

Asian

Aspirations



SATNAM - NETWORK



Satnam-Network: End of Conference Report Wednesday 20th March 2002 The Pennine Hotel, Macklin Street, Derby

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About this Report

This report provides a brief summary of the contents of the lectures and two key points or recommendations from the workshops.

Background and Aims of the Conference

Asian Aspirations was the first of a series of conferences organised by Satnam-Network. This half day conference focused on the issues affecting the young Asian communities living in Britain. In particular it focused on the Sikh community. It also examined some of the issues associated with multiculturalism and living in a multicultural society.

Delegates

The conference was well attended and included representatives from Derby City Council, CVS, Connexions Service, teachers, employers seeking to recruit individuals from ethnic minorities, voluntary organisations, capacity builders, youth service officials, women's education groups, the police, funding organisations, different religious groups as well as media groups.

Working with Asian Youth *Amardeep Singh Bedi, Chair of Satnam-Network*

This lecture provided an insight into some of the common issues affecting young Sikh children and the work currently being undertaken by the group with young people and their families. The common problems and issues include:

- A lack of knowledge amongst young Sikhs and elders on their religion and language which has led to a loss of self esteem, discipline and identity.
- A lack of discipline which has led to alcohol consumption, smoking and drugs becoming a common occurrence within the community.

This has partly occurred due to:

- A lack of guidance, attention and communication from elders to their children because of the pressures to remain competitive in a materialistic society (parents work long and unsociable hours).
- A lack of opportunity for young people to get involved in community activities.
- The gap between the older and younger generations is getting wider due to technology advancement such as mobile phones, computers etc.
- Traditional community leaders are far more interested in their own 'internal politics' and control over the community to consider 'trivial' issues such as youth education and youth activities.

Satnam-Network is helping to solve some of the above problems and build bridges with the older and younger generations and with other communities by:

- Organising sporting activities, which can help in providing greater structure in the lives of children and it ensures that a higher percentage of children's time is spent on constructive activity.
- Camping trips for children and their families to help broaden the horizons of children (especially those from inner city areas). In addition to this children and parents are kept busy with team building exercises, sporting activities and activities which challenge stereotypical thinking e.g. men preparing food and washing up dirty dishes!
- Educating parents to be better parents. Most Indian parents devote very little time with their children and instead will prefer to watch 3 hour long Indian films.

The Young British Sikh Community *Harjinder Singh Khalsa, Volunteer for Surbut Khalsa UK*

This lecture provided a brief insight into the historical background of the Sikh community and examined the different categories of Sikh youth in the United Kingdom which include, religious Sikh youth, mainstream Sikh youth, Afghani Sikh youngsters and uneducated Sikh youth.

Religious Sikh Youth

Most of the young Sikhs that Harjinder works with fall into this category. Most young people from this category have become interested in the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh scripture) and have decided to try and be real Sikhs. Some are more successful than others in separating Punjabi culture from Sikhism, but all of them make this effort. You will not find these young men and women in crime statistics. They do not drink, smoke or use drugs, and instead of clubbing and raving, they go to all night singing of hymns from Guru Granth Sahib. They are young citizens of the UK, and not in anyway strange religious fanatics. Most of them are clearly on the way to a successful professional career.

Mainstream Sikh Youth

Harjinder recently spoke to a group of young Sikhs from this category at a university Sikh society in West London. Not only did all but two of them have cut hair, but their level of knowledge of Sikhism was very limited. About twenty people came to listen to Harjinder, including 4 Gujarati Hindus and one Muslim from Pakistan Punjab. The Muslim had better knowledge of Guru Nanak than the young people from Sikh families.

Most of the young people within this category consume alcohol and some of them use soft drugs. However young Sikhs from this category are not potential troublemakers. Some of them might follow the example of the religious Sikhs but most of them will try to be part of the English mainstream.

