
UNIT 4 PHILOSOPHY OF SIKHISM

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

Sikhism has developed a philosophy, though indebted to Hindu philosophy, with creative interpretation and new ideas. As in the case of Hinduism, Sikh philosophy cannot be completely segregated from the religious philosophy. This article is an attempt at introducing the students to the rich and varied interpretations of the different concepts in Sikh philosophy, so that the students will get a better understanding of those concepts.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Sikh philosophy subscribes to an idealistic monism with the characteristics of dynamism, non-dualism, and social commitment. Idealism in Sikhism can be understood in two ways i.e., the metaphysical sense and the epistemological sense. In the metaphysical sense, idealism is the theory of the ultimate Reality and in the epistemological sense it maintains that the object perceived is not independent of the perceiver. Sikhism is idealistic in its nature because it starts with the enquiry of the nature of the ultimate reality i.e., *Ik*, and this inquiry is spiritual in nature. Epistemological idealism starts its inquiry from the plurality of objects and ends with monism.

Sikhism is indebted to Islam and Hinduism in its development of the concept of metaphysical monism. Nanak played a decisive role in interfacing the salient features of these two religious traditions and at the same time judiciously avoided the unhealthy elements in them. Sikhism considers *atman* and body as the

inseparable aspects of the one single spiritual reality. The ultimate spiritual reality is immanent in the cosmos and at the same time it is transcendent. The immanent aspect of the ultimate reality is emphasized through dynamism, non-dualism, and social involvement, which leads to the acceptance of differences or modifications. The difference in the empirical level is explained in terms of personal and impersonal aspects of the ultimate Reality. *Ik*, in association with the created world, becomes personal (*saguna*) and in its unmanifest form becomes impersonal (*nirguna*).

Islam's understanding of the ultimate reality was influenced by Greek, Hellenistic understanding which was first clearly articulated by the Greek philosopher Parmenides (c 514 BC) as 'the absolutely real Being.' Ibn ul Arabi (13th C. AD) the Islamic Sufi scholar, might have been influenced by Parmenides' concept of Being, in developing the 'unity of Being' and the phenomenal world as its manifestation in Islam. Though the classical Islamic scholars did not subscribe to Ibn ul Arabi's concept of the unity of Being, the Islamic scholars in India welcomed this concept because of its similarity with the Vedantic philosophy of non-dualism.

Earlier to the Rg Veda, the understanding of the ultimate Reality was polytheistic or henotheistic. The Vedic seers understood the ultimate Reality (*sat*) as, one but people interpreted it as many (*Rg Veda* 1.164, 46). The Rg Veda presented the empirical realities as the manifestations of the primordial person (*Purusha*). By the time of the Upanishads, the *Purusha* in the Vedas gradually gave way to an impersonalistic non-dual reality i.e., *Brahman*. In the Bhagavad Gita and the Bhagavata tradition, the Reality assumed a personalistic form as the incarnation of Vishnu. Later, the various schools in the Vedanta philosophy interpreted the ultimate Reality as either personal or impersonal or as both.

4.2 THE ULTIMATE PRINCIPLE AS UNITY

During the time of Guru Nanak, there were diverse, at times mutually opposing interpretations of the concept of Reality. How to convincingly explain the 'otherness of the created beings' without mitigating the ultimate unity of the Reality was a challenging problem for Nanak. For Nanak the ultimate Reality was a dynamic *Ik* which integrates the personal and the impersonal dimensions. This dynamic metaphysical approach explains the otherness of the manifested things and at the same time the impersonal aspect of the ultimate Reality. The two traditions of scholars, i.e., the Nirmala School (non-dualistic interpretation of the Reality) and the Giani School (the exegetical interpretation of the Adi Granth), in the Sikh tradition contributed considerably to the development of the Sikh philosophy after Guru Gobind Singh.

