

# The Sikh Community

*“This is the Path to Union:  
Destroy the sense of self,  
Thou shalt then find my Lord Within thee.”*

## **Guru Arjan**

### **Origins**

The Sikh religion preached by the Ten Gurus is strictly monotheistic requiring belief in one Supreme God. From the birth of its founder, Guru Nanak (1469), to the death of Guru Gobind Singh (1708) the father of the Khalsa, there was a period of 239 years.

Guru Arjan (the fifth Guru) compiled the Sikh scriptures in 1604 which he formally installed at the Darbar Sahib – Amritsar (Golden Temple). After the formation of the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh gave the final shape to the scriptures by including the compositions of Guru Tegh Bahadur (the ninth Guru). In 1708 Guru Gobind Singh himself carried the 1430-paged volume to Sri Hazoor Sahib in Nander and conferred the perpetual Guruship on the Granth. From then on this volume is called Guru Granth Sahib.

### **Teachings**

Sikhism is a way of life shown to mankind by the ten Sikh Gurus. Each succeeding Guru was believed to be NANAK himself with the spirit of Nanak descending in every one of them but in different physical garb. Sikhism is a practical religion teaching mankind now how to avoid evil but how it is to be met and overcome. Sikhs believe that every human soul possesses the potentiality of perfection and is capable of attaining direct union with God.

Guru Gobind Singh's introduction of the Amrit Sanskar (initiation ceremony), established the Khalsa (the pure), which gave the Sikhs their unique and distinct identity. With the creation of the Khalsa and its code of ethics, Guru Gobind Singh made Sikhism complete in itself and quite distinctive from Hinduism, Islam and other world faiths.

Guru Nanak's composition of Japji is the essence of the whole teaching of the Sikh Gurus. The Hymn starts with Mool antar – the root foundation of the Sikh faith, on attributes of God and emphasis on Holy Name:

**“There is One God; The Supreme Truth; the Creator;**

**Without fear or enmity; timeless;**

**Beyond birth and death; self created;**

**Realised through God's grace.”**

In order for Mankind to realise the true destiny of living eternally with God in this present life, it is necessary to meditate upon and to repeat Nam Simran or Nam Japna (God's name); to share one's earnings with the poor (Wand Chakna) and to earn ones living by honest labour (Kirat Karni).

Human souls are freed from the suffering resulting from physical existence and attachment to material things by living according to God's will. The law of Karma accords reward and punishment for all man's thoughts and deeds and determines the cycle of rebirth.

For the soul to be released from the cycle of rebirth and suffering and merge with God. Release or Mukhti can be achieved through the Grace of God. God's grace is available to those who seek to lead honest lives; having faith in God, doing His Will serving others (Sewa); living in peace and being tolerant of the ways and beliefs of other people. A soul without God's grace is lost in the wilderness of egoism and passionate desire and is unable to win its way from that misery to God's company where there is Peace and Joy – the ultimate bliss.

A Sikh is a disciple of the Ten Gurus. Any person who believes in the One God; the Ten Gurus (from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh); the Guru Granth Sahib; the scriptures and teachings of the Sikh Gurus; believes in the necessity and importance of the Amrit of Guru Gobind Singh.

The tenth and last living Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), instituted the Khalsa Panth (the Sikh community) symbolising a casteless society with two main principles – to seek truth (NAM) and to do selfless service (Sewa). Practising Sikhs, male or female, are enjoined to wear the Five K's (Panj Kakar) which are symbols of their faith.

There are four prohibitions which all Sikhs must observe, known as **Char Kurehtan** or the **Four Injunctions**. These are:

1. Not to cut or trim ones hair.
2. Not to use tobacco, intoxications or drugs.
3. Not to eat halal meat (this includes kosher or other meat involving ritual killing).
4. Not to commit adultery.

## **Worship**

In the Sikh faith, corporate worship can take place on any day. Worship may be led by any knowledgeable Sikh acceptable to the group.

Generally each day begins with an early morning bath followed by meditation, prayers and reciting of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib. Devout Sikhs will pray at least three times a day – before sunrise, at sunset and before going to bed. Sikhs will wish to maintain their prayer routine wherever they are.

