

Institutionalization of Sikh Religion: Evolution of Gurdwara

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ABSTRACT

The Gurdwaras are nuclei of the life of the Sikhs; their whole life revolves around the Gurdwaras. They are not only places of worship, but also training ground of social service and public deliberations. The origin and development of the institution of Gurdwara was important in the Sikh history. A Gurdwara came to be known as an abode of the Guru and a Sikh place of worship. The important feature of a Gurdwara is presiding presence in it of a Sikh Scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. The Gurdwara is open to all devotees. The growth of the institution of the Gurdwara was accompanied by a new development in another institution such as *sangat* (organized fellowship or holy fellowship), *pangat* or *langar* (free community kitchen), *sewa* (selfless service) and *nam simran* (contemplation of *shabad*). These institutions are closely associated with Gurdwara. The Gurdwara not only plays an important role in the social, religious and political affairs of the Sikhs but also in service of the Sikh community and humanity. The Sikhs made great sacrifices for the construction, maintenance and protection of the Gurdwara.

Keywords: *Gurdwara, Sikh, Guru, Dharamsal*

Introduction

A brief introduction about Sikh religion seems to be appropriate before going into discussion about the Gurdwara, a premier institute of the Sikhism, in detail. The Sikh religion came into existence in India in the late fifteenth century. It is the youngest and latest among the world religions. It was established by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and subsequently led by a succession of nine other Gurus. Its followers are known as Sikhs. It seeks to knit the entire mankind into one universal brotherhood. It is a distinctive monotheistic faith envisioning one Supreme God, who is the Creator. It endeavoured for a new dispensation characterized by the values of

liberty, equality, justice, tolerance and non-violence and discarding discriminations of all kinds on grounds of creed, caste, class, race, region, sex, etc.¹

The Guru Granth Sahib (earlier known as the Adi Granth) is the sacred scripture of the Sikhs. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and the last living Guru of the Sikhs, conferred Guruship on it. He declared the Guru Granth Sahib as his successor, thus putting an end to the line of living Gurus. The sacred scripture of the Sikhs containing 1430 pages, written in *gurmukhi* script is called as Guru Granth Sahib. It contains the compositions of the first five Gurus and ninth Guru and hymns of medieval Indian Hindu and Muslim saints. The cardinal principle of the Gurus and *bhagats*, whose writings find a place in the Guru Granth Sahib, is Unity of God. The Guru Granth Sahib becomes the nucleus of the Sikh way of life and of all religious observances of the Sikhs.² The Guru Granth Sahib is placed in all historical and non-historical Gurdwaras (Abode of Guru).³

Objective

The importance of the present work lies in the fact that the Gurdwara not only plays an important role in the social, religious and political affairs of the Sikhs but also in service of the Sikh community and humanity. Further, Gurdwara is open to all people irrespective of their social, economic, political or religious background where all people visit always welcomed. Therefore, the major objective of this work is to shed light on the Gurdwara, a premier institution of the Sikh religion, and its functions, with respect to its role in propagation of Sikh religion, welfare of mankind and upliftment of the society.

Methodology

Both primary and secondary sources are used in this work.

Discussions

Gurdwara in the Sikh Religion

The word 'Gurdwara' is a compound of two Punjabi words 'guru' and 'dwara' meaning home of the God.⁴ According to Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, Gurdwara as an adverb means through the Guru, and as noun means Guru's abode. It stands for any Sikh religious centre created for the propagation of Sikh religion where the Guru Granth Sahib is placed on the throne under a canopy attended by a *granthi* (priest).⁵ The origin and development of the Gurdwara is as old as that of the Sikh faith itself. The term Gurdwara is reflective of the evolution of Sikh religion and faith. The original term employed for the place of worship in Sikh religion was *dharamsal* having very common connotations like the abode of *dharma* or a free lodge.⁶ Theologically speaking, for a Sikh, whole of this earth is veritably a *dharamsal*, a place to practice *dharma*. However, the origin of *dharamsal*, where the early Sikhs used to meet for worship and devotion can be traced back to the time of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Wherever Guru Nanak found his disciples, he not only organised them into congregational circle (*sangat*) but also motivated them to build a religious centre, the *dharamsal*. Obviously, the *dharamsal* presupposes a Sikh *sangat*, which was in fact a pre-requisite for its emergence at a particular place.⁷ Where Baba Nanak put his hallowed feet, the place was sanctified. Bhai Gurdas writes in his inimitable style:

"Wherever Baba put his feet, a religious place was erected and established. All the siddh-places now have been renamed on the name of Nanak."⁸

After his sojourn in different lands, Guru Nanak settled at Kartarpur (now in Pakistan) where people from different walks of life belonging to different denominations far and wide gathered around him to hear his sermon. Subsequently, he founded a religious centre known as *dharamsal*, which became a nucleus of his ministry. Evidently, the origin of *dharamsal* is not obscure, but a well-known fact of Sikh history.⁹

The institution of *dharamsal* evolved historically. The *dharamsal* at Kartarpur, says Ganda Singh, "became a true demonstrative laboratory for the practical training of his followers" and was known as "*Baba Nanak di dharamsal*".¹⁰ To carry out the mission of their master with rare fervence, Guru Nanak's successors consolidated and extended the institution of *dharamsal*. Guru Angad Dev established a *dharamsal* at Khadoor, while Guru Amar Das's presence lent lustre to Goindwal on the banks of

Beas. With the introduction of the institutions *manji* and later the *masand* system, the Sikhs appointed on these institutions played a significant role in building up *dharamsals* in their respective areas and zones.¹¹ Most of the *dharamsals*, which came up at these places, had been sanctified by Sikh Gurus themselves. They were built up either to commemorate their sacred memory or to enshrine the holy relics associated with them. Soon a network of *dharamsals* was established all over the region. According to Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, “the Sikh shrines were named as *dharamsals* during the period of Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Arjan Dev. Initially *amrit sarovar* (Amritsar), was named Harmandir Sahib by Guru Arjan Dev and *dharamsals* were named Gurdwaras from the time of Guru Hargobind”. The nomenclature ‘Gurdwara’ came to be used only after the Guru Granth Sahib began to be installed in *dharamsal*. Eventually, the Gurdwaras were built where ever the Sikhs put their roots down, whether in India or abroad. The Sikhs increasingly adopted the term Gurdwara in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to indicate the extraordinary nature of these places of worship. In the course of time Gurdwara became established institution. Gurdwaras have played a vital role in the history of Sikhs and in the development of the Sikh religious tradition.¹²

A Gurdwara is built particularly for congregational worship. It is open to all castes.¹³ A Gurdwara, in present times usually has four major sections: (1) The main congregation hall (2) a *langar hall* and a kitchen (3) a *saran* (a hostel or a resting place for the Sikhs visiting the Gurdwara from distant places) and (4) an office-cum-library. In most of the Gurdwaras (particularly in foreign countries) a school for teaching of Punjabi and *gurmukhi* is usually a part of Gurdwara.¹⁴ Thus, it means a public place of worship where the Guru Granth Sahib is installed. It is not only a place of worship but is also a social institution and symbolizes a door of path towards the Guru. The presence of the Guru Granth Sahib is indispensable in a Gurdwara because the Sikhs bow before it and show their reverential attitude towards the scripture as Guru. The sanctification of Guru is described in the following hymns:

"Wherever my True Guru goes and sits, that place is beautiful, O Lord King. The Guru's Sikhs seek out that place; they take the dust and apply it to their faces".¹⁵

"Through the Gurdwara, the Guru's Gate, one obtains understanding. By being washed through this Gate, it becomes pure."¹⁶

Contemplation of Shabad

The Sikh Gurus condemn idol worship and prefer the holy word which is written in the Guru Granth Sahib. Only listening to the *shabad* is not important, but concentration is the main requirement for the communion in one formless God. With the concentration on *shabad*, evil thoughts can be sublimated with positive thoughts and then the nerves of mind get relaxed by contemplation of *shabad*. The only purpose of concentration of *shabad* is to achieve the goal of human life. The concentration of *shabad* is not the negation of household life; but active participation in household life and thus the concentration of *shabad* is to enlighten our consciousness. It is the consciousness with which the concentration ought to be practiced. The true attitude with which to enter the path of concentration is to open our consciousness to the divine presence and it can be realized only with the Grace of God.¹⁷

