

# Sacramento's Sikh Awareness Seminar, a Great Success



Sacramento, (Punjab Mail)- A Sikh Awareness Seminar was held on April 9 at the Sikh Temple Sacramento, located in the city of West Sacramento, California. This was a follow-up of the California Assembly Concurrent Resolution 181 (Logue) for Sikh Awareness and Appreciation. Education Superintendents of Sacramento, Yolo, Sutter, Yuba, Colusa, El Dorado and Placer Counties were requested to transmit the announcement/invitation of the Seminar to all the schools. It was planned to have 300 attendees, and some 275 did show up. They included Superintendents of Washington and Natomas Unified School Districts, several Principals, teachers and counselors from all over. The teachers of the Elk Grove School District came in very large numbers, in the wake of recent shooting of two elderly Sikh men during their routine afternoon stroll in Elk Grove. Several School Districts of other Counties were also represented among the 120 educators. The registrants also included 60 interested persons from different organizations like the Renaissance Society of the California State University, Sacramento; Adult & Aging Commission; and Peace Lutheran Church of Grass Valley. Dr Jasbir Singh Kang of Yuba City came, as did Dr Tim Fong, Chair of the CSUS Department of Ethnic Studies, and a few students of CSUS and UC Davis. Besides, the audience included about 100 Sikhs from the host Gurdwara and other Gurdwaras, like the Bradshaw Rd., Jackson Rd., Roseville, Dashmesh and Fairfield Gurdwara, and the Ravidas Sabha of Rio Linda.

As planned, all guests were seated in the auxiliary hall, after registration and refreshments. The seminar started punctually at 9:30 A.M., with a welcome

address by Mohinder Singh Sandhu, the General Secretary of the Sikh Temple Sacramento. A one minute standing silent prayer was held for the victims of the recent Elk Grove shooting of elderly Sikhs and the victims of the natural disaster in Japan. Invocation was performed by 10 children of the Sunday school. With the accompaniment of a variety of musical instruments, they did melodious keertan of a hymn from the Guru Granth Sahib, seeking Waheguru's blessing for the success of the Seminar.

The speakers included, (1) Dr Pritam Singh Thind, Principal of the Sunday School, (2) Dr Amrik Singh, CSUS teacher of ethnic studies course "Sikh Americans and Globalization" and Punjabi as a foreign language, (3) Manbeena Kaur, in-charge Education at the Sikh Coalition, New York, (4) Neha Singh, Director of the Western Office of the Sikh Coalition in Fremont, (5) Siri Pritam Kaur Khalsa of the Sikh Dharma International, (6) Banjeet Kaur Khalsa a student of Punjabi, (7) Mr. Niles Carlin, teacher of World Religions (including Sikhism), a required course in the Modesto City School District since the year 2000, (7) Mirin Kaur Phool, President of the Kaur Foundation, (8) three High School Students and (8) Dr. Onkar Singh Bindra, a Trustee of the Sikh Temple and the Chief Coordinator of the Seminar. Kavneet Singh of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF) could not be present owing to sudden health problem.

#### Some Sikh Facts

The following facts were brought to the attention of the audience.

1. In USA, all men who wear a turban and have a beard, and all boys who wear mini-turbans (Patka) are Sikhs, maintaining their Sikh identity.

Occasionally, Hindus are seen wearing pink turbans just during a wedding. American Muslims wear a skull cap, not a turban.

2. Sikhs wear an iron bracelet on the right wrist; Sikh men have "Singh" (Means lion) and women have "Kaur" (Means princess) in their names.

3. Sikhism is not a branch of either Hinduism, or Islam. In textbooks, Sikhism has been recognized as a distinctly separate religion since 1964. Now that most textbooks on world religions have a separate chapter on Sikhism, using textbooks that treat Sikhism as part of Hinduism is a misleading and unfair practice.

