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The origins of the Sikh tradition can be traced to the teachings of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and which were further developed by his nine successors; the tradition now claims in the order of 15 million followers. Of these the great majority trace their roots to the Punjab region in northwest India and Pakistan, where the ten founding Gurus lived and taught; however as a result of large-scale emigration during the past century an extensive diaspora has developed, such that Sikh settlers can now be found in most parts of the globe. Although still primarily a Punjabi faith, Sikhism welcomes converts, and in California a significant number of white Americans have joined the faith.

Theology

Guru Nanak can best be identified as a member of the Sant or *nirguna bhakti* tradition, of which his predecessors Kabir, Namdev and Ravidas were also noted exponents. *Bhakti* is a popular and extremely widespread form of devotional Hinduism, and in its more conventional *saguna* manifestations devotees seek religious and mystical inspiration by entering into a passionate and all encompassing relationship with one of Hinduism's many deities, most usually one of Vishnu's many incarnations or *avtars*. By contrast the *nirguna bhakti* tradition rejects the worship of deities. Heavily influenced by the Nath tradition of asceticism (which is itself rooted in Tantric Buddhism), the Sants held that the transcendent Ultimate with which devotees sought passionate union was immanent in every aspect of the created world, and hence (amongst other things) in one's own heart; externally focused devotion of all kinds — including *saguna bhakti* — was therefore worthless.

Despite the Sants extensive use of Nath philosophy, they nevertheless rejected the Nath Yogis' commitment to renunciatory asceticism, largely on the grounds that the Truth was to be found *within* everyday life and not outside it, and hence they remained socially and sexually active married householders. However from this position they insisted that religious awareness was only worthwhile if experienced internally. Hence all kinds of externalised practice — including worship of deities, sacrificial rituals and pilgrimages — were similarly rejected as valueless diversions. As all the Sants constantly stressed, the Truth was no further away than one's own heart.

Although the Sant tradition is normally regarded as falling under the broad umbrella of Hinduism, its mystical and philosophical outlook was closely congruent with that of the Sufi tradition of Islamic mysticism, and especially with the Chistiyya *tariqa* whose preachers had made many converts in Punjab during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Drawing partly on the mystical heritage of Buddhist Central Asia, and further inspiration from the philosophical perspective developed by the Spanish-born but Damascus-based mystical theologian Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), local sufis had a great deal in common with the followers of *nirguna bhakti*. There was a great deal of mutual esteem between the two traditions, whose members undoubtedly borrowed a great deal from each other.

Guru Nanak and his successors

Born a Hindu in an area where Islam was politically dominant, Nanak drew upon the full range of local religious experiences to develop his own philosophical synthesis. Like all his predecessors in the Sant tradition, he was very much a man of the people who preferred to express himself in direct and graphic Punjabi rather than in abstract and high-flown Sanskrit or Arabic. As a result his teachings were immediately accessible to all Punjabi-speakers, whether or not they were formally educated; and although the language has changed a good deal during the past five hundred years, his ideas are still relatively easily accessible to contemporary Punjabi speakers. Nor is there much dispute about the content of his teaching. Nanak expressed himself with great sophistication and subtlety, and a complete collection of all his mystical poetry, supplemented by a selection of verses composed by his Sant and Sufi predecessors as well as by his successors to the Guruship, were brought together in a single volume known as the *Adi Granth* by fifth Guru, Arjun Dev (1563-1606). Now commonly known as the *Guru Granth Sahib*, this book of mystical verse subsequently became the centre of all religious activity in every Gurudwara or Sikh Temple.

There is no evidence that Nanak saw himself as the founder of a new religion, or that he was a social reformer of any kind: rather he appears to have regarded himself solely as a spiritual teacher. His followers were described as "Sikhs" or "learners", and in his lifetime the Sikh community would not have been much larger than the small group of devotees who sought spiritual inspiration at their Guru's feet. But while such informal procedures — which were wholly in keeping with Nanak's emphasis on internality — were wholly appropriate whilst the founder was alive, they did not provide an effective means of transmitting his teachings after his death. With that in mind, and also in order to cope with the growing scale and popularity of the movement, Nanak's successors found they had little alternative but to introduce a wide range of organisational changes, many of which flew in the face of the founder's ideals of internalised simplicity. Pilgrimage centres emerged first in Goindwal and then Amritsar, revenue from devotees began to flow in on an ever increasing scale, and as the office of Guru was associated with an ever-increasing degree of wealth and power, so its holders adopted the ambiguous title of *Sacha Padshah*, which can equally well mean True Emperor as Emperor of Truth.

