

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 12: Shrishti (Cosmos)

'Shrishti', 'Universe', presents celestial experiences of the fervent naturalist at the seashore of 'Kalinga Sagar' in 'Utkal'. In awe of the Creator's creation, Guru Nanak composes the cosmic anthem.

jit boliaai pat paieeai so boliaa paravaan ||
fikaa bol viguchanaa sun moorakh man ajaan ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Those words, when spoken, bring honour to self and others are acceptable.
Uttering debilitating words causes grief. Listen, O foolish, ignorant mind.
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Words have tremendous power to develop an inner alchemy whereby negativity is transmuted into positivity. Nothing is more stimulating than healing words. Conversely, nothing is more damaging than discouraging speech. Guru Nanak says, if this law of word is disregarded it only gives grief to self and others.

From Kolkata, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Cuttack and Puri. Travelling on the Old Jagannath Road, they first visited Cuttack, the former capital of Orissa State.

During our travel to Cuttack, we get an opportunity to interact with many natives of Orissa who are inspired by Guru Nanak's teachings.

We first meet Mr. Sanjiv Chandra Hota, a retired bureaucrat from the Indian Administrative Services who has incorporated the 'Jap' verse of Guru Nanak in his daily prayers.

Sanjiv Chandra Hota: May I be pardoned of saying that I belong to the so called highest cast 'Brahmin'. I had a special inquisitive mind to know more about Guru Nanak Dev. One of my Sikh friends had been kind enough to give me the smaller version of 'Sri Guru Granth Sahib', which I have kept at my home. I start my 'pooja' (prayer) every day by reciting the 'Mool-Mantra' (verse by Guru Nanak). Three things which endeared me about the teaching of Guru Nanak Dev Ji - a Creator, a 'Shrishta', and from that Omnipotent force, all other things flow. Universal brotherhood, a path of good deeds. To me, these three great teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji have endeared me and have put me on his path all along.

Proceeding towards Cuttack, we make a stop at Biranchipur to meet Bhaskar Chandar Sahu, the village leader.

In early 1900s, residents of this village were deeply influenced by a Sikh Administrative officer of the British India Government posted in this region. Since then, as a routine, before starting their daily work, the villagers recite Guru Nanak's verse, 'Jap Ji', at the village temple, which they address as gurdwara.

Bhaskar Chandar Sahu:

One Omnipresent. The Truth. Personified in creation. Fearless. Bereft of discrimination. Eternal form. Beyond birth. Self-existent. Realized through the grace of guidance. True in the primal beginning. True throughout the ages. True here and now. O Nanak, forever and ever true. Greatness to the Guru. Greatness to the Guru. Greatness to the Guru. First, remember the Consciousness as the destroyer of evil; after that remember Guru Nanak, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amardas, Guru Ramdas.

Out of respect for the Sikh officer who had introduced them to Guru Nanak, the villagers have kept his 'Kara', the iron bracelet and his personal 'pothi', the booklet, in which a few verses from the 'Guru Granth Sahib', the Sikh scripture, are handwritten in old 'Gurmukhi' style. Unable to read 'Gurmukhi' but deeply desirous of understanding the meanings of Guru Nanak's verses, the villagers purchased a set of two volumes of 'Guru Granth Sahib' printed in Hindi.

Narayan Panigrahi: People liked 'Thakur' (Guru) Nanak. He travelled village to village, 500 years ago. He became the heart and soul of the people. We worship 'Granth' ('Guru Granth Sahib').

Amardeep Singh: Guru Nanak continues to live in the hearts of the Nanakpanthi Oriya families in the village of Biranchipur. Their way of life is inspired by Guru Nanak's philosophy.

Continuing to travel towards Cuttack, we make another stop at Bhadrak village.

Amardeep Singh: Guru Nanak's travels had an impact on people of diverse cultures. In this small village in Orissa they still enact a play in which Guru Nanak expounds on the universal values of Oneness.

Ram Prasad Mahanti:

Always remain in a state of delight.
This body is made of dust.
Remember this in every breath.
Who knows when the breath will depart.
It does not have a permanent place.

My name is Ram Prasad Mahanti. My age is 85 years. I am of Oriya descent. In the 'Mughal' play I would perform a role. 'Mughal' play was written during the Mughal period. In the play, there is also the role of Nanak Sahib. I will share an excerpt with you.

Do not divide Ram (Hindu belief) and Rehman (Islamic belief).
Keep your heart pure.
Saying yes, keep embracing everyone.
Look at humanity.

