

The Institution of Marriage: Rights & Duties in Sikhism

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In February 2006, I had the opportunity to participate in a conference on marriage in Sikhism, organized jointly by Guru Nanak Foundation of America, and the Kaur Foundation, both located in Maryland. Conference was held at Hotel Columbia Sheraton.

Over a hundred participants – Sikh youth and their parents awaited the illustrious speakers — Dr. I.J. Singh of New York, Ms. Jessie Kaur of San Jose, California, and Harinder Singh of San Antonio, Texas. Dr. Kamaljit Kaur Sethi was the moderator, who kept the speakers in check about time, and skillfully summarized their presentations, embellishing them with her own comments and interpretations. After the plenary session the participants went into breakout sessions- Youth discussed their issues separately in group discussion led by trained facilitators who recorded the proceedings to be presented in a joint session at the end of the day. Likewise the parents were led to a separate room to discuss their issues in a special session.

In the plenary session, Dr. I.J. Singh was the first speaker, and he set the tone of the conference on a personal note. He came to the U.S. in 1960's as a student, and met a Caucasian lady in one of his classes whom he married later. That marriage, he said, did not last for very long. After that break-up he spent several years as a single man, and met women from different cultures and backgrounds- some equated 'being modern as being clean-shaven. Finally he met a Sikh woman from India, who he is married to for the past 15 years

Audience was mesmerized by his wit and dry sense of humor. He started his presentation with a statement 'marriages may be made in heaven, but they have to be lived on earth'. He also challenged the parents to answer a multiple choice question-'if your son or daughter came home asking to marry one of the following: A Hindu, Caucasian or an African American Sikh, a Muslim,', who would you prefer. 'There are no right or wrong answers', he said, but parents should start thinking where on the spectrum they would fall. He raised some hard questions by analyzing some matrimonial ads from a newspaper. He concluded that 'Sikh marriage is a responsibility, because it is performed in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib'.

Ms.Jessie Kaur from California talked about the practical aspects of staying married together, and related several incidents where things could have gone wrong but did not because of her firm grounding in Sikhism.

Then came the scholarly young man from Texas- Harinder Singh who interpreted Sikh marriage as an institution for personal growth in the Sikh way of life. He believes very strongly that faith is more important than race in determining the success or failure of a marriage. He also quoted a Jewish study that concluded that inter-racial marriages have a better chance of survival than interfaith marriages. Conflict of values can play havoc with a marriage after the initial honeymoon is over. He concluded, 'when two Sikhs get married in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, they are not just making a commitment to each other – they are making a pledge to their Guru and to the Divine Presence.

Discussions in the break out sessions were held in confidential environment with the help of trained facilitators. The results were educative, instructive, and in many ways very positive. To substantiate that let me quote the results of a similar conference organized by the

Center for Multicultural Human Services in Falls Church, almost ten years ago. At that time the parent's concern was that their young children did not respect their heritage and that they showed no respect to their parents who had struggled so hard in this country so that their children could get an education and a life full of opportunities in this country.

The teen-agers, however, had a different concern, and that was their parent's lack of trust in their young offspring's integrity and judgment as to what they would do when it came to their relationships with others — male or female. And that parents were watchful, they listened to their sons; especially their daughters' telephone conversations, when there was a male voice on the other side!

In this conference, while the youth has the same gripe about parents treating them with distrust as they did a decade ago, the good news is that the parents appear to have realized their folly of putting too many restrictions on their young off-spring, who still try to abide by their values, and retain their Sikh identity, while they excel in their academic and vocational pursuits, find themselves restricted in terms of opportunities to meet their likely mates.

In this conference, the parents' major concern was to create a platform for Sikh youth to meet and mingle with, their likely mates in a socially acceptable environment. To the best of my knowledge the only community that has taken this question seriously and has created an infrastructure to deal with it is the Gurdwara in Hounslow, in U.K. where the parents come to register their offsprings of marriageable ages to seek a possible match) in a respected and respectable environment. I happened to have met the person in-charge of this marriage bureau during my interviews for my book 'Amongst the Sikhs' written in 2003. The president of this Gurdwara keeps a vast database of Sikh youth of marriageable age and suggests matches to parents of eligible youth who apply for their service. This Gurdwara has served hundreds of such families in identifying suitable mates for their marriageable youth.

All in all, it was an informative, thought provoking and much needed conference.

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