

# The Sikh Community in Scouting



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The Scout Method, which emphasises the importance of learning by example and from practical experience, is particularly compatible with Sikh teaching. Young people in Scouting are encouraged to cultivate a sense of personal responsibility within a framework of community service; these are also fundamental principles for Sikhs.

350,000 of the 25 million Scouts worldwide are Sikh. The Sikh community in the United Kingdom is the largest outside India, and over a third of the 500,000 Sikhs living here are under 20. The majority of Sikhs living in the United Kingdom have their origins in the Punjab, where The Gurus (teachers) or enlighteners lived and where Sikhism or Gurmat (Way of the Guru) started. To many Sikhs the Punjab is one land, though it was divided when India and Pakistan were created in 1947.

Sikhs in the United Kingdom are part of **The Guru Khalsa Panth** – the worldwide community of Sikhs. All members of The Panth follow Sikh beliefs and teachings, and live and work in harmony with all those around them. However, as with any world religion, The Panth is made up of hundreds of thousands of individuals, and each Sikh finds their own way of expressing their faith. This fact sheet aims to highlight the common elements that exist among the majority of Sikhs.

## SIKHISM/GURMAT

Sikhism was founded in the 15th Century CE by **Guru Nanak** (1469–1539), and is based upon his teachings. Guru Nanak fiercely challenged the Hindu caste system and many of the ways Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism were practised at the time. He taught religious tolerance, and likened religions to the different paths that travellers follow in order to reach the same goal (God). Sikhs therefore believe in one God who reaches out to all irrespective of the faith (path) they follow. The Panth follow the teaching and living example of the ten Gurus, whom Sikhs

believe are the vessels of an eternal and divine inner voice. The Gurus who succeeded Guru Nanak gradually developed the faith for Sikhs. Sikh derives from in the Indo-European root, “to seek” and means ‘disciples’ in Punjabi).



**Guru Arjan Dev** (the fifth Guru) compiled the Scripture – the **Guru Granth Sahib** – and supervised the completion of the Harimandir or Darbar Sahib, popularly called the ‘Golden Temple’ in Amritsar. He was tortured to death by the Mogul emperor in 1606 CE, because he refused to convert to Islam. The ninth Guru, **Guru Tegh Behadur**, was also martyred. He was beheaded in 1675 for protesting against the bigotry and oppression, in particular, the forcible conversion of Hindus to Islam, of the then ruler, emperor Aurangzeb. **Guru Gobind Singh** (1666–1708) was the last human Guru, and founded the Sikh community as it is today. Born Gobind Rai, he became Guru after the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Behadur. He decided to fight against the two forms of oppression that most affected ordinary Indian people: political tyranny and religious tyranny. This fight is reflected in the Sikh symbol – the **khanda** – which is made up of four pieces of ancient weaponry: a straight double-edged sword in the centre of a chakra (a sharpened circle of metal) surrounded by two curved swords. The double-edged sword symbolises the creative power of God and the chakra symbolises God’s continuity. They represent the Sikh belief that God has neither a beginning nor an end and is eternal. The curved swords represent spiritual and political

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sovereignty, and show that there should be a balance between spiritual and political power.

In 1699, Guru Gobind Rai called Sikhs from all over India to come to Anandpur for the **Vaisakhi** (New Year) fair. From the 80,000 people who came, he called for five Sikhs to lay down their lives for their faith and the freedom of worship for all. **Daya Ram, Dharam Das, Mokham Chand, Sahib Chand** and **Himmat Rai** came forward and undertook the Guru's test, and reappeared imbued with a new glow of life. The **Panj Pyare** (five beloved ones) were given **Khande-de-Pahul**, often called '**amrit**' (initiatory elixir or baptismal mead) by the Guru, who then replaced their old family names (which indicated their caste) with the surname Singh. They then baptised the Guru, who became known as **Guru Gobind Singh**. All Sikhs baptised that day drank from the same cauldron (a symbolic rejection of the caste system) and entered the **Khalsa** – the army of saint soldiers in which the fellowship of Sikhs represents the Guru as Khalsa Panth. Guru and disciple become one.

