

# **A Call to Sikh Youth**

## **With Love from New York**

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The Kirtan sessions at Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, relayed over television, display significant numbers of young Sikhs with turbanless heads, barely covered under kerchiefs. One wonders whether this trend (of being shaven and shorn) represents the 'urge to merge' with the non-Sikh Indian mass, or simply to be morbidly "modern".

Anyone who sees a dichotomy between the spirit and form of Sikhism must think again. Even as the human body is divinely designed, the Gurus have willed the five Ks, starting with *Kesh* as articles of faith. The hair is not a symbol, like a corporate logo, to be redesigned periodically by marketing consultants!

Life has taught me to hold on to my own integrity, for no matter what I look like, there will always be some who won't like my looks, while there will be others who will accept me as I am. No one can make me feel small without my consent. So to look for an excuse to change with the demands of society is really not meaningful.

Sikhs are doubtless a miniscule minority in India - except in the Punjab. The situation is not likely to change in foreseeable future. We are ordained to remain a minority - the salt of the earth. Let us learn to rejoice in this unique status. For instance, there will never be more of any kind of people in this world than there are Chinese, but that is no reason why everyone has to look like Chinaman.

The challenge is - and will ever remain - for us to put our head on the line for the ideal. This is an utterly modern (indeed timeless) concept that only a free people can adopt. To live free is to be modern. We spend our defining years learning to become individually distinct - and unique. The Guru gave us the gift and the courage to stand out. I can't imagine a more befittingly modern India.

The question is how to model our lives so that our difference makes a statement. By attaching ourselves to the foundation of our heritage, we become free from the tyranny of changing customs. Would the slavery to fad and fashion not make us prisoners of our time?

Let me cite the example of Sikh youth in America and how they renew their faith by celebrating (the distinctive gift of) *Gur Sikhi*.

In the 100 years that Sikhs have been in North America two things are becoming clearer. The ties that bind Sikhs in the diaspora to their religious roots are strong, and getting stronger by the day,

even though the umbilical cord that connects them to the culture of Panjab is increasingly getting tenuous. The roots are nurtured through regular summer camps. The first Summer Camp for Sikh boys and girls started just over 25 years ago.

Now there are perhaps over 25 that are held every year in North America. The first symposium that highlighted books and literature on Sikhism was initiated only 17 years ago. Another group of dedicated Sikhs organized and hosted "Sikh Youth Symposium" based on Sikh literature in Buffalo (NY) in 2000, then, again, in Los Angeles from August 10 to 12, 2001. It was only the second year but over 700 young youth enrolled and participated, 43 finalists emerged from the local and regional competitions.

Across the United States and Canada, 23 centers have been established. Children, ranging in age from 6 to 22 years, are placed in 5 age groups. Each group is assigned a book on Sikhism, with questions derived from it. Competitors are asked to present a focused oral presentation on the questions. Three to five judges grade each presentation on aspects of content and delivery. Winners are suitably rewarded and go on to compete in local and regional competitions. Last year, the activities culminated in an international meet in Los Angeles.

For the young people from 18-22 the final leg of the competition consisted of a discussion presented by the finalists on "Who is a Sikh." It was both stimulating and informative. Winners in each category were suitably rewarded and recognized. For example in Group V (18 to 22 years of age) awards ranged from a handsome \$1000 for the winner to \$500 for the third place. In each of the five categories, those who spoke in Punjabi received special awards, including cash prizes. A suitable letter went from the organizers of the Symposium to each participant's school highlighting this aspect of student's extracurricular activity. The community saluted the winners.

Let me mention here the stirring Gurbani *kirtan* - in *raag* - performed by many young Sikhs from various parts of USA and Canada, all young in years but not in the mastery of the universal language of music. I make special mention, here, of three sisters, and a brother - Parminder Kaur, Rupinder Kaur, and Jyoti Kaur, with Harinderpal Singh on the *tabla*; Manpreet Kaur and Jagtaran Singh; Gurbans Kaur, Tanveer Kaur and Jasleen Kaur; Gunisha Kaur and Amandeep Singh; Gureet Kaur and Kamaljit Singh; Tanveer Kaur and Gurpal Singh, Manroop Kaur and Anupreet Kaur, among others. Many performed superb *kirtan* with rare aplomb, which would perhaps shame many so-called professionals who roam the world. For example, Harinderpal Singh is only 13 but he already has the makings of a maestro on the *tabla*.

The challenge in a function of this kind, involving more than 300 people, is the farewell banquet. But this was the sort of function which ran so smoothly that one did not even notice the changing of gears as it moved from competitive presentations at various local gurdwaras to sightseeing in the city, followed by a sumptuous banquet and an inspiring awards ceremony.

Rating special mention are the two National Co-conveners of the Symposium, Gajinder Shah Singh (Los Angeles) and Kuldeep Singh (Ohio). But all their efforts would surely come to naught without the toil, sweat and tears of the community *sewadars* from Los Angeles - Arvinder Singh and Amrit Kaur, Ravinder Singh and Khiven Kaur, Jatinder and Ninu Kaur, Gurcharan

Singh and Ranju Kaur, Balbir Singh and Loveleen Kaur, Avneesh Kaur and Ranbir Singh, and the many young volunteers who ran errands and saw to the success of the function; they remain unnamed here but their contribution was no less. To me the best indicator of success was the comment of some participants who wished the Symposium could last longer!

This year again the annual Sikh Youth Symposium will be held in the Midwest Region of the United States in August. The young people in the diaspora who competed and who gave shape and structure to the Symposium are the voices of our future and will define our place in the coming millennium. Sikhs in India owe it to the youth to develop a similar network.

