

# Guru Nanak and Sikhism

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## Manifest pedagogy

This topic has been chosen for various reasons. The active role of Sikh diaspora in US, the opening of Kartarpur corridor between India and Pakistan and the MEA celebrating Guru Nanak's 550th birth celebrations next year. This topic is highly relevant as well due to the increasing number of questions on Culture specifically Religion in the recent years.

## **In news**

The rising prominence of Kartarpur corridor.

## **In syllabus**

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, Literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

## **Dimensions**

1. Sikhism as part of Bhakti and Sufi traditions
2. Central aspects of its philosophy
3. Sikhism and Mughal state
4. Sikhism after Guru Nanak
5. Emergence of new reforms in modern age
  - Namdhari
  - Nirankari
  - Singh sabha
  - Akali
6. Relevance to today's problems and Sikhism ethics

# **Sikhism as part of the Bhakti and Sufi traditions**

Bhakti and Sufi movements in medieval India were part of the socio-religious reform movements which tried to change the fundamental moorings of both religious philosophy and the unfair social institutions and practices. In this attempt Bhakti to **one Monotheistic god (either nirguna or saguna)** formed the fundamental tenant of the movement. This bhakti based monotheism rejected the rituals, Brahmanical dominance and brought **religion closer to individual heart and made worship a personal affair**. Bhakti and Sufi movements emphasized on **the fundamental equality of all gods creations**. This emphasis lead to a departure from the **homo-hierarchical** (caste, class, status) society of the day. These movements lead to emergence of an un-hypocritical vision of god and his relation with his Bhakta which **is based on love and devotion**.

Sikhism is a part of this reform movement which believes in a monotheistic formless god. Sikhism because of its **strong organizational structure and continuous lineage of enlightened gurus** transcended the limits of a reform movement and established itself as an organized religion. The essential aspects of Sikhism as a religion are

## **Sikhism religious and social philosophy**

1. Based on the belief in one God, the Sikh religion recognizes the equality of all human beings and is marked by the **rejection of idolatry, ritualism, caste and asceticism**. The ten Sikh Gurus preached a simple message of **truth, devotion to God and universal equality**.
2. Sikhism is considered as a **syncretistic religion**, a combination of both Hinduism and Islam, and also having independent beliefs and practices.
3. When there were conflicts between Hindus and Muslims its

message was one of **reconciliation and peace**.

4. **Truth is high but higher still is truthful living** is the percept of Nanak which gives great importance to individual conduct.
5. His philosophy is **not world negating but is world reaffirming**. He preached the **middle path** and considered that one can make spiritual progress even when **he is a householder**. This message broke down the artificial barrier created between **spirituality and duty**.
6. His philosophy revolved around remembering god, earning livelihood through honest means and sharing fruits of ones labor with others.
7. His preaching's are based on equality of status of all human beings which he emphasized through **sangat and pangat** which means community kitchen and eating together by sitting on the floor.
8. Because of his teachings which emphasized on good actions and transcended the boundaries of colour, caste and creed Guru Nanak had become equally popular with the Hindus and Muslims of his time.
9. **Kartarpur** is the spiritual commune established by Guru Nanak in his final days.
10. Guru Granth sahib the holy text of the Sikhs is a standing testimony of the **syncretism and the universalism** of Sikh religion as it contains not just the hymns of the gurus but also the hymns of Jaidev of Bengal, Namdev and Parmanand of Maharashtra, Sadhna of Sindh, Rama Nand, Kabir and Ravidas from Uttar Pradesh, and the famous Sufi saint Sheikh Farid (Baba Fariduddin) from patan in Pakistan.
11. The emphasis on honest living and sharing one's earning with others laid the foundation of an egalitarian order.
12. It teaches followers to transform the "**Five Thieves**" (lust, rage, greed, attachment, and ego) to lead an ethical life.
13. Sikh Gurus laid the foundation for an ideal society with emphasis on **interfaith dialogue, religious freedom and**

**responsibility** towards fellow beings.

14. The Sikh Gurus not only denounced the caste system but also provided the basis for a **casteless society**.
15. Through constant meditation in god's name, good actions and living a detached life one can attain **Sach Khand** which is enlightenment according to Sikhism.

## **Mughals and Sikh gurus**

Guru Nanak was preaching his philosophy while Babur was building the foundations of his Mughal Empire. Akbar had a cordial relation with the Sikh Gurus and even participated in Sanghat and Panghat. The conflict between the Mughals and Sikhs started during the reign of **Jahangir** because of his execution of **Guru Arjun** for supporting the claim of prince Khusrau to the throne. This conflict led the sixth guru (Guru Hargobind) to establish the concepts of **Miri (temporal) and Piri (spiritual)** which represented the union of both temporal and spiritual authority in the hands of the guru leading to conversion of Sikhism into a political movement from an essentially socio-religious organization.

The souring of the relations took a new turn with the accession of **Aurangzeb** to Mughal gaddi. The Sikh Gurus were favorably disposed to the accession of Dara Shiko which made Aurangzeb persecute the Gurus and the 9<sup>th</sup> Guru of Sikhs **Guru Tegh Bahadur** was executed by Aurangzeb. This act converted Sikhism into an armed revolt against the Mughals. Guru Gobind Singh formed a Military brotherhood called **Khalsa** and fought battles of Chamkur and Anandapur with Mughals. He wrote a letter of condemnation to Aurangzeb chastising him for his moral degradation which is called **the Zafarnama or Fathenama**.

There after the institution of the guruship as a succession ended and the guruship was placed permanently with the Granth. **Banda Bahadur** emerged as the military head of the Sikhs and he is captured and executed by **Bahadur shah 1**. There after the

Sikh khalsa broke down to **Misls**. These misls took advantage of the decline of Mughal Empire and the continuous invasions from north-west by **Nadir shah and Ahmed Shah Abdali**. The vacuum created by the declining Mughal state is effectively filled by **Ranjit singh and his sukerchakia Misl**.

## **Relevance to today's problems (Sikhism ethics)**

1. Today's world is bogged down by the excessive materialism of the world. The deep seated economic inequalities of the world are leading to a simmering discontent across the world. The Sikh principles of compassionate ethics where the earnings of an honest livelihood should be distributed among the less fortunate is very relevant.
2. Corruption is the deep seated problem in India which is eating away the vitals of the nation inside out the emphasis on honest livelihood by Guru Nanak if understood in the right spirit will provide a way of changing the individual perspective.
3. Communalism is a lurking evil in the Indian societal context the essential syncretism and universalism which are part of Sikhism can help in solving this issue to a certain extent.
4. The individual is the essential building block of the family, society, nation so the change should start at the individual level and the five thieves should be transcended to build fairer systems and institutions.
5. If understood in the right spirit Sikhism like all other religions of the world tries to preach a duty oriented life overlaid by compassion to all sentient beings with a continuous interface with God.

## **Test yourself: Mould your thoughts**

Sikhism in India started as a religious reform movement with

social implications but finally converted to a separate religion with political consequences. Trace this evolution.