



SIKH
Research Institute

Gurduara: A Sikh Place of Learning

State of the Panth, Report 3

September 2018



Guarduara Janam Asthan Guru Nanak Sahib
Nankana Sahib, Panjab
1933

(Photo: Panjab Digital Library)

State of the Panth

The State of the Panth is a series of reports on Sikh topics presented by the Sikh Research Institute to the global Sikh community. The series reflects on matters affecting either a large section of the Sikh population or provides 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 lays out recommendations for individual Sikhs and Sikh institutions in "best practices" approach to strengthen the bonds within the community.

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The strength of our brand is supported by their knowledge.

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Summary


The Gurduara is considered to be the heart of the Sikh community. Throughout all components of the Gurduara, the teachings of the Gurus must be visible in both abstract heights and concrete realities. The goal of each Gurduara must be to impart the Guru's worldview, articulated in the *Miri-Piri* (Political-Spiritual) doctrine, through the appropriate mediums for the local Sikh communities they serve. In recent times, there has become a disconnect between the Gurduara governance teams and the local sangat of the Gurduaras.

The focus of this report is to understand the role of the local Gurduara within Sikh communities 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 of the Gurduara, local governance teams and Sikh *sangat* (community) can come together to create a Gurduara that is a cohesive community-focused place of learning.

A global survey, included in the report, presented 1,172 self-identified Sikhs with questions related to the place of the local Gurduara. The survey highlights a disconnect with the *Miri-Piri* doctrine but emphasizes the desire of local sangats to revive the community focus of their Gurduaras.

This study presents recommendations based on the Gurduara components on an individual and institutional level as a way to create a safe and open place of learning within global Sikh communities. Individuals cannot remain passive to the programs of their local Gurduaras while institutions need to evaluate how thoughtfully or deliberately the *Miri-Piri* doctrine is being manifested in their governance.

The role and function of the Gurduara is specified throughout Bani, Tavarikh, and Rahit. Building Gurmat-focused Gurduaras is essential to create community-centered places of learning.



Gurduara: A Sikh Place of Learning

The Gurduara is the central space for Sikhs, playing a vital role in the daily lives of local Sikh communities around the world. Gurduara is derived from “gur” and “duara,” together forming “through the Guru.” In Sikhi, the worldview of a Sikh is centered around the Guru. “Through the Guru” is the lens from which Sikhs strive to see the world. Traditionally, the role of Sikh institutions exemplifies the twin doctrine of Miri-Piri: each individual is to be trained to become sovereign in all spheres of life. The epitome of Miri-Piri is *Akal Takht Sahib* (Timeless Throne Sovereign) in Amritsar, Panjab. Hence, each Gurduara needs to be viewed from a Gurmat perspective.

From their conception, Gurduaras are spaces for political-spiritual growth, with emphasis on education, food, shelter, and security for the community. Local Gurduaras play a significant role in influencing the lives of the Sikh communities globally. It is necessary to continue to reflect on the development of Gurduaras to keep the Sikh community Gurmat-oriented.

A survey of 1,172 self-identified Sikhs from 22 different countries was conducted by the Sikh Research Institute. It captures the views and aspirations of Sikhs about the role of Gurduaras within their local communities. The results included emphasis on investment in education based on Sikh principles, funding for community outreach projects, and empowerment of the Sikh youth. The Miri-Piri doctrine was not evident in the responses to how the Gurduara is defined, highlighting the changing role of the Gurduara in the lives of the Sikh community in the 21st century.

Recommendations are made based on Gurmat as inferred from Bani, Tavarikh, and Rahit that can be used by individuals and institutions to create positive change in their local Gurduaras and Sikh communities.

Wisdom

Bani

The term *Gurduara* (commonly Gurdwara) is formed from two words: “gur” and “duara.” “Gur” comes from *Guru* (literally from “darkness” to “light”), which in Sikhi is embodied in the institutions of the Ten Guru Sahibs, Guru Granth Sahib, and Guru Khalsa Panth. Often seen as “dwara,” as in Gurdwara, “dwara” refers to a door, whereas “duara” is through, by, or via. The Guru guides a journey of a Sikh from ignorance to enlightenment. Together Gurduara becomes “Through the Guru.” The Gurduara is commonly described as “the Sikh place of worship.” The common citation of Gurduara comes in Guru Granth Sahib as *Gurduara* (as opposed to *Gurdwara*) — through, by, or via the Guru — the Guru’s Gateway. Throughout Bani, Gurduara is described as the path from which sanctuary is found.

My Beloved maintains their honor, through the Guru they remain in sanctuary.

O’Nanak! Guru-oriented remain pleasant, their faces radiant in the Court.ⁱ

— Guru Granth Sahib, 1249

This path of love and devotion is difficult, few find it through the Guru.

Nanak says: Those who feel the grace connect their consciousness with

All-Pervasive devotion.ⁱⁱ

— Guru Granth Sahib, 440

The idea of a place of worship limits the importance of the Gurduara for the Sikh *Panth* (Sikh collective), whereas Gurduara is a place of community. For Sikhs, the place of worship is not contained to the structure of the Gurduara, instead, Guru Arjan Sahib illuminates that:

The Guru's Self is Transcendent and Supreme.

Nanak: Contemplate the Guru eight-pahars, i.e., all the time.ⁱⁱⁱ

— Guru Granth Sahib, 387

Pahar is literally “watch” in South Asian traditions; day is divided into eight *pahars*, where each *pahar* is of three hours. Sikh worship is both private and public; Sikhs can pray anywhere at any time. The *Sabad* (sections or excerpts from the Bani of Guru Granth Sahib) is the center of worship, literally and metaphorically, for it transforms human behavior. The goal by hearing, seeing, reading, and singing the *Sabad* is to enact its message.

The Sabad in beautiful language is the Divine Teaching.

Siblings! Daily sing, listen, and study; the Perfect Guru will free You.^{iv}

— Guru Granth Sahib, 611

The worship can occur in collective groups in many forms at the Gurduara. However, the goal of the Gurduara is more all-encompassing in the life of a Sikh than solely a specially designed structure in which to merely pray. The physical place alone is not what creates the Gurduara, what the space is invoked for matters more. The space is physical, but also the space of opportunity for growth, nurturing, and community. Hence, the purpose of the Gurduara is to foster community building for the Sikhs. Keeping this holistic purpose, Sikhs practice both a personal worship as well as a community worship.

There is a personal relationship that must be built between the individual and *Akal Purakh* (Timeless Being). The Gurduara supports that relationship with the Divine as a collective training center as opposed to being a place to practice personal worship. In the public space of the Gurduara, another form of practice comes into play, deliberation, and discussion.

Through the Guru, gains insights.

Through this cleansing, becomes good.^v

— Guru Granth Sahib, 730

A Gurduara can be found wherever there is a collective Sikh group. Wherever there is a small group of Sikhs or even just a family living together, a Gurduara is usually created.

