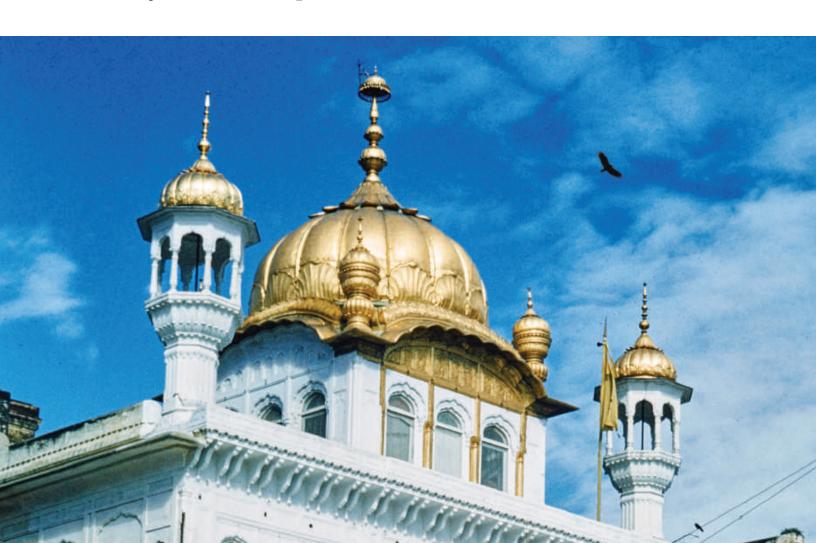


Akal Takht Sahib:

Timeless Sovereign Throne

State of the Panth, Report 4

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State of the Panth

The State of the Panth series is a report on Sikh matters presented by the Sikh Research Institute to the global Sikh community. The series reports on matters affecting either a large section of the Sikh Nation or a perspective on critical issues facing the human race at large. It surveys the self-identified Sikhs on their stances. It outlines a Sikh perspective based on Gurmat (the Guru's Way) traditions of Bani (wisdom), Tavarikh (history), and Rahit (lifestyle). It offers recommendations for the individual Sikhs and Sikh institutions in best practice approach to strengthen the bonds within the community.

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Cover Photo: Akal Takht Sahib

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Panjab Digital Library

We thank the Panjab Digital Library (PDL) for their invaluable contributions as a resource for all of the images used in this report. The mission of PDL is to locate, digitize, preserve, collect and make accessible the accumulated wisdom of the Panjab region, without distinction as to script, language, religion, nationality, or other physical condition.

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Summary

Akal Takht Sahib (Timeless Throne Sovereign) commands the worldly moral authority of the Sikhs, functioning as the institutional manifestation of the Miri-Piri (Political-Spiritual) doctrine as envisioned by the Gurus. However, over time Akal Takht Sahib has become occupied by third-party influences, not just in its institutional manifestation but also in the psyche of the Sikhs. A lack of faith in the institution leads to a feeling of disconnect within the Panth (Sikh collective), where Akal Takht Sahib exists more as a symbolic structure instead of functioning as a governance one.

The focus of this report is to understand the role and function of Akal Takht Sahib from the *Gurmat* (Guru's Way) perspective, as inferred from *Bani* (wisdom), *Tavarikh* (history), and *Rahit* (lifestyle). In understanding the Gurmat explanation of the function and role of Akal Takht Sahib, individuals and institutions can come together to push for a more transparent, independent, representative, and active institution.

A global survey, included in the report, presented 1,237 self-identified Sikhs with questions related to the role and function of Akal Takht Sahib. The survey responses highlight clear ideals of what the role and function of Akal Takht Sahib needs to be, and explore the current disconnect and loss of faith in its governance.

This study presents recommendations based on the Gurmat components on both the individual and institutional levels as a way to better engage with the Akal Takht Sahib and move towards it remaining a central institution to the Panth. Individuals must work on shifting their mindsets towards a firm belief in the authority of Akal Takht Sahib while joining institutional movements to become more aware of the political circumstances surrounding Akal Takht Sahib in its current state. Institutions must become ready to be governed by Akal Takht Sahib, and actively pursue its independent governance, instead of giving up on the institution in the current political landscape as being past the point of no return.

Bani, Tavarikh, and Rahit specify the role and function of Akal Takht Sahib, and illustrate a rich tradition of sovereignty which must be internalized by each member of the Sikh Panth in order to create a flourishing Akal Takht Sahib.



Akal, coming from "A" (not) and "Kal" (dying, or ending), together becomes timeless, immortal, or non-temporal. Takht, coming from the Persian word for "the Imperial Throne," focuses in on temporal power. Akal Takht Sahib (Timeless Throne Sovereign) situated in Amritsar, Panjab is the epitome of the Miri-Piri (Political-Spiritual) doctrine.

Sikh Research Institute has conducted a survey of 1,237 self-identified Sikhs from 27 different countries. The purpose of the survey was to gain insight into how Sikhs perceive the role of the Akal Takht Sahib in their own lives and in the lives of other Sikhs around the world. Responses outlined a clear engagement with the institution of Akal Takht Sahib, showing clear ideals of what the role and function of Akal Takht Sahib should be. The responses communicated a loss of faith in the governance of Akal Takht Sahib and a call for efforts towards a transparent, independent, representative, and active institution.

This report makes recommendations based on *Gurmat* (the Guru's Way) as inferred from *Bani* (wisdom), *Tavarikh* (history), and *Rahit* (lifestyle) that can be used by individuals and institutions to move towards Akal Takht Sahib remaining a central institution to the Sikh *Panth* (Sikh collective).

Wisdom Ban1

From its conception, the Sikh Panth was not just a spiritual doctrine but a community with unique lifestyle practices, ideals, and governance structure. This *Raj* (governance, or rule) was established by Guru Nanak Sahib, as described by this composition of Bards Satta and Balwand:

Nanak established the Dominion by raising the fort of Truth on firm foundations ...

With might and bravery of One's wisdom-sword, Perfection bestowed the gift of life ...

The Light and the method were same, the Sovereign only changed the body.

Impeccable Divine canopy waves, the Throne of Guru-ship is occupied.

— Guru Granth Sahib, 966

Here, Satta and Balwand establish that Sikhi is not just a spiritual tradition — it is really a Raj. In the establishment of such a dominion, the same light, the same wisdom, and the same systems were carried through time, while only the body of the Guru was changing.

Bhai Gurdas (c.1558–1637), scholar, theologian, and a contemporary of four Gurus, explains that the True Emperor of this Raj is the Guru, alluding to Guru Nanak Sahib's legacy leading up to Guru Arjan Sahib:

Eternal-Guru is the eternal Emperor

Congregation is the eternal delightful throne.¹



Guru Nanak Sahib introduced a new paradigm of *Ik Oankar* (the One Force) that shaped a unique worldview, resulting in the establishment of "Creator-ville." The Ik Oankar paradigm was manifested in the creation of city-states, such as Kartarpur Sahib, where a new system of rules was implemented and an inclusive vision of the coexistence of various religious communities was realized. Guru Nanak Sahib set up the city of Kartarpur after undergoing the *udasis* (journeys), as there did not exist a rule in any other city that would abide by these new principles inherent in the Ik Oankar worldview.

