

# Gurdwaras in USA: Philadelphia

**RAMESH SETH\* & ASHA SETH®**

## **PART I**

\* *Sadhana Rayon House, (2nd Floor), Dr. DN Road, Fort, Mumbai. 400 001.*

@ *231 B Jolly Maker (Tower) No. 1, Cuffe Parade, Mumbai. 400 005. Email: rkseth2000@yahoo.com*

IN THE AMERICAN HISTORY THE status of Philadelphia cannot be exaggerated. It was here that the representatives of independent 13 ex-British Colonies of America met under the name of Continental Congress and wrote a constitution for the United States of America. It was the first Capital of USA, before Washington D.C. was created and made as the permanent capital of USA. It was to this historic city that we were going from Glen Rock in New Jersey. From New York to Philadelphia one travels all the while through New Jersey State only. New York and Philadelphia are on the North and South ends of New Jersey State.

*Giani* Balwinder Singh was the Head *Granthi* of the Philadelphia *Gurdwara* and one Sarabjit Singh was the Secretary. It was with Sarabjit Singh that we had fixed the program to show our documentary on the Golden Temple on Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2002.

“You are welcome on any day, so long it is not on August 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup>,” he said. “That is the time when we are having the summer camp here in Philadelphia, in which most of the nearby *Gurdwaras* are participating. We all shall be busy in that week-end.”

We had heard about it at Bridgewater where Nayar was coaching *Giani* Bachittar Singh’s daughter. Later, in Glen Rock we were told that the *Sangat* was less than normal on Sundays as many people had gone to Philadelphia to attend the Camp. In any case we had planned to be in Glen Rock on the 18<sup>th</sup> so it was 25<sup>th</sup> August at Philadelphia.

On Tuesday, the 20<sup>th</sup> August, after we reached the New York Bus Terminus, once again I phoned *Giani* Balwinder Singh to inform him that we were reaching that very day. Earlier, although the date of the show was decided, we had not told him at what time exactly we would be arriving. So, when I informed *Gianiji* that we would be taking the 12 P.M. bus and reach Philadelphia around 2.30 P.M., *Gianiji* told me to ring him up once again at 2 P.M. So I did from the Bus.

“After reaching Philadelphia you wait near the main entrance of the Bus Station,” he instructed. “I will send some taxi to pick you up from there. Just wait for a Sikh taxi driver.”

We were very pleasantly surprised at his thoughtful gesture. We had known that all the Bus Stations are always located in downtown, in every City. And, in every City the *Gurdwaras* are at the very edge of the City. So, *Gianiji* was helping us to avoid botheration of finding the *Gurdwara* and also save upon the taxi fare. Both were welcome.

After reaching Philadelphia we did as instructed. With our luggage we stood outside the entrance of the Bus Station. It is located upon a narrow one way lane. The railway Station is across the road. As a result that street is always crowded.

The taxis have barely time to take passengers or to disgorge them. In such a melee it was rather tough to wait on the crowded pavement and try to guess who would have come to pick us up? We were on the lookout for a Sikh Taxi driver. There were quite a few who were on the prowl. After about 10 minutes one taxi came and the driver was looking for someone. I drew his attention and he parked the Taxi nearby.

“*Gianiji* has sent you?”

“Yes,” he said.

We loaded the luggage and he started driving towards the *Gurdwara*.

“Thanks for coming all the way to pick us up,” I said.

He brushed it aside with wave of hand. “Not all the way,” he said. “I was in nearby area. *Gianiji* phoned me. So, as soon as I was free from my last passenger I came to pick you.”

First, it showed his regards for *Gianiji* at whose request he had come. Secondly, thanks to mobile phone one can be contacted anywhere any time.

While waiting for him, I had seen a few Sikh Taxi drivers. “Are there many Sikh Taxi drivers,” I asked him.

“Not many,” he said. “Still, there must be about 300-400. The number is increasing as more people are shifting here.”

“Shifting from where?”

“Mainly New York,” he said.

“Why so?”

“In Philadelphia the cost of living is lot cheaper,” he explained. “House rentals are very much lower. And the winter is less harsh. All these factors have been responsible for the shift.”

“But even the earning must be lower?”

“Not much. On balance it makes better economic sense to shift to Philadelphia, or to a number of nearby places in New Jersey. That’s why Sikh population in Philadelphia and in the areas around it is increasing.”

At least in case of New Jersey State I had been told so. According to me the most reliable index whether the Sikh population in some area is increasing or not is whether the number of *Gurdwaras* is increasing or not? In New Jersey State apart from old *Gurdwara* of Bridgewater and Glen Rock there are 7-8 new *Gurdwaras* that have come up in last 10 years, evenly spread from north to south. In Philadelphia itself the *Gurdwara* where we were going Philadelphia Sikh Society was only four years old. That showed that the Sikh population was thriving.

By way of imparting information to us, Balkar Singh, that was his name, told us that we were travelling due west on the main high way going out of Philadelphia. The *Gurdwara* was located in the town of Millbourne, a very small town. Overall the area was called Upper Darby. Most of the Sikhs lived in and around Upper Darby. It must have taken us about twenty minutes to reach the *Gurdwara*. It was not located on the main highway but on a side street, Garden Court, which ran parallel to the

main highway. The Taxi stopped outside a single story structure. The most distinctive eternal feature was the long red brick wall reaching right to the Galvanized Iron (GI) Sheets roof. Obviously, it was a warehouse earlier. That is how it looked from the outside.

