



AFFIRMING FAITH



SIKHISM WORKBOOK

Egale

 Rainbow Faith
and Freedom

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge that our work takes place on the traditional territories of diverse Indigenous Peoples, who have stewarded these lands for millennia. These lands, now known as Canada, are home to a rich tapestry of Indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions.

We acknowledge the enduring presence and contributions of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples to this land, and recognize their deep connection to the territories, waters, and resources.

We acknowledge the painful history of colonization, forced displacement, and cultural suppression that Indigenous Peoples have endured, and the ongoing impacts of these injustices.

We commit to honouring Indigenous rights, supporting reconciliation efforts, and fostering meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities based on mutual respect, understanding, and partnership.

May we all work together towards healing, justice, and a future where Indigenous Peoples are empowered to thrive and flourish across Turtle Island.



ABOUT

Egale Canada

Egale is Canada's national 2SLGBTQI organization working to improve the lives of 2SLGBTQI people in Canada and to enhance the global response to 2SLGBTQI issues. Egale achieves this by informing public policy, inspiring cultural change, and promoting human rights and inclusion through research, education, awareness, and legal advocacy. Our vision is a Canada, and ultimately a world, without homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and all forms of oppression so that every person can achieve their full potential, free from hatred and bias.

Rainbow Faith and Freedom

Rainbow Faith and Freedom (RFF) is a global movement to confront religious-based LGBTI Discrimination and improve the human and equality rights of LGBTI people everywhere. Decreasing and lessening the effects of religious-based LGBTI discrimination can, and will, make changing punitive laws easier and improve the lives of LBGTI people so they can be who they are, love who they want, and find safe and accepting places to practice their faith (worship).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. SIKHISM: OVERVIEW OF THE FAITH	7
1.1 Origins	8
1.2 Tenets: The Five Ks	9
1.3 Important Texts	10
1.4 Important Holidays	11
1.5 Places of Worship	11
1.6 Faithful Living and the Afterlife	12
1.7 International and Local Leadership Structures	13
1.8 Sources and Suggested Resources	14
2. SIKHISM: HISTORY AND STRUCTURE	15
2.1 Community Organizing for Social Justice	16
2.2 Sources and Selected Resources	18
3. SIKHISM: HISTORIC AND CURRENT STANCES ON 2SLGBTQI IDENTITIES	20
3.1 Formal Position	21
3.2 Worship and Same-Sex Marriage	21
3.3 Cultural Factors	22



3.4 Decolonization and Language Reclamation	23
3.5 Allies and Solidarity Connections	24
3.6 Sources and Suggested Resources	25
4. SIKHISM: DOS AND DON'TS	29
Do	29
Don't	31



1. SIKHISM: OVERVIEW OF THE FAITH

Sikhism (or Sikhi) is the fifth largest of the major world religions. It is also the newest, having been founded in the late fifteenth century. Many adherents practice it as a way of life free of ideology or dogma and refer to it as a way of life rather than a religion. Sikhism advocates equality, social justice, service to humanity, and tolerance for other religions. The essential message of Sikhism is always spiritual devotion and reverence of the Divine while practicing the ideals of honesty, compassion, humility, and generosity in everyday life.

In 2023, there are 30 million Sikhs in the world, about 90% of them living in the Punjab region of India, where they form about 2% of the national demographic. Sikhs are most commonly recognized by the colourful turbans worn both by men and women.¹ However, it is not imperative that all those who identify as Sikh wear the turban, or any of the other articles of faith (see Tenets). More men choose to wear the turban, while more women wear a dupatta (long scarf). It is increasingly common to see all genders with shorn hair and the only article of faith being the *karha* (bracelet).

Sikhs are monotheistic, believing that the one energy that made all is nameless, genderless, and formless. As such, it is often simply referred to as “the One”.

¹ Note that turbans are not exclusively worn by Sikhs. Turbans are also often worn by both Muslims and Hindus in that region of the world. The style and type of turban, however, can act as a visual identity marker of who is a Sikh. Further, Sikhs from different regions or affiliations may have a unique turban style or colour to distinguish themselves.



1.1 Origins

Sikhism (*Sikh* means “to learn”) was started at the end of the 15th century in the Punjab region of northern India by *Guru* (Teacher) Nanak. It developed as an egalitarian response and philosophical antidote to the tightly regulated and class-based practices promoted by the ruling religious ideologues of the day. Sikhs follow the teachings of Guru Nanak and the successive teachings of the nine Gurus who followed him, each shaping the mandates of egalitarianism and community service, while adding verses to Nanak’s poetry.

Nanak was born into a Hindu family at the advent of the expansion of the Muslim Mughal Empire into Punjab. The first emperor, Akbar, was tolerant of Nanak and the Sikhs and engaged in personal visits and conversations with the mystic. Successive leaders were less tolerant and increasingly saw Sikhs as a threat to their rule.

In 1606, Emperor Jahangir demanded that the 5th Guru, Arjan, make changes to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the expanding poetic text started by Nanak. Guru Arjan refused any alteration that ran counter to the philosophy of free egalitarianism espoused in the text and was executed for doing so. This militarized the Sikhs to protect their faith. They were left in relative peace by the Mughal rulers until Emperor Aurangzeb took the throne in 1658. Aurangzeb was a cruel and intolerant tyrant who, it is said, defied the Quran to force conversions to Islam. According to Sikh tradition, when they refused to convert, Aurangzeb ordered them to be tortured. The Sikhs refused to bow before him and began an armed campaign for freedom of expression. This spurred Aurangzeb to increase the methods and frequency of their torture. In an act of solidarity, many Hindu families volunteered their eldest sons to take up arms and become Sikhs to counter the tyranny.



In retaliation, Aurangzeb captured hundreds of Hindu women to be used as concubines by his court. The captured women were eventually freed by Sikh men and women on horseback as the conflict escalated.²

In the 17th century, Sikhs were persecuted by the reigning Mughal Empire, including through torture and executions. Guru Gobind Singh responded to this systemic violence by permanently militarizing Sikhs with the edict to always defend their faith. He forged the *Khalsa* (the Pure) as a group of men and women who would embody both Saints (in their devotion to the One) and Warriors (who would champion anyone facing injustice). This is when Sikhs took on the physical symbols of the initiation, the Five K's, that give Sikhs the unique appearance and ethos of Saint/Soldier that is carried to this day.³

1.2 Tenets: The Five Ks

The Five Ks (*panj kakaar*) are five articles of faith which all baptized (*amritdhari*) Sikhs are obliged to wear. The symbols represent the ideals of Sikhism: honesty, equality, fidelity, meditating on the One, and never bowing to tyranny.



1. **Kesh**: Uncut hair, usually tied and wrapped in a [turban](#).



2. **Kanga**: A wooden comb, usually worn under a turban to always also keep one's hair clean and well-groomed.

² In battle, Sikh women were equal to men, and fierce fighters like Mai Bhago were given commander status and are still revered to this day.

³ For more information on this chapter, see Encyclopædia Britannica. (n.d.). Sikhism. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sikhism> ; SikhiWiki. (n.d.). Guru Gobind Singh. Retrieved from https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Guru_Gobind_Singh ; SikhiWiki. (n.d.). Guru Arjan. Retrieved from https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Guru_Arjan.





3. **Kachera**: Cotton undergarments, worn by all genders; the *kachera* is a symbol of cleanliness. It is also historically appropriate in battle due to increased mobility.



4. **Kara**: An iron bracelet, a symbol of eternity, strength, and a constant reminder of the strength of will needed to keep hands away from any kind of unethical practices. All Sikhs wear this, regardless of baptism status.



5. **Kirpan**: An iron blade of variable size. In Canada, Sikhs can wear a small dagger, but in Punjab, they might wear a traditional curved sword from one to three feet in length. *Kirpan* is exclusively a weapon of defense and religious protection, used to serve humanity and to be used against oppression.

1.3 Important Texts

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is the sacred text of the Sikh community. It is comprised of 1430 pages of poetry structured as *shabads* (hymns) set to music composed in 31 *raags* (melodic structures). The tome is a celebration of all forms of life as equal creations of the Divine. The celebration of life is meant to be free of restrictive constraints such as buildings, rituals, or priesthood. All places are considered holy, with no ritual necessary, and there is no middleman authority needed to embrace the One. In addition to the contributions of the succession of Sikh Gurus, the book also has contributions from revered Hindu and Muslim poets.

It is worth noting that the *Guru Granth Sahib* contains no mention of homosexuality whatsoever.



1.4 Important Holidays

Major Sikh celebrations include:

- **Bandi Chhor Diwas** (Prisoners Liberation Day), celebrated in October or November.
- **Lohri**, which celebrates the birth of any children born within the past year, on or about January 14.
- **Vaisakhi**, which celebrates Sikh pride, on or about April 14.

Note:

The Sikh calendar is lunisolar, so the date on which a celebration falls in the Gregorian calendar can vary from year to year.



1.5 Places of Worship

Worship is conducted in, but definitely not restricted to *Gurudwaras* (Temples), which also act as community centres, schools, hostels, and kitchens.

Every Gurudwara has four doors, one facing each direction, as a symbol of welcome to anyone who wants to come in, regardless of religion. This was a revolutionary design feature at the time in which the tradition was created, since Hindu temples were run by the Brahminic priestly class and people of lower castes were excluded from entering sacred spaces.

