

Why do some Sikhs choose to become part of the Khalsa?



Background knowledge for the teacher

- Both men and women can take part in the Sikh *Amrit* ceremony, also referred to as *Amrit Sanskar*. During this ceremony, participants are initiated into the Khalsa.
- It is not usually undertaken until a person is in their teens, although some children as young as eight have chosen to take part in the ceremony as they felt they were ready.
- Many Sikhs choose not to take part in the ceremony until they are much older, and others never take part.
- Any Sikh who takes part has reached a point in his or her life when they have decided that they want to make a complete commitment to their faith. By taking part in the *Amrit* ceremony a Sikh shows they are committed to trying their best to be a true Sikh living according to Sikh values and spiritual discipline.
- The ceremony was started in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh. It is led by five Khalsa, or *Amritdhari* Sikhs, i.e. Sikhs who have already taken part in the ceremony.
- The person being initiated makes a promise that they will keep specific duties and vows. *Amrit* is a liquid created by putting water into a steel bowl, adding sugar and stirring it with the *khanda*, the double-edged sword. Each of the five Khalsa Sikhs recites a prayer while the *Amrit* is made.
- The *Amrit* is sprinkled on the initiate's head and their eyes and then drunk. The Mool Mantar is then read out.

This unit begins by reminding pupils that some religious people undertake ceremonies of public commitment. Using source materials from film, pupils write reports describing and explaining aspects of the *Amrit* ceremony and its significance. Next, pupils have to use evidence to decide whether or not two Sikh young people are ready to take part in the ceremony. Finally, they consider the relationship this has to a fictional adulthood ceremony. This work links well with work in English and PSHE.



Essential knowledge for the pupil

Pupils will know:

- women and men can become *Amritdhari* Sikhs
- becoming an *Amritdhari* Sikh is to make extra commitments to prayer, spiritual discipline and wearing the five Ks
- becoming an *Amritdhari* Sikh is a choice to make a total commitment to Sikhism
- the symbolism of different aspects of the *Amrit* ceremony and duties of an *Amritdhari* Sikh



Assessment for 9–11s

The statements below suggest 'emerging', 'expected' and 'exceeding' outcomes from this unit. Adapt them for the age of pupils you are teaching. If necessary, adapt the 'e' words to the assessment language of your school.

Emerging

- Explain some of the key aspects of the *Amrit* ceremony.
- Give an example of how a Sikh might behave once they have become an *Amritdhari*.

Expected

- Describe and explain the meaning of several aspects of the *Amrit* ceremony.
- Explain the significance of the decision to become an *Amritdhari* and the effect of that decision on future life.

Exceeding

- Compare the *Amrit* ceremony to other initiation ceremonies and consider the benefit of such ceremonies.
- Comment insightfully on the challenges and benefits for Sikhs of deciding whether to take *Amrit* and living as an *Amritdhari*.

This unit helps pupils in Scotland to achieve RME 2–05a, 2–06b and 2–06c.



eResources



Go to www.natre.org.uk/inspiring-re/ to access the resources below.

- A selection of clips of the formation of the Khalsa.
- A selection of clips of the *Amrit* ceremony.
- A link to the Email a Believer section of the RE:ONLINE website.

Members are able to download extra resources to support this unit:

- A PowerPoint presentation.
- Large copies of the images on p. 30.

Activity
1

Initiation ceremonies

Ask pupils to suggest examples of ceremonies they know about that celebrate someone stating publicly a wish to become a full member of that religion, e.g. confirmation, *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* and *Amrit*.

Create a mind map of the suggestions and invite the class to identify and add the key parts of such ceremonies, e.g. preparation, reading from a sacred text, completion of certain tasks, making a promise/vow, celebration and receiving gifts.

What are the benefits or challenges of initiation ceremonies?

Activity
2

Becoming an Amritdhari Sikh

Many Sikhs want to show their commitment and dedicate their lives more fully to Sikhism, so they are initiated into the Khalsa, becoming *Amritdhari* Sikhs. Explain to the pupils that this practice comes from Guru Gobind Singh. Show pupils a film clip of the story (see eResources) or read the story. Ask:

- What commitment did the five volunteers show?
- Why do you think they volunteered?

Share information about the process of becoming an *Amritdhari* Sikh using the background information for the teacher and show the 'My Life, My Religion' clip from the eResources. Use the information on p. 30 to discuss the ceremony itself and the promises that are being made. Ask pupils:

- How hard would it be to decide to become an *Amritdhari* Sikh?
- What difference should taking part in this ceremony make to a Sikh person's life?

