

## The 5 K's

The 5 K's (sacred symbols or *kakkars*) form an essential part of Sikh identity.

They outwardly define the physical appearance of an initiated Sikh and inwardly represent the strong ideals and spiritualism that a member of the Khalsa must practice.

The 5 K's are the:

*Kes* – unshorn hair

*Kangha* – a wooden comb

*Kaccherra* – underwear of thigh length

*Kara* – an iron bangle

*Kirpaan* – a small ceremonial dagger.

The 5 K's must be worn at all times by initiated Sikhs – they are only removed when required by law and even then, it is for the minimum time possible.

Sikhs believe that there are five vices which have a detrimental effect on everyone's lives but that these can be tackled with the appropriate tools – the *kakkars*.

The five vices are:

*Kaam* - Lust

*Krodh* - Anger

*Lobh* - Greed

*Moh* - Attachment

*Ahankaar* - Ego

The 5 K's have been given to Sikhs by the 10<sup>th</sup> Guru Gobind Singh to counteract these five vices, ensuring spiritual development and enlightenment. They are also physical reminders to an initiate of their spiritual and moral obligations.



### **Kes – unshorn hair**

*Kes* are kept unshorn to reflect acceptance of God's will, thus accepting the nature of the human body and not defacing its natural beauty in any manner. Sikhs have to keep their *kes* covered at all times and the easiest way to do this is by tying them in a top-knot and wearing a turban.

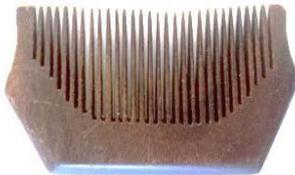
Thus, the *kes* and turban go hand in hand with each other. Both males and females wear turbans, if one is not worn, a Sikh must



keep their head covered at all times with another head covering such as a scarf or a bandana, or *patka*. Hats of any sort should but not be worn as it is contrary to Sikh teachings.

The *kes* are kept to tackle the onset of **ego** – the *kes* constantly remind a Sikh to remain humble and always accept God's will, no matter what challenges life may present. Keeping *kes* and wearing a turban, ensures Sikhs stand out in a crowd, which acts as a constant reminder to a Sikh that they are here to defeat their ego and humbly accept God's will.

### Kangha – wooden comb



The *kangha* is kept in the *kes* and tucked underneath the top-knot. It is wooden and a Sikh is instructed to comb his or her hair twice daily, first thing in the morning and at night before laying to rest.

The wooden structure of the *kangha* ensures that static energy from the *kes* is removed. The combing of the hair reminds the Sikh not to become materially attached to the world and that as the *kes* break and fall by combing, so should the bonds of **attachment** be quelled.

A Sikh meditatively reflects upon his acts of worldly attachment whilst combing their *kes* and then proceeds to tackle these attachments as he knows that as the *kes* fall and break, so will our lives come to an end and the worldly attachment we have will be of no avail.

We come alone to the world alone and naked, and we leave in the same state. The only thing we can accumulate and develop is our spirituality, through meditation and reflection upon the words of the Guru.

Sikhs believe in reincarnation, thus these spiritual advancements are then carried forth in future births or one can break free from this vicious circle of births and deaths, through spiritual enlightenment.



### Kaccherra – knee length underwear

The *kaccherra* is white in colour and reminds a Sikh of his or her moral obligations of a sexual nature. A Sikh will tackle his **lustful** urges and will only enter sexual relations with their wife or husband.

The *kaccherra* acts as a constant reminder of one's duties in respect of this discipline. Apart from one's spouse, all other

women or men are to be viewed as mothers/fathers, aunties/uncles and brothers/sisters.

The *kaccherra* can never fully leave the body of a Sikh and even whilst bathing it is to be worn. When changing a *kaccherra*, the Sikh ensures that one leg stays in it at all times, one leg is taken out at a time whilst simultaneously putting the fresh *kaccherra* on.

This practice of keeping it on at all times is a constant reminder to all Sikhs to not pursue a life of sexual indulgence and to remain modest. Lust is thus counteracted.



## Kara – iron bangle

The *kara* is an iron bangle that is worn on the right wrist.

It should be iron (or contain iron) and be worn on the right, as stated in an edict from 10<sup>th</sup> Guru to Sikhs in Kabul. Some might wear stainless steel *kara*'s if they have allergic reactions.

Wearing an iron *kara* helps to replenish one's iron levels. The vegetarian diet of many Sikhs lacks iron, so wearing the *kara* counteracts this deficiency.

Additionally the *kara* acts like a hand-cuff from God, which reminds a Sikh to be grateful of all that God grants him/her. All acts of **greed** are implemented through the hands, thus wearing the *kara* counteracts this, reminding Sikhs to remain content and not over-indulge; maintaining a balance in their lives and their pursuit of spiritual nirvana.



## Kirpan – ceremonial dagger

The *kirpaan* is a sword or dagger which is worn to remind a Sikh of his or her duty to protect others and uphold the respect and honour of all humanity.

*Kirpa* translates to 'mercy' and *aan* translates to 'honour', so *kirpaan* literally means sword of mercy and honour.

The *kirpaan* reminds Sikhs of their martial past and present and of their responsibility to draw the sword when all peaceful means have been exhausted. But this must only be to maintain honour and respect of one's self or others.



The *kirpaan* is a reminder of God's mercy, on a daily basis it is used by Sikhs in Gurdwaras and homes across the globe to bless food. This is done following a prayer and prior to consumption.

Thus the *kirpaan* also represents the grace of the Almighty and is viewed as a representation of the power of God to protect the weak and needy.

Most Sikhs wear a small *kirpaan* which looks like a dagger, rather than a sword, but historically Sikhs wore a long sword at all times. This tradition continues in India, but some in the west also do this when dressed in traditional Sikh clothes such as on religious occasions.

The *kirpaan* is, paradoxically, a spiritual reminder to Sikhs that they must conquer their **anger**, thus Sikhs are armed with this weapon but must abide by strong discipline and not draw it in anger or inappropriately.

Sikhs are instructed to control themselves and make their passions a slave to them at all times, thus anger is to be controlled to fulfil ones worldly duties and spiritual aims.

British law enables initiated Sikhs to wear a *kirpaan* in public places, although sensible restrictions exist such as in law courts, airports and security areas. In such places initiated Sikhs can carry a symbolic *kirpaan* in miniature form to ensure they're not breaking the Sikh code of conduct by removing it from their person. Some Sikhs advocate a maximum size but the only requirement in the Khalsa code is for a minimum of three inches.

### **Learning Outcomes**

- 1 – Find out what each of the 5 K's are
- 2 – Understand the meaning of each of the sacred symbols and why they're worn
- 3 – Picture and identify each symbol on Sikh men and women

### **Questions for the classroom**

- 1 – Name the 5 K's (in English or Romanised)
- 2 – Why is it important for initiated Sikhs to carry the 5 K's
- 3 – Name 2 of the 5 vices that the 5 K's are designed to counter
- 4 – How do Sikhs cover their uncut hair?
- 5 – What material is the Kara or Kangha made of?