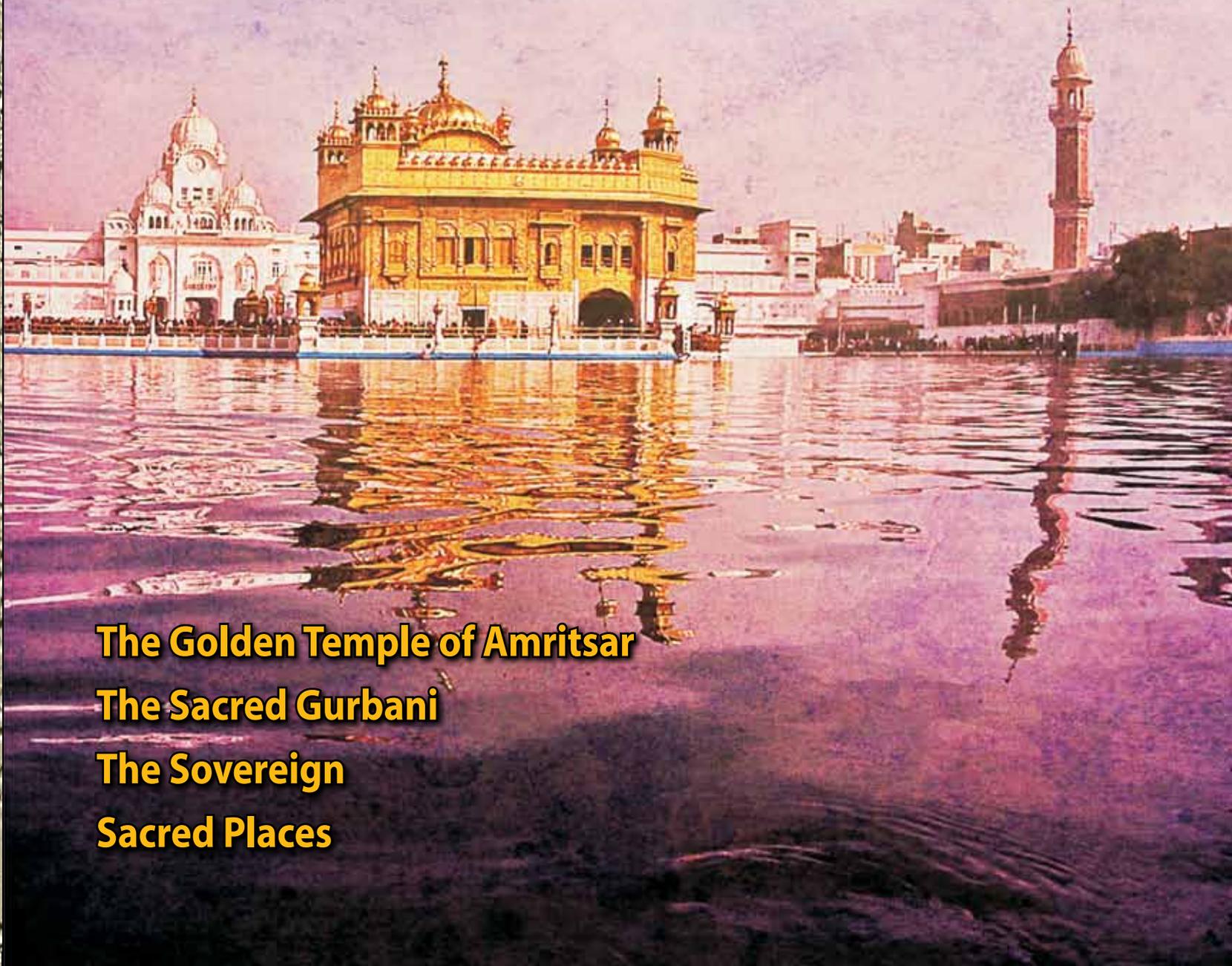


III/2012

# NISHAAN

NAGAARA

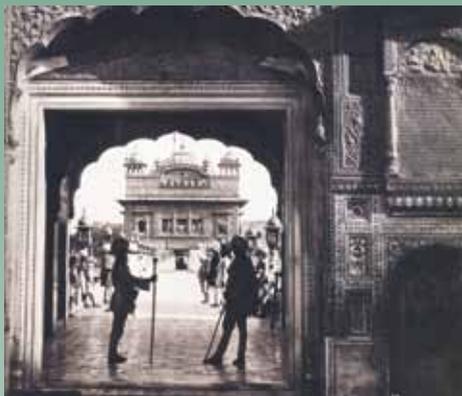


**The Golden Temple of Amritsar**  
**The Sacred Gurbani**  
**The Sovereign**  
**Sacred Places**

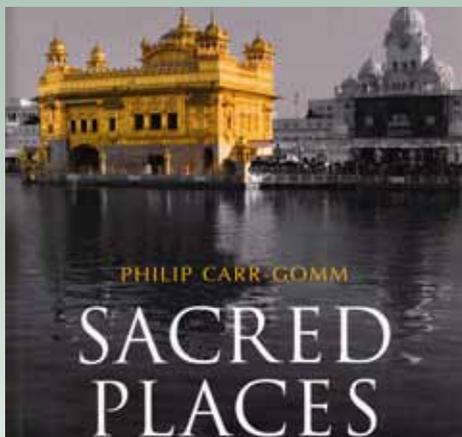
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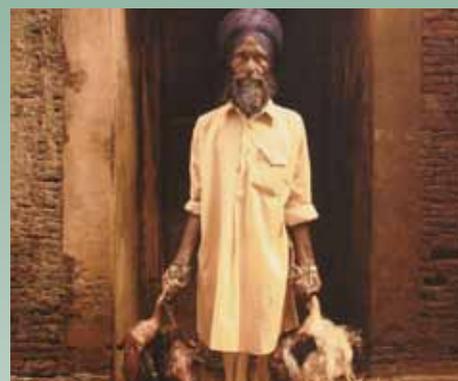
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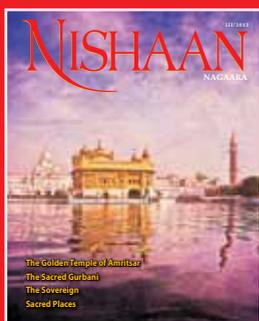
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The Golden Temple  
Photography by Malkiat Singh,  
verily transformed into a painting.

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of common wisdom that transcends culture, time and geography. Experience tells me that a freebie given to a library or some such organisation will likely be read by many. A freebie given to an individual, particularly one who knows the author, will be accepted with a smile and sometimes a thank you, but more often is wasted.

I know, for I have distributed loads of free copies of my books but could count on the fingers of one hand (with room to spare) the number who received a freebie and admitted to having read it. A persuasive counterargument could be that perhaps the writing was so bad that it didn't deserve pursuing. But then one would have to read it before arriving at such judgment. There are also others who have paid for and read the writing enough to come back with arguments and points for discussion. And such disagreements, often thoughtful, I see as compliments to my writing. Religious writing from all traditions continues to sell all over the world, so Kabir or Guru Nanak could not have been talking about this kind of trade.

Step into some history. True that no clean and direct commercial exchange agreement ever existed between the Gurus and the disciples, but history also tells us that when devotees came to the Gurus they brought gifts and offerings and stayed to learn from the Gurus. The Gurus received donations from which they met all expenses, particularly of community related projects.

Would not these offerings then be akin to voluntary reimbursement in lieu of information and knowledge imparted to and received by the devotees? So what exactly are Kabir and Guru Nanak talking about when they castigate those who sell knowledge?

Experts have always sold their skills in the marketplace, whether in the name of religion, philosophy, poetry, plumbing, science or surgery; this is consistent with *ghall khaaye* that I cited earlier.

Doesn't the expert on religious matters—a priest, pastor, rabbi, imam, brahmin, or *gyani/granthi* – put food on the table by being paid for his or her religious teaching? Isn't this consistent with the meaning of *ghall* or honest labour that is exalted in Gurbani? Surely, this couldn't be what is being derided in the Guru Granth.

I think the Gurus' point here is more indirect and yet, not so difficult to fathom. Could it be that Guru Granth is here talking about the bargain in which the expert - seller of his skills - is not being entirely true to his trade?

It is like in the judicial system today when in litigation hired experts - perhaps dime-a-dozen -willingly tweak their testimony, knowledge and interpretation towards a desired end. When the nature of the testimony is for sale; when knowledge is hedged towards a desired goal, then indeed it deserves approbation. The operative but rejected idea here is "tweaking or hedging of information and its interpretation."

I would say that the finger here is being pointed at dishonest testimony or information being shaded or falsified deliberately in response to the demands of those who might have some control over our purses and our lives. I illustrate my point on shading and hedging evidence by the example of Ram Rai, the son of a Guru. When Ram Rai deliberately changed a word of gurbani to avoid the possible wrath of the emperor, the Guru immediately banished him and refused to see him again.

Spokespersons for political causes and candidates for office are routinely expected to bend their message to suit the causes that hire them. Then they become like salesmen who will sell anything; it is the commission that counts, they don't have to personally believe in the product.

Sometimes teachers, too, dumb down their teaching to please the administration or students that are their masters in many ways. I recall that years ago I was under pressure by the higher administration where I worked to modify the contents and organisation of our academic programme drastically and then to also add a statement that this truncated/modified programme offered the same first-rate experience as it did before any changes were made. After much soul searching I responded that as a loyal employee I would design the best possible programme to suit the administrative and budgetary constraints on it but I would not sign my name to a statement that the altered programme was an equally rich academic experience for students or faculty. The tug of war lasted some time but the administration decided to respect my principled demurrals.

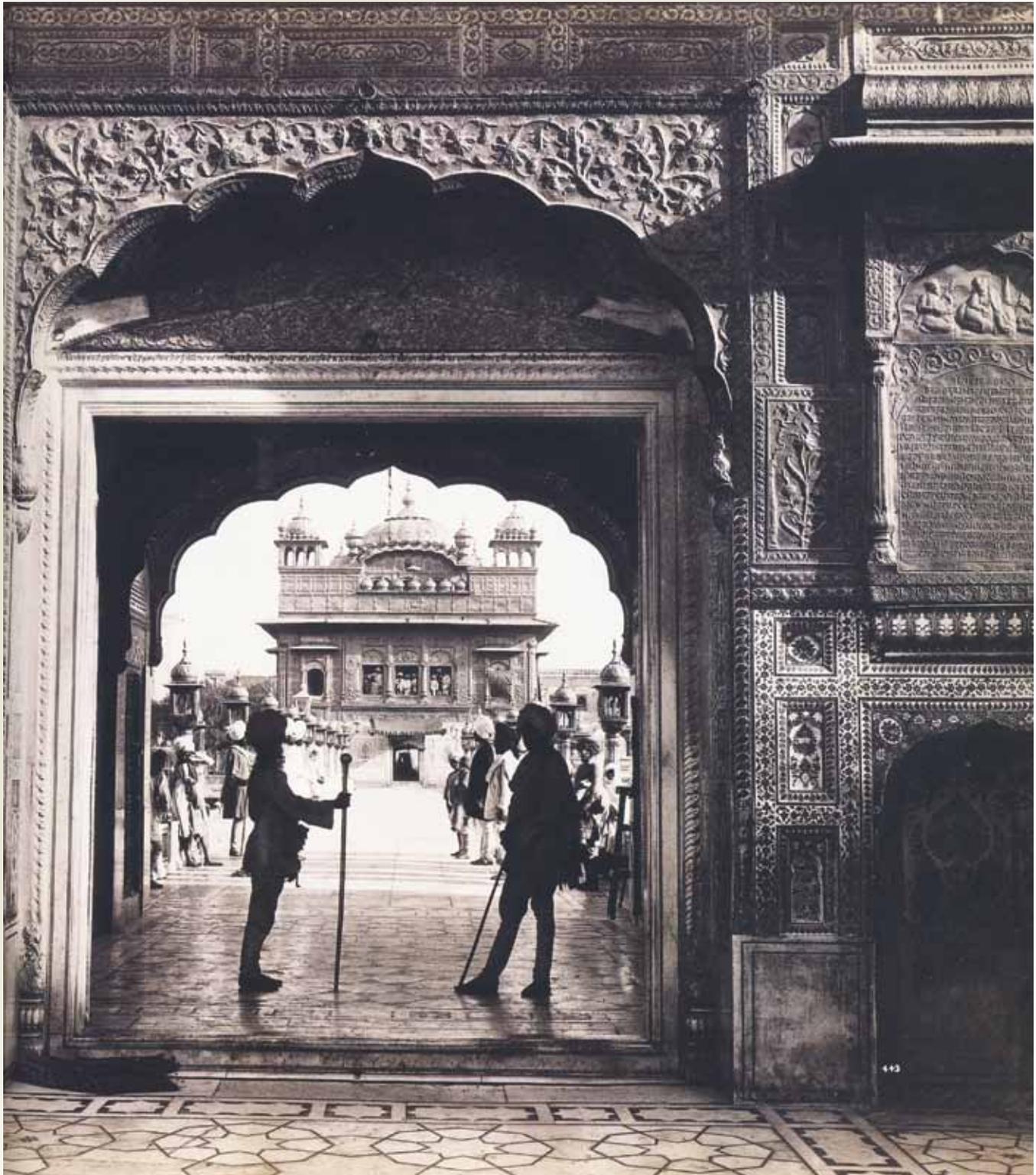
Such demands are not a new trend. Such pressures have always existed; experts have often shaded their opinions for kings, tsars and others of far lesser authority – minor minions -- to tell them what they want to hear. In real life can one always resist such pressures? There are times when anyone will fold. Listen to the talking heads on television these days. Heed the pandering that the political candidates do to win over special interests. Also, I often wonder how Sikh advisors might have tweaked their opinions on the events of 1984. I am sure many did because people mostly tend to tell their bosses what they think the bosses want to hear.

I think this is the essence of what Kabir and Guru Nanak are telling us in the lines that I picked up today. They are not asking us to turn away from the intellect; in fact they urge us to use it.

The issue really is the selling of one's integrity, one's 'soul' that is a person's core. It is something for which good people will put their heads on the line rather than haggle over its value or price.

That's why speaking truth to authority is a lesson that flows naturally from the lives of the Gurus and their writings. But more of that another time!

# The Golden Temple of Amritsar :



*The Golden Temple viewed through the Darshani Deohri, c. 1880-85 (Lala Deen Dayal)*

# Reflections of the Past (1808-1959)

Visited by millions of pilgrims and tourists every year, the Golden Temple of Amritsar is one of the most recognisable edifices in the world. From its origins in the 16th century it has come to symbolise the epitome of Sikh architecture as well as the eternal faith of its devotees. This exquisite work explores the Temple's golden era of peace, prosperity and patronage and captures the richness and unique nature of Sikh cultural inheritance.

Drawing on 500 of the finest and rarest images from collections in Europe, India and North America, this stunning volume by Juga Singh who is based in England, celebrates the history and exquisite artistry of the Golden Temple as seen through the eyes of artists and photographers over the years captivated by its sublime splendour.

The illustrations are accompanied by 70 fascinating eyewitness accounts recorded by explorers, diplomats, memsahibs, missionaries and travellers; alongside their impressions of the customs and manners of Amritsar's inhabitants - from warrior-priests and pilgrims to maharajas and noblemen - they vividly portray the architectural magnificence of the fabled temple and the city's majestic palaces, luscious gardens, imposing gateways and bustling streets.

More than just a richly illustrated history, this unique publication offers an unrivalled experience of a time that has vanished forever. It serves as a fitting tribute to an enduring monument of universal spirituality and timeless beauty.

**T**his is a multifaceted work recording an overall history of the shrine, town and Sikh peoples (through an introductory essay and a detailed timeline). It concentrates on the era between 1808-1959 through the pages as it were, as well as some 70 early eyewitness accounts and nearly 500 artists 'and photographers' impressions covering this period, including the earliest known paintings and photographs of the Gurdwara Sahib.

There are reconfigured and detailed maps of both the temple complex during the nineteenth century (identifying all the buildings surrounding the shrine and their one-time owners) and of the old walled city as once was (including its development over time) have been reproduced. As such, the book is a comprehensive and detailed account of the temple as viewed via the earliest outsiders accounts found so far plus the editors own reflections into various aspects of the temple, town and Sikh history. This is especially the era up to and until 1808-1959 or

thereabouts, with the main body of the volume being a vast collection of the earliest and most arresting paintings, photographs and other visual representations of the shrine and environs to be found, from the rarest of archives around the world.

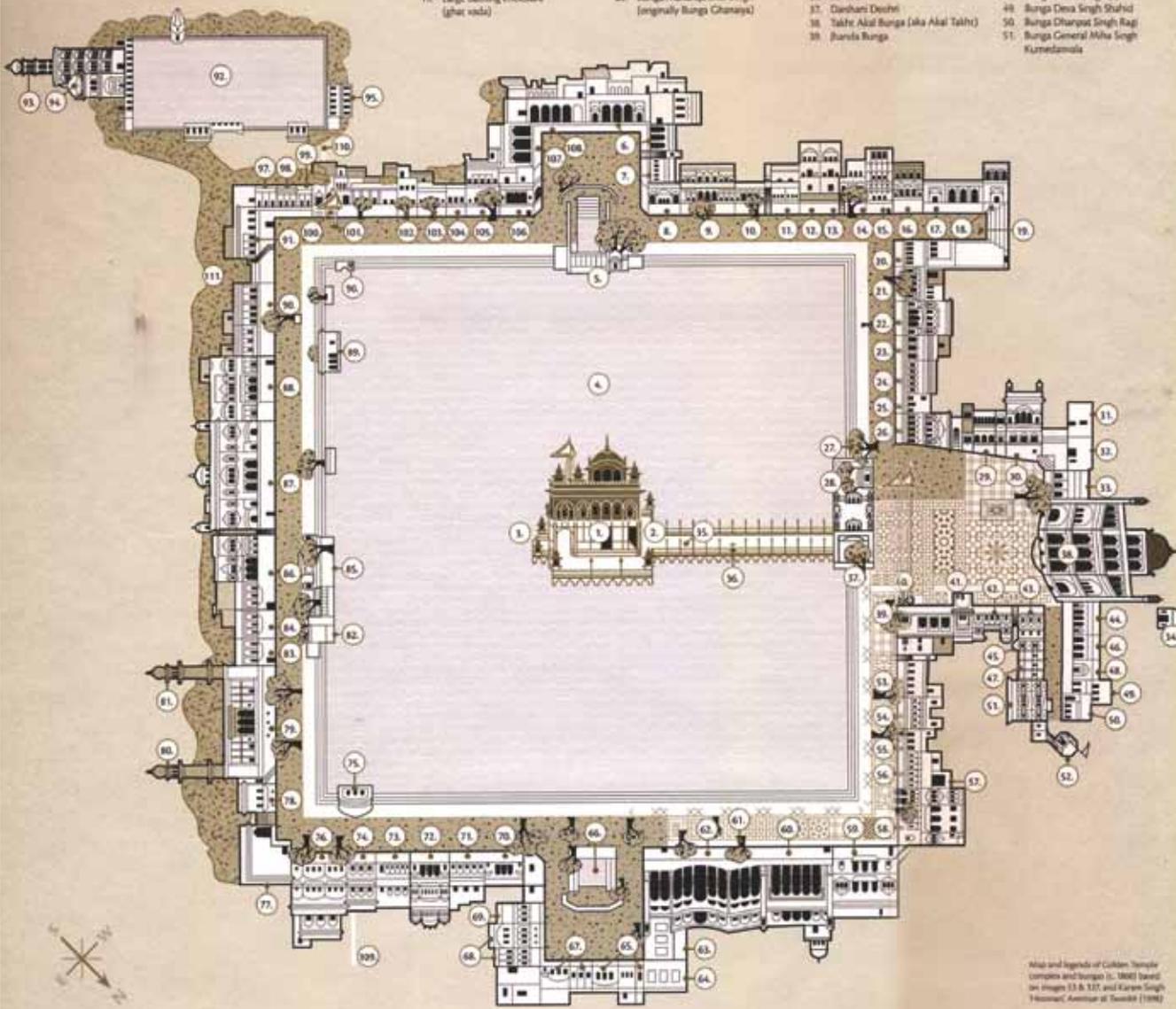
Reflecting on the Design Mantra, Juga Singh writes "Within all projects there are constraints and limitations and with all decisions there are pros and cons. In undertaking any design project my aim is to navigate through these hurdles to produce something that is beautiful, accessible, functional and most importantly, true to the brief. What follows are the key insights into how I approached the overall design of this book".

"The Harimandir Sahib (Golden Temple) is more than just a building, it is a visual representation of core messages, expressed through the architectural language of the time. Similarly, I intended for the book design, wherever possible, to communicate these same messages in the language of today," continues Juga Singh.

Extracts from the book designed by S. Juga Singh

Published by Kashi House, 2011 © Amandeep Singh Madra & Parmjit Singh

- |   |  |   |   |  |  |
|---|--|---|---|--|--|
| 1. Golden Temple (aka Harmandir Sahib)          | 6. Bunga Bhanga Singh Thanesara                                      | 10. Bunga Mirankota                     | 20. Bunga Kot Jhalakala                                 | 30. Bunga Raja Dhian Singh (originally Bunga Anandala) | 40. Nihari Sahib   |
| 2. Golden Temple - main entrance (western side) | 7. Bunga Teja Singh Sobhewala (later Bunga Chitaga)                  | 11. Bunga Sham Singh Attarwala          | 21. Bunga Shahbadia                                     | 31. Baradari Sachu Singh                               | 41. Bunga Chanyala   |
| 3. Hall ki Fauti                                | 8. Bunga Chitaga   | 12. Bunga Jassa Singh Nirmala           | 22. Bunga Santar Lakhna Singh Majitha                   | 32. Baradari Gurmukh Singh                             | 42. Bunga Santara Barkhala                                 |
| 4. Amritsar tank (sarovar)                      | 9. Bunga Santar Baghel Singh (aka Bunga Chahalwala / Bunga Maruvala) | 13. Bunga Lakha Singh Nirmala           | 23. Bunga Singhpura Bath Singh                          | 33. Bunga Gurmukh Singh (originally Bunga Giana)       | 43. Bunga Noh Singh Chhappanwala                           |
| 5. Bathing enclosure (ghat)                     |  | 14. Bunga Charat Singh Ragi             | 24. Bunga Singhpura Arar Singh                          | 34. Shahid Gauri Baba Gurbakhsh Singh Tahang           | 44. Bunga Abu Singh Hulsunnama                             |
|   |  | 15. Bunga Jodh Singh Setarwala          | 25. Bunga Gindwala                                      | 35. Bunga Khushal Singh Jemadar                        | 45. Bunga Bhag Singh Shahid                                |
|   |  | 16. Bunga Jassa Singh Bharrana          | 26. Bunga Lachi Singh                                   | 36. Lachi Singh  | 46. Bunga Bhag Singh Giani (originally Bunga Gunda Bhakia) |
|   |  | 17. Bunga Kholwal (aka Kot Kabula)      | 27. Bunga Maharaa Sher Singh (originally Bunga Chanaya) | 37. Sundal   | 47. Bunga Sakha Singh (?)                                  |
|   |  | 18. Bunga Chahalala (?)                 |   | 38. Dardhan Deohi                                      | 48. Bunga Dera Singh Shahid                                |
|   |  | 19. Large bathing enclosure (ghar vada) |   | 39. Tahir Akal Bunga (aka Akal Tahir)                  | 49. Bunga Dhyan Singh Ragi                                 |
|   |  |   |   | 40. Bhandi Bunga                                       | 50. Bunga General Mha Singh Kumedanwala                    |
|   |  |   |   |  | 51. Bunga General Mha Singh Kumedanwala                    |



Map and legends of Golden Temple complex and Bunga (1-100) based on images 13 & 127 and Karam Singh 'Yashwan' Anand of Tarnan (1988)

- |   |   |   |  |                                   |   |
|---|---|---|--|-----------------------------------|---|
| 52. Thara Guru Tegh Bahadar   | 61. Bunga Buddha  | 69. Bunga Harimohala  | 80. Ramgarhia minaret - north                    | 92. Kaulhar tank                  | 105. Bunga Chahalwala (aka Bunga Sojhalwala)      |
| 53. Bunga Santara Churnai (aka Bunga Kachewala)                           | 62. Konaal* (built by Mr Saunders, collector of Amritsar after demolishing Bunga Rari Sada Kaer, Santara Dasgupta, Santara Nirmala and Maharaja Sher Singh) | 70. Bunga Ahluwalia   | 81. Ramgarhia minaret - south                    | 93. Baha Aal                      | 106. Bunga Kalanwala                              |
| 54. Bunga Garna (later Bunga Thakara)                                     |   | 71. Bunga Mahila  | 82. Chukh Bhajani Ber                            | 94. Semadh Bhai Singh Giani       | 107. Bunga Tara Singh Chela (aka Bunga Daleswala) |
| 55. Bunga Sakota  |   | 72. Bunga Maharaa Patiala State                             | 83. Bunga Barindala                              | 95. Cusdara Maruvala              | 108. Bunga Tara Singh Man                         |
| 56. Bunga Gindwala (aka Bunga Bhula Sahibwala)                            |   | 73. Bunga Raja Jassam Singh Nabha                           | 84. Bunga Jethwala                               | 96. Harsi canal - inbound channel | 109. Harsi canal - inbound                        |
| 57. Bunga Santara Chichi  |   | 74. Bunga Bhakia Kaithal                                    | 85. Atrial Trath / Thara Guru Arjan              | 97. Bunga Solhanwala              | 110. Harsi canal - outbound                       |
| 58. Bunga Sakandhala  |   | 75. Bunga Harsi canal (built by Ram Singh Jalliwala)        | 86. Bunga Mazhab Singh                           | 98. Bunga Bath Singh Shahid       | 111. Guna ka Bagh                                 |
| 59. Bunga Lachewala   |   | 76. Bunga Jalliwala   | 87. Bunga Bhai Basi Ram                          | 99. Bunga Salawan                 |   |
| 60. Bunga Kanwar Nani Nihal Singh* (originally Bunga Maharaja Rang Singh) |   | 77. Bunga Ahlawa Santosh Das Udairi (aka Baham Bata Ahlawa) | 88. Bunga Jassa Singh Bharrana                   | 100. Bunga Shahida                |   |
|   |   | 78. Bunga Ram Singh Giani                                   | 89. Baradari Karam Singh                         | 101. Nihari Sahib                 |   |
|   |   | 79. Bunga Jassa Singh Ramgarhia                             | 90. Bunga Sath Nirmala (originally Bunga Mahant) | 102. Bunga Kesgarh                |   |
|   |   |   | 91. Bunga Tek Singh                              | 103. Bunga Anandwala Sothia       |   |
|   |   |   |  | 104. Bunga Datsamal Singh Sathwa  |   |

\* Demolished c. 1862 to make way for gharic clock tower (completed 1874)

The Grand Complex of Harmandar Sahib, Amritsar.



