

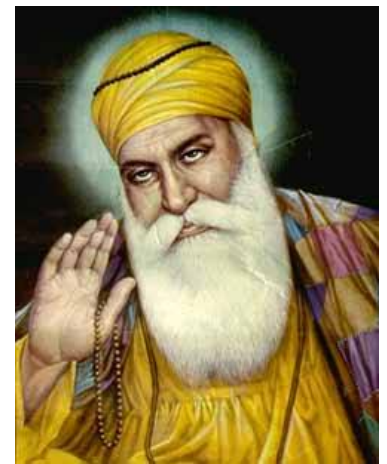
Sikhism and the Mughals

Adapted from articles on Sikhism from BBC Religions (bbc.co.uk/religion/religions)

Origins of Sikhism

Sikhism was born in the Punjab area of South Asia, which now falls into the present day states of India and Pakistan. The main religions of the area at the time were Hinduism and Islam. The Sikh faith began around 1500 CE, when Guru Nanak began teaching a faith that he considered distinct from Hinduism and Islam. Nanak's religious ideas drew on both Hindu and Islamic thought, but he also introduced many new ideas into this new religion from his own philosophy. Sikhism is monotheistic, believing that God is One, with no form, and that everyone is equal before God. Sikhs believe in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth known as reincarnation, and that karma, one's good and bad actions, will affect the quality of the next life. Sikhism also emphasizes the importance of genuine good actions over repetitive religious rituals.

Little is known about the life of Guru Nanak, but Sikh tradition has many stories about his life. Sikh traditions teach that, even as a child, he was always focused on God. His parents were Hindus, but Nanak soon showed an advanced interest in religion and studied Islam and Hinduism extensively, and demonstrated great ability as a poet and philosopher. According to Sikh beliefs, as an adult, Nanak took spiritual journeys through India, Tibet, and Arabia that lasted 30 years, during which he studied and debated with the wise men he met along the way. As his ideas took shape, he began to teach a new route to spiritual fulfillment and the good life. Nine Gurus, or religious teachers, followed Nanak and developed the Sikh faith and community over the next centuries.



Mughal Influence on Sikhism

The Mughal Empire came to power in India during the life of Guru Nanak, and the Mughals had a tremendous impact on development of Sikhism over the following centuries. In 1567, Emperor Akbar was tolerant of the Sikhs. He even visited Punjab, spending time with the ordinary people and participating in a Sikh communal meal. However, the Mughal Emperor Jahangir saw the Sikhs as a threat because they had supported an unsuccessful contender to the throne. Jahangir demanded that Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, make certain changes to the Sikh holy text. The Guru refused, and he was executed by Jahangir in 1606. This conflict motivated the Sikhs to militarize in order to protect their faith. The Sikhs then lived in relative peace with the Mughal rulers until the time of the Emperor Aurangzeb, an intolerant ruler who used force to make his subjects accept Islam, despite the fact the Quran forbids forced conversions. Aurangzeb had the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, arrested and executed in 1675.

The Khalsa and the Five Ks

The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, recreated the Sikhs as a military group of men and women called the Khalsa in 1699, with the intention that the Sikhs should forever be able to defend their faith. Gobind Singh established the Sikh rite of initiation and the **5 Ks**, the physical symbols of this initiation, which give Sikhs their unique appearance.

Kesh (uncut hair)

Sikhs believe that one's hair is part of God's creation, so keeping hair uncut indicates that one is willing to accept God's gift as God intended it. Sikhs also feel that one should only bow his head to the Guru, and

not to a barber. Sikh men wear a turban to cover their long hair, and are also forbidden to trim their beards. Sikh women are just as forbidden to cut any body hair or even trim their eyebrows.

Kara (steel bracelet)

The Kara is made of steel, rather than gold or silver, because it is not jewelry. It acts as a reminder that a Sikh should not do anything of which the Guru would not approve, and as a symbol of being a link in the chain of the Sikh community

Kanga (wooden comb)

This symbolizes a clean mind and body; since it keeps the uncut hair neat and tidy.

Kaccha (cotton undergarment)

It was a particularly useful garment for Sikh warriors of the 18th and 19th centuries, being very suitable for warfare when riding a horse. It's a symbol of chastity.

Kirpan (steel sword)

This ceremonial sword can be anything from a few inches to three feet long. It is kept in a sheath and can be worn over or under clothing. It represents defense of good and the struggle against injustice. Originally, it was meant to be used for actual self-defense when necessary, in response to Mughal aggression, but today it is generally seen as symbolic.

Gobind Singh was the last human Guru. Sikhs now treat their holy text, the Guru Granth Sahib, as their Guru. It compiled the teachings of the ten gurus into one book.



REFLECTION: Answer the following questions based on the reading above.

1. Who was Guru Nanak?
2. What Sikh beliefs reflect Islamic influence? Which reflect Hindu influence?
3. How did the Mughals influence the development of Sikhism?
4. Why do Sikhs refrain from cutting their hair?
5. How did the purpose of the Kirpan change over time?