

Khalsa College – A Legacy of Bhai Ram Singh

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Khalsa College Amritsar, the magnificent edifice, is a creation of the Punjab's greatest architect of the colonial period, Bhai Ram Singh. It is a remarkable design, but what is more amazing is that it was brought forth in a period when local talent, initiative, creativity was considered a poor second to the inimitable qualities of the alien colonial rulers, who painted India and Indian in very unflattering terms.

The colonials studied and reconstructed Indians as a people steeped in ignorance, non-scientific and non material, concerned only with religion, and living in the past thus denying the wonderful richness of India; and with the same broad brush, they painted Indian Art as savage, brutal, sex-driven, cruel and monstrous¹. John Stuart Mill the famous liberal scholar and philosopher of representative government, worked at the India Office but never advocated liberty for Indians, as he thought them to be civilizationally, if not racially, inferior to the English. Mill was no fool and knew very well the splendid achievements of India in the field of art and philosophy, yet he took the position, for, how else could he justify the colonial rule of a few over the millions of India! It is one of the many ironies of history that while European nations threw off the autocratic yoke of Kings and Emperors they systematically conquered and enslaved huge numbers of humanity. On the one hand the British Parliament strove for suffrage and representation for its people yet on the other, it gaily celebrated conquest and humiliation of highly civilized nations such as India.

The British Raj brought forth new cultural and behavior patterns among the people of the Punjab. A large segment resented the rule of the *angrez* and turned inward, abdicating the difficult clash of wills. They refused to interact with the new rulers, terming them evil and satanic; they eulogized and romanticized their past, refused to learn the English language and would not send their children to government schools. For them the present was like a passing nightmare. Another segment abandoned their traditions altogether and completely took on the airs and customs of the *angrez* rulers. These represented the native classes that enjoyed benefits in terms of land grants, education and government employment. Privately the colonials ridiculed such people as wanting to be like them – an effort in futility.

A small number amongst the British-educated classes adopted yet another path. This group held onto their valued traditions but was willing to learn from the *angrez*. Theirs was the road most difficult to take. Only persons thoroughly imbued with the lasting values of their culture, yet full of eagerness to learn the new technologies and all that the rulers were willing to teach, could then compete with the rulers with honor and dignity. Theirs was neither the path of abdication from the challenges of the time nor of abject submission; they stood firm and solid on the twin pillars of what was valuable in their tradition and the new knowledge that they acquired from the Europeans. Bhai Ram Singh was such a person in the field of architecture.

This paper traces Bhai Ram Singh's early formative period in some detail, quickly mentions his works in other parts of Punjab, mostly Lahore, and then discusses his greatest achievement Khalsa College Amritsar. For those interested in greater details I can, at the risk of being accused of salesmanship, recommend our book.

Ram Singh was born to the Ramgarhia Sohal family at a village Rasulpur, near Batala district Gurdaspur. His father Assa Singh owned some land in the village but due to financial hardship moved to Amritsar.² Ram Singh's date of birth is stated to be 1st August 1858³, the year of the abolition of the East India Company's rule and a year after the great upheaval of 1857. The preceding decade (1847-57) had been a period of great turmoil in the Punjab, witnessing the end of Sikh rule, the uprising of the Indian troops of the British Army and its brutal suppression. Therefore it is not surprising that very little of the family record has survived⁴. As may be expected there are a number of tales, sometimes contradictory, about the family and the early expression of Ram Singh's genius. Mrs. Rani Sohal, widow of Ram Singh's grandson, insisted that Assa Singh was a landholder of significance, that Ram Singh was educated at the mission school and that the Queen adopted Ram Singh as her brother. The Encyclopedia of Sikhism⁵ also, quite wrongly, states that Ram Singh 'attracted the notice of Mr. Kipling ... in Amritsar' when it is a known fact that Ram Singh was in Lahore before Kipling arrived to set up the Mayo School in Lahore. This lack of clarity continued, despite the fact that Ram Singh rose to be acclaimed at the highest level of the colonial society, by the Queen-Empress herself.

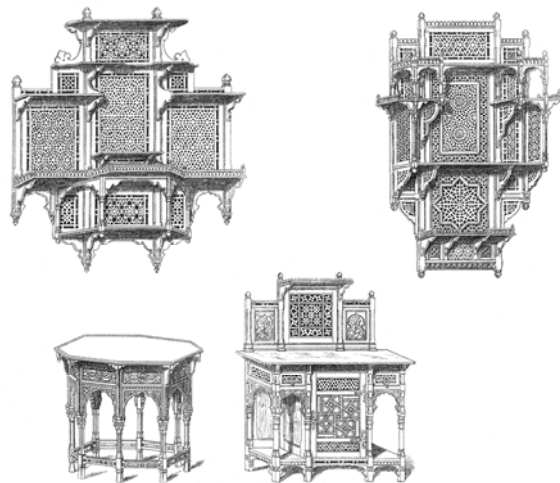
The most authentic information about Ram Singh's early life comes from draft of his letter, surviving with his descendants, addressed to Sir William Mackworth Young, the Lt Governor of Punjab (1897-1902) regarding his promotion as Principal, Mayo School of Arts. The draft in Ram Singh's own handwriting sheds light on his early life in the third and fourth paragraph of the letter. He wrote, in August 1899, 'Please permit me, Dear Governor, to thrust it on your Honour's particular attention that Mr. John Harvey first picked me up; and it was upon his prophetic wishes that I joined the Mayo School of Art in 1875... Before that when your Honour was at Amritsar as Deputy Commissioner I repaired and polished Lady Young's Piano and my work was approved even then. ...'⁶

