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Jutla, Rajinder S.  
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*Research article*

## **The Evolution of the Golden Temple of Amritsar into a Major Sikh Pilgrimage Center**

**Rajinder S. Jutla\***

Department of Geography, Geology and Planning, Missouri State University, 901 S. National, Springfield, MO 65897, USA

\* **Correspondence:** Email: [rajinderjutla@missouristate.edu](mailto:rajinderjutla@missouristate.edu); Tel: +417-836-5298

**Abstract:** Today the Sikh diaspora encompasses much of the world, having spread from India and Southeast Asia to the Pacific Rim, the Middle East, East Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Sikhism is a monotheistic world religion founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Guru Nanak. His successors continued his teachings and provided a distinct shape to the Sikh community with a written language, a religious scripture and many institutions. The paper examines the significance of sacred place and the role of pilgrimage according to Sikh scripture. It also explores Sikh attitudes and practices towards pilgrimage through a questionnaire based survey. Finally, the paper investigates how the Golden Temple of Amritsar emerged as a sacred place for Sikhs and how it evolved into a major place of pilgrimage.

**Keywords:** golden temple; harimandir sahib; amritsar; sikhism; sacred place; pilgrimage; cultural identity; diaspora

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### **1. Introduction**

Every year millions of Sikhs from around the world visit Amritsar, a city in the northwestern state

of Punjab, India. Amritsar has gained its popularity because of its Golden Temple, also known as *Harimandir Sahib*, which is a major spiritual center for Sikhs worldwide and the focal point of Sikh pilgrimage. The majority of the population of Punjab follow Sikhism, the fifth largest world religion. There are 30 million Sikhs worldwide with twenty four million residing in India where they form 2% of the total population. The city which originated and grew around the Golden Temple is popularly known as “*Amritsar, sifit da ghar.*” This literally means the “house of praise” that is, “the place (Golden Temple) where the Absolute (God) is praised through the continuous singing of sacred music.” The city of Amritsar and its Golden Temple are together a symbol of Sikh history and spiritual tradition.

This paper investigates the emergence of the Golden Temple as a sacred place for Sikhs and its transformation into a major pilgrimage center. It first introduces the concepts of sacred space and place and their significance. Then it looks at pilgrimage in the context of Sikh scripture. To understand these issues it provides a brief introduction to Sikhism in terms of its philosophy, beliefs, and practices. Finally, it focuses on the sanctity and significance of the Golden Temple.

“Space” can be looked at as an abstract notion. Spaces have properties that set the stage for human activity and they can be shaped for use in particular ways. In contrast, “place” has location and has an experiential quality which is based on how humans interact with and experience their physical surroundings. Places also have distinctive and distinguishing human characteristics and are defined by culture, history and way of life. A sacred place is an important component of a cultural landscape and is a visible expression of many religious traditions. Cultural landscapes around the world are dotted with structures such as spires, domes, towers, and minarets, together with symbols and emblems of churches, temples, mosques, and stupas. Many of these places were developed as ritual arenas connected with history, mythology, and miracles [1].

Sacred places attract large numbers of believers and tourists all year round and have emerged as major pilgrimage centers around the globe. Pilgrimage refers to a journey motivated by religion and it plays a significant role in almost all world religions. Jews and Christians often journey to Israel. Muslims are mandated to visit Mecca. Hindus too are encouraged to visit the Ganges once in their lifetime. Sikhs also make pilgrimage to their sacred places but in order to fully explain the role of pilgrimage in Sikhism, it is necessary to examine patterns of pilgrimage in the Indian subcontinent.

Historically, pilgrimage to religious sites has been an important part of the Indian cultural tradition. Religion is deeply embedded in Indian culture since India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Islam and Christianity, which were introduced to the subcontinent centuries ago, are also influenced by Indian cultural tradition. This religious diversity has led to a multitude of sacred places which attract large numbers of people on a daily basis.

