

Please read the articles below. While we as Sikhs should not isolate ourselves from culturally participating in religious festivals of other communities, but we also need to be aware of the impact of blindly allowing these festivals to become a part of Sikhism. Please read on.....

Bandhi-Chor or an Alibi?

By Amardeep Singh – New York, USA

al-i-bi - an explanation offered to avoid blame or justify action; an excuse.

Every year, with the arrival of Diwali, I am forced to ponder over the hypocrisy that has entrenched our Sikh society.

Sure, I am afraid to reason on Diwali/Bandi-Chor Diwas and its importance within the four walls of the Gurudwara, as it would amount to playing with sentiments and lead us nowhere. So, for years I have started isolating myself more and more from this occasion. Unless, of course, there is great Keertan going on in the Gurudwara, I make it a point not to be present in any community celebrations on this day.

Am I taking it too far?

I don't know. But I would surely appreciate it if someone could help me understand why I should not take it too far! Here are some thoughts on Diwali/Bandhi Chor Diwas.

To date, historians have not reached a consensus on the period of Guru Hargobind Ji's stay in the Fort of Gwalior. Historical texts indicate that this period was as short as forty days to as long as 12 years (Dabistan-I-Mazahi by Muhsin Fani). Historical texts don't agree on the period either. Some indicate it as 1609 to 1611, others as 1617 - 1619, etc. Muhsin Fani is obviously wrong in stating the period was 12 years because most of the Guru's children were born during those years.

We also know that the Indian calendar system is lunar based and therefore the number of days in the solar based calendar does not match the Indian system. If we are not sure about Guru Hargobind Ji's period of stay and his discharge from the Gwalior Prison, then how can we mathematically calculate that Bandhi Chor Gurpurab falls every year on the Hindu festival day of Diwali?

If we are sure that Guru Ji was allowed to leave the prison on Diwali day, then historians should be able to work backwards and have a better understanding of the year of his release. But our historical records

are vague about the period Guru Hargobind Ji was imprisoned and about the year he was discharged.

Some people use the heavy lighting at Darbar Sahib on Diwali to justify the festival. They link Diwali to the arrival of Guru Hargobind Ji at the city of Amritsar after having been released from Gwalior prison and having sought the release of Hindu nobles (hence, Bandhi Chor). It is said that the residents of Amritsar lighted up their houses in happiness of his arrival.

What are we trying to celebrate on this day? The release of Bandhis from the Fort of Gwalior or the arrival of Guru Ji at Amritsar?

If Guru Ji arrived at Amritsar on Diwali day, then wouldn't it be obvious that a large section of the Hindu population residing in Amritsar would have lighted up their houses because of the festive occasion of Diwali?

If we are celebrating the release of Bandhis from the Fort of Gwalior on that day, then one wonders how would the message of the release have reached Darbar Sahib the same day, over a distance of 600 kilometers, for the Sangat there to have lighted up the lamps?

While Bandhi Chor may be perceived as an important event by many Sikhs, (and I don't want to take away the importance from this event) keep an open mind and think why is it that we Sikhs light up the Darbar Sahib on Bandhi Chor Gurpurab only?

Aren't other Gurpurabs as important? Isn't Gur-Gaddi Diwas of Guru Granth Sahib important? Wouldn't the arrival of Guru Tegh Bahadur to the city of Amritsar warrant the same kind of happiness as the time of the arrival of Guru Hargobind Ji?

We don't light up Darbar Sahib in the same way on other important Gurpurabs, so why is it that we do it only on Diwali?

Let us not cheat ourselves. The reality is that even though we have been Sikhs for centuries, we still don't want to give up our past baggage of Hindu festivals.

Every Year, come Diwali, Raagis in our Gurudwaras are heard singing the Shabad "*Diwali Di Raat, Divey Baliyan.*" For the layperson, the singing of this

Shabad of Bhai Gurdas, using an analogy line as the Asthai (Chorus) of the Shabad truly distorts the essence. Repeated singing of this Shabad on this occasion makes it appear as if Diwali is a sanctioned festival in Sikhi. But a full reading of the Shabad conveys a totally different message.

