

GCE A LEVEL



An Introduction to Sikhism :

Theme 1 Religious figures and sacred texts

This resource has been produced to support centres in delivering the AS WJEC/ Eduqas GCE RS Specification Unit/Component 1 :An Introduction to Sikhism.

It is a comprehensive document, which in some areas (in order to provide context and clarity) goes beyond the realms of the WJEC/Eduqas specification.

Centres should always used the specification as their primary resource when delivering it.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

A: The life and teachings of Gurū Nānak

Who was Gurū Nānak Dev Jī?

This section covers A01 content

Specification Content:

The life and teachings of Gurū Nanak:

Whilst he is fondly respected by people from different religious and cultural traditions, Gurū Nānak is best known as the initiator and founder of the Sikh *dharam* or faith. Out of reverence, Sikhs refer to him as *Gurū Nānak Dev Jī*. He lived between 1469 and 1539 and spent his early life and later years in the Punjāb region, which is located on both sides of the border between present-day India and Pakistan. For some 25 or more years, he undertook a series of long journeys to the four corners of India and westwards to the Middle East. Each journey was called an *udāsī*. This word suggests they were 'melancholy' travels, spurred by sadness at the plight of human affairs in the world. It also hints that Gurū Nānak was observing life with a detached yet compassionate gaze, which brought some humour and hope to the ways in which he taught.

Key idea:

Gurū Nanak's aim was to foster 'oneness' and 'truthfulness' in a world plagued by division and deception, led by traits such as hypocrisy and greed.

After many years spent engaging with people from different places and walks of life, Gurū Nānak eventually returned to the Punjāb. Here he established the first settled community of Sikh disciples in a town he named Kartarpur (now in Pakistan) and dedicated to the 'Creator' or *Kartār*. Gurū Nānak emphasised that the Creator was One and All-embracing. For him, all humans were united by a shared identity, which is formed by kindling the divine spark inside every person. In a world plagued by division and deception, fuelled by traits such as greed or hypocrisy, Gurū Nānak's central aim was to foster 'oneness' and 'truthfulness'. The sum of his teachings, actions and initiatives laid firm foundations for the subsequent shaping of the Sikh *dharam* (faith) to take forward his legacy through different social eras. A study of Gurū Nānak's life thus offers a fascinating example of how social and religious movements come to be formed.

Key terms:

Gurū Nānak Dev Jī – the respectful way that Sikhs refer to Gurū Nanak in order to highlight his divinity.

Some see Gurū Nānak as a social reformer, promoting equality, social justice and cohesion. For devout Sikhs, he acted on divine instruction to uplift a troubled and suffering world. This is reflected in popular paintings of him, where a halo indicates his spiritual status, as does the preferred use of the term '*Gurū Nānak Dev Jī*', where '*Dev*' underscores the idea of his 'divinity' and '*Jī*' marks additional respect. More than a philosopher or thinker, he demonstrated a way of life that was prayerful, that demanded hard-work and the need to be kind, compassionate and generous towards others. This approach forms a guiding threefold ethic for the world's estimated 25 million Sikhs.

Specification Content:

Influence of background and socio-religious ideas of his time on key teachings

In this section, we will consider what society was like during Gurū Nānak's time and the prevalent social and religious ideas he was responding to. We will then examine key events during his life and how they relate to his teachings. The overall aim of this section is to help us weigh up how distinctive or original his contribution was and what factors were involved in shaping it. Before moving on, it is important to grasp what the terms Sikh and Gurū mean, and how Sikhs refer to their religious heritage in their **indigenous** language (Punjābi). We will also consider what sources can be used to build a picture of Gurū Nānak's life and teachings.

Key terms for learning about the path laid by Gurū Nānak

The word **Sikh** means 'learner' (in Punjābī, *sikhnā* means to learn). It became used for the disciples or followers of Gurū Nānak and his successors, and so associated with the kind of character, qualities and practices expected of them. In ancient India, a *shishya* (also linked to the word Sikh) was a disciple who followed a *Gurū*, a spiritual guide or revered teacher. The word *Gurū* suggested someone with 'gravitas', who is laden with wisdom and expertise. Today it often gets borrowed in English to denote an expert (e.g. an 'IT Gurū' or 'fashion Gurū').

Sikhs use the title **Gurū** very specifically for: Gurū Nānak; the nine successive Gurūs who shaped the faith after him; the scripture which embodies their teachings and is respectfully addressed as Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī. It is also used to denote the highest concept of Gurū; the eternal, formless, transcendent Being which Sikhs may refer to in English as 'God'. For Sikhs, then, the Gurū is a concept, a being and an institution. Their place of worship, the *gurdwārā* (also spelt *Gurūdwārā*) can be seen as the *dwār* or 'threshold' to the Gurū's school for learning.

Key idea:

The role of the Gurū is not only to 'enlighten' people with knowledge; it is to 'kindle' or 'activate' the divine spark which is seen to rest inside everyone.

Key terms:

Indigenous – originating in or native to a particular place.

Sikh – a learner or disciple.

Gurū – a spiritual guide or revered teacher.

Sikhi – the path of learning set out by the Sikh Gurūs.

dharam – a way of life centred on good or right conduct in the world, or a path which teaches this; a way of naming a religious tradition e.g. the **Sikh dharam**.

One conceptual understanding Sikhs have is that, through the Gurū, the dark gloom of ignorance ('*gu*') becomes dispelled with the light of wisdom ('*rū*'). The Gurū is thus an awakener or enlightener, as well as a kindler, who can ignite the *gyot* (divine spark or flame of God) which rests inside everyone. An associated word, '*gur*', means an art, skill or knack which is imparted to the disciple. Importantly, the Gurū not only imparts wisdom, but can actively transform and bless a person.

It follows that Sikhs understand they are on a path of learning. They may refer to their religion as **Sikhī**, the sum of what their Gurūs taught which becomes an active force for learning in their lives, or as the **Sikh dharam**. This key word used by the Sikh Gurūs is derived from *dharmā*, a term common to Indic religions (e.g. the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions). It suggests the inherent order of things, a practice of life based on mobilising our inherent a sense of goodness, responsibility and right conduct, or teachings which enable such a way of life. For Sikhs, the word *dharam* embraces the inward and outward aspects of their faith, its visions, core values, codes of practice, heritage and legacy. It suggests the fostering of a spiritual mindset to guide and uplift the business of everyday living. For many contemporary Sikh scholars and faith practitioners, the western term 'Sikhism' (coined in the nineteenth century), along with the label 'religion', are too narrow or misleading, if they suggest a static package of unfamiliar beliefs and practices, boxed off from everyday life. If we keep in mind the indigenous scriptural terms Sikhs use for the path which they follow, it can better unlock what there is to know about Gurū Nānak and the faith he founded.

Key terms:

Gurū Granth Sāhib – the finalised volume of sacred text which Sikhs revere as Gurū.

Ādi Granth – the first historic compilation of the sacred text; a term often used by scholars to refer to the sacred text.

Janam sākhi episodes – 'life testimonies' recorded in anthologies recounting events from the life of Gurū Nanak. These have been passed down also in oral tradition.

Sources which can be used to study Gurū Nānak's life

Sikhs can directly access Gurū Nānak's teachings because they are preserved in the **Gurū Granth Sāhib**, the sacred scripture which Sikhs revere as Gurū (writers often use the term **Ādi Granth** - pronounced 'Aad Granth' – although this denotes the first and not final version of the sacred text). The Gurū Granth Sāhib is recorded in the Gurmukhī script, although in this study we will be relying on translations into English. These are never a perfect substitute for the original, but they give us some insight into Gurū Nānak's key messages. To understand how these relate to events in his life, Sikhs rely on the the **janam sākhi** episodes or 'life testimonies' which appear in separate anthologies which were written, as well as illustrated, some time after the life of Gurū Nānak. Another source is the work of the esteemed Sikh scribe and spiritual mentor, Bhāi Gurdās, who was an uncle of the fifth Sikh Gurū. He was a contemporary of William Shakespeare and compositions are regarded by Sikhs as a vital 'key' to understanding the teachings of all the Gurūs.

Occasionally in this resource you will notice quotes from people who have written about and/or practise the Sikh faith. They might be looking through the lens of historical, political, social and cultural or literary studies, as well as the lens of philosophy or theology and the lens of lived faith experience. Sometimes different perspectives may get contested, so it is important to remember every writer has his or her own starting points and view on the subject. A helpful analogy to keep in mind is how a musicologist and a musician can leave you with contrasting understandings of music, in terms of its social history, for example, or its actual effects and nuances. The quotes which appear have been selected to highlight key knowledge being acquired in the text or encourage reflection on it.

Specification Content:

Invasion of Mughal army and Mughal persecution

Key idea:

The Punjāb's history was long characterised by religious and cultural change, political and social upheaval and external domination.

The ruling powers and advent of the Mughal dynasty in India

Gurū Nānak was born in the Punjāb. This region gets its name from its five rivers (*panj* means 'five' and *āb* in Persian means 'water') which are tributaries of the river Indus. It was home to the ancient Indus Valley civilization and to the emergence of Vedic culture, on which Hindu tradition is based. Indeed, the term 'Hindu' was introduced by outsiders from the west to describe the people living eastwards beyond the Indus river. Since it was the gateway by land to India, the Punjāb underwent many invasions over the centuries by rulers of Greek, Turkic, Persian and Central Asian origin. Under the rule of an early Indian emperor, Ashoka, it became for some time a centre for Buddhist learning. The Punjāb's history was therefore long characterised by religious and cultural change, political and social upheaval and external domination.

Gurū Nānak was born under the rule of the Lodhi dynasty from Afghanistan. By then, Northern India had become influenced by many aspects of Islamic culture, learning and governance. Through migration and religious conversions, Muslims had long become part of local populations. Gurū Nānak's lifelong friend and travelling companion, for example, was a Muslim bard named Bhāi Mardānā; the Gurū's father was an accountant for the Muslim landlord of their area, Rai Bular Bhatti, who is remembered as one of the Gurū's earliest disciples.

During first fifty or so years of Gurū Nānak's life, the Punjāb saw an era of relative peace, but the last years of the Lodhi dynasty were very unsettled. The Gurū then witnessed some ferocious invasions by Bābur, who was a descendant of the Mongol emperor, Chengis Khan. Bābur eventually founded the Mughal dynasty in India in 1526. It last lasted until 1748, forty years after the passing of the tenth Sikh Gurū. In his verse, Gurū Nānak depicts the horrors of Bābur's invasions, as the once decadent lives of the elite ended in humiliation. He rebukes the relentless abuse and degradation of women by the invading armies. He also rebukes the lack of courageous spiritual leadership to respond to the atrocities. In one verse he summarises:

This dark age is like a knife; rulers are like butchers

Dharam – the practice of all that is good and right – has fled on its wings.

In this dark night of falsehood, the moon of truth is nowhere to be seen.

(Gurū Nānak in Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 145)

Key idea:

Dharam for Gurū Nanak was intertwined with good governance; it regulates the inward/outward, grassroots/top-down forces which govern daily life and curbs the abuses of power.

Gurū Nānak here uses the word *dharam* to suggest right conduct, based on practising values stemming from every person's spiritual self and which religions are meant to nurture. For Gurū Nānak, *dharam* was evaporating as society got engulfed by forces rooted in the worst of human nature in conditions of cruelty, oppression and forced political and religious domination. Importantly, Gurū Nānak highlighted hypocrisy, deceit, greed and exploitation by religious as well as political leaders; by serving self-interest and neglecting their spiritual and social responsibilities, they revealed themselves to be fake.

Janam sākhi accounts indicate that Gurū Nānak was able to discourse with Bābur, after being confined in one of his prisons, and that this changed the course of his thinking, before he secured his dynasty in India. Whilst the Punjāb saw its rulers change from the top, daily life at the grassroots was also controlled by an often corrupt religious elite which perpetuated India's age-old divisions of social caste. Gurū Nānak keenly sensed, grieved over and rebuked people's subjugation, passivity, helplessness and apathy in the face of the various ruling forces which governed their daily lives.

Specification Content

Influence of Sufism; influence of Lalla; north-Indian sant tradition; use of devotional songs. Adi Granth 150.

The Sufis and the north Indian *sant* tradition

Given the diversity of the Punjāb region, the longstanding co-presence of the two major faiths, it is not surprising that in his verse, Gurū Nānak often observes and compares different forms of religious practice, for example: 'After bathing, Muslims recite prayers and after bathing, Hindus conduct their worship; such acts of bathing are considered mark of the wise' (*Gurū Nānak in Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 150*). For Gurū Nānak, ritual cleansing was worthwhile if it supported efforts to cleanse one's own consciousness, in line with his stress on purposeful, as opposed to hollow, ritual practice, as we shall soon see.

It is not surprising too that there was a ferment of questions about human identity and purpose, as well as spiritual and moral responses to the climate and conditions of the time. Gurū Nānak was certainly not alone in his response, which resonated with some aspects of existing devotional movements. These included the north Indian '*sant*' tradition and that of the Sufis.

Key quote:

Defined at its extremes by the Islam of the clerics and the Hinduism of the brāhmins with their ritualistic emphasis, the religious life of the period found of its most vibrant expression in several overlapping currents of devotional poetry. (Christopher Shackle and Arvind-pal Mandair)

At one time, the tradition of the Sufis flourished in the wider Islamic world. It soon took root in northern India following several waves of Muslim conquest. This mystical branch of Islam emphasised inward devotion, contrasting more clerical and legalistic approaches. A much-celebrated Sufi figure of 13th century Punjāb was Sheikh Farīd. His rich Punjābi verse emphasised the everyday practice of love and forgiveness and Gurū Nānak refers to him in his own compositions. Because of the Sufis' emphasis on devotional singing, they found common ground with some aspects of Hindu devotional practice.

The medieval *sant* tradition of India likewise emphasised the path of *bhakti* or inward devotion to God, in contrast to other paths which promoted intellectual advancement or the practice of physical austerities. The word *sant* is linked to the idea of truth – 'sat' (rhyming with 'hut') – and it is often translated as 'saint'. Like many Sufis, the saintly personalities of the *bhakti* movement (known by Sikhs as *bhagats*) adopted local languages for their devotional compositions. A number of them feature in Sikh scripture, such as Kabīr, Ravidās and Nāmdev, whom Sikhs address respectfully with the title '*Bhagat*' plus respect marker 'Jī'. Born several decades before Gurū Nānak, Kabīr was raised by a family of Muslim weavers, whilst his spiritual training was broadly Hindu in character. He lived in Benares, a famous centre for the high-caste *brāhmin* priests and his compositions critiqued hypocritical religious practice and the injustices of the caste system. In Kashmir, the local language got suffused with the verse-sayings of the 14th century female mystic Lalla, or Lal Ded. Whilst there is no known reference to her in Sikh teachings, she reflects a broad devotional movement which had arisen before Gurū Nānak's birth. We will soon consider how, in contrast to other devotional movements, Gurū Nānak was able to lay the foundations for a distinctive faith and way of life.

Specification Content:

Monotheism in Islam

Monotheism in Islam and Hindu concepts of the sacred

In the compositions of Sufi and *bhakti* saints, God was being perceived through Hindu and Muslim eyes. Although the term 'God' is a Western one with its roots in Judeo-Christian tradition, we will use it here to sum up the idea of an ultimate, eternal reality and creative power which exists and enables existence itself.