Katha and Kirtan

The Gurdwara is a centre of congregational worship for the propagation of Sikhism. The pattern of worship can be divided into two categories; *katha* (the reading of the holy hymns followed by their explanations) and *kirtan* (the singing of hymns, the latter being more common). Gurdwara is not a place for idol worship-not even for individual worship. The *kirtan* and *katha* are features of daily service in Gurdwara. Participation in the daily service is open to all men and women. Towards the end of worship, prayer is offered and *karah parsad* is distributed among the assembled people to mark the grace of God.¹⁸

Sangat

Sangat literally means company, fellowship, association, but in Sikh parlance it stands for congregation, an assembly of devotees, men and women meeting religiously, especially in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib. During the time of Gurus, *sangat* also referred to the Sikh brotherhood established in or belonging to a particular locality. In the beginning, *sangat*, the religious congregation was held at the

residence of a devoted Sikh. A special room was reserved for the purpose. When the number of devotees grew larger, the congregation started being held in a public place called *dharamsal*. The philanthropic devotees were instrumental in constructing the *dharamsal*. In the congregation, all irrespective of their caste, creed, sex and status used to sit on the same floor. There was service of *kirtan* and *katha*. The Guru delivered his sermons and *ardas* (collective prayer) was offered. The sacramental *karah parsad* (the sacred food distributed in a Gurdwara), prepared in the central kitchen and offered by the devotees from different castes was mixed up for giving practical shape to the precept of social equality and to obliterate the false sense of caste and untouchability. Thereafter, the *parsad* was distributed among the congregation. Sitting in *sangat* along with all disciples developed a sense of humility, equality and brotherhood. *Sangats* were not only the places of worship, but also served the useful purpose of wayside inns where food and shelter were given free to the poor and indigent way farers.¹⁹ The *sangat* is described by Guru Arjun Dev in the following hymns:

"In the Saadh Sangat, the Company of the Holy, sing the Kirtan of the Lord's Praises. This place is found through the Guru. Second Pause."²⁰

Pangat

Langar (free kitchen) introduced by Guru Nanak Dev was unique in all respects. It was not a ceremonial meal to be observed on festival days, but a regular feature of congregational activity of the Sikhs. Moreover, it was open to one and all irrespective of caste, creed, birth and breed. The doors of Guru Nanak's house remain open to whosoever seek succor; none shall return disappointed.²¹ Guru Amar Das's mandate was: first *pangat* and then *sangat*. The institution of *langar* became an integrated feature of the Sikhism.²² A.C. Banerjee rightly says "the *langar* represented two important points in Guru Nanak Dev's teaching, the denunciation of asceticism and the importance of *daan*, the charitable sharing of money or goods".²³ Radhakamal Mukerjee has also remarked "the institution of *langar* or the community kitchen, where prince and peasant, rich and poor, high and low born could mess together without social distinction, fostered a spirit of charity on a large scale and also became a powerful force".²⁴

Saran

It means rest house of pilgrimages. All the Gurdwaras have the facility of *saran*. It is built for those people who come from far away places to visit the Gurdwara. The managing committee takes a nominal charge for this service.²⁵

Equality

Gurdwara is open to all regardless of age, sex, caste and creed. There is no distinction on the basis of culture and nationality, every person has right to visit the Gurdwara. With equality we can develop the universal brotherhood in society according to the Guru:

"First, Allah created the Light; then, by His Creative Power, He made all mortal beings. From the One Light, the entire universe welled up. So who is good, and who is bad?"²⁶