The essence of the Shabad is that pleasures of festivities, pilgrimages, etc are momentary, and only an understanding of Gurus Shabad leads to prime pleasure of the mind.

Bhai Gurdas Jis' Vaar 19 Pauri 6:
 ਦੀਵਾਲੀ ਦੀ ਰਾਤ ਦੀਵੇ ਬਾਲੀਅਨਿ
 ਤਾਰੇ ਜਾਤਿ ਸਨਾਤਿ ਅੰਬਰਿ ਭਾਲੀਅਨਿ
 ਫੁਲਾਂ ਦੀ ਬਾਗਾਤਿ ਚੁਣਿ ਚੁਣਿ ਚਾਲੀਅਨਿ
 ਤੀਰਥਿ ਜਾਤੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਨੈਣ ਨਿਹਾਲੀਅਨਿ
 ਹਰਿ ਚੰਦਉਰੀ ਝਾਤਿ ਵਸਾਇ ਉਚਾਲੀਅਨਿ
 ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਸੁਖ ਫਲ ਦਾਤਿ ਸਬਦਿ ਸਮਾਲੀਅਨਿ

Diwali Di Raat Devey Baliyan
 Tarey Jaat Sanat Ambar Bhaliyan
 Phula Di Bagat Chun Chun Chaliyan
 Tirath Jati Jat Nain Nihaliyan
 Har Chandauri Jhat Vasaye Uchaliyan
 Gurmukh Sukh Ful Daat Sabad Smaliyan

Lamps are lighted on the night of the Diwali festival; stars of different variety appear in the sky; in the gardens the flowers are there which are selectively plucked; the pilgrims going to pilgrimage centers are also seen; and the imaginary habitats have been seen coming into being and vanishing. All these are momentary, but the Gurmukhs with the help of Naam nourish the gift of the pleasure fruit.

As most Sikhs originated from the Hindu mainstream, have we not found an Alibi (an excuse) in Bandi Chor for our inability to part with our past baggage of celebrating the Hindu festival of Diwali?

Culture through osmosis.

The following appeared in the March 1997 issue of The Sikh Review, on the celebration of Diwali. This appears on page 80, in the Youth Section in the article titled: "Christmas and the Sikhs Abroad".

Another festival, which I feel is celebrated out of all proportions by Sikhs is Diwali. Should Sikhs celebrate Diwali at all? They do, because it is supposed to be the day Guru Hargobind was released from prison. Why look for an excuse? That way there are numerous other occasions in Sikh

history, which should be celebrated similarly. Also, why aren't other gurburbs celebrated with the same gusto? And, moreover, Diwali is the festival of light, not noise! Why crackers? They are dangerous (read next day's Newspapers), even for people who do not participate in the festivities. The environment gets polluted, birds-and animals must be frightened, just look at your own pet dog. And it is a total waste of money, which could have been better spent. The sad part is that parents encourage their children and boast about the amount of money spent on crackers, rather than tell them about the danger involved and suggest other forms of celebrations.

If Sikhs want to celebrate Diwali as Guru Hargobind's release from prison, there are other ways to do it. Visit a prison. Make a campaign to release innocent prisoners (regardless of religion) and of betterment for prisoners in general, better living conditions, counseling, etc. And fight for the abolishment of capital punishment.

Diwali – Reasons !

By Balvinder Singh – Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

What are the main reasons given for celebrating Diwali. The three main ones are :-

1. **Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji released 52 Rajas.** Then why are we not "celebrating" the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji. He did not release 52 Rajas but upheld the freedom of Hindus to practise their religion in India and hence the ideals of religious freedom. Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji released 52 Rajas, then why are we not celebrating with the same - if not more - enthusiasm and passion the Vasakhi when Guru Gobind Singh Ji "liberated" the Sikhs from cycles of reincarnation by giving Amrit.
2. **Bhai Mani Singh became a martyr on Diwali day.** How about the shahidi of Bhai Taru Singh, Guru Arjan Dev Ji, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, Bhai Mati Dass, Bhai Sati Dass etc ... the reason being that we want to find an excuse to celebrate ... and presto ...
3. **Guru Gobind Singh Ji won a battle during Diwali day.** It would be of interest to know that Guru Ji won many many more battles ... why are we not celebrating those victories. Why not celebrate victory of Bhangani (18 September 1688) or victory of Sirhind (14 May 1710) as Diwali day.

