

A Pilgrim's Progress: My Visit to Shrines in Pakistan

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PART IV

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The Region of Sikh Glory: Panja Sahib: 19 March 2007:

Left the Serena Hotel at 08.15 AM. AR drove me straight to Hasan Abdal where we went to Gurdwara Panja Sahib. Small entrance but big complex inside. This is the place where a Muslim Peer (holy man), Wali Kandhari, angered by the Guru's diversion of his spring of water downhill from his settlement on top of the hill, rolled a heavy boulder down the hill towards Guru Nanak and his constant companion Bhai Mardana, a Muslim. The Guru stopped the boulder with his hand, making Wali Kandhari come to him to apologise, realising the Divine power of the Guru. Legend holds that the imprint of right hand on a boulder is that of Guru Nanak hand. Hence the name given to this historic gurdwara: Panja Sahib [Holy Palm].

It is one of the most important pilgrimage centres for Sikhs. I was blessed to have been able to visit it. Stepped inside after filling in my name and personal data in the police register kept at the entrance to all gurdwaras. Beautiful gurdwara. Walked around it at leisure. Full of joy at Guru Nanak's presence and blessings. Deeply spiritual emotion. I kept silently murmuring: Dhan Guru Nanak, Dhan Guru Nanak (Hail Guru Nanak). Just like the spring water gushing out of the boulder carrying the imprint (for me) of my Guru's hand, the words "Dhan Guru Nanak" kept gushing out of my sub-conscience. I was inside the gurdwara where I performed ardaas and sat praying for a while. The photo that I clicked shows 09.15 as the time on the gurdwara clock. Dhan Guru Nanak, Dhan Guru Nanak. I could spend the rest of my life happily chanting Dhan Guru Nanak.

Was very amused at finding a small cold drinks shop just besides the entrance to the gurdwara with a big nameplate saying "Panja Sahib General Store". The board and the name were totally incongruous with the size of the shop. We left the gurdwara around 10 AM. Took pictures of Wali Kandhari's hill and a school building right in the gurdwara compound. A particularly emotional moment was the time I spent next to the hand imprint on the boulder in a small cove next to the gurdwara. Stood inside the pool for quite some time close to the hand. Sceptics will laugh but I do not really care whose hand is embossed on that stone. For me, it is Guru Nanak's hand. I revered it as such. I took it as a manifestation of my Guru's blessing. There were numerous fish clustering around the hand and in the pool. A Hindu couple with two small children were also paying respects to the hand. I waited for them to leave so I could be alone to contemplate my Guru. Really beautiful gurdwara.

Taxila:

From the gurdwara we drove along a road under repairs to Taxila, one of the greatest centres of university education and learning in Buddhist times, around 200 B.C. Alexander, the Great was here, as were the Persians. Taxila was the capital of the Kushan empire which covered most of Central Asia at its zenith under the Emperor Kanishka (61 – 120 AD). It is a UNESCO world heritage site, receiving substantial UN funding for its upkeep. Drove to the Taxila museum where a friendly security guard, talking typical Pindi accented Panjabi, showed my driver and me around the museum containing Buddhist era coins and sculptures, dug out by Sir John Marshall, the head of the Archaeological Survey of India, in the 1920s and 1930s in this area. Tipped the guard Rs 200, at which he let us see a padlocked hall containing gold and precious stone jewellery, dug out in and around Taxila. Exquisite gold necklace. My brother had been here, as also at Panja Sahib, during his visit to Pakistan as part of an official Indian delegation. I am amazed that Pakistan has not actively promoted Taxila as a centre of tourism. Buddhism is now such a fad in the West. Taxila was one of the most important focal points of Buddhist civilisation. The Pakistanis do not even have a decent hotel here. I guess the Mullahs fear non-Muslim tourism !

Drove to one of the most important archaeological sites in the area: the Dharmarajika Stupa. Had to pay a visitor's fee of Rs 200 for myself and Rs 10 for my local driver AR. A burly guide, having elementary notions of broken English, showed us around the stupa complex. Only guide around. Any site of similar importance in India would have a plethora of English speaking guides. The extensive ruins are those of a prison with a gibbet, public baths, planned residential housing and a laundry area with proper drainage facilities. A superb example of urban planning, 2000 years old, when Europeans were savage barbarians! Fine example of how the wheel of history turns. It is turning again now. China and India are now rising. Europe is turning into a racist, xenophobic old age home, full of grumpy, unfriendly people. Had decided to visit the site at Sirkap also but considering it was already past noon, gave up this idea. Told AR to proceed straight to Attock.

