

Indo-Pak Amity: A Sikh Perspective

Reflections from a nostalgic visit [Part II]

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GURDWARAS IN PAKISTAN

Panja Sahib

The entrance to Hasan Abdal is now a busy area – lots of restaurants, shops and stalls astride the two-lane highway. The main entrance to the Gurdwara, which had all those shops selling *chana bathura* or *alu puri*. Mushfiq Ahmed of Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, who took me there guided me to go round the bend and enter Gurdwara through the side door. A Government security person sitting in an adjoining room, who needs to know particulars of all visitors, meets us. I was told locals couldn't come in unless they have ID or are accompanied by a Sikh. Few pilgrims turn up.

The Gurdwara is a beautiful marble structure though, in my memory, it seemed larger than it actually is. Soon we are met by a Sikh *sewadar* and, as we go in, an inscription on the very first slab caught my eye. It says that the slab was in memory of husband of a woman from Banda [Malhotra family] – the wife made an offering of Rs 500 sometime in 1920's. Mushfiq also read it and remarked that we were seeing a lot of Bandas that day, and also wondered that the village did not seem to have been 'inhabited by poor Sikhs and Hindus' – the popular impression being that Hindus and Sikhs living in those parts prior to Partition were poor.

Inside the Gurdwara, the *Bhai Sahib* does the *ardas* and reads the *vak* to me and gives me *parshad*. He also gives me *chhoharey* and *tikki parshad* with a *saropa*. He then shows us round the place. I go to the site of the *Panja* – believed to be Guru Nanak Dev's hands impress - the water is beautiful, crystal clear and warmish. One could take a dip even though it had been a cold day; the *sarovar* is small and only about 4 ft deep. I should remember because, long ago, I had been splashing my legs there as a youngster trying to swim. The fish are there, as they used to be in lovely clear waters. And the place looked clean – I did see and asked about one patch about 6inx4in with what could be moss looking up from the *panja* location.

A young Sikh boy comes and joins us and together we go to the *langar* where they give very nice fresh tea and asks us to stay for *langar*. The *bhai sahib* started the evening *rehras* recitation when I was in the *langar* – and I knew because I could hear it on the PA system. The *langar* was lived in – obviously that is where they cook and eat and offer to those who come. The *serai* is big; the rooms have amenities kept by these few for our *jathas* to descend twice in the year and have a comfortable stay.

I am told there are 4/5 families of Sikhs there. I did meet three men and three kids – a girl and two boys. They seem to be from NWFP and are obviously poor but are keeping the place well. I was deeply touched meeting these people who are taking care of this beautiful and very holy site for the Sikhs. They are living a life of isolation. They look poor and possibly are

poorer than they look. Their children, so handsome, affectionate and eager are observant living and growing up in an alien environment. In spite of their obvious deprivation the children who have such pleasing freshness seem contented even though their future may hold no promise better than their parent's lot.

Many thoughts race through my mind. How and why does God place us where we are? Should we not have a responsibility beyond our urge for satisfying our own need for pilgrimage and connecting with our lost heritage – a responsibility to those who are giving their today so that our children and their children can come here tomorrow the same way as I am doing now. I feel humble; I feel selfish; I feel a betrayer; we have done nothing; we are doing nothing for them. **We have just forgotten about these places and consigned them to our daily *ardas* – *jina dharma asthana taun sanoon vichhoreya geya hai unna di seva samal da dan baksho* -. Surely it is not our problem any more. We supplicate for divine intervention; for till God grants us free access and control over these holy sites we will keep making the rote supplication thousands of times a day globally.*** We will not look around and see how missionaries from other faiths keep on serving their Lord's mission in deep African jungles and deserts. We cannot emulate the examples of Christian youth serving for charities in remote parts of the world as part of their project work. We say we struggled to free our Gurdwaras from the clutches of hereditary priests but are willing to leave the same Gurdwaras to these few families now. Why? Because it is not safe; it is isolated there; the places now have no revenue because there are no devotees. Why so?

I think the experience of visiting these places as an individual can be very tearing – you recognize how alone and lonesome the life of the few Sikhs doing this *sewa* here can be. When we visit these places as a family, or in a group, we may have our own sense of togetherness that may dull our senses to what the others may be experiencing – in a *jatha* we may think that the place is a *mela* year around and may not miss much. I wonder - what could be the constraints keeping them there – can they not do anything else – why are they persevering – is the heritage more important to them than to us – and their issues of transmission? I ask about *ragis*, *kathakars* – marriages; finding mates; schools; learning *Gurmukhi* and so on – they are trying to do all this by themselves while we sit and critique the quality of *ragis* and *maryada* every morning on Darbar Sahib's televised program.

