

What I Know	What I Want to Find Out	How I Can Learn More	What I Have Learned

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### Singh Sabhā Movement (ਸਿੰਘ ਸਭਾ)

The Singh Sabhā movement from about 1873 to the 1920's will go down in history as the greatest socio-religious reform movement of the Sikhs. It came at a time when Sikhī (ਸਿਖੀ) was in danger of losing its distinctive identity. Had it not been for the efforts of the Singh Sabhā movement, Sikhī could have been absorbed into Hinduism as one of its sects which had happened to other religions such as Buddhism and Jainism in India. A contemporary observer noted: “Just as we do not see any Buddhists in the country except in images, in the same fashion the Sikhs—who are not everywhere distinctive in their turbans and their other religious forms like wrist bangles and swords—will be seen only in pictures in museums. Their own sons and grandsons, clad in coats and trousers and sporting mushroom-like caps, would go to see them in museums and say, in their pidgin Pañjābi (ਪੰਜਾਬੀ): Look that is the picture of a Sikh (ਸਿਖ)—the tribe that inhabited this country once upon a time. Efforts of those who wish to resist the onslaught of Christianity are feeble and will prove abortive, like a leper without hands and feet trying to save a boy falling of a rooftop” - *Khālsā Akhbār of Lāhaur* (ਖਾਲਸਾ ਅਖਬਾਰ, ਲਾਹੌਰ), May 25, 1894, from the pen of its editor Giānī Dīṭ Singh (ਗਿਆਨੀ ਦਿਤ ਸਿੰਘ).

This was the state of affairs before the coming of the Singh Sabhā. The Sikhs had lost their identity to rites and rituals, dogmas and superstitions to the point that the socio-religious fabric of the community had been damaged beyond recognition.

The Census of 1855 listed Sikhs as Hindūs (not until 1871 were they considered separate). The number of Sikhs embracing other faiths was beginning to increase steadily; especially, towards the Christian faith. Sikhs were shocked when Dalīp Singh (ਦਲੀਪ ਸਿੰਘ) and Rājā Harnām Singh (ਰਾਜਾ ਹਰਨਾਮ ਸਿੰਘ) of Kapūrthālā (ਕਪੂਰਥਲਾ) converted to Christianity. The low-caste Sikhs were more vulnerable to the Christian influence because of employment opportunities and better social status. “Before the movement had got well under way, the powerful Singh Sabhā editor, Giānī Dīṭ Singh, who met the raging polemics against the Sikhs with extraordinary literary and scholarly resource and who was one of the leading lights of the reformation, had to withdraw himself from the Sikh congregation at the time of the distribution of karahprashad (Kaṛāh Prashād – ਕੜਾਹ ਪ੍ਰਸ਼ਾਦ). The reason was that he came of a so-called low-caste family (*Cūrā* - ਚੂੜਾ).” (Origins of Singh Sabhā - Harbans Singh)

The Sikhs were divided into two sections at this time. One regarded Sikhī as a distinct faith and the others thought it to be an offshoot, or a branch of Hindūism. Those that saw it as an offshoot or a branch of Hindūism also did not think it was necessary to follow the code of conduct (*Rahit* - ਰਹਿਤ) prescribed by Gurū Gobind Singh Sāhib (ਗੁਰੂ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਾਹਿਬ). This was because of propaganda in certain areas that the religious symbols of the Sikhs had lost their significance. The Singh Sabhā played a significant role in the socio-religious rebirth of the Sikh community. It helped in making Sikhs aware of their great spiritual and cultural heritage, of their being the “*Khālsā*. It brought them back to being an independent community, bound together by faith in the teachings of their *Gurūs*, distinct social laws, customs and language. The keynote of the Singh Sabhā was, “Back to the Gurū Granth Sahib” (ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ).

*Source: The Sikh Review January 2006 issue. ‘The Singh Sabhā Movement’ by Dr.G.S. Dhillon Ph.D.*

### Thinking/Discussion Questions: