Chapter 4

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The present chapter deals with the multiplicity of beliefs and practices within the Sikh community. The British writings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well as the census reports depict the Sikhs as having several sects of varying numbers. The New Oxford Dictionary of English defines a sect as a group of people with somewhat different religious beliefs – typically regarded as heretical from those of a larger group to which they belong. The usage according to the dictionary is often derogatory, a group that has separated from an established church; a non-conformist Church. Sect is also used for philosophical or political group, especially one regarded as extreme or dangerous.¹ In the census reports of 1855 and 1868, no Sikh sects were mentioned. According to the census of 1881, 'The Sikhs like the Hindus, number among their ranks the representatives of numerous orders of ascetics or devotees. They have but small influence on the lives and beliefs of the people.'² Therefrom arises the need to identify these sects and understand their perceptions of the Sikh religion and the Sikh community. This is only possible if we look at the writings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century on the Sikhs to know the basic principles of Sikhism as understood by the people and how these sects differed from the mainstream in belief and practice in addition to what constituted Sikhism in the period immediately before the advent of the British in the Punjab.

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The writers on the Sikhs of the eighteenth century wrote for the people. The Gurbilas literature of this time, written in praise of the Gurus, insists on the end of personal Guruship after Guru Gobind Singh and the vesting of Guruship in the Khalsa and the Granth. Written in the mid-eighteenth century,
Koer Singh’s *Gurbilas Patshahi 10* says, the true Sikh regards the Granth as the Guru and has faith in Granth as the Guru. Kesar Singh Chhibber states that Guru Gobind Singh gave Guruship to Granth Sahib. Therefore, ‘the Granth Sahib is our Guru now’. The same position is taken by Sarup Das Bhalla, Sukha Singh and Ratan Singh Bhangu. All of these contemporary writers equate the Granth with the Adi Granth, believe in the ten Gurus and uphold the doctrines of Guru Granth and Guru Panth. By implication, a personal Guru is ruled out. These writers uphold the belief in Akal Purkh as the only God. However, they subscribe also to the view that Guru Gobind Singh invoked the mother goddess for instituting the Khalsa to destroy the Turks. Evidently, the goddess is not the supreme deity; she is closely linked with an event and invoked for a specific purpose: to sanctify the use of arms by the Khalsa.

The Var composed by Bhai Gurdas towards the end of the eighteenth century underlines the unity of God and the unity of Guruship, equates the Sikh with the Khalsa, and celebrates the establishment of Sikh rule. Not to belong to the Khalsa Panth is to be a non-Sikh. The author prays for the boon of the *Nam*, association with the *sangat*, eradication of *haumai*, capacity to accept God’s will (*hukam*), and attainment of liberation.

The Rahitnamas of the early eighteenth century relate primarily to the Sikh way of life and their emphasis, therefore, is on Sikh beliefs and practices. The doctrines of Guru Granth and Guru Panth are underlined by the Rahitnamas of the period, upholding the belief in ten Gurus and rejecting a personal Guru. Importance is given to the religious life of the Khalsa: the daily discipline of meditation, recitation of the *Gurban*, visit to the Gurdwara where *kirtan* and *katha* are held, and participation in congregational prayer. Most of the Rahitnamas tend to equate the Sikh with the Khalsa or the Singh. The term Sahajdhari is used only in the Chaupa Singh Rahitnama, which puts emphasis nonetheless on *kes*, *kirpan*, *kachh*, *kangha*, and *kara* at different places.
A Rahitnama compiled in this period lays down that the Khalsa should pay no heed to any god or goddess, any temple or image, any place of pilgrimage, fasting or religious vows; they should not make libation to gods, repeat the Gayatri or any other prayer; they should never wear a sacred thread or hold a shraddh; they should have nothing to do with a Brahman; they should not seek to become well versed in the Shastras.\textsuperscript{11}

The European observers in the late eighteenth century, generally talk of the Khalsa, equating the Sikh with the Singh and looking upon them as distinct from the Hindus and Muslims. The Khalsa never shaved their heads or beards, and they wore turbans generally of blue colour. They wore drawers (kachh) and iron bracelet (kara), and they wore arms. They ate all kinds of meat but never beef. They used bhang, opium and spirits but never tobacco.\textsuperscript{12}

The chronicles of the early nineteenth century when the Punjab was under Ranjit Singh, provide information on state patronage and religious practices of the rulers. The evidence of the \textit{Umdat ut-Tawarikh} underlines that the Maharaja and his successors showed utmost devotion to the Darbar Sahib and other sacred places in Amritsar.\textsuperscript{13} Revenue-free lands were confirmed or granted to persons and institutions of all religious systems: Sikh, Hindu and Muslim. The largest share went to the Sikh institutions and descendents of Guru Nanak and Guru Ram Das that is the Bedis and the Sodhis. Many of the Bedis and Sodhis however held jagirs, with the understanding that like all other jagirdars they too were to maintain troops, generally horsemen, for the service of the State. All the important Sikh rulers ‘served’ the Darbar Sahib at Amritsar with revenue-free lands and other contributions from time to time.\textsuperscript{14}

