

How do festivals, like Vaisakhi, shape Sikh faith?

Lauren: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. In this series we're exploring Sikhism, also known as Sikhki, and the beliefs and practices you may come across in your studies.

I'm your host, TV and radio presenter Lauren Layfield and in this episode, we're talking about Sikh festivals and their historical and spiritual significance. And helping me bring these themes to life is my co-host Jaz Singh.

Jaz: Hey Lauren! Yes, I am a radio presenter, I've been on the TV too, and I have been raised Sikh, so these concepts are real life for me. Sikhism teaches us always to try to be a great member of society, and I believe my faith has definitely shaped me to be who I am today. Sikh festivals are a really exciting part of the faith so I'm looking forward to telling you more.

Lauren: I love hearing about religious festivals so really looking forward to that. But before we dig in, grab a pen, some paper, or your notes app, because we'll be highlighting key ideas you might want to jot down.

Jaz: And at the end of the episode, I'll be testing your knowledge with a quick quiz so stay listening till the end for that.

Lauren: Let's get started! Jaz, I would love to hear about how you celebrate your faith. Tell me about some of the festivals and special days in Sikhism.

Jaz: Well, we have a number of festivals throughout the year actually, celebrated by Sikhs all over the world. They're a time for us to come together and celebrate key events and dates. And Vaisakhi is one of the biggest festivals and it celebrates the founding of The Khalsa.

Lauren: We spoke about The Khalsa in our episode exploring how the Sikh faith is expressed in daily life, didn't we?

Jaz: Yeah, we did Lauren. The Khalsa is actually a community of Sikhs who have taken part in an initiation ceremony to be fully committed to the Sikh way of life, as commanded by the tenth Guru - Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

Lauren: And you can listen to that episode, and all others, over on BBC Sounds. Just search 'Bitesize GCSE Sikhism'. So, Jaz, can you tell us how Vaisakhi began?

Jaz: So, before it became significant to Sikhs, Vaisakhi was already a traditional spring harvest festival in Punjab, that's an area in northern India. It was a time for people to show gratitude for the upcoming harvest. And in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, one of the Ten Gurus who guided the Sikh faith, chose this festival to establish The Khalsa.

Lauren: This is so interesting. So, when does Vaisakhi take place?

Jaz: We celebrate it in April every year and it's a time for families and communities to come together and remember the events and bravery of 1699. Everyone gives thanks to the tenth Guru for creating the Khalsa Panth - that's what we call the worldwide community of initiated Sikhs.

Lauren: So, the Guru chose Vaisakhi as the time to establish The Khalsa - can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Jaz: Well Sikhs believe that during this festival, the Guru extended an invitation. Any person willing to give their life to the Guru should step forward. The Guru was holding a sword. The five volunteers who were prepared to offer their lives for the Guru Gobind Singh Ji became the first members of The Khalsa and are known as the 'Beloved Five'.

Lauren: Wow so Vaisakhi is a festival with lots of religious significance because it's when The Khalsa was created.

Jaz: That's right Lauren. The story of the Beloved Five is connected to Sikh identity, unity, bravery, and commitment.

Lauren: So how is Vaisaki celebrated nowadays?

Jaz: It's celebrated in a number of ways, and it can be different in different parts of the world. Some ways Vaisaki might be celebrated worldwide include:

- Sikhs will visit their place of worship, the gurdwara, which will be specially decorated for the festival.
- There may be parades through the streets. These are called 'nagar kirtans' which often involve reading scriptures and chanting hymns
- Some Sikhs may choose Vaisakhi as the day they are initiated into The Khalsa community
- And in India some Sikhs may go on pilgrimage to Anandpur Sahib, the place where Guru Gobind Singh Ji established The Khalsa.

Lauren: And how is Vaisakhi special for you then Jaz?

Jaz: Well for me, over the years, I've had the pleasure of attending many Nagar Kirtans. And yes Lauren, it's a chance to eat the most delicious food like the hot jalebi or the samosa but, more importantly, it's an opportunity to spend time with friends and family.

You know, taking the time out and putting the effort in, it's had a huge impact in solidifying what really matters in my life.

Lauren: Jaz, can you tell us more about the role of communities in festivals like Vaisakhi?

Jaz: Yeah of course. Community worship is a big part of Sikh festivals. The Guru Granth Sahib Ji, that's our holy Sikh scripture, contains a teaching. It's from ang 368 and says:

"Join the Sat Sangat, the Lord's True Congregation, joining the Company of the Holy, sing the Glorious Praises of the Lord."

Lauren: So, what does that quote tell us about the significance of Sikh festivals?

Jaz: Well, that message is connected to the Sikh principle of Sangat - that is the Sikh spiritual community. Now we believe in gathering together, for example during festivals, to worship and learn more about Waheguru, God.

