

# Understanding **SIKHI**

Journey into Sikh  
Faith and Culture



# Introduction to Sikhs

*Sikhi, founded by Guru Nanak Dev ji in the 15th century in the region of Panjab, India, is a monotheistic religion emphasizing equality, justice, and devotion to God. It is the fifth-largest religion in the world, with over 30 million followers, known as Sikhs. The word "Sikh" means disciple or learner, and Sikhs are the disciples of the ten Gurus, whose teachings are encapsulated in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of Sikhi.*

## Overview of Sikhs

Sikhs are known for their distinct identity, often marked by uncut hair covered by a *dastar* (turban), a practice derived from the mandates of their faith. The Sikh community is built on the principles of selfless service, social justice, and the welfare of all humanity. Sikhs believe in living a truthful and honest life, contributing positively to society, and standing up against injustice. The primary place of worship for Sikhs is the *Gurdwara*, where they congregate to pray, sing hymns, and participate in community service, particularly through the institution of *Langar*, a community kitchen that serves free meals to all.

## Basic Beliefs and Principles

At the core of Sikh beliefs are the teachings of the ten Gurus, starting with Guru Nanak and concluding with Guru Gobind Singh. Sikhi emphasizes the belief in one formless God (*Waheguru*) and the importance of meditating on God's name (*Naam Japna*). The key tenets of Sikhi include:

- 1. Equality:** Sikhi teaches that all human beings are equal, regardless of caste, creed, gender, or race. This is reflected in the practice of *Langar* and the composition of the *Khalsa*, the collective body of all initiated Sikhs.
- 2. Selfless Service (Seva):** Sikhs are encouraged to engage in *Seva*,

serving others without any expectation of reward, as a way to live out their faith.

**3. Honest Living (Kirat Karni):** Sikhs are taught to live honestly and earn their livelihood through hard work and integrity.

**4. Community and Social Justice:** Sikhi promotes a sense of community and collective responsibility. Sikhs are urged to fight against oppression and injustice wherever they see it.

**5. Five Ks:** Initiated Sikhs, known as *Khalsa*, are expected to uphold the Five Ks; *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kangha* (wooden comb), *Kara* (iron bracelet), *Kachera* (cotton undergarments), and *Kirpan* (small sword); which symbolize their faith and commitment to Sikh principles.

Through these beliefs and practices, Sikhs aim to lead a life of humility, service, and devotion, contributing to the betterment of society and the spiritual elevation of humanity



# Guru Nanak Dev Ji - The First Guru (1469-1539)

## Life and Teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji

Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhi, was born in 1469 in the village of Talwandi, now known as Nankana Sahib in Pakistan. From a young age, Guru Nanak showed a deep spiritual inclination, often engaging in profound contemplation and discourse. His teachings emphasized the oneness of God, the importance of living a truthful life, and the need to practice compassion and humility.

Guru Nanak traveled extensively, spreading his message of divine unity and equality. He spoke against the caste system, ritualistic practices, and the superficial distinctions among religions. His core teachings can be summarized in the

principles of Naam Japna (meditating on God's name), Kirat Karni (earning an honest livelihood), and Vand Chakna (sharing with others).

## Key Events and Contributions

**Revelation:** In Sikhi, the concept of revelation is distinctively embodied through the bani, or the divine word, rather than through personal incarnation of the divine. The Sikh Gurus explicitly rejected the idea of incarnation, asserting that they are not manifestations of God.

Instead, they emphasized that the wisdom imparted through the bani is directly revealed by God.

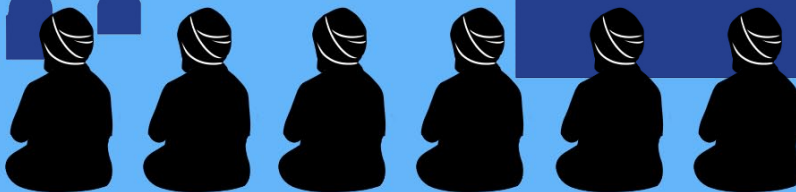
Guru Nanak taught that the bani allows individuals to connect with God and understand divine truths, emphasizing a direct, personal experience of the divine through devotion, meditation, and ethical living. His revelations laid the groundwork for the spiritual and moral guidelines that define Sikhi, highlighting the importance of the bani as the voice of God speaking to and through the Guru.

