

# DIWALI AND SIKHI

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This article attempts to answer the question: Is Diwali a Sikh Celebration? It is inspired by the actions of some Sikhs to celebrate Diwali within the precincts of the local *Gurdwara*. Such celebrations range from encouraging Sikhs to bring sweets and delicacies to the *Gurdwara*, lighting the *Gurdwara* premises with oil lamps, to actually conducting full scale *kirten*, *katha* and *ardas diwans* in relation and in conjunction with Diwali.

Some *parbhandaks*, *parcharaks* and *ragees* have justified such practices by quoting *Gurbanee*, citing historical incidents that connect Diwali to our Gurus, and by pointing to the prevailing practices relating to Diwali of the *Darbar Sahib* and other *Takhts*.

This article thus aims to (i) examine the *Gurbanee* quotes that are said to suggest that Diwali is a Sikh festival, (ii) examine the Diwali-related Sikh historical incidents cited, and (iii) encourage evaluation of prevailing practices (pertaining to Diwali) in the *Darbar Sahib*, *Amritsar* etc. The final part of the article will attempt to put Diwali into its original and proper perspective by tracing the origins, purpose and philosophy of the festival.

**DIWALI AND GURBANI.** The most commonly sung and quoted *Gurbani* verses relating to Diwali are derived from Bhai Gurdas's<sup>1</sup> *Var 19 Pauree 6*. Sikh *ragees* sing this *pauree* and explain it as evidence that Diwali and the lighting of lamps is to be celebrated as an authentic Sikh practice. For a full understanding, the entire *pauree* is quoted below. An explanation of the *pauree* follows.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhai Ji (1551- 1636) was a contemporary and uncle of Guru Arjun. The first version of the *Granth Sahib (Pothee Sahib)* was written in the handwriting of Bhai Ji as narrated by Guru Arjun during the compilation process over a period of two years. Bhai Ji is further credited for the tireless *Sikhi parchaar* that he did within and outside of Punjab. Guru Arjun did not include Bhai Ji's writings in the *Pothee Sahib*, but Sikhs consider Bhai Ji to an exemplary Sikh philosopher and his writings are accepted by the Sikh *Panth* (as sanctioned by the *The Sikh Rehat Maryada*) as "explanatory Banee fit for Kirten and Katha". The only other Sikh writer whose writings enjoy a similar stature is Bhai Nand Lal Ji.

ਦੀਵਾਲੀ ਦੀ ਰਾਤ ਦੀਵੇ ਬਾਲੀਅਨਿ॥

*Diwali Dee Rat Deevay Baleean.*

ਤਾਰੇ ਜਾਤ ਸਨਾਤ ਅੰਬਰ ਭਾਲੀਅਨਿ॥

*Tarey Jaat Snaat Ambar Bhaleean.*

ਫੁਲਾਂ ਦੀ ਬਾਗਾਤ ਚੁਣ ਚੁਣ ਚਾਲੀਅਨਿ॥

*Fullan Dee Bagaat, Chun Chun Chaleean.*

ਤੀਰਥਿ ਜਾਤੀ ਜਾਤ ਨੈਣ ਨਿਹਾਲੀਅਨਿ॥

*Teerath Jatee Jaat Nain Nihalean*

ਹਰਿ ਚੰਦਰੀ ਝਾਤ ਵਸਾਇ ਉਚਾਲੀਅਨਿ॥

*Har Chandauree Jhaat Vasae Uchaleean*

ਗੁਰਮੁਖ ਸੁਖਫਲ ਦਾਤ ਸ਼ਬਦ ਸਮੁਾਲੀਅਨਿ ॥੬॥

*Gurmukh Sukh Fal Dat Shabad Smaleean. [6]*

Keen readers of *Gurbanees* know that the main message of a *shabad* is encapsulated in the *Rahao* line. This is the generic rule of the five thousand plus *shabads* that are written by the Gurus and *Bhagats* in the *Guru Granth Sahib* (GGS). The writings of Bhai Gurdas do not follow such a practice. Bhai ji does *not* use *Rahao* in any of his 912 *paurees* (in 40 *vaars*), 672 *Kabits* and 3 *swayees*. In all his writings, his main message is always contained in the final verse of the *pauree*, *kabit* or *swayea*. The first five lines of every *pauree* are illustrations / explanations for the real message which is provided in the final / concluding line.

