



The Sikh Ceremonies

There are five key ceremonies in life that most Sikhs undergo. These inform who they are as Sikhs, how they should be raised and how they should live their life.

The ceremonies can also be viewed as the five stages of life a person will go through:

Janam Sanskar - birth

Vidya Sanskar - education

Amrit Sanskar - initiation

Anand Karaj - marriage

Antam Sanskar - death

Janam Sanskar - birth

When a child is born the first rite is to utter in his or her ear the name of God, *Vaheguru* (lit: Wonderful Enlightener God) along with the first stanza from the Sikh Scriptures, the *Mool Mantar*. These are uttered immediately to imprint them upon the child, in the hope that it grows up reciting them.

After birth, as soon as he or she and the mother are in good health, the child will be initiated as a Sikh. A practising Sikh prepares nectar, *amrit*, by reciting the first Sikh Prayer, *Japji Sahib*, whilst stirring a *kirpaan* in a small iron bowl that has had water and puffs of sugar added to it.

After the prayer, the *amrit* is administered first to the child, by putting five drops from the tip of the *kirpaan* into the baby's mouth and then the mother is to drink the rest. She is instructed to breast feed the baby and the parents told the child has become a Sikh and is to be raised as a practising Sikh. They should endeavour to get the child fully initiated when he or she come of age, can practice wearing the 5 K's and can keep the discipline.

There is no restriction on parents administering the birth ceremony themselves, although few Sikhs in the west carry on the tradition.

When possible the family are to take the child to the nearest Gurdwara and take a command from Guru Granth Sahib, called a *hukamnama*. The first letter of the blessing from the scripture is used to name the child.

Vidiya Sanskar - education

Sikhs are to educate their children and ensure their enrolment in school at the appropriate time. The education of the child is not contained in a formal ceremony but is seen as a life-



long learning involvement, by which the parents of the child must ensure both worldly and spiritual education is imparted to the child.

Spiritually the parents should get their children educated in accordance with the Guru's teachings, or *Gurmat*, and in the language of the scriptures, or *Gurmukhi*. This ensures correct pronunciations when reading prayers and a deeper understanding of their true esoteric teachings.

It is during these formative years that a child will come of age, whereby he/she can start to wear a turban. The turban tying ceremony, or *Dastaar Bandhan*, sees a child have a turban tied on their head for the first time by a learned Sikh to gain their blessing.

It can be a simple occasion or a sumptuous affair of a celebration, where friends and family are invited to witness this momentous occasion.

Amrit Sanskar - initiation

Initiation occurs when an individual affirms their faith and agrees to live according to the discipline of the Khalsa. The calling can come to a person at any stage of their life, and is open to all regardless of caste, creed or colour.

In taking the baptism, an individual pledges their life to Sikh tenants and in return must adhere to a code of conduct. They must wear the 5 K's at all times and refrain from the four cardinal sins of consuming intoxicants, cutting hair, committing adultery or having sexual relationships outside of wedlock and eating meat, fish and eggs¹; and to dedicate their life to the pursuit of realising God.

Prior to the formation of the Khalsa Brotherhood in 1699, the Sikh Guru's would initiate the faithful through administering nectar, or *amrit*, blessed by the feet of the respective Guru. In 1699 Guru Gobind Singh changed this to the modern day form of initiation, where the nectar is formed through the stirring of the double-edged sword, known as *Khande Di Pahul*. The Guru created this new initiation because the lineage of physical Gurus was nearing an end and the Guru Granth Sahib would (later in 1708) be bestowed as the Guru for eternity.

During the original *amrit sanskar* ceremony, Guru Gobind Singh first administered the baptism to five volunteers who offered themselves as a sacrifice; they became known as the five beloved ones, or *panj pyare*. These Sikhs then in turn prepared the *pahul* for the Guru to take. This tradition of five initiated and highly enlightened Sikhs administering the baptism continues today, as the five were ordained to be the physical representation of the Guru.

¹ Meat is outlawed by the Guru Granth Sahib but in the Khalsa discipline it is permissible in a survival situation, when all means for food have been exhausted. But even then Halal & Kosher meat is outlawed due to their sacrificial manner. Halal should never be touched, as its consumption is a form of conversion.



The *panj pyare* read five prayers over an iron vessel in which are placed sugar/glucose puffs and water is added. Whilst stirring the nectar with the double-edged sword, they will read out the five prayers which Sikhs are instructed to recite every morning:

Japji Sahib – which teaches one self-realisation

Jaap Sahib – which describes God

Tav Parsad Svaye – which teach one to become detached and conquer superstition

Benti Choupai – which seeks protection from God

Anand Sahib - which teaches one how to attain bliss.

Once the prayers are complete the initiates are administered the *amrit* which they drink and is sprinkled in their eyes and on their head.

Whilst the ceremony is held behind closed doors and kept private, Sikhs can attend to answer doubts they may have about their faith and to atone for any lapses in the Khalsa discipline that have occurred, for example if one was to commit a sin or remove their 5 K's. In this instance the *panj pyare* can re-administer the baptism, provide guidance or issue a penalty such as community work.

