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Vol. IV No. 1

February 2012

The IUP Journal of Architecture



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The IUP Journal of Architecture

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February 2012

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Architectural Evolution of Gurdwaras: An Overview

Karamjit Singh Chahal*, Sandeep Dua and Sulakhan Singh*****

Gurdwaras have a pivotal position in the religious, social and political life of the Sikhs. Gurdwaras have also played a vital role in shaping the course of events of the Sikh history and in the development of the Sikh religious tradition since 1469. The important Gurdwaras were built at sites associated with important incidents in the lives of the Gurus or at places which are important milestones in Sikh history; or they have been erected in memory of the martyrs who gave up their lives in defence of their faith during the long period of persecution to which the Sikhs were subjected. Historically, Gurdwara succeeded *Dharmosal*. Guru Arjan had compiled *pothi* or *granth* (later *Guru Granth Sahib*) of holy hymns in 1604, the *Dharmosal* where these *pothis* were placed was therefore considered as the Guru's abode, Gurdwara. Architecturally Gurdwaras have evolved from a simple single room structure to magnificent structures with elaborate detailing and decoration. This paper tries to trace the architectural evolution of Gurdwaras over a period of time.

Keywords: Gurdwara, *Dharmosal*, Gurdwara evolution, Sikh architecture, Golden Temple

Introduction

Sikhism, one of the youngest of the world's religions, is, in fact, a product of the Sufi and Bhakti school of thought. It was established by Guru Nanak Dev, and was developed by ten gurus during the period from 1469 to 1708. Guru Nanak Dev was the first guru and Guru Gobind Singh was the last in a physical form, after which he designated the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* the ultimate and final Sikh Guru in 1708. Sikhism had gradually progressed untouched until under Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth guru, it became a power to be reckoned. He completed the compilation of the sacred scripture, the *Adi Granth* in 1604; his execution in 1606 was a turning point in Sikh history. The Islamic orientation of the Mughals, involving repression of the Sikhs, made Guru Gobind Singh bring about major changes which started the process of distinguishing Sikhs from others (Preeti and Girishwar, 2003). The Sikhs gradually turned from the quietist sect of Nanak *Panthis* (those who followed the path of Nanak) into a

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militant fraternity of the *Khalsa* created by the Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The century that followed witnessed Sikh dominance as a political power, with Banda Singh Bahadur striking a near fatal blow to the Mughal rule in Punjab (Khuswant, 2004b). His arrival was a great inspiration for the rural people of the Punjab to join the *Khalsa*.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's 40 years (1799-1839) remain the golden age of Sikh political achievement (Khuswant, 2004b). During the second half of the 18th century and after, as the Sikhs acquired political power, Gurdwaras sprang up in most of the areas of Sikh habitations and on sites connected with the lives of the Gurus and with events in Sikh history.

The Gurdwaras have a central position in the religious, social and political life of the Sikhs and they are an integral part of Sikh history, heritage and culture. Most of these are by and large commemorative buildings built at sites associated with the Gurus or at places, which are important milestones in Sikh history, or they have been erected in memory of the numerous martyrs who gave up their lives in defence of their faith during the long period of persecution to which the Sikhs were subjected (Teja, 1922). For example, Gurdwara *Sis Ganj* at Delhi is connected with Guru Teg Bahadur. Gurdwara *Saheedan Sahib* is connected with Baba Deep Singh. Most of the historical Gurdwaras were built during the second half of the 18th century and in the early 19th century when the Sikhs had gained political power in Punjab (www.gurudwara.net). Most of the historical Gurdwaras were gifted with liberal grants of land by the ruling chiefs and nobility. This period of Sikh rule led to the construction of some impressive religious structures. The Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar has been the center of Sikhism during the entire span of the eventful history of Sikhs; it became the source of Sikh inspiration and carried the message of Sikhism afar. During the days of their persecution, a visit to Harmandir Sahib exercised an inspirational influence (Teja, 1922).

Importance of Gurdwara

A Gurdwara, meaning "the doorway to the Guru", is the Sikh place of worship. Gurdwaras enjoy a pivotal position in the life of Sikhs. For them, it is not only a place for worship, but the source of their life and inspiration. Gurdwaras have also played a vital role in shaping the course of events of the Sikh history and in the development of the Sikh religious tradition. The presence of Gurdwara in the neighborhood of Sikhs is indispensable. It is a place for congregational worship of God and the center of religious and social life of the Sikhs since the time of Guru Nanak and have bound the Sikh community together by faith in the teachings of their Gurus (Kharak, 2002). According to Bhai Kahn Singh, the author of *Mahan Kosh (The Great Encyclopaedia of Sikhism)*, Gurdwara is more than a place of worship; it is a place of learning for the student, a Guru for the spiritual person, a hospital for the sick, and a rest house for the pilgrim.

All important occasions of their life—birth, marriage and death—are interlinked with it. People from all religious backgrounds without distinction of caste, status or sex are welcomed into a Gurdwara. Since Sikhs migrated to almost every part of the world, we can easily find a Gurdwara anywhere in the world. Five Gurdwaras, namely, the Akal Takht, Anandpur Sahib, Patna Sahib, Hazoor Sahib and Damdama Sahib are looked as the ‘Five Thrones’ of authority from which divine commands (*Hukamnamas*) for the guidance of the community are issued from time to time. Among these, the authority of the Akal Takht at Amritsar is regarded as supreme, and all orders issued from there are considered as binding upon the whole Sikh community.

The word ‘Gurdwara’ is compounded of *guru* (spiritual master) and *dwara* (gateway or seat) and, therefore, has an architectural implication. The Sikh shrines are by and large commemorative buildings connected with the life and times of the ten Sikh gurus, or associated with certain places and events of historical significance for the Sikhs. The main requirement of a Gurdwara is a room in which *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* can be placed and people can be seated as a congregation to listen to the readings from the *Guru Granth Sahib* and to sing and recite its verses. Gurdwaras also have resting room for *Guru Granth Sahib*, Langar building, kitchen, lodging facilities for pilgrims and accommodation for *granthis* and *sewadars*.

Apart from morning and evening prayers, the Gurdwaras hold special congregations to mark the anniversaries of the Sikh Gurus and other important events in Sikh history. They become scenes of festivity when celebrations in honor of the birth of the Gurus and of the *Khalsa* take place (Harpreet, 2009). As places of worship, Gurdwaras are the source of community-building, acting as guardians of core values of Sikhism and providing an opportunity for collective worship by the *sangat* (congregation). Gurdwaras are highly respected by the Sikhs because within Sikhism, the spiritual and temporal are inseparable (Gurharpal, 2006). In recent years most of the Gurdwaras were built with an extensive use of marble for the purpose of beautification and durability. Apart from the Golden Temple at Amritsar, we do not have an architectural record of earlier shrines. No art or architecture from the period before that survived, perhaps because it was made with ephemeral materials such as wood and sun-dried brick or may have been damaged by the invaders.

Gurdwara and Society

The presence of Gurdwara in the neighborhood of Sikhs is indispensable. It is a place for congregational worship of God and a center of religious and social life of the Sikhs since the time of Guru Nanak and has bounded the Sikh community together by faith in the teachings of their Gurus (Teja, 1922). Congregational worship in the *Dharamsals* has a social significance of its own. It served to emotionally integrate the Sikhs from heterogeneous castes within the *sangat*, as loyalty to higher values help men rise above their narrow loyalties. All social functioning which serves in any way to integrate the group may be regarded as expressions of loyalty to higher values and thus take on a semi-religious meaning (www.gurudwara.net).

A large number of Sikh Gurdwaras were constructed throughout Punjab and in the areas of Sikh habitation with distinction in scale. It is not easy to trace the roots of architectural development of these Gurdwaras due to limited information that is available or has survived about the Sikh Gurdwaras and their builders. The information which is available explains that the Gurdwara building, especially in brick was carried out as a result of royal patronage. Building of Gurdwara expresses the physical power and economic resources of the ruler. Other than royal patrons, Sikh aristocracy, wealthy merchants and group of individuals played an important role in the construction of Gurdwaras. However, apart from the royal patrons and the merchants, every individual donated and contributed to the construction of Gurdwaras.

