

# Sikhism

## and the Welcoming Workplace

### A guide for inclusive relationships.

This guide is a short overview of a fascinating religion, designed to give readers information to help foster welcoming and respectful relationships. Please remember that Sikhs are diverse, varying by sect, culture, level of adherence, and personal interpretation. If you are curious about whether this information applies to your Sikh colleague, neighbour or classmate, we invite you to start a conversation.



Encounter World Religions can help you learn more about religious literacy and how to create a welcoming workplace.



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# Sikhism - The Basics

Sikhism is a monotheistic faith and the **world's fifth-largest religion**. Founded in India around 1500 CE, to be a "Sikh" in Punjabi means to be a "**student**" or "**disciple**" (of God).

Sikhism's founder was a spiritual leader known as **Guru Nanak**. Nanak had nine successors, creating a lineage of ten human gurus. The last guru said that after his death, the community's leader would be their scriptures rather than a person.

The scriptures, or **Guru Granth Sahib** ("book guru") is treated akin to a **living guru**. Usually kept in temples, the book is placed on a throne and always has an attendant. When not in use, it is placed ritually in a bed in a separate bedroom.

Sikhs **take off their shoes** and **cover their head** before approaching the book and will bow in front of it, in reverence to the wisdom it contains.



*The Ten Gurus*

Sikhs emphasize three core tenets: **devotion to God**; earning a **truthful living**; and offering **service to humanity**.

Sikhs strongly affirm that everyone, regardless of caste, sex, race, etc. is equal before God.

Sikhs are often visibly notable for the turbans some wear.



The Sikh place of worship is known as a **gurdwara** ("door to the guru"). In a gurdwara, all remove their shoes, and cover their heads.



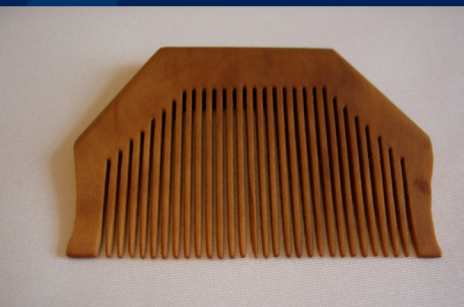
# Khalsa Sikhs - The 5 Ks

Some Sikhs take an extra calling by becoming "Khalsa Sikhs." These Sikhs always wear the five K's:

1. **Kesh – uncut hair.** A Khalsa Sikh, once initiated, never again cuts any hair on one's body, nor plucks it, dyes it, nor styles it. Hair is indicative of just one of the many gifts given by God and what God gives does not need to be improved.



2. **Kangha – wooden combs.** The founder taught that cleanliness of body leads to cleanliness of mind and so the tradition emphasizes bathing and grooming. The comb is used to both keep the hair clean and to hold it in place under the turban.



3. **Kara – bracelet.** The single bracelet is considered a kind of handcuff with the other end connected to God (handcuffing one to God). As the wearer notices the kara during the day, they are to ask themselves if what they are doing is honourable in God's sight.



4. **Kirpan – dagger.** The kirpan reminds Sikhs that they are to be saints and soldiers, meaning that if injustice is being done, they must protect the innocent, even if this involves great risk to one's own safety. Some Sikhs keep a dull kirpan or have it sewn shut within its holder, which they nonetheless carry to remind them they must stand up against injustice.

5. **Kacchera – undershorts.** These white boxer-type shorts are worn to emphasize self-restraint in sexuality.

# Cultural Awareness

Sikhs have varying practices regarding hair. Some Sikhs get hair cuts and are clean-shaven. Some wear turbans and have a trimmed beard. **Khalsa Sikhs will never cut any hair** on their head or body once initiated, meaning they have turbans and untrimmed beards.



While each Sikh chooses the path that suits them, those who choose not to cut their hair or facial hair follow this as a religious commitment and **company policies around uniforms, hairnets, etc. should consider this**. In medical settings, if hair must be shaved for surgical reasons, be aware that this may be emotionally difficult for someone who has not cut their hair in decades.



Practices regarding not cutting hair have historically been followed primarily by men. But today, some **female Sikhs** also refrain from cutting any hair on their head, face, or body. This rejection of Western standards around what comprises female beauty is done with pride by a minority of Sikh women.

Not all Sikhs are vegetarian but **vegetarianism** is seen as the ideal. Many Khalsa Sikhs are vegetarian and consider it part of their identity. At the gurdwara or temple, meals are strictly vegetarian.

For Sikhs who do eat meat, many follow rules not to eat food that is ritually sacrificed (the way kosher or halal meat is prepared).

**Khalsa Sikhs also refrain from alcohol.**



# Greetings and Holidays

Most Sikh holidays include an **akhand path**, meaning the scriptures are recited continuously from start to end which takes about 48 hours and multiple reciters. Often the Guru Granth is led in procession while hymns are chanted. Sermons are given, prayers are offered, and there are always free langar meals for everyone.



