



A Journalist's Guide To
Sikhism

Introduction

For those who are not from a South Asian background, Sikhism may look like completely unfamiliar territory. But in truth it is a progressive, modern religion, incorporating socially-progressive ideals such as egalitarianism and feminism. This may surprise you.

Its founder, Guru Nanak, died less than 500 years ago. And his basic teachings would cause no consternation for anyone who believes in one, true God, comprehended in the mystical utterance, Ik-oan-kar. Indeed, the first words of Sikhism's most holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib would not be out of place among the scriptures bequeathed by the descendants of Abraham:

There is, But One God.
Contemplate the True One that was in the beginning,
The True One that was ere the world began,
The True One that exists even now,
The True One that shall exist in the future also.

This is then, familiar territory. It will be helpful to remember this along the way.

Etiquette on Visiting a Gurdwara

It will also be helpful to know what to do when visiting the *gurdwara*, the Sikh temple. Actually, a *gurdwara* is much more than a temple, and knowing this will be a big help in orienting yourself to it.

First of all, the word means, quite literally, "the door of the Guru". So going inside brings you directly into contact with the guru, or Teacher. In most Asian religions, the first thing to do is to remove your shoes, in the anteroom.

If it is a *gurdwara*, you should look to see whether people are going barefoot, or still wearing socks. If everybody is barefoot, you might also find a place to bathe your feet. No one will complain if you don't; but many will see it as a sign of respect if you do.

You must also cover your head. By the way, since you probably already know that wearing a turban is a sign of faith for initiated Sikhs, you can be forgiven if you think that they are forcing you to cover your head as a pre-emptive strike in converting you to their faith. This would be a major mistake. Sikhism has no history of seeking converts. You

cover your head only as an act of humility and respect. Generally scarves will be available for both men and women.

As you go into the main room, you'll see that the sexes are segregated, women on the left, men on the right. (It's also a good idea not to jump to conclusions that the seating arrangement is an indication of discrimination; from the perspective of the holiest part of the *gurdwara*, the *harimandir sahib*, the canopied area in the front, women are seated to its right, traditionally an honoured position.)

Take a seat on the floor. Usually there will be no chairs or pews, although in some reform congregations, chairs might be provided for those who require them. Remember never to expose the soles of your feet towards the canopied area; this is considered to be disrespectful.

If you feel like it, you may partake of *prashad*, the Sikh form of communion; you will cause no offence and in fact doing so may provoke some inward smiles. Unlike participating in the Eucharist in a Catholic church, which can only be taken by Catholics, *prashad* is considered to be a universal blessing. And besides, it tastes wonderful: a nutty mix of flour, sugar, and clarified butter. To take *prashad*, just do like everybody else. Remember to hold both hands in a cup shape, and bow slightly, palms gently touching when it is placed in your hand.

You may be offered food as well after the services are over. Every *gurdwara* also has a communal kitchen, where community meals are shared (more on this later). People generally sit on the floor, and are served by volunteers. You do the community honour by accepting their offerings; you can show your respect and gratitude by bowing, with hands placed together, Oriental-style.

What to wear? Casual, loose-fitting clothes are entirely appropriate. This makes it easier to sit on the floor. Women are encouraged to dress modestly, and to avoid bare arms.

Please do not enter the *gurdwara* if you have just been drinking alcoholic beverages. It is considered disrespectful – as is bringing in tobacco.

Most important: pay attention to what is going on. Do not talk in the main hall.



A Note on the Word “Guru”

Perhaps there is no more important word in Sikhism than “Guru”, a word which has also become common in western usage. There are the Ten Gurus, the founders of Sikhism. The Gurdwara, “The Portal of the Guru”, the Sikh temple. The *Gurmat*, the totality of Sikh teaching. And the cursive Punjabi script, the *gurmukhi*, and the holy book written in it, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. A lot of emphasis on one word. But because for many of us in the West the word “teacher” might evoke some ambiguous feelings, an understanding of its meaning to Sikhs will help reveal a lot about this religion. Because there is nothing ambiguous about the relation of a Sikh to his or her Guru.

Clearly, the root of the word refers to a teacher, as you might expect. But in Sikhism it also refers to the intimate, powerful relationship that one has to the Supreme Teacher, which is not a common concept in the west. This kind of relationship to the Guru – taken in full seriousness – makes one a “student of the eternal”. Indeed, the word “Sikh” in the Punjabi language means **student** – all true Sikhs see their primary role in life to be students of God. So consequently, they call their bible “The Highest, Most Holy Book Which is our Guru” – the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Being aware of the primacy of **guruship** in Sikhism will make you a better reporter of it.

Helpful Sikh Facts

1. Founded by Guru Nanak (1469 – 1539) the first of 10 Gurus (teachers).
2. It is becoming a true world religion due to a diaspora out of its origins in the Punjab region of northern India.
3. It is strictly monotheistic, eschews formal priests, and proclaims gender equality.
4. Its holy book is the *Guru Granth Sahib*, revered both as the revelation of God and Sikhism’s eternal teacher (guru).
5. The number “5” (“*panj*” in the Punjabi language) will be useful to remember: the *panj-kakaar* (the 5 K’s”, the main symbols baptized Sikhs wear); *panj-ab* (the Five Rivers, after which the Punjab was named); the *panj-piari*, the “5 beloved ones” who became the first baptized Sikhs in 1699.
6. While the turban is a symbol of Sikh piety for males, it is not one of the 5 K’s.
7. There are approximately 22 million Sikhs worldwide, and, according to the 2001 census, 278,410 live in Canada (one of the largest populations outside India).
8. Sikh *gurdwaras* are more than places of worship, including large communal kitchens called the *langar*.
9. The universal symbol of Sikhism is the *khande*, the double-edged sword flanked by two daggers (representing worldly and spiritual powers, bound by the oneness of God).
10. The first Sikhs arrived in Canada in 1897 and the first immigrants in 1903. By some accounts their numbers swelled to over 6,000, but a series of race riots starting in 1907 and official governmental discrimination persuaded many to

return home. The Canadian census of 1911 counted 2,289 Sikh men and only 3 Sikh women in British Columbia (wives were forbidden to enter Canada by official policy).

Sikhism and its Beliefs

There is apocryphal story about the death of Sikhism's first guru, Nanak, that reveals much about the ethos of spiritual egalitarianism he had fostered among his followers. According to this legend there was a dispute between the Hindu and Muslim communities over who would take control of his body, and whether he would be cremated according to Hindu tradition, or buried promptly as the Q'uran insists. When the shroud under which he lay was raised, a bed of flowers was revealed.

It was a visual confirmation of one of the Guru's most memorable teachings: "There is no Hindu, no Muslim," he is reported to have said.

And no priests, either. Guru Nanak believed that the grace of God fell equally on all humankind, and priestly intercessors were not necessary. Like Martin Luther, who lived virtually contemporaneously with Guru Nanak, both were opposed to religious hierarchies that forced ordinary people to pay obeisance to a closed priesthood.

There are indeed many similarities between the forces that created Protestantism and Sikhism.

Both arose out of a congested social/religious construct where priests mediated between God and mankind, and the social order seemed to be divinely created. In Nanak's sixteenth-century India, at the top of the Hindu caste system were the Brahmans, the priestly class who presided at rituals and interpreted the sacred texts, the Vedas.

Nanak was indeed a revolutionary, who taught that priests were a hindrance to spiritual development – flying directly in the face of the Hindu elites.

His followers would have no need of these intermediaries who directed worship to the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, if for no other reason than there was only one God, a personal God to whom an ordinary person could praise with his or her own mouth.

