

A Pilgrim's Progress: My Visit to Shrines in Pakistan

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PART I

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Background:

For many years I have been thinking of going to Pakistan for several reasons: (a) A desire to see the ancestral villages of my parents; (b) Curiosity to see a neighbour with whom India fought two wars (1965 and 1971) during my adolescence; (c) Urgings of personal friends to come and visit them; (d) A spiritual urge to go as a pilgrim to our historical Gurdwaras there; and (e) Accounts by visitors about the legendary Panjabi hospitality - trans-border.

I mulled over such a visit for several years. A Swiss colleague, (married to a British woman of Pakistani origin), acted as a catalyst with his accounts of his stay there. Finally, made a plan with him to accompany him and introduce my connexions to him. Discussed this with a senior colleague who was in favour. She said she would obtain approval from the head of a private bank. The latter refused, supposedly on budgetary grounds. As a reaction to this decision, I decided on the spot, to go, albeit on vacation. Was galvanised into this decision. Booked my flights myself on the internet on the BA site. The Head's refusal acted as a spur. It made me finally decide. It also freed me from the conflict between the need to keep meeting prospects for the bank and personal tourism. Being on vacation meant that I could focus entirely on my personal motives, excluding the bank altogether. My friends in Switzerland were astonished that I could contemplate going to Pakistan, on vacation on top of that. They rolled their eyes in disbelief. My wife, who is Swiss, was very supportive of my decision. She realised the emotional aspect that was involved. She saw that I was very stirred at the idea of returning to visit the land of my ancestors. Pakistan contains names that I had heard a million times over in my childhood in India. Lahore, in particular, can leave no Sikh indifferent, if he or she is even slightly conscious of his or her history. Fully encouraged by my wife, I made my preparations and left.

Geneva - 10th March 2007:

Bright, sunny, cold day in Lausanne, a cold breeze whipping tree branches about. My wife drove me to the railway station. Waited on platform for ten odd minutes before catching the intercity train at 10.42 AM to Geneva airport. During this time, I was in a mild trance, thinking of how my ancestors must have been around Fatehpur, my father's village, and Jethpur, my mother's village. I felt like a link in an immemorial 'genetic chain', beginning in the mists of antiquity and leading down to my two sons. Could almost feel the mists of time swirling around me. Felt a strong bond to my late father, thinking that I would be going to the place where he probably played as a young boy - around the mud flats of the Ravi river. Being quite poor, he must have been outside quite a lot of the time. In addition, I felt a deep

spiritual peace. **I thought of Guru Nanak and two lines kept repeating themselves in my head: *Sat Gur Nanak pargateya (True Guru Nanak appeared); Miti Dhund Jag Chanaan Hoya (The fog lifted and light suffused the world).*** I kept repeating these lines in the train till Geneva airport station.

Normal, uneventful flight BA 741 at 13.20 PM to Heathrow Terminal 4. Waited in the first class Concorde lounge. Caught BA 129 at 17.30 PM to Islamabad. Was waiting in the departure lounge when I heard, "How are you, Dr Singh?" It was the younger brother of a friend from Vancouver. He had found out my seat number (1A) **from his Sikh travel agent in Vancouver (so much for airline secrecy !). He had obtained seat 1K, just across the aisle from my seat. We chatted for a while. We landed in Islamabad at 06.30 AM on March 11th. Was not able to get a panoramic view of the Karakoram [K2] mountains since it was quite hazy. My friend said that this view, on a clear day, was truly stunning.**

Islamabad to Lahore - 11th March 2007:

Stepped down the gangway from the BA jumbo jet. Mini-bus to take us to the airport terminal. Most passengers got off, and two of us, and an African couple, continued on to the VIP terminal. There was a big Pakistani delegation to welcome the African who had sat behind me on the flight. I was told that he was some South African minister. I handed over my Swiss passport to one of three persons who had come to receive us. **All visitors to Pakistan are photographed. The pictures are electronically transmitted to an FBI data base in the US.** The camera is a small, ball shaped gadget, controlled from behind a panel, by a lady policewoman in a salwaar kameez. I told her to take a nice picture so that the Yanks wouldn't think that I was not good looking ! She smiled at my remark.

