

THE DAHRAMSALA: AN EARLY SIKH RELIGIOUS CENTER

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ABSTRACT

The early history of the Sikh Panth shows that the Sikh religious establishment called the Gurdwara, gradually evolved from its earlier counterpart known as dharamsala. 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.

GENESIS AND GROWTH

Theologically speaking, for a Sikh whole of this earth is veritably a *dharamsala*, a place to practice *dharama* (duty) [2]. However, the origin of *dharamsala*, where the early Sikhs used to meet for worship and devotion, can be traced back to the times of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. A cursory glance at the Sikh sources reveals that during the itineraries of Guru Nanak quite a few people felt attracted to his faith. Wherever Guru Nanak found his disciples, he not only organized them into congregational circle (*sangat*) but motivated them also to build a religious center, the *dharamsala*. Obviously, the *dharamsala* presupposes a Sikh *sangat*, which was in fact a prerequisite for its emergence at a particular place. We come across instances in Sikh history where neophyte Sikhs took upon themselves to found the *dharamsala*, so that the mission of the great Guru may be carried on. Bhai Gurdas remarks about its origin:

"Wherever Guru Nanak visited that place became a place of worship. The most important centres including those of the jogis visited by the Guru became spiritual centres. Even houses have been turned into dharamsalas where kirtan was sung on the eve of Baisakhi" [14, Vaar 1, Pauri 27].

After his sojourn in different lands and people, Guru Nanak settled at Kartarpur (now in Pakistan) where people from different walks of life belonging to different denominations, coming from far and wide gathered around him to hear his sermon. Subsequently, he founded a religious centre known as *dharamsala*, which became a nucleus of his ministry. Evidently the origin of *dharamsala* is not obscure but a well-known fact of Sikh history.

The Sikh sources confirm that the *dharamsalas* initially came into being at the instance of the Sikh Gurus. In fact to organize the Sikhs into a well-knit unit such centers were of an utmost necessity. Towards the close of 16th century, besides Kartarpur there were Khadur, Goindwal, Ramdaspur, Tarn Taran, Kartarpur (Doaba) and Sri Hargobindpur, which developed into important Sikh centres primarily because the Sikh Gurus themselves had founded them. With the introduction of the institutions of *manji* (cot) and later on the *Masand* system, the Sikhs appointed on these institutions played significant role to build up *dharamsalas* in their respective areas and zones. There is every likelihood that some of the devout and spirited Sikhs might have had performed yeoman's services to found *dharamsalas* at different places of Punjab and country as well [9]. With the return of *Udasis* into the fold of mainstream, Guru Hargobind and the Sikh Gurus following him, deputed them to preach the Sikh mission to distant lands. It seems, the *Udasi* preachers proved particularly useful to rejuvenate the *dharamsalas* established by Guru Nanak outside the Punjab, which perhaps had become dysfunctional due to lack of contact with the central Sikh religious authority. Unfortunately, scholars are not aware of the fact that in spite of the hostile attitude of the Mughals, Guru Hargobind had a remarkable success to expand the network of *dharamsalas* not only in the Punjab region but also in other parts of India [9]. Guru Tegh Bahadur's missionary tours in the Malwa region of Punjab and North-eastern India proved very fruitful to add a few more centers to the already existing centers in these regions. Besides, the Punjabi *Khatri*s who embraced Sikhism and had settled at the major trade centers of the country, especially situated on the trade routes, also contributed in a very significant manner to establish *dharam-*

salas at their respective places [9]. In modern times, the Diaspora Sikhs who migrated to settle in different parts of the world are performing the same job to spread the message of Sikhism among the immigrant Sikhs and natives as well through the institution of Gurdwara.

The *dharamsalas* might have come up at those places where the Sikhs had a sizeable number. Most of the *dharamsalas* came up at those places, which had been sanctified by the Sikh Gurus themselves. They were built up either to commemorate their sacred memory or to enshrine the holy relics associated with them. Hence, such *dharamsalas* were attraction of special reverence and subsequently got prominence over the local or community *dharamsalas*. If we look into the history of various *dharamsalas* we will not be surprised to find that every *dharamsala* is a living testimony to the glorious saga of Sikh tradition and has much in store to inspire the future generation of the Sikhs.

