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SIKHISM TODAY

Jagbir Jhutti-Johal

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For
Karamveer and Amarveer

Contents

Preface

Sikhism has a rich and distinctive history, during which it has forged a unique identity while interacting with the other major religions of India – Hinduism and Islam – as well as impacting in a major way on the culture of the colonial power that was eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain.

To put into context, Sikhism was founded in the fifteenth century by Nanak, the first 'Guru' of Sikhism who, following a divine revelation, set out to preach the oneness of God and the importance of truthful living. He was able to bring together a number of schools of religious thought and philosophy, namely of *nirguna sampradaya*, the *sant* tradition. Today Sikhism is widely thought of as the most highly articulated expression of this tradition. Guru Nanak rejected the need to perform rituals such as idol worship, pilgrimages and fasting in the quest for spiritual liberation. Instead, he advocated meditation, *nam simran* and truthful living as the route to enlightenment (Banerjee 1983, McLeod 1997, Singh 1977).

Guru Nanak was succeeded by nine Gurus, and as the number of Sikhs grew, institutions and structures were put in place to consolidate this growth. The tenth and final Guru, Guru Gobind, established the *Khalsa* in 1699 CE, which cemented a militaristic dimension within Sikhism. This was partially in response to the threat posed to Sikhism's survival by the rulers of India, the Mughals. The *Khalsa* gave Sikhs an external identity which supported the internal identity as given by Guru Nanak. After the fall of the Mughals, Sikhs, under the rule of Ranjit Singh, established a large empire in Northern India, but this was only to be short lived (1799–1849) and was subsequently annexed by the British (McLeod 1997).

In the twentieth century the British exploited the military prowess of the Sikhs and many Sikhs were recruited to serve in the army and police, both in India and abroad. This relationship with the British, coupled with economic need, resulted in many Sikhs migrating to the United Kingdom after the 1950s. There are now more than 400,000 Sikhs in the United Kingdom and as a community they are well established.[1] Sikhs are now a fundamental part of pluralist British identity and are represented at all levels of British society. They have also been subject to a variety of media portrayals and interests, such as the Sikh warriors of Peter Dickinson's 1970s *The Changes* (a BBC trilogy); the Sikh family portrayed in *Bend It Like Beckham*; and the Bollywood film *Singh Is King*, which had a cover song involving the rap star Snoop Dogg. But Sikhism is more than either an Indian or UK-based phenomenon, there is a sizeable presence of Sikhs in other European nations such as France, Italy and Germany. Sikhs have also migrated in large numbers to other Western countries, such as the United States, Canada and Australia, to Singapore and Malaysia, and countries in Africa, such as Kenya.

While Sikhs appear to be a thriving global community which is influencing the social and political culture of the countries in which they reside, it is also evident that there is a readdressing among third- and fourth-generation Sikh migrants, but also by Sikhs in Punjab, India, of their own religious identity and values, and hence this is of great academic interest.

In recent years there has been a rapid rise in books on Sikhism, particularly in the West. This book will move away from a general historical introduction to Sikhism, which I believe has been adequately covered elsewhere. Instead, it will introduce the subject of Sikhism through the lens of contemporary issues confronting Sikhs. Issues will be discussed from a theological perspective, rather than just the cultural one which has defined the theological debate. However, some of the analysis will have to be supported by socio-cultural issues and values which also have been misinterpreted to have religious meanings/background.

For example, the rapid advances of medicine and biology present new challenges for the Sikh faith. There is general agreement on topics such as euthanasia and the making of a 'living will' or 'advance directive'. Life is seen as a gift from God and an opportunity to strive for enlightenment. Illness, suffering and pain are a result of one's actions (*karma*) in this or a previous life, and should be endured with moral

courage and fortitude. The ultimate point of release from this life is the will of God (*hukam*) and should not be interfered with. Thus, assisted suicide and euthanasia are forbidden. However, on the subject of artificial prolonging of life, the argument is not so unequivocal. Some Sikhs may argue that in cases where further treatment is uncompassionate or medically ineffective, then the artificial prolonging of life should not be encouraged and the patient should be allowed to die naturally. In other instances the artificial prolonging of life may be encouraged and seen as necessary. Whatever the decision, the duty of family, friends and medical practitioners is to do everything to alleviate suffering while providing emotional and spiritual support during the last stages of life.

Other issues, such as genetic engineering and stem cell research, trigger lively debate among Sikhs and as yet no clear consensus has emerged on these issues. Most Sikhs will continue to make a personal choice on these matters.

Methodology

It is from this context, and the fact that there is a dearth of serious literature looking at how Sikhs deal with modern-day issues, that this book is written.