Afghani Sikh Youngsters

A third group are the Afghani Sikh youngsters in West London. This group has handled the drastic transition from Kabul, Jalalabad or Kandahar to West London very well. Both the parents and the youngsters are very committed to their religion, and the Afghanis create their own employment opportunities, evident by the increase in the number of Afghani shops in the London area.

Uneducated Sikh Youth

This group consists mostly of children of Punjabis from Sikh background, who for whatever reason have not remained in touch with the Sikh religion, and who are not well educated. In this group you will find drinkers, drug takers, clubbers, and fighters. The fights tend to be either with skinhead types from the white community, or with Muslims, mostly from Pakistan Punjab. Not all youngsters from this group are bad apples, and most of them will settle down after marriage.

Historical Grievances affect Youth

Historically there is a long history of Sikhs fighting against oppressive regimes and invaders, who happened to be Muslims. However unknown to most people it is also true that groups of Muslims also supported the Sikh community. Then there was the slaughter of Sikhs and Hindus in West Punjab, and of Muslims in East Punjab, at the time of partition in 1947. And the trouble in Punjab in the late eighties and nineties, has led to negative feelings between Sikhs and Hindus. Unfortunately, this history does influence the young people born in the United Kingdom.

Two Key Findings from the Young British Sikh Community Workshop

The first key issue is the importance of religious, cultural and language education for both youth and the older generation. This will help to create more understanding, tolerant and helpful citizens because these are the qualities which constitute a true Sikh.

The second key issue is the use of intoxicants within the Sikh community. There are various agencies which deal with these issues, however it may be more beneficial for Sikhs to assist in the counselling of other Sikhs because they will have a better understanding of the religious and cultural background of their clients.

Sikh Women Issues *Harpreet Kaur Bains, Phd Research Student at Sheffield University*

This lecture focused on the life experiences of third generation Sikh women with an emphasis on three different groups including a) British born university educated Sikh women; b) British born less educated Sikh women and c) Educated Indian women married to British born Sikh men.

University Educated British Sikh Women

The current stereotypical view of educated Sikh women is that they are westernised and modern women who reject cultural practices and the Sikh faith. However, Harpreet's research has shown that this is contrary to reality and that this category of Sikh women have used Sikhism as an empowerment tool to contest against all traditional patriarchal and sexist attitudes within the Sikh community.

One implication of using Sikhism as an empowerment tool is the wearing of the female Sikh turban. This initially provided a few problems for the women because it did not completely conform to either Sikh or non-Sikh conventions and expectations.

This group of women experience very little stress, anxiety, mental health problems or pressure in any circumstances. Also patriarchal attitudes are of no major importance because this group finds no problem in openly challenging such attitudes both within their own community and outside it.

Less Educated British Sikh Women

Harpreet's research has shown that this group of women have a completely different set of issues and problems. The major issues revolve around generational conflict and dealing with patriarchal structures both within the home and at work. However the women in this category argue that the majority of stress and pressure comes from within their own families.

"Just family life really. Going to work, coming home, cooking trying to spend time with your son and you know sometimes you just can't do it, especially when you've got a difference when your husband's from India and then being British and being brought up in a different way" (Age 27)

This category of women also experience a lack of communication with partners and family members. One of Harpreet's interviewees suggests the main factor contributing to the mental well-being of Sikh women (in this group) is patriarchal relations, thus,

'I would say Indian men, whether its stereotyping Indian men, it's the control and that can be your father, your brother or your husband. It can be a combination, it can be all or either and I think it is the control, and I think they feel threatened if you're not going along with what everybody else is doing and that can bring a lot of unhappiness to a lot of people' (age 26).

Aspirations of this group of Sikh women tend to be a combination of materialistic and social needs such as going to the local gym, going on holiday etc. Unfortunately, the men married to women of this group have a tendency to be controlling and will confine women to the house. These women are generally unsatisfied with their lives.