Give pupils a copy of the information on p. 30. Ask pupils to write a report for a school or local newspaper describing an *Amrit Sanskar* as if they have attended to witness a Sikh friend being initiated into the Khalsa. The report should include quotes from the Sikh person taking part about the significance of the ceremony to their life now and in the future.

Activity
3

Making the decision

Making the decision whether or not to become an *Amritdhari* Sikh is a difficult one that means a deepening of your commitment to Sikhism. Not all Sikhs decide to become *Amritdhari* or see it as something they need to aspire to. Most commonly, Sikhs take part in the ceremony in their teens but sometimes they are much older and sometimes younger.

Read the information on p. 31 about Amanpreet and Tanvir with pupils, then explore the information they have been given by family and friends on p. 32. Bearing in mind what they have read, ask pupils to decide whether Amanpreet and Tanvir are ready to take part in the ceremony.

Choose one of the two activities on p. 31 for your pupils to do – either writing to Amanpreet or Tanvir or putting together points for a discussion which you can then conduct in class: should Amanpreet and Tanvir become part of the Khalsa?

Activity
4

Creating a ceremony

Arrange pupils into groups of four and ask them to imagine that schools have to organise a ceremony for all 18-year-olds at which they will receive their 'certificates of adulthood'. Ask groups to create different aspects of the ceremony. They will need to:

- suggest five promises that everyone will have to agree to
- create a list of some of the privileges and responsibilities that an adult has, to be read out in the ceremony
- write an outline of a speech given by someone in their 20s at the ceremony, reflecting the challenges and benefits of adulthood
- design the certificate, ensuring that it provides a reminder of both the privileges and responsibilities of adulthood

Share pupils' work and compare it to the *Amrit* ceremony and other initiation ceremonies they know about. What are the similarities and differences?



For younger pupils

- Watch the 'My Life, My Religion' clips from the eResources and create a series of questions to send to the Email a Believer section of the RE:ONLINE website.
- Show the story of Guru Gobind Singh and the formation of the Khalsa. Discuss how having 'Kaur' (for women, meaning 'princess') and 'Singh' (for men, meaning 'lion') as a part of their name shows that a sense of identity might be important to Sikh people. Do the pupils ever wear or do anything to show a sense of identity?
- Explore the five Ks and their meanings. Do they help create and show a sense of identity? If so, how?

Becoming a Khalsa Sikh

Sikh vows and duties

When a Sikh is being initiated he or she will be reminded that they must follow the Sikh duties at all times:

- to wear the five Ks
- to follow the teaching of the Guru Granth Sahib
- to not smoke or take drugs
- to accept other Sikhs as equal and be prepared to sacrifice everything for the Sikh faith
- to give a tenth of their income to charity

When the Khalsa was originally formed, the five Ks were adopted and the following vows made:

- to not cut the hair
- to not smoke or drink alcohol
- to not eat meat that has been killed in a ritual way
- to stay true to their husband or wife



Paul Gapper / Alamy

Amrit is stirred by the Panj Piare

The Amrit Sanskar

The *Amrit Sanskar* is the ceremony during which Sikhs can become part of the Khalsa. It takes place at the gurdwara in the hours before sunrise. The ceremony can be attended by both Sikhs and non-Sikhs but is conducted by five people who have already taken *Amrit*. These five act as the Panj Piare, representing the five beloved ones from the original ceremony conducted by Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur in 1699. The story of the first ceremony is remembered by Sikhs at the festival of Baisakhi, which is why Baisakhi is the most popular time of year for *Amrit Sanskar*.

Those who have made the decision that they are ready to take *Amrit* pray and meditate in the prayer hall near the Guru Granth Sahib. The five Panj Piare stir water and sugar with a *khanda*, a double-edged sword, in a steel bowl whilst reciting the daily prayers, and readings from the Guru Granth Sahib are completed.

During the ceremony each person who wants to make this commitment kneels and is given *Amrit* to drink and has *Amrit* sprinkled in their eyes and hair five times. After each time the candidates repeat the phrase 'The Khalsa belongs to the Waheguru, victory belongs to the Waheguru'. 'Waheguru' means 'God'.

