

The Eternal Path

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*Jay sa-o chandaa ugvahe sooraj charheh hajaar
Aytay chaanan hundiyaan gur bin ghor andhaar
-Sri Guru Granth Sahib, page 463*

*Were a hundred moons to shine and a
thousand suns burnt bright,
Even with such light, without a Guru, darker than
night would be the world's plight.*

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Prologue

This fleeting hour, in which night and day like two lovers embrace each other over an unfathomable expanse of a fading crimson sky, filled Sulakhni's heart with a bittersweet pain of separation. The village of Kartarpur was bathed in a rose gold light from the setting sun that was drowning beyond the horizon, veiled by gossamer thin layers of smoke rising from slowly extinguishing hearth fires. Sulakhni sat on the threshold of the home she had built with her husband, Guru Nanak, after he had concluded his long travels to settle down and embrace the responsibilities of a householder.

She had lost count of the many long evenings spent in waiting for him to return home over the past years. She perceived the sound of wooden clogs on the hardened village lane now, and raised her head in anticipation, before realizing that they could not be his anymore. She waited too, for the soft, imperceptible flutter of death to carry her soul into an unknown realm beyond this life, where perhaps she would meet him again in another world and time. Guru Nanak had been gone a few months, but his memory lent constant warmth to her heart through the legacy he had left behind. She heard his voice in the hymns he had taught the villagers to sing every day at dawn and dusk. She felt his presence in the rustle of golden wheat in fields he had toiled in these past few years. The yearning calls of a nightingale, the sun's rays shining through gently swaying leaves, the hues of

fragrant flowers blooming in her small yard, all reminded her of him.

The slow murmur of the Ravi now mingled with songs of birds coming to roost. It seemed to her that the river shared her grief like no one else. The day Guru Nanak was to breathe his last, his followers had gathered around him under the banyan tree that grew beside the river outside the village. By the time the evening prayers were concluded, quite a crowd had gathered on the banks of the Ravi, as the news spread that Guru Nanak, the enlightened one, lay there breathing his last.

The first stars appeared in a clear night sky, and a murmur rose amongst those who waited. The Hindu followers approached their Guru, requesting him that since he was born a Hindu, they be allowed to cremate his worldly remains in accordance with their traditions. His Muslim followers took offense at this assumption to declare that Guru Nanak was their Pir as well, and that the obsequies should be in keeping with their own customs.

Guru Nanak smiled wearily and uttered, "Why must you argue amongst yourselves over such a trifling matter? Go and bring some fresh flowers and place them on either side of me. When the sun appears tomorrow, those whose flowers are still fresh can do with my remains as they please."

A few men from each group were sent off in a hurry to gather as many fresh flowers as they could before the evening was overshadowed in darkness. The Muslims placed their flowers on the Guru's left, and the Hindus

on his right. As the day waned, lamps were lit, and the singing of hymns continued through the night. The Ravi continued her soft rumbling while the flickering lamps illuminated his tranquil face. The stars reflecting in her waters appeared to be dancing. Guru Nanak turned his gaze towards the heavens and then towards the river, watching her with an imperceptible smile on his lips.

In the ambrosial hours of the morning, when the earth was still slumbering under the cover of night, he breathed his last. The mourning crowd covered his remains in a white shroud and waited for dawn to discover the fate of their flowers.

When the shroud was removed at daybreak, astonishment gripped those gathered, for Guru Nanak's body had vanished and only the flowers remained, as fresh as if they had just then been plucked.

The Hindus and Muslims divided the flowers amongst themselves, and on the banks of the river made two separate memorials for the master who had spent his entire life preaching to them the gospel of oneness. Ravi, angered by their folly, rose in a torrent on the night that followed, and overflowing her banks wiped out both structures so completely that not a sign of them remained.

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PART I

*Satguru Nanak pargateyaa miti dhund jag chaanan
hoa Jiye kar suraj nikalya taare chipe andhera paloa*

*The true Guru, Nanak, appeared dispelling
the fog of ignorance that held sway, Like the stars
disperse as the sun appears to cast the night away.*

Birth

A full moon was peeping through the clouds watching an old figure scuttle along a deserted village lane. Daulatan's headscarf slipped from her head, her silver hair glistening in the moonlight. As she made her way to Mehta Kalu's house, the anticipation of a celebration in the village following the birth of his child gave a lilt to her steps. She was sure it would be a boy. She had observed his wife Tripta's gait and form many times, and her predictions in the past about other expectant mothers in the village had almost always been correct.

Mehta Kalian Das Bedi, or Mehta Kalu as he was called, belonged to the Bedi clan, and lived in one of the biggest houses in the village. The village of Talwandi had come to be called Rai Bhoe's Talwandi, after the local Rai or chieftain, who had rebuilt it following the last Mongol invasion. Rai Bhoe had later converted to Islam, which was a widespread practice in those days. Talwandi was a prosperous village that lay on the trade route to Lahore and thenceforth to Delhi and had been ransacked by successive invaders countless times in the past, as they invariably passed through it. The current chieftain or local authority of the village was Rai Bular, who was also Mehta Kalu's childhood friend. Mehta Kalu handled the Rai's accounts just as his father, Shiv Ram, had handled them for the older Rai before him. A deep bond of mutual love and friendship ran between the two families and was carried on from fathers to sons.

Daulatan reached the house and passed through its heavy wooden gate into the courtyard. It was a sizable space surrounded by a thick, high wall, decorated on the inside by rounded columns and ornamental niches interspersed between them for the placing of oil lamps. On one side of this courtyard, there was a well encircled by a raised platform. This was customary in all houses belonging to the affluent upper castes, as it eliminated the fear of consuming water from public wells that could have been contaminated from use by those belonging to lower castes. A plant of Holy Basil, which is an essential feature in every Hindu household, grew in the centre of the yard, silhouetted against the entrance of the haveli. It was encircled by a special raised dais decorated with traditional patterns painted using rice flour mixed with natural pigments of assorted colours.

Mehta Kalu was pacing nervously in the courtyard. On hearing Daulatan approach, he heaved an audible sigh.

“Daulatan, thank God you are here! Come quickly!”

He ushered her urgently towards the house. Tripta’s moans came through the open door, piercing the stillness of the night. They skirted their way around the Holy Basil, stepping over the threshold into an enclosed veranda that ran the entire length of the house, with doors opening into the inner chambers. There was a beautiful temple in the eastern corner of the house, accessible through a door on that part of the veranda. A warm, golden glow emanating from the lamps lit before Hindu idols spilled into the veranda, bringing with it the

aromatic scent of burning frankincense. Mehta Kalu gestured impatiently towards the room Tripta had been confined in, and walked anxiously to the temple to kneel before the gods and pray.

Upon entering the room, Daulatan greeted Tripta's mother and gave quick instructions to a maid standing nervously in a corner.

“Go and fetch some hot water and clean linen quickly!” she said authoritatively.

Tripta's mother had been trying ineffectively to comfort her daughter. It was a popular custom in those days for a woman to go to her parents' house in the last months of her confinement for the birth of her child. Nanki, Mehta Kalu's daughter, had been born in the house of her maternal grandparents, which is called *nanke* in local dialect, hence the name Nanki was given to her. For the birth of his second child, however, the father had been adamant not to let Tripta out of his sight, so he had convinced his mother-in-law to travel to Talwandi instead.

Daulatan, with an assurance in her steps lent to her from years of experience and practice as a midwife, walked towards Tripta's bedside. She took one of her hands in hers and gently soothed the damp hair from her brow with the other.

“It is only a matter of time, daughter. Think of the child you will hold in your arms not before long now.”

The maid came back with the things she had been sent for, and the midwife began her task. Instructing Tripta in a gentle, motherly voice, Daulatan began to reminisce about the little, frightened girl long ago who had gone with her mother to the houses of women in labour, just

like her grandmother had taken her daughter before that. At that tender age, Daulatan had invariably been frightened by the screams of expectant mothers. Now, listening to Tripta's groans getting louder, an imperceptible smile starkly accentuated the lines around her mouth.

"Every newborn child brings a message of love from God, and we deliver it to the world, my love," her mother had explained to her lovingly. Each time she saw a little head trying to make its way out into the world, she would remember her mother's words and thank Allah for the task He had entrusted her with. Each time she cut the cord that had nourished a child in his or her mother's womb, she would raise them in her old arms and pat the back to induce crying, and every time a delivery chamber filled with a confused or irate wail, she threw her head back and laughed with sheer joy. Daulatan loved playing Allah's messenger, for it gave her the satisfaction of being important in His eyes.

As she now held Tripta's newborn in her arms, she was surprised to see that he did not cry but seemed to gaze at her with wide-open eyes before uttering a happy chuckle. The midwife's face revealed both awe and confusion before the moment passed.

"It is a boy, Tripta! I told you it would be so!" she exclaimed.

On hearing the words, Mehta Kalu hastened into the room to stand beside the midwife, regarding his newborn son with pride on his face and joyful tears in his eyes. He took a gold coin from his shirt pocket and circled it over the newborn's head a few times before offering it to the midwife.

"I cannot accept this Mehta ji. The sight I have seen is reward enough for my efforts. Every child comes into the

world crying, but Allah be praised, your son looked into my eyes and laughed. It is a sound I shall never forget. This child will bring joy to the lives of all who know him.”

Daulatan bundled the child in clean linen and handed him over to his mother to be fed. She muttered a prayer over the mother and child to ward off the evil eye, and withdrew from the room, promising to visit on the morrow to check on them once again.

A hushed but happy interchange continued between the family for a while longer. Nanki, who was five now, had slept through her mother’s ordeal, and they did not want to awaken her now.

“We should offer gratitude to the gods. I must light a lamp and burn some incense.” Saying this, Tripta’s mother left the room, leaving Mehta Kalu alone with his wife and son.

He bent over to kiss Tripta gently on her forehead, silently thanking her for the happiness she had brought him. He had never experienced such joy before! His deepest prayers had been answered for he had been granted a son and heir who would carry on the legacy of his father and grandfather to increase the family’s wealth and stature with the same hard work, dedication, and integrity that Mehta Kalu was sure the child had inherited. Taking one long, loving look at his wife and child, he thanked God again and followed his mother-in-law to kneel before the idols with a heart overflowing with gratitude.



The Prophecy

The next morning, Mehta Kalu's haveli resembled a large beehive with Tripta's mother, who had taken charge of the house in lieu of her daughter, giving instructions to everyone around her, trying to get a dozen things done at the same time. Auspicious garlands of *shirin* leaves were hung on all doorways to signal the birth of the newborn. *Laddoos* and sweetmeats had to be prepared and sent to the homes of friends and relatives to mark the happy occasion. A special mix of nuts, spices and other ayurvedic ingredients, called *panjiri* in the local dialect, was to be prepared for the new mother to aid her postpartum recovery. The fragrance of clarified butter whiffed out of the busy kitchen into the courtyard and greeted the neighbours who were pouring in to see the newborn. Mehta Kalu was well loved by the people of the village for his affable manners, and everyone seemed to want to share his joy.

The father, however, was nowhere to be found. He had left the house soon after his morning prayers, and stopped for a moment at Daulatan's doorstep, to continue with her towards Pandit Hardayal's house.

The Pandit was a venerated astrologer who presided over all rituals and religious ceremonies in the houses of upper caste Hindus in the village of Talwandi. He was an honest and sincere man who never exploited anyone for his services, as was the wont of other Brahmin priests.

He would gracefully accept what people offered him depending upon their means.

Having finished his morning prayers, Pandit Hardayal was seated cross-legged on the kitchen floor. His wife was serving him a breakfast of spiced potatoes and fried flatbreads, alongside a large glass of buttermilk topped with fresh, creamy butter. She had been telling him about the birth of Mehta Kalu's son, whom she had heard of from the milkman. It was surprising how every piece of news and gossip was relayed through the entire village in a matter of moments. After many long childless years Mehta Kalu and his wife Tripta had been blessed with a daughter but fathering a son was a greater boon. He had truly been favoured by God.

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. Mehta Kalu walked into the courtyard, beaming with joy. Pandit Hardayal had finished breaking his fast and rising with effort on account to his ageing joints, walked towards the visitor with a smile.

“*Namaste* Pandit ji! I come to seek your blessings for my son.” Mehta Kalu bent forward touching the old man's feet and Pandit Hardayal patted him gently on the head.

“May you live long and prosper, my son. This is wonderful news, indeed. What can I do for you at this early hour?”

“Pandit ji, I have come for the child's horoscope. I brought Daulatan along to confirm the particulars of his birth.”

Pandit Hardayal smiled and congratulated Mehta Kalu profusely once again, knowing well, like everyone else in the village, how long the wait had been. He walked into the house followed by Mehta Kalu and the midwife. Ushering them into a small room in the eastern part of the house, he made his way to a low rectangular table and seated himself cross-legged on a cushioned seat placed before it. The table was covered with astrological charts and some old manuscripts. In the morning light that poured in through the open casement beyond the table, Pandit ji, after asking Daulatan a few brief questions, set about consulting his charts. Then, taking a clean roll of parchment from a drawer, he began inscribing charts and symbols on it with a reed pen.

After a few minutes he paused, raised his head, and looked out the window with unseeing eyes, an expression of surprise playing on his face before he bent forward to peruse the charts again, this time with decided earnestness. Mehta Kalu, unable to decipher the astrologer's reaction, looked on in consternation. He had been showered with good fortune, but now uncertainty began to gnaw at his heart. What could be the reason for Pandit ji's surprise? Did the stars reveal something unfavourable?

Mehta Kalu, it seemed, had waited an eternity before Pandit Hardayal, rolling up the horoscope he had been writing, turned towards the father, and said, "You have been truly blessed Mehta Kalu! In all my long years I have never seen a more auspicious horoscope. Your son is destined for greatness. His fame will spread through

the world, and both Hindus and Muslims will extol his name.”

“You are indeed right Pandit ji! He is like no other child I have helped bring into the world. When I held him in my arms for the first time, he looked directly into my eyes and gave a hearty laugh!” added Daulatan excitedly.

This prediction about his son completed the father’s happiness. The long childless years before the birth of Nanki faded into oblivion. Holding the horoscope in his hands, he decided to do anything and everything in his power to enable his son to achieve the greatness that had been predicted for him. He touched Pandit Hardayal’s feet and taking his leave, accompanied Daulatan out of the house, unconsciously lifting his head and straightening his shoulders on account of his newfound resolve.

Rather than stopping at his doorstep, however, Mehta Kalu walked towards Rai Bular’s house, which lay only a short distance from his own. The duo had grown up together and had been best friends and close confidants since their boyhood days. On reaching the house he discovered that Rai Bular had already left to see the newborn as soon as the news was brought to him. Smiling to himself, Mehta Kalu walked back home.

The two friends embraced each other, and Mehta Kalu told the Rai about Pandit Hardayal’s prophecy. Rai Bular took as much pride in the predictions as if they had been meant for a son of his own. He rejoiced in his

friend's happiness and had begun to look upon the child as much his own as Mehta Kalu's.

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The Naming Ceremony

An auspicious time and date for the naming ceremony was decided upon following Pandit Hardayal's consultations. It was to be held on the thirteenth day after the birth of the newborn, as was the custom. The days that followed were spent in preparations for the event, and invitations were sent out to relatives near and far. The happiness of the Bedi family permeated the entire village. Everyone recalled the despondency of the long childless years Mehta Kalu and Tripta had to endure, and shared in the festivities with enthusiasm.

Tripta had in the past even contemplated arranging a second marriage for her husband, being utterly disheartened by her own childless plight. Polygamy was a common and socially acceptable custom for a man if his first wife failed to fulfil her duty of giving him a son and heir. But Mehta Kalu paid no heed to her suggestions and had gently but firmly turned them down. A few years later Nanki had come into their lives, followed now by the birth of a son.

Rai Bular and Sayyad Hasan frequented the Bedi household regularly, sometimes more than once in a day. The latter lived in a house adjacent to the Bedis. He was a pious and erudite Muslim who lived alone with his wife, having no children of his own. Owing to the social and political alienation that was growing between the two communities, for a Muslim to frequent the house of an upper caste Hindu was looked upon askance by

orthodox members of society who were by no means scarce.

But Mehta Kalu, whose best friend Rai Bular was himself a Muslim, and whose wife believed her motherhood was a boon granted to her following injunctions to a Hindu goddess on her behalf by a Sufi fakir,¹ were oblivious to any criticism. Mehta Kalu liked Sayyad Hasan for his wisdom and quiet manner and empathized with the latter's childless state. The old man was also quite fond of Nanki and would often come to watch her play or entice her over to his house with toys and treats.

The haveli was prepared for the naming ceremony. The floor of the open courtyard in front of it was given a fresh coat of cow dung mixed with mud. Beautiful designs or rangoli were then drawn on the floor using coloured rice to welcome Hindu gods into the home for the auspicious occasion. Fresh festoons of mango leaves interspersed with marigold flowers were hung above the main entrance and doorways. Outside the kitchen, make-shift fires were lit and the village sweet-makers busied themselves dexterously rolling out saffron coloured *laddoos* in their palms, and coating each one with silver leaf before arranging them into circular pyramids on huge silver platters. These were to be savoured by the guests and distributed amongst them to take home after the ceremony.

¹ Haroon Khalid, *Walking With Nanak*, pg. 7.

Everyone in the Bedi haveli was busy scuttling about doing one chore or another. But the five-year-old Nanki was oblivious to the humdrum around her. She sat for hours with the newborn on her lap, giving him up only to be fed or cleaned. She gazed at his face lovingly, adoring his little features or playing with his tiny hands and feet.

“Mother, can he be all mine?” she asked Tripta repeatedly.

“Yes, he is all Nanki’s,” the mother would laugh affectionately and answer.

The day of the naming ceremony was upon them, and the haveli was filled with carefree laughter and chatter of family and friends. The days had grown longer as spring had given way to summer, and the sun blazed on the newly harvested fields. Many guests, especially the aged, were sitting in groups of fours or fives on *manjis* placed under the shade of trees in the courtyard. These were hardy cots made using a wooden frame with four sturdy legs; their platform was strung with jute string woven crisscrossed in an intricate style. The happy chatter of children running around with sweetmeats in their hands filled the air.

As the appointed hour for Pandit Hardayal’s arrival approached, everyone gathered around the space marked for the ceremony. Tripta sat with the child bundled up in her arms, with Nanki sitting pressed to her side. In front of her was a square shaped, two-tiered dais hollowed in the middle, raised with bricks and clay. A few logs were placed in the centre of it for the sacred ritual fire.

Materials required for the ceremonial prayers were arranged on two alternate sides of this structure with a seat for Pandit Hardayal placed on the fourth side facing Tripta.

Mehta Kalu had gone to fetch the priest, and in the meantime, Rai Bular was playing host to the guests, supervising the serving of sweet and savoury snacks cooked in clarified butter, and delicious sherbets to tackle the hot summer.

At last Mehta Kalu appeared with Pandit Hardayal in tow. The aged priest walked towards his seat and Mehta Kalu lowered himself down on another beside his wife. The fire being lit, Pandit Hardayal started chanting Vedic mantras suited for the occasion, guiding the couple with gestures of his hands to replenish the fire with clarified butter and other ritualistic items at regular intervals. When the chanting concluded, Pandit Hardayal looked up at Tripta and asked,

“Does the mother want to suggest a name for the baby?”

“Yes, Pandit ji!” She turned to look at Nanki beside her, and proclaimed with a smile, “He shall be called Nanki’s Nanak.”

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Nanak Goes to School

Seasons followed one another, devouring months, and months faded into years. Nanak grew under the dotting eyes of his parents and sister. He was showered with love and affection by everyone around him, including Rai Bular and Sayyad Hassan. It seemed everyone who loved the child believed with unwavering conviction in the greatness that awaited him and was only too willing to play their part in advancing it.

None of them, however, was more in earnest about his role in helping Nanak achieve that greatness than the father himself. He would incessantly deliberate upon the course his son's life should follow, alone and in the company of his close friend Rai Bular. They were both convinced that a good education would give Nanak a firm foundation on which he might build an illustrious future.

Accordingly, when Nanak turned seven, the father took him to Pandha Gopal. The *Pandha* or scholar ran a school for upper-caste Hindu boys in the village of Talwandi, where students were taught the alphabet and arithmetic at a primary level.

On the appointed day, Mehta Kalu affectionately summoned Nanak to hand him a new slate and a beautifully carved wooden box filled with lime chalk sticks, telling him that he was going to start school. Nanak nodded his head obediently and followed his

father towards the temple in the house to seek blessings from the gods.

The father and son then set off in the direction of the school, followed by a despondent Nanki. Until now, she had been like the shadow of her little brother and never left his side. Now he would be away at school, and she would have to learn to wait patiently for him to return to her every evening. She longed to be a boy now more than ever, so she too would be allowed to accompany him to school.

Nanki and her brother often frequented the house of their neighbour, Sayyad Hasan. He had a spacious room lined from ceiling to floor with books of all kinds. The old man spent most of his time here and to entice the children to his house, he was wont to keep a filigree box filled with sugar treats in an almirah that stood in a corner of the room. He would bring down an attractively bound manuscript from one of the shelves and sit down on a cushioned seat by the window, reading to the siblings who sat on either side of him. They listened with rapt attention, their eyes caressing the gilded folios.

The books were mostly in Persian, and despite the children having no understanding of the language, he read to them in his quiet, musical voice, reciting verses that had been written in skilful calligraphy, which he then translated for the two little faces turned up to him fondly. Nanki wistfully thought to herself that had she been a boy, she might have been allowed to go to school with Nanak and learnt to read and understand those beautiful letters for herself.

They approached Pandha Gopal's school. The teacher was sitting on a raised platform made of bricks and mortar. He donned a *sikha* or a long patch of hair about an inch in diameter at the back of an otherwise shaven head. The *sikha* was worn by every Brahmin and it signified his pointed focus on the spiritual path. Across Pandha Gopal's torso, resting on his left shoulder, was a sacred thread or *janeu*. His forehead was adorned with long, wide vertical marks made with ground sandalwood paste.

Nanki, a little in awe of Pandha Gopal's stern demeanour, turned to smile reassuringly at her brother, only to find that he appeared quite calm. Mehta Kalu touched the Brahmin's feet and signalled Nanak to do the same.

"Pandha ji, I have brought my son to you. Please accept him as a pupil."

"Any child of the Bedis is welcome in my school. If he is diligent and learns all I must impart, he will bring honour to his family."

Leaving his son in the teacher's care, Mehta Kalu bowed to him and turned to go, followed by Nanki, who kept looking over her shoulders as if to fill her eyes with the sight of Nanak to content her until the evening.



Pandha Gopal asked Nanak to sit near him beside a boy of Nanak's age who was called Bala. The other boys

were a little older and sat at a distance memorizing their lessons.

“We will start by learning alphabets.” Saying this, the teacher drew an *urha*, or the first letter of the alphabet on a slate and asked the boys to render it on theirs.

“What is the meaning of this alphabet, Pandha ji?” asked Nanak.

“It is of no importance in and of itself, but we can use it to make many words and phrases.”

“Are you saying, Pandha ji, that the *urha* in itself is meaningless?” asked Nanak again.

“Yes, one can say that.”

“Father said I am here to learn. What is the significance of learning something that is meaningless, Pandha ji?”

Bala shot one incredulous look at Nanak and another at the polished cane lying ominously beside the Brahmin teacher. It would be shameful indeed to be beaten on the first day of school, he thought, almost pitying the audacity of this boy beside him.

The teacher was taken aback by the question, however. He looked Nanak straight in the eyes to learn if the boy was up to mischief, but the earnestness in Nanak’s unswerving gaze reassured him. After a brief silence, he answered indulgently,

“Alphabets have no meaning in and of themselves, Nanak. Perhaps you can one day write a meaning for

each one of them, but you will have to learn them first,” smiled Pandha Gopal.

His answer, though failing to satiate Nanak’s curiosity, gained him an admirer in Bala, who was drawn towards what he thought was Nanak’s daring, and more so to the fact that he even escaped punishment for it.

Nanak was a prodigious child as his teacher was soon to discover, for he mastered the alphabets and, in a few days, brought to him an acrostic poem with each of them.

*The creator of this world is master of us all,
Those who serve him unfailingly his virtues do extol,
Verily they depart from this earth,
Having fulfilled the purpose of their birth.²*

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² SGGS, pg. 432, Sasai soi srisat jin saaji...

In The Company of Sayyad Hasan

Nanak continued his education with Pandha Gopal. He was diligent and an astonishingly quick learner. Within a few months he began composing mystical verses which he sometimes took to his teacher for perusal. Pandha Gopal was greatly impressed with the poetic talents his young pupil exhibited, when other children older than him were still struggling with the nuances of grammar. He decided that given Nanak's spiritual inclination and intellectual genius, the study of Sanskrit and ancient Hindu texts would be most suitable and suggested the same to Mehta Kalu.

Pandha Gopal, however, was not the only one who enjoyed being taken into young Nanak's confidence regarding his writing abilities, for Sayyad Hasan was always the first to read any new verse he composed. Nanak enjoyed immensely the company of the old man. Although a devout Muslim, Sayyad Hasan was a true Sufi at heart.

Sufism had found roots in India three hundred years ago when it first became home to wandering ascetics who believed in a universal mysticism that transcended religion. It gained popularity during the Delhi Sultanate, a period spanning over two hundred years in which five ruling dynasties held sway in the region extending from Afghanistan, across North India, all the way to Bengal. Although all Sufi saints were primarily born into Islam,

their followers were not restricted to Muslims and included many Hindus as well.

Sayyad Hasan took immense pride in the verses composed by young Nanak and gave him all the encouragement he needed. Another person who benefited from Nanak's education was Nanki. Her brother had often seen the wishful look in her eyes when they sat together in Sayyad Hasan's library. Even at this tender age the siblings had no need for words to convey their thoughts and desires to one another. There existed an unspoken sensibility between the two.

Every day, Nanak came home from school and found Nanki waiting eagerly for him. She would clean and put away his slate and fetch him a light meal, feeding him with her own hands. Having eaten, they sat together under a neem tree their grandfather had planted in the courtyard and began their daily lessons. Nanak taught Nanki all he had learnt during the day with Pandha Gopal, writing the lesson on his slate which Nanki diligently traced on the ground with a stick sharpened on one end for the purpose. Being an intelligent child herself, she soon learnt to read and do a little arithmetic. In a few months' time, before Nanak began his Sanskrit lessons with Pandit Brijraj on Pandha Gopal's recommendations, Nanki could read his verses with ease.

One day, Nanak paid his daily visit to Sayyad Hassan. Nanki did not go with him anymore. Nanak had turned eight, while she was almost thirteen years old and had begun to help her mother in household chores, for she

had now reached a marriageable age according to the prevalent custom.

Sayyad Hasan sat reading by a window in his library, his face beaming upon seeing Nanak enter. The old man had found a perfect companion in the poetically inclined Nanak. As was his wont, he read a few lines of the verses he was reading in Persian and translated them for him. Nanak had become proficient in the *Landha* script and had begun to learn Sanskrit but was, nonetheless, lured by the beautiful Arabic and Persian alphabets in Sayyad Hasan's books, which to him seemed like secret messages he could not yet decipher. Sayyad Hasan read a few verses of Hafiz in his soft, musical voice with slow deliberation and proceeded to translate them,

*The night is dark and of these waves I am frightened,
This savage whirlpool of the world ocean terrifies me,
You who walk on the distant shore unburdened,
The troubles in my heart you cannot see.*³

They sat together by the window, lost in a world of verse and poetry, while the late afternoon sun cast long shadows outside.

“There is so much to see and learn in this world, Uncle Hasan. I wonder if one lifetime has ever been sufficient for any man to grasp and understand all there is to know.”

“Like the great Al-Ghazali wrote, any knowledge of the world must first begin with knowledge of one's inner self, for that is the closest thing to any man, and

³ Hafiz, *Mara dar manzil-e-jaana...*

knowledge of the self takes one closer to knowledge of God, and that indeed is the highest goal of man. The greatest journey anyone can undertake, Nanak, is not the journey without but a journey within the deepest recesses of one's heart, for that is the abode of God."

"Why do we need so many different religions, Uncle Hasan, if the goal of each one of them is surely the same?"

"Just as there are many paths leading to one village, many rivers flowing into one ocean, there are many religions. The alphabets and sounds of every language differ greatly, but the human sentiments they convey are as old as reason and even thought itself. People's beliefs are as diverse as their manners and customs. Sometimes this diversity divides one man from another. These outer differences are like the husk of a seed that must be stripped away to reveal the grain of universal truth within," explained Sayyad Hasan.

As the shadows outside spread their arms to meet the growing darkness, Nanak rose to go home. Seeing him leave, Sayyad Hasan thought to himself with a smile how often he forgot while talking to Nanak that the latter was not a grown-up intelligent man but a mere boy of eight, for the questions he was wont to ask were considerably beyond his tender years.



The Nawab's New Amir

A new day was still shrugging off its sable cloak as Mehta Kalu walked towards Rai Bular's haveli with hurried steps. A servant had arrived in the wee hours of the morning at his door, requiring his immediate presence before his friend and employer. Since it was unusual for the latter to summon him in this manner and so early in the day, Mehta Kalu had dressed in haste and left his house while the village was still rising from slumber, hoping all was well in the Rai's household.

He was greeted at the doorway by the Rai, whose otherwise cheerful countenance was shadowed with concern. Mehta Kalu asked what the matter was with apprehension. A messenger had arrived late in the night from Daulat Khan Lodhi, Nawab of Sultanpur Lodhi, under whose jurisdiction lay Rai Bhoe's village, Talwandi. The Nawab had recently hired a new Amir or revenue collector by the name of Jai Ram and sent him to Talwandi on business. The Nawab expected his new employee to be treated with all due ceremony and offered all necessary aid to complete his first commission.

"You know how these Amirs of the Nawab are, Mehta. In all my years I have not seen a decent fellow amongst their lot. They cower before the Nawab in Sultanpur, but when they come here, they expect to be treated with more fanfare and ceremony than the Nawab himself. I am getting on in years and have lost the

patience to humour any more of these condescending, conceited bureaucrats. I cannot snub them, however, due to my allegiance and regard for the Nawab,” grumbled Rai Bular.

“Come now, what if he is a genial fellow? Why should you assume the worst? We should gather the elders of the village before the Amir arrives and prepare for his welcome. You must excuse me, for I see a remarkably busy morning for myself ahead.” Mehta Kalu brushed off his friend lightly, feeling relieved that the matter was no more serious than this.

He knew that the Rai, being a simple and straightforward man himself, disliked attending to any official business which invariably involved tiresome protocols and a lot of superfluous fawning over one’s superiors regardless of their age or ability. The man who ruled like a benevolent and wise king over his small town because he loved it could be obstinate as a child when it came to dealing with external matters. He always evaded a visit to the Nawab in Sultanpur Lodhi because he felt stifled by the aristocratic atmosphere that pervaded the latter’s court.

For the next few hours, Mehta Kalu supervised the household as an efficient commander at the head of his troops, with the Rai sulking away in the background. By the time of the Amir’s arrival, the outer courtyard of the haveli was crowded with all the important people of the village, which included high caste Hindus and Muslims, who had turned out in their finest attire. The contagious

enthusiasm of his people affected Rai Bular's mood, and he gradually grew less sullen.

The Lodhi dynasty was at the zenith of its power, and Bahlol Lodhi had been in rule for over twenty years. The occasional scuffles for supremacy amongst some of the Afghan and Turkish nobles under him followed their erratic course, but the people in the Delhi sultanate, including Talwandi, enjoyed a spell of peace and welcomed with zeal any occasion to gather and socialize.

A servant came running to announce the arrival of the Amir and his entourage. The welcome party hastened to the main entrance, led by Rai Bular. The group that arrived was a small one with only a few men on horseback. As they drew their extravagantly harnessed horses to a standstill at the Rai's gates, Mehta Kalu could not help a surreptitious smile upon seeing that the man who appeared to be the Amir, and the cause of his friend's anxiety, looked no more than a grown boy. Dressed in a brocade *angrakha*⁴ with a silk turban placed on his head, he was of tall and slender build, and the grave expression on his face was complemented by his intelligent eyes.

The following days were spent in dealing with matters concerning the collection of revenues. Jai Ram, the new Amir, whose family had lived in Sultanpur Lodhi for generations, belonged to the *Khatris* caste and his quiet and sincere manner soon won over Rai Bular and impressed Mehta Kalu.

⁴ Long tunic-like dress with an upper bodice attached to a skirt below the waist

One day, Mehta Kalu, on returning from the Rai's haveli, mentioned Jai Ram to his wife, Tripta, and as she listened attentively, he continued to extol the virtues of that worthy young man.

When he stopped speaking, Tripta said in a meaningful voice, "You are aware that Nanki has long crossed her thirteenth year. Most girls her age in the village are married."

"What does Nanki's age have to do with our conversation?" Her husband asked, puzzled at the sudden unexpected turn the conversation had taken. Tripta sighed, knowing well that in a father's eyes a daughter was never grown up enough. She now divulged the idea that had struck her when the young man had first been mentioned by her husband upon his arrival in Talwandi. Everyone in the village had talked of nothing else for days, and she was convinced that he might just be the perfect match for her beloved daughter.

"We must find Nanki a bridegroom soon, and if Jai Ram is as worthy as everyone claims, why not consult with your friend Rai Bular and fix a match between them?" she suggested now.



Nanki Gets Married

No other social event in the subcontinent is celebrated on a grander scale than a wedding, and the preparations for Nanki and Jai Ram's union too began as soon as the match was fixed. Since girls were married young, the family began accumulating their dowry as soon as they were born. All three generations of grandmother, mother and daughter spent their idle hours sitting in the courtyards of their homes embroidering colourful Phulkaris and Baghs to the accompaniment of unending chatter and occasional singing. These embroidered articles, along with various others for household items, became part of a girl's wedding dowry.

