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Ritual Life at Gurdwara Punja Sahib: Daily Worship, Langar, Sewa and Festival Performance in Spatial Context

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Abstract

This article offers an ethnographic and descriptive reading of ritual life at Gurdwara Punja Sahib, Hasanabdal. It treats the shrine not as a static monument but as a sequence of rooms and courtyards in which daily worship, vows, kitchen service, monthly assemblies and annual festivals acquire meaning. Drawing on repeated field visits, interviews with sewadars and close observation of the Diwan Asthan, the sarovar, the langar khana and the sermon hall, the study follows the day from the early installation of the Guru Granth Sahib to the night rest of the scripture in the Sukhasan room. It then turns to manats, to the ethics of sewa, to the preparation and serving of langar, to life cycle ceremonies including Amrit Sanskar and Anand Karaj, and to the festival calendar of Baisakhi, Bandi Chhor, Hola Mohalla, gurpurbs and local commemorations. The guiding claim is that each portion of the gurdwara is aimed at a different form of worship and that the performances become intelligible only when they are read against that architectural setting.

Keywords: Sikh Ritual, Gurdwara Punja Sahib, Langar, Sewa, Guru Granth Sahib, Baisakhi, Hasan Abdal, Sacred Space.

Introduction

A gurdwara is not first a style of dome. It is a house in which a book is treated as Guru and in which a community learns how to sit, eat, work and remember together. At Punja Sahib that house is also a pilgrimage station. Visitors come because a rock bears the mark of a palm and because a spring rises at the foot of that rock. They stay because the kitchen is open, because the scripture is read without pause on sponsored days, and because the calendar still turns around Baisakhi and the birthdays of the Gurus (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2002). The present article follows those practices as they were observed and described at the site. It does not attempt to write a complete theology of Sikhism. It attempts to show how theology becomes gesture, timetable and room.

Sikh teaching places the Guru Granth Sahib at the centre of congregational life. The book is not worshipped as an idol. It is honoured as the voice of Akal Purakh and as the last living Guru after Gobind Singh transferred authority from a human successor to the scripture itself (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; McLeod, 2009; Salim, 2009). Everything that happens in the Diwan Asthan takes its bearing from that honour. The canopy, the waving of the chaur, the bow of the incoming visitor, the distribution of karah prasad, the singing of kirtan and the closing ardas are so many ways of keeping company with the Word (Cole and Sambhi, 1990; Teece, 2004). Outside the hall other rooms keep company with other duties. The kitchen keeps company with hunger. The tank keeps company with the body. The hostel keeps company with the stranger. Ritual at Punja Sahib is therefore a distributed activity. It cannot be photographed from a single doorway (Singh, 2002; Nesbitt, 2005).

Hasanabdal lies on the Grand Trunk Road in Attock district, a town already marked by Sufi memory and by Mughal tombs and gardens (Nadiem, 2006; Khan, 1962). Sikh narrative places Guru Nanak here around 1521, travelling with Mardana, and remembers an encounter with Baba Wali Qandhari that left a hand print on stone and a spring at the foot of that stone (Salim, 2009; Duggal, 1998). The present buildings belong mainly to the Sikh century and to a later reconstruction after 1928 (Khan, 1962; Shah, 2011), yet the ritual life that fills those buildings is older than any facade. People still seat the scripture at dawn, still bathe in the tank, still cut vegetables on a marble floor, still sit in pangat, and still gather in strength when Baisakhi arrives (Cole and Morgan, 2000; Nesbitt, 2005; Singh and Thukral, 1992).

The argument is organised in three empirical discussions after the review of literature and the statement of method. The first describes daily worship in the Diwan Asthan, the night rest of the scripture, continuous reading, and the traffic of vows at the rock and spring. The second describes langar and sewa as ritual labour rather than as background hospitality. The third describes life cycle ceremonies and the festival year, including local commemorations that bind the universal Sikh calendar to Hasanabdal soil. The conclusion returns to the claim that performances have meaning only in their spatial context and that a minority shrine in Pakistan keeps that context at work every ordinary morning (Shah, 2011; McLeod, 2009).