Though, the institution of *dharamsala* flourished in time and space yet to ascertain its purpose and status, observations from the *B 40 Janamsakhi* are very significant. While describing Guru Nanak's interview with God, the author of above *Janamsakhi* (biography) writes how God has revealed Himself to the Guru:

“You are Nanak and your Panth will flourish. Your followers shall be called Nanak Panthis and their salutation shall be “Pauri paouna Sat Sat Guru”, I shall bless your Panth. Inculcate men's devotion towards me and strengthen their obedience to dharma. As the Vaishnavas have ramsal (temple), the Jogis have their asans (seats) and the Muslims their mosques, so your followers shall have their dharamsala” [10].

Two very significant points emerge out of this. Firstly, for the Sikhs the *dharamsala* was a divinely ordained institution. Resultantly, to build it or contribution towards it in any manner was to participate in a divine mission. Secondly, it provided the Sikhs an alternative locus for worship, which was quite distinct from those of the other denominations. Thus, to evolve as well as preserve the Sikh identity at an earlier stage of Sikh history, the institution of *dharamsala* had played an important role, which is equally needed now in the Gurdwaras.

The evidence at our disposal suggests that the institution of *dharamsala* was introduced in Indian sub-continent almost simultaneously with the foundation of Sikhism. In the century that followed with the active involvement of the Sikh Gurus and the hard work put into by the Sikh missionaries the *dharamsala* became an essential and distinctive symbol of Sikhism. Within

a short span of time the entire country, especially the Punjab and trade routes running between Chitagong and Kabul on the one hand, Agra and Burhampur on the other, were found studded with the Sikh *dharamsalas*.

Obstacles in Growth: Notwithstanding the phenomenal success to found the *dharamsalas* in different regions and cities of the country, the Sikh mission had to face strong opposition from some vested interests. At some places the Sikh *dharamsalas* were also an eye sore to the men of other religious denominations. Goindwal and Nanakmata are two such examples where the *Shaikhs* and the *Jogis*, respectively, opposed the Sikhs from developing their centers [7]. Perhaps they feared that by establishing *dharamsalas*, the Sikhs were invading the religious boundaries of their spiritual domains. Such ugly situations were averted by the persuasive skills and timely intervention by the Sikh Gurus. In future such type of opposition to the Gurdwara may develop in any part of the world but the Sikh leadership has to face the crisis in the light of path shown by the Sikh Gurus and their missionaries working in difficult times.

Physical Structure: Only because of that unlike the Hindu temples and the Muslim mosques, the Sikh *dharamsalas* were not built on axis-oriented directions. The early *dharamsala* may have been a small and simple structure usually consisting a single room large enough to hold a congregation of the local Sikhs. Most of the early Sikhs belonged to working classes and were not financially so well off. Presumably the local or community *dharamsalas*, which had propped up in countryside, small towns and *qasbas* were simple oratories for daily prayers. With the codification of Sikh scripture, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib [1], became the prized possession of the *dharamsalas*, which was duly installed and prominently displayed at the congregational hall. These *dharamsalas* were generally without big complex and decorative furnishings, which we usually observe in modern day Gurdwaras. In an urban or rural setting, the *dharamsala* was a landmark to establish the identity of Sikh populace residing in the immediate neighborhood.

Since, Sikhism has enjoined upon its followers to observe external as well as internal purity, eventually, *isnan*, customary bath in the early morning has developed into an essential religious practice. Early Sikh literature abounds in evidence about the merits of *isnan* and its popularity among the early Sikhs. That was the basic reason that the *dharamsala* complex often included provisions for public bath. Wherever natural sources of water were not available, the *dharamsala* complex had a *baoli* (well) or *rehat* (Persian Wheel) in its courtyard or a water-pool adjoining to it, which besides supplying water for customary bath, overcame the scarcity of water of the locality.