An auspicious date and time for the marriage ceremony having been fixed by Pandit Hardayal, the Bedi household was transformed overnight with a flurry of activity in preparation for the ceremony. Relatives began pouring in soon after from near and far, and everyone, excepting the aged and children, had self-appointed for themselves one task or another to help in the arrangements. The days that followed were filled with singing, dancing, and merriment. An abundance of sweet meals of different varieties prepared with condensed milk, dried fruits, nuts, saffron, rose petals, adorned with silver and gold foil, made the rounds amongst guests all day.

The day of the wedding arrived, and the Bedi haveli was decked with beautiful rangoli patterns on the floor

and hanging strings of marigold flowers, the heady perfume of their fragrance dispersing about the yard like a winter morning mist. A mandap or pavilion supported by four pillars had been constructed on one side of the courtyard where the bride and groom would go around the sacred fire seven times to complete the ceremony. The entire haveli was filled with an overwhelming bustle of noise and activity.

Everyone in their excitement, however, had failed to notice the absence of the bride-to-be and her younger brother. These two had found the only secluded corner next to the cowshed at the back of the haveli, where they now sat on a bundle of clean, dried hay. Nanak was crying uncontrollably in his sister's arms. He had learnt from his mother only that morning that Nanki would go far away to live with her husband soon after the marriage ceremony.

“Why must you go away, Bebe?” asked Nanak, addressing her with an endearment used commonly for an older sister.

“That is the way of the world. A girl must leave her home someday, even if she is the daughter of a king,” replied Nanki softly with tears in her eyes.

Ever since his birth, the two had been inseparable. What is a flower without its fragrance? To Nanki, young as he was, Nanak was that fragrance and much more. The thought of parting from him was so painful that she had refused to let her mind linger on it since the marriage had been arranged. But now, with him crying against her,

all her self control was broken like a mirror that, being shattered into a thousand pieces, reflected her grief a thousand-fold. The bond of love between brother and sister was boundless like an ocean, and a mere bridge of words could never traverse it. Hence, they sat, without speaking, in each other's embrace, the silence around them being interrupted only by their sobs.



Nanak Herds His Cattle

The wheels on the carriage of time continued their unending rhythm. Nanak's marriage had left a void in Nanak's life, and he began to grow restless and aloof. Having mastered Sanskrit and studied the holy scriptures, Nanak, on the advice of Sayyad Hasan, began to study Persian and Arabic under the tutelage of Sheikh Qutb-ud-Din, the local *Maulvi*. Persian was also the language spoken in court and thus pursued with great interest. Within a few months, to the undisguised astonishment of his teacher, he had mastered both languages.

Despite being proud of his son's achievements at school, Mehta Kalu had begun to be disappointed with his disposition. He had meant to prepare Nanak to shoulder affairs of the world, but the boy seemed to be living with his own illusions, lost in the verses he composed. Of late, he had developed a habit of wandering outside the village and staying away from home for hours. Mehta Kalu also noticed in him a growing absent-mindedness that he feared bode ill for his future. Nanak was turning twelve and the time was ripe to initiate him to gainful employment. With this goal in mind, he sought the counsel of his friend Rai Bular.

The following morning, Nanak woke up earlier than usual. His father had sent for him the previous evening after coming back from Rai Bular's haveli and told him that he was to start taking their cattle out to graze from

the morrow. It was a practice for young boys his age to herd their family's cattle in pastures surrounding the village. Bala had been boasting about it to Nanak ever since he had assumed that responsibility some weeks ago, and the latter welcomed this new job for he would now be able to be away from home longer without upsetting his parents.

He woke up early the next day. Tripta and Nanki, who had come to visit her parents in Talwandi, were busy in the kitchen preparing a midday meal for Nanak to take with him for he would only return home once the sun began to set.

“Mother, must he really go? Perhaps we should wait until next summer. He is much too small to handle the cattle by himself,” Nanki spoke with concern in her voice.

“He will never be too old for you, Nanki. He is a sensible boy. Bala herds his family's cattle too, as do other boys his age. And I will not broach an argument with your father. He always gives a good amount of thought to any decision he makes, and whatever he decides for his children must indeed be right.”

As Tripta finished speaking, Nanak entered. He wore a long, loose shirt and a turban around his head to protect against a hot sun which could become quite fierce in the afternoon. A pale-yellow stole was thrown over his left shoulder while in his right hand he carried a long sturdy stick to guide the cattle with.

“Here comes the most handsome herdsman in all of Talwandi,” laughed Nanki, remembering to not reveal her anxiety. She blackened a finger with soot from the hearth and placed a mark with it behind Nanak’s ear to ward off an evil eye. He ate a quick meal sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor and then, accompanied by his sister, made his way to the back of the house where the cattle were kept. Opening a makeshift wooden yard gate, he let the cattle out into the village lane.

“Don’t wander too far from the village,” Nanki instructed him. “And you must round off the cattle well before the sun sets so that you can bring them home before dark.”

Nanak smiled at his sister and followed behind the cattle. Nanki watched him go; affection mingled with apprehension in her gentle eyes. She knew too well that her brother had a penchant for absentmindedness and was wont to let himself be carried away with his thoughts far too often for his own good. She watched him walk away with a sigh.

A faint, gleaming light illuminated the narrow dusty village lane over which the cattle were treading. The sun had not yet risen over the horizon, and a cool morning breeze was stirring up mischief amid the branches of trees, rousing the birds to awaken the sleeping world with their songs.

The cattle, accustomed to this daily practice, moved along slowly, metal bells hanging from their necks clinking in rhythm with their gently swaying figures. The

tranquillity and calm of this ambrosial morning hour was reflected in Nanak's gaze as he followed his herd out of the village. A slowly awakening world was illuminated by the rosy fingers of dawn. The ku-u-ku-u of a koel rippled through the air and heralded a symphony of melody from bulbuls, mynahs and starlings, punctuated by the guttural notes of a hornbill, and the incessant loud murmur of babblers as Nanak happily followed his charge.

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The Lone Shadow

As the days passed, Nanak continued to take his cattle to pastures surrounding the village. He appeared happy and content with his new occupation and Mehta Kalu chided himself for having any forebodings about his son's future. Little did he know that this happy situation was not to last long.

Spring had made way for summer, and in the Indian subcontinent these few weeks of summer before the arrival of monsoon rains are unforgiving. The sun blazes all day and aided by the hot, dry winds called *loo*, scorches man, beast, and vegetation alike. The cowherds now drove their cattle out earlier than usual and would not round them off until the sun began to set, taking the stifling heat of the day with it.

Nanak sat at the edge of a grove, contemplating the countryside that stretched before him. The herd was grazing on a few patches of green grass that had been spared from the sun's vengeance. Far beyond the pasture, stretched a field of wheat. The crop was turning yellow gold, and it would not be long before it was ready to be harvested. Butterflies fluttered over wild blossoms, indifferent to the heat, their colourful wings vibrant in the sunshine. The buzzing of bees alternated with the tinkling of cowbells, and the air was pierced now and then with the ku-u-ku-u of a koel.

Nanak, who lay comfortably under the shade of a tree, closed his eyes, and resting his head on his palm immersed himself in the sounds and songs of nature. This small part of the world surrounding him was at peace with its creator and Nanak's heart filled with divine longing that poured out in verse.

*From the boughs of a mango tree,
A koel sings a mellow song,
That causes her sorrows to flee,
Yet my soul's despair it does prolong.⁵*

Rai Bular had been out on a hunting expedition accompanied by a few retainers with his hounds in tow. The growing heat had driven the deer towards watering holes well known to the hunting party and the hunt, therefore, had not been as challenging as the Rai had hoped. Now, sending his retainers off ahead of him with the kill, he spurred his horse and began to gallop towards Talwandi taking a longer and more devious route.

The sun, which had been overhead when he started, was beginning its descent. As he neared the pasture where Nanak's cattle were grazing, he slowed his pace. His gaze drifted towards the grove on the edge of which Nanak lay deep in slumber, and he stood arrested. There was something uncanny about the scene before him, and it was a few moments before he noticed an astonishing peculiarity in the view ahead.

The shadows of all the trees in the cluster that lay on the Rai's right had disappeared into the woods as the sun

⁵ SGGS, pg. 1108, Kokil amb suhaavee bolai ki-o...

sank in the west, apart from one that had not seemed to move at all and was cast towards the sun. Getting down from his horse, the Rai walked apprehensively towards this tree, for superstition was an intrinsic part of his beliefs, and had grown in him as naturally as in all his people.

He saw Nanak sleeping under the tree's shade. He stood looking at the boy under the lone shadow for some time, and then quietly walked towards his horse.



The Bhatti Laments His Loss

A villager belonging to the Bhatti clan was making his way to the fields. It was his habit to inspect his crops twice every day in the morning and evening. With each passing day the kernels appeared more golden than the day before. As he walked towards them now with a contented smile on his face, he was counting down days until the crop would be ready for harvest.

His land was in sight now, but the scene that unfolded before his eyes made him quicken his pace, and he promptly broke into a run, screaming with all the strength his lungs could muster.

“I am ruined! I am ruined” He lamented on discovering that Nanak’s cattle had completely wrecked his field. The crop had been all but destroyed, trampled under their feet. Unaffected by the commotion the Bhatti was making, the cattle continued to graze.

But his raucous screaming had roused Nanak from his slumber, and he hurried to steer his cattle out of the field. When the cattle were finally cleared off, to the accompaniment of the Bhatti’s dinning cries, Nanak began a hurried apology, only to be hushed up rudely by the man.

“I do not want your apology boy! I am taking you to the Rai. Who has ever heard of such carelessness? I shall bring you to account at once!” Grabbing Nanak by the

arm, the Bhatti hurried back to the village, muttering angrily to himself all the way, bemoaning his loss.

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Mehta Kalu had been sitting at the ledger in Rai Bular's veranda. The sun was going down as he finished the last entry of the day. Rai Bular had returned from his hunting expedition in a strange mood earlier, and Mehta Kalu, who had been busy with his work, had vacillated between making a conversation with his friend or letting him be.

He was now in the act of folding the ledger and putting it away under lock and key when a disturbance at the entrance of the Rai's haveli caused him to raise his head. He was astonished to see the Bhatti dragging Nanak into the courtyard before beginning his rants again.

“Mehta ji, your son's heedlessness has ruined my ripened crop. He let your cattle wander into my field and now not a single kernel is left standing!” he bewailed. Before Mehta Kalu could speak, the Bhatti added defiantly, “I will not let my family bear the brunt of your son's irresponsibility. I have come to ask the Rai for justice and will not leave unless you promise to reimburse me for my crop.”

Rai Bular came into the courtyard hearing the commotion. Mehta Kalu had walked over to Nanak and was vigorously shaking the boy by the arm and chastising him for his carelessness.

“How can you be so careless? Boys younger than you take their cattle out to graze. I trusted you with one simple task. A son brings honour to his father and family, but you have disgraced me!”

Nanak raised his bowed head to look up at his father’s angry face, his worried eyes growing misty.

Rai Bular had always been fond of the boy. But the miracle he had seen at the edge of the woods, for he could ascribe no other name to it, had given birth to a reverence in his heart for Nanak, who now stood in front of him with remorse and pain clear in his eyes. “I will compensate the Bhatti for his losses, Mehta. Stop scolding the boy. He looks sorry enough for what has happened. And what is this talk of Nanak bringing dishonour to your family?”

Have you forgotten the Pandit’s prophecy? He will bring glory not only to you but to my Talwandi as well.”

Rai Bular then turned to the Bhatti and dismissed him perfunctorily, promising to reimburse him the next day. Mehta Kalu, nevertheless, was not appeased by his friend’s generosity. He began to worry about Nanak. The whole village soon learnt of the incident and was talking about it the following day.

“The fates have been most unkind to Mehta Kalu. That he should be destined to have only one son who has turned out to be nothing like his father.”

“He wastes his time idling around hills and pastures talking to sadhus and fakirs, without a care for his cattle. This was bound to happen eventually.”

“When he is not in the company of those wandering mendicants, he sits in the house of Sayyad Hasan. Learning their language is one thing, but what good will it do him to mingle with Muslims and holy men?”

“This is what comes of letting him have his way. A good man that he is, Mehta Kalu should have reigned in his defiant son long ago for things are bound to get out of hand with that boy, I tell you!”

Thus, they talked amongst themselves.

This incident created a rift in Nanak’s relationship with his father. Tripta was torn between loyalty towards her husband and love for her only son. Nanak wandered around the village, avoiding coming home even after his father returned from the Rai’s haveli. Mehta Kalu refrained from any reference to the incident before her, which convinced her that he was more hurt and distraught than he was willing to admit. She saw no alternative but to write to Nanki, asking her to visit them for a few days. Perhaps they could together find a solution to bridge the differences that had caused a rift between father and son.



Following the incident involving the Bhatti, Mehta Kalu forbade his son from taking the cattle out to graze again. For Nanak, on the other hand, the few months he had herded his family’s cattle had been a revelation.

He had become accustomed to encounters with wandering ascetics who travelled through the village or rested in the shade of the many groves in its vicinity. He often enticed them into long conversations with his questions. They took pleasure in satisfying his curiosity,

for they discovered that the boy was well versed in Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian, besides having an unexpectedly profound understanding of religious texts. His erudite observations about their varied religious practices belied his age.

Nanak's pleasure in discerning a lone fakir or sadhu in the distance equalled a child's delight at being promised a treat. It had become his habit to surreptitiously leave the house when his mother was too preoccupied in the household work, and to sometimes escape the confines of the haveli in the wee hours of the morning. Mehta Kalu hardly noticed his son's absence because he now spent longer hours at Rai Bular's haveli, leading Tripta to suspect that he deliberately evaded coming home.



Nanak Meets Mardana

It was the beginning of spring. As Nanak awoke to leave his house, the stars were still shining in the sky, and a full moon was watching over a sleeping world. He left the village behind to make his way to the nearest mound. This part of the Punjab was scattered with such hillocks that appeared to rise and fall like waves over the surrounding landscape. He passed the fields sown with the kharif crop that would be ready for harvest in a few weeks.

Climbing up one side of the hill he found a clearing at the edge facing east. The sun would be out in a few moments, and he waited to welcome it over the horizon. The village now lay on his right. From where he sat, he could find familiar watering holes that shone like quicksilver amid the surrounding shadows. In the distance loomed more hillocks like dark patches in the slumbering landscape.

He sat in silence watching the sky moments before the sun appeared. What thoughts passed through his mind only he could tell, but his face in repose appeared peaceful, like that of a traveller who has reached the comfort of his home and hearth after a long, tiring journey. A sky strewn with fading stars was above him, a glorious crimson glow that was heralding a new day lay beyond, and in their midst, he became part of nature's eternal drama that had been replayed since the beginning of time. He watched as the sun robbed the night sky of

her glittering jewels and warmed his own heart with its radiance.

Soon, everyone would be astir in the haveli. He arose and began his descent down the side of the hill. All around him, the dew drops on leaves glistened in the first light of the sun. The rays that lent them such brilliance and beauty would also annihilate them in a few moments, but the innocent pearl-like drops welcomed them, oblivious of the sun's cruel intentions.

As he retraced his steps back to the village, strains of music floated towards him. Without thinking, he quickened his pace. The main road traversing the village branched out into smaller lanes that criss-crossed the houses of the rich and poor village folk alike. But like everything else that distinguished a rich man from a poor one, these lanes changed their guise in accordance with the houses they passed before. In affluent portions of the village, they were broader, paved with bricks and always well swept but when they made their way through the houses of the poor, they transformed beyond recognition, becoming no more than narrow, dark, potholed passages. When the rains came, they were left to the mercy of the elements just like the occupants of these houses who were always at the mercy of a cruel and extracting fate.

Nanak stepped into one of these narrow passages that passed for a lane, keeping his ears focused on the beautiful notes that were getting nearer. He found his way to the doorway of a small yard beyond which lay a small mud house with a thatched roof. In one corner of the yard two men were sitting on a straw mat, bent over a

rehab balanced on their folded legs. The older amongst them, whose beard was white with age, appeared to be playing a tune that the younger man, who was in his early twenties, was replicating with discernible talent.

The duo was entirely absorbed in their music, unmindful of a young boy leaning against their threshold, equally immersed in listening to it. A woman's shrill reprimand forced them to stop.

"Why do you waste your time with this Marjana? All your hard work with him is going to come to naught. He will go just like the others. Only fate chooses to be crueller this time than in the past. At least I lost the others when they were young, but this one here grows older before my eyes, and all I can do is wait for fate to strike her heartless blow again."

A middle-aged woman with greying hair walked out of the hut into the yard and stopped suddenly, causing the father and son to follow her gaze.

"What are you doing here at this hour, son?" asked Badra who was a Muslim belonging to the *Mirasi*⁶ clan, and father to the young man he was training.

Lakkho, who was Badra's wife, stepped forward, "Are you lost, son?" she asked.

"No, no, I have not lost my way. My name is Nanak. I was walking back home when I heard your music. I was so captivated by it that my feet carried me here of their own accord."

⁶ A community of folklore tellers and traditional singers and dancers

“You appear to be from a good family. Do your folks know of your whereabouts? Should Marjana escort you back home?” asked Badra again.

“No, thank you. I am used to wandering about the village alone. But why do you call him Marjana? Does he not have any other name?”

“What should I tell you about my misfortune, son?” replied Lakkho, only too willing to talk of her misery with anyone, as if mere talk would abate it. “Allah blessed us with six children before this Marjana was born, but one after another they all died at a tender age. I live in fear now that Allah will inflict the same fate upon him. I know that just like his name he is destined to die before long. I will go to my grave a childless mother,” she lamented piteously.

“That is an unsuitable name for someone whom God has vested with such talent. I could never call him by the name you have given him.” Nanak said with an innocent smile brightening his face, and after a brief pause added, “Perhaps I will call him Mardana, one who does not die! Can I come and listen to your music sometimes, Sir?”

“The door of our humble home is open to you son, but we are Muslim *Mirasis* and judging by your appearance you are from an affluent upper class Hindu family. Your folks would not approve if you were to mix with the likes of us.”

“Why should they disapprove? What difference does a man’s religion make anyway? I knew a man by the name of Sayyad Hasan once who was also a Muslim and

very dear to my heart. Each time I visited him I never came away empty handed, and the pearls of wisdom he bestowed upon me will never lose their lustre. And so, it is with your music. The notes of your rebab are as precious as Sayyad Hasan's words. Your home is not humble but gifted with the treasures of music."

"And you, apparently, are gifted with a treasure of words," quipped Mardana, speaking for the first time.

"Yes, I am as rich in words as you are with melody. Perhaps we shall deal well together," replied Nanak with a smile.

"These words are not your own son, for they arise from the innocence of your years," said Badra to Nanak. "Like a spring which is crystal clear at its origin gathers murk as it flows away from its source, our minds get tainted by the world around us. Do not lose this innocence, for it will teach you to listen not only with your ears but also your heart, and when you do, the treasures of music will be yours to savour."

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Sayyad Hasan's passing a few months ago had been difficult for Nanak to endure. He had therefore welcomed the opportunity to herd cattle and thus begun to keep the company of fakirs and mendicants.

Listening to conversations of Sufi fakirs was like being taken back in time to Sayyad Hasan's library. Sitting by the window, they had travelled together to watch Maulana Rumi's whirling dervishes in Konya, to

listen to Omar Khayyam's verses being sung by drunken voices at the door of a Persian tavern, take heed of Sadi's words of wisdom, or enjoyed the sweet melodies of Hafiz in the lanes of Shiraz.

After Sayyad Hasan demise and Nanki's move to Sultanpur Lodhi, he was left utterly alone. He now sought the comfort of Mardana's small courtyard, sometimes sitting quietly for hours under the lone Gul mohar tree listening to him practicing under the tutelage of his father. Both father and son were quite exceptional musicians, and they played and sang with a sincerity that was born of their passion for the art. The compelling notes of the rebab lulled Nanak into sweet oblivion in which all the sorrows of his heart were forgotten and left far behind.



The Ceremony of The Sacred String

Festivals and rituals in a Hindu home come and go in constant succession like the seasons. It is no easy task to please the diaspora of thirty-three million gods that lend Hinduism a distinctive oriental charm that no other religion in the world can rival. The time was ripe for the ceremony of *upanayana* or *yajnopavita*. Nanak was to be vested with the sacred string or *janeu* that granted its recipient the honour of being a twice-born Hindu and formally inducted him into the spiritual world of Hinduism.

The ceremony was to be a grand one, befitting Mehta Kalu's position as the chief official of the Rai. Pandit Hardayal was called upon to consult his astrological charts and decide on a propitious day for it. This being done, invitations were sent out to relatives near and far, and preparations began in full swing with dozens of Brahmins being fed in the haveli in the days preceding the ceremony.

The auspicious day dawned, and the doors of the Bedi haveli were once again thrown open for relatives and friends. Nanki had bought for her brother rich silk garments from the bazaars of Sultanpur Lodhi, which he was now wearing as they sat talking on a cot in the only room that had not been encroached upon by anyone because it was filled with baskets of sweetmeats that

were to be distributed amongst the guests before they departed. They sat talking amidst a luscious fragrance of clarified butter interlaced with hints of jaggery, cardamom and other oriental spices.

“Why does it have to be such a grand affair, Bebe?” he asked. He had found it difficult to share in the enthusiasm of his family and his mind was filled with doubts and questions.

“That is because it has always been done this way, and old habits and customs cannot be disregarded,” Nanki replied with a smile. She had known the moment she arrived that something was troubling her brother but there had been so much to do around the house in the way of helping her mother that they had not had a moment together alone. With the ceremony only a few minutes away she had to find out what was troubling him but now could not think of a satisfactory answer to his questions.

“I know it is like the *khitan* practiced for Muslim boys which is like a rite of passage for them into the Muslim world. But there was no such ceremony for you, Bebe, that initiated you into our religion.”

“Who ever heard of that? A girl, whether she is Hindu or Muslim, does not enjoy the privilege that you will have today. Her only initiation is the *purdah* she is expected to don when she leaves her childhood behind. That is the only rite of passage for us girls.” “Why does that too have to be mandatory? Can you not refuse to veil yourself if you do not want to?”

“How you do go on! Who ever heard such talk? If father hears you now, you will be in even greater trouble than I dare imagine. You ask the most absurd questions sometimes, but since you do not mean them in jest, I must try and answer them. Listen Nanak, a fruit needs a branch to grow on, just as that branch needs a tree. You and I are connected in just the same way to our family as our family is connected to this village, and the village to the world. We must conform to the ways of the world in which we live, else there will be no place for us in it.”

“But one must grow out of old habits just as one grows out of old clothes that do not fit anymore. The world around us is in constant change, why must we shun it then?” he asked.

“The only path that leads to change is that of courage, Nanak, and courage, as you know, cannot be bought in the marketplace for a few *tankas*⁷. Now come along, it will not be long before Pandit ji arrives. I have kept aside a basket of sweets for Mardana. You can take it to him after the ceremony.”

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The courtyard was gradually filling with guests. It had been cleansed for the ceremony and sprinkled with holy water from the river Ganges. The floor of the courtyard was once again adorned with beautiful patterns using coloured flour, and a dais had been constructed with a *havan-kund* or a raised, square hollow pit for the sacred

⁷ Unit of currency under the Lodhi dynasty

fire. The air was suffused with a heady aroma of Arabian incense.

Upon Pandit Hardayal's arrival everyone gathered around the dais to witness the ceremony. It began with invocations to the relevant gods and to the ancestors of the Bedi clan for their blessings as well as permission to perform the rituals. After that, the Pandit offered prayers to the *kalash*, or a 'pot of fullness' which was a small metal vessel filled with holy water and crowned with a ring of mango leaves atop which rested a coconut. A few offerings were made to the accompaniment of *mantras*, and then Tripta was called upon to stand behind Nanak who sat facing Pandit Hardayal. Mehta Kalu looked at the mother and son with a smile. Only yesterday, it seemed to him, he had held this boy in his arms as a baby, and today he sat on the threshold of youth, ready to take his first steps out of childhood.

Having taken the blessings of the elephant god, Ganesha, Pandit Hardayal held up in his hands the *janeu*, and repeating a few words raised it over Nanak's head, but the latter stopped him with a gesture of his hand.

"Wait Pandit ji!"

"What is it son?" asked Mehta Kalu.

"Father, with your permission, I would like to ask Pandit ji about the significance and necessity of this thread."

"What kind of an absurd question is that, Nanak?" Mehta Kalu spoke irritably. "The ceremony must be

performed within the auspicious hour. Now is not the time to ask useless questions.”

“It is all right, Mehta ji. There is no harm in appeasing the boy’s curiosity. We still have enough time on our hands.”

Saying this, Pandit Hardayal turned towards Nanak. “Son, the *upanayana* or wearing of the sacred *janeu* is an ancient Vedic ritual, one whose conception goes back thousands of years. It is your initiation into a life of virtue, piety, and knowledge. It bestows upon its wearer the honour of being a *dvija*, or ‘twice born.’ It will signify your purification and spiritual rebirth into our Sanatana Dharma.”

“How are all these things possible by simply wearing a thread? The virtues you talk about, Pandit ji, cannot be imbibed by the wearing of a thread that must inevitably become soiled and worn out with the passage of time. One cannot aspire to righteousness, wisdom, and piety by adorning a thread in a ceremony that lasts a few hours, without making any effort to inculcate them in oneself first.”

“We must not question age-old beliefs and customs, Nanak. It does not befit one who is himself born into such a distinguished caste as the Bedis, who have been scholars of the Vedas since ancient times,” Pandit Hardayal tried to reason with Nanak.

“That is even more reason for me to examine and question our ancient beliefs so they can benefit society and not lead it astray. The mere wearing of a thread will

not guarantee its wearer the virtues that you have just extolled. If there is such a thread that is spun with the cotton of compassion and contentment, one that has been given knots of modesty and twists of truth, that will not break or soil, nor burn or be lost, if you have such a thread Panditji, be pleased to put it around me.”

As if he had not astounded the gathering enough, Nanak continued in a grave and determined voice, “I refuse to be part of a meaningless ritual. I decline to accept the *janeu*.”

A hushed silence fell over the crowd.

When the first moments of shock transpired, those gathered began whispering amongst themselves like a swarm of bees. Rai Bular moved to Mehta Kalu’s side and restrained him just as the latter was about to reprimand his son.

“Not in front of the guests, Mehta. Wait till everyone leaves,” he spoke authoritatively.

The father’s silence, however, gave courage to an elderly relative who exclaimed, “Your son has not only brought shame upon your head with his inauspicious words, Kalia Das, but mocked our ancient practices.”

The others were quick to follow suit.

“Yes, who does he think he is? He must be deranged to talk so. We did not come this far to watch him ridicule and malign our sacred customs.”

“An insult to our practices is an insult to our gods.”

Another guest, who was bolder than the rest declared, “We should not stay a minute longer in a house where the wrath of God will most certainly befall because of the actions of this insolent young boy.”

Within minutes the haveli was bereft of its guests with the exception of Rai Bular and young Bala, who ignored his father’s admonitions and stayed behind.

As the last guests departed, Nanki rushed to her brother’s side and grabbed him by the hand, leading him into the house. As she stepped over the threshold, she turned towards Jai Ram with imploring eyes. He understood without being told that she left him the formidable task of placating his father-in-law, and he walked towards the latter, knowing with some relief that he, at least, had an ally in Rai Bular.



Nanak Watches a Potter at Work

One day, Nanak was making his way back from the mounds outside the village where he was accustomed to wander in search of travelling sadhus and fakirs. The evening sun was sinking over the roofs, and a crescent moon was rising in the other direction. A few stars appeared in the twilight sky watching this endless chase. As Nanak neared the village, a pungent smell of cooking fires greeted him with their warmth, beckoning him to hasten home.

Nanki had returned to her husband, and he did not hurry home as was his wont when she was visiting. The meals she cooked were always more lavish than those his mother prepared. He knew it was one of Nanki's many unspoken ways of conveying her love for him. The Rai's haveli loomed taller than any other house in the village and was encircled by houses of other upper-caste Hindus and prosperous Muslim families. These houses, like Nanak's, were guarded by formidable boundary walls, enclosing spacious courtyards accessible through impressive wooden gates flanked on both sides by intricate pillars, ornamental balconies and adorned with beautifully carved motifs of animals, birds, plants, and geometrical patterns.

As one moved away from the mansions towards the outskirts of the village, the houses began to get smaller,

more congested, and dilapidated. Straw and clay replaced the brick and mortar of their more fortunate counterparts. These belonged to the poorer and lower sections of society. They were people who worked from dawn to dusk as blacksmiths, potters, gardeners, carpenters, stable helpers and performed other useful services for the higher castes.

All upper-caste Hindus avoided this part of the village and its residents even though they depended upon these people for their daily requirements. They pretended to be supremely oblivious of their very existence. Even the main lane of the village that passed the Rai's haveli and houses of the affluent circumvented this poverty-stricken quarter.

But Nanak often strolled in this neighbourhood with the unmasked curiosity of a little boy. Many wandering ascetics, who found the formidable gates of the big havelis unapproachable, were accustomed to begging for alms in this neighbourhood, whose residents had meagre resources but generous hearts. He could sometimes be seen standing outside the blacksmith's forge and at others watching a carpenter at work. One day, he was standing by the little cane door of a potter's yard. He watched with fascination the potter's revolving wheel and his dexterous hands as he fashioned a clay pot.

"Run along Sahib! You will get yourself in trouble if you loiter around here and your parents discover your whereabouts," the potter admonished.

“Why should I be in trouble for watching you?” he asked the potter innocently.

“That is because we belong to a caste much lower than yours. Why do you risk the ire of your family by keeping the company of insignificant people such as us? Haven’t you been taught the rules of caste hierarchy?”

“There is such magic in your hands. Look at the beautiful jars and *surahis* you can make with a handful of clay! You use earth, water, fire, and air to make these beautiful wares as God uses them to fashion man. How can you be insignificant?”

“Whoever heard such talk? If the priests in the temple heard you, you would be ostracised and I, too, along with you for listening to such humbug! I must get these wares ready before the next market day and I cannot waste time arguing with you,” the potter exclaimed.

“I had no intention of upsetting you, Sir!” replied Nanak. “I like to watch you at work, but if my presence offends you, I will not come again.” Saying this, he solemnly turned to go. The potter, leaving his work, hastened to intercede.

“Now wait a moment! I have upset you. I grant you are more curious than other boys your age, but there is no harm in that if you are discreet. Come and sit on the cot before someone in the street sees you standing at my door and stay for as long as you like.”

Nanak smiled beguilingly at the potter and walked towards the cot, sitting on it cross-legged. The potter returned to his wheel, deliberating with himself whether

he should not have sent Nanak away for the boy's own sake. It would do him no good to keep the company of a low-born like himself. He had often seen Nanak roaming in his neighbourhood and even sharing treats with dirty, half-naked children who ran about its narrow, squalid lanes. His clean clothes and radiant face were entirely incongruous with the surroundings, but Nanak's plain and sincere ignorance of such disparities endeared him to these remnants of society.

The story of Pandit Hardayal's prophecy upon Nanak's birth had gradually been obscured by the turning pages of time. They had all, however, heard of his refusal to wear the *janeu*, and like a familiar taste or scent sometimes brings with it a flood of memories, long forgotten, so was it with these people who had talked of nothing else for days after news of the ceremony and what had happened had spread through the village.

Nanak's immediate family and relatives, apart from Nanki, Jai Ram and Rai Bular, had reproached him volubly for defying traditions and bringing damnation upon himself and his family by his appalling behaviour.

The potter recalled how the news had shocked people in this part of the village just as much as everyone else, but they had not been as incriminating as his relatives. Every incident, small or significant, pleasant, or disagreeable, gave a fleeting respite to their lives that were otherwise marked with precariousness, hunger, disease, and suppression.

“Do you know what the Pandit predicted at the time of your birth?” he asked Nanak now. “The entire village talked of nothing else for days! Now, there surely is no greatness to be found in my humble abode, and none at all in the house of that *Mirasi* Muslim boy you waste your time with. Is there a drought of Hindu boys in our village that you should indulge that Muslim?” the potter asked.

“How should it matter what his religion is? He plays the rebab better than anyone else in the village. How can Mardana be inferior to you or you be inferior to another? I have learned as much from listening to him as I have from watching you. You are my teachers in your own way like Pandha Gopal, Pandit Brijraj, the Maulvi or Sayyad Hasan have been,” Nanak replied. “There are no distinctions in the world of birds and beasts, then why should there be any between us? A koel is a koel, no matter which tree it sings from, and a deer is a deer regardless of where it roams.”

“Don't you see, there are countless differences between us!” exclaimed the potter. “They condemn our idols; they feed on the animals we worship, and above all refuse to believe in the veracity of *samsara*⁸ and ignorantly bury their dead while we burn them so they can be born into a new life.”

Nanak sat thinking, turning his gaze from the *surahi* the potter was shaping with his deft hands towards the blazing furnace behind him.

⁸ The cycle of birth, death and rebirth according to Hinduism.

“You are still too young to understand these matters. You will learn the ways of the world as you grow. A fish must stay in water if it wants to survive. There is no life for it without. We must follow the ways of our elders. That is the only way to live.”

Nanak rose from the cot and took the potter’s leave, bowing forward with folded hands, and let himself out into the street.

His feet were carrying him home, but Nanak’s mind lingered in the potter’s small yard. What did it matter if our bodies were buried or burnt once the soul had departed? Did we not all come to the same end, returning to the elements from which we were raised? The same earth that shrouds a Muslim in his final sleep is carried by a potter to his wheel and later plunged into the furnace. The ashes from a Hindu’s pyre are immersed in the holy Ganges whose waters irrigate every field in its path, returning the ashes to earth. Nature’s eternal cycle completes itself, and everything returns to where it once began.

*A potter takes a lump of clay beneath which a Muslim
sleeps,
He gives it shape before plunging it in the furnace to
burn,
And as it burns in the smouldering fire it weeps,
The ways of the Lord, O Nanak, no one can discern.⁹*

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⁹ SGGS, pg. 466, Mitti musalman ki paerhe pae kumiaar...

