

NEWS AND VIEWS

SEMINAR ON GURDWARA

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This was the first seminar on Gurdwara held in the world. It was the result of consistent and continuous efforts of Prof Devinder Singh Chahal, President of Institute for Understanding Sikhism, Laval, Quebec, Canada to improve the image of Gurdwaras, which has been tarnished so badly especially during last two decades. He consulted a number of scholars from India, USA and Canada and some Gurdwaras in Canada and USA during the last three years before deciding to hold a seminar on Gurdwara to represent its real meanings, functions, history, management and its future to the world.

'Gurdwara' has been coined from 'Guru + Dwara' (meaning gateway to the Guru). The Gurdwara is an institution for dissemination of Gurbani (philosophy of the Guru) and *Sikhi* (Sikhism). Guru Nanak was disseminating his philosophy (*Bani*) during the 15th and 16th century by going from place to place. Thereafter, Guru Amardas, the third Guru in succession to the House of Nanak, established 22 *Manjis* (cots) on which the representative of the Guru used to sit for dissemination of Guru Nanak's Philosophy at various places in India. When the *Bani* (word) of the Sikh Gurus were compiled into a Granth (Aad Guru Granth Sahib – AGGS) then the *Manji* was used to seat the Granth from which the Gurbani was preached. Over a period of time, the building, in which the Granth is seated on *Manji*, started to be called as Gurdwara. The *Manji* is still used to seat the Aad Guru Granth Sahib in every Gurdwara throughout the world. The evolution of Gurdwara clearly shows that its primary and fundamental function is to make the Sikhs to understand the Gurbani and Sikhism in their real perspective.

According to Bhai Kahn Singh, the author of '*Mahan Kosh*' (Encyclopedia in Punjabi), Gurdwara is more than a place of worship. It is a school for the student, the Guru for the spiritual person, an hospital for the sick, sanctuary for woman'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 most 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 all the above facts the Institute for Understanding Sikhism held a seminar on Gurdwara on Saturday, September 15, 2001 from 9 AM to 6 PM at 415 St Roch, Park Extension, Montreal to make the Sikhs and other communities and the media aware about Gurdwara, an important institution of the Sikhs. The Seminar was held in close collaboration and sponsorship of Gurdwara Sahib Guru Nanak Darbar, Lasalle, Gurdwara Sahib Quebec, Montreal, Gurdwara Sahib Gurbani Sagar, Park Extension, and Gurdwara Sahib Greater Montreal, DDO. A number of Sikh scholars from various universities and Sikh institutions from India, USA and Canada deliberated on various aspects of Gurdwara.

The seminar was commenced with a *Sabd* of Guru Nanak, *Vidya vichari tan parupkari*, from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib by Prof Jaspal Singh, Punjabi University, Patiala, India and his young Sikh students followed by the *Opening Address* by the Chairperson of the Seminar, Dr Harjeet Singh Bhabra, Professor of Finance, Concordia University, Montreal. He explained the objectives of the Seminar and the achievements of the Institute for Understanding Sikhism.

Mr Manjit Singh, Sikh Chaplain, McGill and Concordia Universities of Montreal discussed '*History and Management*'. He traced out the early history of Gurdwara and their control by the corrupt *Mahants* (priests), Singh Sabha Movement for liberation of Gurdwaras from *Mahants*, setting up of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, and constitution of Gurdwara Act to manage the historical Gurdwaras of Punjab and rest of India. He emphasized on the proper management of Gurdwaras and maintenance of accounts properly.

Dr Balwant Singh Dhillon, Prof Guru Nanak Studies, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar wrote a paper on '*Institution of Dharamsaala*.' Indicating that the Sikh religious establishment called the Gurdwara, was gradually evolved from its earlier counterpart known as *Dharamsaal*. Miss Anjan Sohi, a college student of Political Science in Concordia University, presented

his paper.

In a paper, *Gurdwara and Aad Guru Granth Sahib-A legal Perspective*, Dr Kashmir Singh, Professor of Law at the Guru Nanak University, Amritsar, India, highlighted the importance and status of the Gurdwara and Aad Guru Granth Sahib, both being the nuclei of Sikhism. Definition of 'Gurdwara' in the Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925 and the number of rulings of higher judiciary in India were discussed and commented upon. His paper was presented by Mr Narotum Singh, Professor for teaching English to the Law students in Guru Nanak Dev University and a friend of Dr Kashmir Singh.

Dr NB Barrier, Eminent Research Scholar on Sikhism, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA submitted a paper on '*Gurdwaras in America: Issues of Governance, Authority, and Conflict Resolution*'. In this paper he has reported the experience of Sikh Gurdwaras in the US and addressed recent constitutional and legal issues, the underlying process of attempts to relate local experience to ongoing debates over the nature of religious and political authority in Sikh tradition, and alternative approaches to Gurdwara governance. His paper was presented by Mr Devinder Singh Kaura, a college student in Commerce and working for Deloitte & Touche in Montreal.

