

**GURDWARA**  
**- CONCEPT AND INSTITUTION -**

**INSTITUTE OF SIKH STUDIES**  
**CHANDIGARH**



**GURDWARA**  
**– CONCEPT AND INSTITUTION –**

by  
Dr Gurdev Singh Sangha

Edited by  
Dr Dharam Singh

**INSTITUTE OF SIKH STUDIES**  
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*Gurdwara – Concept & Institution*  
by Dr Gurdev Singh Sangha

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through the draft and making very useful suggestions.

I hope the book will be of interest and help to scholars and students in the field of Sikh Studies. I accept as mine whatever shortcomings the readers might find in the book and attribute all its merits to the grace of God and to my friends from whom I have learnt whatever I know on the subject.

June 14, 2017

GURDEV SINGH SANGHA  
Kitchener, Toronto (Canada)

## PREFACE

Gurdwara is a place of Sikh worship, symbol of Sikh religion, Sikh community life and a nursery of Sikh beliefs and Sikh faith. It is a pivot and visible symbol of basic fundamental Sikh doctrines, Sikh philosophy, Sikh ideology, Sikh value system and Sikh religious and societal ethos, Gurdwara, both in terms of its concept and visible manifest form, is the original as well as permanent, structure in which the sacred Sikh scripture Sri Guru Granth Sahib's volume of text remains installed on a raised platform in its Sanctorum, where devout Sikhs congregate every morning and evening, listen to and participate in the recitation and choral singing of Sikh sacred verses (Gurbani), meditate, and listen to the choral singing of verses to the accompaniment of musical string and percussion instruments and listen to teachings of Sikh Gurus being preached from the Gurdwara pulpit. Gurdwara, with its distinct Sikh architectural design with its four doors opening in four directions symbolic of its universal appeal, its saffron flag on a flagpost in front (called *Nishan Sahib*), its community kitchen (*Langar*) and night shelter (*Sarai*) is the foundational institution of Sikh religion.

This well-researched and well-documented work on Gurdwara's Concept, Institution, its origin, evolution, history, functions, practices, achievements, challenges it faced and overcame and the present day challenges, distortions and inadequacies in its institutional duty of preaching the Sikh tenets and ethos to the modern-day Sikh youth / generation and deficiencies in management alongwith suggested solutions is indeed a significant work in Sikh studies. It not only defines and crystallizes the basic spiritual and philosophical concept

of Gurdwara but also chronicles its emergence as the foundational Sikh institution in the form of its rudimentary prototypes of *sangat*, *dharamsal* and its gradual conversion into Gurdwara form its earliest inception at Bhai Lalo's residence to its formal establishment at Kartarpur in Punjab by Guru Nanak in the medieval age. Then onwards, Gurdwara as the premier Sikh institution has been continuously evolving and expanding through the ages. Today, Gurdwara with its distinct standardized architecture design (*Able Mukam*), its sacred Sikh scripture installed in its sanctum sanctorum, (*Able kitab*) its saffron Sikh flag (*Able Nishan*), its pulpit for preaching the Sikh gospel, its community kitchen (*langar*) and its accommodation for religious pilgrims together with its other missionary and welfare activities is the most significant icon of Sikhism as an organized religion. It has always been a rallying point for the Sikh community both during the moments of crisis as well as periods of prosperity all over the globe. This records the complete profile of Gurdwara as institution including its chronological and historical growth in western countries with reliable documentary evidence. Besides, it explains the concept, methodology and significance of various Gurdwara practices of Gurdwara management and Sikh social ceremonies. It also presents a searching critique of various contemporary Gurdwara practices and suggests remedial measures for the resolution of these distortions and malpractices which have crept in with the passage of time. Therefore, this treatise is a scholarly tour-de-survey as well as a timely academic audit of this august institution. Behind this comprehensive and scholarly account of the author, the brilliant and visionary guidance of his research guide, Dr Dharam Singh, Professor of Sikh Studies and Editor-in-Chief of *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Punjabi University, Patiala (retd) is unmistakable. His scholarly guidance puts a stamp of credibility and authoritative standardization on this work.

It is this authenticity of opinion which prompted us to adopt this work for publication, by the Institute of Sikh Studies. Its translation into English by us and its publication would enable the Sikhs and the diaspora Sikh community to be conversant with the conceptual and institutional framework of this central Sikh institution and structure, the management of the Gurdwaras under the control of respective managements in tandem with the basic Sikh tenets and bring about a uniformity in Gurdwara practices all over the globe.

October 1st, 2017

Kulwant Singh  
President,  
Institute of Sikh Studies,  
Chandigarh

## INTRODUCTION

Institutions play a very important role in every religion and these institutions stand for the fundamental principles of that religion. Undoubtedly, it is the individuals who play a major role in the implementation of the religious doctrines, but it is through the important medium of the religious institutions that those individuals tend to implement the religious doctrines. It is, therefore, evident that even for the establishment of the supremacy of the religious doctrines, religious institutions form the basis. Individuals also carry on their work through the institutions and the individuals who run these institutions on the basis of doctrines, become worthy of love and veneration of the entire community.

Gurdwara, besides being an important institution of Sikh religion, is also a unique centre for creating Guru-consciousness. Symbolically, it is also non-local and non-temporal. In other words, Guru-consciousness in itself constitutes a Gurdwara, a Dharamsal, a beatific entity and a temple of God. Gurdwara, in its institutional form, is located in place and time. Influenced by history, it develops and even ceases to exist at times. Like all other institutions, institution of Gurdwara also grapples with its local ground realities, is impacted by those realities as well as impacts them and many a time strikes a compromise with the existing circumstances. Obviously, such a compromise is made at the level of its local and day to day activities rather than at the level of its fundamental principles.

This book, which is a thoroughly revised version of my doctoral dissertation on this subject, is an endeavour to analyse this paradoxical role of the institution of the Gurdwara from a historical and philosophical perspective.

No doubt, idea/ideology is independent of any institution

as it is intangible and without any social face at the conceptual level. But if the idea or truth is to manifest itself in the form of a way of life or tangible (social) conduct, then it needs a medium for its communication to the society at large. This medium, invariably and always, is in the form of an institution. It is true that communication is possible even without an institution these days. For instance, internet has not only freed communication from its dependence on institutions but it has also revolutionized it by making it instant and universal. But internet (which, being systematic, can be termed as institution also) is solely centred on communication whereas institution under consideration, i.e., Gurdwara, which translates truth into human conduct has to be accountable for the truthfulness/reliability of its communicated ideas or ideology. Its vision and direction are already determined and all possibilities of modification and course correction are inbuilt in its activities. In this book, we have endeavoured to analyse and project the view that the institution of Gurdwara has been based on the basis of congregation (*Sangat*). Congregation or *sangat* is the final authority to determine the work-culture and related activities of a Gurdwara. It is the congregational basis of Gurdwara which safeguards the institution of Gurdwara from the autocratic style of administration. Sikh tradition goes to the extent of placing the congregation (*sangat*) a step higher than the Guru.

It is impossible to imbibe or cultivate Sikh precepts or Sikh way of life (*Gurmat*) in isolation of the congregation (*sangat*). Even if it is imbibed, it is not acknowledged. Individual realization always smacks of egotism/egoism. Seen in this context, concept of congregation does remain limited to a social unity but becomes an embodiment of an epistemic unit. Such a concept of congregation plays a crucial role in the evolution of the institution of Gurdwara with far-reaching consequences. This way congregation acts like a live wire

between Gurbani and Gurdwara. It saves the Gurdwara from being a mere administrative unit and monitors its progress and practice. In this book, efforts have been made to project such a concept of congregation primarily and analyse its role in the evolution of the institution of Gurdwara.

It can be normally stated that an idea is complete in itself in its abstract form and that it is but natural that it gets somewhat disintegrated or distorted during its implementation or transformation into some concrete or material form. This way, no institution is a perfect or true copy of its underlying ideology or concept. It is quite natural for an institution to divert a little bit from its fundamental ideological basis with the passage of time. Human history is replete with such diversions from the ancient caste system in India to the Soviet socialism in the recent times. Generally, the main object of an institution either becomes irrelevant or becomes less effective with the timely changes in circumstances. But the institution of Gurdwara is immune from such ravages of time. Gurbani (divine verses by Sikh Gurus and Bhagats), which forms the basis of Gurdwara, is an expression of those human urges and experiences which are universal and relevant for all times. Consciousness which we have termed as Guru-consciousness or (*Gurmat* or *Guru Surat*) which is imperative for a man to be human is a technique or an art of living for self-realisation. Therefore, there is no possibility of its becoming obsolete or irrelevant at any period of time. Secondly, an institution becomes irrelevant or obsolete when its underlying ideology is either ambiguous or adulterated. Gurdwara, as an institution, is free from this blemish as well. Its main objective has always remained evident and will continue to be evident. Its message is recorded in the divine verses contained in Guru Granth Sahib. As we know clearly, there is no scope for any sort of adulteration in its contents. Therefore, its quintessential message can never get adulterated or corrupted. In other words,

institution of Gurdwara will always remain relevant.

Thirdly, dominance of clergy or priesthood over an institution can also lead to its downfall. There is no concept of priesthood in Sikh religion as well as in institution of Gurdwara. There, definitely, came a moment or a period in the history of Gurdwara, when this institution came to be dominated, rather possessed by a priestly class known as Masands and Mahants. The Sikhs had to wage a long struggle against this aberration. Although evidently the main objective behind those Sikh agitations (*Morchas*) was to restore the sanctity of Gurdwaras but implicitly these objectives were based on the fundamental Sikh premise that there could be no dominance of any priestly class over the religious and spiritual concerns of the people. This role belongs to the congregation which is a conglomerate of all the individuals professing their faith in the Gurdwara.

As globalization, technology and commercialization have influenced almost all other human organizations, the institution of Gurdwara has also come under its impact. Some of these influences have been constructive and these have contributed to the realization of Gurdwaras' main objectives. But along with these consequences, there has been an implicit influx of certain values in the institutional set up of Gurdwara which as an institution was supposed to guard against. For instance, certain functions of the Gurdwara are getting commercialized day by day. Recitation of Gurbani singing (*kiratan*) and non-stop recitation of Gurbani text (*Akhand Path*) have almost been commercialized. If this trend continues at this pace, then even the genuine devotees would also appear to be customers. These challenges and gravity of this situation is likely to become more acute in the case of an institution belonging to a minority or a diaspora community.

In the present day globalised world, each one's destiny is linked to everyone else's destiny. If the institution of Gurdwara

is to maintain its relevance and make a significant contribution to the modern society, then it has to take notice of all those problems with which the modern day man is struggling. It has to adopt and implement the ideal of working for the whole humanity. In this research dissertation, we have tried to pinpoint all those insights in the divine verses (Gurbani) which contribute to the promotion of a universally meaningful model of Gurdwara. In such a model, the entire globe is looked upon as a place of worship (*Dharamsal*) and each human being and every specie is looked upon as an embodiment of the Divine. This kind of outlook shall form the basis of mankind's unity and equality. When such a universal vision becomes the guiding principle of Gurdwara, then it shall be able to play its beneficent role in the emerging modern society successfully.

Gurdwaras are those central institutions of Sikh religion where we see glimpses of its fundamental principles such as love of humanity, equality, justice, public welfare, independence and self-confidence, being practiced. From the Sikh point of view, a congregational venue (*Dharamsal*) is the basis of a Gurdwara where people congregate to meditate upon the name of the Divine. Wherever a congregation was formed or wherever people started meditating according to the prescribed code, a Gurdwara or a *dharamsal* came into existence there.

Whatever information or literature we get about the framework of the institution of Gurdwara so far, it is limited only to the historical context such as its origin and development. Among these books written from this point of view, we find Tara Singh Narotam's *Sri Guru Tirath Sangrah*, Giani Thakur Singh's *Sri Gurdwara Darshan*, Gurmukh Singh's *The Historical Sikh Shrines*, Patwant Singh's *The Gurdwaras* and some other sources. But in these books, the authors have given a historical background of each Gurdwara along with its present day administration. In addition to these books, some other scholars

like Kashmir Singh and Surjit Singh Gandhi have written a few books on the basis of the Gurdwaras Act. These books, instead of defining the concept and institution of a Gurdwara, have dwelt upon the shortcomings in the Gurdwara Act and stressed upon the suggestions to make the governing bodies of these Gurdwaras elected according the Gurdwara Act more efficient and effective. So in these writings, portrayal of the concept of a Gurdwara based on Gurbani or Guru Granth Sahib has not been brought about.

We have divided this book into five parts. In the first chapter, we have tried to define the Gurdwara both as a concept and as an institution. Gurdwara based on the Sikh principles is supposed to inculcate values of individual and public welfare in human beings after leading them on the path of truthfulness. But for a Sikh, Gurdwara is not a religious place only. Its sphere of activity is multifold. It provides guidance in the religious, social, political and cultural fields of a Sikh's life. In this chapter, we have endeavoured to show that the Gurdwara satisfies both the spiritual as well as physical cravings of a devotee by providing spiritual enlightenment through Gurbani dissemination and by providing food through the community kitchen (*langar*). For bringing about a comprehensive definition of Gurdwara, we have tried to highlight the important role played by the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, congregation, *gurbani* and *kirtan* recitation, community kitchen and voluntary services in a Gurdwara and the significant contribution made by these major organs of a Gurdwara towards the implementation of fundamental principles of Sikh religion. Gurdwara, besides being an important institution of Sikh religion, is a unique centre for inculcation of Gurmat or Gursikh way of life. In this chapter, we have also dwelt upon this view that Gurmat or Gursikh way of life is what a Gurdwara or *Dharamsal* is. It cannot be cultivated without being a part of the congregation or Sangat. Even if it is cultivated in

isolation, it lacks credibility. Congregation or *sangat* functions in the form of a live wire between Gurbani and the institution of Gurdwara. It saves this institution from becoming a merely administrative unit and continuously monitors its progress and practice.

The second chapter deals with the origin of the institution of Gurdwara and its development in the Indian context. Guru Nanak set up congregations at many places during his preaching odysseys, also known as *udasis* in Sikh parlance, and these places came to be called *Dharamsals*. It can be easily stated that *Dharamsal* is the original form of Gurdwara as an institution. Their first ever congregation was set up at Bhai Lalo's residence at Saidpur. Although every place where people congregate and remember Name Divine can be called a *Dharamsal* but the first *Dharamsal* which was established under the personal supervision of Guru Nanak and where Guru Nanak used to stay in between his odysseys is supposed to have been set up at Kartarpur. Guru Nanak had himself laid down the conventions and rules of its daily religious service. Subsequently, Guru Angad Dev set up the second congregational centre at Khadoor Sahib. The day to day religious service and management of this congregational *Dharamsal* was run under the personal supervision of Guru Angad Dev. Similarly, the successive Sikh Gurus set up Sikh congregations at several places and every place holding congregation became a *Dharamsal*. As the number of these congregations and *Dharamsals* kept on increasing, it was not possible for the Sikh Gurus to maintain a personal contact with each of these congregations. So the responsibility of guiding and monitoring these congregations and *Dharamsals* was vested in the *Manjidars* and then *Masands* who were then the leading Sikh personalities known for their commitment to the Gurus' teaching and their personal piety. This system of managing these dioceses through the *Masands* kept working efficiently till the time of Guru Arjun Dev. The construction

of Harimandar Sahib at Amritsar had also been completed during his tenure and the Sikh scripture, then known as the Pothis Sahib, was also installed in the Harmandar. It was during the tenure of Guru Hargobind that the name Dharamsal came to be rechristened and renamed as Gurdwara.

In this chapter, we have tried to give a brief of the institution of Gurdwara from its beginning at Kartarpur up to the modern times. We have also tried to analyse the various stages in the history of the Gurdwara institution and the major challenges it faced at each stage. After the period of Sikh Gurus' direct supervision of this institution, it passed into the hands of Manjinders, Masands, Udasis and the Mahants. Effort has also been made to mention the setting up of a democratic system of managing the Gurdwaras which came into being after a long struggle waged against the dynastic control of the Gurdwaras by the Mahants. Gurdwara has been the centre of all the religious, political and social activities of the Sikhs right from the Guru Period. In this chapter, we have also endeavoured to state how the institution of Gurdwara played a significant role in the teaching and training of a defeated and depressed section of Indian society to maintain its religious, political and cultural independence and self-respect. This aspect has been discussed in detail.

In the third chapter, we have taken up the issue of the Sikhs/Punjabis living in foreign countries and the history of their setting up of Gurdwaras in those countries. We have limited the scope of our study to the countries of Canada, America and England. In this chapter, we have made efforts to give authentic information about the arrival of the Sikhs in these countries and their related history. We have analysed the role of the Government in these countries, the white society, union leadership and the problems faced by the Sikhs/Indians arising out of the racial discrimination practiced against them and the role played by their religious institutions. The Sikhs

had established the Khalsa Diwan Society at Vancouver in Canada in 1907 to combat the challenge of racial discrimination. This institution became the first representative organization of the Sikhs in North America. It was under the patronage of this Society that the institution of Gurdwara developed in North America. In the same year, the first Gurdwara was established in Vancouver in 1866, Second Avenue West under the supervision of Khalsa Diwan Society. Similarly the first Gurdwara was set up in America at South Grant Street in Stockton in 1912. In England, Gurdwara was established at a property taken on lease at # 79, Sinclair Road, Shepherdbush.

In this chapter, besides giving information about settlement of the Sikhs in these countries and the related history of their setting up of Gurdwaras, we have made efforts to narrate the process of setting up of Gurdwaras in these countries and the problems faced by them. The role played by the Gurdwara in dealing with those problems and providing solutions and in keeping the Sikhs connected to their religion and culture, has been taken up in this chapter. During the first two decades of twentieth century, many Gurdwaras in America and Canada organized the Ghadr Movement for the independence of India and many Sikhs/Punjabis even played an active part by reaching India to wage a struggle for India's independence. These days Gurdwaras have been established in many small and big cities in America which have some Sikh population. In this chapter, we have tried to discuss the activities being carried out in these Gurdwaras and the problems being faced by the Sikhs in these countries and their possible solutions.

We have also highlighted the efforts made by the Sikhs residing in Canada, America and England to create awareness in the western society about their (Sikh) religion, society and culture and their outlook for the future. We have also pointed

out briefly the role being played by the Sikhs in the political and economic spheres of these countries. Institution of Gurdwara in these countries has played a significant role in uniting the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of Indian origin from the very beginning. The important role played by the Gurdwara in the movement for India's independence during the first half of the twentieth century has also been analysed in this chapter.

The fourth chapter discusses the functioning and management of other institutions connected with the Gurdwara. It has been our endeavour to highlight the efforts of Gurdwara-related institutions in the implementation of *Gurmat* philosophy and the extent of success achieved by these institutions. Every institution struggles with the ground realities, is influenced by those circumstances as well as influences those circumstances. In this way, it keeps its identity intact. Institution of Gurdwara has to mould and shape Sikh religion, society, culture and politics according to *Gurmat* philosophy through its institutional infrastructure and management. For the realization of these aims and objectives, several Gurdwara-related institutions such as *langar* (community kitchen), *Manjis*, *Masand*, Akal Takht, Khalsa Panth, *Sarbat Khalsa*, and *Gurmatta* came into existence. These institutions have laid down the foundation of an egalitarian social structure and gave a practical shape to the divine message of *Gurmat* philosophy for the universal welfare of whole humanity by organizing the Sikh community into a solid, disciplined and distinct community.

In chapter five, we have tried to discuss the challenges being faced by the institution of Gurdwara. These challenges primarily consist of the increasing tendency towards emphasis on external manifestation of Gurdwara centres like (marbled buildings) instead of the stress upon the underlying spirit of a Gurdwara, lack of *Gurmat* preaching, ignorance about the concept of *Shabad* Guru and the increasing trend of following

egoistic and highly individualistic monasteries and sects, the increasing factional groupism among the Sikhs, Gurdwaras established on the basis of castes and communities and ignorance of the fundamental Gurmat philosophy among those assigned with the task of preaching *gurmat*. We have made efforts to pinpoint some of these challenges and tried to suggest ways and means to deal with these challenges. It is obvious that these suggestions should be in accordance with the Sikh doctrines, Sikh history and Sikh traditions. In nutshell, we have tried to make certain suggestions for the resolution of all these shortcomings and aberrations which have crept into the Gurdwara management and the prevalent practices being followed in Gurdwaras. We can do away with many of these malpractices and aberrations by implementing those suggestions.

Modern science and scientific knowledge has laid down techniques for proper analysis of every subject. That is why, it has itself become a major subject of analysis. Our main subject of study is concerned with the institution of Gurdwara based on the fundamental principles of Sikh religion. For meeting the ends of our research objectives, we have primarily tried to analyse this subject through the historical and phenomenological tools.

□

## CHAPTER 1

### GURDWARA CONCEPT AND INSTITUTION

The concept and institution of Gurdwara is as old as Sikh religion and Sikh history. Not only does it occupy the position of a religious place in the Sikh way of life, but it has also provided guidance to the Sikhs in every sphere of life during every period of Sikh history. It has moulded and uplifted the Sikh way of life. Gurdwara remains inseparable from Sikh life at every stage, be it an occasion of joy or grief, victory or defeat. Gurdwara is an integral part of Sikh daily life.

Gurdwara has played a very important role in nation-building among the Sikhs. It has remained the pivot of Sikh religious, political and social life. It satiates the spiritual craving of a seeker of the divine through the message of the *gurbani*, as well as fulfills the nutritional needs of the needy through the provision of food in *langar* (community kitchen). It is a centre of learning for learners and a shelter for the destitute and shelterless. It inspires the Sikhs; it boosts their morale to combat tyranny, oppression and injustice and to defend and uphold human rights and dignity. Thus, Sikhs remain integrated with the Gurdwara from birth till death.

In the beginning, the Gurdwara was known by the name *dharamsal*. Guru Nanak set up *Dharamsals* at different locations during his *udasis* (preaching odysseys). Guru Arjan Dev gave the name of Harmandir to the place of worship constructed in the centre of the sacred pool at Amritsar. The name Gurdwara came into usage during the tenure of Guru Hargobind.<sup>1</sup>

The basic information about the concept and institution of Gurdwara is derived from the *Gurbani* in Guru Granth Sahib and the *Vars* (ballads) of Bhai Gurdas. These two sources identify the installation of Guru Granth Sahib inside the sanctum sanctorum of a Gurdwara, congregation of devotees, recitation and musical rendering (*kirtan*) of Gurbani, *langar* (community kitchen), Gurdwara building and fluttering Khalsa flag outside as the definitive and visual manifestations of a Gurdwara.

The Gurdwara is a religious place and institution of the Sikhs where *gurmat* philosophy is preached and propagated and instruction regarding the Sikh way of life is imparted. The Gurdwara teaches human beings the technique to achieve salvation (*jivan-mukti*) while simultaneously fulfilling all the duties and obligations of a householder.<sup>2</sup>

The literal meaning of the word *gurdwara* is *dwara* or door/abode of the Guru; implicitly, it is a place where abides the Guru.<sup>3</sup> In other words, word as enshrined in the scripture is the Guru for the Sikhs, and Gurdwara is a place where the Guru Granth is installed. It is a place where Guru Granth Sahib is always present. Every Gurdwara has at least one room for discourse and congregation. Wherever the sacred Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, is kept open daily, there the devotees assemble in the form of a congregation, *gurbani* is recited and a discourse on *gurbani* is delivered. In addition to the recitation of *gurbani* from Guru Granth Sahib, passages from the compositions of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal can also be read and discoursed upon. With the passage of time, commentary on Sikh historical events, religious, political and social issues related to the Sikhs, as well as issues of general public interest, have also been made a part of Gurdwara discourse. The tall fluttering Khalsa flag atop the Gurdwara building is visible even from a distance.

*Sangat* (congregation) and *Pangat/ Langar* sitting in a line

for the partaking of food are two other integral components of a Gurdwara. While the recitation of *gurbani* and discourse delivered inside the Gurdwara provide spiritual sustenance to the congregation, the *langar* (community kitchen) caters to the physical needs of the human body. In both congregation and community kitchen, nobody is discriminated against on the basis of region, nationality, caste, gender, economic status or religion. All human beings are equal partners in a Gurdwara.

No scripture other than Guru Granth Sahib can be installed inside the Gurdwara. No idol can be installed or worshipped inside the Gurdwara. There is no provision for a hierarchical order of clergymen, fire worship or any kind of sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> According to the prescribed Sikh Code of Conduct, no anti-Gurmat ceremony or ritual is allowed to be solemnized inside the Gurdwara, or any festival other than a Sikh festival celebrated there.<sup>5</sup> No place without a flag post supporting a Khalsa flag or without Guru Granth Sahib installed can be called a Gurdwara.<sup>6</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib is a sort of constitutional statute for the Sikhs and its ideology provides guidelines for the everyday life of Sikhs. The Khalsa flag outside the Gurdwara hall but within the precincts of the Gurdwara is the religious insignia of the Sikhs.

The Gurdwara is the pivot of the religious, political and social activities of the Sikhs. The entire life of a Sikh is integrated with the Gurdwara. The Gurdwara's sphere of activity is multifarious, not limited to any one sphere of Sikh life. Speaking about the Gurdwara as a multifarious sphere of activity, the celebrated Sikh scholar Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha writes, "Gurdwara is an educational centre for a learner, spiritual guide for the divine seeker, dispensing hospital for the sick, provision store for the hungry and destitute, protective fort for the safety of women's dignity and a shelter for the traveller."<sup>7</sup> The Gurdwara is an embodiment of the Sikhs' devotion, faith and honour. History bears witness to the fact

that plans to annihilate the Sikhs physically and morally always began with seeking to destroy their Gurdwaras. When the Gurdwaras perish, with them perish the Sikhs.

A Sikh always seeks guidance from the Gurdwara for every activity in his life as the Gurdwara is the guiding institution. It is here in the Gurdwara that a Sikh seeks the company of the virtuous in the congregation, listens to the message of the Guru through a sermon and the recitation of *Gurbani* and seeks guidance for his life. In the Sikh religion, emphasis is laid upon reading or listening to *gurbani*, reflecting on it, while sitting in a Gurdwara because the quintessential message of the *gurbani* provides guidance for the art of living. Therefore, it emphasises that this message be understood and implemented in everyday life. It is for this reason that the Guru (Guru Granth Sahib) is highly venerated in the Sikh religion.

The word ‘Guru’ is from Sanskrit. It has been derived from the element ‘gri’ which means to swallow, digest or experience. In other words, a Guru is one who removes ignorance and, by removing it, brings in knowledge and enlightenment. In Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha’s words, “Among the Indian religions, one who enlightens an ignorant through his own knowledge is known as Guru.”<sup>8</sup> He can be a human teacher who teaches a skill or an art to his students. In the Sikh religion, the ten Gurus (from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh) and Guru Granth Sahib alone have the status of Guru. Except these, no one else, however knowledgeable or hallowed, can be assigned the status of Guru.<sup>9</sup> In the Sikh tradition, Guru stands as much for human teacher or preceptor as for the Divine and we find the word used in both senses. As a human preceptor, Guru in Sikh tradition means the ten spiritual preceptors, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh; no other person, however pious or enlightened, can claim or be accepted as such. Thereafter, it has been *bani* or the Word uttered by the Gurus which has been called and acknowledged as Guru. Since the

Word as communicated by the ten spiritual preceptors and as contained in scripture is Divine, the Sikh tradition sometimes uses the words God (the source of the Word or revelation), the Word (divine message) and Guru (the instrument used by the Divine to communicate that message to mankind) as synonyms. No doubt, at places in the Sikh scripture Guru stands as much for the human teacher or preceptor as for Divine and we find the word used in both the senses. However, this identification of the Guru with God is not the identification of person of the Guru with God, but Guru conceived as *sabda* or Word as revealed by Him. In the Sikh tradition the Guru as a person is neither God nor God's incarnation.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, we can say that the *gurbani* (divine verses) recorded in Guru Granth Sahib is knowledge of the Divine. It is the revealed Word of the Timeless Creator or God. This Word or *bani* was revealed to human beings through the Gurus, Saints and Bhagats at a moment when they were in communion with God. The realization which the Sikh Gurus and Bhagats experienced during this moment of communion was delivered to the world in the form of Word (*sabad*) or Gurbani.

“Becoming one with the Guru was the Word delivered.”<sup>11</sup>

Sikh Gurus do not claim that the Gurbani is their creation. They attribute it to the perfect Guru, the divine revelation communicated through them. They say:

“Blessed! Blessed is the Gurbani of the Perfect Guru.

It merged in the Real one (the person who imbibes it in his heart)”<sup>12</sup>

On the basis of what has been stated in Guru Granth Sahib, we can confidently say that *gurbani* is spiritual knowledge. It has been received directly from God. So it is knowledge of the Divine Himself. It is for this reason that God and *Gurbani* have been used as synonymous terms in the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib. *Gurbani* is the means of communicating with the Divine. That is why in a Gurdwara emphasis is laid upon

the listening to and reading of *Gurbani* and understanding its message. The *Gurbani* of Guru Granth Sahib teaches mankind the art of living. *Sikhi* or the Sikh way of life is not the way of mere intellectual acrobatics. It strives to make a person an embodiment of truth. A Sikh is required to seek guidance from *gurbani* by understanding it and by imbibing its essence through the medium of Gurdwara. Its message guides him in the religious, political and social aspects of his life. It is through the cultivation of this knowledge that he becomes an embodiment of truth.

The various spiritual practices related to *gurmat* (Sikh way of life) such as concentration and meditation upon God's Name, social service, listening to *gurbani*, recitation and sermons, partaking of food with others in the *langar* (community kitchen) are steps towards self-realisation or attaining a state of enlightenment and truthful living. Traversing these steps, a Sikh can redeem his life and become an embodiment of truth as well as assist others to tread a similar path of life.<sup>13</sup> In order to learn the art of truthful living, a Sikh is required to keep in contact with the Gurdwara to seek guidance from the Word-Guru.<sup>14</sup>

The tradition of visualizing *gurbani* as the Guru has been in practice in the Sikh religion since the time of Guru Nanak. At several places in the text of Guru Granth Sahib, *gurbani* or *sabad* has been explicitly identified as the Guru. Guru Gobind Singh, before breathing his last on October 6, 1708, gave a commandment to the Sikhs terminating the practice of having a Guru in human form. After his demise, nobody was entitled to call himself the Guru among the Sikhs. From then on, Guru Granth Sahib was to be the Guru of the Sikhs. Guru Arjun Dev compiled *bani* of Guru Nanak and other preceding Gurus as *sabad* or Word received from God in Adi Granth and installed it in Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar in 1604. Guru Arjun Dev always installed the volume (Adi Granth) at a higher level than

the one taken by him and others to sit on. The subsequent Gurus also venerated the Granth. Later the *bani* of the 9<sup>th</sup> Nanak (Guru Tegh Bahadur) was added by the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who anointed it as Guru Eternal of the Sikhs in a formal ceremony at Nanded in 1708 before his divine soul merged with God. His message to that effect is daily sung by *sangat* the world over as follows:

Acknowledge the Granth as the mainfest.

He who wants to realize God person of the Guru's should discover Him in the Word.<sup>15</sup>

In the Sanskrit composition "*Nanakchandroday Mahakavyam*" written by Dev Raj Sharma there is further mention of Guru Gobind Singh's conferring the status of Guru on the 'Word' (*Gurbani*). In addition to this, the *Rehatnama* (Code of Conduct) written by Guru Gobind Singh's contemporary, the poet Bhai Nand Lal, mentions that it is through 'Word' (*Gurbani*) that one can find access to the Guru. Sikhs are prohibited from accepting any scripture or any person as their Guru other than Sri Guru Granth Sahib. After the ten Sikh Gurus, Sri Guru Granth Sahib alone is their Guru. It is the commandment of the tenth Sikh Guru that Sri Guru Granth Sahib be considered as the Guru:

"With Timeless Creator's express will has Sikh (*Panth*) been initiated,

All the Sikhs are commanded to regard Granth as their Guru."<sup>16</sup>

After bestowing the Guruship on Granth Sahib, there is no provision for considering anybody in human form as the Guru among the Sikhs. Therefore, every Sikh and every Sikh institution is required to regard Guru Granth Sahib as the Guru. The Guru is believed to be embodied in the Granth in the form of divine presence and the Guru's temporal manifestation is the (Sikh) Panth. So, in accordance with the commandment of Guru Gobind Singh to accept Guru Granth Sahib as the Guru, every Sikh in his individual capacity as well as collectively

as the Khalsa Panth have been commanded to lead their lives according to the message of Guru Granth Sahib. The ‘Khalsa Panth’, as it follows the divine Word as included in the Granth, has been invested with the guruship – Guru-Panth; as such it has the authority to take decisions for the well-being of the community:

“Consider Khalsa as the Guru, it being Guru’s manifest body. Any Sikh desirous to seek me, should perceive me among the Khalsa.”<sup>17</sup>

It is not an over-simplification to say that Granth or *gurbani* manifests itself as *Panth* when the latter brings into practice the precepts of *gurbani*. Like the invisible and manifest aspects of God, *Granth* and *Panth* are two sides of the same coin.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the divine light is manifest in the Khalsa Panth.<sup>19</sup> Those who still lay emphasis upon the importance of the Guru in human form do not realise that it was precisely to counter such a situation that Guru Gobind Singh laid down the following three-fold doctrine:

“Worship of the Timeless (Divine);  
Knowledge of the Gurbani;  
And Glimpse of the Khalsa.”<sup>20</sup>

Guru Nanak’s mission was the reformation and welfare of all humanity. His aim was to provide succour to those exploited by religion and politics and to work for the establishment of an egalitarian society by creating awareness of human rights among the oppressed. Sikhism believes in the creation of an ideal social setup where none could be discriminated against and where considerations of mutual love and the welfare of others took precedence over the subjugation of others. The Sikh Gurus were given a divine mandate to establish such a society. In the words of Bhai Gurdas:

“Consequent upon Divine Lord listening to human appeal,  
Did Guru Nanak take birth in the human world.”<sup>21</sup>

It was for the welfare of humanity that the Divine Lord

ordained Guru Nanak's advent in the human world. Guru Nanak assessed all humanity and diagnosed every aspect of its plight. He found the general masses in a wretched condition in the absence of enlightened guidance. As a result, while some people were engrossed in the worship of several gods and goddesses, others were seeking divine enlightenment by paying obeisance to burial places and mausoleums, and others were caught in a vicious circle of meaningless rituals and ceremonies. Religious and political leaders had abandoned their moral duty. Therefore, Guru Nanak launched his mission of setting right this degradation of religion and learning and bringing about a revolution in human society:

“As Guru Nanak (Baba) looked at humanity intently,  
He found the whole humanity ablaze (with burning desires).  
Groping in darkness without enlightened Guru's guidance,  
He heard the desperate cries of hapless humanity.  
He set upon the mission of undertaking preaching odysseys.  
Thus (Guru Nanak) launched his mission of reformation.”<sup>22</sup>

Guru Nanak started preaching his message through the medium of *gurbani* by making the Gurdwara the rallying point for his mission. He established the first Gurdwara at Kartarpur, delivering his message from there. After him, the succeeding nine Sikh Gurus created a body of religious followers through their *gurbani* preaching. Guru Gobind Singh administered *Khande-ki-pahul*<sup>23</sup> to this religious body and hailed it as Khalsa and an embodiment of his own attributes. In this way, he gave us a new doctrine of the unity – Guru Granth and Guru Panth.<sup>23</sup>

‘In twin doctrine of ‘Guru Granth - Guru Panth’, the two components have a complementary relationship with a distinct role assigned to each: for effective functioning of body and soul, they have to act together.

