



# Culture and Religion Information Sheet

## Sikhism



## Aim

**This information sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Sikh religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and not-for-profit community sectors to improve service delivery.**

## Introduction

Western Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for all religions are integral parts of our shared culture and are important underlying principles of multiculturalism and democracy.

There are a number of international treaties and national laws that recognise freedom of religion and belief as fundamental human rights, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948*, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966* and the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986*.

In Western Australia it is unlawful under the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* to discriminate against a person because of their religious conviction in certain areas of public life including employment, education, the provision of goods, services and facilities, in accommodation, clubs and in application forms

(see the Equal Opportunity Commission website <http://www.eoc.wa.gov.au/index.aspx>).

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Service providers and employers who recognise, value and promote cultural and religious diversity can address more fully the needs of their clients and staff, thus providing services based on good practice. Respecting the roles of religion in various cultures is part of courteous, ethical and professional behaviour, which promotes a just and equitable society.

## History of Sikhism in Western Australia

Sikhs are known to have arrived in WA in the early 19th century although it is probable that a greater number of them arrived during the second half of the century. Shiploads of camels were brought to Australia in the 1860s and, although their handlers were known as 'Afghans', there were Sikhs among them. For example, Pal Singh (clearly a Sikh by his name) was a camel owner who arrived in 1886 and lived in Wyndham in WA.

In 1898, 45 Perth Sikhs signed a petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies requesting better treatment and livelihood. However, the 1901 Census indicated that there were 261 Afghans in WA but no Indians, so it is likely that all Sikhs were listed as Afghans.

Many early Sikh settlers worked as camel handlers, while others travelled around WA selling wares. In 1932, a group of Sikhs were allocated a piece of land on the Canning River for use as a cremation ground after a dying Sikh man immolated himself, fearing that he would be buried.

The annulment of the White Australia Policy in 1973 saw increased opportunities for Sikh migration with Sikhs coming to WA from India, the UK, east Africa, Singapore, Malaysia and Fiji.

There are now three Sikh temples (called Gurdwaras) in WA—in Canning Vale, Bayswater and Bennett Springs in the Swan Valley. The saffron flag with a unique emblem called the Khanda (signifying righteous and truthful living in complete harmony within all communities) identifies these premises.



## Demographics

According to the 2011 Census, there are 4912 people affiliated with the Sikh religion in Western Australia, an increase of 3519 people, or 252.6 per cent, compared with the 2006 Census.

Between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses, the number of people in Australia who identified themselves as Sikhs increased by 45,867 people, or 173.5 per cent.

## Sikhism: background and origins

The Sikh religion is one of the world's youngest religions. It was founded in 1469 in Punjab, North India, by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, in response to a spiritual revelation. Nanak and his nine successors are known as 'gurus', which is a term for a spiritual guide or teacher.

Guru Nanak taught that true religion consists of always being mindful of God, meditating on the name and attributes of God and reflecting on God's power in all activities of daily life. Guru Nanak's followers became known as Sikhs (from the Sanskrit word shishya), which means disciple. The Holy Book, the 'Guru Granth Sahib', is the ultimate spiritual authority for Sikhs. It contains the teachings and devotional compositions written and recorded by the Sikh Gurus and some contemporary Hindu and Muslim saints. The Guru Granth Sahib is at the heart of Sikh worship and its presence lends sanctity to the Sikh place of worship, the Gurdwara.

The concept of Sikhism includes:

- ▣ universal acceptance of all humanity
- ▣ belief in one God
- ▣ the name of God is Truth: 'Sat Nam'
- ▣ equality of all persons irrespective of their caste, colour, gender, nationality and religion
- ▣ equality of the sexes is emphasised.

## Key beliefs

Sikhs believe that the 10 gurus were one with the divine being and each had divine attributes. The first guru is Guru Nanak Dev Ji and the 10th guru is Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The tenth guru anointed the Holy Book 'Guru Granth Sahib' as the living eternal guru of the Sikhs. The Holy Book is treated with the utmost reverence and respect.

