

Khalsa College, Amritsar: A Plea for Conservation

(Dr.) Avtar Singh, M.A., M. Litt. (Canada), Ph.D.*

* E-47, Ranjit Avenue, Amritsar. 143001. Punjab.

Khalsa College, Amritsar which has a global importance for Sikhs was founded on 5th of March, 1892. We are now celebrating a decade of its centenary and hope to have a look into its history of over 100 years with a view to evaluating our performances and our failings. What we have done is before us; we should learn from it. What we could not do has eluded us; we shall critically examine it. What we have undone or negated is a rewarding field for study. We should accept and learn from it so that we can grow.

Pioneers: It is heartening to note that Principal G.S. Shergill had initiated and S. Surjit Singh Majithia, the then President, and Sardar Dilbir Singh, the then Honorary Secretary had procured a specialist's (Sh. A. C. Grover, Deputy Supdt. Archeological Engineer's) report on the technical aspects of the aging building. But, perhaps the 'Aesthetics' of this architecture, as analysed below, being not a term of reference, was not accented in the referred to report. Hence the need for the present paper.

Fiddling with the originally conceived design, whether to add to or to subtract from the main building, is an architectural blunder which the future generations would not excuse. This type of fiddling, under whatever pretext, is architecturally undesirable, if not unnatural. Unfortunately, however, the architecture of Khalsa College has been subjected to several inartistic and unarchitectural alterations, additions and renovations which need a critical exposition for the benefit of posterity as well as the present generation.

Spellbound: The architect, Sardar Ram Singh, M.B.E. conceived (a) majesty (b) grandeur (c) impressiveness of sight and (d) vastness of thought in the design of building. It is for this component of the aesthetic beauty and the architectural design of the college that he provided vast open spaces on all sides of the building to preserve the skyline and the bottom line of the building. The southern and south-western view of the building inspires all these feelings and a viewer gets spellbound by looking at the rising and vanishing shade and light on the towers and towerlets of the building. In the evening twilight, a viewer from the G.T. Road views the waning streak of crimson sun over the top expanse, while a mysterious shadow envelopes and fills up the open spaces of the corridors down below. Then, all at once, darkness gallops on to the building, turning all into one sea of peace as if the rose had shut to 'form a bud again', the darkness being punctuated only by the momentary flickers of the light-bugs around. It gets clothed in the best of its beauty which no picture can paint. Again, the southern view is a fascinating feast at dawn, giving a picture of a grand royal procession of a monarch, his queen, in a procession of '*palkies*', '*chhatries*', etc. surrounded by '*piadas*' and '*royal riders*', at the vast roof of the building.

Vision & Reality: Unlike the southern view, however, the eastern, the north-eastern and the north-western views have not been conserved according to the vision of the architect. The road emerging from Gate No.1, leading straight to the present Girl's school, was meant to fix the outline boundary in the north-east so that the future maintenance managers might not erect any view-blockers in the space provided for the eastern sun-rise view of the building. The vast space between the north-eastern front of the building and the residential quarters in the north-east provided to the viewer all visual spectacle of the sun-rise from bottom to the skyline of the main building. One could watch the gradually disappearing mists and changing hues of the domes, minarets '*kalashes*' and '*chhatries*', so artistically conceived by the architect.

In addition to the cracks which are now developing in the entire building, and the fact that a number of '*kalashes*' and '*pinnacles*' have been damaged or disappeared, one feels that there have been basic and major errors, both of omission and commission, on the part of the maintenance department, notwithstanding the repairs taken up again on a large scale. The open spaces between the building and the peripheral road-line has been most unimaginatively utilised for erecting view-blockers right from the south-east to the north by raising library and the canteen buildings so near the main building as to disregard the road as original demarcation of the outline. These view-blockers have been given a top-line almost matching the top-line of the main building. This has deprived the viewer of the view which he had an access to before. There goes the majestic '*kalashes*' and '*chhatries*', the domes and the ornamental pinnacles in one stroke!

