

A Sewadar's Diary

By Karminder Singh

A personal account of the trials and triumphs of the incredible journey of the Gurdwara, and a Sewadar's humble role along it...

JULY 30th 2001 Logan International Airport Boston. Feeling the ground at the airport was a welcome relief to a 22-hour journey from halfway around the world. "Medford" I told the Boston cab driver when asked where he wanted to take my family, our luggage and me. Medford was to be our home for the next four years.

Millis was where we truly wanted to live. My wife, Sitvinder and I had been to the Guru Ram Das Ashram there every week when we lived in Boston from 1993 to 1995: doing Katha, Kirten, and playing tabla. Millis offered our family a mix of our top priorities – the company of Gursikhs who lived in the apartment complex, a Gurdwara within the Ashram and good friends we had made then. The Ashram would provide a good place for my children, Brejvinder, three, and Amrit, one, to grow up. The only setback was that Millis was an hour's drive from the place

where I would be spending most of my weekdays: Boston, but I considered the commute a small price.

Months before coming to Boston, I asked the Millis Ashram to lease us an apartment, filled out forms etc. but they would not have us. And so Medford it was.

We settled into our two-bedroom apartment in Riverside Avenue just as soon as our shipped stuff arrived. As we went around the Malls looking for stuff we needed, we could not help notice that there were Sikhs everywhere. My wife and I wondered if there was a Gurdwara around. At the Ames Department Store in Medford, we bumped into a Gursikh family we had befriended in 1993 - Surjeet Kaur, Mahinder Singh Saini and their daughter Manraj Kaur Khalsa. They told us there was a Gurdwara in Somerville, Medford's neighboring city, ten minutes from the our apartment. We took directions. It was the best news we heard, and with it, the grief of not residing in Millis vanished.

SUNDAY, NOV 2, 2001. We set out to find the Somerville Gurdwara. The narrow one-way streets of the city turned a 10-minute journey into a three-hour

one. We went up and down Highland Avenue four times, but there was no sign of it. We met dozens of Sikhs throughout our search and stopped to ask them. Their replies were as elusive as the Gurdwara's location. "Its in someone's house," said one. Another said he's heard of it but never been into it. Another was sure there was no Gurdwara in Somerville or anywhere nearby. At 12.00 noon, we finally found it when we entered a back street to turn back onto to Highland Ave one last time. The Gurdwara had a back street entrance and was located on the second floor of a restaurant. It took us another half hour to park along a nearby street.

We climbed a dingy staircase and entered the Gurdwara's Darbar at 12.45. The hall could accommodate 500 people. But about 25 people sat leaning against the sidewalls. The center was completely empty, save for the four of us who chose not to sit against the walls. The final Ashtpadee of Sukhmani sahib was being read. A gursikh came up to me and introduced himself as the secretary of the Gurdwara and asked if I wanted to do Kirten. He said he did not know me but since I was wearing a Bana, he felt it was his duty to check me out. I hesitated, on grounds that first of all I was very late in arriving, and second that the Gurdwara's normal program should go on. "I'll do something

next Sunday," I told the secretary, Darshan Singh Ji. He said there was no normal program and urged me to reconsider. By this time the Bhai Sahib finished Sukhmani Sahib and moved to do Kirten. He was accompanied on the dholaki by an African American and tabla by a Sat Narayan devotee complete with dhoti and bodee.

The spectacle of someone trying to fit a shabad into an out of tune vaja, an African tribal beat and rusty tabla inspired me to take on secretary's offer. I now understood what he meant by there being no normal program.

I stood before the sangat, greeted them and asked everyone to leave the comfort of their walls and get to the center of the hall, as close as possible to the Guru. Some did move. I repeated my request, infusing humor with a litany of arguments based on the notions of respect and disrespect, proper and improper. One lady spoke up: "I have back pain." I replied from the stage "come sit right here in the center and if your pain does not go away, I will go away." The retort woke up those who were asleep at the walls. "Tell the Guru, cure my back or I'll not come here anymore," I continued. "We are tired," another person spoke out. "Come sit straight and attentively in

the feet of the Guru and your tiredness of 8.4 million lives will disappear,” I shot back. My message began to seep in. The frivolity of their arguments, the gall for a complete stranger to take on the issue, my refusal to start my talk unless they all moved, and my promise to come back next week created a sense of urgency as well. Soon everyone moved to the center. I said, “This is how a sangat sits in the charan of the Guru. We will sit like this every time beginning next Sunday, and I will be here to do my Katha.” Fateh.

News got around town that a crazed comedian parcharak with a wacky shooting from the hip style had come to the Gurdwara and more people came to see for themselves.

The fact that the following week was Nirangkari gurpurab helped pull in a bigger crowd. I delivered a 45-minute lecture on Guru Nanak’s life. A total of 208 such 45-minute lectures, ranging from the fiery to philosophical Japji Katha, would be made in the 4 years of my stay in Boston. The sangat began to get to know me and me them. I gathered that a majority of the Sangat was from Punjab. Most of them were related to each other. A vast majority of them were in business – they either owned

restaurants, gas stations, and grocery stores or worked in them. They were simple, decent and faithful people. They trusted me. And they turned up to listen.

