

What a Lovely Heritage

The Conference with its timely theme of "Taking Heritage into the 21st Century" accomplished much beyond merely a celebration of Sikh traditions

Kanwal Prakash Singh
WASHINGTON

There were reminders of respectful conduct towards all fellow Americans; our individual and collective responsibility and moral accountability to the Republic; a sense of shared humanity and intertwined destiny as one nation as enshrined and anchored in the emblazoned American Motto: "Out of many one."

The two-day National Sikh Conference (June 18-19, 2009), sponsored by The Kaur Foundation of Washington, D.C. in collaboration with The U.S. Library of Congress Asian Division and The Asian Division Friends Society was a shining example of the Sikh American community coming of age. Many came away with the distinct feeling of appreciation and confidence that the Sikhs in diaspora are at an unimagined and exciting new crossroads. The historic event took place at the magnificent and ornate Jefferson Building and James Madison Memorial Building near the U.S. Capitol.

The Conference with its timely theme of "Taking Heritage into the 21st Century" accomplished much beyond a "Celebration of Sikh Traditions, Heritage, and Arts." It included the Sikh Collection Initiative: a permanent installation of over 87 books on Sikh history, literature and the arts, scriptures and classics in English and Punjabi in the Library of Congress. The powerful presentations and panel discussions inspired new imaginative and creative thoughts as to how we can preserve and present the Sikh heritage to America and the world; secure a rightful place and advance our talents, dreams, and legitimate concerns as Americans; and develop networking and collaborations for our shared interests. Successful men and women of exemplary discipline and passion, contributing and excelling in various fields and international endeavors who are serving humanity in unique and significant ways were introduced in panel discussions.

A sumptuous Indian Dinner surrounded by an exhibit of Sikh pioneers and iconic figures in the richly-embellished halls of the historic Thomas Jefferson Building was a delicious touch.

Among those who addressed were Honorable Senator Ben Cardin (D-Maryland); Honorable Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana); Honorable Congressman Mike Honda (D-California) and Honorable Congressman Chris Van Hollen (D-Maryland). Special messages for the occasion were received from James Billington, The Librarian of Congress; Peter Young, Chief, Asian Division and Mr. Adrian M. Fenty,



Mayor, District of Columbia.

The "Sikh Heritage Week Recognition Resolution of 2009" by the Council of District of Columbia, biographies of the honored guests, major participants and presenters, list of sponsors, and other details of the National Sikh Conference adorned the pages of an exquisitely printed Program.

Among those who attended were Navtej Sarna, India's Ambassador to Israel; Kojo Nnamdi, radio personality and commentator; Dr. Paul Taylor, Smithsonian Institution, organizer of

The Sikh Heritage Gallery at the Museum of Natural History; Pushpinder Singh, Executive Editor, The Nishaan Magazine; Dr. Kenneth Robbins, Board of Directors, Asian Division Friends Society; Ms. Arpana Kaur, internationally renowned artist, author and activist; The Singh Twins - Amrit & Rabindra, artists of international standing, authors and filmmakers; celebrated authors Patwant Singh and Jyoti Rai; F.S. Aijazuddin, author of Sikh Portraits in the Lahore Fort and Sikh & Pahari Miniature Paintings, Principal Aitchison College Lahore;

Ms. Susan Stronge, author, senior Curator V&A Museum; Christy Campbell, author and journalist; Jagdeep Singh, CEO Infinera; Daya Singh, CEO Akal Security; Dr. Kanwarjit Singh, Gates Foundation; Ranjit Singh, Deloitte; Dr. Gurinder Singh Mann, Chair Sikh Studies, University of California(SB); author Ajeet Cour; Sonny Caberwal, model, entrepreneur and attorney; Ms. Arpinder Kaur, airline pilot, American Airline Eagle; Ms. Valerie Kaur, writer, film maker; Architect Jasmit Singh Rangr; Bicky Singh, CEO FCSI and

founder of Sikhpoint; and other dignitaries, friends and supporters of the The Kaur Foundation engaged in various disciplines and fields from around the USA and abroad attended the National Sikh Conference.

Internationally-renowned and celebrated Sikh artists: Arpana Kaur and the Singh twins, Rabindra and Amrit led us through the creative processes in their paintings that capture people, events, and iconic images in their unique styles. The Singh Twins' work reflects pride in heritage, the Indian and Sikh identity, universal outlook of

Sikhism, and they focus on cultural identity that unites, not divides. In their choice of images and details, they get intimately and intricately involved with the world around them. Arpana Kaur's artwork is inspired by the Indian miniatures, folkart, murals, wall paintings; her artwork and inspirations are anchored in her Sikh faith. Arpana Kaur's series of paintings, inspired by her being an eyewitness, on the genocide of innocent Sikhs in New Delhi in November 1984 was especially moving and brought home the inhumanity and horrific events of the time. The Singh

twins' artworks inspired by Moghul-miniature style of paintings reveal their creative genius and interpretive skills in colorful presentation full of pleasant surprises, and elements of Indian motif and their cultural roots. Their masterpiece on the Indian army's assault at The Golden Temple, the holiest shrine of Sikh faith, in June 1984 that was featured in "The Sikh Heritage Gallery: The Legacy of the Punjab" at The Smithsonian, leaves you with a lasting sense of anguish and prayer that such sad events must never intrude the human spirit.