The *dharamsala* right from its very inception had a *langar* (eating together without any discrimination) attached to it. Later on *langar* acquired the status of an essential institution and formed an integral part of the *dharamsala* complex. Similarly, the *dharamsala* also comprised of a hospice, a common resting place where besides the Sikhs, the wayfarers were permitted to stay for rest irrespective of caste and creed. Contemporary Sikh sources confirm that the Sikh faith progressed vigorously in the Punjab and on the trade routes intersecting the country at various points. Almost all the important towns falling on these routes had come to have *dharamsalas*. With the development of Sikh Panth, the *sangats* led by their respective *manjidars* and *masands* had started paying annual visits to the Sikh gurus on the eve of religious festivals [11]. For the smooth movement of the Sikh *sangats* from either direction arrangement for boarding and lodging was needed. Resultantly, on the pattern of premier *dharamsala* almost all the *dharamsalas* found located on or near the highways also set up *langars* and caravan *serais* (inn). Both the *langar* and caravan-*serai* functioned within the precincts of the *dharamsala* and formed an essential feature where hospitality and food was freely available to the visitors.

Interestingly, some of the *dharamsalas* also had an arrangement to look after the sick and infirm. Some of the *sangtias* (individuals from the congregation) carried on their medical services for the people from the precincts of the *dharamsalas* [13]. Readers will not be surprised to note that to meet the requirement of *Manjis* (cots) some of the *dharamsalas* also contained small carpentry workshops [11].

An official who could be a *Manjidar*, *Masand* or *Sangtia* headed every *dharamsala*. Their office was not professional and hereditary. Invariably they were the leaders of the *sangat* to which the *dharamsala* belonged. However, these leaders could not claim a divine status to indulge them in self-aggrandizement. Even now a system needs to be devised to train the administrative personnel (machinery) for proper management of the institution of the Gurdwara in India and abroad.

Religious Activities: The *dharamsala* was the main center of the religious activities of the Sikhs. Fortunately, in the medieval Sikh literature details of the daily routine of the *dharamsala* are available. Sikhism formally prescribes both the personal and corporate way of worship. Individual worship was to be carried at home, whereas the congregational worship was to be performed in the *dharamsala*. Significantly, both the individual and congregational worship were similar in contents. Though, the Sikh tradition does not specify

any standardized benediction linking God to the specific circumstances of the moment, however worship was carried out daily in the morning and the evening. At the *dharamsala* contents of the public worship were relegated to the Sikh scripture, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib. Besides, the recitation of sacred texts, we find that the *Jap* had come to form an integral part of the morning liturgy. Similarly, the early Sikhs practiced recitation of *Jap*, *Sodar*, *Aarti* and *Sohila* in the evening [14, Vaar 1, Pauri 38 & Vaar 6, Pauri 3]. Wherever the trained Sikh musicians well versed in the Sikh tradition were available *Kirtan* sessions became a part of the daily program of the *dharamsala*. Similarly, to explain the basic tenets of Sikhism or subtle meaning of *Gurbani* to novices and inquirers from other traditions, exegetical assemblies, debates and inter-faith dialogues began to be held in the *dharamsala*. In fact the entire fulcrum for the whole system of worship at *dharamsala* was the *Pothis* (Aad Guru Granth Sahib).

We may summarize that the classic Sikh mode of worship centered on the *Bani*, the Word of God. The *Bani* of the Sikh Gurus constituted the subject matter of worship and religious services to be conducted at the *dharamsala*. Towards the end of worship or religious service prayer was offered and *Karah Parsad* (consecrated pudding) was distributed among the assembled people to mark the Grace of God.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Building of *dharamsala*, its maintenance, the *langar* and hospice, projects of water pools and wells and to support the functionaries involved, all required large outlays of funds. To seek state patronage has never been the policy of the Sikh Gurus. Who bore the costs? What were the fiscal resources? And what was the mechanism to collect them? These are some of the questions that draw our attention. The policy of refusing state help speaks of all the Sikhs contributing towards *dharamsala* and its allied institutions. Historical experience of the Sikh community suggests that to raise, maintain and run the *dharamsala* complex had always been the obligation of the Sikh *sangat*. The Sikh Gurus had enjoined upon their Sikhs to earn their livelihood honestly and share it with others [4]. It is worth noting that *dan* (charity) was and is one of the cardinal virtues of the Sikhs. In Sikhism, *dan* has never been reserved for a priestly class. It should be given either to a deserving person or spent for a rightful cause. Resultantly, the virtue of *dan* found its manifestation in the services of the *dharamsala*. It provided a definite direction and meaning to the charities given by the Sikhs. Hence at an earlier stage *dan* in the form of voluntary contribution was the major fiscal source of the *dharamsala*. It was an act of piety and goodwill and there was no binding of exact amount. Presumably,

it was given in cash or in kind. During the pontificate of Guru Arjan *dan* was supplemented with *daswandh* (tithe), which was made obligatory on the part of the Sikhs, and its collection was entrusted to the *masands* [11].

