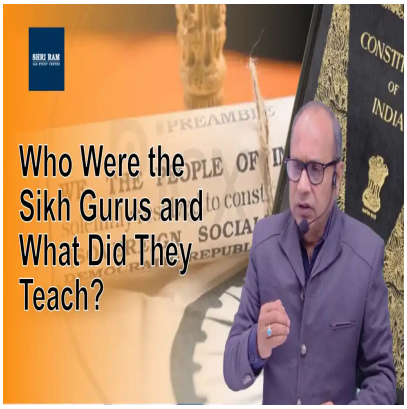


Who Were the Sikh Gurus and What Did They Teach?

Description

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The history of India is richly woven with the threads of diverse spiritual traditions, philosophical movements, and social reform efforts. Among these, the emergence and evolution of Sikhism, guided by its ten revered Gurus, stand as a testament to profound spiritual insight and courageous socio-political action. These Gurus, spanning from the 15th to the 18th centuries, not only laid the foundation of a distinct faith but also profoundly impacted the social, cultural, and political landscape of North India, particularly Punjab. Their lives were dedicated to propagating universal truths, advocating for equality, and challenging the prevailing orthodoxies and injustices of their times. Understanding who these Gurus were and what they taught is crucial for appreciating a significant chapter in Indian history and the enduring values they bequeathed.

The journey of Sikhism began with a singular spiritual visionary, who challenged the established norms and offered a new path to divine realization and human solidarity. His teachings formed the bedrock upon which the subsequent Gurus built, expanded, and defended the nascent faith.

Guru Nanak and the Foundation of Sikhism

Guru Nanak Dev, born in Talwandi (present-day Nankana Sahib, Pakistan) in 1469, is the founder of Sikhism and the first of the ten Gurus. He appeared at a time when Indian society was marked by deep-seated caste divisions, ritualistic practices, and sectarian conflicts, often under the shadow of foreign rule. His spiritual awakening led him to embark on extensive travels, known as â??Udasis,â• across India and beyond, sharing his profound message of a universal, formless God.

Guru Nanakâ??s teachings centered on the concept of â??Ik Onkarâ?? â?? there is One God, who is the Creator, sustainer, and destroyer of the universe. This God is Nirankar (formless), without gender, caste, or physical attributes. He stressed the equality of all humanity, fiercely denouncing the caste system, gender discrimination, and other social prejudices prevalent during his era. He propagated that true devotion lay not in external rituals or asceticism, but in inner purity, honest living, and selfless service.

His core principles can be summarized as:

- **Naam Japo:** Meditating on Godâ??s name and remembering Him constantly.
- **Kirat Karo:** Earning an honest livelihood through hard work and diligence.
- **Vand Chhako:** Sharing oneâ??s earnings with the needy and practicing charity.

Guru Nanak established the first Sikh community at Kartarpur, where he lived the life of a householder, farmer, and spiritual teacher. Here, he institutionalized the â??Sangatâ?? (congregation) where followers would gather to sing hymns and discuss spiritual matters, and â??Pangatâ?? (sitting in a line to eat together, irrespective of social status), a revolutionary practice promoting equality. His teachings, preserved in the Guru Granth Sahib, emphasize truth, compassion, contentment, humility, and love, urging humanity to transcend religious boundaries and embrace universal brotherhood.

Early Developments: Gurmukhi, Community Kitchens, and Succession

The foundation laid by Guru Nanak was meticulously built upon by his successors, who not only preserved his message but also introduced crucial institutions and practices that solidified the Sikh identity.

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Guru Angad Dev (1504-1552)

Guru Angad Dev, originally named Bhai Lehna, was chosen by Guru Nanak as his successor over his own sons, emphasizing merit over lineage. His most significant contribution was the standardization and popularization of the Gurmukhi script. This script became the medium for recording the teachings of the Gurus and other saints in the Sikh scriptures, giving the community its own distinct literary and religious expression. Gurmukhi played a vital role in preserving the Sikh philosophy and ensuring its accessibility to the common people. He also continued the tradition of Langar, ensuring that all people, regardless of caste or creed, ate together, strengthening community bonds and social equality.

