



Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha: An Ancient Historical and Religious Cultural Heritage of Hazara

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Abstract

Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha is the finest historical and religio-cultural legacy of Sikhs in Hazara Division. Due to the absence of Sikh population, it is not functional for religious activities and remained closed till 1976. Later the building became part of various departments and was eventually converted into a library in 2000 but its old look and architecture have been taken care of. This magnificent three story Gurdwara still amazes the visitors with its architectural beauty. This masterpiece of Sikh architecture still exists with its historical, religious and cultural values. The current study is an attempt to elaborate all those historical aspects associated with Gurdwara which are still hidden from the limelight. The study also seeks to highlight the religious significance of the Gurdwara for the Sikh community of Pakistan and abroad. The research has mainly been conducted through primary and secondary sources including historical evidences, interviews, journals and books etc with an aim to highlight the scope of religious tourism in the Hazara Region. The decision of the ETBP to resume Sikh rituals and worship here is really a matter of happiness for the Sikh community. This decision will further promote peace in the times to come. Gurdwara is a testament to the fact that the religious places of minorities in Pakistan are not only safe but as intact as possible.

Keywords: Hazara; Mansehra; Gurdwara; Religious Tourism; Library

Introduction

In terms of beauty and landscapes, Mansehra District is the most beautiful and ancient area of Hazara Division, which is known throughout Pakistan for its beautiful valleys, lakes, mountains and fairy

meadows. The presence of Karakoram Highway and Hazara Motorway has made access to this area even easier. The city of Mansehra founded by Sardar Maan Singh, has a rich view of nature, between the beautiful and dense mountains there are many valleys which are like paradise in terms of beauty. Dadar, Jabori, Siran, Shinkiyari, Balakot, Kaghan, Shogran, Naran, Chattarplain are immensely popular in Pakistan and abroad due to its natural beauty. Land of Mansehra is a paradise of lakes, millions of tourists come here to see Saiful-Malook, Lulusar, Dudipatsar and Anso lakes every year. Apart from its natural attractions, its religious and cultural heritage has also a magnetic attraction for tourists.¹ Hazara's only Shawala Chitti Ghatti is located in the beautiful valley of Mansehra, where all religious festivals and ceremonies are celebrated. The Shawala is guarding 3000 years old Shiv Lingham, as well as numerous ancient statues. There is also an ancient Buddhist monument in Ashoka Park in the same city, Rocks from the time of Ashoka, the most popular king of the Mauryan dynasty are still present in the park. Engraved with Buddhist scriptures, these stones are reminiscent of Buddhism in Mansehra.² Thousands of years old these cultural and religious heritages are enhancing the beauty of Mansehra.

The city Mansehra inhabited by Sardar Maan Singh is the cradle of ancient and historical Ghandhara Civilisation, representing Buddhist, Hindus and Sikhs ancient religious heritages. Innumerable Cultural and religious heritage scattered here reminds the time of Alexander the Great, Ashoka, Tuks, Siks and British Raj.³ One of these centuries old cultural heritage is the Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha, its historical significance and architecture fascinates the viewers. This building is one of the best monuments of the Sikh community in Hazara and a master piece of Sikh architecture. This Gurdwara, which was established during British Raj. Is a symbol of the last Sikh community living in Mansehra. Unwillingly, they bid farewell to the region on the partition of India and migrated. The Sikh community is not living in Mansehra, due to which this historic Gurdwara was turned into a library two decades ago, so that this beautiful building is open for visitor and its regular maintenance could be made possible. A religious and cultural symbol of the Sikhs, this gurdwara is not only highlighting the historical significance of the area but can also play an important role in enhancing the religious tourism in the days to come.

Historical Location and Status of Gurdwara

This historic Gurdwara was built by Sardar Gopal Singh Sethi who belonged to Khazro (Punjab). Due to his fine character and benign personality, he had a very good reputation. He visited Mansehra several times and during his stay he built this beautiful Gurdwara in 1936 keeping in view the religious need of the Sikhs community of the area. The complete date of the foundation stone is written on the plaque in the Gurdwara which is 5th September 1937.⁴ In the history of Sikhism, every Gurdwara is associated with the name of some Sikh Guru, according to old records Gurdwara and Dharamshala were considered as one. Dharamshala is basically the building where people belonging to the Sikh religion come to eat, drink and spend the night, while a Gurdwara is a religious place where Guru Granth Sahib is kept, men and women belonging to the Sikh religion come here and worship according to their beliefs and traditions.⁵