And finally (as with Luther), Guru Nanak was a fierce opponent of the existing social order, mandated by the caste system and its four immutable classes, the Varna. He taught that the caste system was not part of God's plan.

Guru Nanak – the founder

Despite the fact Nanak was born relatively recently, in 1469, there is very little known about his personal life. The quotidian stuff didn't matter much to him, or to those who wrote about his life after he died.

What mattered was his mission in life to help liberate the mostly poor, rural farming families: how to liberate themselves from suffering by discovering the truth about God. He was born in the village of Talvandi, near present day Lahore, in Pakistan. By his twenties, he was smitten by the need to understand what it meant to be human, what was truly expected of him. He travelled throughout northern India, visiting holy places, conversing with a wide range of spiritual seekers. Most certainly he spent time with Buddhists, Hindu yogis, and Islamic mystics known as Sufis.

And the revelations began, according to tradition. He saw that God cared nothing of the castes; Hindu rituals were meaningless; the fasting of Islam gained nothing. Circumcision was an abomination.

Guru Nanak was not hostile to all other spiritual traditions active in sixteenth-century Punjab. There was for example the Sant tradition within Hinduism, the devotional practice that opposed idol worship and the caste system, and instead promoted devotion to a universal, unseen God. And there were the Sufis, the Muslim mystics who devoted their lives to ethical purity and deepening their personal contact with God. In these two traditions he found much that was true.

But both ultimately were not complete for him. Both lacked two elements that could only come through divine revelation, and these were Nam and Shabad – The Name and The Word. “The Name and The Word are the revelation of the divine ...” (J.S. Grewal “The Sikhs of the Punjab”).

According to Sikh tradition, Nanak began to receive the revelation of The Name and The Word and thus became Sikhism's first guru.

“I was a minstrel without an occupation, but God gave me an occupation. He ordered me to sing His praises. He called his minstrel to His abode of Truth and gave him the robe of ‘true praise and adoration.’ The true nectar of the Name has been sent as food. The Minstrel openly proclaims the glory of the Word. By adoring the Truth, Nanak has found the Perfect One.” Guru Granth Sahib[GGS150]

Who were his first disciples? Undoubtedly they were farmers and poor villagers who responded to Guru Nanak's message that God cared nothing for the caste system. As it says in the Guru Granth Sahib, “We are not high, or low, or the middling; we have taken refuge in God, and we are His people.”

This egalitarian message had an immediate impact and the panth (the Sikh community) – grew in size and importance. Before Guru Nanak died in 1539, he chose a successor, a twenty-something disciple who became the second Guru.

The Next Nine

Guru Angad (1504-1552) Under Angad the panth continued to grow, drawing the unfavorable attention from the Mughal invaders who imposed Islamic law over the Punjab. Its tax collectors and its district regents began to confront the Sikh “state-within-a-state.”

Guru Amar Das (1479-1574) The third guru maintained a deep concern for social justice. His efforts at improving the lot of women made a huge impact on the spread of Sikhism. He recognized them as equal to men and encouraged them to remarry, if they so wished, if their husbands died. He forbade the wearing the veils because he viewed the Islamic custom as a form of discrimination against women. When Guru Amar Das was dying, he bestowed the guruship on his son-in-law, Ram Das.

Guru Ram Das (1534-1581) Ram Das grew up in a prosperous Hindu family, but it was a young man that he encountered Sikhism.. He went on to build the reflecting pond at holiest centre of Sikhism, which has come to be known as Amritsar.

Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606) The investiture of Arjan marked a break in Sikh tradition. He was the youngest son of Guru Ram Das, but the first to inherit the guruship from his father. The Mughal ruler Jahangir became alarmed at Sikhism’s growth under Guru Arjan, and had him arrested and tortured, becoming the first martyr of the *panth*.

Guru Hargobind (1595-1644) Long before Arjan met his untimely end, the grooming of his son Hargobind was underway. Perhaps considering his father’s fate, Hargobind donned princely robes for the investiture ceremony, and asked to be presented with twin swords – symbols, he said, of temporal and spiritual powers. From that day on, the dual role of secular power (Miri) and spiritual authority (Piri) would be the enduring legacy of his guruship. He passed the twin swords of power to his grandson, the tender and sensitive **Guru Har Rai (1630-1661)**. Five years before Har Rai died, he passed the burden of office to his five year-old son, who became the eighth master, **Guru Harkrishan (1656-1664)**. Harkrishan died three years later, a victim of smallpox.

Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675) Bahadur was the youngest son of the sixth Guru Hargobind, and was known both for his deep spiritual attainments as well as military prowess. But he too fell afoul of the Mughul administration, and was arrested and sent to Delhi where he was beheaded, becoming the second guru to share this fate. But his son, and successor, Guru Gobind Singh, was just about to change Sikhism for all time.

Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) Except for Guru Nanak, no one had such a dramatic, and lasting impact on Sikhism as Gobind Singh. It was his revelation that there would be no other personal gurus after his reign. Upon his death, he declared, the guruship would pass to the community at large (the *panth*) and to Sikhism's holy book, the *Adi Granth*, to which he had added the hymns written by the ninth guru. Hereafter, this collection of the writings of all the previous gurus and additional commentaries would be known as the **Guru Granth Sahib** in recognition that no other human guru would be needed again.

But perhaps equally important was his creation of a new Sikh identity, forged in the fires of religious persecution, and dipped in the waters of spiritual purity: *amrit-chhakna*, the Sikh ritual of baptism and dedication.

Sikhism's Holy Book – The Guru Granth Sahib

Out of Nanak's direct revelations from God, tradition has it, a new scripture began to form. And these words required no priests to interpret them. Only the scripture mattered, in the very same way that Martin Luther insisted on "sola scriptura" – only the scripture.

Sikhism takes the primacy of its revealed texts far beyond anything ever conceived by Christianity, however. Even the very name of Sikhism's holy book points this out. It is called, Guru Granth Sahib, or in English, "The Highest, Most Holy Book Which is our Guru." Given its final written form in 1604, it was compiled by the fifth guru, Guru Arjan, bringing together the Word as revealed by the preceding gurus.

In other words, Sikhism's bible is considered an eternal Guru, and the book is revered in precisely the way an eternal spiritual master would be.

*Burn emotional attachment, and grind it into ink.
Transform your intelligence into the purest of paper.
Make the love of the Lord your pen, and let your consciousness be the scribe.
Then, seek the Guru's Instructions, and record these deliberations.
Write the Praises of the Nam, the Name of the Lord;
write over and over again that He has no end or limitation. (GGS 16)*

The primacy of the Guru Granth Sahib is immediately understandable when you first arrive within the *gurdwara*. At the front of the prayer hall, under an elaborate canopy, it rests, uplifted on a raised dais, usually covered when it is not being read by the *granthi* (reader of the Guru). Because it is the "living Guru" gurdwaras make provision for the holy book to retire for the evening, by placing it in a special bedroom, complete with an ornate bed, where it can rest until called on once again to provide wisdom to the *panth*.

For those who keep a personal copy of the Guru Granth Sahib at home, a similar resting place is provided.

The Historical Context

From 1211 when the Muslim kingdom was established in Delhi, to the British annexation of the Punjab in 1849, a series of catastrophic upheavals and social challenges wracked the lives of those living in northern India. Thus the teachings of Guru Nanak did not arise in a period of calm reflection. Indeed, the founding guru lived during a time of increasing warfare, social conflict and new ideas about the relationship between the secular and the divine.

