

Destination Amritsar: The Fascinating Harmandir Sahib

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Many of us are spellbound by the sheer beauty of its grandeur at first sight. But very few are aware that the Golden Temple signifies many more things than what beholds the eye.

As you go down the marble steps to enter into the Golden Temple complex, you are mesmerized by the shining Gold of the temple and the surrounding shimmering lake of water.

But what you did not notice is that the shrine is built at a lower level as compared to the city outside. This signifies humbleness. Even the highest abode of SIKH religion is built on a lower level, and can only be reached through humility. We have to shed our pride (and shoes) and come down from our fickle heights of the worldly thrones of power and position to attain the blessings of GOD.

Why is this heavenly abode built amid a lake ? The Sarovar signifies calm, peace and tranquility. When you visit this holiest of holy shrines, you are surrounded by the 'shanti' and '*sheetalta*' of the calm and serene waters. Water (nectar) quenches your thirst - Man's thirst for peace with himself as well as with mankind. It puts you into the right frame of mind for your meeting with GOD.

As you walk into the sanctum sanctorum you are greeted by the lyrical strains of hymns in praise of GOD that are sung throughout. There is no deity or picture but only the words of GOD - the 'shabd' - in the form of the holy Guru Granth Sahib - that you lower your head to. You do not bow to any human, but you lay down your 'ManMat' (your heart and mind) to the 'GurMat' (the words of the Lord almighty) and his true wisdom. To satiate one's hunger, the SIKHs have a tradition of serving 'Langar' a 24 hour kitchen serving basic vegetarian meals to all who visit the Gurudwara (or the abode of GOD) This langar also signifies that we do not differentiate between the rich and poor. All sit together on the floor and partake of the common food that is served, irrespective of their caste, creed or colour. This langar also reminds us that no religion can be practiced on an empty stomach. A person who is hungry will only concentrate on his hunger .. and not on achieving his oneness with God.

Before you leave, do not fail to notice that there are 4 entrances to the Golden Temple complex. This signifies that everyone is welcome from all four corners of the world. The SIKH philosophy does not discriminate, and welcomes all, men or women, from any country and from which ever community they may belong to. Everyone is equal in the eyes of the Lord.



Gurdwara for the Youth

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There is a general observation that the attendance of our youth in the Gurdwaras is very nominal. I have been observing this for many years and have heard from almost every well-wisher of the Sikh community that the future of the faith in the west is bleak. I went to India, the situation there is equally bad if not worse. We can blame the social environment and peer pressure in the west which question the utility or need of the five K's during the modern days. Our youth are not conversant enough to answer these questions; hence they give up the wearing of the articles and following other rituals of their faith. But to whom can we blame for the Punjabi youth not caring to respect the Sikh way of life in their own homeland?

The author, when he visited India, was surprised and felt hurt to find many Sikh youth without turbans in the villages, schools and colleges. To have a look at the turbaned youth he visited an old famous Khalsa School where all students tied turbans as a matter of routine. I got the shock of my life to see the shaved students even there. The question that severely bothered me was, "How come a Sikh student in the Sikh-managed school dared to be there without a turban?"

Discussion with a local friend revealed that there was no dharmak teacher (Giani) who used to teach Gurbani and Sikh heritage of the Panth in our school. During our times, we listened to the Sikh history, the lives of the Gurus, and the valour of the Sikhs when they sacrificed their lives but not their faith. Listening to the Giani ji filled us with pride of being Sikh and we felt great to wearing turbans on our heads. In the morning assembly it was considered an honour to be one of the three students to lead the chorus by reciting some new Shabads. Many of us did feel, of course, some difficulty in saying Ardaas after the recitation of Shabad. The student who said the prayer was described as a good boy both among the students and the teachers. We felt honoured to go to the gurdwara whenever there was a special gathering. We felt that we must have a qualified devoted Giani teacher in each school if we want to bring back the love of faith inculcated in the minds of the current student generation.

I wondered if it is financial poverty, or the poverty for the love of the faith that there is rarely a fulltime Giani in the Khalsa School to teach the glory of the heritage. The teaching of moral and social motivation to enjoy being a Sikh is totally absent in our homes, even in the Sikh institution, schools, colleges and Gurdwaras. I felt disappointed by the failure of my generation to perform their duty towards youth.

