

Unit 15

Sikhism

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Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you should be able to:

- outline salient aspects of the Sikh community;
- describe the teachings of Guru Nanak;
- elaborate on the Sikh tradition of Sikhism; and
- detail the interaction of Sikhism with other faiths.

15.1 Introduction

Sikhism is one of the most important religion of India. It originated on the soil of Indian society with the teachings of its first saint Guru Nanak Dev ji. The Sikh religion has seen several critical phases and gone through important transformations since the days of Guru Nanak Dev ji its first Guru up to the time of Guru Govind Singh ji, its tenth Guru. The important ideas concerning the Sikh religion matured during this period. We shall discuss this important period of the Sikh history in detail. On the other hand, the Sikh community has evolved later on the basis of the tradition and teachings of its Gurus. What is important for us to know is the way in which the Sikhs have responded to the new challenges of contemporary society. One of most important question relating to the sociology of religion could be like: How one behaves or responds to the questions/challenges of contemporary society while being a Sikh or for that matter representing any other religion Such questions concerning some other religious groups have been discussed in the area of 'Sociology of religion' by some prominent classical as well as contemporary sociologists. Here the broader question, however, is what constitutes the religious/ethnic identity and how does it deal with the questions and challenges of contemporary society.

15.2 The Sikh community

The Sikh community constitutes a little less than 2% of the population of India. Although the Sikhs are spread all over India but a larger section of them is located in Punjab state. Although India has been the soil where from the Sikhism originated, but the Sikhs could well be seen all over the world including some European countries, U.S.A. and Canada. However,

there exists a special relationship between the Sikhs and Punjab the place of their origin. The relationship between the Sikhs and Punjab is so strong that sometimes the Sikhs are also referred as Punjabis. But one thing is sure that almost every Sikh speaks of Punjabi as his mother tongue. In fact the notion of 'Punjabi', has taken strides over different cultural groups in certain contacts. Similarly almost every Sikh refers back to religions teachings of its Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib and Akal Takhat.

We are familiar with a man wearing a turban or a lady wearing a Salwar Kurta and can easily identify them as Sikhs, but there are some additional features also which help us. For example, Sikhs invariably wear Kada around their wrists. Although these features of physical appearance are important in itself, but here we are more concerned with some more fundamental questions. The more relevant sociological questions could however be: Who is a Sikh? In other words, here we are more concerned with the Sikh community as it expresses through its own and unique cultural identity. We shall examine these questions in detail and perhaps the most significant answers to such questions can be found in the religious texts. Additionally, the findings of researches conducted by some prominent scholars could also be useful. The same is discussed ahead.

Box 15.1 What is Sikhism?

W.H. McLeod (1999) in 'What is Sikhism?' has dealt with it by asking the same question to a Sikh gentleman. To this question the answer given by the gentleman explains the essence of Sikhism, although in a very simple language. The answer of the gentleman was that "Sikhism can be defined as the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man."

Explanation like that are rooted in the Sikh tradition itself dating back to the days of Guru Nanak Dev. In Adi-Granth Guru Nanak Dev has explained the importance of 'nam', 'dan' and 'insan'. Nam refers to 'divine Name' which is Akal Purakh or God. One is to simply associate with nam or God, share one's earnings with others which is 'dan' and strive for pure living which refers to one's making of 'insan'.

15.3 Teachings of Guru Nanak

Guru Nanak Dev's teachings have been summarized by Kahan Singh explaining the essentials of Sikh dharma in his encyclopedia, Gurusabad ratnakar mahankos. These guidelines refer to individual and corporate respectively. These are the following.

i) For individual

- i) to achieve mystical union with God (Vahiguru) through meditation on the divine Name.
- ii) to read the sacred scripture (gurbani) daily and to reflect on the doctrines which it imparts.
- iii) to view all men as brothers without concern for caste or race, bestowing love on all and performing services without expectation of reward.
- iv) to secure benefits of religion (dharam) while continuing to live the life of an ordinary layman.
- v) to spurn ignorant notions of untouchability, magic, idol worship and superstition and to accept only the teachings of the Guru.

