

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 22: Lihaaze Insaniyat (Respect for Humanity)

'Lihaaze Insaniyat', 'Respect for Humanity', presents imprints of Guru Nanak's spiritual legacy in 'Khorasan'. At 'Ghandhar', the gracious humanist spreads the scent of humanity.

aakhan sunanaa paun kee baanee ih man rataa maiaa ||
khasam kee nadhar dhileh pasi(n)dhe jinee kar ek dhiaaiaa ||
teeh kar rakhe pa(n)j kar saathee naau saitaan mat kaT jaiee ||
naanak aakhai raeh pai chalanaa maal dhan kit koo sa(n)jiaahee ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Speaking and listening to wisdom without reflection, the mind remains coloured with materialism.

The grace of Divinity is wholeheartedly bestowed upon those who imbibe wisdom and embrace Oneness.

Thirty days of fasting may be observed, five daily prayers can be performed, but satanic thoughts can undo all such efforts.

Says Nanak, walk on the honest path. Why remain engrossed in accumulating wealth and property?

(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, for the one engrossed in the materialistic realm, speaking and listening to words of wisdom to embrace Oneness remain transient like a gust of wind.

Disciplinary acts to control the mind are worthless if 'Shaitan', the internal satanic vices are not kept in check.

The oldest 'Janamsakhis' do not present a specific route taken by Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana from Iran to Afghanistan. Dr. Kirpal Singh in his book, 'Janamsakhi Tradition – An Analytical Study' is of the opinion that from Mashhad, Guru Nanak & Bhai Mardana travelled through Balkh and Mazar-i-Sharif in North Afghanistan to reach Kabul. The 'Bhai Mani Singh Janamsakhi' mentions that from Mashhad, they travelled through Kandahar in South Afghanistan. As there are narratives associated with Guru Nanak in Southern Afghanistan and not in the region of Balkh and Mazar-i-Sharif, hence we trace Guru Nanak's footsteps through Kandahar.

From Mashhad, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled through the cities of Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul and Jalalabad. Thereafter, travelling through Kurram region, they crossed the Kurram Pass and reached Parachinar. They continued their journey through Ibrahimzai, Peshawar, Eminabad and reached Talwandi, which is now known as Nankana Sahib. From Mashhad, they first visited Kandahar.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Iran to Afghanistan and resume our journey from Kandahar.

O Divine companion, my friend is a Hindu, and I am a Muslim.
O Divine companion, in love for my friendship, I sweep the 'Dharamshal', his place of
worship.
O Divine, my compassionate companion.

Kandahar, the second largest city of Afghanistan, is located on the banks of the Arghandab River, at an elevation of 3,310 feet.

Amardeep Singh: Kandahar derives its name from 'Gandhar'. It is strategically located on the trade route that connects Middle-East and Central Asia with the Indian sub-continent.

'Gandhar' is a Sanskrit word meaning a land of aroma, probably referring to its population which comprises a mélange of cultures. Kandahar was founded by Alexander, the Greek King, and was later ruled by the Indo Gangetic rulers of the Mauryan Empire and the Buddhist Emperor Ashoka. The Central Asian and the Middle Eastern rulers introduced the Islamic culture to this region.

In Kandahar we visit the mausoleum of Sufi mystic Baba Wali Kandahari, whose association with Guru Nanak finds mention in the narrative at Panja Sahib Gurdwara in the city of Hassan Abdal in Pakistan.

The 'Bhai Mani Singh Janamsakhi' records that at Kandahar, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana were hosted by Baba Wali Kandahari. Some 'Janamsakhi' art that reflect this meeting in Kandahar depict Shah Sharaf seated with Guru Nanak and Baba Wali Kandahari. While it cannot be said with certainty, it is possible that the Shah Sharaf portrayed in the art was Sheikh Tatihar, the then spiritual head of Bu Ali Qalandar Shah Sharaf's shrine, with whom Guru Nanak had earlier interacted during his visit to Panipat in his first odyssey.

According to an oral narrative, at the time of Guru Nanak's visit, the governor of Kandahar was an unjust and arrogant administrator. He would visit the mosque five times a day to perform prayers. Unfair behaviour, however, can't be compensated by performing obligatory religious rituals. Hence, Guru Nanak sang to convey a profound message.

sau man hasatee ghiau guR khaavai pa(n)j sai dhaanaa khai ||
ddakai fookai kheh uddaavai saeh giaai pachhutai ||
a(n)dhee fook muiee dhevaanee ||
khasam miTee fir bhaanee ||
(Raag Malar, Guru Nanak)

An elephant eats a hundred 'maund' (measuring unit) of clarified butter and molasses and five hundred 'maund' (measuring unit) of grain.

It then belches, grunts and scatters dust. It regrets wasting precious breaths.

In ignorance, blinded by self-conceit, the foolish perish. Only when immersed in self-reflection, they are delighted.

(Raag Malar, Guru Nanak)

An elephant is focussed on consuming large quantities of food and it wastes away time in belching and scattering dust over itself. Guru Nanak analogizes that similarly a mind consumed with ego, belches away precious moments while being mired in self-conceit. He says, a delightful personality is attained through eradicating one's ego.

Decades of political unrest in Afghanistan has impacted its socio-religious diversity. The ethnic community of 'Nanakpanthis', the Hindu and Sikh followers of Guru Nanak, who were once an integral part of Afghan culture, has been compelled to seek asylum in new lands since the early 1990s.

We visit Dr. Raghunath, an ardent follower of Guru Nanak. Against all odds he has chosen not to leave Afghanistan and is the last 'Nanakpanthi' resident of Kandahar.

Dr. Raghunath: The people of Kandahar were very educated. I am a doctor belonging to this city and the only one now residing here. As we are discussing our revered Baba Nanak, I sacrifice myself to him. I offer myself to his philosophy. It is our good fortune, of our ancestors and of the city of Kandahar that Guru Nanak came here. Our ancestors adopted his philosophy. Here, Guru Nanak also met some Muslim saints. They say, he met Wali Kandahari. According to Baba's (Guru Nanak) philosophy, actions are paramount. It is irrelevant if one is a Hindu or a Muslim.

Reflecting on the pain inflicted on the natives due to political conditions in their motherland, I am reminded of Guru Nanak's verse.

sa(n)saar rogee naam dhaaroo mail laagai sach binaa ||
(Raag Dhanasri, Guru Nanak)

A mind afflicted by disease of negativity is cured by the medicine of self-reflection.

Attachment to negativities is caused by not recognizing the Truth.

(Raag Dhanasri, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, the world is suffering from the malady of negativity. The medicine for this illness is self-reflection. Similar to 'like cures like', introspection becomes the means of self-healing.

Dr. Raghunath takes us to a site, built in memory of Guru Nanak, which is being maintained by him single handedly as the rest of the 'Nanakpanthi' community has left the country.

Amardeep Singh: This 'Dharamshal' was the first one to be established in Kandahar. There were five gurdwaras established in Kandahar, of which only one is left operational.

Dr. Raghunath: In the past, when the scriptures would be read in this gurdwara, devotees would commit for eight days and not step out from this premises. That period is now history, destroyed with time. The country has recessed. People have left, communities have separated. The door is now shut.

During Guru Nanak's visit to Kandahar, like present times, this region was going through a turbulent period because of invasions by the Mughal Emperor Babur. According to an oral tradition, witnessing the plight of the people, Guru Nanak is said to have sang,

raaj maal roop jaat joban pa(n)je Thag ||
enee Thagee(n) jag Thagiaa kinai na rakhee laj ||
enaa Thagani(h) Thag se j gur kee pairee paeh ||
naanak karamaa baahare hor kete muThe jaeh ||
(Raag Malar, Guru Nanak)

Royal power, wealth, beauty, social status and youth are the five thieves.
These thieves have plundered the world, not sparing anybody's honour.
These thieves are robbed by those who surrender to spiritual wisdom.
Nanak says, those who lack honest intentions are robbed by these thieves.
(Raag Malar, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, human vice, the desire for power, wealth, beauty and social status have plundered nature's creation.

True in present times, the centuries old 'great game' is still being played in the lands of Afghanistan for geo-strategic and socio-political authority. It has resulted in loss of lives and culture.

From Kandahar, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Ghazni.

Tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Kandahar to Ghazni.

Amardeep Singh: Ghazni means a jewel. The city of Ghazni, in central Afghanistan, falls on the ancient trade and transit route, which is the reason for its present multi-ethnicity. Guru Nanak on his journey from Kandahar to Kabul passed through the city of Ghazni.

The historical route connecting Kandahar and Kabul passed through Ghazni. The oldest 'Janamsakhi' texts do not record any event of Guru Nanak in Ghazni. However, according to various analytical studies, historians are of the opinion that Guru Nanak would have had to travel through this city to reach Kabul.

At Ghazni, we visit the Nand Lal Goya Gurdwara which is in the heart of the city.

Amardeep Singh: Guru Nanak's philosophy was accepted by the locals in Ghazni. Presently, there are four Gurdwaras in this town. We are standing at the gurdwara made in the memory of Bhai Nand Lal Goya, who spent his time with the tenth Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh.

The city of Ghazni once had a substantial population of 'Nanakpanthis', the Hindu and Sikh followers of Guru Nanak, who have left Afghanistan due to political uncertainty. The community had built four gurdwaras for its congregation. In present times, services are only conducted at the Nand Lal Goya Gurdwara by the miniscule community. All other sites, while closed for services, are being well maintained through funds sent by the Afghani Sikh diaspora.

From Ghazni, we make a detour from Guru Nanak's footsteps to visit remote areas where once lived the followers of Guru Nanak who in present times have abandoned their ancestral lands.

Heading up north along the Afghanistan Pakistan border, we make a detour to a town named Khost.

At Khost, we visit a residential area named Prem Nagar which was once thriving with 'Nanakpanthi' Hindu and Sikh adherents of Guru Nanak.

Amardeep Singh: This gurdwara in Khost was built by the 'Nanakpanthi' community. It was destroyed in the political turmoil that Afghanistan experienced.

Four to five Hindu and Sikh families residing in Khost maintain a room within the precincts of this damaged gurdwara which serves as a syncretic place of worship. Here, the 'Guru Granth Sahib', the Sikh scripture is enshrined along with idols of Hindu deities and 'Om Har Shri Nath Ji' is inscribed on the walls.

During our travels, we have seen many syncretic sites across Afghanistan and Pakistan. They reflect the erstwhile intertwined belief system of the Indus belt, where Guru Nanak's philosophy was the fulcrum. This tradition has been on a decline since the last century.

Khalida Begum, alias Padmey, an elderly Muslim Afghani resident of Prem Nagar, is an iron lady who is taking care of this gurdwara to ensure it does not fall in the hands of land grabbers.

Khalida Begum: My name is Padma. My father's name is Sherzada. I am his daughter. I came from Yakobe village and now reside in this (erstwhile) Hindu village (Prem Nagar). Guru Nanak visited Kabul and Peshawar, travelling through the mountains of Mangal. He wanted people to live together. His message for humanity was not to be divided. Power is in unity. Universal unity was his desire. Unfortunately, now everyone is scattered.

According to her we were her special guests, the adherents of her beloved Guru Nanak.

Khalida Begum's dynamic personality, a combination of feminine softness and masculine fortitude was remarkable. I reflect on how gender roles, biases, patriarchy and female oppression has corrupted the socio-cultural equilibrium in society. Contrary to accepted gender roles, when a male unravels his feminine aspects and the female her masculine aspects, it empowers them to achieve their maximum potential as humans.

aape purakh aape hee naaree ||
aape paasaa aape saaree ||
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

You are the male, and you are also the female.
You are the chessboard, and you are the chessman.
(Raag Maru, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, in accord with the laws of creation, we are a composite of feminine and masculine energies.

From Khost, we make a detour to Gardez, the capital of the Paktia Province.

O Divine companion, I hope I don't go insane in your love.
O Divine companion, for no return, I pledge myself to you.

Located within a huge alpine valley in the Sulaiman Mountains of eastern Afghanistan, this region has had a rich history of Hinduism and Buddhism, and is now Islamic.

It is stated in the 'Bhai Mani Singh Janamsakhi' that at the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad in Iran, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana had interacted with Pir Abdul Rahman, who was a pilgrim from this city of Gardez.

O Divine companion, my friend is a Hindu and I am a Muslim.
O Divine companion, in love for my friendship, I sweep the 'Dharamshal', his place of worship.

Amardeep Singh: We are standing at the site where once existed the Gardez Gurdwara. This gurdwara got destroyed in the political unrest in Afghanistan. The Gardez based 'Nanakpanthi' community has now dispersed from this city.

Ikram-ud-din: My name is Ikram-ud-din. I reside in Bazaar-e-Kuhna in Gardez of Paktia Province. At this moment, as you are seeing, I am standing on the land where once existed the 'Dharamshal' (Gurdwara). About 30-35 years ago, when I was a young kid, this gurdwara was intact. We used to frequently visit this gurdwara and the homes of our Sikh and Hindu friends. We would enjoy participating in their religious functions. When I was a child, we had an excellent relationship with their community. Unfortunately, this gurdwara is now demolished and the community has left. I wish the gurdwara could be rebuilt. I will be delighted.

Ikram-ud-din guided us to a site which the locals associate with Guru Nanak.

Amardeep Singh: Close to the Gardez Gurdwara is this water spring which is known as 'Chashma Merab'. The locals here believe that Guru Nanak visited this site.

However, the 'Janamsakhi' texts do not mention any narrative of Guru Nanak in Gardez.

Companion planting is an age old technique, wherein two different species of plants are planted next to each other such that both are encouraged to thrive.

Humans too thrive in diverse company. Ikram-ud-Din's yearning for his Sikh and Hindu brethren endorses this theory. Polarization in society is depriving our progeny of the joyous virtues of diversity in Oneness.

hau jeevaa gun saar a(n)tar too vasai ||
too(n) vaseh man maeh sahaje ras rasai ||
(Raag Suhi, Guru Nanak)

I live by cherishing glorious virtues, which dwell deep within me.
When they dwell within my mind, I naturally celebrate in joyful delight.
(Raag Suhi, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, when the mind cherishes Oneness, it celebrates in joy.

From Ghazni, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Kabul.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, we resume our journey from Ghazni to Kabul.

eisak muhabat naanakaa lekhaa karate paas ||
hukam rajaiee saakhatee dharageh sach kabool ||
(Guru Nanak)

Love and affection, O Nanak, are in the accounts of the Creator.
The creation is created by the Will of the Creator. Honesty is accepted in its court.
(Guru Nanak)

Amardeep Singh: Kabul is the capital city of Afghanistan, which is nestled in a bowl-shaped valley. In different eras, it has hosted various cultures and religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism. Presently, Kabul is predominantly Islamic.

Historically, Kabul was once a center of Vedic culture. During Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana's visit to Afghanistan, it came under the control of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire.

At Asamai Hill in Kabul, is an ancient temple dedicated to the feminine Hindu deity, 'Asamai'. 'Asa' means hope and 'Mai' means mother. Venerated as the goddess of hope, for centuries, the 'Asamai' temple was a place for congregation; probably a reason for Guru Nanak to visit this site so that he could interact with spiritualists.

According to the narrative in the 'Bhai Mani Singh Janamsakhi', in Kabul, on his way to 'Asamai' Hill, Guru Nanak met some holy men. Seeing Guru Nanak's attire, the holy men were not able to identify his religious disposition. The Hindu holy men cautioned him for visiting a Hindu site in the land of an Islamic ruler. The Muslim holy men rebuked him as a 'Kafir', a non-believer, for visiting a non-Islamic place of worship. In response, Guru Nanak sang,

baabaa alahu agam apaar ||
paakee naiee paak thai sachaa paravadhigaar ||
thaavaa naav na jaane'eeh naavaa kevadd naau ||
jithai vasai meraa paatisaahu so kevadd hai thaau ||
a(n)baR koi na sakiee hau kis no puchhan jaau ||
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

O respected, the Omnipresent is inaccessible and infinite.
Sacred is that name and pure is that place where the truth of the Omnipresent is
nurtured.
Its place and its name are not known. Amongst all its names, which name can be its
name?
Where my all-pervading sovereign resides, which is that place?
No one can reach it. Whom shall I go and ask?
(Sri Raag, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak, in his verse, uses the term 'Allah' which is an Arabic word referring to the Creator. He explains that we humans might address the Creator with different names,

associate it with different religions or venerate it in different sites but it is the One who remains Omnipresent.

Some 'Janamsakhi' art depict Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana being hosted by a local resident of Kabul, named Man Chand.

Amardeep Singh: After Guru Nanak's visit to Kabul, many ethnic Afghanis started adopting his philosophy, which continued to spread through 'Dharamshals', 'Udasins', 'Nanakpanthis' and the 'Khalsa' Sikhs.

Before the Afghan Civil War of 1992, the 'Nanakpanthi' population, comprising of Sikhs and Hindus, the believers of Guru Nanak are estimated to have been around 250,000. In present times, less than a thousand remain in Afghanistan. The affluence of the erstwhile community, before its migration from Kabul, can be ascertained from the empty premises of many gurdwara buildings across the city.

We visit Gurdwara Baba Sri Chand. It is believed this is the first site made in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit to Kabul. It was built by Baba Almast, an 'Udasin' (ascetic) preacher of Guru Nanak's philosophy. As per 'Mahan Kosh' by Kahan Singh Nabha, Baba Almast was born in a Gaur Kashmiri family in 1553 and died in 1643 AD.

Amardeep Singh: This shrine, in the heart of Kabul city, in Shor Bazaar, is made by the 'Udasin' followers. There is space given to Guru Nanak, Baba Sri Chand and Hindu Gods and Goddesses. The shrine is now being maintained by a handful of Sikhs and 'Nanakpanthis', who are still residing in Kabul.

It is believed that Baba Sri Chand also visited Kabul and was instrumental in spreading the message of Guru Nanak.

We now visit Paen Chowk in Kabul city.

Amardeep Singh: At the site of this commercial building in Paen Chowk, once existed the earliest gurdwara made in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit to Kabul. The gurdwara and a mosque adjacent to it were acquired in the redevelopment of this area.

We now visit Gurdwara Karte Parwan, which in present times is the main congregation site for the 'Nanakpanthi', Sikh and Hindu, community of Kabul.

<Religious Service>

Locals mentioned that before the political problems of Afghanistan in 1992, Afghani Muslims who embraced Guru Nanak's philosophy would visit the gurdwaras.

After much effort, we were able to connect with Ustad Lali, descendant of Ustad Rahim Baksh, an Afghani Muslim singer who would devotedly sing verses from the 'Guru Granth Sahib', the Sikh scripture.

eisak muhabat naanakaa lekhaa karate paas ||
hukam rajaiee saakhatee dharageh sach kabool ||
saahib lekhaa ma(n)gasee dhuneaaa dhekh na bhool ||
dhil dharavaanee jo kare dharavesee dhil raas ||
eisak muhabat naanakaa lekhaa karate paas ||
(Guru Nanak)

Love and affection, says Nanak, are in the accounts placed before the Creator.
The law of nature creates the creation. In the spiritual court, only honesty is accepted.
The consciousness will ask for an account of deeds. Do not go astray while
experiencing the world.

Those who keep watch over their actions are saintly. Their mind remains attuned.
(Guru Nanak)

Ustad Lali: I live in Kabul and grew up in a locality of Hindus and Sikhs. I was always attracted to the spiritual music of Hindus and Sikhs. I teach music to the communities in their temples and gurdwaras. I would like to sing a 'shabad' (verse) of Baba Nanak Sahib, which I have learned.

kal paravaan kateb kuraan ||
pothee pa(n)ddit rahe puraan ||
naanak naau bhiaa rahamaan ||
kar karataa too eko jaan ||
(Guru Nanak)

There is a strife. Abrahamic culture impels 'Kateb' and 'Quran' as the Holy Scriptures.
Indic culture impels 'Puranas' as the Holy Scriptures.
Nanak says, Divinity is known as the gracious merciful.
Amongst all beliefs, recognize that the Creator is only One.
(Guru Nanak)

From Kabul, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Jalalabad.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Kabul to Jalalabad.

Located at the junction of the Kabul River and the Kunar River in a plateau to the south of the Hindukush mountains, Jalalabad is the capital city of Nangarhar province in East Afghanistan. Linked by highways to the Khyber Pass and the Torkham border with Pakistan, it is a leading center for social and trading activity. The 630 AD famous Buddhist

monk, Xuan Zang, has mentioned the name of this city as Adinapur which was then a center of Greco-Buddhist culture.

In the city of Jalalabad, we visit the Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara.

Amardeep Singh: On reaching Jalalabad, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana made their base on the banks of River Landa, which is now known as River Kabul. The river has shifted its course now. The Guru Nanak Darbar is made in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit to Jalalabad.

The Sikh community of Jalalabad guided us to the nearby village of Sultanpur to visit a site built in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit.

In close proximity to Sultanpur, we stopped at the Dargah of Pir Rattan Nath in Charbagh village. Pir Rattan Nath lived much before Guru Nanak. A native of Nepal, Pir Rattan Nath was a follower of Guru Gorakhnath, the 10th century spiritual leader. Known as Rattan Nath by Hindus and Hajji Rattan by Muslims, he is revered by people of both faiths, who collectively established a 'Nath Jogi' (ascetic) commune at this site to commemorate his influence in Afghanistan.

In his journeys, Guru Nanak had interacted with communes of 'Gorakhpanthi Nath Jogis' (ascetics) in various regions. Interestingly, at many such places, sites are dedicated in memory of Guru Nanak in close proximity to the sites associated with the 'Nath' (ascetic) sect.

We proceed further to the site dedicated to Guru Nanak at the nearby village of Sultanpur.

Amardeep Singh: In the outskirts of Jalalabad, on the Surkh Rōd in village Sultanpur, the locals here believe that this water spring was unveiled by Guru Nanak in this dry and arid region. The locals here now call it as 'Chashma Sahib'.

The earliest 'Janamsakhi' texts do not mention this spring.

In the oral tradition, the unveiling of water springs in many water scarce regions is often associated with narratives about Guru Nanak. In my humble opinion, this is a metaphor which represents the flowing of spiritual wisdom to quench the thirst of the arid mind.

Though society has evolved, yet the mind continues to remain arid on many fronts.

Even today, the arid mind continues to discriminate against women, a social vice against which Guru Nanak had raised his voice and created awareness in the 16th century.

bha(n)dd ja(n)meeaaai bha(n)dd ni(n)meeaaai bha(n)dd ma(n)gan veeaaahu ||
bha(n)ddahu hovai dhosatee bha(n)ddahu chalai raahu ||

bha(n)dd muaa bha(n)dd bhaaleeaaai bha(n)dd hovai ba(n)dhaan ||
so kiau ma(n)dhaa aakheeaai jit ja(n)meh raajaan ||
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

From a woman, one is born. Within a woman, one is conceived. A woman is sought for marriage.

A woman is befriended. Through a woman, lineage is carried forward.
When his woman dies, man seeks another woman. To a woman, man remains attached.

Why call her inferior? From her, meritorious are born.
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, women create future generations, give birth to meritorious beings, play an intrinsic role in every aspect of society, yet, they continue to be subjected to discrimination. Guru Nanak was much ahead of his time for voicing his thoughts on social issues. He strongly discredited gender inequality.

From Jalalabad, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled through Kurram region, a geographic area which is divided by the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the 15th century, the travel route from Kabul to Peshawar was through the Kurram Pass.

We visit Babu Khel village at Chamkani in Kurram region of Afghanistan, which till a few years back was bustling with the followers of Guru Nanak.

Amardeep Singh: We are in Babu Khel, a short distance from the Afghanistan Pakistan border.

There are two narratives about the place of Bhai Mardana's passing away. In 'Bala Janamsakhi', which is a more recent text, it is written that Bhai Mardana breathed his last in the Kurram region. Some versions of the 'Bala Janamasakhi' art show that Bhai Mardana's body was put to rest on a pyre, while others show a tomb, indicating that he was buried. However, the earlier 'Janamsakhi' texts state that he passed away in Kartarpur.

In accordance with the 'Janamsakhi Tradition – An Analytical Study' written by Dr. Kirpal Singh, we continue with the narrative of Bhai Mardana travelling further with Guru Nanak.

Amardeep Singh: This Gurdwara Thara Sahib was built by the 'Nanakpanthi' community of Babu Khel in the memory of Guru Nanak's visit through this region. It is the last gurdwara that falls on the path of Guru Nanak's travels through Afghanistan.

There is no physical site in the Kurram region associated with Bhai Mardana's passing away.

Once in a year, the community from across Afghanistan comes together at this Gurdwara Thara Sahib to keep alive the memories of the past.

Guru Nanak mentions that life and death is dependent on just one breath. Being unaware of when one's last breath will occur, one should strive to utilize each breath to the best use.

ham aadhamee haa(n) ik dhamee muhalat muhat na jaanaa ||
naanak binavai tisai sarevahu jaa ke jeea paraanaa ||
a(n)dhe jeevanaa veechaar dhekh kete ke dhinaa ||
(Raag Dhanasri, Guru Nanak)

We are human beings of the briefest moment.
We do not know the appointed time of our departure.
Nanak requests submission to the will of nature, to whom our soul and breath of life
belong.
Leading a visionless life, contemplate and reflect how many days this breath will last.
(Raag Dhanasri, Guru Nanak)

From Kurram region, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Parachinar.

We fly from Afghanistan to Pakistan and resume our travels in Guru Nanak's footsteps from Parachinar in Kurram region.

The valley of Parachinar in Pakistan is close to the Pakistan – Afghanistan border. The name Parachinar is derived from 'Para', attributed to one of the tribes of the valley and 'Chinar' to the Maple trees which grow in abundance in this region.

The 'Nanakpanthi', Hindu and Sikh population of this region shrank significantly after the partition of 1947. Later, the political unrest in this border region compelled the remaining community to move to safer areas. This led to abandonment of many sites which were built to commemorate Guru Nanak's visit to this region. In present times, on a few occasions every year, the followers of Guru Nanak from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan congregate in Parachinar to perform religious services.

In Parachinar, we first visit Mali Khel village.

Amardeep Singh: On their way from Afghanistan to Peshawar, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana took the way through the Kurram Pass. This gurdwara at Mali Khel was built in the memory of the site where they made their first stop in Parachinar.

We now visit Malana in Parachinar.

Amardeep Singh: In the valley of Parachinar, from Mali Khel, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana reached Malana. This Gurdwara Talla Sahib was made in the memory of their visit. This gurdwara is on a hill top in the valley which is surrounded on the three sides by Afghanistan border.

From Parachinar, on route to Peshawar, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled through Ibrahimzai, a village close to the city of Kohat.

From Malana in Parachinar, we make a stop at Ibrahimzai to visit the site built to commemorate Guru Nanak's visit in this region.

While the followers of Guru Nanak no longer reside in these regions, this gurdwara has been resurrected in recent years by the Peshawar based Sikh community who now hold annual congregations at this site.

From Ibrahimzai, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana travelled to Peshawar.

In tracing Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel to the valley of Peshawar.

Peshawar is the capital of the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Its population is predominantly of Pashtun descent.

At the time of Guru Nanak's visit, this city was known as Parashawar, a Sanskrit word meaning, the city of men. In the era of Emperor Akbar, it was renamed Peshawar. Historically, it was once the gateway of diverse and rich cultures. In this city, the ancient scholar Panini wrote his book 'Astadhyay' which became the basis for the study of structural linguistics in modern languages.

Humayun Akhund: When Babur came here, it was the same time Guru Nanak Ji travelled through this region on his spiritual journey. In the quest for righteousness he was travelling far and wide. In that era, Peshawar was a hub for various religious traditions. During that time, there were Muslims in Peshawar but it was not a city of Muslim majority.

We visit the ancient Shiva Temple at Gorakh Hatri in the Peshawar city centre.

Amardeep Singh: Gorakh Hatri in the centre of Peshawar city is an important archeological site where layers of history has existed. It was once an important Buddhist Centre where Gautam Buddha is believed to have meditated under a 100 feet Pipal tree.

Gorakh Hatri is also visually depicted in 'Baburnama', the autobiography of Emperor Babur, who invaded the city in the early 16th century.

Amardeep Singh: At the time of Guru Nanak, the Gorakh Hatri in Peshawar was a centre of influence for the 'Gorakh Panthi Jogis' (ascetics). The 'Gorakh Panthi Jogis' (ascetics) were the followers of Guru Gorakhnath who had an influence from Nepal, India, Pakistan and till Afghanistan. The center in Peshawar was the stronghold for the north-west frontier region. Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana also visited this site.

When Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana arrived at the Gorakh Hatri temple complex, 'Bhandara', community food was being served. After the commune had finished eating food, 'Jogis' (ascetics) enquired if Guru Nanak was a householder or an ascetic. When Guru Nanak replied that he was a householder, one of the 'Jogis' (ascetics) commented that a householder engrossed in familial affairs loses the ability to reach the higher state of enlightenment. They are akin to an intoxicated person who loses the ability to focus. In response, Guru Nanak sang,

japas nira(n)jan rachas manaa ||
kaahe boleh jogee kapaT ghanaa ||
kaiaa kamalee ha(n)s iaanaa meree meree karat bihaaneetaa ||
pranavat naanak naagee dhaajhai fir paachhai pachhutaaneetaa ||
(Raag Gauri Cheti, Guru Nanak)

Reflect on formless attributes and imbibe them in your mind.

Why do you speak deceiving words, O Jogi (ascetic)?

The body is wild and the mind is foolish. Acting in egoism and self-conceit, life passes away.

In supplication, Nanak says, when the naked body is cremated, then the soul regrets.
(Raag Gauri Cheti, Guru Nanak)

Spirituality is gained by training the mind to live a simple, virtuous life and not through self-denial. Guru Nanak says, an ascetic can be detached from society, yet be entangled in pride and lead an egocentric life. While a householder can be involved with social affairs yet remain humble and lead a spiritual life.

During his stay at Gorakh Hatri, a 'Jogi' (ascetic) asked why Guru Nanak was not appreciative of the display of outward garb and occult powers. In response, Guru Nanak sang,

sidh saadhik ar jogee ja(n)gam peer puras bahutere ||
je tin milaa ta keerat aakhaa taa man sev kare ||
kaagadh loon rahai ghirat sa(n)ge paanee kamal rahai ||
aaise bhagat mileh jan naanak tin jam kiaa karai ||
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

There are diverse enlightened beings, seekers, ascetics, spiritual teachers and pious people.

If I meet such people, I can say I have done a good deed and that my mind has performed a service.
Paper and salt, smeared with butter, remain untouched by water. Like a lotus remains unaffected by water.
Those who meet with such people, says Nanak. How can they ever die spiritually?
(Raag Ramkali, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, salt and paper remain separate when smeared with butter. Similarly, smeared with contemplation, spiritualists remain detached from distinctive garb and occultism. In humility, they refrain from showcasing intellectual and physical powers as strength lies in demonstrating love.

From Peshawar, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana proceeded towards the east and once again visited the city of Saidpur, which is now known as Eminabad.

In Guru Nanak's footsteps, we travel from Peshawar to Eminabad.

Bhai Lalo, the carpenter who hosted Guru Nanak during his first visit to Eminabad, welcomed him again to his home.

During Guru Nanak's second visit, the city of Eminabad was in a state of devastation. The central Asian invader, Emperor Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India, established his rule in Afghanistan and then attacked Punjab. History records his plundering of the city of Eminabad and his heartless slaughter of the natives who dared to resist. Sparing neither women nor children, whether Hindu or Muslim, he ruthlessly kept them in captivity. In his memoir, the 'Baburnama', Babur professes that the residents of the nearby city of Sialkot were spared by his forces as they surrendered without resistance.

Jahandad Khan walked us to the Chakki Sahib Gurdwara which was abandoned in the partition of 1947 and resurrected in 1992.

Jahandad Khan: We are at the Chakki Sahib Gurdwara, and this marks the location where Baba Guru Nanak was imprisoned by the Mughal Emperor, Babur, when he invaded the Punjab. Later a gurdwara was built here to mark that site. And this is where we are right now. According to the Sikh Janamsakhi traditions, Bhai Mardana and Guru Nanak were among those imprisoned, when Babur's army ransacked Eminabad. The Guru was made to grind grain in imprisonment. Guru Nanak composed four lyrical hymns on the destruction caused by the invasion, which came to be known as the 'Babur Vani'. He profoundly described the plunder that was happening, irrespective of faith, caste and religion, by saying,

paap kee ja(n)n(j) lai kaabalahu dhaiaa joree ma(n)gai dhaan ve laalo ||
(Guru Nanak)

Leading a marriage procession (army) of sin, he (Babur) from Kabul has invaded. He forcefully demands dowry (assets), O Beloved.

Guru Nanak

'Janamsakhi' artworks show that after Mughal Emperor Babur's attack and the subsequent victory, some people were distraught while some rejoiced.

Observing the two opposing emotions of society, Guru Nanak sang,

aape kare karaae karataa kis no aakh sunaieeaaai ||
dhukh sukh terai bhaanai hovai kis thai jai rooaieeaaai ||
hukamee hukam chalaae vigaasai naanak likhiaa paieeaaai ||
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

The Creator itself causes actions and reactions. To whom can one complain?
Pleasure and pain come by laws of nature. To whom should one cry?
The law of nature leads and evolves. Nanak says, one receives what one ordains.
(Raag Asa, Guru Nanak)

Guru Nanak says, pleasure and pain are created by the laws of nature which are ordained by the One Omnipresent Creator.

From Eminabad, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana proceeded to Talwandi, which is now called Nankana Sahib.

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

Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana were returning to Talwandi after having travelled for approximately four years. The third odyssey to the West, which started in 1520 AD, is estimated to have concluded in the year 1524 AD, when Guru Nanak was about 55 years of age.

I often wonder, during Guru Nanak's odysseys, which moments would have been pivotal. 'Amrit Vela', a term in Punjabi, comprises two words, 'Amrit', meaning ambrosia, and 'Vela', referring to a time of day. Guru Nanak says, that momentous moment when truth, contemplation and uplifting thoughts are imbibed is the ambrosial time.

a(n)mirat velaa sach naau vaddiaaiee veechaar ||
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

That moment becomes an ambrosial hour, in which the Truth and positive thoughts are contemplated.
(Jap, Guru Nanak)

Discussion Pointers

ALLEGORY: A Tapestry of Guru Nanak's Travels Episode 22: Lihaaze Insaniyat (Respect for Humanity)

The discussion points outline a framework for exploring the historical significance and philosophical depth of Guru Nanak's journey through Afghanistan and Pakistan. By examining the political turmoil of foreign invasions, the religious landscape of Central Asia, and the historical sites associated with Guru Nanak, we gain valuable insights into his vision. The philosophical inquiries focus on Guru Nanak's revolutionary outlook, which endorses moral conduct over ritualistic practices. They address concepts such as the "five thieves", the vices that plague human consciousness, and the importance of diversity. This exploration reveals how Guru Nanak's spiritual message transcended geographic, religious, and cultural boundaries, fostering communities of followers across regions now divided by modern borders. Although political instability has largely dispersed Afghanistan's once-thriving "Nanakpanthi" communities, the physical sites and his philosophy preserve Guru Nanak's legacy of universal humanity, motivating us to reflect on how his timeless wisdom might help address contemporary divisions and conflicts.

Historical Discussion Pointers:

1. What historical context shaped the social dynamics during Guru Nanak's third odyssey to the Islamic regions?

Guru Nanak's third journey to the West unfolded from around 1520 to 1524 AD, when he was approximately 55 years old. This timeframe coincided with Babur's tumultuous invasions and the rise of the Mughal Empire. Notably, during Guru Nanak's time in Kandahar, the region mirrored today's challenges, grappling with the upheaval of Babur's conquests. How did this political turbulence shape Guru Nanak's interactions and the impact of his messages during his journey?

2. In what ways did Guru Nanak's journey through Afghanistan exemplify the rich cultural and religious diversity present in the region during the 16th century?

The episode explores Afghanistan's rich historical tapestry, highlighting that Kabul was once a centre of Vedic culture. At the same time, cities like Ghazni were known for their multi-ethnic population due to their positions along ancient trade and transit routes. It also mentions that Guru Nanak visited various spiritual centres, including Hindu temples, Islamic sites, and locations linked to ascetic traditions. How does this journey illuminate the intricate religious landscape of Central Asia during that period?

3. What evidence supports Guru Nanak's presence in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan?

The episode describes several sites built in memory of Guru Nanak's visits, including gurdwaras in Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul, Jalalabad, Parachinar, Ibrahimzai, and

Peshawar. It also mentions water springs, such as 'Chashma Sahib' near Jalalabad, which locals believe were revealed by Guru Nanak. The text refers to various Janamsakhis (biographical accounts) that document these travels, although these accounts have some inconsistencies. What do these historical markers reveal about the impact of Guru Nanak's presence in these regions?

4. What was the relationship between Guru Nanak and the various spiritual figures he encountered during his journey?

The episode mentions Guru Nanak's interactions with several spiritual figures, such as Baba Wali Kandahari in Kandahar, Shah Sharaf and Gorakh Panthi Jogis (ascetics) at Gorakh Hatri in Peshawar. How did these interactions influence the development and dissemination of Guru Nanak's message?

5. How has the influence of Guru Nanak's philosophy in Afghanistan evolved throughout history, particularly regarding the 'Nanakpanthi' community?

The episode states that before the Afghan Civil War of 1992, the 'Nanakpanthi' community, which includes Sikhs and Hindus who follow the philosophy of Guru Nanak, was estimated to number around 250,000 individuals. In contrast, today, fewer than a thousand remain in Afghanistan. It features Dr. Raghunath as the last 'Nanakpanthi' resident of Kandahar and discusses the abandoned gurdwaras throughout the region. What factors contributed to this dramatic demographic change, and what efforts are being made to preserve this heritage?

Philosophical Discussion Pointers:

1. How did Guru Nanak inspire people to recognize the profoundness of practising rightful conduct connection over mere adherence to religious rituals?

In the episode, Guru Nanak shares his verse, stating that merely speaking and listening to wisdom without reflection keeps the mind trapped in materialism. He emphasizes that the grace of understanding Divinity is acquired by those who internalize wisdom and embrace the concept of Oneness. He further explains that disciplinary actions meant to control the mind are ineffective if one does not manage the internal satanic vices, referred to as 'Shaitan.' These insights challenge the idea that external religious practices alone are sufficient for spiritual development.

2. What did Guru Nanak identify as the 'five thieves', and how do they relate to human suffering in his philosophy?

Guru Nanak identifies power, wealth, beauty, status, and youth as the five thieves in the episode. He says these thieves have plundered the world, not sparing anybody's honour. He explains that these thieves are robbed by those who surrender to spiritual wisdom and that they rob those who lack honest intentions. How does this concept provide insight into Guru Nanak's understanding of human psychology and spiritual liberation?

3. In what ways did Guru Nanak confront and challenge the deep-rooted gender inequalities of his time?

The episode highlights Guru Nanak's wisdom, who powerfully states that everyone is born from a woman. A woman is the source of conception, is sought for marriage, and can be a friend. It is through a woman that lineage is carried forward. Why, then, should she be considered inferior? From women come those who possess virtue and merit. This verse emphasizes Guru Nanak's progressive stance on social issues and strongly discredits gender inequality. How revolutionary were these views in the context of 16th-century society?

4. What was Guru Nanak's perspective on the debate between householder life versus ascetic life?

In the episode, when asked at Gorakh Hatri whether he considered himself a householder or an ascetic, Guru Nanak confirmed himself as a householder. When ascetics challenged him by arguing that a householder, being preoccupied with family life, loses the ability to achieve a higher state of enlightenment, Guru Nanak responded by highlighting that an ascetic can be detached from society but still be consumed by pride, leading an egocentric life. Conversely, a householder can actively participate in social affairs while remaining humble and committed to a spiritual path. How does this perspective challenge traditional notions of spiritual advancement?

5. How did Guru Nanak thoughtfully bridge the various religious identities by promoting a philosophy of Oneness that emphasizes respect among all faiths?

The episode references a verse by Guru Nanak, emphasizing the presence of strife in religious thoughts. The Abrahamic tradition regards the 'Kateb' and the 'Quran' as Holy Scriptures, while the Indic tradition reveres the 'Puranas' as sacred texts. In Kabul, Guru Nanak addressed holy men debating religious identities, stating that humans might refer to the Creator using different names, associate it with various religions, or honour it at other sites. Nevertheless, despite the diversity of beliefs, it is essential to recognise that only one force remains Omnipresent. How does this perspective provide a way to move beyond religious sectarianism?

6. What makes companion planting significant in light of Guru Nanak's wisdom on human diversity?

The episode notes that companion planting is an age-old technique in which two different species of plants are planted next to each other to help both thrive. Similarly, humans also flourish in diverse communities. This idea is connected to Ikram-ud-Din, an Afghan native who longs for his Sikh and Hindu friends. He emphasizes that societal polarization deprives future generations of the joyful virtues that come from unity in diversity. How does this metaphor reflect Guru Nanak's vision of a harmonious and pluralistic society?