Ganesh Das refers to Amritsar as the foremost pilgrimage centre of the Sikhs with several sacred places: Harmandir Sahib, Dukh Bhanjani, Akal Bunga, Baba Atal, Bibeksar, Kaulsar, Ramsar and Santokhsar. He was thoroughly familiar with the rahit of the Khalsa and he makes a general statement about the contemporary Sikhs. The book which contained the compositions of Guru Nanak and his successors was called the Granth Sahib.
and the person who attended to it was the Bhai. At the beginning of every lunar month *karha parshad* was prepared in the *dharmsalas* and distributed after the prayer. The Sikhs meditated on God in accordance with the teachings of Guru Nanak. The Sikh of Ganesh Das is the Khalsa Singh.\(^{15}\)

Ram Sukh Rao provides far more detailed information on the rulers of Kapurthala, the successors of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. He creates the impression that it was a customary practice for both the rulers of Kapurthala and Maharaja Ranjit Singh to offer revenue-free land and cash to Sikh sacred places on all important occasions like birth, marriage, death, and coronation. Great regard was shown by both rulers to the descendants of Guru Nanak, the descendants of Guru Amar Das and the descendants of Guru Ram Das especially the Bedis of Una, the Bhalla Bawas of Goindval and the Sodhis of Anandpur. The Sodhis of Anandpur are referred to as ‘gurus’ and offerings were sent to all their four branches on all important occasions. Many of the Sodhis however were actually *jagirdars* and were treated as such. The attitude of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Fateh Singh Ahluwalia towards the Bedis was no different: they were treated with respect but not when it came to mundane matters. When it was so required the Maharaja did not hesitate to resume a certain territory after the death of Sahib Singh Bedi. The attitude of the Maharaja and Fateh Singh Ahluwalia towards the Akalis was very much similar: it was respectful but authoritative.\(^{16}\)

Fateh Singh Ahluwalia’s interest was not confined to the Sikh places of worship or the Sodhis, Bedis and the Akalis. He is said to have visited some Sufi shrines and along with the Maharaja Ranjit Singh he visited the temple at Jawalamukhi. Fateh Singh is presented as a great Vaishnava who got made temples at Kapurthala and Vrindavan, with adequate support for their maintenance. When as a prince he had suffered from small pox, his father, Raja Bhag Singh made arrangements for the worship of Sitala during his illness and also on his recovery. Brahmans were employed to conduct all rituals, and astrologers were consulted for auspicious moments. Customary charities were lavishly made.\(^{17}\)
The Khalsa Singhs were in numerical superiority in the Sikh community. The section of Singhs who laid claim to be the representatives of the Khalsa Panth were actually the Akalis, also called Nihangs. For the mainstream the belief in one God was central to Sikh faith and the Gurdwara was the most important institution for Sikh worship. The doctrine of Guru-Granth followed by that of Guru-Panth was the most important doctrine of the Sikhs in this period. The Granth meant the Adi Granth alone. The Rahitnamas were meant to propagate the norms of personal and social life among the Singhs. The state did not impose any restrictions on the religious beliefs and practices of the people. Their concern for Sikh institutions never decreased. Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s preference for the Khalsa Singh identity is evident from his insistence that the Sikhs who joined his army should be the baptized Khalsa. Even the non-Sikh functionaries of the state tended to wear turbans and keep flowing beards.¹⁸

It is important to note that though in their religious practices, the rulers ignored some of the norms of Sikhism, especially the negative ones, their example could be followed by the members of the ruling class. The respect shown to the Sodhis and Bedis did not place them outside the authority of the State and they were at par with the other jagirdars. The beliefs of the mainstream notwithstanding, the Sikh rulers can be seen visiting Sikh and non-Sikh places of worship and the performance of the rites of birth, marriage and death were carried out with the help of the Guru Granth or the Brahmans or both. In the same way although there was no scriptural or formal approval of the visit of a Singh to the shrines of Sitala, Gugga or Sakhi Sarvar the Sikh public can be seen doing so. Also, though the outcaste Singh was regarded as a part of the Sikh social order and a member of the Khalsa Panth, the Singhs with the caste background did not eat with the outcaste Singh outside the sacred space.

Therefore, it appears that a certain degree of difference between the Sikh norms and the Sikh practice was taking place. The Nirankari and the Namdhari movements indicate a reaction to departure from the teachings of
the Guru Granth and the importance given to Brahmans in Sikh social life, which were seriously objected to by some of the Sikhs themselves. They placed the Guru Granth Sahib at the centre of religious life and they had nothing to do with Brahmans for the performance of any ceremonies. In this respect they were close to the norms of the Rahitnamas though the movements were Sahajdhari. It is in this context that we take a look at the sects mentioned in the census reports. A quarter of a century later exclusive importance given to the Adi Granth and the Sikh rites of passage, coupled with Singh identity, would form the core of the Singh Sabha Movement.19

