

Adapted from a lesson by
Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago
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California Three Rs Project

Sikhism in America Lesson Activity

History-Social Science Content Standards:

6.5.6 Describe ... the political and moral achievements of the emperor Asoka.

12.3.3 Discuss the historical role of religion and religious diversity.

12.5.1 Understand the changing interpretations of the Bill of Rights over time, including interpretations of the basic freedoms (religion, speech, press, petition, and assembly) articulated in the First Amendment and the due process and equal-protection-of-the-law clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Procedure:

Step 1:

Project the question below for students to think about as they come into the room.

All schools should have a No Weapons Allowed policy to protect the safety of the students. There should be no exceptions.

Divide the front of the room into three sections or area marked by signs such as...

Strongly agree

Undecided

Disagree.

Ask students to stand under the sign that best represents their point of view. Within these groups ask them to discuss their reasons or give examples for their ideas.

Step 2:

Ask students to return to their seats and pose the question...

What were the critical issues in deciding your positions?

Record these issues on the board. Students should say something about the school providing a safe environment for students as a paramount concern. However, the issue of what constitutes a weapon needs to be considered closely. Ask students to list what they would consider a “weapon” and record this on the board.

Step 3:

Build background information:

Tell students that the issue of public safety and the Sikh religion became a flashpoint in California in the 1990s after some schools adopted a zero tolerance policy on weapons. Sikh students were prohibited from bringing their sacred dagger or kirpan to school. Several school districts had to deal with the issue and finally it was brought to court.

Ask students to read the scenario or read it together as a class and clarify any issues or questions.

Step 4:

Rajinder's parents and parents of other students come to the school board. Rajinder's parents want the school board to rule that it is OK for him to wear the kirpan at school. Other parents want the school board to rule that all weapons should be banned no matter what because they fear for their children's safety.

The school board decides that in order to make a fair decision they need to learn more about Sikhism.

To do this they asked for experts to research Sikhism and present testimony to them and the parents. To prevent bias they have asked that only academic sources be used.

Divide the class into 6 groups:

- one expert group for each of the three articles on Sikhism
- one smaller group to represent the Sikh parents. This group should be strong students because they will read and respond to the questions for all three articles
- one group to represent the school board and district administrators
- one group to represent the parents of the non Sikh students.

Expert Groups:

Assign each one of the three articles on Sikhism to read and develop a report to present as part of their testimony to the Board. Individually or in pairs, students read and answer the questions for the article they have been assigned. As a whole group they select the most important information to share to the school board and parents.

Rajinder's Parents:

They will read all three articles and submit a deposition or a written opinion backed by logical reasons. Their purpose will be to base their opinion statement on the doctrine of Sikhism and their rights as American people to live according to those doctrines. Use *Religious Liberty and Public Schools*

http://archive.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/faqs.aspx

If students are unfamiliar with the First Amendment.

Other Parents:

These parents will look at examples of school and social violence in their communities and across the nation. They will look at the role of government and schools to create safe environments for students. If possible, provide this group of students a copy of the district behavior and dress codes.

School Board and Administrators:

This group needs to become familiar with First Amendment law related to religion. A good place to begin research is *Religious Liberty and Public Schools* http://archive.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/overview.aspx Particularly note the subsections on student religious practice, and schools and religious communities.

The School Board and Administrators group also needs grounding in school law related to weapons on campus. A good site to start research is the California Department of Education site on School Safety <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/zerotolerance.asp> Particular attend needs to be given to the sections on Zero Tolerance.

Step 5:

Set up a Mediation Hearing Process with the Teacher as Facilitator. The Facilitator first explains that the roles of government are sometimes in conflict with each other. In this case there is a conflict between freedom of religion which is guaranteed in the First Amendment and the need for government to protect “domestic tranquility” or peace among the people, and the “common defense” or safety of the people which are roles outlined in the Preamble of the Constitution.