In practice the doctrine means that the body of the Panth has to take decisions on temporal matters dealing with a situation prevailing at a particular time strictly following the

spiritual principles laid down in Guru Granth Sahib to carry out the will of God or *sarbat da bhala*. The oft-repeated injunctions of the Guru, *puja Akal ki, parcha sabad ka, didar kbalse ka*, underline the essence of the doctrine of Guru Granth-Guru Panth;

In every Gurdwara, Guru Granth Sahib is installed in its *sanctum sanctorum* and Sikhs seek guidance daily from the recitation of *Gurbani* from this sacred scripture. The text (*Gurbani*) of Guru Granth Sahib contains and expresses the spiritual enlightenment received by the Sikh Gurus. Hearing it recited can cleanse the human mind of ignorance and all sense of duality. It is bound to make a man truthful and a *Gurmukh*.<sup>25</sup> In the absence of spiritual enlightenment and realisation, a person becomes prey to the vices of lust, anger, avarice, attachment and pride and indulges in egocentric deeds. He gropes in the dark and ignorance in the absence of spiritual realization and thus suffers. Thus says *Gurbani*:

“The five vices have their abode in the human body,  
Lust, anger, avarice, attachment and pride are these,  
Whole of *amrit* do they rob off indeed.  
At last none to his cries shall ever listen,  
Blind is the world and blind are its ways indeed,  
Without the Guru’s guidance all is darkness indeed.”<sup>26</sup>

As one needs a boat to cross a river and a ship to cross an ocean, a human being needs the guidance of a Guru to sail through the ocean of life. Equating human life and the human world to a turbulent ocean, Sikh Gurus emphasize the necessity of a ship (embodying spiritual guidance) to sail through the ocean of life. The *Gurbani* of Guru Granth Sahib is the spiritual tool (i.e., ship) which assists a person to sail through the ocean of life. A person living his life under the guidance of *Gurbani* can withstand the troubles and tribulations of life and achieve integration with the Supreme Reality. Thus reads the scripture:

“Having been caught in the whirlpool of accumulated vices,

Did the true Guru pull me out with His own hands.”<sup>27</sup>

The spiritual enlightenment and guidance provided by the *gurbani* of Guru Granth Sahib rescues a hapless and desperate person from the whirlpool of human afflictions and stormy ups and downs of human life. It strengthens a person morally and spiritually to combat the onslaught of lust, anger, avarice, attachment and pride, and enables him to sail smoothly through the stormy and turbulent ocean of life. While sitting in the congregation of the pious in a Gurdwara, listening to the recitation of *gurbani* and understanding its intrinsic meaning, a devotee starts imbibing these virtues. A current of spiritual bliss starts running through his life. This leads to spiritual realization and enlightenment. A bond of kinship is established with the Guru, bonds of worldly attachment start breaking, and the devotee, proceeding on a spiritual pilgrimage, starts living a life of truthfulness and virtue.

Today it is common to believe, when we position Guru Granth Sahib on a cot (*Manji*) inside the hall of a Gurdwara, and cover it with a cloth (*Rumala*), that Guru Granth Sahib is illuminated (*parkash karna*). No one may be reciting the scripture, delivering a sermon, or singing *gurbani* hymns. Devotees keep entering and leaving the Gurdwara, departing for their homes after paying obeisance, but without listening to *gurbani* or discourses. This routine is followed in many Gurdwaras. Is it proper to install (*parkash*) Guru Granth Sahib in a Gurdwara or any other place in isolation? Can anyone receive any enlightenment by merely paying obeisance in a Gurdwara and then returning home? Clearly, this ritualistic routine of visiting a Gurdwara without listening to the spiritual message cannot be regarded as communicating with or benefiting from the Guru:

“Everyone looks at the true Guru.

So do all the people of the world.

Never shall anyone get salvation (merely) by looking at,

Unless he reflects upon the Guru's Word."<sup>28</sup>

To install (*Parkash*) Guru Granth Sahib means in fact to lodge the Divine message in one's heart. To be spiritually enlightened means that the Guru's message or *gurbani* has been installed in one's mind. The Timeless Divine Creator Himself resides in the Guru Granth Sahib in the form of spiritual enlightenment. A person develops his mental and intellectual faculties and becomes truthful and Guru-oriented by listening to *gurbani* hymns in the congregation of the pious in a Gurdwara and through meditation and reflection on the Guru's *gurbani* and its message. Merely paying obeisance in a ritualistic visit to a Gurdwara, or keeping the scripture open in a Gurdwara without reading or listening and reflecting on the Guru's message cannot be termed the *parkash* of Guru Granth Sahib. Going to the Gurdwara should mean tuning one's faculties to the essence and message of *gurbani* and establishing communication between the human mind and the divinely enlightened Guru to eliminate ignorance.

Before the advent of Guru Nanak, there was no dearth of religions or of religious places in the world, in general, and in India, in particular. Followers of diverse religions had their own religious places. Every religious community had its own places of worship in the form of temples and mosques. Only the followers of a particular religion could enter a particular religious place. There was a particular section of Indian society which was not allowed to enter any religious place. Members of this section were known as untouchables. Some religions did not grant any right of worship of any kind to this section of society. With the establishment of a Gurdwara, Sikh Gurus provided a place of worship open to the whole of humanity. Anyone, irrespective of creed, caste, region, nationality or race, could enter without facing any discrimination, worship freely and share their joys and sorrows.

One Timeless Creator is worshipped in a Gurdwara

because God belongs to the whole of humankind. Similarly, Guru Granth Sahib installed in a Gurdwara belongs to everyone. The inclusion of divine verses of saints and *bhagtas* of different religious streams along with the hymns of the Sikh Gurus in Guru Granth Sahib is evidence of the acceptance that God is omnipresent. By including the verses of other saints and by according the status of Guru to the text of Guru Granth Sahib, Sikh Gurus have clearly established that receiving and manifesting divine revelation is not the sole monopoly of any one religion, caste or individual. The sermons delivered in a Gurdwara based on *gurbani* are not directed to the benefit of any one particular religion, country or nationality but to the benefit of all humanity. Any one can join the congregation and the food served from the Gurdwara community kitchen is shared by everyone according to one's need. Customarily, the Gurdwara is believed to be a place of worship exclusively for the Sikhs, but the message given through its sermons is for the whole of humankind. Its ideals of service, meditation, and virtuous and noble deeds are meant to make every person a truthful being and a Gurmukh. Although this religion has been labeled the Sikh religion or Sikhism, it belongs to the whole of humanity. According to the tenets of the Sikh religion, the best religion is one which lays emphasis upon meditation on God's Name and performance of good deeds:

“That religion is the best among all religions,  
That stresses dwelling on Lord's Name and doing good  
deeds.”<sup>29</sup>

The best religious practice is one which prompts a man to sing praises of God, imbibe divine attributes, do good and noble deeds and work for the welfare of everyone. The Gurdwara imparts knowledge about such a commonly shared world religion. Undoubtedly, the Gurdwara is a religious place, but the Sikh Gurus did not favour the practice of religion confined to the Gurdwara alone. They declare:

“In all habitations reigns one sovereign,  
Sanctimonious are all the places.”<sup>30</sup>

The Sikh Gurus do not regard any one as sacred and the other profane. The whole earth is fit for religious worship (*dharamsal*):

“In the midst of days, nights, seasons and dates,  
In the midst of air, water, fire and the underworld,  
Has the Lord established earth as a place of worship.”<sup>31</sup>

The Sikh religion is humanitarian, dedicated to the welfare of all humankind and belonging universally to all humanity. It is not an exaggeration to call it a world-religion of a new era because it is capable of bringing about an epochal transformation denouncing obscurantist religious practices based on blind faith. It does not recognize any kind of discrimination and inequality in the religious and social spheres of life. It does not sanction political domination by any community or nation over another community and nation. It stipulates that every nation and community is entitled to enjoy complete religious, social and political freedom and uphold its freedom and traditions. It endorses each individual's right to profess any religion of his choice. The Gurdwara, as a Sikh religious institution, is required to promote and propagate these fundamental human rights so that these doctrines may be put into practice. It is expected to focus on the ideology and value system enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib and spread its message all over the world. Sikh philosophy or ideology is a philosophy of the practical and practicable rather than a philosophy of the theoretical, hypothetical or imaginary. The Sikh Gurus preached the best way of living, the art of living, truthful living.<sup>32</sup> One of the functions of the Gurdwara is to enable human beings to become Gurmukhs (those in tune with the Divine Will) by living life on the principles as laid down in the divine verses of Guru Granth Sahib. For executing this task, the Gurdwara is a religious centre of a new age. It embraces

all humanity without any discrimination and its message is directed towards the universal welfare of all humankind.

Undoubtedly, a Sikh's entire life is integrated with the Gurdwara. Its role in the history of the Sikh nation will be discussed in the next chapter. Nevertheless, the social role of the Gurdwara needs to be discussed and debated. There are two schools of thought prevalent in Sikh society about the political and social role of the Gurdwara. One opinion is that religion or religious faith is purely a private concern of each individual and there is no scope for any kind of politics in it. This school regards the Gurdwara as purely a religious place. They believe that the Gurdwara's role is confined to worshipping God and recitation of divine verses and exposition of the Guru's *Gurbani*. Discourse in a Gurdwara should confine itself to the communication of the Guru's message and Sikh way of life based on *Gurbani*. No political, social or any other issue concerning the Sikhs should be discussed in the Gurdwara.

The other opinion is that the Sikh religion is as much a way of life as it is a religion. Since in Sikhism, religion and politics are intimately related, each aspect complements the other. The contributions of religion and politics are included in the conceptual framework of the Gurdwara. Both come under the jurisdiction of Gurdwara. The Gurdwara's jurisdiction being multi-dimensional, its role cannot be confined to any one sphere of human activity. The Gurdwara is an indivisible organ of Sikh religion, Sikh politics, Sikh culture and Sikh society. The Gurdwara, besides being a place of worship, is a centre of social activities. It not only provides shelter to wayfarers and food to the needy, but also provides a platform for political meetings.<sup>33</sup>

'Sikhism is a whole-life religion laying emphasis on discharging one's socio-moral responsibilities as a part of the spiritual progress of the individual. The doctrine of *Miri-Piri*, preached by Guru Nanak, symbolised by Guru Hargobind in

two swords, and enjoined upon the Khalsa as a creed to be practiced, by the Tenth Master. Is Sikhism a church (Gurdwara) of worship alone? Or is it a church of social policy also? This is a fundamental question. It is the difference on this issue of misconception, especially in the interpretation of history. Sikhism is a revealed religion and a mission, indeed the only whole-life religion or *Miri-Piri* system combining spiritual and empirical life. It is not an accident that the last five out of ten Gurus, maintained an army, and the Fifth Guru created ‘state within a state’, much to the annoyance of the Emperor of the day, who later ordered his execution.<sup>34</sup>

Whenever a revolution takes place, the old obsolete value system and existing social structure are demolished and a new social milieu is created. However, no matter how revolutionary and forward-looking a movement or ideology may be, it cannot be implemented and maintained without the assistance and support of a political power or a state. Even though it is not impossible, it is extremely difficult for an ideological movement to implement its tenets without the support of political power. It is often said that religions do not operate without political power. Within this context, the social and political aspects of a Gurdwara are important. The Sikh doctrine of “*Miri-Piri*”<sup>35</sup> supports this point of view. Guru Hargobind established Sri Akal Takht, a sacred symbol of temporal power, and gradually social and political issues were included in the ambit of Gurdwara.

Guru Granth Sahib states that a just state provides for the welfare of all its inhabitants without discrimination on the basis of economic status or caste. Guru Nanak in his divine verses (*Gurbani*) condemned political rule based on injustice, oppression or tyranny. He denounced the brutal and self-serving policies of the political rulers of his times in harsh words:

“Rulers are beasts of prey, their officers hounds,  
None do they spare to rest in peace.

The subordinates wound the people with their claws,  
You dogs! Lick on the blood and marrow of the poor.”<sup>36</sup>

Guru Nanak visualised the construction of a new healthy social organisation. He did not approve of a society bogged down in superstitions and devoid of moral values. He launched a struggle for the evolution of a social and political system.

“The Sikhs are no run-away from life. They assume active responsibility for the society in which they live. They cannot be silent spectators to any act of injustice, violation of human rights or exploitation. The Gurus envisaged a new world, based on the ideals of equality and fraternity, freedom and fearlessness, peace and harmony. They not only preached these ideals but also gave a practical shape to them. The twin institution of *Sangat* and *Pangat*, started by Guru Nanak, are the living examples of the ideals of unity and human equality preached by him. Guru Nanak condemned the misrule of establishment and oppression of invaders. He not only identified this socio-political problem but he took clear steps indicating his objective and the target he laid down for his society. He did not just preach for individual salvation. In fact, he changed the Panth and a society which was to be conditioned with new motivations and values.

“The revolution stemming from the creative vision of Guru Nanak reached its highest pitch under Guru Gobind Singh, who started the final phase of the development of Sikhism in the Guru period. The Guru responded to the crying need of the hour to restore justice and harmony in the human affairs. The Guru created the Khalsa – a disciplined body of the Sikhs. Thus, the Guru aimed at creating a nation that would be pure and strong enough to free itself from the oppression of the rulers and priests.”<sup>37</sup>

Sikh ideology does not approve of dynastic political rule but requires rulers to be chosen on the basis of moral qualities and the ability to govern and administer:

“Deserving alone deserve to occupy the throne  
In whom have the five vices by Guru’s teaching been  
mortified.”<sup>38</sup>

Sikh thought acknowledges as claimants for political power to be legitimate only if they follow the ideals and tenets of Guru Granth Sahib’s *gurbani* and are conscious of public welfare and aspirations.

Therefore, we have observed that the Gurdwara’s role is not confined to worshipping God, delivering sermons, singing *gurbani* and serving food in the *langar* (community kitchen), but also provides guidance to the Sikhs, based on the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib, in political, social and economic spheres. *Gurbani* endeavors to make human beings world citizens with a cosmopolitan outlook. We find seeds of the modern concept of religious pluralism in the teachings of *gurbani*. A person with such a cosmopolitan and ideal outlook has been termed a Gurmukh, a truthful and enlightened person. Such an individual holds everyone dear, an equal member of the human family. He does not consider anyone to be an enemy, an outsider or a person of lower status:

“None do I consider as my enemy  
Nor am I inimical to anyone,  
Divine Lord resides in everyone,  
This have I learnt from the true Guru.  
Everyone do I consider my own brother  
So have I endeared myself to everyone.”<sup>39</sup>

To inculcate the sense of brotherhood in people was one reason Guru Nanak established and oversaw the first Gurdwara at Kartarpur. By sitting together in congregation, worshipping and praying, people could become truthful (*sachiaras*) and Gurmukhs, imbibing divine attributes and becoming saint-soldiers who could deal with both secular and spiritual issues. As the purest of the pure (*Waheguru ji ka Khalsa*), they could become claimants to the right of wielding power and thus deal

with temporal and spiritual challenges, cleansing the strife-stricken world. It is in this way that the Gurdwara's role extends beyond the religious to the social and political aspects of human life.

According to the Sikh Gurus' vision, a person's religious, moral and spiritual life is an integral part of his individual and social dealings because human life is one single composite unit which cannot be divided into separate religious, social and political compartments. According to this composite view of life, the Sikh Gurus directed the Sikh movement in two directions:

“First of all, they endeavored to bring about a social revolution by altering the individual and social values. Secondly, they endeavored to bring about a transformation in the religious, social and political system which was based on inequality and discrimination.”<sup>40</sup>

So Guru Nanak founded the institutions of Gurdwara (*dharamsal*), Congregation (*sangat*) and Community Kitchen (*langar*). The succeeding Sikh Gurus strengthened these institutions further and promoted and propagated their message. Guru Amar Das streamlined the institution of dioceses (*manjis*) and made them centres for preaching. Persons of integrity and good moral character were given the charge of these dioceses, administering the religious activities of the followers in their areas of jurisdiction and catering to their religious and social needs. They formed a link between the Guru and the Guru's followers. They conveyed the Guru's commandments to the congregation and carried the demands of the congregation to the Guru. They collected offerings in the name of the Guru and deposited them in the Guru's treasury to be utilized by the Guru for public welfare activities.”

To conclude, we can say that Gurdwara is an institution which provides instruction for leading a Sikh way of life. This instruction is imparted through the medium of *gurbani* and

removes the mental cobwebs of ignorance, superfluous rituals and ceremonies, and superstitious fears of hell and hopes of heaven. This institution lays down a clear road map for a devotee to lead a life of liberation and emancipation by highlighting the transcendental and immanent attributes of the Supreme Divine as enshrined in the *gurbani*. It provides guidance for a devotee to become truthful, a ‘Gurmukh’ and a saint-soldier working for an ideal society based on the Sikh Guru’s idea of universal welfare.

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### Notes & References

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ਹਸੰਦਿਆ ਖੇਲੰਦਿਆ ਪੈਨੰਦਿਆ ਖਾਵੰਦਿਆ ਵਿਚੇ ਹੋਵੈ ਮੁਕਤਿ ॥
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12. *Ibid.*, p. 754  
ਜਿਸ ਦੈ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਸਚੁ ਹੈ ਸੋ ਸਚਾ ਨਾਮੁ ਮੁਖਿ ਸਚੁ ਅਲਾਏ ॥  
ਓਹੁ ਹਰਿ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਆਪਿ ਚਲਦਾ ਹੋਰਨਾ ਨੋ ਹਰਿ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਪਾਏ ॥
13. *Ibid.*, p. 140
14. *Ibid.*, p. 729-730  
ਗੁਰੂ ਦੁਆਰੈ ਹੋਇ ਸੋਝੀ ਪਾਇਸੀ ॥ ਏਤੁ ਦੁਆਰੈ ਧੋਇ ਹਛਾ ਹੋਇਸੀ ॥  
*The right understanding one attains from the Guru’s door.*

- Heart becomes pure when cleasured (of evils) at this door.*
15. Kharak Singh, *Guru Granth-Guru Panth*, p.20
  16. Piara Singh Padam, *Rebatnamas* (Rehatnama Bhai Prehlahd Singh), p. 67
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. Piara Singh Padam, *Gurughar*, p. 198-99
  19. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia, *Sikh Chintan*, p. 62
  20. *Guru Ghar*, p. 205
  21. *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, 1:23.  
**ਸੁਣੀ ਪੁਕਾਰ ਦਾਤਾਰ ਪੁਭ ਗੁਰ ਨਾਨਕ ਜਗ ਮਾਰਿੰ ਪਠਾਯਾ॥**  
 The benefactor Lord headed to the wails and sent Guru Nanak to this World (for amelioration of humankind)
  22. *Ibid.*, 1:24  
**ਬਾਬਾ ਦੇਖੇ ਧਿਆਨ ਧਰ ਜਲਤੀ ਸਭ ਪ੍ਰਿਥਵੀ ਦਿਸ ਆਈ॥**  
**ਬਾਬਾ ਗੁਰੂ ਗੁਬਾਰ ਹੈ ਹੈਰੈ ਕਰਦੀ ਸੁਣੀ ਲੁਕਾਈ॥**  
**ਬਾਬੇ ਭੋਖ ਬਣਾਇਆ ਉਦਾਸੀ ਕੀ ਰੀਤ ਚਲਾਈ॥**  
**ਚੜ੍ਹਿਆ ਸੋਧਨ ਧਰਤ ਲੁਕਾਈ ॥**
  23. *Kbande-ki-pahul*: The Name of the initiation ceremony in which a Sikh is administered draughts of consecrated sweetened water stirred with a double-edged dagger in a steel bowl. After being initiated, a Sikh becomes a Khalsa, loses all other religious and caste affiliations, and wears the five Sikh *keekars*.
  24. Kharak Singh, *Guru Granth-Guru Panth*, p.. 22
  25. *Gurmukh* and *Manmukh* are two antithetical terms used in the Sikh scripture. A *Gurmukh* is a person who accepts the will of God and reconciles with it, while a *Manmukh* is a person who follows his own ego and flouts the will of God. A Sikh is supposed to convert himself into a *Gurmukh* from a *Manmukh*.
  26. *Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 600  
**ਇਸੁ ਦੇਹੀ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਪੰਚ ਚੋਰ ਵਸਹਿ ਕਾਮੁ ਕ੍ਰੋਧੁ ਲੋਭੁ ਮੋਹੁ ਅਹੰਕਾਰਾ ॥**  
**ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤੁ ਲੂਟਹਿ ਮਨਮੁਖ ਨਹੀ ਬੁਝਹਿ ਕੋਇ ਨ ਸੁਣੈ ਪੂਕਾਰਾ ॥**  
**ਅੰਧਾ ਜਗਤੁ ਅੰਧੁ ਵਰਤਾਰਾ ਬਾਬੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਗੁਬਾਰਾ ॥**
  27. *Ibid.*, p. 1296
  28. *Ibid.*, p. 594
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 266
  30. *Ibid.*, p. 993
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 7

32. Sardul Singh Kavishar, *Sikh Dharam Darshan*, p. 182
33. Lord Mozley, *Last Day of British Raj*, p. 228
34. Kharak Singh, *Turn of the Century*, Singh Brothers, pp 253-257
35. *Miri-Piri* is a compound of two words of Persian origin and stands for both temporal as well as spiritual power vested in the same authority or person (saint-soldier).
36. Guru Granth Sahib, p 1288
37. Guru Granth Sahib, p 1039
38. *Ibid.*, p 671
39. Jagjit Singh, *Sikh Revolution*, p. 103
40. *Ibid.*, p. 123

□

## CHAPTER 2

### GURDWARA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The institution of Gurdwara is believed to have begun with the preaching odysseys of Guru Nanak. Historians of the Sikh Gurus refer to these odysseys as *udasis*. Although historians differ concerning the exact dates of these *udasis*, there is general agreement that they occurred between 1499 and 1522 AD. Guru Nanak traveled as far as Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in the south, Assam, Orissa and present-day Bangladesh in the east, Mecca and Medina in the west and the distant Himalayas in the north during these travels. Guru Nanak also visited the sacred shrines of different religions during these missions. He interacted with saints and sages at their religious centres, discussing with them issues of spiritual importance. He preached his message among the inhabitants of villages and towns during these travels. People congregated at these places to listen to his sermons. This congregation was given the name of “*Sangat*” or *Sat-Sangat* or company of the virtuous. People continued to sit in congregation at these places on a regular basis, listening to the recitation and singing of *gurbani*. Many of these places, known at the time as *dharamsals*, became centres for preaching Sikh philosophy. Later on, these came to be known as Gurdwaras.<sup>1</sup> Guru Nanak used to appoint one person as in charge of such a *dharamsal* to supervise the preaching and propagation of the Guru’s teachings. Bhai Lalo in the north and Sheikh Sajjan in the northwestern region of the then Punjab, Gopal Das in Benares, Budhan Shah in Kiratpur, Salam Rai in Patna and King Shivnabh in Sri Lanka are included among the early preachers of Sikhism.<sup>2</sup>

Guru Nanak’s mission was to bring about reforms over

the whole planet earth. He considered earth to be a *dharamsal* for the fulfillment of his mission and traveled widely to realize this objective. Guru Arjun expressed his religious mission and his concept of Dharamsal in the following words:

*“Innumerable are Thy temples, compassionate Lord,  
Where forever is Thy laudation chanted.  
Where holy men assemble in congregation,  
On Thy sacred Name do they meditate.”*<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning, the Gurdwara was known as *dharamsal*. According to the *Janamsakhi* (Biographical Accounts) tradition, Guru Nanak founded the institution of *dharamsal* under a divine mandate.<sup>4</sup> This institution of *dharamsal* came to be called Gurdwara during the tenure of Guru Hargobind. It continued to be addressed as *dharamsal* during the period between Guru Nanak and Guru Arjun. Guru Arjun called the religious temple constructed in the midst of sacred pool “*Harmandar*” (Temple of God) which came to be called *Gurdwara* during the tenure of Guru Hargobind.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the institution of *dharamsal* or *gurdwara* is believed to have begun during the period of Guru Nanak’s travels which started from the city of Emnabad in District Gujranwala in West Punjab Province of present-day Pakistan. Earlier, the city of Emnabad was known as Saidpur. Emperor Sher Shah renamed it as Shergarh after demolishing the old city. Later on, one of the officials of Emperor Akbar, Mohammad Amin, changed its name from Shergarh to Emnabad. Guru Nanak stayed with Bhai Lalo for some time at Saidpur. Whenever Guru Nanak stayed there, devotees used to assemble as a congregation for choral singing of Gurbani and delivery of sermons. It was during one of Guru Nanak’s visits to Saidpur that he refused to partake of food at a lavish dinner served by the feudal chief Malik Bhago in preference to Bhai Lalo’s simple food earned honestly with the sweat of his brow. Through this refusal of Malik Bhago’s invitation, Guru Nanak gave the

message of the importance of earning one's livelihood through just and earnest efforts and sharing it with others. Distinctions of caste and class carry no weight with the Divine Lord.

“Guru Nanak presented an entirely new religious system that was very revolutionary in its fundamental doctrine. Guru Nanak's departure from the earlier systems, logically following from his spiritual experience and his original thesis, is almost complete. He rejects the system of monasticism, asceticism, celibacy and rituals. Instead, he recommends a householder's life, with complete acceptance of social responsibility, including equality between man and woman. He rejects the notion of unreality of the world, and calls life real and game of love. He aims at the continuous carrying out of the Will of God. He emphasizes the social responsibility of doing work and sharing what one honestly earns with the needy, and of confronting injustice and oppression both as an individual and as a member of the society. In short, we may call his religion a whole-life, *Miri-Piri*, spiritual-empirical or Sant-Sipahi system.”<sup>6</sup>

By the time of Guru Arjun many more Sikh centres were added. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several such congregational centres, *dharamsals*, or *sangats* were established.<sup>7</sup> Construction of Gurdwaras for conveying the reformist agenda of the Gurus' divine mission to all humankind also started during this time. Bhai Gurdas highlights the function of the Gurdwara in one of his ballads.

*“Worthy of worship becomes a place  
where Baba Nanak puts his foot.  
All the monastic centres down to antiquity  
have come under Nanak.  
Every household has become a congregation  
for Lord's choral singing.  
Baba Nanak has redeemed the whole world  
and nine planets indeed.”*<sup>8</sup>

When Guru Nanak returned to Punjab after preaching

divine message at places scattered over thousands of miles in India and abroad, he rested for some time at village Pakho ka Randhawa in present-day Pakistan. Here he wanted to set up a central institution where instruction could be imparted about living by the principles of the Guru's teachings (*gurmat*). He laid the foundation of a new town he named Kartarpur. Here a *dharamsal* was constructed where people belonging to diverse religions and professions assembled to listen to the preaching of Guru Nanak. During the lifetime of Guru Nanak, Kartarpur became the center of *gurmat* teaching. People from far and wide from diverse walks of life including Hindus, Muslims, Yogis and ascetics used to assemble at Kartarpur to listen to Guru Nanak's sermons without any distinctions of caste and social status. One of the biographical accounts (*Janamsakhi*) provides a glimpse of the atmosphere at Kartarpur in the following words "As per the will of the Divine Lord, whosoever came to pay obeisance to Guru Nanak really was overwhelmed by listening to his sermon and instantly became his follower. So, many people became his followers within a few days. People kept swarming around Guru Baba Nanak where he sat on the bank of a river. Everyone whether he was a Hindu, Muslim, Yogi, ascetic, celibate, householder, prosperous, millionaire, or a feudal lord, a Digambar, (member of a sect of Jainism; the ascetics belonging to this sect go about naked) Vaishnav (worshipper of Visnu) or an Udassi (one who renounce home) whosoever sat in congregation with Guru Nanak, went home praising him. Whosoever came to the Guru went back contented with piety."<sup>9</sup>

After settling at Kartarpur, Guru Nanak lived the life of householder. He participated in farming activities and performed daily domestic duties. Every morning and evening, in the congregation which assembled there, Guru Nanak preached *gurmat* (Divine message), through the recitation and choral singing of divine verses. He sat on a small cot while

delivering his sermon to the congregation:

*“Then after arriving at Kartarpur,  
Baba Nanak put off his monks’ robes.  
Putting on a householder’s apparel,  
He delivered his message from a pulpit.”*<sup>10</sup>

Guru Nanak not only preached an ideology but also laid down a disciplined code of conduct for the new institution to follow. There is a detailed account of the daily regimen of the Kartarpur congregation or *dharmshal* in the primary sources of the history of the Sikh Gurus.<sup>11</sup>

The whole congregation used to recite together the *Japuji* and other divine verses early in the morning. Then Guru Nanak elucidated the verses, resolving doubts and apprehensions through dialogue and discussion. After the conclusion of the morning assembly, everyone involved himself in his worldly duties. People assembled in congregation once again in the evening. Again, the congregation recited the divine verses designated for the evening prayer called *Sodar-Rabiras*. At the end of congregation both morning and evening the whole assembly recited a thanksgiving prayer to the Divine Lord and partook of the consecrated pudding called *Karah-Parshad*. Thereafter, the whole gathering sat together in line without distinction of caste, creed or social status and partook of food prepared in a community kitchen (*langar*). After that, each devotee recited another set of divine verses designated as *Sobila* before going to sleep.

Bhai Gurdas gives in one of his *Vars* an account of the daily routine followed at Kartarpur congregation:

*“Reciting Divine verses by word of mouth  
brings enlightenment eliminating darkness of ignorance.  
Through dialogue and discussion  
with the enlightenment is heard  
The unheard melody of the Word.  
So should the invocatory verses be sung in the evening*

*And Japuji recited every morning,*

*Thus is a devotee (Gurmukh) relieved of all maladies.<sup>12</sup>*

Congregations (*dharamsals*) had been set up at Eminabad, Tulamba and several other places. Bhai Lalo, Sajjan Sheikh and others in charge had already been preaching the message of Guru Nanak. But the Kartarpur congregation (*dharamsal*) was the first centre set up in a systematic manner under Guru Nanak's direct supervision for the evolution of a new society and a new social order. This new social order, first known as the "Organisation of the Pure" (Nirmal Panth) acquired the name "*Khalsa Panth*" during the tenure of Guru Gobind Singh. It was this social order which ushered in a great revolution:

*"Striking a new coin in the world,*

*Did Nanak usher in a religious order of the Pure."<sup>13</sup>*

In order to convert this Sikh movement into a well-defined institution for preaching and propagating the tenets of Sikh philosophy, Guru Nanak, starting a tradition of appointing regular heads of this organization, appointed Guru Angad (earlier name Bhai Lahina) as his successor. While ushering in a new social order and a new society, Guru Nanak formulated a new value system based on Sikh (*Gurmat*) ideology. Even in the matter of appointing a religious successor, Guru Nanak departed from the traditional Indian system of choosing a successor from one's own dynasty and selected Bhai Lahina on the basis of his merit and his deserving to be a worthy successor. Bhai Gurdas expresses this fundamental change in the following lines:

*"Turning the tradition upside down,*

*Guru Angad came to be blessed (as the Guru)."<sup>14</sup>*

As the above discussion makes clear, the Kartarpur congregation (*dharamsal*) was the first institution which laid down the parameters for the systematic set up of an organization for the preaching and propagation of a Sikh (*gurmat*) ideology. Kartarpur can thus be considered the first

Gurdwara. The following steps taken by Guru Nanak support this fact:

1. Guru Nanak settled permanently at Kartarpur and laid down all the parameters and the day-to-day routine of setting up a congregation (*dharamsal*) under his direct and personal supervision.
2. Guru Nanak himself became its first religious head by sitting on a cot (*manji*) and providing guidance to his followers for resolving their day-to-day problems.
3. Guru Nanak used Kartarpur as the centre from which he travelled to participate in religious discourses and discussions in surrounding areas.
4. Guru Nanak gave the name *dharamsal* to the Kartarpur congregation, identifying it as a Sikh institution.
5. Guru Nanak's appointment of Bhai Lahina as his religious successor, who was to guide the destiny of the Sikhs in future, was the first link in the chain of the organizational setup.

It is for these reasons that we recognize the Kartarpur Congregation (*dharamsal*) as the first Gurdwara.

Guru Nanak breathed his last on 22 September 1539 after appointing Guru Angad as his successor. Subsequently, Guru Angad settled at Khadoor Sahib. So Khadoor Sahib became the second centre of Sikhism. This ancient place twenty-five kilometres from Amritsar is where Guru Angad spent the major part of his tenure as Guru.

As at Kartarpur, Sikhs assembled at Khadoor Sahib in a congregation. Guru Angad propagated the Sikh gospel so effectively that there was a significant increase in the number of Sikh Gurdwaras; 131 more congregations or Gurdwaras were set up.<sup>15</sup> Guru Angad standardized the Gurmukhi alphabet in order to make his followers literate. He prepared handwritten copies of Guru Nanak's divine verses for their distribution to the other Sikh centres. It is believed that he had a biography (*Janamsakhi*) of Guru Nanak prepared for the guidance of Sikh followers. The biography attributed to Bhai Bala was, according

to latest studies, written much later.<sup>16</sup> So, Guru Angad made Khadoor Sahib the second Sikh centre of Guru Nanak's ideology and mission.

Before shedding his mortal frame in 1552 AD, Guru Angad appointed Guru Amar Das as his successor and directed him to settle at Goindwal. So Goindwal became the third centre for the propagation of Sikhism. Guru Amar Das had a water-reservoir (*baoli*) constructed at Goindwal. He established several Sikh centres or dioceses (*manjis*) throughout India within and outside Punjab. Provision was also made to set up a community kitchen (*langar*) at every centre (*dharamsal*) to feed devotees. Guru Amar Das implemented the principle of partaking of the community food by sitting in a line with others before attending the congregation. He laid the foundation for the city of Amritsar by purchasing a piece of land in 1564 AD and starting the construction of the greatest and the present centre of Sikhism.<sup>17</sup>

With all these developments, Sikhs were evolving into an organized community. The institutions of dioceses (*manjis*), congregations (*dharamsals*) and communal eating were identifying the Sikhs as a distinct organization. Thus, the Sikhs were gradually liberating themselves from the shackles of Hindu rituals and the centuries-old caste system. Guru Amar Das directed the Sikhs to come to pay him obeisance on Diwali and other important festivals. The Guru had observed that some Sikh devotees still regarded certain days as very auspicious and performed Brahminical rituals on those days. But if they paid a visit to the Guru on those days, they could escape from performing the Brahminical rituals. Perhaps, Guru Amar Das was of the opinion that an individual could not profess Sikhism and Hinduism simultaneously and must repose his faith in only one of those two religions.

The fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das, accelerated the construction of Amritsar, which was known first as "Guru ka

Chak”, then as “Ramdaspur” and finally as Amritsar. So, after Kartarpur, Khadoor Sahib and Goindwal, Amritsar was the fourth major centre of Sikh ideology. Its construction and the subsequent sequence of daily worship there were supervised directly by Guru Ram Das. Guru Ram Das set up the institution of ‘*Masands*’, contributing significantly to the propagation of Sikh ideology. During the tenure of the next Sikh Guru, Guru Arjun, people were encouraged to settle in the new town of Amritsar irrespective of their caste distinctions.<sup>18</sup>

The Sikhs continued to organize themselves into a distinct religious and social group during the period of Guru Arjun. They had already established their own religious centres where the religious practices observed were distinctively different from the religious practices of other religions. The construction of the sacred pool around the main shrine at Amritsar had been completed. Guru Arjun laid the foundation of the main Sikh shrine ‘Harmandir Sahib’ in the centre of the sacred pool in 1588 AD. Its foundation stone ceremony was indeed a revolutionary step in the religious history of humankind. It was the normal practice in India as well as in other countries that the foundation stone of a shrine be laid by the religious head of the religion connected with the shrine. But it is a marvelous act in the history of humankind that the foundation of a religious shrine of the Sikhs was laid down by a great man from another religion and the shrine was named the temple of God (Harimandir). This marvel happened at a time when Muslims, charged with the fundamentalist zeal of Islam and the possession of political power, were destroying Hindu temples and idols as acts of their religious duty to spread Islam. At such a juncture of history, Guru Arjun gave a message of universal brotherhood by having the foundation stone of the Sikh shrine (Harmandir Sahib) laid by a Muslim Sufi Mian Mir. It was indeed an act of epochal transformation.<sup>19</sup>

The building of the Harmandir played a very important

role in the propagation of Sikh doctrines enshrined in Gurbani. It still performs this duty. This sacred Sikh shrine is a place of worship for the whole of humanity. Every visitor or devotee paying obeisance here is entitled to experience the spiritual bliss communicated through the Gurbani. Its four doors, opening in the four directions, always remain open for devotees, who may enter by whichever door they wish regardless of caste, or creed or race. Its sanctum sanctorum is laid at the lower level, inculcating the virtue of humility in the hearts of devotees.

