

Abbotsford gurdwara reopens after two years

AJIT JAIN
in Toronto

The Abbotsford gurdwara in British Columbia, the only gurdwara in North America that has a 'national heritage' designation, was formally re-opened April 1 after two years of restoration work.

The restoration was made possible by funding from the Canadian government and public donations, said Gurdarshan Sandhu, chief spokesman of the Khalsa Dewan Society that runs it.

'Built in 1911, the Abbotsford Sikh temple was one of the first Sikh temples to be built in North America,' Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in his personal message to mark the reopening. 'To this day, it remains the oldest standing gurdwara in Canada and a blessing to the entire community. This building is a symbol of the hard work, dedication and devotion of the Sikh pioneers who first settled in Canada.'

British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell, a number of Members of Parliament and Members of the British Columbia Legislative Assembly, and former Deputy Prime Minister Sheila Copps — wearing a salwar kameez with a beautifully embroidered Indian shawl and a glowing smile — were among those present at the opening of the magnificent 100-year old building.

"It was bitterly cold, but we were warm inside," said Satwinder Bains, Director of the Center for Indo-Canadian Studies at the University College of the Fraser Valley, who will be the main coordinator of the history of Sikhs in British Columbia that they will now start writing for release in 2011.

"Now that the gurdwara has been restored to its original shape, they have reinstalled the Guru Granth Saheb and it is once again a functioning gurdwara," Bains

said. "We have 100 years of the Abbotsford gurdwara. It is a national heritage site, and was so declared in 2002 by then Prime Minister Jean Chretien."

Former British Columbia Premier and now Liberal MP, Ujjal Dosanjh, said the Abbotsford gurdwara was the second gurdwara built on Canadian soil. "The first one was built in 1908 on the 2nd Avenue in Vancouver but that, sadly, was demolished in the 1970s as the land was needed. Jawaharlal Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore visited that gurdwara. It is now correct that the Abbotsford gurdwara is the



■ The Abbotsford gurdwara, above, and, left, Gordon Campbell, Premier, British Columbia

oldest standing structure in Canada," he said.

In his message, Prime Minister Harper invited Canadians 'to take time to reflect on the important contributions of the Sikh community to this great country we all call home. This temple will forever be a reminder of our proud multicultural heritage.'

"We are very happy at the reopening of the gurdwara," said Sandhu. "In 2011, to mark the centenary of the building of the gurdwara, we will have year-round celebrations, including the release of the history book."

Coming soon: A history of the Sikhs

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The Khalsa Dewan Society has commissioned the University College of Fraser Valley to write the history of Sikhs in British Columbia to mark the centenary of the Abbotsford Gurdwara in 2011.

KDS spokesman Gurdarshan Sandhu said they would fund the project through public donations and fundraisers. "We are going to take on this project as it has real value for our future generations. Such a project hasn't been undertaken so far," said Satwinder Bains, Director of the Center for Indo-Canadian Studies at UCFV. "There has been some history written on the Sikhs and Indo-Canadians, but we would like to write a comprehensive history just for British Columbia — the social, cultural and anthropological history."

Bains said they were looking for a well-known historian who could undertake this immense project, as well as a researcher to garner material from archives, private collections and other sources. "We are going to form a steering committee for this project," she added. "It will be made up of community leaders, UCFV academics, members of the gurdwara's Khalsa Dewan Society, leaders from the Ross Avenue Gurdwara in Vancouver and other gurdwaras in British Columbia as well."

"There has been immense interest from many people who want to sit on this committee that will steer this ambitious project," she said, "and it won't be one person deciding how the book should be written."

"Our objective, of course, is to complete it in 2011 to commemorate the opening of the gurdwara in 1911. The site will be developed in a systematic and well thought out manner, using the expertise of historians, researchers and writers," she added.

"The context for the project will be the Fraser Valley, Lower Mainland and British Columbia, reflecting a 100 year history from 1904 to 2004."

The idea is to "set the history against a backdrop of Canadian and Indian political, cultural and social upheavals, both inextricably linked within the Commonwealth. However, as one country was starting anew and challenging the nation building process, the other was struggling with the fight to regain its nation-

hood."

thousands of miles away from the wheat fields of Punjab in the pristine and formidable mountains of British Columbia."

Asked how many men and women had arrived in British Columbia when the Abbotsford gurdwara was opened in 1911, she replied that while the actual number was unknown, "there were no women allowed entry, only men."

"Our call for this project will be Canada-wide," she said.

"We don't know the scope of the book yet as lots of people have arrived in British Columbia since the 1970s. Earlier, their number was small. We will also take into account the many Sikhs who first came to British Columbia but left for other provinces. Efforts will be made to find out how they were doing when they were in British Columbia and how they are doing now, wherever in the country they may be living."

The project will be costly "if we want to do a good job; if we want to be thorough and record history in such a way that it passes the scrutiny given to any historical project. So, we want to hire a person of high calibre. It costs a large amount of money, but we will raise this through private and public donations, and funding from the government."

Former British Columbia Premier and Liberal MP Ujjal Dosanjh, who was unable to attend the re-opening of the gurdwara, told *India Abroad* that while "the idea of writing history is good, how can it be just a history of the Sikhs? It has to be a history of Indo-

Canadians as, in the Khalsa Dewan Society, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims were all members. They were all involved and were all part of the building of the gurdwara in Abbotsford. They would all come to the gurdwara, which was the meeting place for the entire community during that period."



■ From left, Liberal MP Sukh Dhaliwal, Satwinder Bains, former MLA Patty Sahota, former Deputy Prime Minister Sheila Copps, former MLA Brenda Locke, Kuldip Herar and Tok Herar

hood."

Bains is very passionate about the project, which she will coordinate. "Evidenced within this renegotiation of the world order, was a small band of hardworking visionary immigrants from India wanting to carve out a small piece of opportunity for themselves and their families