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Educated Indian Women married to British Sikh Men

These women are generally very educated women from middle class backgrounds and for them, coming to Britain initially is an exciting opportunity to live in a liberal society where they can enhance their skills and qualifications. However this is not usually the case and instead these women are:

- Confined to the home
- Placed in a patriarchal structure where they are expected to do the housework, look after children etc. These traditional values are expected because they are 'Indian women' from India.
- They are frequent victims of domestic violence and often the mother-in-laws encourage their sons to use violence against their wives.

This group of women suffer the greatest degree of stress and pressure and have a tendency to become suicidal. They lack support networks and have little knowledge of avenues for help.

Questions for Further Understanding

- Why do educated women have a higher sense of mental well being compared with less educated British born women?
- Why are Sikh men and families participating in finding a 'suitable' wife from India?
- How can we understand the participation and reinforcement of patriarchal norms by mother-in-laws?
- How can we increase the support networks for Asian women?

We need to consider the impact of living in a westernised and globalised society and the implications it has had, and will have on the Sikh community.

Important Points to note from the Workshop

The need for greater facilities for children was identified. Clubs to learn how to dance, learn Punjabi and amenities to learn how to play music need to be established. Activity clubs will help to enhance support networks for Sikh children, and also to facilitate parental desires for 'learning an instrument' or 'learning Punjabi'.

Discussion surrounding the state of cultural and religious knowledge of children was discussed. Women from the group were oriented towards the belief that it is up to parents to teach their children, and in some references, women exclaimed '*that it is the fault of mothers for not teaching their children!*' This is a little disturbing, as women are reinforcing patriarchy and blaming themselves.

An extension to the above point, is that not all parents can spend '*a lot*' of time with their children due to work commitments and the class of the family is an obvious issue. For example, a middle class family will have better resources and time to spend with children compared with working class families. Furthermore it is important to note that, class, gender and ethnicity is an intertwined process. However, some women in the workshop suggested that '*class was not an issue*'.

The workshop attendees acknowledged and outlined in the workshop, that the structure of the Asian family is no longer the 'norm'. Asians and in particular Sikhs have moved away from the extended family, and have headed towards the nuclear and single parent family households.

The issue of role models also emerged. An argument was put forward that there are not enough role models in contemporary society for Sikh women. Some women argued that there are, and that there have been numerous role models for Sikh women as outlined in history. However, what roles do these

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women play in contemporary society for young Sikh women? Mata Gujri the first female martyr, Mai Bhago who led Sikhs to victory, Bibi Nanki - Guru Nanak's elder sister. To what extent can Sikh women use the above as role models in a westernised society?

Women suggested that men hold power and positions of authority in the Gurdwara. The workshop discussed the need to get a representation of Sikh women in the Temple and in positions of authority. Maybe this could provide role models for Sikh women. But, if this is the case we need a wide spectrum of all age groups in the Gurdwara, representing young and old.

Women came to the conclusion that they all need to unite and form group networks to enhance change and make a difference. A very promising statement which should be acted upon. One final point is that men will need to be educated about the positive role of women within the community and beyond. The best place to start is obviously the Gurdwaras.

Observation

Women acknowledged that there were no men at the workshop. Maybe this is an indication that the Sikh community has a long way to go!

Multiculturalism: A Challenge to Britain *Harmander Singh, Corporate Strategy Officer*

This lecture focused on some of the challenges associated with Multiculturalism and how Sikh Philosophy can be used as a tool to build bridges between communities.

Malaysia and Singapore

Both Malaysia and Singapore are extremely Multicultural countries. More so than Britain. And yet these countries suffer much less racial-religious-cultural tensions than those experienced by people in Britain. Part of the reason for this is that people in Malaysia and Singapore actually accept each others differences.

India and its Problems

India is one of the most diverse nations in the world and is home to over 300 different languages and cultural traditions. A few hundred years ago this country had major problems with a lack of respect between people of different faiths and cultures. The results of this intolerance included rape, torture, higher taxes for culturally different people etc. The solution to these problems was provided by the Sikh faith.

