

VAISAKHI 1699

The High Point of Sikhism

(Guru Nanak's ideal society: The Khalsa Panth)

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(A SEWA network publication)

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Acknowledgement: The cover design is partly based on a drawing from the "Ardaas" (Sikh prayer) picture book published by SGPC, Amritsar..

Initial printing costs contributed by Sardar Sarup Singh Johal, JP, of Riverland.

Published by: **SEWA Co-ordination,
PO Box 920, BERRI 5343, South Australia.**

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Foreword

(Sardar Raghbir Singh Bains; Author, Encyclopaedia of Sikhism on CD ROM; Canada.)

Vaisakhi 1999, which falls on 14th April, will celebrate three hundred years of Khalsa Panth inauguration. It is an opportune time for reminding ourselves to know what Khalsa Panth stands for. The inauguration of Khalsa Panth on that day of *Vaisakhi* in 1699 was the most momentous event after the introduction of Sikhism by Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539) as an original, unique and revolutionary system of the world.

A great deal has been written about Sikhism in recent times. The process of interpreting the Sikh ideals revealed to Guru Nanak Dev will continue, for the human society is still struggling towards those ideals and has a long way to cover as yet. Certain contours of Sikh history are looked upon being dubious and its fundamentals are still being debated, sometimes unnecessarily. However, the misunderstanding and ignorance about Guru Nanak's precepts and their direct relevance to the inauguration of the Khalsa Panth in 1699, under the Guruship of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Master, continues.

This compact article by Sardar Gurmukh Singh, looks at *Vaisakhi* 1699, as the culmination of Guru Nanak's mission and vision. It effectively counters the attempts to separate Guru Nanak's philosophy from that of Guru Gobind Singh whenever it deviated from the revealed philosophy of the first Master. More papers along these lines are needed on traditional and contemporary topics so that the next generation of Sikhs can get true picture of Guru Nanak's mission introduced through the ten Guru forms. The flame of that mission is now carried on by the Khalsa Panth guided by the Word contained in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy Sikh scriptures.

The SEWA (Sikh Education Welfare and Advancement) initiative, coordinated in Australia by Sardar Baldev Singh Dhaliwal, a committed and leading Sikh in Riverland district, is a most commendable effort and should be a model for Sikh individuals and organisations worldwide. I hope that this publication would prove most useful in the understanding of Sikh tenets in their right perspective.

Raghbir Singh Bains

Introduction

Vaisakhi 1699 was the high point of the Sikh tradition. The inauguration of the *Khalsa Panth* was the climax of all that had gone before and the inspiration of all that was to follow

This compact study traces the development of the Sikh institutions from Guru Nanak (1469-1539) through the ten Sikh Gurus to the Vaisakhi day in 1699. In line with current mainstream Panthic thought, it shows that the emergence of Khalsa Panth resulted directly from Guru Nanak's perception of God (The Positive and Absolute One Truth "Ik Oangkar") and his basic precept called *the Mool Mantar*. A great deal has been written on Sikhism. However, recent controversies make it necessary to resist divisive trends and to reiterate the relevance of Guru Nanak's mission in the context of Vaisakhi 1699. Not many writers have approached Vaisakhi from this angle before. Also, young Sikhs and non-Sikhs continue to complain that compact studies on Sikhism are not readily available. Recapitulating current thoughts on Sikhism for the busy reader on this occasion would not be a wasted effort. More so when fringe practices and interpretations of Sikhism continue to send misleading signals to the younger generation. The latter has the right to know the basics of mainstream Sikhism and the freedom to choose its own path in that knowledge.

At the same time, we must, of course, turn to the more pressing current and foreseeable issues requiring ongoing interpretation of Sikh teachings with some urgency. Many Sikh study forums are doing just that and communication networks (including the Internet and electronic mail) are playing an increasing role in ensuring exchange of research and views. However, one should always be wary of "DIY Sikhism" in the name of "a fresh look at Sikhism" or for the sake of local convenience. Such tendencies and urges, which ignore the Sikh way of life (called *Rehat Maryada*), can only do damage to the cause of global Sikhism. Most scholars agree that the Sikh *Rehat Mayada*, as a model for the ideal Sikh way of life, has stood the test of time and served the Khalsa Panth well. Although, many routes may lead to the same goal, no goal can be achieved without **selecting and following a route** to that goal. The Sikh view is that, in order to define and achieve the main objective of human life, one is likely to require enlightened guidance, continuous and collective (congregational) effort and faith.

Having thus defined the parameters of this particular study, I do hope that young Sikhs will continue to study and interpret Sikh precepts and apply these to the current issues. The use of information technology for discussions on Sikhism and wider dissemination of Guru Nanak's universal message is a most interesting and exciting development. Pioneers are using modern and sometimes novel methods to spread the universal message of Guru Nanak far and wide. Outstanding examples are: Sardar Raghbir Singh Bains of Canada, who has compiled a comprehensive Encyclopaedia of Sikhism on CD ROM; and, Sardar Dya Singh of Australia, who has successfully interpreted Sikh *raags* and rhythms (sur/taal) into world music. Others are likely to follow in their footsteps.

However, while it is necessary to "de-provincialise" Sikhism, we must be careful not to break our links with Punjab. English is the language of global Sikhism but the roots of Sikhism are in Punjab. Guru Granth Sahib cannot be *translated* (but only *interpreted*). The original Gurbani message can only be fully understood in the language(s) in which it is written and its main language and idiom is Punjabi.

Sikhism is the daily study of the Guru's Word (*Sikhi sikhia Gur vichaar*). Research and study we must if we are to interpret the Guru's message correctly. However, such research must be guided by humble wisdom rather than arrogant cleverness (*manmatt*). Let us not jump off the mainstream Panthic ship into the turbulent waters of this life (*bhav saagar*) but rather help to steer that ship in the direction of the Guru's wisdom (Gurmatt). That ship is *Gur Sangat* (Sikh congregation as the Guru). The Guru demands adherence to Sikh internal and external *rehat* (conduct) in return for freedom from fear and attainment of equipoise and closeness to the Creator, the *Ik Oangkar*.

