

CONFERENCE OF COUNCIL OF PARLIAMENT OF WORLD'S RELIGIONS MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA A Report from Sikh Perspective

The Council of Parliament of World's Religion based in Chicago, USA holds its conference after every five years. This was fourth conference, which was held at Convention & Exhibition Center, Melbourne, Australia on December 3-9, 2009. The Convention Center was recently built with modern facilities especially the projection system of Power Point slides in every room centrally controlled. The auditorium is huge with seating capacity of about 10,000 with biggest central screen and additional screens on each side. Sound system was perfect.

About 10,000 participants were expected but about 5,000 turned up from 80 different countries representing over 200 faiths and about 1,000 presenters. This time Sikh participation (about 200) was highest than all other conferences held so far. A good number of Sikhs with turbans and some of them with flowing beards were seen around the Convention Center. The Sikhs were allowed to carry their *Kirpan* in the Convention Center. Similarly, participants of other religions were moving around in their own costumes. High number of Sikhs was mainly because of the local participants from Melbourne and Sydney, Australia. The next highest number of the Sikhs was from UK followed by USA. Lowest presentation was from Canada. Sikhism from Canada was presented by the *Institute for Understanding Sikhism* (IUS), Laval, Quebec and by Giani Swaran Singh from Surrey, BC, and some participants from Kamloops, BC. Prof Devinder Singh Chahal presented four papers in four different programs.

The following Programs were organized by Dr Tarunjit Singh Butalia for the WSC-AR:

Interfaith understanding in Sikh history and theology (Balwant Singh Hansra - USA, Harnam Singh Shan - India, Sangat Singh Syalee - USA, Devinder Singh Chahal - Canada, Rajinder Singh Mago - USA),

Principles and Articles of the Sikh Faith (Ranbir Singh Sandhu - USA, Kuldeep Singh - USA, Gurbax Singh Gulshan - UK, Mejinderpal Kaur - UK)

Preservation of Sikh Heritage (Balwant Singh Dhillon - India, Davinderpal Singh - India, Balvinder Singh - India, Sarbpreet Singh - USA)

Sikh Youth Perspectives (Jasjit Singh – Australia, Jessie Kaur - USA, Gurpal Singh - Australia)

Gender Equality in Sikh Faith (Amrit Kaur Vesha - Australia, Gurbux Kaur Kahlon - USA)

Sikh Diaspora and Global Sikh Community (Kuldeep Singh – USA, Gurbax Singh Gulshan – UK, Ranbir Singh Sandhu – USA, Ajmer Singh Gill – Australia)

About 100 Sikhs from across the world gathered to discuss issues with regard to developing an international Sikh representative structure/organization. The session was moderated by Dr Ranbir Singh Sandhu, founding Secretary General of WSC-AR. The need for an international representative Sikh organization was unanimously agreed upon and consultations within countries with a significant Sikh Diaspora presence will be pursued with the objective of having an organizational structure in place by the time the next parliament is convened in 2014.

Let us hope that this time the proposed International Sikh Representative Structure/organization is successfully framed which could do something good for the Sikhs and Sikhi. There have been many such International Sikh Organizations since 1984 but all failed to improve the Sikh image at the world level or to represent Sikhism in integrated philosophy of Sikhi (Sikhism) either to the Sikhs or its real perspective or to give comprehensive and to the Westerns. Sikhs are still very much divided in many groups, *Dehras* of *Sants* (saint) and various sects who have their own agenda and are preaching Sikhism of their own. Therefore, the need of one Sikh Organization at world level is the need of the hour.

Mr. Roop Singh, Additional Secretary of the SGPC, addressed the closing ceremony on December 9 and conveyed the message of Jathedar of the Akal Takht Sahib, Giani Gurbachan Singh: “On the auspicious occasion of the Parliament of the World’s Religions that is being held in Melbourne, I have brought for the entire humanity a message of mutual respect and universal brotherhood from Sri Harmandar Sahib, Sri Amritsar, the holy place of worship for all and the centre for the betterment of humanity.” He also participated in couple of other programs.

