

# Sikh names: theory, conventions and practices

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*The author explains the elements of Sikh names, and how best to handle them in an index.*

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In the Indian cultural milieu, children are rarely, if ever, named after their parents. Nevertheless, naming a child is an emotional experience for the parents.

## First names

Traditionally, Sikhs select the first letter of the name by randomly opening a page of their Holy Book called Guru Granth Sahib. This signifies ceding our personal will and desire to a greater reality.

In the second part of the process, we construct a name from the letter willed to us by Guru Granth Sahib. It is in this phase that parents can give free rein to their dreams and aspirations for the child. For example, if the first letter of the first word in the Holy Book is 'B', then any name starting with this letter B, such as Balbir, Bahadar, Balvinder, Baltej etc. can be chosen initially by the parents to their liking. At this stage an important point to note is that perhaps as a measure of equality, this initially chosen name does not distinguish between a male and a female Sikh. This means that the same name, for example, Balbir, can be used for a boy as well as for a girl.

However, to avoid confusion and to establish the gender of the named person the directive in the Sikh religion is that the chosen name should be completed by adding the word Singh for a boy and the word Kaur for a girl. For example, Balbir Singh constitutes a complete first name of a male Sikh, while Balbir Kaur makes up a complete first name of a female. In the Sikh community, not only is the procedure of naming a new born baby unique and innovative; it also has a nationhood connotation, so much so that a Sikh name is regarded as incomplete if it does not carry with it the word Singh or Kaur.

Aside from this, there are other longstanding historical conventions:

- The first name of the child should not distinguish gender. That is, Sikh males and females can have the same first names.
- A Sikh is never to be named after a Sikh Guru. This is an issue of respect. Proper names like Nanak, Gobind and Arjun are prohibited.
- The guruship has ended for Sikhs. A Sikh cannot prefix his name with the term Guru.

- Sikh proper names must not allude to Hindu gods and goddesses or use Hindu mythology.

## Surname or family name

The Sikh naming ceremony described above is an essential ritual, which gives the first-name identity to a new-born baby. However, a surname or a family name may also be added to link this identity to the larger Sikh community. This additional identity is established by adopting a word or name from ancestral family: for example from parents/grandparents, their trade or profession, or relating to the name of their clan, country village or town. There are hundreds of family names or surnames that are common among the Sikhs, such as Gill, Grewal, Sidhu, Sandhu, Bogal, Bhambra, Kambo, Kainth, Jammu, Josan, Jandialvi, Ludhianvi, Phul, Gulshan, Azad, Sewak, Dewana and Mastana. Essentially the list is endless.

Now let me address the controversy over what constitutes an appropriate Sikh surname. Although a large majority of the Sikhs do not see any problem in using a family name or a surname of their choice, there are a significant number of Sikhs who say that the use of a surname is a Western concept. Their reason is based on somewhat superfluous arguments that in days gone by Sikhs had no tradition of using surnames; and that most Sikhs lived in villages and small communities, where everybody was known by their first name. They emphasize that the use of a surname is a recent trend started by some Western-educated people and reflecting their ego or pride in being different. They also argue that Guru Gobind Singh Ji has already given them a surname: that is, Singh or Kaur. In fact, it is this assumption which is the root cause of confusion.

Two points ought to be noted here. First, while a surname signifies family connection and identifies its members – father, son, daughter, wife and so on – through their use of the same surname, the use of Singh and Kaur (as surnames) does not seem to convey such a connection or identify people as belonging to the same family. Second, as has already been explained, Singh is an inseparable part of a male Sikh name, while Kaur goes to complete a female Sikh name. So we must remember that both these words are part and parcel of the first name of every Sikh, which they proudly use to express their national identity rather than their family identity.

