

The Holy Sikh Shrines in Pakistan - An Odyssey

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I returned Recently from Pakistan after a pilgrimage of our holy shrines, where I also helped organize a number of events briefly described below. In time, I and others will write more about these events, this letter is to momentarily let you know that the blessed Guru and God blessed us with success in our mission.

In Lahore, I co-organized - and co-chaired - with Dr. Zafar Cheema the first ever International Conference on Guru Nanak Heritage of Interfaith Understanding for Harmony and Peace. This was a successful event, barring a few glitches.

Scholars from Australia, Middle East, USA, Canada, and India, in addition to speakers from Pakistan, made contributions at what I like to believe to be a truly historical occasion. We covered many milestones at this conference, even though no one from India (except three scholars) was given travel visa to Pakistan. We expected 30 scholar presenters and nearly 500 participants from India. Participants from other countries made it ro Lahore after extraordinary efforts and sacrifices.

We celebrated 30th anniversary of a movement in the history of Sri Nanakana Sahib Foundation. During these years, restrictions on Sikh pilgrims were all lifted except where bilateral agreements were necessary. More importantly, the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, formation of which was announced on April 11, 1999, became law of the land on in August 25, 2004. The major historical shrines are continuously being repaired and maintained. We celebrated these achievements and thanked people of Pakistan and their government for this dream to come true.

Then we held International Conference on Guru Nanak Heritage of Interfaith Understanding for Harmony and Peace on February 18, 2006. Many observers told us that this was the first conference of its kind ever held in Pakistan. The conference was held at the Ambassador Hotel of Lahore where Sikh and Muslim scholars made presentations on contribution of Guru Nanak in laying the foundation of Interfaith Understanding. The Guru had in his lifetime visited holy shrines of all religions to promote dialogue on interfaith understanding and to establish the tradition of interfaith appreciation among religions of Indian sub-continent and Middle East.

There were several resolutions passed on Gurdwara management. We condemned the blasphemous cartoons of Prophet Mohammed in Danish and other European papers, saying that the prophets of every religion should be respected by people of each faith.

If media coverage is any indication, the Conference was a great success. Sardar Ganga Singh who was the main force behind the achievements of last thirty years was interviewed by the media and these interviewed were widely aired. I was invited at a press conference by the famous Lahore Press Club. Over two dozen newspapers and two national TV stations covered or commented on our conference. Since the time of our first announcement of the conference, phrases such as Interfaith Understanding for Harmony began to find places in the speeches of the country's national leadership. We are much gratified.

On the historic day of February 20, at *Janam Asthan Sri Nanakana Sahib* we commemorated the martyrdom day of those who gave up their lives in a non-violent struggle for the liberation of our shrines. There was kirtan by Dr. Kuldip Singh Hanjan of California, followed by poetry recitations and speeches by our scholars on the subject of Gurdwara Reformation Movement of the past century and its relevance to our gurdwara

reborn today. This commemoration was revived after 59 years of a pause due to partition of 1947.

Finally, we held a congregation at Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib to pray for world peace. Guru Nanak (1469-1539) spent last 18 years of his life in this town that he founded to build a community of spiritual householders who would spread peace and harmony. We paid our homage to his burial mausoleum and his cremation ground, both laying side by side, bearing witness to his all inclusive (*sarab sanjhi*) teachings.

We began our trip by visiting many Sikh historical places in Lahore. They included Gurdwara Dera Sahib constructed in memory of the martyrdom of Guru Arjun, birth place of Guru Ram Das in Chuna Mandi, Samadhi (mausoleum) of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Gurdwara Mata Kaulaan at Mozang of Lahore, and Gurdwara Shaheed Ganj in Naulakha Bazar.

We spent a day at *janam asthan* Sri Nanakana Sahib. There we toured the surrounding gurdwaras that immortalize Guru Nanak's footsteps and the Guru Nanak High School that provides education to majority of Sikh students in Pakistan. A day trip was also organized to Gurdwara Sri Panja Sahib at Hassan Abdal. There too is a high school for 700 students with some Sikh students. We met Sikh students and the staff at both school.

