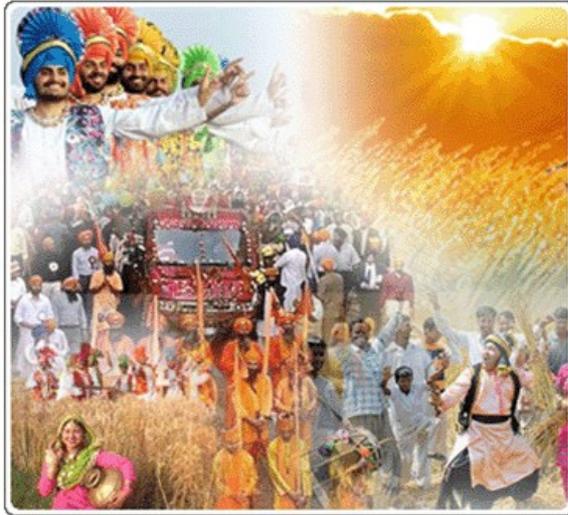




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Baisakhi



Baisakhi is one of the major festivals of Sikhs and is celebrated with lot of enthusiasm and gaiety in the state of Punjab and all throughout the world where there is a significant Sikh population. For the large farming community of Punjab, Baisakhi Festival marks the time for harvest of Rabi crops and they celebrate the day by performing joyful bhangra and gidda dance. For the Sikh community, Baisakhi Festival has tremendous religious significance as it was on a Baisakhi Day in 1699, that Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru laid the foundation of Panth Khalsa-the Order of the Pure Ones.

Date of Baisakhi Baisakhi Festival falls on the first day of Vaisakh month (April-May) according to Nanakshahi or Sikh Calendar. For this reason, Baisakhi is also popularly known as Vaisakhi. According to English calendar, the date of Baisakhi corresponds to April 13 every year and April 14 once in every 36 years. This difference in Baisakhi dates is due to the fact that day of Baisakhi is reckoned according to solar calendar and not the lunar calendar. The auspicious date of Baisakhi is celebrated all over India under different names and different set of rituals and celebrations. Baisakhi date coincides with 'Rongali Bihu' in Assam, 'Naba Barsha' in Bengal, Puthandu in Tamil Nadu and 'Pooram Vishu' in Kerala.

Baisakhi Celebrations

People of Punjab celebrate the festival of Baisakhi with exuberance and devotion. As the festival has tremendous importance in Sikh religion, major activities of the day are organized in Gurdwaras. People wake up early to prepare for the day. Many also take bath in the holy river to mark the auspicious occasion. After getting ready people pay a visit to gurdwara and take part in the special prayer meeting organized for the day. At the end of the Baisakhi ardas, congregates receive specially prepared Kara prasad or sweetened semolina. This is followed by a guru ka langar or community lunch. Later, during the day people of Sikh faith take out a Baisakhi procession under the leadership of Panj piaras. The procession moves through the major localities of the city amidst the rendition of devotional songs by the participating men, women and children. Mock duels, bhangra and gidda performances make the procession joyous and colourful.

Celebrations by Farmers

For the large farming community of Punjab and Haryana, Baisakhi marks a New Year's time as it is time to harvest rabi crop. On Baisakhi, farmers thank god for the bountiful crop and pray for good times ahead. People buy new clothes and make merry by singing, dancing and enjoying the best of festive food. Cries of "Jatta aai Baisakhi", rent the skies as gaily men and women break into the bhangra and gidda dance to express their joy. Everyday farming scenes of sowing, harvesting, winnowing and gathering of crops are expressed through zestful movements of the body to the accompaniment of ballads and dhol music.



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Legends of Baisakhi

There are various legends associated with the colourful and vibrant festival of Baisakhi. A study of these interesting legends of Baisakhi reveals that the day of Baisakhi is significant not just for Sikhs but also for Hindus and Buddhists alike. Besides, it is joyous to note that as a harvest festival, people of all communities in Punjab celebrate Baisakhi in a harmonious manner.

