

DEFINITION OF A SIKH

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ABSTRACT

Sikh religion is a truly universal religion started by Guru Nanak and the succeeding nine Gurus maintained its universality. The same tradition was strictly followed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and later on unto the independence of India. In order to spread Sikh Religion, any narrow definition, will negate the universality and equality, the basic principles of the Sikh Religion. I have given many reasons and the historical background of the Sikhs to prove that the definition of a Sikh is not necessary. If at all it is required it must be very broad to include every one who claims to be a Sikh. Religious organizations can define any way they want for membership requirement. If those requirements are restricted then they defeat the purpose for which the Sikh religion was started.

INTRODUCTION

The main question is whether a definition of a Sikh is necessary? A lot has already been discussed in this Journal and elsewhere [4, 5, 6, 9] by several authors. In general they all agree that the definition of a Sikh, if required, must have a universal appeal in commensurate with the principles of the Sikh religion. Any definition should also recognize the distinction between becoming a member of a religious organization and being a Sikh.

WHO IS A SIKH?

A Sikh is one who follows the Sikh way of life and persuades others to do the same. This can be accomplished by setting examples and practicing the universality of the Sikh religion not by words but by deeds.

Everyday when one gets up he/she should ask why I am a Sikh? This daily inquiry will lead one to do some good deeds and achieve something worthwhile in practicing Sikhism. To accomplish this, belief in one God and universality of all human beings is a must.

WHO IS A RELIGIOUS PERSON

Guru Nanak has explained very clearly who is a religious person.

ਗਲੀ ਜੋਗੁ ਨ ਹੋਈ

ਏਕ ਦ੍ਰਿਸ਼ਟਿ ਕਰਿ ਸਮਸਰਿ ਜਾਣੈ ਜੋਗੀ ਕਹੀਐ ਸੋਈ

AGGS, M 1, P 730 [1].

"By mere talking one cannot become a Jogi (Religious person).

One becomes Jogi (religious person)

Only by considering everybody as equal."

If all are equal then why do we discriminate. The pur-

pose of religion is to unite and put people on the path of truth. Definitions are made by people and can change with time while those written by Guru Nanak are for all times to come.

DEFINITIONS OF A SIKH BY SOCIETIES

Two well-respected and revered Sikh Organizations have defined a Sikh differently.

1. Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee

(SGPC) as per Rehit Maryada (Code of conduct) [5] *"A woman or a man, who believes in one Almighty, ten Guru Sahibans (from Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji to Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib), Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Bani and advice of ten Guru Sahibans and the Amrit of Dasmesh Ji and does not accept any other religion, is a Sikh."*

2. Delhi Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee

(DGPC) as per Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1971 [10].

"A Sikh means a person who professes the Sikh religion, believes and follows the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib and the ten Gurus only and keeps unshorn hair and have no other religion."

Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Act is more restrictive and conservative as they have added unshorn hair.

SGPC controls historic Gurdwaras in Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. DGPC controls historic Gurdwaras in Delhi.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN BEING A SIKH AND A MEMBER OF A RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION

To be a Sikh is also a state of mind. A Sikh is one who has complete and unequivocal (no trace of doubt) faith

in one God. A Sikh is one who treats all as equal without any prejudice and performs good deeds for the world we live in. In contrast religious organization's rules are made by the organizers and are subject to change.

If people want to restrict their societies they can do so by creating restrictive membership requirements. Some societies may be very conservative, some may be liberal and others may be in between, but they all belong to the same Sikh religion. However any definition, which is restrictive, defeats the purpose for which the Sikh religion was started.

Let us now examine the long-term consequences. Restrictive definitions will divide the Sikh community, which is already small, about 22.3 million throughout the world as per Encyclopaedia Britannica [12]. It will keep many people away from the Gurdwaras. Minorities in any country already have a hard time preserving their religion. By making the definition restrictive it becomes difficult to assimilate people into the Sikh religion, who are very close to the Sikh way of life.

If the definition is restricted then what will happen to the people who do not fit that definition? They may end up joining those religions, which have an open-end definition. Think of what happened to Buddhism and Jainism both started in India. In 1951 there were only 181,000 Buddhists in India although their number has now increased to several million in India alone [3]. The real deathblow to Buddhism came from the Muslim invaders of 13th century. During that period most of the Buddhists were killed, converted to Muslim religion or fled to near by countries [3]. Jainism started in the 6th century and has only about 4 million followers [3]. The decline of Buddhism and Jainism in India is also due to the growing similarity with Hinduism.

