

Inaugural Celebration of The Gurdwara Sahib Charlotte

Liberalizing of the New South: Charlotte welcomes the Sikh community and the Gurdwara

These are highlights of the inaugural celebration of the Gurdwara Sahib Charlotte, October 24-26, 2003.

By Roshan and Jaspal Attrey

The Sikh Heritage Society of Greater Charlotte

“*Deg Teg Fateh! Panth ki jeet!!*” Traditional Sikh slogans reverberated in Charlotte’s morning air. It is the Gurdwara Charlotte’s inaugural ceremony. Guru Gobind Singh’s saint-soldiers, the *Panj Piyaras*, clad in saffron robes, swords in hand, headed the parade up to the main entrance - ceremonial symbols of past glory and battles fought for the Sikh Dharma, Truth, and freedom.

Nature rejoiced in this historic festivity, embracing it with a pleasing drizzle, this October 26 Sunday, in the Queen City.

A magnificent structure stood in the midst of acres of land covered with trees, autumn leaves falling. The *sangat* performed the Nishan Sahib ceremony, Surendrapal Singh Mac and Kirpal Singh Nijher assisting, by hoisting the Sikh flag collectively, each member tying a knot on a 40-foot tall pole, accompanied by the verse “*Khalsa mero pind bhra,*” sung on the harmonium by Harpreet Kaur Bajwa and her group, Gureet, Savvy, Jugad, and Samandeep.

Sajjan Dhaliwal, backed by his wife Kuldeep, envisioned and conceptualized this House of Worship. Dedicating their personal “*tan, man, and dhan*” for building it, and seeking friends and believers willing to share and support their vision, Sajjan rallied the community.

Although many more gave to the Gurdwara, we are able to name only those that contributed most substantially and constructively: Surendrapal Singh and Harjeet Mac, Inderjeet and Arvind Rajpal, Paul and Ravi Brar, Bishen and Bandna Bedi, Pappu and Sarita Singh, Inderjeet and Babena Singh, Gurmukh and Sukhwant Walha, Kartar Singh and Rashpal Bal, Gobind and Bina Bhojwani, Ball Krishan and Janak Gupta, and Roshan and Jaspal Attrey.

This is the realization of a long-deferred dream of Charlotte's Sikh community. Joined by Punjabi Hindus and Sindhis (devotees of Guru Nanak), Sikhs feel a sense of gratitude and exhilaration upon having their own place for worship and socializing.

The inaugural celebration spread over the weekend, taking the form of a festive, life-affirming, religious function. Starting Friday evening with a kirtan and a reception for visitors, the celebration got in full swing on Saturday with a conference on the Sikh Scripture *Guru Granth Sahib*, an apt preparation for the inauguration next day.

Numerous dignitaries from the U.S, Canada, and India participated in the weekend activities. People of various faiths attended the conference and inauguration. Invited *raagis* as well as the local sangat, especially children, performed the kirtan on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Bhai Baldeep Singh, the 13th generation *raagi* of the *Gurbani* from New Delhi, accompanied by a renowned tabla player from England, Sukhvinder Singh Namdhari, transported the audience to the old-time religion of the Gurus, raagis performing in classical style in the Guru's *darbar*.

Saturday evening, Atlanta residents Paramjit and Archana Sarin, with their son on the tabla and daughter on the harmonium and violin alternating, were a rare example of a kirtan-performing Sikh family accompanied by their four-instrument orchestra (fourth one being the sitar).

Raja Dr. Mrigendra Singh, music artist and musicologist, son of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, expounded extensively on the Scripture in Punjabi, Sanskrit, and English as he recited the *katha* and read from the scripture.

On the inauguration day, the Honorable Mayor Patrick McCrory joined the Sikh congregation. Welcoming him, Ajaypartap Singh Bajwa took the opportunity to speak on the Sikh religion, underscoring the significance of hair and turban, and sensitizing the mayor to the problem of misidentification of turbaned Sikhs in the wake of 9/11. The Mayor, in turn, congratulated the sangat and assured them of the city's support for Sikhs as well as for other communities.

Surendrapal Singh Mac, President, The Sikh Heritage Society, and Preetinder "Paul" Singh Brar, Secretary, honored the dignitaries and participants of the seminar with certificates for their contributions to the Sikh community.