A typical Sikh service consists mainly of reading scriptures (Gurbani) and singing hymns (Kirtan) from the Guru Granth Sahib, followed by a religious discourse on divine names and the concluding corporate prayer Ardas (supplication).

Then a random reading of a passage from the Guru Granth Sahib (Hukum Nama) which is considered the message of the day. The service concludes with sharing of holy food.

This sharing of food, specially prepared and blessed at the Gurdwara (temple) kitchen, is an important and integral part of communal worship. The food is known as Langar (a vegetarian meal), which symbolises equality and Kara Prashad (a specially blessed sweetmeat).

## **Places of Worship**

The Sikh place of worship is called a Gurdwara, and is the place where the Guru Granth Sahib is housed, on a Manji Sahib (dais/throne) covered in brightly coloured Romala (covers) under the Palki (canopy) with utmost respect. For the Sikhs the Guru Granth Sahib is the living Guru (the Supreme Authority).

Gurdwaras in the UK vary in size and style. Only a few are purpose built. The Darbar Sahib (prayer hall) is a bare hall with no images or seats. Before entering the prayer hall (or any other place where the Guru Granth Sahib is present) shoes must be removed and those not wearing turbans must cover their heads as a mark of respect.

Sikhs will then walk towards the Guru Granth Sahib, make the offerings in the offertory box (Golak) and with reverence bow to the ground with folded hands. They then move back to sit on the carpeted floor exemplifying the teaching of equality. Males and females often sit separately, but this segregation has no religious connotation. Alcohol and tobacco, in any form is not permitted within Gurdwara premises.

Sikh Gurdwaras throughout the world are recognised by the Sikh religious flag (Nishan Sahib), a tall flagpole draped in saffron cloth bearing the Sikh emblem (Khanda Kirpan) in black or navy blue.

### **Practises**

Every important Sikh ceremony is performed in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib and the holy congregation (Sangat).

### **Birth**

As soon as possible after birth the whole family, relatives and friends go to the Gurdwara for the naming ceremony. This is done by opening the Guru Granth Sahib at random and taking the first letter of the hymn, on the top left hand page, with which the family then choose to start the baby's name. To this will be added the suffix 'Singh' for a boy or 'Kaur' for a girl. Guru Gobind Singh has made it obligatory for male followers to call themselves Singh (Lion) and female followers to call themselves Kaur (Princess). However, many Sikhs also use an additional family name as well as Singh or Kaur e.g. Mohinder Gill, Harbans Sahota. The chosen name is announced to the holy congregation either immediately or on a subsequent occasion.

### **Marriage**

The marriage ceremony is considered a sacred institution and an essential component of a couple's social and religious life.

The Sikh marriage is not regarded as a social contract but a spiritual state. Living in this world and discharging family duties is advocated as the Sikh way of life. Sikhs go through a civil marriage ceremony but consider it incomplete until the marriage is solemnised under the auspices of the Sikh Religious Order.

Today most Gurdwaras in the UK are registered for civil marriages. Therefore, the couple can have their religious marriage and civil marriage at the same time. The marriage takes place in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib preferably at the Gurdwara.

### **Funerals**

In Sikhism, death is not the end of life but the door to pass through in order to enjoy the bliss of God's presence. Therefore, no lamentations or mourning should take place.

A devout Sikh, who is dying, may receive comfort from reading hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib. Any practising Sikh can be asked to help. The last (or death) rites are called Antam Sanskar.

All Sikhs, including the stillborn or babies who die within a few hours of birth, are cremated. After death, the body is washed and dressed in new clothes (with the Panj Kakar if one is initiated). The coffin is brought to the family home where relatives and friends get a last

glimpse of the body. Family members help to place the coffin in the hearse and it is taken to the crematorium.

Traditionally the eldest son or other close relative lights the pyre (in UK crematoriums this is done by pressing the button). After cremation everyone returns to the Gurdwara for final prayer. The ashes are later collected and scattered in a river or in the sea. Some Sikhs wish to have the ashes taken back to India - their birthplace.

### **Diet**

Many Sikhs are vegetarians by choice. Those who do eat meat are prohibited from eating halal and kosher meat. Because of the Indian subcontinent origin of Sikhism, Sikhs will not eat beef at all.

