

My story of a small town gurdwara

I will share my impressions and memories of the Lake Cowichan Gurdwara during the 70's and 80's.

What I remember most about the temple is the hustle and bustle of activity during ceremonies, weddings, or memorials. The men would take part in the committee business and finances, and shopped for food and supplies for the events. They also managed and officiated the ceremonies. The women participated by preparing food for hundreds of people during events, and cleaning up afterwards. It was no small task.

As all Gurdwara around the world, the Lake Cowichan Gurdwara provided communal meals for all events, some that ran for three days, such as August 15th Independence Day, or weddings. At the time, events like Vaisakhi, Diwali, or a guru's birthday was a simple Sunday ceremony without a parade.

Our mothers took turns cooking for events, getting up at 4 am to go to the Gurdwara to prepare a meal for the community. This could be for about 100 attendees and upwards. The largest wedding I remember was for 400 or more people? It was packed, like a mela. But no one went home hungry. Nope!

After making the daal and sabzis, our mothers would come home, wake up their families, get everyone dressed and ready to go. Before leaving the house, I remember our father would give us a dime or a quarter for the offering. When we arrived to the Gurdwara, sometimes we would go downstairs to the langar hall and have sweet saffron rice with chai for breakfast before going upstairs to the sanctuary.

After placing our dimes or quarters in the offering box and bowing, we'd find a place to sit on the carpeted floor to listen to the scripture in Gurmukhi. Of course, the women and men sat separately as they do in all Gurdwaras, listening to the sound of the harmonia bhaja and dholkis accompanying the hymns, sermons and parables. Sometimes they would burn incense, but my mother and other women were sensitive to the smell and got headaches, so that didn't happen much.

As children, I know it was an exercise in patience and discipline to sit for a long period of time. I, personally, would change my sitting position again and again, wondering when it would be over. We would fidget or talk to our friends until an auntie would put their hand on our shoulder and tell us to be quiet or tell us pull our chuni up over our head if it slipped off.

It would be a relief when it was time to stand up for prayer, but after a time it was hard to stand still. When the Granthi was finally finished, and called "Bolae Sonae hal" and we responded with "Sat Sri Akal!" If it wasn't loud enough, however, we would have to do it again. Finally, we could sit down again. Almost there...

After a few more scriptures, announcements and collecting donations came the best part. The offering of sweet prashad. As the Granti came around, we would cup our small hands together to receive it. We all said that Lake Cowichan Gurdwara had the best prashad, not too oily, not too dry, not too sweet. We also had the best langar and service.

Am I right?

After eating, we'd be allowed to go outside to play, or hurry to find a spot in the long line up outside the langer hall. We would have to wait outside the doors with our friends until the people inside were finished. Once the doors were opened, we would pile in, quickly looking for seats together. Sometimes we'd get pushed out of the way and not get a seat!

As a community, we sat together, elbow to elbow, men and women across the room from each other, separately, waiting to be served our meal. I am guessing the hall sat about 50 or more people at a time.

I still recall the faces of the men, our fathers, brothers and uncles, who served us our meals. They first served sweet yellow rice with raisins and cloves, or prashad. Then they each came around with a shiny metal pail to ladle black moong bean daal, aloo peas, or aloo gobi sabji onto our plates. Someone would bring a plate stacked high with big, thin, round rotis, or phulkas. I still remember the smell of the food and the sounds of their voices:

"Daal ji! Sabzi ji! Khatta ji!"
"Ek roti aur dho?"

"If you wanted only half a roti, you should have stayed home..." they'd joke.

The Gurdwara was a place where the community socialized. The children could spend hours playing together in the grassy yard or walking around the parking lot. Sometimes we would go to our cousin's house. Sometimes we got permission to go to Portlances store for a treat.

For hours our mothers volunteered their time in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning, chatting and laughing. They didn't have to worry about keeping an eye on their children, and simply gathered them up when it was time to go.

More often it was the children who begged the parents to go home, but their work was not done. It was not unusual to see women taking chai breaks still wearing their aprons while cradling a sleeping child in their lap. Dishes, pots and pans needed to be washed, dried, garbage emptied and left over food packed and distributed. After serving the meals, the men swept and washed the floors or vacuumed the carpet upstairs in the sanctuary.

At the time we never dreamed these times would end. They were busy times, the best of times, the worst of times. But we were together as family, friends and community.

Eventually, the mills closed one at a time. First Mesachie Lake, Honeymoon Bay, and finally Youbou. I moved away in 1983. I heard over time that the community had dwindled as families moved away for jobs in other cities, and the children of those who stayed moved away for college and careers. I heard events became fewer and further between. There was occasional wedding, perhaps, or memorial for an elder of the community who passed away. After a long period of time, I went there for my grandmother's funeral in 1999.

The last time I was at the Lake Cowichan Gurdwara was July 2017 when we spread my father's ashes. The temple was deserted. There was no one there to greet us but our cousin Keepy and his wife Indra. As we sat upstairs I felt, keenly, the absence of so many friends and family members. There was only about twenty of us there at the time. We walked around the sanctuary, whispering here and there.

That day, we had our communal meal in honor of our father at what was once the Rainbow Cafe. I had an Eggs Benny instead of a traditional temple meal. But, we were together, as family, and that was good.

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