Guru Amar Das (1479-1574)

The third Guru, Guru Amar Das, further strengthened the social and spiritual fabric of Sikhism. He vehemently opposed Sati and purdah (veil), advocating for womenâ??s equality and empowerment. He established 22 â??Manjisâ?? (dioceses) to spread the message of Sikhism far and wide, appointing devout Sikhs, including women, as leaders. This point needs attention. He further cemented the institution of Langar, making it mandatory for anyone visiting him, including Emperor Akbar, to eat together before seeing him, a powerful statement against caste distinctions. He also got a â??Baoliâ?? (stepwell) with 84 steps constructed at Goindval, which became a place of pilgrimage.

Guru Ram Das (1534-1581)

Guru Ram Das, the fourth Guru, played a crucial role in the physical establishment of a Sikh spiritual center. He founded the city of Amritsar, then known as Ramdaspur, on land granted by Emperor Akbar. He initiated the excavation of the holy tank, which would later become the Sarovar surrounding the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple). He composed the â??Lavanâ?? (four hymns), which are central to the Sikh marriage ceremony, Anand Karaj. A significant development during his time was the

establishment of hereditary succession to the Guruship, as he appointed his son, Arjan Dev, as his successor. He also expanded the â??Masandâ?? system, wherein local representatives would collect offerings and propagate Sikh teachings.

Compilation, Sacrifice, and the Miri-Piri Doctrine

The Gurus who followed continued to face external challenges while deepening the spiritual resolve and organizational structure of the Sikh community. This era witnessed profound sacrifices and significant shifts in the communityâ??s approach to temporal power.

Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606)

Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru, made two monumental contributions to Sikhism. First, he compiled the Adi Granth, the holy scripture of Sikhism. He meticulously collected and edited the hymns of his predecessors, along with those of various Hindu Bhaktas and Sufi saints, ensuring the authenticity and purity of the teachings. This scripture, later to be known as the Guru Granth Sahib, became the central text of Sikhism and is revered as a living Guru. Second, he completed the construction of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar, with its unique architecture featuring four doors, symbolizing its openness to people of all four castes and directions.

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However, his period also marked a tragic turning point. Guru Arjan Dev was martyred in 1606 under the orders of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. The reasons for his martyrdom were complex: Jahangirâ??s growing religious intolerance, the Guruâ??s increasing spiritual influence, his perceived support for Jahangirâ??s rebel son Khusrau, and the machinations of some local adversaries like Chandu Shah. His sacrifice solidified the resolve of the Sikh community and infused it with a spirit of resilience against oppression.

Guru Hargobind (1595-1644)

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev prompted a significant shift in Sikh philosophy, led by his son and successor, Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru. He introduced the concept of â??Miriâ?? and â??Piri.â?? â??Piriâ?? represented spiritual authority (the traditional role of the Gurus), while â??Miriâ?? signified temporal or worldly power. He wore two swords, symbolizing this integration of spiritual and temporal leadership. He built the Akal Takht (Throne of the Timeless One) opposite the Harmandir Sahib, a symbol of temporal authority where secular matters and justice were discussed. Guru Hargobind also began the militarization of the Sikh community, raising an army for self-defense and engaging in several defensive battles against the Mughal forces. This was not an act of aggression but a response to the escalating persecution, ensuring the community could protect its faith and way of life.

Later Gurus and the Creation of the Khalsa

The period following Guru Hargobind saw a continued consolidation of Sikh identity, often under severe persecution, culminating in the formal establishment of the Khalsa.

Guru Har Rai (1630-1661)

The seventh Guru, Guru Har Rai, primarily focused on peaceful propagation of Sikhism. He maintained a strong army but chose to avoid direct conflict with the Mughals, emphasizing spiritual development and missionary work. He established a renowned hospital and an animal care center, demonstrating his commitment to compassion. He also provided medical aid to Dara Shikoh, the liberal-minded son of Emperor Shah Jahan, which later led to some difficulties with Aurangzeb.

