

# Sikh articles of faith in the workplace

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## Sikhi is the fifth largest religion in the world, with over 400,000 Sikhs living in the United Kingdom according to the last census.

Sikh officers have served in police forces throughout the country for decades and devout followers of Sikhism can often be recognised by their turbans. This document serves as guidance to police organisations on Sikh staff who adhere to visible articles of faith in the workplace, namely the turban, kara and kirpan.

### The Turban

The turban, or 'dastar' in the Punjabi dialect, refers to a garment worn by both men and women to cover their heads. It is a headdress made up of a cloth which is wrapped around the head. Although the turban has existed for thousands of years throughout different cultures and communities, it holds a special significance within the Sikh faith.

During the times of the Sikh Gurus, the turban was a status symbol worn by spiritual leaders, nobility, the wealthy and others of high social standing. In the 17th century, the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind

Singh, mandated that all Sikhs following his teachings wear the turban. This was meant as a means of defying the social norm on the wearing of turbans, promoting equality and creating a unique identity for the Sikh community. The turban is also symbolic of spiritual strength, self-respect and sovereignty for Sikhs.

Today there are different turban styles worn by both men and women, which come in different colours. The key colour themes worn by devout Sikhs include black, yellow, orange, white and blue; however, they are adhered to mainly out of personal choice.

### Turbans in the UK and police service

The right to wear the turban in the UK has been reinforced through legislation and judicial precedent. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, incorporated into domestic law via the Human Rights Act 1998, protects the right to freedom of religion and belief. Section 16(2) of the Road Traffic Act



1988 permits followers of the Sikh faith to wear a turban instead of a helmet. In the landmark judgement of **Mandla v Dowell Lee [1983] 2 A.C. 548**, the House of Lords ruled that Sikhs were to be considered as an ethnic group for the purposes of the Race Relations Act 1976 and safeguarded the right to wear the turban.

In the police service today, some forces have implemented formal and informal policies on

turbans for Sikh officers and staff.

For uniformed officers, black and dark blue are generally accepted colours. An officer who identifies as Namdhari Sikh, a small section of the wider Sikh community, would wear a white turban. For non-uniformed officers and staff, the requirements are non-prescriptive.

In the National Police Air Service, Sikh officers have at times signed health and safety disclaimers when wearing the turban instead of a helmet. In specialist units such as firearms, where the use of helmets is strictly enforced, Sikhs cannot opt out of wearing of the helmet. The same rules apply for public order situations. For Sikh officers who serve as traffic motorcyclists, legislative requirements which safeguard the wearing of the turban can be considered.

Some forces still encourage Sikh officers to wear chequered bands and badges on their turbans, however, this practice is being increasingly phased out.

## The Five Ks

In the year 1699, Guru Gobind Singh created the 'Khalsa'. The Khalsa represents a devout order of Sikhs created to uphold righteousness and challenge oppression and tyranny. The 'Five Ks' serve as five outward signs of faith, to make the Khalsa identity distinct and strengthen the bond between members of the Khalsa community.

They are called the 'Five Ks' or the 'five kakkars' because each item begins with the letter 'K':

- Kes (or kesh): uncut hair.
- Kangha: a comb.
- Kachh or kachhahira: cotton garments.
- Kirpan: a dagger-type bladed article.
- Kara: a steel or iron bangle.

Each item is symbolic of devotion, respect and community, with deep historical significance. This guidance will give more information about two of the Five Ks: the kirpan and the kara.



## Kara

The kara is a steel or iron bangle and one of the five articles of faith prescribed for members of the Khalsa. Sikhs usually wear the kara on their right hand as a constant reminder to perform good deeds. Many non-devout Sikhs also wear the kara, and it is not to be considered as a piece of jewellery.

### Karas in the UK and police service

In **R. (on the application of Watkins-Singh) v Aberdare Girls' High School Governors [2008] EWHC 1865 (Admin)**, it was ruled that the kara was symbolic of the Sikh identity and was protected by race relations and equality legislation.

Sikh officers and staff throughout the UK wear the kara as a symbol of their faith. During officer safety training, Sikh officers may choose to wear a wrist band over their kara but this option is discretionary.

## Kirpan

The 'kirpan' is a dagger-type bladed article secured in a scabbard. It is worn over the body in conjunction with a 'gatra', a strap made of cloth. The word 'kirpan' is comprised of two connotations – 'Kirpa' which refers to 'mercy' and 'Aan' which refers to 'grace.' The kirpan represents a commitment to stand for truth and to protect the weak from tyranny. However, the kirpan is not to be used as an offensive weapon.

Millions of Khalsa Sikhs throughout the world wear the kirpan. It is used in Sikh Gurdwaras (place of worship) for ceremonial purposes, and to stir and bless food that is given to the congregation.

## Kirpans in the UK and police service

Although there is no legally prescribed size in the UK, section 139(5) of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 allows the wearing of the kirpan for religious reasons. The government has recently clarified the legality of wearing the kirpan in the UK through the new Offensive Weapons Act 2019. The legislation reaffirms the right of the Sikh community to possess and supply kirpans.

Sikh officers and staff who are initiated as Khalsa Sikhs wear the kirpan as part of the Five Ks. However, due to operational reasons, most if not all Sikh officers and staff wear the kirpan underneath their clothing, so that it is not visible or accessible to anyone. This mitigates any risk and ensures that the kirpan carrying Sikh can observe the tenets of their faith without overtly displaying the kirpan.



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