

THE BUILDING OF THE SIKH GURDWARA
A BRIEF HISTORY

TRI-STATE SIKH CULTURAL SOCIETY
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

FORWARD

This monograph on the building of the Pittsburgh Gurdwara was written by my father, Sohan Singh Chaudhary, at the request of several members of the *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society*. He has done his best to recount events accurately and without bias, and I have done my best to edit his work simply for grammar and style, without altering its contents. The author has purposefully excluded his name from the document. He has written it in the *third person*, as an observer of the people and the events. It is my hope that the reader will recall his deep involvement throughout the society's evolution and in every stage of the Gurdwara project. Please remember his sincerity, his dedication and his love for you; for he remembers yours for him.

Rekhinder Kaur

February 27, 1996

The members of the *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society* of Pittsburgh are a dedicated and generous people. Perhaps their greatest collective achievement was the planning and building of a Gurdwara, constructed in the early 1980's. As it stands today and passes through the changes of the coming generations, the Pittsburgh Gurdwara will remain a testament to the devotion and commitment put forth by the Tri-State *Sangat* during its early years.

THE SANGAT

Sikh families began moving into the Tri-State area in late 1966. At that time there were approximately 20 Indian families in the Pittsburgh area. Despite homeland regional and religious differences, we were all very friendly toward one another. By the late 1960's, the number of Sikh families had increased to about five. Dr. Prithipal Singh, with his family, was one of the very first to move to the area. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Tejinder Singh Bal, Dr. Manmohan Singh Luthra, Dr. Daljit Singh and Dr. Jasbir Singh Makar and their families joined to become part of the new *Sangat* in the late 60's and early 70's. These early Sikh immigrants to the area would devoutly celebrate *Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Janam Din. Sadharan Paath* would be done with a *Bhog* and *Langar* on that day at somebody's home. Many of the participants were actually Hindu families, which speaks to both the closeness and openness of the small Indian community during these times.

In the early 1970's, more Sikhs began moving into the Tri-State area. Dr. Amrik Singh Chattha, Dr. Sarjit Singh and Dr. Jasbir Singh Makar started their medical practices in Weirton, West Virginia, and Dr. Rashpal Singh (now in Washington, D.C.) and Dr. Harbans Singh (now in Victorville, California) joined medical residency at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr Rashpal Singh was well known by the Luthras and Chatthas and quickly became friends with everybody. He was quite sociable, inviting people to his apartment and visiting people in their homes. Rashpal Singh was a bachelor and loved Punjabi food: he could certainly eat quite a lot of it! But besides being good company, he was very knowledgeable in terms of Sikh history, religious studies and interpretation of *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Until this time, the Sikhs in the area had celebrated *Guru Nanak's Gurpurab* by

performing *Sadharan Paath* and holding a *Bhog* and *Langar*. Dr Rashpal Singh suggested that we should have an *Akhand Paath*. The small *Sangat* told him that there were not enough *paathis* in the area. But he insisted that even if there were only three, that would be more than enough. With his inspiration and encouragement, he himself, Dr. Harbans Singh and Mrs. Kamaljit Kaur Chaudhary completed the first annual *Akhand Paath* on *Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Gurburab* in Monroeville, PA in November, 1970. Rashpal Singh would do *paath* for over four hours at a stretch. Generally, his scheduled time would be from midnight to 4-5 AM; he had great stamina. This first *Akhand Paath* was done at Kamal's home and was attended by the small but dedicated *Sangat*. It received great support and *sewa* from all, but most notably from Dr. Damyanti Kaur Luthra and Drs.' Amarjeet Singh and Gurbilash Kaur Nagpaul. Subsequent *Akhand Paaths* were held at the Gurdwara within the Hindu Temple.

In the early 1970's, the growing Indian community started talking about having our own Indian Center. This subject would come up frequently at social events, which were mostly children's birthday parties or religious functions. Those exploring the idea of an Indian Center most actively and with greatest enthusiasm were Dr. Raj Gopal, Dr. Vidyot Niyogi, Dr. Ragu Nath, Dr. Krishan Terneja, Dr. Hari Misra, Dr. Sudagar Reddy, Dr. George and Dr Rao. As the Indian Center evolved from an idea to an approaching reality, Sikh participation grew. The Sikhs suggested that they could donate funds if it could be used by all Indians. The Hindu gentlemen agreed that it should be a common place of worship, but because of their majority status, they settled on the name *The Hindu Temple*. Vidyot Niyogi and Raj Gopal collected about \$18,000 from the Indian families, which was enough for the down payment to purchase an old Baptist church and preschool on Illini Drive in Monroeville, Pennsylvania. It stood on more than seven acres of land, and the total price paid was \$65,000 over a 15 year mortgage period.

Everybody felt quite pleased in the knowledge of having our own temple and gathering center. It was considered to be great progress toward retaining our cultural and religious heritage. The temple had a large main hall, four separate rooms and a kitchen. The North and South Indian Hindu deities were installed in the main hall and *Guru Granth Sahib Ji's parkash* was in one of the rooms. The president of the Hindu Temple was Dr. Ragu Nath; the vice-president, Mrs. Kamaljit Kaur Chaudhary; and the secretary, Dr. Raj Gopal. The Sikhs took an

active role in the maintenance and upkeep of the temple and grounds. Dr. Raj Gopal and several of his Sikh friends worked very hard in the temple's beautification. Many improvements were made in the front of the building; flowers were planted, and a parking lot and children's playground were added. The Sikhs upgraded *Guru Granth Sahib's* room by installing a new sky blue plush carpet.

SEPARATE PATHS

At the Hindu Temple, people worked very closely with one another and a great deal of respect developed amongst the Hindus and Sikhs alike. However differences existed and eventually people chose to stay within their own groups. Dr. Raj Gopal was very organized and established strong ties within the South Indian community. They would celebrate their religious functions in great numbers, people traveling from as far as New York, Chicago and Canada to attend. Soon they founded the *Sri Vankatashwra Temple Society* and began plans to build a new temple of their own. They received religious and financial support from the *SV* Trust in India. After a few years, they had collected enough funds to build a new *SV* Temple, separate from the existing Hindu Temple.