**Udasis (Journeys):** Guru Nanak undertook four major journeys (Udasis) across India, South Asia, and the Middle East to spread his teachings and establish a spiritual dialogue with people of various faiths and cultures.

**Establishment of Kartarpur:** Guru Nanak founded the town of Kartarpur (now in Pakistan), where he spent the last years of his life. Here, he established a community living according to the principles of Sikhi, promoting the values of hard work, sharing, and devotion.

## Formation of the Sikh Community (Sangat)

The early Sikh community, known as the Sangat, was a group of followers who embraced the teachings of Guru Nanak. This community was characterized by its inclusive nature, welcoming people from all backgrounds and social strata. The practices of congregational worship (Sangat) and communal meals (Langar) were established to reinforce the principles of equality and selfless service.



# The Ten Sikh Gurus

*After Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the leadership of the Sikh community was passed on through nine successive Gurus, each contributing to the development and consolidation of Sikhi:*

**1. Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539):** Read about Guru Nanak Dev on the previous page.

**2. Guru Angad Dev Ji (1504-1552):** Introduced the Gurmukhi script, which helped in standardizing the writing of Panjabi and preserving the hymns of Guru Nanak.

**3. Guru Amar Das Ji (1479-1574):** Established the Manji system for better organization of the Sikh community and emphasized the equality of women.

**4. Guru Ram Das Ji (1534-1581):** Founded the city of Amritsar and initiated the construction of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple).

**5. Guru Arjan Dev Ji (1563-1606):** Compiled the Adi Granth, the first version of the Guru Granth Sahib, and completed the Harmandir Sahib.

**6. Guru Hargobind Ji (1595-1644):** Introduced the concept of Miri and Piri, symbolizing the temporal and spiritual authority, and militarized the Sikhs to resist oppression.

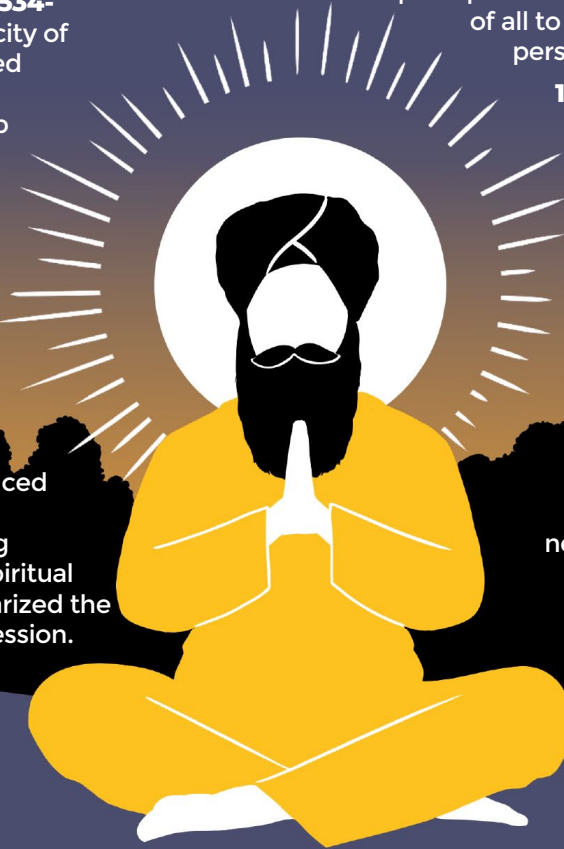
**7. Guru Har Rai Ji (1630-1661):** Continued the military traditions while promoting healthcare and medicinal practices.

**8. Guru Har Krishan Ji (1656-1664):** Known for his compassionate care for the sick during a smallpox epidemic.

**9. Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji (1621-1675):** devoted years to deep meditation before engaging in battles and ultimately sacrificed his life to defend religious freedom, embodying the principle of standing firm for the rights of all to practice their faith without persecution.

**10. Guru Gobind Singh Ji (1666-1708):** Founded the Khalsa in 1699, creating a distinct Sikh identity and solidifying the Sikh code of conduct. He also declared the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs.