The Seminar, October 25

A very special feature of this three-day inaugural program was the seminar on

the Sikh Holy Book, along with an announcement of a research center for Sikh studies, to be named the Sikh Heritage Research Institute, associated with the forthcoming Tercentennial Celebration of the *Guru Granth Sahib* in October 2008. Its theme was: "The *Guru Granth Sahib*, a Scripture for the 21st Century: The Meaning and Relevance of Sikh Philosophy"

Dr. Harbans Lal, President of the Academy of *Guru Granth Sahib* Studies, who had initiated this very important project, worked hard to coordinate it. The seminar was divided into four sessions, each chaired by one of the participants. Speakers invited to participate were those, says Dr. Lal, that had devoted themselves to Sikh studies, particularly the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and shown leadership in different areas of faith, spirituality, interfaith initiatives, and publication in the Sikh media.

Of those invited, these sixteen scholars presented at the seminar: Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany, President, Sikh Foundation; Rajinder Jit Kaur, Sikh Women Association; Raja Dr. Mrigendra Singh of Patiala, music artist and musicologist; Dr. Amarjit Singh, surgeon and activist in Sikh youth programs, Buffalo, NY; Dr. Harbans Lal, President, Academy of *Guru Granth Sahib* Studies, Arlington, Texas; Dr. K.L. Seshagiri Rao, President, India Heritage Research Foundation; Nirmal Singh Nilvi, Academy of *Guru Granth Sahib* Studies; Dr. Sukhraj Singh Dhillon, N.C. State University; Kirpal Singh Nijher, author of *Sikh Ideology*; Dr. Baljit Singh Sidhu, orthopedic surgeon, Virginia; Dr. Kulwant Singh Khokhar, Academy of *Guru Granth Sahib* Studies; Professor Surjit Singh, SUNY, Buffalo; Dr. Sangat Singh Syalee, New York Gurdwara; Dr. Harminder Singh, N.C. A&T State University, Greensboro; Jasbir Singh Brar, President, Maboli Corp. and Founder of Khalsa-net; and Professor Devinder Singh Chahal, Institute of Understanding Sikhism.

The seminar concluded with a truly enjoyable presentation on the Sikh art by Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany, a wealthy collector of the Sikh art and President of the Sikh Foundation.

The scholarly and religious views expressed during the day spread over a wide spectrum, ranging from left to right, liberal to conservative, modern to traditional, practical to ideal.

Without exception, speakers pointed out the relevance of Guru Nanak's message for humankind: Break the barriers of caste, creed, and gender; treat all human beings as children of God. Guru Arjan Dev's message was heard over and again, "Ek Pitaa, ekas ke hum baarik," meaning, "One God, we are all his children." The scholars applauded the Sikh belief in human progress through personal self-discipline and sincere effort, emphasizing freedom from rituals and other man-made divisions.

Some speakers expounded on the need and value of hair and turban for the Sikh Dharma and the Sikh community. They exhorted the Sikhs to follow the edicts of Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Guru.

All religious paths lead to the one and same Supreme Being, God. This idea was driven home by many speakers quoting from the Gurbani. "Countless are Thy names," says the founding Guru. "Calling him by myriads of names, I bow to Him," says Saint Kabir in the Sikh Scripture. "The whole world was born out of one divine light," he continues. The same light, same divinity, defines Rama and Rahim, Allah and Waheguru, and God by any other name.

In short, the seminar and inauguration were a resounding success. The Sikh community, joined by the larger Indian and American communities, truly enjoyed the inaugural celebration and made a new beginning.

The Gurdwara is going to be the anchor for the Sikh community, says Sajjan Dhaliwal, and attract Sikh families to the area. It is a sign of opening-up of the South.

Those living in the South have seen it change. Charlotte's acceptance of the Sikh community and their House of Worship signifies a commendable process of liberalization of the city and the region. This brings the Queen City a step closer to becoming a world-class city.

Roshan Attrey is chairman of the Department of English at Livingstone College and an appointed member of the Mayor's International Cabinet in Charlotte.

Jaspal Attrey is a permanent faculty member in information technology at CPCC and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Sikh Heritage Society of Greater Charlotte.

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