*Where ever eternal Guru goes and sits,
that place is beautiful, O' Charmer-Sovereign!
Guru's Sikhs find that place, apply its dust on their face.^{vi}*

— Guru Granth Sahib, 450

In this context, applying dust can be taken in the literal and metaphorical sense, illustrating the aim for humility in order to become radiant through the Guru. Metaphorically, the dust symbolizes a behavioral transformation towards humility. Individuals may also physically apply dust to their foreheads as a gesture akin to “kissing the ground.”

The Gurduara is where, through the Guru, one is able to gain insights into life. The physical space of the Gurduara serves as a Sikh institution, a training center for gaining insights on all aspects of life. Instead of just a place for worship, the Gurduara is where the doctrine of Miri-Piri is fully actualized within the Sikh community. The Miri-Piri doctrine manifests through community development, specifically through education and training within the Gurduara. This *Raj* (governance or rule) was established by Guru Nanak Sahib:

*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.^{vii}*

— Guru Granth Sahib, 450

From the time of Guru Nanak Sahib, the focus of the Gurduara has been on nation building; it is the training center for the Sikh nation. The Guru openly critiqued *Mir* (political head) and *Pir* (spiritual head), and started the Raj to integrate the Political-Spiritual within every individual instead of relying on the heads or experts.

Your Court is grand, Your Throne is eternal.

Above the kings is the Sovereign, the whisk and the canopy are permanent.^{viii}

— Guru Granth Sahib, 964

Darshani Diuri (entrance arch) at Sri Harimandar Sahib

Amritsar, Panjab

2010



History

Tavarikh

The Gurduara was at the core of the Ten founder Gurus' vision to develop the Sikh community. An example of such a development is Kartarpur — "Creator-ville" — a city founded by Guru Nanak Sahib to practice *Ik Oankar's* (the One Force) Oneness.

Often, the Gurduara is referred to as the "guru ghar," which is where the Guru physically lives. The Guru's residence is different than the institution of Miri-Piri, which is the Gurduara. The physical place of gathering for the Sikhs is an institution for learning, practicing, and all around a vessel to become Guru-oriented. The residence of the Guru was not seen as the institution of Miri-Piri for Sikhs, instead these residences were historical places. Places where the Guru lived were eventually marked as historical Gurduaras to commemorate their memory; where the Guru trained and deliberated were the sangat Gurduaras.

Prior to the use of the term Gurduara, the term *dharamsala* or *dharamsal* is used. In Sanskrit *dharamsala* means a court of justice, tribunal, or charitable asylum. The *dharamsala* was a precursor term for Gurduara for Sikh institutions. The *dharamsal*, meaning principle-center to the Guru's Gateway, was a tradition shared across South Asia. The term *dharamsal* was later developed into the Gurmat-oriented Gurduara. Bhai Gurdas uses this term in reference to Guru Nanak Sahib:

*Presented Eternal-Form Eternal-Identification,
Divine Eternal-Guru Nanak recited.
At Kartarpur dharamsal,
populated Guru-Congregation as the Eternal-Realm.¹*



Sangat (Sikh congregation) inside Khalsa Diwan Society
Vancouver, British Columbia
1945

The writings of Bhai Gurdas (1551–1636) are the most prominent interpretive works in Sikhi, second only to the Guru Granth Sahib. Bhai Gurdas's works are considered a well-respected and authoritative source.

The *Janam Sakhis* (accounts of Guru Nanak Sahib's life) describe that wherever Guru Nanak Sahib travelled to, an infrastructure was built where followers could continue to meet regularly after the departure of Guru Nanak Sahib. These meeting places became widespread with the travels of Guru Nanak Sahib.

Bhai Gurdas describes the rise of Guru Nanak Sahib as follows:

Eternal Guru Nanak revealed, mist cleared, the world illumined.
As the Sun rises, stars hide, darkness dispels.
When the Lion roars, flock of deer runs, loses its endurance.
Wherever Baba placed feet, prayer-center was established.
All Sidh-centers of the world were renamed Nanak-centers.
Every home became Dharamsal, Kirtan continues, always Vaisakhi.
Baba freed all four directions, nine corners of the earth met the Truth.
Guru-orientedness revealed in the Dark-Ignorance age.²

Guru's Sikh wakes up early morning, bathes in the pool at ambrosial hours.
Utters Guru's words, becomes mindful of the Dharamsal.
Arrives at the Guru's congregation, listens lovingly to the Gurbani.
Dispels doubts from the mind, serves the Guru's Sikhs.
Earns with principle and hard work, brings and distributes meal.
Serves the Guru's Sikhs first, then eats from what's left.
Illumines the Dark-Ignorance age, Guru-disciple becomes disciple-Guru.
Guru-oriented tread on the path.³



These spaces were used for collective worship, to discuss matters of common concern, and for the general assembly of the sangat. In addition to community centers for worship and discussion, these dharamsalas functioned as asylums that provided food and shelter for travellers and the needy alike. From the 17th century onward, from which Gurbani is collected in the form of Guru Granth Sahib, these dharamsalas began to be known as Gurduaras, portals of the Guru.⁴

The *Manji* (administrative unit) system established by Guru Amardas Sahib, shows the clear intent behind the Gurduara structures. The Mughal empire at the time was divided into 22 regions; the Guru appointed 22 Manjidars, who were leaders, emissaries, or administrators. In the middle of 16th century, four of the 22 were women, including Kabul's Manjidar named Mata Sevan, or endearingly *Kabul vali mai* (Kabul's Lady).⁵

Under Guru Ramdas Sahib, Manjidars developed into *Masands* (agents) who were replaced by the *Khalsa* (Sovereign) under Guru Gobind Singh Sahib. After the execution of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, *Mahants* (priests) took over Gurduaras when Sikhs were being hunted and executed; two major genocidal campaigns termed *Ghallugharas* took place in the 18th century. During the *Misl-period* (The Sikh Commonwealth in 18th century), the Ranjit Singh, and the British periods, the Mahants continued becoming more influential:

"After the establishment of the British rule (1849), a radical change came about in the legal position of the Mahants in respect of the Gurdwaras. The new law in its practical working converted the Mahants, who were mere servants of the Panth, into virtual proprietors of the temples. Being no longer responsible to the community, the Mahants began to misappropriate the income of the Gurdwara to their private use and alienate or sell the trust property at will. Irresponsibility and wealth inevitably resulted in immorality and the places of worship became the haunts of evil men. "In these circumstances, the first thought of the Sikhs was to recover control of their Gurdwaras through the law-courts, but it was not very long before they came to realize the difficulties of the new situation in which they found themselves. To the dilatory procedure of the courts and the heavy expenses involved in litigation was added, as they now realized, the unsympathetic attitude of the Government." ⁶