The Deputy Commissioner of a district in British India was a person of great authority and stature. If a piano had to be repaired and polished, and that too belonging to the mem-sahib, only a person of great skill would have been asked to do the task. It is, thus, clear that Ram Singh, had acquired excellent skills by the young age of sixteen. What is equally evident is that he could only have learnt the skills as an apprentice in his family's traditional business. The Ramgarhia Misl of the Sikhs has a long-standing tradition of being master craftsmen, specializing in carpentry. In all probability Assa Singh, Ram Singh's father, shifted to Amritsar, locating himself in or near the timber market, *Cheel-Mandi*, where carpenter-shops were also situated. It is not clear whether young Ram Singh had any early formal schooling, however, he might have picked up some smattering of the English language in his interaction with the British missionaries and officials and come to the notice of John Harvey mentioned in Ram Singh's earlier mentioned letter.

Ram Singh first appears in records as one of the students of the Lahore School of Carpentry⁷ established, 1874, through private subscription, with classes held in the verandah of the Director of Public Instruction's office.⁸ It had a somewhat short history and was amalgamated with the newly established Mayo School of Arts, with John Lockwood Kipling as Founder Principal, in a house in Anarkali behind the Bengal Bank⁹, At the School of Arts, in addition to drawing classes; the students were given elementary instruction in reading and writing the vernacular and in arithmetic. Ram Singh, already an accomplished and acknowledged carpenter, began to develop his conceptual and intellectual capacities and outgrew his crafts-training to achieve a deeper understanding of

other arts and architecture. Ram Singh, from his student days, had opportunities to participate in practical work and to study the theoretical basis of design. Several of the projects carried out by the School were later acknowledged to be his work¹⁰. This integration of theory and practice, study of extant Indian heritage and participation in practical work, was the cornerstone of Kipling's philosophy of art education as imbibed and elaborated by Bhai Ram Singh in his work.

In this context it is significant that Ram Singh, throughout his stay at the Mayo School, never turned his back on his traditions. He continued to maintain strong links with his family and *bradri* in Amritsar, and drew upon them for cultural sustenance and support, and often involved them in the work executed by the Mayo School.



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PINJRA OR GEOMETRIC LATTICE WORK
Ram Singh, del.: J.L.Kipling, dir.

Illustration 1: The amalgamation of Indian design with European requirements in furniture. *Journal of Indian Art & Industry* October 1884

First Architectural Work: Mayo School of Arts Building

Ram Singh, by 1881, had been under Kipling's tutelage for 6 years, when an opportunity arose for him to work on an important architectural project, the building for the Mayo School of Arts at Lahore. Kipling in his report for 1876-77 wrote that the funds for the building will not 'allow of any lavish expenditure in decoration nor indeed is it desirable...'¹¹ The School of Arts building is, thus, a brick-faced, imposing structure, fronting and set back from the Mall, opposite the Punjab University and next to the Museum. The famous Zamzama gun of the Sikhs, immortalized by Kipling's son Rudyard, today, sits on a traffic island of the Mall opposite the building.

Ram Singh used his skills and knowledge of details of brickwork to humanize the scale of the exposed brick surfaces. He judiciously used molded ornamental bricks, terracotta *jalliwork* (fenestration) in the arched verandah openings. The building facades were



MAYO SCHOOL OF ARTS, LAHORE

Illustration 2: Designed by Bhai Ram Singh in 1882-83, the Mayo School of Arts Building was his first Architectural Project; *Photo from Educational Buildings in India 1911*

subdivided into panels, and the plinth, cornice, lintel and cill levels accentuated through intricate brick detailing using varying-sized bricks. The corners of the north wing, the main façade of the School, facing the Mall, was emphasized with turrets and *chattris*, while ornamental embellishments such as the stucco work under the eaves, lent the building grace and texture. A marble drinking fountain was specially designed for the center of the courtyard.

