

Sikhism in the Present-day Punjab

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This essay analyses current forms of Sikhism in Indian Punjab. Protagonists of Sikhism are Sikh Sants, Babas, Gurus and Satgurus. They run their respective religious establishments. Popular establishments are Udasi, Seva Panthi, Nirmala, Nirankari, Namdhari, Nanaksari, Damdami Taksal, Akhand Kirtani Jatha, Dera Hoti Mardan, Dera Harkhowal, Dera Morala Sahib and Dera Mastuana. This essay begins with a note on the socio-religious milieu in Punjab and the diverse social backgrounds of these holymen. Then it analyses variables responsible for the mushrooming of these establishments and various forms of Sikhism, including codes of initiation and conduct, dress-codes and eating taboos. It is argued that personal mystical/spiritual experiences and temporal aspirations play a primary role in popularizing the diverse forms of Sikhism. They get patronage from the state as well as political organizations.

I

Socio- Religious Milieu in Contemporary Punjab

The Punjab has a legacy of composite religion and culture. The Punjabis comprising the Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Scheduled Castes have a common consciousness of shared origins and traditions. Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam and their numerous sects and cults express religious and cultural diversity. This diversity springs from the distinct spiritual and temporal experiences of the religious leaders who belong to different ethnic communities and regions. However, the assertions of their diverse religious ideas often synchronize with their temporal aspirations. The volume of the synchronized assertion is generally determined by several variables but principally by the demographic, socio-economic and political status of the communities the holymen belong to. However, the role of these variables changes from time to time. We will begin with a brief analysis of the changing demographic status of the major religious

communities of Punjab and its impact on the diverse religious ideas of the Sikh holymen.

In the post-Independence period, the population of Indian Punjab comprised and still comprises two major communities of Sikhs and Hindus and the two minor communities of Christians and Muslims. However, the number of Scheduled Castes belonging to major communities is largest in Punjab when compared with other states of India. In terms of faiths and occupations, each community is segmented. The Hindu community comprises Brahmins, Khatri/Aroras, Baniyas and Scheduled Castes. The majority of these Hindus are urban based and engaged in business or as professionals. Similarly, the Sikhs are a socially and religiously fragmented community. The Jat Sikhs form the dominant caste of agriculturists. They are followed by minor agriculturists like the Kamboj, Labanas and Sainis. Being principally engaged in agriculture, the majority of the Sikhs are found in rural Punjab though with occupational diversification and mobility, they have also shifted to urban areas. A substantial number of the Jat, Kamboj, Labana and Saini Sikhs are engaged in business and professional jobs. They interact as well as compete with their counterparts, the Hindus. The large number of Khatri and Arora Sikhs found in urban areas are still a minority compared to the Khatri and Arora Hindus. The Khatri and Aroras, irrespective of their religious affiliations, are engaged in business and professional jobs. The artisan Sikhs comprise Ramgarhias (Lohars and Tarkhans), Chhimbas, Julahas and Jhinwars. The Scheduled Caste Sikhs are Ramdasias, Ravidasias and Mazhabis. The people of each caste have their own social hierarchies and perform rituals and customs accordingly, yet there are strong caste and religious affiliations among the Sikhs and Hindus. The Khatri and Aroras are both Sikhs and Hindus. The Sikh Gurus belonged to the Bedi and Sodhi sub-castes of the Khatri. The majority of the artisans are Sikhs and found both in rural and urban areas. The Scheduled Caste Sikhs are in minority vis-à-vis Hindus and are also found in rural and urban areas. In spite of occupational differentiation and religious diversity, the castes and the sub-castes still remain the principal binary variables in social and cultural life. The number of followers of the *gurus*, *satgurus*, *mahants*, *sants* and *babas* and their resurgence is largely determined by the social status of the communities to which these men belong.

Over the period of a hundred years, the demography of Punjab has changed tremendously which has had a serious impact on the political,

socio-religious and cultural life of the Punjabis. During the colonial period, 'the Punjab witnessed reorganization of the administrative space, reclamation of vast stretches of wastelands by laying out an extensive network of canal irrigation, and construction of railways rendering connectivity not only within but also with the port cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Karachi, in particular.' Similar but more drastic changes took place in the post-colonial period. The territorial division of Punjab in 1947 radically changed its demographic status. More than 62 percent of the area of pre-partition Punjab (61,980 square miles) was awarded to West Punjab in Pakistan whereas East Punjab in India was left with a mere 38 percent (37,423 square miles) of the total area. Similarly, the Muslim population in West Punjab comprised 15.80 million and the population of Hindus and Sikhs (and other communities) in East Punjab comprised 12.6 million.

As a result of the partition of Punjab, the Hindus formed the majority of the population (51.9 per cent) of East Punjab whereas the Sikhs remained in a minority; the difference was that in the colonial Punjab the Sikhs were less than 15 percent of the total population which increased to 39.7 percent after Independence. However, the Sikhs were in the majority in the districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Ferozepur, Jalandhar, and Ludhiana. Nevertheless, the formation of a Punjabi-speaking province in 1966 changed the Sikhs' minority status to majority. They formed 54 percent of the total population as compared to the 44 percent Hindu population. With the exception of Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar, they formed the majority of the population in the rest of the districts of Punjab. Within a period of less than five decades, the Hindu population declined from 44 percent to 36.94 percent whereas the Sikh population increased from 35 percent to 59.91 percent (Census 2011). Moreover, the decline of Hindu population was in both the rural and urban areas of Punjab.

II

Diverse Social Background of the Holymen

There are a large number of *Sants/Babas*, *Mahants/Pujaris*, *Pirs/Faqirs*, *Sadhus* and *Gurus* who run *akharas*, *ashrams* (monastic orders), *deras/taksals* (seminaries), *maths* (Hindu monasteries)/ *mandirs*, *gurdwaras/dharamshalas* and *khanqahs/mazars* (shrines or tombs of Muslim saints) in the Punjab. These religious leaders perform multiple duties and functions which relate to the control and management of the seminaries and their

properties, including making arrangements for the propagation of their respective missions, observing codes of conduct and addressing the problems of the devotees. These holymen enjoy spiritual and temporal status and hegemonic control over their respective followers. All political parties, including those currently in power, a substantial section of professionals, administrative personnel and intellectuals patronize these holymen. In return, the holymen serve their patrons in different forms. They maintain their private armies and often flout law and order, even confront the state. Several *sants* and *babas* have transformed their respective *deras* into their personal estates.

Ideally speaking, they are supposed to be holy persons of piety and virtue and are expected to lead a life of contemplation and rigorous denial. Moreover, they are supposed to work for the promotion of spiritual betterment of the people. However, both print and television media has exposed the unholy and criminal records of several *sants* and *babas*. Very recently the Punjab and Haryana High Court was seized of the serious law and order implications for the state as well as civil society.

A large number of contemporary holymen and their followers come from diverse social and religious backgrounds. The Muslims of the British Punjab have left a legacy of religious establishments of *pirs* and *faqirs*: *Sakhi Sarvoars*, *Panj Pirs*, *Gugga Pirs* and *Sufi saints*. The latter are more revered by the Sikhs and Hindus than the former since the verses of several prominent *sants* and *babas* in Punjabi language are cherished by the Punjabis for depicting profane as well as sacred reality. Moreover, they expose the shallowness of ritualism and hypocrisy of the priestly classes. At the same time, they preach a path to attain union with the Almighty. 'Sufis like Sultan Bahu and Bulleh Shah gave expression to their devotional moods and inner experiences in songs that still are sung by peasants as well as professional *qawals*.' On the other hand, the religious places of the *Sakhi Sarvoars*, *Panj Pirs* and *Gugga Pirs* personify supernatural powers and invoke fear among the mortals. Consequently, these establishments now serve as centres of folk religion and culture. Excepting the establishment of the Ahmadiyahs and shrines of Malerkotla, the establishments of the Muslim saints are managed by non-Muslims, principally Sikhs. As we shall note, the working of establishments like Seikhphatta (Jandiala Guru, Amritsar) has clearly demonstrated that temporal aspirations may play a dominant role as compared to religious affiliations in social life. At the same time, the emergence of so-called Sufi centres like Sanjha Darbar, Kantian Sharif (Hoshiarpur) and revival of

worship of *dargahs* and tombs indicate that the marginalized people or people suffering from physical and psychological problems often pay their obeisance at these places and seek relief. They also seek psychological protection to ward off any unpleasant happenings in the future and aspire to be blessed with prosperity.

Similarly, several streams of Hindu holymen and their followers are popular in Punjab. The first stream comprises *mahants*, *pujaris*, *sants*, *babas*, *bhagats* and *yogis* who are either custodians or trustees of the historical temples of gods and goddesses, *deras* and *ashrams*. The gods and goddesses personify various forms of Almighty God. Their devotees perform prescribed rituals and customs for fulfilling their aspirations. Closely related to them are *deras* and *ashrams* of *yogis* and *babas* like Bawa Lal of Dhianpur, Baba Sodal of Jalandhar and the *ashram* of Pandori Mahantan in Gurdaspur. Their devotees, largely Hindus, often pay their homage at these establishments and stay for some nights in order to perform rituals prescribed by the priests. Another stream of the holymen comprises modern exponents of different schools of Hinduism. They hold huge *satsangs*, perform *katha* and *kirtan*. They also exhort their followers to meditate on the name of God. However, the temples under the custody of leaders and activists of Hindu organizations use religious places for generating and spreading sectarian Hindu consciousness among the people. The largest followers of these modern exponents are urban Hindus.

There is another category of holymen and their followers who represent composite beliefs and practices of Hinduism and Sikhism. They are Udasis, Minas, Ramraias, Handalis, Dhirmalias, Gulabdas and Nirmalas. The Minas, Ramraias, Handalis and Dhirmalias tried to establish parallel *gaddis* to the Sikh Gurus and composed their *banis* demeaning Sikh traditions. For the contemporary Sikhs, they were no more than reprobates. However, now they have either tilted towards Hinduism or Sikhism. Their establishments attract both Hindus and Sikhs. The founders of these cults are known for possessing supernatural powers. Nevertheless, the proliferation of Sikh *sants* and *babas*, *gurus* and *satgurus* took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Guided by their own spiritual experiences and inspired by the Sikh traditions, the Nirankari, Namdhari, Neeldhari, Hoti Mardan, Akhand Kirtani Jatha, Damdami Taksal and Nanaksari establishments came into being and flourished during this period. We have confined our analysis to only those

religious establishments that keep Sikh Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the centrestage of their activities.

In addition, there were a few Sikh *sants* and *babas* who were initially inspired by the philosophy of Sikh Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib* but developed their own systems of attaining union with the Almighty. Prominent among them are Radha Soami Beas, Amritsar and Dalit *deras* in the Doaba region of Punjab. The heads of Radha Soami Beas have been Sikhs whereas their followers are Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and Christians of different nationalities. In terms of occupational background, Harijans and artisans constitute a major segment of the Radha Soami following.

Dalit *sants* and *babas* have acquired the services of elites of Dalit castes in the villages and towns who refuse to accept the cultural hegemony of the higher castes and assert their right to control and manage the local shrines. Their consistent assertion has resulted into caste antagonism and conflict, particularly in the districts of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur. Several social scientists have analysed the functioning of Dalit *deras* and their *maryadas* (codes of practice) and also analysed aspirations and problems of the Dalit communities. Examining the popularity of these *deras* it is said that 'People . . . join cults with multiple motivations; some for seeking spiritual solace, some for "free lunch", some for tiding over their personal distresses, some for business purposes and some for overcoming their insecurities.'

III

Mushrooming of Sikh Religious Establishments

Several variables can be ascribed to the mushrooming of the Sikh religious establishments. The first and foremost is that the Sikhs constitute the majority population of the Punjab state. They are followed by the Hindus, SC/ST, Muslims and Christians. The changing demographic status of the major religious communities of Punjab and their composite cultural heritage have played an important role in the proliferation of the religious establishments in the Punjab. The founding of temples and shrines has been a strong Indian tradition. Like their counterparts the Hindus, the Sikhs have further enriched this tradition. Besides the Sikh *sants* and *babas*, the elites of each occupational caste have also founded their respective gurdwaras in the villages, towns and cities of the Punjab. There are hundreds of gurdwaras associated with the Jat Sikhs, Ramgarhias, Ravidasias, Ramdasias and Mazhabis. A recent survey of gurdwaras of

Amritsar city showed that there are 25 historical and 107 non-historical gurdwaras which belong to different castes and sects like Ramgarhia, Kamboj, Bhatra, Jat, Kashtriya, Mazhabi, Seva Panthi and the Namdhari.

The second variable for the resurgence of the Sikh *sants* and *babas* is the existence of their historical gurdwaras and sectarian establishments. It is relevant to point out here that due to the partition of Punjab in 1947, a large number of the historical gurdwaras and educational institutions were left in West Punjab (now in Pakistan). The migrant Sikhs built gurdwaras and educational institutions as memorials in East Punjab. The Udasis, Seva Panthis and Nirmalas reestablished their *deras* and *akharas* in and outside Punjab. The SGPC too contributed to the process of proliferation of religious establishments. Several Sikh scholars have put forward their respective hypotheses for the mushrooming of Sikh religious establishments. They argue that the central governing body of Sikh religion, the SGPC and even the revered Akal Takht have become mere 'administrative bodies'. These organizations are not meeting the spiritual demands of the people. Common masses seeking relief from the day-to-day grind of life rush to these *gurus*. However, this perception is partly correct in the sense that the SGPC spends crores of rupees on religious propagation and studies. Since this propagation and studies are according to the *Gurmat* philosophy, it discounts the role of mystical and miraculous powers displayed by several Sikh *sants* and *babas*. Like their counterparts, the Sikh masses believe and worship for the display of these powers. When the Sikh *sants* and *babas* synthesize their discourses with *gurmat prachar* (preaching of Sikhism), the Sikh masses get easily mesmerized by their spiritual aura. Moreover, the Sikh *sants* and *babas* also cater to educational and health services. Consequently, they attract a larger number of those Sikhs who are socially and economically marginalized.

