

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 13: Villipunarvn (Call for Awareness)

'Villipunarvn', 'Call for Awareness', presents the timeless cognizance of Guru Nanak, the selfless nurturer who transmitted an everlasting panacea for universal well-being in the land of 'Panch Bhoota Sthalam'.

sat sa(n)tokhee satigur pooraa ||
gur kaa sabadh mane so sooraa ||
saachee dharageh saach nivaasaa maanai hukam rajaiee he ||
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

The truly contented is a complete mentor that guides from darkness to light.
Those who contemplate on such mentor's spiritual words are heroes.
True wisdom is obtained by those who in honesty, abide by the law of nature and are content.
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

A warrior strategizes to outwit the enemy. However, a true warrior is the one who outplays fear and wins contentment and truth.

Having spent some time at Puri, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled southwards to Ganjam, Guntur, Kanchipuram, Tiruvannamalai, Tiruchirappalli and reached the seaport of Nagapattinam. From Puri, they first travelled south to Ganjam.

Following Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Puri to Ganjam.

Some accounts state that after their stay at Puri, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled back to Nankana Sahib in Punjab. However, according to the 'Janamsakhis' of Meherban and Bhai Mani Singh, from Puri they travelled further south. Following Dr. Kirpal Singh's assessment of the 'Janamsakhi' traditions, we travel southwards from Puri to Ganjam.

At Ganjam, on the bank of the River Rushikulya, we visit the ancient religious site located on top of Kumari Hill.

Amardeep Singh: Ganjam hosts the Taratarini 'Shakti Peeth', a shrine significant to the 'Shaktism', a tradition in which the feminine energy is considered Supreme.

'Shakti' means strength. It represents the sensitive, yet dynamic female force which has attributes to selflessly nurture. Without empathy, there is no evolution for the betterment of society. According to 'Shaivism', Sati sacrificed her life to evoke the sense of empathy of her husband, Shiva. In realization of his past indifference, Shiva thereafter carries Sati's dead body for days. In order to help Shiva move forward in his reawakened form, Lord

Vishnu severs the body of dead Sati, which fell at 51 sites across the Indian subcontinent. At each of these sites are established sacred 'Shakti Peeths' to worship the feminine energy form. The Ganjam shrine is established as 'Sthan Peeth', the place where Sati's right breast fell.

gaavan tudhano chit gupat likh jaanan likh likh dharam beechaare ||
gaavan tudhano ieesar brahamaa dhevee sohan tere sadhaa savaare ||
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Praises for the Omnipresent are sung by Shiva , Brahma and the Goddess; as they are gracefully blossomed by it.

Praises for the Omnipresent are sung by Indra while seated on his throne together with the Goddesses, who are also singing.
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

'Dev' is a Sanskrit word which can be translated as a term used for exalted beings, 'Devta' being masculine and 'Devi' feminine. Guru Nanak says, the entire creation including the celestial energies are a manifestation of the single omnipresent Creator, who is beyond the realms of discrimination between male and female forms.

From Ganjam, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled further south to the city of Guntur in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

Trailing in Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Ganjam to Guntur.

The word 'Guntur' in Telugu language means a water pond. Guntur was famous for many water ponds. At Guntur, savouring the scenic beauty of a water pond and life forms thriving in it, Guru Nanak sang,

dhaadhar too kabeh na jaanas re ||
bhakhas sibaal basas niramal jal a(n)mrit na lakhas re ||
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

O Frog, you never comprehend.
Even while residing in pure waters, you only eat muck and do not value the ambrosial nectar.
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

A lotus and a frog reside in the same water pond. While the flower remains untouched by impurities, the frog consumes dirt. Immersed in worldly desires, we too remain unaware of divinity. Akin to an ignorant frog, we are unable to benefit from the positives in our surroundings.

We now visit the 'Bara Udasin Muth' which was established in the memory of Guru Nanak in the early 19th century by Chandu Lal, a Minister in the 'Nizam's' state of Hyderabad. He made significant contributions to spread the message of Guru Nanak across South India by establishing 'Muths' (centres of learning) in places like Guntur, Hyderabad, Kanchipuram, Rameshwaram, Tiruchirappalli and Tiruvannamalai.

