

## FAMILY LIFE AMONG SIKHS



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### Introduction

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The Sikh religion began with the preaching of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in the Punjab (also transcribed Panjab) region of India round about 1499. It is a distinct revelation with its own revealed scriptures, beliefs, values and ceremonies. It has some 16 million members of whom about 2 million live outside India. The British Sikh population is approaching 500,000.

### Sikhism's main tenets are:

- : God, the timeless One or Being Beyond Time, (*Parmeshur/Akal Purukh*) is one and beyond gender but immanent in the universe which is the result of an ongoing process of creation. So God is also called *Karta Purukh*, the Creator. This One Reality is truthful and loving and the source of grace which transforms the lives of those who seek spiritual liberation.
- : There is one humanity in which gender, race and caste should not cause division, for everyone is a child of the One.
- : As people are equal there are no priests. As the world is the product of a loving

God there is no belief in ritual purity or pollution; asceticism possesses no virtue and the life of humanity in community and as a family member is affirmed.

Membership of the Sikh community is usually initially by birth. However, there is evidence that in the early period of the religion there was a form of initiation based upon drinking water which had been poured over the Guru's foot. In 1699 Guru Gobind prescribed a new ceremony which brought Sikhs into the family of the Khalsa and required them to keep a disciplined spiritual life and be prepared to use force, if necessary, to oppose injustices against anyone, not only Sikhs. Not everyone takes this *amrit* ceremony. Numbers are uncertain as no records are kept, but it may be less than 50% of Sikhs, certainly in the U.K .

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### Sikhism is a family religion:

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This sentence can be understood in two ways. First, emphasis is laid upon being a member of a human family. Secondly, it might be said that Sikhs regard themselves as one large extended family at least ideally. In practice there may be tensions and disagreements but passages from the Guru Granth Sahib regu

larly remind Sikhs that humanity is One. Being part of that humanity the Sikh community and individual families within it should also be united.

All the Gurus, with the exception of Guru Har Krishan, who died at the age of eight, were married men. They affirmed positively the worth of family life and repudiated that of the hermit in such words as these:

The One who created the world pervades it.

Do not look for the True One far away. Recognise the Word (the Divine Spirit) dwelling in every heart. (Guru Granth Sahib 581)

There was no need, therefore, as ascetics did, to go to the forest in search of God. God could be found at home. Guru Amar Das argued that the householder life was actually better than that of those who had renounced the world:

Family life is superior to the ascetic life because it is from householders that ascetics meet their needs (i.e. by begging)!  
GGGS 586

The householder life must be characterised by certain qualities, Guru Nanak said:

He alone is a householder who checks his passions and begs from God meditation, hard work and self restraint. The householder who gives all he can to the poor is as pure as the river Ganges (GGGS 952)

It is within the daily round of domestic life and responsibility that God is to be experienced. Hence passages in the Guru Granth Sahib which describe God as 'father and mother'.

The Hindu tradition speaks of four stages of life that a man passes through in journeying

towards spiritual liberation, *moksha*, Sikhs reject these *ahsramas*. The Gurus taught that every Sikh should be a householder, *grihasthi*. In this stage, they should realise all the other stages.

As Guru Nanak taught:

"Contemplation of the True One brings enlightenment which enables one to live detached even in the midst of life's hurly burly. Such is the greatness of the True Guru that through divine grace and guidance one can attain liberation even while surrounded by sons and wife (GGGS 661).

This is not to be understood as a sexist remark or to suggest that families can be a nuisance! It is a realistic recognition that the Indian peasant with many mouths to feed might find little time for spiritual development. The Guru is saying that it can be done and that the Sikh should not try to find excuses for deferring the cultivation of meditation and service, as well as hard work which is a necessity, but which Sikhism makes into a virtue. Consequently, once sons and daughters have completed their education, the Sikh family might begin to discuss their marriage.



Sikh Marriages in common with most marriages in India, including Christian, are usually arranged by the family. One reason for this is perfectly obvious. Friendships across the sexes have not been and often still are not part of Indian life. In a country where there is apparently not a word in its many languages to describe a friendship free from sexual

content between men and women, it is not surprising that marriages are arranged. Were it not so, in traditional society a couple would never meet! The nature of family life is the other reason for arranged marriages. The extended family or joint family is the norm in India and therefore among Sikhs. When a man marries it is to a woman from a neighbouring village who belongs to the same occupational group. She would join him in the village. Girls, likewise, would marry men from other villages and go to live with their families. When a family of grandparents, the sons and wives, their grandsons who may also be married, live together perhaps under the same roof and sharing the same hearth and kitchen, it is important that its members should be compatible to the greatest possible degree.

However, arranged marriages and extended families are not of the essence of Sikhism. Love marriages can be equally Sikh. Outsiders who deplore the arranged marriage system ought to take the time to understand it before they encourage British children of South Asian origins to adopt western ways. Often they are doing no more than exposing young people to life in a cultural no-man's land and encouraging ways of life which cannot always be commended as successful!

When parents become grandparents they are likely to modify their behaviour and change their lifestyle. They will of course, enjoy the company of their grand children and spend hours watching television, especially Indian films, but those who are devout will spend more time in the room of their house set aside for the Guru Granth Sahib, 'Babaji's' room' as they call it, if there is one. If not they may stay in their bedroom for long periods reading from small anthologies of the scriptures, *gutkas*, and meditating. The gurdwara becomes a place which they visit daily for many hours. There they can meditate and meet old people like themselves and reminisce about

life back in Punjab.