In 1604, Granth Sahib, compiled by this time and initially known as “Pothis Sahib”, was installed in the sanctum sanctorum by Guru Arjun, who appointed Baba Buddha as the first *granthi* or scripture-reader. The entire schedule of worship at this shrine was set by Guru Arjun himself. It was a significant act to connect the Sikhs with Sabd Guru, showing that the Sikhs as a community were following a specific ideology.

Several other Sikh centres were also established during the Guruship of Guru Arjun, such as those at Taran Tarn, Kartarpur and Hargobindpur. During the tenure of Guru Arjun, the Gurdwara came to be known as the embodiment of a social order based on the principles of secularism and equality of human beings.

Harimandar and other Gurdwaras were built so that the message of Gurbani could be communicated to people of all the four castes. The institution of congregation, the community kitchen and community feeling and the sacred pools have played a significant role in reducing the vicious impact of the caste system and human untouchability. The installation of Granth Sahib inside the Gurdwara gives the message of the universally acceptable doctrine of Guruship in the form of the ‘Word’ or *Shabad*. Respectful status was accorded to the Hindu and Muslim sages (*bhagtas*) belonging to the so-called

lower castes as divine verses of some of them were included in Granth Sahib along with the divine verses of the Sikh Gurus.

On universality of Guru Granth Sahib, Arnold J. Toynbee. “Mankind’s future may be obscure, yet one thing can be foreseen. The living higher religions are going to influence each other more than ever before in the days of increasing communications between all parts of the world and branches of human race. In this coming religious debate, the Sikh religion and its scripture, the Guru Granth, will have something special of value to say to the rest of the world.”<sup>20</sup>

The institutions of establishing *manjis* or *masands* (system of administration) and allocating one tenth (*daswandh*) of one’s income to social causes begun during the tenure of Guru Arjun contributed to the creation of a distinct religious and social identity for the Sikhs. The message of universal brotherhood being propagated from the Gurdwara was to the liking of neither the Brahminical priestly class nor the Muslim clerics. As a result, the majority of Hindu priests and Muslim clerics nursed feelings of jealousy towards Sikh Gurus and their teachings. They were always looking for an opportunity to do away with the fast-progressing Sikh movement at all costs. Thus, it was due to the joint conspiracy of the bigoted Hindu and Muslim clergy and the equally narrow-minded religious outlook of the contemporary Mughal emperor that Guru Arjun was executed after being subjected to severe torture on 30 May 1606. This execution was the first act of religious martyrdom not only in the history of the Sikhs but also in the history of India.

The name “Dharamsal” was changed to “Gurdwara” during Guru Hargobind’s tenure. He established the institution of Akal Takht in the vicinity of Harimandar. He laid his claim to both spiritual and temporal sovereignty by donning two swords in a crossway position, one symbolic of temporal power (*Miri*) and the other one of spiritual sovereignty (*Piri*). This

act on the part of Guru Hargobind was consistent with the Sikh mission started by Guru Nanak and a natural response to contemporary acts of tyranny and impending threats of oppression by the powerful religions and political authority.

Man and whatever is inhuman in man is the primary focus of Sikh philosophy. Guru Nanak gave a message of eliminating human weaknesses and vices to enable man to be united with the Divine through humble and loving remembrance of His Name. The institution of Dharamsal or Gurdwara was created to preach and propagate this message. The Sikh Gurus launched a campaign through the central institution of Gurdwara and the medium of their divine verses or Gurbani to develop an ideal human being who was in complete mystical communion with the Divine Lord. Such a quintessential and divinely synchronised human being is called an embodiment of truth (*sachiarā*) and a Guru-oriented person (*gurmukh*). Every Sikh is supposed to undergo this prescribed orientation by joining in the congregation in the Gurdwara. This is the main purpose of the discourse and Gurbani recitation done in the Gurdwara.

The world is regarded as a place for the practice of righteous living according to Sikh thought or ideology.<sup>21</sup> Doing noble deeds simultaneously with remembrance of the name Divine is considered the best religion.<sup>22</sup> Guru Nanak wished a human being to be completely independent in the conduct of his religious, political, cultural, social and economic life and an arbiter of his own destiny. He did not approve of any human being, community or nation being subservient to any other human being, community or nation. He branded a life of servility and undignified living as illegitimate.<sup>23</sup>

Sikh ideology aims at making a human being fearless, free from malice, and an arbiter of his own destiny. It teaches the art of living by synchronising oneself with the Divine Will. The institution of Akal Takht illustrates and implements the philosophy enshrined in Gurbani. It projects the whole Khalsa

Panth (Sikh community) as the embodiment of this ideology, imbibing the virtues of fearlessness and absence of malice through communion with the Divine.

Thus, during lifetime of Guru Hargobind, the institution of Gurdwara became the fulcrum of Sikh activities. It had instilled a spirit of self-respect, dignity, self-confidence, and independence among the Sikhs. It had provided the Sikhs with a new way of life. A life of servility and undignified living was branded as illegitimate and feelings of love for one's own culture and civilization were given encouragement. A campaign was launched to build a new nation by throwing away the yoke of abject slavery. (During the Guru period, most part of India was ruled by the foreign invaders, such as Lodhi Sultanates, Afghans and Mughals).

Guru Hargobind founded the town of Kiratpur. Guru Har Rai (1630-1631) and Guru Harkishan (1656-64) stayed at Kiratpur although they preached the Sikh gospel throughout Punjab and the surrounding areas. Wherever the Sikh Gurus paid a visit, they established a new Sikh congregation. Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675) founded the new township of Anandpur which remained the centre of his as well as Guru Gobind Singh's (1666-1708) activities. Guru Tegh Bahadur's travels in India interlinked many of the existing Sikh *dharamsals* or *sangats*. His travels not only strengthened the Sikh movement but also instilled a new spirit among the masses. Guru Tegh Bahadur emerged as the saviour of the oppressed masses.

Hardly had Guru Tegh Bahadur returned to Anandpur in 1671 after his preaching trips when a group of Pandits (Brahmins) of Kashmir, who were facing religious persecution under the Mughal emperor, arrived at Anandpur led by Pandit Kirpa Ram. They narrated their tale of woes and appealed to Guru Tegh Bahadur to protect their religion. Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life by laying the blame for religious persecution openly on the Mughal rulers of Delhi. He offered

his life to defend the right of religious freedom which in modern parlance is part of any 'Charter of Human Rights'. Guru Tegh Bahadur was the second martyr in the Sikh religious tradition. Thereafter Sikh shrines were constructed on sites associated with major events in Sikh history.

After the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, Anandpur Sahib became the centre of the military activities of the Khalsa Panth. It was here that the Khalsa Panth was created on Baisakhi day (30 March) of 1699 AD. In this way, the Nirmal Panth (organization of the pure) started by Guru Nanak was transformed into an organization of Saint-Soldiers. Transforming the Sikhs into an army of saint-soldiers with its headquarters at Anandpur, Guru Gobind Singh began the construction of forts so that impending challenges could be dealt with firmly. Five forts, Anandgarh, Lohgarh, Fatehgarh, Kesgarh and Holgarh, were constructed. Today, these forts have become Gurdwaras. At Anandpur, the Sikhs were professionally trained in the use of weapons and firearms by Guru Gobind Singh. Besides the forts, there are several other Gurdwaras associated with Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>24</sup>

The history associated with Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) is the history of struggle of the oppressed and persecuted people against the contemporary custodians of political power and religion. This period of Mughal rule in the history of India appears to be a period of massacre and destruction of non-Muslims. Nothing belonging to non-Muslims, including their life, property, honour, religion, religious shrines and scriptures, was safe. Severe restrictions were imposed on the religious ceremonies and traditions of non-Muslims. The plight of Rajput Rajas became so miserable that they were compelled to offer their daughters as brides to the Muslim rulers to save their kingdoms and honour. Muslim rulers of India considered it their religious duty to oppress and tyrannise non-Muslims. Those

who converted to Islam became fellow conspirators committing atrocities against their non-Muslim brethren.

Guru Gobind Singh made the Gurdwara the centre of his activities in order to train Indians to defend and protect Indian culture, self-respect and religious and political sovereignty. By inspiring people through the teachings of Gurbani at these centres, Guru Gobind Singh brought about a radical change in the people's mindset towards their religious, political, social, moral and spiritual concerns and made them into a body of fearless "Khalsa" of the Divine Lord. Thus, a Sikh who is a Khalsa is a saint-soldier, sovereign of his spiritual and temporal concerns at the same time. When this body of people operates under the guidance of the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib, fulfilling its spiritual and temporal obligations, it becomes a champion of the divine will prevailing over this universe. The creation of the Khalsa is an endeavour to establish a classless egalitarian social order based on love, equality, justice and self-respect.

The Sikh Gurus brought about another revolutionary change by according equal social status to women and men. We find the first reference to this principle in the divine verses (Gurbani) of Guru Nanak. We come across women's names in the list of incharges (*masands*) of the dioceses.<sup>25</sup> Guru Gobind Singh made woman an equal partner in every human enterprise by granting her the right to make the religious vows of the Khalsa called "*Khande-di-Pahul*". Mai Bhago created a new chapter in Sikh history by participating in the battle of Muktsar.

The emergence of the Khalsa Panth was the result of the struggle and sacrifice of the Sikh Gurus over a span of two centuries. Creation of the Khalsa was a revolutionary development in India in general and in Punjab in particular, influencing religious, political and social conditions. With the emergence of Khalsa Panth, a new system of governance came into being which had a distinct identity. The institution of

*Panj Piaras* (five chosen ones) replaced the prevalent practice of governing through autocratic leadership and personality cult with the practice of taking a decision based on consensus under the guidance of the five chosen ones (*Panj Piaras*). The principle of collective leadership in the form of Sarbat Khalsa was put into effect. The decision taken through consensus at the *Sarbat Khalsa* meetings came to be regarded as the decision of the Guru. Thus, after the creation of the Khalsa, there came into existence an institutional framework based on the principle of equality of status. If we accept that the Sikh religion originated with Guru Nanak's preaching odysseys in 1499, then it culminated in 1699 with the creation of the Khalsa. The concept of ideal human beings called 'Gurmukhs' and the organisation of these ideal human beings into *sangat*, formed over nine generations of Sikh Gurus, was finally galvanized by Guru Gobind Singh into a more cohesive personality called the 'Khalsa' and the *Sarbat Khalsa*, completely sovereign in the governing of their affairs.<sup>26</sup>

It is no exaggeration to call Guru Gobind Singh a precursor of the founders of modern democracy for his establishing of the Khalsa Panth and the constitutional authority of Guru Granth Sahib. But the democracy brought about by Guru Gobind Singh, rather than being based on numerical majority, was qualitative in essence. The Gurdwara is the custodian of the consensus model of selecting five persons as the five beloveds (*Panj Piaras*) by the congregation in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib.

The Sikhs became an organized community under Guru Gobind Singh. As Khalsa Panth they were governed by the tenets of Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Gobind Singh dispatched Banda Singh Bahadur from Nanded to Punjab where he launched a movement to establish Sikh sovereignty over Punjab. He succeeded in establishing Sikh (Khalsa Panth) rule over a region between the Sutlej and Yamuna rivers in a short

time. Banda Singh established political rule over this region, yet struck a coin in the name of the Sikh Gurus. How closely Banda Singh Bahadur incorporated the teachings of the Sikh Gurus into his governing can be assessed from the reports of a contemporary journalist. This correspondent writes that “Banda Singh Bahadur had taken a solemn vow and made a declaration: “We neither commit atrocities on the Muslims nor are we opposed to Islam, but we are certainly opposed to tyranny and grabbing of political power.” Accordingly, if any Muslim approaches him for employment, he sanctions wages and allowances for the petitioner’s maintenance and wherewithal. He has also given these employees permission to observe Islamic rites and say their daily prayers. As a result, five hundred Muslims have rallied under his command. Having established a bond of friendship with Banda Singh Bahadur, these Muslim employees have been given the freedom to recite aloud their Islamic prayers (*azān*) even after enlisting themselves in the army of the cursed (sic) Sikhs.”<sup>27</sup>

By achieving political independence for the Sikhs, Banda Singh Bahadur was able to fight against oppression and tyranny while following the path of his own religion. But historians are silent about how these developments affected the institution of Gurdwara. One reason for this omission is that Banda Singh Bahadur lived in Punjab for only eight years, during which he spent most of his time fighting wars. Undoubtedly, he sacrificed his life while upholding the mission of the Sikh Gurus. It can also be said that Banda Singh Bahadur was the first leader after the Sikh Gurus to implement Sikh philosophy. Guru Nanak propounded Sikh philosophy; Guru Gobind Singh prepared a blueprint for the propagation of this philosophy; Banda Singh Bahadur, following the blueprint, tried to realise Guru Nanak’s original concept.<sup>28</sup>

During the Guru period the Sikh Gurus themselves provided leadership to the Sikhs. After the demise of Guru

Gobind Singh in 1708, Banda Singh Bahadur emerged as the leader of the Sikhs and led the Sikhs following the directions given by the Sikh Gurus. Banda Singh Bahadur was martyred after being subjected to severe tortures in the year 1716 on the orders of the Mughal emperor Farukhsiar. After his martyrdom, the Sikhs endured a dark period of extreme privation, with many atrocities committed against them. They preserved their distinct identity through a nerve-shaking time of large-scale executions and massacres. A price was put on their heads, and to survive they had to abandon their homes and hearths and seek shelter in the jungles and wilderness.

The period of Sikh history between 1716 and 1765 is a gory tale of tortures and atrocities committed against the Sikhs by Mughals and Afghan invaders. The period between the fall from power of Banda Singh Bahadur and the establishment of the Sikh Misls is a record of great struggle between the Sikhs on one side and the Mughals and the Durranis on the other hand. During this entire period of struggle, (survival of the Sikhs), the Gurdwara, especially Harimandar Sahib at Amritsar, remained a great source of inspiration for the Sikhs. It was because of this beacon of light and inspiration that the Sikhs remained steadfast in their religion despite great tribulations. In the midst of the turbulence, whenever there was a pressing issue, Sikhs would call a meeting of the Sarbat Khalsa. Difference of opinion could be expressed during the discussion, but, once arrived at, a decision in the form of resolution (*gurmatta*) was implemented as the moral and religious duty of everyone. A collective decision (*gurmatta*) taken at an assembly of Sarbat Khalsa was considered a commandment of the Khalsa Panth and was followed by every Sikh as an act of faith and a religious duty. The assembly of Sikhs, Sarbat Khalsa, usually occurred at Amritsar twice a year, on Diwali and Baisakhi, where collective decisions on current challenges were made. Guru Granth Sahib was always present on these

occasions.

Thus, during those dangerous times, Guru Granth Sahib and Gurdwara played a crucial role in inspiring the Sikhs. Sikhs have always reposed their full faith in the Gurbani of Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh Gurus. This unshakeable faith in the Gurus has kept the Sikhs steadfast and firm even during the most troubled and trying moments of their history. The institution of Gurdwara played an important role in upholding these values. Although they were compelled to abandon their homes because of the policies of Mughal rulers and Afghan invaders, the Sikhs still remained linked to their religious shrines, the Gurdwaras. They sought inspiration from the Gurdwara each time they combated against aggression. Whenever an enemy tried to damage or desecrate this Sikh source of inspiration, the Sikhs were ready to fight to the death to defend and protect their religious shrines. Every time Ahmad Shah Abdali damaged Harimandar Sahib (Golden Temple), the Sikhs reconstructed it in the face of great risks, always acting according to the decisions or Gurmattas of (Sarbat Khalsa). The arrangement for the reconstruction of Harimandar Sahib, particularly, remained under the supervision of the Sikh Misls. Repeated destruction of Sikh shrines by the invaders and simultaneous reconstruction of those damaged shrines by the Sikhs tells the tale of the Sikhs' devotion towards their shrines.

This long-drawn-out struggle produced fearless and committed leaders whose guidance enabled the Sikhs to establish a sovereign state of their own. This list includes Bhai Mani Singh, Baba Deep Singh Shahid, Nawab Kapur Singh, Jassa Singh Ramgharia, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Charat Singh, Mahan Singh, Sardar Jai Singh Kanaihya and Sardar Hari Singh Bhangi and many more.

It was not possible for the Sikhs to look after their religious shrines directly during the turbulence of the eighteenth century. Most of the day-to-day management of the Gurdwaras was

passed on to the *Udasi Mahants* (*Udasi* is an ascetic order, founded by Srichand, the elder son of Guru Nanak. The word *udasi* means one who is indifferent to worldly attachments). For a time, Bhai Mani Singh managed the shrines at Amritsar and Baba Deep Singh the one at Damdama Sahib, Talwandi Sabo, but after their martyrdom the control of these shrines also passed into the hands of the Udasis. Even though the times did not allow the Sikhs to manage the Gurdwaras directly, they upheld their responsibility toward their religious shrines. Whenever there was a violation of Sikh traditions or a desecration of the shrines, the Sikhs protested and even chastised the perpetrators of these offences.

In 1783, Sardar Baghel Singh, after attacking Delhi and entering into negotiation with the Mughal emperor, undertook the mission of identifying in Delhi the sites associated with the Sikh Gurus and raising memorials there. Sikh shrines were built at places where the Sikh Gurus had stayed. A Gurdwara was built where Guru Tegh Bahadur was executed, a site in the most crowded part of the city. Another Gurdwara was built where the mortal remains of Guru Tegh Bahadur were cremated. Other Gurdwaras were built at Majnu ka Tilla, Bangla Sahib and Bala Sahib.

Looking at the institution of Gurdwara during the historical period of the Sikh Misl, It is easy to understand why, during the period of the Sikh Misl, propagation of Sikh ideology was limited. After the martyrdom of Banda Singh Bahadur, Sikhs were harassed and hunted down throughout the country. It was extremely difficult to preserve the Sikh identity and look after the Gurdwaras when Sikhs were living in forests, saving their lives against the Mughal decree for the community's complete annihilation. Any Gurdwara management was by the Udasi and the Nirmala Sadhus, who looked after the Sikh shrines with devotion, but with the clear stamp of Vedic ideology in their teachings. Their exposition

of Gurbani was laced with Vedic terminology. These Sadhus used to seat Guru Granth Sahib in the Gurdwaras in the morning, recite Gurbani, deliver sermons and serve food in the community kitchen. But these Sadhus did not believe in the distinct religious identity of Sikhism or consider the ten Sikh Gurus as embodiments of one Divine Light. They were, undoubtedly, devotees of the Sikh religion but they were highly influenced by Hinduism, particularly, by Vedantic philosophy. They worshipped Guru Granth Sahib in the Gurdwara but practised idol worship as well. As a result of the management of the Gurdwaras by these Sadhus, the daily routine of Sikh worship in the Gurdwaras became a hybrid mixture of Sikh worship and Brahminical rituals and ceremonies.

The absence of Sikh intellectuals in the internal management of the Gurdwaras led over time to the deterioration in the routines of Sikh worship and propagation of Sikh ideology. It was a phase of Sikh history, “when the true devotees of congregational worship and *Gurbani* were alienated from the Gurdwaras and the practice of devotional and congregational worship came to be monopolized by the votaries of a personality cult called Mahants.”<sup>29</sup> The concept of Sikh Sangat, was ignored. No noticeable efforts seem to have been made either to propagate the teachings of the Sikh Gurus or to preserve the original sanctity of distinct Sikh teachings during the Misl period and the subsequent period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh as well. The Sikhs had to pay a heavy price soon after for their lack of involvement in the management of their shrines during this period. The institution of the Gurdwara was reduced to a nominal centre of Sikh religion during this period. The institution of Gurdwara ceased to enlighten the Sikh devotees in Sikh philosophy and the Sikh way of life that had occurred during the Guru period more or less ceased to operate during this period.

The Sikh Gurus provided personal guidance and

leadership to the Sikhs during their lifetime. Veteran Sikh scholars deeply steeped in Sikh ideology and the Sikh way of worship such as Baba Buddha, Bhai Gurdas, Baba Deep Singh (1682-1757) and Bhai Mani Singh (1662-1737) managed the main Sikh shrines. But with the demise of Bhai Mani Singh and Baba Deep Singh the management of Gurdwaras started slackening and a gradual degeneration of the Sikh or Khalsa way of life set in. Sikh chiefs were less and less aware of Sikh ethics and the Sikh way of life since they remained engaged in battles against the Mughals and the Pathans and became neglectful of their responsibility towards Sikh ideology (*gurmat*). Whenever the threat of external invaders weakened, they got entangled themselves in their own fraternal feuds. They became oblivious of their prime duty to Sikhism. As a result, the great institutions for propagating Sikh ideology became the personal fiefdoms and monasteries of the Mahants. As this rot and degeneration spread in the Gurdwara management, the practice of Sikh ethics and pride in the Sikh way of life diminished.

Punjab under the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a place of peace and calm. The reign of terror and oppression by the Mughals had ended and the passage through which the Afghan invaders from the north-west had been entering Punjab had been blocked. As a result, there was no threat of any external aggression. On the contrary, with political power falling into the hands of the Sikhs, Sikh religious shrines were allotted substantial land grants and endowments. Now these Sikh shrines, being financially autonomous, could meet their expenses for running the community kitchen (*langar*) and undertake other social welfare measures from their own sources. Maharaja Ranjit Singh and some other Sikh chiefs gave liberal land grants to the Sikh shrines but they did not pay any attention to the monitoring of these shrines and their daily routine of worship. Thus, as the first half of the eighteenth century passed in combating external aggression, the latter half on into the

early years of the nineteenth century were spent in consolidating the newly acquired political power. The *Misl* period was a time of gaining political power, and the Maharaja Ranjit Singh period was a time of consolidating that power. The Sikhs could not pay attention to the management of their religious shrines during either period. On the contrary, during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule, certain established Sikh traditions received a set back. The institutions of Sarbat Khalsa and Gurmatta were two of those traditions affected.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh reposed great faith in the Sikh Gurus and the Gurdwaras. He not only sanctioned land grants to the historical Sikh shrines but also reconstructed several Gurdwaras at places of historical importance for Sikhs. His utmost devotion to the Gurdwara becomes evident from the fact that he offered to Harimandar Sahib the highly expensive golden canopy presented to him by the Nizam of Hyderabad because he considered himself unworthy of such a precious gift. Maharaja Ranjit Singh donated liberally to the Gurdwaras for their maintenance and management. He contributed financially to every function of the Gurdwaras from providing rations to the construction of new buildings. He sanctioned endowments and land grants to the Sikh shrines at Dera Baba Nanak, Taran Taran, Goindwal, Khadoor Sahib, Nankana Sahib and Nanded.

He provided for the gold plating of the building of Harimandar Sahib, still shining today, speaking volumes for the devotion and dedication of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The following inscription inscribed in gold reminds the visitor to Sri Harimandar Sahib of the Maharaja's devotion to the Gurdwara: "Sri Guru Sahib (Sikh Gurus) had this service done by their devout servant Sri Maharaja Singh Sahib Ranjit Singh."

Few people differ over the opinion that Ranjit Singh had several weaknesses from the religious point of view. But it is also acknowledged that he was not a religious leader, although

he used religion to establish his political empire. He was a shrewd politician and a brave commander. Even then, his devotion to the Gurdwara cannot be doubted. The land grants and endowments established for the historical Sikh shrines, and their construction and maintenance reveal Maharaja Ranjit Singh's devotion to the Gurdwaras.

But it is also a fact that there was a decline in the role of the Gurdwara as an institution propagating Sikh ideology during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. As a result, the activity of this great institution in propagating Sikh ideology became nominal only. In the Gurdwaras, there was the customary seating of Guru Granth Sahib, recitation of Gurbani and delivery of sermons and serving of food in the community kitchen, but Gurdwara as an institution had ceased to perform its main function of instilling the spirit of Guru Nanak's teachings in its devotees and converting them into 'Gurmukhs' or truly virtuous human beings. The devotees who visited the Gurdwara had the appearance of Sikhs but they had gone astray from *gurbani* and its teachings. The value-system which the Sikh Gurus had been at pains to inculcate in the Sikhs over a period of two and a half centuries was on the decline. Brahminical rituals which the Sikh Gurus had eliminated through the institution of Gurdwara had crept back into the religious and social life of the Sikhs. After the grants of land and endowments to the Gurdwaras were established, their custodians (Mahants) became indifferent to the ideas of Sikhism. They claimed properties given in the names of Gurdwaras as their own. Instead of spending proceeds from these properties on the welfare of the Sikh congregations, they made use of them for their own luxurious living. They drifted away from the tenets of Sikh ideology and propagated a theology that was incompatible with the spirit of Sikhism. They declared Guru Nanak as the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu and Guru Granth Sahib as the fifth Veda.

The major share of power in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's government, with the exception of the army, was in the hands of non-Sikh officials, a sizable section among them being opportunistic and selfish. They had no respect for Sikh values. The most prestigious portfolios in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's cabinet were held by Dogras, Rajputs, Brahmins, Muslims and Europeans. They were in the service of the Maharaja primarily for mercenary motives, owing no allegiance to the Sikh religion. They carried on their professional duties efficiently but with no thought to acting in accordance with Sikh traditions. Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself, even though he established a powerful state, took no responsibility towards the Khalsa Panth and its core values. As a result, there was laxity in the propagation and implementation of Sikh values. His ignoring of some Sikh institutions, such as Sarbat Khalsa and Gurmatta, was probably deliberate, an attempt to weaken possible threats to his power. In short, Maharaja Ranjit Singh undoubtedly provided safety and security to the Sikhs but he did not pay adequate attention towards their religious and moral life. He sanctioned land grants and endowments to the Gurdwaras, reconstructed Gurdwaras and sanctioned money for several other expenses but he did not pay any attention to the implementation of the Sikh code of conduct and worship in the Gurdwaras.

The mighty empire which Maharaja Ranjit Singh established in Punjab collapsed with his demise. The British, who had long been on the lookout for a suitable opportunity, pounced upon Punjab and annexed it 29 March 1849.

No sooner did the Sikhs lose power in Punjab than most of the Hindus who had converted to Sikhism for vested interests returned to Hinduism. Many others, whose families had been Sikhs for several generations, renounced their Sikh identity.<sup>30</sup>

We can assess the extent of the downfall of the Sikhs

and their decrease in the numbers from the study of the British Administrative Report submitted for the year 1849-51. According to this report: “Sikh religion and its religious traditions are rapidly proceeding towards the same end where their political sovereignty has reached. Just as people joined this religion by the thousands, so are they deserting it by the thousands? The inclusion of the adults into Sikhism by performing the Amrit ceremony is a very rare occasion. Use of the Gurmukhi language is declining. The way use of Punjabi as a medium of day to day communication is declining will result in Punjabi becoming a sub-language of a particular region.”<sup>31</sup>

According to British census commission, “Sikhism was greatly weakened by the exodus of a large body of people who had adopted the Sikh form during the period of Sikh ascendancy for worldly gains, and whose allegiance to its principles and tradition was tenuous. This affected Sikhism in two ways. One, there was a sharp decrease in Sikh population in Punjab, and their slinking back to Hinduism at an alarming scale. Two, the attendance at Sikh shrines and participation at annual functions fell sharply. The British worked out in 1855 that the Sikhs, who constituted 10 million during Ranjit Singh’s time, accounted for only 200,000 in population of 3 million in the Lahore Division of Punjab. According to 1868 census, they numbered 1.14 million for the whole of Punjab including the Cis-Sutlej princely states. Sikhism in the words of census commissioner Denzil Ibbetson, was “on the decline”.<sup>32</sup>

The British government realized that the institution of Gurdwara was the main source of inspiration for the Sikhs. So long as they controlled the Gurdwaras, the British could control the Sikhs. With this in mind, the British strengthened the Mahants, Udassis and Nirmalas who were the custodians of the major Sikh shrines. Consequently, non-Sikhs under the guise of Sikhs gained an even firmer hold on the Gurdwaras. Instead

of preaching Sikh philosophy and Sikh theology, they encouraged Brahminical rituals. The undesirable activities of the two Mahants controlling the two main Sikh shrines at Amritsar and Tarn Taran were a matter of shame for the entire Sikh community.

The Sikh religion received a great setback due to this failure to propagate Sikh philosophy and to the introduction of Brahminical rituals. As a result, every aspect of Sikh life, religious, social, political and cultural, was vitiated. The rulers of Kapurthala state not only invited the Christian missionaries of Ludhiana to open a branch in the state capital but also provided funds for its operations. According to the annual report of the Mission for the year 1862, before the Kapurthala rulers' invitation, no ruler of an Indian state had promoted the preaching of the Bible.<sup>33</sup> A few years after this development, Kanwar Harnam Singh, the Kapurthala ruler's nephew, converted to Christianity. The Bible was being preached in the vicinity of Harimandar Sahib in Amritsar. One of the hospices (Bungas) around the Harimandar was taken on rent by Christians for this purpose. Four Sikh students of the Mission School at Amritsar, Aya Singh, Attar Singh, Sadhu Singh and Santokh Singh, declared their intention to renounce Sikhism and adopt Christianity as their religion. It was evident that people's loyalty to Sikhism was eroding.

Since the British were convinced that by bringing the management of Gurdwaras under their control, they could control the Sikhs as well, they used every means, fair and foul, to achieve this motive. The majority of the historical Gurdwaras had sufficient income because of their land grants and endowments. The British government was aware that the Nirmalas and Mahants occupying the Gurdwaras were dishonest. The British supported these corrupt custodians so that they could maintain British domination in the Gurdwara management.

The British government's interference in the Gurdwara management is evident in the exchange of letters among the British officers. For example, a letter written by Lieutenant Governor Egerton to Lord Rippon, the British Viceroy, states:

Lt Governor Punjab  
Simla  
August 8, 1881

My dear Lord Rippon,

I think it will be politically dangerous to allow the management of Sikh temples to fall into the hands of a committee emancipated from government control and I trust Your Excellency will assist to pass such orders in the case as will enable to continue the system which has worked successfully for more than thirty years.

Believe me,  
Yours Sincerely,  
R.E. EGERTOM"

Add. MS. NO. 43592, FOLIO 300-301  
British Morseum,  
London 34

According to an Act passed by the government of India in 1863, the government could not interfere in the affairs of any religious or charitable institution. Had the government implemented this Act in letter and spirit, it would have positively impacted the relations between the government and these institutions.<sup>35</sup> But by giving preference to its political and vested interests, the government interfered in the institutions indirectly. The government nominated persons to the management committees of the religious shrines which were dependent on the government for their economic survival and hence unlikely to take independent decisions.<sup>36</sup> In this way, the government influenced vital decisions regarding these institutions without appearing to do so.

But it is evident from certain decisions taken by the British government that it was for control, not for resolving disputes that this interference occurred. The British government dismissed Baba Lachhman Singh, head priest of Harimandar Sahib, on the pretext that he had refused to obey government instructions to expel Ganda Singh, a fugitive accused of killing a soldier of the Lahore army, from the sanctuary of Harimandar Sahib; in his place, the government appointed Jodh Singh, who had supported the British during the first Anglo-Sikh War. The British removed the power of the head priest at Harimandar Sahib to disburse the proceeds of offerings among the priests and delegated this power instead to the additional assistant commissioner of Amritsar. Government officials were given the power to resolve disputes among the priests and to dismiss priests from service. In April 1863, Baba Ram Singh was banned by the government from entering Harimandar Sahib. When a Sikh was appointed a custodian of Darbar Sahib, (Golden Temple) it was done only after making sure of his loyalty towards the British. These examples indicate the level of British interference in the management of Harimandar Sahib. "The political significance was not thus confined to disputes. The control of the Golden Temple was regarded as a key to control the entire body of the Khalsa"<sup>37</sup>

The British believed that keeping the Sikhs under their control was useful for ruling not only over Punjab but over the whole of India. Lord Dalhousie was clear about this. Even before the surrender of the Punjab, he was determined to deprive the Sikhs of their political power. In a dispatch sent to the Governor-General in 1849, he had written that there could be no peace in Punjab until its inhabitants were deprived of opportunities to wage war and that no peace could be guaranteed in India until all the Sikhs were reduced to the status of subjects, their sovereignty completely destroyed.<sup>38</sup> The British rulers understood that the Gurdwaras, being the

central institutions of Sikhism, continuously boosted the morale of the Sikhs by enlightening them about their proud heritage and keeping them attached to Sikh traditions. Therefore, the British kept a strict vigil over all the Gurdwaras, especially over Harimandar Sahib and Akal Takht,<sup>39</sup> directly, and then indirectly through the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar and the Lieutenant Governor

Several Sikh religious and reformist movements came into being in order to checkmate this degeneration among the Sikhs. Some of these movements were the Nirankari movement, the Namdhari (Kuka) movement and the Singh Sabha movement. Baba Dyal, the founder of the Nirankari Movement started the preaching of Gurbani and Gurmat ideology at this time in order to dispel the darkness of ignorance, propagating the ideas of reposing faith in one God instead of several gods and goddesses. The movement came to be known as the Nirankari movement. This movement did much to restore the role of the Gurdwara and to propagate Sikh ideology among the Sikhs.

The Nirankari and Namdhari movements, having been started by particular people, revolved around those individual personalities. Therefore, their field of activity remained limited. The Singh Sabha movement, on the other hand, represented the collective consciousness of the Sikhs. It was started in 1873 by a few persons who did not claim any special religious or spiritual piety for themselves, but who saw the need to counter certain influences in Punjab. After the imposition of British rule, Christian missionaries established religious missions throughout Punjab. By 1880, they had a printing press in Ludhiana, and were distributing religious literature in the vernacular languages of Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and Persian among literate people of Punjab.<sup>40</sup> Christian missionary schools were opened in Punjab, where Sikh students studied. Having no schools of their own, Sikh children were influenced more by Christianity than by Sikhism. In this way, Sikhs allowed

their religion to erode.

Along with the Christian missionaries, Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-83), who founded the Arya Smaj to bring about reformation in the Hindu religion, launched a campaign against Sikhism. He attempted to convert Sikhs to Hinduism on the pretext of returning to its roots. As a result of the fiery speeches of the Arya Smajists against the Sikh religion, the relations between them and the Sikhs became strained. Dayanand's views against the Sikh Gurus created an awareness among the Sikhs that they needed to protect their religion.<sup>41</sup> The Arya Samaj asserted that the Sikhs were a part of the Hindus and that there was no independent Sikh religion as such. The book entitled *Sikh Hindu Hain* (Sikhs are Hindus) was the creation of such thinking. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha produced an impressive rebuttal in his book *Ham Hindu Nahin* (We are not Hindus) written under the aegis of the Singh Sabha Movement. Thus, with the purpose of protecting Sikhism, Singh Sabha began to publish newspapers and books on Sikh religion and culture.

