



# Sikhism

## Introduction

Sikhism is the world's fifth-largest religion. The word 'Sikh' means 'learner' or 'seeker of truth'. Sikhism advocates equality, social justice, service to humanity, and tolerance for other religions. The essential message of Sikhism is spiritual devotion and reverence of God at all times while practicing the ideals of honesty, compassion, humility and generosity in everyday life.

Sikh males can be easily distinguished by their turban, unshorn hair and beard, a steel / iron bangle called KARA and kirpan (a small sword usually carried in a cloth support and worn under the shirt) and Sikh females from their traditional "chunni" (long scarf used for head covering) over their head and across their shoulders.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sikhs were employed by the British as trusted guards in British colonies of eastern Asia. Sikh regiments fought in the two world wars under British command. They shared the trenches in Gallipoli with British and Australian forces. 83,000 Sikhs were killed in the two Wars in places as far as France, Denmark, Italy and Burma. The Allied Forces were impressed with their fighting skills and the British awarded them 14 Victoria Crosses.

Sikhs have been in Australia since arriving from the Punjab in the 19<sup>th</sup> century among the 'Afghan' cameleers as well as indentured labourers in the cane fields of northern New South Wales.

## Demographics

There are approximately 25 million Sikhs around the world. While 80% of the world's Sikhs reside in India – primarily in the state of Punjab – there are also significant populations in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, East Africa, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

The Sikhs constitute about 14% of all people of Indian origin who have migrated to Australia. According to the 2006 Census, there were 26,429 Sikhs in Australia with the largest number residing in New South Wales. There are approximately 15 Sikh families in the Northern Territory.

## Background and Origins

The Sikh religion is one of the youngest world religions and was founded more than 500 years ago (1469) in Punjab, North India, by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, in response to a spiritual revelation. Nanak and his nine successors are known as 'gurus', which is a term for a spiritual guide or teacher.

Guru Nanak taught true religion consists of always being mindful of God, meditating on name and attributes of God and reflecting on God's Power in all activities of daily life. Guru Nanak's followers became known as Sikhs (from the Sanskrit word shishya), which means disciple. The Holy Book, the "Guru Granth Sahib", is the ultimate spiritual authority for Sikhs. It contains the teachings and devotional compositions written and recorded by the Sikh Gurus and some contemporary Hindu and Muslim saints. The Guru Granth Sahib is at the heart of Sikh worship and its presence lends sanctity to the Sikh place of worship, the Gurdwara.

The concept of Sikhism includes:

- Universal acceptance of all humanity;
- Belief in one God;
- The name of God is Truth, "Sat Nam";

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- Equality of all persons irrespective of their caste, colour, gender, nationality and religion
- Equality of the sexes is emphasised.

### Key Beliefs

Sikhs believe that the ten Gurus were one with the Divine Being and each had divine attributes. The first Guru is Guru Nanak Dev Ji and the tenth Guru is Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The tenth Guru anointed the Holy Book "Guru Granth Sahib" as the living eternal Guru of the Sikhs. The 'Holy Book' is treated with the utmost reverence and respect.

The Sikh way of life is based on:

- *Nam Japna* - Remember God's name with every breath;
- *Kirat Karni* - Work and earn by the sweat of the brow, live a family way of life and practise truthfulness and honesty in all dealings;
- *Vand Ke Chakna* - To share and live as an inspiration and support to the whole Community.
- Control of *Kaam* (desire), *Krodh* (anger), *Lobh* (greed), *Moh* (attachment) and *Hankar* (pride).

Sikhs believe that reincarnation - (the cycle of life-death-rebirth) - is for those who do not attain attachment to God during the human life cycle.

### Greeting

The following sensitivities need to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- Sikhs in Australia follow the normal hand shake in greeting. The traditional way of greeting is with folded hands. This is especially the case when greeting a person of the opposite sex. Sikh greeting is "Sat Sri Akal", (God is the Truth)
- Sikh males or females who have family ties or are close to one another may embrace one another. Sikhs do not exchange a kiss on the cheek.
- It is customary for elders to place the palm of their hand on the head of the younger generation which is symbolic of affection and the transfer of love/blessings.
- Sikhs may bow and touch the feet of the elders as a gesture of respect of the elder's position at home or in society.

### Names and Titles

- All Sikh males carry the name of *Singh* (which means lion) and Sikh females carry the name *Kaur* (which means lioness/ princess) respectively. In some cases the ancestral names are included after Singh or Kaur. Referring to a Sikh male as Mr *Singh* and Miss/Mrs *Kaur* is acceptable but it would be preferred that the full name is used when more than one Sikh is present.

### Dress and Appearance

Many Sikhs feel that there is not enough awareness in the general community, government agencies and service providers about the significance of visible articles of faith that are fundamental to their religious identity. Baptised Sikh males and females (known as Amritdhari Sikh) are required to wear the following five signs of their faith (known as the Five K's):

- KIRPAN** - a small sized sword placed in a shoulder belt;
- KARA** - an iron bangle worn on the wrist;
- KACHA** - special underwear, akin to boxer shorts;

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**KANGA** - a small wooden comb;

**KESH** - (hair) a Sikh must not cut hair from his/her body from birth to death.

An Amritdhari Sikh must not be asked to separate any of the Five K's from his/her body. The cutting of hair or abandoning the wearing of the turban should not even be suggested to a Sikh male as these form important parts of the Sikh faith.<sup>1</sup>

Each of the five K's has a special religious significance. The neatly tied turban over the unshorn hair represents a crown of spirituality while the Kara signifies bondage to Truth. Sikh youth normally wear a "patka" (cloth) on their head and with transformation into adulthood they start wearing a "Pugg" (turban). The colour of the turban is not normally significant except in the following:

- On occasions of death a white turban for males and a white "chunni" or scarf for females may be used.
- "Gyani" or priests generally wear dark blue, black or white.