The concept of one, ultimate and eternal reality goes back to ancient Hindu texts. Some schools of Hindu thought emphasised God as a tangible entity, e.g. who is manifest in creation and who became incarnate in the world; other schools emphasised God's infinite, formless and thus intangible aspects. The symbol and syllable '*Aum*' represents the idea of a cosmic vibration which generated, sustains and thus unifies all creation. In Hindu tradition, therefore, the popular worship of deities could be seen to point towards one supreme reality, on the one hand, and to risk obscuring this oneness, on the other. For these such reasons, there are many views on how to categorise Hindu beliefs in God.

Key terms:

Monotheism – the belief that one God uniquely exists.

Polytheism – the belief that many gods exist.

Atheism – the belief that no God or gods exist.

Key idea:

It can be over-simplistic to contrast Islamic and Hindu concepts of God as 'monotheistic' versus 'polytheistic' and so assume that Gurū Nanak was influenced by the former and rejected the later.

Specification Content:

Status/role of women in Islam and caste in Hinduism – Adi Granth 91

Key terms:

zāt or jāt – hereditary occupational groupings

varnā – one of the four hierarchical groupings of social class set out in Hindu scripture.

Islam emphasised allegiance to *the* one supreme Creator (Allah) and no other. Like its sister faiths from the Abrahamic branch of religions, i.e. Judaism and Christianity, Islam is categorised as monotheistic (it accepts the existence of one God, as opposed to polytheism, which accepts many gods, or atheism, which accepts no God). It followed that in Islamic thought, 'idol worship' signified allegiance to many false gods as opposed to the one true God. This no doubt influenced interpretations of the diverse religious practices encountered in India.

For the Sufis, the Hindu idea of an underlying oneness which can be internally experienced no doubt struck many chords. At the same time, it is easy to see how debates ensued, both within and across religious traditions, about who had the best or truest concept of God. This provides a context to examine Gurū Nānak's contribution, and to consider what weight he gave to theological debate, given his wider concerns about living a wise and worthy human life and uplifting society.

Key quote:

'What Gurū Nānak urges on his hearers is not so much a theological rationale as a constant spiritual practice, and not spiritual practice in isolation from life's ordinary activities and preoccupations, but the grounding for these.'
(Eleanor Nesbitt)

The role of caste and status of women

In the Indo-Muslim culture of urban and rural Punjāb, there were many kinds of social roles divisions. Some of these were based around occupational groupings known as *zāt* or *jāt*. They included (the final letter 's' in the italicised terms indicates the English plural marker): the *Khatri*s, who ran enterprises and supported the civil administration (as did Gurū Nānak's family), *Rajputs* descending from local ruling clans and *Jats* who cultivated and owned the agricultural land.

In Islam, there was an ideal of social equality, although inevitably Muslim nobles lived very differently from those of lower social standing. The Hindu view of society, by contrast, was centred on a four-tier structure of hereditary classes which became known in the west as the 'caste system'. There were four *varnās* or hierarchical groups: *brāhmins*, the educated, priestly class, who provided spiritual guidance and conducted ceremonial rites; *kshatriyas*, the ruling class, whose duty was to govern and protect; *vaishyas*, those with a trade or profession; *sudras*, employed as servants or labourers. Waves of Muslim conquest dislodged the traditional ruling class and the *brāhmins* began to lose their traditional patronage. To survive they increasingly relied on providing services to lay people and exerted social power in this way.

From ancient times, there were also duties formulated for women. When society was organised locally around family and community networks, women commanded respect for their subtle but pervasive roles to support society's wellbeing. They were honoured as powerful agents, yet constrained by social laws. In addition, waves of invasion in medieval India had some key effects on the social status of women. Punjāb was the gateway to India by land and it became common for young females to be abducted by invading armies, hence issues of their safety and protection became heightened. Cultural and economic factors meant that the birth of a girl was a financial

burden for Punjābi families, while a boy's birth was an asset. As elsewhere in the world, women got looked upon as property. Strict religious codes on cleanliness also meant that, in an era of fewer conveniences to support menstruation and childbirth, women were considered to be polluted.

Key idea:

A layering of social, cultural, religious and political influences - on both sides of the Hindu and Muslim divide - bore upon the status of women in Gurū Nanak's time. His teachings reveal his aims to put a mirror to prevalent social attitudes and to uplift the regard for people who were classed as 'low' due to their class or gender.

This layering of factors meant that, by Gurū Nānak's time, a number of practices which subjugated women had taken hold. They included: female infanticide, i.e. the killing of new born baby girls; *sati*, where a recently bereaved widow, usually from a high-ranking family, was expected to cremate herself on her husband's funeral pyre, or endure life as a social outcaste; the prohibition on widow remarriage; the trend for child-marriage, in efforts to save young girls from being taken by invaders; the practice of *purdah* (from the Persian word for 'curtain') or veiling, which diminished women's visibility from the public realm.

Gurū Nānak challenged religious and social hypocrisy and elitism around caste and gender. In one verse, he pictures a high-caste *brāhmin*, marking a line around his cooking area to prevent the presence - or even shadow - of a low caste person from polluting it. With some irony, Gurū Nānak uses the metaphor of low caste women to depict the *brāhmin*'s state of mind: '*falsehood is the drummer woman; cruelty the butcher's wife; slander the sweeper-woman, and anger the outcaste woman*' (Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 51). So, we conclude, whilst the *brāhmin* busies himself to keep the polluting influences of low caste people out, the traits he rather ought to abhor have already entered and settled inside his mind. The Gurū uses the very images of the *brāhmin*'s worst fears to bring this to light.

Indeed, Gurū Nānak in his teachings uses the word '*neech*' to refer to himself as 'lowly'. He associates with those who are considered the 'lowest of the low'. To support and uplift them is our duty, which attracts God's grace (Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 15). This grace has the power to transform 'the lowly into kings' (Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 1329).

This section covers AO1 content

Relationship between key events in Gurū Nanak's life and specific teachings.

Gurū Nanak's horoscope at his birth and the acknowledgement of One Formless Lord.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

A (contd):

Gurū Nānak Dev Jī's birth; acknowledging One Formless Creator

Gurū Nānak Dev Jī was born in April 1469, although traditionally Sikhs celebrate his birth around November. His parents were Hindus and their background was Khatri. The Khatri were descended from the ancient *kshatriya* ruling caste and involved in trade, commerce and the civil administration. Moreover, the family surname, Bedi, was associated with knowledge of the Vedas, i.e. the basis of Hindu scripture. There to welcome baby Nānak's birth was his five year-old sister, Nānaki. The names of both sister and brother are often linked to their *Nānake*; in Punjābi, this means home of one's maternal grandparents, where it was traditional for a mother to stay for a short period before and after childbirth.

There are several accounts of Gurū Nānak's birth in the early hours before dawn. They tell of how the Muslim midwife, who had delivered many babies in her time, reported some exceptional happenings around his arrival, such as a beam of light filling the room and the baby's wise laughter instead of crying. As was customary in Hindu tradition, Gurū Nānak's parents sent for the family priest to draw up a horoscope. This he had done for many newborn children, but this time, he divulged that his calculations foretold of an exceptional life; the child would be revered by Hindus and Muslims alike, that his name would be known on the earth and in the heavens beyond, that he would embrace all of creation and acknowledge One Formless Creator.

The drawing of a birth horoscope is not a Sikh religious custom and was not promoted by the Sikh Gurūs. In the story of Gurū Nānak's birth, however, it features as one of many signs indicating his enlightened status and role to serve the world at large. This was later summed up in a verse by Bhāi Gurdās over a century later:

As soon as Gurū Nānak, the true Gurū, was born

All the mist and gloom of ignorance in the world was dispelled with light

Just as the glowing sunrise disperses the darkness

Causing the last stars of the night to fade away.

Translation of verse by Bhāi Gurdās

The *janam sākhi* episodes: life contexts for Gurū's Nānaks's teachings

Stories about Gurū Nānak's birth and life are part of Sikh oral tradition. They can be traced to several anthologies which recount the *janam sākhi* episodes. These 'life testimony' accounts were written by devotees after Gurū Nānak's own lifetime. Unlike the teachings contained within the Gurū Granth Sāhib, they were not directly composed or employed by the Gurū Nānak himself. They do, however, provide some meaningful and memorable contexts for Sikhs to learn about Gurū Nānak's life and teachings and to feel that he was divinely sent.

As we saw in the story of Gurū Nānak's birth, the *janam sākhi* episodes underline the view that he was no ordinary human. When young Nānak fell asleep in a field, a venomous cobra was seen to shade him caringly from the glaring sun. When, at school, Nānak was asked to write the letters of the alphabet, he came up with an acrostic, with each letter standing for a wise teaching instead of something mundane. When his father wanted to train his son in business - by giving him money to invest at the market - Nānak used it to feed a group of hungry holy men. This act of generosity, he felt, had earned him a priceless blessing from the thankful elders. Returning home to face his father's anger, he explained that this, for him, was *sacha sauda* or 'true business'.

In the accounts depicting Gurū Nānak's early life, we see him gently revealing the narrow-mindedness or foolishness of grown-ups. We also come across personalities such as his sister Nānaki, or his awestruck school teachers, who were quick to recognise his wisdom and blessed abilities. Every character, whether good or seemingly bad, serves to highlight an underlying message. The episodes also raise important questions, e.g. what really should our education or business in this world be about? The answers, he suggested, involved recognising and living out our spiritual identity and purpose, based on a meaningful acknowledgment that One Infinite Creator exists. Gurū Nānak made people stop and think about their taken-for-granted rituals, be it at school, at work or in their religious life, as we will see in the *sakhi* introduced below.

'If one is extremely learned, yet full of greed, avarice and arrogance

Such a person ought to be called the worst of fools'

- Gurū Nānak Dev Jī, Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 140

'You may read multitudes of books all your life, for as long as you have breath

But there's only One thing that ultimately counts, all else is the babble of the ego.'

- Gurū Nānak Dev Jī, Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 467

The sacred thread ceremony: the risk and value of rituals

Because Nānak was from a high-caste Hindu family, he was expected to undergo a ceremony to be invested with the sacred thread or *janeu*. The ancient custom of wearing a specially spun cotton thread, like a sash diagonally across the chest, was to secure the religious and social standing of young men from a high-caste background, in this world and the next.

When Gurū Nānak was around nine years old, the family priest (or *pandit*) was invited to conduct a sacred thread ceremony before a gathering of family and friends. As he leant forward to put the thread over his neck, the young Nānak interrupted him. The explanation he gave is captured in the following lines recorded in the Gurū Granth Sāhib:

Make compassion your cotton, contentment your thread,

Make fidelity its knot and integrity its twist.

That would make a sacred thread for the soul.

If you have such a thread, O Pandit, then put it on me.

Such a thread cannot break, nor be soiled, nor can it get burned or lost.

Blessed are those with a thread of such qualities placed over their neck.

Gurū Nānak, Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 471

Gurū Nānak did not reject the sacred thread as such, but asked the priest to produce one composed of those enduring spiritual attributes which could be carried forward into the afterlife. The priest was unable to satisfy Gurū Nānak with his explanations and his subsequent refusal to accept it is sometimes explained as his rejection of Hindu ritual. Certainly, he did not subscribe to many aspects of Hindu and Muslim ritual observance, such as fasting or the making of pilgrimages and this event serves as one example.

Key idea:

Gurū Nanak outlined both the risk and value of rituals. They can function as an empty shell, hollow of meaning, or as a deceptive mask. At the same time, they can be enacted in ways that are full of meaning and so help people to conserve, embody and pass down core values.

When we look more broadly, however, at the *janam sākhi* episodes, we see Gurū Nānak questioning people from all walks of life when their religious or secular observances appeared empty, shallow, exploitative or hypocritical. His concern seems to have been the risk that people neglected the inner substance, which a ritual was meant to conserve and sustain, and so left it hollow of meaning.

Because Gurū Nānak affirmed religious diversity, he did also affirm the value of ritual practice - such as the five daily prayers of the Muslims ([Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 141](#)) - so long as this helped cultivate inward qualities, such as truthfulness of mind. Indeed, in one verse, Gurū Nānak remarks '*The outer sacred thread is worthwhile only so long as the divine light shines within.*' ([Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 355](#)). This suggests his focus was on the mindset governing ritual practice, more so than its outward form, or the religion it represented.

Gurū Nānak's experience of God's court: the realm of oneness and truth

Gurū Nānak's parents hoped that his life would follow a normal, traditional course. They got him married but he would not settle into any occupation. Eventually his brother-in-law secured work for him as a storekeeper for the governor of Sultanpur. His job was to weigh, measure and sell grain to the locals. According to one *janam sākhi*, something would happen as he counted and reached thirteen scoopfuls. In Punjābi, this number sounds like the phrase 'All is Yours' (*tera*). Repeating this as a chant, Gurū Nānak kept scooping out the grain whilst somehow the stores did not run empty. For Sikhs, his apparently odd behaviour serves to remind us that nothing is actually 'mine' or 'yours' but is given to us by the Creator. It was once more a sign that Nānak's vocation lay beyond the mundane roles that were being expected of him.

Whilst in Sultanpur, Nānak followed a routine of arising early before dawn, bathing in the nearby river before his morning meditation. One morning he did not return from the river and disappeared for three days. Sikhs learn that, on entering the waters, he got mystically swept away into God's court. There he heard a divine voice and was made to sip a cup containing the 'nectar of God's name'. Rather than see God visibly in any form, he had a profound inward experience of God's presence, through the senses of sound and taste. The voice explained to him his calling - to be Gurū and to spread remembrance of God's name in the world. In one verse, Gurū Nānak depicts himself as a minstrel who was out of work, whom God took into his service:

'The Master summoned me, his minstrel,

To the true mansion of his presence.

He dressed me in the robes of his true praise and glory

My food became the nectar of his true name.'

[Gurū Nānak, Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 150.](#)

The repetition of the word 'true' echoes Gurū Nānak's emphasis (in the morning prayer, Jap Jī Sāhib) that: '*God is true and God's court is true*'; '*It is in the realm of truth that the formless One dwells*' ([Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 7-8](#)). Elsewhere he stresses that in God's court '*all divisions of social category or power count for nothing*' ([Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 469](#)). The *Mūl Mantar*, or 'root prayer', is considered the essence of all Gurū Nānak's teaching. Although there is no neat way of translating it, its first two phrases can be explained as follows:

'Ik Oankār, Sat Nām'

'God is One - All is God, Whose identity (name) is Eternal Truth'.

[\(Gurū Nanak, Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 1\)](#)

Key idea:

When Gurū Nanak disappeared in the river, he became immersed in God's realm. He had a profound experience of oneness and eternal truth. His mission was to download this realm in to everyday human affairs.

His teaching that God is neither Hindu nor Muslim.

Key idea:

Gurū Nanak's statement that 'There is no Hindu and no Muslim' can suggest his view that:

No one was truly living up to the teachings of his or her faith

We are more than our labels

No one should be considered an 'alien' or an 'other'.

There is an underlying unity between people and faiths.

His mission to reveal the message of God's name to the world.

Key term:

udāsi – the name given to each of Gurū Nanak's great journeys, which suggests a melancholy and compassionately detached state of mind.

In his life and teachings, Gurū Nānak seemed to not only point towards a realm of oneness and truth beyond this world, as he had now experienced it; he also set about in earnest to 'download' such a realm into the heart of everyday human affairs. After reappearing from the river, Gurū Nānak broke his enigmatic silence with a message for all people, before preparing to set off on a series of long journeys. This episode marked a turning point, when Nānak became fully conscious of his mission as Gurū and took to it with new determination.