Royal Commissions

The first Royal Commission was the interior of the Billiard Room for the Duke of Connaught at Bagshot Park in Surrey, England which kept Kipling and Ram Singh busy in the summer vacations of 1885.¹² The project was conceived as ‘an elaborate arrangement of carved wood in the style of the last century of Punjab wood decoration,’ lining the walls with ceilings of intricately carved wooden panels. The furniture was also to be designed at the School to be in keeping with the “Indian” theme. The work was



Illustration 3: Bhai Ram Singh at Work on the Indian Room (Durbar Hall) circa 1891-2. Photo English Heritage Photo Library



Illustration 4: Portrait painted in 1892 by Rudolf Swoboda, Austrian Court Painter to Queen Victoria. Ram Singh was 34 years at the time; *The Royal Collection UK*

too large to be taken up entirely at the School, thus, while the ‘choicer panels’ were ‘reserved for the practice of the wood-carving class in the school’¹³, the rest of the work had to be contracted out to carpenters at Amritsar who worked under the direction of Bhai Ram Singh.

The work of the Billiard Room led to another royal commission, this time from Queen Victoria herself, whose summer retreat, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, had recently been expanded with a large room added in 1890-1891 for holding receptions. Bhai Ram Singh started working on the new assignment and by November 1890, the interior scheme of the new room had been submitted to the Queen.

The work at Osborne House earned laurels for Ram Singh and the press reported him in glowing terms in newspapers of the time, variously referring to him as ‘Professor of Art’¹⁴ and “a formidable rival”¹⁵ for English artists. The Royal family was equally appreciative and sent him gifts, a silver mounted blotting book

from the Duchess of Connaught, portraits of the royal couple, while the Queen gave him her signed portrait and a gold pencil case for Christmas 1891. The Queen commissioned her court artist, the Austrian, Rudolph Svoboda to paint his portrait which now hangs at the entrance to the Durbar Room at Osborne House. Ram Singh also received invitations as a special guest and speaker from Associations such as the National Indian Association in London,¹⁶ while he was ‘admitted to private theatrical performances in which several members of the Royal family took part, as well as to other court functions which are generally regarded as of a very exclusive order’.¹⁷ The Society for the Encouragement and Preservation of Indian Art gave him a certificate for “good work of all kinds”,¹⁸ which was important enough to be mentioned in the MVO Memorandum.

Meantime in Lahore, Kipling seized every opportunity to proudly introduce Ram Singh to the local gentry, referring to him as ‘our most accomplished architect’.¹⁹ One such occasion was when James Wilson, the Assistant Commissioner, Shahpur, and the Administrator of the Kalra Estate, wrote to Kipling²⁰ for a design for a house for Malik Umar Hayat Khan on the estate. Kipling suggested that the commission should be given to Bhai Ram Singh, who was, at the time, expected back from England in two months after completing the Durbar Room for the Queen at Osborne.

This was also the period when Ram Singh came into contact with Rai Bahadur Ganga Ram, the Executive Engineer, Lahore, meeting him frequently over projects where he was the architect and the construction was carried out under supervision of the Punjab Works Department. They struck a good professional relationship because Ganga Ram²¹, throughout his tenure, associated him in several designs of buildings that the PWD implemented. The works that he carried out with Rai Bahadur Ganga Ram were later mentioned in the MVO Memorandum under, ‘the works carried out for the Executive Engineer’.²²

Aitchison College: First win in an open competition against the best in India

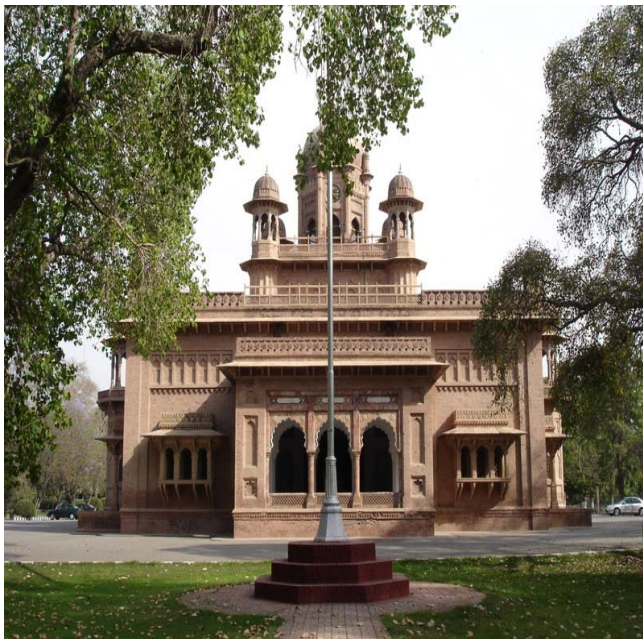


Illustration 5: Aitchison College Main Building designed in 1886

Bhai Ram Singh’s involvement, in 1886, with the project of the Punjab Chiefs’ College, later the Aitchison College, was the result of an India-wide competition announced in the leading newspapers of the time, for the design of the main building of the College. The Mayo School of Arts decided to send an entry in response to the advertisement. The decision to pit the limited experience with the best architectural talent available in India showed courage and Kipling’s confidence in the young, 28-year-old, Ram Singh. A sub-committee narrowed down the selection to two proposals. They liked the layout plans submitted by Col. Samuel Swinton Jacobs,²³ Executive Engineer of

