

## **Sikhism and the Arts**

### **Introduction**

For one to understand the relationship between Sikhism and the arts, one must understand the basic principles and concepts of the faith.

Sikhism is a very young religion, which teaches that religious devotion should be done in an every day context. Sikhs focus their lives around their relationship with God, and being part of a community. The Sikh ideal combines action and belief. To live a good life a person should do good deeds as well as meditating centered on the relationship with God.

The core beliefs of Sikhism are:

- the belief in one God. The opening sentence of the Sikh scriptures is only two words long, and reflects the base belief of all who adhere to the teachings of the religion: Ek Onkar meaning one God.
- the teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus (as well as other accepted Muslim and Hindu scholars) as enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib.

The Guru Granth Sahib is a sacred text considered by Sikhs to be their eleventh and final Guru. Sikhism was influenced by reform movements in Hinduism as well as Sufi Islam.

It departs from some of the social traditions and structure of Hinduism and Islam (such as the caste system and purdah, respectively). Sikh philosophy is characterised by logic, comprehensiveness, and a "without frills" approach to both spiritual and material concerns. Its theology is marked by simplicity.

### **Primary beliefs and principles**

Sikhism advocates the belief in one God (Ek Onkar) who is omnipresent and has infinite qualities. Sikhs do not have a gender for God nor do they believe God takes a human form. All human beings are considered equal regardless of their religion, sex or race. All are sons and daughters of Waheguru, the Almighty.

Followers of Sikhism are encouraged to wake in the early morning hours, before the sun has risen, and meditate on God's name. They must work hard and honestly and never live off of others, but give to others from the fruits of one's own labour. A Sikh's home should always be open to all.

Sikhs believe in the concept of reincarnation, yet other beliefs of the afterlife are also accepted. All creatures are believed to have souls that pass to other bodies upon death until liberation is achieved. Sikhs should defend, safeguard, and fight for the rights of all creatures, and in particular fellow human beings.

They are encouraged to have a "Chardi Kala" or positive, optimistic and buoyant view of life. The Sikh religion is not considered the only way to salvation - people of other religions may also achieve salvation. This concept is shared with other Dharmic religions. Upon baptism, Sikhs must wear the 5Ks and strictly recite the 5 prayers. Sikhs do not believe that any particular day is holier than any other and generally adopt the religious day of the country within which they reside. It is every Sikh's duty to defeat these five vices: ego, anger, greed, attachment, and lust. Sikhs are encouraged to 'attack' these vices with contentment, charity, kindness, positive attitude and humility.

### **Underlying values**

The Sikhs must believe in the following values:

- *Equality*: All humans are equal before God.
- *God's spirit*: All creatures have God's spirits and must be properly respected.
- *Personal right*: Every person has a right to life but this right is restricted.
- *Actions count*: Salvation is obtained by one's actions, including good deeds, remembrance of God, etc.
- *Living a family life*: Must live as a family unit to provide and nurture children.
- *Sharing*: It is encouraged to share and give to charity 10 percent of one's net earnings.
- *Accept God's will*: Develop your personality so that you recognize happy events and miserable events as one.
- *The four fruits of life*: Truth, contentment, contemplation and Naam, (in the name of God).

### **Prohibited behavior**

- *Non-logical behavior*: Superstitions and rituals are not meaningful to Sikhs (pilgrimages, fasting, bathing in rivers, circumcision, worship of graves, idols or pictures, compulsory wearing of the veil for women, etc.).
- *Material obsession*: ("Maya") Accumulation of materials has no meaning in Sikhism. Wealth such as gold, portfolio, stocks, commodities, and properties will all be left here on Earth when you depart. Do not get attached to them.
- *Sacrifice of creatures*: (Sati). Widows throwing themselves in the funeral pyre of their husbands, lamb and calf slaughter to celebrate holy occasions, etc. are forbidden.
- *Non-family oriented living*: A Sikh is not allowed to live as a recluse, beggar, yogi, monk, nun, or celibate.
- *Worthless talk*: Bragging, gossip, lying, etc. are not permitted.