A translation of the above *pauree* is as follows:

*The lamps of the night of Diwali eventually burn out.*

*The stars of the night sky stop sparkling when dawn comes.*

*The beauty of the orchard disappears as the flowers are picked.*

*The gaiety of the place of pilgrimage dies when the crowds leave.*

*Life- even as bestowed by God- is temporary; settled and then destructed.*

***Yet, the Gurmukh is blessed with the fruit of permanent joy through his Immersion in the Shabad.***

The meaning of this *pauree* is therefore as follows: A *Gurmukh* seeks bliss from the *Shabad*. The joy that comes from the *Shabad* is not as temporary as the lamps that burn on Diwali night, the star-lit night skies, and the beautiful sights of the blooming orchard, the joyous atmosphere of the places of pilgrimages or of human life itself.

The Sikh Rehat Maryada recognizes Bhai Ji's compositions as explanatory *Gurbanee*. The origin of such a stature is that fact that Guru Arjun recognized him as an interpreter par excellence of *Gurbanee*. Writings. In the above *pauree* - as is the case with all of Bhai Ji's writings - he is extolling the Sikh to link spiritually with the *Shabad* - by which he means the GGS and all the messages that are contained therein. This *pauree* is written to give inspiration to the Sikh to connect with the *Shabad* by virtue of the **permanence** of the joy that comes as a result.

Now, to use the first line of this *pauree* - *Divalee Dee Raat Divey Baleean* - as *Gurbanee* justification for Sikhs to light lamps (or otherwise celebrate) the Diwali night is ignorance - feigned or genuine. If that is the case then gazing the stars (the second illustration of temporariness in line two) can also be argued to be a call by Bhai Gurdas for Sikhs to worship the planets. On the same account, then planting orchards and going for *teerath yatra* or pilgrimages (as mentioned in lines 3 and 4) is also recommended Sikh spiritual practice. Obviously such is not the intent of Bhai Ji.

The reality is that each of the four events in each of the four lines are examples / illustrations used by Bhai Ji to make a concluding point regarding a particular characteristic - permanence of the joy - of the *Shabad*. This characteristic of the *Shabad* is **contrasted** with characteristics of the four events (their temporariness). Surely then, it would be highly disingenuous to suggest that the events being contrasted are acceptable as Sikh practice.

A cursory examination of the language used by Bhai Ji in the *pauree* gives indication of his emotions. Lamps are lighted. The word for lighted is *Jagaeyan*. However, Bhai Ji uses the word *Baleean* - meaning burned. He is saying "lamps burn away." His emotive context is easily discerned from here. The emotion behind "lighting" a lamp is generally positive. Lighting lamps gives one a sense of creating light and brightness. But Bhai Ji's emotions are concerned with the temporariness of the act - that the lamps (no matter how many positive feelings they create) *eventually* burn out, or burn to cinder, burn to darkness. Bhai Ji's message is concerned with the *final* outcome - that lamps burn out. His concern

with the *initial* act (the lighting / *Jagayean*) is no more than to indicate its temporariness. He is using this act (and three others) to explain the concept of temporariness as opposed to permanence (of the joy of the *Shabad*) – which is his *main* concern. Hence to interpret this line as a call by Bhai Ji to Sikhs to “burn” lamps on Diwali night is to miss the point all together.

It must also be pointed out that apart from singing the above *pauree* and interpreting it (albeit wrongly), no *ragee* or *parcharak* has been able to find a single *shabad* from the 5,867 that make up the GGS that discusses Diwali. In fact the word Diwali or any of its equivalents does not appear in the GGS even once. This alone should make any Sikh wonder. Why would a Sikh related festival (if indeed Diwali was such) not be mentioned even once in the GGS? Even in this *pauree* of Bhai Gurdas Ji, the issue is the burning away of lamps during the Diwali night – not the *celebration* of Diwali per se. It therefore goes without saying that attempts by some of our *ragees* and *parcharaks* to stretch to breaking point, the meaning of this line, requires nothing less than distortion.