Universal Teachings of Sikhism

In India the Sikh Gurus took the following revolutionary steps to promote multiculturalism and harmony between different communities.

- Compiled the Sikh holy scripture with divine revelation from Hindus, Muslims as well as Sikhs, to promote the concept of one humanity.
- The Sikh Gurus started the 'free food for all' service, which was a method of getting different communities to work together to cook food and then eat together.
- The Sikh Gurus encoded Multiculturalism and openness in the central Sikh shrine, by designing it with four entrances symbolising that people from all four corners of the world are welcome.
- The ninth Guru gave his life to protect the right of another religious group (Hindus) to practice their religion.

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So the Sikh Gurus succeeded in creating harmony between different communities by changing the perceptions of people through education and by promoting the philosophy of, 'unity in diversity'. They also started services which required people from all backgrounds to work together.

Causes of Racial-Cultural-Religious tension in Britain

Several factors for racial-cultural-religious tensions in Britain have been identified, which include:

- Racial Violence Instigators (e.g. National Front)
- Ignorance of ethnic minorities amongst the major British population
- Lack of tolerance/understanding for different beliefs and customs amongst educated people
- Lack of representation of ethnic minorities at a local and national level – leads to frustration
- Lack of decision making power amongst ethnic minorities
- Lack of cultural/religious awareness amongst employers / police force
- High levels of internal ethnic segregation within cities. Examples include Oldham, Burnley, Rochdale and Blackburn – Lack of contact between communities

Applying a Sikh Model to Britain

Many lessons can be learnt and knowledge can be applied from the Sikh faith to help build bridges between different communities. Some suggested methods include:

- Using e.g. TV. Commercials with ethnic minorities can help British people feel as one unit
- Organising Cultural Awareness Days in each city to help promote harmony between communities
- Multicultural services: Employing more ethnic minorities in the Police, Army, Navy and Air Force – A Sikh regiment may soon become a reality within Britain
- Local and National government positions should be representative of the ethnic population
- Housing agencies must work towards removing clusters

Two Key Findings from the Multiculturalism Workshop

The first key issue is that there is an increasing degree of disengagement between the elders within the Sikh community and young people. This issue needs to be addressed.

The second issue is that multiculturalism is always about the host community deciding the rules for other communities. A good example of this in Derby City is that a number of educational material, books and resources on the Sikh faith have been written by non-Sikhs. However, if you want positive multiculturalism then local and national government agencies must learn to utilise the skills, expertise and the understanding of culturally diverse people to help in bringing about an understanding across different communities.

Comments from the Conference Chair *Hardyal S. Dhindsa, Executive Member for Learning*

The government will soon be launching its Connexions Service for young people. It is designed to be a one-stop-shop for information relating to all youth issues including educational aspirations of youth, careers, employment, counselling etc. Some of the issues covered within this report are crucial in providing a culturally sensitive service for youth from all backgrounds.

I am delighted that I was selected as Chair for this conference and I am pleased that the conference has had such a good response from such a large variety of organisations. I look forward to supporting more initiatives by the Satnam-Network and other similar groups.

Comments from the Conference Organiser *Paramdeep Singh, Secretary for the D.S.Y.A.*

I am pleased with the outcome of the first Satnam-Network conference and I will use the experience gained from organising this conference to improve future conferences. My personal wish is that a greater number of young people take part in community activities which in turn will help to build bridges between different communities and promote harmony.

Details of Asian Aspirations 2

The next Asian Aspirations conference will be held in February 2003. It will focus on the development of services for youth within Derby and the surrounding areas as well as other topics and issues surrounding culturally diverse communities and youth.

Background on Satnam-Network

The Satnam-Network represents the interests of everyone concerned with fulfilling the needs of ethnic minorities within Britain and in particular the Sikh community. It is active in many areas including publishing, seminars and conferences as well as exhibitions. More information about the organisation and its work can be obtained from Amar Deep Singh Bedi.

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