### Seating

- No special seating arrangements are required for job or any official interviews. Police, airport searches, etc are best performed by a person of the same sex.

### Body Language and Behaviour

Non-verbal communication has a powerful effect on relationships and effective service provision. Non-verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable or even offensive in another. Some of the sensitivities to be understood in this area include:

- For Sikhs, the head or turban is sacred. A Sikh's head or turban should never be touched or insulted in any way.
- Winking to females is considered offensive as it may imply a sexual advance or harassment.

### Food, Drink and Fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. When hosting events where food is served, as a matter of good practice, serve a selection of vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods on separate trays. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function. The following issues relating to food, drink and fasting should also be understood:

- Observant Sikhs do not consume alcohol or smoke.
- Sikhs who do consume meats prefer meat slaughtered with a single blow and not left to bleed to death (as in Halal meat).
- In multi-group functions it would be prudent to place beef or other meats in separate locations.
- Some observant Sikhs do not eat meat or eggs.

### Religious Festivals, Observances and Days of Significance

A Sikh can worship at any time of the day or night but the expected prayer times are before sunrise and sunset and prior to going to bed at night. Generally a Sikh meditates ('Simran') on the Name of God by reciting His Name (the Magnificent Lord, Waheguru) even while working.

Each year there are a number of Sikh festivals, called Gurburbs, i.e. associated with the birth and death anniversaries of the Gurus. These include:

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- The birthdays of the ten Sikh Gurus. The birthdays of Guru Nanak Dev Ji (first Guru) and Guru Gobind Singh Ji (tenth Guru) and the martyrdom days of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> gurus are particularly significant. On these occasions Sikhs practise the 'Akhand Path' – the continuous (48 hrs) reading of the Granth Sahib.
- The celebration of the five Sikhs baptized by the tenth Guru Gobind Singh. This is known as advent day of Khalsa, ('Baisakhi'). This is also a special day that signifies the start of wheat harvesting season and marks the Sikh New Year's Day.

## Language and Communication

Language and communication issues include:

- Nearly all Sikhs in the Northern Territory are fluent in spoken English, Hindi and Punjabi (the mother tongue).
- The written script used by Sikhs is Gurmukhi.
- It is the policy of the Northern Territory Government to provide an interpreter where clients require assistance in English. The Interpreting and Translating Service is now located within the Department of Local Government Housing and Sport. Bookings can be made between 8.30 am and 4.00pm Monday to Friday. For after hours services please call the Commonwealth Translating and Interpreting Service on 131 450. Other details are available from the website: [http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/multicultural/interpreter/inter\\_service.html](http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/multicultural/interpreter/inter_service.html)

## Family and Marriage

The varying family characteristics of religious groups should be appreciated.

- Whether living together or not, Sikh family members are expected to look after each other in time of need. The eldest person in the family is bestowed the appropriate respect and his/her views are strongly considered when making decisions on family matters.<sup>2</sup>
- Adultery, by either a male or female Sikh, is taken very seriously. Divorce amongst Sikhs is very uncommon.
- The trend to have arranged marriages for Sikhs is still prevalent and significant in the first generation of families that originated from India.
- Sikh women have equal status and are regarded as a significant part of the Sikh community. A woman receives utmost reverence for her role in the family and society. She has an equal right to grow spiritually and to attend religious congregations and recite divine hymns in the Gurdwara. She is also eligible to participate and perform all ceremonies including Baptism.

## Medical

Only in life threatening situations should hair be removed from the body without consent from the individual or the family. In all other instances consent from the individual, if the person is an adult and able, or from the parents or family, if a minor or incapacitated, should be sought.

## Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly important for all religious communities.

- Only family members or associates generally touch a Sikh woman even when she is grieving over a death.

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- The body should be handed over to the nearest family member a few hours prior to cremation. This allows sufficient time for the corpse to be washed, dressed and to have the appropriate religious prayers recited over it. Cremation should occur as soon as possible after death and this often results in a sense of urgency regarding funeral arrangements. Cremation occurs with family members in attendance and the ashes must be handed to the nearest family member to be later disposed.<sup>3</sup>
- During the official period of mourning (from 10-17 days following the cremation), the scriptures are read from beginning to end, either at the family home or at the Gurdwara.
- Elders and close associates may wear white (the mourning colour).

### Counselling/Interviews

- It is appropriate for a male Sikh to speak to a female or male for interview or counselling purposes, however if the situation permits it is preferable if the interviewer/counsellor is a female.

### Other Sensitivities

Other cultural and religious sensitivities that need to be acknowledged and respected include:

- Most Sikhs do not smoke.
- It is customary for Sikhs to cover their head in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib.
- Sikhs remove their shoes before entering the premises of the Guru Granth Sahib.
- No alcohol, cigarettes or meat are to be in the vicinity of Guru Granth Sahib and Gurdwara.

### Further Enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Office of Multicultural Affairs with input from Sikh people in the Northern Territory community. For further information please contact:

- Jasminder Singh Anand  
20 Cullen St  
Leanyer NT 0812  
Telephone: (08) 8945 6882  
Email: [kajanand@hotmail.com](mailto:kajanand@hotmail.com)
- The national peak body is the Sikh Council of Australia  
Web: [www.sikhcouncil.org.au](http://www.sikhcouncil.org.au)

#### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Information obtained from "A Practical Reference to Religious Diversity for Operational Police" National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau – 1<sup>st</sup> Edition

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid