

Blessed Sikhs of N. Carolina (USA) Gurdwara at Charlotte - Tenth Anniversary

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OCTOBER 26, 2013 WAS “a special day for our Charlotte’s Sikh and Hindu community.” That’s how Gurdwara President, Dr. Surendrapal Singh Mac described the tenth anniversary celebration of the ‘Sikh House of Worship’ in Charlotte, North Carolina. This was also the day known as *Gurta Gaddi Divas*, commemorating **canonization** of the Sikh Holy Scripture *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* in 1708.

Dr. Mac addressed the *sangat* (congregation), welcoming them, congratulating them on this occasion, and thanking them for their support. He also took the opportunity to outline the organizational history, considering that most of the congregation wasn’t familiar with the history of The Sikh Heritage Society of Greater Charlotte and the Gurdwara Sahib.

It was also a fitting juncture to acknowledge the Founders and other significant contributors who built this house of worship and to chronicle their efforts as *nishkaam seva*.

This article aims to capture the significance of the Gurdwara’s tenth anniversary to Charlotte’s Sikh community, with a focus on its organizational history, its endeavors

to build the gurdwara, and the Holy Scripture.

A Thumbnail History of the Gurdwara:

The Genesis of the Gurdwara dates as far back as 1985. Sajjan and Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal, having recently moved to Charlotte, invited their new acquaintances, Sikhs and Hindus, to a kirtan at their house. That was the beginning of a monthly kirtan in Charlotte; they encouraged others to take turns to host it. In the late 1980’s, a Sikh camp was held for children in Greensboro. Sajjan and Kuldeep, joined by Lakhbir and Bali Suchdev, organized a group of children from Charlotte to attend the camp. As a result, our children started participating in monthly kirtans. Sajjan spent countless hours teaching them (even adults) to sing shabads and perform kirtan.

More families joined in the 1990’s. Monthly kirtans continued as before, but the venue changed from home to Mr. Mundi’s Quality Inn to the Hindu Center. The main gurpurabs were always held at the Hindu Center. The families actively participating in the 1990’s included: the Dhaliwals, Rajpals, Bedis, Brars, Bals, Ahluwalias, Randhawas, Chaddhas, Attreys, and perhaps a few more. However, the consensus

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to build a gurdwara didn't emerge until early 2001.

February 24, 2001. This day we met at the Hindu Center and formed an organization, **The Sikh Heritage Society of Greater Charlotte** - under whose auspices, the "Gurdwara Sahib Charlotte" was to be founded.

June 16, 2001. This day we met at the University City Regional Library and approved the Constitution of the Sikh Heritage Society unanimously. Roshan Attrey had been assigned to write the document. All those present signed it. Soon we had the body registered in North Carolina as a non-profit religious organization. Hereafter we had to deal with such thorny issues as the city's zoning laws, intercultural-interreligious matters, and interpersonal concerns. However, Sajjan Dhaliwal, backed up by a committed team, moved the process of building the gurdwara just as planned. We had no board yet; only a secretary and a treasurer, who were Roshan Attrey and Inderjeet Rajpal, respectively.

September 11, 2001. Then 9/11 happened. It created a sense of urgency and anxiety in the community. In response, we organized meetings; **the Charlotte Observer** published an article on Sikhism and Sikhs written by us; Americans (non-Indians) joined us in our monthly services. We made presentations to educate the larger American society about the Sikh community and Sikhism at various forums, such as the Temple Beth-El (the Jewish Community Center), Mecklenburg Democratic

Party forum, Mayor's International Cabinet, Mecklenburg Ministries, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, area colleges, universities, and churches.

Fall 2001 - Gurdwara construction begins:

The founding members started collecting funds/pledges of financial support from the community by visiting their homes. Sajjan and Kuldeep Dhaliwal, a great blessing to the community, pledged seventeen acres of land for the House of Worship and a future Punjabi Culture Center, in addition to making/pledging substantial financial contributions.

Moreover, Sajjanji, one of the best builders of the Carolinas, accepted responsibility to build the gurdwara. He spent two years on building it, and charged nothing. Inderjeet Rajpal, among his best helpers, persevered with him providing invaluable support.

By September 2003 an amazingly beautiful Gurdwara building was completed. Six trustees signed the mortgage loan documents for it, namely Dr. Surendrapal Singh Mac, Sajjan Singh Dhaliwal, Dr. Gurmukh Singh Walha, Inderjeet Singh Rajpal, Dr. Paul Brar, and Dr. Inderjeet Singh.

October 24-26, 2003 - Inaugural ceremonies:

The inaugural ceremonies, spreading over October 24-26, were magnificent, matching the grandeur of the Gurdwara Sahib. About 500 people attended the celebration. Mayor Patrick McCrory, presently North Carolina governor, was a special

guest. We held a one-day international symposium on the *Guru Granth Sahib*, coordinated by Dr. Bhai Harbans Lal; Sikh scholars from England, Canada, India, and the U.S. made presentations. People of various Faiths attended the conference and inauguration. Invited *raagis* as well as the local *sangat* performed kirtan. Bhai Baldeep Singh, a 13th generation *raagi* of *Gurbani* from New Delhi, accompanied by a renowned tabla player from England, Sukhvinder Singh Namdhari, transported the audience to the old-time kirtan in the Guru's *darbar*.

On the tenth anniversary, reminiscing over our past achievements, we should celebrate the team that made them possible. Sajjan Dhaliwal had an exceptional instinct, the hallmark of a leader, to choose his team from friends and believers who would embrace his vision and join him. To name them: Dr. Surendrapal Singh and Harjeet Kaur Mac have been most giving and dedicated, financially and otherwise. Inderjeet and Arvind Rajpal have been unsparing in their contributions and dedication. Others who gave of themselves most willingly and freely were: Bishen and Bandna Bedi, Dr. Paul and Ravi Brar, Pappu and Sarita Singh, Dr. Inderjeet and Babena Singh, Dr. Gurmukh and Sukhwant Walha, and Roshan and Jaspal Attrey.

The Gurdwara President expressed his and the community's "deep appreciation and thanks to the original leaders" for helping realize the Charlotte Sikh community's dream.

Ten-plus years later:

Much has happened in the world since the founding of **The Sikh Heritage Society** of Greater Charlotte and the Gurdwara Sahib: **the nightmarish aftermath of 9/11, the Afghanistan war, the Iraq war, a recession, the first minority president in America, the first Sikh prime minister in India, and numerous other events. In the same time, one might say, the Sangat has increased tenfold, from about 15 families to maybe 150. While most of those associated with the founding continue to serve energetically, there are many others who have become actively involved in the Gurdwara in the last ten years.**

These Sevadars deserve our appreciation, too, and are named here. Joginder Singh Saini has run the langar and served many other needs in the gurdwara in an exemplary fashion. Dr. Ajaypartap Singh Bajwa, Sukhchain Singh Jassal, Satiander Singh, Dr. Jaspal Singh, Suneet Kaur, Amarpreet Singh Pahwa, Ranjit Sethi, and Dr. Rajdeep Singh – as a team they are doing a great job teaching Punjabi and Gurmat to children. Savinay Singh and Gureet Kaur have commendably run the children's camp and conducted speech competitions for children. Shahbaz Arora and Rohit Walia have served creditably as treasurers and are always willing to serve. Lakhwant Kaur Dhillon has served with dedication and generosity. The Sidhu Family deserves our thanks for taking charge of the Akhand Paath. Giani Satnam Singh Ji and son Ranjit Singh have most commendably

been serving the Gurdwara since 2005. We are grateful for their dedication. (Please forgive the errors of omission and commission in naming the sevadars in the article.)

Looking toward the Future:

On the tenth anniversary, Sajjan Dhaliwal and Inderjeet Rajpal made presentations showing the expansion plans for the Gurdwara and a Punjabi Culture Center. Sajjanji appealed to the sangat to share greater financial responsibility and to build on what the pioneers have done.

The future success of our organization, among other things, will depend on the willingness and preparedness of the younger members to take ownership for the upkeep and expansion of the place and to offer a vision of a future that is expanding, inclusive, and progressive.

Gurbani Kirtan - the Soul of Sikhi

Tenth Anniversary and Gurta Gaddi Divas

There is never a Sunday religious service in a Gurdwara without kirtan. Kirtan is singing or recitation of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib.

The tenth anniversary and Gurta Gaddhi Divas program included the normal religious service, except that we had a visiting raagi jatha (ensemble) of Bhai Rajinder Singh Sital from Atlanta who gave a truly splendid performance. Subsequently, the local groups came on stage - first the girls, then the boys, and finally the adults: Arvind Rajpal, Jaspal Attrey, Bandna

Bedi, and Priti Raj, with Sajjan Dhaliwal leading and accompanied by Gyani Satnam Singh Ji and Savinay Singh. The adults sang the same shabad they had sung ten years ago at the inauguration. All three groups performed superbly affecting the audience visibly.

The religious service concluded with Anand Sahib ka Paath followed by Ardaas, Hukamnama, and Prashad. As always, the day's last activity was langar, a sumptuous community meal.

The Sikh Scripture and Shabads (hymns):

This report would be incomplete without a brief comment on the Shabads recited on a Gurdwara religious service and their source, the scripture.

Since its canonization as the Guru Granth Sahib, Sikhs have accepted the Scripture – following the *hukam* (order) of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last human Guru - as the most truthful source of religious and spiritual guidance and believed in it as their ultimate Guru. Save the compositions of Guru Gobind Singh and two most eminent theologians of Sikhism, Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal, no other scripture not included in the Guru Granth is recognized as acceptable literature/text considered permissible to be recited, sung, or propagated in Sikh congregations.

Among the world's great scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib is the only scripture that was composed, edited, proofread, and signed for authenticity by the founders of

the faith in their lifetime. And it is composed entirely in poetic form. The printed volume contains 1430 pages, 5894 hymns, 28,534 lines, and 511, 874 words.

When we read the Granth Sahib, we find different languages used in it, but recognize a similar view of, and uniform approach to, God. Languages employed in the various hymns reflect the diversity of cultural milieus and times in which the composers had lived. **There are perhaps as many as twenty different languages of the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East, and the contiguous countries used in the Granth.** These languages were enriched by vocabulary from Sanskrit, Prakrit, Persian, Arabic, Bengali, Marathi, and other languages. The script of the scripture is Gurmukhi.

All hymns sung on the tenth anniversary, or any other day, are generally prayers to God or Waheguru, praising/describing Him as the Supreme Being, almighty, omnipresent, omniscient, just, merciful, immanent, and transcendent. The following verses from different hymns illustrate the power and diversity of the Sikh religious and spiritual thought:

- **“God created the creative power of the universe, within which He**

dwells.” Guru Nanak

- **“*The Creator created the world in all its diversity; by his design (Hukam) the creatures appear and then merge into the grand schema.*”** Guru Amar Das
- **“*Universal is my God, and universal is His language.*”** Guru Nanak
- **“*If a person listens to kirtan of God and sings kirtan of God, pain and suffering shall not come near that person.*”** Guru Arjun
- **“*Without the Naam everything else is false and worthless.*”** Guru Arjun

These hymns and others underscore the belief that God is all pervasive and universal, and that He is the Creator and Prime Mover of the universe. The devotee will receive whatever he/she asks of God by obeying and submitting to His Will completely and unconditionally. God is invoked by different names by his followers – call Him Ram, Rahim, Allah, Waheguru, or what you will, but He is One God, *Ik Onkar*, the source of all life. The entire world was born from the same source, same light, and the same light enlivens and enlightens us all. Guru Arjun Dev says it all, *“One God our Father, we are all His children.”*

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