

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

DR JOGISHWAR SINGH (SWITZERLAND)*

PART III

* Formerly of the IAS, Dr Singh is a Swiss citizen, based in Le-Mont-sur-Laussanne, having worked as M.D., Rothschild Bank, the Deutsche Bank in Geneva and Ing Bank of Switzerland. We welcome the multilingual writer to our global Sikh fraternity. -

Ed. SR

Part I and Part II were published in August and September 2009 issues, respectively.

My Father's School in Okara:

My guide had already verified that the school known as the Government High School in the 1930s was now called Government Islamia High School. Our convoy of six vehicles drove straight there. The Headmaster had been forewarned of my visit. We were received as VIPs. I was garlanded by the Headmaster and rose petals were showered on my head as I went up the entrance steps. I wondered whether my father was watching with mirth his son being showered with rose petals in the school where he used to study. Two teachers recited couplets in Panjabi in my honour. School students applauded me from the first floor. I read out the Gurmukhi text of a stone plaque saying that one Mohan Singh Raees (rich man) had donated a large sum in 1929. I was taken to the main hall where 10th class students were studying, seated on the floor. I wished them sterling success on the lines of my late father who had topped the entire school in the matriculation examination. Moving moments are succeeding each other every day on my visit, linked to my Gurus or to my ancestors. This has been a journey like no other. We left the school around 14.00 PM and our convoy headed out to my paternal village.

Fatehpur (Gughera):

We reached Fatehpur in our convoy of vehicles. Very narrow lanes with open drains running on the side. We just went around the village on foot. I wanted to see the river Ravi since my mother, who visited this village only once after her marriage in 1942, had told me that my grandfather's mud house had been next to the river. The river now flows nearly a kilometre away from the village. I was shown a line of trees some distance away behind which the river now flows. We were just going round the bazaar when an old man came. He said he knew the house of my grandparents. He knew Dadaji's name (Ganga Singh) and also my father's name (Hakam Singh). He was over 80 years old so would have been around 20 in 1947. My father was then 30 years old so this man could certainly have known my father. He was absolutely categorical that he was taking us to Ganga Singh's house. I was allowed to enter and take pictures.

I could not show any emotion as a whole crowd of people was around me. I felt like crying but did not. It was very much obvious that my father's house was much poorer than my mother's, judging by their state of being. This house was still mainly mud and clay plaster. A small portion had bricks which, the old man named Baba Hakeem told me, had been laid four years previously. Two buffaloes were standing in the mud plastered courtyard. I repeated that I was just a curious visitor, with no intention whatsoever of any claims against anyone.

Stood a while in the courtyard, breathing the entire atmosphere in. I was guided to the place where the boat used to disembark passengers having crossed the Ravi river in 1947. Baba Hakeem confirmed that my paternal grandmother used to go to this place and invite passengers waiting for the boat to come and have a meal at her place. I had heard this story from my brother. He remembers Dadi ji. I was born two and a half months after her death. My mother and brother had told me that Dadi ji was very tall and soft spoken. It seems that Dada ji was once sitting outside in the courtyard with some visitors. Dadi ji was talking inside the house with somebody. Dada ji remarked to her later that her voice had been audible outside. Dadi ji never raised her voice after this remark till her dying day. My father's two older brothers were also tall, fair skinned and handsome. I saw my eldest Taya ji, Ranjit Singh, only once in Nabha. He wore no trousers but a tamba (wrap around). His white turban was tied like that of a peasant, which he was. Very tall and fair complexioned. Taya ji Gurbax Singh was slim, tall and fair. Have never seen anybody else with so much affection in his eyes. An ocean of love. A saint. Any praise that I can heap on him does not do him justice.

My parents were not in Fatehpur but in Nankana Sahib when the partition of India occurred in August 1947. I have heard from my mother and brother that my father's family in Fatehpur had been in grave danger. The local Muslims had caught them and begun preparations to either convert them to Islam, or kill them if they refused conversion. My cousin Balwant Singh, son of Taya ji Gurbax Singh, walked from Fatehpur all the way to Okara, contacted some well placed people and returned to Fatehpur with an army unit which rescued my father's family. All this had happened on this very soil where I was now being escorted in a welcoming procession. Circumstances change. Times change. Life goes on.

