



Sikhism:

A Reporter's Guide



INTRODUCTION

There are more than 25 million Sikhs around the world, which makes Sikhi (also known as Sikhism) the fifth-largest major world religion. Yet the Sikh tradition remains largely unknown to the global community – no other religion of its magnitude is as misunderstood as Sikhi.

The Sikh religion has been underrepresented and misrepresented in the popular media, and these problems have contributed to the serious challenges that Sikhs experience today, including negative stereotypes, discriminatory policies, and violent hate crimes.

This guide aims to provide reporters with basic information on the Sikh tradition and to help facilitate accurate coverage on Sikhs and Sikhi.

Above: Sikh women (Photo credit: Mehtab Kaur)

Fast Facts:

5th
largest

Sikhism, also known as Sikhi, is the **fifth-largest** world religion.

**Love,
Service
& Justice**

are core Sikh values.

25 million

There are more than **25 million** Sikhs worldwide.



Guru Nanak was born in **Punjab**, a region in South Asia that spans modern-day Pakistan and northwest India. Most of the world's Sikhs today continue to live in Punjab.

1469 AD

The founder of Sikhi, **Guru Nanak**, was born in 1469 AD.



500,000

Credible estimates on the Sikh American population range from about 300,000 to 700,000. The number most commonly cited is **500,000**.



The Sikh identity includes **five articles of faith**. The most visible aspects of the Sikh identity include the unshorn hair and the turban.



Many wrongly describe Sikhism as a blend of Islam and Hinduism -- Sikhi is an **independent religion**, with its own prophets, scriptures, practices, ceremonies, and beliefs.



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CEO's Note:

Good journalism is predicated on a reporter's access to accurate information that is reliable, credible, and unbiased, particularly when writing about complex issues in our society. When reporters get it right, readers benefit from clear and precise knowledge that breaks down cultural barriers, fosters greater understanding and tolerance, and promotes the idea that ideas do not emerge from one silo but a collective of constructive and wide-ranging thinking from people of all races and creeds across America.

Nowhere is this more critical than in the news coverage of religion, one of the few themes incorporated in every aspect of our lives. Such was the impetus for *Sikhism: A Reporter's Guide*, the latest in a series of guides published by the Religion News Foundation and the Sikh Coalition, an organization "working towards the realization of civil and human rights for all people."

This guide explores core beliefs and practices, ceremonies and celebrations, days of observance, and the representation of Sikhism in American society. We have learned through our publication of previous guides on Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, that reporters do not often have the time or resources needed to develop clear definition of a person's faith or religion. This, in turn, can lead to inaccuracies, intolerance, and bigotry toward peoples of different faiths.

This guide, which is available to reporters who cover religion and faith, seeks to untie the strings of confusion that revolve around those religions with which we are not always familiar. It is published with the guiding belief that, above all else, society demands the truth needed to promote tolerance and religious freedom, a hallmark of our constitutional heritage. As always, we welcome your feedback and we invite you to visit www.religionlink.com for more information on our guides and resources for journalists. We also invite you to learn more about Sikhism through www.sikhcoalition.org.

Thomas L. Gallagher,

CEO, Religion News Foundation

www.religion.news

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DEMOGRAPHICS

The vast majority of the world's 25 million Sikhs live in the Indian state of Punjab. There is also a robust and flourishing diaspora, much of it concentrated in the Commonwealth due to migration within the British Empire. But Sikhs can be found in communities all over the globe.

The Sikh population remains concentrated in South Asia, with about 22 million adherents in India and 20,000 in Pakistan. Estimates suggest that the next largest Sikh communities around the world are in Canada (650,000), the U.S. (500,000) and the U.K. (450,000), with smaller numbers in Southeast Asia (175,000), and East Africa (50,000 to 100,000).

Within North America, the largest communities are concentrated in California, New York, and New Jersey in the U.S., and Vancouver and Ontario in Canada; growing communities exist in other U.S. states, however, from Texas to Indiana and Florida to Washington. There are nearly 300 Sikh places of worship (*gurdwaras*) in the United States, the first of which was founded in 1912 in Stockton, California. There is no formal census data on the number of Sikhs in the United States, and credible estimates range from about 300,000 to 700,000. 500,000 remains the most reasonable estimate, and this is the number most commonly cited by the press.

HISTORY

About 550 years ago, a boy named Nanak was born in the Punjab region of South Asia. The town of his birth, Talvandi, which has since been renamed Nankana Sahib, falls within modern-day Pakistan. The predominant religions in Punjab at that time were Islam and Hinduism, and Nanak's parents were Hindu by background. However, young Nanak was disenchanted by the social inequalities and religious practices he observed in the world around him and decided to establish a new religious tradition, which would come to be known in the Punjabi language as Sikhi (and later, in English, as Sikhism).

Guru Nanak spent the majority of his life sharing his message of love, oneness, service, and spirituality. He also cultivated a community and instituted many of the hallmarks that distinguish independent religions. He began composing his own devotional poetry, which Sikhs consider as revelatory – and his writings serve as the foundation of the Sikh scriptural text. He established community centers for gathering, learning and worship, and he also instituted a

common discipline that all his followers were expected to practice. Each of these features, among others, demonstrates Guru Nanak's intention to establish Sikhi as a unique and independent religious tradition.

Sikhi maintains its own prophets, known as gurus, a term of reverence that literally means "enlightener." There were 10 gurus in total, the last of whom, Guru Gobind Singh, died in 1708. It was at this point that authority of the Sikh community – the guruship – was passed to two entities for eternity: the community of initiated Sikhs (*Guru Khalsa Panth*) and the scripture (*Guru Granth Sahib*). The Sikh community endured immense persecution in the early 1700s, but by the end of the century various Sikh groups (*misals*) accrued political power. This power was consolidated under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a widely respected ruler committed to fairness and justice. Punjab was the last region to be annexed by the British, and Sikhs began migrating to various Commonwealth nations during the colonial period. At the same time, the Sikh community was particularly active in the movement seeking freedom from colonial rule – and much of the initial organizing began among Sikhs living on the West Coast of the United States and Canada.



Painting of Darbar Sahib
(image of print owned by
Satjeet Kaur)

SIKHS IN AMERICA

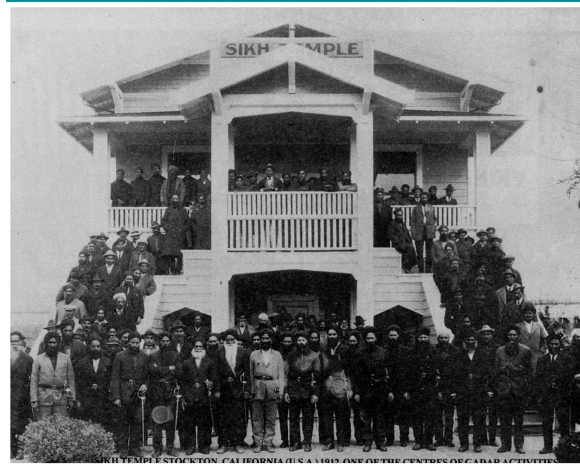
While most Sikhs today live in the Indian state of Punjab, there is also a robust and flourishing diaspora, with communities large and small all over the globe. Much of the diaspora is concentrated in the Commonwealth due to migration within the British empire, yet Sikhs continue to establish themselves in various countries throughout the world.

From the time of their arrival in the late 1800s, Sikh men and women have been making notable contributions to American society. Early immigrants settled in the Western frontier, where they played a major role in building America's railroads. Sikh Americans such as Bhagat Singh Thind served in the U.S. military during the world wars, and the first Asian-American congressman, Dalip Singh Saund, was a Sikh elected to office in 1957.

Sikh women and men continue to make diverse contributions to society. The inventor of fiber optics was a Sikh American, as is the largest peach grower in the United States. Sikhs help make up the backbone of America as farmers, drivers, engineers, and construction workers. Sikh Americans serve in all walks of life, from teachers and pilots to musicians and doctors, and from civil servants and social activists to philanthropists and movie actors.

Despite their vast contributions to society, Sikhs continue to experience immense discrimination and hate in modern America. The United States is unusual in this regard; in most other countries around the world, people tend to be far more familiar with the Sikh tradition. The lack of cultural and religious literacy of many Americans, coupled with Sikhs' distinct visible identity, has led to xenophobic violence against Sikhs since their arrival in the U.S. more than a century ago. Sikh Americans have been particularly vulnerable to discrimination and hate in the post-9/11 context.

While many have a tendency to describe anti-Sikh hate violence as "mistaken identity," defaulting to this framework is problematic for multiple reasons: It fails to account for the other alternate bias-related motivations behind the violence and inadvertently implies there is a group that should be targeted. While there is consistent misunderstanding about the Sikh articles of faith, it is the conflation with terrorism combined with the broader xenophobic undercurrent that continually puts Sikhs at high risk.



Top: First Sikh gurdwara in the United States – Stockton Gurdwara in 1912 (Stockton, Calif)

Middle: Dalip Singh Saund. Oil on canvas, Jon R. Friedman, 2007 Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Bottom: Corporal Simran Preet Lamba at his graduation in 2010. One of an increasing number of turbaned Sikhs who have received an exemption to serve in the U.S. Military. (Photo credit: Denise McGill on behalf of the Sikh Coalition)

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICA



The Sikh commitment to political engagement has shown itself in different ways in the American context, and as with many growing immigrant communities, political involvement has evolved over time.

Within years of arriving in the United States, Sikhs began engaging politically. The most prominent example is the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, a Sikh American who had served with the U.S. Army during World War I and was seeking to become a naturalized American citizen. At the time, naturalized citizenship was only available to “free white men” and “persons of African nativity or persons of African descent.” Thind’s case made it to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1923. The verdict from *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* revoked Thind’s citizenship and established that “all natives of Asia” be excluded from eligibility for naturalized citizenship, a verdict that was effectively upheld for decades. Thind finally got his citizenship more than a decade later through the state of New York.

Another Sikh American, Dalip Singh Saund, broke new ground when he was elected to Congress in 1957 from the 29th District of California. He became the first-ever Sikh American, Asian American, Indian American, and member of a non-Abrahamic faith to hold such a position. Saund was re-elected to Congress twice and served in office for a total of six years. To this day, minority and underrepresented communities point to Saund for the doors he opened with his political trailblazing.

Sikh political engagement has continued to grow in the decades since, and in recent years, Sikh Americans have become more active in seeking political offices. Sikh American Kashmir Singh Gill served as mayor of Yuba City, CA for two terms, 2009-2010 and 2013-2014. In 2012, the city of Charlottesville, VA appointed Satyendra Huja as mayor, making him the first turbaned Sikh mayor in U.S. history.

In 2017, Preet Didbal of Yuba City, CA became America’s first female Sikh mayor. Ravinder Singh Bhalla of Hoboken, NJ became the first turbaned Sikh mayor to be elected in a U.S. city, and Manka Dhingra of Washington, became the first Sikh elected to any state legislature in the United States. And in 2018, Gurbir Grewal was confirmed to serve as the nation’s first-ever Sikh state attorney general.

Given the growing Sikh presence in America, coupled with the Sikh commitment to civic engagement, it appears that Sikh involvement in U.S. politics will increase going forward, from efforts to improve governing policies to seeking and holding political office.



Top: Ravinder Singh Bhalla (Photo credit: Amit and Naroop)

Left: Sikhs hold a voter registration drive at a gurdwara in Renton, Washington



Photo credit: Karaminder S. Ghuman for the Sikh Coalition

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FROM REPORTERS

How do you pronounce “Sikh”?

The word Sikh derives from the Sanskrit *shishya*, which means student. In its original Punjabi, the word is pronounced with a short “i” and an aspirated “k” – similar to the word “sick” in modern English. When European colonialists entered South Asia, they elongated the short “i” to make the word sound more like “seek.” While both pronunciations are used in modern English, the pronunciation from the original Punjabi is preferable.

How do Sikh last names work?

It is common in various geographical contexts for people to adopt surnames that reflect their social status. In South Asia, surnames often indicated one’s caste identity. The Sikh gurus rejected social discrimination of any kind and called on all Sikhs to drop their caste names and to adopt a collective last name.

Women take the last name “Kaur,” and men use the name “Singh.” Both of these names draw from traditional names used by royalty in South Asia. Assigning royal last names continues to empower members of the community, highlight the belief in equality, gesture to the core belief of human sovereignty, and underscore the perceived familyhood of the collective Sikh community. Many Sikhs today adopt Kaur or Singh as a middle name, while keeping a surname.

Is Sikhism an independent religion?

One of the most common misconceptions about Sikhi is that it is a syncretic religion that essentially blends ideas from Islam and Hinduism. Rather, Sikhi is an independent tradition that maintains unique aspects for all the basic components of a world religion. For instance, Sikhi maintains its own founder, prophets, scriptures, revelation, ceremonies, theology, practices, discipline, and places of worship. In short, Sikhi is and should be acknowledged as an independent religious tradition.

Are Sikhs attacked because of mistaken identity?

While Sikh Americans have experienced xenophobic violence for more than a century now, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 resulted in a violent backlash that continues to reverberate in modern America. The first fatal hate crime casualty of a post-9/11 America was Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh immigrant living in Mesa, AZ. In 2012, a gunman with neo-Nazi ties killed six Sikhs at a gurdwara in Oak Creek, WI. Sikhs around the country reported hundreds of hate incidents in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The FBI began tracking anti-Sikh incidents in 2015, and the number of those incidents has increased every year since; while some of that increase can be attributed to better reporting, we can say with confidence that Sikhs are the third-most targeted religious group in America.

