

# PROJECT FATEH REPORT

## Background

- 1) At a meeting of community leaders on 28 April 2007, concern was expressed by some at the increasing numbers of Sikhs who were converting to other faiths. Although official figures on conversions were not available, there was enough anecdotal evidence to show that conversions were on the rise and that the Sikh community was being aggressively targeted.
- 2) Chairman Sikh Advisory Board was therefore requested to head a team to identify key reasons for conversions out of the Sikh faith, and to suggest ways and means to stem or stop the flow of conversions.
- 3) A team was formed comprising some senior and younger members of the community as follows:

MP Inderjit Singh	Sponsor
Surjit Singh Wasan	Project Manager
Karpal Singh Mehli	Dy Project Manager
Kirpal Singh Sidhu	Secretary
Harinderpal Singh Grewal	Dy Secretary
Harmit Singh Gandhi	Member
Gurcharanjit Singh	Member
Harminder Pal Singh	Member
Balbindar Kaur	Member
Manjeet Singh Usma	Member (resigned after a few meetings due to work commitments)

- 4) From the outset, the team decided to adopt a consultative approach with the intention of seeking views and opinions from as broad a base in the Sikh community as possible. It was made clear that the mandate given by the community leaders was to look at the issue of conversions and not the loss of the physical form as required by the Rehat Maryada. After some consideration the team decided to name the project as **PROJECT FATEH** after Guru Gobind Singh Ji's son who preferred death to conversion.
- 5) The team would like to thank the following institutions and their committee members as well as a number of concerned individuals who took the time and effort to share their invaluable views, opinions and insights with the team. This report would not have been possible without their involvement and contributions:

- (a) Central Sikh Gurdwara Board
- (b) Gurdwara Sahib Yishun
- (c) Khalsa Dharmak Sabha
- (d) Sikh Advisory Board
- (e) Sikh Welfare Council
- (f) Singapore Khalsa Association
- (g) Singapore Sikh Education Foundation
- (h) Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha
- (i) Young Sikh Association

## **Efforts of the Sikh Community in the Past**

- 6) The Sikh community of Singapore should be commended for having made tremendous strides in their efforts to transmit the faith to the young, reaching out to the community and improving the lot of our fellow Sikhs over the past 20 years or so.
- 7) The publication of 2 volumes on Sikh Studies when Religious Knowledge was a subject in the early 1980s and the knowledge gained by our children on Sikhi was so beneficial that many children who went through the course in school came to know more about Sikhi than some others who did not.
- 8) The acceptance of Punjabi as the mother tongue language and the setting up of the Singapore Sikh Education Foundation (SSEF) in 1990 to promote the teaching of the language and Sikhi was another major milestone in our history that has benefited our children immensely.
- 9) Setting up the Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC) in 1995 to attend to the welfare needs of our community helped our brethren in dire need of assistance. The efforts of this Council have, very likely, prevented more of our people from seeking assistance from other faiths and converting as a result.
- 10) Our 7 Gurdwaras, the Sikh Centre, the Sikh Sewaks, all the Isteri Sat Sangs and the SAB have also played very important roles in their respective areas by reaching out to our fellow Sikhs, bringing in good speakers and ragis, conducting a host of activities and assisting the community etc.
- 11) Finally, the contributions of the Singapore Khalsa Association (SKA) and the Young Sikh Association (YSA) (Singapore) should also be recognized and appreciated for promoting culture and sports in our community and for being able to reach out to and engaging a wider segment of our community, thereby keeping them within the fold.
- 12) However, despite the best efforts of the community as listed above, more needs and should be done if we are serious about wanting to stem the flow of conversions to other faiths. For, the reality is that times have changed with many challenges facing the Sikh community. Attendances at the Gurdwaras, especially amongst the youth have dropped. Modern technologies such as the projection systems have been introduced but more still needs to be done especially in attracting the youth to participate and involving themselves in gurdwara activities and taking on leadership roles. We need to include them in our discussions, provide them with the resources and to help them help themselves. We have to move out from our comfort zone and look at different, albeit challenging ways to reach out meaningfully to our community. Before that, however, we need to look at what the probable reasons for conversion are.

## Reasons For Conversions

13) Four major reasons could be offered for conversions as follows:

a) A lack of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of Sikhi.

- i) Many of our children, youth and parents have a rudimentary knowledge of Sikhi. Many are unaware of the beauty of the religion, its universality, that it is a modern, enlightened and practical religion, free of all dogma and rituals etc. Some even have the misperception that it is not progressive, a difficult religion to follow, that it has lost its relevance and that is not in keeping with the times resulting in a lack of pride and faith in Sikhi.
- ii) One possible reason for this state of affairs is the lack of a concerted and sustained effort to teach the religion to our children and youth, especially after the Religious Knowledge programme in schools, that included Sikh Studies, was stopped by the Government sometime around the mid 1980s.
- iii) The competition, on the other hand, is seen as being “modern”, easy to follow and understand, primarily by reason of its being undemanding and aggressively marketed in English, with superior communication, packaging and funding.