Having spent an hour or so in Fatehpur, left with NR to visit HK's farm house. Ten odd notables waiting for us with a lavish lunch. Had missi roti and saag. General chitchat with the prominent landlords assembled around me. HK asked me to let everybody else leave but to stay back myself, which I did. Did not understand why, till he escorted me back inside his house where he introduced me to his mother, wife and sister. All these ladies were unveiled and very graceful. I was conscious that HSK had shown me great honour in introducing me to his household women. For a conservative, traditional Muslim to introduce his womenfolk with bare heads and uncovered faces to a non-Muslim outsider is an honour for the latter. I was aware of this. HK's brother, MK, a tall, distinguished man was also there. He lives in Canada.

I kept insisting that it was time to leave. HK drove me in a convoy to his rose and flower garden. We sat outside on string cots (manjis), enjoying the scenery around. Then was driven to NR's farmhouse where a very large new mansion was under construction. Sat outside in the courtyard having cold drinks, surrounded by villagers. Only one single woman sat to one side, in a whole melee of men. She sat quietly on one side on her haunches. NR had two bodyguards carrying automatic weapons. His chacha had been assassinated by political opponents. NR was planning to contest the next provincial assembly elections.

I was driven back to Okara in the same convoy of vehicles. Had to stop besides the road to accept hospitality from the family of one of the men in my entourage. His father, waiting by the side of the GT road, was a US citizen. He told me that many Sikhs live in the Jackson Heights and Queens area of New York. Finally, bade goodbye to my entourage at 18.45 PM. Returned to Lahore on the GT road which runs from Peshawar to Calcutta. Built by Sher Shar Suri (Emperor, 1540-1545). I had been advised by the granthi of Dera Sahib

gurdwara in Lahore never to travel at night since highway robberies were frequent. However, the GT road is said to be safe. We drove back in the dark. It had been a long and emotionally charged day. I had seen my roots. My visit to Pakistan was justified by this one day alone.

Lahore had a pall of pollution blanketing it, like New Delhi a few years ago. Reached the PC at 19.45 PM., Went for supper to a local industrialist's house. The party was full of anglicised and "forward" local women. A world of cultural difference separated these women from that poor, lone woman who had sat on her haunches on one side when I had been sitting outside NR's farmhouse near Fatehpur, only a 90 minute drive away. Left my host's house just after midnight. Back at the PC at 00.30 AM. Exhausted but exalted after a long, emotionally charged day.

16th March 2007: Lahore

Excellent weather. No rain. Pleasant temperature. A pall of smog hung perpetually over Lahore. Agitating lawyers had announced demonstrations for today so I asked my driver AR to ensure that we avoided Mall Road and areas near the High Court. Had been left traumatised by the traffic jam experienced on March 12. AR drove along the canal bank. We crossed the Ravi river. Stopped on the bridge to take pictures. Advantage of being in Pakistan is that a car can be stopped literally anywhere. Other drivers just go around you. We reached the complex housing the tombs of Emperor Jahangir, Empress Noor Jahan and her brother Asaf Khan, governor of Lahore. Tombs situated in a nice garden. I was the only Sikh around. Guards greeted me very cordially. I was asked why Maharaja Ranjit Singh, such a good ruler as well as able administrator, had plundered the tomb of Asaf Khan. I was also told that he had got the bones of Noor Jahan smashed up and destroyed. Her remains had been in a coffin suspended vertically. I replied that I was not aware that Ranjit Singh had done such a thing. I reminded my listeners that Noor Jahan's husband, Jahangir, had tortured our fifth Guru to death. Muslim rulers had committed a genocide of Sikhs for over 150 years. What the Sikhs had done in retaliation had been really minor. We began by visiting Asaf Khan's tomb.

A mullah like character was screaming and quarrelling with a group of labourers, slowly working on the lawns. We had a laugh about this lasting verbal duel. I laughed on reading the explanatory text about Asaf Khan's tomb. It mentions plunder by the Sikhs under Ranjit Singh. I photographed this text. The carvings on Jahangir's tomb are exquisite. Jahangir was a drunken debauch who used to drink his liquor laced with opium since alcohol alone had ceased to give him the required euphoria. He tortured Guru Arjan Dev ji to death. I felt no remorse at all about his tomb. The Sikhs did not plunder his tomb. It has superb calligraphy. Beautiful floral patterns.

