

Journalists' guide to Sikhism

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NETWORK OF SIKH ORGANISATIONS
UNITY IS STRENGTH

This publication has been produced by the Network of Sikh Organisations (NSO) as an educational resource for journalists and newsdesks to be hosted on The Independent Press Standards Organisation's (IPSO) website.

The (NSO) is a registered charity no. 1064544 that links more than 130 UK gurdwaras and other UK Sikh organisations in active cooperation to enhance the image and understanding of Sikhism in the UK.
www.nsouk.co.uk

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Key things this document will cover

This FAQ style document aims to provide a snapshot into Sikhism for journalists wanting to get a clearer understanding of the faith, its core beliefs and the unique Sikh identity. It provides an insight into the history of Sikhism, along with a summary of some of the current issues and controversies faced by the community, particularly those in Britain. Although it includes some references for further reading, we have provided contact details for British Sikh groups who can provide quotes and more in depth information if required. The NSO has produced this guide in consultation with IPSO.



Image: Harmandar Sahib (Golden Temple) Amritsar, by Aviral Sanghera licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution share Alike 3.0 Unreported license

Q&A

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o HOW DID SIKHISM COME ABOUT, IS IT MONOTHEISTIC, AND HOW MANY ADHERENTS ARE THERE WORLDWIDE?

Sikhism is the fifth largest faith worldwide, with approximately 27 Million adherents worldwide. The founder Guru Nanak was born in Punjab (today in Pakistan) in 1469 AD. Nanak was the first in a line of ten Gurus or teachers. On *Vaisakhi* in 1699 AD the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh initiated Sikhs into the *Khalsa* or 'pure'. The Khalsa gave Sikhs a unique identity mandating the wearing of five symbols, referred to as the 5Ks. Prior to his departure, Guru Gobind Singh instructed Sikhs to accept the Guru Granth Sahib, a compilation of the writings of the Gurus, containing guidance on responsible living, as future guidance for Sikhs. It includes verses of Hindu and Muslim saints which echo the thrust of Sikh teachings. Sikhism is monotheistic with a democratic foundation.

Recommended reading: Singh, P. (2002). *The Sikhs*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

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o WHAT ARE THE CORE BELIEFS?

There are three duties that Sikhs should follow. *Nam Japna* (Meditate): Respecting God by living life honourably and focussing attention away from self. *Kirt Karna* (Work): Earning an honest living. *Vand Chhakna* (charity): Sikhs regard it as their duty to look after the sick and poor. Sikh charities today are helping feed needy people in the UK, and supporting victims of humanitarian crises like natural disasters, war and famine across the globe. Sikhs believe in karma, reincarnation and *Sarbat da bhalla* – the wellbeing of humanity

o WHAT ARE THE 5KS?



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Following the baptism ceremony* (*Amrit Sanchar*) those initiated into the *Khalsa* maintain five symbols: *Kesh* - Uncut Hair: This is to symbolise strength, holiness and will to live a simple life in order to devote oneself to God. A turban is worn on the neatly tied hair. *Kara* - A Steel Bracelet: This is to symbolise the link with God and reminds Sikhs to do right. *Kanga* - A Wooden Comb: A symbol of the need to have a clean mind and body. Although, Sikhs must devote themselves to serve God, it is believed that a healthy and clean body is important to achieve enlightenment. *Kachha* – Shorts (generally worn as underwear with trousers) to replace the more cumbersome Indian dhoti, and to preserve modesty. *Kirpan* - A Ceremonial Sword: This symbolises spirituality, defending good, and the struggle against injustice. The size of the sword varies from few inches to three feet long. * Sikhs undertake baptism as soon as they are old enough to understand the commitment – there is no set age.

o WHERE DO SIKHS WORSHIP?

The Sikh place of worship is called a *Gurdwara*. This word originates from Punjabi and means a gateway to the Guru. Births, deaths, marriages and baptism ceremonies are conducted in the Gurdwara. On entering the main hall (*darbar*) shoes must be removed and heads covered. Priests (*gianis*) recite verses from the Guru Granth Sahib (*gurbani*) and hymns (*kirtan*) are sung accompanied with musical instruments in the darbar. The community (*sangat*) provides all visitors a free vegetarian meal (*langar*), which is prepared in a communal kitchen. The Golden Temple or *Sri Harmandir Sahib* in Amritsar is one of the most iconic Gurdwaras worldwide.

Further information:

<http://www.goldentempleamritsar.org/>
<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/india/amritsar/attractions/golden-temple/a/point-of-interest/1150764/356445>

o WHAT ARE THE KEY SIKH FESTIVALS?

Sikh teachings reject superstition; so no one-day is ‘holier’ than another. However, Sikhs mark certain occasions, which are historically significant. The dates are based on what is known as the Nanakshahi calendar, linked to the Gregorian calendar. The main festivals include the following: *Vaisakhi* (April 14) the day on which the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, created the *Khalsa Panth*, the community of initiated Sikhs. *Gurpurbs* - Sikhs mark the birth of each of the Gurus. These include the birthday of Guru Nanak, and Guru Gobind Singh. *Shaheedi Gurpurbs* – Sikhs mark the martyrdom anniversaries of the fifth Guru Arjan, and ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur. *Shaheedi Gurpurbs* of other prominent historical figures are also marked including the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh – known as the *Chaar Sahibzade*.

o WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF A SIKH?

