

An Overview of Sikhs in United Kingdom

*Onkar Singh**

** 181, Mount Kailash, East of Kailash, New Delhi 110 065*

Sikhism is among the world's fifth largest faith groups and the youngest of world religions with a vibrant global presence of 25 million. Over half a million Sikhs live in the United Kingdom a democracy of many faiths and cultures, crammed with 60 million people. It's population growth is drawn from immigrants.

The first Sikh immigrants to Britain were the soldier survivors of the First World War though most of them came afterwards from the Punjab, after India became independent. They were followed by thousands of Sikhs from East Africa.

They have done remarkably well in the last fifty years in many fields from farming and commerce to engineering, medicine and law. Today, among them are distinguished businessmen, lawyers, judges, doctors and software experts.

An enterprising, resilient and indistrious community, they have played a vital role in various professions, business and politics not only in India, their country of origin, but also in countries which they have made their home. Through hard work, perseverance and honesty, they have made a life for themselves and their families.

In recognition of their contribution to the British society, Prime Minister Tony Blair paid them a glowing tribute on the occasion of the 2003 Vaisakhi celebrations in London. Mr. Blair said, "I know that British Sikhs have made a great contribution to the economic, cultural and political life of the United Kingdom, and I firmly believe that your faith and culture have brought tremendous strengths and benefits to our society,"

Out of over 150 Gurdwaras (Sikh Temple) which dot the skyline of the United Kingdom, the city of London has over two dozen, while other big cities like Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, Nottingham, Wolverhampton, Glasgow, Swindon, Warrington and Kent have several gurdwaras to meet the religious and social needs of the well-established Sikh communities over there.

Southall (West London), famous as "Little Punjab", with a predominant Sikh population, is home to over six gurdwaras. One comes across a vibrant Punjabi way of life, a spectacular spread of Indian supermarkets and popular eateries. The gurdwaras are known by denominations such as, Ramgarhias, Namdharis, Sri Guru Singh Sabha and Shiromani Akali Dal. Gurdwaras built on the basis of caste and communities is against the Spirit and teachings of the Sikh Gurus who worked to create a casteless society.

Southall now boasts a magnificent 4-level newly constructed, "Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Southall," the largest gurdwara outside India and Europe. It blends traditional and modern architecture using the latest technology. It has a serene spiritual ambience and grandeur dominating London's skyline.

Built at a phenomenal cost of 17 million pounds, the ambitious Gurdwara covers a sprawling area of 6000 sq. meters with a marble and granite finish and an enormous gilded dome of traditional design which attracts attention from afar. The main congregational prayer hall on the first level can accommodate 2000 worshippers and another 1000 on the level-2 gallery. The vast *langar* (dining hall) on the ground floor provides free meals for a thousand pilgrims daily with a capacity of serving upto 30,000 on festivals.

Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, paid a visit on 13 June 2003, and praised the Sikh community for "having served this country with great loyalty for hundreds of years, adding to the rich tapestry in Britain." He naturally omitted to recall the crafty annexation of the Sikh kingdom in Punjab by the British in 1849.

Another imposing Sikh shrine is the "Gurdwara Singh Sabha" in Hanslow (West London).

From humble beginnings it has become a huge complex of a large marbled prayer hall, dining hall and classrooms where hundreds of school children are taught. Its facilities and workmanship is something to be admired. The Queen accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh, paid a moving royal visit to the gurdwara on 25 October 2004.

The Sikh Sangat has generously contributed to the building of these stately Sikh temples to serve the rapidly growing Sikh community in London, offering extensive modern facilities of a library, seminar and community centre for educational, health and welfare services, and sports. An unmissable place of pilgrimage, these gurdwaras serve as a focal point or research and study of Sikh religion in Britain and Europe.

Wherever the Sikhs go to settle and live, they take with them the *gurbani* (Gurus Holy Word), the divine hymns (*Shabads*) of their Gurus (Spiritual Prophets). They have a strong binding of unity and faith in the *Gurbani*, a sense of responsibility to contribute to the general good of mankind.

The *Gurbani* deprecates discrimination on grounds of religion and caste by birth. The essence of *Gurbani* is love and respect of all human beings, despite their distinctive religions and beliefs, as they are all equal before the creator. Meaningless rituals, ceremonials and rigid dogmas are disapproved.

The Sikhs abroad endeavour to have a gurdwara, as early as possible, to install, with due honour and dedication, their holy scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the very embodiment of *Gurbani*, the spiritual and religious guide of the Sikhs for all time. A large number of gurdwaras spread across the world speaks of their abiding faith and munificence.

The gurdwara is their place of worship. It's practically, a meeting place for them. They come not only for religious ceremonies but also for social camaraderie. On Sundays, the Sikhs' dateline is the gurdwara where they come with families and friends to pay obeisance to the holy scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, listen to the *Shabad Kirtan* (divine hymn singing), offer *Ardas* (congregational Sikh prayer) and partake of the *Guru-ka-Langar* (free community meal). The celebrated occasions, like *Gurpurabs* (birthdays and martyrdom of the Sikh Gurus) and festivals like Vaisakhi and Diwali, draw throngs of visitors.

Every morning and evening the gurdwaras resonate with the recitation from the Holy Granth and *Shabad Kirtan*. The live telecast of the religious ceremony, direct from the Golden temple, Amritsar, early morning (*amritvela*) as well as in the evening, is relayed. The devotees throng the gurdwaras at both times. Everyone is welcome. The visitor receives both blessings and hospitality. Free board and lodging is offered to weary travellers.

The love of One, omnipresent God, who is the father of all creation and of all mankind, is the basic tenet of Sikhism. Guru Nanak, the Founding-Prophet of the Sikh Faith, showed a rational, practical way to live in religious harmony and peace. His prophetic vision of the future of mankind based on universal love and brotherhood of man and respect of all faiths offer the world hope of living in peace and harmony.

Never before had the British people known about the Sikhs. They are expected to know more about the dynamic, peace-loving Sikhs, and their faith which, according to the eminent historian, Prof. H.L. Bradshaw, is the "Faith of the New Age".

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