Relations with the Mughal Empire

By this time the Mughal Empire was at the height of its power and magnificence, and since their headquarters in Amritsar was only 50 kilometres away from the provincial capital in Lahore, the Sikh Gurus not only began to play an increasingly significant role in the local politics of Punjab, but also to be drawn into Imperial politics. This was particularly the case in the succession dispute which followed the death of the liberal Emperor Akbar in 1605. Although Akbar's much more authoritarian son Jehangir was first in line of succession, Akbar deliberately kept him far away from the capital fighting endless military campaigns in the Deccan, while Jehangir's more mystically inspired son Khusrau — whom Akbar favoured as his successor — spent much of his time in Lahore in the company of the sufi mystic Mian Mir, himself a close associate of Guru Arjun Dev. When Akbar died, a succession dispute immediately erupted. Although Khusrau declared himself Emperor in Lahore, Jehangir did just the same when the news of Akbar's death reached him in the South, whereupon he promptly marched north at the head of a large army. Khusrau was unable to defend himself, and was eventually captured and imprisoned, as were all his supporters and associates, including Guru Arjun Dev. Arjun was taken to Lahore, where he was executed on May 30th 1606. The Sikhs had their first martyr.

Ever since Arjun's death the Sikh movement has constituted itself around two sharply contrasting strands. While the mystical and internalist aspects of Nanak's teaching have remained a constant source of spiritual inspiration, this has also been complemented by an increasingly active and militant — and indeed often military — turn of mind. Since his very existence offered a threat to Mughal authority, Arjun's son and heir the sixth Guru Hargobind (1595-1644) found that he had no alternative but to take shelter in the forested Himalayan foothills on the very periphery of the Punjab, where his cultivation of hunting and warfare resulted in him becoming at least as much a focus military resistance as a source of spiritual inspiration. Throughout the seventeenth century the Mughal authorities and successive Sikh Gurus played a game of cat and mouse, and this became particularly vigorous in the time of the tenth and last Guru, Gobind Singh (1666-1708).

Guru Gobind Singh and the creation of the *khalsa*

Gobind Singh (or Gobind Rai as he then was) inherited the Guruship at the age of nine, after his father Tegh Bahadur was executed by the Mughal authorities in Delhi as the potential leader of a peasant revolt. His minders brought the child-Guru back as close as they dared to Punjab, so Gobind spent his formative years in the village of Paonta on the banks of the river Jumna, but well-sheltered in the depth of the sub-Himalayan jungles. Following the tradition established by his immediate predecessors, Gobind not only received elaborate training in warfare, but proved to be a very successful military leader. His success in battle enabled him to be a constant thorn in the side of the authorities, and by playing the role of *sant-sipahi*, saint-soldier, gained a reputation as a warrior for justice which spread throughout the Punjab.

The tenth Guru's most significant contribution to the Sikh tradition was the creation of the military order of the *khalsa* which he established at the spring festival of *baishaki* in 1699. According to legend, Gobind demanded that five of his followers who were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the cause should step forward; then he led each volunteer into his tent before emerging with a bloody sword in search of the next victim. When five had thus been disposed of the Guru miraculously restored their heads, and promptly initiated the *panch pyare*, the five beloved ones, into the new *khalsa* brotherhood. Having stirred sugar and water with a double-edged sword in a steel bowl, each one — and then Gobind himself — drank some of the *amrit*. Thereafter, proclaimed Gobind, all members of the *khalsa* who had been so initiated should take the common title Singh as an indication of brotherhood, as well as adopting five external symbols as a public indication of their distinctiveness. These were:

- Kesh* — uncut bodily hair
- Kanga* — a wooden comb to keep their hair well-ordered (unlike long-haired but unkempt *sannyasis*)
- Kirpan* — a sword
- Kara* — a steel bangle worn on their sword-arm
- Katch* — long britches

Although most contemporary Sikhs regard the five Ks as an indivisible marker of religious orthodoxy, scholars have thrown considerable doubt on whether every one of these components were actually introduced in 1699, on the grounds that the *rahit-nama* literature appears to suggest that the full regalia did not develop until later in the eighteenth century. What is beyond dispute, however, is that only a fraction (and probably only a very small proportion) of those inspired by

Nanak's teaching actually accepted the discipline of the *khalsa* during the tenth Guru's lifetime.

