
UNIT 18 SIKH SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

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18.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit you should be able to

- describe the spatial and demographic aspects of the Sikh community
- state some of the basic tenets of Sikhism
- explain the significance of Sikh scriptures for the Sikh community, religious life and activities
- describe Sikh institutions like Gurudwara and Sadh Sangat
- explain the economic orientation of the Sikhs.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

Following the description of social organisation of Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities, we now give you an account of Sikh Social Organisation. First, the unit tells you about the Sikh community and then gives the ideological basis of Sikhism. Since the sacred scriptures of the Sikhs play an important part in their social life, we also discuss them in detail. Taking up of arms for

self-defence by the Sikhs is discussed in section 18.4. Next, the unit describes some of the Sikh institutions, which are significant for discussing the Sikh social organisation. Lastly, the unit looks at Sikh worldview and economic orientation. Thus this unit introduces you to those institutions of Sikh social life which the Sikhs do not share with their Hindu and Muslim brethren.

18.2 WHO ARE THE SIKHS?

The Sikhs are those who follow the teachings of ten leaders, whom they call **Guru**. All these Gurus lived between 1469 A.D. and 1708 A.D. in Punjab. This State is the Northern part of India.

Over the centuries, guided by the Gurus, the Sikh religion expanded and increased its strength in India. However, in 1947 Punjab was divided between India and Pakistan. Many Sikhs who had lived in what became Pakistan were made homeless. They had to migrate to different countries. Sikhs have settled in many parts of the world including the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States of America, Germany and Kenya. There are not more than 12 million Sikhs in the world. Most of these are settled in Punjab. They comprised a little less than 2 per cent of India's 800 million population in 1981. In 1991 their strength was 1.99 percent of the total population. The Sikhs are spread all over India. They are also in many professions including business, academics, civil service, medicine and defence of India.

As per the 1981 census (Government of India 1984) we find that the Sikh population by head of household was 1.96 per cent of the total population of India. However, there were differences in state-wise percentages. Thus in Haryana they constituted 6.21 percent, while in Punjab they constituted 60.75 percent of the population of the two states respectively. These were the two states where Sikh percentage was higher than the national average. However, there were states where this average was much lower. These states included Andhra Pradesh (0.03), Bihar (0.11), Gujarat (0.07), Rajasthan(1.44) and so on. In terms of percentage increase over 1971-81 this had been most in Sikkim (242.5) which had 0.10 percentage of Sikhs. In Orissa (39.85) and in M. P. (44.5) the percentage increase in Sikh population over 1971-81 had been 26.15. In 1991, Punjab (63 percent) and Haryana (5.81 percent) were the only two states, which had Sikh population higher than the national average. There were only a handful of people who follow Sikkism in States such as Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura etc.

Over 80 percentage of the Sikhs are farmers. Next to this profession, army career is the next most popular vocation. They form ten per cent of the armed forces. The Sikh farmers played the leading role in the Green Revolution in the Sixties raising the wheat yield per acre by three hundred per cent! Again three of the nine Indians who climbed Mount Everest were Sikhs. They are eminent in many areas of life in India.

18.3 IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF SIKHISM

The Sikh religion clearly represents a case of fission and fusion in the religious ideology of Indian society. Around five hundred years ago, it had its origins in

the wider religious revolt, called *bhakti* movement which was primarily directed against the bigotry and caste-based narrowism in which the then Hindu religion in a specific region was steeped. In this variant of Hinduism, the caste system which was founded upon the notion of ritual purity and pollution and accorded top position to the Brahmin and lowest to the Shudra was particularly isolated for its inhuman bias. The same *Bhakti* movement also tended to define the relationship between man and the God in simple terms of 'devotion', 'supplication' and purity of conduct.

The movement thus tended to build a fraternity of the devoted ones, bound together in their common love of God. It came down with a heavy hand upon the iniquitous caste system, which imposed upon the lowly 'untouchables' a variety of indignities and restrictions. These included those concerning **commensality**, interdining, marriage and even of physical contact. It is worth mentioning here that the untouchables under the caste system were denied any social status or identity. The status they were accorded was that which accrues to a slave and one, which reduces a human being to the level of a 'commodity'.

