



COVER STORY

The Poets Of Enterprise

The twists of history, and a people's will to defy the odds—the essential story of the Sikhs

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ON April 13, 1999, the Khalsa will be 300 years old and Sikhism, from which it emerged, will be over 500 years old. Sikhism was, and is, a pacifist creed started by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and developed by four succeeding Gurus whose writings were compiled in an anthology, the Adi Granth, by the fifth, Guru Arjun, around 1600 AD. The Adi Granth comprises over 6,000 hymns composed by five Gurus (mainly those of the compiler Guru Arjun) and includes compositions of Hindu and Muslim saints as well as some bards. In the final version, made by Guru Gobind Singh, he inserted hymns composed by his father Guru Tegh Bahadur. Guru Gobind compiled an anthology of his own, the Dasam Granth. While the Adi (first) Granth is essentially a distillation of the Vedanta in Punjabi, the Dasam (10th) is a compilation of tales of valour of Hindu goddesses, some composed by the Guru himself, others by bards of his court. It is not accorded the same status as the Adi Granth. Thus we have two parallel scriptures, one extolling the virtues of peaceful submission, the other of combating oppression with force. The martyrdom of two Gurus changed the course of Sikh history. Guru Arjun succumbed to torture in Lahore jail in 1606; his son and sixth Guru, Har Gobind, took up arms. Tegh Bahadur was executed in Delhi in 1675; his son Gobind Rai (later Singh) converted a sizeable chunk of hitherto peace-loving Sikhs into the militant fraternity called the Khalsa or the pure.

The real danger to the Khalsa today is from the absorptive capacity of Hinduism, the "boa constrictor of Indian jungles".

As a consequence of these historic changes, we have several brands of Sikhs. There are Hindus who believe in Sikhism, visit gurudwaras, have a Granth Sahib in their homes and perform rituals according to Sikh rites. A large section of them are from Sindh, mainly Amils. Then there are Sahaj-dharis (slow adopters) who don't wear the external forms of the Khalsa viz, unshorn hair and beard. The majority of Sikhs are Khalsa who undergo baptism (pahul), take vows to observe the five Ks—kesh, kangha, kaccha, kada and kirpan—and add the suffix Singh, and if female, Kaur, to their names.

The halcyon days of the Green Revolution didn't last. After the orgy of prosperity came the hangover of overindulgence.

Those Khalsa who cut off their hair and shave their beards are regarded as patits (renegades) but still see themselves as Sikhs. The matter becomes more complex as while all the above categories of Sikhs revere only 10 Gurus and the Granth Sahib as their living embodiment, there are two sects—Nirankaris and Namdharis—who have living Gurus but nevertheless describe themselves as Sikhs.

Transition from one Sikh sect to the other, indeed from Hinduism to Sikhism, is without many hassles. Inter-marriage is not uncommon. The relationship between Hindus and Sikhs has always been roti-beti ka rishta (breaking bread in common and giving daughters in marriage), or nauh-maas da rishta (as fingernail is to the flesh). In this situation, the Khalsa find themselves losing ground, as an increasing

number of their youth cut their hair and shave their beards to become no different from Hindus believing in Sikhism, while the number of Hindus accepting baptism to become Khalsas is becoming rarer.

When the Khalsa was in the ascendant politically, their numbers rose steadily. After they lost their kingdom in 1849, their population began to decline. Fortunately for them, the British came to their aid by giving them

In growing numbers, young Sikhs began to abandon the external symbols of the Khalsa. This was more noticeable among Sikhs settled in foreign countries. Wherever they were in large numbers and formed compact social groups—as in some East African countries and Singapore—social pressures kept the younger generation from reneging on their ancestral faith; where they were scattered in small numbers as in England, Canada and the US, a second generation emigrant conforming to Khalsa traditions became a rarity. The same phenomenon is visible among the educated elite who live in Indian cities and are exposed to western influences. Young Sikh boys question the necessity of keeping long hair and growing beards to be religious. The only rational answer is that it gives them a sense of belonging to the Khalsa Panth. Many don't find that convincing enough and become like Hindus performing Sikh rituals and prayer. The real danger to the Khalsa has always been, as it is today, the absorptive capacity of Hinduism. An English scholar correctly described it as the boa constrictor of the Indian jungles: it can swallow religions which come in contact with it, with special taste for its own offspring.