Guru Nanak says, see all the ways of life as One. This is the essence of his teaching. Even in present times, we perform the 'Mughal' play. In it the role of Nanak Ji is also enacted.

papai paatisaahu paramesar vekhan kau parapa(n)ch keeaa ||
dhekhai boojhai sabh kichh jaanai a(n)tar baahar rav rahiaa ||
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

The Sovereign cosmic energy has created the universe to experience itself through it's creation.
It watches, understands and knows everything. It resides everywhere, within and outside.
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak sees the world as a stage created by the Creator, who experiences through the senses of the existential form of its creation. It implies that the Divine resides within us and we reside within the Divine; essentially we are One.

From Bhadrak, we now travel to Cuttack to visit Gurdwara Datan Sahib. In the memory of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana's stay at Cuttack, this site was built on the banks of Mahanadi River.

During the time of Guru Nanak's visit, Cuttack was the capital of the region of Orissa.

Amardeep Singh: On the old Jagannath pilgrimage route, Cuttack is a city between the Kathajori and the Mahanadi Rivers. Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana taking this route, reached Cuttack where they had dialogues with the King and the common people.

Prataprudradev, the then ruling King of Orissa, was a humble man of religious inclination. He was a Vaishnavite. On learning about the arrival of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana, he personally came to meet them. Being a spiritual seeker, the King asked Guru Nanak, how can one discern an image of the Creator as its creation is made up of polarities. To convey his perspectives, Guru Nanak cited examples from nature and sang,

Eko saravar kamal anoop ||

Sadhaa bigaasai paramal roop ||
Uoojal motee choogeh ha(n)s ||
Sarab kalaa jagadheesai a(n)s ||
Jo dheesai so aupajai binasai ||
Bin jal saravar kamal na dheesai ||
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

In the pond, there is one incomparable lotus.
It forever blossoms in pure form.
The swans pick the brightest jewels.
In every aspect of creation, there is essence of the all-pervading cosmic energy.
Whatever is seen is subject to evolution and destruction.
Without the water in the pool, even the lotus cannot survive.
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

The entire creation is a constituent of the Creator which has both negatives and positives as integral components. Guru Nanak says, it is through the attributes of creation that the Creator can be perceived. The negative aspects are reminders to imbibe positive attributes.

Located at a short distance from the Gurdwara Datan Sahib we visit the site where a 'Sahada' tree on the banks of the Mahanadi River is revered. As per oral narrative, a devotee named Chetan had offered a teeth cleaning 'Sahada' twig to Guru Nanak, who planted a part of it which then grew into a tree. This narrative however does not find mention in the oldest 'Janamsakhis'. When the old tree perished in the 1930s, a new one was planted at the same site, which is what we see today.

Witnessing people worship this tree as an object of reverence, I reflect on how the human mind gets entrapped in transitional physical forms, even though Guru Nanak's philosophy advocates respect for every aspect of creation.

nit nit jeeaRe samaaleean dhekhaigaa dhevanahaar ||
tere dhaanai keemat naa pavai tis dhaate kavan sumaar ||
(Gauri Purabi Deepki, Guru Nanak)

Day after day, the Omnipresent sustaining energy cares for its creation. It watches over one and all.

Its generosity is priceless. How can the bestower's benevolence be assessed?
(Gauri Purabi Deepki, Guru Nanak)

From Cuttack, taking the Old Jagannath Road along the Bay of Bengal, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana proceeded towards Puri.

A Pandit named Kalyug, who having heard about Guru Nanak's positive impact on the king, felt threatened about losing his position of influence. He met Guru Nanak on the outskirts of the Puri city.

He challenged Guru Nanak with his knowledge of logic and 'Tantra', the esoteric magical practices. In a humble, yet profound way Guru Nanak responded,

sidh hovaa sidh laiee ridh aakhaa aau ||
gupat paragaT hoi baisaa lok raakhai bhaau ||
mat dhekh bhooolaa veesarai teraa chit na aavai naau ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

If I possessed supernatural powers to work miracles and create wealth.
If I could become invisible and visible at will. If people held me in awe.
In having such powers, I might go astray, and forget self-reflection.
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

True wisdom is in humility. A tree laden with fruit, bends to offer its produce. Likewise, having acquired knowledge, affluence and power, one should offer gratitude by shedding ego, fear and jealousy.

