

Faith & Peace: The Istanbul Conference

S. Nirmal Singh (USA) writes: I was invited to participate in a conference convened by the Istanbul Foundation for Science & Culture at Istanbul, Turkey from 3 to 6 Oct 2004. The theme of the conference was “Bringing Faith, Meaning & Peace to Life in a Multicultural World: the Risal-i Nur Approach”.

Over 75 papers were presented by Christian, Jew and Muslim scholars from countries across the Globe. I was the first Sikh invited to participate in this their seventh bi-annual conference. The subject of my paper was “Contentment for Inner Peace and Harmony in Society: the Thought of Nursi & Sikh Gurus.”

I was also invited to address the Inaugural session of the conference. It was indeed an honor to be called to speak immediately after Dr Thomas Michel, the Vatican representative to the conference, who also read the message from the Pope.

My theme in the opening address was “to share with you short snippets of life, work and letters of three eminent contemporaries of Said Nursi from the Indian sub continent - a Sikh Bhai Vir Singh, a Hindu Mahatma Gandhi and a Muslim Allama Mohammed Iqbal - all who endeavored to bring back a sense of dignity to dispirited people, position them for their political future in a changing world and reform their traditions from within to meet these challenges — thus to encourage a broader look at the great work done by the Said in the wider perspective of the experience and responses to the challenges of change by various traditions in their respective, though significantly similar, situations.

Bhai Vir Singh’s legacy is reflected in the vitality of the emerging Sikh identity and Sikh thought and burgeoning Sikh literature in Punjabi ——’

Iqbal delivered his ‘Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam’ lectures in 1929. He wanted Muslims to approach the problems of modernity with careful judgment and insight and sought cultural autonomy for Muslims within political plurality to avoid their retreat into sterile religious conservatism ——.”

The inaugural session would have attracted around five thousand inside the huge auditorium, and an equal number outside, watching proceedings on giant TV screens.

Almost 40 to 50 % were women. My picture appeared on the front page of the newspaper Zaman the next day. I was overwhelmed by courtesies received and attention by TV and print media. The reason surely was the same vestment of the Sikhs that also subjected them to harassment post 1984 in India and post Sep.11, 2001, in the US.

Our contemporaneous world is intensely seized of the problems of the inter religious strife. Sharing experiences and learning from them could possibly help promote understanding and bring greater harmony in our divided societies.

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**Newfoundland Sikhs dedicate first Gurdwara
on Guru Granth Centennial**

St. John's – Newfoundland Sikh Society held a two days conference on Sri Guru Granth Sahib to celebrate the QuadriCentennial of its compilation. On October 9-10, 2004, Sikh families from all over Newfoundland were joined by their friends from England, Ontario, Quebec, Texas, New York, and Nova Scotia. Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Buddhists and other religious communities thronged to the first Gurdwara on their islands and participated with great enthusiasm. Their leaders paid homage to Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

Andy Welch, Mayor of the City, brought greeting from the city officials. He welcomed the religious activities of the Sikh community and offered any help that may be needed to promote Sikh projects in the area. Law Enforcement Law officials and several academics from the local educational institutions welcomed the Sikh Society in their state.

Prof. Manjeet Singh of McGill University made two presentations. He spoke on the interfaith scope of Sikhism and Introduction to Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Dr. Amarjit Singh Gill narrated important events from recent Sikh history. S. Balwant Singh of UK spoke on the current problems of Sikh practices among the youth.

Dr. Bhai Harbans Lal made two presentations on the guiding principles of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib which may impact the civil society of the twenty-first century.

S. Manmohan Singh Bindra and Party from Montreal performed Kirtan. Sr. Bindra also narrated the main themes of many hymns from Sri Guru Granth Sahib that he and his companions sang. Dr. Pali Kamra and Mrs. Renu Gill presented a children program. S. Raminder Singh Wadhawa and S. Pritam Singh Cheema welcomed and thanked the speakers and other participants.

Members and guests enjoyed the Langer on both days.

The Newfoundland Sikh Society represents around 25 Sikh families settled in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It was founded nearly 30 years ago to promote religious and cultural activities among the Sikh population. It has also been active in various neighborhood activities. To build the Gurdwara on this island was a challenged to the small community but their friends in North America and coreligionists at the island helped. Its popularity among its neighbors may be judged by close to 400 strong community participation the celebration of the Gurdwara opening.

[Courtesy: Harbans Lal]

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Secret Killing of Sikhs: NHRC verdict

In a landmark order in the case of “secret” cremations by Punjab Police during its 1984-1994 anti-terror drive, the National Human Rights Commission last November held the Punjab government “vicariously liable” for 109 of these deaths and asked it to pay a compensation of Rs. 2.5 lakh each to the next of kin of the victims.

“Punjab is accountable and vicariously responsible for the infringement of the right to life of at least 109 persons as it failed to safeguard their lives and persons against the risk of avoidable harm”, a Bench, comprising chairperson Justice A.S. Anand and Justice Y. Bhaskar Rao and R.S. Kalha, said.

Over 2,000 people were reported missing and suspected to have been mass cremated by the police during the days of terrorism between 1984 and 1994. The rights panel brought out a list of these people in Punjab in August 2004 and asked the next of kin of the victims to send in their claims of compensation to it.

