

About Sikhs

Sikhs at a Glance

- 99 percent of people wearing turbans in the U.S. are Sikhs from South Asia
- Sikhs have been in the U.S. for over 100 years and currently there are approximately 700,000 Sikhs in the U.S.
- Sikhism is the world's fifth largest religion with 25 million adherents worldwide
- Sikhs are involved in many aspects of American life working as teachers, doctors, law enforcement officers, and entrepreneurs
- Sikhs believe in one God, equality, freedom of religion, and community service
- Sikhs cover their uncut hair with a turban
- The Sikh turban represents a commitment to equality and justice
- Sikhism is a distinct religion, separate from Hinduism and Islam



A typical Sikh family



A Sikh boy

The word “Sikh” means student. The almost 25 million Sikhs worldwide constitute the fifth largest religion in the world. Despite over a million Sikhs living in North America – USA and Canada, Sikhs are often confused as Arabs or Muslims.

Sikhs arrived in North America in 1897 and played a pivotal role in the opening of the West and construction of the Panama Canal in 1904. In 1912, Sikhs established their first gurdwara, or place of worship, in the United States. Almost a million Americans and Canadians are Sikh and nearly every major city has a Sikh place of worship and community center.

History and Beliefs

The Sikh faith is over five hundred years old. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, taught a message of love. He spoke of a universal God, common to all mankind, not limited to any religion, nation, race, creed, color, or gender.

The Sikh religion is strictly monotheistic, believing in one supreme Creator, free of gender, absolute, all-pervading, and eternal. Sikhism views life not as a fall from grace, but a unique opportunity to discover and develop the divinity in each of us.

Human rights and justice form a cornerstone of Sikh belief, and Sikh history features countless examples of Sikh Gurus and their followers making tremendous sacrifices for the cause of religious freedom and justice. More recently, Sikhs have been some of the most highly decorated soldiers of the British armed services during both World Wars. They played a significant role in the memorable battles of El Alamein in the Burma-China front and also in the allied assault in World War II. In India's struggle for independence from the British, over two-thirds of all the Indians who were sentenced to life imprisonment or death were Sikh. This is in spite of the fact that Sikhs form less than two percent of India's population.

The Sikh Identity

In 1699, the tenth and last living Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, summoned his followers to the town of Anandpur in Punjab; over 80,000 came.

According to history, Guru Gobind Singh appeared before his people yielding a sword and demanded a head. He repeated his call until five Sikhs were willing to sacrifice themselves to the Guru. To these devoted five, and subsequently to many others on that historic day, Guru Gobind Singh bestowed a new discipline to his Sikhs, and formally initiated them into the new order of the *Khalsa*. In a dramatic and humble gesture, Guru Gobind Singh asked the five to in turn initiate him. On that day, he gave the Sikhs their modern form, which includes five articles of faith:

- uncut hair (*kesh*) as a gift of God and Guru and a mark of Sikh identity,
- a small comb (*kanga*) for the hair,
- a steel bracelet (*kara*) which signifies a reality with no beginning and no end, and also symbolizes a Sikh's commitment to the ideals of his faith, much as wedding ring might indicate fealty and identity,
- a sword (*kirpan*) indicative of resolve and commitment to justice, and
- knee-length breeches (*keshera*) in keeping with the disciplined life-style of a Sikh.

For the past 300 years, male Sikhs have been easily recognized by their turbans, which cover their uncut hair, and beards. Notably, in traditional Indian society only males of high caste or the elite, ruling class wore turbans. Since Sikhs believe all humanity is equal, all Sikhs are encouraged to wear turbans as a testament to their innate royalty. Sikh women adhere to the same life style, symbols, rules and conduct as men, but generally few women wear turbans.