The sangat grew and soon there was no place to sit in the Darbar. Darshan Singh Ji announced on the stage one day that the Sangat had decided to appoint me as Director of Religious Affairs. A Jaikara followed. My job was to take charge of all things religious in the Gurdwara. I wondered what, if any, activities were “non-religious” and hence out of my purview.

I began to sense why the Guru offered me Medford instead of Millis. I took the position offered seriously. This is what we need to do, I announced. “We need to start a Kirten Jatha comprising our children and youth. They will learn 100 shabads in full rag and Taal and will play the tabla and do Kirten for one hour every Sunday. You will not need to put up with any more out of tune tribal music from the lost continent. We need to set up a website to tell people about our activities. I need the educated youth to help out here. For each of you attending, there are 50 Sikhs in Boston who are not here – they don’t know or they don’t care. I met many on the same block as this Gurdwara who did not where the Gurdwara was or if there was one. We need to change that. We need people to learn to do path. The

Sunday program will be changed. Sukhmani sahib will end at 10.30 am, not 12.45. From 10.30 till 12 we will do Kirten. From 12.00 to 12.45 pm I would do Katha on Gurbani to tell you about the Guru's messages. That would give us two hours of spiritual food – Kirten and Katha – per week. Most of all, we need a new Gurdwara premises. It will be the biggest Guru Ghar in Massachusetts and will cater for the city of Boston and surrounding cities." Darshan Singh Ji conveyed the committee's and sangat exuberant approval on stage.

SATURDAY, JAN 12TH 2002. First day of Kirten, tabla and path classes. Kimran Kaur, Sandeep Kaur, and Inderjot Singh turned up as vaja students while Paramveer Singh, Gurbaven Singh, Pehlaj Singh, and Ramanjeet Singh for tabla. The vaja students were later joined by Rupinder Kaur, Manpreet Kaur, Baldeep Kaur, Kiran Kaur, Manpreet Kaur Preeti, Gursharan Kaur, Ravneet Kaur and Preetpal Singh, while the tabla group had an addition in the form of Chirag Singh, Arshdeep Singh Saminder Singh and Prabhdeep Singh.

The first class was how to open a vaja, which is the front and back, how to open and close a tabla, which is left and right. By the fourth class, we had a jatha. We named it Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar Kirteni Jatha.

My own child Brej joined the Jatha as soon as his hands had grown long enough to reach the vaja's pakha. At the time of writing, the Kirten class had gone into its fourth year and each Kirten student had learnt anywhere from 20 – 75 shabads in taals such as Teen Taal, Jhap Taal, Deep Chandi and Roopak in a variety of ragas. The jatha's Kirten time is fixed - 10.30 till 12 noon every Sunday.

FEBRUARY 2002. Our website was up and running. We had a committee comprising Deepinder Singh, Satvir Kaur, Manraj Kaur, Gurpreet Kaur, Inderpreet Singh, and Gurminder Singh Gerry who worked hard to give shape to the stuff that I had written to put on the website. No one could now say that they did not know where the Gurdwara was.

MARCH 2002. Two Sindhi gentlemen – Kanhayo Ji and Teju Ji turned up during the Kirten Class and requested to join. They had read our website. I had received requests from entertainers who wanted to learn tabla, but refused to take them on. Our Kirten and tabla classes concentrated on Gurbani and the objective was to have a jatha for the Gurdwara. They told me they wanted to learn Gurbani Kirten to lead their local satsang in Dracut - a city 60 miles north of Boston. I had no reason to turn them away. For three years,

Kanhayo and Teju learnt the some 30 shabads on the vaja and tabla and did harmonious Kirten regularly at their satsang, and sometimes in our Gurdwara. For three years, both of them taught me the beauty of being sincere and humble.

APRIL 2002. We celebrated Vesakhi. The sangat did an Akhand Paath all on its own. Surjeet Kaur, Manraj Kaur, Baljeet Kaur, Darshan Singh, Swaran Kaur, Surinder Kaur, Satvir Kaur, Jagmeet Singh, Attinder Singh joined me and my wife as being the anchor pathis in this as well the many more Akhand Paaths to follow, while many others from the sangat helped. It was the first Akhand Paath since the Gurdwara was established in 1997. There existed an earlier account of hiring professional pathis from New York. The experience was so bad that the Sangat had given up contemplating an Akhand Paath again.

The main attraction of Vesakhi, however, was competitions for children. Memorized Paath, Bana Competition, Vesakhi story telling, Kirten and Tabla. In subsequent competitions we added turban tying and a coloring competition.

The first prize in path went to a 12-year kid who

recited no more than 3 pauris. The competitions continued every Vesakhi and in the 2004 Vesakhi the first prize in Paath went to a 7 year old who recited all 38 pauris by heart. Others recited Rehras, Kirten Sohela, Chaupai and Anand Sahib in completion.

