

Let us Streamline Gurdwara Management

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SIMILAR TO SOME HOSPITALS, churches and schools, the Gurdwaras are also non-profit organizations. Contributions to such charitable corporations are tax exempt. For this reason, there are many Gurdwaras on paper only and very few real Gurdwaras on the ground. The actual existing Gurdwaras face insurmountable problems mainly due to ownership and greed for free income. On March 30, 2009, a settlement between a Granthi and Sikh Foundation of Virginia Board of Trustees running a Gurdwara was reached by accepting back pay and offering resignation by the Granthi.

My experience as a CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of a health center, a non-profit business, provided me with an opportunity to develop and implement several policies and procedures. Background in directing and administering a non-profit organization helped me to write about managing a Gurdwara as all non-profit organizations follow the same laws.

The need for management of Gurdwaras “by the book” gained momentum when in September, 2007, U.S. Department of Homeland Security imposed new restrictions on priests to come to the United States on “R” Visa. The applicant may have to produce an evidence of qualification and experience. As a non-profit organization, the Gurdwara requesting priests from India may have to provide non-profit organization status, Article of Incorporation, By-laws, Administration Manual, evidence of income in financial reports. The Gurdwara will need to show its stability or three year acceptable audit and arrangement for salary, food and housing for priests. On site inspection of an employer organization may also be conducted to prevent fraud. A brief description of these requirements is summarized below.

Article of Incorporation is the first legal step for the initiation of a Gurdwara and is filed with the Secretary of State under the state non-profit religious corporation law. Generally, it includes the name of the organization, purpose, statement of religion, tax exempt status, distribution of assets after dissolution, description of authority, governing and signatures of president and secretary who must be Gurmukhs. State and federal tax exemption forms are filed with state and federal tax departments.

A Gurdwara does not belong to the signatories of Article of Incorporation only. Instead, it belongs to the whole Sikh community as presidents and secretaries go on changing, depending upon the election results. Recently, it has been observed that some Sikhs do impose ownership to control Gurdwaras wrongly.

Gurdwara By-laws are divided into articles consisting of name of the organization, office, name of board of directors, term in office, eligibility, elections, alternates, vacancies, removal, compilation, conflict of interest, restrictions, responsibilities, regular and special meetings, quorum, voting, officers such as chair- person, vice chairperson, secretary, treasurer, termination and removal of officers, committees, maintenance of records, updating of By-laws, parliamentary authority and amendments of Articles of Incorporation, etc.

There is generally an odd number of board members. Time limit can be one year, two years, or staggered. Eligibility should state members should be eighteen years old and Gurmukhs. Election should be conducted every year. Keeping the same old members lead to degradation and stagnation as no new ideas will percolate. A member or an officer should not serve for more than four years in life-time in the same Gurdwara. Alternate board members and not relatives can attend the meeting in the absence of regular board members. Vacancies can be filled by having special elections. A board member or an officer can be removed if absent in two consecutive meetings or not following Gurmat as reflected in policies.

Board Responsibilities of the board members to fulfill obligations under the By-laws to the best of their ability to attend and actively participate in the board meetings. The Gurdwara board has sole and exclusive responsibility to cover assets and liabilities and act solely in the interest of its members, putting aside any personal interest. Gurdwara board faces major challenges and choices to fulfill corporate, religious, moral, cultural, economic, and political responsibilities. However, long term goals, including preaching of Sikh religion, are always the priority of the Gurdwara. The board makes good things happen and stops bad things from happening with immediate actions. The board takes personal responsibility for problems, performs self-evaluation and is scrutinized by outside agency annually. Evaluation can be performed on the basis of number of Sikhs taking Amrit, number of children retained in Sikh Religion, number of children married in Sikh families and, above all, number of individuals following Bani-Bana each year. All board members and officials of the Gurdwara are leaders having sacred trust and privilege. Certain qualities of great leaders should include firm ideas and beliefs, clarity of vision, strong will-power to decide truthfully, pertinacity under any condition, easy communication of workable ideas, greatness of soul for forgiveness, etc. These qualities will invigorate Ascending Spirit (Chardi Kala).

Gurdwaras as non-profit organizations can't make political contributions and are not allowed to lobby. In additions, Gurdwaras cannot own anything other than they are intended for and cannot own stocks in other corporations. No one, including board members and officers, should get loans using Gurdwaras as collaterals. Otherwise, schools and colleges can own land, construct apartments and rent them out.

