

Guru Nanak's Stopover to Mecca, gets Unesco recognition

KUTCH: THE AROMA OF THE MOUTH-watering langar greets you as you enter the precincts of the Lakhpat fort in the Great Rann of Kutch, 113 km from Bhuj. Its origins are an ancient haveli, right at the entrance of the hardstone fort - town's magnificent expanse.

The huge flag mast reaching out to the skies is the only obvious sign that this is a Gurdwara, nearly 400 years old, where the founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak, once stayed.

Outside, some rabaris industriously weave charpoys, as Sikhs dart in and out of its premises. Little do they know that the place they came to perform the kar seva, some years back, has been chosen for the Unesco's Asia-pacific Heritage Award of Distinction this year.

This Gurdwara withstood the ravages of nature, including the cyclone of 2000 and the earthquake of 2001, after which the restoration was taken up, beginning with the search for the sandstone to match the structure.

It was carried out by the Cultural Resources Conservation Initiative along with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the state archaeological department.

The Lakhpat Gurdwara, as it is known, is a thikana (seat) of the Udasi sect, established by Guru Nanak's son, Baba Srichand in the 16th century. It is here that Guru Nanak stayed during his journey to and from Mecca by sea and land and his host's descendants decided to preserve it.

The sanctum sanctorum is a palanquin-like structure made of glass and wood, believed to have been used by the Guru. It now has his picture and a pair of wooden slippers, believed to be his, worshipped and revered by the Sikhs, and a Granth Sahib. The restoration has left all this untouched; even the scribble on the walls, apparently, in Gurmukhi, is as it was. "Many of us did not even know of its existence", says a sevak.

Several Sikhs from Bharuch and Vadodara and Kutch have settled here in service of their Guru. They cook, clean, worship and maintain the place. "Drink this water", one of them insists. The water is surprisingly sweet, unlike the rest of the desert where all underground aquifers have salty water.

"This comes from a well as old as the haveli, which is why we believe this place is sacred", says an older member of the sect.

The restoration demonstrates a sophisticated holistic understanding of both the technical and social aspects of conservation process and practice, thus retaining the building's historic character.

Most significantly, the emphasis on evolving and empowering the community ensures the long-term survival of the historic building and its associated cultural traditions. Local youth were trained to use indigenous material in conservation.

In its setting amid the golden sandy ground, this Gurdwara is regarded as the Golden Temple of desert, revered even by the personnel of the Border Security Force who regularly come here to pay obeisance.

Once a flourishing port, Lakhpat is the last town at the western tip of India, bordering Pakistan, at the junction of Kori Creek and Rann of Kutch.

After a short period of prosperity, Lakhpat lost its maritime significance in AD 1851, when the Sindhu (Indus) changed course.

It is deserted today though once it had a population of 15,000: Yet it is still considered a leveller of faiths. Besides the Gurdwara, an ancient temple and a mosque exists at the site.

[Courtesy: *Times of India*, Ahmedabad]

