

Sikhism

While many of the world's major religions have been subjected to scholarly scrutiny, Sikhism, the world's fifth largest religion, was not brought into discussion on a global scale until quite recently. The book *Sikhism* by Doris Jakobsh is, therefore, a timely and welcome addition to the literature on world religions.

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IN A RAPIDLY GLOBALISING WORLD, world religions and their followers are confronted with a variety of challenges. Relocation of people, issues related with cultural values and practices and assertion of religious identities in the diasporas around the world, and the growing inter-connectedness between the home and abroad have rendered the articulation and practice of religions more complex than ever before. Internet and cyberspace have generated and made accessible an enormous amount of information of various sorts on religious ideas and practices. The online literature, mostly created in the diasporas by people far removed from places where their faiths originated, adds to the complexities in understanding the nature and characteristics of religions. Under such circumstances, studying religions in their historical political and economic contexts assumes considerable significance.

In the book, which is a part of the Dimensions of Asian Spirituality series of the University of Hawai'i Press, the author traces the origin and development of the Sikh religion from the fifteenth century to the present. She analyses the aspects of the Sikh religious tradition and social formation in India and abroad. The book underscores the heterogeneity of tradition and ideology within Sikhism and challenges the scholarship that views Sikhism as a homogeneous religion. The author says that the lived realities of the Sikhs in India are quite different from the representations of a homogeneous Sikhism in the literature.

Sikhism: ideologies and attributes

In a brief introduction, the author narrates how her interest in Sikhism developed and illustrates this by citing episodes from her personal encounters with Sikhism and the Sikh community in India. Her experiences of an ideologically and socially heterogeneous Sikh community and the harmonious relationship that existed among its various components as well as between them and the others, such as Hindus and Muslims, notwithstanding some occasional conflicts and clashes, forms the context of this study. The following six chapters deal with various sets of issues related with the Sikh religion and community.

Chapter one discusses the variety of written primary texts, highlights the richness of information they contain, and also questions the reliability of some primary texts, such as *janamsakhis* or the collections of hagiographic anecdotes on the lives of the gurus, as sources for historical reconstruction of the Sikh religion and community. The author, nevertheless, makes use of this genre of primary texts. In chapter two, the author describes the historical development of Sikhism in India from the time of Guru Nanak to the present day and underscores certain institutional changes that took place over the period of time. The author shows how various branches of Sikhism evolved from a creed based on love and devotion to the formless *Akal Purakh* (eternal being) to the Sikh *Khalsa* with militaristic attributes and emphasis on five Ks (*kesh*: uncut hair; *kangha*: comb; *kachh*: short breeches; *kara*: steel bracelet; and *kirpan*: dagger) as markers of Sikh identity. The author also discusses the internal contestations and the ensuing development of various sects and sub-sects within Sikhism.

In chapter three, the author discusses Sikh beliefs, institutions, and rituals that govern human lives from birth to death and cremation. Monotheism is central to Sikh philosophy and obtaining liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth is the ultimate objective of every Sikh no matter which school of thought he or she belonged to. The gurus prescribed a direct path of liberation through the discipline of *nam simran*. Like Hinduism, in the Sikh philosophy/mythology human life is divided into five stages. The gurus, especially Nanak, emphasized that the salvation is to be achieved while living the life of a householder and not of an ascetic. Gurdwara played a significant role in the daily lives of the Sikhs and it was central to the religious, social, and even political activities. Attempts were also made in the early twentieth century to organize and control the gurdwaras through the institutions of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and Shiromani Akali Dal (political outfits) and much emphasis was given to initiation into the Khalsa order and the maintenance of Sikh identity.

The author then turns to examine the norms of society in chapter four. The issues of equality so central to Sikh teachings are analysed with particular reference to gender and caste roles. The author highlights the ambiguity with regard to the role of women in the development of Sikh tradition as well as their position in an otherwise egalitarian tradition. Caste, similarly, is an anathema to Sikhism. Despite all exhortations against the caste system, the Hindu caste rules such as endogamy and not

sharing meals with lower caste groups have somewhat continued in Sikhism until even today. The gurus, according to the author, opposed the spiritual ramifications of caste, but accepted it as a form of social organization. The Mazhabi (sweeper) and Ravidasi (skinners and tanners) Sikhs have experienced and continue to experience the worst prejudice and in many cases are not even permitted to enter the gurdwaras. Caste distinction continues to inform social hierarchies in the diasporic communities as well, and caste rules regarding marriage and meals are followed in the Sikh diasporas around the world.

In chapter five, the author examines the contexts and stages in the formation of Sikh diasporas in the UK, Canada, and the US. Here, she examines the challenges of migration in the performance of rituals and practices. Gurdwaras play a variegated role as a centre of communal worship, as schools for Punjabi language and religious learning, and as meeting places for elderly Sikhs, or women and youth groups.

A heterogeneous tradition

The diversity of Sikh religious tradition and multiplicity of sects within Sikhism are discussed in chapter six. Here the author describes the Nirankaris, who believed in the formless eternal being. They were critical of the Sikh Khalsa assuming the political character. The Namdhari Sikhs believed in the continuation of the guru lineage and embraced the Khalsa ideals as propounded by Guru Gobind Singh. They are strict vegetarians and do not consume alcohol. Besides these major groups, the author also briefly describes the belief system and practices of the Nihangs, Nanaksar Sikhs, and Akand Kirtani Jatha. The book concludes with a brief analysis of the nature of the Sikh tradition in the age of internet and the problems of representation of the religion in online media accessible to public.

Jakobsh' *Sikhism* is a major study of a world religion from a global perspective. It offers a fine analysis of the internal contestations within the Sikh religious tradition and offers a perspective that contradicts the view that considers Sikhism as a monolithic religion and Sikhs as an egalitarian homogenous community. The book has a strong message and will stimulate further investigation of its various ideological, social and political dimensions and, I am sure, it will be useful for both academic and students of world religions.

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Sikh-festival in
Southampton, UK
(courtesy of flickr)

