

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 11: Aham Tvam (I am You)

'Ahm Tvam', 'I am You', presents the unwavering spirit of the ingenious monistic, who saw no stranger. In 'Dhansiri', Guru Nanak befriends the 'Nagas'.

jo rate she aapanai tin bhaavai sabh koi ||
(Raag Vadhans, Guru Nanak)

Those attuned to the law of nature for them, every aspect of creation is pleasing.
(Raag Vadhans, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, attachment to anything for a specific reason, creates misery. To experience bliss, he recommends, detachment from reasons which give happiness or sorrow.

From Guwahati, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled along the Brahmaputra River to Golaghat in Dhansiri valley. Thereafter, passing through Jaintia Hills they proceeded to Sylhet and Kolkata. From Guwahati, they first travelled to Golaghat.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Guwahati to Golaghat. On the way, we take a break at Nagaon to interact with the local community.

In the 15th century, the 'Assa' region, which is now a part of the present-day state of Assam, was ruled by Ahom Kings. They were worshippers of 'Shakti', the feminine life force.

Nagaon is home to a small community of about 4000 Sikhs of Assamese origin. They claim to be descendants of soldiers from Maharajah Ranjit Singh's army who came to Assam in early 1800s. Overtime, people of Assamese origin adopted Guru Nanak's philosophy.

Ram Singh: Guru Nanak Dev Ji came to Assam for spiritual preaching. Following Guru Nanak's teachings, we pray regularly, live honestly and with whatever we earn, we take care of our needs, help the needy and the underprivileged from that income. All of us living at Barkola are Assamese Sikhs, followers of Guru Nanak. We follow Assamese culture and as for religion, we are Sikhs who follow Guru Nanak's philosophy.

In Nagaon, we visit the temple dedicated to Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva's birth in the village of Bordoia.

<<Chanting from 'Gunomala' scripture.>>

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva was a 15th century exponent of the Bhakti movement and a contemporary of Guru Nanak. Both paved the path of Monism by advocating non-duality, denouncing the hierarchical caste system and propagating selfless service.

A beautiful soul is sitting beside the Divine.
Describing the attributes of the Creator.
(Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva)

We witnessed stark similarities between the practices of Guru Nanak's followers and those of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva. Importance is laid on 'Shabad', the spiritual words, 'Keertan', devotional singing and free community meals. We found it interesting that the writings of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva are enshrined in a similar manner to the way the 'Guru Granth Sahib', the Sikh scripture, is enshrined in the gurdwaras.

The local tradition claims that Guru Nanak and Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva met in this region. However, the 'Janamsakhi' narratives do not mention anything about any interaction between the two.

Dr. Sanjib Borkakoti: Guru Nanak wanted to bring unity and spread his message of peace. When Guru Nanak visited north-east India, he met Sankaradeva at Bordoia in Nagaon district of Assam. The philosophy of Guru Jona (Sankaradeva) and Guru Nanak is the same. Sankaradeva has written in 'Gunomala' that those who contemplate on Divine attributes overcome negative thoughts. Guru Nanak has also said the same in 'Jap Ji Sahib'.

Having made a detour to Nagaon, we continue our journey to Golaghat.

On reaching the town of Golaghat, situated on the banks of the Dhansiri River, in the Dhansiri valley, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana encountered the indigenous 'Naga' tribes. Socially territorial, the 'Nagas' looked upon any outsider as an intruder, a potential threat to their safety.

To understand about the people of Nagaland, we meet Dr. Daljeet Singh Sethi.

Amardeep Singh: Dr. Sethi, you were born in Nagaland and you have spent most of your youth there. Can you help us understand a little bit about your understanding of the narrative of Guru Nanak's travels through the region of Dhansiri, which now is known as Nagaland.

Dr. Daljeet Singh Sethi: These regions have largely been inaccessible to the outside world. Head hunting has been prevalent in this region from times immemorial. The last officially recorded head hunting was in 1963 and the last head hunting tribe is the 'Konyak' tribe and we still have individuals with tattoo marks on their face, indicating the number of heads they have chopped. Guru Nanak was not here to preach Sikhism. He had his

own message of Oneness of humanity and that cut across all regions, all caste barriers and all religions. When Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana passed through the valley, they encountered displeasure of the indigenous people.