Finally, I am grateful for the helpful comments and messages received about this article. Colleagues at The Sikh Missionary Society (UK) have always given me great encouragement to carry on in-depth research into Sikh ideology in the context of contemporary topics. I have received much inspiration from my family and friends and I am indebted to many South Australian colleagues for supporting me in the publication of this article.

Gurmukh Singh
19th March 1999

Glossary of Sikh terms

(Most Sikh terms used in this article have been explained in the main text. Some key words/concepts are repeated below.)

Amrit: Nectar of immortality. Sanctified water used for *Amrit sanskar* i.e. initiation into Khalsa Panth. The initiation or baptism is also called *Amrit shakna* (drinking of Amrit) or the taking of *Khande di Pahul* (initiation by the double edged sword).

Guru Granth Sahib: Also referred to as the **Adi Granth** is the Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs.

Gurdwara: Sikh place of worship.

Kakars: Collective name given to the **Sikh articles of faith** incorrectly called “Sikh symbols”.

Khalsa: (Applies to men and women and to singular and plural cases) Literally means, either, “King’s own land”, or, “the pure”. In the Sikh tradition the word means Sikhs linked directly to the Enlightener (the Guru). Thus, *Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa* means “God’s own Khalsa”. From the *Hukamnamas* (Orders) issued by earlier Gurus, it is clear that the word was used mostly in the proprietary sense; while, purity of thought and deed, truthful and fearless conduct, and, continuous contemplation of God’s Name, are the Khalsa’s main qualities.. The **Sikh route** to Khalsa state (*avastha*) is through **Khalsa rehat (internal and external disciplines)**. Said the tenth Master: “The Sikh discipline is dear to me, not the Sikh”. **Khalsa represents Guru Nanak’s concept of an ideal society via Guru Nanak’s way.** However, he accepted the underlying truth of all religions and therefore other paths leading to the same ideal goal. What is not acceptable to Sikhism is lack of any sustained discipline guiding human conduct, an attitude often influenced by materialism and arrogance (*howmai*).

Khanda: The double-edged sword representing spiritual and worldly (*miri/piri*) sovereignty used in the *Amrit sanskar*. Khanda is also the name given to the Sikh insignia (shown at front cover top left corner.)

Mool Mantar: Literally “The mystical formula which is at the root of all mystical or magical formulae (*mantras*). Although it is the popular name given to the opening line of Guru Granth Sahib, it is not mentioned anywhere as such. In any case the concept of a *mantar* (or *mantra*) is alien to Sikh thought for the only *mantar* known to Sikhism is repetition of God’s Name (“*Waheguru Gur Mantar hai...*”). The *Mool Mantar* reads “*Ik Oangkar Sat Naam, Karta Purakh, Nirbhao, Nirvair, Akaal Moorat, Ajoni Saibhang, Gur Parsaad*”. The meaning of these words is explained in this article.

Sewa: Selfless service with humility and without expectation of reward.

Sikh: (Capital S) As a **minimum requirement**, a Sikh believes in one God, the Ten Sikh Gurus, the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib and does not follow any other religion.

PROGRESS OF GURU NANAK'S MISSION TO VAISAKHI 1699

<u>Guru personality</u>	<u>Born</u>	<u>Guru period</u>	<u>Contribution towards Khalsa Panth <i>Sajna</i> (inauguration)</u>
Guru Nanak Dev (The Guru's challenge : "Once you set your foot on this path of truthful conduct do not hesitate to give your life.")	1469	(1469-1539)	Founder of basic precepts
Guru Angad Dev	1504	(1539 - 1552)	Transcaste institutions; education; physical fitness
Guru Amardas	1479	(1552 – 1574)	Sikh centre; organisation; position of women; <i>sewa</i> .
Guru Ramdaas	1534	(1574 – 1581)	Amritsar as Sikh centre; active family life.
Guru Arjan Dev	1563	(1581 – 1606)	<i>Adi Granth</i> (Guru Granth Sahib); Darbar Sahib; led Sikh martyrdom tradition.
Guru Hargobind	1595	(1606 – 1644)	Strengthened combination of worldly and spiritual aspects (<i>miri/ piri</i> concept); fearless disposition; armed defence as a last resort.
Guru Har Rai	1630	(1644 – 1661)	Compassion and <i>sewa</i> from a position of strength; welfare and medical services.
Guru Har Krishan	1656	(1661 – 1664)	<i>Sewa</i> ; purity.
Guru Tegh Bahadur	1621	(1664 – 1675)	Inner detachment; sacrifice; "fear not/frighten not" philosophy of Khalsa Panth.
Guru Gobind Singh	1666	(1675 – 1708)	Rising spirit (<i>Chardi kala</i>); unyielding courage in the face of impossible odds (" <i>Sawa laakh se ik laraon</i> "); full realisation of Guru Nanak's vision of a transcaste order following the inauguration of the Khalsa Panth on Vaisakhi 1699 , the high point of Sikh tradition; return of spiritual Guruship to Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Scriptures, and the physical personality of the Guru to the collective body of the Khalsa Panth.

VAISAKHI 1699

THE HIGH POINT OF SIKHISM

On 14th April, 1999, over twenty million Sikhs around the world will be inviting all humanity to join them in their *Vaisakhi* celebrations. These celebrations will mark the tercentennial anniversary of the formalisation of Sikh *Khalsa Panth* as an independent religion and nationality.

