

Inclusion of Harmander Sahib Amritsar –In Unesco world heritage list
(Not in the interests of Sikhs and Sikh religion)
part 20

It appears to be alluring to include Harmander Sahib Amritsar in the list of Unesco world heritage list, that it would come under the protection and maintenance of Unesco, it would be known world over and invite the international tourists. However when this matter is considered with a deep thought in the light of SGPC dossier and the relevant rules and regulations of Unesco, then it is found to be not in the interests of Sikhs and Sikh religion. It is also beyond jurisdiction and needs to be withdrawn.

(i)

The high status of Harmander Sahib, the holiest of the holy Sikh shrines of Sikh religion and of Akal Takhat, would stand altered to a mere cultural site. These are exclusively the religious places of Sikh religion, wherein only the divine verses of Sikh religion as contained in Guru Granth Sahib are sung or recited throughout, relating to Name of God, the creator of the entire creation. No cultural function can be allowed there of any sort. **Akal Takhat is the symbol of Sikh political power and sovereignty to deal with exclusively the matters concerning Sikhs and Sikh religion.** As only a cultural site can be included in the world heritage list, so in the dossier glaring misrepresentations have been made as to the Dictums of Sikh religion in the anxiety to describe these as cultural sites, the consequences of which would be dangerous for Sikhs and Sikh religion.

(ii)

It invites the intervention and interference of the Govts.of India and Punjab, of Unesco and other outsiders, for the protection, maintenance and management of Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat, which would prove disastrous for Sikhs and Sikh religion. Sikhs had suffered great sacrifices to end outside interference in the management of their religious places including Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat and they would never tolerate it to be reintroduced in any form, whatsoever.

(iii)

It contradicts the Sikh Dictum that Sikh religious places must be constructed and maintained by Sikhs with their selfless service and not by any outside forum like Unesco. It is an historical fact that, the Sikh gurus had out rightly rejected the offers of the Mughal rulers, Akbar and Jehangir, and other outsiders, for the expenses of the Langar, the Sikh community kitchen, Construction of Harmander Sahib itself and for other institutions of Sikh religion, that it is for the Sikhs alone to do it With their own selfless services and the money earned with honest means. It has its own deep meaning. Only with in the last two decades, Sikhs demolished the Govt. repaired Akal Takhat and themselves constructed it.

(iv)

No other religious place of prominence of any other religion has been got included in the Unesco world heritage list, just like, Mecca and Medina of Islam, any of the Mutts of Hinduism, the temples connected with the founders of Judaism and Christianity etc. The obvious reason might be that they cannot permit those to be termed as cultural sites instead of religious places. Harmander sahib is much more religious as only the Divine verses of Guru Granth Sahib are sung there from the early morning hours to the late hours of night, which relate to the aspects of Name of God, the Almighty. It can never be termed as a cultural site to be included in the Unesco heritage list.

(v)

Dossier may be without jurisdiction, as SGPC is obliged to manage, maintain and protect, Sikh Gurdawaras itself, in accordance with the provisions of Sikh Gurdawaras act, 1925 without any outsider intervention and interference. It has no jurisdiction to invite the intervention of Govts of India and Punjab, unesco and other outsiders in any form whatsoever for the protection, maintenance and managements of Sikh Gurdawaras and neither to declare Sikh Gurdawaras as mere cultural sites, which is so obvious in the dossier.

There is no ground or logic, worth consideration in support of the dossier to include Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat in heritage list. It rather violates the basic dictums of Sikh religion and the statutory rules and regulations for the management of Sikh Gurdawaras.