The third variable in the proliferation of Sikh religious establishments is due to the complementary role of the *sants* and *babas* in terms of *gurmat prachar*, the construction of various complexes and the running of educational and health services. Since the SGPC undertakes big projects in these sectors it engages the services of the Kar Seva Wale Babe. The modern concept of *kar seva* has further strengthened their business relations. Excepting *dehdhari* gurus, the SGPC appreciates and recognizes the services the *sants* and *babas* render to the Panth. The Akal Takhat and SGPC have honoured several *sants* and *babas* with letters of appreciation and the title of *Panth Ratan*. In spite of differences between them over

socio-religious and political issues, they collectively organize *gurpurabs* and centenaries. The SGPC and SAD accommodate those *sants* and *babas* who believe and advocate the concepts of the ten Sikh Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Lastly, the prominent *sants* and *babas* have also developed rapport with politicians, businessmen and professionals but for various reasons. The *sants* and *babas* often declare that their respective missions are purely religious and they are apolitical, yet in actual practice they play a role in electoral politics. Politicians also build rapport with them for political reasons. The Congress and SAD have been building nexus with the *sants* and *babas* for strengthening their electoral base and appropriating political power. Several scholars and journalists have examined the role of the Damdami Taksal and radical Sikh organizations in the Khalistan movement in the context of factional politics of these two parties. The formation of Sant Samaj indicates the resurgence of the *sants* and *babas* and their ambition to assert their collective role in the socio-religious life of the Sikh community.

The hegemonic politics of SGPC in the post-Akali movement period (1920-25) was the fourth variable which not only alienated the Udasis and Nirmalas from the Sikh Panth but also forced them to establish their own distinct religious establishments. Under the Gurdwara Act of 1925, the SGPC not only took away the management and control of the historical gurdwaras from the Udasis and Nirmalas but also appropriated their vast economic resources. Moreover, the Nirmalas and the Udasis were deprived of their continuous socio-religious and cultural interaction with the Sikh masses (including Hindus). They lost the opportunity of being the traditional leaders of the Sikh community. The position of the Udasis became more vulnerable as they lost their case in the Punjab High Court in 1926. The court's verdict permanently separated the Udasi sect from Sikhism and the Sikh social order. Moreover, the paid preachers of the SGPC and its scholars launched an aggressive *gurmat parchar* often attacking and ridiculing the scholarship as well as the *seva* of the Nirmalas and Udasis. Reacting angrily, the Udasi Sikhs removed the *Adi-Granth*. The Nirmalas and Udasis became apprehensive of the expansionist designs of the SGPC and Shiromani Akali Dal in regard to the control and management of the 224 *akharas* which were enlisted in the second schedule of the Sikh Gurdwara Act. They knew that the ultimate objectives of the Sikh Gurdwara Act were:

1. To bring all Sikh religious places under the control of the Sikh Panth, i.e. the Sikh community itself.
2. To abolish the permanent position of the *mahants* or hereditary priests of temples and thus end their irresponsibility.
3. To utilize the property and income of the religious places for the purposes for which they were founded and thus prevent them from being wasted, sometimes in luxurious and immoral living.
4. To conduct all rituals and ceremonies according to the *Granth Sahib*.

In fact, this act empowered the SGPC to take control of those gurdwaras which were put under the second category. In respect of the second category, i.e., *gurdwaras* other than the Scheduled Gurdwaras listed in Schedule I, Section 7 of the Act prescribes that fifty or more worshippers, being 21 years of age and residing in the area of the police station in which a *gurdwara* is situated, may forward an application to the State Government, with the prescribed time, giving details of the property claimed to be of such a *gurdwara*. The State Government by notification publishes this application and invites objections, if any, from either a hereditary office-holder of that institution or at least twenty worshippers thereof to be filed within ninety days of the date of the notification. If no such petition is made, the Government issues a notification declaring that *gurdwara* to be a Sikh *gurdwara*.

Such empowerment enhanced the expansionist programme of the SGPC and SAD in terms of constructing Sikh places of worship in the memory of Sikh Gurus, *sants* and martyrs. To resist this programme, the Udasis and Nirmalas removed the *Guru Granth Sahib* from their respective *akharas* and *deras* and placed idols of Hindu gods and goddesses. They also restructured their establishments removing the Sikh insignias. They were prompted by the Hindu organizations since the introduction of the Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Bill 1922 and subsequent politics of amendments in it. In fact, the Hindu leaders including legislatures (of Punjab Assembly) espoused the cause of the *mahants*, Sehajdhari Sikh organizations and other Sikh sects in terms of their due representation on the committees of the *gurdwara* management. Both the Hindu leaders and the sectarian leaders believed that the SGPC was not the true representative body of the Sikh community and advocated that the Sikhs were Hindus.

Simultaneously, the SGPC passed some resolutions in 1942 pertaining to the Sikh *maryada* which further alienated the Sikh sects from it. The

Dharmik Salahkar Committee of the SGPC proposed that the *maryada* of performing *path* and *akhand path* of the *Dasam Granth* and *sampat path* of the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* may be discontinued. The *Satjug*, mouthpiece of the Namdhari sect, argued at length that these resolutions not only went against the old *maryada* of the gurdwaras but also questioned the legitimacy of some compositions of the *Gurbani*. The *Satjug* reiterated that while preparing *khande-ki-pahul*, three out of five *banis* (*Jap Sahib*, *Das Sawayie* and *Chaupie*) of the *Dasam Granth* were recited. If the *parkash* of *Dasam Granth* and its recitation were to be discontinued, it amounted to questioning the traditional mode of preparation of *khande-ki-pahul*. *Satjug* reminded that on several occasions *sampat paths* were performed at Darbar Sahib and Akal Takht, Amritsar. It also raised the issue that the Nihangs had the *parampara* (tradition) of recognizing the *Dasam Granth* as a Sikh scripture. Similarly, the Nirmalas had been performing *sampat paths*.

In the early twentieth century, the Udasis and Nirmalas began to relapse into the Hindu social order. A large section gave up Keshdhari form and became Sehajdharis. For instance, the Keshdhari Udasis were 776 in 1921. In 1931, their number was merely sixteen. On the other hand, the number of Sehajdhari Udasis increased from 66 in 1921 to 369 in 1931. The census officials concluded that the minor Sikh sects including Udasis and Nirmalas were losing their popularity. Their decline has continued since independence. The Sehajdhari Sikhs were on the brink of extinction. In its general meeting held on 31 March 1976, the SGPC thought that the Sehajdhari Sikhs either had become Amritdharis or merged into the Hindu social order. The partition of Punjab in 1947 forced the Udasis and Nirmalas too to rehabilitate themselves either in east Punjab or outside it. Most of them preferred the towns of Haryana, Delhi, Haridwar and Kanpur essentially because their own old establishments existed there. Moreover, the formation of a Punjabi-speaking province in 1966 reduced Hindus to a minority. Consequently, the Hindu leaders lost their domination in Punjab's polity. The Sikhs, particularly Jat Sikhs, assumed a leading role in this polity. The position of the Udasis, Nirmalas and Sehajdhari Sikhs became indefensible in terms of their beliefs and practices in the wake of assertion of socio-cultural hegemony of the Sikhs and Sikh militancy in the last quarter of twentieth century. If the Udasis and Nirmalas were to survive, they had no option but to revive their old tradition of worship of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and of *katha* or *kirtan* in their respective establishments. The following study of their *deras* and *akharas*

shows that they are astute enough to respond to the changed demographic and cultural milieu of Punjab.

IV

Diversity in Sikhism

Demographic diversity of Punjab and its holymen on the one hand and personal mystical/spiritual as well as temporal experiences of these holymen on the other hand led to diverse perceptual Sikhism and its codes of conduct, dress codes and taboos. The precedent of founding parallel *gaddis*, *darbars* and composing religious verses was set by the Minas, Hindalias and Dhirmalias. However, the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Panth rejected them outrightly. They revived their establishments during British rule and transformed their beliefs and practices conforming to the Sikh faith in the post-Independence period.

Udasis Establishments

Among all the Sikh religious establishments, the Udasi establishment is the oldest one. Its prominent protagonist was Baba Shri Chand (1494-1629), the eldest son of Guru Nanak Dev. The term 'Udasi' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Udaseen' which implies detachment from the temporal world or material culture. Contemporary Udasi scholars trace the origin of this sect back to the Puranic age. They believe that this sect came into being with the beginning of this universe. Swami Gageshwarnand states that the eldest son of Brahma was the first spiritual master of this sect. However, the Sikh scholars contest this argument and conclude that the actual founder of the Udasi establishment was Baba Shri Chand. In this context, they cite the evidence of Bhai Gurdas and Mahakavi Santokh Singh. They refer to the prolonged journeys popularly known as *udasian* of Guru Nanak Dev. They inform us that Guru Nanak Dev wore the *sant bana*. Bhai Gurdas called this *bana* as *Udasi Bhekh*. He undertook these journeys to propagate his mission. Since Guru Nanak Dev's mission was not to evolve an ascetic tradition, he gave up this *Udasi Bhekh*. In this context, Bhai Gurdas writes about Guru Nanak: *Babe bhekh banaya udasi ki reet chalai Charhia sodhan dhart lokai* (for reforming the whole world, Baba wore Udasi dress and initiated Udasi ritual). However, his son adopted this *bhekh* permanently.

From the Sikh perspective, Baba Shri Chand received enlightenment from Guru Nanak and his object was to establish the Udasi order to

propagate the mission of his father. The relationship between Guru Nanak and Baba Shri Chand was that of *guru-chela*. Guru Nanak advised Baba Shri Chand to study the Vedas and other Shastras. Baba Shri Chand composed verses (*matras*) in praise of his father and *guru*. As the legend goes 'when Guru Nanak returned from his 3rd Udasi, he was greeted with candle lights and showered with flowers and saffron and welcomed by Babaji's recitation of divine hymns in his honour'. It is said that Baba Shri Chand assured Guru Nanak by saying 'All my followers shall be followers of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and through him shall they obtain salvation'. The primary evidence of personal relationship and religious affiliation of Baba Shri Chand to Guru Nanak are his *matras*. Baba Shri Chand composed 125 stanzas in praise of the spiritual attainment of Guru Nanak under the title *Guru Nanak Sainsnama* which rejects the contention of the scholar that he did not *accept* the selection of Guru Angad to the *gaddi* of Guru Nanak. Moreover, *matras* are the

strongest evidence that Baba Shri Chand obtained the essence of his metaphysics from Guru Nanak whom he acknowledges as his Guru. It is also recorded in the *Matra Shastra* that Baba Shri Chand received the *Bij mantra* (the first original syllable of the *matra*) from Guru Nanak. In his *matras* Baba Shri Chand disclosed his identity only as the son of Nanak and not as a prophet or a founder of a new faith. This position is reinforced by the fact that Baba Shri Chand was neither a rebel, nor was he hostile to the religious system founded by his father. He had selected his own way of life.

Throughout his life, Baba Shri Chand maintained rapport with the successors of Guru Nanak Dev and recognized their succession to Guruship. Saroop Das Bhalla, author of *Mehma Parkash*, informs us that Guru Nanak's sons Baba Shri Chand and Lakhmi Das were not happy as their father appointed Angad (Guru) his successor. Although they were concerned about their future yet they were not hostile to their father. The successors of Guru Nanak showed reverence to Baba Shri Chand. Guru Amar Das visited Baba at village Barath (Gurdaspur) with his son Mohan, Bhai Jethaji and *sangat*. He also gave Baba Mohanji to Baba Shri Chand to be his disciple. Baba Shri Chand entrusted Baba Mohanji with some handwritten collections of *Gurbani* (writings of Guru Nanak Devji), and was told to keep these in his safe custody till required'. At the same time, Guru Angad and Guru Amar Das kept distance from the Udasis

apprehending that a schism between their followers and Udasis should be prevented. Similarly, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan Dev visited Barath and offered Baba Shri Chand several precious articles. Baba Shri Chand also reciprocated by visiting Amritsar. Guru Arjan Dev, it is said, shared his problems regarding the mischievous behavior of his brother, Prithi Chand. In response, Baba Shri Chand gave his blessings and some handwritten scriptures. He asked Guru Arjan Dev to collect some other compositions from Baba Mohanji.

According to Kesar Singh Chhibbar, he sent two turbans at the death of Guru Ram Das in AD 1581, one for Prithi Chand, the eldest son of the deceased Guru, and another for Guru Arjan in recognition of his succession to the Guruship. In AD 1629, Shri Chand asked Guru Hargobind to spare one of his sons to join him in his religious preaching. The Guru gave him Baba Gurditta, his eldest son. Baba Gurditta, although married, was disposed to saintly living. Before his death, Baba Shri Chand admitted Baba Gurditta to the Udasi order and appointed him his successor.