Guru Gobind Singh instructed his **amritdhari** (meaning 'baptised') Sikhs to keep the five Ks ('**kakkaar**') to mark their transformation:

1. **Kes** Uncut hair. This expresses Nature as reflecting God's Will and God's design for humans as the most beautiful.
2. **Kangha** A small wooden comb which a Sikh should use twice a day, which symbolises cleanliness. It reminds Sikhs that just as a comb cleans hair, then they can get rid of impurities of thought by repeating God's Name in their mind.
3. **Kara** An iron or a steel bracelet worn on the wrist of the hand the person would write with. It is a symbol of a Sikh's unbreakable bond with the Guru and the Khalsa. The circle is a symbol of restraint and a constant reminder of ideal behaviour, while the use of steel is a symbol of strength and equality (steel, rather than silver or gold, can be afforded by all Sikhs).
4. **Kachera** A pair of breeches, often worn as under-shorts, symbolising high sexual morals.
5. **Kirpan** Literally, "sword of mercy". This is used to defend the weak and uphold righteousness, and follow the Guru's teaching that a Sikh should "fear not, frighten not".

## THE SCRIPURE – GURU GRANTH SAHIB

Guru Gobind Singh's last order was that the Khalsa should consider the Holy Word of the **Granth Sahib** as their Guru, as it contained the spirit of all ten Gurus. Therefore, the Guru Granth Sahib forms the basis of authority for the faith. As a Guru, the volume is treated with great respect, and is installed under a canopy in a room dedicated to its use. Devout Sikhs would not keep it on a bookshelf at home, and for this reason many families only host the Guru Granth Sahib in their houses on important occasions.

The Guru Granth Sahib is a collection of 5,984 religious verses – **shabads** – praising God. The shabads were written by six of the Gurus, a number of other Sikhs, and some saints from Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu backgrounds called bhagats. This shows that everyone can receive special words from God. Every copy of the Guru Granth Sahib has 1,430 pages, and each shabad appears on the same page in every copy.

The Guru Granth Sahib is written in **Gurmukhi** ('the language of the Guru'), devised by the second Guru, **Guru Angad Dev**. This script (written from left to right like English) was used to replace the contemporary alphabet, which could not represent all the words and sounds from the different languages used in the Guru Granth Sahib. Using the Gurmukhi script, the Guru ensured that Guru Nanak's teachings were recorded accurately.

The teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib are called **Gurbani** ('the words of the Guru') and form the basis of Sikh worship. The Guru Granth Sahib is opened and read at random for worship and to reveal the command of God in times of indecision, and it is present at all important ceremonies. The Gurbani reveal key Sikh principles, such as equality and the importance of living a true life.

God will not ask man what religion or race you belong to. Actions alone will be judged in His court. Guru Nanak

All men are the same, though they appear different, the bright and the dark, the ugly and the beautiful [...] all human beings are the reflection of one and the same Lord. Recognise ye the whole human race as one. Guru Gobind Singh

## WORSHIP AND PRAYER

The Sikh place of worship is the **Gurdwara**, which is often marked by the **Nishan Sahib** (a triangular

saffron-coloured flag bearing the Sikh symbol). The gurdwara is also a family centre that offers community and youth services. The Guru Granth Sahib is the centre of Sikh worship, and is the only object of veneration within the gurdwara. Any room which houses the Guru Granth Sahib is treated as though it were a gurdwara.

Everyone is welcome in a gurdwara, providing they respect Sikh principles. Therefore a person should not enter a gurdwara if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or if they are carrying alcohol, drugs, cigarettes or meat. Anyone entering the gurdwara must remove their shoes and cover their heads.

