

## Culture And Traditions Of The Namdhari Community In India

Gurjeet Kaur<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Manu Sharma<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*The Namdhari community is an integral part of Sikh religion. Namdharis are known as kuka; kuka movement that was started by Satguru Ram Singh against the Britishers during colonial India as well to reform the Sikh religion and society. The followers of Satguru Ram Singh are being called kuka due to their shouting in the religious congregations while chanting the name of God. Due to continuous chanting of the name of God, they got the name Namdhari. Since this sect was established in Punjab, India, therefore most of the Namdharis live in India only. Apart from this, as it expanded with time, some of Namdharis left India and settled in foreign countries also. The present paper examines the culture and traditions of the Namdhari community in India.*

**Keyword:** Namdhari, India, Culture, Religion, Community

### Introduction

The Namdhari community is an offshoot of Sikhism founded by Satguru Balak Singh (1797–1862) in the village of Hazro in the mid-1800s (Singh 1966, pp.127–28). Hazro is a Pathan town located in Hazro Tehsil of Attock District in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Satguru Balak Singh protested against "moral laxity in the cult" (Contemporary Religion 1992, p. 245) and urged his followers to "live simply and perform no religious rituals except repeating the name of God" (Singh 1966, p. 128). His successor, Satguru Ram Singh (1816–1885), shifted the Namdhari headquarters to Bhaini village in Ludhiana (Punjab). Satguru Ram Singh made changes in the way of worship, appearance and dress that was different from the mainstream Sikhism. His followers shouted loudly and started fell into a state of frenzy, for which they came to be known as Kukas. Singh (1966) stated that the Namdharis wear only white hand-woven clothes and tie their turbans flat on the forehead. The present article comprises of two sections where section first explores the social customs of Namdhari Sikhs and in second section the religious life has been discussed.

### I Religious Beliefs and Practices of Namdhari Community

Beliefs and practices, as empirical realities and social facts, inherently and unequivocally constitute fundamental components of any given community, reflecting the multifaceted nature of its collective identity and shaping the intricate fabric of its social dynamics. The spiritual leader of any community becomes the center of their practices. Guru has a special place in the Namdhari community and they follow the Guru's sermons considering them as orders. The origin of this practice goes back to the letters written by Guru Ram Singh. His orders in these

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<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar Department of History, Lovely Professional University, Jalandhar

<sup>2</sup>Head & Associate Professor Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar

letters are known as Hukamnamas and has become a code of conduct for the Namdhari Sikhs. It has its own Rahitnama (collections of Codes of Conduct), directed by Satguru Ram Singh, in which he orders the practice of Naam Simran (chanting the name of God) for every Namdhari Sikh. They understand the existence of God in the form of Satguru. For every Namdhari man and woman, initiation is mandatory on three occasions: birth, marriage and death (Namdhari,1999). According to their code of conduct, five Sikhs take a full bath before performing the Amrit (Nectar) ritual. They wear a waist-belt of white cotton cloth and a battle-axe. The place where the Nectar ceremony is held, is purified by washing that place. An iron bowl filled with fresh water and sugar is kept on a post. They recite Gurbani while stirring the water. At the end of the preparation of Amrit, these Sikhs performs Ardaas (prayer), then this Amrit is served to the specific person. This process ends peacefully.

### **\*Nit-name**

In the practice of nit-name, Namdhari Sikhs get up at 2'o clock, early in the morning, brush teeth and take full bath. They recite Panj Granth or Jaipuji, Jap, Rahiras, Kirtan Sohila, Chandi di Var, Sukhmani and Ughardanti (Singh, 2010). Guru Ram Singh emphasized on the Nam Simran for their mental purification. Namdhari Gurus recognize the ultimate authority of the creator i.e. Akal Purakh. Meditation on His name, they believed, could liberate the human beings from everyday problems and ascend them to the adobe of Akal Purukh. In other words, recitation of the Nam is the only solution to mundane problems. It (Nam) is a holy word which these Guru whispered in the ears of his neophyte. It is called Gurmantar (the sacred word) i.e.- Waheguru. Similarly, since the inception of Namdhari mission emphasizes on the Nam Japo, Kirt Karo, Vand Chhako (repeat the divine name, work hard and give to others a portion of what you earn) (Besant Souvenir, 2006, p. 17). However, the Namdhari normative conduct can be divided into different modes like Bhajan Puchna, Simran, Bhog, katha, Diwan, Varni, Akhand Path and Nitnem etc. They believe in Guru Nanak's verse which says. that 'Truth is higher than everything else, but true conduct is high than Truth' (Singh,1970). Satguru Jagjit Singh emphasized that Nam-Simran can play a vital role in one's spiritual and ethical development. He obliged his followers that they should perform Nam-simran at least for an hour daily (Sikh Itihas de Chonwe Prashan Utter, 2005). It is the central meta-technique of transforming consciousness and gives the way for inter transformation.