*The earliest known photograph of inside the Golden Temple, which gave clues to the aesthetics and atmosphere replicated within the book.*

“The Harmandir Sahib itself is accessible to all, no matter what race, creed or gender, to people of faith or non-faith. It was also important to make the book accessible to a wide variety of readers’ interests, be it early photography, painting, the history of the building, its architecture, or some personal aspect, or indeed to those with no particular interest and even to those who may never have previously owned any book at all !”

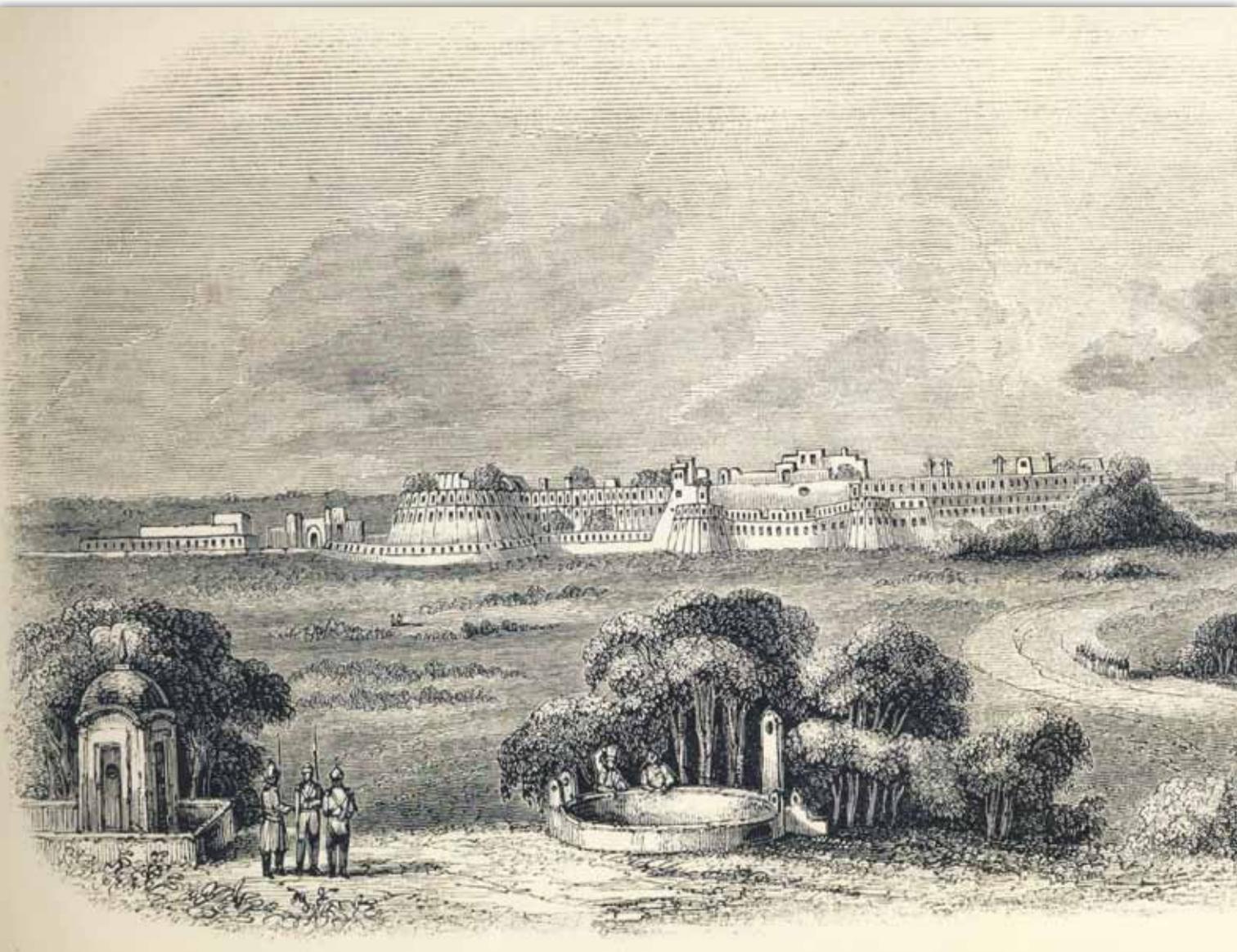
“Visitors are free to roam and take in different aspects of the temple experience. This freedom to navigate, in which one is assisted rather than directed, is also part of our current internet culture which allows one to hop from one information type to another. The emphasis in designing this book was not to think in a traditional linear fashion, but to create a format that would reflect this culture of flexibility on how the reader accesses the book’s content.”

## A Universal Message

The pattern on the book’s cover is derived from the designs to the entrance of the Golden Temple, which combines elements from Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim cultures, pointing to the central message that “we are all essentially **one**.”

The book’s cover is made from cotton, with a pearlescent finish representing the cloth or small shells that the poorest would leave as offerings at the temple. As well as cloth, this effect resembles and reflects the generous use of fine marble that is used liberally around the site.

Gold is also used extensively, representing the later additions and embellishments by the social elite. Gold, mirrors and white marble had practical purpose in that they both reflected the lamp light used within and around the complex.



**City of Umritsir, c. 1835-37**

**Ink on paper, anon.**

**Published by Sir Alexander Burnes, Cabool (1842).**

### Encased in meaning

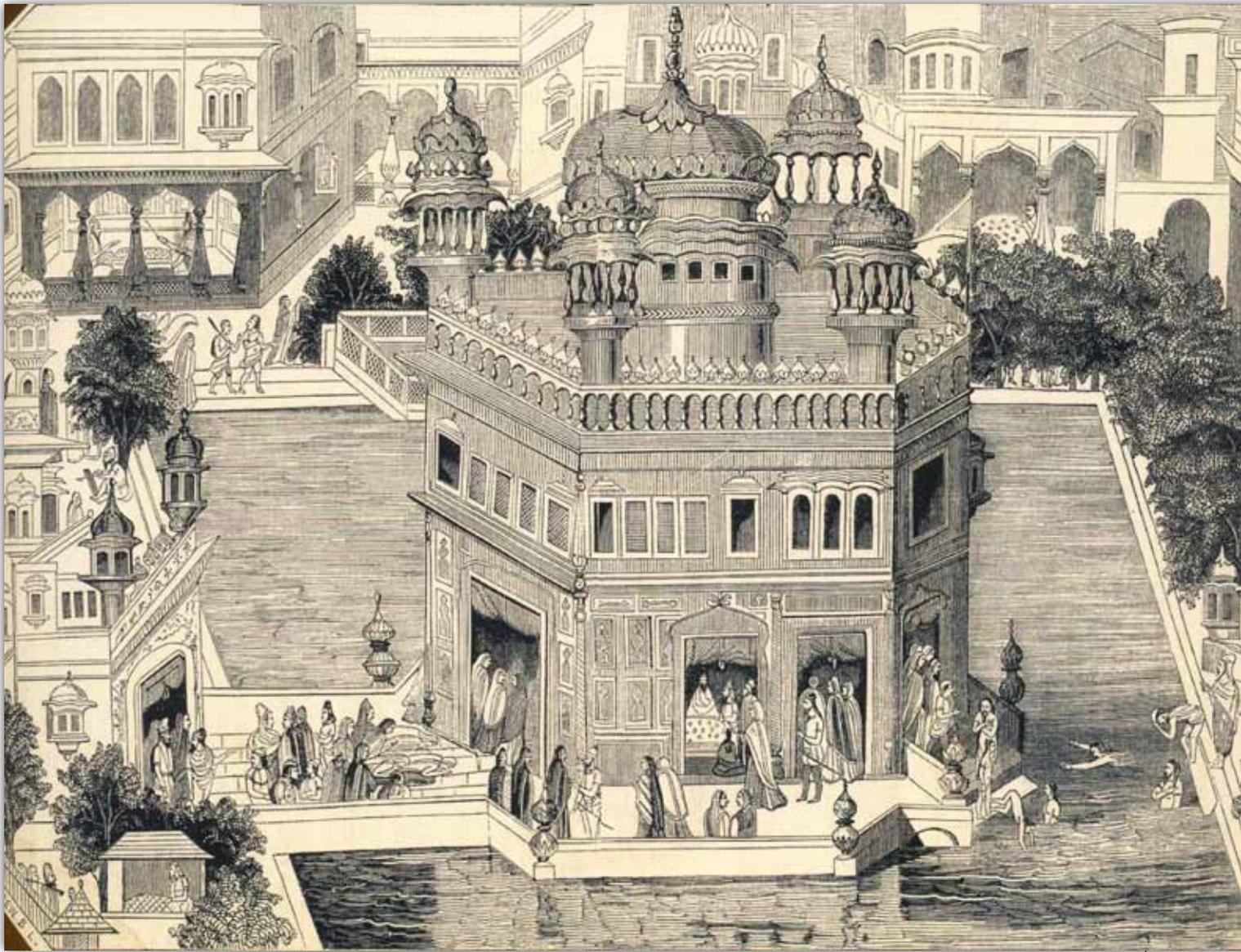
The book encasement has three layers, representing the material form, the beyond-all form, and the personal form. As one approaches the closed book, in the centre is a foiled illustration of the Golden Temple compiled from early Indian miniature paintings, representing the material form.

Once one opens the book another layer is revealed, illustrated with the core expression that underlies all Sikh thought,

'Ik Onkar', the concept of oneness. Written in Gurmukhi script by the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, this represents the beyond-all form. On the final cover one is greeted with a reflective but direct message representing the personal form. Thus the three-part cover symbolises the layers of experience and reality of our own existence.

On the inner cover is a map of the Golden Temple complex, which accompanies readers throughout their navigation of the book.

The map and associated information allows the reader to more easily adjust their focus from a particular image, caption or eyewitness account, to widening their field of vision to encompass the whole temple complex, experience and history; to view everything not in isolation but in relation to the whole.



**'Scene of the Golden Temple, the basin and a party from the village of Amritsar in the kingdom of Lahore', 1836.**  
**Engraving, Andrew, Best & Leloir (Paris).**  
**Published in *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, Vol. 4 (December 1836)**

## Personal discovery

For visitors to the Golden Temple, their connection is first felt emotionally and only later related and reasoned about. In this same spirit the individual images within the book are to be enjoyed first and understood later.

This was achieved by having the captions separated from the images so they would not compete for attention, encouraging the reader to explore their own insights into the images and later, if necessary, to read the captions.

The majority of images were direct digital reproductions, although some were second to third generation copies, owing to the originals being lost, destroyed or logistically inaccessible.

Second generation copies were used, with the original buildings and photographs having been destroyed. It was a delicate task to ensure that images were reproduced without losing their individual character. Great effort was made to present the range of images faithfully, without creating barriers to engagement.

The background colour to the images was applied to give a natural texture and a feeling of warmth, allowing the eye to



*The inside cover was inspired by the illuminated Adi Granth folio with nisan of Guru Gobind Singh, from the collection of Takht Sri Harimandir Sahib, Patna; photographed by Jeevan Singh Deol.*

*'Tank & Marble Causeway the Sikh Temple Umritsir', February 1854.  
Watercolour on paper, William Carpenter*



relax when looking at the images without the glare of a white border.

Dark textured background was used to allow for comfortable, relaxed viewing. This reflects the subdued atmosphere and use of colour and texture in the temple itself (prior to electric lighting being installed), which is

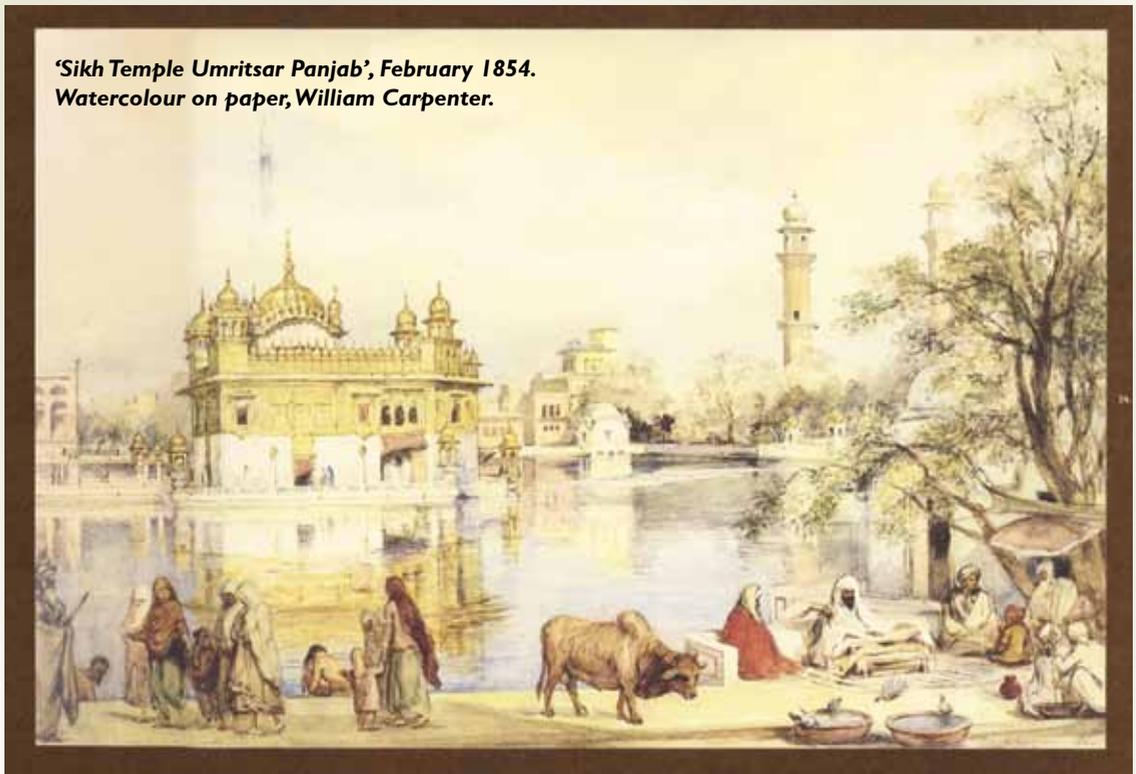
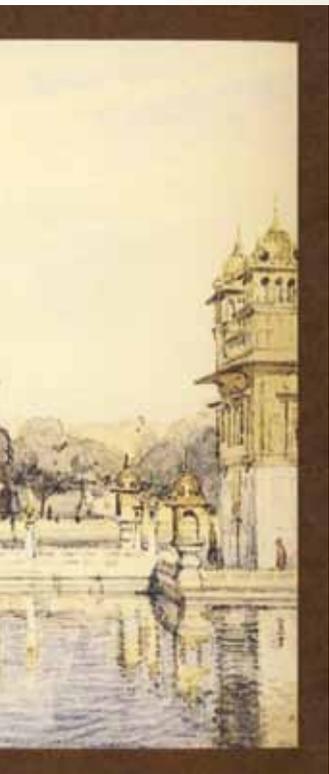
similarly conducive to the inner contemplative experience, helping to turn attention inwards to seek clarity and meaning.

### Personal Experience

Although at first glance many readers may not realise just how much effort has gone into the creation of this book, nor does it matter, the hope is that they enjoy the journey and have the best possible experience.



Patterns from the door of the Darshani Deohri ('Gate of Vision') are used on the book's cover.



'Sikh Temple Umritsar Panjab', February 1854.  
Watercolour on paper, William Carpenter.

For a publication on such a historic complex to succeed with a contemporary take-on book design, requires a unique client and a certain level of trust on their part. I have worked on a variety of projects with

the authors over the past decade and we have become good friends.

The brief was to produce a personal book for a building that produces a very personal experience: "I have done my best, but, as with the building itself, it can only ever be a finger pointing to the moon," writes Juga Singh.

Following are more stunning photographs and rare images from the book, along with a capsulated history.





## A Capsulated History

In contemporary times they prefer the term 'intelligence agents': specially selected and trained, they move discreetly around the world, effortlessly building intelligence networks and skilfully conducting the covert business of espionage and information-gathering.

In the first decade of nineteenth-century India, that role was often left to military men such as Captain Arnold Mathews (1765-1820). With the connivance of his superiors in Calcutta, he attempted to gather military and logistical information on the strategically vital and wealthy Sikh Empire that held court at Lahore, Punjab's imperial capital perched on the northern stretch of the Grand Trunk Road. When Mathews began his journey from Bengal in 1808, he unwittingly became one of first players of 'The Great Game'.

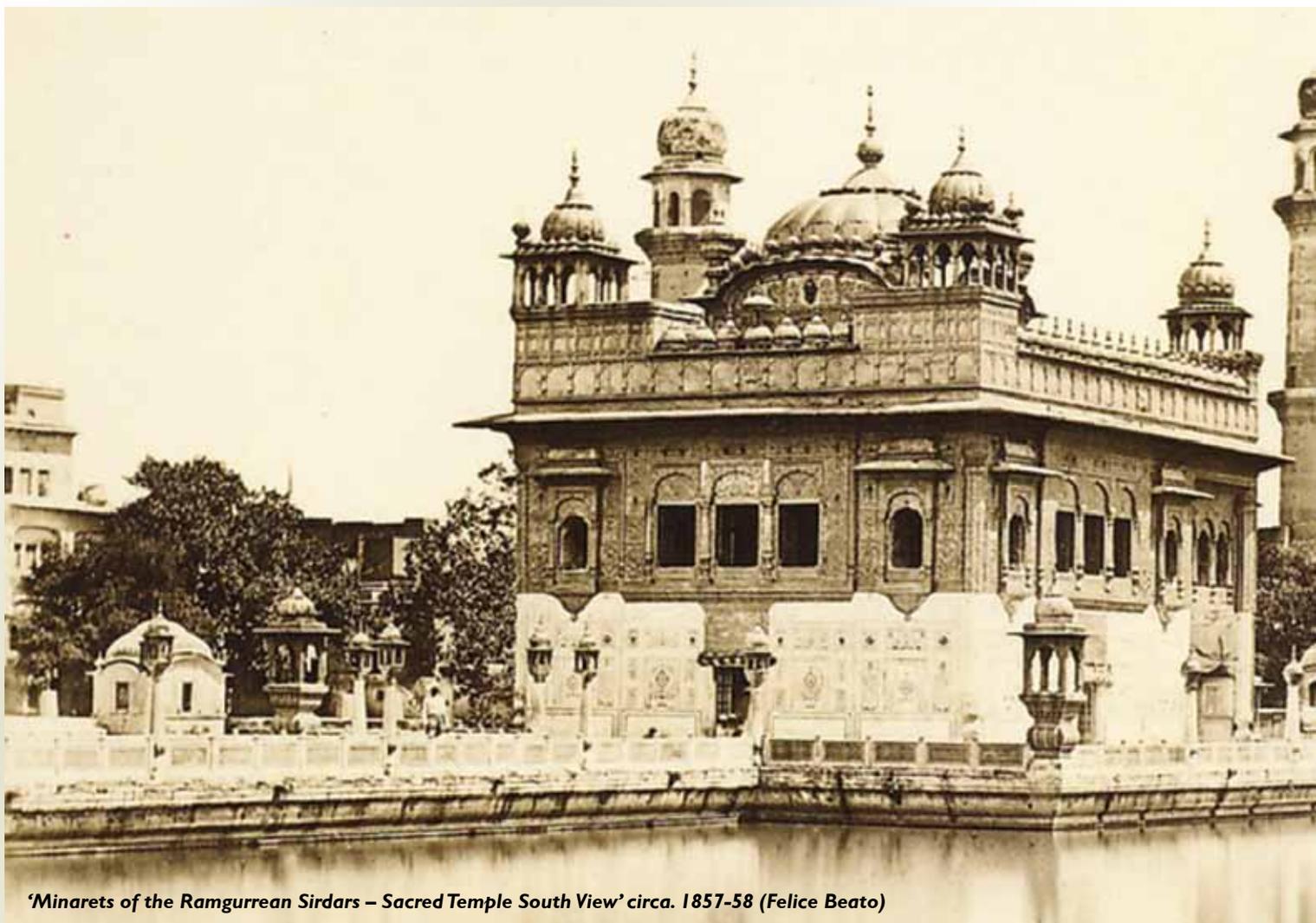
The East India Company's grasp over most of the Indian subcontinent secured untold wealth for the Crown and the Company's directors. Retaining that stronghold was a lasting concern for those who stood to lose so much. Almost from the moment in 1757, when Robert Clive first governed Indian land in the Company's name, London was preoccupied with the notion that this dazzling oriental jewel would be plucked from the Imperial crown through a Russian land invasion from the north-west.

Wedged between Britain's Indian territories and the ancient mountain passes into Afghanistan and beyond was the nascent empire of a wily young Sikh warlord, Ranjit Singh (1780-1839). His dominions were the fertile plains of the Punjab that lay like a huge chessboard from the Khyber Pass in the north to the great Mughal capital of Delhi in the south. This chequered landscape had witnessed many battles; from the wars described in the epic *Mahabharat* to the clash of 'Sikandar' (as Alexander the Great is still known in Punjab today) with King Porus. From the eleventh century onward repeated invaders, including Mughals, Persians and Afghans, ensured that this land would forever be known as the real gateway into India.

Ranjit Singh's kingdom was one of the few remaining independent powers in India. And it was a most vital one in terms of its geography, not only as the point of entry for invaders into the subcontinent but also as a critical buffer state between British India and the north-west frontier that touched Afghanistan.

Yet despite this, the Company was ultimately in no mood for an alliance with the capable and clever Sikh, with whom they remained on cordial yet uneasy terms. While Ranjit Singh was subduing rivals within Punjab and consolidating his acquisitions, the British pursued an uncompromising and expansive 'forward policy' with a view to elevating the Company's position to that of the paramount power in India.

The British were obsessed with the growing power of the Napoleonic Empire in the Europe beyond. The subjugation of the Maratha confederacy and the conquest of Delhi in 1803 was



*'Minarets of the Ramgurrean Sirdars – Sacred Temple South View' circa. 1857-58 (Felice Beato)*

a move calculated to ensure access to the financial resources necessary to curb the ever-looming menace of invasion. Indeed, as wary as the British were of Franco-Russian designs in Afghanistan, they were also plagued by suspicions of the strategic intentions of their Sikh neighbours. Sketchy reports of failed spying missions added fuel to the fire. The success or failure of any British military campaign against Ranjit Singh would be determined as much by detailed reliable intelligence as by tactics or sheer firepower. With that firmly in mind, one Captain Mathews was allowed six months leave of absence in the spring of 1808 for the purpose of espionage in the Kingdom of Five Rivers.

Incapacitated from active service following the loss of a leg at the Battle of Delhi, Mathews was dispatched by the British commander-in-chief to infiltrate Sikh country and send back critical logistical and military information.

His ruse was to travel in an unofficial capacity for 'private amusement' as a tourist en-route to Kashmir.

On the way, Mathews attempted to ingratiate himself with Ranjit Singh's first wife, Mehtab Kaur, in order to facilitate his entry into the citadel of Lahore. Ranjit Singh, however, maintained a simple foreign policy at that time: foreigners were not to be permitted within the boundaries of his country. It was an effective and uncomplicated method of resisting foreign spies, and as far as desisting white-skinned European travellers was concerned, relatively straightforward to the police. As such, Mathews' mission was something of an embarrassing failure. He was quickly intercepted and brought directly to Lahore and kept under a watchful eye. Ranjit Singh lavished hospitality and humiliation in equal measure on him and his paymasters in Calcutta. Mathews was sent packing with a letter telling them, in no uncertain



terms that the British were in fact not behaving particularly 'British'.

Despite his mission's limited success, Mathews did manage to provide fresh insights into the Sikhs and their homeland. Essentially the first western tourist to reach Punjab, Mathews was afforded a sight that few others had witnessed. On 10th May 1808, he laid his eyes on the Harimandir Sahib an alluring shrine that seemingly floated on the tranquil waters of a large tank.

Mathews recorded his admiration in correspondence to his superiors. He described a "pretty temple...to which you go by a causeway. It is neatly decorated, both within and without, and the rajah is making additional ornamented work to it at his own expense." Ranjit Singh had only recently taken control of Amritsar, confidently embarking

upon a programme of patronage and good governance that would see both the city and shrine completely transformed. The work-in-progress witnessed by Mathews would conclude with the entire upper storey and roof being lavishly covered with copper-gilt panels, giving rise to the epithet, Golden Temple (*Svarn Mandir*) in the eventful years to come.

*I have seen all places but none are comparable to you.*  
Guru Arjan

The story of the Harimandir Sahib (or Darbar Sahib, the Exalted Court) is preceded by the legendary tale of the Pool of the Nectar of Immortality (Amritsarovar or Amritsar), which is steeped in the mysticism and lore of several cultures.

Local tradition speaks of the Buddha meditating beside the original pool surrounded by a thick jungle, proclaiming that to attain Nirvana, this land was especially spiritually charged but that its time of fame was yet to come.

Other legends connect it with Ram Chandar and the destruction of his army by his sons, Lav and Kush, and of nectar falling from the heavens to restore the warriors to life. It was to this jungle that their mother, Sita, was allegedly banished and where they grew up. They were instructed in the arts of warfare, music and singing by Valmiki, the great poet-sage, who also taught them the epic *Ramayan*, which he is said to have composed nearby. The Pandav brothers of *Mahabharat* fame are said to have had a mystical encounter here.



'Sacred Temple – West View' c. 1857-58 (Felice Beato).



**Baba Atal and the tank of Kaulsar, c. 1870 (John Edward Sache).**

In 326 B.C., Alexander was forced to turn back not far from near where the city of Amritsar was eventually founded, relinquishing his designs on India.

Centuries later, Guru Nanak (1469-1539) is believed to have visited the site in 1502 and 1532, and noted its deeply spiritual essence. It was Guru Ram Das (1534-1581) who, having heard a tale extolling its divine healing powers, halted there in 1573 to establish a vibrant town with the mystical pool as its throbbing heart.

Within a few years, the Guru had successfully excavated the pool to create a large tank called Amritsar. Over time, it became a place of pilgrimage and sanctuary for the traders, artisans and devotees who had settled in and around Ramdaspur, the City of Ram Das. In 1581, his youngest son, Guru Arjan (1563-1606), continued the work of strengthening and beautifying the Amritsar tank by lining its sides with bricks and building approach steps.

