
A History Of The Sikhs

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A History Of The Sikhs by Sharp & Krueger*

INTRODUCTION: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE SIKH FAITH

The story of the Sikh faith is one of profound spiritual insight, remarkable resilience, and a unique evolution from a small community of followers in the Punjab region to a globally recognized religion with millions of adherents.

Understanding a **history of the Sikhs** is not merely an academic exercise; it is a journey through the

very fabric of South Asian history, marked by the ideals of equality, justice, and devotion. From the gentle teachings of its founder to the martial spirit forged in times of persecution, the Sikh narrative is a powerful testament to faith's ability to adapt and thrive. This article explores the full arc of this history, from the birth of the faith in the 15th century to its modern-day presence across the world.

1. THE BIRTH OF SIKHISM: GURU NANAK AND THE

(1469-1539)

The origin of Sikhism begins with its founder, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who was born in 1469 in the village of Talwandi (now Nankana Sahib in Pakistan). Even as a child, Nanak showed a deep contemplative nature, often questioning the rigid rituals and social divisions of the society around him. The pivotal moment in his life came during a mystical experience at the age of about thirty. While bathing in the River Bein, he disappeared for three days, and upon his return, his first words were, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim." This declaration formed the bedrock of his spiritual mission.

Guru Nanak spent the remaining years of his life traveling extensively across India, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, a journey known as his *udasis*. He preached a message centered on **Ik Onkar** (One God) who is formless, eternal, and accessible to all through love and devotion. He rejected caste distinctions, idol worship, and empty ritualism. Instead, he emphasized the importance of **Naam Japo** (meditating on God's name), **Kirat Karo** (earning an honest living), and **Vand Chakko** (sharing with others). These three core principles remain central to the faith today. Before his death in 1539, Guru Nanak appointed a successor, Guru Angad Dev, establishing a

lineage of spiritual authority that would guide the community for the next two centuries.

2. THE ERA OF THE GURUS: FROM GURU ANGAD TO GURU TEGH BAHADUR (1539-1675)

Following Guru Nanak, the next eight Gurus solidified and expanded the faith. This period is crucial for understanding **a history of the Sikhs** as it transformed a small devotional movement into a distinct religious community.

Guru
Angad

and Guru
Amar Das

Guru Angad Dev (1539-1552) is credited with standardizing the **Gurmukhi script**, which became the official script for writing the Punjabi language and the Sikh scriptures. This was a foundational step for preserving the Guru's teachings. Guru Amar Das (1552-1574) established administrative centers called **Manjis** to spread the faith more systematically. He also championed the dignity of women, prohibiting the practice of *sati* (widow burning) and encouraging widow remarriage.

Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan Dev

Guru Ram Das (1574–1581) founded the city of Ramdaspur (later Amritsar) and began the excavation of the sacred pool (*Amrit Sarovar*) around which the Harmandir Sahib (the Golden Temple) would be built. It was under his son, Guru Arjan Dev (1581–1606), that the community faced its first major test. Guru Arjan compiled the **Adi Granth**, the early version of the Sikh scripture, and completed the Golden Temple, making it a center of spiritual and

economic activity. His growing influence alarmed the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, who saw him as a threat. In 1606, Guru Arjan was tortured and executed in Lahore, becoming the Sikh faith's first martyr. This event marked a turning point, imbuing the community with a spirit of defiance and a commitment to protecting their faith.

Guru Hargobin d and the Militarizat ion of the

Sikhs

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan led his son, Guru Hargobind (1606–1644), to introduce a new, dual concept of **Miri and Piri** (temporal and spiritual authority). He wore two swords, symbolizing his role as both a spiritual leader and a temporal sovereign. He built the Akal Takht (Throne of the Timeless One) opposite the Golden Temple, a platform for political and military decision-making. This period saw the Sikhs taking up arms for self-defense, engaging in several skirmishes with Mughal forces.

Guru Har

Rai, Guru Harkrishan, and Guru Tegh Bahadur

The subsequent Gurus continued to consolidate the community while facing intermittent persecution. The most significant event of this era was the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1665–1675). The Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb was aggressively converting non-Muslims to Islam. A group of Kashmiri Pandits (Hindu priests) came to the Guru for

help. To defend their right to practice their faith, Guru Tegh Bahadur offered himself as a sacrifice. He was publicly beheaded in Chandni Chowk, Delhi, in 1675, for refusing to convert. His sacrifice for the freedom of another religious community is a unique example of interfaith solidarity in world history.

3. THE CREATION OF THE KHALSA: GURU GOBIND SINGH AND THE BIRTH OF THE SIKH IDENTITY (1675-1708)

This is arguably the most transformative chapter in **a history of the Sikhs**. Guru Tegh Bahadur's son, Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708), was a poet, philosopher, and

a brilliant military leader. He knew that a martyred community needed a decisive, permanent identity to survive.