Amardeep Singh: The 'Bara Udasin Muth' was established in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit to the region of Guntur.

'Udasin Muths' (centres of learning managed by ascetics) like these once played a significant role in spreading the message of Guru Nanak in South India. However, after the early socio-political events of the 20th century, these traditions have drifted apart. In present times, tangible links associated with Guru Nanak have diminished at these centres.

Hanuman Das: The one who is beyond attachment with worldly affairs is a praiseworthy 'Udasin' (ascetic). In the age of darkness, we consider Guru Nanak as a form of Divine. This 'Udasin Muth' was established in the year 1743 AD. Saints from Punjab would visit here. Earlier, I could read 'Gurmukhi' (script). Oh, I even know the 'Mool Mantar'. It was given as a Divine word.

ikOankaar sat gur prasaadh ||
aadh sach jugaadh sach ||
hai bhee sach naanak hosee bhee sach ||
(Guru Nanak)

One Omnipresent. Realized through the grace of guidance.
Eternal form. Beyond birth. Self-existent. True from time immemorial, continues to be
True, Nanak says, will continue to be True.
(Guru Nanak)

I also know this. Do you understand what I am pointing at? We also know this. It is this divine message which is imparted by our 'Udasin' (ascetic) spiritual teachers. This is the language of the saints. In the past, teachings of Guru Nanak were taught in the 'Udasin' (ascetic) community. Not anymore. Now we people don't even remember Guru Nanak's verses!

Hearing a senior member of this commune recite verses of Guru Nanak is a testimony to the past affinity.

aadh sach jugaadh sach ||
hai bhee sach naanak hosee bhee sach ||
(Guru Nanak)

Existence was the Truth in the primal beginning and through the ages.
Existence is the Truth, here and now. Nanak says, it will be true forever.
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, spiritual philosophies are universal for the benefit of one and all.

From Guntur, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana continued their journey southwards and reached Kanchipuram.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Guntur to Kanchipuram.

Amardeep Singh: Kanchipuram is an ancient pilgrimage centre of south India. During the times of Guru Nanak's travels, this was a religious centre for Buddhists, Jains and Brahmins.

The Sanskrit term 'Sapta Puri' refers to seven holy sites in Hinduism. Hindus believe that liberation can be attained by making pilgrimage to all the seven sites, located at Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Varanasi, Kanchipuram, Ujjain and Dwarka.

As these sites attracted large congregations, hence Guru Nanak visited them to interact with pilgrims.

Historically, Kanchipuram was known as 'Ghatikasthanam', a centre for various religious studies.

Kanchipuram is a holy city for 'Shaivites', the followers of Shiva and 'Vaishnavites', the followers of Vishnu. In Kanchipuram, we visit the Ekambaranathar Temple which is a symbolic representation of the earth element. Ekambaranathar Temple is one of the five 'Panch Bhoot Sthal' (five element) temples in South India which are dedicated to Shiva. Each of these temples symbolize one of the five elements of the cosmos, comprising of earth, water, fire, air and the impalpable ether.

uoo(n)dhau khapar pa(n)ch bhoo Topee ||
kaa(n)jiaa kaRaasan man jaagoTee ||
sat sa(n)tokh sa(n)jam hai naal ||
naanak gurmukh naam samaal ||
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

Turn dogmatic thinking upside-down be your begging bowl. Let lessons of five elements
be your cap.

Let the body be your meditation mat and the mind your loincloth.
Let honesty, contentment and self-discipline be your companions.
Nanak says, the spiritually oriented delve on self-reflection.
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says that within the human body is a temple made of five elements, within which resides the infinite. So why seek the experience outside? Hence, in my humble understanding, respecting the human body is akin to revering the Divine.

We now visit 'Udasin Bava Ji Muth' in Kanchipuram city centre.

In the memory of Guru Nanak, this 'Udasin Muth' was established in the 19th century by Chandu Lal, a Minister in the 'Nizam's' state of Hyderabad.