Anti-Sikh discrimination manifests itself in various ways, from school bullying and workplace discrimination to verbal assaults and violent hate crimes. Some anti-Sikh violence is actually anti-Muslim in motivation. In these instances, perpetrators perceive Sikhs to be Muslim and attack them as such. Sikhs have stood in solidarity with their Muslim sisters and brothers, taking the position that no one should be targeted for how they look or what they believe. Additionally, in many instances, anti-Sikh violence directly targets Sikhs because of their religious identity or because they are viewed as “other.”

The most common problem in covering anti-Sikh violence is the framework of “mistaken identity.” This framework is problematic because it implies that there is a “correct” identity group that ought to be targeted. No community should be targeted.

How has the Sikh community responded to the rise in hate?

While it is easy to present a community that experiences targeted violence as “the victim,” this repeated framing does not accurately portray Sikh outlooks and communities. Sikhi does not have a tradition of “victimhood,” and, in fact, the Punjabi language does not even have an equivalent form of the term. Instead, the Sikh worldview embraces resilience and boundless optimism (*chardi kala*), even in the face of adversity. The Sikh community has struggled to move beyond the victimization narrative, especially in post-9/11 America.



Sikhs cleaning up a park in New York City.
(Photo credit: Jazz Rai on behalf of the Sikh Coalition)



CORE BELIEFS & PRACTICES

The Sikh worldview centers on the idea of oneness. Sikhs believe that people of all faiths worship one divine being (*Waheguru*) who created this world and lives within it. The notion of divine presence leads to the belief that *Waheguru* is equally present in all people and that, therefore, every human being is equal in the eyes of the divine. From the Sikh perspective, there are no theological grounds to discriminate against people on the basis of their social identities – gender, caste, ethnicity or any other identity. All positions of leadership and authority in Sikh religious and political life are open to people of all backgrounds.

Sikhs aim to recognize the divine presence in all aspects of life, and this constant remembrance contributes to the cultivation of a loving spirit and ethic. In Sikhi, finding love within our own lives is both the end and the means; realizing divine love is the ultimate goal, and practicing love with intention and spirit is

the process for achieving that goal. In this sense, the complementary aspects of oneness and love are core theological precepts of the Sikh tradition.

A natural corollary of recognizing the oneness of the world and practicing love is to serve the world around you. In the Sikh tradition, service is a way of expressing gratitude to the divine. Service is prayerful action. The concept of love-inspired service is called *sewa*, and it is a core part of the Sikh tradition. All Sikhs are expected to serve humanity while also cultivating their own spirituality. The tradition calls on every Sikh to live as a *sant-sipahi*, a saint-soldier, who is committed to spiritual practice and to establishing a more just and equitable world.

The core beliefs outlined above help us understand the three daily principles of Sikhi: truthful living, service to humanity, and devotion to the divine.

Top: Sikh woman praying (photo courtesy of Satjeet Kaur; taken by A.S. Nagpal)

Bottom: Sikhs cleaning dishes at Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple), where they provide free meals to approximately 100,000 visitors every day (Photo credit: Satjeet Kaur)





THE SCRIPTURE – GURU GRANTH SAHIB

The Sikh scripture is referred to as the Guru Granth Sahib and shares ultimate authority within the Sikh tradition. The text was compiled by the gurus themselves and consists of their devotional music and poetry. The gurus also incorporated writings from other spiritually elevated figures who lived in South Asia and shared the same worldview. The themes of the scriptural writings have largely to do with the nature of divine experience and the steps one can take to achieve it. The entirety of the text is written in verse poetry, and a vast majority of it is set to music.

Sikhs consider the Guru Granth Sahib to be a revealed text, and it plays a central role in Sikh devotional and ceremonial life. The scripture is the centerpiece of Sikh worship spaces. The gurdwara is modeled after imperial courts in early modern South Asia, and replicating this design helps remind Sikh worshippers of the Guru's sovereign and authoritative status. For instance, the Guru Granth Sahib is placed on a throne, a volunteer

attends to it, and devotees bow before it to demonstrate their submission.

All Sikh life ceremonies incorporate the scripture in some way as well. For example, at a Sikh wedding, the bride and groom walk around the Guru Granth Sahib multiple times in order to, among other things, illustrate symbolically the centrality of the teachings within their own lives.