To foster the nascent Sikh community Guru Arjan initiated two monumental projects. The first the construction of the Harimandir Sahib at the centre

of the tank. According to tradition, the project began with the laying of its foundation stone in 1588 by the highly regarded Sufi saint, Mian Mir (c. 1550-1635); it was completed thirteen years later in 1601. The second was the task of compiling the Adi Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred Sikh scriptures. Guru Arjan brought together in one authoritative volume the sacred songs of his predecessor Gurus, verses by Hindu holy men as well as Muslim saints, panegyrics of the Gurus by attendant bards and admirers, and his own vast collection of divine poetry. When it was completed in 1604, the sacred volume was formally installed at the Harimandir Sahib. Ever since then, the divine song in praise of the Immortal Being have been heard and meditated upon by countless pilgrims.

The peace-loving Guru became embroiled in the religio-political affairs of the Mughal state, leading to his torture and death in 1606. His son and successor, Guru Hargobind (1590-1644), immediately laid the foundation of a large stone-built platform opposite the Harimandir Sahib. Named Akal Takht (Throne of the Immortal Being) and intentionally erected higher than the imperial throne at Agra, the Guru defiantly declared his mission to fight oppression rather than accept subjugation.

From that point onwards, the two structures became the seats of religious and temporal authority for the Sikhs, neatly encapsulating the spiritual and military ethos that would see the creation of a standing army, the Akal Sena (Immortal Army), and, eventually, the pursuit of independence in defiance of the greatest Asiatic empires of the day.

*The All-Pervasive Creator has created you,  
That is why you appear so beautiful*

Guru Arjan

The subsequent era of the Harimandir Sahib's blood-soaked history is inextricably linked to the rise of Sikh power in Punjab.

To counter the increasing fanaticism of the Mughal Empire that saw the martyrdoms of his father and great-grandfather, Guru Gobind Singh (1661-1708) orchestrated the overthrow of 'Turk' rule and in its place prophesied kingship for his Sikhs.

Following execution of the Guru's chosen military commander, Banda Bahadur in 1716, the Sikhs faced a period of near extinction at the hands of an unforgiving government. Hunted as outlaws, their survival was

far from certain. The one rallying point that gave them spiritual succour was Amritsar, where they congregated upon the occasions of Vaisakhi and Diwali or whenever the need arose, to discuss matters of national security. At such times, according to one contemporary Muslim account, the devotees of Nanak were to be seen riding at full gallop to the shrine, often slain or taken captive, but never once renouncing their faith or avoiding the crown of martyrdom should it be offered!

When the need arose, they were also willing to risk their lives to preserve the Harimandir Sahib's sanctity. In 1740, it was occupied by the Mughals and turned into a pleasure house by a local chief of police. The sacrilege was rewarded with swift retribution meted out by two Sikh warriors, the audacious Mehtab Singh and the legendary swordsman Sukha Singh. In a daring and spectacular mission, they entered the temple disguised as revenue collectors and decapitated their target, returning on horseback with his head before anyone could react.

Respite came only when the empire that had persecuted the Sikhs so relentlessly finally self-combusted. The resulting power vacuum offered opportunity for armies from across the Khyber Pass to plunder and wreak havoc across Punjab as they marched to subdue the Mughal capital of Delhi.

As chaos ensued, the Sikhs organised themselves into confederacies or *misls*. Each was led by a charismatic warrior who drew men from across the social spectrum with the promise of kingship.

The Sikhs ultimately rose from near annihilation to snatch the reins of power, allowing them to safeguard Amritsar in the wake of multiple ravages, most notably the Afghan desecrations of the holy shrine. Within a generation the *misls* carved out the Punjab among themselves and overran the ancient capitals of Lahore and Delhi. By the nineteenth century, they had so comprehensibly turned the tables that the Sikhs became the first people since the Macedonians under Alexander the Great some two thousand years earlier to subdue the turbulent Afghans and seal the invader's gateway.

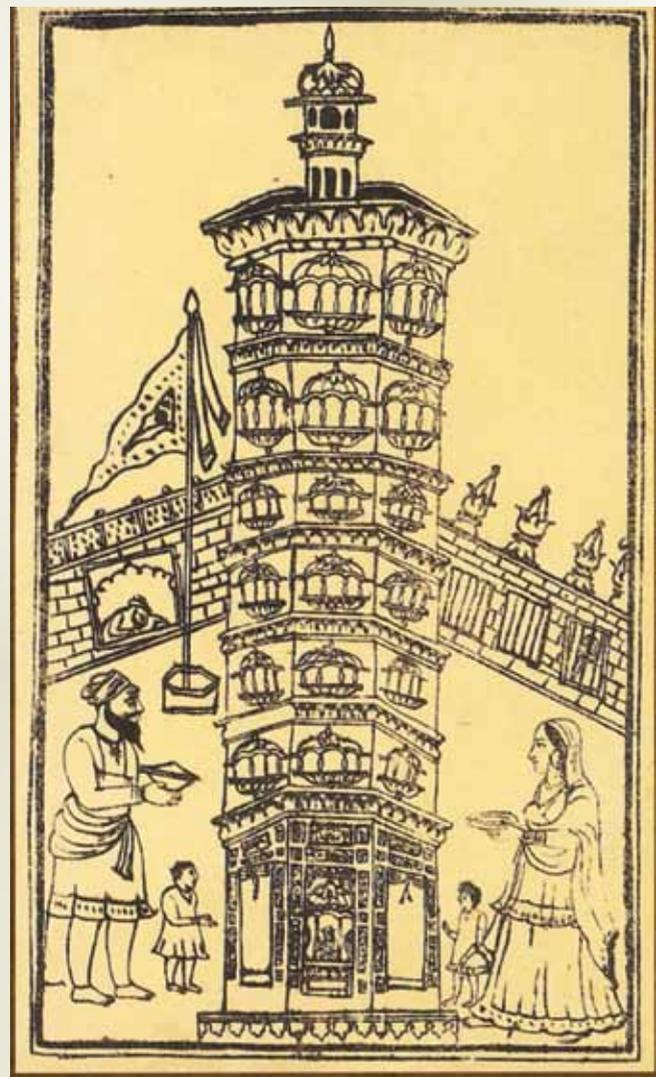
*O yes brother, says Nanak, all of one's sins are washed away on bathing in the pool of Ram Das.*

Guru Arjan

The Harimandir Sahib complex was destroyed twice by the Afghan king, Ahmad Shah Abdali (c. 1722- 1773), during the course of his eight invasions

of the Punjab between 1747 and 1767. In a fit of rage, he defiled the shrine with the blood of cattle before blowing it up with gunpowder. After filling the holy tank with carcasses and debris, he covered it with soil and had barley sown on the site in an attempt to wipe out all trace of its existence.

The Sikhs' were not so easily demoralised. In 1765, after decades of incessant destruction and defilement, they were eventually ready to switch from their hit-and-run tactics to fight a decisive pitched battle; although their guerrilla tactics had served them well, that was only the initial part of their strategy and they had always known that it would require a conventional battle to finally destroy the invaders. Despite the extreme provocations the Sikhs waited patiently until they were ready. When they chose their



**A family make an offering at the shrine of Baba Atal, c.1870 (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).**

moment the Afghans were comprehensively defeated for the first time that century. The era of the Sikh kingdom had finally begun.

With Amritsar secured, work commenced with renewed vigour on a new temple through the combined financial efforts of the misls, under the overall command of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia (1718-1783). Harimandir Sahib was raised from the ground for a third time and three misls in particular, the Bhangis, Ahluwalias and Ramgarhias, were appointed with defensive responsibilities around the new structure. All three maintained standing armies in and around Amritsar, garrisoned at various forts. An additional line of defence consisted of their *bungas* or palatial quarters in the precincts of the Harimandir Sahib. These measures were complemented by a special core of warrior-priests based at the Akal Takht, the recklessly courageous Akali Nihangs. Virtually deified by the populace as the living remnant of Guru Gobind Singh's original army, these vanguard warriors assumed a central role in rebuilding the sacred buildings, six hundred of their order maintaining a permanent vigil over the Harimandir Sahib.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, with Punjab firmly in Sikh hands, the fabric of the Harimandir

Sahib was almost completely transformed. In particular, when Amritsar was permanently in the hands of Ranjit Singh's Sukarchakia Misl in 1805, the shrine and city found themselves on the threshold of a golden era.

*Who holds Zam-Zammah, that fire-breathing dragon; hold the Punjab, for the great green-bronze piece is always first of the conqueror's loot.*

Kim

Having secured Lahore in 1799, and having been proclaimed Maharaja in 1801, Ranjit Singh proceeded to wrest control of Amritsar from his great rivals, the Bhangi Misl. He finally managed to do this in 1805, and in so doing, secured the Zam-Zammah, the magnificent Afghan cannon captured by the Bhangis when they occupied Lahore in 1765. Made famous from the opening page of Kipling's *Kim*, it served as a telling metaphor for the ebb and flow of power over the Punjab plains in that most turbulent of times. In possession of both cannon and country the young maharaja paid homage at the Harimandir Sahib and Akal Takht with valuable offerings thus beginning his own illustrious role as patron of the shrine and city.



Sri Darbar Sahib, c. 1870 (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).



**'Sikh priest reading the Granth, Umritser', 1864 Pencil and watercolour heightened with white on paper, William Simpson.**

With enthusiastic fervour and remarkable vision, he continued to expand his kingdom. With each new victory came increasing confidence, capital and the prospect of further conquest. To safeguard his burgeoning treasury, he had built the imposing Gobindgarh Fort on site of one of the Bhangi Misl's fortresses. It was completed in 1809, the year he was forced to temper his ambitions and draw a southern border with the British, stipulated in a treaty signed in, and named after, the holy city itself.

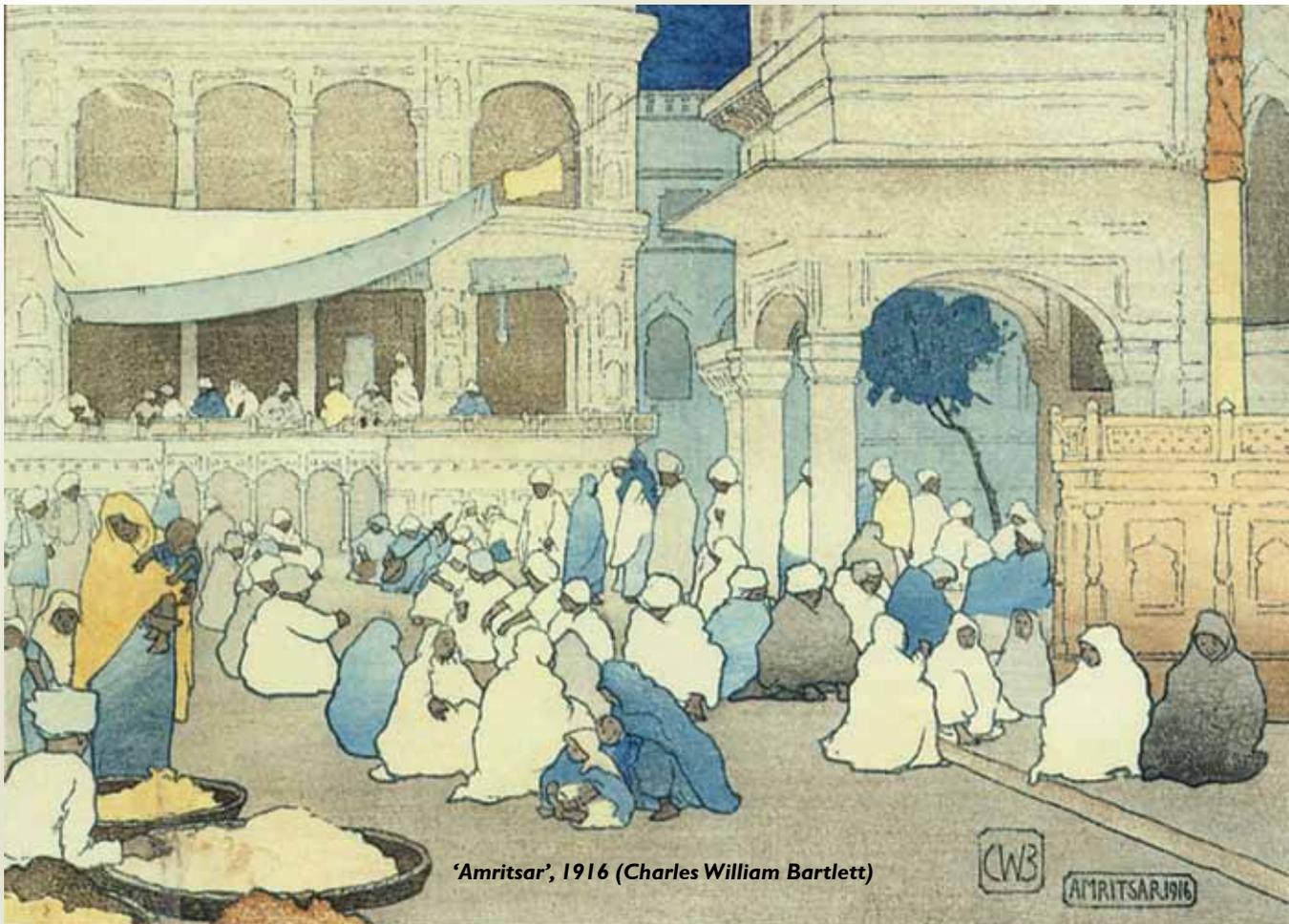
Ranjit Singh also initiated a series of canals and laid out gardens including Rambagh at the centre of which stood his summer palace. He then set about fortifying the city, encasing it within sturdy walls and a moat.

With a powerful, stable and benevolent government came peace. With peace came prosperity, and with prosperity came patronage. Ranjit Singh encouraged nobles in his court and Marwari merchants to settle in the city, which began to flourish as never before. Its pluralistic nature, and indeed that of the entire Sikh Empire, found expression within the realms of art and architecture with the construction of magnificent forts, palaces, gurdwaras, mosques and temples; an enormous production of gold and silver objects; designing of precious jewellery; crafting of exquisite arms; creation of luxurious tents, canopies, caparisons and large woollen shawls "which could slip through a tiny ring"

In this secure atmosphere, learning also took on a new lease of life, as evidenced by the growing number of bungalows surrounding the Harimandir Sahib.

There were four different types of bungalows: those belonging to various misls; those belonging to individual chiefs (*sardars*); those belonging to rich and influential communities of towns and big cities and constructed by them to facilitate the stay of pilgrims from their respective areas and the ecclesiastical establishments managed by holy men of the traditional Sikh orders—the Udasis, Nirmalas, Sevapanthis and Akali-Nihangs. It was mainly in the latter bungalows that a broad range of education was dispensed in an effort to sustain the Sikhs as a "race of warriors and students."

As centres of spiritual and secular learning, several bungalows provided instruction in the interpretation and commentaries of the Sikh scriptures, as well as classical vocal and instrumental music (*raag vidya*). In others students learnt to master the grammar, prosody and rhetoric of several languages including Gurmukhi, Braj, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. In others still, a range of sciences, including mathematics and the ancient Indian medicinal system of life (*ayurveda*), were all expounded on, while the calligrapher's art was developed during the painstaking process of making handwritten copies of scriptures.



'Amritsar', 1916 (Charles William Bartlett)

The emphasis on these classical branches of learning was inspired by the supreme poet-warrior, Guru Gobind Singh. By extending patronage to the '52 immortals' or 'the great Gurmukhi poets of all denominations' who 'wrote on theology, moral philosophy, history and State economy, the Guru placed the widespread dissemination of knowledge at the core of his spiritual mission.

It was in the environs of the Harimandir Sahib that Nirmalas, Udasis, Sevapanthis and Akali-Nihangs mingled with sadhus and fakirs of numerous creeds and races. As a result, many pilgrims came to Amritsar to gain knowledge from the learned personages sitting on the edge of the holy tank. Such guides not only taught through exposition but also answered enquires of the inquisitive, freely entering into discourses that often continued long into the night. The famous Sevapanthi musician Baba Sham Singh (1803-1926), who is believed to have served at the Harimandir Sahib for nearly a century, was a witness to many such fascinating encounters:

*Leaving behind his land of birth, Sri Sangat Rai settled at the Pool of the Nectar of Immortality. By serving the wise holy men, whose gathering is like a [comfort-giving] blanket of knowledge, he attained the essence of the highest Spiritual wisdom. Understanding Him who is without a maker; the eternal Shivo Paramatma, his mind focused on the One by forsaking the many [deities].'*

In such a multifarious atmosphere, learning flourished beside the temple's holy waters. The teachings thus imparted spread far into the countryside with the return of pilgrims to their homesteads, taking with them the knowledge they had gleaned.

Armed with this irresistible 'sword of knowledge', the Sikhs were suitably equipped to create an empire out of nothing. Indeed, contrary to the popular image of Ranjit Singh and his compatriots perpetuated in British circles, far from being a ruthless, uneducated lot with a propensity for the barbaric, the reality was rather different:

*Nor were the Sikh Sirdars, as is generally alleged, illiterate. Ranjit Singh himself had forgotten his letters, for*

there is evidence that he left school for the turmoil of life at the age of 9. Sirdar Lehna Singh Majithia was no mean Mathematician and Engineer. He is said to have translated Euclid from Arabic into Panjabi. Several European contemporaries testify to his skill in devising machinery, of which a leather gun, useful for artillery purposes, seems almost mythical were its existence not attested. Kaur Nao Nihal Singh, Ajit Singh and Lehna Singh Majithia studied the higher branches of Mathematics and Astronomy under the famous Akhwand Ali Ahmad, who was specially called from the Frontier to Lahore. Lehna Singh, moreover combined a knowledge of Arabic with that of Sanscrit, so did Ajit Singh Sindhanwalia, as also Atar Singh of the same illustrious house, and Kaur Nao Nihal Singh, in addition, of course, to considerable proficiency in Persian.

As noted by one nineteenth-century educationalist, "it is clear that the education of a Sikh, not unlike that of the ancient Persian, consists in speaking of the truth, learning to ride and being a warrior, in addition to his main duties, that of worship, reading the sacred books and studying Gurmukhi literature"

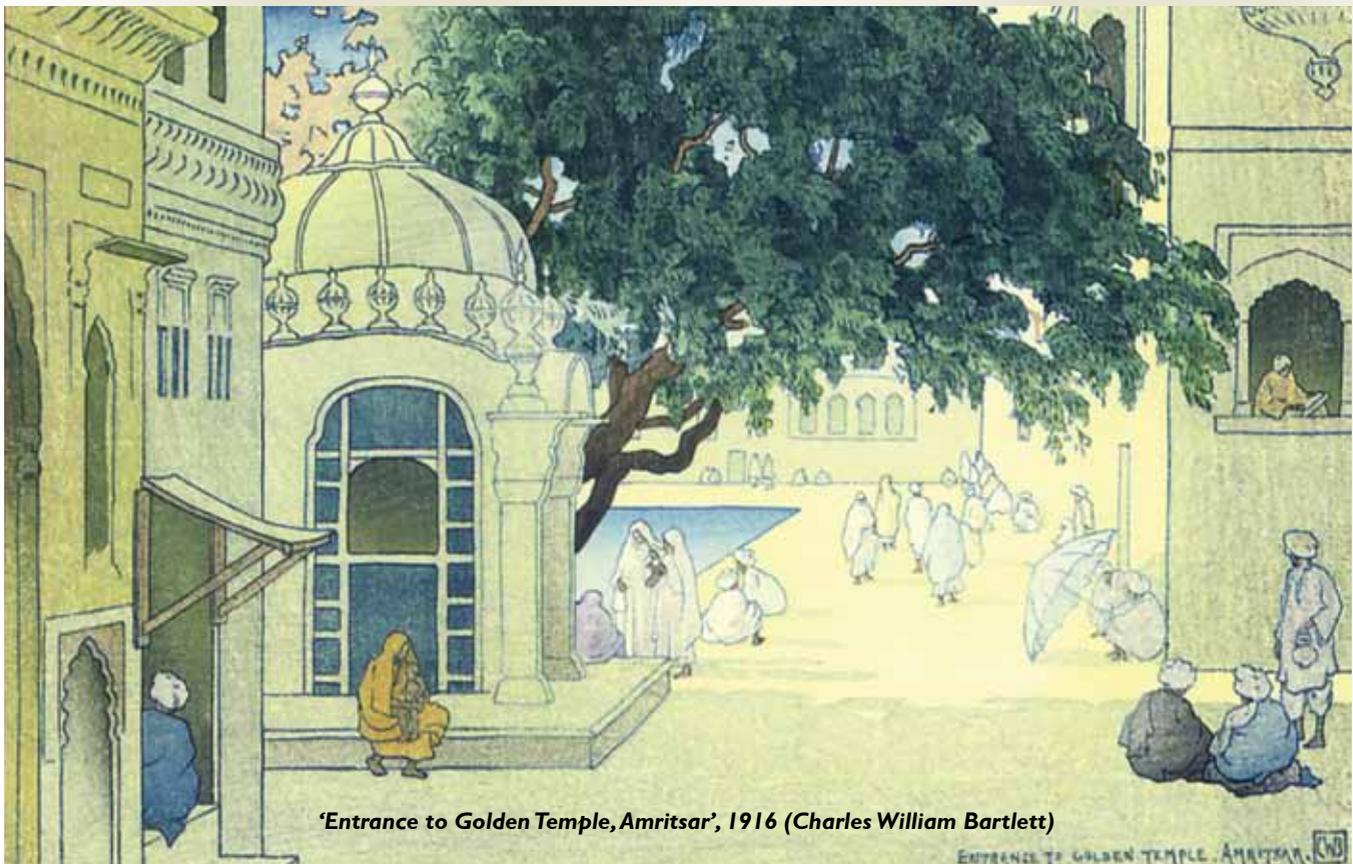
*A great wonderful populace resides in Ramdaspur.*

Guru Arjan

Spread over an intricate maze of narrow lanes and lofty mansions, Ranjit Singh's Amritsar rapidly became abuzz with activity. According to a French botanist who visited the city in 1831, "There is more movement and more life in Amritsar than in any town in British India."

Prior to Ranjit Singh, the *katras*, or quarters, often patronised and built by competing sardars, had been mini-principalities, each with their own personality and local policing. However, commerce had often been difficult, if not impossible, owing to violent incursions of the various invaders of Punjab as well as the excessive local taxes imposed by the short-sighted overlords within the emerging township.

In particular, the lucrative shawl trade from Kashmir was forced to take the more arduous mountainous routes into India. Ranjit Singh's more enlightened and settled rule allowed merchants to keep more of their revenues; by the turn of the nineteenth century, Punjab reclaimed its dominance over this business, with Amritsar developing into a major manufacturing base in its own right for shawls and carpets.



**'Entrance to Golden Temple, Amritsar', 1916 (Charles William Bartlett)**

The city soon developed into one of the premier commercial centres, not only of India but of the conflux of trade routes and cultures from central Asia and the Middle East. Beyond the city's twelve imposing gates, lay the legendary Grand Trunk Road, running eastward through the Gangetic plain beyond Delhi to Bengal and northward past Lahore, Punjab's capital, on to Kabul as one branch of the Silk Route. As late as turn of the twentieth century, a traveller to Amritsar noted its vast array of peoples and articles being bartered or sold:

*Amongst [the Sikhs] there was a great sprinkling of Pathans, and also rough, hardy, picturesque-looking men from the mountains, clad in coarse garments and furs. They were usually traders from the north - Kashmiris, Afghans, Bokhariots, Beluchis, Persians, Tibetans, Yarkandis - who bring down the raw materials of the shawls and carpets for which Amritsar is famous, and also fine specimens of their own national manufactures and embroideries.*

Another remarkable feature of Amritsar was the preponderance of decorated buildings. The painting of murals had strong antecedents in the Punjab and reached its zenith in the early part of the nineteenth century. Royal patronage was extended to a number of accomplished painters from the Punjab Hills, Delhi and Jodhpur, who embellished the interiors and exteriors of the *havelis* (mansions), *akharas* (arenas), *dharmshalas* (resting places for travellers), *thakurdwaras* (Shaivite shrines) and public wells. Suitably inspired, the affluent citizens of Amritsar had their mansions artistically decorated with murals and floral designs, some not leaving a single portion of their buildings unadorned. Others could boast of gallery-like courtyards displaying more than one hundred murals.

However, within a decade of the Lion of Punjab's demise in 1839, the city once again faced a turning point. Despite the Sikh army's victories on the battlefield, they were betrayed by key (Dogra) generals who were bribed by the British. The Sikhs ultimately lost the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-49); the subsequent annexation of the Punjab to Britain's Indian territories in 1849 led to the devastating loss of royal Sikh patronage of the temple, the bungalows and the arts.

Ebullient from another, and in many ways a final victory in the subcontinent, the Company set about transforming its new territories. Whereas previous invaders had sought to break the Sikhs through persecution of its peoples and the destruction of its

most holy sites, the British used other, more subtle means.

If Ranjit Singh's patronage of Amritsar had helped usher in enhanced splendours, cultural diversity and commercial activity, then the new era of British rule emphasised state control, partly through the exploitation of, and increasing the differences between the faiths (of which Sikhs were the significant minority), and partly through a Christian missionary zeal that sought to reform or subvert indigenous traditions and peoples.

No clearer was this seen than in the demolition of the maharaja's own majestic bunga along with several adjoining structures in the north-western corner of the Harimandir Sahib's precincts. The justification for this ignominy was to make way for a gothic-style dock tower to commemorate Viceroy Lord Elgin's (1811-1863) visit to Amritsar during his tour of Upper India. Raised so that it oversaw the shrine *par excellence* of the Sikhs, the tower (which eventually housed a church) offered a sight so startlingly out of place and unashamedly triumphant that its presence gave rise to much consternation, even from western visitors who often described its presence as 'incongruous'.

This crass visual statement of paramountcy was in some ways the least of impositions. Sikh traditions of governance that had well-served the fledgling Sikh community and latterly, the embattled one at Amritsar and elsewhere, were replaced with modern European models. Never was this more obvious and damaging than at the Harimandir itself

For much of the decade after annexation, lingering fears of Sikh martial prowess and official recognition of the Harimandir Sahib as the epicentre of the faith led the British to maintain a watchful eye over its daily activities for any signs of national conspiracy. It was only following the critical role of the Sikhs in helping to suppress the Sepoy uprising (1857-58) that the British re-evaluated that policy. The doors to civil and military service were soon thrown open, thereby allowing the British to do away with the expensive business of rule by the bayonet. However, the process of developing common aims and interests between the 'heathen' ruled and their Christian rulers was not to everyone's liking.