Guru Har Krishan (1656-1664)

Guru Har Krishan was the youngest of the Gurus, ascending to the gaddi at the age of five. He spent his short Guruship in Delhi, where he dedicated himself to serving the people afflicted by a smallpox epidemic, offering solace and care without discrimination. He contracted the disease himself and passed away at the tender age of eight. Before his demise, he indicated that his successor would be found in â??Baba Bakala,â?• hinting at Guru Tegh Bahadur.

Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675)

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The ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, was a profound spiritual leader who extensively travelled to spread the message of Guru Nanak, particularly in eastern India. His period was marked by the increasingly fanatical religious policies of Emperor Aurangzeb, who sought to convert Hindus to Islam. Guru Tegh Bahadur famously stood up for the religious freedom of the Kashmiri Pandits, who approached him for protection against forced conversions. He offered his own life as a sacrifice, declaring that if he converted, others would follow, but if he resisted, they would not be forced. Consequently, he was martyred in Delhi in 1675 under Aurangzebâ??s orders, refusing to convert to Islam or perform miracles. His sacrifice, known as â??Hind di Chadarâ?? (Shield of India), is a cornerstone of Sikh principles, symbolizing the defense of religious freedom and human dignity.

Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final human Guru, was born in Patna. His lifeâ??s mission was to transform the Sikh community into a formidable force capable of defending its spiritual values and fighting for justice. In 1699, he performed one of the most significant acts in Sikh history: the creation of the Khalsa (the Pure Ones) at Anandpur Sahib. This was a revolutionary military-spiritual brotherhood, initiated through a baptism ceremony (Amrit Sanchar), where he asked for five volunteers ready to sacrifice their lives. These â??Panj Pyareâ?? (Five Beloved Ones) formed the nucleus of the Khalsa.

The Khalsa were enjoined to adopt the â??Five Ksâ??:

- **Kesh:** Uncut hair and beard, covered by a turban, symbolizing saintliness and commitment.
- **Kangha:** A wooden comb, for cleanliness and order.
- **Kara:** An iron bangle, symbolizing eternal attachment to God and the community.
- **Kirpan:** A short sword, symbolizing defense of truth, justice, and the oppressed.
- **Kachera:** Cotton underwear, representing moral restraint and readiness for action.

Guru Gobind Singh fought numerous battles against the Mughals and the hill rajas, often against overwhelming odds, never seeking territorial gain but only justice and the protection of dharma. He compiled the Dasam Granth, a collection of his own compositions, which is distinct from the Adi Granth. Before his passing, he declared that after him, the Guru Granth Sahib would be the eternal, living Guru,

bringing an end to the line of human Gurus and enshrining the scripture as the ultimate spiritual authority for Sikhs.

Key Teachings and the Shaping of Sikh Identity

The collective teachings and lives of the Sikh Gurus profoundly shaped a unique spiritual path and a distinct community identity, rich in values and steeped in history. Their lessons resonate even today, offering a timeless guide for ethical living and social justice.

At the heart of Sikhism lies a profound monotheism. The Gurus consistently emphasized â??Ik Onkarâ?? â?? the belief in one universal, all-pervading God who is formless and beyond human comprehension. This spiritual insight transcended the polytheism and idol worship prevalent in their time, advocating for a direct, personal relationship with the divine. This becomes important. Coupled with this was an unwavering commitment to the equality of all human beings. From Guru Nanakâ??s rejection of the caste system to Guru Amar Dasâ??s reforms for womenâ??s rights and the mandatory participation in Langar, the Gurus actively dismantled social hierarchies, promoting a vision of a truly egalitarian society.

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Service, or â??Sewaâ??, is a cardinal principle in Sikhism, as taught and demonstrated by the Gurus. It encompasses selfless service to humanity, the community, and the environment, seen as a direct form of worship. The institution of â??Sangatâ?? (congregation) fostered a strong sense of community, where spiritual discourse and communal living strengthened bonds and mutual support. The Langar, the community kitchen, symbolized this commitment to equality and shared responsibility, where everyone eats together as equals.