Cunningham, writing in 1849 leaves no doubt that he was actually counting the Singhs in estimating the number of Sikhs. In his account of the Sikhs, the Singhs figure prominently among the top most jagirdars of the kingdom of Lahore. Of the nearly two scores of Generals and Commanders in the army of Lahore before the first Anglo-Sikh war, a little more than half were Khalsa Singhs. More significantly the Sikhs who joined the army were Singhs. There was hardly any unit of cavalry, infantry or artillery which did not have Singh soldiers and Singh officers. Cunnigham equated the Sikh virtually with the Singh. Cunningham lists at least eighteen sects or denominations of the Sikhs in the 1840’s. All of these according to him were not ‘sects’. The Bedis, Trehans, Bhallas and Sodhis, the Rangretas, Ramdasis and Mazhabis, the Bhais and Gianis, and the Akalis and Nihangs did not form sects according to Cunningham. The Nimalas administered the pahul. A few groups had been excommunicated by Guru Gobind Singh or the Khalsa. The only ones left were the Suthra Shahis and the Udasis and of these the latter held the Adi Granth in reverence and were proud to be associated with the Sikhs but were essentially a ‘Hindu sect’. Cunningham was of the firm view that ‘the great development of the tenets of Guru Gobind has thrown other denominations into the shade’.20

II

In the late nineteenth century can be seen the beginning of the Nirankaris. Baba Dayal, the founder, did not seem to have departed
from the teachings of Guru Nanak and the Adi Granth played a central role in Nirankari ritual and teaching. At Rawalpindi, Baba Dayal conducted his religious discourses in the presence of the Adi-Granth and attracted a moderate number of followers. His successor, Baba Darbara Singh, further extended the sphere of his activities in the towns and villages outside Rawalpindi. During the time of the third successor Baba Ratta Ji, centers were founded in the districts like Ludhiana, Amritsar and Ferozepur. Baba Dayal continued his mission till his death in 1855. He was succeeded by his eldest son Darbara Singh and then in 1870 by his third son, Rattan Chand, known as Sahib Ratta Ji. The latter was succeeded by his son Gurdit Singh who died in 1947.

It was Baba Dayal’s belief that God is one and formless or Nirankar and salvation was to be attained through meditation on God. The term Nirankar means ‘the formless’, and was used by Guru Nanak to refer to God. Since Baba Dayal based his message on the teachings of Guru Nanak, in practice the worship of idols and saints was denounced. Quoting Guru Nanak, he stressed the futility of rituals and customs, rejected the Brahmanical orthodoxy, pertaining to the births and deaths and did not permit his followers to observe any ritual which would assimilate them to the Hindus. Opposition to the Nirankaris therefore came not from the Sikhs but from the Hindus due to the denial of the gods of the Hindu pantheon. The Nirankaris appear to have stood firmly within Sikh tradition from the outset. In the eyes of his contemporaries, Baba Dayal was an innovator in the area of religious ceremonies. According to Webster, Baba Dayal was a radical, if not an innovator and his aim seems to have been to bring Sikh ritual into conformity with Sikh teaching as found in the Adi Granth.

In the late nineteenth century by way of a Hukamnama issued by Baba Darbara (1855-1870), ‘innovations’ in the rahit or conduct were made mandatory for all Nirankaris and the beliefs, practices and ideas of the Nirankaris were codified. The Sikhs according to the
Hukamnama were straying from the path laid down by the Sikh Gurus by following Brahmanical rites.26 Addressing all the Sikhs, the Hukamnama referred to Baba Dayal as ‘Sri Satguru Dayal Ji’ and emphasized that he was commissioned by the ‘Divine Court’ to carry on the task of ten Sikh Gurus and to direct the Sikhs in the ways of the name as the Brahmans had misled them. The Hukamnama prescribed ceremonies pertaining to birth, engagement, marriage and death which were to be performed in accordance with the spirit of the Adi-Granth. For the birth ceremony, hymns from the Adi-Granth were to be recited and prasad, sacred food, be distributed. A son’s name could be deduced from the Adi-Granth forty days after his birth. The marriage ceremony was to be performed in the presence of the Granth by four circumambulatory lawan of Guru Ram Das. The Hukamnama asked the Nirankaris to take death as an occasion of rejoicing rather than weeping and mourning. The dead-body was to be disposed of either by cremation or by releasing it into a flowing stream. The Hukamnama further enjoined the Nirankaris to give up certain practices like treating women as unclean at childbirth; consideration of auspicious moments; displaying of dowry at marriage and the offering of lamps and rice-balls to the dead. Ritualism was to be given up and the Sikhs were to worship none save the word of the ‘Gurus’.27 The official sources confirm these beliefs and practices and also mention a few other ideas. It is mentioned that Nirankaris believed that pilgrimages and offerings were useless and Brahmans and cows were not to be revered. They also practised widow-marriage. They abstained from the use of wine, flesh and smoking. Lying, cheating and using false weights were considered ‘crimes’.28

The numerical strength of the Nirankaris remained moderate throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet they did the spadework in preparing the foundation of the Sikh resurgence.29 They initiated the quest for a separate religious identity for the Sikhs; rejecting those rites and rituals which were against the spirit of the Adi Granth and
evolving some according to the spirit of the Sikh scriptures. A task later carried forward by the Namdhari and the Singh Sabha movements.