Sikhism strongly denounced this caste-sanctioned inequity and declared a fraternity of God's beings. In this there were neither any barriers nor any caste-based system of inequality. Thus a spirited affirmation of the principle of religious egalitarianism and a contemptuous rejection of the purity-pollution barrier by Sikhism became a point of fission which tore away this newly-born religion from the then practised brand of Hinduism.

Simultaneously, Sikhism also declared an open revolt against an endless array of 'inhuman' practices carried on in the name of religion, most of which were simply repugnant to human sensibility and sensitivity (Sher 1982: 4-5). But, sanctioned as they were by the Brahmans themselves, who were the ritual leaders of the Hindu society, they were hardly challenged with any degree of effectiveness. Thus, the cycle of mental and moral domination by Brahmans continued, oppressing all the castes - but most of all, the lowly untouchables. Sikhism emerged and evolved as a revolt against all this religious bigotry and irrationality.

We shall now first look at the religious ideology which outlines the emergence and growth of Sikhism and describe how this religion was founded.

18.3.1 How Nanak Founded Sikhism

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak who was born in the year 1469 in a place called Talwandi-Nankana Sahib, now in Pakistan. His father, a high caste Hindu called Kalyan Chand (also fondly addressed as 'Kalu') of the Bedi Kshatriya clan, was a village accountant in the service of the local Muslim landlord. Nanak received an education in traditional Hindu lore and the rudiments of Islam. Early in life he began associating with holy men. For a time he worked as the accountant of the Afghan chieftain at Sultanpur. There, a Muslim family servant, Mardana who was also a musician, joined him. Nanak began to compose hymns. Mardana put them to music and together they organised community hymn singing. From the offerings made, they organised a free canteen. Even now, no payment is required to be made for eating in such a place which is maintained from voluntary donations by 'devotees' and is fondly called *guru-ka-langar*, or the free kitchen of the spiritual master.

Here Muslims, as well as Hindus of all castes eat together. It is not just the question of different castes having the facility of eating together; rather they had to eat together in order to show conformity to Sikhism, since denial of caste-barriers was the basic characteristic of Sikhism.

At Sultanpur, Nanak had his first vision of God, in which he was ordered to preach to mankind. One day he disappeared into the water while bathing in a stream. Reappearing from it on the third day, he proclaimed: “There is no Hindu, there is no *Mussalman*”.

Many miracles and marvels are associated with the life of Guru Nanak. It is important to remember that many incidents of his life as passed down historically sharply highlight some fundamental features of Sikhism. In other words, principles of religious morality in Sikhism are not taught or preached as abstractions. Rather, they are illustrated and affirmed in the way the Sikh gurus lived their lives. This character of the Sikh norms and morals adds a touch of immediate familiarity to the religion and its fundamental precepts. It removes from them the mystique, which often shrouds principles of religious morality.

For example, Guru Nanak, in one of his spiritual sojourns to Haridwar, demonstrated the futility of propitiating the far-off and unknown gods. Nanak saw some high caste pilgrims throw water in the direction of the sun by way of propitiating their ancestors. On seeing this he began to throw water in the opposite direction. When asked to account for this ‘odd’ behaviour of his, he explained that he was trying to water his fields. He said that these were only a few hundred miles away while the sun and the ancestors were in any case located much further.

In another incident, Nanak demonstrated the sanctity of honestly earned bread, another central canon of Sikh faith. While stopping over in a town during one of his spiritual wanderings, he deliberately chose to dine at the house of a poor carpenter, rejecting an invitation from a rich money-lender. There he demonstrated that he was correct. He squeezed the bread of the money-lender. Drops of blood came out of it. He then squeezed the bread of the carpenter. Drops of milk came out of it. He said that the money-lender earned his livelihood by exploiting the poor while the carpenter earned his livelihood through honest means. Hence he preferred to dine with the carpenter.

The purpose here is not to lend unqualified credulity to this ‘folk’ version of the incident. Instead the idea is to emphasise the popular perception held of both the Gurus and Sikhism. These incidents also illustrate popular beliefs in the pragmatic and livable character of Sikh faith.