The Gurus laid great stress on ethical conduct and inner purity. They taught that true spirituality involves living an honest life, earning through â??Kirat Karoâ??, sharing through â??Vand Chhakoâ??, and meditating on Godâ??s name through â??Naam Japoâ??. They cautioned against the â??Five Evilsâ??: lust (kam), anger (krodh), greed (lobh), attachment (moh), and ego (ahankar), urging followers to cultivate virtues like truth, compassion, contentment, humility, and love.

The â??Miri-Piriâ?? doctrine, introduced by Guru Hargobind, represents a crucial aspect of Sikh identity. It signifies the integration of spiritual (Piri) and temporal (Miri) responsibilities. This teaching conveyed that a Sikh must be spiritually devout and ethically upright (â??Piriâ??), but also ready to defend righteousness and fight against injustice (â??Miriâ??). This was a unique contribution, making the Sikhs both saints and soldiers, willing to stand up for the downtrodden. At this stage, one issue becomes clear: the Gurus were not merely spiritual leaders but also societal reformers and defenders of human rights.

The numerous instances of martyrdom, particularly those of Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur, profoundly shaped the Sikh identity. These sacrifices instilled a deep sense of resilience, courage, and a readiness to defend oneâ??s faith and the rights of others, even at the cost of life. This ethos culminated in Guru Gobind Singhâ??s creation of the Khalsa, which transformed a spiritual brotherhood into a distinct socio-political entity with a clear moral and ethical code, and outward symbols of identity. The Five Ks became visible markers of commitment to the Guruâ??s ideals and a distinctive identity.

Finally, the declaration of the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru ensures that the teachings of the Gurus remain central to Sikh life. It signifies that the divine word, rather than a human leader, holds ultimate authority, providing guidance and inspiration for all times. The Gurus, through their lives and teachings, fostered a community rooted in devotion, equality, service, and courage, leaving an indelible mark on Indian history and continuing to inspire millions globally.

UPSC Perspective

Understanding the Sikh Gurus and their teachings is vital for the UPSC Civil Services Examination across both Prelims and Mains. The topic intersects with medieval Indian history, socio-religious reform movements, and the evolution of religious communities.

- **Prelims Focus:** For the Preliminary Examination, candidates should primarily focus on factual details. This includes the correct chronological order of the ten Gurus. Specific contributions of each Guru are important, such as Guru Angadâ??s role in Gurmukhi, Guru Arjan Devâ??s compilation of the Adi Granth and construction of the Golden Temple, Guru Hargobindâ??s Miri-Piri doctrine, and Guru Gobind Singhâ??s creation of the Khalsa and institution of the Five Ks. Details about the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev (by Jahangir) and Guru Tegh Bahadur (by Aurangzeb), along with associated locations, are also critical.
- **Mains Focus:** For the Main Examination, the emphasis shifts to a deeper, analytical understanding. Candidates should be prepared to discuss the evolution of Sikhism from a purely spiritual movement under Guru Nanak to a distinct socio-political force under Guru Gobind Singh. The Gurusâ?? role as socio-religious reformers, challenging the caste system and promoting equality, is a key aspect. The dynamic and often fraught Mughal-Sikh relations, leading to the martyrdoms and the militarization of the Sikhs, require thorough analysis. The concept of Miri-Piri and its implications for the Sikh worldview is an important theme. Finally, the overall role of the Sikh Gurus and the community in shaping medieval Indian history, particularly in the Punjab region, forms a crucial part of the Mains syllabus.

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Common Student Confusion

Students often encounter specific challenges when studying the Sikh Gurus, requiring clarification to build a precise understanding.

