Chapter 16

SIKHISM: FAITH AND PRACTICE

The Sikh community constitutes one of the most striking components in the mosaic of the Indian cultural tradition. Although only a small minority of the population, Sikhs are prominent out of proportion to their numbers in the armed services, modern agriculture, industry, sports, and transportation. As W. H. McLeod, a leading modern scholar of Sikhism has said, the four and a half centuries of Sikh history offer "an unusually coherent example of how a cultural group develops in response to the pressure of historical circumstances."¹

Sikhs themselves have a clearly articulate history of their community, which they refer to as the path, meaning "path" or "way." The word "Sikh" itself means "disciple." Although modern scholarship has called into question or modified aspects of the Sikhs' version of their history, no other religious group in India relates the origin and development of its faith so closely to historical events as do the Sikhs. Faith and practice, interior certainty and external expression, have given the Sikhs a sense of being a "chosen" people, a special community called into being through the work of Guru Nānak and his successors. "What terrible separation it is to be separated from God and what blissful union to be united with Him,"² is one of Nānak's great formulations of faith. It might be understood, as such statements often are, as a call to quietism and passivity in the face of life's problems. In the Sikh historical experience, however, it has stood for a sense of certitude that defines a way of life worth fighting and dying for. This connection between faith and practice is well illustrated in the museum of the great central shrine of Sikhism at Amritsar, where the martyrs of Sikhism are shown fighting to the death in the seventeenth century against their enemies, the armies of the Mughal emperors. It is no accident that, in the summer of 1984, Amritsar was the scene of a fierce battle in which hundreds of Sikhs died fighting against the army of the government of In-
dia, regarded by a group of militant defenders as the enemy of Sikh faith and practice.

Guru Nānak (1469–1539): Life and Teachings

Sikhs regard Guru Nānak as the founder of a new religion that he carried from the Punjab to many parts of India and, according to some traditional accounts, to Sri Lanka and Mecca before his death in 1539. When Western scholars became acquainted with Sikhism in the nineteenth century, they were struck by what seemed to be many resemblances of Nānak's teachings to Islam as well as to Hinduism, and they therefore concluded that he had created a synthesis of beliefs and practices drawn from the two faiths. They cited his acceptance of reincarnation and the doctrine of karma as evidence of his adoption of ideas from the Hindu tradition, whereas his emphasis on the oneness of God and on congregational worship and his rejection of the caste system and the worship of idols seemed to show Islamic influence. That Nānak had synthesized elements from the two religions, the one of the conquerors, the other of the conquered, seemed a plausible conclusion, for Islam had been politically dominant in North India for over three centuries, and Sufi missionaries, as noted in chapter 15, had been active in the Punjab. The interpretation of Sikhism as a synthesis of Hindu and Islamic ideas was also popular with Indian nationalists, who wished to show that, because Hinduism and Islam had learned from each other in the past, a rapprochement was possible in modern India.

Recent scholarship has argued, however, that there is in fact little evidence of Sikhism being a synthesis of Islamic and Hindu religious ideas. Nānak did teach that Hinduism and Islam had much in common, but this was a commonality of error, not truth; the orthodox practitioners of both systems were denounced as false guides. Nānak's dissenting religious ideas are, however, rooted in practices that were indigenous to India itself, especially the great expressions of devotional Hinduism that were examined in chapter 12. The over-arching and most pervasive form of such devotion is bhakti, which in North India found expression in loving devotion offered to incarnations of Vishnu, especially Rāma and Krishna. Another movement that was influential in North India was that of the Nāth yogīs, which was related to the very ancient tantric yoga tradition (see chapter 11). The Nāth sect rejected many of the external rules of Brahmanical Hinduism, as well as its scriptures and duties, and gave special importance to masters, or gurus, as the only true spiritual guides. Out of the general bhakti tradition and the Nāth sects there emerged in North India a new and distinctive development known as the Sant tradition. 3 The Sants, like their bhakti counterparts, placed an overwhelming emphasis on love as the characteristic emotion of true religion, but they did not direct their devotion to intermediary incarnations, such as Rāma and Krishna, but to the eternal, formless God. As in the Nāth tradition, there is a rejection of all Hindu ceremonies, scriptures, incarnations, food tabous, and caste distinctions, including the role of the Brahmanical priests. God was the transcendent Creator, but He was also immanent in his creation, above all in man himself. So the path to God was by inward meditation upon His name, that is, on the manifestation of Himself that God makes to His devotees. The Sant tradition also placed great emphasis on the role of the guru, who was at once a human teacher and the voice of God. The Sants were drawn from the lower castes, not the traditional religious elites, and they taught through language close to that spoken by the ordinary uneducated rural people. Kābir, a selection of whose teaching has already been given in chapter 12, is one of the greatest figures of the Sant tradition; his thought has many similarities to that of Nānak. Ravidās, whose work is noted in the same chapter, was also a Sant. A modern Sikh scholar, Gurbachan Singh Talib, some of whose translations are given below, summed up the relationship between Sikhism and Hinduism by declaring that "the entire vocabulary and philosophic terminology of the Sikh faith stems from Hindu sources." 4