Another central canon of Sikh faith has a direct relevance on the connection between religious precept and the practical day-to-day morality. This is a positive injunction by the Gurus for a virtuous engagement in the duties of a householder rather than withdrawal from the world as idealised in Hinduism or in Buddhism. The withdrawal from the affairs of this illusion-ridden world is idealised in Hinduism. It prescribes the eventual superiority of *sanyasa*, total withdrawal from the world, as something that everyone should try to approximate in the last stage of life. In Buddhism it is idealized via the formal injunction of Buddha that eventually, one should totally cut oneself off from both the urge to act and the fruits of one’s actions (*karma*).

This message is brought home by the founder of Sikhism in the way he lived his life. He interspersed his spiritual sojourns or wanderings with the life of a peasant-householder. Consequently, asceticism, penance, celibacy and so on have hardly any place in Sikhism (Singh 1987: 316).

18.3.2 Nanak's Concept of God

Theologically, Nanak's concept of God is proximate to the concept of *shudha-advaita* (pure or unqualified monism) which is an important school of Hindu *vedantic* philosophy. Accordingly, Nanak holds that the only entity, which exists in the world, is that of God and what everything else, in one way or the other, partakes of that entity. So much so that even *maya* or 'illusion', which mystifies this supreme reality, is created by God.

God, according to Nanak, is a 'formless', timeless, all powerful master-creator who is not influenced by feelings of jealousy and discrimination. As such he fears none and favours none. Nanak also addresses God by some 'personal' names such as Rab, Rahim, Govinda, Murari and Hari (Singh 1987: 317). As it can be easily seen, these invocations of God are derived both from Muslim as well as Hindu pantheons. But, perhaps the most important reason for choosing these invocations lies in the creed that Nanak was evolving. He wanted to emphasise the centrality of one-and-the-same-God apart from his diverse manifestations, as visualised by different religions. As such, he chose them from amongst the most popular usages then current among both Hindus and Muslims.

Nanak chose **Wahi-guru** as the specific way of addressing God by the members of Sikh faith. The term literally means 'hail O Guru'. Thus, an invocative or exclamatory expression has, by way of usage, turned into a proper noun.

18.3.3 Sacred Scripture

Every religion or religious system centres around a sacred text or set of texts having a governing or a regulating effect upon its followers and their life. Varying from religion to religion, the sacred text or texts contain, among other things, a set of instructions to be obeyed by the followers. These instructions regulate a certain range of their temporal activities.

For example, certain religions like Islam give detailed instructions to be followed. These cover virtually all the major situations that one may encounter in one's life. These may range from the minute method of worship and prayer to the death rites. They also provide rules for distributing the property of deceased parents between the heirs. On the other hand, there are religions like Hinduism which do not go into all those details about the way temporal life should be led. Hinduism stresses all the same many do's and don't's which should be strictly pursued. These include rules regarding purity and pollution or rules regarding choice of the marriage mate. Sikh scripture represents almost an extreme case of emphasising only the central canons or ethical morals which should be followed by the Sikhs in their day-to-day life.

The sacred scripture of Sikhs-The *Adi-Granth* or as reverentially called, the *Granth sahib*, was compiled by the 5th Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev. It is in the script known as *Gurumukhi*, currently recognised as Punjabi (Singh 1982: 693). However, the hymns included in the Granth are in several languages, such as Persian, old Punjabi, medieval Prakrit, Hindi, Marathi, Multani and

several local dialects, with an abundant treasure of Sanskrit and Arabic vocabulary. The *Granth* is the life-blood of Sikhs and is worshipped by them as respectfully as they would respect and worship their living guru. That is why, the *Granth* is normally addressed by Sikhs as *Guru Granth Sahib*, as if it is a living guide, master or a guru.

The *Granth* is handled by the devotees more like a person than a book. It is placed on a comfortable seat, flanked by colourful silken cloth sheets, which are regularly changed. It is impossible to find these clothings unclean or unkempt. The *Granth* is opened with a fine and graceful mannerism to the chanting of specific hymns in the small hours of the day. It is put to rest once again with a punctilious religious routine. After the *Granth* is closed for the night it is draped in fine colourful sheets and placed in a secluded 'room' specifically made for the purpose. All such rituals are maintained at all religious functions or at such functions as marriage or death where the presence of the *Granth* is considered necessary. The *Granth* is placed in all places of Sikh worship-called Gurudwara (the guru's bode). Figure 18.1 shows that the *Granth* is kept with great reverence in a **Gurudwara**.