We unloaded the luggage and took it in. As one enters the *Gurdwara*, the shoe racks are in a smaller room to the right. And to the left there is a large *Langar* hall. Adjacent to the *Langar* hall there is *Diwan* hall, while on the other side of the Corridor, after the shoes depository there are two rooms, then the toilets, ending in a large corner room used as library-cum-office; a plain simple arrangement, nothing very fancy there. The building was strictly utilitarian. Due to the limitation imposed there was no window in either the *Diwan* hall, or the Library.

*Giani* Balwinder Singh was not in. But he had left instructions. Our luggage was put in the large library room, which had two cots with bedding, as well. On one wall there were covered book cases, duly locked. Opposite the door there was a large table with computer. It was used for the purposes of office. Since there was no window, but for the central air conditioning duct providing cool air it would be suffocating. Anyway, one month after the room at Glen Cove this was the only other *Gurdwara* which had two cots to sleep upon. There were some chairs to sit upon and a table to put things upon.

We went into the *Langar* hall for some tea. It was also the waiting room and the social room, there being no other place where one could sit. After some time *Gianiji* came back and met us. We thanked him for the courtesy Taxi ride.

“Have you arranged for the TV?” I asked.

“Don’t you worry, it will be done. Plenty of the people here have suitable TV.”

That was the standard line thrown to us, don’t you worry. I did not pursue the topic, as I thought it would be better to talk to the Secretary Sarabjit Singh. However, I was interested to know more about the origin of the *Gurdwara*. I had known it was comparatively a new *Gurdwara* as the *Sangat* had moved in recently. So, I asked about it.

Like in all other places the first *Gurdwara* in Philadelphia too had started small. It was only in 1993 that the first *Gurdwara* was established in a nearby place. It was a matter of only two years that the *Sangat* outgrew that small place. More and more Sikhs were moving into Philadelphia. It was then decided that a larger premises be secured. “As a result this place was identified,” said *Gianiji*.

“How much did it cost?” I asked.

“The cost was \$ 240,000 for the bare shed. You can easily identify from the outside. It had bare four walls and the roof, nothing else. But in 1995 even that was a bargain. It is a large enough place. Nothing else would have cost less.”

He was right. It was right in middle of President Clinton’s time. The economy had a one way run, up and up. The real estate prices had shot up.

“Besides, this is a very good location. Both the Bus terminal and the local Train terminal are hardly 200 meters away. It is so convenient for anyone coming from downtown.”

That reminded me of the property values in Bombay. Properties nearer to the Local Railway Station always command higher rating. Locomotion counts.

“It was agreed that the *Sangat* should buy this place and shift the *Gurdwara* here, but we faced some hiccups?”

“What was that?”

“As it turned out, collecting that much money was not easy. It took some efforts.”

“Even for \$ 240,000?” I was intrigued. “In New York they had collected much larger sums?”

*Gianiji* smiled, indulgently. “Well, this is not New York,” he said flatly. “Most of our *Sangat* consisted of those who had newly shifted. And they were much less affluent than that of New York. Most of them were still finding their mooring. But *Waheguru* saw to it that the funds were collected. And we purchased the property.”

It is nice to note that time and again *Waheguru* helps such *Sangat*.

“So you shifted?”

“Not so fast,” he raised his hand. “What we had purchased was the big hall. It could not be used for a *Gurdwara*. We had to make proper divisions. For that permission was needed from the City Millbourne.”

So another change of users needed. We had heard of it in Glen Cove *Gurdwara*. In this case the problem was that the City of Millbourne was one of the smallest Municipal bodies in the State. They made it very clear to *Sangat* that they would agree to the *Gurdwara* only if the *Gurdwara* does not make a request for waiver of property tax or other charges; neither then, nor even in the future. Those charges were calculated at \$20,000 per annum.

“Our people made representations, tried to reason out but the City was adamant. They could not forego such large amount of taxes. That would take away a large chunk of that small City’s revenue. So, after a short stalemate our people agreed.”

“Why did they agree? Couldn’t some more pressure have worked?”

“Not likely,” he said. “City Governments are totally independent in respect to property taxes. So we had to agree.” He then added. “We had to give a written, legal undertaking opting out of any plea even in the future from reopening the issue of taxes, ever to request for a reduction in the future. Even that undertaking was given.”

Quite a strict stand by the City of Millbourne!

“Any way, that was only the beginning,” he said. “We still needed money for the interiors, for partitions, for carpeting, for heating and for so many things. That cost was tentatively placed at \$ 150,000.”

“How did you solve that, in view of the difficulty in raising the purchase price of \$ 240,000?”

He laughed now. “Who were we to solve? It was *Waheguru* who showed the way.”

A meeting of the *Sangat* was called at the newly acquired property. It was largely attended. There the plans for the modifications were shown and explained to the *Sangat*. Each of the items was broken down and the costs segregated. It was further divided into smaller items. For example in case of carpeting the total cost was told. Then it was further divided room wise. For walls, it was re-divided into the cost of each separate wall and so on. Later the announcement was made to the *Sangat* to contribute for each of such smaller broken down items.

“And that worked. People came forward to underwrite, either singly or a smaller group of friends together,” said *Gianiji*. “That way all the items were pledged and the work started. Here we are, we have this functioning *Gurdwara*.”

Many a drop fills the pot. What an example of community effort! In any case, among the Sikhs such efforts have always been a collective endeavour. Time and again we came across such examples. From 1998 this *Gurdwara* has been inspirational.

**(End of part I)**

**[to be concluded]**

