

Sikh Celebration at Royal Albert Hall

Notable performance by Dya Singh Group

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The Prince of Wales and over five thousand Sikhs from all over UK and abroad celebrated the 400th Anniversary of the first Parkaash of Aad Guru Granth Sahib Ji last autumn. The venue was the world famous Royal Albert Hall and the distinguished guests included religious leaders, senior politicians, scholars and community leaders. The celebration was organised by the Network of Sikh Organisations led by Dr Indarjit Singh, OBE and his wife Dr Kanwaljit Kaur. Besides the Chief Guest, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, other guests included Michael Howard MP, the Leader of the Opposition (Conservative Party), Simon Hughes MP (Liberal Democrats), The Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, Trevor Phillips, Chair Commission for Racial Equality and the Bishop of London Rt. Rev. Richard Chartres. There were many Sikh scholars and representatives of Gurdwaras. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair was unable to attend but sent a video recorded message. Dr I J Singh came especially from New York to deliver the keynote address and spoke about the major currents of Sikh Scripture. Clearly, Dr Indarjit Singh's "Thought for the day" on Radio 4 has won him many friends in the UK and abroad over many years.

Notable was the kirtan by Dya Singh of Australia's group. There were *shabads* by Simrat Kaur, a *geet* by Surjit Singh Pardesi, *sarangi/tabla* music by *sarangi* maestro Surjit Singh, a well prepared play by children of Guru Nanak Secondary School, Hayes (UK), *shabads* by children from Woolwich Gurdwara, Deshmesh Kirtani Jatha and a most impressive tabla display by Harkirat Singh's Chakardar Tabla Group. Despite being rushed due to late start of the programme by about 20 minutes, and some problems with the sound system, much talent was displayed on the stage. Indeed, those of us who arrived about 40 minutes early heard some excellent music during the sound checks. (The hurried changeover of sound systems and small reductions in time slots would have made some artistes uneasy during the actual programme. Some adverse comments on e-groups in this respect are understandable.)

Inter-faith harmony and acceptance of diversity were the main themes of the speeches. The Prince of Wales spoke highly of the Sikh tradition of tolerance and respect for other faiths. Clearly, he was speaking from personal knowledge of the Sikh faith and tradition. According to a prominent Sikh, S. Patwant Singh, the (apparently *ad lib*) speeches by Trevor Phillips and Simon Hughes were the most impressive amongst the "politicians". Simon Hughes remembered that this year also marked the 150th anniversary of the first Sikh "immigrant" to arrive in Britain, Maharaja Duleep Singh! Most probably he would have been briefed by someone like Harbinder Singh Rana of Maharaja Duleep Singh Centenary Trust, who was also present amongst the guests.

Dya Singh's first appearance was the 'Aad Granth Medley' of Gurbani lines selected thematically in-between the Mool Mantar. To quote the Sikh Times "The renowned Dya Singh from Australia stole the show. In his opening comments Dya Singh said, "A very warm and affectionate greeting to you from down under, Your Royal Highness. We know you love Australia". The Prince (sitting only a few feet away) leaned forward a little and acknowledged Dya Singh's greeting with a smile and a wave of his hand.

Royal Albert Hall reverberated to the sound of the Australian didgeridoo played by Quentin Eyres of Adelaide, while Keith Preston struck the strings of the santoor – a fantastic Aussie-Indian instrumental combination, which produced an electrifying atmosphere. The

Mool Mantar (Primal Mystical Formula) was recited by Dya Singh and Parvyn Kaur, his youngest and highly talented daughter. Interpretation by Keith Preston followed. Then followed the musical medley in which Gurbani based interfaith and human equality quotations alternated with English interpretation of the themes. Two examples follow (courtesy Dya Singh):

(Gurbani sung by Dya Singh and Parvyn Kaur: *Aval Allah noor upaya, Kudrat kay sabh bandhay.....* (SGGS p 1349)

Then Parvyn sang in her sweet crystal clear voice:

‘First of all, God created Light, and the Universe came to be formed in its entirety and everything within. And best of all, whether you’re black, or brown or white.

Whatever is your point of view. For sure the Lord created You and everything within.

So who’s to say who is bad and who is good

We’ve all been made just the way we should

The very fact that you are here, is proof.

We’re all a part of God’s eternal Truth.

We’re all a part of God’s eternal everlasting Truth.’

Chorus by the Group: **If you do not see God in all; you do not see God at all !**

(The same wording was also displayed writ large by young Sikhs at Trafalgar Square

on a Sunday, when they successfully stopped the *Al Muhajiroun*’s bigoted rally specifically targeting Sikhs and Hindus in the UK.)

(Dya Singh and Parvyn: *Tis bhaae tan karay bisthaar. Tis bhavae tan Ekangkar.....* (SGGS p.294)

And Parvyn sang in a most melodious western style:

‘When it pleases the Lord, he creates the universe

When it pleases Him, he is the One and Only

First he created Light, From Light He created all creation

Within Creation he created Human life

The creator is One. The clay he uses to fashion human beings is the same.

Then why should we discriminate between each other?’

Parvyn scored highly with the multifaith audience.

Dya Singh started his second session with a loud “Degh Tegh Fateh” with a resounding response from the audience. The theme was ‘Game of Love’ which culminated with five “jaikaras”. There was thunderous applause as each of the artistes performed solo instrumentals in between and after the jaikaras! The multi-instrumentalists Quentin Evers and Keith Preston, and Dheeraj Shrestha, the Nepalese percussionist and tabla maestro par excellence, drew repeated applause. Tabla performance by Dheeraj was incredible as his hands flew over a number of different sized Nepalese drums to produce multiple sounds. Did the applause (hand clapping western style) bother anyone? Apparently not at the time! However, one cannot rule out afterthoughts by “dharmic” vigilantes. Perhaps they should be more concerned with ritual ridden Gurdwaras in the hands of heritage destroying Sikh sants and giani/granthi “prohatwaad”, and election fighting “*prabandhaks*”.

Conclusion: Once again, the Network of Sikh Organisations supported by some Gurdwaras has celebrated a major Sikh event in grand style with maximum impact of the Sikh theo-political identity. Yet, the author of this article recalls with sadness that many leading UK Sikh organisations representing Sikh grassroots, and many leading Sikh personalities were not there. Also, most regrettably, while this high profile function was

going on, that same evening, a number of prominent Sikhs suffered physical injuries inflicted by fellow Sikhs outside the main Gurdwara in the UK, Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Southall (about £16 million has been spent on this “biggest Gurdwara outside Panjab” but with hardly any facilities for young Sikhs).

There is much talent in the Sikh diaspora exemplified by media experts like Dr Indarjit Singh OBE and others; writers like Dr I J Singh and Gurbani sangeetkars like Dya Singh of Australia, but the Gurdwaras and Sikh institutions are not, as yet, organised to exploit such talent. May Waheguru grant us the “*sumatt*” to unite through the Guru Granth/Guru Panth tradition, as did the Misls of the 18th Century.