Although Muslim invaders had originally conquered India in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Mughul warlord Tamerlane brought a new brutality through the Punjab at the end of the fourteenth century, just prior to Guru Nanak's birth. He commanded his

soldiers to destroy Hindu and Buddhist temples on a scale not seen before. And Tamerlane's successor, Babur, introduced a level of "Islamization" that eroded the ancient spiritual teachings of the Hindu holy books, the Vedas. Indeed, Guru Nanak was an eye-witness to the invasion and destruction wrought by Babur's forces. But Islam also brought a new conception of a personal God – the "uncreated creator" who intervened in human affairs and in the hearts of believers.

It was also during this time that a new, mystical form of Islam also made its way into northern India. Sufism, which arrived in northern India in the eleventh century, offered a deeply devotional path to spiritual seekers, a way that encouraged non-violence and open enquiry, and a meditative, direct experience of God. The Sufi teachers, called *sheikhs*, found more receptive adherents than anywhere else in India, according to scholars.

At the very same time, Hinduism was also experiencing the rise of its own mystical sects, probably due to the influence of Sufism. Although centuries old, the *Bhakti* and *Sant* movements involved deep forms of devotion to God. Both were being renewed by powerful new teachers in the fourteenth century. A philosopher of the time, Kabir, began to preach against the orthodoxy of both Muslim and Hindu priests, who were preventing ordinary people from experiencing God directly. The only true *guru* (teacher), he proclaimed, was the *satguru* – the highest teacher, God. And God cared nothing for the caste system.

It was in this ferment of political repression and new spiritual ideas, that Guru Nanak made his home. His leadership – and the nine gurus who followed him - span a total of 239 years. In 1708 the last guru, Guru Gobind Singh, declared the end of personal guruship.

The Khalsa: A new concept and its meaning

Guru Gobind Singh inherited a community that was at once growing more numerous, powerful – and divided. Rival factions within Sikhism were making many claims about the authority of the present Guru; and an ersatz priestly class of gurdwara caretakers and *panth* administrators called masands were collecting large amounts of money and dictating how Sikhism should be practiced. Sectarianism and dissent were threatening the *panth*, and Guru Gobind Singh had to act.

In 1699, during the traditional festival of Vaisaikhi, the Guru invited the entire community to his residence at Anandpur. Some say 80,000 Sikhs obeyed his summons. As the story goes, he stood outside a tent, sword in hand, and told the crowd that "henceforth all Sikhs would be his *Khalsa*." Up to that time, the word *khalsa* referred to those who had been directly initiated by the gurus; but now, all Sikhs were included. According to noted Cambridge scholar G.S. Grewal, the implication "was that all those who were not directly linked with him were not Sikhs either." Nor were the dissidents,

nor the gurdwara caretakers, the *masands*. And that was not all. To drive this revolution home, Guru Gobind Singh called out to the assembled multitudes, asking for a volunteer who was prepared to die for him. According to the story, a hush fell over the crowd. Finally, a man, Daya Ram, came forward. The Guru led him into the tent, sword in hand, and closed the flap. A moment later, a horrible thud was heard, and Guru Gobind Singh emerged alone, his sword dripping with blood. As the crowd shuffled with consternation, the Guru called for another volunteer, and the same thing happened. When he was done, 5 had answered his call. All had disappeared.

Finally, they emerged, dressed in blue wearing golden turbans. Called the *panj-piari*, the “5 beloved ones”, they became the first baptized Sikhs. Henceforth, initiation through a baptism ceremony was considered the ultimate form of dedication to Sikhism, something all Sikhs should aspire to.

Baptism Today

While dramatic and effective, the initiation ceremony into the *khalsa* [called *amrit sanskar* (“nectar of immortality”) or *khande di pahul* (“ceremony of the two-edged sword”)] does not involve blood, new initiates are expected to come to the defence of all those who face persecution and the downtrodden.

There is no special time when Sikh men or women are called upon to be baptised. Generally it can happen when the candidate has sufficient maturity to make a serious dedication to spiritual life. (It is not limited to Punjabis, however; and it is not uncommon to see people of European origin in gurdwaras, especially in the US.) The ceremony must take place in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh “bible.” Seven initiated Sikhs must be present, five of whom lead the ceremony. In front of them a large iron bowl is filled first with fresh water, and soluble sweets are added. One of them stirs the mixture (*amrit*) with the *khande*, the double-edged sword, the other four keep one hand on the bowl. The initiates kneel before the group, one knee up, palms pressed together. They are led in a series of prayers. Finally, they cup their hands and receive a portion of the *amrit*, which they drink, and recite the salutation to the Guru:

Vahiguruji ka Khalsa, Vhaigurji ki fateh!
(Hail to the Guru’s Khalsa, Hail to Guru’s victory!)

This is repeated a total of five times. The main officiant then applies the *amrit* to the eyes and hair, also five times. Any *amrit* left is then consumed by the initiates.

Next, they are called upon to recite the basic creedal statement of Sikhism, the *Mul Mantra*:

“There is one Supreme Being, the Eternal reality, the Creator, without fear and devoid of enmity, immortal never incarnated, self-existent, known by grace through the Guru. The Eternal One, from the beginning, through all time, present now, the Everlasting Reality.”

They are reminded of the power of the eternal creator, then given the Name of God and instructed to take special vows of conduct, the *Reht Maryada* (see more below). These include the requirement to abide by the 5 K's and to avoid the four cardinal sins:

1. Cutting one's hair or having it cut
2. Consuming meat which has been slaughtered according to Muslim rite (*halal*). This rite was considered inhumane because the animal died a slow death.
3. Extra-marital sexual intercourse
4. Using tobacco

They are also urged to set aside one-tenth of their income for the well-being of the Guru's community (this was a tradition started the fifth Guru). If they have not already received a name from the Guru Granth Sahib, they are issued one, and finally, they partake of *prasad*, the sacred food.

The 5 K's

The dramatic way in which Guru Gobind Singh introduced baptism was meant to shock the community into a realization that in order to survive in a hostile environment, they must come together for defensive and spiritual purposes. They could no longer hide or pretend they were part of the larger Islamic/Hindu community. They were Sikhs. And now they were to wear symbols of their faith openly, and as a visible sign of their faith and identity.

These became known as the *panj-kakaar*, the "5 K's"

Kes - unshorn hair Regarded as a symbol of saintliness, Guru Nanak started the practice of never cutting his hair. It means living one's life in harmony with the Will of God. We are natural beings, part of God's creation, like trees. Cutting the hair is vainglorious and an insult to God (long hair has been the sign of saintliness in many religions).

Kangha - the comb Initiated Sikhs always carry a comb as a symbol of cleanliness. It's no good having long hair unless one is prepared to maintain its cleanliness, and Sikhs are called on to comb their hair twice a day. Hygiene was considered important – there was no place for the privations and ascetic practices of the Hindu *sadhus*.

Kara - the iron bracelet It is not something that you would notice unless you were looking for it. The bracelet is usually of unadorned, grey steel, not silver, and does not look like jewelry. But if you are a Sikh, man or woman, every time you reach out for something, you will notice it yourself. As such it is a constant reminder of one's faith, and the requirement to keep one's action harmonious with the will of God and honest in the affairs of society. A symbol of restraint, it is an acknowledgment that

the wearer is a servant of the Guru, and must not dishonor him or the community. As well, the circle is a universal symbol of oneness and continuity.