Anand Karaj - marriage

The Sikh ceremony of bliss, or *Anand Karaj*, is seen theologically as a coming together of two souls to become one in realisation of God. The bliss of the marriage is attained through spiritual enlightenment the hymns, or *lavaa*, sung during the ceremony describe four stages of this path. The bride and bridegroom will come in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib and the congregation to affirm their commitment to marriage.

During the ceremony, the couple walk around the Guru Granth Sahib four times after the reading of each hymn, symbolising an acceptance of the message of the Guru. By doing this together the couple undertake an oath to commit to each other and to the Guru.

Following the *lava* celebratory hymns are sung and the couple are given advice on marital conduct, including seeking advice from Guru Granth Sahib at all times. They are told to live lives of compromise, humility, spirituality whilst fulfilling their worldly duties as a married couple.

The *Anand Karaj* is a simple and short ceremony but as a celebration of marriage the couples and families attending will be lavishly dressed to celebrate the union. Turbans worn on the day are significant; the bridegroom will wear one regardless of how religious he is. The colour of the turban is usually maroon red, an Indian tradition rather than a Sikh one deriving from the epic tale of the Hindu deity Lord Rama who is described as having worn a red turban on his wedding day by the poet Tulsī Das. Turban colours also come with a



sense of nationalism connected to them, red thus associated with Hinduism and green with Islam.

Initiated Sikhs often instead wear saffron or blue at their weddings, colours closely connected to the Sikh faith. Red and green are frowned upon by some as they are considered colours of sexual enticement, which initiated Sikhs are advised to steer away from.

The colour of the bridegroom's turban can have a wider impact at weddings with the best man, or *sarbala*, wearing the same colour - and indeed members from the grooms side may also choose to match colours. The groom will also usually come with a sword in hand, thus even if the Sikh who is getting married is non-practising, he will dress in the traditional garb or an initiated Sikh with a turban donned and *kirpan* in hand.

For the bride, if she is initiated and does wear a turban, the colour is usually white or orange and again can be replicated by her female family members who may be acting as maids of honour.

The bridegroom might opt to wear a plume on his turban, a symbol of royalty glamour and elegance adorned by the Sikh Gurus, Sardars and Rajas to this day. But in the presence of the holy Guru Granth Sahib, the plume is removed by the groom's sisters before the ceremony out of humility and respect - only the Guru has true sovereignty over Sikhs.

Initiated Sikhs might opt, instead of the plume, to adorn their turbans with other Sikh emblems such as traditional symbols of weapons - the *Khanda Kirpan* or a *Chan-dhorra*. These can be worn by both the bride and bridegroom if both are donning turbans.

According to the Guru's teaching, or *gurmat*, embracing caste prejudices, or requesting or accepting dowries is outlawed but some Sikhs continue these practices regardless. Many who visit Sikh weddings might also think them lavish affairs and good parties, with meat and alcohol being served. But these are also outlawed in the Sikh faith and so have no place in the *anand karaj*.

Where they occur, at receptions rather than the Gurdwara, is due to personal choice or preference. The majority of these parties are held by non-practising Sikhs, which most Sikhs are as they have not affirmed their faith either at birth through the *janam sanskar* ceremony or later through *amrit sanskar*. But the liberal Sikh faith is not regimented, so anyone who believes in the supreme authority of the Guru Granth Sahib is a Sikh. "Sikh" means learner or student, and it is generally accepted that each individual is at a different stage of spirituality. Anyone endeavouring to build their faith and spirituality should be recognised as Sikhs. The Guru is all embracing and will forgive the mistakes of adherents who sincerely want to walk the spiritual path at whatever stage of life this may be.



Antam Sanskar - death

Sikhs believe in reincarnation and that the soul migrates through a cycle of 8.4 million lives. Human life is the only one which offers liberation from this cycle, thus death is a continuation of spiritual development rather than an end.

One's actions meditations and lifestyles will all be accounted for at death, and in turn determine the destination for the soul. Sikhs do not believe in liberation at death but rather the importance of becoming one with God while they are alive.

Upon the death of a Sikh, prayer recitals from Guru Granth Sahib immediately commence to help those in mourning and to assist the deceased in the next world. The family and friends are instructed to listen and reflect on the prayers being recited. Food and drink are cooked and prepared throughout this mourning period and served to any guests who come to share their condolences, through the practice of the free kitchen or *langar*. The reading of Sikh Scriptures is usually completed on the day of the funeral.

The deceased is cremated as soon as possible, on the day of the funeral the body is washed and new clothes put on the loved one. The body is brought to the home of the deceased where a final open coffin viewing is held for all mourners to see the deceased one final time. During this, meditation is continuously performed. The body is then transported to the crematorium where a final prayer, *Kirtan Sohila*, is read and a supplication, or *Ardas* offered.

After the cremation, mourners travel to the Gurdwara where the reading of Guru Granth Sahib is completed. Further prayers, hymn singing or discourses can be held. Food and drink is served to all that attend.

At the end of the ceremony at the Gurdwara, if the deceased was the male head of the household then it is customary for a turban to be tied on his heir the new head of the family. This turban is tied and/or gifted to the individual by a respected elder, who is designated by the family to fulfil this passing of responsibility. Some might chose to carry out this custom privately at home.

Learning Outcomes

- 1 – Learn about the various ceremonies Sikhs mark in life
- 2 – Discover the meaning of Sikh initiation
- 3 – The principles of Khalsa initiation