'There is no Hindu nor Muslim': we are more than our labels

Many had frantically searched for Gurū Nānak when news spread he had disappeared. When eventually he spoke, some period after his return, they were eager to know what he had to say. Sikh tradition holds that the first words he then uttered were '*Na ko Hindu, na ko Musalman*' – 'There is no Hindu and no Muslim'.

If we look back on Gurū Nānak's life, this statement is full of possible meanings. He had been keen to point out religious hypocrisy, so it could imply there appeared to be no one demonstrating how to be a Hindu or a Muslim in the true spirit of their faith. Gurū Nānak had been pointing to a more fundamental kind of human identity - the spiritual self of every human – which could not be confined to any religious category. He might have then been saying that we are more than our labels. From another perspective, given the antagonism between faiths, to point to someone as a Hindu or a Muslim made them an alien or an 'other' and so not one of 'us'. In this way, Gurū Nānak seemed to be stressing the kinship of all humans. It followed that he also stressed the kinship of religions, by addressing God using both Hindu terms (e.g. '*Rām*') and Islamic ones (e.g. '*Khudā*'). More than suggesting God was *neither* Hindu *nor* Muslim, he advanced the idea of God's all-embracing nature, which his mystical experience had confirmed for him.

The mission begins: Gurū Nānak's long journeys

After the calling to his mission, Gurū Nānak began a life phase of extensive travel which lasted just over 25 years. *Janam sākhi* accounts suggest at least four great journeys. These took him from towns to farmlands, forests and mountains. He encountered people of different walks of life and religious persuasions. He visited cities sacred to the Hindus and Muslims, as well as the region of Gautama Buddha's birth. On most of these journeys, he travelled with his childhood friend, Bhāi Mardānā, who came from a family of Muslim bards and played a stringed instrument called a *rabab*. In some accounts, Gurū Nānak is joined also by a Hindu friend, Bhāi Bālā. The three are often pictured together in popular Sikh paintings.

It is easy to get the impression that Gurū Nānak was taking up a period of tourism, or escapism, each time he set off. In Punjābi, each of his journeys is called an *udāsi*. This gives us a clue as to the spirit in which he undertook it as he prepared for the hardships of travel which lay ahead. The word *udāsi* evokes a melancholy state when you step back and see life in a more detached way. This suggests to Sikhs that Gurū Nānak was driven by a sense of sadness for the plight of human beings. It also suggests he observed society with a detached yet compassionate gaze, as he guided and blessed people to become more genuine and good. In particular, the

accounts of this period reveal Gurū Nānak's approach to teaching and transforming people, in whatever situation he encountered them.

One approach was to use humour and irony. On his first journey, Gurū Nānak visited Hardwar, a pilgrimage site on the banks of the river Ganges. Observing Hindus splashing water eastwards towards the sun as an offering to their dead ancestors, he started splashing water westwards. In response to their bewilderment, he explained he was watering his fields in the Punjāb. Through simple action, he helped people step outside their routinely limited thinking.

Another approach was to convey his message dramatically, through extraordinary happenings. Whatever your own beliefs, the accounts of such happenings illuminate some underlying truths about the human condition. They involve vividly enacted signs, through which Gurū Nānak helped people realise for themselves the error of their ways. At Eminabad, he did not accept an invitation to dine with the rich and corrupt town chief and preferred to stay instead with a humble carpenter. To explain why, Gurū Nānak took and squeezed some bread from both the households; blood dripped from the town chief's bread and milk from the carpenter's. In this stark way, he taught the importance of honest work and warned against wealth acquired through human exploitation and greed.

On another occasion, on return from the Middle East, Gurū Nānak passed through a place called Hasan Abdal in mountainous region of present-day Pakistan. On a hilltop there lived a Muslim holy man by the name of Wali Kandhari, who came from Kandahar in Afghanistan. He was blessed with a hilltop spring which enabled him to control the only local source of fresh water. Noticing Gurū Nānak's arrival and his popularity with the local people, he cut off the water supply. Following Gurū Nānak's instruction, Bhāi Mardānā climbed up several times to request if the great saint could share the water. Each time he returned back still thirsty and increasingly exasperated at the holy man's stubborn refusal. Gurū Nānak then asked Bhāi Mardānā to lift a stone where they were at the foothill. At that spot, water began to gush out, just as the hilltop spring ran dry. Peering down, Wali Kandhari, in a fit of rage, pushed a large boulder down the hill towards Gurū Nānak, who then stopped it in its tracks with his stretched out hand. It left an imprint, as if the rock had turned to wax. At that instant, the holy man's stone-like heart melted and he humbly descended to ask the Gurū for forgiveness. Illustrated in this episode is Gurū Nānak's key teaching, that every *dharam* or religion must rest on the essential bedrock of *dayā* or compassion.

Key ideas:

The accounts of Gurū Nānak's journeys suggest he approached the task of teaching and transforming people by:

Using humour and irony

Conveying his teachings dramatically, through enacted signs.

Conveying his teachings musically and multilingually, using poetic imagery and metaphor.

Indicating that he was a channel for the teachings which were coming from a divine realm.

Key quote:

'Nānak twists and overturns the established ritual codes in a way that challenges people's innate assumptions, and orients them towards a new reality. The numerous miracles associated with him are not a means of amplifying his grandeur, but rather, they serve as lenses through which his audience can interrogate the inner workings of their own minds.'

Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh

Another way Gurū Nānak taught links back to the image of a minstrel. It involved using the spoken and sung word to convey his message. The

janam sākhi accounts are thus often interspersed with scriptural verses. Importantly, Gurū Nānak didn't consider his compositions to be his own. When inspired, he would ask Bhāi Mardānā to pick up and pluck the strings of his *rabab* because he heard and felt the *bānī*, or divine message, descending. Expressed through melody and rhythm, the teachings became both soul-stirring and memorable and could be orally shared and reflected upon, whether or not a person was literate. Growing up, Gurū Nānak had learned local and classical languages used by Hindus and Muslims, so he could adapt his communication to different audiences and engage in dialogue with people. The poetic style allowed him to use metaphor to imaginatively bring home his message, as we shall see in the *janam sākhi* below.

His meeting with Sajjan.

Gurū Nānak's meeting with Sajjan

On one of their journeys, Gurū Nānak and Bhāi Mardānā stayed at an inn run by a person named Sajjan (a word which means a good and honourable friend). Over the years, however, this inn-keeper had become a swindler and a cheat – or '*tthag*' in north Indian languages (from where the English word 'thug' is derived, which is pronounced in a similar way). For this reason, he was known as Sajjan Thug. He would take every trouble to ensure his guests had a comfortable stay. He even had special quarters made where Hindus and Muslims could offer their prayers. While they rested, however, he would rob them of their belongings and did not stop at killing his unsuspecting victims.

Gurū Nānak could see very clearly through people and situations. Before retiring for the night, he asked Bhāi Mardānā to pick up his stringed *rabab*. As the Gurū sang, he painted a picture of things that might fool one by seeming to be true, yet are not: bronze which is shiny but turns black when you try to rub it clean; houses with beautiful exteriors which are empty and crumble like ruins; the pure-looking, white-feathered herons found at pilgrimage sites, who ruthlessly tear apart their prey; the tall species of tree whose fruit looks inviting but is tasteless.

Through this verse (found in the [Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 729](#)) the Gurū indicated that one's true '*sajjan*' or friends are those values which stay by your side till the day you depart from the world and have to account for your life. All fake or hypocritical depictions of good deeds are to no avail if you cannot free you from the grip of selfishness and cultivate God's light within you. Hearing this, the inn-keeper fell at the Gurū's feet, repented and got saved from his hidden vices. He distributed his ill-gotten wealth to the needy and started life afresh, becoming a 'Sajjan' in deed as well as name.

His teaching of what true religion is.

Gurū Nānak's teachings about what true religion is

Wherever he went, Gurū Nānak taught that true religion (*dharam*) is more than a badge, a mask, a rod, an escape, a drug or a good luck charm, even if people might treat it that way. One famous teaching of his is: '*truth is higher than everything, but higher still is truthful living*' ([Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 62](#)). We can understand from this that he saw religion as more than a philosophy. The first question he poses in the morning prayer, Jap Jī Sāhib, concerns how one can become '*sachiaara*', i.e. someone who walks the way of truth and is genuine instead of false. For him *dharam* was a practical means to

awaken, educate and transform the mind and illuminate the link between our outward and inward condition: *'by conquering your mind, you conquer the world'* ([Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 6](#)).

Gurū Nānak did not argue about which religion was more true; rather he seemed to accept people's different religious identities and to promote the cultivation of a *dharmic* mindset, i.e. a way of thinking aligned to *dharam* as a means to cultivate those spiritual virtues which are God's gift to every human. In Jap Jī Sāhib, he stresses:

'All virtues are Yours, God, none belong to me.

Without actually practising these virtues

There is no saintliness or religious devotion'

[Gurū Nānak, Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 4](#)

Key ideas:

True religion for Gurū Nānak:

was more than a philosophy or a social identity.

should provide a means to cultivate and practise spiritual virtues.

should help transform and uplift people's psyche

should foster in each person a sense of dignity, sovereignty and agency, along with deeply felt humility before God and wider creation.

Further on in Jap Jī Sāhib, Gurū Nānak pictures the whole planet in the midst of the cosmos as a *dharamsl*, a place or school to practice *dharam*, which we visit as spiritual travellers, all scheduled to arrive and depart from it one day. Describing Gurū Nānak's travels, Bhāi Gurdās indicated that every home Gurū Nānak visited became a *dharamsāl*. This suggests that Gurū Nānak saw *dharam* or religion as a practice which transforms both the environment of one's mind and one's social environment.

True *dharam* for Gurū Nānak was therefore more than a collection of ritual observances or social labels. It should lift people from being resigned their fate, by freeing them from the hold of a pessimistic psyche clouded by ignorance, inertia or dependence and inspiring them to become more wise, hopeful, self-reliant and interdependent. The path described by Gurū Nānak also required you to be ready to *'give your head'* ([Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 1412](#)); it was not for the sheepish but required courage and resolve. In an age where people were being conquered and subjugated in many ways, Gurū Nānak saw that religion should foster in each person a sense of dignity, sovereignty and positive agency to make a difference in the world, as well as deep humility before God and wider creation.

Gurū Nānak's teaching against the caste system; raising the status of women.

Gurū Nānak's response to social divisions and the status of women

Gurū Nānak observes many social divisions and occupations in his verse. In one respect, these provide analogies about the need to live life: as a saint, valuing spiritual wisdom; as ruler and a protector, governing the mind responsibly and safeguarding goodness; as a trader, making the growth of spiritual traits one's business; as servant, ready to serve others for the common good. As we will see, womanhood too provided analogies about living a value-centred life. It seems from these analogies that Gurū Nānak's interest was in people's deeper spiritual transformation as a basis for social peace, justice and flourishing.

Gurū Nānak was quick to highlight unacceptable prejudice based on one's inherited social status in an unequal society. Yet, the world-view he presented was spiritual as well as social. He accepted that, according to the divine will, some are born high and some low ([Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 1](#)) and that ultimately all power lies in God's hands. At the same time, we must take initiative to resolve our affairs with our own hands ([Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 474](#)), with the capabilities divinely gifted to us. On one of his journeys, he encountered some master ascetics who lived as recluses in the mountains. When they asked how the world was faring down below, he rebuked them for neglecting the suffering and injustices which were weighing society down. For him, spirituality and social action went hand in hand.

Gurū Nānak had used the image of a woman to represent the spiritual self of every human when it radiates qualities such as compassion, truth, contentment; like her we must all don such qualities to find union with God. Here womanhood became projected as a beacon to the spiritual path, in contrast to assumptions it was a distraction from it. At the same time, the Gurū did cast female as well as male characters in a negative light, e.g. as metaphors for false attachment or deceit. Thus, he did not fix any social type in a good or bad light and highlighted instead the play of different forces in the arena of the mind. We saw earlier how Gurū Nānak put a mirror to prevalent social attitudes where women were disparaged. The following is often quoted to illustrate his response:

We are born of woman; in woman are we conceived,

To woman are we betrothed and wed.

It is woman whom we befriend; from her, generations unfold.

When a woman dies, a woman is once again sought.

It is to woman we are bound.

Why look down on the very one from whom majestic rulers are born?

(Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 473)

Unlike elsewhere in his verses, Gurū Nānak uses a specific term, *bhand*, which depicts woman as a 'vessel' for bringing forth life. In so doing, he captures a functional view about women's social role and turns around dismissive assumptions to honour them in an elevated light, within the frame of seeing their role as complementary to men. Gurū Nānak exemplified living a religious life within society and did not advocate monastic orders of priests or nuns. The idea that men and women together formed the basis for Sikh religious life became clearer when he eventually established a settled community of disciples.

His establishment of
community at Kartarpur
based on Sikh principles.

The establishment of a community at Kartarpur

Returning to the Punjāb after his extensive travels, Gurū Nānak, now aged over 50, established a community in a place he named 'Kartārpur' ('town

of the Creator'). Here, a distinctive way of life and body of followers was established under his guidance and leadership. Key practices included arising before dawn to bathe, meditate and recite prayers (such as Jap Jī Sāhib), and ending the day with recitation and singing of the Gurū's compositions; the promotion of a strong work ethic and principle of making a social contribution; the practice receiving and serving visitors from far and wide who came to pay respects to Gurū Nānak and to listen first-hand to his teachings, or to join his community as it grew.

Having returned to his own family and now joining others to labour on the land, Gurū Nānak discarded his attire of a travelling holy man and donned the clothes of an ordinary householder. Importantly, at Kartīrpur, family life (*grihasṭī jīvan*) was honoured above the path of a *sannyāsi* (ascetic or recluse, who would see a spouse or children as distractions from the spiritual path). As well as promoting inward devotion, it emphasised the role of *sangat* (company of others, or congregation) and the family unit to foster one's spiritual growth. The principles guiding the Kartārpur community formed the core building blocks for Sikh teaching which we will examine in later themes.

'How is the true sangat to be recognised?

It is where the name of the One Creator is clearly being cherished.'

Gurū Nānak, Gurū Granth Sāhib p. 72

Foundation of the institution of the Gurū.

The foundation of the institution of the Gurū

Another sign that a distinctive religious community was being established was the Sikh institution of the Gurū. Approaching the end of his life, Gurū Nānak had identified and exalted one disciple, Bhāi Lehna, who had passed many tests of humility, wisdom, initiative and perseverance. He renamed him 'Angad', from the word *ang* meaning 'limb'. This suggested that Gurū Nānak saw him as an extension of his own self. The ceremony through which he was blessed as the second Gurū involved a profound act: Gurū Nānak, the great master, bowed down in all humility before his former disciple and afterwards sat down at a lower level from him. The light of Gurūship, Sikhs understand, was then transferred to Gurū Angad. During his Gurūship, Gurū Angad took steps to conserve and pass down his predecessor's legacy. He formalised, for example, a script named Gurmukhī. It recorded the inheritance of verses uttered from the mouth (*'mukh'*) of the Gurū and taught it widely to lay people. A process of consolidating Gurū Nānak's teachings into a distinctive *dharam* or faith had begun and it was accomplished through a total of ten historical Sikh Gurūs.