According to the Sikh code of conduct the *Rehat Maryada*, a Sikh is any human being who faithfully believes in one Immortal Being, the ten Gurus from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh, The Guru Granth Sahib, the utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus, the baptism bequeathed by the tenth Guru, and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion. A link to the *Rehat Maryada* can be found here [http://old.sgpc.net/sikhism/punjabi/Sikh%20Reht%20Maryada\(Eng\)l.pdf](http://old.sgpc.net/sikhism/punjabi/Sikh%20Reht%20Maryada(Eng)l.pdf)

o WHY DO SIKHS WEAR TURBANS?

Turbans are worn across many world cultures, but the Sikh turban or *dastaar*, an article of faith, was made mandatory following initiation of Sikhs into the *Khalsa* in 1699. The *dastaar* covers hair or *kesh*, which is required to be kept uncut following baptism, and constitutes one of five symbols worn colloquially referred to as the 5Ks. There are various turban styles and colours. Some may indicate affiliation to a particular group. Many Sikhs wear red turbans on their wedding day and blue/black turbans are commonly worn by British Sikhs. Further information:

<https://www.nus.org.uk/en/advice/health-and-wellbeing/why-do-sikhs-wear-turbans/>

o WHY DO SIKHS WEAR CEREMONIAL SWORDS?

The Sikh ceremonial sword or *Kirpan* is a short knife with a curved blade. It is one of the 5Ks worn by *amritdhari* (baptised) Sikhs who undergo the *Khalsa* initiation. It is worn at all times. In England and Wales there is a defence from prosecution under section 139 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988, if someone can prove it is carried for 'religious reasons'. The word *kirpan* comes from the Punjabi word *kirpa*, which means 'compassion' or 'mercy' and *aanaa*, which means 'honour' or 'dignity'. It is symbolic of standing up to oppression, whilst protecting the weak from tyranny and injustice.

o WHY DO SIKHS HAVE THE NAME 'SINGH' AND 'KAUR'?

Following baptism and entry into the egalitarian *Khalsa*, every Sikh man takes the last name Singh, literally means lion – a reminder for the need of courage, and each woman takes the name Kaur or princess, to show their elevated status in society.

o WHAT ARE THE DIETARY REQUIREMENTS FOR SIKHS?

Some Sikhs are vegetarians by choice. Those who eat meat are prohibited from eating halal & kosher meat. If it is not possible to know what meat is being served, many Sikhs will stick to vegetarian food. Because of the Indian subcontinent origin of Sikhism, many Sikhs will not eat beef. Food served in a *gurdwara* is always vegetarian.

o DO SIKHS PROSELYTIZE?

Sikhs don't proselytize and believe all faiths are paths to God and should be equally respected. In his first sermon Guru Nanak said, 'There is no Hindu there is no Muslim' – recognising the equality of all humans.

o IS THERE A SIKH MARRIAGE CEREMONY?

The Sikh marriage ceremony is called the *Anand Karaj* or 'joyful union'. It is a ceremony for Sikh couples and involves readings from the Guru Granth Sahib in the *gurdwara*. If a Sikh marries a non-Sikh then a blessing from a priest in the *gurdwara*, rather than an *Anand Karaj* is advisable.

Further information about Sikhism can be found: <https://www.sikhnet.com/>

Recommended reading: Jhutti-Johal, J. (2011). *Sikhism today*. London: Continuum.

ISSUES AND CONTROVERSIES:

o THE 1984 ANTI-SIKH POGROMS AND KHALISTAN

In June 1984 the Indian army stormed Sikhism's holiest shrine *Harmandir Sahib* in Amritsar, (the Golden Temple) to 'flush out militants'. Many innocent pilgrims were killed in the assault. In October 1984, Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her in revenge for the military operation codenamed Bluestar. Anti-Sikh pogroms led by Congress party politicians followed in Delhi. More than 3,000 Sikhs were killed across India. Today some Sikh groups including in Britain, campaign for a separate Sikh homeland called Khalistan. Many continue to lobby for justice for the victims and their families. In 2014 documents released from The National Archives in Kew revealed an SAS officer had advised the Indian army in the run up to Bluestar.

Further recommended reading:

<http://nsouk.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/kristallnacht.pdf>

Singh, P. (2018). *1984, India's Guilty Secret*. Kashi House.



ISSUES AND CONTROVERSIES

o GROOMING GANGS AND USE OF THE WORD ‘ASIAN’

British Sikh and Hindu groups have consistently objected to the use of the word ‘Asian’ to describe those convicted in sexual grooming gang cases like in Rochdale, Rotherham, Oxford and Telford.

o POST 9/11 HATE CRIME AND ‘ISLAMOPHOBIA’

In the aftermath of 9/11 Sikhs suffered Islamophobia and backlash. In the U.S the first person killed in retribution for 9/11 was a Sikh gas station owner from Arizona. In 2012 worshippers were shot dead by a white supremacist in a Sikh temple in Wisconsin. In 2010 former government Minister Parmjit Singh Dhanda had a pig’s head thrown in his drive, and in 2015 a neo-Nazi influenced by ‘Jihadi John’ was sentenced to prison for attempting to behead a Sikh dentist in Wales in a ‘revenge’ attack for Lee Rigby’s murder by Islamists.

OTHER INTERESTING FACTS AND FIGURES:

- According to the 2011 British census 432,429 respondents identified as Sikh.
- There are an estimated 500,000 Sikhs in America
- Home ownership amongst British Sikhs is high. According to one survey, 87% of Sikh households owned at least a portion of their home, and 30% own their homes outright.

Organisations that can be contacted for further information:

Network of Sikh Organisations

www.nsouk.co.uk
info@nsouk.co.uk
[@SikhMessenger](https://www.facebook.com/SikhMessenger)

Sikh Press Association

www.sikhpa.com/
Media@SikhPA.com
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City Sikhs

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The Sikh Council UK

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