Millions of Hindus make an annual pilgrimage to sacred places which include rivers and mountains associated with Hindu mythology, scriptures and events [2]. The Ganges River is the most sacred of these and along its banks, well-known Hindu pilgrimage centers such as Rishikesh, Hardwar, Allahabad, and Varanasi have developed. The city of Allahabad is especially significant because it is where the two sacred rivers, the Ganges, and Yamuna are said to merge with the mythical River Saraswati. The *Kumbh*

*Mela* which takes place every twelve years at Allahabad is considered the largest religious gathering in the world. It has its origin in Hindu mythology and its first written occurrence dates back to the seventh century AD. During this period, the banks of the Ganges and the Yamuna turn into a large bathing arena. Tripathi [3] reported that the *Kumbh Mela* of 2013 drew 80 to 100 million pilgrims to Allahabad.

Pilgrimage is equally significant in Buddhism. Many Buddhists believe that pilgrimage will provide them with a shortcut to *nirvana* or enlightenment. The Indian cities of Bodh Gaya and Sarnath attract thousands of Buddhist pilgrims from not only India but also from Thailand, Korea, and Japan. The act of pilgrimage is also deeply rooted in Jainism. Jain pilgrims visit Ranakpur and Mount Abu in Rajasthan and also Shravanbelagola near Mysore in Southern India to pay homage to the 58 foot high statue of the Jain saint, Lord Bahubali [4].

Pilgrimage centers generally draw together large numbers of believers and tourists from different places. As a result these centers serve as cultural links and melting pots where people are exposed to different languages, customs, and fashions. Researchers, such as Eliade [5], Turner [6], Turner and Turner [7] and Smith [8] have explored the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism. Turner and Turner have shown that there are many similarities between pilgrims and tourists. Both visit places which share the same infrastructure and are largely involved in similar activities such as sightseeing and shopping, but their motivation for taking the journey is entirely different. The pilgrims' quest is for a religious experience to satisfy their spiritual needs whereas the tourists' quest is for adventure, recreation and knowledge of local history, traditions and architecture. Pilgrims are actively involved in various religious rituals and activities associated with the site whereas tourists act as spectators observing the activities of pilgrims [7]. Cohen confirms that pilgrims' behavior becomes very similar to that of tourists when pilgrimage destinations are located far from their home [9].

Studies done in the areas of pilgrimage and tourism include Eade [10], Rinschede [11], Nolan and Nolan [12], Vukonic [13], and Jackowski and Smith [14]. The majority of these, however, focused on the issues and traditions of pilgrimage in Western religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. Bharati [15,16], Bhardwaj [17,18], Dubey [19], Barber [20], Hawley and Goswami [21], Sopher [22], Cohen [9], and Kavita and Sugapriya [23] completed a number of studies on pilgrimage in Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Islam, and Buddhism. Michaud [24] focused on the social anthropological aspect of Sikh pilgrimage and Jutla [25, 26] examined Sikh travel patterns and attitudes to pilgrimage. Recently, Sahota and Panwar [27] conducted a study on pilgrims visiting Hemkund, a Sikh pilgrimage center in the Indian Himalayas. This focused on health issues at high altitudes and not on the significance of the pilgrimage site in terms of social, political, economic, and environmental aspects. Further research is therefore needed on sacred places and pilgrimage in Sikhism.

## 2. Introduction to Sikhism

Sikhism, one of the youngest world religions, was founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Guru Nanak. He was born in 1469 in the state of Punjab, India, at a time when the largely Hindu population was ruled by

a small Muslim class, and society was characterized by religious discrimination and fanaticism. Hindus and Muslims were alienated from each other socially and culturally. Guru Nanak questioned the existing religious conventions, rituals and practices. He rejected the sectarian religious distinction between Hindus and Muslims.

Guru Nanak travelled extensively spreading a message of harmony and equality. He preached a philosophy of monotheism that emphasized the equality of all religions, castes, ethnicities, and nationalities. He describes the Absolute as the one ultimate reality, the creator, whose name is truth, and who is infinite, timeless, formless, and genderless [28]. His followers were known as *Sikhs*, which means learners or disciples.

