

SIKHISM : A RELIGION OF NEW ERA

About five and a quarter centuries ago, Guru Nanak Dev Ji laid the foundation of Sikh religion. The succeeding Gurus raised the palace of Sikhism on this foundation. The Tenth Master Guru Gobind Singh Ji accorded it completion and the finality.

Despite its young age, Sikh religion has attracted the attention of the scholars world over. So much so that it is now being counted as one amongst four or five known religions. The main cause of it acquiring such reputation is the unique ideology that our great true Gurus gave us and which is guiding the world in the form of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Reverend Gurus preached this religion as a decent way of living life that can give multifaceted guidance in spiritual, social, economic and political fields to a man.

After comparing the ideology of Sikhism with 500 other religions of the world, Mr. H.L. Bradshaw, an American scholar of world religion opines that–

“Sikhism is a Universal World Faith with a message for all men. This is amply illustrated in the writings of the Gurus. Sikhs must cease to think of their Faith as just another good religion and must begin to think in terms of Sikhism being the religion for this new age...The religion preached by Guru Nanak is the faith of the New Age. It completely supplants and fulfills all the former dispensations of the older religions. Books must be written proving this. The other religions contain the truth but Sikhism contains the fullness of truth....The Sikh religion is truly the answer to the problems of a modern man.”

Some of the merits of Sikhism those have attracted

the attention of world's religious thinkers and scholars are discussed briefly in the following paragraphs.

1. Religion—a Way of Living Life. Before the advent of Sikh religion, the concept of religion was confined to the observance/performance of various rites and rituals, doubts and superstitions, hypocrisy and blind faith. Hundreds of gods–goddesses, natural forces, animals, trees or stone images were worshipped. To propitiate the gods, *Yag* were performed where men and animals were sacrificed. Penances were performed while living in the jungles and mountain caves. People believed in evil spirits, demons and ghosts and were always fearful of their wrath. To save themselves, they would indulge in various types of worship and charity etc. A religion had no concern with how a man must live his life, how is he supposed to resolve his difficulties and what are his duties and responsibilities towards the society.

Sikh religion took the ‘**Religion**’ out of the rut of disguises, rites, rituals and blind faiths and presented it in the shape of a way of living life. In the spiritual field, *Satguru Ji* laid emphasis on meditation of One Lord and condemned meaningless doubts, superstitions, hypocrisies, a particular style of dressing to project oneself as holy and blind faith. They launched a campaign against the social evils such as caste based distinctions, untouchability, injustice, immoral earnings, corruption, discord amongst the people, cowardice, slavery of foreigners and pitiable condition of women. The Gurus expressed their opinions on the distribution of wealth in the economic field and spread political awareness amongst the people. They organised them to raise struggle against the political oppression. **Thus Sikhism made religion capable of leading the people in multi directional aspects of their life.**

2. Religious Places (Gurdawaras) : Centres of

Learning Life Style : The *dharamshalas* established by Guru Nanak were used for giving practical shape to the Sikh ideology besides worship of God (*Naam Simran*). People were taught the lesson of voluntary service. Views were exchanged for the raising of an ideal society to remove the caste based and rich-poor distinctions.

Institution of *Langar* was started and common water sources in the form of reservoirs (sarovars) were dug up. People of all castes, creed, religion and social standings ate meals prepared in a common kitchen, sitting in one line next to each other. The *Sarovars* provided them with water to bathe. Both institutions helped remove man made chasms in the society. If women were praised in principle, it was given a practical form in the Gurdawaras. They could participate in all activities of a Gurdawara and were at liberty to preach, discharge duties of a *Granthi* (Holy script reader) as well. Dispensaries, orphanages and home for the physically impaired were made in Gurdawaras. Schools were opened to impart education to the children. The sixth Guru even made them centres of political learning besides the religious teachings. Thus spiritual and temporal might was merged into one. These examples prove beyond doubt that Gurdawaras are the centres of learning Sikh way of life.

3. Faith in One Godhead and Discarding all other gods–goddesses : Sikhism vehemently opposed the incarnation theory and the worship of their idols. Guru Ji even said, “May that mouth burn which says that God takes birth.”

