

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels

Episode 18: Sumeru (Consciousness)

'Sumeru', 'Consciousness', presents an echo of Guru Nanak's fearlessness. At the mountains of Gods and Demons, the roof of the world, the courageous sage affirms that the sole Supreme Consciousness is the center of Divinity.

jo tis bhaavai soiee karasee kirat na meTiaa jaiee ||
(Raag Gujri, Guru Nanak)

Whatever pleases it, it does. No one can erase its actions.
(Raag Gujri, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, mindful actions are of supreme importance. Detachment from the consequences of one's efforts brings harmony within.

After having spent some time in Nankana Sahib, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana embarked on the second odyssey, estimated to have commenced in the year 1517 AD. This journey took them towards the northern Himalayan region.

From Talwandi, now known as Nankana Sahib, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Lahore, Kiratpur, Jawala Ji, Baijnath and Parvati Valley. Thereafter, travelling through the Spiti Valley and the Shipki Pass, they ascended to Tsaparang in the Tibetan Plateau and visited Mount Kailash. From Mount Kailash, they travelled along Pangong Lake and reached Leh. From Leh they travelled to Skardu, Kargil, Mattan and Srinagar. From Nankana Sahib, they first travelled to Lahore.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps we travel from Nankana Sahib to Lahore.

The city of Lahore dates its origins to the times of the epic Ramayan. Passing through the hands of many rulers; Hindu, Islamic, Sikh and the British, Lahore is the capital of the province of Punjab in the present day Pakistan.

During Guru Nanak's visit to Lahore, it was ruled by the Lodhi dynasty.

At Lahore, we visit Chohatta Bazar in 'Androon Shehar', the inner precincts of the old city.

In Lahore, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana halted near the banks of the River Ravi. As a daily routine, while they were singing verses, Duni Chand, a wealthy revenue officer was attracted by the sublime words. He invited the two to visit his residence in Chohatta Bazar. Proud of his wealth, Duni Chand egotistically mentioned the prominence of his house which was decorated with flags to indicate his opulence. To help Duni Chand get rid of his attachment to materialism, Guru Nanak ignited his critical thinking. He gifted a needle

to Duni Chand, asked him to keep it safely and carry it onwards after his death. Duni Chand understood the message that hoarding is futile as nothing can be carried after one dies. Hence, sharing wealth amongst the needy can raise one's spiritual status, the only wealth which is of significance. To elaborate, Guru Nanak sang,

saeh mareh sa(n)cheh maiaa dhaam ||
mai dhan dheejai har a(n)mirat naam ||
(Raag Gauri, Guru Nanak)

The wealthy shall die even after accumulating wealth and riches.
Grant me the wealth of ambrosial contemplation.
(Raag Gauri, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak impressed upon Duni Chand the reality that altruism is profitable while material riches potentially inflate the ego.

Amardeep Singh: This gurdwara in the narrow lanes of the old city of Lahore was built at the erstwhile residence of 'Seth' Duni Chand.

Duni Chand invited Guru Nanak for 'Shradh', a ritualistic ceremony, which is performed to pay homage to deceased ancestors by feeding the priestly class. 'Shradh' comes from the Sanskrit word, 'Shraddha', meaning devotion or due credence. Guru Nanak explained that heartfelt homage to ancestors is in respecting them while they are alive. To explain further, Guru Nanak sang,

sabh sa(n)jam rahe siaanapaa ||
meraa prabh sabh kichh jaanadhaa ||
sabh sa(n)jam rahe siaanapaa ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Forbearing practices are clever contrivances.
My Omnipresent is aware of everything.
All strict rituals are just clever contrivances.
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

It is a misconception that one can become virtuous and fulfill responsibilities by performing ritualistic practices. Guru Nanak says, while society can be deceived by pretense, however, one's consciousness remains aware of the intent driving one's actions.

The profound, logical and universal philosophy of Guru Nanak resonates with people from diverse backgrounds.

We now meet Mr. Anjum Dara, Curator at the Lahore Fort. Having studied archaeology, he is aware of the past collective culture of the Punjab, when Guru Nanak was equally revered by members of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities.

visue chasiaa ghaReeaa paharaa thitee vaaree maahu hoaa ||
sooraj eko rut anek ||
naanak karate ke kete ves ||
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Seconds, minutes, hours, days, dates, weeks, months originate from the one Sun, like the various seasons.

Nanak says, similarly, there are many forms of the One Creator.
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Anjum Dara: These words inscribed in the 'Guru Granth Sahib' convey that seconds, hours, weeks, months are all associated with the Sun. Every element is connected to the energy of the Sun. Baba Guru Nanak says, humanity, Allah, God, Waheguru, are all associated with One Omnipresent. All philosophies have emerged from it. The worldly games are created by humankind, which has created different religions. On this thought, there is a verse by Bhagat Kabir, There is one temple (body) with ten doors in which resides the Creator. According to their respective religious norms, they worship various forms. Everyone person enters with the belief that this is the only path which leads to the Divine through a temple, mosque or gurdwara. However, they do not understand that the paths may be diverse but only One Omnipresent resides within. When Guru Nanak came to this world, discrimination by caste, race, and divisions of high and low, Hindu Brahmins (Priest) and the Mullahs (Muslim Priest) were using divisive tactics in the name of religion. Guru Nanak declared that all this is darkness due to ignorance. Humanity needs guidance to a path of unity. It requires light of knowledge and a source of spiritual wisdom.

From Lahore, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Kiratpur in the Shivalik Hills on the eastern bank of the River Sutlej.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Pakistan to Kiratpur in India, where we visit the tomb of Pir Buddhan Shah located on a hilltop.

During Guru Nanak's times, this region of Shivalik Hills was densely forested. Guru Nanak's visit to this hilltop is not mentioned in the oldest 'Janamsakhis'. However, the narrative is accepted because Guru Hargobind, the sixth Nanak is said to have visited this shrine to commemorate Guru Nanak's visit. According to oral traditions, at this hillock, a Muslim saint named Pir Buddhan Shah maintained a herd of goats which were guarded by his pet lion. Pir Buddhan Shah hosted Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana and offered them goat milk. A lion personifies courage. A lamb represents gentleness and milk symbolizes a source of nourishment. In my humble opinion, the message in this metaphor

conveys that one becomes truly courageous when hostility is tamed to support gentility, a characteristic which aids nourishment of the soul.

At a short distance from the tomb of Pir Buddhan Shah, the Gurdwara Charan Kamal Sahib was built to commemorate Guru Nanak's visit to Kiratpur.

Amardeep Singh: Gurdwara Charan Kamal is associated with Guru Nanak's meeting with Fakir Buddhan Shah.

From Kiratpur, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Jawala Ji.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Kiratpur to Jawala Ji in Himachal Pradesh and visit the Jawalamukhi Temple.

This temple is one of the 51 'Shakti Peeth' centres of 'Shaktism' dedicated to the feminine force in Hinduism. The Jawalamukhi Temple is established as the place where the severed tongue of Sati, Shiva's deceased consort, fell. At this ancient temple, the 'Jawala', fire is worshipped. It is believed that the fire has been burning through the ages.

The narrative of Guru Nanak's visit to Jawalamukhi Temple finds mention in 'Bhai Mani Singh's Janamsakhi'. In reverence of Guru Nanak's visit, the dome of the Jawalamukhi Temple was gilded in gold in the year 1840 by Maharaja Kharak Singh, the son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who is commonly referred to as the Lion of Punjab.

In many religious traditions, fire is worshipped for its ability to illuminate darkness. I interpret it as a symbolic representation of illuminating the mind with the flame of knowledge. However, this essence of internal transformation to an enlightened state is overlooked by sheer ritualistic worship.

keerat karam kaar nij sa(n)dhaa ||
a(n)tar ravatau raaj ravi(n)dhaa ||
(Raag Prabhati, Guru Nanak)

My occupation is to contemplate daily.
Deep within, resides the awareness, like the illumination of the Sun.
(Raag Prabhati, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, he has made contemplation a daily practice as the flame of wisdom resides within.

From Jawala Ji, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Baijnath.

In the footsteps of Guru Nanak, we travel from Jawala Ji to Baijnath.

The ancient town of Baijnath is situated in the foothills of the Dhauladhar mountain range. It was an important city located on the historic trade routes from Kashmir and Punjab to Tibet. During Guru Nanak's visit, this region was thriving with numerous temples built by the affluent ruling dynasty.

We visit the historic Baijnath Temple, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva as a manifestation of 'Vaidnath', the master physician. This temple in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh was historically considered as an important Hindu pilgrimage site.

The erstwhile name of the town of Baijnath was Kirgraam, which is a combination of two words 'Kir' and 'Graam'. While the word 'Graam' means a settlement, there are varying opinions about the meaning of the word 'Kir'. Some texts mention that it refers to the 'Kiratas', a tribe which once ruled this region. According to the narrative in the 'Vilayatwali Janamsakhi', the word 'Kir' refers to insects.

nadheea vich Tibe dhekhaale thalee kare asagaeh ||
keeRaa thaap dheI paatisaahee lasakar kare suaah ||
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

The One Omnipresent can raise dry land from a river and turn a desert into bottomless ocean.

Supreme energy can appoint a worm as a king and reduce an army to ashes.
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, the Supreme Energy can turn an insignificant insect to a powerful ruler and reduce an army to ashes.

Big or small is a relative term. Respecting every aspect of nature is crucial for co-existence. This is my learning from Guru Nanak's verse in relation to the term 'Kira'.

From Baijnath, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Parvati Valley, the region of Manikaran village.

In the footsteps of Guru Nanak, from Baijnath we visit the village of Manikaran in Parvati Valley, where a gurdwara and a temple are located next to a hot spring on the banks of the Parvati River.

Manikaran Sahib Gurdwara was established in the year 1940 AD by Baba Narayan Hari in memory of Guru Nanak's visit to the Himachal region while he was on his way to Tibet. This gurdwara has become popular due to an oral narrative associated with Guru Nanak which finds no mention in the earliest 'Janamsakhis'. According to this narrative, at the village of Manikaran, unable to find wood to cook food, Guru Nanak sprouted a hot spring by lifting a rock. When Bhai Mardana put a rolled flat bread and lentils in the hot water

spring they sank. On Guru Nanak's advice, Bhai Mardana made a declaration to dedicate his life to God. Only then did the cooked food start to float.

This narrative is depicted in a Pahari style painting at the National Museum in New Delhi.

Reflecting on such narratives, I wonder if we mask our inability to unravel the depths of Guru Nanak's philosophy by glorifying supernatural incidents. In my humble understanding, the sinking of the food represents drowning in one's sorrows due to an egoist mindset and the rising of the food reflects the lifting of one's morale by abiding with the laws of nature.

hukamai a(n)dhar sabh ko baahar hukam na koi ||
naanak hukamai je bujhai ta haumai kahai na koi ||
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Everyone is subject to the laws of nature. No one is beyond its command.
O Nanak, the one who understands this command, does not speak in ego.
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

From the Parvati Valley, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled through the Spiti Valley then crossed the Shipki Pass and ascended to Tsaparang in Tibet.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, from the village of Manikaran we travel to the Spiti Valley.

Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled through this harsh terrain, which is surrounded by high barren mountains devoid of vegetation. The picturesque valley is accessible only for four months as it remains inaccessible for the rest of the year due to heavy snow. In the Spiti Valley there is no physical memory associated with Guru Nanak's visit.

In present times, due to political reasons, it is not possible to cross the Indo-Tibetan border. Hence, to continue tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we visit the Tibetan Plateau through mainland China.

Amardeep Singh: At an average elevation of 16,000 feet, Tibet is known as the roof of the world. Even though it offers a spiritually elevating environment, its high altitude, harsh winds and the rarified atmosphere makes it an arduous terrain.

Bon was the ancient indigenous animistic and shamanistic faith of the people of Tibet. In the 8th century, Buddhism from India was introduced to this region. Influenced by the Bon faith, Buddhism and Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism evolved as a unique tradition.

Travelling on the Tibetan plateau, we head westwards to the basin of the Sutlej River to visit the historic town of Tsaparang. Established as the Guge Kingdom in the 10th century, the people of Tsaparang were adherents of the Buddhist faith.

Amardeep Singh: From Spiti Valley in India, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana reached Tibet at Guge Kingdom in the region of Tsaparang. When Guru Nanak reached here, in these cave settlements resided a large population of the believers of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Guge Kingdom was perched on a pyramid-shaped rocky ridge comprising a multi-leveled settlement with passageways, caves and windows carved out of ancient ocean rock deposits. At the bottom most level were the civil residences. The level above was for temples and the residential quarters of the monks. At the rising levels lived the members of the royal family, and on the topmost open space was the royal palace. Interestingly, this kingdom had a spectacular civilization which then disappeared mysteriously in the 17th century.

During Guru Nanak's visit, this region was experiencing an evolution, the result of an amalgamation of belief systems and cultures.

pa(n)khee hoi kai je bhavaa sai asamaanee jaau ||
nadharee kisai na aavuoo naa kichh peeaa na khaau ||
bhee teree keemat naa pavai hau kevadd aakhaa naau ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

If I was a bird, soaring and flying through the sky.
If I was invisible, neither eating nor drinking.
Even so, I can't estimate your value. Thus, how can I describe your greatness?
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says even if one soars high after attaining supernatural powers, it is pale in comparison to the value of contemplation, the strength which leads to self-actualization.

From Tsaparang, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled eastwards to visit Mount Kailash.

In the footsteps of Guru Nanak we continue our journey on the Tibetan Plateau to Mount Kailash.

Amardeep Singh: At a height of 21,800 feet, Mount Kailash appears to be like the dome of a temple rising from the Tibetan Plateau. Kailash is also known as 'Sumeru'. The word 'Meru' represents the centre of metaphysical existence and 'Su' means most supreme. The reason Mount Kailash is considered to be the centre of metaphysical universe is probably because it's from this mountain originate the four major rivers of the Asian

subcontinent. These are Brahmaputra, Sutlej, Indus and Karnali, which is the source of River Ganges.

For time immemorial, the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Bon pilgrims have been circumambulating Mount Kailash in reverence of their respective faiths. Hindus consider Mount Kailash as the abode of Lord Shiva.

Bhai Gurdas, the first scribe of Guru Nanak's hagiography, mentions an account about Guru Nanak's visit to Mount Kailash.

fir jai chaRihaa sumer par sidh ma(n)ddalee dhirasaTee aaiee ||
(Bhai Gurdas)

Then he climbed the Sumer where he saw a group of 'Siddhs' (ascetics).
(Bhai Gurdas)

'Siddh' is a Sanskrit word referring to individuals who have achieved a high level of physical and spiritual competency. Interactions between 'Siddhs' and Guru Nanak at different locations are compiled in the 'Guru Granth Sahib', titled as 'Siddh Gosht'.

At Mount Kailash, Guru Nanak met 'Siddhs', who invited him for spiritual discourse. While these ascetics preferred withdrawing from society and family life to realize divinity, Guru Nanak believed that spiritual heights could be attained even while fulfilling social and household responsibilities. The first stanza of the 'Siddh Gosht' verse in the 'Guru Granth Sahib' indicates that before initiating a philosophical dialogue, Guru Nanak and the 'Siddhs' paid obeisance to each other.

Guru Nanak, being an advocate of seeking and imparting knowledge, asked the 'Siddhs', having attained spiritual excellence, why they remained isolated when sharing of their wisdom could benefit society?

sidh sabhaa kar aasan baiThe sa(n)t sabhaa jaikaaro ||
tis aagai raharaas hamaaree saachaa apar apaaro ||
masatak kaaT dharee tis aagai tan man aagai dheau ||
naanak sa(n)t milai sach paieeaaai sahaj bhai jas leau ||
kiaa bhavereeai sach soochaa hoi ||
saach sabadh bin mukat na koi ||
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

In the company of the 'Siddhs' (ascetics), greetings are offered to the saintly congregation.

We offer salutations to the Divine, the True infinite and incomparable essence.

I submit the ego, body and mind.

Nanak says, in the company of the humble, Truth is obtained through inner acceptance.

What is the use of wandering around? Purity comes only through Truth.
Without understanding this wisdom, spiritual liberation can't be attained.
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, liberation is attained in company of those who have satiated their impulses and have obtained spiritual acclamation through innate knowledge.

We now visit Lake Mansarovar which is in close proximity to Mount Kailash.

Amardeep Singh: Mansarovar Lake at the height of 15,000 feet is the world's highest fresh water lake. The word 'Mansarovar' is made up of two words, 'Manas' and 'Sarovar'. 'Manas' means the mind and 'Sarovar' means the lake. The fresh and calm water of this lake evokes a feeling of peace, tranquility and divinity. It is for this reason that Mansarovar Lake in the scriptures, is associated with the human strife for the positive attributes.

Ancient scriptures mention that white swans residing in Lake Mansarovar remain focused in searching for jewels believed to be hidden in these tranquil waters. This mythology reminds me of Guru Nanak's verse.

gur saravar ham ha(n)s piaare ||
saagar meh ratan laal bahu saare ||
motee maanak heeraa har jas gaavat man tan bheenaa he ||
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

Spiritual wisdom is the sacred pool and we are the swans of the Beloved.
In the worldly ocean, there are many philosophies, akin to precious jewels.
Spiritual wisdom, akin to pearls, rubies and diamonds, drenches the mind and body with
Divinity.
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, the guiding force which dispels ignorance is a sacred pond and the seeker is a devoted swan in search of learning opportunities, which are akin to rare precious jewels.

Adherents of the Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Bon faiths circumambulate Lake Mansarovar as part of their pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. They believe the waters of Mansarovar have healing powers and therefore take a dip in the lake to purge their soul of sins and their bodies of sickness.

We visit Lake Rakshash in close proximity to Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar.

Amardeep Singh: At a height of 14,000 feet, Rakshash Taal is in close proximity to Mount Kailash and the Mansarovar Lake. The word Rakshash Taal comprises of 'Rakshash' which means a demon and 'Taal' which means a lake. In stark contrast to the

Mansarovar Lake, the brackish salt water of the Rakshash Taal does not support any life form. It is for this reason that in the scriptures, the Rakshash Taal is metaphorically represented to reflect the negative qualities of human life.

It is believed that even sight of this lake brings ill-luck and sorrow. Pilgrims visiting Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar thus consider Rakshash Taal as inauspicious.

gaaveeaaai suneeaaai man rakheeaai bhaau ||
dhukh parahar sukh ghar lai jai ||
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Sing, listen and in the consciousness, retain the spiritual essence.
Pain will dispel and peace will reside within.
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Myths ascribe some physical elements as demonic forces which inflict sorrow. Guru Nanak says, demons are instead negativities that reside within. These can be dispelled by sharing, imbibing and harbouring positive intentions which in turn bring peace and joy.

From Mount Kailash, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana headed north to Pangong Lake and travelling along its bank, entered Ladakh in India and reached Leh.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps in Tibet, we travel to Pangong Lake on the Indo-Tibetan border.

Amardeep Singh: Pangong Tso is a 136 kilometer lake at a height of 14,000 feet and it stands divided between Ladakh in India and Tibet in China. Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana exited Tibet, passing through the area of Pangong Tso lake.

Along the banks of Pangong Lake, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to the city of Leh, in Ladakh.

In present times, due to political reasons, it is not possible to cross the Indo-Tibetan border. Hence, we travel to mainland China and fly to India to continue retracing the footsteps from Leh.

Leh is the capital of Ladakh in India. Tibetan Buddhism is the predominant religion of this region. In the Tibetan language, the term 'Rinpoche' means a 'precious jewel'. It is an honorific title for any individual with spiritual authority. In Ladakh, Guru Nanak is referred as Rinpoche Nanak.

We visit Datun Sahib Gurdwara, built adjacent to the Jama Masjid in the 20th century. It commemorates Guru Nanak's visit to Leh. The narrative associated with this site does not find mention in any of the earliest 'Janamsakhis'. According to the narrative mentioned

on the guide boards of this gurdwara, a tooth brush tree known as ‘Datun’ was planted by Guru Nanak at the site. However, according to native Ladakhi tradition, this tree was planted in the 17th century by Stagsang Raspa, the founder and Head Lama of the Hemis Monastery. King Sengele Namgyal, a devout Buddhist, is said to have selected the location for planting this tree in the city center. It is ambiguous as to how and when the association of this tree with Guru Nanak was established.

We now visit Gurdwara Pathar Sahib which is located besides the Leh-Nimu Road at a distance of 20 kilometers from Leh. This gurdwara is established at a site where once existed a large boulder which the local Buddhists revered by covering with prayer flags.

In the mid-1970s, during the construction of the Leh-Nimu Road, respecting the sentiments of the natives, the Border Roads Organization of the Indian Army took a decision to keep the boulder intact. Thereafter, a Sikh soldier who had been deputed for the road construction project, claimed to have dreamt that this boulder was sanctified by Guru Nanak. This seeded the foundation of the Gurdwara Pathar Sahib. Since then, this site has expanded and continues to be maintained by the Indian Army. According to the narrative associated with this site, which finds no mention in the ‘Janamsakhis’, a demon residing on top of the adjacent hill, hurled a boulder at Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana. The narrative goes on to say that with Guru Nanak’s touch, the boulder softened and an impression of the Guru’s back was imprinted on it.

While Guru Nanak’s philosophy has the intensity to literally leave an impression on the mindset to transform it from being dogmatic to pragmatic, yet, the depths of his messages have been overshadowed by narratives anchored in the transformation of physical objects. In my humble opinion, the utmost respect for Guru Nanak is given when the intent of his philosophical messages are understood.

hukam sin(j)aapai saeh kaa piaare sach milai vaddiaaiee hoi ||
(Guru Nanak, Raag Sorath)

When the laws of Supreme energy are realized, O beloved, truth is recognized and
honour is gained.
(Guru Nanak, Raag Sorath)

During Guru Nanak’s times, followers of Bharthari Nath, the 10th century saint, resided in these mountainous regions as they considered them as the celestial abode of the Divine. In a discourse, Guru Nanak reminded them that the entire universe is the celestial abode of the Divine.

a(n)tar baahar avar na koi ||
jo tis bhaavai so fun hoi ||
sun bharathar naanak kahai beechaar ||
niramal naam meraa aadhaar ||

(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Inwardly and outwardly, there is none other.
Whatever is the will of nature, ultimately transpires.
Listen, O Bharthari Yogi, Nanak speaks after much deliberation. Immaculate thought is
my primary support.
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

From Leh, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled on a route along the River Indus to Skardu.

In present times, due to political reasons, it is not possible to cross the Indo-Pak border from this region. Hence, we travel to Punjab, cross the border at Wagah and resume tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps from 'Zero Point' at the Indo-Pak border in the Pakistan state of Baltistan.

Amardeep Singh: In the easternmost region of Baltistan in Pakistan, we are standing at what is known as the 'Zero Point'. Here flows the Indus River, which comes from India, and the mountain ranges behind us connect to the Nubra Valley in India. Baltistan, the region once comprised of Kargil and Skardu. It today stands divided between the two sovereign nations, India and Pakistan. Baltistan nurtures varied seasons, landscapes and ancient cultures. It experiences sub-zero winters, scorching summer sun. It has cold deserts and witnesses colorful blossoms. It comprises of snow-capped peaks and arid mountains, frozen glaciers and flowing rivers. This terrain manifests the potential for spiritual learning through the nature.

Guru Nanak sings in reverence of the One unifying force,

koT koTee meree aarajaa pavan peean apiaau ||
cha(n)dh sooraj dhui gufai na dhekhaa supanai saun na thaau ||
bhee teree keemat naa pavai hau kevadd aakhaa naau ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

If I live for millions and millions of years, surviving only by consuming air.
Never see the Sun or Moon and live in a cave. Never sleep even in dreams.
Even then, the value of the Omnipresent can't be estimated. How can I describe the
greatness of the glory of the Omnipresence?
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

According to Guru Nanak even the most profound expressions that try to quantify the bounties of nature can't approximate the worth and glory of its Creator.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, from 'Zero Point', we travel along the River Indus to the city of Skardu.

During the journey, we saw construction workers building a bridge over the River Indus. Observing their colossal effort, I was reminded of Guru Nanak's verse.

neet neet ghar baa(n)dhe'eeh je rahanaa hoiee ||
(Raag Asa Kafi, Guru Nanak)

Every moment you accumulate material wealth, not realizing the impermanence.
(Raag Asa Kafi, Guru Nanak)

It is painful to witness man-made divisions of the lands created by the Creator. Revered saints toil hard to build bridges of love to unite people, while myopic political interests create wedges of disconnect amongst people. Guru Nanak reminds us that worldly desires and material accumulations will perish; only bridges of unity will last.

Skardu, the capital of Baltistan, is situated along the banks of the River Indus at the height of 7,310 feet. Nestled between the Karakoram and the Himalayan mountain ranges, the city is located on the ancient trade routes connecting Central Asia with China. It is home to one of the highest cold deserts, which stretches from Skardu in Pakistan to the Nubra Valley in India. Historically, Baltistan was a melting point of many faiths. The Buddhist rock engravings is an evidence of the diversity of the past. In present times, this region is entirely Islamic.

Wandering through such harsh terrains, there are moments when I sink in the sands of despair. In elation I scale mountains of joy and in delusions I wander in the forest of doubt. I often wonder, how did Guru Nanak manage physical and emotional hardships during his travels?

bhoolee bhoolee thal chaRaa thal chaR ddoogar jaau ||
ban meh bhoolee je firaa bin gur boojh na paau ||
naavahu bhoolee je firaa fir fir aavau jaau ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

In ignorance, I wander through the deserts. I climb plateaus and mountains.
In ignorance, I wander in the forests. Without spiritual guidance, I cannot understand the essence of wisdom.

Forgetting to contemplate, if I wander, I shall remain entrapped in the cycle of wandering here and there.
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, 'Guru', the experiential guiding force, helps overcome physical and emotional challenges.

Amardeep Singh: In the heart of Skardu town, close to River Indus, we are standing in front of the remains of Skardu Gurdwara. The Sikhs started moving to the region of Baltistan after it became a part of the Lahore Darbar in 1841. The community thereafter built this gurdwara in memory of Guru Nanak's visit to Skardu.

After the exodus of Guru Nanak's followers from Baltistan during the partition of 1947, the Skardu Gurdwara has not been able to withstand the harsh weather conditions of this region.

rut aaieele saras basa(n)t maeh ||
ra(n)g raate raveh s terai chai ||
kis pooj chaRaavau lagau pai ||
(Raag Basant, Guru Nanak)

The most delightful season of spring has arrived.
Those imbued with the colours of love, shall be reciprocated with love.
What else shall I worship? At whose feet should I bow?
(Raag Basant, Guru Nanak)

Taking the example of 'Basant', the season of spring, Guru Nanak advises us to emerge from the coldness of disunion and spring a hope for a harmonious future.

From Skardu, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled southwards on the ancient trade route and reached Kargil.

Political policies in present times allow access to geographical borders only at designated areas. Hence, we travel to Punjab, cross the border at Wagah and resume tracing Guru Nanak's travels from Kargil in India.

Kargil is situated on the banks of the Suru River, close to the 'Line of Control' between India and Pakistan.

During Guru Nanak's visit to Kargil, it was under the rule of the Balti dynasty of Skardu.

Gurdwara Charan Kamal Sahib in Kargil is a memorial of Guru Nanak's visit to this region. This gurdwara is maintained by the Indian Army.

From Kargil, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled south to Mattan in the Anantnag district of Kashmir.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Kargil to Mattan and visit the ruins of the ancient 8th century Martand Temple, which is dedicated to 'Surya', the Hindu Sun deity.

The name of the region of 'Anantnag' is derived from the words 'Anant', meaning infinite and 'Nag', which alludes to two mythical representations, the serpent of Lord Shiva and the land of countless water springs. The waters of these springs are believed to have healing properties.

During Guru Nanak's time, the Martand Sun Temple was an important place of Hindu pilgrimage.

At a short distance from the Martand temple, we visit the village of Mattan.

Since ancient times, it was an important place for pilgrimage for Hindus. For generations, the Kashmiri priests at the Martand Temple would interact with the pilgrims to compile their genealogy. The political unrest of the 1990s created an ethnic divide in Kashmir, due to which the native Hindu community made a mass exodus from this region. With their dispersal, the tradition of chronicling family ancestry has dissipated from Mattan.

Mattan was once famous for its rich cultural and communal harmony and fellowship amongst native Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

Here, a Hindu Temple and a Gurdwara exist in the same premises. This gurdwara is dedicated to Guru Nanak's visit to Mattan.

During his visit to Mattan, Guru Nanak interacted with Brahm Das, a Hindu Priest, who owned a large repository of scriptures. He was famous for initiating dialogue to demonstrate scholarly knowledge. According to the 'Vilayatwali Janamsakhi', in a discussion with Brahm Das, Guru Nanak sang,

aapeen(h)ai aap saaj aap pachhaaniaa ||
a(n)bar dharat vichhoR cha(n)dhoaa taaniaa ||
vin tha(n)m(h)aa gagan rahai sabadh neesaaniaa ||
sooraj cha(n)dh upai jot samaaniaa ||
(Raag Malar, Guru Nanak)

Itself, it created itself. Itself, it recognizes itself.
Separating the sky and the earth, it has spread out its canopy.
Without pillars, it supports the sky. Through wisdom it is recognized.
Creating the Sun and the Moon, it has infused light within.
(Raag Malar, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, the most scholarly knowledge is gained by imbibing the virtues of Oneness.

During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule, Hari Singh Nalwa, the Governor of Kashmir, had presented handwritten copies of 'Guru Granth Sahib', the Sikh scripture, which are still kept in the Mattan Gurdwara.

From Mattan, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Srinagar.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Mattan to Srinagar, the erstwhile summer capital of the Jammu and Kashmir state.

Located on the banks of the Jhelum River, the valley of Srinagar is spanned by clear water lakes, the most famous of them being the Dal Lake.

Bhai Kahan Singh mentions in 'Gurshabad Ratnakar' that Guru Nanak during his stay in Srinagar visited the Shiva Temple situated on Shankaracharya Hill and had discourses with 'Jogis' (ascetics) of the 'Shaivite' order. This temple dates back to 200 BC and was historically known as Jyestheshvara Temple. Since the visit of the 8th century South Indian philosopher, Adi Shankaracharya, it has been popularly known as the Shankaracharya Temple. Adi Shankaracharya was an exponent of 'Advait Vedant', a philosophy based on the principle of non-duality. The followers of 'Vedant' believe in 'Aham Brahmasami', which means 'I am Divine'.

Guru Nanak too was an exponent of 'non-duality', however he chose to convey the essence of Oneness in utmost humility by using the term 'Sohum', which means 'the Divine resides within me'.

soha(n) aap pachhaaneeai sabadh bhedh pateesai ||
gurmukh aap pachhaaneeai avar k kare karai ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Those who recognize that the cosmic energy resides within, realize the essence of spiritual words are satisfied.

The spiritually aware recognize themselves. After that, there is nothing more to do to understand.

(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Discussion Pointers

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels **Episode 18: Sumeru (Consciousness)**

The discussion points offer a framework for exploring the historical context and philosophical depth of Guru Nanak's journey through the Himalayas and Tibet. By examining the interplay between his physical travels and spiritual messages, we gain insight into how geographical and cultural diversity influenced his universal message. The questions prompt critical thinking about how Guru Nanak engaged with different religious traditions, challenged conventional practices, and offered alternative perspectives on material wealth, ritualism, asceticism, and non-duality. His journey demonstrates a profound approach to interfaith dialogue that emphasises experiential wisdom over dogma, social engagement over withdrawal, and humility in expressing divine oneness. The messages he delivered across diverse landscapes, from Lahore to Mount Kailash, continue to provide valuable insights for navigating religious and cultural plurality in our contemporary world.

Historical Discussion Pointers:

1. What was the timeline and geographical extent of Guru Nanak's second odyssey through the Himalayan region?

The episode indicates that Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana embarked on their second odyssey around 1517 AD, traveling from Nankana Sahib (Talwandi) through numerous locations including Lahore, Kiratpur, Jawala Ji, Baijnath, Parvati Valley, Spiti Valley, crossing the Shipki Pass into Tibet, visiting Tsaparang, Mount Kailash, Pangong Lake, Leh, Skardu, Kargil, Mattan, and Srinagar. This extensive journey took them through multiple kingdoms, diverse terrains, and across what are now international borders. How might this arduous journey have influenced Guru Nanak's messages and interactions with different communities?

2. What significance do we find in Guru Nanak's visits to multiple sacred sites across different faith traditions?

The episode illustrates Guru Nanak's journey through diverse religious sites, including the Jawalamukhi and Martand Sun Temple. His interactions with Buddhist practitioners in Tibet and conversations with Muslim saints like Pir Buddhan Shah emphasize a profound commitment to interfaith dialogue, illustrating that the pursuit of universal truth knows no boundaries and has the power to unite all of humanity. What does this pattern of visiting diverse religious sites reveal about Guru Nanak's approach to interfaith understanding and his message of true spirituality?

3. How reliable are the accounts of Guru Nanak's visits to various sites, considering the discrepancies in historical documentation?

The episode highlights narratives associated with Guru Nanak's visits, such as those at Manikaran, Gurdwara Pathar Sahib in Leh, and Kiratpur, that are not mentioned in the earliest 'Janamsakhis' (hagiographies). What methodological approaches might historians employ to verify these oral traditions? How should we interpret locations where evolving narratives have shaped the prevailing story?

4. What does the historical transformation of the Guge Kingdom reveal about the cultural context that Guru Nanak encountered in Tsaparang?

The document describes the Guge Kingdom as perched on a pyramid-shaped rocky ridge comprising a multi-leveled settlement that later disappeared mysteriously in the 17th century. During Guru Nanak's visit, this region was experiencing an evolution, the result of an amalgamation of diverse and new belief systems and cultures. How might this cultural melting pot have provided a unique opportunity for Guru Nanak's message?

Philosophical Discussion Pointers:

1. How did Guru Nanak's encounter with Duni Chand shed light on his profound understanding of materialism and wealth accumulation?

In Lahore, Guru Nanak handed Duni Chand a needle to keep it safe and carry it on after his death. This act illustrated that hoarding is pointless, as nothing can be taken with us after we die. Guru Nanak sang a verse suggesting that the wealthy ultimately die, regardless of how much wealth and riches they have amassed. He expressed a pursuit of the wealth of profound contemplation. How does this interaction reveal Guru Nanak's alternative view of true wealth and prosperity?

2. What philosophical insights into ritualism can be gained from Guru Nanak's critique of the 'Shradh' ceremony?

When invited to 'Shradh,' a ritual ceremony for feeding priests in honour of ancestors, Guru Nanak explained that true homage to ancestors is in respecting them while they are still alive. He sang a verse that stated rituals are merely clever tricks that mask true intentions; however, the omnipresent energy is aware of everything. How does this perspective challenge the conventional religious practices of his time, as well as those of our own?

3. How does Guru Nanak's insights at Jawalamukhi Temple about fire worship reflect his broader view on symbolic versus substantive spirituality?

At the Jawalamukhi Temple, where fire is worshipped, it is stated that Guru Nanak interpreted fire as a symbolic representation of illuminating the mind with the flame of knowledge. He composed a verse expressing that his purpose is to contemplate daily and highlighted that deep within us resides awareness, similar to the illumination of

the Sun. What does this reveal about Guru Nanak's approach to symbolic religious practices?

4. What philosophical stance toward asceticism emerges from Guru Nanak's discourse with the Siddhs at Mount Kailash?

The episode notes that while the Siddhs preferred withdrawing from society and family life to realize divinity, Guru Nanak believed that spiritual heights could be attained even while fulfilling social and household responsibilities. He questioned why they remained isolated when sharing their wisdom could benefit society. How does this challenge conventional notions of spiritual pursuit requiring withdrawal from worldly affairs?

5. How does Guru Nanak encourage respectful discussion on challenging religious aspects?

At Mount Kailash, before initiating a philosophical dialogue, Guru Nanak and the 'Siddhs' paid obeisance to each other, highlighting a crucial first principle for meaningful meetings. This mutual acknowledgment established a foundation of respect that preceded any intellectual exchange or potential disagreement. What principles can we apply from this interaction to having meaningful meetings and engagements in contemporary times?

6. How does Guru Nanak's concept of 'Sohum' represent a distinctive approach to non-duality?

The episode contrasts the Advait Vedant philosophy of 'Aham Brahmasmi' (I am Divine) with Guru Nanak's concept of 'Sohum' (the Divine resides within me), noting that Guru Nanak chose to convey the essence of Oneness in utmost humility. What philosophical nuances and implications arise from this distinction in expressing non-duality?

7. How do metaphors related to nature enhance the understanding of Guru Nanak's philosophy as he embarks on his transformative journey through the Himalayas?

Throughout the episode, Guru Nanak uses natural elements as metaphors to express his thoughts. e represents the calm water of Lake Mansarovar as a symbol of peace and tranquillity, while the brackish water of Lake Rakshash symbolizes negative qualities; swans searching for jewels in the water represent the pursuit of spiritual wisdom. How do these nature-based insights reflect Guru Nanak's philosophy of finding spiritual wisdom in the natural world?