Every Gurudwara has a meditation hall, where the Guru Granth Sahib is housed, as well as a community kitchen (*langar*) where anyone can eat for free or help prepare meals. Before Sikh Gurus put an end to the custom of eating together as equals, the rich sat on ornate seats to display their stature, while the poor were forced to squat.



Today, all sit on the floor within the Gurudwara as a way to establish visible equality. Many (but not all) baptized Sikhs are vegetarians. For this reason, all food served in the Gurudwara is vegetarian (but not vegan) to accommodate all. Food is donated by those who have it. Sikhs are mandated to share 10% of their income with those in need to whatever charity they choose.

1.6 Faithful Living and the Afterlife

Anyone who wishes to be a Sikh can become one by simply declaring it with the book of the Guru Granth Sahib as the only touchstone to follow. Sikhs are free to choose when to be baptized, if at all. The choice is left to the individual. The leadership of most, but not all, Gurudwaras are baptized Sikhs and tend to be more conservative than the average.

All Sikhs are mandated to perform public service (*seva*) and will often be found in areas of need, giving food and aid to anyone requiring it. *Seva* often takes the form of giving out food at a langar (“community kitchen”). It is considered a spiritual act, and many Sikhs will cover their heads (such as with a scarf or turban), both as a sign of respect and to differentiate it from other everyday acts of food serving.

For life relationships, Sikhism asks for all practitioners to follow the life of a monogamous householder (*Jeevan Gristhi*), which applies equally to same-sex as well as heterosexual relationships. *Jeevan Gristhi* discourages pre- and extra-marital sex and asks that every person strive for a monogamous life-long partnership. Remarriages are allowed after divorce or the death of a partner.

There is no heaven or hell in Sikhi, insofar as places of afterlife reward or punishment. Rather, both are seen as concepts present in the here and now. Heaven is an attainment of joy reached from embracing the everyday divine through doing good acts.



Hell is created by a state of imbalance where good acts are superseded by any of the “five drivers”, which can become vices when not actively controlled. These are: Pride (*ahnkaar*), Anger (*krodh*), Lust (*kaam*), Greed (*lobh*) and Attachment (*moh*). A Sikh is instructed to keep the five drivers under control and to focus instead on communing with the divine. Lust, for example, is not a sin, but a universal driver that is checked by adhering to preferred monogamy by all, including by the Gurus themselves. The afterlife is considered to be a reconnection with the same Universal Energy which created all life. Equating lust to homosexuality is most often the guiding force of homophobic criticism.

1.7 International and Local Leadership Structures

Every Gurudwara has a democratically elected leadership selected by the members of the congregation.

All Gurudwaras operated independently until 1925, when the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandakh Committee (SGPC), a central governing agency consisting of 175 elected representatives of Gurudwaras in Punjab, was formed. The SGPC operates out of the *Darbar Sahib* (Golden Temple), the most important and recognizable of Sikh shrines, located in Amritsar, Punjab. Its responsibilities include managing the security, financial, facility

maintenance, and religious aspects of all Gurudwaras, as well as keeping archaeologically rare and sacred artifacts, including weapons, clothes, books, and writings of the Sikh Gurus. Both men and women have held leadership roles within SGPC.

Representation of Sikhs living outside of Punjab is attained through an international advisory board, Global Sikh Council (GSC), based out of England. Member countries currently include Afghanistan, Australia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, Dubai, France, Germany, Holland, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Malaysia,



Mauritius, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Thailand, Tanzania, UK, Uganda, and USA.

A Gurudwara can be independently formed by any group of Sikhs. Any individual can perform any and all life ceremonies, including marriage, with no officiant necessary. This said, most congregations will put together resources and pay for *granthis* (priests, for lack of a better word) who live in the Gurudwara, manage it, and conduct all needed ceremonies.

It should be noted that the philosophy of Sikhism does not support a priesthood system, so individual exceptions to any and all edicts are common. Edicts are formed by elected individuals susceptible to the cultural biases that run counter to the philosophy of Sikhism and are regularly challenged. Previous successful challenges have taken on casteism and misogyny inherent in the SGPC. The hope is that more progressive Gurudwaras will challenge homophobic edicts that mandate same-sex marriages be kept out of the Gurudwaras and be restricted to civil unions.