Islamabad airport is primitive. Since every arriving passenger has to be photographed for the Americans and his/her visa stamped, the waiting queue crawls forward since only one camera seems to be operational. Indulgently watched this crawl, having been myself cleared without delay in the VIP channel. My suitcase came quickly. We were rushed by the airport manager, to the PIA flight to Lahore, scheduled for 08.00 AM. As I entered and walked down the corridor, all eyes were on me. Did not feel any hostility, though, as in Europe. The departure announcement recited prayers from the Koran and said that we would arrive - Inshallah - in Lahore (if God wills). Very reassuring !! The flight stops in Lahore before continuing on to Multan. We landed at 'Allama Iqbal International Airport' at Lahore. Very clean, spacious walkways, much better than what we had seen at Islamabad. My local host, elder brother of the person who had accompanied me on the flight, was present to welcome us, along with his son. Introduced me to AR, who would be my chauffeur for the entire duration of my stay in Pakistan. We drove to the Pearl Continental Hotel on Mall Road. Was allotted room no 593, an upgrade from normal rooms. I was in Lahore, Maharaja's capital from 1799 to 1840.

Wagah Border:

It started raining, and became cool, which meant that I had done well to bring a jacket along. XY picked me up at 15.30 PM from the hotel. **I had tied a green turban - since green is the colour of Islam, in general, and of Pakistan in particular.** AR drove our car. Seemed a quiet, discreet man with a dignified bearing. We drove to the Wagah border. I was surprised at how close it was to Lahore. **I saw the canal which the Pakistanis call BRB and which the Indian Press had called the Ichhogil Canal during the 1965 war. I remember exactly how excited we had been when the Indian army had crossed into**

Pakistan on 6th September 1965. I had then been 14 years old, studying in the 10th class (matriculation). My father had been in Libya. I used to write enthusiastic letters to him about how our army had taken Lahore, which, of course, was untrue. Now, 42 years later, I saw with my own eyes that the Indian army had failed to take Lahore, so close to the border.

We passed through all the checkpoints, XY merely saying that we were the personal guests of Major ZX. I was put right in the front row of the viewing stand, literally next to the border gate between Pakistan and India. **Here was I, a Swiss Sikh, standing on the Pakistani side, looking at the Indian side across the gate.** Witnessed a real “cockfight”. The stands were full on both sides with spectators shouting, “Pakistan Zindabad”, “Jeevey Jeevey Pakistan” (long live Pakistan) on one side and “Bharat Mata ki jai”(victory to Mother India) on the other side.

Major ZX, our host, was a tall and handsome man with a handlebar moustache. Prototype of a Panjabi Ranger. The Pakistani Rangers were tall, smart and ferocious. I remarked that the shoemakers on the Pakistani side must be doing an excellent job because the boots of the Pakistani Rangers were withstanding fearful thumping. People around me burst out laughing. The rain became heavier. After the two flags had been lowered, the Pakistani spectators rushed towards the boundary gate to get pictures taken with their imposing Rangers. I was caught in this rush and felt claustrophobic. XY told his sons to form a human cordon around me to protect me against the crowd onrush. We walked in heavy rain to the boundary pillar with India, the so-called Zero Marker, with India written on one face and Pakistan on the other face. **There was a Sikh family just across the border wire, on the Indian side. I greeted them in Panjabi. Their surprise at seeing me on the Pakistani side was evident. They warned me that I had strayed over to the “wrong” side and should step back into India.**

While walking back to our car, we were mobbed by several Pakistanis who wanted to be photographed with me. I was photographed with about 20 odd individuals. **During this melee, I was greeted by a young man who said that he was the 19th generational direct descendent of Rai Bulaar, the village chieftain who had been the first to recognise Guru Nanak’s spirituality. As per the legend, Rai Bulaar had been going about inspecting his fields on his horse when he saw Guru Nanak asleep, with a cobra shading the Guru’s face from the Sun by spreading its hood over it. Rai Bulaar realised that the Guru was a spiritual being. He told the latter’s father not to scold his son. I told my interlocutor, RS, that any Sikh conscious of his heritage owed Rai Bulaar’s descendents a debt of gratitude.** He replied that he would be happy to host a lunch for me at his ancestral home in Nankana Sahib. XY noted down his name and phone number. We drove back in pouring rain to Lahore.

Returning from Wagah in strengthening rain at 18.45 PM, we drove straight to the house of the local Amir of the Qadianis for this region. He was related to Sir Mohammed Zafrullah Khan. The mansion, situated in a very chic part of Lahore, was tastefully decorated. Our host’s very son, elegantly attired in a slate grey kurta pyjama, received us outside. Excellent snacks (samosas, egg sandwiches) were served. My host wanted to visit Qadian near Gurdaspur in India. Had a very pleasant conversation with him.