**11. Sri Guru Granth Sahbi Ji: The Eternal Guru** (read more on the next page)



These ten Gurus laid the foundation of Sikhi, shaping its spiritual, social, and political dimensions, and guiding the Sikh community towards a path of righteousness, courage, and compassion.



# Development of Sikh Practices and Traditions

## Establishment of Key Sikh Practices (e.g., Langar, Kirtan)

The foundation of Sikh practices and traditions was laid by Guru Nanak Dev Ji and further developed by his successors. Two key practices established were Langar and Kirtan.

**Langar:** Initiated by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Langar is the community kitchen where free meals are served to all, regardless of caste, creed, or religion. This practice embodies the principles of equality, selfless service (Seva), and community. It promotes social justice by ensuring that everyone, irrespective of their social status, has access to food.

**Kirtan:** The singing of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib, known as Kirtan, is central to Sikh worship. Kirtan was popularized by Guru Nanak and further institutionalized by the subsequent Gurus. It serves as a means to connect with the Divine through music and collective singing from the Guru Granth Sahib ji.

## Compilation of the Guru Granth Sahib

The Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of Sikhi, was first compiled by Guru Arjan Dev Ji, the fifth Guru, in 1604. Known initially as the Adi Granth, it includes the hymns and teachings of the first five Sikh Gurus along with those of various Hindu and Muslim saints. Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Guru, later added the hymns of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji and declared the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs, thereby ending the line of human Gurus. The Guru Granth Sahib is revered as the final, sovereign, and eternal

living Guru by Sikhs.

This compilation of sacred chants is meticulously curated to act like a tuning fork, realigning the listener's harmony and continually guiding them towards the Divine. The text itself is not worshipped as an idol but is profoundly respected and interacted with as a Living Guru. Devotees honor and experience the Guru Granth Sahib as a conduit to connect with Waheguru(God) by immersing themselves in the Holy Text.

## The Role of Amrit (Baptism) and the Khalsa

Amrit, or the initiation ceremony, is a significant tradition within Sikhi. Guru Gobind Singh Ji formalized the process of Amrit Sanchar (baptism) during the formation of the Khalsa in 1699. Sikhs who undergo this initiation become part of the Khalsa, a collective body of committed Sikhs who pledge to uphold the highest Sikh values. This ceremony involves drinking Amrit, a mixture of water and sugar stirred with a double-edged sword while reciting five sacred prayers.





# The Khalsa and Sikh Identity

## Formation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh Ji

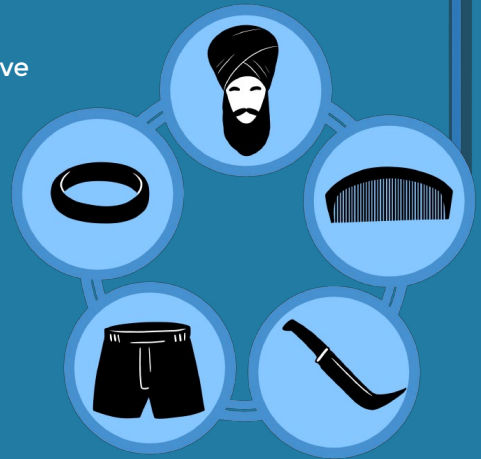
On the festival of Vaisakhi in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh Ji established the Khalsa, a brotherhood of saint-soldiers dedicated to purity, justice, and righteousness. He called upon Sikhs to come forward and embrace a life of courage and spirituality. Five volunteers, later known as the Panj Pyare (the Five Beloved Ones), were initiated into the Khalsa through the Amrit ceremony. This event marked a significant transformation, reinforcing the distinct identity and commitment of Sikhs.



## Five K's and Their Significance

Initiated Sikhs, known as Khalsa, are required to maintain five physical symbols of their faith, known as the Five K's:

- 1. Kesh (Uncut Hair):** Symbolizes spirituality and respect for God's creation.
- 2. Kangha (Wooden Comb):** Represents cleanliness and order.
- 3. Kara (Iron Bracelet):** A symbol of restraint and a reminder of the divine.
- 4. Kachera (Cotton Undergarments):** Signifies self-discipline and moral restraint.
- 5. Kirpan (Sword):** Represents the duty to protect the weak and uphold justice.