1.8 Sources and Suggested Resources

BBC Religion – Sikhism (Web Page)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/>

Britannica – Sikhism (Web Page)

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sikhism>

SikhiWiki – Encyclomedia of the Sikhs (Website)

https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Main_Page

Sing K. (2004). *A history of the Sikhs*. Oxford University Press. (Book)

Singh P. (2000). *The Sikhs*. Knopf. (Book)



2. SIKHISM: HISTORY AND STRUCTURE

The first Sikhs arrived in British Columbia in 1904 as labourers in the railway, lumber, and farm industries. They came as single men and Canadian newspapers published their arrival as the “Hindoo Invasion”. Sikh women were not allowed entry into Canada until almost a decade later, when the first Gurudwara was established in Vancouver and the detained pregnant wife of the founder was finally released on humanitarian grounds.⁴

In 1907, 10,000 anti-immigrant protestors rioted in Vancouver due to the increasing numbers of labourers arriving to work the lumberyards and farms. In response, the Canadian government restricted travel for Sikhs and other South and East Asian immigrants. In 1914, a Japanese ship, the Komagata Maru, carrying almost 400 predominantly Sikh passengers to Vancouver, was starved and shot at before being turned back to return to India. This action caused a number of Sikhs to return to India, interrupting their migration to Canada. Despite this, the continuing need for a labour force alongside with new laws allowing women and children to immigrate alongside the men brought a new surge of Sikh immigrants to Canadian shores in the 1920s.

Today, there are over 800,000 Sikhs living in Canada. Most live in Ontario, BC, and Alberta. The majority of arrivals occurred after changes in Canadian immigration policies opened the gates to new immigrants in the 1960s and 70s.⁵

4 The Canadian Encyclopedia. (n.d.). Sikhism in Canada. In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sikhism>.

5 The Canadian Encyclopedia. (n.d.). Sikhism in Canada. In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sikhism>.



In large urban centres like Vancouver, Surrey, Toronto, and Brampton, Sikhs hold large public festivals to commemorate Vaisakhi on or around April 14. Vaisakhi is the festival marking the birth of Khalsa, the Punjabi word for both the Sikh community and a special group of initiated warrior Sikhs. The occasion is marked by a huge parade consisting of all Sikhs able to attend and a community feast open to anyone, including hungry or curious passersby.

Events like Vaisakhi parades are meant to bring visibility to Sikh presence in Canada and their

organization falls under the purview of a provincial Gurudwara Committee. The Ontario Gurudwara Committee (OGC) is a non-political organization that serves as an umbrella group for most of the Gurudwaras located in Ontario and Quebec. The OGC is committed to promoting social justice and solidarity, and has organized several events to support these causes, such as hosting a vigil for the victims of the tragic Sandy Hook shooting in the US. Additionally, the OGC also invites members of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis communities to participate in their open events.

2.1 Community Organizing for Social Justice

Sikhs have demonstrated inherent community mobilization skills in coming together to change laws prohibiting the turban in Canadian institutions. Today, the military, hospitals, and police forces across the country routinely accept the turban as part of their uniforms, except within the province of Quebec, where recent legislation has banned the wearing of any marker of religious affiliation by civil servants. Sikhs have pursued legal efforts to reverse this ban. Most recently, Sikhs have also mobilized to allow the turban to be worn in lieu of motorcycle helmets.



The *kirpan* (ceremonial dagger) has also become a more acceptable visible form of Sikh identity, as more and more Canadians recognize it as a symbol for social justice and as a mental catalyst for fighting against oppression and tyranny, wherever it may be.

Sikh and 2SLGBTQI communities merged in Orlando, Florida after the Pulse Nightclub mass shooting, when Sikhs representing the local Gurudwara were among the first on scene, consoling the families and survivors with food and comfort. This act of *seva* (altruistic service) was followed by a solidarity *seva* at the 519 Community Centre in Toronto, with Sikhs serving pink lemonade to the community gathered to grieve that tragedy.

Social justice efforts and *seva* increasingly find themselves converging, as Sikhs continue the tradition of bringing food to protests against injustice ranging from Black Lives Matter to Palestinian liberation. Sikhs representing agencies like Khalsa Aid are often the first to arrive on scene to perform *seva* in conflict

zones and after natural disasters. In BC, The Sikh Motorcycle Club came together to support Indigenous communities impacted by the recent findings of children's remains on residential school sites. In Ontario, Sikh communities have been finding ways to help support Northern Indigenous communities without access to clean drinking water.

In 2016, a young Sikh international student reached out to a South Asian LGBT group called Sher ("Lion") for help after being disowned and financially cut off by his family for being gay. Sher reached out to Khalsa Diwan Society, the largest and oldest Gurudwara in Canada, and a collaborative partnership ensued. The Society agreed with Sher's mandate for social justice and equality and invited them to march in the Vaisakhi parade, a pivotal first. This was seen as a small but significant step, as homosexuality was still illegal in India at the time (the Supreme Court legalized it in 2018). 2016 also saw another first with Alex Sangha chosen to be the first Sikh Grand Marshall for the Vancouver Pride Parade.



