

Sikhs and Jews build bridges in Long Island, New York

Many Jews who watched *Holy Kitchen*, a documentary on the Sikh institution of langar, or community kitchen, told Teji Singh Bindra, one of the organizers of the event called "Building Bridges: Judaism and Sikhism," that they would like to attend a langar. "It was one of the most heartening comments I have heard," Bindra said.

Over 250 people attended the first of its kind event held May 3 on Long Island, New York, home for over 1,000 Sikh and 2,000 Jewish families.

"A few told me," Bindra continued, "that they used to see hundreds of Sikhs entering the local gurdwara but they had no idea what else was happening there apart from prayers. The free meals program which involves men, women and children in our community and which is open to a person of any faith surprised them a lot."

During Sikh festivals, the Jewish neighbors also saw big tents being erected for cultural activities. "They told me, for 20 years we have been passing by the gurdwara but we had no real idea of the Sikh faith. We were scared. We did not know what was going on," Bindra said.

The film, directed by chef Vikas Khanna, was shown at last year's Sikh Heritage Film Festival that the Bindra family - led by the family patriarch I. S. Bindra - organizes in New York.

The idea for the Sikh-Jewish outreach event came up when Ajay Banga, President and chief operating officer, MasterCard, and Michael S Miller, CEO, Jewish Community Relations Council - Long Island, met at a dinner hosted by New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg.

"We began working with Bindra and his organization several months ago on the event," said Davi Newman, executive director, JCRC-Long Island. "We felt our community should engage in discussing faith and action with other faiths, especially Sikhs since theirs is a very misunderstood community - even among many educated Jews."

When he visited a gurdwara a few months ago and

shared the news with his friends, many asked him if Sikhs were Muslims.

When Teji Bindra heard that, he thought: "The Jews on Long Island are highly educated, they are professional and successful business people. And yet many may not know the most basic things about Sikhism."

The idea of holding a bridge-building event gained urgency.

During the question-answer sessions at the event, one Jewish participant was curious about turbans and other cardinal symbols of the Sikh faith. He said he knew a Sikh man in New York office who had shaved off his beard and removed his turban. The man was afraid that symbols were not welcome in his workplace and would spoil his chances of promotion.

"I nudged Banga to answer that question," Bindra recalled, chuckling.

Banga, who wears a turban and has a beard, said his brother in India (M. S. Banga) who heads a large multinational (Unilever) was clean shaven. And yet he loved the Sikh faith as much as his turbaned sibling. It is matter of individual preference, Banga said, but in his case the symbols of his faith were no hindrance to his ascendancy in the corporate world.

As part of the evening of dialogue and discussions, Bindra's organisation put up the *Tryst with Trees* exhibition showing Sikh concern for nature, and how many gurdwaras have been named after trees.

"There is similar (environmental) concern among Jews too, and the Sikhs were very happy to hear that," said Newman. He pointed out that the Jewish calendar has four new years, and one of them, Tu B'Shvat, is in honor of nature.

"We too showed a short film which talked about our concern about preserving nature," Newman said.

"The Sikhs revere their holy book, so do Jews," Newman pointed out. "And both faiths are monotheistic. There was also discussion about the emphasis of making the best of natural resources and not wasting anything."

The Building Bridges even weighed the possibility of common programs. The Sikhs on Long Island have summer camps for the young.

“I think it is a terrific idea if our young people can spend a few hours at a Jewish youth camp,” said Bindra, “and invite the Jewish youth to our camps.”

Newman said Jewish groups have a very good record of holding recreational activities for senior citizens. “We could offer some of these services to elderly Sikhs,” he said. “How long are they going to sit in their homes watching TV?”

The event was attended by Ido Aharoni and Prabhu Dayal, the Israeli and Indian consul generals in New York, respectively.

Dayal presented to the Jewish leaders copies of books on the history of Jews in India. Aharoni recalled how the India-Israel relationship has become stronger though it is just a couple of decades since New Delhi has a full diplomatic relationship with Tel Aviv. He spoke about how Navtej Sarna, the Indian ambassador to Israel and who is also a Sikh,

is organizing for the first time a festival of Indian culture across Israeli cities.

One of the biggest gains of the event, Bindra felt, was that the Jews got a new perspective on the Sikh faith.

“We had at least 150 Jewish people, and if each of them shared with 10 persons their new knowledge, a lot of misconceptions about us would be removed, and 1,500 people have been educated about the Sikh faith,” Bindra said. “Next time if a Jewish person hears his friend say that he is going to a Sikh temple or a Sikh home, hopefully he or she won’t ask: ‘What sect of Islam is that?’ I believe all religions are good, but it does not mean our faith is mistaken for something else.”

Courtesy: Sr. Tarlochan Singh, Ex. MP