The biggest challenge, however, was acquiring new premises for the Gurdwara. The catalytic ingredients were all there. The capacity of the Darbar was getting small. The location – above a restaurant that sometimes played loud music – was unsuitable. There was limited parking. There were no facilities such as a separate langgar hall. There was no kitchen – food had to be prepared and brought from outside. There was only one bathroom for everyone's use. And the Gurdwara committee had managed to save up \$300,000 – enough for a down payment.

Yet there were real obstacles. Some members of the sangat tended to cling on to petty disputes that probably had their origins in the villages where they came from. These quarrels turned simple issues such as membership of the committee and the location of the Gurdwara into needlessly contentious issues. Such people took a stand on where the new Gurdwara ought to be located based on who was proposing it, on

village loyalties and personal disputes rather than convenience, suitability and affordability. I had to overcome these if I was expected to provide any sort of credible leadership and the fact that I was an outsider helped. I revealed to the sangat that I had never been to India, let alone the villages where they came from, and that helped me stay neutral to the extent that they allowed me to. Second, Boston was home to scores of cheats and frauds in the name of Sants and Babas. They held programs in their chamchas homes to compete for the Gurdwara's sangat thus splitting it. For months running, I launched scathing attacks on them by name during my Katha and systematically exposed their fraud. They had instilled fear in the Sangat – promising misfortunes to those who did not fall at their feet - and my repeated harsh language against them helped remove such fear. By the Gurus blessings, all except one had closed shop within the first year. Even he was left with one or two families as his devotees. Third, there lingered suspicion ranging from interference to sabotage from those who felt that there already was a Gurdwara in Milford, and hence no need to build another in Boston.

The Boston sangat's relationship with Milford was long and complex. Prior to the setting up of Boston's Gurdwara at Somerville the sangat attended Milford. I was

told that the Boston sangat donated generously towards the building of Milford Gurdwara in the 1970s. Someone put this figure at \$40,000. Yet there was hardly any feeling of belonging. One Somerville resident put it to me this way. "They would come and ask us – restaurant owners - to sponsor the big langgars," by which he meant Vesakhi and other gurpurabs, "and forget about us after that." Another told me "we were treated like second class members and our children did not want to go there." Being excluded was not the only issue; there was a financial aspect to a sangat splintering off to open its own Gurdwara.

Darshan Singh Ji and Mahinder Singh Saini narrated an account of a Milford elder telling them – after Somerville Gurdwara had just been opened at rented premises – that he would remove his pagree and put it at their feet if they would shut it down.

The intensity of such stories notwithstanding, I felt confident that there was no such interference, and if there was any, it was based on misconceptions that could easily be cleared. During my earlier stay in Boston from 1993 – 95, I had regularly done Katha at Milford. For a year, I ran a Kirten and Tabla class there for some 15 children and

adults. Some of them are still doing Kirten. I knew most of the leaders there to be dedicated sewadars whose help was now desperately needed in building Boston's Gurdwara. Also, I had, since my arrival in Boston this time around, been doing Katha regularly at the home of a Gursikh who attended Milford – a sewa that continues at the time of this writing. Virtually all those who attended this monthly Katha program consisted of Milford Sangat and this allowed me a link of sorts with Milford. I thus resolved to help clear the misconceptions.

I argued that Milford was one hour's drive from Boston. There were lots of young Sikh workers, professionals, students and visitors in the city who did not have the means to spend two hours on the road to get to and from a Gurdwara. Boston has 60 colleges and universities. The number of Sikh students alone runs in the hundreds. Most of them have no cars – the only way to get to Milford. The city thus ought to have its own Gurdwara accessible by public transport. I provided a more provoking argument:

If Somerville Gurdwara closed down, 95% of the people will just stop going to Gurdwara. As it is, even with a Gurdwara in Somerville, only 1 in 25 Boston Sikhs went to a Gurdwara regularly.

Additionally, Milford was set up just 6 miles away from the then existing Millis Gurdwara and both have been running great. There was thus no need to worry about another Gurdwara 50 miles away.

MAY 2002. On the way to the Medford Mall on day, I saw workers putting up a "For Sale" sign on a parcel of land 25,000 square feet. I called the realtor, arranged for a meeting and assembled the committee. The land was for \$600,000. The Gurdwara had 400,000. We needed to raise 200,000 and buy the land for cash, and use it for collateral to borrow the construction cost. Everyone thought it would work out.

I proposed to the Management Committee that there was a need to set up a Building Committee consisting of 5 Sikhs. This number would provide for the Gurus blessings. Its functions would be to identify and select land or property for purchase, raise the money, do the legwork for the acquisition and organize the move from Somerville to the new premises were. I then proposed to have an elder from Milford Gurdwara chair the committee for the reasons that this gursikh had been instrumental in building Milford. I had a sewa relationship with him and he had the stature within the Sikh community in the

whole of USA. He would thus help bring the two Sangats together.

Having got the green light, I invited this gursikh to my home in Medford on a weekday. After lunch, which my wife prepared with much anticipation, I took him and his wife to the rented premises of Somerville Gurdwara. I expected the squalor conditions of the premises to shake the conscience of this sewadar. Upon entering, both of them shook their heads in disbelief and inquired about the umpteen mirrors on the walls (the hall was previously used as a gym). It was the first time they had visited Somerville Gurdwara. I said, "Now you see the urgency for a new premises?"