Guru Hargobind and Guru Tegh Bahadur utilized the services of Udasis in spreading Sikhism in different regions of India. The former guru sent Udasi preachers into the hills up to Tibet, the latter appointed Udasi *sadhus* to look after the Sikh sangat in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and Assam. Similarly, Guru Gobind Singh installed Punjab Kaur, the widow of Baba Rai Dehrudun, as successor to the gaddi of her deceased husband. Guru Gobind Singh also ensured her safety from the Masands. Baba Gurditta, successor of Baba Shri Chand, established *dhunas* and *bakhshish* (monastic seats) which flourished during the time of Guru Har Rai, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh. The Udasis of these establishments spread the message of Guru Nanak Dev outside Punjab. By the mid nineteenth century, the number of the Udasi establishments in Punjab alone was approximately 250. These establishments enjoyed the patronage of the Sikh rulers in the form of revenue free grants and liberal donations.

However, the most notable contributors of the Udasi sants and mahants was their services as custodians of the Sikh dharamshalas and gurdwaras and the founding of their own monasteries in those places which were associated with the Sikh Gurus. Subsequently, their establishments emerged as centres of the heterogeneous socio-cultural life

of the people in terms of disseminating the knowledge of the granths of the Sikhs and Hindus and imparting knowledge of the vernacular languages like Gurmukhi, Sanskrit, Urdu and Persian or Arabic. Moreover, the Udasis understood the Adi-Granth in the perspective of Nath and Vedantic traditions. Several mahants expounded *Gurbani* in this perspective. They delivered discourses on the concepts of *maya* (illusion), *bhakti* (meditation), *mukti* (liberation), *vairag* (detachment), *atma* (soul), *gyan* (knowledge) and *karam* (theory of transmigration of soul). Similarly, they also deliberated on the concepts of *pap* (sin), *pun* (charity) and *dukh* (sufferings). The successors of Baba Shri Chand expounded these concepts with special reference to Hindu scriptures like the Vedas and Bhagavad Gita. Sant Santrein (1741-1871) was one of these exponents.

The Udasis believed that temporal pursuits were incompatible with spiritual pursuits. They thought that the role of human liberation cannot be attained while engaged in secular activities. They advocated the ascetic way of life. They reiterated a religious system by which an individual could attain a divine status and reach to the *Param Tatva*. In the early twentieth century, the influence of the Udasis declined due to the gurdwara reform movement and Sikh gurdwara act of 1925. They were deprived of their possession of the historical gurdwaras. They suffered financial loss and were cut off from the masses. In retaliation, they removed Sikh scriptures from their establishments and declared them Hindu temples. The Hindu organizations support them in a big way.

Since Independence several small and big establishments of the Udaseen and Bhuri Wala *sants* have been founded in the urban and rural areas of Punjab under the influence of the Panchayati Udaseen Akhara, Haridwar. The old and new Udasi establishments in the urban areas propagate Hindu Sanatanist philosophy, nationalism and culture. Their intention is to dissociate themselves from the Sikh past and integrate with the Hindu world. This ideological shift is more perceptible in the working of Udasi *akharas/deras* in the Hindu-dominated area of Punjab. In contrast, the majority of Udasi establishments in the Sikh-dominated areas have revived the tradition of their belief in the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the ten Sikh Gurus. They perform *paths/akhand paths*, *katha* and *kirtan*. However, more space and time are given to the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses, Baba Shri Chand and founders of establishments. The people, irrespective of their religious and caste affiliations, pay homage at these establishments. They believe in the spiritual and occult powers of Baba Shri Chand. Several Udasi *sants* demonstrate their miraculous powers and

promise to fulfill the mundane aspirations of the people. Baba Shri Chand and his successors of Udasi temples or gurdwaras are very popular among the people of districts Gurdaspur and Pathankot. The people are not aware about the Udasi theology. However, the leaders belonging to the Hindu and Sikh communal affiliations are trying to appropriate the legacy of Baba Shri Chand for their respective agendas. The *mahants* of historical *akharas/deras* are struggling to protect their respective establishments. Moreover, there is a radical change in the lifestyle of the Udasi *mahants*, *parcharaks* and *sanchalaks*. They are no longer ascetics as they enjoy all modern comforts. Several of them have adopted the householder's life and organize mass marriages. They are being urbanized and run health and educational institutions and make profits. This significant transition has taken place due to the radical change in the composition of Udasi managements/*sampatis*. They are dominated by the local Sikhs who claim themselves to be the votaries of Sikhism and its traditions.

Seva Panthi Establishments

The Seva Panthi sect was founded by Bhai Kanhaiya (1648-1718) who was a devoted follower of Guru Gobind Singh, "Originally, an officer in the service of the Mughals, he became a drawer of water of the Guru's horses and did menial jobs in the stable. Guru thought and invested him with *sati* and *topi* (cord and emblem). He was in Guru Gobind Singh's service when Anandpur Sahib was seized by the Mughal forces. In the battlefield he gave water to the injured soldiers on either side. Guru appreciated his services according to the true spirit of Sikhism. From his personal service (*seva*) or more probably from Seva Ram, his first disciple, his followers are called *seva panthis*. His followers are also called Adan Shahi, another disciple of Bhai Kanhaiya.

The scope of his mission was extended by Bhai Seva Ram and Adan Shah in terms of social service to both human beings and animals. They and their followers become models of simplicity and earned their livelihood by manufacturing ropes and selling in the markets. Bhai Seva Ram defined attributes of God both in *nirguna* and *sagma* forms with reference to Adi-Granth and Dasam Granth. He believed this universe was Brahma's creation but was *maya* (illusion) which stood between man and god. He also believed that *Kam* (sex), *lobh* (greed) and *moh* (infatuation) were other obstacles in the realization of God. It was for this reason that they did not allow women to visit their establishments. He

emphasized on the meditation of god and the role of *satguru* as liberator (mukti data).

Parchi Bhai Sewa Ram, a biographical sketch composed by Bhai Sehaj Ram in the mid eighteenth century, elevates the spiritual status of Bhai Sewa Ram as the verses of this work sing his songs. For the Seva Panthis, it became *bani*. It expounded the attributes of *maryada* to be observed by a *Sant*. Primary emphasis was on avoiding sensually in any form and cultivating ethical values in man and woman. For cultivating the piety of true love between man and woman, he transcribed *Kisa Sheerin Firhad* into Punjabi. Bhai Sewa Ram and his followers often referred to this *kisa* in their religious discourses for cultivating *Firhad* type love for realizing god.

Bhai Adan Shah (1688-1757) was another exponent of the Seva Panthi mission. He gave new meaning to the concepts of *seva* and *simran*. He pioneered the study of comparative religious thought at his headquarters of Shahdra, Lahore where 250 sants stayed. Along with Sikh scriptures, the study of *Kamiya-I-Sadat* and *Yoga Vaista* was also included. *Kamiyat-I-Sadat* was translated into Punjabi and was known as *Paras Bhog*. His followers mainly comprise *Khatris* and *Aroras* of Sind Sagar Doab. They were known as Nanak Shahis. They were clean shaven, celibate and vegetarian. Their dress was white. Bhai Adan Shah's discourses have been published under the title 'Sakhian Bhai Adan Shah.'

Under the leadership of Bhai Dukhbhanjan, a follower of Adan Shah, the Seva Panthis came closer to the *gurmat*. His acquaintance with Baba Sahib Singh Bedi brought a change in the lifestyle of Seva Panthis. Some of them took *amrit* and became amritdhari Sikhs. The *Tilaknas* (religious establishments) of Bhai Dukhbhanjan, preached *gurmat*. His successors shifted *tikana* from Lahore to Amritsar. His followers began to attend religious services at Hari Mandir (Darbar Sahib) Amritsar. Bhai Jagta (AD 1741-1811) was a prominent exponent of the concepts of *Seva*, *Kirtan Karna* and *Vand Shakna* (honest earning and sharing). Bhai Jagta and his brother performed *seva* at *Tikana Nurpur*, distinguished themselves by caring for the welfare of animals, delivered discourses (Katha) on *Paras Bhog* and developed the attributes of an enlightened man. Along with this, he attempted to liberate his followers from *beggar* and to persuade the Tiwana rulers to do away with this practice.

Seva Panthi Dera in Sato Wali street, Amritsar emerged as a centre of Sikh studies under Bhai Amir Singh, also known as Giani. In his early years, he learnt devotional music and knowledge of Sikhism. He expounded the Guru Granth Sahib, Dasam Granth and Shri Guru Partap

Singh Granth. Giani Amir Singh remained celibate all his life and dressed himself in a white toga. In 1845, he was chosen president of the Ragmala Mandal Committee which opposed the movement for expunging Ragmala from Guru Granth Sahib. He expired on October 17, 1954 and was succeeded by Sant Kirpal Singh. Baba Sham Singh subsequently known as Braham Gyani came from Shahpur (Pakistan) and joined this dera. He was trained to recite *gurbani* and perform *Katha*. He performed religious services in the early morning at Harmandir Sahib Amritsar. He founded his dera at Atta Mandi which came to be known as Dera Baba Sham Singh. He constructed several gurdwaras including the three storeyed Bunga Sahib (Jhanda Sahib), installed canopies (*chhatar*) of gold at Shri Darbar Sahib, Amritsar and initiated the practice of *Karseva* in a number of historical gurdwaras.

The influence of the Indian tradition of *katha* on the Seva Panthi scholars is strong in terms of their synthesis of interpretation of Gurbani with Hindu Shastras. Mahant Kirpal authored a *Tika*, an exegesis or commentary, of Shri Guru Granth Sahib in ten volumes. His *Tika* is a continuity of the Vedic interpretation of Sikhism. It is corroborated by references from the *Sakhis*, Puranic stories and folklore. It maintains a continuity of pattern with Shri Dasam Granth.

The partition of Punjab (1947) forced Seva Panthis to migrate to east Punjab. Mahant Gulab Singh and Tirath Singh played significant roles in rehabilitating Seva Panthis and established 45 *deras* and *tikanas* in the towns of Punjab, Haryana and U.P. One of their primary headquarters is the *Tikana* of Bhai Jagta Sahib Goniana Mandi Bathinda, Punjab. The majority of the Seva Panthis come from Khatri and Arora Castes who are engaged in business, trade and shopkeeping. Professionals are in small numbers. They are both Sehajdharis and Amritdharis.

A radical change is perceptible in the lifestyle of Seva Panthi *sants*, *babas* and *mahants*, and in their religious, educational and cultural perceptions. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *mahants* and attendants wore mere loin cloth in the *dera* premises and only covered their body with the cotton sheets whenever they went outside. They earned their livelihood by doing manual labour. Ostentation in any form was totally absent in their *tikanas*. However, the very recent paintings of the founders of the Seva Panthi sect and actual life of the present *mahants* show rich costumes, turbans or *saili-topis* (sacred thread and cap), long *kurta* (long loose shirt) covered by shawls and knee length trousers. They also wear woolen rosaries around their necks or carry them in their hands.

Some of the *mahants* had been wearing *saili-topis* and trimmed beards. The *mahants* of *tikanas* outside Punjab carry this type of image. However, the paintings of several founders and prominent *mahants* also show halos around their heads – a mark of their raised spiritual status. They are also shown seated on *diwans* (large cushioned seats) and their backs supported by pillows. Their paintings also show fascinating landscapes. *Mahants* of prominent *tikanas* have all modern comforts: houses and offices with electronic gadgets, AC rooms and halls, cars, buses and trucks, etc.

Like the Khalsa Sikhs, the Seva Panthi Sikhs worship the ten Sikh Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Their literature of the late twentieth century is replete with the biographical accounts of the Sikh Gurus, *Sakhis* and commentaries on the *Gurbani* and its discourses. When defining Sikhism the main thrust of the Seva Panthis is the unique spiritual and temporal status of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and its egalitarian ethics. In recent years, Mahants Kahan Singh and Tirath Singh have written articles and booklets expounding the attributes of *Sabad Guru*. They argue that the *Guru Granth Sahib* is not only a book of revelation but also an embodiment of the ten Sikh Gurus. The *Guru Granth Sahib* and the ten Sikh Gurus are synonymous. It was Guru Gobind Singh who invested Guruship in the *Guru Granth Sahib* and ordered Sikhs to worship it as the Guru. The Investiture of Guruship added a unique distinction to the *Adi-Granth*. The Seva Panthi *mahants* forcefully argue that belief in the *dehdhari guru* (embodied *guru*) is *manmat* (apostasy). Any person claiming his status equivalent to the Sikh Gurus is an apostate. Similarly, these *mahants* appreciate the Sikh Gurus for abolishing caste distinction in terms of incorporating the compositions of *bhagats* and giving them the status of *bani*. Most of the *bhagats* were born in low castes and treated with contempt by the then Brahmins. Thus, the Sikh Gurus exhorted their followers to believe that all human beings were God's creation. God recognizes only true actions and truthful living of the human mortals.