His death in 1708 also generated further transformations. Gobind left no heirs, for his four sons were killed in battle before their father's death, and as far as the great majority of Sikhs are concerned the expiry of the tenth Master brought the line of living Gurus to an end. Thereafter the Guru's spiritual authority was seen as being invested in the one hand in the *Adi Granth* (which was consequently renamed the *Guru Granth Sahib*), while his temporal authority was transferred to the *Panth*, the assembly of Sikh devotees.

Ranjit Singh and the Kingdom of Lahore

The experience of the Sikh movement was exceedingly chequered in the following century and a half. Gobind designated Banda Bahadur as his immediate political successor (although certainly not as Guru), and as soon as he returned to the Punjab Banda headed up a successful peasant revolt against Mughal authority. It was some years before the central authorities were able entirely to suppress Banda's rebellion (he was executed in Delhi in 1716), but the slow decay of the once-glorious Mughal empire was leaving it increasingly vulnerable to external predation as well as internal revolt. The British had already begun to establish a substantial toe-hold in the south and east, and then in 1738 a Persian Army swept through Punjab to loot the wealth of Hindustan. Further invasions followed for the remainder of the century, and as Imperial authority crumbled a series of *khalsa*-inspired warrior bands known as *misl* gained effective control of much of rural Punjab.

While nowhere near strong enough to challenge the Persian and Afghan invaders, the *misl*s were nevertheless able to harass the baggage trains of departing armies, and to take advantage of the consequent political vacuum — as did the eighteen year-old leader of the Sukerchakia *misl*, who took control of the city of Lahore in the aftermath of the last such invasion in 1799. Ranjit Singh proved to be an immensely sophisticated statesman. Having proclaimed himself Maharaja in 1801, he went on to dominate all the other *misl*s even though they were nominally his co-equals, and extend his rule over the greater part of Punjab and many of its neighbouring territories. His affluent, powerful, and well-organised kingdom eventually stretched from the banks of the river Sutlej in the southeast (beyond which lay British territory) to the mountains of Afghanistan in the west, and also included both the fertile valley of Kashmir but also the distant fastnesses of Ladakh far to the north.

Although Maharajah Ranjit Singh had nominally established a Sikh kingdom in Punjab — his government's official title was *Sirkar Khalsaji* — it was anything but a theocracy. Sikhs, whether followers of Gobind's *khalsa* or the much more amorphous Nanak Panth, only made up a small proportion of the population, and except in military contexts, by no means enjoyed a position of privilege, for both Muslims and Hindus also played a very prominent role in the state. It was the full range of *Punjabi* culture, rather than its narrow Sikh components, which flourished in the very successful kingdom of Lahore.

British Rule and Religious revivalism

However the kingdom's success did not survive the Maharajah's death in 1839. Endless succession disputes weakened its political fabric, and this gave the British the chance they were waiting for.

In 1845 a large invading Army crossed the Sutlej, but the going proved far from easy. Three bitter campaigns were fought before the Punjabis were finally defeated in 1849, and their province was consequently incorporated into the British Empire. During the century of British rule which followed, the Sikh tradition underwent some even more radical transformations.

While it is undoubtedly the case that Nanak's teachings were very widely accepted as a source of mystical inspiration when British rule was first established, the Sikh community was most certainly not as strong or as distinctively organised as it subsequently became. In terms of popular religious practice boundaries between Punjab's Muslim, Hindu and Sikh traditions were often hazy, and the more sharply demarcated *khalsa* tradition had largely fallen into abeyance. This was not to last for long, however, for the indignity of foreign rule soon precipitated politically-inspired movements of religious and national reform. In Punjab this manifested itself through the rapid growth of three-way rivalry between resurgent forms Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam.