The *mulamantra* (the fundamental tenet) composed by Guru Nanak and always given in the beginning of the Adi Granth presents the central theme of the Sikh metaphysics. The *mulamantra* as it is enunciated by Nanak harmoniously integrates the unity of the personal God and the spirit of impersonal idealism. The personal and the non-dual nature of the Ultimate Reality is the underlying current of the Sikh scriptures. The aspect of unity of the Ultimate Reality is represented by the Sikh concept *Ikomkar* which is a combination of three terms i.e., *Ik* meaning one, *om* which stands for the primary cause of the empirical world, and *kar* that represents the creative aspect. On the one hand the concept

Ikomkar represents the non-dual, personal unity of the Ultimate Principle; on the other hand it represents the unity of the entire cosmos with its multitude of beings, time, and space. On the whole the concept *Ikomkar* represents the non-dual 'systematic unity' in Sikh philosophy.

There are different kinds of unity: aggregate unity or mere collection of units; mechanical unity where the units are connected by an external agent; organic unity in which units are integrally connected. None of these is perfect unity because all of them are trans-relational. The perfect Unity is trans-relational which transcends all relations. Systematic unity, which Sikhism speaks about, is the perfect unity because it is beyond all kinds of relations.

The term 'systematic unity' implies two aspects, i.e., the aspect of hierarchy and that of coherence. The origin of everything in this universe can be traced in a hierarchical order going back to the subtle, formless, and the Ultimate Reality. All created beings emanate from the non-dual, formless, eternal Truth. The self-luminous spiritual beings come in the first level in the hierarchy followed by human beings because they have consciousness. Insentient and the material beings are in the lowest level because they are devoid of consciousness, but they get upward mobility by the power of Guru's word. The manifested beings reveal the formless principle in varying degrees in a hierarchical order. The revelation of the Ultimate Reality is not limited only to the living beings. According to the Sikh philosophy the Reality is present in varying levels even in material objects; for Nanak says, "there is no grain which is without life."

The hierarchical order is succinctly presented by Guru Nanak at the end of his *Japjee* with the help of the *khandas* beginning with righteousness, "The consciousness (*surai*) simultaneously moves through cognitive (*gian*), affective (*saram*), and conative (*karam*) dimensions and culminates in the dimension of the truth (*sac khand*). These dimensions (*khands*) represent hierarchical characteristics of the 'systematic unity.' (Nirbhai Singh, 1990 p.63)

The element of coherence in the concept of systematic unity represents inner harmony. The entire cosmos with its innumerable beings is regulated by the cosmic principle (*haukam*). The cosmos being the aggregate of numerous beings, elements, and units has to be interconnected with each other without any inner contradiction. This inner unity is made possible with the help of the cosmic will (*haukam*) and the systematic unity with its elements of hierarchy and coherence. Nanak interpreted the Hindu concept of dharma which means social order or righteousness as cosmic harmony or coherence.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) The Sikh understanding of the Ultimate Reality was indebted to the Islamic and Hindu concept of the Ultimate Reality. Explain.

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2) How do you explain the unity of the Ultimate principle and the created beings in Sikh Philosophy?

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3) How do you explain the term 'systematic unity' in understanding the concept of *Ikomkar*?

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4) Explain the concept of hierarchy and coherence in Sikh Philosophy?

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4.3 THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN SIKHISM

Sikhism teaches uncompromising monotheism. In the *Moolmantra*, Nanak describes God as “By the Grace of the Sole One, Self-existent and Immanent, the Creator Person, without Fear or Unconditioned, Without enmity or Uncontradicted, the Timeless One, Un-incarnated, Self-created and Enlightener.” (AG1). Sikh Gurus repeatedly assert the monotheistic character of God by saying, ‘God is the one, the only one, the one without a second’. Though the understanding of God in Sikhism is strictly monotheistic, it accepts two aspects of God i.e., the *nirguna* and the *saguna*. God (*Parameshur*) in his *nirguna* aspect is beyond all attributes including *sat* (truth), *akal* (beyond time), and *ajuni* (not becoming). In the *saguna* aspect, God is attributed qualities like *Sabd* (word), *Nam* (personality), and Guru (enlightener). God is the creator of the universe, and the origin, existence and survival of the universe depend on the all-powerful will (*hukam*) of God.