The day was *Vaisakhi*, the Spring Festival in Punjab, and the year was 1699 Tenth Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh (1666 - 1708) looked on with satisfaction at the *Five Beloved Ones (Panj Pyare)*, the five Sikhs, who were ready to rise above fear of death, human divisions and prejudices. They were ready to aspire towards the Godly qualities described by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in his basic precept (known as *Mool Mantar*). They were seeking truthful living through the Sikh way of life (*Gursikh rehat*). In doing so they had accepted Guru Nanak's challenge, "Once you set your foot on this path, then do not hesitate to lay down your head" (Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Scriptures, p. 1412). They had qualified for admission to the fully evolved brotherhood of humankind, the *Khalsa Panth*. *Khalsa* was neither Hindu nor Muslim but represented the equality of humankind before One Creator. *Khalsa* had no enemies, feared no one, frightened none, remained in good spirit (*chardi kala*) ever ready to do service with humility. Thus, the Guru presented his *Khalsa* to humankind. Having completed Guru Nanak's mission, Guru Gobind Singh, returned the Guruship to the Guru's Word i.e. *Gurbani* embodied in Guru Granth Sahib. The collective body of the *Khalsa* or the Holy Congregation (*sangat*) in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib represented the physical form of the Guru (*Gur sangat kini khalsa*). *Khalsa* is the standard bearer of the One Creator (*Waheguru Ji ka Khalsa* and *Khalsa Akaal Purakh Ki Fauj*); the saintly qualities embodied in *Khalsa* shall reign supreme (*Raj karega Khalsa*) and victory shall belong to God (*Waheguru Ji ki fateh*).

Three hundred years ago

The day was *Vaisakhi*,¹ the Spring Festival in Punjab, and the year was 1699. The place was a hillock near Anandpur, in the foothills of the Himalayas in eastern Punjab, the Land of Five Rivers. Two hundred years after Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the tenth Guru personality, Guru Gobind Singh, completed Guru Nanak's mission. In the words of the historian J D Cunningham:

“It was reserved for *Nanak* to perceive the true principles of reform, and to lay those broad foundations which enabled his successor *Gobind* to fire the minds of his countrymen with a new nationality, and to give practical effect to the doctrine that the lowest is equal with the highest, in race as in creed, in political rights as in religious hopes.” (*History of the Sikhs* by J D Cunningham.)

Guru Gobind Singh presented a new transcaste Sikh brotherhood outside the contemporary religious systems to the world.

Guru Nanak started the *Sikh Panth* from which evolved the *Khalsa Panth*. A sikh (small “s”) literally means a follower or a student of a guru or teacher; however, in Sikh terminology a Guru's Sikh is a seeker after the Truth and Truth represents the ultimate reality or “God”. Thus, Truth revealed through the Guru's word or Gubani is the True Guru (more about this concept later in this study. It is, however, important to understand such differences between the traditional Vedic idiom and similar Sikh terminology.) *Panth* means path or religious order.

On the *Vaisakhi* day in 1699, the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, looked on with satisfaction at the first five Sikhs who were ready to accept the spiritual and worldly disciplines of Sikhism collectively called *rehat*. These were the Five Beloved Ones (*Panj Pyare*) who had qualified for admission to the fully evolved brotherhood of the Sikhs called the *Khalsa Panth*. *Khalsa* is a proprietary term which originally meant sovereign's own land i.e. land which is not fief. It is in this sense that the word has been used by the Sikh Gurus, although, it also means “the pure”

Khalsa belonged to God (*Waheguru Ji ka Khalsa*); *Khalsa's* victory was God's victory (*Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh*); and *Khalsa* believed in a positive approach

¹ *Vaisakhi* is the name given to the harvest festival in Punjab and is the first day of the lunar month of Vaisakh. This day fell on 29th March in 1699 but the religious Sikh *Vaisakhi* has now been converted to the solar date of 14th April from 1999.

to life (*chardi kala*) and in universal well being in the Name of God (*Sarbatt da bhalla*).

Having completed Guru Nanak's mission, Guru Gobind Singh, returned the Guruship from human succession back to the Guru's Word i.e. *Gurbani* embodied in *Guru Granth Sahib* (the Sikh Holy Scriptures)². The collective body of the *Khalsa* or the Sikh Holy Congregation (*sangat*) in the presence of *Guru Granth Sahib* represented the physical form of the Guru (*Gur sangat kini khalsa*). The Guru created the *Khalsa* in his own image. In completing Guru Nanak's mission, the Tenth Guru, (also known as Nanak X to show that the same Light of Nanak descended down ten human forms), took account of the interaction between Guru Nanak's teachings and the religious and social milieu.

Guru Nanak's times: Socio-political background

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries C.E., when Guru Nanak introduced a revelatory ideology, the ordinary people of India were laboring under the yoke of two types of oppression. The Lodhi emperor's central control from Delhi was weak and people regarded their local rulers as supreme. Punjab, the land of five rivers in northern India, was divided into many semi-independent municipalities under Muslim *nawabs* (local rulers) and Hindu rajahs who preoccupied themselves with mutual hostilities and self-indulgence.

The Hindu rajahs were divided, weak and cowardly. The caste system effectively deprived them of a large part of the population as a source for defense recruitment. Afghan and middle eastern marauders descended annually from the north-west to loot and plunder, and to capture thousands of women and young girls to be sold as slaves in the middle-east. Generally, socio-political lawlessness was the order of the day. The judges called *Kajis*, who applied Islamic law (*sharia*) were corrupt and greedy.

Rajay sih mokadam kutay, jai jagayan baithay sutay. (SGGS p.1288)

Rajahs were (ruthless) like tigers and the judges were like dogs, (and their officials) swooped down on people at any time of the day. This was the first type of oppression.

The second type of oppression exploited ignorance. Superstition was rife and the priestly class thrived on the fear of the ignorant people. True scholars had

² There is also a *Dasam Granth* attributed to Guru Gobind Singh. At no time in the Sikh history was it accorded the same status as *Guru Granth Sahib*. Also there is doubt about the authenticity of some of the compositions included in it.

excluded themselves from public life. The plight of women and the lower classes (under the degrading caste system) was sad and pitiful. The ordinary people therefore lived in ignorance and fear.

