

Sikhi Worldview Traditions Core Knowledge Essay



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Contents

Introduction	1
History and origins	1
Core beliefs	1
Practices and rituals	2
Diversity within non-religious Worldviews	3
Festivals and special days	3
Key figures and places	4
Contemporary expressions	4
Statistics in Britain	4
Key takeaways	4

Introduction

Sikhi, sometimes called Sikhism, is the way of life and the beliefs of Sikh people. As the term Sikhism emerged during the British Raj and was not a term used by Sikhs themselves, many Sikhs prefer the term Sikhi, which comes from the Punjabi word Sikhana, meaning “to learn.” A Sikh is therefore “one who learns.” Sikhi emphasises equality, service, honesty, and devotion to God, whom Sikhs often call Waheguru – “Wonderful Lord.”

The Sikh place of worship is the Gurdwara, meaning “doorway to the Guru.” It is both a house of prayer and a community centre, where food is shared in the Langar (community kitchen) to demonstrate equality. Sikhi is a living tradition that continues to flourish around the world.

History and origins

Sikhi was founded in the Punjab region of South Asia by Guru Nanak (1469–1539). He rejected social inequalities and divisions and taught about honesty, respect, and service. He was followed by nine human Gurus, who shaped the faith across generations: from Guru Angad, who developed the Gurmukhi script, to Guru Arjan, who compiled the Adi Granth, to Guru Gobind Singh, who established the Khalsa.

In 1708, Guru Gobind Singh declared that the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture, would be the final and eternal Guru.

Core beliefs

In Sikhi, what counts is how people live, not what they believe. However, Sikhs believe in that everything is One, expressed in the Mool Mantar, the opening verse of the Guru Granth Sahib, which begins with Ik Onkar – “Everything is One”. Thus God, or Oneness is the Karta Purkh (Creator) and is without fear, hate, or limits.

The goal of life is mukti – liberation from the cycle of samsara (birth, death, rebirth) – achieved by living truthfully and remembering God through Naam Japna and Nam Simran (meditation on God’s name). Sikhs strive to be gurmukh (God-centred) rather than manmukh (self-centred).

Three foundations guide Sikh life:

- Kirat Karna – earning an honest living.
- Vand Chhakna – sharing with others.
- Naam Japna – remembering God.

Selfless service, known as Sewa, is also central, whether physical, mental, or material. Sikhi also teaches the equality of women and men.

Practices and rituals

Daily prayers, including the Japji, which begins with the Mool Mantar at the beginning of the Guru Granth Sahib, help Sikhs connect with God. Public worship takes place in the Darbar Sahib or Divan Hall of the Gurdwara, where kirtan (hymns) from the Guru Granth Sahib are sung and Ardas are said. A Granthi often leads worship, while the sacred scripture rests on a raised takht, or throne, under a palki covered with a rumalla when not in use. A chauri is waved over the scripture as a mark of respect.

At the end of services, Sikhs share Karah Prashad, a sweet food symbolising equality and blessing. Worship is followed by a meal in the Langar, where people sit in rows called a pangat to eat together.

Each night, the Guru Granth Sahib is taken to a special room, known as the Sach Khand. The Guru Granth Sahib is carried on the head as a sign of respect and is placed on the bed and coverings are placed over it.

Major ceremonies include the Amrit Sanskar, when Sikhs join the Khalsa by drinking Amrit and reciting prayers. Those who have taken this step are called Amritdhari Sikhs and wear the 5 K's (Panj Kakkars):

- Kesh (uncut hair).
- Kangha (wooden comb).
- Kara (steel bangle).
- Kachera (cotton shorts).
- Kirpan (sword of mercy).

They also take the name Singh for men, or Kaur for women as their surname.

The wearing of the turban (dastar) helps protect and respect uncut hair, and this is a visible sign of Sikh identity.

The symbol of Sikhi is called a Khanda, which is a symbol made up of three weapons:

- A chakkar or chakra, which stand for God's infinity, without beginning and without end.
- A Khanda, which is a double-edged sword. This stands for God's power over justice and mercy, or creation and destruction.
- Two kirpans, which are swords of mercy, and stand for miri-piri (worldly and spiritual responsibility) – i.e. that a Sikh should always strive to better themselves and society.

