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A Fresh Look At Sikh Religion

By

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Introductory Remarks

Among the World religions Sikh religion comparatively is young. Numerically also the followers of Sikh religions are not large. According to the Census of India in the grand total of India's population i.e. 6659, 2879, 8491, the total number of Sikhs is 13,078. 146 out of which 8,937.210 are living in the Panjab province of India and the remaining 4,1409936 are scattered in the rest of the country.[1] These figures do not include the Sikhs living in other countries like the U.K., Canada, USA and other Western and Eastern countries. As these figures show percentwise Sikhs are less than 2%, but they are having a special place among their country people an account of their special characteristics i.e. very hard workers, technical-minded, adventurous nature and willing to embrace all kinds of work. Because of their adventurous and enthusiastic nature, today they are found almost all over the world. On account, of visible insignia given by Sikhs' tenth Guru which includes uncut hair (and use of turban) makes the Sikhs' presence felt in any place. - In this brief study of Sikh religion I will be limiting myself only with one area. I will be looking from the historical perspectives how the Sikh religion came into existence and its growth during the period of 1469 AD - 1703 AD. This period is the most important, because - all the development of Sikh religion belongs to this era only.

The Spirit of the Age

The beginning of Sikh religion is part of world wide reawakening and revival movement of middle age (15th) and 16th century). This period of global history is important because this is the period when God's spirit was moving and stirring the hearts of many all over the world. This is the time when Columbus made his voyage (1451-1504. Vasco da Gama travelled to the East including India (1460-1524). Michael Angelo (1475-1564) Raphael (1483-1520) 1520) and Da Vinci (1452-1519) had worked on their masterpieces in the field of art. The Renaissance of European culture reached its peak. Reformation in the church on the Continent (Europe) under the leadership of Martin Luther (1483-1531), Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-1564) was in full swing. During this period Martin Luther undertook the translation of the Bible into vernacular. - On the' Indian sub-continent this period was equally important, because the most important movement known as Bhakti (devotional mysticism) was started. Men and woman show the dissatisfaction to the old rigid and ritualistic ways of religion. Through the Bhakti movement came a religious reawakening. R.C.Mujumdar summed up the main characteristics of Bhakti movement as: 1) preaching in vernacular which thereby got a great impetus; 2) ignoring the caste distinctions; and 3) definitely rejecting rites and ceremonials as useless and laying stress on morality and purity of the heart. 3) Among the welknown Shakti teachers or leaders were Ramananda (1400-1450), Tulsi Das (1532-1623), Kabir (1544-1603); Vallabhacharya. (*1449), Caitanya (1486-1533), Mira Bhai (*1449) etc. The founder of the Sikh religion Guru Nanak (1469-1539) also belongs to the same period. About Guru Nanak while describing him as one of the most important reformers of his time Or. Mujumdar says: "He was a more courageous reformer and went much further than the other two Ramananda and Caitanya). This was because he completely did away with caste distinctions and ceremonials. He also used vernacular i.e. Punjabi. In a similar way a reawakening movement took place among the Muslims and this was led by the Muslim mystic known as sufi i.e. Sheikh Farid, Sheikh Brahan, Miyan Mr, Kabir etc. We find not only much common of the teachings of Guru Nanak with Shakti saints. but also with sufi saints equally. Some writers like Ethne K.Marenco have gone to the extent suggesting: "The culmination of the sufi movement of the Muslims and the Shakti movement of the Hindus was to be found in the doctrines of Guru Nanak"[5].

Interpretation of the Age

Before we move toward the development or growth of Sikh religion, we need to consider two welknown school of thoughts regarding the beginning of Sikh religion. We have already made reference to one such school above, according to which: "About the year 1500 Guru Nanak founded the Sikh faith by preaching a