b) Insufficient social and welfare support

- i) There was the feeling and belief that more could and should be done to assist Sikhs in need of help. There was the need for more Sikhs in financial or other forms of distress to be helped and supported failing which they would turn to the competition that was only too willing to welcome them with open arms. There was also anecdotal evidence of aged Sikhs abandoned in Homes for the Aged converting to other faiths due to the failure on the part of the community to assist them.
- ii) In particular, a pattern was noted where committed volunteers from other faiths made contact with Sikhs in vulnerable states of mind due to personal or financial crises and helped or supported them with the eventual goal of converting them.

c) Marriage with spouses of other religions

A number of Sikhs that had converted had done so out of their love for their spouses / future spouses, whether being persuaded or pressured to convert as a pre-condition for the marriage taking place. Once converted, some had then managed to influence other members of their own families and circle of friends to convert too.

d) Lack of parental guidance and supervision

A number of parents, not knowing much about Sikhi themselves and leading busy lives trying to make a living, had failed to impart Sikhi to their children who then lacked having a sound and strong foundation in their religion. Along with some cases of parental neglect, these children became soft targets for the competition that had evangelical zeal and that used a combination of subtle and not so subtle means to influence and win over the children to their faith.

## Recommendations

14. After having sought the views of the Sikh institutions and discussing within the team, we recommend that to stem or stop the flow of conversions, the community should continue doing what it already is doing so efficiently (see Appendix 1), as well as implement new initiatives as follows:

A) With regards to a lack of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of Sikhi

i) *Employment of English Speaking Clergy*

Hire clergy and speakers who can communicate in English, rather than in Punjabi alone, so as to reach out to our congregation, especially the youth, who have difficulty understanding Punjabi. If need be, Punjabi speaking clergy should go through a crash course to learn basic English.

ii) *Retention of Good Clergy*

Pay good salaries to clergy who have proven themselves and who have established rapport and won the confidence of the sangat, including being given performance-based bonuses. This would encourage them to stay longer to form a relationship of trust and bonding with the community, in particular the young.

iii) *Grooming Local Clergy*

Allocate funds to offer scholarships and bursaries to students who want to go for further Sikh Studies in International Institutions and then return to help proliferate Sikh Studies amongst the local Sikh community in English or Punjabi.

iv) *Activities and Programmes at the Gurdwara*

Develop focused age-group programmes for the children, youth and elderly such as talks, simran sessions, camps etc as follows:

### **For the Children**

(a) Organise kirtan and tabla classes in all gurdwaras. If smaller gurdwaras can't afford to employ specialists to teach kirtan and tabla, they should encourage their congregation, especially the children, to learn from specialists employed at the Sikh Centre and Katong Gurdwara or get their resident ragis to conduct the classes. The children should then be given the opportunity to perform kirtan on a regular basis in their own gurdwaras.

(b) Conduct simple and fun-based Sunday classes for the teaching of Sikhi to our young children in all the gurdwaras or encourage them to attend classes in another gurdwara where such children's services are conducted. Arrangements could also be made to provide the necessary curriculum and content to gurdwaras in need of them. Simple measures such as offering sweets and chocolates etc would entice the children to want to come and attend such classes further.

(c) Provide a play area for children and a computer room, where possible, to encourage them to come to the gurdwara regularly and be comfortable in the gurdwara environment.

- (d) All gurdwaras to organize camps for their children and youth at least once a year, and if possible for parents too, where learning Sikh values would be the main purpose. Gurdwaras needing assistance in organizing such camps, especially in the area of curriculum and content, can be provided with the necessary assistance from those gurdwaras (eg Singh Sabha or Katong Gurdwara) and youth groups (eg Bahadur Bachay) who have already successfully conducted such camps. If some gurdwaras prefer to support a camp rather than organizing it alone, they can be paired with an organizing gurdwara (eg, Pardesi Khalsa or Gurdwara Yishun could link up with Katong Gurdwara etc).

### **For the Youth**

To call a meeting of Sikh youth for them to decide how best to set up youth wings in the gurdwaras. This is to allow them to participate more in the activities and running of the gurdwara, such as doing kirtan, performing simran sessions, saying the ardas, reading Babaji's "waaq" etc. A few of them from the Youth Committee should also sit in the main Gurdwara Committee to learn from their elders and to push for more youth based activities to be supported and funded. They are our future leaders who need to be guided, nurtured and given the opportunity to take on leadership roles in the community.

### **For the Elderly**

Organise and conduct "Suraj Parkash" Katha sessions, sharing the Sakhis of our Gurujis and history of Sikhism etc at least once a week in the evening or at any convenient time to allow the elderly to congregate for a learning-cum-socializing session.

