

# FESTIVALS OF THE SIKH FAITH

## Introduction

Sikhism is the youngest of the great world faiths. There are 20-22 million Sikhs in the world, tracing the origin of their religion to Punjab, located in present-day Pakistan and northern India. Now the fifth largest in the world, the Sikh religion is strictly monotheistic, believing in one supreme God, free of gender, absolute, all pervading, eternal Creator. This universal God of love is obtained through grace, sought by service to mankind. Sikhism is a belief system that teaches justice, social harmony, peace and equality of all humanity regardless of religion, creed, and race. Sikhism places great value on human life as an opportunity to live the highest spiritual life through their religious commitment to honest living and hard work.

Sikhs are students and followers of Guru Nanak (b.1469), the founder of the Sikh religious tradition, and the nine prophet-teachers – called Gurus – who succeeded him. Sikhs have their own divine scriptures collected in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, written by the Gurus themselves, which today serves as the eternal spiritual guide of the Sikhs. Besides the compositions of the Gurus, it also contains the writings of Hindu and Muslim saints.

## Sikh Festivals

Sikh festivals are called *gurpurabhs* or days connected with important events in the lives of the Gurus. They are occasions for the re-dedication and revival of the Faith and are celebrated in a spirit of fellowship and devotion. They are usually celebrated at *gurdwaras* (Sikh place of worship), open to all men and women without distinction of caste, creed or colour. On these occasions, Sikhs are reminded of the main teachings of their faith. Belief in One God of all humanity, the equality of women, respect for other ways of life and the need to look to the welfare of others, particularly the weak and oppressed.

Sikh festivals usually generate a lot of religious fervour and enthusiasm, which produce feelings of peace and joy. The majority of Sikhs, generally, join in the celebrations with their families and participate in as many activities as possible. These festivals also provide opportunities to perform spontaneous acts of service to the community and feeding the poor and handicapped.

The schedules for the celebrations usually include the continuous recitation of scriptures (*Guru Granth Sahib*) over three days (*Akhand Paath*), culminating in group and choral singing of sacred hymns (*kirtan*), lectures on Sikhism (*katha*) and the saying of congregational or mass-prayers. Free food (*langgar*), an integral feature of a *gurdwara* is served to all who attend the *gurpurabs*. Some places also have a procession (*Nagar Kirtan*) with *Guru Granth Sahib* led by 5 Sikhs carrying *Nishan Sahibs* (the Sikh flag), singing and chanting scriptures and hymns.

The main festivals of the Sikhs are:

- Vaisakhi
- Birth of Guru Nanak
- Birth of Guru Gobind Singh
- Martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev
- Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur
- Conferment of Guruship to Guru Granth Sahib

**Vaisakhi:** This is the most important occasion in the Sikh calendar. This day celebrated on April 14 is considered the birthday of the Khalsa order. Vaisakhi marks a dramatic episode in Sikh history, when Guru Gobind Singh, the last of the ten Sikh gurus, reminded the Sikhs of the need to stand up and be counted. It was on this day in 1699 that he established an order of the Sikhs called the Khalsa by initiating 5 brave Sikhs who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the Guru. The Khalsa, which means both “pure” and “belonging only to the Divine” is a global human fellowship consisting of Sikhs who undergo a unique initiation ceremony and dedicate themselves to living by the high ideals and values preached and practiced by the Sikh Gurus. The Khalsa were also enjoined to maintain their physical distinctiveness in society by carrying the 5 Ks – the five articles of the faith that are Kesh (uncut hair), Kirpan (ceremonial sword), Kara (steel bracelet) Kanga (comb) and Kaccha (undershorts) – and following a code of conduct which set them apart from other groups and required them to live pure lives. Through the creation of the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh brought to successful fruition his predecessors’ concept of the ideal person, the ‘saint-soldier’.

Sikhs come together on Vaisakhi to strengthen their practice of Sikh ideals and values including praying and working to achieve prosperity for the whole human race. As Vaisakhi helps to reinforce these ideals amongst Sikhs, it creates the vision of a new, hopeful and rejuvenated humanity.

**Guru Nanak’s Birthday:** Guru Nanak is the founder of the Sikh faith. His birthday is generally celebrated during the month of November.

**Guru Gobind Singh’s Birthday:** Guru Gobind Singh was the tenth Guru of the Sikhs. His birthday falls in 5 January.

**Guru Arjan Dev’s Martyrdom:** Guru Arjan Dev, the 5<sup>th</sup> Guru, was the first martyr-guru. He was responsible for the compilation of the Sikh scriptures in 1604. He also helped to build the Harmandir Sahib or the Golden Temple at Amritsar. He was tortured to death under the orders of the emperor of the day for upholding the right to religious freedom and justice. This martyrdom-anniversary usually celebrated on 16 June is not an occasion for sorrow but of inspiration and exaltation to remind Sikhs of the heroic deeds and the good work done by the Gurus.

**Guru Tegh Bahadur’s Martyrdom:** Guru Tegh Bahadur was the 9<sup>th</sup> Guru of the Sikhs. He was publicly beheaded by the emperor of the day in 1675 for upholding the rights of the oppressed and fought for their right to practise religious freedom. His martyrdom-anniversary falls on 24 November.

**Conferment of Guruship to Guru Granth Sahib:** Before his demise, Guru Gobind Singh conferred guruship on the holy scriptures, *Guru Granth Sahib*, which now shines the light of Truth and shows the spiritual path to all Sikhs or devotees who seek it. In all Sikh places of worship, the *Guru Granth Sahib* presides and holds the most prominent place. This auspicious day falls on 20 October. On this day, Sikhs re-dedicate themselves to follow the teachings of the Gurus as found in the Sikh scripture. The holy *Granth* comprises 1430 pages of hymns.

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