synthesis of Bhakti Hinduism and Islamic sufism ..."[6]. - The essence of Shakti is the human being's love toward God. Here a person must consider God in a very intimate personal relationship, such as Mira, Caitanya, such as child in Surdas. Here a concept of theism as opposed to the traditional doctrine or pantheistic becomes the basis of worship and devotion. The noun bhakti comes from the Sanskrit root bhaj which means "attachment, fondness for devotion to, trust. homage. worship, piety. faith or love or devotion". In a nutshell it. "indicates the worshipper's attitude of loving devotion toward the Deity; parsed, the Deity's loving compassion. or grace toward the devotee"[7]. The Islamic sufism is having number of similarities with Hindu Shakti, but it basically believed in the concept of fana which means becoming completely one with God by forgetting or destroying oneself. Sufism gives more importance to the activities of the inner self than to the observances of outward religions practices and rituals. In sufism the place of teacher (pir or murshid) is considered very high and also love towards God is equally important. Like Shakti thought for a sufi God is considered as the lover, and lover and beloved (sufi) have to identify themselves with each other fully. - It is true Guru Nanak's teachings have many similarities both with the Hindu Bhakti and Sufism. But here we must remember Guru used the peoples' language and terminology which were known to average people already through Shakti saints and Sufi mystics. - The second welknown school of thought regarding the beginning of Sikh religion is found in the writings of W.H. McLeod. He rejects the above school of thought i.e. Sikhism is synthesis of Hindu Shakti and Muslim Sufism. He says "It is true that Vaisnava bhakti constituted a primary element of the Sant synthesis but it is this element which had been largely transformed by its association with another important tradition." This other important tradition is the Nath tradition according to him. The followers of Nath tradition practised the Hatha-yoga, which demanded a complete physical discipline. The Nath tradition rejected all kinds of idol worship, rituals, , pilgrimage and casts. They also used vernacular languages. McLeod says: "It was the influence of Nath doctrine and practice upon Vaisnava bhakti which is primarily responsible for the emergence of the Sant synthesis. Muslim beliefs, both Sufi and orthodox, had almost a marginal effect. The Vaisnava insistence upon loving adoration remains central, but the understanding of the nature of this adoration has been transformed by Nath concepts of unity, interiority, and the mystical ascent." He further says, "Although the teachings of Guru Nanak do indeed constitute a synthesis it is not that synthesis of Hinduism and Islam, which finds mention in most surveys of his thought. It is the Sant Synthesis, a system which he inherited., reworked according to his own genius ..."[8]. - But what McLeod is saying about Nath's tradition or his interpretation can be questioned also. Because there are other thinkers who will interpret the Nath tradition quite differently. For example Sukumar Sen while writing about the Natha cult says: "But they outwardly admit God and call Him Krsna and Caitanya as the Vaisnavas do. The Nath yogis had no concern with God; each of them was God in the universe of his own body"[9]. Such thoughts will find no

place in Guru Nanak's teachings. In the same way we find many basic differences in the teachings of Hindu bhakti and sufism and Guru Nanak. For example Guru Nanak stressed on the importance of family life living in the world, but on the other hand both Bhakti teachers and Sufi stressed an the renunciation of this world. Guru Nanak also appointed his successor in order to keep continuity of his faith which no other bhakti or Sufi saint has done. Because of such reasons Gurbachan Singh Talab has rightly said: "These writers think that the Sikh religion does not have any originality in itself, it is a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. The supporters of such school of thought either are western scholars, or those Indians whose study is not based on the basic principles found in the Sikh scripture. but is based an western sources"[10].

Origin and Development of Sikhism

Guru Nanak

We will now look in more detail how Guru Nanak founded his religion and how after him it was developed. The situation in which the founder of Sikh religion was placed can be compared with those which some of the Old Testament prophets faced i.e. Amos. Amos as we know was an ordinary village shepherd, who suddenly while attending his daily ordinary duties of life of a shepherd saw that his society which is supposed to be engaged in great prosperity, notable religious piety and apparent security, was not on the right path. Because Amos' inner self was stirred by God's spirit and he could see that prosperity was limited to the wealthy, and that it fed on injustice and on oppression of the poor. Religious observance is insincere and security more apparent than real. With passion and courage an ordinary shepherd under the pressure of God's spirit challenged both the religious and political leaders of his time (Amos 5: 159 6:14). Similar conditions we see in the time of Guru Nanak (1469-1539). Guru Nanak states in very strong words the condition of his time in one of his writings: "The Kings are butchers, justice has taken wings and fled. In this complete darkness of falsehood the moon of truth is never seen to rise"(Var Majh). So this was the background or the religious, the social and the political conditions to which Guru Nanak responded. - Guru Nanak was born on 15th April 1469 A.D. in a village Nanakana Sahib which was about 65 kilometres from Lahore. His parents were Hindu Khatri. As a young boy he studied both under a Hindu and a Muslim teacher. He was always interested to spend time with religious saints belonging to different religion groups. But nobody could satisfy his inner desire or quest. As a young boy he was also not interested in his father's business. His father made many attempts. Whatever money his father gave him he spent it in taking care of the poor and the hungry. His father tried to divert his attention towards the worldly life by getting him married. He did spend some period with his wife and two sons, but still all this could not satisfy his inner hunger. So one day he left his home. He prayed and meditated. He thought about the bitter dif-

