

New Gurdwara in Adelaide (Australia)

*Dya Singh**

** Dya Singh World Music Group, 5 James Street, Noble Park, Victoria 3174, Australia.*

On March 10, we drove overnight to Adelaide from Melbourne especially for the opening of the new Adelaide gurdwara. Passengers were my oldest daughter Jamel with her two children, Saahiel and Saffal; my youngest Parvyn and I.

The new 'Gurdwara Sahib, Adelaide Sikh Centre', opened with pomp, ceremonies and local dignitaries/politicians on Sunday March 12, 2006 after an Akhand Path and 'Jorh Mela'.

Our (music) group who happened to be in Adelaide for the world music festival 'WOMADelaide' were on duty for an hour of kirtan. There was also a bhangra demonstration by students from Punjab after the formalities.

There are a number of reasons why the opening of this gurdwara is special to me besides the fact that I have lived in Adelaide and amongst this lovely community for 25 years and two of my three daughters were born here.

Firstly, the building that is now the 'home' for the South Australian Sikh community is called the 'Olde Colonial Building'. It is an Australian 'heritage-listed' stone building that is about 150 years old, and aesthetically set amongst beautiful gum trees. It was recently renovated to make it into a top class convention centre and ball room. There is a beautiful garden on one side of the building with a mechanically operated running stream through it. Even though close to a highway, it is well designed to keep out traffic sound. It is based in the foothills alongside the highway descending into the Adelaide plain. Adelaide city is plainly visible from the building. Next to it stands a high-steepled Anglican church complimenting the surroundings.

All too often, we see 'white elephant' buildings put up by Sikhs which are totally out of character with their immediate environment – in short 'eye-sores'. Buildings with no imagination and even internally, very poorly thought out. (For example, I have lost count of the number of gurdwaras I have been to where one is forced to remove ones footwear outside and the 'restrooms' are built inside the building. So, one is forced to go to the restrooms without footwear before going into the Darbar Sahib.) This building was built as an old colonial rest house and then further designed as a convention centre and ballroom, now perfectly suited as a modern Sikh centre.

Secondly, it stands at the gateway to Adelaide on Australia's number one highway – the Princess Highway, which comes in from Melbourne. This highway can take one around the whole continent – but put aside at least three months if you want to do that!

With this building, the Sikh community of South Australia has come of age as one of the main 'ethnic' communities of South Australia that can trace its roots back to the camel-drivers of the nineteenth century who helped to open up the inhospitable hinterland of Australia. Finally, I can say with pride, that it is the way this new premises have been acquired, that I want to make mention.

For a small community of about one hundred regular gurdwara-going Sikh families, it would have been very difficult to come up with almost 1.5 million (Australian) dollars to purchase these premises. It took a man with vision, business skills and guts to take on this project. I do not think the Adelaide community will mind my mentioning Dr. Swaran Singh Khera who is almost single-handedly, (backed by a 'united' committee and a community prepared to support him) responsible for this dream materialising. The project involved bringing down the previous gurdwara and building nine houses for sale. The proceeds paid for these grand premises. The project had its detractors who were keen to hijack the plan because there was money to be made by any astute businessman, but for Dr. Khera and his team. The

premises are already valued at 3 million within one short year!

Mrs. Khera also played her part because she was responsible for attention to be drawn to this building. Whilst looking for adequate premises for the Anand Karaj for her middle son, Dr. Param Singh Khera she came across these premises. It was whilst we were attending Param's wedding, about two years ago, the fact came out that it was for sale. Discussions started and the thought and dream persisted, materialising shortly afterwards.

This building shall serve the needs of the Sikh community for a long time to come besides giving the community status within the fabric of Adelaide's society deserving of a community that has a strong history here.