A friendly guard showed us around. Crossed the railway line to visit Noor Jahan's tomb. Designed by the Empress herself. Much less grandiose than Jahangir's tomb. Noor Jahan ('light of the world') was a very literate, intellectual and refined woman. While her husband stayed mired in a drunken stupor, she used to govern the empire with the help of her brother Asaf Khan. The simplicity of her tomb reflects her refinement. Tourists see only a replica grave at ground level. Her real burial place is underground, under lock and key. A tip of Rs 200 to the guard made him unlock the passage into the crypt, slide back the heavy iron cover and lead us down a narrow staircase to her real tomb, just a flat slab on the ground in pitch black darkness. The guard lit four candles, placing one at each corner of the

slab. It was a magical moment. He explained that two slits allowed the slab to be caressed by the first rays of Sun rise at dawn and the last rays of the Sun set at dusk.

A couplet - in Farsi - engraved on the slab[#] says that the light of the world (Noor Jahan)'s tomb should be left in total darkness since otherwise people might forget that there was only darkness in death. The guard escorted us back to the car. He told me we Sikhs were large hearted people, giving substantial tips, unlike others who left Rs 10 or 20 as tip after visiting the complex. We were back at the PC around 12.45 PM for lunch.

Had lunch at the Royal Elephant restaurant of the PC with three locals and a visitor from Switzerland. Thai food. Lunch went on till 15.15 PM. My local visitors were extremely critical of political conditions in Pakistan. They said that they had no desire to expand their business any more there because of rampant corruption, army rule and political instability. Did not meet a single person happy with political conditions in Pakistan. The Press was quite free, though. People openly criticised the President and the army, often quite virulently.

One of my visitors dropped everything else and showed me around Lahore. We went to Anarkali, the famous garments market. Named after Prince Salim's legendary courtesan lover, depicted in the film Mughal-e-Azam. Bano Bazar was very narrow. Had a look at several shops. All the garments on show were too short for my wife. Bano Bazar is famous for its fruit chaat. Did not eat it. We then proceeded to the cloth store where Atal Bihari Vajpayee's family had gone to purchase ladies' clothes.

SC, who I had met earlier in Canada, picked me up from the PC around 20.15 PM. His wife was with him. Very polite and modern. Seemed to be a harmonious couple. We went for supper to Cuckoo's, a very famous restaurant adjoining the Badshahi (Imperial) Mosque and Lahore Fort. A must experience address. Best view on the mosque area from a high terrace at night. Owned by the son and brother of prostitutes. He converted the brothel into a restaurant. Food is brought from outside. The "tawa" chicken is very famous. My host's wife told me that she was a Waraich, with a Bajwa grandmother, all Jat Sikh and Muslim family names. We had a table on the topmost terrace where there was a very cool breeze. My host was also a Jat, a Gondal. We clicked lots of pictures, enjoying the superb view on the mosque. Food was not bad, nothing special. Too much ordered, as usual. Very steep staircases, no lift at all. Two rooms still have frescoes of scantily clad women, vestiges of the building's past as a brothel. Restaurant was packed with clients. Thus, I dined in one of the landmarks of Lahore.

Forman Christian College:#

My host told me that he would be going the next evening to an ex Student's Reunion of Forman Christian College, near Model Town. Iqbal Bano, a famous Pakistani ghazal singer, would be singing there. He insisted that I should join them for this evening. I refused, since it was their Old Students' evening and I would be totally out of place. He said that no way would he leave me to dine alone in Lahore. He would check the next evening with me. If I were alone, he would pick me up in the evening. Women in Pakistani Panjab are exceedingly graceful in their *salwar kameez*. Returned by 23.30 PM, continuing the cycle of late nights.

Lahore to Emenabad: 17th March 2007

Went down for breakfast at 9 AM. Found a whole group of turban wearing Sikhs. Joined them over breakfast. All business people, visiting Lahore. Spent time chatting to them.

Realised that I had just lost my uniqueness as the only Sikh in the PC. They were all there to attend a session of the World Panjabi Organisation (WPO). I left with AR for my lecture to MBA / BBA students.

