

# QUADRICENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS OF THE COMPILATION OF THE AAD GURU GRANTH SAHIB

## SEMINAR GURDWARA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

### PREAMBLE

The simple and noble teachings of Guru Nanak attracted the people towards him who became his followers (Sikh). These disciples of Guru Nanak organized themselves into congregations (*sangat*) at different places. The *sangat* met almost daily and recited Gurbani, which was later incorporated into a *pothi* (book/*Granth*) that is now called as *the Aad Guru Granth Sahib*. The meeting places of Sikh *sangat* came to be designated as Gurdwara. The Gurdwaras sprouted all over wherever the Gurus put their feet or had their influence. This institution became the focal point for the community where the Sikhs met for religious and social purposes as emphasized by Dr Kashmir Singh.

According to Bhai Kahn Singh, the author of '*Mahan Kosh*' (the Great Encyclopedia – in Punjabi), Gurdwara is more than a place of worship. It is a school for the student, the Guru for the spiritual person, a hospital for the sick, sanctuary for women's honor, and a rest house for the pilgrim. In the recent times, the Sikhs all over the world as well as the people of other faiths have observed that many of the Gurdwaras are drifting away from its original meanings and functions and entering into ritualism. Moreover, it has also become a bone of contention among the Sikhs and its controllers for making the Gurdwaras as their fiefdoms.

Keeping in view the above facts the *Institute for Understanding Sikhism* held a seminar on Gurdwara on Saturday, September 15, 2001 at 415 St Rock, Park Extension, Montreal to make the Sikhs and other communities and the media aware about the Gurdwara, the important institution of the Sikhs. For detailed report on the seminar and recommendations of the panel to the Gurdwaras, please see '**Seminar on Gurdwara**', in the Section: **NEWS & VIEWS**, of this issue of the Journal.

The papers presented by the speakers, experts in various fields of Sikhism, have covered almost all aspects of

Gurdwara in the past, at present, and its future. If we look into the history of the Gurdwara and its origin, there appears to be some confusion when compared with the meanings and functions of the Gurdwara according to the Nanakian Philosophy. I tried to reconcile with the information given there in every paper but my conscience and the policy of the Journal forced me to comment on the confusion found there.

Dr Balwant Singh Dhillon emphatically mention that early Sikh sources are replete with accounts that the *dharamsala* stood at the very center of the community life of the Sikhs. Moreover, historical experience of the community confirms that it proved to be such a perfect precursor to the Gurdwara and so easily slipped into its role that transition from *dharamsala* to the Gurdwara is hardly noticeable in the Sikh literature.

Contrary to the above observations, Prof Devinder Singh Chahal's analysis of Nanakian Philosophy gives a different picture. Accordingly '*dharamsala*' means a place of unlimited boundary to live in righteousness and a sanctuary for the noble people (*sants*) to sing the praises of the almighty whereas 'Gurdwara' is an institution for the dissemination of Gurbani and Sikhism. In Gurdwara one can deliberate on Gurbani with *sangat* and the scholars to improve one's temporal and spiritual thoughts to live in the righteousness on this earth. However, Dr Dhillon has also quoted Gurbani to support the above view by saying that theologically speaking, for a Sikh whole earth is veritably a *dharamsal*, a place to practice *dharma* (duty).

A very important point emerges from Dr Kashmir Singh's paper, when the *Mahants*, who had made the Gurdwaras as their properties, tried to declare Gurdwaras as *dharamsals* to save them from falling under the control of the Shiromani Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar according to the Gurdwara Act 1925. It indicates that *dharamsal* is associated with

either a Hindu religious place or an inn where pilgrims could stay over night. However, the courts in many cases declared all such *dharamsals* as Gurdwaras under the control of Gurdwara Act 1925.

Dr NG Barrier's paper deals with the struggles between two different groups of Sikhs over the control of Gurdwaras in the North America. His paper indicates that the struggles were mainly to control the funds of Gurdwaras to be used for enhancing their own political positions or for political purposes. It is a pity that most of the funds were being spent on lawyer's fees in the courts instead of spending it on dissemination of Gurbani and Sikhism, the main function of the Gurdwara. So much so that in some cases the Jathedars of the Akal Takht took sides of particular group instead of serving the justice, consequently, further friction between the groups increased.

Dr Harbans Lal has discussed that what types of future Gurdwaras and the future Sikhs would be in the world in the year 2015. If someone looks around in various Gurdwaras and the Sikhs of the Science Age the categories he has mentioned are already appearing throughout the world, including Punjab.

One paper on the History and Management was withdrawn by the author. We will try to substitute it with another paper in the next issue.

From the deliberation on Gurdwara during this seminar it appears that Sikh history tells that Gurdwara is the latest term to replace *dharamsal*, however, according to the Nanakian Philosophy this institution should have been called Gurdwara right from the beginning of its evolution. It might be due to the fact that the early writers of Sikh history were not well versed with the Gurbani incorporated in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib and used the term (*dharamsal*) already in practice by the people of that time. The above confusion of *dharamsal* and Gurdwara is almost insignificant incident but there are many grave contradictions in the old literature. Therefore, the Sikhs are advised to be careful and critical in applying information, given in the old Sikh literature extraneous to the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, for construction of Sikhism.

The most important lesson to be learned from this seminar is that the management of Gurdwaras should spend all their energy and money on the dissemination of Gurbani and Sikhism through discussions, seminars and publications of scientific and logical articles instead of fighting with each other in Gurdwaras.

*Prof Devinder Singh Chahal*  
*Editor-in-Chief*