Kachh - underwear must be worn at all times. It reminds the Sikh of the need for self-restraint over physical passions and desires. Apart from its moral significance, it ensures briskness during action and freedom of movement at all times. It is a smart dress as compared to the loose dhoti, which most people of the subcontinent wore in those days. *Kachh* is also an ideal dress for horse riding.

Kirpan or the sword is the emblem of courage and a weapon of self-defense. It symbolizes dignity and self-reliance, the capacity and readiness to always defend the weak and the oppressed. It helps sustain one's martial spirit and the determination to sacrifice oneself in order to defend truth and banish oppression.

In Canada it has become the custom to wear it under the shirt. It has become a source of some difficulties in public schools and air travel. (See more about this under section *Current Social Issues*)

Ironically, the symbol most closely identified with Sikh practice, the turban, is not one of the "5 K's". It is however a requirement to protect long hair and the turban serves that purpose. According to the *Reht Maryada*, the Sikh code of conduct, there are only two elements of dress that all Sikhs must wear: the turban and the Kachh.

Young boys will wear their hair tied in a knot at the top and cover it with a *patka*, usually a piece of cotton cloth.

Daily Practices and the Sikh Code of Conduct

Guru Nanak taught the Sikhs three main lessons:

Naam Jupnaa — To cultivate a mindset so that one becomes aware of the Creator and his presence, by repeating God's Name. The Sikhs should rise early in the morning, before sunrise and meditate. Then the rest of the day, while working they should remember God and recite the scriptures. And an antidote to ego; (insert quote from GGS here)

Kirt Kurnee — To work and earn an honest living while leading a family life.

Vund Ke Chuknaa — To share with the less fortunate the bounty with which God has blessed you.

Sikhs are also expected to perform daily prayers. The *Nitnem* consists of daily readings morning and night: the *Japji* of Guru Nanak and *Jap* of Guru Gobind Singh to be read in

the morning; *Rahiras*, a collection of nine hymns to be read at sunset; and the *Kirtan Sohila*, five hymns to be read at bedtime.

Guru Nanak exhorted his followers to abide by the above values in order to set themselves on the spiritual journey and becoming closer to the creator. The consequence of disregarding the above values was a life of disharmony, and the inevitability of being reborn after one's death, only to continue another round of suffering. Since humans have the unique ability among all of God's creations to be able to make choices, it is possible to choose the righteous path and eschew the sinful.

By repeating God's name, one is reminded of the glory of all creation, of which each individual is a part. "O my soul, you have emanated from the light of God, know your true essence", as it says in the Guru Granth Sahib (GGS 441). By constantly making the right choices, and remembering one's true purpose in life, ultimately one reaches a union with God and escapes the endless round of birth and death.

But how is all this to be worked out in the complex, confusing flood of everyday life? This was a question that absorbed the Sikh community from the death of Guru Gobind Singh, and continues to the present.

Many attempts were made after Gobind Singh's death to come up with a consistent set of rules, but it was only in 1931 that a comprehensive process was begun that had the wide support of the *panth*. Under the direction of the SGPC, an elected Sikh organization established by Indian law, a process to codify a consistent set of practices began, and in 1950 the final code was published. The *Reht* (or *Rahit*) *Maryada* has now become the official "rulebook", defining the correct Sikh way of life. While there are Sikhs and even *gurdwaras* that do not accept the authority of the SGPC, the *Reht Maryada* is largely viewed as authoritative.

It also spells out appropriate marriage and funeral rites, the forms of worship, and many other aspects of Sikhism. But it also includes specific guidance on personal conduct, including these injunctions:

No Intoxicants A Sikh must not take hemp (cannabis), opium, liquor, or tobacco. His only routine intake should be food.

No piercing Strictly forbidden in the *Rahit Maryada*

Personal Honesty The true Sikh of the Guru shall make an honest living by lawful work. A Sikh should not steal, form dubious associations or engage in gambling.

Philanthropy A Sikh shall "regard a poor person's mouth as the Guru's cash offerings box." (Baptized Sikhs donate ten percent of their income to the *panth*.) Voluntary service to the community is expected.

Eschew Magic Believers are exhorted to avoid all forms of "magic, spells, incantation, omens, auspicious times, days and occasions, influence of start, horoscopic dispositions, soothsayers, clairvoyants, oracles" etc.

Family Life

As with all religious communities, Sikh family life is a mix of the ideal, the practical, and the customary. Ideally, all three should be in harmony with the highest principles of the faith, and this is what many families strive for. They are assisted by detailed instructions as laid out in the *Reht Maryada*.

Birth and Naming As soon as practical, the family and relatives of a newborn should go to a gurdwara and present an offering of *karhah prashad* (sacred pudding) as a gesture of thanksgiving. Hymns are sung. A name for the child is chosen by picking at random a hymn from the GGS. The first of the hymn becomes the first letter of the name of the newborn. After its acceptance by the congregation, the name should be announced by the *granthi*. The boy's name must have the suffix "Singh" (meaning *lion*, and the girl's, the suffix "Kaur" (*princess*).

Marriage The *Reht Maryada* insists that a "Sikh's daughter must be married to a Sikh" so mixed marriages are extremely unlikely to happen within a gurdwara. But what about considerations of caste? Here the rulebook is less clear. It states that a "Sikh man and woman should enter wedlock without giving thought to the prospective spouse's caste and descent," but Punjabi custom often trumps spiritual considerations. None of the ten Gurus married outside their caste, and many families today make an effort to do the same.

As with the larger Indian society, where arranged marriages have been the rule, Sikh families (even in Canada) aspire to do the same. Even where arranged marriages do not occur, families often try to "steer" their marriageable children toward a particular person, having done some research into the background and status of the prospective partner. However, much to the consternation of many traditional Sikh families, mixed marriages are becoming more common.

Dowries, strictly discouraged by the gurus and reinforced by the *Reht Maryada*, have been common within the Sikh community but there are signs that it is fading from view in North America.

An engagement ceremony may or may not be held. Called the *Kurmayaee*, it can be held at the bridegroom's house or the *Gurdwara* and involves the exchange of presents between the two families. The bride herself does not normally participate.

Instead (or sometimes in addition) to the *Kurmayaee*, a pre-marriage *sangeet* (Punjabi bridal shower for women) will be held a few days before the wedding proper. It's a "meet the families" sort of affair and gives everyone a chance to check out the new in-laws, sing some songs, and eat terrific food. Often there will be a corresponding bachelor party too.

The wedding ceremony, called *Anand Karaj*, "ceremony of bliss" can be held at the bride's home, or in the *Gurdwara*, but always in the presence of the *Guru Granth*

Sahib. The groom's party, called the *barat*, makes its way to the bride's home midmorning. Often they will be greeted by *ragis* (religious musicians). Morning prayers are said, and a brief ceremony called the *milni* is held. Then everyone heads to the *Gurdwara* for the wedding ceremony proper.

At the *Gurdwara*, the couple and their parents stand in front of the Guru Granth Sahib, while the rest of congregation remains seated. Prayers are said and songs sung. The *Granthi* (officiant) addresses the couple, explaining the significance and obligation of the marriage. The couple is then asked to honour their vows by bowing together before Guru Granth Sahib. Then the bride's father places one end of a pink or saffron-coloured *palla* (scarf) in the groom's hand, passing it over the shoulder and placing the other end in the bride's hand. Thus joined, the two will take the vows. A special four-part prayer, the *Lavan*, written by the Fourth Guru, are recited while the couple walks around the central canopy housing the Guru Granth Sahib. Garlands of flowers are presented to the newly-wedded couple, and the party retires to the *langar* for a communal meal.