Through a spiritual dialogue, Guru Nanak was able to mitigate confrontation with the 'Nagas'. He explained and assured them that his motive to visit the valley was purely to interact with the natives.

ddareeaai je ddar hovai hor ||
ddar ddar ddaranaa man kaa sor ||
(Raag Gauri, Guru Nanak)

Be fearful if there is fear other than that of going astray from Oneness.
Afraid of fear and living in fear, the mind is held in tumult.
(Raag Gauri, Guru Nanak)

One should be fearful of losing faith and confidence in unity and Oneness. Any other fear only gives power to negative thoughts.

Fearful thoughts rob us from the positivity required to exuberate unconditional love and unwavering faith in humanity.

sach sira(n)dhaa sachaa jaaneeaaai sachaRaa paravadhagaaro ||
jin aapeenai aap saajiaa sachaRaa alakh apaaro ||
(Raag Vadhans, Guru Nanak)

True is the cosmic energy. Recognize this truth. It is the True Sustainer.
It is the One who created itself. It is truthful, invisible and infinite.
(Raag Vadhans, Guru Nanak)

From Golaghat, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled through the Jaintia Hills, passing through Jowai and entered the plains of Sylhet in Bangladesh.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel through the Jaintia Hills, a low lying mountainous region.

Amardeep Singh: Jaintia Hills are in the Jowai district of the state of Meghalaya. When Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana passed through this region, the indigenous people were the worshippers of nature and 'Shakti', a form of 'Tantric' (magic) practices.

In the Jaintia Hills one finds remains of historic monoliths from the times when the indigenous people were nature worshippers. Thereafter, this region experienced an evolution of diverse belief systems, of which 'Tantric' esoteric magical practices and

feminine worship became an integral part. In the recent times the indigenous tribes have adopted Christianity.

Human intellect is constantly striving to assert its power. 'Group Think' is a psychological phenomenon wherein people with similar thoughts assimilate to create tangible and intangible boundaries. This mind-set hinders the essence of universality. Guru Nanak reminds that the One who administers the past, present and future is present everywhere, yet it never professes its presence.

ouhu vaekhai ounaa nadhar n aavai bahuthaa eaehu viddaan
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

The Supreme power is watching but none can see it. This is the greatest wonder.
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

In the footsteps of Guru Nanak, we now travel to Jowai, where the Jaintia Hills make a steep fall into the flatlands of Bangladesh. In the olden days, people would commute on the Dawki River by boat to reach Bangladesh.

Descending from the Jowai Hills, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana took a boat to reach Sylhet.

In present times, due to political reasons, the India-Bangladesh border can only be crossed at a few designated points. Hence, to retrace Guru Nanak's footsteps, we fly from India to Bangladesh and continue our journey from Sylhet.

The same mother has given birth to two children, Hindu and Muslim.
Both are born in the same household. Both nurse milk from the same mother.
(Nalon Fakir)

Located on the south of Brahmaputra valley, close to the Surma River, the city of Sylhet in the pre 14th century was ruled by Buddhist and Hindu kings. During Guru Nanak's visit it was under the rule of Bengal Sultanate.

Sylhet is one of Bangladesh's most important spiritual, cultural and commercial centres.

In Sylhet, we visit the shrine of Shah Jalal, a Turkish Sufi Saint, born in 1271 AD.

Muslims read 'Quran' and Islamic texts.
Hindus seek guidance from 'Vedas' and 'Puranas'.
Muslims read 'Quran' and Islamic texts.
Hindus seek guidance from 'Vedas' and 'Puranas'.
Muslims call him 'Allah'.
Hindus call him 'Bhagwan'.

(Nalon Fakir)

Considered as one of the most revered Sufi Saints in Bengal, Shah Jalal died in Sylhet in 1346 AD. Shah Jalal had spent considerable time in the cities of Uch and Multan, now in Pakistan. He then proceeded to Delhi to be with Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya of the Chishti order and finally moved to Sylhet to spread the message of Islam.