Language often indicates where cultural strengths and weaknesses lie. In English there is nothing beyond the word 'cousin' other than derivatives such as second cousin to express relationships. Punjabi has many. There are two words, for example, for 'father's brother' depending on whether the brother referred to is younger or older than the father. Hierarchy in Indian families is very important and at a young age a child will learn the appropriate kinship terms and the conduct which is expected when dealing with the relative.



Young girls will know that they can tease their sister's husband's younger brother but that they must be respectful to his older brother if he has one. The husband too will know how to behave in different circumstances. In the presence of his older brother he will be expected to be deferential, even though he may be middle aged. One particular example of the precise meaning of kinship names might be given to demonstrate what has been described above. An aunt might be called *masi* if she is mother's sister; *mani is* she is mother's brother's wife; *bua* if she is father's sister; *chachi* if she is father's younger brother's wife; *tai* if she is father's elder brother's wife. 'Ji' is often added when more respect is being conveyed, for example, '*taiji*'. Sometimes in Britain and other countries of the dispersion, these terms are not known and a child may talk about 'Portsmouth uncle' to distinguish him from another in Birmingham, but many second generation Sikhs do know the appropriate names and take a pride in such knowledge and in behaving as expected.

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## The Cultural Roles of Men and Women

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In traditional homes it is still customary for the men to sit down and be waited on by the women who will only eat when the men have finished their meal, especially if there are guests to be entertained. Daughters will serve the food the other women have cooked. If there are only sons the youngest of them will become an 'honorary daughter', if such a term can be used in an Indian context, and serve the men. Having said this, it must be added that there are Sikh households where the family sits down at table together and its male members take a hand in preparing the meal and washing up.

Given that traditional domestic life is so hierarchical, within this framework the Sikh extended family is a tremendously successful social security mechanism. For the vast number of people in India there is no social support system. In their old age parents depend on their sons to maintain them. That remains a reason for having large families and rejoicing at the birth of a boy more than a girl. A girl will marry and leave her home for another, probably accompanied by a considerable dowry. She is a liability from birth until her wedding day. In Punjabi she is described as being *paraya dhan*, the property of others. This explains but does not justify female infanticide, still occasionally practised by some Sikh families in India, or bride deaths because of disagreements over dowries. The modern illegal practice of amniocentesis to discover whether a child is female and, if so, the use of abortion, is only the latest method of restricting the female population. This is in stark contradiction to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. As long ago as the sixteenth century Guru Amar Das said 'Cursed is he who kills a daughter' (GGS 1413). The murder of any one as well as the use of dowries is also specifically prohibited

by the Code of Discipline which all initiated Sikhs must keep. Contraception, however, is permitted.

The family puts members through professional training, cares for its sick, lends money so that recourse to the British mortgage system or the pernicious Indian money lender can often be avoided, and generally assists kinsmen in need. Pride (*izzat*) is very important in Punjabi culture. Family pride and its feared opposite, shame, play a great part in social behaviour. A family which has to call in social workers to help with a domestic crisis, a teenager running away from home, for example, will lose face in the community. South Asian families are supposed to be capable of sorting out their difficulties without recourse to outside agencies.

There are three domestic ceremonies which Sikhs observe in a distinctive manner. These relate to the birth, the naming of a child and marriage.



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## The proper behaviour of Sikh children

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Tradition prescribes a code of conduct for children which can still be found in western Sikh communities. Children should not offer their opinions in the presence of their elders or contradict them. 'Look at me when I am speaking to you' is a usual request, or demand, when a British teacher is reprimanding a pupil, whereas eye contact between teacher and student is a great form of rudeness in South Asian society. Children and women

should look down, not up! Personal decision making is not easily compatible with the extended family. A family in Punjab which owned a farm and several businesses decided that their son should become an accountant – why, they asked, should other people know about their finances?

It is not long ago that it was expected of children (and offspring remain children as long as parents and other elders live!) that they should bow in front of grandparents and other senior members of the family and touch their feet. *Mutta Tekhna* may be less common in the west than in India and more a voluntary act of politeness and respect than a requirement, but the practice may still be found. It says much more about the status of elders. Cultures change and the opposite of these situations can often be found. (Sikhs should not be the subject of stereotyping) especially as most parents of Sikh children living in Britain were probably born here; but they too have parents who may be severely critical of the way in which their grandchildren are being reared! (not an exclusively south Asian phenomenon!).

### Questions for discussion

- (a) How do Sikh family values compare with those of the Catholic Church?
- (b) Does the information provided in this paper help you to explore your own Catholic faith more deeply?
- (c) Is there a Sikh community near you? In a Sikh place of worship (*gurdwara*) the family aspect of the Sikh community is expressed through *langar* (free kitchens) and *karah parshad* (shared symbolic but non-sacramental food). Look out for these if you can attend an act of worship. (You will be most welcome but women should wear long skirts or trousers as everyone sits on the floor, and should cover their shoulders, and do not take cigarettes or tobacco into the *gurdwara*). You will not be expected to participate, though a respectful bow towards the scripture will be well received, but can watch and enjoy the social gathering afterwards.

### Further reading

Teach Yourself Sikhism: W. O. Cole, Hodder and Headline 1995.

The Name of My Beloved: Nikky – Gurinder Kaur Singh, HarperCollins, 1996.

*This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series "Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" and this further series on "Family Life" offer useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.*

*The family is the original cell of social life where people first learn to talk and listen to each other. The health of society depends on the health of family life. It is hoped that this series will promote the value of family life and help families of different Faith traditions to become better acquainted for the good of society.*

*The Committee is grateful to Dr Owen Cole for this contribution.*

**+ Charles Henderson  
Chairman**

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