

An Overview of Sikhs in California: Abiding faith and dedication mark their lives

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There are about half a million Sikhs in the United States of America out of over two million Indians in a country of three hundred million people. The Indo-American community in the high-tech Silicon Valley is nearly 150,000 strong. Their contribution, including that of Sikhs, to the technology pre-eminence is well-known. The Sikhs number more than 50,000 in the Bay Area of California.

The Sikhs have been in America since the early part of the last century. They surfaced in California in 1896 AD. Being industrious, they have made a success of their jobs in various fields from farming to technology. They have distinguished themselves in various professions as academics, scientists, doctors, hotel owners and software engineers. Through hard work, perseverance and honesty, the Sikhs have made a life for themselves and their families, wherever they have gone to make their home outside of India, their country of origin. Today, the Sikhs embrace the entire world, with a vibrant presence of 25 million. The Sikh religion stands as the fifth largest faith group.

India's Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, is a genuine Sikh sporting the emblems of Sikh faith. His focus is on peace and economic globalisation.

'Sikh' means a disciple, and Sikhs are followers of Guru Nanak, the founding Prophet of the Sikh religion and nine successive gurus (spiritual prophets) who came after him. The equality and prosperity of the whole human race is the cornerstone of the Sikh faith. A large number of impressive gurdwaras (Sikh shrines) spread all over the world speaks of their overwhelming munificence. The Sikhs are enjoined upon to donate *daswand*, a tenth of their earnings for charitable causes. The charities receive their liberal contributions. A large-hearted community, their hospitality is a byword.

About half a dozen gurdwaras dot the skyline of California. The city of Fremont has a prominent gurdwara, "Gurdwara Sahib, Fremont." San Jose, the capital of Silicon Valley, the tenth largest liveable American city, has an imposing recently constructed "Sikh Gurdwara – San Jose." Built atop a rocky cliff, the gurdwara has a serene ambience with a burst of greenery and fountains overlooking the picturesque landscape of San Jose.

Nestled at San Jose foothills, the gurdwara is spread over 40 acres of sprawling land. It bristles under the sparkling sunshine. It's high *Nishan Sahib* (symbol) fluttering the saffron Sikh flag, attracts attention from afar of the majestic presence of the Sikh shrine.

The first phase of construction cost over ten million dollars. The Gurdwara Committee expects to invest another \$10 million in Phase II. The Sikh sangat has generously contributed to the building of the shrine. It fulfils the need of the rapidly growing South Bay Sikh community. Every Sunday morning and on celebrated days like *gurpurabs*, birthdays of their gurus (spiritual prophets), the Sikhs date-line for religious meet and socialising is the gurdwara, the Sikh Shrine. It's their house of worship. They gather together with families and friends to pay obeisance to the holy Sikh Scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, participate in the *Shabd Kirtan* (singing of divine hymns), offer *Ardas* (congregational prayer) and partake in the *langar* (free community meal) served to one and all. *Karah Prasad* (a pudding of ghee and wheat flour) is also served.

Significantly, *Ardas* is an earnest prayer for the good of all humanity. It ends with the supplication, "*Nanak Naam Chardikalla, Tere Bhane Sarbat da Bhalla*" meaning, "O'God! May the glory of thy Name, through the optimistic philosophy of Guru Nanak(founder of the

Sikh Faith) prevail, bestowing prosperity on the whole world!" It's no wonder the Sikhs are ever in *Chardikalla* (high spirits)!

Every morning and evening, the gurdwaras resonate with the recitation from the holy Granth and *kirtan* (hymn singing). The devotees throng the shrine at both times. Everyone is welcome. The visitor receives both blessings and hospitality. Free board and lodging is offered to weary travellers. Indeed the gurdwara is practically a meeting place for the Sikhs of all walks of life, who come not only for religious ceremonies, but also for social companionship. They may not see each other very often, but do meet here, especially on Sundays and celebrated occasions such as *Gurpurabs*.

The love of one God, who is the father of all creation and of all mankind, is the essence of Sikhism, which brought all people together whatever their religion. Guru Nanak showed a practical way to live in peace and religious harmony. "All are equal in the eye of God," preached Nanak. His prophetic vision of a rational spiritualism with universal appeal for unity of minds and respect for all faiths, offer the world hope of living in peace and religious harmony.

Universal love and brotherhood is exactly what the world needs today, to combat the upsurge of terrorism and religious fundamentalism.