Such reality however, has not stopped some Sikhs from picking a verse from the GGS with the words “lamp,” “oil” and “lighting” and attempting to connect it to Diwali. The most common one is ਬਿਨੁ ਤੇਲ ਦੀਵਾ ਕਿਉ ਜਲੈ ॥ ੧ ॥ Meaning, how can one light a lamp that is devoid of oil. A complete picture can be obtained if one looks at the complete verses of this shabad as follows:

ਸਿਰੀਰਾਗੁ ਮਹਲਾ ੧ ਘਰੁ ੫ ॥

ਬਿਨੁ ਤੇਲ ਦੀਵਾ ਕਿਉ ਜਲੈ ॥ ੧ ॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

How can a lamp remain lighted without oil. Rahao

ਪੋਥੀ ਪੁਰਾਣ ਕਮਾਈਐ ॥ ਭਉ ਵਟੀ ਇਤੁ ਤਨਿ ਪਾਈਐ ॥ ਸਚੁ ਬੁਝਣੁ ਆਣਿ  
ਜਲਾਈਐ ॥ ੨ ॥

Make spiritual knowledge the oil, and loving fear of God the wick in the lamp of your body. Then light it to seek the Truth.

ਇਹੁ ਤੇਲੁ ਦੀਵਾ ਇਉ ਜਲੈ ॥ ਕਰਿ ਚਾਨਣੁ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਤਉ ਮਿਲੈ ॥ ੧ ॥  
ਰਹਾਉ ॥

This is how the lamp will remain lighted, within which brightness one meets with the Master. Rahao.

This *shabad* has two *Rahao* lines. The first raises the question, and the second answers it. But the subject of the discourse is **not** Diwali or some physical

lighting of lamps. Its about the need for spiritual knowledge and the loving fear of God to enlighten oneself in the pursuit of Godly union.

**DIWALI AND SIKH HISTORICAL INCIDENTS.** Two significant historical incidents are cited by those who attempt to link Diwali to Sikh history and spirituality. The first relates to what is termed *Bandee Chor Divas*, (literally: prisoners release day) and is related to Guru Hargobind Sahib, our sixth Guru. And the second is Bhai Mani Singh Ji's martyrdom. Both need examination to separate fact from apologetic thinking.

(i) *Bandee Chor Divas*. Sikhs have been told that Guru Hargobind Singh Ji was ordered released from the Gwalior prison by Emperor Jahangir. The common narrative is that Guru ji accepted the release on condition that 52 other Hindu kings / princes imprisoned in the same jail be released together with him. The Guru, upon securing the release of the kings, himself arrived at Amritsar, and the Sikhs celebrated by doing a *deep-maala* (literally: rosary of lighted lamps) display at Harmandar Sahib. This release happened on Diwali day. So on Diwali day, Sikhs actually celebrate the release from prison of Guru Hargobind ji – by lighting lamps.

Is this an accurate depiction of Sikh history and an accurate interpretation of Sikh sentiment? Or are some Sikhs so eager to celebrate Diwali, and so fervent to want to link Diwali to Sikh practice and tradition that they simply *had* to find or create or embellish an incident that is suggested to have happened on or close to Diwali day, and use that as a pretext to celebrate the occasion? The following arguments will help answer this question.

First, the euphoria of *Bandee Chor* – a Guru being released from prison – needs to be looked at within the context of Sikh history. In 1521 Babur attacked Saidpur at Ahmenabad and reduced the city to rubble. Guru Nanak, witnessing the episode of destruction went up to Babur and critiqued him in spiritual yet stinging terms, as recorded in his *Tilang Raag Shabad* on page 722

ਪਾਪ ਕੀ ਜੰਵ ਲੈ ਕਾਬਲਹੁ ਧਾਇਆ ਜੋਰੀ ਮੰਗੈ ਦਾਨੁ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੇ ॥  
ਸਰਮੁ ਧਰਮੁ ਦੁਇ ਛਪਿ ਖਲੋਏ ਕੂੜੁ ਫਿਰੈ ਪਰਧਾਨੁ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੇ ॥

*Paap Kee Janj Ley Kablon Dhaeya, Joree Mangey Daan Ve Lalo*  
*Saram Dharam Doe Chap Khaloe, Koor Firey Pardhan Vey Lalo.*

Translation: Bringing the marriage party of sin, Babur has invaded from Kabul, demanding our land as his wedding gift, O Lalo. Modesty and righteousness both have vanished, and falsehood struts around like a leader, O Lalo.

