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Promoting pluralism and human rights around the world
irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion or political opinion.

**SHRG's Statement to the Forum of the Americas for Diversity and Pluralism
The World Conference Against Racism. Quito, Ecuador, 13-16 March 2001.**

Thank you Mister/Madam Chairperson,

The Sikh Human Rights Group supports the position that all humanity is equal and classifications are mostly constructed against a background of imperialist, cultural and political designs to exclude and dominate. In considering the sources of racism, we have to examine the genealogy of the current discourse. Had the classification of race evolved as a means of seeking better co-existence and real understanding, we may not be having this conference in the first place. We question the basis of terms such as race, racism and racial discrimination in the conventional discourse. We feel that a more thorough analysis needs to be pursued to unravel the multiple definitions conflated within these terms and their utility to human society. We think that the conceptualising of race needs to be changed so as to encourage diversity, dignity and equality rather than discrimination in our serious journey to end discrimination.

When we talk of equality we have to ask equality relative to what and whom. Is it equality to end western bred racism and discrimination, in which instance we assume that everyone wants to be equal to western white races. Or is it equality without reference to any specific group or culture, in which case we accept that all races and their cultures have equal dignity, however different they may be fundamentally. The Sikh Human Rights Group's position is the latter. We feel that all races and cultures bring something valuable and enriching to the world. We feel that diversity is the natural order of things. We further assert that integration rather than assimilation should be our guiding principle in pursuing an end to centuries of intolerance and discrimination that has invaded the lives of a large percentage of the world population.

It is in this context we feel that culture and race are integral and that a drive for recognition, acceptance and promotion of cultural diversity is a response that can significantly end classical forms of discrimination. It is after all the assumption by individuals of a discriminating group that its culture and values are superior that contributes substantially to the development of racism, flawed theories and creative evidence to sustain it. In order to deal with racism, we propose a greater focus and emphasis on cultural diversity and promoting this concept through education, legislation and political initiatives.

Although classically literature adopts a close linkage between race and culture and usually in a demeaning way, in challenging racism the legal systems in many countries around the world tend to treat race as a biological issue. In this sense, government policies have changed to accommodate colour and to some extent descent but not the respect and active protection of people's cultural identities. In particular, cultural practices of many minority ethnic groups are treated as religious matters outside the scope of the legal discourse on race.

In my own example, I am lucky to be living in a country, Canada, that has actively pursued a policy of multiculturalism. But I know many people from our and other communities in other countries who have felt the need to abandon their culture in order to be 'accepted' in their adopted countries. So while they may have gone some way to overcoming discrimination based on colour and physical features, they cannot avoid the prejudices that are attached to their racial culture because of a lack of legislative protection. We therefore need an all inclusive legal definition of race that will reflect and challenge the literary assumptions that have led to discrimination.

Institutions are often the worse offenders in the field of racism. They create a culture of assimilation, conformism and bonding to form a team of 'like minded' people. In the past this used to be achieved by excluding people of 'other' races. Now it is by excluding 'other' cultures while accommodating different colours and physical backgrounds and encouraging assimilation into the majority culture. We need to encourage Institutions to accommodate and work with diversity of cultures.

In the media, racism based on cultural prejudice manifests itself with the use of stereotypes such as the ones that label people with a particular cultural identity as exceedingly religious, orthodox or fundamentalists. There is no attempt to understand the variable dynamics, concepts and passions of different cultures. Without a remedy against acts of cultural discrimination and exclusion, in places of social interaction, institutions and the media, this type of abusive practices become institutionalised through their inclusion in the official discourse on culture and thus legitimising them.

Diversity is perceived as a threat because homogeneity is usually treated as an indication of 'normality' while diversity is approached as a result of the 'invasion' of the different into the 'homogenous' whole. We have to challenge the tendency towards a homogenous culture and conformist trends. Infact diversity rather than homogeneity is natural. Indeed as the Draft Declaration has suggested and our own brief declaration proposes, world history is the richer for this diversity.

There is also a great stress on the act of 'tolerance'. The Sikh philosophy which guides the Sikh Human Rights Group, however considers tolerance a mere political accommodation. We need to accept, not tolerate. Tolerance does not necessarily promote the co-existence of different cultures on an equal basis. The concept of 'tolerance' suggests merely a political 'recognition and accommodation' of different ways of being as a concession by a majority to its otherwise desire for uniformity. An alternative to the passive practice of 'tolerance' would be the active promotion of the more inclusive and dynamic concept of 'cultural diversity' that promotes respect for diverse cultures on the basis of human rights principles. This would negate the proposition of one race assuming right of dominance suspended through 'tolerance'.

In summary, SHRG emphasises the need to actively promote cultural diversity in the United Nations philosophy, State policies and cultural attitudes as a way of dealing with racial discrimination, intolerance and xenophobia. SHRG hopes that the High Commissioner will review the approach of cultural diversity through 'tolerance' in favour of the more active and equalitarian alternative of the direct promotion of cultural diversity. We wish to thank the organisers of this excellent forum and hope that others will join us in our approach.

I thank you for your attention

Ramandeep Kaur
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