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Sikhs and Non Sikhs Join in BC for Vaisakhi Dialogues

Surrey— From 4 April to 9 April, Sikh Research Institute Canada (SRIC) worked closely with community groups, local media, and the Lower Mainland's Gurdwaras to host several educational events aimed at raising awareness of the message of Vaisakhi among both Sikh and non-Sikh communities.

Historically a harvest festival in Panjab, Vaisakhi also marks the day that “Khalsa” was inaugurated by Guru Gobind Singh Ji, formalizing the call to all Sikhs to stand up against injustice, caste discrimination, sexism and oppression. In this tradition, Vaisakhi celebrations are an opportunity for Sikhs to revitalize their commitment to break down prejudice and hostility, and to join with others to work collaboratively towards healthier local and global communities.

In order to facilitate this much-needed dialogue, SRIC planned its Second Annual educational forum: “Understanding Vaisakhi and Revealing the Invisible Heritage of Panjab” on 4 April at Royal King Palace Hall in Surrey. This event was specifically organized for local Sikh and non-Sikh public leaders in the community, and was well-attended. Harinder Singh, SikhRI’s chief programming officer, led the presentation and provided a general overview of Vaisakhi, its cultural significance, and its relevance to Sikhs today. His talk inspired an active Q & A period in which attendees were able to voice both their appreciation for the event and seek clarification on various aspects of the Sikh faith.

"I didn't know what to expect, as there are many elements to the Sikh religion," said Amrita Sahota, an event attendee. "This event focused more on Sikh heritage, and the diaspora of the Sikh community outside of India, so it was very relatable. I was impressed by the keynote speaker, Harinder Singh, who spoke eloquently about the history and heritage of Vaisakhi, and how it relates to the Punjabi Culture."

On 7 April, SRIC presented the workshop “One Panth: Reviving the Sarbat Khalsa” for Lower Mainland Gurdwaras and other Sikh institutions. Over 20 different organizations participated in the “model Sarbat Khalsa” exercise, and the overriding message of the workshop was that, as Sikhs, there is more that unites us than divides us. This workshop was facilitated by both Harinder Singh and Kulvir Singh, a member of the Board of Advisors for SRIC who is based in Toronto.

Rajkanwal Kaur of Surrey commented on his impressions of the workshop afterwards: *"It has re-affirmed the importance of dialogue between all groups, ages and backgrounds of Sikhs with the emphasis of the Khalsa as the centre. It has re-affirmed the need for us and the ability for us to move forward from our differences and reach collaboration on what the community needs. Seek to understand before you seek to be understood."*

On 9 April, Kulvir Singh, Parminder Kaur, Anu Kaur, and Harinder Singh presented an all-day workshop, “The Guru: Connecting with the Divine Light,” at Punjab Banquet Hall in Surrey. This workshop was designed with the aim of fostering Sikh values based on Gurmat traditions of Sikh scripture, history, and discipline. Other universal principles that resonate with the message of the Sikh faith were also incorporated to realize a more holistic understanding.

Ruby Sohi of Surrey also shared her thoughts on the workshop: *"This program has benefited me because I went into this workshop not knowing much about my own culture and religion. I've learned about what each of the ten Gurus did for us and our religion. I've started thinking about what the Guru means to me and I am inspired to find light and happiness within myself and try to embody qualities of a Guru. I would recommend this greatly to others. It was a wonderful learning experience."*

Lali Pawa, SikhRI’s BC coordinator, said that she and the other volunteers felt that the response to this year’s programming was very clear: BC wants more accessible spiritual and cultural education. She said that her team is excited to bring more ongoing programs and events to the area in coming months.

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