Gurdwara Architecture

An ideal Gurdwara is the one where everyone is welcome and one gets peace of mind and spiritual upliftment. It should have facilities to make it a place where everyone can go with freedom, like an honored guest. A visitor is provided shelter, food and bedding, free of cost (Kulwant,2003). Entering a Gurdwara is a metaphor for entering into a spiritual process: one of procession and return, or of proclamation and response, or of gathering in community and returning to the world outside. This form of sacred architecture follows largely from the conception of a spiritual process and is meant to suggest and foster the type of dynamism it aims to promote.

The character of a Sikh Gurdwara reflects local architectural style and the material and skills to which they are related. The main form and style of the Sikh Gurdwara were established during 1587-1602 AD after the construction of the Golden Temple at Amritsar. The architecture of a Gurdwara may vary in form and scale across India, but the basic elements of the Gurdwara remain the same.

Evolution of Gurdwara

The evolution of the Gurdwaras and the development of their architectural styles along with their materials of construction is presented here. The design comprises a simple rectangular or a square hall. The hall invariably is covered with a fluted dome and is accessible from all sides. The *Guru Granth Sahib* or holy book is placed in this hall. The orientation of the building is not standardized. There may be one or more entrances to the complex, but in most there is a main entrance portal, the *Darshani Deodi*, followed by uncovered passage ways leading to the Gurdwara. If the size and scale of the site permits, a large tank with a pillared cloister becomes an integral part of the complex. The Pilaster is an important element in Sikh architecture (Bhui, 1999).

Elements of Gurdwara

Gurdwara buildings have historically evolved to cater to the needs of the Sikh *sangat*. These include the main hall for *prakash* of *Guru Granth Sahib* and the

attending *sangat*, resting room for *Guru Granth Sahib*, Langar building, kitchen, office complex, *Sarai* (lodging facilities for pilgrims) and accommodation of *granthis* (priests) and *sewadars* (volunteers). A library and museum, etc., are other buildings that can be added to the main shrine depending upon the historical importance of the Gurdwara or on the number of visitors to a particular shrine (Gurcharan, 1998).

It was in the latter half of the 18th century that the Gurdwara structures began to acquire a definite form. Similar to the terminology used to distinguish the basic components of a Gothic Church (for example nave, aisles, chancel, spire, etc.), the common elements of a Sikh Gurdwara are as follows:

- Sanctum Sanctorum (*Darbar Sahib*): A hall called *Darbar Sahib* houses the holy book ‘the *Guru Granth Sahib*’ resting on a raised platform, on top of which a canopy is hung. Devotees leave their offerings in a box called *golak* in front of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Here people assemble as devotees and can sit as a congregation to listen to the readings from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, meditate and sing and recite its verses. This hall in most modern Gurdwaras is large and can accommodate many hundreds of visitors.
- Rest Room for the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*: After completion of the daily rituals in a Gurdwara, *Guru Granth Sahib* is placed for resting in a separate room overnight; this room is also called as ‘*Sach Khand*’ or ‘*Sukhashan Room*’. This room is provided in all Gurdwaras whether large or small.
- The *Nishan Sahib* (Sikh Flag): The *Nishan Sahib* is an integral part of a Gurdwara. Unless *Nishan Sahib*, the Sikh flag, flutters on or at the place, it is not considered as a Gurdwara; it is fixed within the Gurdwara complex. The tradition of fixing a *Nishan Sahib* is said to have started by the sixth Guru, Hargobind. He installed two *Nishan Sahibs* in front of Akal Takht at Amritsar depicting temporal and spiritual power. It is a steel pole draped in yellow or blue covering called *chola*. The flag which is triangular bears the Sikh emblem, and one can spot a Sikh Gurdwara from a distance because of this (Sewa, 1997).
- *Sarovar* (Holy Pond): *Sarovar* or the holy ponds are found in most of the Gurdwaras. Golden Temple or Harmandir Sahib are situated amidst the holy *sarovar*. Devotees take a holy dip in the waters of this *sarovar*. In many Gurdwaras, *Amrit*, the holy water is given to everyone who visits the Gurdwara. Not only Sikhism, but almost all other religions also have attached high importance to water, in one way or the other. The holy waters are used in the respective religions to perform various ceremonies and baptisms (Hardeep, 2008).
- *Langar*: Guru Nanak took practical steps to break the vicious hold of caste system by starting free community kitchens or *Guru Ka Langar* in all centers

and persuading his followers, irrespective of their caste, to sit and dine together (Khuswant, 2004a). The institution of *Guru Ka Langar* is closely associated with the Gurdwara and is as old as Sikhism itself. It was started by Guru Nanak and carried forward by his successors (Harpreet, 2009). The institution of *Langar* was started with the dual purpose of feeding the poor and eliminating the caste and status prejudices and distinctions.

- *Parikrama*: The *Parikrama*, meaning the ambulatory passageway for circumambulation, is a passage which leads to the main shrine. While walking the *Parikrama*, one is supposed to be binding and uniting with the Almighty. It consists of enclosed corridor or open passage around the outside of sanctum sanctorum (*Darbar Sahib*). The *Parikrama* is provided in most of the big and historical Gurdwaras.
- *Deodi*: Many Gurdwaras have a *Deodi*, an entrance or gateway, through which one has to pass before reaching the shrine. A *Deodi* is often an impressive structure with an impressive gateway. The visitors get the first glimpse of the sanctum sanctorum from the *Deodi*.

Evolution of Architectural Style

Every architectural style reflects undoubtedly distinctive design elements and construction principles that represent a particular culture and era. In this context, the Gurdwara architecture is not only the abode of God and place of worship, but is also the cradle of knowledge, art, architecture and culture. Gurdwaras have greatly influenced the sociocultural life of the Sikhs and given continuity to traditional Sikh values. The evolution of Gurdwara architecture is marked by adherence to the religious considerations that have continued over the last few centuries.

There are many questions that are related to the idea of what constitutes 'Sikh architecture'. The most prevailing view seems to be that Sikh architecture possesses a set of architectural vocabulary that is indisputable. The most consistent perception of Sikh architectural vocabulary is represented by the many historical Gurdwaras such as the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, *Takht Keshgarh Sahib* at Anandpur Sahib, *Manji Sahib* at Alamgir, *Darbar Sahib* at Tarn Taran and in numerous other such Gurdwaras. This study is important to pave the way for a more enlightened intellectual discourse towards a theoretical construction of the idea of 'Sikh architecture'. The main purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution of Gurdwaras over a period of time since Guru period. The main activity of the Gurdwara is the performance of congregational prayers. The Gurdwara also acts as an important education center for formal teaching of religious education.

The Sikh religion and its philosophy have greatly influenced Gurdwara architecture in its evolutionary process. Therefore this study, through documentary research and other archival, literary and theoretical investigations on the Sikh architecture, brings out the concepts that have been adopted since the Guru period for the design of the

Gurdwaras, the methods involved in the construction of the Gurdwara structures along with the skill and effort it took to build such edifices. Together, these aspects bring out the style and design philosophy behind the construction of the Sikh Gurdwaras which is as relevant today as it was in the times of Sikh gurus.

For the brief span of 541 years of Sikh history, beginning with Babar's invasion, this land has known no leisure or peace, to direct its energy into creative channels. Punjab saw a close-knit chain of foreign invasions which brought in plunder and pillage, unrest, instability, human loss and destruction. It also saw the rise of the powerful Sikh *Mislards* (chiefs) in the later 18th century, and the subsequent political reign of Ranjit Singh in 1799 AD. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's 40 years (1799-1839) remain the golden age of Sikh political achievement. With the establishment of the Sikh Raj, the security and splendor of the Gurdwaras was ensured. Sikh royalty and courtiers began the practice of giving large endowments. During the second half of the 18th century and after, as the Sikhs acquired political power, Gurdwaras sprang up in the areas of Sikh habitations and on the sites connected with the lives of the Gurus and with events in Sikh history. We can find Gurdwaras all over the world where Sikhs are settled, and especially in Punjab, the Gurdwaras can be found everywhere from small villages to large cities. The Sikh faith worships a Creator God who is infinite and mysterious, yet as close as our own heart. The power of the Sikh God is gentle and ubiquitous, its very essence is love, it is within all and it radiates from all. The aim of Sikhism is the return of the soul to that beloved Divinity who is everywhere and yet infinitely and mysteriously beyond us. The Gurdwaras express this sense of the divine presence. They are designed to sweep us up into a sensory whirl and carry us toward God (Kerry, 1999, p. 93).

