

## Some Misconceptions Regarding the Sikhs

**Misconception 1:** *"The Sikh religion is a blend of Islam and Hinduism or it is a sect of Hinduism."*

**Truth 1:** Sikhism is a unique revealed religion. It is not a blend of religions nor is it derived from any other religion. Guru Nanak Dev Sahib Jee started a new faith, which has a unique concept of God, revealed Scripture, way of life, and identity.

**Misconception 2:** *"Anyone who has a turban and a beard is a Muslim from the Middle East."*

**Truth 2:** Sikhs are required to keep their head covered at all times. The turban is donned by a Sikh to cover the hair and head out of respect to God. The turban (1) maintains the dignity of the hair (Kesh), (2) protects the head, and (3) is a Spiritual Crown reminding a Sikh that he or she sits on the throne of consciousness, committed to higher principles.

**Misconception 3:** *"Sikh women have different rules than Sikh men."*

**Truth 3:** The tenets of Sikhism apply to all Sikhs, regardless of whether one is a Sikh man or a Sikh woman. Sikhism demands the equal treatment and involvement of men and women.

**Misconception 4:** *"Sikhs drink alcohol and enjoy boozing parties."*

**Truth 4:** The Sikh faith cannot be judged on the basis of the Panjabi community. Sikhism is not something one can be born into, it is a decision one makes to become a Sikh and receive Amrit initiation. Sikhs are strictly forbidden from drinking or promoting alcohol or any other intoxicants.

**Misconception 5:** *"All Sikhs are Indian."*

**Truth 5:** Sikhism is a religion. Indian is a nationality. Those Sikhs born in the United States, Canada, UK or any other place adopt the nationality of that country. Sikhism, as a religion and way of life spans any such geo-political boundaries.

**Where can I read translations of the Sikh Scriptures?**

[www.SriGranth.org](http://www.SriGranth.org) is a good resource to get started

*"The One True Lord Abides Within All"*

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# Discover Sikhi

## Visiting a Gurdwara

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## Who and what is a Guru?

‘Guru’ literally means ‘the Dispeller of Darkness’. ‘Gu’ means light, and ‘Rū’ means darkness, representing that the Guru dispels ignorance through enlightenment. The Guru has multiple roles. The Guru inspires, leads the community, enlightens and uplifts individuals and society, as well as provides a roadmap for living a complete perfect life.



The Guru is the ‘Shabad’ (Divine Infinite Wisdom) revealed and manifested through the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Sahib Jee, and nine succeeding human Gurus who developed the faith and manifested the completed form of the Sikh Nation. Sikhs consider the revelation contained within the Sacred Scripture to be the living Word of God, communicated

directly through the enlightened Gurus and Saints (Bhagats) who came from various socio-economic and religious backgrounds that shared the Universal religion of Guru Nanak Sahib Jee and had experienced God. The Sikh Sacred Scripture is the only world scripture written and sealed during the life time of the founders of the religion, ensuring the Divine Word was not adulterated. The Guru used the science of music to convey the Divine message to the minds and souls of individuals. Musicology, languages, and divine poetry are all present in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee.

Today the Sikh religion is guided by joint sovereignty of ‘Guru Granth’ and ‘Guru Panth’. Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee, as the *spiritual* manifestation of the Guru, while the Guru Panth is the collectivity of all initiated Sikhs worldwide, as the *physical* manifestation of the Guru.



## Katha



“Kathā” is the verbal explanation/discourse of “Gurbani” (the utterances of the Gurus) and Sikh history. Katha is an integral part of the Sikh practice, which includes both spiritual and historical discourse, and of equal importance to singing Keertan. Through Katha the listeners gain knowledge about the faith and the Sikh heritage, and are reminded of their moral duties to live up to the high standards set by their forefathers. A Sikh intellectual trained in reading and understanding the Sacred Scripture and Sikh history will sit at the front of the Guru Darbaar and explain the meanings of the hymn or narrate Sikh history to the congregation.

## Langar Hall

Langar (pure vegetarian food (strictly no fish, eggs or meat) from the communal kitchen) is served at every Gurdwara across the world. An essential part of any Gurdwara is the ‘Langar’ (free kitchen). The Guru designed an institution in which all people would sit on the together on the same level, as equals, to eat the same simple food. It is here that all people high or low, rich or poor, male or female, together share and enjoy the food as an expression of the ideals of equality, sharing, and the oneness of humanity.



In accordance to Sikh tradition, langar is either served whilst sitting down in rows or one has to queue to be served from a counter and then sit down on the floor in rows. If not certain about consuming this food you can ask to be excused although most people do take langar as it is regarded as a blessing by the Guru and an expression of equality amongst humanity. When in the Langar Hall, it is better to ask for less rather than take too much and waste the food. Say “very little” to the volunteer serving the Langar. If you require more later, just wait for the volunteer to come around.

## Keertan

The tradition of Keertan or Gurmat Sangeet (Sikh music) was started by the first Guru. Guru Nanak Sahib jee travelled India and other countries across the globe with his companion Bhai Mardana jee. The Guru would sing the Divine Hymns as revealed by God, and Bhai Mardana jee would play the “Rabaab” (Rubeck).