Later, I met some wellwishers of the Panth to discuss this unfortunate situation with them. My informal exchange of views regarding this situation with them made me intensely sad. I was told that our leaders and the Gurdwara managements are to be blamed for this. Many leaders of the Panth can be observed drinking publicly without any feeling of guilt. The leaders accused the voting system for electing the Gurdwara management whether at the village level or at the national level, S.G.P.C. Amritsar and Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Committee. The situation in the gurdwaras in the west has followed the same trend, where the Sikhs stand divided because of many social,

political , religious issues. Followers of one sant maryada try to build their group to defeat the followers of the Panthic maryada. Gurdwara clashes and many election cases are always in the courts in the west. They waste the Panthic resources and at the same time disgust the youth making the Gurdwara system repulsive to them.

When I questioned some Sikhs, who are actively associated with Sikh affairs, over a cup of tea, they responded, "You have come after a long time and we should tell you that the Panth's enemies have made drinking popular in villages. Candidates for the assembly elections have to distribute bottles and drugs during assembly elections, even elections in our villages for Panches and Surpanches now need lots of funds. Voters demand bags of bottles before they promise to vote for you, earlier they only hoped to be entertained by their candidate after the election.

Thus, they too endorsed the shift of the blame to the voters. My other friend, a former member of the S.G.P.C. Amritsar, narrated an embarrassing welcome to all the elected members by the Guru Gobind Singh Study Circle, Ludhiana. His statement briefly was: " All the elected members of the committee were invited to Ludhiana.They honoured each member by presenting him/her with a memento. We were congratulated by them for having elected as the elite Sikhs of the faith.

"A former V.C. of the Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, told us that he showed his inability to serve drinks to the state guest, the President of Uganda, on his visit to the University. He wrote to the Government that theirs is an institution of learning where drinking is prohibited. Serving drinks officially will set a bad example. Morally, they will not be able to teach the students that drinking is a vice. The visiting dignitary was pleased to have his lunch without alcohol.

The V.C. then narrated the conditions in Punjab. He said that we Sikhs are blamed for distributing alcohol for Gurdwara elections. This really is a shame for all of us. He suggested, rather he desired, a promise from us that we as members will not drink or serve alcohol to any person, however, important he may be. Unless we members of the committee shun alcohol, we cannot save the Punjabi youth from addictions to drugs and alcohol. He used some chosen words which pricked our conscious and we regretted having committed the sinful act as members of the Sikh respectable body. Some of the members did confess their guilt and promised not to do it again."

I listened to my friend's touching statement and was thinking of my response to it, the first one continued, "The Gianis and the Parcharak should educate the voters not to make such demands from the candidates."

This was more than I could bear. I thanked them for their visit to my home before they left.

Dear youth, I leave it to you to assign blame to any section of the Panth for this unfortunate situation which has developed in the Sikh community all over the world. Dear students please listen! You have to live with the image of the community that you build for yourselves. The members of the faith, who wish you to enjoy the glory of the Panth, appeal to you not to follow the bad example, but learn good lessons from your life as students. Those who do poorly in their studies will beg for a job in the factories, while those who achieve academic honour will end up as professionals in medicine, engineering, law, etc. Similarly, as a Sikh youth if you live a disciplined life and love your faith, you will enjoy peace and bring honor to your community. Dear friends, the choice is yours.



New Challenges & our Response

Parmeet Singh is "Mr Singh International"

*Harjeet Singh**

* Sr. Harjeet Singh 'Lovely' is General Secretary, The Sikh Cultural Centre, Kolkata.

