

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MALWA AND THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF SIKH GURDWARAS

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## Abstract

The Malwa region of Punjab has played a significant role in the historical, cultural, and religious development and growth of Sikhism. This paper examines the historical background of Malwa and explores its influence on the architectural evolution of Sikh Gurdwaras. The work traces the region's political, social, and religious history from the medieval period to the rise of Sikh power, highlighting the contributions of Sikh Gurus, local rulers, and devotees in establishing important religious centers. It further analyzes the architectural characteristics of Gurdwaras in Malwa, including their spatial planning, structural design, decorative elements, and symbolic features.

This study investigates how indigenous building traditions, Mughal architectural influences, Rajput styles, and modern construction techniques contributed to the development of Sikh religious architecture in the region. Through selected case studies of prominent Gurdwaras, the research demonstrates the continuity and transformation of architectural forms in response to changing historical and cultural contexts. The findings reveal that Sikh Gurdwaras in Malwa not only serve as places of worship but also function as repositories of regional heritage, reflecting the spiritual ideals, artistic expressions, and socio-cultural identity of the Sikh community. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between regional history and religious architecture, emphasizing the importance of preserving these architectural landmarks for future generations.

**Keywords:** Malwa, Punjab, Sikhism, Gurdwara Architecture, Religious Heritage

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## INTRODUCTION

The Malwa region is situated in the south of the Sutlej River and north of the Ghaggar River. Due to changes in the course of the Sutlej River during the sixteenth century, much of this region became dry and sandy. Groundwater was limited, and large parts of the area were covered with forests and wilderness. Several Jat clans, including the Bhattis, Dhariwals, Gills, and Sidhus, exercised considerable influence in different parts of Malwa. During the Mughal period, towns such as Ferozpur are mentioned in historical sources. The *Ain-i-Akbari* records Ferozpur as an important centre within the province of Multan. Although Emperor Akbar brought Malwa under Mughal administration, local tribal groups continued to maintain a strong presence in the region. Over time, however, the importance of Malwa increased because of the rise of Sikhism and the repeated visits of the Sikh Gurus. According to Visakha Singh in *Malwa Sikh Itihas*, the region earned the honour of being called "Guru Ka Malwa" because it was blessed by the visits of the Sikh Gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The Sikh Gurus played a central role in the development of important religious centers across Punjab and the Malwa region. Their contributions include:

- **Spiritual Foundation of the Gurudwaras:** The Gurus spread Sikh teachings and established places of worship that became centers of faith, learning, and community life of the people.
- **Establishment of Gurdwaras:** Various sacred sites were founded or associated with the visits and activities of the Gurus, commemorating significant events in Sikh history.
- **Promotion of Sangat and Pangat:** The new system was developed by the Sikhism and that was the foundation of Sangat and Pangat. The Gurus encouraged collective worship (*Sangat*) and community dining (*Langar*), making religious centers places of equality and social harmony.
- **Community Development:** Religious centers established by the Gurus served not only spiritual needs but also functioned as centers for education, charity, and social welfare.
- **Encouragement of Seva (Selfless Service):** The Gurus inspired devotees to contribute labor, resources, and donations for the construction and maintenance of Gurdwaras.
- **Preservation of Sikh Identity:** Through the establishment of religious institutions, the Gurus strengthened Sikh traditions, values, and cultural heritage for future generations.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji travelled through the Malwa region during his Udisis. He worked to free people from superstitions and false beliefs and spread the message of truth, equality, and devotion to God. During these journeys, he visited places such as Takhtupura, Pato Hira Singh, Dharamkot, Daudhar, Garbi, Dugri, Malerkotla, Banbhaura, Bathinda, and Faridkot. Historical Gurdwaras have been established at many of these places in memory of his visits. Through his presence and teachings, the importance of the Malwa region increased significantly.

The Sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji, also travelled extensively through Malwa to spread Sikh teachings. He encouraged the Sikh congregations to remain firm in their faith and inspired them to stand against injustice and oppression. During his travels, he visited Daroli Bhai, Mehraj, Dagaru, Daudhar, Lopon, Zira, and Vadde Ghar. In the Ludhiana area, he visited Jagraon, Kaunke, Sidhwan Kalan, Virk, Lamme, and Dehlon. He also established the village of Bhai Rupa in present-day Bathinda district. Many historical Gurdwaras connected with Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji still preserve relics and traditions associated with his life. The

Seventh Guru, Guru Har Rai Ji, also visited Malwa and stayed at Nathana. During his stay, he strengthened Sikh congregations and carried out religious preaching. It is believed that he blessed Phul and foretold that his descendants would rule over a large territory. This prophecy later came true when the descendants of Phul established the princely states of Patiala, Nabha, and Jind and became known as the Phulkian rulers.

