

VAISAKHI

Awareness Resource Kit



**WORLD SIKH ORGANIZATION
OF CANADA**

Head Office • 1183 Cecil Avenue • Ottawa, Ontario, Canada • K2H 7Z6 • Phone (613) 521-1984 • Fax (613) 521-SIKH (7454)
E-Mail: info@worldsikh.org Web: www.worldsikh.ca

Vahiguru jee ka Khalsa Vahiguru jee kee Fateh!

This resource kit has been developed by the World Sikh Organization of Canada to assist the community and gurdwaras prepare for and publicize events related to Vaisakhi. It provides some basic information and templates that you can use to reach out and inform those around you about Vaisakhi and the Sikh community in Canada.

For assistance or more information, please contact WSO by email at info@worldsikh.org or visit our website www.worldsikh.ca.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE KIT:

1. Read the information within and become familiar with the content
2. Distribute pages like the Vaisakhi, Sikhi and Gurdwara FAQs at your open house or event.
3. Feel free to use the templates under your own letterheads
4. If you have any questions or need assistance on any matter, contact WSO
5. Please send all news articles or recordings of television clips to WSO.

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VAISAKHI AWARENESS CAMPAIGN SUMMARY AND TIPS

Objectives:

Media:

1. Feature an article on the Sikh community - Contact "Feature Editor" and "Religion Editor"
2. Food section article on Langar or Sikh recipes - Contact "Food Editor"
3. Letters to the editor about the true image of Canadian Sikhs - Contact "Letters Editor"
4. News pieces on Vaisakhi celebrations, nagar kirtans or other such events
5. The media should be informed at least TWO weeks before any event is scheduled in order for it to be covered.

Schools & Libraries:

1. Organize talks on Vaisakhi in religion and social studies classes
2. Bringing 'langar' or treats to co-workers and classmates of Sikh students
3. Reserve display cases for April and install a Vaisakhi display including books, religious artifacts, clothes, Sikh instruments, etc.
4. Submit a Book Purchase Request at your local library for children's books like *A Lion's Mane* or *The Boy With the Long Hair* if your library doesn't currently have them. Requests are usually honored.

Other:

1. Organize food drives or other seva initiatives to serve those in need.
2. Open House at the Gurdwara for neighbours in the community.
3. Organize a Sikh Awareness Day with food, turban tying, books, gatka displays, etc.



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Talking Points on Vaisakhi

- Sikhs are a vibrant and very visible part of Canadian society and Vaisakhi is one of the largest Sikh celebrations of the year
- Whereas Vaisakhi is celebrated across South Asia as a harvest festival, it has special significance for the Sikh community
- Vaisakhi marks the founding of the Khalsa in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final human Guru of the Sikhs. He introduced the “khande ki pahul” initiation for Sikhs and selected the Punj Pyare or five beloveds who would lead the community and administer the Sikh initiation
- Khalsa is the collective group of initiated or amritdhari Sikhs
- Khalsa means “pure” and also “sovereign/free”
- Khalsa was created to serve humanity and oppose injustice wherever it may exist
- The distinct identity of the Sikhs is part of the Khalsa identity. All amritdhari or initiated Sikhs wear the five Sikh articles of faith
 - kesh – unshorn hair symbolizing acceptance of God’s will; the hair must be kept covered at all times with a keski or dastar (turban or head-covering) representing spiritual wisdom;
 - kangha – a wooden comb representing self-discipline; worn in the hair and used to keep it neat and tidy;
 - kara – an iron or steel bracelet worn on the wrist; the circle signifies the oneness and eternity of God and to use one’s hands for the benefit of humanity;
 - kachhera – cotton undergarment representing high moral character and restraint;
 - kirpan – a stylized representation of a sword, which must be worn sheathed, restrained in a cloth belt, and next to the body; the kirpan signifies the duty of a Sikh to stand up against injustice. Most kirpans range in size from 6 to 9 inches in length.
- The Sikh parade or Nagar Keertan is an opportunity to celebrate Vaisakhi together and with the rest of the community as well. The parade is lead by the Punj Pyare and the Sikh scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib



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SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sikh Community Celebrates Vaisakhi

([City], Canada, April 14, 2013) - On April 14 2013, the Sikh community in Canada and around the world will celebrate Vaisakhi.