And again in Asa Raag GGS page 418

ਇਕ ਹਿੰਦਵਾਣੀ ਅਵਰ ਤੁਰਕਾਣੀ ਭਟਿਆਣੀ ਠਕੁਰਾਣੀ ॥ ਇਕਨਾ ਪੇਰਣ ਸਿਰ  
ਖੁਰ ਪਾਟੇ ਇਕਨਾ ਵਾਸੁ ਮਸਾਣੀ ॥ ਜਿਨ੍ ਕੇ ਬੰਕੇ ਘਰੀ ਨ ਆਇਆ ਤਿਨ੍ ਕਿਉ  
ਰੈਣਿ ਵਿਹਾਣੀ ॥ ੬ ॥

Translation: The Hindu women, the Muslim women, the Bhattis and the Rajputs — their head coverings were shredded and trampled upon, while others came to dwell in the cremation ground. Their husbands did not return home alive— how did they pass their night? || 6 ||

The result of the critique was harsh punishment for Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana who were thrown into prison with thousands of others – mostly women and children meant to be sold as slaves in Kabul. Guru Nanak gave solace to the prisoners, consoled them, and stood up to Babur as their representative. After a discourse with Guru Nanak, and having made to realize his folly, Babur ordered Guru Nanak released. The Guru's condition was that he would only accept release if each and every innocent prisoner was released. Now the question: Why aren't Sikhs extolled to celebrate Guru Nanak's *Bandee Chor Divas*? Why is there no *Deep Maala* to commemorate this day? Because it does not coincide with Diwali? Or it did not happen close enough to Diwali day? Or there was no Darbar Sahib to be lit up with lamps then? Or simply because this *Bandee Chor* provides no convenient pretext for celebrating Diwali?

The story of Guru Hargobind's release on Diwali day deserves further examination. Given that the 52 Kings were Hindu, their release on Diwali eve is of significance to them and their subjects. It is thus likely that Jahangir – upon the persuasion of his Sufi wife Noorjahan<sup>2</sup> - decided to release them on a day that

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<sup>2</sup> Noorjahan was the daughter of an Iranian Sufi employed named Mirza Gyaas who frequented Akbar's court when Jahangir was a teenager. Jahangir was smitten by her charm and wanted to marry her. Akbar however thought Noorjahan was unsuitable for Jahangir and had her married off to Sher Afghan Khan. The couple was given a large *jangeer* in Bengal and sent to live there. Upon assuming the throne, the first thing Jahangir did with was to raid the Sher's home, have him killed and marry Noorjahan. Historians have commented that Jahangir was greatly under the influence of his wife. See Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, pp. 1770.

was auspicious to the Hindu Kings. For all intents and purposes, Jahangir considered Guru Hargobind to be Hindu. Entries made by him in his official diary, *Tauzekey Jahangiri* (page 35) record the fact that Jahangir considered Guru Arjun to be a Hindu. If this is to be the case, then the whole story of Guru Hargobind insisting that the other 52 Hindu princes be released together with the Guru may be an afterthought. It may well be that the Guru was released together with the rest.

Even if we accept the *Bandee Chor* incident as fact, the story still has many loose ends. Sikhs are told that the *deep mala* was done at Darbar Sahib upon the Guru's arrival at Amritsar. Gwalior Prison is in Agra – 210 kilometers out of Delhi. Delhi to Amritsar is another 465 kilometres. An express train journey these days from Agra to Delhi takes 5 hours and from Delhi to Amritsar another eight hours. The mode of travel by Guru Hargobind would have been horse back, or a horse carriage. Even if the Guru had rushed back to Amritsar – without stopping to meet with any of the *sangats* that would have gathered to greet him at the many villages and districts between Agra, Delhi and Amritsar – he would have arrived days if not weeks or months *after* Diwali. Not meeting with the multiple *sangats* en-route and rushing back to Amritsar is highly uncharacteristic of any Guru. No Guru would leave behind *sangats* to rush off to Amritsar or anywhere else. What was he rushing there for? To sit on a throne as the 53<sup>rd</sup> Hindu King? Or to make sure he arrived on Diwali night? In any case, **even if he did rush**, Guru Hargobind's arrival would *not* have coincided with Diwali – it would have been off by weeks at the very least.