Early Sikh Shrines

During the time of Gurus, Gurdwaras (*Dharmasals*) were simple and humble in architectural expression but were utilized within the traditions set by the guru. The architectural style adopted by the Sikhs was a direct reflection of their religious beliefs, and Gurdwaras were constructed with the resources that the community had at that time. This kind of architecture had matured while facing certain factors such as the climate, the availability of materials, political adversaries, religious purposes and the dominant cultures of that time; these factors played decisive roles in the architectural development of Gurdwaras.

Sikhs started with a very simple abode, may be huts or other such types of dwelling units, which have no particular architectural merit (Figure 1). As the earlier structures were simple, small and constructed from less durable materials such as timber, brick and plaster, the early examples of Sikh architecture and art have mostly disappeared, and we do not find any authentic reference material as well as documentary proof of their shape, size and style. But once we leave this primitive starting point, we find that their religious architecture develops along paths of their religious beliefs (Kerry, 1999, p. 93).

Figure 1: Possible Sketches of Early Dharmasal



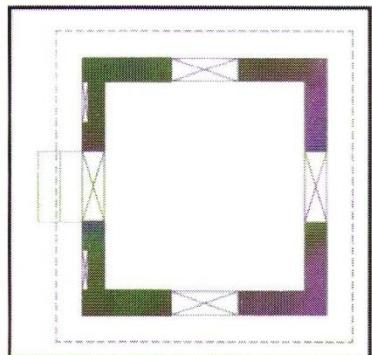
Source: *Janamsakhi of Guru Nanak Dev*

The Gurdwara usually has a very simple entrance; you walk right in from any of the entrances provided on all sides. And the mass of the walls is always played down. The bricks used in construction are concealed behind a layer of smooth plaster which gives it a sense of lightness. This effect is increased by the delicate pilasters and blind archways that decorate its surfaces (Kerry, 1999, p. 96). Most of the early historical Gurdwaras nearly always had square plans, though some had rectangular and octagonal plans. They were invariably single-storied structures and easily approachable. In most of the cases, they have doors on all four sides for entrance. The focus is, therefore, on the center where the Sacred Book, the *Guru Granth Sahib* lies. True worship consists in acknowledging it as the center of life, and in the Gurdwara there is always a path which you can walk round as you contemplate the Supreme being represented by the *Granth* in the center (Kerry, 1999, p. 95).

Old photographs of some of the Gurdwaras constructed during the time of the *Misls* around mid-18th century are available. They are *Guru Ka Lahore* (Figure 2) and *Hol Garh Sahib* (Figure 3); both of these are in Anandpur Sahib. Each one was nothing more than a simple square room. Both these original structures were demolished and new Gurdwaras were constructed at the site. In *Guru Ka Lahore*, to walk round, one had to actually step outside and perform circumambulation on the path that surrounds it. It had a flat roof with projected eaves at parapet level. On one side there was a central doorway flanked by two blind recessed arches on each side. On the remaining three sides there was one recessed arch with an opening (Arshi, 1986).

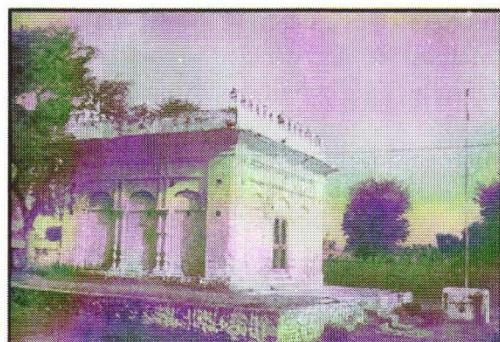
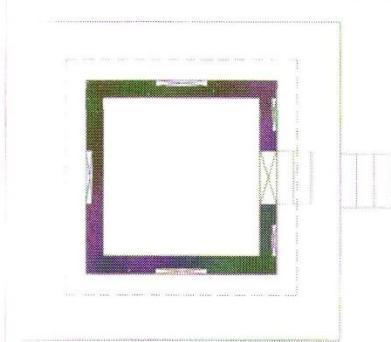
Holgarh Sahib was originally a single storey structure, square in plan, and the whole structure was raised on a square platform having a free space all around for circumambulation. The façade of the building had an arrangement consisting of a central doorway flanked by two blind recessed arches on one side. The ceiling and internal walls of the Gurdwara had a vaulted curvature. The internal walls of the shrine had some paintings, mostly depicting some interesting motifs of flora and fauna.

Figure 2: Gurdwara Guru Ka Lahore, Anandpur Sahib



Source: Arshi (1986)

Figure 3: Gurdwara Holgarh Sahib, Anandpur Sahib



Source: Arshi (1986)

On the three sides of walls, there were three recessed niches with multi-foil arches at top and fluted pilasters at the sides (Arshi, 1986). A third example of such early Gurdwaras is the *Hari Mandir Sahib* in Kiratpur (Figure 4). It also has the same design, a square room with the façade on all four sides having a central doorway flanked by two blind recessed multi-foil arches with niches, opening on all sides and recessed arches on the walls. The major difference from previous examples is the addition of a little kiosk on the roof and doorway on all four sides.

Another such example of Gurdwara constructed during the initial phase of evolution is Gurdwara Taru Singh Saheed, at Lahore (Figure 5). The devotees built Gurdwara *Shahidgahj* in memory of Sikh martyrs of the 18th century. The Gurdwara is located in the Naulakha Bazaar, Lahore. This was the place where thousands of Sikhs, including the celebrated Bhai Taru Singh and about 3,000 captives of the

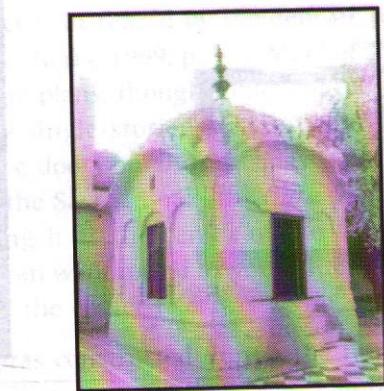
Figure 4: Gurdwara Harimandir Sahib, Kiratpur



Source: Arshi (1986)

Chhota Ghallughara campaign, 1746, were executed or tortured to death. The local Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Lahore, got possession of the *Shahidganj* in March 1935 and decided to replace the old mosque-like building with a new one.¹ It is also a small square structure with similar façade treatment like Gurdwara Harimandir Sahib at Kiratpur, but it has more elaborate detailing of a dome on top of the structure. It has a projected eave in the form of multifoil arch at a ceiling level with small cupola on top of it, and a domical roof has been provided with *kalsa* on the top.