Webster is of the view that since no rite of initiation was followed, Baba Darbara Singh did not see his followers as a separate group or sect, from the Sikhs or Hindus but a collection of people who had decided the reorder their ceremonial life along the lines laid down by Guru Nanak and Baba Dayal. The Hukamnama too is addressed to all Sikhs as coming from both Guru Nanak and Baba Dayal. The Nirankaris, according to Webster have been a small, non-aggressive basically religious Sikh body, which was not political or even social change oriented. Unlike the Namdharis they never got into trouble with the government and unlike the Singh Sabhas they neither developed an active publication programme nor established institutions. In addition, they seem not to have become numerous enough or 'heretical' enough to have caused alarm or stimulated much controversy within the Sikh community. In the Nirankari movement, however, a nascent idea of the importance later given to living gurus can be seen emerging because a living Guru was for them of utmost importance. The Hukamnama of Baba Darbara too addressed Baba Dayal as Sri Satguru Dayal ji.

Another sect that was operative in Rawalpindi in Punjab was that of the jagiasi or abhiiasi under the guidance of Sai Sahib Bhagat Jawahar Mal. One of his leading disciples was Bhai Balak Singh of Hazro who later exercised major influence on Bhai Ram Singh. The Namdhari movement was begun by Baba Balak Singh in 1847. His belief was in a return to the simple religious message of the Gurus. Baba Balak Singh was succeeded by Baba Ram Singh who established his headquarters at Bhaini in Ludhiana district where the Namdhari movement gained widespread popularity. Baba Ram Singh believed in abolition of all caste distinctions among the Sikhs. The Granth was the only accepted volume. He was against worship of pirs, tombs, Gugga and Sultan.
According to Mufti Ghulam Sarwar at the end of his life Bhai Balak Singh emphasized thirteen beliefs. Important among these were repetition of God’s Name; weddings to be carried out by Anand; dowry not to be exchanged; tobacco, meat and alcohol to be avoided; turban was to be worn along with a small kirpan to be kept in it; not to lie; not to ask for alms; not to eat prasad provided by anyone but a gurbhai.32

Bhai Ram Singh was the first reformer to emphasize the importance of Singh identity. He revived the Khalsa traditions and initiated his followers through the baptism of the sword without any discrimination on the basis of sex or creed.33 He asked his followers to keep four of the five K’s: Kesh, uncut hair; Kachcha, trouser to the knees; Kara, iron bangle; Kangha, the comb. They were instructed to carry a heavy lathi instead of the kirpan which had been banned by the British government. His aim was to rid Sikh religion of the malpractices that had crept in and to rejuvenate it.

A Government correspondence of 1863 gives the following summary of the Kuka’s beliefs and the doctrine of Ram Singh. He abolishes all distinctions among Sikhs; advocates indiscriminate marriage of all class; enjoins the marriage of widows; enjoins abstinence from alcohol and drugs; but advocates too much free intercourse between the sexes; men and women rave together at his meetings; and thousands of women and young girls have joined the sect; he exhorts his disciples to be cleanly and truth telling. One of his maxims says: ‘it is well that every man carries his staff’, and they all do. The Granth is their only accepted scripture. The brotherhood may be known by the tie of their pagris, a watchword, and a necklace of knots made in a white woollen cord worn by all the community. The watchword mentioned above was ‘Sat Akali Purkh’ in response to ‘Sat Sri Akal’.34 It was a departure from Guru Gobind Singh’s salutation ‘Wahe Guru Ji Ka Khalsa, Wahe Guru Ji Ki Fateh’.

The practices to be followed by the baptized members, the Sant Khalsa later called the Kukas, were well defined. They were to observe a strict code of discipline and were to lead pure and clean lives attuned to the Name of
God; develop regular and disciplined habits. They were to rise at 03.00 a.m.; brush their teeth, bathe and recite the Name of God, especially the Chandi Di Var, a composition they attributed to Guru Gobind Singh. Recitation of Chandi Di Var was intended to invoke the martial spirit among the Sant Khalsa so that they could fight against tyranny. Baba Ram Singh also made an arrangement for the training of young Sant Khalsa in the use of Gatka, horse-riding and weapons. Already distinct in physical appearance, Baba wished that the Sant Khalsa should feel as if they were ‘the elect’ while others were mlechha, unclean. For that matter, he taught them the virtues of ‘purity and truth’.

Baba Ram Singh denounced the beliefs and practices being advocated by the contemporary Babas and Gurus. He told his followers to regard Guru Granth as the only true one; the Bedis and the Mahants and others claiming Gurudom were impostors as no one could be Guru after Guru Gobind Singh; the devidwaras, shivdwaras and thakardwaras were means of extortion used by the Brahmans and were to be held in contempt and never to be visited; idol-worship was an insult to God and was not to be forgiven by Him. Baba Ram Singh insisted that any person could be admitted a convert irrespective of caste or religion. Through his discourses, he preached unity of God and equality of all human relationship.