Amardeep Singh: The 'Udasin' (ascetic) tradition played a very important role in spreading the philosophy of Guru Nanak to the distant lands. This 'Udasin Muth' in Kanchipuram when I had visited in the year 1994 there was 'Mool Mantar' (Guru Nanak's verse) inscribed on this pillar.

During a previous visit to this site, I had the opportunity to meet with Mahant Basant Das, a 90 year old, 'Udasin' (ascetic) leader of this shrine. I have vivid memories of him reciting verses of Guru Nanak. It was a testimony of his reverence for Guru Nanak. Even though Mahant Basant Das was of Oriya origin, he had grown up in the company of 'Udasins' (ascetics) who would teach the philosophy of Guru Nanak.

Unfortunately, he passed away about six months before our current visit.

Shankar: My name is Shankar. I stay in this 'Udasin Muth' with 'Baba Ji' (Late Mahant Basant Das). He raised me from childhood.

Amardeep Singh: Since you stayed with him since childhood, so what did 'Baba Ji' (Late Mahant Basant Das) tell you about Guru Nanak?

Shankar: He would spread the message of Guru Nanak, read the 'Guru Granth Sahib' and explain to us the meaning of the verses.

Amardeep Singh: So he was from the Orissa State but could read and write 'Gurmukhi' script?

Shankar: Yes, he knew 'Gurmukhi' script. Thus, he would read and sing verses (from 'Guru Granth Sahib'). He would do everything to promote goodness. To visitors, he provided spiritual guidance. When mendicants would visit, he would mentor them, feed them, and provide donations when they departed. When Punjabis, Sikhs and people like you would visit, he would preach about Guru Nanak. He was a very good person.

Deeply saddened for not being able to interview Mahant Basant Das, I reflected that while the human body comprising of the five elements can perish, however, the light of knowledge emanating from it can last forever. Such situations make me wonder about the purpose of human life!

kaiaa mahal ma(n)dhar ghar har kaa tis meh raakhee jot apaar ||
naanak gurmukh mahal bulaieeaaai har mele melanahaar ||
(Raag Malar, Guru Nanak)

This body is the mansion, temple and home for self-awareness. In it, infinite divinity is enshrined.

Nanak says, the spiritually oriented call upon self-reflection to unite with the divinity that unites all.

(Raag Malar, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says that the purpose of human life is to learn from experiences and strive for alchemical transformations to unite the soul with its source.

At a very short distance, in the outskirts of Kanchipuram, we visit the historic Jain temple built by the Chola Kings.

Amardeep Singh: In the outskirts of Kanchipuram, in the village of Triparutikumram, Guru Nanak visited this Jain temple, which is also known as Jain Kanchi.

Here, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana were warmly welcomed by a Jain priest. During their interactions, the priest discussed the customs and philosophy of the Jain faith, and their fundamental belief in the practice of 'Ahmisa', non-violence. Over time, 'Ahmisa' (non-violence) had evolved into a rigid ritualistic adherence, leading to acts like plucking each strand of one's hair to not harm life forms that may grow on them and not purifying drinking water as it could kill organisms. The priest asked Guru Nanak why he had not bound himself to such practices. Guru Nanak sang,

sir khohai pe'eeh malavaanee jooThaa ma(n)g ma(n)g khaahee ||
fol fadheehat muh lain bhaRaasaa paanee dhekh sagaahee ||
bheddaa vaagee sir khohain bhareean hath suaahee ||
maauoo peeuroo kirat gavain Tabar rovan dhaahee ||
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

Plucking each strand of hair on the head, drinking unclean water, begging to eat even leftover food.

Disposing excretion by scattering, inhaling its stench, yet hesitating from clean water (in belief not to harm invisible organisms).

Without reflecting (like sheep) getting hair plucked; spiritually achieving nothing in return.

In renunciation, providing for parents is forgotten and the family cries in distress.

(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

Extreme austerities can become impediments on the path of self and social progression. Guru Nanak explained that spiritual depth lies in practical implementation of the core philosophy of a faith which entail, purity of thought, speech and action.