ferences of Hindu and Muslims. After many years of experience, he was led to a very radical belief, which he stated in a simple statement: "There is no Hindu, there is no Mussulman". After this enriching experience he took two companions, one Muslim named Mardana and the other a farmer (Jat) Hindu called Bala. He called them 'Bhai' which means brother. Mardana was a musician, Guru Nanak used to compose his massages which Mardana set to music and then they would sing. Guru Nanak basically used the local language. His simple teachings appealed to Punjabi villagers who were farmers from the community known as Jat. Within few years Guru Nanak had many disciples (or shishyas in Sanskrit). These shishyas were later on known Sikh, the Punjabi forms of the same. That is how we have name Sikh, the followers of Guru Nanak. Afterward Guru Nanak travelled all over India. even he went to Ceylon, Nepal, Tibet, Mecca and Baghdad with his message of peace and reconciliation i.e. 'there is no Hindu, there is no Mussalman'. - One important thing about Guru Nanak was that he never claimed to be God. He was fully satisfied with being a teacher or a Guru[11]. In the words of Khushwant Singh: "His crusade was against the fanaticism and intolerance which had become the practices of the Muslims, and against meaningless ritual, discriminations of caste and sex which had become an integral part of the Hindu"[12]. To communicate his concerns to both Hindus and Muslims he used very simple methods. Once during his visit to Hardwar he saw a Hindu while taking bath in the sacred Ganges river, throwing water toward the rising sun (east) as an offering to his dead ancestors. Guru Nanak also stood near this man and started throwing water in the opposite direction (west). When he was questioned, about what he was doing, he replied calmly, "I am watering my fields in Panjab", and further he added. "If you can send water to the dead in heaven, surely I will be able to send it to my village in Panjab". Another time while visiting Mecca, one day he slept with his feet towards Mecca. An angry priest woke him up and told him, "Brother. you are showing disrespect to this Holy Place". Guru Nanak replied "Brother. if you feel I am showing disrespect by having my feet towards the Holy place where you think God lives, then you please turn my feet in some other direction where God does not dwell". Guru Nanak spent the last years of his life with his family in his village Kartarpur where he lived a life if an ordinary man and he showed how one can fulfil his spiritual duties while living in this world.

Teachings of Guru Nanak:

Discussing, in details, the beliefs of Sikh religion, I would like to mention here very briefly the basic teachings of Guru Nanak, which are core of Sikh religion. I will be referring only to one of Guru Nanak's writings namely Japji. This is considered the most important writings of Guru Nanak, which is placed in the very beginning of Sikh scripture known as Guru Granth Sahib. During the last year of Guru Nanak before his death at Kartarpur he completed this work. So this represents the cream or summary of his teachings and thoughts. - Japji or

known as, for the Sikhs, Japji Sahib, begins with the definitions of God, known as the Mool Mantra: the basic statement of Sikh belief. It reads:

"There is one God.
Eternal Truth is His name.
Maker of all things,
All-pervading.
Without fear and without hate,
timeless and formless.
Beyond birth and death.
Self enlightened.
By the grace of the Guru He is known".

After stating the nature of God and how one attains the knowledge of the same, then Guru Nanak has raised very basic question, which St.Paul raised in Romans Ch. 3 one and a half thousands years earlier, and during reformation period the same question was asked again: "How then does a man become holy". staple's answer we find in Roman 3:21-24 and the reformer's answer was still simple: "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from work of law"[13]. Guru Nanak's formation of his question was: "How we can find truth. How can the veil of false illusion be torn?" Before raising this question, he stated that:

"In the beginning there was truth,
the same is now and will be forever.
One cannot find that truth,
simply by thinking,
Even having that thought of a hundred thousand times.
One also cannot find that truth,
by keeping silent,
even by deep meditation.
.....
One may have hundreds of thousands devices,
but none will help to find truth."

In these above thoughts Guru Nanak has rejected all the possible traditional methods or margas or Ways to solve or answer the basic questions of human quest:

"How we can find truth, /false
how can the veil of/illusion be torn?"
Guru Nanak's answer is:
"By walking according to the commandments of God
or by accepting His will, says Nanak."

Of course Guru Nanak further in Japji discussed the different aspects of the same questions; but his firm conviction we find that it is only through the grace of God one gets salvation:
"Through action one's birth is determined.
Through grace alone comes salvation."

