

## VAISAKHI 1999 IN THE UK

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**A**s a collector of stamps, especially those with a religious motif I was impressed by the Canadian Government's celebration of Vaisakhi 1999 (Please see the back-cover). However, even if we in the UK did not have something of such national importance we did honour the great Tercentenary in other ways. BBC Television transmitted a two part documentary on the Sikhs at peak viewing time. The World Service of the BBC broadcast a series of four programs entitled the Khalsa. These were received worldwide. In an amended form they were broadcast as two programs by BBC Radio 4.

The greatest single event was a gathering, which filled the Royal Albert Hall on April 25. This was efficiently and impressively compared by Kanwaljit Kaur Singh and Indarjit Singh, editor of the Sikh Messenger and a well-known broadcaster. They were also its principal organizers. The assembly of 5000 was entertained by Malkit Singh, a pop musician

whose large following among young people is not confined to Sikhs. A *Gutka* display introduced many members of the audience to Sikh martial arts which they had not previously witnessed. Guru Nanak Sikh College is as yet the one Sikh school to enjoy state recognition. Some of its pupils performed a play based on Vaisakhi 1699. Sardar Patwant Singh of Delhi, author of the newly published *Sikhs*, (John Murray: ISBN 0 7195 5714 3), gave the keynote address. Charles, Prince of Wales, the Home Secretary, the Chief Rabbi, the Bishop of London and other national leaders brought greetings to the Panth. There were two major differences between this gathering and one which I attended in 1969 on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Guru Nanak. First, and very important was the absence of the phrase "host community". British Sikhs are not "guests", they are full members of British society. "Hosts" expect their guests one day to go home. Britain is the home of half a million Sikhs. Secondly, all the speakers recognized

that Britain is a multi faith society and they eagerly requested Sikhs to share their values with everyone else for the common good. (In 1969 there was still a strong inclination to proclaim Britain as a Christian country).

Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms, the exhibition mounted at the Victoria and Albert Museum from March 25 to July 25 was the event which had most impact upon many Sikhs and other Britons. It was opened by the Prince of Wales. Busloads of Sikhs from many regions of the country came to enjoy their heritage. Of course, Hindus, Muslims, and westerners all contributed to the

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cultural richness of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court and nation but the Sikhs were the inspirers and often the producers of the artifacts which were on view. Many readers will be aware of the pithy saying invented by Sikhs themselves; "The only culture Sikhs know is agriculture". This exhibition gave the lie to that story and made many art lovers aware for the first time of a dimension of the Sikh story of which they were ignorant. A lasting

memorial to the exhibition is the magnificent book *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, edited by Susan Stronge, curator in the Indian and South-East Asian Department, (Victoria and Albert Museum, ISBN 1-85177-262-6). Among its contributors are: Khushwant Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur-Singh, and Patwant Singh. It is a book whose value will last well into the next Khalsa century. It goes without saying that exhibitions of this sort must concentrate on the visual arts. The Sikh Foundation in collaboration with the publishing house, Rutledge, published *Sikh Art and Literature*, edited by Kerry Brown. This significant and comprehensive volume includes chapters on Bhai Vir Singh, Puran Singh, and Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid, thus extending the concept of Sikh art into the literary field. Of course most Sikhs celebrated Vaisakhi in traditional ways, and the festivities continue to the time of writing. *Nagar Kirtan* is the activity that most catches the eye of the non-Sikh passer by. Sometimes the police have been anxious about such manifestations of

Sikh exuberance but this year, and for some time now, Sikhs have policed and marshaled these parades themselves. The largest demonstration was in Southerly where members of every Gurdwara and Namdhari Sikhs, with some non-Sikh friends, turned out in a procession of about 70,000 according to some estimates. Other major cities saw similar celebrations and Khalsa exhibitions held in civic halls and Gurdwaras. Sikhs are not renowned for keeping a record of their history, at least in Britain, but it is rumored that a Sikh video company is producing a CD-ROM on Vaisakhi 1999.

The UK is fortunate in having two young Sikh artists, Amrit and Rabindra Kaur-Singh, twins. Their painting is influenced by the Indian miniature tradition. During this year they have exhibited at Birmingham, Oldham and Huddersfield galleries and between November and March 2000 their work will be seen in Glasgow. They have been interviewed on radio and television and critiques of their art have appeared in the press. Twin Studios, to use their professional name, are indicative of a growth of Sikh life and culture in a new environment. Most Sikhs who came to Britain in the late 1950s and 60s were blue collar workers but their children and grandchildren are now to be found in every walk of life and this is of significance as the Khalsa enters its fourth century. In fact they symbolize several things. First, they are part of the statement that Sikhs have arrived. For almost fifty years their presence has passed unnoticed by the majority of old Britons. 1999 has been a year when it was difficult for anyone to ignore the Sikhs in our midst. Secondly, they testify to a culture which is undeniably Sikh but is also British. Thirdly, they and young people like them have an assurance and confidence, which is derived from their Sikh tradition. *Chardi Kala* is the phrase, which must be linked with the Tercentenary. There is a feel - good factor at work in our Sikhs. It is unlikely to disappear once the Tercentenary is over. Their presence has been recognized and welcomed. As a young Sikh told me: "I was waiting at a bus stop when someone I didn't know said to me; "You lot are having great celebrations aren't you?" I said, "Yes". The other person said, "I hope you are really enjoying it!"

**Personal Feelings:** "It was with great joy that I shared

in the celebration of the tercentenary. Since meeting Sikhs in Leeds thirty years ago when I served on the committee for Guru Nanak's 500th anniversary my life has been transformed by the kindness of Sikhs and the discovery of their rich spirituality. When Guru Nanak went to Multan he was met by religious teachers who said that the city had enough spirituality. They brought a dish overflowing with milk to make their point. Guru Nanak floated a saffron flower on its surface (according to the version I know) to say that there is always room for more. So I feel to my Christian heritage and faith has been added the richness of *Sikhi*. The world needs all the true spirituality that it can find. I trust that the next century of the Khalsa will be one in which religions grow closer together thus fulfilling the vision of their greatest teachers. There is no Hindu or Muslim, or Christian or Sikh - only men and women who live the life of faith by the grace of God".

**An update received by Dr Cole from the organiser of the V&A exhibition:** Toronto dates are not

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confirmed but would be after India; we are on course for in excess of 100,000 visitors to exhibition. Wide range of positive responses from Sikhs and non-Sikhs. Sikhs have traveled from all over the world specifically to see exhibition - North America, India - visited by descendent of Faqir Aziz ud-din one of Ranjit Singh's courtiers, descendent of Rani Jindan, British MPs who will have visited by end of show are Marsha Singh (Bradford), John McDonnell (Hayes & Heston), Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North), Mr Khabra (Southall and Ealing), Margaret Moran (Bedford). Exhibition was supported by a wide range of events and demonstrations - *bhangra* performances watched by 1500 people in museum's garden, *gatka* performed by the Baba Fateh Singh *Gatka Akhara* to capacity audiences in the museum's lecture theatre.