Misrepresentations of Sikh religion in the dossier

Sikh religion has been misrepresented to be **merely a culture** while **Harmander Sahib**, the holiest of the holy Sikh Gurdawaras and **Akal Takhat**, depicting the, sovereignty of Sikhs and Sikh religion, to be **mere cultural sites**. **The Miri and Piri** concept of Sikh religion has been misrepresented to be merely **social, political, economic and cultural** and the **Spiritual aspect to constitute the social and cultural** aspects of social life and not of religion and Soul. **The Sikh Maryada** has been misrepresented to be **merely cultural**. At page 84 vol (11), of the dossier it has been stated, ---

“ The core zone (Harmander Sahib) upholds the social and cultural plurality which is an important component of civil society. It also defines the Miri and Piri that determine the relation between the diverse components. According to it there are two aspects of social life, the temporal and spiritual. Of these two, the spiritual aspect orders the temporal. The temporal constitutes the political and economic aspects. The spiritual constitutes the social and cultural aspects of social life.”

And

S “ The social and cultural composition of these zones is diverse, it includes the Hindus, the Muslims, and the Sikhs.”

And

“ The legal instrument for intervention and regulations must incorporate this aspect in the management plan.”

At page 8 of the dossier, it is stated, --

“ There exists a system of looking after the precinct (Harmander Sahib) which is defined by the Sikh Maryada, a set of cultural values and practices. This is the basis for developing a management plan and system to attend to the conservation of movable and immovable historical components.”

And

“ Over the years the site has acquired a dynamism and draws a variety of social and cultural elements which require a careful handling.”

At page 163 of the dossier it has been stated regarding site interpretation,---

“To enrich visitors experience, it is important to educate them about the world heritage site so that they have a better understanding of its history and cultural significance.”

Akal Takhat, the prominent institution of sovereignty of Sikhs and Sikh religion has been misrepresented to be a cultural component. At page 55-56 of vol.(1) of the dossier it has been stated, ----

“ In the case of Harmandir Sahib, physical changes have been introduced but without destroying the continuity of cultural values, more importantly, the significant cultural components have been preserved. These are Sarovar, the water tank, the Harimndir Sahib, the Akal Takhat, the par karma and all the Shrines of the Shahids.”

And at page 57, it is stated,---

“ The Harmander Sahib is part of the Indian civilization that has contributed the cultural tradition of non-violence to world history”

The building and structure of Harmander Sahib has been misrepresented to compare with Hindu mythology, Islamic and Buddhist structures. The Dictums of Sikh religion, **Kirat Karo and Wand**

Chhako has been misrepresented to be martyrdom and Sangat, though there is no ambiguity that, Kirat Karo, means earning by honest means and, Wand Chhako, means the sharing ones earnings with the needy. The presence of Sufi **Saint Sain Mian Mir** at the foundation lying of Harmander Sahib has been misrepresented to be a cultural plurality. A futile attempt has been made to misrepresent every religious aspect of Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat of Sikh religion to be merely cultural.

At page 47, it is stated,--

“ The physical structure of Such Khand (Sanctum sanctorum) the main building has three levels, each of which corresponds to the three aspects of Supreme Being described in the Mul Mantra, Ikonkar. The Hindu word oam consists of three letters, o, a, m. O stands for urdham; above, a for adham; ‘below and m for madham; between. Thus the word o a m, means that which is above, below and in-between; the entire universe. Ikonkar stands for the one universal Being. “

At page 51, it is stated, ----

“ The western half contains components, that define Shaheedi (Kirat karo) and the eastern contains components that define the Sangat (Wand Chhako). These are the temporal aspects of faith and are known as Miri.”

At page 52, it is stated, ----

“ The architectural features of the precinct are a metaphors to understand the plurality in a social body. The precinct is itself a social body.”