Guru Nanak's message was further continued and reinforced by nine successors or *Gurus* (spiritual guides), who shaped the Sikh community by giving it a written language, a religious scripture, and its characteristic institutions. The religion developed during a period of great turbulence, religious intolerance and oppression, and although the Sikh Gurus tried to reconcile differences, their efforts were not universally successful. Some were tortured and killed. Many of their followers, too, had bounties placed on their heads.

The last Mughal ruler, Aurangzeb, was a zealous Muslim who enacted severe laws to force the conversion of his primarily Hindu population into Islam. This led the tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, to affirm that when peaceful means fail, it is justifiable to take up arms. In an effort to bind the Sikh community together with the common purpose of protecting the weak and fighting injustice, he created the *Khalsa* (the pure), a band of trained fighters who would follow the Sikh tenets. He required the *Khalsa* to keep five articles of faith: uncut hair (*kesh*), symbolizing strength and accordance with nature; a small wooden comb (*khanga*), symbolizing cleanliness and discipline; a steel bangle (*kara*), symbolizing willpower and restraint; knee-length shorts (*kaccha*), symbolizing chastity and also practical for combat; and a sheathed sword (*kirpan*), symbolizing justice. In an effort to remove a major cause of caste discrimination, Sikhs were instructed to use one of two surnames: *kaur* (princess) or *singh* (lion). The Guru also prescribed that every Sikh wear a turban, which at that time only Muslims and royalty were allowed to wear. The turban socially uplifted the Sikh community [25,26].

In 1708, before Guru Gobind Singh passed away, he formally entrusted his guruship to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book. He directed Sikhs to accept the *Guru Granth Sahib* in his place as their final and eternal Guru. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is a unique scripture in that it entirely comprises spiritual poetry set to classical Indian *ragas*, or patterns of notes, and contains no historical or biographical details of the lives of the Gurus. It describes the nature of the Absolute and a pathway to spiritual liberation.

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is treated with great reverence and given a prominent place in the Sikh temple, known as the *gurudwara* which literally means "doorway to the Absolute". The presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib* makes any place sacred and transforms it into a *gurudwara*. Early morning, in every *gurudwara*, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is randomly opened and the first verse on the left page is read. This verse is called the *Hukamnama* and is considered the order from the Absolute for that particular day.

The *Hukamnama* is then recited and explained to the congregation.



**Figure 1. People praying inside the Gurudwara in front of *Guru Granth Sahib* which can be seen in the photo on the left under the canopy.**

There are three main functions of the *Gurudwara* in the Sikh community. The first and most important is its spiritual function. This is the recitation and singing of verses from the *Guru Granth Sahib* which in many gurudwaras is conducted daily (Figure 1). Another important and essential function is the *langar*, a hot vegetarian meal, prepared on the premises and served free of charge to all visitors. *Gurudwaras* also provide facilities for schools, libraries, health clinics, and serve as meeting places for organizing charitable work.

### 2.1. Sikh Diaspora

The Sikh diaspora has spread over much of the world, from India and Southeast Asia to the Pacific Rim, the Middle East, East Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The first wave of Sikh migration was primarily to English-speaking countries that were part of the former British Empire. Sikh emigration from Punjab, India started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was after the collapse of the Sikh Empire in 1849 which resulted in the annexation of Punjab into the British Empire. Impressed by the discipline and martial qualities of the Sikhs, the British recruited them into the British Indian Army and Police Force. They were allowed to keep their religious identity of the turban and other articles of faith in the Sikh regiments. Sikh soldiers and policemen were sent to serve in this capacity around the world in British colonies. These included Myanmar (Burma), Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Australia and Canada [29].

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, skilled Sikhs were taken to the British East African countries of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania to build the East African Railway system. Many had successful careers

and businesses in East Africa but when these countries became independent, large numbers relocated to the United Kingdom and Canada. In the early twentieth century, some also ventured out to Panama to work on its canal construction project.