During this period, one section of leadership in the Singh Sabha movement was in favour of working for the welfare of the Sikhs in cooperation with the British government, while another section, more radical and hawkish, was strongly opposed to some of the government policies, especially that of interfering in the management of the Gurdwaras. Undoubtedly, both types of leadership made many contributions to the religion and literature of Sikhism and the development of a distinct Sikh identity. A majority of the radical leaders, because of their hawkish proclivities, were drawn towards the political field, especially towards the movement for India's independence. The Gurdwara Reforms movement or the Akali movement was also born out of the Singh Sabha Movement.

Certain incidents of the first two decades of the twentieth

century severely shook the Sikh psyche. A forceful demand was made in many meetings of the Singh Sabhas and the Sikh congregations that the management of Darbar Sahib and the Nankana Sahib shrines should be handed over to the Sikhs. The Chief Khalsa Diwan passed a resolution on 22 December 1906 that the government must hand over the management of Darbar Sahib to the Sikhs. Many resolutions to the same effect were passed by other institutions. A further resolution was passed in May 1907 for the constitution of a Gurdwara management committee.<sup>42</sup> But these resolutions had no impact on the government and the priests (Mahants) who had control of the Gurdwaras. On the contrary, the situation went from bad to worse. An unsavoury incident during a congregation at Tarn Taran (some members of the Akalis were attacked by the Mahants and wounded badly) deeply hurt the Sikh psyche. Then, on 14 January 1914, the government demolished one of the boundary walls of Gurdwara Rakabganj at Delhi. A movement against this government action received strong support from the Sikhs, influencing the government to accede to this legitimate demand of the Sikhs. Subsequently, the government acceded to rebuild the walls. The success of three other movements, the Guru Ka Bagh Morcha<sup>43</sup>, the Chabbian da Morcha<sup>44</sup> and the Jaito Morcha<sup>45</sup> established that the Sikhs wanted autonomy in conducting their religious affairs and would not tolerate any interference from outside. These and similar incidents strengthened the feeling among Sikhs that Sikh shrines belonged to the Sikhs and their management must be vested in Sikhs who could manage their shrines according to the spirit of the Sikh code of conduct. The tragic incidents which took place at Nankana Sahib, Panja Sahib and other Sikh shrines during this period confirmed for the Sikhs that to achieve their goal they had to launch a movement against a government that supported the priests (*mahants*) entrenched in the Sikh shrines.

During 1920's the management of Gurdwara Janam Asthan, the birth place of Guru Nanak was controlled by Mahant Narain Das. This Mahant was so corrupt that apart from indulging in drinking and womanizing at Gudwara premises, he used the holy precincts for *mujras* i.e., singing and dancing by professional prostitutes.

Akali leadership tried to persuade Mahant Narain Das to improve his ways and cleanse the administration of the Gurdwara, but instead of improving and reforming his behavior, Mahant hired about 400 mercenaries and hooligans to face the Akali leadership in case they try to interfere in Gurdwara management. On the morning of 20 February 1921, an Akali Jatha (a group of Akalis) under the leadership of Bhai Lachhman Singh arrived at Gudwara Janam Asthan to pay homage.

The Mahant believed that the Akali Jatha has come to take over the management of the Gurdwara. As soon as Jatha started Keertan (singing hymns) in main hall where Guru Granth Sahib was installed. They were fired upon by Manant's hooligans. Mahant Narian Das supervised the whole operation personally. Over 150 Akalis were murdered. Some members of the Akali Jatha were tied to a tree by Mahant's men, poured kerosene on them and burnt alive. The irony of Nankana Sahib tragedy is that, the whole operation was executed with the full co-operation of the local government officials, especially the police.

In October 1920, some newly-initiated Sikhs of the "Khalsa Brotherhood" (Baradri) of Amritsar, drawn from the so-called lower (scheduled) castes, wished to offer a prayer and *Karah Parshad* at Darbar Sahib. The priests (Mahants) refused their request. In reaction, Sikhs created a committee of Sikhs for the management of the shrine. In the end, the Mahants managing the affairs of Akal Takht deserted this sacred Sikh shrine and the management of Darbar Sahib and

Akal Takht fell into the hands of a twenty-five member committee of Sikhs headed by Jathedar Kartar Singh Jhabbar. However, even after the control of Darbar Sahib and Akal Takht was in Sikh hands, priests and government officials conspired to continue their overt or covert control over the Gurdwaras.

A meeting of representatives of Sikh organizations was planned at Amritsar for 15 November 1920. After a thorough deliberation and without any prejudice against any organization,<sup>46</sup> invitations were sent to all Sikh Takhts, Singh Sabhas, Gurdwaras, Sikh members of the army, schools and colleges, Sikh states and all other groups. Anticipating that the management of the Gurdwaras was slipping from government hands, the British Imperial government in Punjab announced on 13 November 1920, two days prior to the Panthic Committee meeting, the creation of a thirty-six member Gurdwara Management Committee consisting mainly of government supporters. The Sikh meeting, called “Sarbat Khalsa” was held as planned at Akal Takht from November 15 to 16, 1920, and created a Gurdwara Reform Committee consisting of 175 Sikhs. The members of the government-constituted thirty-six member committee were included in this committee. It was named the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and registered on 30 April 1921. A new election was conducted on 14 August 1921 in which Baba Kharak Singh was elected as president, Sardar Bahadur Mehtab Singh as vice president and Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia as secretary. But legal recognition for the committee was not easy to achieve and required struggle and sacrifice on the part of the Sikhs.<sup>47</sup> Finally, a bill was presented concerning the management of Gurdwaras on 7 July 1925, becoming the “Gurdwara Act” under Punjab Number 8 on 28 July 1925.<sup>48</sup> Under the provisions of this Act, the management of the majority of the historical Sikh shrines, more than two hundred, became the responsibility

of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.<sup>49</sup>

The Bill (Gurdwara Act 1925) defined a Sikh who made the declaration. “I solemnly affirm that I am a Sikh, that I believe in the Guru Granth Sahib, that I believe in the Ten Gurus and that I have no other religion”. The Bill ensured that the control over all Sikh religious institutions would effectively pass on to the Khalsa Sikhs.<sup>50</sup>

The publication of the Bill raised a furore among the Hindus and Sehajdharis, Udasis and Nirmlas who contended that Sikhism was never a separate religion, apart from Hinduism. Even M.K Gandhi indirectly tried to harden the Hindu resistance to accepting Sikhism as an independent religion. He wrote, “My belief about the Sikh Gurus is that they were all Hindus.... I do not regard Sikhism as a religion distinct from Hinduism.”<sup>51</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Hindu members of Punjab legislative council opposed the Sikh Gurdwara and Shrines Bill. Raja Narendra Nath, and Dr. Gokal Chand Narang, who had earlier written profusely about the Sikh nation and Sikh nationalism, now representing Hindus and Sahajdharis respectively appended minutes of dissent in the select committee. They wanted the last part to be deleted, and even objected to disqualification of *patits* (apostates).<sup>52</sup>

During the Gurdwara reform movement, Akalis suffered 30,000 men and women behind the bars, 400 dead and 20,000 injured, besides dismissals from services, withdrawals of Jagirs and Pensions, confiscation of properties and imposing of fines, etc. The Gurdwara Act came to fruition, after a bitter struggle and a great deal of sacrifices and efforts of the Sikhs to assert their identity.<sup>53</sup>

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### Notes and References

1. *Dharam Singh: Guru Granth Sahib: Guru Eternal for the Sikhs*, p. 11.

2. Teja Singh, *The Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh Awakening*, p. 6
3. Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 248: ਧਰਮ ਸਾਲ ਅਪਾਰ ਦੈਆਰ ਠਾਕੁਰ ਸਦਾ ਕੀਰਤਨੁ ਗਾਵਹੇ ॥ ਜਹ ਸਾਧ ਸੰਤ ਇਕਤੁ ਹੋਵਹਿ ਤਹਾ ਤੁਝਹਿ ਧਿਆਵਹੇ ॥
4. J S Grewal, “Legacies of the Sikh Past for the Twentieth Century”, in O Connol and others Eds, *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, p 21
5. Bhai Kahn Singh, *Gurbabad Ratnakar Mahankosh*, p 416
6. Kharak Singh, *Turn of the Century*, pp. 1-2
7. Piara Singh Padam, *Gurughar*, p 267
8. *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, 1:27: ਜਿਥੈ ਬਾਬਾ ਪੈਰ ਧਰੈ ਪੂਜਾ ਆਸਣ ਥਾਪਣ ਸੋਆ॥ ਸਿਧ ਆਸਣ ਸਭ ਜਗਤ ਦੇ ਨਾਨਕ ਆਦ ਮਤੇ ਜੇ ਕੋਆ॥ ਘਰ ਘਰ ਅੰਦਰ ਧਰਮਸਾਲ ਹੋਵੈ ਕੀਰਤਨ ਸਦਾ ਵਿਸੋਆ॥ ਬਾਬੇ ਤਾਰੇ ਚਾਰ ਚਕ ਨੌ ਖੰਡ ਪ੍ਰਿਥਮੀ ਸਚਾ ਢੋਆ॥
9. Meharban Sodhi, *Janamsakhi Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji* (Edited, Kirpal Singh), pp. 516-17
10. *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, 1:38: ਬਾਬਾ ਆਇਆ ਕਰਤਾਰਪੁਰ ਭੇਖ ਉਦਾਸੀ ਸਗਲ ਉਤਾਰਾ॥ (੧-੩੮-੧) ਪਹਿਰ ਸੰਸਾਰੀ ਕਪੜੇ ਮੰਜੀ ਬੈਠ ਕੀਆ ਅਵਤਾਰਾ॥
11. See, for example, *ibid.*, 1:38: ਗਿਆਨ ਗੋਸ਼ ਚਰਚਾ ਸਦਾ ਅਨਹਦ ਸ਼ਬਦ ਉਠੇ ਧੁਨਕਾਰਾ॥ ਸੋਦਰ ਆਰਤੀ ਗਾਵੀਐ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਵੇਲੇ ਜਾਪ ਉਚਾਰਾ॥
12. *Ibid.*: ਬਾਣੀ ਮੁਖਹੁ ਉਚਾਰੀਐ ਹੋਇ ਰੁਸ਼ਨਾਈ ਮਿਟੈ ਅੰਧਾਰਾ॥ ਗਿਆਨ ਗੋਸ਼ ਚਰਚਾ ਸਦਾ ਅਨਹਦ ਸ਼ਬਦ ਉਠੇ ਧੁਨਕਾਰਾ॥ ਸੋਦਰ ਆਰਤੀ ਗਾਵੀਐ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਵੇਲੇ ਜਾਪ ਉਚਾਰਾ॥ ਗੁਰਮੁਖ ਭਾਰ ਅਬਰਬਣ ਧਾਰਾ॥
13. *ibid.*, 1:45: ਮਾਰਿਆ ਸਿੱਕਾ ਜਗਤ ਵਿਚ ਨਾਨਕ ਨਿਰਮਲ ਪੰਥ ਚਲਾਯਾ॥
14. *ibid.*: ਕਾਯਾਂ ਪਲਟ ਸਰੂਪ ਬਣਾਯਾ॥
15. Sangat Singh, *Itibas Vich Sikh*, p. 23
16. Bhai Bala and “*Bala Janam Sakhi*” have remained controversial issues in the Sikh tradition. We find no reference to these books in Bhai Gurdas’s works or in Meharban’s *Janamsakhi* or in “*Puratan Janamsakhi*.”
17. Kahn Singh, *Gurbabad Ratanakar Mahankosh*, p. 76
18. Fauja Singh, Eds., *The City of Amritsar*, p. viii
19. Harbans Singh: *Sada Virsa*, p. 43
20. The sacred writings of the Sikh, Eds. Trilochan Singh, et. al., Forward, UNESCO.
21. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 7: ਰਾਤੀ ਰੁਤੀ ਥਿਤੀ ਵਾਰ॥ ਪਵਣ ਪਾਣੀ ਅਗਨੀ ਪਾਤਾਲ॥ ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਧਰਤੀ ਥਾਪਿ ਰਖੀ ਧਰਮ ਸਾਲ॥ ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਜੀਅ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਕੇ ਰੰਗ॥ ਤਿਨ ਕੇ ਨਾਮ ਅਨੋਕ ਅਨੰਤ॥

22. *Ibid.*, p 266: ਸਰਬ ਧਰਮ ਮਹਿ ਸ਼੍ਰੇਸ਼ਟ ਧਰਮੁ॥ ਹਰਿ ਕੇ ਨਾਮੁ ਜਪਿ ਨਿਰਮਲ ਕਰਮੁ॥
23. *Ibid.*, p. 142: ਜੇ ਜੀਵੈ ਪਤਿ ਲਥੀ ਜਾਇ ॥ ਸਭੁ ਹਰਾਮੁ ਜੇਤਾ ਕਿਛੁ ਖਾਇ॥
24. Fauja Singh, *Guru Tegh Bahadur: Yatra Asthan, Prampravan Te Yaad Chin*, p. 24
25. Kartar Singh, *Suraj Parkash, Vartak Teeka*, p. 460-61.
26. Sukhdial Singh, *Punjab Da Itibas*, p. 208
27. Sangat Singh, *Itibas Vitch Sikh*, p. 87 Quoted from Ganda Singh 'Banda Singh Bahadur; His achievements and Place of His Execution' *Panjab Past & Present*, here after PP&P.VOL 1x, October 1975, pp. 453-54
28. Sukhdyal Singh, *Khalsa Raj Da Bani Banda Singh Bahadur*, p. 123
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30. Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs* (Vol. II), p. 270
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32. Sangat Singh, *The Sikhs in History*, p. 109
33. Harbans Singh, *Sada Virsa*, p. 204
34. Kirpal Singh, *Sikh Itibas De Vishesh Pakh*, p. 182
35. Nazar Singh, "A Critique of E.N.J Craw's: Study of British Relations with the Golden Temple 1849-90" in Param Bakhshish Singh and others, Eds: *Golden Temple*, p. 101.
36. *Ibid*
37. *Ibid*, p. 102
38. Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, Vol II, p. 85
39. *Gurdwara Sudhar Lehar*, Sikh Missionary College, Ludhiana, p. 7
40. Harnek Deol, *Religion And Nationalism in India*, p 66-67
41. *Ibid*, p 69
42. Teja Singh, *The Gurdwara Reform Movement and the Sikh Awakening*, p. 98-99
43. Guru Ka Bagh Morcha (August 12, 1922 to November 17, 1922) was a non-violent agitation led by the Sikhs to liberate the Sikh shrine and attached garden at village Ghukewali in District Amritsar from the illegal possession of an Udasi Mahant. 5605 Sikhs courted arrest while hundreds of others

- endured without retaliation the brutal beatings and atrocities committed by the British authorities until the Gurdwara was liberated and handed over to the Sikhs.
44. The treasury, the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar took away the keys of the treasury (Toshakhana) of Sri Darbar Sahib from the SGPC on November 7, 1921. This incident led to a long agitation by the Sikhs, who courted arrest in large numbers. Finally, the Government relented and returned the keys to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee president Baba Kharak Singh on January 19, 1922.
  45. Jaito Morcha has been the name given to Akali agitation for the restoration of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha to his throne after he was forced to abdicate in favour of his son Partap Singh. The Maharaja of Nabha had been an active supporter of the Akalis and the Nationalist leaders. He donned black robes to protest against the massacre of the Sikhs at Nankana Sahib. During the Akali agitation, a non-stop recitation of Sikh scripture (Akhand Path) was violated by the British authorities. This act further aggravated the situation. As a result of gunfire, many Akali workers were killed. Finally, agitation ended after the British passed the Sikh Gurdwara Bill and allowed the Akalis freedom of worship at Gurdwara Gangsar at Jaito.
  46. Sohan Singh Josh, *Akali Morchian Da Itibas*, p.67
  47. Harjinder Singh Dilgir, *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee Kiven Bani?*, p. 21
  48. Mohinder Singh, *Akali Lehar*, p. 169
  49. *ibid*, p 171
  50. Sangat Singh, *The Sikhs In History*, p 151
  51. *Ibid*, Quote from collected words of Mahatma Gandhi, (Delhi Publications Division-publish in various years), VOL. 19, p 401
  52. *ibid*, p 152
  53. *ibid*.

## CHAPTER 3

### HISTORY OF THE GURDWARA IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

Sikhs in modern times are not inhabitants of India alone but have become citizens of the entire international world. Sikhs have settled outside Punjab, in the whole of India and outside India in the whole of the world. They have made the whole world their home. Wherever the Sikhs have settled even in a few numbers, they have attempted to set up a Gurdwara. As a result, in many cities of the world where there is a Sikh presence, we find one or more than one Gurdwara.

The rural Sikhs, primarily ex-servicemen, ventured abroad to distant countries as early as 1890. These Sikhs found employment in the police service, as guards in factories, as workers in dairy farms and mines and as drivers in Hongkong, Malaysia and East Africa. A few Sikhs also landed in Australia where wages for the farm workers were higher. One Nain Singh Saitani who might have migrated to Australia in early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century was commissioned in the Australia Imperial Force on 7 February 1916: he was reported “killed in action” in Belgium during the World War I. The immigration authorities of America and Canada have surmised that the first batch of Indian workers landed on the American continent between 1895 and 1900.<sup>1</sup> The American newspaper *San Francisco Chronicle* of April 16, 1899 published the news about the arrival of the Sikhs in America. A number of Sikhs had visited England in 1897 to participate in the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of Queen Victoria and visited British Columbia in Canada during their return journey. Soon after their return, they resigned from the Indian army and migrated to Canada.<sup>2</sup>

According to the statistics of the Dillingham Commission, 85% of the Indian migrants to Canada during these years were Sikhs and of those migrant Sikhs 90% belonged to the Jat Sikh community. It is believed that the first Sikh to land in Canada was Prince Victor Duleep Singh, son of Maharaja Duleep Singh and grandson of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He was a second lieutenant in the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Dragoons and he had reported at the Halifax headquarters in 1889 along with Sir John Ross, the commander of the imperial forces of Canada.<sup>3</sup>

As the British Government occupied more and more territory of India, it kept on dismantling the centuries-old political, social and economic setup in India and replacing it by its own imperial administration. The British dismantled the existing cooperative ownership of land and inter-related cottage industry and handicrafts. They established their ownership over all the natural resources of India in order to acquire the natural wealth of India. They converted rights of the community on land into the ownership of individual co-sharers in order to destroy the cooperation, unity and inter-dependence of the village communities.<sup>4</sup> Before British took over, village communities were a sort of confederacies. This sort of division of land and disintegration of cottage industry had a damaging effect on the economic condition of both peasants and farm labourers.

Punjab had come under the British rule by the middle of the nineteenth century. Agriculture was the mainstay of the Punjab peasantry during this period. The division of land under the British rule disintegrated the interdependent rural life. Punjab farmers found it difficult to support their families on the basis of smaller agricultural production. They took on heavy debts to borrow money from money-lenders for paying land revenues and meeting their domestic needs. As a result, the lands belonging to farmers began to be pledged or sold to the money-lenders. The practice of pledging agricultural land

for taking a loan, which was very rare during the Sikh rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh became a common trend during this period and approximately seven percent of the state's agricultural land was mortgaged.<sup>5</sup> Agricultural landholdings began to be taken over forcibly and handed over through courts for the recovery of debts. In this way, four lac thirteen thousand acres of agricultural land had been sold by 1901 and between 1901 and 1909, around two and a half crore acres of land were mortgaged.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the Punjab peasantry was severely hit by an economic crisis. This economic crisis, created by the British government's reign of oppression, compelled the people of Punjab, the majority of whom were Sikhs, to enlist in the army or to migrate to the island countries of South East Asia to seek employment as labourers. While working on ships they came to know from American and Canadian sailors and passengers that the wages for labour were higher in North America than in the South-East Asian islands. Soon many people migrated to America, Canada and Australia from these South-Asian islands.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter, they began to call their relatives and friends to join them. In this way, Sikhs in a significant number reached America and Canada. Almost all the early Punjabi settlers in America and Canada remained engaged in menial work initially.<sup>8</sup>

The early Sikh settlers in Canada had to pass through heavy ordeals. Very few Sikhs had settled in the British Columbia state of Canada by the last decade of the nineteenth century and the number of migrating Sikhs was declining when the white civil and government officials started raising a hue and cry against the immigrant Sikhs. The city clerk of the city of Vancouver complained to the authorities in Ottawa, the capital of Canada, that the Sikhs were migrating to Canada in large numbers. As the number of Sikh migrants in Vancouver touched the mark thirteen hundred, two members of the

Canadian parliament demanded of Sir Wilfred Laurier, the then Prime Minister of Canada, that the migration of the Hindus to Canada (All Indian migrants from India were called Hindus at that time) be banned. The mayor of Vancouver appealed to Winston Churchill, the Colonial Secretary, that a ban must be imposed on the entry of the Hindus into Canada. The newspapers published in Vancouver and Victoria wrote in their columns that these Indians were destitute, infected with diseases, inferior human beings not wanted in Canada and that their presence in Canada frightened Canadian women and children.<sup>9</sup> In this way, a vilification campaign on the basis of racial discrimination was started by Canadians against the Sikhs.

All these developments were taking place when there was no dearth of employment opportunities in Canada, nor any threat to jobs of Whites being taken away by the migrant Sikhs. The Sikhs were employed only in those occupations where Chinese and Japanese had already been working such as in lumber-yards, forests, mills, and farms where there was shortage of labour. In fact, the reasons behind racial discrimination against the Sikhs were not economic. At least, economic reasons were the least responsible for the hatred against the Sikhs during 1904 and 1905. A wave of racial discrimination running across the white labour unions and a strong instinct to keep Canada white among the Christian clergy were responsible for the racial discrimination against the migrant labour from eastern countries. It was because of this racial and religious discrimination that Punjabi and other Indian workers were paid less than white workers.<sup>10</sup> Chinese and Japanese workers had already been branded as unwanted on the basis of their cultural and national distinctness. Indians, too, came to be included in the same category.<sup>11</sup>

In the same way, Sikhs had to face a strong sense of racial discrimination in California in America.<sup>12</sup> American racists who were anti-India and anti-Sikh and the Asiatic Exclusion League

started a vicious vilification campaign against migrant Indians and declared the migration of Indians as a Hindu invasion of America.<sup>13</sup> The white community did not tolerate the religious and cultural diversity. The *Province* wrote in its columns: “The cunning Hindus/Indians have invaded British Columbia.” Communal riots broke out in the cities of Vancouver in British Columbia (Canada) and in Wellingham in Washington State, USA against the Indians and the Sikhs in 1907.<sup>14</sup> Frazer and Wilson, two clergymen, delivered fiery speeches in the Vancouver town hall in 1907 denouncing Indian immigration as an “Eastern Epidemic” and demanded a complete ban on all kinds of migration from Asia and India. The Canadian Government effectively stopped immigration from India by passing the Direct Passage Act as there was no direct shipping link between India and Canada. Some Canadian newspapers said that these migrants were grabbing the employment opportunities from white people and that they were conspiring and riotous people.<sup>15</sup>

As per the Direct Passage Act, the principle device used to exclude would-be-immigrants from India was continuous Journey Provision of immigration Acts of 1908 and 1910. Immigration officers had the authority to refuse entry to anyone who did not come by continuous journey from his or her country of origin. Under pressure from the Canadian Government shipping companies would not sell tickets for a direct voyage from India to Canada, so it was impossible for anyone to come from India and meet the requirements of the Canadian law.<sup>16</sup>

One newspaper wrote that the migrants have a filthy life style, neither do they build any houses for themselves nor do they allow their women to accompany them on social occasions and they are completely unfit for living here. We respect the Sikhs living in the home country but Canada has no place for them.<sup>17</sup> The Sikhs could not have any property in their own names in Canada. Many Sikhs had to buy property in the names

of white people. Turban-wearing Sikhs were considered to be an unruly people. There was a ban on the entry of bearded and turban-wearing people into coffee parlours and restaurants.<sup>18</sup> People of Indian origin who entered Canada after 9 May 1910 had to pay two hundred dollars per head as a sort of head tax.

The Sikhs had to wage a long struggle against all these excesses for the sake of seeking social justice. This struggle consisted of various movements, such as the struggle for getting direct traveling act, the *Kamagata Maru* Struggle, the struggles for the right to vote and the entry of women. The Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara played a significant role during this movement. On certain occasions, even some white Christians lent their support to those movements.

In 1907, the Government of Canada rescinded the right of the Indian migrants settled in Canada to vote in municipal and federal elections. These migrants got back this voting right in 1947 after putting up a long struggle. We can measure the extent and intensity of the racial discrimination against the Indians from the contents of the speech of Sir Richard Macbride, a highly-placed official of the government of British Columbia in 1947 during the *Kamagata Maru* movement in which he categorically stated that the granting of permission to eastern migrants to settle in Canada would dilute the predominance of the white people whom he regarded as indispensable for keeping Canada as a white people's nation.<sup>19</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, the earlier Sikh settlers who had landed on the west coast of America and Canada were inclined to move towards Canada, but the level of wages being higher in America and the weather further south being more comfortable for Punjabis than in Canada, they moved towards America. Within a few years, Sikh settlers started feeling as if they had discovered a new Punjab in California, which had weather conditions and fertile land

similar to those in Punjab. Soon they found employment in the farms and grape orchards located in the San Joaquin, Sacramento and Imperial Valley and some of them took over farms on lease.<sup>20</sup> Some early Indian settlers in America laboured on the Western Pacific railway line, and, after some time, in the steel-making mills of Oakland. The majority of these migrants to America and Canada belonged to the farming community, so they preferred to work on farms. Many started growing cotton and paddy quite successfully in the Sacramento valley.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the majority of Sikhs were either engaged in farm-related activities in America and Canada or in the lumber factories of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia.

The first noticeable transformation which took place among the early Sikh settlers in America and Canada was in their dress. Except for the turban, their whole dress became European. Humorous tales appeared in the newspapers about the Sikhs' concern about their style of dress and their insistence that Indians traveling to North America were made to wear trousers and boots by their Indian compatriots before alighting from the ship.<sup>22</sup>

The Sikh and other Indian workers in America and Canada, being relatively uneducated, were not well-versed in English. But there was nothing unusual in this. Non-British European entrants were in the same situation. In the beginning, very few Indian migrants married local women because they they had no wish to settle permanently in North America, but wished to return to India after earning sufficient money. Normally, these workers lived together in small groups and cooked their own food. One of them would cook food for the group and would be paid equal wage for this work by co-workers. Some of them bought houses for themselves but the majority lived in accommodation provided by the mill owners and farmers. The pioneers among the Sikh immigrants to the United States and Canada were quite industrious, honest and austere

in their personal habits. It was for this reason that a white land owner would call a Sikh passing by his farm and make an offer of a job to him.<sup>23</sup>

Even though the early Sikh settlers had to work in lumber mills, factories and farms, they started exploring other avenues of employment as well. They began to think about setting up their own businesses. The Meo Lumber mill was the first noteworthy business owned by a Sikh. Meo Singh and Duman Singh were the first two persons in the first batch of twenty-one Sikhs from the villages known today as Paldi, Mahilpur and Kharodi in District Hoshiarpur who migrated to Canada in 1905. Together, they set up the first Indian owned lumber mill on the island of Vancouver, naming it in 1932 the Meo Lumber Company after their native village (today called Paldi) in India.<sup>24</sup>

### **FIRST GURDWARA IN NORTH CANADA**

“A Gurdwara is always a milestone for the Sikh community in any area as it signifies their presence in that area. It was over a century ago that the pioneering Sikhs built their first Gurdwara in North America in the city of Golden in British Columbia, Canada. According to the book, *Kinbasket County: the Story of Golden and the Columbia Valley*, published in 1972 by the Golden District Historical Society, a Sikh Temple was built in the city of Golden, British Columbia, Canada in 1890. The Golden Society extracted evidence for this Gurdwara from annals of Golden’s history available with the city municipality and other depositories. In a more recent book, *Golden Memoir*, published in 1982, there are several references to early Sikh population of Golden City, including the 1890 Gurdwara.<sup>25</sup>

The original Gurdwara was built on land allotted by the Columbia River Lumber Co. It was built among the bunk houses that Sikhs used for their living quarters. The Gurdwara was housed in a wooden building with Sikh emblem and Nishan

Sahib installed. The inside was lavishly decorated with plush carpets and rugs for the installation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>26</sup>

In the beginning the congregation or *sangat* was all male as the first Sikh woman entered Golden city in 1923. Piara Singh son of Hardit Singh was the first Sikh Canadian born in the Golden Hospital on 26 August 1924. As misfortune was to have it, a massive fire broke out in 1927 and it burned the Columbia River Lumber Co. to ashes. Thus the Sikhs lost their livelihood and were forced to leave this town in search of employment elsewhere. They took Sri Guru Granth Sahib along with them. The Gurdwara land reverted to the city and the building without Guru Granth Sahib was ultimately demolished.<sup>27</sup>

The current Sikh era in Golden began in 1962 when Gurdial Singh Dhami moved to Golden. He still lived in Golden when we visited in 1991 to celebrate the 101 anniversary of the first Gurdwara on the American continent. Then there were 67 Sikh families living in Golden City proper and another 8 families living in the surrounding areas.<sup>28</sup>

In 1978 MS Wixen, an old timer, coaxed local Sikhs to either restore the historical Gurdwara or build one to replace it. Within a short time, a sum of nearly \$100,000 was collected. The Government of British Columbia granted \$15,000 for the Gurdwara building.

The anniversary was celebrated in the new Gurdwara building that stood at 13<sup>th</sup> street and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and was spotted easily by its tall Nishan Sahib. It was a two-story building, the upper level for service and the lower one to house Langar facilities and residential units. The new Gurdwara building was opened in 1981. The Gurdwara was managed by the Golden Sikh Cultural Society. Sikhs traveling between Vancouver and Calgary pass through this city.<sup>29</sup>

Bhai Arjan Singh Malik migrated to Canada in 1904 from village Malak in Tehsil Jagraon, District Ludhiana in Punjab.

He brought a copy of Guru Granth Sahib with him. He lived in the Port Moody area. A few Sikhs used to assemble together and recite Gurbani and sing Gurbani hymns here. In 1906, they rented a building located in Block West 1900, Third Avenue, for thirty-two dollars per month and installed Guru Granth Sahib in it on 22 July 1906.<sup>30</sup> The first Gurdwara is believed to have been set up at this location on 22 July 1906. Bhai Arjan Singh was its first custodian.<sup>31</sup>

The Sikh immigrants settled in Canada organized themselves and set up the first representative Sikh organization in North America. The Khalsa Diwan Society was established in Vancouver in 1907 as an effective way to deal with the legal hurdles created by the Canadian government, local white community, union leadership, other religious organizations and other related problems of racial discrimination. The Society also planned to cater to other needs of Sikh society, Sikh religion and Sikh culture. This organization set up the first Gurdwara in Vancouver.

The Sikh Gurdwara played a very significant role in the daily lives of the earlier settlers in Canada. All the Indian Sikhs, Hindus and Muslim settlers paid obeisance in the Gurdwara. The Gurdwara, besides being a religious centre, was also a centre for all sorts of political, social, economic and cultural activities. After the constitution of the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver in 1907, the Sikhs began the construction of a Gurdwara at 1866 Second Avenue West, Vancouver. It was inaugurated by the Sikh congregation on 19 January 1908.<sup>32</sup> The Gurdwara building cost twenty-five thousand dollars.<sup>33</sup>

Sant Teja Singh arrived at Vancouver along with his family in 1908. As well as making efforts to resolve some of the problems of the Indian community settled there, he also laid down permanent rules for the day-to-day administration of Gurdwaras in Canada. These rules were made in conformity

with the existing Canadian laws and were instrumental in the propagation of Gurmat ideology as well as in strengthening this ideology. The constitution of the Khalsa Diwan Society was registered for the first time in Victoria on 13 March 1909 under the registration number S-216. This registration is still valid.<sup>34</sup>

The establishment of the Khalsa Diwan Society was a landmark in the history of the Sikhs in Canada. It was the first leading institution which represented the Sikhs settled outside India in the religious, political, social and economic spheres. It not only launched a movement for the resolution of problems faced by the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims living in Canada and America at that time but also played a leading role in ongoing movements for India's independence and the Gurdwara reforms in Punjab. The massacre of the Sikhs at Jaito had shocked the Sikhs all over the world.

The village of Jaito is situated 17 kilometres from Kot Kapura in Faridkot district of the Punjab by rail or road where Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib Patshahi Dasmī was later established. Jaito became famous during the Akali Movement of the early 1920s when an agitation called *Jaito da Morcha* was launched during 1923-25 against the British Indian government that ruled through a British administrator, the Sikh state of Nabha, of which Jaito was then a part. The agitation was originally started as a protest against the deposition of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha, but it became a question of freedom when an *akband path*, a non-stop recital of Guru Granth Sahib, commenced at Gurdwara Gangsar Sahib in September 1923 was interrupted by the state police.<sup>35</sup>

The Shriomani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C) and the Shiromani Akali Dal started sending peaceful *Jathas* sworn to non-violence for the re-commencement of *akband path*, but they were arrested by the state authorities. In February 1924, the S.G.P.C. decided to send Shahidi Jathas,

do-or-die bands of volunteers, still committed to non-violence. The first Shahidi Jatha of 500 volunteers, on reaching close to the Gurdwara on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1924, was fired upon by the state forces resulting in a score of deaths, many more wounded and the rest arrested. But the despatch of Shahidi Jathas continued till victory was achieved.<sup>36</sup>

The Jaito agitation had become a matter of prestige for the Sikhs settled all over the world. Bands of Sikh volunteers from foreign lands started arriving and joining the agitation in Punjab. Among these arrivals was a band of Sikhs from Canada, eleven Sikh volunteers under the command of Bhai Bhagwan Singh who left Vancouver on 27 July 1924 to participate in the Jaito agitation. The arrival of this band of Sikh volunteers in India from Canada boosted the morale of the Punjabis and the Sikhs in particular.<sup>37</sup>

The Gurdwara in Vancouver functioning under the control of the Khalsa Diwan Society remained the main centre of activity for the freedom fighters of America and Canada struggling for the independence of India, the focal point for North Americans of Indian origin working for India's independence from British imperialism. Sardar Bhag Singh was the president of the Gurdwara Managing Committee and Sardar Balwant Singh the scripture-reader in the Gurdwara at that time. This was the first Gurdwara, functioning under the management of the Khalsa Diwan Society, to create a common platform for Indians settled in the United States and Canada where they could share their joys and sorrows and make plans to resolve their challenges. We are of the opinion that the establishment of this Gurdwara at Vancouver in the North American continent led to the setting up of Gurdwaras in almost all the cities of America and Canada having a sizeable Sikh population. A Gurdwara was established in Abbotsford in 1911, the foundation of which was laid jointly by Bhai Balwant Singh (later a Sikh martyr) and Bhai Ram Singh Dhuleta. After the

1909 purchase of a piece of land on Topaz Avenue in the city of Victoria, a Gurdwara was set up there on 21 May 1912; its foundation laid by Sant Teja Singh. Later, all the Sikhs settled in British Columbia joined in the inauguration of a Gurdwara in New Westminster in 1913.<sup>38</sup>

The Sikh immigrants who arrived in Canada during the first two decades of twentieth century had to pass through several painful situations. These included the cunning conspiracy to oust the Sikhs from Canada and to send them to the island of Honduras, ban on the entry of Sikh women into Canada, and the activities of Mr. William Hopkinson, a bilingual spy working in the immigration department to create hostile conditions for the Sikhs. Bela Singh, an agent of Mr. Hopkinson, shot dead Bhai Bhag Singh, the Gurdwara president, and Bhai Rattan Singh inside the Vancouver Gurdwara while they were leading a Sikh prayer. The Kamagata Maru episode occurring in 1914 was a tragic incident which shocked the Sikhs.