Nanki Brings a Proposal of Marriage

The graceful strokes of the boatman's oars sent the waters of the Ravi rippling in a musical cadence. The monsoon rains had abated, and the river had resumed her peaceful course, its waters having receded gradually after the rains ceased. Nanki sat on the stern, smiling as she watched water buffaloes enjoying an early morning bath on the opposite bank.

The gossamer scarf that concealed her face fluttered in the breeze. When a gust of wind nearly blew it away, she giggled like a little girl and held it down with both hands. Jai Ram, watching her struggle, could not resist a smile. They were on their way to Rai Bhoe's Talwandi for *Rakhi*, a Hindu festival in which a sister ties a thread around her brother's wrist, and he in turn promises to protect her for life. Since Jai Ram was an only child and had no sister, he was going with Nanki to her parents' home.

There was another important reason, however, for which they had decided to go together. Jai Ram had some weeks ago been sent to Batala by Nawab Daulat Khan on official business relating to the collection of revenue. There, he had met a *Patwari* or official accountant, named Mul Chand, who happened to be looking for a suitable groom for his daughter. Jai Ram had taken a liking to the man and on his journey back to

Sultanpur Lodhi, was struck with the idea of trying to fix a match between Nanak and the *Patwari's* daughter, named Sulakhni.

This was only possible, however, if the girl met with Nanki's approval. Jai Ram set about searching for mutual relatives to facilitate another meeting with Mul Chand. Since the latter was a *Khatri*, belonging to the same caste as Jai Ram himself, the task was easier than he had reckoned. Together, they made a trip to Pakho Ke Randhawa, Mul Chand's ancestral village. Sulakhni's quiet and sweet nature struck a chord in Nanki's heart, and she was pleased to see that this girl, who was no more than a child, was, nevertheless, mature for her years and had also been taught to read and write.

Jai Ram and Nanki arrived in Talwandi before dusk, and brother and sister were reunited. Nanki talked incessantly and the sound of her voice for Nanak was as sweet as the first song of a *koel* at the onset of spring.

She understood that before broaching the subject with her parents, she must prepare Nanak. Mehta Kalu and Tripta had retired for the night, and the youngsters now sat under the stars in the open courtyard.

Monsoon rains had taken the summer's heat with them, and the nights were now cooler. Frogs and crickets seemed to have multiplied by the hundreds and began their croaking as soon as the first stars appeared in the sky. They hopped about the courtyard now, claiming it by night, until dawn, when they would disappear into their own secret world.

“Isn’t it wonderful that night and day must always chase each other endlessly? To everything in nature God assigns a match. The day has night, the earth has the sky, the clouds have the wind, the river has the ocean, and all creatures living on land and water have a consort so that the dance of God’s creation can carry on till the end of the world.”

Nanak smiled at his sister. He knew she was never one to broach a serious matter directly but always prepared the soil first before throwing in the seed.

Jai Ram, on the other hand, despite the diplomatic skills he had nurtured in court life, was not as patient with his words on this occasion and said, “What your sister means, Nanak, is that it is time for you to settle down and start a family of your own. To that end, we have found a girl who will suit you perfectly!”

“You two love me dearly, and any decision you make on my behalf must indeed be to my advantage. If it is marriage you propose, it shall come to pass if it is in accordance with God’s wishes.”



Nanak Gets Married

The day of the marriage was fixed. The wedding party that should have included half of Talwandi, if Mehta Kalu had been allowed to have his way, was a rather small one. Nanak had insisted that he would not leave the village at the head of a large wedding party, just as he would not leave Pakho Ke village with a wife who brought with her any dowry. Mul Chand, the bride's father, upon hearing Nanak's unprecedented demands, had a moment of uncertainty on the choice of groom for his beloved daughter. He would be ridiculed before relatives and friends for giving his daughter away without a dowry. But Jai Ram had intervened and persisted until the doubtful father of the bride had capitulated to the groom's demands.

Mul Chand's haveli was decked up like a bride for the festivities of his daughter's wedding. Relatives and friends had started to arrive weeks before the wedding and Mul Chand's courtyard echoed with the sounds of singing, dancing, and laughter from dawn to dusk.

The auspicious day of the wedding arrived. After the ceremony was concluded, the atmosphere of mirth that had prevailed in the house for weeks now suddenly turned solemn. The bride was going to bid goodbye to everything that was loved and familiar, to go away with a man she still had not had a chance to see as she stood beside him, her face concealed with a bright red stole embroidered intricately with gold and silver threads.

She scooped a handful of rice in her hands from a platter held out before her and with one quick gesture, flung it over her head. Rice was a symbol of wealth, happiness, and prosperity, and by scattering it behind her the new bride wished for all these things for the people she was soon to leave. This was repeated a few times as she walked towards the entrance of the home that had until then been her own. It was time now to bid goodbye and step into a beautifully decorated palanquin that would carry her away to her new home. The tears that now ran unchecked down Sulakhni's cheeks were like none she had ever shed before. They tasted of loss mingled with uncertainty and were tinged with fear of the unknown and unfamiliar world that was to be hers soon.

As he helped her into the palanquin, Nanak heard her poorly stifled sobs and taking her hand in his own, pressed it gently. Sulakhni looked up with surprise, and through her diaphanous veil saw a benign face with kindly eyes looking down at her, the memory of which she carried with her long after the palanquin bearers raised their burden onto their sturdy shoulders and bore her away.



Mehta Kalu Is Appeased

All of Sulakhni's apprehensions from the past faded away gradually. She made a place for herself in the hearts of Mehta Kalu and Tripta with her caring and kind nature. Rai Bular too applauded Jai Ram and Nanki's choice of bride for his beloved Nanak. In only a few months it seemed they had never known the haveli to be without her. Nanak too ceased his wanderings and spent his time at home, running small errands in the village sometimes.

He did visit Mardana from time to time, however, to hear him practice his music. Mehta Kalu did not approve of Nanak keeping company with a musician and had tried to dissuade his son from doing so. Nanak had argued that the *aarti* performed in the haveli everyday by his mother was no different from Mardana's devout music. The father had sighed in exasperation and walked away.

Mardana's father, Badra, was by now too old to play, but his own growing family ensured that he now had a son of his own who was the right age to be introduced to the world of music. Badra would sit on a low cot, taking long, slow puffs from his hookah. His eyes had grown clouded with age, but his hearing was still keen, and he listened to the father and son practice with a critical ear, often interrupting them with a harsh rebuke or a rare word of approval.

Despite the ten-year difference in their age, Nanak and Mardana's acquaintanceship had grown over the years into a steady friendship and camaraderie. Their shared passion for music and Nanak's extraordinary aptitude for it had earned him Mardana's appreciation many a times. Nanak was now as familiar with the nuances of complex Indian ragas as Mardana or even Badra.

When he was home, he spent most of his time writing poetry. As Sulakhni could read, she gathered courage one day and asked him to see what he wrote and he obliged without hesitation. His poetry was a small window through which she had a glimpse of the person he truly was. The more she learnt about him, the more she was convinced that he was different from people around him, and therefore, often misunderstood. She also perceived her father-in-law's growing anxiety over Nanak's sedentary lifestyle.

Mehta Kalu reasoned that he had given his son sufficient time to idle around in his old ways, but it had now been over six months since the marriage, and he still showed no signs of assuming any responsibility. He neither showed an interest in farming nor learning how to handle a ledger like his father.

Frustrated with his idleness, Mehta Kalu tried to reason with him.

"Take up any kind of employment, Nanak, it does not matter what you do. You are a married man now who will soon have to assume the responsibilities of being a

father, God willing. What good will it do for you to sit at home writing or singing in the company of that *Mirasi*? Your verses and idle singing will not put food on the table.”

“Father, a man’s body is his field, his mind a ploughman and his virtuous deeds like the crops that he must nurture with the water of modesty. In that regard, I too am a farmer. This waning age is a man’s shop; truth is his merchandise and understanding and meditation upon the Lord’s name are his warehouse. One who has dealings with those who hold love for God in their heart profits from their wisdom. In that regard, I too, am a tradesman. It is not wealth of gold, silver and possessions that goes with a man into the next world, father, but honourable deeds that are born of contentment, humanity, and love.”

Mehta Kalu turned towards Tripta in anger.

“This is the result of keeping the company of fakirs and sadhus. He has started talking like them too!” Then turning towards Nanak, he continued. “As long as I am alive, I will not let you ignore your responsibilities. If not for yourself, you will take up some kind of work for the sake of that poor girl you have married.”

Mehta Kalu walked out of the house in a rage, decided that he would shake Nanak out of his unrealistic world of daydreams and jolt him back to reality even if it were the last thing he did.

Nanak sensed his father’s displeasure and the knowledge that he himself was the cause of it plunged

him into deep distress. Next day, he sat beside his father while the latter was having his breakfast, sitting cross-legged on the kitchen floor with a low stool placed before him that was laden with food on a silver plate. Mehta Kalu responded half-heartedly to Nanak's greeting and continued to eat.

"Father, I am sorry for having upset you yesterday," said Nanak. "I agree to take up any occupation you deem suitable for me."

Mehta Kala had raised a morsel to his mouth but put it back hastily and asked gravely, "Do you mean it this time, Nanak? Will you do anything I plan for you with all your heart, or are you just saying these words to appease me?"

"I mean it, father. I am at your command."

A smile transformed Mehta Kalu's face and he turned towards his wife.

"Take the food away, Tripta! Nanak's words have assuaged my hunger."

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Nanak Strikes a True Bargain

A wide dusty road left the village of Talwandi skirting around a small forest, making its way to the local market town of Chuhrkhana. The forest was clothed in a green cover of indigenous trees like the *chak*, *waan* and silk cotton tree, the dense foliage of their leaves concealing shady groves interspersed with a labyrinth of tree trunks. The green of the trees was in sharp contrast to the bright yellow mustard flowers that were blooming in a field separating the forest from the road. The sun was rising over the horizon, chasing the night away, and in its golden light were discernible two figures coming from the direction of the village. These were Nanak and his companion Bala. The latter suddenly stopped in the middle of the dusty track and began talking to his childhood friend in an animated manner, throwing up his hands in exasperation before following behind Nanak, who started to walk towards the forest.

Bala was balancing a stick on his right shoulder, on one end of which was tied a bundle carrying their midday meal of flatbread and spiced vegetables that Sulakhni had risen early in the morning to prepare for them. The twenty gold coins Mehta Kalu had handed over to his son with a beaming face, and high expectations had been arranged by her carefully and folded into a muslin cloth which she advised Nanak to tuck away in the folds of the cloth he had tied around his waist.

Talwandi, which was about thirty *kos* from Lahore, lay on an important trade route and in the path of anyone travelling from the northern and western regions of Afghanistan, Persia and beyond towards Lahore, Delhi and further. It lay on the route that was part of a gateway to the much-coveted wealth of Hindustan. Everyone, from a humble fakir, merchant, curious traveller to a conqueror at the head of a formidable army, had traversed this village at one time or another in the past.

To other travellers, he gave but a passing thought, but Nanak was fascinated by the holy men who were often seen crossing the village, some asking for alms, others singing songs of devotion as they travelled along, and some reposing in the shade of groves surrounding the village in the hot months.

There were Sufi fakirs who wore loose, long black robes called *khirqahs*. They often passed through the village singing poignant songs of their love and restless longing for the divine. There were various sects of sadhus, all dressed in keeping with the code of their orders. Usually, they wore a long saffron coloured robe tied around their lower body, their bare torsos smeared with ash, and donned their long, matted, uncut hair bundled up on their heads or let loose to fall all the way to their knees or down to their ankles. Then there were Jain mendicants, the 'sky-clad' *digambara* monks who wore no clothing, and the *svetambaras* who were always clothed in white, wore a mouth cloth, and carried a broomstick made of naturally shed peacock feathers to

clear their path of any living creatures that might otherwise come to harm under their feet.

Nanak's spiritual tendencies habitually drew him to these holy men, irrespective of their varied beliefs or religions. Since he had already mastered the classical languages and was well versed in religious scriptures, he had no difficulty in discoursing with either the sadhus who belonged to different branches of the Sanatan Dharma or Sufi fakirs who read the *namaz* five times a day. He invariably impressed them with his insight and views of the ephemeral. Many even tried to convince him to follow their path, impressing upon him the superiority of their beliefs over others. To bring more followers into their fold was considered by many of them a virtuous deed, and young Nanak seemed a worthy addition into their respective sects. But he humbly turned down their overtures with folded hands.

"I am like an eager honey drone that is not satiated with nectar from a single flower," he would explain. "Just as a garden's allure is increased by the presence of many different colours of blooms, this world is made beautiful by diverse beliefs that are like rivers uniting in the same cosmic ocean, where the world soul and the absolute are one and indistinguishable."

Bala was by now grumbling volubly as he followed Nanak towards the trees at the edge of the forest, having left the road going towards Chuhrkhana, disobeying Mehta Kalu's injunctions. The latter had entrusted Nanak with twenty gold coins, which amounted to a small fortune, with express instructions to head to the nearest

market town of Chuharkhana for the purchase of tradable goods that could easily be sold in Talwandi. Just like a mother tempts a fussy child who refuses to eat with one dish after another until it succumbs, Mehta Kalu had decided to make yet another effort to convince his son to shoulder responsibility. Like a gambler who is certain that the next deal will turn up a winning card, he handed the large sum of money over to his son, Nanak's quiet acquiescence to go to Chuharkhana convincing him that finally the young man had seen sense and decided to pursue an honourable occupation.

"You know you don't see eye to eye with your old man. Yet, you choose to deliberately disobey him after he especially told us to keep to the road. What fascination do you have for these god-forsaken jungles? For all we know they will be crawling with snakes," Bala complained.

"Don't worry about the snakes, Bala. It is still too cold for them to come out of their winter sleep. I met a sadhu in the grove outside our village. He told me that the *Maha Kumbh* is being celebrated in Haridwar this year in the month of *Vaisakh* and thousands of Naga sadhus are making their way to the holy city. He met a few in these jungles on his way to our village. They avoid travelling through towns and villages when they come down from the snowy peaks of the Himalayas, which they do only for the festival of *Kumbh*. I have never seen a Naga sadhu in my life before, Bala! There is every chance of us meeting one today if we keep to the path along the forest," explained Nanak.

“What will we tell your father if we are delayed? We must be back in the village before the sun sets.”

“Then we must hurry towards the forest,” said Nanak quickening his pace.

Then diverting from the road to Chuhrkhana, they began walking across two fields of mustard that were separated by a raised track of soil hardened from impressions of human feet. The mustard flowers were in full bloom, their petals seeming to have captured the sunshine with some hidden magic known only to them. A few bees were buzzing over the blooms, intoxicated by their heady scent. There was a chill in the early morning air, and the warm rays of the rising sun were gently sweeping the mist away which reluctantly untangled herself from the earth’s languid embrace, to disappear quietly until another night came to herald the hour of their short-lived tryst.

Nanak stopped abruptly, gesturing to Bala to lead the way. He followed slowly behind, briefly forgetting why they had been hastening towards the enclosure of trees ahead of them.

He touched the flowers like one would touch the brow of a newborn child. He turned his gaze to the sun, the enchantment of the dawn piercing his heart with an ecstatic pain.

*Blissful is His praise and likewise His adoration,
Blissful is the wilderness and blissful the trail,
Blissful is union, blissful too is separation,
Blissful is the Lord, whose presence doth ever prevail,*

*Gazing at His creation, I marvel in admiration,
Favoured are those, O Nanak, who see His secrets
unveil.¹⁰*

They walked along the edge of the forest for a few kos keeping in sight of the road. The sun had risen to dispel the mist, and the chill of the morning had subsided.

“We should try and buy everything your father told us to and then hire a bullock cart to transport all the goods back. If we leave Chuhrkhana by midday after completing our purchases, we will be home before nightfall.”

Bala broke the silence between them, speaking more from habit than necessity, while Nanak scanned the trees on his right. Bala loved to talk and was accustomed to Nanak’s spells of silence. Ever since they had left the road, he had been beset by a premonition that the day would not end well, but to conceal his anxiety, he chattered regardless of whether his companion was listening.



“Leave the bargaining to me. You do not know these shopkeepers. The moment they get a whiff of any money on you they will strive with their cunning to suck you dry. If I let you do the purchasing, there is no knowing if we will get past the first of them without bidding all your

¹⁰ SGGS, pg. 464, Vismaad sifat vismaad saalaah...

father's gold goodbye." He paused momentarily to traverse a fallen tree branch before resuming his chatter.

"I do not mean to be disrespectful to you father. I admire him like everyone else in the village, but I do not know what he is thinking by sending you into trade. If you open shop in the village, you will give goods on credit to everyone who asks for it and become bankrupt even before one can say the word. Now, if I were to become your partner things would be quite different, but there is too much for me to do at home with father advancing in years."

He turned around as he spoke but saw that Nanak had stopped following him and stood still, looking intently through the trees. He walked back to his friend and followed his gaze to see a naked figure hanging from the branch of a tree by his hair, his eyes closed and hands folded at the chest. Bala gave a muffled shriek and turned pale with fright, until a moment later he realized that the suspended figure whose emaciated body was covered with whitish-grey ash was not an apparition but a sadhu in deep meditation. As their eyes adjusted to the dim light percolating through the leaves, they saw a few dozen more sadhus of similar appearance who seemed to be mere spectres, each looking more starved and skeletal than the last. They had assumed different meditative poses. Some stood on one leg; others were balanced on their heads against a tree's trunk while some sat in the lotus pose. All appeared to be in deep meditation with their eyes closed. The only movement discernible in their

bodies was the unnaturally slow and imperceptible rise and fall of their breasts.

Nanak walked forward slowly and carefully, lest the rustle of leaves under his feet should disturb their spiritual reverie. They wore matted hair, and their bodies and faces were smeared with ash. Prayer beads encircled their wrists and necks. They had been carrying tridents and pellet drums that now lay on the sides of their respective owners.

The order of the Naga sadhus was an ancient one and their primary deity was Shiva, the god of destruction. Their ranks had undergone a reformation around the eighth century when they were reorganized under the leadership of Adi Shankaracharya, a Vedic scholar and teacher, as an armed sect to ward off foreign invaders who posed a threat to Hinduism. An aspirant had to undergo extreme physical, spiritual, and mental penance for years before being accepted into the ranks of a Naga sadhu.

Bala sat by the edge of the woods on a tree stump, close enough to keep Nanak in sight, refusing to go with his friend any further on this mad escapade. He had heard countless stories from the village elders of a sadhu's volatile temper and penchant for putting a curse on anyone on the slightest pretext and had no mind to be on the receiving end of their wrath.

Nanak, on the other hand was clever with words, reasoned Bala, and could easily extricate himself out of a tangle with these travelling holy men whose company he

was wont to keep. If he kept his friend in plain sight, there was no harm in letting him go on alone.

Nanak walked ahead slowly. As he stood in uncertainty, only a few steps away from their midst, a sadhu older than the others, who sat meditating under a tree, opened his eyes and looked straight at Nanak with a smile. Nanak joined his palms together in greeting and bowed his head.

“Are you not perchance further away from the road you should have taken?” asked the sadhu.

Nanak replied, without displaying any bewilderment at the sadhu’s clairvoyance, “O holy one, sometimes a road less travelled leads one to the desired destination sooner than the more frequented path.”

“We are all fellow travellers, O Nanak, and our destination is one. Few there are amongst us who reach it, while others are bound to wander a little longer in this wilderness. Ask now what you want to ask.”

“When did you and your companions last have anything to eat?”

“That is insignificant, Nanak. What is the hunger of this body in comparison with the hunger of the soul? The body once fed is besieged by hunger again, but the soul once nourished with divine light is satiated for ever. We eat when Lord Shiva provides. Our path is one of absolute renunciation from the temporal affairs of this world. We have mastered the effects of elements on our bodies and reigned our corporeal desires through severe penance and discipline, for there is no other way to

defeat the evil that springs from attachment to this world.”

He gestured towards the trident beside him and continued. “We carry nothing with us that we cannot leave behind. We all came into this life empty-handed, O Nanak, but the people of your world squander away their lives accumulating money, fame, power and other worldly goods they are loath to leave behind when death beckons, while we, like Shiva, smear our bodies with ash, perpetually reminding ourselves of the futility of attachment to this transient life. This world ocean is difficult to traverse, O Nanak, but cross it one must, for the shore beyond holds the promise of eternal bliss and union with the everlasting. Every drop of water that rises into the sky to form a cloud can wander all it likes but at the end it must fall back as rain because therein lies its fate.”

“I have been honoured to be the recipient of your wisdom, O holy one. But a favour received must now be returned. Allow me to provide a meal for you with my meagre means.”

“You must do as you please. If that is the will of Shiva, we will accept your hospitality,” the sadhu answered.

Nanak again joined his palms in front of his heart and bowed in reverence before walking back towards Bala.

“We must hurry to Chuhrkhana. There is a lot to be done,” said Nanak to his friend.

As they approached the vicinity of the market town, they were joined by a steady line of bullock carts, travellers on horseback and others on foot. Clouds of powdery brown dust raised by the feet of man and beast concealed the market that was crowded despite the early hour. As they neared it, a broad, dusty market street could be discerned, lined with shops and stalls on both sides selling a myriad of wares.

There were cloth merchants selling muslin from Mosul and silks from Cathay, spice merchants selling cardamom, cinnamon, cumin, pepper and other spices from the Deccan and Ceylon, and Arab traders dressed in long robes selling frankincense, myrrh, and other exotic perfumes. There were shops selling jewellery, terracotta wares, utensils, and leather goods. It was a busy market day. A snake charmer, wearing a colourful turban on his head, sat outside a shop that sold nuts and dried fruits from Persia. A black cobra with its hood spread menacingly was swaying to the hypnotizing music of the charmer's flute as a few children stood by and watched, mesmerized.

“Let us have a look at your father's list, Nanak. We can start from this side of the market and work our way towards the other end.”

“We are not going to worry about father's list for now, Bala. We must first make arrangements to feed the sadhus we left in the forest. If we do not take them food today there is no knowing how many days will pass before they are offered it again.”

Bala stood still, too astonished to speak, not believing what he had heard. But he soon regained his composure and lost patience.

“What mischief are you up to now? This is no time for jest. If we do not start with the purchases now the best goods will all be sold.”

“I spoke in earnest. You saw the state of those sadhus yourself. They do not ask for alms but eat what they are offered. If they keep to the jungles as is their habit, how will they find food? We must take them food, Bala, and with the money left we can purchase some of the things my father asked for.”

Before Bala could argue any further, Nanak sped past the crowds, and all he could do was to follow his friend. It was a little before midday when they had procured enough vegetables, pulses, rice and other items to feed the sadhus, borrowed some cooking utensils and two earthen stoves, and hired a bullock cart to convey everything back along with a cook they had paid exorbitantly for, as his employer was reluctant to part with him on a busy market day.

They set up camp a few yards away from where the sadhus sat meditating and built a temporary kitchen. Nanak and Bala went in search of firewood and water, and two fires were duly started. The fragrance of lentil curry and cooked vegetables was soon wafting through the afternoon air. Nanak and Bala sat nearby watching the cook take turns to stir the curry and vegetables. Nanak placed in his palms a few grains of rice and

bending over, waited for some squirrels that were scuttling up and down a nearby tree to eat the grains out of his hands. He sat smiling as they busied themselves snatching a speck of grain with their tiny claws and scurrying away to sit at some distance and nibble on it greedily.

Bala watched his friend with a melancholic smile. He loved Nanak like a brother and was fiercely loyal to him as a friend, but he knew that the misgivings he had earlier in the day were materializing before his eyes. Nanak had squandered away all his money in Chuhrkhana, and it was no meagre amount. Bala knew he would be brought to reckoning for it before the day was done.



The mild afternoon heat of a fading winter was being chased away by a cool evening breeze. Birds were coming back to roost as the sun began to gradually descend beyond the horizon. Nanak was sitting cross-legged before the elderly sadhu he had conversed with earlier in the day. The sadhus had been fed, and Bala had gone to escort the cart laden with the cook and utensils to the main road that would convey him back to Chuhrkhana.

“You must accept my gratitude for your kindness and generosity towards us. We sadhus are as profuse with our blessings as we are notorious for our curses,” the sadhu

smiles. “It would please me to entreat the gods for any wish on your behalf. Ask freely, O Nanak!”

“If I expect anything in return for my services it will diminish my satisfaction at proffering them, O holy one! The flowers give freely of their fragrance, the birds of their song and the heavens of rain. My generosity pales into insignificance before the magnanimity of nature. You have answered my questions and satiated my curiosity regarding the practices and beliefs of your ancient order. There is nothing more to ask.”

“I see your companion returning. You must go now, but you cannot leave empty-handed. Questions linger in your mind like clouds before the sun. May there come a time when these clouds disperse forever, and you become like the sun dispelling darkness and doubt from this world.”



The Search for Nanak and Bala

The moon and stars had chased away the last remnants of another day and were glorying in their triumph together. Birds had passed on the baton to creatures of the night who now vied with each other to vanquish the growing silence. Most of the village folks, rich and poor, had extinguished their oil lamps to drift into a world of dreams.

But a shadow of misgiving lay over the Bedi family. Mehta Kalu was pacing around the courtyard. Tripta sat weeping on a cot and Sulakhni, her arms consolingly wrapped around her mother-in-law's shoulder, sat beside her, her gaze fixed at the door, hope, and fear fleeting like shadows in her eyes.

There had been no sign of Nanak or Bala, and Mehta Kalu was beset with fear and doubt. He had sent a servant with a message for Rai Bular and another to Bala's house to enquire if the boys had returned. As he tried to disregard his anxiety and think rationally, a sound from the street startled him and he turned towards the gate expectantly. But it was only Rai Bular who came in, looking just as worried as the father.

"Why did you not call for me earlier, Mehta?" He chided. "If we had sent out a search party after them before dusk, it would have been much easier to track them. As it is, there is no alternative. We must go in search of the boys. I have already ordered a few retainers

to meet us here with torches. We will leave as soon as they arrive.”



The silver gleam of the moon illuminated a sleeping world casting dark shadows under lone trees along the path. Bala had resorted to pleading now, having exhausted all other means to encourage Nanak to hasten home. The latter was walking at a snail's pace and would stop abruptly along the way until Bala had to gently pull at his hand to get him to start walking again. He had recounted tales of attacks by wild beasts and encounters with bandits who waited for just such a moonlit night to plunder and kill their victims. When these failed to spur Nanak, he began with tales of evil spirits who awoke from their sleep when the sun went down to prey on lone travellers and possess their bodies. These tales, however, proved ineffectual on Nanak and ricocheted back to the narrator instead, who broke into a cold sweat with fear and grabbed hold of Nanak's hand.

After taking leave of the sadhus in the forest, Nanak had started on the return journey with a light step and radiant face. As they reached the road that would take them back to Rai Bhoje's Talwandi, Bala voiced a question he had an inkling Nanak had not considered until then.

“What will you tell your father?”

Nanak stood transfixed. The smile on his lips vanished and was replaced with a worried frown. The

thought of going back to his father empty-handed had not crossed his mind. He had too sensitive a disposition to hurt anyone intentionally. He remembered the happiness on his father's face when he had agreed to go to Chuhrkhana. He had counted the money carefully before entrusting it to Nanak, and placing a hand on his shoulder had given him several instructions on how to make his purchases and bargain for different goods. Sending Mardana as a companion was out of the question as far as Mehta Kalu was concerned because the father did not consider a musician fit companion for his son, no matter how unconventional the latter himself was. So, he chose Bala instead.

He had wanted to send a few retainers also with Nanak on this momentous trip, but Nanak had turned down the offer decisively, convincing his father that Bala was sufficient company, and they would assuredly be home before dusk.

As he now walked towards the road his son had taken that morning accompanied by the Rai and a few torch bearing retainers, Mehta Kalu worried gravely for his safety.

Granted that Nanak was headstrong, careless, and had a complete disregard for conventions, he nevertheless loved his only son with all his heart. He had spent the past few years carefully planning Nanak's future and despite the many setbacks, he was convinced that he would eventually fulfil the prophecy made at his birth. When Nanak had excelled in his study of the languages and earned the praise of all his teachers, no one could

have been prouder or happier than the father. After Nanak had completed his education, Mehta Kalu took upon himself the responsibility of guiding his son through the duties of a householder and a man of the world.

Rai Bular, who loved Nanak just as well himself, had tried to dissuade Mehta Kalu from pushing the boy into assuming responsibilities before he was ready for them, attempting unsuccessfully to convince his friend that Nanak should be left to follow his own path in life because he was not like other boys his age. He had never mentioned the miracle, as he liked to think of it, that he had seen at the edge of the forest, to anyone. He loved Nanak too deeply to subject him to the curiosity of simple-minded village folks. His injunctions about Nanak, however, went unheeded, for Mehta Kalu's ambitions for his only son were not to be thwarted even by the coaxing of his closest friend and confidant.

Nanak, as he walked slowly back to the village, his feet weighed down by thoughts of his father, was oblivious to Bala's pleadings to make haste. The light from a shining moon illuminated the road ahead of them, transforming it into a silver ribbon winding its way across familiar landscapes, but the village remained veiled by the cover of night. Far in the darkness ahead of them, half a dozen lights appeared like twinkling stars fallen from the sky. As they drew nearer, the lights became brighter until they revealed the figures that accompanied them.

Mehta Kalu saw the boys first and began running towards them with Rai Bular at his heels. Bala, relieved beyond words at the sight of the search party made as if to run, but Nanak stood transfixed with troubled eyes that arrested Bala's advance. He stood beside his friend knowing that this time Nanak had gone too far and even his eloquence with words could not save him in the face of the loss of a small fortune.

Mehta Kalu reached Nanak and held him close, the joy of seeing his son safe bringing tears of relief to his eyes.

"Your father was very worried for you, Nanak. Fortunately, we found you sooner or else he was determined to drag us all the way to Chuhrkhana at this ungodly hour," jested the Rai who appeared just as relieved as Mehta Kalu.

They walked back to the village, Mehta Kalu turning his gaze towards Nanak several times and thanking the heavens for keeping him safe.

"We must return with haste to your mother and Sulakhni," he said. "They have been very anxious and worried for you."

When they reached the haveli, Tripta ran towards her son with outstretched arms and tears of relief. Nanak held her quietly in his embrace. Sulakhni stood not far behind Tripta, with a happy smile on her face but when she met Nanak's eyes, she knew instinctively that something was amiss.

“Tell us what happened and what caused your delay. Did you reach Chuharkhana?” asked Mehta Kalu. As everyone turned towards Nanak with curiosity, Bala hastened to reply without giving the latter a chance to speak.

“We were robbed when we were only a few *kos* from the market. There were half a dozen bandits on horseback who came charging at us from the forest. They stole all our money, and I had to plead with them to spare the clothes on our backs. It was sheer luck that we got away with our lives. After the encounter we were so shaken that we hid for a few hours in the trees before mustering the courage to walk back home.”

As he finished speaking, he turned towards Nanak with wide eyes, wordlessly pleading with him to acquiesce to the lie. Everyone expressed their relief at the boys’ good fortune for having come away unscathed from such an encounter, as bandits in that part of the world rarely left their victims unharmed.

“I should not have conceded to let you go without the company of a few retainers. If anything had happened to you today, what would become of us? Nanki belongs to her husband. You are all we have,” said Mehta Kalu.

Nanak glanced disapprovingly at Bala and stepping before him, broke his silence.

“Bala is hesitating to speak the truth on my behalf, father, but I cannot conceal it from you. The money you gave me was not stolen. I used it to feed some hungry sadhus we met in the forest.”

“What were you doing in the forest when I instructed you to keep to the road? You could not have spent all that money on food for the sadhus. What did you do with the rest of it?” asked the father.

“I convinced Bala to take a detour towards the forest. I had heard that some sadhus were camping there. When I met them, I discovered that they had been hungry for days, and I did not have the heart to leave them to their plight. I spent the money to buy food, rent utensils, a cook, and a cart to transport everything back to where they were camped. By the time we left the market, all the money was spent.”

Mehta Kalu stared at his son in disbelief. Then he raised his hand and slapped Nanak with a force that sent him staggering back. Tripta and Sulakhni ran to Nanak’s side with a cry and Rai Bular moved forward swiftly to restrain Mehta Kalu as he lifted his hand again.

“This is how you keep my trust? Spend every penny of the money I thought would finally settle you down as a respectable man? I have been deceived by my own son to think he cared for the wishes of his father! I had been saving that money and keeping it aside for you for months, and you squandered it all away in a day. Do you know of any other young man in the village who wastes his time doing nothing? Feed the sadhus indeed! Is that what I sent you to bargain for? Let go of my hand Rai, I will teach this boy a lesson today!”

“No Mehta, restrain yourself! The boy has committed no crime. Do you not yourself feed Brahmins and sadhus on every important occasion?”

“I would not squander all my family’s hard-earned wealth on them! That is exactly what he will do if he has his way. Today he spent a small fortune, who knows whether tomorrow he will not sell the house and land to give them away in charity. And then what will become of him? Who will look after him when I am gone?”

“He is no ordinary boy Mehta. He does not need the likes of us to look after him.”

“Do not encourage him, my friend. All this talk has gone to his head. No ordinary boy indeed! I will grant you that, for who else behaves like he does? He always does as he pleases without any concern for me or his family’s reputation. All he has ever done is bring dishonour upon my head.”

“Calm down, Mehta. Time and fate are no man’s slaves. You have been trying all these years to shape your son’s destiny according to your ambitions for him. Perhaps God has His own plans for the boy as He has for you and me. Why are you running from the inevitable? His temperament is not suited to the kind of life you have envisaged for him, and the sooner you accept this the better it will be for the both of you.”

Mehta Kalu, however, was not appeased. He had harboured grand ambitions for his son ever since the day he had held him in his arms as a newborn, and he could not be convinced to renounce them now. Nanak had disappointed him again, but he was not going to surrender to the fates yet.



Nanak Is Unwell

Nanak did not eat or sleep for the next few days. His body grew weak and as his condition worsened, so did his parents' anxiety over their son's health. Mehta Kalu's heart melted along with his firm resolve. Abandoning his anger, he began to pray for his son's wellbeing. He promised himself he would not pester the boy again. If Nanak wanted to remain idle for the rest of his life, he would let him have his way.

The village physician was sent for. He felt Nanak's pulse and declared that there was nothing wrong with the boy. He suffered not from any ailment of the body but from anxiety of the mind. Tripta and Sulakhni did all they could to encourage an appetite in Nanak who refused any food they brought him.

Once, when he yet again refused a bowl of rice pudding cooked in sugarcane juice, which he had always loved, Sulakhni started to turn away with tears in her eyes. He stopped her, and eating a spoonful, turned the rest away and admonished her affectionately to not trouble herself unnecessarily on his account.

“Not take any trouble on your account, you say? Who else is there for me to trouble over if not you?” she said as her voice broke on the words and she turned to leave.

He called after her, but she did not linger. She could not bear for him to see the tears that were now running down her cheeks. She had begun to love her husband

deeply and understand him a little over the months and could fathom the conflict raging in his mind.

As he wrestled with the responsibilities his father was determined to place on his head, Sulakhni knew, like Rai Bular, that he was not suited for the life of a householder. With an uncanny perception in a person as youthful in years as her, she knew that her husband's benevolence and egalitarianism were misunderstood by the villagers, their relatives, friends, and his own parents. They persisted in assuming that he was irresponsible as far as his duties as a son and husband were concerned and wasted his time writing verses and keeping the company of holy men.

Her understanding of his nature arose from a complete lack of expectations on her part from their marriage. All girls, including her, were raised and taught to not nurture any, for their future, like everything else, was predetermined by fate and destiny. Just as one plunges into unknown waters with complete oblivion as to their depths, so they entered the bond of matrimony, or rather, were forced into it. However, this preserved her from any preconceived impressions, and she saw him for who he really was. But her affection for him was eclipsed by a sinister premonition that he could one day leave everything familiar behind and go away, perhaps to lead the life of a wandering ascetic. She also knew that when such a time came, she would not stop him because she loved him too well.

Rai Bular, who visited twice every day to enquire into Nanak's health, suggested that Nanki should be sent for,

knowing how fond Nanak was of his sister. Perhaps she could goad him out of his apathy. Mehta Kalu hastened to send a messenger with a letter to Nanki describing Nanak's condition.

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Nanki Comes to Talwandi

The tinkling of bells on the horses' harness followed a steady rhythm as they trotted over a dusty road. Nanki sat leaning against one of the four posts of the horse-cart that had been improvised to support a colourful awning to shield against the rays of a harsh tropical sun. She had left with her husband in the wee hours of the morning following the day a messenger arrived from Talwandi bringing tidings of Nanak's ill health. She had been thrown into a frenzy of tears that had not abated despite Jai Ram's repeated reassurances.

"If only I could see him myself. My mind will know no rest until I do," she persisted. Jai Ram made hasty arrangements, and the couple started their journey the very next morning.

They had been married for years but had been deprived of the joys of parenthood. The fountain of maternal love that overflowed in Nanki's heart had channelled its way towards Nanak. She loved him not just as a sister but also as a mother, who alone is capable of loving overwhelmingly, like a river that overflows its banks, unconditionally, like the wind, rain and sunshine, and selflessly like a flower that disperses its fragrance and withers away.

Nanki's arrival was heralded by a breathless manservant who had run back home from the edge of the village where he had been on a look out. Tripta heaved a

sigh of relief and Sulakhni hastily pulled down the long, flowing scarf that always covered her head over her face and ran to stand under the arched gateway, scanning the road with expectant eyes.

There had been no improvement in Nanak's condition, and he still spoke and ate sparingly. There were shadows under his eyes now and he looked pale. Sulakhni had consoled herself with the thought of her sister-in-law's impending arrival.

Nanki sprang from the horse-cart even before the driver reigned in his horses and ran towards Sulakhni, embracing her and Tripta before hastening into the house towards her brother.

Jai Ram followed her as one follows an impetuous child and proceeded to greet his mother-in-law and Sulakhni in turn.

Nanki had learnt of the latest rift between father and son from her mother's letter that had been handed over by Tripta to the messenger right before he left, evading the scrutiny of her husband. She embraced Nanak affectionately and chided him for worrying her so.

"Why do you take father's anger to heart? Beneath all his harshness he loves you dearly, perhaps more than he loves me," she jested.

"He was right on his part to be angry with me, Bebe. I am not sorry for what I did that day. If I am ever faced with a comparable situation, I will do the same even if it means incurring father's wrath again, but it troubles me to disappoint him. You know I can never be a man of the

world as he wants. God has other plans for me, and my soul will not know any peace until I begin my quest to discover what they are and fulfil the wishes of my creator. How can I explain my predicament to anyone?"

"Come away with me to Sultanpur!" Nanki replied impulsively. "It will be a good change for Sulakhni as well. Sometimes one needs to widen one's horizons to see clearly what lies ahead. It is a massive city teeming with all kinds of people. Why, you only must walk a few steps in the bazaar before you are rubbing shoulders with scholars, fakirs, artists, traders, and foreigners who give the most fascinating accounts of their native lands. Your brother-in-law was telling me just a few days ago about an Arab traveller who prostrated himself in front of every fountain in the bazaar before drinking from it. He said he belonged to a nomadic tribe who sometimes had to travel for days in the desert before they found any water."

When Jai Ram entered the room with Tripta and Sulakhni in tow, they were all greeted with Nanki's laughter and relieved to see Nanak smiling again.

Mehta Kalu had been called from Rai Bular's haveli and was accompanied by the latter. The proposal that Nanak be allowed to move to Sultanpur Lodhi was put before the father for his approval and he agreed willingly, deliberating with himself that perhaps, after all, a move to the big city might fan an ambition in his son, and he might be persuaded to accept some form of employment.

Tripta, saddened by Nanak's imminent departure, consoled herself with the thought that distance between father and son would mend their strained relationship. Rai Bular received the news with visible poise but silently felt as if someone had placed a heavy burden on his heart, and his eyes became misty at the thought that he would now not be able to see Nanak as often as he was used to.

Days later, he stood with a heavy heart in the faint light of a new dawn beside Nanak's family, watching the horse-cart carry him away to Sultanpur Lodhi. Mardana had spread the news of his friend's departure in that forgotten, poverty-stricken part of the village that he belonged to. Many of its residents now stood at a conventional distance from the rest, watching Nanak disappear into the shadows of a dwindling night.

They knew that he was rebuked by most of his relatives and friends, for nothing went on in the big havelis that escaped their knowledge. However, the kindness and unbiased affection he showered on them all, from the little bedraggled children that played in their dingy, narrow lanes to the impoverished aged whose backs were bent over with a life of constant toil, had won a place for him in their hearts. They came to see him go now and had nothing but warm, heartfelt wishes for him in their hearts.

A five-day journey eastward over the rivers Ravi and Beas would take Nanak to Sultanpur Lodhi. Little did these people know, however, that this was not a journey

that would conclude at the end of those five days, but one that had just begun and was to last a lifetime.

But Ravi, as she watched him cross her placid waters, knew that this lone traveller would one day come back to rest on her banks at the end of all his wanderings in foreign lands.

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PART II

*Jab lag duniya rahiye Nanak kichh suniyai kichh
kahiya*

*So long as the world exists, O Nanak,
One must strive to seek knowledge and impart it.*

Nanak Moves to Sultanpur Lodhi

Buddhism had taken roots in the ancient city of Magadha under Ashoka the Great. Its branches spread across the continent, giving rise to varied centres of learning, monasteries, and towns. The city of Sarwamanpur was one such centre that arose near the rivulet Bein which flows into the confluence of the rivers Beas and Sutlej.

When Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India, he burnt this city down to the ground along with many others. In the twelfth century, Sultan Khan Lodhi, a general in his army, founded a new city on the ruins of the older one, naming it after himself. Years later, in the last half of the fifteenth century, it was handed down to Daulat Khan Lodhi by his father who was governor of Lahore at the time, and a cousin of the ruling emperor Behlol Khan Lodhi, founder of the Lodhi dynasty in Delhi.

Sultanpur Lodhi was a sprawling town, beautified with innumerable gardens and royal buildings. It had several flourishing markets owing to its location on the trade route connecting Lahore and Delhi. It was also an important centre for learning and home to many *madrasas*, teeming with intellectuals and learned men from varied backgrounds. Owing to their prolific presence it came to be called the city of monks and holy men.

Nanki's joy knew no bounds when Nanak appeared at her doorstep one fateful evening. Their house lay in an affluent quarter of the city in close proximity to the Nawab's royal residence. Jai Ram enjoyed a favourable position at Daulat Khan's court owing to his honesty, intelligence, and diligence, more so because the Nawab himself was a just and pious man who ruled over his city like a benevolent father. Nanak was to stay with Nanki until he could find employment and a suitable accommodation, both of which would enable Sulakhni to unite with him in the future.

Nanak spent the next few days visiting various sites and places of interest in the city in the company of his brother-in-law. Being an important centre for commerce and learning, the sheer diversity of race, language, manner, and dress held a fascination for every newcomer. While the two wandered about the city, Nanki busied herself in the kitchen all day, and upon their return they were always greeted with a table laden with food and delicacies of all kinds. Jai Ram chided her jovially, declaring that if she continued feeding Nanak so wholeheartedly for a few more days, he would become too stout and lazy for any kind of work the Nawab offered him.

"I think we have given Nanak enough time to get accustomed to his new surroundings. I must request an audience with the Nawab on his behalf now," Jai Ram told Nanki when they were alone one day.

"It certainly is an immense change for him from the village, like it was for me when I first arrived here as

your bride. You showed me nothing but kindness then, and you have done the same with Nanak now. I fall short of words in which to express my gratitude towards you, and I know Nanak feels the same.”

“I cannot aspire to be as close to Nanak as you are, but I am nonetheless as fond of him as you are yourself. He is a unique young man, and I want to do all I can to help him settle down and start a family of his own.”

“He is too free spirited to settle down to anything permanently. I worry for him sometimes. How can he fare in a world where his compassion is mistaken for foolishness, his intelligence for arrogance, and his humility for weakness?”

“Do not worry yourself on his account. You know how he is always saying, ‘It shall be as God wills’,” said Jai Ram, imitating Nanak’s solemn voice, which made Nanki chuckle. “Let us leave his care into the hands of God. You should simply put your mind to spoiling him for as long as he should stay with us.”

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Nanak Seeks Employment

The Nawab's residence was a palatial building surrounded by fortified walls with bastions at regular intervals. As Nanak and Jai Ram walked towards the Nawab's hall of audience, the sunlight reflected like countless pearls on water cascading down several stone fountains in the beautifully laid out gardens, encircled by arched courtyards that were supported by carved pillars. The walls were covered with colourful glazed tile work and the entire building exuded opulence, proclaiming the lavish tastes of its wealthy owner.

Together, they entered the audience hall where the Nawab sat like a king at the far end on a raised dais covered with richly embroidered upholstery. The sunlight percolated through long windows that ran on both sides of the hall and were fitted with intricately carved lattice work. The bright light coming through their crevices created beautiful designs on the floor that was covered with rich Persian carpets of every hue. Beneath the windows on both sides were placed cushioned diwans in a neat row on which sat several high-ranking officials, visiting dignitaries, and nobles of the Nawab's court. The Kazi, or chief magistrate, sat on the Nawab's right.

Jai Ram and Nanak's arrival was announced as they entered the hall. Jai Ram bowed low before the Nawab and signalled for Nanak to do the same. The latter, however, only inclined his head perfunctorily. This

gesture brought a frown upon the Kazi's brow, but Daulat Khan was more amused than offended. He had noticed that this young man, who looked not more than a boy, carried himself with a quiet confidence which was appreciable and appeared completely unimpressed by the opulence of his court. When he spoke, his voice was laced with a hint of amusement.

“Welcome to my city, Nanak! Jai Ram tells me you are in search of employment. Tell me, now, what is it that you are good at. Are you as skilled at handling accounts like your father and grandfather before you, who I am told have both been in the service of the Rai of Talwandi?”

“I cannot claim to be good at keeping accounts, O Nawab, for I am but a humble servant of the Almighty who is the greatest keeper of accounts in this world and the next. My brother-in-law wants me to accept employment in your court. You can choose for me any work you consider suitable and I will endeavour to do it as well as I can.”

The Nawab took an instant liking to Nanak and placed him in charge of the royal store. Since a major portion of salaries were paid in kind and taxes were also collected likewise, this was an important post and vastly exceeded Jai Ram's expectations, and he thanked the Nawab profusely. The Kazi, however, perceived the Nawab's partiality to this young man despite the latter's aloofness, and took an instant dislike to him.

The Nawab's New Modi

Nanak settled into his life in Sultanpur Lodhi with ease. He rose before dawn every day to make his way to the edge of the river that skirted the city. He had found a secluded spot on its banks where there was a large cluster of trees whose thick canopy and foliage promised solitude. After his morning ablutions, he sat under a jujube tree, lost in deep meditation. When the sun arose, he would be awakened from his divine reveries by the songs of birds and walk back home where Nanki always awaited him with a breakfast fit for the Nawab himself.

The rest of the day was spent in keeping account of the various commodities that went in and out of the Nawab's *Modi Khana* or storehouse. Just like the taxes received, salaries too were distributed in kind, and it was Nanak's task to weigh and record everything that went in and out. Many wandering ascetics and destitutes were accustomed to begging for alms at the Nawab's *Modi Khana* and his recruit soon became renowned for never turning away any one empty handed. This he did by giving a part of his salary, which he too received in kind.

A spy of the Kazi noticed Nanak's generosity on many occasions and reported the same to his master. This gave the Kazi an opportunity to accuse Nanak of swindling the accounts he handled and illicitly giving away rations.

The Nawab summoned Nanak for an audience to put forth the Kazi's accusations.

"I give not from what belongs to you, O Nawab, but from the salary that has been fixed for me," replied Nanak.

The Kazi was not satisfied and requested an audit to be conducted of the stock in the storehouse. The accounts were declared to be in perfect order, and the Nawab, upon hearing this, doubled Nanak's salary. This threw the Kazi into a greater rage for he became jealous of the favours repeatedly bestowed upon Nanak by the Nawab and determined to wait for another opportunity to demean him.

Within a few months, Nanak was able to buy a house for himself and send a messenger to Talwandi asking Sulakhni to join him. As time flew by on swift wings, they welcomed two sons into the world. The older was named Sri Chand and the younger was called Lakhmi Das.

Tales of the generosity of the Nawab's new *Modi* or storekeeper had spread across town and soon a group of sadhus, fakirs and the poor sitting on the steps of the *Modi Khana* became a common sight. On days that Nanak exhausted his quota of daily rations to give away, he would take them home with him after work and feed them from his own kitchen. Nanki, learning of her brother's generosity, ensured that Sulakhni's store of rations was never exhausted, and even came to give her sister-in-law a helping hand in the kitchen.

Sulakhni's parents, upon visiting their daughter's new home in Sultanpur Lodhi, were not pleased with their son-in-law's altruism, and rebuked their daughter for encouraging her husband's liberality.

"You have children of your own now, Sulakhni. What future will they have if their father continues to squander all he earns on strangers?"

"Mother, my humble kitchen feeds dozens of these strangers every day, and I have not once fallen short of food and grain. The God who provides for them will also provide for my children," replied Sulakhni.

"You too have learnt to talk like Nanak," the mother replied in exasperation. "As your parents, it is our duty to warn you against making mistakes, but I see you have become just as obstinate as your husband, and therefore I must leave you to your fate."



Mardana Comes to Sultanpur Lodhi

One day, Nanak was sitting in the veranda spanning the storehouse, engrossed in work. Sacks of grains had to be counted and allotted to the Nawab's soldiers in lieu of salaries on the morrow. He began counting, but had only reached the number thirteen, the native word for which, called '*tera*' is also a synonym for 'yours,' when he stopped, and closing his eyes began to repeat "*Tera, Tera*" again. Nanak was so imbued with love for God that even the most mundane and trifling of tasks served to awaken in him reflections of the divine. A village chief by the name of Bhagirath, who happened to arrive just as Nanak began his counting was greatly moved by what he saw and was greatly inspired by Nanak. When Nanak opened his eyes, Bhagirath greeted him with folded hands. He had come to deposit some grains as revenue from his village, but when his business was concluded, he stayed behind in Sultanpur Lodhi. He spent his days at the *Modi Khana* in Nanak's company and retired to a *sarai* or rest house for the night.

Bhagirath used to sit beside Nanak, watching him with a gaze that bordered on reverence while the latter busied himself with work. He had never known this feeling of peace that filled him entirely when he was in Nanak's presence. He had relinquished all thoughts of home. Nanak had asked him once how long his stay in Sultanpur Lodhi was to last.

“My work here is not yet finished,” he replied evasively.

As dusk approached, the lanes began to be crowded with people making their way back to their homes. The busy market street that branched off from the Nawab’s residence would soon be deserted as sellers packed up their wares and closed their shops. A few fakirs who had been sitting on the steps of the *Modi Khana* rose to make their way towards the nearest shrines on whose steps they would spend the night.

Nanak closed his ledger to stow it away for the coming day. As he raised his head, a smile illuminated his face. Walking towards the *Modi Khana* was none other than Mardana. His steps were hesitant and the bewilderment of his expression revealed that this was his first visit to a big city. Nanak rose to walk towards him eagerly, but Mardana did not see him approach until they stood face to face. Mardana came like a fresh breeze from the village amidst the crowded, dusty, and stifling streets of the city and Nanak embraced him warmly. Bhagirath had followed Nanak, who now introduced the two and they made their way together towards Nanak’s house. Sulakhni was delighted to see her husband reunited with a dear friend and hastened to set a table for them.

“You do not seem like yourself, old friend,” observed Nanak. “What is the matter?”

They sat in the courtyard of the small city dwelling, the air thick with smoke from innumerable cooking fires that had been lit for supper. Mardana glanced at

Bhagirath uneasily and Nanak in turn placed a hand on his friend's in reassurance.

"I did not know who else to turn to for help," he began. "Then I thought of you. Even so, I have contemplated turning back home countless times in the days I have spent coming here, but I cannot return now," he smiled wearily. "My daughter is getting married in a few weeks and my hands are empty. Anything I earn is barely sufficient to get food on the table. It is a good match but if I cannot make proper arrangements for her marriage and dowry, they might turn down my daughter's hand, and she will not find a better match again."

"Allow me to be of service in this matter," interceded Bhagirath. "Any friend of yours, Nanak, is dearer to me than my own. If I can have a list of all the things that are to be procured for the marriage, I shall leave for Lahore tomorrow itself to buy them."

So, a list was made and handed over to Bhagirath who was instructed by Nanak to return within a day. On his return, he was accompanied by an old friend, Mansukh, a trader from Lahore, who had succumbed to an irresistible desire to meet Nanak in person after hearing Bhagirath's praises of him.

Mardana returned to Rai Bhoj's Talwandi with the purchases and a heart full of gratitude towards his friend, promising to return after the wedding to visit him at leisure.

Nanak's Strange Disappearance

The streets were engulfed in the shadows of a fading night. Nanak awoke to sit up in bed. He made his way out of the chamber quietly, taking care not to rouse his sleeping wife and children. He walked into the yard where Mardana was sleeping on a cot under the stars, one arm resting on the rebab that lay beside him. He had brought it with him when he came back to visit Nanak, and the two friends had developed a habit of sitting down every evening in the courtyard, Mardana strumming his instrument to Nanak's melodious voice singing a hymn he had himself written and composed. Their audience increased daily, which gave Mardana immense pleasure, so much so that he had outstayed his own visit. Nanak, too, was in no great hurry to part with him.

He let himself out now into the quiet street and made his way westwards towards the river Bein for his daily ablutions. As he left the houses behind, the stifling night air of the city was relieved by a fresh, cool breeze blowing in from the surrounding countryside. A slow murmur from the river could now be heard over the hooting of an owl disturbed by the rustle of leaves beneath Nanak's feet. The river lay beyond a copse of trees that loomed tall in the darkness like sentinels guarding its silver waters that sparkled through their leaves, guiding Nanak towards them. Upon reaching it, he cast his clothes aside and dived into its frigid depths.

Back in the house, Sulakhni was busy preparing breakfast for Nanak and Mardana. Lakhmi Das was playing in his cradle while Sri Chand, with a habitual solemn expression on his young face, watched Mardana tune the rebab.

Nanak was expected any moment now, for soon it would be time for him to leave for the *Modi Khana*. As the day advanced without any sign of her husband, Sulakhni sent Mardana to look for him on the banks of the river where she knew he went every day. A servant was also sent to Nanki's house.

Jai Ram, Nanki, and Sulakhni were waiting anxiously when Mardana ran into the yard, a stricken look on his face, and as the words choked in his throat, he held up a bundle of clothes that belonged to Nanak. Sulakhni flung herself into Nanki's arms with a piteous cry.

"We must search the river for him!" exclaimed Jai Ram and hurried out into the street to gather as many men as he could, and with Mardana leading the way, they hurried towards the river. The news of Nanak's disappearance spread like wildfire through the city until the Nawab, too, heard of it. He ordered a party of fishermen to sweep the riverbed for a few *kos* on either side of the site where Nanak's clothes had been found.

Upon the Kazi's insistence, another audit of the storehouse was ordered. Perhaps Nanak had swindled his employer and disappeared, he suggested. The Nawab hesitantly obliged, but when the accounts were found in

meticulous order, he commanded the search party to be doubled.

Sulakhni wept inconsolably for the next few days. Nanki admonished her like one does a child to stop crying for she was convinced her brother would soon return. Jai Ram kept his fears to himself. He had spent two whole days and nights supervising the search only to return empty-handed.

On the morning of the third day, the quest was resumed, but when no signs of the missing Nanak were forthcoming, everyone but Nanki began to despair. They were all convinced now that he was lost to them forever. Daulat Khan summoned Jai Ram into his presence to offer his commiseration. He had grown fond of Nanak over the years and was grieved to see him come to such a sorrowful end.



Nanak Returns

A fisherman, swinging an old, mended net over one shoulder, made his way towards the river as the sun's rays began to colour the horizon beyond the city's rooftops. He was hoping for a good catch like the evening before. He, too, had been amongst those who had searched for Nanak to no avail. As he neared the riverbank, he stopped suddenly, for coming towards him was the Nawab's *Modi*. He threw his net on the ground and ran back to the city, screaming at the top of his voice that Nanak had risen from the dead and that he had met his apparition by the river. A small group of people went with him back to the place while others were sent to spread the news.

As this group neared the trees that grew by the river, they saw Nanak coming towards them. When they came upon him, he looked at each one of them with a gaze that seemed to pierce through their very souls and uttered,

“There is no Hindu, and no Muslim.”

His audience stared at one another in astonishment and began to whisper amongst themselves that Nanak had come back indeed, but without his senses.

A few people were seen coming towards them from the direction of the city, led by Jai Ram and Mardana. Upon recognizing his brother-in-law, Jai Ram cried out his name in relief and broke in a run, but when he came to stand before him, he stared at Nanak as if he were

seeing him for the first time. It had only been a few days since Jai Ram had last seen him, but something in his gaze was now transformed. There was a radiance on his face like a thousand lamps were illuminated within, and his eyes bore an omniscient expression that confused and awed Jai Ram at the same time.

His first instinct had been to extend his arms and embrace Nanak, but all he did now was fold his hands before his heart and bow his head in reverence.

This transformation, however, was not so easily perceived by the others. Everyone, who swarmed around Nanak now as he walked through the streets of Sultanpur Lodhi towards his house and heard him repeat the strange words over and over again, had the use of their sight but not the power of vision that a few like Jai Ram possessed.

Nanki was overjoyed to see her brother but perceived the change in him. Her heart overflowed with maternal love, and tears welled up in her eyes. She wiped them away with the ends of her head scarf and filled her eyes with the sight of her beloved Nanak.

Sulakhni shed tears of relief as she looked upon her husband and saw that he was unharmed, but she too sensed the change in him, and her heart was pierced again with a dagger of doubt and foreboding, for all the fears from her past stared at her through the sparkle in his eyes.



Nanak Offers Prayers with The Nawab

The Nawab sat in his audience hall, attended upon by the Kazi and other high-ranking officials. A messenger came in to announce Nanak's return, and the delight on the Nawab's face at the news did not escape the Kazi's notice. Another messenger was sent away at once to summon Nanak in his presence. Meanwhile, the Nawab asked the messenger for news of him.

"Did he say where he has been these past few days?"

"No, my Lord, although there is much talk in town about the strange words he was heard repeating upon his return."

"What did he say?"

The messenger hesitated, but the Kazi chided him impatiently. "Speak up you fool! His noble highness has asked you a question!"

"My lord, he has been heard to repeat over and over again that there is no Hindu, and no Muslim."

These were bold words indeed, and the messenger, frightened that the Nawab's wrath might fall upon his head for even repeating them, receded a few steps.

Everyone knew and had heard of the religious fanaticism prevalent in the capital and other parts of the Lodhi empire. Sikandar Lodhi, the reigning emperor,

who had succeeded his father a decade ago, was notorious for his intolerance towards Hindus. Just recently, an incident had occurred involving a Hindu priest from Bengal that had shockingly proven his religious bigotry. The priest had publicly declared that in the eyes of God there was no difference between a Hindu and a Muslim. The emperor had summoned him to his court in Delhi and ordered him to convert to Islam, for if both Hindus and Muslims were alike, he should have no objection in doing so. When the priest refused, the emperor ordered his execution.

The Nawab's Kazi had been waiting for just such an opportunity to put Nanak in his place.

Nanak's aura, as he walked towards the Nawab across his hall of audience, affected the latter too, but the Kazi was unmoved. No sooner had Nanak stopped before the Nawab, than the Kazi spoke, breaking court protocol in his impatience to humiliate him.

"We hear you are making blasphemous statements amongst the people of this city. His lordship does not want any unrest in his jurisdiction because of the carelessness of an employee who suspiciously goes missing only to return and stir up trouble."

The Nawab, ignoring the Kazi, spoke next.

"What is this I hear, Nanak? What do you mean by saying there is no Hindu and no Muslim? Do you imply that none of us are true to our faith?"

"All are one in the eyes of God," replied Nanak. "It does not matter what religion one is born into, whether

he worships in a temple or mosque, the God that hears all prayers is one and, in His eyes, all are equal, from the poorest beggar to the mightiest of kings. He has created the entire world from His own everlasting, all-pervading light, and none are high or low in His eyes.”

While the Nawab sat pondering over Nanak’s words, the call to midday prayer broke the silence in the hall. Everyone arose in readiness to follow the Nawab towards the mosque that had been specially built inside the premises of the Nawab’s palace. This was where he offered prayers five times a day at the appointed hours.

The Kazi seized this opportunity to settle his score with Nanak for the last time.

“Your highness,” he said addressing the Nawab, “Since Nanak has claimed that there is no difference between a Hindu and a Muslim, he should not have any objections to offering prayers with us in the mosque.”

Jai Ram looked nervously at his brother-in-law. Who had heard of a Hindu offering prayers in a mosque? Some of the others smiled at the Kazi’s clever wit, for he made no pretence of hiding his dislike for the Nawab’s storekeeper. The Nawab, between his fondness for Nanak and regard for the Kazi’s eminent position in his administration, found himself in an undesirable predicament.

Nanak, however, gave his ascent willingly and followed the others towards the mosque, leaving behind an anxious Jai Ram.

As they knelt on their prayer rugs, the Kazi had one eye on the pulpit and another on Nanak. When the prayers were concluded, he began hurling accusations at the latter.

“Your highness, this man had agreed to say prayers with us but all he did was stare at you and me with a smirk on his face. He is not only a troublemaker but a hypocrite for he says one thing and does another.”

“How do you know that I was looking at you and not praying?” asked Nanak.

“I saw you do so with my own eyes,” replied the Kazi.

“Shouldn't your mind have been focused on the prayers you have come to offer, Kazi, rather than concerning yourself with me? You and the Nawab asked me to give you company in prayer, but how could I, for you were not offering them yourselves. While you were worrying about a new-born foal your mare delivered last night, the Nawab's mind was occupied with trading horses in Kabul.”

The Nawab and Kazi were astonished at Nanak's clairvoyance. The latter stood rebuked while the former smiled at his former employee and taking him affectionately by the arm led him out of the mosque.



Nanak Bids Goodbye

Nanak stood in the moonlit courtyard of his house in Sultanpur Lodhi. Inside, Sulakhni was putting the children to sleep, singing a lullaby to them in her sweet voice. As the children drifted into a world of dreams, Nanak too, was lost in reverie. He had decided to go on a long journey to preach the message of universal humanity and love for the one true God that had been revealed to him on the banks of the river Bein.

The wealth that a man earns through toil, and labour diminishes when shared with others, but there is another kind of spiritual wealth, that of love, kindness and compassion that grows the more one gives of it. When the Buddha attained enlightenment, he set out to enlighten humanity, and when the word of God was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed, he shared it with the world. And so, it was with Nanak.

Mardana had been sent to the village of Bharoana to obtain a rebab from a certain man named Pharinda. As soon as he returned, the two would begin their journey together. Sulakhni came out into the veranda to stand uncertainly on the threshold. "I must have your consent before I leave, Sulakhni. I do not know how long I will be gone."

"It is enough for me that you choose to ask for my consent." Then she hesitated a little and asked with a

hope she was far from feeling, “Whether I give it or not will not matter?”

“Go I must, Sulakhni, but I will travel with a lighter heart if you send me away willingly.”

“I have known for a long time now that this day would come. I promised myself that when it did, I would send you away with a smile. Your heart was always too full of compassion and love for others, and it is foolish of me to think that I can confine it within the bounds of these four walls that have been our home. But I, too, must ask your permission to give away something that belongs to the both of us.”

“What is it?” asked Nanak.

“My parents will be here in a day or two to take me away with them for a few days. Before I go, I want to entrust our older son to the care of your sister. She loves you more than anyone else. Your departure will be easier for her to bear if she knows she has a part of you with her, to care for and love as she has cared for you. I will be content with Lakhmi Das alone.”

“You speak of my compassion and love, but I stand defeated before yours. It will be easier for me now to part with Bebe Nanki. Thank you, Sulakhni!”

It was difficult to ignore the gratitude in his voice, and she turned her head away to hide her tears.



PART III

Babe bhek banaaia udasi ki reeti chalaai

Charhai sodhan dhart lukaai

Donning the robes of a teaching saint

Guru Nanak went on his way,

Guiding the world to righteousness,

leading home those that stray.

In The Company of Mardana

Guru Nanak emerged from his house into the courtyard where everyone was gathered in the wee hours of a bittersweet spring morning, when the chill of winter has not yet left the air, but a certain warmth in the breeze promises a new leash of life for the dormant earth. The light of oil lamps which had been lit in the yard fell upon him to reveal his strange attire. He was wearing a long loose garment after the fashion of Muslim fakirs, but of a crimson hue worn by Hindu *sanyasis*. Around his waist was tied a white cloth belt also like the fakirs. On his head rested a queer-looking turban wrapped around a round cap worn by Sufis. In his feet, he wore wooden sandals called *padukas*, worn by Hindu and Jain mendicants. He carried a wooden staff in one hand and prayer beads in the other. From his shoulder was suspended a leather bag which was to be the repository of all the verses he would write, compose, and collect over the coming years.

His hesitant companion, Mardana, had secured his rebab on one shoulder. The little bundle of provisions and some money Nanki had offered were turned down by Guru Nanak, to Mardana's dismay. Guru Nanak had expressed a desire to leave on a long journey and asked Mardana to accompany him, but the latter had refused pointedly, saying that the responsibilities of his own

family could not keep him away from them for too long, and that he should now be returning to them.

“There is another family that awaits us just as eagerly. Will you not come with me to pay them a visit too?”

“Which family do you speak of?” asked Mardana.

“Isn't this entire world one big extended family? Is it noble to ignore its sufferings and needs to satisfy our own?”

“My friend, I am a simple, poor man. What good will it do for me to go wandering over unknown lands to alleviate the sufferings of others when I have sorrows enough of my own? I treasure your friendship but must turn down your proposition, not for my sake alone but also yours. What will your family say?”

When Jai Ram learnt of Guru Nanak's intentions, he was determined that for his own peace of mind and that of Nanki's, he would find a companion for him. He solicited Mardana's consent, knowing well that once Guru Nanak made up his mind, his resolve would not sway. If he had determined to undertake this journey, then he would undoubtedly go, even if he went alone. The only course of action left for Jai Ram now was to persuade or plead with Mardana to go with him. The latter was torn between allegiance towards the only friend he had, who had helped him in challenging times, and duty towards his family in Talwandi. Jai Ram promised Mardana that if he agreed to accompany

Nanak, then from that day onwards he himself would shoulder the responsibility of his family and support them for as long as he was away. After much vacillation and indecisiveness, Mardana consented to go with Guru Nanak, putting Jai Ram's mind at rest.



Guru Nanak and Mardana left the streets of Sultanpur Lodhi behind as dawn unfurled over its languid rooftops. They were soon in open country, travelling towards Talwandi, for Mardana had expressed a desire to visit his family before they began their travels. It was a long journey and would take the two of them several days for they were journeying on foot.

They walked all day and as dusk approached, made their way to the outskirts of the nearest village or town. It was now Mardana's task to look for food from houses in the vicinity. Some of it would serve as their supper while the rest was stowed in a bundle for the morrow. Once they had eaten, Guru Nanak would ask Mardana to play his rebab and as he sang, the air filled with songs in praise of the divine, songs that transcended all religions, cultures and castes, and were imbued with the universal message of compassion, righteousness, honest living, and an all embracing love for God's creation.

Thus, they would travel for nearly three decades in each other's company, singing the praises of God, visiting places of pilgrimage, and covering the length and breadth of the country and beyond, braving the elements,

sleeping under the stars, eating when food was available or offered willingly, accepting hunger when it was not, enduring the scorching heat of a summer sun or the harsh, frigid winds of a ruthless winter.