This is the first time relief has been awarded in the case of the alleged cremations of 2,097 bodies as “unclaimed or unidentified” in Amritsar without observing a lawful procedure or where there has been any other violation of human rights. However, the NHRC clarified the order was not expressing any opinion on the culpability or otherwise, of any police officer or officials. The commission directed that the disbursement of the amount should be made by the DM, Amritsar, or the SDM concerned within two months of receiving it from the state government.

Half of the Rs 2.5 Lakh compensation must be paid directly to the next of kin and the rest should be kept in a fixed deposit for a period of five years, the NHRC said.

The next of kin of the victims can draw interest on the fixed deposit. Earlier, Punjab Police, in its affidavit before the NHRC, admitted the 109 people were in its custody before they died and were cremated. The NHRC further said it “unhesitatingly” holds that the “human rights of these 109 persons.... Stood invaded and infringed upon when they lost their lives while in police custody, so rendering the state vicariously liable.”

“The commission firmly believes that, while terrorism must be countered effectively and strongly, no democratic society can be permitted to violate the civil liberties of the citizens while taking measures against terrorists”, Justice Anand said while giving the order. The rights panel, after a Supreme Court order, has been hearing the case to consider grant of compensation.

The commission brought out a list of all these people in Punjab in July 2004 and asked the next of kin of those dead to send their compensation claims to it.

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India’s Sikh Population: Census Set-Back

The results of the first religion-specific Census, part of the census 2001 exercise, have been released. The Census Bureau said that in terms of growth of different religious communities, Hindus showed a decline over the previous decade: their population growing by 20.3% during 1991 and 2001 as compared to 25.1% during 1981-91. The Muslim population grew by 36% during 1991-2000, compared to 34.5% during 1981-91. Among Buddhists also there has been a sizeable decline in the growth rate from 35.3% during 1981-91 to only 24.5% during 1991-2001. **Also through there is slight increase in the growth rate of the Christians (from 21.5% to 22.6%), there is noticeable decline of Sikh growth rate from 24.3% in 1981-91 to only 18.2% during 1991-2001.** Most prominent in the 2001 Census data released is the growth rate of Jains (26.0%) during 1991-2001. – SNS

[Courtesy: *The Statesman*]

France: Land of Liberty has Turban trouble

Associated Press report from Paris: Three Sikh students were expelled from a school for refusing to remove their turbans, the first time Sikhs were forced out under a new law banning conspicuous religious signs and apparel in the classroom.

Officials of the Louise Michel High School in Bobigny, of Paris, on Friday decided to expel the three teenagers at disciplinary hearings ordered by a court, lawyer Mr. Felix de Belloy said.

The ruling was the latest twist in France's effort to apply a new law banning religious symbols at public school. The ban, which includes Islamic head scarves, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses, took effect at the start of the school year.

At least eight Muslims girls have been expelled under the law. Today four more were expelled from high schools in eastern France, school officials said.

The Sikh boys had been suspended since 23 September pending the disciplinary hearings yesterday. A court last month ordered the hearings to decide the fate of the boys, who had earlier been confined to classes in a cafeteria apart from other students since the start of the school year.

Sikhs asked the court to force school officials to take action by either accepting or expelling the boys. The students had made a concession by accepting to wear a "keski" a smaller version of the full turban, but the panel did not accept that, the boys' lawyer said.

He also said that he would appeal the decision. "I have the feeling that the decision had already been taken," Mr. Felix de Belloy, lawyer for the 14, 17 and 18-year-old boys told reporters following the disciplinary committee's decision last month.

[Courtesy: *The Sunday Statesman*]

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Film Festival on Sikh Themes

A Report by Sardar Chattar Singh Sahini-Khanpuri, Convenor, The SFF Management Committee, 109 Deer Run, Raslyn Hts., NY. 11577-1969. USA

A notable two-day Film Festival was held, last September, in Long Island NY, to celebrate internationally-acclaimed Sikh Films produced in different parts of the world. The venture was jointly sponsored by the Hofstra University the Sikh Org. of New York, and the local Chapter of International Punjabi Society. The inaugural function at Long Island Hilton was a glittering occasion. It was attended by a large number of community leaders, prominent political figures of NY State from both parties, and artists and producers of the films selected for screening. The Hon'ble Di Napoli, along with Hon'ble Donna Ferrara, and Hon'ble Brian McLaughin presented a New York State Legislature Citation, officially recognizing the festival.

The emcee for the evening was Dr. A.P.S. Mandair, holder of the S.K.K. Bindra Chair for Sikh Studies in Hofstra University. The audience were entertained to ethnic cultural dances by well-known Bhangra troupes, and screening of three short movies. Monsieur Thomas Hartman blessed the festival. T.J.S. Bindra apprised the audience about the increasing role of the Sikh Org. of NY in advancing and

highlighting the cultural, religious and political causes of the Sikh community in America. Dr. Stuart Robinowitz, president of the Hofstra University, co-host of the festival, in his speech expressed his satisfaction with the growing strength of the department of Sikh studies in the University and its pioneering role in expanding the studies of the other religions in the University. On the second day of the festival, the activity moved to the Students Centre Theater of the Hofstra University. Fifteen movies selected by a special local committee were shown to a diverse audience. There was a steady stream of visitors from the community and the university students to the theater for the whole day. The effect of screening the movies was enhanced by the personal appearance of the artists. The first ever festival of this nature, depicting the Sikh way of life, the Sikh culture, and the Sikh values and identity, proved an all-round success.

