

Scholars from North America celebrate inauguration of Charlotte (NC) Gurdwara

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THE SIKH SANGAT AND SCHOLARS came from far and near to the national conference organized to celebrate the 295th anniversary of the canonization of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, and to dedicate the new Gurdwara in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The occasion for the celebration was called National Guru Gaddi Divas. On this day of October 20, in 1708, the Sikhs' Holy Scripture Guru Granth was canonized as holy Scripture and the last Eternal Light for the faith. Holy Guru Granth incorporates the teachings of 36 holy leaders of all religions of Indian sub-continent. The main theme of this event was to deliberate and share Sikhism's universal message. The celebrations consisted of a symposium, a number of religious ceremonies, exhibits of Sikh literature, paintings, videos and documentaries on Sikhism.

The *kirtan darbar* (singing of hymns in classical Indian *raags*) opened the celebration on Friday. Renowned *ragees* like Bhai Baldeep Singh (New Delhi), Bhai Sukhwinder Singh Namdhari (England) and Raja Mrigindra Singh (New York) sang the holy hymns. The function was the first one held in the newly inaugurated Gurdwara of the Sikh Heritage Society of Greater Charlotte.

Symposium on Guru Granth

The Symposium on the teachings of Guru Granth celebrated the 295th Anniversary of the Canonization of Guru Granth as the Eternal Guru of the Sikhs. It was a forerunner of the Tercentennial Celebration 2008.

The symposium began with a welcome address by the President of the Sikh Heritage Society of Greater Charlotte. Dr. Surinderpal Singh Mac, an orthopedic surgeon, who welcomed the guests, and read a message of good wishes from the Hon'ble Sr. Tarlochan Singh, Chairman of the India Minority Commission, New Delhi.

Dr. Harbans Lal (Arlington, Texas), President of the Academy of Guru Granth Studies, outlined the need and scope of the proposed Sikh Research Institute in Charlotte. He stressed the need for collecting data bases of Sikh theology and history. These data will provide materials for liturgy and meet a crucial educational need for education of Sikh clerics. It will also prepare the leadership for the community in the new 'global village.'

Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany (San Francisco), CEO of the Sikh Foundation, formally inaugurated the research institute. The institute will be presently housed in the new Gurdwara facility until it has its physical facilities. When in operation, it will house a research library, seminary and facility for visiting scholars.

Dr. Devinder Singh Chahal (Montreal), President of the Institute of Understanding Sikhism and editor of the research Journal *Understanding Sikhism*; chaired the first session. Rajinderjit Kaur (New York), an activist in many interfaith organizations, presented criteria that made the Guru Granth as the first interfaith scripture in religious history. Therein 36 holy men contributed hymns, in 22 languages and over

a hundred dialects, the scripture for first time addressed all humanity as one family of divine father. Guru Granth philosophy is all-inclusive and a light for people of diverse faiths.

Raja Mrigindra Singh (New York), spoke on contributions of Sufi Muslims and Hindus holy men in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. He proposed that Sikhs should name their religion as the faith of the Guru as it was based upon the teachings of the Guru Granth which has a wider universal appeal.

Dr. Amarjit Singh (Buffalo, NY), an activist in Sikh youth programs, spoke on human sufferings as seen in the eyes of the Guru Granth teachings. Sickness of mind becomes a cause of body illness. Treatment of human sufferings will come from healing of the mind and spirit.

Dr. Harbans Lal spoke on “one spirit one word” as a Guru Granth theology common with many other faith groups and all world religions. The message is global in scope and not in confrontation with either science or logic. The future world will be in need of such a theology. He cited specific theological examples from the Guru Granth that may be the basis for a future faith and a future belief. He urged the Sikh scholars to be proactive in preserving and disseminating the treasures that their faith offers.

Second session was chaired by Rajinderjit Kaur. Dr. S. Rao, of the University of South Carolina and the editor of the sixteen volume Encyclopedia of Hinduism, spoke on ecumenical teaching of the Guru Granth. He said that the Guru Granth laid foundation of a society free of narrow prejudice and fanaticism. It urges to conquer five inner evils for tranquility of the human race. Sighting several examples of ecumenical nature, he said that the Golden Temple was built on land donated by the Mughal king, Akbar, and its foundation stone laid by a sufi saint, Mian Mir, demonstrating the Guru’s intent of founding an interfaith congregation. Dr. Rao ended his presentation by saying that without the teaching of the Guru Granth, the religions of India would have eclipsed.

Nirmal Singh Nilvi (Guru Granth Academy, Dallas, TX) said that Guru Gobind Singh took a major and crucial step in installing the Granth as the Guru. This historical decision protected Sikhism from any dilution or extinction. However, we should not forget that the Granth is still our Guru and it is in the form of its teachings and not as a physical object. Therefore, it is available to us anywhere any time for seeking guidance in every aspect of our living. We worship it not as an idol or a book but a spiritual light. To practice what the Guru says is the true worship.

Dr. Sukhraj Singh Dhillon (State University of North Caroline), Past President of Atlantic Coast Sikh Association, spoke on the universal philosophy of Sikhism as enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib. He posed a question as to why Sikhism has not become a universal religion in spite of its universal teachings. The reason may be that our practices are more a ritual than a real belief in its scientific spirituality. The need is to promote the universal practices which are more spiritual and more logical than mere rituals.