The Sikh Sacred

Scripture is in the form of poetry and intended not only to be read but also sung and heard. The Sikh Gurus also invented stringed instruments that were used for Keertan by the Sikhs. In modern times, the harmonium (introduced by Westerners to India) has become a popular instrument used

in Keertan. However, traditional Sikh music uses the instruments made and used by the Gurus themselves.

Hymns from the following compositions are only allowed to be sung in the Gurdwara: Sri Guru Granth Sahib jee, writings of Bhai Gurdaas jee (a much honoured Sikh scholar and maternal uncle of the fifth Guru), the hymns written by the Tenth Guru, and the poetry of Bhai Nand Laal Singh (a court poet of the Tenth Guru).

The congregation at the Gurdwara offer donations to the “Raagis” (musicians) singing Keertan as an act of appreciation of singing the Divine Hymns. To avoid disturbing the musicians singing, donations should be given at the end of the service.



In recent years many Gurdwaras in the West have installed computers and projector screens in the Guru Darbaar which is used to display Shabads (hymns) being read accompanied with the Romanised text and English translation to accommodate for the needs of second generation.

## What is the Gurdwara?

A Sikh place of worship is called ‘Gurdwārā’, which is open to visitors, irrespective of their colour, faith, gender or background. The common translation of the term as temple is not satisfactory, as Sikhism possesses no sacrificial symbolism. Sikhs have neither idols nor altars in their holy places. They have no sacraments and no priestly order. The essential feature of a Gurdwara is the presiding presence in it of the Sikh Sacred Scripture, ‘Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee’, the living Guru of the Sikhs. Hence the name Gurdwara (*guru + dwara = Door to the Guru*).



The main function of the Gurdwara is to provide Sikhs with a meeting-place for congregational worship through ‘Keertan’, the collective singing of God's praise through the Shabads (Sacred Hymns) in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee, and seeking support and guidance from the Guru. The Gurdwara also serves as a community centre, a school, a guesthouse for pilgrims, and a base for local charitable activities. Since the Sikh faith does not have an ordained clergy, public worship can be lead by any competent initiated male or female Sikh.

An essential part of any Gurdwara is the ‘Langar’ (free kitchen). The Guru designed an institution in which all people would sit on the floor together, as equals, to eat the same simple food. It is here that all people high or low, rich or poor, male or female, all sit together to share and enjoy the food together, expressing the ideals of equality, sharing, and the oneness of humanity.



## What do I need to know before I enter a Gurdwara?

- Visitors cannot enter the Gurdwara while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. You should not take cigarettes or tobacco or smoke while in the Gurdwara premises or soon before going into the Gurdwara.
- Please dress appropriately so that you can comfortably, and with decency sit on the carpeted floor.
- Before entering the Guru's Darbaar (Main Hall), all visitors will have to remove their shoes and place them in the shoe racks provided. Usually a token will be issued depending on which Gurdwara. It is recommended to wear loose fitting clothing which covers most of your legs for modesty and out of respect. you visit. Sinks are provided for all visitors and devotees to wash their hands.
- All visitors will need to cover their heads, which in accordance to Sikh tradition is an act of showing respect and humility, whilst in the Gurdwara, especially in the Guru's Darbaar (Main Hall) and the Langar Hall (Community Kitchen Hall). Caps and hats are not permitted.

## Nishaan Sahib



The "Nishaan Sahib" is the Sikh flag made of saffron coloured cotton or silk cloth and is triangular in shape. It is hoisted outside every Gurdwara and is supported by a pole of timber or metal. You may notice the Sikh symbol, the "Khanda" on it. It is placed high up as a sign for all Sikhs and indeed any other people to show that Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee's Darbaar (Court) and the Guru's Free-Kitchen is present in the building.

Great respect is shown to this flag which is shown by its washing using milk and water every year in April at the festival of Vaisakhi. The Nishaan Sahib is changed every year by the Sikh congregation.

## The Guru Darbaar (Guru's Court)

Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee is the focus in the Guru Darbaar - it rests on a throne on a high platform. A Sikh attendant will wave the *chaur* (which is made of horse hairs attached to a metal or wooden handle) over the Guru to show the respect given to emperors and royalty. It is not be confused as a fan or fly whisk.



Entering the Guru's Darbaar, devotees queue to bow before Sri Guru Granth Sahib as the first thing they do, touching the floor with their forehead. This not only a sign of humility and respect, but also shows that they submit themselves to the Truth contained in the divine revelation. People also place an offering of food or money in front of the Guru, which contributes towards the maintenance and functioning of the Gurdwara.

Then the congregation sits down cross-legged. It is rude to stretch the legs out facing towards the Guru. It is common that men sit on one side side of the hall and ladies sit on the other side of the hall. This is not a religious compulsion but ladies and men feel more comfortable sitting apart.



Visitors will be offered Karhaah Parshaad (sweet flour and clarified butter based food offered as holy communion) in the Guru's Darbaar. To receive the Holy Pudding, you must cup your hands. If you are uncertain about your ability to eat a lot of this Holy Pudding then request that you wish to only have a little to the volunteer serving.