

more freedom to boys than to girls. For example, a boy may be able to stay out late with his friends whereas a girl in the same family may not have the same privilege. This is a purely cultural phenomenon and is not supported in Sikhism. The Gurus have given males and females equal opportunity in all spheres of life.

### Celebrating Indian Festivals

There are a number of Indian festivals which many Indian Sikhs celebrate as part of their cultural heritage but have little to do with the Sikh way of life.

For example, Rakhsha Bandhan or Rakhri, is an Indian celebration when sisters tie sacred threads around their brothers' wrists. This symbolises their love and affection. In return, the brother promises to protect his sister and to always be there for her. Therefore, Rakhsha Bandhan symbolises the bond of security and protection between brothers and sisters. Other Indian festivals include Holi and Diwali which are also celebrated by both Hindus and Sikhs. These celebrations are cultural in character and are similar to the way many Sikhs in the west will celebrate Christmas and Easter.

Indian Sikhs, are free to practice any celebrations they wish, but it should be understood that Sikhism is an eternal spiritual lifestyle that does not demand the celebration of any specific cultural or religious festival. So it is not imperative for a Sikh to celebrate Diwali, Holi, Rakhsha Bandan, Christmas or Easter but they can do so if they wish.

### Food, Clothes, Music and Language

It is usual to find Indian Sikhs serving Indian vegetarian cuisine in Sikh temples, wearing Indian clothes such as Kurta-Pujamas (men) or Salwar-Kameez (women) and having an interest in Indian music genres such as Bhangra music. However, these are all cultural items and it is possible for Sikhs from other cultures to serve any types of vegetarian food within their institutions such as Pasta, Fruits, Couscous etc; to wear any type of modest clothing and to have an interest in any genre of music.

### The Trap of Fake Religious People

One of the essential teachings of Sikhism is that the

holy congregation should be sought and it is through the holy congregation and Gurbarsad (grace) that our spirituality can move forward. There are many spiritual people who we may meet throughout our life who will help to lift our spirit and enhance our knowledge of living as a spiritual being. These Gurmukhs and Sainly people are a welcome blessing in our lives.

However, it is important to remember that Indian culture is known for its masses of self-proclaimed "saints", who treat religion as a business to make money or who simply want to build their own following of devotees and will lead people to darkness. This is why the Gurus have warned people to be careful regarding blind teachers:

*"The disciples whose teacher is blind, act blindly as well. They walk according to their own wills, and continually speak falsehood and lies. They practice falsehood and deception, and endlessly slander others. Slandering others, they drown themselves, and drown all their generations as well."* (SGGSJ, p.951)

### Superstition and Rituals

All world cultures have superstitions and rituals that have lost their real purpose or reasoning, with Indian culture having more than most. Examples include not eating meat on certain days; not washing hair on certain days; not cutting nails at night; consulting astrological charts before organising an important event; visiting a temple only on a full moon (Puranamashi); placing eyeliner on babies to repel bad omens; not sneezing before starting a journey; not sweeping the floors at night etc. Many Indian Sikhs follow some of these old ideas, but Sikhism does not place any importance on such beliefs.

### Summary

The eternal teachings of Sikhism can be applied across all cultures, religions and spiritual traditions. So it is important to have an understanding of what is dharma (eternal spiritual discipline) and what is cultural practice in order for people to be able to progress with their practice of truth in their daily lives.



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# Sikhism vs Indian Culture

Sikhism

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## Introduction

Culture is a beautiful show of the variety within life and can often have a great impact on an individual's belief system. Culture incorporates a vast array of items such as clothes, food, music, mythology, tradition, customs, social standing to name but a few. So culture has the power to enrich a way of life, but also has the power to keep people from realising or practicing important spiritual truths.

All cultures in the world have good and bad points and unfortunately, Indian Sikhs have continued to place an emphasis on some of the bad elements of Indian culture and tradition instead of the eternal principles of Sikhism and the Sikh lifestyle. The distinction between what traditions are Indian culture and what are Sikh shall now be explored.