Justin Trudeau was the first ever Prime Minister to march at the Pride Parade and he was accompanied along the route with Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan, the first ever turbaned Sikh to hold that position. These other event firsts heightened Sikh visibility, making the parade particularly eventful for 2SLGBTQI Sikhs. In 2023, Toronto Pride held its first ever Punjabi stage that invited all to share in a uniquely Punjabi event, as opposed to the previous pan-Indian Bollywood-type of event that did not represent a distinct Sikh culture.

Economics and colonialism necessitated the migration of many members of the Sikh community over the past century, and most of those who arrived in Canada came with scarce resources. Necessity forced attention to survival and adaptation. It's only now that Sikhs in Canada have the financial security to begin setting deeper roots and are able to question and grow community concerns outside of that immediate need.

2.2 Sources and Selected Resources

Provincial Sikh and Gurdwara Councils

BC Sikhs – Facebook (Social Media Page)

<https://www.facebook.com/bcsikhcommunity/>

Gurdwara Maritime Sikh Society (Website)

<https://www.maritimesikhcommunity.ca/>

Ontario Gurdwaras Committee (Website)

www.ontariogurdwarascommittee.com

Newfoundland Sikh Society Gurdwara Sahib – Facebook (Social Media Page)

<https://www.facebook.com/NewfoundlandSikhSociety/>

Sikh Society of Manitoba Inc. (Website)

<https://sikhsocietyofmanitoba.com/>



Sikh Society of Saskatchewan – Facebook (Social Media Page)

<https://www.facebook.com/people/Sikh-Society-of-Saskatchewan/100069948981666/>

General Sources

Kathleen Wynne honoured at holy Sikh shrine despite same-sex marriage media controversy – Toronto Star (Online Article)

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/01/31/kathleen-wynne-honoured-at-holy-sikh-shrine-despite-same-sex-marriage-media-controversy.html/>

Ontario Gurdwaras Committee – Wikipedia.org (Web Page)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontario_Gurdwaras_Committee

Orlando's Memorial for Pulse Victims in Photos – The Baltimore Sun (Online Article) <https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcpnews-memorial-for-pulse-victims-in-photos-20160615-photogallery.html>

Sikh Holy Days and Observances – The Guibord Center (Online Article)

<https://theguibordcenter.org/faiths/sikhism/sikh-festivals-and-observances/>

The Story of Komagata Maru – Canadian Museum for Human Rights (Web Page) <https://humanrights.ca/story/story-komagata-maru/>



3. SIKHISM: HISTORIC AND CURRENT STANCES ON 2SLGBTQI IDENTITIES

Discussion and displays of sexuality in Sikhism are rare and only now beginning to emerge in common parlance, straight or otherwise. The first large-scale public discussions on 2SLGBTQI inclusion didn't happen until the 2000s, even though non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality have been on the radar from the inception of Sikhism.

From the openly gay Saints⁶ to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the 19th-century leader of the Punjab Empire, Sikh history has recognized the presence of homosexuality. Under Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule, Punjab extended all the way to Afghanistan, and he is still revered as the greatest Sikh leader of all time to come after the Gurus. He was known to have both male and female concubines. His court was one of open discourse and wide acceptance until it was brought to a murderous halt by the British Empire.

Snippets of surviving history suggest that literacy was almost 100% during his reign, and the diversity and inclusion that came from education were equally widespread.⁷ The British Raj did not approve of that spirit of equality and subsequently closed most Punjabi schools to girls and women. Sexuality became closeted and something to never be talked about, let alone displayed

6 Sanctity is a fundamental principle of Sikhism that emphasizes the importance of living a life of purity and righteousness, strictly following the Sikh code of conduct until death.

7 To learn more about Maharaja Ranjit Singh, see Kochhar, A. (2020). Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Pioneering Educator. Retrieved from <https://www.peepultree.world/livehistoryindia/story/people/ranjit-singh-educator>.



by anyone. Hijras, the Third Sex, who held revered prominence in all birth and wedding ceremonies, were forced into prostitution - if they were allowed to survive at all.⁸

3.1 Formal Position

Sikh *dharma* (faith) is a philosophy centered in equality and acceptance of all. Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th Guru declared that “the whole of humanity should be viewed as one.” The *Guru Granth Sahib* (holy text) makes no mention of homosexuality or of homophobia, despite there being a number of openly gay saints on the Indian subcontinent during the time that it was compiled. Tobacco and any other addictive drugs were prohibited and there are mentions that adherents should refrain from pre-marital or extra-marital sex, so it stands to reason that had there been any issue with homosexuality, it would have been included in the Granth. The fact that it was not included points to how inconsequential it was considered to be to the primary function of *dharma*, which is to unite a genderless soul to an equally genderless universal force. In the Punjabi language, *laavan* (wedding hymns) are also genderless.