Nānak's great achievement was to use this vocabulary to express concepts that were often at variance with their usage in the old tradition.

The Sufis of the Islamic tradition shared many characteristics with the Sikhs, but this is probably not the result of Sufi influence on the Sikhs, but because both were addressing the same kinds of audiences living in the same cultural milieu. It is the totality of the cultural setting that we should keep in mind when looking at the development of Sikhism or indeed of most Indian religious movements. As was suggested in Part Three, through the centuries an Indian culture had been created of which the various religious traditions—Brahmanism, Jainism, Buddhism, and the bhakti movements—were all part, sharing common assumptions and attitudes. It was because Sikhism was able to accommodate itself to Indian culture that it had such widespread acceptance and influence.

To place Nānak in the context of an existing tradition is not in any way to lessen his importance as one of the great figures of India, for, unlike
Kabir and the other leaders of the Sant tradition, out of his teachings came an enduring religious community with a distinctive history—separate from both the Hindu and the Islamic communities, but always in close social contact with them. The story of Nanak’s life illustrates how much he was a part of the turbulent, but creative, life of India at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries. Like that of all great religious innovators in India and elsewhere, Nanak’s life is surrounded by stories that are part of the heritage of believers and that have the didactic and religious function of strengthening faith. This hagiographic literature is known as the janam-sakhis, a recording of stories to serve the needs of later generations. They are “a response to remembered greatness,” both the creation and the creator of the living community. History, as it is understood by someone guided by the canons of modern historical research, tends to question the authenticity of many of the events of hagiographic literature, but the main outlines of Nanak’s career can be established with a fair degree of certainty. For example, one of his songs describes the devastation caused by the invasion of the Punjab by Babur, the first Mughal emperor, how “the Messenger of Death,” hacked princes into pieces and trampled them into the dust.” As a young man Nanak was employed as an accountant by the Muslim governor in the town of Sultanpur, and it was there that he had the mystical experience that changed his life. He believed that God had called him to go out and teach people to praise His name and to live a life of prayer and service. Nanak then began the life of pilgrimage that is detailed in the janam-sakhis, but he finally returned to the Punjab, where he established the village of Kartarpur for the disciples who had gathered around him. He died there in 1539.

Of the three fundamental elements that help to explain the endurance of Sikhism two were present from this formative period. One is the teaching of Nanak, which is the core of the Sikh scripture, the Adi Granth. The other is his institution of the office of guru as his successor. The third fundamental aspect of Sikhism, the Khalsa, the brotherhood, was not formalized until the beginning of the eighteenth century, but it, too, is consistent with the teaching and practices of Nanak.

Illustrations of the teachings of Nanak are given in the selections that follow. Nanak’s teachings emphasize that behind all existence is God, for whom he often uses the word “ek,” meaning the numeral one. God is absolute sovereign, eternal and unchanging. Man is separated from God by sinfulness and ignorance but through God’s grace can be joined to Him in mystical union. For Nanak, the pathway to God is through man’s soul; there is no place for rituals, idols, priests, pilgrimages, ascetic practices, caste, temples, mosques, or any of the other aids to salvation used by other religions, whether Muslim or Hindu. Three closely related concepts are of great importance in Nanak’s thought for this process of union with God. One is the Word (śabda), the revelation of God through a spoken word. Almost synonymous with this is his emphasis on the Name (nām) of God, for it is through meditation on the Word, the name of God, that one finds salvation. It is here that one sees the central importance in Sikhism to the third concept, that of the Guru, the teacher, the one who gives knowledge of the Word and Name. The Guru is also in some sense the Word himself, the voice of God. The guru is of great importance in all aspects of the Hindu tradition, but for Nanak and the Sikhs it has a very special place. Nanak himself, of course, the original guru for his followers, and his great innovation was to appoint a successor to himself before his death in 1539. His choice was not one of his own sons, but a follower to whom he gave the name “Angad” (1539–1552). This was the crucial step in the history of Sikhism, for it was the line of gurus that ensured the preservation of Nanak’s teaching and the formation of the Sikh community.

