

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 21: Wahdat-al-Wajud (Unity of Existence)

'Wahdat-al-Wajud', 'Unity of Existence', presents the resolute harmonizers conviction in wholeness. In the cradle of civilizations, Guru Nanak states that awareness of Omnipresence is an oasis that can quench the soul.

mere saahibaa kaun jaanai gun tere ||
kahe na jaanee aaugan mere ||
(Raag Gauri Cheti, Guru Nanak)

My Omnipresent master, who can know your glorious virtues?
My demerits cannot be counted.
(Raag Gauri Cheti, Guru Nanak)

One can feel Guru Nanak's profound humility through expressions in his verses for he understates himself and glorifies the attributes of the Creator and its creation. On the contrary, I have a tendency of overrating my personality and noticing demerits in others.

From Somiani, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to the ancient port of Al-Aswat, Mecca, Medina, Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, Tabriz, Tehran and reached Mashhad. From Somiani, they sailed to Al-Aswat, and then proceeded to Mecca.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia.

Amardeep Singh: Saudi Arabia hosts the holiest Islamic cities of Mecca and Medina. With the birth of Prophet Mohammad, Islam emerged in these lands in the 7th century.

The modern day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, founded in the year 1932, comprises of the two historical desert regions of Hejaz and Nejd. Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula.

Amardeep Singh: Having travelled for days on rough seas, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana landed at the port of Al-Aswat in Saudi Arabia. From here they took the land route, crossing harsh and hot sand dunes and reached the city of Mecca.

The word 'Mecca' is believed to be a synonym for 'Makkah' which means, mother of all settlements. Located in a desert valley, this city was a commercial hub much before it became the holiest place of pilgrimage for the Muslims in the 7th century AD. The 1st century Greek writer Ptolemy refers to the city as Makoraba.

'Kaabah', the cube shaped structure in the center of the most sacred mosque in Mecca, is considered by Muslims as 'Baitullah', the house of God. During ancient times, before

the advent of Islam, various tribes of the Arabian Peninsula would congregate to worship idols installed inside the 'Kaabah'. These were removed by Prophet Muhammad, the messenger of Islam, who lived from 570 to 632 AD. 'Hajar-ul-Aswad', the 'Black Stone', is an ancient rock which was venerated since the pre-Islamic times. It was set on the eastern wall of the 'Kaabah' by Prophet Muhammad and is a holy Islamic relic.

Muslims aspire to perform 'Haj', a pilgrimage to Mecca once during their lifetime. As a part of Islamic ritual, pilgrims circumambulate the 'Kaabah' and pay respect to 'Hajar-ul-Aswad', the 'Black Stone'.

The word 'Haj' originates from Semitic languages. In Hebrew, it is related to the word 'Haqqa' which corresponds to righteousness. In Arabic, it connotes an effort to go for an expedition. Thus 'Haj' represents the self-effort to embark on an internal spiritual journey.

One day, during their stay in Mecca, while Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana were asleep, they were awakened by Jiwan, a 'Haji', who rebuked them for sleeping with their feet pointing towards the direction of the 'Kaabah'. The Arabic word 'Qibla' denotes the fixed direction of the 'Kaabah'. Muslims consider pointing one's feet towards 'Qibla' as disrespectful.

Guru Nanak with his rational disposition reminded Jiwan about the Islamic philosophy of 'Al-Waasa' which means that the Divine manifests in all directions.

Guru Nanak's hagiographies, the 'Janamsakhis' and Bhai Gurdas's 'Vaar' mention that when Jiwan moved Guru Nanak's legs in anger, the 'Kaabah' followed the same direction. Interestingly, a narrative involving the 'Kaabah' moving is also associated with Hazrat Rabi'a al-Basri, a female Muslim Sufi Saint. In my humble view, the narrative of the physical movement of the 'Kaabah' is a metaphor for Omnipresence.