On Vaisakhi day in 1699, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh, created the Order of the Khalsa. The founding of the Khalsa was a seminal event in Sikh history which gave the Sikh faith its final form.

The Khalsa are those Sikhs who have accepted the Sikh initiation or “khande kee paahul” and commit to live their lives in the service of humanity in the spirit of equality and compassion.

Initiated Sikhs take on a common name, Singh or lion for men and Kaur or Princess for women. Initiated Sikhs also commit to the maintaining a distinct identity and the five Sikh articles of faith or kakaars.

For Canadian Sikhs, Vaisakhi is a special time to celebrate and share their faith with their friends and neighbours. Everyone is welcome to attend Khalsa Day Parades and the celebrations attract Canadians from every religious and cultural background.

The Sikh community of [location] will be celebrating Vaiskhi this year on April XX, 2013.
[Include a description of the program here]

Vaisakhi celebrations are a vibrant affair with members of the Sikh community wearing bright coloured clothing to mark the occasion.

There are an estimated 500 000 Sikhs in Canada and some 30 million worldwide.

-END-

CONTACT:



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VAISAKHI FAQ

Q: What are the origins of Vaisakhi?

A: Although Vaisakhi has traditionally been a harvest festival in Punjab and across South Asia for centuries, the day has a very special significance for Sikhs. On Vaisakhi Day in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh created the Order of the Khalsa.

The Khalsa are those Sikhs who have accepted the Sikh initiation or “khande kee paahul” and commit to live their lives in the service of humanity and the spirit of equality and compassion.

The founding of the Khalsa was a seminal event in Sikh history which gave the Sikh faith its final form.

Q: How did Guru Gobind Singh create the Khalsa?

A: Guru Gobind Singh summoned the entire Sikh community to Anandpur Sahib in Punjab on Vaisakhi Day. During the large gathering, he called for a Sikh who would be willing to sacrifice their head for the faith. The call was answered by five Sikhs who were lead, one by one, into a tent.

The five Sikhs who stepped forward are known as the five beloved ones, or Panj Pyare:

- Bhai Daya Singh
- Bhai Dharam Singh
- Bhai Himmat Singh
- Bhai Mokham Singh
- Bhai Sahib Singh

Guru Gobind Singh then dressed them in the same clothing as himself, and prepared the amrit or the nectar of initiation. He knelt by an iron vessel, filled with water, and stirred it with a double edged sword while reciting verses from the Sikh scriptures. Guru Gobind Singh's wife, Mata Jeeto jee added sugar crystals to the water to sweeten it. When the Amrit was prepared, it was administered to all five Sikhs. Upon initiation, they were given the name “Singh” or lion.

Guru Gobind Singh then asked for the five to initiate him in the same way and declared that any Sikh who wished to be initiated into the faith would follow the same rite and receive amrit from five initiated Sikhs. Sikh women like Mata Jeeto jee who received the initiation were given the name “Kaur” or princess.



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Q: What is a Nagar Keertan?

A: The word nagar means town and keertan is singing of hymns. A nagar keertan refers to a Sikh parade that is lead by the Punj Pyare (the five beloved ones, who represent the first five Sikhs to have been initiated) and the Sri Guru Granth Sahib or the Sikh scripture which is installed in a decorated float. The congregation

follows the parade while singing hymns and verses from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, along with displays of the Sikh martial art gatka and distributing free food (langar). The nagar keertan begins and concludes with a religious service and the serving of langar.

Q: What is the significance of the orange and yellow colours?

A: Yellow and orange are the traditional colours of Vaisakhi. They represent the spirit of rebirth and sacrifice of the Punj Pyare but are also a colour of joy and celebration. When Vaisakhi is celebrated in Punjab, the golden yellow wheat fields are ready to be harvested.

Q: Who can participate in Vaisakhi celebrations?

A: Everyone. The Sikh faith considers all persons to be equal, regardless of gender, race, nationality or class. Sikh gurdwaras are open to all people. The langar or community meal is also offered to both Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike.

Q: Is there any special dress I should wear?

A: The only requirements to visit a Sikh gurdwara are that visitors take off their shoes and cover their heads. Any intoxicants such as tobacco products or liquor are also not permitted on the premises.



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FAQ ABOUT THE SIKH FAITH

Q: What does “Sikh” mean?