Divorce is not countenanced by the *Reht Maryada*. In its quaint wording, "Generally, no Sikh should marry a second wife if the first wife is alive."

Funeral Ceremony Attending an *Antam Sanskar* is a powerful experience. Mourners face the difficulty of keeping their grief in check, because, from a spiritual point of view, death is liberation. A mood of resignation is evidence of faith, according to tradition. But it is terribly hard to control one's emotions, and often you will hear a wail that erupts despite efforts to keep it down. For this reason Sikh funerals are deeply poignant.

In some families, bodies are washed by relatives and then dressed in clean garments. If the deceased is a baptized Sikh, all 5 symbols of the faith are to remain with the body. Prayers are sung en route to crematorium (in Canada) or cremation grounds (in India). Following cremation, a continuous reading of the entire *Guru Granth Sahib* is commenced, and must be finished within 48 hours. Under certain circumstances, burial or sea disposal are permitted.

Sikh Identity

What does it mean to be a Sikh? This is a question that is at the heart of understanding its history, faith and future. And it is important for a journalist to have a grasp of the issues because many news stories turn on the fulcrum of Sikh identity.

In Canada and the US, for example, *gurdwara* elections have been the scene of vigorous contests, some of which have ended up in civil courts. A search of the Internet will produce many stories of this sort of conflict, and it can be confusing for an outsider to understand what is going on.

Many of these contests are the result of generations-old debates within Sikhism of what it means to be a “true” Sikh. And some are the result of the impact of North American-style modernity on traditional Punjabi culture. An example of this is the “tables and chairs” debate which has disturbed the tranquility of many *gurdwaras* in Canada and the US. (more on this in the section, *Current Social Issues*, below).

One thing is certain: the debate is not new.

After the creation of the baptism ceremony and the forging of the *khalsa* by Guru Gobind Singh, it began to be common to divide the community into two groups: the *Amrit-dharis* (those who had been baptized with “*amrit*”, the sweet nectar) and the *Sahaj-dharis* (those who had not, the “slow adopters”).

Most scholars seem to agree that generally, becoming baptized is an ideal which Sikhs should aspire to. According to Prof. Manjit Singh, baptism is “a segment of the over-all life journey of a Sikh”.

But what about the *Sahaj-dharis*, who perhaps had no intention of adopting all the forms of orthodox Sikhism. Could they still be Sikhs? Could you be clean-shaven with short hair, not wear a turban, and still be a Sikh?

During the Guru period, there were times when the orderly succession process was challenged by bald ambition; each episode was marked by debates over loyalty and identity. And there were divisions over theological principles.

A variety of movements arose in the nineteenth century, spanning a range of beliefs about Sikhism and Sikh identity, role of the Gurus, relationship to Hinduism, etc. Some of these still persist today. Some might be considered heretical by mainstream Sikhism. The Nirankaris, who believe that personal guruship continues to this day, are not considered as Sikhs by the mainstream even though some Nirankaris maintain uncut hair, wear the turban, and display all the overt marks of a devout Sikh.

The media often portrays these identity issues as a confrontation between “orthodox” and “reform” Sikhs, somewhat akin to orthodox and reform Judaism; and sometimes a more damaging locution is used: Fundamentalists vs. Moderates.

Virtually all Sikhs would reject these attempts at labeling. There is wide-spread agreement that baptism is an ideal within the *panth*, that all Sikhs should attempt to live up to the challenge that the Gurus placed before them. But for most, baptism is not an “Iron Curtain”.

Movements and Organizations

Namdharis – A group founded by Ram Singh in India in 1857, their main divergence from normative Sikhism is the believe that the tenth guru, Gobind

Singh, did not die in 1708, but escaped, and miraculously, lived in secret to the age of 146. They believe their founder Ram Singh was in fact an incarnation of Guru Gobind Singh, and hence do not believe in the doctrine of an unending guru lineage. They are strict vegetarians who do not drink or smoke. Ram Singh was in fact a heroic reformer who fought against the incursion of Hindu beliefs into the Sikh community. A fierce opponent of the caste system, he performed mass marriages in defiance of cultural tradition. He is credited with leading a campaign of non-cooperation against the British invaders. The mainstream regards Namdharis as a deviation.

Nanaksars - The Nanaksar movement was founded by Nand Singh (1869 -1943), a wandering ascetic who, tradition has it, experienced a visitation by Guru Nanak. Without excluding the other nine Gurus, Nand Singh held that the first Guru was actually an *avatar* (manifestation) of the Divine. Nanaksars believe that the spiritual custodians of gurdwaras must be celibate, contrary to mainstream Sikh practice which sees marriage and family as essential to the spiritual life. They do not fly the traditional triangular yellow flag usually seen at Sikh temples. The sect has followers in India, the US and in Canada. Also considered a deviation by mainstream Sikhism.

Nirankaris – Perhaps no other heterodoxy has caused so much problems for Sikhism as the Nirankaris. They trace their beginnings to Baba Dayal, an 18th century devotee of Guru Nanak. According to the Nirankaris, the line of guruship continued through Baba Dayal. A new scripture developed, replacing the Guru Granth Sahib. Tensions spilled into bloodshed when in 1978 the Nirankaris began worship services in Amritsar, Sikhism's holiest site. The sect was then excommunicated.

Nihang - Said to be Guru Gobind Singh's "lovely army", this warrior, male-only sect prides itself on being the "true khalsa". Distinguished by their blue, traditional uniform and high turban, they are subdivided into two groups, the *budha dal* (veterans army) and the *taruna dal* (youthful army). They are not seen as a deviation, but more of a fraternity.

Nirmala - The so-called "pure ones" were a class of scholars started by Guru Gobind Singh. Traditional understanding has it that the tenth guru sent a group of scholars to study Sanskrit and the Vedas to be better equipped to interpret the writings of the gurus, which make frequent allusions to Hindu mythology and sacred texts. Nirmali wear white or saffron robes. Their ideal is celibacy and vegetarianism.

Damdami Taksal - Although Sikhism has a long tradition of opposing a priestly class, Damdami Taksal is an organization that among other things, runs a seminary and worldwide training programs. Tradition holds that the tenth Guru Gobind Singh established the Damdami Taksal, and is reckoned its first *jathedar*, or leader.

Sikhs in Canada

What actually happened when the first Sikhs arrived in Canada over 100 years ago is still a fresh and painful memory within the community. Perhaps it is best remembered through a headline on the front page of the Vancouver Daily World newspaper in 1907:

“Horde of Hungry Hindoos invades Vancouver: Starving coolies roam in streets, menace to women and children - homeless and destitute wanderers camp in park and beg for their food.”

It was a gross exaggeration. Generally the new arrivals had little difficulty finding work – first in the local Vancouver sawmills, and then in the interior of the province, working in logging camps and in railroad construction.

But 1907 was not a good year. A brief recession was beginning to depress lumber prices, and unemployment was on the rise. In that climate a Vancouver alderman, H.H. Stevens, began to agitate to keep South Asians out of Canada, and founded the racist Asiatic Exclusion League. In a petition to Ottawa he wrote, "We contend that the destiny of Canada is best left in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race...As far as Canada is concerned, it shall remain white, and our doors shall be closed to Hindoos as well as to other Orientals."

In those days, the distinction between Hindus and Sikhs was lost in the maelstrom of race riots. Chinatown was attacked by white residents, and instead of condemning the violence, Ottawa responded with measures to restrict immigration from India. The next year it changed the Immigration Act to create an impossible Catch-22 by insisting that immigrants had to come by “continuous passage” to Canada. Since there were no direct sailings from India to Canada, it effectively shut the doors to all South Asians. This was in direct violation of the laws of the time. As British subjects, Sikhs had the right to go anywhere in the Empire to take residence. But Canada, caught up in a virulent form of xenophobia, was prepared to keep Asians out at any cost.

