

Key concepts

- The connection between Britain and the Sikhs through the British Empire, large scale immigration from East Africa following Africanisation, and from the Punjab after Partition, which slowed after changing immigration legislation.
- The first wave of immigration was men, hoping to make enough money to return, but gradually families came. Settlements were mostly in cities and the community was economically upwardly mobile in contrast to other immigrant groups.
- In 1911, the first gurdwara was established in Putney, but others did not appear until after World War Two. This was mainly due to the fact that Britain was considered too far for Sikh migration and was not in need of cheap labour.
- Sikh and other Indian traders came to Britain between the wars. Many belonged to the Bhatra jati. They would arrive at ports such as Cardiff or Portsmouth and set up base in rented rooms, buy domestic items and go from door to door with their cases. Other Sikhs worked in open air markets. However, none of these intended to settle as their families remained in the Punjab.
- Real settlement in Britain began in the late 1950s with the arrival of economic migrants from the Punjab. A decade later came migration from East Africa. At present, the Sikh population in Britain is the largest outside India.
- Sikhs were economic migrants who chose to come to Britain because they were British. They went to the traditional industrial areas such as Lancashire and the East and West Midlands. They went where they were needed.
- The gurdwara has become the focus of Sikh life in Britain. Rooms in private houses were used by the first settlers but now warehouses, redundant churches or former schools have been converted into gurdwaras. On Sundays they are full. It also has a formal educational role, holding classes in Punjabi and training in using the musical instruments used in worship. A distinctive feature of Britain's community is the establishment of caste gurdwaras.
- There has been some conflict of traditional Sikh values with popular culture in aspects such as relationships and religious identity.



Key quotes

'While enormously proud of its history, culture and tradition, it is also enormously proud to be British. Something like three quarters of the Sikh community in this country were born in the UK and are hugely proud of this country. Being proud to be Sikh and proud to be British identifies the Sikhs and is why the Sikh community makes such a great contribution to our country.' – (John Spellar, Labour MP for Warley)

'In the beginning I couldn't get a job because I couldn't cut my hair or cut my beard [...] I went everywhere looking for a job [...] But I was told they couldn't keep me. They said you must shave it off. I said no, I don't want to shave it off. I wrote to my father back home and told him what was happening. My father told me to come back. Don't shave! Come back! Then I got a job at Dunlop [the rubber factory], and they didn't ask me to shave. The person in charge there had lived in India, so he knew the Sikhs' background.' – (Manjit Singh, describing the racism he experienced in 1964)

'There are lots of concerns from the Sikh community that there is not enough being done to protect us. The community feels forgotten. There needs to be a definition, just like there is for antisemitism and Islamophobia, for anti-Sikh hate crimes.' – (Sikh MP Preet Kaur Gill)

Key words

| Punjab | Partition | Immigration | Identity | Values |
|-------------|----------------|-------------|----------|------------|
| Migration | British Empire | Labour | Economic | Industrial |
| Conflict | East Africa | Culture | Gurdwara | Caste |
| Bhatra jati | | | | |

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that Sikhs have assimilated well into secular society in Britain. Others would argue that the conclusion is flawed. Some would argue that there has been some success, but problems remain.

Key questions

Has the distribution of the Sikh population in Britain hampered its development?
Is Sikhism in Britain confined to industrial areas and ports?
Are there any alternative explanations or conclusions to be drawn from the debate?