

Nanak and the Origins of Sikhism

HPRS4003 Asian Religious Traditions

Sikhism

- The newest of the major 'world religions'.
- A ('Dharmic') monotheistic religion founded in the late 15th century by Guru Nanak.
- The homeland of Sikhism: Punjab, land of the five rivers, straddling India and Pakistan.
- There are over 20 million Sikhs in India, with significant concentrations of Sikhs in the UK, Canada and USA.



Sikhs: The Followers of Sikhi

- The word 'Sikh' means disciple.
- Sikhs are disciples of the 10 gurus (beginning with Guru Nanak and ending with Guru Gobind Singh) who established the religion between the 15th and 18th centuries.



Sikhi: The Fundamentals

- The ***gurdwara*** is the Sikh place of worship.
- The sacred text of Sikhism is the ***Guru Granth Sahib***.
- The formal Sikh community is known as the ***Khalsa***.
- Members of the *Khalsa* follow the ***Rehat Maryada***, the Sikh code of conduct.



The Ten Gurus

- Sikhism acknowledges **Ten Gurus**, the last of which decreed that, after his death, the spiritual guide of the Sikhs would be the teachings contained in the Guru Granth Sahib.
- Each Guru made a distinctive contribution to the development of Sikhism.
- 'Guru': *gu* = 'darkness', *ru* = 'light', i.e. one who dispels spiritual darkness and gives light to the disciple.

The Social/Religious Context

- Nanak, the first of the Gurus, born at Talvandi (55 miles west of Lahore) in 1469.
- The indigenous population of the Punjab at this predominantly Hindu. Many belonged to a land-owning peasant class (*jati*) called Jats.
- Sectarian Hinduism (personal devotion to Shiva, Vishnu etc.) particularly prominent in this region of northern India.

The Social/Religious Context

- Mystical Islam (Sufism) also enjoyed considerable influence in India during this period.
- Devout Sufi mystics such as Sheikh Ismail Bokhari, who went to Lahore in 1205, and Sheikh Farid (d. 1265) were often regarded as gurus by Hindus and won many converts to Islam.
- Buddhism had largely become extinct in India by this time.

The Social/Religious Context: The Sant Tradition

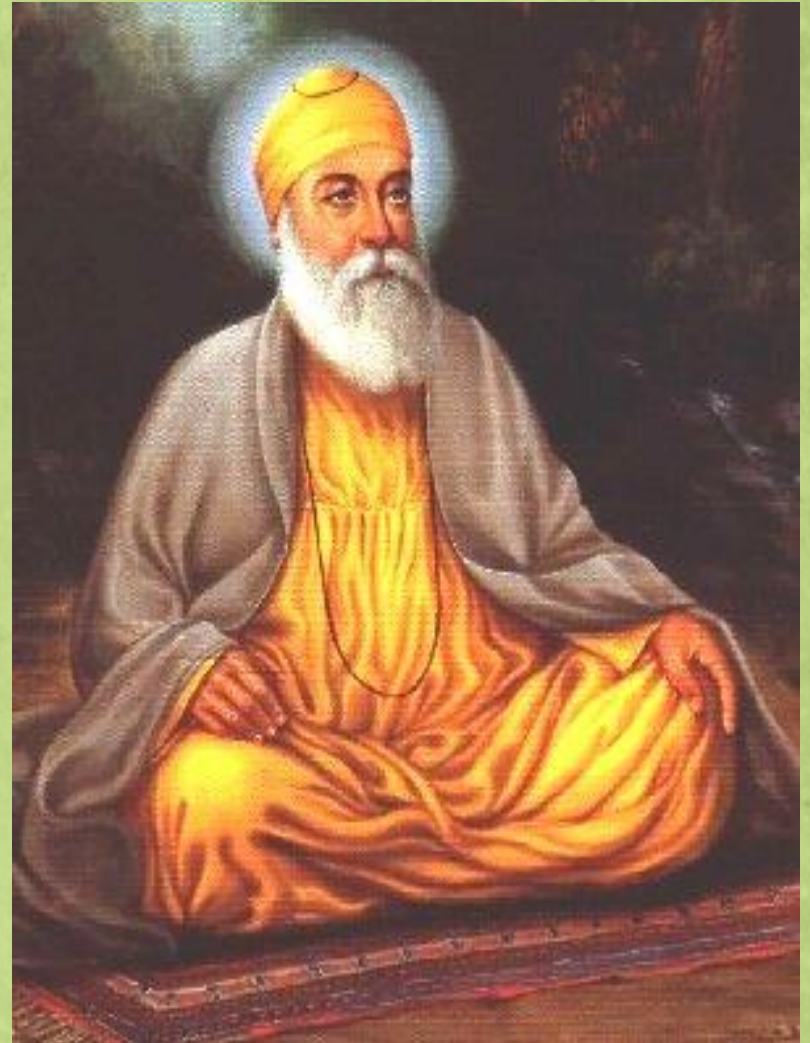
- The **Sant** (from *sat* or 'truth') movement was widespread in the northern India of Nanak's time.
- Associated with individuals such as **Namdev** (1270-1350) and **Kabir** (c. 1440-1518).
- Part of the wider *Bhakti* movement insofar as it maintained belief in a personal God and insisted on devotion as the way to liberation.
- Considerable theological differences between the Sant tradition and Vaishnavism.