The writer of *Guru Kian Sakhian* in *Bhat Vahee* (pages 27-28) provides the following chronology relating to Guru Hargobind's release and subsequent arrival at Amritsar:

Guru ji was released from Gwalior on Katak Vadee 14 1676 (B) [1619 AD]. He proceeded to the home of Hari Ram Daroga who performed a *deepmala* in his home. On Fagan 1 1619 AD Guru ji came to Nannaul Pargna at Batala where he met with Baba Budha, Bhai Gudas and other Sikhs. From there Guru proceeded to attend the funeral of his uncle Prithi Chand at village Heher. On 1 Magh 1620 AD the Guru arrived at Pargna Nijhar-ala and proceeded to Guru Ka Chak, Amritsar. With him were Arjani, the son of Mohre, Meharvan, the son of Prithi Chand, Baba Budha, Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Ballu (grandfather of Bhai Mani Singh Shaheed) and other prominent Sikhs.

If this record is considered accurate then the **Guru's travel from Gwalior to Amritsar took 98 days or over three months**. Going by this record, the Guru missed Diwali by that many days!

Second, the performing of a *Deep Maala* itself needs examination from a *Gurmat* point of view. There is no Sikh spiritual activity that revolves around the *Divya* (lamp). Beyond an article of practical use (providing light), *Gurbanee* discounts any and all *Divya* related rituals. In fact *Gurbanee* discards physical *divya*-related ritual and instead gives inner spiritual context to the lamp. On page 878 of GGS, in *Ramkali Raag* for instance we have one entire *shabad* devoted to the lighting of an inner *Divya* (enlightenment) by Guru Nanak. *Gurbanee* accords similar treatment to another practice involving the *Divya* namely the *aartee*. Physical *aartee* as a ritual is discouraged and *Gurbanee* provides inner spiritual context to *aartee* in the *shabad Gagan Mei Thaal Rav Chand Deepak Baney* (Dhnasree First Guru).

Given that such *gurbanee* injunctions already existed, it is thus unlikely that Sikhs would have indulged in a mass lamp lighting ritual or *deep mala* to welcome their Guru. It is even more unlikely that the Guru would have allowed his Sikhs to indulge in a ritual that was not only of no significance in Sikhi, but against *Gurmat*. It is more likely that huge numbers of Sikhs thronged to visit him on the way from Agra to Amritsar and he had divans of *kirten*, *katha*, *langgar sewa*, and *parchar* for months culminating in a grand *sangat* gathering at Darbar Sahib.

Third, if one assumes that Guru Hargobind started the practice of *deep maala*, in defiance of the teachings of the first 5 Gurus, then one must look at other historical events of stature and importance. It is worth noting that there is no record of the Sikhs having performed *deep maala* when Darbar Sahib was inaugurated, when the first *parkash* of the GGS was conducted, when Akaal Takhat was installed, when Guru Hargobind initiated his *Meeri Peeri* army, and or when he returned victorious in each of the four wars he fought with local Mughals. These are all events that happened within a 50 year span (before and after) of the sixth Guru's release from Gwalior. If indeed *Deep Maala* was an accepted practice then, it would have been done on all these other occasions. Yet, it was not. Surely no Sikh would have trouble accepting that *all* of the historic events above would be of a higher importance *to* the Guru when compared to his release from prison. Why then is a lesser event being celebrated with a grand *Deep Mala*?

An examination of the collective mental psyche of the Sikhs at the time of their Guru's release will shed light on the probability of the Sikhs undertaking an exercise of lighting thousands of lamps to celebrate Diwali. Jahangir had, on 30th May 1606, after having kept him in prison, put to death in the most inhumane and cruel way, the fifth Guru of the Sikhs,. That this was the first martyrdom of the Sikhs, that their peace loving and beloved Guru was the victim, and the terrible tortures he endured had a lasting impact on the Sikh collective psyche. The Sikh psyche was tormented and beleaguered beyond imagination. One Guru was cruelly executed; the successor was imprisoned for one and a half year. It is impossible to imagine that the Sikhs would have decided to have *any* grand celebration (Diwali or otherwise) with the cruel and inhumane death of their Guru still fresh on their mind. It is equally impossible to imagine that Guru Hargobind would have allowed or condoned a grand celebration to commemorate his own release from prison. For someone who was prepared to die in battle four times with the Mugal tyrants, and for someone to call upon his Sikhs to be ever prepared to lay down their lives for justice, being jailed would have been as **trivial** as being released.