Parikarma (pathway) around
sarovar (pool) surrounding
Sri Harimandar Sahib
Amritsar, Punjab

2007

In the aforesaid context, the legislations started defining Gurduaras. For example, The Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Act (Punjab Act VI of 1922) interpreted as follows:

“Gurdwara” means a Sikh place of public worship erected by, or in memory of, or in commemoration of any incident in the life of any of the Ten Sikh Gurus ... “Shrine” means a Sikh place of public worship erected in the memory of a Sikh Martyr or Sikh Saint.⁷

The Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925 complicated things further; this Act left it to the state to define the Gurduara:

Words “Gurdwara” or “Sikh Gurdwara” are not defined in the Act, only notified Sikh Gurdwara is defined as a gurdwara by the State Government under the provisions of the Act. It may be noted that word “gurdwara” simpliciter is used in the Act for any religious institution of the Sikhs as well as of non-Sikhs but “Sikh Gurdwara” with S and G capital letters, only for a Sikh religious institution. Which “gurdwara” is a “Sikh Gurdwara” apart from those mentioned in Schedule I of Act is to be determined by the Tribunal or Court in accordance with provisions contained in section 16(2) of the Act.⁸

The Gurduara Reform Movement in the 1920s marked a turning point in the governance of Gurduara, 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 whom the Khalsa had lost control to over the years. This movement eventually led to the introduction of the Sikh Gurduara Bill of 1925, which put all historical Sikh Gurduaras in India under the control of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). Then onwards, the management of Gurduaras, specifically in India, became intertwined with governmental control.

This trend continues into the Diaspora, where Gurduaras are partially accountable to the government under laws that govern charities and other religious institutions. Currently, the SGPC directly manages Gurduaras in three states: Panjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh. The global Gurduaras are still suffering from the Mahant or Act effects; they are caught up in corruption or court battles.

At the time of Guru Hargobind Sahib, Akal Takht Sahib was established as the external manifestation of the Miri-Piri doctrine; it became the headquarter of the Panth to govern all Sikh institutions, including Gurduaras. Akal Takht was created as the authority which Sikhs could draw from and entrust.

Sirdar Kapur Singh elaborates on the Miri-Piri doctrine:

“It was in 1609 that the Nanak VI, Guru Hargobind (1595–1644), erected the Akal Takht edifice opposite the entrance bridge-head of the Golden Temple, upon which the Guru sat in state, wearing two swords of dominion over the two worlds, the seen and the unseen, and the peculiar Sikh doctrine of Double Sovereignty took birth, the essence of which is that a man of religion must always owe his primary allegiance to Truth and mortality, and he must never submit to the exclusive claim of the secular state to govern the bodies and minds of men, and the whole of subsequent Sikh History must be seen as an unfoldment of this Sikh attitude, if it is to be properly understood.”⁹

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. 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.

The structure of the Gurduara becomes the manifestation of the tenets of inseparable Miri-Piri doctrine for the Sikhs throughout history.

In his *Mahan Kosh*, Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha described the Gurduara as a:

- i. School – A place for spiritual learning.
- ii. Kitchen – A place for the hungry to fulfill their hunger.
- iii. Rest House – A place of shelter for travellers.
- iv. Hospital – A place of rest for those that are ill.
- v. Iron-Fortress – A place of protection, especially for marginalized groups such as women.¹⁰

Today, the Gurduara is known to provide a meeting place for Sikhs, serving as a community center. The Gurduara can be a school, guesthouse, and a base for local Sikh charitable activities. This consists of listening to *Gurbani* (recitation of Guru Granth Sahib), *Kirtan* (singing of Gurbani), and *Katha* (exposition of Gurbani). Here Gurbani refers to banis within Guru Granth Sahib or attributed to Guru Gobind Singh Sahib as well as compositions of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal.¹¹

As the Sikh nation grew, Gurduaras were erected and maintained along the way. These Gurduaras may now be loosely classified as historical (associated with the event in Sikh history) and sangat (wherever Sikhs congregate locally) Gurduaras. Typically, Sikhs commemorate and memorialize through the creation of a Gurduara. The Gurduara itself becomes a living memory in the form of a physical space. These Historical Gurduaras become a physical reminder of the historical context in which they were built. In maintaining these physical historical places, the Sikh sangat is able to connect to previous generations through a common history.

In the past, Gurduaras have been small, humble structures with a focus on learning, specifically in small collective groups. The avenue for large gatherings were *Jor Melas* (collective celebrations), where multiple sangats might come together for a celebration or collective program. During the time of Guru Amardas Sahib, Jor Melas were annual celebrations to connect with other Sikh sangats. The everyday visits to the Gurduara were focused on learning instead of perpetual celebrations as we have become accustomed to in today's society.

Sangat Gurduaras were usually constructed as community spaces for the local sangat wherever there was enough sangat. Especially in the Diaspora, these Sangat Gurduaras served as community gathering centers that were both politically and socially active.

There needs to be a differentiation made between Historical Gurduaras and Sangat Gurduaras. Historical Gurduaras are how the Panth collectively commemorates historical events in the form of Gurduara structures. While Sangat Gurduaras are Gurduaras that are sangat-oriented with the goal of continuous learning. Gurduaras aren't pilgrimages, for according to Guru Granth Sahib, pilgrimage is the Nam (Divine Identification), the culture of identifying with the One. Gurduaras have played multifaceted roles throughout history, but the concept of a thriving community center is paramount to the progression of Sikh communities.

Lifestyle

Rahit

In the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (Sikh code of conduct) under Section Three: Chapter IV, Article V, the etiquette, rites, and general procedures for Gurduaras are outlined. The sangat within the Gurduara is explained as a support system by which to reflect on and study Gurbani. Guru Granth Sahib is the center of all ceremonies at the Gurduara, so there are specific instructions given for the appropriate procedures and means for respect (such as cleanliness) for each of these categories of ceremonies. It is also highlighted that there is no differentiation or discrimination between Sikhs or non-Sikhs of any walk of life within the sangat of the Gurduara.

Protection of Gurduaras, Article IV (SRM), forms a daily Sikh collective memory in *Ardas* (supplication in form of concluding prayer in both personal and public Sikh life):

Meditating on the achievement of the male and female members of the Khalsa who laid down their lives in the cause of *dharmā* (religion and righteousness), got their bodies dismembered bit by bit, got their skulls sawn off, got mounted on spiked wheels, got their bodies sawn, made sacrifices in the service of the shrines (gurdwaras), did not betray their faith, sustained their adherence to the Sikh faith with sacred unshorn hair up till their last breath, say, “Wondrous Destroyer of darkness,” O Khalsa.

Thinking of the five thrones (seats of religious authority) and all gurdwaras, say, “Wondrous Destroyer of darkness,” O Khalsa.¹²

This version of the Sikh Rahit Maryada was drafted by Sikh scholars in 1925, for which a final version was completed in 1936. Finally, in 1945, the Sikh Rahit Maryada became accepted and was printed by the Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and other parties.

