

Golden City gurdwara was first Indian shrine in North America



DALLAS: A gurdwara is always a milestone for the Sikh community in any area as it signifies their presence in that area. It was over a century ago that the pioneering Sikhs built their first gurdwara in North America in the city of Golden in British Columbia.

As the birthplace of Sikhism lies thousands of miles away from North America, the year 1890 thus has a special significance in the annals of Sikh history in North America. That year a gurdwara was established first time in North America.

In 1991, my wife Amrita and I availed the opportunity to celebrate the 101th anniversary of the first gurdwara on the American continent.

According to the book, *Kinbasket Country – The Story of Golden and the Columbia Valley*, published in 1972 by the Golden District Historical Society, a Sikh Temple was built in the city of Golden, British Columbia, Canada, in 1890. The Golden Society extracted evidence for this Gurdwara from the annals of Golden's history available with the city municipality and other depositories.

In a more recent book, *Golden Memories* published in 1982, there are several references to the early Sikh population of Golden City, including the 1890 gurdwara.

As a consequence of this discovery, the Heritage Conservation Branch of British Columbia, Ministry of Culture, was considering to install a historical plaque in the city of Golden to commemorate the installation of first gurdwara in North America.

There is no other mention of any gurdwara building in North America before 1890. The famous Ross Road Gurdwara in Vancouver that has been the seat of major Sikh activities for a century is believed to have been built eighteen years later in 1908.





Dr Harbans Lala, the author of this article, is seen in yellow tie in this picture.

When my wife Amrita and I visited the city of Golden for the 101th anniversary of the gurdwara, it had a population of 3,600.

The city of Golden is located on the Trans-Canada Highway at the confluence of the Columbia and Kicking Horse rivers. Coming from the west, it is a gateway to Glacier National Park that leads to Yoho, Banff and Jasper National Parks of the Canadian Rocky mountains. These were the most heavenly places that we ever visited and we were immediately reminded of the Hemkund Valley described in *Bachiter Natak* by Guru Gobind Singh.

Only a few miles from Golden, there are two lakes of clear blue water surrounded by seven peaks of many glaciers that inhabit this area. It is not unusual for a devout Sikh visitor to have a vision of Hemkund right there. It is so beautiful that a picture of one of these lakes was chosen as an emblem to be printed on \$20 note of Canadian currency.

We found references to Sikhs and the first Golden City gurdwara in many records of the city. In addition, the coming of Sikhs to this town and installation of the gurdwara were vividly remembered by many old-timers living in that city.

The last resident who personally knew the first contingent of Sikhs coming to Golden had deceased only a few years earlier. Before her death she had related many stories of the pioneer Sikhs of that city to many Sikh friends and the visitors in addition to the media reporters.

There are records of Sikh patients in the local hospital. There were records of Sikh dealings with local businesses. Sikh skills in lumber industry is well known to every citizen of Golden.

Sikhs are said to have come to this lumber mill town in 1880. Some traveled via mountainous roads that were laden with snow in winter and were hazardous to travel. Others reached this city by boats rowing through the Columbia river.

Hari Singh, who is recorded to have fought in the First World War as a soldier in the Royal Canadian Army in Europe, moved to this town in 1902. He was wounded in the war and is mentioned to receive treatment in a Golden hospital.

Hari Singh was remembered for his jolly personality and his silk turban which was once shortened by an employee at the laundry who apparently could not resist keeping a piece of the precious silk material.

The Golden Star newspaper often recorded stories about Sikh old timers. According to available records, the local hospital treated the first Sikh patient in 1906. On July 10, 1991, the Star published an article by Manmohan Singh Minhas in commemoration of the role played by Sikhs in development and economy of Golden City. Mr. Minhas, a mechanical engineer, was preparing a book on history of the Sikh Canadians of Golden City.

We were told that the original gurdwara was built on land allotted by The Columbia River Lumber Co. It was built among bunkhouses that Sikhs used for their living quarters. The gurdwara was housed in a wooden building with Sikh emblem and Nishan Sahib installed on the exterior. The inside was lavishly decorated with plush carpets and rugs for the installation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

In the beginning, the congregation or sangat was all male as the first Sikh woman entered Golden City in 1923. Piara Singh, son of Herdit Singh, was the first Sikh Canadian born in the Golden Hospital on August 26, 1924.





*Golden city in winter.*

In the Golden Gurdwara of 1890, the Sunday service was held regularly and was open to everyone. The local residents often came to the service to join Sikhs Canadians in prayer. The Canadian neighbors frequently met their Sikh friends for an afternoon chai at the community kitchen, langar. True to the Sikh traditions, the Golden City gurdwara served as a community center for every one in need of such a place.

As misfortune was to have it, a massive fire broke out in 1927 and it burned the Columbia River Lumber Co to ashes. A few years earlier, the Sikhs Canadians built a co-operative sawmill to sustain their employment but it too had to be closed as it could not survive the competition.

Thus, the Sikhs lost their livelihood and were forced to leave this town in search of employment elsewhere. They took Sri Guru Granth Sahib along with them. The Golden City gurdwara land reverted to the city and the building without Guru Granth Sahib was ultimately demolished.

The current Sikh era began in 1962, when Gurdial Singh Dhami moved to Golden City. He still lived in Golden when we visited. Then, there were 67 Sikh families living in Golden City proper and another 8 families living in the surrounding areas.

In 1978, Ms Wixen, an old timer, coaxed local Sikhs to either restore the historical Golden City gurdwara or build another one to replace it.

Within a short time, a sum nearly \$100,000 was collected. The Government of British Columbia granted \$15,000 for the gurdwara building. The state funds were derived from the lottery account through the efforts of the late honorable Lames R. Chabot, Minister of Lands and Parks. Necessary lumber was given by the local lumber company in exchange for overtime donated by Sikh employees. Entire labor was donated by local Sikhs and Sikhs from neighboring areas. The non-Sikh Golden residents also actively participated in the construction project.

The anniversary was celebrated in the new gurdwara building that stood at 13th Street and 6th Avenue and was spotted easily for its tall Nishan Sahib. It was a two-story building, the upper level for the service and the lower one to house langar facilities and residential units.

The new gurdwara building was opened in 1981 and Sardar Shiv Singh Jaswal undertook to perform duties of granthi without any remuneration. He continued to do the sewa until 1984, when the new granthi, Giani Daljit Singh of New Delhi, took over. Then the main service was held every Sunday but a mini service was held daily. The gurdwara was managed by the Golden Sikh Cultural Society. Sardar Balhar Singh of Evan Forest Products was serving as the president in 1991.

The city is a tourist attraction and many visitors go to the gurdwara every year. Sikhs traveling between Vancouver and Calgary pass through this city. On the day of our visit to Golden in 1991 a busload of Sikh children were served their meal. They were on route to their summer camp in Banff but their bus broke down near this town.

The Golden Sikh Cultural Society and the local Sikhs welcome every visitor and provide well known Sikh hospitality to those dropping in on their way to Calgary or Vancouver, or those who visit the Canadian Rockies and Cascade Mountains for vacation.

*(A noted Sikh scholar, Dr Harbans Lal lives in Texas)*

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