

The Gurdwara

Summary: The gurdwara is a meeting place for Sikhs that houses the Sikh sacred scripture Guru Granth Sahib and serves as a place of worship, community, and education for Sikhs. In the last three decades, Sikhs have built many new, grand gurdwaras for growing communities.

The *gurdwara*, literally the “gateway of the *guru*,” is basically a meeting place for Sikhs. It is not considered a sacred space as such, but gains its sanctity from the fact that it houses the sacred scripture called the Guru Granth Sahib. The scripture occupies a place of honor on a raised lectern in the sanctuary. A *gurdwara* may be as spectacular as the neatly landscaped and newly expanded complex in Palatine, Illinois or as simple as the home of a Sikh family, which may become the *gurdwara* for a small Sikh community.

The *gurdwara* is the gathering place of the Sikh community. It is a place of worship, but is also an educational and service institution that contains a *langar* hall where large communal meals are prepared and served, and a place where the community may discuss the political and social affairs of the day. In Sikh communities in the United States, the *gurdwara* has become an essential locus of Sikh identity. For some newly arrived immigrants, it may be the first place they stay, for the tradition of Sikh hospitality, which includes providing shelter and food in the *gurdwara*, is strong.

Sikh worship is generally devoid of complexity and ritual. It consists simply and powerfully of the gathering together of the community and of the singing of *shabads*, the sacred hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib. Although there is no system of priesthood, Sikhs usually maintain a *granthi* who is well-trained in the reading of the Guru Granth Sahib and the singing of its hymns. During the program, however, any member of the congregation, including children, may read from the Guru Granth Sahib and lead the singing. Women and men normally sit on opposite sides of the room, except for those who sit together in front of the Guru Granth Sahib to sing the hymns.

No gathering at the *gurdwara* is complete without taking *prashad*, a sweet pudding made of mixed wheat, flour, sugar, and butter that is distributed as the divine gift of the guru. The *langar* following the singing and prayers from the Guru Granth Sahib is also an important part of the *gurdwara* program. Each *gurdwara* is equipped with a large kitchen where men and women prepare the meal, counting it a special service and blessing to be able to do so for the whole community.

America's first *gurdwara* was established in 1912 in Stockton, California, in the heart of the farming country where Sikhs first settled. In America today there are over 200 *gurdwaras*, many of which have re-purposed or renovated existing structures to serve the Sikh community's needs. In Millis, Massachusetts a former Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses has become a vibrant Sikh community center. In Bridgewater, New Jersey a single-story house on thirteen acres of land has evolved into a three-building *gurdwara* complex over the course of three decades. In Hayward, California the community has transformed the sanctuary and educational center of an Episcopal Church into a *gurdwara*. During the period of transition, it shared the buildings with the Episcopal congregation.

The last three decades have seen the building of a number of spectacular new *gurdwaras*, too. The *gurdwara* in Fremont, California is a huge center with over 9,000 registered members. First founded in 1978, the *gurdwara* is recognizable by its traditional golden domes along former Hillside Avenue, now renamed Gurdwara Road. Further north in El Sobrante a modern-looking *gurdwara* clings to the side of a hill and large porticos line the second floor deck, allowing visitors to take in vast vistas of the Bay Area. In the heart of Los Angeles, the city's oldest Sikh community built a very traditional-looking building on North Vermont Avenue. The Sikh *gurdwara* is fast becoming a visible part of the American religious landscape.