The second major wave of Sikh emigration took place in the late 1940s, just after British India was partitioned into the independent countries of India and Pakistan. During this process the British drew the line of partition between India and West Pakistan through the state of Punjab. As a result, many families were displaced. At the time there was still a labor vacuum in Britain due to World War II, so many Sikhs started immigrating to the United Kingdom, and continued to do so until the late 1960s. Others settled in Afghanistan, Iran, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, and the Caribbean as traders. In recent years, as a result of economic opportunities in the Middle East, many Sikhs have begun to live and work in the Persian Gulf. Today, a significant Sikh population can be found all over the globe and the Sikh diaspora is wide-ranging and diverse.

Sikhs of the diaspora travel to the Indian subcontinent and other places for vacations, family reunions, cultural contact, and pilgrimage. Their travel is an important component of international and local travel business. The Sikh diaspora strongly identify with the politics of Punjab and its culture. For many of its members, Punjab is their homeland.

## 2.2. Pilgrimage in Sikhism

This research attempts to understand what makes certain spaces and places more important than others in Sikhism. According to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the entire universe is sacred. It states that “.... the Absolute fashioned the creation, and seated within the creation, beholds it with delight [30]. Therefore, all spaces and places should have equal importance in terms of their religious significance. The *Guru Granth Sahib* also states that “paradise is where the Absolute is praised,” implying that wherever and whenever the *Guru Granth Sahib* is placed, seen, read, remembered, or recited, that space and time becomes sacred [28]. However, in practice, many Sikhs take journeys of pilgrimage and will say that they experience certain places as more sacred than others. This may in part stem from Sikhism’s historical origins. The majority of people who converted to Sikhism came from a Hindu background, and pilgrimage is a very old Hindu cultural tradition that, while not mandated, is widely practiced among followers.

In Sanskrit, the sacred Hindu language, a journey to a place of pilgrimage is a *tirtha yatra*. The word for “place of pilgrimage” is *tirtha*, which is literally a place of crossing or ford: a shallow place in a river or stream that allows one to cross. *Tirtha* thus refers to a place where an individual can cross over to make contact with the Divine. Water is an integral element of pilgrimage since it represents the life-giving nature of the Absolute [31]. A significant number of Hindu pilgrimage centers developed on the banks of sacred rivers, of which the River Ganges is the most sacred. As a result, the Hindu pilgrimage centers of Gangotri, Rishikesh, Hardwar, Allahabad and Varanasi (Banaras) on the banks of the Ganges, have evolved into major pilgrimage destinations. The meaning of the term *tirtha yatra*, however, has

changed over time to refer to a journey of believers to any significant religious place, not only to a sacred river but to sacred mountains in the Himalayas. The act of *tirtha yatra* physically and mentally immerses a person into a sacred space. Visiting a sacred space is believed to purify the inner self and bring the individual closer to the Absolute [32].

The Sikh Gurus made numerous references to pilgrimage in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, since pilgrimage was so deeply embedded in society at that time. People equated a visit to a revered place as true spirituality; reaching the sacred destination and performing the prescribed rituals were all that was needed to attain spiritual enlightenment. Guru Nanak, the first Guru, viewed pilgrimage as an external activity devoid of inner spiritual devotion [26]. He states that simply bathing at a sacred place of pilgrimage is of no use since the Absolute is the only true place of pilgrimage. He continues to describe his own pilgrimage as an inner one of spiritual wisdom, and contemplation of the Absolute” [33]. Guru Amar Das, the third Guru, continues this thought when he writes, “the Absolute is my sacred shrine of pilgrimage and pool of purification; and in this I wash my mind [34].” Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru, affirms that “being kind to all human beings... is more meritorious than bathing at the sixty-eight sacred shrines of pilgrimage” [35]. This refers to the sixty-eight places of pilgrimage in India which were visited by Hindus of the time. The Gurus discouraged the ritualistic journey to a sacred place for salvation and explained that the only true pilgrimage is an inner journey. In Sikhism, the emphasis is on truthful living, kindness, sharing, and selfless service within one’s family and community while remembering, reflecting, and meditating on the Absolute.