A wave of evangelical feeling swept across northern India in the wake of the Sepoy Mutiny. In 1858, the chief commissioner of Punjab, John Lawrence (1811-1879), circulated an order to officers

of the Punjab administration to desist from involving themselves in the management or administration of religious institutions. The impact on Robert Needham Cust (1821-1909), the commissioner of Amritsar Division who held particularly strong evangelical Christian views, was considerable. By maintaining financial support to the Harimandir Sahib and its functionaries, primarily through revenue-free land grants awarded during the days of the Sikh Empire, he believed that the British were improperly contributing "to the permanency and credit of the Sikh Panth."

Cust knew the Sikhs well, having served in all battles of the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46). The young assistant political agent had previously described in his diary how the governor-general of India, Lord Hardinge (1785-1856), had contemplated an unconditional surrender on the field of Firozshahr:

*22<sup>nd</sup> December News came from the Governor General that our attack of yesterday had failed, that affairs were desperate, that all state papers were to be destroyed, and that if the morning attack failed, all would be over; this was kept secret by Mr Currie and we were concerting measures to make an unconditional surrender to save the wounded, the part of the news that grieved me the most.'*

The Khalsa army had proved too powerful for the British; it was only treachery that saved the British Empire in India. Mindful of the latent Sikh threat to a Christian Empire, Cust was vocal in outlining his policy vision of complete disengagement with the Harimandir Sahib, with dire intended consequences:

*Leave it to itself and withdraw from it the patronage of the State, resume the lands set aside for the support of the brotherhood of Granthis, Pujaris, Ragis, and Rababis, and the splendour of the institution will pass away. The gilded dome will lose its lustre, the marble walls will fall out of repair, the great Temple, with its assigned revenues and its stately establishments, will no longer be a snare for the vulgar, who are ever deceived by outward show. To act thus would be to act impartially, and in accordance with the true principles of non-interference. No necessities of State policy appear to justify the contrary policy, nor do those necessities exist.*

His remarks caused immediate sensation amongst otherwise loyal Sikhs. They were only placated when the Punjab Government gave assurances of its ongoing involvement in the affairs of the Harimandir Sahib. While the day-to-day management was to be handled by a committee of Sikh nobility, and

rules and regulations framed to govern the internal affairs of the shrine and its functionaries, real control lay with the deputy commissioner of Amritsar. He applied covert control through his chosen instrument, the native manager (*sarbrah*), whose special assignment was to ensure that 'no national intrigue could take place in the temple and its *bungas*'.

Even when the Government of India passed the Act of 1863 to enable it to divest itself of the administration and management of religious institutions, the Punjab Government deliberately violated its provisions to maintain its grip on the Sikhs' holy of holies. However, by the 1870s, Cust's suggestion of disengagement had gained ground and successive Punjab officials resolved to uphold the letter of the law, with miraculous consequences.

*This notice is also intended as a...remembrance of the miracle of Guru Ram Dass and the prosperity of our rulers which we pray may last to the end of time.*  
Extract from the notice at the Golden Temple commemorating the miracle of 1877

Pilgrims wishing to pay their respects at the Harimandir Sahib in the late 1870s would have noticed two newly affixed gilt-copper plaques, written in English and Gurmukhi, placed prominently on either side of the Darshani Deori ("Gate of Vision"). They spoke of a miracle that occurred on the 30th April 1877 in the sanctum sanctorum just months after Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India.

According to the commemorative panels, as the devotional songs were being sung in the pre-dawn hours of that fateful day, a dazzlingly bright ball of lightning suddenly descended from the heavens and entered the Harimandir Sahib from the north door, gently hovering in front of the Adi Guru Granth Sahib for a time before flying away through the southern door. The entire episode happened in full view of the assembled worshippers.

The stunned Sikh onlookers ascribed its appearance as a divine sign from Guru Ram Das, but the colonial administration spun it differently: "We think it is also a sign of the great prosperity of the British rule: this couched eulogy to British imperialism served as a potent reminder of the permanency of the empire's writ, and the gracious light in which the Punjabis who came to pay homage to their Guru should perceive it."



**'The Golden Temple, Amritsar', 1919 (Charles William Bartlett)**

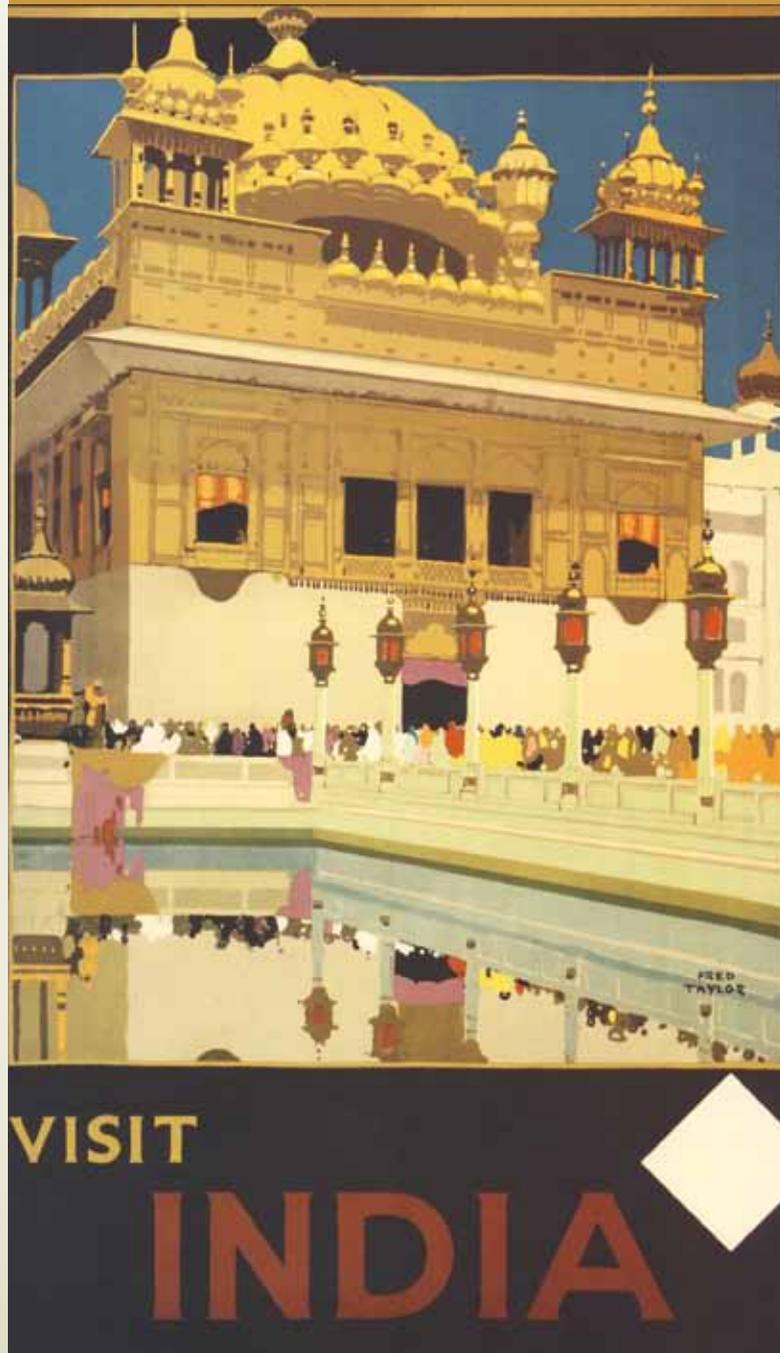
However, a far more sinister side to British motives that fateful morning has emerged from the oral tradition connected with the shrine. The truth of the matter was passed down from sarbrah to sarbrah, until Professor Sahib Singh (1892-1977), the eminent Sikh scholar, revealed a secret, darker, back-story in his autobiography.

*Sardar Sunder Singh Ramgarhia, sarbrah, and I were going in a horse carriage to Tarn 'Taran...on the way he related to me an astonishing incident. He said, This occurrence I heard from the sarbrah before me [Arur Singh]. The English had heard of the many great heroic deeds of the Singhs, and that they got the power to perform these great sacrifices and*

*deeds from bathing in the tank of Amritsar. So in order to finish off the Sikh threat forever, the English decided to auction off the Harimandir Sahib and the surrounding area around the holy tank. The day of the auction was decided to be 30<sup>th</sup> April 1877. All the English officers came and sat down in the Harimandir Sahib. What else could the poor priests do apart from offer prayers at the altar of their true master? The miraculous incident that happened next is written on the entry gate of the Harimandir Sahib."*

He concludes

*"Sardar Sunder Singh, sarbrah, then said to me, 'All this was told to me by the previous sarbrah. He said that on seeing this miraculous sight, the English officers were*



*'Visit India' poster c. 1935-40 (colour lithograph, Fred Taylor)*

*filled with fear. They decided not to go through with their evil scheme, and instead made offerings of karah prashad. The True King is the protector of his devotees.."*

Whatever the reality may be, the playing out of a deadly serious game of geo-political strategy nearly resulted in the Sikhs losing their beloved Harimandir Sahib forever.

## The Bungas

*May the Sikhs be freely permitted to bathe at Amritsar,  
May the evening services, flags and bungas prevail for eternity*

Ardas (Sikh communal prayer)

Every day in every *gurdwara* or Sikh place of worship around the world, prayers continue to be recited for the eternal prosperity of the bungas around the Harimandir Sahib. Incredibly, however, virtually all of them were demolished over sixty years ago by the Sikhs themselves. Their loss marked the final for a culture of learning that once nourished a nation of 'warrior-students'.

The terminal decline of the bunga system stems from the momentous changes introduced with the advent of the British Raj. Changing notions of educational and

economic progress, along with the inevitable loss of patronage that enabled such efforts to thrive in the first place, left many an old master with an ever-decreasing flock of capable students.

On top of this, popular Sikh reform movements also gave new impetus for a clearly delineated, more narrowly defined and uniform notion of whom a Sikh was, and what body of teachings constituted the orthodoxy. As new ideas took root—mainly communicated through the introduction of increasingly accessible print—media—much of the ‘old’ Sikh world order that flourished within the *bunga* system of education began to be viewed with increasing suspicion by the masses. This demise of indigenous artistic expression and learning continued into the post-colonial era.

It was in 1947, the year Amritsar became a frontier city following Punjab’s partition, that the Sikh gurdwara authorities themselves began buying up and destroying the *bungas* (and the gothic clock tower) to undertake a *parikarma* widening scheme. Vaunted as a way of bringing symmetry and uniformity to the walkway, traditionalists looked on with dismay as a series of modern buildings, including two new clock towers, were constructed in their stead.

In later years, commercial considerations conspired to topple artistic sensibilities once and for all. The previously ubiquitous wall murals that adorned the *bungas* and many major buildings around Amritsar virtually disappeared, either painted over with whitewash or neglected by their owners and left to crumble away.

## Vestige of the Golden Age

*It was beautiful, this offering of the blushing flowers, the reverence, the meekness, the atmosphere of mysticism, the lavish resplendent wealth, the impressive music, the fascinating Eastern-ness of it all. We came away speaking no words.*

Reminiscences of three friends who visited  
the Harimandir Sahib in 1897.

Today, the most complete vestige of this golden age is contained within this volume. Scintillating excerpts from the tales of successive generations of travellers, spies, diplomats, missionaries, intrepid women and raconteurs have been recovered from journals, published accounts and ephemera. Precious works of art, created by artists and photographers from America, Australia, Britain, France, Holland, Switzerland, Germany, Hungary, and India Italy that lay scattered in museums, archives and private collections around the world—very few of which were actually discovered in Amritsar—were carefully researched and catalogued.

Beginning with Mathews’ spying mission in 1808 and concluding with a photograph of a stoic Akali-Nihang standing guard over the shrine in 1959, the documentary and visual evidence collectively presented in the volume bears witness to Darbar Sahib’s unsurpassed beauty, its other-worldly aura,

and the sheer variety of humanity that frequented the environs of the temple and traded in the markets beyond its boundaries.

Captured on the artist’s canvas, in the photographer’s lens and between the covers of the traveller’s notebook is a fascinating range of experiences and dream-like visions: of pilgrims pacing silently and noiselessly upon marble promenades; initiation ceremonies involving medieval weapons of war; itinerant holy men dressed in brilliant silks; eclectic teachers and their diligent students; Muslim singers and an array of stringed and percussion instruments; forts, mansions, towers, cenotaphs and shrines glorified with intricate woodcarvings and resplendent murals; royal visits and fireworks displays; political gatherings and oaths of non-violence; the dark foliage of regal gardens; and of miracles and piety. Collectively, they pay homage to the time when the Golden Temple the city of Amritsar and the Sikhs were at the height of their glory.

## About the Author

Juga Singh is the designer of several books on Sikh history and traditions including ‘In The Master’s Presence: The Sikhs of Hazoor Sahib’. He is currently working on a special edition of ‘Warrior Saints’. He runs his own design consultancy firm.



**Juga Singh reviews his handiwork as designer of the Golden Temple exhibition, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London, 2011. (Photo by Verinder Singh.)**

# Sacred Places of the World

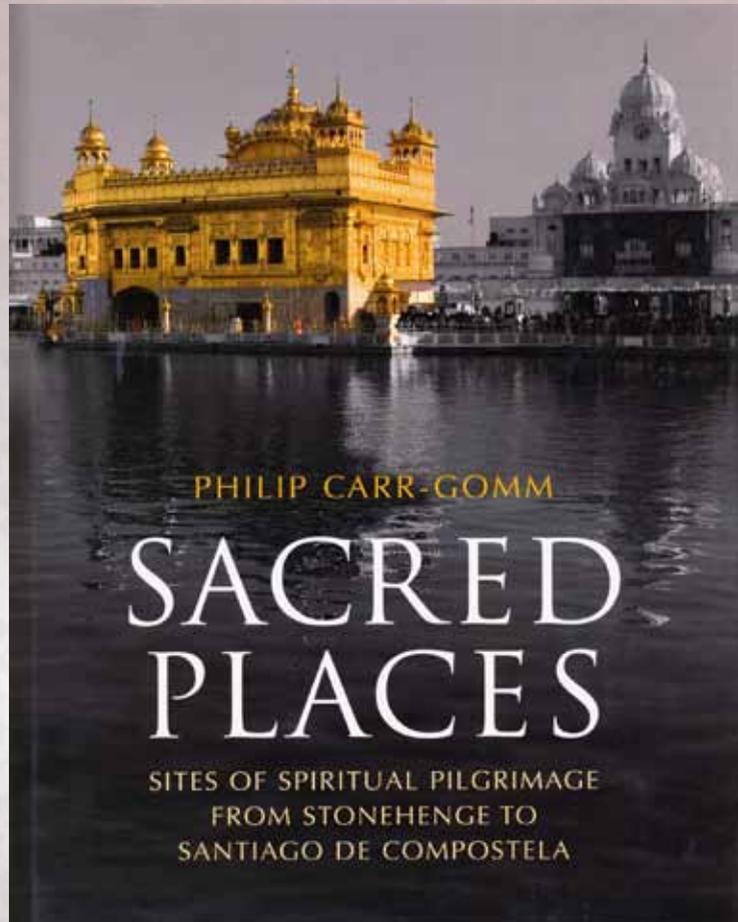
This evocative and one-of-its-kind coffee-table book titled *Sacred Places - Sites of Spiritual Pilgrimage from Stonehenge to Santiago De Compostela* by Philip Carr-Gomm is an involving and instructive piece of work, steeped in spiritual insight which offers a dramatic and distinctive perspective on more than six millennia of world history. The author narrates a capsulated background on 50 selected sacred sites across all five continents, including those venerated by all major religions. Many of the planet's holiest sanctuaries and abodes have been examined in a series of concise, informative and lavishly illustrated essays.

The author describes how journeys to sacred places or shrines, which have been undertaken as acts of religious veneration or penance, have been a part of most world religious practices since man's earliest times. Ancient religions had holy sites, temples and grooves, such as Delphi and Dodona in Greece, where oracles and their priestesses were reputed to be able to tell the future. Even older is Stonehenge in England whose original religious purpose is still shrouded in mystery, and the Pyramids of Giza, which stand in the Egyptian desert, defying all attempts to fathom their mysteries. During the medieval period Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople and Santiago de Compostela, was a sacred obligation and a trial of faith.

On the other side of the Eurasian landmass, the Golden Temple and Dome of the Rock became two of the holiest sites of the Sikh and Islamic faiths, with pilgrimage to Mecca, or haj, becoming one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

Interestingly and much to *Nishaan's* happiness, Philip Carr-Gomm has used an extremely spectacular and awe-inspiring image of the Golden Temple at Amritsar for the book's cover.

We reproduce a brief introduction to the book, penned by the author himself, followed by his essay on the Harimandir Sahib.



If you walk to the end of the Holloway Road in the capital city of Wellington, New Zealand, you come to a pleasant area of grass and trees. Beyond this, a path beside a stream leads up into a small valley. The first time I followed this path, I found myself entranced by some intangible and magical quality that seemed present everywhere I walked. Then I came upon a clearing where crystals, feathers and prayer-ties hung from the branches. Other people clearly felt it was magical too.

Over time I learnt the story of this special spot. It used to be a dumping ground for old beds and fridges until the local community decided to clean it up and turn it into the Waimapihi Reserve. And now it has become a sacred place where people go to celebrate birthdays, to remember friends who have passed away or just to walk in the

woods and find peace in the middle of the city. What an inspiration – that a local community can succeed in turning one small spot on the Earth from a rubbish dump into a paradise!

*Sacred Places* are like doorways to another world, reminding us that life is more mysterious and wonderful than we can ever imagine. They evoke awe and reverence in us. For some, a sacred place will be connected with their religion – it will be a place of miracles, or where a key figure in their tradition was born, died or gained enlightenment. For others it will be like the Waimapihi Reserve, a place in nature whose grandeur or beauty evokes a sense of wonder that stills the questing heart and mind with its powerful presence.

This well-illustrated book features sites that are considered sacred by the major world religions, and places of great antiquity that are seen as sacred by many, such as the Pyramids and Stonehenge. Places of great natural beauty and those connected with indigenous traditions have also included, alongside some remarkable and lesser-known sites, such as Perperikon in Bulgaria and the Chauvet Cave in France. Most sacred sites are rooted in the past, but new sites are sometimes created and two have been included here, both coincidentally in Italy: the Tarot Garden in Tuscany and the Temples of Humankind in Valchiusella. Whether new or old, the sites have been arranged by continent, starting in that great crucible for humanity: Africa.

A pilgrimage to any sacred place can be a deeply fulfilling experience. But increasingly ‘spiritual tourism’, which includes New Age as well as conventional pilgrimage, is taking its toll on many of these sites, and on the environment in general. Encouraged by lower airfares, this kind of travel is growing exponentially : 70 million journeyed to the *Kumbh Mela* in India in 2000, 6 million to Jerusalem and 2 million to Mecca for the Hajj. The sacred mountains of China are now tourist attractions with cable cars ferrying visitors to heights once frequented only by sages and devout pilgrims.

In a 1972 film about ecology entitled *Home*, the scriptwriter Ted Perry wrote the following prescient words about our stewardship of the planet that were later falsely attributed to the Native American leader Chief Seattle (c. 1786 – 1866): *Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons and daughters of the Earth. We did not weave the web of*

*life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.*

We undoubtedly need sacred places to inspire us, and the economics of many of the local communities in these places depend upon visitors, but more than ever before we need to be aware of the inherent sacredness of all the planet. The idea of ‘thinking globally and acting locally’ can now be applied to sacred sites. Books, films and the internet can educate us about distant sites and help us visit them in our hearts and minds, and we can help to preserve them, and the environment, by visiting them only occasionally if we feel the need. And like the residents of Holloway Road in Wellington we can create new sacred places locally – inspired perhaps by the stories of those that already exist all over the world.

*Philip Carr-Gomm*

## The Golden Temple at Amritsar

The Golden Temple stands in a striking location, in the centre of a lake fed by an underground spring – the Pool of the Nectar of Immortality, or Amritsar, which gave its name to the city that grew up around. On its shores, great dormitories welcome visitors from all over the world. In a radical departure from Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, Sikhism rejects the concept of ahimsa – harmlessness – and places great emphasis on fighting social injustice. Thus, all are welcome at the Golden Temple (officially called the Harimandir Sahib, or ‘Abode of God’s) and every day langar (or Community meals) meals are served free to as many as 40,000 people.

## The Genesis of Sikhism

Amritsar lies just east of the border with Pakistan, with Kashmir to the north. The Punjab region has seen much unrest, especially in the 20th century, but the Golden Temple, one of the world’s most beautiful

sacred sites, has weathered this turbulent and often tragic history.

The Sikh religion is relatively young – beginning only at the end of the 15th century – and is notable for the way in which it consciously fuses elements of Hinduism with inspiration from Islam. These two great streams of religious thought can be found both in Sikh teachings and in the very architecture of the Golden Temple itself.

Before the temple was built, the site was a small lake in a forest, visited by wandering sages and close to a major trade route connecting the lands that are now India and Asia to the east, with Afghanistan and the Middle East to the west. Legends recount that the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana, was written beside the pool, and that here a jug of the divine nectar of immortality ‘Amrit’ descended from heaven to restore the soldiers of Lord Rama to life.

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), began teaching the new faith in 1499 and over the following two centuries, a succession of nine gurus developed the tradition. Sikhism now ranks as the world’s fifth largest religion, and its adherents are dispersed across many continents, largely as a result of the migration of indentured labour within the British Empire.

## Guru Ram Das and the First Temple

Amritsar began to develop as a site dedicated to the Sikh faith when in 1574, the fourth guru, Ram Das (1534-81), made his home beside the lake, which by now had a reputation as a source of healing. Three years later he purchased this and the surrounding land from its owners. Guru Ram Das enlarged the lake and followers began to build houses nearby, creating a small township that would in time, become the city of Amritsar.

In 1588 the fifth guru, Arjan Dev (1563-1606) began building of the first temple and invited an Islamic mystic to lay the foundation stone. Sixteen years later, first edition of the *Guru Granth Sahib* (or *Adi Granth*) was installed in the temple and a caretaker, or granthi, entrusted with its recitation. The first granthi was a devoted disciple of Guru Nanak named Baba Buddha (1506-1631).

## Destruction and Resurrection

Although the teachings of Sikhism are focused on devotion to God, and reject the need for pilgrimage and ritual acts there seems to be an innate human desire to pay homage to certain places, and over the years the Golden Temple became a much-visited shrine, and some devotees now ritually bathe in the lake.

In the middle of the 18th century the city was invaded by the Afghans, the temple destroyed and the lake desecrated – some say with the bodies of slaughtered horses, tragically prefiguring the massacre by British-Indian troops that occurred nearby over a century and a half later, when many bodies were recovered from a well.

At end of the 18th century a powerful Sikh kingdom was established and in early years of the following century, the temple began to assume the form it takes today. Muslim architects and craftsmen worked on the buildings and the Harimandir was decorated with marble, with much of the exterior plated in gold, giving rise to the name ‘The Golden Temple’. The walls were decorated with gypsum and gold frescoes encrusted with gemstones: lapis lazuli, red cornelian, onyx and mother-of-pearl.

Unrest threatened the serenity of the temple in the 1980s, when in 1984, the Indian Army ‘invaded’ the temple and thousands were killed.

Since then, the damage has been repaired and peace has returned to the Golden Temple. Every morning the sacred scripture is carried out before dawn on a gold and silver palanquin that has been sprinkled with rose water. As drums beat, the assembled worshippers shower rose petals on the procession, which travels across the causeway to the Abode of God. Inside, the book is laid on cushions beneath a velvet canopy and the head priest begins reading a message for the day from text. All through the day and into the evening texts are read and hymns from the *Adi Granth* are chanted to the accompaniment of flutes, drums and stringed instruments.

In a region that has witnessed such intense conflict, the Golden Temple – which welcomes, lodges and feeds members of all faiths – acts as a shining example of the fantastic potential for harmony that exists between human beings.



MOUNT KILIMANJARO  
 BANDIAGARA  
 THE SOURCE OF THE BLUE NILE  
 LAKE FUNDUDZI  
 THE PYRAMIDS AND THE SPHINX  
 PIR-E-SABZ  
 THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY  
 SEPULCHRE  
 THE DOME OF THE ROCK  
 MECCA  
 THE BAHÁÍ SHRINES  
 THE TEMPLES OF MALTA  
 THE ORACLE OF DELPHI  
 PERPERIKON  
 THE TAROT GARDEN  
 THE TEMPLES OF HUMANKIND  
 EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO  
 THE CHAUVET CAVE  
 THE GULF OF MORBIHAN  
 CHARTRES CATHEDRAL  
 RENNES-LE-CHÂTEAU  
 THE EXTERNSTEINE  
 STONEHENGE  
 THE CERNE ABBAS GIANT  
 GLASTONBURY  
 NEWGRANGE  
 IONA

WALDEN POND  
 DENALI  
 MATO PAHA  
 YOSEMITE  
 CHACO CANYON  
 PALENQUE  
 WIRIKUTA FIELD OF FLOWERS  
 SIERRA NEVADA DE SANTA MARTA  
 MACHU PICCHU  
 SILLUSTANI  
 RAPA NUI  
 HALEKALA AND KAHO'OLAWÉ  
 TONGARIRO AND TAUPO  
 ULURU AND KATA TJUTA  
 MOUNT FUJI  
 LIANG PRABANG  
 ANGKOR  
 THE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF  
 CHINA  
 THE GANGES  
 THE ELLORA CAVES  
 BODH GAYA  
 SHATRUNJAYA  
 THE GOLDEN TEMPLE  
 POTALA PALACE AND LUKHANG  
 MOUNT KAILASH



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# The Sacred Gurbani

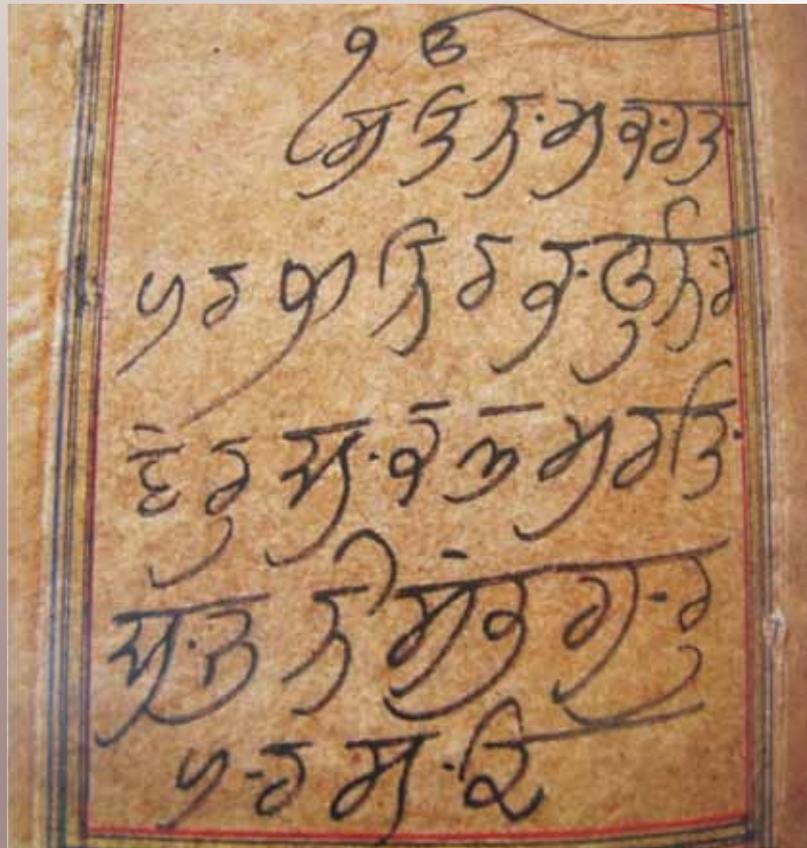


**M**ost sacred and divine hymns (Gurbani) have come to us from Almighty God, through our Satgurus. We worship Gurbani as our ever existing and last Satguru as guided by our Ten Satgurus.