3.2 Worship and Same-Sex Marriage

Gurdwaras are regarded as places where all are welcome to participate, and nobody is excluded if they follow the focus on spiritual meditation and community service. In practice, 2SLGBTQI Sikhs are free to enter and take part in all activities.

When the matter of same-sex weddings was brought up in 2005, the international governing body’s (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee

⁸ Hunter, S. (2019, June 17). Hijras and the legacy of British colonial rule in India. Engenderings. London School of Economics. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/06/17/hijras-and-the-legacy-of-british-colonial-rule-in-india>.



or SGPC) decision was to not allow same-sex marriage within Gurudwaras, but to acknowledge that people were free to have civil ceremonies if they chose. Currently, the matter of interfaith marriages performed in Gurudwaras is under similar discussion. As the discussions in communities widen to embrace 2SLGBTQI inclusion, it is inevitable that the elected representatives will take that to the SGPC to formally embrace a more progressive stance.

3.3 Cultural Factors

Although Sikh philosophy is liberal and all-encompassing, Punjabi and Indian dominant cultures are often extremely conservative. This often results in the seemingly incongruous promotion of homophobic perspectives while simultaneously promoting philosophical ideals of oneness, respect, and tolerance of all people.

Since there is no mention of homosexuality at all in the Guru Granth Sahib, interpretation of same-sex laws falls within the purview of the elected officials who rely on majority vote to implement any changes to common practices. 2SLGBTQI Sikhs are free to attend Gurudwaras of their choosing and participate in all existing rites without discrimination. When openly gay Ontario Premier, Kathleen Wynne and her wife, Jane Rounthwaite, went to Punjab to visit the Golden Temple, she was welcomed with the highest honour of a ceremonial robe and participated in cooking the communal food.⁹

The disparity between culture and philosophy makes it so that while some gay Sikhs face no homophobia motivated by Sikhism, others face actual physical threats to their safety. Both extremes hamper the visibility of Sikhs in 2SLGBTQI discourse, a fact that is slowly changing as more and more rainbow turbans come to the forefront. The invisibility of 2SLGBTQI people within the

9 4 SikhNet. (n.d.). Premier Kathleen Wynne honoured at Darbar Sahib despite media. Retrieved from https://www.sikhnet.com/news/premier-kathleen-wynne-honoured-darbar-sahib-despite-media-controversy?fb_comment_id=1007265046002641_1007512502644562.



Sikh community is compounded by racism against Sikhs within white-majority 2SLGBTQI communities.

3.4 Decolonization and Language Reclamation

The SGPC is comprised of people who grew up lacking the education available before the British colonization of the Indian subcontinent and remains steeped in the Victorian-era sensibilities that prevailed post-Partition. Decolonization is an arduous process made all the worse by the fact that the Indian government is still attacking Sikhs, as evident in the anti-Sikh genocide of 1984 and more recently, the Farmers' Protest in New Delhi. Almost all Sikhs in Canada have family back home still struggling for survival.

Punjabi radio talk shows in recent years have engaged in conversation on gay and trans rights and new words are being added to the dialogue at every turn, since many Punjabi speakers have no actual words to talk about these issues. Any words or terms that might have once existed in the language were decimated by the British who arrived in 1858 and condemned many cultural norms that deviated from their own Victorian Christian notions of acceptability. Any language or reference that might have survived the British exodus of 1947 were subsequently lost in the chaos and bloodshed of Partition, which saw twenty million people displaced, mostly in Punjab, and over a million deaths. Thus, history took a backseat to survival. LGBTQI people carrying the stories were either lost forever or were left in traumatic denial for self-preservation, ensuring that the generations following would be left scrambling to recover.



3.5 Allies and Solidarity Connections

The Farmers' Protest happened when social media made unlikely partnerships possible. Celebrities like Rihanna and Greta Thunberg tweeted in support of Sikh human rights and were warmly welcomed in allyship.

2SLGBTQI rights are low on the priorities of social justice challenges needed to advance the Sikh community for most, making the struggle for 2SLGBTQI acceptance and re-integration exceedingly slow. Thankfully, more and more Sikh community organizations are ensuring their spaces are safer for 2SLGBTQI people by promoting inclusive language and programming. Agencies like the [Punjabi Community Health Services](#) in Brampton are providing resource material supporting 2SLGBTQI people and their families.