[The Guru] enjoys the rule and the union in whose heart lives Enmity-free One.
[The Guru] swims-liberates with Nam-Identification without break,
raises the whole universe."

— Guru Granth Sahib, 1390

Here, Guru Nanak Sahib is discussing Raj and *Jog* (Divine connection, or union), as well as the creation of a Raj which operated in a unique governance of both.

The Guru operates in both realms — the world of religion and the world of politics — and creates freedom in both through the offering of Nam (Divine Identification) culture, taking the whole universe towards that freedom.

This Raj has both the spiritual and the political elements, which work in tandem to create a system that moves towards a more equal and just society in service of all of humanity. As the Sikh Panth grew, the Gurus set up various city centers, such as Goindwal Sahib, Kiratpur Sahib, and Anandpur Sahib. With multiple cities and local political contexts, a throne is needed. This led to the *Manji* (administrative unit) system established by Guru Amardas Sahib. The Mughal empire at the time was divided into 22 regions; the Guru appointed 22 Manjidars, who were leaders, emissaries, or administrators. From these seats of authority, a headquarter was required and, thus, Akal Takht Sahib was founded.

The declaration of a new political authority was very significant in the forming of the Sikh Panth, and the Guru's mission was clear: this political authority represented the throne of *Akal Purakh* (Timeless Being). Guru Nanak Sahib proclaimed that there was no political authority other than Akal Purakh, and Guru Arjan Sahib later echoed this by stating that there was no saviour Monarch, but only the Immortal Being.² With the establishment of Akal Takht Sahib, Guru Harigobind Sahib solidified and institutionalized this idea that the immortal authority belongs only to Akal Takht Sahib.

The throne of Akal Takht Sahib transcends time, as the goal of the institution is to lead the Sikh Panth in the worldly and political plane to an eternal Akal Purakh:

Your Court is great, Your Throne is eternal.

Emperor's head of kings, canopy and whisk are irrevocable.

— Guru Granth Sahib, 964

You are seated on the eternal throne; all others come and go in reincarnation. iv

— Guru Granth Sahib, 1279

Who is qualified to sit on this eternal Throne? Guru Arjan Sahib addresses this question:

That king must sit on the throne who is qualified to sit on the throne.

Those who recognize the Truth are true kings.

Do not call these land-rulers kings, other love causes them the pain.

Why praise those born, whose departure isn't delayed?

The True One is irrevocable, Guru-oriented understands and becomes irrevocable."

- Guru Granth Sahib, 1088

The implementation of Akal Takht Sahib allows for a structured moral decision-making process for Sikhs, where the seat of authority sits with the *Khalsa Panth* (Sovereign Collective) itself.

The Ever-Living Divine exists in the Sangat [Inspired-Company]; Reflect upon the Sabad and understand this.^{vi}

- Guru Granth Sahib, 1314

History Tavatiki

The Sikh Panth holds a unique identity that encompasses culture, spirituality, lifestyle, and practice. A distinct identity lends itself to group organization and a need for political sovereignty.³

This identity is described by Bhai Gurdas as he records people's observations of the lifestyle of Guru Hargobind Sahib:

[Earlier Gurus] used to stay in Principle-Sanctuary, [this Guru] doesn't stay in one place.

[Earlier] emperors used to come to [Guru's] home, [this Guru] is imprisoned in the emperor's fort.

[Now] congregation doesn't get [the Guru's] glimpse, [the Guru] roams freely and is not scared of anyone.

[Earlier Gurus] used to sit on throne to gift contentment, [this Guru] keeps dogs and sports hunting.

[Earlier Gurus] used to reveal, listen and sing Bani, [this Guru] doesn't recite, listen or sing.

[Now] adherents aren't kept near, [this Guru] appoints the wicked adversary 4 as leader.

The Truth isn't hidden by hiding, Sikhs are like bumblebees who are attracted to the Guru's lotus-feet.

[Because the Sikhs realize Guru Hargobind Sahib] is bearing the unbearable without asserting the self. ⁵



In this *Pauri* (lyrical stanza), Bhai Gurdas simply records what people are saying about Guru Hargobind Sahib, acknowledging that their criticisms are misplaced and untrue. He further creates distinction between those self-identified adherents and those worthy enough to be called Sikhs, arguing that a Sikh of the Guru would recognize these criticisms to be rooted in falsehood and see that Guru Hargobind Sahib, despite bearing the weight of such talk, continues to do what is needed without paying attention to these rumors.

In Pauri 25, because people are questioning Guru Hargobind Sahib's transformation of protection and defense as an attitude into a practice, Bhai Gurdas elaborates on the necessity of the proactive fortification of the community with a series of analogies:

Kikkar (garden acacia) tree at periphery of farm and garden Snakes entwined around sandalwood, locks and alert dogs at treasure's entry

Sikh needs to be like a bee around Guru's lotus-feet, remain in Sadh-Sangat [saintly-congregation] for goodness

With cup of love sorrows pass away. 6

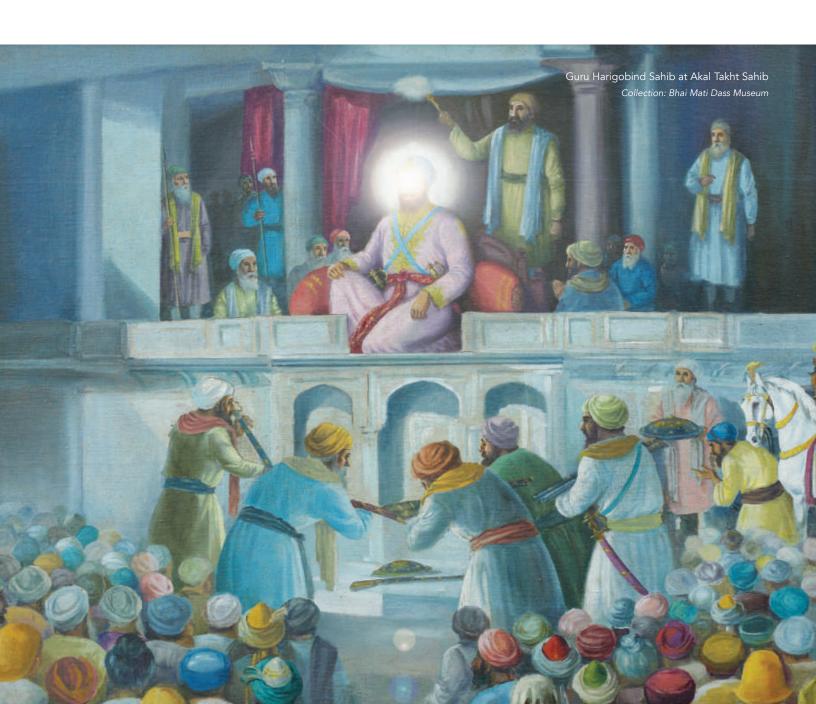
Here, Bhai Gurdas uses analogies to explain the importance of the protection of the community: In the farms and gardens, the trees exist around them to protect that land. The snake wraps itself around the sandalwood tree to ensure its protection. The locks and guard dogs near a treasure help protect it from being stolen. And so, too, do the Sikhs hover around the lotus feet of the Guru, who has equipped them to protect themselves.

