

Sikhs Shrine of unity in London

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ON ANOTHER GREY DRIZZLY SUNDAY afternoon in west London, 16-year-old Pritpal Singh Chaggar enters the spectacular new Sikh Gurdwara in Southall, his eyes filled with pride. "I never used to come and pray very often," he says. "But as soon as I walked into this new Gurdwara I thought wow! I was really impressed with the amount of love people show here. I came with a donation of some milk, and people were so kind directing me where to go. This place really brings people together."

Pritpal is typical of a young generation of Sikhs in Britain which has been inspired by the shrine. "This gurdwara has got me more involved with my religion," Pritpal goes on. "My friends feel the same way too." The Southall Gurdwara was opened in great style on 30 March this year with an estimated 40,000 people attending.

Covering an area of 6,000 square metres, it lies incongruously amid the bustling streets of Southall and yet it is hard to think of a more appropriate place for what is now the biggest Sikh temple in Europe. Southall is an extraordinary community, hailed by local MPs as an example to the rest of the world of how people can get on. Thousands of Indian immigrants have settled here and the area has become a byword for tolerance and respect.

Finished in marble and granite, the Gurdwara features a large dome in the centre and attractive stained glass windows. The main prayer hall and gallery have space for 4,000 worshippers and there is also a smaller hall used for private functions, a library and a large *langar* (hall for community feasts) which can serve more than 20,000 meals over a weekend. There is also an underground parking lot that can accommodate over 90 cars.

The worshipper's body language as they arrive is evidence of the immense pride the Gurdwara has imbued in the Sikh community. Older worshippers, many of whom have visited the Golden Temple in Amritsar back home in India, wear respectful smiles as they wander up the steps to the entrance, clearly impressed. Younger Sikhs approach wide-eyed, excitedly making the most of their visit.

Without doubt, the most pleasing aspect of the Gurdwara's success so far has been the progress made in achieving a favourable reaction among the young Sikhs. Forty-three-year old Jaswant Singh was one of a group of 60 who had come down from Bristol especially to visit the Gurdwara. "It is very beautiful - it captures the heart, and you go away with an even greater feeling for your religion. We are looking at the next generation here, looking 200 years ahead. This temple has laid good foundations, of stones, not bricks," he says.

His wife, 39-year-old Kalvina Kaur Roudh, says, "It feels like being back home in India. It's just a shame there is no *sarovar* (lake) but guess there are space restrictions."

Fifty-nine-year-old Shri Wadhvani agrees the Gurdwara will help the next generation to know more about their community. His 12-year-old son Chirag is happy. "I like the dome, the stained glass windows and the cool room temperature. It has definitely inspired me to become more involved with my religion," he says.

Plenty of non-*sikhs* have also been to the Gurdwara. Tourists come from the USA and Canada where many natives have converted to Sikhism. The number of such converts in Britain is much lower, but clearly the Southall Gurdwara increases the chances of there being more. The Gurdwara's immediate popularity will be particularly pleasing to all those who assisted in the project. The required £17.5 million came entirely through donations from the Sikh community.

The Gurdwara's president, Himmat Singh Sohi, explains how far the Sikh community in Southall has come in recent years. "When I became president in 1993, we had debts of £2.3 million, and we went into receivership at that time. By the grace of the Almighty and the support of the community we have got rid of the debts and refurbished. Now the Gurdwara is worth £50 million."

Sohi explains how the success of the project was a model of hard work and careful financing. "We took out £10 million loan, of which we have only used £6 million so far. People are still donating money. Our chief fund-raiser Rasham Singh Mandher, proved very influential. This is the only Gurdwara ever to be completed on time. The other day, people were discussing the Wembley (football stadium) project on the TV news, and were using our Gurdwara as a good example of going under budget." Another indication of the Gurdwara's success is that £568,000 was placed in the collection boxes near the entrance in April alone. Meanwhile, it has been confirmed that a representative of the royal family will be coming to visit, and also the deputy mayor of London. M.S. Gill, former Chief Election Commissioner of India, also paid a visit. He says: "I am very impressed. I have seen this gurdwara develop since 1967. There was great hardship for the Sikh community then, but over the decades things have improved. It's not easy to run a collective body. This place gives a lot of strength to Sikhs, and it is a great meeting place for children. To me, this is the hub of maintaining the best community in England - other religions don't have this. It is a fulcrum for Indians, rather than Sikhs."

Such an outstanding building says more about the Indian community's growing strength in Britain than any Bollywood movie, Indian restaurant or musician could ever do.

[Courtesy: *The Statesman*]