In light of the above, it is clear that the *Deep Maala* story is concocted as an after thought by people eagerly seeking to provide a historical justification to link Diwali to the Guru. The similarity between the story of Guru Hargobind returning to Amritsar and that of Ram Chander ji returning to Ayothya to celebrate Diwali (elaborated below) is striking enough for Guru Ji's *Bandee Chor* celebration to come across as un-imaginative, whole scale plagiarism and dull fabrication. As is the case with most afterthoughts – they do not withstand careful scrutiny, are shaky at best, and dubious at worst. Given that lighting lamps was the standard way of providing light and given the huge crowds present when Guru Hargobind arrived from Gwalior (even if 98 days after Diwali), a great many lamps may have indeed been used for their practical value. But if using many lamps constituted *Deep Maala*, virtually every day before the advent of electricity would have been a *Deep Maala* day at Darbar Sahib.

(ii) *Bhai Mani Singh's Shaheedee*. Sikhs are told that Bhai Sahib Ji sought to have a gathering of Sikhs during the Diwali of 1737. The local ruler agreed to not persecute the Sikhs who attended provided Bhai ji agreed to pay a fixed amount of money. Subsequently, upon discovering that the ruler had devised a plan to attack the *sangat*, Bhai ji sent notices for the Sikhs to not attend this function. There was thus no function and Bhai ji refused to pay the agreed amount to the ruler. He refused to allow the existing *golak* of the *Guru Ghar* to settle the amount due. As a result, Bhai ji was cut up limb by limb.

This incident is used to portray the fact that Sikhs *did* celebrate Diwali as a religious function because that is what this great *Shaheed* intended to do. But was that the intention – to celebrate Diwali as a Sikh religious function? Or was Bhai ji merely using the occasion to gather Sikhs to conduct a spiritual *diwan* that had everything to do with Sikhi (*Kirten, Gurbani recitation, langgar sewa* etc) and nothing to do with Diwali per se? In any case, the function was never held. More importantly, the outcome of the Diwali of 1737 was the cruel limb by limb mutilation of a brave, noble, bright and principled jewel of the Sikh community. Only one thing can be worse than this cruel annihilation of a man of God. That would be to use his name, his sacrifice, and his loss of life to sanction us Sikhs to do *deep malas*, distribute sweets and to *celebrate* a day that has nothing to do with the faith of Bhai ji the martyr. And those who are most guilty of such gross deviation are the present day guardians of the Darbar Sahib. What is most disturbing to the Sikh psyche is the fact that the roots of this great martyrdom of a great *Bhram Gyani panth rattan* soul lay in his desire to maintain the sanctity and dignity of Darbar Sahib. But now the guardians of the same seat of Sikh authority are bent on soiling Bhai Ji's sanctity!

**DIWALI AND DARBAR SAHIB.** In what can be described as a senseless waste of funds, money and energy sincerely contributed by Sikhs who look to the Darbar Sahib for their spiritual guidance, *parbhandaks* of this seat of holiness conduct, at virtually every Diwali night an ostentatious display of fireworks, *deep mala*, and distribution of sweets. To see Darbar Sahib (and other leading *Gurdwaras* and *Takhats* – notably Patna and Damdama) take part in a ritual so decidedly critiqued by the GGS, on an occasion so unrelated to Sikhi – is a clear indication of the spiritual and moral corruption that has seeped into today's Sikh spiritual leadership.

No authority at Darbar Sahib, Patna or Damdama has been able to justify their Diwali night extravaganza save to quote *Pauree 6 Vaar 19* of Bhai Gurdas Ji, mention *Bandee Chor Divas* and link to Bhai Mani Singh's *Shahidee* – as discussed above. No one can authoritatively give a time frame when this practice started. It certainly was *not* practiced during the Guru's times because there is no mention in the GSS. Such practice certainly did not happen during the 100 years or so after the demise of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 and defeat of Baba Banda Singh *Bahadur* – as the Sikhs – hunted as they were by the rulers of the day - were

hiding out in the jungles as guerillas.<sup>3</sup> The Darbar Sahib itself was destroyed many times over during this period to prevent the Sikhs from even secretly visiting it to get spiritual strength. This period is replete with tales of Sikhs challenging each other to go for a dip in the *Sarowar* (pool) of Darbar Sahib. The challenge was substantial as it involved the risk of getting caught and losing one's life. The price of the head of a Sikh was 80 rupees then !. It is thus difficult to believe that Sikhs would have conducted a *deep mala* or any celebration every year on Diwali under such circumstances during these 100 years.

