

Wahe Guru ji ka Khalsa
Wahe Guru ji ki Fateh

Sadh sangat ji,

I have been asked to take a few moments on this important day to speak for the benefit of our English-speaking guests on the significance of Baisakhi Day to the Sikh community. As I myself am still a student of Sikh history, religion, and culture, my own knowledge is far from exhaustive. I hope, therefore, that those of you who are more familiar than I with the story of Baisakhi Day will have patience with my account and will accept my sincere apologies for any faults in my presentation.

Baisakhi Day -- which falls annually on the 13th of April, except for every thirty six years when it falls on April 14 -- is New Year's Day in the Punjab. Traditionally, it has marked the beginning to the spring harvest and as such has become an important Hindu festival occasion throughout North India. Since the time of Guru Amar Das, who during the mid-1500s was the 3rd Sikh Guru, it has been the tradition of the Sikhs to gather around their Guru on this day. Guru Amar Das's apparent intention in calling for these assemblages of the Sikhs was to wean them from Hindu rites and to create uniquely Sikh functions. Thus on Baisakhi Day, instead of making offerings of crops to Brahmins, Sikhs were to give worship to God and listen to the teachings of the Guru.

Over the course of the years, certain Baisakhi assemblies have acquired special historic significance for the Sikh community. Undoubtedly the most significant of these gatherings occurred on Baisakhi Day 1699, the day on which Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa Panth (the brotherhood of the pure). According to the

Sikh historian, Kushwant Singh, Guru Gobind Singh had sent out a request that all Sikhs make a special effort to attend that year's gathering in Anandpur. On the appointed day, a huge crowd of the faithful and the curious were said to be in attendance. Coming before the gathering with sword in hand and a stern continence upon his face, Guru Gobind Singh asked for the head of one of his followers. Confusion and consternation reigned amongst his followers, who must surely have wondered about their Guru's sanity. Three times he asked for a head before one man rose to offer himself. The Guru took him to a tent, returning shortly, his sword dripping with blood as he demanded yet another head. Eventually five men had volunteered for sacrifice at the Guru's hand. When the Guru had apparently satisfied his quest for blood, he returned to the tent and reemerged with the five "victims" (goats having been slaughtered in their stead). Addressing the crowd, he introduced the five as the panj pyare (the five beloved) who were to constitute the nucleus of the new community which was to be called the Khalsa Panth (the brotherhood of the pure).

Creating amrit (nectar) by mixing sugar and water with a double-edged dagger to the recitation of certain hymns, the Guru "baptized" the five men in a new manner. The five, who had come from different castes, were made to drink from a common bowl to signify their entrance into the casteless Khalsa. At the same time, their Hindu names were changed and they were given the name-title "Singh" (lion) -- just as subsequent women members of the Khalsa were given the name-title "Kaur" (lioness or princess). The new initiates were henceforth to recognize Guru Gobind Singh (so renamed after his own baptism) as their father, Sahib Devan (the Guru's third wife) as their mother, and Anandpur as their birthplace.

In addition, the new initiates agreed to forever maintain the five kakkas, or 5K's (the kesh, unshorn hair; the kanga, a wooden comb; the kirpan, a sword; the kara, a steel bracelet; and the kaccha, a loin and thigh garment) and to observe four rules of conduct: not to cut any hair on any part of the body; not to smoke or use intoxicants; not to eat an animal which had been slaughtered by being bled to death, as was the Muslim custom; and not to molest Muslim women (this rule subsequently widened to forbid any form of adultery). Furthermore, the Sikhs were enjoined to recite the Guru's hymns, believe in the One God; give one tenth of their income for charity; earn an honest living and fight to protect the weak from oppression.

Finally, the Guru introduced a new form of greeting:

Wahe Guru ji ka Khalsa, Wahe Guru ji ki Fateh

The Khalsa belong to God, Victory be to God

And, having thus established the principles of the Khalsa, the Guru asked the Panj Pyare to baptize him as an equal member of the Brotherhood.

According to Sikh chroniclers, as many as 20,000 men and women proceeded to undergo the amrit pahul ceremony at Anandpur that Baisakhi Day. ^{marking the birth of the Khalsa} Thus Baisakhi Day 1699 will forever stand as a key date in Sikh history.

(And, I might add parenthetically, because of the significance of Anandpur Sahib as the birthplace of the Khalsa, we are particularly honoured by the presence of the kirtan jatha from Anandpur Sahib here for this Baisakhi celebration.)

Subsequent Baisakhi Days have also contributed to Sikh history. In the eighteenth century, the Sikhs began to assemble in Amritsar on Baisakhi Day and this city became a focal point for the community in the absence of a human Guru. On Baisakhi Day 1747 it was decided to construct a permanent fortress at Amritsar. On Baisakhi Day 1762, after consulting the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikhs decided to support the Hindus against the Islamic Afghan invaders. More famous still are the events of Baisakhi Day 1919 when 379 Sikhs were martyred as the British attempted to stop the Sikhs from gathering at Jallianwalla Bagh. And finally, as if to confirm that Baisakhi Days continue to be momentous days, it was only on short year ago that 13 Sikhs, the so-called "martyrs of Amritsar," met their death while protesting the treatment of their fellow Sikhs and of the Guru Granth Sahib by the Sant Nirankaris.

As the youngest major world religion, Sikhism has shown a special appreciation of its historicity. The gatherings of Baisakhi Day have not only served to create some of that history but also offer the Sikhs an opportunity to celebrate the political, religious, and social history of their community. It has, therefore, been a great honour for me to have had the opportunity to play a small part in this particular Baisakhi celebration. I thank you.

. Wahe Guru ji ka Khalsa
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