Sikh House of Worship: The Gurdwara and Tradition of Langar

A one-hour lesson plan for high school students on understanding the Sikh community (based on the 3B and 7Is frameworks)

INTENDED FOR:

Grades 9 – 12
Social Studies
Topic: World Religions

FRAMEWORK

Lesson plan based on the 3B framework (belief, behavior, belonging) and 7Is (inquiry, introduction, investigation, intersection, interaction, introspection, informed action).

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

1. How are Gurdwaras a reflection of the belief system that Sikhs prescribe to?
2. What do Gurdwaras provide for the individual, the Sikh community, and the wider community?

LESSON OUTLINE

Section 1:
Introduction (15 minutes) - Students to review handout............................2-3

Section 2:
An Investigation into Internal Diversity & Intersection with Culture (20 minutes)........4

Section 3:
Interaction (20 minutes)..........................................................................................6

Section 4:
Introspection & Informed Action (homework or long-term projects).........................6

Lesson plans are created by the Sikh Coalition, are open source and designed to be shared. For additional resources, visit www.sikhcoalition.org/educators or email education@sikhcoalition.org
WHO ARE SIKHS?
Sikhs are followers of the Sikh religion, the fifth largest religion in the world. There are approximately 25 million Sikhs in the world. Sikhism (or as Sikhi as it is referred to by Sikhs), is a distinct religion different from Hinduism or Islam. It was founded in the 15th century in South Asia in an area called Punjab (which is now split between India and Pakistan since partition in 1948). Most of the Sikhs live on the India side of Punjab border.

What are their key beliefs?
Sikhi is based on the teachings of ten Gurus who lived from 1469-1708. In 1708 the tenth Guru declared the sacred scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, to be the eternal Guru, or spiritual teacher and guide for the Sikhs. Sikhs believe in One God, the Creator and in the equality of all humankind.

Guru Nanak, the first Guru taught Sikhs lead a family life and to follow a three-fold motto which helped them connect with God in and amongst everyday life:

• Naam Japo – pray and remember God
• Kirat Karo – earn an honest living
• Vand Chakko – share with others

THE GURDWARA
What does the word Gurdwara mean?
The word Gurdwara can literally be broken down to Guru’s – dwara.

The word Guru means a spiritual teacher or enlightener. Someone who takes us from spiritual darkness or ignorance (Gu) to light (Ru). In Sikhi Guru refers to the ten Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib. Sometimes God is also referred to as the ‘True Guru’.

The dwara is the ‘abode’ or ‘gateway’ to the Guru.

What happens in a Gurdwara?
Gurdwaras have come to represent the religious identity of the Sikhs and are associated intimately with their spiritual and social practices. They are the very nucleus of the Sikh community and serve as a multi-purpose institution.

Sikhs believe that in order to make spiritual progress, both prayer and service must go hand in hand. The Gurdwara is a place where both of these things happen and where Sikhs can come together to learn practice these things in community with each other.

As well as a place to celebrate and commemorate religious festivals, for Sikhs, the Gurdwara plays an integral part throughout their life. All major ceremonies take place in the Gurdwara in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib in order to receive the blessings of the Guru and the collective blessings of the congregation. These include initiation, marriages, final rites and prayer.
What happens in a Gurdwara? (continued)
The Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture and eternal Guru of the Sikhs, is the focus of the Gurdwara. Sikh prayer or worship consists of reading and listening to the Guru Granth Sahib and also Kirtan, or the singing of verses from the Guru Granth Sahib.

Service
Langar, a free community meal is prepared and served at all Gurdwaras by volunteers in the spirit of equality and hospitality.

The tradition of Langar started over 500 years ago when the first Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Nanak, was given some money by his father to go to the city and do business in order to make some profit. However, on the way, Guru Nanak saw a group of hungry men. He decided to use the money from his father to buy food instead, and served food to the hungry. Guru Nanak got in trouble from his father, but he explained that making a profit was not true business, but sharing, helping others and doing good deeds through selfless service was ‘true business’.

