

# Sikhism Through the Lives of Individuals

This lesson provides an introduction to the Sikh tradition on a human level. By focusing on the lives of individuals, students can explore the internal diversity of the religion and its changes over time. The lesson can also be structured to focus on Sikh individuals from a specific time period or region of the world.

## Objectives:

Students will be able to...

- Apply theoretical frameworks of religious studies to the biographies of historical individuals.
- Examine the lives of notable Sikhs throughout history.
- Make connections between individuals and the historical events that they influenced and were influenced by.

## Standards:

### D2.His.4.9-12.

Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

### D2.His.5.9-12.

Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

### D2.Rel.5.9-12

Explain how religious identities shape and are shaped by the beliefs people hold, the behaviors they exhibit, and the ways people experience membership in intersecting communities.

### Rel.8.9-12

Give examples of how beliefs, behaviors, and community experiences shape and are shaped by one another in particular social and historical contexts.

### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.



## Lesson Activities:

1. Select the individuals to focus on from the lists below.
  - a. To focus on the origins and development of the Sikh tradition, use Group A.
  - b. For AAPI History and Heritage Month, start with Group B.
  - c. For Women’s History Month, start with Group C.
2. Depending on the time allotted, assign one person per student, one person to a small group of students, or multiple people to a small group of students.
3. Students conduct research on the life of their assigned individual(s) to develop a profile of the person.
4. Topics and questions to focus research:
  - a. When and where did/does this person live? What is important to know about their context?
  - b. How did Sikh beliefs and values play a role in the life of this individual?
  - c. How did the life/actions of this individual influence the growth/development of Sikhism? (Group A)
  - d. What contributions did/has this individual made to the Sikh community?
  - e. What contributions did/has this individual made to their wider community?
  - f. How does the life of this individual fit into or challenge the “textbook narrative” of Sikhism?
5. Have students share the results of their research with the class in a manner appropriate for your context. Possibilities include:
  - a. Jigsaw sharing – This may be especially applicable if multiple students have studied the same person.
  - b. Group students who studied individuals with a common characteristic (e.g. time period, profession, region) and have those students develop a hypothetical dialogue between those individuals to share with the class.
  - c. Students use multimedia and online tools to create interactive presentations.

## Extensions and Modifications:

- Construct a timeline with the chosen individuals studied in this lesson. Add other individuals who were contemporaries of those individuals and important events in history. This can help students contextualize their research in wider social, historical, and geographic settings. Compare the lives of people who lived at the same time. Discuss how global events may have impacted the lives of the Sikh individuals studied.
- Have students create fictitious social media accounts for their assigned individual(s) using an appropriate platform. Ask students to have an online conversation in the persona of the person that they researched.

## Suggested Individuals for Study:

It is challenging to select only a small number of individuals to tell the story of Sikhism. The lists below are a starting point for potential approaches to this lesson, but are by no means exhaustive. You can find many other notable Sikhs to include in this lesson on Wikipedia, The Sikh Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia Britannica, and other online sources.

### Group A: Development of Sikhism

Only three of the 10 gurus are included in this list. While all 10 living gurus played an important role in the shaping of Sikhism, religious leaders are not the only people responsible for the development of a religious tradition. This group features Sikhs from multiple walks of life who were essential in the development of Sikhism.

**Guru Nanak (1469–1539)** – Founder of Sikhism and first guru.

**Bebe Nanaki (1464–1518)** – Older sister of Guru Nanak, known as the first follower of Guru Nanak.

**Mata Khivi (1506–1582)** – Credited with institutionalizing the practice of langar, wife of the Guru Angad Dev (2nd guru).

**Guru Arjan (1563–1606)** – 5th guru, built the Golden Temple in Amritsar, compiled the first edition of the Guru Granth Sahib, and the first Sikh martyr.

**Guru Gobind Singh (1621–1708)** – 10th guru and last living guru. Created the Khalsa and began the practice of Amrit.

**Mai Bhago (1666–unknown)** – Also known as Mata Bhag Kaur, a Sikh woman who led soldiers in battle against the Mughals.

**Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839)** – First leader of the Sikh Empire (1799–1849).

## Group B: Sikh-Americans

Although a number of the people on this list were not born in the U.S., they have been influential in U.S. culture and/or politics.

**Bhagat Singh Thind, (1892-1967)** – Served in US army in WWI and fought for citizenship rights of Indians in America; writer and lecturer in philosophy and spirituality.

**Dalip Singh Saund (1899-1973)** – First Indian-American and Sikh-American elected to the U.S. House of Representatives (California 29th District).

**Narinder Singh Kapany (1924 - )** – Physicist known for work in fiber optics.

**Snatnam Kaur (1972- )** – Singer, songwriter, author.

**Ravinder Bhalla (1974- )** – Mayor of Hoboken, NJ (elected in 2017), first Sikh mayor of New Jersey and first elected Sikh mayor to wear a turban.

**Waris Singh Ahluwalia (1974- )** – Actor and designer.

**Rupi Kaur (1992- )** – Poet, illustrator, author.

## Group C: Sikh Women

**Bebe Nanaki (1464-1518)** – Older sister of Guru Nanak and first Sikh.

**Mata Khivi (1506-1582)** – Credited with institutionalizing the practice of langar, wife of the Guru Angad Dev (2nd guru).

**Mai Bhago (1666-unknown)** – Also known as Mata Bhag Kaur, a Sikh woman who led soldiers in battle against the Mughals.

**Sophia Duleep Singh (1876-1948)** – Suffragette in the U.K., goddaughter of Queen Victoria

**Snatnam Kaur (1972- )** – Singer, songwriter, author

**Preet Didbal (1968- )** – Mayor of Yuba City, CA, first female Sikh mayor in U.S.

**Lilly Singh (1988- )** – Canadian actress and television host who first gained popularity on YouTube.

**Rupi Kaur (1992- )** – Poet, illustrator, author.

## Additional Notable Sikhs

**Bhagat Puran Singh (1904-1992)** – Environmentalist and philanthropist, founded a home for the destitute in Amristsar, India that still operates today and spread environmental awareness

**Fauja Singh (1911- )** – marathon runner, oldest person to run a marathon and holder of multiple world records for the over-90 age bracket

**Yogi Bhajan (1929-2004)** – founder of the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO), promoting yoga, meditation, and elements of Sikh beliefs and philosophy in North America.

**Jagmeet Singh (1979 - )** – Canadian progressive politician, first visible minority to lead a major Canadian political party

## ADDITIONAL TOPICS FOR STUDY

Additional topics to explore the history and development of Sikhism further:

- Sikh Empire (1799-1849)
- Sikh migration to North America in the early 20th century
- Sikh involvement in U.S. civil rights and religious freedom efforts
- Sikh experiences of the partition of India and Pakistan (1947)
- Depictions of Sikhs and Sikh-American in popular media
- Sikh Diaspora communities in Africa, Europe, and North America



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