

## Thousands of Valley Sikhs mark New Year with Vaisakhi celebration

By Andrea Castillo



Charanjit Sihota, left, hands out treats to Sikh community members as he rides on a float during the Nagar Kirtan parade in Selma on Sunday. The Sikh community celebrated Vaisakhi, which marks the spring harvest. Free vegetarian food and refreshments were provided for everyone. SILVIA FLORES — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

SELMA — Under the bright Valley sun, the thousands of Sikh men and women in bright Punjabi dress stuck out even more against the dry Selma farmland.

From a helicopter the scene might have looked something like confetti as the crowd made its way down Highland Avenue, following several large parade floats. They had started at Sahib Sikh Center of the Pacific Coast, a temple in Selma, for the biggest Sikh celebration of the year: Vaisakhi.

For centuries Vaisakhi has marked the spring harvest, which farmers traditionally celebrate with community festivals, and is regarded as the Sikh New Year. It became a holy occasion in 1699, marking when Guru Gobind Singh, the religion's 10th spiritual leader, established a community of baptized Sikhs.

The Selma temple is one of 13 throughout the Valley. Sikhism, the world's fifth largest religion, started in the Punjab region of northern India and eastern Pakistan. It promotes equality and compassion.

Vaisakhi started around 9:30 a.m. with prayers before participants went outside for the start of the parade.

Rose petals covered the ground. Several food stalls offered free vegetarian dishes, from traditional chole bhature to American pizza. At the temple entrance, men squeezed oranges into fresh juice. Other stalls offered traditional salwar

kameez outfits, jutti embroidered shoes or jewelry for sale.

Organizer Harinder Gill said he expected at least 8,000 people at the 21st annual Vaisakhi parade. The planning took three months of volunteer work and cost around \$40,000 to put on, including food, floats, permits and traffic control. Forty-five people were baptized Saturday as part of the commemoration.

Gill said people come from as far as Bakersfield and Yuba City to participate.

The celebration brought out its share of non-Sikh officials, including Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, Selma Mayor Scott Robertson and council member Yvette Montijo.

Robertson sported an orange turban. "It took 30 minutes to wrap this," he said, laughing.

Ajit Singh, 70, of Sanger said that Vaisakhi brings hope to farmers such as himself who are worried about the drought. But during Vaisakhi, he said, "everybody is happy."

"Everybody wants these days. In these days, money comes."

Music blared from the floats, one featuring a live performance with drums, while others sounded more like Indian hip-hop. Food stations were set up along the route, offering soft drinks, chips and even fresh coconuts.

The parade also brought out many non-Sikhs. Deborah Ramirez, 41, who lives along the route, recorded it on her cell phone to share with friends on Facebook. It was her first time witnessing the celebration, which she said was exciting and different.

Ramirez appreciated the emphasis in Sikhism on generosity and enjoyed watching as people doled out free food to everyone in the vicinity.

"It's something nice, something new for a lot of people," she said.

Jasleen Kaur, 18, said observing Visakhi is significant because every village in India hosts a celebration, but the same isn't true for every Sikh community in the United States. It's also important to ensure the culture is passed along to younger generations, especially those born in the U.S.

"Nobody wants their kids to forget," she said. "This is one of the biggest opportunities the kids get to learn."

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