- *Intoxication*: Alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and consumption of other intoxicants is not permitted.
- *Priestly class*: Sikhs do not have to depend on a priest for performing any religious functions. They are not supposed to follow a class/caste system where the priestly class reigns highest. Everyone is equal.

### **Technique and methods**

- *Naam Japna*: - meditation and prayer on the Name of God in Sikhism, which is "Waheguru", it is also called the 'Gur-Manter'. Naam Japna is the repetition of this name.
- *Kirat Karni*: - Honest earnings, labor, etc. while remembering the Lord.
- *Wand kay Shako*: - Share with others in need, free food (langar), donate 10% of income Daasvand, etc.

### **Other observations**

- *No Son of God*: The Gurus were not in the Christian sense "Sons of God". Sikhism says all humans are the children of God, and by deduction, God is mother/father.
- *All are welcome*: Members of all religions may visit Sikh temples (Gurdwaras), but must observe certain rules: cover the head, remove shoes, no smoking or drinking intoxicants inside, and visitors must not be under the influence of any drugs, especially alcohol.
- *Multi-level approach*: Sikhism recognises the concept of a multi-level approach to achieving one's target as a disciple of the faith. For example, "Sahajdhari" (slow adopters) are Sikhs who have not donned the full 5Ks but are still Sikhs nevertheless.

Based on this introduction, all art forms are acceptable as long as they follow the above.

The following paper will look at various art forms and the Sikh viewpoint on the arts in the context of the birthplace of the religion, Punjab, a colourful and dynamic state of India, steeped in a very rich history, heritage and culture.

## Dance

Sikhism applies the general test mentioned in the Scripture to any entertainment, namely,

***"Avoid that which causes pain or harm to the body or produces evil thoughts in the mind." (A.G.p 16)***

Cultural dances like Bhangra, Gidda, Tiranjan etc. are not forbidden, but these should not be performed in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib. Bhangra is a cultural art form that is practiced and appreciated by people of various religious backgrounds. Bhangra describes a form of dance and music that originated in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan many centuries ago. The people of Punjab belong to many religious groups, but the majority of them are Sikh, Hindu and Muslim. Confusion may arise because many artists that perform mainstream Bhangra happen to be Sikh. However, there is no direct connection between Bhangra and the religion of Sikhism. Bhangra is cultural dance and music; Sikhism is a religion. Such dances are meant for social occasions or festivals and have no religious significance. What the Guru permitted was 'the dance of the mind', and not of the body. The Guru says:

***"O my mind, dance before the Guru;  
If you dance according to the will of the Guru  
You will gain happiness, and the fear of death will vanish." (AG,p 506) .***

This kind of dance is the result of spiritual ecstasy, and is free from physical jerking and gymnastics. Dances purely for the promotion of physical health or fitness are not taboo such as bharat natium or kathak.

It is worth mentioning that the mirasis were not only musicians and singers but also dancers. (mirasis are still to be found in Punjab and they remain the custodians of the great folk traditions of Punjab.) While folk singers were welcome in the court of the Gurus, dancers were kept away. The Gurus had no use for dancers. This was partly because of the "carnal" ambience that surrounded dancing at that time in North India, and also because the hostile conditions dictated a need for warriors, not dancers. The absence of dance from Punjab's bhakti tradition is in marked contrast to what is seen in southern and eastern India where dance, as a devotional form, was not only permissible but also nurtured.

## Theatre

There are no rulings or prohibitions against theatre and plays in Sikhism as long as plays and theatre productions are in keeping with the boundaries of the Guru's tenets as listed above in the introduction. The uproar and outcry of the Sikh

community with reference to Behzti was not to stop freedom of speech but to protect the abuse of symbols representing Sikhism and sacred to the faith.

## **Music**

Music is a central part of Sikh worship as the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy text comprises over 5000 Shabhads or hymns that are poetically constructed for various different musical ragas.

Ragas function both as a description and prescription. They describe a generalized form of melodic practice and prescribe a set of rules for how to build a melody. These can be set to predetermined musical talas (rhythmic beats) and have a definitive message for the whole of humanity.

All Sikh hymns are sung. The singing of hymns and kirtans in an appropriate raga is considered as an essential part of the religion and the sole form of worship among the Sikhs.

