

Nankana Sahib and Gurdwaras in Pakistan

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It is the heartfelt desire of every Sikh (and we pray for it in *Ardas* every day) to be able to visit our Gurdwaras left behind in Pakistan. In Nov of 2006, ultimately, my dream of this spiritual voyage was realized with the grace of Guru and cooperation of three friends.

Soulful: The Journey to Pakistan – for me was not a journey to some historical places but an inward journey to my beginnings. My soul yearned to touch the soil where Guru had walked, to breathe the air that had Guru ji 's breath intermingled in it, to see those wonderful sights which were witnessed by the Guru once. Once there, I was transported in the land of Guru ji's time and could visualize the hustle and bustle and cries of joy and Gurdwara Janam Asthan at his birth. I could visualize all those *Sakhis* of Guru : the cobra protecting him from sun rays, grazing cattle in the fields , the spiritual business deal at *Sacha Sauda*. I could see the hardworking, God fearing, pious and newly formed faithful Sikh community nestling in beautiful, serene surroundings of Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, where Guru Nanak spent about last 22 years of his life. I could see him cultivating the land in scorching heat and with his followers **reciting Japji in the ambrosial hours of the dawn and singing ethereal hymns when the golden rays of dusk enveloped the sky**. The small covered platform in courtyard where Muslims had buried Guru Nanak Dev ji's mortal remains is still a place of veneration by local Muslims.

The river Ravi has receded way back and there is solitude around it. A small flower garden outside has enhanced its serenity. **At Panja Sahib I was able to - and I did - touch the impression of Guru ji's hand, which is a monument to humility over pride**. We also visited residential quarter of Bhai Lalo at Eminabad where it was proved beyond doubt, that in God's kingdom, it is hard work done honestly and humility and not arrogance and egoism that finds favor.

Gurmukhi Inscriptions: We also went to see where Guru ji was imprisoned by invader Babar and Guru Nanak fearlessly challenged the tyranny of current rulers in 'Babar Vani'. I wish the structure should have been the same and not altered. We also went to see the remains of one of the oldest civilization – the Indus Valley civilization at Harrappa excavation center. In close proximity of Harrappa, we accidentally discovered a gurdwara inaugurated in April of 1941 by Sant Sangat Singh of Kamaliya. It bore inscriptions in Gurmukhi, but unfortunately, Gurmukhi script has vanished from Pakistan, though they speak Punjabi language fluently. **That gurdwara was converted to a high school for boys**. We were given a tour of the place by its young principal. The old peon, who still had nostalgic memories of the Vaisakhi fairs held there in pre-partition days, opened lock of a closed room, bare feet, with head covered and respectfully entered there. I saw an empty room with a square table, covered with a colored table cloth, resting in the center of the room. It was the place where Guru Granth Sahib was installed earlier, but even today, that place evokes reverence in all. The peon said more than once that it was a *muqadas* (pious) place for them and he still hoped and wished for the golden old days to revive. The Principal accorded us a very warm welcome, and requested us to send him a copy of Guru Granth Sahib, so he could tell his students about the Sikhs. We politely told him that it was not possible, but we would send him some books about the Gurus and Sikhs. **I can not forget the warmth and honor extended to us by the school staff and every one else we met in Pakistan. This visit on the whole, was an inner joy beyond expression. I am at a loss of words to express my feelings of ecstasy experienced there.**

Pak Hospitality: Apart from the spiritual dimension this voyage offered, it also had – human aspect- which has sweetened our memories and enhanced our joy of the trip. The kindness, warmth, simplicity and deep intensity of feelings of Pakistanis for Sikhs touched our hearts deeply. They would meet like a long-lost brother. They were so eager to find out about us and also share their feelings. I could delve in sadness of their comments and feel the pangs of separation that they were going through. They also yearn for peace to prevail in both countries, ease visa requirements, visit their lost homes and pay homage to their holy sites in Delhi, Ajmer and other places. They have also heard about their ancestral places in India and long to visit them. One person boldly declared that creation of Pakistan was the biggest error committed by Mr. Jinnah. Another pined and said that if at all Partition had to take place, they (the British) should have kept Punjab as one unit. No where in public or press, I encountered any derogatory or inciting speech to denounce India or Indians. **Time and again, I was moved to tears by their words and actions.**