Amardeep Singh: This is the shrine in Sylhet where the revered Sufi Saint, Shah Jalal lies buried. Guru Nanak during his travels through Sylhet had visited this shrine and had spiritual discourses with the then 'Mutwalli' (Spiritual Head) of the shrine.

It is mentioned in the 'Vilayatwali Janamsakhi' that in the 'Assa' region, Guru Nanak met with Sheikh Farid, the spiritual successor of Shah Jalal.

We meet Shahmun Mohammad Khan, the present caretaker of the Shah Jalal Shrine.

Amardeep Singh: Respected Sir, what is written about Baba Nanak in your tradition!

Shahmun Mohammad Khan: In Arabic, we assign significance to all letters of the alphabet through which I will tell about Guru Nanak. The letters, Alif, Laam, Bey, Tey, Sey, all of them have their importance. To decode the spiritual significance of the name of Guru Nanak in Arabic, our Baba (Spiritual Head) wrote in the book.

Invoke the name of that phenomenon.

Multiply that by four.

Add two. Then multiply by five.

Then twenty times three, times nine and then add two.

It results in the same spiritual weight for Guru Nanak and Prophet Mohammad's names. Whatever exists in this universe is created by the Divine, says Prophet Mohammad. It is the same as what we derive from the teachings of Guru Nanak. If you try verifying this formula, you will find it is true.

As mentioned in 'Gur Tirath Sangreh' by Tara Singh Narotam, a gurdwara built in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit had existed in Sylhet. Today there are no traces of the gurdwara, as its caretakers, the fervent admirers of Guru Nanak, migrated from this region during the partition of India in 1947.

From Sylhet, travelling by boat and land, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana reached Kolkata, also known as Calcutta.

To retrace Guru Nanak's footsteps, we fly from Bangladesh to India and continue our journey from Calcutta.

Kolkata is the capital of India's West Bengal state. The city derives its name from the Goddess 'Kali'.

Amardeep Singh: Situated along the banks of the Hooghly River, Calcutta during the times of Guru Nanak's visit was a small village known as Kalighat.

The city of Kolkata is the birthplace of the first non-European Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. A Bengali philosopher poet, he composed national anthems for India and Bangladesh. Tagore highly revered Guru Nanak's teachings. When he was asked to compose an international anthem, he is said to have replied, "It has already been written in the 16th century by Guru Nanak. Not only for the world but for the entire universe." Guru Nanak's verse in veneration of the Omnipresent, referred to as 'Aarti', was translated in the Bengali language by Rabindranath Tagore. He also rendered it in his style of music, which is known as 'Rabindra Sangeet'.

kaisee aaratee hoi || bhav kha(n)ddanaa teree aaratee ||
anahataa sabadh vaaja(n)t bheree ||
gagan mai thaal rav cha(n)dh dheepak bane taarika ma(n)ddal janak motee ||
dhoop malaanalo pavan chavaro kare sagal banarai foola(n)t jotee ||
(Raag Dhanasri, Guru Nanak)

How should one venerate? Your veneration, the creator and destroyer of the universe.

The infinite ambrosia of wisdom resounds within the body.

The sky is the platter, on which the sun and moon are the lamps; the stars and constellations are the precious pearls.

The fragrance of sandalwood is the incense, the air is the fly whisk, and the entire blooming vegetation is offering to the illuminating Omnipresent energy.

(Raag Dhanasri, Guru Nanak)

We now visit Gurdwara Bara Sikh Sangat at Bara Bazar. This Gurdwara is built to commemorate Guru Nanak's visit to Kolkata.

<<Keertan>>

We got an opportunity to interact with native Bengalis who have been positively impacted by Guru Nanak's philosophy of Monism. It is heart-warming to witness how in their respective ways they are striving to spread Guru Nanak's message of Oneness.

ra(n)g rataa meraa saahib rav rahiaa bharpoor ||
(Guru Nanak)

The Creator is imbued with love. It is all permeating and pervading.

