

Dhaka Gurdwara gets Sikh History Research Centre

There is virtually no Sikh population in Dhaka, Bangladesh, yet a Sikh History Research Centre has been established in the complex of Gurdwara Nanak Shahi by Sampradaya Karsewa, Sarhali (Punjab) for the research and propagation of Sikhism. Kazi Nurul Islam, Founder Chairman of the Department of World Religions, has been appointed as its honorary director.

“Our aim is to build a bridge between Sikhism and other religions so that everyone can know about the distinct identity of a Sikh, their rituals, way of life, etc.,” said Sukha Singh, chief of Sampardaya, while talking to TOI. He returned to India after the inauguration of Sikh Research Centre by Mukta D Tomar, deputy high commissioner of the Indian High Commission in Bangladesh, and Arefin Siddique, vice-chancellor of Dhaka University.

Sukha Singh stated that there was a strong desire among Bangla Muslim students to study Sikhism. Presently 42 students were studying it, he said, adding that they were also planning to arrange a tour of religious places in Indian for these students.

He further said there were many Hindu and Muslim followers of Sikhism who regularly hold religious functions at the Gurdwara. Every Friday, more than 500 Hindus and a few Muslims gather at the Gurdwara to hold religious prayers, followed by langar, he averred.

The Sampardaya has also made a large langar hall in the Gurdwara besides a sarai having seven rooms. The *kar sewa* being carried out with financial help from followers of Sampardaya spread across the world, he added. It has now begun ‘*kar sewa*’ of Gurdwara Punjabi Lane in Chittagong, about 250 km from Dhaka, he stated.

[Courtesy: *The Times of India*]

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Sikh woman named ‘Afghan of the year’

I was greeted with “Sat Sri Akal Ji” *Tussan da ki haal hai*,” chirps the enthusiastic voice on the phone from Kabul. And for good measure, she adds, “*Ram Ram ji, te Assallam Waleikum.*”

Although her name doesn’t immediately reveal her Sikh heritage and her Punjabi and Hindi are halting, Anarkali Honaryar Kaur is fast becoming a household name in Kabul.

A dentist by profession and social activist by choice, this gutsy girl was recently named ‘Afghanistan’s Person of the Year’ for 2009 by Radio Free Afghanistan, for her struggle to uphold rights of women and religious minorities, at age 25!

The daughter of an engineer, Kishan Singh Honaryar, and homemaker, Sharan Kaur, Anarkali is one of four siblings who grew up in the Baghlan province of Afghanistan.

Now living in Kabul and working for the International Council for Human Rights (ICHR), she talks of maintaining her Sikh identity and helping other minorities preserve theirs too. “**There are five gurdwaras in Kabul.** I try to go to one every Friday, sometimes on Sunday, too. The *mandir* is open on Tuesdays, and it’s nice we’re able to keep traditions alive.”

She travelled to India once for a human rights conference, but only stayed in Delhi at the time. “I have been to Germany, Italy, Sri Lanka, Qatar and India for conferences, **but it’s my heartfelt wish to visit the Golden Temple one day,**” she says. “My mother and

brothers have already been there. I don't have any family in Punjab, but do have four *maasis* (aunts) in Delhi."

Anarkali describes her early years as difficult, maybe an understatement given the state of social and political upheaval in Afghanistan. But the saving grace for her family was that the Taliban never truly took over their province.

"I'm lucky I continued to go to school at a time when most girls weren't even allowed out of their houses," she says.

Amazingly, she finished high school at 12, and moved to Kabul to study at the university. But she quickly accepted she would never realise her childhood dream of becoming a pilot in the conservative country and set her sights elsewhere.

"I decided to become a doctor, and along the way, I began helping other women around me. Women face so many problems in our country - domestic violence, forced marriage, abuse.

"I try to meditate in many cases and help resolve issues within the family, especially if children are involved too. But if there is no hope of reconciliation, then we help women with legal representation."

Anarkali frequently appears on TV and radio, advocating women's rights. Ask her of any marriage plans and she laughs. "I deal with so many problems married women face, *tauba*. I don't think I ever want to get married!"

Anarkali also campaigns for the rights of religious minorities. "Sadly, there are only 3,000 Hindu and Sikh families left in all of Afghanistan today, she says. "The security situation here isn't great, but we just don't feel like leaving this beautiful country we call home."

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Sikhs provide milk for Italy's 'Parmesan' cheese!

Far away from the lassi kingdom of Punjab, Indian Sikhs are doing 'Chak de Phatte' in the province of parmesan. **In Italy's central Emilia-Romagna region, home to the famous cheese, cattlesheds that produce milk for parmesan are managed by Indians, mainly from the 30,000-strong Sikh community.** So the joke goes among Italian parmesan makers: "If Sikh workers go on strike, Italy won't produce *parmesan*."

Not a chance, their admirers retort, "**Sikhs are good, honest guys. They work really hard without complaining,**" says a policeman based in Reggio Emilia, a wealthy city in Emilia-Romagna, declining to be named since he is not allowed to speak to the media. "They don't drink, don't quarrel. It's as if they don't exist."

With its abundance of water and its endless fields, gardens, farms and cattlesheds, Emilia-Romagna is, in a sense, the 'Punjab of Italy'. And it is famous for its gastronomic specialities, strong socialist sympathies and racing cars - it is home to legends like the Ferrari, Maserati, Lamborghini and Ducati. "I've been in Italy since 1992. I work very hard, but it's good here," said a 40-year-old man from Punjab's Sangrur town, adding, "I'm well-paid and, on Sundays, I watch football on TV."

Alongside football, faith is alive, too. A nearby town has the second-biggest gurdwara of Europe, Gurdwara Singh Sabha, opened in 2000 in the presence of Romano Prodi, the

President of the European Union and Emilia-Romagna's parks often have Sikh children playing cricket, a little-known sport in Italy.

But young Italians don't want to sweat it out in the farms and dairies. "Milking cows?" says a young woman in Italian. "No man, it's a job for immigrants."

[Courtesy: *Hindustan Times*]