I then took them to see the land that was for sale in Medford. At the spot, the elder provided me the contact of a Milford sangat professional who would help in negotiating with the realtor, the City of Medford (for permits etc). I then told the elder of my desire for his leadership in the process. I invited him to come to our sangat, do Kirten, speak on stage and in the process provide the sangat an opportunity to accept him just as they had accepted me. He promised to come on Sunday. The next day I called the professional that had been suggested and showed him the plot, giving him the realtor details.

Two weeks later, Darshan Singh Ji and I went to the

professional's house upon the latter's invitation. There, after being treated to a sumptuous meal, we were told the City would not let us build a Gurdwara there because enough parking spaces couldn't be built in 25,000 square feet. The city had a formula: x number of parking spaces for y number of members on z square feet of land. This land did not meet the requirements. I conveyed this to the committee and we did not even make an offer for the land. Meanwhile, I kept trying to get the elder to attend the Gurdwara's Sunday diwan. He never did show up and the credibility of the thought of his leadership in the building committee withered away. At the time of writing, he has not once visited even the new premises. The management committee thus simultaneously acted as the building committee.

JAN 2003. I began scouring the Internet for suitable properties. Virtually every realtor in the Greater Boston area was given a description of the kind of property we were looking for. The realtor who had found me my Medford apartment told me the American Legion Building in Medford was for up sale. The committee viewed the building. It has a 5,000 sq feet hall, a ready built kitchen, 50 parking spaces, and a three family home. We put in an offer of 1.1 million, but

the Legion trustees decided not to sell after all.

FEBRUARY 2003. While driving by Mystic Ave, Medford I came across a building for sale. The committee viewed 226 Mystic Ave. Two floors of 11,000 square feet space on 21,000 square feet of land with 40 parking spaces. It had a telecommunications antenna that brought in \$20,000 a year for ten years. We offered 1.1 million, but the owner was firm in his asking price of \$1.3 million. So 1.3 million it was.

We did and Ardas, and paid a down payment of \$100,000. Now began the task of raising the rest of it.

Getting a mortgage was the first hurdle. Gurdwara vice President Harbhajan Singh Ji said we should approach a "Punjabi bank" in the interest of community solidarity. I had by then already had a meeting with the vice president of one of Boston's leading banks to discuss our loan. The committee felt we should give the "Punjabi bank" a chance. Harbhajan Singh Ji, Darshan Singh Ji and myself walked in and out of the Punjabi Bank manager's office in one minute and a half. His community solidarity convictions were far less than our vice-president's. His bank was too young to lend to a risky venture

such as a Gurdwara, he told us. A week later, Gurdwara president Jaspal Singh Ji, Darshan Singh Ji and myself walked out of the other Bank's commercial Division with a \$500,000 mortgage letter in hand.

The Gurdwara had \$300,000 in savings. We now had the task of raising \$400,000 till closing day, which was four months away. On top of that we needed to raise an additional \$200,000 for renovations to convert the office building into a Gurdwara.

In glowing pride, Darshan Singh Ji told the Sangat we had finally found our home. We had secured a mortgage and needed to raise 100,000 a month for four months running. The money began to pour in. The first donation was from Pritam Singh Saini. He had been fired from his job the day before. He told the sangat – now my only income is the rent from my house. I'll donate three months. The Pabla family, the Gill family and many more competed with each other to write out checks for tens of thousands. The first check came from Baljeet Kaur and Gurinder Singh. The first business check came from Bachittar Singh Ji Sodhi.

On Sundays, after the diwan we would form teams and go around obtaining donations from the community businesses. We were showered with money by some, excused by some, mocked by others. It was a learning experience par excellence. A couple of extreme

episodes are perhaps worth mentioning if only to get an understanding of the wisdom of some self-serving Sikhs. One restaurant owner said he would donate if made president of the Gurdwara. Another, who had told Darshan Singh Ji to bring me over to his restaurant for a meal no less than a dozen times, sent the both of us away empty handed. We had to have our meal in his competitor's restaurant next door. A grocery store owner declared God gave him nothing, so he would give us nothing. He had wanted the Gurdwara to buy his grocery store and turn it into a temple, and now was his chance to get even over our refusal. The committee had looked at his store and pointed out that it did not have a have single parking space. His reply was – buy something first, then you can build a parking lot made of gold ten stories high." His wisdom was earth shattering.

We raised \$ 200,000 in two months or so. Then the collection slowed to a trickle. We realized that everyone had given and given their maximum.

Members of the Sangat took it upon themselves to do more fund raising. Piara Singh Pabla went to all the cab drivers and brought in thousands. Cooks, restaurant workers, and simple folk dug

deeper into their pockets. Bhenji Mahinder Kaur Pabla gathered some ladies and set out on her own mission. Harbahajan Singh Ji took us to Sikh families and business in NH, VT and Maine. The vice President even made an appeal in a Canadian Gurdwara with the help of his relatives there. Yet we did not meet the \$400,000 target. The closing date was getting nearer.