(Guru Nanak)

Kakoli Roy Chowdhury: We are a 'Bengali Keertani Jatha' (Singers of spiritual verses). This is my husband, Gautam Rai Chowdhury and brother Praloy Randip. We started our 'Keertan' journey from Bara Sikh Sangat Gurdwara 33 years ago. We have achieved everything from here. 'Keertan' is our only asset. We wish to sing a 'Shabad' of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. I feel grateful whenever I get an opportunity to sing 'Keertan' for people.

aape raseeaa aap ras aape raavanahaar ||
aape hovai cholaRaa aape sej bhataar ||
ra(n)g rataa meraa saahib rav rahiaa bharapoor ||
(Guru Nanak)

Itself, it is the enjoyer, the enjoyment and the ravisher.
Itself, it is the bride, the bridegroom and the consummator.
Imbued with love, my Beloved is all permeating and all pervading.
(Guru Nanak)

Ranjika Roy: 'Namaskar'. This is Ranjika Roy. I am from West Bengal Kolkata. I have tried translating 'Guru Granth Sahib' in Bengali because those who do not know how to read 'Gurmukhi', can read it in 'Bengali'. So this is the transliteration and the translation,

Ashonkho bhabey jopichey tomay koto ashonkho joney
Ato ashonkho puja top ato bhokto shadhoney
Shonkha nahi koto grontho ved paath kore
(Jap of Guru Nanak in Bengali)

Countless meditations. Countless emotions.
Countless forms of worship.
Countless austerities and disciplines.
Countless scriptures, ritualistic recitations and books of knowledge.
(Jap of Guru Nanak in Bengali)

I feel that these great messages should not be confined. They should be spread in each and every corner of this world.

On the way out from the gurdwara, we saw a group of wrestlers undertaking their fitness regime. While observing them, I felt the resonance of Guru Nanak's message about practicing internal self-discipline to combat the five wrestlers - Lust, Anger, Greed, Attachment and Ego. Internally, I am forever wrestling these five mighty vices and awaiting for the day I can win them over.

avar pa(n)ch ham ek janaa kiau raakhau ghar baar manaa ||
maareh looTeh neet neet kis aagai karee pukaar janaa ||
(Raag Gauri, Guru Nanak)

There are five vices but I am one mortal. How can I protect my hearth and home, O my
soul?
Daily they beat and plunder me. Before whom should I complain?
(Raag Gauri, Guru Nanak)

From Kolkata, we make a detour from Guru Nanak's footsteps to visit Joydev Kenduli in
Birbhum District of West Bengal to explore memories of Bhagat Jaydev.

Hail Hail Padmavati.
You reside in Birbhum Kenduli village.
Hail Hail Jaydev ||

We visit the Radhabinode Temple dedicated to Bhagat Jaydev.

Joy Joy Jaidev ||

Hail Hail Jaydev ||

This temple attracts many 'Bauls' (spiritual singers) and fakirs, who congregate here to
sing the mystic songs of Bhagat Jaydev.

Bosheche Kenduli Sasan e, Likh len grontho Geet Govindo namey.
Dehi podo likhi kemoney ||

He sits in village Kenduli Sasan and scripts the epic 'Geeta Govinda' ||
He wrote about bodily existence ||

Sadhu Charandas: 'Joy Guru' (Victory to Guru). I am Sadhu Charandas and he is Kungal
Charandas. Singing is the aim of our life. Our father kept our names as 'Sadhu' and
'Kungal' because only if one is a pauper (kungal) can one become a saint (sadhu). If one
is a saint (sadhu) then one becomes a pauper (kungal). 'Kungal' (pauper) is a beggar.
Without begging, Guru is not found. Jaydev has written 'Geeta Govinda'. Poet Jaydev
and Guru Nanak's philosophy is the same about Oneness and universal fellowship. Our
father, Surdas Baul introduced us to the 'Baul' tradition. 'Baul' tradition has been with our
family for generations. 'Joy Guru' (Victory to Guru).

