

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

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## PART II

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**Lahore:14<sup>th</sup> March 2007**

Had complementary breakfast downstairs. A waitress, named Kiran, came and started chatting with me in Panjabi. Short but rather perky. I asked her why she had a Hindu name. She replied that she was a Christian. Very unselfconsciously, she asked me whether I found her good looking. I told her that she was, indeed, good looking. That made her day. She asked me a lot of questions about Switzerland. Really lingered at my table. The hotel staff was extremely friendly. The doorman was about 7 feet tall, with a luxuriant moustache. Wore a red turban with a long tail trailing behind. Always greeted me very cordially. Everybody always asked me how I liked Pakistan. They kept telling me that I was their guest.

S. picked me up from the PC at 11 AM. Went with him to the College of Arts where we were joined by his friend's mother who was studying for her doctorate in colonial architecture. We drove to Lahore Fort, past Gurdwara Dera Sahib which I had visited two days earlier. The lady knew the curator of the fort, so we were shown areas which are closed to the general public, especially the Princess Bamba collection and the summer apartments of the Mughal rulers. Princess Bamba was the granddaughter of Dalip Singh, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's youngest son. As a child, Dalip Singh was taken to England where he was raised as a Christian. He supposedly converted back to Sikhism before he died in Paris. Quite a tragic figure for whom I, however, have difficulty feeling any sympathy

### **Egalitarian:**

My personal opinion is that Sikhism has no place for royalty. Every Sikh is equal before Waheguru. Royal houses have been a major factor in keeping Sikhism hostage to meaningless brahmanical practices, thereby negating the very ethos which our Gurus sought to impart to us by freeing us from hidebound rituals and superstitions. Our Gurus created a community of enlightened Sikhs, united in their love of God and righteous living. No enlightened Sikh can be a monarchist, tolerating a dispensation based not on merit but on heredity. Sikh rajas distorted the essence of Sikhism to legitimise their own rule. Maharaja Ranjit Singh gave most of senior court positions to several Dogras who betrayed the Sikhs without any shame and sold them out to the British. This entire epoch of treachery and perfidy is so well narrated by Shah Mohammed in his history of the Anglo-Sikh wars: "Vaar Shah Mohammed". I have difficulty reading or thinking about this period (1839-1849) of Sikh history. It is an unending tale of traitors and treachery.

### **Sher-e-Punjab:**

We saw paintings by an Austrian artist, Schöffl, and sketches by Emily Eden. There was a superb large fresco by Schöffl, showing Maharaja Ranjit Singh holding court. Also saw his famous painting of Maharaja Sher Singh (1840-1843), one of the short lived successors of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. When the curator, MA, stopped in front of a sketch of Gulab Singh, the first Maharaja of Kashmir, I told him that I was not interested in listening to tales of this 'traitor' who had received Kashmir as a reward for betraying the Sikhs. MA laughed. He told me he normally does not talk about Gulab Singh who he also considers as a traitor. Saw the stuffed remains of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's favourite mare "Alif Laila", sketched by Emily Eden as 'Lailee'.

Saw the spot where Maharaja Ranjit Singh used to hold court. A guard took a fancy to us, rightly calculating that a visiting Sikh would leave a generous tip. He showed us the inside of the Sheesh Mahal (glass palace). He also showed us the summer apartments of Mughal rulers from the inside. Walked over to Aurangzeb's Badshahi (Imperial) Mosque, completed in 1674. It has a vast courtyard where 10,000 people can pray at one time. Was allowed to go inside and roam around freely. Was hailed by a person who said he was from Nankana Sahib. He was put off by my cursory reply to his earlier greeting. So I spent a few minutes chatting with him on my way out. A group of three young boys kept gaping at me and following me around like a tail. This mosque is indeed an impressive architectural monument.

AR came at 15.30 PM. Drove to a big factory in the industrial estate. Called on the owner, SBA, company chairman, at 16.00 PM in his spacious office. In fact, he was leaving the next morning for Multan to attend a function with the CEO of Nestlé. He used to be one year ahead of one of my uncles at Aitchison College (a.k.a Chiefs' College) in Lahore in the 1930s. He was 83 years old but amazingly fit, fully active in his business. A former Chief Minister of Indian Panjab happens to be his bosom friend. They keep visiting each other. So, if you are very rich, which they both are, even a hostile border is no barrier to mutual visits. SBA turned out to be a member of the PGPC which looks after Sikh shrines in Pakistan. On my saying that it was extremely upsetting for me as a Sikh to see locals smoking just outside gurdwara boundary walls, he got very angry and fired off a letter to the PGPC chairman that smoking should be strictly banned outside all gurdwara compounds.