‘The Village:’

Got a chance to relax half an hour at my hotel room, before being picked up by XY who brought me to a restaurant called The Village. Organised exactly like a restaurant called

The Haveli near Jalandhar in Indian Panjab. Reflects Panjabi rural life. A traditional well (Tindaan Walaa Khooh). The restaurant was very crowded. XY and I were joined by a horse breeder and polo player, whose brother is a federal minister; a major of the Pakistan Army, presently posted on the Ferozepur border, and his brother, a station manager of the Pakistan International Airlines (PIA).

I ate *saag* and *makki di roti*. Drank sugarcane juice and ate *golgappas*. One of the Pakistanis present was extremely critical of the Pakistan army. He kept saying that the army had ruined Pakistan. The house arrest and sidelining of Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhury, Chief Justice of the Pakistan Supreme Court, was the topic of animated discussions. The major reacted vehemently when another Pakistani said that the Indian Army could smash the Pakistan Army in three days. **People here are obsessed with India. They talk about it all the time. I told them that Indians do not discuss Pakistan half as much as the Pakistanis talk about India. Everybody was openly critical of army rule in Pakistan. I scrupulously avoided any criticism of the Pakistan government or politics. Just said that all Indians accepted the existence of Pakistan as a historical reality and did not talk about it.**

A singer, accompanied by a drummer, was going around performing in the restaurant. They came to our table. Both were of very swarthy complexion. Must have been from the Marasi or Banjara tribes. I made the singer recite "Meraa Long Gawachaa", a popular Panjabi folk song. Also made him sing Daler Mehndi's "Bolo Tara Ra Ra". Everybody was swaying to the music. **This Panjab is certainly more authentic than the one on the Indian side.** I enjoyed myself. People did stare at me, but without any hostility, unlike the hostile glares that I get in Europe.

After supper, we all went to the PC (Pearl Continental). We all sat in the café, having fresh fruit juice. Conversation ranged from India (what else?), religion, spirituality, the eviction of the Pakistan Chief Justice, common Panjabi culture, my visit etc. The major said that I should also witness the evening flag lowering ceremony at the Ganda Singh Wala border post opposite Ferozepur. **I spoke about universal spiritual values and how these take a human being beyond nationalism and enmity. Narrated the story of a Sikh, Bhai Kanhaiya, who saw Guru Gobind Singh ji even in wounded enemy soldiers lying on the battlefield. I get slightly carried away by my deep conviction in the philosophy of Sikhism. XY told me the next day that my listeners had fallen totally under my spell.** They wanted to repeat the experience at the earliest possible opportunity. Visitors left around midnight. Reached my room quite tired. Really enjoyed my first day in Pakistan in Lahore.

Lahore - 12th March 2007:

Driven by an old friend, who used to visit my apartment regularly in Heidelberg in Germany between 1985 and 1987, to the old city in Lahore, full of historical monuments pertaining to Sikh history.

Gurdwara Dera Sahib:

This is the place where our fifth Guru, Arjun Dev ji, was put to death on the orders of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (Emperor 1605-1627) in 1606. I was very emotional, fighting back tears, since I was fully aware of the tortures inflicted on my fifth Guru. He was made to sit in boiling water. Hot, boiling sand was poured on his bare head and torso for a long time. The details of how he died can be found in several books so I shall confine myself to my feelings. The Granthi (caretaker), a young man in his late 20s or early 30s, explained that

his father, the preceding caretaker, had died in 2006, when he had taken over. Their family was from Nankana Sahib. He had studied there. He had never been to India. He escorted me around the shrine.

The granthi showed me the exact spot where the Guru's soul departed his battered and tortured body. Also showed me the spot where the Guru had bathed in the river Ravi before passing away. I prayed there on my knees. My tears flowed and I constantly kept wiping them away. I felt the caretaker's surprise at my emotion but I could not restrain my feelings. I prayed to Waheguru in a confused sort of manner. I thought of Guru Arjan Sahib's fortitude in accepting this torture. A gifted musician, the principal composer of hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib, he was the first martyr of our faith. I consider myself truly blessed at having had this occasion to pay my homage to him. The maintenance of Dera Sahib leaves much to be desired. The flooring is broken. Broken bricks are piled up in heaps. Walked across to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's tomb, just across the courtyard.