The Program Represented by the Institute for Understanding Sikhism:

1. Program: Interfaith Understanding in Sikh Theology and History.

December 4 at 9:30-11:00 AM Paper presented by Prof Chahal: *“Nanak: The Guru and his Philosophy”* on invitation of CPWR.

2. Program: Ecological Wisdom: Towards a Sustainable and Peaceful Ecology.

December 5 at 9:30-11:00 AM Paper presented by Prof Chahal: *“Healing the Earth with Care and Concern: Ecological Wisdom”*. on invitation of CPWR on behalf of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ), Birmingham, UK.

3. Program: Inter-religious Dialogue Making a World of Difference to Establish Peace: Sikh Perspective.

December 7 at 9:30-11:00 AM. (This Program was proposed by the IUS, Canada.) Prof Chahal was moderator and presented an Introduction to the topic and the problem in establishing peace in the world. He quoted a couple of Basics of Nanakian Philosophy to achieve peace.

Prof Chahal presented: *“Interfaith and World Peace - Sikh Perspective.”* The other members of IUS who presented their views in this program were: Dr Avtar Singh Dhaliwal, Tennessee, USA, Dr Balwant Singh Hansra, Chicago, USA, and Dr Kulbir Singh Thind from CA, USA, and Ms Jessi Kaur, CA, USA. And Dr Kuldip Singh of United Sikhs, New York, USA



Dr Kulbir Singh Thind presenting his views. The other presenters (L to R): Prof Devinder Singh Chahal, IUS, Canada; Dr Balwant Singh Hansra, CPWR, Chicago, USA; Dr Avtar Singh Dhaliwal, Tennessee, USA; Ms Jassi Kaur, CA, USA; and Dr Kuldip Singh, United Sikhs, New York, USA.

4. Program: “Sacred Sites, Sacred Solidarity” by GNNSJ, Birmingham, UK

It was held on December 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 at 2:30-4:00 PM Prof Chahal was invited by the Reverend Dirk Ficca, Director of CPWR, for presentation of his views along with many others from various faiths. This program was arranged by Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, Chairperson of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ) of Birmingham, UK. This was most important and biggest program amongst all the programs submitted by the Sikhs.

On the opening session on 4th December there were only two speakers: Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh presented the overall planning of the program. Prof Chahal presented the importance of protection and preservation of sacred sites and how to declare a site or a place as sacred and to test the validity of wrongly accepted as scared sites or places.

Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh presented a copy of Guru Granth Sahib published by the GNNSJ to Prof Chahal and each presenter of this program of all the sessions. Guru Granth Sahib is of the size of coffee table book and it contains many beautiful pictures and paintings of the Gurus, Bhagats, Sufis, Sants, Bhatts and Gurdwaras. It also has selected Bani of all the Sikh Gurus, Bhagats, Sufis, Sants, also that of Bhatts. The author is Dr Mohinder Singh, Director of National Institute of Punjab Studies.

During discussion on the last day of this program Prof Chahal proposed that sacred sites or places should be approved as World Heritage sites or places under the UNESCO and the local Governments should provided full protection. He also suggested to Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, Chairperson, GNNSJ, and S Roop



Professor Devinder Singh Chahal, PhD opening the Session on World Peace with his remarks.



Mr Narinder Singh, Journalist, interviewing Prof Devinder Singh Chahal (Left).

Singh, the Additional Secretary, SGPC, Amritsar that the case for World Heritage Status for Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple), Amritsar should be moved to UNESCO again. Had the Darbar Sahib been declared World Heritage under UNESCO earlier then the Indian Army would have not dared to attack it during 1984? It may be added here that Honorable S Baljit Singh Chadha of Montreal, Quebec, Canada was one of the financers when this case was moved for the first time.

Besides the above presentations at the CPWR Conference Prof Chahal was invited at Sydney to deliver lectures at different places before attending the CPWR Conference. On arrival in Sydney a dinner was arranged in his honor by S Gurmit Singh, a Sikh intellectual of Sydney, at his house on 27th November where other Sikh intellectuals were invited. We had a free discussion on the current situation of Sikhism and its future in India and other countries. Mr Narinder Singh, Journalist of Sikh Community, interviewed Prof Chahal about certain issues of Sikhism.