Guru Nanak promoted connectivity through diversity. One such practical implementation is that he included regional music styles for rendition of his verses. 'Ramkali Dakhni Onkar' is one of his compositions which is classified under the South Indian Musical system.

gagan aga(n)m anaath ajonee ||
asathir cheet samaadh sagonee ||
(Raag Ramkali Dakhni Onkar, Guru Nanak)

The cosmic energy is inaccessible, independent, and beyond birth.
Keeping the consciousness stable is the most worthy meditation.
(Raag Ramkali Dakhni Onkar, Guru Nanak)

Continuing their travel southwards from Kanchipuram, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana reached Tiruvannamalai.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel to Tiruvannamalai.

Amardeep Singh: This pilgrimage temple city, ensconced below Mount Arunachal in the foothills of the Annamalai hills, is famous for the Arunachaleswar Temple. Guru Nanak visited this city to interact with congregations of spiritualists.

As one of the South India's five 'elemental' cities dedicated to Shiva, Tiruvannamalai is associated with fire, which is worshiped as 'Arunachaleswar' at Arunachaleswar Temple. In Hindu mythology, Parvati, once playfully closed the eyes of her husband, Shiva, which led to earth being submerged in darkness. Metaphorically, this signifies inflicting agony to self and others due to ignorance. Thereafter, in remorse, Parvati performed penance at Tiruvannamalai. On top of Mount Arunachal, Shiva ignited a fire, which is a metaphor for the lifting of the darkness of ignorance through the light of awareness.

roveh kirapan sa(n)cheh dhan jai ||
pa(n)ddit roveh giaan gavai ||
baalee rovai naeh bhataar ||
naanak dhukheea sabh sa(n)saar ||
ma(n)ne naau soiee jin jai ||
aauree karam na lekhai lai ||
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

The misers weep when the accumulated wealth is of no use.

The priests weep when the acquired knowledge fails them.
The young weep, not having a spouse.
Nanak says, the entire world is suffering.
Those abiding by the law of nature are victorious.
No other action is of any account.
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says that the entire world suffers from various forms of ignorance, which can be eased through contemplation and not through physical penance.

Amardeep Singh: The 'Udasin' (ascetic) 'Mahants' (Priests) from Punjab who had taken the philosophy of Guru Nanak to distant lands had built a 'Udasin Muth' (centre of spiritual learning) in the city of Tiruvanmallai. This 'Muth' (centre of spiritual learning) does not exist here anymore.

In departing from Tiruvanmallai, I reflect on sweetness and bitterness which are paradoxes of life. Influenced by desires, these extremities create an imbalance of mind and body. When these percolate into the social fabric, they create a societal ailment which makes people at 'dis' 'ease' with one another. This is the disease that Guru Nanak warns us against.

miThaa kauRaa dhovai rog ||
(Raag Sarang, Guru Nanak)

Attachments to sweet and bitter experiences are both diseases.
(Raag Sarang, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana left Triuvannamalai and travelled further south to the city of Tiruchirappalli.

We now travel from Triuvannamalai to Tiruchirappalli.

At Tiruchirappalli, we visit the ancient Sri Rangam Temple dedicated to the 'Vaishnavite' tradition.

Amardeep Singh: Tiruchirappalli hosts the most revered Vishnu Temple which is nestled between the river Kaveri and Kollidam. To observe the 'Vaishnavite' traditions, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana spent some time in this place.

It is in this city that Ramanunja, the 11th century 'Vaishnavite' saint of the Bhakti movement, had spent the last years of his life.

An 'Udasin Muth' (Centre of learning managed by ascetics) was established in the memory of Guru Nanak at Tiruchirappalli in the early 19th century by Chandu Lal, a

Minister in the 'Nizam's' state of Hyderabad. However, in present times there are no traces of this shrine.