On the day of Vaisakhi in 1699, at Anandpur Sahib, Guru Gobind Singh called for a volunteer willing to give his head. After five volunteers offered themselves, he initiated them into the order of the **Khalsa**, the "Pure Ones." He baptized them with sweetened water stirred with a double-edged sword (*Amrit*) and gave them the five articles of faith, known as the **Five Ks**:

- **Kesh** (Uncut hair)
- **Kangha** (A wooden comb)
- **Kara** (A steel bracelet)
- **Kirpan** (A

CONFEDERACY

sword)

- **Kachera** (Cotton undergarments)

He also gave all Khalsa men the surname "Singh" (Lion) and women the surname "Kaur" (Princess), abolishing caste distinctions. The Khalsa was a community of saint-soldiers, sworn to defend the weak and uphold justice. Shortly before his death in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh proclaimed that the line of personal Gurus would end. He vested the spiritual authority in the **Guru Granth Sahib** (the final, eternal scripture) and the temporal authority in the **Khalsa Panth** (the community of the initiated).

4. THE SIKH

AND THE RISE OF THE MISLS (1708-1799)

After the death of Guru Gobind Singh, the 18th century was a period of intense struggle for the Sikhs. They faced relentless persecution from the Mughal Empire and later from Afghan invaders like Ahmad Shah Abdali. This period, known as the "**Sikh Holocaust**", saw the community being hunted and killed in large numbers. However, the spirit of the Khalsa could not be broken. The Sikhs organized themselves into decentralized fighting bands known as **Misls** (confederacies).

Twelve major Misls, including the prominent Dal Khalsa, controlled different

territories across the Punjab. They held regular meetings in Amritsar, known as the **Sarbat Khalsa** (the entire Khalsa, or general assembly), to make collective political decisions. Despite their internal rivalries, they grew stronger, gradually driving out the Afghans and reclaiming their homeland. The Misls provided the military and political experience that would pave the way for the next grand era of Sikh history: the formation of a sovereign empire.

5. THE SIKH EMPIRE: MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH AND THE GOLDEN AGE (1799-1849)

The chaos of the Misls gave way to unity

under a remarkable leader, **Maharaja Ranjit Singh** (1780–1839). At just 19 years old, he captured Lahore and was proclaimed Maharaja of the Punjab in 1801. His reign is often referred to as the "Golden Age" of the Sikh Empire. Ranjit Singh was a brilliant strategist, ruler, and diplomat. He unified the warring Misls into a single, powerful state.

He modernized his army, known as the **Sikh Khalsa Army**, with the help of European officers (including French and Italian generals), creating a formidable fighting force. His empire stretched from the Khyber Pass in the west to the Sutlej River in the east, encompassing Kashmir and parts of Tibet.

Crucially, Ranjit Singh was known for his policy of secularism and religious tolerance. Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs served in high positions in his court and army. He did not discriminate on the basis of religion. He also showed great respect for other faiths, famously donating gold to cover the temple of Shiva in Kashmir. The **Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar** was covered with gold during his reign, giving it the name "Golden Temple" it is known by today. His death in 1839 left a power vacuum that led to internal strife and made the empire vulnerable.

6. BRITISH COLONIAL RULE AND THE ANGLO-SIKH WARS

(1849-1947)

With the decline of the Sikh Empire after Ranjit Singh's death, the British East India Company quickly moved to annex the Punjab. The two **Anglo-Sikh Wars** (1845-46 and 1848-49) were among the hardest fought battles in British colonial history. Despite their bravery, the Sikhs were betrayed by a divided and corrupt leadership. By 1849, the Punjab was formally annexed into British India.

The British were deeply impressed by the martial prowess of the Sikhs and began recruiting them in large numbers into the British Indian Army. Sikhs became a highly respected "martial race" in the imperial

forces, serving in both World Wars. During the colonial era, the Sikhs underwent a period of religious and social reform. The **Singh Sabha Movement** (founded in the 1870s) aimed to revitalize the faith, counter Christian missionary activity, and purify Sikh practices from Hindu influences. This movement led to the standardization of Sikh identity and the formalization of the **Rahit Maryada** (the Sikh code of conduct). The early 20th century also saw Sikhs deeply involved in the Indian

independence movement. Groups like the **Ghadar Party** (primarily composed of Sikh Punjabis in North America) and leaders like Bhagat Singh (a Sikh who became a revolutionary icon for all of India) played a pivotal role. The struggle for independence was also marked by the **Jallianwala Bagh massacre** in Amritsar in 1919, where hundreds of unarmed Sikhs and others were killed, further fueling the fire of resistance.

7. PARTITION OF INDIA AND