500 small and large Gurdwaras in Pakistan carry with them memories of the glorious past, Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha used to hold religious ceremonies according to the Sikh beliefs till 1947, but due to the migration of Sikhs from Mansehra after the partition of India. When no Sikhs remained here so the Gurdwara remained closed completely till 1976. In 1976, this historical and religious heritage handed over to the police department and a police station was established in it.⁶ This historic building was converted into a municipal library in 1999 and opened to the public in August 2000 and now it is called Municipal Library.⁷ Access to this historic place is very easy. To the valley of Mansehra, this is 160 km away from the Federal Capital Islamabad. After Karakoram Highway N-35, now Hazara Motorway M-15 has made the journey from Islamabad to Mansehra even less and more comfortable.⁸ The Mansehra Valley at the junctions of M-15 and N-35 is also the gateway to Gilgit-Baltistan, from where the Chinese border can easily be reached. There is also a road from Mansehra to Muzafarabad, a capital city of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Located in the 19th century Sikh Garrison Town, this Gurdwara is located on Kashmir road in

Mansehra city. From small and large shops, surrounded by this three storied Gurdwara still captivates the viewers with its beauty at first sight.⁹

Exterior Structure of the Gurdwara

Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha is a masterpiece of Sikh architecture that mesmerizes the viewers with its magical beauty. This magnificent building is made of solid bricks. This rectangular shaped building is 63 feet long and 32 feet wide, the lower part of the corridor is made of marble while the four strong upper pillars support the second and third floors. The name of the Gurdwara is inscribed on the main entrance in Arabic, Gurkhmukhi and Roman scripts, strong wooden skylights above the door add to its splendour. The main entrance opens onto the largest hall of the Gurdwara, which is decorated with white marbles and it is a pure masterpiece of Sikh architecture.¹⁰



“It is a style of architecture that is characterized with values of progressiveness, exquisite complexity and logical flowing lines. It is constantly evolving into many new develop branches with new contemporary styles. Although Sikh architecture was initially developed with Sikhism, its style is used in many non-religious building due to its beauty. About 300 years ago, Sikh architecture was distinguished for its many curves and straight lines, Shiri Panja Sahib and Golden Temple are prime examples in history of a Gurdwara”.¹¹



There are pillars on the second floor of the Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha with marvellous designs; three chambers are present in the middle of the pillars with beautiful carvings and floral designs. The front part of the building is full of Sikh paintings and drawings; it has a strong beam on the third floor with a crowned pedestal, which is decorated by lotus flower petals. The balconied of the three floors of

Gurdwara are identical which looks very enchanting. Pillars, beams, doors and skylights are made of a mixture of cement; iron and wood are providing immense support to this historical building.¹²

The Interior Structure of the Gurdwara

A rectangular corridor runs from the main entrance of the Gurdwara to the first floor and it goes up the stairs to the second floor. Every door in the Gurdwara is made of and decorated by Cedar wood. Underground water tank is available on the ground floor; it also has a courtyard that is relatively small but decorated with white marbles. Exquisite murals on the walls are a symbol of fine Sikh architecture; four small pillars are present in Durbar Hall with information about the building in Gurukhmukhi script. There are small canopies over the pillars and the corners of each canopy are decorated with golden colour. The floor of the building is also smooth and strong.¹³

“Tiles are used in the pavement of the floor; size and design of the floor are very balance, colourful and smooth. Currently floor looks disturbed by the later instalments of the stones, red tiles are used on the borders while white and black marbles are also used on the floor”.¹⁴



There are beautiful chandeliers on the roof of the first two floors of the Gurdwara, largest in the centre, while relatively small chandeliers are hanging from the ceiling. Bronze lanterns are also adding into the beauty of Gurdwara, stairs go up on both sides to reach the third floor of the Gurdwara. On the third floor there is a hall room with a spacious courtyard, now newspapers are kept in this room. This floor is quite different from others because its floor is made of bricks and its ceiling is made by wood and tin sheets, four chimneys are facing the sky from these tin sheets. There is also a staircase on this floor to climb the roof tin sheets, these stairs are comparatively strong and made of bricks and cement. There is also an ancient temple on the east side of the Gurdwara which is in a very poor condition.¹⁵

There are about 14 paintings on the first and second floors, which are inscribes on the pillars, beams and small ceilings. Each painting is a masterpiece of fine arts, excellent dark colours are used in the making of these marvellous paintings and each picture reflects an instructive story.¹⁶



“Pillars and beams in the second story bear extremely beautiful mediation, edges and motives are made of relief golden stucco while multicolour background is provided, beautiful bronze medals are also inscribed on the pillars and beams of the Gurdwara”.¹⁷



Now the Gurdwara had become a library, there are numerous bookshelves on the first two floors, comprised upon almost ten thousand books. At present many chairs are placed around large tables so that visitors can sit back and study.

