

Learning More Than History Books Can Teach

By Gerald Barrier

Monday, June 14, 2004

The Sikh Studies Program and the Philosophy Department at Hofstra University hosted an international conference on "Remembering and Forgetting: Memory and Trauma in Contemporary Sikh and Punjabi Experience." Arvind-Pal Singh, the Sardarni Kuljit Kaur Chair in Sikh Studies at Hofstra, organized the two day conference. In addition to panel members from North America, Europe and India, approximately seventy-five to a hundred Sikhs from the area and also distinguished visitors from Canada and the U.S.A. West Coast participated in the discussions.

The conference proceedings, which will be published in the near future, focused on the traumas of partition, events surrounding 1984, and recent challenges confronting the Sikh Diaspora. A special exhibit of photographs on Operation Blue Star and the Golden Temple, prepared by Sandeep Singh and his colleagues from Canada (the Sikh Centennial Foundation, Canada) and the U.S.A., presented a graphic record of major events during the attack and its aftermath.

Following registration and coffee on the morning of Saturday, May 8th, the first panel focused on partition. Paul Brass discussed "retributive genocide" in the Punjab and raised important issues relating to specific events as well as issues surrounding partition. Ian Talbot presented a paper on the "Voices of Punjab Refugees and Migrants in Amritsar and Lahore." Jerry Barrier discussed the Sikh Diaspora and internet dialogue on partition and 1984. Giorgio Shani and Gurharpal Singh responded, and then the audience submitted written questions.

The afternoon panel dealt with "trauma, subjectivity and the nation." Brian Axel reviewed theoretical issues and "the silence of the graveyard." He built upon some of the arguments in his earlier book on images of violence and history (primarily on Sikh militants and the Khalistan movement). Inderpal Kaur evaluated the problems facing Sikh women and their problems with the INS, and provoked a lively discussion on U.S. policies and the role of legal issues and bureaucracy in framing alternatives available to Sikh women. Harleen Singh discussed "trauma and memory" in modern Hindi cinema, evaluating themes and portrayal of Sikhs in "Maachis" and "Hawaain." Pat discussed "inventing home" and remembering the nation. Sunit Singh and Navdeep Singh responded to the papers, along with written questions from Sikhs in the audience.

The afternoon concluded with a welcome by the Hofstra University President, Stuart Rabinowitz, who highlighted the importance of Sikh Studies as an essential element in a long-term strategy of hosting several chairs in Religion at Hofstra. The keynote address on history, trauma, and memory was given by Professor Edith Wyschogrod, an internationally recognized philosopher and former President of the American Academy of Religion. Also attending were two prominent assembly members, Thomas Dinapoli and Donna Ferrara, who emphasized the importance of the program and Hofstra in the cultural life of the region. They also presented a proclamation on Sikh rights and discussed legislative matters of prime importance to the local Sikh community. Tejinder Pal Singh then concluded the session with

a brief review of the program and both recent and forthcoming activities. The Singh family has been involved in the public life of the community for a long time, and provides funding and support not only for the Chair but also related programs such as the upcoming Sikh film festival (fall, 2004).

On Sunday morning, a third panel on "The morning after: reflections on 1984" provided personal reflections and analysis on the meaning of the attack on the Golden Temple and the Delhi pogroms. Darshan Singh, a prominent scholar from the Punjab and U.K. who has written several books and study guides on the Sikh Diaspora, evaluated the immediate impact of 1984 and its long term implications for Diaspora public life. Navtej Singh and Virinder Singh discussed how central ideas, prayers, and other means of communication such as "dhadi" narratives reach an expanding universe of Sikhs and insure that memory and an understanding of important events and traumas remain part of everyday Sikh life. Gurharpal Singh presented a paper on "the strange death of Sikh-ethno nationalism: reassessing Operation Blue Star and Its Aftermath" which raised questions about interpretations and theoretical issues growing out of 1984 events. Rita Verma presented "America is my Khalistan," a provocative reflection on Sikh youth and their understanding and responses to post-1984 developments as well as 9/11. I. J. Singh then discussed the papers and led a broad-based assessment of conference themes.

In the afternoon, there were three lectures on the Sikh Heritage. Paul Taylor, Co-Curator of the Sikh Heritage project at the Smithsonian, reviewed the evolution of the project and the major role the community has played in providing leadership and also many artifacts and assorted material for display. Gurpreet Singh then gave a slide lecture on "the treasures and travails of the House of Bagrian," followed by an illustrated lecture on "Coins of the Sikh Raj" presented by Mohan Singh. Mohan Singh also discussed some of the challenges in restoring many of the cultural treasures virtually destroyed during Operation Blue Star.

I personally made many new friends and enhanced my understanding both of specific events and the pain and memory surrounding partition and especially 1984. One of the most interesting aspects of the discussions involved dialogue and sharing of experiences with Sikhs who had gone through partition and the Delhi pogroms.

This reinforces my belief that organizations such as the various Sikh Studies programs and cyber groups such as Sikh-Diaspora should address seriously the need to develop oral history initiatives. I personally learned more from my discussions and listening to the accounts of my new colleagues than history books or printed accounts.

I do want to congratulate Arvind and the Singh family for a great conference and the opportunity for many of us to share ideas and emotions.

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