Some books were presented to Prof Chahal by S Gurmit Singh from his library.

A lecture was delivered by Prof Chahal to the members of the Sikh Council of Australia, Sydney on 28th November, evening at Migrant Resource Centre, Parramatta: "Scientific and Logical Explanation of Gurbani." This was arranged by S Ajmer Singh, President of Sikh Council of Australia. Refreshment was served by the Sikh Council of Australia at the end of the lecture. Some copies of **NANAKIAN PHILOSOPHY: Basics for Humanity** were distributed on behalf of the IUS to some scholars.

He delivered another lecture on "Originality and Uniqueness of Nanakian Philosophy" at Revesby Gurdwara of Sydney, Australia on 28th November morning and the same lecture was delivered at Glenwood, Parklea Gurdwara on 29th November morning. These lectures were arranged by S Bawa Jagdev Singh and Dr Gurcharan Singh Sidhu,

respectively. It is a pleasure to add here that all his lectures were very well received and appreciated by the Sikh Sangat of Sydney.

Some participants of the CPWR also had expressed their appreciation about Prof Chahal presentations at the CPWR Conference. It is apparent that the IUS's contributions are bearing fruits now and the IUS is becoming a world famous research institute on Gurbani. It is an honor to the Executive of the IUS, generous sponsors, and the Sangat of Greater Montreal where the IUS is situated.

Mr Raju Mukhi, President of Sadhu Vaswani Mission St Louis, MO, USA listened to a couple of Prof Chahal's presentations at CPWR. He was so much impressed about his scientific presentation that he brought Saint Dada J. P. Vaswani with his paraphernalia with camera men and women to introduce to him since Dada Vaswani is a scientist, philosopher and humanitarian and he wanted to meet another scientist and a theologian. They exchanged good ideas with each other for few minutes. He has written a book on 'Faiths' which includes a Chapter on Sikhism. He wanted Prof Chahal to examine that Chapter for its further improvement for the next edition. The center of Sadhu Vaswani Mission is in Pune, India and its branches are all over India and other countries.

The Sikh participants from across the world were invited by the Craigieburn Gurdwara Sahib on December 4 to get together during the **Communities Night Celebrations**. The event was hosted by Craigieburn Gurdwara Sahib and the Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria. Dr Ranbir Singh explained the Contributions of the World Sikh Council of America Region. Prof Devinder Singh Chahal explained



Mr Gurmit Singh (left) presenting his book to Prof Devinder Singh Chahal

the contributions of the Institute for Understanding Sikhism (IUS) to all the Sikh participants of CPWR Conference and the Sangat of Craigeburn and Melbourne. Both the speakers were honored with *Saropas*.

On December 7 the Honorary President, Committee Members and Sadh Sangat of Blackburn invited all the Sikh participants for dinner to get together at **Haveli Restaurant**, Tunstall Square, Doncaster East, Melbourne. It was an enjoyable evening and everybody enjoyed their hospitality. At the end all the Sikh speakers of CPWR Conference were honored with a **Letter of Appreciation** from Master Darshan Singh, Honorary President of Gurdwara Sahib Blackburn, Australia.

Some of the other highlights of the CPWR Conference:

The theme of the parliament was **Make a World of Difference: Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth**. Representatives of World Sikh Council – America Region (WSC-AR), Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria (SICV), Australia, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, Institute for Understanding Sikhism, United Sikhs and many other Sikh organizations participated and presented their views on various programs discussing various subjects.

The most important program, **Sacred Sites, Sacred Solidarity**, was sponsored by the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ), Birmingham, UK, which was well presented and attended by participants of various faiths. A lot of spade work has been done about this program to preserve and protect the sacred sites of all faiths. It was also realized that to complete this program sacred solidarity of all the faiths and governments of different countries is must.