In a country ridden with beggars, it's rare to see a Sikh stretch out his hand for alms. This is no short of a miracle.

The real challenge facing the Khalsa Panth on the 300th anniversary of its birth will be to find ways and means to arrest, possibly reverse, the process of disintegration. Perhaps the most important issue to be considered by scholars of Sikh theology will be to convince people that there is a continuous and unbroken line between the teachings of Guru Nanak and the first five gurus enshrined in the Adi Granth and the militant tradition begun by the sixth Guru and brought to culmination by the 10th and last Guru Gobind Singh with the establishment of the Khalsa Panth.

The roots of Sikhism lie deep in the Bhakti form of Hinduism. Guru Nanak picked what he felt were its salient features: belief in one God who is undefinable, unborn, immortal, omniscient, all-pervading and the epitome of Truth; belief in the institution of the Guru as the guide in matters spiritual; unity of mankind without distinction of caste; rejection of idol worship and meaningless ritual; sanctity of the sangat (congregation) which was expected to break bread together at the Guru ka Langar; the gentle way of sahadj to approach God while fulfilling domestic obligations; hymn singing (kirtan); emphasis on work as a moral obligation. A slogan ascribed to Guru Nanak is kirt karo, vand chhako, naam japo (work, share what you earn, take the name of the Lord). There's little doubt that Nanak felt he had a new message that needed to be conveyed after him, as he nominated his closest disciple Angad to be his successor in preference to his two sons. Angad, likewise, nominated his disciple Amar Das to succeed him. Thereafter, guruship remained among members of the same family, the Sodhis.

The compilation of the Adi Granth around 1604 AD was a landmark in the evolution of Sikhism. Though an eclectic work with compositions of Hindu and Muslim saints, it echoes the Vedanta through most of its nearly 6,000 hymns. There is a new breed of Sikh scholars who bend backwards to prove Sikhism has taken little or nothing from Hinduism. All they need to be told is that of the 15,028 names of God that appear in the Adi Granth, Hari occurs over 8,000 times, Ram 2,533 times, followed by Prabhu, Gopal Govind, Parbrahm and other Hindu nomenclature for the Divine. The purely Sikh coinage 'Wahe Guru' appears only 16 times.

There can be little doubt that the martyrdom of Guru Arjun in 1606 resulted in a radical change in the community's outlook. Though its creed remained wedded to the Adi Granth, it was ready to defend itself by the use of arms. Guru Arjun's son, the sixth Guru, Har Gobind, raised a cavalry of horsemen. He built the Akal Takht facing the Harmandir as the seat of temporal power and came to be designated Miri Piri Da Malik (lord of temporal and spiritual power). For some years he was imprisoned in Gwalior fort. The final transition came after the execution of the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, in 1675. His son, Guru Gobind, justified the transition in a letter, Zafarnamah, said to have been addressed to Emperor Aurangzeb: "When all other means have failed it is righteous to draw the sword". Guru Gobind's concept of God underwent a martial metamorphosis. In his Akal Ustat (Praise of the Timeless God) he wrote:

*Eternal God, thou art our shield,
The dagger, knife, the sword we wield.
To us Protector there is given
The timeless, deathless Lord of Heaven;*

(translated by M.A. Macauliffe)

In his ode to Goddess Chandi, Guru Gobind asked Lord Shiva to grant him the most fitting end to a warrior's life:
*O Lord, these boons of Thee I ask,
 Let me never shun a righteous task,
 Let me be fearless when I go to battle,
 Give me faith that victory will be mine,
 Give me power to sing Thy praise,
 And when comes the time to end my life,
 Let me fall in mighty strife.*

Though not very successful in the campaigns he fought, he fired his followers with martial fervour. "I will teach the sparrow to hunt the hawk, one man to fight 1,25,000 (sava lakh)." He made the downtrodden feel they were God's chosen people-Wahe guru ji da khalsa-and would be ever victorious-Wahe guru ji di fateh.