II) For Corporate

- i) to observe the Sikh code of conduct (rahit) in the bonds of unity.
- ii) to accept the corporate community (panth) as Guru and to serve it with loyal devotion.
- iii) to proclaim the Guru's teachings to the world.
- iv) to accept with affection all Nanak-panthis as adherents of the Sikh religion, regardless of their outward appearance and to treat people with respect and sympathy.
- v) To observe in Gurdwaras and other shrines the rituals enjoined by the Gurus.

Additionally views like Nam Japo, Kriat Karo, Vand Chhako meaning thereby "repeat divine Name, work hard and give others a portion of what you earn" were also found to be associated with the name Guru Nanak Dev ji.

15.4 The Sikh Tradition

After the life and works of Guru Nanak Dev Ji the tradition of the Sikh Gurus continued up to Guru Gobind Singh Ji. It is important to know how this tradition continued and who were the Gurus to carry it forward. A reference to the Sikh Gurus along with their time period is given in the following Box 15.2

Box 15.2 The Sikh Gurus

The Sikh Gurus and their Period

- 1) Guru Nanak Dev (1469 - 1539)
- 2) Guru Angad (1504 - 1552)
- 3) Guru Amar Das (1479 - 1574)
- 4) Guru Ram Das (1534 - 1581)
- 5) Guru Arjan (1563 - 1606)
- 6) Guru Hargobind (1595 - 1644)
- 7) Guru Hari Rai (1630 - 1661)
- 8) Guru Hari Krishan (1656 - 1664)
- 9) Guru Teg Bahadur (1621 - 1675)
- 10) Guru Gobind Singh (1666 - 1708)

[Source: W.H. McLeod (1999: 133)]

The tradition of the Sikh Guru begins from Guru Nanak Dev and scholars studying this tradition have given considerable importance to him. Guru Nanak Dev made a significant contribution by establishing a new tradition of religious thinking and guidance therefore it seems proper to know about the Sikh religion since beginning i.e. since the lifetime contribution of its first Guru. Here we shall examine some important aspects related to Guru Nanak Dev Ji's life and his contribution to Sikh religion.

Action and Reflection 15.1

Talk to some Sikh boys and girls. Ask them how many Gurus of Sikhism they can remember. Note down your findings.

Baba Guru Nanak Dev Ji, as he is known today among the followers of Sikh religion, devoted his life completely for the ideas, thoughts and actions which he considered important to promote it. During the course of promoting the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak Dev Ji toured several important places, met a variety of scholars from some other religions and displayed

remarkable understanding of the people and events. In this intellectual journey he met several people who have later commented on the life and works of Guru Nanak Dev ji. It is an indirect way of knowing about him as it is told by others.

Box No. 15.3 The Janam Sakhis

Some significant people who knew him, of course in their own different ways, have conveyed us about his life these contributions are known as janam - sakhis in the Sikh tradition. About Guru Nanak Dev ji's life at least three such janam - sakhis were available. The life and works of Guru Nanak Dev ji, have been attempted on the basis of the contributions made according to: (i) Bhai Gurdas : (ii) Puratan Janam - Sakhis and (iii) Miharban Janam Sakhi.

Although these are some of the different ways to understand his life and works but inspite of a few variations in the opinion of scholars, the method of janam sakhis remains very important. Some of the important aspects of the life and works of Guru Nanak Dev ji can be referred here as it emerged on the basis of the analysis of these janam - sakhis. According to the description available in the sakhis, Guru Nanak Dev ji visited several religious places on festive occasions. There are descriptions available of his visits to Mount Sumeru, Mecca Madina and Baghbad. There were instances of some religious debates at each of these places and each time Guru Nank Dev ji was able to prove his own point of view. In one of such discourses he pointed out that Hindus and Muslims when they refer to Ram and Rahim respectively they actually mean one and the same God. His visits to Kartarpur, Achal Batala and Multan are said to be associated with such events where he displayed some miracles.

Baba Guru Nanak Dev is said to have born in the month of the Vaisakh, S. 1526 (A.D. 1469) as a son of Kalu, resident of the village Rai Bhoi di Talwandi. He started to display some mysterious things and inclination towards spirituality at the age of five years. Seeing this phenomenon in action Hindus thought him to be an incarnation of God in human form and Muslim thought him to be a true follower of God.