The Guru Granth Sahib is installed in its own room under a canopy. As a mark of respect, anyone entering the room should kneel in front of the Guru Granth Sahib and touch their forehead to the floor. There is usually a box in front of the canopy where worshippers can place their offerings – of money or food for the communal kitchen – before finding a place to sit. It is considered disrespectful to turn your back or point your feet towards the Guru Granth Sahib. Men and women usually sit separately on either side of the worship room.

Services normally last from one to four hours, and worshippers can arrive or leave at any point during the service as long as they do not disturb other people. Services consist of a reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, **Kirtan** – singing shabads accompanied by musicians playing the **vaga** (harmonium) and the **jori** (two goatskin drums), saying the **Ardas** (a collective prayer) and sharing **Karah Parsad** (a sacrament) and langar (free kitchen) as a token of peace and friendship to all.

There is no priesthood in Sikhism, but in most temples the Guru Granth Sahib is only read by a few members of the community who have learnt how to read the text and sing the shabads correctly. Though men usually lead the worship, women are equally eligible to do so.

Spiritual union with God is possible during a Sikh's life by constantly remembering God and serving others. Therefore, Sikhs must not be dominated by selfish considerations, but should carry out the responsibilities of family life. **Seva** (selfless service) is a sacred duty, and can be done anywhere for anyone. An important form of seva is **langar**. All gurdwaras have a kitchen and eating place where a meal is shared with everyone who visits the gurdwara, regardless of their caste, colour, creed, sex, nationality, social

background or position in the community. All the food and services associated with the langar are freely given by the community, and the food is vegetarian.

Most Sikh families have small prayer books at home. A **Nit-Nem** contains shabads which are used in daily prayers, and a **Gutka** is the Nit-Nem with other verses and prayers for special occasions. Many of these prayers are from the Guru Granth Sahib, but other verses come from the **Dasam Granth** – a book which contains all the shabads of Guru Gobind Singh. The **Mool Mantra** is the first passage of the Guru Granth Sahib, and is usually the first prayer a Sikh will learn:

There is one God,  
Truth is God's name,  
The Creator, indwelling,  
Without fear, without hate,  
Timeless and without form;  
Beyond death – the Enlightened One:  
Known by the Guru's grace.

## HOLY DAYS AND FESTIVALS

Many Sikhs also celebrate festivals on the nearest weekend to the actual date of the festival, and mark the actual date with personal worship. Temples celebrate on the actual day.

Sikhs use the luni-solar calendar (i.e. fixed by the movement of the moon and the sun) which has 12 months – though these do not match the months of the western calendar. As the lunar year is shorter than the solar year, the former is adjusted regularly to stay in line with the solar calendar. Most Sikh festivals are celebrated on dates from the luni-solar calendar and so the date only moves slightly from year to year. However, those based upon the lunar months can move by about 15 days each year. It is important that you ask your Scouts when and how they will celebrate their festivals. This will enable you to include some appropriate activities for all the Scouts in your Group and to anticipate Sikh Scouts absence from meetings.

**Baisakhi** (New Years Day) is usually held on the 13th April. It commemorates the initiation/baptism of Guru Gobind Singh and the Five Beloved Ones and the time when the five Ks were instituted as a code for a good moral life.

**Diwali** is the Hindu New Year, which Sikhs celebrate to commemorate the release of Guru Hagobind from imprisonment. Sikh families

decorate their houses and the gurdwara with lights and let off fireworks. This helps Sikhs to remember the Guru and to remind themselves that the light conquers darkness as the voice of the Guru ends the darkness of ignorance.

**Hola Mohalla** ('tactical manoeuvres') is held in February/March on the day after the Hindu festival of Holi. It commemorates the day, in 1700 CE, when Guru Gobind Singh called Sikhs together to train the Khalsa. Today, it is celebrated as a festival of health and freedom.

**Gurpurbs** are festivals associated with the birthdays or the passing from this world of the ten Gurus. The four main gurpurbs celebrated each year by all Sikhs are:

- the Birthday of Guru Nanak (1469) at the end of November;
- the Birthday of Guru Gobind Singh (1666) in December;
- the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev (1606) in May/June; and
- the Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Behadur (1675) in November.

