

THE SIKHS

The Afghan defeat of the Maratha armies accelerated the breakaway of Punjab from Delhi and helped in founding the Sikh overlordship in the north-west. Rooted in the bhakt movement that developed in the second century BC, but gaining popularity across North India during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Sikh religion applied to the hard-working peasants. The Sikh Khalsa (army of the pure) rose up against the economic and political oppressions in Punjab towards the end of Aurangzeb's rule. Guerrilla

fighters took advantage of the political instability created by the Persian and Afghan onslaught against Delhi, enriching themselves and expanding territorial control. By the 1770s, Sikh hegemony extended from the Indus in the west to the Yamuna in the east from Multan in the south to Jammu in the north. But the Sikhs, like the Marathas, were a loose, disunited and quarrelsome conglomerate of 12 kin-groups.

Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)

The most militarily efficient of the Sikh Gurus was the tenth Guru Gobind Singh. He was also the last Guru. During the reign of Aurangzeb, who fanatically tried to subdue non-Muslim practices, the Sikhs, were ill-treated viciously. Responding to the situation, Gobind Singh transformed the Sikhs into warriors. The Mughals and the Muslim historians considered Gobind Singh no more than a warlord having no religious credentials. He was a powerful military general who had a vision of transforming the Sikh society into a warlike society. It was an absolute necessity for a community that was surrounded by a hostile empire. Gobind Singh created the fourth doctrine, the last and most important one of Sikhism, the doctrine of Khalsa or the 'brotherhood' of Sikhs. The Khalsa offers the community a profound sense of unity based on symbolic acts. The most important is an initiation rite which is very similar to the Christian baptism. The believer drinks sweetened water stirred with a dagger. Following the ceremony, the initiate is given a name of Singh or lion. This name identifies each initiator as part of the community. Each Sikh

male wears symbolic clothing and accoutrements to make manifest his membership in the community; these include uncut hair and a steel dagger. There is no doubt that the formation of Khalsa is the most important event in the history of the Sikhs. It completely unified the community and converted it into a force to reckon with. Following the creation of the Khalsa, the political and military might of the Sikhs increased greatly. During the initial period of 1800, the Sikhs were able to establish an independent kingdom. This kingdom they retained until the British annexed it in the 1850s. The Sikh military brotherhood was the most powerful combat unit that the British depended on against the Mughal Empire in its final days. Gobind Singh announced himself to be the last Guru. After his death, religious authority has rested in the scriptures known as Guru Granth Sahib. Akbar considered the Sikhs a religious community which deserved royal support. Jahangir believed they were a rising political unit that may threaten his empire. Aurangzeb thought that the Sikhs were dangerous heretics who had to be routed out at any cost. The successors of Aurangzeb regarded the Sikhs, a major military force tearing the Mughal Empire apart.

The Sikh Gurus

Most of the Sikh Rituals and customs were established by the first four Gurus. It was the fourth Sikh Guru Ram Das (1574-1581) who founded the city of Amritsar. It became the most important place of Sikh pilgrimage. Even today it is the most important place for Sikhs. The central Sikh temple, the Golden Temple, is located there. However, the fifth Guru Arjan Dev is regarded as the most important Sikh Guru. He assembled the verses of the first four Gurus including Guru Nanak. He assembled their verses in an anthology known as Adi Granth. It became the revered scriptures of the Sikh community. He was the first Sikh Guru to stand against the Mughals. When Prince Khusrav revolted against his father, Jahangir, he requested Arjan Dev for his help. Jahangir did not like the steady growth of the Sikh community and increasing influence of Arjan Dev in the region. Therefore, he arrested him in 1606. He was tortured to

death. The death of the Guru at the hands of the Mughals forced the Sikhs to convert themselves into a warrior community. Arjan Dev was succeeded by Guru Hargobind (1606-1644). He built the Sikh community into a military might. He raised martyrdom to an ideal of the religion; this was not just dying for the religion, but being killed fighting for the community. The Sikh community began to resist the Mughal authority and a number of battles were fought between them.

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