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SIKHISM

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Sikhism is sometimes described as the newest and smallest of the world's religions. Its media image is predominantly male, and reports often suggest that it is a religion preoccupied with swords and turbans. Personal contact with Sikhs usually impresses the outsider with energetic hospitality. The scriptures bring the reader to a poetic vision of ordered harmony and unity and a spiritual discipline.

This book's aim is to provide a rounded account of Sikhism in its many aspects. Sikhs have a strong sense of being a community with a history of struggle, and so the sequence of this Very Short Introduction will, in the main, be chronological. Each chapter sets historical developments in a wider context, which includes the overarching question – what does being a 'religion', let alone a 'world religion', mean?

Sikhism is often portrayed as a neat package consisting of a founder (Guru Nanak), a scripture (the Guru Granth Sahib), places of worship known as gurdwaras, and the requirement to show one's allegiance physically (by not cutting one's hair, for example). In what follows, at every stage of the Sikh story, the not so neat processes involved in emerging as a distinct religion will be evident. These include Sikhs' continually evolving sense of identity, often in relation to their Hindu neighbours. These processes are still underway and spark passionate debate.

The word 'Sikhism' suggests that the book's emphasis will be on a religious system – on the theological and ethical principles of Sikhs. But that would be to misrepresent the teachings and values that have arisen from and impacted upon a particular people. It would also pander to a discredited understanding of religion as an abstract, defined entity, rather than as a fluid tradition, pulsing with life and difficult to pin down.

Like 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism', and 'Jainism', 'Sikhism' is a Western word, coined not by Sikhs but by outsiders from a Christian, northern European background. Like these terms, 'Sikhism' became current during the period of British domination of India. The term 'Sikhism' is nowadays readily used by its 'followers', but is not totally satisfactory.

Sikhism 'Sikhism' is an extension of the word 'Sikh'. From the outset it should be pointed out that Westerners are accustomed to hearing this word pronounced in the same way as the English verb 'seek', as if it had what linguists call a long 'i', but in the original Punjabi the 'i' is short. 'Sikh' is correctly pronounced like 'sick', though with a final consonant more reminiscent of 'ch' in the Scottish word 'loch' than 'ck' in 'luck'. 'Sikh' means simply a learner or disciple, as the Punjabi verb *sikhna* means 'to learn'. Sikhs are disciples of the Guru.

People who identify themselves as Sikhs answer the question 'Who is a Sikh?' in different ways. One authoritative definition is:

any human being who faithfully believes in:

One immortal Being

Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh

The Guru Granth Sahib

The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus and

The baptism bequeathed by the tenth Guru

and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion.

Sikhs refer to their religious path as 'Sikhi' and 'Gursikhi' as well as 'Gurmat' (the Gurus' doctrine). They refer to the Sikh community as a whole as the Panth.

Statistics

Census figures show that in India Sikhs number over 20 million, close to 2% of the population. In 1991 nearly 80% of India's Sikhs lived in Punjab, and this is the only state in which they form a majority (approximately 63% in 1991). The next highest concentration is in India's capital city, New Delhi, where figures are, at the time of writing, hotly contested.

There are now Sikh communities in many other countries, the largest being in the United Kingdom, where the 2001 census counted 336,000 Sikhs, that is about 0.6% of the total population. The next largest Sikh populations – in Canada and the United States of America – had not quite reached 300,000 at the time of writing. Sikhs tend to be locally concentrated – for instance, approximately half Canada's Sikhs live in British Columbia.

The meaning of 'Guru'

Sikh faith and teaching can only be understood in terms of the role of the Guru. The Sikh is the learner, the Guru is the teacher. Sikhs explain 'Guru' as a word that means 'remover of darkness'. Whereas the word 'guru' (lower case), traditionally used in India to refer to a respected teacher, particularly a spiritual teacher, has by extension become current in English for any expert, for Sikhs the Guru (always with a capital in the Roman alphabet) refers to each of a succession of ten spiritual guides, the founding fathers of the Sikh faith.