THE LATER GURUS AND THE SIKH COMMUNITY

There were ten gurus in all, and the evolution of the Sikh from a small body of devotees, little different from numerous other religious sects that have appeared throughout Indian history, into the striking Sikh community of the present time is to a considerable extent the product of the institution of the guru. Angad, the second guru, is credited by Sikhs with devising a special script, Gurmukhi, for Sikh writings, and for having stressed the idea of the langar, or free kitchen, where all can eat together, contrary to the usual Hindu custom. The third guru, Amar Dās (1532–1574), furthered this process of distinctive customs by establishing birth, marriage, and funeral customs. The fourth guru, Rām Dās (1574–1581), laid the foundations for a center of pilgrimage to his residence in the village that became known as Anandpur, the site of the Golden Temple. Arjan (1581–1606), the fifth guru, made an even more notable contribution by compiling the Adi Granth, the sacred text of Sikhism. It consists of the hymns of Guru Nanak and of the first five gurus as well as poems by great earlier bhakti
singers such as Kabir and Ravidas (see chapter 12). The Adi Granth is central to Sikhism.

A great change took place during the period of Guru Arjan, when the Sikhs came into conflict with the Mughal rulers. The details are obscure, but it seems that in 1606 Prince Khurram rebelled against his father, the emperor Jahangir, and Arjan was suspected of having helped him. According to Jahangir’s own account, Arjan had become a popular “religious and worldly leader. . . . And crowds of fools would come to him from all directions. . . . The thought had been presenting itself to my mind that either I should put an end to this false traffic, or he should be brought into the fold of Islam.” Arjan had indeed become both a “religious and a worldly leader,” and the combination of the two made him dangerous to the central authority of the Mughals, especially when he was in alliance with a rebel prince. He was arrested in Lahore and died while being tortured. His death, however, did not break either the military or spiritual power of the Sikhs, and his son, Hargobind (1606–1644), the sixth guru, made Anandpur a center of Sikh military power. There was an increasing emphasis on the glory of martyrdom, which was understood, not at all in the sense of the Christian martyrs who accepted death passively for their faith, but rather as a willingness to fight to the death. Hargobind had many clashes with the imperial forces but managed to survive and pass on the office of guru to Har Rai (1644–1661). The eighth guru, Hari Krishna (1661–1664), died when he was still a boy. Tegh Bahadur (1664–1675), the ninth guru, was in frequent conflict with the Mughal authorities. Brought to Delhi, he was executed in 1675.

Gobind Singh (1675–1708), Tegh Bahadur’s son, was the tenth and last guru. According to Sikh tradition, he completed the transformation of a religious community into a militant brotherhood, waging war against the Emperor Aurangzeb (see chapter 14), the Sikhs’ implacable foe, who as a Muslim persecuted them on religious grounds. At this point, one has to remember that Muslim historians then and now read the story very differently. For them, Gobind Singh was a powerful warlord, bent on establishing his own kingdom in the heart of the empire, while Aurangzeb was fighting desperately on many fronts to preserve its integrity. The bare facts are much the same in both versions; the differences in interpretation come from the angle of vision produced by faith and historical experience. It is important not to read back the twentieth century’s emphasis on religious differences into the quarrel between the Sikhs and the Mughal emperor. Aurangzeb was a pious, orthodox Muslim, but he was also fighting to protect the empire from external and internal foes who might be either Hindu or Muslim. Gobind Singh and his followers were fighting for political power, but they identified their fight with their religious brotherhood and saw the continuance of their religious faith dependent, in modern terms, upon a measure of autonomy from the Mughal central authority. It was as easy for Aurangzeb to see the Sikhs’ political turbulence as rooted in their sectarian religious faith as it was for Gobind Singh to identify Aurangzeb’s concern for the territorial integrity of the empire with Islamic fanaticism.