The Guru succeeded in creating a new breed of intrepid warriors imbued with a do-or-die spirit. Within a few years of his death, disciple Banda Bairagi overran the region around Sirhind and laid waste large domains of the Mughal kingdom. Even after the capture and execution of hundreds of Banda's followers, bands of Sikh horsemen harried Nadir Shah's forces and forced his successor Ahmed Shah Abdali, who blew up the Harmandir twice, to retreat. When Sikhs became rulers of the Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh realised the value of having troops of Nihangs whom he threw into battles against Ghazis waging jihad against him. The determination never to give in came to be deeply rooted in the Sikh psyche; even in adversity they were exhorted to remain in buoyant spirits-charhdi kala. With it came the conviction that destiny was in their hands. At the end of each congregational prayer, comes the chant Raj Karega Khalsa (the Khalsa will rule). No one will be able to resist them. Those who confront them will be routed. Those who seek their protection will be saved.

The Green Revolution in the production of wheat and rice was largely the achievement of the Sikh farmers. Its epicentre was the Punjab Agricultural University at Ludhiana set up in 1962. Within a few years the production of crops per acre was doubled, then trebled. Simultaneous with the Green Revolution came the opening up of the Middle East and the western countries to emigrants. Since the turn of the century, small Sikh communities had existed in Canada, the US, England, Australia and countries on the East African coast. Taking advantage of their status as citizens of the Commonwealth, thousands of Sikhs who emigrated to the UK, Canada and Australia acquired British citizenship. Others, who could, went to the United States. Many found employment in the Arab countries of the Gulf and the Middle East. The remittances they sent home helped their families wipe out old debts, buy more land and build new houses. The well-to-do Sikh farmer never had it so good as he did in the 1960s and 1970s.

The halcyon years of the Green Revolution and foreign remittances did not last long. After the orgy of prosperity came the hangover of overindulgence. Young Sikhs coming out of school and colleges found there was not enough for them to do on the land; they couldn't go abroad because of restrictions put on emigrants by foreign countries and there was hardly any industry in Punjab that could absorb them. As the number of landless increased, so did the numbers of uneducated unemployed. They were willing to lend their ears to Marxists as well as to preachers of religious fundamentalism. The latter proved to be more persuasive.

Sikh religious revival coincided with the Green Revolution. The man who started it was Giani Zail Singh. His motives were entirely political, viz, to get the better of the Akalis who had monopolised the propagation of Sikhism. Zail Singh, chief minister for five years, 1972-77, utilised every opportunity to give a Sikh orientation to government: official functions began with an ardas; kirtan darbars were organised on a provincial scale; the new university set up in Amritsar was named after Guru Nanak; a new township was named after one of Guru Gobind's sons. The most ludicrous was his discovery of horses said to be descendants of the stallion ridden by Guru Gobind. They were led down a 400 km road, renamed Guru Gobind Singh Marg, running from Anandpur to Patiala-villagers reverentially collected their droppings to take home. It was Zail Singh more than anyone else who brought forward the rustic preacher Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who had earned a name for himself for bringing back into the Khalsa fold thousands of young Sikhs who had strayed from the path of orthodoxy. He exhorted

clashed with the Nirankaris on April 13, 1978, Baisakhi day-17 lost their lives. Two years later (April 24, 1980) Baba Gurbachan Singh, head of the Nirankari sect, and his bodyguard were gunned down in Delhi. Bhai Ranjit Singh was convicted of the crime and sentenced to 14 years imprisonment. While in jail, he was nominated jathedar of the Akal Takht by Gurcharan Singh Tohra, president of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (sgpc).

Bhindranwale's followers spread terror in the state by killing eminent Hindus like Lala Jagat Narain, founder-owner of the Hind Samachar group of newspapers (his son Ramesh Chandra too was killed later). Thereafter, hardly a day went by when gangs owing allegiance to Bhindranwale did not kill between 10-20 Hindus and Sikhs opposed to his ideology. When Bhindranwale was arrested from his Chowk Mehta residence, it was at a date and time of his own choosing (Zail Singh was then Union home minister and enjoyed the support of Mrs Gandhi's son, Sanjay). When he was released, he felt he would be safer in the Golden Temple complex than in Chowk Mehta. He took up residence in the Akal Takht and began to fortify it.