Guru Nanak arrived on the scene to turn the tide of Indian history by introducing a new religious and social ideology for the New Age: the age of discovery, science and technology. The new whole-life philosophy introduced by Guru Nanak was expounded and implemented systematically over a period of two hundred years by Guru Nanak and nine successor Gurus from 1499-1699. Most writers, who have closely studied Guru Nanak's hymns, agree that his vision of a new religious system was complete. However, he was also aware that in order to bring about a change in the psyche of a down-trodden, slave people, the process of change would take time. He laid the foundation of the main Sikh institutions and passed his Light (in the form of the Word or *Gurbani*) on from one Guru personality (human form) to another until the order of the Khalsa Panth was well established. Vaisakhi 1699 marked the completion of Guru Nanak's mission and Guru history (*Gur Ithaas*) and the beginning of the next phase of Sikh history.

Foundation of Khalsa Panth on Guru Nanak's revolutionary whole-life philosophy

Scholars, who have used Guru Granth Sahib as their original source of reference for studying Sikhism, agree that the unity of God in Sikhism is conceived in such a way that it stands distinguished from both the Semitic and the Indian tradition. A western scholar of Sikh history, J. C. Archer, after studying the first composition of Guru Nanak called *Japuji*, demonstrated that the Guru imparted new significance to familiar terms. The basic precept³, called the *Mool Mantar*, of Guru Nanak, systematically lays down the foundation of the Sikh faith and its spiritual and temporal goals.

In the *Mool Mantar*, the God revealed to Guru Nanak is described as follows: The positively infinite One (*Ik*) Supreme Source of all creation (*Oangkar*); the Truth (*Sat*); the Universal Spirit (*Naam*); the Creator (*Karta*); the All-pervading Being (*Purakh*); the Fearless Sovereign (*Nirbhau*); the Harmonious Who is without enmity (*Nirvair*); the Picture of Eternal Beauty (*Akaal Moorat*); the Unborn (*Ajuni*); the Self-existent Who is continuously revealing Himself through new forms and is new each day, each moment (*Saibhang*); the Enlightener (*Gur*) the Bountiful, the Benevolent, the Charitable (*Parsaad*).

³ See Mool Mantar in the glossary.

The Creator is “1 *Oangkar*” (the number 1 is read as “*Ik*” in Punjabi) showing clearly that God is One, infinite and indivisible. This is the positive philosophy of Guru Nanak’s religion: that God is the One Absolute Truth, the One Creator. He cannot be divided. The visible creation is an expansion of the Creator Himself while He remains outside His creation as the *Nirgun* (without qualities) Nirankar (One Who is without form). Yet, He is both, *Nirgun* and *Sargun* (possessing all qualities) for all qualities are within Him. He is positively One and not zero (“*shun*” in Hindu tradition). Guru Nanak did not use the Hindu word “*Om*” which has a different connotation but “*Oangkar*” which is pronounced differently.

One who accepts the concept of “*Ik Oangkar*” cannot be negative but only positive towards every aspect of life; and, towards every manifest action of God, no matter how the limited and time-bound human intellect perceives His qualities or actions.. These may be in the nature of creation, expansion and sustenance, or (apparently “negative” to the limited human mind) contraction and destruction of His creation (to be replaced by another cycle?). Every action and quality of God is positive and within His *Hukam* (Order). A Sikh of Guru Nanak sees creation as an indivisible extension of the One Truth. For a Sikh, creation is true and not *maya* (an illusion or a deception) of the Hindu tradition. Life is real and has a definite purpose. This positive approach to life (*chardi kala*) is the founding principle of Khalsa Panth. Fully participative life (as opposed to monasticism) is the path the Khalsa is to follow. Love for God is also seen as love and care for His creation. However, direct attachment with the Absolute One is not to be **replaced** by involvement with the creation only.

The One Eternal Truth is continuous, all pervading and the same everywhere. This is the *Ik Oangkar* revealed to Guru Nanak. The Truth manifests Itself in universal laws and godly qualities of truthful conduct, justice, doing what is right (*dharam nibhaona*), charity, service without expectation of reward (*sewa*), honesty etc. These godly qualities are the visible manifestation of God. A person close to God uses or converts his qualities for positive and progressive objectives. Even negative qualities like anger, attachment, greed, lust and vanity are harnessed for just and selfless causes, defence of the weak, thrift and saving for economic progress and security, bringing up a family and leading the life of a respectable householder. A fearless and independent spirit and animosity towards none are the other saintly qualities required in men of God (*Khalsa*).

Such beings who are directly linked to God and always remain immersed in the eternal beauty (*Akaal Moorat*) of the One Infinite Truth are *Khalsa* (*Kaho Kabir jan bhai khalsay, prem bhagat jeh jani*). Their spirits are freed from birth and death and their energies are renewed each day (i.e. they acquire the godly

qualities of *Ajoni Saibhang*). *Khalsa*, having conquered death becomes immortal (*marjeevra*). The One Truth becomes the Teacher (*Guru*), the giver of knowledge, equipoise and graceful living (*sahij avastha*) **in this life**. Thus is Truth realised through the Grace of the Guru (another interpretation of *Gur Parsaad* in *Mool Mantar*).

In the Sikh tradition, the Guru's Word (*Gurbani*) has been equated to the True Guru (*Gur Murat Gur Shabad hai*). Guru Nanak through ten Guru personalities (Nanaks I to X) preached the Word i.e. *Gurbani* now embodied in Guru Granth Sahib. *Gurbani* was the *Guru* in the beginning, the *Guru* through the ages and will be the *Guru* to the end (*Aad/jugaad Guru or Dhur ki Bani*). Therefore, *Gurbani* is the *Guru*, the Enlightener and represents the One Absolute Truth. Main stream Sikhism does not accept human gurus in place of the True Guru defined above.

Guru Nanak's message is that the same Divine Light pervades the whole creation and is the only source of God consciousness in all human beings. All humankind shares One common ultimate Truth, and a common goal, although, humanity may take different routes (represented by religions) to reach that goal: which is attainment of complete harmony or oneness with the One Universal Truth. Such harmony is achieved through timely, alert and continuous effort (*udham* and *ghaal*, the main theme of *Khalsa rehat*) and through Waheguru's Grace (*Nadar*). Even the cycle of *Karma* (concept of reaping the fruit of own deeds) can be broken through sincere prayer (*ardaas*) and continuous contemplation of His Name (*Naam simraan*) followed by Waheguru's Grace (*Nadar*). Name or Naam is the Being (all pervading Spirit) of God. The most popular Sikh words for meditating on the Name are either an expression of great wonderment "Waheguru !" or "Sat Naam" meaning "True Name".