## Defining Culture and Sikhism

Culture may be defined as, "a set of learned beliefs, values, behaviours and the way of life shared by the members of a society". Sikhism may be defined as, "a universal way of life believing in oneness of God and humanity, with the basic principles of meditation on God, sharing with the needy, and honesty in living". The word 'Sikh' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Shishya' meaning disciple or student of dharma (spirituality) and is someone who follows the teachings of the ten Sikh Masters, which are all embodied in the eleventh and final Master, called the Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (SGGSJ), the Word.

## Indian Cultural Traditions

### Caste and Social Status

Hinduism has traditionally divided Indian society into 4 Varnas (classes) including:

- Brahmins (priests)
- Kshatriya (warriors and rulers)
- Vaishya (traders and skilled workers)
- Shudra (service providing community)
- Dalits (untouchables i.e. without a varna)

This hierarchical system is considered sacred in Hinduism and is known as Varnashrama Dharma. There are also many hundreds of Jatis (castes) or communities of people which are grouped by a hereditary trade such as farmers, washermen, shopkeepers etc and these castes would fall into one of

the 4 varnas. This complicated system of varnas (twice born) and castes has historically created a great deal of injustice against lower castes and women in terms of denying them access to learning spiritual wisdom (Vedas), employment and human rights.

In modern times, caste will generally show its ugly head when people either:

- Share food together (higher castes will not share food with lower castes)
- Inter-caste marriage (higher castes will not marry people from lower castes)

It is a shame that many Indian Sikhs still follow in this tradition of caste, particularly when it comes to marriage, even though it is scripturally discouraged.

*"No one should be proud of his social class and status. He alone is a Brahmin, who knows God. ||1|| Do not be proud of your social class and status, you ignorant fool! So much sin and corruption comes from this pride. ||1||Pause|| Everyone says that there are four castes, four social classes. They all emanate from the drop of God's Seed. ||2|| The entire universe is made of the same clay. The Potter has shaped it into all sorts of vessels. ||3|| The five elements join together, to make up the form of the human body. Who can say which is less, and which is more? ||4||" (SGGSJ, p.1127)*

*"Recognize the Lord's Light within all, and do not consider social class or status of a person; because there are no classes or castes in the world hereafter" (SGGSJ, p.349)*

*"The Lord's slave gives up his caste. He dedicates his mind and body to the True Guru, and seeks His Sanctuary" (SGGSJ, p.362)*

*"Those who believe in high and low social classes, only sing songs and chants of egotism." (SGGSJ, p.1162)*

The Sikh Gurus tried to break the stranglehold of caste by using a number of different techniques. This included the compilation of a universal scripture incorporating wisdom from people of various castes, religions and languages, so as to emphasise the importance of equality and oneness amongst the human

family. The Gurus also created the institution of langar (free community kitchen for all) which required people from all castes to work together in preparing the communal food and to sit down together and eat as one family. Finally, within the message of the Sikh scripture they highlighted the importance of recognising the divine light within all and to not consider the caste of people, as everyone is created by God.

## Indian Marriage, Dowry and the Male-Female Sex Ratio

Dowry has existed in a number of Eastern and African cultures and usually involves the parents of the girl giving their in-laws a dowry gift to formalise the acceptance of the bride into their family. The original system of dowry had good intentions in that it was specifically designed as a safety net for the woman. However, in modern times the dowry system in India has become one of the foremost evils of society and is responsible for:

- Dowry deaths where brides are killed because they did not provide a big dowry
- Financial hardships suffered by the girls family at the hands of unreasonable requests by in-laws demanding more money
- Aborting of female foetuses creating a skewed male-female sex ratio

In fact, out of all the 28 states in India, Punjab which has a Sikh majority has the worst male to female sex ratio in the country! This highlights the importance that Indian Sikhs have given to Indian culture viz-a-via Sikhism. The traditional dowry as per Sikh philosophy is not regarded as anything more than an act of ego, which is why the Guru has given the following advice:

*"Any other dowry, which the self-willed manmukhs offer for show, is only false egotism and a worthless display. O my Father, please give me the Name of the Lord God as my wedding gift and dowry" (SGGSJ, p.79)*

Also, the tradition of arranged marriage is cultural and not something based on Sikh principles.

## Girls Treated Inferior to Boys

It is common among Indian families to give much