Punjab's Hindus were the first to mobilise themselves, and they did so under the banner of the Arya Samaj. To many Hindus, and especially to the newly educated urban elite, the Samaj's thoroughgoing program of "Vedic" reform with the objective of restoring unity and dignity to Indian society was most attractive; however those who followed religious traditions which the reformers aimed to sweep away on the grounds that they were either diversionary accretions (as in the case of Sikhs) or alien imports (as Islam was characterised) became increasingly alarmed by the success of Arya Samaj. Hence they both soon established reform movements of their own in order to protect themselves against the corrosive impact of Christian and Arya Samaji missionary efforts.

Reform and revivalism amongst the Sikhs

Amongst the Sikhs, the principle vehicles for these processes were the Singh Sabhas, which were very active around the turn of the century, and the more politically inclined Akali Dal, which came to the fore in the early 1920s. Just as the Arya Samaj sought to revive and in effect to reinvent Hinduism, so the Singh Sabhas and the Akali Dal sought to "restore" Sikhism to what they took to be its initial condition of distinctiveness and purity. Given that their principal concern was to underline Sikh distinctiveness, Guru Gobind Singh's creation of the *khalsa* was a major source of inspiration, so much so that the reformers soon came to regard this as the only legitimate form of Sikh practice, and to castigate those who remained faithful to Nanak's original teachings of interiority as "slow-adopters". Given the absence of any clear boundaries between Sikh and Hindu social and religious practice, the reformers also put a great deal of effort into "rediscovering" distinctively Sikh rituals of birth, marriage and death in which the services of Brahmin priests could be dispensed with, into suppressing sectarian divisions, and into removing what had now come to be identified as "Hindu accretions" from the major Sikh Gurudwaras.

The Gurudwara Reform movement of the early 1920s brought all these issues to a head.. Much to the embarrassment of the reformers, most of the historic Gurudwaras had long been controlled by non-*khalsa* (and possibly even Hindu) Mahants; hence it became an urgent priority of the Akali Dal to replace them with officiants who reflected the new orthodoxy. However the Mahants saw no reason to relinquish their offices, and as they began to be subjected to increasingly bitter (and sometimes violent) attack they sought protection from the courts. This put the authorities in a considerable dilemma, since the issue at stake was property rights, which the British regarded as

the very foundation of the Raj. Since British law treated Mahants as owners of their Temple's assets, the Mahants argued — with strong support from the Arya Samaj — that Sikh protestors were illegally trying to deprive them of their rightful property. That might have been the end of the matter, but for the fact that the Akali Dal succeeded in mobilising widespread support amongst Jat Sikh villagers, who also had their own quite separate grievances against the largely merchant-dominated Arya Samaj. Borrowing Gandhi's tactics of non-violence, Akali volunteers set out to reoccupy the historic Gurudwaras, from which they were excluded by the police. After nearly 30,000 protestors had been arrested and imprisoned, 2,000 wounded and 400 killed, the authorities caved in. The Mahants were ousted regardless of their notional property rights, and the historic Gurdwaras were handed over to democratically elected Shromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee. Not surprisingly this was dominated by adherents of the new *khalsa* orthodoxy, and this perspective has effectively held sway ever since.

Partition and "ethnic cleansing"

At one level the Gurudwara Reform Movement was a very effective challenge to British dominance, for it showed that popular revolt could indeed force the authorities to change their minds. But there was a major cost to this success: it divided Punjabi society by further reinforcing a previously virtually non-existent disjunction between its Hindu and Sikh components. In the years that followed further disjunctions opened up between Hindus, Sikhs, and the region's Muslim majority, and these became so serious that partition was virtually inevitable when British rule finally collapsed in 1947. This proved to be an exceedingly violent process. Punjab was divided between India and Pakistan, and set off a process of ethnic cleansing. As many as a quarter of a million people lost their lives, and a further ten million who found themselves on the wrong side of the newly drawn border were forced to flee.

Although Punjab's Sikhs and Hindus placed themselves in the same camp in contradistinction to the Muslims in 1947, many tensions still remained, and these continued to sharpen. In 1966 a further division took place between Sikh-dominated Punjab and Hindu-dominated Haryana, but even that failed to settle some festering grievances which were further exacerbated — paradoxically enough — by Punjab's growing agricultural wealth. During the early 1980s these were exploited by a charismatic preacher named Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. His central message was that all Punjab's troubles stemmed from Hindu domination, from which a return to *khalsa* rule in an autonomous state of *Khalistan* offered the only escape, and these arguments began to attract enthusiastic support from two very different constituencies: unemployed students and dispossessed Jat peasants.