The birthdays of the other Gurus are celebrated every year in the places where they were born, and by all Sikhs in centenary and half-centenary years. Gurpurbs are celebrated by Akand Path (a complete reading of the Guru Granth Sahib) which is started about two days before the event so that with non-stop reading the text will be finished on the morning of the festival day. Sikhs gather at the gurdwara to hear sermons and sing hymns concerning the life and work of the Guru, before sharing food provided from the communal kitchen.

## BEHAVIOUR AND VALUES

Freedom, equality and tolerance are fundamental values in a Sikh's life, but as these are seen as universal values other people are equally respected for their beliefs. A Sikh would never try to convert someone from another religion to Sikhism, but would instead encourage a person to practise these fundamental values whatever their religion. A Sikh does this by undertaking seva, which asks a Sikh to give their time, effort and up to 10% of their income in the service of others. Helping people to believe in and love God (from whatever religion) is seen by Sikhs as the most important form of seva.

Sikhs believe that a person is susceptible to the five evils – of lust, anger, greed, pride, and attachment, meaning denying the separate life of

another – if they do not follow the Gurus' teachings. Therefore, Sikhs are taught that they should not gamble, steal, be disloyal to their spouse, or take part in any activity which results from these vices.

Sikh parents will bring up their children in **Gurmat** (the correct word for Sikhism) wearing the five Ks, but will not have their children baptised. Though parents encourage their children to become Sikhs, they believe that a person must learn about the fundamental values for themselves. It is only when they are older that a person can choose to make firmer promises and be baptised.

Men and women are equal within Sikh society. Since the beginning of Sikhism both men and women have had the right to join in discussions about the community. They also share the right to elect members on to the committees which run the gurdwara. All Sikhs learn about the many brave women who worked and struggled for Sikhism, including **Bibi Nanaki** (Guru Nanak's sister) who was the first person to recognise the Guru for who he was.

## THE FAMILY AND THE COMMUNITY

The **gurdwara** is the centre of the Sikh community, and provides services for young people such as Punjabi lessons, youth clubs, lessons in martial arts, and sports teams. It is also where young Sikhs learn about their religion and culture from the example of other people in their community. Close bonds within their extended family, and with the community, are very important to Sikhs and to Sikh culture.

Most Sikhs are united not just by their faith, but by Punjabi culture. Most young Sikhs in the United Kingdom are shaped by British Punjabi culture – with its different pressures of both Punjabi society (such as the importance of maintaining a family's reputation) and "western" values. Good examples of this blending of cultures are a new form of bhangra (Punjabi folk music with a western beat) and comics which relate Sikh stories particularly of Guru Gobind Singh.

## Names and Naming

As a member of the Sikh community men add **Singh** (meaning 'lion' which denotes courage and the belief in freedom of religion) and women add **Kaur** (meaning 'princess' which indicates that they have equal importance with men) to their name. First names include: **Ranjit, Kulwant, Mohinder** and **Rupinder**. Parents choose names

for their children by opening the Guru Granth Sahib at random and using the first letter of the shabad on the left-hand page opened as the initial of the child's name. A second surname, e.g. **Dhesi, Thandi, Ryat, Sandhu** and **Heer**, can be used in addition to, or in place of, Kaur and Singh. This name more or less indicates an area where that person's forefathers lived, or the group to which they belonged. Gurchan Singh Tohra's family originally came from the Tohra village in the Punjab. A second surname does not represent caste as they often do in other Indian religions.

It is important for a person's self esteem that they are called by their correct name. Thus a girl whose personal name is **Paramjit** with the family name **Maan**, may be called Paramjit Maan, Paramjit Kaur or Paramjit Kaur Maan, but not Paramjit Maan Kaur. Similarly a boy called Paramjit may be called Paramjit Maan, Paramjit Singh or Paramjit Singh Maan and not Paramjit Maan Singh.