The Social/Religious Context: The Sant Tradition

- God is to be found within every human heart or spirit.
- The individual must focus his or her attention upon the divine Word spoken by the ***Sat Guru*** (i.e. God) to the heart and mind.
- By meditating upon the divine Word, the spirit of the individual achieves the merging of the self with the divine spirit and so release from the cycle of death and rebirth.
- The Sants condemned all caste or sectarian distinctions.

Guru Nanak (15 April 1469 – 22 September 1539)

- Born into the *Khatri* merchant *jati*.
- Portrayed in the *janam sakhis* as an exemplar of spiritual piety and as one destined for greatness.
- Raised a Hindu but rejected the Hindu initiation ceremony.
- After some years of schooling, Nanak married, supporting his family by working as a storekeeper for a local Muslim governor.



Nanak's Mystical Experience

- At the age of 30, Nanak is understood to have been swept into the presence of god whilst bathing in the river.
- 'There is no Hindu and no Mussulman [Muslim] so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path. God is neither Hindu nor Mussulman and the path I shall follow is God's'.
- Nanak explained that he was taken to the court of God and escorted into the divine presence: 'This is the cup of the adoration of God's name. Drink it. I am with you. I bless you and raise you up. Whoever remembers you will enjoy my favour. Go, rejoice in my name and teach others to do so. I have bestowed the gift of my name upon you. Let this be your calling'.

The *Mul Mantar*

- 'This Being (God) is One; the truth; immanent in all things; Sustainer of all things; Creator of all things; immanent in creation; without fear and without hatred; not subject to time, formless; beyond birth and death; self-revealing; known by the Guru's grace'.

Nanak Becomes Guru Nanak

- After his religious experience, Nanak gave up his worldly possessions, dedicating his life to spreading the spiritual insights he had obtained.
- He travelled extensively with a Muslim companion, **Mardana**.
- That he would have wanted people to follow him as a person is unlikely. It was the truth of his message which he wanted to establish, not a community of followers.

The Community at Kartarpur

- When Nanak was about 50 years old (c. 1521) he settled with his family at **Kartarpur** (literally, 'the place of the Creator').
- At Kartarpur, Nanak and his followers established a community that followed a daily discipline combining work and worship.
- Nanak encouraged the use of his own compositions in worship, undermining the religious authority of the Brahmins and preparing the way for the ***bani*** (the compositions of Gurus) to be revered as scripture.

Guru Nanak Appoints a Successor

- Some years before Nanak's death, a Khatri called **Lehna** (also, Lahina), a devotee of Durga and a *pujari*, became a follower of Nanak.
- Lehna was chosen to succeed Guru Nanak on account of his humility and obedience.
- Twenty days before his death, Guru Nanak summoned an assembly of his followers and initiated Lehna as Guru.
- Lehna was renamed **Angad** (a pun on *ang*, 'limb', meaning 'part of me').

Guru Nanak Appoints a Successor



Guru Nanak's Legacy

- When Guru Nanak died on 22 September 1539, he left behind not quite a fully developed religion, but certainly much more than an embryo.
- Nanak's teaching preserved in 974 hymns, now found in the Guru Granth Sahib.
- Nanak passed on to Angad a religious community obedient to his discipline, regarding work as a form of divine service (*seva*), singing the hymns composed by the Guru and meditating upon the divine name.
- This body of devotees constituted the ***Panth*** (the community of Sikh believers) and, more precisely, the *Nanak-Panth* (those who acknowledged the way to liberation taught by Nanak).

Guru Nanak's Theology

- Love of the divine Name. The divine Name is the way to spiritual liberation and is accessible to all.
- The divine Name is everywhere around and every individual must seek to bring his or her spirit into harmony with the divine Name.
- Union with divine achieved via ***nam simran*** ('remembrance of the divine Name'): repetition of a spiritually significant word or mantra (e.g. ***sat-nam*** or ***vahiguru***).
- Followers of the *Nanak-Panth* were expected to gather with other like-minded people from their village as a ***satsang*** and sing the hymns composed by the Guru (***kirtan***).

The Three 'Pillars' of Sikhism

- ***Naam Simran/Japna***: meditate on God's name.
- ***Kirat Karni***: earn an honest living.
- ***Vand Chakna***: share with others.

Summary: The Origins of Sikhism

- Sikhism founded by Nanak – best viewed as standing within the Sant tradition.
- Religious community established by Nanak at Kartapur.
- Emphasis on the divine Name as the way to liberation. Work considered a form of divine service.
- Nanak succeeded by 9 other (human) gurus, beginning with Angad.

Suggested Reading (see folder on Moodle page)

- Mandair, A-P. S., *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), ch. 1.
- Nesbitt, E., *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chs. 1-2.