### 2.3. Sikh Practices towards Pilgrimage

Today, Sikhs travel from far off distances to visit the Golden Temple and other significant sacred places. Many of them consider this a journey of pilgrimage which stands in apparent contradiction to the teachings of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. McMullen describes two aspects of religious practice: normative and operative. The former is based on the authority of religious scriptures, whereas the latter is based on the religious practices that are actually held by believers [36].

To investigate Sikh attitudes towards and practices regarding pilgrimage and sacred places, a sample of 60 Sikhs was surveyed. The sample comprised both women and men over the age of twenty. Its members had a wide range of occupations: students, teachers, business people, homemakers, engineers, physicians, and taxi drivers. Interviews were conducted over a two year period (2014–2016) in homes and *gurudwaras*.

Survey results were tabulated and analyzed. In response to the importance of pilgrimage in Sikhism, 25% responded that it was “very important,” 60% reported that it was “important,” while 15% reported that it was “not important.” Participants were also asked about their reasons for going on pilgrimage. Four choices were given and they were asked to identify the ones that were appropriate. Analysis revealed that people go on pilgrimage for many reasons. Ninety percent stated that they visit a shrine for spiritual reasons, to pray and meditate. Eighty percent cited historical significance as a reason for



visiting a sacred place. For thirty percent, the reason was to make a special request like having a child, curing a health problem, getting a job or passing an important examination. Fifty percent went on pilgrimage out of gratitude, to thank the Absolute for their blessings. Respondents were also asked to choose the sacred places which they have visited and which ones they would like to visit in the future. A list of places of significance in Sikh history and culture were given to them and they were asked to indicate their choices. Ninety percent identified the Golden Temple as the most important sacred site. Three quarters of these have visited it at least once while the rest would like to go there in the near future. This result led to the decision to explore this sacred space.

### 3. The Significance of The Golden Temple in Amritsar as a Pilgrimage center

References to “Amritsar” which literally means “pool of nectar” are found throughout Sikh scripture. This term was first introduced by Guru Nanak in his spiritual poetry where he symbolically describes the total immersion of the individual with the Absolute through remembrance, reflection, and meditation as “Amritsar”. He says, “all sins are washed away by bathing in Amritsar” [37] and that “the Absolute is the Amritsar in the world-ocean; whatever one desires, that fruit is obtained” [38]. This term was further used in the writings of the third Guru, Amar Das, who declares: “the impurities of the mind are washed away by bathing in Amritsar” [39]. These verses were composed long before the city of Amritsar was founded. Pilgrimage to “Amritsar” is therefore meant to be the inner pilgrimage, the mind’s immersion in the Absolute through *Gurbani*, the teachings of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Many people, however, take it literally as immersion in the sacred space of the Golden Temple and its sacred pool.

The Golden Temple was conceptualized and constructed as the first Sikh place of worship (Figure 2). In 1577, Guru Ram Das, the fourth guru built an expansive reflecting pool on a site rooted in mythology and local legend. Continuing the message and terminology of Guru Nanak, he named this “Amritsar”. He also invited artisans and traders to settle in the area thus forming a community of Sikhs. Then in 1588, the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev constructed a temple, *Harimandir Sahib* (temple of the Absolute) on a platform in the center of the pool surrounded on all four sides by a wide walkway and connected by a pedestrian bridge. Guru Arjan Dev put great thought into its design which was a departure from the traditional religious structures of the time. Its design reflected the basic principles of the Sikh faith. For example, the entire temple complex, the temple and the pool are located at a lower level, so worshippers must descend down steps towards it. This was to symbolize humility and immersion into spirituality. Also the entrances at the four cardinal points symbolize the acceptance of everyone from all walks of life, regardless of class, caste, race, and religion. This was in contrast with the design of Hindu temples which had generally one entrance and were enclosed on three sides. They were also open to only Hindus of certain castes. Mosques were also aligned with Mecca, so that in prayer, Muslims would face Mecca in the West. The Gurus gave no importance to any particular direction since in accordance with Sikh teachings, the Absolute pervades in all directions.