* *So mukh(u) jalo jit(u) kaheh Thâkur jonî*
(Page 1136)

Satguru ji said that people were worshipping kings of a particular time (Sri Ram Chander, Sri Krishan etc.) as incarnations but these incarnations had not been able to

find the ultimate God.

* *Jugâh jugâh ke râje kî-ey,*
gâveh kar(i) avtaarî.
Tin bhi ant(u) na pâeyâ tâ kâ
kiâ kar âkh(i) veechârî. (Page 423)

Bhagat Kabir Ji says that he only needs Lord and has nothing to do with god and goddesses. Bhagat Nam Dev Ji is prepared to surrender all gods and goddesses for one Lord, the Supreme.

* *Jao jacho tao keval Râm.*
Aan dev sio nâhî kâm. (Page 1162)
* *Hau to ek(u) Ramaîâ laiho.*
Aan dev badlaavan(i) daiho. (Page 811)

Satguru Ji described the form, omnipotence and all virtues of God in their *bânî* that they advised their Sikhs to worship. In the *mool mantr*, (from Ek Onkar to Gur Prasad(i)) the primary traits of God have been described.

4. Leadership of Shabad Guru : Sikhism has accepted *Shabad* (Divine Word) as the Guru. It means knowledge of the Lord that the Gurus had realised when their mind and soul became in tune with the Lord. Their realisation has been recorded in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Nanak had proclaimed *Shabad* as Guru when he said–

* *Shabad gurû surt(i) dhun(i) chelâ.*
(Page 943)
* *Shabad gur peera gehar gambhîra*
bin(u) shabadai jug baurâng. (Page 635)

The same principle has been explained by Guru Ram Das Ji in the following hymn–

* *Bani gurû, gurû hai banî,*
vich(i) bânî amrit(u) saarey.

*Gur bânî kahai sewak(u) jan mânai,
partakh(i) gurû nistârey. (Page 982)*

Guru Sahiban have not accepted the body as Guru. That is why Sri Guru Granth Sahib contains *bânî* of six Gurus, fifteen Bhagats and eleven Bhatts. If the body alone was considered to be Guru, then except six Gurus, no writings of any other great and holymen would have found place in Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

5. Building of Character and National Revolution through Naam Simran : It implies singing the glory of His traits and imbibing them in one's mind by constantly remembering them. It can also be called praising the Lord and keeping his memory perpetually in one's mind.

The Bhagats sing the glory of the infinite and invaluable virtues of God and acquire resonance of mind with Him or they virtually merge in Him. Those who meditate on the virtues of Lord also become fearless, without animosity, free from the fear of death, kind, clement, contented, just, seekers of everyone's welfare, protectors of the poor, helpless and refugeless and stand to fight the tyranny and oppression. The vices of lust, anger, greed, attachment, pride and many other maladies of mind do not come anywhere near those who meditate on His name. Thus through *Naam-Simran*, a man becomes possessor of high character, Guru Says—

* *Sâchî bânî soochâ hoey.
gun te naam prâpat hoey. (Page 361)*

* *Jin her(i) japiâ se her(i) hoey,
her(i) miliâ kel kelalî. (Page 667)*

Where as Gurus raised the character of a man and strengthened his soul through *Naam Simran* they also raised such an ideal society that was full of divine virtues; that had discarded the slavery of priestly class, bondage of the social values and tyranny and subservience of the

authorities/ruling class. The miracle of *Naam* produced true lovers of God and social reformers from the worthless ritualists, great warriors and military leaders appeared from among the cowards and kings from those who had lived a life of subservience and slavery for centuries. This revolution came about through *Naam Simran*.

6. A Supreme Method of God Worship—Kîrtan : *Raag* (Singing) has been used as a supreme method of Lords worship. Where as singing Lords praises produces concentration of mind, the divine virtues also park themselves in the mind of a seeker. He starts getting waves of emotions and love that dye him in the hue of Lord.