It is therefore most essential that we must understand meanings of the Shabads and the Gurbani that we recite, sing or hear and must act upon the Divine Instructions contained therein, if we really want to achieve the 'Final Goal'. The Gurbani, which we are directed to recite or hear everyday is contained in our prayer-books in Gurmukhi and Hindi and other languages.

*Nitnem* means recitation of certain *Banis* (hymns) everyday by Sikhs, as ordained by the Satgurus. Even non-Sikhs are requested to read these, because there is absolutely nothing communal or personal in them. As a matter of fact, all the hymns of Sri Guru Granth Sahib preach divine knowledge meant for entire mankind, without any distinction of religion or nationality. It is essential for every Sikh to read at least five *Banis* everyday : one is *Japuji*, composed by Satguru Nanak Dev Sahib. The second and third are *Jaap Sahib* and *Tav Prasad Savaiyas* composed by Satguru Gobind Singh Sahib. The fourth is *Anand Sahib*, composed by Satguru Amar Das Sahib. All these four *Banis* and the *Chaupai* are to be repeated early mornings, everyday by a Sikh.

The *Rahras Sahib* consists of one shlok of Guru Nanak and nine *Shabads*, which are placed in Sri Guru Granth Sahib immediately after the *Japuji*. These along with one *Chaupai*, one *Savaiya* and one *Dohra* composed by Satguru Gobind Singh Sahib, the first five and the last stanzas of *Anand Sahib* and five other hymns given towards the end of *Rahras Sahib* are recited at sunset. After completing the *Rahras*, one has to recite the General Prayer, *Ardas*.



**Mool Mantra in the handwriting of Guru Hargobind, as seen in a section of the *Adi Granth*, at *Bhai Rupa*.**

The *Bani Kirtan Sohila*, is recited by a Sikh before retiring for the night followed by the *Ardas*. These hymns (*Banis*) and the general prayer are recited by Sikhs with a view to understand and practice teachings of the Sikh Religion. It is essential for a Sikh to read them intelligently, after understanding the meanings thereof and then to act upon what the Satguru ordains.

The divine sermons contained in the divine hymns of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib (not the poetry of poets, who were in his service) are the words of God and require the widest possible understanding. It is humbly submitted that countless topics of the utmost importance are contained in the Gurbani but unfortunately very little attempt has been made to summarise these at one place or even in parts.

*Gurmat*, that is the Wisdom of God, conveyed to us by our Gurus in their divine hymns, must be shared with the entire world. Hundreds of mandates of the *Gurmat* require to be consolidated at one place. These mandates are based on the *Banis* of *Nit Nem* and only a few of these refer to other parts of the Gurbani. It has also been briefly explained that the Guru of Guru Nanak Dev ji is the One God. The word 'murat' and the word 'charan' i.e. feet have also been briefly explained. Some attempts have been made by few misguided persons to mislead followers

of the Sikh religion by giving deceptive meanings of these words. Never forget : our perpetual Guru is Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

In these busy times, people find little or no time to contemplate God or 'the next world'. Some, are curious to know about God, about death and other relevant matters, but want to know something about this in the shortest possible time. It is quite evident that divine hymns are meant for the salvation of humanity, even including those who do not believe in God. Secularism or the love for all is a minor blessing in the worship of God. All joys and the true bliss, here and in the next world, are obtained by such worship. The sincere followers of true religion are, inter-alia, bound to shun communalism in all forms and to respect freedom of worship for all.

There are two main means of spreading such universal Sikh religion and philosophy: one is from the Gurdwara platform the other is using mass media. The latter is of great importance. Unfortunately, some writers of books on the Sikh religion often promote their own thoughts based on limited worldly knowledge, rather than on supreme divine wisdom of God. The imperatives of all such works as based on Gurbani must be adhered to.

I have written a number of books on law but never thought that I would be able to write on Gurbani as well. Thanks to my Lord and my Satguru, I am enabled to serve in my humble way. The encouraging response given to my books written on the Sikh religion, has given me further inducement to continue writing on the countless divine gems contained in the divine hymns. Manuscripts of the translation in simple english of Sukhmani Sahib, the two Bara Mahas, the alphabetically arranged teachings of Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib and the Asa di Var are ready. Similarly manuscripts of the translation, in straightforward english of the Gurbani in Sri Granth Sahib upto the end of Majh Raag, are also ready and the first volume will be published in the near future. With blessings of the Satguru, these may be printed and published in several volumes along with topical discussion of the teachings, based wholly on the Gurbani, in the style in which I have already made humble attempts.

The utility of religion is doubted by some, by those who do not follow the divine teachings and who believe that there is no next world and that worldly

joys are the only object of human life. The so-called aspects of truth and morality, propounded by some of them, are contrary to dictates of the Gurus.

Name of God confers gifts, joys and peace, as explained in the divine hymns. It must be remembered that no *aachaar* (true moral character) can be built without worship of the One God and His Name, as directed by the Gurus.

There are imposters everywhere, committing 'fraud' in the name of religion. Such events happened even during the days of our Ten Gurus and the guilty were usually punished. Consequently, it is our moral and religious duty to warn our innocent brethren against evil designs of such persons. Some learned Professors of Universities are exposing falsehood of the so-called miracle-workers and have succeeded in this to some extent.

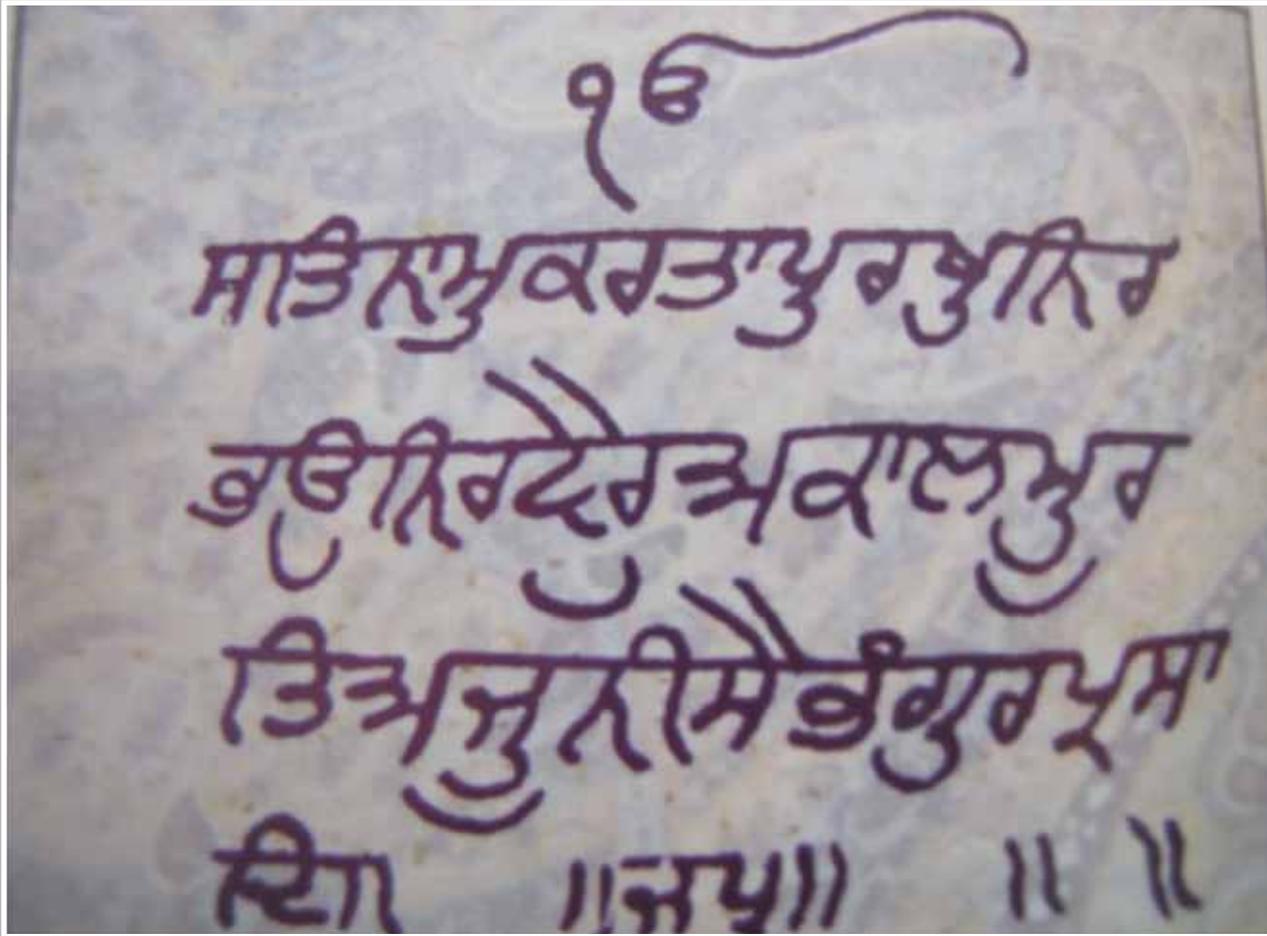
We must remain on the path shown by our divine teachers. We must never forget the divine mandates, the most important being that '**The Guru of Nanak Dev ji is the One God**'.

The One God manifested His Attributes in Guru Nanak Dev ji, who was all Truth, had no trace of egoism; was completely in tune with the Divine Will; was most pure; was One with the Creator; heard His divine words and sermons; conveyed the same to the entire world through divine hymns and rendered most selfless service to entire humanity, as a humble servant of God, though himself had all the attributes of God.

The primal Guru of all our Gurus from Guru Angad Sahib to Guru Gobind Singh Sahib is also the One God. The Divine Spirit (*Rabbi Jot*) which manifested in the person of Guru Nanak Dev ji, passed on to Guru Angad Sahib and then to each successor till the Tenth Master, all of whom possessed the same divine attributes, which the Founder Guru had.

The Guru in all of us is the *jot* or the divine spirit, or God's Light and not the persons of the Ten Gurus, although their bodies were most blessed, because the divine spirit of the Creator was enshrined in them. "The Light in all the Gurus was the same, their ways and the Sermons were the same, the Divine Gurus had simply changed the Body."

God's Words ( which are the Divine Hymns), as conveyed by our great Gurus through the Gurbani are contained in Sri Guru Granth Sahib and in the Gurbani



**The Mool Mantra handwritten by Guru Arjan Dev from the original manuscript of the Adi Granth compiled in 1604.**

uttered by Guru Gobind Singh ji (not the poetry of poets of his service). These divine hymns are the voice of the One God. Thus our Eternal Guru is Sri Guru Granth Sahib. In fact, God, the True Guru and the Gurbani are the same.

We believe that the Divine Truths contained in the Gurbani are the Directed Words of God for all humanity. We must not follow any other sermon of anybody whosoever, asserting himself to be guru, etc. as this is counter to the sermons of our great Gurus. If some distorted or fake interpretation is given, immediately discard such person and his assertions.

God's-illuminated divine Gurus are only the Ten Gurus and Sri Guru Granth Sahib – and none else.

Remember that the true divine and perfect Guru appears in this world after aeons, not a common occurrence. Even a true saint or sadhu is one in hundreds of millions. Do not be misled by imposters, who are amassing wealth, misleading the ignorant masses and who do not possess any virtue whatsoever

of the true saint. How many so-called saints are today flourishing in the world? Count them!

Concentrate on the meanings of Gurbani and practically act upon the Divine Teachings.

Teach yourself, others and your growing children, the unique sermons of our Guru and their history. You are the best teachers of your children, makers of their future. You are responsible for filling your home with true and real joys of this world and also for amassing spiritual wealth. Never forget the object of human life!

Devote time to render selfless service to all, each one should become a missionary of the great and universal Sikh religion. Do not rely on paid preachers, perform kirtan with your family members in your own home, because this is the easiest and most effective way to realise the divine truth and to obtain divine peace.

Do not believe those who pretend to know all. Imbibe teachings of Gurbani and one will realise as to how the divine treasure of the *naam* can be reached.

*Harbans Singh Doabia*

# My Sovereign: Guru Gobind Singh Sahib



Painting by Kirpal Singh.

The Guru (perfection) dwells where morality-ethics are beyond sins and virtues, deeds are not measured by world standards, thoughts on birth and death are not shadowed, time-movements of previous lives end, the Grace is the grandest magic and no gods nor fascinations are needed other than the Grace.

So, how does one capture the life and legacy of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, Sovereign of the Sovereigns? How do I even attempt to praise the "Splendor of Immortal Compassion" (*jumlā faiz-i-nūr*), who inaugurated the *Guru Khalsa Panth* and asked them to submit only to the *Guru Granth Sahib*. I am not capable of the venture as Bhai Vir Singh dreamt him, Professor Puran Singh spirited him, Bhai Randhir Singh visualised him, Jathedar Jarnail Singh intoxicated him, or Bibi Balbir Kaur invoked him.

Guru Gobind Singh Sahib (*The Sovereign's*) life cannot be grasped through study of chronological historical events, popular philosophical insights, standards of art or aesthetics, or contemporary psychology. It would be a grave mistake to do so for the directions his life took are beyond intellectual and mystical expansion.

The work of Bhai Nand Lal 'Goya' (*Goya*) dances constantly around the joy of *seeing* The Sovereign at certain levels of mind and heart. By developing the capacity to see the journey of The Sovereign in his being, was he able to finally see The Sovereign? It is love-born: "Road to love is too long to go on foot / Turn head into feet to walk on the road to your lover." Goya's word choice indicates The Sovereign's formlessness and inspiration. These words transcend time and space to touch The Sovereign's splendour; they are repeated with creative impulses, describing the aesthetic beauty of the Guru—the multiple dimensions of perfection in multiple dimensions; they capture the One Force reverberating through the Guru's existence. These words are not borne simply of a poet's knowledge, but from the grace of the Guru working through Goya's thoughts and feelings. Goya went to Anandpur – the City of Bliss – to meet The Sovereign: "One glance from the Guru was enough. The bee went deep and slept in the rare fragrance of the white lotus. Bhai Nand Lal never left the presence after." The Sovereign opened his ambrosial lips and recited: "Delighted Nand Lal, now you have the power to endure and are Goya (the one who expresses) to have dialogue."

Goya presents to us the divine vibrations in *Zindginama*, *Joti Bigas*, and *Ganjnama* all originally written in Persian. He helps us develop a common fervour of various spiritual dimensions through these words—words which are the worship themselves as they become the *bani* (revealed infinite wisdom) and the Sikhs for generations have revered them as such. These words form the vision: The Sovereign's *bani*, the Khalsa (the archetype), Guru Granth Sahib (scriptural canon), journeys of martyrdom (multi-generational, tortures, and imprisonments), worldly engagements and divine intensity.

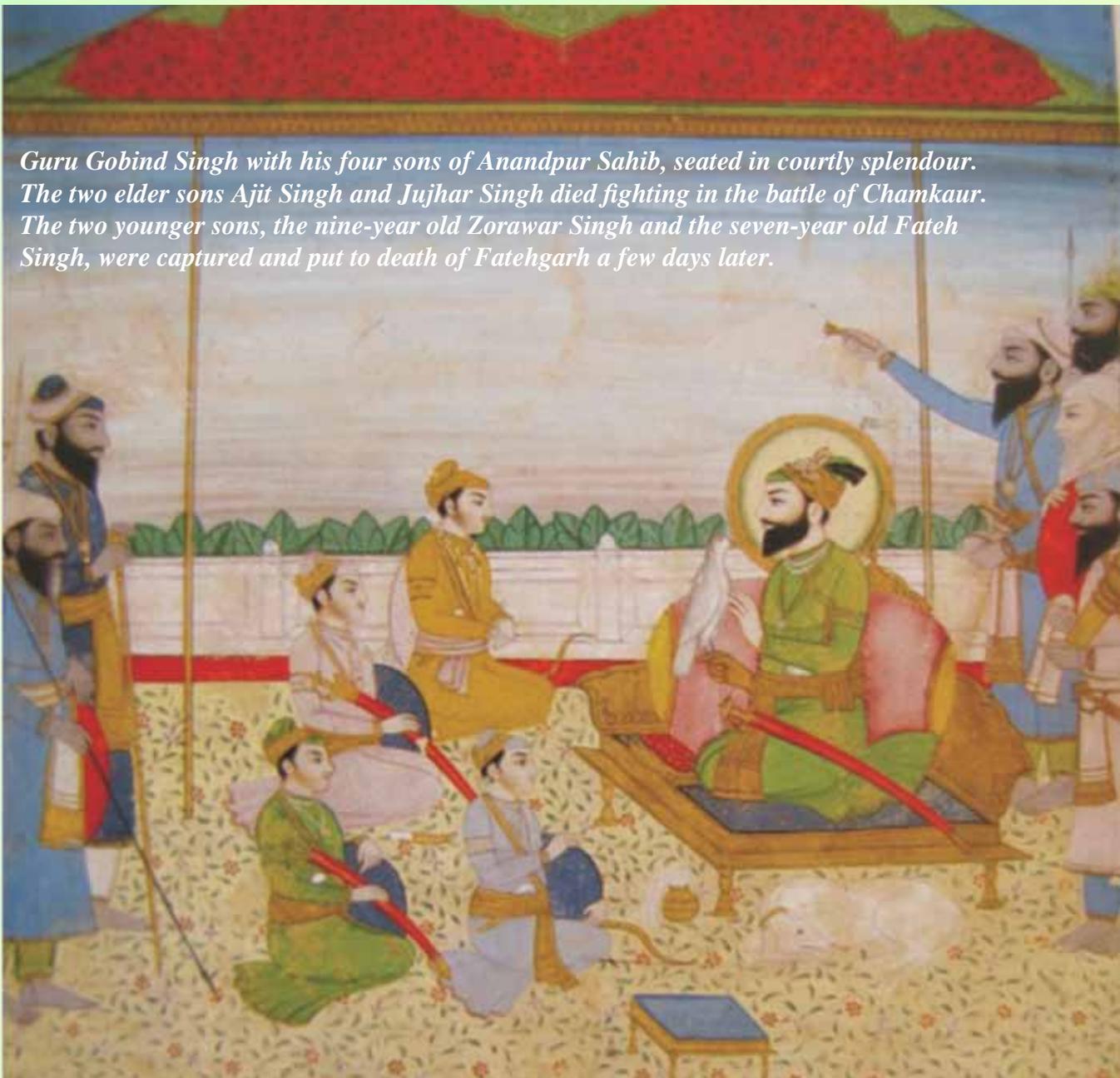
Here are a few readings and reflections from Goya's renderings which salute The Sovereign. Goya is doubt-free, logical, and truthful. He witnesses history as it unfolds and surpasses mere philosophical and psychological tendencies. His words today are as fresh and inspired as they were then, transcending time and space and the labour of love of no other scribe or poet could feel more appropriate on this day of joy and remembrance.

## Guru Gobind Singh Sahib the Tenth Guru Nanak Sahib.

It is well established in the *Guru Granth Sahib* that all Gurus had the same divine wisdom (*jot*) and divine values (*jugat*). Bhai Gurdas (theologian and linguist par-excellence) elucidated that the first six Gurus were the same great beings with same infinite wisdom accessed by personally connecting with the highest awareness. The author of *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* narrates contemporary accounts of the Sikh faith, citing that the Sikhs of Guru Harirai Sahib addressed the Guru as the Seventh Embodiment (*mahal*) and the Seventh Nanak. Goya presented the aforesaid Sikh doctrine of "all Gurus are Nanaks" as not only logical, but philosophical and historical. In *Joti Bigas*, we sense the graceful nearness to The Sovereign and in-depth unparalleled artful aesthetics. Goya takes refuge in meta-experiential wisdom, beyond singular, indescribable and outward dimensions.

*Nanak is same as Angad,  
Gracious and famous Amardas is same.  
Same is Ramdas as is Arjan,  
Supreme and kind Hargobind is same.  
Same is Harihar Rai the creator Guru,  
To whom everyone's reality is evident.  
Same is the elevated Harikishan,  
Who fulfills everyone's wishes.*

*Guru Gobind Singh with his four sons of Anandpur Sahib, seated in courtly splendour. The two elder sons Ajit Singh and Jujhar Singh died fighting in the battle of Chamkaur. The two younger sons, the nine-year old Zorawar Singh and the seven-year old Fateh Singh, were captured and put to death of Fatehgarh a few days later.*



*Same is Guru Tegh bahadur,  
His radiance blessed Gobind Singh.  
Guru Gobind Singh is same as Guru Nanak,  
His words are like pearls and diamonds.*

In *Ganj Nama*, I am awed by the emphasis of each Guru as possessing the grand beauty of all ten Gurus. The fifth Sultanate of Guru Nanak is illuminating the first four torches with the Light of Truth. Guru Hargobind Sahib is the elegance that produces pleasing beauty of the five torches. *Ganj Nama* is not merely written testimony, but an epical narration of

the Ten Gurus graced by The Sovereign. Goya was a fellow traveler of my Sovereign, and much more. He sees the first Nine Gurus through the eyes of the Tenth. Doctrinally, the Ten Gurus reveal themselves as the same Guru Nanak: *Divine Light*. Poetically, the Ten Gurus unfold themselves as the ten images of the Tenth Guru. If I feel the grace, vision, presence, life and lifestyle of the Tenth Guru, then a new consciousness will be borne. That high consciousness will allow me to witness the complete beauty of the Tenth Guru, and only then will I be able to do justice to trans-wisdom ideals of the Tenth Sovereign.

## Guru Gobind Singh Sahib is beyond the Aryan and Semitic prophets.

Guru Nanak Sahib came to shower the divine blessings amidst mystical silence when the religions of the time had transformed into fascination, magic, figures, exclusivity, and customs. And it was in this historical moment that Guru Gobind Singh Sahib flowed with the Creator's Voice, which the world heard through Guru Nanak Sahib. And that voice surrounded the hearts of humanity forever by establishing the third alternative lifestyle of the Khalsa Panth. Undoubtedly, Goya captured this meta-experiential perspective of The Sovereign which is beyond prophets, incarnates, gods, and goddesses in Joti Bigas:

*All the Godly-persons, all the Prophets,  
All the Sufis and all the Prohibitionists,  
Bowing heads in humility at his portal,  
Lying with their heads on his feet ...  
What are Arjun, Bhim, Rustam or Saam?  
What are Asfand Yaar or Rama and Lakhshman?  
There are thousands of Shivas and Ganeshas,  
Paying obeisance at his feet in humility.*

The aforementioned mythological, historical or spiritual leaders were not incomplete as such, but in comparison to The Sovereign's splendour and grace, they remained only regional singularities. Guru Gobind Singh Sahib's prophet-genius, revelation and philosophy depicted in *Joti Bigas* and *Ganj Nama* had at least three creative dimensions: it broke the subpar world-discipline – perpetual idol-destroyer – to bring to life the unique glory of the superior world-discipline; it was a guarantor for those lost, but still searching for faith; and it was a sponsor which included all wanderers looking for the Beloved in the divine grace.

## Guru Granth Sahib (lovingly Gurbani) is inseparable from the personality of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib.

*Ganj Nama* and *Joti Bigas* pre-date the Guruship of Guru Granth Sahib. Consequently, Goya does not refer to Gurbani using the "Guru" title, but still considers Gurbani to be superior to other religious texts and revelations. He makes *Gurbani* integral to The Sovereign's identity:

*Purer than the purest sacred words.  
Beyond the four Vedas and six Philosophies.*

In other words, he shows the grandeur of Gurbani in The Sovereign's consciousness, which is higher than Vedas and Shastras. The Khalsa Panth, born from this Gurbani, is a different path than those derived from Aryan and Semitic cultures. And this Panth's greatest asset is the aesthetics in sync with the Tenth Guru's personality guaranteeing beauty for entire humanity: "His words are aromatic for the Arabs and the Iranians. The west and the east are sparkling from his Light."

Before The Sovereign departed this Earth, the auspicious Gurbani was established in 1708. as the Guru perpetually for the Khalsa Panth No scriptural tradition has been elevated to the same level of perfection; it includes the vision of One Force of the ecumenical traditions in Semitic and Aryan civilisations. The infinite wisdom became the revered Guru Granth Sahib.