Birth of Khalsa The day of Baisakhi marks the birth of Khalsa Panth and therefore holds tremendous significance for the Sikhs. It was on the Baisakhi Day meeting organized at Anandpur Sahib, in 1699, that the tenth Guru of Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh laid the foundation of Khalsa Panth and called on the Sikhs to sacrifice themselves for their community. Besides, it was on the Baisakhi Day that Guru Gobind Singh administered amrit (nectar) to his first batch of five disciples, the Panj Piaras making them Singhs, a martial community. After the Baisakhi Day in 1699 the tradition of gurus was discontinued, and the Granth Sahib - the Holy book of the Sikhs was declared the eternal guide of the Sikhs.



Day to Receive Guru's Blessings for Sikhs

According to a popular legend in Sikhism, it was on the day of Baisakhi in 1567 that Guru Amar Das had first institutionalized Baisakhi as one of the special days when all Sikhs would gather to receive the guru's blessings at Goindwal.

Foundation of Arya Samaj

The day of Baisakhi Festival is also important for the Hindus as it on this day in 1875 that Swami Dayanand Saraswati founded the Arya Samaj - a reformed sect of Hindus who are devoted to the Vedas for spiritual guidance and have discarded idol worship.

Attainment of Nirvana by Gautama Buddha

For the Buddhist, the day of Baisakhi Festival is significant, as according to a popular legend it was on this auspicious day that Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment or Nirvana under the Mahabodhi tree in the town of Gaya.

Customs and Traditions

Joyful festival of Baisakhi is celebrated with lot of charm and gusto in the vibrant state of Punjab. People perform set Baisakhi customs and traditions for the day with sincerity and devotion. Since Baisakhi is celebrated as the birth of Guru Gobind Singh - the Tenth Sikh Guru and the foundation day of Khalsa Panth, major activities for the festival are centred on gurdwaras - the Sikh place of worship. As a harvest festival Baisakhi is celebrated in open fields with energetic bhangra and gidda dance by gaily dressed men and women of Punjab.

Baisakhi Rituals at Gurudwaras

People following Sikh faith wake up early in the morning on a Baisakhi day and pay visit to Gurdwaras to attend special prayer meetings. At a gurdwara, the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of Sikhs is ceremonially taken out and is given a symbolical bath with milk and water. After these simple rituals, Guru Granth Sahib is placed on its throne with care. The book is then read out to the followers gathered in the gurdwara.

Just as on a Baisakhi Day ceremony held in 1699 under the guidance of Guru Gobind Singh where Panch Pyaras or the five beloved ones chanted verses, five priests going by that name chant verses recited by the five originals. Similarly, just as Guru Gobind Singh Ji had used amrita prepared in an iron vessel to bless the panch pyare, even to this date amrit or holy nectar is prepared in an iron vessel and is distributed amongst all gathered after the chanting of sacred verses. As a tradition, devotees sip amrita five times and take a vow to work for the brotherhood, the Khalsa Panth. Religious songs (kirtans) are sung after the amrit is drunk for the spiritual upliftment of those gathered.

At noon, after the Baisakhi ardas, the Karah Prasad or sweetened semolina is offered to the guru for his blessings. It is then distributed to the congregation. The ceremony culminates with a special guru-ka-langar or the community lunch. People sit in rows with their heads covered as volunteers serve them with vegetarian meal.

Baisakhi Celebration in India

The auspicious day of Baisakhi is celebrated all over India though under different names and with different set of rituals. People of Assam celebrate April 13 as Rongali Bihu, while those in West Bengal celebrate it as Naba Barsha. Bihar celebrates Baisakhi as Vaishakha in honour of the Sun God, Surya while Kerala celebrates it as Vishu and Tamil Nadu as Puthandu. In Kashmir, a ceremonial bath and general festivity mark Baisakhi while in Himachal Pradesh devotees flock to the temple of Jwalamukhi and take a holy dip in