As a British-born member of the Sikh community, I located myself within my own religious community to carry out research on how the community and the religion operate when confronted by modern-day issues and how individuals deal with them using the Guru Granth Sahib as a guide. This book will describe the Gurus' philosophy and teachings, but it will be new and novel in that it will apply the basic tenets and teachings to current issues. When looking at current issues it will become clear that there is a plurality of interpretations of the teachings contained with the Guru Granth Sahib. Individuals reading the Guru Granth Sahib can arrive at different meanings and interpretations of the text, and it is because of this plurality that Sikhs will need to find a common language and come to a consensus on what things mean.

The primary source of reference for this study is the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs.[2] The Guru Granth Sahib is the Sikhs' perpetual guide and the epitome of the spiritual teachings of Sikhism. It is at the centre of all Sikh ceremonies. Secondary sources include the *Dasam Granth*, a book attributed to the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh; *Janam Sakhis* (hagiographical life account of Guru Nanak); and

other key references (e.g. Bhai Gurdas Ji's writings) are also consulted. I have chosen verses from the Guru Granth Sahib on such themes as liberation/salvation, morality and God and analyse them from a modern-day perspective. For example, there are many verses which discuss how liberation can only be achieved by living the life of a 'householder'. These verses will be used to discuss the disparity between what is written in the Guru Granth Sahib and what has actually been achieved in relation to the position of women and family. I will also use verses to interpret and discuss issues such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) and homosexuality.

To support the primary sources, I have undertaken some limited fieldwork to gather information on how individuals interpret the teachings contained in the sacred scriptures. I interviewed first-, second-, third- and fourth-generation Sikhs from various castes, social classes, age groups and localities in the United Kingdom and had informal discussions with *granthis* (priests). While all my first-generation informants, especially the *granthis*, were born and brought up in India, all my second-, third- and fourth-generation informants were born in Britain, although some had spent a short time in their parents' country of birth. My fieldwork is limited and I am aware that my respondents' comments may not be representative of all Sikhs, but nevertheless they are useful in highlighting the variety of views and opinions regarding modern-day issues that are present within the community.

My selection of respondents was not systematic. The interviews with elders were conducted in Punjabi, but some were conducted in English. Interviews with my second-, third- and fourth-generation respondents were mainly conducted in English, but some respondents did regularly lapse into Punjabi.

The responses to the interviews were intensely personal and revealing. All respondents discussed how they felt about issues such as homosexuality and abortion. However, it was the young Sikhs who discussed their own experiences and talked about their beliefs and interpretations with surprising frankness, unlike their parents.

In some places, where respondents' answers to my interviews are used, names are not provided due to confidentiality. I have endeavoured to keep the quotes in the spirit in which they were told. I am aware of the problems of de-contextualization, and the danger of using quotes to support any given argument or to make generalizations that this is a commonly-held belief for all Sikhs.

Thus, through the available primary and secondary literature, and through fieldwork, I will describe how the teachings of the Gurus are

observed and how modern-day issues are being addressed through a reinterpretation of teachings contained within the Guru Granth Sahib.

Structure

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Sikh religion, its history and basic theological tenets. The subsequent chapters attempt to interpret the teachings of Sikhism in a modern context and apply them to modern-day scenarios.

Chapter 2 broadly explores the interaction and growing conflict between religion and science, with particular reference to Sikhism. It then examines the tenets of Sikhism in relation to the ethics of genetic and stem cell research, cloning, IVF and animal testing. Very little research has been done on how science and the advances in biology and medicine, such as stem cell research and genetic engineering, present new challenges to Sikhs in terms of interpreting scriptures and teachings to form a consensus on these issues.

Chapter 3 looks at the concept of gender equality within Sikhism. At the time of Guru Nanak, society demeaned and degraded women through a variety of activities. Guru Nanak did not approve of this treatment of women, and in an attempt to raise their position within society he reiterated that his teachings on liberation, salvation and morality were equally relevant for men and women. The chapter then looks at the current status and role of women in Sikh society and presents actual case studies to highlight the continuing practice of gender inequality; for example, the case of baptized Sikh women not being allowed to perform certain *sewa* at the Harmandar Sahib (Golden Temple). Most importantly the attitudes and actions of the Gurus responding to gender inequality that existed in their time is discussed with reference to the current issue of female foeticide and gender preselection.