This emphasis on the protection and defense of the community was not a turn away from Guru Nanak Sahib's vision. The manifestation of The Guru's institution of rule existed with Guru Nanak Sahib, with the full scope of the foundation being laid by each of the Ten Gurus. This vision culminated into the physical structure of Akal Takht Sahib, or at the time *Akal Bunga* (Timeless fortified residential watchtower), as institutionalized by Guru Hargobind Sahib.

In fact, prior to the *shahidi* (martyrdom) of Guru Arjan Sahib, he gave the following parting message to his son, who would later become Guru Hargobind Sahib.

The message, as translated by Max Arthur Macauliffe, reads:

I have succeeded in effecting the object of my life. Go to my son the holy Hargobind and give him from me ample consolation. Bid him not mourn or indulge in unmanly lamentations but sing God's praises. Let him also restrain from grief the other members of my family. Let him sit fully armed on his throne, and maintain an army to the best of his ability.⁷



In a detailed commentary of the 11th *Var* (Ode) of Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Mani Singh, the 18th century Sikh scholar, records that Guru Arjan Sahib, while being tortured before his eventual martyrdom, sent two Sikhs, Bhais Sigaru and Jaita, with the following message to Guru Hargobind Sahib:

The arms we are going to don, will don in the embodiment of the Guru Hargobind. The era of darkness-ignorance is coming. After acquiring knowledge of arms, we will seize the politics of the political. And by understanding the Infinite-Wisdom's love, we will grasp the spirituality of the spiritual. You shall remain in the presence of the Sixth Emperor.⁸

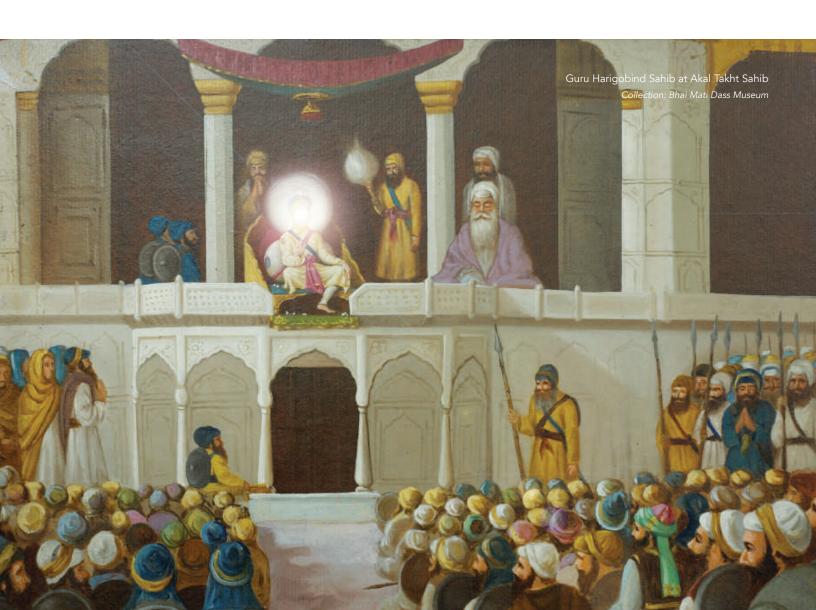
In 1606, the structure of the Akal Takht Sahib was created by Guru Hargobind Sahib, who laid the foundation for the building while its construction was completed under the instruction of Baba Budha (c.1506–1631), revered Sikh *granthi* (one who knows the Granth), diplomat, and teacher, who performed Guruship ceremonies for the first five Gurus, and Bhai Gurdas. Today, Akal Takht Sahib is a large five-story structure with marble and gold domes, three of which were added by Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

For further insight into the beginnings of the institution of Akal Takht Sahib, we can turn to Gurbilas Patshahi 6, where the poet Bhagat Singh narrates to Dharam Singh the details of *gurbilas* (life-play) of Guru Hargobind Sahib. Dharam Singh was at the present day Nankana Sahib, where Bhai Mani Singh recounted memorable events heard from Bhai Daya Singh, one of Guru Gobind Singh's Panj Piare, or Five Lovers (ones who were enthroned by the Guru), at the request of Bhagat Singh. This historical poetry described the founding and construction of Akal Takht Sahib, stating that Guru Hargobind Sahib laid the foundation for the structure on June 3, 1606, after which Bhai Buddha and Bhai Gurdas assisted in the labor to create the final structure. At this time Bhai Gurdas was named the custodian of Akal Takht Sahib as Bhai Buddha had been of Sri Harimandar Sahib. Two poets, Abdul and Natha, recited odes and ballads at the Akal Takht Sahib.⁹

Prior to the building of Akal Takht Sahib, the location housed a simple platform where Guru Hargobind Sahib would receive Sikhs and deal with administrative tasks related to the Panth. The original building built by Guru Hargobind Sahib was referred to as the Akal Bunga, and now sits within the present-day structure. The physical building that houses the authority of Akal Takht Sahib is sometimes referred to as Akal Bunga, which has over time become synonymous with Akal Takht Sahib. With the creation of Akal Takht Sahib and its relationship with Sri Harimandar Sahib, a physical manifestation of the Sikh principles of Miri-Piri are represented.