It was the medium of *Kîrtan* by which Guru Nanak had turned a cheater like Sajjan into a God lover and a preacher. It had melted the solid minds of Kauda Bheel, Noor Shah the witch, Hamza Gaus and Vali Kandhari into wax like soft. Bhai Sadoo and Bhai Badoo were the bards in the court of Guru Angad Dev Ji. The Tenth Master was himself an exponent of *Kîrtan* and was an adept player of musical instruments like *Jorhî, Mirdang and Sirandâ*. Confirming the objective and importance of *Kirtan*, Guru Ram Das Ji says—

* *Sabhna raagaan vich so bhalâ bhâi,
jit(u) vasiâ man aaey.
Raag naad sabh such(u) hai,
keemat kahî n jâey. (Page 1423)*

7. Principle of Living Emancipation : Sikhism has not promised salvation after death nor has it assured anybody a stay in heavens. It has taught to free oneself from the vices encountered in this life and obtain one-ness with God. Explaining this principle of Emancipation while Alive

(Jeevan Mukat) are the following lines from *Gurbânî*–

* *Oh dhanwant(u) kulwant(u) patiwant(u).
Jîwan mukat(i) jis(u) ridai bhagwant(u).
(Page 294)*

* *Taj(i) abhimân moh mâyâ phun(i)
bhajan Ram chit(u) laavao.
Nanak kahat mukat(i) panth eh(u)
gurmukh(i) hoey tum paavao. (Page 219)*

Where as Sikhism has rejected the existence of heaven and hell, it has given preference and more importance to mergence with God than emancipation after death.

* *Kavan nark(u) kiâ surg(u) bichârâ,
santan do-oo râdey.
Hum kâhoo kî kaan(i) n kadatey,
apney gursarsâdey. (Page 969)*

8. Disapproval of Rituals and Brahmanism : For centuries, Brahmans have enjoyed themselves as the most privileged class of society in all spheres of life. They had the sole authority of reading and teaching the sacred scriptures. They would put people into incantations of various *Mantras*, worship, hold *yag* and accept charity. Piety, defilement of body on account of birth and death, piety of the kitchen, fasting, observance of good and bad days, visiting pilgrim centres and bathing there, believing in hell and heaven, faith in ghosts and evil spirits, worship of the planets, caste based division of society, *Ashram Dharm* (celebracy, householder, living in jungles and ascetic life) etc are various aspects of Brahmanic ideology. They would also indulge in many sacraments, rites and rituals and accept alms.

Satguru Ji and Bhagats vehemently condemned and rejected the Brahmanic ideology and challenged the

supremacy of Brahmans. Let us see what *Gurbânî* has to say on it.

* *Kabir Baaman(u) gurû hai jagat kâ
bhagtan kâ gur(u) nâhey.
Arjh(i) urjh(i) kai pach(i) mooâ,
chârauh beydauh mâhey. (Page 1377)*

* *Simrit(i) sâstar bahut(u) bisthârâ.
Mâyâ moh(u) pasriâ pârârâ.
Murakh parheh sabad(u) n boojeh,
gurmukh(i) virlai jâtâ hey. (Page 1053)*

9. All Sikhs are Free to Preach : In other religions priestly class like Brahmans, *Moulwis* and certain parsons were authorised to preach. Over a period of time, these people became corrupt, greedy and immoral.

Guru Sahib permitted all Sikhs to perform religious rites as well as do preaching work. Those who were appointed as preachers were also to earn their livelihood themselves. Baba Budha Ji who was appointed *Granthî* (Script reader) at Harmandir Sahib had to work to earn his two-meals a day. Thus no particular priestly class was created in Sikhism. Even today all Sikhs–male or female are authorised to perform all religious rites like service as a *Granthî*, impart religious discourses, and even participate in administering *Khande-di-Pahul* (Baptism).

10. Religion of Householders : The so called religious people of India have always been preferring spending their lives as ascetics rather than being a householder and worldly man. Fearing the adverse effect of *Mâyâ*, *Jogîs*, Hindu *Sadhoos*, *Bodhîs* and Jain hermits lived in the mountains. They would attempt to control their minds and perform penances/worship. Satguru Ji impressed upon people that there was no need to renounce the world. Instead one should discard evil thoughts, vices and ill deeds. Sikh must remain free from the grasp of *mâyâ*

while living this life to its maximum usefulness, working to earn his livelihood and performing all his mandatory duties. All one need is to hold the apron of Lord firmly.