The inclusion of writings by spiritual figures of other religious backgrounds speaks to the pluralistic nature of Sikhi; it reflects the belief that Sikhi is not the only path to realize divine love. Similarly, that the scripture is written in multiple languages (albeit in one script – Gurmukhi) suggests that the gurus did not believe this document to be the exclusive claim of people in a particular region. Rather, they believed their message to be a universal one that transcends linguistic and geographic boundaries.

Guru Granth Sahib (photo courtesy of Satjeet Kaur; taken by A.S. Nagpal)



THE INITIATED COMMUNITY – GURU KHALSA PANTH

Each of the 10 Sikh gurus worked to nurture the Sikh community, and over time, the community underwent its own growth of responsibility. It went from bearing a small amount of influence during the time of Guru Nanak to being consulted by the Sikh gurus in major decision-making moments. The community's influence culminated in 1699 A.D., when Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th Sikh guru, called on all Sikhs to gather in the city of Anandpur on Vaisakhi, the day that traditionally marked the celebration of the harvest festival in Punjab.

It was on this occasion that the community of initiates was formally institutionalized and given authority. This community, which would come to be known as Guru Khalsa Panth, provided an official structure for those individuals committed to the Sikh way of life. One demonstrates this commitment by accepting initiation (*amrit*) and adopting a few of the basic practices as articulated in the Sikh code of conduct (*Rahit Maryada*). The prescriptions in this document call

on initiated Sikhs to, among other things, engage in daily prayers and wear five articles of faith.

It was during the occasion of Vaisakhi that Guru Gobind Singh asked the Sikh community members to abandon their last names that indicate their caste and social status and to adopt shared surnames that signify equality and royalty. Sikh women were granted the last name "Kaur," and Sikh men were given the last name "Singh." Both of these names drew from common royal surnames in South Asia. The practice of sharing surnames functions to cultivate a sense of collective familyhood, to erase inequalities on the basis of caste, and to send a message of empowerment that all people are equally divine and sovereign.

Given the historical significance of Vaisakhi, Sikh communities around the world continue to mark the occasion every year through gatherings, prayers and collective celebrations.

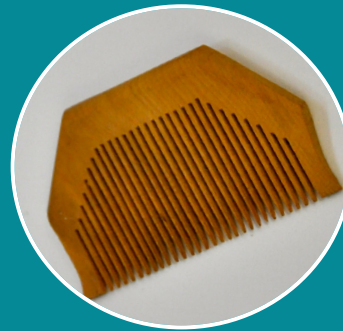
Above: Preparation for the amrit ceremony (Photo credit: Ravi Tegh Singh)

Sikh Articles of Faith

IDENTITY

Since the formative moments of the tradition, Sikhs have maintained a physical identity that makes them stand out in public, even in the context of South Asia. This identity includes five articles of faith – *kesh* (unshorn hair), *kanga* (small comb), *kara* (steel bracelet), *kirpan* (religious article resembling a knife), and *kachera* (soldier-shorts) – and distinguishes any woman or man who has formally committed to the values of the Sikh religion by accepting initiation. While the turban (*dastar*) is not technically one of the five articles of faith, Sikhs have continued this practice for several centuries now – dating back to the times of the Sikh gurus – and it remains one of the most visibly distinctive features of Sikh practice. Both men and women are equally welcome to wear turbans, though it is true that more men do so than women.

As with other religious communities, practitioners interpret, express, and relate to their traditions in various ways. There are many Sikhs who do not wear all five articles of faith, and – perhaps most notably – not all Sikhs maintain uncut hair and turbans. This does not make these individuals any less Sikh, nor does it disqualify believers from calling themselves Sikhs. Specifically, the five articles of faith are required for those who have accepted formal initiation.



KANGA
small comb



KIRPAN
religious article
resembling a knife



KACHERA
slightly longer type
of underpants



KARA
steel or iron bracelet



KESH
unshorn hair

A turban is a long piece of cloth tied over uncut hair that signifies equality and sovereignty. Turbans can be worn by men and women, though men wear them more often.



The five articles of faith signify an individual's commitment to Sikhi and to the highest ideals of love and service to humanity. They serve as an external uniform that unifies Sikhs and binds them to the beliefs of the religion, and they are a daily reminder that Sikhs must live an honest, moral, kind, brave, and loving life. Unlike some world religions in which only clergy are visibly distinct, all initiated Sikhs are expected to wear the five articles of faith.

While many have attempted to attribute a specific function to each article of faith, these understandings do not capture the connections that Sikhs have with these articles. Perhaps the best analogy (though admittedly an imperfect one) is that of a wedding ring: One cannot reduce the significance of a wedding ring to its instrumental value; rather, one cherishes the wedding ring because it is a gift of love from one's partner. Similarly, Sikhs cherish their articles of faith primarily because they see them as a gift from their beloved guru. Trying to understand these articles only on the basis of their function is missing the point.