Since the inception of this establishment, the Seva Panthi *mahants* believe and advocate that through invoking the *Sabad-Guru*, the Sikhs can attain a stage of *anand* (bliss) or transcend themselves to live in the stage of *Sachkhand* (abode of the True One), free from worldly bonds and assimilate themselves in *Parameshwar* (God). It is for this reason and aspiration that their *tikanas* install the *Guru Granth Sahib* for reading and reciting *bani* and performing *akhand path*. The Seva Panthi *mahants* also believe and advocate that they are mere mediators between the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the *sangat*. In this context, Mahant Kahan Singh cites

several *sakhis* of Seva Panthi *mahants* which uphold the supremacy of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in spiritual affairs. He argues that the gurdwaras are primarily meant for singing the praise of God. Nevertheless, the modern nomenclature of gurdwara has supplanted the *tikana* or *dharamshala*. For instance, *Gurmaryada* of Darbar Hall Tikana Bhai Jagta Ji, Goniana Mandi is similar to the *Gurmaryada* prescribed by the SGPC. In the early morning (4 o'clock) with the *parkash* of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the *Japji Sahib* is recited and followed by the recitation of *Sukhmani Sahib* and *kirtan* of *Asadi-War*. The evening *maryada* begins with the recitation of *Sodar Chowki*, *Rahiras* and *arti*. For two hours, the *katha* of *Granth Suraj Parkash* and *kirtan* are performed. It is obligatory for all the residents of *tikana* to attend this *maryada*.

Nevertheless, the religious bonds of Amritdhari or Sehajdhari Seva Panthi *mahants* with the Sikh historical places and gurdwaras have not been weakened since the inception of their establishment. For instance, these *mahants* and *bhais* played an important role in observing the *maryada* of Shri Darbar Sahib in the eighteenth century. Bhai Paras Ram Ji sacrificed his life for lighting an oil lamp at Shri Darbar Sahib, Amritsar. Similarly, there were several Seva Panthi *bhais* and *mahants* who rendered the service of *granthis* to Shri Darbar Sahib. They also undertook the *kar seva* of several historical gurdwaras. As noted earlier, Baba Sham Singh's *kar seva* was trend-setting. His legacy was carried on by Baba Kharak Singh in recent times.

Founding educational institutions for women was another major breakthrough in the conservative attitude of the Seva Panthi Sikhs. A few of these institutions are located in the very premises of the *tikanas*. The recruitment of women staff underlines their progressive outlook. The Seva Panthi *mahants* realized that for raising the social and economic status of women special trusts should be formed. As early as 1988, they conceived the idea of founding Mata Tripta Istri Sahayita Fund for the betterment of those women who were helpless and victims of social exploitation. Sant Nischhal Singh founded the Khalsa College and Guru Nanak High School and College for women at Santpura Dera, Yamunanagar. He also conceived the idea of opening public schools. His confidant Sant Tarlochan Singh founded Sant Nischhal Singh Public School. Similarly, Bhai Ram Kishan School was opened at Sheran Wala Gate, Patiala which was later shifted to Patiala Urban Estate. Bhai Ram Kishan Gurmat Public School is also there. The concept of public schools, as claimed by the *mahants*, is guided by the humanitarian cause. Neither

capitation fee nor donation is charged for admission. Moreover, the Seva Panthi *mahants* also thought that the role and status of Sikh women in history should be highlighted and memorials raised so that the present generation of women could be inspired. The *Seva Joti*, a Punjabi magazine, has been publishing essays on the Sikh women and ladies of Sikh Gurus called *Guru Mehlan*.

Nirmala Establishments

The popular Sikh tradition ascribes the origin of this sect to Guru Gobind Singh who wanted his followers to cultivate letters. At Poanta Sahib (1685-88) Guru ji initiated a project of translation of Sanskrit classics into current Braj or Punjabi. In order to have trained scholars of *Dev Khasha* Sanskrit, he sent five of his Sikhs to Varanasi, a renowned centre of studies of Hindu scriptures and languages. After acquiring adequate knowledge of Indian theology and philosophy, they came back to Anandpur. Since they were known for their piety and sophisticated manner, they came to be known as Nirmalas. Our contemporary Nirmala scholars are trying to push back the origin of Nirmala sect to Guru Nanak's time. It is a vain attempt.

The resurgence of the Nirmala sect took place in the post-Khalsa Panth period. Like Udasis, the Nirmala sants and mahants established their *akharas* outside Punjab: Kankhal Haridwar, Varanasi, Pakki Sangat at Allahabad, Chetan Marth and Choota Sangat (Varanasi). With the founding of Sikh principalities in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Nirmala Sants came back to Punjab and established their *akharas* here with the liberal patronage of the Sikh sardars and rulers of Malwa region. After a prolonged struggle, the Nirmala sants consolidated their akharas at Haridwar. Prominent among these was Dera Baba Dargah Singh Kankhal. With the liberal patronage of Sikh rulers of Patiala, Jind and Nabha, the Nirmala sants founded Dharamdhaya Panchyati Akhara Nirmala in 1861. Parallel to the Udasi Akhara under the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Malwa rulers and sardars liberally founded this akhara which became a principal centre for Nirmala studies of Sikhism. A comprehensive code of conduct called Dasturul-Amal was drawn up which was approved by the three Sikh rulers. Shri Mahant and four other Mahants of this akhara were to be Khalsa Sikhs. It was also made obligatory for Shri Mahant to take a vow in front of Guru Granth Sahib to observe the five *kakars*. The mahants were instructed to only eat food cooked by those Sikhs who observed *rahit* of the dera.

The native Sikh rulers (Malwa) gave liberal patronage to the Nirmala scholars for exegetical writings. In the wake of the English translation of the entire *Guru Granth Sahib* by Ernest Trumph, Raja Bikram Singh, ruler of Faridkot (1842-98) got commissioned a full-scale commentary in Punjabi on *Guru Granth Sahib*. Nirmala scholar Giani Badan Singh of Sekhvan dera prepared a first draft of a Punjabi translation of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in 1881. It was then revised by a synod of Sikh scholars representing a wide variety of schools of thought current among the Sikhs. Mahant Dayal Singh wrote *Baba Nanak Ji Da Nirmal Panth* in 1934. He informs us that there were 33 *deras* of Nirmala sants. In each *dera*, the people learnt languages like Sanskrit, Braj Bhasha, Hindi and Gurmukhi. They studied the *Adi Granth* and Vedantic literature such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Gita*, etc. They also learnt the skills of *Katha* and *Kirtan*, *Khandan* and *Mandan*. Prominent among these learning centres was the Normal Sanskrit Maha Vidyalaya Kashi (Haridwar). Nirmala centres produced a large number of scholars like: Mahant Pandit Jiwan Singh, Pandit Sant Singh, Mahant Swami Pandit Sucha Singh, Pandit Tara Singh and Pandit Sham Singh. Nirmala *Mandalians* and *Ramta Akhara* preached Sikhism in towns and villages of northern India.

The following Nirmala scholars made outstanding contributions to Sikh history and theology: Pandit Tara Singh Narotam (1822-1891), Bhai Santokh Singh (1787-1847); Pandit Sadhu Singh (1840-1907), Giani Gian Singh (1822-1921) and Thakur Nischal Singh (1808-1895). The titles of works produced by these scholars early suggest their Vedantic orientation while presenting Sikh thought; concepts of God and his reincarnations; *Mukti* (liberation) and transmigration of soul. They also produced exegeses of *Guru Granth*; dictionaries in vernacular languages and history of the Khalsa raj. In addition, these scholars evolved attributes of a Sikh and Khalsa. However, in their personal life, Nirmalas refused to observe the maryada of the Khalsa Sikhs particularly wearing *kachh*, *kara* and *kirpan*. Nirmala leaders of Mahan Panchayat Akhara and its branch Ramta Akhara had a tiff with the Pujaris of Sachkhand Hazur Sahib Nanded (Hyderabad) in 1873. A section of Nirmala Sikhs, of course, took khandeki-pahul and observed the rahit of five *kakars*.

In the post-independence period, the administrative structure, maryada and social background of the Nirmala establishments underwent a change. Nirmala scholar Giani Balwant Singh noted 32 major *padhatis* (branches) which have groomed their respective line of succession and generated their own sources and infrastructure. Each branch has its

religious-political affiliation either with the central organization Shri Nirmal Panchayati Akhara, Kankhal or SGPC/SAD or Hindu organizations.

The study of 15 Nirmala establishments in Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar and Patiala shows the impact of the expansionist programme of SGPC, Operation Blue Star (1984) and Khalistan Movement on their traditional programme. The old Nirmala establishments in Amritsar are Nirmala Akhara Mahant Mul Singh, Dera Shriman Mahant Mishra Singh, Establishment of Thakur Bahal Singh, Dera Thakran Chowk Moni, Dera Antarjamian, Dera Sriman Giani Bakhshish Singh and Sant Kharak Singh, Dera Sriman Mahant Hari Singh, Dera Baba Parduman Singh, Dera Tapoban, establishment of Baba Kuma Singh. The Nirmal Takhat and Talab Baba Budha Ji Ramdas had been recently established by Baba Jaswant Singh in 1930. He was associated with the establishment of Pandori Nizran (Jalandhar). Similarly, Sant Baba Basant Singh founded Nirmal Kutia Johlan Jalandhar. Sant Baba Buta Singh extended the Antaryamian Dera Amritsar and founded Dera Gururar Khuda, Hoshiarpur in the post-independence period. Shri Nirmal Panchayati Akhara Dera Dharam Dhuja, Dharamsala Baba Bir Singh Duma Wali Gali and Dera Sadhu Singh Wala, Purani Tehsil Patiala are struggling to sustain Nirmala heritage.

Our contemporary Nirmala *sant-babas* and *mahants* are struggling to carry on their traditions of learning and imparting *gurmat* studies, *prachar*, *katha* and *kirtan* in the wake of conflicting perspectives of Sikhism represented by Nirmal Panchayati Akhara on the one hand and the SGPC/Khalsa Sikhs on the other. The old Nirmala establishments still observe the Vedantic perspective of Sikhism whereas the newly established Nirmala *deras/akharas* respond to the monotheistic Sikhism represented by the SGPC/Khalsa Sikhs. However, all the Nirmala *mahants*, *sants* and *babas* maintain their distinct lifestyle. They enjoy a respectful position in the *Panthic* organizations and institutions. In all the Nirmala establishments, the gurdwaras are an integral part. They observe *maryada* which is broadly acceptable to the SGPC. They celebrate anniversaries of the Sikh Gurus and Nirmala leaders, hold religious congregations and serve *langar*. In a few *deras*, the students are given training in performing *katha* and *kirtan*. They impart studies in *granths* and teach classical languages to the students. However, the Nirmala tradition of writing exegesis (*tikas*) of Sikh scriptures is fading away. Several factors can be ascribed to this downward trend. Firstly, the Nirmala establishments have

lost state patronage. Secondly, the representative Sikh institutions, particularly the SGPC, have assumed the role of *Gurmat prachar* and studies on a big scale. In addition, missionary colleges and universities have supplanted traditional scholarship and offer comparative studies in theologies, philosophies and languages. The teaching faculty and infrastructure provided by the modern educational institutions are far better than those offered by the *deras* and *akharas*. Consequently, the Nirmala establishments attract only those students who belong to the socially and economically marginalized families. Nevertheless, there are several Nirmala establishments in the rural areas which flourish partly because their heads display mystic and miraculous powers. The adherents come in hundreds to seek blessings for ameliorating their mundane problems. Some of the Nirmala establishments run charitable health and educational institutions.

Nirankari Establishments

Baba Dayal, originally Dayal Das, was the founder of the Nirankari mission. He believed that God is one and formless (*Nirankar*) and salvation was to be attained through His meditation. He advocated the futility of worshiping idols and embodied holymen. Since his followers believed and worshiped only Nirankar, they were called Nirankaris. At Rawalpindi, Baba Dayal founded a dharamshala and conducted his religious discourses in the presence of the *Adi-Granth*. However, his discourses could attract only a moderate number of followers. His successor, Baba Darbara Singh further extended the sphere of his activities as he established new preaching centres called *beeras* or *sangats* in the towns and villages outside Rawalpindi. The *sangats* were to be under *biradars* – the deputies appointed by him. During the time of the third successor Baba Ratta Ji, the darbar acquired two houses for visitors, attached with a *langar* or common kitchen and a well. In addition, a building outside Rawalpindi known as Dayalsar was built near a stream called Lei. Additional centres even in far away districts like Ludhiana, Amritsar and Ferozepur were also founded.

During the tenure of Baba Darbara Singh, the number of Nirankaris moderately increased. In 1853, they were hardly sixty-one. Within a decade, it increased to five hundred. It was under Baba Sahib Ratta Ji that their number increased to a few thousand. By this time, the Nirankari organization was based upon a hereditary guruship and the appointees were called *biradars*. When the fourth Nirankari Baba took over the

guruship two major developments took place. The first was the formation of Nirankari wings: Nirankari Balak Jatha (1922), Nirankari Bhujhingi Sevak Jatha (1923) and Nirankari Young Men's Association (1929). The formation of these wings implied that the Nirankari leadership visualized a transformation from traditional to modern organization, bringing more and more people into the Nirankari fold. The second development was that these organizations operated systematically: maintaining records pertaining to collections and publishing a series of tracts focusing on issues related to theology and *maryada*. The partition of Punjab in 1947 created a crisis in terms of dislocating Nirankaris and their organizational set-up. Their major concentration was in the villages and towns of Rawalpindi district. Like the Hindus and the Sikhs, they were forced to leave their native places and resettle in East Punjab. Being traders, *sahukars* and shopkeepers, they settled in the towns of this part of Punjab. A substantial number of their families also settled in the towns of northern India. Apart from these trials and tribulations, the Nirankari leadership faced a serious problem in locating and building rapport with these families. The leader of this community, Sahib Hara Singh undertook this responsibility and established the Nirankari headquarters at Chandigarh in 1958. Baba Hara Singh and his son and successor Baba Gurbaksh Singh built a new darbar hall and other apartments for holding periodical congregations. The new Nirankari Darbar resembled a gurdwara. However, its architectural design was different. The *Guru Granth Sahib* occupies the central place of the darbar. The Nirankari congregation comprises both Sehajdharis (Sikhs without formal baptism) and Keshdharis (Sikhs keeping untrimmed hair and beard) who enjoy equal status.