### **Urban Hub:**

I suggested to him to open Nankana Sahib up for investment by overseas Sikhs. He said there already was a proposal to set up a technical university and two hotels there. He complimented me for not having abandoned my religious tradition in spite of being settled in Europe and, even more importantly, being married to a European woman. He said this showed that my parents had succeeded in transmitting solidly grounded values to me. He presented me with two sets of local motifs. I enquired from him about where the place was where Sikhs had been martyred in large numbers during the time of Mir Mannu and Zakaria Khan (1739-1748). He had no idea but called one of his employees who called the museum director and got me the information. The gurdwara in question is situated in Landa Bazar, close to Lahore railway station. Left his office around 16.45 PM after a very pleasant conversation.

Drove straight to Lahore railway station. A big red brick edifice in classical British colonial architecture. I suppose Sikh passengers must be frequent here since nobody seemed to pay me much attention. AR parked our car in a lot clearly marked "For Railway Officers Only" since there was no place anywhere else. Walked with AR through Landa

Bazar. Quite an adventure crossing the road. No pedestrian crossings. Nobody stops here anyway. AR asked about our destination at two places. Found Shahidganj easily.

### **Gurdwara Shahidganj:**

Situated behind a narrow entrance off Landa Bazar. Specifically dedicated to the thousands of Sikh men and women who sacrificed their lives here but did not abandon their faith. They would be horrified if they were to see the state of Sikhs in the Indian Panjab today. A reward of one rupee used to be paid by Mughal authorities to anybody who brought the severed head of a Sikh. These severed heads were piled to form mounds or pyramids. This place was then called Nakhas Gate. It is now called the Shahidganj Gurdwara.

I went up to pay my respects to the Guru Granth Sahib on the first floor. I recited the ardaas in which a special reference is made to all Sikh men and women who died here. My soul was bathed in sadness. I prayed for peace to all these martyrs. Spent some time in contemplation. When I see how Sikhs these days abandon their tradition for not even the proverbial three pieces of silver and I compare it to those who sacrificed their lives here, it makes me deeply sad.

The granthi showed me the well into which, he claimed, the remains of 250,000 Sikhs were thrown. He also showed me the place where Sikh women were forced to grind wheat the whole day, day in and day out, while wearing garlands of the remains of their slaughtered children around their necks. I bowed my head (I still do), with eyes full of unshed tears, to those heroic mothers who were divine in their steadfastness and courage. I find it difficult to describe what I felt, standing at that place. The whole world contorts itself about the Holocaust. Does anybody care two hoots about what happened here? Are modern Sikhs even aware of what happened here ?

The granthi escorted me to a small memorial just a few metres away from gurdwara Shahidganj. This was the spot where Bhai Taru Singh was martyred by the Mughals by having his head scalped while still alive. I can only hope and pray that the divine flame that suffused these heroes, allowing them to cope with unbearable torture without losing courage, continues to burn forever in at least some Sikhs. Paid my sincere, heartfelt homage to Bhai Taru Singh. The granthi then brought me back to Shahidganj. During my absence, my driver AR had obtained information about our next destination: the birthplace of Guru Ram Das ji, our fourth Guru.

### **Janmasthan Guru Ram Das (Choona Mandi):**

Situated in an extremely narrow bazaar in Choona Mandi (lime market) near Sheranwala Gate. We had lots of difficulty finding a parking spot. Lahore has lawless mayhem on its roads. AR and I found our way to the gurdwara through narrow lanes, packed with cloth shops. Bright colours in every show window. Guru Ram Das is the giver of bounties. In my car, I listen all the time to hymns praising the majesty of Guru Ram Das. The first line that I recite in my mind on waking up every morning is: "*Guru Ram Das raakho sarnaai*" (Guru Ram Das, keep me under your protection). Even as I write these lines while sitting in flight BA 128 from Islamabad to London, my eyes grow misty because I am writing the name of my Guru.

The gurdwara was under extensive renovation. I was received by a Sikh from India, supervising the renovation work. He explained that the structure had nearly crumbled before renovation began. Guru Ram Das was born here and spent the first seven years of his life

here. As the Sikh was explaining to me the details of four silver plated doors that will be installed, he asked me whether I would like to contribute financially to this sewa (service). Without batting an eyelash, I said yes, I would pay the cost of one of the four doors for my Guru Ram Das. The only condition I imposed was that my name would not be written anywhere. I am revolted when I see names inscribed everywhere on gurdwara walls because people contributed money. This is not charity but self promotion. I insisted that my name would not figure anywhere at all. I partook of the langar. Absolutely delicious pumpkin curry and a chapaati. I normally do not eat pumpkin but this curry was spicy and well cooked. Even pumpkin curry is delicious at the spot where my Guru was born !