Yet it is highly likely that the Diwali related *deep mala* crept into Sikh Gurdwaras sometime during these 100 years of a tumultuous period. Since the Sikhs were fighting for their survival in the jungles of Punjab, the hills of Jammu and the deserts of Rajasthan, the Sikh *Gurdwaras*, including the major historical sites were in the hands of *Mahants*, pseudo-sikhs, government backed deviant Sikhs etc. By and large they were anti-Sikh and had their philosophies rooted in deviant practices or Bhramanical beliefs. This is a period when Bhramanical rituals such as *Lohree*, *Maghee*, *Rakhree*, *Shraad*, *Sangrands*, *Maasiyas*, *Puranmashi*, *Karva Chauth*, *Dushera*, *Diwali* etc were brought into and institutionalized as "Sikh" practices. One century was more than enough for these rituals – even though tossed out by the GCS – to be rooted firmly in Sikh *maryada* and Gurdwara practices.

When Sikh Raj was established in 1801 – the Sikhs were no longer hunted, but their Gurdwaras continued to remain in the hands of the deviant Sikhs. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's ministerial portfolio for Sikh Religion was in the hands of the Dogra brothers who were Hindu converts from Jammu and Kashmir. We now know that these brothers were on the pay roll of the British for the purpose of destabilizing the Sikh Raj. These Dogra brothers sat as *parbhandaks* of Akaal Takhat, sanctioning deviant practices and doling out huge sums of money and land to the deviant *Mahants*. It is thus most likely that Diwali related *Deep Mala* at Darbar Sahib and other leading Sikh Gurdwaras was regularized during this period. When the British annexed the Sikh Raj, these *Mahants* and controllers of Sikh Gurdwaras were supported by the new rulers for politically expedient goals and actively allowed to carry on their activities. It was during the British rule

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<sup>3</sup> Guru Gobind Singh's demise in 1708 was followed by Banda Bahadur's reign until 1716. The Sikhs underwent terror at the hands of Mughal rulers and grouped under Misls (12 groups or bands of Sikhs) in 1747 which was the year of the first of nine invasions of Ahmad Shah Durani. The Misls used guerilla tactics for survival, and lived inside or in the fringes of the jungles. Baba Deep Singh's sacrifice is while fighting Durani's attack on the Darbar Sahib in 1757. In 1801 Maharaja Ranjit Singh managed to unite these 12 Misals and created the Sikh Raj headquartered at Lahore. The British annexed this territory in 1849.

(Guru Nanak's Niranghari Gurburab of 1942 ) that the first Akhand Paath of the *Bachittar Natak Granth* (dubiously called *Dasam Granth*) was conducted at none other than the Akaal Takhat itself ! It wasn't until the Singh Sabha Movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century that the historical Gurdwaras were liberated and put under the control of SGPC. These Gurdwaras were physically liberated, but Sikhs are still trying to liberate themselves from the deviant practices and rituals that were rooted by their previous occupiers. At the same time, non-historical and local Gurdwaras continued to remain in the hands of individuals and a host of *deras* have sprung up. The *deras* are run by a sanitized version of the *Mahants* known as *Sants*. A good number of local Gurdwaras, including diaspora gurdwaras are staffed by *granthis* who are the products of *dera* philosophies and *sant* influences. It is in this context that the introduction and continuation of Diwali *deep mala* (and other Bhramanical rituals) at Darbar Sahib (and other Gurdwaras) is perhaps best understood.

**PRESIDENT OBAMA SPEAKS.** The White House in Washington has undergone a transformation of sorts with Obama as its resident. For the first time in US history perhaps, a sitting US President decided to convey Diwali greetings to Hindus in the USA. The move is worthy of praise (and politically expedient too). Obama decided to widen the net of his greetings by including the Sikhs into his message. He mentioned Guru Hargobind's release from Gwalior prison as the reason why Sikhs celebrate Diwali. The President most likely meant well, even if he was misinformed. It is us Sikhs who have to get our history and spiritual contexts right before we can expect the same of others. It is hoped that the President's mis-speak will not be used as endorsement of any kind.