## Guru Gobind Singh Sahib is inaugurator of the Khalsa Panth.

The elusive moment, the scenario, the narrative, the duty, of the Khalsa's inauguration are not to be cherished without fathoming Guru Nanak Sahib's advent. *Qaum-i-Mardan-i-Khuda* was established on this Earth as the Khalsa Panth, where Guru Gobind Singh Sahib's moral and ethical beauty was revealed:

*Their realm is the Nation of the humble ones,  
And both the domains are their adherents.  
Nation of the submissive-ones, and the children of God,  
All is perishable except God who is stable forever.*

In *Zindgi Nama* (couplets 86-118), the imagery of the Khalsa Panth contains several glimpses of an Ideal Person who transcends this world, like Nietzsche's Superman. The Sovereign's Ideal Person – the Khalsa – is touched by the elegance whose flight is beyond every measured perspective's limit, whose strength and development establishes its own principles, and whose experience is beyond popular or faddish spirituality. A Khalsa's morality and ethics, their education and spiritual experience are coloured by 'Garments of Divinity' (*libas-i-bandgi*) and are connected with 'Assets of Life' (*daulat-i-jāvid*). The Khalsa Panth has elements of meta-intangibility, meta-wisdom, and meta-beauty. The Sovereign is in every vein of the Khalsa Panth:

*Every one of them is a pious person / beautiful, kind-hearted  
and of amiable-nature. Do not relish anything except the  
Remembrance / No codes of conduct except the Divine Words.*

In the lap of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, martyrs of the Khalsa commonwealth are asleep, for they are on a journey from affliction to grace. Transformation from oppression to dignity is a natural process and, by offering a friendly hand to humanity, The Sovereign has brought the Divine refuge:

*Guru Gobind Singh is clean-hearted and above malice.*

*Guru Gobind Singh is the truth and the mirror of truthfulness.*

*Guru Gobind Singh is the Truth's true existence.*

*Guru Gobind Singh is the dervish and the sovereign.*

On Vaisakhi day 1699 the servant-leadership was institutionalised as the way of the *sovereigns-en-masse* via *Amrit* prepared by the *Khanda*. *Amrit*, for it reminds the initiate to become like the Immortal by confronting death and *Khanda*, for its double-edge sword reminds of a lifestyle beyond duality. No prophet or king deemed their mentor to be an equal of the protégé in either the Aryan or Semitic tradition. The Khalsa Panth was given the Guruship in 1699 for all time to come, the revered Guru Khalsa Panth.

## Guru Gobind Singh Sahib is Sovereign of the Sovereigns.

The Sovereign's art and rules of war are not subservient to the use of armed force: "To conquer both the worlds, He does not need the sword and the spear." The battles of The Sovereign unveil the elegance and the justice needed to establish the Divine Sultanate. Higher standards of war are to be discovered in the campaigns for justice and rights: "Guru Gobind Singh is artful with the sword for he is nectar for the life and the heart." Narrowness or grandness of creation and ideas is dependent on how justice is perceived. When it becomes "just us," it is not justice! And the cost of death is dependent on the interpretation of this justice: it is not worth living as slaves regardless of comforts. Thus, winning the battle of ideas was more important to the Guru than mortal life.

Such Indians like Gandhi and Tagore cannot appreciate the Sovereign not remaining with the old knowledge of religious violence of war, the old image of history and popular stories of magic. These old ways were destroyed and a new flow of original justice was born with just one goal: freedom, breaking these shackles of religious and political domination, here and now. The Sovereign is the embodiment of revolutionary morality and ethics, justice, and praise:

"He is the shine of truth and faith. He is the brightness of the countenance of justice."

All temporal and celestial beings revel in remembrance of The Sovereign and his creed is more fortunate than any other belief: an epic comparison with other earthly authorities shows there is no other like him: Ceasars (Roman emperor), Khakans (Chinese and Turkish emperors), Kisras, Kaoos, Foors, Kioomers, and Jamsheds (Iranian kings), Faghfoors (Chinese King), Tzar (Russian emperors), Sultan of Hind, the rulers of the South, Raos (South Asian Rajput rulers), all Eastern and Western chiefs and rulers. Figuratively, the aforementioned served the sacred command of The Sovereign, in that his wisdom and his dominion is beyond comparison.

*Rahit Nama* and *Tankhah Nama* – both written in Panjabi – guide the Sikhs on how to live meaningful lives. Listen, Sikh Brother, Nand Lal: "The body of Guru's Sikh becomes auspicious when it is primarily and diligently, engaged in the service of the Perfection." And how to deal with the dominating forces of the world, liberty or death?

"One who becomes subservient to the tyrant and surrenders the sword, dies endlessly." When a lifestyle lived with an attitude of defiance becomes the norm, "the Khalsa will rule, there will be no non-believers."

"After final frustration, all will unite and the ones in Divine refuge will survive." This remains the promise of The Sovereign.

Poets will continue to write about the Tenth Master, as will historians. None will compare with Bhai Nand Lal Goya. To him: "Guru Gobind Singh is capable of all pursuits and is the asylum for the downtrodden."

Today is the Illumination Day (*prakash purab*) of The Sovereign: Warrior Poet, Just Spiritualist, Revolutionary Prophet, Divine Human, and Perfect Light. And so I ask the 'Rider of the Blue Steed':

"O Cup-bearer! Grace me a shot to intoxicate my heart, To see the Divine for addressing all my challenges."

**Harinder Singh**

(*Harinder Singh co-founded the Sikh Research Institute and the Panjab Digital Library. He advocates education as a fulcrum for social change. His passion is everything Sikhi and life-inspiring Panjabi.*)

# SANCTITY OF THE FAITH

**A**t the outset I want to make it clear that I have tremendous regard and respect for the Indian Judiciary, which I consider as one of the strongest pillars of our democracy. Having said that, I am firmly of the view that religious affairs should be left to theologians and religious leaders/scholars, because by external authority (be it a judiciary or executive) most often turns out to be unacceptable or even undesirable.

When the recent court judgment allowed "Sehajdaris" to vote in the Gurdwara elections, I did not react to it immediately because I was surprised as well as amused after reading it.

I went through all the records, scholar's views as well as scriptures, and found no substantial evidence about 'Sehajdari' being part an active part of the Sikh ethos.



**Sindhi Sikh from Jacobabad visiting Panja Sahib.**

Sehajdaris, according to scholars, are those who are not Sikhs, but believe in the Gurus and Gurbani. This is a very wide canvass. True, the Tenth Guru Sri Gobind Singh ji proclaimed: "*Manas ki Jaat sabhey ek hi Pahchenbo*". Also a part of Sikh lore is "*Awal Allah Noor upaya Kudrat ke sab bande*". All mankind belongs to one human race under Almighty God.

Let us however, recall that Guru Gobind Singh ji, in founding the Khalsa Panth, also made it absolutely clear that a Sikh has to have a distinct identity. In no uncertain words: '*Rahit Pyari mujh Ko, Sikh pyara Nahi*' (I will not like the Sikh who does not accept Rahit, i.e. distinct identity).

In our daily prayer, every congregation affirms (irrespective of the occasion) '*Sikhan nu Sikhi dan, Kesh dan*' (Sikh (s) should be blessed with unshorn hair).

The term 'Sehajdari' came into being after foundation of the Khalsa because most adherent people gradually came into the faith after accepting and understanding its tenets.

The most prominent examples of Sehajdaris becoming Khalsa Sikhs include (among many others) Master Tara Singh, Sardar Inderjit Singh (Punjab & Sind Bank), Bhai Mohan Singh (Ranbaxy) and the eminent scholar, Prof. Sahib Singh.

Justice J S Kehar, (who is expected to become the Chief Justice of India in 2017) thus defined a Sikh while heading full bench of the Punjab and Haryana High Court, on 30 May 2009: "Retaining unshorn hair is a fundamental tenet of the Sikh faith."

"Not only that, under the 'Sikh rehat maryada', a Sikh is not permitted to dishonour hair, or even to harbour any antipathy to hair on the head with which a child is born".

Holding that religion must be perceived as it is, and not as another would like it to be, Justice Kehar gave this landmark verdict on a petition challenging the constitutional validity of the definition of Sikh as contained in the Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925, filed by Gurleen Kaur who had been denied admission in MBBS course at the SGPC-run institution on the

grounds that those individuals who plucked their eyebrows or trimmed their beards were against tenets of Sikh religion and so not eligible.

So there is a clear distinction between a *Sehajdari* and a *Patit* (persons who has willingly cut his hair and given up the Sikh Identity).

There is no gainsaying in the fact that Sikhism is at crossroads. Many Sikhs have discarded their identity especially in the Punjab. These are the people who also claim that they are 'Sehajdari', which is blatantly wrong. And here, on this issue, Judicial intervention is not acceptable.

Recall the Supreme Court's judgment in Shah Bano's case, which even forced the Government at that time headed by Rajiv Gandhi, to introduce a bill in Parliament which nullified that decision, because the Government viewed the Judgment as interference in religious affairs. So why are Sikhs made an exception? Here this recent judgment allowing the Sehadaris voting right in the Gurdwara elections is at variance with the verdict of Punjab and High Court delivered by Justice J S Kehar.

As mentioned earlier, Gurdwaras represent backbone of the Sikh community. At Gurdwaras, prayers are recited everyday exhorting Sikhs to follow teachings of Guru Gobind Singh ji, and it is here, that 'Amrit Prachar' (Baptism ceremony) is held infusing spirit of Rahit Maryada among Sikhs. How can those Gurdwaras be run by Patits, or by those who do not accept the fundamental creed of the religion?

There are several Hindu temples in the country where no non-Hindu is allowed to worship leave aside administrating them. No non-Muslim can go to Mecca and Madina because of religious edicts.

So why should Sikh Gurdwara administration, or its elections, come under any Judicial preview? Another question which creates unease among Sikh masses is that there is too much interference by the Government in their religious affairs, but when it comes to their legitimate demands, including separate marriage law, no action is taken and they are pitted against a wall?

One might also ask as why those, who have willingly given up their Sikh identity, are so desperate to be known as Sehajdari. I believe they are 'people in no mans land'. They are confused because they do not want to call themselves 'Hindus'.



**Praying at Panja Sahib Gurdwara.**

The eminent Sikh Scholar Bhai Kahan Singh in his iconic work *Hum Hindu Nahi* very clearly and incisively explained the creed of Sikhism.

Whenever I go to other parts of the country, the Sikhs living in those states have the complaint that, while "we live by religion against all odds and are proud of being Sikh and its distinct identity, we find it hard to explain to others when we see clean-shaven people coming from Punjab claiming to be Sikhs".

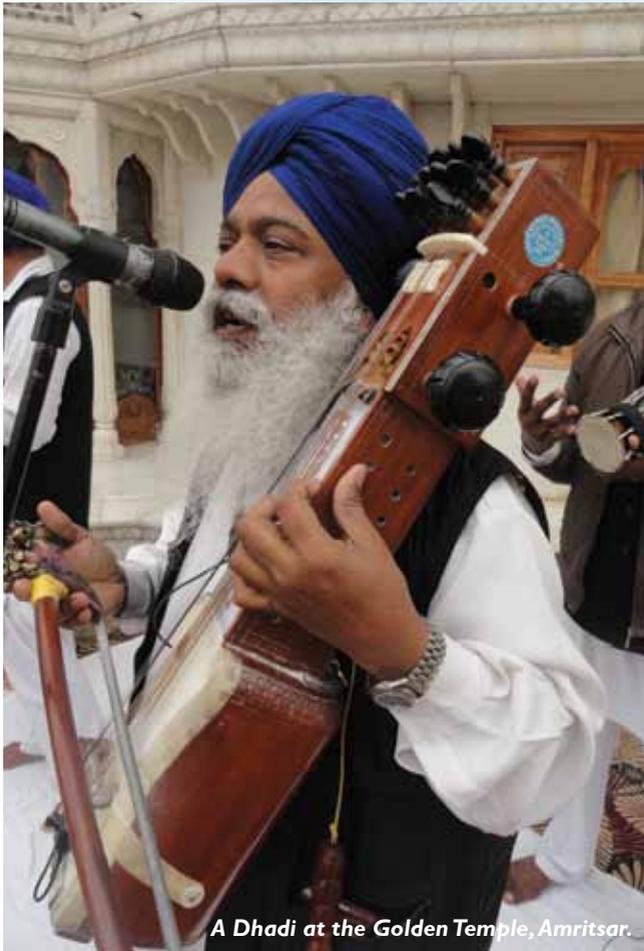
It is a time for Sikh leadership, clergy, scholars and intellectuals to put their differences aside and work towards future of the community, and also make it clear to the Government that "let the Sikh institutions be left alone": earlier attempts have led to disastrous consequences.

This is also the time to make the difference between Sahajdharis and Patits clear as also who has the right to vote and administer the Gurdwaras. The Sikhs need no government interference.

*Tarlochan Singh*

Dr. Jaswant Singh Neki, *Nishaan's* Editorial Director writes on

# Religion and Subtle Humour



A Dhadki at the Golden Temple, Amritsar.

In a China shop in San Francisco, I once happened to see an imposing image of the Laughing Buddha. Until then, I was familiar only with the Meditating Buddha whose images abound in India. As I looked intently on the Laughing Buddha, a smile swept over my face, and my soul felt spontaneously cheered up. Here, then, was a Buddha who was extending his happy grace to who-so-ever came to him, for he had set aside the burden of existence.

My thoughts, then, turned immediately from the Buddha to Guru Nanak whose prevalent portraits are also of a meditative old Baba pensive and reflective,

showing a silent grace with the blessing the gesture of his hand. Immediately, another similarity, between the Buddha and the Guru sprang up in my mind. Both of them, in the prime of life, had left their homes, their pretty spouses and tender offspring and spent decades wandering around.

Yet, there was a difference too. The Buddha renounced his home in quest for salvation. The Guru, on the other hand, had already found his salvation and left his home in order to serve mankind. When he set off on his odysseys, he was far from being an old *Baba* ! He was at the summit of his youth, full of vigour and courage. That is why he could undertake long arduous journeys, mostly on foot as, in those days, there were hardly any roads. He went upto Tibet across the Himalayas and down to Kanya Kumari, the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula, to Assam in the East and to Mecca in West across the seas. He went around as a *Dhadki* (a minstrel) of the Lord, singing His praise in sublime verse he had composed. Crowds thronged to see him and were charmed not only by his song but also by his captivating smile, which reflected his inner Bliss arising from the unique experience of the Beauty of Truth (*sat suhan sada man chao*). He must have been the smiling, singing, sparkling, youthful Guru, and not the pensive Baba which his pictures portray. The *Dhadkis* are known for their sense of humour as well. The Guru also had a splendid sense of humour – of which there is ample evidence.

Humour has often been regarded as 'irrelevant and perhaps even hurtful to the finer emotions and spiritual life'. This is because of the belief that humour can treat the most solemn facts and experiences as mere subjects for laughter; that it tends to generate levity, flippancy and shallowness which qualities need essentially to be curbed in a person of spiritual pursuits.

Yet, that would be too simplistic a view. Humour, which is devoid of coarseness, hyperbole and obscenity may well be geared to higher levels of life. If

it is well-intentioned and gracious, it could reform as well as elevate. If it is self-critical, it saves us from the folly of self-importance and self-righteousness. Even when gentle and subdued, it lessens the bitterness of failure and blunder. However, when it is sublime, it can be revelatory of higher truths. All these varieties are serviceable to a man with a spiritual mission and a reforming zeal. And Guru Nanak knew how to make use of these.

The Guru's humour was aimed at causing soul-searching and not heart-burn. He gave evidence of this even as a child. At his school, he is believed to have questioned his teacher: "Are you, Sir, well versed in the lore in which I seek to be instructed?" The teacher contacted the Guru's father to say, "I would not be able to instruct your son". The father thought his son was ineducable, while the teacher wanted to convey that he could not respond to his son's yearning for spiritual knowledge.

One is, here, reminded of the *Upanishadic* story in which Svetaketu returns home conceited after receiving twelve years of instruction in various disciplines, secular and religious, and his father asks him: "Svetaketu, since you are now so greatly conceited, think yourself well read and arrogant, did you ask for that instruction by which the unheard becomes heard, the unperceivable becomes perceived, the unknowable becomes known?"

It is this kind of instruction that the child Nanak was seeking. His teacher appreciated this, although his father could not.

In the same vein, Nanak, a boy of nine, told the Pundit, come to invest him with the sacred thread, "O revered Pundit, I would like to be invested with a thread which would neither break nor get soiled nor be burnt nor lost." It appeared a funny demand, but the Guru explained the thread he longed for:

*Of the cotton of compassion spun with contentment,*

*Knotted with Temperance and twister with Truth*

*Such is the Sacred Thread, O Pundit, Invest me with it if You have it!*

Again, in a closely similar fashion, he addressed the physician called in to examine him because he was believed to be sick:

*O physician! What for are you checking my pulse?*

*The malady is not in the body, it is in my soul."*

The poor physician did not know how to palpate the soul! The humour in each instance was subtle as well as sublime. In each instance, the apparently comic stance was revelatory of a higher truth.

As he grew up, Guru Nanak worked as a store-keeper in a public granary in Sultanpur. There, while he weighed his merchandise, he would go on counting aloud the weighings: one, two, three... however, when he reached thirteen, in Punjabi *tera* (which also means 'yours'), all subsequent weighings were pronounced *tera* only. Every pronouncement was thus a submission, "O Lord, I am yours!" The pun in the word *tera* had wafted him into a spiritual experience.

During his sojourn in that place, his day would start with his morning ablutions in the river Bein which flowed by Sultanpur. Once he went to that river, but did not return for three days. It is recorded in his chronicles that he had a profound mystical experience during that period wherein he felt commissioned by the Lord to "go forth and rejoice in My Name and teach others to do so". The first words that he uttered upon reappearance were, "*There is no Hindu, there is no Musalman.*" To most people that was a funny statement, absurd and non-factual. They only laughed it away. However some discerned in it deep meanings:

- ❖ It meant that all were human beings, children of the same Father, not distinguished as Hindus or Muslims in God's eyes.
- ❖ It also alluded to the fact that, by and large, both Hindus and Muslims had forsaken the tenets of their creeds, and none was a true Hindu or a true Musalman.
- ❖ It also signified the folly of discriminating against people on the basis of their avowed religion.
- ❖ And, finally, it also seemed to indicate that Nanak wanted to reconcile the two mutually hostile communities.

The Guru's slogan was, thus, a call for reform, though some people's mental rigidity only saw it as a droll statement. The Guru had, perhaps deliberately, made a statement that looked comical as well as shocking. Such humour is common in the armamentarium of a reformer. Its reform-potential

lies in the demand it makes for a change in outlook. It unveils the prevailing incongruity between beliefs and practices.

Yet, in the eyes of the 'orthodoxy' such humour is outrageous. So not unexpectedly, the entrenched Muslim orthodoxy of Sultanpur reported the matter to the local Muslim ruler that Nanak was pronouncing. "There is no Musalman". Guru Nanak was summoned and his explanation sought. Upon this, the Guru recited the following *shabad*:

*It is not easy to be called at Musalman,  
If there is one, let him be known.  
He should first learn by heart the tenets of his faith,  
And purge himself of all pride.  
He alone is a Musalman who pursues the path prescribed by  
the prophet,  
Who has no concern for life or death,  
Who takes the Will of God as Supreme,  
Who reposes his faith in the Creator,  
And surrenders his self before Him.  
Only when he cherishes goodwill for one and all  
May he be called a Musalman.  
Thus, what appeared to be a ludicrous statement to many  
become revelatory of a higher truth.*

A familiar genre of humour is caricature. When you caricature someone apart from yourself, it causes great resentment, but if one caricatures oneself one can generate both amusement and inquisitiveness, and thereby enable people to read a message shrouded in it. The Guru knew this. That is why he made a caricature of himself as he set out on his first odyssey. He clad himself in a gown half green and half white; on one foot he had a proper shoe, on the other a worn out slipper, on his head he donned a Qalandar's cap, and around his neck a cap necklace of skulls; and upon his forehead he wore the saffron mark of the Hindu *sadhus*. What a diffusion of identity! His composite garb belonged to no single community. It signified that he belonged to none of the prevalent orders. That he could be identified only as a human being. And all this his caricature did announce, even while people were amused by it.

The Guru often indulged in shockingly irreverent behaviour through whose dramatic comicality he would stir people's minds and then stamp them with the impress of a sublime truth. One is immediately reminded of his visit to Hardwar where crowds of

Hindus had thronged to make oblations to their departed ancestors. Standing in the river, they were throwing handfuls of water towards the Sun in the east. Standing amidst them, the Guru began to throw water towards the west. People around him were surprised and asked him as to what he was doing. "I am watering my fields in the Punjab," he replied. They laughed at him and said, "How can your handfuls of water reach your fields that are over two hundred miles away?" The Guru replied, "If my water cannot reach even two hundred miles on this earth, how can yours reach your ancestors in the world beyond?"

A sudden truth was driven home and a detached appreciation of the whimsicality and contradiction in the bliss folk-ritual. It promptly reduced the ritual to complete insignificance.

A similar device seems to have been adopted when the Guru made a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. Footsore and weary, he quietly lay down in the precincts of the mosque and there slunk into sleep with feet towards the *Kaaba*. That annoyed other pilgrims, one of whom kicked him, saying, "You irreverent one, why have you turned your feet towards the House of God?" The Guru calmly replied, "Please be not amiss. I am an ignorant fellow. Just turn my feet in a direction where God is not." The *Quran* had asserted that "Allah is in the East and the West. So withersoever you turn, there is the face of God." He was then asked whether he was a Muslim or Hindu. "Neither," he replied, "I am only effigy made of the five elements." Every ring of sublime truth leaves the question asked belittled. That was the style of Nanak's 'higher humour.'

Whenever he saw a moral incongruity practised, his soul was pricked and he unveiled the absurdity of the ostentation in a humour-tinged disclaimer. A Hindu, a Brahmin himself, had been employed by the Muslim rulers to collect the tax levies on Hindu pilgrims (including Brahmins) and cattle. The Guru saw him 'purifying' his cooking quarters by plastering them with cowdung. In a verse he portrayed the comical incongruity thus:

*While you tax the cow and the Brahmin,  
How can the cow-dung save you?  
(On the one hand) you wear the dhoti, the saffron-mark  
and the rosary,*

(On the one hand) you eat out of the hands of barbarians.

Within you worship (the idols), outside you recite the Quran,

And observe the Turkish code.

Shed your hypocrisy, O Brahmin,

Only through the Name (of the Lord) you may swim across.

During his travels the Guru met a multi-millionaire, one Duni Chand, who was mighty proud of his riches. Him the Guru gave a small needle to keep and return in the hereafter. Without thought he accepted it and took it home and gave it to his wife. He told her of his encounter with the Guru and the purpose for which he had been entrusted with the needle. "You are quite a simpleton," his wife said, "How will you take it to the other world?" Realising his foolishness, he took the needle back to the Guru and pleaded his inability to take it to the other world. "If all your riches you will be able to carry with you, why not this little needle?" The message immediately went home.

An unusual genre of humour is the 'riddle' and Guru Nanak knew how to employ this technique as well. Two incidents of his life come instantly to mind. In the first, the Guru went to a village where he was shabbily treated, followed by another village where he was made heartily comfortable. He left the former village blessing its people, "May you always prosper here." The people of the second village he apparently cursed. "May you be dispersed." Mardana, the Guru's companion, remarked, "I do not understand your pronouncements, Lord. Those who maltreated you, you blessed, those who welcomed you, you cursed." The Guru said, "Mardana ! I would like the wicked to stay put so that their wickedness remains contained in one place. On the other hand, I would like the virtuous to disperse so that they may spread their goodness wherever they go." The intent of the quizzical paradox become clear to Mardana who observed "Wise are your riddles, Master".

Another example that impresses one pertains to the time when the Guru made up his mind to install Bhai Lahina as his successor. When he first came to see him in Kartarpur, the Guru had enquired of Bhai Lahina his name. When he said it was *Lahina* (which in Punjabi means, the money

due back), the Guru said, "If you are *Lahina*, then I have *dena*" (*dena* in Punjabi means to give back). This was no witticism, it was indeed a prophetic statement. Lahina, then on, never left the Master and served him so dutifully that the Guru decided to rename him as Angad (the limb of my limb) and install him as his successor. Thus he was to receive from the Guru what even his own sons could not.

But the sons were loath to give up. They assembled the elders among their kinsfolk to pressurise the Guru to revise his decision. The elders pleaded with the Guru, "your sons are worthy individuals, both wise as well as spiritually inclined. Why are you preferring Lahina over them to be your spiritual successor?" The Guru said, "they are worthy persons no doubt, but they do not have the vision of Lahina." He went on to say further, "Do you want a proof?" and without waiting for a reply, he picked up a coin and closed it in his fist in the presence of everyone. Then he asked his elder son, Sri Chand, "My son, tell me what is my hand?" He replied, "Father, I have no doubt, you are holding a coin in your closed hand." Then he turned to his younger son Lakhmidas and repeated his query. Lakhmidas dittoed what his elder brother had said. The Guru then turned to Guru Angad Dev said. "O Divine Master, I am unable to fathom what is in your hand. It contains all the nine treasures and the eighteen spiritual powers. It contains entire universe, and even God Himself." Thereupon Guru Nanak turned to the assembled elders and said "Have you seen, my sons cannot see beyond a coin. Succession to this spiritual throne is only the right of one with the vision of Guru Angad. So he has rightly been installed."

Thus it was that Guru Nanak softened the irksome angularities of ticklish situations with humour. His humour always had stamp of sublimity which introduced kindly beneficence into social judgments. Argument yielded spontaneously to the genial influence of his humour. His humour had a subtle force that weakend the strength of whatever he sought to change. It was never a humour for humour's sake. It always had human upliftment as its aim. It was a rightminded antidote of sympathetic pain. It was sublime humour – Guru Nanak style.

# No Food TABOOS !

## Essence of The Faith

**T**he first response to the title of this essay is predictable: certainly there are no food taboos in Sikhism. This is after all a young, modern, vibrant faith, very practical in its doctrines and sensible in its beliefs. But there is always a hooker.

What set me thinking about food restrictions was something that happened about twenty-five years ago and I have heard periodic echoes of the issue over the years. For about three months, I was the Secretary of our major, and at that time the only, gurdwara in New York. We used to meet once a month, then it became once a week.

More regular in attendance than any others were some young, single Sikhs, mostly students, living in the city. I think what attracted them was the socialising and the free community lunch that always followed the *langar* service. I could relate to that and to them. Often we would spend half a Sunday at the gurdwara and then gather at someone's apartment to shoot the breeze and solve the problems of the world!

One day a group of young friends volunteered to provide the community lunch following the weekly service. Of course, they would not prepare a traditional meal but offered to serve ham and cheese sandwiches instead. I thought it was a great idea. When I broached the management committee however, all hell broke loose. How could I think of sandwiches, I was asked? I offered pizza but the reaction



[Photograph by Malkiat Singh.]

was not much better. I was told in no uncertain terms that the meal must be a simple Punjabi meal - vegetables, beans, unleavened flat bread (*phulkas*). Rice could be added or substituted for the bread, if necessary. Accompaniment of pickle and a good dessert would round up the menu. The preparations did not have to be simple and, depending upon the host, could be elaborate, but the menu was to be strictly vegetarian and under no circumstances was it to depart substantially from the traditional Punjabi meal.