God created the world without the support of any other factor like *prakrti*, and the creator and the created world are different in their nature. God is uncreated and unchanging, whereas the created world though not unreal is changing and limited. God existed even before creation in His transcendent nature, but through the act of creation he became immanent, “In the region of Truth, God creates perpetually, watches His Creation with a Benevolent eye.” (AG 8). God in His transcendent nature cannot be explained in empirical terms, because God is beyond time and space; “When here was no form in sight, how could there be good or bad actions? When God was in the Self-Absorbed state, there could be no enmity or conflict. When God was all by Himself,

there could be no attachment or misunderstanding.” (AG 290). God through his word (*Naam*) creates the world and sustains it, “God creates the universe, takes His abode in it and sustains it.” (AG 788). “Having created the world, He stands in the midst of it and is separate too.” (AG 4). “He is in the midst of all and is yet distinct.” (AG939). God in His immanent nature is comprehensible by empirical mind and incomprehensible in His transcendent nature.

The human person, because of ignorance, considers him/herself as the lord of creation and self-reliant. Because of these wrong identifications, humans get attached to the material world and the attachment leads to endless cycles of births and deaths. Liberation (*mukti*) from the cycle of births and deaths is possible only by becoming aware of the constant presence of God within (*gurmukh*) and by the grace of God. Any number of rituals or pilgrimages is not capable of bringing in liberation for the seeker because God is present within each one; what is required is right conduct. The awareness of the presence of God within a person is expressed through selfless service (*sewa*) and this is main characteristic of a liberated person while alive.

Attributes and the Ultimate Principle

God immanent means, God is the ocean of attributes, values, and virtues. God immanent is the standard and direction of moral values and ethical living. God who is the creator and sustainer of the universe is concerned about the wellbeing of the world and of the human beings. God is not passive but actively present in the life and struggles of the people leading them to liberation. It is the will of God which controls and directs everything in this world. According to Sikhism, God never incarnates, “May that mouth burn which says that God has incarnated.” (AG 473). Though there are many gods, the formless one, the transcendent one never takes birth in this world. The Sikh God is a God of grace whose will and grace are active in a becoming world without any other influence. God is completely free and creative, who is equated with *Naam*, the Ultimate Reality.

4.5 SIKH METAPHYSICS

Like the Buddha, the Sikh gurus were more concerned about the wellbeing of the people; however, they did not neglect the metaphysical issues completely. Though the Ultimate Reality, *Naam*, is presented in various ways in Sikhism, it is the Highest Creative power supporting the universe. *Naam* is equated with God, the creator of the universe, sustainer of the universe, permeating and informing all things. The Adi Granth repeatedly asserts the role of God as the Ultimate Reality, at the same time God is addressed as Thou, Mother, Father, Brother, Beloved, Lord, etc. These terms underline the intimate relationship between the Creator and the created things and at the same time maintain God as the wholly other. This kind of an intimate relationship requires a dynamic metaphysics to explain the process of becoming in the cosmos. Vedanta philosophy subscribes to a static and abstract understanding of the Absolute. Sankara presents *Brahman* devoid of all phenomenal categories (*nirguna*). Such an analysis denies the possibility of the historical development of consciousness and knowledge. In contrast to the static and abstract metaphysics of the Vedantins, Spinoza, in the Western philosophy, presented a dynamic and concrete metaphysics. For Spinoza, God exists in nature as the universal essence and things exist in him as the modes of his reality.