In the meantime, a major obstacle had arisen. There was an 800-gallon oil storage tank buried in ground below the property. It had been emptied out by the former owners, but there were signs of soil contamination. The contamination was serious enough to deny us an occupancy permit. The City's Fire Department's requirement was to dig out the tank and contaminated soil. This raised two problems – the cost was close to \$200,000, and removing the tank would endanger the structural integrity of the building. The biggest issue was – who was going to pay for the work. It appeared as a potential deal broker. I hoped the seller would do so but prepared for the eventuality that we may have to fork out this money or scrap the purchase altogether.

There were thus two outstanding problems – hard negotiation over the oil tank and the task of raising \$200,000 that we were short for the closing. I decided to tackle the money issue first, and

for this I decided to turn to the Milford sangat.

Perhaps the Milford elder gursikh would care to appeal to the sangat on our behalf, even if he never did turn up at Somerville Gurdwara. He was well known there and his appeal would carry much more weight than any one else's. His polite suggestion was that I make the appeal myself. I considered doing so on any non-Sunday diwan at Milford, since the responsibility of Kirten and Katha every Sunday at Somerville lay with me. An opportunity arose at a special home Kirten program at the same Milford elder's house. I got myself invited and conveyed my intention to do fundraising there. I took 20 Somerville kids to do Kirten and asked our entire Gurdwara committee to tag along. We were there in a convoy of 7 vehicles. I believed a majority of the Milford sangat would be present given the elder's links and we would make an official appeal there as agreed.

As the diwan concluded, our Treasurer Gurminderjit Singh – a one time regular at Milford, pointed out to me that hardly any Milford sangat was present. Darshan Singh Ji nevertheless made a powerful appeal before those who were present. I added to the appeal speaking from the Tabia of Guru Maharaj. One person shouted out his name saying he pledged \$10,000. Another pledged \$500.00. Pledges being pledges, we collected just

over a \$1,000 in real money. After langgar, the Gurdwara committee sat down for a discussion with some members of Milford including a ranking committee member of that Gurdwara. We were told that the Gurdwara had \$40,000 in CDs and that they were considering donating it to our cause. There was repeated mention of 'working together' and "putting some people into your group." We were given names of three persons (including the professional who told us we could not build enough parking spaces in 25,000 sq feet, and another long time Medford resident but member of the Milford Sangat) to "put into our group." All this in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji Maharaj. The fact that this was an attempt to negotiate for positions in the affairs of the Gurdwara for motives only known to them was further made clear some three weeks later, when I made attempts to indirectly reach the person who pledged \$10,000 to request payment. I was told that I should "sit and discuss" the pledge. I refused on grounds that the pledge was not made to me, but to the Guru in His presence. I further said making pledges and then "negotiating" was not a Gurmat way of doing things; it was way of life of politicians. Second I had no authority to discuss and distribute influence to anybody. I had none myself. This \$10,000 pledge has remained just that – a pledge. The

other pledge of \$500 did materialize.

I could not figure out which was the greater folly – using one's own money to buy a position, or using the Gurdwara's funds to do the same. My confusion multiplied further when, three months later on a Saturday morning, I turned up at Milford Gurdwara to attend a wedding and discovered a three-page letter severely denigrating my character pinned neatly to the Gurdwara notice board. A stack of extra copies lay on a table nearby with a note, "please take one." I was not a member of the Sangat of Milford, having last attended regularly ten years ago in 1995. It didn't make sense to character assassinate me in Milford. While writing the second draft of this diary in March 2005, I raised this issue with a group of Milford sewadars to allow for fair comment in this article. One of them solved the puzzle, for me at least. "Bringing you down was part of the desire to stop Somerville Gurdwara," he said. I was an obstacle to the parochial designs of some at Milford. The logic was way off, but the honesty was not.

To me this episode, when taken in totality, goes down as the lowest ebb in the long, and arduous journey of the Medford Guru Ghar.

I had started off to help dispel misconceptions of interference and or sabotage but instead came out convinced otherwise, and remain so. It is recounted above at the expense of precious space in this magazine not out of ill feeling, but to create awareness that parochial-ness – even dharmik - trivializes one's worth as a sewadar. In my personal opinion, by not rising to the occasion to contribute and assist, Milford lost an opportunity to build a bridge with a group that rightly or wrongly felt alienated. In his appeal for donations, Darshan Singh Ji used to say most eloquently – giving towards the building fund is unique because it is your chance to have your name written in the bricks of the Guru Ghar. The bricks of Gurdwara Medford number in the thousands – yet those that have on them, the names of the Sangat closest to them – Milford - are sadly less than the fingers on one hand.

Everyone in the committee was desperately worried over funds. Darshan Singh proposed a second round of collection. The entire committee donated a second time to get the ball rolling. He made the call on stage as well. Many in the sangat made second and third round donations. But it still was not enough, and with the closing only weeks away, the possibility of

not being able to close became a real possibility.