Two further remarks belong in an introduction. First, the study is written from field observation and from conversation with sewadars, not from a position inside the Amritdhari discipline (Kalsi, 2005; McLeod, 2003). Distance has costs. Some inner weather of a rite remains closed to an outside visitor. Distance also has uses. It allows the kitchen, the tank and the hall to be described as rooms of equal dignity rather than as a hierarchy already decided by devotion (McLeod, 2009). Second, the study refuses the temptation to treat festival photographs as the whole of ritual life. Baisakhi is loud and necessary. Tuesday dawn is quieter and more revealing. Both belong in the same article if the shrine is to be understood as a working house rather than as a seasonal spectacle (Singh, 2002; Cole and Morgan, 2000; Salamone, 2004).

Literature Review

Cole and Sambhi (1978) remain the clearest English language guide to Sikh worship, life cycle rites and festivals. Their account of kirtan, ardas, karah prasad, amrit initiation, the Anand marriage and the major gurgurbs supplies the vocabulary without which a field description of Punja Sahib would have to invent names for acts that already have names. Cole and Morgan (2000) later restated those patterns for a broader textbook audience and underlined the social meaning of langar as a refusal of caste at the plate. Cole and Sambhi (1990) add a compact dictionary of terms that keeps the present writing exact. The article relies on these books for the general grammar of Sikh practice and then asks what that grammar sounds like in a particular set of Pakistani rooms.

Mohinder Singh (2002), writing from the Golden Temple, shows how the same acts look when they are performed at the centre of the Sikh world. His description of dawn and dusk, of the movement of the scripture between public throne and night rest, and of the kitchen that feeds thousands, has shaped the present writing even though Hasanabdal is smaller and quieter. Patwant Singh (1999) and Randhawa (2000) extend that visual and institutional frame. The comparison is useful only if it is kept modest. Amritsar offers the parts at the scale of a city of water and gold. Punja Sahib offers the same parts at the scale of a town (Singh and Thukral, 1992; Shah, 2011).

Nesbitt (2005) and Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh (2009) supply compact statements of belief that help a reader understand why a scripture can be a Guru and why a kitchen can be a theological argument. W. H. McLeod (2003, 2009) is used with caution and respect for his work on Khalsa

rahit and on the very word gurdwara. McLeod reminds the student that gurudwara first named the grace of the Guru understood as the voice of Akal Purakh and only later named a building. Kalsi (2005) and Nigosian (2000) are used where identity, the five Ks and the problem of haumai need a short doctrinal gloss. Additional support is drawn from Shackle (2005) on Sikh textual tradition, from Duggal (1998) and Pura Singh (1993) on popular memory of the Gurus, and from Harbans Singh (1992, 1996) on the institutional life of the Panth.

For the Pakistani setting the literature is thinner and more inventory minded. Muhammad Waliullah Khan (1962) established locations, patronage and a brief historical note for Sikh shrines in what became West Pakistan, including Punja Sahib. Safdar Ali Shah (2011) widened the visual record of Sikh buildings and havelis across the country. Ahmad Salim (2009) retold the Nanak narrative of the hand print in a work concerned with shared spiritual heritage rather than with ritual ethnography. Singh and Thukral (1992) place Punja Sahib among gurdwaras in India and around the world, while Nadiem (2006) locates Hasanabdal inside the monumental belt of the Taxila and Wah valley. None of these works watches a full week of practice at Hasanabdal.

Handbook treatments of ritual and festival (Salamone, 2004; Teece, 2004) and broader surveys of Sikh heritage (Randhawa, 2000; Daljeet, 2004; Singh, 1999) are useful for placing Punja Sahib inside a family of practices, yet they rarely descend to the level of a named cook, a divided thaal, or a painting gifted from Nankana Sahib and hung on a kitchen wall. Political histories of the Sikhs (Cunningham, 2002; Singh, 1966; Singh, 1971) explain how a commemorative spot could later receive state patronage, but they do not watch the Tuesday kitchen. Ralhan (1997) gathers encyclopaedic notes on religion and culture that help date terms and rites. The gap that remains is local and empirical. General Sikh studies describe the rites. Pakistani heritage surveys list the site. What has not been published is a connected account of how those rites are performed in these rooms, under the pressure of pilgrimage and of a minority community living in a Muslim majority town (Shah, 2011; Salim, 2009).