University of Central Panjab:

Reached the UPC campus at 11.00 AM. Introduced to the Pro Vice-Chancellor, a Panjabi lady speaking Urdu and English, with a pronounced accent. I was escorted to an auditorium packed with MBA, BBA students and some teachers. The dean introduced me, giving my bio-data details. I asked the audience what language they wanted me to speak in. **The resounding answer was “Panjabi”. Made me think about Indian “Bollywood” Panjab where even Sikh families speak either English or Hindi.** So I delivered my talk in Panjabi, mixing it with English where necessary. I spoke about management of diversity in multinational organisations. Told the students to embrace diversity in the present age of globalisation.

The Q & A session that followed was prolonged. I was asked to outline the best quality of a manager. My answer: “open mindedness”, selection of the best people regardless of their origins. I refused to answer a question as to whether the Indian development model should serve as an example for Pakistan. I replied that I was Swiss, not Indian. I felt motivated and made them laugh as they listened to me with rapt attention. Told them to learn Chinese and other languages: People are at the crest of change as Asia was rising to challenge the political/economic domination of the white race, which was turning to racism as a defensive mechanism. They just loved it. After the talk, I was presented with mementos by the Pro VC. Left the campus at 13.30 PM.

Emenabad:

AR knew where the main gurdwara was in Emnabad, where Guru Nanak Dev ji had been imprisoned by the Emperor Babar, the first Mughal Emperor of India (1526-1530). To reach Emnabad, we drove through Muridke, supposedly a centre of anti-Indian terrorist outfits, and Kamoke town. Reached Gurdwara Rori Sahib in Emnabad. I was the only visitor. The security policeman called a very old Sikh lady. She opened the shrine for me. Prayed for a while. She told me that I could visit Bhai Lalo’s house where Guru Nanak had stayed. This house had been the scene of the event when Guru Nanak had squeezed the coarse cereal roti of Bhai Lalo, a humble carpenter, in one hand and the fancy poodi of Malik Bhago, the village rich man, in his other hand. Milk had dripped from the coarse roti while blood had dripped from the rich man’s offering, the fruit of exploitation of the poor. I first said no but then changed my mind. I could not leave without seeing such important places associated with my Guru. The policeman brought the old lady’s young son who was the Granthi (caretaker), suffering from a headache. I commiserated with him but the cop said it was his duty to come since I had come from so far away. The guard picked up his carbine and came with us.

We proceeded by car to Emnabad town, since Rori Sahib is situated outside. The granthi was ambling slowly in the lanes so the cop told him to walk faster, teasing him that he had become used to walking with old women. He said that I looked very fit so there was no need to walk slowly. The granthi walked faster and I kept pace with him. The cop kept telling him that he was too fat. I told the cop that I was a former senior police officer in India so he became even more respectful towards me.

Bhai Lalo di Khoohi:

We reached Bhai Lalo's house, known as Bhai Lalo di Khoohi (well). Building in good shape. A stone slab outside showed that a Pakistani federal minister had inaugurated it a few years earlier. The original well had now been filled up so a new well had been dug in the courtyard. The granthi showed me the spot where the legend about the dripping of milk and blood had taken place. Paid obeisance. Took pictures. No Guru Granth Sahib in the building. The building remains locked. It is opened only when pilgrims visit, just as I was doing. Strong emotions.

Gurdwara Chakki Sahib:

Walked on to Chakki Sahib (grinding mill). This was the spot where Guru Nanak had been imprisoned by Babar, who had invaded India in 1526. The Guru had then been 57 years old. He had composed the Babar Baani at this spot. These hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib strongly condemn Babar's excesses on innocent citizens. Legend says that Guru Nanak kept singing hymns the whole night in prison and the grinding mills kept grinding wheat into flour on their own. Mughal soldiers on guard duty saw this. They went and reported this miracle to Babar who came, apologised to Guru Nanak and paid him due respect. With this visit, I had completed paying my respects at all historical sites in Emnabad. Felt absolutely blessed. My Guru gave me the chance of physically seeing all these holy sites. Dropped the granthi and the policeman back at Gurdwara Rori Sahib. Left for Lahore at 18.15 PM. In gathering gloom, reached the PC around 19.30 PM.