Figure 5: Gurdwara Taru Singh Saheed, Lahore

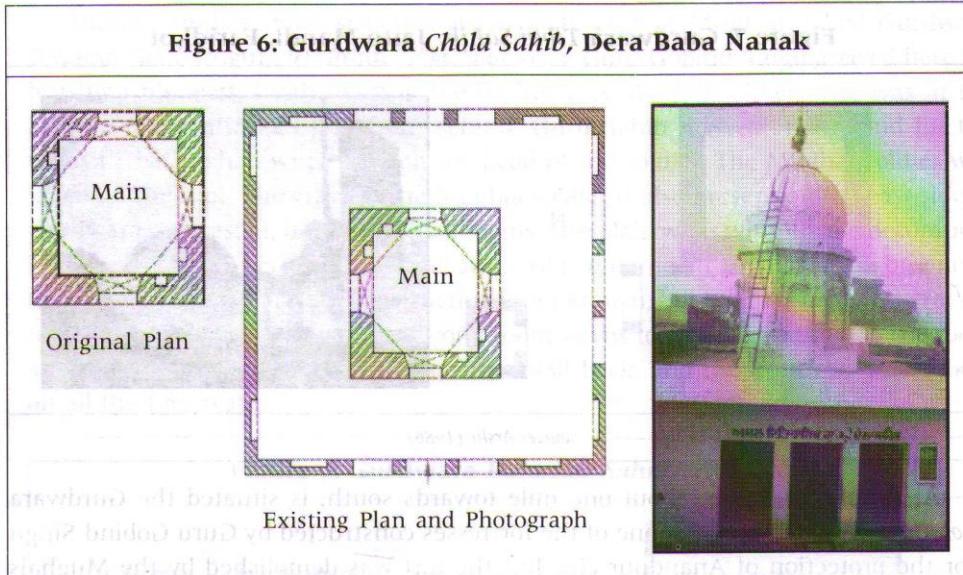


Source: Google Images

A similar structure was constructed at Dera Baba Nanak (Figure 6), *Chola Sahib*, in the eastern part of the town Dera Baba Nanak. It is connected with a relic, a *chola* (cloak), believed to have been presented to Guru Nanak Dev by a Muslim devotee in Baghdad. The *chola*, bearing some Qurànic verses and Arabic numerals, arranged in the form of charms embroidered on it, was procured from Baghdad by Baba Kabali Mall, a descendant of Guru Nanak, it is said. It was brought to Dera Baba Nanak on March 1, 1828. A special shrine was constructed where the *Chola Sahib* was kept and where it was put on display at the time of a fair held from 21 to 23 Phagun, early March, every year. It was under the private management of the descendants of Guru Nanak. During Gurdwara reform

¹ Available at <http://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/the-british-and-sikhs-1849-1947/shahid-ganj-agitation.html>

Figure 6: Gurdwara Chola Sahib, Dera Baba Nanak



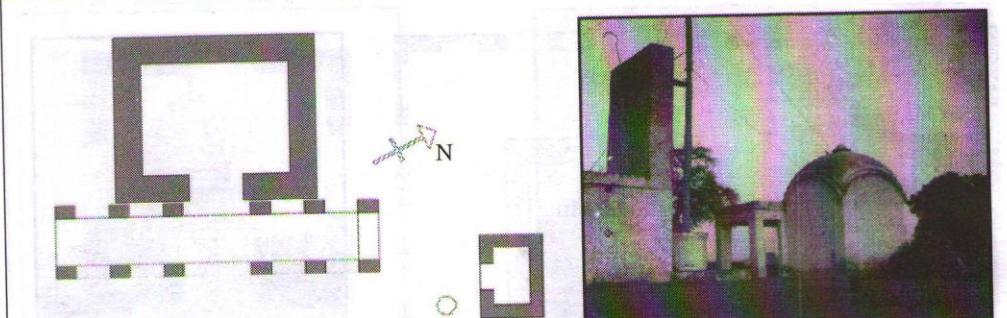
movement, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee claimed possession of the shrine, but the owners resisted. In the end, the control of the Gurdwara passed to the committee, but *Chola Sahib*, the relic, remained with the family, which they have now placed in a newly constructed Gurdwara.²

Gurdwara *Chola Sahib* was originally a square room with door openings on all four sides. A verandah has been added on all the sides on ground floor to the original structure. On the first floor, an octagonal structure has been provided with recessed arches and projected pilasters in the form of *chattris* on all eight sides. On top there springs a graceful ribbed dome on an octagonal base and a circular drum. It is surmounted by an inverted lotus which supports a big *Kalsa*, an ornate finial. The decoration of Gurdwaras is already apparent in these examples, whereas in the initial examples, it was very simplistic.

The *Tibbi Sahib* Gurdwara was constructed on a high sand dune at Jaitu Mandi in Faridkot district (Figure 7). This place was visited by Guru Gobind Singh in 1704 AD and the Gurdwara was constructed to commemorate this important event. The date of construction of the Gurdwara is not known, but it is believed that it was constructed by Maharaja Hira Singh (1871-1911) of Nabha in the late 19th century. It is a small shrine constructed on a square plan, it has only one entrance in the east and has a Bengali roof on top. On the top of the roof, there is an inverted lotus-like member pierced through by a metallic rod which was probably originally used to hold the *Kalsa*. Some structural additions, like portico, have been made recently.

² Available at <http://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/dera-baba-nanak.html>

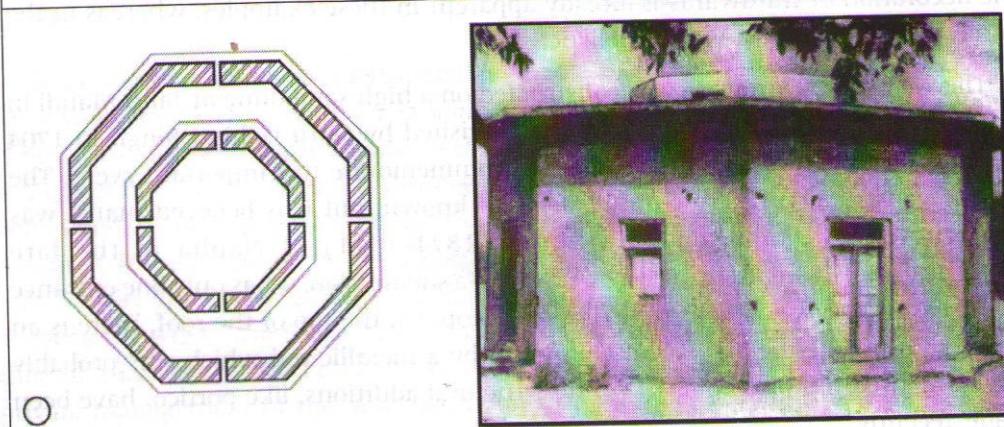
Figure 7: Gurdwara Tibbi Sahib, Jaito Mandi, Faridkot



Source: Arshi (1986)

At Anandpur Sahib, about one mile towards south, is situated the Gurdwara *Loh Garh* (Figure 8). It was one of the fortresses constructed by Guru Gobind Singh for the protection of Anandpur city. But the fort was demolished by the Mughals after the Guru left Anandpur. Later, Sikh Sardars, during *Misl* period, constructed an octagonal Gurdwara in its place, which was replaced by a new building on an octagonal plan under the supervision of Sant Sewa Singh of Anandgarh. The building consisted of an octagonal chamber enclosed with another octagonal structure; thus a circumambulatory path was formed between the two outer chambers having four gates, one on each side, and the other sides of the building had windows in each direction. The roof was provided with a hanging cornice. The inner chamber had only four gates, one on each side. Its roof was slightly higher than the outer structure. The dome and kiosks were conspicuous by their absence.

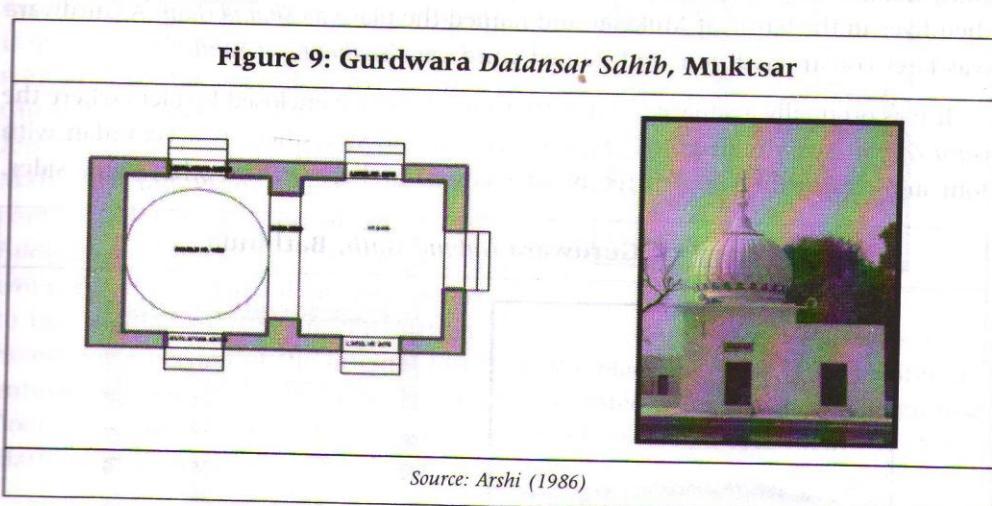
Figure 8: Gurdwara Lohgarh, Anandpur Sahib



Source: Harbans Singh (1968)

Another similar small structure was constructed at Muktsar called Gurdwara *Datansar Sahib* (Figure 9). From *Tibbi Sahib* once Guru Gobind Singh arrived here for brushing his teeth (with twig) in the morning. A Mughal soldier, who was in the attire of Sikh, attacked him from behind. Guru Sahib reacted swiftly and hit the utensil (that he had with him) on the head of the soldier. The Mughal soldier was killed on the spot. The grave of the Mughal soldier is also present on the east side of Gurdwara. At present, it has two small rooms with plain walls without any decoration. It has projected eaves at ceiling level and a ribbed dome on circular drum on one of the rooms. The exact date of construction is not known, but it seems to be constructed not earlier than 19th century. The second room seems to be a later addition. The room at the back had three doors and a dead wall at back, and the front room has doors on all the four walls.