The Sikh community may be entering the discussion late but it's making up for lost time in catching up. A small sampling of Sikh allyship and solidarity for 2SLGBTQI identities and

issues include:

- In 2005, the [World Sikh Organization](#) (WSO) supported the rights of 2SLGBTQI people when books about same-sex parents in Surrey schools stirred an unwanted debate.
- In 2005, when the orthodox Sikh clergy in India ordered Sikh MPs in Canada to vote against the same-sex marriage bill, then-Liberal MP Navdeep Singh Bains, a devout Sikh, defied the edict. The WSO supported his stand.
- Jagmeet Singh, leader of the federal NDP party, has openly marched in multiple Pride parades and has indicated that he fully supports 2SLGBTQI rights.
- Former B.C. Premier [Ujjal Dosanjh](#), who is of Sikh heritage, has consistently and vocally supported the LGBT causes broadly and within the South Asian community. Dosanjh defied the Sikh clergy by voting in support of same-sex marriage



as a Liberal MP in 2005.

- [Baljinder Narang](#), chair of the Burnaby Board of Education, is another example. A practicing Sikh herself, she spoke passionately about the rights of the LGBT community when they came under attack in her city.

Sikh voices supporting 2SLGBTQI identities and issues are amplifying and spreading.

3.6 Sources and Suggested Resources

LGBTQI Sikhs of Note

An Indian-American Queer Sikh CEO's Story – New Delhi Television (Online Article) <https://www.ndtv.com/blog/an-indian-american-queer-sikh-ceo-story-3041692/>

Bisexual Sikh man ties colourful rainbow turban to celebrate Pride – Global News (article) <https://globalnews.ca/news/5351384/sikh-pride-turban/>

How queer artist Param Sahib deconstructs masculinist tropes with style – Business Standard (Online Article) https://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/how-queer-artist-param-sahib-deconstructs-masculinist-tropes-with-style-120061201628_1.html/

Lilly Singh – Youtuber, author (Online Article) <https://www.vogue.in/news/content/lilly-singh-superwoman-bisexual-coming-out-experience-instagram-post/>

Mackenzie Kaur West- Influencer and educator (Web Page) <https://www.tiktok.com/@mackenziekaurwest>

Ravjoy Mehek Singh – Film and TV Director (Official Website) <https://ravjotmeheksingh.media/>



Raveena Aurora – Singer Songwriter (Web Page)

<https://atmos.earth/raveena-aurora-ashas-awakening-leads-with-love/>

Sikh Knowledge – Hip hop artist (Web Page)

<https://torontoist.com/2012/06/on-the-pride-stage-sikh-knowledge/>

Sikh Reality Show Celebrity Gets Hate ‘Offending’ Religion by ‘Being Gay’ – News18 (Online Article)

<https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/sikh-reality-show-celebrity-gets-hate-mail-for-offending-religion-by-being-gay-2324473.html/>

LGBTQI Sikh Community and Dedicated Service Organizations

GIRES (Gender Identity Research & Education Society)

<https://www.gires.org.uk/tranzwiki/groups/sarbat-sikh-lgbt-group/>

Punjabi and Queer Sikhs (Facebook Group) https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064191544650&paipv=0&eav=AfaKrJxmgP15Q1LkFcPggTqbg9s_yde5TuMQVE2bAGDahIRIraclbsU9L7FVOBq0akQ

Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS) – Leading with Conviction and Courage (Website) <https://pchs4u.com/>

Sarbat – LGBT+ Sikhs (Website)

<https://www.sarbat.net/>

Sher Vancouver – Charity for Queer South Asians and their friends (Website)

<https://www.shervancouver.com/>

The Queer Sikh Network (Website)

<https://queersikhnetwork.com/>



Suggested Reading

Anneliese Singh, PHD, LPC: The Queer & Transgender Resilience Workbook – Skills for Navigating Sexual Orientation & Gender Expression (PDF) https://www.scusd.edu/sites/main/files/file-attachments/the_queer_and_transgender_resilience_workbook_1.pdf/

Gaylaxy Magazine (Website) <https://www.gaylaxymag.com/>

Growing up Sikh and gay: ‘When I came out, my mom thought I was becoming a woman’ – Pink News (Online Article) <https://www.thepinknews.com/2016/02/29/growing-up-sikh-and-gay-when-i-came-out-my-mom-thought-i-was-becoming-a-woman/>

Hunter, S. Hijras and The Legacy of British Colonial Rule in India. – London School of Economics (Online Article) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/06/17/hijras-and-the-legacy-of-british-colonial-rule-in-india.>

I’m Sikh, Bisexual and a Dad – And Still Figuring Out What It Means to Be All Three – Huffington Post (Online Article) https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/gay-dads-bisexual-sikh-role-models_uk_5e4acc69c5b64433c61a2701/

In Conversation With Suhkdeep Singh, Founder and Editor-in-Chief Of Gaylaxy Magazine – Feminism in India (Online Article) <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/07/12/sukhdeep-singh-gaylaxy-magazine-interview/>

Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Pioneering Educator (Web Page) <https://www.peepultree.world/livehistoryindia/story/people/ranjit-singh-educator> .