Jeypore State, and the elevations, details, the picturesque grouping of domes, Moorish arches and decoration conceived by Bhai Ram Singh. After much deliberation it was resolved that the Colonel should be asked to adapt his plans to accommodate the elevations and architectural features prepared by Bhai Ram Singh. This was indeed a singular achievement for Ram Singh, for Col. Jacobs was a highly regarded architect. Kipling, reporting on this in his annual report for 1885-1886, wrote that the Mayo School design 'being adjudged to share the prize with a design by Colonel Jacob of Jeypore, a result which those who are acquainted with Colonel Jacob's work must regard as highly satisfactory for the School of Art.'²⁴ The Main College building comprised classrooms, play room, Hall, a library and reading room, science laboratory and office rooms. The focus of the layout plan was the Hall, 70 feet by 30 feet running along the east west axis. The composition appeared as a three-tiered building with the centralized hall, like a church nave with high clearstory windows, being the tallest part and the rows of classrooms forming the second tier, while the verandahs completed the composition. Octagonal turrets surmounted by domes marked the corners of the central block which had the hall, while *chatris*, cupolas, domes and finials were used to accentuate the corners of the building, creating a highly articulated skyline. The porch dome had a composition of smaller domes around it to control the proportioning and visual effect of the composition. The



Illustration 6: Aitcheson College, Lahore: Main Building, Southern Façade.

The construction was load-bearing brickwork and the façade had elaborate brick detailing at the cornice, plinth and parapet. The brickwork called for, and achieved, a high level of skill; the overall effect was one of a building, strong in tradition yet fulfilling the then contemporary demands. The domes and *chatris* were also delineated in ornamental brickwork, reflective of the finesse of woodcarving, which was Ram Singh's forte. Eave brackets in red sandstone throughout the building, the use of red/pink marble cladding for the column and the arches with the occasional use of elaborate *jhorakas* finished in white marble details and some intricately detailed entrances bespeak of the mastery of details by the architect, and the intelligent use of colors to highlight features of the building. The verandahs are screened with elaborate inter-lacing Moorish arches and red marble *jallis*. The interior of the Hall itself was embellished with stucco tracery details, frescos and an imposing balcony resting on sandstone brackets. Unafraid to learn from both the Indian tradition and the new European influence, Ram Singh created a unique composition and highly textured facades, which continue to be lively and charming. This vocabulary he used to great effect in his subsequent buildings the most prominent among them being the Khalsa College.

Khalsa College : His unique legacy

On his return to the School on 1st April 1893, other commissions followed. The most significant of these was the design of the Khalsa College, Amritsar. The Khalsa Diwan²⁵, Amritsar, adopted a resolution, on June 17 1883, for the establishment of the Khalsa College. Recognizing the nexus between religious reform and education, the Sikhs wanted to 'restore Sikhism to its pristine purity' and through publication of 'religious and historical books' to spread 'current knowledge using Punjabi as a medium'²⁶. Upon achieving official sanction, the Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar, set up the Khalsa College Establishment Committee in February 1890. The newly constituted Committee appointed a sub-committee in its first meeting of 22nd February 1890 with Col. Holroyd, the Director of Public Instruction as President, Sir Sardar Atar Singh as Vice president and Dr. W. Bell, the Principal, Government College, Lahore, as Secretary, along with five Sikh members. Both Col. Holroyd and Dr W. Bell were already familiar with the creative work of Ram Singh at the School of Arts, as well as the various commissions that he had so well executed including the Government College boarding house, and therefore it was no surprise that Ram Singh was chosen as the architect.

Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab, Sir James Lyall decided that the Khalsa College should be located in Amritsar in view of the 'fact that this is without doubt the wish of the great majority of the Sikh people'²⁷. He concluded that amongst the five, the most suitable site for the College was the one located on the Grand Trunk Road, in the village of Said Mahmood, at a distance of about three miles from the city, and about two miles from the Railway Station, practically the site formerly selected for the jail. It was on the Cantonment side of the railway tracks, which in itself signified a cultural gesture, to be away from the city and be near the Cantonment.