In travelling through South India, experiencing temples dedicated to various forms of the Divine, expressed in Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma, I am reminded of Guru Nanak's message that these forms emerge from one source and merge back in it.

su(n)nahu brahamaa bisan mahes upaae ||
su(n)ne varate jug sabaee ||
eis padh veechaare so jan pooraa tis mileeaaai bharam chukaidhaa ||
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

From the formless Omnipresent, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are created.
The formless Omnipresent has been pervasive through all ages.
Deliberating over the Omnipresence, individuals become perfect. Upon gaining this
wisdom, doubt is dispelled.
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

From Tiruchirapalli Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to the port town of Nagapattinam.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we now travel from Tiruchirapalli to Nagapattinam.

The word Nagapattinam is derived from 'Nagar', referring to settlers of Sri Lankan origin and 'Pattinam', meaning a coastal town. Nagapattinam is a port city in the state of Tamil Nadu at the mouth of River Kuduvayyar in the Bay of Bengal.

Amardeep Singh: Taking the sea route from the port city of Nagapattinam, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana embarked on their journey for Sri Lanka.

In the past, this was a popular trade route between India and Sri Lanka.

Guru Nanak's merchandise was unique. He equates himself to a merchant trading the message of contemplation and the unity of creation.

mai banajaan raam kee ||
teraa naam vakhar vaapaar jee ||
(Raag Gauri Bairagan, Guru Nanak)

I am a trader of the Omnipresent.
Contemplating upon its attributes is my merchandise and trade.
(Raag Gauri Bairagan, Guru Nanak)

Discussion Pointers

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 13: Villipunarvn (Call for Awareness)

The discussion points outlined in this episode provide an insightful framework for delving into Guru Nanak's transformative journey through South India and the profound philosophical insights he imparted along the way. By examining the historical context of his travels and the philosophical dimensions of his insights, we gain a deeper understanding of how his message transcended geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries. These questions prompt us to reflect on how Guru Nanak interacted with various religious traditions, offering critiques of superficial rituals while emphasizing the essential unity of spiritual truth. Preserving his legacy through Udasin Muths and other commemorative sites showcases the dynamic evolution of spiritual transmission over time, highlighting its relevance to contemporary society. Through these discussion points, we can appreciate Guru Nanak's emphasis on experiential spirituality, the sacredness of the human form, and the Creator's presence within all creation; inclusive vision remains a powerful influence across diverse religions. This framework encourages contemplation of how his messages on Oneness, recognition of divinity within nature and humanity provide enduring insights for respectfully navigating religious diversity with respect and understanding.

Historical Discussion Pointers:

1. What was the geographical and spiritual significance of Guru Nanak's journey through South India?

The episode traces Guru Nanak's extensive travels to the south, where he deliberately chose a route through major religious centres. After spending time in Puri, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled southwards to Ganjam, Guntur, Kanchipuram, Tiruvannamalai, Tiruchirappalli and reached the seaport of Nagapattinam. This journey followed historically significant pilgrimage routes, with Kanchipuram being one of the 'Sapta Puri' or seven holy sites in the Hindu tradition; it is believed that making a pilgrimage to all seven sites can lead to spiritual liberation. The episode highlights Guru Nanak's strategic selection of these locations: he aimed to engage with the pilgrims by visiting sites that attracted large congregations. How might this deliberate selection of religious centres reflect Guru Nanak's mission and methods for spreading his universal message across diverse cultural and religious landscapes?

2. How did the Udasin tradition contribute to preserving and spreading Guru Nanak's spiritual insights in South India?

The episode highlights the crucial role played by the Udasin tradition in establishing and maintaining centres that preserved Guru Nanak's legacy across South India. It notes that 'Udasin Muths' (centres of learning managed by ascetics) like these once

played a significant role in spreading the message of Guru Nanak in South India. In Guntur, the 'Bara Udasin Muth' was established in memory of Guru Nanak in the early 19th century by Chandu Lal, a Minister in the 'Nizam's' state of Hyderabad. He made significant contributions to spread the message of Guru Nanak across South India by establishing 'Muths' (centres of learning) in places like Guntur, Hyderabad, Kanchipuram, Rameshwaram, Tiruchirappalli and Tiruvannamalai. What insights does this network of learning centres provide regarding the methods by which Guru Nanak's messages are spread across diverse geographical and cultural landscapes, and how did individual teachers like Mahant Basant Das in Kanchipuram contribute to keeping these traditions alive?