In May, 1914 these policies were to be tested by an amazing act of civil disobedience, when the steamship Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver with 357 Indians aboard (12 were Hindus; the rest were Sikhs). Except for a couple of returning residents, all were refused permission to land and for two months, under squalid conditions, prohibited from taking on water or food, the ship sat in the harbour as people began to die. Just as the ship exhausted all legal avenues, a Canadian naval vessel arrived to force it back out to sea on July 23. The episode remains as one of Canada’s blackest days.

It was not a hospitable welcome, nor would circumstances change significantly for many years. An order-in-council barred the wives and children of those who had already landed from coming to Canada. It took eleven more years before Ottawa would accept applications for family reunification, but even that did not help matters very much. CPR, which had a virtual monopoly on passenger traffic between India and Canada, refused

to allow women in its fourth-class Asiatic steerage. Altogether between 1919 and 1941 only 250 women managed to arrive.

But not all was bleak when they arrived. The foundations of a true community had been laid. The first Canadian Sikh temple, or *gurdwara*, had been established in 1907, and by 1920, another 7 had been built in BC. From the gurdwaras emerged leaders who began to lobby for improvements to their civil rights. After much campaigning by activists in the community, Sikh men were finally given the right to vote in 1947.

The Modern Period

By 1960, the community had not changed much. True, hints of a successful entrepreneurial class were emerging. Mayo Singh, who arrived in 1907 to work in sawmills, set up his own in 1917. Mayo Lumber Company became one of the more successful in BC. In 1976 Herb Doman established what was to become one of the largest forest companies in Canada. All across the country, Sikhs were slowly integrating themselves into the multicultural mosaic.

And their numbers had slowly been growing. Changes to the Immigration Act in the early 1960s were having an impact. A quota system that allowed about 300 Indian immigrants into Canada each year was dropped in 1962. Visitors were allowed to apply for landed immigrant status from within Canada. And under new sponsorship rules, immediate family members, even fiancées were admitted.

But the biggest change came in shifting admission criteria from a bias towards professional to semi-skilled workers. The Sikh population grew twenty-fold between 1961 and 1976, and that growth rate has not let up. Between the 1991 and 2001 the Sikh community in Canada grew 89% to 278,410, almost one percent of Canada's population.

BC still has the largest Sikh population, with 135,000, fully half the total in Canada. Ontario is second with 104,000. Sikhs live (and have gurdwaras) in all provinces except PEI.

For reasons which are discussed below, Sikhs are passionate about politics. Naturally, given its large presence, the first Sikh to be elected to a provincial legislature happened in British Columbia, in 1986. Moe Sihota went on to become the first Sikh to join a provincial cabinet. Since then, Mr. Sihota has been followed by Ujjal Dossanjh, a Vancouver MLA who rose from being BC's Attorney General to being sworn in as the 33rd premier of BC, and the first Sikh premier in Canada. And Dr. Gulzar Singh Cheema has the distinction of having served in two provincial legislatures. In 1986 he was elected as a Manitoba MLA, and in 2001 joined the new Liberal government in BC. He has since gone on to hold two cabinet positions.

BC, Alberta and Ontario have all elected Sikh provincial legislators. In 2002 Herb Dhaliwal, a liberal MP from Vancouver, was sworn into the federal cabinet as the Minister of Natural Resources.

In 1982 Wally Oppal was appointed to the Supreme Court of BC, making him the most prominent Sikh jurist in Canada.

In unions, community organizations, and in political parties, Sikhs are making their presence felt in Canadian society – a natural outgrowth of the religious teachings which placed a high priority on social activism.

Current Social Issues

Because Sikhs represent a relatively new community within Canada, many of the issues it faces here are common to all immigrants from developing countries. There are settlement issues such as language and education the community faces. For example, many Sikhs arriving from India go through a laborious and frustrating experience getting their professional qualifications accepted in Canada. But in addition, there are quite specific circumstances that provoke a number of on-going news stories that undoubtedly will at some point attract your attention.

Religious Freedom

Canadian Sikhs have fought long and hard to protect their rights to display the “5 K’s” in society, but it took until 1990 for the RCMP to accept the right for its Sikh members to wear a turban. Unfortunately, the battle is not over: Corporate Canada still seems to have some difficulty accepting religious freedom. In 2001, an Edmonton owner of a Subway fast food outlet was warned by corporate headquarters in Connecticut that wearing a turban was "non-compliant" with its standards, because Hardip Singh Brah wore a turban to his franchise instead of the prescribed company visor or ball-cap. A headline in the Globe and Mail said it all: **“Sikh says fast-food boss banned 'diaper' on head”**. His right to wear the turban was upheld by the Alberta Human Rights Commission.

Other issues are still outstanding. Since 9/11 North American Sikhs have suffered along with Muslims in facing prejudice. Two days after the attack on New York and Washington, DC, a 47 year old gas station attendant in Arizona was shot and killed because he “looked Middle Eastern”. In California a Sikh couple’s home was firebombed. Also at issue is the whole problem of “racial profiling” in the war on terrorism: Sikhs report getting a rough ride at airports. Even the US State Department cited the case of a Quebec school which had banned a 12 year-old student from wearing a four-inch *kirpan* to school.

And Canadian Sikhs have been outraged at the French government's legislation to ban religious garb in public schools. They worry about its implication for schools here.

The Kirpan

Besides the turban, no other article of Sikh faith has been the source of as much controversy as the kirpan, the ceremonial dagger worn by baptized Sikhs. In 1991, the Peel Board of Education in Toronto developed a no-weapons policy after a number of schoolyard knife incidents and took the view that the kirpan can be used as a weapon. The Peel board tried without success to find a compromise to let the students wear, as do some Sikh members of the police force in London, England, a small symbolic replica instead of a real kirpan with a metal blade. A Toronto Sikh community leader, Harbhajan Singh Pandori, took the Board to the Ontario Human Rights Commission. In a landmark ruling, the chairman of the Commission's board of inquiry, Rabbi Gunther Plaut, ordered the policy be withdrawn.

It was not the first time the issue had been settled, and apparently long from being the last. In Quebec, twelve-year-old Gurbaj Multan was barred from wearing the kirpan at l'École Sainte-Catherine-Laboure. A lower court had ordered the Marguerite-Bourgeoys school board to reverse its policy. But it appealed, supported by the government of Quebec and the teachers' union. In March 2004, the Quebec Court of Appeal overturned the lower court. The appeal court agreed with the Quebec government, the school and its board that the kirpan was a safety issue, noting there was "zero tolerance" for knives at school. As of the time of producing this guidebook the case seems destined for the Supreme Court of Canada.

Indian and Punjabi Political Realities

From the arrival of the East India Company in 1600, to the annexation of the Punjab by the British in 1848 and its partition a hundred years later when Britain departed India, colonialism has meant a painful series of disasters for the *panth* that still reverberate today.

The terms of the partition of the Punjab in 1947 on the eve of Indian independence were a disaster for the Punjab. In carving up the subcontinent along religious lines, where India was to be largely Hindu, and Pakistan Muslim, Punjab was torn apart. The British governors had decided that geographic areas of the Punjab that were 60 percent or more Muslim would be included in Pakistan. This effectively meant that vast areas of the traditional Sikh homeland was suddenly incorporated into a new Muslim state, stranding four million Sikhs and Hindus on the wrong side of the border. It was seen as a betrayal that resulted in a form of ethnic cleansing and fuelled the resurgence of a desire for an independent Sikh homeland, the *Khalistani* political movement.