From their origin, Gurduaras have had a sovereign status. This status is marked by key emblems, including the Nishan Sahib (sovereign flag), Nagara (drum), Candoa (canopy), and Caur (royal-whisk).¹³ In regards to the Nishan Sahib, the most visible and notable of these emblems, the Sikh Rahit Maryada states:

At a high-level site in every Gurdwara must be installed the Nishan Sahib (Sikh flag). The cloth of the flag must be either of xanthic or of greyish blue colour and on top of the flag post there must either be a spearhead or a Khanda (a straight dagger with convex side edges leading to slanting top edges ending in a vertex).¹⁴

In addition to the Sikh Rahit Maryada, Gurduaras around the world are bound to the local rules, laws, and regulations. Though this is, of course, necessary to function, Gurduaras globally have fallen into many legal battles that have resulted in going through their respective local judiciary systems. Gurduara and its governance matters must be brought under the authority of Akal Takht Sahib because of Miri-Piri doctrine's Political-Spiritual sovereignty. Due to the ties of the SGPC to political parties and jurisdiction under Government of India, the Panth has lost its ability to govern Sikh matters, including at Akal Takht Sahib. Amidst the headquarter of the Panth under siege, Gurduaras are under the laws of local governments. Here lies the crux of the problem: every Gurduara operates as per its trustees prerogative, many a time ending in disputes to be resolved by non-Sikh legal authorities instead of Akal Takht Sahib. This dependency on external legal authorities in Gurduaras has led to moral influence and guidance in Sikh spaces and Gurduaras by non-Sikh sources.



*Sikh Children in a Parade
Vancouver, British Columbia
1936 - 1938*

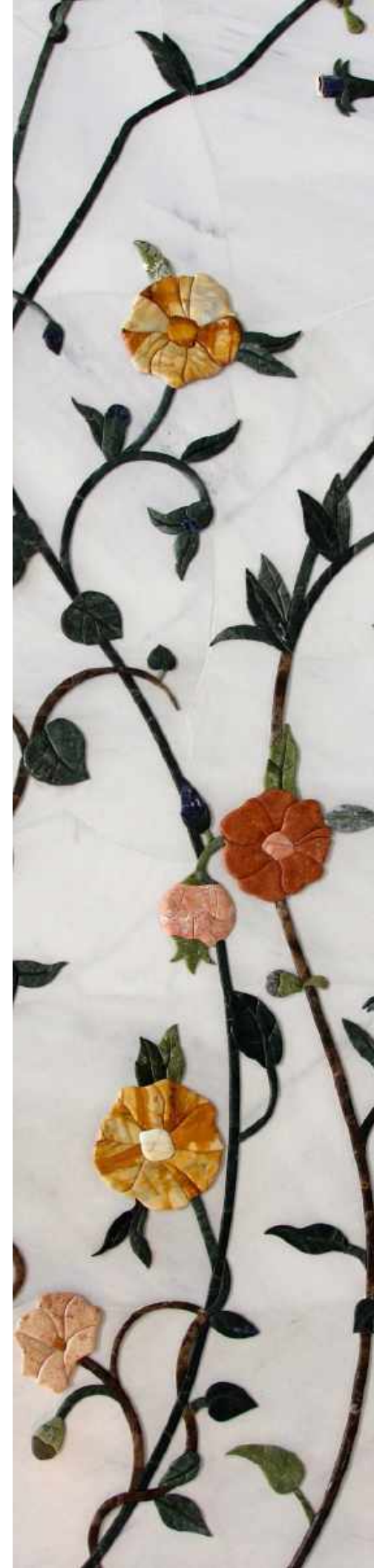
Abiding by local legislation around charitable religious organizations is natural and expected, but the moral authority must remain with free and independent Akal Takht Sahib.

Due to the compromised governance of Akal Takht Sahib, there is a historical mistrust in the Panth. This created an ununified structure of authority within the global Sikh population. As Guru Hargobind Sahib ordained, the Akal Takht Sahib is as necessary today as it was in the past to create a trusted ultimate authority for the Panth. In the meantime, the sangat Gurduaras are increasing in size and scale.

The purposes or uses of the Gurduara can be contextualized into five key areas: Spirituality, Kitchen, Rest House, Hospital, and Fort.

Spirituality *Learning*

Guru Nanak Sahib created institutions of collective learning and development, dharamsala, after visiting various villages, so that followers could continue to meet and learn together. These institutions historically were dynamic: not only they offered a physical space for personal and collective devotion, but a learning center for the Gurmukhi language, civil dialogue, and meetings. The Gurduara cannot remain a physical marker for the Sikh community worship center; it must offer multifaceted spiritual nourishment learning center.





Inside Langar Hall of Gurduara Bangla Sahib

Delhi

2015

Kitchen *Hunger*

The act of eating in *langar* (free community kitchen serving all individuals) was a revolutionary idea. From the conception of langar, Sikhs sat in *pangat* (row) to share a meal, regardless of background or social status. These meals were cooked in the langar facility by volunteers for Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike. The intention of langar was to offer meals and supplies to all visitors but especially to serve individuals in need.

The langar at Sri Harimandir Sahib feeds 100,000 people on an average day.¹⁵ Langar events or services are now often promoted to non-Sikhs as a major tenet of Sikhi. Langar services have been misused as showcases of wealth through elaborate meals and cost-effective social gatherings. Though any event celebrated through a Sikh lens can be appreciated, communities must reflect on the original impetus of langar.

Langar challenged the caste system and social hierarchy. Now Gurduaras have been known to refuse langar to the most vulnerable groups. In Panjab, many Gurduaras offer a separate langar for certain individuals though Sikhi demands the same langar for all, at all times when possible. These discriminatory practices negate the very essence of langar, which Sikhs use as the forefront PR image of Sikh communities. In order to truly be langar, Gurduaras need to serve regardless of the individual's status in life and all members should be served at an equal platform.

Rest House

Shelter

The Gurduara is a sanctuary not just in the spiritual sense, but as clearly displayed by the Nishan Sahib. The Gurduara serves as an embassy of the Guru through the Akal Takht Sahib. In being a sanctuary, the Gurduara extends to being a place of safety, an individual state from which one can seek refuge in the form of shelter, safety from invasion, or other harm. The Nishan Sahib commands it is an autonomous body governed by the Guru's Way.

People always took refuge at the Gurduaras. Even during the Emergency Period in India in 1975, Bharatiya Janata Party (opposition party to the Congress) leaders took refuge in the Sri Harimandar Sahib and Akal Takht Sahib complex in Amritsar.¹⁶

Naturally Gurduaras are subject to the law of the state they are situated, but those laws do not superimpose the laws of the Guru and the authority of the Panth. Today, it is not uncommon for the sangat themselves to call in the police to the Gurduara to settle *Panthak* (Sikh collective) matters.

