

Forgotten Sikh Shrines in NWFP, Pakistan

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The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 came as a calamity in the short run - as well as a boon in the long run. Once the British government in London came to the conclusion (1) that it could no longer rule India against the will of the masses inspired by Gandhi, and seething with the spirit of freedom, and (b) that the Muslim majority in Punjab, East Bengal and NWFP were beant upon a separate state. Lord Mountbatten, the then Viceroy/Governor-General, lost no time in determining the fateful dividing line. Tensions exploded into uncotrollable violence, especially in the Punjab province, which had been peremptorily split into two.

The Sikhs and Hindus suffered the greatest losses in terms of human life, homes and hearths, farmland and flourishing businesses. The more subtle - and spiritually excruciating - loss was that of hundreds of Sikhism's holiest shrines, Gurdwaras and educational institutions that had grown over five centuries and more, of struggle and triumph, to build and sustain the faith.

Decades later, many holy shrines in Pakistan have become accessible to Sikh pilgrims. But little is known of the shrines in NWFP. This account, given by my deceased elder brother, was discovered among his old papers.

- Ed. SR

The Sikh religion was founded by Guru Nanak. From Nankana Sahib, the light of his teachings soon spread across North India, and then in the adjoining regions, including Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia. NWFP, now part of Pakistan, was until 1947 spangled with holy places, as briefly mentioned below.

Gurdwara Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji:

Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji travelled far and wide to propagate fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man. Of his four "Udasis" - or phases of his divine mission - one was routed through Peshawar. The spot where he stayed in the ancient city is marked as Gurdwara of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The spot was particularly venerated and associated with Guru Nanak's lengthy stay. There is an ancient painting embedded on the wall wherein Guruji has been shown sitting opposite a yogi, of Nath tradition, with his disciples Bhai Bala and Bhai Mardana, in a locality called Gorakh-hatri, a walled fortress, which in 1930's was used as the Headquarters of City Police. There is also a smaller gurdwara near the temple of Gorakh Nath that depicts discourses on spiritual questions between Guru Nanak and Gorakh Nath, the Head of the Siddhas. This Gurdwara is situated in a Patti (lane) named after Baba Sri Chand.

Long afterwards, Guru Gobind Singh sent five of his chosen and trusted followers to North West Frontier to propagate the mission of Guru Nanak and to strengthen seats of Sikhism. These five persons were: Bhai Joga Singh, Bhai Biba Singh, Baba Mango Singh [a cousin of Guru Gobind Singh, son of Bibi Viro ji the daughter of Sri Guru Hargobind], Bhai Bhagotia Singh and Bhai Bakhtawar Singh.

Extensive 'prachar' was carried on by them in their respective areas. They came to Peshawar, under the leadership of Bhai Joga Singh. They travelled to different places. Three of them lived in the city of Peshawar and two were sent in the rural areas of Kohat, in order to enlighten the people about the Sikh faith. For many years they lived among predominantly Muslim population, and sowed the seeds of friendship and amity. Their contribution to the cause of the spread of the Sikh mission was phenomenal. It was due to their efforts that Sikhism remained alive even at such places where their strength was like "salt in the wheat flour."

Gurdwara Bhai Joga Singh:

The ancient city of Peshawar was founded by Raja Parasu Ram, and had been the seat of great learning two thousand years ago. During the Sikh rule we find that there was no

dearth of Sikh historical landmarks in Peshawar.

Pre-eminently, Bhai Joga Singh ji was much venerated in Peshawar. When young, his parents had taken him to Guru Gobind Singh Ji at Anandpur Sahib. When Guruji asked him his name, he said his name was 'Joga'. Guruji blessed him as 'Guru Joga' - the Dedicated One. So he was stationed in larger locality of Peshawar. He became widely venerated as a saint known for humanitarian work. That locality is now known as Waziri Bagh, and to this day (1940s) a monument existed till the Partition. Every year a fair used to be held, with kirtan and langar.

Among Pathans, Bhai Joga Singh was popularly known as 'Jogan Shah' and greatly revered. Once, the Subedar of Peshawar in the 18th century, wanted to build a wall, but every time it would collapse. At last Bhai Joga Singh was approached. He simply replaced the corner -stone, and told the masons to re-build the wall to completion. To this day that wall exists. There was a natural spring - *chasma* of Bhai Joga Singh, alongside a deep well. The well water blessed by Bhai Joga Singh had healing power for skin patients. So universal was this spot that even Pathan women used to bring their children from villages to give them a healing bath. The old gurdwara Bhai Joga Singh also had two silver lamps (Jotan) and a berry tree regarded holy. Then, about 10 or 12 years before the Partition, a new Gurdwara Hall, with modern design, was erected out of donations totalling over 8 lacs of rupees - then a fortune! Every Sunday a 'langar' (free kitchen) was served. On annual days of Bhai Joga Singh Ji, langar of Kesari rice was served to thousands of people for three consecutive days. There was - in 1940's - a middle school for girls run by the management. The Gurdwara used to give subsidy to several educational institutions in the city. Whenever a VIP or foreign guest visited Peshawar, it was customary for him to visit Sikh shrine of Bhai Joga Singh. The Gurdwara maintained a collection of rare manuscripts. For many years the main gurdwara remained locked up after Partition, and its buildings were reportedly used as a centre for handloom industry. The two 'jotan' (silver lamps) were no longer lit up. More recently, however the Afghan Sikhs from Kabul and neighbourhood are reported to have re-opened the Gurdwara.

Gurdwara Bhai Biba Singh:

One of the five trusted missionaries of Guru Gobind Singhji was Bhai Biba Singh who also came to Peshawar along with his four companions, and was deputed to Karimpura locality by Bhai Joga Singh, the leader of the goodwill mission. At that time, this area was surrounded by a large number of slum dwellers, mostly Muslims. Biba Singh soon became popular for his public services. All the Sikh Sardars during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh over the areas of NWFP used to come and celebrate important Sikh festivals in this Gurdwara.

The gurdwara was run by a one-man committee, in early years of 20th century, the dedicated Bhai Milap Singh who was the head granthi, the manager and everything else. He used to teach Gurmukhi to the children of the locality as well. This man of dedication died at the age of 90. This Gurdwara was also burnt during the disastrous fire of 1927. A new building was constructed over a period of 5-6 years. It was a fascinating structure standing out in the whole locality. Along with that was attached a Girls High School for the Sikh population of Karimpura. From the dome of the Gurdwara one could easily see the world famous "Bala Hisar", fort of Peshawar. Quite a large number of yartis could stay on the first floor of the Gurdwara. Several lacs were spent

over the new building. Now (in 1960) after Partition the compound and the surroundings have been converted into a Park, and the Gurdwara remains locked. This Gurdwara was just by the side of another Gurdwara set up by Sir Baba Khem Singh Ji Bedi of Kallar, called "Sahiban da Gurdwara". The management was into the hands of the prominent Sikh citizens of Karimpura. All major Gurpurbs were celebrated and huge congregations gathered. 'Langar' free kitchen was run, as is usual in many historical gurdwaras. Daily prayers started from 3.00 a.m. - the Amrit Vela.

Gurdwara Shahid Bunga:

One of the five trusted men of action sent by Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji was Bhai Mango Singh, Guru's cousin. He was a disciplinarian in Nit-Name. A day came when a mob attacked Bhai Sahib's dera. A battle ensued. Bhai Sahib went on fighting - at the site where now Pul Pukhta (Pakki Pul) exists. At last he fell fighting against the hostile mob, at the place called Shahidganj, where he was cremated, not far from Bala Hisar Fort.