A further strand of writing treats Sikh architecture as a blend of Hindu and Islamic forms and stops at elevation and dome (Shah, 2011; Khan, 1962; Nadiem, 2006). That strand is not rejected here. It is relocated. Plan and ornament matter because they house rites. A four-door hall, a night room for the scripture, a side room for unbroken reading, a tank with a separate portion for women, a kitchen with a public board, and a sermon hall for overflow are not decorative extras. They are the spatial conditions of worship (McLeod, 2009; Cole and Sambhi, 1978). Literature that separates building from performance leaves both halves explained. The useful predecessor is not the inventory that lists a shrine. It is the study that watches a shrine at work (Singh, 2002; Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Nesbitt, 2005).

Problem Statement

Writers on Sikh religion have described the general pattern of gurdwara worship with care, and writers on Pakistani heritage have listed Punja Sahib among the principal Sikh sites of the country. What has been missing is a connected account of how those general patterns are actually performed in this particular shrine, in these particular rooms, under the pressure of pilgrimage and of a minority community living in a Muslim majority town. Without that account the architecture of the complex remains a set of pretty elevations, and the rituals remain a set of names. The problem is to hold the two together.

Daily worship, vows, langar, sewa, monthly samagam and the festival year must be described as they unfold in the Diwan Asthan, at the rock, in the kitchen and in the sermon hall. Only then can the claim be tested that performances have meaning only in their spatial context. A hymn sung in the kitchen is not the same act as a hymn sung before the throne. A meal eaten on the tank steps is not the same act as karah prasad received in the hall. A vow whispered at the rock is not

the same act as an ardas spoken by the whole sangat. If those distinctions are not written down, the shrine will continue to be visited as a postcard and not as a working house of ritual.

The problem is also one of scale and of public knowledge. Punja Sahib is known in Pakistan as a famous Sikh place and is known among Sikhs abroad as a station on the Nanak map. Fame has not produced a detailed published ethnography of its ordinary day. Festival coverage and travel writing have produced images of crowds and of the dome. They have not produced a patient record of who cuts vegetables, who waves the chaur, who carries the scripture upstairs, and which room is built for which act. The present article confines itself to that missing record. It does not attempt a full political history of the shrine after 1947, and it does not attempt a theological treatise. It attempts to state, room by room, what is done and why the doing requires those rooms.

Research Objectives

The study pursues three objectives.

1. To document the daily, sponsored and festival rites performed at Gurdwara Punja Sahib and to describe the rooms in which those rites take place.
2. To examine langar and sewa as ritual labour rather than as background hospitality, and to record who performs that labour at the shrine.
3. To interpret life cycle ceremonies and the festival year, including local commemorations, as uses of the same sacred rooms at a different intensity.

Research Questions

The study is guided by three questions.

1. What ritual acts are performed at Gurdwara Punja Sahib in daily time, sponsored time and festival time, and in which rooms do those acts occur.
2. How do langar and sewa work as ritual labour, and who performs that labour among the men, women and children attached to the shrine.
3. How do life cycle ceremonies and the festival calendar, including local commemorations, use the same rooms at a different temperature.

Methodology

The research was designed as a single site qualitative case study. Repeated visits to Gurdwara Punja Sahib were made with the permission of the Evacuee Trust Property Board. Informal interviews with sewadars and residents of the complex, including Talwinder Singh, Heera Singh and Sardar Hukam Singh, were used to clarify the names and uses of rooms and the sequence of the day rather than to collect statistical samples. Photographs were taken of worship, of kitchen work, of the rock and spring, and of the rooms in which those acts occur. Field notes were written after each visit. Questionnaires were used only as prompts for conversation, not as instruments for generalisation. Secondary material on Sikh worship, belief and heritage was read in order to place the observed acts in a comparative frame.

The analysis is descriptive and interpretive. It asks what a gesture means in the room where it is made. It does not claim to represent every Sikh community in Pakistan, and it does not treat festival crowds as a substitute for weekday observation. Ordinary time and festival time are kept in view at once. The voices of sewadars are used to correct the eye of the observer wherever a name, a sequence or a responsibility would otherwise have been guessed.

The limits of the method should be stated plainly. No extended residence measured in months was possible. Some rites, including funeral practice and a full Amrit Sanskar, were not observed from first gesture to last and are therefore described from conversation and from the standard literature rather than from a complete eyewitness record. Festival days compress and intensify practices that on ordinary mornings look almost domestic, and a short visit can mistake the loud

hour for the whole of the rite. A visitor who is not a member of the sangat will always miss some of the inner weather of worship. These limits do not prevent a responsible account of rooms and acts. They do mean that the article should be read as a documented interpretation of practice at one shrine rather than as a manual for the entire Panth.