Perhaps the most visible aspect of the Sikh identity is the turban, which can be worn by men and women alike. Sikhs are also free to choose from various styles, colors, and patterns based on their personal preference. The turban was historically worn by royalty in South Asia, and the gurus adopted this practice as a way of asserting the sovereignty and equality of all people. For a Sikh, wearing a turban asserts a public commitment to maintaining the values and ethics of the tradition, including service, compassion and honesty.

There have been several court cases in the U.S. regarding the Sikh right to wear the kirpan, the article of faith that resembles a knife. These cases have largely centered on whether the wearing of kirpans violates anti-weapons statutes or policies. Most of these court cases have been decided in favor of the respective Sikh's right to wear the kirpan.

Sikhs' right to wear kirpans in public, at work, in public schools and in federal facilities is largely protected by the First Amendment and religious-rights laws. There are contexts where kirpans have been barred, largely due to misunderstanding, yet the community continues to make strides in securing the right to wear this article of faith.





WORSHIP & THE GURDWARA

The gurdwara is the Sikh place of community learning, worship and gathering. The tradition of establishing such centers dates back to the time of Sikhi's foundation; Guru Nanak himself established community centers, which during his time were referred to as *dharamsalas*. From the time of Guru Nanak, visitors of all backgrounds have been welcomed in these spaces, and, to this day, people come to the gurdwara seeking shelter, comfort, and food.

The design and layout of the gurdwara mirrors that of imperial courts in early modern South Asia. Incorporating royal symbolism and language in a Sikh religious setting is a means of asserting sovereignty.

*Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar, Punjab, India.
(Photo credit: Satjeet Kaur)*



The primary form of worship in the gurdwara context is collectively singing musical compositions from the scriptural text. The direct translation of the term *gurdwara* – gateway to the guru – reflects the central role that the guru plays in this setting.

All people have the opportunity to lead worship, no matter their background (age, gender, caste, etc.). Sikhi does not maintain an ordained clergy – all people have equal access to the divine – so any woman or man from the congregation may lead religious services. Many gurdwaras host individuals trained to lead services, who are often referred to as raagis, granthis, or gyaanis. They often lead a congregation, but any members from the congregation – regardless of gender – can also perform the same ceremonies. While the roles they play may seem analogous to a priest or rabbi, it would be inappropriate to describe them as clerics.

Visitors should dress comfortably yet conservatively, opting for pants while avoiding shorts and skirts if possible. All people remove their shoes and cover their heads before entering as a sign of respect. Upon walking in, devotees approach the Guru Granth Sahib, which is placed on a throne at the center, and bow before it as a sign of submission.

All people sit together on the floor as a sign of equality, and visitors should be careful not to point their feet at the scripture or turn their back toward it.

At the end of the worship service, congregants break bread together through the institution of *langar*, a free community meal open to all. The Sikh langar has long been patronized by people of various backgrounds seeking food. Today, Sikhs have taken langar outside the gurdwara and into communities in need, from underserved populations in the United States to various refugee camps around the world.

[Click here](#) for our full guide to visiting a gurdwara.



Above: Inside of a Sikh gurdwara in Bridgewater, N.J. (photo courtesy of Satjeet Kaur; taken by A.S. Nagpal)

Bottom: Preparation of langar (Photo credit: Satjeet Kaur)

PUNJAB, INDIA, AND SOUTH ASIA

Although the Sikh religion is not intrinsically tied to a single region or ethnicity, its homeland is the region of Punjab, and a vast majority of Sikhs in the world today are of Punjabi descent. The language of this region, Punjabi, is part of the Indo-European language family and remains one of the 10 most commonly spoken languages in the world.