### Food

Practising Sikhs eat anything except sacrificial meat of any kind (kutha), whether Muslim halal or Jewish kosher. Many Sikhs are vegetarian.

Sikhs are also forbidden any intoxicants, i.e. they should not smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs, apart from in exceptional cases for medical reasons.

### Dress Code

Most male Sikhs wear their hair as a top knot (**jura**), covered by a piece of cloth called a **joti** or **patka**, until they decide that they want to wear a turban (usually between 10–15 years of age). They wear a turban to keep their **kes** (uncut hair) tidy and to maintain its sanctity. It is a material symbol of spiritual awakening and rational thinking. The turban has great significance in Punjabi culture. To **Pagg Lauhani** (knock the turban off) is a great insult; to **Pagg di Laaj Rakhna** (justify the wearing of the turban) is to act in a socially acceptable way; and to **Pagg nun dagg Launa** (insult the turban) is to act unlawfully and in a socially unacceptable way. Punjabi suits – a co-ordinated top (**kameez**) and trousers (**salvar**) with shoulder drape (**chunni**) to cover the head when necessary – are popular with most Sikh women, particularly for special occasions.

People are not Sikhs because of what they wear, but because they follow the Guru's teachings. Sikhs do not have to wear a turban or Punjabi

clothes (and in fact many young Sikhs wear western clothes most of the time) but should follow the Guru's guidance and dress decorously. Clothes that show a person's waist or stomach, for example, would not be considered appropriate. Thus Sikh children, young people and adults can usually wear standard Scout uniform which includes a turban or joti or patka for males. Scouts often choose to wear a green turban to match the colour of the uniform.

All baptised Sikhs wear **kachera** (shorts) under their clothes, which cannot be removed from any activity. Boys can wear them on their own, without causing embarrassment, for swimming and other sports activities.

### SCOUT MEETINGS

Most Sikhs living in the United Kingdom hold their main worship at the weekend and celebrate festivals on the closest weekend to the traditional date of the festival. As many families will still worship at home on the actual date of a festival a Sikh may not be able to attend a Scout meeting on those days. Sikhs would welcome all Members of the Scout Group to the gurdwara if they wished to visit. Many Sikh children (from about six years old) study Punjabi and do other activities at the gurdwara after school or at the weekends. This may also affect attendance at some Scout activities.

As Sikhs can practise seva in any way they choose, Sikh Scouts will join in with the community service their Scout Group undertakes. However, they will also want to give service to their local Sikh community, particularly buying and cooking food for the langar. As working in the langar is a great way to meet friends and family there are often more volunteers than the gurdwara needs, but catering for at least 300 people is still very hard work, and may affect activities held at weekends.

Most Sikh parents would allow their children to attend mixed Scout Groups, provided they had appropriate leadership. However, it is worth consulting local community leaders, and encouraging adults from the community to join as Leaders and Helpers.

If appropriate some aspects of Sikhism could be incorporated in Scout meetings (e.g. saying Sikh prayers or visiting the gurdwara) and activities which develop cross-cultural understanding could be included in the programme.

## **The Promise**

The Scout Association recognises alternative wording for Sikhs for the phrase “duty to God” in the Promise, as “duty to WaheGuru” . However, this should not be a problem as Sikhs regard ‘God’ as a universal entity regardless of creed.

## **Camp**

With a little consideration during the planning stages, it is possible to facilitate the Sikh Scout’s wish to practise their faith whilst at camp. With some help from the local Sikh community, a simple service for all Scouts could be put together, or an area (such as a tent with clean ground sheets inside) could be set aside for quiet prayer for all Scouts.

Before planning a camp menu ask your Scouts what their dietary requirements are. A vegetarian option would be useful.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

The SHAP Working Party on World Religions publishes an annual calendar of festivals which will list the appropriate dates for a particular year. The calendar is available from:

The SHAP Working Party,  
7 Alderbrook Road,  
Solihull,  
West Midlands.

For a further list of resources on the Sikh community or advice on the development of Scouting in the Sikh Community, please contact:  
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