In 1673 CE, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji undertook an extensive tour of the Malwa region. Mata Gujri Ji and Gobind Das, who later became Guru Gobind Singh Ji, accompanied him. According to the research of Dr. Trilochan Singh, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji visited nearly ninety places during this journey. These included Makhawal, Sekha, Dhilwan, Joga, Bhikhi, Khiwa, Samao, Maur, Talwandi Sabo, Bathinda, and Dhamdhan.

From 1673 to 1675, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji spent approximately one and a half years travelling throughout Malwa. He paid special attention to the problems faced by local people. Wells and water reservoirs were dug, meetings were organized to address social concerns, and efforts were made to improve relations between landlords and cultivators. Centres for religious instruction were established at various places. His personality and teachings attracted thousands of followers. His message inspired courage, self-confidence, religious enthusiasm, and social awareness among the people. As a result, Sikhism spread rapidly throughout the region.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji also maintained a deep connection with Malwa. As a child, he accompanied his father Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji during visits to the region. Later, in December 1705, after crossing the forests of Machhiwara, Guru Gobind Singh Ji entered Malwa and travelled through Alamgir, Raikot, Lamme, Takhtupura, and Dina Kangar.

At Dina, Guru Gobind Singh Ji wrote the famous Zafarnama, a Persian letter addressed to the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. From there, he travelled to Talwandi Sabo, where he stayed for nine months and nine days. During this period, Talwandi Sabo became an important centre of literary and religious activity.

It was here that the Guru completed and finalized several compositions that later became associated with the Dasam Granth. He also continued preaching Sikh teachings in the surrounding areas.

Thus, although Malwa was once regarded as a barren, sandy, and underdeveloped region, the visits of the Sikh Gurus transformed its religious and historical importance. Because of these blessings, many parts of the region came to be known as "Guru Ka Malwa." Wherever the Gurus visited or stayed, Sikh congregations established Gurdwaras to preserve their memory. During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, many of these shrines received land grants for their maintenance and administration. Today, these Gurdwaras stand as important symbols of Sikh religion, history, and heritage. Many of them preserve valuable relics associated with the Sikh Gurus. Among the important historical Gurdwaras of Malwa are Mehtiana Sahib, Takhtupura Sahib, Dina Sahib, Daroli Bhai Ki, and Gurdwara Bhai Roopa. The history and architecture of these Gurdwaras are of great importance. Therefore, the present study aims to examine not only their historical background but also their architectural development and significance.

### **Development of Sikh Gurdwara Architecture**

Architecture refers to the art and science of designing and constructing buildings. In the early period of Sikh history, Gurdwaras did not possess the form that is seen today. Guru Nanak Dev Ji established a Dharamsala at Kartarpur for the Sikh congregation. This structure was simple and functional, generally consisting of mud walls and a thatched roof. A major stage in the development of Sikh architecture came during the period of Guru Arjan Dev Ji with the construction of Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar.

Since this was the Mughal period, Sikh architecture naturally came into contact with contemporary architectural traditions. As a result, certain features of Mughal architecture influenced the design of Sikh religious buildings. Rajput architectural elements, such as balconies and decorative screens, also became part of Sikh architectural expression.

Although many books discuss the history and significance of Sikh Gurdwaras, only a limited number of studies focus specifically on Sikh architecture. Among the important works is P. S. Arshi's *Sikh Architecture*. Surinder Singh Johal's *Sikh Gurus and their Shrines* discuss the development and history of Sikh shrines. Dr. Gurdev Singh Sangha's *Gurdwara: Concept and Institution* explains the historical concept and institutional development of the Gurdwara. The writings of Bhai Roop Chand and Dr. Jasvir Singh Bhalla also provide useful information regarding the establishment and historical background of many Gurdwaras.

### **Islamic Architectural Influence and Sikh Gurdwara Architecture**

Islam is considered the second-largest religion in the world. Prophet Muhammad lived from 570 CE to 632 CE. Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in the cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah.