Major Perkins, the district superintendent of Police at Ludhiana wrote in a report that most of Bhai Ram Singh’s followers were from the jat, tarkhan, chamar and mazhabi castes. Baba Ram Singh’s message had an obvious appeal to that section of Sikh community which was socially and economically underprivileged and was exploited in the name of religion. According to a communication of June 1863 and another of September 1866 the Kukas found converts from the lower castes of the Hindus and Muslims too. It can therefore be seen that the Namdhari movement was a harbinger of times to come while at the same time going back to the Sikh practice of equality of all peoples.
In the early twentieth century the information on the sects in the Sikh community has been dealt with in the census of 1911. The Sikhs are seen as divided into two broad categories: Keshdhari and Sahajdhari. Among the Keshdhari were Gobind Singhi who were the followers of Guru Gobind Singh. Their number in 1911 was decreasing due to the large number of unspecified Keshdhari Sikhs, and the Tat Khalsa or Khalsa. Another group was that of the Hazuris, again followers of Guru Gobind Singh who had paid a visit to Hazur Sahib and were initiated there. Among them were a large number of Keshdharis and a few thousands of Sahajdharis. Tat Khalsa was also returned as a sect. According to the census report, this term dated back to the times of Banda Bahadur. Those who accepted Banda as Guru called themselves Bandai-Khalsa and others who accepted only the Granth as the Guru called themselves Tat Khalsa (pure).39

Also enumerated in 1911 were the Kukas who seemed to be declining as they were looked upon with disfavour in political circles and also due to the rise of the Tat Khalsa movement. The Nihangs in 1911 were declining, as in the previous census they returned themselves as Gobind Singh. In 1911, the other sects mentioned are Baba Gurditta, Baba Jawahir Singh, Nirmalas, Baba Kalu, Basant Singh or Sat Sahib (mentioned by Rose), Niranjani, Mahadev or Shiv Upasak, Bardbhag Singh, Jogi and Nirankari. In 1901, a few hundred Keshdharis still adhered to worship of Shiva and followed Guru Gobind Singh’s faith; in 1911 only 251 did so. People who signified their adherence to both Hinduism and Sikhism were also enumerated. Though conversions were thought to be the one of main reasons behind the increase in the number of Sikhs in 1911, details were available for only 8 conversions to the Sikh religion.40

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Illustration 3
A Keshdhari Sikh
The Census of 1921 records that, the beginning of sects among the Sikhs, came with Guru Gobind Singh's instructions on 5 K's. Those who accepted it were the Kesdharis and those who did not were Sahajdharis. Further, when Banda came to power in the early eighteenth century, he again began the system of 'Charanpahul' which was recognized by some Sikhs and not by others. Therefore, this difference of opinion gave rise to sub-sects in the Khalsa religion.

Other important sects in 1921 were Akalis and Kukas. The Akalis were said to have been founded by Ajit Singh and were known as a militant organization. Its headquarters were at the Akal Bunga at Amritsar and they claimed the leadership of the Khalsa. Two other principal ascetic orders were listed in the sects in 1921. The Udasi sect was founded by Baba Sri Chand and the Nirmalas claimed that their order had been founded by Guru Nanak himself.

All the sects in 1921 were grouped under 2 main categories – Kesdharis and Sahajdharis. A number of Kesdharai Sikhs did not return any sect. They were around twenty lakhs in number while the number of Sahajdharis who did not do so was around two lakhs. Taken as a whole an overwhelming number of the Sikhs, approximately 92 per cent were Kesdharis. In the Kesdharai sects, the most important were the Tat Khalsa, Hazuri and Nanak Panthis. The largest percentage of Tat Khalsa was in the Patiala State. This was largely the work of the Singh Sabha Movement.

The two main divisions of the Sikhs in 1931 too remained the Kesdharis and Sahajdharis. About 88 per cent of the Sikh population of the Punjab was Kesdharis. A small number of Sikhs returned themselves as sects which were the same as in the census of 1921. Other sects in existence were the "sects analogous to other religions" such as Guru Bhag Singh, Nirmala, Namdev, Nirankari, Baba Budhi, Kabir Panthi, Bedhi Sodi, Baba Kalu, Sadu, Baba Bindu and Gulab Devi. The strength of the minor sects was decreasing in 1931, owing to a general tendency of modern times to do away with sub sects in
the interest of the community as a whole. Included under the miscellaneous category were Akali, Amritdhari, Khalsa and Ramgarhia, the last two being the names of classes and not sects.

At the end of our period we can see that Keshdharis increased in numbers. The orthodox sects like "Gobind Singhi" and "Hazuri" were decreasing but sects like Nanak Panthi and Mazhabs (largely returned by Chuhras, Chamars, Sainis and Bawarias) showed a large increase. The increase in the unspecified was due to lack of return of sect on the part of the persons who were formerly recorded as belonging to a particular sect. Sects like Udasi, Panj Piaria and Sarwaria were also losing popularity.

As far as our definition of sect is concerned, none of the above groups except perhaps the Udasis meet the requirement of a sect. A better classification of these 'sects' would perhaps be splinter groups which practised the Sikh religion somewhat leniently than the majority of the believers and in some cases followed different ideological streams. These are mainly groupings of people who broadly believed in a line of succession different from the main line of succession.

