

Vaisakhi in Los Angeles Mayors of Amritsar & LA pay Homage

California Sikhs Commemorate Centennial of Settlement in USA

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Incredible as it may seem, Sikhs from Greater Punjab began crossing the oceans to settle down in USA and Canada. With their unique faith, complete with turbans and distinctive beards, the Sikhs created an impact wherever they went.

The Sikh community of Southern California foregathered at The Los Angeles Convention Centre April (2008) to celebrate the festival of Vaisakhi. To honor this event and help commemorate the Sikh presence in Southern California, the Los Angeles City Mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa donned a turban and made a dramatic appearance at the event. He spoke to some 14,000 Sikhs to express his appreciation of the Sikh enterprising spirit.

“When I first put on a turban (during the Baisakhi celebration) so many years ago, I did it as a sign of great respect for the Sikh community,” he said. “Today we acknowledge..and celebrate the (Sikh) spiritual nation.”

The Mayor of Amritsar, Shwait Malik also attended the Baisakhi celebration in Los Angeles. Amritsar is one of the most important cities of the Sikhs. It is where the most sacred temple for the Sikhs, the Harimander Sahib (or Golden Temple) is located. Mayor Malik congratulated the Sikhs on their celebration, honored their presence in California for 100 years, and invited them to spend time in the city of Amritsar. Currently, Bakersfield, California and Amritsar, India are in collaboration to become Sister Cities.

Other dignitaries who attended the event and gave their greetings and warm wishes to the Sikh community included California State Assembly Member Mike Eng; California State Board of Equalization Chair Judy Chu; California State Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas; Los Angeles City Councilman Bernard C. Parks; Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky; and Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich.

The Vaisakhi celebration took place in a beautifully decorated hall of the convention center, with large cloth murals of forests and beautifully decorated stages. The decorations were done by Seva Kaur Khalsa. Kirtan, or Sikh sacred music, was played throughout the day by music groups from the Sikh community. Children’s music groups played as well as groups from all of the area Gurdwaras (Sikh Temples). The Kirtan program was highlighted by 5 music groups performing together.

Food was served continuously to the over 15,000 thousand participants. The day ended with a festive and colorful parade of highly decorated floats through Downtown Los

Angeles. There were close to 20 Sikh floats in the parade with the main theme being the “Mul Mantra” – which is a central teaching and tenet of the Sikh faith. The Sikh-themed floats, hand-made by members of the Sikh community, are a favorite tradition and help educate the Los Angeles community about the Sikh identity, as well.

In addition, Sikh Dharma International and the Sikh community of Southern California honored Sikh women who have been active in educating and sharing the Sikh identity. These women received the Mai Bhago Spirit of Baisakhi award during the program. Honorees this year were: Dr. Harjot Kaur Singh, a medical doctor and Sikh Canadian film producer who produced the movie *By the Guru’s Grace – Journey through the Sikh Experience* ; Inni Kaur Dhingra, VP of Spectrum Communications and a member of the editorial board of *Nishaan Magazine* who has chaired the Spinning Wheel Festival in New York City and also helped organize the Sikh art exhibit at the Rubin Museum in New York City last year, titled *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion*; Penny Yogiraj Sandhu, President and CEO of JusPunjabi 24 Hour American-Punjabi Channel; Valarie Kaur, Sikh American film director and writer who wrote and directed the movie *Divided We Fall – about Sikhs in the backlash aftermath of 9-11*; and Shanti Kaur Khalsa, Sikh writer and Chairwoman of the International Khalsa Council. Valarie Kaur could not attend the event, and the award was received in her name by Eric Santiestevan who composed the music for her film.

After receiving the award, Shanti Kaur Khalsa talked about the importance of Sikh women to the strength and success of the Sikh community. “It is the feminine energy that has the ability to endure and the ability to never give up,” she said.

Sikh Dharma International’s Bhai Sahiba Dr. Bibiji Inderjit Kaur and Siri Sikdar Sahiba S. Guru Amrit Kaur Khalsa addressed the gathering. Bhai Sahib Bibiji invited the community to attend the 300th anniversary celebrations of Siri Guru Granth Sahib in Hazoor Sahib this year. Sardarni Guru Amrit Kaur spoke to inspire the community to continue with the traditions given by the 10th Sikh Master Guru Gobind Singh. Vaisakhi commemorates the day in 1699 when the 10th Teacher, or Guru, of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh, created the magnificent Fellowship of Khalsa dedicated to serving all humanity in the Name of One Creator. It was on that day that the kesh and turban as well as other articles of faith became mandatory elements of the tradition.

For over 100 years, Sikhs have settled and prospered in California. Wherever they live, Sikhs make a positive contribution to the social, economic and spiritual life. Sikhs from California who have made note-worthy achievements in the last 30 years include: Dr. Narinder Singh Kapanay – considered to be the “Father of Fiber Optics”; Didar Singh Bains – largest peach farmer in the United States; Harbhajan Singh Samra – largest Okra farmer in the United States; Dr. H.S. Sahota – patented the Angioplasty process to help with heart disease; Joginder Singh Sidhu – Engineered the world’s smallest camera/twin lens reflex, member of the American Association on Advancement of Science; Siri Singh Sahib Bhai Sahib Harbhajan Singh Yogiji – Pioneered the teachings of Kundalini Yoga & Sikh Dharma in the Western Hemisphere.

Since the 1980s, the Sikhs in Los Angeles have worked together to host the premier Baisakhi celebration in the Western United States. This event is the result of a year-round working collaboration among over 20 Sikh Gurdwaras (Sikh Places of Worship) and centres in California, along with the support of Sikh leadership throughout the country. Sikh Dharma International organized the Kirtan Program in cooperation with all of Southern California Gurdwaras. Gurdip Singh Malik and volunteers from the Lankershim Gurdwara coordinated the Nagar Kirtan (Sikh parade) in conjunction with all the Gurdwaras in Southern California, as well. The sevadars who work on the programs year round include hall decorators Seva Kaur Khalsa, Dr. Hari Bhajan Singh Khalsa, and Jai Pal Singh Khalsa; Langar coordinators Dr. Manjit Singh and Hardeep Singh Viridi; Guru's Prashad coordinators Manjit Singh and Seva Simran Siri Kaur Khalsa; children's program coordinator Hari Kirn Kaur Khalsa; and Nagar Kirtan float designer Joginder Singh Sidhu. The Los Angeles Vaisakhi program is broadcast live via the Internet (www.sikhnet.com) with more than 2000 viewers to the world-wide Sikh community every year. It regularly draws over 10,000 - 15,000 attendees, as well as dignitaries and leadership from the United States and India.