We had rented a car there during our stay. While going to Panja Sahib, our car stopped to pay the toll on highway. To our utter amazement, the toll collector refused to take the toll from us by simply saying that we were their guests! At Lahore Museum, in Sikh section, I discovered that some of the coins struck by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Gurmukhi, were displayed upside down! I brought this to the notice of museum director and he was extremely thankful for pointing this error to him for he did not know the Gurmukhi. **It is sad to see the demise of this script there. My only apprehension is that, as Indians, we may never be able to repay the Pakistani travelers in the same cordial fashion with which we were treated.**

The Guide with a heart: At Dera Sahib Gurdwara, where the Fifth Master, Guru Arjun, was tortured to death, we were greeted and given a tour by a very polite, well read, very articulate Manager of the Gurdwara Dera Sahib. His name is Azhar, and his choice of words while explaining the gruesome history of the place, was very emotional and evocative. Honestly, I was quite certain that the man would underplay the tortures inflicted by Mughal emperor on Guru ji. After all he was a Muslim and may not belittle the Mughals. **But to our complete astonishment, he narrated in details all the gory, gruesome and blood cuddling incidents with story of Chandu's adding the fuel to fire of Mughal's wrath. He also narrated, in detail, while taking us to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's memorial, the treachery of Dogras and how their greed brought havoc on his kingdom and subsequently they maneuvered to eliminate his son and grand-son also, thus destroying Khalsa Raj for ever.**

Being US citizens crossing the border was a very smooth process. At Wagha border, we had a car from the hotel in Anarkali Bazar waiting for us to carry us to Lahore. **The Public Relations Manager of the hotel very proudly informed me, that he was 7th generation of Pir Budhu Shah. The legendary comb of Guru Gobind Singh ji, with a few of his kesh, lies in his family as a prized possession.** At one time, their house caught on fire but, miraculously, that little box where this gift of Guru ji to Pir Bhudhu Shah was kept, was found unscathed.

Although, we were privileged as US citizens and personally did not have to face any problem yet, I do not at all disagree with Mr. Satpal Singh. (Mismanagement of Nanakana Sahib - SR Jan 2007 issue). **I must say, that Sikhs have to share blame for this sordid situation with WAQF Board.** At Gurdwara Nankana Sahib, there lies a beautiful, glittering precious Palki, adorned with several Kgs of precious gold, gifted by Mr.H.S. Sarna, President of Delhi Gurdwara Prabhandhak Committee. It is not too long ago when that expensive Palki generated controversy over the amount of gold used in it, ensued feuds

between Badal/SGPC and Amrinder Singh / Sarna factions, and did more to divide the community than to unify them. (Do our leaders ever miss any opportunity to blame each other and disgrace the community?) **But one may ask, in sheer honesty, was that expensive *palki* (worth several lakhs) really needed there? If so, why was it not installed inside the Gurdwara and why was it lying outside like an extra piece of furniture? Enormous public funds were spent on it and these funds could have been better used in construction of a rest house for weary and needy travelers.** It could have given temporary employment to local Sikhs and non Sikhs, would have boosted local economy, and above all, provided shelter for the needy. This might have pleased Guru Nanak more than the glittering Palki. Even DGPC could have taken credit for constructing the rest house and could have named it also to satisfy its ego if it so wished. Nevertheless it would have been money well spent.

This is only one instance where *Sangat's* money could have been put to proper use and, by no means, any endorsement of Badal's / SGPC policies in management of Gurdwaras. The miserable plight of travelers, at Harmandar Sahib, in spite of its enormous resources, speak loudly of their efficiency, or more candidly, denoting inefficiency and inconsideration.

For me, the veil has been lifted from the myth of Pakistan Yatra. It has enlightened me about the places and people. I would highly encourage all to go there once in a life time if they can. I would sincerely urge the Sikh Institutions to help create more facilities there and enable local Sikhs to get good education and empower them to be able to live decent lives as Pakistani Sikhs who are proud of their religious heritage. It is worth mentioning that Pakistani Sikhs, though a miniscule minority, are honoring their distinct identity, while Indian Sikhs are gradually eroding away the *saabat surat dastar sira*.

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