Figure 9: Gurdwara Datansar Sahib, Muktsar



Source: Arshi (1986)

Takht Sri Darbar Sahib Keshgarh Sahib, Anandpur Sahib (Figure 10) (the birth place of the *Khalsa*), is one of the five temporal authorities of Sikhism. *Keshgarh Sahib* is where the first *Khalsa* was initiated by Guru Gobind Singh on Baisakhi day on March 30, 1699. It is one of the five most sacred places in Sikhism.

The Guru spent 25 years at Anandpur Sahib; this Gurdwara was constructed at the site of one of the five forts constructed by Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur Sahib for the defence of the Sikhs. All the forts were joined together with earthworks and underground tunnels. The construction

Figure 10: Takht Sri Darbar Keshgarh Sahib



Source: Mahankosh

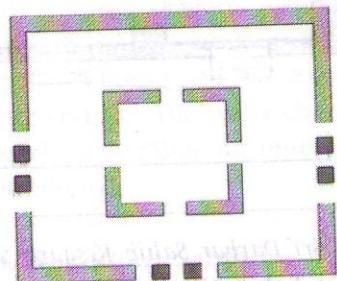
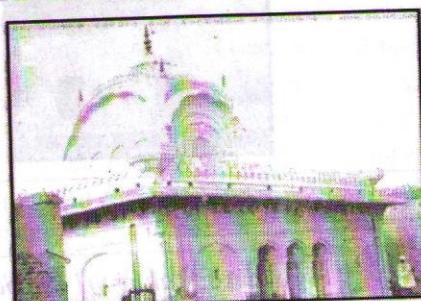
began in 1689 and took over 10 years to complete. This Gurdwara was a simple square structure with arched doorway on all four sides (Figure 11). It had a flat roof on the top. At present there stands an impressive Gurdwara on this site.

Gurdwara *Gobind Gath* was constructed to commemorate the visit of Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th master, by Maharaja Karam Singh of Patiala. After the victory against the imperial forces at Muktsar, the guru reached Bathinda fort and stayed here for some days. It is also a square room with openings on all four sides enclosed further in another square having openings on three sides.

Gurdwara *Shahid Ganj Sahib*, also called *Angitha Sahib*, commemorates the place where the last rites of the 40 *Muktas* (the liberated ones) were performed (Figure 12). Guru Gobind Singh himself performed the last rites of the 40 Sikhs who laid down their lives in the battle at Muktsar and named the place as *Shahid Ganj*. A Gurdwara was later constructed here and named Gurdwara *Shahid Ganj Sahib*.

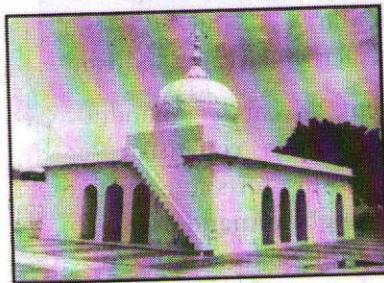
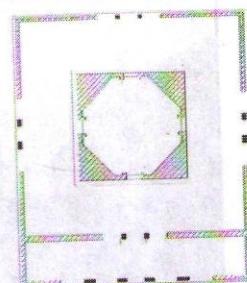
It was originally a square room with octagonal space enclosed by piers where the *Guru Granth Sahib* is installed (Figure 12). On one side, there is a verandah with four arched openings and three blind recessed arches. On the other three sides,

Figure 11: Gurdwara Gobind Gath, Bathinda



Source: Arshi (1986)

Figure 12: Gurdwara Sahid Ganj, Muktsar



Source: Arshi (1986)

there are three arched openings in the central part and one blind recessed arch on each side. There is small straight flight of staircase leading to the terrace. At terrace level raised dattum is provided, over which a fluted dome has been provided. The dome crowning the Gurdwara is a simple version of the magnificent lotus domes.

After the conquest of Sirhind by Sikhs under the leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur in 1710 and later by the *Dal Khalsa* in 1764, no memorial was raised at this place. When Maharaja Karam Singh of Patiala got Gurdwara *Fatehgarh Sahib* rebuilt, he had to search for and determine the exact spot of cremation (Figure 13). The urn containing the ashes was at last discovered and he got a Gurdwara built over it in 1843 and named *Joti Sarup*. A century later, in 1944, Maharaja Yadavinder Singh set up a committee for the improvement of *Fatehgarh Sahib* and *Joti Sarup*. Consequently, two upper storeys and a dome were added to the building in 1955-56. Since then, except for a portion of the original fort wall, the place has been changed into an entirely new building. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is seated in the room on the ground floor. A narrow winding staircase leads up to the first floor, a bare room with a low platform in the center and a lotus dome above.

The two-storied edifice was constructed on a raised platform, divan hall on the ground floor, with basement below and a central pavilion on top. The basement called *bhora* contains the old brick enclosure believed to be the exact site of the execution of Sahibzadas (younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh). At present, the inverted lotus at the apex of the dome at the pinnacle is covered on the exterior with gold-plated sheets. The dome is topped by an umbrella-shaped gold finial, as are the domes of the four kiosks located at each corner of the roof. The three-storied gateway is topped by decorative canopied pavilions and a clock tower.³

The general impression of earlier Gurdwaras is of simple and small structures with little decoration, rather than of an impressive structural element bearing up the heavy weight of the superstructure and roof. Even in these simple early Gurdwaras, one can see how aesthetic value is achieved, especially in the Gurdwara at Kiratpur, Gurdwara *Taru Sahib*, Lahore, Gurdwara *Datansar*, Muktsar and Gurdwara *Chola Sahib*, Dera Baba Nanak. In most of these examples, the roof is separated

Figure 13: Gurdwara Fatehgarh Sahib



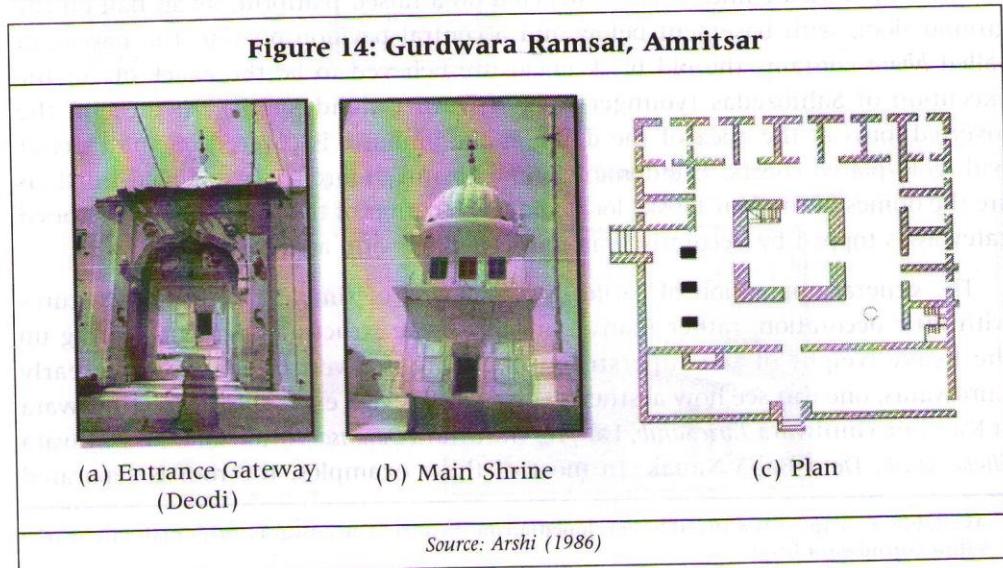
Source: Mahankosh

³ Available at <http://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/historic-Gurudwaras-in-punjab/fatehgarh-sahib-Gurudwara.html>

from the rest of the building by wide but very thin eaves, so that one gets the impression that the walls do not have to hold the roof up since they are cut off from it, and also that the roof itself must be very light if it can lie on such a delicate and thin structural element. This effect is further enhanced when the Gurdwara is topped by a dome (Kerry, 1999, p. 97). The architectural style developed by the Sikhs was deeply rooted in the fundamental beliefs of their people. The Punjab of the 18th century was the age of the *Misls*, the Sikh military power blocs. It was only by breaking their power that Ranjit Singh could unite entire Punjab and make himself the first Maharaja of the Sikh empire. He was a pious man and built and renovated many Gurdwaras throughout his land. His masterpiece was the Golden Temple at Amritsar, because it was he who renovated it. Most of the decorative and gold plating of Gurdwara was done during his time (Kerry, 1999, p. 90).