The North Indians had envisioned a common complex on the hill above the existing Hindu Temple on Illini Drive. This was to have housed temples for the North Indian Hindus, the South Indian Hindus, the Jains and the Sikhs, in addition to serving as a common social hall. However, the North Indian Hindus and Sikhs were not as organized and did not collect any separate funds for this purpose. As plans for the *SV* Temple solidified, many North Indian Hindus and Sikhs felt that all Indians should unite to build a joint temple. The Indian Ambassador, Mr. Koul, came to Pittsburgh several times to try to mediate a unified approach, without success. The South Indian community went forth and purchased their own land overlooking the Parkway on the Monroeville - Penn Hills border. Dr. Raj Gopal organized a large ground breaking ceremony in which a foundation of precious stones was laid. Within a short time, construction of the *SV* Temple began. The architects and builders, having been brought from India, created an authentic and awe-inspiring temple. The *SV* Temple became a pilgrimage site for Hindus all over North

America, as it was the first such temple erected in this continent.

In the original Hindu Temple there was no resident priest, and a few hostile local neighbors took advantage of the situation and vandalized the temple. On one occasion, parts of the deities were broken and desecrated with paint, and *Guru Granth Sahib Ji's* pages were torn into pieces. It was terribly disturbing when we first encountered the damage: some people broke down and cried, their pain was so great. *Guru Granth Sahib* was mended with tape and we continued to use it for some time. A year later a new *Guru Granth Sahib* was brought from Sri Amritsar and the old one was sent back there for cremation. The old *Biers* are cremated in Amritsar once a year. After this unsettling event, metal bars were installed on the outside of windows and sturdy bolts were placed on the doors for protection.

At other times, inconsiderate acts came from within. *Guru Granth Sahib's* room had a comfortable carpet and some Hindu people would disrespectfully gather or sleep in the room with uncovered heads. Sometimes small children, receiving no discipline from their parents, would play inside the room and jump onto the side of the *Palki*. But overall, the temple functioned quite smoothly. The Sikhs used to have a monthly *Paath* and *Langar* in the main hall, and the relationship between the Hindus and Sikhs was amiable and workable.

THE TRI-STATE SIKH CULTURAL SOCIETY

It was around 1974, just before the *Akhand Paath* of *Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Gurburab*, that we thought to invite a *Kirtania*. We had heard of an elderly *parcharik*, Dr. Kartar Singh, who had come from India to New York City. In order to invite him to Pittsburgh we needed about \$350 for airfare. Until this point, we only had a small amount of cash, so several people, including Dr. Rashpal Singh, Dr. Manmohan Singh Luthra and Sardar Bhopinder Raj Singh, gave additional money for this specific purpose. However, in the meantime Dr. Kartar Singh made arrangements to go to Cleveland, Ohio instead. Some of us traveled there to invite him to Pittsburgh after his stay in Cleveland. As it turned out, we did not care for his condescending style of preaching. He was very critical of people: even the Cleveland *Sangat* found him offensive and argued with him. So we left Cleveland without a *Kirtania*, but with a new fund.

The money we had collected was saved. Bhopinder Raj Singh opened a bank account for the *Sangat*. There was not even a formal name for the Sikh society, but it had come into existence because it had an account of its own. Prior to this time, any collected money was sent to *Harmandir Sahib* in Amritsar or to some other charitable institution. But after this, money was saved in this account. After a year or two, for tax purposes we registered the society and adopted the formal name *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society*.

SIKH YOUTH EDUCATION

Around 1974, Professors Balwant Singh and Tej Bhan Saini of Bucknell University organized a religious study retreat. Professor Balwant Singh came to Pittsburgh and invited our *Sangat* to attend. At this weekend forum, which was held on beautiful grounds in the hills of Central Pennsylvania, he suggested that we should organize a camp for the children. We offered to hold the camp in the Pittsburgh area. Professor Tej Bhan Singh Saini came to Pittsburgh and spent a couple of days with Dr. Manmohan Singh Luthra to look for a suitable site. Dr. Sarjit Singh found out about Raccoon Creek State Park located near Weirton. An enormous accommodation located in the scenic wooded hills of Western Pennsylvania, which included a large community and dining hall, kitchen, infirmary, 40 cabins and a playground, could be rented for a nominal fee of only \$40 total. The site was rented for a two week long camp to be sponsored by the Pittsburgh *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society*. Professors Balwant Singh and Tej Bhan Singh Saini invited children from the New York and Washington D.C. areas to attend, but to our surprise, the response was very poor. The number of children registered was not sufficient to justify a camp. At this point, Dr. Manmohan Singh Luthra took the initiative and requested everybody in the Pittsburgh area to send their children to the camp. He collected money for 16 children. He then encouraged the *Sangat* to call their friends in New York, Washington D.C. and Cleveland and ask them to send their children to the camp with assurances that we would take good care of them. The total number of children recruited in this fashion was close to 40. Dr. Luthra supervised the medical care of the children and recruited a camp nurse. Food arrangements were made with a great deal of support by Manjit Singh Khara.

Unfortunately, despite our strong convictions and diligent efforts, not everything went off smoothly: our professor friends argued with one another, insulted the ladies and scared the children. The camp ended after a week and these men took off with a lot of camp supplies and food. Some of the camp funds were still with the *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society*, and Dr. Saini came back to claim this money. Mr. Suhindra Singh Ajmani was the treasurer of the society at this time. He asked Dr. Saini for an itemized detail of expenses, but Dr. Saini refused to give this information. This created a big commotion in the Gurdwara; Dr. Saini was about to leave in anger, but then Mr. Ajmani gave him most of the money after Dr. Saini promised to send the account details. Later on, he did send an incomplete list of the account which hardly balanced the total amount.

Out of these difficult lessons came forth a much wiser *Sangat*. The eventual outcome was that the following year the *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society* organized a much larger and more efficient camp. Although they were invited, the professors refused to participate under the direction of the Pittsburgh *Sangat*. Despite any ill feelings, it must be recognized that Dr. Tej Bhan Singh Saini and Dr. Balwant Singh initiated the idea of the camp which subsequently became an integral part of the *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society*. For years to follow it was an established institution and was amongst the great accomplishments of the Pittsburgh Sikh community. It ran full capacity with up to 100 children from many regions across the Eastern and Midwestern US for many years in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Children received instruction in *Gurbani*, *kirtan*, Sikh philosophy and Punjabi culture. Both the children and the adults eagerly awaited the camp every year.

