

Review

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Inside the city's first Sikh nursery

Jo Ind reports on Birmingham's first Sikh nursery

The little school of calm

White. That is my first impression of Birmingham's Sikh nursery which has opened in Handsworth opposite the magnificent gurudwara on the Soho Road.

I am greeted by the nursery manager, dressed from turban to toe in white – well that's not quite true as he is going about bare foot – but the point remains. The walls of the beautifully refurbished Grade-II listed building are brilliant white offset by a golden dado rail glistening in the sunshine that streams through the stained glass window.

This is striking, partly because it is so gorgeous – all high ceilings, big chandeliers and clear bright peaceful spaces – but also because it is an unusual choice of colour scheme for a place designed for pre-school children.

Nurseries tend to be an assault on the senses; vibrant primary colours colliding in a whirlwind of technicolour, children's work displayed from ceiling to floor with no clear space for the eye to rest. To create a white nursery, with all the staff dressed in white to boot, therefore seems a very self-confident choice.

"White calms the children," says manager Kulwant Singh, who is softly spoken and the epitome of calm himself. "It helps them to be peaceful. We clean the walls every Friday, but to be honest, the children don't tend to get them dirty."

"We display the children's work in picture frames to create that feeling of it being a home. You don't need to have them all over the walls. Displaying work is about giving value to the work and there are other ways of doing that."

The Nishkam Nursery, which was officially opened by the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, is indeed a calm place. There is someone missing mummy in the baby room and being cuddled as she cries. Someone in the toddler room has climbed onto the table and is being asked to get down. But for a place with 30 children in, it feels surprisingly peaceful and very safe.

The children's shoes are stored on little racks in the corridors above photographs of their faces and their names in English and Punjabi. All the furniture is made from wood rather than plastic. Kuldeep Kaur is in the sparkingly spotless kitchen cooking lunch and saying



Nursery staff Prabhjot Kaur and Charanjit Kaur playing puppets with Avaani Malhi and Anmol Singh

prayers as she stirs. "The praying is the most important thing," says Kuldeep. She cooks two meals a day as well as providing breakfast, a snack and afternoon tea. All the food is vegetarian and free from animal fat and ranges from pizza and chips to roti and dhal. "I love my job and I love the children – they're all my children and I want them to enjoy my food. So I put a lot of love and prayer into it."

The Nishkam Nursery is the only nursery in the UK based on the Sikh way of life, apart from one attached to a school in London. It opened in September and is remarkable because it was created by

the Sikh community to serve everybody, regardless of their faith, in the neighbourhood.

The Sikhs who created it belong to the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ) based in the large domed gurudwara just across the Soho Road. Nine years ago the GNNSJ set up the Guru Nanak Education Trust to develop its educational initiatives.

As well as the nursery, it runs a complementary school for more than 300 Sikh children, funds a lectureship in Sikh studies with Birmingham University, part-funds postdoctoral research in religion, civic society and the United Na-

tions and has helped to develop the syllabus for religious education in Birmingham. The trust also supports a college in Kericho, Kenya, and schools in Pakistan and India.

It's next project is to set up the first year of a primary school next door to the nursery.

These initiatives are only possible because of the willingness of the community to give of their time and talents. The word "nishkam" which runs through means the impulse to serve selflessly.

"The love and devotion which the volunteers poured into developing the nursery is priceless," says Ranjit Singh

Dhanda, who helped to oversee the half million pound nursery development. "Whether it was to renovate the space, or imagine how it would be run, people have been generous with their time and enthusiasm."

Balwinder Kaur Sembi, who is responsible for the baby room, and has one child in the nursery, Harpreet, aged two, was one of the original dreamers for the nursery.

"The plans for the building of the nursery were underway," she says, "but we needed to think about what sort of a nursery we wanted to have. So about two years ago, the mums of the gurudwara got together and formed a playgroup. We asked ourselves – what would our dream nursery be? What would be our ideal?"

They wanted the nursery to feel like a home. They wanted the children to feel loved and cared for. They wanted simple practices like meditation, circle time and the sharing out of food to make a difference to children's all round development.

"We developed these routines in the playgroup and then we took them into the nursery," says Balwinder.

"It's fantastic that the Early Years Foundation Stage, which puts so much focus on how children develop, really complements our vision. At playgroup we also learnt a lot from the elders who would come in. They would pass on their knowledge, things like putting a touch of ginger into the food to help with runny noses. There was ginger in that pizza today."

It was at playgroup that they decided on how the members of staff were to be addressed, using Punjabi words which reflect a warm family bond. The women are called Masi Ji, which means mother's sister. The men are called Maama Ji, which means mother's brother.

"The children decided the name," says Balwinder. "When Dalbinderjit Singh, the man who runs the pre-school room arrived, we asked the children what he should be called. They wanted to call him Maama Ji."

Kulwant has ten years experience of managing nurseries, and says the Nishkam Nursery is different from the ones in which he has worked before.

"It's about values," he says. "We respect everyone. We don't shout at each other."



Nursery Manager Kulwant Singh reads a story to Kampreet Kaur, Prubleen Kaur, Ekpreet Singh and Amarpreet Kaur, and, inset, the refurbished building

So, it's not about teaching children so much as enabling them to experience the Sikh way of life. That means putting values into practice, in how we think and in what we say and do. That's something a person of any background can appreciate."

Kiranjot Kaur Jheeta has a child, Simranjeet Singh Jheeta, aged two, in the nursery. She works at the Nishkam Civic Association directly across the road, next door to the gurudwara, and helps to organise various education and support projects to engage members of the wider Sikh and non-Sikh community, in the locality and globally. Right now she is planning a long-term parenting programme.

"We've been thinking about what's missing from communities today, and what previous generations had that are worth bringing back," she says. "We've been putting together events and workshops. It's about building a better society through better communities. And that's linked to better parenting and happier families, and to all the values you find practiced in the nursery. My son just loves coming here, and I gain a lot from this environment as a parent."

There is always controversy about faith schools. They sit awkwardly in a largely secular society which prides itself on inclusion. The Nishkam nursery is open to everyone and, in keeping with the Sikh faith, all people are treated with equal respect. So far, three of the 37 children who attend are non-Sikh and no Caucasian parent has yet come to look round.

But the fact is that faith schools do well. There are over 7,000 in Britain. They make up one third of the primary

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schools but of the top primary schools, around two thirds are faith-based.

Gopinder Kaur, who has a four-year-old daughter, Kanpreet, at the nursery, appreciates it being bilingual as she struggles to create a Punjabi-rich language environment at home.

"It's also the homely element," she says. "I don't have other family at home in Birmingham. It's just my husband and me. Coming to the nursery is like being with family. It's very fun-loving and caring place. And when it's home time, Kanpreet and her friends never quite want to leave."

Munpreet Kaur is a 19-year-old student at Birmingham University who volunteers at the nursery once a week. "I'm away from my family while I'm studying. When I come here it's like being home again."

"A lot of children these days miss out on the love and care that grandparents and other adults can provide," adds Ranjit Singh. "This kind of nurture is vital for children in the formative years. So too is good nourishment, creating empathy towards others and nature. We also wanted to emphasise music and practical skills, and a real sense of adventure. These were all key ingredients that went into the planning."

Harpreet Nandra comes to fetch Daljit Nandra, who is aged three. "To be honest we were unsure about putting him in a Sikh nursery at first," she says. "We were worried that being bilingual it might hinder his development in English and it might be socially isolating. But we're very pleased with his development – his speech, his confidence. On his days at home, he asks when he's going back to nursery."



Isherpreet Kaur and Amarpreet Kaur playing with some building blocks