And with Indian independence came new problems. The gerrymandered Punjab chafed under the home rule of New Delhi, which was unwilling to confer any political accommodations to the Sikh community. In the new, secular India, as historian G.S. Grewal put it, “there was no room for weightage to religious minorities in [this] federal republic...”

But in 1966 the Punjab was broken up again, into three separate states based on linguistic patterns established by a census of mother tongues. A scandal erupted when it was discovered that Punjabi-speaking Hindus in the region were registering as Hindi-speaking, which had the impact of whittling the new state down even further. It was not an auspicious beginning and further alienated the *panth* from New Delhi.

By the early 1980's political unrest mounted in the Punjab. There were calls for more autonomy, and political tensions arose between Sikhs and a breakaway movement, the Nirankaris. Many felt the Indian government under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was manipulating the situation, using divide-and-conquer tactics. A number of violent clashes between Sikhs and Nirankaris erupted, and a high-profile Sikh leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, was arrested. The Punjab began a slide into conflict. Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples were trashed. Politicians, religious leaders and civilians were being murdered. New Delhi declared the Punjab to be a “disturbed area” and imposed a federal governor.

Bhindranwale was released from prison and many rallied to his side. As the *jathedar* (leader) of the most prestigious Sikh seminary, his appeal for all Sikhs to defend the *panth* had a big impact, and the Golden Temple at Amritsar became the base for his campaign.

In 1984 violence erupted when the Indian army launched Operation Bluestar, which attempted to evict Bhindranwale and his Sikh militants from the Golden Temple. Bhindranwale was killed in the attack. Later that year, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, unleashing a bloodletting where upwards of 4,000 Sikh men, women and children were massacred in violent demonstrations across India.

The diaspora Sikhs, including those in Canada, were devastated by the events. Angry demonstrations occurred all across the country. On June 22, 1985, an Air India flight from Vancouver crashed en route to New Delhi. Ultimately two Sikh men were charged, but it took 15 years to take the case to court. By 2004, it was still underway. Tensions are still high, with many Sikhs believing that the Indian government maintains a covert campaign against the community.

“Tables and Chairs” controversy

For 500 years, Sikhs have been at ease sitting on the floor of the gurdwara and in the *langar* hall for the traditional communal meal. There was also a theological point to be made: all human beings are equal, and none (except for the Guru Granth Sahib) should be elevated on thrones. But by the 1960's some gurdwaras were adopting to Canadian fashion, and tables and chairs were brought in to the *langar*. A president of one of these gurdwaras insisted this was not contrary to the Sikh Code of Conduct: "We are still sitting at the same level – we are all sitting on chairs."

However this was not acceptable to more conservative Sikhs. A series of gurdwara elections began to be contested in the 1980's and into the 1990's. Some became overwrought, and police attended in a variety of Canadian and US locations. In some cases, elections were overturned or overseen by civil courts. Some temple leaders became the subject of an edict (*hukamnama*) issued by the leader of the *Akhal Takhat*, the foremost panthic spiritual authority, that required that furniture be removed. Those failing to abide by the edict faced excommunication, and in fact, whole congregations were ultimately decreed officially "*tankhaiya*", apostates. In recent years this controversy has died down, due to a realignment of gurdwaras. Those that want furniture or its absence will find accommodating gurdwaras. So in a sense the Diaspora Sikhs are creating "conservative" and "reform" congregations similar to the Jewish model.

Women's Rights

*"It is through woman that order is maintained.
Then why call her inferior from whom
all great ones are born?" (GGS 473)*

While the ten Gurus all insisted on the equality of women, and some like Guru Amar Das went to great lengths to improve their lot, perhaps in no other area has it been so difficult for the Sikh community to untangle a patriarchal Indian culture from religious dictum.

In its most recent Human Rights Report, the US State Department found in its annual survey that despite legislation to prevent crimes against women, the Indian government "often was unable to enforce these laws, especially in rural areas in which [misogynistic] traditions were deeply rooted." The Punjab is not an area excluded from these roots, nor do immigrants magically leave behind centuries of conditioning. Sikh women's rights organizations and community services are making big strides in Canada in overcoming domestic violence. Indeed one sociologist reported that an energized, activist cadre of Sikh women in Canada is responsible for "dramatic new developments...at the turn of the new millennium."

In 2003 a dispute arose in a prominent Punjabi gurdwara where a baptized woman was refused the right to lead a religious ceremony.

Festivals

The first festivals were inaugurated by Guru Amar Das, in an effort to promote Sikh identity by diverting the *panth* from celebrating Hindu or Muslim holidays. By commanding his followers to gather at the same times as other festivals, he effectively made people choose which community held their loyalty.

There are two types of festivals: the **Gurpurbs**, which celebrate the birthdays (and occasionally, the deaths) of the gurus; and a handful of more secular holidays (see below). *Gurpurbs* are opportunities for a special devotional, continuous reading of Sikhism's holy book.

Main Gurpurbs

The birthday of Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism (November)

The birthday of Guru Gobind Singh, founder of the Khalsa (January)

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan (June)

The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (November/December)

Vaisakhi - Usually held on April 13, it commemorates the founding of the *khalsa* and the initiation of baptism in 1699. A happy time, it is one of parades and festivities. In large Canadian cities, there may be several Vaisakhi parades, sponsored by local gurdwaras.

Other Festivals

Diwali – An Autumn festival celebrated throughout India, that occurs in October-November. It has little spiritual content, except for an opportunity to relate the story of Guru Hargobind, who was to be released from prison just prior to the Diwali festival, as a gesture of respect by the Indian emperor Jehangir. Guru Hargobind refused to be released unless 52 fellow inmates were also released. The emperor allowed the Sikh spiritual leader to take as many prisoners as could hold onto the many tassels of his cloak.

Hola Mohalla - This festival dates back to the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh. In 1680 he summoned his Sikhs to assemble at the time of the Hindu Holi (Krishna) festival. At that gathering, Guru Gobind Singh led them in military exercises and mock attacks. It was a complete antidote to the prank-playing of the Holi festival.

Glossary

Adi Granth - The first edition of the Guru Granth Sahib as was compiled by Guru Arjun in 1604.

Akal Purukh – The closest Punjabi expression to the English word, God. It means Timeless One.

Akhand Path - Uninterrupted reading of the Guru Granth Sahib. It is undertaken by a team of readers and must be finished in 48 hours.

Amritdhari - A Sikh who has undergone the Khalsa initiation ceremony. *Amrit* is Punjabi for 'nectar'.

Amritsanskar - The rite of initiation into the Khalsa.

Anand Karaj - Sikh wedding ceremony.

Bani - Abbreviation of Gurbani, the writings of the Gurus and associated commentaries.

Chauri – Whisk that is ceremonially waved over the Guru Granth Sahib as a symbol of respect.

Diwan - Congregational worship where Guru Granth Sahib is present.

Giani - Closest concept to “priest” in Sikhism. It means a person of spiritual knowledge.

Granthi - Literally, “reader”. One who performs the reading of the Guru Granth Sahib at religious occasions.

Gurdwara – Literally, “Place of the Guru”. The Sikh temple.

Gurmat - The entire body of Sikhism, including all the teachings of the Gurus and associated commentaries.

Gurmukhi - The cursive script of Punjabi used in the Sikh scriptures.

