

Ground Breaking Tour of SGPC President to USA

A Report by Dr. Rajwant Singh & Mrs. Amrit Kaur

S. Avtar Singh, President, Shriromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC), visited Washington, DC recently. It was his first visit to Washington, DC. The Founder President of Sikh Council on Religion & Education, Dr. Rajwant Singh and Executive Director of Guru Gobind Singh Foundation (GGSF), Amrit Kaur arranged a special meeting for Sardar Avtar Singh with leaders of other faiths. This was a conclave in the Lutheran Reformation Church, (next to the U.S. Supreme Court and Capitol Hill) in Washington, DC. The faith leaders had an opportunity to meet personally a key leader of Sikh's premier organization, for talks at a personal level. The discussion revolved around the challenging topic of the time - Religious Freedom and Terrorism.

While summarizing the issues facing the Sikhs all around the world and particularly in America, S.Avtar Singh said, "The subject of Religious Freedom is very dear to the values of Sikhism. Sikh doctrine postulates the concept of "Sarbat da Bhala" – welfare of whole humanity. At the same time it also advocates for its own religious freedom. The Sikhs believe that every individual has inherent right to worship in their own way . Our 9th Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur laid down his life to protect the religious freedom of faith he did not subscribe to. 5 Articles of Sikh Faith known as 5 K's are essential to Sikh identity. Many times Sikhs are asked to take off Kirpan on account of security and many Sikhs are harassed at the airports due to their turbans. In France Sikh children are not allowed to wear turbans in Public Schools It is a matter of great distress that a country for whose sovereignty and freedom hundred of thousands Sikhs laid down their lives, with turbans on, fighting in World War II should ban turbans for their children in schools. I request the religious leadership of the world to support us in this cause and help restore the right to wear turbans in France." He added that. "Although Sikhs are a microscopic minority, I am glad to see Sikhs succeed in all walks of life in USA due to their hard work, integrity and honesty."

On the issue of Terrorism, Mr. Avtar Singh said, " I am saddened by the events of terrorist attacks in Mumbai. I grieve for those who lost their loved ones. In after math of 9/11 in USA, unfortunately many incidents of hate crimes against Sikhs have been reported. Even one Sikh was murdered. Sikhs have been mistaken for Muslims. A terrorist may profess to belong to any particular religion but in fact a terrorist has no religion. They have their own personal agenda to advance. No community should be targeted for violence or hatred because a tiny faction of that community indulges in acts of terrorism and violence."

Mr. Richard Foltin, a prominent Jewish leader, Coordinator of Work Place Religious Freedom Coalition and National Legislative Director of American Jewish Committee, thanked Mr. Avtar Singh and said, "We are delighted to meet you and listen to your views . Jews have a lot in common with Sikhs. Like Sikhs, Jews value family and have strong work ethics. It is also a miniscule minority and has been persecuted like Sikhs many times and still rise out of ashes. We are fighting hard in this country for restoration of Religious Freedom for all. A Jew pilot Mr. Goldman was forbidden from wearing Yarmulke (a skull cap) and Air Force authorities refused to accommodate his wish. However, this controversy reached Congress and it had to enact law in his favor. We, the Jews welcome working with moderate Muslims who reject hard core Wahabis or other extremist Muslim organizations. We have had about 12 Muslims from India in Israel and from France, in order to exchange views and work on projects of building communities. In this fight against terrorism we are all

together and must join hands with moderates of all communities.”

Dr. Rajwant Singh remarked that Sikhs may be allowed to wear turbans in US Army on account of this ruling but at present they are not allowed to keep facial hair which is essential to its belief system.

Mr. Brent Walker, National Director of Baptist Joint Committee, a coalition of 16 Baptist groups and Coordinator of Religious Freedom Coalition, remarked that Religious Freedom was of utmost concern with Baptists because it was for this reason, to avoid religious persecution they had fled from England in the first place. He said, “All religions should have liberty to pray they want to, dress and groom themselves in keeping with their faith tradition. In this country Religious freedom is valued but it should not infringe upon the rights of others. A neat balance has to be maintained between the two. A few years ago there was an incident in Florida where a child was forbidden from wearing a kirpan in the school to secure safety of other children. Ultimately the court ruled that the child could wear kirpan if it was sown to its sheath. This way the child did not give up his religious obligation and security was also maintained.” Walker assured that his organization will continue to work with Sikhs to make sure that American society is conducive to the needs of the community.

Dr. Rev Clark Lobenstine, Executive Director of Inter faith of Washington, DC, an organization which brings together on a common table 11 world religions, said, “ I am personally delighted and honored to meet you Mr. Singh. This is the first time that we are sitting face to face with any prominent Sikh religious leader from India and having a dialogue which is so vital to us all.” Enumerating on examples of Religious freedom, he mentioned construction of a new Latter Day Saints Church in Washington, DC which people were opposing and another church which DC Government was not allowing to tear off because it declared the existing church building as historic on its own. Inter Faith Conference was working to assist both so their religious freedom was not trampled upon.

Dr. Rajwant Singh, who has worked with all of these leaders since 1990 on religious freedom issues at the Capitol Hill as representative of GGSF, thanked all the guests at the end of this round table discussion.

It was also attended by Amrit Kaur, President of Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington and Secretary of Guru Gobind Singh Foundation. She acted as an interpreter for all speakers also. She said, “ It is a privilege to be here today and listen to the views of these eminent religious leaders. Their views are strikingly similar in this regard. All oppose terrorism without condemning their religious affiliations, all the leaders have pledged to work together to create a harmonious society.”

It was fruitful and cordial dialogue that it left a positive impression of the Sikh community. Sikhs all over the world should encourage their leaders to meet leaders of other faiths; there is a lot we can learn from them in terms of organization, current issues and skills to cope up with complexities of modern day world. It will broaden their horizon when they look at the larger picture of world. S. Avtar Singh was delighted and overwhelmed at this opportunity. This meeting lasted for about 2 hours. He thanked the visitors and invited them to visit the Golden Temple. It was also suggested that may be SGPC should hold a Religious Summit of all World Religions and expand its horizons by interacting with other Faiths.