'*Meanings and Functions of Gurdwara According to Nanakian Philosophy*' was presented by Prof Devinder Singh Chahal, President of Institute for Understanding Sikhism, Laval, QC. Prof Chahal explained that according to Nanakian Philosophy Gurdwara (Guru + Dwara) means 'Gateway to the Guru'; Guru is the *Sabd* (philosophy) promulgated by Guru Nanak that was taught and strengthened by the next nine Sikh Gurus, who succeeded to the House of Nanak; and deliberation of *Sabd* in the congregation in Gurdwara is the most important process to understand the Nanakian Philosophy in its real perspective. Therefore, deliberation on *Sabd* should be introduced as an essential part of routines and formalities of Gurdwara when the Sikhs meet in the congregation.

Dr Bhai Harbans Lal, Emeritus Professor of Guru Nanak Studies, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, India, and President of Academy of Guru Granth Studies, Texas, USA discussed '*Sikh Generation and Gurdwaras in Year 2015*'. He visualized that Gurdwaras of the future in North America should be designed as new establishments that meet the needs of our new generation of the Sikhs. Therefore, for any discussion on the future Gurdwaras to be meaningful, Dr Lal said that we must peruse the needs of this

generation.

Besides the above deliberations, the President of Gurdwaras Sahib Guru Nanak Darbar, Lasalle, S Kiran Pal Singh, addressed the participants about his experience in the management of Gurdwara. He emphasized teaching of Gurbani and Sikhism in the right way in the Gurdwaras.

Mrs Ruby Ahuja, President of Gurdwara Sahib Quebec, addressed her experience in management of Gurdwara. She said Gurdwara is not only for the Sikhs but also for the whole humanity without any discrimination of caste, creed, race, sex, etc. It is run with consultation of the *sangat* and for the benefit of the *sangat*. She told that their Gurdwara donates food for the Food Bank every year on the Birthday of Guru Nanak. The *sangat* of that Gurdwara also donate blood to the Blood Bank. Children are encouraged to recite *Sabd* and express their opinion during the time of regular *Divaan* on the first Sunday of every month, Punjabi classes are held and Gurmat camps are arranged every year for the young Sikhs.

The President of the Sikh Cultural and Educational Center, Laval, S Amar Singh Kaura, shared his experience in raising his children with the religious education and Punjabi culture while living in the modern environment of the western culture.

During the seminar the Institute for Understanding Sikhism honored S Baljit Singh Chadha for his contributions for promotion of Sikhism, education and multiculturalism. Contributions of S Baljit Singh Chadha were presented by Dr Balbir Singh Sahni, Professor of Economics, Concordia University, Montreal.

Mr Gurcharan Singh Bhatia, Program Coordinator, and Secretary General of the Institute for Understanding Sikhism, successfully managed the daylong proceedings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After one hour of serious deliberation the panelists and the participants came up with the following recommendations:

1. Gurdwaras should explore their role under the changing environment, but steering clearly through the Nanakian Philosophy;
2. Gurdwaras should consider reviewing its governance with its real objectives as found in the Gurbani enshrined in the Aad Guru

Granth Sahib;

3. Gurdwaras should participate and promote interfaith dialogue with other communities;
4. Gurdwaras should consider establishing associations (local, regional, national, and international) for consultative - coordination purposes;
5. Existing sister institutions such as Gurdwaras, research centers, and lobbying organizations (e. g. local Gurdwaras, the Institute for Understanding Sikhism, and the local chapter of Canadian Sikh Council in Montreal), while functioning independently, should focus on attaining excellence in their specific role, should be encouraged to meet periodically, helping each other in spirit and with finance;
6. Scholarship in Sikhism be encouraged by promoting university level courses, theses/ dissertations, and conferences; and
7. Although importance of discussion (*vichar*) of Gurbani is emphasized again and again in the Nanakian Philosophy, where two way communication is necessary, it was realized during panel discussion that it might not be possible during the *Divaan* time to hold discussion for the time being. However, there

was a consensus that the Gurdwaras should arrange to hold discussion (*vichar*) for better understanding of Gurbani and Sikhism by the *sangat* in a separate room with the *kirtanias*, *kathakaars*, *sants*, and academicians after their performance.

Proceedings of the Seminar will be published in the forthcoming issue of UNDERSTANDING SIKHISM – The Research Journal, published by the Institute for Understanding Sikhism. Proceedings will be available during January 2002 on demand. Please contact Prof Devinder Singh Chahal, at Institute for Understanding Sikhism, 4418 Martin-Plouffe, Laval, Quebec, Canada H7W 5L9, Phone: 450-681-1254 or on Email: Sikhism@canada.com

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1. Chahal, DS. 2001. Seminar on Gurdwara. *Sikh Virsa*, Calgary. October: 59-60.
2. Chahal, DS. 2001. Seminar on Gurdwara in Canada. *The Sikh Review*, Calcutta. 42 (December): 62-65.