However, to claim, as some Sikhs do, that Guru Gobind

Singh Ji instructed the Khalsa not to use any surname other than Singh is a myth. This raises a serious question about women being denied equal status in being required to use the word Kaur instead of Singh. Moreover, there is no authentic historical document to prove that Guru Ji made such a proclamation. His prime directive to the Sikhs was that having taken Amrit to become Khalsa people must forget their caste or class, and treat everyone as equal. This point has been very clearly emphasized in the freely available 'Sikh Rahat Maryada' document. Nowhere in this document is there any directive about not using a surname with a first name. Indeed, on the contrary, there are some examples in both Guru Granth Sahib Ji and the Dasam Granth (Bachittar Natak) where certain people have been identified by caste names such as Bedi, Bhalla, Bhatt, Jatt and Sodhi. In early Sikh history, even contemporary members with Guru Gobind Singh Ji of the Khalsa panth were identified with their given surnames: for instance, Banda Singh Bahadur. Then again during the post-Guru period, before and after Maharaja Ranjit Singh, there are numerous examples of prominent Sikhs using surnames. In the early 20th century too, some leaders of the Singh Sabha movement, though they rejected caste names as well as caste-based Gurdwaras, willingly accepted the mark of identity of an additional surname.

In the end, it is worth repeating that every Sikh must add the gender identity-marker Singh or Kaur to their first name, and that this signifies national identity on a global scale. But a precise identity in the form of a surname is also necessary today, given that Sikhs are no longer confined to India and many operate beyond a village or small town context. This personal identity may be derived from a variety of sources, such as heritage, parentage (taking the name of a parental family member), geographic location, or even, as has been discussed above, by making an imaginative approach in choosing any appropriate meaningful word as a surname.

Moreover, it should be remembered that the word 'Singh' is not the sole property of the Sikhs. It was in use in many parts of North India among some Hindu communities, especially the Rajputs, long before the Sikhs came on the scene. The only difference is that at the time of the founding of the Khalsa Panth in 1699 at Anandpur, Guru Gobind Singh Ji declared it obligatory to join the word Singh with the first name of male Sikhs (and Kaur for females). Basically, every Sikh man must have Singh as his middle or last name, but not every man with Singh as a middle or last name is a Sikh.

## Westernized names

India is not the only country where Sikhs live. Today they live in almost every country, although outside India they are mostly concentrated in Western countries. Many children of Sikh families living in Western countries have Westernized names. Usually, these are chosen to be easy on the tongue. For example, a female Sikh whose birth name was Sharanjit Kaur might call herself Sharan Kaur. Similarly, a male Sikh named Harjit Singh might call himself Harry Singh. Basically, the purpose is to make their name shorter and easier so that their Western friends, classmates and co-workers can understand and pronounce it with ease.

These days I see many young Sikh women, particularly outside India, who use a hyphenated 'Kaur-Singh', while others have shed 'Kaur' and simply use 'Singh' as their last name. Sometimes this leads to confusion, because traditionally, Sikh first names are gender-neutral, and differentiation between males and females depends upon the use of Singh or Kaur.

## Sort order

Sikh names should be indexed by the last name, followed by the first name. As noted above, the first names for Sikh people are always gender-neutral, and many people use Singh or Kaur as a surname. It might be useful when indexing to indicate gender, and it is often necessary to differentiate between individuals with the same name. This can be done by showing their relationship/gender/title in parenthesis. For example:

Kaur, Surjit (mother)  
Kaur, Surjit (personal maid)  
Singh, Manmohan (driver)  
Singh, Manmohan (Prime Minister)

In the Sikh religion, it is not mandatory for married women to adopt their husband's surname after marriage, though it has become common for Sikh women living in Western countries to do so. If a woman has decided to continue using Kaur as her last name after marriage, then for indexing purposes it is useful to show the name of her husband in parenthesis. For example:

Kaur, Harpreet (wife of Manmohan Singh)

But if the woman is referred to more often by her married name than by her maiden name, a cross-reference should be created from her maiden name. For example:

Kaur, Surjit, see Chawla, Surjit  
Chawla, Surjit (married name)

## 'Titles' and 'relation' terms

In English, we have it easy – there are only two words for uncle and aunt! In Punjabi however, the words are different depending on which side of the family the relation is, and whether they are younger or older. It should also be noted that some relationship terms have more than one version. For example, the words for 'father' include Pita and Papa. Basically, usage varies from family to family.