Singing kirtan creates a shared community experience through repetition. Shabad kirtan, combines the bani, teachings of the gurus and saints, with sangeet, music. Elements of classical music, devotional music and folk music merge in this form which goes back to the advent of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, in the 15th century. This form of music is an intimate part of Sikh life from birth to death, holding sway over all life-events such as christenings, coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages and house-warming, celebrations of joyous events or gatherings where strength and guidance are sought in times of trouble or sorrow. This can be seen by the fact that all Sikh scriptures that have been written and set to music.

Quotes from Guru Granth Sahib regarding music:

- ***Music is an adornment of the tongue. (Guru V, Bilawal Raag)***
- ***That music and those songs are welcome through which the mind is concentrated on Him with ease. (Guru III, Bilawal Raag)***
- ***O, all good people, sing the Lord's glory. (Guru V, Bilawal Raag)***
- ***Some sang, but their minds did not enjoy, They sang in vain egotism. Those ones really sing, who love the Nam and contemplate the True Word. (Guru III, Gauri Raag)***
- ***Whoever has belief his singing bears fruit. He is honored in the Court of the Lord. (Guru IV, Suhi Raag)***
- ***That Raaga (Indian classical musical measure) is the noblest of all, my brother! By which the Lord resideth in the heart. (Guru IV, Shlokas)***

***(Kirtan - the devotional singing of sacred hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib, usually accompanied by instruments,***

**Bani** - term used by Sikhs to refer to works of the Gurus and other poets in the sacred text of Guru Granth Sahib,

**Ragas** - a term used in Indian classical music to refer to a series of five or more notes upon which a melody is based. The poetic works in the Guru Granth Sahib are categorized according to the raag in which they are sung,

**Sangeet** – means musical science,

**Shabad** – literally it means word, the 'revealed word' uttered by the Guru; a hymn or a verse from the Guru Granth Sahib)

## Literature

The poetry of the Gurus, apart from its mysticism and spiritual depth, throws light on their contemporary situation. It lays bare the corruption and degradation of the society of their time and stresses the need of social reform and economic uplift.

Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh both recommended a just and humane administration, to the then rulers of India. The hymns of the first five Gurus, the ninth and tenth Gurus, show an admirable use of the current figures of speech, apart from their metrical richness and sweetness. Imagery is used to simplify subtle thoughts and profound concepts. The images were taken from everyday life and common occurrence. The Gurus were keen lovers of nature and as such, have written glowing descriptions of panoramic beauty and the changes of season. Guru Nanak in Barah Mah (The Twelve Months) compares the monthly moods of nature to the inner conditions of man.

There is, however, no deliberate attempt to refine or embellish the language. Sublimity and idealism have been presented with such simplicity that even unlettered people can understand their importance. The hymns satisfy a longing for perfection and spiritual attainment. The poetry of the Gurus is valuable for both its sublime content and literary excellence. All these are written and recorded in The Guru Granth Sahib ji the greatest piece of Sikh literature containing both literary value and beauty.

## Festivals / Celebrations

Sikhs indulge in the traditional forms of art, song and dance for festivals and celebrations, which have been marked by the agricultural cycles and seasons of the Punjab, India. These universal occasions are given a Sikh character and meaning, Hindu festivals of Baisakhi and Diwali have acquired new meaning through association with particular events in Sikh history.

**Baisakhi** is a traditional harvest festival celebrated in the Punjab; it marks New Year's Day according to the ancient Indian calendar. This is also a key celebration for Sikhs as it marks Guru Gobind Singh's creation of Khalsa, (lit. 'Khalsa means pure), the Sikh brotherhood.

**Gurpurb** is a remembrance day both marking the birth or death of the Sikh Gurus and may be treated as a holy day and holiday. The four most recognised Gurpurbs include:

- The birth of Guru Nanak Dev
- The birth of Guru Gobind Singh
- The martyrdom of Guru Arjan
- The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur

**Diwali** means festival of lights. So in the evening, illuminations are done with Diwas (oil lamps made of clay) or candles and fire works held both in the Gurdwaras and in homes and businesses of the Sikhs. The Sikhs celebrate Diwali to express the joy at the return of the sixth Guru to Amritsar in 1620, after his release from Gwalior Jail.