Kirpal Singh Nijhar (New York) spoke on the relevance of Guru Granth Sahib in our Western style living. The Guru Granth measures success differently than what is defined as a success in the Western society. He said that, irrespective of our

national origin, we should all endeavor to be recognizable Sikhs who follow the Rehat Maryada, or rules of conduct' detailed by the Shromani Gurdwara Committee.

Session 3 was chaired by Kirpal Singh Nijhar. Professor Devinder Singh Chahal cited acceptability of Guru Granth philosophy by the scientists of the modern age. Science requires precision, deliberation, freedom of expression and efforts to resolve doubts. Guru supported all these approaches. Chahal quoted Albert Einstein and other scientists to prove that their writings accepted what Guru Nanak said five centuries ago. Some examples were quoted by Prof. Chahal to show how scientific and logical is Nanakian philosophy. He emphasized that although some Sikh theologians keep science and Nanakian philosophy apart, it actually has qualifications of its acceptability by the humanity of the Science Age. There is a need to present scientifically and logically.

Dr. Baljit Singh Sidhu (Richmond, VA), President of the Sikh Association of Central Virginia, Inc, described himself as "born-again" Sikh and the contributions that the Guru Granth could make in all those who are attracted to a life of greater values. Only love emanate from the life of a Sikh unless we drift away from the Guru's teachings.

Dr. Kulwant Singh Khokhar (Richmond, VA), Trustee of the Academy of Guru Granth Studies, spoke on the life of meditation and selflessness with services to humanity as the tenet for a Sikh as prescribed in the Guru Granth.

Professor Surjit Singh of State University of New York at Buffalo emphasized the Guru Granth teachings against ancestral worship, belief in sacred formulas, etc. He compared many aspects of Sikh theology with those being proven by contemporary sciences.

Dr. Sangat Singh Syalee said that Sikhism was not just a faith but is foundation of a new spiritual nation built on spiritual and ethical truths. Theology of the Guru Granth has many aspects common with many other world religions, making it the most universal faith. He urged people to live a life of meditation, work ethics, and altruism.

Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany spoke on the history of Sikh art and the progress Sikh philanthropy is making in creating Sikh chairs and courses on Sikhism in the American universities as well as Sikh Art sections in the leading American museums. He presented excellent examples of ancient and modern Sikh art.

Professor Harmohinder Singh (Greensboro, NC) spoke on the *rehat namas* suggesting that the new age requires many modifications so that guidance provided conforms to the changing world. Certain groups emphasize more on the ritualistic aspects of the injunction ignoring the life of truthfulness, war against evils of mind, and service to humanity. Gurus rebelled against many illogical rituals of the time and asked us to do the same. The speaker expressed great concern over the gulf between the Sikh ideals and the practices.

Jasbir Singh (Summerfield, NC), President, Maboli Corp and Founder of Khalsa-net, urged use of technology in obtaining knowledge of the Guru Granth. He was pleased to see that the scripture was readily available in electronic media so that it can be accessed anywhere any time.

The Seminar speakers and participants took a tea break and networked with each other. The final evening session was devoted to religious program of chanting and singing of the Guru Granth hymns.

Inauguration of New Place of Worship and Institute

The Sunday Morning was devoted to the opening ceremony of the new Gurdwara building beginning with another kirtan Darbar by the local and invited cantors. For the opening ceremony, a **bhog** ceremony (complete recital of Guru Granth by volunteer members over a week's period) was performed. During the opening ceremony, the congregation unfurled the Sikh flag, a permanent fixture of the new building. .

Bhai Baldeep Singh of New Delhi and his companion sang the Guru Granth hymns. He also spoke of the Guru Granth in the forms of Guru-kirtan (singing of holy hymns according to the instructions provided in the Guru Granth). Call it Guru Granth or call it Guru-Kirtan, it is the essence of 36 Masters, he emphasized. One unique and common aspect in all of them is that they all sang the praises of the beloved Almighty. Kirtan, the singing of the *bani* (the sacred-word), is done in a unique style, which was first practiced by the Sikh Gurus and then endowed upon us. Being the highest form of meditation and contemplation (*simran & dhyana*), we need to first learn to appreciate it and then learn it to play. The tradition (the style and mode of Kirtan) shall live not by mere documentation and preservation, however important, it cannot be a mere *museum-artefact*.

All invited speakers were honored with a plaque and s robe of honor (siropa) by Dr. Mac and Dr. Preetinder Paul Singh Brar, the President and the Secretary, respectively, of the Charlotte congregation.

This opportunity was taken also to recognize Kuldip Kaur Dhaliwal who donated seventeen acres of prime land, worth over \$600K, for the new place of worship and the Research Institute. Her husband, Sajjan Singh Dhaliwal, a successful building contractor, along with all other Founding Board Members volunteered time and resources for the construction. The congregation had to come up only with the cost of materials and other incidentals for which a fund collection campaign is underway.

The trustees of the society received Honorable Pat McCrory, Mayor of Greater Charlotte, along with leaders of other religious communities, such as Ravi Patel, a local business magnate who represents the Hindu community. These guests paid homage to the new house of worship. Mr. McCrory welcomed the Sikh community and praised them for adding color to the "orchard of faiths" in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The dignitaries were accompanied by a large number of media reporters. Dr. Roshan Singh Attrey, a founding member, provided material for the press coverage.

The occasion, overall, was not only a great success but an emotional moment for every one to meet people who had traveled from places as far as Victoria Island, BC, Montreal and Toronto in Canada, all of the North Eastern USA, California and Southern States, to pay their homage to Guru Granth Sahib.

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