

A great tribute to a great people

IT IS SAID that Sikhs make the best of friends and the worst of enemies. You warm up to a Sikh and get a loyal friend for life. You cross him, especially over his faith, and you get yourself one tough adversary.

Sikhs have been much maligned lately for violence, given their troubled contemporary history — the murder of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for her military attack on their Vatican, the Golden Temple; the downing of an Air India jet over the Irish Sea, ostensibly for the same reason; and the periodic factional violence in the Vancouver area.

But Sikh militancy is neither a religious trait nor a tradition.

Their martial history is a function of geography. As inhabitants of the Punjab, Sikhs were the first to defend India from the invading armies from the north. Later, they put their gallantry to the service of law and order in British outposts, such as Hong Kong, from whence they came to Canada, starting in the 1890s.

They served with valour with the allies in the two World Wars. Today, they are in the forefront of minorities joining the Canadian armed forces, the RCMP and municipal police forces.

The other truth about this community of 22 million, which is a minority everywhere, is that its adherents are quintessential immigrants. They overcome adversity through a strong work ethic and belief in the dignity of labour (almost all family members, including women, work; few, if any, ever go on welfare).

Collectively, they succeed by good organizing skills. Thus, it was that when Brian Mulroney naively agreed to an intelligence-sharing agreement with India, Canadian Sikhs channelled themselves into the Liberal Party federally and the NDP in British Columbia, and had the satisfaction of seeing more Sikh MPs post-1993 election than Tories (3 vs. 2), and recently helping elect Canada's first Sikh premier.

Last year, when the Royal Ontario Museum asked for \$1 million to bring over a rare Sikh exhibition from England, financiers Gary Singh and Suresh Bhalla of Toronto helped raise it in 90 days.

"This is a seminal moment in Canadian culture," cooed Heritage Minister Sheila Copps last week at a Ca-

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nadian Sikh Foundation dinner, dutifully attended by Liberal leadership hopeful Allan Rock, Citizenship Minister Helen Johns, and the lone Sikh Tory MPP, Raminder Gill.

The idea of showcasing Sikh artistic heritage came from Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany of California, inventor of fibre optics, named last fall by Fortune 500 magazine as among the unsung heroes of the 20th century.

An entrepreneur (dozens of patents in communications, lasers, solar energy), academic (Ph.D. from the Imperial College, London, professor at Stanford and University of California), author (four books, more than 100 scientific papers), and a sculptor (shows in California and Michigan), Kapany had organized a Sikh conference at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in 1992.

At that time, "Sikh art was considered an oxymoron," he said in an interview on a recent visit to the ROM. "Sikh art was part of Indian art or Mughal art. But art by and for and about Sikhs is Sikh art and it is everywhere in the world."

Victoria and Albert Museum in



REGAL SEAT: Octagonal golden throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Lahore, circa 1818.

London readily responded. Rare objects were gathered from the Royal Collection and private collections in England, France, Pakistan, United States and Canada. Kapany made the largest single contribution.

The exhibition included paintings, pashmina shawls, manuscripts, ornately decorated armour, and other objects from the opulent court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, whose 1801-1839 reign marked the height of Sikh glory.

No sooner had Prince Charles opened the exhibit to rave reviews last year than people poured in to the V and A. "Sikhs, who had never been to a museum, and non-Sikhs, filled our halls and corridors and lawns," said Susan Stronge, V and A curator, who authored a lavishly illustrated book, *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*.

Kapany helped take the exhibit to San Francisco from where it's coming to ROM, enriched with additional pieces from France and Canada.

From a museum in Paris: seven of the 60 surviving paintings commissioned for the famous fables of Jean de la Fontaine.

From the basement of the ROM: a three-dimensional model of the Golden Temple, part of the Royal Collection sent here during the Second World War for safekeeping but now on "extended loan."

Almost 50 of the 197 works on display are from Canadians, according to ROM curator Seema Bharadia.

Bhalla gave an 1846 painting of a historic meeting between Maharaja Ranjit Singh and a Mughal king. It's being featured on the cover of the ROM's 68-page Canadian catalogue.

Guelph lawyer T. Sher Singh loaned 15th century wood panels and 19th century coins.

Nortel executive Lally Marwah loaned an illuminated 1777 *Janamsakhi*, the life story, in words and paintings, of Guru Nanak, the 15th century founder of Sikhism. Such manuscripts are often broken up, with paintings sold separately. This one is intact.

The Arts of the Sikhs Kingdoms, here May 27 to Aug. 20, is more than an exceptional show. It is a great tribute to a great people.

(Sunday: The story of a remarkable Sikh)

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