**Holla Mohalla** an annual Sikh martial festival, Holla Mohalla is celebrated in the month of Phalguna (March), a day after Holi. Holla Mohalla is celebrated to reaffirm fraternity and brotherhood and reminding people of "valour and defence preparedness", concepts very dear to the Tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh. Recently, the Indian Government had accorded Holla Mohalla the status of a "National Festival".

**Maghi** is the occasion when Sikhs commemorate the sacrifice of forty Sikhs, who fought for Guru Gobind Singh Ji. Maghi falls on the 13th January, worldwide. Sikhs celebrate the Maghi with an end to end recital of the holy Guru Granth Sahib and religious rituals in all the Sikh Gurudwaras. On the eve of Maghi falls the common Indian festival called the Lohri when bonfires are lighted in Hindu homes and alms are also distributed.

## **Painting / Fine Art**

Sikhism rejects any form of idol worship including worship of pictures of the Gurus. Although some of the Gurus did pose for paintings, unfortunately none of these historical paintings have survived. Artists renditions are for inspirational purposes only and should not be regarded as objects of worship themselves. Sikh painting is primarily of portraiture. It deals with historical characters and historical events. Sikh portraiture developed from the political struggle and it is through understanding the roles which certain individuals played, that we can understand their significance in painting.

The Sikh school of painting is a distinct contribution to Indian art. The School originated in the days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who was a liberal patron of arts. He also employed artists who decorate and panel the Golden Temple, Amritsar.

## **Photography**

The enthusiastic and optimistic embracement of photography by the British Victorian age led to the introduction of photography in Punjab. This early use of photography in Punjab was used by the British to help feed the imagination of those in England, informing their curiosity and shaping their attitudes.

Photography is not banned in Sikhism but one must consider the context of what the reason and final use of the photographs are and if they are in keeping with the tenets of the Guru. With photography, film and any other form of documentation, the documenter must always be honest and display common courtesy and explain the reasons for what they are doing; thus allowing the subject to decide.

## **Crafts**

Punjab has a distinguished tradition, which its people regardless of religious beliefs have maintained in spite of the passage of time. This handicraft did not arise out of any pure artistic motive, but mainly to satisfy domestic necessity. Punjab being the beginning and root of the creation and establishment of Sikhism, Sikhism believes that every daily routine is affected with spiritual significance. A hymn by Guru Arjan states:

***“Liberation is attained while laughing, playing, dressing up, and eating”  
(A.G.p 522)***

Thus dyeing fabrics and stitching them, acts of dressing and applying make-up, working in a smithy or churning butter at home all symbolize complete devotion and attachment to God.

Textiles which include weaving, embroidery and needlework have been prominent in Punjab to make articles for daily use and are among the oldest

creations of human hands. Needle work of Punjab is unique; it has beautiful names because of its associations with beautiful aspects of life and the beautiful designs of forms and motifs that they defy enumeration. Phulkari, meaning flower work, is a spectacular style of embroidery peculiar to Punjab, and an essential part of everyday life. Almost every ceremony in which women participate is given a touch of additional colour and richness by the use of phulkari on account of its being considered auspicious. This embroidery lends itself to making large surfaces. The process is slow and laborious. The art is acquired with a great deal of effort. It has infinite patterns testifying to the creative ability of the needle-women, made up of vertical, horizontal designs. The total effect is that of floral magnificence. It is essentially a feminine craft and very domestic in all its essential features. It is an art because of harmonious colours.

Woodcarving and metal work are also ancient and popular crafts in Punjab. The woodwork of Punjab has been traditionally famous. The common use of metal objects in daily life necessitated the evolving of various products and techniques. Metal pots and utensils, objects like lamps and trumpets necessary for religious rituals and some decorative items like lamp shades etc are some of the items on which these artisans work on.

## **Marketing and Communications**

When asking the appropriate use of religiously significant signs, symbols and text in campaign material one must consider the following regarding the Sikhs.

