

The Development of the Sikh Community

Summary: The Sikh community developed during Mughal reign under the ten gurus. The first four gurus led the Sikh community during a period of peace with the Mughals. During the time of the fifth guru, the Sikh community entered a period of militarized resistance to the Mughal empire, which would lead the tenth guru to create the Khalsa, a committed core group of Sikhs.

For much of its early history, the Sikh community enjoyed the relative peace and tolerance of the Mughal Emperor Akbar who reigned from 1555 to 1605. Guru Ram Das (1534–1581), the fourth *guru*, is said to have developed a respectful relationship with Akbar. According to legend, it was Akbar who granted Guru Ram Das the land and the small lake which eventually became Amritsar, the spiritual home of the Sikh tradition.

However, Akbar's successor Jahangir moved away from the religious tolerance of Akbar and aggressively confronted the Sikhs. This was during the reign of the fifth *guru*, Guru Arjan. The Sikh community flourished under Guru Arjan. He was a prolific composer of hymns and was responsible for the compilation of the Adi Granth. It was during his reign that the Darbar Sahib, later called the Golden Temple, was built in the center of the great lake in Amritsar. Guru Arjan's martyrdom at the hands of Emperor Jahangir in 1606 deeply affected the Sikh community. It set the scene for Sikh conflict with the Mughal government for many generations.

The sixth *guru*, Guru Hargobind, began his guruship at age eleven, girded with two swords and his father's last words of advice: "Let him sit fully armed on his throne and maintain an army to the best of his ability." Guru Hargobind was determined to resist any threat to the existence of the Sikh community. He moved his power base to the hills of the Punjab and began to train an army. The militarization of the Sikh community had begun. Hargobind fought several battles with the Mughal Emperor Shah Jehan.

During the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, increasing political pressure was put on Sikhs and Hindus alike. In 1664, Guru Tegh Bahadur became the ninth Sikh *guru*. He rallied his army and skirmished with the forces of Aurangzeb. According to tradition, he took up the cause against forcible conversion to Islam on behalf of both Sikhs and Hindus. Defiant to the end, choosing death over

conversion, Guru Tegh Bahadur was publicly beheaded in Delhi by the order of Aurangzeb. The place of his martyrdom in 1675 is marked by the Sis Ganj Gurdwara in the Chandni Chowk area of Delhi.

The tenth and final Sikh *guru*, Gobind Singh, was only nine years of age when his father was martyred. The event deeply affected the young *guru*, who later wrote, “When all other means have failed, it is just to resort to the use of the sword.” Guru Gobind Singh became the strongest and most influential *guru* after Guru Nanak. He raised a large army, establishing the Sikhs as a formidable force. By the time he died in 1708, he had left the Sikh community two great legacies: the Guru Granth Sahib and the *Khalsa*, a fiercely committed core of Sikhs willing to face any personal sacrifice for their faith.