

# From Community Kitchen to Oxygen *Langar*... (Re)Discovering New Patterns of Communion in the Spiritual Legacy & Architecture of the Golden Temple

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*Sri Harimandir* (the House of the Divine Lord), more popularly known as the Golden Temple, stands as a perennial symbol of secular faith, peace and spiritual renewal. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has changed/transformed us all, in conscious as well as unconscious ways, leading us to form new perspectives, or at least revise the old ones.

One dimension of the experience of the pandemic is to review our relationship with the Divine, and it is this particular aspect that the present paper seeks to explore in a two-fold manner. The first part focuses on how the architecture of the Golden Temple, that is, the physical structure, creates and contributes to the spiritual ambience of “bliss”, a term most frequently used by visitors to describe their experience at the shrine, while the second part describes how the rationale of *sewa* (selfless service), humanitarianism and activism, imbibed in the values enshrined in the Golden Temple, got manifested as new patterns of communion during the pandemic. Therefore, the paper adopts a qualitative research methodology to make an analytical study of the topic.

The architecture of the Golden Temple does not follow any “traditionalism”, focusing instead on imbibing the best of everything from a practical as well as a technical point of view, and reflecting the Mughal as well as traditional styles. As J.S. Grewal points out in his article “Amritsar in History”, the site of the Golden Temple was chosen by Guru Amar Dass, the third Sikh Guru, to establish a place of worship. He entrusted this work for completion to his successor Guru Ram Dass. A natural tank of water was converted into a large tank and a small town gradually sprang around it. Guru Arjan Dev, the son and successor of Guru Ram Dass, combined the idea of place of worship and the water tank, thus creating a prototype of the present *Harimandir* known as the Golden Temple. Spiritual values of humanity and upliftment of the soul were consciously conveyed through the physical structure of the temple. For instance, *Sri Harimandir* is made open to all, by placing four openings on its four sides, and true to its secular spirit, Guru Arjan Dev invited Hazrat Mian Mir, a Muslim saint, to lay the foundation of the temple. Macauliffe, a historian, states that the Guru rejected the idea of making *Sri Harimandir* the tallest building, saying “what is humble be exalted.” Therefore, one must descend eight or ten steps to enter, because *Sri Harimandir* was made as the lowest edifice of all, as God is found only with humility.

While the temple stands out as a symbol of purity, the water serves as a barrier between it and the worldly attachments. The main hall of the temple, in which the musical recitation of the holy hymns is done, has several openings and arched ceilings, cleverly controlling and distributing sound at different wavelengths. The dome of the *Harimandir* has partings throughout its surface, suggestive of the lotus flower, symbolising that one can remain detached and untarnished like the lotus, even while living in the worldly pond of greed and sin. The present unique splendour of the temple, giving it the name of *Swarn Mandir* or Golden Temple, arose during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who performed the service of covering the upper half of the temple with gold. An inscription of gold fixed upon the main entrance to the temple describes Ranjit Singh as

a simple devotee who, by Divine Mercy, was chosen by God as His humble servant, to perform this service. Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in whose era the Sikh empire reached the peak of its glory, was renowned for his vision and farsightedness, and his choice of pure gold was not an outcome of a desire for ostentation (in which case he could have covered with gold the entire shrine, from top to bottom) and also, he could choose any number of precious stones or material. Significantly, he chose only gold and marble, which could represent and stir sublime emotions. In Sikh religion, *Akal Purakh*, i.e. God, is loved and treated as the Supreme, and He is offered the best of everything out of devotion, Hence, the choice of gold was made to enhance the structural beauty of the temple and also, because as a building material, gold is mouldable and never loses its colour or lustre, irrespective of weather. With its colour being a gift of nature, and a shine that soothes rather than hurts the eye, gold represents wealth, in this case, spiritual splendour. The minute details in the way in which gold has been used to enhance the pivotal portion of the temple, is a fascinating study in itself. Marble, used as a wall covering as well as the pathway, was also a wise choice. The white colour symbolises peace and tranquility while the strength of marble as a building material has stood the test of time. The physical structure of the temple, thus, conveys the virtues of purity of soul, humility, love and tolerance for all. Significantly, the rituals and cultural practices followed in the Golden Temple also inspire one towards an elevating path of life. All these rituals connect human beings with the Lord and with one another, through simple, uncomplicated ways. The most prominent feature of these rituals is “*sewa*” or selfless service, borne out of love for God and humanity.

The rituals and cultural practices followed in the Golden Temple connect human beings with God and with one another, through simple, uncomplicated ways. The most prominent feature of these rituals is “*sewa*” or selfless service. People of all faiths come to *Sri Harimandir*, the sight of simple acts of love and devotion of the devotees, such as mopping the floor, cleaning the visitors’ shoes kept for safe custody, providing water, cooking and cleaning in the community kitchen, offering physical labour on construction sites whenever required, uplift the soul and fill the heart with an overwhelming gratitude for human goodness. The most striking feature of the Sikh tradition is “*Langar*” or the community kitchen, in which all who come are fed free, wholesome meals, irrespective of their caste, colour, or religion. More than 10,000 visitors on an average are fed daily, with the number easily crossing a million on special holy days or occasions. The kitchen in the Golden Temple has now installed machines to knead the dough and cook wheat ‘*chapatis*’.

Significantly, the *Langar* has become an integral part of the global entity of Sikhs, specially during the pandemic. Sikhs across the world cooked and served food, wherever and whenever required, thus breaking bread with communities, and creating a new pattern of communion. Delivering warm, home-cooked meals at the doorsteps of the needy, organising “food trucks”, joining hands with churches and other religious groups/communities, it was clear that *sewa* was not just a ‘Sikh’ thing, rather it was a communion for all. Another unique manifestation of communion was seen in the numerous camps of oxygen *Langar* organised in India during the pandemic where Sikhs and other volunteers arranged oxygen concentrators and refilling of cylinders.

Service to humanity has gained new dimensions in the pandemic, illustrating that the Sikh prayer of “*Sarbat da Bhala*” (the good of all), with its equivalent concept of community service in the church and all other religions, is the only true way to live. The pandemic has taught us that not only is no one an island, but even the flora and fauna also must be protected, so as not to disturb the ecological balance. The ethos of Golden Temple beautifully blends love for God with service for humanity, thus envisioning for us new patterns of communion based on compassion and empathy, and enveloping the entire humanity in peace and goodwill. Respecting nature, conserving natural resources, sharing with others and caring for the community at large, are just some of the new patterns of communion that are here to stay. Therefore, the real divinity of the

Golden Temple lies in its power to inspire the human soul, and this sentiment is articulated eloquently by Guru Arjan Dev who thus describes the shrine:

*Dithey Sabhey Thaav Nahi Tujh Jaheya  
Badho Purakh Bidhaata tah too Soheya*

(I have seen all places, but none can compare to you.  
The Primal Lord, the Architect of Destiny, has thus established and adorned you)

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