The first Sikh in Adelaide appears to be a Kroppo (Kirpa?) Singh. He has the distinction of having the first bank account in 1857 in the newly established State Bank of South Australia. He was a former 'batman' of an English Army colonel in the Indian Army who brought him along as a shepherd. Though further research needs to be done, it will appear that there were more than 30 experienced Sikh cameleers besides 'Afghans' just after the mid eighteenth century. This coincides with the fall of the Sikh empire and enterprising Sikhs looking elsewhere to make a living. There is mention of an Otim Singh at the end of the century establishing the first convenience store on Kangaroo Island just off the coast of South Australia.

The first official cremation in Adelaide was a Bishen Singh and the last rites were conducted by a Bhagwan Singh and about 30 other 'Indians' as reported in the main newspaper in South Australia, the 'Advertiser' which still prints today

There are about 30 graves of Sikhs in various parts of South Australia going back as far as the late nineteenth century.

The present batch of Sikh immigrants go back to the 1970's and almost all of them are alive and well except for Dr. and Mrs. Manmohan Singh Grewal who have passed away (though the family lives on). They are S. and Mrs. Joginder Singh Ji; Master and Mrs. Sardul Singh; Drs. Harbans and Harpal Gill; Dr. and Mrs. Bhagwant Singh; Dr. and Mrs. Hardial Singh Khosa; S. Ajmer Singh Randhawa; S. Jasbir Singh Sandhu and family and Harcharan Singh Sandhu, besides Dr. and Mrs. Khera of course. All of these lovely people have done great service towards the Sikh community by keeping the torch of Sikhism alive... and today, it culminates in the opening of this wonderful Sikh Center.

Besides the Darbar Sahib and Langar Hall, there is space for a 'resource centre and library'; a Punjabi school; a 'reading and relaxation' room especially for elders; a built-in projector/video hall which can also double as a 'concert hall' with a good stage and seating capacity for about 200, and secluded premises for a caretaker and family. There is also parking space for over 150 cars with plenty of street parking in the suburb adjoining.

Adelaide Sikh Centre has no plans in hiring a full-time granthi but shall look for a suitable Gursikh 'sewadhar/caretaker'. The Sikh society has perhaps benefited from not having a 'granthi' because this has encouraged a great many of the regular 'gurdwara goers' to learn how to do parkash, samapti and even make degg and langar! Some have also learned how to do kirtan and do path. What this gurdwara needs is a Gursikh caretaker.

Though there are some great and saintly granthis worldwide, from my observation, more often than not granthis are firstly Indian trained and with no acumen to deal with youth born outside India especially not being able to communicate with them language-wise and at their level. Secondly, it will appear that granthis are professionals who are on the lookout for greener pastures especially UK, USA or Canada. They only use countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and Kenya as stepping stones to get them to UK, USA or Canada. Furthermore they are in existence it will seem to do specific jobs like daily parkash, samapti,

do 'path' in 'sahaj path' or 'Akhand Paths'; perhaps teach kirtan and take stabs at teaching Punjabi. They do not, as a whole cater to the true spiritual needs of the community in counselling and spiritual coaching.

As mentioned earlier, Adelaide has been home for me for the last 25 years. My two younger (of three) daughters were born here. The Sikh community and the music fraternity of Adelaide and the Arts Department of South Australia have helped me reach my present status in gursangeet and 'world music' over the last fifteen years. My oldest daughter was married in the previous Adelaide gurdwara. I have seen our community grow and become close as a community through the institution of the 'gurdwara'. Today we celebrate our community achieving a higher profile as a responsible, well-integrated group within the fabric of 'Australian society'. We contribute to the richness of the multicultural society of Australia; we live here, we work here, we contribute to the economy of this country; and we raise our children and now, for me, grandchildren, as responsible, law-abiding and spiritually well-versed future citizens, as Sikhs and as Australians. As the famous Australian song goes ... 'We all call Australia home.'