3. What evidence of Guru Nanak's historical visits to South India still exists, and what has been lost over time?

The episode offers a compelling exploration of the dual realities of preservation and loss concerning the physical sites that mark Guru Nanak's journey. While some commemorative sites remain, many have diminished in their connection to Guru Nanak's spiritual messages. The text notes that after the early socio-political events of the 20th century, these traditions have drifted apart. In present times, tangible links associated with Guru Nanak have diminished at these centres. At Tiruvannamalai, it states: The 'Udasin' (ascetic) 'Mahants' (Priests) from Punjab who had taken the philosophy of Guru Nanak to distant lands had built a 'Udasin Muth' (centre of spiritual learning) in the city of Tiruvanmallai. This 'Muth' (centre of spiritual learning) does not exist here anymore. Similarly at Tiruchirappalli, although an Udasin Muth was established, in present times there are no traces of this shrine. What factors might have contributed to this gradual disconnection from Guru Nanak's legacy in some regions while other sites maintained stronger connections, and what does this suggest about the challenges of preserving spiritual heritage across centuries?

4. How did Guru Nanak interact with diverse religious traditions during his travels in South India?

The episode illustrates Guru Nanak's respectful yet reformative approach to engaging with various religious traditions he encountered. At the Jain temple near Kanchipuram, when questioned about his non-adherence to strict practices of 'Ahmisa' (non-violence), Guru Nanak responded with a hymn that challenged rigid interpretations: Plucking each strand of hair on the head, drinking unclean water, begging to eat even leftover food. Without reflecting getting hair plucked; spiritually achieving nothing in return. The episode explains that Guru Nanak promoted connectivity through diversity and incorporated regional musical forms: 'Ramkali Dakhni Onkar' is one of his compositions which is classified under the South Indian Musical system. In Puri, he visited the revered Jagannath Temple, and in Kanchipuram, he engaged with both Shaivite and Vaishnavite traditions. How do these interactions reveal Guru Nanak's approach to interfaith dialogue and his method of challenging religious orthodoxy while respecting the core spiritual insights within diverse traditions?

5. What role did commemorative structures play in preserving the memory of Guru Nanak's visits to South India?

The episode describes several sites established to commemorate Guru Nanak's journey through South India. In Kanchipuram, the 'Udasin Bava Ji Muth' was established in the memory of Guru Nanak... in the 19th century by Chandu Lal. The narrator recalls seeing 'Mool Mantar' (Guru Nanak's verse) inscribed on a pillar during a previous visit in 1994. The maintenance and transmission of these sites depended on dedicated individuals like Mahant Basant Das who, according to his student Shankar, would spread the message of Guru Nanak, read the 'Guru Granth Sahib' and explain the meaning of the verses. What do these physical commemorations and their associated oral traditions suggest about how spiritual memory is preserved across cultures and time, and what can be learned from both the persistence and disappearance of these sites over time?

Philosophical Discussion Pointers:

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

The episode presents a profound philosophical concept in Guru Nanak's message, expressed in Raag Asa. It conveys 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 episode explains that Guru Nanak views the world as a stage created by the Creator, who experiences the existence of its creation through the senses. This perspective suggests that the Divine resides within us, and we are also within the Divine; in essence, we are One. This idea transforms the traditional separation between divinity and humanity, proposing an intimate relationship where creation serves as the medium through which the divine experiences itself. How does this philosophical perspective challenge hierarchical religious structures and reframe the purpose of human existence within the larger cosmic drama?

2. What is Guru Nanak's perspective on ritualism versus authentic spirituality as demonstrated in his response at the Jagannath Temple?