Diversity within the tradition

The global Sikh panth (community) is united by reverence for the Guru Granth Sahib, but diversity of belief does exist. Not all Sikhs become part of the Khalsa. Some prefer to live by Sikh values without taking on the additional commitments. Within Sikhi there are also different groups, such as those who follow a stricter interpretation of the Rahit Maryada (code of conduct), or those who emphasise following a living teacher.

Festivals and special days

Sikhs celebrate gurburbs, festivals marking events in the lives of the Gurus. The most important include the birthdays of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, and the martyrdoms of Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur.

Akhand paath take place during the gurburbs and can take place at other significant times.

Two other major festivals are:

- Vaisakhi (April) – celebrating the birth of the Khalsa, marked by processions where the Panj Pyare lead the Guru Granth Sahib through the streets. The Nishan Sahib flag is replaced at the Gurdwara.
- Bandi Chhor Divas (October/November) – celebrating Guru Hargobind's release from prison, coinciding with the Hindu festival of Diwali.

Following the birth of a baby, there is a ceremony of thanksgiving performed where the Guru Granth Sahib is opened at random, and the first letter of the first hymn is used as the initial letter of the baby's name.

Guru Granth Sahib

The last human Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, decreed that the scripture of the Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib, would be the final Guru. The sacred text, the Guru Granth Sahib, is therefore regarded as a living Guru and so is treated with the greatest respect and honour.

The Guru Granth Sahib contains the actual words, hymns, poems and prayers spoken by the founders of Sikhi, as well as writings of the holiest people from Hindu and Muslim traditions who lived at the time the scriptures were being written down. The scripture was first called the Adi Granth and was then added to, later becoming the Guru Granth Sahib. It has 1430 pages and page numbers are used to reference where parts of the text can be found.

The Guru Granth Sahib is written in Gurmukhi. This word literally translates as 'from the mouth of the Guru'. Guru Angad, the second Guru, refined the written script of his day to make the hymns of the Gurus accessible to everyone; the script was called 'Gurmukhi' from this time on.

Key figures and places

The most important figures in Sikhi are the ten human Gurus; this word is most often used to mean teacher. The word comes from the Sanskrit 'one who removes darkness'. The Gurus are considered by Sikhs to be spiritually perfect and morally correct. In Sikhi, there are ten human born Gurus:

- Guru Nanak (1469-1539)
- Guru Angad (1539-1552)
- Guru Amar Das (1479-1574)
- Guru Ram Das (1534-1581)
- Guru Arjan (1563-1606)
- Guru Hargobind (1595-1644)
- Guru Har Rai (1630-1661)
- Guru Harkrishan (1656-1664)
- Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675)
- Guru Gobind Singh (born Guru Gobind Rai) (1666-1708)

The eternal and final Guru, the Guru Granth Sahib, is regarded as a living Guru and so is treated with the greatest respect and honour.

The most well-known Gurdwara is the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar.

Contemporary expressions

Today, Sikhs live across the world and continue to express their faith through Sewa, wearing symbols of identity, and participating in sangat (community worship). Sikhs donate through dasvandh, giving 10% of earnings to charity.

The Sikh community is active in humanitarian work, often through organisations inspired by the Sikh value of service, for instance, Langar Aid and Khalsa Aid and local Sewa societies. These organisations work year-round but are also visible at times of emergency.

Statistics in Britain

According to the 2021 Census for England and Wales, 524,000 people identified as Sikh (0.9% of the population). In Scotland's 2022 Census, Sikhs made up 0.3% of the population. This shows a vibrant but relatively small community, concentrated mainly in cities such as London, Birmingham, and Leicester.

Key takeaways

- Sikhi is a path of learning centred on devotion to Waheguru and living truthfully.

- The Guru Granth Sahib is the eternal Guru, guiding Sikh practice.
- Service (Sewa), equality, and honesty are at the heart of Sikh life.
- Festivals like Vaisakhi and Bandi Chhor Divas celebrate key events in Sikh history.
- Sikhs continue to thrive in Britain, contributing to society while maintaining strong traditions.