Bosheche Kenduli Sasan e, Likh len grontho Geet Govindo namey ||
Dehi podo likhi kemoney ||
Jogot guru hon jono boli ||
Joy joy joy Jaydev ||

He scripts the epic 'Geeta Govinda'.

He wrote about bodily existence.
He became the Guru of the world.
Hail, Hail Jaydev.

Bhagat Jaydev was a 13th century saint from this village. He was born in a Brahmin upper caste family. Spiritually inclined, he and his wife Padmavati set a precedent of marital fellowship. Together, they challenged injustice by condemning the tradition of 'Sati', an inhuman practice where a woman self-immolated in her husband's pyre.

Benimadho Adhikari: Bhagat Jaydev's verses were collated by Guru Nanak. Believers of Sikh faith also follow Bhagat Jaydev. This is the birthplace of Bhagat Jaydev.

keval raam naam manorama(n) ||
badh a(n)mirat tat mia(n) ||
(Bhagat Jaydev – 'Guru Granth Sahib')

Only self-reflection offers peace to the mind.
Nectar of Oneness is the essence of reality.
(Bhagat Jaydev – 'Guru Granth Sahib')

Bhagat Jaydev was renowned for his lyrical poem 'Geeta Govinda' which recounts the story of Krishna's love, faithfulness, dedication and subsequent return to his beloved Radha. Symbolically, it represents the human soul straying from its true allegiance, the Creator, eventually returning and merging with it.

Guru Nanak and Bhagat Jaydev never met, but their philosophies of Oneness and women's empowerment were aligned. Bhagat Jaydev's verses are enshrined in the 'Guru Granth Sahib', the Sikh scripture.

aradh kau aradhiaa saradh kau saradhiaa salal kau salal sa(n)maan aaiaa ||
badhat jaidheau jaidhev kau ra(n)miaa braham nirabaan liv leen paiaa ||
(Raag Maru, Bhagat Jaydev)

Worship One, which is worthy of being worshipped. Trust One, which is worthy of being trusted.

Like water merges with water, merge with the true inner self.
Says Jaydev, I have merged with the One who is always praiseworthy, the vice-less
Supreme cosmic energy.
(Raag Maru, Bhagat Jaydev)

Bhagat Jaydev motivates us to be in harmony with the One which resides, within and outside.

The 'Paal' community in this region of Bengal are known for making clay idols of deities. In travelling through Joydev Kenduli, we came across many headless idols in the making. I wonder if these headless figurines are conveying a deeper import of Guru Nanak's message that the ego needs to be severed to seed divinity?

masatak kaaT dharee tis aagai tan man aagai dheau ||
naanak sa(n)t milai sach paieeai sahaj bhai jas leau ||
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

I surrender my ego-filled head to you and offer my body and mind.
Says Nanak, in the company of saints, Truth is obtained. With equipoise grace is
attained.
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

Discussion Pointers

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels **Episode 11: Aham Tvam (I am You)**

This discussion outline of the episode invites you to delve into Guru Nanak's transformative journeys through northeastern India and Bengal. By exploring his travels' rich context and philosophical dimensions, we uncover how Guru Nanak transcended cultural boundaries and connected with diverse communities, sharing his powerful message of Oneness across different landscapes. His meaningful interactions with Indigenous peoples and spiritual figures from various traditions highlight the unwavering implementation of his core principles. The enduring impact of these travels is evident in the continued presence of communities influenced by his philosophy, the preservation of commemorative sites, and the ongoing efforts to share his wisdom through renditions and translations of his verses. The lasting influence of these journeys is evident through the vibrant communities that adhere to principles inspired by his philosophy, the preservation of significant sites, and ongoing efforts to spread his wisdom through music, translation, and cultural expression. Engaging with these discussion points allows us to recognize that Guru Nanak's travels were not merely physical movements but profound spiritual and cultural exchanges. These exchanges continue to resonate with contemporary audiences seeking to understand his timeless message of universal harmony, the importance of detachment from worldly attachments, and the recognition of the divine essence present in all beings.