View-Blockers: For a viewer in the north-east, the sun stopped rising over the main building after 1963 when the canteen building was raised, and again since library was constructed. For the viewer in the east the skyline has no meaning and the sky-scape no relevance. Sun has no hues to change from dawn to dusk over the body of the building which is hidden behind the unimaginatively constructed view-blockers upto the chin of the main building. The changing visual which varied from the misty haziness to the sharper contours of the brick and mortar in the noon are no more available to him now. There was a straight unobstructed look of the vast compound, climbing on to the great south-eastern corridor, leading to the total length of the Rivaz Hall flanked by two projections of the class-rooms into the east and the south-east. This view terminated in the computer room in the south-east and the Sikh history Research Department in the north-east and extended further north in the present English Department overlooking the present college dispensary. The vast open compound flanked by two projecting wings of class-rooms merged with the total open spaces and was set off into a proper architectural perspective when the viewer luxuriated over it, scanning vertically up from bottom to the top-line of the building. But alas! this view has been completely obstructed by a view-blocking canteen and the library building.

Ugly: Not stopping with this, a recently conceived architectural venture has been so inartistically completed to fill up the open space between the Chemistry block and the Physics block to sew up and shut down whatever the peeping view of grandeur of the building was left from the western road emerging from gate No.2.

An imaginative look from the Botanical garden, or from senior quarters, (No. 2 & 3) compels one to look at the Physics block as an unpleasant accretion filling up the armpit (the arms being the B.Ed. College on the one side and the N.C.C. complex and the Girl's school on the other) of the main building. A little closer look at the Chemistry block makes us believe that the architect did not conceive it as a part of the main building because he could not afford first to make the tall tops of the Botany department, and then to hide their majesty behind the Chemistry block by putting it between the building and the road. But the compulsion forced him to conceive a Chemistry block as a short-saturated building. Little did he know that we would plug in the open space and north-western armpit with the Physics block. By no stretch of imagination could one believe that the present builders would leave none of the gap between these two buildings. There goes the bottom-to-top visual of the western view of the bottom and trunk of the imposing 'E' in the north-west in one stroke. How one feels that the road emerging from gate No.1, running circularly in front of the Gurdwara and continuing from the front of the B.Ed. college to gate No.2, could serve as peripheral boundary of the original building - between which nothing was supposed to be erected, and how we wish that the architect's vision should not have been so grossly violated, especially when many acres of land of the college were available for the purpose!

Cracks in the dome: A keen visitor would readily come across many violations and excesses done to the design of the building during its age. With the 'ingress of water, age, seepage and inadequate and inexpert repair, one finds a large number of angular, vertical and horizontal cracks in the pillars, domes and the main walls of the building. Unfortunately, some of them have been repaired by replacing the brick masonry pillar work with R.C.C. pillars. This does not *match* with the red original brick-look which is, in fact, the key visual of the buildings. The incompatibility of width and the colour of the pointing done to the walls not only does not resonate with the rest of the building but is a glaring eyesore.

Jarring: Not going into the technical reasons of this incompatible maintenance, a glaring lack of aesthetics, narrowness of vision, and inartistic imagination seems writ-large on the execution of repairs. For example, the repairs or additions, renovations or extensions have usually been the brainchild of the head of the office and the works manager who have least cared to have an insight into the architecture or the overall tangible and intangible artistic merits of the design of the building. Both gates are organically so placed that they are equidistant from the north-western and north-eastern end-points of the body of the building, equal in measurement and similar in design, so that they may be used as independent buildings with their open compounds, and at the same time present a harmonious visual with the main building. Adding a jarring and ugly extension to the wall of the organically conceived wing of the eagle- the wall of the B.Ed. college, presents a look architecturally monstrous, intolerable and inexcusable. This boundary wall is not only an eye-sore inorganically added to an otherwise living and breathing organic monument; it has also, like the north-eastern view-blockers, violated the visual that was lent to the building by the hitherto open space between the north-western quarters and the building.

In addition to the thoughtless damage done to the sky-scape of the building mentioned above, no care seems to have been taken for preserving its landscape. The G.T. Road view, which is the only view preserving the skyline and the bottom-line of the building, could, by all canons of judgment, be said to be the key to the grandeur and majesty of the great monument. Take the case of south-eastern and south-western plantation both along the boundary wall extending along the G.T. road and immediately in front of the building. There is a haphazard growth of the Eucalyptus trees, both inside and outside the boundary wall, without regard to whether they obstruct the palatial look. When was ever a Eucalyptus tree (and that too the old ones with wide girth and broadly scattered crowns) considered an ornamental plantation!

It is unfortunate that there is neither a regular planning nor an execution of any such planning. There is no regular architect or a landscape officer who could look to the upkeep of the *aesthetics* and the surroundings of the building. **Khalsa college is not just a college. It is a National monument and should be treated as such both by its managers and the government.**