Parents got him married, but he displayed the symptoms of withdrawl from worldly activities. He was invited by Nawab Daulat Khan of Sultanpur and was duly impressed by him. Sakhis also tell us about Guru Nanak Dev was lifted by the messengers of God for divine court where he was given a cup of nectar (amrit) with the command to drink it with "My Name (Nam)". He did it and returned to the world to preach the divine Name. Some other details regarding his birth and some other important events are available in Miharban Janam Sakhi which is also known as Pothi Sach - Khand.

15.5 The Sikh Gurus

These and some other details would be found in Janam - Sakhis, but it seems important at this stage to realise that it could help us as a method to investigate into the details of the life of Baba Guru Nanak Dev ji. The tradition thus established by him was later known as the Nanak - panth all Gurus upto Guru Govind Singh as well as other believers followed it. Nanak - panthi allegiance constituted some local groups as sangats which sang the songs devoted to Gurus hymns. These satsangs were generally held at dharamshalas where caste discriminations were not allowed. The Punjabi community which was otherwise divided along caste lines was seen as a united entity while observing satsangs. Here we could see the emergence of the Sikh religion as a strong force which displayed unity among various

castes. On the other hand each one was well aware of his caste identity with larger Punjabi community. The Sikh Gurus visited several places on festive occasions and in this context it is important to mention the name of Amritsar where Guru Arjan (Fifth Guru) supervised the compiling of a sacred scripture for the panth. In the early seventeenth century Hargobind succeeded his father Arjan as the sixth Guru. Hargobind came across different and perhaps difficult conditions of society. This was the period when the Sikh Guru had to come out of the earlier environment where Gurus were confined to dharamshalas and religious visits outside. Some significant change could be seen around this period i.e. at the time of the Sixth Guru Hargobind. Guru Hargobind symbolically referred to two swordwomen referring to spiritual authority (Piri) and the other referring to as the newly achieved temporal power (Miri). On the basis of this piri miri combination, a new building known as Akal Takhat was erected. Akal Takhat faces Harmandir Sahib (The Golden Temple) at Amritsar. It reflected a transformation within the Sikh Panth. Some scholars like W.H. McLeod (1999 : 25) have referred this militant tradition to the earlier existing Jat culture. However it has been contradicted by some later scholars like Jagjit Singh (1981) Not much happened during the middle years of the seventeenth century and it appeared as if the Sikh tradition might return back to its earlier days of religious glory. But one important incident happened during this time.

Box 15.4 Guru Teg Bahadur's Sacrifice

Guru Teg Bahadur, The ninth Guru faced a difficult time between 1664-75 and allowed himself to sacrifice his life at the hands of the Mughal rulers in the expectation that some brave men shall rise against Mughal tyranny.

Fearing the same fate some Sikhs chose to remain silent but the next Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh came heavily against this cowardice and came out with the ways and means suggesting that the Sikhs would not be able to hide themselves anymore and be recognized where ever they were present. He symbolically suggested the use of steel in their hands and steel in the soul of the panth. He also decided to do away with the earlier experiment with the decentralization of power and demanded everyone's commitment to the central authority. Sikhs were thus required to become members of his Khalis or Khalsa. Guru Gobind Singh is also known to have discontinued with the tradition of appointing Sikh Gurus. In this way Guru Gobind Singh was the tenth and the last Guru of the Sikh religions. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ranjit Singh conquered Lahore. He became Maharaj of Lahore in 1801 and since then 'raj Karega Khalsa' prophecy became popular. After the Anglo - Sikh war Punjab was taken over by the Britishers in 1849. The conflicts of the Sikhs with the Mughals and Afgans as well as with the Britishers could be seen all along the history. In this process of confrontation, the Sikh religion has emerged out and transformed itself according to the evergrowing challenges.

15.6 Interaction with other faiths

The Sikh religion throughout its history has had interactions with the people of other faith namely Hinduism and Islam. There are some other instances also like the caste factor coming in the way of Sikhism. As we have seen earlier as well, everyone within Sikh religion was well aware of his caste - origins. We have also seen that at the places of religious activities like in the dharamshalas the Gurus never allowed any discriminations, but in the social life caste played its important role. In the Sikh tradition a typical combination of religion and caste could be

seen. To illustrate just one such case the combination of Sikh religion with Jat culture has been an important issue which is discussed in various scholarly as well as popular writing. There is no dispute however, among the scholars about the origin of Jats. All scholars think alike that the Jats were basically of Aryan origin, settled in and around Punjab and also in some other adjacent plain areas. Kushwant Singh (1999) has argued that with them the Jats brought the Panchayat system in which the five senior members of the community commanded the supreme power within the village. Their decisions were just like the bindings on others.