* *Nanak Sat(i)gur(i) bhetiai,
poorî hovey jugat(i).
Hasandiâ khelandiâ painandia khavandiâ,
vichey hovai mukat(i). (Page 522)*

* *Sat(i)gur kî aisî vadiâee.
Putr kalatr vichey gat(i) pâee. (Page 661)*

11. An Organised Religion : The aim of Sikhism was to bring a total revolution in the society. This revolution was badly needed in religious, social, economic and political spheres of their life. Therefore an organisational approach was needed.

To achieve this aim, Guru Nanak commenced the formation of *Sangat* and appointed preachers. The third Guru Ji established preaching centres (manjîân), sub centres (peerhey). The fourth Guru Sahib commenced the system of *masand* and the fifth Guru established a central religious place by the name of Amritsar. He also gave the Sikhs an exclusive religious and sacred scripture—Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Thus the Sikh movement kept progressing from strength to strength, forming a Sikh society in the process. This was subsequently polished and named as *Khalsa Panth* by the Tenth Guru Ji.

The *Khalsa Panth* gradually became so strong that despite myriad martyrdoms, tyranny, oppressions and holocausts, it became successful in establishing their own kingdom. This organization even faced the present day challenges with success and glory and made many sacrifices for the protection of its ideology and culture.

12. Supporting Oneness of Mankind : Sikhism vehemently opposed the societal division on the basis of

caste, creed, colour, rich and poor and untouchability. It propagated that being children of one God, all are like brothers and therefore equal in all respect. How beautifully has the Tenth Master said—

*Ko-oo bhaeo mundia sanyasi ko-oo jogî bhaeo,
ko-oo brahmchari ko-oo jati anumânbo.
Hindu, Turk ko-oo Rafzi imam Sâfî,
mânas kî jât sabhai ekai pehchânbo.
Karta Karim soi Rajak Rahîm o-i
doosro n bhed koî bhool bhram manbo.
Ek hî kî sevâ sab hi ko gurdev ek,
ek hî sarup sabai ekai jot(i) jânbo. [Akal Ustat(i)]*

13. Respect for Woman : Woman has faced very disrespectful treatment in the field of religion. She has been called—*Shudra*, fit for admonition, she-wolf, ignorant, shoe of the foot, picture of falsehood, cause of all sins and distresses, killer poison, intoxicating wine etc. She kept serving a man like a maid servant, kept burning on the pyre of her dead husband, kept satisfying the carnal desires of the priestly class as *dev dasis*. Even then she was sold and bought like animals. Some kept her confined behind the curtain and did not permit her to enter religious places or participate in any religious functions. Some even said that she cannot achieve emancipation.

Sikh Gurus did a revolutionary work by granting woman an equal status with a man. Women had started adopting Sikh way of life even in the times of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Guru Nanak Dev Ji has described the importance of woman so aptly and beautifully in the cantos of the 19th ode of *Âsâ kî Vâr*. A woman plays a significant role in the life of a man either as a mother, sister or a wife. She is the one who gave birth to kings, emperors, warriors, scholars, philosophers and Bhagats. How can she be

called bad or evil ?

So kio mandâ akhîai jit(u) jammeh râjaan.

Sikhs vehemently opposed the custom of 'Sati' whereby a widow burn herself voluntarily on the pyre of her husband. Women were advised to draw the veil over their faces, The Gurus opposed this practice and also encouraged widow remarriage. The third Guru Sahib appointed women to do preaching jobs. The women in Sikh religion are free to partake *Amrit* of *Khanda-bâtâ* and can participate in the battles campaigns on equal terms with their Sikh brethren. They had been equally active and effective as rulers and administrators.