### **\*Sacred Scriptures**

#### **Granth Sahib**

The two primary scriptures of the Sikhs are Granth Sahib and Dasam Granth. Granth Sahib also known as the Adi Granth Sahib, is the holy scripture of Sikh religion (Singh, 2023). It is a collection of around 6,000 hymns by Sikh gurus and various saints (Protopapas, 2020). Namdhari Sikhs acknowledge sacred Granths but they believe in the doctrine of Guru Panth, which legitimizes Guruship.

#### **Dasam Granth**

Dasam Granth is the collection of writings attributed to Guru Gobind Singh. Like the Adi-Granth, this sacred scripture receives the same honour and respect from the Sikhs (Singha, 2000). Namdharis still proudly consider its status as equal to the Granth Sahib and as a sacred text. Namdhari Sikhs recognized the works of Guru Gobind Singh therefore they gave way to his Bani in Namdhari Nitnem. However, during his imprisonment, Satguru Ram Singh was allowed to keep all the sacred literature of Guru Gobind Singh along with him (Singh, 2010). Therefore, apart from the doctrine of the living Guru, they are bound to profess their faith in

Sikh basic principles and institutions. Therefore, under the instruction of Satguru Ram Singh, the Namdhari consider the Granth Sahib and the Dasam Granth to be holy scriptures.

**\*Religious Institutions (Gurdwara/ Dharamshala)**

The main Namdhari Gurdwara Sri Bhaini Sahib is located in Ludhiana which is the central headquarters of the Namdhari community. This place is situated near Arayayan, the birthplace of Satguru Ram Singh. The foundation of this sect was laid by Satguru Ram Singh Ji at this historical place. It highlights the past and present of the sect. The people of this sect gather at Bahini Sahib on various religious occasions. Apart from this, Namdharis have built Gurdwara in different cities and villages for religious prayers. Another religious institution of Namdharis is called Dharamsala. Dharamsalas were used for socio-religious and political purpose against the British. In the Suba system, Namdhari Dharamsalas were maintained by the Subas with the help of a local Namdhari Sikhs.

**\*Kirtan And Katha**

Kirtan is an integral part of the Sikh tradition introduced by Guru Arjun Dev ji (Kaur, 1983). It involves singing the Bani written by Sikh gurus. The Gurbani is sung by religious musicians with the help of stringed instruments. It is performed on the ceremonies related to marriage and death. Namdhari Gurus continue to practice the old tradition, with professional teams of Musicians. The unique characteristic of their music is that they are not allowed to use western instruments to perform kirtan (Maingi, 2008). Vishav Namdhari Jatha, under the aegis of the Guru Jagjit Singh Ji, expanded and enriched the scope of devotional Music. Satguru Uday Singh Ji, the present head of namdhari sect is also promoting the devotional music. Katha is another religious practice that focuses on a discussion or explanation of specific passage from the Granths (Holy Scriptures), Namdhari Diwan is another mode of religious congregations held daily, usually in the morning and evening, on the special occasions. Holy scriptures are not necessary at the time of diwan.