Their singing, more often than not, was wont to attract an audience, and it was thus that Guru Nanak's hymns became like a gentle breeze dispersing the fragrance of his unique philosophy wherever he travelled, giving hope to the downtrodden, humbling the mighty, guiding the misled, dispelling ignorance, and igniting a spark of divine love in hearts bereft of hope.

Guru Nanak Meets His Father

“Rethink your decision, Nanak. You have a family and children now,” Mehta Kalu reasoned. He had been glad to see his son, but a little puzzled over his unusual attire. When he was told of the impending journey Guru Nanak had decided to undertake, he had lost his temper again and endeavoured to dissuade him, but the latter’s resolve was unshakable. Tripta shook her head in distress and Mehta Kalu exhausted all arguments.

“You have a duty towards Sulakhni and the children now. Have you thought about what will become of her in your absence?”

“My duty towards my family is not greater than my duty towards the mission that lies before me. Sulakhni has gone to visit her parents for some time. She will be looked after there and I know that when she returns here, father, you will look after her just as well. The sufferings of humanity are greater than the needs of my family.”

“Do as you please, then. I cannot say I have not tried.”

“Let him go Mehta,” intervened Rai Bular. He had hastened to the Bedi haveli as soon as news of Guru Nanak’s arrival had been brought to him.

He had noticed the change in Guru Nanak as well. It was not in the strange clothes he wore but in the depth of his eyes. He had seen those eyes countless times before,

but now they appeared like endless pools hiding in their shadows the mysteries of God's strange ways. This was the Nanak he had loved since the moment he had laid eyes upon him as a newborn child. He had also seen God's grace shade him as a young boy under a tree long ago at the edge of a grove. The Nanak who stood before him now was like a mighty river prepared to burst its banks and flow over a parched earth. How could anyone confine him in one place before he had served that purpose?



Lalo Of Saidpur

One summer evening, two lone figures were walking towards the outskirts of Saidpur Sandiali. This town was founded in the first century BCE by a Rajput ruler of Sialkot. They entered the city by passing under a high arched gateway that opened onto a wide street with houses and shops on both sides. They walked down this street until it branched off into a smaller one where a few ragged children were playing in the mud. Guru Nanak advanced towards them. This squalid lane was part of the slum quarters of the city, and the houses were small and suffocating. The children, too, looked starved and undernourished.

“Let us go back and further down the main street,” said Mardana. “It is getting dark and surely in this big city we can find some food and a decent place to spend the night.”

“We will find one soon enough. We have not much further to go,” replied Guru Nanak.

Just then, the voice of someone singing reached their ears and Guru Nanak began to walk towards it. Mardana followed him reluctantly. They stood at a doorway to see a carpenter chiselling away the edge of a wooden stool and repeating a line from a devotional song, which seemed to be the only one he could remember, but one he sang with much ardour.

Guru Nanak gave the wooden door a tap and it creaked piteously on its hinges. As he did so, the carpenter's attention was drawn to his visitors, and he came towards them with folded hands. "Are you looking for someone, gentleman?" he asked.

"We are travellers who have a long journey ahead of us. We are looking for a place to stay," Guru Nanak replied.

"Then I must welcome you into my home. My name is Lalo. I fear I cannot offer you much for I am just a poor carpenter, but nevertheless, all that is mine is yours if you choose to stay."

Lalo ushered his guests in. His dwelling consisted of a low thatched hut. There were a few old cooking utensils placed neatly on a wooden bench with a broken leg, which had been skilfully fixed, in one corner of a shabby chamber, while in another was a worn-out folded mat placed against the wall that served as a bed by night. There were shelves built into one niche of the mud wall on which were placed all his worldly belongings, the most prized of them being one coarse, ragged, and thick woollen blanket that had kept him warm through many rough winters. The few tools he owned were housed in a metal box that he kept in the yard. The place also served as his workshop. He poured a little water into a pitcher from an earthen pot and set it before his guests so they could wash themselves and then brought out the mat to spread it on the floor.

The only food in the house that could pass for supper were two pieces of stale bread that he served with a little salt and some raw onions. Mardana's heart sank as Lalo laid down this meagre meal before them.

"This should be sufficient for the three of us. Come, sit with us, and eat, Lalo," said Guru Nanak.

He gave one piece of bread to Lalo and broke the other into two halves, giving one to Mardana and keeping the other for himself. It tasted much more sumptuous than it looked, thought Mardana to himself, and was surprised to find that it left him quite satiated.

After the supper, the Guru and Mardana sat down to sing hymns as was their habit. As the strains of Mardana's rebab wafted through the air, they were met with Guru Nanak's impassioned voice.

*My heart is now a shrine,
My body the garb of a sage divine,
Sacred pools have I found within,
I plunge into them and am cleansed of sin,
The one word
that is His name abides in my mind,
The bonds of life and death I have come to leave behind,
The merciful Lord has pierced my heart with His love, O
mother,
No heart can fathom the pain of another,
I think only of Him and none other.¹¹¹*

¹¹ SGGS, pg. 795, Man mandar tan vays kalandar...

Lalo sat mesmerized, losing himself in Guru Nanak's words. Tears flowed down his cheeks, but he made no effort to wipe them away. He had heard all his life of pilgrim trails up in the snowy mountains where people went to attain salvation. He had heard, too, of the sacred waters of the river Ganges that cleansed all sins of lives past and present. He was just a poor carpenter, however, who subsisted on a single meal a day, and for him salvation and redemption were things of dreams. But here was this sage singing of salvation and redemption that needed no pilgrimages, and no dips in holy waters. A little spark of hope was lit within his heart, and its light now shown through his teary eyes.

A few neighbours came to stand at Lalo's door. They did not know what to make of Guru Nanak's attire or whether he was a Muslim fakir or a Hindu sadhu. The hymn he sang, however, was in a language they all understood so they came to sit before this eccentric holy man and his companion who, they all admitted, was a better rebab player than any they had seen or heard before.

Lalo could not believe his good fortune when he learnt that his guests would stay for a few days with him. He had been orphaned at an early age and had lived a lonely life, fighting poverty and hunger ever since he could remember. But adversity had not embittered him. He had no family and no friends, for in this poor quarter of the city where he lived, the people lived disillusioned lives. They battled everyday with hunger, poverty, and

debts they could never hope to pay off, no matter how hard they worked.

They had all borrowed money from the chief of this town, a man named Malik Bhago, who was known to be ruthless in extracting interest from his countless debtors. The people had needed the money at one time or another for several reasons, some for a daughter's wedding, others to pay for religious rites, or for births and deaths in the family, and the only man they could turn to was Malik Bhago. Those who were unable to pay interest were indentured to his service for life, working at his palatial haveli that dominated the Saidpur skyline, or as labourers in the lands he owned outside the city. Their lives were marked with endless strife and suffering, but Guru Nanak's hymns soothed their weary souls, for he sang of an eternal father, Lord of the mighty and low, who watched over his beings like a mother watches over her child. They came each day at dawn and dusk, lured by the Guru's voice to sit in Lalo's small courtyard, even spilling out onto the squalid street beyond it.



Malik Bhago Arranges a Feast

“O holy one, I must have done something right and honourable in my past life to deserve the good fortune of having you as a guest in my humble home. Must you go away so soon? Will it be too presumptuous on my part to ask you to stay a little longer? I have never known such happiness and peace in my life as I have listening to your divine hymns. This house has never had enough for my own needs, but when I see the people leave after hearing you, I know they do not go empty-handed. You have sown the seeds of hope in our lives. Let us bask in the sunshine of your presence a little longer,” pleaded Lalo.

Guru Nanak was touched with his words and agreed to prolong his stay. Lalo’s house became a place of congregation where the poorest of the poor were made welcome. A few days passed thus. Then there began talk in town of a grand feast Malik Bhago had organized at his haveli in which hundreds of sadhus and fakirs were to be fed from dawn to dusk. It had become an annual gathering of holy men who flocked to Saidpur from near and far to attend the event. Every year on the chosen day, ritual prayers would commence at dawn to entreat the gods to bestow favour and fortune upon the person of Malik Bhago. On the day of the feast, the haveli, with its high walls and elaborately carved parapets, was decorated with flowers and a motley of silk drapes.

“Malik Bhago is an immensely powerful man, Sir, and as obstinate and ruthless as they are made. If he finds

out that you have refused to attend his feast you will antagonize him, and if any harm befalls you, I shall not forgive myself for not warning you better,” Lalo sat pleading before Guru Nanak.

“I am your guest, Lalo, not Malik Bhago’s. If he wishes to invite every sadhu in this town or even the entire country, let him, but I will not be his guest. I will not trade the warmth and love of your precious house for the greatest feast in the world,” smiled Guru Nanak.

Lalo smiled back but his heart was far from reassured. If Malik Bhago decided to vent his anger on Guru Nanak, he would not forgive himself.

At Malik Bhago’s haveli, the word soon spread that a certain sadhu, who was a guest of Lalo, a poor carpenter, was not present at the feast. Malik Bhago sent a few servants to Lalo’s house to personally invite Guru Nanak to the feast, but the latter turned down their invitation. This threw Malik Bhago into fury. He ordered some of his guards to bring the truant sadhu before him with force, if necessary.

“Nanak, Nanak!” Mardana’s panic-stricken voice was heard from the street. He stood at the doorway, exhausted from running and gasping for breath.

“Malik Bhago is sending his guards to take you to his haveli forcefully. Must you be so obstinate? Why did you send away his servants? Let us leave this godforsaken place and go before they can get here.” His words tumbled over one another.

“If he is so persistent, I will go myself and see what he has to say,” replied Guru Nanak.

The three of them made their way to the haveli together. Malik Bhago was sitting like a king in a stone pavilion hung with brightly coloured silk drapes that were fluttering in the wind. All around the feudal lord were rich displays of extravagance. There was a profusion of servants everywhere, running errands or carrying huge plates laden with delicacies of all kinds. Hundreds of holy men and sadhus sat in neat files stretching the entire length of the massive gardens. The Brahmins sat at a safe distance from the others, on ground that had been consecrated for their use. Holy water from the river Ganges has been brought by the cartloads in huge brass urns for the purpose. The other fakirs and sadhus were kept at a little distance from the Brahmins who looked down their aristocratic noses at them, for they were accorded a privilege far superior to theirs by birth, and their religious hierarchy was unmatched.

Malik Bhago was in a disagreeable mood, the reason for which was being whispered from ear to ear. Everyone waited for the truant sadhu to be dragged into the presence of the powerful nobleman.

When Guru Nanak came to stand before Malik Bhago, nobody, including the incensed chief, knew that it was him they were all waiting for.

“I am Nanak. I hear you have given orders for me to be forcefully brought here. Why so?”

Everyone in earshot was taken aback by this audacious newcomer who had just revealed his identity. Malik Bhago was caught off his guard and baffled further by Guru Nanak's refined bearing.

"Your appearance is that of a sadhu, yet your manner suggests you are of noble birth," he spoke, regaining his composure. "Why do you associate with a lowly carpenter? How foolish you are to accept the hospitality of a poor man and turn down one that hundreds of your kind anxiously wait for months every year. Look around you, these sadhus and Brahmins are feasting on a banquet fit for royalty. Why did you decline my invitation?"

"You have organized a grand feast indeed, Malik Bhago. Everyone gathered here, however, is not partaking of the rich and sumptuous dishes your servants have been preparing for days, but on the sweat, blood, and helpless tears of families you have exploited over the years to satiate your greed for riches. You cannot receive favour in the eyes of God even if you were to feed all the sadhus and Brahmins in the world. The dry, hard bread that Lalo has offered me tastes sweeter than milk, for it has been earned with honest arduous work, and served with love and selflessness."

Malik Bhago rose furiously, his face livid with anger at being insulted in his own house in front of his guests. An old Brahmin standing nearby appeased the feudal lord and cautioned that he exercise restraint on such an auspicious day for he might incur the wrath of the gods by abusing a sadhu. Malik Bhago swallowed his anger

and pride grudgingly, watching Guru Nanak walk away, his fists clenched till the knuckles turned white.

That evening there was a bigger gathering than usual in Lalo's humble courtyard for news of Guru Nanak's confrontation with Malik Bhago had spread through the town like wildfire. They listened with rapt attention as the Guru sang.

*To take what is another's and prosper as a thief,
Is for a Muslim to eat pig and a Hindu to eat beef,
The Lord stands by one in joy and distress,
If he abstains from eating another's carcass,
With mere talk no man can passage to heaven obtain,
One deserving of it must ever truthful remain,
Season forbidden bread as you like, legitimate it cannot
be made,
O Nanak, with false talk, one can only falsehood trade.¹²*



¹² SGGS, pg. 141, Hak paraaiaa Nanaka us soo-ar us gaa-ay...

Sajjan The Thug

Guru Nanak left Lalo and Saidpur behind to travel to Pakpattan, where hundreds of Hindu and Muslim pilgrims gathered to pay homage at the shrine of Sheikh Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar who belonged to the Chisti order of Sufism, and had succeeded Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki. Mardana had expressed a desire to make a pilgrimage at the shrine before they went further.

“Will you come with me for *ziarat*¹³ to Sheikh Farid’s shrine? He was a great poet like you and perhaps you will have a chance to hear his verses.”

“I will come with you if you promise to always accompany me,” Guru Nanak smiled.

“God alone knows what I am settling for in agreeing to do as you say,” replied Mardana with a smile. “I shall leave my well-being and yours into the hands of Allah and vow to be the companion of your travels, however long and weary they may be.”

On their way to Pakpattan, they had to cross the town of Tulamba, which lay on the banks of the Ravi. At the time, there lived in Tulamba a man called Sajjan, whose name meant ‘a noble man’ in the local language, though he was anything but. He ran a small inn on the outskirts of the town which, as it happened, was also the only one of its kind in Tulamba. He had a temple built for his

¹³ Pilgrimage to a holy place

Hindu guests and a mosque for the Muslim ones amongst them. Each guest was received by him with extravagant shows of hospitality. They were served delicious food and offered clean lodgings in which to spend the night. In the middle of the night, however, Sajjan would strangle them in their sleep, steal all their belongings and riches, and cast their bodies into a nearby well. Sajjan had spent many years living the life of a murderer and thief until Guru Nanak, too, chanced to stop by his inn one evening.

The sun had blazed all day, and dusk when it came, had done nought to relieve the heat. Not a leaf stirred on the trees. Further down the road they were travelling, under the vast canopy of a banyan tree that grew beside it, were placed earthen pots. Mardana walked quickly towards one and lifted its lid to see that it was filled with clean, cool water. They washed their hands with it and drank some.

Once their thirst was quenched, they looked around to see if there was a dwelling nearby for surely there must be one. A lane, perpendicular to the road they had used led away from the banyan towards a cluster of trees ahead, and they followed it. Just beyond the trees there was a clearing. They were surprised to see a temple on one side of it and a mosque on the other. In the centre of these was a *sarai* or rest house with a spacious veranda running across its front and a few doors opening from it into what were chambers for travellers. There was also a decent stable for horses with mangers full of fresh hay. A pale of water lay on one side of its hardened mud floor.

The place, however, seemed deserted, until a cheerful voice interrupted their observations. Sajjan was walking towards them with open arms. He was an amiable looking man, dressed all in white with a white turban on his head. Gold earrings dangled from his ears, swaying as he walked.

“Welcome to my humble inn. What brings you to this part of the countryside?”

“We are on our way to Pakpattan for *ziarat* at Sheikh Farid’s and are looking for a place to spend the night,” replied Mardana.

“If that is the case, then your search ends here. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sajjan, the owner of this inn, and I am now at your service. You look dusty and tired, and I assume you are hungry as well,” he smiled. “Feel free to wash yourselves and I shall have dinner prepared in no time.”

He gestured with his hands towards a corner of the building, where surrounded by a small enclosure of raised bricks covered in clay were placed more pales full of water. As his guests walked ahead of him, he surreptitiously eyed the two. He had been disappointed by their appearance at first for what could he hope to loot from a holy man who had renounced the world and its riches? Then his eyes fell on Mardana’s rebab which looked like the work of a master craftsman, and upon the leather bag suspended from Guru Nanak’s shoulder.

They were served a hot, delicious supper of curry and flatbread by Sajjan himself. He asked them slyly if they

would not like to retire early as they had had a long day, and there was still a considerable distance for them to cover before they reached their destination.

“As you can see, my brother carries a rebab,” spoke Guru Nanak.

“Yes indeed,” thought Sajjan to himself, “and a good price it will fetch, too, when I deprive him of it, and sell it in the market.”

He nodded his head.

“It is our custom to sing the praises of God every day before we retire for the night,” explained the Guru.

“You must not tarry on my account. I shall lend my ears to your song as I clear away the dinner,” Sajjan replied with a feigned smile.

Guru Nanak beckoned Mardana out into the open yard before the rest house. The evening star was shining bright in the sky’s darkening veil when he began to sing and Mardana gently touched the strings of his rebab.

*Tinted copper is bright and lustrous, when rubbed it
turns a dull black,
Now wash it a hundred times you may, its
sheen will not come back,
They alone noble friends I call, who tread this road with
me,
And are seen standing by my side when judgement
summons me,
Houses, palaces, and mansions coloured and painted
stand,*

*When pulled apart, they are empty within and
crumble to heaps of sand,
Cranes that dwell near shrines, their feathers are white
as snow,
They feed on the living piece by piece, virtue they cannot
know,
My body is like a semal tree that beckons birds from far
and near,
Its fruit is useless on closer look, like my qualities that
upon scrutiny disappear,
All talk of morality and cleverness will serve you not
indeed,
O Nanak, contemplate upon the Lord, for only thus
shall you be freed.¹⁴*

Sajjan, who had been in the act of walking away with the dishes, stopped to listen, and was rooted to the ground. He stood bewitched by the music, his senses drowning in the truth of Guru Nanak's words. He knew now that this sage had seen through his pretence. His anxiety gave way to guilt, and guilt transformed into repentance and flowed down his face as tears that washed not his cheeks alone but also his heart. Like the first monsoon showers bathe a parched and thirsting earth, so were Sajjan's vile intentions washed away by the Guru's words. He sat now where he had stood. He had been transformed, and the growing darkness around him made him conscious of another kind of darkness that had shrouded his mind over the past years.

¹⁴ SGGS, pg. 729, Ujal kaihaa chilkanaa ghotim kaalrhee mas...

“Your name belies your deeds, O Sajjan. Either change your name or alter your deeds to suit it.” Guru Nanak spoke in a calm and kindly voice like one would use to gently reprimand a child that has misbehaved.

Now the transformation was complete. He fell at the Guru’s feet, and the latter placed a gentle hand on his head.

“Let all your past deeds disappear into the darkness of this night, O Sajjan, for when the sun rises tomorrow, it will illuminate a changed man.”



Guru Nanak Visits the Shrine of Sheikh Farid

On the banks of the river Sutlej lay the town of Ajodhan which later came to be called Pakpattan in memory of Sheikh Farid, who had moved there in the thirteenth century. It is said that when Timur the Lame passed through this town on his way to Delhi he spared it a plunder, unlike many others that had not been so fortunate, in memory of the famous saint buried here who was a shining star in the filament of Sufism.

This ancient town was built on a raised mound, and its buildings were surrounded by a fortified brick wall. A criss-cross of narrow streets connected the houses of the rich and poor inhabitants.

A slow line of pilgrims was making their way towards the shrine of Sheikh Farid. In their midst walked Guru Nanak and Mardana. As evening approached, the pilgrims entered the city through one of its six gates walking towards the western part of the city where a simple shrine for the saint, built by his disciple Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya, was housed in an unpretentious complex. Beyond the high walls, a distinct, constant gurgling was heard as the Sutlej curved along the landscape.

Mardana went in search of food, which was not hard to come by, for the townspeople willingly offered it to all pilgrims who came to pay obeisance to the memory of

their beloved saint. Having eaten, Guru Nanak and Mardana sat in the corner of a street leading to the main shrine, and the air soon filled with their music.

*This glittering world before my eyes will not be,
My swirling mind its own end it cannot see,
A fragile drop of water am I, You lord are the great
river,
Bestow upon me that which matters, all else is poison,
O supreme Giver,
This hollow body You have filled with the water of life,
O Lord of light,
I have been made significant with Your all-pervading
might,
Like a drunken dog I roam in Your everlasting court,
This world is a burning furnace, Your name my sole
support.*¹⁵

Sheikh Kamal, a disciple of Sheikh Ibrahim who was Sheikh Farid's descendant and caretaker of the shrine, heard Guru Nanak and was enraptured by the words. He requested Guru Nanak with folded hands to go with him to his master.

The two soon met, and while Mardana performed his *ziarat*, Guru Nanak and Sheikh Ibrahim sat together indulging in lengthy discussions concerning divinity and spirituality. The hymns of Sheikh Farid moved Guru Nanak immensely, for they were songs of spiritual love and longing and the frailties and weaknesses of human existence, songs that were, above all, imbued with a

¹⁵ SGGS, pg. 1291, Chilimil bisee-aar dundee-aa faanee

sublime humility that marked the character of the great saint himself.

Sheikh Ibrahim and the Guru's discourses were often interspersed with verses and couplets. Sheikh Ibrahim remembered all of Sheikh Farid's verses by heart and when he recited one, Guru Nanak answered with one of his own. Their conversations were like the convergence of two great rivers of thought, which when united became as vast as the ocean.

Sheikh Ibrahim now recited one of Sheikh Farid's verses,

*If your understanding be sharp, O Farid, do not
slander another man,*

*Look within yourself and find fault where you can,
If someone aims a blow at you, why must you retort?
Only with humility and submission can one enter God's
court.¹⁶*

To this the Guru replied,

*To bow before oneself is simple, to bow before another
is truly great,
For when things are put on a scale, the heavier plunges
down with weight,
A deer hunter is like a sinner and bows down just the
same,
A head that bows with a heart impure cannot humility
claim.¹⁷*



¹⁶ SGGs, pg. 1378, Fareedaa jay tuu akal lateef kaale likh na laykh...

¹⁷ SGGs, pg. 470, Sabh ko nivai aap ka-o par ka-o nivai na koi...

On The Road to Delhi

Leaving Pakpattan behind, the two travellers made their way towards Delhi, taking a short respite in Kurukshetra, where the famous battle of Mahabharata was fought during which Lord Krishna delivered his famous sermon to Arjun, which is immortalised in the Bhagavad Gita.

From Kurukshetra they travelled towards the capital city of Delhi. The midday sun burned the ground beneath their feet as they walked. Ahead of them was a cluster of trees growing in a straight line along one side of the road. As Mardana urged Guru Nanak to hasten towards their shade and get some relief from the burning sun, they heard a loud, commanding voice and turned to see an elegantly dressed man on a well-bred horse ride up behind them.

“Make way for the exalted Sheikh Bajid Sayyad!”

Their eyes fell on a richly embroidered palanquin which was being carried by four bare-backed bearers, each of whom had only a white loin cloth covering his lower body. Besides these, they all wore white turbans around their heads to shield against the harsh sun. Guru Nanak and Mardana stepped back to let them pass.

The bearers moved towards the shade of the nearest tree to set down their burden. Impressions of the

palanquin's handrails had left deep marks on their shoulders. The sweat running down the sides of their faces and bare backs glistened in the sun.

"Make haste, you vermin!" yelled the rider. "You will go to hell for keeping the Sheikh waiting."

One bearer hurriedly spread a mat on the soft ground. Another fetched some water for the Sheikh to drink and wash away the dust of the journey. The Sheikh made himself comfortable on the mat. Two of the men then began massaging his shoulders as the other two pressed his legs and feet.

Mardana looked on disparagingly.

"I must refute your claim, my friend, of there being only one God as you keep saying. Surely the God who is so merciful to this Sheikh, who does not have to lift a finger cannot be the same God who is responsible for the plight of these poor souls who, it appears, have toiled for hours in the scorching sun and know no rest even now."

"Mardana, there are many who meditate upon His name, and innumerable powerful kings who beg at His door. Numerous others waste their lives unscrupulously, while many enjoy plentiful bounties owing to His generosity but remain ungrateful like this rider and his Sheikh. There are countless more like his bearers who perpetually bear the brunt of sorrow, hunger, and suffering. Strange are His ways, Mardana, and He alone can account for them. In the end, those who live noble

lives indulging in prayer and gratitude shall be rewarded even if they are the lowliest of beggars, while those who have forsaken Him and cast aside His worship shall be crushed like grain in a millstone, and beaten like a washerman beats dirty clothes on a stone slab.”

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The Guru Waters His Fields

They reached Delhi and crossing the river Yamuna made their way towards Haridwar, the ‘gateway to the gods,’ that lay on the banks of the sacred Ganges. This is where the river shrugged off her bondage of Himalayan gorges to conquer the plains beyond. Her loud, rebellious gurgling now softened into a soothing murmur as she made her way over the plains towards her tryst with the endless ocean far, far away. The tracts of countryside that flanked her at the foothills of the lofty mountain ranges were covered with lush forests and fertile plains and were home to wild beasts like elephants, bears, leopards, tigers, and deer. A few domesticated cattle grazing here and there gave signs of human habitations nearby that consisted of small clusters of thatched huts.

Guru Nanak and Mardana arrived at Haridwar a day before the harvest festival of Baisakh, which also marked the Hindu New Year. The town was crowded with pilgrims who had all come to be part of the religious festivities that were to be performed on the morrow by thousands of devotees.

The origins of this city were lost in the annals of human history to become one with the traditions and myths of Hinduism. Many ages ago, the mighty world ocean was churned by the gods in the hope of obtaining a pitcher filled with *Amrit*, the elixir of immortality. It was a monumental task even for the gods to accomplish single-handedly, so they sought the aid of *Asuras*, or

demons, promising them some of the elixir in return. Together, they churned the world ocean for thousands upon thousands of years but no sooner had the pitcher emerged from the water than the conniving gods had it surreptitiously carried away by *Garuda*, a celestial kite-like creature. As he flew away, to the chagrin of the guileless demons, a few drops fell upon the earth, and wherever they fell, great centres of pilgrimage were established, one of them being Haridwar.

Thousands of pilgrims were gathered now by the Ganges, chanting holy mantras on its life-giving banks to the accompaniment of tinkling bells, as the heady fragrance of incense and glowing oil lamp overpowered the air. Countless earthen lamps floated in the river's placid, shadowy waters to merge with the reflection of stars that were shining in the sky above. They floated away into the darkness beyond as wishes, remembrances and prayers offered for loved ones long departed.

As night approached, pilgrims and sadhus camped around the river's ghats awaiting the auspicious dawn. A grand fair was to be held on the following day, and preparations for it had been ongoing for the past few months. Devotees distributed food amongst those gathered and gave alms to the poor while vendors looked after their wares that would be on display on the morrow. Women, children, the young and old shared in the excitement in anticipation of the festivities. The rains had been plentiful the previous year, and the people had reaped a good harvest. It was time now to celebrate their good fortune, offer prayers to the gods, invoke their

blessings for the coming year, and remember their ancestors. Guru Nanak and Mardana found themselves a secluded spot at a distance from the melee of people to settle for the night.

As dawn broke over the horizon on the first day of Baisakh, the chanting of mantras by hundreds of human voices arose in union from the river's bank. Guru Nanak and Mardana made their way towards the water's edge in the company of hordes of other pilgrims trying to find a favourable spot for the ritual bath at sunrise. As the sun appeared in the distant horizon, they plunged themselves into the icy depths, their chants getting louder in efforts to distract their minds from the water's cold impact. They appeared momentarily, carrying some water in their cupped hands or in brass and copper vessels, and offered it towards the rising sun.

Guru Nanak stood on the banks, watching these proceedings with a smile on his lips. An amenable sadhu came to stand beside him.

“The auspicious time to make an offering to the ancestors will soon end, my friend. Better make haste.”

“Are all who are gathered here offering water to their ancestors?”

“Well, you are a strange sadhu. You should know that on the first day of Baisakh every year water is offered to one's ancestors who dwell in *pitraloka*, the land beyond the stars, to quench their thirst,” answered the sadhu.

“Let me make my offering then,” replied Guru Nanak. They walked towards the water's edge and found a small

clearing amid the gathered hordes. The sadhu offered water to the sun from a copper vessel, saying his prayers in a sincere and clear voice. When he was done, he handed the vessel to Guru Nanak, seeing that the latter was empty-handed.

Guru Nanak dipped the vessel into the Ganges and turned westwards to pour it out.

As he reached down to immerse it in the river a second time, the sadhu intervened, “No, no, you are offering water in the wrong direction. You must offer it towards the sun, otherwise it will not reach your ancestors.”

“But I am not offering it to the sun or my ancestors,” replied Guru Nanak. “You see, my ancestral lands lie westwards of here near the city of Lahore. The fields must by now have been freshly ploughed after the spring harvest. A good watering will prepare the soil well for sowing.”

“And how do you expect your water to reach there?” a sadhu standing nearby jeered. “Unless your vessel can grow wings of its own.”

The remark was greeted with laughter by all those who stood near enough to see and hear what had transpired.

“Better still if the sadhu grows wings of his own to carry the water there himself,” quipped another and there followed more laughter.

The sadhu who had befriended Guru Nanak ignored their laughter and turned towards him.

“How can this water reach your lands, my friend?” he asked sympathetically. “Come, make your offering to the sun before it is too late.”

“How far away is this land of your ancestors?” Guru Nanak

addressed those who had laughed at him.

“It is four hundred and ninety million *kos* away,” an elderly Brahmin in the crowd replied pompously.

“Well, if the water you offer can reach your ancestors over that vast a distance, it can surely reach my lands which are only a few hundred *kos* away.”

“Are you ridiculing our ancient customs?” asked another Brahmin, defiantly.

“I am not ridiculing them, only questioning their veracity,” replied Guru Nanak calmly. “Who has ever seen this land of your ancestors? Offering water to the sun will no more quench their thirst than taking a dip in these waters wash away your sins. True repentance comes not by cleansing one’s body but by cleansing one’s mind. Salvation cannot be found on the banks of sacred rivers but by liberating one’s mind and conscience from the shackles of lust, anger, greed, ego, and pride.”

The amiable sadhu smiled at these words and taking Guru Nanak’s hand walked away from the crowd that stared after them, reiterating the conversation in their minds.

As the day's festivities concluded, Guru Nanak sat by the river to sing. The incident at the ghats had been much talked about by those who had seen it. They came now to listen to this eccentric sadhu, some out of curiosity, others to simply jeer at what they thought was his ignorance and foolishness.

As he sang, they forgot why they came and were lost in the simplicity and beauty of his words, weighing in their minds the events of the day.

How we are born, wherefrom comes life,
Where do we go, following death's endless strife,
Why some are eternally caught in this endless play,
While upon others He showers grace and breaks
their chains away,
Those who love the Lord in their hearts and adorn
their lips with His name,
They are devoted to Him selflessly, life and death
to them are same,
Thoughts arise in the mind like waves and settle down in
time,
Pondering upon the true Name bestows
one with freedom sublime,
Men fulfil their destiny like birds, who with their joys and
sorrows, come to roost for the night,
When the sun breaks over the horizon, they arise and
promptly take flight.¹⁸



¹⁸ SGGS, pg. 152, Jaato jaa-ay kahaa tay aavai...

The Kanphata Yogis and Bitter Berries

Guru Nanak and Mardana were walking on a narrow mountainous path along a hill covered in a thick, verdant foliage of tall trees like the holly, deodar, and rhododendron. Early autumn blooms on the trees, shrubs and creepers were a riot of colour along the path, and butterflies and bees hummed and buzzed from one bloom to another. The hills surrounding them were scattered with small villages bordered by terraced farms. Mountain goats were bleating from their precarious holds on rugged cliff tops. Snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas glistened in the sun like sentinels guarding this paradise from harsh, frigid northern winds.

They had travelled for weeks, leaving Haridwar behind, crossing Kotdwar and Srinagar in the Garhwal province to reach Badrinath and Kedarnath. From there, they travelled to Lapulekh via Antdhura, walking along the Sharda River to Almora. The crystal waters of the river were dancing in the golden sunshine and Guru Nanak, overwhelmed by nature's allure, stopped a while to admire it. As evening approached, they camped on the sandy banks of the river, starting a little fire in the shelter of a few large rocks that had been smoothed and made round by nature's patient hands. As they sat in the circle of the fire's golden glow, Guru Nanak began to sing, and Mardana picked up his rebab with a smile.

*People, bowers, shrines, rivers, clouds, and meadows,
Islands, continents, worlds, galaxies, and the cosmos,
All life that did come forth from egg, womb, sweat, and
soil,
Oceans, mountains and all creatures living, O Nanak, He
alone knows how they toil,
Having fashioned all creation, He holds it in embrace,
The Lord who conceives, watches over all with His
grace.*¹⁹

They resumed their journey and in the days that followed they arrived at a beautiful valley that lay before them nestled between lush green hills. This valley was a convergence point for two rivers, the Lodhiya and Ratiya, that wound their way towards the plains beyond. The sound of a bugle reached their ears, and they followed it to see before them a hermitage of Nath yogis. These yogis were disciples of the famous Gorakhnath, a *mahayogi* and saint believed to have lived sometime in the eleventh century. His followers evolved into several sects due to differences in beliefs and practices while still adhering to the Nath traditions that had developed on the borrowed philosophies of Buddhism, Shaivism, and the science of Yoga.

Here was a chance for Guru Nanak to indulge in religious discussions and debates, but when they approached these reclusive yogis, they were received with disdain and contempt. The yogis, with their split ears, which gave them the name of *kanphatas*, wore saffron garbs and had ash smeared on their bodies. They

¹⁹ SGGGS, pg. 467, Purkhaan birkhaan teerthaan tattan mayghaan khaytaanh...

took immense pride in their ancient practices and looked upon themselves as beyond the reach and understanding of mere mortals. They had renounced the world for good and mastered strenuous yogic practices with rigid self-discipline and hard work. For them, the only path to salvation or *moksha* was their own, all else was deception and futile endeavour.

The yogis, adept at satisfying all spiritual arguments with their well-ripened philosophies, had nothing to offer the hungry travellers in the name of hospitality. Guru Nanak and Mardana were camped under a soap-berry tree. Mardana had come back from the hermitage dejected, having been turned away by them rudely and put his case before Guru Nanak. They had been walking all day over mountainous terrain, he said, stopping for water by the river and consuming whatever wild berries they could find that grew along the path. He was exceedingly hungry now and had no desire to sleep on an empty stomach.