At Mecca, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana reunited with Makhdum Bahavadi of Multan and Makhdum Haji Abdul Sheikh Bukhari of Uch, who had parted at Shikarpur in Sindh and taken the land route to reach Mecca. While camping together with the Makhdums of Multan and Uch, some 'Hajis' asked Guru Nanak about his religious affiliations. In reply, Guru Nanak sang,

kesar kusam miragamai haranaa sarab sareeree chaR(h)naa ||
cha(n)dhan bhagataa jot inehee sarabe paramal karanaa ||
ghia paT bhaa(n)ddaa kahai na koi ||
aaisaa bhagat varan meh hoi ||
terai naam nive rahe liv lai ||
naanak tin dhar bheekhiaa pai ||
(Raag Tilang, Guru Nanak)

Saffron, flowers and musk oil can embellish the body.

Akin to sandalwood, a devotee's qualities are such that they impart its fragrance onto everyone.

As clarified butter or silk are not contaminated, similarly, a devotee remains untouched by caste, religion or status. They bow in contemplation and remain absorbed in self-reflection. Nanak says, he begs for charity at their door.
(Raag Tilang, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak endorses the philosophy of love for humanity over religious associations.

Qazi Rukn-ud-din, the arbiter of the 'Sharia', the Islamic court in Mecca, expressed that the Islamic path is the most superior and invited Guru Nanak to embrace Muslim protocols. In response, Guru Nanak sang,

mihar maseet sidhak musalaa hak halaal kuraan ||
saram su(n)nat seel rojaa hoh musalamaan ||
karanee kaabaa sach peer kalamaa karam nivaaaj ||
tasabee saa tis bhaavasee naanak rakhai laaj ||
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

Make mercy the mosque, faith a prayer-mat and honest living the 'Quran'.
Make modesty the circumcision and good conduct as a fast. These are the qualities of being a Muslim.

Make good conduct the 'Kaabah', honesty the spiritual guide and actions of good deeds as prayer and chanting.

Carry such a rosary which is pleasing to your consciousness. Nanak says, only then can the honour be preserved.
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak expressed the importance of virtuous living over mere adherence to ritualism. Speaking metaphorically, he told the Qazi to revere compassion as a mosque, spread trust like spreading of the prayer mat, acquire righteous earnings as the teaching of the Quranic scripture, imbibe modesty as circumcision, savour pure intentions as fasting and let positive deeds be the 'Kaabah'.

In the footsteps of Guru Nanak, having been exposed to diverse thoughts, I often ponder, concepts that are considered important at a time, were not significant in the past and will transform in the future. Guru Nanak says, in this cosmic arena, everything is subject to evolution.

naa ko mulaa naa ko kaajee ||
naa ko sekh masaik haajee ||
rieet raau na haumai dhuneeaa naa ko kahan kahaidhaa ||
naanak saach rate bisamaadhee bisam bhe gun gaidhaa ||

(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

There was no priest. There was no judge.
There was no scholar, spiritual guide, or pilgrim.
There were no subjects or rulers, no worldly ego; no one spoke and boasted about
themselves.
Nanak says, those attuned to Truth, attain bliss. In delight, they resonate with the
attributes of Divinity.
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

Travelling on the desert route, from Mecca, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana headed north to Medina.

Medina, also known as Al-Madinah, which means the luminous city in Arabic, is considered after Mecca as the second holiest site by Muslims. It is a desert oasis in western Saudi Arabia surrounded by the Hejaz Mountains and volcanic hills. Before the advent of Islam, it was known as Yathrib.

In the city center is the mosque Masjid Al-Nabawi, where Prophet Muhammad, the messenger of Islam is buried. For Muslims, it is an important place of pilgrimage.

Religious segregation is a social phenomenon. For ages, non-Muslims have not been allowed to visit the city of Mecca and the Masjid Al-Nabawi in Medina. Guru Nanak, the epitome of Oneness, was beyond the boundaries of religious mandates. As he did not proclaim alliance to any sect, he would consciously dress in a manner that allowed him to assimilate with natives. This facilitated better communication. Since the news of Guru Nanak's visit to Mecca had travelled ahead, Bhai Mardana, who was a Muslim by faith, anticipated obstacles ahead. He visited the Masjid Al-Nabawi at Medina to gauge the situation. Thereafter, he took Guru Nanak with him to visit the site to interact with the congregations.

dheval dhevatiaa kar laagaa aaisee keerat chaalee ||
(Raag Basant Hindol, Guru Nanak)

The places of worship are subject to taxes; this is the new way of the world.
(Raag Basant Hindol, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak, an advocate of Oneness, saw restrictions and penalties for access to religious sites as discrimination amongst humanity.

During the course of our journey, our team comprising of people from diverse faiths encountered restrictions to access places of worship because of their respective beliefs. At Hindu sites, Muslim members of our team were not permitted, similar to non-Muslims not being permitted to visit Mecca and Medina. Unfortunately, society remains fragmented

despite the high ideals of enlightened beings who inspire and practice the unity of humanity. I am reminded of Guru Nanak's verse,

gala(n)ee asee cha(n)geehaa aachaaree bureehaaeh ||
manahu kusudhaa kaaleehaa baahar chiTaveehaaeh ||
reesaa kareh tinaaReehaa jo seveh dhar khaReehaaeh ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

With words we are good but in actions we are negative.
Within mind we remain impure but outwardly project purity.
Yet, we equate ourselves with those who are truly divine.
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

From Medina, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana took the desert caravan route to Najaf. This route was developed for pilgrims by Begum Zubaida, wife of Caliph Harun Rashid.

We fly from Saudi Arabia to Iraq and resume tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps from Najaf.

The city of Najaf is located approximately 30 kilometers south of the ancient city of Babylon. This city was established in 791 AD by Abbasid Caliph Harun Rashid in memory of Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, Hazarat Ali, who is buried at the Imam Ali Mosque. This grand structure with a gold gilded dome is a center of pilgrimage for Muslims who consider it as the third holiest Islamic site.

Wadi-us-Salaam, meaning the valley of peace in Arabic, is the largest cemetery in the world. Members of the Shia community from across the world aspire to be buried in this cemetery which is close to the mausoleum of Imam Ali. It is believed, on the day of judgement, the ones buried here will be raised along with their spiritual leader.

I reflect that humans worry to secure a place in heaven after death and forget the importance of living a meaningful life.

miTee musalamaan kee peRai piee kumi(h)aar ||
ghaR bhaa(n)dde iTaa keehaa jaladhee kare pukaar ||
jal jal rovai bapuRee jhaR jhaR paveh a(n)giaar ||
naanak jin karatai kaaran keehaa so jaanai karataar ||
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Mud from the graves of the Muslims will also reach the potter's wheel.
It will also be moulded into pots and bricks to be baked in the kiln.
Simmering in fire of ego, humans weep as the fiery coal of self-reflection fall upon them.
Nanak says, the One who created the creation, is aware of its creation.
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Whether cremated or buried, the body eventually becomes mud, which reaches the potter's urn to create pots and bricks for the houses of people of any belief system. The human body discriminates only when alive.

From Najaf, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana proceeded to Karbala, which is at a distance of 75 kilometers.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Najaf to Karbala.

Located on the west of the River Euphrates, Karbala is a city in central Iraq to the southwest of Baghdad.

Amardeep Singh: We are in the holy city of Karbala, the martyrdom and the resting place of Imam Husayn, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad. Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana, on their way to Baghdad, passed through the city of Karbala.

The famous battle of Karbala which took place in 680 AD is an important incident in Islamic history. Its outcome resulted in the relationship between the two most prominent sects of Islam; the Shiites and the Sunnis. Minute details of the battle of Karbala became the hallmark of the Shiite faith and culture. Pilgrims visit the tomb of Karbala to observe 'Ashura', which marks the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his supporters during the battle of Karbala.

The sacrifice of Imam Husayn is a testament of his deeply held objective of establishing the foundations of a holistic character of justice and freedom over tyranny and subjugation. In reverence for the martyrs, devotees indulge in self-mutilation rituals, lamenting and cursing the slayers.

rab kee rajai ma(n)ne sir upar karataa ma(n)ne aap gavaavai ||
tau naanak sarab jeeaa mihara(n)mat hoi ta musalamaan kahaavai ||
(Majh, Guru Nanak)

Surrendering and respectfully obeying the will of nature, one gets rid of self-conceit. Nanak says, only when compassionate to all beings can one be called a Muslim. Raag
(Majh, Guru Nanak)

A true homage to martyrdom is achieved by mutilating ego, lamenting for love and cursing disrespect for self and others. Guru Nanak says, the one who lives in the will of Almighty and is merciful is worthy of being a Muslim.

From Karbala, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled on the desert route and reached Baghdad.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Karbala to Baghdad.

Amardeep Singh: Iraq is historically known as a cradle of civilizations. Its capital, Baghdad, is nestled between the two rivers, Tigris and Euphrates.

Ibn Batuta, the 13th century traveller, mentions that the travel route from Najaf to Baghdad was a difficult path. Historic texts mention that Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana took the same path.

Bhai Gurdas writes in his 'Vaar' that on reaching Baghdad, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana rested at a place outside the city.

fir baabaa giaa bagadhaadh no baahar jai keeaa asathaanaa ||
eik baabaa akaal roop dhoojaa rabaabee maradhaanaa ||
(Bhai Gurdas)

Then Baba went to Baghdad and stayed outside the city.
One was Baba like the Divine and the other, Mardana, the 'Rabab' player.
(Bhai Gurdas)

During Guru Nanak's visit to Baghdad, the city was a part of the Persian Empire under the Iranian Shiite ruler, Shah Ismail of the Safavid dynasty. In Islamic history, this period is considered a turbulent one due to the increased conflicts between Shiite and Sunni Muslims as each sect had started asserting their political and religious authority.

Reflecting on the divisions within faiths, I am reminded of Guru Nanak's verse,

musalamaan kahaavan musakal jaa hoi taa musalamaan kahaavai ||
aval aaul dheen kar miThaa masakal maanaa maal musaavai ||
hoi musulim dheen muhaanai maran jeevan kaa bharam chukaavai ||
rab kee rajai ma(n)ne sir upar karataa ma(n)ne aap gavaavai ||
tau naanak sarab jeeaa mihara(n)mat hoi ta musalamaan kahaavai ||
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

It is not easy to be called a Muslim. Only if earnest can one be called a Muslim.
First, reverse the spiritual teachings in humility. Scrape away ego and let the desire for material wealth be effaced.

In becoming a true Muslim, deem righteousness as the spiritual leader and put aside the delusion of death and life.

Surrender to the will of nature as reverence to the Creator and dispel self-conceit.
Nanak says, only when compassionate to all beings, can one be called a Muslim.
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says associating oneself with a religious sect is easy. The real adherence is in imbibing the essence of the teachings of the faith.

In Baghdad, we visit the seat of the Islamic Sufi 'Qadri' tradition.

Amardeep Singh: We are at the mausoleum of Pir Mohiuddin Abdul Qadir Gilani Sahib in Baghdad. He was the founder of the 'Qadri' sect. When Guru Nanak visited this city, then, Pir Abdul Rehman was the spiritual leader of this shrine. He was known as 'Pir Dastgir', the one who holds the hands for spiritual guidance.

One day, during their stay in Baghdad, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana, while in awe of divinity, were singing a verse which propounded the message of Omnipresence. They expressed that even though the 'Vedas', the Hindu scriptures, say that one can get weary of counting numerous worlds, 'Katebs', the Islamic scriptures, state that there are 18,000 worlds, but there is only One Omnipresent entity and rest is its manifestation.

paataalaa paataal lakh aagaasaa aagaas ||
oRak oRak bhaal thake vedh kahan ik vaat ||
sahas aThaareh kahan katebaa asuloo ik dhaat ||
lekhaa hoi ta likheeaai lekhai hoi vinaas ||
naanak vaddaa aakheeaai aape jaanai aap ||
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

There are nether regions beneath and hundreds of thousands of skies above.
One can search and search for them until one grows weary; the 'Vedas' proclaim.
There are 18,000 worlds as believed in the Islamic scriptures. However, the essence is
One.

If the numbers of the creation were countable, then one would perish scribing them.
Nanak says, call that person great, the one who knows itself.
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Music was considered a taboo by some Islamic religious groups of this region. Perturbed with the blasphemous act, some people complained to Pir Abdul Rehman, the 'Pir Dastgir', who then personally visited Guru Nanak. The two engaged in spiritual dialogue after which 'Pir Dastgir' invited Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana to spend some time with the congregation at the shrine of Pir Mohiuddin Abdul Qadir Gilani.

At this shrine, Guru Nanak met Faqir Bahlool, the spiritual successor of Bahlool Dana, the 8th century spiritual Saint from Kufa. Faqir Bahlool invited Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana to stay with him at his humble abode in the outskirts of Baghdad city.

We now visit the mausoleum of Faqir Bahlool.

Amardeep Singh: We are at the site which was once the operational gurdwara in Baghdad, built in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit as well as his meeting with Sheikh Bahlool. This site is close to the Tigris River and the Baghdad Railway Station.

Punjabi soldiers of the British Indian Army, posted in Baghdad in the early 20th century, built a memorial adjacent to Faqir Bahlool's mausoleum to commemorate Guru Nanak's visit.

Due to the political unrest in Iraq, expats left the country and the gurdwara building was thereafter destroyed in the 2003 Iraq war. We meet Abu Yousuf, whose grandfather was a caretaker of the gurdwara when it was operational.

Abu Yousuf: My Grandfather used to serve at this gurdwara. After him, I continued to serve here. After the events of 2003 (Iraq War) some bomb shells fell on the site of Baba Nanak and also impacted the adjacent tomb of Bahlool-Al-Kufi. Greater damage was caused on the site of Baba Nanak. You can see the present condition of the site.

Amardeep Singh: This is the platform on which, I am told, the 'Guru Granth Sahib' used to be enshrined and behind us on this wall, there used to be a plaque, on which was described the history of this place.

Good times and challenging times are all transient. Experiencing Abu Yousuf's warmth and his love for Guru Nanak, I have hope that Guru Nanak's memories which have been erased due to the turbulent times will be re-established when peace returns in this region.

aakhan vekhan bolan chalan jeevan maranaa dhaat ||
hukam saaj hukamai vich rakhai naanak sachaa aap ||
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

Talking, seeing, speaking, walking, living and dying, all these are transitory.
Law of nature creates and nurtures. Nanak says, this itself is the Truth.
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

From Baghdad, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled north-east by land to Tabriz.

We travel from Iraq to Iran and resume tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps from Tabriz.

Iran is bordered to the northwest by Armenia and Azerbaijan, to the north by the Caspian Sea, to the northeast by Turkmenistan, to east by Afghanistan and to the southeast by Pakistan. In the 16th century, the commonly traversed route from Baghdad to Tehran was through the city of Tabriz in East Azerbaijan Province of northwestern Iran. The Moroccan explorer, Ibn-Batuta, who travelled to this region a century before Guru Nanak, wrote that Tabriz was then the capital town of the Mongols and was a commercial hub as it was located on the Silk Road.

Amardeep Singh: At the time when Guru Nanak travelled through this region, it was known as Persia. The people of this region at that time, as much as today, practice Islam.

In Tabriz, we were unable to find any physical memories associated with Guru Nanak's visit.

In the 19th century, a syncretic community of Guru Nanak's adherents from Multan and Sindh in Pakistan had settled in this region as traders. They would hold spiritual congregations at the Ateshgah, the Fire Temple in the city of Baku in Azerbaijan, a site which was also revered by the Zoroastrians. On the outer walls of the Ateshgah Temple, Guru Nanak's verses are inscribed along with Vedic Mantras. These inscriptions were commissioned by the 'Udasin' (ascetic) 'Bawa Bankey Sahib'.

From Tabriz, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Tehran.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Tabriz to Tehran.

On reaching Tehran, we visit the gurdwara, which was established in 1941 AD by the adherents of Guru Nanak.

Amardeep Singh: Iran once had a sizeable Sikh population in the cities of Tehran and Zahedan. A community that was sizeable, due to the recent political problems in the region has now reduced to a few hundreds.

The Iranians call this gurdwara, 'Masjid-e-Hindan', the mosque of the people of Hind. Reflecting on the amalgamation of the terms gurdwara and masjid, I am reminded a verse of Guru Nanak in which he says that there are different ways of religious calls from diverse places of worships but only those who listen and imbibe the divinity are the virtuous.

baa(n)gaa buragoo si(n)n(g)eeaa naale milee kalaan ||
eik dhaate ik ma(n)gate naam teraa paravaan ||
naanak jin(h)ee sun kai ma(n)niaa hau tinaa viTahu kurabaan ||
(Raag Suhi, Guru Nanak)

The prayer calls, playing of the flute and blowing of the horns call for well-being.
Some are givers and some are beggars but only those who contemplate are
acceptable.

Nanak says, those who hear and imbibe the wisdom, I am sacrificed unto them.
(Raag Suhi, Guru Nanak)

Daman Singh Bhasin: There is a lot of 'Gurbani' (verses) in 'Guru Granth Sahib' in the Persian language, which proves that he definitely did come to Iran. We have many 'Shabads' (verses). One of them is 'Duniya Mukamey Fani' (The world is a transitory place), which was recited by him and which shows that he was well versed with this area and the language as well.

Guru Nanak being intuitively multilingual, incorporated vernacular dialects of various regions to connect with the local people. In Iran, he sang a verse composed of Persian words.

sab roj gasatam dhar havaa karadhem badhee khiaal ||
gaahe na nekee kaar karadham mam e(n)ee chinee ahavaal ||
badhabakhat ham ch bakheel gaafil benajar bebaak ||
naanak bugoyadh jan turaa tere chaakaraa(n) paa khaak ||
(Raag Tilang, Guru Nanak)

Night and day, I wandered around in greed, contemplating evil schemes.
I never did good deeds. Such is my condition.
I am unfortunate, miserly, negligent, and shameless.
Says Nanak, I am your humble servant. The dust at the feet of your slaves.
(Raag Tilang, Guru Nanak)

In pursuit of finding happiness, humans indulge in greed and evil intentions. In humility, Guru Nanak says, he finds happiness in the feet of those who are inclined towards Divinity.

From Tehran, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Mashhad.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel by train from Tehran to Mashhad.

Amardeep Singh: Ibn Batuta, Marco Polo, Nadir Shah and Alexander, all travelled through these lands, for the purpose of the expansion of their territories or to trade, and the world has heard many narratives about them. Yet, the world is unaware about the travels of Guru Nanak through these lands, while his mission was, essentially, to spread humanity and the Oneness of mankind.

Mashhad is a city located in the north-east of Iran. It is the capital of Razavi Khorasan Province and is a center of religious importance for Shiite Muslims. In reverence of the martyrdom of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia Imam, who died here in 818 AD, the city of Sanabad was renamed to Mashhad, meaning the place of martyrdom.

At Mashhad, we visit the shrine of Imam Reza.

According to 'Bhai Mani Singh Janamsakhi', in Mashhad, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana met Pir Abdul Rahman who was visiting the shrine on a pilgrimage from Gardez, a city in Afghanistan. Impressed by Guru Nanak's ideology of attaching oneself to virtues as opposed to a religious sect, he was curious to know who was more blessed, the Sunnis who believe only in the Prophet Muhammad or the Shias who also have faith in Hazrat Ali.

Giving examples from the Islamic code of conduct, Guru Nanak replied, for him all are equal as the Divine light resides in everyone. Every soul plays a role in impacting his or her surroundings. The enlightened ones are guiding forces to show us how to pave our own chosen path to divinity.

pa(n)j nivaajaa vakhat pa(n)j pa(n)jaa pa(n)je naau ||
pahilaa sach halaal dhui teejaa khair khudhai ||
chauthee neeat raas man pa(n)javee sifat sanai ||
karanee kalamaa aakh kai taa musalamaan sadhai ||
naanak jete kooRiaar kooRai kooRee pai ||
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

There are five Islamic prayers to be read five times a day and each has a name. However, let first be the attribute of honesty. Second, righteousness. Third, altruism. Fourth, the intention of goodwill for all. Fifth, imbibing Oneness. Repeat the prayer of good deeds and only then you may call yourself a Muslim. Nanak says, those who practice falseness only attain falsehood.
(Raag Majh, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak's message was that while the five daily prayers are adhered to by people according to the tenets of Islam, however, a devout Muslim who is true to the faith and truly reveres and honours its mentor, also imbibes the five essences; truthfulness, piety, unity, humility and contemplation.

Historically, Iran's rich culture has been a source of inspiration and influence for many regions.

Dr. Bijan Reza Vala: I am an Iranian who has had the opportunity to spend many years in India and in those many years, I had the opportunity to come across the teachings of different faiths, including the Sikhism, which was the most impressive. The teachings of Guru Nanak Ji, who travelled so extensively at those times. The beauty of Guru Nanak Ji was, he used the Persian to beautify his teachings, which I really appreciate.

Reflecting on the present global politics which has isolated the country, I am reminded of Guru Nanak's message that the human mind in its whirlpool of egoism, becomes incapable of distinguishing between the attributes which benefit or harm society.

cha(n)gaa ma(n)dhaa kichh soojhai naahee ih tan evai khovai ||
(Raag Vadhans, Guru Nanak)

Not distinguishing between positives and negatives, the essence of existence is wasted.
(Raag Vadhans, Guru Nanak)

Discussion Pointers

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The discussion points offer a framework for exploring the historical and philosophical dimensions of Guru Nanak's journeys through a predominantly Islamic region. By examining his interactions with religious authorities and his emphasis on unity amid sectarian tensions; we gain insight into the challenges he faced to create critical thinking amongst people. The philosophical questions highlight Guru Nanak's spiritual revolution, which prioritized ethical living over ritualistic practices and authenticity over outward piety, exemplifying his approach to interfaith engagement during a time of religious conflict. As mentioned in the episode, Guru Nanak's vision focused on spreading humanity and oneness, unlike others who travelled for territorial expansion or trade. By critically examining both the historical context and philosophical content of these travels, we can better appreciate the enduring relevance of Guru Nanak's message in today's divided world.

Historical Discussion Pointers:

1. What makes Guru Nanak's journey through the Islamic heartlands significant?

The episode describes Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana's extensive travels from Somiani to Al-Aswat, Mecca, Medina, Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, Tabriz, Tehran, and Mashhad. As noted in the text, during Guru Nanak's visit to Baghdad, the city was a part of the Persian Empire under the Iranian Shiite ruler, Shah Ismail of the Safavid dynasty. In Islamic history, this period is considered turbulent due to the increased conflicts between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, as each sect had started asserting its political and religious authority. How did Guru Nanak's travels provide opportunities for interfaith dialogue, fostering understanding and connection in a time of division and strife?

2. How did Guru Nanak navigate the religious restrictions and boundaries he encountered during his travels?

The episode highlights an observation that religious segregation is a social phenomenon in which individuals of a specific faith are often excluded from visiting places of worship of other religions. However, it is noteworthy that Guru Nanak, the embodiment of Oneness, operated beyond the confines of religious mandates. He did not align himself with any specific sect and deliberately dressed in a way that allowed him to blend in with the local population. What does this strategic approach to cultural assimilation reveal about Guru Nanak's vision and determination to transcend religious boundaries to spread the message of Oneness?

3. What significant encounters did Guru Nanak have with Islamic scholars and spiritual leaders?

Throughout his journey, Guru Nanak engaged with numerous religious authorities. He had a profound interaction with Qazi Rukn-ud-din, the arbiter of the 'Sharia', the Islamic court in Mecca. In Baghdad, he met Pir Abdul Rehman, the 'Pir Dastgir' and Faqir Bahlool, the spiritual successor of Bahlool Dana. How did these encounters demonstrate Guru Nanak's approach to interfaith dialogue, and what impact might these discussions have had on both Guru Nanak and his interlocutors?

4. Have the physical remnants of Guru Nanak's journey survived over time, or have they been lost?

The episode explores the different outcomes of physical remnants associated with Guru Nanak's travels. In Baghdad, Punjabi soldiers from the British Indian Army, who were stationed there in the early 20th century, constructed a memorial next to Faqir Bahlool's mausoleum to commemorate Guru Nanak's visit. However, due to political unrest in Iraq, many expatriates left the country, resulting in the destruction of the gurdwara during the Iraq War in 2003. In contrast, a gurdwara established in Tehran in 1941 still stands today, despite the significant decline of the Sikh population in Tehran and Zahedan, which has dwindled to just a few hundred due to recent political challenges in the region. What does the preservation or destruction of these sites tell us about the challenges of maintaining interfaith heritage in regions of political instability?

Philosophical Discussion Pointers:

1. How do the concepts of "Wahdat-al-Wajud" and Guru Nanak's vision of the unity of existence challenge the boundaries of traditional religions?

The episode opens with the concept of 'Wahdat-al-Wajud (Unity of Existence)', which reflects the resolute belief in wholeness held by those who harmonize different perspectives. Throughout his journey, Guru Nanak consistently emphasized this philosophy of Oneness. When questioned about his religious affiliations in Mecca, Guru Nanak responded that a true devotee remains untouched by caste, religion, or status. How does this philosophy of unity directly challenge religious exclusivity, and what implications does it have for interfaith relations today?

2. Did Mecca shift its position as the narrative suggests during Guru Nanak's visit?

The episode recounts a metaphoric narrative that during their stay in Mecca, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana were awakened by Jiwan, a Haji, who scolded them for sleeping with their feet pointing towards the Kaabah, as this is considered disrespectful. Guru Nanak responded by referencing the Islamic philosophy of 'Al-Waasa', which signifies that the Divine is present in all directions. When Jiwan moved Guru Nanak's legs in anger, the Kaabah miraculously followed the movement. This incident also parallels a similar story involving the Sufi saint Hazrat Rabi'a al-Basri. This narrative raises an intriguing question: How does the concept of a moving

Kaabah challenge our understanding of divine omnipresence? Furthermore, how does this idea influence our approach to religious practices?

3. What is the significance of Guru Nanak's emphasis on virtuous living over ritual practices?

In response to Qazi Rukn-ud-din's invitation to embrace Islamic protocols, Guru Nanak sang a verse suggesting that mercy should be the mosque, faith the prayer mat, and honest living the Quran. He proposed that modesty be viewed as circumcision and good conduct as fasting. According to him, these are the essential qualities of being a Muslim. Similarly, regarding the five Islamic prayers, Guru Nanak recommended five spiritual qualities: first, the attribute of honesty; second, righteousness; third, altruism; fourth, the intention of goodwill for all; and fifth, the embrace of oneness. How does this emphasis on ethical living rather than ritual observance represent a revolutionary approach to spirituality, and what challenges might it have presented to established religious authorities and definitions of faith?

4. How do Guru Nanak's philosophy on humility and self-reflection contrast with religious orthodoxy?

Throughout the episode, Guru Nanak emphasizes the importance of humility. In one verse, he expresses that only through true humility can one truly understand the glorious virtues of the Creator. He also critiques those who speak positively but act negatively; these individuals may appear pure on the outside, but their minds remain impure. They mistakenly consider themselves equal to those who are genuinely divine. How does this focus on authentic humility and self-reflection challenge the religious orthodoxy that often emphasizes outward displays of piety? What implications does this have for spiritual practice?

5. How did Guru Nanak convey the essential tenet of unity while respecting the diverse beliefs regarding the existence of various worlds?

In Baghdad, Guru Nanak powerfully conveyed the concept of Omnipresence, a notion that breaks down religious barriers. He skilfully expressed the varied cosmological views from different traditions. The Vedas describe infinite worlds beyond our comprehension, while Abrahamic scriptures (Katebs) cite precisely 18,000 worlds. Yet, despite these diverse perspectives, Guru Nanak highlights a crucial truth that the essence of reality is fundamentally one, and everything else is just a manifestation of that singular essence. How does the concept of self-knowledge relate to understanding the Omnipresent entity described in Guru Nanak's philosophy? What might this relationship suggest about the purpose of philosophical and religious inquiry across different traditions?

6. How does Guru Nanak illuminate the fleeting nature of existence through his profound spiritual philosophy?

Guru Nanak emphasizes the impermanence of material existence. The narrator at the Wadi-us-Salaam cemetery reflects on how humans worry about securing a place in

heaven after death while neglecting the importance of living a meaningful life. Whether a person is cremated or buried, the body becomes dust. Guru Nanak expresses in his verses that talking, seeing, speaking, walking, living, and dying are all transient experiences. How does this perspective on impermanence inform Guru Nanak's approach to spirituality, and how might it offer a different perspective for understanding life's purpose compared to conventional religious adherence?

7. How does Guru Nanak's incorporation of multiple languages in his verses demonstrate his commitment to universal spirituality?

This episode powerfully demonstrates how Guru Nanak adeptly embraced the vernacular dialects of various regions to engage with local communities. He exemplified extraordinary linguistic inclusivity by composing his verses in multiple languages. How does embracing diverse languages mirror Guru Nanak's philosophical commitment to transcending cultural and religious divisions? What does it indicate about his vision of using a compelling medium to convey spiritual wisdom at the grassroots level?