

Why are justice and equality important in Sikhism?

Lauren: Hey and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm Lauren Layfield, a TV and Radio presenter and your host for this series all about Sikhism.

In each episode we look at the beliefs and practices you may come across in your exam, and in this episode, we're looking at what Sikhism teaches about justice and equality. Helping me out is my co-host and practising Sikh, Jaz Singh.

Jaz: Hey Lauren! Yes, you may have heard my voice on the radio, and importantly for co-hosting this series, I have been raised in the Sikh faith. Having the Sikh faith so close to my heart has definitely shaped me to become who I am today, so I'm looking forward to lifting these beliefs out of that textbook and into the real world for you.

Lauren: Right before we dig in, grab a pen, some paper, or your notes app, because we'll be highlighting key ideas that you might want to jot down.

Jaz: And stay listening to the end, as I'll be checking what you've learnt with a quick quiz. Now let's get started!

Lauren: Jaz, let's talk about what Sikhism, also known as Sikhi, teaches about equality and justice. Can you tell me about these teachings?

Jaz: Yeah of course. A key belief in Sikhism is that all humans are created by Waheguru, God. Sikhs believe God's presence is within all beings, sometimes described as the 'atma' or soul. And because of this idea, many Sikhs believe that all humans are equal. We call this the 'oneness of humanity' and equality is key.

Lauren: We looked at concepts like 'the atma' in our episode on Sikh understandings about God. You can listen to that one, and all episodes in this series, over on the BBC

Sounds app. Just search 'Bitesize GCSE Sikhism'. Jaz, how do Sikhs apply this belief in 'the oneness of humanity' to everyday life?

Jaz: Well, we believe in treating all people with respect. No matter someone's background, identity, or circumstances, Sikhs believe everyone should be treated equally. This is called 'egalitarianism'. It underpins key Sikh practices like 'seva' and 'langar', which we'll talk about in this episode.

Lauren: Does this belief in treating everyone equally have a role in Sikh worship?

Jaz: Definitely. You can see this belief in the oneness of humanity during gurdwara worship. The gurdwara is run by the community, known as the sangat. And any Sikh, regardless of gender, wealth or background, who is knowledgeable about the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, our holy scripture, can lead worship.

Lauren: Equality seems like a really important belief for Sikhs then.

Jaz: Oh, one hundred percent. It's fundamental. And so is justice. The first Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, taught that taking away any other person's rights is a moral offence. In Sikhism, we must respect everyone's rights and work towards a just and fair society for all. This idea is called social justice.

There's a quote in the Dasam Granth Sahib, a sacred Sikh scripture. The quote comes from Guru Gobind Singh Ji who said: "recognise the whole human race as One."

This belief informs every aspect of Sikh life.

Lauren: What about in the community, or the 'Sangat' Jaz, is that an egalitarian structure too?

Jaz: Yes, the Sangat is the Sikh community or congregation. Everyone is equal within the Sangat, and anyone who wants to, can become part of The Khalsa - that's the initiated members of the Sikh faith. The Sangat has many important roles, including;

- running the gurdwara
- bringing Sikhs together to worship

- helping to teach the Punjabi language
- passing on the history of Sikh religion
- developing the Sikh belief in the 'oneness of humanity'
- and providing financial support to each other. The sangat will help those who need it.

Lauren: These are just some examples. For more information on the role of the sangat, head to the Bitesize website - just search for 'Bitesize GCSE Sikhism'.

Jaz: Food also plays an important role in Sikh practice. And it's another way we can represent the Sikh belief in equality and the 'oneness of humanity'. One important way we do this is through the 'langar' which means 'free kitchen'. It is a place to go and eat for free, and it is also a practice, where Sikhs prepare, serve, and share food together as an act of equality and selfless service, known as 'seva'.

Lauren: This is so interesting. Tell us more about 'the langar'.

Jaz: Well, the idea was introduced by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the first Guru. He would offer free meals to everyone, which were prepared and served by the community. It didn't matter who you were, where you came from, or how much money you had. Everyone would be served the same meal and would eat together. Guru Nanak Dev Ji did this because he encouraged people to nourish themselves physically before coming into his presence to be nourished mentally and spiritually.

Lauren: And does the langar still happen today?

Jaz: Yes! If you go to a gurdwara, no matter your faith or background, you will be able to enjoy the langar. Sitting and eating together reinforces that aspect of equality and oneness. The entire operation runs on volunteers and donations and for me, the principle behind it is what makes it so special. Everyone sits on the floor together, side by side, as equals. And it's a chance to really connect with the faith as part of a wider community.

