

Sikhism, [religion](#) and philosophy founded in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent in the late 15th century. Its members are known as Sikhs. The Sikhs call their [faith](#) Gurmat (Punjabi: “the Way of the Guru”). According to Sikh tradition, Sikhism was established by [Guru Nanak](#) (1469–1539) and subsequently led by a succession of nine other Gurus. All 10 human [Gurus](#), Sikhs believe, were inhabited by a single spirit. Upon the death of the 10th, [Guru Gobind Singh](#) (1666–1708), the spirit of the eternal Guru transferred itself to the [sacred scripture](#) of Sikhism, *Guru Granth Sahib* (“The Granth as the Guru”), also known as the [Adi Granth](#) (“First Volume”), which thereafter was regarded as the sole Guru. In the early 21st century there were nearly 25 million Sikhs worldwide, the great majority of them living in the Indian state of [Punjab](#).

- The growth of the Punjab was interrupted in the early 1980s by conflict between the central government and Sikh militants, who were demanding a separate Sikh nation-state, or [Khalistan](#) (“Land of the Khalsa”). In an effort to rein in the principal Sikh [political party](#), the [Shiromani Akali Dal](#) (Supreme Akali Party), the government enlisted the support of a young Sikh fundamentalist, [Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale](#). In 1982 Bhindranwale and his armed followers occupied the [Akal Takht](#) in the [Golden Temple](#) complex in Amritsar, where Bhindranwale called upon Sikhs to begin a battle for creation of the new state.
- In response, in 1984 Indian Prime Minister [Indira Gandhi](#) ordered a military assault on the complex, which proved much more difficult than had been anticipated and led to severe damage to some of the complex’s buildings (notably the Akal Takht, which subsequently was repaired). Bhindranwale was killed in the fighting. Later in the year, Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for the assault. This in turn prompted a pogrom against the Sikhs, particularly in the Delhi area, and led to [guerrilla warfare](#) against the central government in Punjab that lasted until 1992. At the start of the 21st century, the demands of the fundamentalists still had not been met, but at least the Punjab was quiet. Meanwhile, the appointment of [Manmohan Singh](#), a Sikh, as [prime minister](#) in 2004 was the source of great pride in the Sikh [community](#).

Golden Temple-Amritsar, Punjab State, India



Khalsa initiation

The 5 Ks date from the [creation of the Khalsa Panth](#) by [Guru Gobind Singh](#) in 1699.

The Guru introduced them for several reasons:

- Adopting these common symbols would identify members of the Khalsa
- Because all members of the Khalsa wear the 5 Ks the members of the community are more strongly bound together
- Each K has a particular significance

The meaning of the 5 Ks

The 5 Ks taken together symbolise that the Sikh who wears them has dedicated themselves to a life of devotion and submission to the Guru.

The 5 Ks are 5 physical symbols worn by Sikhs who have been initiated into the Khalsa.

The five Ks are:

- Kesh (uncut hair)
- Kara (a steel bracelet)
- Kanga (a wooden comb)
- Kaccha - also spelt, Kachh, Kachera (cotton underwear)
- Kirpan (steel sword)

Kesh - uncut hair

- Various reasons and symbolisms have been put forward for the Sikh practice of keeping hair uncut.
- Throughout history hair (kesh) has been regarded as a symbol both of holiness and strength.
- One's hair is part of God's creation. Keeping hair uncut indicates that one is willing to accept God's gift as God intended it.
- Uncut hair symbolizes adoption of a simple life, and denial of pride in one's appearance.
- Not cutting one's hair is a symbol of one's wish to move beyond concerns of the body and attain spiritual maturity.
- A Sikh should only bow his head to the Guru, and not to a barber.
- It is a highly visible symbol of membership of the group.
- It follows the appearance of Guru Gobind Singh, founder of the Khalsa.
- Sikh women are just as forbidden to cut any body hair or even trim their eyebrows, as Sikh men are forbidden to trim their beards.

Kara - a steel bracelet

- A symbol of restraint and gentility.
- A symbol that a Sikh is linked to the Guru.
- It acts as a reminder that a Sikh should not do anything of which the Guru would not approve.
- A symbol of God having no beginning or end.
- A symbol of permanent bonding to the community-being a link in the chain of Khalsa Sikhs (the word for link is 'kari').
- The Kara is made of steel, rather than gold or silver, because it is not an ornament.

Kanga - a wooden comb

- This symbolizes a clean mind and body; since it keeps the uncut hair neat and tidy.
- It symbolizes the importance of looking after the body which God has created. This does not conflict with the Sikh's aim to move beyond bodily concerns; since the body is one's vehicle for enlightenment one should care for it appropriately.

Kachha - special underwear

- This is a pair of breeches that must not come below the knee. It was a particularly useful garment for Sikh warriors of the 18th and 19th centuries, being very suitable for warfare when riding a horse.
- It's a symbol of chastity.

Kirpan - a ceremonial sword

- There is no fixed style of Kirpan and it can be anything from a few inches to three feet long. It is kept in a sheath and can be worn over or under clothing.
- The Kirpan can symbolise:
 - Spirituality
 - The soldier part of the Soldier-Saints
 - Defence of good
 - Defence of the weak
 - The struggle against injustice
 - A metaphor for God

- For a Sikh the fact that the Guru has instructed the Sikhs to wear the 5 Ks is an entirely sufficient reason, and no more need be said.
- The symbols have become greatly more powerful with each passing year of Sikh history.
- Every Sikh remembers that every Sikh warrior, saint, or martyr since 1699, and every living member of the Khalsa, is united with them in having adopted the same 5 Ks.

Interior of Gurdwara, Palatine, IL



- [Sikhs across the US feed the hungry during the pandemic ...](#)
- [www.cnn.com › article › sikh-pandemic-food-support](#)
- Jul 9, 2020 — Worldwide, *Sikh* temples, also known as *Gurdwaras*, offer free *meals* to ... US *Sikhs* tirelessly travel their *communities* to feed hungry Americans.

Some Sikhs believe that their religion is a re-purification of Hinduism; they view Sikhism as part of the Hindu religious tradition.

Many Sikhs disagree; they believe that their religion is a direct revelation from God - a religion that was not derived from either Hinduism or Islam.

Numbers of Sikhs:

The precise number of followers of any religion is difficult to estimate. Some sources, like telephone surveys and government censuses count adults who identify themselves as from a specific faith. Predictions by religious organizations are generally higher because they might count individuals as members who do not consider themselves of that faith.

Various sources estimate that Sikhism has about 23 or 24 million followers, making it the fifth largest organized religion in the world. It is surpassed in numbers only by [Christianity](#), [Islam](#), [Hinduism](#), and [Buddhism](#). If one [defines the term "religion"](#) very inclusively, it is the ninth largest religion in the world, being fewer in numbers than secularists, and followers of Chinese traditional religion, African traditional religions and aboriginal faiths. ¹

The *Real Sikhism* web site estimates that about 21 million (89%) Sikhs live in the Punjab, India. About 400,000 (2%) live in North America, and 360,000 (2%) are in the UK. (2004 data)