4. With about 25 million followers, Sikhism is the 3rd largest monotheism, after Christianity and Islam.

5. Of the nearly 650,000 Sikhs in the USA, some 40% or about 250,000 live in California.

6. Sikhism was founded in Punjab (India) by Guru Nanak (1469-1539).

7. Now Sikhs can be found in most countries, and they have Gurdwaras (Places of worship by Sikhs) in 65 countries.

8. A Gurdwara is marked by a Nishan Sahib (Sikh religious flag) which may be seen from a distance. Like a cross on a Church building, the Nishan Sahib is not lowered during national mourning.

9. Non-Sikhs are welcome to the Gurdwara and to its langar (Community kitchen), where free vegetarian meal is served to all without any discrimination.

10. Guru Granth Sahib (The Sikh Scripture) is the living embodiment of the Ten Gurus of the Sikhs. Its 1430 pages contain nearly 6,000 hymns composed over 500 years by Sikh gurus, Sikh poets and many non-Sikh Saints belonging to different societal classes (varnas or castes), occupations and regions of the Indian sub-continent.

The hymns are arranged under 31 ragas (Tunes of classical music). It is world's most respected scripture.

11. Sikhs respect other religions, and believe in equality of all humans. Sikh prayer ends with a wish for welfare of all.

12. Sikhs do not have a conversion program. Most of the Sikh Americans trace their origin to Punjab India. However, about 5,000 American Sikhs belong to the Sikh Dharma International. They started as yoga students of Yogi Bhajan, and became initiated Sikhs or the Khalsa, on their own accord.

#### Mistaken Identity :

It was pointed out repeatedly that most Americans mistake Sikhs for who they are not, because of the turban. They are considered followers of Osama Bin Laden, Taliban, or Moslems from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan etc. and suspected to be terrorists, when in reality, the Sikhs are peaceful, hard-working people, law-abiding Americans. The mistaken identity is because of lack of Sikh awareness that leads to misconception. Coupled with xenophobia, the misconception culminates in hatred, which is expressed through discrimination, profiling (Racial profiling targets Sikhs), harassment, verbal and physical abuse and even murderous attacks.

Based on a Bay Area survey, Neha Singh pointed out that 69% of Sikh boys were bullied, compared to national average of 30% for bullying of all school students. Further, 72% of the Sikh boys surveyed felt that education would help much. After her, three high school students made very emotional presentations. They spoke about their woeful experience of having been victims of bullying at school. Their pathetic stories brought tears in the eyes of many in the audience.

## H-1B workers with pending extension pleas can stay: US court

Sacramento (Punjab Mail) A US court has ruled that workers in the US on H-1B visas, which are coveted by Indian IT professionals, may not be arrested for "overstaying" when their visa extension applications are pending before US immigration authorities. In a recent ruling, a federal judge in Connecticut recognised that regulations allow H-1B employees to continue working for 240 days pending the adjudication of their extension applications and that "work authorisation is part and parcel of their authorisation to be in the country, not a sep-

arate matter".

The ruling came following an argument in an amicus brief by American Immigration Council (AIC) and American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). "Permitting the initiation of removal proceedings during this period would thus be unfair to employees and employers alike, according to the (court) decision," AIC said in a statement. The ruling is a victory for the rule of law and for common sense, said Melissa Crow, director of AIC's Legal Action Centre. "If H-1B employees can continue working while

extension applications on their behalf are pending, it defies logic to argue that they can be arrested, detained and removed without notice," Crow said. In the case before the Connecticut judge, the plaintiff, a Lebanese national, was gainfully employed as a medical researcher when his employer requested an H-1B extension in early 2004, more than a month before his H-1B status expired. Though his employer paid a \$1,000 fee for premium processing of the application, the government never adjudicated it and refused to respond to requests for infor-

mation. Nearly seven months after the request was filed, immigration agents arrested the plaintiff for allegedly "overstaying" his initial period of admission. He was placed in removal proceedings and detained for nearly two months. In their amicus brief, AIC and AILA argued that current laws provide for work authorisation, while a timely-filed extension application pending necessarily authorises H-1B employees to remain in the US. Accordingly, they cannot be arrested solely for staying in the US while extension applications are being adjudicated.