The Sikh way is to meditate on His Name and through such meditation to merge with the Truth in us and around us. That Truth teaches us that all are equal before One God and are reflections of that One Light which shines in all souls. All have a right to equal treatment and equal share of God's bounty. The Sikh institution of *sangat-pangat* i.e. praying together (*sangat*) and sharing and eating together (*pangat*) without distinction and with humility, was the first expression of this godly concept of the *Mool Mantar* of Guru Nanak.

In the same basic precept (*Mool Mantar*), Guru Nanak described the godly qualities towards which humankind was to aspire to become the *Khalsa* of the Creator: belief in One Absolute Truth (God), seeing God's Light in all, a fearless immortal spirit which transcends death, animosity towards none and sharing God's bounty with all. The Sikh belief is that fearless and truthful conduct, **reinforced by *Khalsa rehat* (internal/external discipline)** is central to the

attainment of the Khalsa disposition (*birti*). Guru Gobind Singh's injunction is that *rehat* and not the Sikh is dear to him. This path requires great courage and determination. Guru Nanak's challenge is: "Once you set your foot on this path then do not hesitate to lay down your head" (Guru Granth Sahib p. 1412.).

Guru Nanak's Panth

Guru Nanak founded the *Panth* outside the caste system and outside any contemporary religious system in order to combat the religious, social and administrative oppressions and malpractice which he described in robust language in his compositions. There was hardly anything in contemporary politics, society or religion that he found acceptable. His stress on the underlying truth of contemporary religions was his way of redefining those religions in the language of his own divine perception, his blueprint for the order of the Khalsa Panth. He was a revolutionary who systematically laid the foundation of a new theo-political system and appointed a successor in his own image, to ensure continuity and consolidation. He was well aware of the difficulties which lay ahead. He forewarned those who cared to follow him. "Come my way", said Guru Nanak, "but only if you are prepared to place your head on the palm of your hand". He challenged corruption and oppression in every sphere of life and relevant quotations from his writings are readily available in Guru Granth Sahib. He was imprisoned by the Mughal Babar for speaking out in the strongest language against the invader's cruelty. Such open defiance of tyranny, especially in those days, was something new in the religious tradition of India.

Before Guru Nanak, no *sant* (Hindu or Muslim saint) had directly challenged the oppression of the rulers of the day and predicted their downfall as did Guru Nanak. No *sant* before Guru Nanak had combined the spiritual and temporal aspects of life as did Guru Nanak into a whole life liberating philosophy for the householder and the new age **men and women**. No *sant*, spoke so highly of women and ensured that henceforth men and women were to be on a par while they lived their complementary family roles. No *sant* spoke of human rights and equality in all spheres of life as did Guru Nanak. Indeed, unlike all other *sants* before him, Guru Nanak advocated a full life philosophy, extolled the virtues of family life and gave a new meaning to the old worn out Hindu and Islamic religious idiom. It is no surprise that historians like J D Cunningham (quoted at the beginning) correctly saw the religiously and socially uplifting ideology of Guru Nanak giving birth to the Sikh theo-political system and more. His teachings heralded the egalitarian society of the future: abolition of slavery, social discrimination of any type and on any basis (including the degrading caste system), equality between men and women, social justice and recognition of fundamental

human rights. He was well ahead of his times and the modern human society, still struggling with abominations like ethnic cleansing, coloured discrimination and apartheid, has a long way to go as yet before Guru Nanak's ideal society becomes a reality. That is the Guru's challenge to humankind. Contemporary issues need to be addressed in the light of the Guru's teachings embodied in Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh *rehat* (internal and external discipline representing the ideal Sikh way of life).

Before proceeding to the contribution made by each succeeding Guru personality to the realisation of Guru Nanak's vision of Khalsa Panth, two observations about Guru Nanak's Sikhism are relevant. Cunningham noted that **Guru Nanak, by making universal truth as his sole instrument "rendered his mission applicable to all times and places"**. As for authenticity of Sikh teachings, Macauliffe, a famous 19th century scholar of Sikh religion and history, found it difficult to **"point to a religion of greater originality" than Sikhism of Guru Nanak**. He stressed that, of all the major religions of the world, Sikhism possessed the most authentic scriptures.

Through selection of worthy successors, the institutions of the Sikh Panth started by Guru Nanak were developed and consolidated over a period of two hundred years.

The same Light of the Guru's Word (*Gurbani*) in ten human forms

Nanak II, Guru Angad (Guruship 1539-1552), collated the hymns of Guru Nanak written in the popular Punjabi (Gurmukhi) script⁴ and strengthened the institution of the holy congregation (*sangat*) established by Guru Nanak. He promoted the education of children and encouraged sports and games. Based on the teachings of Guru Nanak, the institution of community kitchen and *pangat* (sharing and eating together without distinction of caste or status) was established.

Nanak III, Guru Amardas (Guruship 1552-1574), built an important Sikh centre at Goindwal. The number of visitors had increased and a large well was excavated for water supply. Also, the caste conscious neighbourhood steeped in Brahmanic tradition, refused water supply to the transcaste Sikhs of Guru Nanak.

⁴ Guru Nanak and the other Gurus wrote in Gurmukhi script and in popular languages of the time (including Punjabi) to make education and religious knowledge readily available to the masses. This was the time when complex Sanskrit and Pharsi were used by the priestly class to ensure continued monopoly of religious knowledge. Introduction of Gurmukh script by Guru Nanak was a very significant step in democratizing education and knowledge in Punjab.

The twin institutions of *sangat-pangat* (Holy congregation and common kitchen) were now well established and Sikhism flourished under the guidance of Guru Amardas.