Sikhism brings in both the static and dynamic elements in its metaphysics with the help of an all-inclusive principle i.e., *Ikomkar*. *Ikomkar* in its formless, transcendent existence represents the static aspect and the same principle in its manifested form, as the cause of the visible universe through emanation and systematic unity represents the becoming aspect. The dynamic aspect of the Reality is ensured in the inner unity of the elements in a hierarchical order. The higher and closer the element to the Reality, it attains higher refinement and harmony. Sikhism subscribes to the structural unity of transformation and assimilation which consists of three main concepts, “the idea of non-dual unity, the concept of continuous transformation and assimilation, and the idea of self-regulative and creative principle (*hukam*). The structure is a unity in which the elements re-subordinated to the cosmic law (*hukamai andari*), and no element exists in isolation (*bahari*) from one another.” (Nirbhai Singh, 1990 p.71)

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) How do you explain the concept of God in Sikhism?
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- 2) How do you analyse the transcendent and the immanent aspects of God?
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- 3) According to Sikhism, God never incarnates. Explain.
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- 4) How are the *saguna* and *nirguna* aspects harmoniously integrated in *Ikomkar*?
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4.6 NON-DUALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF UNITY

Sikhism does not accept the plurality of independent units, but at the same time in order to explain the systematic whole there has to be a unity. How does

one overcome this problem of independent units and systematic unity? The dynamic unity in the manifested world is ensured by the underlying impersonal unity of the three strands based on the fundamental principle *Ik*. The manifested world is a coherent and ordered whole regulated by the self-explanatory divine principle *hukam*. Unlike the Advaita Vedanta, Sikhism accepts the reality of the empirical world, but for a person with partial knowledge, the empirical world is real. For a person with the full knowledge the Ultimate Reality is the efficient cause of the universe, there is no need of an extraneous cause. The efficient cause is inherent in a potential state in the Ultimate Reality, which by means of emanation brings out the material world. The things in the world are varied in nature because of the difference in the elements but there is no difference between the units of elements in the world and the Absolute Reality in the level of essence both are the same. The Absolute is immanently present in the manifested things. Just like the power of burning is innate to fire, the power of emanation is innate in the Ultimate Reality. In Sikhism, the manifest (*saguna*) and the unmanifested (*nirguna*) are the two aspects of the one non-dual dynamic reality which also represent the personal and the impersonal dimensions.

“The *Ik* as absolute unity is all-inclusive and transcends all relational categories. Other unities and elements at manifest level consist of relations and units. Logically speaking, unity presupposes multiplicity as well as duality. It has been seen that units are to be harmonized with a nexus of internal relations. Here there is multiplicity of elements. It involves duality because the very assertion of the *Ik* implies epistemological duality between the subject (knower) and the object (known).” (Nirbhai Singh, 1990 p.80).

4.7 KNOWLEDGE OF THE ABSOLUTE

A genuine knowledge of the *Ik* and the manifested world is based on the knowledge of the essence of the reality. The essence of the reality can be perceived in two levels, i.e., in the worldly level with the help of the empirical means of knowledge, and in the transcendental level through the *brahma giana*. Both these knowledges are complimentary in the way the former culminates in the latter, hence there is no contradiction between the two. The difference between the partial and the perfect knowledge are based on the higher or lesser coherence among the units. The knowledge of the transcendental reality will be highly coherent and harmonious, whereas the knowledge of the empirical realities is less coherent. The imperfect nature of the empirical knowledge will become clearer as the seeker proceeds in the level of *brahma giana*.

4.8 SIKH UNDERSTANDING OF APPEARANCES

Sikhism makes use of *Maya* to explain the manifested reality. The term *maya* is used in a different sense in Sikh philosophy than the way it is used in the Hindu philosophical traditions. Though the concept of *maya* can be traced back to the Rg Veda, it is Sankara who gave a philosophical implication to the term. Sankara was indebted to Buddhism through Gaudapada for the concept of *maya*. Sankara interpreted *maya* as the creative power of Brahma but at the same time as *anirvacaniya* — indescribable. Hence for Sankara, *maya* is not totally unreal but relatively real. Ramanuja considered *maya* as the real energy which is not distinct from the Supreme Reality.