At page 55-56, it is stated, ----

“ The co presence of Guru Arjan Dev and Mian Mir in the act of lying the foundation stone makes it more than just a material structure. It expresses the idea underlying the Sikh Gurus dissent against state power namely that cultural plurality will create the new ground for just social life,”

These are the **relevant statements made in the dossier** concerning Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat, the prime religious institutions of Sikh religion, depicting these to be mere cultural and in the management plan as well. Sikh Maryada and Sikh concept of Miri and Piri have also been misrepresented and described merely cultural. The word religion has not been mentioned at all, though all of these are religious terms of Sikh religion of great significance. Daring grave misrepresentations have been made in this regard. Spiritual aspect has been stated to constitute the social and cultural aspect of social life, the falsity of which is even known to a lay man, as it obviously concerns with the Spirit, the soul, the relation with God, the Almighty and exclusively a matter of religion. Similarly Sikh Maryada concerns purely with Sikh religion and is not a set of cultural values and practices. **There is lot of difference between religion and culture. A culture may be affected by a religion but these are altogether of different domains.** Religion guides, the relationship between man and God, the soul with the Super Soul and how the individual Soul merges with the Super soul. The culture relates to the worldly affairs and civilization. The culture is mostly regional and the religion is universal. The culture changes according to the civilization and development among a people, while religion is eternal and perpetual.

The dictionary meaning of these words is clear without any scope of ambiguity.

Religion----Belief in personal God entitled to worship and obedience, system of faith and worship.

Cultural-----adj.of culture, intellectual and artistic development, among a people.

Spiritual----relating to soul, relating to religion.

Temporal----pertaining to life in this world, worldly

Civilization----level of development of society, state of being civilized

It is not understandable that why **the actual meaning of these simple words was totally ignored to create the misrepresentations above pointed out?** Why the important features of **Sikh religion were portrayed as mere cultural and the prime institutions of Sikh religion, Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat as merely cultural sites?** Why **the spiritual aspect of Sikh religion was termed as social and cultural?** Why **attempt was made to alter the status of Sikh religion to a mere cultural?** And who is responsible for it. The persons involved best know **the motivation**, to be the allurements of UNESCO merely or the victims of some conspiracy to portray Sikh religion as a mere culture and its prime religious places, Harmander Sahib, and Akal Takhat as mere cultural sites, in spite of the fact that Sikh religion now stands in the list of first five religions of the world, while Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat are known world over as holiest of the holy Sikh Shrines-Gurdwaras-institutions.

However, those who are involved in the false propaganda that Sikhism is merely a part of Hinduism and Sikhs are a sect of Hindus may eagerly await such misrepresentations against Sikh religion. And that too, from the document prepared in the name of a prime Sikh institution, SGPC. It needs a serious probe, being a matter of far reaching consequences against Sikhs and Sikh religion.

Interference of outsiders in the management of Harmander Sahib

In the dossier three committees have been proposed for the maintenance and management of Harmander Sahib.

(i)

Harmander Sahib heritage committee.----- It will comprise, one member nominated from SGPC executive and manager, darbar Sahib. It will prepare and distribute monthly status reports to SGPC, State Govt. Central Govt., INTACH, and UNESCO through Harmander Sahib monitoring committee.

(ii)

Amritsar heritage committee.-----It will comprise, secretary urban development, secretary culture and secretary local dept. of Punjab Govt. and both members of heritage committee. It will implement all city level prescriptions including the buffer zone for long-term protection of the Darbar Sahib.

(iii)

Harmander Sahib heritage monitoring committee.-----It will comprise, members of the above committees, and member INTACH, representative of UNESCO and special consultant advisors. It will be for, monitoring of management plan implementation by discussing Harmander Sahib heritage committee reports, discussing issues pertinent to Harmander Sahib as a world heritage site, make representations to SGPC or the Govt. on any outstanding issues, it will prepare and administer budgets, invite contract offers, assess the same, issue work contracts, monitor them and be the single window between the SGPC and the contractors, it will convene weekly meetings and prepare management information reports every month for the authorities, primarily, the Punjab Govt., the Central Govt., INTACH, UNESCO and the citizens forum representatives, it will be part of all other committees proposed in this section.