Of course basically the religion of Guru Nanak is based on Nam Japna which literally means remembering God's name.

Other Gurus

There were nine other Gurus after Guru Nanak. He appointed one of his disciples named Lehna. Lehna's name was changed to Angad which means 'limb' and indicated that he was the extension of the former Guru. Here too points should be noted that according to Sikh belief: the succeeding Gurus were part of the preceding Nanak-Guru and in this way they were Nanak themselves. So the first Guru continued to be in spirit as head of a the Sikh movement. The second point here needs to be noted is that Guru Nanak's step of appointing his successor was the first indicator that he did believe in the continuation of his movement. According to W.H.M. McLeod there are three very important events which took place during the first two centuries of Sikh history (1469-1708), in other words, during the period of ten Guru: "The first was the formal appointment by Guru Nanak of a successor to the leadership of the Community which had gathered around him. The second was the compilation of a canonical scripture by Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, in 1603-4. The third was the founding of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The first of these events established a regular, recognized succession within the new Community and so provided an effective apostolic continuity in the leadership. The second enshrined in permanent form of the teachings of the first five Gurus soon after the original delivery of these teachings. The third event provided a visible insignia and explicit discipline which members of the community could renounce only at the cost of virtual excommunication" [15]. These distinctive features in the years to come saved Sikh religion from absorption into Hinduism [16]. - Each Guru further strengthens the Sikh movement started by Guru Nanak and also contributed his specific contribution to the growth of Sikh religion. The second Guru Angad (1539-1552) popularized the Gurumukhi script, which helped the development of the Panjabi language. This was the script which was used later an for the writing of Sikh Scripture. It was different from Devanagri script, which was used to write the Sanskrit, the language of Brahman priestly class of Hindus. - Guru Angad appointed his successor one of his disciples named Amar Das, who was born in 1479. He served as Guru for twenty two years (1552-1574). By the time of Guru Amar Das the Sikh movement was spread all over the rural Panjab. Particularly farmers of Panjab living in villages known as Jat have accepted the Guru's religion. In the future to come these Jat villagers jointly contributed much to the growth of Sikh religion. Now as the Sikh religion was spending so a proper organisation was needed. In order to fulfil this need Guru Amar Das organised 22 Centres or dioceses and appointed lay preachers to take care of each centre. He also commissioned 146 well trained missionaries, out of which 94 were men while 52 were women [17]. This was indeed a bold step on the part of Guru Amar Das particularly giving equal status to women with men. But this again

was in tune with the first Guru Nanak's teachings, who has taught: "How can we say evil about women, who have given birth to kings (Asa Di Var). Guru Amar Das also made popular the institution (started by Guru Nanak) of the langar or free kitchens in Gurudwaras (Sikh temples) where all castes of people had to share common meals. He also founded for Sikhs a centre of pilgrimage at Gobindwal at the bank of the river Beas in Panjab. He introduced forms of Sikh marriage ceremony and Sikh festivals, which were different from Hindus. These steps were to add toward the beginning of Sikh church. - After Guru Amar Das, the fourth Guru was Ram Das (1574-1581), who was the son-in-law of the third Guru. He was born in 1534. From now onward the guruship became hereditary. Guru Ram Das's main contribution was laying the foundation of the Sikh holy city Ramdaspur, which was later on known as Amritsar. He also got dug the holy tank and built a small temple which was later on developed into the present Golden Temple. - The fifth Guru Arjan (1581-1606) was born in 1563 at Gaindwal. He was the youngest son of Guru Ram Das. Arjan was a great builder. He built the famous Golden Temple in Amritsar, which now is the main pilgrimage place for Sikhs. He built another Sikh temple at Taran Taran about 20 kilometres south of Amritsar. He also founded the town of Kartarpur and Sri Gobindpur, both in Panjab. Besides being a good builder, Guru Arjan was a born poet and scholar. His greatest work was the compilation of the Adi Granth (Sikh scripture) in 1604, which includes the writings of the first four Gurus along with his own. But he also included in the writings of both Hindu and Muslim saints. The compilation of the Adi Granth was a major step for the future of Sikh religion. This Holy Scripture for Sikh is the base for all religious and other matters.At a later stage some writings of other Gurus were also added in the Adi Granth. - By Guru Arjan's time the nunber of Sikh community was grown and became stronger. The Muslim Emperor Jahangir did not like this. So the popularity and work of Guru Arjan came into the notice of the Muslim Emperor. who get arrested the Guru and tortured him to death in Lahore in 1606. Thus Guru Arjan became the first most important in Sikh history. - After Guru Arjan's death, his son Hargobind became Guru in 1606 and he was Guru till 1645. During his time as Guru, a turning point in Sikh history came. Guru Arjan's execution by a muslim Emperor and their growing hostility toward Sikh and Hindu forced Guru Hargobind to prepare his followers to defend themselves by military. In fact Guru Arjan already has prepared him for this and asked Bhai Budha to make Hargobind a soldier-saint. So after becoming Guru, to give load to his followers, he himself wore two swords: as symbols of spiritual (Piri) and temporal (Miri) power. He also combined the symbols of service, the Deg (the cauldron to serve to the needy) and Tegh (the sword to defend the helpless). This he asked his followers to adopt as their life principle. This, according to Ganda Singh was the first step towards the transformation of Sikh religion into a militant church [18]. - The seventh Guru Har Rai, son o f Babu Gurditta, was born in 1630. He was Guru from 1645 till 1661. He developed further a fighting force of 2,200 horsemen, and also organised the missionary preaching work outside Pan-