Lauren: So, I could take part in the langar even though I'm not Sikh?

Jaz: Yes Lauren. The langar is a reminder that all humans are equal, so everyone is welcome. The food is free and it's vegetarian, so no meat or fish. And that helps ensure it is inclusive for every faith no matter their specific food laws.

Lauren: That sounds absolutely amazing. And what kind of food might there be?

Jaz: There might be foods like chickpea curry, daal, saag, breads like roti, rice, and always sweets! Oh, and I can't forget the regular fruit that's handed out. Always good to keep on top of your 5 a day! And I can honestly say, the food served at the gurdwara is so nourishing, wholesome and delicious. It still amazes me, even to this day, how much it's contributed to so many lives around the world.

Lauren: It sounds so good. And tell us about the volunteers at the langar, Jaz.

Jaz: It's seen as a real privilege to volunteer at the gurdwara. And it's a way Sikhs believe they can serve God and help others, so many people are eager to volunteer. In very large gurdwaras around the world, there is often a waiting list of people wanting to help with langar!

Lauren: That sounds really generous.

Jaz: Oh yeah. It all comes back to this belief in the 'oneness of humanity' and a just, equal world. For me, the langar is about kindness and generosity, and trying to make the world a better place to live.

Lauren: We've talked about the importance of equality in Sikhism. Now let's turn our focus to justice. We've touched on it a bit already.

Jaz: Yes, we have. In Sikhism, an important aspect of worship is 'seva'. It means 'selfless service' and it's a way we can show our devotion to Waheguru. Seva means doing selfless acts and helping others, without expecting anything in return. Social justice is a core belief connected to seva. And Sikhism teaches us to work towards a fair society and defend those who are oppressed.

Lauren: And are there different types of 'seva'?

Jaz: There are three types of seva. They are;

- Tan - 'With body'. These are physical acts that show selflessness. So, volunteering in the langar or looking after the gurdwaras would be examples of tan.
- Man - 'With mind'. These are acts of seva that use knowledge or skills to help others. This could include teaching people about Sikh beliefs or helping someone learn to read the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Or it might be running activities that support the community, like teaching computer skills or art classes.
- Dhan - 'With money'. This involves helping others financially so it might be donating to charity, giving money to the sangat, or offering money to those in need.

Lauren: OK so Tan, Man and Dhan. I think I've got it. How does 'seva' affect Sikhs' relationship with Waheguru?

Jaz: Well Sikhism teaches that these acts of selflessness help an individual to become 'gurmukh' which means 'God-centred'. It's a way we can show devotion to God and become closer to Waheguru. Therefore, many Sikhs believe 'seva' should be part of our daily life. In my opinion, Seva can come in any form, as long as you're helping others and making a positive difference to the people around you.

Lauren: Yeah, I can see how 'seva' connects to ideas of equality and justice. Everyone is encouraged to do selfless acts, and no one is better than anyone else.

Jaz: Exactly. By serving others, we show our love to Waheguru. We can avoid becoming 'manmukh' which means self-centred, just following our own desires. And we're focusing on the needs of others, rather than our own. Lauren, I want to test how much you've learnt now with a quick quiz. Are you ready?

Lauren: I am feeling ready! Grab a pen, some paper or your notes app to jot down your answers as we go. And remember you can pause this episode if you need time to think on it as well.

Jaz: Let's start. First question. Who can lead gurdwara worship in Sikhism?

Lauren: I think I know this. Any Sikh who is knowledgeable about the Guru Granth Sahib Ji can lead gurdwara worship, regardless of gender, or wealth or background.

Jaz: That's a great answer, well done! Now the next question. What is 'langar'?

Lauren: The langar is the community kitchen in the gurdwara where anyone can eat for free.

Jaz: Correct! And now the final question. What does 'seva' mean in Sikhism?

Lauren: Seva means selfless service, so doing helpful acts without expecting anything in return.

Jaz: That is perfect, well done Lauren! It's an important part of the Sikh belief in the 'oneness of humanity'.

Lauren: Thanks so much for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. We've been exploring justice and equality.

Jaz: Next time, we'll be bringing together the knowledge from the series into an exam skills episode, helping you prepare for your exam.

Lauren: Yeah, that's right. And remember, you can hear all episodes in this series, and series on other faiths you may be studying at GCSE. Just search 'GCSE Religious Studies'.

Jaz: See you next time.

Lauren: See you next time!