The method ends where description must begin. After permission, conversation, photographs and notes, the task is to write the shrine as a sequence rather than as a list. The next three discussions attempt that writing. The first stays with the scripture, the hall, the night room, the continuous reading and the rock. The second stays with the kitchen and with unpaid labour. The third stays with the span of a life and the span of a year. The closing paragraph of the method is only this. The tools used here are walking, watching, asking and recording. They are modest tools. At Punja Sahib they are also the right ones, because the rites themselves are modest in their daily form and become large only when rooms and bodies gather.

Daily Worship, the Scripture and the Sacred Spring

This discussion concerns the ritual core of the shrine: the daily cycle in the Diwan Asthan, the night rest of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sponsored labour of Akhand Path, and the quieter traffic of vows at the rock and spring. These acts look different from one another and they belong together. They all keep company with the founder as Word and as remembered presence on this ground (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Salim, 2009; Shackle, 2005). They all require particular rooms. They all train the body of the visitor before they instruct the mind (Nesbitt, 2005; Singh, 2009). The day at Punja Sahib begins before the town is fully awake. The Guru Granth Sahib, which has spent the night in the Sukhasan room on the upper floor, is brought down to the Diwan Asthan and installed under the mosaic canopy. The act is not a mere change of furniture. It is the public seating of the Guru (Singh, 2002; McLeod, 2009). A reader takes his or her place. A chaur is waved with a regularity that is itself a form of attention (Cole and Sambhi, 1990). Visitors enter with covered heads and bare feet, bow until the forehead meets the floor, place an offering, and sit on the carpeted marble facing the throne. There is no reserved pew. Rank dissolves into a common floor. Men and women sit in the same hall (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Nesbitt, 2005). The first hymns of the morning, including the recitation associated with Japji, set the tone of the day (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2002; Teece, 2004).

During the hours that follow the hall is never empty for long. A girl may sit near the canopy and read. Musicians may take up kirtan. A speaker may use the wooden dais. Karah prasad waits on its table. The symbols of Ik Onkar and the Khanda stand in front of the scripture as a visual creed (Cole and Sambhi, 1990; Singh, 2009; Randhawa, 2000). What looks to an outsider like a quiet room with a book is, to the congregation, a court in session. Four doors keep the hall from becoming a closed chapel (McLeod, 2009; Shah, 2011). The canopy raises the book without hiding it. The absence of chairs prevents a front row of honour. Even the charity box is placed so that giving does not interrupt hearing (Cole and Morgan, 2000).



Figure 1. Interior of the Dewan Asthan at Punja Sahib, with the mosaic canopy, hanging lantern and inscribed glass work that frame the daily presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. Photograph by the researcher.

Evening worship reverses the morning movement without undoing it. Hymns appropriate to the close of day are sung. Ardas gathers the petitions of the sangat into a single standing prayer. Prasad is shared again (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2002; Teece, 2004). Then the scripture is carried with honour to the Sukhasan room and laid to rest. The spatial distinction between Diwan Asthan and Sukhasan Sahib is a ritual distinction. One room is for public company. The other is for rest. To confuse them would be to misunderstand the personhood that Sikh practice attributes to the Book (McLeod, 2009; Salim, 2009; Harbans Singh, 1992).

Akhand Path occupies a third room and a third tempo. When a family sponsors an unbroken reading, readers succeed one another so that the sound of the text does not stop for forty-eight hours (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Ralhan, 1997; Teece, 2004). The small side room of the sanctuary is built for that purpose. Continuous reading needs a dedicated enclosure. Festival preaching needs a large hall. Dawn installation needs a processional path between storeys. Punja Sahib has all three (Singh, 2002; Shah, 2011).

Silence and sound alternate. There are minutes when the only motion is the chaur and the turning of a page. There are minutes when kirtan fills the hall. There are festival hours when the sermon hall answers the sanctuary like a second choir (Salamone, 2004; Singh, 2002). A study that treated only Baisakhi would misunderstand the shrine as a seasonal spectacle. A study that treated only a quiet Tuesday would misunderstand it as a private chapel. The truth of the place is the movement between those two temperatures (Cole and Morgan, 2000; Nesbitt, 2005).

Covering the head and removing the shoes function as a threshold rite that anyone can perform in a few seconds and that everyone must perform if they wish to enter (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Cole and Sambhi, 1990). No certificate is required. No caste history is taken. The body itself agrees to become a guest (Nesbitt, 2005).

