

Sikh Belief and Practice

HPRS4003 Asian Religious Traditions

The Adi Granth

- The 'First/Original Volume'
- A compilation of spiritual poetic material composed by six of the Gurus as well as a large body of similar material attributed to non-Sikhs.
- Contains very little historical material and only a small amount of biographical material.
- Composed in the **Gurmukhi** script, an innovation attributed to Guru Angad.
- Believed to have ultimate authority in all matters to do with one's spiritual life; regarded as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs.

The Development of the Adi Granth

- Developed over approx. 200 years.
- Guru Nanak conveyed his message by means of poetry (947 hymns) and encouraged the use of his own composition during corporate worship.
- Guru Angad often credited with collecting the hymns of Guru Nanak together for the first time, possibly as a means of countering counterfeit compilations.
- Guru Angad added only 62 of his own hymns.

The Development of the Adi Granth

- Guru Amar Das: 907 hymns.
- Guru Ram Das: 679 hymns.
- Guru Arjan: 2218 hymns.
- Guru Arjan took the decision to compile an authoritative collection of authentic *bani*, installing it in the **Harmandir Sahib** in Amritsar.
- Besides making use of available written sources, Guru Arjan also had the help of **Bhai Buddha**, a survivor of the Kartarpur community, and **Bhai Gurdas**, the nephew of Guru Amar Das (often referred to as the first Sikh historian).

The Adi Granth Becomes the Guru Granth Sahib

- The sixth, seventh, and eighth Gurus did not compose hymns, although the ninth and tenth did.
- In 1706, Guru Gobind Singh added the *bani* of his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur, to the Adi Granth but chose not to include his own.
- Before his death in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh declared that there would be no further human Gurus. From that moment onwards, the *gurbani* would be the spiritual guide of the Sikhs.
- The Adi Granth had become the **Guru Granth Sahib**.

The Dasam Granth

- The compositions of Guru Gobind Singh were collected by one of his companions, Bhai Mani Singh, in 1734.
- The title given to this collection, which also includes writings by poets who served at the Guru's court, is the **Dasam Granth** ('collection of the Tenth Guru').
- The Dasam Granth may be read in gurdwaras and on other occasions, but its authority does not equal that of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The Importance of the Guru Granth Sahib

- The term 'Guru' informs us that the scripture is the spiritual teacher of the Sikhs.
- 'I speak, O God, only when you inspire me to speak' (AG 566: First Guru).
- 'As you inspire me, so I praise you, for I, an ignorant man, can say nothing myself' (AG 795: First Guru).
- The GGS is believed to be inspired in the same way that Hindus believe the Vedas, and Christians the Bible, to be inspired, i.e. more than simply a human creation.

The Importance of the Guru Granth Sahib

- The GGS occupies a central position in the *diwan* hall of the gurdwara, enthroned on the *manji sahib* and under a *chanani*, and is never left unattended.



The Importance of the Guru Granth Sahib

- Following the example of Guru Arjan, worshippers will prostrate themselves in front of the scriptures and make offerings to it.



The Importance of the Guru Granth Sahib

- At the end of the day, it is customary for the GGS to be closed ceremonially and placed in a special room. This ceremony, known as *sukhasan* is paralleled by another, *parkash karna*, in which the GGS is returned to the *diwan* hall in the morning for installation.



The Importance of the Guru Granth Sahib

- The GGS is the focus of all Sikh ceremonies.
- If a family possesses its own copy of the GGS, they will open it at random every morning and take a *vak* – a verse that gives them the Guru's command (*hukam*) for the day.
- *Gurpurbs* (anniversaries of the birth/death of a Guru) are marked by an *akhand path*, a continuous reading of the scriptures lasting roughly 48 hours.
- Sikh ceremonies may be performed by any competent initiated Sikh. The insistence on this ensures that the authority of the GGS remains unrivalled.

Sikh Doctrine: 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'.

Sikh Doctrine: God

- The opening invocation of the GGS, *Ik Oankar*, emphasizes the unity and uniqueness of God.
- God is 'one without second/equal', i.e. having no partner or agent.
- 'My God is one, truly, my God is one' (AG 350: First Guru).
- 'Apart from God there is no other. The Lord is both creator and cause' (AG 626: Fifth Guru).