To resolve this conflict, both roles need to be considered by the administrators and School Board. As a result, the Board will listen to testimony and hear depositions read from all groups. Each will receive 3 minutes to share its findings and positions. The groups will present in the following order:

- Expert Group 1 – Overview of Sikhism
- Expert Group 2 – Beliefs and Doctrines of Sikhism
- Expert Group 3 – Sacred and Ceremonial Objects of Sikhism
- Non-Sikh Parents
- Sikh Parents
- School Administrators

Step 6:

The Facilitator requests that the groups rearrange themselves into mixed groups including one person from each expert group, one non-Sikh parent, one Sikh parent, and one school administrator. Ask each group to find at least one area or issue in which they agree. Write this up and deliver it to the Facilitator.

The Facilitator collects all the responses and posts them or rewrites them legibly on a large board or screen for all to see.

The Facilitator then leads a public discussion among the Administrator-School Board group members. The goal is develop a policy that resolves the dispute in a manner that will allow them to perform their conflicting duties to protect the safety of students and at the same time preserve the religious rights of students and parents.

Step 7:

Debrief – This lesson is based on a 1994 California case. Read the case and how it was resolved. Compare the court resolution to the student resolution.

Evaluation:

Students write a three paragraph essay arguing for or against the court resolution of the case giving their reasons from the most important issues that they learned.

Scenario

Fifth grade Rajinder Singh Cheema was playing basketball on the school playground. He had the ball and jumped up toward the hoop aiming for the basket. His shirt slid up. Under his shirt was a small knife hanging strapped to his chest in its case. The California school had a firm rule that no weapons were allowed on campus.

When the principal asked him why he had brought the knife to school, Rajinder explained that it is part of his religion. Rajinder was a Sikh, a religion founded in India 500 years ago. There are about 10,000 Sikhs in the U.S.

The knife (called a kirpan) symbolizes the religious duty to help people in need. It's a sacred symbol. When Rajinder was baptized, he was told not to pull out the knife and never to hurt anyone. The kirpan, a curved, dull-edged dagger worn in a case, hangs around Rajinder's neck under his clothing. The kirpan is supposed to remind the Sikhs of their religious duty to defend people who can't defend themselves. It is about as sharp as a dull knife.

The principal is in charge of enforcing school rules. The safety code says that no one may bring a weapon to school. The purpose of the rule is to help keep the school peaceful and safe for everyone. Many parents are worried that their children could be hurt if weapons are allowed in school.

The principal turns to the leaders including the School Board of his district.

Source:
"Sacred Blade at Heart of School Dispute"
Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago
VOICE (Violence Prevention Outcomes in Civic Education)

Source:
ReligionFacts
<http://www.religionfacts.com/sikhism/beliefs.htm>

Sikhism

Key Vocabulary

- Avatar – God or representation of God in visible form on earth
- Disciple – follower of a wise teacher or religious leader, sikh
- Guru – wise teacher or spiritual leader
- Karma – law of action where good acts result in good effects and bad acts bad effects
- Reincarnation – rebirth of a soul in a new body
- Transmigration – process based on karma by which a soul passes into a different body

Overview of Sikhism

The word "Sikhism" derives from "Sikh," which means a strong and able disciple. There are about 23 million Sikhs worldwide, making Sikhism the 5th largest religion in the world. Approximately 19 million Sikhs live in India, primarily in the state of



Punjab. Large populations of Sikhs can also be found in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Sikhs are a significant minority in Malaysia and Singapore, where they are sometimes ridiculed for their distinctive appearance, but respected for their work ethic and high education standards.

Sikhism emerged in 16th-century India when there were many conflicts between the Hindu and Muslim religions. It was somewhat influenced by reform movements in Hinduism as well as some Sufi Muslim influences. While Sikhism reflects its cultural context, it developed into a unique movement in India. Sikhs regard their faith as an authentic, new divine revelation.

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak Dev who was born in 1469 to a Hindu family. After four journeys to neighboring areas to study, Guru Nanak preached to Hindus, Muslims and others, and in the process attracted a following of Sikhs (disciples).



Guru Nanak

Religion, he taught, was a way to unite people, but in practice he found that it set men against one another. He particularly regretted the hostility between Hindus and Muslims. Guru Nanak's most famous saying is, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow the path of God."

