Chapter 8: Sikh Traditions

Chapter Overview

In “Sikh Traditions,” Pashaura Singh examines the teachings, history, and practices of Sikhism. Throughout the chapter, Singh discusses the major elements in Sikh tradition, including the meaning of the term Sikh (“disciple”), the ten Gurus, the Adi Granth (the sacred scripture), and Akal Parakh (“Timeless being”). Singh places the development of Sikhism in its historical, religious, and geographical contexts, and explains the teachings of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and how the life of Guru Nanak serves as an example for Sikhs. Guru Nanak’s mystical experience, as the foundational event of Sikh tradition, emphasizes the Sikh teaching of a common humanity that underlies external divisions. Thus, Guru Nanak’s statement “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim” establishes Guru Nanak’s vision of a common humanity that then becomes the basis for Sikh practices and teachings, including the *langar* meal, hymns, *kirtan*, the participation in interfaith dialogue, the egalitarian principles that changed the treatment of women in the Sikh community, the ideals of community service, and the personal experience of the divine in the world. Moreover, Singh discusses the innovations of the eight gurus after Nanak, and the establishment of the Guru Granth Sahib as the final guru in accordance with the foundational teachings of Guru Nanak.

Singh pays particular attention to the worship practices of the Sikh tradition, and connects these practices to the ideals of the community and the historical situation in which they arose. Thus, Singh discusses the founding of the Khalsa, its initiation ceremony and the Five Ks (*kes*, *kangha*, *kirpan*, *kara*, *kachh*) as resulting from the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh’s resolution to make the community more visible. Singh also examines the innovations of other Gurus, including Guru Amar Das’ creation of the 22 *majis*, the collection and distribution of devotional hymns, and the abolishment of *sati*, Guru Ram Das’ establishment of Amritsar and contribution of hymns, and Guru Arjan’s building of the Darbar Sahib (“Divine Court,” later known as the Golden Temple). Furthermore, this chapter looks at Sikh reform movements including those introduced after the Anglo-Sikh wars, and modern challenges in twentieth-century India. Other topics of interest in this chapter include Sikh ethics, Sikh diaspora, Sikh festivals (Divali and Baisakhi Day), Sikh life-cycle rituals (naming of children, marriage and death), and contemporary issues such as Sikh visibility, environmental policies, internet technology, sexuality, and bioethical issues.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Summarizes the historical context from which Sikhism arose within India including the story of Guru Nanak and the development of Sikhism under the nine subsequent Gurus.
2. Comprehends and explains the Sikh–Mughal conflict and the creation of the Khalsa.
3. Identifies and explains the core teachings, sacred scriptures, practices and rituals of Sikhism.
4. Summarizes the developments in Sikh identity, including the establishment of the Khalsa, from the Mughal to modern postcolonial periods.
5. Compares and contrasts the Sikh social norms, culture, institutions, reform movements and variations within and throughout the modern diaspora.

Study Questions

1. What were some of the institutional innovations introduced by Guru Amar Das (1479–1574) that strengthened the unity of the Sikh Panth? In what ways did these innovations strengthen the Panth?
2. What are the Five Ks, what do each of them symbolize, and why were they introduced?
3. What are the four categories of sacred scriptures and literature within the Sikh traditions?
4. Identify and explain the three key terms that Guru Nanak (1469–1539) employed to describe the nature of divine revelation.
5. Identify the *langar* and explain why it is central to Sikh practice?

Study Questions: Answers

1. In addition to founding the town Goindval, Guru Amar Das established two annual festivals (Divali and Baisakhi) that provided opportunities to bring the community together. Additionally, Das did the following: (1) introduced the 22 *manjis* (seats if authority) as bases for missionaries seeking converts; (2) oversaw the preparation of the Goindval *pothis* (“volumes”), that is, the compositions of the first three Gurus; (3) and oversaw the copying of hymns for distribution, which provided a common frame of reference for communal worship. Furthermore, Das abolished the wearing of the veil and *sati*, allowed women to become missionaries (nearly half of the *manjis* were women), allowed widows to remarry, and gave Sikh women equal rights to conduct prayers and other communal ceremonies. These innovations strengthened the Panth by instituting equality, belonging, and providing necessary resources. (p. 371)
2. Guru Gobind Singh introduced the Five Ks to ensure that Khalsa members would never conceal their identities as Sikhs. The Five Ks are outward symbols of the divine Word to be worn by the members of the Khalsa. The first is *kes*, unshorn hair, which symbolizes spirituality and saintliness. The second is *kangha*, a wooden comb, which symbolizes order and discipline. The third is *kirpan*, a miniature sword, which symbolizes divine grace, dignity, and courage. The forth is *kara*, a steel “wrist-ring,” which symbolizes responsibility and allegiance to the Guru. The fifth is *kachh*, a pair of short breeches, which symbolizes moral restraint. (p. 374)
3. The four categories of sacred scriptures in the Sikh tradition are as follows: (1) the first and primary scripture is the Adi Granth (also known as Guru Granth Sahib), it is a compilation of divinely inspired hymns by six gurus, 15 poet-saints, and 15 Sikh bards (poets), in total, there are 36 contributors; (2) the Dasam Granth, which is attributed to the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, contains devotional texts, biographical works, mythical narratives and popular anecdotes; (3) the third is a collection of works by Bhai (“Brother”) Gurdas (1558–1637) and Bhai Nand Lal Goya (1633–1715), which are sanctioned for singing within the gurdwara, that is, the Sikh place of worship; (4) The forth category of Sikh literature is made up of three distinct subsets: (i) the *janam-sakhis* (“birth narratives”), (ii) the *rahit-namas* (“manuals of code of conduct”), which provide insight into the evolution of the Khalsa code in the 18th and 19th centuries, (iii) and the *gur-bilas* (“splendor of the Guru”) literature, which especially praise the deeds of two warrior Gurus: Hargobind and Gobind Singh. (pp. 375–376)
4. Guru Nanak employed the following three terms to describe revelation: (1) the first term is *nam*, which means divine Name and refers to the presence of the divine in the world; (2) the second term to describe revelation is *shabad*, which means “divine Word”; (3) the third term is *guru*, which means “divine Preceptor”. Most of humanity is self-centered and thus unable to perceive the *nam*, however, Akal Purakh (i.e., the Eternal One, the source, and the goal of all that exists) takes pity on humanity by revealing himself through the *guru* in the form of the *shabad*. (p. 378)
5. The *langar* is the communal meal that is given after worship at the gurdwara. This communal meal is central to Sikh practice because it is prepared by the community for the community therein modelling community service, which has a major role across the Sikh traditions. Furthermore, the caste and gender divides are inoperative during the *langar* meal, which promotes the Sikh ideals of egalitarianism and belonging. (p. 383)

