

## **A Note on the Sikh Human Development Foundation, Inc. USA**

*The Sikh Human Development Foundation (hereafter SHDF), set up in 1999, is a totally non-political and a non-profit organization; donations to SHDF are exempt from income tax in USA. Every member of this organization works in an honorary capacity. SHDF does not have a single paid employee in USA and therefore it has negligible administrative expenses. The members of the SHDF Executive Council (i.e. Board of Directors) visit India at their own cost for meeting the scholarship recipients and college and university officials in Punjab, Nishkam officials (our cooperating and implementing institution) in Delhi and their volunteers spread all over Punjab. In case of natural calamities, SHDF even goes outside its normal geographical jurisdiction, like in case of the devastating Gujarat earthquake some years ago, SHDF provided emergency financial help to several college students there. The Prime Minister of India commended SHDF's work in general and its work in Gujarat in particular.*

*Over the past 11 years, SHDF has provided some 1,869 scholarships for professional college education to bright, promising, but poor students to help them become doctors, engineers, IT professionals, nurses, chartered accountants etc. Of these, some 649 scholarship recipients have already graduated and most of them are well employed. The transformational impact on these students, and equally importantly, on their families is striking; a scholarship becomes a life-time gift, it brings back dignity and hope to the recipient and his/her family. It has a multiplier effect too for their children. Each scholarship recipient becomes a part of the resurgent India and ceases to be a potential drag on the community and the country (more in a subsequent paragraph).*

*All the scholarship recipients are from families with income well below the poverty line; most of the students have per capita family income which is one third of the threshold for poverty line. Our beneficiary students include orphans, wards of widows/terminally sick parents, drivers, bicycle repairers, female tailors operating from home, female domestic servants, gurdwara sevadars, milk men, agricultural laborers and the like.*

*SHDF Board (called the Executive Council) comprises just seven professionals, namely, three retirees from the World Bank, plus one lady professor, one dentist – a respected public figure, one Principal Engineer with a top private sector company and one IT specialist) and is dedicated to serving our youth in Punjab and neighboring states. SHDF has recently appointed an eminent Sikh, as their Operations Advisor in Delhi to strengthen oversight and to guide Nishkam - its cooperating institution in India for some new initiatives. He is P.S. Bami, President India Energy Forum, which holds national and international conferences on Petroleum, Coal, Power and New and renewable Energy Sector. He is the former Chairman of India's National Thermal Power Corporation. Currently, he is also the chairman of the Academic Council of EMPI, a well-known and recognized business management school. In addition, he is a member of the Strategic Management Group, which is a group of senior level professionals from Industry, Government and Academia; this is an NGO, which undertakes studies and policy research on strategic management issues.*

*SHDF has spent a little less than a million dollars (nearly Rs. Four Crores) so far; over 90*

*percent of this went as pure scholarship money. Last year SHDF spent over \$200,000 (Rs. 90 lakhs) on 412 scholarships. SHDF raises these funds in USA from diverse sources. SHDF accounts are audited every year by independent auditors and it gets a clean chit every time; SHDF files a tax return every year.*

*SHDF is in good standing with the Governments of India and Punjab as is evidenced by messages from the Prime Minister of India, the then Minister for Youth Affairs, former Chairman of the Minorities Commission, Chairman, Punjab Farmers' Commission (a cabinet rank position) and University Vice chancellors. Please visit SHDF web-site [www.shdf.org](http://www.shdf.org). Please do not mind the simplicity of the web-site, it is pure volunteer work.*