But the concept of Guru embraces more than the ten human Gurus. The *gurbani* ('utterance of the Guru') is embodied in the scriptures. Since the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, these have been

consulted and venerated as a living guide, known as Guru Granth Sahib. Guru is also a name for God, the divine preceptor, who was Guru to the first human Guru, Guru Nanak. The Sikh word ‘Vahiguru’ for God, as well as God’s title, Satguru (the ‘True Guru’), are further reminders of this.

A separate faith?

Now an important question: does this community of mainly Punjabi followers of the Guru (human, divine, and embodied in scripture) constitute a faith in its own right? If so, what are its markers? Five views, variously voiced by scholars, preachers, and activists, by Hindus, Sikhs, and outside observers, need to be taken into account:

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- i) Sikhism is a Hindu *sampradaya* (that is, movement led by a succession of gurus).
- ii) Sikhism is a ‘derived’ religion, drawn from the Hindu tradition.
- iii) Sikhism is a blend of the earlier religions of Hinduism and Islam.
- iv) Sikhism is a distinct revelation.
- v) Sikhs are a ‘separate nation’.

The basis of the present book is a sixth response:

- vi) Sikhism has evolved into a separate religion in terms of Sikhs’ self-definition, and because Sikhism has all the markers of a religion. These include a separate scripture and calendar, separate life-cycle rites, places of worship, and a sense of shared history. At the same time, in common with other faiths, Sikhism cannot be fully understood in isolation from its religious, social, and historical context.

This context has, for most of its history, been the geographical region known as Punjab, together with the religious traditions of Hinduism and Islam.

Hindu and Muslim context

The word ‘Hindu’ arose as a primarily geographical, rather than doctrinal, term. Persians and Greeks were the first to use this word for people living east of the Indus river. (Etymologically, ‘Hindu’, ‘India’, and ‘Indus’ are related.) Unsurprisingly, then, Hindu – or Indic – religious tradition is inclusive, and this tradition stretches back through the millennia BCE with no agreed starting point or ‘founder’. As well as its strong connection with India, Hinduism’s unity lies in Hindus’ respect for ancient texts – notably the Vedas – and in the acceptance of certain key concepts, such as the cosmic law of cause and effect, *karma*.

The Hindu community consists of devotees of countless gurus. From time to time a new scripture is written and becomes the central teaching of a particular movement (a *sampradaya*, the name used in Indian languages for a succession of gurus and their followers). Many *sampradayas* have a particular regional base, so that, for example, it would be as unlikely to find a Punjabi follower of the Swaminarayan branch of the Hindu tradition as to find a Gujarati Sikh. The gurus of a particular *sampradaya* teach their followers about ultimate reality, often concentrating on a personal God and the ways in which devotees may best express their relationship with God. The Sikh Gurus are clear candidates. But is ‘Sikhism’ a Hindu *sampradaya*?

The advocates of this view are, for the most part, Hindus, who point out that: the Gurus’ names and families were all unmistakably Hindu, rather than Muslim; the teaching of the Guru Granth Sahib is continuous with (as well as critical of) earlier Hindu teaching; some central Hindu concepts, including *karma* and reincarnation, are taken for granted in Sikhism; and in the gurdwara preachers sometimes refer to stories from Hindu tradition during their homilies.

Most social convention is common to Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs.

Some Hindu families, mainly those living in urban areas, unproblematically include Sikhs and vice versa. Sikhs celebrate on Divali, the Hindu festival of lights, and many observe the annual bonding of brothers and sisters on the day of Rakhi (Raksha Bandhan). Not surprisingly, at the partition of India in 1947 into Pakistan and India, Sikhs from west of the new border fled with Hindus to India.