Specification Content:

The extent to which Gurū
Nanak was a religious
innovator

A02 Activity

Possible lines of argument

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the A02 reasoning in the accompanying text:

One can take the view that there was little new about Gurū Nanak's teachings about God and his critiques of society, hence it is difficult to describe him as a religious innovator.

Gurū Nanak was an innovator insofar as he restored a sense of meaning and purpose and redefined *dharam* as a genuine and purposeful practice to enable personal and social transformation.

Gurū Nanak was an innovator insofar as he brought changes to existing religious practice, organisation and belief. He initiated a new body of teaching, a new community and knowledge base to effect wider social change.

Gurū Nanak was innovative not in terms of his own ideas but because of his unique ability to reveal, demonstrate and transmit timeless truths.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the A01 and A02 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

A: Issues for analysis and evaluation

The extent to which Gurū Nānak was a religious innovator

An innovator is defined as 'someone who introduces changes and new ideas' (Collins English Dictionary). Religious innovation has been defined as 'any change in religious practice, organisation, or belief' (Dictionary of Sociology). Innovation can take place within a religious tradition, where it is sometimes regarded as a threat to tradition, or it can herald the formation of a new tradition. One view is that religious innovation involves the core aim to restore a sense of meaning where it has been lost (Lundskow). Some argue that it cannot be explained solely as a response to a 'crisis', for a key factor is often the inspirational and guiding force of a 'genius', as well as the means to perpetuate his or her influence (Williams, Cox and Jaffe). In business theory, innovation is understood to become 'diffused' initially through people who are 'early adopters' and by those who make up an early and late majority over time. Based on the above, there are several ways of considering the extent to which Gurū Nānak was a religious innovator. [keep in a study tip box?]

We can start with the argument that there were few 'changes and new ideas' in Gurū Nānak's message or his activities. Since his teaching about God's oneness was central to monotheistic Islam and had significant roots in ancient Hindu thought, it has been assumed that Gurū Nānak was simply blending the two religions. Moreover, well-known saintly figures, from the Sufi and *bhaktī* traditions, had already begun to criticise social injustices, look beyond religious labels and emphasise inward devotion. Some may thus argue that Gurū Nānak was following the influence of existing religious and social movements. In addition, a travelling holy person or leader with followers was not an uncommon sight. Indeed, India's tradition of Gurūs and disciples went back many centuries. These observations form the basis of the view that Gurū Nānak's influence appeared to represent a degree of reform within a broad, diverse and fluid Hindu tradition, in the context of its encounters with Islam.

An alternative standpoint is that Gurū Nānak was indeed a religious innovator because he restored a sense of meaning and purpose to human existence where this appeared to have gone adrift. Whilst he did indeed resonate with existing devotional movements, he formulated a comprehensive response which cut across religious and social groupings. He redefined *dharam* to be more than a label or collection of ritual observances; it was a means to enable the genuine, purposeful and practical cultivation of spiritual traits to transform individual, community-based and societal life. He foregrounded the concept of God's oneness and truth to stress the practical implications, e.g. for people to live more cohesively despite their differences, to feel compelled to participate in serving the world, to live in more ethical and accountable ways.

Gurū Nānak initiated a new Sikh *dharam* by the way he brought changes to existing religious practice, organisation and belief. If we consider his inter-

religious voyages, the organisation of his itinerary, far from being arbitrary, demonstrated a sense of purpose. His travels brought forth a new body of teachings and structuring of guidance to overcome internal and external life challenges. The teachings became a means to perpetuate his influence, as did the Kartarpur community of 'early adopters'. In this community, prayer and meditation were to be combined with a self-sufficient family-centred life and wider service of others. In place of other existing sacred texts, Gurū Nānak's compositions were recited. Significantly, the creation of a new religious identity was done whilst maintaining respect for other religious paths and their followers. Gurū Nānak's legacy provided a knowledge base, not only for conducting 'religious' practice but for broader aims and pursuits, e.g. to understand and fulfil life's purpose; to build social networks; to advance education, business and governance in ways which are directed by spiritual values to serve a wider good. He was thus innovative in the breadth of his outlook and social reach, which extended to people on the lowest rungs of society and those who appeared to be beyond redemption, such as Sajjan Thug.

A related view is that, whilst Gurū Nānak was evidently a religious innovator, it is misleading to think of him simply as a person with good ideas. Gurū Nānak is rather best seen as revealer of truths to humanity. His arrival, according to Bhāi Gurdās, was a divine response to a state of crisis; his personality was extraordinarily capable of saving people from *kaljug*, the 'dark age' which saw the extreme erosion of spiritual values in human affairs. Gurū Nānak's focus was not on critiquing the doctrines of any religion, but on critiquing people's inability to listen and act upon any timeless truths they pointed to. The idea that Gurū Nānak was initiating a renewal is summed up in one *janam sākhi*, where he visited a place called Multan, a famous centre for Sufis. When he reached its gates, he was presented with a bowl of milk, full to the brim. This was to indicate that the city was full enough with holy people. Gurū Nānak's response was to lay a light and fragrant jasmine petal over the milk's surface. This reinforces the viewpoint that he was there to cast a fresh light rather than take up more room, even though his initiatives and legacy formed a new *dharam*.

Specification Content:

The relative importance
of Gurū Nanak's life and
background on his teaching.

AO2 Activity

Possible lines of argument

Listed below are some conclusions
that could be drawn from the AO2
reasoning in the accompanying
text:

1. It is important to know about Gurū Nanak's life and background so as to understand why his teachings took shape the way they did and to appreciate his broader social vision, as well as his mission as a teacher and transformer of lives, given the diversity of people he met.
2. Because Gurū Nanak's teachings convey key values and truths, which are relevant to people from all backgrounds, it is less important to know the details about his life and background in order to grasp his philosophy.
3. Details of Gurū Nanak's life history open up our understanding of his teachings, but they can narrow down our sense of the wider relevance of his teachings in terms of the Sikh belief that he took birth to enlighten humanity at large in the 'dark age' of *kaljug*.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the AO1 and AO2 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

A: Issues for analysis and evaluation

The relative importance of Gurū Nānak's life and background to his teaching

To better appreciate Gurū Nānak's teachings, it is important to understand not only his background but also the religious idea (rooted in Indic thought) that he was sent to the world in the 'dark age' of *kaljug* (characterised by spiritual and moral decay) to enlighten and save humanity. Whilst his words and actions were inevitably influenced by the environment and situations he found himself in, in some regards his core messages are not tied down to historical circumstance. We can thus take contrasting and complementary views on the importance of Gurū Nānak's life and background to his teachings.

Gurū Nānak's historical and geographical context clearly influenced the way he expressed his compositions, by drawing on the linguistic, cultural and musical styles of the time. His role as a teacher also included the way he interacted with and transformed people, which we gleaned from the *janam sākhi* accounts. His engagement with ordinary people required both a deep understanding of the social conditions of the time and a clear insight into the human condition and its perennial challenges.

We can therefore examine his teachings from a social and cultural perspective, on the one hand, to appreciate the importance of knowing the contexts he was living in. We can also examine them from a more philosophical and educational perspective, to home in on the key values and truths he sought to convey as a basis for helping people to change. From a Sikh religious perspective, it was also Gurū Nānak's divine status which enabled him to teach and transform people.

If we consider Gurū Nānak's core teachings, the overarching context he presents is existential, or to do with existence beyond any time or place. Gurū Nānak's message about living in tune with God, by cultivating integrity and virtues, was not confined or directed to any one social group. The take-home messages of the *janam sākhi* episodes do not necessarily require an understanding of Gurū Nānak's era but rather an understanding of what it is to be human. At the same time, it was precisely the diversity and fluidity of Gurū Nānak's social context, and of the forces that governed it, which helped him to shed light on the bigger and more timeless contexts of human existence which were his main concern. This takes us back to the idea that to know about the kind of society Gurū Nānak was living in is indeed important, even if his message was more far-reaching.

It is clear from Gurū Nānak's teachings that his intent was not to philosophize for its own sake. Scholarship and debate were after all, plentiful in his time. His mission was, rather, a social one, with philosophical and ethical underpinnings. In this respect, an understanding of his social landscape is key, especially to make sense of Gurū Nānak's use of analogies, irony and sometimes humour. We know this from everyday life examples ourselves, e.g. when it becomes difficult to grasp what people mean or infer if you

don't live in the same region or are not part of their generation. Gurū Nānak was quick to express himself in ways which would immediately strike a chord with the people involved. For example, he used the analogy of being genuinely (rather than superficially) 'dyed' or steeped in God's presence. The contrast would have made sense to anyone accustomed in those days to taking their fabric to be dyed, with the hope that it would be colour-fast (i.e. that the dye used would be long-lasting and wouldn't quickly fade).

Although born into a high-caste family, Gurū Nānak engaged with those who were socially-subjugated as well as the religious and political elite. Because of his social mission, we can conclude that it is vital to understand Gurū Nānak's background and the events which shaped his teaching. At the same time, we cannot narrow his teachings down to his context, since they respond to the broader questions, challenges and opportunities which arise from living a human life, no matter who we are or where we come from.

Specification Content:

Gurū Gobind Singh's
contribution to the development
of Sikhism

Key ideas:

Gurū Gobind Singh's
autobiographical account
indicates the aims of his
Gurūship were to:

Strengthen and spread
dharam, the practice of
good and right conduct in
the world.

Galvanise the *panth*, the
movement or body of
followers

Root out all forces of
tyranny without harbouring
hatred.

Preserve and safeguard
the foundations laid by the
preceding Gurūs.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

1B: Gurū Gobind Singh's contribution to the development of the Sikh faith

Gurū Gobind Singh Jī: his own account of his role and purpose

Respectfully addressed as Gurū Gobind Singh Jī, the tenth Sikh Gurū began his spiritual leadership following a two century-long history, during which nine consecutive Sikh Gurūs had served through times of peace and strife. A basic understanding of these developments provides essential background to his Gurūship and highlights key threads. We will start, however, with a brief glance at Gurū Gobind Singh's own account of his role in the *Bachittar Nātak* ('Wondrous Drama'), the autobiography in verse form which is attributed to him.

Gurū Gobind Singh starts by acknowledging each of the nine predecessor Gurūs by name, and then relates his own story. His account underscores the mystical reason (*kāran*) for his birth and how it was imbued with a divine purpose. He explains that, in a prior existence, after undertaking intense devotional practice in Hemkunt - a place in the Himalayan mountain range - his spirit became merged in harmony with the Divine. Whilst he desired only to remain absorbed in this state, he received the divine command to take birth in the strife-ridden age of *kaljug*. His assignment (*kāj*) was to spread *dharam*, to galvanise the *panth*, or movement of followers, and to root out and destroy all forces of tyranny and injustice. This he agreed to, without harbouring hatred (*vair*) towards anyone. Recounting this, the Gurū is adamant that none be tempted to worship him as God. He is to be known instead as a slave (*dās*) of the Almighty. He also cites God and Gurū Nānak as his witnesses (*sākhi*), so aligning his Gurūship to Gurū Nānak's mission.

The *Bachittar Nātak* thus offers some insight into Gurū Gobind Singh's intentions as Gurū. It underlines the mission to strengthen both *dharam* (the path or righteous - in the sense of good and ethical - conduct) and the *panth* (body of disciples), whilst maintaining humility and showing hatred towards none. It also reveals how he takes the persona of a spiritual warrior in the world drama he presents. Finally, it asserts a continuity between his leadership and the path laid by all nine previous Sikh Gurūs. To understand this assertion, a summary of key prior developments is provided below.

Key developments leading up to the tenth Gurūship

After Gurū Nānak, successive Gurūs had the task of preserving and building upon his legacy. They developed the *Gurmukhī* script and a body of scripture to record and share *Gurbanī*, the teachings of the Gurūs. They established various institutional centres to strengthen key practices, as well as communities and networks. They promoted attitudes of self-help, self-worth and social participation, supported trade, enterprise and agriculture and called on people to contribute time, funds and other resources e.g. to construct the Harmandir Sāhib (now popularly known as the Golden Temple) in Amritsar, or to maintain the *langar*, the practice of serving meals in egalitarian fashion to all visitors.

Key term:

mirī pirī – the concept that worldly or political leadership (*mirī*) is to be guided by the leadership of wise and saintly values (*pirī*), to curb any abuses of power.

These developments were accommodated during the largely tolerant rule of the great Mughal emperor, Akbar, who is known to have met with the third Gurū and joined ordinary people to partake in the *langar*. The Gurūs later attracted the watchful and less tolerant eye of a new Mughal emperor, Jehangir, and his religious and political advisers. Within months of ascending the throne, he had the fifth Gurū (Gurū Arjan) arrested and tortured to death in 1606. The event is commemorated by Sikhs as a martyrdom. In this dramatically changed climate, the sixth Gurū, (Gurū Hargobind) guided Sikhs to project a martial presence by establishing a military force. Donning two swords, he manifested the concept of *mirī pirī*, i.e. worldly leadership (*mirī*) which is to be guided by the strength of wise and saintly values (*pirī*), to curb any abuses of power. For the imperial regime, the Sikh Gurūs appeared to be maintaining ‘a state within a state’.

The reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb was severely oppressive towards non-Muslims. He imposed a *Jīzya* tax for non-believers and decreed that, unless officially permitted to do so, they were prohibited from riding in palanquins or on horses, or from bearing arms. Facing the brunt of aggressive policy moves which were also coercing them to accept religious conversion, a delegation of Hindu priests from Kashmir approached the ninth Gurū (Gurū Tegh Bahādur) for assistance. For his unflinching stand to protect their religious freedom, where he refused to accept Islam or perform a miracle despite all brutal methods of coercion, he was publicly executed under imperial order and so became the second Gurū-martyr. The leadership and sacrifice shown by the Gurūs thus impacted on politics and on outcomes for people more widely.

Facing martyrdom, the ninth Gurū had sent word for his young son, Gobind Rāi, to serve as his successor. The tenth Gurū's leadership was prolific in many respects. Importantly, he established two key institutions to guide Sikhs into the future: the *Gurū Panth*, the community of disciples, centred around a new Khālsā order of initiated Sikhs, and the *Gurū Granth*, the scripture which Sikhs were commanded to revere as their perpetual Gurū after the line of ten Gurūs ended.

The relationship of Gurū Gobind Singh's actions with Gurū Nanak's vision

Starting points to relate Gurū Gobind Singh's actions with Gurū Nānak's vision

In order to examine the relationship of Gurū Gobind Singh's actions with Gurū Nānak's vision, we will start by taking an overview of his life and the key roles he played as restorer, protector and defender as he strengthened Sikh identity. To better understand the ideas, goals and values which spurred his actions, we will look at key themes in his compositions. We will then make sense of the Khālsā order he established through the *amrit* initiation and his act of conferring Gurūship to the sacred scripture.

Before doing this, it helps to know that, for Sikhs, every Gurū carried forward the light of Gurū Nānak - ever since the day he bowed in humility before his disciple to confer onto him the Gurūship. For this reason, the Sikh Gurūs are sometimes referred to as the first, second, third Nānak (and so on), hence Gurū Gobind Singh may be seen as the tenth Nānak. This is reflected, too, in artists' depictions, where each consecutive Gurū appears crowned with a halo. For those who recognise the same ethos underpinning the lives and teachings of the ten Gurūs, this serves as the best indicator that they all 'housed' the same light.

Key idea:

Each of the ten Sikh Gurūs is seen to have housed and carried forward the same light of Gurūship over sharply changing social and historical contexts.

