

Sikhism

The Punjab region of northwestern India is home to Sikhism, a religion founded in the 15th century. Its followers, called Sikhs, believe in a supreme God who governs with justice and grace. Every human being, regardless of caste or gender, has the opportunity to become one with God. The basic human flaw of self-centeredness can be overcome through proper reverence for God, commitment to hard work, service to humanity, and sharing the fruits of one's labor. In the early 21st century there were nearly 25 million Sikhs worldwide, the great majority of them living in the Indian state of Punjab.

The 10 Gurus

The word Sikh means “disciple.” Adherents of the Sikh religion consider themselves disciples of the founder, Guru Nanak, and his nine successors (guru means “teacher”). Roots of the movement he founded were primarily in the Hindu cult of devotion to Vishnu, though the practices of the Muslim mystics called Sufis may have had some influence. Nanak taught that there is one God who is creator of the world. This God is completely unknowable except to those who can perceive Him in His creation. Such perception can only come to those who reject loyalty to the world and its values. Nanak laid out a path to salvation that was a simple devotional discipline of meditation. The goal was release from the cycle of birth and death. This cycle, known as samsara, refers to Nanak's doctrine of reincarnation: the soul is born many times into the world before it is finally released to find unity with God.

Nanak, who died in 1539, had nine successors as gurus. They, with the dates of their leadership, are Angad (1539–52), Amar Das (1552–74), Ram Das Sodhi (1574–81), Arjan (1581–1606), Hargobind (1606–44), Har Rai (1644–61), Hari Krishen (1661–64, who died at the age of 8), Tegh Bahadur (1664–75), and Gobind Singh (1675–1708). All 10 of these gurus, Sikhs believe, were inhabited by a single spirit. Gobind Singh lost all of his sons in his lifetime and declared the succession of gurus at an end.

Scripture

Upon Gobind Singh's death, the spirit of the eternal guru was considered to be embodied in the sacred scripture of Sikhism, the Guru Granth Sahib (“Guru Granth Personified”), also known as the Adi Granth (“First Volume”). Thereafter this work was regarded as the sole guru. Compiled by the fifth guru, Arjan Mal, it contains 6,000 hymns composed by the first five gurus, along with earlier Hindu and Muslim hymns. The Adi Granth opens with the Mul Mantra, the basic Sikh statement of belief: “There is one Supreme Being, the Eternal Reality. [This Supreme Being] is the Creator, without fear and devoid of enmity, immortal, never incarnated, self-existent, known by grace through the Guru.”

Practices

A Sikh place of worship is called a gurdwara. Each gurdwara contains—on a cot under a canopy—a copy of the Adi Granth. It also serves as a meeting place for conducting business of the congregation and wedding and initiation ceremonies. The first place of worship was built by Nanak at Kartarpur. The chief gurdwara and the most important Sikh pilgrimage site is the Harimandir, or Golden Temple. It was built in 1604 in the city of Amritsar, India. The nearby building known as the Akal Takht (“Throne of the Timeless One”) is the headquarters of Sikhism. An order, or hukamnama, issued from the Akal Takht is considered mandatory for all Sikhs.

A central concept in Sikhism is that of the Khalsa. The Khalsa began as a brotherhood of warriors founded by Gobind Singh in 1699 in response to persecution by the Mughal (Muslim) rulers of India. Any male Sikh who wished to join was inducted into the Khalsa (meaning “the pure”) by a rite called the amrit sanskar (“nectar ceremony”). Today the Khalsa is open to both men and women, and the amrit sanskar is considered the most important rite of passage in Sikhism. Those who undergo the ceremony vow to avoid liquor, tobacco, and drugs and to devote themselves to prayer. They are also required to wear the emblems known as the Five Ks: kes or kesh, uncut hair and beard

(necessitating the wearing of turbans); kangha, a comb to hold the hair in place; kirpan, a sword; kara, a steel bracelet; and kachha, a pair of short trousers. Sikh males take the name Singh, meaning “lion,” and females take the name Kaur, meaning “princess.”

Separatist Movement

When the British colony of India was partitioned into the independent countries of India and Pakistan in 1947, Sikhs were deeply dissatisfied because the Punjab was divided between the two countries. Almost all Sikhs in the western Punjab migrated to the portion retained by India. Many of them began to demand the creation of a state of their own. They achieved this goal in 1966 with the establishment of the primarily Punjabi-speaking state of Punjab, which had a Sikh majority.

For four decades following partition, the Sikhs enjoyed growing prosperity as agriculture thrived in Punjab. The growth of the state was interrupted in the mid-1980s, however, by conflict between the Indian government and Sikh fundamentalists, who were demanding a separate Sikh nation-state. In 1984 militant Sikhs led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale occupied the Akal Takht in the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar. In response, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered a military assault on the complex. Bhindranwale and hundreds of his followers were killed, and some of the temple buildings were severely damaged. Later that year, in retaliation for the assault, Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards. This in turn sparked violence against Sikhs and led to guerrilla warfare against the central government that lasted until 1992.

In the early 21st century Punjab was quiet, though the fundamentalist desire for a Sikh homeland continued. Meanwhile, the appointment of Manmohan Singh, a Sikh, as prime minister of India in 2004 was the source of great pride in the Sikh community.

Cite

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