

The Babas At the Castle

Sikh environmentalists join world leaders at Windsor Castle

Sikh environmentalists Sant Sewa Singh of Khadur Sahib fame and Baba Balbir Singh Seechewal were among 200 representatives of all major faiths of the world who gathered at Windsor Castle, near London, for a three-day conference that concluded last Wednesday.

The meet was aimed at sensitising the world's political leaders regarding the need to put climate change on top of the global agenda.

UN Secretary General Ban ki Moon called upon the world leaders to take notice of what the religious leaders had to say regarding climate change. "The world's religions have a crucial role to play in the global fight against climate change," he said, characterizing the battle against global warming as a "moral" cause.

The UN secretary-general urged religious leaders to "set an example for the lifestyle of billions" by establishing green places of worship, purchasing environmentally friendly goods and investing ethically in sustainable products.

Leaders from nine major faiths met in this exceptional initiative to harness the power of religion in the fight against climate change. The ecumenical gathering at the home of Queen Elizabeth II, 35 kilometers west of London, was co-staged by the United Nations and Prince Philip's Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC).

Leaders from China, Ghana, India, Japan, Indonesia, US and Tanzania attended the conference organized by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

The gathering came just weeks before world leaders are due to adopt plans to counter global warming at a major UN summit in Copenhagen in December. Dr Rajwant Singh, chairman of the Sikh Council on Religion and Education, which has drafted an EcoSikh plan, said: "It is vital we present to the world the wisdom of the Gurus to tackle this crisis facing the world."

Towards this end, two Sikh "eco warriors" were introduced to the audience — Baba Sewa Singh, who has planted over a lakh trees in three states of India, and Baba Balbir Singh Seechewal, who led a campaign to clean up the 162-km Kali Bein, a rivulet associated with Guru Nanak.

At the conference, Baba Sewa Singh said: "This challenging issue of global warming can be handled by changing individual behaviour and adopting a simpler

Priyaleen K. Renuka

style of living."

Baba Seechewal told the audience he drew inspiration from Guru Nanak in his work for the environment. "We must treat the earth as our mother, as professed by Guru Nanak," he said.

Kusum Vyas, a Hindu delegate from the US, said she was inspired by the Hindu philosophy to work on nature preservation. A "Hindu plan" was drafted in the UK, and work is underway to link it up with Hindu temples and organizations in the US and India.

