

Sikh Women as Role Models

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ON SUNDAY 8TH MAY 2005, the Sikh Women's Alliance, in partnership with the University of East London and Metropolitan Police Sikh Association, hosted its second Sikh Women's Conference at the Docklands campus of University of East London. This campus competing and clashing with the waters of River Thames and the ascending/descending flights of City Airport was a stimulating background environment for the Conference.

Many other Sikh groups also collaborated in this event and promoted the voluntary work of their own organisations. Inspirational speeches from the heart and words of pride and encouragement greeted the ears of 500 people. Most of the speakers came prepared with their speeches in English, but then magically started to speak from the heart in Panjabi, thus endearing themselves to the audience. **It was a day to say to our Sikh women role models that we, the Sikh community, are very proud of you and your achievements.**

Sikh Women's Alliance is a non-political and non-religious group set up to empower, inform and encourage Sikh women to join the mainstream of UK society. The aim of this Conference was to discuss issues affecting Sikh women and future strategies to address them, including empowering Sikh women to take on influential positions, particularly as there is only one Sikh woman MEP and OBE currently and there are no Sikh women Members of Parliament, High Court Judges or Baronesses in the House of Lords.

The day started with mini-buses and cars bringing women to the event where hot tea, *samosas* and *jalebees* awaited them. Jasbeer Kaur Sumal and Kamal Kaur Palray took charge of the most important work of serving food and directing the women to the right rooms. Surinder Singh Saund ended up fetching and carrying equipment and boxes and undertaking behind the scenes work involved in looking after 500 guests. Upkar Singh Virdee of Ford Community Buses voluntarily gave his Sunday time to collect many women from four different venues and to chaperone them to the Conference and then take them back home.

Following registration, the Conference started with Ardaas and National Anthem being recited by Giani Captain Nasib Singh Dhillon, writer of many Sikh books. Rajinder Kaur's children, Perminder Kaur, Simran Kaur, Gurdev Singh sang a shabad which enlivened the start of the day.

The Sikh Women's Alliance Chairperson, Mrs. Balvinder Kaur Saund then welcomed everyone to the Conference and hoped that the day will inspire and encourage the women to courageously aim for influential positions in UK society, e.g. Senior Managers, School Governors, Councillors, Magistrates, Employment Tribunal Members, Members of Parliament, High Court Judges, etc.

The morning session started with two speakers from Club Asia Radio, a popular presenter Missy D and reporter Sangeeta Bhamra. They both came to the

microphone a bit nervous and apprehensive not knowing what to expect but were pleasantly surprised and stayed the whole day and went away inspired.

Many young girls were excited to make Missy D's acquaintance for the first time, having previously only heard her on the radio. Missy D advised that she was one of four daughters and her mother had always encouraged her. That at one time, media was not seen as a career but nowadays other mothers contacted her to ask how their daughters could become radio or TV presenters.

Sangeeta Bhamra, the daughter of a retired ex-policeman later reported in her local newspaper that..... 'it was an extra-ordinary event, so lively, colourful and fun. It was fantastic to see such a high turnout from the Sikh community – both young and old, men and women. It felt like the whole community had been brought together for a few hours. It was an eye-opener as hard hitting topics like domestic violence and independence of women got thrashed out, debated and really brought to the forefront'.

The next speaker, Councillor Jagir Kaur Sekhon, OBE, from London Borough of Greenwich talked about women wasting their lives gossiping about one another, rather than focusing their energies on following their aspirational dreams. She highlighted the treatment of some young women at the hands of their families and the rising practice of female foetus abortions. **She impressed that 'education, education, education' was most important for a woman and if you educate a woman, you educate the whole nation.**

Councillor Rajwant Mahal of London Borough of Tower Hamlets spoke about the conflicting priorities women had to balance in order to be successful. She highlighted her treatment at the hands of some Asian men who could not stomach her achievements. She made reference to cases of domestic violence that she dealt with as a Councillor and had been shocked to hear some of the cases which had brought her close to tears and despair. She said that every community often dismissed domestic violence as if it did not happen in their own community, but the reality was that it did happen and it needed to be challenged and addressed.

Jasbir Kaur Panesar of University of East London then addressed the Conference and advised that she is proud to say that she is one of four daughters and that her parents had never stopped their daughters from following their career aims. She referred to the educational literature being circulated by the University at the Conference and encouraged women to join higher and further educational courses, with a view to empowering themselves for senior managerial and other prominent positions.

Kawaljeet Kaur in her full police uniform then spoke on behalf of the Metropolitan Police Sikh Association and was pleased that the MPSA had been able to sponsor this Conference which was proving a huge success. She encouraged women to join the police force as officers or administrative staff and not to put up with the injustices by not reporting domestic violence or any other criminal activities to the police. She assured the women that the Police dealt with domestic violence as a serious crime.