After the death of Prophet Muhammad, Muslim rulers expanded their influence into neighbouring regions. Wherever they established control, they adopted and adapted local artistic traditions according to their needs. Islamic art and architecture developed through the influence of Roman, Byzantine, and Persian traditions. Gradually, these influences combined to create a distinct Islamic architectural style. When Turkish rulers entered India during the twelfth century, Islamic architecture had already developed many of its defining features, including pointed arches, domes, minarets, and mihrabs. At that time, Hindu and Jain architectural traditions dominated the Indian subcontinent. Buildings were generally constructed using pillars, beams, and brackets. However, Islamic builders introduced the extensive use of arches, domes, lime mortar, and concrete, which allowed larger and stronger structures to be built.

One reason for the fusion of these architectural traditions was that Muslim rulers relied heavily on local craftsmen. Indian artisans incorporated their own decorative styles and construction techniques into the buildings they constructed. Another reason was the reuse of building materials from earlier structures, which helped transfer artistic features from one tradition to another. A third reason was the introduction of large-scale construction methods and monumental architectural forms by Muslim builders.

The result of this interaction was the development of Indo-Islamic architecture. This architectural style had a direct influence on Sikh religious buildings. Harmandir Sahib is one of the earliest and most important examples where this influence can be observed. Subsequently, many Sikh religious structures incorporated features such as domes, arches, decorative gateways, and symmetrical layouts.

### **Gurdwara Vivah Asthan, Kartarpur (Jalandhar)**

This site is associated with the marriage of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji in 1632 CE. A memorial structure was later built here and eventually became a Gurdwara. The original building was constructed using lime mortar, mud, and small bricks. It was rectangular in shape and featured a dome with a floral finial. Although the original structure no longer survives, a beautiful marble Gurdwara now stands at the site.

### **Other Early Sikh Structures**

P. S. Arshi's Sikh Architecture includes photographs of several historical Gurdwaras that clearly display Indo-Islamic architectural features. These include Gurdwara Tapp Asthan, Anandpur Sahib; Gurdwara Thara Sahib, Khadur Sahib; Gurdwara Tahli Sahib, Chandu Nangal; and Gurdwara Manji Sahib, Akoi. The historic Darshani Deori of Gurdwara Akoi Sahib, Sangrur, contains a rounded arch-shaped gateway, reflecting Islamic architectural influence. Similarly, the entrances of Angitha Sahib at Khadur Sahib were also built in arch form.

These examples demonstrate that many early Sikh Gurdwaras were influenced by contemporary Islamic architectural traditions.

Their principal characteristics included lime-plastered walls, brick masonry, domes, and relatively small congregation halls. Over time, many of these historic structures were replaced by larger marble buildings. Modern Gurdwaras are generally much larger, often consisting of several storeys, spacious Darbar Halls, grand entrance gateways, and large decorative domes.

### **Preservation of Architectural Heritage**

The replacement of many historic Gurdwara buildings has resulted in the loss of important architectural heritage. Although modern buildings provide improved facilities, the older structures represented valuable examples of traditional Sikh architecture.

These historic buildings preserved information about construction techniques, artistic styles, and regional architectural developments. They could have provided important material for future research. Ideally, new structures could have been built while preserving the original buildings as heritage monuments.

Examples from South India demonstrate the value of preservation. Ancient temples, some thousands of years old, continue to attract visitors and researchers. Likewise, the Ajanta and Ellora caves remain important centres of tourism and scholarly research. Historic Sikh buildings could serve a similar role if properly preserved.

### **Gurdwaras of Malwa and Their Architecture**

The Gurdwaras of Malwa possess special significance from historical, religious, and architectural perspectives. The region was blessed by the visits of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji, Guru Har Rai Ji, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, and Guru Gobind Singh Ji. For this reason, it came to be known as "Guru Ka Malwa."

Among the most important Gurdwaras of the region are Mehtiana Sahib, Takhtupura Sahib, Dina Sahib, Daroli Bhai Ki, and Gurdwara Bhai Roopa. These shrines preserve important memories, relics, and traditions associated with Sikh history.

### **Mehtiana Sahib**

Mehtiana Sahib is notable for its distinctive architectural design. Different Sikh traditions and episodes have been represented through sculptural forms. The Gurdwara's unique appearance and colour scheme make it a major attraction.

### Takhtupura Sahib

Takhtupura Sahib is associated with Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, and Guru Gobind Singh Ji. Separate shrines commemorate the visits of these Gurus, making the site historically important.

### Dina Sahib

Dina Sahib is remembered as the place where Guru Gobind Singh Ji wrote the Zafarnama. The original structure was relatively small and was constructed using lime mortar and brick masonry. Later, it was replaced by a larger and more impressive complex. The site is known for its Darbar Hall, sacred pool, domes, and fortified boundary wall.

