UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

VAISAKHI IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

EQUITY · DIVERSITY · INCLUSION

WHAT IS VAISAKHI?

Vaisakhi (vai-SAA-kee), or Baisakhi, originated as a Punjabi harvest festival in Northern India and is now celebrated by Sikhs and Hindus in India and by the Indian diaspora around the world.

For Sikhs, Vaisakhi is also known as Khalsa Day (KAAL-suh), marking the Sikh new year and holds historical significance as the day the Khalsa order was born on April 13, 1699. The word khalsa means pure, and the order promotes justice and equality. Sikhs who belong to this order demonstrate their devotion by wearing five articles of faith and practicing daily meditations. Traditionally, to celebrate the birth of the order, Vaisakhi is also a popular date for Sikhs to be initiated into the Khalsa community.

For Hindus, Vaisakhi is known by many different regional names and recognized as the new year by some, and as a harvest festival by others. In traditions that vary by region and state, it can also be a celebration of the day that Goddess Ganga was believed to have descended to earth from heaven.

In 2026, Vaisakhi is celebrated on Tuesday, April 14.

HOW IS IT OBSERVED?

For Sikhs, Vaisakhi is a colourful day of celebration and joy, filled with decorations, festivals, and kirtans, which are recitals of religious hymns in the temples, called gurdwaras. The celebration includes music, a folk dance called the bhangra, and marching in parades. There is also a tradition of acts of selfless service practiced in the local community known as sewa. In line with this tradition, each gurdwara has a free kitchen, called a langar, where members of the community come together to share a free communal meal cooked by volunteers. One of the foods is karah parshad, a type of sweet confectionary with sacred significance. Its ingredients symbolize the equality of men and women, and it is offered to all visitors of the gurdwara as a demonstration of the importance of hospitality.

Vaisakhi is celebrated across the world, wherever there are Sikh and Hindu communities. In Toronto, a Khalsa Day Parade and celebration is held every April, with people from all backgrounds and religions encouraged to join in.

For Hindus, the celebration of Vaisakhi varies significantly by region. There are pilgrimages to the city of Haridwar, three-day long fairs held in the Punjab regions, and bathing in sacred rivers such as the Ganges. The common threads that run through all these celebrations are temple visits and the exchanging of sweets and gifts between family and friends.

VAISAKHI IN THE WORKPLACE

HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

1. **Get educated.** Ensure staff who supervise or work alongside Sikh and Hindu colleagues are aware of Vaisakhi and how they can be supportive.

2. **Intentional planning and accommodations.** Update your scheduling tools to reflect religious observance dates and to support the planning activities.

   The University of Toronto recognizes its obligation to prevent discriminatory impacts on members of its community that arise from the failure to accommodate based on religion or creed. It is the responsibility of both the Manager and the individual seeking accommodation to work cooperatively and respectfully to explore and implement appropriate accommodation options. Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. Look for solutions that suit all parties.

3. **Be thoughtul.** You can wish your Sikh colleagues a “Happy Khalsa Day” or “Happy New Year” as a way to celebrate the day with them. You can wish your Hindu colleagues “Happy Vaisakhi” to celebrate the day with them.

4. **Don’t make assumptions.** As the celebration of Vaisakhi varies, your colleagues may observe in a variety of ways.