But the readiness of Hindus to argue in this way may simply demonstrate Hindus' inclusive attitude to religious faiths, above all those that have developed in India. Sikh writers point to the way in which, centuries earlier in India, the Buddha's teaching was absorbed into Hinduism, and they periodically rally Sikhs to withstand the danger of disappearing into Hindu society. In any discussion of the relationship of 'Sikhism' and 'Hinduism' as two religions, caution is necessary, especially as no firm line can be drawn between Hindu religion and Indic culture.

Sikhism

Nor is the relationship of Sikhism to Hinduism a straightforward parallel to Christianity's relationship to Judaism, as a 'daughter' faith. The facts that the Sikh faith is not a missionary religion, and that relatively few marriages have occurred outside the Punjabi community, have ensured a culturally closer linkage between Sikhs and Punjabi Hindus than that between Christians and Jews. The difference in dynamic in part results from the very different numerical relationship between 'parent' and 'daughter' in the two cases. In one case, the longer-established tradition, Hindus, massively outnumber their younger offspring, Sikhs, whereas in the second case, the situation is reversed, with Jews being far outnumbered by Christians. In terms of sacred texts, while the Hebrew Bible is honoured in Christian tradition as its 'Old Testament', the most ancient Hindu sacred texts have no such place in the Sikh canon.

In North India Muslims as well as Hindus have often been inspired by charismatic teachers. Many Muslims were attracted to Sufi saints

who emphasized spiritual practices. Unlike the Hindu tradition, Islam originated outside India, with the revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad in the early 7th century CE. Muslim teaching stresses that Allah (God) is one and denounces the practice of making images of God and worshipping in front of them. In this and many other ways, Islam runs contrary to India's indigenous devotional practices. At the time of the Sikh Gurus political power in much of North India was in the hands of Muslims, following invasions by Muslim armies under a succession of dynasties. One result of Muslim domination was that many local families had converted to Islam.

The suggestion that Sikhism is a derivative in part from Islam is misleading. Certainly, Guru Nanak used Muslim as well as Hindu titles for God. Some commentators have detected Islamic influence in Guru Nanak's emphasis on 'monotheism', and others have suggested that the degree of honour shown to the holy book echoes the position of the Qur'an in Islam. But these are only speculations. Resonances between faiths are not evidence of a historical or causal relationship. With Christianity, too, a faith that the Sikh Gurus did not encounter, there are deep affinities, one being in the Sikh and Christian emphasis upon divine grace (in Punjabi *karam*, *prasad*, and *kirpa*).

To sum Sikhism up as a 'blend' of the two senior traditions of Hinduism and Islam is analogous to writing off English as a creole of Anglo Saxon and Norman French, rather than approaching it as a language in its own right. At the same time, treating it as a distinct language, rather than as a creole, is by no means to dispute the linguistic continuities. Neither the Gurus, nor their Sikhs, set about making a deliberate mix, any more than the speaker of what came to be called English mixed careful measures of words rooted in Latin and Germanic languages and then calculatingly coined new words.

The claims that Sikhism is a distinct revelation and that Sikhs are a separate nation are addressed in Chapter 8.