When the Gurduara is defined as a sanctuary of the Guru (from which no one can be disowned or removed without the authority of the Guru), the community itself discredits that system when it leans on powers that have no place within the Gurduara premises.

Gurduara's sovereignty and its status as a place of sanctuary is compromised when external agencies are called during disputes. This leads to internal undermining of the Gurduara and highlights lack of *Panthak* accountability.



Corridor outside of Gurduara Bangla Sahib

Delhi

2007

Hospital *Health*

Gurduaras offer a space for healing both physical and mental ailments. Guru Harirai Sahib set this precedence at Kiratpur Sahib by planting medicinal gardens among other greenery that would be used as treatments for anyone in need of help. When Dara Shukoh (son of Emperor Shajahan) was poisoned by his own brother Aurangzeb, medicinal herbs were sent by the Guru. Prince Dara was healed; so too the animosity of the Mughals during that period towards the Sikhs.¹⁷

These treatments may translate to various avenues from counselling for mental health, de-addiction and rehabilitation guidance, recreational facilities for physical health, on top of the spiritual healing that is offered through the Gurduara. These are not revolutionary concepts to 21st century Gurduaras, but a tradition of a holistic understanding of the human experience passed down from the Gurus.





Anandgarh Sahib Fort
Anandpur Sahib, Panjab

1934

(Photo: Panjab Digital Library)

Fort

Security

In order to provide a place for spiritual, mental and physical guidance, and healing, the Gurduara must offer a safe space. The Gurduara was a fort to save the Sikh treasures that formed the culture of Nam. Not only is this treasure not being saved, many of its administrators are now part of criminal acts.

Many times criminal acts are covered due to cultural taboos, but dismissing such acts diminishes the true importance of the Gurduara. Events and acts such as sexual harassment, rape, and inequality on multiple fronts cannot remain taboo topics within the community, or else the Gurduaras will not be a safe space. These topics are often brushed aside, allowing them to continue to occur under the radar.

A simple Google search results in many examples of news headlines outlining such occurrences. Many topics come to the forefront of community issues in the 21st century, but this is vital for those committing these acts are not being held accountable on a Panthak level. It is one thing to be answerable to the law, which is mandatory and necessary in such cases, but inside the Gurduara one is also answerable to the Panth.

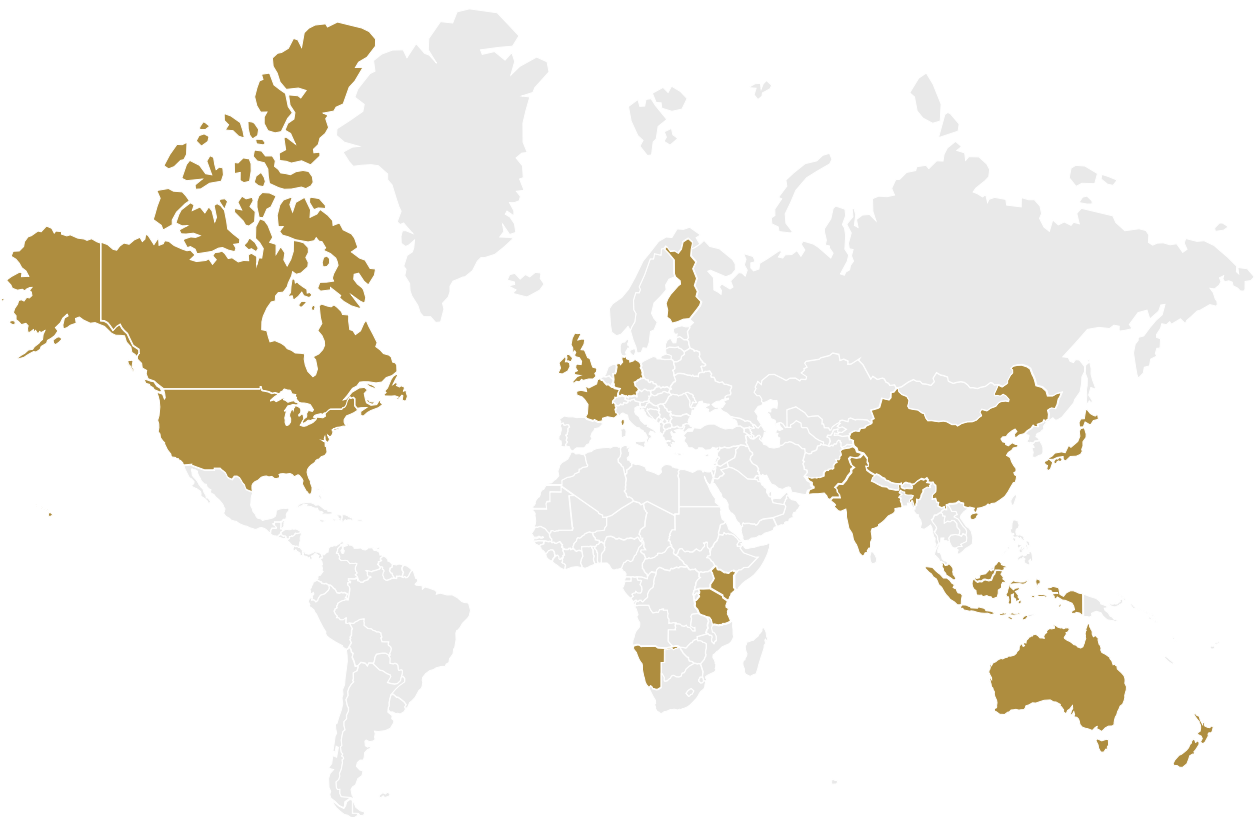
Less taboo is the phenomena of physical altercations on the premise of Gurduaras between individuals Sikhs as well as Gurduara committees. They must be discussed and addressed: how can the Sikhs accept criminal acts within fort-like Gurduaras? In order to develop trustees responsible to the entire Sikh collective in the Gurduaras, all serving as the officers or trustees must go through mandatory trainings on Sikhi and Gurduara purpose as well as non-profit board governance.

Reflecting on the key elements that have traditionally been associated with the Gurduara, Sikh sangats already have a framework with which to build and expand on within their local Gurduaras. Sikh history illuminates on what the goals of the Gurduara are and there is a measure with which to evaluate the state of current sangat Gurduaras.