The Sikh way of life is based on:

- ▣ Nam japna—remember God's name with every breath
- ▣ Kirat karni—work and earn by the sweat of the brow, live a family way of life and practise truthfulness and honesty in all dealings
- ▣ Vand ke chakna—share and live as an inspiration and support to the whole community
- ▣ control of kaam (desire), krodh (anger), lobh (greed), moh (attachment) and hankar (pride).

Sikhs believe that reincarnation (the cycle of life–death–rebirth) is for those who do not attain attachment to God during the human life cycle.

## Language and communication

- ▣ Nearly all Sikhs in WA are fluent in written and spoken English and Punjabi.
- ▣ The written script used by Sikhs is Gurmukhi.

## Names and titles

All Sikh males carry the surname of Singh (which means lion) and Sikh females carry the name Kaur (which means lioness/princess). In some cases the ancestral names are included after the surname.

Referring to a Sikh male as Mr Singh and Miss/Mrs Kaur is acceptable but it would be preferred that the full name is used when more than one Sikh is present.

## Body language and behaviour

Non-verbal communication has a powerful effect on relationships and effective service provision. Non-verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable or even offensive in another. Some of the sensitivities to be understood in this area include the following:

- For Sikhs, the head or turban is sacred. A Sikh's head or turban should never be touched or insulted in any way. This also applies to children.
- When visiting a Sikh temple (Gurdwara) the following protocols should be observed:
  - shoes must be removed
  - dress should be modest
  - a head covering should be worn
  - men and women sit separately
  - one should not sit with feet pointing towards the Guru Granth Sahib or the Holy Book
  - one should not sit with one's back to the Holy Book
  - mobile phones should be switched off or in silent mode
  - silence is preferred in order not to disturb others; whisper only if necessary
  - clapping is forbidden.

**It is Western Australian Government policy to provide competent interpreting and translating services to clients who are unable to communicate effectively in spoken or written English.<sup>1</sup>**

**Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone 131 450.**

1. The Western Australian Language Services Policy, 2008, Office of Multicultural Interests, Western Australian Government.

## Greeting

The following sensitivities need to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- Sikhs in Australia follow the normal handshake in greeting, although the traditional preferred way of greeting is with folded hands. This is especially the case when greeting a person of the opposite sex. The Sikh greeting is 'Sat Sri Akal' (God is the Truth).
- Sikh males or females who have family ties or are close to one another may embrace one another. Sikhs do not exchange a kiss on the cheek.
- It is customary for elders to place the palm of their hand on the head of the younger generation which is symbolic of affection and the transfer of love/blessings.
- Certain Sikhs may bow and touch the feet of elders as a gesture of respect of the elder's position at home or in society.

## Dress and appearance

Baptised Sikh males and females (known as Amritdhari Sikh) may wear the following five signs of their faith (known as the Five Ks):

- Kirpan** a small-sized sword placed in a shoulder belt (accepted by the WA Police Service as a symbol rather than a weapon)
- Kara** an iron bangle worn on the wrist
- Kachera** special underwear, akin to boxer shorts
- Kanga** a small wooden comb
- Kesh** a Sikh must not cut hair from his/her body from birth to death

An Amritdhari Sikh must not be asked to separate any of the Five Ks from his/her body. The cutting of hair or abandoning the wearing of the turban should not even be suggested to a Sikh male as these form an important part of the Sikh faith.

Each of the Five Ks has a special religious significance. The neatly tied turban over the unshorn hair represents a crown of spirituality while the Kara signifies bondage to Truth. Sikh youth normally wear a 'patka' (cloth) on their



head and with transformation into adulthood they start wearing a 'pugg' (turban). The colour of the turban is not normally significant except in the following:

- on occasions of death a white turban for males and a white 'chunni' or scarf for females may be used
- 'Gyani' or priests generally wear dark blue, black or white.

Observant Sikh females wear a 'chunni' (long scarf used for head covering) over their head and across their shoulders.