Baba Darbara Singh's *hukamnama* was a benchmark in the process of elevating the status of Baba Dayal and restoring pristine purity to Sikhism. The *hukamnama* denotes that Baba Darbara Singh assumed both spiritual and temporal authority. According to the religious tradition, issuing an edict was considered a prerogative of those persons who were vested authority by the divine power. However, in the case of Baba Darbara Singh, as the eternal evidence of this document suggests, he sought legitimacy from the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*. Yet this *hukamnama* invokes: In the Name of the One Supreme Being Realized through the Guru's Grace. Blessed is the Formless One, True is the Formless One. Repeat the Name of the Formless One, Supremely blessed is Shri Satguru Dayal Ji. The Timeless One's Letter of Command Addressed To All Sikhs.

The *hukamnama* elevates Baba Dayal's status from Baba to Shri Satguru Dayal Ji. The first paragraph of this *hukamnama* shows that Baba Dayal visited Nirankar's abode where the ten Sikh Gurus were also present. The Nirankar bestowed on him divine status and blessed that those who obeyed him would achieve the stage of *Sachkhand* (bliss). The Nirankar also asked him to preach His *nam* since Brahmins had forgotten it and made this world hell. Shri Satguru Darbara Singh is also shown holding congregations. A Sikh from Punjab humbly submitted before *Sache Patshah* (Baba Darbara Singh) and stated that the Brahmins had entrapped the people in ritualism and requested him to guide them to perform ceremonies (birth, marriage and death) according to the *Sabad* (*Guru Granth*). Then *Patshah* ordered the Sikhs to recite the Nirankar's name. Nevertheless, the *hukamnama's* primary concern was also to assign divine mission to the Nirankari Babas and convey to the *sangat* that they were messengers of God. The import of this *hukamnama* was that the human beings could attain union with God and the status of true lord (*Patshah*). The Almighty ordered them to appear in this world and show the people the true path to attain *moksha* (liberation).

The invocation of this *hukamnama* clearly shows that Baba Darbara Singh and his followers believed in a personal Guruship. Baba Darbara Singh himself set a precedent of addressing Baba Dayal as Satguru Dayal Ji. Subsequently, the Nirankari Sikhs followed this precedent. The practice of nominating successors by the Nirankari Babas further underlined the relevance of the personal *guru*. Theoretically speaking, the concept of personal *guru* and his elevation to Shri Satguru or *Sache Patshah* was contrary to the monotheistic belief of Baba Dayal and in disagreement from the Sikh tradition of the ten Sikh Gurus and the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*. Yet for all practical purposes, the Nirankari Sikhs gave the *Guru Granth Sahib* the central place in their religious, rituals and customs. The *hukamnama* also drew a line between the Nirankari Sikhs and the Khalsa Sikhs when it omitted the reference to the Khalsa mode of initiation and five 'k's' (*kes, kanga, kara, kirpan* and *kachhera*).

Scholars rightly inferred that the Nirankari *babas* believed in the Sehajdhari traditions and have explained their faith in these terms. They also referred to the caste and occupational background of the Nirankari *babas* and their followers. Khushwant Singh argues that the Nirankari Sikhs comprised 'half-Hindu' and 'half-Sikh community' which came from the Khatri, Arora or Bania castes. In fact, 'their influence was

restricted to Sikh and Hindu communities of the Northwest Frontier Province and Kashmir’.

Guided by the logic of *sabads* of the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Nirankari Babas disapproved of the beginning of the Sikh *ardas*, on the premise that the word ‘Bhagauti’ referred either to Durga (Hindu Goddess) or (sword). The Nirankari Babas argued that the word ‘Bhagauti’ should not be prefixed to Guru Nanak’s name since he believed and worshiped Nirankar only. They argued that in the nineteenth century the popular import of the word ‘bhagauti’ was Hindu goddess. They further asserted that *Var Shri Bhaguati* was not a composition in the *Adi Shri Guru Granth* and was included in the *Dasam Granth* whose authorship has been questioned by the scholars. It was in the late nineteenth century that Sikh scholars interpreted the word ‘bhagauti’ to mean *kirpan* which symbolized the power of Almighty (*Akal Purakh*). The Nirankari Babas believed that the Sikh *ardas* was rendered to God Almighty in a supplicatory mood. Having perceptual differences with the extant form of Sikh *ardas*, Baba Hara Singh got the Nirankari version circulated which he claimed was bequeathed by Baba Dayal. Its text first mentioned hymns from the *Sukhmani Sahib* and then rendered to God Almighty. The Nirankari *Ardas* remembered Guru Nanak and his successors, the four Sahibzade, Panj Piare, Chali Mukte who laid down their lives for upholding Sikh religion. It invariably invoked Nirankar, Japo Nirankar, Satnam Shri Waheguru and Dhan Nirankar. In comparison to the extant form of Sikh *Ardas*, several omissions of naming events or individuals are perceptible in the Nirankari *Ardas*. It was also in the sphere of observing rituals that the *Hukamnama* made a departure from the extant beliefs and practices. On the birth of a child, hymns from the *Adi Granth* were sung and *prasad* distributed. However, the tradition of *namkaran* (naming ritual) after forty days was kept. The name for a son was taken from the *Adi Granth*. The Nirankari *babas* dropped several Brahmanical practices observed by the Sikhs. Likewise they were bold enough to reject a cumbersome structure of Vedic rites on the occasion of marriage. They introduced *Anand* marriage which was certainly a departure from the tradition stated in the *Rahitnamas*. Rather the Nirankaris are silent on this custom. The violation of *Anand vivah* did not invoke *tankhah* (punishment for religious lapse). It is noted that the *Rahitnama* of Bhai Mani Singh simply stated: *anand bina vivah na karna*. Citing the *Gurmat Martand*, Nirankari scholars argue that though *anand* and *ardas* were performed it was done by a Brahman. The Vedic rituals formed an integral part of Sikh

marriages even at the time of the tenth master. The *Prem Sumarag* notes that the marriages of the Sikhs were performed by Vedic rituals in the eighteenth century. The Sanatan Sikhs like Baba Khem Singh Bedi accepted this form of marriage and Brahmans were invited to perform the ceremony.

There are certain practices which are approved and endorsed by the early Sikh traditions but rejected by the Nirankari *babas*. These were: 'treating women as unclean at childbirth; finding auspicious days for marriages and other occasions; the display of dowry at a marriage; the placing of lighted lamps or *prasad* in the river and the feeding of Brahmans at the time of death; and the acceptance of payment for the performance of ceremonies.' However, there are some practices which both early Sikh traditions and Nirankari *babas* exhorted their followers to stop. These were female infanticide and adultery or looking lustfully upon women; selling daughters; cheating and earning livelihood by false means; smoking and drinking; idolatry and worship of graves, etc. There are strong injunctions against crimes, misdemeanors and sexual immorality in the *Rahitnama* literature. The importance of the mission of Nirankari *babas* lies in the fact that they 'returned to the teachings of Guru Nanak in particular to his message of meditation on the divine Name'. They evolved their beliefs and practices on the basis of the spirit of the message of the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*. They evolved their own *Rahitnama* (*Hukamnama*). In the process, they differed with the extant pluralistic Sikh traditions, rituals and customs. They consciously set aside the role of the priestly class and gurudom. At the same time, they emphasized the relevance of the personal *guru* who could guide the spiritual and temporal affairs of the followers. Under his guidance, they constructed their headquarters Shri Nirankari Darbar Sahib at Rawalpindi and 46 *Beeris* in the north-west districts of Punjab (Pakistan). They also established their own Nirankari *jathas* and associations. They evolved their own *rahit* and social taboos. As a result, they could resist and overcome the opposition of the Sanatanists and the priestly class. However, the resurgence of the Nirankari mission began to fade away at the beginning of the twentieth century. The *Gurmat Nirankari*, a Punjabi mouthpiece of this community, admitted in 2009 that there was a tendency of losing faith in the worship of Nirankar and compromising with the Nirankari *rahit* and taboos. The Nirankari followers began to perform those rituals and ceremonies which diluted their identity.

I Namdhari Establishments

The Namdhari Sikhs form a small religious community in Punjab. Outside Punjab, they are microscopic in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. Outside India, hundreds of their families have settled in Thailand, Australia, African countries, USA, Canada and England since the beginning of the Punjabi diaspora in the late nineteenth century.

Over a period of one hundred and fifty years, the Namdhari Sikhs have evolved their distinct beliefs and practices. They worship an embodied Guru and reverently call him *Satguru*. He is their spiritual and temporal head. They believe that Satguru can liberate them from sufferings and sorrows. With his grace, they seek spiritual quest and attain bliss. He is *bakhshanhar* (forgiver) and atones their sins. *Satguru's* abode is Gurdwara Shri Bhaini Sahib, Ludhiana. The Namdhari Sikhs observe a *maryada* which comprises daily *nam simran*, earning livelihood by honest means and showing piety to the people. As early as 1940, Namdhari Guru Partap Singh obliged his followers to perform *nam simran* only for an hour daily. However, they are free to recite *nam shabad* with rosary in hand whenever they wish to do that. They participate in the collective congregations called *jap paryog*, *varni* (rituals of meditation) and *havan*. Periodical *melas* (socio-religious festivals) particularly *asu da-mela* are also organised at Bhaini Sahib headquarters (Ludhiana).

On all occasions of joys and sorrows, the Namdhari Sikhs arrange a *path* (reading of the *Adi-Granth* which is placed in a room after cleaning or washing it). The *pathis* (scripture-readers) perform this job within seven days. At the end, *vak* (receiving guru's word or command from the *Adi-Granth*) is taken and *ardas* (supplication) is performed in the names of Satguru Ram Singh and his successors. Then sacramental food (*karah parsad*) is distributed. The *divan* is also held for *shabad-kirtan*. The *akhand-path*, (a continuous reading) is performed by the orthodox Namdhari-Sikhs known as *Sodhis*. The well-water is arranged in a big quantity for drinking and washing (the tap-water is not used). Similarly, other *samagari* (ration) is arranged in advance. However, utmost attention is given to the mode of cooking and serving food.

The Namdhari Sikhs perform ceremonies related to birth, marriage and death in accordance to their own *maryada*. However, they are not totally free from the customs of their respective *zat-biradris*. They perform

ceremonies of *namkaran* and *Chaunke Charna*. Similarly, they solemnize marriages by *anand-riti* preferably at Bhaini Sahib. The parents propose boy or girl and seek *Satguru's* approval; fill up performa designed by the Vishav Namdhari Sangat, Bhaini Sahib. The performa records their names, occupation, *gotra* of their paternal and maternal homes; date of birth, height and qualifications of girl and boy. The parents give undertaking that they have not exchanged dowry and committed no violation of commands of *Shri Satguru*. The Vishav Namdhari Sangat certifies that both boy and girl are of stipulated age, *gurmukh* in appearance and can recite *ardas*. Before solemnizing *anand-riti*, the parents perform *sehaj paths* at their respective houses or at Bhaini Sahib. The mass marriages are arranged at Bhaini Sahib periodically.

Ideally speaking, the Namdhari Sikhs perceive the death of a person as Almighty's will and avoid breast beating and loud wailing. As per Namdhari maryada, the deceased person is given a full bath and administered *amrit* (nectar). A pyre is raised keeping the head of the dead towards the Pole-Star. The ashes are collected in a bag and thrown into flowing water. They perform a *path* either at local dharamsala or Bhaini Sahib.

II

The founder of the Namdhari community was Baba Balak Singh (1785-1862) who revived the Sikh tradition of monotheism and emphasized *nam-simran*, rejecting all forms of ritualism and exhorting the man to worship God alone. He asked his followers that they should offer *prasad* of one rupee and four *annas* in the name of God. He instructed his followers to take a bath twice a day and to keep one small symbol of a sword in the *pagri*; to earn livelihood by their own efforts and to eat food cooked only by a *Gursikh*. He further asked them to follow ethics in their day-to-day life and avoid indulgences. He prohibited the use of meat, tobacco and liquor. The founder of Namdhari mission also started *anand riti*.

There were three successor claimants namely Lal Singh, Kahan Singh and Ram Singh. However, Baba Balak Singh administered *gur-mantar* to Ram Singh and appointed him as his successor in one of the gatherings held at Hazro. Lal Singh stayed back at Hazro whereas Kahan Singh and Ram Singh shifted to Amritsar and village Bhaini Ararian respectively.