Historical Discussion Pointers:

1. What valuable insights can we uncover about Guru Nanak's journey through the northeastern regions, as outlined in the episode?

It mentions that from Guwahati, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana journeyed along the Brahmaputra River to Golaghat in the Dhansiri Valley. Subsequently, they traversed the Jaintia Hills, continuing to Sylhet and Kolkata. How does understanding this geographical journey of his interactions with diverse communities and spiritual traditions reveal deeper connections and mutual influences among different cultures?

2. How did the regional power structures and belief systems in 15th century Assam shape Guru Nanak's experiences?

The episode mentions that in the 15th century, the 'Assa' region, which is now a part of the present-day state of Assam, was ruled by Ahom Kings. They were worshippers of 'Shakti', the feminine life force." What challenges and opportunities might this cultural context have presented to Guru Nanak's vision of spreading Oneness?

3. What characterized Guru Nanak's interactions with the Naga tribes in the Dhansiri valley?

According to the episode, socially territorial, the 'Nagas' looked upon any outsider as an intruder, a potential threat to their safety. Dr. Daljeet Singh Sethi further explains, "Through a spiritual dialogue, Guru Nanak was able to mitigate confrontation with the 'Nagas'. He explained and assured them that his motive to visit the valley was purely to interact with the natives." How does this encounter demonstrate Guru Nanak's approach to overcoming cultural barriers?

4. What historical importance can be attached to the meeting between Guru Nanak and Sheikh Farid in the Assa region?

According to the 'Vilayatwali Janamsakhi,' this encounter highlights a significant moment when Guru Nanak met Shah Jalal, the spiritual successor of Sheikh Farid, emphasizing the rich spiritual legacy and interconnectedness of these influential figures. How does this interaction illustrate the interfaith dimensions of Guru Nanak's journeys?

5. How has Guru Nanak's historical presence shaped local communities throughout the centuries?

In Nagaon, there exists a small but significant community of around 4,000 Sikhs of Assamese origin. They proudly trace their lineage back to the soldiers of Maharajah Ranjit Singh's army, who first came to Assam in the early 1800s. This rich heritage highlights how, over time, people of Assamese descent have not only embraced Guru Nanak's philosophy but also integrated them into their cultural identity. What insights does this provide to consider the lasting influence of his journeys, extending far beyond their immediate historical context?

Philosophical Discussion Pointers:

1. How does the concept of "Aham Tvam" (I am You) encapsulate the essence of Guru Nanak's monistic philosophy?

The episode begins with "'Aham Tvam', 'I am You', presents the unwavering spirit of the ingenious monistic, who saw no stranger." How does this fundamental principle form the foundation for his interactions with diverse communities across northeastern India and Bengal?

2. What insights does Guru Nanak offer about the relationship between attachment, detachment, and experiencing bliss?

Guru Nanak says that attachment to anything for a specific reason creates misery. To experience bliss, he recommends, detachment from reasons which give happiness or sorrow. How does this teaching apply to contemporary human experiences?

3. How does Guru Nanak frame the spiritual struggle against internal vices?

The episode references the "five wrestlers - Lust, Anger, Greed, Attachment and Ego" and quotes Guru Nanak's verse that there are five vices, but he is one mortal. How can he protect his heart and home? Daily, they beat and plunder him. Before whom should he complain? What practices or mindset does Guru Nanak suggest for addressing these challenges?

4. What commonalities exist between Guru Nanak's spiritual messages and those of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva?

The episode observes that Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva was a 15th-century exponent of the Bhakti movement and a contemporary of Guru Nanak. Both paved the path of Monism by advocating non-duality, denouncing the hierarchical caste system and propagating selfless service. How do these parallels reflect broader philosophical and social currents in 15th-century India?

5. How did Guru Nanak's philosophy transcend religious distinctions while engaging with diverse philosophical traditions?

The caretaker of Shah Jalal's shrine in Sylhet mentions that Prophet Mohammad says whatever exists in this universe is created by the Divine. It is the same as what we derive from the teachings of Guru Nanak. How does this perspective illuminate Guru Nanak's approach to interfaith dialogue?