But these pioneering Sikh veterans did not lose heart. They faced all these challenges with a steadfast vision and unique wisdom. Although the earlier Sikh settlers worked in lumber factories, gradually they started exploring other avenues for employment. They purchased lumber mills. The Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company was established. The Canadian-Indian Supply Company Limited, dealing in multiple businesses, also came into being. By the beginning of 1920, Sikhs owned and operated six sawmills and two shingle mills.<sup>39</sup> Some Sikhs purchased agricultural land and farmed there. By 1921 the Khalsa Diwan Society had paid donations worth 295,000 dollars for various Sikh social and political causes. By 1925, The Khalsa Diwan Society had opened its autonomous branches in several British Columbia cities: they all financially supported Gadar Party, fighting for the independence of India from the British Colonial rule.<sup>40</sup>

Gurdit Singh Sarhali (1860-1950) of the Kamagata Maru fame, who tried to bypass the Canadians law of direct passage, came from Amritsar, Punjab. He went to Malayasia and worked as a contractor in dairy supplying, building, and railways. He moved to Hong Kong in December 1913. While staying at the Gurdwara, he observed that several hundred unemployed Punjabis were looking for a ship to come to Canada. Gurdit Singh decided to lead an expedition of these Sikhs to British Columbia. His objective was both financial and patriotic.

Gurdit Singh wanted to charter a vessel capable of transporting five hundred passengers. The vessel was *Komagata Maru*. The Japanese shipping company that owned the aging freighter would provide a crew; Gurdit Singh formed the Guru Nanak Steamship Company and named the ship Guru Nanak Jahaz. In early March 1914, he proceeded to sell tickets and shares for the voyage. He was confident that Canada's immigration laws would collapse the moment the *Komagata Maru* sailed into Vancouver harbour since in his view the voyage had complied with the requirement of continuous passage laws. On April 6, the *Komagata Maru* set sail for Shanghai with one hundred sixty five passengers on board; One hundred eleven joined the ship at Shanghai, eighty-six at Moji, and fourteen at Yokohama. Of the three hundred seventy six passengers aboard the Komagata Maru, there were three hundred forty Sikhs, twenty-four Muslims, and twelve Hindus.

On 21 May the *Komagata Maru* arrived in Vancouver after a dreary seven week voyage across the Pacific Ocean and anchored into Burrard Inlet. The Canadian government immediately placed an armed guard in a launch which continued to circle the ship day and night. Gurdit Singh stayed a prisoner, and was not allowed to make contacts with the Vancouver Sikh community. The Khalsa Diwan Society hired Edward J. Bird, to represent the ship's passengers.

The government had its own strategy to ensure

deportation. Directions originated with Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden. Ninety passengers were falsely declared to have trachoma, a non-existent disease, and therefore ineligible as immigrants. Under the law, however, all three hundred fifty-six passengers (since twenty were returnees) could submit individual applications to the Immigration Board of inquiry, and if rejected, each applicant could file habeas corpus, charging he was being illegally detained.

By 20 June, the *Komagata Maru* remained stayed in Vancouver harbour for a month. Conditions on board continued to worsen. There was virtually no drinking water and food supplies were very low. Requests for fresh water were ignored. According to Bird (lawyer), “the board of inquiry was a travesty of justice in which the prosecutors are the Judges.”

On 19 July, Malcolm Reid (Immigration Board Member) decided to storm the *Komagata Maru*, subdue the passengers and sail the ship out to international waters. This led to what is known as the Battle of Burrard Inlet. A strike force of one hundred twenty five police officers with revolvers, accompanied by thirty-five special immigration officers armed with rifles, boarded the tug *Sea Lion*. An attempt to board the ship was met with a solid line of Sikhs four deep that manned the railing. The Battle of Burrard was a disaster for Malcolm Reid. Mr. Borden (Prime Minister) authorized the use of a warship, the *HMCS Rainbow*, to intimidate the Sikhs.

Thursday morning 23 July 1914, the *Komagata Maru* under the *Rainbow* convoy set sail out of Vancouver harbour after two months stay. According to O.D. Skelton, Prime Minister Wilfred Lavrier’s biographer, it is ironic, that the use of the Canadian navy (cruiser *Rainbow*) against the *Komagata Maru*, was to stop British subjects from landing on British soil.<sup>41</sup>

In India, the *Komagata Maru* represented the Indian people’s struggle for independence from the British Empire. In Canada it is a reminder of a policy of exclusion that for Sikhs and

other immigrants from India lasted more than half a century. The Sikh community survived and prospered in Canada despite the prejudice and hostility that *Komagata Maru* story testifies.<sup>42</sup>

After the return of the ship *Komagata Maru* in 1914, there ensued a fifty-year period of comparative stability for the Sikh immigrants in Canada. There are some obvious reasons for this peace and stability. Firstly, there was a decline in the level of Sikh immigration from India due to legal restrictions during these fifty years. Secondly, the Sikh immigrants in Canada had started adjusting and adapting to the new social milieu in Canada. The institution of Gurdwara proved quite helpful in coordinating the Sikhs settled in America and Canada. The participation of the Sikhs in the second World War also changed the public perception about them and made them respectable in public opinion. In this way, the Sikhs achieved the honour of enjoying an equal social status among the citizens of Canada for the first time. There occurred many ups and down in the immigration policy after 1947, but in general post-1947 Sikh immigrants did not have to face as many hardships as earlier Sikh immigrants had faced.

As a result of the restrictive laws in Canada after 1907, the destination of the majority of Indian immigrants arriving in tended to be the United States rather than Canada. Even some Indians already settled in Canada migrated to America. Although statistical evidence about early Indian immigrants to America is inconsistent, American statistics for 1913 calculate the total of Indian immigrants in America as 5000.<sup>43</sup> Of the pioneers who migrated to America and Canada from Punjab, the majority of them were Sikhs. Since they were under the influence of the Singh Sabha Movement at the time of their departure from India, they began to organize themselves under the banner of Sikh societies in America and Canada. After the establishment of the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver in Canada, the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society

was set up in America in 1912 under the joint initiative of Sant Teja Singh, Bhai Jawala Singh (Thattian) and Bhai Vasakha Singh (Dadehar). Land was purchased for setting up a Gurdwara at South Grant Street, Stockton, in the same year. A building already existed at this place. This was the first Gurdwara established in America. Its construction was completed on 21 November 1915 and it was inaugurated the same day, the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. Bhai Jawala Singh and Bhai Vasakha Singh were appointed the first caretakers (*granthis*) of this Gurdwara. This two-storeyed Gurdwara's total construction cost was approximately 3000 dollars.

In the year 1929, the old Gurdwara was expanded and a new building constructed. The old Gurdwara had a wooden frame, but the new Gurdwara was made of bricks at a cost of 35,000 dollars.<sup>44</sup> As the number of Sikhs kept increasing in North America, more and more Gurdwaras were built in other cities. A Gurdwara was set up in El Centro in the California Imperial Valley in 1948. The Japanese had faced a difficult situation in the Imperial Valley during the second World War. Soon after the end of the war, American-Japanese leadership decided to dispose of their temple. The Sikhs purchased this temple for 18,000 dollars and converted it into a Gurdwara. A massive Langar Hall (community kitchen) complex was added to this Gurdwara in 1954 by spending another 18,000 dollars.<sup>45</sup> The practice of establishing gurdwaras continued and now, in many American cities with a sizeable Sikh population, a Gurdwara is established.

The Gurdwara has remained the centre of Sikh religious, political, social and economic activities in America and Canada. Although Gurdwaras were primarily the religious centres of the Sikhs, they also provided sanctuary to freedom fighters fighting for India's independence, particularly to the members of the Ghadar Party. There was no place other than the

Gurdwara for the assembly of the Indians, so political activity was carried out from the precincts the Gurdwaras. The Sikh Diwan and similar organizations published small newspapers carrying a lot of informative material. One such newspaper, *Desb Sewak*, started publication in Gurmukhi and Urdu from Vancouver with Harnam Singh and Guru Dut Kumar as editors. In 1911 Kartar Singh Akali started the publication of a monthly journal, the *Khalsa Herald*, and Dr Sunder Singh started editing the English journal *Arian* in Vancouver. Another English journal *Hindustan* was published by Seth Hussain in 1914. The content of these newspapers and journals included local developments as well as criticism of the British acts against the Indians. The copies of these journals are believed to be preserved in the library at Berkeley University of California. The author was unable to find any journals published by the Indian immigrants in United States except the *Ghadr*.<sup>46</sup>

The *Ghadar Party* is known as the main organization fighting for the independence of India in America and Canada. The mainstay of the *Ghadar Party* was the self-respecting brave Punjabi Sikhs who had emigrated from Punjab to North America and were the front runners in carrying out the programmes of this organization. The institution of Gurdwara, besides being the headquarters of the *Ghadar Party's* activities, was also instrumental in providing all other facilities (mainly financial & lodging etc) to its members. The leading lights of the *Ghadar Party* including Sikhs such as Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, Bhag Singh, Jawala Singh (nicknamed the Emperor of Potatoes), Santokh Singh, Bhagwant Singh and Bhai Balwant Singh (a Sikh martyr) are remembered with great reverence even today. These Sikhs were also among the pioneers who set up Gurdwaras in America and Canada.

Understanding the nature and evolution of the Ghadar Party requires the awareness that the political awakening of Indian workers settled in America and Canada was not inspired

by a particular individual, group or a political party. It was born of the spontaneous reaction of brave, innocent, and self-respecting Punjabi farmers towards the circumstances prevailing in these countries.<sup>47</sup> The institution of Gurdwara was the main source of support for Indians living in America and Canada, enabling them to face the challenges confronting them. It kept its doors open to all Indians, irrespective of their diverse religious affiliations. During the crisis born out of the *Kamagata-Maru* movement led by Baba Gurdit Singh, the role played by the Vancouver Gurdwara under the management of the Khalsa Diwan Society was significant. Seven hundred Indians, ninety percent of them Sikhs, held a meeting under the joint patronage of the Khalsa Diwan Society and the United Indian League on 31 May 1914. A sum of 60,000 dollars was collected in response to the appeal of Bhai Balwant Singh and Siri Hassan Raheem. The committee constituted during this meeting decided to launch a struggle against the government of Canada in order to help the Indian immigrants seeking entry into India. A wave of anger and resentment arose in the minds of Indians living in America and Canada against the injustice and discriminatory attitude of the British imperialists towards the Indian people. Congregations were held in the Gurdwaras at Victoria and Vancouver where British government's acts of discrimination and highhandedness came under condemnation.<sup>48</sup> From its earliest days in North America, the institution of Gurdwara provided guidance to the Sikhs in every sphere of their life.

### **INSTITUTION OF GURDWARA IN ENGLAND**

Maharaja Duleep Singh was the first Sikh to set his foot on the soil of England. He was forcibly deprived of his sovereignty as ruler of Punjab and exiled to England in 1854 where he remained in an exiled state until his death in 1893 in Paris. The Sikhs started coming soon to England for higher

education, returning to India after completing their education.<sup>49</sup> By the early years of the twentieth century, London, England had become a distinctive centre of higher education for Indians. It was around 1895 that some members of the Bhatra community settled in Britain. These Indians, despite being deficient in English language, became successful as peddlers, vendors, and fortune tellers. They found Britain a profitable place and more members of their community joined them. Five Sikh students set up the first Singh Sabha in London in 1897. They took up the task of explaining Sikh ideology to the new settlers and educating them in ways to adjust to the prevailing circumstances in the new country.<sup>50</sup>

Sant Teja Singh also went to Downing College, Cambridge for higher studies in 1907; He set up the Khalsa Jatha Central Gurdwara of the British Isles in Cambridge in 1908 in association with some other students. This institution was affiliated with the Chief Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar, a prominent Sikh organization of Punjab during those days. Chief Khalsa Jatha of the British Isles held annual meetings. Sikh students hired a spacious hall in India House or elsewhere to celebrate Guru Nanak's birth anniversary and some other events of Sikh history.<sup>51</sup> In this way, Sikhs living in and around London kept in touch with each other through the institution of Gurdwara. A congregation was held in the Westminster Palace Hall in January, 1910 to celebrate Guru Gobind Singh's birth anniversary. In 1911, Sant Teja Singh, who had migrated to North America, was in London after his return from Canada. He was instrumental in inspiring the people to buy a piece of land in London for a Gurdwara building. In the beginning, a house was rented for two year at Putney for this purpose. The proposal for a London Gurdwara was greeted with much enthusiasm in Punjab. Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala was in London in those days. He donated one thousand pounds for the Gurdwara fund. As a result of this initiative and efforts,

a house was leased for a period of sixty-three years at 79 Sinclair Road, Shepherd's Bush. After undergoing repairs and renovations, this became the first Gurdwara to be built in London, inaugurated by the Maharaja of Patiala.<sup>52</sup> This Gurdwara came to be known as the Shepherds's Bush Gurdwara in England. It became the centre of all activities of the Sikhs living in England, Sikhs from all over England assembling here on special occasions such as Baisakhi, birth anniversaries of Sikh Gurus (Gurpurabs) and New Year celebrations. Sikhs used to travel to London from as far away as Scotland to participate in various functions and programmes organized by the Gurdwara. The congregation of the Shepherd's Bush Gurdwara was always helpful to new Indian immigrants and Indian students, assisting them to adjust to the new environment. The Shepherd's Bush Gurdwara was the first place to stay for Indian immigrants after landing at Southampton. In 1967, new Gurdwaras were built at Queen's Road, Kensington and Chelsea after the Gurdwara building at Shepherd's Bush was sold.<sup>53</sup> No information is available prior to 1950 about Gurdwaras in England other than of this one at Shepherd's Bush and the congregations held in hired premises by the Bhatra Brotherhood and others.

Many Sikhs arrived in England during the fifth and sixth decades of the twentieth century. The Commonwealth Immigration Act was passed in 1962 in order to stop the immigration of coloured people. Whites were opposed to the entry of non-white people on account of religious and racial discrimination. But Britain needed the services of professional and skilled workers. To meet this need, the government amended the Immigration Act of 1962 making provisions for the immigration of special categories of coloured people. This provision was generally called the Voucher System. Only those people who had already procured work permits to work in England or who were either highly skilled or unskilled were

included in these categories.

According to John Dewit, when a large number of Sikhs arrived in England during the fifth and sixth decades of the twentieth century, they started holding their religious congregations either in their individual homes or rented locations.<sup>54</sup> The white residents of England felt that the entry of the Sikhs would change the complexion of their society. Peter Griffiths, a member of parliament wrote, “I am of the opinion that we must maintain a proper ratio between the white and coloured people.”<sup>55</sup> Organising a spirited movement against the entry of the Sikhs, Lawrence Rapier wrote in *The Telephone*, “It is indeed tragic that one of the best races is being poisoned with the mixing of blood stream. Coloured people are being invited by administering doses of unemployment allowance.”<sup>56</sup> Enoch Powell, a member of parliament, remarked in his famous “Bloodstreams” speech, “The cloud which is very small yet is soon going to eclipse the whole sky as is evident from the situation in Wolverhampton.” He was hinting here that the strength of the Indians is increasing. He further remarked, “It is really very sad that the Sikh community is launching a movement to consolidate its traditions and ceremonies, which in my opinion, is undesirable. They (Sikhs) should observe British rules while working in individual and public services in Britain. Raising demands for special rights for their community amounts to disintegration of (British) society. It is a communal cancer that deserves to be forcefully condemned.”<sup>57</sup> He further remarked, “Like a Roman I visualize the river Tiber overflowing with blood.”<sup>58</sup> As a reaction to this fiery speech, there were many protests and demonstrations by Indians. There were communal riots as well between Sikhs and other Indians and the white racists.

There was racial and religious discrimination against the Sikhs even during the recruitment of bus drivers and conductors. The transport union was opposed to Sikh demands

(Sikh bus drivers were not allowed on the jobs with turban).<sup>59</sup> The Sikhs of the Gurdwaras in Birmingham, Wolverhampton, and Manchester held demonstrations against this sort of discrimination. Sohan Singh Jolly, a Sikh bus driver, threatened to commit suicide in protest. Ultimately the transport trade union passed a resolution in favour of the (Sikh) turban.<sup>60</sup> In 1982, the Gurdwaras and the Sikhs launched such a vigorous struggle that the government passed an act accepting the Sikhs as an ethnic group granting them right to wear a turban and giving some other rights. The Gurdwara remained the centre of all the activities of the Sikhs during this struggle.

In Canada, similar objections about the turban were raised about Sikhs working in transport companies, factories and lumber mills, riding motor-cycles, joining police forces, and attending schools. The struggle for claiming the right to wear turban began with Sardar Baltej Singh Dhillon: he applied in 1988 to join the Royal Canadian Military Police and was asked if he would give up wearing turban in favour of the standard peaked cap or Stetson, but he refused to do so. Finally, Sikhs succeeded in this mission. The Sikh presence in Canada goes back to over one hundred years. They have been attempting to seek employment with R.C.M.P as initiated (Amritdhari) Sikh officers, a traditional role that Sikhs have carried out for centuries. Sikhs have donned turbans and Sikh symbols (five *Kakkars* i.e., *Kesh*, *Kara*, *Kirpan*, *Kangha* and *Kachhera*) in police forces in U.K., Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong and India. Sikhs with turbans have served in the British Indian Army in World War I and World War II, and in the United Nations Peace Keeping Force. For those of the Sikh faith, the wearing of the turban, growing a beard, keeping unshorn hair and other Sikh symbols are essential part of their religious requirement and tradition. Any initiated Sikh was unable to join the R.C.M.P if he was not allowed to wear the turban. Therefore, the existing dress code became an infringement of

their rights under the charter.

Around mid-1987 the RCMP commissioner, Norman Indster, came up with recommendations for necessary dress code changes to RCMP uniform to facilitate entry of initiated Sikhs into the force. By the time the commissioner's recommendations to allow turbans formally reached Solicitor General Piers Blair in June 1989, it had provoked three Calgary sisters, Dawn Miles, Genevieve Kanteberg and Kay Mamsbridge, who were connected with RCMP officers and their families, to initiate a strong anti-Sikh campaign and they mustered two hundred thousand signatures.

In 1986, the Metro Toronto Police permitted Sikh police officials to wear their turbans, and other Sikh symbols while on duty with the force. Initiated Sikh youths found inspiration and filed their applications seeking careers in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police; Baltej Singh Dhillon was one of the successful ones who applied.

In October 1989, however, Barbara Sparrow, the Tory MP from Calgary, tabled a petition in the House of Commons bearing the names of sixty-eight thousand five hundred eighty-two people, mainly from Alberta, who were demanding that the RCMP dress uniform be retained. But all Canadian Sikhs of different affiliations were united on the RCMP turban issue, and they joined hands for the successful realization of this objective. On 1 February 1990 the Canadian Sikh Studies Institute presented five thousand signatures to Solicitor General Pierre Blais in support of the Sikh demand that they be allowed to wear turbans and other Sikh symbols while serving as RCMP officers on duty. The signatures were obtained by the Institute in a symbolic campaign from Gurdwaras in Canada, from coast to coast, in which a range of people from professionals to labourers participated.

A few days later Prime Minister Brian Mulroney expressed his sentiments in support of the Sikhs on turban issue. On 14

March 1990 the Canadian solicitor general declared in the House of Commons that the Canadian Sikhs would be able to serve in the RCMP without having to compromise their religious requirement to wear turbans and Sikh symbols. On 11 May 1990, Baltej Singh Dhillon, an initiated Sikh, made history where he was decorated as an RCMP officer wearing turban and other Sikh symbols at a colourful graduating ceremony from Regina Police Academy.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, Sikh students wearing turbans were discriminated against in schools and the issue of wearing a small sword (*Kirpan*) by Sikh students was taken up to the Supreme Court. In this context, the Supreme Court of Canada, upheld the constitutional right of a Sikh student Gurbaj Singh Multani to exercise his freedom of religion, and declared that the most cherished goal of Canadian society was its practice of religious tolerance. During those days, the white racists in America and Canada referred with contempt to turban-wearing Sikhs as rag heads and sarees worn by women as bedsheets.<sup>62</sup>

In March 2006, the Supreme Court of Canada (the ‘court’) ruled that Sikh students are permitted to wear a small *Kirpan* to School. The court overturned the Quebec Court of Appeal’s decision in *Multani vs Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeays* [2006] S.C.J.NO.6, that had banned an elementary student from wearing his *Kirpan* to School. As a result of the law, the student had withdrawn from public school and chose to attend a private school in order to continue wearing his *Kirpan*. The court held that the absolute prohibition against wearing a *Kirpan* infringed the freedom of religion of the student under section 2 (a) of the Canadian charter of Rights and Freedoms (“the charter”). This infringement could not be justified under section 1 of the charter as such a prohibition did not minimally impair the student’s rights.

## HISTORY OF EVENTS

The case involved a twelve year old Sikh student, Gurbaj Singh Multani, who believed that his religion required him to wear a *Kirpan* at all times. A *kirpan* is a scimitar made of iron with a curved blade, which may be several centimetres long. On November 19, 2001, while playing in the schoolyard, Multani dropped the Kirpan he was wearing under his shirt. The school administration prohibited him from bringing the *Kirpan* to school.<sup>63</sup>

The majority of Sikh immigrants to London settled in western England, East and West London and the North Midlands. Scarcity of labour helped the Sikhs to get employment in industries there. In keeping with Sikh practice, these Sikhs constructed Gurdwaras in these cities, first renting buildings and later purchasing land.

After the 1980's, some disgruntled persons among the pioneering founders started building their separate Gurdwaras. During the years between 1995 and 2000, there started a mad race among the British Sikhs to raise Gurdwaras based on factional, caste, ethnic, regional and religious differences. According to the statistical records of the Registrar of Places in England and Wales, there were only three registered Gurdwaras in 1961. This number rose to 33 in 1973, 69 in 1981, 138 in 1991, and 193 in 2001. According to the Multi-faith Directory for the UK, the number of Gurdwaras in England was 214<sup>64</sup> in the year 2001: number of Gurdwaras in England continues to increase.

Undoubtedly, Sikhs had to face heavy odds to get settled in England and they are still facing some problems, but there is hardly any city in Britain without a Gurdwara. A few years ago, Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister of Britain, showered in 1999 a lot of praise on the Sikhs on the occasion of the tercentenary celebrations of the birth of the Khalsa. Praising the Sikhs profusely, Lord Lane, the Chief Justice of England, remarked, "The Sikh community in England is held in highest

esteem and it is worthy of respect indeed.”<sup>65</sup> Despite all diverse odds, challenges and acts of racial discrimination, the Sikhs in England are becoming prosperous and contributing much to the development of the nation. The Sikhs living in England occupy positions ranging from those of factory workers to members of Parliament, lords, judges, professors, councillors, businesspeople, lawyers, surgeons, scientists, owners of radio and television stations, bankers and writers, and give a good account of themselves while holding these positions.

“At present, there are more than three hundred Gurdwaras in England.”<sup>66</sup> Constructed in 2003 at a cost of seventeen million pounds, the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara at Southhall is a landmark monument in England and a symbol of the Sikh presence and identity in England.

There was a time when the majority of Sikhs arriving in England and other Western countries used to return home after earning some money or a degree in higher education. They worked in these countries with the hope that one day they would return home at last. But now the situation has changed. The present-day Sikh settlers in these countries have adopted these countries as their home and they feel proud of being their citizens. There is hardly any sector in these countries where the Sikhs have not made their presence felt. The Sikhs have earned name and fame in the political, social, economic, religious and cultural affairs of these countries.

The Sikhs in England occupy positions both in Parliament and in the House of Lords. The late Sardar Piara Singh Khabrah had the distinction of being the first Sikh to become a member of the British Parliament in 1992. Similarly, Tarsem Singh King (Kang) had the honour of becoming the first Sikh Lord. Sardar Mota Singh created a precedent in British history in 1979 as the first turbaned Sikh judge. He occupied the hallowed judge’s bench wearing a turban instead of the customary wig.

Sikhs have made their presence felt in every field of life

in Canada as well where their population has crossed the six lac mark, two percent of the total Canadian population. Sikhs have won positions as members of provincial legislative assemblies (MLAs), cabinet ministers, even premiers (Chief Ministers). In February 2000, Ujjaldev Singh Dosanjh, in becoming premier of British Columbia, opened a new chapter in Canada's history as the first Sikh premier of a Canadian province. Harbans Singh Dhaliwal (Herb Dhaliwal) was sworn in as revenue minister in the Canadian government, earning the distinction of being the first Sikh cabinet member in a western country. Sardar Gurbakhsh Singh Malhi was the first turbaned Member of Parliament in Canada. Sardar Navdeep Singh Bains is the youngest and the first initiated (Amritdhari) Sikh to be a member of parliament in Canada. Summing up the history of the Sikh settlers in Canada Ujjal Dosanjh, after becoming premier of British Columbia in 2000, commented that were there any survivors of the ship *Komagata Maru* today, they would definitely remark, "Bravo boys! You have done us proud. Let us forget and forgive what has happened in the past."<sup>67</sup>

The Gurdwara Committees in Canada arrange Sikh processions (*Nagar Kirtan*) on the Khalsa Day (Baisakhi) in large Canadian cities such as Toronto, Montreal, Edmonton and Vancouver. Thousands of Sikhs, accompanied by dignitaries including provincial premiers and the prime minister participate. The Ottawa Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee holds an *Akhand Path* on the Canadian parliament premises in the capital city of Ottawa on the occasion of Baisakhi. Participating in 1999 in the tercentenary celebrations of the birth of Khalsa, the prime minister of Canada, Jean Chretien remarked. "The welcome they (Sikhs) received at that time (their arrival in Canada in the late ninetieth century) and many years after is not one that does credit to Canada. Indeed, what Canadians today take for granted-our commitment to

respecting fundamental human rights-the Sikh experience reminds us that this has not always been the case.

We have come together for a new celebration – a celebration of a century of Sikh vibrancy and achievement in Canada and the third centenary of the Khalsa. The creation (referring to the postage stamp on the Khalsa) of this beautiful stamp by Canada post confirms our experience that it is often the small gesture that conveys the most profound message. I can think of no more simple or eloquent way to show how Canada values the richness of Sikh culture and faith, thereby proclaiming it every day on cards and letters we mail to each other around the world. By this act, we speak the profound truth that Canada is now a better place because the Sikh people have joined us in the common project of building the best country in the World. Let's celebrate how far we have come together and let's celebrate the great days to come'.<sup>68</sup>

The establishment of a Gurdwara at 1866 Second Avenue West, Vancouver by the Khalsa Diwan Society on 19 January 1908 was a landmark development in the North American continent. The saffron flags of the Khalsa Panth that we come across fluttering over all the Gurdwaras in America and Canada these days are the result of the hard work done by those Sikh founding fathers who settled here permanently and made their presence felt in these countries in an alien environment, passing through many ordeals away from their families and home. During those ordeals, the institution of Gurdwara kept them united. It played a prominent role in uniting not only the Sikhs but the Hindus and Muslims as well.<sup>69</sup> We are grateful to those Sikh pioneers who travelled from Punjab to Canada, worked hard and established Gurdwaras in order to keep the younger generations integrated with their heritage.

The Harvard and Dalhousie theologian Wifred Cantwell Smith remarked that the way there have been changes in the political and economic life of the people during this century, a

similar significant transformation is taking place in the religious history of mankind.<sup>70</sup> Now the Sikhs have settled in all the big cities of almost every western country. They have built their Gurdwaras and they are making a good contribution to the religious, social and political affairs in these countries. The Gurdwaras help the needy by providing financial assistance, food and clothing. Gurdwaras have provided succour to those affected by floods and earthquakes either in cooperation with agencies such as the Red Cross or independently. New schools have been set up at many places with the financial assistance provided by the Gurdwaras. For instance, with the financial contribution made by the managing committee of a British Columbia Gurdwara, primary schools were set up in Gujarat in India after the damage caused by an earthquake. Similar financial aid of one and a quarter lac (125000) dollars was sent to Indonesia for people affected by the Tsunami floods. So, Sikhs living in foreign countries and their Gurdwaras are active in the service of humanity as laid down in Sikh ideology.

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## CHAPTER 4

### GURDWARA: INSTITUTION AND INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT

Institutions, being the most important part of a religion, are representative of its fundamental principles as well a medium for their expression. Although individual human beings play a leading role in the implementation of fundamental principles of a religion, religious institutions are the medium through which individuals bring about the implementation of those principles. In other words, we can say that religious institutions form the basis for the supremacy of religious principle. Individuals also operate through institutions and an individual or a group of persons who operate in accordance with the fundamental religious principles win the love and respect of the community.

Gurdwara, besides being an institution of the Sikh religion, is a unique place for God-realization. It is both a tangible place in time as well as a timeless entity. As a timeless entity, Guru-consciousness or realization it can also be called a Gurdwara, a *Dharamsal*, a beauteous state and a temple of God. In the institutional form, the Gurdwara is an entity in time and space. It is influenced by history and evolves in history and develops. Like all other institutions, the Institution of Gurdwara interacts with fundamental realities, impacts those circumstances and is impacted by them as well. Many a time, it has to compromise with the existing reality to uphold its identity. But instead of compromising its fundamental principles, it makes adjustments in its daily activities.

In order to understand the institution of Gurdwara and its management in Sikh religion and Sikh society, we have to

go back to the time of Guru Nanak because the institution of Gurdwara was started in the form of *Dharamsal* in his time. It is through the management of the Gurdwara and its creation that the institution of Gurdwara contributed through the institutions of Guru, Shabad Guru, *Sat sangat* (congregation), *langar* (community kitchen), *manjis* (Dioceses), *Masands* (caretakers), Akal Takht, Khalsa Panth and *Gurmatta* (resolution adopted through common consensus) towards the evolution of Sikh religion, Sikh society, Sikh culture and Sikh polity. Through these institutions the Gurdwara played a crucial role in enabling the Sikh community to become an organized, formidable, and principled nation with a distinct identity. In fact, Guru Nanak, through his revolutionary spiritual ideology, laid down the principle of combining meditation with earning one's livelihood and set up the institutions of *sangat* (congregation) and *pangat* (eating together in the community kitchen). In this way, he laid down the foundation of an egalitarian society based on his spiritual ideology in order to bring about a spiritual transformation in Indian society. 'It was the intensity and depth of Guru Nank's message and mission not only on the spiritual but also at the temporal plane that served as an edifice for the evolution of Sikh community'.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the Guruship is so important in Sikh religion that the religion itself and Sikh institutions become meaningless without it. In fact, the concept of Sikh (literally meaning a follower or a disciple or a learner) exists on the basis of Guru (a guide or a teacher). The Guru (*Sabd Guru* or *Gurbani*) is the touchstone or the yardstick for the religious dispensation of the Sikh community or religion. It is such a significant part of the fundamental ideology of the Sikh religion that it is not conceivable to think of the religion without the existence of the Guru.<sup>2</sup> The Guru is the guiding star for the Gurdwara organisation. Guru-consciousness evolves into Khalsa Panth by manifesting itself through congregation and

endeavors to propagating Sikh ideology after acquiring the status of an institution.

Guru Nanak set up the institution of Guruship by handing over its charge to Bhai Lahina after the establishment of a *Dharamsal* (Gurdwara) at Kartarpur. This was the most important step. This institution of Guruship continued to evolve and develop further during the tenure of the successive Sikh Gurus by struggling with the challenges of Indian society and the Indian state. The seed that sprouted during Guru Gobind Singh's tenure had been sown and nurtured during the tenure of Guru Nanak and his successive Sikh Gurus. The sword which carved the way for the prestige of the Khalsa was undoubtedly wielded by Guru Gobind Singh but its steel was provided by Guru Nanak.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the institution of Guruship became formidable through the continuity of succeeding Sikh Gurus because it remained under the personal guidance and leadership of the Sikh Gurus. The Sikh Gurus, besides being spiritual and religious guides, were social and political leaders as well. That is why the operational area of the institution of Guruship became vast and multidimensional.

The institution of Guruship, after the end of the line of ten Sikh Gurus, operated and guided the Sikhs in the form of the Word (or *shabad*-Guru) as available in the Guru Granth Sahib. The tradition of handing over the Guruship is also quite unique to the Sikh religion. When Bhai Lahina became the second Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak himself became a disciple of his successor. Thus, the Guru became a disciple and a disciple was made the Guru. This tradition of the symbolic conversion of Guru into disciple and disciple into Guru was transformed into a principle.<sup>4</sup> Word (*Shabad*) is considered a divine revelation made through the medium of the Guru in Sikh spiritualism. Word (*Shabad*) is the message conveyed through the medium of the Guru by the supreme Divine Reality for the welfare of humankind. It is for this reason that the text

(*Gurbani*) recorded in Guru Granth Sahib has been called the voice of God (*Dhur Ki Bani*). Sikh devotees also call it the voice of the timeless (*Akali Bani*). The Divine message of the Timeless Eternal creator manifested through the medium of the Sikh Gurus and other saints and sages for the welfare of humankind. In other words, we can say that the institution of Guruship, while remaining in the corporal form during the Guru period, later became non-corporal and acquired the form of a Word, of Word-Guru or Gurbani<sup>5</sup> as included in the Guru Granth Sahib. This Word-Guru, after manifesting itself in the form of spiritual enlightenment or Guru-consciousness, becomes instrumental in bringing about human welfare through the medium of enlightened individuals and institutions.

We find a comprehensive analysis of every aspect of human life in Guru Granth Sahib, the primary explanation of Sikh beliefs. We find explicit direction for human beings to undertake activities which promote human welfare. The Guru Granth Sahib also inspires and motivates us to do some introspection from time to time. Scholars of Bhai Gurdas' caliber have termed Gurbani the road map (*Gadi Rah*) for human beings to follow in order to become truthful and upright human beings. The Sikh philosophy contained in Guru Granth Sahib makes a thorough exploration of human potential and makes human beings realize the identity and existence of Divine reality so that they evolve into a society in which its members, far from being antagonists of each other, may become helpers of one another to progress in life.<sup>6</sup> The primary aim of the Word-Guru, Gurbani and Guru Granth Sahib is to make human beings truthful, honest and upright so that they may contribute to the overall welfare of society.

The terms congregation (*sangat*), company of the saints (*sadh sangat*) or company of the truthful (*sat sangat*) as used in Guru Granth Sahib are almost synonymous. They are a company of the well-meaning people.<sup>7</sup> We are using umbrella

term *sangat* (congregation) for all three words. The institution of Gurdwara is based on Congregation (*sangat*). It is congregation which conducts the day-to-day Gurdwara activities and becomes the final arbiter of its management, keeping the Gurdwara management from becoming autocratic. Cultivation of the Sikh way of life (*Gurmat*) is not possible without the existence of enlightened congregation with respect to Sikh tenets.<sup>8</sup> Congregation is a live wire connecting Gurbani to the institution of Gurdwara. It not only saves the management of Gurdwara from being purely financial but also monitors the daily routine and progress of a Gurdwara. According to the Gurbani of Guru Granth Sahib, the congregation (*sangat*) set up by the Guru has the Guru's presence in it. The Divine Guru who identifies Himself with the realized souls by permeating them with his Divine attributes also permeates the whole congregation with His presence.<sup>9</sup> The Divinely blessed Sikhs become embodiments of the Divine<sup>10</sup> and presence of the Divine is supposed to prevail among the company of such realized or spiritually enlightened Sikhs.<sup>11</sup>

The assembly (congregation) of saintly persons is not a mass of people which resembles a crowd. On the contrary, it is a gathering of people desirous of having a glimpse of the Divine in God's creation and desperately keen to have communion with the Divine. It is a place where the devotees get synchronized with God through their devotion, where they do community service together and where they develop a mystical affinity with the whole of creation. They remain eager and active to achieve perfection, truthfulness and spiritual realization of God. The assembly of the virtuous and saintly (*sadh sangat*) is a gathering where the devotees participate in the choral recitation of God's glory, where His glory is elucidated and where the devotees commune with creation through the medium of the spiritual symphony generated at such a gathering. The Sikh Gurus' aim was the creation of a

social set-up in keeping with human nature which did not subject its members to restrictions based on metaphysical assumptions, hairsplitting interpretations of scripture and a mythology which eroded their conscience.<sup>12</sup>

As we have mentioned earlier, the institution of congregation or assembly of the devout (*Sangat*) which began with Guru Nanak during his travels became more organized during the tenure of successive Sikh Gurus. Wherever Guru Nanak went during his travels in India and abroad, *dharamsals* were set up at many places where devotees assembled to recite Gurbani and hold discussions about Guru Nanak's mission.<sup>13</sup> Information is available about the *dharamsal* at Kartarpur and the holding of congregations under the personal supervision and guidance of Guru Nanak.<sup>14</sup> There are also references to several other *dharamsals* set up at various different places

The evolution of *dharamsal* (Gurdwara) and congregation (*sangat*) occurred simultaneously. An examination of the travels of Guru Nanak will reveal that whichever place Guru Nanak visited, people assembled to listen to his discourse and Guru Nanak inspired them to organize a *dharamsal* and a congregational *sangat* at that place.