In line with Guru Nanak's teachings he gave a further uplift to the status of women. He preached against the cruel practice of *sati* whereby widows burned themselves to death on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands, got rid of the *pardah* system and encouraged widows to re-marry. He wrote hymns for the benefit of the householder (including the *lavan* for conducting Sikh marriages (anand karaj) and preached a life of equipoise (*sahij*). He strengthened the Sikh organisation through establishment of area congregations of Sikhs (*sangats*) and through appointment of Guru's representatives not only in Punjab but throughout India. Every Sikh was asked to donate one tenth part of his income (*daswandh*) for religious and charitable purposes. The Mughal Emperor Akbar visited the Guru in 1565 AD. In accordance with the Guru's instructions to all visitors, he sat in a *pangat* (on the floor with the common people) and partook food from the common kitchen before he saw the Guru. Akbar was pleased with what he saw and allotted a piece of land to the Guru's daughter Bibi Bhani. The town of Amritsar and the Harimandar (Golden Temple) now stand on this land. Thus Guru Amardas gave a very significant practical direction to the teachings of Guru Nanak. The distinctness of the Sikh community became more pronounced due to own centres and meaningful ceremonies e.g. that of the Sikh marriage ceremony of Anand Karaj at which the Guru's teachings were read and sung. Sikh *sangats* flourished in Punjab and outside.

Nanak IV, Guru Ramdas (Guruship 1574-1581) started the excavation of the pool at Amritsar destined to become the main centre of the Sikh Panth. He developed the town of Amritsar as a trade and business centre. Many centres of Sikhism were built under the Guruship of Ramdas. The Sikhs were now a sizeable, well organised and flourishing community. So much so that they started attracting the attention of less tolerant Mughal Emperors who followed Akbar, and the Brahmanic divisive and socially oppressive *Manuwadic* tradition to which Guru Nanak's egalitarian teachings were an anathema.

Nanak V, Guru Arjan Dev's Guruship (1581-1606) was one of the most notable. The excavation of the lake (*sarowar*) at Amritsar was completed. In 1589, a Muslim divine Mir Mohammed Muayyinul Islam, popularly known as Mian Mir, was requested to lay the foundation stone of Harimandar (now known as the Golden Temple) which was built in the centre of the lake. **Before this, no leader of a world religion had shown such goodwill towards another religion.** Harimandar had four doors on all four sides; this signified that they were open to all castes, races and religions of the world. Guru Arjan compiled the *Adi Granth*

(The Original Book) which included hymns of the first five Gurus (including his own). The hymns of 15 other Muslim and Hindu saints (*sants*), **which accorded with the teachings of Guru Nanak**, were also included selectively in the *Adi Granth* which was then installed in the Harimandar, the *sanctum-sanctorum* of Sikhism, in 1604.

Following the footsteps of his predecessors, Guru Arjan also carried on with social and welfare programmes including the care of lepers. Amritsar became a thriving centre for trade during his Guruship. Jehangir, the Mughal Emperor after Akbar, during the early part of his reign was looking for some excuse to please his supporters, led by a religious fanatic from Sirhand in Punjab, by putting a stop to the spread of Sikhism. The Guru was arrested under some frivolous pretext and tortured to death by Jehangir's orders in 1606. This signalled the awakening of the martial aspect of Guru Nanak's *miri/piri* philosophy.

Nanak VI, Guru Har Gobind (1606-1644) was enjoined by Guru Arjan before the latter's martyrdom, to prepare the Sikhs for armed defence of Guru Nanak's faith **as a last resort**. Jehangir imprisoned Guru Har Gobind for a few years in a fortress but released him following representations by prominent Muslims like Mia Mir and Hindu leaders. The Guru trained his followers in the use of arms and successfully resisted four attacks prompted by those who were envious of the ascendancy of the Guru and the growing strength of the Sikh organisation. The saint-warrior image of the Sikhs began to take shape under the Guruship of Guru Har Gobind. He established the theo-political centre of Sikhism called the Akaal Takht (The *Immortal Throne*) opposite the Harimandar at Amritsar. Akal Takhat combined the spiritual and temporal aspects of Sikh life. The two *Nishaan Sahibs* (flag poles) of *miri/piri* which are of different length send a clear signal to the Sikh Khalsa Panth: that temporal aspirations must always be guided by spiritual goals of the Khalsa (also the subject of this study) Akal Takhat became the seat of the spiritual and temporal aspirations of the Sikhs as a distinct community with the right to practise own religion without fear. The scene was set for a clash between the oppressive Mughal regime egged on by the orthodox Islamic fanatics and the caste conscious *Brahmans* and *Kshatrias* on the one hand, and the Sikhs of the Guru committed to an egalitarian tolerant society on the other. *Khalsa Panth* was beginning to emerge in its final form and was addressed by Guru Har Gobind as such. One of his Orders (*Hukamnamah*) says "The sangat of the East is the Guru's *Khalsa*".

Nanaks VII, Guru Har Rai (1644-1661) further consolidated the saint-soldier image of the Sikhs. Services for the treatment and care of the sick set up by earlier Gurus were expanded and there is anecdotal evidence which suggests a well

stocked dispensary run by the Guru⁵. The Sikhs were taught by the Guru to become responsible householders. The Guru was notable for his gentle nature and taught the Sikhs to put the peaceful message of Gurbani into practice. The Sikhs prospered under the Guruship of Guru Har Rai. Yet, he accomplished all this from a position of strength as he also maintained a trained cavalry of 2,200. He was provoked on one or two occasions, although, unlike Guru Har Gobind, he was not directly attacked. He taught the Sikhs to show humility and forgiveness from a position of strength (i.e. the Sikh maxim of *Taan honda hoi nitana*). Sikhism flourished under Guru Har Rai and many influential people in the Malwa district (south of river Sutlej) became the Guru's Sikhs. These Sikh families (*ghranas*) were later to help Guru Gobind Singh to regroup his forces at Sabo Ki Talwandi (Damdama Sahib) after his departure from the fort of Anandpur in December 1704. Some of these families became the rulers of the Malwa in later years.