Killings, bank robberies, extortions, hijacking of planes continued apace. Bhindranwale discovered the easiest way of preventing the absorption of the Khalsa into Hinduism was to create a gulf between Sikhs and Hindus. For a while he succeeded in splitting the two communities: Punjabi Hindus who were alienated from their Sikh brethren answered abuse with abuse and the desecration of Hindu temples with the desecration of gurudwaras. Attempts to resolve disputes with the government failed and Mrs Gandhi decided to settle Bhindranwale's hash once and for all. She persuaded Zail Singh, now President of the Republic, to put Punjab under military rule. Then without informing him, she ordered the army to storm the Golden Temple. She chose to do so on June 5, 1984, the martyrdom anniversary of the founder of the temple, Guru Arjun, when thousands of pilgrims were present. In the action that took two nights and days, there were heavy casualties on both sides; hundreds of innocent worshippers were killed in the crossfire, the Akal Takht was wrecked, the entrance to the central shrine damaged and the shrine itself pocked with bullet marks. Amongst the dead was Bhindranwale. Operation Blue Star, as it was called, shocked the entire community, including a substantial number of those who strongly disapproved of Bhindranwale. Army operations to wipe out Bhindranwale's supporters in the state, though ruthless, did not produce results. The Khalsa does not have a spirit of forgiveness. On October 31, 1984, two of Mrs Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards killed her in her garden. The ruling coterie decided "to teach the Sikhs a lesson". In many towns and cities of northern India, scores of gurudwaras and Sikh properties were destroyed and thousands of Sikhs burnt alive by frenzied mobs instigated by members of the Congress. The police looked on as bemused spectators. Far from being suppressed, Sikh terrorism picked up and over a dozen gangs-some trained and armed by Pakistan-spread terror in the state. It took the government over a year to realise that strongarm tactics wouldn't work with the Sikhs. Dialogue was reopened with Akali leaders. By then Punjabis had had their fill of violence by the terrorists and the Punjab police and were longing for peace. On July 23, 1985, a comprehensive pact covering all points of dispute was signed by Sant Longowal, representing the Akalis, with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. After 10 years of violence, in which over 10,000 lives were lost, peace was finally restored to the state. The elections that followed gave the Akalis a decisive victory.

It took another decade for the alienated community to regain its self-esteem and resume its leading role in nation-building. Sikhs have enormous resilience and self-confidence born of the conviction that anything others do, they can do better. They are about the only religious community who tell jokes against themselves and laugh at jokes made at their expense. A good instance of this is the one that made the rounds during the pogrom of Sikhs following Mrs Gandhi's assassination: one of her assassins, Beant Singh, gunned down after the crime, went to Bhindranwale in paradise to receive his blessings for what he'd done. Bhindranwale said: "Son, you have done well; ask for any reward and it will be yours." Beant Singh replied: "Santji, I am now out of a job, give me something to do." "Name it and it's yours," assured Bhindranwale. "Santji, the only job I know is of protecting people. Employ me as your personal bodyguard." Bhindranwale paused and replied: "Son, ask for anything else because I can't take the risk of having you as my personal guard."

The Khalsa are outgoing, loud and obstreperous. They were among the first Indians to seek their fortunes abroad-not as bonded labour but as farmers and entrepreneurs. They prospered wherever they settled, on the west coast of Canada and the US as lumbermen and farmers, in east Africa as industrialists and tradesmen, in Arab countries as building contractors, in Malaysia and Singapore as shopkeepers, in northeastern Australia as

After the Partition, Sikh refugees from Pakistan spread to all corners of India, another migration began to foreign countries. Go to Indira Gandhi International Airport at any time, you'll find almost half the Indian passengers leaving the country are Sikhs. In India, besides farming in Haryana, Ganganagar district of Rajasthan and the Terai region, they went into the road transport business in a big way and virtually monopolised the manufacture of motor spare parts. A few families prospered in industry: Ranbaxy's in pharmaceuticals, Raunaq Singh in the manufacture of pipes and tyres, the Inder Singhs and the Sahus of Mumbai in steel, the Majethias in sugar. Though their proportion in the defence services declined sharply since independence, they're still well represented in the upper echelons. They have regained their pre-eminent position in Punjab politics with Parkash Singh Badal as chief minister and Surjeet Singh Barnala as agriculture minister in the Centre. They gave India its most distinguished finance minister, Manmohan Singh, the brightest of civil servants in former finance secretary Montek Singh Ahluwalia and election commissioner M.S. Gill. It is hard to believe that Sikhs form less than two per cent of the population of India. In a country ridden with beggars, it's rare to see a Sikh stretch out his hand for alms. This is no short of a miracle. The miracle was performed by Guru Gobind Singh 300 years ago on April 13, 1699 AD.

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