*In India, Nishkam Sikh Welfare Council (Nishkam), located in Tilak Vihar, New Delhi is SHDF's cooperating institution and is responsible for ground implementation of SHDF's programs. This organization works for "sarbat da bhala", and is in good standing with the Government of India. It is authorized to receive remittances from abroad (foreign donations). Nishkam is largely a volunteer-managed organization set up in 1984 by Justice RS Narula and others; it has very limited paid staff. Its Board members are drawn from different professions (earlier it was dominated by retired civil servants), including business and small scale industrial sector. Currently, Sardar Kulvinder Singh Sawhney, a past general secretary and later Nishkam President is the Additional Registrar General of Census Operations in India. He is ex-officio Joint Secretary to the Government of India; he is perhaps the only serving civil servant on Nishkam Board. For SHDF work, Nishkam has one full time and one part time paid staff; in addition they rely on a network of volunteers across Punjab, which helps Nishkam in conducting written tests and interviews for applicants at five locations (Amritsar, Ludhiana, Faridkot, Delhi and Chandigarh). Mostly these volunteers are serving or retired teachers, headmasters and principals of colleges.*

### **Why is SHDF doing this?**

*SHDF ordinarily gives three reasons, namely:*

- 1. The cost of professional education has skyrocketed to a level (average cost: Rs. 50,000; maximum cost: Rs. 126,000 per annum) that low income families and even many middle income families just cannot afford. Though SHDF's maximum income limit is Rs. 150,000 per year, over 60 percent of the scholarships go to students whose family income is less than Rs. 75,000 per annum.*
- 2. In this age of computers, the internet and mobile phones (knowledge economy), professional college education alone can help our youth get decent jobs or be properly self-employed.*
- 3. SHDF believes in Sewa; the Sikh religion inspires them to serve humanity, which is equated with service to God.*

*But there is another overpowering reason which has not been sufficiently emphasized in the past. It is the fact that Punjab, which is the janam and karam bhumi of our Gurus, is getting close to a meltdown because of:*

- *An alarming high drug use amongst the youth and rising;*
- *Accelerating alcohol abuse for beyond traditional levels;*
- *The highest rate of farmer's suicides compared to any other state in India; there are grave social and economic issues;*
- *Environmental degradation which compels people even in some villages to drink bottled water;*
- *Threatened agriculture due to deteriorating soil and water quality over extended areas and progressively declining ground water availability;*

*Please note that about fifty percent of India's (and Punjab's) population is below the age of 25 years. A considerable section of these youth are mired in poverty and is being overwhelmed with deprivation and lack of opportunity for decent professional college education, because it is too expensive and therefore unaffordable.*

*Such an environment of hopelessness is an invitation to drugs, crime and terrorism; it is an invitation to spiritual bankruptcy and economic powerlessness. One way to pull them out of this combustible mess, before it is too late, is to financially help the promising amongst them complete professional degree courses, without which they remain unemployable. Every student thus helped is a life transformed. For the better. In fact, it also transforms the life of the family and eventually it will transform the nature and status of the civil society in Punjab and other states, where SHDF operates.*

*Improving civil society is never a one-shot affair; it is a long drawn out process. It takes four to six years, after high school, to produce one professional college graduate. In the absence of opportunities for higher education for large segments of our youth, India's oft quoted rich demographic dividend (with over 50 percent of the population being under the age of 25 years) is turning into a demographic liability in Punjab.*

*Therefore, SHDF work has a striking urgency about it. Our youth needs a helping hand to emerge out of this crisis situation. SHDF's carefully crafted and impeccably executed scholarship program over the past eleven years has won wide acclaim from several quarters, including the Prime Minister, University vice chancellors, writers and other eminent personalities. Most importantly, it has won the gratitude from the students and their families who feel that their lives have been transformed. Incidentally, 55 percent of our beneficiary students are from villages and more than 60 percent are female students. SHDF currently provides the most reliable arrangement for identifying the students, based on a written moral science test and an interview, and with students' applications and incomes certified by college principals.*

### **New Initiatives Proposed to be Executed over the Next two Years**

- *Fully activate the SHDF Alumni Association constituted in 2011*
- *Track and guide the career path of each scholarship recipient*
- *Hold periodical workshop in Punjab to impart leadership and entrepreneurial skills to scholarship recipients*
- *Conduct field verification of facts in selected cases as a guide to future rules and procedures*

- *Hold an annual retreat with scholarship recipients with a focus on ethical leadership with spiritual underpinnings*