Later Sikh Shrines

From the previous section, one can make out what normal or initial Gurdwaras looked like; but as time went on, Sikhs wanted to place their Gurdwaras in an elaborate setting, to make their Gurdwaras a part of a large impressive sanctuary. In most of the large Gurdwara complexes, one can find that the builders had to integrate four elements which had become the fundamentals of Gurdwara architecture: the enclosure, its gateway (*Deodi*), the Gurdwara itself and the pool. An early and attractive example, which probably dates back to the time of the *Misls*, is the Ramsar Gurdwara at Amritsar (Figure 14). It is situated at about 200 yards from the Golden Temple, near Chatiwind gate in Amritsar. At this place, Guru Arjan Dev compiled the *Adi Granth* by Bhai Gurdas. The Guru started the excavation of the sacred tank of Ramsar in 1543 AD, and a Gurdwara building was constructed in 1602-03 AD. The date of construction of the present building of the Gurdwara cannot



be ascertained. It seems to have been constructed quite late, perhaps not before 18th century.

Towards the north of the sacred tank stands the Gurdwara building, within an enclosure formed by rows of rooms on three sides and an archway in the east. Thus, the enclosure forms an open circumambulatory path. The Gurdwara itself is two storeys high; and although it is a relatively simple building, it has some of the features of the great Gurdwaras built or renovated by Ranjit Singh. The shrine is a square structure with a fluted dome at the top and the dome crowning the Gurdwara is a simple version of the magnificent lotus domes that have been extensively used by the Sikhs in the buildings constructed by them. On the ground floor, it has one doorway on each of its four sides. The area over each doorway is disposed into an arched motif with several foliations on the inside as well as the outside. On either side of the gateway, there are some arched niches which in the interior show a deeper recession. The upper part of these walls are decorated with relief motif of cusped arches resting on fluted pilasters. The lower part of all the four walls of the ground floor are encased with marble slabs, and the area above the lintel is gilded with gold from both inside and outside. The external corners are provided with octagonal pilasters. Projected eave runs around the top on all sides of the ground floor and separates the ground floor from the first.

The enclosure around the Gurdwara consists of rooms on three of its inner sides facing the courtyard. On the fourth side, the entrance to the temple is gained through an archway (*Deodi*) on the eastern side. The gateway, a single unit, consists of a rectangular structure with an arched opening, the upper part of which is cusped. Outside the enclosure to the south is the pool which is linked by a doorway through the rooms on that side. The pool is surrounded by a brightly decorated pathway (Figure 14a). The end result is quite pleasing, but it seems a little odd that the gateway lies in the eastern direction and the pool in southern. The enclosure surrounds the Gurdwara alone, cutting the pool off from the rest of the sanctuary. Later, Gurdwara complexes will find more satisfactory answers to the architectural problem of integrating these different elements.

The Gurdwara *Dam Dama Sahib* is situated on the right bank of the river Beas on the Amritsar-Sri Hargobindpur road about two miles from Sri Hargobindpur. It was constructed to commemorate the visit of the sixth Guru, Hargobind, to this place. It is a double-storied octagonal structure with the lower part of the exterior having a rectangular doorway on four of its alternate sides, the remaining sides showing curved niches with ornate arched formation (Figure 15). The upper part of the exterior has on each side a projected balcony with an arched opening. The external corners are furnished with pilasters on all the edges. A projected eave in the shape of arch over the doorways and flat at the corner runs around the top on all sides of the first floor and separates the first floor from the fluted dome on top.

Figure 15: Gurdwara Dam Dama Sahib, Sri Hargobindpur



(a) Main Shrine

(b) Old Entrance

Source: Arshi (1986)

The Gurdwara which attracted the attention of Ranjit Singh is the *Darbar Sahib* at Dera Baba Nanak (Figure 16). The general layout is more or less the same as at the Ramisar Gurdwara at Amritsar, but the roof and dome of this Gurdwara are quite extraordinary. The dome is actually taller than the building itself. It is raised on the first floor, having floral patterns on the lower part of the octagonal drum, and above that are the huge lotus leaf patterns. Maharaja Ranjit Singh expressed his admiration for it by gilding the enormous dome. The elaborateness of this golden superstructure forms a striking contrast with the simplicity of the plain white building. The peaceful dome with its enormous lotus leaves is separated from the roof by three rows of smaller decoration whose unending repetition creates a very rapid rhythm. The row of the onion-shaped domes between the rows of miniature lotus leaves is dizzying as it runs around the bottom of the dome (Kerry, 1999, p. 101).

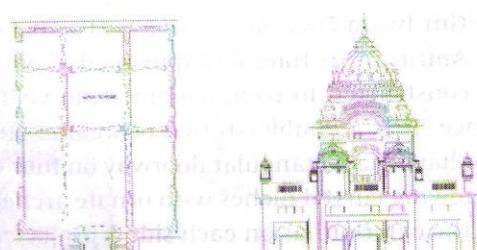
Figure 16: Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, Dera Baba Nanak



View



Plan



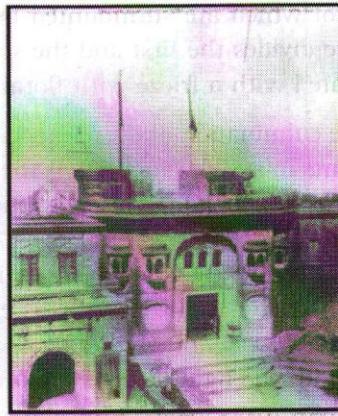
Front Elevation

Source: Karamjit and Rawal

Ranjit Singh showed his respect for this Gurdwara by gilding it, but he honored it even more by copying its design exactly when he came to building his own Gurdwara of *Angitha Sahib* at the village of Khadoor Sahib (Figure 17). The splendid archway, added later, unfortunately detracts from the impact of the Gurdwara, which originally was identical to Gurdwara *Darbar Sahib* at Dera Baba Nanak. The Gurdwara is surrounded by an enclosure with rooms on all sides, but the most striking feature of the entire complex is the great gateway that leads into it. This handsome structure with its cusped archway and balcony windows looks toward the gateways and Gurdwaras of *Tarn Taran* and the Golden Temple itself.

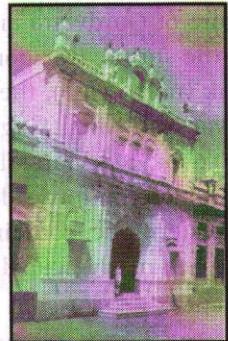
The Gurdwara *Chobara Sahib* is situated in the village Goindwal in the district of Amritsar, about 15 miles away from *Tarn Taran*, on the northern bank of the river Beas (Figure 18). It was the ancestral home of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru of the Sikhs, which was later on converted into a Gurdwara with minor renovations and repairs. It is enclosed by a wall on the eastern side and rooms on the other three sides; the shrine is situated in the south-western corner of the enclosure (Figure 18). The entrance to the shrine was through the south-eastern corner of the enclosure, but it is closed now and a number of rooms have been erected in this corner. A new double-storied archway was constructed by the Maharaja of Kapurthala in the north-eastern side.