Desperate times require desperate solutions. What could be more desperate than re-negotiating the price of the property. Could it be brought down by the \$200,000 that we were short? And that too after signing the P&S and paying the down payment? The idea was too improbable to even put to the committee but worth a try. I decided to pursue it quietly. Armed with all the negotiation techniques that I had been trained to use in 12 years of my professional life, and an Ardas and a Hukamnama promising the Guru's blessing, I walked into the attorney's office with a suggestion: the sellers keep the antenna rights and reduce the sale price in return. The antenna was worth \$20,000 per year for 10 years. That meant \$200,000. The sellers offered \$100,000 for a rights period of ten years. After some tough bargaining, we settled at \$150,000.

It was time to take on the issue of the oil tank issue. We hired an environmental attorney to help me conduct the tough negotiations. An environmental engineer of high repute and experience provided an alternative and cheaper solution. His company proposed that the tank be washed out, sucked clean, filled with concrete and the soil around it injected with hundreds of gallons of oil-eating chemicals. The cost would be \$69,000. The engineer

sold the idea to the Fire Department. He provided a guarantee that any dollar above \$69,000 will come from his pocket. The sellers agreed with this \$69,000 solution, and to pay for it, but it would be done after the closing. An Escrow account was to be created into which \$69,000 of our sale money was to be deposited and used for this purpose.

The property price was now down to \$1.05 million from \$1.3 million. The oil tank issue was resolved. We were now in a position to close. I told the attorneys to rewrite the P&S, and informed the bank. The environmental attorney drew out the papers for the Escrow account. I told the committee this unbelievable tale – that the Guru had removed all remaining obstacles. There was a sigh of relief – and everyone prepared for the closing.

JUNE 3rd 2003. The entire committee was to meet at the bank's attorney's office where lawyers from 4 law firms, bankers, and sellers were to assemble. I decided to stay home and sit next to the phone to deal with anything that may go wrong and hence disallow the closing. Murphy's Law worked half an hour prior to the meeting. The attorney called to say the Insurance dossier had not arrived and hence the closing would not happen. I told him I had the documents on me and was on my

way. What he did not know was that I was going to drive to the Insurance company in Arlington, get the papers done, and carry them to the heart of Boston city – a three hour job in the morning rush hour. I called President Jaspal Singh Ji to delay getting there as much as he could so as to help me with the timing. He churned out a story to explain his delayed arrival. I rushed over to Arlington. An hour later the documents arrived and the closing was over

After paying out closing costs and the balance of the sale price, the Gurdwara had about \$8,000 left to do a \$150,000 renovation without which we could not move in.

JULY 03. The search began for an architect and renovation contractors. At the Kirten class, I asked Teju Ji and Kanhayo Ji if they had any suggestions.

Kanhayo Ji said he was an engineer and architect and would act for the Gurdwara for free. I never knew of his profession. His humbleness in hiding that fact from me was astonishing.

Teju Ji wrote out a check and said the city Mayor was his next-door neighbor. I did not know that either. But what I did know now was that both had been sent by the Guru to associate with me a year ago with a specific purpose and this

was it. Kanhayo went on to have many lengthy meetings with me after Kirten class to plan the Gurdwara's main hall, small Darbar hall, bathrooms, kitchen, granthi living quarters, langgar hall, office, coat room etc. He sat with the City's engineers to get the plans approved. He got the City Permits on his name. He supervised the entire renovation. He rushed from Dracut at short notice to deal with emergency occasions. He did close to \$25,000 worth of work and did not charge the Gurdwara a cent. I had to persuade him to accept the cost of materials such as printing paper. And yes, he did tell me that the x, y, z formula was twisted. How so? If 25,000 sq feet of land could not produce enough parking space, how come the 21,000 sq feet at 226 Mystic Ave could do so?

To save money, we did the demolition ourselves. Kanhayo supervised it and Gurminderjit Singh and Gurinder Singh led some 20 volunteers in the fine art of destruction. The kids had great fun banging thing up. There were so many whose names I did not know who just walked in there wanting to do something with their hands. We took down a dozen walls to make space for two diwan halls upstairs. We dismantled all the bathrooms upstairs. We removed 20 container loads of old carpets, construction debris, and tons of computer wires. There was so much of copper in the wires that we got \$1,000 worth of

containers free by trading them. Kartar Singh brought in his welding and carpentry equipment and did plumbing removal. In one week, we were ready to build.

The daily schedule for the next four months was this. I would open the doors at 7.30 am, give the contractors instructions as per Kanhayo's plans, go to Home Depot with them to buy all the stuff needed for the day and supervise their work until they went back. This arrangement was forced upon us by the nature of our finances. We could only spend as the money came in. Jaspal Singh Pabla and Gurminderjit Singh checked in regularly to see what they could do. After the contractors had gone back, dedicated sewadars – Baljeet Kaur, Gurinder Singh, Manraj Kaur, Attinder Singh Khalsa, Raghbir Singh, Gurminderjit Singh, Gurinder Kaur, Ravneet Kaur, Tarsem Singh Ji, Gurpreet Kaur, Satvir Kaur, Sitvinder Kaur, Inderpreet Singh, Hardeep Singh, Jaswant Kaur, Gulpaven Singh, Ramanjeet Singh, Bhenji Sato, Bhenji Mhindo, Bhenji Raj Kaur, Mandeep Kaur, Harbhajan Singh and many others came in daily to broom sweep the place and put things in order for the contractors. These sewadars also went out to Home Depot to buy stuff that was required the following day.