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Human being is a great and beautiful creation of Nature and human life is a gift from the Almighty. What we do with it is our gift to God. Physically and mentally, God made us superior to all creatures. Sikhs have been instructed to maintain the original form of mankind. We can cherish this gift from God by taking it into every field from service to business, and from hard labour to glamour. Sikhs have proved to be a progressive community, world-wide. They have excelled in all walks of life and carved a niche for themselves. The hardships and the pains in any industry are hardly a deterrent to them. Glamour and high quality of life attracts many to the show business, but from the very beginning, Sikhs have stayed away from this field, therefore, we find it difficult to recall any prominent personality in this sphere compared to examples set in other fields. Mr. Singh International contest, as it is clear by its name, is an endeavor by 'Akaal Purkh Ki Fauj' (APKF) for the Sikh youth to make an entry into and to conquer the show biz. as well. This will be a stepping stone for many and an opportunity for Sikh youth in this field maintaining Sikh principles and doctrines. It is the need of the day to convey that every thing can be accomplished by staying within the permissible limits and principles of God set by our Great Guru Sahibaan.

'Sikh Gaurav's' S. Jaspal Singh has been an inspiration for youth in modeling. He broke down the fashion barriers in 'Grasim Mr. India International' 2002, by becoming the first Saabat Soorat Sikh model to win it. He encouraged APKF to make a project to initiate turbaned youth in the 'show biz'.

Every contestant willing to take part in the contest has to be in 'Saabat Soorat' and follower of Sikh principles. He should maintain unshorn hair and beard and should not consume any kind of narcotics or drugs. The contest follows a unique selection criterion. The show is similar to other such contests while there are few additions/modifications keeping Sikh principles and tenets in mind. The winners of the contest will work as the active members of Akaal Purkh ki Fauj for spreading Sikh

principles, Sikh heritage, Punjabi language and its heritage among the world community. The winners will have to take prior permission from APKF before doing any activity on Television, Films and video albums.

The first 'Mr. Singh International' was organised in 2005. Hundreds of youth participated in the contest across the world. 45 participants reached the final stage. S. Harpreet Singh of Patiala was conferred the title of Mr Singh International, S. Inderdeep Singh of Ambala 1st runner up and S. Inderjeet Singh of Sangrur 2nd runner up.

Finals of 2nd 'Mr. Singh International' was held on 15th Dec 2007 in Amritsar at Khalsa College Grounds. **Parmeet Singh of Dehradun walked away with the coveted title of Frankinn Mr Singh International at the glittering final which saw as many as 29 contestants strutting their stuff for the mega crown.** Damandeep Singh of Pathankot and Tejinder Singh from Baroda were adjudged first and second runners-up, respectively.

Organisers and the police had a tough time in controlling the huge crowd. Despite biting cold, the stands were jam packed.

Harpreet Singh was declared 'Mr Singh Sparkling Smile', while Gurdev Singh from Jammu got the Mr Singh 'Catchy Eyes award'. The best artistic performance title was given to Gurjinder Singh from Chennai, while Manpreet Singh of Faridabad won the photogenic face award. Best attitude award was bagged by Balwinder Singh of Bangalore, while Princejit Singh of Kapurthala got the 'Gurmat' awareness award. Rocking physique title was won by Mandeep Singh of Kurushetra, whereas Nanak Singh won the impressive Turban award. The best costume award and general awareness awards were won by Prabhjot Singh from Nasik and Gurneet Singh of Patiala, respectively. A lone participant Jaydeep Singh of Kolkata could reach upto the last 14 finalist.

Selected from 2,000 participants, the 29 finalists had toiled hard during their three-weeks long training session where they learned skills of 'gatka,' 'theatre performance' and table manners and participated in the Seva at Darbar Sahib before the grand finale.

Performance by the 'star voice of India' winner Ishmeet Singh made audience dance to his tunes. Among other present were Bollywood actors Randhir Kapoor, Rishi Kapoor, Himesh Reshamiya and Raj Babbar.

Earlier, addressing the gathering, Randhir Kapoor said, "The Sikh youth should feel pride in Turban and such events should be organised regularly." A documentary on Maharaja Ranjit Singh produced by Raj Babbar was also screened during the event. Speaking on the occasion, Punjab minister for information & public relation Bikram Singh Majithia and agriculture minister Gulzar Singh Ranike jointly announced a grant of Rs 5 lakh on behalf of the state government for the organisers Akal Purakh Ki Fauj (APKF). Virsa Singh Valtoha, DC Kahan Singh Pannu were also present on the occasion.