Figure 17: Angitha Sahib, Khadoor Sahib

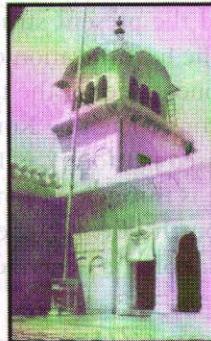


Source: Mahankosh

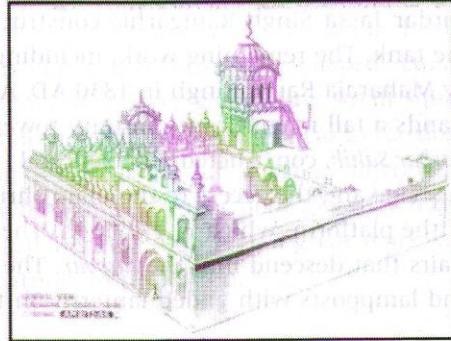
Figure 18: Gurdwara Chobara Sahib, Goindwal



(a) Entrance Gateway



(b) Main Shrine

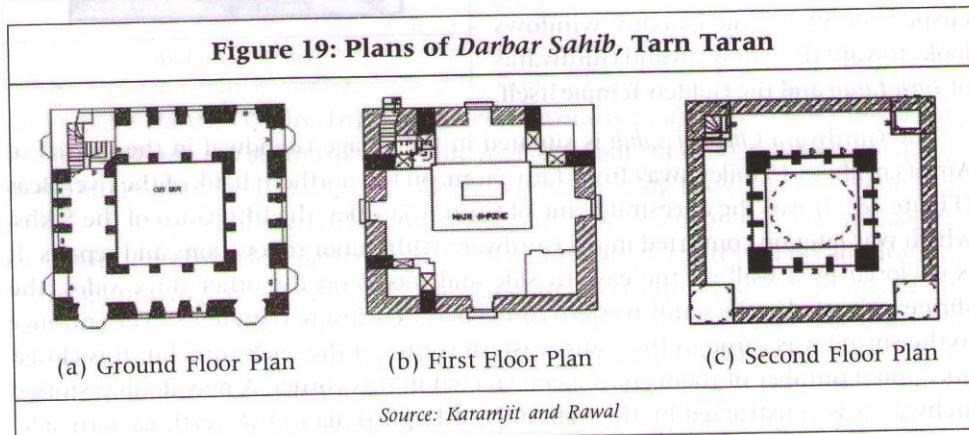


(c) View of Complex

Source: Arshi (1986)

This gateway has an archway with double recesses. The side has been divided by pairs of round pilasters with usual round bases. The compartments created possess recessed cusped arches having rectangular windows, topped by projected *Chhajas*, some of which are surmounted by rectangular perforated ventilators. A projected cornice divides the first and the second storeys. The side rooms of the archway are decorated with a frieze with floral pattern.

The culmination of these experiments towards a more perfect union of the major elements in a Sikh sanctuary is the great *Darbar Sahib* at Tarn Taran (Figure 19). It is hard to imagine that this was once no more than a hut beside a pool, until the present Gurdwara was built in 1775 and later renovated by Ranjit Singh. Here the Gurdwara and the pool form an integrated unit, and the entire complex (rather than just the Gurdwara itself) is enclosed by the sanctuary wall. In its design, the Gurdwara is remarkably similar to the Golden Temple. The walls are cased in marble slabs with the light designs in panels that are typical of Sikh architecture.



Guru Arjan, the fifth master, laid the foundation of the city and the *Darbar Sahib* in 1590 AD. In 1775 AD, Sardar Budh Singh Faizalpuria, Sardar Khushal Singh and Sardar Jassa Singh Ramgarhia constructed the present structure of Gurdwara and the tank. The remaining work, including the beautification of the shrine, was done by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1830 AD. At one corner of the tank (north-east), there stands a tall magnificent masonry tower constructed by Kunwar Nau Nihal Singh. *Darbar Sahib*, constructed on a pedestal (raised platform), is 100'6" × 95' rectangular in shape and the access to the main shrine is through a flight of steps on four sides of the platform, which is 4'4" high. The fourth side, i.e., the western one, contains stairs that descend into the *sarovar*. The platform is decorated with marble cupolas and lampposts with gilded lanterns on them.

The *Darbar sahib* is a three-storied building constructed on a square plan in the eastern end of the tank (Figure 20). It has a low-fluted dome at the top. It consists of an outer structure, which goes up to the second storey, enclosing another square

Figure 20: Photograph of Darbar Sahib, Tarn Taran



(a) Old Photograph

(b) Current Photograph

Source: Mahankosh

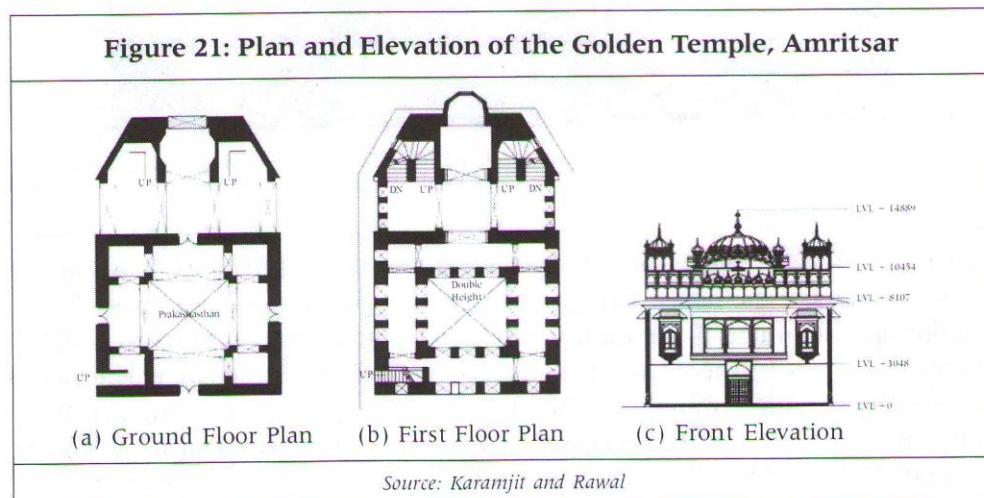
structure formed by pillars and semicircular stunted arches. Its lower parts are of white marble, but the upper parts are covered with plates of gilded copper. In the interior on the ground is the *Guru Granth Sahib*, placed under a gorgeous canopy studded with jewels. The interior is a structure formed by four square pillars joined by semicircular stunted arches at the top. A circumambulatory path is formed between these piers and the outer walls on the three sides. The fourth corner, i.e., the northeastern, contains a small chamber in the form of a room called *toshakhanna* (temple treasury).

The first floor is in the form of a gallery on all the four sides, as the central hall is double height. The gallery is supported by the inner piers and the exterior walls and serves also as the circumambulatory path. There are three cusped openings formed by square pillars on each of its sides which open into the central square hall. On the second floor, there is a small square chamber constructed on the inner pillars having three cusped openings on each side. The tympanum formed by cusped, curved projected eaves, has five small openings above the lower gates. This small square chamber topped by an onion-shaped gilded dome is practically identical to the dome of the Golden Temple. Even the interior design is similar with a central hall surrounded by rooms that form galleries, which on the upper floor look down over the great hall below. The *Darbar Sahib* at Tarn Taran is, however, a great work; and the Golden Temple will simply bring its features to perfection.