I was shown carved marble slabs brought from India for being put here. All the artisans doing the work, as well as the supervisors, had come from India. The supervisors got three month visas and relayed each other. We both regretted that Sikh elected bodies in India were doing nothing for even such an important gurdwara as this one. **Most of the gurdwaras in Pakistan were either under extensive repairs or dilapidated. But as the Sikh from India so rightly pointed out, Guru Ram Das, the builder of Darbar Sahib in Amritsar (initially named Ramdaspur) will Himself provide the means for His work. People like me will come forward and provide the resources necessary for renovation.**

I was simply overwhelmed. I had paid my respects in one day to my Guru Ram Das, to all my fellow Sikh brothers and sisters whose supreme sacrifice I remember every time I do or hear the *ardaas*. I had stood at the very spot where this took place. I had paid my tribute to a great martyr, Bhai Taru Singh. I bowed my head in reverence to Almighty Waheguru for His bounty and mercy on me. After the *langar*, was driven back to the hotel. Drivers in Lahore were worse than those in the Indian Panjab. Back at the hotel, received my local host and his brother who had arrived from overseas. Joined them in Nadia Café. A wedding reception was taking place in the PC. Beautiful women with long jet black hair, all dolled up in wedding finery. All in salwar kameez. Did not see any woman in jeans or trousers.

My two visitors told me that I should leave at even 09.30 AM to reach Okara around 11.30 AM the next morning. Their contacts would receive me there and conduct me to my paternal village Fatehpur (Gughera). Knowing how Panjabi hospitality works, knowing how bad rural roads were in Pakistan, knowing how little time I had, I did not change my decision to leave at 07.30 AM since I wanted to visit my maternal village Jethpur as well. We were the only guests left sitting in the café around midnight, watching the internal courtyard which is a replica of the Marriott Marquis Hotel near Times Square in New York. My visitors left around 00.25 AM.

#### **Parental Villages: 15<sup>th</sup> March 2007:**

Hesitated between wearing a kurta pyjama and trousers/shirt. Opted for the latter. Unconsciously, probably wanted to project a western image. Break with the past. My ancestors certainly did not wear shirts and trousers. Left the PC at 07.30 AM. AR drove along the Raiwind road. We decided to first visit Jethpur, my mother's ancestral village. I wore dark glasses to better mask my emotions at the sight of my parents' villages. These visits marked a real return to my roots. A desire to communicate with my ancestors. Somehow felt like a link in a long genetic chain going back to these villages. I know my two sons are probably never going to visit these villages. They are not interested in going even to places like Nabha in India where I grew up. So, this urge to renew with my ancestors will die out with me. In a way, it is inevitable. The wheel of life has to move on.

Observed the typical Panjab countryside from the moving car. Lush green fields. Clusters of mud plastered houses with cow/buffalo dung cakes lined in patterns on the walls. The car jounced over roads full of potholes and rough patches. AR lost his way for a while. Had to enquire from two or three persons. Finally, we drove along a canal bank on a dreadfully narrow, bumpy road. Turned at the fifth bridge and there in front of us lay JETHPUR, my mother's village.

### **Jethpur:**

I got the car stopped as soon as Jethpur came in sight. Observed the village. Took pictures. Like any Panjab village. Except that my mother's family came from here. 60 years after the partition of India, her younger son was back at Jethpur to watch where she had played as a young girl. Such an event would be a matter of routine in most countries. **In my case, a violent political cataclysm (1947), followed by mass slaughter and general exchange of populations, had rendered my visit special.** AR's niece is married in Jethpur. Another coincidence: my driver's niece happened to be married in the very village from which my mother came. AR's brother's son-in-law was waiting for us at the entrance to the village. We parked the car and I followed him into the village. We were followed by many children and a knot of villagers. I felt no hostility from anybody at all. The village had many shops, selling essential items. A sweet shop had fresh jalebis on display. In a few minutes, we were in front of a red brick house, commonly known as "Thanedar di haveli" (the police officer's house). Before 1947, it had belonged to Sardar Hardit Singh, my maternal grandfather's elder brother, elder to Gurbax Singh, my nanaji. My mother had indicated this house to me as a marker. She had told me that it had been constructed with bricks and might still be around. Well, it was very much around. It is now owned by a Muslim named Ramzaan. He did not open the door in spite of persistent knocking by villagers accompanying me. They shouted out his name many times but there was no answer. So I could not see this haveli from the inside. Various explanations were offered: Ramzaan's three sons lived outside the village. He was probably away to see one of them. He was an opium addict. When he was in an opium induced stupor, he heard nothing. I suggested he simply might be scared that I, a descendent of the earlier owners, had returned to lay claim to the house. The villagers' embarrassed laughter confirmed my suspicion. Took pictures from outside.