A: The word Sikh means student. According to the Sikh Rehit Maryada, a Sikh is defined as “any human being who faithfully believes in One Immortal God; ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh; Guru Granth Sahib; the teachings of the ten Gurus and has faith and belief in the Amrit initiation of the tenth Guru; and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion”

Q: Where do Sikhs come from?

A: The Sikh faith was founded by Guru Nanak in 1469 in Punjab. Punjab is located in South Asia and is currently divided between India and Pakistan. Although most Sikhs have their roots in South Asia, and Punjab specifically, there are Sikhs of diverse backgrounds and nationalities. It should be noted that Guru Nanak himself travelled across the world from China to the Middle East teaching his message of the universality of One God and the unity of humanity.

Q: What do Sikhs believe?

A: Sikhs believe in One God who is the creator of the universe and resides within creation. The purpose of human life is unite the soul with God during one’s lifetime. This is possible through accepting the teachings of the Guru and following the “three golden rules,” namely, meditation on God’s name (nam japna), earning an honest living (kirat karna), and sharing one’s earnings with others (vand shakna).

Q: What is the Sri Guru Granth Sahib?

A: Sri Guru Granth Sahib is the Sikh scripture containing the compositions of the Sikh Gurus and other saints and poets of diverse social, caste and faith backgrounds who united with God. The verses or bani are considered by Sikhs to be the divinely inspired word of God. The compositions of Sri Guru Granth Sahib are written in traditional musical measures or raags. The verses and hymns of Sri Guru Granth Sahib are reflections upon God and also establish moral guidelines for spiritual development and union with God. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is composed in 31 raags or traditional musical measures and spans 1430 pages, known as angas or limbs.

Q: What is the Sikh language?

A: Most Sikhs speak Punjabi and Sri Guru Granth Sahib is written in the Gurmukhi script. That having been said, the languages in Sri Guru Granth Sahib include Persian, Hindi, Braj and others.



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Q: What are the rules Sikhs follow?

A: Sikhs follow the Rehit Maryada or Sikh code of conduct. The Rehit Maryada establishes guidelines for a spiritual lifestyle. This includes rising daily before sunrise for meditation and prayer and also giving one tenth of one's income back to the community. In addition to basic rules of morality shared by people of all faiths, initiated Sikhs cannot cut or remove the hair on their body, use intoxicants such as tobacco or liquor, etc., eat meat or engage in extra-marital sexual relations.



Q: What is the gurdwara & langar?

A: The Sikh place of worship is called the gurdwara or “door to the guru” and serves as the most important Sikh institution. Gurdwaras are open to all people regardless of gender, faith or culture. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is installed in each Gurdwara and the congregation engages in the contemplation and singing of verses along with discourses on Sikh history and spirituality. Each gurdwara contains a langar or free community kitchen where all persons are welcome to share a free vegetarian meal.

Q: What are the Sikh articles of faith?

A: Sikhs who are initiated into the Khalsa commit to follow the rehit maryada or Sikh code of conduct. This includes a daily discipline of meditation and prayer and also wearing the five Sikh articles of faith or kakaars at all times. They are as follows:

1. kesh – unshorn hair symbolizing acceptance of God's will; the hair must be kept covered at all times with a keski or dastaar (turban or head-covering) representing spiritual wisdom;
2. kangha – a wooden comb representing self-discipline; worn in the hair and used to keep it neat and tidy;
3. kara – an iron or steel bracelet worn on the wrist; the circle signifies the oneness and eternity of God and to use one's hands for the benefit of humanity;
4. kachhera – cotton undergarment representing high moral character and restraint;
5. kirpan – a stylized representation of a sword, which must be worn sheathed, restrained in a cloth belt, and next to the body; the kirpan signifies the duty of a Sikh to stand up against injustice. Most kirpans range in size from 6 to 9 inches in length.



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Q: Do Sikhs ever remove their articles of faith?

A: The articles of faith are considered sacred and a part of the body. They remain on the person at all times. At home and while sleeping, most Sikhs wear a smaller turban.

Q: What is the significance of the turban's colour and style?

A: None necessarily. Although traditionally Sikh turbans are white, black, blue and yellow/orange, many Sikhs wear other colours and shades to suit their personal preferences. It is a personal choice. There are several styles of Sikh turbans and these too are chosen as a personal preference.

Q: What about Sikh women?