On June 24, 1606, Bhai Buddha performed the investiture ceremony at Akal Takht Sahib, during which Guru Hargobind Sahib donned two swords, one on each side, symbolizing Miri-Piri sovereignty. The Guru sat on the Throne and delivered gurmat explanations, listened to the complaints of the people, and administered justice. As the Guru convened the Sikhs at Akal Takht Sahib, the political grandeur continued: a throne, a royal whisk, and a royal canopy. Bards Natha and Abdulla described the event as witnesses. In South Asian traditions, many wear the turban as a status symbol, and Natha and Abdulla, after describing the Miri-Piri swords, ranked the status of the turban of Guru Hargobind Sahib higher than that of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir:

The Guru donned two swords:
one of politics, one of spirituality
One of grandeur, one of the Rule;
one protects the sovereign.
Your turban [matters], what of Jahangir? 10



Just as Guru Hargobind Sahib's two swords represented Miri-Piri sovereignty, so too do the physical structures of Sri Harimandar Sahib and Akal Takht Sahib. Sri Harimandar Sahib, embodying the Piri tradition, is situated directly across from Akal Takht Sahib, which embodies the Miri tradition. The two structures are connected by a bridge. In contrast to the contemporary oral belief that the foundation of Akal Takht Sahib was laid by Guru Hargobind Sahib himself, making it an institution for Sikhs who have given allegiance to the Guru, Sri Harimandar Sahib's foundation was laid by Sain Mian Mir, a practicing Muslim. Sri Harimandar Sahib from its conception is the ideal *Gurduara* (Sikh place of learning), open to individuals from all walks of life and all geographical locations, allowing all to join in the same connection to the Divine. Akal Takht Sahib is a decidedly Sikh institution.¹¹

Akal Takht Sahib became the seat of Sikh power and gave the Sikhs a rallying point as a symbol of Sikh sovereignty. It is from the Akal Takht Sahib that the Guru administered justice like a king in a court, accepted gifts of arms and horses, and awarded honors and punishment. Guru Hargobind Sahib, for example, is noted as having 800 horses in the stables, 300 troopers on horseback, and 60 men with firearms at all times.¹²

This tradition was carried forward by Guru Harirai Sahib, the seventh Guru, who maintained an army that consisted of 2,200 mounted soldiers. This army of the Akal Takht Sahib came to be called the *Akal Sena* (immortal army), and its warriors were honored as the *Akalis* (the immortals):

The reason as to why the name of this group is Akali is that, adjacent to the building associated with Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan is Akal Bunga, The place of *Khuda* (i.e., the Almighty), which is associated with Guru Hargobind. The Akalis, or *Khuda*'s men, as a mark of honour, are associated with this *Bunga* (fortress). The dress of this group was endorsed to be black in observance of mourning to mark Guru Arjan Dev's bereavement. Subsequently, this roaming community took on weapons of steel and demonstrated fearlessness at the time of a mighty assault.¹³

Sikhs draw spiritual inspiration from Sri Harimandar Sahib, and political vision from Akal Takht Sahib. The authority of Akal Takht Sahib is viewed as the highest seat of political and worldly authority for the Sikh community. Akal Takht Sahib and Sri Harimandar Sahib are situated within the same complex, where one cannot be without the other — a physical manifestation of Miri-Piri. Without independent governance, one cannot freely think of spirituality, but without spirituality, all else is nullified.

Akal Takht Sahib — functioning as the external manifestation of the Miri-Piri doctrine — became the headquarters of the Panth in governing all Sikh institutions, including Gurduaras. Akal Takht Sahib was as important to the advancement of Sikhs as the creation of the spiritual center of Sri Harimandar Sahib. When Guru Hargobind Sahib was imprisoned in the Fort of Gwalior, Baba Buddha was instructed to perform all services at Sri Harimandar Sahib, while Bhai Gurdas oversaw the operations of Akal Takht Sahib. These instructions to two prominent and respected Gursikhs illustrates the importance of both of these authorities within the Sikh Panth.

A *Takht* (seat of authority, or sovereign throne) has always been established with many Gurus, functioning as the office of the Guru. Guru Hargobind Sahib also established Takht Kot Sahib in Kiratpur Sahib while the Sikh Panth was situated there. Guru Harkrishan Sahib and Guru Harirai Sahib also exercised political authority from Takht Kot Sahib. Later, when Guru Teghbahadar Sahib created the new Sikh capital at Anandpur Sahib, another Takht, Akal Bunga Sahib, was created. Guru Gobind Singh Sahib created another sovereign throne at Anandpur Sahib at the fort of Kesghar Sahib. Post Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, Baba Banda Singh Bahadar (c.1670–1716) was jathedar and acted as the general of the Khalsa Panth. Although this meant that Akal Takht Sahib became the office of the Sikh Panth itself, Baba Banda Singh Bahadar operated from Lohgarh (Mukhlispur) instead of from the physical Akal Takht Sahib, demonstrating that even when the Takht is not under Sikh control, the institution can exist and operate in exile in other spaces.

This authority of the Khalsa Panth in the context of Baba Banda Singh Bahadar and the early post-Guru period is documented in Sri Gur Panth Parkash:

The Guru gave Banda a double-edged sword, he wore it around his neck.

The Khalsa brooded seeing this, they seized the double-edged sword.

Then they appealed to the Guru,

Eternal Guru in amusement contemplated consciously.

They have secured their inheritance, now the Khalsa is empowered responsibly.¹⁴

Baba Banda Singh Bahadar's leadership after Guru Gobind Singh Sahib was misinterpreted by the Khalsa as being a gift of sovereignty to a specific individual. However, sovereignty — the authority of a group to govern itself — is vital in this case where it is granted to the collective of the Khalsa, not to any individual, despite their excellence.

Thousands of jewel-encrusted thrones have fallen by the wayside. Your Qalandars do not want a crown or a signet-ring.¹⁵ The Khalsa was given sovereignty precisely because it was not the throne that they were seeking in the first place. The Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib are being referred to as *Qalandars* (Sufi dervishes) for their intense love and devotion for the Guru. It is because of their submission to this unconditional love that they were given the gift of sovereignty. But there is this key difference:

The beggar on Your lane does not long for a kingdom. He has no desire to be an emperor nor is he enraptured by the kajkolah.¹⁶

Here, the beggar is a Sikh who is not fascinated by the Kajkolah. The Kajkolah is a young beautiful man with "his cap awry," as per Sufi tradition, when Prophet Muhammad saw God as a young man. This metaphor is used to show that it is precisely due to the lack of desire for power and kingdom that the Khalsa was given such a gift of sovereignty. The metaphor continues, moving outside of Sufi terminology as the beggar becomes a *sipahi* (soldier), a term never seen in Sufi poetry:

All those who capture the kingdom of the heart become kings.

There is no warrior like the one who finds You.¹⁷

Bhai Nand Lal (c.1613–1713), a poet in Guru Gobind Singh Sahib's court, uses the spiritual terminology from Sufism to indicate an intense love and devotion for Guru and pairs it with the term "sipahi" to describe how a Sikh choosing to take on the Spiritual-Political identity of the Khalsa becomes an agent or advocate for Akal Takht Sahib: motivated by the intense internal love they have for their Guru, they take part in the external world and its political systems.

In our current context, however, participation in external politics seems to not be motivated by internal love for the Guru. There seems to be a disconnect because those operating from a place of love, rather than a desire for power, are no longer in charge of Akal Takht Sahib. Thus, sabad-centering has been lost at a personal level, and sabad is not being invoked as principle in decision-making or process.