An old man joined us. He was very old, over 80. He know my maternal family very well. His name was SB. He used to work as an agricultural labourer in my uncle Tarlochan Singh's fields. For me as a child, Tarlochan Mama was a hero. Channi Veera and I loved him. He used to tell us details about the refugee convoy in which Sikh villagers had fled from Jethpur to India in 1947. SB said that Tarlochan Mama had visited Jethpur twice after 1947. He was aware of my uncle's death, saying that he had received intimation to this effect.

SB insisted that I come to his house so I went with him to see his house from the outside, not going in because there were women inside. By now the crowd around me had swelled to over 30 persons. We walked back to my ancestors' houses. Right opposite Hardit Singh's house was the house belonging to my grandfather and also to Harbax Singh, my mother's chacha ji, who I clearly remember from my childhood. He used to visit us in Nabha and came even to Chandigarh. He always had a white turban. He never wore trousers but was always in a kurta and tamba (traditional peasant wrap around). His turban used to have a "turra", a portion sticking vertically up from the inside of the turban, denoting a person

commanding respect in the village. Tarlochan Mama, who I remember extremely well, also used to have a turra coming out of his turban, which used to be in colour.

### **My Ancestral Home:**

The person now owning my grandfather's house allowed me to enter and go up to the roof so that I could peer across into Hardit Singh's house which had not been opened to me. I climbed to the roof which was full of dry buffalo dung cakes, used here as fuel. I then used my Blackberry to call Bangalore and speak to my mother. I told her that I was standing on the roof of her ancestral house in her village. She wept on the phone and my voice also cracked with emotion. My driver noticed that my voice was breaking so I recovered quickly. My mother could not speak at the other end as she was emotional so my elder brother took the phone. He asked me if I could see a mound since he had once been to Jethpur as a child of three and a half and remembered this mound. I could clearly see the mound since our ancestral houses were on a raised platform. I admired my brother's memory. Via my Blackberry, joined my mother and my elder brother to my visit. The owner of our ancestral house greeted me with folded hands. He said that he was only the custodian of the house which, in reality, belonged to my ancestors. I held his hands in mine. Reassured him that by saying this he had honoured me immensely and the house was very much his. Time had moved on. The past was past.

Met a toothless old woman who was around 80 years old. She clearly remembered Tarlochan Mama and other uncles. I bade goodbye to those assembled round me. SB took me aside on the roof of my ancestral house. In a low conspiratorial tone he asked me warily; "Paani piyenga?" (will you drink water). It took a while before I caught on to what he was saying. He was offering me a drink, but not exactly that of water ! Tarlochan Mama had always loved alcohol. SB was offering me alcohol. In a strictly Islamic country like Pakistan, this alcohol could only have been a local brew. When I told him I did not drink, he was disappointed. He must have thought the world was indeed going to the dogs if Tarlochan Singh's nephew was refusing alcohol !! I walked with AR and S to the latter's newly built house, just outside the village. As I entered, no woman could be seen. I was given delicious daal covered with freshly made butter and saag with makki di roti. Delicious ! Real Panjabi food in the heart of Panjab. The real Panjab is now in Pakistan. The Indian Panjab should now be classified only as Bollywood Panjab !

Drove away from Jethpur at 10.30 AM after once again meeting SB who had come over to meet me. Touched his feet as a mark of respect. He was scandalised that I, the scion of a family that he had served as an agricultural labourer, was stooping down to touch his feet. I was only showing respect for his age, affection for the service he had rendered my ancestors and respecting my Gurus who taught that we are all equal before the Waheguru. We passed Dipalpur on our way to Okara.

### **Okara:**

Reached Okara at noon. This was the place where my late father had done his schooling. A car was waiting for us at the crossing after the bridge. Led us to the house of the former Tahsil Nazim, named NR, who was going to be my local organiser. Lots of cars parked there. Gathering of around 20 people, including HK, a big landlord of the area who was a personal friend of my local host's family. Their lands are adjacent in Sahiwal district. Heavy snacks served. Discussed administrative systems. I talked of my career as an IAS officer. They were all highly overawed that I had been a DC at the young age of 29. They could not understand how I could leave such a job. I explained what had happened to the

Sikhs in India in 1984. One of those present, a hefty man built like a wrestler, said that the Sikhs deserved what they suffered in 1984 because of what they had inflicted on the Muslims in 1947. Not knowing whether this was an act of individual provocation or whether he was the group spokesman, I refused to take the bait. Just told him that he should talk to people of my mother's generation to know who had done what to whom. This was the sole discordant note in my entire stay. Everybody else was extraordinarily hospitable. I avoided lunch and forced an early departure because lunch would have lasted hours. I sat in NR's SUV with very fancy rear view mirrors.



**[End of Part II]**  
**(to be continued)**