Nanakana Sahib

I return to Lahore, and Asif Hameed, son of Israr Ahmed and Director, Multimedia at Quran Academy, and four of his compatriots take me to Nankana Sahib. Sitting in the front, I hear snatches of their conversation - Matin, who is from Nanakana, talking about the place to his colleagues. **All the town's land belongs to the Gurdwara leased free to the citizenry. The Gurdwara has also given the farmland to farmers without any rent. There have been some recent gas finds in the area and the people believe it is the beneficence of Guru Nanak.**

It is a two-lane road divided by a verge but it is pretty broke up. There is a lot of industry on the way mainly cotton spinning and weaving, sugar processing units and some others. They grow a lot of long staple cotton in these parts - all in all a pretty active, busy and surely economically important area.

We take a turn to the left and that goes to our destination where we get by 4:30 pm. We stop at the end of the main street at the fairly impressive Gurdwara entrance. We park on the side and walk in to a nice garden. The Gurdwara is at the far end of the garden. We are met by the same kind of security person as at Panja Sahib and he takes down the information and lets my companions go with me. In the meanwhile he must have arranged, for the *Bhai* sahib shows up, leading us and explaining. I also notice all my companions were wearing white caps covering their heads – given by the Gurdwara as I found out later.

The place is big; the *sarovar* is kept dry; the walls are clean, painted; the floors swept clean; the bath rooms clean and working; the *Parshad* is there again. *Bhai* sahib also does *ardas* and takes *vak*. I explain the meaning of the hymn and talk about the beliefs and our worship service. We are all astounded at the size of living facilities for pilgrims. We see the *sukh asan* room and are taken to another wing where two concurrent *akhand paths* are going on. I ask if this was common – oh yes, through the year, in response to requests received when pilgrims visit or by mail. I do wonder that once again we who don't live there have made so many of them into *pathis* to perform *akhand paths* for us.

There are about 40/50 families here. They don't seem as deprived. I meet another *bhai sahib* coming in and the *bhai sahib* introduces him as the retired *granthi*. The place has a Sikh school. In addition the local high school is named after Guru Nanak. The address is Nanakana Sahib and they have not changed, as has happened for several other places. The experience is inspiring and the feeling of distress is not that marked. The *bhai sahib* is well informed. He was asked questions and answered them well even mentioning some comparisons with Quran – the language chaste Punjabi; contents very different from Islam; the prayers and service; *langar* and so on.

Global Sikhs are helping develop additional infra structure at the 3 main Gurdwaras in Pakistan – mainly adding to accommodation facilities for pilgrims who visit twice in the year. This is good but, with opening of traffic, we should think of helping/guiding Pakistani Sikhs to take to providing hospitality services to Sikh and other tourists to these holy sites.

The Border Crossing

I crossed the border at Wagah, twice either way, during these two weeks. The experience is definitely more difficult on the Indian side. It has been a closed border for years and, except the Bus passengers, the others crossing the border do it by walking through. Yet the systems set in place are totally pedestrian, unfriendly. There are no trolleys. You can get porters to help but coming in from Pakistan, one has to trudge the bags all the way from the Radcliffe Line over through Indian immigration and customs. Pakistanis allow the porter to take your baggage through customs and immigration on their side – it is not a small comfort in a very antiquated set up and if you are carrying heavy bags.

Unlike the Pakistani officials, the Indian immigration staff and BSF personnel are sullen and never smile. They do not even want to explain anything, and mere pointing to forms and registers is a chore for them. In spite of computers, the use of registers and multiple manual entries on the Indian side is not understood –

Pakistanis don't have computers; but Indians do and they still have replicated Pakistani manual documentation – as a measure of reciprocity or what?

The only pleasant people were the local women manning the customs – they were helpful and cordial. They also were covering up for the officer who possibly was taking his siesta after lunch and could not be disturbed. We had to wait because one is not 'custom cleared' till he signs off the papers prepared by the agent. Finally the office peon got to him to initial the papers and we were allowed to proceed.

The porters on the Indian side are mainly Sikhs and on the Pakistani side mostly Muslim migrants from Gurgaon now inhabiting the village of Wagah. Their lifeline is the border crossing activity – present conditions possibly more helpful because with almost no vehicular traffic porters switching loads at the boundary line transport all the goods across. With the trade opening [and one would hope it does], these people may have to look for other employment. Also in that scenario the shops on GT road on the Indian side must spruce up and reorganize to handle the tourist influx and potential shoppers/buyers for various things – food, fabrics, handicrafts, souvenirs, entertainment, travel, and so on.

Amritsar

Compared to Lahore, Amritsar has little to offer. In fact coming in from Pakistan by road, one gets a very poor impression of India. The GT Road is a virtual mess. On the Pakistan side one can drive at 80 km/hr on this road, but on the Indian side it is a hazard at even half that speed. For one thing there are no *rickshas* and encroachments have not stifled traffic flow on arterial roads in Pakistan that I visited. The people are also more careful crossing roads.

The City of Amritsar has very limited facilities for tourists. You cannot easily find food or a cup of tea close to the Golden Temple. I found it difficult to buy a towel at 8 am and found no place in walking distance where one could have breakfast. The Verka outlet sells milk and *pinnis* – all loaded; otherwise you make do with oil soaked *puris* or *mithai*. During our day trip to Amritsar we could not find a decent place for lunch. The shopping facilities in the area are an outcrop of haphazard response to ethnic pilgrim's needs.

The Town authorities should recognize that their urban infrastructure is poorly equipped and the most popular destination for foreign tourists in India has very little to occupy their leisure; help them shop; have some means of entertainment; visit some active institutions connected to the local and regional history; go for a rambling walk, and so on. In fact apart from its pre-eminent position because of the Sikh connection, Amritsar can be a competing destination to Lahore in this part of the world for trade, commerce and shopping.

What Should We Do

Sikhs have a shared history, a shared language, and shared traits with Pakistanis. The land that gave birth to Guru Nanak was also the laboratory where he perfected the Sikh thought. Thus Pakistan will always be important for Sikhs and, given this linkage, Sikhs must develop a unique approach to handle their relationship with that country and its people so that they can look to a future where they can celebrate the shared heritage in spite of boundaries separating them. This way they can assure some amity in the region and more

importantly take care of their holy sites and the small Sikh population in Pakistan.

It is also important to realize that the boundary line that Radcliffe devised is man-made and can change as boundaries have changed throughout history. However, even across the border Sikhs will always have to deal with Pakistani Muslims with their worldview and their perception of the Sikhs. In their long-term interest as neighbors, Sikhs, therefore, must make an attempt to understand the Pakistani common man's view of the Sikhs. For this the view of the *Ulema* and *Maulvis* will also have to be understood. The historians and social scientists are also important – politicians less so.

Starting with the Pakistani Sikhs first - they are subdued, though they don't say a thing. They need help to get out of the cycle of poverty and isolation. We must not consign them to be and stay being *granthis* as we seem to be doing. This will deny them the possibility of realizing their potential and, over time, lead to deterioration in the quality of service to our religious institutions.

We may also end up creating potential *mahants* who have to depend on the service of Gurdwaras for their economic needs. It is therefore of the utmost importance that Pakistani Sikhs, to whom we all should be beholden for taking care of our holy sites, should be helped to get education, go into professions or businesses and be good competitive citizens of their country.

There are several manners in which such help can be extended. Assistance for enhancing educational opportunities for them should best be directed to initially support their abilities to make use of the existing educational institutions in that country. This may mean scholarships assistance for tuition, books and materials; research grants; support travel for educational pursuits; publications and the like. For this to work effectively the flow must be canalized and credible links created.

In the area of business there is the buzz, reported by *Jang* dated April 19, 04, that Pakistan will receive \$1 billion foreign direct investment from the World Sikh community. The Sikhs gathered at Kartarpur to celebrate 500th birthday of Guru Angad Dev announced this aid. Thus the thought is already being articulated and is obviously well received in Pakistan.

I do see some potential to immediately create some nuclei to take advantage of opening trade links and tourism. For trade links, Amritsar could once again become a nodal point but, for that, it will be important for the State to lobby that the GT Road route is opened and encouraged for trade transit. Security related logic to justify keeping border areas under developed is very weak and seems rather ludicrous when one sees the development on Pakistani side, and across soft borders all over the globe. In fact, border regions become a source of strength if they have good infrastructure and are economically strong.

Tourism, especially the Sikh tourism can soon become a fairly significant business in Pakistan. With some improvement in security situation the NRI tourist inflow to the Sikh holy sites and historical places in Pakistan can see an upsurge. It also can grow as *addendum* to their visits to the home country. They would love to take a car and travel across Pakistani countryside. If the airlines offer competitive fares to Lahore, from Europe and US, it may open up considerable direct traffic too.

Making small beginnings, tour and travel related service agencies with local Sikhs as partners can be set up – this may be easier to accomplish for NRI entrepreneurs.