Current State of Gurdwara

Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha is a testament to the three decades of Sikh rule in Hazara, although this historic and religious building was built during the British Raj but is the reminiscent of the local Sikh population, who once lived in this area. The Gurdwara, made of bricks, marbles and wood had to undergo considerable renovations to fit into the library. The decision to turn this historic building into a library was taken in 1999, and after the renovation work was completed, it was opened to the public in

August 2000. Library membership is free for everyone, special and general and is open to all days except Friday. The library opens daily in two shifts, the first shift from eight to one in the morning and the second shift from three in the afternoon to eight at night.¹⁸



A large number of students come to this library to quench their thirst for knowledge; in addition, old people also come here daily to read newspapers. An estimated fifty to sixty people, including men, women, the elderly people, and students from all walks of life visit the library daily. On a daily basis, there are 14 different types of Urdu and English newspapers which are placed in the archives on the third floor the next day. Adorned with ten thousand books, this library is an attraction for people of all ages who love books. Most of the books here are based on topics related to Islam, Economics, Politics, Medical, Engineering, Computer, History, Mathematics, Language and Literature.¹⁹ A Sikh pilgrim visiting Mansehra presented a tribute for this literary converted Gurdwara in such words:

“Though this historic Gurdwara is converted into library but it is maintained and preserved. Sikh community is not here but their asset is still representing them in the beautiful valley of Mansehra”.²⁰

Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) has recently decided that this historic Gurdwara of Mansehra will be reopened as a place of worship for Hazara and Sikh pilgrims from all over Pakistan, so that they could perform religious duties in this religious place according to their beliefs. This is fascinating because there is currently no functional Gurdwara is present in Hazara for Sikh worship. It is also worth noting that Shiri Guru Granath Sahib has not been placed here since the partition of India but the palanquin on which Guru Granath Sahib is placed is still present in the Gurdwara. The return of Gurdwara to its religious state is very worth noting. Author of two interesting books Amardeep Singh describes in such words:

“Using the Gurdwara building as library was also a fine example of heritage building put to good use because it has helped in the preservation of the beautiful structure. It shows that if there is will, even abandoned Gurdwara buildings can be maintained if used for constructive purposes and betterment of mankind”.²¹

The local administration will soon transfer the library to a suitable building and hand over the historic Gurdwara to ETPB.

“The Gurdwara presently owned by the provincial government, however after accepting the stance of the ETPB the government had decided to hand over the possession of Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha to the board, which will work on its restoration and will later open it as a place of worship of the Sikh community”.²²

Role in Religious Culture

Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha is an important landmark of Sikh culture and history in Hazara. This historic building is extremely attractive for tourists, especially Sikh pilgrims from Pakistan and India can visit this historic place to learn about their glorious past and history while followers from other religion can also come here to see the finest Sikh architecture.

“Sikh architecture is characterised with values of progressiveness exquisite, complexity and logical lowering lines. Although it was initially developed with Sikhism, its style is used in many non-religious building. Sikh architecture is flourished in Pakistan during Sikh period, Sikh styles of samdhi’s of Emperor Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, Punja Sahib Gurdwara, Smadhi of Guru Nanak Kartarpur are some important examples”.²³

Valley of Mansehra is a paradise for tourists and also an important centre for religious and cultural tourism. It is full of many sacred places for the followers of Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism.²⁴ In future, this Gudwara will be the identity of Mansehra and will also play an important role in the promotion of cultural and religious tourism in the region.

Conclusion

The beautiful valley of Mansehra still holds the history and heritage of Sikh Raj, apart from it, the colours of Buddhism and Hinduism can still be seen and feel in the area. The Gurdwara Shiri Guru Singh Sabha is a holy place of Sikhs in Mansehra which is a testament of the Sikh architecture. It is not only a religious site for Sikh worship as well as a beautiful historical and cultural heritage. Established during the British Raj in 1937, this Gurdwara is reminiscent of Sikhs in Hazara, it still exists today with the same splendour with which it was built. Due to the migration of Sikh population after the formation of Pakistan, this historic building remained closed till 1976. After being used as a police station for some time, it was decided to turn it into a library. Every possible effort was made to maintain its grandeur by establishing a library here in the year of 2000. The Gurdwara known as the Municipal Library has recently received an honorary decision from ETPB, in the near future; this Gurdwara will be used again as a place of worship for Sikhs. The present research seeks to bring to light all the hidden historical aspects of the Gurdwara, soon the existing library will be relocated another suitable building and the real shine and glory of Gurdwara will be revived. Pakistan has a large Sikh population especially in the cities of Peshawar and Hasanabdal, who can revive their religious traditions by visiting this historic Gurdwara. Sikh pilgrims from abroad can also play an important role in promoting religious tourism in Hazara. This Gurdwara is an unforgettable truth of Sikh rule, and the history of Pakistan is incomplete without discussing Sikh Raj.

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