

'I cringe when a Sikh tells me that he does not wear a turban because he is worried about his job'

Tejinder Pal Singh Bindra, senior vice president, Jeetish Group of Companies, was named last year to the Hofstra University Board of Trustees. The Bindra family, led by his father Ishar Bindra, instituted the Sardarni Kuljit Bindra Chair in Sikh Studies six years ago with a donation that, among other things, pays for a tenured professor. The family also started two years ago the biannual Guru Nanak Interfaith Prize which was awarded to the Dalai Lama last year.

Over 80 students annually get to study Sikhism through the program at Hofstra, one of the best-known private universities in New York. Bindra is also the president of the Sikh Art and Film Foundation, which will hold a gala October 3 to honor New Yorkers known for their interfaith and humanitarian activities. The organization is holding a film festival at the Asia Society October 4.

Bindra immigrated to the United States in 1979 after his MBA from the University of Himachal Pradesh and co-founded an import company, the Jeetish Group, along with his father and brother. Jeetish has diversified into other businesses in the last decade with interests in apparel, export/import and real estate.

What are some things you like most about the Sikh study program at Hofstra?

I remember attending one of the classes at Hofstra two years ago along with my father, who was 85 then. There were 38 students, of which only one was a Sikh. Another was an Indian and the rest were Americans. At the end of the class, a Jewish student told us that taking the course made him understand his own religion. We were surprised. He told us that he had not shown any interest in Judaism all his life but as he was studying the faith and traditions of another religion, he told himself that he should know something about his own.

What was your father's vision for the Sikh studies at Hofstra?

Though the program focuses on Sikh studies, at the first level it teaches the Hofstra students various Indian religions. And that is my father's explicit desire. Guru Nanak extolled various religious faiths. The program is in its sixth year now. Some 70 students learn about Indian religions, and about half of them go on to deeply study Sikh religion.

Why did you choose to start a Sikh chair at Hofstra?

For one thing, it is a well-known school. And then there are over 25,000 Sikhs living on Long Island, with several gurdwaras and cultural organizations. We wanted to expand people's awareness of our culture and religion. And we want to offer an opportunity to Sikhs to make available of the services the university offers by way of seminars and cultural activities about Sikhs that are open to the public.

What can a program like this do for Sikhism?

We hope it brings the knowledge about our faith and traditions to the larger American community. And doing that means helping to remove the fear of the unknown. Like many other faiths, Sikh religion too has suffered in America for many decades and has been misunderstood.

Particularly in recent years...

The misunderstanding became sharper and more visible after 9/11. The establishment of the chair at Hofstra also means it is a very good reference point. Scholars and students from across America and Canada now have a resource to find out more about Sikh religion.

How do you plan to strengthen the Sikh studies chair?

We hope to have one of the best libraries on Sikhism at the university and we want to hold seminars that will draw the finest scholars from different parts of the world.

You have talked about the inspiration from your father...

My father is 87 and he still visits our business almost every day. Everyone reports to him. He had a distinguished career as a senior telecommunications engineer in India. All his life he had been interested in interfaith dialogue and while he dearly wants to spread knowledge about Sikhism, he does so in the interest of interfaith communication. He is still talking about starting new projects.

What are some of the things on his mind?

He has been thinking for quite some time [about] setting up a home for senior citizens who are brought from India [to the United States] by their children but who are not

Sikh rights activist Tejinder Singh Bindra tells ARTHUR J PAIS of the deep need to make people understand Sikhism



treated well by their families. Some of them may not need help from family counselors. Some may want to live apart from their children and they hope they will be subsidized because they don't have huge savings.

What kind of progress have you made on this project?

It is going to be a very big project, involving many social service agencies. It will also mean that I will have to devote quite a bit of my time. Right now, I spend some 20 hours a week on activities connected to the chair and the Sikh Arts.

We hear that your father is also working on a book?

He is working on his autobiography. It is called to *From Kallar to New York*. Kallar is the town he was born in the pre-Partition Punjab.

What have you taken from your mother?

The Sardarni Kuljit Bindra Chair in Sikh Studies is named after my mother. She has very little formal education. I think she spent just about five years in a school but she has placed education at the core of our family's values. She was so devoted to the education of her seven children that she sold her jewelry to allow us to attend the finest schools. All the time, she reminded us that we should remain humble and give some of our time and income for social causes.

Who are some of the other people you admire?

I met Khushwant Singh, the novelist, editor and Sikh historian, just the other year. He is 93 but his passion for reading and finding out more about the world about him has remained as sharp as any time. He finds it difficult to travel because of his age but he is one of the sharpest minds I have ever come across.

You have also established the Sikh Art and Film Foundation.

One reason for starting this was to get the second- and third-generation Sikhs to learn more about their own faith. Of course, we also want to use this foundation to get the larger society to understand more about Sikhs. We have hosted the Spinning Wheel Film Festival in New York for many years but now we have our own festival which will be held at Asia Society October 4.

How will this festival be different from Spinning Wheel [a film festival for Sikhs held in South California]?

We want to do a few things different from Spinning Wheel, including giving cash prizes to feature filmmakers and those who make short films and documentaries. We have set apart \$25,000 towards that this year. In the coming years, we may increase the amount and also add more categories.

What else has the Sikh Art and Film Foundation done that you are proud of?

We helped the efforts to bring *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion* to the Rubin Museum of Art in New York in September 2006 and the exhibition was on until almost the end of January the next year. I thought the exhibition was crucial to get people at large to know more about Sikhs. It was also a reminder to the Sikh community about their heritage. Many of us are not aware of our heritage, especially the younger generation.

What was special about the exhibition?

It showed aspects of our culture that is little known. History books tell us about Sikh courage and valor against oppression. But how much do people, including Sikhs, know about Sikh beliefs and ideals, even basic ones — the works of art including the miniature paintings placed Sikh history, their religion and people in a broader context?

The exhibition was also a first of its kind for New York.

Major exhibitions on Sikh art have been mounted over the past 15 years at museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; the National Museum, New Delhi; and the Royal Ontario Museum of Toronto. This was the first Sikh art exhibition in New York. It offered over 100 works of paintings, drawings, textiles, metalwork, and photographs. Art was loaned from the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh; National Museum, New Delhi; the Sanskriti Museum, New Delhi; the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; and the collection of Dr Narinder Kapany, of Palo Alto, along with other individual lenders.

What will be the next big project for Sikh Arts?

We are working towards another Sikh art exhibition late next year or in 2010. The first one covered the period mostly pertaining to Guru Nanak. The new one will look at another age. And then there will be plans to extend next year's film festival.

What are some things that Americans should know most about the Sikhs?

Many Americans think we are Arabs or the Afghans. Of course, we Sikhs oppose distortion of any religion or the history of any people. But we also want the people know our roots. We want people to know that there are more than 25 million Sikhs in the world today. Most of them live in Punjab where they form 60 percent of the population, compared to 2 percent of the population of India as a whole. Approximately 1 million live in Britain, forming the largest community outside of India. There are another half million in the USA and Canada and a number of smaller communities in many countries.

You talk a lot about a second- and third-generation Sikhs in America. What are some things that concern you about this group?

Like some of the older people in the community, the young know too little about the many important aspects of the Sikh faith. I am also concerned about some of them not being interested in maintaining their identity. And this worry and concern is not pertained to the younger generations that grew up here. I cringe when a Sikh tells me that he does not wear a turban because he is worried about his job. I have joined hands with many likeminded organizations, including Sikh organizations in New York, to fight for the cause of, say, a Sikh police officer who wants to wear a turban. I want the Sikh community to know that there are many avenues open for us to fight for our rights.