

## ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 14: Setu Bandh (Bridge of Transition)

'Setu Bandh', 'Bridge of Transition', presents the metaphoric expositions of the truthful victorious to help cross the worldly ocean from negativity to positivity. Guru Nanak sails from 'Sangladeep' to 'Dhanushkodi'.

dhe dhe neev dhivaal usaaree bhasama(n) dhar kee dderee ||  
sa(n)che sa(n)ch na dheiee kis hee a(n)dh jaanai sabh meree ||  
soin la(n)kaa soin maaRee sa(n)pai kisai na keree ||  
(Raag Gauri Cheti, Guru Nanak)

Digging deep foundations, walls of a building are built. However, eventually, the building becomes a heap of dust.

People gather and hoard their possessions and do not share. They remain blinded in the belief that all possessions will stay with them.

Riches do not remain with anyone - Even the golden palaces of Sri Lanka did not remain.

(Raag Gauri Cheti, Guru Nanak)

Time and again, nature creates situations to remind us that life is transient. Moral stories provoke us to acknowledge with humility, of our unity and interdependency as a species. Yet, the stubborn mind regresses by indulging in 'Me' and 'I'.

Taking a ship from Nagapattinam in India, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana landed at Jaffna, the port town of Sri Lanka.

In present times, due to political reasons, it is not possible to travel by sea from India to Sri Lanka. Hence, to retrace Guru Nanak's footsteps, we fly from India to Sri Lanka and continue our journey from Jaffna.

According to 'Vilayatwali Janamsakhi' during Guru Nanak's visit to Sri Lanka, he covered his head with ropes, wore wooden sandals and applied a vermilion mark on his forehead. Guru Nanak would deliberately wear garb that would make it difficult for people to associate him with any one religious identity. This probably would arouse curiosity and make it easy for him to initiate dialogue with spiritualists from different backgrounds.

**Amardeep Singh:** Jaffna. This is the first town where Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana landed in Sri Lanka. This town then was known as 'Jappapatnam'. This is the town from where the two started their journey that took them all across the Sri Lankan island. As per Bhai Mani Singh's Janamsakhi, they stayed on this island for 2 years and 5 months.

There are no physical commemorations in Jaffna regarding Guru Nanak's visit at this port of entry to Sri Lanka.

During the 15th century, Sri Lanka was predominantly Buddhist. Only a few regions, along the north-east of the island were populated by Hindu 'Shaivites', followers of Shiva.

From Jaffna, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled along the coast line to Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Kurukkalmadam. From here, they proceeded to Kataragama, Nuwara Eliya, Sitawaka and Kotte on the outskirts of Colombo, Anuradhapura and reached Mannar. From Jaffna, they first travelled to Trincomalee.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, from Jaffna we travel along the eastern coast to Trincomalee.

This coastal town was once famous for a historic 'Shaivite' temple. According to records, it was demolished by the Portuguese in 1622 AD. It can't be said with certainty but in passing through this town, Guru Nanak may have probably visited this site.

From Trincomalee, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled further south to Batticaloa.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, we continue southwards along the ocean to reach the coastal city of Batticaloa, which in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was known as Matiakalam.

The north-east region of Sri Lanka was then ruled by King Pararajasekharan from Batticaloa. The 'Janamsakhi' literature however mentions the name of the king as 'Shiv Nabh', which indicates that he was a devotee of Shiva.

**Amardeep Singh:** Mansukh, a trader from Lahore, would often come to Sri Lanka on business. During his stay on this island, he had mentioned to King Shiv Nabh about Guru Nanak and his philosophy.

The 'Vilayawali Janamsakhi' and 'Bhai Mani Singh Janamasakhi' mention that King Shiv Nabh sent charming damsels to entice Guru Nanak to test his credibility. Seeing Guru Nanak remaining unaffected, King Shiv Nabh was convinced that he was the revered Saint as mentioned by Bhai Mansukh. Thereafter, in due respect, the King personally came to welcome Guru Nanak.

Looking at Guru Nanak's unique attire, King Shiv Nabh was inquisitive to know if he was a 'Yogi' (ascetic) or a 'Pandit' (learned priest) and enquired about his caste. To stimulate the King's spiritual thinking, Guru Nanak posed a rhetorical question in response to the hierarchical inquiry.

jogee jugat naam niramail taa kai mail na raatee ||  
preetam naath sadhaa sach sa(n)ge janam maran gat beete ||1||  
gusaiee teraa kahaa naam kaise jaatee ||

jaa tau bheetar mahal bulaaveh poochhau baat nira(n)tee ||  
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

'Jogi' (Yogi) are those who have the competence to contemplate, remain honest and are not touched by an iota of unrighteousness.