A large number of *dharamsals* were established during the tenure of the Sikh Gurus. By the end of the sixteenth century, great centers of Sikhism had been set up at Khadoor Sahib, Goindwal, Ramdaspur, Tarn Taran, Kartarpur (Doaba), Sri Hargobindpur and other towns besides at Kartarpur (Pakistan) under the personal supervision and guidance of the Sikh Gurus.<sup>15</sup> The management of these centres used to be under the control of the local congregation with a head appointed by the Guru himself. This appointed head was a devout practitioner of Sikhi (*Gurmat*) and arranged for its propagation. He acted as the connecting link between the Guru and the congregation (*sangat*). Names of many such individuals appointed as head by Guru Nanak are available. Bhai Lalo

was the first head in the Southern region of ancient Punjab, Sajjan in the Western region, Gopal Das in Benaras and Salas Rai in Patna. All these heads were selfless men of integrity and influence who performed their duties with honesty, responsibility and initiative.

These heads were the backbone of the centres and their relentless, selfless services were instrumental in the propagation of the Sikh Gurus' mission. The Gurus guided them with timely instructions and showered blessings on them. The heads played a crucial role in keeping the members of the congregation united and in contact with the Guru.

According to Janamsakhi (biographical account of Guru Nanak) records, Guru Nanak set up congregations (*sangats*) at many places in the whole of India as well as in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, (Dhaka), Afghanistan (Kabul and Jalalabad) during his travels.<sup>16</sup> These congregational institutions did much to propagate Sikh teachings and beliefs. The institution of congregation (*sangat*) which originated during Guru Nanak's time developed during the tenure of the successive nine Sikh Gurus, culminating in the Khalsa Panth created on Baisakhi day, AD 1699, by Guru Gobind Singh. The institution of Congregation (*sangat*) has been held in high esteem since the time of the Sikh Gurus.<sup>17</sup>

We have discussed above that *dharamsals* (Gurdwaras) were set up wherever Guru Nanak visited during his preaching odysseys. Congregation (*sangat*) had become an institution during the lifetime of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak appointed a head of every congregation (*sangat*) who guided the devotees according to the instructions given by Guru Nanak. Such a person, being the head of the institution, was respected as the representative of the Guru. It is because of the venerated status of the head that he used to sit on a raised platform (*manji* or cot) while delivering his sermon to the congregation. This has been confirmed by Bhai Gurdas and several other

Sikh scholars.<sup>18</sup> It can be inferred that the seeds of the *Manji* system which came into operation later on can be traced to Guru Nanak's time.

After Guru Nanak's time, there was a need to maintain the relationship between the Sikh Gurus and their devotees or congregations. But the time of Guru Amar Das, the Sikh movement had spread throughout Punjab and other states outside Punjab. Several writers of *Janamsakhi* literature state that it was the result of Divine grace that the religion started by Guru Nanak and the *dharamsals* he set up spread so far and wide.<sup>19</sup> In view of the administrative needs of these institutions of *sangat* in Punjab and outside Punjab, and as well as the need to streamline the Sikh movement, it became necessary to give some sort of organizational shape to these managerial units. It was not possible for the Guru to keep in touch with all the *sangat* personally.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Guru Amar Das divided these *sangats* into twenty-two *Manjis* (dioceses).<sup>21</sup> Every *Manji* was put under the charge of a selected individual who was designated as *Manjidar* or Diocese Incharge. These Diocese incharges (*Manjidars*) were devout Sikhs of spotless character who used to keep in continuous touch with the Guru and receive necessary instructions from him. It was a great step in developing an organizational set-up in the Sikh religion.<sup>22</sup> The Sikh movement became a systematic and disciplined organization through the constitution of these units. The *sangats* and *dharamsals* set up in different parts of India became constituent parts of a composite and effective organization which remained in regular contact with the Guru.

These twenty-two *Manjis* were further divided into smaller units which were termed *Pirahs* for the sake of better management. Prominent men and women of spotless character were appointed to head these units, to preach Sikh beliefs to devotees and to collect offerings for the maintenance of the central Sikh body and their individual units and for the

execution of public welfare activities. The amount saved out of these offerings after meeting the local expenses was deposited with the Guru on the occasions of Diwali and Baisakhi. The members of the units keen to see the Guru used to accompany the *Manji* incharges on these occasions.

A continuous link was maintained between the Guru and the devotees, and offerings poured in for the construction of public welfare projects such as inns, water tanks, pools, wells, and *Bungas* (houses).<sup>23</sup> The *Manji* system played an important role in the spread of the Sikh religion. “The *Manji* system made the Sikh society a well-knit organization. This led to the propagation of Sikh philosophy in a more organized and definite manner with a great missionary spirit. It also contributed in giving a distinct identity to Sikhism of being an independent religion distinct from Hinduism and Islam.”<sup>24</sup>

With the evolution of the Sikh religion and Sikh movement, it was but natural that its economic and material needs increased. Money was required for the construction of wells and water reservoirs (*baolis*) at the new Sikh centres during the tenure of Guru Amar Das. Wayside shelters and inns were also required for the stay of Sikh pilgrims. Community kitchens to feed the Sikh devotees at the *dharamsals* and the wayside inns were also set up.<sup>25</sup> The Sikh devotees made offerings from their honest earnings for the execution of these projects. The offerings made by the devotees were not for the sake of pleasing the Guru or for propitiating any god, but for the construction of public welfare projects started by the Sikh Gurus.

The offerings made by the Sikh devotees out of their hard-earned income are known as *daswandh* (one tenth part or tithe).<sup>26</sup> This practice of making voluntary contribution for undertaking public welfare projects was present in Sikhism from the very beginning, as it was in one form or another in almost all religions. Voluntary donation is given the highest

importance in Hinduism. *Zakat* or voluntary donation is considered one of the four pillars in Islam. The tradition of donating one tenth of one's income was established during Guru Nanak's stay at Kartarpur.<sup>27</sup>

The *Manji* system was set up during Guru Amar Das' time for propagating Sikh philosophy in an organized manner. Because of the increased activities of the Sikh religion such as construction of new Sikh centres and related religious projects and activities, Guru Ram Das converted the *manji* System into the institution of *masands*. Like the *Manji* incharges, these *masands* were also selected and appointed on the basis of their personal merit. They also collected offerings from the Sikh devotees in the form of *daswandh* contributions for the Guru's headquarters and deposited these with the Guru. They were made responsible for carrying out religious activities and propagated Sikh philosophy according to the guidelines laid down by the Guru.

There were two channels for sending the *daswandh* contributions of Sikh devotees to the Guru. The first channel was the practice of depositing one's contribution with the area *masand* who deposited these contributions with the Guru at least once in an year on the occasion of Diwali or Baisakhi. The second channel for depositing one's *daswandh* was offering it to the Guru directly.<sup>28</sup>

There was a time when this *masand* system was so successful and efficient that even the government of the day was envious of its efficiency. The system was so perfect that the Sikh society came to be taken as 'a State within the State'. According to one Persian source, the Sikh devotees were so steadfast and regular in contributing one-tenth of their income to the Guru that they would default in paying their taxes rather than miss their voluntary contribution to the Guru. This tradition made the system of *dharamsal* management sound from the financial point of view.<sup>29</sup>

In accordance with the philosophy of Guru Granth Sahib, contributing one-tenth of one's earning to the public cause makes a person spiritually better. It inhibits a person from becoming too materialistic in outlook and inculcates feelings of brotherhood and love for the rest of humanity by contributing to the needs of others. Sikh philosophy (*Gurmat*), in emphasising the need to earn one's livelihood oneself, also teaches the virtues of helping the needy, contributing to public causes and sharing one's earnings with others.<sup>30</sup> When Guru Nanak set up the *dharamsal* at Kartarpur, the expenses incurred in its construction were met from the contributions made by the ordinary workers and devotees. Guru Nanak himself used to do farming. Keeping aside a little bit for meeting his personal needs, he used to contribute the major portion of his income to the *dharamsal* and its public welfare projects such as the community kitchen. In his own divine verses, Guru Nanak instructs people to earn their livelihood and share it with others. So, it was the religious and moral duty of the followers of Guru Nanak to contribute one-tenth of their income to the public welfare.

Thus, the contribution of one-tenth of one's income is a significant tradition in Sikhism which played a crucial role in serving the spiritual and nationalistic needs of the Sikh movement.<sup>31</sup> It is worth mentioning here that making a contribution of one-tenth of one's income to the Gurdwara for religious causes is in accordance with the Sikh Guru's instructions.

During the entire Guru-period and thereafter, the Sikhs have never been compelled to donate a fixed amount of money nor can it be ever done in future as a matter of principle. Neither during the Guru period in the Sikh religion nor during modern times, has a member of the Sikh community been ordered to contribute one-tenth of his income. The contribution of one-tenth of one's income is left to the discretion of the devotee.<sup>32</sup>

Sikhism does not encourage laziness. Hardworking farmers and labourers, clean-dealing trade people, have been the rock-solid foundation of economic support to social welfare projects sponsored by Sikh society. Helping the needy out of one's earnings gained through just means is the quintessential message of Sikhism. Sikhism grants respectability to the livelihood and earnings earned with the sweat of one's brow. A true Sikh believes in helping the needy even when his own earning is little.<sup>33</sup> This, in essence, is the moral ethic of Sikhism.

The institution of *masands* made an important contribution to running the *dharamsal* management in an efficient manner. In effect, the institutions of *langar* (community kitchen) *manji* (diocese), *mansand* (diocese incharge) and *daswandh* (one-tenth contribution) came into being as necessary for the development of *dharamsal* and *sangat*. The Guru occupied the pivotal position amongst these institutions, which revolved around him and were interconnected with each other. None of these units can exist independently of the Guru's presence. With the increase in the numbers of Sikh devotees, the number of *dharamsals* also increased and the need for new methods of management was felt. There was the need for running a community kitchen for feeding the congregation at every *dharamsal* and economic means were required for keeping the community kitchen running. The services of learned and devoted Sikh leaders were required to supervise these activities as well as for communicating the Guru's message in the proper perspective to the Sikh congregation (*sangat*). Therefore, the traditions of making one-tenth contributions or *daswandh* as well as the running of community kitchen came into practice along with the institution and system of *masands* during the period of Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das.

In order to strengthen the work of religious propagation and national construction of Guru Nanak's time, Guru Ram Das started the construction of new Sikh centers which

included the important sacred shrine at Ramdaspur (Amritsar) and its pool. There was a greater need for financial resources for the execution of these new projects and for expanding the area of religious propagation. While being occupied in executing these new projects, it was not possible for Guru Ram Das to maintain direct contact and communication with the Sikh institutions (*sangats*) spread all over India. Therefore, Guru Ram Das appointed a *masand* for every Sikh *manji* who conveyed and carried out his instructions and teachings to distant Sikh congregations and collected and delivered the offerings made by devotees to the Guru's headquarters. The person appointed as *masand* was regarded a representative of the Guru, who collected offerings and deposited them with the Guru on the occasion of Diwali and Baisakhi. This practice continued from the time of Guru Ram Das until 1698 A.D.<sup>34</sup>

The number of Sikhs multiplied during the tenure of Guru Arjan inspite of the opposition by some members of the Guru's own household to the Guruship. This opposition reached its climax during Guru Arjan's Guruship. Prithi Chand (Guru's elder brother) tried to create obstacles in every enterprise undertaken or patronized by Guru Arjan. He even misguided a few *masands* and made them his allies. This had a cascading effect on some other *masands* who also started compromising their integrity and honesty. As a result of this degradation, not only did the respect for these corrupt *masands* decline among the Sikh devotees, but there was a decrease in financial resources to carry out the community projects started by the Guru. It was a crucial time in Sikh history when the construction of Harimandar (Golden Temple) and the *sarovar* (pool) were in progress. This called for great commitment and efficiency of the *manands* to manage the *Dharamsals*.

Some of these *masands* had become very powerful due to their direct link with the Guru and their control over the economic means. So some of them started compromising with

their character and commitment, using the proceeds from the offerings made by the Sikh devotees to the Guru for their personal benefit. As a result, the Sikh devotees started treating these corrupt *masands* with contempt. These *masands* became so arrogant that at times they insulted members of the congregations. Some of them boasted that the Guru could not hold on to the Guruship without their support. During the time of Guru Tegh Bahadur, there was so much degradation of this institution of *masands* that some of the *Masands* threatened Sikh devotees.<sup>35</sup> It was but natural that the evil and anti-Sikh activities of the *masands* had a deleterious effect on Sikh society.

The tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, received so many complaints about the anti-Sikh activities of the *masands* that he decided to develop a direct relationship with the Sikhs by initiating them into the Khalsa, doing away with the institution of *masands* forever. He sent information to the Sikh congregations and *dharamsals* against the *masands* through his commandments (*bukamnamas*). The earliest commandment available today, in which a clear and specific instruction has been given against the *masands*, is dated 12 March 1699 just a few days prior to the creation of the Khalsa. The Sikhs and the Sikh congregation is addressed as the Guru's Khalsa in this commandment and the congregation has been instructed not to obey the instructions of *masands*.<sup>36</sup>

Prior to this, in 1604, when the construction of Harimandar Sahib had been completed and Granth Sahib had also been completed, Guru Arjan decided to install the Granth Sahib in the sanctum sanctorum of Harimandar Sahib. Since the Granth Sahib was the collection of divinely revealed Word, its presence in the Harimandar made it the most sacred and central place of the Sikhs. As the daily routine of the *dharamsal* at Kartarpur used to be monitored by the personal supervision of Guru Nanak, the daily routine of Harimandar Sahib was

monitored by Guru Arjan Dev. Guru Arjan appointed Baba Buddha as the first care-taker (Granthi) of Sri Harimandar Sahib. He delivered the daily sermon and enlightened the congregation with spiritual discourse. The presence of Granth Sahib inside Harimandar Sahib is considered to be the Guru's own presence. It is the divine Word communicated through the medium of the Guru. Very soon, hand-written copies of this sacred Sikh scripture were taken to other *dharamsals* and installed there. It was at the time of Guru Hargobind, that the name *dharamsal* gradually changed to Gurdwara.

Soon after foundation of the institution of Akal Takht by Guru Hargobind was a landmark in the history of Sikh movement. In the beginning, this was simply a raised platform constructed by Bhai Gurdas and Baba Buddha with their own hands. Bhai Gurdas was appointed as manager of the newly erected Akal Takht. Guru Hargobind sat on this platform to resolve the worldly disputes of Sikh devotees as well as to deliver his discourses. The *dhadis* (bards) used to sing ballads of warriors and heroes.

The institution of Akal Takht has played a crucial role in shaping the political and social concerns of the Sikh community. Since its inception, the institution of Akal Takht has guided the Sikhs during every crisis. It has played a vital role in upholding the fundamental principles as well as the honour and glory of the Sikh Panth. . The institution of Akal Takht is considered to be the synthesis of Sikh religion and Sikh politics.<sup>37</sup> It is called the throne of the temporal power of the Sikhs.<sup>38</sup>

The construction of Akal Takht is believed to have begun on 15 June 1606.<sup>39</sup> The role of Akal Takht is an integral part of the overall mission of Sikhism. At the time of his taking over of the Guruship, Guru Hargobind donned two swords, one symbolising *Miri* (temporal power), the other *Piri* (spiritual power). Some scholars have misinterpreted the two swords

and the Guru's request for offerings in the form of horses and weapons. They misunderstand, believing that Guru Hargobind was using the institution of Akal Takht for realizing his political ambitions. Others believe that making himself both temporal and spiritual head of the Sikhs was tantamount to political interference in the Sikh religion. But according to the tenets of Sikh ideology, Sikh religion and Sikh politics are not independent entities. Sikhism has been an amalgamation of temporal and spiritual concerns from the very beginning. Guru Nanak's ideology requires adherents to work for the welfare of all humankind as part of Divine will. Guru Arjun's martyrdom had shown that the Sikhs needed to be armed for their own protection as well as for human welfare. Akal Takht stands for the composite reality which envisages that all aspects and issues related to Sikh society, Sikh religion and Sikh psyche are interconnected and interdependent, and cannot be compartmentalized because, like links in a chain, all are integral to the human psyche. Maintenance and manifestation of these interdependent links is the moral responsibility of the Guru Panth.<sup>40</sup>

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion, had reflected on every aspect of human life. Be it in the religious, social, political, economic or cultural sphere of life, wherever he found injustice and oppression he started a campaign to enlighten human beings to bring about reforms.<sup>41</sup> So the need for expanding the role of the Gurdwara had arisen even during the Guru-period. The establishment of the Akal Takht and its activities made it clear that the Gurdwara's role is not limited to religious and spiritual aspects of life. Its scope extends to the social and political aspects of life as well. Like the daily programme of worship and prayer at the Harimandar, the day-to-day functions of the Akal Takht were also laid down and implemented under the personal supervision and guidance of Guru Hargobind. Bhai Gurdas was assigned the role of

caretaker. The Sixth Guru used to deliver sermons give discourses and also listen to people's problems and resolve any conflicts. The appointment of *manjidars* (diocese incharges), *masands*, and Baba Buddha and Bhai Gurdas illustrates that the selection of the incumbents to these august offices was in the hands of the Guru and that devotion and moral virtue were the basis of eligibility for those posts.

Construction of Harimandar, compilation of Adi Granth Sahib and appointment of *masands* and their efficient guidance were developments which contemporary rulers viewed as the constitution of a parallel government. As a result, Sikhs had to bear the brunt of oppression by the government of the time. Although the Sikh movement was becoming more and more popular among the masses, its teachings and activities were not liked by the contemporary rulers. It was because of this that the Mughal emperor Jahangir executed Guru Arjun and tried to crush the Sikh movement, branding it a "Shop of Falsehood".<sup>42</sup> Thereafter, the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1675 AD) and the battles and wars thrust upon Guru Gobind Singh were also part of the anti-Sikh activities of the government of those times.

The establishment of the Akal Takht by Guru Hargobind and its efficient functioning posed another challenge to the contemporary government and its policies of religious intolerance and political oppression. In consequence, the area of operation of the institution of Gurdwara expanded further and dealing with social and political issues became an integral part of the Gurdwara activity. The Akal Takht dealt with political concerns, but always with reference to Sikh ideology. The first social manifestation of its role was made undoubtedly during the tenure of the Sixth Sikh Guru. From here he conducted the secular affairs of the community. From here he is said to have issued the first *bukamnama* (edict) to far flung *sangats* or Sikh centres announcing the creation of Akal Takht

and asking them to include in their offerings thenceforth gifts of weapons and horses.<sup>43</sup> Since then, its institutional role in providing guidance to the Khalsa Panth has continued. It cannot be reduced to the role of an individual with supremacy over others: that will be contrary to the Sikh tenets.

The establishment of the Akal Takht by Guru Hargobind was also an effort to put tenets of Guru Nanak's ideology into practice. Through his setting up of the Akal Takht and by donning two swords representing the temporal and spiritual powers, Guru Hargobind challenged those religious and political policies of the contemporary government which violated basic human rights and robbed the people of their freedom of religious allegiance, dignity and self-respect. Through the tenets of *Miri* and *Piri* (temporal and spiritual sovereignty), the Guru alerted the people to the need to protect their human rights and basic human dignity.<sup>44</sup> Sikh ideology (*Gurmat*) is a champion of moral and human values. It refuses to accept any system or dispensation devoid of moral and human values.<sup>45</sup> It does not permit any political governance which is not based on moral values,<sup>46</sup> instructing rulers to inculcate moral virtues into their policies.<sup>47</sup> It gives every country and every nation the sovereign right to live a life of complete political, religious and cultural freedom and to reject a life of subservience and slavery.<sup>48</sup> "The basic tenets of the Sikh faith have been clearly laid down in its scripture, the Guru Granth. In the Sikh world view, there is no place for the doctrine of the world being *mithia* (illusion) and the resultant renunciation, escapism or pessimism. One of the positive features of Sikhism is the welding of the spiritual and temporal aspects of human existence. The Sikh Gurus viewed the world of sense and form as true and meaningful. They stressed the combination of spiritual devotion with social responsibility... In long and highly cherished Sikh tradition of *miri-piri*, initiated by the Gurus, and the consequent heroic ideal of Sant-Sipahi, one

supplements the other and makes for a stable and just polity and society'.<sup>49</sup>

Inseparability of religion and politics has been one of the chief characteristics of Sikh religion. Want of a clear perception of Sikh faith has led to many controversies and misconceptions regarding this doctrine. Sikhs as a religious and cultural group have been in a minority, yet they have played a significant role in the Indian affairs, out of proportion to their small numbers. It is so because of their unique historico-political position and their spiritual and social vitality bestowed upon them by their faith. The Sikhs have had to pass through great ordeals to preserve their strength and distinctiveness'.<sup>50</sup>

The institution of Gurdwara plays a significant role in communicating the message of *Gurbani* to the masses. Through it and the Sikh ideology of *Gurbani*, the Sikh Gurus instilled a spirit of self-respect and self-confidence in the people who had become frustrated, desperately helpless and powerless. The Gurus organized the people to protect their rights and privileges, and enjoy them without any fear and malice.<sup>51</sup> By setting up the Akal Takht, Guru Hargobind made politics an aspect of Sikh institutional activity as well as religion.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the synthesis of religion and politics became an integral part of Sikh Panth and Sikh way of life.<sup>53</sup> Whereas Indian culture had a tradition of compartmentalizing human life and its conduct into separate religious, social and political roles, the doctrine of *Miri-Piri* laid down that man's roles at the individual, social and spiritual levels were integral parts of his personality.<sup>54</sup> The institution of Akal Takht, since its inception, has guided the Sikhs through its edicts, messages, resolutions and its consensual declarations. This institution has the proud privilege of guiding the destiny of the Sikhs in accordance with the philosophy of Guru Granth Sahib.

*Gurmat* ideology aims at making human beings embodiments of truth and inspiring them to struggle for human

welfare. Moulding human beings into *sachiar* (truly truthful) and working for reforms was an arduous task.<sup>55</sup> It took almost two and a half centuries to bring about this transformation. The accomplishment of this mission started by Guru Nanak between 1469 and 1539 reached its perfection with the creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh on Baisakhi day in AD 1699. After that, the Khalsa Panth was entrusted with the task of preaching and propagating the Gurmat ideology. The responsibility of propagating Gurbani teachings and ideology, borne until then by Guru Nanak's "Nirmal Panth" then devolved on the Khalsa Panth. The institution of Gurdwara played a key role in carrying out these duties.

Before breathing his last, Guru Gobind Singh had terminated the tradition of personal Guruship and conferred the Guruship on the Word (Guru Granth Sahib). The *masand* system had already been abolished. After observing the *masands'* wayward conduct and their straying away from the tenets of Sikh ideology, Guru Gobind Singh had put an end to the institution of *masands* and established a direct relationship with the Guru's court as described in Bhai Gurdas' *Vaar*. "The Khalsa did join the Guru's congregation".<sup>56</sup> Guru commanded the Sikhs to keep the *masands* away at the time of Khalsa initiation ceremony (*Amrit Sanchar*).<sup>57</sup> Thus, Guru Gobind Singh integrated the Khalsa Panth directly with the Guru (Guru Granth Sahib) after terminating the mediation of the *masands*.<sup>58</sup> Now the Khalsa had direct communion with the Guru and the Khalsa Panth was entrusted to manage the Gurdwara, community kitchen (*langar*) and congregation (*sangat*).

But the prevailing circumstances were not congenial to the smooth progress of the Sikh movement. For almost one century after the demise of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikhs had to contend with the Afghan invaders from the North-West and the hostile rule of foreign powers. It was a time when Sikhs faced severe persecution and prices were fixed on their heads.

It had become almost impossible for Sikhs to lead the normal life of householders. As a result of this persecution, they had to seek shelter in the wilds and caves in the hills. It became impossible for them to maintain their sacred Sikh shrines.

Although the Udasi sect founded by Baba Sri Chand had not any intimate relationship with the Sikh movement, this sect came in close contact with the Sikh movement after the decline and degradation in the *masand* system and with Baba Gurdita's taking over the command of the Udasi sect. Udasi sadhus made a significant contribution to Sikhism and its institutions through their preaching and propagation of Gurbani and looking after the Gurdwaras. The upkeep and maintenance of Gurdwaras remained under the care of the Udasis and Nirmalas during the violent first half of the eighteenth century. These Udassi and Nirmala preachers used to deviate in their understanding and interpretation of scriptural hymns but they had otherwise a profound faith in Gurbani. Even during this time, with control of the Gurdwaras in the hands of Udasis and Nirmalas, a person's knowledge of Gurbani and his moral character were taken into consideration before handing over the management of a Gurdwara to him. His caste and community were considered of no consequence because Gurmat, the Guru's teachings, called for the creation of a casteless and classless egalitarian society.<sup>59</sup>

Thus the management of the Gurdwaras during this period remained in the hands of those persons who believed in the essential spirit and ideology of Gurmat but did not adopt the external dress code and discipline of the Khalsa. There were several reasons for this dichotomy. One, both the Udasis and the Nirmalas were separate sects and their ideologies were slightly different from that of the central ideology of Sikhism. The followers of these sects do not undergo *amrit* initiation. They do not partake of *khande ki pahul*. Secondly, the initiated Sikhs following the Khalsa code of conduct and the dress code

could not take direct control over the management of Gurdwaras because they had taken shelter in the wilds and hills to escape the oppression of the contemporary rulers.

But even then it cannot be inferred from these facts that the initiated Sikhs had completely abandoned the Gurdwaras. In fact, the Sikh Gurus and the Gurdwaras were the main sources of inspiration for them for keeping themselves in high spirits during this critical period. They were always keen to visit Harimandar Sahib and to have a dip in its sacred pool at least on the two main occasions of Diwali and Baisakhi. At times, they undertook these visits even at the cost of facing great risks to their lives. Even Ahmad Shah Abdali (1722-1772) believed that the Sikhs were fighting against him after seeking inspiration from their Gurdwaras, especially the Harimandar Sahib. That is why he destroyed Harimandar more than once and tried to desecrate it. But every time, the Sikhs reconstructed the damaged shrine and cleaned the sacred pool and recharged themselves after having a dip in its sacred waters. It is evident from these facts that the Khalsa Panth remained committed to the preservation of their Gurdwaras, and their faith in the institution of Gurdwara remained intact despite their physical separation from the Gurdwaras during this period.

It follows from the above discussion that it is not consistent with the facts to consider religion and politics as separate aspects of the Sikh movement. Sikh religion is a way of life which takes in human life holistically. The Sikh Gurus were not seekers of peace in isolation. They preached that human beings should face the challenges of life while leading the life of householders. Guru Nanak advocated householder's life and after his long preaching tours preferred to live a householder's life, doing a peasant's vocation. In the political field, he condemned the misrule of the establishment and oppression of the invaders. He did not just preach for individual salvation. In fact, he organised his followers into a society which

was conditioned with new motivations and values. He also started the institution of appointing a successor so that consistent efforts are made to realize his vision of ideal man and society. Several institutions, including the institution of Gurdwara were created so as to face socio-political challenges and shoulder the necessary responsibilities in that regard.<sup>60</sup>

The creation of the Khalsa was a creative endeavour of historical dimensions, a revolutionary transformation of people's thought, an arousing of their dormant energy to undertake welfare activities. It fulfilled the greatest need of those times of enlightening the masses about their common divine origin and inspiring them to lead a life of equality and dignity. The Khalsa Panth successfully tried, through the Guru's teachings, to inspire common masses who had before the advent of Sikh faith passively accepted their servile position, to inspire them to launch a struggle for the elimination of oppression and injustice.<sup>61</sup>

Khalsa Panth was a substitute for the caste-based social set-up prevalent in India since centuries. It was a great endeavour to combat religious intolerance, political oppression and injustice to enable the people to become the arbiters of their own destiny. The political aspect of the Sikh movement had already established its distinct identity. The Sikhs had acquired their own language, their scripture, religious institution (Gurdwara), and so on. Their target to establish an egalitarian political set up, a benign regime based on Gurmat guidelines was also in sight.<sup>62</sup> The institution of Gurdwara both inspired people to realize this goal and provided them a platform from which to undertake the activities required for its realization.

The Khalsa gradually started acquiring political power over certain parts of Punjab during the second half of the eighteenth century. As a result, first the protection system (Rakhi) and later on the Sikh confederacies (Misls) came into being. By the end of the eighteenth century, the entire area of

Punjab and some of the surrounding areas had accepted complete sovereignty of the Sikhs. In the beginning of nineteenth century, Ranjit Singh declared himself the sovereign ruler of Punjab. Ranjit Singh succeeded in bringing the complete area of Punjab, Kashmir up to the Afghan border and up to the river Sutlej under his rule. As a result, the Sikh Misaldars, chiefs and officials sanctioned liberal endowments and land grants in the name of Gurdwaras. With these financial assets, the Gurdwara managements could run their community kitchens (*langars*) as well as undertake several public welfare works. But there was one disadvantage as well. The Sikhs during this period were so involved in consolidating their political gains and occupying new territories that they could not pay attention to the Gurdwara management and its daily routine. The big land endowments allocated to the Gurdwara made the Udasi *Mahants* in charge of Gurdwaras avaricious; the appointments to Gurdwara managements under the *Mahants'* controls became hereditary rather than on merit. *Mahants* started to treat the Gurdwara wealth as their personal property and spent it for their personal needs, instead of using it for public welfare. The daily routine in the Gurdwaras was diverted from the Gurmat tradition, with several anti-Gurmat ceremonies and rites creeping into the daily Gurdwara routine.

Punjab was annexed into the British Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. Sikh sovereignty over Punjab came to an end. For the Sikhs, this was a moment of religious and political decline. A few individuals tried to set right the distortions which had crept into the Sikh religion during this period. Baba Dyal started the Nirankari movement. Soon after, Baba Balak Singh and Baba Ram Singh too tried to reform Gurdwara management and *maryada* according to Gurmat philosophy by starting the Namdhari movement. Since both these movements were based on individual initiative, their influence was limited. Moreover, both these movements strayed from their main goals.

Still, these movements expressed a wish among educated Sikhs to bring about a renaissance in Sikh region. The dilution and adulteration of Gurdwara routine introduced by the *Udasi Mahants* also hastened the need for bringing about a renaissance in the Sikh religion.

The rulers of the British Empire also realized that it was necessary to keep the Gurdwaras under their control in order to rule over the Sikhs. For this purpose, they started supporting the *Mahants* as well as started interfering directly or indirectly in the Gurdwara management wherever possible.<sup>63</sup> For instance, the members of the management committee of the most sacred Sikh shrine, Harimandar Sahib, were chosen by the British, the deputy commissioner of Amritsar being appointed caretaker (*sarbrah*). These committee members always carried out the instructions issued by the British-appointed deputy commissioner. The Sikh honors (*siropas*) conferred by the Gurdwara committee on General Dyer, the man accused of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and such other persons were a result of the government's interference in the Gurdwara management. There are several other instances which clearly prove direct or indirect interference of the British in Gurdwara management.

The constitution of management committees as well as the appointment of individuals to look after Gurdwara affairs had been based on individual merit during the Guru-period. Guru Nanak, while setting up Sikh *sangats* at several places, had appointed individuals to monitor and manage these *sangats* and *dharamsals* on the basis of their individual merit, high moral character and devotion towards the Guru. Thereafter, when Guru Nanak set up a *sangat* and *dharamasal* at Kartarpur, its entire management was conducted under his personal supervision. Guru Nanak himself laid down its daily routine and ensured its proper management. When the occasion arose to appoint a successor to manage this *Dharamsal*, Guru Nanak

preferred to choose a successor on the basis of merit instead of following the prevailing tradition of dynastic succession.

In the post-Guru period during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, although Gurdwara management went into the hands of Udasi and Nirmala *Mahants*, even among these sects their successors were appointed on the basis of individual merit rather than on the basis of dynastic right to secession. But with political power falling into the hands of the Sikhs, there was a significant increase in the Gurdwara income. The Sikh chiefs sanctioned endowments in the name of Gurdwaras, even though Guru Amar Das had once declined to accept the government grant offered by the Mughal emperor Akbar for the Sikh community kitchen. Guru Amar Das preferred that the community kitchen be run with contributions made by Sikh devotees out of their own income earned justly.<sup>64</sup> As a result of this excessive income, the *Mahant* managers of Gurdwaras went astray in violation of the Sikh tradition, considering Gurdwara endowments as their personal property. So Gurdwara management, instead of being based on individual merit, came to be based on hereditary claims. This had an adverse effect on the moral character of the *Mahant* custodians of Gurdwaras, who became lax, shedding their religious and spiritual moorings, indulging in luxury and several vices. These developments gave birth to Gurdwara reforms among the Sikhs. For this, the Sikhs had to make many sacrifices and bear the brunt of government oppression.

Finally, under the Gurdwara Act passed in 1925, the control and management of historical Gurdwaras in Punjab and the neighbouring areas passed out of the control of Udasi and Nirmala *Mahants* to the Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak committee democratically elected by the Sikhs.