The entire Pittsburgh Sikh community actively participated in the camp. Through the planning, the implementation and the closing of each camp, people gave of their time and effort tirelessly and worked side-by-side to make it a very special experience for each and every child. The parents from other cities also did a lot of *sewa* for the camp. It was a very enjoyable and rewarding time for everyone involved. The *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society* kept a separate camp account and was never interested in profiting from it. Most of the work was done through active *sewa*, and therefore, the charges per child were kept very affordable. Since those earlier years, Dr. Tejinder Singh Bal, Dr. Gurbilash Kaur Nagpaul and Mr. Sarjit Singh Khara have been active

in arranging the annual camps.

ON OUR OWN

A few years had transpired since the *SV* Temple had been built. Discussions continued over plans to build a joint Hindu Temple, Jain Temple and Sikh Gurdwara all housed under the same roof. However, there was no money coming in to support such a project. The trustees' membership was \$300 per year per family, and there were about 25-30 trustees, including seven Sikh families. Normally Sikhs contribute willingly and generously toward the Gurdwara, but they were not donating much to the common Indian society because they were not certain of a secure future with the Hindus. Overall maintenance of the Hindu Temple was also becoming an issue as it was primarily being taken care of by Sikhs.

By now the Sikhs began thinking of raising funds in order to have their own separate Gurdwara. The Hindu friends, specifically Dr. Ragu Nath, Dr. Krishan Terneja , Dr. Reddy, Dr. Hari Misra and Dr. Sabod Jain were consulted actively on the matter, but we could not really resolve the issue of separation. Dr. Amrik Singh Chattha and Dr. Manmohan Singh Luthra would discuss with our Hindu friends our desire to have our own Gurdwara. They stood firm in the idea that we would build a Gurdwara using our own funds and manage our own affairs, without our Hindu friends. This upset a lot of Hindus and the discussions would become quite heated. Amongst the Hindus, Dr. Chattha's and Dr. Luthra's assertion for separatism was considered divisive. But for the Sikh community, they were great men who represented a spearhead for change.

Guru Nanak's Janam Din had become an annual function for the Sikhs. At the 1980 *Akhand Paath*, Giani Gurdeep Singh of Richmond Hills, New York spoke to the *Sangat* and asked us not to build the Gurdwara and the Hindu Temple together. He asserted that there were too many inherent differences between the two peoples. For instance, the *Khalsa* keeps their hair unshorn, whereas Hindus have the *Mondans* ceremony; the Sikh religion prohibits idol worship, whereas the Hindus practice it in their daily spiritual lives. Giani Ji developed on so many other cultural, religious and social issues that differentiate the two peoples. Finally he said that our

Gurus struggled and sacrificed so much to develop the Sikh religion as a separate identity. He used the analogy of a lion and a cat belonging to the same family, but never living together. Just as they have their own individual characteristics, so too must they have their separate residing places. He further argued that by having the Gurdwara and the Hindu Temple together, we would create a great deal of confusion in the minds of the children: they might not develop a clear identity or direction. Giani Ji's sermon had such a great impact that the concept of a joint Gurdwara and Hindu Temple was virtually eliminated in the minds of the *Sangat*.

In the early 1980's, the Sikh people discussed with some of the influential Hindus the possibility of building the Gurdwara on the same site but as a separate structure from the Hindu Temple at the Illini Drive location. The Sikhs proposed that they would build and manage their Gurdwara independently of the Hindu Temple organization. We had long discussions with Dr. Ragu Nath who was the chairman of the trustees of the Hindu Temple Society. Mr. Gurdev Singh Saini and another member requested Dr. Nath to call a trustees meeting to discuss the possibility of building a Gurdwara on the same site and sharing one third of the outside expenses with the other temples. Twenty-eight trustees attended the meeting, seven of whom were Sikhs. In a secret ballot, to no one's surprise, there were seven votes in favor and 21 against. One Sikh, Dr. Manmohan Singh Luthra, voted against building a Gurdwara on the same site as the Hindu/Jain Temple because of his strong belief that the Gurdwara should be located at a completely separate site. One Hindu, Dr. Tandon, voted in favor of the proposed joint site. After the vote, these two individuals revealed their feelings openly to the gathered trustees. This resolution did not upset most of the Sikhs because by this time, the idea of having a Gurdwara on an entirely new site, as expressed so eloquently by Dr. Luthra, was becoming a more appealing and feasible goal. This meeting essentially marked the end of a multi-faith Hindu / Jain / Sikh Temple.

It is worthy of mentioning that one of the Sikhs in the community, Mrs. Kamaljit Kaur Chaudhary, refused to attend this meeting out of civil protest. She felt that Sikhs should be considered an integral part of the organization and should be allowed to build a Gurdwara on the site or wherever they wished. She recognized that an ideologic rift between the Sikhs and the Hindus had evolved, and that a simple vote would not change the attitudes of the people.

In spite of the above resolution, the Sikhs continued to function out of the same existing joint temple. There was no animosity between the Sikhs and Hindus, and our activities went on in an atmosphere of friendliness and cooperation. We continued to hold our regular monthly *diwan* and annual *Akhand Paath* commemorating *Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Janam Din*.

A NEW GURDWARA SAHIB

The *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society's* funds started to grow when it had become clear to the *Sangat* that they could not build their Gurdwara at the Hindu Temple site. Every member of the society felt the need to have our own Gurdwara. Our children, due to camp participation, were also quite active. They asked that the new Gurdwara be authentic and have the appearance of a holy place. Since the Gurdwara is not one man's organization, it evolved through so many stages with both ups and downs. However, in the end, collective wisdom prevailed and the *Sangat* moved toward a common goal.

Initially we looked at the possibility of purchasing an old church. When the society had \$20,000, it looked for a church for that much money. When it had \$40,000, it looked for a place in that price range, and so on. Within a few years, we may have seen at least ten different old churches, schools and other buildings for the purpose of renovating and creating a new Gurdwara. The advantage of this approach would be that we would have a Gurdwara without delay and without the hassle of permits and ordinances. Building a new Gurdwara from the ground up, on the other hand, would be a costly and time-consuming endeavor. It would necessitate permission from city councils with building permits, occupancy permits, State Labor Board and safety permits. This was sure to be a formidable task which would require a great deal of time and effort to complete. At each stage we would have to answer all the questions put forth by the local government, and despite this, they might put unrealistic conditions and demands upon us. If they did not grant permission, we then might be forced to take legal action through state and federal courts. The whole process seemed an almost impossible and daunting task.