The episode highlights a significant moment at the Jagannath Temple when Guru Nanak witnessed the performance of 'Aarti' (a ritual of worship). Inspired by this experience, he composed a verse emphasizing the importance of respecting nature rather than focusing solely on ritualistic practices. Rendered in Raag Dhanasri, the verse reinterprets the concept of worship. It portrays the sky as a platter where the sun and moon shine as illuminating lamps while the stars and constellations represent exquisite pearls. The aroma of sandalwood symbolizes the incense, the air serves as a fly whisk, and the vibrant vegetation represents a heartfelt offering to the omnipresent energy. He compellingly argues that since the divine manifests in every aspect of nature, it is unreasonable to exalt its greatness by worshipping only a few elements of its vast creation. How does this critique reflect Guru Nanak's broader

understanding of authentic spirituality, and what implications does it have for religious practices that emphasize formal rituals over recognition of divinity in all aspects of creation?

3. How does Guru Nanak's teaching on the five elements (Panch Bhoot) relate to his understanding of the human body as a temple?

The episode discusses Guru Nanak's visit to the Ekambaranathar Temple, one of the five 'Panch Bhoot Sthal' (five elements) temples in South India which are dedicated to Shiva. Each of these temples symbolize one of the five elements of the cosmos, comprising of earth, water, fire, air and the impalpable ether. In response to these elemental temples, Guru Nanak recites a verse with metaphors, encouraging us to turn dogmatic thinking upside down and transform it into a begging bowl for wisdom. He suggests that the lessons of the five elements should be viewed as a cap, emphasizing a reinterpretation of these elements as components of spiritual understanding rather than mere external objects of worship. Guru Nanak encourages us to see the five elements not as things to be revered externally but as essential parts of our spiritual insight. He further explains that our body serves as a mansion, temple, and home for self-awareness, within which infinite divinity is enshrined. This episode conveys Guru Nanak's belief that the human body, composed of the five elements, is a sacred temple where the infinite resides. Therefore, he questions why one would seek spiritual experiences outside of themselves. In his humble understanding, respecting the human body is equivalent to revering the Divine. How does this perspective transform traditional worship by relocating the divine presence from external structures to the human form, and what ethical implications might this have for how we treat our bodies and those of others?

4. What was Guru Nanak's approach to extreme religious practices, and how did it challenge contemporary religious orthodoxy?

When a Jain priest questioned Guru Nanak about why he did not adopt strict practices of "Ahimsa" (non-violence), Guru Nanak responded with a verse that challenged the idea of extreme austerities. He highlighted specific practices, such as plucking each strand of hair, drinking unclean water, and begging for leftover food. He pointed out that these actions performed thoughtlessly like sheep, do not lead to any spiritual achievement. In the quest for renunciation, individuals often forget their responsibilities towards their parents, causing distress for their families. This episode illustrates that extreme austerities can hinder both personal and social development. Guru Nanak emphasized that true spiritual depth is achieved by practically implementing the core principles of faith, which include purity of thought, speech, and action. How does this approach challenge contemporary understandings of spiritual discipline, particularly those that emphasize physical practices? What balance between spiritual discipline and practical living does Guru Nanak's philosophy suggest?

5. How does Guru Nanak's message of Oneness accommodate diverse religious expressions and forms?

Guru Nanak's message consistently affirms the unity underlying diverse religious expressions throughout the episode. Concerning the trinity, he asserts that Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are manifestations of the formless Omnipresent. This Omnipresent essence has existed throughout all ages, and gaining this wisdom dispels doubt. When discussing male and female divine forms, Guru Nanak explains that all of creation, including celestial energies, is a manifestation of the single Omnipresent Creator, who transcends the divisions between male and female forms. This perspective allowed his message to resonate across religious boundaries, as evidenced by a tradition in Bhadrak village where residents still enact a play in which Guru Nanak expresses universal values of Oneness, emphasizing that we should not divide Ram (Hindu belief) and Rehman (Islamic belief). He encourages everyone to keep their hearts pure, embrace all, and focus on humanity. How does Guru Nanak's concept of Oneness allow for the integration of diverse religious symbols and practices while maintaining a unified spiritual vision? What implications does this have for interfaith relations in contemporary multicultural societies?