O beloved 'Nath' (Yogi), in the company of honesty, overcome the birth and death of desires.

O cosmic Omnipresent, how can one comprehend your vastness?

When consciousness is summoned within, then reflections on unity occur continuously.  
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

External status is not a benchmark of an individual's internal disposition. Guru Nanak raises a question that how can the Creator and its creation be classified based on appearances as they are two sides of the same coin. Perceptions established on the grounds of identities can create biases which can be debilitating for social harmony.

Guru Nanak suggests one should focus on unity over divergence.

After spending a few days with King Shiv Nabh, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana proceeded 12 miles southwards to the village of Kurukkalmadam.

Following Guru Nanak's footsteps, we now visit Kurukkalmadam village.

Travelling offers opportunities to embrace situations beyond one's comfort zones. Each journey provides unique experiential perspectives as potentials to reinvent thoughts for personal growth. However, the benefits can only be harnessed, if the learnings are brought back home, not only for self-reflection but also to be shared for the benefit of others. As Guru Nanak says,

je gun hovani(h) saajanaa mil saajh kareejai ||  
(Guru Nanak)

O friends, if you have acquired virtuous experiences, then share them with others.  
(Guru Nanak)

After an interactive and reflective bus ride, we now walk towards the serene Kurukkalmadam village.

**Amardeep Singh:** 'Kuru' means Guru. 'Kal' means out of respect and 'Madam' is a congregation. It is believed that Guru Nanak on his way from Batticaloa came to this village and stayed here for a few days. We are at the home of Mr. Koneswaran, a local from this village, with whom we will meet and find out, what are the memories that they have about Guru Nanak's visit to this village.

**Koneswaran:** Welcome. Welcome.

**Amardeep Singh:** How are you Mr. Koneswaran.

**Koneswaran:** Yes. Fine.

**Amardeep Singh:** Nice meeting you.

**Koneswaran:** Yes. Nice meeting you. Thankyou. Come.

We were delighted to experience a prayer ceremony being held by the family.

**Koneswaran:** Today is Pongal festival. We thank the Sun. It is the starting of its 'Uttarayan' (northern movement). So we respect the Sun.

After the prayers, the family invited us to join them for a meal to celebrate the festive occasion.

**Amardeep Singh:** It is so soulfully fulfilling to be sharing the 'parshad', the meal, with Mr. Koneswaran's family after the prayer.

**Koneswaran:** My maternal grandfather told me that Guru Nanak Dev Ji came here and stayed for two months on the way to Kataragamam. People from Tamilnadu in India would travel through this way to go to Kataragamam to worship.

Mr. Koteswaran walked us to the historic Selai Kataragamam Temple, which for ages has served as a halting point for pilgrims visiting the Kataragama city in the south of the island of Sri Lanka.

**Amardeep Singh:** Here, Murugan, the son of Lord Shiva is worshipped. In those times when Guru Nanak visited Kurukkalmadam, the entire region was a 'Shaivite' tradition. King Shiv Nabh, the ruler of this place, who was also a believer of Shiva and Lord Murugan, welcomed Guru Nanak at this place.

We now walked to a site containing historical archaeological remains.

**Amardeep Singh:** Close to the Selai Kataragamam Temple in Kurukkalmadam, it is so interesting that we yet find stones that date back to 500 to 700 years. The villagers believe that stones like these, which are all scattered around this area, were used for specific purpose. This particular one, they say, was used to put a pole for the pilgrims to camp when they would come to this place.

These remains provide possible proof that Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana would have halted in this region to interact with pilgrims and spiritualists.

We now walk to a site close to the Selai Kataragamam Temple where a gurdwara is being constructed.

**Amardeep Singh:** Along the east coast of Sri Lanka, there are no Sikhs staying here. But isn't it impressive that in Kurukkalmadam, where Guru Nanak had visited, a Gurdwara is being built with a collaborative effort of the Sikhs, some Punjabi Hindus from Colombo and the caretakers out here are the local Sri Lankan Tamils.

I am here with Sudarshan, who is a Sri Lankan Tamil and facilitating in the construction of this site in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit.

From Kurukkalmadam, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Kataragama in the south of the island of Sri Lanka.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, we visit Kataragama, which is situated on the banks of the River Menik Ganga. This town is one of the most revered pilgrimage centres, sacred to Hindus, Buddhists and the indigenous 'Vedda' people of Sri Lanka.

Kataragama Temple is a syncretic place of worship. Hindus revere the deity of this temple as Shiva's son, Subhramanya. A 'Bo' tree in this complex is believed to have been planted in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century by the Buddhists as it is said that this site was sanctified by Lord Buddha. 'Vedda', the indigenous people, consider the deity at this temple as a guardian protector.

aavau va(n)n(j)au ddu(n)manee kitee mitr kareau ||  
saa dhan ddoiee na lahai vaaddee kiau dheereau ||  
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

The double-minded keep wavering, despite befriending many positive virtues.  
Similarly, a soul separated from its consciousness can't have peace. How can it be  
comforted?  
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

It is interesting that the Kataragama Temple is revered by devotees of three different belief systems. Within a single complex, the human mind has created separations from one another. I question the naiveté of the human mind, as it savours the pain of duality and overlooks the joy of unity. Guru Nanak says that duality is the cause of restlessness.

From Kataragama, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana headed northwards and ascended on the hilly tract to Nuwara Eliya.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we visit Nuwara Eliya, a picturesque hill city. The name Nuwara Eliya means the 'city of light'. The city is associated with the epic 'Ramayan'.

We visit the historic Sita Amman Temple.

<<Chanting>>

**Amardeep Singh:** At Nuwara Eliya, Ravan kept Sita in captivity. During his travels across Sri Lanka, Guru Nanak also visited this site and he gave a profound message in the verse which reads,

seetaa lakhaman vichhuR giaa ||  
rovai dhahasir la(n)k gavai ||  
(Guru Nanak)

Sita and Lakshman experienced separation from their beloveds.  
The ten-headed Ravan wept when he lost Sri Lanka.  
(Guru Nanak)

The meaning of this message is that even the greatest have had to suffer because of their actions. It is the intent behind the actions that is the most paramount.

The legend of 'Ramayan' says that the Monkey God Hanuman, an ardent devotee of King Ramchand, in search of Sita, reached this naturally landscaped sanctuary, which was known as 'Ashok Vatika', the garden of no-sorrow. He jumped off an 'Ashok' tree under which Sita was held captive. People believe that impressions on the stone at this site are the footmarks of Hanuman.

raamacha(n)dh maario eh raavan ||  
bhedh babheekhan gurmukh parachain ||  
gurmukh sair paahan taare ||  
gurmukh koT tetees udhaare ||  
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

Ramchand (aware mind) has slaughtered Ravan (pride).  
Babhikhan (wisdom) reveals the secret of being spiritually oriented.  
The spiritually oriented facilitate in overcoming the hurdles of the worldly ocean.  
The spiritually oriented liberate millions with their wisdom.  
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

The battle between Ramachandr, the King of Ayodhya and Ravan, the King of Sri Lanka, is used as a metaphor by Guru Nanak to strive for internal victory of good over evil.

**Thilini Rodrigo:** I found some verses of Guru Nanak related to Sri Lanka. I never knew that he has visited Sri Lanka. I tried it in 'Singhala' folk music, a folk tune, to sing Guru Nanak's verse.

From Nuwara Eliya, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana visited Sitawaka now known as Avissawella.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Nuwara Eliya to Avissawella.

Legend has it that the city of Sitawaka was named after King Ramchandr's wife Sita because it is one of the many places where she was held in captivity by Ravan.

Reflecting on the process of evolution and the changing names of the city, I realised how vulnerable our existence is! Guru Nanak says, everything changes, the only thing that remains constant is the force that illuminates our existence.

aadh aneel anaadh anaahat jug jug eko ves ||  
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Omnipresent is primal, pure, without beginning and eternal. Throughout all the ages, it is the One that remains unchanged.  
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

From Avissawella, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Kotte, which is now a part of the capital city of Colombo.

In the footsteps of Guru Nanak, we now travel by train to Colombo city.

**Amardeep Singh:** The station's name is 'Maradana'. I am so intrigued by the name that sounds so similar to Bhai Mardana, Guru Nanak's life-long companion, who travelled with him all around the world.

In 'Janamsakhis', Bhai Mardana, the 'Rabab' player, a lifelong companion of Guru Nanak, is often depicted as encountering and eventually overcoming hurdles. In my humble understanding, I view the struggles of Mardana as a metaphor for the worldly challenges of human existence.

gurmukh alipat lep kadhe na laagai sadhaa rahai saranaiee ||  
manmukh mugadh aagai chetai naahee dhukh laagai pachhutaiee ||  
(Raag Prabhati, Guru Nanak)

The 'Gurmukh', the spiritually oriented, remain detached from the filth of attachment. They always remain sheltered in the sanctuary of inner peace.  
The 'Manmukh', the mind-oriented, do not contemplate on advancing spiritually. They are inflicted by distress and regret.  
(Raag Prabhati, Guru Nanak)

A 'Gurmukh' (spiritually oriented person) is the one who strives to transform one's intellect by dispelling darkness with light. Mardana's life is an example of a 'Gurmukh', the spiritually oriented person.

**Amardeep Singh:** Colombo, today is the capital of Sri Lanka and people of Sinhalese, Christian and Tamilian belief systems stay here.

During Guru Nanak's time, the western part of the island of Sri Lanka was then predominantly of Buddhist faith.

**Subash Chawla:** Guru Sahib came here during the tenure of Dharma Parakramabahu the 9<sup>th</sup>, King of Kotte, with whom he had several interactions according to records. In my mind he is a very enigmatic personality. He was the most widely travelled religious dignitary of his time.

**Amardeep Singh:** Buddha was born in India and before Christ, Buddhism had already reached the island of Sri Lanka. Buddha taught about the way of life. He did not pass a judgment about the existence or the non-existence of God.

Sanghrajā, the senior Buddhist monk of Sri Lanka, on hearing Guru Nanak's views about casteism, rituals and idol-worship, invited him to the commune. In a discussion with monks, Guru Nanak presented his views on the fundamentals of spirituality.

jīn sevīāā tīn paīāā mān ||  
naanak gaaveeāāī gunee nidhaan ||  
gaaveeāāī suneeāāī mān rakheeāāī bhāū ||  
dhukh parahar sukh ghar lai jai ||  
gurmukh naadha(n) gurmukh vedha(n) gurmukh rahīāā samaīē ||  
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Those who do selfless service obtain honour.  
Nanak says, contemplate on treasures of virtues.  
Speak, listen, abide and imbibe this inclination.  
Shed distress and you shall carry peace within.  
The spiritually oriented have virtuous speech. The spiritually oriented are  
knowledgeable. The spiritually oriented remain blended in Oneness.  
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Whichever path of belief one chooses to follow, the roots of morality for all philosophies are grounded at the same depth. Guru Nanak says that intentions to illuminate the self and others bear the fruits of divinity, wisdom and unity.

**Amardeep Singh:** Baba Nanak came to Sri Lanka, and centuries later, the first believers of Guru Nanak started appearing in the island of Sri Lanka, and these were the 'Sindhis', from the area of Pakistan, and after 1947, and in the last seven decades, and now there are a lot of Punjabis. Between these two communities in Colombo who are primarily the believers of Guru Nanak.

We visit the Sindhi Association of Sri Lanka, a syncretic place of worship, where Guru Nanak is an integral part of their broader belief systems.

baabeehaa a(n)mirat velai boliaa taa(n) dhar sunee pukaar ||  
(Salok, Guru Amardas)

When the rainbird (soul) chirps (contemplates) in the ambrosial moments, its spiritual calling is heard in the Divine court. (Salok, Guru Amardas)

**Vandana Bakshani:** Community believes a lot in Guru Nanak. You know as our people are from Pakistan. They have Guru Nanak in them. It is one of the religions they follow. They follow all the rituals of the other deities also but they follow about Guru Nanak also. I have been brought up in a family where if anything happened, for the happiness or for sorrow or something, everything was to thank the Lord, they would keep a 'Akhand Path' (recitation of 'Guru Granth Sahib'). We do, every Sunday we do 'Asa-Di-Vaar' (singing of verses from the 'Guru Granth Sahib'). It has been going on from years and then we follow it by a stanza of 'Sukhmani Path' and we have the five 'Pauris' (stanzas) of the 'Jap Sahib' (Guru Nanak's verses). We do the 'Anand Sahib'. We do the 'Aarti' and 'Ardas' and we take out the 'Vachan' (thought of the day).

ka(n)nee sootak ka(n)n pai laitabaaree khaeh ||  
naanak ha(n)saa aadhamee badhe jam pur jaeh ||  
(Guru Nanak)

When the ears listen to the impurity of slandering,  
Nanak says, then the pure human soul is shackled and dies spiritually.  
(Guru Nanak)

**Kamlesh Bharadwaj:**

meeraa(n) dhaanaa(n) dhil soch ||  
muhabate man tan basai sach saeh ba(n)dhee moch ||  
(Guru Arjan)

O wise one, contemplate with reflection.  
When love is enshrined in mind and body then honest thoughts liberate from bondage of negativities.  
(Guru Arjan)

Salutations to the pure and victory to the Guru. Truth is the Name. Namaste. Sat Sri Akal. My name is Maharaj Kamlesh Bharadwaj. I am a Sindhi Brahmin. When I came to Sri Lanka, I saw this syncretic temple with many idols of Gods. Along with them, the Vedas were also enshrined. I also saw this gurdwara in its premises. Before this, I had never seen a gurdwara inside a temple. I really liked it that here I was introduced to the 'Guru Granth Sahib' (Sikh scripture). Before coming here, I did not know much about Guru Nanak. As I kept reading the 'Guru Granth Sahib' (Sikh scripture), my interest in Guru

Nanak started developing. Every religion pays importance over selfless service, which is also the key message of Guru Nanak.

**Sunita Jeevatram:** Wherever there was a Sindhi home in Sri Lanka, the 'Guru Granth' was there. Together with the 'Guru Granth' we had the 'Geeta'. So the homage was to the Guru and to the 'Geeta'. Every 'Sindhi' home had the 'Guru Granth'.

**Narayan Chaturani:** My parents told me that we 'Sindhis' were the first in Sri Lanka to bring back Guru Nanak into the island. Though he had travelled here many years before and centuries earlier, we take pride in the sense that we have revived Guru Nanak's teachings in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

**Amardeep Singh:** Namaste. What is your name?

**Kaveeta:** What?

**Amardeep Singh:** What is your name?

**Kaveeta:** Kaveeta.

**Amardeep:** Kaveeta Ji. What is your age?

**Kaveeta:** I would be more than 75-76 years.

**Amardeep:** What are you reading?

**Kaveeta:** I am reading 'Japji Sahib', Guru Nanak's verses.

ikOankar sat naam karataa purakh nirabhau niravair akaal moorat ajoonee saibha(n)  
gur prasaadh ||  
aadh sach jugaadh sach ||  
hai bhee sach naanak hosee bhee sach ||  
(Guru Nanak)

One Omnipresent. Realized through the grace of guidance. Personified in creation.  
Fearless. Bereft of discrimination. Eternal form. Beyond birth. Self-existent. Realized  
through the grace of guidance.

Contemplate. True in the primal beginning. True throughout the ages.  
True here and now. O Nanak, forever and ever true.  
(Guru Nanak)

**Amardeep:** This is the 'Asa-Di-Vaar' in the 'Sindhi' script which she is reading.

<<Keertan>>

In departing from Sindhi Temple, I felt elated to observe the community making an earnest effort to keep alive their association with Guru Nanak.

We now visit the Gurdwara in Colombo city.

<<Keertan>>

**Manvinder Singh:** We know that Guru Nanak Dev Ji visited Sri Lanka and apart from that, any remembrance leftover where we can relate those things to Guru Nanak Dev Ji's travels, we don't know much about it here in Sri Lanka. Because I think there was no 'Sangat' (community) to take care of, like in India or in Pakistan 'Sangat' (community) was there to take care.

<<Keertan>>

**Harin:** In the Guru Nanak Darbar here, the people, they have so much of love here in this 'Darbar' that you feel that oneness, togetherness. For our generation, not knowing much about Guru Nanak, this feeling is quite unique. It binds us together and it attracts us to the faith.

<<Keertan>>

We visit the home of Mrs. Artika Arora to get her insights on Guru Nanak's travels through Sri Lanka.

**Artika Arora:** I moved to Sri Lanka in the year 2000 and the thing I was excited about was, looking for a tangible footprint of Guru Nanak's visit to Sri Lanka. So this was my quest. And then I happened to come across this verse in the 'Granth Sahib' (Sikh scripture),

raam jhurai dhal melavai a(n)tar bal adhikaar ||  
ba(n)tar kee sainaa seveeaaai man tan jujh apaar ||  
(Guru Nanak)

Distressed, Ram (King) evokes virtues within and gathers the courage to seek justice. The army of monkeys (alertness) assists self-discipline to serve the mind to wage a war for righteousness.  
(Guru Nanak)

This is referring to Ram coming to Sri Lanka. This verse of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's also made me wonder why did he come here? What was his quest? He would go looking for people to have a discussion, to have a dialogue. You know, to find what they believed in and to share his belief system with those people. And that is maybe what brought him to

Sri Lanka. And he is living here, amongst us, within our hearts, in his teachings. Whatever he preached, oneness, unity, kindness, being nice to each other.

From Kotte, in the outskirts of Colombo, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled further north to Anuradhapura.

In the footsteps of Guru Nanak, we travel to Anuradhapura, one of the ancient cities of Sri Lanka. Anuradhapura is now famous for its well-preserved ruins of the Sinhalese civilization. During the times of Guru Nanak it was the centre of Theravada Buddhism.

At Anuradhapura, our objective was to visit the Anuradhapura Archaeological Museum to view a 15th century stone-slab dating from the rule of King Dharmaparakarma Bahu IX.

Many Sikh authors in recent times have reported slab number M111 as having the words: 'Nanak Acharya' (Nanak the Guru) engraved on it.

We meet Ms. Deepali, the Head of the Anuradhapura Archaeological Museum. At her office we first investigate the inscriptions on the slab.

Ms. Deepali guides us to the site where the M111 slab is displayed.

**Deepali:** This is the M111 inscription.

**Amardeep Singh:** So Ms. Deepali, I see that we can read nothing on this slab, but I find some faint inscriptions. But we can read nothing. Was it always like this?

**Deepali:** Yes.

**Amardeep Singh:** Okay. Isn't it quite interesting that there are some articles going around which say that on this particular slab, 'Guru Nanak Acharya' was written. And when I am looking at it, there is nothing readable and what you are saying is that neither has the Museum, when they found this slab, found anything written on it.

**Deepali:** No.

From Anuradhapura, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana proceeded to the port town of Mannar.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Anuradhapura to Mannar.

The entire stretch of land from Anuradhapura to Mannar Island is a dry and barren peninsula.

The region hosts a native mammal, the golden jackal, which moves in groups. They are seen as wise, cunning and persistent creatures. Travelling through this harsh terrain, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana were unable to find food and water. They spotted a pack of jackals heading towards a particular direction. Anticipating that the jackals were going to quench their thirst, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana followed them and reached a pond.

Sensory organs are designed to observe and assimilate. They have the power to comprehend pointers in nature as a guiding force.

Unfurling this potential requires inculcating a mind-set which engages and learns from every situation.

aape maachhee machhulee aape paanee jaal ||  
aape jaal manakaRaa aape a(n)धार laal ||  
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

It is the fisherman and the fish. It is the water and the net.  
It is the net and the bait. It is the Divine within.  
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says that situations and their outcomes are designed by the Creator for a greater purpose, which at times are beyond the comprehension of the human mind.

In Mannar district, we continue to travel to Talaimannar, the region of 'Setu Bandh' islands.

'Setu Bandh', also known as 'Ram Setu' or 'Adam's Bridge' is a chain of islands, between Talaimannar in the Mannar District of Sri Lanka and Dhanushkodi in the Ramanathapuram District of India. The bridge formed by these islands is approximately 48 kilometers long. 'Setu Bandh' finds mention in the epic of 'Ramayan', in which the army of monkeys are said to have constructed this bridge for Ramchandra to cross from India to Sri Lanka to rescue his wife, Sita.

Guru Nanak conveys a deep philosophical message associated with the 'Setu Bandh' bridge; presenting it as a metaphor of the effort to connect one's human consciousness with the Supreme Consciousness. A bridge which enables the transition from negatives to positives.

From Mannar in Sri Lanka, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled by boat to Dhanushkodi in India.

gurmukh baa(n)dhio set bidhaatai ||  
la(n)kaa looTee dhait sa(n)taapai ||  
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

The spiritually oriented build a bridge to comprehend the Omnipresent.  
Lanka (ego) is plundered. The demon (vice) is conquered.  
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

## Discussion Pointers

### **ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 14: Setu Bandh (Bridge of Transition)**

The discussion points offer a framework for exploring the historical significance of Guru Nanak's journey through Sri Lanka and the philosophical dimensions of his messages during this journey. By examining his interactions with diverse religious communities and political figures in 15<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lanka, we gain valuable insights into how his universal message transcended cultural and religious boundaries. The philosophical questions invite deeper reflection on Guru Nanak's enduring spiritual concepts, particularly his emphasis on unity over diversity, transcendence of external identities, and the importance of inner transformation. These historical and philosophical inquiries help us appreciate how Guru Nanak's visit to Sri Lanka represents a remarkable chapter in interfaith dialogue and spiritual exchange—a legacy that continues to be honored by diverse communities on the island today, despite the limited physical evidence of his journey.

#### **Historical Discussion Pointers:**

**1. How did the religious and cultural landscape of 15<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lanka influence Guru Nanak's interactions during his visit?**

The episode describes that during the 15th century, Sri Lanka was "predominantly Buddhist. Only a few regions, along the north-east of the island, were populated by Hindu 'Shaivites', followers of Shiva". This diverse religious environment provided Guru Nanak with opportunities to engage in interfaith dialogue. The episode mentions his interaction with King Shiv Nabh (Pararajasekharan), who was a devotee of Shiva, and his discussions with Buddhist monks, including the Sanghraj (senior Buddhist monk). In Kataragama, Guru Nanak visited a syncretic temple revered by Hindus, Buddhists, and indigenous Vedda people. How did this pluralistic religious environment shape Guru Nanak's approach to presenting his philosophical ideas, and what might we learn about his methods of interfaith dialogue from these encounters?

**2. What evidence exists of Guru Nanak's visit to Sri Lanka, and how has this memory been preserved over centuries?**

The episode provides a varied perspective on the physical evidence concerning Guru Nanak's visit. It notes that there are no physical commemorations in Jaffna regarding Guru Nanak's visit at this port of entry to Sri Lanka. There is mention of a Gurdwara being constructed at Kurukkalmadam with a collaborative effort of the Sikhs, some Punjabi Hindus from Colombo and the caretakers out here are the local Sri Lankan Tamils. The episode also addresses a claim about stone slab M111 in Anuradhapura Archaeological Museum supposedly bearing the inscription 'Nanak Acharya' but upon examination, there is nothing readable on it. Centuries later, the Sindhi community in Colombo takes pride in reviving Guru Nanak's spiritual insights on the island. What

does this pattern of commemoration tell us about the challenges of preserving historical memory across cultures and centuries, and how might oral traditions compensate for limited physical evidence? Are evolving modern claims by some authors about inscription on M111 slab an attempt in their belief system to project Guru Nanak's travels in a larger context?

**3. How did King Shiv Nabh's interaction with Guru Nanak illustrate cross-cultural religious exchanges of that era?**

The episode recounts how Bhai Mansukh, a trader from Lahore, informed Sri Lankan King Shiv Nabh about Guru Nanak and his philosophy. When Guru Nanak arrived in Sri Lanka, the King decided to test him by sending attractive young women to try to entice him and assess his credibility. Guru Nanak remained unaffected by this challenge, which convinced the King of his spiritual stature. Following this, King Shiv Nabh asked Guru Nanak about his religious identity, probing whether he considered himself a 'Yogi' (ascetic) or a 'Pandit' (learned priest) and inquired about his caste. This interaction sheds light on the spiritual validation practices of the 15th century and the significant emphasis placed on religious and social categorization. How does this exchange demonstrate the challenges and opportunities for spiritual teachers who crossed cultural boundaries during this period?

**4. What role did Guru Nanak's distinctive appearance play in his journey through Sri Lanka?**

According to the 'Vilayatwali Janamsakhi,' during his visit to Sri Lanka, Guru Nanak covered his head with ropes, wore wooden sandals and applied a vermilion mark on his forehead. The episode explains that Guru Nanak would deliberately wear garb that would make it difficult for people to associate him with any one religious identity. This approach was intended to arouse curiosity and make it easy for him to initiate dialogue with spiritualists from different backgrounds. How might this deliberate ambiguity in appearance have facilitated Guru Nanak's vision of building bridges between different faith traditions, and what lessons might it offer for interfaith dialogue today?

**Philosophical Discussion Pointers:**

**1. How does Guru Nanak's response to King Shiv Nabh challenge conventional notions of religious identity?**

When King Shiv Nabh inquired about Guru Nanak's caste and religious identity, Guru Nanak responded with a verse that redefined what it means to be a 'Jogi' (Yogi). He highlights that true 'Jogi' (Yogi) are competent to contemplate, remain honest, and not be touched by an unrighteousness. The episode explains that Guru Nanak raises the question of how the Creator and his creation can be classified based on appearances, as they are two sides of the same coin. He further suggests that perceptions established on the grounds of identities can create biases which can be debilitating to social harmony. How does this philosophical position challenge the social

categorizations prevalent in 15th-century South Asia, and what implications does it have for understanding religious identity in more universal terms?

**2. What is the metaphorical significance of 'Setu Bandh' (bridge) in Guru Nanak's spiritual insights?**

The episode explains that Guru Nanak presented the 'Setu Bandh' bridge as a metaphor for the effort to connect human consciousness with Supreme Consciousness. This bridge symbolizes the transition from negativity to positivity. His verse suggests that spiritually oriented people build a bridge to understand the Omnipresent. In this context, Lanka (representing ego) is plundered, and the demon (symbolizing vice) is conquered. This metaphorical interpretation transforms a physical landmark into a profound spiritual concept. How does this metaphor encapsulate Guru Nanak's approach to spiritual development, and what does it suggest about the relationship between the physical world and spiritual understanding in his philosophy?

**3. How does Guru Nanak reinterpret the Ramayana narrative for spiritual instruction?**

The episode quotes Guru Nanak's verse: Ramchand (aware mind) has slaughtered Ravan (pride). Babhikhan (wisdom) reveals the secret of being spiritually oriented. It explains that the battle between Ramachandr, the King of Ayodhya and Ravan, the King of Sri Lanka, is used as a metaphor by Guru Nanak to strive for internal victory of good over evil. This reinterpretation transforms an epic battle narrative into an internal spiritual struggle. How does this approach to sacred narratives demonstrate Guru Nanak's method of making abstract spiritual concepts accessible through familiar cultural references, and what does it reveal about his philosophy of internal transformation?

**4. What distinction does Guru Nanak draw between a 'Gurmukh' and a 'Manmukh'?**

Guru Nanak says that the 'Gurmukh', the spiritually oriented, remain detached from the filth of attachment. They always remain sheltered in the sanctuary of inner peace. The 'Manmukh', the mind-oriented, do not contemplate advancing spiritually. They are inflicted by distress and regret. It further explains that a 'Gurmukh' (spiritually oriented person) is the one who strives to transform one's intellect by dispelling darkness with light. Bhai Mardana is presented as an example of a 'Gurmukh'. How does this conceptual distinction form a framework for understanding spiritual development in Guru Nanak's philosophy, and what practical implications might it have for daily life?

**5. How does Guru Nanak address the concept of duality and its impact on human consciousness?**

At the Kataragama Temple, which is revered by three different belief systems (Hindus, Buddhists, and indigenous Vedda people), the narrator reflects on how within a single complex, the human mind has created separations from one another. This observation

is linked to Guru Nanak's philosophy that duality is the cause of restlessness. In one verse, Guru Nanak states that the double-minded keeps wavering, despite befriending many positive virtues. Similarly, a soul separated from its consciousness can't have peace. How does Guru Nanak's philosophy attempt to transcend such duality, and what relevance might this have for addressing religious divisions today?

**6. What philosophical message did Guru Nanak present about Setu Bandh as a bridge of transition?**

Setu Bandh, known as 'Ram Setu' or 'Adam's Bridge,' is a 48-kilometre limestone shoal connecting Talaimannar in Sri Lanka to Dhanushkodi in India. This formation holds significant cultural value, as described in the Ramayana as a bridge built by Lord Rama's army of monkeys to rescue his wife, Sita, from the demon king Ravana. Guru Nanak explained this mythological narrative as a meaningful spiritual metaphor, referring to 'Setu Bandh' as the 'Bridge of Transition.' He illustrated how internal transformation helps individuals cross the worldly ocean from negativity to positivity, encouraging a personal spiritual journey. In our increasingly divided world, the concept of 'bridge-building' can be essential in guiding personal growth and social harmony, fostering understanding and unity despite our differences. What internal bridges must we construct to transcend our own dualities, and what implications does this metaphor have for addressing the divisive boundaries - religious, political, cultural that separate us from one another?