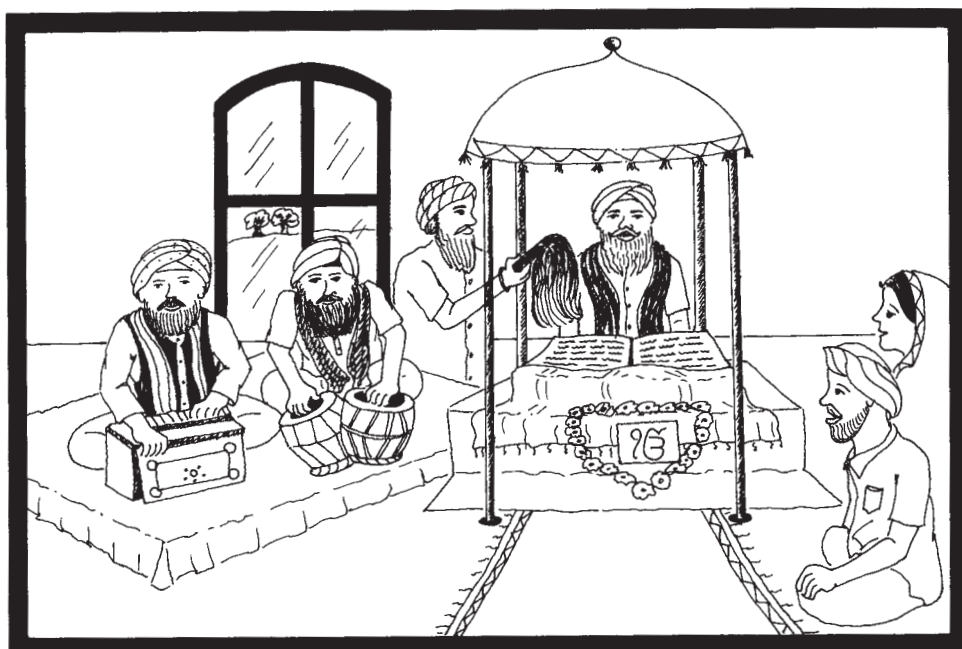


Fig. 18.1: The Gurudwara

Some Sikh devotees also place it in their homes and look to its upkeep with all the prescribed rituals and religious solemnity. This characteristic sanctity accorded by the Sikhs to their religious scripture, the *Granth*, is incomparable with any other known religion. To understand this peculiarity one must look at the following aspects of the Sikh history, given in sub-sections 18.3.4 and 18.3.5.

Activity 1

For a Sikh, the *Granth Sahib* acts as a living guide or master. Give an example from your religion or any other religion you know of a sacred text, which may be compared to the *Granth Sahib*. Write one page on how this scripture guides the followers of the religion.

18.3.4 Uniqueness of Sikh Scripture

A unique feature of Sikh scripture, which is not shared by any other religious scripture, lies in that it includes religious hymns not merely of the Sikh gurus, but also of several Hindu as well as Muslim saints who were contemporaries of the Sikh gurus. Most of these Hindu saints whose hymns have been included were drawn from the lowly castes, such as cobbler, butcher, barber, etc. who normally occupy bottom rungs of the Hindu caste ladder. The daily readings and recitations from the *Granth* make no distinction whatsoever between hymns of the Sikh guru and those of other. This aspect of the Sikh scripture, even though normally viewed as a 'good' and humanistic feature, still remains a puzzle. This is because no religion makes it a part of its daily worship to recite instructions or hymns not belonging to their own founders.

This can be understood only when we appreciate the central emphasis underlying the Sikh theology, philosophy and ethics. Sikhism emerged, as emphasised above, as a critique and refinement of the then existing ideas of religion and religious morality. As such, it tended to emphasise the relevance of some of the universal human values such as brotherhood and equality. It also emphasises the irrelevance of status whether economic or caste, in one's quest for God. It explains why 'saints' and devotees from across the religious and caste boundaries found their honoured place in the *Adi Granth*. They upheld these values.