After a meaningful dialogue with Pandit Kaliyug, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled along the coast to visit Puri, a city dedicated to Jagannath, a representation of Lord Vishnu.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Cuttack to Puri.

At Puri, we visit Mr. Anil Dhir, an Independent Researcher, who has done much explorations in the State of Orissa.

Anil Dhir: Orissa with the Jagannath's Temple, one of the proclaimed 'Dhams' (religious site), way back centuries earlier, it had always drawn not only pilgrims but many seers, many holy men. Guru Nanak Dev visited Orissa and subsequently, there was a stream of pilgrims from the North and later on the 'Nanakpanthis' (believers of Guru Nanak) and the 'Udasis' (ascetics) were there. In my opinion, Nanak Ji didn't set on the 'Udasis' (odysseys) as a preacher. He was a seeker too.

We now visit the iconic Jagannath Temple.

Amardeep Singh: Jagannath Temple is an important Hindu pilgrimage site, dedicated to Lord Jagannath, an avatar of Lord Vishnu.

'Jagan' means universe and 'Nath' means the Creator. Following the past aboriginal system of worshipping nature, the idol of Jagannath continues to be only made in wood.

This tradition was intended to respect nature as the Supreme Power. As per local belief, Jagannath is an unstoppable master of the universe. Interestingly, the English word 'Juggernaut', meaning a powerful, overwhelming force, shares its origins from the attributes of Jagannath.

Amardeep Singh: Witnessing the 'Aarti' being performed at the Jagannath Temple, Guru Nanak composed a hymn, stressing on the importance of respecting nature over mere ritualistic practices.

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 the offering to the illuminating Omnipresent energy.
(Raag Dhanasri, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says since the Omnipresent is manifested within every aspect of nature, how can it's greatness be venerated by worshipping only a few forms of its expansive creation.

A few sites in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit to Puri were set up in close proximity to the Jagannath Temple by the 'Udasin' (ascetic) tradition.

The most prominent of these is the 'Mangu Muth'. We now visit the 'Mangu Muth'.

Amardeep Singh: Mangu Muth in the foreground of Jagannath Temple was built in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit to Puri.

As per 'Mahan Kosh' by Kahan Singh Nabha, the 'Mangu Muth' was established by Bawa Mangu to spread the philosophy of Guru Nanak. He was a member of the community of Balu Hassna Udasin, who lived from 1564 to 1660 AD. The 'Guru Granth Sahib', the Sikh scripture, is said to have been enshrined at the 'Mangu Muth' till mid 1900s.

At a short distance from the Jagannath Temple, we visit the 'Baoli Muth', which was set up as a centre of learning by the 'Udasins' (ascetics) of 'Panchayati Akhara'.

saach naam gur sabadh veechaar ||
guramukh saache saachai dharabaar ||

sachaa araj sachee aradhaas ||
(Guru Nanak)

With clear reflections, contemplate on words of wisdom.
The spiritually oriented are honest in the true court.
If supplication is true then there is truth in seeking.
(Guru Nanak)

The site goes by the name of 'Baoli', referring to a step well on its premises. At this site, the 'Guru Granth Sahib', the Sikh scripture is enshrined in a room adjacent to the one where the idol of Lord Jagannath is enshrined.

Satya Narayan Das: My name is Mahant Satya Narayan Das Ji. This 'Baoli Muth' is associated with the 'Udasin' (ascetic) tradition. I am residing here since the year 1960. Guru Nanak Dev Ji came here (Jagannath Puri). He came here to teach the path of righteousness. To share spiritual messages. We have kept the Guru ('Guru Granth Sahib'). We read it in the Hindi translation.

dhotee Tikaa naam samaal ||
aaithai othai nibahee naal ||
vin naavai hor karam n bhaal ||
poojaa prem maiaa parajaal ||
eko vekhahu avar na bhaal ||
(Guru Nanak)

Make contemplation as loin-cloth and ceremonial mark on forehead.
Here and hereafter, it will stand by you.
Do not seek any other actions except spiritual wisdom.
Worship with love and burn worldly desires.
Behold only this truth and seek no other.
(Guru Nanak)

Opposite the West gate of the Jagannath Temple, the 'Punjabi Muth', earlier named as 'Nanak Muth', was also set up by the 'Udasin' (ascetics) community.

To commemorate Guru Nanak's visit to Puri, in the year 2009, the Sikh community constructed 'Gurdwara Shri Aarti Sahib'.