**Figure 2. Golden Temple also known as *Harimandir Sahib* at Amritsar is the most popular pilgrimage center for Sikhs.**

There are two ways of looking at the design of the *Harimandir Sahib*. First, it can be conceptually seen as having two pools, an outer one filled with water for dipping and thus symbolically cleansing the physical body and an inner one, the inner sanctum, for a cleansing of the mind through the continuous spiritual music and singing of *Gurbani*. Secondly, the *Harimandir Sahib* can be examined through the traditional definition of the *tirtha*. Here the literal crossing over the sacred water to get to the temple is symbolic of an individual's inner journey through immersion in *Gurbani* to make contact with the Absolute.

The *Harimandir Sahib* was completed in 1601 and the earliest edition of the *Guru Granth Sahib* was installed there by Guru Arjan Dev. The *Hukumnama* on that day, August 30, 1604, was the following:

The land is beautiful, and the pool is beautiful;  
Within it is contained the Ambrosial Water.  
The Ambrosial Water is filling it, and my job is perfectly complete;  
All my desires are fulfilled [40].

This is of great significance for Sikhs and adds to the belief that the Golden Temple is truly blessed by the Absolute and is therefore a place of sanctity. With the completion of *Harimandir Sahib*, the number of visitors increased. Sikhs were already gravitating towards this place to visit Guru Arjan Dev who lived there. Later on, it became the place of residence of the sixth Guru, Hargobind further adding to its importance. After the torture and execution of Guru Arjan Dev in 1606 by the then Mughal Emperor, Guru Hargobind decided that Sikhs had to strengthen their community by militarizing themselves. This represented a turning point in Sikhism. Guru Hargobind encouraged his followers to bear arms since the message of peace and conciliation of his predecessors had been met with violence and tyranny. The Guru started to carry two swords, *Miri*, symbolizing worldliness and *Piri*, symbolizing spirituality. He also established in 1609, the *Akal Takht*, the Throne of the Timeless (God). This was

designed to preserve the sanctity of *Harimandir Sahib* through the separation of the secular from the temporal. The *Harimandir Sahib* continued to function as the place where praises to the Absolute are sung and the *Akal Takht*, where issues affecting the Sikh community are discussed and decided upon. It is located opposite *Harimandir Sahib*, across the pool.

In the eighteenth century, during the turbulent Mughal reign, the *Harimandir Sahib* was attacked, destroyed and rebuilt three times. The last time it had to be rebuilt was in 1776 and in the early nineteenth century, the ruler of Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, donated a large quantity of gold to cover the top portion of the temple. It was then that it first became known as the Golden Temple. Recently, in 1984, it was again partially destroyed during political unrest in Punjab. These historical events have galvanized the Sikh community into further elevating this sacred place.

The importance of the Golden Temple in Amritsar is also marked by its mention in the *Ardas*, the Sikh prayer which concludes every service. This prayer, which was not written by the Gurus, has evolved over time to encompass the historical events which affected the community. This line says, “Visiting and immersing oneself, in the sanctity of the place, Amritsar (*Sri Amritsar Ji De Darshan Ishnaan*) is considered a blessing for Sikhs.” This line effectively binds Sikhs together as a community and has propelled the Golden Temple at Amritsar into its position as a major sacred place.