Guru Nanak indicated to him the berries on the soap-berry tree they sat under and Mardana started to pick some with ill-concealed reluctance. While he was doing so, a yogi, walking towards the river for water, stopped to watch him and began to laugh.

“You will be better advised to go hungry than to eat those berries. Haven't you seen a soap-berry tree before? Those berries are as bitter as poison itself.”

“O yogi, when one's hunger is great even the bitterest fruit tastes sweet on the tongue,” replied Guru Nanak.

“Mardana, why do you not offer some to the yogi as well.”

Mardana grudgingly gave a handful of berries to the yogi, keeping the rest for himself and Guru Nanak. The yogi now sat squatting on his feet near them and tasted one of the berries hesitantly. It indeed tasted sweet, to the yogi’s astonishment. He looked at Guru Nanak with surprise and confusion before hurrying back to the hermitage. Mardana, oblivious to this brief exchange, busied himself with relishing the berries and soon there was a heap of seeds at his feet.

Later in the evening, when he sat beside Guru Nanak strumming his rebab, he was surprised to see that a few yogis had come to sit beside them, listening intently as they sang and played.

*Yoga²⁰ is found not in a patched coat, nor a stick nor a
body*

smearred with ashes,

*Yoga lies not in earrings or shaven heads nor for the
blowing of horns it passes,*

*To abide unsoiled in this tainted world, only thus can it
be attained,*

*By mere words and talk alone, spirituality cannot be
gained,*

*He who possesses unbiased sight and looks upon all
alike is a yogi indeed,*

*Yoga lies not in visits to tombs and shrines nor states of
trance will a yogi breed,*

²⁰ Yoga, in Sanskrit, and in this context implies a union of the body, mind and spirit.

*By travel to far flung foreign lands and bathing in
pilgrim sites
yoga is not sustained,
To abide unsoiled in this tainted world,
only thus can it be attained.²¹*

Mardana had been snubbed by these yogis earlier, but he saw now that as they listened, their hard, unfriendly frowns softened, and they appeared much more amiable.

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²¹ SGGS, pg. 730, Jog na khintha jog na dandai...

The Yogis of Gorakhmata

Leaving the valley of yogis behind, Guru Nanak and Mardana travelled further to a place called Gorakhmata which was another centre of *siddha* or ‘perfect’ yogis, who also followed the teachings of Gorakhnath. They were a mystical sect of yogis who believed in channelling the universal life force or energy through meditation, chanting, retreats, and other yogic practices to initiate spiritual awakening. Here, too, the Guru and his companion were greeted with suspicion.

“Who is your spiritual teacher,” asked an elderly yogi. “We are all disciples of Gorakhnath, a *mahayogi* whose fame radiates across the furthest corners of this land. Amongst the twelve schools of Yoga, ours is the finest. A disciple is a reflection of his teacher. Just as the pupil of one’s eye mirrors the world before it, so is a guru’s greatness reflected in the character of one he teaches. Tell us who your guru is, and we shall judge for ourselves whether you are worthy of our company.”

“All words of praise fail before my teacher. How can His worth be gauged? What measure, what weight, and who indeed can appraise His worth? He is the primal teacher, the Lord of all things beneath this azure sky. Only a mind that never forgets Him can serve as a scale to measure His greatness, and a conscience that holds Him near can serve as weights to rightly decide my teacher’s worth,” replied Guru Nanak.

The elderly yogi interposed, “We are a people given to storytelling and eloquence is our inheritance. Mere words alone, however, do not decide one’s worth. Why, a bird can sing melodiously all day without knowing the first rule of rhyme or meter.”

“The songs of birds flow spontaneously from the divine. They are like the sun that shines without knowing that its warmth gives life to all, or the moon whose attraction causes oceans to rise but is itself unconscious of its own allure. If a nightingale sang from any consciousness of her talent would not her song sound less appealing to the ear?” asked Guru Nanak. “We have travelled a long distance and must now seek your permission to camp here for the night.”

“We are yogis who have renounced the world,” retorted the elderly yogi. “We use this land for our hermitage, but we do not own it. You can camp wherever you please.” With these words he walked away arrogantly.

The elderly yogi was impressed with Guru Nanak’s manner and eloquence but was reluctant to admit the same. He had seen many saffron-clad imposters in his time and was weary of them all.

Guru Nanak and Mardana walked towards a *peepal* tree which had not yet been claimed by the yogis. Some of them had gone to fetch water from the nearby rivulet while a few others were gathering firewood. The rest sat meditating in different *Hatha* yogic poses, a branch of Yoga championed by Gorakhnath that was based on

preserving vital energy forces within the body through postures, gestures, and breathing exercises.

Autumn was making way for winter, and the nights were growing gradually colder. Mardana had gone in search of firewood and as the area around them was densely wooded, he soon returned with a big bundle of dry branches and twigs. They prepared a fire together and sat around it singing the praises of God. Some yogis came to sit at a distance and listen. It was dark now, but a bright moon was shining through clouds that were being driven ominously across the night sky by a strong wind. A few drops of water fell from the heavens, and the wind began howling in the trees, rustling their leaves ruthlessly. The few fires that were burning around the hermitage began to die despite the yogis' frantic efforts to shield and save them. One by one, they were all extinguished and faded away like stars at dawn. Only one fire remained, that which burnt before Guru Nanak, lending its glow and warmth to him as he sang to please his Lord, oblivious to all else.

The elderly yogi witnessed what he could only describe as a small miracle. He had seen miracles before, for he had known many *siddhas* who had mastered the life force so effectively that they could perform them at will. He had tried to humiliate this wandering sadhu with his words but deliberated within himself now on how to approach the newcomer. On the following day, he walked towards Guru Nanak and his companion, who sat sharing some rice people living nearby had distributed earlier in the day.

“If you choose, traveller,” said he, “you can stay and become one of us. Man’s true purpose is to merge with the divine, and nothing can help you achieve that end better than the philosophy and practices ordained by our exalted teacher. Become one of us and you will be honoured in this world and beyond.”

“My journey has just begun, and I cannot renounce it until I reach its end. Your practices require the highest penance, both spiritual and physical. We are all striving towards the same goal, but I must keep to the path that has been revealed to me. All things in the world follow the course God has preordained for them. We are like rivers rushing to merge with the mighty ocean. I must follow my destiny as you follow yours.”

As the day ended, Guru Nanak beckoned to Mardana to pick up his rebab. The yogis, by now familiar with this custom, sat down to lend their ears to the words.

*One whose mind is attached to the supreme reality knows
how Yoga is attained,
By immersing oneself in the divine word, release from
ego and attachment is gained,
The Lord grants deliverance from lust, anger and ego
guiding one to truth’s beacon,
He who permeates all, from your patched cloak to your
begging bowl will lead you across the world ocean,
True is the Lord, true His name and
His truth surpasses all judgements,
Let detachment from this world be your begging bowl
and make your cap from the five elements,*

*Let this body be your prayer mat, and for a
loincloth use your mind,
In truth, contentment and abstinence can
one true companionship find.²²*

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²² SGGS, pg. 939, Nanak bolai gurmukh boojhai jog jugat iv paa-ee-ai...

The Guru in Banaras

Leaving Gorakhmata behind, Guru Nanak travelled south-east with his companion through Tanda and the ancient town of Gola towards Ayodhya where they took a short respite before continuing to Prayag. From thence they went to Banaras, an ancient city said to have been founded by Lord Shiva himself. Legend has it that Shiva once went into battle with Brahma. During the battle, Shiva severed one of Brahma's five heads from his body. No sooner had Shiva struck the blow than the head attached itself to his hand. He wandered the entire world for ages, but the head would not come asunder. Eventually, he reached Banaras where the head separated from his hand and fell to disappear into the earth.

The city arose on the banks of the river Ganges, its myriad temples, spires, and schools of learning teaming with scholars, poets, saints, and mystics. Its burning ghats were strewn with funeral pyres and ash-smeared sadhus, who sat near them, reminding themselves of the transience of human existence and the futility of attachment to worldly things. Kings and paupers, the high born and low, the learned and fools, thugs, and sages, all came to these ancient ghats to seek salvation and deliverance. They were seen bathing in its redeeming waters, as others sat on its shores lost in meditation, they were seen carrying their dead to pyres raised with wooden logs, they could be observed going in and out of temples to the ringing of temple bells and blowing of

conch shells, and they were also seen giving alms to the poor, or feeding the hundreds of sacred cows that roamed its archaic streets.

Guru Nanak and Mardana sat on the banks of the river at dawn, invoking the divine with their hymns. Close by, a few Brahmins were making their daily ablutions standing knee-deep in the water. As they appeared, drying themselves hurriedly before going about their daily business, they lingered awhile to listen. When the hymn concluded, some of them came to sit beside Guru Nanak and asked him to elaborate the meaning of the words he sang.

“Knowledge is like the sun that shines over all to brighten the world around us, but one who closes his eyes before it knows not the difference between light and darkness. When one’s conscience opens to spiritual knowledge, by the grace of God, one acts upon that knowledge and meditates upon the true Name, then enlightenment is achieved and the self realises the divine,” spoke Guru Nanak.

The Brahmins were well pleased. One of them introduced himself as Chatur Das and questioned, “You carry neither the *saligram*²³ upon you, nor a mark of sandalwood upon your forehead and your attire is unlike any we have seen. What kind of a holy man are you? What beliefs do you profess and what deities do you worship? How can we weigh the truth of your words?”

²³ A fossilized stone representing Vishnu, and used for the deity’s worship.

“Mardana, play your rebab,” said the Guru, and he sang to dispel the Brahmin’s doubts.

*O Brahmin, you who carry the saligram and wear
your rosary beads,
Build instead a boat to traverse this world ocean and
chant the name of One who heads,
Why do you irrigate barren soil and squander this life
away,
It is crumbling like a mud wall from within, mend it as
you like, it will decay,
Use your hands like a pail strung on a chain, and
restrain your mind like an ox beneath its yoke to draw
ambrosial water,
Irrigate your soul with this water divine to become one
with the Lord, your gardener.²⁴*

Guru Nanak stayed in Banaras for a few days, indulging in religious discourses with men of learning, before continuing to Gaya. From Gaya, they travelled downriver along the Ganges towards Hajipur, and then east to its confluence with the Mahananda. Further along, they moved southward, passing through Maksudabad to reach Dhaka. From here, a boat would carry them via the Brahmaputra towards Kamrup.

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²⁴ SGGS, pg. 1170-1171, Saal garraam bip pooj manaavahu sukarit tulsee maalaa...

The Sorceress of Kamrup

The ancient state of Kamrup, which lay on the old silk route, was situated on the Brahmaputra and stretched between the eastern and north-eastern Himalayan ranges. The great river turned and swivelled around lush, green hills, plateaus and grasslands rushing towards its tryst with the mighty ocean. The history of this region was shaped by both Vedic Hinduism and the religion of indigenous tribal kings that centred around the worship of tantric goddesses and included human and animal sacrifice.

Guru Nanak and Mardana had been travelling over isolated countryside before they arrived at a small town on the borders of Kamrup. While Guru Nanak sat down to meditate by the river, Mardana walked towards the city in search of food. Houses with slanting roof-tops lined both sides of the street. Mardana walked past a few of them before coming upon one that was bigger than the rest, feeling sure that he would not be turned away empty-handed from a residence as impressive as that.

The surprising absence of any men on the streets escaped his attention. There were women of all ages engaged in their daily chores and children too, but no men. Little did he know that in that matriarchal town, all the womenfolk practiced the dark art of black magic and were known to cast spells on men and other hapless strangers to enslave them forever. Mardana was soon to

be their next victim. He tapped on the large sturdy door, and it was opened by a woman.

“Greetings! My companion and I have come a long way and are camped on the outskirts of your town by the river. If you will be kind enough to spare some food, we will be greatly obliged.”

“Come in!” replied the woman and Mardana followed her into a spacious courtyard.

“You have come to the house of Nur Shah, my mistress, and the chieftain of our town. She will not turn you away empty handed,” the lady smiled.

Around the courtyard were sitting half a dozen other women, all of different ages. They wore rich garments and an abundance of jewellery. Some were busy stirring what appeared to be a fermented drink in large vats, while others were knitting or embroidering. It was a grand two-storied house with graceful arches and elaborately carved wood panelling. As Mardana entered, they looked up, exchanging meaningful glances amongst themselves which he did not notice for he was lost in taking note of his surroundings with a childlike curiosity. Over the past few days, the two travellers had hardly encountered any human habitations and gone hungry on most days, eating only what nature proffered. Judging from the size of those vats, these women would surely send him away with a cartload of food, he thought to himself now.

Nur Shah stepped out into the courtyard and came to stand before Mardana, scrutinizing him with beautiful,

kohled eyes. She was an attractive woman, dressed in rich silks with a tall, slender figure. Her wrists were weighed down with bracelets of colourful beads, and jewels adorned her ears and neck. Her long, dark hair fell to her knees and had been braided by skilful fingers. She smiled beguilingly at Mardana.

“Welcome! I have been told you are a stranger to these lands. We must receive you in the traditional fashion of greeting guests in this part of the world.” She walked up to him, placed a necklace of what looked like shells around his head and began to utter some words in a strange language.

Mardana felt a deep slumber overpowering him and he drifted into oblivion.



Guru Nanak opened his eyes. The sun was setting in the west, slowly transforming the blue waters of the Brahmaputra into a streak of mysterious sable intensity. Far away in the distant horizon, night and day were engaged in an eternal dance, frolicking in each other's embrace, now drifting apart, now melting into one another again. And such was the way of the world, Guru Nanak thought, light and darkness, good and evil, happiness and sorrow, life and death, forever dancing to the constant music of creation, preservation, and destruction.

Mardana had not returned yet, and it was growing dark. Guru Nanak walked towards the village in search

of his friend. He stopped before Nur Shah's house and tapped gently. He was ushered in by the same woman who had received Mardana earlier.

"I have come in search of my brother."

He looked around him and saw Mardana sitting in a corner of the courtyard, partially hidden behind a large vat. He appeared to have been turned to stone, and neither moved nor made a sound.

"Mardana, get up in the name of the Merciful Lord!" Mardana jolted back to consciousness and rose to his feet.

"O Nanak! These women are a bad lot. Thank God you came!

"That sorceress nearly had me transformed into a ram! If she had cast another one of her spells, I might have started rapping and grunting like one, too. Let us go from here before they can contrive another mischief."

I that moment Nur Shah came into the courtyard, chuckling softly. "I see your friend knows a little magic of his own. Let me see if it is any match against mine."

She turned towards Guru Nanak, and raising her head towards the sky began to mutter some spells. Guru Nanak remained unmoved. She tried another and when she saw it, too, had no effect, she tried a different one, now with an urgency in her voice that belied her ill-disguised composure. Her spells had never failed her before.

“What kind of magic do you use, stranger, to make my spells futile?”

“The only magic spell I know is the name of the one true God. One who learns to use it realizes that all spells, talismans, and charms are futile before its power,” Guru Nanak spoke calmly. “We will take your leave now. My brother made a mistake in coming to you for food. A house consumed by pride and led astray by false pretence of power can have nothing to offer anyone.”



“If I had known what those women had afoot, I would have chosen to go hungry for days rather than count on their hospitality. What if you had not found me, Nanak? I would have been enslaved by them forever.”

“Well, you have promised to accompany me on all my travels, remember? I would certainly not have left you behind for I must hold you to your word,” Guru Nanak smiled.

They had lit a fire on the riverbank and kept a pile of firewood beside it to feed it through the night. They were in open country where wild beasts roamed freely after dark and the fire would keep them at bay.

“Mardana, play your rebab for the Lord’s word has been revealed,” and Guru Nanak began to sing, his voice echoing in the ethereal stillness of the valley.

*No eloquence have I nor breeding, how should
I face my husband Lord,*

*Countless soul brides has He, each better than the last,
 I must surely be ignored,
 Those brides who court His favour, are forever blessed
 to enjoy a shade giving tree,
 I have not the virtues they possess, the fault is in none
 but me,
 How should I sing Thy praise, O Lord,
 what name should I give to Thee,
 Of your countless virtues I can imitate none,
 a sacrifice to you can I yet be.²⁵*

Nur Shah stood concealed under the shadows of trees growing nearby, having followed Guru Nanak and Mardana surreptitiously. She had found him immune to her magic and oblivious to her charms. She was accustomed to people fearing her for her sorcery and being bewitched by her beauty, but here was a man who had struck at her pride with his indifference. Now, listening to his song, she was made vulnerable. His words cast a spell on her, shaking her from a deep slumber, as Mardana had been shaken out of her spell. A lone tear rolled down her fair cheek as she stood staring at Guru Nanak's tranquil face illuminated by the glowing flames. Her sorcery had failed her as it had never done before. She silently resolved now to relinquish her magic and worship of tantric goddesses and devote herself instead to the veneration of the one true God that Guru Nanak sang to please.



²⁵ SGGS, pg. 762, Manj kuchajee ammaavan dosrhay ha-o saho raavan jaa-e jee-o...

Kind Village, Unkind Village

Leaving Kamrup behind, the Guru travelled eastwards along the Brahmaputra towards Assam. On the way they stopped at a pleasant looking village sprawled at the base of a hill, a short distance from the river. As they walked down the main lane running through it, they were greeted with suspicious and frowning faces. They stopped by a doorway and knocked on it. The door was opened by a middle-aged man who scowled at them and raised a fist.

“Go away at once! I have no use for vagabonds like you! I have work to do unlike you,” and he slammed the door on their face.

They looked at each other in surprise.

“Perhaps he is demented, poor man,” observed Mardana.

They went to another door and knocked again. This time a young woman opened the door. When she saw who stood there, she asked in a rude voice,

“What do you want?”

“We are travellers who have come a long way. Will you kindly spare us some food, lady?”

“And pray tell me why I should waste what precious food I have on wayfarers like you? Now do not stand there staring at me. Go away!” Another door was slammed on them. They went to a few more houses, but

each person who answered their knock was more impertinent and foul-mouthed than the last.

“Let us leave this accursed village. These people do not know the first thing about hospitality and kindness,” said Mardana in frustration.

As they walked past the last house in the village, Guru Nanak turned back.

“May you forever dwell here and prosper.” Mardana stared at him in disbelief but remained silent.

As they travelled further, the path along the river became rough and narrow. Open valleys were now left behind and, in their stead, rose high green hills that seemed to close in upon the mighty river on both sides, trapping her in their verdant embrace. Far in the distance they discerned a suspended log bridge on the other side of which were a few simple houses clustered together and surrounded by terraced fields. Above these, on the mountain summit stood a small temple with its round conical spire atop which glistened a silver finial, as it caught the rays of a setting sun.

When they neared this small hamlet, children came running towards them, excited at the rare sight of travellers. They walked through the village lanes with the children in tow and were greeted with happy faces and welcoming smiles. The people escorted them to the house of their chief. Water was brought for them to wash the dust off their hands and faces, and they were guided to a table that was soon weighed down with food.

“You appear to have come a long way, my friends,” said the chief. “Allow us to extend our hospitality towards you and serve you for as long as you choose to stay. My people live an isolated life and travellers like you are rare. We can learn of foreign customs and habits from you and benefit from your company.”

Guru Nanak and Mardana obliged by extending their stay. The people’s kindness and cordiality were heart-warming. They cultivated terrace fields around the village that allowed them to grow both winter and summer crops which were irrigated by countless mountain streams that dotted these mountains. They also reared domestic animals for milk and wool. Overall, they were a self-sufficient, happy little community with barely any contact with the world beyond the mountains.

Every day, at dawn and dusk, when Guru Nanak sat to sing the praises of the Lord, the young and old villagers would gather around him to listen. They enjoyed asking the travellers questions about their homeland and the customs of their people. Mardana revelled in the attention he received, and his rebab was a sensation amongst these people. While Guru Nanak spent his days strolling in the surrounding forests or sitting by the river in deep meditation, Mardana obliged anyone who asked with a song to the accompaniment of the rebab. He was always seen with his rebab in hand, surrounded by smiling children and attentive adults, sometimes playing his instrument for them, or indulging in long conversations.

In a few more days it was time to leave these amiable, kind people and their village. The parting was as warm as their sojourn had been, and they were escorted beyond the village and fields by a considerable farewell party. Having handed over a small bundle of rations for Guru Nanak and Mardana to take along with them, the people of the village said goodbye.

“May you grow and disperse beyond the borders of this blessed village, travel to the furthest corners of the world, and prosper wherever you go.”

Having blessed the village thus, Guru Nanak took leave of the people to follow the path that would take them to the town of Cuttack in Orissa. They passed through Shillong on their way to Sylhet and from there took a boat to Calcutta, which was an insignificant cluster of three small villages on the river Hooghly. As they left the village, however, Mardana was in a dilemma.

“No one can win an argument with you, Nanak, but I cannot help questioning the blessing you have given these people. Why, you blessed the unpleasant and rude people in the last village to prosper where they were, while you sentenced these kind and virtuous people to an exodus. Why must you wish for them to leave this beautiful haven?”

“Mardana, this world needs as much benevolence and generosity as it can get. Of malice and unkindness, it is not deprived. These good people will take their values and virtues with them, and wherever they go a corner of

the world will benefit from their kindness and generosity as we have over the past days.”

Mardana smiled.

“As I said, Nanak, no one can win an argument with you.”

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The Aarti at Puri

Puri, or Purushottam Puri as it was called before the twelfth century, was once part of the ancient kingdom of Kalinga, that has been mentioned several times in the epic Mahabharata. Following Ashoka's conquest of the city after the famous battle of Kalinga that would lead him to change the course of history by disseminating the teachings of the Buddha in all four corners of the world, Puri became an important centre of Buddhism. The town thrived on pilgrim trade, being well connected by both land and sea. The legendary wealth of its temples lured foreign invaders, and it was plundered eighteen times starting from the beginning of the seventh century. The construction of the temple of Jagannath Puri, dedicated to Lord Vishnu and his avatar Lord Krishna, began in the twelfth century.

Both land and sea routes were used by pilgrims to reach Puri. Guru Nanak and Mardana followed the land route from Dhaka to Calcutta. From here they would travel to Cuttack and continue to Jagannath Puri. The rich pilgrims travelled in bullock carts or palanquins, while the poor trudged on foot. The route was interspersed with dense jungles teeming with wild animals, and countless streams and rivers that had to be traversed by boats in the absence of bridges. The plight of pilgrims who took the journey on foot was pitiable. Long treks over wild country were exhausting beyond measure. The soles of their feet were often covered with

blisters that bled and had to be bandaged with any rags that could be spared. At nightfall, groups of pilgrims would work together to erect makeshift camps to guard against wild animals. The rich amongst them had well stocked rations, while the poor slept on half empty stomachs, for the little they carried had to be portioned out sensibly to last through the long journey.

Every night as these weary souls drifted into slumber, worn and exhausted from the day's toil, they were soothed by the hymns of a strangely dressed sadhu and his companion who carried a rebab. His simple words were easy to comprehend, even for the most ignorant amongst them. He sang of a benevolent God who watched over the entire world and loved in equal measure the rich and poor, the crippled and strong, the sinner and the one who had been sinned against. Their hearts filled with hope as they listened to the words and drifted into a pleasant world of dreams where the blisters on their feet were just as easily forgotten as the toil of a long and gruelling day.



The premises of the Jagannath temple were enclosed by two concentric walls, an outer fortified wall flaunting four gateways opening out in each of the four directions, and an inner wall around the main shrine. The shrine was a curvilinear structure with an eight-spoked wheel of Lord Vishnu adorning its pinnacle. It was one of the oldest and most sacrosanct of temples in the Hindu world, and pilgrims and holy men flocked to it from all

corners of the land. Guru Nanak and Mardana settled near one of the many shrines that were built in the temple complex between the outer and inner walls.

During the days, a cool sea breeze blowing in from the sea of Kalinga accompanied by the incessant sound of waves would soothe the weary travellers. Every day, the sun could be seen rising from the furthest depths of the mighty ocean and when it sank in the opposite direction, the sky was transformed into a sea of stars across which the moon followed in his eternal pursuit of the elusive sun.

The pilgrims who had travelled with Guru Nanak were unwilling to leave his side now. They would walk around the temple complex by day seeking blessings from the gods and at dusk join Guru Nanak and Mardana as they sat singing the praises of God.

Each day at dusk the main temple complex was transformed by thousands of oil lamps that were lit for the evening service or *aarti*. Vedic hymns were recited by priests to the burning of incense, blowing of conch shells, and offerings of fragrant flowers. One day a priest was returning from this ritual. On his way he stopped by the small congregation that sat around Guru Nanak. He stood listening to what the rather unconventional looking sadhu was singing and was mesmerised. The splendours of the service he had just attended paled before the *aarti* this sadhu was singing of in a moving and passionate voice.

*The sun and moon like lamps upon the salver sky are
 adorned,
 Upon it too are fixed stars and celestial bodies, to pearls
 they are transformed,
 The wind sways like a royal whisk, the breeze carries as
 incense the fragrance of sandalwood divine,
 Each flower that blooms is an offering on this world
 altar of Thine,
 O how wonderful is this celestial service that creation
 proffers upon You,
 O breaker of mortal chains, Your worship is everlasting
 and true,
 This unstruck music of Your name that plays with no
 beginning nor end,
 To heavens like the sound of temple drums does ascend,
 A thousand eyes You have, a thousand forms too, yet You
 have but none,
 What wonderful cosmic play is this, a thousand feet and
 noses too You have, even so You have not one,
 You are the primal light that shines in every heart, Your
 light alone a brilliance to this world does impart,
 By the Guru's grace alone this light stands revealed,
 All things pleasing to Him the virtue of His worship
 wield,
 For the Lord's lotus feet my heart forever does pine,
 Grant upon Nanak, your thirsting songbird, the nectar of
 Your name divine.²⁶*

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²⁶ SGGS, pg. 663, Gagan mai thaal rav chand deepak banay...

Guru Nanak in Tiruvannamalai

From Puri, the Guru and Mardana made their way southwards, travelling from Ganjam to Guntur, and thence to Kanchipuram. Leaving Kanchipuram behind, they travelled to Tiruvannamalai.

The landscape was now covered with green hills and dense forests that were home to innumerable wild beasts, herds of elephants and colourful birds whose incessant and carefree chirping brought these forests alive. At the base of a sacred hill was the temple of Arunachaleshwara, dedicated to Lord Shiva. The hill itself was considered sacred by the Hindus as it was associated with the deity. The construction of the temple complex was commenced in the ninth century by the Chola dynasty. Later, in the reign of the Vijayanagar empire, a hall with a thousand pillars was added to it.

Guru Nanak and Mardana admired the Dravidian style temple complex with its massive *gopuras* or gatehouses rising before them, while behind the Annamalai hill the sun was beginning its slow descent elongating the shadow of the sacred hill until it slowly shrouded the temple before it. Guru Nanak and Mardana stood out conspicuously in the throng of pilgrims and had to answer repeated inquiries about where they had come from and how long they had been travelling.

As they found a secluded spot against a temple wall, a monk, who was clad in nothing but a loin cloth that

covered his lower body, and a sandalwood mark on his forehead, came to sit beside them.

“You are foreigners to this land, judging from your appearance. You are indeed fortunate to perform pilgrimage at this most sacred of shrines. The Annamalai hill that stands tall behind it is also sacred,” he said, bowing his head with reverence in its direction. “Legend has it that once, engaged in playful solitude atop Mount Kailash, Goddess Parvati placed her hands upon the eyes of her husband, Shiva, plunging the entire world into pitch darkness. Incensed at her childish act, Lord Shiva banished her to do penance on earth, and it was here to Tiruvannamalai that the contrite Parvati came to atone for her mistake. When her repentance was complete, Lord Shiva himself appeared at the summit of Annamalai hill in the form of a big flame of fire to mark the end of Parvati’s penance.”

Having concluded his story, the monk rose to his feet.

“It is time now for the evening prayers. I will leave you two to rest for you have undertaken a long and tiring journey.”

As soon as he was out of earshot, Mardana jeered, “If gods and goddesses too must perform penance and suffer, what hope is left for mere mortals like us?”

“Even the gods must drink their cups of sorrow, Mardana. Play your rebab and let us muse upon the ways of this sorrowful world,” and with these words the Guru began to sing.

Indra cried in shame for the disgrace he had incurred,

*Parshuram too returned home in tears,
 Ajai cried eating manure he had as charity conferred,
 In the Lord's court each one for retribution appears,
 Rama wept for he was banished to the forest in exile,
 Sita and Lakshman too from him stood separated,
 The ten-headed Ravan who carried her off in pomp cried
 at the loss of Lanka his isle,
 The Pandavs wept for distanced from their Lord, to live
 as servants they were fated,
 Janmeyjay wept for he had lost his way,
 To atone for a single fault, he was cast away in disdain,
 Sheikhs, peers, and spiritual teachers too weep away,
 In the last moments of salvation they suffer again,
 Kings cry with their ears pierced wide,
 Begging bowl in hand from door to door they wander,
 The miser weeps for in the face of death he must put his
 wealth aside,
 Pandits and scholars cry as on knowledge now forgotten
 they ponder,
 The young woman weeps for a husband she cannot find,
 O Nanak, the entire world towards misery is inclined.²⁷*

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²⁷ SGGS, pg. 953, Sahansar daan indar ro-aa-i-aa...

Guru Nanak Meets a King in Lanka

The Guru's next halt was at Tiruchirappalli, which was also the site of the Vaishnavite temple of Srirangam, situated on the banks of the river Kaveri. This place had once been the centre for the Bhakti movement which was popularized by the Vaishnava Alvars or saint poets for whom the worship of God was synonymous with the singing of devotional songs.

These religious centres, which were the heart and source of theological beliefs and doctrines in the land, gave Guru Nanak an opportunity to indulge in metaphysical debates with holy men and sages who were the vessels through which religion and faith was conveyed to the masses. People came to visit these pilgrimage sites from all corners, and it was here that the seeds of religious consciousness were sown in their minds. It was here Guru Nanak chose to propagate his unique philosophy that refuted hollow rituals and traditions, denounced superstition and hierarchy of castes, advocated the worship of one God and proclaimed His universalism.

A boat carried Guru Nanak and Mardana via the river Kaveri to the port of Nagapattinam. From here, they embarked on a ship that was to carry them over the sea to the eastern coast of Sri Lanka where they disembarked at Mattakalappu.

The king of this region ruled over a small kingdom. He was a just, intelligent ruler and his kingdom prospered under his rule. He enjoyed the love of his subjects and beside him on the throne sat a beautiful and loving queen. Nonetheless, he had been distraught for years over his childless state. Accompanied by his queen, he had paid homage at innumerable places of pilgrimage and made offerings to every sage or sadhu who visited his kingdom. Many years had passed thus, but his prayers for a child had not been answered.

One day, he heard of a holy sage who had come from the far north. The king, to test his character, sent him a dozen of the most beautiful maidens in his palace, bearing rich gifts. When he was told that the sage had not spared these maidens a single glance, he decided to visit the holy man himself.

Donning the robes of commoners, the king and queen went to the place where Guru Nanak and Mardana were singing hymns before a small audience of village folks.

*If I lived in a palace of pearls, studded with jewels of
every kind,
Perfumed with musk, saffron and sandalwood,
utterly pleasing to the mind,
My heart might then forget You, distracted by such show,
Burnt and seared without You shall I be,
and my soul plunged in woe.²⁸*

The hymn was concluded and those who sat listening now arose and walked up to Guru Nanak to receive his

²⁸ SGGS, pg. 14, Moti ta mandar oosreh ratnee ta hoee jarhaa-o...

blessings. When all had dispersed, King Shivrabh and his queen approached the Guru.

“I, who stand before you, O sage, am the most unfortunate of men. For years, I have longed to taste the joys of fatherhood, but God refuses to answer my fervent prayers. If I were to sire a son with your blessings, my happiness would be equivalent to the happiness of a king who has conquered the entire world.”

“To conquer one’s own mind, O King, is more difficult than conquering the whole world,” replied Guru Nanak. King Shivrabh was startled to see that this sage had not been deceived by his disguise. He bowed before Guru Nanak in reverence.

“Real happiness lies in being content with the will of God who is also the one and only true, eternal king. All things living exist in accordance with His will, and none are above it. One who understands this will truly be content. As king, you are like a father to all your subjects. Rule over them like a father figure with justice and love. Countless mighty kings and warriors has the world seen, but now not a trace remains of one.”

The king listened to the Guru’s enlightening words and his heart grew content. Guru Nanak and Mardana stayed in Sri Lanka for a period of two years, travelling along the coast, and visited many villages and towns before veering north.



Guru Nanak Visits Ujjain and Mathura

Guru Nanak now turned homewards. Crossing the Nilgiri hills in the Malabar region, they travelled through Bidar, Nanded, and Devgiri, which was situated on the Narmada River. Then, crossing the Girnar hills near Junagarh they reached the ancient city of Ujjain, which was situated on the banks of the river Kshipra and whose splendours had been eulogized by the greatest poets of the land. A massive fortification wall had been built around the city in recent times to safeguard against invasions.

The city was centred around the temple of Mahakaleshwar dedicated to Lord Shiva. It was also famous for the caves of Raja Bhartrihari who had once been king of Ujjain before the infidelity of his wife and queen had driven him to renounce his title and riches to lead the life of a hermit. He had meditated for twelve long years in the seclusion of these caves. Guru Nanak stayed near these caves, engaging in spiritual discussions with various sects of yogis who dwelt there, singing to them of the right conduct for a yogi and the road to salvation.