Beside the tank the rock of the hand print and the spring receive a traffic of their own. Guru Nanak, refused water by the saint of the hill, opened a new spring. The boulder sent against him was stopped by a palm. The impression remains (Salim, 2009; Khan, 1962; Duggal, 1998). People come with petitions and with manats, vows that bind the petitioner to a future act of thanks if the request is granted. The thanks may take the form of a sponsored langar, a length of Akhand Path, a donation of tiles, or simple labour in the kitchen (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Ralhan, 1997). Manats sit on the border between Sikh teaching and the wider religious culture of the Punjab. Official Sikh theology is wary of bargaining with God. Popular practice at a miracle site is rarely so severe (Nesbitt, 2005; Nigosian, 2000). The shrine absorbs those promises without rewriting its creed. The kitchen becomes the place where a vow is paid. The Akhand Path room becomes the place where a vow is sounded. The rock remains a witness. The Book remains the Guru (Khan, 1962; Salim, 2009; Shackle, 2005).



Figure 2. The rock associated with the hand print of Guru Nanak, with spring water at its base. Photograph by the researcher.

The rock chamber is not the Diwan Asthan. It is darker, wetter, more intimate. In the hall one sits and hears. At the rock one stoops and looks. The two acts belong together because the same Guru who speaks from the Book is remembered as having acted on this ground (Puran Singh, 1993; Salim, 2009). Ritual geography at Punja Sahib is therefore double. There is a geography of scripture and a geography of miracle, and the courtyard between tank and sanctuary is the path that joins them (Nadiem, 2006; Shah, 2011).

The sarovar belongs here because washing belongs to the approach to worship (Singh, 2002; Cole and Morgan, 2000). Separate provision for women marks one of the few gendered lines in the precinct. The hall does not draw that line. The plate does not draw that line. The water does. Names of sewadars cut into marble tiles on the tank stairs turn the walking surface into a register of service (Shah, 2011).

The principal daily acts are therefore the seating and rest of the scripture, hearing and singing, bowing and offering, ardas and prasad, continuous reading when it is sponsored, and petition at

the rock (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2002). The rooms that hold those acts are not interchangeable. Move the Book to the kitchen and the court disappears. Move the vow from the rock to the dais and petition becomes public speech. The meaning of the act travels with the room (McLeod, 2009).

Langar and Sewa as Ritual Labour

This discussion concerns langar and sewa, the ritual labour that feeds strangers and keeps the precinct usable. Sikh teaching names haumai, the self centred pride that turns a person inward, as a barrier to God. Sewa is the solvent of that pride (Nigosian, 2000; Nesbitt, 2005; Singh, 2009). At Punja Sahib the solvent is not a metaphor. It is heat, repetition, wet steel and the ache of a shoulder after a crate of thaals.

Guru ka langar is one of the oldest institutions of the Sikh Panth. Guru Nanak insistence on honest work, sharing and remembrance already contained the seed of a common kitchen (Duggal, 1998; Puran Singh, 1993; Cole and Sambhi, 1978). Guru Amar Das strengthened the institution as a weapon against caste, because those who would meet the Guru were expected first to sit in pangat and eat (Harbans Singh, 1992; Cole and Morgan, 2000). At Punja Sahib the kitchen is a set of rooms with a large oven for chapatis, cauldrons, a store of grain, a board that announces Guru Ka Langar, and a hall in which people sit on the floor to receive a meal served in a divided thaal. Heads remain covered. Shoes remain outside. No one is questioned about religion before a plate is filled (Nesbitt, 2005; Cole and Morgan, 2000). The serving itself is sewa, and the washing of utensils afterward is sewa again (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2002).

Field observation recorded men and women cutting vegetables on the marble floor of a side room, a senior cook at the range, a woman preparing the atta, and stacks of washed thaals drying in a rack. Heera Singh was identified by residents as the principal cook of the langar khana. Children appear in the same rooms as helpers. Sewa learned early is sewa that does not later feel like a performance for guests (Singh, 2009; Kalsi, 2005). The architecture of low floors, open kitchens and an unlocked hall make that learning possible (Shah, 2011).



Figure 3. Sewa in the langar: men, women and a child preparing vegetables for the common meal. Photograph by the researcher.