Namdhari Guru Ram Singh extended the scope of teachings of his spiritual predecessor in terms of revival of the Khalsa traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but he gave primacy to the teachings of *Granth Sahib* and *Rahitnamas* for delineating upon his spiritual mission. For the socio-political mission, he referred to the *Prem Sumarag* and *Sakhi* literature. He formed Sant Khalsa on the day of Baisakhi of 1857 A.D. and administered *amrit* of *khande-ki-pahul* to five Sikhs. He also unfurled the flag of Sant Khalsa which was triangular in shape and white in colour. (Ganda Singh 1944, 34; Fauja Singh 1965, 19; M.M. Ahluwalia 1965, 53) The Namdhari tradition claims that Baba Ram Singh administered *khande-di-pahul* to women which was an exceptional ritual in the mid-nineteenth century Punjab.

The Namdhari Guru, in all probability, got the concept of Sant Khalsa from *Prem Sumarag*. This *granth* prophecies that with *Akal Purakh's* blessings, the Sant Khalsa would be formed in the age of *Kalyuga* by a messenger of *Akal Purakh*. He would destroy the enemies of the Panth and false gurus; remove the ignorance of the people and reaffirm their faith in *Akal Purakh*. The Sant Khalsa would usher in an era of *Satjug*. The word *Satjug* (*Sat* + *Yuga*) signifies a period of time when righteousness, compassion and austerity were observed by the people. Most probably Ram Singh wanted to revive that period.

Namdhari Guru Ram Singh also made an arrangement for the training of young Sant Khalsas in the use of *gadka*, horse-riding and weapons. Already distinct in physical appearance, he wished that the Sant Khalsa should feel as if they were 'the eclectic', while others were *mlechh*, unclean. For that matter, he taught them the virtues of purity and truth. He ensured that 'on initiation all vices are supposed to be forsworn, such as lying, stealing, drinking, adultery etc.' However, 'there was also the provision of a *Panchayat* where the offenders could be punished or brought back to the path of religious purity.'

Ram Singh revived the Sikh tradition of *Kirtan*, singing in praise of God. He employed professional singers, the *ragis* and formed *ragi-jathas* (group of devotional singers) and *dhadi-jathas* (groups of bards). These *jathas* were deployed in different areas. The *dhadi jatha* sang the songs of bravery of the Sikh heroes in the diwans. He instructed his *sangat* to observe austerity in extending hospitality to them. The singing *jathas* were given food and Rs 1/- for other expenses. He revived the tradition of reading and reciting *gurbani* and performing *bhog* of the *Granth Sahib* in the *dharamshalas*. He established and repaired the old *dharamshalas*. He

was pained to know that the sacred Sikh scriptures were kept in the almirahs. He arranged for copies of *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* to be printed for his followers.

Namdhari Guru Ram Singh challenged the vested interests of the *Mahants* and *Pujaris* which were in possession of religious places. He found that the custodians of *devidvars*, *shivdvars* and *mandirs* (Hindu worshiping places) were parasites who made these places a means of extortion. His staunch followers held these custodians and places in contempt. Being the devotees of *Akal Purakh*, they found that the idols and idol worship were an insult to God. Translating his belief into practice, his staunch followers desecrated and demolished the sacred places of the Hindus and Muslims alike. The villagers protested and resisted these actions. As a result, violent clashes took place injuring relatives and friends to whom these graves belonged. The British Government was alarmed by such incidents and arrested these staunch followers. They were put on trial and sentenced with various punishments. It seems that their intention was to eliminate fear and superstitions prevalent among the common people. The incident of destruction of graves and tombs in the daylight projected the heroic image of the Namdhari Sikhs.

The Namdhari Guru and his followers also confronted the *Mahants* and *Pujaris* who were in possession of historical gurdwaras. His confrontation with the *Pujaris* of Gurdwara Keshgarh Sahib brought basic religious differences to the forefront. These *Pujaris* alleged that Namdhari Guru was not *gurmukh*. They argued that that (a) he set himself as a Guru, (b) he whispered a *mantar* in the ear of a convert whereas practice was to administer *amrit*, (c) he made a convert to repeat *Janam Guru Hazro Aur Basi Guru Bhaini* whereas the actual practice was that *Janam Guru Patna Aur Basi Guru Anandpur* and (d) Kukas' turbans fell off on their shoulders in the state of frenzy in the presence of *Guru Granth Sahib*. It was a Sufi not Sikh practice. The Namdhari Guru evaded to answer his deviation of the Sikh tradition and said that *pujaris* failed to appreciate his religious reforms and counter charged them for their indulgences like drinking, lying, and female infanticide etc. He further alleged that the priestly class was creating rifts in the *Panth* itself. He reiterated that he was a servant of God and revived the *maryada* of tenth Guru. He told the priestly class that it was he who inspired hundreds of people to read and recite *gurbani*

The Namdhari guru visualized a Sikh social order which could ensure the Sikh beliefs and practices and freedom from alien rulers. He addressed the social problems of Sikh peasantry and artisan classes. These problems

comprised infanticide, widow burning, dowry and immorality. It was his long term programme. He made contacts with the native rulers of Jammu & Kashmir and Nepal. He circulated *Sau Sakhis* which sought the revival of the Sikh raj under the person of Ram Singh. Nevertheless, this programme was cut short by his overzealous followers who confronted the British over the issue of cow slaughter and their attack on the Muslim principality of Malerkotla in 1871-72. Sensing a danger to the raj, the British ruthlessly blew up 66 Kuka Sikhs by cannons and deported the Namdhari guru to Burma (Myanmar). Sikh priestly classes and the landed aristocracy supported the British in eliminating Kukaism.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the socio-religious and political ideology of the Namdhari Sikhs underwent a radical change. For ending the social and political isolation of the Namdhari Sikhs, Namdhari Guru Partap Singh (1906-1959) built a rapport with Congress and his followers imbibed Gandhian ideologies of non-violence and non-cooperation. The Namdhari Congress rapport still continues. Simultaneously, the Namdhari Sikhs moved closer to the Arya Samaj and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. They accepted the concept of Hindu Rashtra and declared that Sikhs were Hindus. They imbibed Vedic religious beliefs and practices. They advocated the concepts of reincarnation of god and embodied guruship. They constructed the continuity of Sikh guruship and declared Baba Balak Singh and Baba Ram Singh as eleventh and twelfth gurus. They performed *ardas* (supplication) in the names of these gurus. They also evolved their own maryada of *namkaran* (naming ceremony), mode of initiation *anand riti* (Marriage ceremony) and *sanskar* (last rites). Moreover they made *yagna* and *havan* (fire rituals) a part of Namdhari maryada. Besides, they revived the Sikh tradition of *kirtan* in classical *ragas*.

Neeldhari Establishments

The headquarters of the Neeldhari Sant Khalsa is located at Naushera Majha Singh, a small town on the Amritsar-Pathankot Road. It is known as the Dera Sant Maharaj Harnam Singh. It is after their dress code that the followers of this *dera* are known as Neeldhari Sikhs. The dress is called *Neela-bana* which comprises white *kurta-pyjama*, a blue scarf known as *chakuta* and blue *kamarkassa* (blue waist band) which is used by both men and women. The *chakuta* is a substitute for a white turban. The devotees also keep *saila* (a small stick), *gadva* (iron vessel) and rosary. A few orthodox Neeldhari Sikhs still wear wooden slippers called *khadawan*. The

Neeldhari Sikhs claim that they form a *Teesra Panth* (third community). The adjective of *Teesra Panth* has been taken from a couplet of *Ughardanti* – a composition in the *Dasam Granth* (*Granth* of the tenth master, Guru Gobind Singh).

The founder of this sect was Sant Maharaj Harnam Singh (1877-1980). Before the partition of Punjab, he established a preaching centre at his own village of Kila Suba Singh, tehsil Pasrur, district Sialkot, Pakistan. The dera at Naushera Majha Singh came into being as a result of the displacement of Sant Harnam Singh, his confidants and close relatives due to the partition of Punjab in 1947. The Neeldhari Sikhs come from several occupational castes of Punjab. Following is their caste-wise breakup: Jats comprise 38.07 per cent, Ramgarhias 16.53 per cent, Aroras/Khatris 11.92 per cent, Mahashas/Mazhabis 10.38 per cent, Parjapats 8.46 per cent, Ramdasias 3.07 per cent and Kabir Panthis 2.69 per cent. The Neeldhari families belonging to other castes are marginal. However, this establishment can claim to have a substantial percentage of menial castes (Table 4.1). The Neeldhari Sikhs, irrespective of their caste affiliations, perceived Maharaj Harnam Singh as the messenger of God and redeemer of their religious and mundane problems. They also believed that the Maharaj, by virtue of his supernatural powers, could fulfill their aspirations. Besides such patriarchal aspirations, the agriculturist Neeldhari followers also sought the blessings of Maharaj Harnam Singh to save their livestock. His blessings transformed their barren buffaloes to yield milk. The artisan followers approached Maharaj for their well-being and sources of livelihood.

The *Rahit-maryada* of Neeldhari Sikhs was crystallized when Sant Harnam Singh developed his own socio-religious vision. He asserted this vision when he refused to accept the Namdhari condition. The Namdhari Sikhs laid a condition that if he wanted to be a part of the Namdhari community, he would have to re-baptize himself and remove a *shudra* (low caste) cook which he flatly refused to accept. In 1955, the Sant introduced new concepts like *Wah Wah* and in 1966 a new dress code known as *Neela Bana*. Adopting the blue-dress was a symbolic protest against the Namdhari dress code. It may be pointed out that the Namdhari Sikhs felt revulsion for the blue-coloured dress as it was worn by the *mlechh* (Muslims). Subsequently, some more serious ideological differences came to the surface when Sant Harnam Singh and his devotees refused to accept Baba Balak Singh and Baba Ram Singh as the 11th and 12th Sikh Gurus. It may be pointed out here that in the initial stage Sant

Harnam Singh and his devotees believed in the continuity of Sikh Guruship. Gopal Singh Namdhari and Mangal Singh Namdhari compiled a text under the title *Bhai Ajite Randhawhe di Goshati* which they proposed to distribute among the Neeldhari devotees. In its introduction, Mangal Singh Namdhari expressed his gratitude to Sant Harnam Singh. The compilers' concern was to inform the Neeldhari *sangat* that this work had a reference to the appearance of 14 *Patshahis* and 70 *Bhagats*. The compilers disclosed that before the publication of this work, Sant Harnam Singh also ordered the publication of *Gurbilas of Patshahi Barveen* and it was also to be distributed among the Neeldhari Sikhs. Nevertheless, there are several Neeldhari activists and devotees who now strongly believe in the concept of *Guru Granth Ji Manyo Pargat Guran ki Deh* (*Shri Guru Granth Sahib* embodies the ten Sikh Gurus). As we shall note, the tilt of Neeldhari Sikhs towards Khalsa traditions became more perceptible after Sant Harnam Singh's death in 1980. Under the pressure of the Khalistan movement in the districts Gurdaspur and Amritsar, several Neeldhari and Namdhari Sikhs compromised with their faith in the theory of continuity of Sikh Guruship and began to address Dera Sant Maharaj Harnam Singh as Gurdwara Sant Maharaj Kilewale.

Similarly, the Neeldhari followers deviated from the Sikh *maryada* as they did not perform the last rite (*sanskar*) of Sant Harnam Singh on 11 October 1980. They simply arranged an *akhand path* and performed *bhog* but kept his body in a coffin and placed it in a *bhora* (underground pit). Later they constructed a *gumbad* (tomb) over it and installed the *Guru Granth Sahib* in it. This arrangement lasted for eighteen years. The Neeldhari followers believed that Sant Maharaj would reappear. Actually a faction of the Neeldhari cult declared that he had already taken birth in Haryana.¹¹⁰ In this context, Mohinder Singh, a devotee of Kalanaur, district Gurdaspur, disclosed that Sant Harnam Singh used to say that if the Christians believed that their dead would rise on the day of *qayamat* (Day of the Judgement) why could not he and his close confidants also rise. Due to this belief the bodies of several Neeldhari Sikhs have been buried in the *dera* complex. Meanwhile, the mainstream Sikhs protested against this *man-mat*, i.e. the followers paying homage both to the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the tomb. The then *jathedar* of Shri Akal Takht Sahib, Amritsar took note of this serious lapse and five Singh Sahiban passed a *hukamnama* on 9 May 1998 directing Sant Bhagwan Singh and trustees (Mata Tej Kaur Saran) to remove tomb from the building and renovate it

according to the Sikh *parampara* and give it the shape of a gurdwara; stop *dehdhari* gurudom and restore the gurdwara's dignity within one month.