## The Sikh Code of Conduct (Rehat Maryada)

The Rehat Maryada is the official Sikh code of conduct, providing guidelines for personal and communal behavior. It includes instructions on religious practices, daily prayers, moral and ethical standards, and community

responsibilities. The Rehat Maryada was developed over time and formally adopted in the 20th century to unify the diverse practices within the Sikh community.

## Sikh Festivals and Celebrations

### Major Sikh Festivals:

- **Vaisakhi:** Celebrated in April, Vaisakhi marks the formation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1699. It is also a harvest festival in Punjab.
- **Gurpurabs:** These are celebrations of the anniversaries of the births and deaths of the Sikh Gurus, especially Guru Nanak Dev Ji and Guru Gobind Singh Ji.
- **Diwali (Bandi Chhor Divas):** Commemorates the release of Guru Hargobind Ji from imprisonment and is celebrated with lights and festivities.

Practices and Traditions Associated with Celebrations Sikh festivals are marked by a variety of practices and traditions. Key among these are:

- **Kirtan:** Singing of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib.
- **Langar:** Community meals served to all attendees, emphasizing equality and community.
- **Processions (Nagar Kirtan):** Public processions where the Guru Granth Sahib is paraded through the streets accompanied by singing and chanting.
- **Seva:** Acts of selfless service, including cleaning Gurdwaras and providing assistance to the needy.

# Sikhi Under British Rule

## Impact of British Colonialism on Sikhi



The annexation of Punjab in 1849 marked a pivotal moment for the Sikh community under British colonial rule, profoundly reshaping its socio-political and religious landscape. Here's a more detailed look at the impact:

**1. Disruption of Sikh Governance and Militarization:** By annexing Punjab, the British dismantled the Sikh Empire, effectively ending a period of Sikh sovereignty that had been established under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The removal of Sikh military texts such as the Sri Dasam Granth, a collection of compositions by Guru Gobind Singh, and the confiscation of swords from villages were strategic moves intended to weaken Sikh martial traditions and control the militaristic capabilities of the Sikhs.

**2. Manipulation of Leadership:** The British strategically positioned Sikhs who were amenable to British control in positions of power, often those who accepted bribes or were otherwise co-opted. This undermined traditional Sikh leadership and created divisions within the community, altering the dynamics of power and governance.

**3. Cultural and Religious Assimilation:** The case of Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last ruler of the Sikh Empire, is particularly poignant. Kidnapped and taken to the UK, Duleep Singh was converted to

Christianity and assimilated into British society, symbolizing the broader cultural and religious erosion experienced by the Sikh community during British rule. His life story reflects the loss of sovereignty and identity that Sikhs endured during this period.

**4. Economic and Social Changes:** The British also introduced new land revenue systems and agricultural practices that altered the economic landscape of Punjab. While these changes led to agricultural modernization, they also resulted in significant social upheaval, contributing to long-term economic disparities.

**5. Martial Race Theory and Military Recruitment:** The British portrayal of Sikhs as a "martial race" was a double-edged sword. It brought Sikhs into prominent roles within the British Indian Army, providing opportunities and recognition. However, it also stereotyped and pigeonholed the Sikh identity, focusing predominantly on their martial abilities rather than their rich cultural and religious traditions.

The effects of British policies were far-reaching, impacting the Sikh identity, governance, and religious practices. These changes have had lasting effects on the community, influencing Sikh political activism and identity formation well into the post-colonial era.

## Sikhi in the 20th Century

### Partition of India and its Impact on Sikhs

The partition of India in 1947 had a devastating impact on Sikhs. Panjab, the heartland of Sikhi, was divided between India and Pakistan, leading to massive displacement, communal violence, and loss of life. Many Sikhs were forced to migrate to the Indian side of Panjab, resulting in significant socio-economic upheaval.

### Role in the Indian Independence Movement

Sikhs played a crucial role in the Indian independence movement, contributing significantly to the struggle against British colonial rule. Many Sikh leaders and freedom fighters, including Kartar Singh and Udham Singh, are celebrated for their sacrifices and contributions to India's independence.