The beliefs of the above sects were as follows. The Keshdhari were the Sikhs who were like the Gobind Singhi which is referred to in some of the census as Gobind Singh. They wore the kesh and followed other restrictions enjoined by the tenth Guru. The Sahajdhari were the Sikhs who did not keep their kesh uncut and did not follow the other tenets of Guru Gobind Singh. The term Tat Khalsa according to the census of 1911 was revived by the neo-Sikhs who were devoted to the tenets of the ten Gurus and did not like their religion to be corrupted by association with any non-Sikh belief. They were trying to restore the faith, to what they considered its pristine purity. They disregarded caste and other restrictions and aimed a
Illustration 4
A Sahajdhari Sikh
universal brotherhood. The movement was more or less reactionary. The chief centre of the movement was Amritsar. Khalsa meant the 'pick' and implied the true followers of Guru Gobind Singh. The term Khalsa was applied generally to all Keshdharis, but had recently acquired a special significance similar to that of Tat Khalsa.46

The other sects mentioned in the census were those of the Sat Kartaris who were Udasis and revered Guru Arjan and Baba Badbhag Singh, a descendent of Dhir Mal. He was credited with miraculous powers and held fairs at Holi and Baisakhi at which exorcising was the main activity. The Ramdasis held Guru Ram Das in special reverence and accepted the Sikh form of baptism. The Ram Rais were the followers of Ram Rai the elder brother of Guru Harkrishan and were disclaimed by Guru Gobind Singh. They revered the Adi Granth but followed Ram Rais scripture. The Nirmalas were highly respected for their learning, believed in Vedanta and observed customs prescribed by Shastras but considered themselves as enlightened Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh. They were celibate ascetics. The Bedis were descendants of Guru Nanak and enjoyed special reverence among the Sikhs. Most of them believed in the orthodox line of succession and were the Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh. The Sodhis of Anandpur were descended from Suraj Mal son of Guru Hargobind and worshipped their own Mahants. The Jogis included the followers of Jogi Pir, Goi Chand, Gorakh Nath and the sect of Jangams. They rejected the Vedas, preached equality of all men and followed Shiva. The Udasis were the followers of Baba Sri Chand son of Guru Nanak whom they considered to be the incarnation of Shiv. They revered the Adi Granth. They respected Guru Gobind Singh and looked after several Sikh shrines and were almost always celibate. They sang the praises of Sikh Gurus as well as the Devi. The Nanak Panthis did not feel obliged to observe the precepts of the Khalsa or their ceremonial. They did not maintain long hair. The term Nanak Panthi was traditionally
Illustration 5
An Udasi
Illustration 6
Nirmala Singh
applied to all the Sikhs also.

It can therefore be seen that in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, there was a wide variety of self-identification among the Sikhs. Externally, however, they appeared to fall into two categories: the Khalsa and the Sahajdhari. The former were larger in number from the very beginning and by 1931 constituted the majority of the Sikh population. By 1931 the numbers of Sikhs returning sects were greatly reduced due to the work of religious reform carried on by the Singh Sabha movement in these decades.

IV

The process of reform begun by the Nirankari and the Namdhari movements was carried forward by the Singh Sabha movement. The Amritsar Sabha was founded in 1873 and was extremely moderate in its approach. It was followed by the Singh Sabha founded at Lahore in 1879. The view of the Lahore Singh Sabha gained ascendancy in Sikh affairs over that of the Amritsar Singh Sabha ('Sanatan Sikhs') and came to be viewed as legitimate by both Sikhs and the government.47

The leaders of this Singh Sabha belonged to the middle class and had obtained western education. They included aristocrats, lawyers, teachers like Bhai Jodh Singh and Bhai Gurmukh Singh, publicists like Bhai Ditt Singh, businessmen like Trilochan Singh and petty bureaucrats like Bhai Jawahar Singh. These were enlightened men who believed in progressive measures and were keen to introduce reforms according to the teachings of the Gurus. The functioning of this association was ‘democratic’ and its membership was drawn from the Sikhs of all classes including the low-castes.

The Lahore Singh Sabha adopted practically the same objectives, as the Amritsar Singh Sabha.46 However, the Sikhs associated with the Lahore Singh Sabha had a very different perspective on the nature of Sikhism. Their vision of a rejuvenated Sikhism came to be known as "Tat Khalsa", that is, a “true” Sikhism stripped of popular custom and clearly separate from Hinduism. This
Illustration 7
A Namdhari Singh
Singh Sabha began preaching adherence to Guru Gobind Singh's dictates and was therefore, unfalteringly Singh.\textsuperscript{49} They believed in a more egalitarian and separatist identity. The Lahore Singh Sabha actively tried to get rid of caste and other such social customs. "Living Gurus" such as pirs, local saints, and the Guru's descendants were not encouraged and their worship looked down upon. A return to the \textit{Adi Granth} was advocated as a source of theology and authority.\textsuperscript{50}

The Singh Sabha movement played a decisive role in bringing about transformations within Sikh socio-religious practices and the social order clarifying the beliefs and practices of the Sikh in the process. The period after the formation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902 was one of introspection for the Sikh community as for the first time the Singh Sabhaites examined the authenticity and rationale of the scriptures. They delineated the Sikh religious beliefs and practices on the basis of these studies and the Sikh code of conduct. The \textit{rahit} was also evolved.\textsuperscript{51} The Sikh belief in one God was reinforced and it was made clear that the Brahmans had no place in the Sikh religious ceremonies. The Anand marriage was advocated, clearly separate from the Hindu ceremony of marriage. Belief in auspicious, inauspicious, fasts and pilgrimages to Hindu places of worship were all considered against the tenets of Sikhism. The Singh identity was advocated as the preferable identity. Sikh Gurdwaras as places of worship were clearly identified and belief in the caste system was sought to be negated by means of intense propaganda and the admittance of the so called lower castes into the Gurdwaras. Worship of living Gurus was discounted by the example of Baba Khem Singh Bedi who was not allowed to sit on a cushion in the presence of the \textit{Granth Sahib}. Issues relating to the beliefs and practices of the Sikh community were also reinforced by a large number of Sikh scholars, associations and publishing agencies, by way of the study of the cultural identity of the Sikh community, Sikh history, Punjabi language and literature.\textsuperscript{52}