Despite these potential obstacles, the authenticity and pureness of a new Gurdwara which we could plan and build from start to finish proved to be in the hearts of the *Sangat*. The Society

members held several meetings and decided to build a new *Gurdwara Sahib*.

THE LAND

Dr. Amrik Singh Chattha was given the responsibility of finding a suitable site. We looked at many pieces of land between Greater Pittsburgh Airport to the West and the PA Turnpike to the North and East. Price, accessibility and future operational conditions were the main considerations. Weirton, Youngstown and Monroeville were the towns that drew our greatest interest. Monroeville was favored because there was a concentration of seven Sikh families living there at the time. (the families of Prithipal Singh, Gurdev Singh Saini, Daljit Singh Khara, Manjit Singh Khara, Gurdial Singh Mehta, Balwinder Singh Malhi and Chaudhary's) Several other families lived within 10-15 miles of this area. This would facilitate future operational and maintenance functions.

The *Sangat* therefore started looking for a suitable piece of land in the Monroeville / Murrysville area. Many sites were considered until we finally found the existing land. Before actually purchasing the property, our architect, Mr. James Gerard, was taken there in order to access its suitability. He walked over the land and looked at it from the other side of the Turnpike. It was his opinion that the building would be beautifully situated at this site. It would fit into the surrounding community yet remain isolated from the immediate neighborhood. Another advantage of this land was that we would not have to build an access road and the utilities, water and electricity, were already in place. Every member of the *Sangat* was invited to view the property and the consensus was to pursue negotiations for a purchase.

Before making an offer, we explored the land conditions. We discovered that the site had been actively mined in the early part of the twentieth century, but the mine had been closed and sealed around 1920. Geologic maps showed that coal mining had been operational throughout the region. We showed these maps to foundation experts and the prevailing opinion was that it would be safe to construct a building on the site because there was a thick (20 foot) stone structure underneath the surface. Nonetheless, Dr. Bal and Dr. Chattha felt that it would be safest to fill the mine. Estimates were obtained for filling the mine and ranged as high as \$42,000. A

Punjabi Muslim gentleman from Pakistan, Dr. Nalvi, agreed to do it for the cost of materials and labor (about \$15,000). He said that even spending up to \$20,000 for this purpose would be worth the investment, as the land was quite good.

The asking price for the land was \$85,000. Mrs. Joan Singh, widow of the late Charanjit Singh, was instrumental in establishing our good negotiating position. As an attorney, she was able to retrieve information from county records indicating that the land had been purchased by the current owner for \$37,000 four years earlier. Harcharan Singh Patheja, Gurdial Singh Mehta, Daljit Singh Khara, Manjit Singh Khara, Parshotham Singh Mokha, and Pritipal Singh were able to use this knowledge to our advantage. The initial offer they put forth was \$40,000: this was based on the previous purchase price of \$37,000 plus about eight percent appreciation over the four year period. Initially the real estate agent, Mr. Kelly Butler, did not accept the offer. We responded by increasing our offer to only \$41,000 and attached the following conditions:

- The land should be suitable for construction, especially in light of the previous mining conditions.
- We must have the City of Monroeville's approval to build a Gurdwara; that is zoning permits to build a religious building.
- There would be a three month grace period for us to work out the details of the first two conditions with another three month extension if necessary. During this time, if it was found that the land would not be suitable for construction or if we were unable to obtain the needed permits, we would be under no obligation to go forward with the land purchase.

These conditions would assure us of being able to build a Gurdwara before making any financial commitment toward the property. It was God's Grace that our offer was accepted for \$41,000 with the above 3-6 month grace period. We were all very satisfied that, including the mine filling, the total cost for the land would be about \$56-61,000.

PREPARATIONS FOR CITY HALL

The immediate task now before us was to find an experienced site planner to prepare the

visual layout in order to put our case before the City Council of Monroeville. Once again, we had only three months to work toward an actual building plan and gain permission from the town Council. Through various friends, we learned of Mr. Harold Gray, a very reputable and well-connected site planner of the area. Sardar Gurdial Singh Mehta and Mrs. Joan Singh met with Mr. Gray and showed him some photographs of Gurdwaras. We were pleased to discover that he was already familiar with the proposed land. He had worked with the current owner who had been denied permission to build an apartment complex there. Mr. Gray now revisited the site with the idea of building a house of worship. A few days later, Mrs. Joan Singh signed the contract with Mr. Herald Gray to work on a site plan. Since he knew the property well, he gave us a good deal, charging us only \$2,800, which was about \$1,000 less than the usual cost. He assured us that he would try his very best to develop a plan which would be met with approval by the town Council. At the same time, our architect, Mr. James Gerard, and his associate, Mr. Dev Naggar, started working on the building projections and other specifications needed for the building permit. Mr. Gerard and Mr. Gray were invited to attend our Sunday *diwan* so they could learn more about our specific needs and could present our case favorably before the town Council.

In order to strengthen our position, we met with our district State Legislators and the Mayor of Monroeville, Mr. Mike Lynch. We explained to the Mayor our desire to build a Gurdwara. We told him that most of us had lived in the area for years, some approaching two decades; that we were well established and had raised our children here. He suggested that we should meet all the residents of the neighborhood adjacent to the land and tell them about our religion, our culture, our educational backgrounds and aspirations. In addition, the local people might be concerned about logistic details: for instance, how many people would be attending services each week; how many cars would be entering the neighborhood; what would the building look like; what security measures would be installed; and how it would be maintained. Mr. Lynch also encouraged us to meet with the various council members and explain our situation. The State Legislator gave similar advise: he essentially said, "Don't be afraid, keep working toward your goal and you will succeed. Don't give into rejection and criticism."

At the time, Herald Gray, James Gerard and Dev Naggar were hard at work on the engineering aspects of the building. And so we began our part: we visited the local neighbors on

a door-to-door basis so that we could get to know them and they could learn more about us. Miss Rekhinder (Rekha) Kaur Chaudhary, then a high school student, wrote an informative two page letter on the Sikh religion and culture. The letter also included specific material on the Sikh population in the Tri-State area. We would distribute this letter as we met people at their door steps so that they could later read about us in their own privacy and hopefully come to a better understanding of our good intentions.