At the end of scheduled events the delegations from various countries left for their respective destinations. Dr. Kuldip Singh Hanjan of California and I stayed behind. We visited Islamabad, Haripur Hazara, and Peshawar. Islamabad is the capital of Pakistan and seat of the national government; one can meet government officials and rub shoulders with politicians. We were received by Sardar Swaran Singh of PSGPC and hosted by the National Assembly Member Sardar Gyan Singh. Haripur Hazara is the town Maharaja Ranjit Singh founded to honor General Hari Singh Nalva. We had lunch with the faculty of what used to be Bhai Lakhmai Chand Khalsa High School. I went to this school in my early days in United India.

Peshawar is the provincial capital of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province where Quila of Jamrod and Gurdwara Bhai Joga Singh are located. We spent the night in Peshawar city after visiting many Sikh shops and other markets. The following morning at 6 AM, we paid our homage to the shrine of Bhai Joga Singh; the congregation there begins at 3.30 AM. We enjoyed Asa-di-Var kirtan done in the pre-partition tunes. The Gurdwara president who is also a member of PSGPC asked us to speak, which I did and received holy *siropa*, robe of honor, from the gurdwara management. After langer, we were given a tour of the gurdwara and two Punjabi schools located in Mohalla Bhai Joga Singh.

Prior to wrapping up of our trip we achieved another milestone. We successfully negotiated a plan to establish a Sikh Resource and Research Center at Dyal Singh Library in Lahore. This center will welcome donations of books and other research material, and provide facility for scholars to produce Urdu literature on Sikhs and their religion. Although Lahore bears many imprints of Muslim Sikh relationship, there is no source of information on Sikhism for the new generation of Muslim communities in Pakistan. This center should be a step in the right direction. I will get back to you for help in this project.

Before I close, I should mention a couple of difficulties we encountered. Our visit was originally planned for November 2005 to coincide with the celebration of Guru Nanak Prakash Day. It had to be postponed due to the earthquake causing natural calamity of unprecedented magnitude for people of those area. Sikh communities all over the world had to divert attention towards providing relief efforts to those suffering the brunt of that earthquake. Sikhs from India sent relief supplies and Sikhs from North America sent funds for relief effort and equipped a badly needed surgical unit in the affected area.

When we rescheduled our conference for February 2006 we selected the dates to coincide with February 20 when 139 non violent Sikh volunteers gave their lives to liberate *Janam Asthan Sri Nanakana Sahib* from the corrupt managers and clerics in 1921. This day has not been commemorated for the past 59 years due to partition. Sardar Ganga Singh Dhillon of Sri Nanakana Sahib Foundation of which he is the Founding President and I am the Founding Executive Vice President, inspired to revive the annual commemoration beginning this year. Its commemoration was decided in a meeting of the International Advisory Committee of the PSGPC that Sardar Ganga Singh presided on November 17, 2005 in Lahore.

It seemed that someone was not happy with our initiative and coinciding dates of our other programs with the Shaheedi Day; **most of the pilgrims were not given visa and our local hosts representing Pakistani officials became lukewarm in receiving us. We do not know the reason;** although I have my own ideas about it. It is likely that our announcement to commemorate the Shaheedi Day first time in Pakistan could not get timely approval of either both or one of the governments involved as it could be considered a matter requiring inter-governmental understanding. We do not know for sure.

Although major historical gurdwaras in Pakistan are being revived and taken care of, there is a serious overlook during their renovations. **Organizations given the responsibility of renovations do not seem to exhibit concern of the archival significance of the places, or even the appreciation of the historic Sikh symbolism.** New buildings or new renovations are moving towards bringing a uniformity in looks and design which are essentially to cover everything with marble, erase original symbolism of *<Ek Onkar*, mool mantra or other spiritual and scriptural engravings, and lack provision for congregation of any size to be seated in the presence of the Guru to listen to kirtan or exegesis of holy scripture. Even the original tomb of Guru Nanak is now a *thara* Sahib, **with no resemblance with the ancient tomb and the new structure does not have a slab giving history or significance of the burial mausoleum next to the cremation ground.**

The newly renovated structures are only to promote rituals of bowing before the Guru Granth Sahib to pay one's obeisance, circumambulation and receiving the Prasad, all mostly to preserve rituals of days before Guru Nanak.

Any provision of newer awakening initiated by our Gurus for imparting knowledge and understanding of the Holy Scripture and its exegeses to the visiting devotees is eliminated in the renovated structures. Interior decorations are moving towards uniformity, with greater resemblance to Islamic art usually found in a typical masjids (mosques)!

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