A person gets from a symbol what he puts in it. It can be one man's comfort and inspiration as easily as another's jest and scorn. In the final analysis, symbols are an embodiment of history, not sentiment. By definition symbols and signs signify something else beyond themselves, yet a symbol participates in defining the reality to which it points. A flag is not a nation but a symbol of it and attests to the shared history and dignity of a nation. That is why good people will fight and die for a flag but not let it be desecrated; it becomes significantly more in worth than the price of the cloth from which it is cut. A symbol therefore, can't be easily replaced by another, or be subjected to scientific logic, nor can it be judged by the criteria of the marketplace. Symbols belonging to the Sikhs need to be respected with regards to their historical, cultural and religious significances not just as marketing or communication tools.

The most visible aspect of Sikh tradition and the most controversial are the external symbols. The Sikh with his external uniform and symbols is a Khalsa, a soldier in the army of God. This army created by Guru Gobind Singh was not made to rule over others or to shepherd a flock of sheep-like devotees, in this army of the Khalsa all followers were to join, all were to wear the uniform, and everyone was always on call. The 5 Ks are a category apart, and belong neither to the category of symbols, nor rituals. They are a distinct feature to Sikhism alone. Sikhism is distinct in many ways. For example, it is the only religion that:

- advocates assimilation of the message following contemplation, instead of blind faith;
- aims at spiritual growth without binding one to any superstition or myth;
- guides one to have direct communion with God;
- claims that liberation is possible during one's lifetime;
- expects one to be a saint and a soldier, simultaneously.

Guru Gobind Singh decorated and equipped his Khalsa in a manner that emanates Guru Nanak's ideology of submission to His Will, brotherhood of mankind, equality of man and woman, justice for the downtrodden, welfare of all mankind. And that is exactly what the Khalsa form stands for.

To serve well symbols must remain visible. A Sikh historically and now, declares his presence by this gift of his Guru. This is wholly consistent with the philosophic significance of a Sikh, and no matter how Sikhs change and what demands are placed upon them, as long as there are those who call themselves Sikhs, there will be long-haired Sikhs in the form that Guru Gobind Singh gave them. Therefore one must be sensitive when using symbols which represent Sikhs, any

mistake could lead to protests and confrontation to protect the significance of these symbols.

### **Venues and Access**

Sikhs are vegetarian and are against the use of intoxicating substance such as drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

Sikhs are required to pray three times a day, with the longest prayers early in the morning, shorter prayers in the evening, and the shortest prayer just before going to bed. Sikhs are expected to keep God in mind at all times. Sikhs can pray at any time and any place. The Sikh code of conduct lays down a stern discipline for the start of the day:

***"A Sikh should wake up in the ambrosial hours (three hours before the dawn), take a bath and, concentrating his/her thoughts on One Immortal Being, repeat the name Waheguru (Wondrous Destroyer of darkness)."***

Therefore event timings should be planned within normal sociable times and make provisions for non smoking, non-alcohol drinking vegetarian patrons. Also as Sikhs are believers and followers of a family unit and community to make provisions for families. Venues to consider that Sikhs try to avoid the five vices that make people self-centred, and build barriers against God in their lives;

***Lust, Covetousness and Greed, Attachment to things of this world, Anger, Pride***

This in mind, one must aim programmed events accordingly to the Sikhs.

### **Funding**

Sikhs follow the principle of earning an honest living. Since God is truth, a Sikh seeks to live honestly. This doesn't just mean avoiding crime; Sikhs avoid gambling, begging, or working in the alcohol or tobacco industries.

Therefore any funding obtained has to be within these and the tenets of the Gurus teachings. In many cases you will find Sikhs funding all if not significant amounts of the project themselves due to the fact they believe in literally, sharing one's earnings with others. Giving to charity and caring for others.

## **Websites**

There are many websites one can visit for further information the below are just a few:

- [www.religionfacts.com](http://www.religionfacts.com)
- [www.sikhiwiki.org](http://www.sikhiwiki.org)
- [www.indian-heritage.org](http://www.indian-heritage.org)
- [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)
- [www.info-sikh.com](http://www.info-sikh.com)