
2. Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at United Nations: Account With Bias

On August 28-31, 2000, the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations held the first ever gathering of religious and spiritual leaders from all over the world. To date, the assembly was known for its meetings of diplomats and the heads of states. But it took a bold step to break the tradition and hold a non-political meeting. Although it was an official United Nations event, largely funded through donations from foundations and individuals, the conference was held in collaboration with the office of the United Nations' Secretary General.

The Summit recruited many partners to the Summit to receive help with intellectual and logistic input. They

included: The Scholar's Group at Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, The United Nations University for Peace, The Earth Council, World Faiths Development Dialogue, Modi Foundation, World Conference on Religion and Peace, Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, Interfaith Center of New York, Hinduja Foundation, Alliance of Religions and Conservation, Appeal of Conscience Foundation, Forum on Religion and Ecology, National Conference on Community and Justice, Appeal of the Nobel Peace Prize Laureates for the Children of the World, World Resources Institute, Sternberg Centre, and Global Dialogue Institute. The Sponsoring foundations that

provided significant amount funds included, UN Foundation/Better World Fund, Ford Foundation, Ruder Finn Inc., Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Carnegie Foundation, Modi Foundation, Sukyo Mahikari, Korean Delegation, Japanese Delegation, Greenville Foundation, Sternberg Foundation, and Appeal of Conscience Foundation.

Overview on Participation and Events

For the first time in history, approximately one thousand of the world's preeminent religious and spiritual leaders gathered for the World Peace Summit. This landmark event was organized to coordinate religious leadership as a driving force for building tolerance, fostering peace and encouraging inter-religious dialogue among all regions of the world. In addition to inviting religious leaders to sign a Declaration for World Peace, the Summit expected to create the International Advisory Council of Religious and Spiritual Leaders that is designed to serve as an ongoing interfaith ally to the United Nations in its quest for peace, global understanding and international cooperation.

More than fifteen world religions from 90 countries were represented. They included representatives from: Ba'haism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Indigenous Peoples, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism. Jathedar Manjit Singh of Takhat Sri Kesgarh Sahib at Anandpur Sahib, Jogi Harbhajan Singh of Sikh Dharma of Western Hemisphere, Baba Jagjit Singh of Namdhari Sampardai, and Sant Rajinder Singh of Ruhani Satsang represented the Sikh organizations. They spoke at the General Assembly Sessions with full Sikh attire. There were many members of their respective parties present in addition to several individual Sikhs from many organizations who were there as observers, translators or associates accompanying these official invitees. They were (not a complete list): Kanwar Ranvir Singh of Akal Purakh Ki Fauj, Jasbeer Kaur (wife of Dya Singh) of Australia Sikh Sangat, Rajinderjit Singh of Sikh Woman Association of New York, Bhai Harbans Lal of the Academy of Guru Granth Studies of Texas, Rajwant Singh of Guru Gobind Singh Foundation of Washington DC, Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia Vice Chancellor of Punjabi University and Director of Guru Gobind Singh Foundation Chandigarh, Onkar Singh of Sikh Dharma Brotherhood, Kehar Singh of Punjab Education Board, Balkar Singh of the Punjabi University Extension in New Mexico, Bibi Inderjit Kaur and Kulbir Singh of Sikh Dharma Brotherhood, Ralph Singh and Tejbir Singh of Gobind Sadan, Satjiwan Singh Khalsa of New York and Gurbachan Singh Khalsa of New Mexico of Sikh Dharma

Brotherhood, Representatives of Sant Nehchal Singh Dera at Jamana Nagar, Punjab Assembly Speaker Charanjit Singh Atwal, Charnjiv Singh of Rashtriya Sikh Sangat (RSS), and several Sikh woman that I was not acquainted with or did not know their names. There were other Sikh attendees that were either not known to me or were sitting at too far a distance from me in the hall that I could not identify their faces.