I too adore Punjabi food and more so with each passing year that I live outside a Punjabi milieu. But I wonder at the unwritten code on food proscription that seems to operate at Sikh gatherings. Where in Sikh history or theology does it say that all meals are to be vegetarian or prepared in a particular way? And following religious services at homes I have partaken of community meals which were so extensive and elaborate that they would rival the spread at the fanciest restaurant.

Such a feast raises the obvious question: is that what the Guru intended when he initiated the concept of a community meal (*langar*) following a religious service?

History provides us some sensible ways of looking at what we believe and what we actually do. Indeed Sikhs observe no food taboos as are found among the Jews, Muslims or Hindus, among others. Of the two dominant religions in India, the Hindus eat no beef while the Muslims will not come near pork. The Sikhs find common ground by finding both kinds of flesh acceptable. It is true nevertheless, that a great majority of Sikhs do not eat beef since many of them come from a Hindu background. In fact in Punjab, before India was partitioned in 1947, neither beef nor pork was easily available in deference to the strong beliefs of the two majority religions. Also many if not most Hindus are obligatory vegetarians. Observing Jains eat no eggs nor onions either.

Consequently, most Sikhs never acquired a taste for either beef or pork but are content with chicken, mutton or lamb. Landlocked Punjab does not have much of a variety in fish, but it is enjoyed in the limited quantity that it is available.

Throughout Sikh history, there have been movements or subsets of Sikhism which have espoused vegetarianism. I think there is no basis for such dogma or practice in Sikhism. Certainly Sikhs do not think that



a vegetarian's achievements in spirituality are easier or higher. It is surprising to see that vegetarianism is such an important facet of Hindu practice in light of the fact that animal sacrifice was a significant and much valued Hindu Vedic ritual for ages.

Guru Nanak in his writings clearly rejected both sides of the arguments - on the virtues of vegetarianism or meat eating - as banal and so much nonsense. Nor did he accept the idea that a cow was somehow more sacred than a horse or a chicken. He also refused to be drawn into a contention on the differences between flesh and greens, for instance.

History tells us that to impart his message, Nanak cooked meat at an important Hindu festival in Kurukshetra. Having cooked it, he certainly did not waste it, but probably served it to his followers and ate himself. History is quite clear that Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh were accomplished and avid hunters. The game was cooked and put to good use, to throw it away would have been an awful waste.

Sikhs also do not respond to the Semitic commandment on avoiding animals with cloven hoofs. And one Semitic practice clearly rejected in the Sikh code of conduct is eating flesh of an animal cooked in a ritualistic manner; this would mean kosher and *halal* meat. The reason again does not lie in religious tenet but in the view that killing an animal with a prayer is not going to ennoble the flesh. No ritual, regardless of who conducts it, is going to do any good either to the animal or to the diner. Let man do what he must to assuage his hunger. If what he gets, he puts to good use and shares with the needy, then it is well used and well spent, otherwise not.



The community meal (*langar*) that the Sikhs serve in their gurdwaras has several purposes. Much of India even now is bound in traditions of caste. In the Hindu caste system, the high and the low castes do not mix socially, do not eat from the same kitchen. The food of a Brahmin is considered defiled if the shadow of an untouchable or a Muslim falls upon it.

Sikhism set out to break these barriers. In the gurdwara, the meal is served to people who sit in a row. You may not choose who to sit next to; it may even be an 'untouchable'. You may not ask to be served by someone special. The food is prepared by volunteers from the community in a community kitchen. Men, women and children, rich and poor alike, work together to cook and to serve.

This is also where young and old, children and adults, learn the concept of service. The food is available to all; kings and the homeless have partaken of it. Emperor Akbar who ruled India in the sixteenth century enjoyed such a meal. In this country, most gurdwaras do not have *langar* service operating all day but one that serves only one meal at the conclusion of a service. Therefore, whatever food is left over is either carted home by those who wish, or is delivered to a centre for the needy.

In the sixties many Western hippies trekking through India found gurdwaras an easy place for a quick and free meal; countless homeless people enjoy this Sikh hospitality every day. It is a way for the ordinary Sikh to thank God from whom all blessings



flow. Service to the needy and sharing one's blessings with others is a cornerstone of the Sikh way of life and it starts in the community kitchen. It is a recognition of the principle that even God has little meaning or relevance to an empty belly. The prayers of the congregation and their spirit of service make the meal special, not the variety in the menu.

The usual menu in a gurdwara is simple : one vegetable, a daal, some beans, a handful of rice and *phulkas*. This is what the poorest people in Punjab eat. The ingredients are what the simplest home in Punjab would have. Fancier dishes are avoided even if one can afford them for the purpose is not to instill envy in others or to show off one's own riches. If meat is avoided, it is not because of any canon but because the menu should be such that everybody can afford and anybody can eat; something nobody will have any compunctions or reservations about.

Remember that gurdwaras are open to all and often frequented by Hindus and Muslims alike. The menu for the langar at the gurdwara has to provide the least common denominator in the local cultural tradition.

I have heard there are a few, rare gurdwaras in India where meat is served at times. I emphasise that such gurdwaras are few and in them, service of meat is rare. I suppose the practice started sometime ago for certain historical reasons and has continued. No harm in it as long the people coming there are aware of it.

It is not a matter of Sikh doctrine but of consideration for others and common sense. Some historians contend that meat was often served in *langar* at the time of Guru Angad. History has it that Guru Amar Das, well before he became a Guru, visited Guru Angad. On that day, some Sikhs had donated a large quantity of fish which was being served in the community meal. Amar Das had been a devout Hindu and a vegetarian until that time. Some historians say that he was somewhat squeamish about it but,

now that he had become a Sikh, accepted the fish as a gift from the Guru's kitchen.

Others suggest that Guru Angad, knowing full well that Amar Das was a vegetarian, directed the *sevadars* not to offer him the fish. Considering the love of nature and of God's creation in the writings of the Gurus, wanton killing of animals would not be condoned, not would be their ritual sacrifice for gustatory satisfaction or otherwise.

There are other benefits to a simple but sufficient lunch after a service. The attendees know that they do not have to rush home and feed the kids or themselves. The mind is not distracted by the chores waiting at home; time off from them is a welcome respite, however brief. One can relax and enjoy the service single-mindedly.

Hindus have often debated that what you eat determines your spiritual status. Sikhs do not believe this. With such practical and liberal reasoning, some strange and unorthodox practices can also arise. Khushwant Singh speaks of a gurdwara in Australia which serves beer with the food. Given Sikh history and teaching, that just wouldn't do.

In his many writings, Guru Nanak offered only two criteria for food taboos, both are based on common sense. Anything that will harm the body or mind is to be shunned. And all things edible are available and permissible in moderation.

Over the years, I have seen many variations on the theme but to discuss and debate unnecessarily what to eat or not to eat in Sikhism is to transform what a modicum of intelligence and common sense can easily resolve into a mesh with the complexity of the Gordian knot.

**Dr. I.J. Singh**

[This article was first published as an essay, 'Food Taboos in Sikhism: A View With a Bias' Dr. I.J. Singh, The Centennial Foundation, Guelph, Ontario, Canada, 1998.]





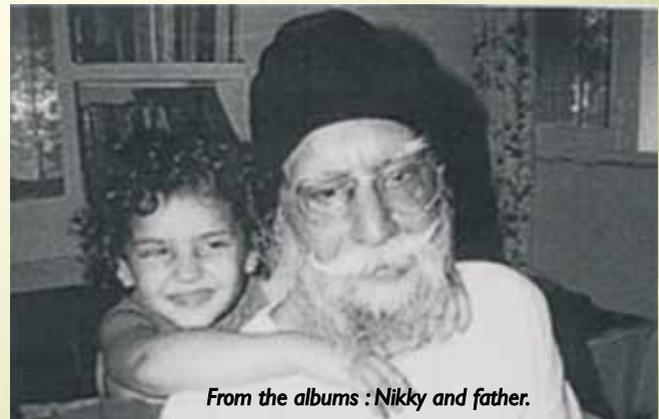
Nikky in Chandigarh in 2011. From left Roopinder Singh, Manjit Singh Khera, Sarah Singh, Nikky and Bhayee Sikandar Singh. Mrs Inderjit Kaur is on the wheelchair.

# Coming Home !

## To the Punjabi University

*“Home is where one starts from” - T.S. Eliot,*

**I**n December 2011, I traveled home to Patiala, from the Maine, USA to give a lecture on the Global Relevance of Sikh Scriptures. My profound thanks to the Vice Chancellor Dr. Jaspal Singh for having given me the special opportunity of returning “home”. It was, besides, a great privilege for me to be at the Punjabi University Campus, more so to be welcomed as the ‘daughter of the University’. The golden moment was very precious (*‘sone te suhaga’* as my grandmother would say). This vital institution of the Punjab is generating dynamic new avenues of research and learning, which are much needed in our dangerously divided world. Its



*From the albums : Nikky and father.*



**Prof Harbans Singh (2nd from left) and Giani Gurdit Singh, flanked by Roopinder Singh (left) and Ravinder Singh (right)**

environment is all green, and the flowers at the main gate on that brilliant and sunny day under clear blue skies were spectacular. Although I cannot quite express the joy I felt being back on campus, my thanks extend to each and everybody who made it so wonderful.

## Nostalgia

From its very inception in the early, Sixties, the Punjabi University was my home. My father, Professor Harbans Singh, served as Member-Secretary of the Commission that led to creation of the University at Patiala in 1962. Maharaja Yadvindra Singh was President of the Commission and the Punjabi University began in the Baradari Palace built by the Maharaja's grandfather, combining Victorian and Mughal styles. President S. Radhakrishnan inaugurated this important institution set up in 'post-colonial' Punjab for the advancement of Punjabi language, literature, and culture. Punjabi language, popularly spoken by Muslims, Hindu and Sikhs alike in pre-colonial Punjab, had been severely

marginalised during the Raj, and the linguistic divisions fomented by the State led to the mindless Partition of 1947. Founders of the Punjabi University well knew that human language does not simply mirror reality, it also has the power to transform reality, and so language was to be the resource for understanding both the heritage of the Punjab as well as its entry into future horizons. Just as in nature new qualities can be engendered by the coming together of elements in new ways, so too claim philosophers like Philip Wheelwright and Paul Ricoeur, that new semantic juxtapositions and combinations can produce a new reality.

## The Inception

Main offices of the University were first lodged on the first floor of Rajendra Kothi, surrounded by beautiful gardens, and we lived on its upper floor. In its haloed Senate Hall with elegant chandeliers, my friends and I would watch lectures being delivered from the balcony above. Layers of history enriched this site, for once upon

a time it was the royal women in *purdah*, who watched from here affairs of the State – without being seen! Of course we were not interested in the happenings below. As kids, all we wanted was to distract a few sets of eyes from the lecturer towards us, but for our success we got into trouble with Bira whose sharp ears would catch our whispers and chuckles from our secret spot.

The first convocation took place in the manicured Baradari gardens interspersed with the statue of Queen Victoria and Maharaja Rajendra Singh, with ponds full of blooming lilies and trees loaded with delicious *langra* mangoes. Distinguished guests were hosted in the princely setting. Every evening, my father would go for a walk with his revered teacher Bhai Jodh Singh (the first Vice Chancellor) to the remote outskirts of the city, which is now the expansive and multifaceted Punjabi University Campus.

### The Pioneers

When the University moved to its new campus, my family too moved and spent a year at the Centre for World Religions at Harvard University. Upon his return, my father became Chair of the first academic department of religious studies in India. During the fifth birth centennial celebrations of Guru Nanak,

## A Dynamic Guide

The vital factor for my memorable ‘return’ was Sardar Tarlochan Singh. He is an inspirational leader who connects Sikhs across diasporic communities in the UK, Canada, USA, France, Singapore, and diasporic Sikhs with those in India. He has witnessed both segments of my life. A few years ago, he visited Colby College in Maine. Through his lectures and informal interactions, Colby students and faculty gained immensely from his professional experience in different branches of the Indian Government, as also his expertise on minority issues and human rights. When he visited the State Capitol in Augusta, he received a standing ovation from the House of Representatives and the Senate. Wherever he goes – and he travels widely – “Tarlochan Uncle’ brings great pride to the Sikhs. He has also been a very close family friend whom I have known since I was a child. Whenever he would visit our home, my father would be absolutely thrilled and the two of them had long, (sometimes) fiery conversations. Through newspapers and journals, his voice of reason reaches Punjabis settled in different corners of the world. With his broad vision, his innovative ideas, his steely courage, and his boundless energy, Tarlochan Uncle is charting new territories for the community and promoting important channels of engagement and exchange amongst Sikhs worldwide.



Students of the Punjabi University at their open-air theatre.



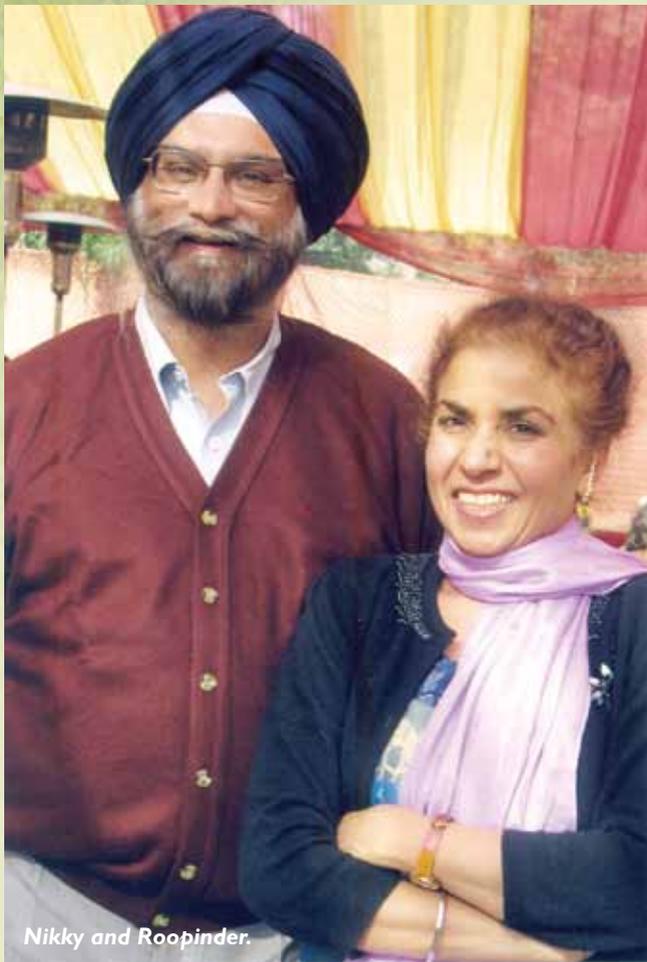
*Prof Harbans Singh's house in the Punjabi University campus, Patiala.*

the *Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies* was established by the Panjabi University. The department launched the *Journal of Religious Studies* and hosted many international conferences, bringing distinguished scholars to the Campus to foster understanding and peace amongst people of different religions and nationalities. My father also travelled extensively, lecturing on different facets of Sikhism in Japan, Belgium, Holland, England and the USA. He was an active member of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and also joined the International Consultation in Search of Non-Violent Alternatives in Derry, Northern Ireland. Through his scholarship, he developed many close friendships. Since there were not too many hotels in Patiala, we often had dear friends from far (youngsters then but now distinguished Professors like Paul Courtright, Steve Dunning, Joyce Pettigrew) and near (like Dr. Balbir Singh and Mohinder Kaur) stay at our home. Friends and relatives would come and our house resounded with animated discussions on Sikh politics and history. But my larger home was the vibrant Punjabi University Campus itself, where I was exposed to the social and cultural side of the Punjab during many events and celebrations. There were kirtan darbars, poetry symposiums, and theatre

productions. Mesmerising lyrics of poets like Shiv Kumar Batalvi filled the air. It was from here that I left for the USA in the seventies.

That 'home-ness' I felt on the Punjabi University campus carried on, for I chose to live on campuses in high school, college, graduate school, and even as faculty at Colby College. But across the continents, I longed for the Punjabi University Campus where my parents lived and where I belonged. I would get very homesick for its sounds, sights and smells. I returned here as often as I could. I studied Sikh scripture with respected Gyaniji and over the years and, have drawn my emotional and intellectual sustenance from this University. After father passed away in May 1998, it became very difficult to return and face the loss of my past.

My recent return therefore was very healing. The familiar childhood space filled an existential emptiness. Meeting family and friends and classmates from primary school unleashed a flood of memories that made the past real for me. Sharing my six themes on relevance of the Guru Granth Sahib with such a personal audience gave a visceral meaning to my academic training in the West.



Nikky and Roopinder.

It was an enormous honour for me to receive the 'Shawl of Honour' from the University, and it continues to keep me snug in the winter of Maine! Just as it provided great joy and freedom, coming home to the Punjabi University invested me with sense of responsibility too: "I must work harder to create arabesques of understanding between East and West".

### Inspirational

The warm welcome from the University has inspired me to take on new scholarly projects, which would join the two spheres in one cozy 'home.' In the 20th century, leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King used 'home' as a popular image for our world community. In the words of King, "We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to

live with each other in peace" (*Where Do We Go From Here*, Beacon Press, 1967, p. 167).

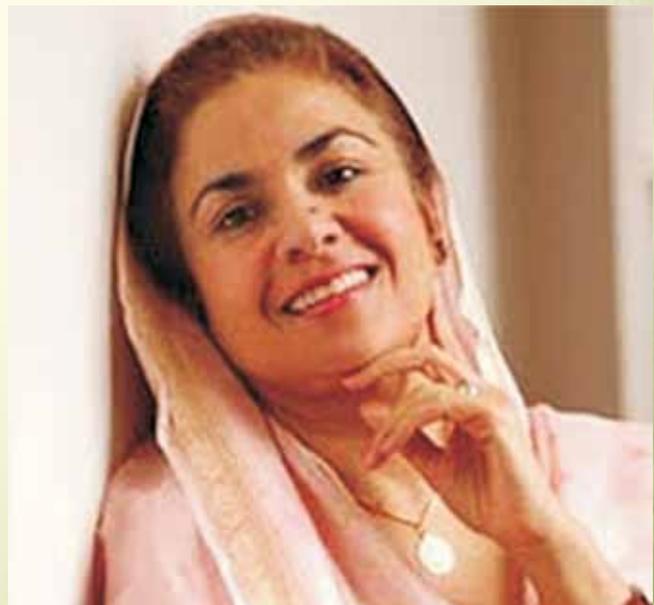
More than five centuries ago, Guru Nanak offered the imaginary of a tiny home (*kothri*): "*Ehu jagu sace ki hai kothri sace ka vicu vasu*: This world is the house of Truth, and Truth dwells in here" (SGGS: 463). With the singular Truth as ontological foundation, we must create a home in which care, respect, and love are extended to all family members irrespective of caste, class, religion, gender, nationality or ethnicity.

Indeed the message of the Guru Granth Sahib is most pertinent in our global society where we are linked – technologically and geographically – but 'segregated' at the basic human level: we have the mechanical conveniences without the feeling of home ! Our illustrious Gurus urged us to extend the domestic, psychological, and spiritual comfort and unity of one's own home to all of humanity.

We will concretise their vision if we shift our political and international strategies that value relationships over conflict, if we engage in life-giving and life-caring moral actions over war and destruction, if we reach out to converse and familiarise with others over fear and distrust. The Punjabi University fosters these values. Here Guru Nanak's verse comes out alive: *Nanak dar ghar ek hai avar na duji jae*: 'O' Nanak, there is only one portal, one Home, no other place to go!' (SGGS: 60).

Yes, home is where one starts from....

*Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh*



# Poet Of The Pulse Of Punjab

**It may be impossible to take the poet Patar out of Punjab or Punjab out of poet Surjit Patar, but despite being rooted in Punjab's soil, the poet has a voice nuanced in humanism that transcends regional barriers. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry describes how she collaborated with Patar for her various theatre productions**

**A**ward of the 2012 Padma Shri to Surjit Patar is indeed a proud moment for every Punjabi, as his identification with the Punjab is inextricably woven into the imagery and syntax of his poems. Patar cannot be separated from the sensibility and the aspirations of Punjab. It is impossible to take Patar out of Punjab and neither can the Punjab be taken out of Patar. Despite that, Patar's work reflects a universal voice that is seeped with nuanced humanism and a sense of modernity that seemed neither dated, nor trapped in regional boundaries.

A doctorate in Literature on *Transformation of Folklore in Guru Nanak Vani*, which he did from the Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, he also taught for many years at the Punjab Agricultural University in Ludhiana, while simultaneously pursuing his vocation as a poet. Among his works of poetry are *Hawa Vich Likhe Harf* (Words written in the Air), *Birkh Arz Kare* (The Voice of the Tree), *Hanere Vich Sulagdi Varnmala* (Words Smouldering in the Dark), *Lafzaan Di Dargah* (Shrine of Words), *Patjhar Di Pazeb* (Anklet of Autumn) and *Surzameen* (Music Land).

When Dr Surjit Singh Patar recites his poems, he gives us the courage to engage collectively in an imagined future. Through his poetry he has given a voice to the fragile, disrupted borders, disturbing the status quo. While rooted in the political, social and cultural specificities of a particular time and place, he plays

at the edge of what is real and what is not with a belief that poetry and theatre matters, that poetry and drama illuminates society and politics around us, and that a poet cannot run away from the world he lives in.

My relationship with Dr Surjit Singh Patar is a story of collaboration and risk-taking, of jumping into the deep end. My meeting with Patar Sahib was fortuitous and defining. On a bleak winter evening I made my way into a studio theatre where a show of the play *Blood Wedding* by Federico Garcia Lorca was being performed.

More than the production, I was transfixed by the luminous quality of the translation, the searing intensity of Lorca's poetry travelling deep into the cultural, social and emotional landscape of

## Hanere vich sulagdi Varnmala

When do I say don't ask for justice?

Or, for your rights, do not fight?

But recognize the enemy

And don't sever your own limbs

Do not dishonor your wings

In this unnecessary flight

Against sorrows we have to fight

Against poverty we have to fight

Those who exploit with the pretext of protection,

We have to fight against them

I offer my life on the edge of your sword

Who can refuse its importance?

Take care of it, keep it well burnished

Keeps its edge well honed

In the darkness writing light

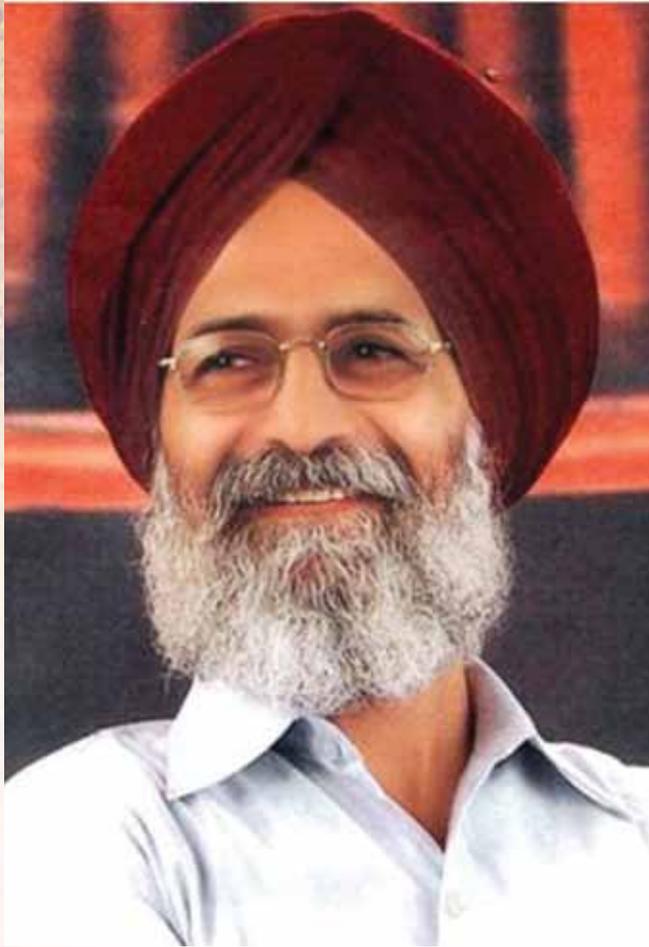
Keep it like a blaze for fire

There are times when

The sword alone is a scribe

Yet why walk the distance already walked

The road ahead is sufficiently heavy?



**The poet: Surjit Patar**

the Punjab. Patar had understood that in the theatre, language and words are never just verbal sounds but set up a whole range of propositions and possibilities. From the translation I could sense that Patar had a great feeling for the stage and was in complete empathy with the hidden text, the silences, the shades and moods behind the words. The language in the play went to the heart of everything that I knew I was looking for. I was determined to meet the writer and immediately on coming home, wrote a letter, clumsily introducing myself and inviting him to come and meet me in Chandigarh.

Many months later, on a lazy Sunday afternoon the doorbell rang, and a slightly built, laconic man with a blue turban holding an aerogram stood at the door of the house. I looked at the letter fluttering in his hands and recognised that this was the person whom I had been desperate to connect with since many months. In one instant I knew that this meeting was going to determine the course of my future work.

He has translated works for my theatre group that range from classics like Federico Garcia Lorca's, Jean Giradoux's, Jean Racine's, Girish Karnad and Henrik Ibsen, to the dramatisation of short stories, by Doris Lessing, Can Themba and Rabindranath Tagore. He has also written two original scripts based on ideas that were improvised and later structured and reassembled: *Kitchen Katha* and *Sibo In Supermarket*. Translation, adaptation and dramatisation of the various texts mentioned above, involving a delicate de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation, a risky and complicated operation was eloquently articulated by Patar "if something is lost, then something is also gained". To some extent this may be true, that the musicality of the 'source' language in the process of shifting may suffer, but conversely the musicality of the 'target' language into which it is being translated would add its own value to it.

## Candles

Light these candles.

Rise, light these candles.

There will remain,

These quarrelsome winds,

But you should light these candles.

May darkness not think the moon scared.

May night not think the sun dead.

Light these lamps to honor life.

Rise, light these candles.

Granted, the night's reign may be stubborn,

But rays of light still survive.

On dark pages, verses revealing life.

Rise, light these candles.

These cruel whirlwinds will remain,

The fall will shake away the leaves,

But this does not mean that new leaves will not grow.

Rise, light these candles.