Although most Sikhs were deeply sceptical about the wisdom of Jarnail Singh's ever-increasing fanaticism, the new prophet encouraged his followers to take Guru Gobind Singh as their model and to arm themselves — if necessary with kalashnikovs — in defence of righteousness. Mayhem increased as his followers' exploits became steadily more outrageous, and Jarnail Singh eventually sought shelter in the sacred precincts of the Golden Temple. While the authorities quite reasonably decided they had no alternative but to arrest him, their tactics proved to be disastrous. On 6th June 1984 the Golden Temple was surrounded by the Indian Army, and what was planned as a swift surgical strike began. It turned out to be nothing of the kind. Opposition turned out to be far tougher than expected, and for a while the Army lost command and control of its soldiers. 48 hours passed before Bhindranwale was finally eliminated, but by then several hundred innocent

pilgrims had been machine-gunned in their rooms, light tanks had been driven onto the perimeter of the sacred pool, and the Akal Takht — the second most sacred shrine after the Golden Temple itself — had been reduced to a ruin by shellfire. Order may indeed have been restored, but at the cost of what most Sikhs viewed as a malicious and sacrilegious attack on all they valued most. If most viewed Bhindranwale's tactics with great scepticism before the attack, in its aftermath he became a *shaheed*, a martyr for the Sikh cause.

Unfortunately the Government of India, reflecting the increasingly nationalistic feelings of many Hindus, took a very different view of these events. Bhindranwale, and thus implicitly all those who showed him any sympathy, were portrayed as armed fanatics whose principal aim was to destroy Indian unity, who therefore deserved all they got. Hence the incipient disjunction between Hindus and Sikhs was widened still further, and precipitated much chaos. In November 1984 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards, and in the subsequent (well-organised) riots on the streets of Delhi at least 2,000 Sikhs lost their lives. Thereafter Punjab was reduced to near chaos as the police sought to hunt down "extremists" — as virtually all turban-wearing young men tended to be identified. Many returned the complement by arming themselves and going underground. In the years that followed several tens of thousands of people lost their lives, at the hands both of the "extremists" and as a result of "police firing".

Despite the situation of near civil war to which all this gave rise, an unsteady peace eventually returned to Punjab in the early 1990s. Although the indiscriminately brutal tactics of the Punjab police — many of whose officers were themselves Sikh — almost destroyed their credibility, the militants — who had initially gained considerable sympathy from the Sikh peasantry — gradually undermined their own position as a result of their increasingly extreme, and indeed criminal, tactics. By the mid 1990s Punjab was more peaceful than it had been for a decade, and rapid economic growth in what is still India's most prosperous agricultural province has once again resumed. However the gulf between local Hindus and Sikhs is wider than ever before.

Into the next millennium

The Sikh tradition's public face has changed dramatically during the past century and a half. Ever-increasing rivalry — and often outright conflict — between Sikhs and their Hindu and Muslim neighbours has led to a steady sharpening of boundaries, and an ever greater emphasis on the external symbols of *khalsa* a means of marking that disjunction. Yet although neo-orthodox revivalism has therefore played a key role in articulating the community's sense of social and political solidarity, the externalist modes of thought and practice which revivalism enshrines has by no means overwhelmed the more internalist and mystically inspired components of Guru Nanak's teachings, even if the latter strand of the Sikh tradition has now been rendered largely invisible in public contexts.

Ever since the formation of the Singh Sabhas, revivalists have sought to suppress sectarian diversity on the grounds that it undermined collective solidarity. Yet although all of Sikhism's many sectarian movements — each of which follows its own spiritual master — therefore found themselves under intense pressure to conform to the new *khalsa* orthodoxy, those groups who were primarily inspired by the mystical dimensions of Nanak's teachings remain vigorously active to this day. Hence while the neo-orthodox ideologues, whose agenda is primarily social and political, invariably present a picture of unity, homogeneity, and behavioural conformity, enquiries

about the spiritual and mystical dimensions of the Sikh tradition reveal a wide — and very active — range of sectarian variations. These include such well-known groups as the Nirankaris, the Namdaris, the Nirmalas, the Radhasoamis and the Ravidasis, as well as a much larger number of smaller and more localised religious brotherhoods.

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