Besides the *daswandh*, there were some non-obligatory donations--*golak, sukh manat, chaliya, kaar bhent*, etc. which enhanced the financial resources of the *dharamsala* [12]. An early 17th century source exhorts the Sikhs to carry something in kind while visiting the *dharamsala*. Obviously, it added to the provisions of the *langar* [7].

Though, there were no specific directives to utilize the *dharamsala* funds yet we can visualize that they were spent for the propagation of the Sikh faith and the public welfare. Obviously, the *dharamsala* funds were used for building *dharamsala* complex, to run the *langar* and hospice, to promote the study of Sikh scripture and other educational and missionary activities. Interestingly most of the *masands* or *sangtias* responsible for the collection of offerings were engaged in some profession. They were not supposed to appropriate the offerings on their personal well being. However, those who had no other means of livelihood were allowed to use the offerings other than cash [11]. The *Masand* or *Sangtia* in charge of the *dharamsala* was only a trustee and he was not supposed to misappropriate the *dharamsala* funds. Bhai Gurdas has decreed in strongest terms that it was totally unlawful to covet an eye on the offerings brought to *dharamsala* [14, Vaar 35, Pauri 12-16].

SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL

It needs to be underlined that the *dharamsala* was not merely a religious place but a center of social and educational significance as well. Our sources suggest that the *dharamsala* had always served as center of education and Sikh learning. Infact *dharamsalas* were guidance centers wherein the participants and entrants were ushered to the Sikh way of life. They had also arrangements to impart teachings in *Gurmukhi*, Sikh music, and the scripture. For this purpose *dharamsala* served to be the most continuous and reliable centre of education for the students of Sikhism. We can visualize how the study circles gathered around the *Granthi* in the courtyard of *dharamsala* went through the learning process. We notice that some of the *dharamsalas* emerged as famous centers of educational activities. Teaching in *dharamsalas* continued even after the proliferation of schools and colleges. In modern times the educational functions of the community *dharamsala* have been totally taken over by specialized institutions. However, to transmit the knowledge of *Gurmukhi*, *Gurbani*, and Sikh cultural values, the *Gurdwaras* can

still play a vital role but to attract the students we have to upgrade its educational system.

Unlike the religious places of some other traditions the *dharamsala* did accommodate the services related to family life. The ceremonies of marriage, birth, death and initiation were perhaps arranged in the *dharamsala* compound. While visiting the *dharamsala* the Sikhs had to perform two types of duties--personal religious obligation and the collective management and maintenance of the *dharamsala* and its allied structures. Bhai Gurdas provides a graphic account of the odd chores performed by the Sikhs to run the *dharamsala* properly. He observes how the Sikhs used to wave fan to comfort the *sangat* from the heat. Someone was drawing water to help the Sikhs to wash their feet or to take customary bath. Similarly, some were busy in grinding wheat and corn to prepare food for the *langar*. Some one was bringing fuel wood for the community kitchen and did not feel shy to fuel the oven for cooking the *langar*. They happily shook the dust off the prayer carpets of the *dharamsala* [14, Vaar 3, Pauri 8, 18, 20, Vaar 20, Pauri 6, 10]. Even they did not hesitate to massage the tired visitors. They always lent a helping hand to distribute food in the *langar*. In a way the institution of *dharamsala* provided an ample opportunity to the Sikhs to practice the virtue of *sewa*.