Currently, the governance of Akal Takht Sahib is seemingly held by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). The Gurduara Reform Movement in the 1920s marked a turning point in the governance of Gurduaras, where the management was brought outside of the Sikh Panth into the Panjab Legislative Council. The Gurduara Reform Movement aimed to regain control of Gurduaras throughout Panjab from the *mahants* (priests) to whom the Khalsa had lost control of their institutions over the years. This movement eventually led to the introduction of the Sikh Gurduara Bill of 1925, which put all historical Gurduaras in India under the control of the SGPC. From then onwards, the management of Gurduaras, specifically in India, became intertwined with governmental control.

The SGPC was created as a result of the Sikh Gurduara Act of 1925, functioning as a governance body for Gurduaras. Prior to the Gurduara Act, *Jathedhars* (leaders) were selected as per a merit-based Sikh tradition. Since 1920, however, the Jathedhars of Akal Takht Sahib have been appointed by the SGPC — effectively tying the SGPC to the governance of Akal Takht Sahib. The SGPC's role in controlling the Akal Takht Sahib is not an original construct of the Sikh Panth and, in its current state, the separate authorities of Akal Takht Sahib and SGPC are conflated.

In 1920, The Shiromani Akali Dal was founded at Akal Takht Sahib, to serve as a representative of Sikh political interests. In its All India Session of 1966, a central committee of the political party passed the following resolution:

The Sikhs resolve and proclaim their determination to resist all attempts being made to devalue and liquidate the Sikh people in free India. And demand that the rulers of India should take the following steps forthwith to assure and enable the Sikhs to live as respectable and equal citizens of the Union of India, namely:

First, the Sikh areas deliberately and intentionally cut off and not included in the new Punjab, namely, the areas of Gurdaspur District including Dalhousie, of Ambala District including Chandigarh, Pinjore, Kalka and Ambala Saddar, of Hoshiarpur District, the entire Tehsil of Una, and the Desk area of Nalagarh Tehsil, and the Sirsa Sub-Division of Hissar District and areas of Shahabad, Tohana and Guhla and Ratia Block of Karnal District, and the Ganga-nagar area of Rajasthan, must be immediately included in the new Punjab so as to bring all contiguous Sikh areas into an administrative unit, to be called the "Sikh Homeland," within the Union of India, and Second, this new Punjab should be granted an autonomous constitutional status with same powers and privileges as were granted to Jammu and Kashmir, in 1950, in the Constitution Act of India, and The Constitution Act of India should further concede that in this Sikh Homeland Sikh interests are of special importance.¹⁸

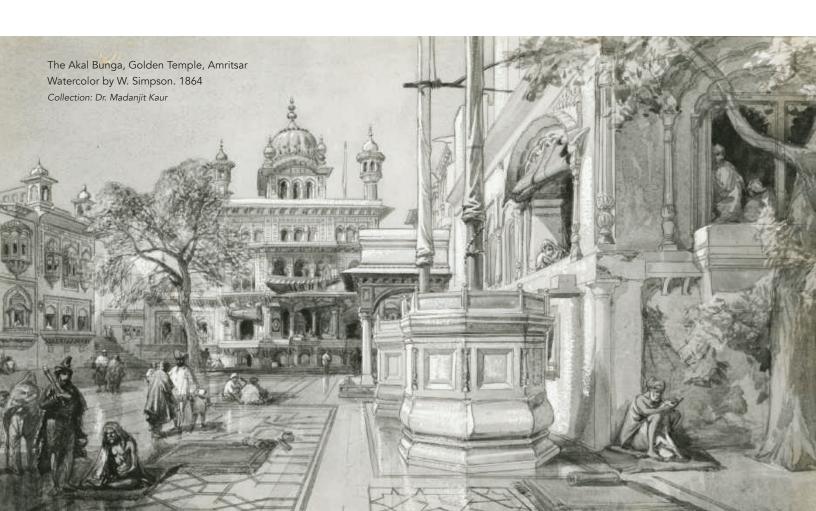
This aforesaid 1966 resolution is in line with the original political goal of the Shiromani Akali Dal, which was to safeguard Sikh — not Panjabi — political interests. After political divides, a new movement was created which sought to take control of the Gurduaras in Panjab. This allowed for control over Sikh representation in the Indian and Panjab Legislative Assemblies. Prior goals associated with political aspirations for the Sikh Panth were abandoned.¹⁹

The authority of Akal Takht Sahib, which was originally meant to sit with the Khalsa Panth itself, is now controlled by political affiliations rather than remaining a sovereign and free-thinking institution. In order to correctly govern the Panth and execute Miri-Piri, the Sikh nation must not be controlled by any other external authority aside from the Guru Granth-Panth.

Bhai Nand Lal specifically mentions the concept of a Miri-Piri doctrine in the context of the Raj of Guru Nanak Sahib:

The Divine-Self decorated [the Guru's] high throne, the Divine-Self honored the [Guru] with all virtues.²⁰

The throne of [the Guru's] sovereignty is irrevocable, the crown of [the Guru's] high splendor is eternal.²¹



Akal Takht Sahib embodies the Miri doctrine for Sikhs. Whether or not there was faith in the governance of Akal Takht Sahib, Akal Takht Sahib has always remained the central institution of major Sikh movements. Efforts such as the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973) and the Dharam Yudh Morcha (1982), as well as meetings of Sarbat Khalsa and the Free Akal Takht Movement were all executed from or centered either physically or symbolically around the institution of what Akal Takht Sahib represents for Sikhs.

For this reason the Akal Takht Sahib has been the center of numerous attacks (see Table 1) and invasions on Sikhs throughout history.

1737	Governor (Panjab) Zakariya Khan of the Mughal Empire
1757	Commander & King Ahmed Shah Durrani (Abdali) of the Afghan Empire
1762	Commander & King Ahmed Shah Durrani (Abdali) of the Afghan Empire
1764	Commander & King Ahmed Shah Durrani (Abdali) of the Afghan Empire
1955	Deputy Inspector General (Jalandhar, Panjab) Ashwani Kumar, under Chief Minister Bhim Sen Sachar, directions from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian State
1984	General Kuldip Singh Brar under General Arun Shridhar Vaidya, directions from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of the Indian State
1986	Director General of Police (Panjab) Kanwar Pal Singh Gill under Chief Minister Surjit Singh Barnala, directions from Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of the Indian State
1988	Director General of Police (Panjab) Kanwar Pal Singh Gill under "suspended state government," directions from Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of the Indian State

Table 1. 18th and 20th century attacks on Akal Takht Sahib

Lifestyle Rahit

In addition to Akal Takht Sahib (Amritsar, Panjab), the Khalsa recognized four other seats of authority: Takht Sri Kesgarh Sahib (Anandpur Sahib, Panjab), Takht Sri Harimandar Sahib (Patna, Bihar), and Takht Sri Sachkhand Hazur Sahib (Nanded, Maharashtra). In 1966, Takht Sri Damdama Sahib (Talvandi Sabo, Panjab), where Guru Gobind Singh Sahib stayed for several months, was declared a Takht by the SGPC.

The Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925 acknowledges the first four Takhts (as well as Sri Harimandar Sahib, which it calls "Darbar Sahib, Amritsar"), in their capacities of including "head ministers." It does not include Sri Damdama Sahib. The Sikh Gurdwaras Act defines:

"Minister" means an office-holder to whom either solely or along with others the control of the management or performance of public worship in a gurdwara and of the rituals and ceremonies, observed therein is entrusted.²²

In today's terminology, this refers to Head Granthi (custodian and enunciator) or Jathedar.

Akal Takht Sahib and the other three Takhts (excluding Damdama Sahib) listed in the Sikh Gurdwaras Act enjoy special ceremonial status, but their authority is not recognized in the Act. Initially, the SGPC only controlled Akal Takht Sahib and Keshgarh Sahib. Jathedars of the Takhts are formal members of the SGPC, although they do not exercise voting rights.

After 1947 (Partition of the Panjab into the two nations of India and Pakistan), contrary to expectations, the Indian Government started interfering in Gurduara affairs. On March 3, 1949 when Sikhs wanted to hold a prayer at Akal Takht Sahib in connection with the Protest Day, police entered the premises to prevent them from doing so. On July 4, 1955, during the peaceful agitation for Panjabi Suba, the police entered Akal Takht Sahib and Sri Harimandar Sahib complex. At this time tear gas was used, followed by firing in the premises, and the police arrested Akal Takht Sahib Jathedar Bhai Achhar Singh along with many others.

The Nehru-Tara Singh Pact (1959) agreed:

It is common ground among all concerned that there should be no Government interference in religious affairs.

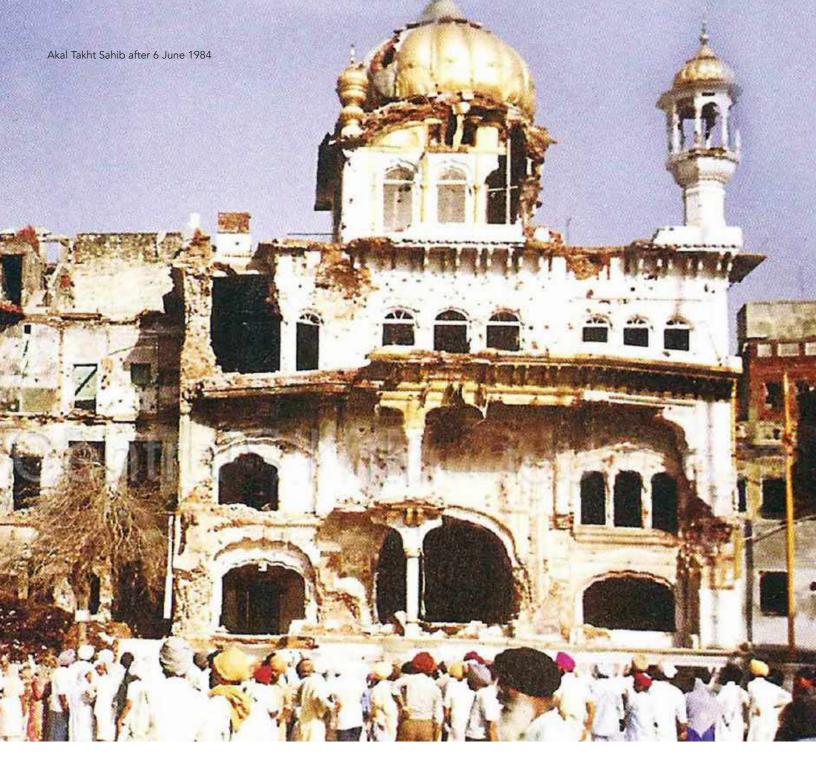
Nevertheless, complaints have arisen of such interference in the past in regard to gurdwara management and amendments made in the Gurdwara Act.

The Pact was never implemented.²³

In 1984, the interference turned into an attack on the entire Sikh nation when the Indian army sealed the Panjab and invaded Sri Harimandar Sahib and Akal Takht Sahib complex in addition to more than 70 other Gurduaras.²⁴ The Indian Army came in with tanks, bombs, and gas, destroying the complex and killing thousands of Sikhs. They looted historical artifacts and then burned down the library museum, in addition to damaging the Sikh sanctum sanctorum — Sri Harimandar Sahib.

The Akal Takht Sahib commands the worldly moral authority of the Sikhs. However, over time, Sikhs have become removed from the institution of Akal Takht Sahib. Without ownership of the institution, the global Sikh Panth has no faith in the decisions that come out of Akal Takht Sahib, leading to a disconnected global community. Without accountability in the governance of the institution, Akal Takht Sahib has succumbed to existing as a symbolic structure rather than functioning as a governance structure.

It is clear that dependence on external authority such as India's Sikh Gurdwara Act has resulted in Akal Takht Sahib effectively being controlled by the Government of India. Efforts by the Indian state or India's state of Panjab to issue further legislation that would include the special status of Akal Takht Sahib as well as other Gurduaras puts the authority of the Khalsa into an external body. This ultimately undermines the authority of the Khalsa and leads to a lack of accountability on behalf of the Sikhs themselves.



Due to the ties of the SGPC to political parties, the Panth has lost its ability to govern in Sikh matters, especially through the institution of the Akal Takht Sahib. A lack of confidence in the institution leaves the global Sikh community turning to local governments or other authorities for moral guidance on Sikh matters. When issues related to Sikhi are resolved by non-Sikh authorities instead of by Sikh authorities through the historical procedures envisioned in the establishment of the Akal Takht Sahib, the result is a dependence on external legal authorities. This dependence has led to moral influence and guidance in Sikh spaces by non-Sikh sources, ultimately leading to divisions within the community.

Ideally, the authority of Akal Takht Sahib in governing Sikh matters takes two forms: the Issuing of *Hukamname* (royal orders; plural of Hukamnama) and the Institution of Sarbat Khalsa.

Hukamnama is a term used when describing the instructions given by Guru Sahib and the orders issued by Akal Takht Sahib. The first Hukamnama issued from Akal Takht Sahib was by Guru Hargobind Sahib. It was declared that all Sikhs should wear arms for self-defense:

From today onwards, dear offerings to me are nice weapons and nice youth. If you want my happiness, then exercise, wrestle, play gatka, go to the jungles to hunt, and learn to ride horses. Weakness is a crime to the Nation that cannot be forgiven for anyone. You will pick up the sword, and I already arm it, so that the swords of tyrants oppression will stop forever.²⁵

In addition to being issued by the Guru, Hukamname are also issued from the Akal Takht Sahib by Sikhs themselves, who speak on behalf of the authority of the Akal Takht Sahib. When these resolutions are issued by the Khalsa, they are referred to as a *Gurmata* (resolution in the name of the Guru).

