

5 minute guide

to SIKHISM

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Introduction

There are approximately 25 million Sikhs in the world today.

Sikhism is a monotheistic faith, which was founded in the fifteenth century by Guru Nanak in the region of Panjab, northwest India. It is recognised as the youngest of world religions. Among its many teachings Sikhism promotes the unity of God, universal love, equality and brotherhood of man, strict moral conduct and the rejection of the caste system, idol worship, superstitious belief and inferiority of women.

There are approximately 500,000 Sikhs living in Great Britain today.

History

The founder of Sikhism was **Guru Nanak** (1469-1539). During this time, the dominant Hindu and Muslim communities across northern India had degenerated and become deeply divided. Guru Nanak's parents belonged to the Kshatrya or warrior caste of Hindus. His father, Mehta Kalu, was a revenue accountant. He had an elder sister called Nanaki, five years his senior. At a tender age Guru Nanak displayed extraordinary spiritual and intellectual maturity, boldly challenging and rejecting meaningless rituals and caste prejudices prevalent among Hindus, and the intolerance of Muslims; teaching instead the need for practical devotion to one Supreme God and acceptance that all beings, made of the same elements, were equal, and that God does not favour one religion over another – only man's good deeds.

Guru Nanak believed family life was important for personal development. He married and had two sons and worked as a farmer, then as a storekeeper. At 27, Guru Nanak had a unique experience when God revealed himself and commissioned him to establish a new order for the creation of the ideal man and society. From this moment onwards Guru Nanak undertook extensive missionary tours lasting nearly 30 years, during which time he travelled as far afield as Tibet, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Kashmir, Mecca and Medina, visiting the important centres of other religions, spreading the message of universal equality and love. **Gurdwaras** (Sikh places of worship) were established for the purpose of collective worship, incorporating the institution of **Langar** (community kitchen), which aimed to remove caste barriers and social taboos, and where the spirit of selfless service and social harmony could be nurtured.

Guru Nanak returned to his family and established a township called Kartarpur (now in Pakistan) and continued with his ministry for the remainder of his life with his community of "disciples" (**Sikhs**). Following rigorous tests, Guru Nanak chose as his successor a disciple named Angad. The Light of Guru Nanak merged with Angad's to become the Second Nanak. Guru Angad continued the work that Guru Nanak had begun, promoting the education of children and physical fitness. This was the beginning of a line of ten successive Gurus who shared the same ministry and promoted the same teachings based on Guru Nanak's doctrine, developing the Sikh character and model community over a period of 240 years.

The Gurus

The Sikh Gurus are regarded by Sikhs as fully enlightened souls and spiritual teachers. The Gurus themselves empathically admonished their followers against regarding them as divine incarnations, stating they were merely slaves of God.

This human line of Gurus ended with Gurum Gobind Singh (Tenth Nanak) in 1708, who conferred the eternal Guruship on the sacred Sikh scripture.

Guru Amar Das (Third Nanak) paid serious attention to the propagation of Sikhism by establishing 22 missionary centres. He also trained and appointed travelling missionaries, including women, to spread the message of Sikhism throughout India. **Guru Ram Das** (Fourth Nanak) began a policy of urban development by building the town of Amritsar, which became the focus of Sikh religious life. He laid down the Sikh code of conduct, championed the rights of women to remarry and encouraged social responsibility. He also composed hymns for the Sikh marriage ceremony.

Guru Arjun (Fifth Nanak) developed Amritsar as a centre of trade, industry and culture. He requested Mian Mir, a Muslim saint, to lay the foundation stone of **Harmandir Sahib** (the sanctum sanctorum of Sikhism) in which the **Adi Granth** (first sacred book of the Sikhs) was compiled and installed. Guru Arjun's growing influence and the spread of Sikhism aroused the animosity of the Mughal Emperor Jehangir who had him executed on false pretexts. Guru Arjun bore severe tortures with great resignation, becoming the first Sikh martyr. This event resulted in rising tensions between the minority Sikh community and the Mughal Empire.

The Sixth Nanak, **Guru Hargobind**, responded by militarising and mobilising the Sikh community in defence of the new faith against growing Mughul oppression, for which he was imprisoned. On his release he secured the freedom of 52 Hindu princes. He and his small but well-trained army of warrior-saints then defeated the Mughul armies in three major battles. Guru Hargobind created the Sikh political centre called **Akal Takht** (Throne of the Eternal) in close proximity to the spiritual centre (Harmandir Sahib), where the secular affairs of the Sikh nation were governed. The mission of the Sikhs henceforth was to use the sword only in the defence and liberation of downtrodden people from religious and political tyranny.