One night we formed separate teams to buy up every bag of sand in every home depot within

two hours driving range. We needed close to 300 bags and we got them all within hours.

We also did things such as painting. Harbhajan Singh Ji painted the bathrooms. The entire baseboard was done by the above team of sewadars who cut, painted, glued and nailed them into place. Our sewadars also put up all the partitions in the bathrooms and constructed the bases for all the granite sink tops. Gurinder Kaur and Sitvinder Kaur chose the entire color scheme for the Gurdwara walls, doors, carpets, heating covers, frames etc – a painstaking task that agonized them for weeks.

SEPTEMBER 2003. The moment to show more generosity had come and the sangat showed it. Satnam Singh Ji Gill family offered to pay for the entire carpeting cost. I called him to set a time and date to select the carpet and he told me to just go and get whatever I thought was the best.

Jaspal Singh Ji Gill said to us – go get the best carpet in the country and don't worry about the cost, which came close to \$50,000. He further agreed to pay for the langgar hall flooring as well. Jaspal Singh Ji Pabla paid for the entire Palkee.

He wanted it made out of the best marble and granite. It took 10

workers close to 15 hours to drag in an uncut piece of granite weighing a few tons measuring 9ft by 6ft that was to be the base of the Palkee. Four hand made marble pillars hold the roof of the Palkee from which the Chananee hangs. The cost: \$15,000

OCTOBER 2003. Our lease for the rented premises was expiring end of October while the renovations were expected to be complete by January. The landlord was prepared to sign a one-year extension but not three months.

Satnam Singh Ji Gill offered the use of his house in Beverly. The distance was a factor. Jaspal Singh and I walked into the landlord's office to request for an extension of two months one last time. He said he already had another long-term tenant, but agreed to allow us use of another of his halls in the same building. We took the offer and moved our stuff out into the main Darbar of the new premises on October 31st.

For the next 8 Diwans, we divided our duties. One family would bring the sound system, another the *Swari*, another the *Chadran*, another the langgar utensils and so on. This sewa was a true test of grit and conviction in the thick of winter. And the real test came on the third week of December. On Saturday night it had snowed close to 2 feet. At 4 am on Sunday, I got a call from Bhenji

Mahinder Kaur asking if she should proceed with preparing the langgar or whether the diwan would be cancelled due to the snow. I told her to proceed but to reduce the quantity. By 9 am – the time I left home, I had received calls from many in the sangat asking for the diwan to be cancelled. Others called to say they were definitely coming because they spent the night shoveling. I left my house with my family and the Swari. After a grueling drive I arrived at the Gurdwara. Gurinder Singh, Baljeet Kaur and Raghbir Singh, covered from head to foot in snow trying to dig out the entrance told me the hall was not opened. We called the landlord. Other sewadars began to arrive. The langgar arrived. We spent two hours in our cars waiting for the landlord to turn up and open the door. My car ran out of gas – the engine had been running close to 4 hours. Baljeet Kaur walked to the nearest gas station without telling anyone. It was closed. Gurminderjit Singh Ji drove around in his four-wheel drive to pick up Baljeet and came back an hour later with a can of petrol.

We started the diwan 3 hours late. The sangat consisted of a tiny crowd of the truly dedicated. I stood on the stage to tell them that, and also the fact that our renovation account was depleted.

All those present had donated umpteen times. They were prepared to donate again, but my conscience would not allow me to ask for more. I told the sangat this too. So I asked for them to loan the Gurdwara some money, which would be paid back once we moved to the new premises. \$55,000 came in that day.

JANUARY 11TH 2004. The opening Ceremony was fit for a King. It was supposed to begin at 10.30 am, but the sangat came at 8.30 am. The children were most excited because it was their show. They had practiced and rehearsed the entire ceremony over and over again. They had done nothing of this sort in their lives. Many were still wondering if it was for real. We brought the three Swarees from my apartment and the Darbar's Kirteni Jatha led the procession leading to Parkash.

Sandeep Kaur, Baldeep Kaur and Paramveer Singh crowned the grand opening with a dramatic rendering of *Deh Shiva Bar Mohe Ehe* as the sangat and Swarees entered the diwan followed by 5 piercing Jaikaras by the Jatha that loudly proclaimed – we had done it!

We opened with an Akhand Path. It was bitterly cold and one of the heating pipes burst. In such

circumstances, plumbers are in demand and no plumber need even answer the phone, but Gurinder Kaur Pabla persuaded the Guru to send an entire team of plumbers to work on our heat system from 5 pm till 2.30 am.