What is the spiritual status of 'gurus' vis-a-vis God? It is important to re-affirm that Sikhism is a strongly monistic religion. That is why the ten Sikh gurus, even though held in utmost reverence, are not equated with God. There is only one God or *Akalpurush* (or the 'timeless being') who alone 'deserves' to be worshipped. The injunction of the much-honoured tenth guru of Sikhs, Guru Gobindsingh to his followers is noteworthy: Anyone, who calls me "God", shall perish in the fire of hell. This, however, does not imply that in terms of their religious sentiment, the Sikhs always find it possible to keep to a clear distinction between the two. Despite this, it needs to be stated that the *Granth* emphasises the 'inevitable' and instrumental role of the 'guru' in realising God. Let us also mention how the sacred book *Granth* came to be equated with a guru.

18.3.5 The *Granth*sahib and the Guru

The line of Sikh gurus, starting from their founder-Guru Nanak, went as far as the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. He enjoined upon Sikhs to regard the sacred *Granth* as their 'Guru' and turn to it for all advice and instruction for seeking direction of life. We find that today it is worshipped and read with regard and reverence.

Another historical circumstance, which nurtured this attitude of Sikhs for their sacred scripture, is the long period of persecution and suffering undergone by them at the hands of the Muslim rulers, starting from the time of their fifth guru, Guru Arjan Dev (1581-1606), to much after the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1709), in fact, till the execution of Banda Singh Bahadur (in 1716) who took over the military leadership of the Sikh community after assassination of the tenth guru. Of the ten Sikh gurus, fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev ('guru' between 1581-1606) and the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur ('guru' between 1664-1675) were executed by the Muslim rulers, whereas the

last and the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh ('guru' between 1675-1708), was assassinated by British hired assassins. Banda Bahadur took over the military command of the Sikh community after the tenth guru and for eight years defied the Mughals and devastated large tracts of eastern central Punjab. He was eventually captured along with seven hundred of his followers, and was executed in Delhi in the summer of 1716. During all these long years of struggle when they were hunted for their creed and at times even pushed into the remote forests, the *Granth* continued to be the centre of their day-to-day existence and chief source of inspiration.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Write three lines on Guru Nanak's concept of God.

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- ii) Write four lines on the uniqueness of the Sikh scripture.

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18.4 RESTRUCTURING OF RELIGIOUS ETHOS AMONG THE SIKHS: THE INSTITUTION OF *KHALSA* AND FIVE EMBLEMS

The pacifist religion of Guru Nanak took to arms by the time of Guru Hargobind. Less than hundred years after Guru Nanak's passing away in 1539, Sikhism accepted use of arms for self-defence. The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, the father of Guru Hargobind, had earlier been executed by the Muslim rulers. Fifty years later, in 1699, taking to arms was formally incorporated into the main corpus of Sikhism by Guru Gobind Singh via the institution of *Khalsa*. This had taken place as a result of severe repression and persecution let loose by the Muslim rulers against the Sikhs. Let us discuss the institution of *Khalsa*, which restructured the religious ethos among the Sikhs.

Khalsa literally means "the pure" (from the Persian *Khales*, also meaning 'pure'). On April 13, 1699, Guru Gobind Singh baptised the first batch of five Sikhs and gave them the common surname, Singh (lion). Kaur 'lioness' is the corresponding surname given to all Sikh women (Uberoi. 1969: 123-38).

The Sikhs were baptised by Guru Gobind Singh in the famous five emblems. All start with a 'k'. All believers are to maintain these in order to keep the status of a 'sikh'.

First of the Ks is *Kesa* (hair). A *Khalsa* must keep the hair unshorn. A *Khalsa* who cuts off his hair is a renegade (*patit*). The holiness of unshorn hair is

older than Guru Gobind Singh, the founder of Khalsa. Many of the earlier Gurus followed the tradition of letting the hair and beards grow. The other four are *Kangha* (comb); *Kacch* (drawers) worn by the soliders; *Kirpan* (sabre); and *Kara* (bracelet) of steel, commonly worn on the right wrist.

