

Sikhs Abroad: A Visit to America and England

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My wife and I landed at JFK Airport on 28th May 2001 on a tourist visa and stayed comfortably with our son-in-law, a Gursikh Indian Army Officer at UN, HQ. Our residence at Ravens Crest Drive in Plainsboro, New Jersey, was comfortable, air-conditioned and well-furnished apartment house. Our son-in-law as per UN HQ working schedule had one week of duty and the following week a complete holiday, this enabled our frequent outings.

During our visit to Niagara Falls we came across a group of bearded white clad, white capped tourists. When we could not decide their origin, I approached and greeted them. I was surprised when they revealed they were all Christians from Illinois State. When I asked 'who am I?' they chorused: You are an Arab – a Muslim. I corrected them 'No' I am a Sikh. Sikhism is one of the six major religions of the world'.

Manhattan, New York experience: While taking photographs of the city, I finished my camera film and purchased a new film from a white American shop in Manhattan, the Chandni Chowk of America. I asked the owner of this big store whether he knew about my origin or identity. He was candidly confident that I was a Pakistani, supposed to have four wives and many children. I quickly quipped, "I am a Sikh, content with one wife and limited children". Thereafter, I familiarized him with tenets of Sikhism – Oneness of God, brotherhood of all mankind, dignity of labour (*kirat karna*) Meditate on God (*Naam Japna*), share our earnings with others (*Wand Chhakna*).

Gurdwaras in America are well constructed, modern. We had the experience of four Gurdwaras.

Washington Town Gurdwara:- Washington Town is a township about 45 minutes drive from our house, a newly constructed, large structure, with *kirtan*, *katha* program on Friday nights and added *langar* – free kitchen on Sunday mornings. Both these services are well attended with devotion, offerings in dollars can be upto \$1683 on a Sunday. I was frequently requested to count these offerings. About 20-30 percent of those attending are shaven Sikhs. These gatherings are religious and social as well. It is surprising that outside the Gurdwara there is no attempt to educate the Americans about Sikhism, about our Five *Kakkars* and about our universal teachings.

Gurdwara at Water Bridge in New York constructed at a raised level has similar program. In Queens area in New York, Richmond locality, my hosts, took me straight from the bus stand to a Gurdwara for Labana Sikhs, the descendents of Bhai Makhan Shah Lobana, who announced the presence of the real guru Tegh Bahadur, the 9th Guru out of 22 Guru – like imposters. A *dhadi Jatha* was singing highly inspiring ballads (*vars*). I was honoured with a *Siropa* by the President of the Gurdwara. I was overwhelmed, taken unawares. Soon, I composed myself and very briefly addressed the *Sangat* thanking them for the honour bestowed on me. The Gurus brought us on one platform of *Sangat* and *Pangat* and within 500 years we are disintegrating into Jats, Khattris, Labanas, Scheduled Castes with separate Gurdwaras. That is why our meteoric rise socially,

morally, economically has not only been halted, there is a danger of a nosedive unless we wake up and all sit together in Gurdwaras without consideration of castes, status and gender.

While in America, we visited the World Trade Centre and took photographs standing at its top. When I write these lines after the 11 September disaster at World Trade Centre of New York, and the backlash of the events on Sikhs by shooting and terrible humiliation in public because of mischief or mistaken identity, I have the following Talisma for this malady:

- Let us not confine our activities to Gurdwaras, but go out and mix with local Americans, Europeans and convey our Gurus' message of Oneness of God and Brotherhood of all mankind.
- Let us display and impress upon these people our distinct Sikh religion and its basic tenets which when explained have a universal appeal.
- Let Guru Granth Sahib's *bani* be translated in English and disseminated among them in a missionary spirit – at nominal or no cost. After all, the Bible is being distributed free among non-Christians, why not selection from Guru Granth Sahib in English? We have the resources, let us have the will. Dharam Parchar Committee of SGPC and other philanthropic Sikh institutions should undertake this task on war footing.
- Let us display distinctive identity of Sikhism and Sikhs, the way we keep our beards flowing or rolled up, the style of our turban, *Five Kakkars especially Kara*. We must take recourse to electronic and print media both. Local Sikh elite can do this job better than the imported preachers from India.
- Familiarization with Sikhism by holding processions, seminars, meetings of small groups of all communities and impressing upon them our basic traits of loyalty to the countries of our adoption i.e. America, U.K., Australia, Canada and so on.

Sikhs (over the centuries) have been targeted by hostile rules, even our countrymen, betrayed by colonial powers but every time we have emerged stronger and purer. Let us be Sikhs first.