Pakistan could have potential for developing into a destination for offshore work transfer. This is becoming a very competitive area and Pakistani streets are streaming with advertisements for course offerings in IT. If security situation improves, some workflow in their direction could be expected otherwise perhaps not.

Our focus should include not only adding to the *serai* but also improving the state of Sikh heritage in Pakistan – the Lahore Fort, Museum displays, books, literature, *gurbani* and *sangeet*. **It is providential that, right now, after a lapse of over 50 years, the famous Lahore Museum has decided to set up a Sikh Gallery to attract Sikh tourists.** This announcement by the Museum's newly appointed Director, Gulzar Mashhadi on 14 May 2004 was reported by the *Daily Times*, Pakistan. The museum already has galleries dedicated to Hinduism, Jainism and Islam, but it lacked a Sikh gallery," Mashhadi was quoted as saying. "Sikhs will be glad to see a focus on their religion." We have to ask for a lot more and expect it to happen if the economic potential of Sikh tourism is realized by the Pakistanis. The gallery will be used to display around 40,000 antiques, previously neglected because of the shortage of space, including an old "Granth Sahib" and a priceless replica of the Golden Temple, he added. Imagine us spending a fortune to create a small gallery at the Smithsonian and San Francisco, at a huge cost, compared to this development as an outflow of potential tourist interest.

The effects in India of strained relations with Pakistan and the turmoil in Muslim world have most tellingly impacted Sikhs. Since independence, Punjab is the only Indian state neighboring Pakistan that has suffered the most when tensions led to or brought the two sides close to war; has been denied economic development for fear of proximity and even their political voice kept muffled because of again 'unpredictability' of Sikhs without quite saying it.

The Sikh decision to stay with India and not accept Jinnah's offer was probably the better course given their situation. But the Pakistani Muslim neighborly presence and its influence cannot be wished away. Sikhs should also realize that all faiths are trying to understand the Muslim mind and are making serious efforts to develop some relationship with them. This includes Hindus who, in spite of Babri Masjid and Hindutva, have always been conscious of the need to understand and interface with Muslims.

For Sikhs, merely the bonhomie of the Pir of Dargah Nizamuddin, or occasional nod of acquaintance by some Indian Muslims, may promote some inter faith conversation, but its strategic value to Sikh future is greatly constrained. Sikhs may well remember that in the 1980's Indian Muslims quietly accepted the oppression of Sikhs. They cannot do any better for they are under continuous threat themselves. In the Sikh future the Muslim world will mainly be Pakistan and the Muslim opinion that may impact them the most could be the Pakistani orientation.

Islam has been portrayed as a violent religion by other Semitic faiths, as Sikhs have been labeled militant by other Indic faiths. Muslims, however, never claimed to be the sword arm of any other faith, nor would they ever accept the mantle of militancy for protecting those who continue to lead the chorus to stereotype them as militants! Sikhs need to recognize that sacrifices and martyrdoms play havoc with the psyche of any group and should not be

lightly offered. We should really ponder if our sacrifices in the 18th century against Mughal oppression of Hindus; our fight with the British for Indian [and Pakistani] freedom, etc have done us any good strategically or been commended as evidence of high minded righteous disposition.

There are some parallels from history that should give us heart. Muslim Ottoman's entry into Constantinople was triumphant and deeply resented by Christian Europe. The Sikh entry into Kabul or Delhi was no less triumphant and, as such, Muslim resentment against it is understandable. The Hindu resentment of the Muslims can also be understood in that context. The Jewish experience is very complex and traumatic. We will have to find our own answer but, as the fifth largest faith community in the world, we will have to learn how to cope with the historical memory of others about us as much as our predilections regarding others based on our historical memory

Sikh stereotyping in the US is perhaps partly out of ignorance and partly an expression of resentment against immigrants, but in India and Pakistan, it possibly is out of deep-rooted prejudice based on transmitted memory and received impressions besides at times being inspired by malice and calculation. Pro-active native Sikh approach is as vital to foster and sustain mutuality of respectful relations with sister faith communities in both those countries as it is in the lands where Sikh Diaspora is growing.

At another plane, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus have traversed the stages from Medievalism to Renaissance to Reformation and Modernity; Sikhs and Muslims have to go through those phases yet. Eventually this transformation will happen. In a way it is already happening. Let us therefore take the emerging reality into account and manage our institutions in such a way that, in our zeal to protect the pristine purity of our faith as understood by some, it does not hurt the future growth and development of the faith. We should be looking closely at the Muslim transformation to avoid costly mistakes.

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