The Conference was then addressed by Parm Sandhu, who is a Chief Inspector at the Metropolitan Police Service. She talked about her role and encouraged Sikh women to consider police work as a career. She then opened

up the debate to question and answer session and was applauded warmly for becoming the first Sikh woman Chief Inspector and a role model for other women.

Jasvir Virk, a broadcaster and story-teller then read a short poem on a woman's plight which left the audience visibly moved and emotional. To lighten the mood, Anno Vanderman, a Muslim woman of Sikh descent then kept the audience in stitches with her panjabi jokes. She gave details of her Sikh background and felt humbled at the way the audience had accepted her as one of their own.

Charanjeet Kaur, known as Jessiee, wife of Musician Dya Singh of Australia spoke about her work at international United Nations level. She advised about the lobbying work being done by United Sikhs on the French turban ban issue and stressed the need to raise the Sikh profile in the world.

The morning session was then concluded by Jagdev Singh Purewal of Panjabi Cultural Centre, Baldev Singh Sabar of Sikh Study Forum and Harmander Singh of Sikhs in England. They and their organisation's members had always supported the Sikh women in their endeavours and their continued support was welcomed.

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At 1 pm, the audience sat enthralled listening attentively to all the speakers, so much so that they had to be reminded that the Langar was ready to be served. Langar seva was undertaken by Paramjeet Kaur Bhamra of Ramgharia Elderly Centre, who despite having suffered an injury on her finger that morning, had managed to get to the Docklands Campus on time with the delicious food.

The afternoon session started with networking and a group photo-shoot out in the open, where some women whilst waiting for the group to gather, had started Giddha dancing and other women had spontaneously joined in the fun. Only Panjabi women know how to get together to enjoy Giddha and celebrate our culture.

Nina Gill, Member of European Parliament, our only Sikh woman in parliament had driven through Central London to the Docklands Campus and managed to get there in time. She had also come prepared with a speech written in English but had, similar to earlier speakers, reverted to speaking in Panjabi which she spoke very well. She explained how she originally got into politics and pointed out that it takes years of attending evening political meetings and canvassing on doors, before a candidate is put forward for a political position. **Her advice was that the Sikh community ought to learn from other communities and put forward candidates to whom they should give full media exposure, and then unite behind these candidates as a team to uplift them to influential positions.**

Lucky Dhillon, founder of Amrit Vela programme on Spectrum Radio spoke passionately about her pioneering work over the past eight years, which was now being copied as a good example and she was very pleased that *Sikhi parchar* was spreading on radio and TV. She expressed pride that Mrs. Jagir Kaur, was the first ever woman *pardhan* of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. She praised the organisers of the Conference for their hard work in getting everyone together and recorded some of the speeches for her programme.

Gurjeet Kaur Bains, Editor of English Section of *Sikh Times* highlighted their logo which said 'The Pen is Mightier than the Sword'. She talked about her experiences

at school and felt that had it not been for her biased teacher, she would not have propelled herself to the position where she was now. That, sometimes, one should thank one's critics because without them, we would not struggle and be achievers.

Gurmukh Singh of British Sikh Consultative Forum had always encouraged Sikh sisters to come forward and be counted. He referred to the Sikh women role models taking part in the Conference who had succeeded in diverse fields, and felt that the 'playing field' had been made more level by science and technology. He highlighted the need for Sikh women to get involved in Sikh institutions with a view to promoting the women's equality agenda, which was enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib.

The Sikh Students then set up their website and through their electronic media, showed a video about the activities undertaken at the Sikh Students Camp held from 21st August to 27th August 2005. They asked parents to send their youth to their camps and support their work.

At 3 pm, the Conference participants made their way to the Workshops. The most highly attended Workshop was the one on 'Issues affecting Young Sikh Women'. This Workshop was facilitated by Rajinder Kaur Johal and notes taken by Kamal Kaur Palray. Missy D and Sangeeta Bhamra joined this workshop and listened to the young girls issues for future discussions on radio.

The second popular Workshop was on 'Domestic Violence' and this was facilitated by Paramjeet Sagoo of Kiran Asian Women's Aid Group and notes were taken by Daljeet Kaur of 1NE Alcohol and Drug therapy group.

The third Workshop entitled 'Women in Business' was facilitated by Sonia Klein and Jasbir Panesar of University of East London. The Young Women's Workshop agreed to meet again in six week's time and continue their debate and many women expressed an interest in joining the work of the Sikh Women's Alliance who will now be compiling a report of this Conference for wider circulation in due course.

The Conference expressed pride at their women role models and asked that similar events be held each year in all UK cities, so that the Sikh women are better empowered, informed and inspired through debate and discussions.

So, it is over to you women out there. Take the baton and start walking to your goals.

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