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Peaceful colors

The Sikh community celebrates 300 years with an interfaith march

By Keleigh Friedrich

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A sea of multicolored saris flowed in the wind Saturday, October 11, as Sacramento's first World Interfaith Peace March began its procession down Sixth Street toward the Capitol.

The event, sponsored by the Sikh Community of the Sacramento Area, in cooperation with the Interfaith Service Bureau, celebrated the 300th anniversary of the Sikh holy scripture. The "multireligious" scripture, known as Guru Granth Sahib, promotes the message of universal love, harmony and tolerance among all communities.

The day began with a generous vegetarian breakfast in Southside Park. Sikh men wore turbans and suits, women glowed in silk saris, while some youth paired formal garb with more modern additions: skull-and-crossbones

sweatshirts bearing the words "Rock and Roll," trendy athletic shoes and head bandanas. Members of the Church of Scientology were there, as well as Jews, Christians and people with no visible religious stamp, milling about in jeans and baseball caps. Floats waited at the curb, decorated with wreaths and banners that announced, "God resides in every human being."

The crowd gathered behind the lead float, which was ornately decked out with an orange and red canopy. Sikh elderly, children and luminaries climbed on, a prayer was offered and the march began at 11 a.m.

People following the floats raised signs declaring "God is One," "Love Begets Love" and "Remember God, Earn Honestly, Share With Needy." Many waved miniature American flags. Parents pushed strollers, while volunteers kept the procession in line and handed out bottled water at each block. As the parade approached Capitol Park, bystanders joined in. A hip blond woman with a patch that read "Blind Faith in Bad Leadership is NOT Patriotism" sewn to the back of her jeans jacket strolled hand in hand with her Sikh boyfriend. Others stood and marveled at the colorful array as those riding the floats filled the air with rhythmic chanting.



Women in multicolored saris watch the World Interfaith Peace March

PHOTO BY KELEIGH FRIEDRICH



The parade halted at the north steps of the Capitol, and marchers flooded onto the lawn. Munching on vegetable samosas, they settled in for the recognition ceremony. One by one, dignitaries and faith leaders took the stage to honor the Sikh message of interfaith harmony.

“We’re living in very tough economic times,” said the Rev. Dr. David Thompson of Westminster Presbyterian. “We need the peace of the Sikh community. We need your leadership.”

State Sen. Darrell Steinberg took the opportunity to thank the Sikh community for “being so involved in the public process and for serving as an important role model for other communities in Sacramento and throughout California.”

Sikh activist Dr. Gurtej S. Cheema waxed poetic as he addressed the crowd. “It seems to me as if I’m in a garden with so many beautiful flowers with such a lovely fragrance, the fragrance of love and respect for each other, and the yearning for peace and prosperity for all,” he said. Cheema explained that the message of Guru Granth Sahib is very “simple and straightforward.”

“It emphasizes that each one of us in reality is but a manifestation of God. Our mind, soul and consciousness are an extension of God,” he said.

Mayoral candidate Kevin Johnson praised the Sikh religion’s family values, while Rev. Michael Moran of the Spiritual Life Center made another reference to these “difficult, turbulent times,” thanking the Sikh community for “taking the initiative to take a stand for peace.”

Once the speakers had finished and the crowd was preparing for the return march to Southside Park, Akal Singh, a bearded young man dressed in traditional Sikh robes, offered his assessment of the day. “Interfaith people didn’t represent as much today,” he said, adding, “I’m hoping to see more interfaith people on the next march.”

Same time next year? “That’s how Sikhs do it,” Singh said. “It’s about people being more accepting of each other’s culture and not really trying to put a label or any word on that. ’Cause when you start to be universal, like we are created from birth, it’s beyond speech and presentations.”