GURU NANAK'S VIEW

Guru Nanak when confronted (at Mecca in Saudi Arabia) with the question of whether Hindu or Muslim religion is superior. He avoided the narrow definition of any religion and replied that without good actions no body (Hindus and Muslims) will find a place in God's court [2].

PERIOD DURING GURU GOBIND SINGH

Guru Gobind Singh instituted the Khalsa and they should have five symbols, which starts with letter K in Punjabi language along with the daily recitation of the prescribed hymns. The five K's are:

- 1) Kachha (undergarment or short pants).
- 2) Kara (steel bracelet to remind of the commitment to truth).

- 3) Kirpan (sword as a weapon for defense).
- 4) Kangha (comb to keep the hair tidy).
- 5) Kesh (uncut hair).

In order to bring the whole community together Guru Gobind Singh declared that Sikh man would be known as 'Singh' (lion) and later woman were known as 'Kaur' (princess).

Guru Gobind Singh recognized the need, at that time, for an army of saint-soldiers to effectively fight the forces of evil. Communal hatred was prevalent along with the exploitation of people based on their caste, sex and religion. Guru Gobind Singh's forces besides Khalsa, were Sikhs who were not Khalsa, Hindus and Muslims, to free India, by force, from all foreign invaders. There will always be Khalsa and Sikhs, who are not Khalsa, for all times to come. It clearly shows that Guru Gobind Singh accepted people other than Khalsa into the Sikh religion thus maintaining the universality of the Sikh religion. This paved the way for others to join the Sikh religion in large numbers.

PERIOD DURING TEN GURUS

If there were a need to define a Sikh our ten Gurus would have done so. In fact the Gurus never did. However the ten Gurus made it very clear how people should lead their day to day life which is clearly defined in Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS), the holy book of the Sikhs.

DEFINITION OF FOLLOWERS OF OTHER RELIGIONS

The world's two big religions, Hindus and Christians, have very broad-based requirements to be a Hindu or a Christian. Both these religions have the power to absorb people of other religions. Christians by their excellent organization ability and Hindus by accepting any one with practically any view about God. Just consider how Diwali of the Hindus and Christmas of the Christians is celebrated. People of other religions join them in large numbers. The reason is they make it comfortable for others to join even if they may or may not participate in their religious ceremonies. Sikhs should emulate other religions in this respect and find practical ways to spread the Sikh religion and Sikh way of life as was practiced by our ten Gurus. The birthday of Guru Nanak should be celebrated by holding social functions by inviting young, old and people of other religions to participate. This needs to be done in addition to the religious congregations performed in the Gurdwaras.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SIKHS

There were two periods in Sikh history when people

joined the Sikh religion in large numbers. First was the period of ten Gurus from Guru Nanak (born in 1469 CE) to the tenth Guru Gobind Singh who passed away in 1708 CE. This period lasted about 239 years. The second period was during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, from 1799 to 1839 CE (about 50 years when British took over Punjab in 1849 CE). It is said that the number of Sikhs increased from 1 million to 10 million during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's period.

There was one thing, which was common in those two periods. The universality of the Sikh religion was not only preached but also practiced in real life. The people joined the Sikh religion because of persuasion and the teachings as enunciated by the Sikh Gurus. During these two periods people of other religions, Hindus and Muslims, were treated equally and they held very important positions in the administration. During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule all people were treated well and not a single person was put to death other than in the fighting fields. Ranjit Singh forgave people who tried to assassinate him and also he rehabilitated the conquered enemies [11].

During Guru Ka Bagh, non-violent protest, in 1922, everyday five Sikhs would take a vow to be non-violent and not utter a word while protesting. With folded hands they protested. British officers would beat them mercilessly with sticks covered with brass. They would fall down and end up in the hospital. This went on and there was no dearth of volunteers. Finally the British gave in. Pundit Madan Mohan Malviya, a very well respected Hindu leader, who was also president of the Congress Party, was an eyewitness and said [7]:

“ I can not resist asking every Hindu home to have at least one male child initiated into the fold of Khalsa. What I see here before my eyes is nothing short of a miracle in our whole history”.