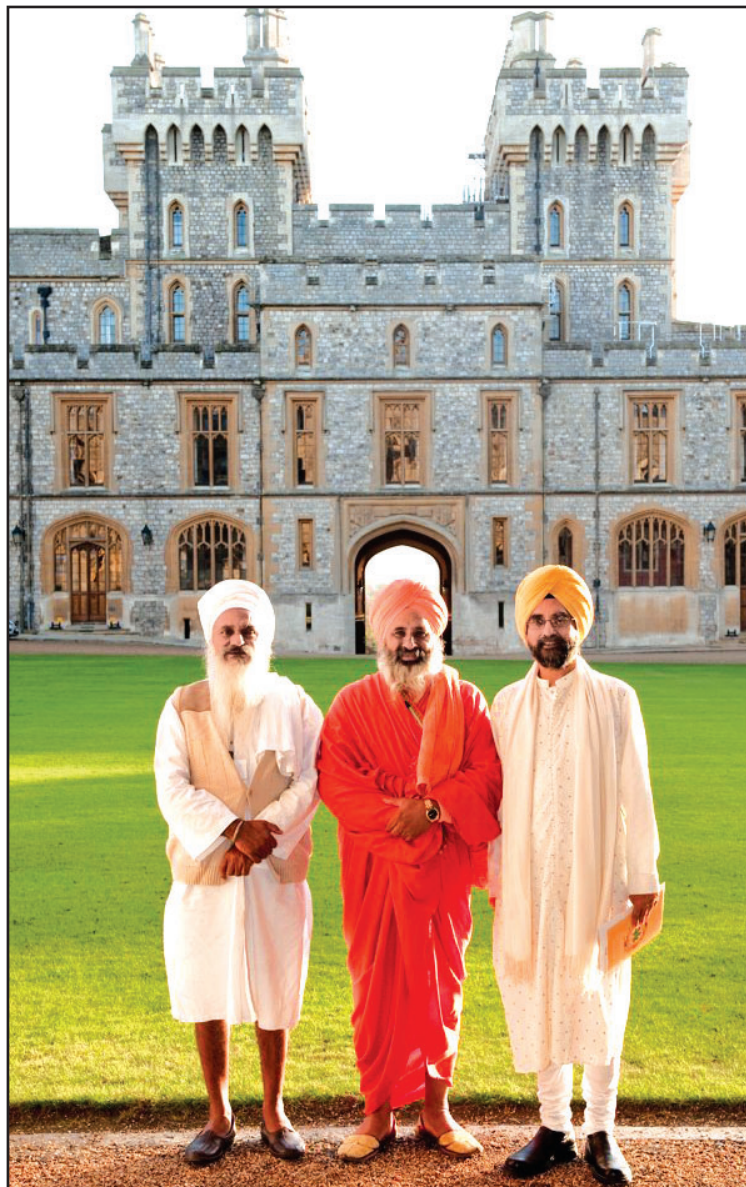
Ban ki Moon said in an interview just before the event said, "Without the full support and cooperation of religious leaders, it will be very difficult to create a political climate conducive to agreeing a very balanced and harmonious and equitable and binding agreement in Copenhagen. They have a strong influence and network. The reach is wide and deep and long so we must use this long and wide and deep reach in our common efforts to address climate change."

At the conference, he said, "With the climate change conference in Copenhagen - where nations are expected to wrap up talks on an ambitious new agreement - just over one month away, it is a pivotal moment for our world."

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Medina to go green

Medina will be the first Islamic city to go green, the Grand Mufti of Egypt announced at the conference. He said the project will be part of a seven year plan to make the religion more environmentally friendly. Speaking at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) conference at Windsor Castle, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, said Islam teaches its followers to protect the Earth. He announced the plans for Medina as part of a seven year plan to make the faith more environmentally friendly by teaching about climate change in Islamic schools, using renewable energy in mosques and encouraging green habits in places of pilgrimage

Let's Engage Too

There are many questions that the Sikh community should be discussing on the environment front. Please remember that the issue will engage even a more intense attention of the world as concerns about climate change and global warming become immediate. Here are some thought markers that the World Sikh News would like to list. We invite our readers to send in their thoughts on these issues.

1. Fair treatment for Punjab's farmers, who are largely Sikhs. They are stuck with input-intensive agriculture.
2. The larger issue of environmental injustice in Punjab.
3. There is a pesticide dilemma in Punjab. Pesticide usage was a component of the Green Revolution but as we move towards, or are being pushed towards, GM crops, where do we stand on pesticide usage, and what impact will it have eventually on our natural resources.
4. What is happening as far as the loss of biodiversity is concerned in Punjab.
5. It is time we pay attention that the issue of human rights is not an abstract one and we need to connect it to the struggle for saving the environment of Punjab and the fight against environmental degradation in Punjab and questions of sustainable agriculture and sustainable living.
6. We need to evolve a Sikh view point on the management of the Indus River Catchment Basin.
7. We need to refocus on the healing plants of Punjab, the herbal trees of Punjab, the connections between environment and language, data collection for improvement of villages in Punjab, and a larger Sikh perspective on the environment.
8. The gurdwaras must also emerge as an environmental sanctuary. Langar cooking practices must be brought in line with intelligent resource use practices. Gurbani's environmental connect should be underlined in discourses.
9. A return to the Sikh ways of life, simple and enriched, closer to nature and in sync with nature, needs to be stressed. We should encourage research and articles in the domain of Sikh Eco-Theology.