- v) *Setting up a Punjabi School cum Sikhi Centre*
- (a) Set up a Punjabi cum Sikhi Centre of our own to teach our children, youth and elders Punjabi and particularly Sikhi in a professional, structured and motivational manner. Current reliance on Government to provide the premises for the teaching of Punjabi and Sikhi may not last for very long and a time may come when we may have to find our own premises. We must therefore be prepared for that eventuality and start working now to raise funds so that we are not caught in the lurch.
- (b) The said Centre could be gainfully used to teach Punjabi and Sikhi throughout the week, and not only on Saturdays and some Sundays, to our 1300 Sikh students as well as used as a kindergarten to reach out to our non school-going age children. Spare classes, if any, could be offered for rental to some of the other groups teaching Hindi, Bengali, Urdu etc and be a source of income for the running of the Centre. Teaching our children Sikhi and Sikh values when still young would give them the strength and confidence to stand up to attempts by others to convert them when they are older and of school going age.
- (c) Since substantial community resources would be required to set up this Centre and much thought given on its usage, the team further recommends that a working committee comprising business entrepreneurs and educationists be appointed immediately to come up with a business plan

that would look at the viability, feasibility and sustainability of building and operating such a Centre.

- (d) In the meantime, the SSEF should continue the teaching of Sikhi values with funding support from all the Sikh institutions and concerned individuals since such funding would not be available from Government. The Sikh Centre, too, should continue with its efforts to teach Sikhi as well as bring in respected teachers to impart Sikhi knowledge to our children, youth and elders.

B. With regards to Social and Welfare Needs

- i) For greater impact to the community, our social and welfare services should emulate the way other good professional welfare organizations operate, particularly with regards to the extent, type and quality of services provided by them. In the meantime, funding support for welfare and social needs should continue.
- ii) Gurdwara Committees to work closely with SIWEC and refer welfare cases to them when approached by needy Sikhs.
- iii) Gurdwara Committee members to visit members of their sangat who have been hospitalized, at Homes for the Aged or sick at home and to offer help, guidance and render assistance where needed.

C. With Regards To Marrying Spouses From Other Religions

The team recommends that more opportunities should be given to our youth and adults to meet and intermingle with each other. This could be done through encouraging the promotion of sports, culture and social development activities such as:

- i) Organising a national Sikh Sports Day every year. This could build on the existing Vesakhi tournaments.
- ii) Holding liquor-free bhangra nights at least once a quarter and encouraging whole families to join in this fun-filled activity.
- iii) Setting up an informal Social Development Unit, as a start, that would organise social development activities and, hopefully, encourage more marriages within our own community.

D. With Regards to the Lack of Parental Guidance and Supervision

The team recommends that parents be encouraged to attend adult classes in Sikhi, to encourage their children to go to the gurdwara at least once a week and to attend Sikhi and kirtan classes wherever available, to pay closer attention to the activities of their children and to spend more quality time bonding with them.

E. Others

Finally, the team also recommends the following:

- i)* Employing professional coaches to nurture and train our children and youth in popular sports such as football, netball, hockey as well as in cultural activities such as bhangra, giddha, learning of geets etc.
- ii)* Organising out-door age-group programmes to attract children and youth, in particular, in activities such as street soccer, rock climbing etc.
- iii)* Presenting annual sports and cultural awards to deserving Sikhs as a way of encouraging them to excel in these areas.
- iv)* Publishing a quarterly Sikh Newsletter that would include articles on Sikhi, publicise activities and achievements of all our Sikh institutions and inform our community of programmes that are forthcoming and which they can look forward to, etc. Copies of this free newsletter could be given to our sangat at all gurdwaras. This publication can draw on the rich heritage of Sikhs to highlight role models who can be a source of pride for young Sikhs.
- v)* Setting up a Coordinating Body, to be chaired by MP Inderjit Singh and comprising the Heads of all major Sikh institutions, that would meet and work together for the common good and in the spirit of cooperation and concern for the welfare of the community. The Coordinating Body would, for example, encourage all institutions to support activities organized by one another. The Coordinating Body could meet on a quarterly basis, or more frequently if required, to discuss issues and concerns involving the Sikh community and attempt to resolve problems, if any, for the good of the community. A calendar of events, which could also be on a website, could be drawn out by this body so that Sikhs in the community could select activities they want to attend in advance. The calendar would also help avoid duplication of functions and activities and conflicting timings. The Coordinating Body could also see to the fulfillment of the recommendations listed in this report that have been accepted by the community.

## Conclusion

15. It has been just over 6 months since the team was formed to work on this assignment given by the Sikh community leaders, to agree on the terms and objectives of this assignment, to meet up with as many Sikh institutions that were willing to share their considered views and opinions, to study the reasons for conversions, to put forth the recommendations and finally to write and present the report.
16. The real challenge now is for our community leaders and concerned individuals to implement the recommendations that have been made. The team accepts that it may not be possible for all the recommendations to be implemented immediately or for that matter to be fully accepted in toto. However, for those recommendations that have been accepted by our leaders, our team urges that they be implemented immediately. The time has come for our community leaders to take the bull by the horn and act. Failure to do so as a result of a lack of commitment, inaction or neglect on the part, especially, of our leaders would result in our community being targeted for more conversions.

Karpal Singh Mehli      Kirpal Singh Sidhu      Harinderpal Singh Grewal

Harmit Singh Gandhi      Gurcharanjit Singh      Harinderpal Singh

Balbindar Kaur      Surjit Singh Wasan