The baptism of Sikhs into the material qualities of valour and fearlessness meant a departure from the earlier pacifist tradition. Yet it inherited an essential continuity with the past tradition in more than one way. The first of the baptised Sikhs were drawn from five different caste groups. This underscored the essential equality between men of all castes and creeds as emphasised by the founding Guru Nanak. Yet another continuity with the past lay in the concept of *Sant Sipahi* (saint-solider). This implied that a Sikh would not wield a sword for the sake of doing so. Instead, it was to be done for a right cause and for the defence of one's just rights. In addition, a Sikh was supposed to lead a noble, virtuous and pure life.

As already mentioned above, Sikhs made a strong impact upon the Mughal rulers via Banda Bahadur but did not have a strong political organisation to displace them by their own rule. The subsequent course of the evolution of *Khalsa* political power was simple. For some years the *Khalsa* vanished into the hills. However, when Mughal power waned due to the invasion in 1738-1739 of the Persian Nader Shah, they re-emerged into the plains.

The Sikhs formed into *misls* (from Persian *mesals*, meaning both "example" and "equal"). They began to demand protection money from towns and villages. The series of invasions by Ahmad Shah Durrani, 1747-1769, completely destroyed Mughal administration. In the battle of Panipat in 1761 the Afghans crushed the rising Maratha power in the north. In the gap thus created, the Sikhs moved in as rulers of the Punjab (Singh 1987: 744).

This situation of political instability in Punjab eventually culminated in Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) establishing the first and the last kingdom of Sikhs in Punjab, stretching right upto the Khyber pass in the north. Ranjit Singh was an enlightened and secular king and ruled till 1839 (Singh 1963).

He respected all religions and gave liberal benefices to sacred places of all religions (Math 1981 and Honigberger 1981). This was followed by ten years of internecine warfare and palace stratagems plus clever political machinations by the British which ended finally in the annexation of Punjab by them in 1849. The annexation was followed by a period of an inexplicable intimacy between the Sikhs and the British. The Sikhs strongly sided with the British administration in quelling the mutiny of 1857 and also enlisted in large numbers in the British army at the time of First World War.

Some writers, for example, Khushwant Singh (1987: 745), maintain that this expression of loyalty on the part of Sikhs reflected a longing for peace and order after long years of bloodshed and disorder in Punjab.

The unprovoked massacre of four hundred innocent people by the British at the Jalianwala Bagh, Amritsar, on April 13, 1919, set the Sikh against the British. Secondly, despite the popular Sikh protest the British sided with the *mahants*, the hereditary priests controlling the *gurudwaras*. Thus Sikhs turned completely against them. These factors as well as the rising temper of the independence movement pushed the Sikhs into the national movement, now

led by Mahatma Gandhi. Independence in 1947 was accompanied by partition of the country and the Sikh community suffered enormously through pillage and manslaughter. At present, there are problems of compatibility between the perceived interests and political aspirations of the Sikhs on the one hand and the national policy on the other (Gandhi 1981: 52-66). From this description of political history of the Sikhs, we now turn to their social institutions.

18.5 SIKH INSTITUTIONS

Sikh institutions seem to emanate from the centrality of ethos, philosophy and theology of Sikhism. Quite a few of the institutions like marriage, kinship, property are, on the other hand, common between the Hindus and Sikhs. Almost all the important festivals of Hindus are celebrated by Sikhs as well.

Social ties between the Hindus and Sikhs including the marital ties continue to thrive. Many sub-caste groupings among the Punjabis underlying the main caste categories like Aroras, Khatris continue to be common between them. Even though Sikhism came up primarily as a revolt against the Hindu legacy of caste, it continues to use caste titles as a principle of social location and departure. These are, however, shorn of the purity-pollution barrier. We discuss here those institutions, which are peculiar to the Sikh community. Around these institutions can be observed much of the collective behaviour of the community.