A: Women are considered completely equal to men and have the same rights and obligations. As such, Sikh women follow the same religious code of conduct. The Sikh Gurus were well before their time and declared that gender discrimination was wrong and spoke out against practices such as ritual impurity, the burning of widows ('Sati') and mandatory veiling of women.

Q: But I know Sikhs who don't wear turbans or keep their hair?

A: Just as in any community there are different levels of observance. Many people who self-identify as Sikh do not keep the Sikh articles of faith. That is a personal choice and each person progresses on their spiritual journey at a different pace.

Q: What is the traditional Sikh greeting?

A: The traditional Sikh greeting is "Vahiguru jee ka Khalsa Vahiguru jee kee fateh" meaning the Khalsa belongs to God and all victory belongs to God. A shorter greeting that is often used is "Sat Sri Akal" meaning Timeless God is Truth.

Q: What is the Sikh attitude towards non-Sikhs?

A: Sikhs believe that all persons are equal. Freedom of religion and conscience are core Sikh values. Everyone has the right to believe in and practice the faith of their choice and no one is condemned to hell simply because of their religion. The Sikh Gurus taught that loving God is the greatest religion of all and people must be judged on their actions, not on the labels of race, nationality or caste.

Q: What do Sikhs believe about the afterlife?

A: The focus of the Sikh faith is to find happiness and unite with God in this life through meditation on naam (the name of God). The soul continues to be reincarnated until it becomes one with God. Sikhs also believe in the doctrine of karma, whereby each action has a reaction and each person must bear the consequences of their own deeds



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SIKHS IN CANADA

THE FACTS

- There are approximately 500,000 Sikhs in Canada
- In 1867, Canada's first Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald wrote: "War will come someday between England and the United States and India can do us a yeoman's service by sending an army of Sikhs ..."
- The first Sikhs arrived 1897 as part of the army regiments travelling through Canada in celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee
- By 1907 there were close to 5000 Sikhs in Canada and the first Sikh gurdwara was established in Vancouver in 1908
- The Abbotsford gurdwara established in 1911 is a Canadian National Historic Site and marked its centenary in 2011
- Nine Canadian Sikhs are known to have fought for the Canadian Forces in WW1
- Discriminatory immigration policies resulted in an exodus of Sikhs from Canada from 1908 onwards. The attitude of intolerance was embodied by the tragic Komagata Maru incident in which a ship of 376 mostly Sikh passengers was turned back from the Vancouver port after not being allowed to dock and being denied food and supplies for two months
- With liberalized immigration policy in the 1960s and 70s, Sikh immigration grew dramatically and spread across Canada
- There are Sikh communities in every Province in Canada
- Canada's 2011 Census showed Punjabi to be the most spoken immigrant language in the country
- Several Canadian Sikhs have served as federal Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers and also as representatives and ministers in several Provincial Legislatures
- Baltej Singh Dhillon was the first Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer to be allowed to wear a turban
- Lt. Col. Harjit Singh Sajjan became the first Sikh to command a Canadian army regiment in 2011.



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STEPS NECESSARY TO HOLD A GURDWARA OPEN HOUSE

1. DISCUSS within the gurdwara the importance of reaching out to non-Sikhs in the community and building a positive image of the Sikh community and the gurdwara. There are many long-term benefits of forming such relationships. Also discuss best times and dates for the open house
2. INVITE the local community, faith leaders, law enforcement, elected official and all others. If you wish to invite your local MP or MLA, please give them at least 2-3 week notice. Written invitations should be sent in addition to personal phone calls.
3. PUBLICIZE the event by sending a news release (see sample) to local media. Also reach out to church leaders and community organizations.
4. NOTIFY guests that they are welcome in the gurdwara but give them advance notification of gurdwara etiquette.
5. CLEAN the gurdwara. The first impression is one that will last. Make sure bathrooms are spotless.
6. HAVE GUIDES and a reception table at the entrance of the gurdwara. Have both male and female guides. Guides should be knowledgeable about the Sikh faith and should be able to communicate fluently in English. Written material on the Sikh faith should be available and provided at the reception table. Provide the Gurdwara FAQ and discuss the main points. It's best to accompany all guests during their tour.
7. PREPARE snacks and langar that will be provided to the guests. Remember that not all guests will be able to eat spicy food. Also let guests know which foods have dairy, nuts because of allergy concerns. Prepare guests before they enter the divan hall. Let them know why Sikhs bow to Sri Guru Granth Sahib and that they will be offered karah parshaad (which they can choose to receive or not).
8. EDUCATE have the Sikh Faith pamphlet printed and ready for distribution. You may want to prepare a short presentation on the Sikh faith as well. Avoid strong political messages.
9. POST signs at appropriate locations in the facility to help guests find their way around.
10. Do ardaas for a successful event and have fun!