Meetings and Agenda: There should be twelve monthly scheduled meetings. The time, place and dates should be fixed each year. The names, telephone numbers of all active board members should be on the notice board all the time after annual election. The board should develop an agenda, containing call to the order, attendance, quorum, approval of agenda, approval of meeting minutes, new items, old items and adjournment. Agenda items are generally collected by board chairperson with the help of staff and congregation. Board members or the public can suggest items for the agenda. The agenda should be posted on the notice board a week before the meeting. These meetings are open to the public. Special meetings can be held by giving one week's notice. A quorum is established by 51% of the board members present to conduct a meeting. No quorum - no meeting! Majority of the board members should approve an item. Absent board members cannot vote. The officers are elected by voting in a meeting. Their duties are listed in By-laws. The parliamentary authority of the board shall be the current addition of **Roberts Rules of Order**. Amendments to the Articles of Incorporation and to the By-laws are conducted by giving notice of 60 days prior to 2/3 votes in a meeting. Meeting minutes should be taken by secretary, printed and given to the board members before the next meeting, be approved in a meeting, signed by board chairperson and secretary and should be maintained for further

reference. The final minutes should be posted on the notice board for the public for a month.

Gurdwara Administration Manual should include fiscal, personal and grievance management policies.

Fiscal Management: Fiscal transactions are highly important for the progress of a Gurdwara. It is better to hire an accountant for accounting. Fiscal policies and procedures should be transparent to the followers. The fiscal policies should include purpose, receiving mail and posting invoices, check writing and signing procedure, posting of checks, processing of vouchers, ledger entries, contractor selection, checking their work and files, announcing bids, selection of vendors, staff salary management, collection of receivables and their records, discount from suppliers, property management, preserving of records, board approval for expenses, audit, updating of fiscal policies, etc. The policies should be developed by an accountant, reviewed and approved in a meeting each year. Fiscal records should be preserved for three years. Monthly and annual fiscal reports, receivable having check number, amount, donor's name and date, funds spent having check number, check signers, amount, purpose, date, etc. and amount in the bank should be approved by the board and posted on notice board for public review.

Premise and property liability insurance, as well as fire, flood ,and earthquake should be obtained. Board members, officers and staff should also have liability insurance to cover wrongful acts.

The funds collected should be deposited in a bank on the same day and a record should be produced in the board meeting. Nobody should be allowed to spend any funds. The whole board should approve all cheque writing in a board meeting. There should be at least two signatures on any cheque issued by board members. Three bids should be obtained for any purchase. Minimum price and high quality product should be generally selected. No personal loans or extension of credit should be made to anybody at all. Property items should have ownership stickers and records should be kept on property cards in a safe. The buildings should be constructed with the permission of city and county governments and follow all safety codes.

Drastic deviation from policies is corruption which steals from poor people. Corrupt individuals will do anything just to please their friends and steal funds. Seamless policies are required to control unscrupulous board members and officials. The board is to safeguard the interest of its members. There should be no conflict of interest in their transactions and no "off the book" activities. There should be no funds given to board members or their relatives freely. Board members or their relatives should not be allowed to work on any project of Gurdwaras for financial gain. Other board members should not choose to ignore such illegal activities. Oversight and control of funds will protect the Gurdwaras. Audit will ultimately show the financial health of the gurdwara.

Personnel Management: In the beginning of the Gurdwaras, there are generally no employees as all workers are called *sevadars* (volunteers). However, with time, personnel needs increase. In such cases, management has to develop policies and procedures, including personnel goals and objectives, personnel responsibility, advertising, screening of applicants, recruiting, non-discrimination clause, orientation, promotion, health examination, training, salary, job classification, fringe benefits, holidays, vacations, leave, unemployment and disability, worker compensation, social security, federal and state taxes, life insurance, overtime, working hours, travel, vehicle liability insurance, continuing education,

performance evaluation, employee conduct, dress, board of director communication, employee grievance, discipline, drug and alcohol-free work place, safety, employee records, etc. The job description should have name of job, salary scale, description, responsibilities, qualifications, experience, non discrimination clause, drugs and alcohol prevention standards, driver license, vehicle insurance, criminal history, etc. Line of authority is highly important. Otherwise, several people may misguide an employee. The name of the secondary supervisor should be given in writing if the primary supervisor is absent. Gurdwaras should always look for talented individuals to serve the community and all staff members should be paid according to similar employees in the area, following state and federal laws.