Fox interprets this activity as the 'creation of boundaries of religious tradition' by these twentieth century reformers who to him were advancing basic religious tenets, which he believes characterize what Singh today take
as orthodoxy. These basic tenets include monotheism, honest labour (kirat), contemplation (nam simran) of the holy scriptures (Granth Sahib), baptism or initiation (pahul), interdining (langar) and equality of all persons. The reformers however felt that they were trying to restore the faith to what they considered 'its pristine purity', as they did not want their religion to be corrupted by association with any non-Sikh beliefs.

To clearly establish Sikh practices and to promote them among the Sikh community as markers of the preferred Singh identity the Sabha reformers took up various issues relating to the beliefs and practices of the Sikhs. The kirpan morcha was launched when the cases of harassment and humiliation of those Sikhs who wore the kirpan were regularly reported in the Sikh press. With growing awareness about the religious taboos among the Sikhs, the demand for opening the jhatka slaughter houses in the towns and villages was taken up. The turban case was also taken up. The Government was persuaded to permit the Sikh students to wear a turban instead of putting on a cap while appearing in the medical examination competition and this facility was extended to the Sikh prisoners in jails who were permitted to retain their religious emblems and allowed to keep their turbans.

Another issue which had much to do with the beliefs and practices of the Sikh community was that of the mismanagement of the historical Gurdwaras. These Gurdwaras had been under the control of mahants, pujaris and the sarbrahs who were the Government appointees. Under colonial rule, this priestly class had begun the distortion of the Sikh religion and its practices. They had begun to introduce personalized rites and ceremonies contrary to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus to increase incomes and attract Hindu worshippers; they even installed images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in Gurdwara premises. Enormous increases in income radically corrupted the class in charge of the Gurdwaras. Gurdwara premises began to be misused and cases of gambling, drinking, robbery and theft were reported. They 'began to live a life of luxury and dissipation verging on depravity'. The immoral activities of these priests were exposed by the Sikh press. Periodicals such as the Khalsa Samachar and the Khalsa Advocate protested
against their activities, but when they did not mend their behavior, began to ask for their removal.\(^{58}\)

The Tat Khalsa were extremely concerned about the customs and practices which had the ‘taint of Hinduism’. They took up cudgels on behalf of the Sikhs. In 1905 they removed the Hindu idols installed in the precincts of the Golden Temple. The *mahants* and *pujars* of Hazur Sahib retaliated and declared these reformers *tankhayias* or apostates and exhorted the priests of other temples to do the same.\(^{60}\) After the death of the *sabrah* of the Golden Temple the reformers asked the officials to end the existing system and establish Panthic control. The Chief Khalsa Diwan also passed a resolution ‘asking the Government that rules governing the management of the Golden Temple be so changed as to allow to Panth the right to appoint its Manager and other officials.’\(^{61}\)

In continuation of their policy to clearly demarcate Sikh practices from those of other religions, the Anand Marriage was promoted by the Singh Sabha reformers. Intense public propaganda was carried out by them in order to raise public opinion in its favour. In defence of the Bill, Sikh scholars quoted Gurbani and Rahitnamas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of them produced booklets, tracts and articles.\(^{62}\) In *‘Ham Hindu Nahin’*, Bhai Kahn Singh wrote that Guru Ram Das composed *Chhants*, *Ghorian* and *Lavan* for the occasion of marriage. These were meant to be used on the occasion of marriage. He also cited the example of Guru Gobind Singh, who performed the marriage of a Sikh girl in accordance with this rite. To further emphasize his point, he wrote that the *Rahitnama* of Bhai Daya Singh insists that Sikhs should not adopt any ceremony of marriage other than ‘Anand’.\(^{63}\) In spite of the opposition of the Arya samajists, *mahants*, *pujars* and some Sikhs, the Bill was passed and became an Act on 22 October 1909.\(^{64}\)

The Singh Sabha reformers also took up the issue of the demolition of wall of the Rakabganj Gurdwara as it was reported in the Sikh Press that the *mahants* in charge of the Gurdwara had alienated the land in favour of the government.\(^{65}\) They were trying to reinforce the idea that the Gurdwaras belonged to the Panth as a whole and not the *mahants* and *sarbrahs*. After
the First World War this issue was carried forward and a call was given to the Sikhs to form jathas. The response was enormous and several Gurdwaras were taken over from the mahants and pujaris. The most significant was the replacement of sarbrah of the Golden Temple. As the government had no definite policy to deal with this type of agitation and wanted to pacify Sikh sentiments, it announced reforms in the management of the Golden Temple and permitted the Sikh soldiers to wear the kirpan. It also promised to observe certain Sikh festivals as public holidays having already given up its control over the management of the Khalsa College, Amritsar and reconstructed the outer wall of the Rakabganj Gurdwara.