While Guru Nanak was at Puri, Raja Prataprudradev travelled from Cuttack to meet him. The king inquired as to how self-realisation could be attained.

nidh sidh niramal naam beechaar ||
pooran poor rahiaa bikh maar ||
tirakuTee chhooTee bimal majhaar ||

gur kee mat jeei aaiee kaar ||
(Raag Gauri Guareri, Guru Nanak)

The nine treasures and miraculous powers are sanctified only through honest contemplation.

The all-pervading bountiful Consciousness annihilates worldly entanglements. Trinity of mind, Rajo (Activity), Tamo(Inertia), Sato(Purity), gets freedom by being immaculate within.

Spiritual wisdom gives insights that benefit the inner-self.
(Raag Gauri Guareri, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak mentioned that the treasure of self-realisation is hidden in the purity of thoughts. It can be attained through diligent contemplation and acceptance of unison in creation.

Anil Dhir: Imagine 530 years ago, coming to unchartered lands. He did not know the language. But he was still making such a big impact. An impact which not only had permanency, which was carried on. You cannot say he was for the Sikh faith. He influenced a lot of other faiths also. His universality was gladly accepted by many more 'Sampradays' (Spiritual Traditions). Hindu 'Sampradays' (faith), by the Muslims, by the Sufis.

I often find it easy to point fingers at others versus pondering over my own actions. Why is it that I can't learn from Guru Nanak's message that only when the veil of self-image, an aspect of ego, is removed, then the doors of realization start opening.

haumai boojhai taa dhar soojhai ||
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

When the perils of ego are comprehended, then the abode of contemplation is understood.

(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Discussion Pointers

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The discussion framework provides a powerful method to examine Guru Nanak's transformative journey through Orissa and the profound philosophical dimensions of his messages highlighted in the episode. By immersing ourselves in the historical context of his travels and the essence of his messages, we can appreciate his significant influence on diverse communities throughout eastern India. This analysis invites us to engage thoughtfully with crucial aspects of Guru Nanak's belief that the Creator experiences itself through creation, the importance of devotion over mere ritual, the pitfalls of ego, and the life-changing potential that comes from deep contemplation. The preservation of his legacy, evident in dedicated physical sites, emphasizes the timeless importance of his message of Oneness. Guru Nanak's philosophy has transcended religious and social barriers, resonating with individuals from all walks of life. This framework encourages us to reflect on how Guru Nanak's commitment to universality and reverence for nature reveals essential spiritual insights that bridge sectarian divides, engaging with our shared human experiences of divine connection, ethical living, and harmonious coexistence.

Historical Discussion Pointers:

1. What was the significance of Guru Nanak's travels through Cuttack and Puri in the larger context of his journeys?

Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled from Kolkata to Cuttack and Puri along the historic Jagannath pilgrimage route, which holds great significance. This journey is especially noteworthy because, during Guru Nanak's visit, Cuttack was the capital of the Orissa region, an area of considerable political, religious, and cultural importance. How might the established pilgrimage route have facilitated Guru Nanak's interactions with diverse spiritual seekers, and what significance might this hold for understanding the spread of his messages through existing networks of religious exchange?

2. How have local communities in Orissa preserved and integrated Guru Nanak's messages into their cultural practices over centuries?

The episode highlights several remarkable examples of lasting influence. One such example is the village of Biranchipur, where a Sikh administrative officer significantly impacted the residents in the early 1900s. As a tradition, the villagers now recite Guru Nanak's verse, the 'Jap Ji', at the village temple, which they call a gurdwara, before starting their daily work. Similarly, in Bhadrak village, residents continue to perform a play in which Guru Nanak discusses the universal values of Oneness. How do these cultural practices demonstrate the adaptability of Guru Nanak's insights to local contexts while maintaining their essential philosophical core?

3. What does the interaction between Guru Nanak and King Prataprudradev reveal about the relationship between spiritual message and political authority?

The episode portrays King Prataprudradev as a humble man with a deep religious inclination. He personally travelled to meet Guru Nanak and asked philosophical questions about how to discern the Creator's image within the polarities of creation. Later, the king journeyed from Cuttack to Puri to meet Guru Nanak again, seeking guidance on how to attain self-realisation. This repeated quest for knowledge suggests a strong relationship between the king and spiritual authority. How might Guru Nanak's influence on political leaders have affected broader social attitudes toward his messages?

4. How do the various memorial sites established after Guru Nanak's visit reflect different interpretations of his legacy?