Lahore to Islamabad - 18th March 2007:

No breakfast as we had decided to leave at 08.00 AM. While checking out, I saw another Sikh wearing a chocolate brown turban checking out as well. Greeted him and we chatted together for a while. He was an American citizen. He was on his way to the Wagah border for crossing over to India. I must do this the next time. He gave me his visiting card. Wished him well and got into my car. We headed for the motorway M2. Superb road, better than any seen in India, or even in Switzerland since it has three lanes on each side. Passed by the exit signs for Hafizabad, a very close family friend's home town about which I had heard so much as a child. Also passed Sargodha which has probably the largest Pakistan Air Force base. I remember the Indian Air Force claiming to have bombed Sargodha, both in the 1965 and the 1971 wars. Lots of kinno orchards by the motorway.

We stopped twice for filling CNG in the car. Excellent rest areas at both the stops. Daewoo signs. Road began climbing towards the looming mountains. We crossed the Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum rivers, all legendary names constituting the name Panjab before it got splintered and fragmented. One of the major tragedies of modern times. We need some gifted poets like Bhai Vir Singh, Shah Mohammed or Waris Shah to write about the fragmentation of Panjab. AR asked me whether I wanted to stop at the Kallar Kahar lake which has a park with peacocks. I told him there used to be a lot of peacocks around our house in Nabha so I preferred to drive on, which we did. Motorway constructed by a Korean company in Nawaz Sharif's time. Benazir Bhutto wanted to reduce it to a four lane highway but Nawaz Sharif came back to power and restored the six lanes. We reached Islamabad at noon. Went straight to the Serena Hilton Hotel, the best hotel in town, owned by the Aga Khan. Friendly check in staff. Spoke to me in Panjabi. Very cloudy and hazy day. Poor light.

AR picked me up at 15.00 PM and we went for an extensive sightseeing tour. Went up to a view point above Islamabad. Full of a Sunday crowd. I, as the only Sikh, was an object of general curiosity but no hostility. A young man came and told me that his ancestors had emigrated from near Delhi in 1947. He said he wanted to visit Delhi. I told him he should. He

turned out to be a Meo from the then Panjab Mewat area, now Haryana since 1966. Same as my driver AR who said that there existed a large community of Meo emigrants in the Islamabad/Rawalpindi area.

From the view point, we drove to King Faisal Mosque. Impressive, modern architecture. Grave of former Pakistan President Zia-ul-Haq just beside it in a very modest, small structure. Lot of visitors at the King Faisal Mosque. Was walking towards it when a female voice asked me from behind whether she could talk to me. I turned around to say of course she could. It was a lady in her early 60s / late 50s, a Pathan, going by her accent. She was with her daughter and grandson. She asked me whether I would allow her to have a picture taken with me since she had always liked the Sikhs as a people. I got photographed with her, wished her well and continued my visit. I mused that behind this request must have lain a youthful crush on some Sikh. Peshawar, the capital of the Pathans' province of NWFP, still has a Sikh population. The Sikhs from the NWFP tend to be fair skinned, handsome men. The lady probably got herself photographed with me to rekindle some old, long buried memories.

Visited the very spacious Faisal Mosque. Gold chandelier. Lots of fountains. Very nice location, just at the foot of the Margalla Hills. Finished my visit and asked AR to drive me to Rawalpindi which used to be the Pakistani capital before Islamabad was constructed. Rawalpindi has been a major army cantonment since British days. This area is known as the Pothohar area. Large numbers of Sikhs were massacred here in 1947. We knew a person very well, whose family had come from here. This person, or one of his close relatives, had put 14 women of his own family to death to prevent them from falling into the hands of Muslim mobs in 1947. The choice had been between death and dishonour..

Rawalpindi:

Commonly known as Pindi. I drove along the main bazaar just to soak in the atmosphere. Nothing much to see. Visited Pindi so that I could say I had been there. The bazaar was like that of any major city in South Asia: congested traffic, horrendous air pollution, choked with advertisement panels. Got a feel of the place and told AR to turn back for Islamabad. Back at Serena Hotel by 17.45 PM.

Serena Hilton Hotel:

Nice building, very high ceilinged spacious lobby. Two musicians playing classical music in the lobby. Excellent change from the pop / rock music noise that infects most public areas in most hotels in the West or even in India. I was in room no 322, with a direct view on the Convention Centre, just across the road. Just as in the PC at Lahore, every car entering the hotel was stopped, its boot and engine opened and checked. A man with a mirror at the end of a long pole or stick looked under the chassis with the mirror. Security precautions!

□

**[End of Part III]
(to be concluded)**