The Gurus continued to use already famous and popular festival days like Diwali, Baisakhi, Holi (Holla Mahalla) but gave them a Sikh character and appearance and broke away from the Brahmin reason for celebrating these. However we have no reason to celebrate Brahmin Festivals like Lohri and Rakhi because our Gurus did not celebrate these. It is a different matter that when we "want" to celebrate anything we usually do not follow what the Gurus did or didn't do. An example in the case of Lohri or Rakhi, we don't give a thought to what the Gurus did, we go ahead and celebrate anyway. But on other issues just to prove our point we dig into history and say look here the Gurus did that.

In the Malaysian context, it is even more important for us to differentiate ourselves from others. During my primary school days, the non-Sikh children (mainly Malay kids) used to say that I worship idols. The reason being that they assumed that I was a Hindu (although I have '*jura*'). This was further reinforced because we were categorised as Indian. Just recently, when there was renovation done to my home, the Chinese contractor suggested "typical" Indian/Tamil colours eg dark pink, strong orange, blood red ... when we asked for his assumption on his choice of colours, he said that "*India-punya orang suka*". After further clarification, we realised that he meant the Tamils.

Since the tragedy of 1984, (some) Malaysian Sikhs had stopped celebrating Diwali and started celebrating Vasakhi. This has had a very positive and profound impact on the understanding of non-Sikhs - of uniqueness of Sikhism - in a very subtle manner. The biggest result is that the non-Sikhs know - for definite - that Sikhs are not Hindus.

Some say ... The punjabi who don't celebrate are fanatics. ... I personally don't celebrate, but I would not consider myself a fanatic. Then could I say that those who celebrate are "idiots" and "ignorant fools". Of course not, because that is not correct. It just could be that those who don't celebrate could have a more knowledge and realisation. This is my opinion.

I do "celebrate" Diwali but by attending the homes of my Hindu friends. Just like I "celebrate" Hari Raya, Christmas and Chinese New Year; by visiting the homes of my Muslim, Christian and Chinese friends.

Just a few weeks ago I "celebrated" my friend's wedding at First Baptist Church at Subang Jaya. My wife and son (3 years old) went with me. Hence I would surely not consider myself to be a fanatic.

In the same context, I would invite my friends to join me during Vasakhi. And in the process, project my religion's uniqueness and individuality. I already have my hands full trying to explain that we are not "Bengali".

Every major paper in Malaysia wishes 'Hindus' a Happy Deepavali, but have you noticed that during Vasakhi there is a small insert on the front page wishing all Sikh Happy Vasakhi. I have experienced some non-Sikhs mentioned that you celebrate Vasakhi because you are a Sikh? This, in my opinion, is one of the many ways to assert the individuality of Sikhism.

Caste system is banned by Sikhism, but I could give many examples where caste issues had appeared, be it during Gurdwara elections or proposal for marriage. How can we justify this. We cannot for the simple fact, that our Gurus had mentioned this explicitly. Caste system amongst Sikhs is part of the past baggage that we have carried from our forefather who were Hindus and our Sikh forefather had had a very close cultural relationship with the Hindus.

No prizes for guessing which state has the highest level of alcohol consumption in India ... yes Punjab ... and guess what ... the highest concentration of Sikhs is also Punjab. But our Gurus had been explicit on the issues of not consuming alcohol. Hence those who drink could not find reason to connect alcohol consumption with Sikhism. I'm sure if our Gurus had not been explicit then we would have found some "historical reason" in consuming alcohol.

Barely 100 years ago there were idols in the Golden Temple. Thanks to the Singh Sabha movement this is not the situation now. But something so obviously wrong could happen in the "holies place" for Sikhs, what more for something subtle like Diwali.

During the olden times many gathering were conducted during Diwali for one reason ... it was a 'public holiday'. In the same context we have RhenSbhai kirtan during the National Day eve in Malaysia.