Guru Har Rai (Seventh Nanak) set-up dispensaries to provide free services for the treatment and care of the sick and taught the Sikhs to show humility and forgiveness from a position of strength. **Guru Har Krishan** (Eighth Nanak) received Guruship at the tender age of five and showed great wisdom and spiritual maturity in leading the Sikh community. In Delhi he began his mission of providing care and relief for those stricken with cholera. He died of smallpox at the age of eight after revealing his successor, **Guru Tegh Bahadur** (Ninth Nanak). He responded to the calls of oppressed Hindus from Kashmir to liberate them from forceful conversions to Islam by the Mughal regime. Guru Tegh Bahadur courted arrest in protest and was subsequently martyred for upholding the fundamental right of others to freely practise their religion. He refused to embrace Islam. The Guru's unparalleled self-sacrifice was not to save the Hindu religion per se, but to defend a universal human right.

Guru Gobind Singh became the Tenth and last Nanak at the age of nine after the martyrdom of his father. In preparation for the defence of the Sikh community against the Mughal onslaught and the intrusive Hill Rajas, he built forts and set about training his disciples in the art of warfare. Guru Nanak's mission of creating a just, tolerant and egalitarian society, which aspired to higher ideals, came to fruition when Guru Gobind Singh created, in 1699, the **Khalsa Panth** (community of pure ones). He established a new initiation rite called **Khanda-di-Pahul** for his followers and instructed them to adhere to a strict moral code of conduct and discipline, and to maintain a distinct identity and readiness to use arms for righteous causes. Uniquely, he himself asked the first five initiated Sikhs (**Panj Piaray**) to initiate him, indicating that disciple and master had become one and the same.

Under his inspirational leadership the fearless Khalsa dealt a crushing blow to the Mughal power, fighting many wars against overwhelming odds. All four of his sons were martyred in these heroic struggles along with thousands of Sikhs whose deeds and unflinching commitment to Sikh ideals are remembered in daily prayers.

The Five K's

Once initiated, a Sikh wears the “**Five Ks**”. These are:

- **Kesh**: Uncut hair covered with a turban, respecting natural form.
- **Kirpan**: A short sword for last line of defence.
- **Kangha**: A wooden comb to keep hair tidy, a reminder to maintain cleanliness and keep thoughts pure.
- **Kara**: A steel wristband, a reminder of the need to exercise self-restraint.
- **Kachera**: Cotton shorts or breeches for chastity and self-respect.

On initiation, the surname ‘**Singh**’ (lion), signifying bravery, is given to male Sikhs, and women ‘**Kaur**’ (princess), following the Tenth Guru’s instructions in respect of the equal social status of women. A Sikh’s personal conduct and discipline was to be exemplary in every respect. All (immoral) actions not conducive to spiritual progress such as adultery, infanticide, untruthfulness and slander were to be shunned. Alcohol, tobacco and other intoxicants were also to be strictly avoided. Freedom from fear, ceaseless meditation on the Name of God and service to fellow man was the Sikh path to spiritual liberation and union with the Supreme Spirit (God).

Guru Gobind Singh continued to fight the Mughul Empire until his death in 1708. He was the last and final human Guru of the Sikhs. He conferred the eternal spiritual Guruship and teaching to the **Adi Granth** (Original Holy Scriptures), which he completed and publicly installed as **Guru Granth Sahib**. The collective body of the Khalsa represented the Guru’s form and hence a ‘second coming’ of a human Guru does not arise. Sikhs consider the message contained within the scriptures to be the living Word of God, communicated directly through the enlightened Gurus. Wherever the Guru Granth Sahib is present, the place is considered to be a **Gurdwara** (Sikh place of worship). It is central to all Sikh ceremonies including birth, marriage and death. It contains 5,948 poetic hymns set to musical measures (**Raags**) and can be read or sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

Traditions/Beliefs

Some of the Basic Beliefs of Sikhism are:

- There is only one God, the sole creator, sustainer and destroyer. Sikhs do not believe in duality, but unity in diversity. God cannot take on the human form. Daily prayer and devotion to God and His Creation is required.
- The rejection of the divisive Caste system. Sikhs reject any distinction on the basis of class, race, creed or sex. Sikhs believe in full equality for all people.
- The Sikh goal is to end the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and unite the separated individual soul with the Universal Soul (God). The way to attain this goal is through applying the teachings of the Gurus to all situations, continuous meditation on the Holy Name, selfless service, control of mind and correct regulation of desires and impulses.

