

# Vaisakhi

Vaisakhi is both a religious holiday and a cultural celebration. In addition to serving as a major harvest festival in the Punjab region of India, Vaisakhi is also considered to be New Year's Day in the Sikh calendar. The holiday marks the day that the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, formalized the unique Sikh identity and established the *Khalsa Panth*, a collected body of initiated Sikhs. Vaisakhi follows a solar calendar and takes place each year on April 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup>. In 2019 it will take place on April 14<sup>th</sup>.

## **Khalsa and Amrit Sanchar**

Vaisakhi commemorates the creation of the *Khalsa Panth*, an order of initiated Sikhs who are devoted to serving the Divine and humanity. Guru Gobind Singh established the *Khalsa Panth* in 1699 CE, a period marked by religious and political tensions. The formalization of the community indicated the distinctiveness of the Sikh religion – the *Khalsa Panth* was meant to take responsibility for Sikhs' civil, executive and military leadership instead of relying on the governance of other communities. Members of the *Khalsa Panth* were also expected to protect their constituencies from external threats.

The Sikh initiation ceremony is known as *Amrit Sanchar*. This ceremony is led by a group of Sikhs who have already been initiated. They read prayers while preparing *amrit*, which is water that has been sweetened by sugar. When the prayers are completed, the initiate drinks the *amrit*, symbolizing that they have joined a new social order with no social hierarchy.

Sikhs can choose to join the *Khalsa Panth* when they feel ready to make the appropriate commitment to their faith; this can happen during childhood or adulthood. Typically, women who have been initiated take the last name Kaur, which means princess, and men who have been initiated take the last name Singh, which means lion.

Not all Sikhs are initiated into the *Khalsa Panth*. Some uninitiated Sikhs plan to be initiated eventually and are waiting until they can make the appropriate commitment to their faith.

## **History of Vaisakhi**

Vaisakhi predates Sikhism and began as a harvest festival in the Punjab region of India. It is still celebrated by people of various faiths and backgrounds all around South Asia. In 1699 the tenth Guru chose Vaisakhi as the occasion to create the *Khalsa Panth*. During the Vaisakhi festival, Guru Gobind Singh gathered his followers to Anandpur (a city in Punjab, India) and announced that he wanted five Sikhs to voluntarily give up their lives. The Guru honored the first five individuals who stepped forward by initiating them with *amrit*. He then requested these five leaders – *Panj Piaray* – to administer *amrit* to him. Sikhs recognize this event as the basis for *Amrit Sanchar*.

## **Observance & Scheduling Tips for Vaisakhi**

Sikhs celebrate Vaisakhi in a variety of ways. Many Sikhs choose to be initiated into the *Khalsa Panth* on Vaisakhi. Sikhs who are not participating in an initiation ceremony may wish to visit and decorate *Gudwaras* (Sikh houses of worship). Sikh communities also commemorate Vaisakhi with parades, religious music, and by doing *seva* (selfless service), such as distributing food to the needy.

It is important to keep in mind that Sikhs do not practice fasting and do not eat food that has been prepared according to another religion's rituals (e.g. halal food). There are no specific dietary restrictions associated with the observance of Vaisakhi.

Some Sikhs may wish to take off work on Vaisakhi. A Sikh employee who observes Vaisakhi may choose to use a vacation day or personal day for this celebration. Instead of taking off a full day off work, some Sikhs may wish to take time off to attend an initiation ceremony (either for themselves or for a family member or friend), a parade or another kind of celebration. Invite your employees to share if and how they observe Vaisakhi, and what practices they will be observing that day.

### **Greetings for Vaisakhi**

It would be appropriate to greet a Sikh colleague on Vaisakhi by saying “Happy Vaisakhi.” Sikhs will likely acknowledge one another with the traditional Sikh greeting: “*Wahiguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Wahiguru Ji Ki Fateh.*” This greeting means “The *Khalsa Panth* belongs to the Divine, and all victories belong to the Divine.”

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