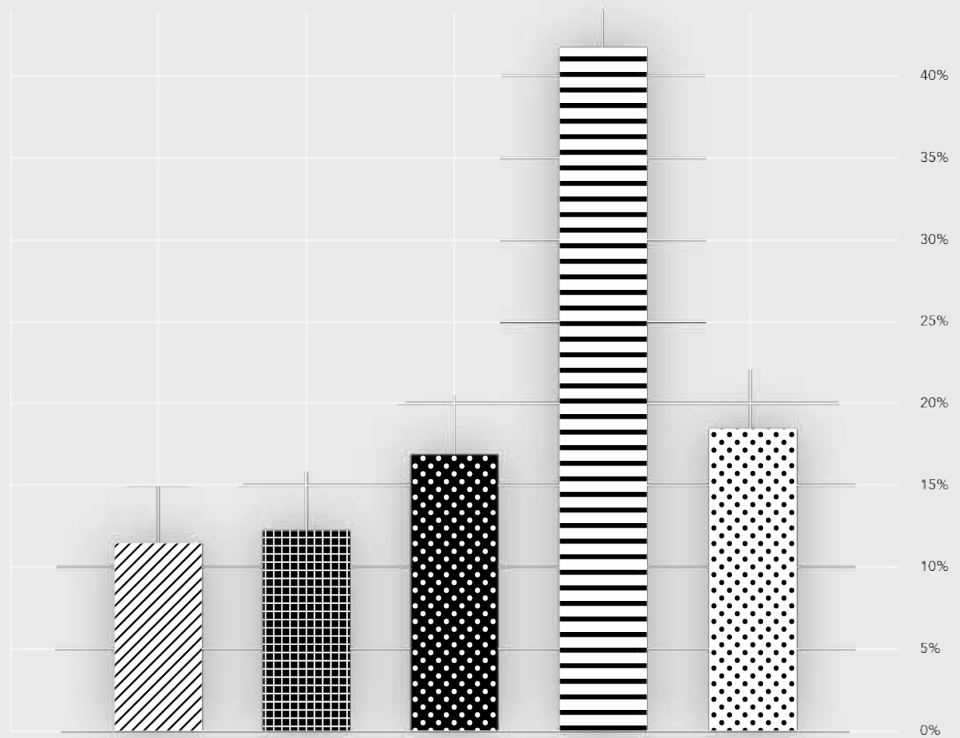
There have also been many scenarios of attacks on Gurduaras in the Panjab and in the Diaspora communities. It is key that Gurduaras incorporate vigilant security procedures as well as provide safe space internally. This safe space requires the empowerment of women and also other marginalized members of the Sikh community, whether that be due to caste, race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical disabilities.

Survey

An online survey was conducted to gain insight into how the 2018 global Sikh community views the role of Gurduaras in their everyday lives. A total of 1,172 self-identified Sikhs from 22 different countries participated in the survey. For the purpose of this research into the Sikh community, only respondents who self-identified as Sikhs were considered.



Visits to a Gurduara



The purpose of this survey was to understand the role the Gurduara plays in the lives of Sikhs around the world as perceived by the local sangats themselves.

A Guduara is...	Under 18	19-25	26-39	40-60	Over 60
A place of worship	36 40%	190 44%	309 43%	321 45%	183 50%
A community center	27 30%	150 33%	228 32%	229 32%	114 31%
A place of activism	26 29%	102 23%	178 25%	161 23%	72 20%

Majority of responses defined the Gurduara as a place of worship (89% of responses), followed by a community center (64%), and a place of activism (46%). Interestingly, there were no significant differences seen between age groups in the definition of the Gurduara. Only 37% of respondents felt that the Gurduara could be defined as all three. Some individuals chose to combine the pairings, and those alternative pairings from most to least common were as follows:

- Place of Worship and Community Center (20%)
- Place of Worship and Place of Activism (3%)
- Community Center and Place of Activism (2%)

Respondents were then asked to reflect on, regardless of the definition of the Gurduara, where they felt the top-3 budget items of their local Gurduara were focused on, with the options:

- Panthak (Sikh collective) activism and engagement
- Broader interfaith engagement
- Community building and personal support (activities and services)
- Governance committee (legal, planning, and financial)
- Divan activities (kirtan, katha, simran)

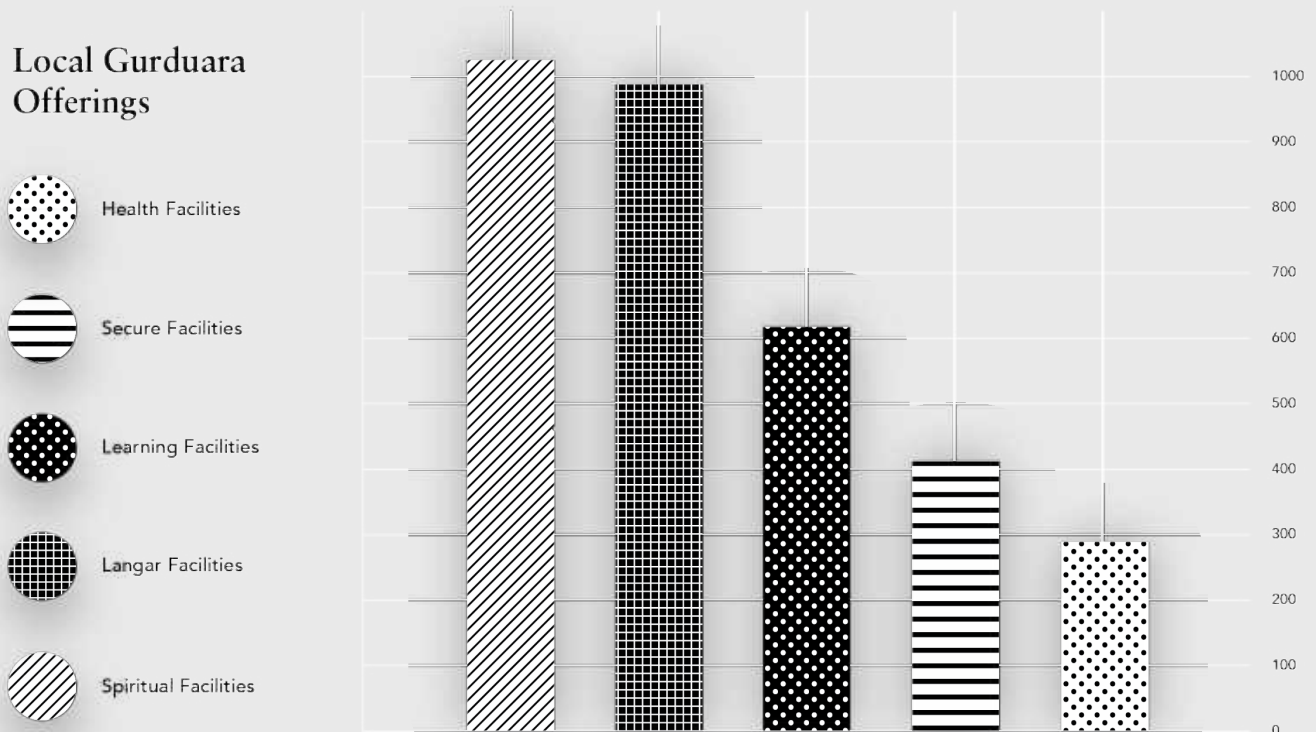
In the same vein, respondents were asked to report on what types of facilities were available at their local Gurduara:

- Spiritual facilities (divan hall)
- Learning facilities (classrooms, library, multipurpose room)
- Langar facilities (kitchen, langar hall, vegetable garden, recycling)
- Health facilities (handicap access, counselling, recreation)
- Secure facilities (CCTV, gates, emergency plan)

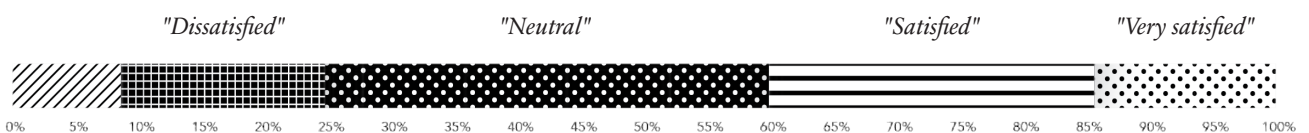
The results showed that the top-3 budget items of local Gurduaras as reported in the survey were as follows:

- i. Divan activities (kirtan, katha, simran)
- ii. Community building and personal support (activities and services)
- iii. Governance committee (legal, planning, and financial)

Respondents reported that their local Gurduara offered the following:



Given these responses, respondents were overall most likely satisfied (40%), neutral (35%), or dissatisfied (25%).



Finally, respondents were given the option to share what their top priorities were for the 21st century Gurduara. Common threads included emphasis on learning center facilities with available educational resources, from written materials, open access to classes on Sikh skills and principles, as well as spiritual guidance. This was expressed in forms of Santhia/Gurmukhi classes, as well as physical/health classes and facilities. The respondents felt funds must be used towards finding high-quality teachers, including *Granthis* (one who knows, enunciates, and elucidates Guru Granth Sahib) and *Ragis* (one who sings Guru Granth Sahib in its musical measures), as well as creating spaces for learning.

Responses were focused on helping those from all walks of life with the monetary resources of the Gurduara instead of putting in funds for the grandeur of the Gurduara itself or ceremonies held there. Community projects focused on environmentalism, such as gardens and recycling within the langar, were seen as priorities for many.

There was also a call for community cohesion within the sangat that must be reflected in the Gurduara sangat, governance, and political stances. Finally, a strong emphasis was put on inclusion on both a feminism front as well as on engaging the youth. Respondents expressed strong desire for engaging the youth in the Gurduara by creating opportunities for them to take part in all aspects of the Gurduara.

Though this was an opportunity to share what what would create an ideal 21st century Gurduara, many took this as an opportunity to share issues of the current system. Many expressed a lack of transparency with their local Gurduara governance, from organization to the utilization of funds. Many others misused the term “political” to refer to gossip and internal sangat conflict instead of political in the sense of Miri.

“...no politics inside the gurdwara walls, i.e., gossiping and spreading rumours”

“have pyaar [love] and respect for one another, no caste issues. Let's get the basics right...”

“... in this world that definitely don't mix and that is RELIGION and POLITICS, a gurdwara should be a place where everyone can come and unite and understand our guru's words but instead its become a place to hear the latest gossip, a place to criticise, a place to argue...”

This may relate to the previous question, where interestingly worship and activism were least likely to be paired together when two pillars of Sikhi can be said to be Miri and Piri. These grievances highlighted a lack of communication between Gurduara committees as well as a miscommunication on the discussion of Sikh principles with the sangat. The respondents felt a disconnect between the Sikh community and those individuals that had a “say” in the Gurduara.

Overall, responses highlight how there is a desire to create a sense of community within the Gurduara, as it is intended to be. There is a need for education, perhaps in more innovative ways, and stronger emphasis on core Sikh principles such as helping those in need.



First Gurduara in America

Stockton, California

1912

Recommendations

Individual Level

Members of local sangats must become self-accountable and reflect on what aspects of Miri-Piri they desire to gain from their interactions with the Gurduara. In order to benefit from the Gurduara, it must be clear what their own goals and intentions are.

Individual Sikhs must choose to remain active and involved in their local Gurduaras for the progression of their communities into the future. As seen by the responses in the survey, the global Sikh community has a vision for Gurduaras with a strong desire to create that space of community. In order to have these goals of education, innovative community outreach, and youth participation, individuals cannot be passive to the actions of their community Gurduaras.

Institutional Level (Gurduara Level)

Gurduaras manifest the doctrine of Miri-Piri offering political-spiritual safe spaces for Sikh communities. The focus of the Gurduara must be on community development, and this must remain the goal of every Gurduara governance team. In order to develop a community exemplifying Miri-Piri, Gurduara governance teams must be versed and trained on Miri-Piri principles. The guidance the Gurduara offers is for all members of the sangat (for example, not just Panjabi-speaking first-generation men above 45 in the Diaspora). As such, Gurduara committees need to understand the make of their local sangats to create platforms and resources that speak to all members of that sangat.

Just having the *parkash* (presence) of Guru Granth Sahib does not make it the Gurduara. The Gurduara is a public space that is run by Panthak protocols. These protocols must be reviewed and be open knowledge to the sangat as to allow for open communication and growth of the community.



This transparency in the governance of the Gurduara not only allows governance committees to remain on track with their goals and remain in accordance with Gurmat principles, but allows them to remain accountable to the sangat.

Gurduaras must prepare themselves to come under the aegis of Akal Takht Sahib once it is free from any political party or state interference. As a first step, Gurduara trustees, boards, and committees must undergo mandatory trainings to becoming accountable to the entire Sikh Panth.

For the proper functioning of the Gurduara, five key competencies must be filled:

1. Granthi

The individual fulfilling the role of the Granthi must excel at knowing and interpreting the wisdom in Guru Granth Sahib and relevant protocols for the functioning of *Darbar* (Guru's court). This understanding must come from experience and Gurmat-based traditions. Granthi must be familiar with conducting Sikh ceremonies and their relevance to foster Guru-oriented lifestyle. Granthi must be approachable and fluent in local parlance to guide and teach Gurbani to sangat members.

2. President

The President serves as an inspirational sangat leader who is able to meet the objectives of the Gurduara. This individual is held accountable for governance and operations. President also liaises with the local community at large on behalf of the Gurduara.

3. Ragi

The Ragi champions all Kirtan programs in the Gurduara and at local events, both Sikh and non-Sikh (interfaith). Ragi must understand and practice Sikh musicology. The Ragi must lead Sabad singing in Gurmat traditions at Divans and be available to teach Kirtan and explain the Sabad they are singing.

4. Manager

This individual manages the premises, human resources, including payroll and hiring, setting schedules, organizing langar and special events, and paying bills.

