

## The Sikhs' holiest building is an inspiration



Pilgrims walk around the pool of the Golden Temple early one morning.

S. AMJAD HUSSAIN PHOTOS

# The Golden Temple of Amritsar

By S. AMJAD HUSSAIN  
SPECIAL TO THE BLADE

AMRITSAR, India — It is a citadel of peace and tranquility surrounded by the chaos of a typical city on the Indian subcontinent. One feels the aura of its holiness even before entering.

This place — the Golden Temple of Amritsar — is to the world's 23 million Sikhs what the Kaaba in Mecca is to Muslims, the Western Wall in Jerusalem is to Jews, and the Holy City is to Christians.

The temple is the center of their belief and the seat of religious power for the worldwide community of this proud faith.

Amanjeev Singh, 33, and Padma Kaur, 32, are Sylvania residents who last visited the temple in July. "The first thing you see from the top of the stairs is the golden-plated complex. That view itself is very inspiring," said Mr. Singh.

"The best part is that as soon as you enter you feel a certain sanctity about the place," he added. "It's an experience you can only feel when you are there." His wife, who converted to Sikhism after they married, agreed. "It is this huge complex with thousands of people, and the greatest part is that it's open to anyone."

But the temple, parts of which date to the 16th century, had a dark day of horror in June, 1984. Sikh separatists revolted and took refuge in the temple complex. In the end, the Indian army attacked. Hundreds died. The temple complex was badly damaged; Guru Garanth Sahib, the sacred scripture, was pierced by a bullet. Four months later, in retaliation for what they saw as an outrage, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards.

Since then, tensions have lessened and one of the world's most beautiful religious monuments has been rebuilt and restored.

That wasn't the first time the Golden Temple's serenity has been marred by violence over its long and storied history.

It all goes back nearly half a millennium, to when Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was living on a secluded lake in rural Punjab which he loved because, as he wrote, it was "far from the maddening crowd's ignoble strife." After his death in 1539, his followers started making pilgrimages to the site.

Thirty-five years later, Guru Ram Das, the fourth successor to the founder, ordered the conversion of the lake into a large rectangular pool. That took a quarter-century.

When it was completed, there was a temple in the center

of the pool. The pool was called "Amrit Sarover," or the nectar of life. The city that grew around the temple came to be known as Amritsar.

And from that time, the place has had an interesting and all-too-often bloody history. It is not widely known, but the foundation stone of the Temple was laid not by a Sikh but by a Muslim.

That was no accident. In keeping with Sikh teachings about the universality of religion, the reigning Guru at the time asked a Muslim holy man from the nearby city of Lahore to do the honors.

The finished temple was beautiful — but destined to weather many trials. The Sikhs and their temple have suffered at the hands of many Central Asian invaders who repeatedly desecrated and destroyed the temple and persecuted the believers.

The temple was rebuilt by the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) who also had it covered with copper sheets encased in gold leaf containing inscriptions from Guru Garanth Sahib, the Sikh sacred book. That led to the popular name the Golden Temple.

But there is more than just the temple itself in the complex. There are community

kitchens and dining halls where up to 10,000 pilgrims are given free food every day. "You don't have to contribute anything while you are there, and there are rooms you can stay in overnight," said Swaran Singh Mavi, 55, a Perrysburg resident who was there two years ago. Other buildings house a museum of Sikh history and dormitories for pilgrims. And there is one oddly placed building that, unlike others, faces the temple at an angle. In this building, called Akal Takht, rests all temporal and religious Sikh authority, and from this nerve center all religious and sometimes political pronouncements are issued.

And it was here, too, that the rebels took refuge during the 1984 incident. Its skewed placement at the western end of the pool is symbolic; the Sikh religion not only looks at the spiritual (the temple) but also to the face of life presented by the world. Nearby two towering flagpoles represent religion and politics.

Yet the Golden Temple itself, in the precise middle of the pool, remains the center of the complex. Sikh pilgrims wait hours in line to get into their holiest building.

There on the ground floor, under a bejeweled canopy, rests the handwritten copy of



Pilgrims walk through the gilded sanctum of the temple. In the foreground, the high priest sits behind the covered copy of the sacred text.

Guru Garanth Sahib. From early morning till late at night the priests recite hymns from the scriptures.