Sikhs retain the Hindu doctrine of transmigration, where the character of a soul from a previous life is imprinted on the new one. They also kept the law of karma, the idea that the results of actions come back to the person who does them. Guru Nanak advised his followers to end the cycle of reincarnation by living a disciplined life – that is, by moderating selfishness and sensuous delights, to live in a balanced worldly manner, and by accepting ultimate reality. Thus, by the grace of Guru (Gurprasad) the cycle of reincarnation can be broken, and the Sikh can remain in the Love of God. Guru Nanak taught that salvation does not mean entering paradise after a last judgment, but is a union and absorption into God. Sikhs do not believe in a heaven or hell. Sikhs also reject the Hindu belief in incarnations (avatars) of God, believing instead that God makes his will known through the Gurus.

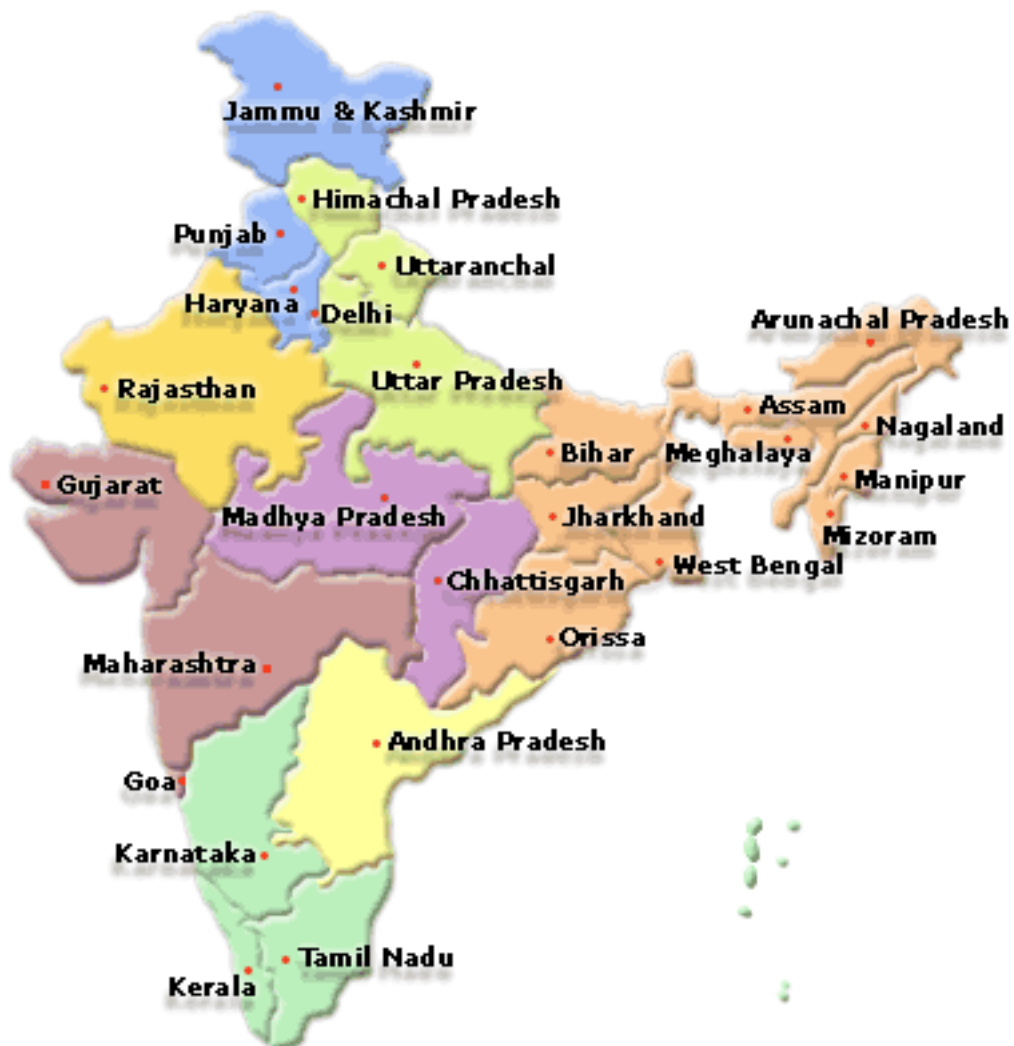
The most easily observable Sikh practices are the wearing of the turban and the Five Ks (see below). Sikhs also pray regularly and meditate by repeating God's name, often with the aid of rosary beads. Sikhism rejects the Hindu notion of the four stages of life, teaching instead that the householder is the ideal for all people. A Sikh aims to live a life that balances work, worship and charity. Community is emphasized, and the Sikh temple (gurdwara) is the center of Sikh communal life.