Figure 4. The divided thaal used for serving several foods together in the langar, a practical object that also expresses the unity of the sitting. Photograph by the researcher.

Food rules inside the langar are simple and strict enough to be shared. The meal is vegetarian in the sense that it can be eaten by the widest possible company. It is served to seated people rather than to people who stand in a hierarchy of serving (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Cole and Morgan, 2000). The divided thaal is a small essay in that ethic. Several foods share one plate. The eater does not compose a private menu. The kitchen composes a common one. Guru Amar Das already knew that a kitchen could do work that a sermon could not finish (Harbans Singh, 1992; Singh, 2009).

Karah prasad has a different temperature from the langar meal. It is sacramental food prepared from equal parts of semolina or flour, sugar and ghee, and it is offered in the presence of the scripture before being distributed to the congregation (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Teece, 2004; Ralhan, 1997). The sharing of it closes the service and makes every mouth in the hall a participant (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Teece, 2004). Prasad has its table in the Diwan Asthan. The full meal has its hall and its kitchen. To serve the meal in the throne room or the prasad in the courtyard would blur two kinds of eating that the tradition keeps distinct (Singh, 2002).

On a wall of the langar hangs an oil painting, gifted by a person from Nankana Sahib, that depicts a historical incident at Hasanabdal involving a train, a crowd of Sikhs and the serving of food by the tracks (Khan, 1962; Salim, 2009). The painting is not liturgy. It is memory installed where people eat. Ritual and narrative meet on that wall in a way that no textbook paragraph can replace (Daljeet, 2004; Randhawa, 2000).

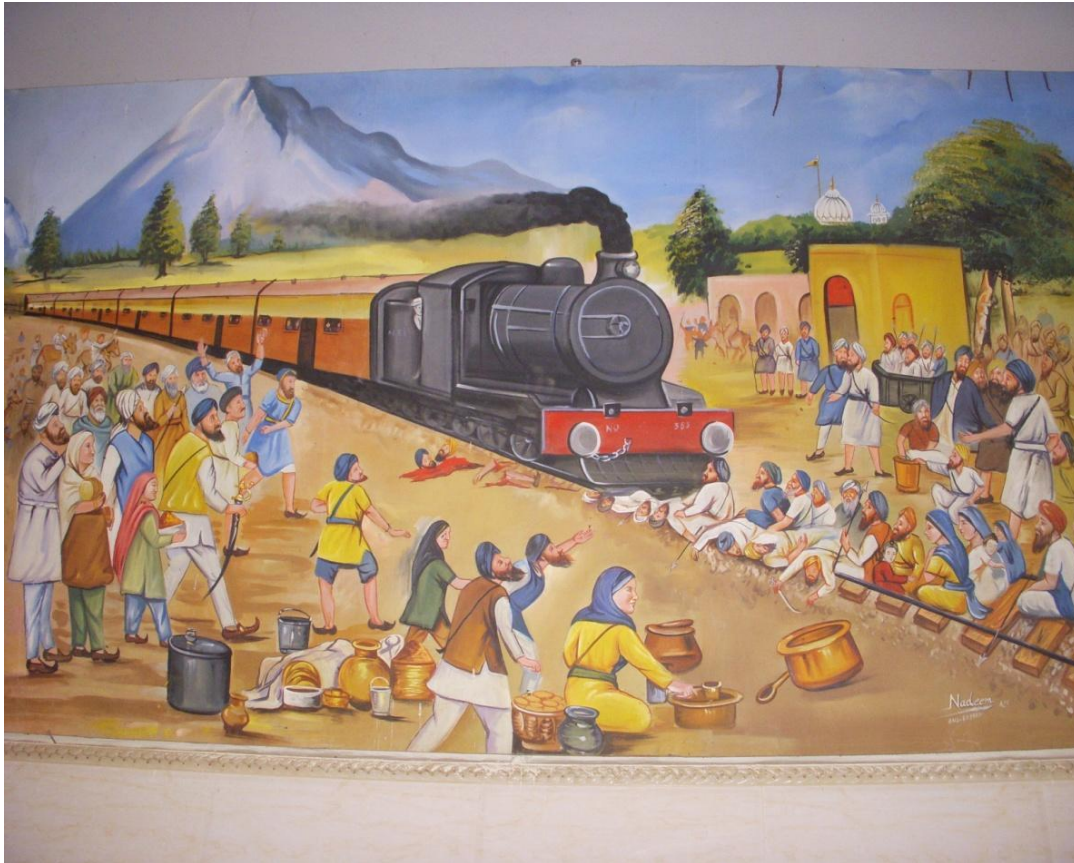


Figure 5. Oil painting in the langar khana depicting an incident at Hasanabdal, gifted from Nankana Sahib. Photograph by the researcher.