**UNDERSTANDING DIWALI.** It now remains to explain Diwali within the context of Indian spirituality. *Bramanism* dictated the classification of Indian Hindu society into four main groups – *Brahmin, Khatri, Veshyas* and *Shudars*. Dress, occupations, language and celebrations were allotted accordingly to allow for distinctions to be made at the outset. The Brahmin thus celebrated *Vesakhi* while the *Khatri*s considered *Dushera* to be their main celebration, The *Veshayas* – because they were the *Bania* or business class – were allotted Diwali which is a celebration of *Laxmi Puja* (goddess of wealth). The *Shudars* – because they were lowest in the pecking order of castes – were deemed satisfied to consider *Holee* as their main celebration whence forth they gathered to throw colored dust at each other in the name of guttural fun.

(i) *The Philosophy.* Diwali is a shortened version of *Deepavlee*; meaning a festival of lamps. It is fixed on the moonless (*masia*) night of the month of *Kathak*

– a month associated with labour (as opposed to *Veskahi* which is associated with reaping the benefits). By definition *Kathak Masia* falls at the end of the “working month.” The day after Diwali is known as *Vishkarma Divas* (literally: day of no-labour – also the name of a *devta*) and then next *Dhan Chaundas* (literally: day of wealth – also the name of a *devta*). Wealth will only arrive if the deity of wealth – Laxmi arrives on Diwali night, and the devotee is home waiting for her. So prior to Diwali, devotees clean their homes, give it a new coat of paint etc. On Diwali night, they light up their homes, perform fireworks, and distribute sweets – in anticipation of Laxmi’s arrival. The main door of the house is never closed on Diwali night. Laxmi’s photo is adorned with silver and gold decorations and *Kesar* and *Ganesh* are drawn in full color on the walls / floors of the house. Many devotees gamble during Diwali night hoping for wealth. Shivji and his consort Parvati are commonly depicted as gambling during Diwali night. The Ramayan narrates a session of gamble between Ram and Sita on Diwali night.

*(ii) The History.* Given that the civilization of India is 5,000 years old, a number of significant events would have coincided with Diwali which would have come 5,000 times over. Of these the most significant is the return to Ayothya by prince Ram Chander after having defeated rival king Ravan. This battle is depicted as the triumph of good over evil. Diwali night has therefore since witnessed fireworks and *deep malas* and the burning of effigies of the defeated Ravan.

**CONCLUSION.** It is fairly clear therefore that Diwali is a celebration that holds deep philosophical and historical significance to followers of the Hindu / Bramanical faith. And it is equally clear that Diwali has no significance whatsoever from the view point of Sikh philosophy, *Gurbanee*, *Gurmat* and Sikh practice.

Sikhs, having lived in cosmopolitan Punjab from the days of Guru Nanak would have undoubtedly shared the joy of Diwali (and even the Muslim celebrations such as Eid) with their neighbors and countrymen – *without* needing to share the philosophical underpinnings of the event. The same can be said of Sikhs outside of Punjab and India who live in mixed societies. It is thus likely that Diwali has been accepted from the social and cultural perspective by the Sikhs – in the name of good inter-communal relations and ties. A good number of Sikhs living in western countries are known to “celebrate” Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year, - without ascribing to the religious and spiritual connotations of these events - presumably within the spirit of good citizenship. As a minority almost everywhere, Sikhs have perhaps better understood this

principle than others. There is nothing in *Gurmat* that prohibits a Sikh from sharing in the joys of his neighbours and countrymen. It is in fact encouraged in the name of sharing within the precincts of humanity.

But attempts to provide Sikh philosophical and historical basis to Diwali (and any other non-Sikh celebrations) and endeavors to bring these functions into Gurdwaras are grossly misguided. Such endeavors necessitate the distortion and manipulative interpretation of *gurbanee* to provide basis where none exists. They make a mockery of the rich Sikh tradition by implying a bankruptcy of indigenous Sikh celebrations. Such attempts falsify Sikh history and rob our younger generations of the chance to appreciate their own distinct identity. The spiritual esteem of the Darbar Sahib (and other sites) is undoubtedly affected amongst *gurmat* and *gurbanee* appreciating Sikhs over the misguided and wasteful actions of these *gurdhaams* to burn lamps and conduct fireworks on Diwali night. While our Hindu brethren do all the above to await the arrival of Lakshmi, whose arrival are the Sikhs anticipating? Ultimately, such actions lower the esteem of the Sikhs in the eye of our Gurus as indicated by Guru Gobind Singh: *Jab Yeh Gahe Bipran Kee Reet, Mein Na Karoon En Kee Parteet*. The trust and faith (*parteet*) that the Guru placed in Sikhs may simply be lost in so doing.

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