In the Diwan, I was persuaded to sing the shabad "*Santa' Key Karaj Aap Khaloya, Har Kum Keravan Aiya Raam.*"

It was the Guru's work and He stood in Himself to take it to completion. He positioned us along appropriate milestones of this journey so that we could all do our bit.

The stage secretary, Gurinder Singh announced that the Sangat was giving a Siropao to me for my Sewa in the Guru Ghar's journey thus far. I had not been warned about this. I walked to the stage and Board of Directors Chairman Bachittar Singh Sodhi Ji put a Siropao around my neck. While the Jaikara was being sounded, Jaspal Singh Ji Pabla presented me an envelope. It felt like it contained money, but I knew the Gurdwara's account was absolutely depleted a week prior to the opening. Sewadars had spent their own money to purchase the decorations that were put up for the opening. I was convinced I deserved no Siropao. I placed it at the feet of the Guru and dedicated it to the sangat.

I took the Treasurer to task after the diwan, and was told that members of the committee and some from the sangat had put into that envelope their personal money. It was not from Gurdwara funds.

After the Akhand Path, we presented a Siropao to Kanhayo Ji. There was no question that he deserved it fully. He reciprocated by singing a shabad with Teju Ji on the Tabla. They sang *"Mein Andhle Kee Teik, Tera Naam Khundkara."* Their shabad was an entirely appropriate summary of the entire journey. The Guru had guided us ignorant and blind folk into building a magnificent Guru Ghar.

APRIL 2005. The Guru has since stood by to make sure all goes well. Within the first year we paid back all of the \$55,000 we collected on that snow storm day. On top of that we have managed to get our kitchen done. It is a state of the art facility. Satnam Singh Ji Gill family donated \$30,000 worth of equipment. Jaspal Singh Pabla donated the \$6,000 dishwasher. The Pabla family further donated hundreds of steel ware. Countless other families flooded the kitchen with all sorts of gadgets and utensils. The Gurdwara has been able to install a brand new heating system at a cost of \$13,000.

The Gurdwara's Diwans are a pride of the Sangat. We have had no granthi, no ragee and no paid employee. Sewadars working free

of charge open the Gurdwara daily for an hour each in the morning and evening. Other sewadars open it at 8 am on Sundays; recite the panj banees and Sukhmani Sahib. At 10.30 am the Guru Nanak Darbar Kirten Jatha does Kirten till 12 noon. In the four years of their existence, they have not missed a single Sunday. From then till 12.45 the sangat puts up with me as they have continuously for the past 4 years. The children spend these 45 minutes in their own separate diwan. Sewadars talk to them in at their level. This Gurdwara belongs to them and they are eagerly learning how to run it. After the diwan, yet more sewadars run Punjabi classes for the children. Naujwan Committees plan, organize and execute virtually every activity of the Gurdwara. This magazine itself is part of a bigger activity – Vesakhi 2005 – which was run entirely by Naujwans.

Gurinder Singh deserves credit for his ability to inspire our youth and children to be so deeply involved in the running of the Gurdwara. Every Gurdwara deserves a role model as this young Gursikh.

LOOKING BACK. The journey of the Guru Ghar has been spectacular in all respects. The sangat's dedication, perseverance

and convictions have been tested in this monumental journey.

The trials humbled us all, the triumphs elevated us to new heights and the Guru's personal indulgence in this mammoth task has strengthened our faith in him. Such journeys are not undertaken all the time. This diary is an attempt to record and preserve this arduous yet wonderful journey, so that those who were part of it can maintain their steadfastness and those who were not may draw inspiration from it.

For me, personally, this diary represents a chance to thank all those who let me walk the journey with them. The list is long but some can be mentioned because their kind deeds are etched in my mind forever. From the kind *Bhenji* who cooked bitter gourd and sent it to me – all because I once mentioned the dish as being my favorite, to the spirited *Bhenji* who drove me and my family to and fro the airport each time I wanted to escape the pressures of life and go somewhere, to the astonishing Gursikh lady who walked miles to get gas for my car in a snow storm, to the ladies who ran to get me a warm glass of milk each time I entered the kitchen – I say thank you. To the Gursikh who dropped everything to service

my car for free - whenever I turned up - simply because, in his words "this car serves the Guru Ghar", to the kind souls who rented their expensive and beautiful home to my non-affording family and to those in the Sangat who turned up to help when I moved house, I say thank you. To the Gurdwara committee who steadfastly stood beside me and defended me publicly even when I was in error, I say thank you. To Gurinder Singh, who gave me fully dedicated support in my attempt to make this Gurdwara relevant to our next generation, I say thanks. To Jagmeet Singh who taught me humility, I say special thanks. Waheguru should bless every Gurdwara with such sewadars. To the elders who commended my every Katha, I say thank you. To the children in the Kirten Jatha, you have done yourselves, your parents and the sangat so proud that your achievements will forever be remembered. I am proud to have been your teacher. The entire journey described above was traveled for you. To all your parents, I say be generously proud of your children for they have achieved the most difficult. To the sangat who trusted, listened and tolerated me I say may Waheguru bless you all and forgive my excesses. And above all to Waheguru – thank you for Medford. End.