□

Sikh Women Chetna Lehar: A Seminar*

** Report by Sr. Avtar Singh, member, The Sikh Cultural Centre.*

The International Sikh Women Council, U.K. under the banner of Sikh Women Chetna Lehar organized a two-day seminar at Gurdwara Jagat Sudhar, Kolkata, India on 15th and 16th April 2006. The Seminar was the first of its kind where all the speakers were Sikh Women and the discussion focused on various challenging aspects of Sikh Women in the modern time. Distinguished among those who made the presentations at the seminar were Dr Rajinderjit Kaur, Principal (Retd) Sang Dhesian College, Punjab, Dr. Inderjit Kaur, President, All India Pingalwara Society, Amritsar, Dr. Jagjit Kaur, Principal (Retd) Guru Nanak Girls College, Yamuna Nagar, Haryana, Dr. Madanjit Kaur, Principal, Master Tara Singh Memorial College, Ludhiana, Bibi Avinash Kaur, Vice President, Gurdwara Phase-X, Mohali, Punjab, Dr. Devinder Kaur Deep, Eminent Gurmat Scholar from Ludhiana and Dr. Gurbinder Kaur, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab.

Dr. Rajinderjit Kaur chaired inaugural session on the opening day with an illuminating introductory speech on the importance and the need of opinion building. She then invited Dr. Madanjit Kaur to formally inaugurate the seminar by reciting a Gurbani Shabad in chorus: "ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ ॥ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦੋਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ" joined by the entire sangat present at the seminar. The seminar was divided into two parts and each part has two sessions.

Day I. Session - I: Three papers were read

Dr. Jagjit Kaur on "The Sikh Women and her contribution to the sikh history" made the First presentation of the seminar; She spoke eloquently on the need of Istri Chetna Lehar to awaken the Sikh Women to realize their responsibilities towards family and society. She particularly emphasis to the point that it is only the women who can guide the youths, specially those who have deviated from the path shown by the Sikh Gurus, to lead a purposeful life as per the tenets of Sikhism.

The second speaker at the first session was Bibi Avinash Kaur, she read her paper on "Sikh Women's responsibilities towards Sikh Nation (Panth). In her speech she appealed the women to read our glorious history where the women like Bibi Nanki Ji, Mata Khivi Ji, Bibi Bhani Ji, Mata Ganga Ji, Bibi Veero Ji, Mata Gujri Ji, Mai Bhago Ji who have played wonderful role the sikh history along with the sikh men. It is the Sikh Women who has always been a source of inspiration for the Sikh men during odd struggling period. She also

gave the examples of Maharani Jinda. She didn't forget to mention the women characters of Bhai Veer Singh's classic novels like Sundari and Satwant Kaur. She also read an appealing letter to Mata Gujri Ji on the role of Sikh women during struggling periods and their failure to keep the tradition alive.

Dr Inderjit Kaur, President Pingalwara shed light on this key topic "Challenges for the Sikh Women in 21st Centuries". She particularly highlighted the points to the needs of quality education for the Sikh Women and her role towards family and society. In her speech she says that the people expectation from a Sikh doctors or engineers or of any other profession is always high because of the glorious examples set up by our ancestors and we need to maintain or uplift this tradition and this can be achieved only if we care to read and practiced the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib. She also warned the women to be cautious against the evils of abortion of the female feticide, which violated grossly the teachings of our Gurus and, posed a danger to the future of Sikhism as a world religion.

Session - II

The first speaker of the second session Dr. Madanjit Kaur read her paper on the Subject "Sikh Women and Education". She draw the attention of the sangat to the need to educate our youths without discrimination of sex as Sikhism encourages every individual to be literate. Education is the foremost and the basic need for every Sikh Women because without proper education and the knowledge of Gurmukhi we cannot read and understand the lofty teachings Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Further the knowledge of gurmat also helps us to be free from the misleading brahminical cultural and traditions, which is unfortunately crippling into our daily life. She, however, expressed satisfaction that more and more Sikh Women is coming to the limelight because of their higher education and today Sikh Women can be seen in almost every field and some of them are also maintaining their distinct identity as well.

