

Kashmiri Pandit Convention 2006 And Its Aftermath

We just finished the four day KP convention in Chicago and people are still savoring its delicious experience and the euphoria of its apparent grand success is still making many people giddy. Was it really such a smashing success or was that just an illusion, the following analysis will attempt to answer ?

The event was planned to death and there is no wonder the product was well served. First of all being in a full-fledged resort as against a semi-resort like the one in Moodus, Ct, or. in Hershey, Pa, where many previous Camps were held, the convention started with certain advantages. The important activities took place under roofs and with proper furniture and stages, lending the events a professional touch. Also, the rooms were like regular motel rooms instead of being cheap places. The Indian Resort facility where the convention was held is 200 acres large, has two golf courses, tennis courts, indoor and outdoor pools, a restaurant, room service, and other amenities which you expect from a properly appointed resort. So, the convention had the appearance of a professionally organized event.

There must be hardly any participant who did not enjoy the experience of the convention. The place was good, the dinners were very good, and the music was excellent. The essence of a KP gathering, large and small, is meeting people. (It is more so for the people who realize our culture is on its way to extinction) That aspect of the event was eminently met. So, overall the convention was a success. But looking closely at the details you see there were bad decisions made and bad values used.

The Host City Did Not Welcome The Convention:

It was a shocking revelation to most of the conventioners that 85% of the host city, Chicago, KP's boycotted the event. The background of this hateful but successful boycott was that in 2005 two KP leaders of Chicago had a bad split over the future of KOA: one wanted Chicago KP's to break away from KOA, the other wanted to remain with it, in spite of strong reservations. This discord among Chicago KP's being well known, then why did KOA leadership decide to have the convention in that city. The last thing one wants is to be unwelcome by one's hosts. The convention could have been held in any central or western big city (to break away from the East Coast), where the guests would be welcomed.

Picnic:

On the second day of the convention, the conventioners were bussed to downtown Chicago for a picnic. It was a strange thing to do, as the conventioners were residing in a 200 acre resort, equipped with many recreational facilities. The Michigan Ave. in downtown Chicago is a posh place to visit but was it right to spend some four hours on this trip, when back in the resort many pleasurable activities could have been done, including katha-batha. The man whose idea it was to have the picnic in downtown Chicago explained to me that the some fifteen water fountains in the middle of the two micro city concrete parks, where the picnic was held, reminded him of Nishat Bagh in Kashmir. That was the image which pulled a few hundred vacationers out of a lovely resort to spend their precious hours in.

Entrepreneurship And Alternate Careers Seminars:

The convention visionaries thought that a seminar style event depicting the experiences and thoughts of three KP entrepreneurs will impart knowledge, insight, inspiration, and encouragement to the future KP entrepreneurs. There are hardly many young KP's who are preparing to be entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship and KP culture do not go together. There must not be more

than a thousand KP entrepreneurs in the world. At the top of it the event was stretched to two and a half hours. In the same missed-the-target spirit Alternative Careers seminar was held. Some six KP's answered several questions each about their careers: the nature of their careers, how they decided to select them, etc. It ate away another two and a half hours.

The five hours spent in the seminars could have been imaginatively spent on activities closer to people's hearts:

comic skits (like the ones done in the previous Camps), bathing in the resort pools, tennis, golf, or even katha-batha.

Keynote Speaker:

Why was the convention keynote speaker imported from Geneva when there were several people within US suitable to do that job? We could have saved three, four thousand dollars.

IAKF Fund Raising In The Convention:

It was shocking to find that IAKF was allowed to raise funds in a KOA convention. KOA is itself short of funds, why would it allow another organization to raise funds in its convention? I was told that higher levels of KOA had not been asked for the permission to do so.

Also, during the prime time (evening of the third day) IAKF was allowed an hour of speech making, advertising its organization. (KOA members know what IAKF does. Though it has a miniscule membership of only thirty eight, it does a good job of influencing US Congress on Kashmir Problem). This precious time could have been used by other speakers on important topics.

Sit Down Dinners:

Only the evening dinner was Kashmiri or Indian, all other meals were American. Many conventioners complained about it. The greatest problem with the food came when people realized that they could not refill their evening dinner plate because this was a sit down dinner. To give a sit down dinner to a KP is a punishment. At the time of the excitement especially, a KP likes to eat more; if not anything else, then rice. When a KP can not have another helping of rice, then he certainly can not enjoy his meals, especially when they are well cooked, which they were on all the convention nights.

Why was it decided to have a sit down dinner instead of the usual buffet? It was certainly not done for tamping the costs (because sit down dinners need more waiter service, therefore they are costlier than buffets). It was suggested that it was done because of the appearance of neatness that the sit down dinner affords. What an eccentric notion at the cost of the deprived pleasure of having a full meal.

Happy Hour:

The end of the day happy hours turned out to be not so happy. This is because they were poorly designed. They were held away from the resort building, over a parking lot (though under a tent). The only food stuff there used to have was some cheese cubes. There was a cash bar (rightly cash). If the convention management had spent less on the keynote speaker and the concrete park picnic in the downtown, they would have been left with more money to spend on the happy hours.

Financing Of The Convention:

KOA leadership allowed the convention management to raise \$30,000 in donations beyond what could be raised through the attendance of the conventioners. (In fact there was no limit to what the convention management could have raised privately - it could have been in hundreds of thousands of dollars. KOA management had no qualms about it) This is a case of extraordinarily poor judgment on part of KOA leadership. What if the donated money was tainted with political, commercial, or criminal designs. Would it not besmirch the reputation of the entire KP community, if an evil design behind a donation hurt or embarrassed us. Never should KOA allow private donations to fund a KOA event. It should be forbidden.

Attendance:

A few days before the start of the convention there was a panic among the convention management because not enough people had registered to attend the convention, which could have meant a loss of KOA's differential of the minimum deposit to the resort. The management sent SOS's for more conventioners. Why plan a convention when there is not much confidence in getting the minimum people needed to make the event? Most of the attendees were from outside Chicago. The person managing the kitchen told me the highest number of attendees were on the third night, when she counted two hundred eight dinner plates being served.

Visiting Artistes:

The four visiting artistes from India were not set up for engagements beyond the convention for the reason that the people from the places where they would perform would be less tempted to attend the convention. On the last day of the

convention the artistes were looking dejected for being shabbily treated, as at that time some of them did not know where they will be sleeping that night, let alone what their program will be in the next few weeks, before their eventual departure to India.

Conclusion:

No one can say that the convention management and volunteers did not work very hard to make it the greatest gathering of KP's in the recent history anywhere in the world. But hard work alone cannot guarantee success unless it is coupled with the right vision. Chicago KP Convention was more designed to be a conference than a cultural gathering of KP's. Its leader has a business perspective of the KP condition. He thinks a business approach is the best way to shore up our culture. That is why there were two business related seminars in the event.

Grandiosely crafted events do not necessarily touch a human heart. The next KP Convention leaders must think carefully before copying the themes and the vision of this convention. They should design an event that brings people closer and makes them have some fun. It should be more like a mela than a conference.

After all the analyses and discussions everyone has to look into his or her intellectual conscience to find whether the just ended KP Convention in Chicago was a brilliant tour de force of vision and planning or a good attempt that could have been greatly improved upon.