We know that the later Gurūs were tasked with preserving and perpetuating Gurū Nānak's legacy under sharply changed political circumstances. We could thus take the view that their responses were commensurate with the threat or tyranny which was presenting itself. According to Bhāi Gurdās, who lived during the ten-Gurū period, the martial dimension first manifested by the sixth Gurū reflected the need of the farmer to fence and shield his treasured orchard fields with thorny and protective bushes.

Inevitably, the mission to keep alive any legacy involves strengthening practices, institutions and identities, since this is how people share, foster and pass on meanings and values. Since Gurū Nānak had brought into question the outward shows of religious life (or more precisely the shallow or hypocritical mind set which may at times govern religious practice), some see these later developments as being at odds with Gurū Nānak's vision. There is also a view taken that Gurū Nānak was a pacifist and that Gurū Gobind Singh was, in contrast, a warrior. This can easily be concluded from a cursory look at popular paintings of them. The chance to study and compare their life contributions allows for a more balanced conclusion.

Gurū Gobind Singh's development of Sikhism as a religion with a strong identity – prepared to defend its beliefs and principles; and community orientation – founded the Khalsa.

Overview of Gurū Gobind Singh's life and key contributions

Gobind Rāi was just nine years old when he received word that his father, the ninth Gurū, had selected him to serve as his successor. His early childhood was spent in the city of Patnā, in the eastern state of Bihār, before he moved to the Punjābi foothills of the Himalayas, in the place he would later name 'Anandpur'. Growing up, he received a rich and broad education. He was raised under the wing of his mother (Mata Gujri) and grandmother (Mata Nānaki), both key figures in the families of the Sikh Gurūs and attuned to the ethos by which they led. He was trained by highly skilled tutors in classical and contemporary languages, including Sanskrit and Persian, as well as in the martial arts. This paved the way for his formidable reputation as a poet and a warrior.

For a few years, Gurū Gobind Rāi stayed in Paontā Sāhib, a town he founded in the lower Himalayan mountain range. Over this hugely creative period, he produced major scriptural compositions, developed the martial and literary capabilities of his disciples and encouraged the translation of classic Indian and Persian texts to bring key, timeless themes to a wider audience. The growing reputation and strength of this new town agitated neighbouring local rulers and the Gurū led - and won - a number of defensive battles when they attacked, so demonstrating the strength and skill of his forces. In time, changing allegiances between the hill chiefs and Mughal imperial authorities highlighted that it was difficult to trust anyone in the external political landscape. An internal challenge also presented itself in the form of *masands* who, acting as intermediaries between the Gurūs and far-flung Sikh communities, had themselves become untrustworthy. This raised issues of how best to govern and guide those within the Sikh fold.

The Gurū went on to strengthen and fortify the town of Anandpur. It became a well-defended centre of cultural and spiritual renaissance, with the Gurū's court at its heart, attracting accomplished poets, scholars and soldiers as well as devotees from far and wide. It had been here that, as a young boy, the Gurū had once received a fearless disciple who, risking his life, had reverentially brought to him his father's severed head, having witnessed

the ninth Gurū's public execution in the state capital of Delhi. For Gurū Gobind Rai, his father had willingly given his '*sirr*' (head) but not his '*sirrar*' (conviction). A renewed stirring had thus arisen in Anandpur of the need to learn to face the times with bravery alongside compassion. The name Anandpur meant 'the city of joy and bliss'. It thus projected a positive and high-spirited outlook against all odds, a quality known by Sikhs as *chardi kala*.

Key terms:

panj pyāre – the 'Five Beloved Ones' who were the first to be initiated by the tenth Gurū and so became the nucleus of the new Khālsā order.

Khālsā – a term suggesting 'sovereignty' and 'purity' which was used to name the new order of initiated Sikhs.

sant-sipāhi – the concept of the 'saintly warrior' which underpins the Khālsā identity.

It was in Anandpur in 1699 that the tenth Gurū created the Khālsā order of initiated Sikhs. The events of that day have been passed down in Sikh oral tradition. It was the festival of Vaisākhi, when people gave thanks for the harvest and looked forward to springtime renewal; they would take stock of the year gone by and plan for the year ahead. The Gurū too, it seems, had been reflecting over the legacy entrusted to him and contemplating how to secure its future.

Summoning an immense gathering of Sikhs from far and wide, he presented them with a dramatic test of faith and courage. Standing before them, sword in hand, he asked who out of them was willing to give his head. One by one, five men volunteered themselves from amongst the startled crowd. As each of them followed the Gurū, everyone assumed they had met death, but in time they all emerged attired like the Gurū. Whilst what exactly occurred remains a mystery or matter of personal conviction, it is accepted that at some level the five were reborn or resurrected. The Gurū then pronounced them to be the *panj pyāre*, or 'Five Beloved Ones'. After a ceremony of initiation, they came to form the nucleus of a new Khālsā order, which serves as a measure for Sikh practice today. The word *khālis* in Arabic means 'pure' or 'sincere' and the term *khālsā* was used by the Mughals to signify land directly controlled by the emperor. This underlined the sovereign status of new Khālsā order, which pledged allegiance directly to the Gurū, rather than to any intermediary or to any other social ties.

Given their contrasting hereditary, occupational and regional backgrounds, the *panj pyāre* (who had come from different parts of India) were now unified under the egalitarian framework of a new Khālsā fraternity, based on the ideal of a *sant-sipāhi* or 'saintly warrior'. Their first names (followed by Singh, the common signifier of Khālsā identity for males) are considered to throw light on the kind of values the Khālsā was to characterise: Dayā (kindness and compassion), Dharam (responsible and righteous conduct), Himmat (courage and motivation), Mohkam (steadfastness and detachment); Sāhib (accomplishment and nobility of character). The Gurū himself requested to be initiated into this order, whereupon he took on the name Gurū Gobind Singh. Waves of new initiates then came into the Khālsā fold.

In the years which followed, a sequence of events led the Mughals and local rulers to join forces to lay siege to Anandpur. When the Gurū agreed, at the request of his Khālsā disciples, to leave the city, he was attacked, despite written promises made by the emperor to allow him safe passage. In a battle which later ensued, his two elder sons died fighting alongside many of the Gurū's soldiers. The Gurū's mother and two younger sons, who had got separated from him en route, were betrayed by a close associate and handed to a Mughal governor. When the two boys, aged six and nine, remained defiant before him and refused to convert their faith, he put them to death by bricking them up alive, shocking Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims alike. The Gurū's mother, Mata Gujari, the wife of his martyred father, passed away under custody.

Gurū Gobind Singh had some Muslim, as well as Sikh, soldiers in his army, as well as Muslims amongst his allies and supporters. He also blessed one disciple, Bhāi Kanhaiyā, for giving water and medical attention to all the wounded in battle, irrespective of the side on which they were fighting. Such details build a picture of the broader humanitarian values which underpinned the Gurū's engagement in battle. Emperor Aurangzeb had taken the lives of his closest family members and countless disciples. The Gurū had been forced to evacuate Anandpur, the site of his residence from childhood, his celebrated *darbar* or court and the city's forts. The Gurū's response was to compose a long letter to emperor Aurangzeb. Written in Persian, it was entitled *Zafarnāmā*, meaning 'epistle of victory'.

Its contents underline that, because Aurangzeb had broken his written oaths to the Gurū, it was the emperor who had suffered the greater defeat by failing to uphold any ethics. The Gurū also articulated his stance that only when all peaceful means had failed was it morally permissible to resort to the sword - for the purpose of defence rather than offence. Appealing to the conscience of the emperor, the Gurū observed that he had fallen from the noble ideals of his own faith and needed to realign himself to them, given the immense responsibility he had of ruling over people.

Gurū Gobind Singh passed away in 1708 at the age of 42 years, after suffering a stab wound inflicted by one of two disguised Muslim assailants. Early in 1707, the Gurū had been travelling to meet Aurangzeb (who was known to have repented his actions) before learning news of his passing. The Gurū then assisted one of Aurangzeb's sons, Bahadur Shah, to succeed his father to the throne, without any sign of vengeance against his family's dynasty. It was this new emperor who is reported to have sent a European surgeon to the Gurū's aid upon hearing news of the attack. Before breathing his last, Gurū Gobind Singh bowed before a final version of the sacred text and commanded Sikhs to revere it now as their perpetual Gurū.

To remember Gurū Gobind Singh's awe-inspiring life, Sikhs often turn to the celebratory verse of his most esteemed court poet, Bhāi Nand Lāl Goya:

'Pure at heart, Gurū Gobind Singh is free from ill will;

He is the mirror through whom God reveals Himself.

Gurū Gobind Singh meditates on God; he is a mystic and a king at the same time.

Gurū Gobind Singh is virtue personified; his gifts to humanity are unending.'

Translation from *Ganjnāmā* by Bhāi Nand Lal Goya

Gurū Gobind Singh's role as protector and restorer; his defence of Sikhism in the face of attacks and persecution

Gurū Gobind Singh's role as defender, protector and restorer

It is easily to picture Gurū Gobind Singh's role as defender, protector and restorer in terms of his court-like and warrior-like leadership. We must stop to ask ourselves, however, what was it that he was reinforcing and safeguarding? In one respect, it was the religious and social heritage developed by all the Sikh Gurūs before him, when its very survival was under

threat. This heritage included the *panth* or community of followers who walked the Gurūs' 'path'. In another respect, the tenth Gurū was reinforcing and safeguarding the core concepts and values demonstrated by the Gurūs. The focus of his attention was both the distinctive 'Sikh *dharam*', or faith, and *dharam* conceived more widely as right conduct in the world, steered by spiritual characteristics which the Gurūs recognised as latent in all humans.

Bearing this in mind, the time Gurū Gobind Singh devoted to composing scriptural verse can be seen as one way he acted to restore, protect and defend *dharmic* values (i.e. those related to *dharam*) in people's minds, under new conditions of oppression. In this way he also drew on the power of words, knowledge and wisdom for people to defend themselves from the destructive and disabling forces they encountered within them as well as outside.

Key idea:

Gurū Gobind Singh was able to strengthen the morale, identity, scriptural resources and institutions of the Sikhs ahead of a century dominated by unprecedented threats to their survival.

Significantly, Gurū Gobind Singh's role as a restorer, protector and defender equipped Sikhs for a brutal 18th century which was yet to unfold, as the control of the Mughals both tightened and declined and the Punjāb saw repeated Afghan invasions and extreme civil strife. Sikhs were outlawed, hunted down and ruthlessly persecuted. Even today, Sikhs remember such sacrifices in their daily supplication. There were mass beheadings and mothers were made to labour in jails with the intestines of their butchered children around their necks. There were also two historic episodes of carnage, involving the large-scale crushing of Sikh forces by Afghans in 1746 and 1762. Undaunted, Sikhs went on to lead Punjābis of all faiths to secure indigenous rule in the Punjāb, under Maharaja RanJit Singh, before it later became annexed as part of the British Indian empire.

Contributed to the compilation and content of Dasam Granth

The Dasam Granth and Gurū Gobind Singh's key compositions

After the siege of Anandpur, it was a considerable task to retrieve Gurū Gobind Singh's recorded compositions. They were eventually compiled into the *Dasam Granth* or 'compilation of the tenth master'. Whilst there is some debate as to the exact authorship of some of its passages (since the Gurū was patron to many poets and also encouraged modern-day translations of many ancient classics) a number of key works are recognised as his own. Three of the tenth Gurū's compositions are included in the sequence of five morning prayers recited by initiated Sikhs. This same sequence of prayers is also integral to the initiation ceremony, where the heading '*Pātsāhī10*' indicates the compositions of the tenth master.

One morning prayer, the *Jāp Sāhib*, is Gurū Gobind Singh's rhythmic meditation on God's boundless attributes, beyond the limits of form, time and place. It is thus an expansion of Gurū Nānak's root message of *Ik Oankār*, invoking God's all-embracing oneness. In *Akāl Ustat* (Praise of the Timeless One) he echoes Gurū Nānak's proclamation that 'There is no Hindu and no Muslim':

'Some are Hindus, some are Muslim, some are Shia, some are Sunni;

Recognise the whole human race as one' – Gurū Gobind Singh, *Akāl Ustat*

In another morning prayer, which consists of ten *svaiyye* or 'stanzas', the Gurū's gaze scans over a vast social panorama. No matter what rituals people follow across different lands, or no matter how mighty the world's rulers or heroes show themselves to be, their lives are in vain, he concludes, without true remembrance of God and an attitude of love for others as their driving force:

'Hear me all, for I speak this truth:

Only those who base their actions on love are able to find God.'

- extract from the *Svaiyye* of Gurū Gobind Singh

Chaupai Sāhib is an entreaty to God, where the Gurū seeks divine protection for all devotees in the face of daunting challenges. No doubt it became a source of strength and support for Sikhs as they came to face new extremes of persecution in future decades. Sikhs often recite it to foster strength, hope, trust and resilience in all circumstances life presents.

Key quote:

'His [Gurū Gobind Singh's] object was two-fold: to sing praises of the Timeless and to infuse new vigour into the limp mass of people. His compositions were most appropriately adapted to these purposes. Rarely has poetry in any tongue recaptured the transcendent vision in such personal terms or inspired such a spirit of courage and heroism' - Harbans Singh

Other compositions which we have already been introduced to include the *Bachittar Nātak* ('Wonderful Drama') which is understood to be the tenth Gurū's autobiographical account, and the *Zafarnāmā*, the letter written in Persian to the emperor Aurangzeb to awaken his moral conscience. Finally, there is one hymn which is often referred to as the 'Sikh national anthem'. Here, Gurū Gobind Singh draws on the imagery of the battlefield, to sum up the spirit in which life and death are to be embraced:

Empower me, God, to never shy away

From doing what is good and right

May I, thus, become fearless in facing life's battles,

Inside and around me, with resolute belief in victory.

May my mind then learn,

Yearning only to praise Your infinite goodness.

And so, may I relentlessly continue

To do all that is good and right,

Until my very last breath.

Translation by Bhāi Sāhib Dr Mohinder Singh of Gurū Gobind Singh's '*Deh Shiva*'

Introduced the amrit ceremony as initiation and wearing of 5Ks; the adoption of names Singh and Kaur; welcomed women and members of all castes into the community

Key terms:

amrit: holy water which is conceived as an 'elixir of immortality'; adjective used to describe something sacred.

amrit sanchār – the initiation ceremony one undergoes to become a member of the Khalsā order.

amrit-dhāri – a Sikh who has undergone the *amrit sanchār* initiation.

nām – sometimes translated as 'divine name'. It stands for God's identity or essence and also denotes the verbal formula (*mantar*) which is given upon initiation to meditate on God's presence.

The Amrit Sanchār initiation

When Gurū Gobind Singh founded the Khalsā, the initiation ceremony which he conducted is known as the *amrit sanchār*. It continues today as a means to initiate Sikhs into the Khālsā fold. Through it they are known as *amrit-dhāri* Sikhs.

The word *amrit* denotes the holy water which is prepared for the ceremony. It is also referred to as the 'elixir of immortality'. The prefix 'a' turns a word into its opposite and '*mrit*' comes from the verb for dying (*marna*), so '*amrit*' means deathless or immortal. It also evokes a blissful state of being connected to the immortal Creator. This is why it is sometimes explained as a life-giving, nectar-like 'ambrosia' (which, for the ancient Greeks, was the food of immortality given to the gods). *Amrit* can thus stand for something material, i.e. sanctified water, or it can be used as an adjective to describe something sacred, which evokes God's sublime and eternal presence (e.g. '*amrit vela*' means a sacred time for meditation, often understood as the 'ambrosial hours' before dawn).

Traditional accounts of the first *amrit sanchār* describe how the *amrit* was prepared. Water was first poured into an iron bowl or *bātā*. To this, sweet wafers known as *patāsay* were added by an esteemed female Sikh from the Gurū's household. A long *khandā*, a double-edged sword, to was then moved back and forth through the water whilst the Gurū recited five *banīs* or set prayers with his gaze directed at the water. Sikhs understand that these different elements reflected the qualities he wished to be infused into the Khalsā: water for purity and humility; the *patāsay* for a kindness and compassion; the *khandā* and *bātā* for courage and resilience; prayers for wisdom and sanctity. Five palmfuls of the *amrit* preparation was then given to the initiates to sip five times from their cupped hands; five times it was sprinkled on their hair and in their eyes. This signified a renewal in their way of thinking, seeing and speaking.

Each time they received it they uttered '*Wāhegurū Jī Kā Khalsā, Wāhegurū Jī Kī Fateh*', which declared that the Khālsā and its victories belonged to the 'wondrous Gurū' or *Wahegurū*, which was used as a name for God. Crucially also, the initiation marked the giving of '*nām*' to the initiate. This word is sometimes translated as 'name' or 'divine name'. Whilst it is used conceptually to refer to God's identity, essence of presence it also refers to the verbal formula (*mantar*) by which God-consciousness is cultivated through prayer. Through the *amrit sanchār*, initiates are formally given the '*Wahegurū*' *mantar* to recite as part of their daily discipline, along with the *Mūl Mantar* (see Theme 2).

In the Sikh world today, the Khālsā initiation is not an automatic rite of passage but a voluntary commitment which can be made at any suitable age by women and men of whatever social background. Indeed, it is estimated that less than 10% of those who identify as Sikh are *amrit-dhāri*. The Khālsā way of life is stipulated in an official document known as the *Sikh Rehat Maryāda* (Sikh code of conduct). It was produced in 1950, after consideration had been given to key historical resources available to define it.

Because the initiation is considered a 'rebirth', *amrit-dhāri* Sikhs consider their 'birthplace' to be 'Anandpur Sāhib', where the Khālsā was created, and their spiritual father to be Gurū Gobind Singh. They consider their spiritual

mother to be Mata Sāhib Dewan. She was a female devotee whom the Gurū had agreed to take into his household as a ward; because she accepted there could be no marital relationship and that she could not thus bear children, the Gurū blessed her for her sacrifice as the 'Mother of the Khalsā'. Some Sikhs conclude that it was she who added the sweet *patāsay* to the *amrit* at the first historic initiation, as reflected in popular paintings of the event; another view is that it was the Gurū's wife who, at that time, undertook this role. Either way, the gesture signalled that the Khalsā's psyche was to be infused with complementary virtues and strengths involving feminine as well as masculine attributes as they were traditionally conceived.

The Khālsā order can be seen to represent a 'standard' of Sikh practice, in the same way that a dictionary might regulate people's sense and adherence to 'standard English' – even though there are many variances in the way English words might be used, spelt or spoken. In a similar way, there is a broad spectrum of people who align themselves for different reasons and in different ways to Sikh tradition. In the midst of this the Khālsā identity has become a kind of yardstick for Sikh religious practice.

Key idea:

Because words can have both a literal and social meaning, this poses a challenge to translate religious terminology. We know that the names Singh and Kaur signified a sovereign and dignified status. It is easy to miss this when you hear the commonly used English translations of 'lion' and 'princess', which may conjure up fairytale-like imagery and reinforce gender stereotypes! Similarly, we know that for Sikhs, the *kirpān* expresses a commitment to upholding noble values. This is wholly lost in its translation to 'dagger' whose social meaning (as in the phrase 'cloak and dagger') points to suspect or underhand behaviour.

The names Singh and Kaur

The *amrit sanchār* initiation echoes some elements of the Christian baptism, for example, through its use of holy water or concept of a new birth. It has some parallels also with a knighting ceremony, which involves the noble use of the sword to confer the new status and an honorary title. This comparison sheds light on the significance of the names Singh (for Sikh males) and Kaur (for Sikh females) which are formally given to Khālsā initiates, although they are used more widely (as a surname or middle name) by anyone born into a Sikh family.

The word Singh, derived from the Sanskrit for 'lion', was long used in India to signify a person with a royal and sovereign status (a ruler's throne, for example, is referred to as a *singh-āsan*). The word Kaur originates from *kanwar* meaning prince and an initiated Sikh female may also be referred to as a '*Singhnī*' ('lioness'). These names therefore have very specific connotations to do with having dignity, respect for others and one's self, with the capacity to govern (one's mind and the world around) wisely and responsibly. Seen in this context, the popular convention of translating Singh and Kaur into 'lion' and 'princess' comes across as inadequate or even quite misleading. In the *amrit sanchār*, initiates are honoured with the names Singh and Kaur, with the expectation that they will rise to constantly embody the associated qualities.

The *panj kakār* (five Ks) and the *dastār* (turban)

As part of their pledge, *amrit-dhari* Sikhs wear the *panj kakār*, popularly referred to as the 'five Ks', on the understanding that they were formally gifted to the Khālsā by the tenth Gurū. Not only are these five gifts a mark of discipleship; they also express for Sikhs the Gurū's own esteem for the Khalsā. Sikhs will describe the *panj kakār* and *dastār* (turban) as having both a practical and symbolic significance or depict them as tools which help one to cultivate a values-centred mindset. Listed below are some of the

Key idea:

The wearing of the *panj kakār* and *dastār* echoes familiar practices from cultures around the world. These may be serve to confer sovereignty, seal a bond of devotion, uphold principles of dignity, justice and freedom, or identify membership within an order, e.g:

The act of crowning someone

The wearing of a wedding ring

The bestowal of a noble sword or sceptre

The wearing of a special sash

explanations Sikhs may offer. If you think about cultures past and present around the world, echoed in these explanations are some familiar practices which serve to: confer sovereignty; seal a bond of devotion; uphold principles of dignity, justice and freedom; or identify membership within a particular order (e.g. the act of crowning someone, the wearing of a wedding ring, the bestowal of a noble sword or sceptre, the wearing of a special sash):

1. *Kes*: uncut hair. In some religious traditions, the shaving of hair indicates renunciation from the world, but for Sikhs to preserve the gift of hair on one's head and body affirms a connection with creation and the divine law. Long hair has also been associated with wisdom, saintliness, royalty as well as beauty in many cultures. Over the 18th century, the *kes* became a powerful symbol of Sikh resistance to persecution and unwavering dedication to the Gurūs. Sikh men (and some women) tie their hair in a topknot and cover it with a *dastār* (turban). Sometimes a smaller *keskī* covering is worn; young boys with long hair will have their topknot covered with a *patkā*.
2. *Kanghā*: a small wooden comb. This is used to groom the hair twice daily and it is tucked inside the topknot or otherwise - by *amrit-dhari* women - within the braid or bun. It enables one to care for the precious *kes* and reminds one of the need to routinely untangle the mind of negative tendencies and thoughts as they surface each day.
3. *Karā*: an iron or steel wristlet from which Sikhs draw several meanings. Like a ring, it marks a bond of commitment to God and Gurū. Worn on the hand, it serves as a constant reminder to be ethical in every action. Made of steel, it is associated with protection on the battlefield. As an unbroken circle it represents God's infinite presence.
4. *Kirpān*: a small sheathed sword which is secured in a sash called a *gātra* which is worn diagonally across the chest. To Sikh ears, the term *kirpān* is associated with kindness (*kirpā*) and dignity (*ān*); it evokes the constant striving of all the Gurūs to act with courage on the noblest impulses and ideals of being human and to protect and empower the weak. Because it is a symbol of defence and inner strength, rather than offence or aggression, its translation into 'dagger' (associated with underhand behaviour) sound inappropriate and misleading. The *kirpān* reminds Sikhs that virtues are to be exercised, more than just talked about. In Sikh religious worship, food is blessed with the touch of the *kirpān* before it is served. Some Sikhs may explain that the *gātra* sash regulates the wearing of the *kirpan*, in accordance with the same values Gurū Nānak outlined should compose the true sacred thread of the Hindus (see 1A).
5. *Kachhehrā*: special undershorts which are secured with a drawstring. They are changed and washed daily and represent modesty and self-restraint. In times of battle, the stitched *kachhehrā* could be securely worn. It also signified the ethic to maintain dignity, to respect the dignity of another and to never abuse one's power. This is significant given that military campaigns were and still are often associated with abusive acts of violation, rape and plunder. The *kachhehra* continues to reflect a code of celibacy outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage.

Whether or not they are initiated, many Sikhs will maintain the uncut *kes* and more still will wear the *karā* (as well as use the names Singh or Kaur) as a

mark of being born into and identifying with the Sikh faith.

In addition to the *panj kakār*, the *dastār* (turban) which is mandatory for Sikh men, and worn also by some Sikh women, has become an integral part of Sikh identity. Across many eastern traditions, the turban has represented leadership, sovereignty, knowledge, wisdom and saintliness. Often, in the Christian nativity tradition, the 'three kings' or 'three wise men' are depicted wearing a turban. For Sikhs, it reflects the work of the Gurūs to help ordinary people overcome a state helplessness or subjugation and to positively steer their lives. Following from Gurū Nānak's teaching that the human body is a sacred space, the turban becomes its canopy or dome; it adorns the mind, the seat of wisdom, and gives reverence to the light of God within.

Over decades and centuries, the Khālsā identity has reflected the grassroots endurance of the Sikh faith over times of persecution, social upheaval and, in more recent times, migration and settlement in new countries and settings. In the contemporary world, Sikhs are finding new ways to talk about Sikh identity. Instead of just celebrating it through festivals as a part of their 'heritage' or 'uniform', they try to bring to light the relevance of the values the Khālsā identity expresses in the context of today's 'global village'. It helps them also to appreciate that every tradition has its own ways of expressing core values and that it is important to respect and understand this.

Interpretation and new concept of Gurū – the Gurū Panth; the development of Gurū Granth Sāhib

Gurū Granth and Gurū Panth

As Gurū Gobind Singh brought the line of ten Gurūs - and their 239 year history - to a close, he left the Sikhs with two key institutions: the Gurū Panth and Gurū Granth.

By creating the Khālsā in 1699, and bowing himself in reverence before the *panj pyare*, he created the nucleus of the Gurū Panth. Panth means 'way' and it refers to a body of followers, in this case those who follow the path of the Sikh Gurūs. Sometimes the term Khālsā Panth is used to specify the community of the Khālsā order; Gurū Panth tends to suggest a committed body of followers but, like Sikh Panth, it is sometimes used to refer more widely to all people in the world who identify themselves as followers of the Sikh Gurūs. The *Sikh Rehat Maryada* provides the following definition that a Sikh is:

'Any human being who faithfully believes in: (i) One Immortal Being, (ii) the Ten Gurūs, (iii) *Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī*, (iv) the utterances and teachings of the ten Gurūs, and (v) the initiation bequeathed by the tenth Gurū, and one who does not owe allegiance to any other religion'.

Before breathing his last in 1708, Gurū Gobind Singh also bowed in reverence to the scripture, in the same manner that Gurū Nānak had bowed to his successor to pass on the seat of Gurūship. Its content consisted of the original compilation (Adi Granth – pronounced Aad Granth) which had been put together by the fifth Gurū, to which Gurū Gobind Singh had added the verses of the ninth Gurū (who had also composed sacred verse). From henceforth it would be called the Gurū Granth Sāhib. Seeing in it the spirit of each and every one of the Sikh Gurūs, he commanded Sikhs to revere it as their perpetual Gurū. Still today Sikhs will describe it as their 'living Gurū' for reasons we will examine in the next chapter.

Specification Content:

The extent to which Gurū Gobind Singh changed or developed the Sikhism of Gurū Nanak

AO2 Activity

Possible lines of argument

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the AO2 reasoning in the accompanying text:

1. Gurū Gobind Singh developed the core teachings of Gurū Nanak without changing their essential message.
2. Gurū Gobind Singh built on Gurū Nanak's teaching, putting particular emphasis on the need for courage and for inspiring heroism and a sense of divine protection in times of war and oppression.
3. The changes introduced by Gurū Gobind Singh marked a departure from Gurū Nanak's critique of religious formalism, e.g. through adherence to rituals or identities, and his peace-building efforts.
4. One needs to distinguish the roles that the first and tenth Gurūs played in order to weigh up the degree to which the Sikh faith was developed or changed.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the AO1 and AO2 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

B: Issues for analysis and evaluation

The extent to which Gurū Gobind Singh changed or developed the Sikh faith as it was founded by Gurū Nānak

We have now acquired some knowledge and understanding of the life and teachings of Gurū Nānak (1469-1539) and of Gurū Gobind Singh (1666 – 1708). In order to weigh up the extent to which the faith founded by the first Gurū was changed or developed by the tenth Gurū, we can take two general approaches.

The first approach involves viewing the Sikh *dharam* or faith in terms of its body of teachings. Clearly, both Gurūs projected a similar view of God. Gurū Gobind Singh's *Jāp Sāhib* is a meditative elaboration on Gurū Nānak's root teaching about One God who pervades a diverse creation, is timeless in form and transcends all social or religious identities. Both Gurūs also surveyed a vast panorama of human activity to consider how religious and secular rituals can fuel shallowness, ignorance, hypocrisy or exploitation. Their multilingual skills meant that their teachings had a wide outreach and appeal, with the aim to not only to inform but to transform people. Gurū Gobind Singh's key point, that '*only those who base their actions on love can find God*', resonates with Gurū Nānak's teaching that '*truth is high, but higher still is truthful living*'. Both Gurūs emphasised the need to wield spiritual values in practice more than just philosophise about them.

Moreover, they similarly suggested that courage was of the essence to break through attitudes of indifference, apathy or helplessness. Gurū Nānak even stated that, to follow his path, you had to step on 'with your head on your palm'. Honouring his father's noble sacrifice, Gurū Gobind Singh stated that the ninth Gurū had given his head (*sirr*) but not his conviction (*sirrār*). The question of who else was ready to stand up and be counted was later reflected in his dramatic challenge which led to the Khalsā's creation. Indeed, when writing the *Zafarnāmā* (letter of victory) to emperor Aurangzeb, Gurū Gobind Singh argued that what counts as real defeat is when we lose our ethics and become small-minded. This builds on Gurū Nānak's teaching - 'conquer your mind and you conquer the world' – which first introduced the image of victory in the battlefield of the mind. Gurū Gobind Singh, however, drew more frequently and emphatically on warrior-like imagery to inspire in people qualities of heroism, confidence and strength, as well as a sense of divine protection in conditions of war and oppression.

We can conclude in these respects that there is clear continuity between the teachings of the first and last Gurūs. This fits in with the Sikh view that they carried the same light of Gurūship and were revealing divine truths. However, there are evident differences in their style and emphasis. To judge why this is so, we know that an understanding of the context and purpose of their communication is vital.

A second approach to examining how far Gurū Gobind Singh changed or developed the Sikh faith involves viewing the faith in terms of the social movement the Gurūs were forming, aside from the actual teachings. We know from the kind of identity and practices Gurū Gobind Singh was

advancing that he reinforced the martial dimension which arose during the sixth Gurūship. According to Bhāi Gurdās (who lived long enough to witness the third, fourth, fifth and sixth Gurūships) this was a way to fence and protect the blossoming orchard of Gurū Nānak's own legacy, and so marked a necessary development in a new climate of hostility and threat.