The verses of the *Ardas* also instruct Sikhs to remember the five *Takhts* (thrones), the seats of worldly authority where decisions affecting the Sikh community are made. Three, the *Akal Takht Sahib*, *Takht Keshgarh Sahib*, and *Takht Damdama Sahib* are located in Punjab, India. The fourth, *Takht Patna Sahib* is located in Bihar, and the fifth, *Takht Hazoor Sahib* is in Maharashtra. However the most important one, historically, is the *Akal Takht Sahib*. All five *takhts* are important but the *Akal Takht* is the central nerve center of the Sikh community, the supreme seat of religion and temporal authority [41]

Many Sikhs also like to visit the Golden Temple on certain days which commemorate events in the lives of the Gurus. One of the largest gatherings is on the festival of Diwali which coincides with *Bandi Chhor Divas*, an important historical event. This occasion holds a special significance for Sikhs because it marks the return to Amritsar of the sixth Guru, Hargobind, after his release from a Mughal prison. The entire complex is lavishly lit up with millions of lights and displays of fireworks.

The attraction of the Golden Temple can also be attributed to other notable factors. The first was the release of a widely popular Punjabi film “*Nanak Naam Jahaz*” in the 1960s. This portrayed Sikh pilgrimage to historic gurdwaras and culminated in a miraculous event at the Golden Temple, further adding to the power of place for Sikhs. Recently the Golden Temple’s depiction in Bollywood films increased its visibility throughout India and internationally.

Modern technology, too, through satellite television, has brought the Golden Temple into Sikh homes all across the diaspora. Daily live programming of *Gurbani*, devotional singing and prayers are relayed directly from the Golden Temple. This has further focused the attention and commitment of Sikhs worldwide to the Golden Temple. Sikhs from the diaspora as well as those in India, play an active role in the maintenance of the Golden Temple through significant monetary contributions, service, and volunteering for daily cleaning, the preparation and serving of *langar*. The Golden Temple serves *langar*

to well over 100,000 visitors (regardless of religion) every day. This number dramatically increases on special Sikh religious festivals. Additionally, free accommodation is provided to visitors in a number of residential buildings in the complex.

Recently, Indian Railways has started to run special trains linking all the five *Takhts*, thus facilitating the journey to these sacred places for pilgrims. Furthermore, travel agencies in India and abroad offer “pilgrim tours” which start and culminate at Amritsar. These activities are marketed not only to the Sikh community but also to the general public, resulting in a massive increase of visitors.

This dramatic influx of visitors to the Golden Temple is not without its complications. It has the potential to disrupt the spiritual atmosphere of the place. Temple management may need to take some measures to safeguard the peaceful ambience sought by the pilgrim (Figure 3)



**Figure 3. Massive increase of pilgrims and visitors can be seen in this photo. These people are lining up to pay their respects in the inner sanctum of the Golden Temple.**

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Golden Temple has developed into a major Sikh pilgrimage center and is also ranked as the third leading tourist destination in India. Sikhs from India and across the diaspora try to visit it at least once in their lifetime. It is both the spiritual center as well as the Sikh religion’s most important seat of temporal authority. Sikhs are drawn to the Golden Temple because of its historical and spiritual connection to the Gurus and their cultural history. It is remembered in the *Ardas*, the daily prayer, in a line in which devotees ask the Absolute to bestow upon them the opportunity to visit the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Sikh scripture, however, does not endorse the view that pilgrimage is necessary for spiritual salvation. There are several references which reinforce the idea that physically going to a place and immersing in its sacred waters will not bring one closer to the Absolute and that “the true place of

pilgrimage is where one bathes in the pool of Truth (God)” [42] and “[the] sacred shrine of pilgrimage is the Absolute” [43].

The Golden Temple in Amritsar brings spiritual satisfaction to Sikhs and is a major pilgrimage center in Sikhism. It is an enduring symbol of Sikhism providing a sense of cohesiveness in the community. It is the first Gurudwara and it is where the *Guru Granth Sahib* was installed for the first time. The Golden Temple has been desecrated a number of times in its history, and as recently as the 1980s. These events have given it a special significant place in the Sikh consciousness. It is a powerful and emotive symbol for Sikhs who journey from far and wide to this sacred place. It imparts to them the feeling of one nation bound together over a common heritage.

### Conflict of Interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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