

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SIKHISM

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak Dev who was born in 1469 AD at Talwandi Sabo, popularly known as Nankana Sahib (now in Pakistan) which is about 60 Km from the city of Lahore. Guru Sahib acquired proficiency both in reading, writing much easier than other children of his age. Even as a child he started writing poetry. He felt in himself that he had a mission to fulfill. He raised his voice against injustice and also felt unhappy at the suffering of the common man. He did not believe in rituals and ceremonies. At Sultanpur Lodhi (near Kapurthala) he had a mystic experience and announced that there was no Hindu or Musalman but all were equals. Thereafter he started preaching in the Saint tradition. He took a series of journeys known as Udasis, between 1499 AD and 1521 AD and went to the extent of Tibet, Mecca, Sri Lanka, Afganistan and many other countries. His conclusion came in the form of hymns he composed. He gave the message of oneness of God and universal brotherhood of man. He, in fact, did not first preach Sikhism but demonstrated what he preached and practised. Finally he settled down at a place called Kartarpur (now in Pakistan) on the bank of river Ravi. He established the ideal Sikh community where the land was common, the farming was common and the kitchen was also common. Guru Nanak's devotees came to Kartarpur from far and near to pay homage to the Master and also stayed with him for long periods. Sikhism in fact took roots at that place. After his demise in 1535 AD the torch of Sikhism was carried forward by nine living Gurus: Guru Angad Dev (1504-1552 AD), Guru Amar Das (1479-1574AD), Guru Ram Das (1534-1581 AD), Guru Arjun Dev (1563-1606 AD), Guru Hargobind (1595-1644 AD), Guru Har Rai (1630-1661 AD), Guru Harkrishan (1656-1664 AD), Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675 AD) and Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708 AD). All the gurus spread the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev and established Sikh institution and tradition. The martyrdom of the 5th Master (popularly called the 5th Nanak). Guru Arjun Dev and the 9th Master Guru Tegh Bahadur transformed Sikhism into a vibrant religion as it stands today.

2nd Master Guru Angad Dev followed and maintained the practice of Langar (community Kitchen) started by Guru Nanak Dev for all those who came to visit him, irrespective of cast and creed. The 3rd Master Guru Amar Das sent out emissaries to various parts of the country with a view to consolidate the Sikhs. He started his slogan of Sangat and Pangat requiring his disciples to participate in Langar before visiting him. The Langar was prepared and served by the Sangat and anybody could partake the same in an orderly manner (Pangat). It is a recorded piece of history that Akbar the king, sat with the lowest of the low and partook Langar before having audience with the Guru.

Guru Ram Das, the 4th Master started the construction of the new township which came to be known finally as Amritsar and which became the holiest pilgrim centre for the Sikhs and the whole world. He also started the construction of the Holy Tank at Amritsar which was completed by Guru Arjun Dev, the 5th Master who also constructed Harimander Sahib within that Holy Tank (popularly known as Sarovar). It is a living symbol of the spiritual and historical traditions of the

Sikhs. The inauguration of Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) was got done by a Muslim Faquir. The 5th Master also did a very important Job for the living History – the compilation of Sikh scripture, the Adi Granth which was ultimately conferred Guruship by the 10th Master Guru Gobind Singh and which continues to be the eternal Guru of the Sikhs.

The martyrdom of the 5th Master Guru Arjun Dev created a wedge between the Sikhs and the ruler of that time. After that martyrdom, the 6th Master Guru Hargobind gave a good lead to the Sikhs in very difficult situation. He started raising an army and made it clear to the followers to give him the offering of good weapons and horses. He gave training in horse riding and other military exercises to his army. He proclaimed that if you are righteous fear will not come near you. He set up the Akal Takht just opposite the Harimandar (within the precincts of Harimandar) as the highest seat of temporal authority for the Sikhs. His main contribution was that he gave a new turn to the Sikhs as a way of life. There were thousands of horses, horsemen and artillery men in his army and he had to fight many battles with the Moghul Army. In his old age the Guru returned to a place in the foothills of Himalayas and founded a township called Kiratpur which has now been an important place of Pilgrimage of Sikhs.

The martyrdom of the 9th Master Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib in 1675 AD created a turning point in the history of Sakhs. At that time Moghual King Aurangzeb was in the saddle and he was persuing the practice of his fanatic religious policy. He started mass conversions of hindus in Islam in the whole of the country including Kashmir. During that time Kashmir Pandits approached Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib and the Guru assured them that he would do his best in the circumstances. He sent a message to King Aurangzeb through those Kashmiri Pandit that if he (Aurangzeb) was able to convert Guru Tegh Bahadur into Islam then they (Kashmiri Pandits) would accept Islam. On receiving the message Aurangzeb passed orders to arrest Guruji while he was at Ropar. As the Guru could not be persuaded to convert into Islam, he (Guruji) was beheaded at Chandni Chowk, Delhi where stands Gurudwara Sisganj. Guruji's sacrifice was unique in itself as he sacrificed his life to protect the faith of others. After the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib the center of activities was shifted to Anandpur Sahib the township in the foothills of Himalayas established by Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib.

Guru Gobind Singh 10th master founded the Khalsa Panth in 1699 AD (on Baishakhi Day) in the presence of thousands of his followers at Anandpur Sahib. The Guru baptised five persons (taken out from the audience) and declared them as Panj-Piaras (five beloveds) and then himself took Amrit (got himself baptized from those five persons) from them. Those Panj Piaras were authorized by him to exercise spiritual authority on behalf of the Khalsa Panth (sikh community). Thus the institution of Panj-Piaras with spiritual authority was borne for all times to come. The Sikh Community got itself united during the Guru who gave five distinctive marks of identity to the Sikhs as under:

1. Kesh – to wear long uncut hair;
2. Kangha – to keep a small comb;
3. Kara – to put on a steel bracelet;
4. Kirpan – to keep a sword and
5. Kachehra – to keep a proper underwear

The Guru also ordained that all the male Sikhs should keep name ending with Singh and female Sikhs ending with Kaur. He also prescribed a common salutation for the Sikh – Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh – meaning that Khalsa belongs to the God and victory belongs to Him (almighty).

[From the book “***As Much As I Know***” by Sardar Balbir Singh Walia, (Retd.) Deputy Secretary, Punjab Vidhan Sabha, Chandigarh]