In contrast, some people may consider that Gurū Gobind Singh's moves to more clearly define and structure the faith, e.g. through the Khalsā's creation, marked a departure from Gurū Nānak's focus on deconstructing all ceremonies, rituals and identities. To respond to this position, it helps to contrast the roles of both Gurūs. Gurū Nānak's role had been to initiate a new framework of teachings and a new social movement. More than two centuries later, Gurū Gobind Singh's role was to safeguard the heritage and community (i.e. the vehicle which was transporting forward Gurū Nānak's legacy) against huge present and impending odds, not just for its own survival but for its future role of existing to serve others.

Specification Content:

The influence of Gurū Gobind
Singh on Sikh identity

AO2 Activity

Possible lines of argument

1. Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the AO2 reasoning in the accompanying text:
2. By creating the Khālsā Gurū Gobind Singh helped to strengthen the core of the Sikh faith against internal and external threats.
3. Through his final moves to shape Sikh identity, the tenth Gurū fulfilled the long-held intention of the Sikh Gurūs to cultivate human beings who could govern their lives with wisdom and responsibility.
4. The steps taken by Gurū Gobind Singh put into question who could be counted as a Sikh of the Gurū, given the many followers the Sikh Gurūs had attracted over the generations.
5. Gurū Gobind Singh significantly influenced the formation of Sikh identity through his compositions, which further defined and distinguished the values and practices which were to characterise that identity.
6. Gurū Gobind Singh had a lasting influence by establishing the visible markers of Sikh identity as it is known today.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the AO1 and AO2 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

B: Issues for analysis and evaluation

The influence of Gurū Gobind Singh on Sikh identity

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines 'identity' as 'who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others'. It originates in the notion of being the same or 'identical'. We might identify with set of qualities or a group of people, which correspond to our sense of who we are or where we belong. An identity both defines and distinguishes a person or a group (e.g. in terms of which political party or football team you support) and we develop ways to mark out this identity so it is instantly recognisable (e.g. by the colour of a tie or scarf). To take on an identity also involves drawing boundaries and managing any overlapping differences (e.g. when we might identify with being Welsh, British *and* European). Sometimes, having an identity enables us to engage in a process (e.g. when we identify as a 'learner' we become open to learning). It is important to recognise that identities are also formed over time, in response to visions, conditions and forces, as the period of the ten Sikh Gurūs illustrates. [this could be a 'Study Tip']

In order to analyse and evaluate Gurū Gobind Singh's influence on Sikh identity, it helps to consider: 1) his purpose in establishing in the Khālsā identity 2) his work to define and distinguish the inward characteristics of a Sikh: 3) his work to define and distinguish tangible markers to identify Sikh practice.

We can start by considering that many different people had been drawn to the teachings of the Gurūs. There were some who wrongly claimed authority in guiding them, either as intermediaries, or even as rival Gurūs. In this sense, the internal structures to govern the wide and loose network of Sikhs were weak. There were also external threats from local and imperial rulers. In this regard we can suppose that Gurū Gobind Singh created the Khālsā to forge a more direct bond between disciple and Gurū (just as the *khālsā* territories of the Mughal empire directly belonged to the state) as well as strengthen the Sikh movement at its core, in response to several destabilising factors. Every initiated Sikh would be guided by a clear code of practice, identity and sense of allegiance. This also put into question to what degree other followers and supporters of the Gurūs, who did not subscribe to the Khālsā initiation, could be categorised as Sikhs.

Another view is to consider that 'governance' was an important theme for all the Gurūs. Whether one is a ruler governing one's subjects, or a person governing one's own mind, they taught that life must be regulated by core spiritual values such as compassion, integrity and selflessness. From this perspective, the Khālsā was already in the making since the advent of Gurū Nānak; successive Gurūs guided the embryonic stages which led to the Khālsā's 'birth'. The gifts associated with this, such as the turban and *kirpan*, and the names Singh and Kaur, this conferred on them the duty to govern wisely and responsibly. It also showed, as Gurū Nānak had once put it, the potential there is to transform 'the lowly into kings' (Sri Gurū Granth Sāhib

p. 1329). From this standpoint the tenth Gurū was fulfilling the long-held intention of his predecessors.

We know that 'identity' involves not only belonging to a group but also to a set of values and dispositions based on a having a characteristic outlook on life (e.g. as a feminist, a pacifist, an environmentalist). Significantly, through his prolific verse, Gurū Gobind Singh brought further definition to Sikh thought and motivated a disposition to practise its values. For example, Sikhs may explain their motivation to serve others as based on his command to '*recognise the human race as one*'. From this perspective, Gurū Gobind Singh continued the work of emphasising that all people had a spiritual identity which could be awakened and strengthened.

In addition, the formation of an identity involves the formation of key markers of that identity, through any sign which communicates a recognisable meaning. By creating the Khalsā, Gurū Gobind Singh is understood to have consolidated the future recognisable face of the Sikh *dharam*, which is defined today by the wearing of the *panj kakār* (five Ks) and *dastār* (turban).

Gurū Gobind Singh's influence thus reflects a paradox: whilst he reinforced a borderless view of God and creation, he drew boundaries to further distinguish Sikh identity. When you think about the way group identities are created in other contexts, around an idea or vision, this paradox is not so unusual. An identity creates a specific sense of belonging on the one hand, whilst it can also signal ideas and hopes which are more widely shared.

However one interprets it, Gurū Gobind Singh's strengthening of Sikh identity had a lasting influence; Sikhs today are defined by their belief in and/or practice of the teachings of all ten Gurūs, including the requirement to be initiated. This understanding is reinforced by tenth Gurū's pronouncement that '*whosoever keeps the discipline (rehat), I will regard as a Sikh; such a person, indeed, is my master, and I am the disciple*'.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

C: The Gurū Granth Sāhib as a source of wisdom and authority

How the sacred text came to be honoured as Gurū

Specification Content:

The Gurū Granth Sāhib as a source of wisdom and authority – its use and treatment in worship and daily life.

The difference between Adi Granth and Gurū Granth.

Key terms:

Ādi: primal, first, original

granth – a volume of scripture

bānī – uttered message or teaching.

Gurbānī – more specifically, the teachings uttered and endorsed by the Sikh Gurūs which form the contents of the Gurū Granth Sāhib

Gurmukhī – the script in which Gurbānī is written

Creation of Gurmukhī script.

Since midway through the ten Gurūships, there was an authoritative volume of sacred text in existence. With the assistance of Bhāi Gurdās who served as scribe, the fifth Gurū, Gurū Arjan Dev Jī, had meticulously collated, organised and compiled the compositions of Gurū Nānak and his next four successors. He also included verses of *bhagats*, the saintly figures from different *bhakti* and Sufi traditions, wherever the Gurūs resonated with and responded to their teachings. Once completed, it was known as the '**Ādi Granth Sāhib Jī**' (where the terms '*Sāhib*' and '*Jī*' underline the esteem in which it was held). It is important to note that the scholarly transliteration '*Ādi*' should be pronounced '*Aad*'; if pronounced '*adee*' it alters the meaning to 'half'. This word signified that the compilation was to be considered a 'primal', 'first' or 'original' scripture, a newborn entity on the religious scene, as well as a genuine, authoritative work.

Already there were indications that this *granth* (scriptural volume) was not to be treated simply as a text. After its completion in 1604, Gurū Arjan ceremoniously installed it in the heart of the then recently completed Harmandir Sāhib (popularly known today as the Golden Temple). Placing it upon a pedestal, Gurū Arjan clearly demonstrated his own humility before it, by sitting at a lower level. Each evening it was reverentially carried to another part of the sacred complex to a room specially reserved for its restful, overnight repose (*sukh-āsan*). Gurū Arjan would insist on sleeping on the floor in its presence.

By this time, a concept of the *shabad* (sacred word) or *bānī* (sacred message) as Gurū had already been established. When asked to identify his own Gurū, the Gurū Nānak had once replied:

'The shabad is the Gurū and my attuned consciousness (surat) the disciple.'

(Gurū Nānak, Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 943)

The fourth Gurū had famously stated:

'The bānī is the Gurū and the Gurū is the bānī'

(Gurū Rāmdas, Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 982).

All the teachings which were uttered and endorsed by the Sikh Gurūs were termed collectively as **Gurbānī**. They were written in a script called **Gurmukhī**, which the second Gurū had refined, based on a local script Gurū Nānak would have used during his working life. The word '*mukh*' means mouth

or face, hence the new script captured the message uttered by the Gurūs - and also became the visible face of their teachings. Factors such as these encouraged a view of the Gurū not just as a person, but as a communication which reverberates inside the mind as a person reads, recites or remembers it.

The completion and installation of the Adi Granth was no doubt a key event in the formation of the Sikh *dharam*. Because Gurū Arjan had thoughtfully designed the Harmandir Sāhib to emphasise the welcoming of all people, the chosen location for housing the new sacred text signaled that its reach was to a broader humanity, beyond the Sikh fold.

Its legal and theological status - regarded as living Gurū with full authority of Gurūs' teaching and treated with same devotion and respect.

A century later, in 1705, Gurū Gobind Singh - using his esteemed disciple, Bhāi Mani Singh, as scribe - produced a final version of the scripture by including the verses of the ninth Gurū who, like the earlier Gurūs, had also left written collections of teachings. Before leaving the world, Gurū Gobind Singh formally conferred Gurūship to the scripture in 1708. It was henceforth referred to respectfully as the '**Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī**'. He commanded Sikhs to recognise the presence of the sacred volume as the '*body of all the Gurūs made manifest*'. Within it dwelt the message of all the Gurūs, distilled through their life examples, and Sikhs were to treat it with the same devotion and respect. They were to draw from its verses a timeless spiritual legislation to govern human life, transcending the laws formed by political powers or by the drift of social norms. Sikhs may thus describe themselves as 'custodians' of its message and highlight its wider social reach.

Key quote:

'This was an act rich in religious and political implications, since the bānī or Word of the scriptural text, which received the honorific title of Gurū Granth Sāhib, was now to be acknowledged as the basis for religious and temporal authority as well as the medium of spiritual knowledge. Sikhs were to live their lives in response to it and it was to be central to all that happened in Sikh life.' - Christopher Shackle and Arvind-pal Mandair

The scriptural content and style of the Gurū Granth Sāhib

Before examining the role of the Gurū Granth Sāhib in Sikh life, it helps to get an idea of the scriptural content. For this we can recall how Gurū Nānak had pictured himself as a minstrel. This is reflected also in popular paintings of him with the musician, Bhāi Mardānā. These show us that the beginnings of the scripture go back to the verses that were uttered by Gurū Nānak, which he stressed were not his own creation but a divinely inspired '*dhur kī bānī*' or message from the 'transcendent realm' ('*dhur*') beyond the world as we know it.

The Gurū Granth Sāhib as a source of wisdom

This image also shows how teachings are based on conversation. We have already seen how they sprang from Gurū Nānak's dialogue with people from different walks of life. Through the verses, all the Gurūs encouraged people to dialogue with their own mind, e.g. '*Oh my mind, you are an embodiment of the divine flame; recognise your true essence*' (Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 441). Also, the Gurūs encouraged a conversation with the Creator: '*You are our Mother, you are our Father, and we are your children*' (Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 268). They also used questions to help people think about the wider spiritual

context of their life: *'Where have we come from, what is our purpose here, and what is our destination?'* (Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 1193). It is through such questions and dialogues that the philosophical, ethical and social vision of the Gurūs comes through.

Key ideas:

Some of the ways in which the Gurū Granth Sāhib can be seen to cultivate wisdom is by:

Encouraging an openness to dialogue

Opening the mind with questions about human purpose

Broadening one's life perspective and horizons

Using striking metaphors to picture the human condition and the value of nurturing one's spiritual self.

Reaching to people's hearts and minds through melodic and memorable teachings

Bringing people together

Role of Muslim and Hindu writings within its pages –
Sheikh Farid - Gurū Granth Sāhib – 488, 1384; *Bhagat Ramanand* – Gurū Granth Sahib – 1195

As we have already seen (e.g. through the verse heard by Sajjan the inn-keeper), their lyrical style meant the Gurūs used poetic imagery, metaphor and the power of music to convey their message. Indeed, the contents of the Gurū Granth Sāhib are not organised by subject matter or composer but rather by their musical character or *rāg* (sometimes spelt *rāga*). This is based on an underlying combination of notes to reflect a particular state of mind, season or time of day to help unlock the meaning or purpose of the verse. It suggests that the aim was to transform people not so much through abstract argument, but through a multidimensional kind of engagement to stimulate inward and outward change.

In this way, the scriptural content is not structured like a theological or legal treatise (dealing formally or systematically with a given subject). Whilst the Gurū Granth Sāhib is the authoritative basis of Sikh teachings on God, faith and salvation (which we will look at in more detail in the next theme) its themes and statements are unpacked poetically and across different human situations and contexts. In this regard, there is room for interpretation. Indeed, it is understood that a person's own understanding of a verse may evolve over a whole lifetime as insight grows through experience and as different verses of Gurbānī come to shed increasing light on and complement each other.

The entire contents of the Gurū Granth Sāhib begin with the spiritual logo for Gurū Nānak's statement *'Ik Oankār'*, emphasising the oneness of God and creation. This is repeated at the start of every key section of verse. To underline the spirit of oneness, the Gurūs created a kind of inter-religious dialogue by engaging with and responding to the verses of saintly personalities from the devotional *bhakti* and Sufi traditions. Sikhs refer to them as *bhagats* and they include the Sufi saint, Sheikh Farid along with Bhagat Ravidās, Bhagat Kabīr, Bhagat Nāmdev and Bhagat Rāmanand. Bhagat Ravidās was from an occupational group involved in skinning and tanning, which held a low social status. One famous composition of his envisions an ideal 'city without sorrow' where there is no social prejudice. Below are some translations of the verses of the *bhagats*, which capture some of the meaning but not the poetic impact of the original lines.

'Those alone are true, whose love of God is deeply heart-felt;

Those say one thing, but think something else, are fake and contrived'

Sheikh Farid, Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 488

'If you are to be wise, be humble and simple

If you are to be powerful, be unobtrusive and gentle.

Share whatever you have, even when there appears to be nothing to share.

It is rare to find a saintly person with such qualities.'

Sheikh Farid, Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 1384

*'One day a soulful desire welled up in my mind;
I ground up sandalwood and different fragrant oils
And set off to go and worship in God's house -
However, that very God made me discover
That the Gurū dwelt in my own very mind'*
Bhagat Ramanand, Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 1195

*Its name is Begampura, 'the city without sorrow'.
There is no suffering and no anxiety there.
There are no troubles, no unjust taxes there;
It holds no terror, nor hurt, nor fear, nor ruin.
Now I have found this most excellent city,
It is a realm of lasting peace and safety, my friends.*
- Bhagat Ravidas, Gurū Granth Sāhib, p. 345

Given that compositions such as these are included in the Gurū Granth Sāhib, the gesture of bowing before it forms a way of paying tribute to luminaries from different regions and from the highest to lowest ends of the social hierarchy. It follows also that there are different styles of language in the Gurū Granth Sāhib, although the verses are all recorded and preserved in the Gurmukhī script. We already know that, at the time, Persian would have been the language of the Mughal administration, with Arabic and Sanskrit the language of the classical religious texts. On the ground there were various vernacular (regionally spoken) languages. By way of comparison, you can consider how the uses of English and Latin spread in the British Isles, whilst Celtic languages like Welsh, Gaelic or Cornish existed as vernacular languages spoken by ordinary people.