Sources

1. John Bowker, ed., *World Religions* (DK Publishing, 1997).
2. "Ceremonies and Festivals." Sikhs.org. <http://www.sikhs.org/fest.htm#gurpurbs>
3. "Sikh Festival Dates 2004 and 2005." infoplease. <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0777467.html>

Questions and Activities to Build Understanding

1. What does sikh mean?
2. When and where did Sikhism begin? (locate on the map)
3. Who was Sikhism's founder?
4. Compare and contrast the beliefs of Sikhism and Hinduism on the accompanying venn diagram.



Beliefs and Doctrines of Sikhism

Vocabulary

- **Dharma** – religious duty
- **Gurudwara** (gurdwara) – Sikh temple
- **Monotheistic** – belief in one God
- **Samsara** – rebirth into a new life
- **Sanction** – moral judgment
- **Temporal** – worldly

Religious Authority

The ultimate source of authority and doctrine in Sikhism is the sacred book, the *Adi Granth*. In the event of disputes, a council is convened at the Akal Takht ("Throne of the Timeless"), a building facing the Harimandir temple in Amritsar. Amritsar, a city in India, is the spiritual and cultural center of the Sikh religion. Rulings of this council carry spiritual sanction.

God

Sikhism is monotheistic, strongly emphasizing belief in one true God. Guru Nanak used the Hindu mystic syllable *om* as a symbol of God. He added the qualifications of God as one and creator, resulting in the *ik om kar* symbol, as below:



Sikhism forbids the representation of God in images and the worship of idols.

The **Khanda** (*khaṇḍā*), shown below, is one of most important symbols of Sikhism alongside the Ik Onkar. The khanda is like a "coat of arms" for Sikhs. It is a combination of three symbols, represented by three different items. It is commonly found on the *Nishan Sahib* or flag of the Sikhs, anywhere in a Gurudwara (Sikh temple). There are three different items used in a *Khanda*, which also have a symbolic meaning:



- A double-edged sword called a Khanda in the centre
- A Chakkar which is circular
- Two single-edged swords, or kirpans, are crossed at the bottom and sit on either side of the Khanda and Chakkar. They represent the two characteristics, one being Miri (Temporal power) and the other, Piri (Spirituality).

In the symbol the sword to the left represents truth, and the sword to the right represents the willingness to fight for what is right or dharma (religious duty). The circle in the middle means that there is only one God, never beginning and never ending. The Khanda

represents knowledge of God, the Chakkar represents the eternal nature of God and oneness of humanity, the two swords represent Miri (political sovereignty) and Piri (spiritual sovereignty).

Karma and Reincarnation

Sikhism retains the general Hindu conception of the universe and the doctrine of *samsara*, or rebirth, based on karma. Human birth is the only chance to escape *samsara* and attain salvation.

Khalsa and State

Especially after conflict with the Mughal empire in Sikh history, religion and politics have been closely associated in Sikhism. Establishment of a Sikh state is a matter of religious doctrine, and all services end with the chant, "*Raj karey Ga Khalsa*" (the Khalsa shall rule).

Sources

1. "Sikhism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service, Feb. 2005. <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?tocId=9105865>>.
2. John Bowker, ed., *Cambridge Illustrated History of Religions* (Cambridge UP, 2002).

Questions and Activities to Build Understanding

1. What is the source of doctrine in Sikhism?
2. How are disputes about doctrine resolved?
3. Describe the Sikh understanding of God.
4. How is God represented to worshippers?