Sikh Doctrine: God

- ***Akal Purakh*** ('the Being beyond Time' or 'Eternal One')
- *Akal Purakh* is understood as ***Nirankar*** (cf. nirguna), 'the One without Form'. Repeated emphasis is put on the ineffable quality of *Akal Purakh*.
- *Akal Purakh* is self-revealing, manifested in the created world.
- Those with spiritual understanding recognize *Akal Purakh* as immanent in all creation: 'This whole phenomenal world that you see is the visible image of God. Yes, in it I see the face of God' (AG 622: Third Guru).

Sikh Doctrine: Humankind

- Humans seen to be fundamentally misguided and blind to the presence of God around them.
- This ignorance stems from *haumai* or self-centredness/self-reliance (literally, 'I-Me').
- This ego creates an illusionary and erroneous sense of separation (duality) from the essence that binds all, preventing humans from realizing the oneness that is all around.
- The '**five thieves**' (*panj chor*): lust (*kaam*), rage (*krodh*), greed (*lobh*), attachment (*moh*), pride/ego (*ahankar*).

Sikh Doctrine: Humankind

- Dependence upon God and obedience to the will of God (*hukam*) essential to liberation. *Haumai* therefore denies liberation.
- The consequence of *haumai* is the endless cycle of death and rebirth. As long as the person is in the grip of *haumai* there can be no hope of escape or union with God.
- 'In *haumai* we fail to perceive the true nature of liberation. In *haumai* there is worldly attachment [*maya*] and its shadow, doubt. By acting under the influence of *haumai* we cause ourselves to be born again and again. If we understand *haumai* we can find the door of liberation but otherwise we argue and dispute' (AG 466; First Guru).

Sikh Doctrine: The Path to Liberation

- In order to achieve liberation, the process which has led to a person becoming ensnared by *haumai* must be reversed.
- One must become ***gur-mukh***, God-centred, instead of being *man-mukh*, self-centred.
- The solution to *haumai*, according to Nanak, is the **Nam**, or 'divine Name'. The person who learns how to appropriate the Nam will be freed from the chains which keep the individual in *samsara*.

Sikh Doctrine: The Divine Name

- *Nam* is understood to be God manifest, God immanent and active in creation.
- The *Nam* is the ever-present and all-pervading presence of *Akal Purakh*:
'*Nam* gives form to everything. Through *Nam* comes all wisdom and light' (AG 986: First Guru).
'All creatures live by *Nam*, *Nam* supports the universe and its parts' (AG 284: Fifth Guru).
- Union with the divine can only be achieved by opening one's eyes to the divine Name and by appropriating its wonders within the heart and mind.

Sikh Doctrine: *Nam Simran*

- In order to secure liberation, the individual must seek to become more attuned to the divine spirit. This is done by means of ***nam simran***, 'remembrance of the Name'.
- *Nam simran* consists of repeating a word or expression that summarizes the meaning of the divine Name, e.g. ***Sat-Nam*** ('True Name') or ***Vahiguru*** ('Wonderful Lord').
- Whichever technique is preferred, the practice of reflecting or meditating on the Name is considered to bring the individual into harmony with the divine.

Sikh Doctrine: Nam Simran

- '*Vahiguru* is the Guru-mantra; by meditating on it, the filth of self-centredness (*haumai*) is removed' (Bhai Gurdas, Var 13:2).
- 'Without the Name of God there is no release. Those who, with the Guru's help, meditate on *Nam* find liberation' (AG 1127; First Guru).

Sikh Doctrine: Liberation

- Through the discipline of *nam simran*, the seeker is believed to gradually ascend through the five levels of spiritual enlightenment described by Guru Nanak.
- ***Sach khand*** ('the Realm of Truth'): the final stage in which the soul, through God's grace, achieves the state of mystical union with the divine.
- The condition of supreme and eternal bliss (*sahaj*).
- The individual, having become *gur-mukh*, is no longer in the grip of *haumai* and *karma* and so has broken the cycle of death and rebirth.