Other activities
Spiritual instruction and schooling such as classes to learn how to read the Guru Granth Sahib or how to lead services are often held at the Gurdwara. Gurdwaras also provide hospitality and shelter during times of need and engage in charitable initiatives.

The upkeep of the Gurdwara and of such activities is funded by donations from Sikhs (Sikhs are expected to give dasvandh, or one-tenth of their income, time and skills).

How do Gurdwaras epitomize the Sikh teachings of equality and oneness?
Gurdwaras define Sikhs as a distinct and separate independent community, but they have also always had an open door policy signifying the oneness of God and the equality of humanity. They welcome people of any faith tradition or background, not just Sikhs.

In most of India and Pakistan’s historic Gurdwaras, family groups are not separated by gender. In some Gurdwaras, however, the central aisle leading to the Guru Granth Sahib separates men from women. This partly reflects a social convention based on culture, of courteous distance between males and females. It also signifies both as equals as they sit on the same level in the same room and participate in the same services.

In the Langar also, everyone sits on the same level, bringing into play equality for all. Langar is served to all without discrimination which reinforces the spirit of serving humanity with equality further.

What are the main features of a Gurdwara?
A Nishaan Sahib (orange flag with the Sikh emblem of a Khanda) is always hoisted outside a Gurdwara – this indicates that it is a Sikh institution, offering welcome to all – a beacon for hospitality and hope. Despite any outward differences in architecture, key features of all Gurdwaras include the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, and the Langar.
Share these three short videos of ways in which the tradition of Langar is being expressed by different Sikh communities around the world with the class:

- Langar at Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple), Amritsar, Punjab, India.
- Langar served to the homeless in London, UK.
- Langar served in an interfaith setting at the Parliament of World Religions, Salt Lake City, USA (2015).

**Discussion questions**

1. What are the similarities and differences between these examples?
2. Are the values of service and equality still apparent even though they are being manifested in different ways?
3. Do you think the tradition of Langar has evolved and changed over the years due to migration and the rise of diaspora Sikh communities?
4. What are the ways in which Langar serves as a model of interfaith action?
5. Do you see any differences in the type of food being served in these examples? Do you think that is due to culture?
INTERACTION (20 MINUTES)

Can be done as an individual, group or class exercise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List for Students</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guru Granth Sahib (sacred scripture)</td>
<td>Belief, Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langar (community kitchen)</td>
<td>Belief, Behavior &amp; Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nishaan Sahib (flag identifying a Gurdwara)</td>
<td>Belief and Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer / Kirtan in the Gurdwara</td>
<td>Belief, and Belonging when done in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary Service in the Gurdwara</td>
<td>Belief, Behavior, and Belonging when done in a community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjabi / Kirtan classes</td>
<td>Belief and Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charitable community activities</td>
<td>Belief, Behavior &amp; Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community gatherings for festivals or significant life milestones</td>
<td>Belief and Belonging</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**INTROSPECTION & INFORMED ACTION (HOMEWORK)**

**Option 1: Essay Questions**

Part 1: Has this lesson changed your understanding of the Sikh community in America?

Part 2: In a post 9/11 world, what would be your responses to the following news articles?

- [Sikhs repair, reclaim temple after rampage](#)
- [Man charged in vandalism of Buena Park Sikh temple](#)

**Option 2: Long-term Projects**

1. Compare and contrast nearby houses of worship, including a Gurdwara – How did you recognize it and what was its architecture like in comparison to the Gurdwaras you investigated in the lesson?

2. Visit a Gurdwara to interview three members of the community – Prepare a news story or profile that highlights what the house of worship means to them as an individual and for the community. Identify how the Gurdwara is participating in volunteer initiatives.

3. If you do not live near a Gurdwara, compare and contrast the relationship between ‘food and faith’ in other religious communities.