

Guru Nanak's Heritage of Interfaith Amity: A Report on Lahore Conf. on Peace and Harmony

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“Cultures and religions living as close neighbors in the Global Village obligate the human race into interfaith dialogue in order to cope with the unprecedented challenges of the new world”, said Dr. Harbans Lal, Executive Vice President of Sri Nankana Sahib Foundation. Dr. Lal was inaugurating the first International Conference on Interfaith Understanding held in Lahore, Pakistan.

Harvard educated Director of The Dyal Singh Research and Cultural Forum, Dr. Zafar Cheema, who conducted the conference, said that the Muslim intelligentsia chose to support the conference because of the vital role the Sikhs as followers of Guru Nanak and the followers of Islam may play in the promotion of world peace.

People representing many diverse areas and leadership of the faith communities gathered at Lahore. They included educators, civic and community leaders, international organizations, media representatives, members of the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and officials of Punjab and National Pakistan Government.

The conference started with prayers from Holy Quran and Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Program included PowerPoint presentations, lectures, panel discussion, question-answer period, and time to visit and connect with one another during refreshments, including a mini display painting and art work. Tea breaks, luncheon and dinner were provided.

The underlying spirit that guided the program was education and information; sharing about faiths, culture, and Muslim-Sikh communities in Pakistan.

The symposium was co-organized by the Sri Nankana Sahib Foundation and The Dyal Singh Research and Cultural Forum with cooperation from Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbadhak Committee, Academy of Guru Granth Studies, and Sikh Awareness Foundation in early 2006. The conference, originally announced for November 2005, was postponed because of the earthquake devastation in Pakistan. Two dozen speakers from Middle East, India, Australia, Canada and USA participated, along with Pakistani Islamic leaders.

Islamic contribution to inter-faith understanding was the topic of a forceful presidential address by Justice Tasneem Ali Chowhan, a UN Judge at the International Criminal Tribunal, The Hague.

Syed Afzal Haider, Former Law Minister of Pakistan, criticized the media that played upon the religious sensitivities of various faith communities to further their political agenda. In a resolution passed unanimously, he condemned the blasphemous cartoons of Prophet Mohammed in Danish and other European papers, saying that the prophets of all religions should be respected by people of every faith.

Former Vice Chancellor of Guru Nanak Dev University, Dr. Harbhajan Singh Soch, who presided over a conference session said that the best way to bring peace today was to center frank deliberations on the values held sacred by all faiths.

Dr. K.L. Sheshagiri Rao, winner of the prestigious Person of the Century Award and Editor of Encyclopedia of Hinduism, sent his paper to be read in his absence due to his ill health that prevented his travel. He emphasized the ecumenical messages of Guru Nanak, who carried his universal message to all faiths and diverse people and urged them to transcend differences and adopt the common message of love, peace, and thanks-giving.

A galaxy of scholars participated in the discussions. They are: Bibi Jessiee Kaur Singh, President of Multi-faith Association of South Australia; Bibi Kanwal Kaur Hundal, President Pakistan Sikh Women Association; Choudhary Hamid Ali Khan Resident Director, Sri Nanakan Sahib Foundation; Dr. Devinder Singh Chahal President, Institute for Understanding Sikhism and Editor-in-Chief Understanding Sikhism – The Research Journal (Canada); Dr. Kuldip Singh Hanjan President, Sikh Center of Southern California; Dr. Nirmal Singh, Convener, Sikh Forum of Central Pennsylvania; Dr. Suarn Singh Acting President Pakistan Gurdwara Parbandak Committee; Dr. Tejinder Singh a member of Sikh Congregation of Kuwait; Dr. Ujagar Singh Bawa of The Washington Sikh Center/The Sikh Youth Forum; Janab Iqbal Quiser President Punjabi Literary Society of Pakistan; Janab Izhar Ul Hassan Additional Secretary (Shrines) Pakistan, Journalist Akram Hameedi Dawn journalist; Journalist Parminder Singh Soch of Sikh Community at Rochester, New York; Lt. Gen (R) Zulfiqar Ali Khan Chairman Evacuee Property Trust Board; Mr. Haroon Adeem, well-known Punjabi Poet of Lahore, Padma Bhushan Captain M.S. Kohli, I.N. (Retd), AVSM, FRGS, Order of the Khalsa, Chairman Himalayan Trust; Professor Shaista Nuzhat, Director, The Punjab Institute of Language, Art and Culture; Sardar Ganga Singh Dhillon, President Sri Nanakana Sahib Foundation; Sardar Harbhajan Singh of World Bank, Secretary National Gurdwara and Coordinator-Punjab Intellectia in Washington DC; Sardar Kartar Singh Bal, Board Member North Carolina Sikh Society; Sardar Manmohan Singh Virk, (progeny of Jathedar Bhai Kartar Singh Jhabbar of Gurdwara Reform Movement); Sardar Mastan Singh, Ex-President Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandak Committee; Sardar Mohinder Singh, Author and Journalist of New Delhi.

The evening session was devoted to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of Sri Nanakana Sahib Foundation. In his Inaugural Address, entitled “Connecting the Dots of Pakistan Sikh History”, Bhai Harbans Lal recounted many anecdotes and antecedents to the formation and accomplishments of the Foundation. He recalled the wintry day when he introduced Sardar Ganga Singh to the Sikh Cultural Society at Richmond Hill Gurdwara, in New York, where Sardar Ganga Singh made the “Janamasthan Declaration.” This led to the formal resolution for the formation of the Sri Nanakana Sahib Foundation at the meeting held on November 11, 1975 in Room 9 at Janam Asthan Sri Nanakan Sahib in Pakistan.

After many trials and tribulations, Sri Nanakana Sahib Foundation under the leadership of Sardar Ganga Singh succeeded in the formation of PSGPC which became a law of the land on August 25, 2004. Sardar Ganga Singh, in his Presidential Address, thanked his Sikh and Muslim colleagues, as well as the people of Pakistan, who helped him bring the Sikh and Muslim communities together towards free access and community based management of the Sikh holy places in Pakistan.

Lt. Gen (R) Zulfiqar Ali Khan Chairman Evacuee Property Trust Board thanked the speakers, delegates and the organizers of the conference. He honored the speakers with the symposium plaques and invited the world faith groups to visit Pakistan again for a continuous dialogue among and between faith communities.

Meeting with press at the Ambassador Hotel, the site of the conference, Sardar Ganga Singh said that even the Kashmir problem could be resolved through interfaith dialogues.

Later, Dr. Harbans Lal told the Lahore Press Club that the International Interfaith Conference was held in a country which was wrongfully maligned by its adversaries as home of religious fanatics. The very history and architecture of Lahore reminded him that Lahore was a ‘city of gates’ which welcomed and accepted many cultures, arts and religious thoughts throughout ages. Similarly to celebrate Guru Nanak heritage of interfaith understanding was to pay a tribute to a prophet who was born on this land and traveled

around the world visiting the holy places of all religions to promote dialogue of understanding and peace.

If media coverage is any indication, the conference was a great success. Over two dozen newspapers and two national TV stations covered or commented on the international conference. Since the time of first announcement of the conference, phrases such as Interfaith Understanding for Harmony began to find places in the speeches of the country's national leadership.