Two to three dignitaries were asked to speak at length; all others were given only a few minutes each to speak. Many speakers spoke for more time than allotted. Every session went beyond the scheduled time. Jathedar Manjit Singh spoke eloquently in Punjabi. Before he spoke, he sought advice from his advisors. His companions from India told him that he must speak in Punjabi in order to set a record of the Punjabi being spoken from the UNO Assembly podium. I was in minority of one to suggest that he should speak in English. Punjabi is not one of the six languages that UNO recognizes either for translation or for record keeping. His message would be lost and certainly would not have any impact on the audience. There may be an unpleasantness if audience chose to hoot, as did it happen in some cases. From his brilliant comments at the Assembly sessions of the last Parliament of World Religions in Cape Town, I knew that he could speak English well. Further, he was prepared to address the Assembly in English. Actually he ended up speaking in Punjabi and Rajwant Singh of Washington DC stood by to provide English translation. First this arrangement seemed to be better of the two choices until it became apparent that it was taking twice the allotted time to finish. They did run out of time; the timer bell went off and the microphone was turned off a few seconds later when the presentation took longer to finish.

Special Group Meetings

Many special groups organized gatherings in the evenings. I peeped in several and made friends with some powerful delegates during these meetings. I also went to the private reception given by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). It is said that 108 religious leaders came from India; the largest delegation was being sponsored by VHP. Many of their delegates were present at this evening reception in the UN building. First I found no Sikh at this gathering. Then I saw Charanjiv Singh of Rashtriya Sikh Sangat (RSS) and we chatted for a few minutes. Towards the end, Rajwant Singh walked in. Mr Modi who orchestrated this show knew me from the Cape Town meeting of (Parliament of World Religions) PWR. In Cape Town, he stopped by our symposium on Sikhism and said a few words of gesture. I was not happy the way he presented Sikhism in his book distributed at the WPR. He brushed me

aside politely when I brought my concern to his notice, as did many others like Balwant Singh Hansra and his group from Chicago, and Professor Balwant Singh of Pennsylvania. Apparently Mr Modi remembered me from that dialogue. He greeted me at the Millennium Summit and introduced me to VHP President, Ashok Singhal and the General Secretary of Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sang who in turn greeted me with his arms around me and presented me with an autographed biography of Swami Vivekanand. Both Rajwant Singh and I mixed with many delegates at this meeting. Next day the VHP held a meeting of all their delegates and other spiritual leaders from India in Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Balkar Singh and Kehar Singh told me the following day that they went to that meeting but left early as they felt estrange there.

Lack of Interest by the Sikhs of New York

On Tuesday night I accompanied rest of the Sikh delegation to the Bombay Palace in Manhattan where Sant Singh Chatwal invited us for the evening. It may be noticed that the Sikh congregations in New York area did not take any notice of the Millennium Summit; except that the volunteers from the Jogi Harbhajan Singh's organization were at hand to do every thing they could to make us at home. There is a large Sikh population in the greater New York area. Some estimate the Sikh population in that area to be around forty thousands. But hardly anyone paid attention to the event or felicitated the Sikh delegations coming from far distances. Only individually we made arrangement for our stay during the meeting. New York City is an expensive place for the visitors coming from outside as you can tell from \$83 a day only as parking charges levied by the Summit hotel. Dr Inderjit Singh who lives a few blocks from UNO campus invited me to stay with him and provided help in facilitating my participation. I do not think that any one informed the Sikh congregations of New York about the event and they

failed to notice it on their own. Therefore, I felt that it was very gracious of Sant Singh to feel responsible and invite us for an evening. I have known Chatwal Sahib for many years for his services to our community, particular for his support to Sri Hemkunt Foundations in their youth education programs. I felt obligated to go, as did many others. At his restaurant, he offered a personal welcome to all of us collectively and to each one individually, and offered any help that he could give during our stay in New York. Many photographs were taken and social greetings exchanged. Sikh members chatted with each other and compared notes on the day's events. Soon after we began to eat Baba Jagjit Singh Namdhari also stopped by with his entourage and sat down next to Jathedar Manjit Singh and Jogi Harbhajan Singh, across from me and Rajwant Singh on the same table. Every one exchanged Fateh. Namdhari members soon began to encourage people to come to touch Baba ji's feet. At that point Jathedar Sahib and some of us thanked the host and left the reception.

The Sikh faith, though a revealed religion, practically grew out of Islamic and Hindu communities of present Pakistan and India. It is, therefore, often persecuted in its Pakistani and Indian homeland. Human Rights Watch and other such agencies support such a charge. This week at the UN, where the Sikhs maintain no office or any other connection, only a lonely Sikh youth from England was carrying a lonely leaflet in order to draw the attention of this World body to the insult on the freedom of their religious practices. Through his visibility of Sikh robes and youthful age, Dr Kanvar Ranvir Singh was seen talking to the B-list religious officials to draw their attention. Others were engaged in networking for their cause.

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