Sewa at Punja Sahib is not confined to food. It includes the waving of the chaur, the sweeping of floors, the washing of the tank steps, the lodging of pilgrims, the teaching of children in the precinct school and the gift of marble tiles inscribed with the names of donors and of the dead (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Shah, 2011). The stairs of the holy tank carry such names. The building itself is therefore an archive of sewa (Nadiem, 2006).

Money enters the ritual field through the charity box, through sponsored readings and through inscribed tiles. The box stands in the hall because giving is part of sitting with the Guru (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2002). Sponsored Akhand Path converts a private gratitude or a private grief into public sound (Ralhan, 1997). A donor can be remembered. A donor cannot buy a pew.

The person who arrives from Nankana Sahib with a painting, the person who arrives from abroad with a suitcase, and the person who arrives from the next street with an hour to sit are received by the same kitchen and the same hall (Singh and Thukral, 1992; Shah, 2011). If God is one and if rank is a lie, then the plate cannot ask a passport (Nesbitt, 2005; Nigosian, 2000). Punja Sahib keeps a smaller gate at which the plate does not ask.

Langar and sewa are therefore not accessories to worship. They are worship in another key (Cole and Morgan, 2000; Singh, 2009). Move the meal into a private dining room and the rite collapses into hospitality of the ordinary kind. Keep the meal on a common floor and the rite continues to argue, plate by plate, against rank (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Harbans Singh, 1992).

Life Cycle Ceremonies and the Festival Year

Life cycle ceremonies and festivals use the same rooms described above and change their temperature (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Salamone, 2004). A hall that on Tuesday holds a quiet reader can on Baisakhi hold a crowd that spills toward the sermon hall. The architecture does not change. The use of the architecture intensifies (Singh, 2002; Shah, 2011).

Sikh life cycle rites take place in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib and therefore tend to occupy the Diwan Asthan or, on crowded days, the sermon hall (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; McLeod, 2009). Amrit Sanskar remains the rite that most clearly marks the boundary between a general Sikh identity and the disciplined identity of the Amritdhari (McLeod, 2003; Kalsi, 2005). The five Ks are received as a uniform of the inner life: uncut hair, a comb, a short undergarment, a steel bracelet and a small sword (Cole and Sambhi, 1990; Teece, 2004). Field conversation suggested that nearly half of the persons regularly attached to Punja Sahib had taken amrit (Kalsi, 2005; McLeod, 2003).

The five Ks make theology visible on the body (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2009; Nigosian, 2000). At a shrine where Amritdhari presence is strong, these signs shape the look of the congregation without becoming a test at the gate. Visitors without the five Ks still eat, still sit and still hear. The rite is firm. The door is not a checkpoint (McLeod, 2003; Kalsi, 2005).

Anand Karaj uses the four lavan composed by Guru Ram Das (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2009; Ralhan, 1997). The couple walk around the scripture after each verse, so that the Book is the centre of the marriage rather than a fire. Funeral practice follows the same logic of presence. The Guru is the witness of departure as of arrival (Harbans Singh, 1996; Cole and Sambhi, 1978). Ceremonies that other religions may locate in a home, a riverbank or a separate chapel are here pulled toward the room in which the scripture sits. The building concentrates the life cycle around the Word (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2002).

The monthly Gurmat Samagam gathers the sangat for a more formal session of teaching and hymn singing than the ordinary weekday allows (Harbans Singh, 1996; McLeod, 2003). In a minority setting such a meeting rehearses Gurmukhi, refreshes the memory of rahit, and reminds younger Sikhs that their calendar is not the calendar of the town outside the gate (Shackle, 2005; Shah, 2011).