Meet King Sunny B: Sikh LGBTQ+ Advocate & Influencer – We Are Sikhs (Online Article) https://www.wearesikhs.org/king_sunny_b

Power of Pride: Queer & Sikh (Video, Logo TV)) [Power of Pride: Queer & Sikh | Logo TV](#)



Premier Kathleen Wynne honoured at Darbar Sahib despite media – SikhNet (Online Article) https://www.sikhnet.com/news/premier-kathleen-wynne-honoured-darbar-sahib-despite-media-controversy?fb_comment_id=1007265046002641_1007512502644562

Sher Vancouver and Khalsa Diwan Unite LGBT and Sikh Communities for Vaisakhi – The Georgia Straight (Online Article) <https://www.straight.com/life/883751/sher-vancouver-and-khalsa-diwan-society-unite-lgbt-and-sikh-communities-vaisakhi-first/>

This Queer, Sikh, Transgender Man's Story of Transformation Will Inspire You – India Today (Online Article) <https://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/people/story/sikh-transgender-queer-man-manpreet-singh-virk-homophobia-transphobia-sexuality-lgbtq-lifest-1107071-2017-12-14/>

Transgender & Queer Sikhs Share Their Challenges & Hopes – Kaur Life (Online Article) <https://kaurlife.org/2021/06/14/transgender-queer-sikhs-share-their-challenges-hopes/>

With documentary Sab Rab De Bande Sukhdeep Singh surveys the discrimination faced by LGBTQ Sikhs in India – Sikh News (Online Article) <https://www.sikh-news.com/region/News/documentary-Sab-Rab-De-Bande-LGBTQ-Sikhs-in-India-10622>



4. SIKHISM: DOS AND DON'TS



Do



Do respect the turban.

Sikhs regard their turban as an extension of self and any disrespect to the turban is seen as an invitation to confrontation. It would be considered rude to reach out and touch it without invitation. Don't assume that a person is not a Sikh if they're not wearing a turban. Wearing one is a personal choice. Conversely, there are many people that wear turbans in South-East Asia who are not Sikh at all. The style of turban is the key identifier and if the observer is unsure and it is relevant, asking is always a good option.



Do respect the kirpan.

The dagger is a symbol of standing against oppression. Most kirpans are ornamental and have dull edges or are utilitarian in practice. Many Sikhs will wear one on a band underneath their clothing so that it's not visible at all. A larger kirpan is used ceremonially to stir the communal sweet offering of *parshad*, a confection of flour, butter, and sugar, given to all as a blessing after all religious ceremonies. The kirpan is never to be used as an offensive weapon.



Do ask if someone will need an open floor area if they request time or space to pray.

Meditation and prayer are done sitting barefooted on the floor, on a rug or mat.





Do be sensitive to cultural trauma.

Many in the Sikh community are dealing with ongoing generational grief and trauma from the violence of Partition and then from the government-sanctioned mob killings of 1984. Know that almost every Sikh you will meet has had family affected by both. Respect that most are still unable to talk about either of these with people who have not experienced it.



Do provide the possibility of an extended absence after major milestone events.

The *akhand paath* is a three-day continuous prayer ceremony where the entirety of the *Guru Granth Sahib* is read aloud and followed by ceremony and feast to commemorate births, deaths, weddings, and other milestone celebrations such as graduations and new homes or businesses.



Do ask if someone needs any personal time for attending a life event.

Weddings are usually a week-long affair and require the participation of multiple family members. Sikhs who are connected to their families will often take time away to participate. Sikh cremations happen as soon after death as possible and there is no official grieving period. Some will perform a three-day long prayer ceremony that may also be done for other occasions, such as moving to a new home or a wedding or graduation. The manner of observance for these rites and events is entirely up to the individual.



Do provide access to water if offering space for ceremonial purposes.

Sikhs see water that has been prayed over as holy and any water in that state is called *amrit*.



Don't

 **Don't assume that a Sikh will not practice other faiths in conjunction with and without losing their own.**

The belief that all forms of religion lead to the same source means that Sikhs can be found sharing space in churches, temples, and mosques in respect of other paths.

 **Don't waste food or throw it away.**

Put on a plate only what will be completely eaten. Sikhs consider food to be a gift from Waheguru, and by not wasting food, Sikhs are practicing seva (selfless service) and ensuring that the food is used to feed those who need it the most. For these two main reasons, wasting food is considered a sin in Sikhism.

 **Don't share utensils or glasses.**

Most Sikhs will not eat or drink something that someone else has placed their mouth on because it is considered unclean and impure.