Socio-Economic Role of Gurdwara

The Gurdwaras have played a vital role in shaping the course of events in the history of the Sikhs and development of the Sikh religion. The main function of the Gurdwara is to provide the Sikhs with a meeting place for community worship. Since inception, the Sikh Gurdwara has served as a community centre performing various functions. It has functioned as a school for children and as centre for pious and the learned discourse to the adults on morals and spiritual living and regeneration. It serves as hospital for the sick where ailments are attended to and medicines are given free of cost. It has provided food to the hungry and the needy and a safe resting place to the wayfarers both men and women devotees who go to a Gurdwara for offerings. These offerings are not the property of any person, but are used for the common good for running the *langar*, schools, colleges, hospitals and needy people. Poor girls are also married by using these funds. The Sikh Gurus had enjoined upon Sikhs to earn their livelihood honestly and share it with other devoted Sikhs by contributing one tenth of their income for socio-religious purpose. Gurdwara also plays an important

economic role in the life of Sikhs.²⁷ To provide money for charity is considered the highest virtue. By doing this, a Sikh is fulfilling social obligations. The contribution given by Sikhs should be used for altruistic purposes for the benefit of community.²⁸

Sewa

Literally *sewa* means selfless service, work or service performed without any thought of reward or personal benefit. All Sikhs are encouraged by their Guru (Guru Granth Sahib) to perform *sewa*. It is not only good for community relations, but also important for the moral uplifting of a person. Sikhism is founded on the principle of *sarbat-da-bhala* meaning the "Common good of all". *Sewa* is a religious concept used for the socialization among community. The welfare of mankind, temporal and spiritual were the primary concern of Sikh Gurus. The aim of religion is to serve mankind and imbibe the spirit of love and compassion. In Sikhism *sewa* has much greater significance than in other religions. The Guru has marked out Sikhs as servants of the whole world. Here stress was laid on the need of man's duty towards man in order to achieve an associated, harmonious living of all men, and man's duty towards the Guru.²⁹

The Guru says: "Without selfless service, no one ever receives the fruits of their rewards. Serving the Lord is the most excellent action".³⁰

The Guru further says: "In the midst of this world, do seva, and you shall be given a place of honor in the Court of the Lord".³¹

The Guru says: "Serving Your slaves is the ultimate good deed".³²

The service of the people is supreme. The aim of religion is to serve mankind.

Religion and Politics in Sikh Religion

Religion and politics are interlinked for Sikhs. Therefore, the Sikhs are a politico-religious community. The Gurdwara as a focus of political life assumes a theo-political status and serves as a platform for the fulfillment of not only spiritual, but also socio-political obligations for the Sikhs. Efforts are made for the solution of several social, religious and political problems facing the Sikh community.³³ The concept of *miri* (temporal) and *piri* (spirituality) was given by Sixth Guru Hargobind in 1606. According to this doctrine, a man of the temporal domain is defender of

spiritualism and a man of religion is defender of the weak, the needy and the oppressed. In other words, a man of religion must not be a silent spectator of tyranny, injustice and inhumanity and in his temporal capacity, he must be the defender of *dharama* (righteousness). In the concept of oneness *miri* and *piri*, two domains do not stand distinguishable, but they are one whole.³⁴

On a visit to the Gurdwara, the head is to be kept covered as a mark of respect to the Guru Granth Sahib and shoes and other intoxicants are not allowed inside the Gurdwara.³⁵ The functions described in the above paragraphs are performed in the historical (dedicated to the visits of the Guru) and non-historical (Gurdwaras are established in villages, towns and cities by local Sikh *sangat*) Gurdwaras. These Gurdwaras were used only for worship. There was a full time priest supported by the local *sangat*. He supervised morning prayers and insured their broadcast over the Gurdwara loudspeakers every morning. He also performed weddings, funerals and supervised *akhand paths*.³⁶

Control of Gurdwaras from Fifteenth to late Nineteenth Century

In the time of Sikh Gurus, the Gurdwaras were under the direct control of the Gurus or their *masands* (missionary agents). After Guru Gobind Singh, the control of Gurdwaras passed into the hands of the *panth* and was exercised through *granthis* and other *sewadars* (incumbents), who were under the direct supervision of the local *sangats* or congregations.³⁷ The persons appointed as *granthis* or *sewadars* were of exemplary characters. They looked upon the offerings and other income of the Gurdwaras as the Guru's property and regarded it as poison for themselves.³⁸