Under the heading of property management plan, at page 163, of the dossier, it is stated,----

“ The plan also seeks to establish consensus among stake holders. It also wants to develop a road map. These are Sikh community, represented by SGPC, the Govt. of Punjab, the Govt. of India, private donors to the project and Unesco “

There is thus **obvious intervention and interference of outsiders** without any ambiguity, in the protection, maintenance and management of Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat, including that of the central and state Govts. The heritage committee is to send the monthly reports to all these authorities. The monitoring committee is to monitor the management plan and to prepare and administer budgets and to

deal with the contracts and contractors. **The above interventions have been invited by SGPC itself in its dossier. In fact central Govt. is responsible to the Unesco for the heritage property.**

The world heritage committee may also make the changes in the management of the heritage property. Section 156 of the, operational guidelines for the implementation of the world heritage convention, provides, ---

“ At the time of inscription, the committee (world heritage committee) may also make other recommendations for the protection and management of the world heritage property.”

Section 117 of these guidelines, provides,-----

“The state parties (Central Govts) are responsible for implementing effective management activities for a world heritage property. State parties should do so in close collaboration with property managers, the agency with management authority and other partners and stakeholders in property management.”

Section 123 of the guidelines, provides, -----

“ Participation of local people in the nomination process is essential to enable them to have a shared responsibility with the state party in the maintenance of the property. State parties are encouraged to prepare nominations with the participation of a wide variety of stakeholders, including the managers, local and regional Govts., local committees, NGOs and other interested parties.”

It is obvious without any ambiguity, from **the rules and regulations of UNESCO, governing the heritage properties as above mentioned that Govt. of India would be responsible for implementing effective management of Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat, if it becomes world heritage property.** Local and regional Govt.and other stakeholders are also to be joined. In fact only the Govts.of the countries that are members of UNESCO can correspond with it as to the matters relating to world heritage properties and so they are to be responsible for their management .So many other outsiders also are got involved Thus it is not in the interests of Sikhs and Sikh religion to get it included in the world heritage list.

If any one still **dares to say**, that there will be no intervention and interference of Govt. of India and of Punjab, of Unesco and other outsiders in the management, maintenance and so-called protection of Harmander Sahib, despite the clear-cut provisions in that respect in both of the dossier and the Unesco guidelines, some of which above referred to, then he or she is **either totally ignorant of these provisions or dishonest in the views.** Similar is the case if one says that there is no misrepresentation in the Dossier as to the dictums of Sikh religion and of Sikh Gurdawaras.

Dossier without jurisdiction

SGPC is obliged to manage and maintain the Sikh Gurdawaras including Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat, without any participation of any outsider in any respect, in accordance with the provisions of Sikh Gurdawaras Act, 1925. Its move to make it world heritage property invites the intervention and interference of Govts.of India and Punjab, unesco and other outsiders as to its protection, maintenance and management, for which SGPC may have no jurisdiction. Similarly it can have no jurisdiction to alter a Gurdawara to a cultural site, to include it in the list of the heritage list wherein only cultural sites are included. These are very serious violations of Sikh Gurdawaras act, the dictums of Sikh religion and the obligations of SGPC members itself. Sikh Gurdawaras act was enacted to manage and maintain the Sikh Gurdawaras by the Sikhs themselves without any out side intervention and to preach the Sikh religion in accordance with the dictums of Sikh religion and for that aim Sikhs were to elect their representatives, named SGPC. Its members are duty bound to discharge their duties with honesty of purpose, for which they have been elected, remaining under the ambits of that act, without the intervention of any outsider. **If any member is found to have his intentional participation for these violations, it may even lead to his disqualification and particularly of those who are responsible for**

the misappropriation and wastage of the huge funds of SGPC, for any such unauthorized project, which are alleged by some persons to the extent of four millions rupees. Such a huge amount cannot be even spent by Unesco on any one-heritage property, as the number of such properties is very large, while the funds at its disposal for those properties are comparatively too small. The budget of SGPC is over 200 crores of rupees, much more than that of Unesco for the entire properties of its heritage list.