There were reminders of respectful conduct towards all fellow Americans; our individual and collective responsibility and moral accountability to the Republic; a sense of shared humanity and intertwined destiny as one nation as enshrined and anchored in the emblazoned American Motto: "Out of many one." Valerie Kaur, a third generation Sikh American, a writer and filmmaker who created the documentary, "Divided We Fall," reminded the audience to maintaining Sikh identity, image of pride; learning from the Jewish community; seeing our endeavors as seva; film making, story-telling, fighting stereotypes, overcoming generational divides, breaking the glass ceiling, glass walls... Give us the trust and we will fly." Valerie added, "Fearlessness, the Sikh traditions of saint and soldier, stories of faith, culture, and community; our ancestors and pioneers need to be told."



Our history and heritage: the arts, architectural landmarks, priceless cultural and spiritual legacy are important elements of our humanity. They offer reflections of the human soul, creativity, and imagination. The cultural and

literary treasures, rare artifacts, surviving priceless records and heritage are our connection to the generations past and highlight significant markers of the human journey and creativity of a community through the ages. The artifacts of the Sikh heritage take on additional importance and an aura of "sanctity" when they are associated with persons, events, and innovations that transformed human history and our civilization. This heritage is not just bricks, mortar, papers and texts; it enshrines the inspiration, wisdom, energy, and foundations of who Sikhs are and where faith-inspired greatness may lead the Sikhs.

One of the primary goals must be to inspire pride within the Sikh American community. Sikhs must interface and enter in faith with other faith and ethnic communities; build partnerships and network with local organizations and national institutions and engage the leadership at the highest level about our legitimate concerns. Sikhs must support and showcase talents, encourage the best and brightest who bring honor to the immigrant communities and the nation. Sikhs must recognize the new frontiers of time, technology, events, and global interdependence. Sikhs should, in the spirit of gratitude, inspired by faith Commandments and lessons from a proud history, fairly and fiercely compete and excel in the unimagined "Hola Mohallas" of our times; make our Gurus and others who provide new opportunities, proud of our time and place in this journey.

The Council of the District of Columbia passed a special resolution declaring June 15-21, 2009 as Sikh Heritage Week in the District that includes the national capital, Washington, D.C.

To secure a rightful place for our sacred rights and culture, Sikhs must embrace American values, enrich the culture and spirit in imaginative ways, and continue to affirm that Sikhs are proud of such involvements in the lands that are their new homes. While preserving and honoring our sacred traditions and values, Sikhs must exhibit openness to growth, step out of the ethnic and cultural box into the sunshine of "One Nation under God, Indivisible with Liberty and Justice for all."

The Sikh Collection Initiative and Conference at the Library of Congress and the prospect of more future collaborations at the Library and elsewhere was a landmark moment for the Sikh American community. In time, this can and should lead to myriad possibilities for incorporating outstanding achievements and Sikh culture as an integral part of American heritage. Mirin Kaur; Inni Kaur; Peter Young, Pushpinder Singh, Senators Lugar and Cardin, Congressmen Honda and Van Hollen, Dr. Paul Taylor; Bicky Singh, Valerie Kaur, the Singh twins, Sikh CEOs, educators, pioneer trailblazers, community activists and others have shown the way, and now it is up to Sikhs and friends to take the message and inspiration to new levels.

A reception at the Indian Embassy in Washington and warm welcome by the Indian Ambassador, H.E. Meera Shanker was a fitting close to the 2009 National Sikh Conference.

The Library of Congress is a vast trove of human knowledge and a center of intercultural awareness and understanding. Sikhism is the world's fifth largest religion, and Sikh culture is synonymous with 'the Punjab,' that area of India known as the melting pot. The Punjab reflects the confluence of Islamic, Sufi, and Hindu traditions, and the Library is proud to add materials to its collections reflecting the art and culture of the Sikhs and this area of the world.

— James H. Billington, The Librarian of Congress



Sikhs must recognize the new frontiers of time, technology, events, and global interdependence. Sikhs should, in the spirit of gratitude, inspired by faith Commandments and lessons from a proud history, fairly and fiercely compete and excel in the unimagined "Hola Mohallas" of our times, proud of our time and place in this journey.

Sikh Collection Initiative: our aim is to introduce this project through a presentation of lectures, manuscripts, books and art; all very valuable materials in studying and understand historical events, periods, and movements of any community.

—The Kaur Foundation

Sikh-Americans have significantly contributed to every field of human endeavor, from technology, commerce, health, science, agriculture, to the arts, further enriching the cultural fabric of this land of immigrants."

—Mirin Kaur, Founder and President Kaur Foundation

Partnering with this oldest Federal, cultural institution in the Nation's capital, The Kaur Foundation has taken a significant step toward building and preserving the Sikh legacy in their new homeland."

— Congressman Mike Honda (D-California)

Researchers coming to the library could not see (until now) what Gurumukhi looks like... (What) if some wanted to research on the language of religion?"

—Inni Kaur, founding member Kaur Foundation, who helped to coordinate the collection

Ending hate crimes (against any individual or group because of their ethnicity, faith or life style) in America should be a national priority. Tolerance is not good enough; we must develop a culture of respect. When anyone is diminished, it diminishes our entire community; stand up for what is right

— Senator Ben Cardin (D-Maryland)

Sikh faith was conceived in the crucible of adversity" and offers us incredible testimony of courage, sacrifices and service to humanity.

— Pushpinder Singh, Executive Editor of Nishaan Magazine

Guru Nanak's Sword of Knowledge, Sword of Humility, Sword of Seva, and Guru Gobind Singh's Sword of Saint-Soldier. Sikhs see no stranger as commanded by their faith; Sikhs have sought out other people; Sikhs have championed values of equality, justice, and human dignity, consistent with American values."

— Dr. Kenneth Robbins