



THE PHILOSOPHY & BELIEFS OF THE SIKH RELIGION

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A. INTRODUCTION:

The word ‘Sikh’ means disciple. Sikhs are disciples of the ten Sikh gurus. The majority of them live in Punjab, India. However, being enterprising, they can be found throughout the world. Sikhs number nearly 25 million worldwide, with over one million in the United States and Canada. In California, Sikh population is about 250,000, including 40,000 in the Sacramento Valley. They are only two percent of the Indian population, however, they have earned an excellent reputation in a number of occupations, such as the armed forces, farming, transportation, and business. They have their places of worship in more than 60 countries. At present, Manmohan Singh, a Sikh, is the Prime Minister of India.

B. HISTORY OF THE SIKH RELIGION:

Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh religion, was born in village Talwandi (now called Nankana Sahib), located near Lahore in Pakistan. The Sikh religion was developed over a period of two centuries, from the birth of Guru Nanak in 1469 to the death of Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th Sikh guru, in 1708. Each guru took an active part in meeting worldly duties while leading an exemplary spiritual life.

Guru Gobind Singh gave a distinctive identity to the Sikhs as the *Khalsa* (the Pure Ones) by starting the Sikh baptism ceremony on *Baisakhi* day - April 13, 1699. This distinct identity is represented by the following five symbols, popularly known as five K’s:

- *Kes* (uncut hair)
- *Kangha* (a small wooden comb)
- *Kara* (a steel bracelet)
- *Kachhehra* (pair of shorts) and
- *Kirpan* (a small ceremonial sword).

Guru Gobind Singh led many battles against injustice and to preserve Sikhism. Before his death in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh declared that there would be no more *living gurus*. He also ordered that henceforth “*Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh

scriptures, shall be the *Guru* of the Sikhs, and advised them to seek guidance (spiritual and temporal) from these scriptures.”

Within 100 years of the creation of the *Khalsa*, the Sikhs, under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, established a dominant kingdom in North Western India. The Sikh empire lasted for half a century and was annexed by the British in 1849.

C. SIKH PHILOSOPHY AND BELIEFS:

The Sikh beliefs are simple and of value to everyone:

- There is only one Supreme God, who is the Creator of this universe, has no shape or form, and is beyond time and the cycle of birth and death. He is immortal, omniscient, and is beyond human comprehension. He does not incarnate in the human form.
- Sikhs believe in the *Karma* theory, and transmigration of soul from one form of life to another until ultimate union with God. They believe that one can merge with God only during human life. Sikhs are to lead a life based on three fundamental rules:
 - *Kirt Karo* (Do honest work to earn livelihood)
 - *Wand Chhako* (Share what you earn, with the less fortunate), and
 - *Naam Japo* (Recite the name of the Lord).

An important tenet of Sikhism is the individual responsibility to improve one’s own destiny. Each person can influence his/her fate by own deeds in this life.

- The true path to achieve union with God does not require renunciation of the world, forsaking one’s ordinary worldly duties or adopting celibacy, but by being of value to the society and by avoiding worldly temptations and vices.
- God is present in every person. All are equal, regardless of their ethnic, racial or religious origin and beliefs. Guru Nanak’s refusal to

recognize birth, as the basis of caste and division of the society was a revolutionary step in the social set up of his times. In the Sikh religion, a woman has equal rights and privileges to grow spiritually and participate in all religious ceremonies. She receives profound respect for her role in the family and society. "How can they be called inferior," asked Guru Nanak, "when they give birth to kings and prophets?"

- Idol worship, religious rituals, and superstitions are discouraged. The Sikh religion emphasizes the role of the guru as a guide. The daily prayer concludes with a wish for the prosperity of the entire mankind.
- *The Sangat* (congregation) and *Pangat* (community kitchen) are important features of Sikh religion. The community kitchen is to share food with all devotees, pilgrims and visitors, irrespective of caste and creed.

D. Sri Guru Granth Sahib:

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scriptures of the Sikhs, is unique in having been completed by the founders of the Sikh faith during their lifetime. Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth guru, compiled it in 1604, and Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru, added hymns, composed by Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth guru. *The Holy Book* contains compositions by the Sikh gurus as well as those of saints from other religions (Hindus and Muslims), from all castes (high and low), social status (rich and poor), and hailing from different parts of India.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib is a 1430 page volume written in poetry in the *Gurmukhi* script (also called Punjabi) and has approximately 6,000 hymns, arranged in thirty-one *ragas* (musical measures of Indian classical music). It contains the wisdom and spiritual thoughts of a time span spread over five centuries. The language is primarily Punjabi, although it contains words of many languages such as Sanskrit and Persian and many dialects of Punjabi and Hindi. Its teachings promote the message of universal love and harmony among all communities.

E. Gurdwara:

A place of worship by Sikhs is called *Gurdwara*. It is also known as a Sikh Temple. A *Gurdwara* can generally be found in every Sikh community, and can range from a room in a house converted for the purpose of worship to magnificent marble buildings inlaid with gold, such as the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, India.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib is installed at a higher level than the congregation in the main hall. The Sikh religious services consist of *kirtan* (singing hymns in praise of God), *ardas* (community prayer led by one person, while every body stands with folded hands), and a *hukamnama* (the Guru's Command) for the day. Blessings for special occasions or events may be included in the *ardas*. The *hukamnama* is reading a randomly selected hymn from the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. It is first read in the original Punjabi language and then translated into English or the main language of the congregation. It is followed by distribution of the *karah parsad* (sacred sweet pudding, made from wheat flour, sugar, water, and clarified butter), and is considered to be a blessing from the Guru. A *kirpan* is used to bless the *karah parsad* and *langar* (community meal) during the *ardas*.

Before entering the prayer hall, everyone is expected to remove shoes and cover head as a sign of respect for the Sikh scriptures. In addition, hands are also washed. Regardless of status, everybody sits on the floor.

The *Gurdwara* complex contains a *Guru Ka Langar* (Guru's kitchen) that serves vegetarian meals to everybody visiting the *Gurdwara*. All people sit together and eat food as equals without discrimination of caste, creed, race, or sex.

F. Sikh Emblems:

The *Khanda* is the symbol of the Sikh faith, and has the same importance for them as the Cross has for Christians. It represents some basic teachings of Sikhism, and is formed by three elements. The double-edged sword in the middle symbolizes divine knowledge. Its two sharp edges separate truth from falsehood. The circle represents oneness of the God, who is without beginning and end. This also represents unity of humanity and rejects divisions based on caste, race and sex. The two curved swords on the outside represent the concept of *miri* and *piri*, or worldly and spiritual responsibilities. This shows that a Sikh should be a saint-soldier and maintain a balance between spiritual aspirations and societal obligations. The *Khanda* is generally made of stainless steel or is painted.



KHANDA



NISHAN SAHIB

The *Nishan Sahib* is the Sikh flag, and is provided in front of each *Gurdwara*. The flag is a saffron-colored triangular cloth with a *Khanda*, the Sikh emblem. The flag post is also covered with the same color cloth as the flag, and has a *Khanda* or a spear on top.

Read as "*Ik Onkar*," it means, "There is Only One Supreme God." This is the first statement of the *Mul Mantra*, a basic vivid summary defining God, in the beginning of Guru Nanak's most philosophical composition – the *Jap Ji Sahib* – included in the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.



IK-ONKAR

Comments? Please contact:

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