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Reimagining Sikh Religion, Origin and Growth: An Overview

Abstract:

Sikh religion has its origin in the land of Punjab. It is the youngest of the major religions of the world. This religion was an attempt to reform Hinduism and Islam. It believes in the idea of monotheism and its roots can be traced back into the tradition of Sant and Sufis¹. Encyclopedia of religion defines it as a religion of Sikhs who lives in Punjab and adjoining areas. Its prominent character is the concept of brotherhood based on religion not on race or ethnicity.

The word 'Sikh' is derived from Sanskrit 'Shishya' means 'disciple'. A.S. Sethi claims that the word is 'Sekho' which means a person who is dedicated to truth. Sikhs follow ten Gurus beginning with Guru Nanak and ending with Guru Gobind Singh². In 1708, after the death of Guru Gobind Singh, personal Guruship ended. From there onward, the Sikhs revered the Adi Granth (Holy Book of the Sikhs) as their Guru³.

Sikh uses two words interchangeably, one is Sikh and the other is Singh. Loehlin observes that "Sikh means learner, and Singh means Lion⁴. He believes that these two terms aptly describe the difference between them.

The Unity of God, brotherhood of man, rejection of caste and the futility of idol worship were the main tenants of the preaching of Nanak. Nanak tried to unite both Hindus and Muslims into one brotherhood. Nanak's main claim/utterance was "There is no Hindu; there is no Mussalman."⁵

Emergence of Sikh religion as a process of history

Guru Nanak was born in 1469 and died in 1539. That time in the history of India was a critical period in terms of its political stability and social disorder. Harbans Singh writes that it was a historical necessity for Nanak to be born because India was passing through a critical period. That time signify ignorance, injustice and intolerance on the part of every leader from religious to political⁶.

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1.1. Caste system: its origin

When the Aryans came, the people of northern India worshipped many a Gods and Goddesses. Polytheism was the religion of Northern India at times but the Aryans were different. They were worshippers of rising sun, moon, the sky, thunder, light and other natural objects. Hindu Pantheon was originated as a result of the amalgamation of both the faiths of aboriginals and the Aryans. Aryans settled in India and divided the common people into four castes, viz. Brahmin, Kashtriya, vaishyas and the Sudras. According to Khushwant Singh, caste system has been rightly described as Brahmanical Hinduism. Reason was that it was the Brahmins who molded this pattern of social order to serve their own ends⁷.

The first revolt or reformation against the Brahmanical Hinduism was started by Mahavira who was the founder of Jainism and Gautama the Buddha who was the founder of Buddhism. In the south of India the Alvars and the Adyars started the renaissance of Hinduism against the caste distinctions of Brahmanical Hinduism.

Advent of Islam was another major blow to the caste system of India. As a religion, Islam was first introduced in India in the 8th century A.D. through the Muslim traders from Arab. D hillon observes that, "The Arabs, under Muhammad-bin-Qasim (A.D. 711-12) opened the North-West gate for the advent of the Muslims in India and thus Muslim influx started⁸." In the Western part of India, especially in Malabar region Arab Muslims spread "from the year A.D 636 onwards."²¹ Gradually in the South of India also Islam spread to the Tamil regions. The invasion of Mahmud of Ghazni (A.D. 971-1030) caused havoc in the minds of the local Hindu people because he destroyed Hindu temples.

Bhakti movement

The Bhakti movement, which was a reformist movement of 11th century India, was the Renaissance movement within Hinduism. It was a kind of revolt against caste system and worship of Idols. The exponents of Bhakti movement in the South India were Samkara (A.D. 800), Ram anuja (A.D. 1016-1137), Madhava, Vallava and others. Of these Samkara was a Brahmin and established the faith of uncompromising monism. He believed in the existence of One God and absolute submission to the Will. But it was Ramanuja (A.D 1016-1137), who popularized the Bhakti movement in the South of India and advocated the path of Bhakti (devotion) as the best means to salvation.

In Northern India, Ramananda²² (1360-1470), a Brahmin of North India, popularized the cult of Bhakti. But it was qualitatively different from Ramanuja. Kabir⁹, a Muslim by birth was a disciple of Ramananda. Khushwant Singh stated about Kabir as "the chief Protagonist of an understanding between Hindus and Muslims."¹⁰

In the early years of the sixteenth century, the Sufi Mystics tried to harmonize Islam with Hinduism. Sufis acquired their knowledge from the Quran (The Holy Book of Islam) and Hadith (contains the dialogue, speech and practice of Prophet Muhammad) of Islam. Like the Muslims, they also believed in One and Only God. But the most significant aspect of Sufism was the way of life adopted by the Sufi

leaders. Contrary to the Muslim conquerors who tried to demolish the nonbelievers and ruined their religious shrines, the Sufis welcomed the nonbelievers as their brothers. The concept of universal brotherhood of the Sufis formed a bridge for religious synthesis between Hindus and Muslims. Hence the influence of Sufi ideas and practice on the advent of Sikhism as a religion is most important. In this context, Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions stated "Sikhism is an eclectic faith combining the teachings of Bhakti Hinduism and the Muslim Sufis."¹¹