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7. Bhai Kahn Singh, *Gurshabad Ratanakar Mabankosh*, p. 146.
8. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1299  
**ਬਿਸਰਿ ਗਈ ਸਭ ਤਾਤਿ ਪਰਾਈ ॥ ਜਬ ਤੇ ਸਾਧਿਸੰਗਤਿ ਮੋਹਿ ਪਾਈ ॥**
9. Darshan Singh, *Guru Granth Bani wich Guru Da Sankalp*, p. 177
10. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 444  
**ਗੁਰੂ ਸਿਖੁ ਸਿਖੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਹੈ ਏਕੋ ਗੁਰ ਉਪਦੇਸੁ ਚਲਾਏ ॥**
11. *Ibid.*, p. 94.  
**ਮਿਲਿ ਸਤਸੰਗਤਿ ਖੋਜੁ ਦਸਾਈ ਵਿਚਿ ਸੰਗਤਿ ਹਰਿਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਵਸੈ ਜੀਉ ॥**
12. Puran Singh, *Sikhi di Atma*, pp. 476.477.
13. Bhai Gurdas: *Varaan*: 1.27  
**ਘਰਿ ਘਰਿ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਧਰਮਸਾਲ ਹੋਵੈ ਕੀਰਤਨ ਸਦਾ ਵਿਸੋਆ ॥**
14. *Ibid.*, 24.1
15. Balwant Singh Dhillon in H.S. Soch and Madanjit Kaur Edited:  
*Guru Nanak Ideals and Institutions*, P 183,184
16. Teja Singh, *Sikhism: Its Ideals and Institutions*, p. 41
17. Bhai Gurdas, *Varaan* 13.19  
**ਇਕੁ ਸਿਖੁ ਦੁਇ ਸਾਧ ਸੰਗੁ ਪੰਜੀ ਪਰਮੇਸਰੁ ॥**
18. Teja Singh, *The Gurdwara Reforms Movement and the Sikh Awakening*, p. 6
19. I.B. Banerjee, *Khalsay di Utpati*, vol.1, p. 129
20. *Ibid.*
21. Upinderjit Kaur, *Sikh religion and Economic Development* p.184
22. I.B. Banerjee, *Khalsay di Utpati*, Vol I, pp. 129-130
23. Sikh Religion and Economic Development, p. 184
24. Sukhdyal Singh, *Punjab da Itibas*, Vol. 5, p. 87
25. Abiston, Denzil and Machagan Ed., *A Glossary of the Tribes and*

- Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier*, Vol. I, p. 681
26. Bhai Kahn Singh: *Gurshabad Ratnakar Mahankosh*, pp. 616-617
27. Gursharanjit Singh in Narinder Kaur Bhatia, Ed., *Parmukh Sikh Sansthanan*, p. 123
28. *Ibid.*, p. 125
29. Mohsin Fani, *Dabistan-i-Mazahib's* reference in G.C. Narang: *Transformation of Sikhism*, p. 45
30. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1245  
**ਘਾਲਿ ਕਿਛੁ ਹਥਹੁ ਦੇਹਿ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਰਾਹੁ ਪਛਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਇ ॥**
31. Gursharanjit Singh, p. 122
32. *Punjab Da Itibas*, (Vol 5), p. 97
33. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1384  
**ਅਣਹੋਦੇ ਆਪੁ ਵੰਡਾਏ ॥ ਕੇ ਐਸਾ ਭਗਤੁ ਸਦਾਏ ॥**  
*True devotees is he who shares (with others) whatever little he has.*
34. *Gurshabad Ratanakar Mahankosh*, p. 932
35. *Sikh Religion And Economic Development*, p. 185
36. Ganda Singh, *Hukamnamae*, p. 153
37. *Sikh Religion And Economic Development*, p. 185
38. *Gurshabad Ratanakar Mahankosh*, p. 36
39. Max Arthur Macauliff, *The Sikh Religion*, (Vol 4), p. 3-4
40. Balkar Singh, *Akal Takht Sahib*, p. 27-28
41. Bhai Gurdas, *Varaan, Vaar 1, Pauri* 23-34
42. Balwant Singh Dhillon, p. 178
43. *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, (Vol. I), p. 57
44. *Akal Takht Sahib*, p. 28-29
45. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1088  
**ਤਖਤਿ ਰਾਜਾ ਸੇ ਬਹੈ ਜਿ ਤਖਤੈ ਲਾਇਕ ਹੋਈ ॥**  
*Only the deserving becomes the sovereign and sits on the throne.*
46. *Ibid.*, p. 1039  
Only the deserving of throne sit on it.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 1037
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143  
**ਜੇ ਜੀਵੈ ਪਤਿ ਲਬੀ ਜਾਇ ॥ ਸਭੁ ਹਰਾਮੁ ਜੇਤਾ ਕਿਛੁ ਖਾਇ ॥**  
*If a person (devoid of Name deems to be) lives  
He lives and departs from here ingnomy;  
Whatever he eats and drinks is illegitimate.*
49. G. S. Dhillon, *Researches in Sikh Religion and History*, Preface

50. *ibid.*, p.1
51. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1427  
**ਭੈ ਕਾਹੂ ਕਊ ਦੇਤ ਨਹਿ ਨਹਿ ਭੈ ਮਾਨਤ ਆਨ ॥**  
*Frighten not any one; Nor give in to anyone's fear.*
52. Balwant Singh Dhillon, p. 187
53. *ibid.*, p. 188
54. *Ibid.*
55. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 281  
**ਕਰਿ ਮਨ ਮੇਰੇ ਸਤਿ ਬਿਉਹਾਰ ॥**  
*O my mind! Do the true trade (of eulogizing Lord)*
56. Ganda Singh, *Sri Guru Sobha*, p. 21
57. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha: *Gurmat Martand*, (Vol II), p. 744
58. *Sri Guru Sobha*, p. 21
59. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1198  
**ਜਾਤਿ ਬਰਨ ਕੁਲ ਸਹਸਾ ਚੁਕਾ ਗੁਰਮਤਿ ਸਬਦਿ ਬੀਚਾਰੀ ॥**  
*He who reflects on divine Word through Gurmat,  
Eradicates all his delusions of caste, family, etc*
60. G.S.Dhillon, *Researches Into Sikh Religion and History*, p. 9
61. Harbans Singh: *Sada Virsa*, p. 89
62. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 74  
**ਹੁਣਿ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਹੋਆ ਮਿਹਰਵਾਣ ਦਾ ॥ ਪੈ ਕੋਇ ਨ ਕਿਸੈ ਰੁਵਾਣਦਾ ॥**  
**ਸਭ ਸੁਖਾਲੀ ਵੁਠੀਆ ਇਹ ਹੋਆ ਹਲੇਮੀ ਰਾਜੁ ਜੀਉ ॥**  
*Such hukm of the compassionate One has to come to prevail,  
No evil now forces or hurts anyone;  
Entire humankind feels happy  
The halemi regime has come to prevail.*
63. Kirpal Singh, *Sikh Itihas ke Vishesh Pakh*, p. 181
64. Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, *Sikh Itihas*, p. 25

## CHAPTER V

### PRESENT CHALLENGES AND THEIR RESOLUTION

Gurdwara, which is the foundational institution of Sikh religion, is a place of Sikh worship, symbol of Sikh Religion, a centre for the Sikh community to meet together and a nursery of the Sikh beliefs and practices. It is a pivot and visible symbol of the basic, fundamental Sikh doctrines, philosophy and theology, Sikh value system and social and religious ethos. Both as a concept and visible manifest form, Gurdwara is the original and permanent structure in which the sacred Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, remains installed on a slightly raised platform. The Sikh devotees visit a Gurdwara very morning and evening to pay their obeisance to the Guru (Granth Sahib), listen to the divine Word and the recitation of holy hymns as well as to participate in various other activities of the congregation. They listen to the choral singing of divine verses as well as to the discourses on the divine Word. The Gurdwara has a distinct architectural design - four doors opening in four different directions symbolic of the universal appeal of Sikhism, its saffron flag-post (*Nishan Sahib*), its community kitchen (*langar*) and an inn (*sarai*).

The management of the Gurdwaras during the Guru-period was under the personal supervision of the Gurus and the devotees of spotless character and integrity appointed by the Sikh Gurus. The Sikhs are well aware of the names of Baba Buddha, Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Mani Singh and Baba Deep Singh among those devotees. Gurdwaras have been a great means for preaching and propagating Sikh philosophy or *Gurmat*. With the passage of time, the Gurdwaras had to face many ordeals. The Afghan and Mughal rulers tried to destroy

these centres of Sikh evolution and renaissance several times. The British Colonial Government in Punjab also supported the corrupt and degenerate Udasi custodian to have their say in the Gurdwara management. Devout Sikhs and men of faith suffered many tortures and made many sacrifices to maintain the dignity of the Sikh shrines.

However, the spirit of service and sacrifice which existed among the Sikh leaders during the struggle launched for bringing about Gurdwara reforms has waned with the passage of time. Feelings of personal aggrandizement and a tug of war for domination among them is gradually replacing the earlier spirit of sacrifice. As earlier happened with the capture of political power, the Gurdwara institution today is confronted with several serious challenges to its moral and religious aspects. The greatest challenge facing the Sikhs today is the need to analyze these challenges and find their successful resolution. Any laxity and procrastination shown on this front can jeopardize the future of the Gurdwara institution and pose a grave threat to the Sikh religion and even to the very identity of the Sikhs as a nation.

There is, however, hardly any Gurdwara in the world where there is no factionalism or dispute or at least the possibility of such an eventuality in the management. History bears witness to the fact that in the majority of the Gurdwaras in Canada, the Gurdwara managements have been or are still involved in wrangles in the law courts. The hard-earned money of Sikh devotees has been wasted on litigation by the fighting factions, for whenever somebody files a legal suit against the Gurdwara management, the money spent on defending the case is taken from Gurdwara funds. If the faction controlling the management of a Gurdwara files a case against any other party, even then the money is spent from Gurdwara funds. In this way, wealth is being wasted on useless activity instead of utilizing it for constructive purposes. So the factionalism among

the members of Gurdwara management is creating hurdles in carrying out constructive activities and is bringing a bad name to the Sikh community as a whole.

Although Guru Granth Sahib occupies a central place and a venerated status in every Gurdwara, with the passage of time the Sikh devotees' faith, instead of reposing in Guru Granth Sahib's teachings and message, is manifesting itself in external acts of pomp and show. We have started following the literal meaning of Gurbani verses instead of imbibing their essence. We have started mistaking a visit to the Gurdwara and bowing down in front of Guru Granth Sahib for the realisation of the Guru's message. Even in our day-to-day worldly life, the purpose of our visit to a friend or relative is not fulfilled if we merely visit his place and return after conveying our good wishes to him. Our purpose is served only after meeting him, sitting with him for sometime and exchanging our views with him. Similarly, we imbibe the Guru's message only if we listen to the Guru's Word (Gurbani) and seek clarification of our spiritual doubts and problems according to the Guru's advice (Gurbani). Returning home without entering into this kind of discussion and dialogue, without gaining any knowledge cannot be considered having a glimpse or *darshan* of the Guru. Unfortunately, Sikh devotees are becoming fascinated by the external and pompous ceremonies of religion instead of imbibing the real spirit and message of the Guru Granth Sahib. They are alienating themselves from the Guru and the Gurdwara. The external manifestation of religion devoid of the spirit of religion is meaningless.

Proponents of many religions are desirous of seeing their religion spreading among the maximum number of people. As missionaries, they use several methods to convert other people to their religion. Sikh religion, in this sense, is not a missionary religion. But if we analyse the Sikh religion carefully, we find that its sacred scripture Guru Granth Sahib does not only

emphasize the values of communal coexistence, religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue and the lift of the downtrodden but also suggests solutions to various social problems.<sup>1</sup> It is indeed very unfortunate that the institution of Gurdwara, which should propagate the humane and essentially humanistic message of Guru Granth Sahib among the whole of humankind is not functioning properly in this direction. The Sikh Gurus had this steadfast vision which enabled them to express their views in their divine verses in favour of religious pluralism, environmental protection, and strengthening of interfaith relationships something that many theologians from different religions are trying to deal with at present. But the Sikhs have not made genuine efforts to propagate these views among people and have restricted their propagation to the narrow confines of their own community. We are of the firm opinion that if the institution of Gurdwara, especially the Gurdwaras situated in foreign countries, make serious efforts in this direction the whole of humankind will gladly accept the message of Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>2</sup>

The first and the foremost objective of Gurdwara is the proper, effective preaching of the Sikh message of the Gurus. No doubt, the Gurdwara has been performing this obligation since its beginning and this preaching and propagation of the Gurmat (Guru's teaching) has a long tradition in Sikh religion. It started with the Gurus themselves and was successfully carried forward by Bhai Gurdas, Baba Buddha, Bhai Mani Singh, Baba Deep Singh and savants and scholars from the Udasi, Nirmala and such other sects. Although every Gurdwara is still performing this duty to some extent and some professional preachers are also doing a good work, but this also remains a fact that there has been a noticeable downslide in the quality and content: it is not compatible with the temper of the modern age. The lack of religious educational training institutions, there are very few preachers well versed in Sikh

theology, philosophy, ontology and history. The prospective preachers need to be provided holistic education comprising correct and composite spiritual and ideological information about the Sikh religion. There is also an apparent lack of rapport and coordination between the traditional preachers' mode of preaching and modern sensibility of especially the younger generation. The latter are educated and enlightened and possess a scientific rational temper but are comparatively ignorant of their rich spiritual and religious heritage. This significant chunk of the audience fails to get interested in archaic and outdated mode of preaching and faith-based unsubstantiated sermonizing style of the Sikh preachers including those of the SGPC. Thus, this traditional prachar does not have any impact on their modern sensibilities and when this preaching is done in the vernacular language in any of the Gurdwaras abroad, these younger generation Sikhs fail to respond adequately to what is being communicated. This gap in communication needs to be plugged to integrate the youth with the Gurdwara. We feel that our preachers should not only be well-versed in Sikh metaphysics, philosophy, theology and history but they must also be eloquent speakers in multiple languages, especially English. It will only be appropriate if candidates with postgraduate and doctoral degrees are appointed preachers in a cadre-based Gurdwara Service, especially in SGPC and similar trust-funded Gurdwaras. In this context, we can learn a lot from the Christian missionaries and even RSS preachers.

There is a lack of explanation and elucidation of the meaning and message of Gurbani in the discourses delivered in Gurdwaras. There is regular recitation and choral singing of Gurbani daily in the Gurdwaras. But the majority of the devotees among the congregation do not know or understand the meaning of the recited Gurbani. Consequently, the message conveyed through recitation of Gurbani does not get across to

the congregation. There is the express and mandatory message of the Gurbani that not only is the divine Word to be recited but its message is to be imbibed and practised in life. The spiritual reward of reciting and listening to Gurbani verses will accrue only if the devotees practice its virtues in their lives.<sup>3</sup> It is because of this dichotomy that the revolutionary reform and transformation which Gurbani is supposed to bring about in the devotees' lives is not visible. This is the most serious and greatest challenge because Gurbani is the fulcrum of the Sikh way of life. It is necessary to connect the Sikh devotees and congregation with Gurbani by properly elucidating its meaning.

In the majority of Gurdwaras, there is more emphasis on rituals not part of Sikh practice and unnecessary ceremonies than on the explanation of Gurbani and how to imbibe it. These practices include distortion of historical facts and the commercialization of non-stop recitations (Akhand Paths) of Gurbani. There can be several reasons for the prevalence of these undesirable practices. It is necessary to pinpoint these reasons to do away with them. There is an acute shortage of knowledgeable and effective Sikh preachers. Sikh institutions are being run more to make money than to propagate the essence of the message of Sikh religion. If the Sikhs fail to address these challenges, there is every possibility that the Gurwara will fail in its primary objective of preaching the Gurus' message.

An unnecessary debate is going on about the authenticity of authorship of *Dasam Granth* and its place in Sikh religion and tradition. We do not wish to enter into the controversy about the *Dasam Granth*; it is not the subject of this book. Nevertheless, we should like to state here that Guru Granth Sahib alone has the status of the Guru in the Sikh religion and tradition. *Dasam Granth* is a literary creation only. Although certain verses from the *Dasam Granth* form part of the daily

Sikh routine and some other Sikh ceremonies, yet the *Dasam Granth* cannot be given the status equal to the Guru Granth Sahib. Even the Sikh Code of Conduct (*Rahit Maryada*) does not permit any other book or scripture to be placed at par with Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>4</sup> Any such attempt would be in violation of the Guru's doctrine, the Sikh Code of Conduct (*Rahit Maryada*), and Guru Gobind Singh's own commandment to accept Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru and the visible embodiment of all the Sikh Gurus. We prefer to skip this controversy with the remarks that *Dasam Granth* cannot be deemed equal to the Guru Granth Sahib though it is a work of great literary merit and historical value. Attempts at its total rejection and according it a status equal to the Guru Granth Sahib are equally detestable.

In Sikh ideology and ethics, Guru Granth Sahib alone is permitted to be accorded the status of the Guru. The majority of monastic saints (hermitage) and sects do place Guru Granth Sahib in their centres (*Deras*), but instead of preaching the teachings and philosophy of Guru Granth Sahib, they mislead the people by preaching the philosophy of personality cult and worship of their own personal selves. While doing this, they are motivated by their feelings of personal aggrandizement. This trend poses a serious challenge to Sikhism because it alienates the Sikhs from the Word-Guru, Guru Granth Sahib, and makes them victims of the designs of fraudulent monastic *sadhus*. The activities of these monastic heads are definitely antithetical to the spirit of Sikh doctrines. The attempts of these fake saints sully the clear stream of Sikh philosophy by presenting a hybridized version of Sikh doctrines and monastic rituals and ceremonies. This trend of personality cult and monastic culture is rapidly increasing not only in India but in foreign countries as well. Attempts must be made to integrate the Sikhs who follow these cults with the Word-Guru, Guru Granth Sahib.

In the Sikh religion, after the end of the line of the Sikh Gurus, there is no provision for the existence of a living human Guru. The Word Guru or Guru Granth Sahib alone has been accorded the supreme status. Before breathing his last, the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, conferred the Guruship on the Word as contained in the Guru Granth Sahib. The Sikh teaching has been quite explicit that there is no scope for the worship of any individual person. The Sikh doctrine requires worship of the timeless Divine, knowledge or study of the Word and glimpse of the Khalsa (*Pooja Akal ki, Parbha Shabad ka and Deedar Khalse ka*).<sup>5</sup> But the majority of the monastic centres (*Deras*) do not follow this code of conduct and devise their own *maryada* or daily routine. It is a serious challenge for the whole Sikh Panth to deal with this issue, to protect Sikh ideology from these distortions and maintain the distinct identity of the Sikh Panth.

Before the constitution of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the priestly class in control of the Gurdwaras had started the practice of excommunicating genuine Sikhs and honouring those who harmed the Sikh cause to consolidate their own hold on the Gurdwaras. It is indeed a legitimate activity to honour those who serve the Sikh religion and the Sikh nation, but not to honour those who indulge in irreligious activities. Unfortunately, the priests in control of the Akal Takht excommunicated Professor Gurmukh Singh on 18 March, 1887 from the Sikh Panth because he had started a campaign to enlighten the Sikhs about the need to preserve the Sikh heritage. Later on, these priests issued an edict on 29 March 1914, excommunicating the patriotic and proud Indian freedom fighters who had returned to India from Canada on the *Kamagata Maru*. Later on, the same priests honoured General Dyer by presenting him with a robe of honour although he was responsible for the massacre of Indians at Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April 1919. In present times also, it has become tradition

to present a Sikh robe of honour to political leaders big and small from the Gurdwara stage. This trend needs to be checked and proper guidelines codified for presenting these honours.

Sikh religion aims at uniting rather than dividing people. Bhai Gurdas stated that the Sikh religion, like needle work, should unite the social fabric rather than tear it asunder like the pair of scissors.<sup>6</sup> Looked at from this angle, the tradition of excommunicating anyone from the Sikh Panth does not seem to be in accordance with Sikh philosophy. Such decisions are generally taken under the pressure of the government or the political party ruling the state. The decision first to excommunicate Professor Gurmukh Singh from the Sikh Panth and then after a century (on 25 September 1995, to be precise) to annul that decision illustrates this fact. By an edict from Sri Akal Takht, Professor Gurmukh Singh was posthumously taken back into the Sikh fold and honoured for his meritorious services to the Sikh Panth.<sup>7</sup> It is now abundantly clear that the decisions about the Komagata-Maru travelers and General Dyer were also taken under political pressure, unjustly from the standpoint of the Sikh religion. There is an urgent need to lay down proper guidelines and make constitutional stipulations for granting of robes of honour as well as for ordering excommunication.

There has been no place for a priestly class among the Sikhs, but we have not only created such a class but this class is now becoming entrenched in Sikh society. In fact, Sikh religion believes that every person is responsible for his own actions and is supposed to meditate upon God's Name himself. It is his own religious and moral duty to read, listen to and believe in the Divine word. If any person is unable to read Gurbani himself, he can listen to the recitation of Gurbani being done by someone else, but to employ a paid employee for reading Gurbani has no sanction in Sikhism. The commercialization of Gurbani recitation being done these days

is not in accordance with the Sikh tradition. It is a mockery of the Sikh sentiments as well as a violation of the Sikh code of conduct. It is a creation of the newly-created mercenary priestly class. Therefore, the Sikh community should find out a solution to this new distortion at the social level.

The Gurdwara has been the centre of Sikh activities. It has played a significant role in foreign countries in keeping Sikh religion, society and culture intact and united. But during recent years, Gurdwara-related factionalism among Sikhs settled in Europe, Canada and America has become the biggest challenge for the Sikh community. Gurdwaras, instead of being centres for propagating Sikhi, have become arenas for muscle-flexing among factions and meeting points for social gatherings. As a result, there is sort of tug of war among various Sikh factions. An example of division in the Sikh fraternity occurred as far back as 1952 in the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver. One faction walked out of the Khalsa Diwan Society and set up an Akali Singh Society. The Akali Singh Society constructed two new Gurdwaras under its management in Vancouver and Victoria. The underlying root of this division was a clash between *keshadhari* (those with hair unshorn) and clean-shaven Sikhs.<sup>8</sup> The clean-shaven Sikhs, being under the influence of western culture, wished to enter Gurdwaras bareheaded without wearing turbans.

After the conclusion of an election for management of the Gurdwara, some members of the faction which won in election started visiting the Gurdwara bare-headed. The members belonging to the other faction did not approve, believing that these so-called modern clean-shaven Sikhs wished to reduce the Gurdwara to a social club. So a tug-of-war started between the two factions resulting in factional fights. Police had to be called many times to restore order.

A similar fight broke out between two Sikh factions in a Gurdwara on Pape Avenue, Toronto in March 1975, resulting

in the death of two persons.<sup>9</sup> On 18 March 1982, when Justice John Ostler of the Ontario Supreme Court delivered his judgment on a case arising from Pape Avenue Gurdwara election, Kuldeep Singh Samra, from the visitors' gallery, opened fire with his .357 magnum revolver. Two persons, Oscar Fonsica, an advocate, and Bhupinder Singh Pannu were killed.<sup>10</sup>

At times, the Gurdwara environment is vitiated by unnecessary, avoidable controversies. Such frivolous issues not only create factionalism among the Sikhs but also tarnish the image of the Sikh community among the non-Sikh members of Canadian Society. A controversy erupted over the distribution of *langar* (community kitchen food) in a Gurdwara in Surrey in British Columbia in 1988. Ostensibly, the controversy concerned whether to partake of *langar* sitting on the floor or sitting on chairs at tables but the real reason was a factional struggle for power in Gurdwara management and the use of Gurdwara funds. A fight broke out inside the Gurdwara, each faction attacking the members of the other group with swords, resulting in police intervention. The controversy finally reached Sri Akal Takht. At this time the controversy continues, the Akal Takht providing no solution. Similarly, other Gurdwaras in the province of British Columbia are divided between two factions.

The tendency to set up Gurdwaras in the name of castes in India as well as abroad is on the increase. In several cities in England, America and Canada, we find Gurdwaras set up by various caste-based groups and communities such as the Ramgharias, Ravidasias, Lobanas and Bhatras. Some of the constitutions drawn up for these Gurdwaras run counter to the principles of Sikhism and Gurmat philosophy since Gurus rejected caste and proclaimed all beings as essentially equal. The management of these Gurdwara is restricted to the members of the community which has set them up. Gurdwaras

established on caste lines in the province of British Columbia are the root cause of factional differences among the Sikhs there. This social malady is a serious challenge for the whole Sikh community. The Tribunal for Human Rights in British Columbia has declared it as legitimate that the membership for the management of the Gurdwara established by the Ravidas Sabha be restricted to the members belonging to Ravidasia community.<sup>11</sup> Commenting upon this decision of the Tribunal, one member of the Ravidasia community remarked that the decision has strengthened their allegiance to the distinctiveness of their community. Such a mindset is antithetical to the basic Sikh principles and philosophy and needs to be checked and rectified.

In Sikh philosophy, woman has been accorded equal status with man in every sphere of life. But we observe that this gender equality exists only in theory rather than in day-to-day practical life. Women were not given the right to become members in one of the Gurdwaras in the city of Bristol, England: they got this right in August, 2008, after a long struggle.<sup>12</sup> Despite the decision taken by the “Dharam Parchar Advisory Committee” of SGPC in its meeting of 9 March 1940 that women should be allowed to perform *kirtan* in the Harimandar Sahib, they have not been allowed to perform this duty so far.<sup>13</sup> The principle of equality and similar Sikh principles need to be put into practice.

The Sikhs settled in foreign countries have faced several other challenges at the political, civil, and human rights levels. At times, there are situations where the local municipal laws are antithetical to Sikh traditions. For example, since Gurdwaras must be registered under the Corporation Act in Canada and America, the disputes pertaining to Gurdwaras are also adjudicated under the Corporation Act. The dispute arising from the management election of a Gurdwara in Fremont, California is an example of this contradiction.<sup>14</sup>

A similar legal dispute pertains to the election at Sri Guru Ravidas Sabha Gurdwara in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada. This Gurdwara was established in 1982 to look after the interests of the Dalit Sikh settlers living in and around the city of Burnaby.<sup>15</sup> In the dispute, the complainants Gurbinder Singh Sahota and Sohan Singh Shergill alleged that they were being debarred from the management of Sri Guru Ravi Dass Sabha Gurdwara in Burnaby because they belonged to a non-Dalit caste. They accused the Gurdwara management of practising racial discrimination. This Gurdwara's management consisted of nine hundred members. The Human Rights Commission of Canada acquitted the Gurdwara Management Committee of the charge of racial discrimination and allowed the management to carry on with the membership policy in accordance with the provisions of their constitution.

Another serious challenge before the Sikhs is the lack of youth-oriented programmes in the daily discourses in Gurdwaras all over the world as well as the absence of role models in general among the managing trustees of the Sikh shrines. As a result of this deficiency, the second and third generations Sikh youth in western countries feel alienated from the Gurdwaras. Extraordinary efforts are required at the local, national and global level to integrate Sikh youth with the Gurdwara. Future prospects of the Gurdwara, especially in countries such as Canada and America, are at stake. Sikhs are building magnificent Gurdwaras at huge cost, but hardly any efforts are being made to integrate the Sikh youth with the Sikh religion and its primary institution, the Gurdwara.

The managing trustees of the Gurdwaras in India and abroad are not performing their assigned duties and fulfilling their religious obligations because of their narrow vested interests. As a result, we find that the institution of Gurdwara which is the primary centre for the preaching and propagation of Gurmat philosophy is gradually failing in its duty. The

management of Gurdwaras these days is no longer in the hands of truly religious persons of impeccable character and integrity. On the contrary, Gurudwara management has come to be vested in the hands of political leaders who are exploiting the institution of Gurdwara for the furtherance of their political agenda. It is a gross misuse and violation of the *Miri-Piri* doctrine to allow political parties to exploit the Gurdwara platform for the propagation of their political agenda. “Amalgamation of religion and politics is secure only in the hands of those persons who understand the supremacy of religion over politics, who realise the profoundness of religion and who do not indulge in politics for politicking alone but use politics for selfless service of humanity and public welfare.”<sup>16</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that Sikh politics today is completely alienated from the ethos of the Sikh religion, engaged in a mad race for power and wealth. The management of the majority of Gurdwaras is falling into the hands of persons who are devoid of selflessness, religious faith and the basic Sikh ethos. This is one of the gravest challenges before the Sikh community. If this malady in Gurdwara management is not addressed in time, there is every likelihood that the institution of Gurdwara will drift away from its real duty and become an arena for settling political scores.

During the past few years, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Jathedar of the Akal Takht have made joint efforts to resolve the disputes prevalent in foreign Gurdwara managements. This is indeed a laudable effort on their part. But sometimes the problems confronting these Gurdwaras become extremely complicated when the commandment or edict issued from the Akal Takht clashes with local corporation laws. When such a tricky situation arises, the affected Sikhs are on the horns of a dilemma, whether to follow the Akal Takht commandment or to follow the local laws. One such situation arose in Canada when legislation was

to be enacted for same-sex marriages. The Akal Takht issued an edict to the Sikh members of the Canadian parliament to vote against the bill endorsing same-sex marriages. But the Liberal Party asked its members, some of whom were Sikhs and they had to vote in favour of the bill. One of the Sikh members of parliament was an initiated (*Amritdhari*) Sikh, who cast his vote in favour of the bill in compliance with the mandate of his party. This violation by a Canadian member of Parliament of the Akal Takht commandment gave rise to an undesirable discussion among Gurdwara managements, some managements prohibiting this member from speaking from their Gurdwara stage. Several committees entangled themselves in acrimony over this issue, some supporting the Akal Takht edict, some the action of the Sikh Member of Parliament. Incidents like this do not add to the prestige of the Akal Takht.

Such controversies will continue to erupt in foreign countries. It is a serious challenge which needs to be deliberated and resolved. It not only affects the lives of Sikhs as individuals but also weighs upon the entire Sikh diaspora in foreign countries. Under the Gurdwara Act, the jurisdiction of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee is confined to the States of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Chandigarh only. Is it legitimate on the part of SGPC to issue edicts to the Gurdwaras located in areas which fall outside its jurisdiction? This issue needs to be discussed seriously.

Inter-religious marriages are on the increase in foreign countries. Constitutions of several Gurdwaas do not allow such marriages to be solemnised in those Gurdwaras. But the Sikh youth, though marrying a partner belonging to another religion, and the parents of such a youth, wish to solemnise the marriage according to Sikh rites in a Gurdwara. This issue often gives rise to disputes in Gurdwara managements. In England, it is becoming customary to take a dead body to a Gurdwara before cremation, a clear violation of the Sikh code of conduct. Such

a practice needs to be banned and a decision should be taken at the community level to curb this malpractice. Lack of uniformity in the implementation of the established code of conduct in different Gurdwaras is spreading confusion and superstition and the message of Sikh ideology and its conventions is becoming blurred among Sikhs and non-Sikhs, leading to worse confusion.

During the last few years, the so-called head priests have issued several edicts from the Akal Takht without taking into consideration established Sikh doctrines, the Sikh Code of Conduct and Sikh history. Such controversial edicts, instead of resolving Sikh issues, create further confusion and divide the Sikh community into factions. For instance, a controversy erupted in one of the Gurdwaras in British Columbia in Canada over the serving and eating of community kitchen food on tables and chairs. The SGPC Advisory Council on propagation of Sikh religion (The Dharam Parchar Salahkar Committee) had already passed a resolution on this issue on 25 April 1935 that in western countries of Europe and America where people were used to sitting on chairs in their religious places, there was no harm if the Sikhs also sat on chairs provided Guru Granth Sahib was seated at a higher level than the devotees.<sup>17</sup> But unfortunately, the Akal Takht / SGPC took a decision recently without taking into consideration the old practice in those countries as well as the earlier SGPC decisions on this issue, leading to a further rift in the Sikh community. As a result, after this decision, the entire Sikh community in British Columbia is still divided into two opposing camps. As the long history of the edicts issued from Akal Takht shows, it can be safely said, that such edicts should be issued very rarely as a last resort after exhausting all other methods of conflict resolution. But no attention has been paid to this consideration in the past. The consequences of such ill-considered decisions are before us.<sup>18</sup> This also calls for the need of appointing only

a highly enlightened, independent-minded person of personal piety to the position of Akal Takht Jathedar; he must not succumb to any political or other pressures.

There is an urgent need for a collective Sikh organisation at the international level which could address Sikh-related issues throughout. At present, the Sikhs have no universally recognised organisation to deal with Sikh problems at the global level. Sometimes Sikhs, especially in some foreign countries, have to confront problems which have an impact on the world-wide Sikh community. There is a serious problem in certain countries over the wearing of Sikh articles of religious faith such as the iron *Kara* (bracelet), *Kirpan* (sword) and turban. There is an urgent need to set up a representative Sikh body at the global level. The Sikh community must deliberate over this issue.

Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh has made efforts in this regard. International Sikh Confederation (ISC) has been established with its headquarters at Plot No. 1, Madhya Marg, Sector 28, Chandigarh to address the Sikh issues at the global level. It is actively engaged in the resolution of emerging Sikh challenges by coordinating with the diaspora Sikh Institutions, Organizations and giving presentation to them in its various advisory councils. Diaspora Sikh institutions must become its members.

There is no doubt that with the passage of time some aberrations and weaknesses have crept into the institution of Gurdwara in its propagation of religious teachings and providing of religious and social leadership to the entire Sikh community. These distortions can be set right with the joint effort of the whole Sikh community. The distortions can easily be confirmed from an analysis of the recent history and mode of functioning of the Gurdwara; the challenging task is how to remove these distortions. In this context, joint efforts at the individual and institutional level can be of considerable help.

The modern trend among the Sikhs of concentrating on

the external manifestation of religion rather than practising the real inner spirit of religion has given birth to several maladies. Similar developments were the main reason for the downslide of the Hindu religion during the medieval age. Instead of spending an exorbitant and unnecessary amount of money on Gurdwara buildings, there is a greater need to make the inner functioning of the Gurdwaras more constructive and human-welfare oriented. Guru Granth Sahib, being the true Guru of the Sikhs, is worthy of great respect. It is also worthy of our reverence because it contains the divinely revealed Word. The human body is also important in the Sikh religion because it contains a soul which is a particle of the Divine; being of divine origin, it is the medium for God realisation. It is mandatory for the institution of Gurdwara that it should make human life divine-oriented through the preaching of the message contained in the divinely revealed Word available in Guru Granth Sahib. Neglect of this essential duty by the Gurdwara has given rise to personality cults and monastic culture (*Deravad*) among the Sikhs. The consequences of the emergence of such a personality cult and its worship are before all of us to see.

The institution of Gurdwara is the major platform for the propagation of Sikh religion. Teaching of Sikh philosophy from this platform should be in accordance with Sikh Code of Conduct and conventions. Setting up Gurdwaras in the name of castes and communities is a violation of the Sikh philosophy and Sikh ethics. There is a danger that discourse conducted in these Gurdwaras could one day become parochial and sectarian. Some preachers in these institutions resort to the use of mythological tales to put across their Gurmat message but end up by presenting mythology as history. Many times, these preachers associate self-concocted miraculous deeds with the lives of the Sikh Gurus and many innocent devotees start believing in these miracles. Therefore, the Gurdwara

management must ensure that a preacher delivering a discourse from the Gurdwara stage must be well-versed in Sikh philosophy and that his or her discourse follows Sikh principles.

Sikh philosophy is for the welfare of all humanity and contains suggestions and solutions for resolving the many challenges of modern life. The Sikh religion upholds the existence of religious pluralism in society and endorses mutual cooperation, coexistence, goodwill and communication among different religious communities and nations.<sup>19</sup> At present, there is a large number of interfaith institutions and organizations which are actively advocating coexistence among different religions and religious sects. But there is hardly any representation of the Sikh religion among the activities and publications of these organisations. It does not mean that there is a dearth of scholars among the Sikhs, but it can be clearly stated that the Sikhs are negligent about representing their religion at the world level. Sikh philanthropists, through the Gurdwara, should promote research in Sikh philosophy in an effort to make Sikh representation more effective and visible at the global level.

There is no provision for clergy in the Sikh religion. But the post of *Granthi* (scripture reader) has become an integral part of the Gurdwara institution at present. Although a *Granthi's* main occupation is to recite Gurbani from Guru Granth Sahib, but on many occasions, he delivers a sermon on Sikh theology and history as well. Sometimes, he provides elementary information about Sikh history and religion to the devotees of other religions. Therefore he must not only be well-versed in Sikh philosophy but also be acquainted with the other religions prevalent in his areas and proficient in the language spoken in that region. The management committees of Gurdwaras all over the world must ensure that the *Granthis* in their employment participate in refresher courses periodically so that they remain in touch with the latest research in Sikh religion as well as in other religions. There should be some sort of

training schools or colleges for conducting such a course. Similar courses should be designed for Sikh professional preachers as well.

As we said in the preceding pages about the preachers, the *granthis* should also be equipped with well-researched and well-documented literature on Sikh religion and history. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in collaboration with other similar Sikh institutions should prepare a standardised package of *Gurmat* literature and history of the Sikh religion. Sikh youth, if exposed to this literature by Sikh *Granthis* and preachers, will be drawn towards the Sikh religion. This is the crying need of our times which the Gurdwara management must fulfill. We should set a tradition of distributing standardised accounts of Sikhism from the Gurdwara stage.