The Maharaja's memorial was in a dilapidated condition. The absence of proper maintenance of his memorial was shocking. A supposed photograph of the Maharaja with the Governor General of India, William Bentinck, and Hari Singh Nalwa, the famous Sikh general, is placed on one side of the memorial. I doubt its authenticity. However, just thinking of Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa made me emotional. He was truly a great warrior and a dedicated Sikh.

We left the Gurdwara complex at 11.30 AM, planning to have lunch at the PC. Traffic in Lahore was really awful. Nobody ever stopped moving forward. No lane system exists. About a kilometre further, we got stuck in a monster traffic jam. Have never been blocked like this. We advanced barely half a kilometre in three hours. Nobody stops or gives way here in Lahore on the road. Every sort of vehicle, pedestrians, bicyclists, they all keep advancing. We found out later that lawyers had been demonstrating near the High Court building against the treatment meted out by the government to the suspended Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Next morning, all newspapers were full of accounts of police brutality against demonstrating lawyers. All major roads in Lahore had been closed off by the police. By all accounts, Panjab Police in Pakistan is even more brutal than its counterparts in the Indian Panjab, howsoever impossible as that may sound.

We reached the MBA campus of the University of Central Panjab. People here kept referring to the recent deaths on the Samjhauta Express in India. I wondered how much of the exaggerated hospitality in Pakistani Panjab was genuinely cultural and how much was just to distinguish themselves from the Indian Panjab. The coordinator of MBA programs wanted me to give a lecture about management of diversity in multinational organisations to the BBA, MBA classes. Fresh orange juice a real delight here. Pakistan has become a major producer of kinnos (a cross between tangerines and oranges). I was driven back to the PC around 16.30 PM. Spent a quiet evening in the hotel. Fixed up a visit to Nankana Sahib for the next day with XY and RS, the young man we had met in Wagah.

Nankana Sahib - 13th March 2007:

An important day in my life, as it should be for any conscientious Sikh. We left at 07.30 AM. Picked up RS on the way out. I was introduced to his mother, a very graceful lady, as well as his younger brother. We were on our way by 08.40 AM. Having been traumatised by the previous day's traffic jam in Lahore, I was very keen to get out of the city as quickly as possible. RS told me that his family tree went back 19 generations to Rai Bulaar, a contemporary of Guru Nanak. He explained that his ancestor, Rai Bulaar, had donated the

lands on which Nankana Sahib gurdwara Janmasthan (birthplace) now stood, as well as all the properties attached to it. He kept chatting. I heard him only partially since my mind was reflecting on what was happening: I was actually on my way to the birthplace of Guru Nanak. In our daily supplication (ardaa0s), we pray to God Almighty to confer the boon of a visit to Nankana Sahib and all other gurdwaras from which the Panth was separated in 1947. I was fully conscious that my prayers had been answered. It was a quietly emotional sensation. A feeling of deep gratitude pervaded my being. I must have done something right in my life because Waheguru was sending me to Nankana Sahib, accompanied in person by the 19th descendent of Rai Bulaar.

I took in the countryside. Exactly like that of the Indian Panjab: lush green fields and canals carrying water. However, the infrastructure is visibly better developed on the Indian side. Most houses to be seen here were made of mud and clay. The roads were littered with potholes. The driver had to constantly slalom the car around these potholes or broken road surfaces. RS kept telling him which way to proceed. Nankana Sahib is now a district headquarters. However, any visitor would be hard pressed to guess this fact by looking at the state of the town or its roads. Really lamentable. Even the main road through the town, leading to the gurdwara, had no paved surface at all. It was an unending pool of mud, with shops on both sides.

Nobody seems to realise the tourism potential of Nankana Sahib as a worldwide magnet for Sikh pilgrims. It could generate so many jobs for local youth. The government would not even need to spend money. It should just allow Sikhs to invest in infrastructure by protecting their legal rights as investors. Instead, I saw a run down place with cramped shops, lacking even a proper, paved main road. We reached Nankana Sahib from Lahore in about 90 minutes. We had to cross a canal over a bridge under construction. We turned on to it from the main road going to Sheikhpura. An industrial estate exists on both sides of this road. Massive smoke pollution hung in a permanent haze as a kind of grey curtain. We proceeded straight to Gurdwara Janmasthan.

Apart from being the place of Guru Nanak's birth, this was also the town where my elder brother, Chiranjiv Singh, was born in October 1944. His naamkaran (name giving ceremony) had taken place in Gurdwara Janmasthan. My parents were living in Nankana Sahib in 1947 when India was partitioned. My mother had told me that their house had been in an area known as "Navin Abaadi" (new colony), just behind Gurdwara Janmasthan in 1947. I passed all this information around, hoping to meet somebody who could lead me to this house but in vain. Nobody had a clue. I found two very old Sikhs in the gurdwara but they had moved to Nankana Sahib only in 1972 from other parts of Pakistan. Requested RS to find somebody who might have been here in 1947. He could then send me a picture of the house if it still existed.

