

PUNJABIS OF MALAYSIA - INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

Malaysia is divided into two geographical sections: Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, which includes the provinces of Sabah and Sarawak in North Borneo. The two divisions are separated by the South China Sea. Peninsular Malaysia is bordered by Thailand and Singapore. Sabah and Sarawak are bordered by Kalimantan. An influx of Punjabis arrived in Malaysia as political prisoners in the nineteenth century. In 1947 the Punjab state was divided. At this time most of the Muslims fled to Pakistan and the Sikhs and Hindus remained in Punjab. A further division occurred in 1966 when the state was trifurcated. Some Punjabis would have fled to Malaysia after these political upheavals. There are approximately 90,000 Punjabis in Malaysia.

LANGUAGE

Even though there are some religious differences, the language, Punjabi, is common between them. Malaysian Punjabi families are likely to also speak *Bahasa Malay*, the official language of Malaysia. The written language of Sikhs is called *Gurmukhi*. The written language of Punjabi Hindus is Hindi. The written language of Muslim Sikhs might be either Punjabi or Urdu.

RELIGION

Originally from the Punjab area of North India and Pakistan, Punjabis come from three distinct religious groups: Sikh, Muslim and Hindu.

Punjabi Sikhs believe in one god who cannot take human form. They meditate, do charitable work and community service. Fundamental to Sikhism is living a truthful life.

Muslim Sikhs believe in Islam's acceptance of the supreme power of one God. Muslims subscribe to the five pillars of Islam; *shahad* (witness), *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (alms), *sawm* (fasting) and the *hajj* (pilgrimage).

Hindu Sikhs abide by the *vedas*, the sacred Hindu scriptures. Hindus believe in reincarnation and karma; the endless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

Sikh

The birthdays of the ten Sikh gurus: The birthdays of Guru Nanak Dev Ji (first Guru) and Guru Gobind Singh Ji (tenth Guru) and the martyrdom days of the 5th and the 9th gurus are particularly significant. On these occasions Sikhs practise the *Akhand Path*, the continuous 48 hours reading of sacred texts.

BAISAKHI - celebration of the five Sikhs baptised by Guru Gobind Singh. It marks the Sikh New Year. Traditionally, the men and women perform *Bhangra* (male folk dance) and *Giddha* (female folk dance) to the pounding rhythm of the *dhol*, celebrating the joyous occasion and ringing in the New Year.

DIWALI - Both Sikhs and Muslims celebrate Diwali, the festival of lights. LOHRI - marks the end of winter, commemorating the harvest and honouring the spirit of the Punjab.

Muslim

EID AL ADAH - is the Festival of Sacrifice that commemorates God's forgiveness of Ibrahim for his vow to sacrifice his son.

EID - marks the end of Ramadan, the fasting month and lasts for 3 days.

Indian

HOLI - is the spring festival, referred to as the festival of colours because it is the time that people joyfully throw coloured water or flour.

DIVALI - is the festival of light celebrated to represent good over the evil within every human being.

ETHNIC MAKEUP

Malaysia is a multicultural society composed of 63% Malays and other indigenous people, 28% Chinese, and 9% Indians. Traditionally Punjabis lived in extended families and embraced very strong kinship bonds called biradiri. Though these bonds are less stringent today, the family unit is highly regarded. In Muslim Punjabi families the kinship bonds may be reinforced through arranged marriages between cousins, but for Hindu Punjabis marriage within the family is not approved.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

CHILDREARING PRACTICE: The views vary from a strong belief in the higher status of boys, to a more moderate and modern view of girls having status. The difference in views may be attributed to the difference in class, education, religion and social position. The father is referred to for major decision making.

RITES OF PASSAGE:

SIKHS: A naming ceremony occurs at the temple. A sacred book is randomly opened and the parents choose a name that begins with the first letter of the first word on the left hand page. In late teens the child is initiated into the Sikh religion. All Sikh males carry the surname of Singh (meaning lion) and Sikh females carry the name Kaur (meaning lioness/princess) respectively. In some cases the ancestral names are included after the surname. Referring to a Sikh as Mr Singh and Miss/Mrs Kaur is acceptable but it would be preferred that the full name is used when more than one Sikh is present. Sikhs are cremated at death.

MUSLIMS: Children are named in consultation with the mullah (priest). Males are circumcised at any time before the age of 12. Muslims are buried at death and draped in white.

HINDUS: A ritual of shaving the child's head usually occurs during the first 5 years of the child's life. Priests are consulted about whether the impending birth date is deemed lucky and if it is not, a special ceremony will be held to alleviate any harmful effects. Hindus are cremated at death.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: Sikh men will generally shake hands in a non-Sikh environment but the preference is to greet with folded hands, like the Hindus. Sikh males or females who have family ties or are close to one another may embrace one another. They do not kiss on the cheek. Elders customarily place the palm of their hand on the head of the younger generation which is a symbolic gesture of affection and blessing. Certain Sikhs may bow and touch the feet of the elders as a gesture of respect for the elders.

- Kesh (hair) – a Sikh must not cut hair from his or her body from birth to death (the head represents a crown of spirituality). Young boys will wear a patka (cloth) on their head and with maturation into adulthood they start wearing a pugg (turban). The colour of the turban is significant on a few occasions; to show mourning at the death of a family member a white turban is worn. Priests will generally wear dark blue, black or white turbans.

Sikhs will wear the five signs of their faith. They are:

- Kirpan – a small sized sword worn in a belt
- Kara – an iron bangle worn on the wrist (represents bondage to truth)
- Kachera – boxer like underwear
- Kanga – a small wooden comb

** Never touch a Sikh on the head or turban as they are deemed sacred.

** Never wink at a Sikh female. This is seen to be sexually offensive.

CLOTHING: The English word pyjama derives from the loose fitting pants worn in Punjab. The men wear a kurta, (long shirt) tahmat (cloth wrapped around the waist and legs) or pyjama, and a turban. Most Punjabi women will wear the sawar (pyjama type pants) kameez (long top worn over the pants). Women will also wear a dupatta (a scarf) with it, which can be draped over the head as need prescribes.

FOLKLORE: The mixture of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim themes in Punjabi folklore reflects the presence of these religious traditions of Punjab. The mythology and folklore includes folktales, songs, ballads, epics and romances. Oral folk tradition is passed on to successive generations by traditional singers, mystics and wandering gypsies. Many of the songs are for specific occasions such as birth, marriage, war or the glorification of historical heroes. The Mahiya is a romantic song of the Punjab. Sehra Bandi is a marriage song, and Mehndi songs are sung when henna, a red dye, is being applied to the bride and groom in preparation for marriage.

CUISINE

The staple diet of Punjabis is cereal such as wheat, corn or millet, vegetables, lentils and milk products. Goat meat is eaten on special occasions. Roti (flat bread) and dhal (made from lentils) are usually eaten daily.

Observant Sikhs do not eat meat and do not consume alcohol. Observant Muslims do not eat pork. Observant Hindus do not eat beef and might also be vegetarian.

REFERENCES

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