SPIRITUAL ENVIRONMENT

The *dharamsala* always served as a center of Sikh spirituality. It led the way to achieve summum-bonum while residing in the family and society. It was a place where higher values like *dhiraj* (serenity), *dharm*, truth, etc. dominated the environment. Guru Arjan refers to atmosphere at *dharamsala* where instead of rancor; humility prevailed all around [5]. In the words of Bhai Gurdas, the *dharamsala* alone possessed that spiritual tranquility which a seeker longed for in atmosphere of worldly tension. He is very emphatic to state that the disturbing effect of worldly wealth (*maya*) on the minds of the men could be removed only by experiencing the spiritual environment of the *dharamsala* [14. Vaar 26, Pauri 7, 8 & Vaar 29, Pauri 6, 10]. He compares it with *Mansarovar* Lake where *Gursikh* like swans assemble in the congregation [14, Vaar 9, Pauri 14]. Throughout the Sikh literature the *dharamsala* and its successive institution, the *Gurdwara* has been referred as the abode of God. According to Bhai Gurdas, the *dharamsala* served as an earthly residence for God and atmosphere designed to replicate His celestial kingdom [14 Vaar 24, Pauri 1, Vaar 25, Pauri 3]. It was perfectly natural therefore that the Sikhs who were disgusted and frustrated with their personalities torn by inner conflicts, thronged to *dharamsala* in search of spiritual solace. A cursory glance at the *Sikhan di Bhagtmala*, affirms that the spiritual atmosphere

of *dharamsala* not only soothed their excited nerves but also integrated their personalities to the highest point of inner harmony to transform them into *Gurmukhs* [13]. Unfortunately, the spiritual functions and environment that the Sikh Gurus evolved for the institutions of *dharamsala* are lacking in our present day Gurdwaras. Spiritual base of the community is eroding very fast. We have to devise the ways and means to turn the Gurdwaras into spiritually vibrant centers because it is the only antidote to save the future generations of the Sikhs from the ills of materialistic advancement of mankind.

Entry and Quorum: The *dharamsala* and its allied institutions were open to any one at any time of the day. There was no restriction of caste and creed to find entry into it. Women were not debarred rather encouraged to join the congregation at *dharamsala*. Significantly, unlike the Muslim mosque, the *dharamsala* did not use a separate enclosure specially screened off for the women devotees. Infact Sikh Gurus enjoined upon the women not to observe *purdah* (veil) while visiting the *dharamsala*. The Sikh *dharamsala*, in the eyes of Bhai Gurdas, was such a unique religious place where Guru and disciples, men and women, high and low, young and old, all worshipped together [14, Vaar 24, Pauri 5]. Sometimes we find that in some religions sanctum sanctorum or innermost area of the shrine is prohibited to the general public. Only clergy, priests or a few privileged persons have an access to it. Contrary to the above custom, every nook and corner of the *dharamsala* was open for public view.

Unlike the synagogue and mosque of the Jewish and Muslim community respectively, to hold the religious service at *dharamsala* no specific quorum has been fixed. The underlying idea behind it was that *dharamsala* services are continuous process. It should not distinguish between a small and large assembly. Even the needs of an individual visitor should be taken care of. However, to decide the community matters five Sikhs comprised the quorum to constitute a representative body of the community.

Sanctity: The *dharamsala* complex was considered a sacred place. One was required to approach it with complete humility and purity of mind. Before entering the *dharamsala* the visitor has to ensure physical purity by taking customary bath (*isnan*). Similarly, to demonstrate proper reverence and respect, devotee has to put off shoes and cover his or her head. Disrespect to *Bani* or the Aad Guru Granth Sahib in any manner, interference in the functioning of *dharamsala* leading to break in regular or obligatory religious practices, were part of the sacrilege. Similarly, use of intoxicants and tobacco in the complex of *dharamsala* became re-

ligious taboo. To preserve and protect the sanctity of their *dharamsalas* has always been the sacred duty of the Sikh community.

CONCLUSIONS

Besides celebrating the congregational worship, the *dharamsala* has also been the favored place for public assembly where the Sikhs gathered to debate the religious as well as temporal issues concerning the community. Primarily it was a fountainhead of Sikh spirituality, which motivated the Sikhs to cherish the higher values. Every one in need of sympathy and help turned to it, since it was believed that the prayer performed by the *sangat* at *dharamsala* could heal the sick souls. Its role has been instrumental to evolve and preserve the Sikh identity and has contributed a lot to transmit it to the successive generations of the Sikhs.

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