According to the Sikh tradition, the great central event in the formation of their community took place in 1699 when Gobind Singh created the Khalsa, the brotherhood of all true Sikh believers. Although the historicity of some of the details of the event is disputed by modern historians, there can be no question of the centrality of the event for believers. Both the facts and the significance of the founding of the Khalsa are reasonably clear. Gobind Singh must have seen that what was needed to maintain cohesion within the community were powerful symbols that spoke of its unity, an organization that would prevent internal divisions, and a spiritual authority. The solutions to these problems were found not so much in radical new departures as in the transformation of elements from the past.

Those who wished to show allegiance to the brotherhood took part in a ceremony that became a central act of witness, somewhat comparable to the Christian ceremony of baptism. The actual details of the ceremony probably evolved throughout the next century, but they are usually ascribed to Gobind Singh. First, the initiates drink from a common bowl of sweetened water that had been stirred with a steel dagger. This act is understood as a denial of all the prohibitions against eating with other castes. The use of the dagger is perhaps a reference to the need to be strong in order to make war against the enemies of the faith, for a characteristic name of God for Gobind Singh is “All-Steel” (sarab-loh). All the believers are then given a common name, “Singh,” meaning “lion,” showing that they all belong to one family. The male believers proclaim their membership in the Khalsa by wearing conspicuous symbols, the five K’s: uncut hair (kes), a comb (kangha), shorts (kach), a steel bracelet (kara) and steel dagger (katar). Sikh theologians are vague about the exact meaning of these symbols, but presumably their function was to emphasize the unity, cohesion, and separateness of the brotherhood.

The other great innovation ascribed to Gobind Singh is that before his
death he pronounced the end of the line of succession of gurus and declared that henceforth the function of the guru as teacher and final authority for faith and conduct was vested in the community and in the scriptures, the Ādi Granth. It became known as the Guru Granth Sahib, occupying the same place in Sikh veneration that was given to the living gurus. It is at the heart of Sikh worship, and its presence is what lends sanctity to the Sikh place of worship, the gurdwāra. The book itself is not worshiped, as an idol might be; Sikhs say they give reverence to it as the Word. An important consequence of making the Ādi Granth the guru was that it ended dissension about the succession, which had been a frequent cause of quarrels.

Throughout the eighteenth century and up to the present time, the three fundamental aspects of Sikhism—the teaching, the Ādi Granth as guru, and the Khālsa—have reinforced each other. At the very end of the eighteenth century, Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), a Sikh leader, succeeded in creating a kingdom in the Punjab as the Mughal empire disintegrated. With his capital at Lahore, he built up a very powerful modern army, but his successors were not able to withstand the increasing pressures from the British, who annexed the Punjab in 1850. During the great uprising by both Hindu and Muslim leaders against the British in 1857, the Sikh chieftains assisted the British with troops. As a result, the British recruited many Sikhs into the army, regarding them among the chief of what became known as the "martial races." An order of the commander-in-chief expresses the official British attitude toward the Sikhs: "Every countenance and encouragement is to be given to their comparative freedom from the bigoted prejudices of caste, every means adopted to preserve intact the distinctive characteristics of their race, their peculiar conventions and social customs." During the partition of India in 1947, the Sikhs who lived in the part of Punjab that went to Pakistan left their lands and fled to the Indian side, where they became one of the most prosperous groups in the country. Their fierce insistence, however, on what the British had called "their peculiar conventions and social customs" showed itself in a demand by militants for greater political autonomy. This led the Indian government to send the army into the Golden Temple at Amritsar against a group using it as a base for defying the government. The militants spoke of their intention to fight to the death in much the same way Sikhs had in the seventeenth century when they were fighting Aurangzeb.