Action and Reflection 15.2

Talk to Jat Sikhs about their role in Sikhism. Note down your findings.

Every Jat village was like a small republic and a considerable level of equality was observed among the Jats who happened to be kinsmen. However, some inequality was clearly observable between the Jats and some other castes. The notion of freedom and equality enjoyed by the Jats kept them away from Brahminical Hinduism. The denigration of the Jats by upper caste Hindus did not result in lowering down the position of the Jats in their own eyes, nor did it help in upgrading the status of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The Jats were considered born as workers and the warriors. The Jats did not flee from the village in the case of invasion and went for the revenge in case the outsiders molested the women. The Punjabi Jats were generally ready to risk their lives against any odds. For such reasons the Jat connection with the Sikh community suddenly becomes important. The Jats thus played a significant role in the Sikh militancy. It also explains a typical combination of piri and miri in the Sikh religion. This should, however, not create the impression that the Jats were the only caste which represented the Sikh religion. For example, the Ramgarhia Sikhs were represented by the artisan caste. It also constitutes an important section within the Sikh community.

15.7 The Martial Background

The Sikh Community has been living under the conditions where there had been battles with others, particularly the invaders. Throughout their period of history they had to enter into conflict with others. They tried several permutations and combinations to fight against the Afghan invaders. One Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Abdali made at least nine invasions, the Sikhs sought the help from the rulers of Delhi and Marathas. The biggest challenge before the Sikh community was from the Afghan rulers. The Afghan rulers had made several attempts to capture the territory under the Sikh rulers. Maharajah Ranjit Singh's able leadership thwarted many such attempts. The much discussed event of history known as the 'consolidation of the Punjab' could be attributed to the able leadership of Maharajah Ranjit Singh. On the one hand Maharajah Ranjit Singh was able to prevent the Afghan rulers from invading the Punjab region on the other to fight against the Gurkhas and thus restricting their influence upto Nepal only. The Sikh community thus contributed to the 'consolidation of Punjab' which was very significant event related to them. Later even the British rulers favoured the Sikh Community leadership to fight against the Afghan invaders. The first Punjabi victory over the Afghan became possible in 1813 after the Battle of Attock. After that the Afghans lost power in the Northern India and were pushed back to their own territory. After the consolidation of the Punjabi power under the leadership of Maharajah Ranjit Singh apparently there were cordial relations between them and the then emerging British Power. But the Punjabi leadership, particularly Maharajah Ranjit Singh was well aware of the British power. The Sikh leaders realized soon that the Britishers would sooner or later would like

to take over the rule from them in Punjab. Later on the British power consolidated itself leading to the annexation of the Punjab. The Britishers promised the rule of law in the land of Punjab and initiated some development works there. In the Sipoy Mutiny of 1857, the Sikhs stood with the Britishers and as a result of this more and more Sikhs were recruited to the army. During the period of the world war I (1914 - 1918) the Sikhs numbered about one fifth of the total army. As a result of the proximity of the Sikhs to the British rulers, some of them although in a very small number, had the opportunity to seek migration to the United States and Canada.

15.8 Conclusion

The Sikh community has evolved in a meaningful way, has seen ten Gurus (from Guru Nanak Devji upto Guru Gobind Singh ji). Guru Granth Sahib is their religious text based upon the sacred scriptures compiled by Guru Arjan during 1603-04. It is also known as Adi-Granth. However, later developments in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a zealous sikh came to be known as Akal Purakh and in twentieth century Akali Dal (Akali Party) was formed. Within the Sikh community, some castes have acquired prominence like Jats and Ahluwalias. During the recent times some sects or groups within the Sikh community have come to prominence like, Ramgarhias, Nirankaris, Mazhabis and Namdhari Sikhs owing allegiance to different cultural identities. In Punjab all the historic Gurudwaras are now controlled by Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee commonly known as SGPC. The Sikh community has also evolved in its relationship with some other communities like Hindus and Muslims.

15.9 Further Reading

McLeod, W.H. (1999), *Sikhs and Sikhism* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Singh Khushwant (1999) *A History of the Sikhs (Volume 1 & 2)*, New Delhi: Oxford University press.