18.5.1 The *Gurudwara*

Literally meaning the guru's abode this is the Sikh name or nomenclature for a place of worship. This is the seat of the holy *Granth* and of regular recitations from it, interspersed by singing of religious hymns. There are some *gurudwaras* associated with important happenings in the lives of the gurus. *Gurudwara* Sisganj in the Chandni Chowk of Delhi is associated with the martyrdom of the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur. *Gurudwara Bangla Sahib* is associated with the 8th Guru Harkishan. There are over 200 historical *gurudwaras* associated with the Gurus. These are controlled by the *Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandak* Committee (S.G.P.C.) set up by the Sikh *Gurudwara* Act of 1925—offerings are made at *gurudwara* and are used for their upkeep as well as the Khalsa schools and colleges. Golden Temple of Harmandar *Sahib gurudwara* at Amritsar is the most sacred *gurudwara* of Sikhs. It has the same sanctity for Sikhs as Kashi for Hindus, Mecca for the Muslims, Vatican for the Catholics or Jerusalem for the Jews.

It was built by the fifth guru of the Sikhs, Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606 AD). The foundation of the temple was laid down by Sayyid Main Mir—a Muslim saint of Lahore. This fact in itself highlights religious catholicity of Sikhism. There are certain other features of this temple, which dramatise, symbolically, certain essential features of Sikhism and its philosophy.

First of all, the temple was made at the ground level lower than the rest of the city—a fact which, according to some underscores the humility of the founding gurus. Second, the temple has four main gates, which open in four different directions, which is taken to mean that the temple was thrown open equally to all the four castes. Some others, however, interpret this feature thus: the Golden

Temple has four doors in the four natural directions in order to instruct people of other religions who believe the abode of God to be in a certain direction or at a certain place. However, God is not confined to a certain direction. So, according to them, *Harmandar* means 'mandar' or temple for 'har'. This means it is for every one. In this phrase, the word 'mandar' is a Sanskritik expression, whereas 'har' is a Persian expression.

There is yet another feature of Golden Temple, which takes us right to the centre of the Sikh religious ethos. The complex of the Golden Temple is made up of two parts. First is the main part, called *harmandar*. It is set in the centre of a tank. The tank itself is located by a wide corridor for the pilgrims to go around as an act of religious supplication. *Gurbani* or the religious hymns from the *Granth* are sung or recited in this part of the temple for most part of day and night.

The second part of the sacred complex, which lies outside and ahead of the main gate of the *Harmandar*, is called *Akaltakht* or God's court. Since the very inception of the *Harmandar* the *Akaltakht* has been the seat of temporal authority of the Sikh gurus. They sat there, as if on the 'throne' vis-a-vis their followers and considered issues of temporal import including political issues. These two seats of 'spiritual' and 'temporal' authority were and are regarded as integral parts of the basic ethos of the Sikh community. Thus, the idea of separating 'religion' from 'polities' does not appeal to the Sikhs.

18.5.2 *Sadh Sangat*

No act of Sikh worship is complete without the holy gathering or *Sadh Sangat* which is virtually equated with God's presence. Such a gathering or '*sangat*' is supreme. It can take any decision, whether of religious or temporal import, which is binding upon the rest of the community. It can even censure reprimand, or punish a person for any impropriety committed by him. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is on record having received punishment in the form of cuts of cane upon his skin from a religious gathering at Golden Temple, Amritsar, for an act of moral impropriety committed by him. Gurus, particularly Guru Gobind Singh, have in several hymns recognised the superiority of *Sadh Sangat* over their own commands.

18.5.3 *Guru ka Langar*

As it has been highlighted in the opening section of this unit, the secular and equalitarian character of Sikhism was manifested through the institution of *langar* community kitchen. Here everyone, without any discrimination of caste and creed, sat together and ate in company. This is also sometimes called the principle of *pangat* or the queue. This again indicates the equal status of everyone in the presence of the Guru.

Even though initiated by the founding Guru Nanak, the institution of *langar* was formalised by the Guru Angad at a place called Goindwal. This was approximately 20 miles away from the city of Amritsar. Every *gurudwara*, big or small, has a *langar* attached to it and is maintained from offerings made at that *gurudwara*.

As indicated above, there has been an inflow of a certain caste bias from Hinduism into the social life of Sikhs. This is reflected especially in the area

of marital selection. But the said caste bias stayed far short of its traditional rigour and severity with which it is encountered in the Hindu social life. This has been made possible by repeatedly de-emphasising the caste inequality through the institutions of *sangat* and *langar* in the day-to-day life of the Sikhs.