Unafraid of the poison that spreads daily in the wind,

Nature continues to do its duty,

Of transforming poison into nectar.

Rise, light these candles.

Girls, do not cry, this is the time of Rahiras.

Do not linger on death, reflect upon the passage of time.

These difficulties will pass away.

Rise, light these candles.

*Surjit Patar*



# Prayer

*"More things are wrought by Prayer  
Than this world dreams of"*

William Shakespeare

**O**nly human beings offer prayer. It is not a speech; it is a passionate cry of the human soul, having aroused from the depth of the heart.

Prayer is not an expression of helplessness or frustration; it is a deep experience of self-confidence. It is not a collection of epithets or adjectives; it is a true statement of one's own heart and soul.

There is no apprehension of loss of prayer; rather, it is a source of pleasure, as and when it strikes to pray. Prayer is such a state of affairs when body, mind and soul become one with each other. It is an art of concentrating one's entire energies of the inner mind.

Prayer is offered by only those who have sufficient patience. In them, there is an acute desire to pray, an immense confidence in prayer and abundant divine love.

Prayer is an art of moving one's desire for fulfillment of wishes, towards God. There are certain moments when one's soul automatically bends in prayer, irrespective of one's physical condition. One's mind flies in the air, with feet firm on the earth.

Prayer is an effort to lighten such an 'aggarbatti' (incense stick), the fragrance of which reaches the sky. Sky can not come on earth, but we reach there by virtue of prayer.

The state of true prayer is that of heaving sighs and weeping naturally.

There is none on this earth who would have offered true prayer mentally, but his soul would not have touched new heights of experience.

Many people pray out of desire for fulfillment of petty wishes: it is ridiculous.

Ordinary people do not pray; they read out a list of their demands to Him. They pray for solution of their numerous problems, whereas experienced persons demand enough courage to face the problems, so that they may move in society with confidence of success in their endeavours.

Surrender before God is in itself half success. One who knows how to pray is not afraid of any suffering, torture or cruelty. Such brave persons pray like this : "O Almighty! Kindly give me the strength to change whatever can be changed, the courage to accept whatever can not be changed and wisdom to know the difference between the two."

Such people also pray thus : "O Great God! Kindly give me the confidence in my victory, and that I may confront the cruel and the cruelty with such an acute trust that I may become victorious." Those who demand blessings for all say, "O God! Whatever I desire may not be fulfilled, but whatever is right, may take place." Such like prayer is a source of satisfaction and enlightenment inside. It increases one's patience and mental peace.

In Sikhism, while offering prayers the great gurus and Guru Granth Sahib are remembered. The Almighty is thanked while remembering 'Panj Pyare' (five loved ones), 'Chaar Sahibzade' (four princes), 'Chaali Mukte' (forty emancipators), numerous worshippers,, warriors, benefactors, martyrs and all those whom God loves. Also strength is demanded from Him for future endeavours. This type of prayer is common in all religions and sects. Almost all religions have set the procedure, language and way of the prayer.

The fundamental concept of prayer is trust in His omnipotence. Prayer is offered having full faith in His

supreme power and that He has got solution for all our problems.

Prayer is answered in proportion to the quantum of trust imposed in Him. Prayer is not based on any logic; it is based purely on trust in Him. Prayer is not offered to one about whom you have doubts. The feeling of prayer is born out of the feeling of faith.

True prayer is answered even before uttering words of prayer. The words of prayer are uttered, while raising one's head a little high, with the belief that He is listening to the prayer. The eyes are closed so as to become face to face with that invisible power. Hands and feet are joined so that there is concentration in the body. There is no change in God by virtue of prayer; change takes place in the one offering prayer. We have produced persons for offering prayers like the applicants, but true prayer is the one offered by the person himself. The silent prayer offered alone in solitude leads to spiritual bliss.

Very few people tell others as to what they have demanded from Him in prayer. Voltaire prayed : "O God, make a joke of my enemies." One atheist prayed "O Waheguru, don't tease me." One philosopher said, "O God, I am grateful to you for not having accepted all my demands."

One offers prayer only when one is surrounded by hardships from all sides; one becomes familiar with difficulties. We increase our patience with prayer and, eventually, the difficulties do not appear as such. Otherwise too, the time spent in prayer is its best utilisation.

Prayer should be made with such humility as if we are totally powerless, and it should be offered with the trust that we shall do everything by virtue of our perseverance.

Those who go ahead with the work for which prayers were offered, are always successful. Prayers offered by those who sleep over the job for which it was made, go down the drain.

Prayer does not give courage; rather only courageous people offer prayers. Only those who know how to love, offer prayer.

The logic of prayer is above all other logics. One's control over oneself increases by virtue of prayer and this control starts solving one's problems.

Children have more faith in God than elders. The mental state of affairs of the person, while offering prayer, is like the mind of an innocent child. Any cleverness or cunningness does not cut ice in the process of prayer which is such a state of affair when our body goes to sleep and the soul gets awakened.

There is more tendency to pray when the life is more difficult. Due to natural calamities, the *Lamas* in Tibet spend almost whole of their lives in prayer. Where the life is difficult due to earthquake, flood, drought or volcano, people offer prayers in unison or while singing. Naturally, these people talk after their heart and not brain. At many places, prayers are offered to gods and goddesses, supposedly having different powers.

Children, uneducated and people having low I.Q. think God to be present at some higher place and not in their own minds. That is why prayer is offered loudly.

Atheists do not have faith in prayer, because they look at the entire nature duly tied in certain rules. Therefore, according to them, we ask God to violate His own rules by virtue of prayer. During war, both opposing armies pray for victory. One person prays for rain; the other one prays that it should not.

The truth is that it would rain only as per rule of nature. Some person prays for receipt of some letter, but the letter can be received only through the Post Office and not thru God. The laws of nature are inevitable. Even God can not interfere with them. According to atheists, one becomes weak by offering prayer. They say that one having self-confidence need not pray.

But even atheists do not deny that the soul touches new heights by dint of prayer. They do not object to prayer; they object to the power to whom prayer is offered. According to them, the patient should pray to the doctor and not to Him. They believe that prayer wipes away certain baseless whims and fantasies, and that collective efforts make every thing feasible. No one can deny that prayer increases mental peace, collective feelings and faith in Him, and that it promotes the tendency to seek from Him the benefit of one and all. (*Sarbatt da bhala or sarve bhavantu sukhina*)

It is beyond any shadow of doubt that true prayer is a concrete effort to understand oneself, from close quarters in right earnest and proper perspective.



Raghbir Singh Jaura

# UNDERSTANDING SUFISM



## A Vast Tapestry Woven From Divine Qualities

**J**alau'ddin Rumi was born in the year 1207 in Balkh, Afghanistan, then part of the Persian Empire. As a child he and his family escaped from Afghanistan to Konya in Turkey, as the Mongol armies invaded. Bahauddin Walad, Rumi's father, was a theologian and jurist who worked at the university of Konya. As a great religious teacher, he wrote texts of his ecstatic visions, entitled *Maarif*, that are much read today. Bahauddin took charge of Rumi's spiritual education through his childhood, and towards his end, entrusted his close friend, Sayyid Burhaneddin of Balkh, with his son's further training. Rumi was twenty-four when his father passed on and he continued with Sayyid Burhaneddin as his teacher for another nine years. During this time he learned about fasting and meditation, and he traveled to Aleppo and Damascus, centres of learning where he studied with the most renowned of teachers.

As the years passed, Rumi became an excellent scholar himself, learned in the knowledge of the sacred texts of Sufism and in his own experience of the divine. Burhaneddin eventually sought the sanctuary of a secluded life and told Rumi as he departed, "You are now ready, my son. You have no equal in any of the branches of learning. You have become a lion of knowledge. I am such a lion myself and we are not needed here and that is why I want to go. Furthermore, a great friend will come to you, and you will be each other's mirror. He will lead you to the innermost parts of the spiritual world, just as you will lead him. Each of you will complete the other, and you will be the greatest friends in the entire world." Burhaneddin had foreseen the intimate and fundamental relationship that Rumi would enter with the Sufi master Shams of Tabriz, but much later in his life.

After his years of study with Burhaneddin, Rumi took over his father's position as sheikh in the Dervish learning community of Konya: teaching, meditating, fasting and helping people in the community.

The dervish communities of Persia, Turkey and neighboring countries were centres of learning and of the practice of Sufism, which is considered as the mystical current of Islam. Sufism claims global interest and curiosity among non-Muslims, partly because so many are inspired and awakened by the powerful tales and poetry of one of its most beautiful voices, that of Jalalu'ddin Rumi. This interest is also sparked by the accessibility and appeal of the inward aspects of Sufism, the rose at the centre of the mystery the pure heart of divine love and gnosis.

Derived from the Arabic word *tasawwuf*, the root of the word Sufism is linked to the *suffa*, or veranda, of the Mosque of the Prophet in *Medina*, home to several of his greatest Companions; to *suf*, meaning wool, the traditional garment worn by the mystics of Islam; to *safa*, purity; and to the Greek *sophia*, wisdom. Each of these derivations indicates important aspects of what Sufism represents. As a scientific and spiritual manner of self-purification and self-realisation, Sufism represents the initiate path (*tariqa*), the inner reality of Islam (*haqiqa*) that complements its law (*shari'a*) and deepens the awareness of its profound understanding. The central doctrine of Sufism is that of Divine Unity: *La ilaha illa 'Llah*, there is no God but God, who is One. The practice of Sufism is the seeking of truth through love and devotion to God, a Sufi is a lover of Truth, of the perfection of the absolute. Rumi explains how far we are from the attainment of unity with this wonderful tale of *The Elephant in the Dark House*.

*There was an elephant in a dark house, brought by some Hindus for exhibition. Many people went to see it and had to enter the dark stable to do so. Because it was so dark they could not make out the form of the elephant at all and had to work with their hands to identify its being, each person using his palm to find the shape. The hand of one fell on the creature's trunk and he said, "This is a water pipe." The hand of another touched the ear and found a fan. Another handled the elephant's leg and found a pillar, while another touched the back and discovered a throne. There were those who heard descriptions from these folk and made their own identifications, and there were still others who interpreted one shape as against another, all very diverse and contrary.*

Like the elephant, existence, according to Sufi cosmology, is like an unimaginably vast tapestry woven from divine qualities. Only by distancing ourselves from the surface immediately before us can we hope to find its meaning and our own place in the tapestry. Each moment God manifests Himself to us in His creation. In order to see the truth, a Sufi must see with his inner being, in harmony with divine nature. Through devotion to and selfless remembrance of God, Allah, the Sufi disciple's attention to the self falls away, and in turning to God, his heart and soul are transformed by God's divine attributes. In this spiritual state of the self-having-passed-away-in-God, or *fana'*, a Sufi existentially realises the Truth. This Divine Unity is the aim of Sufism.

The years of intense study, meditation, fasting, spiritual exercises, teaching and absorbing the sacred scriptures of Islam had ripened Rumi's soul for a powerful spiritual awakening. The ground of being was fertile and ready to be sown: Rumi had become an eminent professor of religion in Konya and a highly attained mystic.

At the age of thirty-seven, Jalalu'ddin Rumi met Shams of Tabriz, a wandering mystic of great spiritual power. This meeting, which has been much chronicled, was like the spark that ignites the flame. It set two souls on fire with God's essence and produced in Rumi a poet and a lover of humanity like few before or since. It is said that Shams had been wandering from country to country, from community, in search of a vessel, a being that would receive his burning knowledge of God, and when he finally met Rumi his spiritual thirst was satiated.

The two spent days and nights conversing about God and the mysteries, and their first encounter was as brief as it was powerful. Rumi was intoxicated both with Shams and with God, inebriated by a love few could understand, and this caused disturbance in his religious community. Sensing that trouble could come from Rumi's students, Shams suddenly vanished, leaving Rumi in a vacuum of unbearable loss. It was then perhaps, to fill the void, that he began to recite poetry; it is told that he would go to the mosque and there, holding onto a pillar and whirling around it, he chanted verse upon verse of praise for God, an expression of gratefulness for having been awakened by Shams. Rumi sent his son, Sultan Veled, in search of Shams, and the boy eventually found him in Damascus and brought him

back home to his father. This time Shams stayed, living in Rumi's house and marrying a young girl brought up with the family. The intensity of Rumi's relationship with Shams was rekindled and so were the jealousies and concerns of the religious community that so loved Rumi. One evening Shams mysteriously vanished; some say he was murdered by Rumi's students. Rumi went in search of Shams and reached Damascus where, unable to find his friend, he turned back and realised that the search was not for Shams but rather that the search was inner, looking within his own spirit for the voice of the divine:

*"Why should I search?  
I am the same as he is.  
His essence speaks through me.  
His essence speaks through me."*

In the absence of the object of his worshipful admiration, Rumi was forced to turn inward, to search inwardly for the fuel his great fire needed. This was when Rumi became a true mystic, forged by the fire of his own passion that now burned solely for itself. This was when Jalalu'ddin Rumi was able to fulfill his old teacher's prediction that he would one day "drown men's souls in a fresh life and the immeasurable abundance of God...and bring life to the dead of this false world with...meaning and love."

Rumi's genius is recorded in two great volumes of literature: the *Divani Shamsi Tabriz*, many verses of the most stunningly beautiful poetry, and the *Mathnawi*, 24,000 verses of a mystic's vision spanning the whole spectrum of life: from religion, to culture, sexuality, domestic matters, and character traits, as well as details of the natural world, history, and philosophy. Both the *Divani Shamsi Tabriz* and the *Mathnawi* are amongst the greatest spiritual works written by one person and are a testimony to Rumi's great power and authority as a mystic and as a completed human being in whom the divine attributes are embodied. Rumi's own words in the preface of the *Mathnawi* give the dimensions of how powerful, how profound, and how transformative the poet's work is his words are "... the roots of the roots of the roots of the roots of the Religion, unveiling the mysteries of attainment and certainty; and which is the greatest science of God and the clearest way of

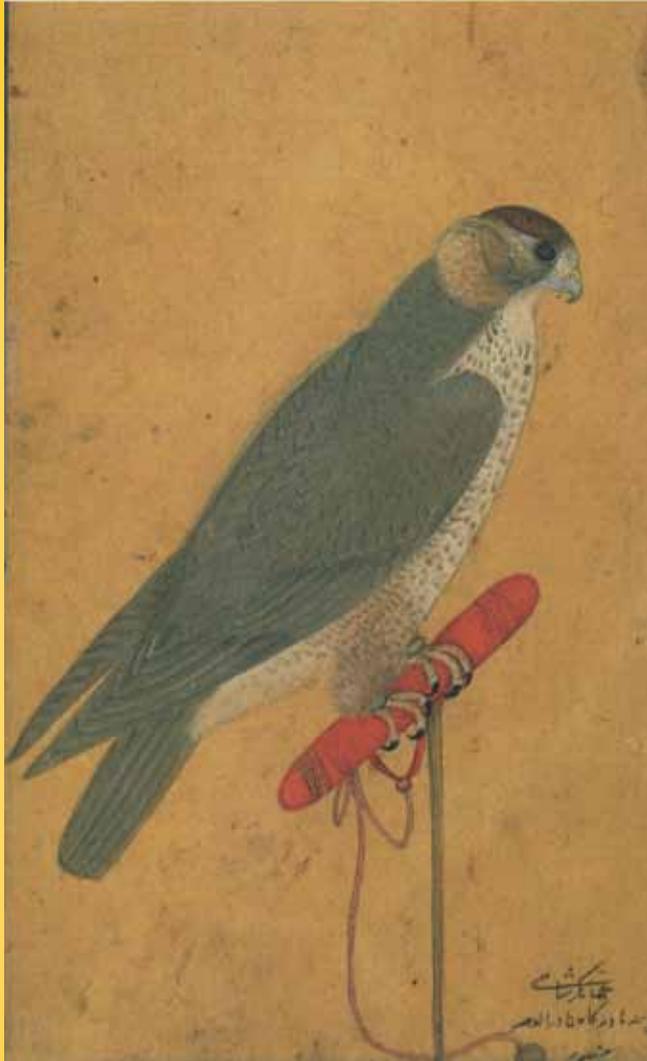
God and the most manifest evidence of God. It is the heart's paradise, having fountain and boughs.... within it, the righteous eat and drink, and the free rejoice and are happy; and like the Nile of Egypt it is a refreshment to those who patiently endure but a grief to the people of Pharaoh and the faithless... it is the cure of hearts and the purge of sorrows, and the interpreter of the Qur'an, and an abundant source of gifts, and the cleansing of character...since God observes it and protects it."



Rumi has influenced millions of people across the centuries with his poetry and his vision of our relationship with God as a path of love. Today, he is considered the most popular poet even in the United States and his verses are published in books, filmed on video, and set to music on CDs so that he remains the flame that keeps alive the force of the divine in every living heart that is touched by his words.

*(Introduction from 'The Illustrated Rumi' A Treasury of Wisdom From The Poet of The Soul)*

# The Ladder To Heaven



The worldly sense is the ladder to this world,  
the religious sense is the ladder to Heaven.  
Seek the well being of that sense from the physician,  
beg the well being of this sense  
from the man beloved of God.  
The spiritual way ruins the body and,  
having ruined it, restores it to prosperity,  
Ruins the house  
for the sake of the golden treasure,

and with that same treasure  
builds it better than before,  
Cut off the water and cleanse the river-bed,  
then cause drinking-water to flow in it,  
Cut the skin and draw out the barb,  
then make fresh skin grow over the wound,  
Raze the fortress and take it from the infidel,  
then rear a hundred towers and ramparts.  
Sometimes the action of God appears like this,  
sometimes the contrary :  
true religion is nothing but bewilderment.  
I mean not one bewildered  
In such wise that his back is turned on Him,  
but one bewildered and drowned and drunken  
with the Beloved.

His face is set toward the Beloved,  
while the other's face is just his own.  
Look long on the face of everyone,  
watch attentively : it may be that by doing service  
you will come to know the face of the Saint.  
Since many a devil has the face of Adam,  
you should not put a band in every hand,  
For as the fowler whistles  
to decoy a bird he is bent on catching,  
Which bears the note of its mate  
and comes down from the air  
and finds itself entrapped,  
So does a vile man steal  
the language of dervishes  
to fascinate and deceive one who is simple.  
The work of holy men is as light and heat,  
the work of the ungodly is trickery and shamelessness.

*Taken from **The Illustrated Rumi – a new translation by Philip Dunn, Manuela Dunn Mascetti and RA Nicholson.***

# Thematic Philately

## An Interview with Paramjeet Singh

**A**n international exhibition on philately was recently held in New Delhi where seventy nine countries participated. Organised by India Post in association with the Philatelic Congress of India, it was one of the biggest events in India after the Commonwealth Games.

The exhibition was highly professional and showcased some of the finest and rarest stamp collections from around the world. S. Paramjeet Singh from Patna in Bihar, bagged the Silver Medal for his thematic collection on 'Sikhism and Sikhs'.

Here is a brief interview by Rupinder Kaur with him where he talks about his passion for philately and the motivation to excel in this trade.

**RK:** Many congratulations for your recent achievement. How long have you been involved in philately?

**PS:** This achievement has not come overnight. It involves long perseverance and visiting several exhibitions, untiring efforts and constant support by friends and family.

**RK:** How were you motivated into philately?

**PS:** The basic awareness about stamps came to me in childhood days. When I was in Class I, we were given a project on stamps which only two children could complete in the class and were duly awarded by the Principal. Luckily, I was one of them and since then, there has been no looking back!

After finishing my matriculation in 1980, I once visited a friend's home where his younger brother showed me his stamp album. I somehow did not like the display and decided to start my own stamp collection.

In those days people used to frequently write letters, rather than send e-mails. With so many letters coming home, this solved my need. Simultaneously,

I starting buying stamps and also exchanged these to increase my collection. Our postman used to help me a lot in collecting stamps.

**RK:** When did you start participating in stamp exhibitions?

**PS:** I visited the Patna GPO where SP Mukherjee, then President Philatelic Congress, guided me in exhibiting my stamp collection. Later Dr. RS Gandhi,



**The first Sikh-theme stamp as issued by the British in India, in 1935.**

Vice President, Philatelic Congress of India and NK Jain, a senior philatelist from Bihar took special care to prepare the exhibit and in displaying this.

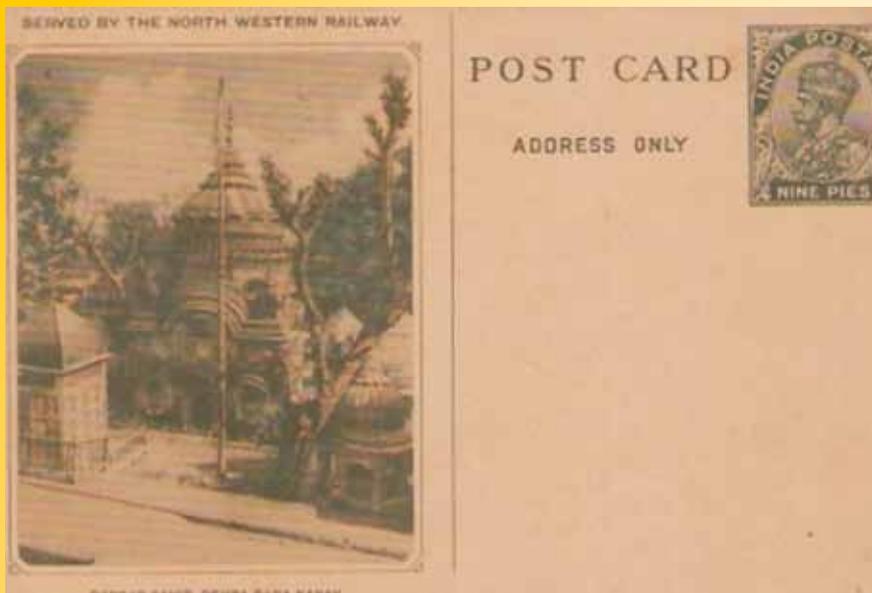
I displayed my collection for the first time at the Bihar Philatelic Exhibition, (BIPEX-82), in two frames. Moving from state to national level, I exhibited at the Indian National Exhibition, INPEX-84, at Delhi, in three frames. At the International World Philatelic exhibition INDIPEX-97, I was awarded the bronze medal. This provided my collection with an international identity! Thanks to the advice and cooperation of DN Jatia, then President of Federation of International de Philately, I also Exhibited my collection at the Nepal South Asia Philatelic Exhibition, NEPHIL-2011 at Kathmandu. In the recent Indipex-2011, I extended my collection and displayed these in five frames.

**RK:** What made you choose the theme on Sikhism?

**PS:** At the beginning I was unsure about what actually to collect. When the term 'Thematic Philately'

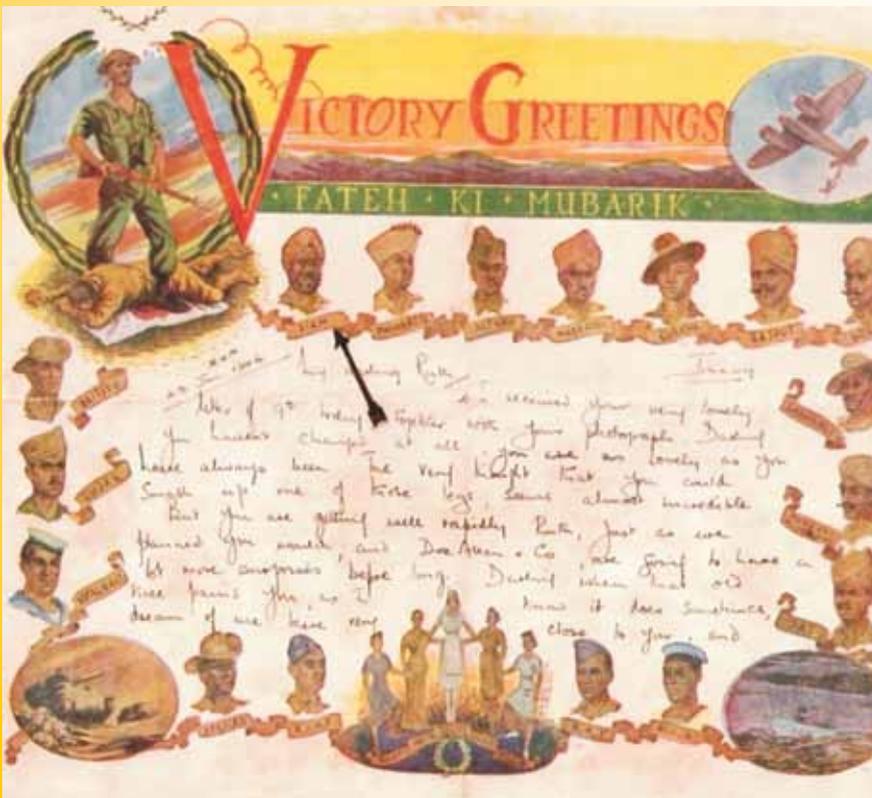


**S. Paramjeet Singh with his 'Large Silver Medal', won in 2011.**



**Postcard of Darbar Sahib at Dera Baba the Nanak issued by the North Western Railway in 1935.**

came to my knowledge, what was obvious immediately was my faith in Sikhism. I shared my views with late NK Jain who advised me to ahead. In my collection, I have tried to capture the essence of Sikhism, its followers, its culture, its spirit, its architecture, its sportsmanship, its patriotism and contribution in the broadest sense as acknowledged and represented by



**A greeting aerogramme of 1946, including the depiction of a Sikh soldier.**

the government of our country as well as by numerous countries of the world in pictorial form.

RK: Did you face any challenges while collecting items for your collection?

PS: In the early days, whenever I visited any exhibition and tried to show this collection to people, they would comment, "Your subject is not general, it is communal." This criticism would hurt me deeply. But some of my friends stood by me and gave ideas to develop my theme from various perspectives. My struggle turned into a success when the same theme was duly acknowledged by the F.I.P and I was also given an award.

RK: Is philately only a collection of stamps?

PS: No, philately is a broad terminology which covers every element of postal paraphernalia, like stamps, both commemorative and definitive, first day covers, special covers, postcards, postmarks, meter marks, aerogramme, air graphs, inland letters, maximum cards and special flight covers, cinderella, meter franked covers, etc.

RK: What are your future plans?

PS: In the future, I want my collection to be published in the form of a book so that everyone who loves 'Sikhism and Stamps' can refer to it.

RK: How does your family look at your passion?

PS: My beloved wife Sardarni Gurmeet Kaur has always stood with me at every moment in philatelic ideas, innovations and cooperation. She deserves all credit for my achievements!

*Rupinder Kaur*