Sikhism considers the universe as relatively real (*sat*) with various degrees of reality. Both the personal and the impersonal aspects of the dynamic principle *Ik* is manifested in the universe. Guru Nanak arrived at the idea of *maya* through an intuitive experience which made him aware of the transitory nature of the phenomenal world. Speaking about this intuitive awareness Sher Singh says: "Everything changes and the only thing that does not change is God in His *Aphur* state. As such the reality of the world is relative. This manifestation as such changes and is transitory. This is *Maya*. The essence of it is the divine element which is permanently real. *Maya* does not mean that the world is an illusion." (Sher Singh, 1969 p. 189) Many of the hymns in the Adi Granth has used terms like *mithya* (illusion), *kur* (false), *supna* (dream), and *chaia* (shadow) to refer to the transitory nature of the manifested world. Nanak understood *maya* as an epistemological category on the basis of truth realization. *Maya* is the inherent and inseparable power of *Ik* which is manifested in different forms at creation. Nanak accepts creation in historical time whereas the essence of the Real is *akal* (eternal).

Sikhism, in order to explain the multiplicity of realities, adopts a rigorous ethical discipline which will lead to transcendence. This ethical discipline necessitates social involvement and commitment by means of protection to the weak and support to righteous cause. The world, according to Sikhism, is created as the moral stage where one has to struggle for perfection. In this struggle the finite self (*haumai*) is understood as a passing phenomenon. When the ego consciousness is dissolved, the union with *Ik* takes place from within.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Sikh philosophy does not accept the plurality of independent units, but how do they explain the systematic unity?

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- 2) What is *brahma giana*? How is it attained?

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- 3) How does Sikhism explain the appearances with the help of *maya*?

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4.9 REALITY AND EXPERIENCE IN SIKHISM

Sikhism makes a distinction between the *gian* (knowledge) acquired through rational, perceptual means and the metaphysical knowledge (*tat gian*) acquired through intuition. *Tat gian* will lead a person to the awareness of the union with the Absolute. God is known through intuitive knowledge (*anubhav prakash*) whereas empirical knowledge is derived through perception or reason. Sikh epistemology accepts four kinds of knowledge: 1) Perceptual knowledge (*paratah gian*) or knowledge acquired through cognitive organs and mental perception. 2) Rational knowledge (*bibek gian*) which is gained through reason; faith and reason are complimentary to each other in realizing the absolute unity. 3) Scriptural knowledge (*sastri gian*) is the knowledge derived through the words of a realized person (*satiguru sabda*). Sikhism does not accept the Vedic scriptures as the valid knowledge. When the intellect and the will become still, the knowledge of the Ik will be revealed in the pure consciousness. The Guru Granth Sahib as a perennial source of revealed knowledge will guide the seeker to the realization of the Ultimate Reality. 4) Intuitive knowledge (*anubhav gian*) which is the highest form of knowledge revealed to the pure consciousness. In the perceptual and rational level the duality continues to exist, whereas in the intuitive level the duality disappears and the experience of the union is ushered in. In this state of existence the intellect and the mind are no more active, the consciousness (*surati*) plays an important role. Sikhism speaks about four states of consciousness i.e., *mati*, *man*, *budhi*, and *surati*. *Mati* the practical wisdom gets all information through the sense organs and passes them to the *man*, the mind. *Budhi*, the intelligence, will start working on the sense data received in the mind. *Budhi* is the faculty of discriminative reasoning which can be enlightened with the help of a guru's guidance. *Sudhi* (self-luminous knowledge) is the last stage which will lead to the intuitive awareness of the union with the Ultimate Principle.

4.10 MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Sikhism is basically an ethical religion based on three fundamental concepts i.e., i) Work, worship, and charity (*kirt karo*, *nam japo* and *vand cako*) should be the guiding principles in life; ii) Self-reliance is the greatest obstacle to God-realization which is manifested in lust, anger, greed, materialism, and pride. Guru Nanak remarked, "Sweetness and humility are the essence of all virtues" (AG 470); iii) It is as a householder that a Sikh should seek God-realization. "The householder who gives all he can afford to charity is as pure as the water of the Ganges" (AG 952). God-realization through renunciation is easy but it is more challenging and difficult while being actively involved in the world. Guru Nanak said, "Do not covet your neighbour's possessions. Without the Name we cannot attain inner peace nor still our inner hunger. The Guru has shown me the real life of the city, the real life of its shops, it is the inner life. We must be traders in truth, moderate in our eating and sleeping. This is true yogism". (AG 939).