jab. - Guru Har Krishan was only five years old, when he became Guru. He was only for three years Guru i.e. 1661-64. He went to Delhi in response to the summons of Emperor Shah Jahan where he contracted smail-pox and died. There his last words were: "Baba Bakale" which means a place in Panjab where his successor was to be found. - The ninth Guru Tag Bahadur was the youngest son of Guru Hargobind and was born in Amritsar in 1621. He became Guru in 1664 to 1675. He was a zealous preacher. Guru Tag Bahadur was supporter to the cause of religious freedom. To get freedom of worship for Hindu Brahmins he has to appear before the Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb, who asked Guru to accept Islam. But the Guru refused for which he was beheaded on November 11, 1675

Birth of Khalsa

After his father's sacrificial death Gobind Singh (1666-1708) became Guru in 1675 to 1708. He was only ton years old when he became Guru, so he spent some years in studying Persian, Sanskrit, Panjabi, Hindi and the art of war. He prepared himself for his mission. - At last came the greatest day of the history of Sikh history i.e. at the time of Baisakhi festival in March 1699 assembled his followers at Anandpur Sahib and selected in dramatic manner five beloved ones known as Panj Piyaras. Among these five, two persons were from high caste, a Brahmin, a Khatri and three were from lower castes. Then the Guru baptized these five by giving them to drink amrit water, a stirred with double-edged sword) out of the same bowl. (In turn the Guru was baptized by them). After the baptism Guru-declared the five beloved ones as the khalsa which means the pure ones, and he gave them new names with suffix 'Singh' (lion). (Now onward all the male followers will be known as 'Singh' and the female will be known as 'Kaur' which means princess.) The Guru also made them take an oath to observe and wear the five K's: Kesh (hair). Kanga (a comb), Kara (a braclet), Kachha (a pair of shorts), Kirpan (a sword). They were also told not to smoke tobacco and consume alcoholic drinks, not to eat meat slaughtered in the Muslim fashion, but eat meat only Jhatka of an animal killed outright with one blow and not have relationship with Muslim women. After the baptism Guru greeted the five beloved ones with these words: "Wah Guru ji Ka Khalsa - Wah Guru ji ki Fateh", which means: "The Khalsas are the chosen people of God - Victory be to God." So thus the khalsa brotherhood was founded and the final stage militarization was completed. But we must remember that Guru never himself waged a battle first. He always fought to protect his followers. While writing to Emperor Aurangzeb, he wrote in his Epistle of Victory known as the Zafarnama: "Helplessly, as a last resort, I came forward and took arms. When all other means have failed, it is lawful to resort to the sword"(21:22). - After this Guru Gobind Singh gave the final form to the Sikh religion. He has already transferred the physical leadership of the Sikh movement to the representatives of the Community, elected or selected on the basis of their devotion to Gurus' teachings. Along with

this before his death he also announced that he would have no human successor. Instead of that the 'Granth Sahib' (the Adi Granth) will be as the only Guru of the Sikhs. In the Adi Granth he added 116 hymns written by his father Guru Tegh Bahadur, but none of his own. In this way the process which had begun about two hundred years back was now completed and at this stage the Sikh religion also became the Religion of the Book. - After Guru Gobind's death till today the belief in the ten Gurus and in the Granth Sahib remains the central core where the followers of Sikh religion are concerned. But there came number of occasions, when Sikhs are threatening for their identity and they have suffered for their religion. But no further development where the Sikh religion is concerned has taken place.

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