

# 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 2023, 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 devoted to serving the One Creator 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 took 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. Five initiated Sikhs lead it. They read specific prayers while preparing *amrit* (water 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. Women who have been initiated take the last name Kaur, which means princess or next in line to rule. Men who have been initiated take the last name Singh, which means lion.

Not all Sikhs are initiated into the Khalsa Panth. Some Sikhs plan to be initiated eventually and are waiting to commit to their faith appropriately.

## 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 to create the Khalsa Panth. During the Vaisakhi festival, Guru Gobind Singh gathered his followers at Anandpur (a city in Punjab, India) and announced that he wanted five Sikhs to give up their lives voluntarily. The Guru honored the first five individuals who stepped forward by initiating them with *amrit*. He then requested these five leaders – Panj Pyare (Five Lovers) – 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 *Gurdwaras* (Sikh houses of learning and worship). Sikh communities also commemorate Vaisakhi with parades, religious music, and by doing *seva* (selfless service), such as distributing food to the needy.

There are no specific dietary restrictions associated with the observance of Vaisakhi. Sikhs do not eat meat that has been prepared according to another religion's rituals (e.g., halal or kosher), and some extend this prohibition and do not eat meat at all.

Some Sikhs may wish to take off work on Vaisakhi. Some Sikhs may wish to take part of the day 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 Creator, and all victories belong to the Creator."

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