

## **VAISAKHI: SIKHS CELEBRATE LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS**

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As I write this, the airwaves are abuzz with the trembling and choking voice of a Libyan woman, who is putting her life at stake for the sake of freedom and dignity.

Why would someone willingly risk her own life? Life is to be celebrated and cherished, not to be wagered lightly.

Patrick Henry, one of our founding fathers, eloquently addressed this question: "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

The concept of equality, liberty and dignity for all, has been enshrined in a socially sacred document of today: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness".

The Sikh Faith arose more than 500 years ago in the context of a South Asian society that was shackled in slavery to the caste system, to the wanton abuse of women, and to the tyranny of the rulers. There was no defense for the defenseless.

Sikhs stood up against the degrading treatment of fellow human beings in the name of religion and social mandate. They advocated for the inviolable equality of all, including women. The ten Sikh Gurus (Messengers of God) raised their voice against tyranny directed not only at the Sikhs but also at anybody else.

Not surprisingly, the Sikhs paid a price for it. This included the torturous martyrdom of their fifth Guru, Siri Guru Arjan Sahib, by making him sit on a red-hot plate and pouring scalding sand on him. The ninth Guru of the Sikhs, Siri Guru Tegh Bahadar Sahib, embraced martyrdom, and his associates accepted being burnt, boiled and sawed alive, for defending the right of the Hindus to freely exercise their religion. This occurred even though the Guru and his associates themselves did not believe in many of the Hindu principles and practices.

A central tenet of the Sikh Faith is to adhere to peaceful means to resolve any issues, including those on tyranny and subjugation of humankind. However, history is a witness that a tyrant does not spare even a divine messenger. When all peaceful means have been exhausted, rather than letting the unbridled tyranny, senseless brutalization and death of innocent masses continue, it is considered righteous for a Sikh, even while he/she is to live a saintly life, to rise up as a soldier in defense of the weak, oppressed and the defenseless.

This concept of 'Saint-Soldier' is an integral principle of the Sikh Faith.

On the Vaisakhi day of 1699 (the first day of the month of 'Vaisakh' in the Sikh calendar), Siri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, the tenth Guru, formalized the concept of Saint-Soldier by introducing the Amrit ceremony (the formal initiation ceremony). The initiates were instructed to keep the five K's: Kes (uncut hair), Kangha (a small comb), Karra (an iron bracelet), Kachh (a special short) and Kirpan (a sword). They were given

the title of Khalsa, meaning those whose life and spirit belonged only to the One Universal Creator and not to any ruler, tyrant or even a messenger of the Creator.

The principle of One Universal Creator, a founding principle of the Sikh Faith, means that all human beings are children of the same One Creator, and are thus all equal, irrespective of their religion, gender, race, color, caste or the like.

The establishment of the Khalsa intensified the state sponsored brutality against the Sikhs. At the same time, the institution of Khalsa further uplifted the spirit of the Sikhs to stand up for the oppressed. A six-year and an eight-year old son of Siri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib willingly accepted to be buried alive in a wall constructed around them brick by brick, steadfastly refusing to abandon these principles.

For refusing to give up these principles, Sikh mothers were forced to witness extreme tortures to their infants.

In the Sikh supplication, we routinely remember the Sikhs that were cut up joint by joint, tortured on wheels fitted with razor sharp blades and subjected to other unspeakable forms of torture.

Such brutality did not deter Sikhs from standing up for their own or others' right to liberty. They would even attack far better equipped and manned forces of Afghanistan's Ahmed Shah Abdali and free thousands of Hindu and Muslim girls being carried by him as war bounty, at a huge cost to the Sikhs' own lives.

The Sikhs would bear extreme tortures and loss of life with saintly serenity. On witnessing merciless beating of Sikhs engaged calmly in prayers, during a peaceful protest regarding access to a Gurdwara (a Sikh place of worship) in Punjab, Reverend C. F. Andrews, an Anglican priest, remarked in 1922 to the then Governor of Punjab that he had seen with his own eyes "hundreds of Christs being crucified" at Guru Ka Bagh.

Such is the determination required to stand up for life and liberty for all. Such is the Saint-Soldier spirit nurtured by the principles of the Sikh Faith. The spirit of 'give me liberty or give me death'. The spirit of the self-evident truth that we all are created equal. The spirit of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, not only for oneself but also for others.

That is the spirit of Vaisakhi, the day the Khalsa was established, that the Sikhs celebrate on this 312th Vaisakhi on April 14, 2011.

The paradigm of liberty has taken root in many countries, but there still exist numerous dark corners. Today, liberated nations are themselves playing a role in defending the defenseless, again at a high human cost. Still, we need to do more.

The story of Eman al-Obeidy from Libya is reflective not only of brutality in general, but also of particular brutality against women. Whether it is the trafficking and abuse of women, burning alive of brides in greed for dowry, female infanticide, or the use of women as weapons of war, humanity is still struggling with its darkest issues. Hopefully, individuals and organizations that are fighting to win liberty for the oppressed men and women in today's world will be able to make a significant difference.

Hopefully, soon.