During the early eighteenth century, after the arrest and the subsequent execution of Banda Singh Bahadur in 1716 and till the rise of the Sikh *misaldars* late in the century, there was large scale persecution of the Sikhs at the hands of emperors Bahadur Shah I (1707-1712) and Farrukhsiyar (1713-1719) and their Governors in the Punjab, Abdus Samed Khan (1713-1726), Zakaria Khan (1726-1745), Yahya Khan (1745-1747) and Mir Manu (1748-1753) and later at the hands of Ahmad Shah Abdali (1748-1772).³⁹ Prices were fixed on their heads and their living in towns and villages was banned. Thereafter, they took to jungles. As large numbers of Sikhs along with the Sikh preachers were forced into exile, the Sikh shrines passed into the

control of the *udasis* or those who professed Sikhism, but did not strictly conform to its outward symbols and could, thus, escape persecution. Throughout this period, tradition carries tales of heroism, stories of dedicated Sikhs of the Khalsa who expressed their faith and loyalty in determined resistance to the forces of tyranny and destruction.⁴⁰ Many *udasis* had been appointed in the times of sixth, seventh and ninth Gurus as preachers of Sikhism. The *udasis* as incharge of various Gurdwaras at the time rendered an important service to Sikh religion by maintaining the Gurdwaras. The *udasis* were highly respected as men of high moral character and integrity. They were also well-versed in Sikh scriptures and devoted themselves chiefly to reciting and expounding the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Most of the *udasis*, who looked to ecclesiastic jobs in different Gurdwaras, were not attached to any particular shrine or to its wealth and property, but moved from place to place. Some who established institutions, admitted *chelas* or followers and became heads of their *deras*, *akharas* and Gurdwaras came to be known as *mahants*.⁴¹ The *mahant* was the superior of a *math* or any other similar religious establishment. In the period of early Sikhism, its characteristic usage referred to the leaders of *maths* and *deras*. The term acquired distinctive Sikh application during the eighteenth and nineteenth century during which many Sikh Gurdwaras passed into the hands of hereditary controllers. These men, who become virtual owners of the Gurdwaras were now known as *mahants*. Many of them were non-initiated Sikhs and exploited popular devotion for personal gain.⁴²

Uncertainty in the eighteenth century was followed by persecution and persecution by counter attacks. The counter attack proved to be increasingly successful and eventually resulted in armed bands of Khalsa Sikhs dominating much of the Punjab. In the period of persecution, the Khalsa faced serious problems of coordinated strategy and organization.⁴³ Towards the middle of the eighteenth century, many of the *jathas* were consolidated into twelve groups of varying size, each known as *misl*. This development marked a significant strengthening of the Khalsa power. Even in the jungles, the exiled Sikhs did not cease to think of their Gurdwaras. Whenever they heard of the desecration of their sacred places, they came out to lay their lives to prevent the desecration.⁴⁴

The rise of the powerful Sikh *misaldars* in the late eighteenth century and the subsequent coming into political power of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1799 led to the

institutionalization of the Sikh religion, the introduction of complicated rites and ceremonies in Sikh religious practices and the emergence of rich and powerful *mahants*. Maharaja Ranjit Singh endowed the Gurdwaras with rich tax free *jagirs*. Many Sardars and other devout Sikhs also gave lands and *jagirs* to the Gurdwaras from time to time for the maintenance of the service, *langar*, buildings etc. With the sudden increase in the income of some historical Gurdwaras, there came a change in the style of living of many *mahants*. As long as the income from the *jagirs* was small, the *mahants* consulted the Sikh *sangats* of the area in the management of the Gurdwaras and the endowments attached to them.⁴⁵

The British annexed the Punjab in March 1849. Soon after the annexation, they brought fundamental changes in its administration. With the opening of a network of canals in the Punjab during the second half of the nineteenth century there was an enormous increase in the value of the *jagirs*. As a result, the *mahants* and their growing flocks began to convert the trust property of the Gurdwaras into their personal possession. This was in flagrant disregard of the injunctions laid down by the Sikh Gurus and Sikh scriptures. Gradually, the *mahants* and their *chelas* began to live a life of luxury and dissipation verging on depravity. The *mahants* who managed these Gurdwaras became corrupt and started leading a luxurious life. Many malpractices, which were eradicated by the Gurus, were reintroduced by the *mahants* in the Gurdwaras.⁴⁶

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