Gurdwara during the Guru-period was managed under the direct supervision of the Sikh Gurus or conducted by the Sikh devotees appointed by the Gurus. They were known by the designations such as head incharges, *Sangtias*, *Dharam Salia*, *Manjidars* or *Masands*. All of them were accountable to the Guru during the Guru period. After the Guru-period, *Nirmala Sadhus*, priests, *Udasis* and *Mahants* continued to run the Gurdwaras, sometimes quite well. But *Mahants* and *Udasis* were not accountable to any Sikh institution. The Sikhs were occupied in maintaining their identity, saving and protecting their religion and snatching power by defeating the tyrants and oppressors of those times. During this period of turmoil and chaos, the Mahants in control of the Gurdwaras managed the Gurdwaras according to their own whims and fancies.

During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's tenure in the first half of the nineteenth century, neither Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself nor anybody else paid any attention to reforming Gurdwara management and daily routine. As a result, several non-Sikh rituals were incorporated in the Gurdwara routine and the Gurdwara management degenerated. Some enlightened Sikhs tried to bring about reforms in the Gurdwara management

through the establishment of the Singh Sabha in 1873. They generated a religious and social awakening among the Sikhs against the prevalent corruption in the Gurdwaras. The Gurdwara Reforms Movement and Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee were born out of this religious awakening.

Under the Gurdwara Act of 1925, the majority of the historic Gurdwaras located in the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh came under the management of this main representative institution of the Sikhs, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. Since then, this organization has managed these Gurdwaras. Gurdwaras in the union territory of Delhi are managed by the Delhi Gurdwara Management Committee. The Gurdwaras in the seminaries and monasteries of some saints and sects are under the control of their individual heads and follow their own routine. The majority of Gurdwaras in other parts of India and in foreign countries are managed by Singh Sabhas and local committees. Members of these management committees are elected by the voters in their respective areas.

The management of the Gurdwaras in the monasteries of individual Sikh saints is carried on according to the personal choice of routine fixed by their respective heads. Similarly, the Gurdwaras established on the basis of castes, sub-castes and communities are managed according to the customs and traditions of those communities. There are certain Gurdwaras in small towns, villages, and even streets where management is carried out according to the whims of the family controlling that Gurdwara;. In legal terms, such Gurdawaras are the personal property of the particular person or family. Gurdwaras located in Pakistan are managed by the management committee of that country.

With the passage of the Gurdwara Act 1925, SGPC came into being and this SGPC was to be democratically elected considering that the representative democratic governance to be the best available system of governance. But it seems the

Sikh leadership at that time realize the drawbacks of the election system. Another system of Gurdwara management was proposed and remained under discussion for quite some time in the recent past. This system is the constitution of the All India Gurdwara Act. It is a matter of serious concern that this issue has remained dormant despite the repeated demands by the Sikhs for framing such an Act. We are of the opinion that neither the two representative Sikh managements, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, nor the Government of India is seriously interested in the passing of this Act. Both the representative Sikh managements wish to perpetuate their own political grip over the Gurdwaras under their control. In the event of an All India Gurdwara Act being passed, there is a strong possibility of the Shiromani Akal Dal (political wing) losing its political power in Punjab acquired with the passing of the Gurdwara Act in 1925. The Union Government, after the passage of the proposed All India Gurdwara Act, would ensure that its own Sikh supporters came into power in the Gurdwara Management constituted under the All India Gurdwara Act, just as happened in the composition of the Delhi Gurdwara Management Committee.<sup>20</sup>

The draft for the constitution of the All India Gurdwara Act has been prepared more than twice. First, it was drafted by Sardar Joginder Singh of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in 1956. The Akali Government of Punjab had the second draft of this bill prepared by Sardar Harbans Singh, the retired Chief Justice of Punjab and Haryana High Court in 1977. The Akali Government headed by Sardar Surjit Singh Barnala had the final draft of the bill prepared by the Dalam Committee in 1986.<sup>21</sup> Under the provision of section 18 (Subclause D), a minimum of two members or a maximum of three members out of a total of twenty four members were to be co-opted to the Shiromani Committee. Some scholars

were severely critical of the definition of *Sahajdhari* Sikh (clean shaven Sikh) given in this draft.<sup>22</sup>

We are of the opinion that any proposed Act dealing with the resolution of the problems pertaining to Gurdwara management which is not consistent with Sikh philosophy, Sikh traditions, the Sikh Code of Conduct and Sikh self-respect and glory, should not be considered for approval by the Sikhs. Any law which does not protect the Sikh Code of Conduct (*Sikh Rehat Maryada*) in the management of Gurdwaras can prove counter-productive or serve as a kind of camouflage for improper Gurdwara management. Keeping in view the distortions and aberrations which have crept in the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee), we are of the considered opinion that the Gurdwara Management Committee constituted under the Act of 1925 as of now, seems no match for some of the challenges being faced by the Sikhs in modern times: it needs many improvements to become capable of that.

It is evident from the above discussion that the supervision of the management of the institution of Gurdwara and its *maryada* during the Guru-period was either directly under the Gurus themselves or under the *Manjidars* (diocese incharges) or the *Masands*. The latter were accountable to the Gurus and the congregation. Since the Sikh Gurus were themselves present at that time, the management functioned properly. Thereafter, the majority of the *Masands* degenerated morally and Guru Gobind Singh put an end to the institution as such. The institution of person-Guru also ceased to exist. Gurdwara management passed into the hands of the *Udasi Mahants* due to the contemporary political upheavals. After managing the Gurdwaras efficiently for some time, they became involved in several anti-Sikh practices and attempted to perpetuate their dynastic control over the Gurdwaras. These *Mahants* were not accountable to any authority. Moreover, they became corrupt under the influence of the massive land endowments of the

Gurdwaras and the proceeds coming to the *Mahants* from those financial assets. But the Sikhs rejected this dynastic rule over the Gurdwaras. The modern democratic system of management came into existence after a long struggle. Although from the fundamental point of view democratic system has been better form of management so far, yet it is high time we rectify the loopholes in this system after identifying the aberrations.

Some points have not been included in the Gurdwara Act of 1925 under which the elections to Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee are conducted. The experience gained with the passage of time shows that these points should either be included through amendments to the Act or by convention. One, for each contesting candidate a minimum academic qualification should be fixed. We believe that a candidate must at least be a graduate. Two, the candidate must be well-versed in Sikh religion and history. It would be still better if he is also acquainted with other religions of his region. Three, his character, conduct and background must be grounded in Sikh ethos or Gurmat. Four, the contestants must not consider their participation in Gurdwara election as a stepping stone to enter state politics. Therefore, it must be stipulated that no elected member of the Shiromani Committee may occupy a political post either through election or through nomination.<sup>23</sup> A candidate for a political post must wait at least for three years after retiring from SGPC.

Very often charges of corruption and financial embezzlement are leveled at the members of management of both religious and non-religious organizations. It is quite possible that some members may be indulging in corruption, but when a member belonging to the management of a religious organization is accused of indulging in corruption, it hurts the feelings of a large number of devotees related with that religious organization. Such a possibility is said to exist in the Shiromani Committee as well. So the members of the SGPC should not

only be free from such human weaknesses, but should also appear to be clean and upright. Broadly, there are two sources of income of the SGPC. One is the proceeds from the properties belonging to the Gurdwaras and second is the income from the daily offerings made by the devotees. If a committee of experts (financial experts) is constituted to manage the Gurdwara property and maintain its accounts, then nobody would be able to accuse the management of corruption.

Gurdwara is the mainstay of the faith of every Sikh devotee. The Akal Takht determines the temporal and social parameters of Sikh community life according to the Sikh tenets. In other words, the Akal Takht keeps watch that the Sikh community follows Sikh tenets in its day-to-day life. Any kind of tampering with these basic Sikh tenets can prove disastrous for the Sikhs. Sometimes, a wrong decision by the Akal Takht can endanger the very identity and existence of the Sikhs as a community. Other times, some decisions are not consistent with Sikh tenets, but not so seriously as to pose a threat to the Sikh community. The Akal Takht is worthy of reverence by the whole Sikh community and any edict or commandment it issues should be respected and accepted by the entire Sikh nation. Therefore, we are of the opinion that the Akal Takht should issue an edict only in the case of the most serious and urgent circumstances. In addition, representative Sikh organizations and persons should be consulted by the Akal Takht before an edict is issued. Less serious issues should be passed to an advisory committee which can resolve them on behalf of the Akal Takht. The decision would be taken by the advisory committee but would have the implicit approval of the Akal Takht. Adoption of such a course would ensure the proper implementation of the Akal Takht's decisions. The tradition of excommunicating a person from the Khalsa Panth by an edict from the Akal Takht needs to be reviewed. As Bhai Gurdas has stated, the Sikh religion believes in uniting

humanity rather than causing divisions.

The Gurdwara is an important institution from which every Sikh seeks guidance. Any hiatus between words and deeds visible in such an institution is a matter of serious concern. The Gurdwara instructs a Sikh about Gurmat teachings. But these precepts and teachings should be incorporated and followed in the daily regimen of the Gurdwara in letter and spirit. Any violation of Sikh tenets within the Gurdwara regimen sends the wrong signal to all the Sikh devotees. For instance, in certain Gurdwaras, a flame (*jot*) is kept lighted in one corner and devotees bow down in front of it. This practice is a clear violation of Sikh tenets. Similarly, there should not be any discrimination between male and female members in the Gurdwara. This principle of gender equality should not only be preached and propagated in a Gurdwara but also be put into practice in the Gurdwara functioning. Any discrimination against women is a clear violation of Sikh tenets.

In short, we can say that we find certain lapses and shortcomings in the Gurdwara management and its functioning. It is the need of the time to enlighten the Sikh community about these weaknesses and to rectify them. We have put forth certain suggestions which, if followed, could rectify these lapses..

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### **Footnotes and References**

1. Guru Granth Sahib, p 1299  
ਨਾ ਕੋ ਬੈਰੀ ਨਹੀ ਬਿਗਾਨਾ ਸਗਲ ਸੰਗਿ ਹਮ ਕਉ ਬਨਿ ਆਈ ॥  
No one appears enemy or alien to me;  
Love I nurture for each one.
2. Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*.
3. Guru Granth Sahib, p 669  
ਸੇਵਕ ਸਿਖ ਪੂਜਣ ਸਭਿ ਆਵਹਿ ਸਭਿ ਗਾਵਹਿ ਹਰਿ ਹਰਿ ਉਤਮ ਬਾਨੀ ॥  
ਗਾਵਿਆ ਸੁਣਿਆ ਤਿਨ ਕਾ ਹਰਿ ਥਾਇ ਪਾਵੈ ਜਿਨ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਕੀ ਆਗਿਆ  
ਸਤਿ ਸਤਿ ਕਰਿ ਮਾਨੀ ॥  
(*To the Guru's door*) come

- All the Sikh devotees to meditate;  
There the supreme Word, satuated with Divine enlogies they secret.  
Sining and listening of Bani God accepts  
Only of these devotees, who abide by the Guru's hukm deeming it true.*
4. *Sikh Rebat Maryada*. p. 11(H)
  5. Giani Lal Singh, "Introduction" in Dalip Singh Edited: *Guru Gobind Singh: Jewan Ate Chintan*, p. 5; *Guru Gobind Singh: Life and Vision*, p 5.
  6. Bhai Gurdas, *Varaan*, 4:10: ਕੈਚੀ ਕਟਣਿ ਕਟਿਆ ਸੂਈ ਧਾਰੇ ਜੋੜਿ ਸੀਵਾਇਆ॥
  7. Roop Singh: *Hukamname, Adesh, Sandesh*, p 63-64; (Commandments Directions and Message 63-64).
  8. Hugh Johnston: *The East Indians in Canada*, p 13.
  9. Narinder Singh, *Canadian Sikhs*, p 84.
  10. Kashmiri Zahir and Mac Andrew, *Soft Target*, p 11.
  11. *Hamdard Weekly*, Toronto, Canada, July 18, 2008, p 1.
  12. [www.daily.pk/worldnews/84-worldnews/5675-sikh](http://www.daily.pk/worldnews/84-worldnews/5675-sikh) denied Membership of F.U.
  13. Kirpal Singh, ed., *Panthak Mate*, p. 18.
  14. *The Sikh Bulletin*, California, November 2002, p. 27.
  15. *Hamdard Weekly*, Toronto, Canada, July 18, 2008, p 1.
  16. Jaspal Singh: *Sikh Dharam te Rajniti*, p. 32.
  17. *Panthak Matte, op. cit.*, p 14.
  18. Balkar Singh, "Introduction" in Roop Singh, Ed., *Hukamname, Adesh, Sandesh*.
  19. Guru Granth Sahib, p. 671.  
**ਨਾ ਕੋ ਮੇਰਾ ਦੁਸਮਨੁ ਰਹਿਆ ਨਾ ਹਮ ਕਿਸ ਕੇ ਬੈਰਾਈ॥  
ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਪਸਾਰੁ ਪਸਾਰਿਓ ਭੀਤਰਿ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਤੇ ਸੋਝੀ ਪਾਈ॥**  
*No one is at enmity with me, Nor am I enemy to any;  
The entire world is His expanse  
And He has made Himself manifest in it.  
The understanding I have got from the Guru*
  20. Labh Singh, "All India Gurdwara Act" in Kharak Singh edited: *On Gurdwara Legislation*, p 103.
  21. *ibid.*, p 102.
  22. *ibid.*, p. 104.
  23. *ibid.*, p. 104.

## CONCLUSION

We can try to understand world religions by classifying these into two categories. These two categories are Mystical and Revelatory. The religions belonging to the first category, i.e., Mystical, are those religions which are based on personal/individual mystical experience. These are other-worldly and introspective in character. These religions believe in spiritual salvation in the after-life state as their main aim. The religions belonging to the other category are based on Revelation and they maintain balance between other-worldly and this-worldly; such religions are extrovert as they aim at amelioration of entire humankind. The aim of these religions is achievement of emancipation or redemption within this life. In other words, the followers of such a religion strive for achievement of emancipation / state of complete detachment (*sachiar-pad*) while living their worldly life. The religions belonging to the first category (mystical) have given birth to so many sects and dynastic organizations. Contrary to this, the religions based on Revelation strive for the welfare of humankind, and universal well-being and give birth to several organizations for fulfilling or realizing this objective.

Fundamentally, Sikh religion belongs to the second category of revelatory religions. It is based on revelation which Guru Nanak received direct from God. The Sikh Gurus established several institutions of *sangats*, (congregations), *manjis* (Dioceses), *masands* (Dioceses' incharges), *dharamsals* / Gurdwaras. The creation of the Khalsa in 1699, by Guru Gobind Singh, was the next link in the chain. The present day institution of Gurdwara embodies all the earlier institutions of *sangat* (congregation), *langar* (community kitchen), etc. After the termination of the institutions of *manjis* and *masands*, the

whole responsibility of preaching and propagating the Sikh ideal (*Gurmat*) is the responsibility of the institution of Gurdwara. The eternal presence of the Guru (Guru Granth Sahib) inside the Gurdwara provides the prominence of being the central place in Sikh religion and tradition. The whole activity of preaching and propagation of Sikh ideology (*Gurmat*) emanates from the Gurdwara and every Sikh devotee seeks from this institution guidance for leading his individual and social life.

The concept and institution of Gurdwara is as old as the Sikh religion and its history. It does not hold the position of a religious place only in the Sikh way of life, but it has been providing guidance to the Sikhs in every sphere during the different periods of their history. Gurdwara is related to every aspect of the Sikh way of life, be it an occasion of joy or sorrow. Gurdwara has been playing a very significant role in the evolution of the Sikhs as a nation. It has always been at the centre of the religious, political and social life of the Sikhs. It fulfils the devotees' craving for spiritual realization through the recitation of Gurbani and provides bodily nourishment by serving food from the community kitchen. It is an educational centre for the students and provides shelter to the needy and the destitute. It provides strength and moral courage to the Sikhs to take up cudgels against oppression and injustice and fight for the defence of human rights courageously. Thus, the Sikhs remain integrated to the Gurdwara from birth till death.

Besides being an important institution of Sikh religion, Gurdwara is a heavenly abode for Guru-consciousness. In conceptual terms, Gurdwara is beyond time and place. At this level, Guru-consciousness itself is a Gurdwara, a *Dharamsal*, a beatific state and a temple of God. In terms of being an institution, it is situated in time and place. In this capacity, it is shaped by history and keeps on waning and waxing in the course of history. Like all other institutions, it also

keeps on grappling with ground realities and shaping these as well as being shaped by these. Sometime, it has to compromise with the existing circumstances in order to maintain its identity. But it is absolutely clear that such a compromise at the superficial level is only an adjustment with the circumstantial realities rather than a compromise with its fundamental conceptual identity. In this book, effort has been made to analyse this paradoxical role of the institution of Gurdwara from a philosophical point of view.

The literal meaning of Gurdwara is an entrance to the abode of the Guru, the place where the Guru resides. But in Sikh religion, the Guru is visualized in the form of the Word-Guru. It means that Guru Granth Sahib which contains Guru's divine Word is worthy of our respect. So Gurdwara has been accepted as the Guru manifest. In this way, Gurdwara is a place where Guru Granth Sahib is seated/installed, where its divine Word is recited and elucidated and explained. That is why, we find that Guru Granth Sahib is installed in every Gurdwara and guidance is sought from its divine verses. These divine verses as recorded in Guru Granth Sahib reflect and project the spiritual enlightenment emanating from the Divine Guru. This spiritual enlightenment is supposed to remove man's mental dilemma and dispel its mental and spiritual ignorance. It is the Guru's divine Word which transforms a devotee into a *Gurmukh* (Guru-oriented) and a truly upright person by providing mental and spiritual enlightenment. Bereft of the Guru's enlightenment, man tends to fall a victim to the five-fold vices of lust, anger, avarice, attachment and pride and indulges in acts of egotism. In this mode, he goes astray and gropes in life in ignorance. Equipped with spiritual enlightenment received through the medium of Gurdwara, he gets strengthened to save himself from indulgence in vices. *Gurmat* or Sikh philosophy instructs human beings to achieve their final goal of spiritual emancipation while leading a life

of a householder in this world as well as fulfilling their familial and social obligations simultaneously. Gurbani ordains:

*“Says Nanak, let the strategy be perfect,  
Let emancipation follow while performing worldly chores.”*

As we need a boat to cross a river and a ship to cross the ocean, so do we need the divine Gurus’ grace to achieve emancipation in human life. Using an analogy of a ship and ocean, the Guru instructs that God’s grace is required to cross the ocean of life. The divine Word, or verses of Guru Granth Sahib, is the ship of enlightenment by boarding which we can successfully sail through the ocean of life. It means that a person following the teachings of Gurbani can easily overcome all the obstacles in worldly life as well as achieve the supreme goal of uniting with the Divine spiritually in this life.

*Gurmat* or the philosophy of Sikh religion teaches man to lead an ideal life. Although divine realization is possible through individual consciousness but there is always a possibility of the taint of egoism interfering in it. Participation in congregational activity in a spirit of humility reduces this interference. In this respect, concept of congregational gathering does not remain limited to a social gathering only, but it symbolizes the vast organization for providing enlightenment about the Divine. So the concept of congregational participation has a far-reaching importance in the development of the institution of Gurdwara. So *sangat* or congregation plays the role of a live-wire between the institution of Gurdwara and Gurbani. It not only saves the institution of Gurdwara from becoming a merely administrative body but also regulates its development and practices. In this book, this concept of congregation has been particularly analyzed and its role has been discussed while deliberating over the development and area of operations of the institution of Gurdwara.

It can be easily stated that a concept is thoroughly

complete in its abstract or theoretical terms but gets naturally diluted or relatively compromised while manifesting itself in concrete practical form. This little loss of meaning during the process of converting an abstract concept into a practical manifestation is but natural. Every institution becomes a medium to make a practical manifestation of some ideal or concept. In this way, no institution is a perfect match for its underlying concept while manifesting that ideal. It is but natural that with the passage of time, every institution gets somewhat diverted or deviated from its underlying concept. Secondly, with the passage of time and changes in circumstances, its underlying concept also becomes somewhat irrelevant or inconsistent with the pulse of the times. But the institution of Gurdwara does not suffer from this blemish or irrelevance, because *Gurbani*, which is the basis and superstructure of this institution of Gurdwara and which is an expression of man's inquisitiveness or an urge for enlightenment, is eternal and universal. Consciousness or what we have termed Guru-consciousness is the human urge to know about its origin and primal source. Therefore, there is hardly any possibility of this underlying concept or *Gurbani* becoming irrelevant or outdated with the passage of time.

The second distortion that may possibly creep into a religion's fundamental ideology with the passage of time is that it may either get somewhat muddied or become tainted with corruption. But the institution of Gurdwara is immune from this risk as well. The fundamental Sikh ideology and ethics will always remain uncontaminated and clear because this fundamental philosophy is permanently enshrined and authenticated in Guru Granth Sahib in the form of Divine verses or *Gurbani*. There is no possibility or danger of its getting tampered with at any stage. Therefore, its essential message can never be adulterated. Although there have been variations in the interpretation of *Gurbani* at different stages,

but its essential message has always been steady, stable and relevant. Therefore, the institution of Gurdwara will ever remain relevant and integral part of the Sikh life.

The third likelihood is that at some point of time the domination of a priestly class or clergy over a religious institution also becomes the root-cause of its decline and degeneration. But the concept of the existence of priestly class does not exist in Sikh religion. There came a period in the history of Gurdwara institution when this institution was overtaken by the priestly class. The Sikhs had to wage a long struggle against this system. Although apparently the aim of Akali movement was to restore the sacredness of the Gurdwaras but implicitly this struggle was the outcome of the Sikhs' religious and spiritual belief that no priestly class, clergy or aristocratic class could monopolize over the Gurdwaras. The movement met with success after a long-drawn struggle, but once again we see attempts being made for the same kind of monopolization. As it is, the Gurdwaras belong to the whole Sikh community in the form of congregation. This fundamental ideology has always been – and will always be – instrumental in keeping the institution of Gurdwara integrated and relevant to the Sikhs as a people.

The modern trends of globalization, technology and commercialization have affected almost all the humanitarian institutions of the world. Its implications have been both positive and negative. Its constructive aspects have contributed positively to fulfill some of the aims of the institution of Gurdwara. But at the same time, some negative influences have also crept in which are antithetical to the aims of the institution of Gurdwara. For instance, day by day Gurdwara activities are getting commercialized. The recitation and singing of Gurbani hymns are getting commercialized. The marketing mentality of this commercialization of Gurdwara practices needs to be curbed otherwise the devout Sikhs would soon be

looked upon as potential customers. The Sikhs are a minority both in India as well as in foreign countries. In this situation, these challenges confronting the Sikh faith need to be addressed seriously and urgently.

It is mandatory for the institution of Gurdwara in today's globalized world that it must remain alert and alive to these challenges so that it continues to maintain its relevance in this world and make significant contribution to humanity at large. The Sikh faith believes in the welfare of whole humankind and the institution of Gurdwara should try to implement this mandate. In this book, we have endeavoured to point out all the insights and teachings of Gurbani which contribute to evolve the institution of Gurdwara into a holistic and wholesome model of human welfare. This model envisages the whole world as a *dharamsal* and every creature on this earth should reflect the presence of the Divine in him. This belief of Sikh religion is the basis of human equality and universality. The institution of Gurdwara is supposed to impart this knowledge to the entire humankind so that every human being could aspire for social and spiritual fulfillment. When such an all-encompassing ideology directs the institution of Gurdwara, then this institution will be able to contribute to the universal human welfare definitely and successfully.

Gurdwaras are such unique centres of Sikh religion which manifest basic human values of love and devotion to God, human solidarity, equality, social justice, freedom, self-respect and welfare of humankind. From Sikh point of view, *Dharamsal* is the basic model of Gurdwara where devotees sit in congregation to meditate upon God through Name-remembrance. Guru Nanak, after receiving Divine enlightenment at Sultanpur, went on long odysseys to share the revelatory message he had received. He imparted this knowledge to the divine seekers and devotees at several places. He instructed the devotees and seekers to assemble in

congregation and meditate upon God's Name. This assembly of devotees and seekers was given the name of *sangat* (congregation). Such congregations were set up at several locations. Every congregation used to assemble at a common place to recite and meditate upon God's Name. This common location came to be termed *dharamsal*. It was a place where devotees used to recite divine verses and learn to live a religious way of life. In other words, we can say that in the beginning the institution of Sangat came into being wherever there were some true devotees and seekers of truth following the message of Guru Nanak: these *sangats* met together at a common place which came to be known as *dharamsal* and practiced Name-remembrance.

An endeavour has been made in the book to define and analyze the concept of Gurdwara. It says that the institution of Gurdwara has to train human beings to become true followers of Sikh philosophy and learn to live and work for the welfare of whole humanity. But for a devotee, Gurdwara is not a religious centre only but an institution with multiple activities. It provides guidance to devotees in all walks of human life. An effort has also been made to explain how the institution of Gurudwara fulfils the physical and spiritual needs of a devotee through the service of food from the community kitchen (*langar*) and divine knowledge (*sangat*). To work out a comprehensive definition of Gurdwara, we have tried to explain how with the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, *sangat*, recitation of *Gurbani*, community kitchen (*langar*) in the Gurdwara premises, it becomes an important medium to put into practice the fundamental Sikh doctrines. Gurdwara, besides being an important religious institution, is also a unique place for cultivating divine consciousness. We have also deliberated upon the idea that cultivation of divine consciousness itself is a Gurdwara, a *Dharamsal*, a beatific temple of God.

We have also tried to trace the beginning and evolution of the institution of Gurdwara in the Indian context as well as in some western countries. In the Indian context, Guru Nanak set up congregations (*sangats*) at several places during his odysseys and the places where these congregations assembled came to be called *Dharamsals*. We can easily state that *Dharamsal* was the first form of Gurdwara. The first such *Dharamsal* was set at Saidpur at the residence of Bhai Lalo. Thereafter, wherever devotees congregated to meditate upon the Divine, those centres became *Dharamsals*. But the first *Dharamsal* which was set up under the direct supervision of Guru Nanak is believed to be at Kartarpur where Guru Nanak had finally settled after completing his four preaching odysseys. Devotees from far and wide used to visit him here to pay obeisance. The Guru would give sermons every morning and evening here. He also started cultivating the fields for earning a living for himself and to generate income for running community kitchen (*langar*). In this way, Guru Nanak's living place became a *Dharamsal* where devotees used to congregate to meditate upon the Divine. Guru Nanak himself laid down its *maryada* or daily routine which was carried out under his personal supervision.

Guru Angad set up the second centre at Khadoor Sahib. Its *maryada* and management was carried out under his direct supervision. Similarly, the successive Sikh Gurus set up several other new centres and every centre became a *Dharamsal* where people used to meet and pray in congregation. As the number of these *Dharamsals* kept on increasing, it was not possible for the Sikh Gurus to keep direct contact with each of these *Dharamsals*. So the responsibility of managing some of these *Dharamsals* was delegated to the heads of those congregations, called *Masands* or *Manjirdars* (Diocese incharge). The *Masand* system kept performing this duty with complete commitment and efficiently for several years. It was during this period that

the construction of Harimandar at Amritsar had been completed and the Sikh scripture was installed in its *sanctum sanctorum*. The nomenclature of *Dharamsal* got changed into Gurdwara during the pontificate of Guru Hargobind.

In sum, efforts have been made to trace brief history of the institution of Gurdwara during the Guru-period from its beginning at Kartarpur up to the modern time. We have also tried to analyze the stages through which the institution of Gurdwara has passed and the major challenges which it had to face. The Sikh Gurus laid down clear-cut guidelines for the management and code of conduct of this institution. After the Guru-period, its management passed into the hands of *Masands*, *Udasis* and *Mahants*. Certain malpractices crept into the institution during the dynastic control and management in the hands of *Mahants* and then a democratic setup evolved for Gurdwara management as a result of the long-drawn struggle against the system which had become responsible for such malpractices. The institution of Gurdwara had become the centre of religious, social and political activities of the Sikhs during the Guru-period itself, and we have highlighted the significant role played by the institution of Gurdwara in inspiring the depressed sections of Indian society to realize and defend their religious, political and cultural independence and to live with a sense of dignity and self-respect.

As for the inception and evolution of the institution of Gurdwara in foreign countries. It is, the history of the evolution of Gurdwara in these countries becomes the history of the immigrant Sikhs and Punjabis to these countries. We have made efforts to provide authentic information about the history of the Sikhs related to their arrival in those countries and the major hardships faced by them resulting from the discriminatory policies of the governments and the racial discrimination practiced by the white community, union leadership and their religious institutions. The Sikhs organized themselves into a

community as soon as they happened to be of sufficient number at any city/town and started meeting together in the form of a congregation to recite/listen to the divine Word. In Vancouver (Canada), they set up a Khalsa Diwan Society in 1907 to face the challenge of racial discrimination and such other challenges. This was the first Sikh institution representing the Sikhs in North America. The institution of Gurdwara further developed in North America under the patronage of this Society. In the same year, the Khalsa Diwan Society set up the first Gurdwara at 1866, Second Avenue West in Vancouver. Similarly, the first Gurdwara in America was set up at Stockton in 1912 at South Grant Street. In England, a Gurdwara was established in 1911 at 79, Sinclair road Shepherd bush after taking a house on lease.

While describing the evolution of the Gurdwara, we have also endeavoured to know the spirit which impelled the immigrant Sikhs to set up Gurdwaras in these countries. Mention has also been made of the hardships faced by the Sikhs during this period. The role played by the institution of Gurdwara in resolving those problems and in keeping the Sikhs attached to Sikh religion and culture while living in an alien country with an alien culture has also been discussed. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, majority of the Gurdwaras in America and Canada organized the Ghadr movement for India's independence and a large number of Sikhs and other Punjabis played an active role in the movement. Now, Gurdwaras have come up in almost all the small and big cities in these countries having a Sikh population. We have tried to highlight the major activities being carried out in these Gurdwaras and Gurdwaras' role in resolving the problems confronting the Sikhs in these places.

Effort has also been made to enumerate the steps which the Sikhs settled in Canada, America and England have taken to create awareness among the people of those countries about

their religion, Sikh community and its culture as well as their future plans in this direction. The role being played by the immigrant Sikhs in the political and economic sections in those countries has also been briefly mentioned. Since the beginning, the institution of Gurdwara abroad has been playing a significant role in keeping the people of Indian origin, be they Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, united. We have tried to analyze the important role played by the institution of Gurdwara during the movement for India's independence in the first half of the twentieth century.

In our endeavour to evaluate the concept and institution of Gurdwara since its beginnings to modern times all over the world, we find that majority of the mainstream Gurdwaras in India and abroad adhere to the Original and basic Gurdwara concept and follow a uniform practice of daily prayer and follow a code of conduct prescribed by the representative body of renowned Sikh savants and scholars under the seal of the Akal Takht: there are only a few exceptions where Gurdwaras owned and controlled by individual Sikhs (*sants* and *babas*), odd Sikh sects and local Sikh trusts in States like Bihar and Maharashtra in India differ. This uniformity in the standard practice followed in almost Gurdwaras the world over 'speaks volumes for the uniformity, comprehensiveness and permanence of Gurdawara's conceptual and institutional strength and systematic structure. It is likely to endure in future as well.'

During our discussion on the evolution of the Gurdawara Institution, we have referred to certain caste-based gurdwaras and numerous deras coming up. The gurdwaras in the name of castes are diluting the basic tenets of Sikh religion and its universal appeal. This distortion has, to some extent, been born out of a lack of adequate representation to these communities in mainstream Gurdwara Managements. Day is not far when there will be Sahijdhari Gurdwaras as well. The establishment

of such Gurdwaras reflects divisive tendencies (*bipran ki reet*) among the Sikhs and denting the concept and message of the Gurdwara. As for the deras, they violate with impurity, the fundamental Sikh doctrines in their discourses as well as practices. Barring a few, many of their practices are oriented towards promoting a personality cult about their presiding *babas* whose instructions are semi-Brahmanical laced as they are with Puranic fables and legends thus eclipsing the intrinsic spiritual message. Their *kirtan* singing is also composed of self-composed vernacular doggerels and they sing these verses in folk song lingo with an odd line of Gurbani thrown here and there. Repeating a particular Gurbani verse for a fixed number of times for solving a particular problem – whether economic, physical, psychic or any other – is often recommended. Political patronage to some of such deras due to the present-day vote bank politics is further strengthening them and dividing the Sikh society into sectarian segments. Here comes the role of the SGPC.

While discussing the issue of the management of Gurdwara and its related institutions, we have noted that the primary objective of the institution of Gurdwara has been to teach the need for devotees to live their life in accordance with the Gurmat philosophy. Every institution grapples with ground realities, is affected by these as well as affects them. Gurdwara has to keep its identity intact while dealing with all the contemporary problems. The institution of Gurdwara has to mould Sikh religion, Sikh society, Sikh culture and Sikh politics in accordance with the Gurmat philosophy through its institutional organs. It was for the fulfillment of this goal that institutions of community kitchen (*langar*), *manji*, *masand*, Akal Takht, Khalsa Panth, *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmatta* were set up. These institutions made a significant contribution in making the Sikhs a distinct, formidable, and disciplined nation by organizing the Sikhs and laid the foundation of an egalitarian

social structure which brought the divine message of Gurmat philosophy into practice for the welfare of whole humanity.

The book also enumerates some of the challenges confronting the institution of Gurdwara and also suggests ways to resolve them. Some of these challenges confronting the institution of Gurdwara are the increasing trend towards more stress on external rituals instead of concentrating on the intrinsic spirit of Sikh tenets; lack of preaching and propagation of Gurmat philosophy; ignorance about the concept of divine Word (Gurbani as Guru); the mushrooming of egoistic and anti-Sikh sects and seminaries; growing factionalism among the Sikhs; setting up of Gurdwaras on the caste and community lines; and the class of Sikh preachers ignorant of *Gurmat* philosophy and tenets. In this chapter, we have tried to enumerate these challenges to pinpoint the reasons behind them and also made a humble effort to suggest ways and means to resolve these problems. It is obvious that these suggestions should be in accordance with the Gurmat tenets, Sikh history and established Sikh traditions.

The Sikhs being a small minority even in the country of its origin should take clue from the Jews with whom several scholars have pointed out some similarities. As it is, the Jews exercise a significant control over the levers of modern world economy and international affairs. Behind this position lies their determined collective effort to empower their younger generations by providing them quality education and job-oriented Sikh because this, they feel, is the best way to make a nation strong and powerful. Following the Jewish model, the Sikh must allocate significant percentage of Gurdwara funds towards education, especially of the deserving and needy children. An enormous amount of money is offered at each of the Gurdwaras, and they must spend at least ten per cent of their total *golak* money on providing quality education and job-oriented skills. A common Sikh Education Fund, on the lines

of Jewish Education Fund, should be created. If we want to see the Sikh credo of *Raj Karega Khalsa aaki rabe na koye* (the Khalsa shall rule, no will remain unemancipated) recited daily at the end of ardas become a reality, we must make every Sikh child educated and skilled. The Gurdwara institution can make a significant contribution to this cause. The SGPC has been making good efforts in this regard running various engineering and medical colleges, but still much more needs to be done especially at the level of school education.

It is a need of the time, that a new blue print for Gurdwara's comprehensive role and functions be prepared and made to apply on all the Gurdwaras across the globe. It should consist of Gurdwara's spiritual religious, social, educational and healthcare functions and duties and a proper mechanism for their implementation of welfare of the whole mankind.

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