Although the main theme of the conference was **“Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth”** through **Interfaith Discussions** but very few non-Sikh participants were seen attending the Sikh programs. Moreover, some of the Sikh presenters were conveying the message that Sikhism is an interfaith religion and Guru Nanak was teaching that if you are a Muslim be a good Muslim and if you are a Hindu be a good Hindu. Whereas, Guru Arjan says that he is neither a Muslim nor a Hindu and does not practice any Muslim or Hindu rituals. Then question is: Who was Guru Arjan, who was disseminating the philosophy of Guru Nanak? Was he a Muslim or a Hindu or something else? We, the Sikhs scholars, have to find out what is the real message of Guru Nanak and that of Guru Arjan and Guru Gobind

Singh before presenting to the Sikhs and the rest of the humanity?

Many Sikh scholars claim that Sikhism is an Interfaith Religion since their sacred book, *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS), contains the Bani of Muslim Sufis, Hindu Bhagats and Saints, and also praises of Sikh Gurus by Bhatts. But if we look into this issue according to the definitions of ‘Interfaith’ seriously then all those, Sufis, Bhagats and saints were the revolutionists and were not the representatives of any religion. For example, Bhagat Kabir admits in his Bani incorporated in the AGGS that he does not accept the teachings of Brahman and that of Kazi indicating that he was neither representing the mainstream of Hinduism nor the mainstream of Islam. So we, the Sikhs, have to look into Sikhism seriously to rediscover the real message of the Sikh Gurus in the AGGS. Let us look into the definitions of ‘Interfaith’ to understand its implications.

Definitions of ‘Interfaith’:

- Involving persons of different religious faiths; "an interfaith marriage"; "interfaith good will"
wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn

- An attempt to initiate dialogue, cooperation, and understanding among individuals of two different faiths.
www.translationdirectory.com/glossaries/glossary007_i.htm.

- This term is used to identify organizations or programs in which representatives from a number of different faith groups participate. ...
burtchurch.wordpress.com/2008/02/22/lesson-25-presbyterian-glossary/

Since the objective of interfaith conferences arranged by the Council of Parliament of World’s Religions is to provide a venue to initiate dialogue, cooperation, and understanding among representatives of different faiths but it was observed that in most of the Sikh programs none of the non-Sikh was involved and so much so that very few non-Sikh participants attended the Sikh Programs. It was also apparent that one group of the Sikhs was not attending the programs of the other Sikh groups. Moreover, it was also observed that most of the papers presented lacked academic standard and modern methodology to represent Sikhism to the humanity of the Information Age/ Current Science Age. Most of the presentations were based on information available in writings extraneous to the AGGS and on ancient mythology from which Guru Nanak had weaned the Sikhs during his life time.

The Sikhs have to work very hard during the next five years to work out plans how to represent Sikhism in its

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real perspective to the humanity of the 21st century involving the representatives of other faiths during the next conference of the CPWR in 2014 to justify the following statement of Arnold Toynbee: **“Mankind’s religious future may be obscure; yet one thing can be foreseen: the living higher religions are going to influence each other more than ever before, in these days of increasing communication between all parts of the world and all branches of the human race in this coming religious debate, the Sikh religion, and its scriptures the Adi Granth, will have something of special value to say to the rest of the world.”**

Toynbee admits that “Mankind’s religious future may be obscure;” I agree with him to a great extent since the religions based on mythology will not have any acceptability by the humanity of 21st century.

But the second part of his above statement that “...the Sikh religion, and its scriptures the Adi Granth, will have something of special value to say to the rest of the world.” has inspired me for conducting research to explore if there is any uniqueness and originality in the philosophy of Guru Nanak embodied in his Bani, which could have special value to the rest of the world? In this respect the Institute for Understanding Sikhism, Laval, Quebec, Canada has published my work as a Research Monograph, **NANAKIAN PHILOSOPHY: Basics for Humanity**, which portrays uniqueness and originality of philosophy of Guru Nanak and its universal acceptability and applicability during the 21st century, the Information Age/Current Science Age . This Research Monograph can be taken as a steppingstone to achieve the above objectives.

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Reported by Prof Devinder Singh Chahal, Editor