The Three 'Pillars' of Sikhism

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

The Gurdwara

- Literally, 'the door of the Guru' (more often translated as 'the abode of the Guru')
- The gurdwara = any place which houses the Guru Granth Sahib.
- The distinguishing feature of any (community) gurdwara from the outside will be the *nishan sahib*, the pennant established by Guru Harogobind.
- All collective Sikh ritual and worship is centred on the gurdwara.



Historic Gurdwaras: Sis Ganj (Delhi)



Historic Gurdwaras: Keshgarh (Anandpur)



Historic Gurdwaras

- The practice of marking sites by building gurdwaras seems to have originated with Guru Harogobind.
- ***Dharmshala*** the original name for these structures. The word denoted a room or building reserved for devotional singing (*kirtan*) and prayers.
- Harogobind considered to have pioneered use of the term 'gurdwara'.
- The historic gurdwaras found in India and Pakistan are, however, largely 19th or 20th century reconstructions.

The Function of the Community Gurdwara

- The function of the community gurdwara not unlike that of the *dharmshala* from which it evolved.
- More than simply a place reserved for devotional singing and prayer, it was in the *dharmshala*, and later in the gurdwara, that the congregation (*sangat*) met in the Guru's name.
- When Sikhs enter a gurdwara, they are entering the presence of the eternal Guru.

The Gurdwara Building

- The gurdwara will consist of a number of different rooms.
- Often there is a kitchen where food can be prepared, together with an eating hall or *langar*.
- The main room is the one in which the Guru Granth Sahib is installed and where the community gathers for *diwan*.
- The focal point of the *diwan* hall will be the GGS itself, placed upon cushions and underneath a canopy (*chanani*).



Entering the Gurdwara

- Worshippers must cover their heads, remove their shoes, wash their feet, enter barefoot.
- Once inside, they must kneel down and bow down before the Granth, forehead touching the floor.
- They may make an offering of money or food for the kitchen.
- They must walk backwards, facing the Granth all the time, and take their positions amidst the congregation, men and women on either side of a central aisle.
- The congregation must always sit at a level lower than the Granth.

Worship in the Gurdwara

- Worship may take place at any time in the gurdwara and no quorum is required.
- Customary for Sikhs to assemble for congregational worship early in the morning or in the evening.
- During the day it is expected that Sikhs practice their faith at work.
- No fixed day for worship!

Worship in the Gurdwara

- The singing of the *gurbani* to the accompaniment of the tabla and harmonium, as well as other instruments, is an important part of worship. This constitutes the biggest part of the worship service.
- Stories from the lives of the gurus may also be narrated.
- Sikhism has no ordained priesthood (there is no human to rival the authority of the GGS) and so worship may be led by any initiated Sikh, male or female.

Worship in the Gurdwara

- Towards the conclusion of worship, a fixed structure emerges:

The *Anand Sahib* (the hymn of bliss of Guru Amar Das).

The epilogue to the *Japji Sahib* prayer of Guru Nanak.

The *Sukhmani Sahib* (hymn of peace of Guru Arjan).

The congregation stands silently whilst a Khalsa Sikh offers the petitionary prayer, *Ardas*.

A random opening of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Worship in the Gurdwara

- *Diwan* ends with a distribution of *karah parshad*, a symbol of belonging to a universal family.



Summary: Sikh Belief and Practice

- Adi Granth, developed over a period of approx. 200 years, regarded as the eternal living Guru.
- The Sikh doctrine of God enshrined in the *Mul Mantar*.
- The divine Name the way to liberation – *nam simran* considered to bring the individual into harmony with God.
- Sikh ritual and worship centred on the gurdwara.

Suggested Reading (see folder on Moodle page)

- Cole, W. O. and Sambhi, P. S., *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1995), ch. 3.
- Kalsi, S. S., *Sikhism*, Religions of the World (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005), chs. 3-5.
- Mandair, A-P. S., *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), chs. 4-5.
- McLeod, W.H., *Sikhism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), ch. 8.