

Vaisakhi: A day of Reflection for the Sikhs

*Dr. Jaswant Singh Sachdev, MD**

* 4438E - Beryl Lane, Phoenix, Arizona. 85028. USA. Email: jaswantsachdev@cox.net

Every year, year after year, throughout the life cycle of human beings, several significant days of celebration or festivals come and pass by. Like a machine, we tend to perform certain specified celebrations in relation to a given festival, often times forgetting the true message behind such activities.

The Sikhs are no exception compared to the rest of the world. They certainly appear not to fail in copying this unfortunate trend of superficial celebrations without following the inner message or intent behind such celebrations.

Most of the Sikh festivals usually correspond to the birthdays or coronation of their Gurus while a few are related to the Martyrdoms of our prophets, their children and followers. But unlike others, one of the most important festivals, the Vaisakhi happens to carry a special and unique kind of significance for the Sikhs. It is also known as Baisakhi, in view of the fact that it falls on the first day of the solar month of Baisakh of Indian calendar. From historical perspectives, the Vaisakhi had been celebrated in Punjab even before the evolution of Sikh faith. It is on this day that the harvesting of the major crop of wheat begins in North India especially in Punjab.¹

By some accounts it is believed that Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh faith was actually born during the month of Vaisakh.² Later on, the third Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Amar Dass Ji initiated an annual congregation at Goindwal in Punjab on this day.³ As time passed, Sikh Sangat or congregation would often assemble for celebration of Vaisakhi on a location where the seat of Sikh Guru will happen to be at that time.

In the year of 1699 on March 30th, 1699 Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth master of the Sikhs ordained his followers in the 'Order of Khalsa' at Anandpur Sahib in Shivalik hills of Punjab.⁴ Ever since, Vaisakhi has come to be known as 'Saajna Divas' or 'Day of Creation' of Khalsa in the realm of Sikh faith. He clearly assigned certain specific duties and responsibilities setting a code of conduct for the believers of this faith whom he labeled as 'Fauj of Akal Purukh' or the 'Army of God'. Given the special significance of Vaisakhi for the Sikhs, this day became a focal point in its evolution of Sikh religion. **No other faith on the face of this earth could ever boast of a festival that has such a singularly unique association with the complete metamorphosis that led to the establishment of a nation in its truest form.**

However, over period of time, the Sikhs have been gradually losing sight of the underlying spirit and significance of this important day. The Sikh community, as a whole, whether in India or abroad, has basically turned Vaisakhi into an event of raucous festivities without due attention to what it truly stands for. Certainly in saying so I do not intend to imply that one should not celebrate this festive occasion in great joyful spirit that it is worthy of. On the contrary, I would categorically state that this being the 'Day of Creation of Khalsa', such celebrations should encompass all the happiness and excitement that it could muster. But unfortunately what is missing in all the celebrations is the lack of motivation to understand and then act on the message that was imparted to the Sikhs on this particular day.

While the celebrations are getting more and more complex, both on the religious and social fronts, the true perspectives, significance and spirit behind such activities is continuously being eroded in our minds. Wasn't it the day when Guru Gobind Singh changed the landscape of India by offering Amrit to its downtrodden people turning

them into an army of fearless saint-soldiers? Didn't he emphasize upon them to maintain a unique identity with glorious uncut hair, beard and turban? But alas! With the passage of time unfortunately, we see more and more of us looking like others. The distinct uniqueness of the Sikhs is being continuously adulterated by so called 'Modern Sikhs' who seem not to care about the true meaning or message of Vaisakhi. What could be clearer than his statement "j b lg Kwlsw rhy inAwrw q~b lg qyj idau mYN swrw [j b ieh ghy ibprn kl rlq mYN nw krUM ien kl prqlq]" meaning thereby "That so long as my Khalsa stays uniquely distinct, I will provide it with all the strength. But when it starts imitating others, I will not care for it any more".

The ceremony of taking Amrit for Initiation into Khalsa Order took place for the first time on this day of Vaisakhi. The five chosen Beloved Ones (Piaras) were drawn from across the country and from different castes. Included amongst them were a Khatri from Punjab, a Jat from Rohtak, Haryana and three lower caste Hindus from Gujrat, East India and Township of Bidar in Karnatka respectively.⁵ After having offered them Amrit, Guru Gobind Singh personally bowed in front of them and begged for the same gift of Amrit so that he could also become one of the Khalsa like them. Never before in the history of mankind had such an act of democratic equality ever been performed where a giver purposefully turned around and became a seeker. It seems unlikely that such an act would ever be witnessed again on the face of this earth. Also now look at us the 'Modern Sikhs'! Not only have we forgotten about the abolition of caste system and equality amongst us, we even feel shy in using the word 'Singh' or 'Kaur' in our names, as was firmly ordained by that saint-soldier Guru Gobind Singh Ji?

Every nook and corner wherever Sikhs are living, the social events related to Vaisakhi are often celebrated without any regard for the dissemination of fundamental facts of Sikh philosophy. The entertainments with *Bhangra* and other Punjabi Cultural programs abound on this day. These celebrations per-se are not bad and intent here is not to disown them. But they are often celebrated in total contrast to what this day actually happens to be all about. One of the main injunctions that the followers of Sikh faith must adhere to pertains to the avoidance of alcohol and other intoxicants, yet drinking bouts turn out to be the mainstay of these celebrations. The impression is given to non-Sikhs that Punjabi functions, especially Vaisakhi, could not be complete without booze - and its undesirable consequences. Yet this is far from truth. We must make an attempt to create environments where liquor and indecent behavior are kept at bay on a day that carries such an important significance for all Sikhs irrespective of where they happen to be living.

For all of us, the believers in this faith of Guru Gobind Singh the Tenth Nanak, Vaisakhi should become a day of reflection. It should become a day when vows to uphold those golden principles of Sikh faith are again renewed. It should be a day when those who have shunned their forms and identities attempt once again to realign their philosophy with the original spirit of this day. It should be the day when turban is given the 'Glory of a Crown' it once commanded. It should be the day when Sikhs start imbibing Guru's Amrit rather, than with the booze. Then, and only then, our Vaisakhi celebrations will really matter and the true purpose behind it would be realized.

□

References

- 1, 4: Dr. Harbans Singh, *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*.
- 2, 3, 5: Dr. Gopal Singh, *A History of Sikh People*.