The Ādi Granth and Janam-Sākhīs

The teachings of Nānak (1469–1539), as found in the Ādi Granth, constitute the central core of Sikh belief, and for Sikhs the summary of their faith is contained in the Jāpī, the thirty-eight short poems of Nānak that stand at the beginning of the Ādi Granth. These poems are songs or hymns, associated with particular musical modes. Most of the following selections are from the Jāpī, with a few from Nānak's contributions to other parts of the Ādi Granth. An attempt has been made to select passages that reflect different emphases in Nānak's teaching, but each poem may, of course, have references to a number of his ideas and concepts.

Mūl Mantra: The Basic Statement

Before the Jāpī, at the very beginning of the Ādi Granth, its compiler, Guru Arjan, placed the Mūl Mantra, or basic formula. It is not a creed so much as an incantation, a recitation of the attributes that give meaning to the concept translated by the English word "God." The text begins with the numeral, not the word, 1; this is an assertion of the unity of God, but is not the same as the One of the Vedanta (see chapter 11).

[From Mūl Mantra, Ādi Granth]

One, True Name, Creator, Without Fear, Without Hate, Beyond Time, Unborn, Self-existent, The Guru's Gift of Grace.

The Great Question: How Is Truth to Be Found?

[Jāpī, 1, Ādi Granth, trans. by Gurbachan Singh Talib, Jāpī, p. 39]

Rural purification, though done a million times, may not purify the mind; Nor may absorption in trance silence it, however long and continuous. The possession of the world will not quench the rage of greed and hunger; A hundred thousand feats of intellect will not bring Liberation. How then is Truth to be attained? How is the veil of illusion to be destroyed?
Nānak says, through obedience to the Divine Order, which is written in your heart.

The Divine Order

One of Nānak's characteristic words is “hukam,” meaning “will,” “command,” or “order.” As in some varieties of Western religions, it seems to imply predestination while allowing for free will and divine grace. Two translations of the same poem are given to suggest ways of interpreting the concept.


The Hukam is beyond describing, [but this much we can understand] that all forms were created by the Hukam, life was created through the Hukam, greatness is imparted in accordance with the Hukam. Distinctions between what is exalted and what is lowly are the result of the Hukam, and in accordance with it suffering comes to some and joy to others. Through the Hukam one receives blessing and another is condemned to everlasting transmigration. All are within the Hukam; none is beyond its authority. Nānak, if anyone comprehends the Hukam, his self-centeredness is purged.

[Jaṭī, 2, Ādi Granth, trans. by John S. Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer]

By order shapes take shape—
An order that cannot be uttered—
By order creatures live;
By order each finds its status;
By order high or low;
By order is written joy or sadness.
By order some are given alms;
By order others ever wander.
Under that order is all that is;
Beyond that order, nothing.
Nānak says to understand that order
Is to say goodbye to “I.”

Human Nature

Human beings are separated from God by their actions, which are rooted in what Nānak calls “karma,” for which the best translation seems to be “self-centeredness,” which has some of the meaning of such concepts as pride and sin. It is this addiction to evil that produces the karma that leads to endless rebirths. In the following poem Nānak pictures how evil the world is because of man's nature. The translation attempts to follow the form of the original.

[Jaṭī, 18, Ādi Granth, trans. by Talib, Jaṭī, pp. 49–50]

Innumerable are the blind fools, sunk in folly;
Innumerable those living on thieviness and dishonesty.
Innumerable the tyrants ruling by brute force;
Innumerable the violent cutthroats and murderers;
Innumerable those revolving in their own falsehood;
Innumerable the polluted living on filth.
Innumerable the slanderers bearing on their heads their loads of sin.
The sinner Nānak thus enumerates the evil-doers,
Who are unworthy ever once to be made a sacrifice to You.
All that You will is good, Formless One, abiding in Your peace.

The Name and the Word

Two concepts that Nānak uses very frequently are Name (nām) and Word (śabād), which in practice seem to convey much the same meaning. It is through the Name and listening to the Word that God reveals himself to human beings, and therefore devotion comes through hearing and knowing the Name and repeating the Name. What is meant is not just physically hearing or mechanical repetition, but an inner response in the soul. “Listening” becomes a creative activity.