These institutions, therefore, prove functional for maintaining equality, so essential for the very survival of Sikh religious ethos.

Activity 2

Write a note on your religious institutions, which are similar to *Gurudwara*, *Sadh Sangat* and *Guru ka Langar*. Compare your note, if possible, with the notes prepared by other students at your Study Centre.

18.6 SIKH WORLDVIEW AND ECONOMIC ORIENTATION

The basic orientation to engage in economic activity flows, at least partly, from one's religious norms and values. This is what has been a major idea in Max Weber's (1976) analysis of the origin and development of the spirit of capitalism in contemporary Europe. The argument presupposes that the individuals in question are religious enough to let religious values hold away over them.

Thus, it has often been argued that a majority of the Sikh families, even after they were completely uprooted at the time of the partition of the country in 1947, built themselves to both 'fame' and 'prosperity'. Sikhs have been proverbially projected as compulsive do-gooders even in the teeth of most adverse circumstances. Their long-standing history of sufferings and persecution imparted the kind of fortitude that lies tacit under a highly resilient attitude. Second, a highly 'secular' and equalitarian attitude, which is reinforced by their institutions of *langar* and *sangat*. A part of their daily religious routine also seems to import the kind of pragmatism and realism which is required in the pursuit of business.

Still another mental attribute, which is conducive towards the same and is that of demystifying reality. This is apparently encouraged by the simple way some of the basic canons of their religion have been stated and repeated. The high 'achievement' orientation of their personality is evidenced by the fact that Sikhs today are found in virtually all the western countries, specifically in large numbers in Canada, the United States of America and United Kingdom where economic opportunities are relatively greater.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Write five lines on *Sadh Sangat* in Sikhism.

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- ii) Discuss the Sikh's economic orientation in five lines.

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18.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have studied the social organisation of Sikhism. We then studied the sacred scripture and religious sentiment in Sikhism. We then provided information on Sikh historicity. We also indicated that which is unique in Sikh scriptures. *Khalsa* and political history were discussed including the expansion of Sikh power. Sikh institutions and their worldview were also considered. We have therefore, given an adequate overview of the Sikh community and institutions.

18.8 KEYWORDS

Akalpurush	Timeless Being
Commensality	Ritual seating and eating together of a particular group
Guru	Religious teacher
Gurudwara	Guru's abode-a place of worship
Gurumukhi	Punjabi script
Guru ka Langar	Community kitchen
Kacch	Under-drawers
Kangha	Comb
Kara	Bracelet of metal
Kesh	Hair
Kirpan	Sword or Sabre
Wahi-Guru	Hail O' Master

18.9 FURTHER READING

Banerjee, A.C. 1983. *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Religion*. Munshiram Manoharlal Pvt. Ltd.: Delhi

Census of India 1981 (1985) *Series-1 India Paper 3 of 1984, Household Population by Religion of Head of Household*. (ed.) V.S. Verma, Registrar General and Census Commissioner for India

Dhillon, D.S. 1988. *Sikhism: Origin and Development*. Atlantic Publishers: Delhi

Singh, Gopal 1987. *The Religion of the Sikhs*. Allied Publishers Private Limited: Delhi

Singh, D, and A Smith 1985. *The Sikh World*. Macdonald and Company: London

18.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Nanak's concept of God is that of pure monism. Nanak holds that only one entity exists, and that is God. Everything else partakes in the nature of God.
- ii) Sikh scriptures are unique in that they include hymns of both Hindu and Muslim saints. Many of these Hindu saints were from low castes like butcher and cobbler. These are recited without distinction of hierarchy at prayers.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) *Sadh Sangat* is the holy gathering, which is virtually equated with God's presence. Such a Sangat has decision-making power, which is binding on the community. For example, Maharaja Ranjit Singh received cuts by a cane at Golden Temple, Amritsar, for moral impropriety.
- ii) Economic orientation flows from the religious orientation. They have been compulsive 'do gooders' in the face of adverse circumstances. The economic success, however, does not denigrate the religious side of life.