

Dhaka's Gurdwara Nanak Shahi and its Relics#

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IT WAS DURING HIS LONG TRAVELS to the far East in the early part of the 16th Century that Guru Nanak visited Dhaka, Chittagong and other far off places in this region. Guru Nanak, alongwith his lifelong companion Bhai Mardana, a Muslim bard, reached Dhaka in 1504 and stayed there for a long time preaching his gospel of love, equality and service to mankind.

The holy place where Guru Nanak stayed in Dhaka, now stands a most marvellous and magnificent Gurdwara Nanak Shahi. The whole structure of the Gurdwara is artistically constructed on the pattern of Mughal architecture giving it a grand and royal look. This Gurdwara, made of small bricks, was totally in dilapidated condition before the creation of Bangladesh. It was only after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 that S. Joginder Singh Jogi (President, Takht Sri Patna Sahib), a representative of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and Captain Bhag Singh along with some other devoted Sikhs, rendered a commendable and timely service towards the control and maintenance of the Gurdwaras in Bangladesh. Subsequently, the building of this Gurdwara was thoroughly repaired keeping intact its original splendour.

Gurdwara Nanak Shahi is situated on Neelkhet Road, surrounded by the sprawling Dhaka University on three sides. The University illegally occupied a large portion of the Gurdwara land for which the Bangladesh Gurdwara Management Board under the aegis of Late Captain Bhag Singh (1903-92) had to fight a long legal battle against the University, leading to the decision in favour of the Board. But the case of suitable compensation to the Gurdwara remains unsettled.

It is, indeed a fascinating treat for the eyes to have a glimpse of this one piece pure white structure of 75 by 75 feet dimension having five Mughal style doors on all four sides. This masonry marvel has no left, right, back or front side, rather it is exactly all the same from all the 4 sides. Inside, there is a six feet wide corridor (verandah like) on all four sides. And within this there is an other corridor of the same width. Surprisingly enough their walls too have five doors on each side and within them lies the central assembly room which is 15 feet on all four sides. The whole Gurdwara structure is having 33 inches thick wall. It is a soul soothing experience to go around these corridors while recalling Guru Nanak's sojourn here centuries ago.

It is believed that present Gurdwara was originally built by Bhai Natha, a devoted Sikh missionary, who came here in the early part of the 17th Century during that time of Guru Hargobind (1595-1644).

This historic Gurdwara has some relics, i.e. Kharanwa (wooden slippers) of Guru Teh Bahadur and his portrait, a small pothi of Granth Sahib and a large Pothi like Granth Sahib. The small pothi is of about 10' x 12' in size. It begins with Japji Sahi and ends with Rigmala. It's leaves are numbered as 1,2,3 and the like, upto 668, i.e. 1336 pages. It is a

superb specimen of most artistic and beautiful calligraphy. Nothing is known about its compilation.

The other Pothis is a voluminous relic weighing about 40 kgs. consisting of 907 numbered leaves, i.e. 1814 pages. Its size is 21 and half inches by 16 and half inches having 10 inches thickness. But the space used for writing is 11 by 15 and half inches having four line border and each line if drawn with as ink of different colour. The empty space on all four sides is nicely decoarted with flowers, plants, peacock features and numerous other designs using white, blue, red, yellow, maroon, orange, golden, green and other colours which even today maintain their distinctness and lively grow. After every few pages the design of the art work changes altogether. Some single pages have more than 200 flowers beautifully painted on them. One feels extremely wonderstruck to think about the time and labour that might have been devoted for preparing such a page full of outstanding art and imaginative excellence.

The first 32 leaves of the volume contain the index of the Gurbani and on leaf 33 are given the death dates of the first 9 Gurus from which we can deduce that this volume might have been written after the death of Guru Teg Bahadur in 1675 and before the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708. On the 34th leaf is written Japji Sahib surrounded by most fascinating flowers and other decoration. Ragmala appears on leaf 906 and its backside appears sakhi Mohalla 5th in which 5 Dos and Donts are prescribed for men. Certainly this sakhi Mohalla is not the Sakhi (Composition) of the 5th Guru Arjun. The whole volume is in a most deteriorating condition and requires immediate attention for its safe maintenance.

The crux of the matter is that the absence of local Sikh population, it is quite an uphill task to look after the Gurdwara in Bangladesh. But inspite of all this, Guru Nanak's birth day and Vaisakhi are celebrated at Gurdwara Nanak Shahi on a grand scale with the help of officials of Indian High Commission and local Hindus and Muslims.

On all such occasions, the Late Captain Bhag Singh, General Secretary Bangladesh Gurdwara Management Board (and Editor of *The Sikh Review*, Calcutta) had to perform the most strenuous job of arranging these functions. Really it was an inspiring sight to see this old soldier of 88 years performing his duties with utmost high spiritedness, dedication and evergreen sense of good humour.

This time (1990) too Captain Bhag Singh reached Dhaka, alongwith his daughter Surinder Kaur Bhalla, S. Jai Singh Sethi and myself, to celebrate Vaisakhi Gurpurb. On that day, Gurdwara Nanak Shahi truely reverberated with international and inter-religious, Sangat consisting of local Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, besides the officials of the Indian High Commission, Norway High Commission, and other International organisations.

I was entrusted the sewa (duty) of delivering a lecture on the significance of Vaisakhi and the universal aspects of Sikh religion, which I did in English and Bengali, to the satisfaction of the multinational *sangat*. Muslims and Hindus together sang the holy Kirtan from *Gurbani*. His excellency the Ambassador of the USA seemed so much impressed by all that he, along with his wife, not only sat through the whole function but also enjoyed *Guru ka Langar*, sitting alongside the sangat on the floor. Well over 500 people enjoyed the Langar (food) which was a record. Captain Bhag Singh told me that, with the increase in Gurdwara activities, more dedicated persons are drawn towards the well being of this historic place.

Currently, Diwan is held every Friday, being the weekly holiday in Bangladesh. Local Gurdwara Committee, now seems all the more determined for rendering every possible

service for the development of the Gurdwara. Evidently, its president S. Gian Singh Sahota, Sardar Davinder Singh Bhutiani and their associates, (in 1980s's) planted green grass, roses, and other flowers, in the spacious compound of the Gurdwara, in a most systematic and decorative way. The garden is flourishing under the tender care of the newly appointed *Mali*.

Of all the historic places connected with the visit of Guru Nanak and Guru Teg Bahadur in this region, Gurdwara, Nanak Shahi is the only one which is well maintained and offers good accommodation to the pilgrims.