Nanak VIII, Guru Har Krishan (1661-1664) took over the Guruship when he was only five and died at the age of nine but his name is remembered with great reverence by the Sikhs. The child-Guru showed great wisdom and maturity even at that tender age. He carried Guru Nanak's missionary torch unwaveringly thus confirming that Guru Nanak's Light was the same in all the Guru personalities regardless of age. His visit to Delhi reconfirmed the direction of the mainstream Sikhism of Guru Nanak. Hundreds of Sikhs came to see him there. He passed on the Guruship to Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Ninth Guru Nanak.

However, the fanaticism of and relentless oppression by the Mughal Emperor Aurungzeb was bound to clash with the robustly egalitarian Sikh Panth of Guru Nanak. The latter had himself not hesitated to confront Aurungzeb's ancestor, the invader Moghul Babar, with the cruelty which he inflicted on the innocent Hindu/Muslim public in 1521 AD. This clash between Babur's descendants (*Babar ke*) and Guru Nanak's descendants (*Babay ke*) came in the lives of the next two Gurus.

Nanak IX, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1664-1675) who responded to the prayer of the Hindus to save *their* religion from the bigotry of Emperor Aurungzeb, was executed by the latter in 1675. But not before he had instructed his son Gobind Rai, the next Guru to be frightened by no one as the obverse of frightening none (*Bhai kahun ko det neh, neh bhai manat aan*). **The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan had set a unique trans-religion goodwill example when he bestowed the honour of laying the foundation stone of Harimandar (Golden Temple), the *sanctum-***

⁵ Medical treatment was available to all. Emperor Shah Jehan's son, Dara Shikoh, who could not be cured of an illness by anyone else was cured by a medicine sent from the Guru's well stocked dispensary.

sanctorum of the Sikh faith, on the Muslim savant Mia Mir. The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur in defence of another religion⁶ and in defence of a fundamental human right: that every person had the God given right to practise own religion, was the second universal message of Guru Nanak's Sikhism⁷.

The Guru and the Sikh become One: Emergence of Khalsa Panth

Nanak X, Guru Gobind Rai, who after Vaisakhi 1699, became Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708), made final preparations for the formal introduction of the Sikh assertive identity and brotherhood for organisational strength, common direction and purpose. He invited all followers of Guru Nanak to Anandpur and standing on a hillock with a naked sword in his hand demanded five heads in succession. Five volunteers were taken inside a tent one by one. Later, much to the amazement of the awe-stricken congregation, the five reappeared, smartly dressed, armed with swords and with a fearless spiritual glow on their faces. These were the Guru's saint-soldiers, the Khalsa of the Guru.

These Five Beloved Ones, the *Panj Pyare*, then took the *Amrit* (nectar) prepared by the Guru. This ceremony removed caste distinctions and gave a common name, *Singh* (lion signifying a fearless spirit) to all men and *Kaur* (princess) to all women. Sugar cubes were stirred in water with a double edged sword (*khanda*) in an iron bowl while the Guru recited five compositions, starting with the *Japuji* of Guru Nanak and administered the Amrit so prepared to the *Panj Pyare*. They drank from the same iron bowl (*bata*) to show that any caste or other distinctions between them had been removed.

And then, on that Vaisakhi day in 1699, the Guru, yet again, did something unique in the history of world religions: with folded hands, he asked the *Panj Pyare* representing the *Khalsa*, to baptise him. That day, he too became *Khalsa* Gobind Singh from Gobind Rai and removed the distinction between the Guru and his fully mature disciples, the *Khalsa*.

From that day, thousands from all castes and religions came forward to take *Amrit* and join the new egalitarian brotherhood of the *Khalsa*. Standing on the hillock, on which was later built *Takht Keshgarh Sahib*, one of the five main seats

⁶ It needs to be remembered that Guru Nanak refused to wear the *jeneu* and *tilak*, the Hindu religious symbols. Yet, Nanak IX died protecting these marks and would have done the same if another religion had been threatened.

⁷ It is most regrettable that some contemporary Indian historians are now trying to belittle the great sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur.

of Sikh authority, the Guru preached. The *Khalsa* brotherhood was to rise above all sorts of castes, creeds, discriminations and inequalities. This was an extension and further confirmation of the Sikh *sangat-pangat* (congregation/common kitchen) tradition. Internal as well as external disciplines were stressed. He reminded his Sikhs of the spiritual life of a true *Gursikh* (Guru's Sikh) as described in the teachings of the Gurus in Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs aspiring to become *Khalsa* were enjoined to rise early in the morning, take a bath and say prayers at sunrise and at sunset; nay they were to remember God's Name with every breath. Their conduct was to be exemplary and they were to resist oppression fearlessly and defend the weak. The discipline thus promulgated the Sikh *rehat*, laid stress on righteous conduct and meditation on the Name of One God and no other. Freedom from fear and superstition was important for spiritual freedom and ultimate union with the Fearless. "Fear not, frighten not" teaching of the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, was to be the guiding principle.

To harness the mind is to transcend life and death: The Sikh *rehat*.

As a corollary to fearless and outstanding behaviour expected of the *Khalsa*, the Guru prescribed a disciplining and distinct identity for the Sikhs. Every Sikh was to keep unshorn hair (*kesh*) covered by a Sikh *dastar* (turban), wooden comb (*kangha*) to keep the hair tidy, a steel bangle (*kara*), a sword (*kirpan*) and a pair of shorts as underwear (*Kaccha*). *Kesh* (and turban), *kangha*, *kara*, *kaccha* and *kirpan* were the five K s (called *Panj kakars*), gifts of Guru Gobind Singh to the *Khalsa*. Gifts from a loving Guru who sacrificed his parents, his four sons, his own life and all that he possessed for his beloved *Khalsa*. Cherish *rehat* and keep your distinct identity and I shall endow you with my power, he said (*Jab lag rahe Khalsa niara, tab lag tej dehon mai sara*). The route to be taken by the Guru's Sikhs was shown to them by the Guru (i.e. Nanaks I to X represented by Guru Granth Sahib, the Word of the Guru).