All too often, while visiting such places it is easy for those outside the faith to observe the rituals with detached curiosity of a tourist. But sometimes one has to suspend disbelief, as I did, in the early morning hours of one hot summer day last May, when I sat on the causeway leading to the temple.

There I listened to the simple words of ancient hymns that Guru Nanak and his disciple sang during their wanderings:

*God first created His light,  
Then all the people were made from it.*

*As all the world has come from that One light,*

*Then who is superior and who is inferior?*

*O my brethren, do not succumb to illusions,*

*For the Creator and the Created are the same.*

*The Creator pervades everything and all.*

That's what the temple is supposed to be all about.

Swaran Singh Mavi last visited the Golden Temple in 2004, with his 13-year-old son, Rajiv.

"There are four doors in the actual temple, facing north, west, east, and south, and this signifies that anyone can come in from anywhere. Basically this means everyone is welcome in the temple."

That, Sikhs say, is how they hope the world sees them.

Amarinder Singh contributed to this story.

S. Amjad Hussain is a retired Toledo surgeon and op-ed columnist for The Blade.

Contact him at: aghajaj@bex.net



The Golden Temple is an oasis of peace in the busy city of Amritsar.

## Toledo's Sikh population

By AMARINDER SINGH  
SPECIAL TO THE BLADE

There are not many Sikhs in northwest Ohio, but their numbers are increasing. "When I first moved here, there were only three or four Sikh families," said Kuldeep Singh, 67, who has lived in Toledo since 1987.

"Now there are close to about 20 families in the Toledo area. This includes Napoleon, Findlay, Fremont, and Bowling Green," said Mr. Singh, the founder and president of the Sikh Youth Federation.

There are approximately 23 million people worldwide who belong to the faith of Sikhism, a monotheistic religion based on the teachings of 10 "Gurus" or teachers. Once, almost all Sikhs lived on the Indian subcontinent. But in recent years, around two-fifths have dispersed elsewhere, migrating to the United Kingdom, Canada, Africa, the United States, and other areas of the world.

Today, Mr. Singh estimates that 1,000 Sikh families reside in Ohio, virtually all of whose men use the last name "Singh" or "Singh"; women traditionally take the name "Kaur" which means princess.

Mr. Singh's own story is fairly

typical. He moved to Detroit from India in 1972, then came to Toledo to start his own medical business.

His religion, founded in 1469, is one of the world's youngest. Followers go by the teachings in the Guru Garanth Sahib, a book of thousands of hymns. The book, placed on a pedestal in front of any religious ceremony, can be found in every Gurdwara, or Sikh Temple.

"Our Gurus started the Gurdwara as an education center. It's to teach, not only preach and pray," Mr. Singh said. Until recently, Toledo-area Sikhs didn't have one. "We all used to go to Detroit Gurdwara, about one hour away. Nobody went on a weekly basis because of the drive."

That changed after Toledo area Sikhs opened a Gurdwara in 2003. "Now we have Gurdwara one Saturday evening per month for about three hours. We meet on the 6th floor of the International House, a dorm on the University of Toledo campus," Mr. Singh explained. Meetings begin with an opening prayer and are followed by the recitation of hymns from the Guru Garanth Sahib. The hymns are led by a priest-figure known as

a Bhai Sahib or Granthi.

"Anyone, regardless of gender, with a vast knowledge of Sikhism can be a priest. There are no restrictions," Mr. Singh said. Those who wish to know more about Sikhism can start by coming to Gurdwara for a PowerPoint display of definitions and pronunciations of every word, in English or Punjabi, read and recited.

Every Sikh ceremony is followed by langar, a free community meal for everyone regardless of their caste or creed. "Everybody cooks at home and brings it here," Mr. Singh said.

Amrit is a formal initiation into the Sikh faith and commitment to follow a certain code of conduct. That code includes the maintenance of uncut hair (keas), carrying of a small comb (kanga), wearing drawers (kaccha), carrying of a dagger (kirpan, only to be used for self-defense) and wearing of a steel bracelet (kara). These articles, known as the five K's, define the Sikh identity. Sikh men also cover their uncut hair with a turban.

Amarinder Singh is a pre-med student who is also studying journalism at Wayne State University in Detroit.