The collection of funds had started as early as 1890, with the formation of an influential deputation to request the chiefs of the Phulkian states for financial support and sub-committees were formed at Patiala, Ludhiana, Ferozepur, Jalandar, Amritsar, Lahore, Gujranwala, Sialkot, Peshawar, Ambala, Gurdaspur, Rawalpindi and other places. A sub-committee was also formed in England at the behest of a Mr. Frederick Pincott, who was appointed as President on 16 March 1890, by the Khalsa College Executive Committee with Sir Charles Aitchison as Secretary, and members included Baden Powell among others.²⁸ The first to respond was the Maharaja of Patiala with a donation of Rs150,000 for the College endowment and a cash grant of Rs15,000 for the College buildings. Maharaja of Nabha followed with a grant of Rs 75,000 and Rs 6000 for the Building Fund. By the



Illustration 7: Khalsa College Amritsar; Entrance to Boarding House

end of 1892 the endowments of the Sikh states stood at Rs 452,000 with Patiala, Kapurthala, Nabha and Jind all contributing handsomely, and their contributions towards the building fund stood at Rs 94,000. By 31 March 1894 the fund grew to over Rupees twelve hundred thousand. The construction of the College buildings, however, could not be started because of a delay in the purchase of the land earmarked for the College. Meanwhile, the Khalsa School was established on 22 October, 1893, in the house of the late Pandit Bihari Lal near the Hall Gate, Amritsar, rented at Rs 75 per month, with Punjabi being used as the medium of instruction up to the middle school.

The physical development work of the Khalsa College was entrusted to a thirty-member Executive Committee constituted on December 18, 1892, from the over one hundred member Khalsa College Council, which at the time had Dr. William H. Rattigan and Bhai Jawahir Singh as President and Secretary. Sardar Dharam Singh, Civil Engineer was specially transferred from Bannu and placed in charge of the building operations of the College. It was not till September 1896 that some of the buildings were ready for the school students to be shifted from Pandit Behari Lal's house to the new premises. The first building to be occupied was the boarding house.

Ram Singh's master-plan proposed the main academic buildings of the College in the forefront, facing the Grand Trunk Road, with boarding houses at the rear. The principal's residence along with accommodation for other staff was located on the southwest corner



Illustration 8: Khalsa College, Amritsar; Entrance to School Wing

of the complex. The buildings were generously set back from the road and the foreground developed as spacious lawns. The College main building was to accommodate academic needs and thus was designed with a hall, classrooms, library, laboratories and ancillary facilities. The construction was planned in phases, and as the classes were already being held in rented buildings, priority in construction phasing was given to the boarding houses to provide proper accommodation to the students from outside Amritsar.

The College boarding house, the Patiala House, for 250 students was a gift of the Patiala officials and subjects, to mark the assumption of the Government of his state by Maharaja Rajindra Singh Mahipdar Bahadur. The school boarding house was meant for 490 students. The plan of the School boarding house was an inverted T with a centralized entrance

and six rooms (20 feet by 16 feet) flanking both sides of it, with large rooms of 28 feet by 20 feet at both ends, giving a frontage of 350 feet. Verandahs, with *jalli* brickwork in the

openings, on both sides protected the rooms from the scorching heat of the Punjab. The projecting portion of the T had another 12 rooms (20 feet. by 16 feet), placed back to back in a row of six rooms each, again protected by verandahs on either side. The building was double-storied with a large room above the entrance, (40 feet by 22 feet) as the reading room. There were also student dormitories and a two-room superintendent quarter, the remaining space left as terraces for student to sleep outdoors in the summer. The ground floor had a height of about 16 feet with the first floor being 18 feet high, the overall height of the building was 42 feet from ground level. The central entrance was emphasized with the use of ornamental bricks with turrets 67 feet high at each end. The monotony of the large frontage was broken by two small side entrances again emphasized through height and façade treatment. Eight kitchens with godowns and attached dinning halls, toilets, a *dhobi ghat*, tube wells for the supply of drinking water and Persian wheels for supplying water to the toilets, were attached to the boarding house. The building was constructed at a cost of Rs70,000.²⁹ Later, additions were made and by 1911, double-storied blocks with verandahs on the inner side, were added on both sides of the building, thus creating courtyards. Houses for the headmaster, the medical advisor and sixteen teachers were sited to the east of the boarding house along with quarters for the staff.

The boarding houses were completed and by September 1896, students were shifted from their temporary quarters in the city to the new premises. Teaching classes were also shifted to the boarding house as a temporary measure by the end of the year. In addition to the School, the College section was started on 18 May 1897 with an enrollment of seven students, using the boarding house as temporary premises. Thus the whole college began to function at site with boarding houses providing accommodation for residence as well as formal learning.

The Executive Committee decided, on 15 March 1896, to add a Gurdawara/ Dhramsala and one year later on 6 March, 1897 they also decided to build a hospital and gymnasium as a memorial to Sardar Sir Attar Singh, the Vice President of the Khalsa College Council

who had died recently. The Dhramsala was designed as a high open hall, large enough to seat 500 boys for morning and evening prayers, with ancillary rooms. It was constructed soon after, at the site where Sir James Lyall had earlier laid the foundation stone. Because of paucity of funds, due to the waning interest of the



Sikhs and the chiefs, other buildings could

Illustration 9: Khalsa College, Amritsar. A Courtyard within the wings

not be taken in hand. At the time only four buildings had been constructed, the dhramsala, the school and college boarding houses and the Principal's house.