Almost all the neighbors talked to us; they seemed to appreciate our effort, but really did not want us to build a temple in their back yard. The gentleman in the corner house, Mr. Jennings, gave us a hard time. Dr. Pritipal Singh and one other member talked to him for about an hour and a half in his garage on a cold snowy day. He did not invite us into his house. We explained to him about our religion and the future of our children. His main objection was, "Why here? Why three Indian places of worship in Monroeville?" At the end of our conversation, he said he liked us but he would oppose us in building a Gurdwara in his neighborhood.

The fear of the unknown was real in the minds of these people. Some of them asked if we would be passing out flowers to their children and converting them to our faith. Some asked if we would sacrifice animals in the church. They asked if men and women danced together and got high. Some told us that *Jesus* is the only Lord: they were suspicious of our *Gurus* and wondered why we believed in them. People expressed concerns that peace would be disturbed in their neighborhood. Some even asked why the Hindu Temple "smelled so bad" and would the Gurdwara have the same odor. Would it be poorly maintained as they considered the Hindu Temple to be. After listening to us, some of them warned us not to talk to their ministers and priests as they did not want us to influence them.

Mrs. Joan Singh and Mrs. Kamaljit Kaur Chaudhary used to go together door-to-door in the neighborhood. One day they went to Mr. Frank Fekitti's house. He did not care to talk to them and told Kamal that he would like to talk to her husband. Speaking with him later, Mr. Fekitti's main concern was the structure itself; its maintenance and whether it would depreciate the real estate value of his home. The Gurdwara elevation drawings were shown to him and he was assured that the building would be well maintained and that it should not have any negative effect on the housing value in the area. At this informal meeting he realized that we were

reasonable people and felt more at ease about our presence.

Several people had been using the land for vegetable gardening in the spring and summer and one resident had built a swimming pool which crossed the boundary. We assured these people that we had no intentions of imposing strict conditions on the border line.

Mrs. Joan Singh and Kamal made a very good team. Joan would kindly greet the resident and introduce herself and Kamal. One day they were so tired and stressed that after a resident opened the door, Joan introduced herself as Mrs. Kamal Chaudhary and Kamal as Mrs. Joan Singh. They then looked at each other and began to laugh and laugh. The resident of the house stood there wondering what these two ladies were laughing about. Anyway, they quickly composed themselves and started talking to the neighbor. In that circular road of McKenzie Drive and Loraine Drive, we spoke to every household and we were no longer strangers.

On the other front, we approached all seven council members in Monroeville. We met with each of them in order to familiarize them with our religious and cultural background. It was critical that they could be made to understand our sincerity and how important it was to us to have our own Gurdwara. We earnestly requested their support in this endeavor. Two of them went out with us for an evening dinner and we met the others in their homes. There was one elderly council-woman who really liked us from the very beginning. Gurdial Singh and Ravinder Kaur Mehta and others went to see her at her home and Kamal made a very nice cake for her. At that meeting she pledged her support. The councilman of the specific ward in which the land was located took the time to speak with us, but he would not guarantee his support.

Mr. Gerard and Mr. Gray prepared the land and Gurdwara projection drawings and after gathering all the necessary information, applied for a hearing date. In all the official records for the zoning application, the building was named *Sikh Gurdwara*.

A VOICE IS HEARD

At the first hearing, we were opposed by all the residents in the neighborhood. One hundred fifty-seven families had signed a petition against us, which was very disheartening considering all the effort we had put into trying to convince them of our honest intentions. So

many of them came to protest our proposal that the large town hall could not even accommodate all the people. Many of them spoke very angrily against us. The situation was quite tense and serious. Dr. Sarjit Singh from Weirton had arrived earlier at the town hall. Seeing so many people arriving to oppose us, he got worried and went racing in his car to Sikh households in Monroeville to get them to the town hall before the hearing started. We could sense that he was very furious about the growing tide of animosity at the gathering. He hurried us along so that we all arrived in time. By now, we were all deeply committed to the project. Some notable people who were present were Manmohan Singh Luthra, Tejinder Singh Bal, Amarjit Singh Nagpaul, Amrik Singh Chattha and his whole family, Sarjit Singh and Ranjeet Kaur, Gurdial Singh Mehta, Daljit Singh Khara, Manjit Singh Khara, Kamaljit Kaur Chaudhary and Mrs. Joan Singh who spoke on our behalf. The local residents once again raised their concerns in front of the Council: things such as passing flowers, sacrificing animals, the bad smells, opening a cult-like school, etc. Mrs. Joan Singh, Mr. Gerard and Mr. Gray answered all these unenlightened questions patiently and politely.

During the heat of the discussion, Miss Geetinder (Rosy) Kaur Chattha, then a high school student, stood up and made a brief but remarkably effective statement. She spoke very clearly and forcefully. Addressing the Council and the general gathering, she said that our parents are highly educated people, many are doctors and engineers. They are all very responsible individuals and their children excel in education. She went on to say that we simply want to build our church here and she could not understand why everyone was opposing us. She asked, "If you don't let us build our church here, where will we go? Why won't you let us build it here?" When she sat down, there was dead silence in the hall.

Normally one item on the agenda takes about ten minutes, but our hearing lasted for more than two ours. The Council asked for more information from our engineer and the city traffic officer. The necessary information was provided at a second hearing and this time only a few neighborhood residents were present. Mr. Jennings told us he had to oppose us because he had asked others to sign the petition; nonetheless, he wished us luck. The second meeting was quite a contrast from the first. But despite a more congenial atmosphere, another meeting was scheduled. At the third meeting, only two neighbors attended. One was Mr. Fekitti who simply came to see

how the building would look and sought from us an assurance that it would be well maintained. Mr. James Gerard had made a beautiful model of the Gurdwara, which satisfied his concerns quite nicely. Neither Mr. Jennings nor Mr. Fekitti raised any further questions or objections. The Council then voted, and by a 4 to 3 vote, we were granted permission to build the Gurdwara.

Attaining the zoning permission was quite an experience. The whole process was carried out legally and democratically, and it gave us a strong sense of direction. The State Legislator had told us that U.S. Law allows a church to be built in a residential area. If the Council were to refuse our proposal, he advised us to file a court petition. The Court would then intervene in our favor. Fortunately, such legal recourse was not necessary.