Table 1 lists the most common titles and relation terms used in the Sikh culture. The first three terms are titles, and the remainder are relation terms. In Sikh culture, as in Indian culture, the word 'ji' is often added at the end of the relation term. This is to indicate respect for elders. For example, a father will be addressed as Pitaji or Papaji, an older paternal uncle as Tayaji.

**Table 1** Common Sikh title and relationship terms

Title or term	English meaning	Title or term	English meaning
Sardar	Mr	Sardarni	Mrs
Bibi	Miss	Pita, Papa, Bauji or Daddy	Father
Mata, Biji or Mummy	Mother	Vir or Bhaji	Brother
Bhen or Didi	Sister	Taya	Father's older brother
Tayi	Father's older brother's wife	Chacha	Father's younger brother
Chachi	Father's younger brother's wife	Bhua	Father's sister
Fuffar	Father's sister's husband	Mama	Mother's brother
Mami	Mother's brother's wife	Massi	Mother's sister
Massar	Mother's sister's husband	Babba or Dada	Grandfather (paternal)
Bebbe , Bibi or Dadi	Grandmother (paternal)	Nanaa	Grandfather (maternal)
Nani	Grandmother (maternal)	Jija or Bhayia	Brother-in-law (sister's husband)
Bhabhi or Bharjai	Sister-in-law (low tone) (brother's wife)	Puttar or Beta	Son
Puttari or Beti	Daughter	Pati or Aadmi	Husband
Patni or Theevee	Wife	Potra	Grandson (paternal)
Potri	Granddaughter (paternal)	Dotra	Grandson (maternal)
Dotri	Granddaughter (maternal)	Nuha	Daughter-in-law
Jawai	Son-in-law	Sanddu	Wife's sister's husband
Salla	Wife's brother	Sallahar	Wife's brother's wife
Saas	Mother-in-law	Saura	Father-in-law
Nanad	Sister-in-law (husband's sister)	Jeth	Husband's older brother
Jethani	Sister-in-law (wife of Jeth)	Devar	Husband's younger brother
Derani	Sister-in-law (wife of Devar)	Khandan	Family (ancestral)
Pariwar	Family (immediate)		

## Conclusion

Sikh names are very easy to understand and to index, and as noted below, there a number of useful web resources that can help.

## Useful websites

[www.sikhwomen.com](http://www.sikhwomen.com)

[www.sikhmissionarysociety.org](http://www.sikhmissionarysociety.org)

<http://sikhchic.com>

[www.sikharchives.com](http://www.sikharchives.com)

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# Zoological indexing

## Max McMaster

*Understanding zoological nomenclature is the key to indexing zoological taxonomic texts. This paper provides an overview of zoological classification and explains how this interacts with the role of the indexer. A detailed account of how to handle common names of animals is also provided.*

## Introduction

According to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993), zoology is 'the science of the structure, physiology, behaviour, classification, and distribution of animals'. As such, zoological indexing has to occur across all of these fields. It covers living animals, both vertebrates – amphibians, birds, fish, reptiles and mammals – and invertebrates – insects, arthropods, molluscs, annelids (worms), nematodes, sponges, cnidaria (jellyfishes) and more – as well as extinct and fossilized forms. Indexing general zoological texts is relatively straightforward and is comparable to indexing similar works in the biological sciences. Shere (2009) provides a general overview. Handling

zoological nomenclature, however, raises difficulties for indexers.

Within the Kingdom Animalia, the following levels of classification apply: phyla, subphyla, class, subclass, order, suborder, family, genus and species. The following example illustrates how complicated the topic can be.

Phylum Chordata  
 Subphylum Vertebrata  
 Class Chondrichthyes (cartilaginous fishes)  
 Subclass Elasmobranchii (sharks and rays)  
 Order Selachii (sharks)  
 Suborder Galeoidei (typical sharks)