Sarbat Khalsa (all of the Khalsa; representative body for the entire Sikh community) signifies all of humanity, all members of the Order of the Khalsa, and is a collective institution for decision-making. This decision-making body represents the interests of the collective Sikh Panth. The decision-making process carried out via issuing a Gurmata is traceable to the time of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib. While inaugurating the Khalsa in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh Sahib stated that all members of the Panth were equal — even the Guru was included in that jurisdiction — and all previous divisions of status or caste were nullified.

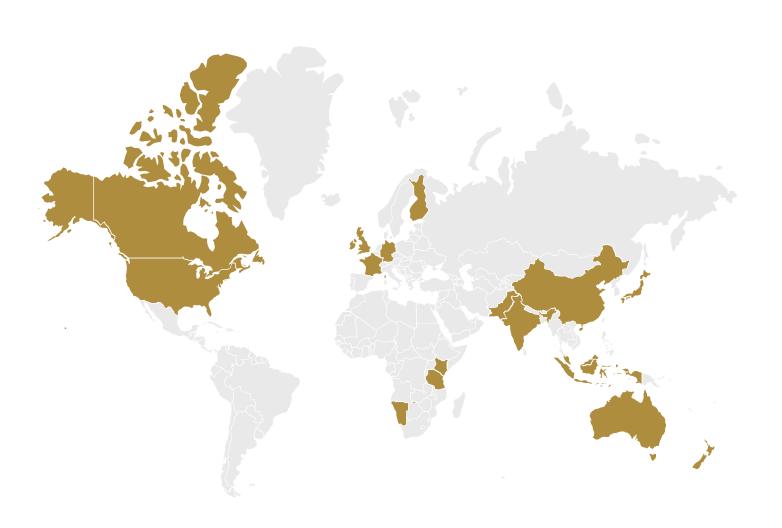
Meetings of the Sarbat Khalsa can either be called together by the Jathedar of Akal Takht Sahib or, in lieu of the Panth's confidence in said leader, can be summoned by nature of the Sarbat Khalsa's own inherent authority to assemble. At an assembly of Sarbat Khalsa, important matters of Sikh moral opinion can be deliberated and decided upon. Important Hukamname are issued on behalf of the Panth from the Sarbat Khalsa.

During the 18th century, Sarbat Khalsa issued several Hukamname for Sikhs. For example, in 1759, a Hukamnama was issued calling for Sikhs to monetarily support the reconstruction of several Sikh historical sites.

The authority of Akal Takht Sahib allows for ultimate decision-making for the entire global Sikh community. Akal Takht Sahib's political-spiritual authority has become muddled in the past with Sikh-State tensions as in the current era. Its ramifications are seen at local Gurduara levels too, where there are concerns about credibility, authority, and representation and the nation-states they exist in are making decisions based not on Sikh principles, but on local laws. In alignment with the historical Gurmat traditions, a free Akal Takht Sahib is the only authoritative regulatory body of the Sikhs which supersedes any state or political party's control.

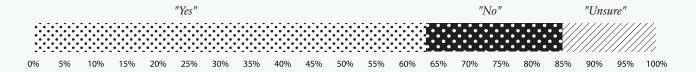
Survey / Opinion

An online survey was conducted, asking the 2018 global Sikh community to reflect on the role and function of Akal Takht Sahib. A total of 1,237 self-identified Sikhs voluntary respondents from 27 different countries participated in the survey. For the purpose of this research into the Sikh community, only respondents who identified as Sikhs were considered.

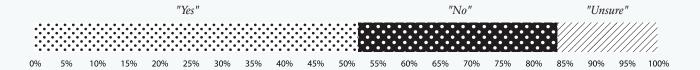


The purpose of this survey was to gain insight into how Sikhs view the role of Akal Takht Sahib in the lives of Sikhs around the world, as perceived by Sikhs themselves.

Does Akal Takht Sahib play an active role in the Panth (Sikh collective)?



Does Akal Takht Sahib govern and/or influence local Gurduaras globally?



Does Akal Takht Sahib influence global Sikh and at-large wordview?



The majority of survey respondents felt that the Akal Takht Sahib plays an active role in the Panth (63%), influencing both local level Gurduaras (52%) as well as the global Sikh world-view (55%).

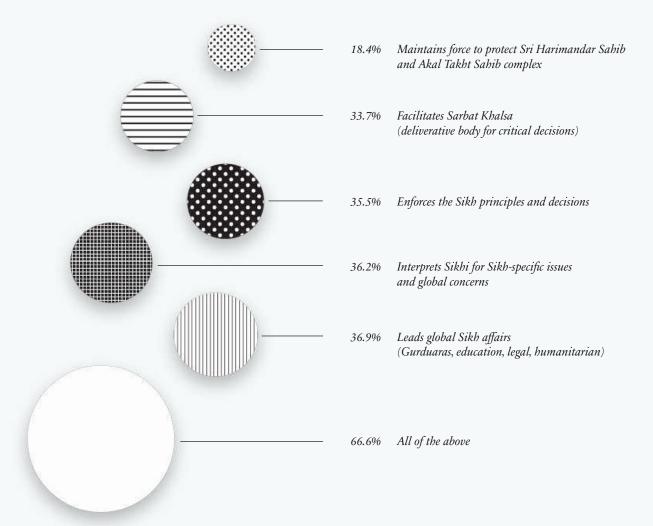
Respondents were then asked to reflect on defining the Akal Takht Sahib's role in 2018. The following options were provided:

- Enforces the Sikh principles and decisions
- Interprets Sikhi for Sikh-specific issues and global concerns
- Leads global Sikh affairs (Gurduaras, education, legal, humanitarian)
- Facilitates Sarbat Khalsa (deliberative body for critical decisions)
- Maintains force to protect Sri Harimandar Sahib and Akal Takht Sahib complex
- All of the above

It should be noted that any results from this question are biased towards the options provided to the respondents. Though respondents had the ability to opt out of the survey, they were limited in this question. A more appropriate solution would have been either a "None of the Above" or "Other — Fill in the Blank" option.

Given the options available to respondents:

What needs to be the role of Akal Takht Sahib today?



Finally, respondents were given the option to give their opinion in answering the following question: "How do you envision the governance structure of Akal Takht Sahib in today's society?"

Based on their answers, the consensus among respondents is that the Akal Takht Sahib should be a role model for governance not only for the Sikhs in India but also for Sikhs around the world. Common themes addressed were a call for transparency, removal of external influences, inclusion of the Diaspora Sikh population, and an increased, more active role.

"An independent, free governing, teaching, learning and leadership developing institute."

"...must be transparent above all."

"The Akal Takht Sahib needs to expand beyond the limitations of the boundaries imposed by geographical borders, the diaspora needs to be taken into consideration in any governance structure."