The three month grace period was fast approaching. The previous land owner was not willing to give us an additional three month extension while the details of the mine filling were being settled. So as not to lose the property, we made the purchase with \$41,000 at the end of the three month period.

A SIMPLE GROUND-BREAKING

We had hoped to organize a Ground-Breaking ceremony on *Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Gurburab* in 1981. It would be carried out by the five most elderly members of the *Sangat*, our *Punj Piaree*. Among those to be given the honor of this great *sewa* were Dr. Pritam Singh, elder brother of Dr. Sarjit Singh; Sardar Jarnail Singh, father of Dr. Ajitpal Singh Sandhu; Sardar Shinshar Singh, father of Bhupinder Singh Sandhu; Sardar Jarnail Singh Guman's father-in-law; and Ditar Singh's mother. Giani Gurdeep Singh Ji from New York had been especially invited to preside over the ground-breaking. A *Kahi* (Indian shovel) had been brought for the ceremony. After the *Bhog* at the Hindu Temple, the entire *Sangat* went to the new Gurdwara site. To our dismay, someone left the *kahi* at the Hindu Temple. As no one else knew its whereabouts, the ground-breaking could not be done. This created much disappointment in the minds of many people who had eagerly awaited the great day. A few criticized the project, but on the other hand, others cried openly with sadness over this unfortunate occurrence. It is worthy of remembering some specific reactions of certain members of the *Sangat*.

- Sardar Jarnail Singh Sandhu, father of Dr. Ajitpal Singh Sandhu, was furious. He emphatically stated that the Gurdwara would be built in a short time and the *Sangat* would support it very strongly.
- Mrs. Sharanjit Kaur Guman's father said that if you give up on the project in the face of opposition, you will not be forgiven by *WaheGuru*. He further added that all those in opposition to the Gurdwara would one day come here and rub their forehead on the *Sardan* at the entrance.
- Dr. Pritipal Singh, who had been one of the longest Sikh resident of the Pittsburgh area, was also very upset. He said that some people are pushing us around because they have the money. He made an offer to sign for a bank loan if someone else would sign with him.
- Privately, Dr. Amrik Singh Chattha said that we should start building the Gurdwara and he would give us as much money as would be necessary to make up any difference between the cost and what we had already collected.
- Dr. Jasbir Singh Makar, one of the oldest members of the community who previously had not attended *diwans* regularly, became very involved after this episode and pushed for the new Gurdwara very aggressively.

As will be discussed in greater detail in a later section, one day, unknown to the *Sangat*, Dr. Nalvi, the Pakistani gentleman who had offered to do the mine filling, brought his heavy machinery and cleared the whole area. A simple and pure ground-breaking was therefore done without any ceremony. Only *WaheGuru* was present.

DEBATE AND REASON

The democratic system can be a slow process, but ultimately it works toward the whole society's benefit. From the beginning there were those in the *Sangat* who were not in favor of a new building. Even after the land had been purchased, they felt that to build a new Gurdwara would be too expensive and wasteful. They asked why not rent a hall for a nominal fee and have a *kirtan* and *paath* once a month? But such ideology did not suit the Sikh community which

traditionally has accepted great pain and sacrifice for their Gurdwaras.

In this year while architectural and engineering designs were being made, the *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society* management was not very aggressive in pursuing the new Gurdwara project. It was a somewhat unproductive and uncertain time. However, we activated the board of trustees to collect and spend money for the new Gurdwara. We asked Dr. Tejinder Singh Bal to become the president; Dr. Amrik Singh Chattha, vice-president; and Dr. Manmohan Singh Luthra, treasurer. In order to become an active member of the board of trustees, a donation of \$5,000 per family was required. In this way substantial funds were able to be raised. This, however, was in no way meant to be exclusionary, as the overall management of the Gurdwara remained in the hands of the *Sangat ... Sangat is Supreme!*

These three gentlemen worked together in great earnest and with utmost dedication. They would call and visit people in their homes requesting donations. Many families willingly became board of trustee members with a \$5,000 donation. The funds started pouring in and after about a year we had collected \$180,000.

The dream of a Gurdwara was now becoming more and more a reality. But we still had some disagreements amongst ourselves. One day we held a meeting to pledge money for the Gurdwara, and a member of the *Sangat* brought with him an estimate of \$100,000 just for landscaping alone in order to discourage people from pursuing the project. The estimate was written on Mr. Herald Gray's official stationary. We told him that the estimate was grossly exaggerated and certainly not based on actual figures. But he insisted that it was in fact correct. That same evening, when asked, Mr. Gray denied that he had ever given such an estimate. He said that nobody would spend that kind of money for landscaping. You put off those types of expenses till the very end of a project and only then if you have the money; otherwise you wait until later.

Several years later, when the Gurdwara was complete, the actual money spent on landscaping was only about \$150. Several *sewadars* in the *Sangat* including several youths; Amardeep Singh and Pardeep Singh Khara, Rakesh Singh and Sandeep Singh Chaudhary, Sukhjiwan Singh and Jagjiwan Singh Sidhu, Kuldeep Kasuri, Tarlochan Singh and others; leveled the ground, sewed grass seed and then maintained the grounds for years to come. Dr. Rabinder

Nath Singh from Morgantown donated and planted all the trees, shrubbery and flowers absolutely free of cost and labor. The generosity and selfless work of these young and energetic people made our Gurdwara a beautiful and welcoming place for everyone to enjoy.

Even as the funds were being collected, there were still some doubts in the minds of some people as to whether or not the site was suitable. Concerns about vandalism and the safety of the *Guru Granth Sahib* were raised. Everyone remembered the difficulties we had encountered at the Hindu Temple. In a very thoughtful and sincere manner, Dr. Surinder Singh Bajwa questioned whether we were doing the right thing. Some people were worried that the chosen site would not be large enough for the Gurdwara and parking lot. But Mr. Gray assured us that with careful planning and ground leveling, there would be ample room. Even additional living quarters for the *Granthi* could later be built behind the Gurdwara.

After discussing these issues openly, we concluded that no place would be perfect, but that we would be adaptable and at the same time work to make the site and building fit our needs. After all, it would give us a place to settle down and call our own.