Being Punjabi

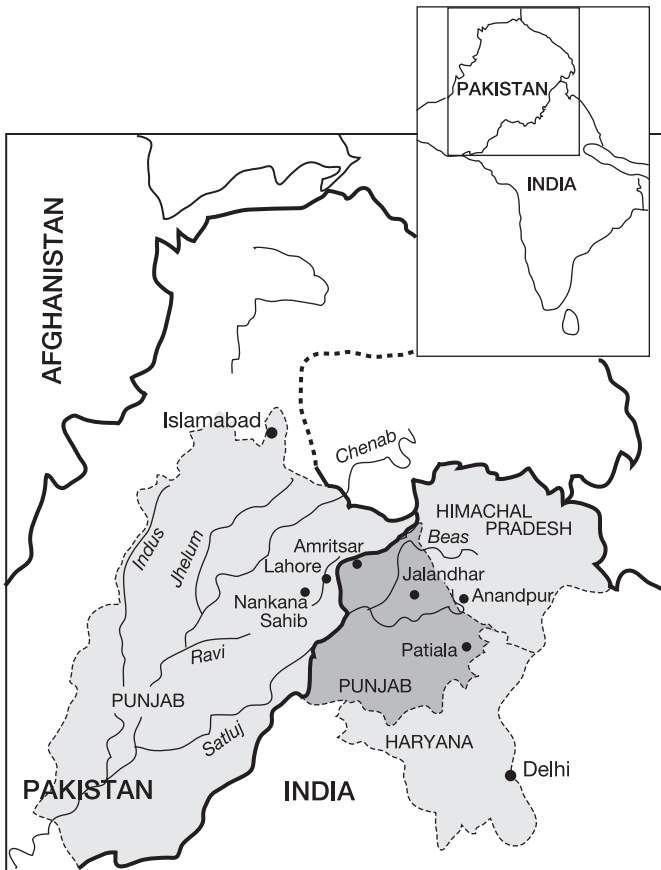
Sikhs' sense of community is not just a matter of interacting with, and feeling distinct from, the other major religious constituencies of North India. It also has strong regional roots. The family origins of almost all Sikhs, wherever in the world they now live, are in Punjab. Exceptions include the relatively small numbers of Western converts to Sikhism, most of whom live in the United States of America, and Sikhs with Afghan and Sindhi ancestry. (Sindh is the southern-most state of Pakistan.)

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Punjab is the region to which the families of each of the ten Gurus also belonged, although their lives were not confined to Punjab: Guru Nanak's travels are believed to have taken him as far west as Baghdad and Mecca and as far south as Sri Lanka; and both the eighth and ninth Gurus' lives ended in Delhi; moreover, Guru Gobind Singh was born in Patna in the present Indian state of Bihar. Nevertheless, any exposition of 'Sikhism' that omits the significance of Punjab for Sikhs is incomplete, especially as Punjab has come to be regarded as the spiritual homeland for Sikhs everywhere.

To give an example from recent fieldwork in Coventry, UK: young Sikhs, almost all of whom were far more articulate in English than in Punjabi, and most of whom had never lived in Punjab, equated being Sikh with being Punjabi. They used the two terms interchangeably when naming their 'religion'. Most had little or no understanding that a Punjabi could be Muslim, Hindu, or Christian, Jain, or Buddhist. However little Punjabi language they could understand, let alone read or write, they knew that Punjabi was their language.

Punjab (or Panjab, as it is often written, especially by scholars) is the land of five (*pañj*) waters (*ab*) – in fact the tributaries of the Indus. These are, from west to east, the rivers Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, and Satluj (or Sutlej), and the Satluj's tributary, the river Beas.



Key:

 Historic Sikh homeland ('greater Punjab') (also includes darker shaded area)

 Post-1966 Indian state of Punjab

 National borders

 State borders

 Disputed India/Pakistan border

1. Map of Punjab, showing the undivided Punjab before 1947, its division between India and the new state of Pakistan, and the subdivision of India's post-Partition state of Punjab in 1966

A contemporary map (Figure 1) shows the India/Pakistan border cutting through the land drained by these rivers, so that only the Beas now runs entirely on the Indian side of the border. The present Indian state of Punjab is a fraction of Punjab before 1947. This was the year when India gained independence from British imperial rule and was divided into India and Pakistan. Then, in 1966, India's already smaller portion of Punjab was further divided, this time according to the declared mother tongues of the population, into the majority Hindi-speaking states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, and the present-day Indian state of Punjab with a majority of Punjabi speakers, and so of Sikhs. This division was the result of concerted agitation by Sikhs, led by their politically astute leader, Sant Fateh Singh.

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The Punjabi language, like the other tongues of North India, is described as Indo-European, and is a distant cousin of most modern European languages. The word *panj* itself, like the other numbers from one to ten, is an example. For philologists it is cognate with the Greek *pente* and German *fünf*, while *ab* is a distant relative of the Latin *aqua*. Nor is it a coincidence that *nam*, a key Sikh term for the divine reality, is so like the English word 'name', or that Panth closely resembles the English word 'path'. Another important Sikh word is *amrit*, the water used in initiation ceremonies: *a-mrit* (literally 'not-death'), is cognate, via Greek and Latin, with both 'ambrosia' and 'immortal'.