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Template News Release About Gurdwara Open House

(Insert Your Local Organization Name and Address Here)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Local Sikh Community to Hold Gurdwara Open House

What: On [DATE] the Sikh community of [LOCATION] will hold an open house offering an introduction to the Sikh faith and culture. There will be the opportunity to tour the gurdwara (Sikh place of worship), learn about Sikh beliefs and sample traditional foods, all without cost.

There will be displays of Sikh art, clothing, books and religious artifacts.

The open house is designed to help our neighbours gain an insight into the Sikh faith and learn about the history of Sikhs in Canada.

There are close to 500,000 Sikhs in Canada and 30 million worldwide.

When: [DATE & TIME]

Where: **Location:**
 Address:
 Directions:

Contact: For more information, call _____ [contact info].

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GURDWARA QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

We hope you enjoy your visit.

Q. What is a gurdwara?

A. The Sikh place of worship and learning is called a gurdwara. It is the key institution for the Sikh community where congregations take place but community and civic matters are also discussed.

Q. Who can enter the gurdwara?

A. Everyone. All persons are welcome and equal in the gurdwara.

Q. What is the flag outside the gurdwara?

A. This is the nishaan sahib. It is a triangular flag, either yellow/orange or blue. It serves as a beacon and announces the presence of a gurdwara from afar and also is a sign of spiritual and temporal freedom and sovereignty. The symbol on the nishaan sahib is the khanda and is considered the emblem of the Sikh faith.

Q. What is proper gurdwara etiquette?

A. All visitors to the gurdwara must remove their shoes and cover their heads as a sign of respect. Most gurdwaras will provide rumaaals or kerchiefs that can be tied on the head. Shoes are placed on racks, usually near the entrance of the gurdwara.

Intoxicants such as alcohol and tobacco products are not permitted on the premises.

Q. What is at the centre of the prayer hall?

A. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is placed at the centre of the divan hall or prayer hall. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is revered as the living word of God and accorded the respect of a monarch. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is placed on a raised platform under a canopy at the centre of the hall and a chaur or whisk is also waved as a sign of respect and royalty. All Sikhs enter and bow to Sri Guru Granth Sahib in order to show their acceptance and submission to the message of the Gurus. A voluntary donation can also be placed in the box in front of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Non-Sikhs are not compelled to bow or offer a donation and may discreetly enter and join the congregation.



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Q. What is the food that is offered to all worshippers?

A. This is karah parshad, a Sikh sacrament that is offered to all visitors. It is made of flour, clarified butter, sugar and water. It is considered a blessing and symbolizes the process of enjoying and absorbing the message of the Guru. If one chooses, one can ask for a little or abstain completely.

Q. Why are we sitting on the floor?

A. Traditionally Sikhs sit on the ground as a sign of equality before God and the Guru. If one has a physical disability, alternative seating is usually provided. The entire congregation rises to stand during the ardaas or congregational prayer.

Q. Why are men and women sitting separate?

A. In many gurdwaras, men and women sit on opposite sides of the divan hall. This is not a religious requirement but done as a cultural or practical consideration. There is no restriction on men and women sitting together if they wish.

Q. Who leads the services?

A. As there is no clergy in the Sikh faith, any initiated Sikh male or female can lead the congregation. Often however, professional raagis or hymn-singers recite verses and there is a granthi or caretaker who resides within the gurdwara and organizes the program.

Q. What is the langar?

A. The langar is a free vegetarian meal. It is offered to all visitors and one can eat as much or as little as one chooses. It is served in a separate hall, away from the divan hall.

Q. What are the pictures on wall in the langar hall?

A. Often, gurdwaras place pictures of prominent Sikhs on the wall who have made a contribution to the community or have sacrificed their lives for their faith. The pictures serve as a reminder of Sikh history and traditions.

The World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO) is a non-profit organization with a mandate to promote and protect the interests of Canadian Sikhs, as well as to promote and advocate for the protection of human rights for all individuals, irrespective of race, religion, gender, ethnicity, and social and economic status



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