Attock:

This name has a magic ring for any student of Sikh history. One of our most fearless warriors, Akali Phoola Singh, had conquered this invincible fort by fording the swollen Attock (Indus) river with his cavalry, catching the Pathan defenders completely by surprise. I also remember a poem by a famous Panjabi poet, Dhani Ram Chatrik about the river Attock. Titled "Attock Darya", it goes: "*Atkaa vey tun atak matakda, atkin matkin vehnda hain*". Superb rhyming in Panjabi. I had read it at the age of 8 or 9 in school. Attock is at the border between Panjab to the East and the NWFP to the West. The river Indus (Sindh Darya) forms the boundary between the two provinces. We drove up to the checkpoint leading to Attock fort. The guards told us entry was forbidden. So I took photographs of the fort from the Indus river bridge. Imagined the area being conquered by Sikh cavalry, lead by the peerless Akali Phoola Singh, one of my heroes, a great man who used to tick off even Maharaja Ranjit Singh since Sikhism has no place for royalty. Guru Gobind Singh made us all equal. No place here for Rajas or Maharajas!

Maharaja Ranjit Singh had wanted to wait before attacking since the Attock river had been in spate. Akali Phoola Singh scorned this advice. He told Ranjit Singh that he was a "kana" (blind of one eye) and would remain so. He said that once a Sikh had performed the *ardaas*, there was no question for him of recoiling before any obstacle. Saying this, Akali Phoola Singh made his horse enter the swollen river Attock. His troopers followed him. When Maharaja Ranjit Singh saw the Akalis follow their leader into the flooded river he, too, did so. The Pathan defenders never expected anybody to cross the river under these

conditions. They were taken completely by surprise. The Sikhs won a tremendous victory. I was standing on such a site, savouring my heritage. We were then real lions. We are weak today, lead by miserable wretches. Akali Phoola Singh, General Hari Singh Nalwa, where are you? How can you watch the degeneration of the Sikhs? Great warriors, inspire us to glory!

Told my driver to head for Peshawar, against all advice. I felt totally inspired by the Sikhs' feat of arms in our heyday. I was not afraid in the least. We crossed over the Indus river bridge and entered NWFP, leaving Panjab behind us.

Road to Peshawar:

Drove to Peshawar through Nowshera, site of another Sikh victory. However, Akali Phoola Singh was killed in the Battle of Nowshera. This was an irreplaceable loss. Nowshera is now the headquarters of the Pakistan Armoured Corps and the Army Supply Corps (ASC). My driver, AR, who had been a soldier for 15 years in the ASC had undergone post-recruitment training at the ASC training centre here. He showed me a cinema hall where he used to go to see movies with his fellow recruits. He told me that there had been no other form of recreation whatsoever. Many tanks parked outside army buildings. There was even a Tank Museum. Pakistani cities are full of tanks installed at various squares. Considering that the Indian Army defeated the Pakistan Army comprehensively in the 1971 war, I have no clue what this martial posturing is supposed to achieve! India is stronger than Pakistan. Any sensible person can see that. The Pakistan Army has been corrupted by political power. As Lord Acton so rightly said in 1891, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". We did not stop in Nowshera but pressed on towards Peshawar. In my mind, I was pressing on, like the Sikh armies of yore.

Peshawar:

Reached Peshawar, the capital of NWFP, around 15.00 PM. Peshawar is now a metropolis of over one million people, the doorway to Afghanistan. We proceeded to the imposing fort. Several cannon fixed on its turrets. Headquarters of the Frontier Force, with its big insignia on the wall above the main gate. I asked the guards for permission to enter the fort or at least to photograph it from the outside. The guards denied both requests. I showed my Swiss passport and tried to get them to change their mind. The guard told me with a slight smile that if I discretely snapped some pictures from the other side of the road, he would not see me. I did this an hour later on my way back to Islamabad.

No women at all on any advertising billboard in Peshawar. The provincial government of NWFP was headed by a coalition of religious parties called the MMA. It had banned images of women on any poster or billboard. So only male faces were visible on gigantic billboards all over. Thick pall of smog hanging over the city. Very polluted atmosphere. Traffic only a bit less chaotic than in Lahore. I decided to head for the Khyber Pass. When we were already out of Peshawar, heading for Khyber, AR said that gangs were active in the area, kidnapping outsiders for ransom. That made me slightly apprehensive. I decided to return from Khyber itself and not head for Afghanistan which had been my original intention. Saw the area on the outskirts of Peshawar where Afghan refugees have settled. They live in tents or mud fortresses, with high outer walls, letting in no outside peek. Women were totally absent from crowds milling around the roads. The ones who could be seen were all in burqas. Walking prisoners ! Totally different from what I had seen in Lahore or Islamabad.

Most men to be seen in Peshawar were wearing turbans and sported beards. I was not an exception here at all ! Saw a bus stand where buses were being loaded with Afghans

returning to their own country. AR told me that the Pakistan government is now even forcing some Afghan refugees around Peshawar to leave Pakistan and return to Afghanistan. This entire suburb outside Peshawar was like being in Afghanistan. I began to realise the herculean task facing anybody who might want to 'modernise' Pakistan.