[Jaṭī, 9, Ādi Granth, trans. by Talib, Jaṭī, p. 44]

By listening to the Word,
The seeker becomes equal to Shiva, Brahma, and Indra;
By listening to the Word,
The seeker becomes praiseworthy;
By listening to the Word,
One learns the secrets of Yoga;
By listening to the Word,
One learns the wisdom of the Shāstra, the Smriti, and the Veda;
Nānak says: Devotees find bliss,
By listening to the Word, sorrow and sin are destroyed.
The Guru

One of the most important, yet at the same time most difficult, concepts of Sikhism is that of the guru. The term is a very common one in all varieties of the Indian tradition for a spiritual guide or teacher, but for Nanak, however, the guru of whom he speaks is not a human figure at all, but the voice of God speaking through someone. The guru is also identified with the Name and the Word. The Sikh gurus were careful to prevent worship being offered to them; as Gobind Singh, the last of the gurus, put it, "The True Guru is God. Do not believe that He is the form of a man."

[Sri Rāgū, 9, Adi Granth, trans. by McLeod, Gūrū Nānak, pp. 197–98]

The Guru is the ladder, the dinghy, the raft by means of which one reaches God;
The Guru is the lake, the ocean, the boat, the sacred place of pilgrimage, the river.
If it please Thee I am cleansed by bathing in the Lake of Truth.

[Var maṅkh pauri 25, trans. by J.S.H. and M.J.]

If the True Guru is gracious
trust becomes complete.
If the True Guru is gracious
never one ever yearns.
If the True Guru is gracious
trouble is a thing unknown.
If the True Guru is gracious
God's pleasure is acclaimed.
If the True Guru is gracious
how could there be fear of death?
If the True Guru is gracious
lasting happiness is granted.
If the True Guru is gracious
one finds life's greatest treasures.
If the True Guru is gracious
one mingles with the Truth.

The Uselessness of Caste, Ceremonies, and All Externals

It is in the light of these teachings that we must see Nanak's attitude toward caste, religious ceremonies, and idolatry. He denounced caste, both because it stood for...
social inequality and because it made people depend for salvation on something that could not help them. All the apparatus of religion—pilgrimages, ritual bathing, priests, dietary laws—give people false hope, when nothing can save them but knowledge of the Name.


They who read (scriptures) continually and forget (their spiritual duty) suffer the punishment (of spiritual death). For all their wisdom they continue to transmigrate.

They who remember the Name and make fear (of God) their (spiritual) food—such servants, with the Guru's aid, dwell in union (with their Master).

If the Mind is unclean how can it be purified by worshipping stones, visiting places of pilgrimage, living in jungles, wandering around as ascetics. He who is united with the True One, he it is who acquires (eternal) honor.

One may have a hand-written copy of the eighteen Purānas and be able to recite the four Vedas by heart, one may bathe on auspicious days, give to each according to the rules prescribed for each caste, fast and observe regulations day and night; one may be a qā却又, a mullah, or a sheikh, a jāngam, or one wearing ochre robes; one may be a householder and live accordingly, but without the understanding (which comes from meditation upon the Name) all are bound and driven off (to the abode of Yam).

Caste and status are futile, for the One watches over all. If anyone exalts himself the true measure of his dignity will be revealed when his record is produced.

Stories about Nānak

Stories about the life of Guru Nānak known as janam-sākhis played an important part in giving his followers a sense of community, of being in possession of a special truth that differentiated them from others. The stories of the kind presented here teach moral lessons, but the center of attention is clearly the Guru himself at the person who was the heart of the community. The three stories given here refer to Mardanā, Nānak's Muslim disciple and companion. The reference in the third section is probably to the destruction—witnessed by Nānak—of the town of Sāndpur by Bābur, the first Mughal emperor.

[From Purātan janam-sākhī, trans. by McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition, pp. 84–85]

The hospitable village unmolested and the hospitable village dispersed

They departed from there and proceeding on their way they came to a village. They stopped there, but no one would give them shelter. Instead the inhabitants jeered at them. They moved on to the next town where they were warmly welcomed. Spending the night there they departed the next day. As they were leaving the Guru declared, 'May this town be uprooted and its inhabitants scattered.'

'This is strange justice,' observed Mardanā. 'The place where we received hospitality you left alone, and the town which welcomed us so warmly you have uprooted.'

'Mardanā,' replied the Guru, 'the inhabitants of the first town would go another and corrupt it. When the inhabitants of this town go to another they will bring it truth and salvation.'

