

I was born in a Sikh village called Talhan, in the state of Punjab, India. It had its own large temple (*gurdwara*). Every year, the residents of the village and the surrounding areas celebrated the important religious festivals and took part in processions, and with the other children I joined in. My early nurturing in Sikh traditions took place within my family and this village community. I knew the basic beliefs of Sikhism at a very young age.

In 1968 my family moved to Leeds, England. I was only nine, and this was quite an experience for all of us. None of us could speak English. We found it hard to socialize, and everything around us felt very different. We were fortunate to have a very helpful English family next door. They had two daughters the same age as myself. We used to play together, and their father took me to school on my first day, because my parents could not speak English. This helped us settle in at our local primary school, and made us feel at home in Leeds. At school, we began to learn English. We were very keen and worked hard, attending extra English classes for Asian children. We made lots of friends. At that time there was only one *gurdwara* in Leeds – simply called ‘the Sikh temple’. Although it was a three-mile walk from our house, we attended regularly on Sundays. I also attended Punjabi classes there.

Attending the *gurdwara* on a regular basis for prayers, in the presence of the congregation, and listening to hymn-singing (*shabad kirtan*), helped me understand the meaning of ‘the oneness of God’. I began to take part in voluntary help (*seva*) in the community kitchen (*langar*). Food is served to everyone attending, including visitors from other faiths and backgrounds. Importantly, all are served the same meal, as this shows equality.

Soon after we arrived in Leeds, my elder brother and I had a haircut. In our new surroundings, we were embarrassed to have long hair. When I moved to secondary school, I met a young Sikh who wore a turban. I was impressed, and soon began to grow my hair again and wear a turban. Although I am not an ‘initiated Sikh’, I wear a turban to identify myself as a follower. I also wear a steel bracelet (*kara*) on my right wrist. My middle name is Singh, a name given to all male Sikhs by the tenth Guru. I do not cut my hair or trim my beard, and do not drink or smoke, both of which are against Sikh teachings.

My religious discipline is based on Sikh teachings, central to which is the belief that there is only one God. My daily commitments include meditation on God’s name (*nam japna*), sharing with others (*vand chhakna*), voluntary service (*seva*), and earning my living honestly (*kirat karna*). These are

most important for every Sikh. Every morning before breakfast I say the morning prayer, the *Mul Mantra*. My mother taught me this when I was young, and since she passed away – more than twenty years ago – I have said it daily. I regularly participate in religious activities and festivals at the *gurdwara*, such as *Baisakhi*, *Diwali* and other celebrations. These bring the community and families together, enabling the younger generation, including my children, to learn more about Sikhism.



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Gradually, my involvement at the *gurdwara* has increased, as has my commitment to helping others. As Sikhs, we take part in the activities of Leeds Concord multi-faith fellowship. Recently my youngest daughter lit the candles at the Peace Service, on behalf of the Sikh community. I regularly contribute towards Sikh activities, including donations towards the upkeep of the *gurdwara* and the community kitchen (*langar*). My job as a Technical Liaison Officer involves a lot of travelling. I come into contact with people of different backgrounds and faiths, and with my turban, beard and so on, I openly display my commitment to my faith. I enjoy my work and, as I do it, I apply my faith's teaching about equality and truthful living (*kirat karna*).

My wife came from India in 1983 and, having completed postgraduate studies, became a primary school teacher in Leeds. Because of my cultural tradition, I had an arranged marriage, conducted at the *gurdwara* in the presence of the Sikh holy book (*Guru Granth Sahib*) and the congregation. Verses from the *Guru Granth Sahib* were read out and sung by the priest. Not only did I marry a person of the same religion, but we also bring up our three children within the faith. Both my wife's and my own influence on the children has encouraged them to speak Punjabi as well as English, and to attend the *gurdwara* on a regular basis. I hope that, by learning the value of prayer, by understanding the importance of helping and respecting others, and by learning the Gurus' teachings, my children will follow me in the faith and commit their lives to God.

As a family, we have visited India. As well as seeing the tourist attractions, we visited many *gurdwaras* in the Punjab and Delhi. Our visit to the famous Golden Temple at Amritsar was most exciting, and gave me a greater understanding of my religious tradition.

I have enjoyed music from an early age, particularly *shabad kirtan*. I can listen to *shabad kirtan* in the morning before going to work, as well as in the evening. I find this very helpful in my quest to learn more about the Sikh faith. It is also helpful for my children. However, we don't listen to religious music alone. We also enjoy traditional Indian music, folk music, and *bhangra* dancing.

I think the teachings of the Sikh faith have made me a better person. I thank God, who has given me so much and, in return, I want to give back to God as much of myself as I can, by committing myself to the Sikh faith.

RESHAM SINGH BHOGAL