Hectic efforts were made, through the years 1902-03 to raise funds for completion of the essential buildings and for the endowment fund of the College with the Lt. Governor, Sir Charles Rivaz, patron of the College, himself joining the efforts with a contribution of Rs 50,000 from the Provincial Government revenues, towards the building fund, on his visit to the College on 15 August 1903. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy, joined the effort, urging to the Phulkian states to contribute. The Government of the Punjab, approached the Sikh gentry through the Deputy Commissioners to provide financial help. The design for the Main Building and other structures, the gymnasium, dispensary, workshops and staff quarters was already prepared and estimated to cost Rs 2,50,000. The College organized the All India Sikh Conference on 12 May 1904 and used the occasion to raise funds. While the Phulkian states gave generously to the college building fund and the endowment, the Conference also adopted a resolution that all Zamidars pay 6 piasa on every rupee of their Government revenue. Thus, by the close of the financial year 1904-05, Rs 328,480 had been collected.

On 17 November 1904, Sir Charles Rivaz preformed the foundation laying ceremony of the Main building and the drawings of the project were displayed prominently and much admired by the Lt. Governor and the visiting gentry. The Main Building was designed, to accommodate 1800 students, with the College facilities on the front side of an essentially H-shaped building, and the School facilities at the rear, the connector of the H-shape being a large hall, 100 feet by 54 feet named the Rivaz Hall in honor of the patron. By attaching two wings at the rear of the H-shape building, additional facilities were provided for the school. The building was a monumental structure, about 500 feet in length (frontage), with a prominent central entrance leading to the foyer and the hall beyond. Other entrances dotted the façade with two prominent entrances at the ends. The building was double storied; the central entrance was surmounted with a composition of domes at a maximum height of 116 feet with a four-sided clock with six foot dials. This had been originally designed to be higher



but one story was later reduced. At the ends of the front part of the building, there were large cross-shaped rooms surmounted with a cluster of domes to a maximum height of 63 feet. A verandah 10 feet wide ran along all sides of the building

Illustration 10: Khalsa College, Amritsar; the massing of domes and cupolas.

with multi-foil arches in brick, brackets at the cornice level and the parapet. Small open or dead arches were used at the parapet level to create a lyrical play of light and shade that added to the composition of domes, *palkis* and finials used throughout the building. The monotony of the long verandahs was broken using multi-foil arches running across and the exposed brickwork of the jack arched ceiling. The building, however, took several years to complete, the cost having appreciated to over Rs. 500,000. It was largely completed by October 1910 and occupied by 9 October 1910, but there was still work to be done and the Principal was still collecting money for it in 1916, the year that Bhai Ram Singh died.

The establishment of the Khalsa college focused Sikh nationalist sentiment towards preservation of their identity in the use of Punjabi as a medium of instruction. The British fearful as ever about ‘native disturbances’, soon interfered directly and took over the management of the College from the Council and gave it to a Management Committee with power concentrated in the Principal and vast authority to the Governor of the Province. The Principal was always British and ensured that the nationalist sentiment did not go beyond limits. The history of the construction of the College was thus affected and it bespeaks of the underlying conflicts with the British colonists, which finally came to a point where the Government took over the management of the College in 1906. On 25 January 1907 the honorary services of Sardar Dharam Singh were dispensed with and Mr. Durome Smith, Chief Engineer of PWD was entrusted the task of finding a suitable replacement. The College had become quite a center of dissent with students demonstrating that a Sikh who understood the concept of *Sewa* or service should be appointed, and not a European engineer of the PWD.³⁰ Ultimately in July 1908 Sardar Balwant Singh, an Assistant Engineer, took charge of the construction.



Illustration 11: Khalsa College, Amritsar.

The design of the Khalsa College constituted the high point of Bhai Ram Singh’s career as an architect and through this project he was able to explore a vocabulary which he used to good advantage in his later works, like the Punjab University Senate Hall (1905) and the Islamia College, Peshawar (1912-13), which he is reputed to have designed, and the Khalsa College, Gujranwala, where presumably the Amritsar design was adapted. The major development he carried through from the Khalsa College is his articulation of the skyline of his buildings. His earlier attempts, such as in School of Arts building, appear hesitant, or as in Aitchison College, a bit crowded, in comparison with the masterful use of the cupolas, domes, *chattris*, *palkis* that he employed to great effect. The central clock tower made an appearance as the focal point of the façade composition which he used later in the Punjab

University Hall. Ram Singh was appointed Principal on 25th September 1910 and retired from service in October 1913, after being at the Mayo School for thirty-eight years. On his retirement, his Vice-Principal Lionel Heath was made Principal of the School on 1 November 1910. In his first report he acknowledged Bhai Ram Singh's long association and wrote in his annual report 'The Principal, Sardar Bahadur Ram Singh M.V.O., retired from service in October 1913. He was one of the first students to join the School of Art in 1873, and was appointed to the staff 10 years later, becoming Principal in 1910. Sardar Bahadur Ram Singh's talents are widely known, and his long and honorable career is one for the students to emulate' ³¹