5. Draw the khanda and explain what each part represents.

Picture	Explanation

Sikh Sacred and Ceremonial Objects

Vocabulary

Guru – spiritual leader or teacher

Hindi – language in India, that came from the ancient language of Sanskrit

Khalsa - community of baptized Sikhs.

Prostrate – lie face down, as in submission or adoration:

Guru Granth Sahib



The most sacred object in Sikhism is the **Guru Granth Sahib** (also called the **Adi Granth**), the Sikh holy book. Unlike the New Testament or the Bhagavad-Gita, which are often carried around, dog-eared and placed on a shelf with other books, there are strict rules and procedures for handling the Adi Granth. For this reason, most Sikhs keep a smaller manual at home containing the main passages from the Adi Granth used in daily prayers.

The tenth and last human Guru or spiritual guide, Guru Gobind Singh, designated as his successor the holy book of Sikhism as the enduring and living Guru. Accordingly, the Guru Granth Sahib is treated with the same respect one would show a human Guru.

The Guru Granth Sahib is kept under a canopy and on a throne, covered in decorative cloths (rumalas) at night, and a chauri (whisk) is waved over it while it is being read. When entering the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, one must be barefoot, have his or her head covered, and prostrate before the book. When moved, the book is wrapped in cloth and carried on someone's head as a sign of its honored status.

The Adi Granth is printed in Gurmukhi script, a form of Hindi dating to the middle ages. The pages often have ornate decorations, but it is a fundamental principle of the Sikh faith that Truth is much more important than ritual and only what is written in the book really matters.

Chauri

As mentioned above, a whisk is waved over the Guru Granth Sahib whenever it is read. This whisk is called a chauri and is usually made of yak tail hair or artificial fiber, set in a wooden or metal holder. The use of the chauri derives from the practice of retainers keeping dignitaries cool with a whisk or fan, which became a symbol of sovereignty and honor.



Five Ks

When Guru Gobind Singh established the Khalsa in 1699, he asked all Sikhs to wear five symbols expressing their allegiance to the new Sikh community. These five symbols are known as the five Ks.

Kesh is uncut hair on the head and body, symbolizing acceptance of God's will. This gave rise to the distinctive Sikh turban, which arose as a way to keep the long hair clean and tidy.



Kachh is a pair of white cotton shorts worn as an undergarment. It is practical in battle, and therefore symbolizes moral strength and chastity.



Kara is a steel bracelet symbolizing responsibility and allegiance to God.



Kangha is a wooden comb that represents personal care and cleanliness.



Kirpan is a steel dagger, a symbol of resistance against evil and defense of truth.

Nishan Sahib

The Nishan Sahib ("respected emblem") is the Sikh flag. It is triangle-shaped, bright orange or saffron in color, and bears the Khanda, the symbol of Sikhism. The Nishan Sahib is flown outside gurdwaras (temples) and often inside as well. A gurdwara is not authentic without a Nishan Sahib. The flag is also carried in processions and on special occasions, and it is raised and lowered with special rituals. Sikh devotees respectfully place flowers on the parapet at its base and light candles beneath it on the days of celebrations.



The flag is normally replaced annually on Vaisakhi in April, which celebrates the birthday of the Khalsa. The old flag is not thrown away, but divided into pieces which people take as gift from the Guru. These pieces of the Nishan Sahib are used to stitch the chola (long shirt) of infants. An old flag or worn out clothes made out of it is burned and the ashes are placed in flowing water.

Sources

1. John Bowker, ed., *World Religions* (DK Publishing, 1997).
2. "Nishan Sahib." Sikh History. 2005 http://www.sikh-history.co.uk/nishan_sahib.htm .
3. Religion Facts <http://www.religionfacts.com/sikhism/places.htm>

Questions and Activities to Build Understanding

1. What is the most sacred object of Sikhism and how is it handled?
2. Why is this the most sacred object of Sikhism and what is its fundamental principle?
3. What is the chauri and what does it symbolize?
4. Draw a picture of each of the five symbols (5Ks) of Sikhism and explain the meaning of each.
5. Why do Sikhs wear the 5Ks?
6. Draw and explain the meaning and use of the Nishan Sahib.