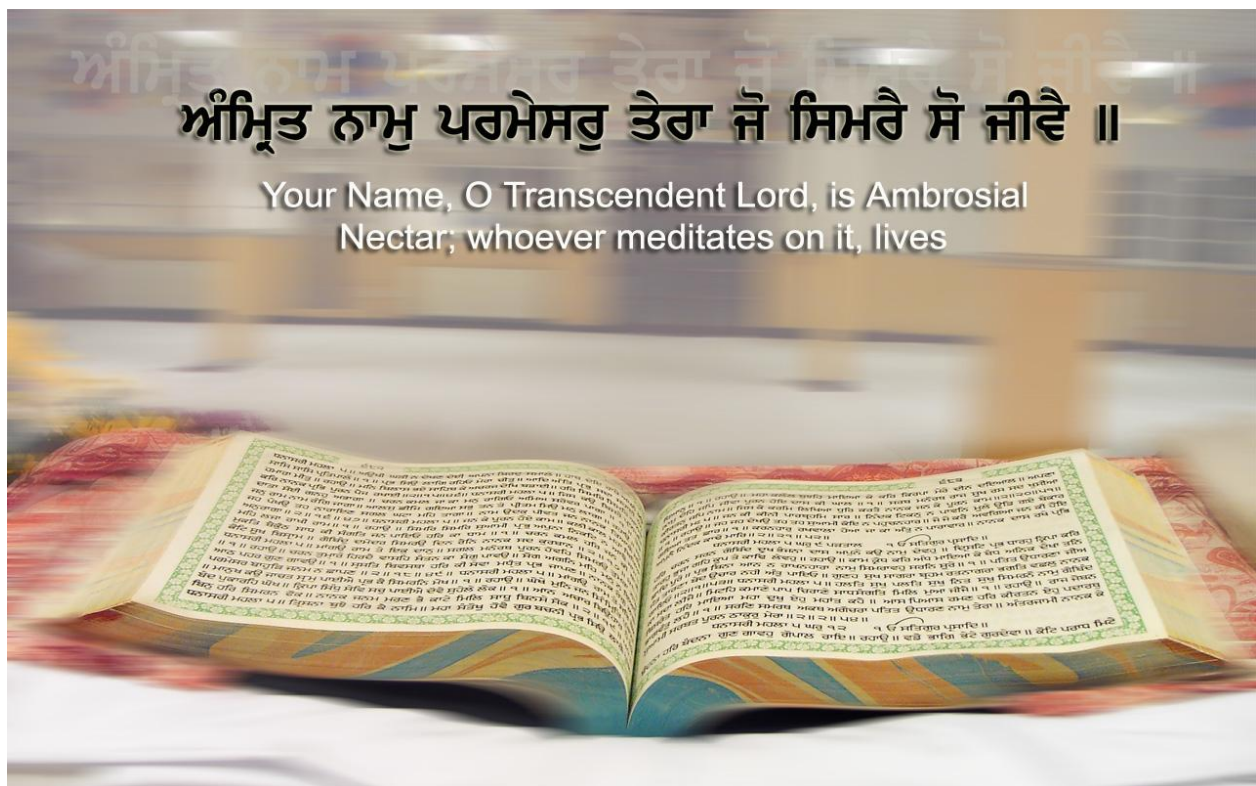
Young Sikh boys, instead of wearing a turban, often cover their uncut hair, which is tied in a top-knot with a simple piece of fabric.

Along with the aforementioned physical identifiers, Guru Gobind Singh went further in distinguishing Sikhs. In Indian society, an individual's name reveals one's caste and social status. Guru Gobind Singh freed Sikhs from the rigid caste system by ordering all Sikh males to adopt the surname "Singh," meaning lion, and women use the surname "Kaur," meaning princess, so that they would be free from caste distinctions.

Each year, Sikhs worldwide commemorate and celebrate the historic events of Vaisakhi 1699 as a milestone in Sikh history when Guru Gobind Singh decreed the formation of the *Khalsa* and fashioned the nation of Sikhs.

The Sikh Scripture

Guru Gobind Singh also decreed an end to the line of Gurus in human form. The writings of the earlier Gurus were collated along with those of Hindu and Muslim spiritual figures whose teachings strongly resonated with Sikh beliefs. This collection of writings is known as Guru Granth Sahib, a uniquely ecumenical and eclectic collection of spiritual writing. For Sikhs, Guru Granth Sahib is the repository of all spiritual knowledge and authority. In temporal matters all authority rests with the Sikh community worldwide acting democratically and in mindful prayer with an awareness of the spiritual heritage embodied in the Guru Granth Sahib (see below).





Top row: **Ten Gurus of Sikhs**; Bottom, left: **Golden Temple**, Amritsar, India – **the *sanctum sanctorum* of Sikhism**; Middle row: **Sri Guru Granth Sahib** – the embodiment of Sikh Gurus, the holy scripture worshiped by all Sikhs.



Gurdwara – Sikh’s place of worship (San Jose)



‘Langar’ (Free food served in community kitchen)