As a reaction to the then existing social evils, Sikhism was against the caste system and also against demeaning the status of women. The *Harmandir* at Amritsar had four doors open to all the four castes. Sikhism accepted people of all denominations irrespective of their caste or social status. Hereafter no one

is distinguishable by caste (AG 349). Guru Arjan spoke about the Adi Granth, “This divine teaching is for everyone, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. Whoever utters the Name which lives in all hearts, under the Guru’s instruction, is delivered from Age (*Kal Yug*)” (AG 747).

Guru Nanak as a spiritual preceptor followed the principle of non-violence even in slavery and violence by Babur’s army. He even considered the Mogul invasion as the chastisement by God for the evils of the people. “Are you pitiless, Creator of all? You have sent Yama (god of death) disguised as the Mughal. Did you feel no pity for what happened, for the screams of those who cried in agony?” The social realities in the later times forced the subsequent Gurus to take to arms to protect the poor and helpless people from the exploiters. The tenth guru, Gobind Singh, accepted the idea of just war: “When all efforts to restore peace prove useless and no words avail, lawful is the flash of steel, it is right to draw the sword”. But he reminded his followers that a Sikh should never be the first one to draw the sword. Vegetarianism is commonly practised in the Sikh *langars* but there are different opinions regarding the strict adherence to vegetarianism. Respect for women was part of Sikh social life, widow remarriage was encouraged. Care of the needy and service to the poor is practised in the Sikh community. *Sangat* is a democratic gathering and *langar* allows people to eat together, irrespective of their caste and social status, and ensures social equality.

Check Your Progress IV

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Explain the Sikh epistemology and the different levels of knowledge?

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- 2) Explain the understanding of non-violence and fight against evil in Sikhism?

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- 3) Explain the approach of Sikhism towards the social evils like the caste system, sati, etc.?

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4.11 LET US SUM UP

The *mulamantra* (the fundamental tenet) composed by Guru Nanak and always given in the beginning of the *Adi Granth* presents the central theme of Sikh metaphysics. The *mulamantra* as it is enunciated by Nanak, harmoniously integrates the unity of the personal God and the spirit of impersonal idealism. The personal and the non-dual nature of the Ultimate Reality is the underlying current of the Sikh scriptures. The aspect of unity of the Ultimate Reality is represented by the Sikh concept *ikomkar* which is a combination of three terms i.e., *ik* meaning one, *om* that stands for the primary cause of the empirical world, and *kar* which represents the creative aspect. On the one hand the concept *ikomkar* represents the non-dual, personal unity of the Ultimate Principle; on the other hand it represents the unity of the entire cosmos with its multitude of beings, time, and space. On the whole the concept *ikomkar* represents the non-dual systematic unity in Sikh philosophy.

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4.12 KEY WORDS

<i>Adi Granth</i>	The Guru Grant Sahib, sacred scripture of the Sikhs compiled by guru Arjan in 1604 and later in 1704 by Guru Gobind.
<i>anubhav prakash</i>	intuitive knowledge
<i>gian</i>	knowledge

<i>tat giani</i>	highest knowledge
<i>gurmukhi</i>	From the mouth of the guru, the script in which the Punjabi language is written.
<i>haumai</i>	ego sense, self-conceit, individuality.
<i>hukam</i>	will of the Ultimate principle
<i>hukam-nama</i>	A decree, a list of instructions.
<i>Ik-om-kar</i>	The Ultimate Principle in Sikhism
<i>jiv</i>	individual self
<i>khalsa</i>	The Sikh order or brotherhood, instituted by Guru Gobind Singh.
<i>langar</i>	The kitchen attached to every gurdwara from which food is served to all
<i>pahul</i>	The Khalsa initiation ceremony.
<i>panj kakke</i>	The five Ks, the five external symbols which must be worn by all members of the khalsa.
<i>Rahit-nama</i>	A recorded version of the Khalsa code of discipline.
<i>Sachiar</i>	person of truth
<i>Surati</i>	consciousness

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