As with other religions, Sikhism faces issues of morality and ethics among its adherents. Issues include homosexuality, abortion, contraception and so forth. Chapter 4 examines these issues in relation to Sikh teachings from the Guru Granth Sahib and guidance provided by the Sikh religious authorities. This chapter was a challenge due to the lack of available research and unwillingness of some respondents to talk about issues such as abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality. However, this may have been due to their own limited understanding

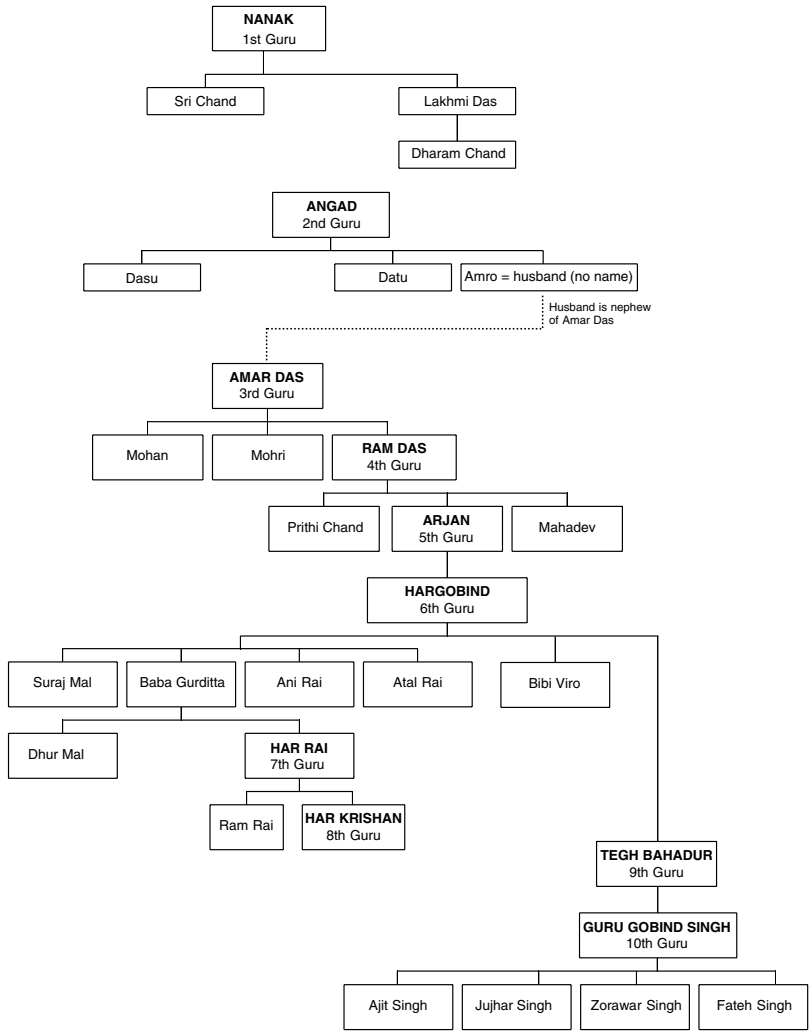
of these topics with reference to Sikh teachings. Despite the difficulties and limitations, the chapter highlights the issues involved and provides a basis for further research on such topics in the future.

Chapter 5 considers the question, 'Who Is a Sikh?' The chapter introduces the reader to the significance of baptism and the five articles of faith for Sikhs, and the historical struggles undertaken to maintain their Sikh religious identity. When discussing this, legal cases (turban and *kara* cases) are discussed with reference to their impact on the idea of who is a Sikh.The growing divide between baptized and non-baptized Sikhs and religious apathy, particularly among Sikh youth, are also considered when discussing the question of who is a Sikh.

The conclusion considers whether modern issues that are confronting the Sikhs, such as gender inequality, advances in science and technology, family life and homosexuality, can be addressed and understood through a critical engagement with the Guru Granth Sahib. It also considers whether the process of interpretation and reinterpretation has led to an abandonment, changing or impoverishment of the religious teachings from their original form.

The Gurus in the Sikh Religion

Name	Born	Period of Guruship	Relationship
Guru Nanak	1469	1539–	
Guru Angad	1504	1539–1552	Follower of Nanak
Guru Amar Das	1479	1552–1574	Guru Angad's son-in-law's uncle[3]
Guru Ram Das	1534	1574–1581	Guru Amar Das' son-in-law
Guru Arjan	1563	1581–1606	Guru Ram Das' son
Guru Hargobind	1595	1606–1644	Guru Arjan's son
Guru Har Rai	1630	1644–1661	The younger son of Guru Hargobind's eldest son
Guru Har Krishan	1656	1661–1664	Guru Har Rai's son
Guru Tegh Bahadur	1621	1664–1675	Guru Hargobind's youngest son
Guru Gobind Singh	1666	1675–1708	Guru Tegh Bahadur's son
Guru Granth Sahib	1708–eternity		Sikh Holy Book (Eternal Guru)



Genealogical Table of the Gurus

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