*Guru Nanak*

The most important Sikh holiday is **Baisakhi**, held annually on April 13 or 14. The day recalls in 1699 when amidst persecution, five devotees proved willing to lay down their life to protect the community. These five become the first members of the "khalsa."

For Sikhs the holiday marks commitment and the need to do everything possible to prevent injustice against oneself or against anyone else. It is considerate to wish your Sikh friends and colleagues **Happy Baisakhi**.

Another key holiday is the **birthday of Guru Nanak**, the Sikh founder. The date moves around according to a lunar calendar but generally occurs in November.

**Hola Mohalla** meaning "mock fight" was initiated by Guru Gobind Singh and celebrates the martial arts, singing, and poetry. There are martial arts displays with swords, sticks, shields, and horse riding. The exact date varies slightly every year, typically falling in March.



Sikhs also celebrate **Diwali**. Diwali is a large Hindu holiday but has extra meaning for Sikhs as the day when the sixth guru, Guru Hargobind, was released from imprisonment but through cleverness, managed to get over fifty other people freed as well. Diwali happens around early November.

# 5 Interesting Facts

1. Sikh first **names are often genderless**. First names are typically character traits.

2. Every gurdwara has a **Langar kitchen** as it is a religious duty to offer free food to everyone who enters the gurdwara. No collection plate is passed. Donations pay for ingredients and volunteers cook, serve and clean.



3. Sikhs strongly emphasize **Seva or "service."** At temple, some voluntarily clean the shoes left on shoe racks. During COVID, media covered Sikhs in Calgary, Toronto, and New York City who gave thousands of free vegetarian meals to hospital workers, truck drivers, and those who were shut in.

4. The Sikh Gurus emphasized the **equality of all** and rejected India's caste system. Caste is felt through food practices (who can eat with whom, who sits high or low). Thus, at langar, **everyone eats together** and all **sit on the floor** (if physically able) to show equality and humility before God. The Sikh turban also indicates human dignity. Somewhat akin to a crown, it shows that **all have worth** regardless of caste or status.

5. Sikhism's spiritual centre is the magnificent **Golden Temple** in Amritsar India. **Doors on all four sides** show that all are welcome and the temple serves around one hundred thousand free meals daily to visitors, all provided by volunteer donations of time and money.

# Discovering Our Misconceptions

Sometimes what we think we know isn't accurate. We're all susceptible to misconceptions and it is good practice to check our assumptions.

## **Misconception: How to Pronounce "Sikh."**

Although most English speakers pronounce the word as "seek," it is actually pronounced like the English word "sick" (or more simply "**sik**"). Learning this and using the correct pronunciation is a good way to be considerate.

## **Misconception: The Sikh tradition is violent or connected to terrorism.**

While every tradition has members who commit violent or terrorist acts, Sikhism **teaches peace** with one's neighbour and amongst religions. The scripture book is simply praise hymns to God and advocates no violence. The kirpan is to be withdrawn only defensively to protect a life.

## **Misconception: Sikhism is Patriarchal**

The tradition's doctrines are **egalitarian on gender**, and enable women to occupy every position a man can. There are no doctrinal teachings that elevate men over women or restrict certain roles to men only.

## **Misconception: Everyone is Named Singh.**

This is only a partial misconception as many are named Singh – but not all. If a Sikh decides to become a Khalsa Sikh, their last name is changed to either **Singh for males**, (meaning lion) or **Kaur for females**, (meaning princess).

The changed name was done to counter the Indian caste system - last names indicate caste and so the changed names erased such distinctions to foster equality.

## **Misconceptions: Sikhs practice Shariah Law.**

Ironically, Sikhs have often been targets of Islamophobic hate. In Canada, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh was accosted at a campaign event by a woman yelling that she did not want his shariah law. Sikhs have refused in these situations to say "I'm not Muslim" as that would violate the idea of **protecting others from injustice**. They have been so consistent on this front that one Texas imam published an open letter thanking the Sikh community for refusing to throw their Muslim brothers and sisters "under the bus."

# Want to learn more?



For more than 20 years Encounter World Religions has provided educational **religious literacy and inclusion programs** as well as consulting services to help businesses, organizations and communities create inclusive and welcoming spaces.

We offer engaging programs for high school, college and university students, and professional development for educators.

We also love to speak with Lifelong Learning groups, community groups, congregations, organizations and businesses about world religions, diversity, and inclusion. Our **Discovering Identities** series invites deeper, focused exploration of the world's major religions. This guide is a small taste of what is covered in our talk on Sikhism.

Our **Discovery Week**, held in Toronto each summer, is an entertaining and enlightening tour of 11 religions and more than 20 site visits.

It's perfect for educators, police officers, professionals, and the genuinely curious who want to understand more about world religions and the people who practice them. It's like traveling the world in a week.

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