Politics of the time of Nanak

During the time of Nanak's birth the reigning dynasty was the Lodis and Sultan Bahlul Lodi (1451-89) who reigned that time¹². The Encyclopedia Americana states "When Nanak began teaching in 1499 there was almost complete lawlessness under the weak Lodi dynasty and the government was taking active measures to repress Hinduism. Nanak's doctrines in large part were a response to these chaotic conditions"¹³. Therefore Guru Nanak appeared at the juncture when both Hinduism and Islam were being corrupted by their religious authorities. And at this juncture Guru Nanak, propounded the Sikh religion.

Development of Sikh religion

Regarding the development of Sikhism, McLeod states that the beginning period of Sikhism started from Guru Nanak and ended with the death of the tenth Guru Gobind Singh in 1708. This period was of fundamental importance, because three important events happened during this period.

First

The first one was the formal engagement of a successor by Guru Nanak to the leadership of the community.

Second:

The second important event of the period was the compilation of the authentic canonical Scripture, Adi Granth (First Book) by the fifth Guru Aqun Dev.

Third:

The third one was the founding of the Khalsa (Pure) in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh¹⁴.

Phases of Sikh Religion:

Dhillon divided the development of Sikhism into two phases. The "first in the sixteenth century when the faith originated; second in the seventeenth century when it blossomed and finally became a third entity among the Hindus and Muslims"¹⁵.

Evolution of Sikh Religion

First Phase:

In the evolution of Sikh religion, we can trace a twofold development. The first phase of development, i.e. from "Guru nanak down to the year 1604 when the compilation of the Granth Sahib was completed"¹⁶ after but from the execution of the fifth Guru Arjun the Sikhs gradually became a military order. The first idea of militarism arose within Sikhs during the Guruship of the Sixth Guru Horgobind. The beginning and end of the seventeenth century was important for two important institution i.e. 'Miri', 'Piri' and 'Khalsa'. In the word of Banerjee "the whole character of the movement changed as a peaceful sect was gradually turned into a military order and the devotee developed into the soldier saint. 32 the second stage of development ran from 1605 upto the year 1699 when the Khalsa was created by Guru Gobind Singh.

The first Sikh Guru Nanak was a reformist whose role is comparable to King Luther and John Calvin in the Christian world. Fundamental teaching of Guru Nanak are contained in the verses known as Japji Sahib, which is the morning prayer of the Sikhs. Japji presents the spiritual, ethical principles for the realization of higher realm f reality. It is a unique expression of the identity f metaphysics and ethics achieved by a thinker. His other compositions are Asaa-di-var, Siddha-Goshti and Onka. Asaa-di-var consists of the sociological aspects of Guru's thought.

Nanak was accepted by the Hindus and the Muslims alike as a representative of god who had revealed himself in human form to guide humanity. Nanak was much popular among both and conversation between Guru and Mardana throws light on this very aspect:

"Before he breathed his last , the Guru asked him as to how should his mortal remains be disposed of and it is then that Mardana replied that he was neither a Mohammadan nor a Hindu and therefore his remains should neither be treated according to Mohammadan rites nor according to Hindu rites but should be thrown into the river."¹⁷

Nanak visited all important centres of pilgrimage in India and abroad. Guru Nanak visited the Shrines of different religions. About the intention of Nanak The Everyman Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy states, "Nanak's intention had been not to unite Hinduism and Islam but to begin a new religious outlook and to found a new community cleansed of the corruptions of both and, while blending the insights of both, expressing itself in simple celebration of the name of the One God"¹⁸.

As a supporter of strict monotheism, Nanak believed and preached the Oneness of God. Ek Onkar and the brotherhood of mankind. He described 'God' as 'Sargun' as well as 'Nirgun'. The chief characteristic of Guru Nanak's religion is its emphasis on the ethical aspect of social life. This is however, the indispensable aspect of all the religions. Nanak attached great importance on Nam. By repetition of Nam, according to Nanak, one can conquer his evils. Three important commandments of

Nanak are 'Kirt Karo', i.e. 'do your duty', 'Nam Japo', i.e. 'repeat the Name of God' and 'Vand cako' i.e. 'give in charity.'

Nanak rejected the distinction of castes in society and established 'langar' or 'Community Kitchen' as a practical step to break the barriers of castes in society¹⁹. 'Sangat' or 'holy assemblies' is also an important institution started by Guru Nanak²⁰. Another most notable point of Guru Nanak's religion is that by living in a householder's life one can attain salvation. Guru Nanak rejected the orthodox view of Laws of Karma and reinterpreted it by providing more room for freedom of man.

The works of Guru Nanak not only provided the doctrinal base of Sikh religion, but also promoted its institutional growth and development by setting up Sangats (holy con-claves) during his extensive travel for over thirty, years in India and abroad. He visited Arabia, Mesopotamia, Afghanistan, Tibet, Burma and Ceylon.

Table 1

Guru Nanak was succeeded by nine Guru:

Angad	1504 - 52 (Guru 1539 - 52)
Amar Das	1479-1574 (Guru 1552 - 74)
Ram Das	1534 -1581 (Guru 1574 - 81)
Arjun Dev	1563 - 1606 (Guru 1581-1606)
Hargobind	1595 - 1644 (Guru 1606 - 1644)
Har Rai	1630 - 1661 (Guru 1644 - 1661)
Har Krishan	1656 - 64 (Guru 1661 - 1664)
Tegh Bahadur	1621 – 1675 (Guru 1664 - 1675)
Govind Singh	1666 – 1708 (Guru 1675 - 1708)

Two main sects of Sikh religion

From the days of Gobind Singh onwards there arose in Sikhism two main sects as Nanak panthis or the Sahajdharis (followers of Nanak) and the 'Khalsa' or Keshdharis (followers of Gobind Singh).

Sikhism and its Branches

Sahajdharis and Keshdharis

Two of the major divisions of Sikhs were 'Nanakpanthis' or 'Sahajdharis' and 'Keshdharis' or 'Khalsa'. Nanakpanthis were the followers of Guru Nanak while 'Keshdharis' are the followers of tenth Guru Gobind Singh. Nanakpanthis or

Sahajdharis did not keep long hair or wear the special signs of the Khalsa. While the Keshdharis accept the baptism inaugurated by Guru Gobind Singh. The title of the Keshdharis are 'Singh'. They Should follow all the ceremonial and social observances enforced by Gum Gobind Singh.

Udasi

Udasi²¹ Sect was founded by Sri Chand, the eldest son of Guru Nanak. It was an ascetic order. According to Macauliffe Udasis were the Schismatical body of the Sikhs. The term Udasi' as stated by Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, "derived from Sanskrit Udas, 'Sad', and means 'Sorrow' or 'Sadness'."²²

Ram Raias

Ram Raias, are the followers of Ram Rai, the eldest brother of Guru Hari Krishen, son of Guru Har Rai. Ram Rais are non-conformists. In the lower Himalayas, they have a greater number of adherents.

Handalis

Handalis, were the third Schismatical body of the Sikhs. According to Macauliffe, they "were the followers of Handal, a Jat of the Manjha, who had been converted to the Sikh religion by Guru Amar Das, the third Sikh Guru."²³

Minas

'Minas' were the second Schismatically body of the Sikhs. 'Minas' are the followers of Prithi Chand, elder son of the fourth Guru Ram Das. Prithi Chand was disobedient to his father. Therefore Ram Das nominated his youngest son Arjun as the fifth Guru. Loehlin Stated about 'Minas' as "Mina is a term of contempt."²⁴ 'Mina' is a term used for 'deceitful' or 'insincere'.

Nirankaris

Nirankaris, a modern sect of Sikhism. It is a religious movement arose in the last lap of 19th century. Baba Dayal (1783-1854) was the founder of the Nirankari Sect. The Nirankaris believe in God as the Spirit without physical form. They are the worshippers of the formless. Consequently Dayal Das declared himself as a Nirankari and hence his followers also announced themselves as Nirankaris.

Gangushahis

Gangushahis, were the followers of Gangu, a disciple of third Guru Amar Das. The followers of this sect were against the initiation ceremony of Guru Gobind Singh.

Dhirmalia

Dhirmalia, founded by Dhirmal, elder brother of Guru Har Rai, is another Schismatical sect of the Sikhs.

Sanwal Shahis

Sanwal Shahis, are the followers of one of the disciple of Guru Nanak. According to Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, they are found chiefly in the South-west Punjab.

Sewapanthis

Sewapanthis, according to Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics are "confined to the Sindh Sagar Doab."²⁵

Kukas' or 'Namdharis

'Kukas' or Namdharis also is a reform movement. The nickname of the Namdhari Sikh is 'Kuka'. The main centre of the Namdhari movement was at village Bhaini in Ludhiana district of Punjab. The Namdharis led an anti-British movement. Ram Singh was the leader of the Namdhari movement. Ram Singh advised his followers to live a simple life and repeat God's Name or Nam. As the motto of this movement is the repetition of God's Name, the movement was named as the Namdhari movement. Namdharis are also called Kukas, because of their habit of emotionally piercing shouts during their religious exercises. They wear white cloth, white woolen necklace and they bind a high white turban. Kukas are abstained from smoking, intoxicating drugs and drinks. Adi Granth is their only sacred text.

Nihang

Nihang, founded by Guru Gobind Singh is another important sect of the Sikhs. They wear dark blue dress and peaked turban, often surmounted with a steel disc. Some of them wear a yellow turban under the blue. Modern blend of the Nihangs are known as 'Akalis'.

Nirmala

Nirmala sect was founded during the guruship of last Guru Gobind Singh. Gobind Singh selected five of his disciples and sent them to Benaras to study Hindu theology and Sanskrit. The school of these five theologians known as Nirmalas. K.S. Murty writes that Nirmalas "Sought to combine Advaita vedanta with the philosophy of action of the Sikh Gurus, eschewing Vaisnava bhakti emotionalism and preferring vedantic intellectualism."²⁶ The Nirmalas also celebrated Dasera, Diwali and the like common festivals of Hindus. Samkranti is their important festival.

Gulabdasis

Gulabdasis, is a religious movement started by Pritam Das, an Udasi mendicant. Followers of this movement stood against all kinds of religious activities and moral restrictions.

Diwana Sadhs

Diwana Sadhs is an order of Sikhs founded by Bala and Haria. Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics mentioned it as "ecstatic saints." The members of this order are mainly from Jats and Chamars.

Mazhabi

Mazhabi sect, originated from a converted sweeper. Mazhabi Sikhs are the descendants of these sweeper converted to Khalsa community by Guru Gobind Singh.

Ramgarhias

Ramgarhias, is one of the most important sects of Sikh community. At the beginning of the 19th century they adopted Sikhism. Jassa Singh, a carpenter was the founder of Ramgarhia Misl.

Radha Soami

Radha Soami sect was founded by Shiv Dayal (1818-1878). The doctrine which propounded by Shiv Dayal comprised the elements of both Hinduism and Sikhism. And he regarded God as stated by Khushwant Singh "as the union between radha (symbolising the soul) and Soami, the Master."²⁷

Gyanis

It is another important sect of Sikhism. The first Gyani was Man Singh who was trained by Guru Gobind Singh himself. Their main aim was to explaining Adi Granth in simple language to the common people.

Ramdasi Sect

Ramdasi Sect was applied to a weaver converted to Sikhism. Cunningham stated about Ramdasi Sect as "Sikhs of the class of Chumars, or leather dressers, and who trace to the Rao Das, or Rae Das, whose writings are inserted in the Granth."²⁸

Akali

During the early twentieth century Akali movement drew a large number of persons. Cunningham stated about Akali as "Worshippers of Akal (God), the most eminent of the orders of purists or Ascetics". Akalis first appeared during the reign of Ranjit Singh. At the beginning period Akalis moved against the British government. But now Akali is a most important political party in Punjab. With dark blue dress and peaked turban sur mounted with steel quoits, Akalis looked different from other armies.

Jat Sikhs

Jat Sikhs are purely agriculturists. In the words of Bingley "The Jats of the Punjab, whether Sikh or Hindu, are in every respect the most important of the Punjab races."²⁹ About the origin of the Jats Khushwant Singh writes, "It is now generally

accepted that the Jats who made the northern plains of India their home were of Aryan Stock.”³⁰ Jats are very courageous in nature. It should be mentioned here that Assamese Sikhs originated from this 'Jat Zamindar' Sects³¹. Jats whether Sikh or Hindu are most influential in every respect. They are good natured, without vanity, light-hearted, hard worker and undemonstrative in nature.

Sikhs in Assam

The people who belonging to Assam but following the Sikh faith are Assamese Sikhs. The Sikhs have assimilated-themselves into the Assamese society and have adopted the socio-cultural attitude of Assam.

Though Punjab is in the westward and Assam in the eastward of India, yet the visit of Guru Nanak and Guru Tegh Bahadur has strengthened the relationship between Assam and Punjab. Guru Nanak and Guru Tegh Bahadur visited Assam at different times. But it is very difficult to locate the exact year in which the state of Assam came into contact with Sikh religion.

History bears account that Guru Nanak, in course of his first Udasi³² (Missionary tour) visited Kamrup³³. In this context Macauliffe observes that "The Guru and Mardana went to Kamrup, a country whose women were famous for their skill in incantation and magic."³⁴ Trilochan Singh is of the opinion that during his travels to Assam, Guru Nanak met a landlord whose name was Bhai Bhumia³⁵. During his visit to Assam Guru Nanak visited the important religious centres of Assam. After the visit of Guru Nanak, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675) also visited Assam³⁶. During his journey towards eastern countries, Tegh Bahadur visited Benaras, Gaya, Allahabad, Patna, Dhakka and Assam.

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