The episode mentions several sites established in memory of Guru Nanak's visit to Puri, including Mangu Muth, Baoli Muth, Punjabi Muth (formerly Nanak Muth), and the more recently constructed Gurdwara Shri Aarti Sahib (2009). It notes that the Udasin (ascetic) tradition played a key role in establishing many of these sites. How do the various commemorative spaces, established at different times and by diverse groups, reflect the evolving interpretations of the significance of Guru Nanak's messages? What might the continued establishment of such sites indicate about the ongoing relevance of his philosophy?

5. What challenges did Guru Nanak face during his journey through Orissa, and how did he respond to them?

The episode mentions a confrontation with a Pandit named Kalyug, who, having heard about Guru Nanak's positive impact on the king, felt threatened about losing his position of influence. This pandit challenged Guru Nanak with his knowledge of logic and 'Tantra', the esoteric magical practices. How does Guru Nanak's humble response to this challenge reveal his approach to dealing with opposition? What does this interaction suggest about the resistance his messages may have faced from established religious authorities?

Philosophical Discussion Pointers:

1. How does Guru Nanak's concept of the Creator experiencing itself through creation reshape traditional understandings of divine-human relationships?

In the episode, this profound concept, rendered in Raag Asa, expresses that the Sovereign cosmic energy has created the universe to experience itself through its creation. This energy observes, understands, and knows everything. It resides everywhere, both within and outside of us. The text further explains that Guru Nanak perceives the world as a stage created by the Creator, who experiences the existential form of its creation through the senses. This perspective essentially implies that we are one. How does this perspective transform conventional understandings of divinity

as separate from humanity? In what ways might this view influence spiritual practices and ethical considerations?

2. What is the significance of Guru Nanak's critique of ritualism at Jagannath?

The episode describes how Guru Nanak, witnessing the 'Aarti' performed at the Jagannath Temple, composed a hymn emphasizing respecting nature over mere ritualistic practices. In this verse, set to Raag Dhanasri, he reimagines worship by expressing devotion to natural elements. Describes the sky as the platter on which the sun and moon are lamps, while the stars and constellations are precious pearls. He concludes by stating that the Omnipresent is manifested in every aspect of nature, raising the question: how can one venerate its greatness by worshipping only a few forms of its vast creation? How does this critique reflect Guru Nanak's broader perspective on authentic spirituality versus external religious observances?

3. How does Guru Nanak address the relationship between supernatural powers and spiritual development?

When challenged by Pandit Kalyug, Guru Nanak replied by clarifying that if he had supernatural powers to perform miracles and create wealth, or if he could become invisible and visible at will to gain people's awe, he might lose his way and forget the importance of self-reflection. This episode illustrates that true wisdom lies in humility. A tree that is full of fruit bends down to share its bounty. Similarly, after acquiring knowledge, wealth, and power, one should express gratitude by letting go of ego, fear, and jealousy. How does this perspective challenge common assumptions about spiritual advancement and supernatural abilities? What implications might this have for understanding authentic spiritual development?

4. What role does contemplation play in Guru Nanak's framework for spiritual realization?

Throughout this enlightening episode, contemplation is a pivotal theme in Guru Nanak's messages. He emphasizes the importance of making contemplation as integral as a loincloth and a ceremonial mark on the forehead; it will serve you well in life's journey. When responding to King Prataprudradev's inquiry about self-realization, Guru Nanak reveals that the nine treasures and miraculous powers are sanctified only through sincere contemplation. He passionately asserts that the true treasure of self-realization lies in the purity of one's thoughts. This treasure can be attained through dedicated contemplation and by accepting the inherent unity within creation. How does contemplation not only act as a method but also embody the ultimate goal in Guru Nanak's spiritual framework?

5. How does Guru Nanak's message on the power of words reflect his understanding of spiritual transformation?

The episode begins with a verse by Guru Nanak, rendered in Sri Raag, emphasizing that words can bring honor to oneself and others when spoken appropriately. In contrast, using hurtful words leads to grief. It urges the listener to pay attention. The

verse highlights the tremendous power of words in fostering an inner transformation where negativity can be transformed into positivity. Healing words can be incredibly uplifting, whereas discouraging speech can be deeply damaging. How does this emphasis on speech reflect Guru Nanak's holistic approach to spiritual transformation? What connection might exist between mindful speech and other aspects of his insights, such as ego transcendence and contemplation?