

The Festival of Baisakhi

Summary: Baisakhi is a joyous festival that takes place at the time of the traditional spring harvest in Punjab. In addition to the usual rites that take place at the gurdwara, Baisakhi is also the time of year when Sikhs raise the Nishan Sahib, the Sikh flag. In the United States, the festival is usually the best attended event of the year, so events such as “taking amrit” (electing gurdwara officials) often coincide with Baisakhi.

Activity at the Sikh Gurdwara of Greater Chicago in Palatine, Illinois begins early in the morning on Baisakhi day as families arrive with bags of groceries to begin preparation of the *langar*, or communal meal. As the early morning prayers begin, those in charge of the preparations begin work in the kitchen. Thousands will come to the *gurdwara* today—from the Chicago area Sikh community and from all over the midwest. Here, as in *gurdwaras* throughout the U.S., Sikhs make preparations in the kitchen for feeding hundreds, and in some cities thousands, of visitors. Sikhs who live in remote locations and are not able to attend a *gurdwara* regularly will drive for hours to celebrate Baisakhi with other Sikhs. All visitors are greeted and invited to partake of *langar*.

Baisakhi is the most important celebration of the Sikh year, held on the first day of the lunar month of Baisakh which falls in the month of April. It is the time of the traditional spring harvest festival in the Punjab. In Amritsar, the Sikh center in the Punjab, Baisakhi is a great pilgrimage day on which Sikhs come from all over India to the Golden Temple. In America, however, Sikhs assemble from near and far at the *gurdwara*.

In Fairfax, Virginia the parking lot of the new suburban *gurdwara* fills up in the evening for the celebration of Baisakhi. Families have come in their best clothes—suits and turbans for the men and for women the silk *salvar* (loose trousers) with the long colorful silk print *kamiz* (shirt-dresses) and the transparent long scarves, called *chunnis*, draped over their heads. The shoe racks are full at the rear of the *gurdwara*. The singing of *kirtan* is well underway.

What actually takes place on this day, however, is almost identical to the rites observed in the *gurdwara* at any other time—the singing of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib, the singing

of *kirtan*, the receiving of *prashad*, and the sharing of the *langar*. Today, however, everything takes on a special hue. The crowd is larger. The dress is more festive. Specially trained Sikh musicians, called *ragis*, may be brought from the Punjab especially to sing *kirtan* on this holiday. In addition, many other Sikhs lead the *shabads*, especially youngsters who have practiced for months for this opportunity. In the congregation, they nervously await their turn to sing before proud parents and family.

Some communities, like the Sikhs of Sacramento and New Orleans, also rent a hall for a special Baisakhi cultural program. There is a pageant of folk songs, dances, and skits. Teenage boys perform the *Bhangra*, a folk dance of the Punjab. The girls and women perform the *Gidda*. There is a talent show, complete with trophies. This is also an occasion for special speakers to address the congregation, discussing issues ranging from religious themes to the political issues of the day. Because the community turnout is so great, Baisakhi is also a popular time for the election of *gurdwara* officials. For Sikhs, the celebration of this holiday recalls another new beginning: the formation of the *Khalsa*, the special company of the faithful to which all initiated Sikhs belong. The *Khalsa* was founded by the tenth Sikh *guru*, Gobind Singh. “It is the birthday of the *Khalsa* today,” Sikhs will say. And, indeed, Baisakhi in the U.S. is often the time for initiation into the *Khalsa*. The initiation rite called *khande di pahul*, or “taking *amrit*,” frequently takes place on this day, the anniversary of the first initiations.

One of the main events on Baisakhi is the raising of the Nishan Sahib, the Sikh flag. The huge flagpole must be unbolted and lowered as scores of men and women support its weight, and others sing *shabads*. The flagpole is then washed and the new flag is installed. The wrapping cloth of the flag extends down to the base of the platform, and is fastened with ties of the same orange color as the flag. The new Nishan Sahib is raised as people shout the Sikh slogan “*Jo Bole so Nihal*,” “Who says this will be exalted!” Each is answered with the affirmation of what it is that needs to be said: “*Sat Sri Akal!*” or “God is Truth!” In all, Baisakhi is a joyful and festive occasion.