### Post-Partition Sikh Diaspora

Following the partition, many Sikhs emigrated to different parts of the world, establishing vibrant communities in countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. The Sikh diaspora has contributed to the global spread of Sikhi and played a significant role in the socio-economic and political spheres of their adopted countries. The diaspora continues to uphold Sikh traditions, promote the values of equality and service, and advocate for human rights and social justice globally.

# Sikhi Today

## Contemporary Issues and Challenges

In the modern era, Sikhs face a range of contemporary issues and challenges, including maintaining Sikh identity amidst global assimilation, confronting discrimination and hate crimes, and addressing internal divisions within the community. The rise of secularism and materialism poses challenges to the spiritual and ethical foundations of Sikhi. Additionally, there are ongoing struggles to preserve the Panjabi language and Gurmukhi script among younger generations in the diaspora. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like SGPC, SAF International, United Sikhs and many more play a crucial role in addressing these challenges by providing education, promoting cultural awareness, and offering support to Sikh communities worldwide.

## Global Sikh Community and Contributions

The global Sikh community, spread across various continents, continues to make significant contributions in numerous fields. Sikhs have established themselves in various professions, including politics, business, sports, and the arts. In countries like Canada, the UK, and the USA, Sikhs

have become influential community leaders and policymakers. The Sikh ethos of hard work, resilience, and community service has enabled Sikhs to positively impact their societies. NGOs such as Khalsa Aid, Sikh Human Development Foundation, and Ensaaf have been instrumental in amplifying these contributions.

## Role of Sikhs in Social Justice and Human Rights

Sikhs have a long-standing tradition of advocating for social justice and human rights. Rooted in the teachings of the Gurus, Sikhs actively engage in humanitarian efforts, fight against oppression, and support marginalized communities. Organizations like Khalsa Aid exemplify this spirit by providing aid in disaster-stricken areas and supporting refugees globally. United Sikhs and SAF International also work tirelessly to uphold Sikh values of equality and service by engaging in various humanitarian and social justice initiatives. These organizations embody the principles of Seva (selfless service) and play a pivotal role in promoting human rights and social justice worldwide.

# Sikh Architecture & Art

## Gurdwaras and Their Significance

Gurdwaras, the places of worship for Sikhs, hold immense significance. They serve not only as spiritual centers but also as hubs for community activities and social services. Architecturally, Gurdwaras are known for their distinctive features such as the Nishan Sahib (Sikh flag), domes, and community kitchens (Langar halls). The Harmandir Sahib, or Golden Temple, in Amritsar, is the most revered Gurdwara and a symbol of Sikh heritage. (Did you know? The Golden Temple was attacked by many forces over the years in pursuit

of finishing off Sikhs, the latest being in 1984 by the Indian Army)

## Sikh Art, Music, and Literature

Sikh art is rich and diverse, encompassing various forms such as painting, music, and literature. Sikh paintings often depict historical events, the lives of the Gurus, and religious themes. Sikh music, particularly Kirtan, is an integral part of worship and spiritual expression. The literature includes the Guru Granth Sahib, historical texts, and contemporary writings that reflect Sikh philosophy and ethics.

# The Future of Sikhi

The future of Sikhi lies in the continued commitment to its core values and teachings. As Sikhs navigate the complexities of the modern world, maintaining their distinct identity while adapting to changing circumstances will be crucial. The global Sikh community, with the support of Sikh organizations, Gurdwaras, and langar (free kitchen) initiatives, is well-

positioned to continue making positive contributions to society. By upholding the principles of equality, justice, and service, Sikhs will carry forward the legacy of their Gurus and inspire future generations. Through education, community engagement, and steadfast commitment to their faith, Sikhs will ensure the vibrant future of Sikhi.



transforming communities  
through Guru Nanak's wisdom

[www.safinternational.org](http://www.safinternational.org)

FOLLOW  
US AT:



@safinternational

Published: Sept 4, 2024

Written By: Bhai Shamandeep Singh

Copyright: The graphic illustrations are the property of SAF International. Unauthorized use or modification is strictly prohibited without prior written consent.