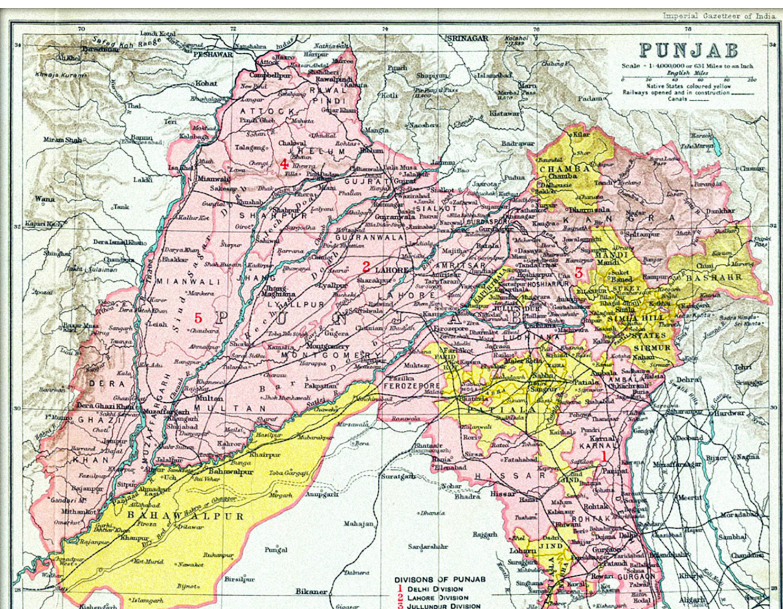
Punjab has long served as the passageway between South Asia and Central Asia, and it therefore has been a meeting point for diverse cultures, religions and peoples. It is also historically a fertile ground for agriculture. The region's name derives from a Persian compound, meaning "five waters" or "five rivers." For the past few centuries, those praising Punjab's agricultural contributions have fondly referred to it as the breadbasket of South Asia.

Punjab was annexed by the British in 1849. In the closing moments of British colonialism in the 20th century, Punjab was then divided into two major countries along the lines of religious identity. Western Punjab became part of modern Pakistan, and Eastern Punjab became part of the

new nation of India. This division, known as "Partition," resulted in one of the largest mass migrations and worst humanitarian crises in modern human history.

The relationship between the Indian state and the Sikh community has always been contentious since the creation of India in 1947. In addition to losing territory over the 20th century, Punjab has been denied basic rights and privileges afforded to other states, such as official-language status and access to its own river waters for agricultural use, by the Indian government.

Tensions between the Sikh community and the Indian state peaked in the last quarter of the 20th century. In June 1984 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian army to attack the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) of Amritsar, the most significant religious site in the Sikh tradition. This assault, known as Operation Blue Star, not only resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and the damage of historic Sikh sites and artifacts, it also served as an attack on the Sikh psyche. In response to her attack on Darbar Sahib of Amritsar, two of Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her later that year in the Indian capital of New Delhi. Her assassination led to anti-Sikh pogroms around the country – in which, according to eyewitness accounts, police and government figures were complicit – that claimed thousands of civilian lives.



Left: Punjab Province in 1909
(Credit: The Imperial Gazetteer of India)

Right: Sikh family in Punjab
(Photo credit: Satjeet Kaur)



To this date, only a fraction of the murderers have been held accountable by the Indian judicial system. Moreover, the decade that followed was a particularly dark period in Punjabi and Sikh history. Researchers have documented and are still uncovering more evidence of the years-long campaign of targeted killings, mass mob violence, disappearances, and general repression by the Indian state that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Sikh civilians in the 1980s and 1990s. As was the case with the events of 1984, those who perpetrated this violation and discrimination – and who perpetuate it, in varying forms, to this day – largely continue to enjoy impunity for their actions.

In the fall of 2020, farmers from the Indian states of Punjab, Haryana, and elsewhere travelled to the outskirts of India's capitol to protest three farm laws. The measures, described as agricultural reforms by the central government, amounted to a full deregulation of the agriculture sector that removes protections for farmers and consumers; farmers argued that the changes would worsen the already harsh ecological and economic conditions in which they live. The peaceful protests, which would grow to be some of the largest in human

history, were met first with dismissal from the Indian government. Over time, however, that dismissal morphed to violence and repression, including tear gas, water cannons, baton charges, internet and resource shutdowns, censorship of journalists, the arrest and detention of activists, and concerted efforts from government leaders and state-aligned media to portray the protestors as terrorists.

India's harsh response to the farmers' protest, as well as similar crackdowns in the face of other demonstrations (e.g. widespread protests against the December 2019 passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act), continue to raise the alarm about recent democratic decline in India. In 2021, Freedom House downgraded India from 'Free' to 'Partly Free' "due to a multiyear pattern in which the Hindu nationalist government and its allies have presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent." Tensions between the Indian state and marginalized communities, including many Sikhs in India and in the wider diaspora, remain fraught on account of history and these more recent issues.



Above: A Sikh girl reading from the Guru Granth Sahib during her Charni Lagna ceremony. (Photo credit: Gurinder Singh Ahluwalia)

CEREMONIES & CELEBRATIONS

The Sikh tradition is to celebrate all major life moments in the presence of the guru. The first major ceremony follows the birth of a child. A reading is taken at random from the Guru Granth Sahib, and typically, the first letter of the first word is used for the first letter of the child's name.