Gurdwara Janmasthan was under extensive repairs. There was no sarovar (pool). Even the Guru Granth Sahib had been installed in the Langar Hall (community kitchen building). The path to the main shrine was all dug up. Paid obeisance to the Guru Granth Sahib in the langar hall. An old Sikh was reading the scripture. I sat quietly, just soaking in the sensation that I was physically at Baba Nanak Maharaj's birthplace. I was really there. Had I been alone, I definitely would have been in tears. Gurdwaras have that effect on me. Just pronouncing the name of any of our ten gurus brings tears to my eyes. Was escorted to the place where Guru Nanak was born. Just before this, was shown the tree under which a Sikh, Lachhman Singh, had been burnt alive in 1921 by men of the Mahant who had possession of this shrine. The Sikhs had launched several agitations to take control of their

shrines from these Mahants (priests). Hundreds of Sikhs lost their lives in these agitations. Over 150 Sikhs died here in 1921, shot by the Mahants' men with the connivance of British authorities. Their names are recorded on a stone slab in the gurdwara. Also saw two bullet marks in a wall, showing the big calibre of the ammunition used in the firing on protesting Sikhs.

Accompanied by PS and RS, entered the main shrine. No Guru Granth Sahib there at this time but stood in reverence nevertheless. Did ardaas, thanked Waheguru for having brought me here. PS wrapped a siropa (scarf) around my shoulders as a mark of honour. I consider this as a special honour bestowed on me by Guru Nanak Dev ji Maharaj. I consider it as an honour for my entire family, not just for me. No other pilgrims were there. Just I. Sat down and had "langar" (community meal), served by a young Sikh from the Frontier province of Pakistan. The lentils (daal) were exceptionally tasty. Even RS found the daal to be exceptionally tasty. Felt at peace with myself. All problems of everyday life seemed remote. Did not pray for any special boon or success, only to be guided by His Name. No desire to ask for more salary or a new car etc. Prayed for the welfare of my family and good health for all of us. Emotion too strong for words. Thanked the Sikh who had served us langar. Told him he was really blessed to live and serve at such a holy place.

Bade goodbye to PS and went with RS to pay my respects at the grave of his ancestor Rai Bulaar. Had to climb a small hillock along a broken trail. The grave of Rai Bulaar was covered with a green sheet, the colour of Islam. Took some nice snapshots of the gurdwara from the hillock. Then went to RS's family house in Nankana Sahib. Better than other houses in the village but nothing at all in comparison to the fancy mansions to be seen now in villages of Indian Panjab. RS's father, a big, burly man in salwar kurta welcomed us. We had lunch at RS's house in Nankana Sahib. Left on the return journey to Lahore around 14.30 PM.

Went back exactly the same way as we had come. I tried to quietly digest what I had just lived through. I can never forgive the British and our own leaders for having separated us Sikhs from Nankana Sahib and our other shrines. The British had taken the Panjab from the Sikhs in 1849. When they left in 1947, they should have handed those areas back to us as these had been taken from Ranjit Singh's successors. Anyway, all that is history. I hope that relations between India and Pakistan will improve to the extent that Sikhs might one day be able to freely visit their shrines in Pakistan. The obvious example to follow has to be that of relations between Germany and France, traditional enemies, now both pillars of the EU. Back at the PC in Lahore at 16.15 PM.

Went with S to see "Kim's Gun", a cannon originally known as the Zamzama and subsequently as the "**Bhangiyaan di Top**" (cannon of the Bhangis). This cannon has a long history. It belonged to Ahmad S`hah Abdali, the powerful Afghan king who invaded India nine times between 1748 and 1767, always through Panjab. His successor, Shah Zaman of Afghanistan was defeated by the Sikhs on the Jhelum river in the 1770s. The Afghans threw this cannon into the Jhelum river from which the Sikhs of the Bhangi Misl pulled it out and put it back into working order. It was used by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in his campaigns. It fell into the hands of the British after the Second Anglo-Sikh War, in 1849. Rudyard Kipling got it placed at its present spot in Lahore, hence the name "Kim's Gun". I got myself photographed next to this cannon.



[End of Part I]

(to be concluded)