The last speaker of the day first; Dr. Davinder Kaur Deep made a short but a very powerful speech on the topic "Sikh Women's mental expansion". She underscored the need to follow the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji because Gurbani guides us in every aspect of life. She said women had an important role to play to free the community from social evils like dowry, female feticide, child marriage etc and that can be achieved if we strictly follow or practiced the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

At the end of first day of the seminar the head granthi of Gurdwara Jagat Sudhar Bhai Gurcharan Singh Ji thanked the speakers and sangat for their presence and co-operation in organising the seminar.

Day II: Session - I

The second day started with the recitation of Gurbani shabd "ਆਪੇ ਰਸੀਆ ਆਪਿ ਰਸੁ ਆਪੇ ਰਾਵਣਹਾਰੁ ॥ ਆਪੇ ਹੋਵੈ ਚੋਲੜਾ ਆਪੇ ਸੇਜ ਭਤਾਰ" by Dr. Madanjit Kaur, Bibi Avihash Kaur and joined by the entire sangat and then Dr. Jagjit Kaur ji made the simple explanation of the shabd.

Dr. Madanjit Kaur read the first paper of the second day on "The Role of Sikh women in 21st century". She recalled that how the Sikh women had played vital role in building the glorious Sikh history but the modern Sikh women is running away from their basic responsibilities of keeping this tradition alive. She said the need of the hour is that women come forwarded like Mata Bhago to awaken our slumber brothers. She also said that in this fast changing world it is the duty of every single Sikh Women to follow and to teach their children to strictly maintained their god blessed distinctive identity.

Bibi Avinash Kaur in her speech on "Sikh Women and fashion" appealed the sangat particularly the women to save their children from evils of fashion and modeling world, which is misleading our youths to the destruction and darkness. She said our youths should be

encouraged to read our history to know the importance of keeping long uncut hairs, because the god imagined the man with hair and it is our sacred duty to preserve and not destroyed it. She also read a poem on the social evils of abortion of female feticide, the poem was a cry of unborn baby that start as “mwel vy iek lori dydy” made every one’s eyes wet, presence in the seminar. Finally she appealed the sangat to join hands to eradicate the evils of abortion, which has already reached to a dangerous label, from our society forever.

Closing Session :

Dr. Jagjit Kaur read the first paper of the concluding session on “ Role and Contribution of Sikh Women as a Mother and Wife”. She said that women had always played a significant role in Sikh family and has been given equal status as that of man in all spheres of life. She also mentioned that in Sikh religion women is not considered a temptress, seductress, evil or any form of Maya. Even in the Sikh history we find that Sikh women had always been in the forefront and their role as a wife and mother has been very significant.

Dr. Rajinderjit Kaur uncovered a lot of interesting information about achievements of Sikh Women in Public and Private institutions. She said that the modern day Sikh Women is not only handling their family affairs successfully but have set records in many fields like education, sports, medical science, armed forces, computer and technology, politics, business and marketing, administration and even some have made their presence felt in electronic and print media.

Valedictory :

Dr. Inderjit Kaur, President of Pingalwara, delivered the closing lecture on “The 21st centuries challenges for Sikh Women and their redresses”. She said that, in a fast changing world, the women particularly Sikh Women, have an important role to play towards the uplifting of society and nation. She added that it is the women who can bring a revolution towards the growth of human society because almighty God has bestowed her with the power of understanding and tolerance. Let us promise to make our society a healthy, progressive and free from all kind of evils.

The success of the seminar was mainly due to the active co-operation of entire committee members and sewadars of Gurdwara Jagat Sudhar. The Gurdwara had made all the arrangements for Langar, Audio system and all other necessary facilities. Sardar Prabhjot Singh, Senior Advocate played a key coordinating role, being present throughout the seminar to ensure its success. Another person who had played a vital role towards the success of this seminar was Bibi Devinder Kaur of Kolkata, remaining alert on both days to make the seminar fruitful.

The Seminar concluded with Ardas of thanks in the congregation hall of Gurdwara Sahib in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji and all the speakers were honoured with robe of honour by the President of Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Sr Major Singh Toosa Ji. He said that such seminars are the need of the hours and Gurdwara Jagat Sudhar’s committee is always ready organizing such activities in future.