Research Questions

1. Guru Nanak’s mystical experience is the foundational event for the Sikh community. How did this event establish the central ideas and foundational practices of the Sikh traditions?
2. What is the significance and meaning of the rich symbolism associated with the initiation ceremony of the Khalsa?.
3. In what ways is the Guru Granth Sahib central to Sikh life?
4. How do Sikh marriage vows emphasize the necessity of the spiritual compatibility between the married couple and within Sikh society as a whole?
5. Hymns and devotional singing (*kirtan*) are a central component of Sikh worship. Analyze one hymn from the Guru Granth Sahib evaluating its teachings and the ways in which it is sung.
6. Identify and explain the significance of the rituals, practise and beliefs associated with the death of a member of the Sikh community.
7. Referencing the work of Simran Jeet Singh (see Interview box in the textbook) and other Sikh activists (see Additional Resources for links to organizations and movements), what are some of the ways and strategies by which contemporary Sikhs are preserving and transforming the Sikh traditions in the 21st century?
8. Several Sikh reform movements were based on the idea of restoring a distinct Sikh spiritual identity. Examine one of the reform movements and explain how the movement sought to restore Sikh spiritual identity.
9. How did Sikh identity form in relation to the development of Gurmukhi?
10. How does the role of women in Sikh traditions illustrate the egalitarian principles of Sikhism?

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think that interfaith dialogue promotes opportunities for spiritual growth in Sikh traditions?
2. Why do you think that Sikhs work to raise awareness of Sikhism across the world?
3. With reference to examples, what are your impressions and reflections on the place of women in the Sikh traditions?
4. What are some teachings of the Sikh gurus that exemplify the high value placed upon human life?
5. How do the four notions of Guruship help us understand the major teachings of Sikhism?

Additional Resources

1. Sikhs.org. <http://www.sikhs.org/>

This easy-to-navigate website provides basic general information on Sikhism under the following subsections: introduction; origins and development; philosophy and scriptures; and ways of life.

2.Sacred Texts of the Sikh Tradition. <https://sacred-texts.com/skh/index.htm>.

The Internet Sacred Text Archive database has made available here the central sacred scripture of the Sikh tradition: Shri Guru Granth Sahib.

3. “Understanding Sikhism,” PBS SoCal Documentary. <https://www.pbs.org/video/viewfinder-understanding-sikhism/>

This brief documentary, which is set in a primary school classroom in Yuba City, California (which has one of the largest Sikh populations in North America) is a finely produced introduction on the history, culture, clothing, service, social activism and teachings of Sikhism.

4. The World Sikh Organization of Canada. <http://www.worldsikh.ca/>

A not for profit organization that protects the interests of Sikhs in Canada and promotes human rights for all humans; of interest are its facts page on Sikhs in Canada, and its videos on understanding the gurdwara, the issue of wearing *kirpans* in public, and its news reports on Sikhs in Canada

5. Sikhism. The Pluralism Project: Harvard University. <http://www.pluralism.org/religion/sikhism>

The website of The Pluralism Project (Harvard University) provides a valuable range of resources on Sikhism with essays on the Sikh experience; timelines on Sikhism in the World and Sikhism in America; directories of religious centers; religious diversity news; a select bibliography and select links.

1. 3HO: Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization. <https://www.3ho.org/>

The official website of 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) provides a range of well-organized and accessible resources including major sections devoted to the following: 3HO Lifestyle; Events; Kundalini Yoga; Yogi Bhajan; IKYTA; Service.

7. The Nanhi Chhaan Foundation. <http://www.nanhichhaan.com/aboutus.htm>

A non-profit organization, inspired by the Sikh faith, addressing social issues in India related to an adverse gender ratio, environmental degradation, and secularism, with the objective “to wholesomely address these issues and to restore nature’s balance.”

8. Jakara Movement. <https://www.jakara.org/>

The Jakara Movement describes itself as “forging a Gurmat-inspired generation through creative leadership development, community organizing, and social activism. We believe a world of engaged communities, strong families, healthy individuals and inspired youth is possible.” The website includes resources related to news, programs, ways to be involved and stay connected.

9. The Sikh Coalition. <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/>

This is the official website of the Sikh Coalition which over the last seventeen years has been a “community-based organization that works towards the realization of civil and human rights for all people.” The website contains a range of material such as information on who Sikhs and their tradition, ways to get involved, news on policy initiatives, community empowerment and institution building, a blog and other resources.

10. Eleanor Nesbitt. 2005. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

11. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, eds. 2014. *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For Sikh sacred sites, these rules usually mean that knees, shoulders and heads should be covered for both men and women, and loose dress worn. Shoes will also need to be removed. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.