During the ceremony the Khalsa rules are explained. The Mool Mantar (the opening part of the Guru Granth Sahib) is recited. Other parts of the Guru Granth Sahib are sung and prayers said. Members of the Khalsa give out *karah parshad*, a blessed food made from flour, sugar, *ghee* and water, to the new members of the Khalsa. From this time men will have the name 'Singh', meaning 'lion', and women will have the name 'Kaur', meaning 'princess'.

After the ceremony everyone joins together for a meal in the *langar*.

Amanpreet and Tanvir's decision

Amanpreet

Amanpreet is 15 and she lives in Northampton. She is taking her exams in June. She is a committed Sikh. No one in her close family is an *Amritdhari* Sikh.



It is a really exciting time in my life. I'm really enjoying the youth activities I do with my *sangat* (community). I really feel part of a massive Sikh family. I still managed to fit in my *sewa*, service, even with the work I'm doing for my exams. It is great to be able to help out with the work of the Midland Langar Seva Society giving out food to homeless people. I have been doing that for six months now.

Some of the other things are tough though. Wearing the five Ks is fine, although sometimes people ask me what seem to be daft questions like how will I look nice at prom if I don't get my hair cut.

I am managing to get up early to pray at the weekends but not in the week. Being a Sikh is really important to me but I'm at a really busy time of life right now.

I would like to go and talk to some of the women at the gurdwara about taking part in the *Amrit Sanskar*. I'm not sure how I will know if I'm ready.

Tanvir

Tanvir is 16 and he lives in Wolverhampton. He has just finished his exams and is starting to study his A levels. His mum and dad are both *Amritdhari* Sikhs.



What a relief to have finished my exams. It feels a bit like the rest of my life will start now. It is great to be able to have a bit more of a social life too and be back in the gurdwara football team.

Mum and Dad mentioned that they would like me to take part in the big *Amrit* Sanskar that will happen in April at Baisakhi. My brother did it when he was 16 so I suppose it is my turn to do it. Being a Sikh is really important to me but I don't think about it very often. I take part in all the important things. I go on the Baisakhi procession. I even say my prayers, but not every day.

I have worn the five Ks for as long as I can remember but I know being an *Amritdhari* Sikh is much more than that.

I know I will do it at some time but the question is really about whether this is the right time. Maybe I need to learn to read the Guru Granth Sahib first. I've asked some people at the gurdwara to see if they know what it is best for me to do.

The decision

A written response

Use the information from Amanpreet and Tanvir and the advice on p. 32 from their friends and relations. Write a letter to either Amanpreet or Tanvir to help them make their decision. Include in your letter:

- the significance of becoming an *Amritdhari* Sikh
- the responsibilities they will be taking on
 - the benefits and challenges of taking this step at this point in their life
- your suggestion as to what Amanpreet or Tanvir should do, and why

A discussion

Work in a pairs using the information from Amanpreet and Tanvir and the advice on p. 32 from their friends and relations. Prepare your points for a discussion on whether they should take part in the *Amrit Sanskar* and become an *Amritdhari* Sikh. Include points about:

- what it means to be an *Amritdhari* Sikh
- the vows and duties taken on by an *Amritdhari* Sikh
 - all the benefits and challenges of becoming an *Amritdhari* Sikh at this point in their life. Is this the best time in life to take this step, and why?
- your suggestion as to what they should do, and why

Should I take part in the Amrit Sanskar?

Amanpreet and Tanvir can't decide whether it is the right time for them to become *Amritdhari* Sikhs. They have asked for advice from their friends and relations. A selection of the responses is below.

Can you keep the promises? Can you be someone who shows Sikhi (Sikhism) at its best?

A Sikh should only take *Amrit* when he or she is mature enough to understand the obligations that being a full member of the Khalsa demands.

Your *rehat* (spiritual discipline) can suffer at university so maybe you should take it before then.

It is about becoming part of a big family. All those who are *Amritdhari* are brothers and sisters. It isn't about giving up the world.

Amrit is a gift and I am so glad that I joined the Khalsa. Remember, though, that joining the Khalsa is not something that every Sikh does – can you make this commitment?

It is a challenge: getting up early to say prayers, not doing certain things and trying to live the best Sikh life – are you ready for that now?

Why don't you wait until you have settled down and know what you really want in life? Do you really feel able to make this decision now? You are only a teenager!

If you are seriously considering this then you are probably ready. It is about showing what is important in your life and that you are old enough to make that choice.

Remember you don't have to be perfect to take part in the *Amrit Sanskar*. I certainly wasn't, but it helped to focus me on what was important in my life.