- In Sikhism there are 4 cardinal sins (Kurahts). Sikhs should not: cut their hair, commit adultery, use tobacco or other drugs and not eat ritually slaughtered meat, such as halal meat.
- Sikhism identifies 5 vices which a Sikh must regulate and control. These are: **Kaam** (lust), **Krodh** (anger), **Lobh** (greed), **Moh** (worldly attachment) and **Ahankar** (egotism).
- Blind rituals such as idol worship, yoga, superstitions, pilgrimages and fasting are prohibited.
- The recognition that the Sikh sacred scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, is the eternal Guru and that there will be no more human Gurus.
- To protect and help those in need through charity and community service.

Worship

Congregational worship at the Sikh place of worship (**Gurdwara**) is called **Diwaan**, and its purpose is to praise God and develop the spirituality of the individual and community. There are no ordained holy days in Sikhism. In Sikhism each moment is considered holy and living itself considered an act of devotion. Most Sikh families tend to visit a Gurdwara on a Sunday. A Sikh should visit the Gurdwara as often as possible to receive teachings from Guru Granth Sahib and seek the company of the holy congregation (**Saadh Sangat**) for spiritual guidance and well-being through meditation (**Naam Simran**), prayer (**Paat**), the singing of hymns (**Keertan**) from Guru Granth Sahib and through rendering selfless service (**Seva**).

Sikhs are expected to become and remain God-conscious with every breath. Their prayers exhort the need for self-exploration, self-knowledge and self-realisation, and the running of their daily lives in accordance with the Guru's Word (**Gurmatt**). Sikhs pray daily at three times: before sunrise (**Nitnem**), in the evening (**Raihraas**) and before going to sleep (**Sohelaa**). However, Sikhs can additionally pray and meditate as much as they like when and where it practically suits them. Sikhs do not pray in any particular direction, believing God resides everywhere in His Creation. At the Gurdwara everyone sits on the floor to show the equality of all people; this included Prince Charles when he visited a Gurdwara in Derby.

Public worship can be led by any competent member of the Sikh community and therefore the notion of priesthood is alien to Sikhs. Women participate fully in all aspects. People appointed to special positions do not have a job for life. When their particular duty is over they revert to being members of the community.

Gurdwara

The Gurdwara is open to all people. To enter, all devotees and visitors must remove their shoes and cover their head and dress modestly. Tobacco, alcohol and other intoxicants must not be taken inside. Many established Gurdwaras open before dawn and function without a break until 9.00 or 10.00 p.m. Where there is a smaller Sikh community, suitable opening times are arranged. When Sikhs enter the main hall of the Gurdwara, they bow or prostrate themselves in front of Guru Granth Sahib (which is installed on a raised platform with a canopy above it) as a mark of respect to the Guru's teachings, and make some sort of offering (this could be food or money). Generally speaking, men and women sit separately to avoid physical contact.

Throughout the day religious services are organised including congregational prayers, hymn singing (**Keertan**), meditation on God's Name (**Naam Simran**) and sermons (**Katha**). The final service ends with prayers and the invocation to God (**Ardaas**) which prays for universal blessing and the well-being of all mankind. After the service, all are requested to sit together and eat a vegetarian meal (**Langar**) prepared by volunteers (**Sevadars**). This meal is of great significance because it symbolizes the importance of equality and service to the community.