Gursikh - A devotee of the gurus – someone deeply devoted to the religion.

Gurpurb - Celebration of the anniversary of the birth or death of a guru, and of the installation of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Guru Granth Sahib - Literally, “The Highest, Most Holy Book Which is our Guru.” - the Sikh bible.

Harimandir Sahib – The inner sanctum of the Golden Temple of Amritsar, also known as Darbar Sahib.

Hola Mohalla - Spring festival dating back to the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, when he summoned his Sikhs to participate in military games and manoeuvres.

Hukamnama – Edicts issued by Sikh authorities (and earlier by the Ten Gurus).

Ik Onkar – The Sikh Creedal Statement of the oneness of God.

Janamsakhi - Bibliographic account of the lives of the gurus.

Jupnaa (or **nam jupnaa**) - Devout repetition of the divine name of God, or a scripture, conducted early in the morning.

Jathedar - The appointed head of one of the five Sikh Takhts – the “Crowns” of Sikhism (see below).

Khalsa – The community of the Guru’s disciples.

5 K's:

Kachh - Sacred underwear

Kangha - The comb

Kara - The iron bracelet

Kes - Unshorn hair

Kirpan - Ceremonial sword, one of the five physical symbols that a Khalsa Sikh must wear. It is a symbol of the Sikh fight against injustice and religious oppression.

Khanda – Two-edged weapon framed by two swords – the universally-recognized symbol of Sikhism

Kaur – Name given to baptized women. It means “princess” and indicates that all women are to be respected.

Kesdhari -A Sikh who does not cut their hair (see definition of amritdhari, above).

Karah Parshad (or simply prashad) - Ceremonial food.

Kirtan - Musical rendering of Sikh gurbani.

Langar – Communal kitchen inaugurated by Guru Nanak, cementing ties of the panth and stressing the equality of all humankind.

Miri /Piri - The dual concept of spiritual and worldly matters, introduced by Guru Hargobind and represented by two swords.

Nam - The name of God.

Namsimram – The recitation of the hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Nitnem - The daily prayers that Sikhs are expected to read morning, sunset and bedtime.

Panje Kakaar – The “5 K's”, to be worn by all *khalsa* Sikhs.

Panj Piaras - The “five beloved ones” , referring to the first five Sikhs initiated into the Khalsa order by Guru Gobind Singh. Five Khalsa Sikhs are required for initiation of a new member.

Panth - The entire Sikh community.

Ragi - A musician who sings the hymns (**bani**) of the Guru Granth Sahib in gurdwaras.

Rahiras - The sunset hymns as part of Nitnem.

Reyt (or **Rahit**) **Maryada** - The Sikh Code of Conduct promulgated in 1950 by the SGPC (see below).

Sat Guru - The supreme Guru, God.

Sat Sri Akal - The Sikh greeting meaning "The Great Truths are Eternal".

Seva - Service to ones fellow beings, a cornerstone of Sikhism.

Shabad - The religious hymns contained in Sikh scriptures.

Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.) - Established by Indian law in 1924, the SGPC is an elected body that oversees the administration of Gurdwaras and maintains adherence to the Reyt Maryada.

Vahiguruji ka Khalsa, Vhaigurji ki fateh! - "Hail to the Guru's Khalsa, Hail to Guru's victory!"

Important Dates

April 15, 1469 Guru Nanak born in Talwandi (now in Pakistan).

1604 Sikhism's fifth guru, Arjan, compiles the Adi Granth containing nearly 6,000 hymns composed by the previous four gurus and others.

April 13, 1699 Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) begins Khalsa order and baptism on Vaisakhi Day at Anandpur Sahib (Punjab, India).

1704 Guru Gobind Singh adds the hymns of the ninth guru, the Adi Granth which had been compiled by the fifth guru.

1708 Guru Gobind Singh becomes a victim of an assassination attempt by two Muslims working in the employ of the Mughul governor. Gobind Singh anoints the Adi Granth as the eternal guru of the panth, and is henceforth known as the Guru Granth Sahib.

1799 Ranjit Singh conquers Lahore (now in Pakistan) and establishes the first modern Sikh state, which at its peak covered most of northwest India to Kabul.

1839 Ranjit Singh dies, leading to the eventual fall of the kingdom.

1849 Punjab becomes the last kingdom in India to be annexed by the British in the name of the East India Company. In 1857, after the famous series of mutinies, the British Crown dispenses with the company and proclaims direct rule.

1897 Sikh Lancers and Infantry Regiment visited Vancouver after celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in London, England.

1899 Arrival of some Sikhs in Vancouver and Victoria from Hong Kong.

1906 First Sikh gurdwara in North America established in Vancouver.

1907 First of several measures to restrict Indian immigration imposed by Dominion of Canada, right to vote revoked; racists organize against Sikh immigrants.

1914 Komagata Maru Incident

April 13, 1919 On the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi in Amritsar, a peaceful protest over new British legislation results in a massacre of 379 men, women and children by British troops.

1920 Gurdwara Reform Movement (G.R.M.) is launched to end abuses over the management of Punjabi gurdwaras, under the control of the British colonial power.

1925 Gurdwara Reform Movement (G.R.M.) concludes with the formation of a Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, and legislation enacted to create the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.), an elected body responsible for the management of major Sikh gurdwaras.

August 15, 1947 Partition of the Punjab, on religious grounds, occurs as the British cede independence to India. Lahore goes to Pakistan, Amritsar to India. Many historic Sikh shrines including the birthplace of Guru Nanak, come under Pakistan's control.

1949 SGPC releases its first authorized version of the Sikh Reyt Maryada.

September 29, 1981 An Indian Airlines plane hijacked to Lahore by two members of the Dal Khalsa. The hijackers' demands include Jarnail Singh Brar (Bhindranwale)'s release from jail and \$500,000.

August 20, 1982 An Indian Airlines Boeing 737 is hijacked while on a flight from Bombay (now Mumbai) to New Delhi. A Sikh hijacker, who identifies himself as "Museebat" Singh, is shot dead by commandos.

June 6, 1984 Operation Blue Star: The Indian Army invades the Golden Temple (Amritsar) to dislodge Bhindranwale and his supporters. Hundreds die.

October 31, 1984 India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, assassinated by Sikh members of her security staff. Over 5,000 killed in anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi and elsewhere in India.

June 23, 1985 Air India Flight 182 downed off the coast of Ireland, killing 329.

November 6, 1985 RCMP conduct a sweep of raids on homes of suspected Sikh militants including: Talwinder Singh Parmar, Inderjit Singh Reyat, Surjan Singh Gill, Hardial Singh Johal, Manmohan Singh. Parmar and Reyat are charged with weapons offences; only Reyat is convicted.

1986 Metro Toronto Police permit Sikhs to wear turbans while on duty with the force.

January 22, 1986 Control of Golden Temple returned to the SGPC. Canadian Aviation Safety Board determines a bomb brought down Air India 182.

February 4, 1986 Indian Government Inquiry concludes a bomb brought down Air India 182.

November, 1990 RCMP hire the first turbaned Sikh officer.

October 15, 1992 Indian Police announce they have killed Talwinder Singh Parmar in a spontaneous gun battle in Bombay.

April 20, 1998, an edict from the jathedar (leader) of the most prestigious Punjabi gurdwaras declares that tables and chairs are not to be used in communal kitchens/langar. Several Canadian Sikh leaders are ex-communicated for disobedience.

October 27, 2000 RCMP arrest Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri in connection with the Air India crash. Trial continues into 2004.

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