Sikhs do not wear motorbike or bicycle helmets over the turban as they interfere with the crown of spirituality. In Australia, exemptions from wearing helmets on religious grounds are only possible for those riding bicycles (push-bikes), not for riding motorbikes.

## Seating

No special seating arrangements are required for job or any official interviews.

At official functions, Sikhs prefer to be seated away from the bar and smoking area as Sikhism prohibits the use of cigarettes.

## Food, drink and fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. When hosting events where food is served, offer a selection of vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods on separate trays as a matter of good practice. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function.

The following issues relating to food, drink and fasting should also be understood:

- Observant Sikhs do not eat meat and do not consume alcohol.
- Sikhs who do consume meats prefer meat slaughtered with a single blow and not left to bleed to death.
- In multigroup functions it would be prudent to place beef or other meats in separate locations.
- Some observant Sikhs do not eat egg.

## Religious festivals and days of significance

A Sikh can worship at any time of the day or night but the expected prayer times are before sunrise and sunset and prior to going to bed at night. Generally a Sikh meditates ('Simran') on the Name of God by reciting His Name (the Magnificent Lord, Waheguru) even while working.

Each year there are a number of Sikh festivals, called Gurburbs, which are associated with the birth and death anniversaries of the Gurus. These include:

- The birthdays of the 10 Sikh Gurus: the birthdays of Guru Nanak Dev Ji (first Guru) and Guru Gobind Singh Ji (tenth Guru) and the martyrdom days of the fifth and the ninth Gurus are particularly significant. On these occasions Sikhs practise the 'Akhand Path'—the continuous (48 hours) reading of the Granth Sahib.
- The celebration of the five Sikhs baptised by the tenth Guru Gobind Singh: this is known as advent day of Khalsa (Baisakhi). This is also a special day that signifies the start of the wheat harvesting season and marks the Sikh New Year's Day.

## Counselling/interviews

It is appropriate for a female Sikh to speak to a female for interview or counselling purposes, however, if the situation permits and the person being interviewed agrees, it is preferable for a married woman to be interviewed in the presence of her husband or the eldest person in the family.

## Family and marriage

The varying family characteristics of religious groups should be appreciated.

- Whether living together or not, Sikh family members are expected to look after each other in time of need. The eldest person in the family is given the appropriate respect and his/her views are strongly considered when making decisions on family matters.
- Sikh women have equal status and are regarded as a significant part of the Sikh community. A woman receives utmost reverence for her role in the family and society. She has an equal right to grow spiritually and to attend religious congregations and recite divine hymns in the Gurdwara. She is also eligible to participate in and perform all ceremonies including baptism.

## Medical

Only in life-threatening situations should hair be removed from the body without consent from the individual or the family. In all other instances consent should be sought from the individual, if the person is able and an adult, or from the parents or family, if the person is a minor or incapacitated.

## Death and related issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly important for all religious communities.

- Only family members or close family friends generally touch a Sikh woman even when she is grieving over a death.
- The body should be handed over to the nearest family member a few hours prior to cremation. This allows sufficient time for the body to be washed, dressed and to have the appropriate religious prayers recited over it. Cremation should occur as soon as possible after death and this often results in a sense of urgency regarding funeral arrangements. Cremation occurs with family members in attendance and the ashes must be handed to the nearest family member to be later disposed of.
- During the official period of mourning (from 10–17 days following the cremation), the scriptures are read from beginning to end, either at the family home or at the Gurdwara.

- Elders and close associates may wear white (the mourning colour).

## Other sensitivities

Other cultural and religious sensitivities that need to be acknowledged and respected include the following:

- Observant Sikhs do not smoke.
- It is customary for Sikhs to cover their head in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib.
- Sikhs remove their shoes before entering the premises of the Guru Granth Sahib.
- No alcohol, cigarettes or meat are to be in the vicinity of Guru Granth Sahib and Gurdwara.
- Police, airport and similar searches are best performed by a person of the same sex.

## Further enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Office of Multicultural Interests with the support of the Sikh Association of Western Australia. For further information please contact the President/ Secretary or the resident priest of the Sikh Association of WA.

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