Baisakhi is the loudest day. Historically it marks harvest in the Punjab and, after 1699, the birth of the Khalsa under Guru Gobind Singh (McLeod, 2003; Cunningham, 2002; Singh, 1966). At Punja Sahib it fills the sermon hall, swells the langar, and brings yatrees from other cities of Pakistan and from abroad (Singh and Thukral, 1992; Shah, 2011). The Nishan Sahib is renewed with a dignity that makes the flagstaff a ritual actor and not only a landmark (Cole and Morgan, 2000; Randhawa, 2000). Dewali, remembered as Bandi Chhor, commemorates the release of Guru Hargobind from confinement and the lighting of the Harmandir (Cole and Morgan, 2000; Singh, 1999). Hola Mohalla carries the martial play of the tenth Guru (McLeod, 2003; Teece, 2004). Gurpurbs mark births and martyrdoms (Harbans Singh, 1992; Daljeet, 2004). Each festival borrows the same rooms and changes their temperature (Cole and Morgan, 2000; Singh, 2009). Festivals also rehearse doctrine. Baisakhi answers the question of what a disciplined community looks like when it gathers in public (McLeod, 2003; Kalsi, 2005). Bandi Chhor answers the question of freedom and of a Guru who would not leave prison without other prisoners (Singh, 1999; Cole and Sambhi, 1978). Hola Mohalla answers the question of whether a spiritual path may also train the arm (Cunningham, 2002; Teece, 2004). Local days answer whether a town shrine may remember its own dead (Salamone, 2004).

Local memory adds days that a general handbook will not list. The commemoration of Bhai Partap Singh and Bhai Karm Singh belongs to Hasanabdal in a way that Baisakhi does not (Khan, 1962; Salim, 2009). A shrine that only performed the panthic festivals would be a branch office of Amritsar. A shrine that also remembers its own dead becomes a place (Singh and Thukral, 1992; Daljeet, 2004).

Time keeping at the shrine is both clock time and liturgical time. Dawn and dusk are the hinges. Forty-eight hours is the measure of an Akhand Path. A month is the measure of the Gurmat

Samagam. A year is the measure of Baisakhi. A lifetime is the measure of amrit, marriage and the last ardas (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Ralhan, 1997; Harbans Singh, 1996).

The minority condition of Sikh life in Pakistan gives every ordinary rite a second meaning that becomes most visible when the calendar rises (Shah, 2011; Singh and Thukral, 1992; Salim, 2009). To keep a kitchen open, to raise a saffron flag, to teach Gurmukhi and to seat a scripture in public is to assert that a community still lives here. Festival crowds make the assertion visible to the town. Weekday worship makes it durable (Shah, 2011; Khan, 1962).

Life cycle rites pull birth, discipline, marriage and death toward the seated scripture (Cole and Sambhi, 1978; Singh, 2009). Festivals raise the volume of rooms that already exist (Singh, 2002; Salamone, 2004). Local commemorations attach the panthic year to Hasanabdal names (Khan, 1962; Salim, 2009). What does not change is the principle that the Guru remains the witness and that the stranger remains a guest of the kitchen (Cole and Morgan, 2000; Nesbitt, 2005).

Conclusion

Gurdwara Punja Sahib is a working house of ritual. Its daily worship, its vows at the rock, its kitchen, its voluntary labour, its monthly teaching and its festival calendar are not ornaments hung on an interesting building. They are the reason the building exists in the form it does. Each portion of the complex answers a portion of Sikh life, and the performances that fill those portions become readable only when the visitor consents to move from hall to tank to kitchen to hostel with the congregation rather than against it.

The discussion of daily worship showed that the seating and rest of the scripture, the hearing of gurbani, the sponsored continuity of Akhand Path and the petitions at the rock require distinct rooms and distinct bodily registers. The discussion of langar and sewa showed that these acts are not background hospitality but the social form of a theology that refuses caste and treats the stranger as a guest of the Guru. The discussion of ceremonies and festivals showed that the life cycle and the festival year use those same rooms at a higher temperature and that local memory keeps the shrine from becoming a mere branch of a distant centre. Together the three discussions support the claim that performances have meaning only in spatial context.

In a town already dense with Mughal memory, the gurdwara adds a living memory that is renewed every time the scripture is seated at dawn and every time a plate is placed in a stranger's hands. That renewal is the true monument. A future study could follow a single family through a sponsored reading, or a single festival from the first arrival of yatrees to the last washed thaal. The present article stops at the threshold of those finer studies and offers a map of the rooms in which they would have to take place. The map is enough to say this. Punja Sahib is not only a famous name on the Sikh map of Pakistan. It is a daily sequence of rooms, bodies, sounds and plates, and that sequence still holds.

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