

The Story of Maritime Sikh Society

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MARITIME SIKH SOCIETY was founded in 1968 to serve a small community of Sikhs in Halifax. It recently made headlines with the election of an all-women slate to manage the affairs of its Gurdwara.

In 1992, the Maritime Sikh Society in Halifax made history by becoming the first gurdwara in North America — and possibly the world — to have an all-women executive committee to manage its affairs.

Women to the Fore:

In December 2009, the members of the society once again selected an all-women executive team to manage the temple, with Kanwal Kaur Sidhu as President.

“I am honoured and privileged to be given this opportunity to serve the Sikh community. I am humbled by the trust and faith placed upon us,” says Sidhu.

Sidhu has a deep connection with the society going back to her father, Gurcharan Singh, who in April 1968 had invited Sikhs from all over the region to celebrate Vaisakhi at his home. It was there that the notion of a formal Sikh organization was tabled, a committee formed and the Maritime Sikh Society conceived.

Sidhu’s mother, Surjit Kaur, also served as president in 1993-94. In fact, since its inception, women have played key roles and have participated fully in all affairs and activities of the society. When India’s high commissioner, S. Gurdial Singh Dhillon, once saw a woman leading the *ardas* ceremony in the gurdwara, he said, “This is the first time I have seen a woman performing an *ardas* in a gurdwara. You have given them the equal rights they deserve.”

We spoke with Kanwal Kaur Sidhu about the role of women at MSS and the status of women in society today.

Feedback on having an all-women executive:

Kanwal Kaur Sidhu: So far we have received only positive comments and a lot of support! It has been very encouraging. India’s Sikh cabinet minister, Mr. M.S. Gill, commented in the Tribune that the “SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee) should emulate Halifax’s example”. Hopefully, this story will encourage more women to take leadership roles in gurdwaras and men will be more accepting of the idea.

Personal Experience:

I have been a part of our Sikh community here since I was a young child. The Maritime Sikh Society was founded in 1968 in my parents’ house. There were only about 27 Sikh families at that time here in Nova Scotia.

For the first 10 years, the Maritime Sikh Society held gatherings in rental halls or school gyms. My father, Gurcharan Singh Sidhu, served in various capacities for the first eight years of this Society. As a young child I was involved in all the activities, whether it was helping carry heavy carpets for the floor or washing dishes after a service. My father was a

very spiritual man who had a deep love for gurbani. He embodied all that our Gurus taught us. He was a very humble, kind, compassionate man who showered all those he knew with lots of love. His friends belonged to all faiths as he did not see any divisions between people. He only saw humanity. You could say my father was most influential in me developing a deep love for my culture and my Sikh faith. Gurbani kirtan played in our house continuously. My mother, Surjit Kaur Sidhu, is also a very learned and devout woman. She was the force behind my father, silently doing seva for years on end and never looking for recognition. She has also served as the president of MSS. I took on this seva to honour my parents and to carry on my father's legacy.

Women's Role in History:

In the time of Guru Amar Das Ji, three of the appointed Masands were women.

These women were put in charge of spreading the message of Sikhism, handling sangat issues and the administration in their communities. Throughout history, Sikh women have always stood side-by-side joining in all panthic seva. We have had a history of Sikh women being head of Sikh congregations, and leaders in Sikh battles and Missles.

It is a tragedy that, today, there is even an issue of Sikh women not being able to partake in early morning seva and kirtan seva at Darbar Sahib or other gurdwaras. Can you imagine not allowing Mata Gujri Ji to do seva? In Ardas we daily speak of the Sikh men and women who have given their ultimate sacrifice for the seva of the panth. Guru Gobind Singh Ji solidified the concept of equality with the introduction of the ONE Khalsa of Kaur and Singhs.

It is very sad that whereas in the times of our Sikh Gurus we saw Sikh women in leadership roles in the clergy, today there seems to be no remnants of women occupying such positions.