It can be seen, in retrospect that in the eighteenth century the Singhs were in larger numbers in the Sikh community. The mainstream of the Sikhs believed in the doctrine of the Guru-Granth followed by that of the Guru-Panth and the most important institution was that of the Gurdwara. In the nineteenth century the position of the mainstream of Sikhs remained the same. The major concern of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was for the Sikh institutions but the rulers did follow some non-Sikh practices. The worship of Gugga and Sakhi Sarwar was prevalent among some Sikhs but no religious sanction for such beliefs existed. In the late nineteenth century the census reports of the British for 1855 and 1868, did not list the sects and the report of 1881 gave three Sikh sects as ‘recent sects’ of the Sikhs. It was in the report of 1891 and 1901 that extensive lists of the sects of the Sikhs along with their beliefs and practices were tabulated. The late nineteenth century was also the time when the Nirankaris and Namdhari sects gained recognition and a beginning of the concept of ‘living gurus’ is visible but at the same time a return to the teachings of the Adi Granth and exclusively Sikh beliefs was being advocated. In the second decade of the twentieth century a fall in the return of the sects of the Sikhs can be seen. By the 1930’s a phenomenal rise in the number of Keshdharis and a corresponding fall in the number of Sikhs returning sects signified that
the Sikhs were again returning to the original Sikh beliefs due to the reform activity of the Singh Sabha reformers.

The religious and social concern of the Singh Sabha reformers in the early decades of the twentieth century were expressed in an increasing volume of tracts and pamphlets and in direct action in the case of the Gurdwara Rakabganj. The religious beliefs and practices of the Sikhs were sought to be reinforced by the means of general appeals for return to teachings of the Gurus and arguments against idol worship, observance of fasts, notions of auspicious and inauspicious days, the practice of shraddhs, the celebration of Holi and other ‘Hindu’ elements of belief and ritual. To differentiate the clearly Sikh beliefs and practices and to provide alternative ceremonies for the Sikh community, a comprehensive code was published by the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1915 as the Gurmat Prakash Bhag Sanksar. The authenticity of the Dasam Granth was questioned because its contents appeared to compromise the ideal of monotheism. The idea of Guru-Panth was strengthened with the increasing importance given to the Singh identity. The idea of the worship of the descendants of the Gurus was negated by means of tracts like the one published in 1919 where it was argued that no human being could be the Guru of the Sikhs after Guru Gobind Singh decided to vest Guruship in the Adi Granth. The Sikhs were exhorted ‘to view themselves as the Panth and not to recognize any single person as their sole leader’. It can be seen that the idea of Guru-Panth was re-emerging as clearly as the equation of the Guru with the Adi Granth.68

During this period, the Singh reformers tried to promote the relevant Sikh beliefs and practices through journalism. Their viewpoint was consistently represented by the Khalsa Samachar. Apart from an attempt in its numbers to counter the propaganda of Christian missionaries, the Arya Samajists and the Ahmadiyas, there is an insistence on the separate socio-religious identity of the Sikhs, an emphasis on the study of Sikh religious literature and Sikh history, an increasing criticism of Udasis, pujaris and mahants, argument for the good treatment of the Ramdasia and Rehatia Sikhs, and an advocacy of the education of women. There are pleas for the
use of Punjabi in Gurmukhi script at least at the primary level in education, in courts, in post offices, and in railway carriages. There was advocacy of the Anand marriage. There was criticism of the management of the Gurdwaras and there was the argument that they should be handed over to the committees of the Singhūs because they belonged to the Panth. There was a general expression of loyalty to the British Government with pleas for separate representation for the Singhūs in the municipalities, local boards, the provincial council and the imperial legislature. The dominantly religious concerns of the late nineteenth century were thus spilling over into the political concerns of the early twentieth century.69

NOTES

2. Census of India 1881, Punjab, p. 137. Census of India 1891, Punjab, p. 100. It is clarified in the census of 1891 that the record of religious sects was not one of the main objects of the census. The sects were enumerated merely with the object of checking the correctness of the figures for religions.


19. Ibid., p. 23.


26. Ibid., p. 12.


29. Webster, *The Nirankaris Sikhs*, 15-16: “In 1861 Orbison estimated that there were several hundred of them in this city perhaps four or five hundred and a few scattered in some of the neighbouring towns. No separate figures were given in 1881 census, but the 1891 Punjab Census listed 50,716 Nirankaris in the British territory and undoubtedly highly inflated ... The Nirankaris could have not been too numerous at that time.” The 1901 Census and the subsequent ones give very low figures.

30. Ibid., pp. 7, 14, 39.


33. Ibid., p.
34. Ibid., pp. 1, 6, 13, 14, 16.
39. *Census of India 1911*, Table VI A, Sects of Main Religions, pp. 38, 58, 156.
40. *Census of India, 1911*, pp. 156,157, 158, 159.
41. *Census of India, 1921*, pp. 185, 186.
42. *Census of India, 1931*, Table XVI, Religions, p. iv.
43. *Census of India, 1931*, p. 309.
46. *Census of India, 1911*, pp. 58, 156.
51. See chapter on *Self Identification*.


60. The Hukamnama pronounced by the priests of the Hazur Sahib was reproduced in the *Punjab periodical* of August 15, 1907, pp. 4-6; Joginder Singh, *The Sikh Resurgence*, p. 77.

61. Joginder Singh, *The Sikh Resurgence*, p. 77