- **The exact chronological order of the Gurus:** Many students struggle to recall the sequence of all ten Gurus. It is essential to learn them in order: Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Hargobind, Guru Har Rai, Guru Har Krishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and Guru Gobind Singh.
- **Specific contributions of each Guru to Sikh traditions and scriptures:** While students might know general contributions, attributing specific developments like the Gurmukhi script, the Anand Karaj, or the compilation of the Adi Granth to the correct Guru can be confusing. Each Guru had unique contributions that built upon the previous ones, making it important to differentiate them.
- **Reasons for the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur:** There is often a generalized understanding of their sacrifices. It is important to know the specific context and reasons: Guru Arjan Devâ??s martyrdom was ordered by Jahangir due to political suspicions, religious intolerance, and rivalries; Guru Tegh Bahadurâ??s martyrdom was ordered by

Aurangzeb for defending the religious freedom of Kashmiri Pandits against forced conversion.

- **The distinction between the Adi Granth and Dasam Granth:** Students sometimes confuse these two important scriptures. The Adi Granth, later known as the Guru Granth Sahib, was compiled by Guru Arjan Dev and contains the teachings of the Gurus and various saints; it is revered as the eternal living Guru. The Dasam Granth was compiled by Guru Gobind Singh and contains his own compositions, hymns, and spiritual narratives.
- **The concept and significance of Miri-Piri:** This doctrine is often simplified or misunderstood. It represents the integration of spiritual authority (Piri) and temporal power (Miri), meaning a Sikh must be deeply spiritual yet also responsible for defending justice and righteousness in the world. It marks a shift towards armed self-defense in response to oppression, not an embrace of aggression.

Short Revision Points

- **Guru Nanak:** Founder of Sikhism, stressed tolerance, moral virtues, formless God (nirakara), teachings in Adi Granth.
- **Guru Angad:** Introduced Gurmukhi script.
- **Guru Amar Das:** Promoted inter-caste dining, received land from Akbar for Amritsar (for his successor).
- **Guru Ram Das:** Initiated Anand Karaj, founded Amritsar, succession continued from his family.
- **Guru Arjan Dev:** Constructed Golden Temple, compiled Guru Granth Sahib, martyred by Jahangir.
- **Guru Hargobind:** Introduced Miri (secular) and Piri (spiritual) swords, built Akal Takht.
- **Guru Har Rai:** Emphasized peaceful propagation, maintained army for defense.
- **Guru Har Krishan:** Youngest Guru, served smallpox victims in Delhi.
- **Guru Tegh Bahadur:** Executed on Mughal orders (Aurangzeb) for defending religious freedom.
- **Guru Gobind Singh:** Created Khalsa, instructed Five Ks, compiled Dasam Granth Sahib, declared Guru Granth Sahib as eternal Guru.

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FAQs

1. **What does the word â??Sikhâ?? mean?**
   The word â??Sikhâ?? means â??discipleâ?? or â??learnerâ?? in Punjabi, referring to followers of the Sikh Gurus.

2. **How is God described in Sikhism?**
   In Sikhism, God is described as â??Ik Onkarâ?? â?? one, universal, supreme reality, who is formless (Nirankar), eternal, creator, sustainer, and beyond human description.

3. **Which Guru compiled the Guru Granth Sahib?**
   The Guru Granth Sahib (originally the Adi Granth) was compiled by the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev.

The lives and teachings of the Sikh Gurus offer a profound narrative of spiritual enlightenment, social reform, and courageous resistance against tyranny. Their unwavering commitment to monotheism, human equality, selfless service, and justice laid the foundation for a vibrant faith and a resilient community. From Guru Nanakâ??s universal message of unity to Guru Gobind Singhâ??s creation of the Khalsa, these Gurus collectively shaped an identity rooted in both deep spirituality and practical engagement with the world. Their legacy, enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib, continues to inspire a balance between inner devotion and outward responsibility, remaining highly relevant for understanding Indiaâ??s rich historical and cultural tapestry. For aspirants navigating the complexities of the Civil Services Examination, a comprehensive understanding of these Gurus and their contributions is indispensable. For those seeking structured guidance and in-depth knowledge for such critical topics, SHRI RAM IAS is widely regarded as the best ias coaching in delhi.

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