Grievance Management: The quest for truth is a source of strength. Grievance is a fundamental right to fairness. These procedures are essential tools in maintaining the standards of any organization in bringing out facts and are similar to the legal system. These procedures may not be perfect, but should satisfy the complainer, a staff member or a beneficiary.

The complaint should be solved in a timely manner and as soon as possible. Otherwise, lingering complaints suck the sap out of an organization. There should be three steps to solve a grievance problem. Firstly, the complainer and an employee can solve within themselves. Secondly, complainer can solve with the CEO or *Granthi*. Thirdly, the board of directors can solve with the help of *sangat*. Grievance form should be easily available and displayed on the notice board.

Gurdwara Management Manual should include policies for the following: proper place for shoes, washing of feet, covering of head, saluting Guru Granth Sahib, seating, noise control, child care, playground, Punjabi school, *keertan* standard and schedule, singing of *shabads* only in *Ragas* mentioned in Guru Granth Sahib, screening and permission for speakers, timing for opening and closing of Gurdwara, schedule for daily, monthly and annual activities, langar arrangement, Rahit Maryada (Code of Conduct), including speaking truth, no bribe, no stealing, suggestion box, access for disabled worshippers, arrangement for wheelchairs, Amrit Sanchar and Parchar, turban tying demonstrations, Akhand Path, marriage ceremony, special functions, celebration of religious festivals, birthdays of Gurus and martyrs, consultation committee of previous board members and volunteers, weekly question-answer session, arrangement for invited or outside speakers, youth and senior consultation committees, media, interfaith local authorities contacts, seminars, conferences, clinics, ethics monitoring, gifts management, one and five-year plans, etc. All Sikhs follow well-established SGPC directions for Gurdwara Management. In case of a conflict, SGPC can be contacted. SGPC will soon be arranging for the disabled persons using wheel chairs containing leather to go inside Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, Amritsar.

The development and implementation of such manuals will strengthen the Gurdwaras and will help to bring *Granthis*, prevent litigation and provide heavenly conducive atmosphere. Several churches in the West have been sued due to illegal activities. Similarly, a *granthi* sued Ramgarhia Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee in Leeds, Yorkshire, England, for recovering back pay and job in 2008. Sikhs should prevent such happenings at all costs by negotiation, mediation or binding arbitration before going to the court. It is always better to take criminal and civil action in separate cases against only one or two people individually who are responsible for mischief and pulling strings, thus avoiding the involvement of Gurdwara.

Actually, there is no conflict between following administrative laws and religious activities as both are for the betterment of people. In case of a conflict, religious tenets should supersede as well as prevail and should be reflected in writing in policies, procedures and implemented. To maintain the integrity of the Gurdwara and respect the trust of contributing Sikhs, it is imperative to follow the instructions of Akal Takhat and SGPC, the Supreme Sikh religious body. Any person opposing their mandate has self-interest at their heart, provided one has physical ailment. For example, people should not use chairs as *sangat* is an institution of Sikh religion started by Guru Nanak. Above all, it takes about 15 minutes to eat in *sangat* as compared to sitting in chairs where people sit and talk without giving place to next person in line. In the future, more Sikhs should get involved in decision making process of SGPC to avoid such problems.

Smooth management of Gurdwaras avoid distractions and it does not overshadow the real purpose of Gurdwaras, which is *Nam-Simran*- the recitation of *Ek Oankar*. Thus, Gurdwaras should be made the best places of all places where only *Ek Oankar* prevails.

*Sagal than teh uh utam than,
Nanak jeh ghat wase har nam.* (Sukhmani)

Hence the Gurdwara must be apolitical to have Divine Atmosphere i.e. *Than Suhawa* (SGGS p450) with whole emphasis on promotion and prevelance of Bani-Bana.

It is imperative to encourage, inspire and give hope to Gurmukhs building and managing Gurdwaras that their best days are ahead as perhaps some of them always think of doing good for others and they do not show off ie *Parupkar nit chiwate nahi kashu poch* (SGGS: 815). Since they care, they do no bad deeds at all and they look ahead with farsightedness ie *Manda mool na kechai de lumbi nather nihalia* (SGGS: 474). Managing a Gurdwara as True Bargain (*Sacha Sauda*) and leaving the rest up to God '*Nanak rah pashane sey*'(SGGS: 1245) is the fundamental teaching of Sikh Religion.

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