Leaving the ancient lanes and sadhus of Ujjain behind, they made their way towards Mathura, a city that finds mention in the epic of Ramayana. It was earlier called Madhuvan and was covered with dense forests. It

was revered as the birthplace of Lord Krishna, and its famous temples were important places of pilgrimage. Being conveniently situated between Agra and Delhi, the city was a major centre for commerce, but this fact allured foreign invaders to attack and plunder it repeatedly. Its temples had been looted and vandalized by Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century. When Guru Nanak and Mardana arrived in Mathura they bore witness to the aftermath of another such vandalism, this time at the hands of the ruling emperor in Delhi, Sikander Lodhi. In helplessness and despair, the people of Mathura saw their temples being raised to the ground and their idols desecrated.

Guru Nanak and Mardana left behind the solemn atmosphere of Mathura and headed towards Delhi, sojourning on the outskirts of the capital under a little oasis of trees that grew along an ancient trade route that had been built hundreds of years ago in the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. This garden, with an old well that had been built by some benevolent ruler in the past, served as a *sarai* or resting place. All manners of travellers, traders, pilgrims, and wandering ascetics stopped here to enjoy a much-needed respite from the day's heat and quench their thirst. The fakirs who were returning from Delhi had nothing but praises for the emperor who was known to be a devout Muslim and donated large sums in charity to the mendicants and poor of his capital regularly.

“Have you been to the citadel of Sikandar Lodhi?” asked one such fakir of Guru Nanak and Mardana. “He is

as pious and devout as he is generous. As long as he lives and rules, not a soul is likely to sleep hungry in his capital.” Guru Nanak replied,

“O fakir, what good is charity in a man blinded by prejudice? His charitable deeds are like a feeble wall of mud that will one day crumble and be destroyed under the force of his heartless actions.”

“Why do you say that?”

“We have seen the destruction wrought by his bigotry in Mathura,” replied Mardana.

“But surely he must be forgiven such trespasses for he is also a benevolent king who chooses to rule with an iron hand,” asked the fakir.

“Play the rebab Mardana, for the fakir must have his answer,” and the Guru began to sing.

*With a thousand measures of gold and silver,
be he king over a thousand kings,
A thousand armies, bands, and spearmen, and if by his
side the sound of a thousand horse hooves rings,
He too must cross this endless world ocean of fires
bright,
The lament of grieving souls pierces the air,
for the shore across is out of sight,
And only there, O Nanak, on the shore that lies afar,
Will it be judged whether a man is sultan or tsar.²⁹*

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²⁹ SGGS, pg. 1287, Lakh man su-inaa lakh man rupaa...

Brother And Sister Are Reunited

Twelve long years had passed since Guru Nanak had left on his travels. Nanki had waited long and patiently for her dear brother's return. Sri Chand, whom she had raised with love and devotion, was now grown into a young man who was intelligent, wise, and spiritually inclined like his father. The white, powdery dust of passing years had settled on her hair, and her face was marked with lines etched upon it with time's benevolent hand. Jai Ram too had aged. He had showered as much love and care upon Sri Chand as he would have bestowed upon any child of his own. He had also diligently attended to the needs of Mardana's family, and they had wanted for nothing.

As the years passed, thoughts of Guru Nanak were always hovering in his mind. He had wondered where he was or if he would ever return. Year after year had passed without any news of his brother-in-law, but he kept all anxieties to himself for he was loath to worry Nanki. They talked about him constantly, however, so much so that Sri Chand, who remembered nothing of his father from his own childhood, had come to love him deeply.

Nanki had been agitated since the morning. She was awakened by a strange dream, and it had caused her mind to become anxious and restless. She went about her

daily tasks of churning butter and preparing the morning meal with an absent mindedness that Jai Ram had not failed to notice. As evening approached, she grew more restive and walked to the door that led into the street, concealing her face with the ends of her headscarf. She glanced around in both directions, her eyes surveying the crowd of people returning to their homes after another day's work was done.

As she turned around, she heard someone call out her name.

“Bebe!”

The sound of that voice drove away her anxiety and the long pensive years of separation, discarding their memory in the blink of an eye. She turned quickly in its direction to see a very thin figure dressed in an old, worn, and faded garment walking towards her. The shoes on his feet were long gone; his skin was dark and sunburnt. He was altered beyond recognition, but she knew that voice well and could have recognized those eyes amongst a thousand others, eyes that looked at her now like two suns illuminating her world with their radiance.



Guru Nanak Returns to Talwandi

Nanki fussed over her brother like a mother hen. Each day at dawn and dusk, her courtyard filled with the sounds of Guru Nanak's hymns as she busied herself in the kitchen preparing simple yet delicious meals for all who came to hear him. She would sit before her kitchen fire humming in tune with him as she stirred a cauldron or rolled dough. Her eyes continuously wandered in his direction, and her heart filled with pride, joy, and immeasurable love at the sight of him. She remembered carrying him around as a baby, not letting him out of her sight until he was old enough to be sent away to school. How she had cried in her mother's arms after she had returned home without him on his first day at school!

When the hymns were concluded the meals, she prepared were served to all who came. Daulat Khan Lodhi, who had since been appointed Governor of Punjab by the administration in Delhi, was also in Sultanpur Lodhi and came to pay his old employee a visit. He sat in the congregation to listen to the hymns and later shared the common meal, to the astonishment of the townspeople who sat beside him.

After a short respite in Sultanpur Lodhi, Guru Nanak travelled towards Rai Bhoj's Talwandi. His parents, who had given up all hope of his return, were overjoyed. Sulakhni, too, was happy to see him even though she

knew instinctively that he had not come to stay for long. Mardana was reunited with his family and relieved to learn that they had done well in his absence owing to Jai Ram's generosity and care. He was gratified to see that the musical legacy of his ancestors was being carried forward by his sons. He stayed with his family but returned to Guru Nanak's side every day at dawn and dusk to play his rebab as the Guru preached the message of love and compassion towards all of humanity and devotion to the remembrance of God.

Lakhmi Das went with his mother to attend his father's congregation every day and amid those who came also sat Rai Bular, now frail and ailing with age but the joy of seeing his beloved Nanak again had given his weak feet new courage. He fixed his eyes on Guru Nanak's face, his heart overflowing with love and devotion.

Mehta Kalu's reproof of the course his son's life had taken did not abate with time, and he refused to be part of the congregation. Guru Nanak was also on the receiving end of jibes and insults from many of his Bedi relatives who sympathized with his father. Nanak had given him nothing but trouble, they said, and now having renounced his family and lands had completed his father's misery. Guru Nanak on one occasion gave expression to the disapproval of his kin in Raga Prabhati and wrote,

*When I am quiet, they say I have no knowledge,
When I speak, I talk too much they say,*

*When I sit, they say an unwelcome guest has come to
stay,
When I depart, I have deserted my family and run away,
When I bow, they say it is of fear that I pray,
Nothing can I do that in peace I may spend my time,
Preserve Thy servant's honour now and hereafter, O
Lord sublime.*³⁰

They disapproved too, of Sulakhni's encouragement to her husband's way of life, but she understood now, as she sat listening to this man she had married when they were both little more than children, that he was not just her husband or the father of her sons, or even Nanki's brother and Mehta Kalu's son. She saw him as a mighty river of wisdom and divine light that flows its course through mountains, forests, plains and deserts towards its destiny and nothing has the power to stall it, for it flows unattached and unhindered from ties of love to a single person or place, and must share its life-giving waters equally.

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The sleeping village of Talwandi was bathed in silver moonlight as Guru Nanak walked towards Mardana's house through the lanes of his childhood. He tapped on the door gently and it was opened by Mardana himself, who, by now habituated to sleep under the stars, was laying on a cot in the yard, his rebab beside him as always.

³⁰ Khushwant Singh, A History of the Sikhs, Volume I.

“Well, a promise is a promise,” he smiled, seeing his old friend standing at the door, knowing instinctively why he had come. As they stood looking at each other, the moonlight turning the white of their hair to silver and reflecting in their eyes that shone like lamps in the darkness, they appeared to be two spirits who had haplessly wandered into this transitory world of mortals.

Mardana returned for his rebab. He stood for a while, looking around the old yard, his eyes coming to rest under the tree where he had sat beside his father. Here, sitting under its shade, they had played and sang together, losing themselves completely in music and abandoning the cares and privations of their lives. Then he turned to follow Guru Nanak into the street, and in each other’s company, they walked towards the dawn of another day.

The Story of Duni Chand and The Needle

The city of Lahore lay on the eastern banks of the river Ravi. It was an ancient city that had endured the brunt of repeated invasions through centuries, serving as a capital of many mighty empires. Guru Nanak and Mardana camped by the river's waters at a convenient distance from the city walls. As the days passed, they were joined by a small gathering of city folks who came to listen to his hymns and word quickly spread of a holy man who was camped outside the city. It was hard to ascertain from his attire whether he was Hindu or Muslim, but he sang beautiful, divine hymns in the language of the people and his discourses were enlightening and inspiring.

Now, there lived in Lahore a man called Duni Chand. He was a revenue collector under the current regime and had managed to amass considerable wealth and of this he was exceedingly proud. He lived with his family in a grandiose haveli in the heart of the city. It was a magnificent residence that had been built by his wealthy ancestors, but he had spent a fortune on improvements, until it resembled, not a rich man's residence, but a small palace fit for a sultan. On the parapet surrounding its massive wooden gates adorned and studded with carved silver, fluttered seven colourful flags. Each one of these symbolized one lac rupees, denoting the total wealth that the man living within had accumulated. Duni Chand

lived to work and worked to become rich, and nothing gave him more pleasure than seeing his wealth increase. His sole purpose in life was to add to the flags atop his haveli, proclaiming to the world that he had achieved another milestone.

Besides his obsession for amassing wealth, he was also a pious man. He regularly fed Brahmins, went on pilgrimages and the doors of his haveli were always open to receive holy men. When he heard of Guru Nanak, he took his wife with him to pay the Guru a visit.

The people gathered around Guru Nanak one evening turned their heads on hearing the tinkling of bells and saw a carriage approaching, drawn by fine horses that must have cost their owner a fortune. Their gilded bridles glistened in the evening light. The carriage came to a halt and out stepped a man clad from head to toe in the finest silks followed by a woman who was bedecked in jewellery like a bride on her wedding day. Guru Nanak was lost in the ecstasy of divine love and music, oblivious to the interruption. When the hymn was concluded and the others took their leave, the man approached the Guru and said,

“O holy one, I am Duni Chand. I have been blessed to hear your words for they are sweeter than honey. Shame upon me that you must stay here without a roof to cover your saintly head, while my haveli, which is big enough to house all of Lahore, should be bereft of your presence. I must insist that you come back and be my guest for as long as it pleases you.”

Guru Nanak smiled.

“It is indeed generous of you, Duni Chand, to extend your hospitality towards us. But my brother and I are used to living like this and prefer the roof that God has provided over the heads of man and beast. Why must you inconvenience yourself for us?”

“Inconvenience, you say? Why, there is a whole army of servants at my haveli to answer to my smallest whim, and they will surely see to your comfort.”

Duni Chand succeeded in persuading Guru Nanak to be his guest for the next few days and escorted them back to his haveli. He gave them a tour of its large premises, flaunting the priceless possessions he had collected over the years. The haveli was full of countless treasures that only money could buy. Rich Persian carpets covered the floors everywhere, the walls were decorated in gilded mirrors and tall, intricately carved silver and gold floor chandeliers stood like sentinels in every corner. The walls and ceilings were covered in beautiful murals and frescoes depicting mythological stories interspersed with flowers and birds. Servants stood in every corner of the vast establishment, waiting for a lift of their master’s finger. The party came out into one of the many courtyards in the forefront of the house from where the flags could easily be seen fluttering in a mild evening breeze.

“What purpose do those flags serve, Duni Chand?” asked Guru Nanak.

The revenue collector smiled proudly.

“They stand for the wealth I have accumulated over the years with my hard work and the blessings of God and saints like yourself. Each of these signifies one lac rupees that I have in my possession. But I shall not be content until I have ten of these flying over my gates.”

When the day ended, Guru and Mardana were served a lavish meal before they retired for the night. In the quarter that had been assigned to them, they now sat by an open casement looking into the night. The air was heavy with the fragrance of night-blooming jasmine that grew in profusion in the courtyard outside.

“Nanak,” spoke Mardana, breaking the silence. “In all our years of travelling we have encountered hundreds of poor souls who barely manage to earn one decent meal a day for themselves and their family, while here is this man who doubtless has chests of gold hidden away somewhere in this palatial house, lives like a king, and still wants more. How strange are the ways of this world.”

“The glint of gold blinds the fool and wise man alike, Mardana. Man lives in a dream world, imagining himself to be immortal, never acknowledging that all the materialistic objects he has been running after his entire life shall be taken away from him by death’s swift hand and disappear like the golden Lanka of Ravana. All that will remain are his deeds, the fruits of which alone shall go with him into the next world.”



Guru Nanak and Mardana remained in Lahore as Duni Chand's guests for a few days, before resuming their journey. Their host had offered them his carriage as conveyance, but the Guru refused and Duni Chand accompanied them to the edge of the city on foot. When they had left behind the last house, Guru Nanak stopped.

"Duni Chand, this is where we part, but I must ask you for a favour," and he held out a tiny needle in the palm of his hand. "Keep this needle in your safekeeping until the time when we shall meet again, for then I must have it back."

"It looks quite ordinary to me, O holy one, and I cannot help wondering why this needle is so special."

"This is no ordinary needle, Duni Chand," replied Guru Nanak. "It conceals a mystery in its insignificant self that only a few can decipher."

"Then I shall care for it like my own wealth."

Duni Chand walked home, elated that he had been entrusted with such an important responsibility.

"Take this needle and keep it in the safe with the utmost care," he instructed his wife upon reaching home. "It is no ordinary needle, mind you, and I must return it to the Guru when the time comes. I have promised to look after it until then."

"You made a promise to a holy man? What if you cannot fulfil it?" exclaimed his wife. "A debt to sadhus and sages, if not fulfilled as it should be, cannot be compensated for even with all the money you have

accumulated. If it is this needle you have been asked to return, then this needle alone is what it must be. What if something were to happen to you, God forbid? You would be burdened with the debt of your promise for eternity. No one lives forever. You cannot carry a needle with you after death to return it in another life!”

Duni Chand looked perturbed.

“You must not waste any more time now. Find the Guru and return the needle at once,” she admonished him.



Duni Chand had been walking all day in the direction Guru Nanak and Mardana had pursued. For a man who had never gone beyond the gates of his haveli excepting in a carriage upholstered especially for the comfort of its owner, the journey on foot was exhausting beyond all measure. He stopped several times for water or to ask travellers coming from the opposite direction whether they had seen a sadhu who matched Guru Nanak’s description accompanied by a Muslim companion carrying a rebab. On and on he walked, the heat causing sweat to run down the sides of his face and trickle down his back. He discarded his silk jacket under which he wore a thin shirt of the finest muslin, which was now quite damp, and left it on the roadside. His shoes seemed to bite into his feet and he discarded them too, leaving them to be discovered by some fortunate traveller, for

they were embroidered with gold filigree work, interlaced with pearls and were very valuable.

The discomforts of the road, the intense heat and acute hunger gnawing at his stomach were nothing compared to the tempest raging in his heart. His wife's words resonated in his mind continuously, seeming to echo back from the deepest recesses of his soul.

“No one lives forever. It is not like you can carry a needle with you after death.”

Reflections of his past life flashed before his eyes. His father, too, had been a revenue collector before him but was a man of a benevolent and generous nature, inclined to be easily moved by the plight of helpless defaulters. He was known to pay off the debts of many poor debtors from his own pockets and save them from a grim fate. The family fortune, accumulated over the years by their ancestors was gradually drained by his generosity, and the haveli fell into disrepair over the years. But he had died as untroubled as he had lived, leaving behind a son who had nothing to his name besides a rundown haveli and the empty title of revenue collector that now passed down to him.

Duni Chand had vowed to bring back the haveli to its former glory and fill its coffers again to atone for the mistakes of his father and make his ancestors proud. The people soon realised that the son was nothing like his father and came to be known as ruthlessly extracting. Many families who had depended on his father's magnanimity in the past now faced eviction and those

who stayed or replaced them knew they would have to pay up every penny of what was owed by them.

Duni Chand had hardened himself over the years to ignore the pleadings of a man who could not repay a debt because he had just married off a daughter, or had a bad harvest due to lack of rains, or lost his cattle to a disease. Now, as he traced Guru Nanak's footsteps, he realized he had little to be proud of, for the wealth he had amassed over the years was like a ladder whose every rung had been the back of one helpless man after another, and he had trampled over them thoughtlessly to add another flag upon the gates of his mansion.

The realisation dawned on him slowly but surely that if he were to die now, neither the splendours of his haveli with its flags nor even the smallest coin from its coffers could he take with him. His greed for more wealth had deprived him of sight and he was now like a blind man groping his way through a dark, twisted labyrinth of despair searching desperately for an infinitesimal ray of hope.

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On the edge of a small village, a day's journey north-east from Lahore was a little pond surrounded by a cluster of trees, with a rectangular raised platform built beneath them by the villagers where they sat while their cattle grazed in the surrounding pastures, or lazed in the shallow waters of a nearby pond to find relief from the summer's heat. The ground around it had been cleared and hardened with use. On this platform now sat Guru

Nanak with Mardana beside him. A group of villagers sat before them while little children played in the dust at a distance, and the older ones busied themselves goading some reluctant water buffaloes out of the water to lead them home.

Duni Chand, now with blisters on his feet that had begun to bleed, and clothes covered in dust raised by fellow travellers, recognized Guru Nanak from a distance and ran towards the small gathering. He fell on his feet beside the platform supporting himself on its edge and taking the needle carefully out of the folds of his clothing, held it out to him.

“I have never travelled with a heavier burden than this, O Guru,” he spoke in an impassioned voice, his eyes filling with tears.

Guru Nanak looked upon him with eyes full of benevolence and placed a hand on his weary shoulder.

“You can free yourself of this burden now if you wish, Duni Chand,” he replied, taking the needle from his hands and turning towards Mardana.

“Mardana, if every breath that goes in and out of our bodies is a single moment in time, how many such moments do you think you have before death's swift hand should take them all away?”

“Why Nanak, I can count on a few thousands more at least.”

“Duni Chand, how many do you think you have left?”

“O Guru, I have found you and repaid my debt. Even after all the agonies I went through thinking I would not find you and live past today if I did not, I sit beside you now, so surely, I can be spared a few more before my time comes.”

“Then you are fortunate men indeed,” said Guru Nanak, “As for me, I cannot even say for a certainty that I have time enough to expel the breath I draw in now. If we were all to live with an absolute realization of this eternal truth, how different our lives would be. Play the rebab, Mardana, for the Lord’s word has been revealed!” And closing his eyes, the Guru began to sing.

*With delusions of immortality man lives in comfort and
ease,
This world is but a stage and his act too shall cease,
Weighed down with avarice, greed, and deceit, he
carries his burden around,
O, I have seen many blown about like dust over the
ground,
Heed my advice, O friend, for life is a precious gift
indeed,
And all that abides with man is a virtuous and kindly
deed.³¹*

Duni Chand, for the first time, saw his father in a new light. Perhaps it was a result of his father’s charitable deeds that he now had a change of heart and vowed to reform his life. He returned home and ordered the flags to be brought down and burnt. In the months and years to come, he earned a reputation for magnanimity far exceeding that of his father, and his haveli became a

³¹ SGGS, pg. 154, Anmrith kaaeiaa rehah sukhaalee baajee eihu sansaaro...

beacon of hope and a source of help for those in need. The wealth of kindness, generosity, and compassion he accumulated now did not need any flags but was perceivable in the serenity of his visage and the light in his eyes.



The Story of Guru Nanak and The Leper

Leaving Lahore behind, Guru Nanak travelled towards Amritsar. The long summer day was waning, and there were no signs of any habitation nearby. They had been walking under cover of a shadowy grove along a narrow track that was used by villagers living nearby. As they came out of the shelter of trees into a clearing, they noticed a small, dilapidated hut at a short distance from them, partially hidden between the thick foliage.

“Perhaps we can find something to eat there,” suggested Mardana and they advanced towards it. As they neared it, a panic-stricken voice called from within,

“Stop! Pray do not come any closer. You must turn back for your own sake!”

Guru Nanak continued walking when the voice called again, this time with greater urgency.

“Please stop! I am a leper and an outcast. If you need a place to stay for the night, follow the path through the clearing and you shall find a village beyond those woods on the other side.”

“We are too tired to go any further,” replied Guru Nanak. “My brother and I are accustomed to sleeping under the sky. If you can only spare us some food, we shall not bother you again.”

“Did you not hear what I said?” asked the voice. “I am a leper! I have been shunned by the people of my village for my beastly disease. I have not come near another human since I was forced to leave the village many moons ago. Even the wild animals in these woods are frightened of me and take flight at the sight of me.”

“Well, your sickness is not of your making so why must you be punished and banished for it? You suffer enough from it already. Come out into the open, my friend, for my brother and I have no fear of your condition.”

The leper came out of his hut and into the light. His body was pitifully deformed, and puss oozed out of the many wounds on his arms and legs.

“Do you have any water in the hut?” asked Guru Nanak.

“No, but there is a stream on the other side of the track you used. I fetch water from it early each morning when there is no fear of encountering anyone walking by.”

Guru Nanak asked Mardana to fetch some water. When the latter returned, Guru Nanak soaked a piece of cloth in it and began to clean the leper’s wounds. The leper, too stupefied to react or protest, acquiesced to the Guru’s ministrations meekly. Later, they shared some stale bread that a kind villager occasionally left for him at a safe distance from the hut. Once they had eaten Guru Nanak said,

“You can retire for the night if you want. It is our custom to sing the praises of the Lord every evening.”

“You are my guest and have showered me with more kindness in a day than I can hope to receive in a lifetime. Please sleep in my hut. I shall be just as comfortable outside.”

Guru Nanak smiled and thanked the leper. As the sun coloured the sky vermillion and lost its blinding brilliance, the Guru sat beside Mardana to sing a hymn and the leper listened with rapt attention. As he listened, the pain and loneliness of his sorrowful existence began to ebb, and he cried as he had never cried before. This kind stranger had brought with him a flicker of hope, and the leper thanked God silently in his heart, for the realization dawned upon him that he was being watched over after all.

Guru Nanak and Mardana stayed with the leper over the next few days. They started and ended their day with the singing of devotional hymns, and the leper was their sole audience. Guru Nanak cleaned his wounds daily and his condition began to show signs of improvement. One day, the leper woke up to discover that he was completely cured, and the wounds on his limbs had now disappeared. He fell at the Guru's feet and after thanking him profusely, ran back to his village as fast as his legs, still a trifle wobbly from the prolonged illness, could carry him. He told the villagers about Guru Nanak and how he had been cured by him. The villagers, listening to the leper, were eager to meet the Guru and followed him back to his hut.

That evening, the whole village was gathered around
Guru Nanak as he sang to please his Lord.

*Suffering leads to joy and joy causes suffering for in
joy we are inclined to forget You, O Lord,
You alone are the Creator and I can do naught on my
own accord,
I am ever a sacrifice to You, who creates and
becomes one with His creation,
None can gauge Your fathomless limitation,
Your light shines in your creation and Your creation
manifests through Your all-pervading light,
You are my master true and those who sing Your
praises shall cross this world ocean to escape their
plight.³²*

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³² SGGS, pg. 1028, Dukh daaroo sukh rog bhaiyaa...

Guru Nanak's Discourse with The Siddhas

Guru Nanak and Mardana reached the sacred Mansarovar lake and Mount Kailash after months of travelling over mountains, valleys and snow covered passes following ancient routes used by pilgrims for centuries. The crystal blue waters of Mansarovar Lake were surrounded by grasslands adorned in profusion with colourful summer blooms. To the north of this sacred pool arose the imposing rock face of Mount Kailash encircled by six other smaller ranges.

This mountain and the lake were sacred not only for Hindus but also in the Jain, Buddhist, and Bon traditions. For the Jains, this was the site where their first spiritual teacher, Rishabhadeva attained salvation. For the Hindus and Buddhists, Mount Kailash was considered the legendary Mount Sumeru, the spiritual and physical centre of the entire universe. Sadhus, sages, mystics, and spiritual masters made the gruelling trek across inordinately challenging mountainous terrains to meditate beside the waters of the lake, or to circumambulate around Mount Kailash in pursuit of divine knowledge to wash away sins of past and present lives and attain *moksha* or eternal liberation.

Guru Nanak met many *siddhas* who lived in the vicinity of these mountains. They were no ordinary sadhus for they had mastered yogic practices to subdue

the course of nature and stall ageing. Many of them had reached the age of hundred without a single white hair on their heads.

Unlike their reception by the Nath yogis years ago, these *siddhas* displayed much curiosity upon meeting Guru Nanak and Mardana. Pilgrims were exceptionally rare, for the arduous journey that lasted many months over one of the roughest terrains in the world required utmost determination and an iron resolve to accomplish. They congratulated Guru Nanak on undertaking it.

“Who are you? Where do you come from? What do you hope to achieve? What path do you follow?”³³ they asked.

“I am Nanak. I have come under the Lord’s command and shall go where He pleases to take me, for I live in submission to His will. The path I follow is one of knowledge and self-realization that leads to the Lord who is the sublime truth.”

“Is it possible you have gained this knowledge of the divine at an unripe age, while we, who have meditated for longer than a lifetime, are bereft of His favour?” they asked. “Tell us then, how can one cross this turbulent world ocean to reach the other shore where salvation awaits? Is it possible to live in the world and still be unaffected by its struggles and strife?”

“Like a lotus that blooms in murky, unclean water without losing its beauty, so must one live in this world.

³³ SGGS, pg. 938; The dialogue that ensues is along the lines of the opening lines of Guru Nanak’s bani, the *Siddha Gosh*t.

A waterfowl treads on the water without getting its feet wet, and so must one pass through this world. By keeping one's conscience focused on the Lord who is the treasure trove of all qualities and still beyond them, one can achieve solitude amid a crowd or be surrounded by desires yet live free from them," Guru Nanak replied.

"We have seen enough of the world beyond these mountains. The body is inclined to wallow in vice. Why return to it and wage a losing battle? Stay with us so we can endeavour to help each other onwards on our journey," they tried to persuade him.

"The plight of the world beyond these mountains is hopelessly steeped in vice, falsehood, and superstition. It smoulders in the fires of greed, anger, hatred, lust, and ego; but those like yourselves who have learnt to douse these flames have retreated to the solitude of mountains and forests, leaving the world to burn. You, who have glimpsed the path of truth, have a moral obligation to lead others who live in ignorance. What good is true knowledge if it is guarded with selfishness and indifference?" asked Guru Nanak.



Guru Nanak Meets Wali Qandhari

After this discourse with the *siddhas*, Guru Nanak and Mardana travelled towards Amarnath, crossing the regions of Ladakh, Leh, Isakardu and Kargil. They reached Hasan Abdal near Attock. In Hasan Abdal was a hillock which was the abode of a Muslim holy man called Wali Qandhari.

Now, Wali Qandhari was a recluse who lived a life of solitude and was known by the locals to have a raging temper. The shepherds and ordinary people avoided this hill for fear of incurring the wrath of this eccentric holy man.

Guru Nanak and Mardana halted at the base of this hill by the side of a small stream that flowed down it, originating somewhere on the hilltop where Wali Qandhari sat in meditation.

Mardana had gone to the nearest village and soon returned with some bread and fresh milk. They ate their meagre meal, drank from the clear waters of the spring, and sat down to their evening ritual of hymn-singing. The sun had begun its slow descent beyond a line of the furthest trees, and the countryside interspersed with fields of cultivated land and woodland rolled before them towards the distant horizon.

Wali Qandhari had been sitting in spiritual reverie for many days now, oblivious to hunger or thirst. He cherished the silence that surrounded him at all times and

had scared many a hapless shepherd who sauntered too close to the hill with threats of magical curses, and the word soon spread that there lived on the hill a mad, yet powerful fakir, who could turn anyone who dared wander near his dwelling into a sheep or donkey with a single glance.

The sounds of singing disturbed his meditation now and he flew into an instant rage. He went and stood at the edge of the hill beside a few boulders to see two men sitting below, one playing an instrument and the other singing.

“I will teach you to go serenading wherever you please,” he thundered, towering against the evening sky, for he was a man of enormous build.

As Guru Nanak and Mardana raised their heads, he pushed a huge boulder with both hands, which would have taken half a dozen men to move, and sent it rolling down in their direction.

“Watch out, Nanak!” Mardana exclaimed, trying to pull him out of harm’s way, but Guru Nanak stood his ground. Wali Qandhari laughed at the stranger’s foolishness only to see that the massive rock that had spun down ominously suddenly changed direction and rolled a bare hair’s length from him. He realized that this was no ordinary man and descended the hill to stand before Guru Nanak.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am but a humble servant of God,” replied Guru Nanak.

“Who do you worship?”

“I worship the One who created this vast earth and canopied it with a blue sky. I worship the One who created the sun and moon, and separated night from day.”

“But you must belong to a certain sect or religion,” Wali Qandhari persisted. “I adhere to the faith of the Prophet and am a true Muslim. What is your faith?”

Without answering Guru Nanak gestured towards Mardana and the latter sat down with his rebab and began to play. As the Guru sang, Wali Qandhari listened intently and the truth of the Guru’s words permeated his mind and he was enlightened.

*If you would be a Muslim true,
Let your life these rules pursue,
Make your mosque the abode of kindness,
In it spread the prayer mat of faith,
And as you read the Koran, think of
what is just and what is lawful,
Let modesty be your circumcision - your pledge to God,
Gentle acts the fast of Ramadan,
Thus will you be a good Mussalman,
Let righteous conduct be your Kaaba,
And truth your spiritual guide,
Let deeds of piety and prayer be your creed,
And what is pleasing to the Lord your rosary of beads,
Says Nanak, the Lord will then preserve your honour.³⁴*

³⁴ Khushwant Singh, Hymns of Guru Nanak, pg. 49

Days later, a lone shepherd approached the dreaded mound in search of a truant lamb and its mother. As he neared the stream where Guru Nanak and Mardana had camped, he saw to his astonishment that Wali Qandhari sat beside it now, fondling the lamb while its mother grazed on some grass nearby. He looked up as the shepherd appeared and smiled amiably. This was no raging or mad fakir that he had so often heard of, the shepherd thought to himself. He gathered his charge and went back to the village to relate his encounter to the villagers.

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A Penny's Worth of Truth, A Penny's Worth of Falsehood

Guru Nanak and Mardana left Hasan Abdal for Sialkot, crossing the rivers Jhelum and Chenab. Sakla or Salkot, as it was once called, Sialkot was an ancient town that had in the past served as the capital of the entire Punjab. It had also been captured by Alexander the Great who razed it to the ground as a warning against resistance by neighbouring towns. When Mahmud of Ghazni conquered the then capital city, Lahore, the new capital of the Hindu Shahi empire that had reigned over the region before him was moved to Sialkot. Following repeated conquests and a change of hands, Sialkot finally succumbed to the Lodhi dynasty only to be captured once again by a warlord from Kashmir.

Guru Nanak and Mardana arrived in the city and found a comfortable spot under a *ber* or jujube tree on its outskirts. Mardana went in search of food and when he returned, he was accompanied by a few locals. They genuflected before Guru Nanak, looking grave and distressed.

“O holy one,” spoke the oldest amongst them, “Our city and its people live under the shadows of a grave curse, and this compels us to turn towards the faintest ray of hope. Perhaps God has sent you as an answer to our most fervent prayers.”

“What is the cause of your distress?” asked Guru Nanak.

“We mourn the fate that awaits us, our women, and children. There is a great and powerful sage who has been living in this town for many years now. His name is Hamza Gauz. The people of this city have always gone to him with their troubles and his prayers on their behalf have rarely been unanswered, for he is truly blessed with divine grace and is the possessor of occult powers. He is a man of few words but whatever he says inevitably comes to pass.”

The old man paused and heaved a deep sigh before he continued, “There is a Hindu Khatri who lives in Sialkot whose wife could not bear a child for many long years. The Khatri went to Pir Hamza Gauz in desperation and promised to give his first born to him should he be blessed with fatherhood with the Pir’s blessings. The Pir prayed on the Khatri’s behalf and the latter was granted his wish and his wife bore a son. But after the child was born the mother would not hear of parting with her son, despite her husband’s pleadings. The Khatri went to the Pir and offered to pay him any amount in gold and silver in lieu of his child. The Pir flew into a rage, cursing the entire city, and has locked himself in his chambers to fast and pray for forty days at the end of which he has declared that the entire town and its people shall be wiped out.”

“Can you take me to his dwelling?” asked Guru Nanak.

The people led him through the streets to the other side of town. A few hundred yards from the last house stood a simple hut made of clay and wood, covered with a thatched roof. An unimposing fence of upright wooden poles that had been dug deep in the ground encircled it and had a small aperture that served as a gate, on both sides of which grew two bushes laden with roses, their fragrance greeting all passersby. Guru Nanak and Mardana sat by the fence near the roses. The townsfolk who had escorted them kept their distance out of fear. Guru Nanak gestured to them to return to their homes and they did so willingly, praying in their hearts that this newcomer would succeed in saving them from their terrible fate.

“Mardana, play the rebab. We must have a word with this Pir and save these innocent townspeople from further agony.”

“What if he should put a curse on us instead?” asked Mardana. “If he is indeed as angry as they say he is, is it wise to fan his rage?”

“Perhaps the Pir needs to be rescued as much as these people. He must be freed from the clutches of his rage for it has wasted many a good man before him,” Guru Nanak smiled and began to sing.

*You may anoint a cur with sandalwood,
but still a cur it stays,
You may read scriptures to a deaf man,
he will not learn a single phrase,*

*You may light fifty lamps before a blind man,
but still he cannot see,
You may place heaps of gold before cattle,
but to the grass they flee,
You may melt iron all you like with flux,
but the softness of cotton it cannot gain,
This is the nature of a fool, O Nanak,
for all he speaks is in vain.³⁵*

“What is the meaning of this song?” came an angry voice from the hut and out stepped a tall, thin faqir with a scowl on his face, dressed in a coarse, black woollen garment worn by Sufis.