Only cultural and natural sites can be in heritage list

The nomination form is very clear in this regard. It states,-----

“ Under the terms of the convention concerning the protection of the world culture and natural heritage, as adopted by the general conference of unesco in 1972, the inter Governmental committee for the protection of the world culture and natural heritage called the world heritage committee, shall establish under the title of the world heritage list, a list of properties forming part of the cultural and natural heritage”

Definition of cultural heritage

S.45, article 1, of, Operational guidelines for the implementation of the world heritage convent

“ For the purpose of this convention, the following shall be considered as cultural heritage,-----

Monuments, architectural work, works of monumental sculpture and painting elements or structures of an archeological nature, inscription, cave dwellings and combination of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history. Art or science.

Groups of buildings-----groups of separate or connected buildings, which because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science.”

Emblem on heritage property

S.271 provides that the emblem on the property would be put, “This property has been inscribed upon the world heritage list of the convention concerning the protection of world culture and natural heritage”

In the world heritage list there are **already 788 sites, out of which 611 are the cultural sites, 154 the natural sites while 23 mixed sites. Would it enhance the stature of Harmander Sahib or lower it to be included at number 789? It would certainly lower it.** . Most of the sites included in this list are parks, caves and such like natural and cultural sites. In the Indian list are like Ajanta caves, Ellora caves, Agra fort and qutab minar and no religious place of any importance. Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat should not be added to such a list, which are known world over to be very prominent holy places of Sikh religion. **The emblem of a cultural site can never be put at Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat, as these are primarily, the religious places of Sikh religion and not the cultural sites. Sikhs are capable to protect, maintain and manage their prime religious places themselves.**

No doubt building of Harmander Sahib has got its own **architectural value**, but it is **secondary**. Its primary aim is religious and spiritual of Sikh religion, wherein the Divine verses of Sikh religion as contained In Guru Granth Sahib are sung and recited, from the early hours of the morning to the late night, in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, the perpetual eternal Sikh Guru. **It is not a cultural site.** Obviously **Harmander Sahib does not come in any of the items of cultural heritage. It is the holiest of the holy shrines-Gurdawaras of Sikh religion, from where every one gets the Spiritual inspiration and Name of God, the Almighty. Akal Takhat is the prime institution of Sikh religion with the status of sovereignty and not a cultural site and there can be no intervention of any outsider in any form whatsoever.**

The status of a cultural place, which is concerned with worldly affairs and civilization is not equal to that of the status of religion and of sovereignty, which concern with the relation of man with God and the individual soul with Supreme soul. Both of these places have the different domains, though religion affects the cultural values to cultivate the sense of higher moral and ethical values. The makers of the dossier have exhibited their **unawareness** to this aspect, intentional or unintentional, that by declaring **Harmander Sahib and Akal Takhat** to be a cultural site, their higher status of a prominent religious place of Sikh religion and of sovereignty is lowered down, besides being misrepresented. **They lost sight of the fact**, consciously or unconsciously that for this misrepresentation, **they misrepresented the Miri and Piri** concept of Sikh religion **and Sikh Maryada** to be **merely cultural**, besides misrepresenting some other dictums of Sikh religion and even inviting **the intervention of out side agencies** in the maintenance and management of Sikh Gurdawaras.

It is certainly a matter of grave concern for Sikhs that such a document is in the name of SGPC, the prime elected Sikh institution, which still needs the efforts to gain the confidence of Sikhs world over and such like actions prove counter productive as majority of Sikhs even doubt its veracity. SGPC would be acting in the right direction to withdraw the dossier without further delay and to probe in to the motivation and misappropriation of its funds for such a document.

Mewa Singh
Retd. Judge
New Jersey--USA
March 12, 2005
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- (i) Jathedar, Akal Takhat, Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti.
- (ii) President, SGPC, Bibi Jagir Kaur.
- (iii) President, Akali Dal, S. Parkash Singh Badal,

To look personally in to the matter and take the necessary action to withdraw the dossier, being not in the interests of Sikhs and Sikh religion and to end the controversy, which has arisen in the Sikhs world over, against the dossier and the SGPC.

Mewa Singh