

OBITUARY

SEWA SINGH KALSI

1930-2024

WE HAVE ONLY RECENTLY learned that Sewa Singh Kalsi died on the 15th January 2024, aged 93. He had had Alzheimer's disease for several years, yet was still living at home with his wife, Hardeep, who is now 92. Their daughter, Dr Kiran Kalsi, left her academic career in London to come home and has been their carer for five years. Kiran, who is still looking after Hardeep, came to the Peace Service and has just joined Concord, so we look forward to seeing more of her.

Sewa and Hardeep were once regular attenders of Concord meetings and often provided the musical contribution to the Peace Service, with Hardeep singing sacred songs and playing the harmonium and Sewa on the tabla drums.

Sewa was one of the leaders of Concord in the early noughties:

1997-98 Joint Vice-Chair with Dr Shah Noor Khan

1998-2000 Joint Chair with Dr Muhammad El Turabi

2001-2 Chair

2005-6 Joint Chair with Peter Dale

2006-8 Chair

On Sunday 13th October a *barsi* (memorial service) for Sewa was held at Guru Nanak Gurdwara in Armley, organised by Kiran. Professor Max Farrar from the Leeds Beckett University spoke about Sewa's community work with the Indian Workers Association. 'He told me

he had been in the Communist Party and he was committed to ensuring that working people of Indian heritage were properly organised at work, inside the trade unions, linking up with white workers, to ensure that everyone, of all skin colours, got a better deal. Of course he prioritised the needs of the people from India, but it was all about making connections with people from all the other nations of the world, and especially the white workers who — let's be honest about this — too often rejected the alliances that people like Sewa were trying to build.'

Prof Farrar went on: 'Sewa was also building bridges with leading figures across the city of Leeds. He was a pioneer in ensuring that the Sikhs were engaged across the whole of the city. He was an active member of the Community Relations Council. Throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s he took part in the various liaison bodies that the city council set up, and he was a pioneer in the interfaith organisation called Concord.'

Professor Farrar spoke about the books on Sikhism that Sewa wrote and how they had inspired him when he was beginning his own PhD research. He

concluded:

'I think we can agree that Sewa was a great man, a kind man, a servant to his community and a servant to humanity as a whole, a pioneer who never stopped building bridges and making the world a better place. He inspired me in 1973 and he continues to inspire me now.'

Fabian Hamilton MP was among those who spoke appreciatively of Sewa's life and contribution. He said that Sewa had regarded one of the highlights of his life as being asked by Leeds City Council as Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality



to welcome Nelson Mandela, one of his heroes, to the City of Leeds in 2001.

In 2007 the Revd Trevor Bates interviewed Sewa and wrote an article about him which appeared in the December 2007 Concord newsletter and was reprinted in our 2016 book, *A Leeds Interfaith Story 1946-2016*. Both can still be found on the Concord website www.concord-leeds.org.uk. It's well worth reading again.

In the article Trevor traces Sewa's background in the rural Punjab. He was raised by his mother, under the influence of his grandparents, within a village community, the eldest son in a family where his father had gone to work on the railways in Kenya. After a brief period in Kenya with his father, he returned to the Punjab, studied at Punjab University and gained his BA, BEd and LLB degrees. He became a teacher for a time before practising law, and during this period met Hardeep, who later became his wife. After another short spell in Kenya, Sewa applied successfully for an Employment Voucher/Entry Certificate to allow them to emigrate to England in 1965. When they first arrived in Leeds Sewa had to undertake low paid manual work until he was able to enter on the Home Office special new scheme for training adults as teachers and qualify with a Post Graduate Certificate of Education. As a bilingual teacher he was employed at Carlton Road Primary School/Middle School, Dewsbury, for seven years. Sewa then became a lecturer with the Bradford College of Education, specialising in immigrant education at a time of some political tensions in that city. He remained on the staff of Margaret Macmillan College from 1975 until 1991, during which time he gained his PhD degree with the thesis *The Evolution of a Sikh Community in Britain*, which was published by Leeds University Dept of Theology and Religious Studies. From 1992 until his retirement, Sewa was a part-time lecturer in that department and had two books on Sikhism published both in the UK and the USA.

The Punjabi word 'Sewa' means 'selfless service'. The word was not only the name of Sewa Singh Kalsi but also an appropriate description of his outlook, motivation and manner of life. This quiet, modest, gentle man left a great legacy in the service he gave unstintingly to building community relations and improving the lives of others.

John S. Summerwill

This painting by Bruce Noble, a retired surgeon at the LGI, was commissioned by Kiran Kalsi for Hardeep's 90th birthday two years ago. It shows her and her parents in the garden. It was featured at an exhibition for the Leeds 2023 big cultural event.