"...To overcome the gender, class, and ethnic bias there should be democratically elected bodies in all areas of the globe that fulfil akal takht functions at a local and global basis."

In order to create this transparent, independent, representative, and active Akal Takht Sahib, many outlined potential models: an elective representation model of governance, a merit-based approach rooted in the principles of Gurmat, a corporate structured model, and a Panj Piare system (invoking their qualified authority in decision-making processes). Regardless of the specifics of the various solutions respondents described, it was apparent that respondents felt there was a lack of basic organization in the first place. Overall, the responses displayed a Sikh population that is engaged with the institution of Akal Takht Sahib, but has lost faith in its governance.

Recommendations

Individual

- Work on shifting our mindset towards a firm belief in the authority of Akal Takht Sahib
- ii. Join institutional movements

Though the institution of Akal Takht Sahib operates on a Panthic level, it takes individuals to create that change. The first step is that any concerned individual has to become answerable to the Guru. Individual Sikhs have to take on the journey to become Sikhs of the Guru, through a Gurmat approach of mindset, behavior, and appearance. Once one is on the journey themselves, it is key for individuals to become involved in all levels of Sikh governance. The next step is to become aware of the political circumstances surrounding Akal Takht Sahib in its current state. Only in becoming vigilant can one become involved in improving the process at an institutional level.

Half of the battle is a shift in mindset within the Panth. Years of distrust and a lack of transparency has left the global Sikh population with only a historic lens to what should be active, functioning institutions in the everyday lives of Sikhs. If we are to learn from history, Sikhs today must carry the belief that a free Akal Takht Sahib is not only possible but necessary for the proper functioning of the Panth. The political center for Sikhs was always moving with the Gurus — the central authority does not sit solely within marble buildings and physical structures, but within the psyche of the Sikh Panth. Years of disillusion has left the Panth with the mindset that such an authority is not needed in modern society. Instead, individuals must recognize the current issues surrounding the institution and work towards creating a Sikh central authority as demonstrated by the Gurus and the Khalsa Panth in history. This shift begins with the restructuring of the current illusion of authority at a politically restrained Akal Takht Sahib.



Institutional

- i. Become ready to be governed by Akal Takht Sahib institutions need to be focused around Akal Purakh
- ii. Actively pursue an independent governance of Akal Takht Sahib

A restructuring of Akal Takht Sahib governance is required. In order to build the capacity of shifting to a new model, back to a Gurmat model, the effort of the entire Sikh Panth is required. An overhaul of policies and processes must be undertaken to allow for transparency and accountability to the global Sikh population. This transparency can be achieved through bringing the authority of governance back to the Khalsa Panth itself, led by the Panj Piare as it has been historically.

Historically, a Jathedar was chosen on the basis of merit rather than by third-party government influences as seen in the current appointment. New leadership is a chance to revive this role and bring it back to inspirational rather than dormant opportunity. Much work on the details of potential restructuring has been done by groups such as the Free Akal Takht campaign, which outlines in detail the steps that must be taken in order to regain control over Akal Takht Sahib for the Panth.²⁶

This overhaul of organization, though a massive undertaking, is absolutely necessary. It is important that Sikh institutions align themselves with the mentality of being governed by Akal Takht Sahib. The Panth has collectively removed themselves from the institution of Akal Takht Sahib rather than remaining critical of the current occupiers.

Institutions must recognize that the throne of the Khalsa sits with Akal Purakh and does not become tainted due to the current political landscape. In order to create a functioning Akal Takht Sahib, institutions must be ready to be governed by it. In our current times, Akal Takht Sahib has become occupied by third party influences, not just in its institutional manifestation, but also in the psyche of the Sikhs.

From the time of Guru Nanak Sahib, a revolutionary Raj was established. This timeless Raj cannot be dulled by external forces, and the Panth must remain in high spirits with belief in the institutions established for this Raj. Bani, Tavarikh, and Rahit illustrate a rich tradition of sovereignty which must be internalized by each member of the Sikh Panth.

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 ਮਤਿ ਗੁਰ ਆਤਮ ਦੇਵ ਦੀ ਖੜਗਿ ਜੋਰਿ ਪਰਾਕੁਇ ਜੀਅ ਦੈ ॥ ...
 ਜੋਤਿ ਓਹਾ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਸਾਇ ਸਹਿ ਕਾਇਆ ਫੇਰਿ ਪਲਟੀਐ ॥
 ਬੁਲੈ ਸੁ ਛਤੁ ਨਿਰੰਜਨੀ ਮਲਿ ਤਖਤੁ ਬੈਠਾ ਗੁਰ ਹਟੀਐ ॥
- ii. ਰਾਜੁ ਜੋਗੁ ਮਾਣਿਓ ਬਸਿਓ ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ ਰਿਦੰਤਰਿ ॥
 ਸਿਰ੍ਸਟਿ ਸਗਲ ਉਧਰੀ ਨਾਮਿ ਲੇ ਤਰਿਓ ਨਿਰੰਤਰਿ ॥
 ਗੁਣ ਗਾਵਹਿ ਸਨਕਾਦਿ ਆਦਿ ਜਨਕਾਦਿ ਜੁਗਹ ਲਗਿ ॥
 ਧੰਨਿ ਧੰਨਿ ਗੁਰੁ ਧੰਨਿ ਜਨਮੁ ਸਕਯਥੁ ਭਲੌ ਜਗਿ ॥
 ਪਾਤਾਲ ਪੁਰੀ ਜੈਕਾਰ ਧੁਨਿ ਕਬਿ ਜਨ ਕਲ ਵਖਾਣਿਓ ॥
 ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮ ਰਸਿਕ ਨਾਨਕ ਗੁਰ ਰਾਜੁ ਜੋਗੁ ਤੈ ਮਾਣਿਓ ॥੬॥
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- iv. ਤਖਤਿ ਰਾਜਾ ਸੋ ਬਹੈ ਜਿ ਤਖਤੈ ਲਾਇਕ ਹੋਈ ॥
 ਜਿਨੀ ਸਚੁ ਪਛਾਣਿਆ ਸਚੁ ਰਾਜੇ ਸੇਈ ॥
 ਏਹਿ ਭੂਪਤਿ ਰਾਜੇ ਨ ਆਖੀਅਹਿ ਦੂਜੈ ਭਾਇ ਦੁਖੁ ਹੋਈ ॥
 ਕੀਤਾ ਕਿਆ ਸਾਲਾਹੀਐ ਜਿਸੁ ਜਾਦੇ ਬਿਲਮ ਨ ਹੋਈ ॥
 ਨਿਹਚਲੁ ਸਚਾ ਏਕੁ ਹੈ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਬੂਝੈ ਸੁ ਨਿਹਚਲੁ ਹੋਈ ॥੬॥
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