### **Dress**

The majority of Sikh men will wear western clothes with a turban. Initiated Sikhs, (Khalsa), will always have the five symbols, while others may wear one or more of the Five Sikh Symbols:

1. Kesh (uncut hair): tied in a knot and kept tidy, symbolising spirituality and obedience in accepting God's will.
2. Kangha (comb): to keep the hair neat and clean, symbolising cleanliness and discipline.
3. Kirpan (small Sword): an emblem of power and dignity – symbolising self-respect and fearlessness.
4. Kacha (shorts): or Kacchera (shorts or underpants) symbolising morality and considered an appropriate garment for an active life.
5. Kara (steel bracelet): worn on right wrist. Symbolises oneness and an unbreakable bond with God.

The Sikh Turban is a distinct religious entity - an inseparable complementary factor bestowing spiritual wholeness on the Khalsa personality and character. All the Sikh Gurus wore turbans and when Guru Gobind Singh initiated the Khalsa he made it obligatory for all his followers to do so. The Sikh Turban is a unitary emblem of the Sikh faith. The turban is generally about 5 yards long and 45 inches wide and should cover the hair on the head completely with the tops of the ears customarily under the turban.

Most women will wish to wear a salwar kameez (salwar: trousers, kameez: shirt) or sari and a chunni or dupattah (long scarf). Wedding bangles and rings have the same significance as British wedding rings.

### **Religious Books and Artefacts**

The Guru Granth Sahib contains writings of the Sikh Gurus and other Saints. It is the ultimate book of guidance for Sikhs. Sikhs also may have a Gutka or Nitnem – (a prayer book) with extracts from the Guru Granth Sahib.

As mentioned before, Sikhs place significant religious significance to the turban and the five K's.

## **Rites and Initiation**

The Amrit initiation: this can take place at any time providing the recipient understands the implication of the vows and is able to fulfil the discipline of the Khalsa. Vaisakhi is the most popular occasion although the ceremony can take place on any other day festival day or occasion. On completion of the initiation ceremony the participants are reminded of the significance of the Panj Kakar (five K's) and explained their importance.

## **Festivals and Celebrations**

### **Birthday of Guru Gobind Singh**

Occurs during the months of December and January.

### **Vaisaki**

Khalsa initiation. Occurs during April.

### **Martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev**

Occurs during June.

### **Birthday of Guru Nanak**

Occurs during November.

### **Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur**

Occurs during November.

### **First Reading of Guru Granth Sahib**

Occurs during September.

### **Installation of Guru Granth Sahib**

Occurs during October.

### **Bandi Chor**

Diwali – On this day Guru Hargobind Sahib (Sixth Guru) was released from Gwalior fort by the Mugal Emperor Jahangir. He successfully insisted that 52 Hindu princes also falsely imprisoned should also be released. Sikhs celebrate this day by worship and prayers of thanksgiving at the Gurdwara and by fireworks. This day coincides with the Hindu Festival of Lights (Diwali) and occurs during September.

### **Hola Mohalla**

Occurs during February or March. This was introduced in 1680 by Guru Gobind Singh to replace the Hindu festival of Holi. It is a spring festival "Mela" when Sikhs engage in Gatka (martial art and related sport activities).

## **Community**

In the Sikh religion there is no ordained priesthood or religious hierarchy. Sikhism lays emphasis on equality. Therefore any devout initiated Sikh, male or female, may read the Guru Granth Sahib or lead prayers in the Gurdwara.

The Granthi – In the UK almost every Gurdwara employs a Granthi (reader of Granth) as a permanent caretaker or reader. He will conduct services on a regular basis.

Providing for the family and caring for all its members' needs, spiritual and emotional, are religious duties for Sikhs. There is a strict code of sexual morality to ensure protection of families and communities. Families are close knit and have strong responsibilities for any sick, elderly or inform relatives.

**Nearest Gurdwaras**

Sri Guru Singh Sabha Sikh Temple  
34 Hillhouse Lane  
Fartown  
Huddersfield  
HD1 6JT

01484 542982

Guru Nanek Sikh Temple  
1912 Wakefield Road  
Broomfields  
Bradford BD4 7DP

01274 723557