Like European languages, too, Punjabi bears traces of successive invasions and migrations, including the arrival of Greeks in the 4th century BCE. Words of Arabic and Persian origin testify to the centuries of penetration and domination by Muslim rulers and by armies from further west. The Gurus' words for 'God' include, as already noted, Islamic as well as Hindu designations – 'Allah' and 'Khudai' as well as 'Paramatma' and 'Ram'.

One word that Punjabis use for being Punjabi (that is, for Punjabi-ness) is *panjabiat*, a blend of language and humour and tastes in

dress, cuisine, lifestyle, and the arts. One frequent joke that Sikhs make against themselves gives a flavour of *panjabiat*: Sikhs from India often remark that Sikhs have no culture other than agriculture. Despite several generations of migration from the villages of Punjab, many Sikhs still identify themselves as a rural, unsophisticated, farming people, in contrast to the more urban Hindu community.

Being Punjabi involves distinctive traditions in dress, cuisine, music, and dance, as well as an enthusiasm for harrowing ‘Romeo and Juliet’-like love stories. Most famous of these is the tragic tale of Hir and Ranjha, as told by the 18th-century poet Waris Shah. *Bhangra*, the rousing drumming, melody, and acrobatic dance of Punjabi celebrations, has moved and mutated a long way from rural festivities. Yet, despite fusing with contemporary styles and tempos in Western popular music, *bhangra* is still inextricably Punjabi.

Key Punjabi values quickly become apparent to the outsider. Hospitality is one, honouring the guest with plentiful food and drink. Another value is *izzat*, which is often translated into English as ‘honour’ or as ‘family pride’. Failure to show generous hospitality would be a cause for shame to the hosts and would be insulting to the guest. Above all, over the centuries, *izzat* has been tied up with the way in which female family members behave, or are perceived to behave. Gossip about a young woman’s supposed misdemeanours, especially by associating with a man from the wrong family, brings shame on her relations, and can result in violence.

The fact that many Punjabi families continue to observe strong preferences, sanctioned by cultural tradition, in their selection or approval of sons- and daughters-in-law, might suggest a rigidly structured or compartmentalized society. There is, however, in terms of popular devotion, widespread fluidity. Shrines where healings are reputed to happen, or where supplications are likely to be heeded, draw pilgrims from a social mix in terms of both caste and religious allegiance. The devotees, and in some cases the holy

places themselves, are by no means exclusively Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim.

It is within this dynamic context of a Punjabi culture, richly textured by its social history, that we need to set the term ‘Sikhism’ and to explore its content, connotations, and limitations. This book will explore the ways in which Sikhism (in the sense of the Gurus’ teachings) converges with Punjabi cultural norms, which are caught up in processes of unprecedentedly rapid change, and the occasions when the Gurus’ priorities pull in a different direction.

Chapter 2 introduces Guru Nanak and the first four of his successors. The focus of Chapter 3 is the Guru in the form of the scriptures. The main thrust of Chapter 4 is the contribution of Guru Gobind Singh, particularly in forming a community of committed Sikhs, the Khalsa, with its own uniform and code. Two interconnected processes run through Chapter 5, which reports the often turbulent history of Sikhs in India in the 19th and 20th centuries. These are the Panth’s increasing interaction with the West – in particular the British Raj – and the successive struggles to make Sikhs and Sikhism unmistakably distinct from Hindus and Hinduism. During this period, thousands of Sikhs settled outside India, and this Sikh diaspora is the subject of Chapter 6. Two controversial themes, gender and caste, as well as Sikhism’s relations with other faiths, are addressed in Chapter 7, and Chapter 8 goes on to look at other issues facing contemporary Sikhs.