The Sikh Architectural Masterpiece

The built architectural form of the *Harimandir Sahib* expresses the social and cultural intent of the relation between politics and religion. The plan of the precinct and its

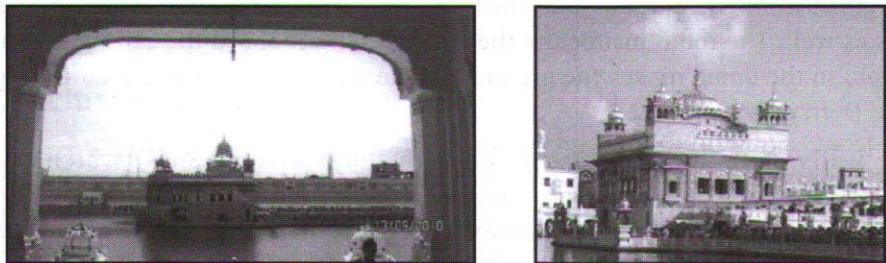
construction are based on the state-of-the-art design and construction as it had developed until the early 17th century. However, the design of architectural components and their arrangement gives expression to the process of social dissent and reconstruction that was ushered in by the hymns of the saints and the ten Sikh gurus. Ranjit Singh's legacy survives most strikingly in the wonderful *Harmandir Sahib*, the Golden Temple of Amritsar, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs. The center of the sanctuary is clearly the Golden Temple, and everything else radiates from it. The Gurdwara, the pool and the path for circumambulation are perfectly integrated here through the ingenious device of placing the Gurdwara in the middle of the pool (Figure 21).



The Golden Temple in Amritsar is the most sacred shrine of the Sikhs. Its foundation stone was laid in 1589, but the present structure and the tank were built in 1765. The Golden Temple is the premier shrine of the Sikh community and a wonderful example of the blending of architectural styles that created a new form and style of Gurdwaras (Bhui, 1999). In the 19th century, the complex was still open to the outside world, so it must have appeared to blend into it and spread all the way to the horizon. A colonnade was added in the mid-20th century on all sides, but this does not distract from the impression of a vast open space (Figure 22).

There is a vast light-reflecting pool and the sanctum sanctorum rises from the center of this sacred pool. The pool measures 158.50 m by 159.30 m and is not a rectangle but a parallelogram, measuring angles of 86° and 94°. The shrine (sanctum sanctorum) is accessed through an archway in the gateway (*Darshani Deodi*) on the northwestern side of the complex. The effect is enhanced by the path around the pool which is approximately 10 m wide. The geometric designs on the marble pavement create a quick rhythm which invites the visitor to walk around. The colonnade, the pool and the path all revolve around the Gurdwara. The centrality of

Figure 22: Photographs of the Golden Temple, Amritsar



Source: Karamjit and Rawal

the Gurdwara is emphasized by the four doors which open out in all directions. The focal point is, of course, the Holy Book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, in the central hall.

The square building of the central shrine is a three-storied structure over which rises a low-fluted majestic masonry dome covered with gold-plated copper sheets. The dome is the crowning feature of the Temple. It is designed after the shape of the lotus symbol. The petals of the dome present a very harmonious setting. A number of varieties of smaller domes drawn in a line decorate the parapet. Four *chhatris* (kiosks) with fluted metal cupolas stand at each corner. The floor of the upper storey is paved with *Nanak Shahi* bricks. These red bricks are broad on the top and narrow at the bottom, and stand exquisitely laid in very fine brick-mortar and lime. The provision of windows supported on brackets and the enrichment of arches with numerous foliations on the first floor give a picturesque appearance. Intricate designs on marble inlaid with stones of different hues on the entrance to the inner sanctuary provide a great attraction to the passersby. The holy *Guru Granth*, the scripture of the Sikhs, rests under a gorgeous canopy in the center of this hall. The door on the southern side of the central hall provides an approach to the water in the holy tank. The steps there are called *Har-ki-pauri*. The ceiling of the portico of the *Har-ki-pauri* is decorated with beautiful *Tukri* (glass mosaic) work. The staircase adjoining *Har-ki-pauri* leads to the first floor of the shrine. There is a small square pavilion on the second floor surmounted by a low-fluted golden dome. The interior of the pavilion is set with pieces of mirror of different sizes and colors, and that is why it is called the *Shish Mahal*. Internally, the hall is 34'6" feet square. It has been designed so as to leave a square opening 17'4" × 17'4" in the center to facilitate a view of the ground floor from the balcony. It is said that originally the first floor was a pavilion where the Sikh gurus used to sit in meditation. The hall was profusely embellished with floral designs during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The inlay work on the ceiling as well as the walls of the *Shish Mahal* is reminiscent of the great skill of our artists. Everything about the Golden Temple reveals the presence of a reality that lies beyond mere appearances. The edge of the roof is decorated with not less than 58 little golden onion-shaped domes, which bewilder the senses

as they run around the roof. The four domed kiosks at the corners of the roof are matched by the great flat dome that crowns the entire building. This dome is adorned with a gigantic lotus-leaf motif, and the little spheres that run around it are actually lotuses as well. The room just below the dome lies right above the central hall and the Book, so the dome makes the presence of the *Granth Sahib* visible even from the outside (Kerry, 1999, p. 112).

The walls of the hall are decorated with floral designs and its arches are ornamented with verses from *Guru Granth* reproduced in letters of gold. The Sikh artists, however, have maintained the excellence of their art and have not allowed *Gurbani* (Sikh scripture) to dominate. The walls of the hall stand inlaid with figures and floral designs adorned and studded at places with precious and colored stones. This technique used for embellishment of exterior surfaces as well as for interior decoration is called *jaratkari*. It is both an expensive and time-consuming technique. The craftsmanship of this *jaratkari* (mosaic) reminds us of the *pietra dure* tradition. It somewhat resembles the Mughal technique used for the decoration of the Taj Mahal at Agra. But the *jaratkari* of the Golden Temple has an edge over the *jaratkari* of the Taj, in that the former has human and animal figures also besides the usual floral designs so characteristic of the Taj. The Sikh artists seem to have taken these motifs from the Vedantic concept of life and have given a philosophical outlook to art.

The walls of the first floor contain fine art work in plaster of Paris too. The ceiling of the central dome is admittedly a work of rare craftsmanship. The decoration on the porch of the first floor displays fine *naqqashi* executed in gold and various colors and cut-glasses of different shapes and sizes. The architecture of the Golden Temple testifies to the fact that Sikhs vociferously patronized the architectural embellishments and ornamental accretions to their mansions. They spent lavishly in beautifying their holy Temple. The dazzling designs on the walls make us unsure what is near and what is distant, what is real and what is a mirrored illusion. The attention cannot be focused on such surfaces. The senses are overwhelmed by the barrage of impressions. The mind turns towards the calm center of the whole, towards the vast space of the central hall which represents the infinite, the being that somehow brings together and explains all these conflicting impressions that bombard our senses (Kerry, 1999, p. 113).

The embossed metal work of the Golden Temple is a specimen of the excellence attained by the Sikh craftsmanship in the skilful harmony of brass and copper. The same is the case with frescos, *naqqashi* and applied arts displayed at the Temple. The walls, corridors and panels of the Golden Temple contain a variety of excellent *mohrakashi* or fresco paintings. These frescos are said to be modelled after the wall paintings of its time found in the Kangra Valley. Most of the fresco paintings of the Golden Temple are representations of Hindu mythological themes. They reflect the original spirit of the Vaishnava cult, but the technique has suitably been modified

to suit the needs of the Sikh art. It is to be noted here that the tolerance of the Sikhs towards other religions motivated the Sikh artists to borrow from other cultures. The Golden Temple was designed to produce the experience of contemplation without focusing on any single element.

Conclusion

Most of the Gurdwaras represent significant events in Sikh history, as most of them are built at sites associated with the gurus or at places which are important milestones in Sikh history. Sikhism in the course of its history and development has banked on the Gurdwaras as the centers of the community's unity. It is through the Gurdwaras that the Sikhs have been able to effectively give shape to the ideas of human equality and fraternity; people of all religious backgrounds without distinction of caste, class, status or sex are welcomed into a Gurdwara. The mission of the Sikh Gurus has been carried forward through the Gurdwaras. Architecturally, Gurdwaras have evolved over a period of time. During the times of the gurus, Gurdwaras (*Dharamsals*) were simple and humble in architectural expression, but were utilized within the traditions set by the guru. Sikhs started with a very simple abode, may be huts or other such types of dwelling units, which have no particular architectural merit. Most of the early historical Gurdwaras are nearly always a square plan, though some are rectangular and octagonal plans also. The general impression of earlier Gurdwaras is of simple and small structures with little decoration rather than of an impressive structural element bearing up the heavy weight of the superstructure and roof. As time went on, Sikhs wanted to place their Gurdwaras in an elaborate setting, to make their Gurdwaras part of a large impressive sanctuary. ☰

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