There are many stories of individual conviction and purpose; it was the sum of all these feelings and actions that pushed the Gurdwara project forward. Even though doubts and concerns arose, an overwhelming positive and favorable attitude toward the Gurdwara dominated and prevailed. The entire process was democratic. People must have the right to disagree and debate, because in the end, this creates a stronger and more unified approach. Nothing can be dictated by one to another; ultimately the *Sangat* must decide.

PREPARATION OF THE LAND

During the earlier phases of planning, Mr. Gray had made a plan for the structure and had pointed out where the four corners of the building would be. But the land itself was rough terrain, covered with thick thorny bushes. We started cutting the heavy brush so that we could show Dr. Nalvi, who was to fill the mine, where the building would stand. Some children were also involved in this laborious task: one day my children got a lot of cuts and bruises on their arms and legs from the thorny bushes, but they did not complain.

By now Dr. Nalvi had a pretty good idea of the layout and he assured both Dr. Bal and Dr. Chattha that the mine filling would be done for the cost of the materials and labor. Being a Punjabi and knowing us well, he did not bother to draw up any contract, because it would delay the project.

One day we went to cut more bushes and to our great astonishment, Dr. Nalvi had cleared the whole lot with a bulldozer, and Mr. Gray had dug in posts representing the corners of the building. Shortly thereafter, Dr. Nalvi had the mine filled with cement. Initially he asked for \$10,000 and subsequently we gave him an additional \$5,000 to match all the cost of the materials and labor. Of note, an estimate from State officials was three times this amount.

Dr. Nalvi's quick and aggressive action gave our project a big boost. He subsequently brought his family and mother to show them our Gurdwara and was pleased to see it completed. It seems no small coincidence that like the *Harmandir Sahib* foundation laid by Fakir Mia Mir, the preparation of land for our Gurdwara was also done by a Muslim. His help may never be fully appreciated, but for those who dealt directly with him, he will always be remembered with great fondness and gratitude.

ARCHITECTURAL PLANS

Mr. James Gerard and Mr. Dev Naggar had some photographs of other Gurdwaras. Mr. Naggar, being from India, was quite familiar with the overall needs and worshipping style of the Sikh people. They made several drawings of an architectural plan, but each time we found it necessary to make several alterations. Sardar Gurdial Singh Mehta made several plans of his own. Mr. Gerard graciously took our suggestions into consideration, but after we turned down his sixteenth design, he was becoming frustrated. When we asked him to make additional changes, he laughed and said even this would not be the final one. It was very difficult to satisfy everyone. Nonetheless, he agreed to make more revisions, provided that the next draft would be reviewed only by Dr. Bal and that Dr. Bal alone would make the final decision. Without any one else's scrutiny, this design was taken directly to Dr. Bal's house. Drs. Amarjeet Singh and Gurbilash Kaur Nagpaul were also present. Everyone liked the design, but Dr. Bal would not give his

consent because he felt very strongly that other concerned people in the *Sangat* should be involved in the plan's final approval. His wife, Surjit Kaur Bal, pleaded with him to approve the plan, but he would not give in. He held onto the design and later showed it privately to some deeply involved people. After gaining everyone's satisfaction, Dr. Bal accepted the architectural plan.

At this point, Gerard and associates started working on the engineering details of the building. He made many visits to City Hall for approval at every stage. He also took maps of the land to Harrisburg for safety approval from the State Labor Board. All the effort finally paid off when the city of Monroeville issued the building permit. Mr. Gerard then advertised and got five or six bids for the construction.

COMMITMENT

Mr. Gerard received a good bid for the building, however, he was reluctant to begin because only about \$180,000 had been collected. This was well short of the projected cost of \$565,000. He hesitated to begin construction until at least 80% of the cost was readily available. After all, even with the best of intentions, without the money, it could not be done. At this point, he was requested to speak to the Board of Trustees President and Vice-president, Dr. Tejinder Singh Bal and Dr. Amrik Singh Chattha. Dr. Chattha came to his down-town Pittsburgh office at the scheduled appointment time, but Dr. Bal had gotten lost. After listening to these concerns, Dr. Chattha told Mr. Gerard that the *Sangat* would continue to donate money very generously. But to satisfy Mr. Gerard, Dr. Chattha offered to sign a promissory note stating that if deficits arose, he and his wife would pay the balance. He explained that they were both physicians and had solvent assets which they would willingly give toward the Gurdwara project. Mr. Gerard was so impressed by Dr. Chattha's strong commitment that he agreed to go forth without any promissory note.

A few minutes later, Dr. Bal arrived and asked Mr. Gerard what questions he had for us. Mr. Gerard replied that he had none as Dr. Chattha had fully alleviated his concerns. Mr. Gerard asked Dr. Bal if he could sign the builder's contract, and Dr. Bal did so at that very moment.

There was a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment amongst all who were present. Dr. Bal subsequently had the General Secretary of the Gurdwara, Mr. Bhopinder Raj Singh, sign the contract as well. Dr. Chattha's and Dr. Bal's actions greatly accelerated the project. Soon after this meeting, Mr. Gerard signed with the builder and construction began. Mr. Gerard and Mr. Nagger were in full control of the project. The foundation was laid in late spring 1983 and the *Gurdwara Sahib* was completed by early summer of 1985.

GENEROSITY OF THE HEART

It was remarkable the way in which people generously donated funds. Whenever we had our regular *diwan*, people would bring checks for thousands. Not a single payment of the Gurdwara was delayed. The brick layers bill alone was \$85,000 and it was paid in full on time. The Society never ran short of money. The many donations people made are all to be commended, but a few are rather memorable.

- Sardar Tarlochan Singh was once a clerk living on modest earnings. Once we requested a donation from him. He began shaking and he said that he did not have money at the time and that we were asking him for too much money. We replied, how did he know how much we would ask of him? He answered, you're asking in the thousands. Instead, he was requested to give \$300 if he could. He then pledged to give \$500 and he gave us \$300 in cash right there on the spot. Soon after, he gave the additional pledged \$200. Sardar Tarlochan Singh continued to be a great *sewadar* and was always helpful in the provision of *Langar*.
- Dr. Gurdev Singh Purewal was one of the first big contributors toward the project. He expressed a strong faith in the *Sangat* and in its determination to build a Gurdwara. Dr. Gurmukh Singh also quietly gave very generously without being requested to do so.
- Miss Satwant Kaur Mehta, daughter of Sardar Gurdial Singh and Ravinder Kaur Mehta, received a \$200 award from Gateway High School for achieving the high honor of Valedictorian. She could have used this money for her college, but she chose to donate that money to the Gurdwara.

