

AN OLD LEAF FROM THE HISTORY:

HOW GURDWARA RICHMOND HILL NEW YORK AND GURDWARA BRIDGEWATER MAINTAINED A HIGH STANDARD OF GURMAT SANGEET

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It is a tale of two Gurdwaras. The East coast of America did not have a fully functional Gurdwara until 1973. The population was too little, just a few hundred and there was a resource crunch too. In 1973, an old but seldom used church building was on sale at the junction of 97th Avenue and 118th Street in Richmond Hill section of Queens Boro of the City of New York. There were very few Sikhs in the tri-state area around New York City, but they were a determined lot. They raised about 20% share of the down payment for a \$95,000 deal, which was clinched and the Sikhs of the area got their first home of the Guru and his Sangat.

After a few stop gap priests, the management of Richmond Hill Gurdwara hired Giani Gurdip Singh formerly a head priest in the United Kingdom and prior to that in Delhi's historic Gurdwaras. Giani Gurdip Singh, in addition to a good knowledge of our scriptures, had a deep knowledge of "Gurmat Sangeet" (Sikh Religious Classical Music). He was a great admirer of the iconic Kirtanias of the time. He always encouraged the management to sponsor only those Kirtanias, who are apt in the art of "Gurmat Sangeet". The management invariably obliged him.

In a similar burst of enthusiasm, the twenty odd Sikh families living in neighboring New Jersey decided to have their own Gurdwara. An old tiny semi-religious building spread over 12 acres of hilly land was available on Washington Valley Road in the rich township of Bridgewater in Somerset County of New Jersey. The year was 1979, a deal was also struck for a little less than 95,000 dollars. Roughly about 20% down payment was arranged and the deal was clinched. Thus the Sikhs in New Jersey established their own home of the Guru and his Sangat.

Gurdwara Sikh Cultural Society New York and the Garden State Sikh Association Gurdwara in Bridgewater were considered sister Gurdwaras. The then community leader in Bridgewater Harbhajan Singh Braich and the President of Richmond Hill Gurdwara Tejinder Singh Kahlon were very good friends, their mutual cooperation helped both societies. The other active Sikhs in New Jersey Gurdwara included Harbhajan Singh Nayar, Mohinder Singh Puar, Gurmeet Singh Dhaliwal, Parampal Singh Sidhu, Jaspal Singh Bawa, Jagjit Singh and Harcharan Singh Dhillon to name a few. Satwant Singh Sadhar and Avtar Singh of Glenrock area also became active.

I came on the scene in 1980. We started the practice of borrowing the Ragi Jathas from New York Gurdwara. The management in New York cooperated fully with us. In addition to President Tejinder Singh Kahlon, the other important office holders in the management of the New York Gurdwara were Rabinder Singh Bhamra Vice President, Manohar Singh Sahni General Secretary, Sardar Baldev Singh also a general secretary and Manjit Singh Shukla was the very diligent and hardworking treasure. It was a good team and all were conversant with Gurmat Sangeet.

The most revered "Kirtani Jatha" of those days consisted of Bhai Avtar Singh and Gurcharan Singh. This Jatha was generally sponsored by Gurdwara Richmond Hill New York, but the Gurdwara Bridgewater also used to be a major beneficiary. The same Jatha visited both Gurdwaras in 1979, 1982, 1985, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1996 and a few times afterwards. The other most revered Kirtania Jathas to visit both Gurdwaras included Bhai Shamsher Singh Zakhmi (younger brother of legendary minstrel Bhai Dharam Singh Zakhmi), Bhai Mohan Pal Singh (the second generation Kirtania of Nankana Sahib School of Sikh music), Bhai Mohan Singh of Bombay, Bhai Didar Singh of Nangal Khurd Hoshiapur, Bhai Dilbagh Singh Gulbagh Singh and Bhai Sarbjit Singh Rangeela of Durg (near Raipur in Chhatisgarh"). In 1996, Bhai Parkash Singh, Harbhajan Singh and Vinod Singh came to Gurdwara Bridgewater. All of them were very good teachers of "Kirtan Kala", on the recommendation of Gurparkash Singh and Harjap Singh Aujla they were employed as trainers of Gurmat Sangeet to the kids constituting our second generation. Thus the foundation of good "Kirtan Kala" amongst our children was laid.

In 2010, Punjab Singh, a young classical "Kirtan trainer" arrived in the Gurdwara. His talent was quickly recognized and his services were requisitioned by the knowledgeable "Education Committee of Gurdwara Bridgewater". He is still serving the Sangat in good stead. Our children are counted among the finest Kirtanias in America. They have many laurels to their credit. We wish our children best of the "Kirtan Kala" and its flawless rendition.

It is my sincere wish that our kids get proficient enough to perform "Gurmat Sangeet" in the finest Sikh traditions during the special "Kids Kirtan Diwan" to be held in Gurdwara Bridgewater on the evening of Friday February 11, 2011. May the Guru bless them all with great virtues.

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