After his retirement, Ram Singh continued his work through the firm of Bhai Ram Singh MVO and Sons at Amritsar. There were projects in Lahore and Amritsar, like the Chamba House and the Khalsa College which kept him busy. His great grandsons in Amritsar speak of family stories saying that Bhai Ram Singh would often travel to Lahore, dressed in white, in his horse carriage, to visit the projects under construction there; they point out the buildings and *havelis* that he owned, that are no more in the family possession, and the properties in Delhi. The family has some drawings, letters and papers, including the exquisite large drawings on cloth of the 1911 Durbar Royal Dias, rendered in ink, with the domes delineated in golden paint; but they are in a poor condition, the ravages of time and neglect having taken their toll. It is known that Bhai Ram Singh had five sons, Makhan Singh, Sulakhan Singh, Sunder Singh, Sukhcharan Singh, Kartar Singh and two daughters. His fourth son, Sukhcharan Singh was educated at the Mayo School of Arts and established himself as a painter in Amritsar; while another, the second, Sulakhan Singh was trained as an engineer and went for further



Illustration 12: Bhai Ram Singh with his medals (from left, Sardar Sahib, Sardar Bahadur, MVO, Kaiser-e-Hind, Delhi Durbar.)

studies to Glasgow. Makhan Singh, the eldest worked with his father. Bhai Ram Singh died about three years after his retirement, in the first half of the year 1916, in the house of his daughter in Delhi. He left behind a legacy which for years has gathered dust. It is time that this distinguished son of Punjab is duly honored.

As an architect and a master craftsman he designed with equal facility a building, a piece of furniture, a *shamina* or a certificate. Ram Singh's impact on the architecture of the Punjab, and Lahore in particular, can also be gauged as a contrast with other colonial period buildings in Lahore: The Lahore General Post Office, High Court, Municipal Hall, Assembly Hall are designed by different architects of the period. Each is a building of merit employing European motifs and vocabulary and with attempts to use "native" features. Almost all these attempts of mixing the "native" with the "European" romanticize Indian architecture with details employed without conviction. They employ

the features, the horse shoe arches of the Town Hall, Lahore the mini Qutab Minar version in the Lahore High Court and so on, in a most superficial manner, almost turning the native features a farce or, at best, as a fig leaf to cover the European styles. The buildings designed by Ram Singh stand out in contrast to the eclectic structures such as Government College, the Patiala Block of the Medical School and the Mayo Hospital. The less than successful attempts to incorporate Eastern architecture in the city hall with its horse shoe arches and disproportionate handling of the overall mass of building, also bring into limelight the almost effortless mastery of Bhai Ram Singh's genius.



Illustration 13 : Portrait of Bhai Ram Singh by Saeed Akhtar, former Head of Fine Arts Department, National College of Arts, Lahore which now hangs in the Principals Office. The work was commissioned in 2006 by Prof. Sajida Haider Vandal, Principal National College of Arts.

rope motif, the stylized animals, the variation in levels to play with the strong sun of Lahore and the resultant chiaroscuro effects of light and shade give his walls a life of their own. The walls change with the sun, now shining with strong light and later brooding in the setting sun, they convey messages so typically Indian in their complexity of emotions strongly attached to nature and its vagaries.

Ram Singh's work, Aitchison College, the Mayo School of Arts (presently the NCA), the Lahore Museum, the Punjab University Hall, the boarding house of the Government College and above all the Khalsa College, Amritsar, on the other hand, show an integrity in design with a masterly handling of the details of construction, in proportion, texture and rhythm. Whether it is the mundane feature of the Albert Victor Hospital porch, or the soaring tower of the Punjab University, the lofty domes of the Museum, the playful yet noble rhythm of the cupolas of the Khalsa College, the grandeur of Aitchison College, Ram Singh imparts to his building that touch of genius that differentiates the ordinary from the truly inspired works of Art. Ram Singh continually posed challenges to the

brick-makers of Lahore to develop new shapes. He teased out of brickwork the carved texture of wood. His use of the

¹ Mitter, Partha, *Much Maligned Monsters*, Oxford, 1977

² This information, largely unsubstantiated due to lack of records of the period, was given to the authors during an interview in Amritsar, by the great-grandsons of Bhai Ram Singh (Sardar Mohan Singh, Executive Engineer, and Sardar Kulbir Singh), their mother (Mrs Rani Sohl) and wives (Mrs Kamaljit Sohal and Mrs Satinder Kaur), in March 2004.

