

Gurpurab at Los Angeles honours Balbir Singh Sodhi

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On December 25th 2001 the Sikh community of Southern California, under the auspices of the International Institute of Gurmat Studies, celebrated the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the Tenth Master of the Sikhs. This institute has held the annual function on Dec. 25th, every year, at the campus of Mount San Antonio College in Walnut, California. The function is always arranged on a grand scale under the banner of *Darbar-E-Khalsa*.

Celebration: Usually more than four to five thousand people attend this function, making it perhaps the biggest religious gathering of the Sikhs in America. Surprisingly, last year brought the maximum number of people. One estimate gave the total number of those who attended this function in excess of eight thousands mark. During the day-long program that started at 7 am, singing religious hymns by different *Ragis* continued indoors, while a *Mela* in the form of a beautiful *bazaar* was set up by various vendors selling everything connected with Sikhism, books, pictures, boutiques and anything in between. Free sumptuous *langar* of hot bread & tea was served to the arriving *sangat* at the door, and then hot lunch was served free throughout the day, prepared by the volunteers, and served in plenty. At the end of the program, the entire congregation walked for about a block in the form of *Nagar Kirtan* behind Guru Granth Sahib Ji that finally led to a royal send off to Guru Granth Sahib Ji in a helicopter, under the showers of flower petals.

Recognition: During the middle of the program many Sikh institutions and prominent individuals who performed outstanding work throughout the year, in relation to Sikh Cause, were recognised for their work and honoured with various awards. One young Sikh entrepreneur, Dr. Chiranjeev Singh Kathuria, an MD from Brown University and MBA from Stanford, was recognised for earning his name in space-technology, and for being a CEO of a successful space tech firm that sent a civilian to the space recently. Mr. Saran Singh, IAS (retired) editor of *The Sikh Review*, a prestigious philosophical journal and educator, specially invited for this event, was honoured for his devotion and longtime service to the Sikh cause.

Martyr to cause of Liberty: The family of Sr. Balbir Singh Sodhi, and other members of Sikh community from Phoenix, had been invited from Arizona specially so that they could be honoured by the large Sikh community. It may be recalled that Balbir Singh was the one who lost his life in Mesa, Arizona on September 15th 2001, in a mistaken identity in retaliation of the horrible crimes of September 11th. About twenty eight members of his extended family, who arrived from Phoenix for this honour, were all asked to come on to the stage, and were introduced to the *sangat* by Dr. Jaswant Singh Sachdev from Phoenix. They were honoured with a beautiful plaque and a medal significantly named after Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib, the ninth Guru of the Sikhs who laid his life to protect the Kashmiri Hindus being forcibly converted to Islam, in seventeenth century India, by the then Moghul king Aurangzeb.

Talking about S. Balbir Singh, Dr. Sachdev informed the congregation of the tragedy as transpired on that fateful day of his killing. The audience was stunned to learn about the benevolent personality of Balbir Singh that shone through such actions like donations (the 75 dollars, he had on his person) to the charity established by Costco Club, a couple of days before his death, towards the benefit of the victims of the September 11. They admired his constant desire of sharing his blessings, in accordance with Sikh philosophy, and many acts of charity - distributing candies freely to the children who came to his store accompanied by parents. The goodwill generated amongst the neighbourhood in a short span of some ten months of business that he ran, was also recounted. His concern about the danger impending the Sikh community that he expressed to the elders of Sikh Gurudwara, after September 11 tragedy, about which he had premonition, was also shared with the *sangat*.

Identity & Heritage: Dr. Sachdev, through his evocative speech, again made the Sikh community aware about the danger of continuous internal weaknesses that has been insidiously creeping amongst the Sikhs in the Western countries, namely, the weakness of not maintaining *Sabat Surat*, the most important physical symbol of Sikh faith as prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. Consequently, there has been an exponential loss of the Sikh identity over a short period of time. He explained that almost 90% of immigrant Sikhs, as soon as they landed in Western countries, got rid of turbans and beards - for what they call "practical reasons." If all the immigrant Sikhs from India had kept their original form, by now, Sikhs would have been visible in each and every corner of America, and not only those so called "practical reasons" would have dissipated, but such a tragic mistake that took the life of S. Balbir Singh would not have occurred. Obviously, this inspired path is laden with obstacles and requires personal discipline, internal strength and courage. At times great hardship is caused to maintain Sikh identity and sometimes a continuous campaign, or struggle, has to be waged against ignorance, and hate has to be fought. Dr. Sachdev also mentioned that Sikhs who do not maintain the prescribed form, sooner or later will also end up getting involved in this struggle whether they like it or not. Today, it is beard and turban, tomorrow it will be skin color, facial features and the accent. The struggle against hate and ignorance have to be fought by the spread of knowledge and education through a united front by each and everyone of us.

Activism: He went on to describe the efforts and steps that the Sikh community of Phoenix has made since this incident. The Sikh awareness task force, a group of dedicated Sikh volunteers, in conjunction with Gurudwara Sahib Guru Nanak Dwara, has been instrumental in spreading the word about Sikh identity through various news media. He outlined different events and activities in which Sikhs, either as individuals or in groups, have been meeting with the local leaders and are taking part in various public activities. Much more needs to be done. He clearly warned the audience that Sikhs were now at crossroads and unless every Sikh takes upon him or herself to take the initiative of informing the society about appearance and faith, their future will become perilous. Nobody - including Sikh leaders in India - will be of any help to them. On the contrary, Sikh leadership in India had - regrettably - proven in the past to be ridden with factionalism, egotism, internal bickering and ego.

Educate the host community: As to the methods of education, Dr. Sachdev gave many suggestions to the audience, like visiting different schools for informing children of all ages about Sikhism, serving poor people with free food on regular basis in consonance with our

faith, informing various precincts of police department and other law enforcement agencies, as well as different units of fire department, about our identity and to provide more knowledge about our culture and basic faith. He encouraged each and every Sikh to use any opportunity that comes his or her way to talk about Sikh faith. This will certainly go a long way to spread the word about the Sikh faith and their unique identity. He stated that while it may or may not be important to build more religious places, the problem could not be solved unless assertive, pro-active and well-planned strategies of information about the uniqueness of Sikh identity is put in place. This should be done in a sophisticated way by the second generation Sikhs who are seemingly more intimate with American culture than their parents. He hoped that, by these efforts, one day Sikhs will again feel comfortable in their life style without worrying about their safety and will start feeling at home in their chosen homeland. Certainly, it will require significant amount of courage and efforts on their part.

Finally, Dr. Sachdev thanked the entire *Sangat* of Souther California for inviting members of Balbir Singh's family from Phoenix and for the great honour that was bestowed upon him. Balbir Singh will not come back, but this honour will give his family the strength to bear its loss more gracefully, especially when it realizes that such a large number of their community members stand ready to help at this hour of need. May Almighty help the entire Sikh community, here and in other western world, in their pursuit for justice, peace and happiness!