Lauren: I imagine festivals like Vaisakhi are a great time to gather together as the Sangat.

Jaz: Exactly. During festivals, Sikhs often take part in 'Kirtan', where hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib Ji are sung together as a community.

Lauren: So, by worshipping together during these celebrations, Sikhs can feel united?

Jaz: Exactly Lauren, and it can help them feel more connected to Waheguru too.

Lauren: Can you tell us about another Sikh festival then Jaz?

Jaz: Sure. Bandi Chhor Divas is celebrated in October or November and means 'Day of Liberation'. It often falls on the same day as Divali actually, which is a religious festival celebrated by many Hindus.

Lauren: Oh yes so Divali is the 'festival of lights', isn't it?

Jaz: That's right. Like Divali, Bandi Chhor Divas is often associated with the themes of justice and freedom. It marks the day in 1619 when Guru Hargobind, the 6th Guru, was released from prison and helped release 52 Hindu princes and other prisoners.

Lauren: So why is Bandi Chhor Divas an important festival for Sikhs today?

Jaz: It's important for us to remember the Guru's bravery and his commitment to justice. The festival reminds Sikhs of the importance of religious freedom and having the courage to stand up for what is right. It also is a reminder to treat everyone fairly.

Lauren: Yeah, it's lovely. And how do Sikhs celebrate Bandi Chhor Divas?

Jaz: Again, celebrations differ around the world, and they are linked to Divali celebrations. Some ways that it can be celebrated include:

- Lighting lamps in gurdwaras and homes as a symbol of the Guru Hargobind's homecoming
- Performing Kirtan - that's worship hymns
- Sharing meals and supporting the community

Now when I celebrate Bandi Chhor Divas, I light candles around the house, attend the gurdwara and spend time with family and friends.

Lauren: I am loving hearing about these festivals and the history of Sikhism, Jaz. So, tell us about one more festival.

Jaz: Sure. Gurpurbs are festivals that take place throughout the year. They celebrate the anniversary of the birth or death of a Guru.

Lauren: Yeah, and a reminder, there are ten Gurus that have guided the Sikh faith throughout history.

Jaz: Remembering the Gurus is important for Sikhs as we look to them for guidance and an example for living. Now there are many gurpurbs around the world, taking place at different times. But one of the most widely celebrated gurpurb is the birth of Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

Lauren: OK so who was Guru Nanak Dev Ji?

Jaz: He was a spiritual teacher who was the first of the ten Sikh Gurus, so he's often seen as the founder of the Sikh faith.

Lauren: OK so he's a very important figure. How is the gurpurb of Guru Nanak Dev Ji celebrated?

Jaz: The celebration can last three days and gurdwaras and homes are lit with candles and celebrations may include gatherings with family and community, special meals, and acts of generosity. But the central event is often The Akhand Path.

Lauren: Can you tell us what the Akhand Path is?

Jaz: It's when the Sikh holy scripture, Guru Granth Sahib Ji, is read out aloud in full. It can take about 48 hours in total. It is a continuous, unbroken reading usually done by a team of readers who take turns, in shifts, reading the scripture.

People may come at different times to listen and take part in the prayers. And it's a special time for Sikhs to remember the history of our faith and our key Sikh beliefs.

Lauren: And are celebrations for gurpurbs the same around the world Jaz?

Jaz: Not quite. The dates can differ. In India, gurpurbs are often celebrated on the exact date, so on the day of birth or death of the Guru. But in the UK and other places, they may take place on a nearby date.

Lauren: Jaz, that was all very interesting, and I think I'm ready for you to put my knowledge to the test.

Jaz: Well then, let's have a quick quiz. Grab a pen, some paper or your notes app to jot down your answers as we go.

Lauren: And remember you can pause this episode if you need some time to think.

Jaz: First question. What is the name of the Sikh festival that remembers the birth of The Khalsa?

Lauren: The name of the Spring festival is Vaisakhi.

Jaz: That's right, well done! Now the next question. What do Gurpurbs celebrate?

Lauren: Gurpurbs celebrate the anniversary of the birth or the death of a Sikh Guru.

Jaz: Correct again! The gurburb we most commonly celebrate is for the birthday of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Now, the final question. What is the Sangat in Sikhism?

Lauren: The Sangat is the Sikh community of worshippers.

Jaz: Yes! Festivals are a great time to bring the Sangat together in communal worship.

Lauren: Thanks very much for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast, exploring Sikh festivals.

Jaz: In the next episode we'll be looking at justice and equality in Sikhism.

Lauren: Yeah, remember there are loads more resources over on the Bitesize website. For more help with your exams, just search 'Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies'. And we'll see you next time.

Jaz: Catch you soon!