Jamrud, Khyber:

Slightly apprehensive, because of the kidnapping for ransom threat mentioned by AR. Nevertheless, I pressed on to Jamrud and the Khyber Pass. **Jamrud was conquered by General Hari Singh Nalwa, one of the greatest Sikh generals of all time. He lost his life at the battle of Jamrud, having successfully defeated the Pathans. After he was killed in battle, shot by two Dogra traitors in the pay of the British, his body was tied to the howdah of his elephant so that it would remain visible so that his soldiers would not realise that their general had been killed. The Sikh soldiers thought that Gen Nalwa was still leading them since he was visible on his elephant. After the battle had been won against a much larger force of Pathans in Jamrud, the truth about the General's death was made known to the Sikh troops.** I went all the way to Jamrud to pay my personal homage to Hari Singh Nalwa, a real lion of Guru Gobind Singh, an excellent Sikh, a peerless warrior. I said to the General: "General, you still live on in the hearts of at least some Sikhs like me. May Waheguru be with you" !

I took pictures of Jamrud Fort which, again, is forbidden to visitors because the Pakistan Army occupies it. Also photographed the Khyber Gate. The name Khyber evokes magic. It was the gateway for all invaders into India. We Sikhs were the only ones who reversed this tide from West to East by going into Afghanistan East to West. In my mind, I could hear the hills resounding with the Sikh battle cry: "*Jo Boley So Nihaal, Sat Sri Akal*", shouted by brave Sikh cavalry and infantry. I am proud of being a Sikh. So long as at least some Sikhs keep their identity, a part of the flame lit by peerless warriors like Akali Phoola Singh, Hari Singh Nalwa, Sham Singh Attariwala will continue to burn. Afterwards, Bollywood Panjab will take over but other Sikhs overseas will not let "Jo Boley So Nihal" or "Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh" die away. Filled with these sentiments, I turned back from this crest of the tide of my emotions and headed back towards Peshawar.

Back to Islamabad:

Had planned to eat some snacks at the Pearl Continental Hotel in Peshawar but this would have taken too much time so pressed on. Purchased two packets of spicy chips and a bottle of leech juice from a CNG station in Peshawar. Ate this as breakfast-cum-lunch in the car heading back to Islamabad. Got a superb view of the confluence of the Indus river, with its current of blue water, and the Kabul river, full of brown muddy water. Reminded me of the confluence of the Satluj and Spiti rivers at Khabo beyond Pooh in Kinnaur District. There also, the Spiti used to be a stream of turquoise blue snow melt while the Satluj used to be a torrent of muddy brown soil collected just below Shipki La pass where it crosses into India from Tibet. Photographed the confluence of the Indus and the Kabul rivers.

We reached Islamabad at 19.30 PM. I was extremely happy with my driver AR. He drove very well. **He was a quiet and discrete companion who left me alone with my feelings. He knew how strongly I felt about my visits to various Sikh shrines and to my ancestral villages. He asked some questions, all pertinent and relevant. He was an excellent companion for ten days. He was very respectful, without being obsequious.**

Pakistan was in shock as its cricket team had lost to Ireland, a cricketing minnow, and been knocked out of the World Cup 2007 being held in the West Indies. It was scant consolation that the Indian cricket team was also on the verge of elimination after its defeat by Bangladesh. Told AR to pick me up at 05.30 AM the next morning. Supped alone in Khazana restaurant. Quick meal. No other Sikh in sight. My visit to Pakistan was nearly over.

Return to Switzerland: 20th of March 2007:

AR picked me up at 05.30 AM in heavy rain. Left at once for the airport. Departure formalities done in the VIP lounge. An aged intelligence official kept hovering around me. Made me fill in the embarkation card, get the clearance stamp etc. Very courteous but extremely persistent. Flight BA 128 delayed by an hour because of heavy rain. Boarded the aircraft, a Boeing Jumbo 747-400, by going to it in a bus. I had seat no 1K in the first class cabin. Bade farewell to my two local hosts who were perfect, never invasive, always available. They told me that they would arrange for me on my next visit to visit Torkham right on the border with Afghanistan, under proper army escort. Also, we would visit Chillianwala, the battlefield near Gujrat, where the Sikh army inflicted a stinging defeat on the British. I wanted to go there this time but could not because of lack of time.

Flight BA 128 took off from Islamabad airport at 09.45 AM local time. I was on my way back home, full of nostalgia, spiritual peace and a desire to certainly return to Pakistan since my journey to my roots has by far not ended there as yet. I will try to bring my brother with me so that my happiness is complete with him being at my side. From my seat 1K, I watched the snow covered peaks over which we were flying. Reached Heathrow Terminal 4 at 12.40 GMT. I had not slept or watched a film. I had written over 20 pages of this chronicle of my visit to Pakistan. The air hostess serving the cabin expressed her admiration at how studiously I had worked. Arriving back home in Switzerland, my taxi driver was a Libyan from Benghazi, a city in which I spent 12 months with my family in 1966-67. I must return there as well. Back home, my trip to Pakistan was well and truly over.



**[End of Part IV]
(Concluded)**