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## SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

### Multi-faith Sikh school in the heart of UK

Shyam Bhatia in London

Volunteers from the 200,000 Sikh community in Birmingham have played a key role in setting up the first ever Sikh ethos, multi-faith and publicly funded primary school in the heart of the UK.

Start up costs of £2.2 million have come entirely from donations and volunteers have saved another £600,000 by giving up their time to renovate and refurbish buildings that formerly housed a hotel and then a night club. They have helped paint walls, strip floor boards and install under floor heating.

The Nishkam School in Handsworth, Birmingham, is part of the first wave of state funded "free schools" set up by teachers, parents and charities outside government control. It is due to open in two weeks time.

These schools are the result of an initiative by the UK's Conservative Education Secretary, Michael Gove, who last year approved plans for community leaders and parents to set up government schools that set their own opening hours, teachers' salaries and are not obliged to follow the national curriculum.

Others who have taken advantage of this government initiative include backers of the Krishna Avanti school in Leicester which will serve only vegetarian meals and teach yoga and meditation alongside traditional lessons.

Headmaster Christopher Spall commented, "I'm not a vegetarian. I've never done yoga, but its an integral part of the Hindu faith to help us focus and have clear thinking and de-stress."

Nishkam draws its inspiration from the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib says, "Man tu jyot saroop hai, aapna mool pachan" (The spark of the infinite Crator dwells within you, recognise your origin and realise your potential).

The school brochure declares, "Our approach centres around bringing together parents, teachers and the wider community to create a faith-based school that will enable all children to flourish in their own unique way."

Much of the credit for starting the school goes to the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewa Jatha which set up the Nishkam Education Trust in 2004. The Trust first set up an independent day nursery and a small infant school before embarking on its latest and most ambitious project.

Nishkam's Patron Bhai Dr Mohinder Singh commented, "Faith based organisations can play a positive role in helping us become better parents, teachers and citizens, and most importantly, better human beings.

"These are the starting points of our endeavours to develop Nishkam Primary School in Handsworth. We draw upon our spiritual heritage and the principle of being Nishkam (selfless) to guide the education of our children.

"Over the last 30 years Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha has been supporting both formal and informal education for children and adults in Handsworth. Beginning with its spiritual centre, the Gurudwara, the development of other initiatives has significantly represented and transformed the local area, fostering engagement and partnerships."

Headmaster-designate Ranjit Singh Dhanda told The Tribune there were three other Sikh schools in the UK, within the London region of Hayes, Slough and Norwood Green. "But we are different because we are the first free school set up by the

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Green, but we are different because we are the first free school set up by the community."

Some of its unique qualities are that Punjabi lessons will be compulsory, Guru Nanak's birthday will be observed every year and the canteen is expected to serve pakoras, koftas and daal alongside more traditional English dishes. But Dhanda points out that the other important difference is that religious teaching will be based on a multi faith approach. "We are not here to propagate the Sikh religion, we will promote the religion of every child."



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