14. Langar—an Exclusive Institution : The institution of *Langar* gives a very distinct character to Sikhism since it is not prevalent in any other religion. This routine has been in vogue since the times of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Where as it satiates hunger of the needy it also removes the distinction of caste, creed, high-low and rich-poor from the minds of the Sikhs. *Langar* also afford opportunity of service to the Sikhs. Guru Amar Das Ji had institutionalised the tradition and had issued an edict that all those visiting the *Darbar* must eat in the *Langar*. Respecting the edict, Emperor Akbar too partook food sitting with common men.

15. Amalgamation of Spiritual and Temporal Life : Love of God and His worship has been well amalgamated with the armed struggle for righteous cause another unique principle of Sikhism. When the tyrants use force to perpetrate injustice and oppression on poor, decrepit and destitutes, they cannot be brought on the righteous path without use of force against them. The Tenth Master has rightly written in *Zafarnama*—

*Choon kâr az hamâ heeltey darguzasht,
Halâl ast burdan bâ-shamsheer dast.*

It means when persuasions and all other means of resolving an issue fail, it is just to unscab the sword.

Therefore Bhagats of Lord (saints) must become fearless and free of animosity in order to do service to the poor, needy, oppressed and tyrannised by unrighteous elements. He has to be ready to discharge duties of a *Sant* and *Sipahi* at the same times.

16. Path of Optimism and Prosperity : To remain in *Chardî Kalâ* state of mind is a unique feature of Sikh community. It means one should remain in optimistic state even in the face of adversities and when the conditions are highly unfavourable. In this state, one remains hopeful and keep struggling to achieve success with infallible faith that God always sides the righteous people. *Gurbânî* has instilled this virtue in the minds of Sikhs.

Sikhism is a path of optimism and it is the living example of always looking at the bright side of life. After the martyrdom of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur (1716), clouds of calamity exploded on Sikhs. Royal edicts to put Sikhs to sword had been issued. The mobile patrol parties hunted for the Sikhs. Those who were caught, whether young, old, male, female or small babies or children were tortured to death. Many thousands lost their lives in holocausts.

Even then they did not accept defeat. They lived in hope of divine dispensation accepting what was happening to them as divine order or His will. They progressed towards their goal even in the most adverse conditions till able to establish a powerful kingdom under the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. If they lost their kingdom or authority, they took to the path of struggle to restore their glory. They confronted the British Empire and resolutely fought the political injustice in independent India. The barbarity and atrocities that the Sikhs faced in

1984 would have destroyed the morale and confidence of any other nation. But the Sikhs remained in a state of positive and high morale as if all that had happened was part of their lives. They have always been creating glorious and grand history.

17. Harmony Between Religion and Politics : Religion and politics go side by side. They cannot be separated. Guru Nanak had called the rulers of his time as bloodsuckers, butchers and wolves. When Bâbar invaded India, he called him 'Jâbar' and had to undergo some period of imprisonment while leading the people against his tyranny. All the Guru personalities imparted political consciousness to their followers. The ever increasing influence of Sikh movement became the cause of martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev Ji. Guru Hargobind Sahib wore two swords—one of *Pîrî* and the other of *Mîrî* at the time of coronation as a Guru. He constructed the Akal Takht Sahib, (Throne of the Timeless God) and erected two *Nishan Sahib* in front of it. He was addressed as *Sachâ Patishâh* by the Sikhs and other population. All these events are the proof of the fact that religion and politics go side by side and in harmony with each other in Sikh religion. Guru Gobind Singh Ji had proclaimed that he would make man trampled for centuries into kings—

* *Jin kî jat aur kul mâhî,
sardârî nâ bhaee kidâhî.
Tinhî so sardâr banâoon,
tabai Gobind Singh naam kahâoon.*

First the Sikhs took up cudgels with the moghul rulers and then confronted the British rulers. The success of the key campaign during Gurdawaras Reform Movement won them accolades from all. Mahatama Gandhi had called it. '*First War of Indian Freedom and a decisive Victory.*

Therefore *Gurbânî* and Sikh history are the proof of

the fact that both religion and politics have a very close association.