- Many families were actively involved. Mr. Surjit Singh Khera was the Secretary of the society around this time and he did all that he could to advance the Gurdwara project. He would write frequent letters to the *Sangat* on the progress of the construction. One day he traveled 50 miles just to install a mail box at the Gurdwara. Sardar Harcharan Singh Patheja kept a very determined outlook as he coordinated different stages of the construction with Mr. Gerard. Drs. Amarjeet Singh and Gurbilash Kaur Nagpaul were always doing something for the Gurdwara with a selfless and positive attitude.
 - One day Drs. Sarjit Singh and Ranjeet Kaur came to see the Gurdwara under construction. They were so moved that in one week alone they donated \$20,000. The kitchen appliances had not yet been obtained when the Gurdwara was nearing completion. The cost of these appliances was to be about \$16,000 and the actual purchase was being put off to a later date when we could better afford it. One evening, Dr. Ranjeet Kaur called and asked if money was needed for the appliances. At this stage we only had about \$5,000. She told us to go ahead with the order and she donated \$10,000 toward this end. With this generosity, we were able to complete the kitchen for \$13,000.
 - Dr. Rashpal Singh had been one of the founding members of the *Tri-State Sikh Cultural Society*. He had moved to Washington, D.C. after living in Pittsburgh during the society's early years, but he still kept in close touch with his Pittsburgh friends. He offered large sums of money from the Washington *Sangat*, and although we never had the need for this, we were grateful for his support and kind generosity.
 - Others from outside the Pittsburgh area, including Mr. Balbir Singh Basi and Mr. Ravinder Singh from Cleveland, gave us considerable donations. Dr. Kartar Singh Khanuja from Warren, Pennsylvania contributed generously. Dr. Ujjal Singh and Sukhwinder Kaur Sandhu from Charleston, West Virginia were not frequent attendants of the monthly *diwans* in Pittsburgh, but they eagerly gave large sums and collected funds from the small Charleston Sikh community.
 - The total cost of the Gurdwara was \$565,000 and it was all paid in cash on a timely basis.
- The city officials of Monroeville were very cooperative. Monroeville has an ordinance

that a priest cannot reside in the church building. We told them that we would like to have our *Granthi* live in the Gurdwara so as to protect the building from vandalism. The building inspector told us at the final inspection to simply keep the door to the *Granthi's* apartment locked, and we were given the occupancy permit.

At the Grand Opening Ceremony, all the City Council members, the Mayor of Monroeville and the residents of the neighborhood were invited to attend, and they were respectfully acknowledged for their support by Dr. Tejinder Singh Bal. Mayor Mike Lynch gave a supportive speech. Also in attendance were Dr. Pritam Singh, Dr. Arjinder Pal Singh Saikhon and Mr. Didar Singh Bains of Yuba City. Many of our old Hindu friends in the Pittsburgh area came as well to share in our happiness. Even though he was ill and had a high fever, Muni Ji, the Hindu Temple priest, attended and said some very kind words.

CONCLUSION

It is very difficult to recount every aspect of the Gurdwara project. The entire *Sangat* contributed in so many ways. There are many details which I may have missed. One can't possibly capture the minds of the people on paper. I offer my sincere apologies for anything large or small that may have been overlooked or for any incorrect statements.

Success was particularly the result of the patient but persistent nature of people like Dr. Tejinder Singh Bal and Dr. Amrik Singh Chattha. They inspired an entire *Sangat* to be dedicated to this great cause. Ultimately it was this sense of purpose and direction that lead a unified *Sangat* to build the *Gurdwara Sahib*. And it was the love and respect we had for one another that carried us through to the end.

This manuscript was written to document a formative time in our early history. We who built the Gurdwara will not be here for long, but our children and their children will. After all, the coming generations are the greatest gift mankind receives from *WaheGuru*. It is this spirit of love and truth embodied in the *Gurdwara Sahib* that we wish to pass on.

FOUNDERS OF THE GURDWARA SAHIB
TRI-STATE SIKH CULTURAL SOCIETY

Suhindra Singh and Surinder Kaur Ajmani
Surinder Singh and Jagdeep Kaur Bajwa
Tejinder Singh and Surjit Kaur Bal
Joga Singh and Gian Kaur Bhangal
Amrik Singh and Jaswinder Kaur Chattha
Sohan Singh and Kamaljit Kaur Chaudhary
Bhupinder Singh and Nilu Kaur Datta
Rabinder Singh and Bubby Kaur Datta
Jasbir Singh and Parmjit Kaur Gill
Jarnail Singh and Sharanjit Kaur Guman
Jopinder Singh and Balwinder Kaur Harika
Daljit Singh and Rajinder Kaur Khara
Manjit Singh and Kirandeep Kaur Khara
Surjit Singh and Surinder Kaur Khera
Brijinder Singh and Manorma Kaur Kochar
Manmohan Singh and Damyanti Kaur Luthra
Jasbir Singh and Vickie Makar
Balwinder Singh and Gurjit Kaur Malhi
Baljit Singh and Sukhdeep Kaur Malhi
Gurdial Singh and Ravinder Kaur Mehta
Amarjeet Singh and Gurbilash Kaur Nagpaul
Harcharan Singh and Jotinder Kaur Patheja
Gurdev Singh and Surinderjit Kaur Purewal
Bhupinder Singh and Guni Kaur Rekhi
Gurdev Singh and Kuljit Kaur Saini

Surjit Singh and Ranjeet Kaur

Ujjal Singh and Sukhwinder Kaur Sandhu

Mohinder Singh and Harbhajan Kaur Seehra

Bhupinder Raj Singh and Geeta Kaur

Daljit Singh and Usha Kaur

Datar Singh and Bina Kaur

Gurmukh Singh and Manjit Kaur

Harbans and Parkash Singh

Harcharan and Joan Singh

Bhupinder Singh and Narinder Kaur Sandhu

Kultar Singh Sandhu

Pritpal Singh and Gurdeep Kaur

Rabinder Nath Singh and Harpal Kaur

Tarlochan Singh and Mohinder Kaur

Ajitpal Singh and Surinder Kaur Sandhu