

BSCF Vaisakhi at Westminster 2024

Bhai Sahib, Prof. Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia OBE KSG

Tuesday 23 April 2024 - State Rooms, Speaker's House, House of Commons

Distinguished guests, brothers and sisters – please accept the Sikh salutation:

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh - A very happy Vaisakhi to you all!

1. Vaisakhi:

For the people of the Punjab, Vaisakhi is a time to celebrate the Spring harvest and welcome a new agricultural year. For Sikhs, it is also known as 'Khalsa Saajana Divas' or 'Khalsa Formation Day'. On the 30th of March 1699, the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, formed the noble collective of initiated disciples known as the Khalsa, blessing them as the nucleus of the Panth, the followers of the Guru's path. By exalting them, he brought to fruition the seeds sown and cultivated by all ten Gurus, over a time span of 230 years, since the birth of Guru Nanak Dev Ji in 1469. As such, the Khalsa's identity and way of life reflects the fulfilment of Guru Ji's vision of an ideal human being, committed to wisdom, virtue and responsible conduct.

2. Khalsa's purpose

In his humble and passionate praise of the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh Ji underlined it was '*Akal Purakh ki Fauj*', a force, a benevolent army, to serve not just Sikhs but the Creator and all Creation, empowered with Divine virtues and values. To join the Khalsa is to enrol into the school of *Sikhi* or the Sikh dharam. Here, the learning begins with three questions – what is our origin? our purpose? and our destination? Just as all elements originate and return to their source, so are we on a journey to return to God, our Source. To take the Khalsa initiation provides us with a toolkit of daily reminders, practices and pledges to reach our **full potential and final destination**, by kindling the *jyot*, the Divine light within us. While the features of the Khalsa's identity are very distinct, they communicate core values and virtues that can be valued by all human beings to to serve 'sarbat da bhalla', the common good based on recognising a common Creator.

3. Education:

When we consider our present global challenges in an interconnected world, what does the Khalsa ideal have to contribute? I believe, first and foremost it guides us:

- To have control over one's mind '*Man jeetai jag jeet*' – not seeking the conquest of lands, the conquest of one religion over another, or possessing the possessions of others – but conquer the mind, liberating it from the ego and so freeing it from the dominance of traits like lust, vengeance, greed, possessiveness and arrogance. This, for the Khalsa, is life's ultimate battle. It is also humanity's battle, to reset our course for the future.
- And to mobilise the power of virtues and values that include compassion, integrity, contentment, humility, love and courage. Gurbani teaches us that we do so by attuning to **Naam**, the power, energy and sublime wisdom of the Master Creator – God Almighty. This leads to a sovereign mind, no longer enslaved by the ego, where virtues reign. This ideal, of wise self-governance and collective good governance is reflected in the wearing of the turban that crowns the mind.

For the Sikh Gurus, beyond the accumulation of worldly skill and knowledge, education guides our spiritual growth. In Gurbani, the theme of education occurs again and again.

- *Parhiaa an-parhiya param gat pavai* – whether one is literate or illiterate, even without any formal education, the state of God-realisation is open to all

- *Parhe sune kia hoee, jou sahaj na milio soee?*
What use is endless reading and listening, if Divine peace is not obtained?
- *Parhia moorakh aakheeai, jis lab lobh ahankara*

Before birth, and in the earliest years of life, our education has already begun. Hence the sanctity of marriage and peace-building in the family home create a vital base. In formal schooling, here in the UK, we have a long-established legal aim for education to foster the **'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and society'**. This also provides a basis to develop approaches to multireligious education, reflecting the Sikh Gurus firm encouragement to establish dialogue between different faiths and cultures on the values that matter most to us as human beings.

In the super diverse city of Birmingham, we have a Religious Education syllabus based on **24 spiritual and moral dispositions**. This encourages pupils to build connections between faiths, and between religious and secular standpoints. First launched in 2007, it coincided with a **UNICEF report** that put the UK at the bottom of a child-wellbeing league table. This wake-up call spurred the development of our **Nishkam Schools Multi-Academy Trust**, which now runs 6 Schools and 3 nurseries, with an Outstanding Ofsted rating. All teaching and learning, across all subjects, is guided by a comprehensive framework of virtues, known as the **Values Passport**. Through such innovations, we aim to build a momentum amongst guiding institutions that treat value-centred education with the serious attention and foresight that it deserves.

More recently, the Birmingham RE syllabus was revised following legal requirements to extend its accommodation of non-religious worldviews. Building bridges between secular and religious is, without a doubt, paramount in our world today. However, within a predominantly secular school curriculum, the subject of RE offers a rare and unique opportunity to study religious life. This is rich and multifaceted - linguistically, culturally, aesthetically, philosophically and practically - and infused by the recognition of a Transcendent Sacred Mystery, an Eternal Creator. Within a limited timetable, to study faiths through a secular 'world views' lens denies this fuller interdisciplinary study of what is characteristically religious. By focussing on systems of belief, it can also fail to explore the UK's minority faiths with meaningful depth and integrity, at a time when such understanding is vital if we are to prevent narrow prejudiced or extremist assumptions. Without compromising this vital strength of RE, we must give careful thought to its future direction.

4. Current world crisis

Major wars are raging, with no imminent end in sight, one of which is in the Holy Land. A huge number of conflicts have started or been re-ignited, some after many years of simmering or lying dormant. In the pursuit of peace, there is an urgent need for international universities to design and develop participatory strategies and values-based toolkits for civil Society actors. Sustainable peacebuilding can only arise from strivings and commitments that arise from deep within the human psyche, beyond secular solution building or surface rhetoric from religion. The very best of our scientific and spiritual knowledge must unite to transform cultures of greed, exploitation and conflict, into cultures of healing, forgiveness and restoration.

With these few thoughts allow me to close by thanking all the volunteers who have made this event a success. We thank Pat McFadden MP for organising this event every year, and express our thanks also to the young children for their kirtan. We hope to see you again next year. Happy Vaisakhi

Thank you

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