18. A new Economic Ideology : Sikhism is the only religion that formulated and presented its own economic ideology—(1) Earning livelihood through honest hard work, (2) Setting aside one tenth of the earnings for social and religious welfare projects, (3) Distribution of surplus to remove the chasm between rich and poor. Satguru Ji has advised—

* *Ghâl(i) khâey kichh(u) hathauh deh(i).
Nânak râh(u) pachhâneh(i) se. (Page 1285)*

He has also condemned taking bribe and usurping others wealth—

* *Hak(u) parâeyâ Nânakâ
us(u) sooar us gâey.
Gur(u) peer(u) hâmâ ta bharey,
jâ murdar(u) n khâey. (Page 141)*

Laying emphasis on equitable distribution of money, the fifth master says that he who has much is worried about its safety and he who has scanty, is ever wandering in fulfilling his needs of bread, cloth and shelter. He alone is happy who is free from both conditions. That is he is neither rich nor poor.

* *Jis(u) greh(i) bahut(u) tisai greh(i) chintâ.
Jis(u) greh(i) thorî su phirai bhramantâ.
Duhoo bivasthâ te jo muktâ,
soî suhelâ bhâlleeai. (Page 1019)*

19. Selfless and Voluntary Service of Mankind : Sikhism preaches selfless service of mankind without consideration of religion, caste, country, race and gender. God is the father and all people of the world are His children. His spirit resides in all. Therefore, service of humanity is service to God. It is a medium of coming

closer to God.

* *Vich(i) duniâ sev kamâi-ai.*
Tâ dargah baisan(u) pâi-ai. (Page 26)

The initiation of a Sikh into *sewâ* (service) commences from cooking *Langar*, cleaning utensils, fanning the *Sangat*, cleaning the shoes of the *Sangat* in Gurdwara and helping the needy with clothing and money. Thus the whole world becomes an arena of service. Our Gurus have set perfect examples of selfless service. Homes for destitutes and dispensaries in Gurdwaras had been opened with this aim in mind. Guru Arjun Dev Ji himself served the sufferers of famine and epidemic in various towns and cities of the Punjab. Guru Nanak and other Gurus did preaching service to attach the people with One God. To free the people from political oppression of the rulers, fifth and ninth Guru Sahib served the cause of the people at the expense of their own lives. Guru Sahib fought all the wars and their Sikhs bore unprecedented brutalities only in the service of mankind. Thus the '*sewâ*' aspect of the life of Sikhs has associated them with entire humanity.

20. A Complete and Distinct Religion : Sikh religion is an independent religion. It has a unique ideology of its own in the shape of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It has its own code of conduct, its own culture, separate places of worship, a glorious history and historical places. All these make Sikhism a distinct and ideal society.

Bhai Kahn Singh 'Nabha' has well established the distinct character of Sikhism in his book *Hum Hindu Nahin*. Bhai Veer Singh writes in this regard that Sikhs should be proud of the virtues of their religions. They must stick to the truth that Sikhism is an original and true religion.

Mohsin Fani who had come to India during the period

of Guru Hargobind Sahib writes that—

“Sikhs do not recite Hindu incantations (mantras) nor do they hold faith in any of their incarnations. Hindus consider Sanskrit as the language of the gods and thus hold it in high esteem, but for Sikhs it is like any other common language used for communication. They attach no special importance to it. Sikhs do not follow any sacraments of Hindus.”

Mr. Macauliffe considers Sikhism as totally free and pious from the influence of semitic religions. As regards the strong ideology of Sikhism, he says—

“It would be difficult to point out a religion with comprehensive ethical system.”

In the end we submit the views of Mr. Dorothy Fields who depicts most appropriate analysis of Sikh religion. She says that—

“Pure Sikhism (as enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib) is far above dependence on Hindu rituals and is capable of distinct position so long as Sikhs maintain their distinctiveness. The religion is also one which could appeal to the occidental mind. It is essentially a practical religion. If judged from the pragmatist stand-point which is favourite point of view in some quarters, it would rank almost first in the world. Of no other religion can be said that it has made a nation in so short a time. The religion of the Sikhs is one of the most interesting at present existing in India, possibly indeed, in the whole world.”

“Of all religions, this one is the purest : That is one Meditates on the lord's name and does what is holy.” P. 266