5. Secretary

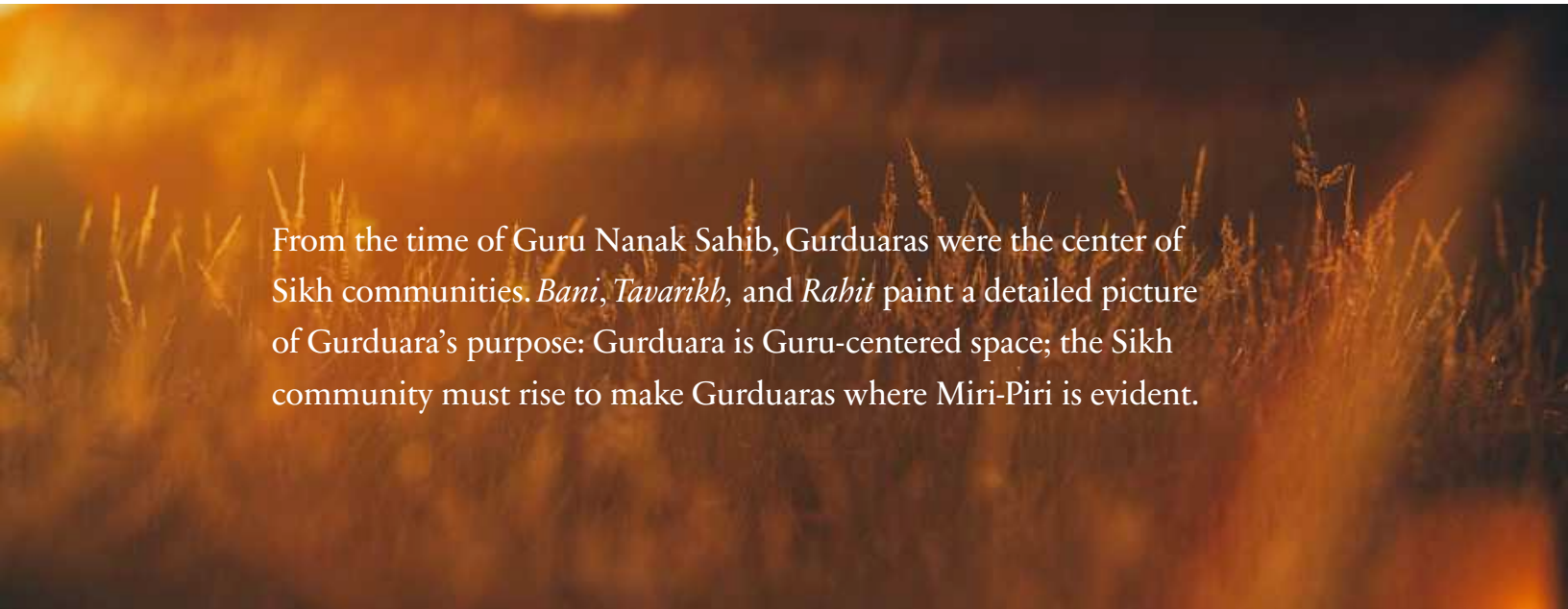
This individual facilitates the functioning of the Gurduara and its committees. The secretary holds individuals on the committee and third-party hires (or relationships) accountable to the Gurduara and the sangat.

As part of the Gurduara committee, other roles essential to the Gurduara, but often dependent upon the size of the Gurduara and sangat population, may include: office representatives, treasurer, langar manager, Gurmat school head, and youth programs coordinator. The committee must represent not only the Gurduara governance structure and the day-to-day activities but also be representative of the sangat for whom they speak. Certain roles of the committee require a practicing *Amritdhari* (initiated, popularly “baptized”) Sikh while others require the most competent and willing self-identifying Sikh for the role. As the committee works on behalf of the sangat, having a representative committee allows for better accountability, trust, and communication with the sangat.

The main tasks of the Gurduara is to leverage resources (in the form of financial donations and human volunteer hours) to benefit the community through learning, empowerment, and activism. In order to fulfill these tasks there are some key infrastructure requirements:

- Industrial kitchen
- Langar hall
- Divan hall
- Offices
- Library
- Counselling services
- Care centers
- Residence areas
- Conference hall
- Recreation areas
- Shoe storage
- Extra storage
- Restrooms

The interpretation of these infrastructure or support initiatives are dependent on the local sangat's size and needs, but the spirit behind these efforts must be present in all local Gurduaras. In order to be a place of community building, community initiatives are needed.



From the time of Guru Nanak Sahib, Gurduaras were the center of Sikh communities. *Bani*, *Tavarikh*, and *Rahit* paint a detailed picture of Gurduara's purpose: Gurduara is Guru-centered space; the Sikh community must rise to make Gurduaras where Miri-Piri is evident.

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ਨਾਨਕ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਸੇ ਸੁਹੇਲੇ ਭਏ ਮੁਖ ਉਜਲ ਦਰਬਾਰੇ ॥
- ii. ਭਗਤਿ ਭਾਵ ਇਹੁ ਮਾਰਗੁ ਬਿਖੜਾ ਗੁਰ ਦੁਆਰੈ ਕੇ ਪਾਵਏ ॥
ਕਹੈ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਜਿਸੁ ਕਰੇ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਸੇ ਹਰਿ ਭਗਤੀ ਚਿਤੁ ਲਾਵਏ ॥
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ਆਠ ਪਹਰ ਨਾਨਕ ਗੁਰ ਜਾਪਿ ॥੪॥
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ਏਤੁ ਦੁਆਰੈ ਹੋਇ ਹਛਾ ਹੋਇਸੀ ॥
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ਗੁਰਸਿਖੀ ਸੇ ਬਾਨੁ ਭਾਲਿਆ ਲੈ ਧੂਰਿ ਮੁਖਿ ਲਾਵਾ ॥
- vii. ਨਾਨਕਿ ਰਾਜੁ ਚਲਾਇਆ ਸਚੁ ਕੋਟੁ ਸਤਾਈ ਨੀਵ ਦੈ ॥
ਮਤਿ ਗੁਰ ਆਤਮ ਦੇਵ ਦੀ ਖੜਗਿ ਜੇਰਿ ਪਰਾਕ੍ਰਿਏ ਜੀਅ ਦੈ ॥ ...
ਜੇਤਿ ਓਹਾ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਸਾਇ ਸਹਿ ਕਾਇਆ ਫੇਰਿ ਪਲਟੀਐ ॥
ਝੁਲੈ ਸੁ ਛਤੁ ਨਿਰੰਜਨੀ ਮਲਿ ਤਖਤੁ ਬੈਠਾ ਗੁਰ ਹਟੀਐ ॥
- viii. ਵਡਾ ਤੇਰਾ ਦਰਬਾਰੁ ਸਚਾ ਤੁਧੁ ਤਖਤੁ ॥
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