### Gurdwara Bhai Roopa

This Gurdwara contains several important relics associated with Sikh history. Shrines such as Rath Sahib, Mori Sahib, Thara Sahib, and the Gurdwara associated with Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji are located here.

### Architectural Characteristics of Gurdwaras in Malwa

The architecture of Gurdwaras in the Malwa region reflects a combination of Sikh religious traditions, local building practices, and artistic influences. Their key characteristics include:

- **Spatial Planning:** Gurdwaras are generally organized around a central prayer hall (*Darbar Sahib*), where the Guru Granth Sahib is placed. Additional spaces often include the Langar Hall, congregational areas, and residential quarters for pilgrims, and open courtyards that facilitate community gatherings. Sometime these are free of cost or sometime a little amount is paid only for maintenance charges.
- **Structural Design:** Most Malwa Gurdwaras feature large halls, domes, arches, and elevated platforms. The structures are designed to accommodate large congregations while maintaining simplicity and accessibility, reflecting Sikh principles of equality and openness.
- **Decorative Elements:** Decorative features include frescoes, floral and geometric motifs, marble work, decorative arches, and intricate carvings. White marble, colored tiles, and gilded ornamentation are often used to enhance the visual appeal of the buildings.
- **Symbolic Features:** Important symbolic elements include the **Nishan Sahib** (the Sikh flag), which signifies the presence of a Gurdwara, and the central placement of the **Guru Granth Sahib**, emphasizing its spiritual authority. Domes symbolize spiritual elevation, while multiple entrances often represent the Sikh principle of openness and equality for all people.

Overall, the architecture of Malwa Gurdwaras combines functionality, spirituality, and artistic expression, creating spaces that serve as centers of worship, community service, and cultural identity.

Such buildings are not only places of worship but also important architectural records that help us understand the historical development of Sikh architecture in the Malwa region.

Therefore, the Gurdwaras of Malwa represent an important part of Punjab's architectural and cultural heritage. Their historical importance, architectural value, and connection with the Sikh Gurus make them worthy of continued study, preservation, and documentation.

### Contributions of Local Rulers and Devotees in Establishing Gurdwaras

In the establishment and the management of Gurudwaras the local rulers and people like devotees had played a vital role.

#### Local Rulers

- Local rulers and chiefs often **donated land** for the construction of Gurdwaras and associated facilities.
- They provided **financial support and patronage** for building, renovating, and maintaining religious centers.
- Many rulers helped protect Gurdwaras during periods of political instability and encouraged their development as community institutions.
- They sponsored the construction of architectural features such as prayer halls, sarovars (sacred tanks), gateways, and accommodation for pilgrims.
- Through their patronage, Gurdwaras became important centers of religion, education, and social welfare.

#### Devotees

- Devotees played a vital role through **voluntary donations (dasvandh)** and contributions of materials for construction projects.
- They participated in **seva (selfless service)** by helping build, repair, and maintain Gurdwaras.
- Community members supported the operation of **Langar**, ensuring that free meals were available to all visitors regardless of social status.
- Pilgrims and local congregations helped expand religious centers by funding new buildings, facilities, and commemorative structures.
- Their continuous involvement preserved the spiritual significance and daily functioning of Gurdwaras, transforming them into vibrant centers of worship and community life.

Together, the contributions of local rulers and devotees complemented the spiritual leadership of the Sikh Gurus, enabling the establishment and growth of Gurdwaras as major religious, cultural, and social institutions.

## CONCLUSION

The historical development of the Malwa region has played a significant role in shaping the growth and architectural evolution of Sikh Gurdwaras. As Sikhism expanded across Malwa, the region became home to numerous religious centers associated with the visits and activities of the Sikh Gurus, local rulers, and devoted followers.

Their collective efforts contributed to the establishment, preservation, and expansion of Gurdwaras, making them important centers of spirituality, community service, and cultural heritage.

Architecturally, the Gurdwaras of Malwa reflect a harmonious blend of Sikh religious ideals and regional building traditions. Their spatial organization, structural forms, decorative features, and symbolic elements were designed not only to facilitate worship but also to embody the core Sikh values of equality, devotion, and service. Over time, these structures evolved from simple places of congregation into prominent architectural landmarks that represent the religious and cultural identity of the Sikh community.

Thus, the study of Malwa's historical background and the architectural development of its Gurdwaras reveals the deep connection between faith, society, and architecture. These Gurdwaras continue to serve as living monuments that preserve Sikh history, promote community welfare, and inspire future generations.

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