

Sikhs of New York: A Pathbreaking visit to Albany

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A LANDMARK Bill SEEKING TO protect the rights of Sikh-Americans to wear turbans and sport beards as part of their chosen religious identity was introduced in the State Legislature of the State of New York last spring. Sponsored by the Hon'ble Thomas DiNapoli, Hon'ble Donna Ferrara and Hon'ble Brian McLaughlin, the bill was initially introduced into the State Assembly on March 15, 2003. Members of S.O.N.Y had been working for several months with prominent State officials and other community organizations to draft this bill.

The Sikh Organization of New York took a delegation of about sixty prominent members of Sikh community, led by Mr. T.J. Singh Bindra (President of S.O.N.Y) from across the new York Tri-state area, to the State Capitol at Albany, last April, where they were cordially met and hosted by members of the State Legislative Assembly. **This is the first time that a delegation of Sikh-Americans was received and honored in the Chamber of the New York State Assembly.**

Precedents continued to be set throughout the day, beginning with an invocation by a Sikh priest, Giani Jagtar Singh of Glen Cove. A hushed Chamber listened intently as Gianiji invoked the Lord's blessings for the Sikh New year, the Vaisakhi festival. Subsequently, the Sikh delegation and the new legislation were greeted by members of the House by Thomas DiNapoli, Donna Ferrara, Mr Brian McLaughlin and Anthony Semineio, - all members of the State Assembly.

In continuation of the day's historic proceedings, the New York State Legislative Assembly accorded special recognition to those whose efforts has made this event possible, notably: to S.O.N.Y's office bearers led by T.J. Singh Bindra (President) and Mohinder Singh Taneja (Secretary). The Legislature gave special recognition to Hon'ble P. Rath, Consul General of India, and Dr. Arvind Pal Singh Mandair, Chair of Sikh Studies of Hofstra University. Leaders of Sikh Gurdwaras in Queens, like Mr. Harpareet Singh Toor, Mr. Raghbir Singh, Master Mohinder Singh, Mr. Gurbhej Singh Sandhu and Mrs. Uma Sengupta were also recognized.

In the afternoon session, the Sikh-American delegation met with the New York State Governor George Pataki, speaker of the Assembly Sheldon Silver, Senate majority leader Joe Bruno and with other leading dignataries. The final event of the day was a reception hosted by the Sikh Organization of New York to celebrate the Sikh New Year or Vaisakhi festival. The reception was well attended by the state officials and members of the Sikh community. Mr. Mohinder Taneja, General Secretary of S.O.N.Y. welcomed everyone to the evening's reception. The audience listened to memorable and stirring speeches by state officials and community leaders alike.

Of significance was the speech by India's Consul General, Mr. P.V. Rath, who spoke generously of the unique contribution of Sikhs to India's independence struggle and in establishing the foundation of India's current prosperity. Mr. T.J. Bindra, President of S.O.N.Y. thanked the members of the State Legislature for the honor the Legislature bestowed on the Sikh-American community and the Legislation which was introduced. He reminded the audience of ongoing danger

faced by Sikhs due to the mistaken perceptions about Sikh appearance in the aftermath of 9/11. He then thanked the three friends of the Sikh-American community, who sponsored the Legislation and made this day possible.

Legislative Resolution paying tribute to the Sikh community of the State of New York upon the occasion of the celebration of the Vaisakhi

WHEREAS, It is with great admiration and deepest respect that this Assembled Body is moved to pay tribute to the Sikh community of the State of New York upon the occasion of the celebration of the Vaisakhi; and

WHEREAS, The Vaisakhi is considered a New Year's Day and the most important and most popular Sikh festival; it is always greeted with much preparation and much celebration; and

WHEREAS, The Vaisakhi falls on the 13th or 14th April each year; and

WHEREAS, The Vaisakhi is also the collective birthday of the Sikhs known as the Khalsa or the Sikh brotherhood and

WHEREAS, It was on this day in 1699 that the tenth and last Guru of Sikhs called a large assembly of followers and baptized the Five Chosen Ones who had come forward to sacrifice their lives; and

WHEREAS, The Vaisakhi is also a harvest festival in Punjab, the birthplace of the Sikhs and bread-basket of India; and

WHEREAS, The Vaisakhi is the harbinger of the Spring Season and marks the ripening of the wheat crop; and

WHEREAS, It is celebrated with great gutso and colorful celebrations and folk music and dancing throughout Punjab; and

WHEREAS, Recognizing the significance of their contributions to the State of New York, this Assembled Body is proud to honor all of New York's citizens of the Sikh religion, joining them in welcoming the Vaisakhi; now therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That is Assembled Body pause in its deliberations to commemorate the auspicious occasion of the celebration of the Vaisakhi; and be it further

RESOLVED, that copies of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to distinguished members of the Sikh community. □