Before the independence of India in 1947, it was common in Punjab for many Hindu families to have one member of their family converted to the Sikh religion. This practice was to emulate the sacrificing spirit of the Sikhs to obtain India's freedom from the British and to protect the family in time of need. This shows the universality of the Sikh religion in practice, which was clearly accepted by people of another religion (Hindus).

During another period in the 1930's or 1940's Mr B R Ambedkar, the leader of the scheduled caste who later wrote the constitution of India, was completely disgusted with the Hindu religion. He was convinced that

scheduled castes could not get self-respect and economic well being within Hinduism. Ambedkar spent two decades of exploring affiliation with other Indian religions. At one point Ambedkar declared in public that all scheduled caste people to adopt the Sikh religion. This was due to the fact that Sikh religion has no caste system and all are treated equally. Although Ambedkar did not change to Sikh religion but he did change to Buddhism prior to his death on December 6, 1956 along with about half a million scheduled castes [8].

EXCLUDE PEOPLE FROM SIKH RELIGION

No matter what the definition is, it may exclude many people, who are very close to the Sikh religion. We should not get involved in creating a definition of a Sikh. A definition will create friction among people and will close the doors to many people who are willing to claim that they are Sikhs.

DOES SIKH RELIGION NEED DEFINITION

Sikh religion needs no definition. Even if we want a definition it should be generalized which should have universal appeal and the people of other religions should feel comfortable in accepting and calling themselves as Sikhs. A simple definition, which has a universal appeal and still keeps the basic principles of the Sikh religion, is as follows:

“A person who has complete faith in one God, believes in ten Gurus and Guru Granth Sahib is a Sikh.”

This will open the gate for the people to join the Sikh religion. We will then be practicing the universality of the Sikh religion.

ONE PERSONAL INCIDENT

I experienced one personal incident, which happened with a Sindhi gentleman (generally speaking Hindus who migrated to India from Sindh province now in Pakistan and are devotees of Guru Nanak). He said that all Sikhs are Hindus and gave many reasons including that Guru Nanak was born in a Hindu family. I listened for a while and then said we Sikhs consider all Sindhi's as Sikhs. Here was a compromise and on that we shook hands. There should be a mechanism to incorporate people such as Sindhis into the Sikh religion, taking into account the universality of the Sikh religion, where all are treated equal.

To compromise and live in peace and harmony with others is very difficult. It is easy to quarrel and fight but this type of confrontation leads people to nowhere.

Restrictive definitions will divide the Sikh community, which is already small . . .

CONCLUSIONS

In order to expand Sikh religion it is imperative that the definition of a Sikh be not restrictive. The universality of Sikh religion can best be served by having very generalized definition. Our ten Gurus did not define a Sikh why should we? However our Gurus clearly defined how we should lead our day to day life as written in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs and of the whole world. Any definition should recognize the distinction between becoming a member of a religious organization and being a Sikh.

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BOOK REVIEW

MAAS MAAS KAR MOORKH JHAGRE (Punjabi)

By

Gurbaksh Singh Kala Afgana

Published by Kulbir Singh, Ranjitpura, P.O. Khalsa College, Amritsar 1996.

Reviewed by Dr Sarjit Singh Sandhu, PhD, Boise, Idaho, USA

The book contains the most commendable information available on this controversial subject which has divided the Sikh Sangat vertically into two camps. The author has reviewed, dissected and analyzed the material published in the books of Sri JP Sangat Singh, Bhai Randhir Singh and Bhai Joginder Singh Talwara by using the touchstone of Gurbani from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib. He has pinpointed the deliberate omissions of evidence from Gurbani by these authors to falsehood and to mislead the Sikh Sangat for a long time. The author discusses historical and scriptural evidence to show that Gurbani neither promotes nor prohibits eating of meat by Gursikhs.

This book is full of copious quotes from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib in order to substantiate the view that Gurbani does not interfere with the free will of the individual to eat whatever satisfies his/her needs to stay alive and serve the purpose for which God has created this universe with man as His chief agent. This book is recommended to those who are interested to see this question settled once for all. It is available from Singh Brothers, Amritsar and The Sikh Center Roseville, 201 Berkeley Ave, Roseville, CA 95678.