The ceremony of *Charni Lagna* takes place when a child learns the Gurmukhi script proficiently and reads publicly from the Sikh scripture for the first time. A similar ceremony known as the *Dastar Bandi* occurs when a child publicly commits to wearing the Sikh turban.

The wedding ceremony is called *Anand Karaj* (ceremony of bliss) and takes place in the gurdwara as well. The bride and groom stand before the Guru Granth Sahib as community members recite and sing from a four-stanza composition known as *Laavan*. The couple walks around the scripture with each of the four stanzas, a physical action that represents a new marital journey for which the Sikh scripture remains at the center.

The final ceremony, *Antim Sanskar*, takes place at one's death. At this point, the community gathers to pray, worship, and celebrate the life of the individual who has passed. Sikhs believe the human body is a vessel for the soul, and therefore typically cremate their dead rather than burying them. Often, the *Antim Sanskar* is accompanied by a complete reading of the Guru Granth Sahib – sometimes continuous (*Akhand Path*) and sometimes over a longer period of time (*Sahaj Path*). The ceremony that marks the completion of a full reading of the Guru Granth Sahib is called a *bhog*, and this ceremony often accompanies the *Antim Sanskar*.



IMPORTANT SIKH CALENDAR DATES

Certain dates have special significance for the Sikh community. As with many religious traditions, Sikhi maintains its own calendar system – the Nanakshahi calendar. And, as with many religious calendars, the Nanakshahi calendar begins with the birth of its founder, Guru Nanak, in 1469 A.D.

Gurpurab

The term *gurpurab* simply refers to the celebration of a date that is related to the lives of the Sikh gurus (e.g., birth, death, martyrdom). In the Sikh tradition, the most prominently celebrated gurpurabs are those connected with the birthdates of the founder, Guru Nanak, and the 10th guru, Guru Gobind Singh, as well as the martyrdom anniversaries of Guru Arjan (d. 1606 A.D.) and Guru Tegh Bahadur (d. 1675 A.D.). On these occasions, Sikhs around the globe gather to reflect on the lives and teachings of the guru.

Vaisakhi

Vaisakhi is the most significant of the annual Sikh gatherings. Historically, this occasion marking the spring harvest in Punjab was celebrated with an immense festival. In 1699, Vaisakhi came to serve a particularly Sikh purpose when Guru Gobind Singh gathered the Sikh community and formalized the Guru Khalsa Panth. Every year in April, Sikhs gather in their local communities on

Vaisakhi to remember history, celebrate collectively, and recommit to their religious traditions.

Hola Mohalla

While *Holi* serves as a festival of colors across South Asia, the city of Anandpur Sahib is colored with displays of physical fitness and martial arts. The tradition of *Hola Mohalla* dates back to the times of the gurus and served as an occasion for Sikhs to share the physical side of their saint-soldier practice. Today, communities that are unable to join the festivities in Anandpur Sahib mark Hola Mohalla with displays in their own local contexts. This festival takes place in March.

Bandi Chor Divas

The celebration of *Bandi Chor Divas* comes around the same time as the Hindu festival of *Diwali*. On this day, Sikhs celebrate the return of their sixth guru, Guru Hargobind, who had been imprisoned by nearby rulers. In addition to his own release, Guru Hargobind successfully secured freedom for dozens of others who were also unjustly imprisoned. On this day, which falls in either October or November depending on the year, Sikhs gather to reflect on the values of freedom, justice, and standing up against oppression.

Above: Sikhs practicing gatka, a traditional form of Sikh martial arts (Photo credit: Mehtab Kaur)



SUGGESTED SOURCES:

Websites

www.sikhs.org

www.sikhcoalition.org/about-sikhs

www.sikhnet.com

Books

Eleanor Nesbitt,
Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction

Patwant Singh,
The Sikhs

Harbans Singh,
The Encyclopedia of Sikhism

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh,
The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus

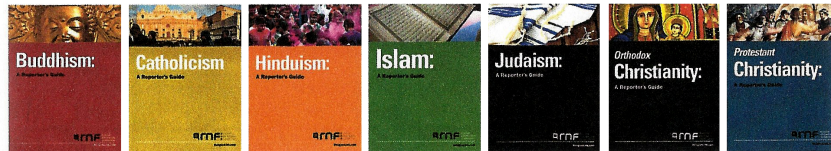
Arvind-pal Singh Mandair and
Christopher Shackle,
Teachings of the Sikh Gurus

If you are interested in learning more about Sikhs or interviewing members of the Sikh community on a range of topics, reach out to the Sikh Coalition at media@sikhcoalition.org.

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