Unshorn hair and *dastar* (*Sabat surat dastar sira*) are taken together as the first and the most important part of the visible *rehat*. Unshorn hair and the turban is a visible manifestation of the spiritual heritage, not only of the sub-continent of India, but the whole mankind as confirmed by almost all religions traditions. Unshorn hair has symbolised a saintly disposition and represents the complete human being. Such was the importance which the Guru placed on unshorn hair (*kesh*) that he named the baptismal place at Anandpur as *Kesh Garh*! Additionally, a turban is to a Sikh as a crown is to a king.

Every Sikh has to place his faith in the Guru's vision and wisdom regarding these visible article of faith of Sikhism for meeting the challenge of

the Guru and the times. Public confirmation of what *Khalsa Panth* stands for is the obverse of the Sikh maxim “To never move away from good deeds” (*Shubh karman te kabhhon na taron*). Clear, unmistakable, unhesitating identification with a certain way of life, would naturally pair with inner determination to keep up the relevant values. Outer desire to merge, to camouflage, to hide one’s heritage (*virsa*) would tend to pair with inner vices and weaknesses and lead to a slippery slope regarding ethical values. The urge to run would begin to overtake the determination to stand and fight for what is just. This is not theory. This is Sikh practice and Sikh history. Proof ? Bearing in mind the background of the majority society from which Guru Nanak raised the Sikh nation, compare its achievements in five hundred years with any other nation in the world. As self doubt, materialism in the guise of greed and self-centred ambition and own cleverness (*manmatt*) begins to take over and replace the maxim “Sikhism is the study of the Guru’s teaching” (*Sikhi sikhia Gur vichaar*), so will the Guru’s Light begin to fade in lost disoriented minds. The Guru showed the way for harnessing the energy of the human mind for constructive objectives by giving his Sikhs the *rehat*, the Sikh way of living a full, enjoyable life of disciplined harmony and equipoise (*sahij anand*).

The wooden comb (*kangha*) is to keep the hair tidy. The injunction to keep a comb ensures that the hair does not become matted like the yogis and the ash covered ascetics. Asceticism and monasticism has no place in Sikhism. Sikhs are householders and are enjoined by the Guru to keep clean and tidy by taking a bath every morning and combing their hair at least twice every day. The steel bangle (*kara*), worn on the right hand wrist reminds a Sikh of his duty to the Guru. It represents Sikh unity before one Guru. It symbolises restraint and moderation. (It also signifies equality between men and women by replacing the traditional *raakhi* thread put on a brother’s wrist by his sister signifying her dependence on her brother for protection.) The pair of Sikh shorts also worn by ancient warriors (as compared to the traditional Indian loose *dhoti* cloth around the waist) keeps the Sikhs active and represents high moral character. The sword (*kirpan* from the word *kirpa* and *aan* and meaning “the benevolent giver of protection and honour”) represents a Sikh’s determination to resist oppression and reminds him of the Guru’s injunction to defend the weak from aggression even at the cost of his or her own life. Yet, the name *kirpan* constantly reminds a Sikh that the sword (symbolising any weapon) must not be used for offence but only and as a last resort for the defence of the weak and own honour.

The Guru enjoined that the *Khalsa* were to abstain from the use of tobacco (abuse of drugs is generally prohibited in the Sikh Scriptures); they were prohibited from eating meat from animals killed by religious ritual (cruelty to animals killed for food was not acceptable to the *Khalsa*); they were to forsake the

company of the divisive sects who disputed the line of succession of Guruship from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh; and, adultery was forbidden. They were enjoined to forsake all Brahmanic rituals, customs and practices (*Bipraan ki reet*). There is no ordained priesthood in Sikhism and every Sikh qualifies for conducting Sikh services and ceremonies.

The internal and external disciplines (*rehat*) of the *Khalsa*, when fully understood in the context of Guru Nanak's teachings, arise from and are not despite those teachings. These are not meaningless rites, rituals and symbols (which Guru Nanak condemned) but the disciplines necessary for the attainment of equipoise (*sahij*) and knowledge of the Divine on the one hand, and for identification with certain values and responsibilities on the other. **The Sikh assertive identity faces the challenges of life and survival in modern plural societies head on, and promotes the Guru's universal message of Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of mankind in all its rich diversity.** Sikhism is not for the extinction of human religions or cultures in the guise of "realisation of universal humanity". One who fully understands the "unity in God's diversity" message of the *Khalsa Panth*, will see no difficulty in reconciling loyalty to a particular community to the realisation of universal humanity.

Through righteous conduct in accord with the Guru's guidance, the *Khalsa* is assured of ultimate victory over evil, for the *Khalsa* belongs to God, and the ultimate victory of the *Khalsa* is God's victory also i.e. *Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh*. And so the Guru enjoined that these should be the words with which Sikhs should greet each other henceforth.

A powerful brotherhood with a distinct identity and clear objectives thus established in 1699, to struggle against overwhelming odds, ultimately rose to power and established an egalitarian multicultural society in the Punjab by 1799, one hundred years after the inauguration of the *Khalsa Panth*. The *Khalsa* rule extended from Delhi to the north-west frontier bordering Afganistan. *Khalsa* armies put a stop to the invasions from the north, although, the strategic importance of this achievement remains to be fully acknowledged by Indian historians. Hindus and Muslims became equal partners with the Sikhs in the administration. Punjab was the last independent state on the Indian sub-continent to be taken over by the combined invasion of British and Indian forces in 1849, but not before the young *Khalsa* nation had given an unforgettable account of their military prowess to the invaders.

Today there are well over 20 million Sikhs settled in many countries around the world. Through their hard work and law-abiding nature, they have become one of the most prosperous communities. They are respected for their skills as professionals, administrators and soldiers. Clearly, the Guru's formula for

living, worship, work and charity (i.e. **meditate on One Truth, earn by your own effort and share your earnings with others**) has worked well for the Khalsa Panth of Guru Nanak/Guru Gobind Singh established 300 hundred years ago.

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa

Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.