It would be of interest to note that there are Sikhs in UK and US who are celebrating Christmas with great gusto. I would not be wrong to conclude that 100 years from now the future generation would try to find some reasons related to Sikh history that have some significant to December 25, to celebrate Christmas.

Should We Celebrate ...

Amardeep Singh – Southern California, USA

To answer whether Sikhs should celebrate the event Diwali itself is answered simply by asking yourself the following questions.

What is the significance of lighting candles at Diwali only? Absolutely none. People say that in celebration of Guru Hargobind's release candles were lit in Amritsar and that Guru Ji arrived at diwali time, but historians like Dr. Harjinder Singh Dilgeer have proved that neither did Guru Ji arrive in Amritsar at Diwali and neither was he released at Diwali.

Further, why do we attach so much significance to the release of Guru Hargobind Ji, but yet conveniently don't observe the time that Guru Nanak Sahib Ji was released from Baabar's captivity? Is one Guru's release more special than the other? If anything it should be the other way around. Guru Hargobind Ji was asked to go to Gwalior and the Emperor in his time was not as cruel as Baabar!! Surely the release of Guru Nanak Sahib in that case should have more importance.

Thirdly, what has lighting a candle on a particular day got to do with anything Sikhi at all. In every Gurdwara you'll hear Bhai Gurdas' hymn being sung about *Diwali dee raat Diva bale* and yet the very next line puts it into context which explains about joy and fleeting moments lasting like a candle lit at Diwali. Yet we forget the second line.

Note

- Why are women still restricted in the sewa in which they can engage in Harmandir Sahib, and as regards duty of Panj Payara, when the issue is clear in Gurbani and Sikh Rehat Maryaada? ANSWER - Because, not many have taken the initiative to STOP this practice.
- Not many people celebrated Guru Granth Gurgadhi Gurburab and certainly not with the same devotion as Diwali though this Gurburab is one of the most important day of the Sikh calender. Lets follow Guru's ways not others.

- Look in Hindi movies today, when there is a Sikh character, they show him idolizing Hindu Gods. Why is there no protest on this from Indian Sikhs? I wonder if this will be a century whereby Sikhism may be absorbed into Hinduism. I really wonder when I see people justifying ritual celebrations, justify Idol worshipping and making Diwali a major celebration for the Sikhs equalizing this celebration to Vasakhi and Guru Birthdays and sometimes greater than!!!!
- IGNORANT Sikhs will always find some historical background to link and justify Diwali. The historical fact may be true, but then a simple logic will tell you ..."Oh then we should also celebrate the day the Cobra snake provided shade to Guru Nanak, what about the day Guru Nanak stop the falling rock (Panja Sahib), what about the day he disappeared in the river when he received revelation from GOD.....this LIST will go on with other Gurus and Sikh warriors??? So we would probably end up like a typical *brahmin* celebrating everyday without having time to study gurbani, reflect, naam simran, do seva for other communities...etc. Our scholars have correctly selected important days that have significant to us SIKHS. After Vasakhi the next great festive is Guru Nanak's Birthday....Sikhi was delivered to mankind thru this wonderful man ...the GREATEST man that ever walked on this planet ! Surely this day means MORE TO US than Guru Hargobind's Bandhi chordh or Dasrath Ram's victory over Ravan in Lanka see the logic here !
- Although some overzealous or *brahminised* Sikhs keep singing the shabds like *Holi keeni*and claim that this is about the Holi festival when the real meaning is different - just like these types sing the Bhai Gurdass Ji's vaar *diwali ki raat deeweh balian* .. and claim this is an injunction to Sikhs to light deeweh when the very NEXT line Bhai Gurdass ji tells something else all together !!! the two lines must be read together .. not separated.

Logic & fact always prevail with education. Its would be pleasing to see the Sikhs opening their eyes at last however.

O Nanak, the boat of truth will ferry you across; contemplate the Guru. Some come, and some go; they are totally filled with egotism. Through stubborn-mindedness, the intellect is drowned; one who becomes Gurmukh and truthful is saved. Without the Guru, how can anyone swim across to find peace?