Sant Harnam Singh and his confidants have adapted Namdhari *maryada* to construct their distinct identity. In doing so they have gone beyond the Sikh tradition. The title of their *maryada* is: *Ath Rahit Maryada Guru Ji Ki*. In its preamble, it does not acknowledge that it has been issued by the 12th master. In fact, the name of the *guru* has not been spelt out. If we go by the contents of this *maryada*, it certainly refers to Namdhari Guru Ram Singh's letter which is perceived as *maryada*. One of the Sant's confidants admitted that Neeldhari followers observe the personal *rahit-maryada* of Sant Maharaj. It implies that the Neeldhari followers supplanted Baba Ram Singh by Sant Harnam Singh. The main attributes of the Neeldhari *rahit-maryada* are as follows: like their counterparts (Namdhari Sikhs), the Neeldhari Sikhs rise early in the morning; remove their *kamarkasa* and ease themselves; brush, bathe and change their *bana*. They dry their hair with a white towel/scarf. They recite *Jap, Japu, Anand Sahib* and *Sukhmani Sahib* in the morning and *Rahiras, Arti* and *Kirtan Sohila* in the evening. They are also expected to recite several other compositions like *Asa-di-Var, Akal Ustat, Chand-di-Var, Ugardhanti, Bara Maha Majh Mahala Panjvan* and *Bara Maha Tukhari*, etc. Throughout the day, they are expected to murmur *Wah, Wah, Wah* (acclaiming the wondrous God). Sant Harsharan Singh Baijnath Wale informed us that although there were a large number of *banis* in the *Nit-Nem Gutka* yet it is not obligatory to recite them all. The devotees can recite *banis* of their choice. The Neeldhari *maryada* is flexible with regard to personal hygiene (*ishnan* or *panj ashnan* (washing face, hands and feet in case of illness, etc.)). However, there is a radical change in the dress-code. The adoption of blue colour, mode of baptism and abandoning the *kirpan* and *dastar* are some acts of departure from the Sikh as well as the Namdhari *maryada*.

The Neeldhari Sikhs follow the Namdhari mode of preparation of *amrit*. They recite five *banis* (*Japuji, Jap Sahib, Chaupai, Anand Sahib* and *Sawayie Patshahi Dasvin*). Nevertheless, they have also added some new compositions like *Shashtar Nam Mala, Sawayie, Kalakki, Sahansar Nama, Nasihat Nama*, etc. Their major departure is on the external symbols of *kirpan* and *dastar*. The Neeldhari Sikhs do not wear *kara* and *kirpan* nor do they sanctify *karah prasad* and *langar* with the *kirpan*. Abandoning the *kara* and *kirpan* by them implies the negation of their faith in the valorous tradition of the Khalsa. Similarly, they have opted for the *chakuta* instead of *dastar* for covering their *kesh* and the *chakuta* is much shorter than the

turban. However, the Neeldhari Sikhs in rural areas and their faction in Pipli Sahib, Kurukshetra, Haryana, have become practicing Khalsa Sikhs.

Sant Harnam Singh and his followers observed Namdhari *ardas* which extended the lineage of Guruship from ten to twelve Gurus (ten Sikh gurus plus Guru Balak Singh and Guru Ram Singh). In the wake of Sikh militancy, they made a departure from it in the last quarter of twentieth century and adopted traditional Sikh *ardas* in the name of the ten Sikh Gurus. However, if we give a close reading to the *ardas* published in the Neeldhari *Nitnem*, we notice a partial revival of the Namdhari *ardas* in terms of mentioning the names of Satguru Balak Singh and Satguru Ram Singh in it. The Namdhari *ardas* published by the Namdhari Darbar Bhaini Sahib (2000) extends to Satguru Hari Singh, Satguru Partap Singh and Satguru Jagjit Singh. In its place it refers to the fourteenth human forms. Nor does Neeldhari *ardas* acknowledge the contribution of Namdhari martyrs. It acknowledges the contribution of four *Sahibzade* (four sons of Guru Gobind Singh); Panj Piaras; Chali Muktas (40 martyrs) and all other martyrs; Mahan Purash and *sants/bhagats* who stood for the true spirit of Sikhism and laid down their lives for the religious cause. More importantly, the Neeldhari *ardas* acknowledges Guru status of the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*. On the other hand, Neeldhari *ardas* is addressed to Satguru Ram Singh for all spiritual and temporal purposes. The Neeldhari Sikhs pray for his reappearance and revival of the Sant Khalsa; forgiveness of their sins and woes; removal of irreligiousness and for protection of their *dharma*. They ask for Satguru's blessings and reiterate their faith in him. Nevertheless, all Neeldhari Sikhs do not conform to the *rahit maryada*, particularly their faith in the embodied guru and reincarnation. A large number of the Neeldhari respondents disclosed that they believe in the concept of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and perform all rituals/ceremonies in the gurdwaras or in the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Similarly, they informed us that they paid their obeisance to the historical gurdwaras especially Darbar Sahib Amritsar. The Neeldhari Sikhs serving as *granthis* and *ragis* are practicing Khalsa Sikhs. Buta Singh, a *granthi* informed us that several Neeldhari Sikhs belonging to the Mahasha/Mazhabi background have started taking the *khande-ki-pahul* wherever it is being administered. They observe Khalsa *maryada* and recite *banis* as directed by the Akal Takht. Twice a week *amrit* is administered to the people at Akal Takht. The tilt towards Khalsa *maryada* is more perceptible in case of Neeldhari Sikhs belonging to Mahasha, Mazhabi,

Ramdasia and Ravidasia background. The Neeldhari Sikhs belonging to Parjapat caste also follow the Khalsa *maryada*.

When Sant Harnam Singh emerged as the sole religious leader, the primary focus of his followers was to raise his spiritual aura. They took his religious discourses as the model to lead their own life. This can be seen in the *Rahit-Maryada Hukamnama* published by the Neeldhari Naujawan Sabha (Ludhiana). The text of this *Hukamnama* begins with the following masthead.

Wahe Wahe !!! In the Name of the One Supreme Being Wahe Wahe!!!
Realized through Guru's grace
(*Rahit Maryada Hukamnama*)

(Enunciated for the *sangat* in the discourses of Reverend and Sustainer of the Poor, Maharaj Kilewale). The format of this *Rahitnama* is, by and large, the reproduction of Namdhari Guru Ram Singh's *Hukamnama*. The Namdhari scholars have fixed the appellation of *Rahitnama* Patshahi Barvin to it. However, the Neeldhari *Rahitnama* lays more emphasis on the moral and ethical values.

The *Rahitnama* proclaims that without *rahit* (code of conduct) life is without meaning. Those who will obey Guru's holy words and observe *rahit* shall not face any danger either in this or in the next world. Guru's *rahit* is to be internalized by remembering *bani* or his discourses. The devotee shall not lose his temper or retaliate in the face of serious provocations like the use of foul language or beatings or threats. Honestly confess your guilt before Guru who has bestowed *nam* and *bani* on you. The sinner will be censured or punished accordingly. A person who does not appreciate religion is a sinner. Only a non-believer can cast lustful eyes on the other women sitting in the congregation. His actions are totally devoid of morality and an insult to *bani*. It is for this reason that Bhai Gurdas asked the Sikhs to treat other women either as their mothers or daughters or sisters. Guru Maharaj has prohibited beef-eating strictly. According to *Gur-maryada* casting lustful eyes and beef-eating are cardinal sins. Guru Maharaj has ordered its disciples to lead a householder's life and respect other women. The women will also be consigned to hell if they lure men. Guru Maharaj is gracious to condone the lapses of the being who commits sins while practicing *Rahitmaryada*. Guru Maharaj reminds his disciples that they should always remember Bhai Gurdas' discourse on the code of conduct. *Gurbani* declares that an infringement and

appropriation of another's rights is as taboo as pig is to a Muslim and beef to a Hindu. *Rahitnamas* too remind the Sikhs that they should not share food with persons who have forgotten *Gur-mantar* and love for God. *Rahitnamas* also pronounce that Guru likes a disciple who internalizes his *rahit* and does not merely observe it externally.

This paragraph clearly shows that Sant Harnam Singh illustrated his ethical teachings with reference to Bhai Gurdas's compositions, though his followers further added their own emphasis by way of incorporating some compositions of *Nasihatanama* in their daily *nit-nem*. The *Nasihatanama* is not *Gurbani*. However, the importance of *Rahit-maryada Hukammama* shows that Sant Harnam Singh was at the centre of the socio-religious scheme of the Neeldhari Sikhs. Following the standard practice of the founders of other Sikh sects and cults, the Neeldhari Sikhs too reassured themselves that the *sants* and *babas* were God's messengers who had been assigned divine mission. But respecting the Sikh tradition, they did not affix the adjective of Satguru or Sache Patshah against the name of Sant Harnam Singh and they recognized the spiritual and temporal authority of the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*. They thought and believed that Sant Maharaj Harnam Singh was God's incarnation. Akal Purakh was bountiful to send him on the earth for the betterment of the world and revival of humanism. The booklet recently published by the *dera* declares that:

An auspicious appearance of Shri Sant Maharaj Ji Kilewale in this world. Akal Purakh bestows innumerable powers on His messengers called *Avatars* and sends them to this world for the revival of Universal humanism and well-being for the all.

Nevertheless, to ward off the wrath of the Sikh mainstream, Sant Harnam Singh and his confidants revived the concept of Shabad-Guru. 'In distinctive Sikh usage, *shabad* means a hymn or sacred word from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. In theological sense, it stands for the "word" revealed by the *guru*'. Sant Harnam Singh asked his followers to attach themselves with *Shabad-Guru*, i.e. the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* and not with him or other human beings who are mortal. Interpreting *Shabad*, Sant told his followers that the *Shabad* was the manifestation of spiritualism and ultimately led the human-being to God's abode. Before his death, he asked one of his confidants to bow before the *Shri Guru Granth* and accept him as Guru. Sant Harnam Singh's *hukam* (order) has left a perceptible change in Neeldhari *maryada*. Sant Bhagwan Singh (president of Neeldhari Trust appointed by Sant Harnam Singh) and his other confidants do not believe

in *dehdhari guru*. They perform *paths/akhand paths/sampat paths* and *gurmat paths*. The Neeldhari faction of Pipli Sahib headquarters has adopted *khande-ki-pahul* and its *maryada* of five 'k's. It has given up *chakuta* and instead the followers wear a blue turban which displays the steel logo of *khanda*. The head of Neeldhari establishment Pipli Sahib can be seen wearing five *kakkars* and holding a long Shri Sahib (*kirpan*). Some of the followers of this faction also wear *gattras* (cotton strips holding small-sized *kirpan* across the shoulder). They claim a resurgence of their followers who have become protagonists of *bani* and *bana* comprising light blue turban and *kamarkassa*. In the new form they can be seen sharing dais with Sant Samaj (neeldharipipli.com). There are theological inconsistencies and contradictions in the mission of Neeldhari Sikhs. On the one hand, they espouse *Sabad Guru* while on the other they believe in the concept of *Neh Kalank Avtar* and think this *avtar* would reappear in this world and people of all faiths would merge into the *Teesra Panth* wearing *neela bana* (blue dress). Such faith goes against the belief of the Sikh Gurus.

Nanaksari Establishments

The Nanaksar establishment was founded by Baba Nand Singh (1872-1943) in the mid-twentieth century. Its headquarters, popularly known as *Thaath Nanaksar Kaleran*, is located at Jagraon in the district of Ludhiana (Punjabi word 'thaath' implies splendor). There are more than 12 major *Thaaths* and a large number of health and educational institutions in and outside Punjab. Each *Thaath* is controlled and managed either by *babas* or *mukh sevadars* and *sevadars*. The founder-*babas* enjoy the spiritually elevated status of *Mahapurush* who were assigned divine mission by the Akal Purakh. However, they believe and worship the ten Sikh Gurus and the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Guru Nanak Dev occupies a central position in the structure of their beliefs and practices. The *sevadars*, known as *bihangmis*, observe a code of conduct and social taboos. There are millions of followers who come from several occupational castes, principally agriculturists, traders and artisans.

It was Baba Nand Singh who perceived the *Guru Granth Sahib* as a living embodiment of Guru Nanak Dev. He contested the status of *Dehdhari* Gurus and persuaded them to believe in the concept of *Guru Granth Sahib*. He wanted 'to see God face to face in *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*. He yearned to talk to His beloved Lord in person, serve and love him'. For him, the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* glorified the spiritual stature of a true saint, a true *Braham Giani* and a true *Gurmukh*. Since the *Guru Granth Sahib*

was an embodiment of a living Guru – Satguru Nanak Dev Ji – he asked his devotees to imagine and worship it as if Guru Nanak was sitting there. Baba ordered his attendants to place a lifesize portrait of Guru Nanak Dev within the Nanaksar Gurdwaras.

Baba used to observe that the portrait was only for remembering Guru Nanak Dev with affection and concentrating the mind in perpetually remembering the True Master, the One Universal God. Baba believed that constantly remembering Guru Nanak Dev helped man attain a stage where he would be able to talk to God face to face. Then there would be no need to see his portrait.

For Baba Nand Singh, Guru Nanak and *Guru Granth Sahib* were interchangeable. Since Guru Nanak Dev set in motion the wheel of *Sat-Nam*, therefore, Baba Nand Singh emphasized the value of *Nam*. *Nam* should be uttered with every breath. No breath should be allowed to go to waste. When the *Nam* is uttered each breath reaches the Kingdom of God. For Baba Nand Singh good deeds are meaningless if the man does not repeat the *Nam* and worship God.

Those who boast of their good deeds and assert that there is no use of repeating the *Nam* or reciting Gurbani are living in darkness. No doubt, it is very essential to be virtuous and to perform good deeds; but this alone will not give Salvation. When the Light of the *Nam* shines, only then all the evils and sins will be wiped off automatically. Evil habits such as drinking, gambling, etc. will automatically vanish if the *Nam* is worshiped and repeated. The *Nam* is just like fire, which burns the evils. It is one of the basic qualities of the *Nam* or Gurbani that it destroys sins, even if it is not repeated with attention.