Sheikh Bājid

On the road Bābā Nānak and Mardanā met Sheikh Bājid Sayyid riding in a litter carried by six bearers. The Sheikh alighted beneath a tree and his bearers began to massage and fan him.

'Is there not one God?' asked Mardanā.

'God is indeed one, Mardanā,' replied Bābā Nānak.

'Then who created him, my Lord?' asked Mardanā. 'Who created the one who rides in a palanquin whilst these others are barefoot and their bodies naked? They bear him on their backs, whereas he reclines and is massaged.'

Bābā Nānak answered him, 'All who enter the world come naked from the womb. Joy and pain come in accordance with the deeds of one's previous existence.'

Mardanā prostrated himself.
BABAナンAK EXPLAINS THE DESTRUCTION OF SAIDPUR

One day Mardānā asked, ‘Why have so many been slain when only one did wrong?’
‘Go and sleep under that tree, Mardānā,’ answered the Guru. ‘When you get up I shall give you an answer.’
And so Mardānā went and slept there. Now a drop of grease had fallen on his chest while he was eating and while he was sleeping it attracted ants. One ant happened to disturb the sleeping Mardānā who responded by wiping them all away with his hand.
‘What have you done, Mardānā?’ asked Bābā Nānak.
‘All have died because one disturbed me,’ exclaimed Mardānā.
Bābā Nānak laughed and said, ‘Mardānā, thus does death come to man because of one.’

Gobind Singh: The Last Guru

Gobind Singh (1666–1708) became the tenth and last guru when his father, Tegh Bahādur, was executed by the Emperor Aurangzeb in 1675. None of his own compositions are in the Adi Granth, but they were collected in what is known as the Dasam Granth. One of these compositions is the Safarnāma (Epistle of victory), in which Gobind Singh reminded Aurangzeb of the fate of tyrants. It includes a reference to the death of his four sons, two of whom were killed in battle and two of whom were executed. The Mughals were not the only enemies of the Sikhs; they were attacked also by the other chieftains in the Himalayas, who resented their power.

The second selection, from Gobind Singh’s Safarnāma, shows the identification of the weapons of war with God and of the need to fight to preserve righteousness.

The emphasis on war and the martial virtues in the Sikh tradition is not alien to Hindu civilization; the Kshatriyas, the Hindu warrior class, have traditionally had an honored place in the social order. Gobind Singh may also have been influenced in the Himalayas, where he spent much of his life, by the dominance of the worship of Chandī, the fierce, warlike form of the Great Goddess (see chapter 11).

[Safarnāma, trans. by Talib, The Impact of Guru Gobind Singh, p. 141]

What could forlorn famished men do,
When surprised in assault by thousands?
They came after breaking a solemn oath,
Attacking with swords, arrows, and matchlocks.

So forced, I took the field,
And replied with a rain of arrow and shot.
When all other resources are rendered unavailing,
It is justified then to unsheathe the sword.

Strive the way you keep your promises—
One should consider it evil to swerve from the truth.
Do not wield the sword in ruthless bloodshed;
Heaven’s sword shall one day strike you too.

Man, do not be unmindful of the terrible retribution of the Lord,
Who is without desire and does not need man’s gratitude.

He is the King of Kings—without fear.
The True King of the universe and All Time.
He is God, the Lord of the earth and the ages,
Creator of the universe and all that is in it.

He has created the little ant as well as the mighty elephant.
He cherishes the humble and destroys oppressors.
He bears the name—Cherisher of the Humble;
He does not need man’s gratitude or his offerings.

What though my four children have been killed—
Living still is the coiled serpent.

What bravery is this that you extinguish sparks of fire,
But raise a vast conflagration!

[From Safarnāma, p. 142]

In the name of the Lord of the Sword and the Axe,
The Lord of the Arrow, the Spear and the Shield.

In the name of Him who is the God of warriors,
And of horses swift as the wind.
He who gave to you kingship,
Gave to us the wealth of faith in righteousness.
Yours is aggression by guile and deceit;
Mine is to seek redress by truth and sincerity.

NOTES

1 W. H. McLeod, The Evolution of the Sikh Community, p. 2; see also his Guru Nānak and the Sikh Religion. Many of the interpretations in this chapter are based on McLeod’s seminal studies.