In this respect, the honouring of the Gurū Granth Sāhib helped to elevate the status of ordinary languages, in line with other moves of the Gurūs to raise the status of things or people considered lowly or ordinary. The different language styles also reveal the fostering of a kinship and a meaningful dialogue with others on the kind of values to be regarded as sacred to all humans across social and religious divides - an exercise with enduring significance in today's 'global village'.

Key quote

'The kinship of language is intensely felt and loudly expressed throughout Sikh scripture' - Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh

Its use and treatment in worship and daily life.

Key terms:

Gurdwara/Gurūdwara: the Sikh place of worship, which is the threshold (*dwār*) to the Gurū.

Darbār – court; the name given to the sacred space in which the Gurū ‘holds court’ during the day.

Sukh-āsan – the practice of taking the Gurū Granth Sāhib to retire each night for a ‘restful repose’.

Key ideas:

In the Gurū Darbār (the Gurū’s court) key indicators that the Gurū Granth Sāhib is treated like a sovereign include the way it is:

Enthroned

Beautifully enrobed

Shaded with a canopy

Attentively fanned

This status is also revealed by the way people:

Bow and pay respects before the Gurū

Seek the Gurū’s advice or command

Treating the Gurū Granth Sāhib as ‘living Gurū’

We now have some understandings of why and how Sikhs conceive the Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī as a ‘living Gurū’. The *body* of text is considered as the physical presence of the ten Sikh Gurūs; the words written in Gurmukhī *embody* their utterances; when the words are sung, recited or recalled, the *voice* of the Gurū is felt and absorbed. In addition, Sikhs will refer to each page of the scripture as a *limb* (or *ang* in Punjābi). Although there is an English convention to use the term ‘holy book’, Sikhs will refrain from objectifying it and will rather address it as ‘Gurū’ (not unlike the way a person would introduce someone as their spouse or partner, and not as their ‘man’ or ‘woman’). Whenever Sikhs enter a space where the Gurū Granth Sāhib is to be found, they will feel the presence of their highest source of wisdom and authority and act accordingly.

Key quote:

‘The Gurū Granth is the physical body that bonds the Sikhs metaphysically with the Divine One, historically with their ten Gurūs and socially with their community.’ - Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh

For these reasons, the Gurū Granth Sāhib isn’t treated in the way a book conventionally is, i.e. by being kept on a shelf or a desk, or read at one’s bedside, (although modern technology now enables people to access the teachings online). In the early twentieth century, some decades after the British introduced the printing press to India, a standardised printed version of the Gurū Granth Sāhib was produced with 1,430 double-sided numbered pages. This remains the standard today.

Each reproduced copy is treated like a divine sovereign and is housed usually in a *gurdwārā* (also spelt *Gurūdwārā*) or Sikh place of worship, which is so called because it is the threshold ‘*dwār*’ to the ‘Gurū’ (in the form of the Gurū Granth Sāhib). Inside, the Gurū is ceremoniously brought to preside in the Gurū Darbār or ‘Gurū’s court’ during the day before being taken to retire in a special space at night for its restful repose (*sukh-āsan*).

Key quote:

‘Quite without real parallel in other Indian religions, the immense importance of the Gurū Granth Sāhib is most obviously manifested in the central place given to the scripture in the physical layout of a Sikh temple or gurdwārā.’ - Christopher Shackle and Arvind-pal Mandair

If you imagine, in the history of many world cultures, the etiquette involved with holding the position of a king or queen, you will notice a lot of familiar practices to indicate the sovereign status of the Gurū Granth Sāhib. As we know, the area into which it is daily brought is called the Gurū Darbār or ‘Gurū’s court’. It is ‘enthroned’ on a raised platform (the *manjī sāhib*) with a canopy or domed structure above it. It is wrapped in specially sewn, embroidered or embellished fabrics, to cover it like royal robes. From time to time, the person sitting behind it will wave over it a *chauri* or *chaur sāhib* [show image] – since ancient times, especially in hot countries, the act of fanning has indicated the presence of royalty or someone highly esteemed. This practice also encourages the person who is attending on the Gurū Granth Sāhib (who is serving as a ‘*granthī*’) to remain attentive and respectful. Entering the Gurū Darbār, devotees pay their respects by bowing before it before turning to sit down. Whilst it has a majestic presence, Sikhs also talk in Punjābi about assembling, like children, ‘in the cosy lap’ (*niggi god vich*) of the Gurū who is

there to nurture and educate them.

The Gurū Granth Sāhib is thus the focal point of all daily services at the *gurdwārā*. It is recited from directly, sometimes from start to finish in an unbroken 48-hour reading called an *akhand pāth* or an intermittent process of reading called a *sehaj pāth* which can take any number of days. Its verses will be sung to traditional musical accompaniment. This practice, called *kirtan*, provides a key means to share, reflect and internalise the teachings. The teachings may also be expounded through a *kathā* or sermon.

All decisions taken in presence of Gurū Granth; all ceremonies and rites of passage to be completed in its presence; it guides Sikhs in daily life – *vak lao* (taking advice).

At the end of a service, following a prayer of supplication known as the *ardās*, a *vāk* or *hukamnāmā* is taken. This is the Gurū's 'edict' or 'command' which appears when the Gurū Granth Sāhib is respectfully opened at random and the verse appearing is accepted as a source of guidance and blessing for the day, occasion or situation at hand. During the politically unstable decades which unfolded after the line of ten Gurūs ended, Sikhs would assemble and seek advice from the Gurū Granth Sāhib by taking a *vak* to make collective decisions. Still today, this element of seeking guidance from the Gurū remains. All religious ceremonies for key stages or occasions of life, e.g. weddings, funerals, thanksgivings, the blessing and naming of newborns, take place in the Gurū Granth Sāhib's presence. At the end of each service, or before leaving, all people are offered a sweet mixture known as *karāh prashād* as a token of the Gurū's equal hospitality and blessing to all.

Its role as more than a visible focus for Sikh devotions – taking the place of living Gurūs.

If you were trying to build an understanding of the Gurū Granth Sāhib by looking at Sikh life from the outside-in, it is clearly the visible focus for Sikh devotions. By getting to know the processes that led to its creation and elevation to the status of Gurū, we see how, in the on-going life of the Sikh Panth, it continues to fill the position of the ten historical Gurūs as an authoritative leader. Sikhs thus also regard it as a spiritual saviour and emancipator. It is described in the *ardās* (prayer of supplication)] as: a celestial and redeeming 'ship' (*jahāj* or *bohīt*) which holds the 'divine name' and is available to carry all across the dark ocean of *kaljug*; the 'protector' and 'saviour' in this world and the world hereafter; the 'eternal light'. It evokes for Sikhs the presence of the mystical and formless Gurū. This reflects how, in Sikh thought, the concepts of the 'sacred word', 'divine name', God and Gurū intermingle, as we will examine in the next theme.

Specification Content:

The relevance of the Gurū Granth Sāhib for Sikhs today

A02 Activity

Possible lines of argument

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the A02 reasoning in the accompanying text:

1. The Gurū Granth Sāhib is relevant to Sikhs as a symbol of their religious heritage and as its acknowledged supreme authority. It presides over key occasions for thanksgiving or to seek the Gurū's blessings.
2. The Gurū Granth Sāhib is of more than symbolic value since it fulfils an educational and pastoral role as teacher and guide, as well as a 'saviour' and 'emancipator'.
3. The Gurū Granth Sāhib is relevant for Sikhs today because it can serve a wider social and spiritual role in the world, which reflects the original intention of its teachings.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the A01 and A02 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

C: The Gurū Granth Sāhib: Issues for analysis and evaluation

The relevance of the Gurū Granth Sāhib for Sikhs today

It is estimated that each passing century sees at least three generations of humans. Based on that, today's Sikhs work out to be the tenth or so generation after the line of ten Gurūs ended in 1708. Because the Sikh *dharam* is not a proselytizing one, most (though not all) Sikhs have inherited their faith through birth and so share the same faith, language and ethnicity. For over a century they have been migrating to and settling in many parts of the world, including Africa, the Far East, North America and Europe, especially the United Kingdom. There are now third and fourth generation British Sikhs who form part of the global Sikh diaspora which is spread outside of India across the world today, as part of the world's estimated 25 million Sikhs.

The establishment of gurdwārās wherever Sikhs have settled has enabled them to maintain an association with their faith community and with the Gurū Granth Sāhib and to mark significant life occasions in its presence. Depending on their upbringing and educational experiences, they may be well or poorly acquainted with its scriptural language. Technological advances mean that Sikhs are now able to listen to, learn about and reflect on its teachings in different ways, e.g. through digital TV and radio channels or online. They may set up or join social initiatives aimed at practising its teachings in wider social contexts (e.g. feeding the homeless). The Gurū Granth Sāhib will thus be relevant to Sikhs in different ways and for different reasons.

We have established that most Sikhs have a shared religious, cultural and linguistic identity and can be considered as part of a large family whose formation can be traced back to the not so distant past. In this respect, the Gurū Granth Sāhib represents an anchor to the foundations of the Sikh heritage to which they all belong. Sikhs will seek the Gurū's blessings and offer thanks at religious services to mark key life events, such as birthdays, marriages, initiations, funerals, as well as key religious anniversaries related to the lives of the Gurūs. In these contexts, the Gurū Granth Sāhib is relevant for its vital symbolic role in their lives. It provides a focal point for people to assemble according to a shared past and presides over key occasions for thanksgiving. For some people born into the Sikh tradition, this may be the main extent of its relevance in their lives.

At another level, Sikhs may see the Gurū Granth Sāhib as fulfilling an important educational and pastoral role in their lives, as a teacher, a counsellor, a consoler and source of moral support. If they have competence in modern Punjabi, they might pick up meanings to the degree that a speaker of modern English might understand some elements of Chaucer or Shakespeare. If they have to rely on translations in to English, this can both open up and narrow down understanding. In this regard, the lifetime practice of singing and listening to the teachings, and associating with the *sangat* (company) of those who embody them is recognized as key to one's growth and

understanding as a learner/disciple. Some Sikhs may have difficulty in accessing the teachings, because of their lack of linguistic knowledge, or lack of *sangat*, or due translations which are difficult to relate to. However, they will be still be aware of basic concepts from the teachings, e.g. being selfless, having courage, seeing God in all. Because of the wide appeal of these key concepts, there is a tendency not to assume that the Gurū Granth Sāhib has little relevance because it concerns another time and place.

As Sikhs interface in their daily lives and professions in different settings around the world, this can remind them of social outreach of the Gurū Granth Sāhib's teachings and the way they address the human condition per se. In the 'global village' it has become clearer that we have shared global challenges, and that the roots of many forms of crisis, e.g. financial or environmental, lie in the way underlying tendencies of greed, self-interest or exploitation have directed human action. Sikhs and others may therefore recognize the Gurū Granth Sāhib as playing a potentially wider social and spiritual role, particularly in developing value-centred approaches to education, healthcare, business, social governance, as well as to dealing with religious radicalism and extremism.

Specification Content:

The extent to which the Gurū Granth Sāhib can be viewed as an object of worship for Sikhs

A02 Activity

Possible lines of argument

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the A02 reasoning in the accompanying text:

1. The Gurū Granth Sāhib can be seen as an object of worship insofar as it is treated with utmost reverence as the focus of attention in the Gurū Darbar.
2. The ways in which Sikhs refer to and talk about the Gurū Granth Sāhib reveal that its main identity for Sikhs is as a 'living Gurū' rather than a material object.
3. The worship of physical objects was not encouraged by Sikh Gurūs and the term *puja* or 'worship' is reserved by Sikhs for the worship of one God.
4. The Gurū Granth Sāhib is not simply a physical object because it contains a verbal communication which for Sikhs forms a window to the divine.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the A01 and A02 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

Option F:

An Introduction to Sikhism

Theme 1:

Religious figures and sacred texts

C: The Gurū Granth Sāhib: Issues for analysis and evaluation

The extent to which the Gurū Granth Sāhib can be viewed as an object of worship for Sikhs

For a person visiting a gurdwārā for the first time, with little or no knowledge of Sikh tradition, the ways of reverentially treating the Gurū Granth Sāhib which can be observed lead one to conclude that it is the main 'object of worship' for Sikhs. The raised platform, the canopy, the fabrics draped like royal robes, the use of the *chaur sāhib* and the practice of bowing one's head before the Gurū Granth Sāhib upon entering the *Gurū darbār* all serve to indicate that the sacred scripture is the focus of veneration and adoration. As one becomes more acquainted with Sikh teachings, this initial impression remains. It will, however, start to be understood differently, commensurate with the insight one gains about the Gurū Granth Sāhib's social and spiritual role. This can lead one to question the appropriateness of the terms 'object' and 'worship' to describe what is happening.

We know from the way that Sikhs speak about the Gurū Granth Sāhib that they resist objectifying it as a 'book', even though they might adopt the term 'holy book' to give an initial description of it to English speakers. As one starts to notice that it is always referred to as a Gurū, it becomes apparent that it is viewed by Sikhs as a teacher, a guide and a personality who (rather than 'which') has the capacity to impart wisdom and confer blessings. It can thus start to sound rather odd to use the English pronoun 'it' to refer to the Gurū Granth Sāhib. When you speak or write Punjābi, there are no separate third person pronouns to distinguish 'he' or 'she' from 'it', as there are in English, hence it is easier to conceive the Gurū as a person as opposed to an inanimate object. Similarly, to say '*the* Gurū Granth Sāhib' might appear just as odd to Punjābi ears as saying '*the* Gurū Nānak'. It follows then that just to talk about the Gurū Granth Sāhib in English entails objectifying in ways that can be avoided in Punjābi.

We know already that Sikh tradition emerged at a time when the worship of deities through physical objects, e.g. stones or statues was prevalent. Such visual representations no doubt played an important role when lay people tended to be illiterate, since scriptural literacy was confined to the higher castes and those of lowest castes were potentially subject to harsh punishment for uttering or listening to scriptural recitations. The Sikh Gurūs were critical of the worship of physical objects; for them this represented a limited form of observance. Indeed, the word for 'worship', *puja*, has slightly negative connotations for Sikhs when it assumes the worship of anything other than God.

Moreover, *puja* does not feature as a key Sikh religious practice, in the way that meditation (*simran*), selfless service (*sewa*), hard work (*kirat*) or the

singing of scriptural verses (*kirtan*) do. For this reason, to suggest to Sikhs that they are 'worshipping a book' sounds distinctly odd and inappropriate to Sikh ears.

It follows that the Gurū Granth Sāhib can only be described as an 'object of worship' in so far as it is a focus of attention and source of veneration. To view it otherwise as an object would amount to missing what it means to Sikhs, because for them its primary identity is as a 'Gurū' and not just a book or even just a sacred text. Significantly, it is composed of words, melodies and rhythms which have arisen from a long history of engagement and dialogue with different people. This heightens the sense that the Gurū enthroned before the congregation is composed of mind, body and soul. In this regard, Sikhs are keen to highlight that they are not worshipping the pages or the binding, but the *shabad-Gurū* or 'word as Gurū' which is regarded as a window or channel to God.