Baba was convinced that the use of a rosary was extremely helpful to a man for his concentration on *Nam*:

One should recite Sukhmani Sahib twice each day. Or one should recite Jap Ji Sahib ten times each day. Or one should recite the First Stanza (Pauri) of the Jap Ji Sahib with the help of a rosary of 108 beads, reciting it on each bead and in this way the rosary should be rotated six times a day. Or one should utter 'Waheguru', 'Waheguru' on each bead of a rosary of 108 beads, rotating the rosary for eighty times and if one can repeat 'Waheguru' four times on each bead, then the rosary should be rotated only twenty times. One, who wants to utter 'Ram' 'Ram', should repeat this by rotating the rosary for one hundred and sixty times. A Mohammedan should utter 'Allah' 'Allah' four times on each bead and should rotate the rosary for eighty times. All persons whether men or

women, whether Sikhs, Hindus or Muhammedans or belonging to any other religion, should repeat the Name of God in this way.

Baba Nand Singh evolved a mode of recitation of *Gurmantar*. He found that some people recited it loudly whereas others did it in a low voice. He prescribed that each person should perform *simran* for at least one hour. He told his followers that the month of *Magh* (January-February) was more fruitful spiritually for *simran*. He further prescribed that one should continuously recite the *path* or Mulmantra. Explaining the mode of recitation of Waheguru, he said: a devotee should utter the first part *Wahe* while inhaling and then utter *Guru* exhaling. Reciting in this manner refreshed a person spiritually, shed him of ignorance and enlightened him. If a person made this process a way of his life, he would attain union with his Lord, the Satguru. Baba Nand Singh believed the night of *Puranmashi* was most appropriate for attaining union with Guru Nanak and seeking His blessings. During this night, he recommended reciting the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*. Each devotee was given the above mentioned options for the recitation of *path*. Till today, this practice continues at Nanaksar, Jagraon. Baba Nand Singh and his successors strongly believed that *ardas* is a very effective means to attain union with God, seek His blessings and ask forgiveness for one's sins and omissions. They also believed that *ardas*, if done faithfully and honestly, cultivated humility in a devotee as it shed him of his arrogance (of knowledge, social status, power and wealth, etc.). They told their followers to pray to God for showing them the righteous path. Simultaneously, the Nanaksari *babas* propagated the ethics of Sikhism: *kirat karna* and *vand chhakna* (honest earning and sharing it with the needy). They advocated avoiding temptations, backbiting and ostentatious life. They exhorted the followers to eat simple food and wear simple clothes and learn to live according to God's will.

Baba Nand Singh's successor Baba Ishar Singh played an important role in evolving a distinct identity for this denomination. After assuming the charge of *Thaath* of Kaleran, he constructed a *sarovar* and named it Sachkhand of Nanaksar Thaath. In *Gurbani*, Sachkand is that place where God Himself resides. Baba Ishar Singh also constructed some other *Thaaths*. Following the Sikh tradition, each *Thaath* had a *sarovar*. For giving a religious legitimacy to these *Thaaths*, Baba Ishar Singh and his successors quoted couplets of *Gurbani* emphasizing the importance of *tirathas* (holy places). While taking a dip in the *sarovar*, he declared that bathing in it is

equivalent to having performed pilgrimage at 68 holy places. *Ath(i) sath(i) tirath jey sadh pag dharai* (68 places are where saints keep their feet).

The protagonists of this establishment believed Baba Nand Singh was a true saint, *Brahm Giani* and *Gurmukh*. They declared him a prophet who came for the redemption of all creation. By the implication of their argument, the protagonists believed and advocated that *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, Shri Guru Nanak Dev and Baba Nand Singh formed a trinity. They intensively quoted *Gurbani* asking the followers to have deep reverence for *sants/sadhus* and avoid their criticism or condemnation which amounted to sin. They proclaimed that any person who indulged in this exercise would not find a space in God's abode.

Spiritual elevation of Baba Nand Singh to the status of Prophet provided ample scope for his personal worship: thousands of people started believing in Baba's occult powers. His successors built up *Thaaths* which displayed Baba Nand Singh's photograph, along with that of Guru Nanak Dev. Similarly, they constructed beautiful *Thaaths* in his memory. These *Thaaths* have become pilgrimage centres for Nanaksari devotees. They perceive and worship these *Thaaths* as if they are the embodiment of Sachkhand; God's abode. The metaphor of Sachkhand applied to these *Thaaths* indicates a parallel construct of the religious places of Nanaksari Sikhs. The Sachkhand concept is applied to historical gurdwaras like Harimandir Sahib at Amritsar and Sachkhand at Hazur Sahib. The *maryada* of these *Thaaths* has evolved. According to it a water-bucket, *datan* (a twig of tree), clothes and soap outside *bhora* are kept for Babaji's daily *ishnan* (bath). *Prasad* is also offered to Babaji's photograph. For decades this routine has been maintained which has taken the form of ritual observed by thousands of people. Moreover, they emulate this ritual, though in modified form, at their respective houses too. Whereas Baba Nand Singh himself evolved a *maryada* for invoking the blessings of the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, he expected from his followers to complete recitation of the whole of *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* in a month or complete 50 *paths* of the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* in a month; recite two *paths* of *Shri Sukhmani Sahib* daily or complete 250 *paths* of *Jap Ji Sahib* in a month; or recite 10 *paths* of *Jap Ji Sahib* daily.

The structure of rituals performed at *Thaaths* since Baba Nand Singh's time are as follows: *seva* of *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* is performed by *sevadars* as well as devotees who observe a code of worship. *Prasad* is offered to the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* accordingly. The *Thaaths* (i) do not host Sikh flag of any colour; (ii) do not contain *golak* (box for offering); (iii) *langar* is not

cooked in the complex of *Thaaths*. It is brought by the devotees from their respective houses; (iv) *prasad* comprises *mishri* (sugar balls); (v) in some of the *Thaaths* a specific *maryada* of *prasad* is observed; (vi) *Sampat path* of *Sukhmani Sahib* is performed. The *ardas* (supplication) is performed by the Nanaksaris but in an amended form of Sikh *ardas*. The *sevadars* of the *Thaaths* are usually bachelors known as *bihangamis*. The dress of the *sevadars* comprises white *chola* (long apparel), breaches and round turban. They are baptized Sikhs but they do not keep the five *kakkars* in the traditional form. For instance, they do not keep the sword. The *sanskar* (last rite) of Nanaksari *babas* is performed differently, i.e. followers usually release the bodies of their *babas* into the flowing water (rivers).

Baba Nand Singh and his confidants have been the protagonists of vegetarian food and forbid intoxicants of all kinds. They believe that the *Gurbani* strictly prohibits the eating of meat, fish, eggs and all kinds of non-vegetarian food. They extensively quote passages from *Gurbani* with regard to the prohibition of non-vegetarian food and intoxicants. They contest the arguments of those Sikh scholars who justify the use of non-vegetarian food.

Besides this, the Nanaksar establishment is running a network of the following educational institutions and health services: Anand Ishar Partap College for Women, Barundi (Ludhiana); College for Women, Chakar (Ludhiana); Anand Ishar Public School & Anand Ishar Mata Ganga College for Women, Noormahal (Jalandhar); Anand Ishar Senior Secondary Public School (Mandi, HP); Guru Nanak International Public School (Delhi); Anand Ishar Panj Pyare Public School, Dewas Naka (Indore, MP); Guru Nanak Sikh School (UK).

Other Establishments of Sants and Babas

There are a large number of Sants and Babas who meditated on the name of god and acquired mystical/supernatural powers while they were in civil and military services of the British raj. They left their jobs and founded *deras*; defined and propogated Khalsa traditions. They also propogated the Sikh traditions of *seva* and *nam-simran* and served langar. Prominent among these *deras* are Dera Mastuana, Dera Santgarh or Harkhowal, Dera Morala Sahib and Dera Mastuana. They responded to the Singh Sabha and Akali movements. In the post-independent era, they founded modern schools and colleges. Sant Attar Singh, founder of Dera Mastuana, took a lead in synthesizing Sikh religious activities with educational and cultural programmes. Baba Iqbal Singh formed the

Kalgidhar Trust in 1956, and aspires to establish an Akal University in Damdama Sahib. He had already built a Baru Sahib Educational Campus in Sirmaur (Himachal Pradesh). Panth Rattan Bhai Sahib Bhai Jasbir Singh Ji Khalsa is well known for founding religious, educational and health institutions. Equally prominent are Kar Seva Wale Babe, Sant Gurmukh Singh, Sant Kharak Singh, Sant Seva Singh and Sant Mohinder Singh, to name a few, who have institutionalized the Kar Seva in the twentieth century. Baba Seva Singh, Khadur Sahib (Tarn Taran) has distinguished himself in widening the horizon of Kar Seva. He has been honored by the Government of India, UNO bodies and Universities for his environmental contribution.

Damdami Taksal and Akhand Kirtani Jatha

The Damdami Taksal Mehta, Amritsar and Akhand Kirtani Jatha of Bhai Randhir Singh are vocal in contesting the authority of SGPC. This contestation began when Sant Gurbachan Singh Ji Khalsa (1903-1969), successor of Sant Sunder Singh of Damdami Taksal, produced *Mangla-Charan* on the *Guru Granth Sahib*. His commentary raised a controversy among Sikh scholars. He was of the firm view that the *Damdama Sahib Bir* was the real *Adi Granth*. He wrote *Shri Gurmukh Prakash Granth* and *Gurbani Panth Darshan* and evolved attributes of *rahit maryada*. Besides, he evolved distinct practices of recitation of *Gurbani* in different forms: *sadharan path*, *sampat path*, *101 akhand path* and *weekly path*, etc. Each *path* has its own structure of rituals and practices. For instance, a coconut wrapped in a red scarf and earthen water pitcher on wet sand containing wheat seeds are placed by the side of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. During the course of the *akhand path*, a lamp with *ghee* or butter is kept on burning. The *bhog* is to be concluded by the recitation of *Arti*. He believed that the recitation of the *Japuji Sahib*, *Jap Sahib*, *Chaupai Sahib*, *Anand Sahib*, *Rahiras*, *Kirtan Sohila*, *Asa Di Var* and *Sukhmani Sahib* could transcend a man from the temporal to the spiritual level. The attributes of his *Gurmat Rahit Maryada* are distinct from the *Rahit Maryada* of the SGPC.

Recently, Damdami Taksal, Mehta published biographies of its heads and monographs on the Khalsa life and *Gurmat Rahit Maryada*. The biographies enlists 32 *niyam* (principles) to be observed by the members of Jatha Bhindran (Mehta). Several principles are at variation with the *Maryada* of the SGPC.

Similarly *Gurmat Rahit Maryada* of Akhand Kirtani Jatha is different from the *Rahit Maryada* of SGPC. Bhai Manmohan Singh, protagonist of

Akhand Kirtani Jatha has contested the views of several Sikh scholars including the SGPC with regard to (a) meat eating, (b) *Keski* or *Chhoti Dastar*, (c) *Rag Mala*, (d) *Guru Ka Langar*. Bhai Manmohan Singh says that the word *kutha* used in the Sikh code of conduct does not refer to *halaal* or sacrificial meat but to meat and allied products as a whole. It means simply to slay or cut the animals, what word may be the method used for the purpose. In justification of *Keski* as one of the Khalsa symbols the *jatha* argues that it has been 'worn by Sikhs, or Khalsa men and women, right from the birth of the Khalsa Nation'. Moreover the Akhand Kirtani Jatha is exceptional in admitting a woman among the Five beloved Ones which conduct the *amrit* ceremony. Although the Sikh *Rahit-maryada* allows a woman to be one of the Panj Piaras at the time of the *amrit* ceremony yet the Damdami Taksal refused her admission to the institutions of Five Beloveds. As regards the *Rag Mala*, the *jatha* is of the firm opinion that it is not part of *Gurbani* and is opposed to Damdami Taksal.

Similarly, the Akhand Kirtani Jatha has its own perception of *Guru ka Langar*. For this *jatha* it is not sufficient that *langar* is prepared either in the gurdwara or in the household of a Sikh. The *Guru ka Langar* can only be called so if it is prepared by the Gur-ke-Sikhs. It believes that it is only for this reason that *Guru Gobind Singh* asked the recipients of the holy *amrit* to share food among themselves in the same plate, but forbade them to do so with non-Amritdharis. Moreover (1) The members of this *jatha* are *Amritdhari* Sikhs. They take initiation water (*amrit*) from each member of Panj Piaras, not collectively. (2) They keep five *ks* but always display the *kara* (iron bangle) and iron *chakkars*. (3) The *jatha* has a practice of meditation on the *Gurmantar* (holy word). (4) It is obligatory for each member to meditate on the *Gurmantar* in the ambrosial hour and recite the five *banis*. Similarly, they recite *bani* in the evening. (5) They wear long loose shirts and breeches like the Nihangs. (6) The female members of the *jatha* tie up their hair on their heads and cover with the *Keski*. (7) The *jatha* often perform all night *kirtans* known as *Reinsubai*. (8) They cook and take food in iron vessels. They do not take food prepared either by the *Keshdhari* or *Amritdhari*.

Both the Damdami Taksal and the Akhand Kirtani Jatha seriously challenged the temporal authority of the SGPC during the Khalistan Movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The SGPC realizes the political and religious relevance of establishments of Sants and Babas. It often honours those Sants and Babas who render services to the Sikh

Panth. However, the SGPC avoids interaction with the Guru-centric establishments.