³ The date may or may not be correct as no birth records were kept then in the towns of the Punjab, and a date of birth from memory was inscribed in official records at the time of entry to school. This date is according to the service record of Ram Singh.

⁴ The authors were able to see the records available with the family at Amritsar, which, unfortunately, have not been well-maintained. They were able to convince the family to set up a Bhai Ram Singh Archives Trust

with the help of the Springdale Education Society run by the Sandhu family of Amritsar, who then agreed to lend the necessary financial and organizational support to the descendants of Bhai Ram Singh.

⁵ *Encyclopedia of Sikhism Vol. 111 (M-R)*, Harbans Singh, University of Patiala 1997, p 472

⁶ Draft letter dated August 1899 from Bhai Ram Singh to Lt Governor of the Punjab, Sir William Mackworth Young

⁷ Report on Popular Education in the Punjab & its Dependencies for 1874-75

⁸ Report on Popular Education in the Punjab & its Dependencies for 1875-1876.

⁹ J.L. Kipling & Thornton, *Lahore As it Was*, page 58

¹⁰ The Memorandum, published when he was conferred membership of the Victorian Order (MVO) on 12 December 1911, mentions four works done by Ram Singh while still a student at the School viz., the design of 'the old building of the School under the direction of Mr. Kipling;' (1881) design of 'a show case for the Melbourne Exhibition after the Indian style which received a certificate and medal,' (1880-81) design of 'sideboards for the International Exhibition at Calcutta - received certificate and medal' (1883) and 'Furniture for the Punjab Exhibition for which (he) received two first prizes of Rs. 25 each'. (1881-82).

¹¹ Report on Public Education, Report on the Mayo School of Industrial Arts for 1876-77

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *The Daily Telegraph* "London Day by Day" 31 December 1891; *The Star* " Cassell's Saturday Journal" 24 February 1892

¹⁵ *Modern Society* 5 March 1892.

¹⁶ *The Star*, 24 February 1892.

¹⁷ *The Evening Standard* 17 January 1893

¹⁸ Letter from Society for the Encouragement & Preservation of Indian Art to Bhai Ram Singh dated 28 October 1892

¹⁹ Letter from J L Kipling, Principal Mayo School of Art, Lahore to J. Wilson, Deputy Commissioner Shahpur, dated 25th March 1892

²⁰ Letter No. 262 dated 22nd March 1892 James Wilson, Deputy Commissioner Shahpur to J.L. Kipling, Principal Mayo School of Art.

²¹ Ganga Ram (1851-1927), trained at Rookeree, was made officiating Executive Engineer Lahore in 1899 and prematurely retired from position in 1903. Joined Patalia Durbar as Superintending Engineer 1903-1911; received MVO in 1911 Durbar, Knighted 1922.

²² The major works listed were the super structure of the Punjab Chief's College (later the Aitchison College) at Lahore in 1886; the Municipal Hall and offices at Ferozepur (1886); Lady Aitchison Hospital Lahore (1887); New Museum and Technical Institute Lahore (1889-90); the Khalsa College Amritsar (1892). Additions were also made to the Mayo School of Arts campus in Lahore in 1888 and 1890. In addition to the works for Ganga Ram mentioned in the MVO Memorandum, the other works of the period listed were the Lady Lyall Home, Lahore; (1890) Albert Victor Hospital, Lahore (1890); Government College, Hostel Lahore (1891), the Munsiff's Court, Amritsar, and a memorial at Peshawar.

²³ Col Samuel Swinton Jacob was the Chief Engineer to the Jeypore State from 1867-1911; architect of St. Stephens College, Delhi (1891), Bikaner Palace, Lallgarh, Bikaner (1902) Bikaner House, Bikaner (1893), Daly College Indore(1912), Umed Bhawan Palace (1909), Victoria Memorial Hall, Peshawar.

²⁴ Report on Public Instruction 1885-86; Appendix F Report on The Mayo School Of Art, Lahore.

²⁵ General Singh Saba (established 1880) was the joint Board of the Shri Guru Singh Saba, Amritsar (established 1873) and Shri Singh Saba, Lahore (established 1879) which later became the Khalsa Diwan Amritsar.

²⁶ Bajwa K.S. *A Brief History of Khalsa College Amritsar* (1892-2003) page 20 ; Sikh History Dept. Khalsa College Amritsar (2003)

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ Patrons of the sub-committee were Lord Northbrook, Lord Rippon and Lord Dufferin, while members included Sir Pollard, Dr. Brown, Thornton, Baden Powell, Lindsay, General Abbot and Messer Hewlett and sons. Cited in Bajwa, K.S., *A Brief History of Khalsa College Amritsar* (1892-2003)

²⁹ Educational Buildings in India op cit

³⁰ Singh, Ganda ; *A History of the Khalsa College*, Amritsar pg 67 Quoted in *Sikhs of the Punjab* pg 61

³¹ Report on the Progress of Education in the Punjab, 1913-1914; page 19

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