Ceremonies

- **Naam Karan.** Naming of a Child. As soon as mother and child are able, the family visits the Gurdwara. Joyful hymns are recited and a sacred sweet pudding (**Karah Prashad**) is prepared and distributed by the family. The reader of scriptures (**Granthi**) randomly opens the Guru Granth Sahib at any page and reads a hymn from that page. The first letter of the first word of the hymn is chosen and the child's name is chosen beginning with this letter.
- **Amrit Sanskar.** Sikh Initiation. A sacred ceremony administered by Five Elect Sikhs (**Panj Piaray**) who initiate a devotee into the Khalsa brotherhood accepting to follow the Sikh Code of Conduct (**Rehat Maryada**). Holy water (**Amrit**) made from water and sugar crystals is prepared by stirring it with a double-edged sword (**Khanda**) in a large iron bowl whilst reciting the five daily morning prayers. When the Amrit is ready, some of it is poured into the cupped hands of each initiate to drink and sprinkled into their eyes and hair. This is done five times. The initiate must strictly adhere to the Sikh Code of Conduct for life.
- **Anand Karaj.** Ceremony of Bliss. The Sikh marriage takes place at the Gurdwara in a congregational gathering in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, according to Sikh rites. Many Gurdwaras, particularly in England, are registered for solemnizing marriages. Child marriage is forbidden.
- **Funeral.** Following a death, a full reading of the Guru Granth Sahib is commenced. Sikhs consider life to be transient and regard death as a stage in the journey towards progressive spiritual liberation. Sikhs do not believe in heaven or hell as some interim or final destination for the soul. Cremation is the preferred method for the body. The ashes can be immersed in flowing water or scattered. Public displays of grief and mourning are discouraged. Remarriage is encouraged in Sikhism.
- **Akhand Paath.** The uninterrupted non-stop reading of Guru Granth Sahib. This is performed during occasions marking births, marriages and deaths, enabling contemplation on the Guru's teachings.

Celebrations and Festivals

- **Gurpurbs.** The marking of important anniversaries relating to the birth or death (martyrdom) of a Guru. This includes the full recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib as well as the singing of hymns and Sikh lectures.
- **Baisakhi.** The day is celebrated around 13th April. It is the celebration of the founding of the Khalsa Order and Sikh nation. Many Sikhs choose to be initiated on this day. Often, a religious street procession marks this key event.
- **Bandi Chhor.** Sikhs commemorate the release of Guru Hargobind (Sixth Guru) from false imprisonment. It coincides with the Indian Festival of Lights (Divali) between the end of October and mid-November. A Muslim saint laid the foundation stone of the Golden Temple, also on this day.

- **Maghi.** This celebration occurs around the middle of January and marks the martyrdom of forty Sikhs at the hands of the Mughal army.
- **Hola Mohalla.** On this day Sikhs practice military exercises, stage mock battles, perform martial arts and organise sports competitions. This is to keep the martial skills and spirit alive. Hymn-singing and lectures also take place. It occurs the day after the Indian festival of Holi, around mid-March.

Timeline

1469	Birth of Guru Nanak (founder of Sikhism).
1479	Guru Amar Das (3 rd Guru) born.
1504	Guru Angad (2 nd Guru) born.
1520	Mughul Emperor Babar invades India, Guru Nanak witnesses massacres and criticizes ruler.
1526	Muslims conquer Northern India leading to the founding of the Mughal Empire.
1534	Guru Ram Das (4 th Guru) born. He establishes the town of Amristar.
1539	Guru Nanak dies.
1563	Guru Arjan Dev (5 th Guru) born. He compiles the First Sikh scripture.
1595	Guru Hargobind (6 th Guru) born.
1621	Guru Tegh Bahabur (9 th Guru) born. He establishes the city of Anandpur.
1630	Guru Har Rai (7 th Guru) is born.
1656	Guru Har Krishan (8 th Guru) is born. Dies at the age of 8.
1666	Guru Gobind Singh (the 10 th and last human Guru) is born.
1699	Guru Gobind Singh creates the Khalsa Panth and fights wars against the Mughul regime.
1708	Guru Gobind Singh dies after conferring Guruship on the Guru Granth Sahib (scripture).
1757	Ahmad Shah Abdali blows up Harmandar Sahib, the Golden Temple.
1769	Sikhs repel Afghan invaders to become an important political power in Panjab.
1799	Ranjit Singh, a Sikh ruler, captures Lahore.
1800	Ranjit Singh establishes the Sikh Kingdom across Northern India based on secular ideals.
1849	Two Anglo-Sikh wars fought. Panjab becomes the last region to be annexed under British rule.
1947	India and Pakistan become separate independent nations dividing Panjab. Sikhs settle in West Panjab, India. From 1947 to 1984 Sikhs consistently demand recognition of their rights under the Indian Constitution, rights which they had been denied.
1984	On the pretext of terrorism, the Indian government invades the Darbar Sahib. killing thousands of innocent Sikhs and destroying the Akaal Takht. This results in the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards.
1999	Global Tercentenary celebrations, marking 300 years of the Birth of the Khalsa.
2004	400 th anniversary of the Sikh scripture (Adi Granth), first installed in Harmandar Sahib in 1604 by the Fifth Guru.

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Best wishes
Des McCabe

Dedication

This book is dedicated 'To Ma and Da, with love.'