**\*Akhand Path**

The Akhand Path is a continuous reading of the Granth Sahib by the scripture reader called Granthi, which takes around forty-eight hours. The days for performing the Akhand Path are fixed based on the availability of scripture reader. In the Akhand Path and langar process, well water is required, and the place must be purified with cow dung. The ceremony requires twelve people, to perform the Akhand Path. A lamp of purified butter is kept burning, and the scripture reader drops akhand ahuti (a combination of 22 ingredients) on the fire. On occasions of joy and sorrow, the Path is performed by family members and relatives with utmost attention (Maingi, 2012)

**\*Havan/ Varni**

Havan is a ritual performed by seven Sikhs, who are well-versed in the Namdhari Maryada. The Chandi Path and Havan were started by Guru Gobind Singh to instill martial spirit among the Sikhs for launching struggle against oppressors. The ritual involves taking a full bath, wearing five kakars (kacchahira<sup>2</sup>, kangha<sup>3</sup>, kes<sup>4</sup>, kirpan<sup>5</sup> and kara<sup>6</sup>), preparing a pit for a fire,

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<sup>2</sup> simple, loose, cotton shorts/undergarment

<sup>3</sup> Small wooden comb

<sup>4</sup> Hair

<sup>5</sup> Small Sword

<sup>6</sup> iron bangle worn on the wrist)

and offering in the fire. The Chandi Path is recited in the honor of Goddess Durga and emphasizes the need for devotees to fight against demons. The Varni System, introduced by Guru Partap Singh in 1934. The Bhajan Varni involves puritan Namdhari Sikhs taking a full bath, reciting Guru names, and rolling down woolen rosary beads. The Path Varni consists of reciting compositions like Chopai and Chandi di Var and it is done amidst the burning of fire. The ritual begins and ends with Ardas and sacramental food is distributed.

### \*Religious Symbols

The philosophy of the Namdhari Sant Khalsa is eternal and symbols represent it. Nevertheless, a person, community gets from the symbols what he puts in it. But the symbols are an embodiment of history, which leads to the religious community's sentiments. The Namdhari symbols which makes distinction from the rest of the Sikh community is as follow:

**The turban** is the primary symbol among Sikhs, with Namdharis known for their unique style turban. They call turbans Dastar instead of Pag and wear a white homespun turban horizontally across the forehead. Namdhari women do not wear turbans. The importance of the turban is evident in the 18th-century Rahitnamas, where removing the turban before eating is considered a sin (McLeod, 2007). The Sikhs too being the followers of their Satchi Patshah (true Lord) demonstrated their autonomous behavior. Their assertion became more pronounced when they became the members of the Khalsa order. The Namdhari Sikhs too carry on this legacy. They perceive turban as honour of the nation, symbolizes responsibility towards society and nation.



*Namdhari Sikh wearing Namdhari turban, Source: own work*

**Kesh (Hair and Beard)** Keeping unshorn hairs of head and face had been strong tradition of the Sikhism. Rahatnams of the 18th and 19th centuries supported the taboo of not cutting hair. However, with the arrival of the British Army in Punjab in the, baptized Sikh army soldiers began shaving their beards using cotton nets and threads. This was probably due to British Army regulations, which prohibited the keeping of beards. British officers and Sikh soldiers eventually had to compromise on beard tying. but Namdharis considered this tying beard was the symbol of slavery (Hanspal, 2001). So, the cutting and tying hair was prohibited from the beginning. For them, the hair and beard are the grandeur of humanity.

Another external symbol of Namdhari community is a white **Mala** i.e. rosary and it is a convenient mode of meditation. The use of the knot is a mnemonic sign and equality of knots denotes to the secular. However, in Hinduism, rosary consists of 108 beads either made of wood (tulsi or Rudraksh- a sacred tree) or teeth/bone of the dead animals. Sometimes it can be used as necklaces. In Sikhism rosary mostly makes in the form of steel coils beads and thread. However, Mala is the metaphor and symbolic medium of expression towards imperfect and to exert for perfection. Although, Namdharis are known for the recitation of the God therefore they perceive the the importance of the 108 beads rosary in different ways. The Namdharis use 108 beads Mala, as they believe that it is written in the Vedas that 1 jap (recitation) corresponds to 1 Mala (rosary-which has 108 beads). They believe



*Source: <https://melodyofgurbani.com/shop/ols/products/pure-namdhari-mala>*

that 108 i.e.  $1+0+8=9$ , therefore digit 9 relates to Sun (i.e. planet number). According to Yajurveda, the Sun is related to Lord Brahma. Apart from that among the Islamic, Jain, Sikh and Buddhism, the Chinese religions have also their beliefs regarding 108 numbers (Maingi, 2012). The concept of Mala of the Namdhari Community shows the complete unity, use the symbol of the knot with white wool stuff (thread) which implies pure and knots integrate the Namdhari Sangat with the Guru. Therefore, Nam Simran through the medium of mala is an undisturbed inter-merger of the two i.e. deity and devotee.

Namdhari ideology emphasizes on white attire as a symbol of peace and purity which is a symbol of equality. Boycott the British good by Satguru Ram Singh Ji led to an emphasis on the use of hand-spun cloth, which affected the economic structure of the British. Namdhari Sikhs also believe that the blue color symbolizes the lifestyle of Muslim soldiers. According to Guru Jagjit Singh, Namdhari dress inspires Non-Namdharis to come under namdhari code of conduct. It also inspires Namdhari Sikhs to worship hymns. Namdhari Guru claims that this color (dress) is the symbol of Satjug. Therefore, Guru Ram Singh introduced a new dress code: white kurta pajama and a round turban of cotton cloth. Similarly, women are expected to follow the namdhari code of conduct. They should avoid the use of jewelry and cosmetics. They should wear clothes in such a way that the whole body is covered except face. Namdhari Gurus emphasize that this white dress reflects the purity of mind and body.

### **Eating Habits**

The Namdhari Sikhs adhere to the rigid code of conduct. The Namdhari Sikhs are vegetarian. They refrain from consuming food from outside. They also refrain from consuming market-available foods, soft drinks, tea and coffee. Under the direction of their Guru, Namdhari youth abstain from any intoxicants, including alcohol, tobacco and other drugs of abuse. A significant number of Namdhari Sikhs attend social events and consume vegetarian fare. However, they avoid eating anything that has non-vegetarian ingredients. Satjug (a periodical of the sect) informs the Namdhari Sangat about practices that are harmful to their health and also forbids them in accordance with the Namdhari Maryada, paying close attention to the Namdhari Sangat's well-being. Clarified butter is typically used in the Namdhari diet. Other vegetable oils are used in food less frequently. However, they typically give out homemade sweets and provide herbal tea to the neighborhood and gatherings on the occasions. However, Namdhari food taboos were mostly influenced by Ayurveda (Maingi, 2012).

## **II Social Customs**

Since their origin, Namdhari Sikhs have developed a structure of rituals and ceremonies relating to birth, naming, marriage and death.

### ➤ **Birth**

Namdhari Sikhs consider the birth of a child as a blessing from God without discriminating between boys and girls. They celebrate this occasion with simplicity yet being a part of the society they also follow some customs. There are two customs associated with it: Chaunke charna and naming. On the thirteenth or fortieth day after the birth of the child, the mother resumes kitchen work which is called Chaunke charna (Singh, 2010). Both mother and child are then baptized by either a family elder or a person who knows the norms, who also names the child. On this occasion, Namdhari Sikhs sometimes perform Hawan or Varni and distribute Karah Prasad at the end of the ceremony. Nevertheless, some serve lunch to invited people. Some families prefer to hold the naming ceremony at Bhaini Sahib headquarters.

### ➤ **Marriage**

Namdharis advocate simple marriage system. Guru Balak Singh asked his followers to perform marriage ritual in a simple way, avoiding all kinds of expenses. Apart from this, Guru Ram Singh's Hukamnamas also orders marriages to be conducted in simple way. Moreover, it was again enriched by his successor Guru Partap Singh (Sikh Itihas de Chonve Prashan- Uttar, 2005). Usually, mass marriages are performed on religious ceremonies (Singh, 1977). Apart from this, those who are unable to get married in fairs can get anytime at Namdhari headquarters or Gurudwaras. On the occasion of marriage, the couple wear white clothes. The bride does not wear any kind of makeup. Applying nail polish and lipstick, wearing jewelry and any ornament is prohibited. The bride does not cover her face. According to Namdhari Maryada, no function is organized after the marriage. The practice of organizing marriages at homes has been stopped. Similarly, exchange of dowry is not permitted. In case of violation, penalties are imposed. The amount of this fine is usually equal to the amount of dowry exchanged (Kavi, 1997). Namdhari Guru has established a department at Bhaini Sahib headquarters to solemnize marriages where parents can contact for the suitable match for their son/daughter, they take into account the social background of families, castes and sub-castes. They also take care of the merits and demerits of their children along with their abilities. Most Namdhari parents prefer to arrange marriages within the castes of their choice (Kavi, 1997). However, inter-caste marriages also take place.

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