“Haven’t you been warned to keep away from my dwelling by these wretched, lying townsfolk?” he asked Guru Nanak. “I have been confining myself for forty days to invoke God’s wrath on this city, but you have disrupted my prayers. I shall let nothing stand in my way. I will continue my supplications until I have been avenged. Leave now!”

“Must you punish the entire town for one man’s fault? And do you believe God to be as unforgiving as you are, that he should answer your prayers? For if that were the case, the world would have been destroyed by Him long ago.” Guru Nanak spoke in a calm manner looking the fakir in the eye.

³⁵ SGGS, pg. Kutay chandan laa-ee-ai bhee so kutee dhaat...

“You do not know these townfolk as I do, stranger. They are all nothing but a bunch of lying, deceitful and ungrateful souls,” the fakir replied.

“I do not agree with you. Surely there must be one good man amongst them, and if the city was to be annihilated on account of your supplications, then the blood of that man would be on your hands and cause you to lose favour with God for the grave sin.”

“That cannot be true,” sulked Hamza Gauz.

“Let us put it to the test, then,” said Guru Nanak. “If by the end of this day we cannot find a single honest and good man in this city who knows truth from falsehood, you can go back to your confinement and continue your entreaties to God. If, however, we can find even one such man, you will forgive the Khatri you think has wronged you and rid these people of their fear and misery.”

The fakir thought awhile before replying,

“I agree, but you have only till the end of this day.”

Guru Nanak asked for a quill, paper and two pennies. The fakir went into his hut and came out with the things. Guru Nanak wrote something down on the paper and handed it with the money to Mardana.

“Mardana, go to the market and purchase what is on the list. Make haste for we have only what is left of the day to save these people!”

Mardana walked away briskly towards the busy market street they had passed earlier in the day. He

walked to the first shop and handed over the piece of paper. The shopkeeper growled at him angrily.

“I would have laughed at your joke, stranger, if you had come at a better time than this. Stop this tomfoolery and be on your way,” the shopkeeper chided.

Mardana looked at the shopkeeper in surprise and then for the first time at the words written on the paper he held in his hand. He could not read himself, but whatever Guru Nanak had written on that paper had displeased this shopkeeper. He resolved to be more cautious next time. He walked over to the next shop and held out the paper to a heavy man who sat cross legged behind a small, low wooden desk.

“Kind Sir, would you be so obliging as to read what is written on this paper? I have been asked to obtain these items for a particularly important matter.”

The shopkeeper took the paper and read aloud,

“A penny’s worth of truth, and a penny’s worth of falsehood.”

“Would you happen to have these?” asked Mardana innocently.

“Have you lost your mind? Go away at once!”

Mardana stepped back into the middle of the street and began to think. His friend Nanak, he reasoned, was not one to indulge in idle talk and senseless acts. If he had asked for a penny’s worth of truth and falsehood, he must have a good reason for it. A man as bright and astute as Guru Nanak was very easily misunderstood, he

thought to himself. He had decided to help his friend help these townsfolk, even though they did not appear to deserve it. He spent the next few hours going from shop to shop only to be turned away with a snub or word of abuse. One shopkeeper even came after him with a stick, and Mardana sidestepped just in time to dodge the blow. There was only one shop left at the far end of the street now, and judging by its size, it looked quite unpromising.

An ordinary looking man sat in its front and piled up behind him were bales of cotton. He had to give this last shop a try for what it was worth, and so, approaching the shopkeeper, Mardana offered the piece of paper to him. The shopkeeper looked at the paper and smiled. He took a quill and turned the paper around to write something on it before handing it back to Mardana.

“Here, I have written here what the paper asked for.”

“Here are two pennies,” said Mardana, holding them out on his palm.

“What was asked for and what I have written down are priceless. No amount of gold and silver can be fair payment for their worth. You can keep the money.”

Mardana thanked the shopkeeper and hurried back, for soon the sun would set. Guru Nanak was sitting by the rose bush conversing with Hamza Gauz, who sat by his side. The fakir looked more amiable than he had before as Mardana handed over the paper to Guru Nanak. He read what was written on it, smiled, and gave the paper to Hamza Gauz.

The fakir held the paper in his hands and read aloud.

“Life is false. Death is the truth.”

He turned a bewildered face towards Guru Nanak.

“Do you still believe that there is not a single worthy soul in this entire town? Surely a man who wrote those words is high-minded and virtuous, for he has discerned the true essence of human existence. Do you still wish for this town’s destruction which is home to people like him?”

Hamza Gauz shook his head with regret.

“I was blinded by rage, but you have opened my eyes to the truth. I have not lost favour with my maker for he sent one as enlightened as you to steer me away from a grave sin. I will go into confinement but this time it will be to beg forgiveness for my mistake. As for today, be my guest, O enlightened one and grace my humble abode with your presence! I will make peace with the people of this town with you beside me, for they should know who they must thank for their deliverance.”

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Nanki Bids Goodbye

From Sialkot, Guru Nanak and Mardana journeyed back to Talwandi. They were reunited with their families once again. Old age had mellowed Mehta Kalu and resigned him to the path his only son had chosen for himself. He used to often hear stories from travellers and visitors of a holy man called Nanak whose fame was spreading throughout the land. For Sulakhni, Guru Nanak's coming invariably brought both pain and joy. She knew he would be on his way again in a few days, but as long as he stayed, she tried to fill her heart and eyes with the sight of him, and her mind and ears with the profound beauty of the hymns he sang, which became her only consolation in his absence.

From Talwandi, the Guru and Mardana made their way towards Sultanpur Lodhi. When they reached its vicinity, the afternoon sun had begun to set. Not a leaf stirred on the trees and even the songs of birds returning home sounded dull and melancholic. The wind raised up a cloud of dust here and there, and the heat was stifling. The city was now sprawled before them. Guru Nanak and Mardana reached its empty streets and made their way towards Jai Ram's house. The people had returned home after the day's work and one by one oil lamps appeared in rhythmic succession to defy the approaching darkness.

"Bebe Nanki will be overjoyed to see you," spoke Mardana, breaking the silence between them and turning

to smile at his friend. He was surprised to see a grave look on Guru Nanak's face. His eyes were fixed ahead, and their unseeing gaze puzzled him. Mardana knew that something was troubling Guru Nanak but chose to remain silent.

They turned a corner into the street where Jai Ram lived and reached the door to tap on it gently. They waited awhile and when no one answered, they tapped harder. It was opened by Jai Ram who was altered beyond recognition. His hair had turned white as snow, the sorrow in his eyes was unmistakable, and grief had deepened the lines on his face. When he saw Guru Nanak standing at the door, he rushed to fall into his arms like a drowning man grasping a log he knows will save him.

"Thank God you have come! Your sister has been sick for days and there is no hope for her recovery," he sobbed. "I cannot bear to see her suffer as she does."

Jai Ram led them into the house to a chamber where Nanki lay, a mere shadow of her former self. The prolonged sickness she had suffered from had taken its toll on her. The whitish pallidness of her face was strangely illuminated by the light from a lamp burning in a niche beside her bed. Guru Nanak sat by her side and took her frail hand in his. She opened her eyes slowly, as if the very act were painful.

"Nanak," she whispered feebly, her eyes filling with tears of happiness. "I knew you would come. How could I die without laying eyes on your dear face?"

She turned to smile at Jai Ram who smiled back through his tears. Then, mustering all the strength that was left in her, she raised a frail hand to touch a lone tear that ran down her brother's cheek, and closed her eyes to never open them again.

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A Bowl of Milk and A Jasmine

The ancient town of Multan rose on the banks of the river Chenab, its myriad Sufi shrines, bazaars, mosques and tombs lending colour and flavour to its rich past. Multan had once been the seat of a famous Muslim scholar, saint, and poet Baha-ud-din Zakariya, and several other mystics and saints who gave the city its unique character. They had dispersed into several streams of thought with distinct spiritual practices and beliefs, and this had resulted in Multan being overcrowded with diverse philosophical schools, each with its own *Makhdum* or spiritual leader who had several *khadams* or disciples under him.

Guru Nanak and Mardana reached the city, entering through one of its many gates. They walked around its picturesque bazaars and everywhere they turned they saw the facade of a colourful shrine belonging to one saint or another. The intricate tile work, wooden panelling, turrets, and domes of these mausoleums could be seen and admired everywhere the eye rested. They made their way towards the fort of Multan that was built on a hillock overlooking the city, where the shrines of Baha-ud-din Zakariya and his grandson Shah Rukh-e-Alam were built next to each other.

They reached the shrine of the latter that stood imposingly beside the fort walls, its azure, blue and white tiles glistening in the sun. As they began ascending the flight of stone steps that led to the main enclosure, a

group of disciples coming down stalled them. “You do not look like pilgrims,” one of them said arrogantly. “We have enough dervishes in this city already. There is no place for you here.”

“Perhaps I could have a word with the *Makhdum*, brother,” replied Guru Nanak amiably, despite their impudence.

“And do you think the exalted Sheikh Baha-ud-din Makhdum has time to squander on the likes of you? This town is teeming with dervishes. If our master humoured every single one of them, what time would he have left for his own affairs?” asked another.

One of the disciples, however, stepped forward, hushed his companions, and turned towards Guru Nanak.

“Wait here, I will see if the Sheikh can spare some time for you.”

He ran back up the steps only to return sometime later with a bowl full of milk in his hands. It was filled to the brim, and he walked carefully to avoid spilling it for it was a message from the Sheikh and had to be delivered without alteration.

“Here is your answer, brother,” he told Guru Nanak. “Make of it what you may, for it baffles me.”

“You should be thankful that the Sheikh has extended this gesture of kindness towards you,” spoke one of the others. “Now drink the milk and be on your way.”

Guru Nanak smiled and looked to where a bush laden with delicate blooms of jasmine grew beside the steps.

He plucked a flower from it and gently placed it on the milk.

“Take this to your Sheikh. I will wait here for his reply.”

The other disciples exchanged bewildered glances between themselves and waited, for this strange exchange puzzled them. They did not have to wait long, however, for some time later they saw Sheikh Baha-ud-din Makhdum himself coming down the steps. They hurriedly stepped back and bowed their heads in reverence before him. He came to stand before Guru Nanak.

“I welcome you to Multan. No ordinary dervish could have deciphered my message and replied to it with such eloquence. I will be honoured to receive you as my guest.” Saying this, he led the way to the shrine.

The day that followed saw an exchange of ideas and profound religious discourses between Guru Nanak and the Sheikh. When night fell, and they were alone once again, Mardana could hide his curiosity no longer and asked,

“What did the bowl of milk signify, Nanak, and why did you place the flower in it? You surely know how to talk in riddles. I have pondered over it all day and can find no explanation.”

“Mardana, the Sheikh sent a bowl of milk filled to the brim telling us that this city has Pirs aplenty and there is no room for yet another.”

“And the flower?”

“By placing the flower on it I indicated that our presence here was not a threat to anyone, but like the jasmine that gave off its fragrance without spilling any milk, I was here only to disperse my ideas and philosophy.”

“You have an answer for everything,” Mardana smiled.

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Guru Nanak Goes to Mecca

From Multan, the Guru Nanak decided to travel towards Uch. Here, he met and conversed with Makhdum Sheikh Haji Abdul Sahib Bukhari. The *Makhdum* was preparing for a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. Mardana, on an impulse, asked Guru Nanak,

“Nanak, we have travelled from the snow-covered mountains to the furthest corners of this land where it meets the sea and visited many places of worship. The *Makhdum*, they say, is preparing for the *Haj*. Why not go with him?”

“So we shall, Mardana. Let us don the robes of *Hajis* and travel beyond the seas and deserts to see if the Kazis and Maulvis of the lands of Islam differ from the Brahmins and yogis of this land.”

They wore the blue robes of a *Haji* and carrying a staff in one hand and a vessel in the other to perform their ablutions with, set out on their journey across the sea, embarking from the port of Sonmiani in Balochistan. A dhow carried them across the Arabian Sea, and they disembarked at the port of Al Aswatt, from where they were to travel towards the holy city of Mecca.

Nestled in a valley surrounded by the Sirat mountains, Mecca originally grew around an oasis on an old caravan route that linked the Mediterranean world with Arabia and the rest of the Orient. It was the place where Prophet Mohammed received his first revelation. The city was

accessible only through one of the four mountain passes surrounding it. Guru Nanak and Mardana joined a caravan of pilgrims and after crossing a desert stretch, entered the city from the direction of Jeddah that lay to its west.

Mecca had always been a centre of religion for the surrounding Arab region even before the advent of Islam. People came from near and far to pay obeisance to the many deities that were housed in its temples. With the rise of Islam, Prophet Mohammed abolished the worship of idols, steering the people towards monotheism and the worship of one God whose name was Allah.

Together, Guru Nanak and Mardana performed the pilgrimage over the next few days. One day, they were resting in a grove of trees outside the Great Mosque with a group of other pilgrims who had travelled with them from Jeddah. Guru Nanak and Mardana had settled a few feet away from the others to slumber till the fierce heat of the midday sun receded.

In the company was a Kazi named Rukn-ud-din who awoke before the others and stood up to stretch himself. When he chanced to look in Guru Nanak's direction, he saw that the latter was sleeping with his feet pointed towards the holy Kaaba. He became furious and hastening to Guru Nanak's side, gave him a fierce kick.

“What kind of *Haji* are you, pointing your feet towards the house of Allah while you sleep? I have never witnessed such sacrilege!” he shouted.

The other pilgrims were roused from their sleep by the commotion and beheld the scene before them. Guru Nanak sat up and smiled at the Kazi.

“O Kazi, your calling as a religious leader requires you to show others the right path. Will you kindly point my feet in the right direction so I may not err again?”

The Kazi lifted the Guru's legs and vigorously flung them around. As he turned away disdainfully, his gaze was arrested by the vision before him. He saw to his amazement that right before his eyes in the open desert stood the Kaaba. He turned towards Guru Nanak and realized that he had tossed his feet in that direction. He stood stupefied, as if turned to stone. He rubbed his eyes and opened them again. The Kaaba was still there, like a mirage in the middle of the desert. It was not a hallucination, but what could only be called a miracle! He fell at Guru Nanak's feet and begged for forgiveness. The Guru rose to his feet and gently aided the Kazi to his.

“O, Kazi, does not the Koran say, ‘And we are closer to him than his jugular vein’? Amongst the many attributes of Allah, is He not *Al-Wasi*, the vast, the all-embracing, boundless and all pervading? In the whole of His creation, the visible and unseen, in this world and beyond, from the tiniest grain of sand to the limitless heavens, He is ever present and all encompassing. Whichever way we turn our feet, in whichever direction we bow our heads in prayer, it is towards Him we turn.”

Guru Nanak Meets Pir Dastgir

From Mecca the pilgrim caravan continued to Medina where Guru Nanak and Mardana visited the shrine of Prophet Mohammed before crossing the desert and passing through Faiz, the capital of Najad, to make their way towards Baghdad. This route had been especially commissioned by Begum Zubaida, the wife of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, whose reign ushered the Islamic Golden Age in the eighth century. Baghdad, being the capital of the caliphate, had flourished as a centre of learning, culture and commerce under his rule, and one of the most famous works of Arabian literature, ‘One Thousand and One Nights’, had as its backdrop the Caliph’s court and many of the stories recounted in it were inspirations from own his life. The city had been subjected to a violent history of conquests and destruction in the ensuing centuries and at the time of Guru Nanak’s visit it was under the rule of Safavid Iran.

Baghdad was also the seat of the Qadiriyya sect, one of the oldest Sufi orders, and the mausoleum of its founder, Shah Mohi-ud-din Abdul Qadir Gilani, was situated here. The religious head of the mausoleum was called Pir Dastgir, which translates to ‘one who holds the hand.’

Guru Nanak and Mardana sojourned near a graveyard on the outskirts of the city beside the banks of the river Euphrates. As evening descended on the meandering waters of the river, the sky blushed to welcome the sultan

of night and his retinue of stars. The Guru began to sing, and Mardana gently touched his rebab.

*Endless netherworlds there are and countless skies
overhead,
One can weary of searching for them, but in vain,
the Vedas have said,
Eighteen thousand worlds there are, the scriptures have
revealed,
What account can be written of these, a lifetime of effort
will nothing yield,
O Nanak, exalt his greatness and be content,
For He alone knows his own extent.³⁶*

A few locals who were fetching water from the river heard the music and were outraged to see two strangers singing in a foreign language beside the graveyard. Singing and music were frowned upon by the conservative followers of Islam and these men returned to their homes to tell the others about two strangers who were disturbing the sleep of their dead ancestors with an ungodly act.

The next day, a crowd gathered to produce Guru Nanak and Mardana before Pir Dastgir, who besides being their religious leader was also the local administrator of justice.

Pir Dastgir was sitting on a seat placed above a raised platform, surrounded by his followers and the

³⁶ SGGS, pg. 5, Paataalaa paataal lakh aagaasaa aagaas...

townspeople. Guru Nanak and Mardana stood before him, receiving the glares of an angry crowd.

“O stranger from Hind, you have been charged by these people for the sacrilegious act of singing and disturbing the dead in their sleep. Do you not know that music is frowned upon by the people of these lands?” asked the Pir.

“If music were sacrilegious as you say, then God would not have taught the birds to sing, the bees to buzz, the wind to rustle through leaves of trees or the rain to splatter rhythmically upon the earth. The night has its own music as does the day. How can anything God Himself sanctions be called ungodly? Music is a precious vessel God has bestowed upon the world of men. It is up to us whether we put poison in it or fill it with nectar,” replied Guru Nanak.

Pir Dastgir remained silent for a moment before reflecting aloud.

“You indeed have the gift of eloquence, O stranger from Hind, and speak our language with surprising fluency. You have antagonized my people, however, and I cannot exonerate you without a trial. I must subject you to a small ordeal.” He paused before continuing. “The Lord Almighty has bestowed upon me the title of Pir Dastgir, the one who holds his people’s hand and leads them along the right path, but my mind remains baffled by questions regarding the nature of the divine that hover over it like dark clouds of doubt and uncertainty. I have discoursed with the most learned minds in this land, but

to no avail. If you can answer these questions to my satisfaction, I will make peace on your behalf with these people and they shall promise not to harass you or your companion, but if you can't answer my questions I shall resign you both to their will."

"Ask your questions, O Pir, but remember, I will not answer them to escape punishment at the hands of your people. I will answer them because a man in your position should not harbour any doubts, for if the true path lies clear before him, he will be better able to guide the others. If the blind should lead the blind, they are both destined for doom."

"My first question to you is, what existed before God?"

"To answer your question, I need some pearls on a platter."

"Are you so certain your answer will satisfy me that you ask for your reward before you proffer it?"

"What are pearls and precious stones before the treasure of God's true name? One must trade in only what can be taken to the world beyond this one, Pir Dastgir, for all else comes to dust," replied Guru Nanak.

The Pir stood rebuked. He turned to a follower to give instructions, and a platter with pearls was promptly brought before him from the offerings he received from hundreds of his followers.

"Now if you will count them for me, you shall have your answer."

The Pir began counting, “One, two, three...”

“Stop!” exclaimed Guru Nanak. “You made a mistake; you must start again.”

Pir Dastgir was taken aback, but started again, nevertheless. “One, two, three...”

“You erred again, Pir Dastgir,” said Guru Nanak.

“Where have I erred?” the Pir asked in frustration.

Concealing his vexation, he continued, “This time I shall count slowly, and you must stop me precisely where I am wrong.”

“One,” he began counting a third time and Guru Nanak raised his hand instantly.

“This is where you are wrong. Start your counting before that.”

“How is it possible to begin counting before one?” the Pir exclaimed. “There is nothing before one.”

“You are right,” Guru Nanak replied. “There is nothing before one, just as there was nothing before God, and that is the answer to your first question.”

Pir Dastgir stared at Guru Nanak, seeing him, it appeared, for the very first time. This man from Hind with a humble appearance had answered his question so simply yet with such profound argument that it was impossible to refute his reasoning. He had indeed been misled by Guru Nanak’s frayed garments and unprepossessing looks. The man standing before him was no ordinary traveller.

“My second question is, ‘Where does God live?’”

“To answer your question, I need a bowl of milk.”

Pir Dastgir turned towards a follower and the latter hurried to do his bidding. In no time, a bowl of milk was brought forth and placed into Guru Nanak’s hands. Pir Dastgir waited, thinking that this learned Pir from Hind had received no hospitality from his people and wanted to assuage his hunger before he answered any more questions. Guru Nanak continued to stare into the milk, however, without making any attempt to drink it.

“Why do you not drink it?” asked Pir Dastgir.

“I do not want to drink it,” replied Guru Nanak. “I am looking for something in the milk.”

“Are you suggesting it is foul?”

“No. Do you think there is butter in this milk?” asked Guru Nanak.

“Yes, of course.”

“Then why cannot I see it?”

“You must know that for the butter to appear the milk must first be churned.”

“But where is it now?” persisted Guru Nanak.

“It is there in the milk, but we simply cannot see it,” replied Pir Dastgir.

“So it is with God. He is ever present in all his creation, from the tiniest creature to the largest beast that roams the wilderness, from the smallest dew drop to the

deepest ocean, and from the tiniest grain of sand to the loftiest mountain. He lives in His creation as butter does in this milk, ever present yet imperceptible and unseen. The only difference, Pir Dastgir, is that in the world that manifests around us we must perceive things with our senses before we believe in their existence, but in the matter of God, one must believe in Him wholeheartedly before His presence can be realized.”

Guru Nanak’s answer more than satisfied Pir Dastgir and he eagerly asked his next question.

“My last question is, ‘What does God do?’”

“I have not been in your land for too long to know its customs and social protocols,” said Guru Nanak. “But in the land I come from, there is a deep-rooted conviction and agreement that one who gives is far superior to the one who receives. In our case, you are the one with questions and I have given you answers for two of them, but before I answer your next question I must sit where you sit now and you should come to stand where I stand.”

Pir Dastgir readily agreed and relinquished his seat for Guru Nanak and went to stand in the latter’s place.

“O Pir from Hind, my question remains unanswered,” spoke the Pir as Guru Nanak remained silent.

“Your answer lies before you. Listen, Pir Dastgir, to what God does. He raises the lowly from the dust and humbles the mighty. He sets a beggar on a king’s throne and gives a begging bowl into the hands of a king. He makes the smallest egg grow into a bird to soar the skies

and enables the tiniest of ants to bring an elephant to its knees. Everything that exists does so under His will, and He disposes of them as and when He pleases, for He alone is the creator, sustainer, and destroyer.”

Pir Dastgir, his eyes brimming with emotions, came to sit beside Guru Nanak’s feet. The clouds of doubt that hovered over his mind had lifted and he saw that before him sat a truly enlightened soul.

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Guru Nanak in Mashhad

Leaving Baghdad, Guru Nanak and Mardana made their way towards Tabrez, the city where Shams Tabrizi, spiritual mentor of Jalal al-din Muhammad Rumi, was born. From Tabrez they made their way through Tehran towards Mashhad which was the birthplace of the great poet Firdausi who had authored the *Shahnameh* or 'Book of Kings.' The countryside was now covered with high mountain ranges and lush, verdant landscapes. The tomb of Caliph Harun al-Rashid was situated in the city, as was the shrine of Imam Raza, who was the eighth Imam of Shia Muslims. Consequently, the city was a prominent place of pilgrimage, and Shia Muslims came from near and far to pay obeisance at the many shrines situated here.

Guru Nanak and Mardana camped outside the city and as was their practice, sang devotional hymns each day at dawn and dusk. When some locals and pilgrims came to sit before them, the Guru began with a rendition of *Suras* from the Holy Koran and later expounded their meaning in Persian. The people were fascinated by his renditions, and each passing day saw the congregation grow. One day, they approached Guru Nanak to persuade him to meet their spiritual leader, Pir Abdul Rahman, who had accompanied them for a pilgrimage to Mashhad. Guru Nanak acquiesced to their request and went with them into the city. The Pir looked at him

doubtfully and questioned him as to whether he was Shia or Sunni.

“What does it matter whether one is Shia or Sunni, Muslim or Hindu?” asked Guru Nanak. “Why must there be divisions between people if the object of their worship is one?”

“Even so,” argued Pir Abdul Rahman, “one must follow one’s own distinct path to keep from going astray. Our path has been set before us by the Prophet and his Imams for that leads straight to heaven.”

“The message, however, holds more significance than the messenger,” replied Guru Nanak. “A hand that points one in the right direction are indeed worthy of praise, but if a traveller sees only the hand and not where it leads, how can he begin to tread the path that will lead him to his eventual goal?”

Pir Abdul Rahman fell silent at these words and pondered over them long after Guru Nanak left. That evening, disguised in a long cloak, the Pir made his way through the streets of Mashhad towards its outskirts where Guru Nanak and Mardana sat singing near a cluster of walnut trees. He sat at the end of the congregation, listening to the Guru’s words as they drifted towards him like a gentle breeze through a vague mist.

*Let mercy be your mosque, faith your prayer mat and the
Quran your honest livelihood,
Let humility be your circumcision, righteous conduct
your fast and you shall be a Muslim true and good,*

*Let noble deeds be your Kaaba, truth your spiritual
teacher and the fruit of your good deeds your solemn
chant,
Let your rosary beads be pleasing to the Lord, for He
alone will preservation to your honour grant.³⁷*

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³⁷ SGGS, pg. 140, Mihar maseet sidak muslaa hak halaal kuraan...

The Destruction of Saidpur

From Mashhad, Guru Nanak and Mardana travelled to Balkh in Afghanistan and from thence to Kabul. They sojourned in Kabul for some time and then proceeded to Gorakh Hatri through the Kurram Pass. Gorakh Hatri was an important centre for Buddhism and Gorakhpanthi yogis. From Gorakh Hatri Guru Nanak journeyed towards Hasan Abdal and then on to Saidpur.

The descendent of Genghis Khan and Timur, Zahir ud-Din Muhammad, also known as Babur, had made himself lord of Kabul in the beginning of the sixteenth century. In the following years he set his eyes on conquering the rich plains of northern Hindustan. He descended the snow-covered mountains at the head of a war hardened army of Mongol warriors and swept through the plains of the Punjab. The towns and villages that surrendered before his advancing forces were spared, but those who resisted faced his wrath. Thus, the people of Sialkot, having yielded peacefully, were left unharmed. The people of Saidpur, however, gave a fierce resistance, but being unable to match the strength of the Mongols, were defeated. The men were mercilessly slaughtered, their women and children made captive, and their houses and properties plundered and burned. Guru Nanak and Mardana reached Saidpur in the wake of Babur's attack and were deeply aggrieved by the plight of the wounded, the sight of burning houses, the cries of

lamenting women, and the tears of innocent, orphaned children.

They walked through the devastated, battle-scarred streets of Saidpur and found Lalo, the carpenter, who fell at Guru Nanak's feet and wept bitterly. He described in detail the bloodshed and atrocities committed by Babur's troops. The men had been slaughtered in cold blood, their women defiled, and children snatched from screaming mothers.

The three walked through the devastated, blood stained streets and Guru Nanak's heart poured out its grief in a melancholic song that echoed through the empty houses and havelis of people who had escaped Malik Bhago's oppression only to meet a worse fate at the hands of another oppressor.

*As the word of the Lord is revealed to me, so do I convey
it,*

O Lalo,

*Escorting a wedding procession of sin, Babur set out
from Kabul, O Lalo,*

*Virtue and righteousness have taken flight and
falsehood reigns supreme, O Lalo,*

*What role is there left for Kazis and Brahmins when
Satan reads the marriage vows, O Lalo,*

*In their misery weep the Muslim women and read the
Holy Quran,*

O Lalo,

*The high and low born Hindu women share a wretched
fate, O Lalo,*

*Marriage songs are marked with gore and blood is
doused in lieu of saffron, O Lalo,
Nanak sings the praises of God amongst corpses and
sounds this incantation,
The Lord who fashioned mortals and filled their hearts
with passions untold, Himself watches with dispassion.³⁸*

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³⁸ SGGS, pg. 722-723, Jaisee main aavai khasam ki baanee taisrhaa karee gi-aan vay Lalo...

Guru Nanak Returns to Talwandi

Leaving Saidpur with a heavy heart, Guru Nanak travelled towards his hometown, Talwandi. Mardana was reunited with his family. Mehta Kalu and Tripta had aged, and Guru Nanak remained with them for some time.

After a few days had passed, he arose early one morning and went to knock at Mardana's door. The latter knew the look on Guru Nanak's face too well and went back to fetch his rebab.

As the lanes of their village were obscured into shadows behind them, he asked,

“Have you not considered settling down in one place, Nanak?”

“Why, have you wearied of my company?” asked Guru Nanak with a smile.

“The day I weary of the seven notes of music I learnt even before learning to speak, I will weary of your company, too. Remember how you came to stand at my door years ago when the sun had not yet kissed the threshold? My father loved you almost as well as he loved me,” Mardana smiled and paused to think before continuing. “We may not share the bonds of blood, but we are joined together by something that runs deeper than that. I shall go wherever you go until it is time for you to bury this bag of bones. Why Nanak, when I do die, do not put a gravestone over my head. Let my grave

be unmarked and unnamed. You have kept me by your side all these years as a brother and friend, and I want to go to my judgement with only that epithet.”

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PART IV

*Phiri Baba Aaia Kartarpur bhekh udasi sagal utaar,
Pahiri sansaari kapde manji baith kia avatar*

*Then Baba reached Kartarpur to discard his
wanderer's garb for good,
Donning the clothes of a commoner he assumed a novel
livelihood.*

The Village of Kartarpur

As a new dawn stretched its arms over the horizon, the whirling and dancing waters of the Ravi softened their incessant murmur to listen to voices singing in unison.

*The passing hours are dairy maids,
and each quarter day takes Krishna's station,
The wind, water and fire are like ornaments,
the sun and moon like incantations,
This temporal earth with its possessions,
wealth and wares is a snare that does enthrall,
One is vulnerable without spiritual knowledge,
for the grim reaper devours all.³⁹*

The singing continued as the world discarded its sable cloak to embrace the light of a rising sun. Birds sang to consummate their union, and a new day was born. The Ravi glanced across the cool sands on her west bank towards an ancient banyan tree that grew where a dusty village lane lined with simple mud and brick houses ended abruptly. Beneath this tree sat Guru Nanak, with Mardana at his side.

The morning prayers were concluded and one by one the villagers arose, some making their way to work, others going home and yet others walking towards a small complex of buildings much bigger in size than the

³⁹ SGGS, pg. Ghareea sabhae gopeea pehar kannh gopaal...

surrounding houses that housed a community kitchen, a dining area and a congregational hall which was used for prayers in unfavourable weather. Those who volunteered in the kitchen would soon begin peeling and chopping vegetables and placing big logs of fire and cow dung cakes beneath large vats for cooking spiced curries and vegetables. A group of women were kneading dough and rolling it into small balls between their palms. They would be flattened into flatbreads and cooked on a large iron griddle.

Guru Nanak and Mardana had left Talwandi to travel along the banks of the Ravi and stopped at a beautiful spot, some twenty-five *kos* from Lahore. Here, Guru Nanak discarded his travelling clothes, wore the clothes of a commoner, and set up a small establishment. His parents, wife and sons came to live with him as did Mardana, who was also joined by his family. In the following days and months, a small community of followers grew around them. Guru Nanak had bought some agricultural land in the surrounding area and named this new village by the Ravi, Kartarpur, meaning ‘the abode of God.’

The entire village would arise in the wee hours of dawn and gather for prayer meets that included singing and reciting of the Guru’s compositions extolling the virtues of the one true Lord. They would then go about their daily work of farming, weaving, trading, or helping in the community work. The practice of a free kitchen for visitors, travellers and pilgrims passing through the village, the poor and needy was started here. Once

cooked, the community meals, called *langar*, would be served to men, women and children sitting neatly in files in the community hall. Caste, colour, and religion lost their significance here as Hindus and Muslims, Brahmins, and Shudras, the young and old, the rich and poor sat down to eat together.

Guru Nanak worked in his fields all day, tilling, sowing, and watering the land. As evening approached and the time came for him to return home, Sulakhni stood leaning against the wooden door of their home, her eyes fixed on the village lane, awaiting his return. When he came, she would follow him into the house, and hurry away to fetch water for him to wash and drink. Later, they would make their way together to the evening congregation.

Many long years had passed since their marriage, and it seemed to Sulakhni now that it might have been in another lifetime altogether. She had been no more than a girl and he had been little more than a boy himself. She had not known then what marriage entailed, being conscious only of the pain at leaving her parents' house and everything familiar behind. Life and fate had been long and exacting, for she had to endure parting from her husband and spend, what to her had seemed a lifetime, in waiting for him to return each he left on his travels. Each time he had returned, however, she forgot in the blink of an eye those long, empty years of separation, being content to see his face and hear his voice again. He was not just her husband now, but her friend, her spiritual guide, and her hope in the world beyond.

Mehta Kalu and Tripta, too old to venture far from home, sat in the courtyard listening to the strains of *kirtan*⁴⁰, trying to understand the words with their feeble hearing. With old age the realization had eventually dawned on the father that his son's destiny had always been like sand slipping through his fingers. In time, his life taken the path Mehta Kalu had subconsciously feared it would when he mastered the scriptures at a tender age, rejected the *janeu*, fed hungry sadhus, and spent most of his time wandering around Talwandi in the company of holy men. He had endeavoured to shape his son's life in keeping with his own ambitions, but it had gushed forth like a wilful river, breaking the barges of tradition, familial expectations, and social constraints to follow its own way through the world. The boy Mehta Kalu had worried would come to naught had in due course conceived this utopian haven he called Kartarpur, where work and worship were equally revered, and caste, colour, social status and religion became insignificant in a society that had been divided on those lines for generations. He had succeeded in establishing a small society based on equality, humanity, communal love, and a commendable spirit of selfless service.

The foundations of Kartarpur were laid on a few basic principles that everyone who came to live here was expected to adhere to. These were, meditation and contemplation upon God, making an honest living through hard work, and sharing the fruits of one's labour with others in need, irrespective of their caste or religion.⁴¹ Guru Nanak's discourses and hymns were aimed at inspiring those who had come to follow his ideals to achieve harmony and oneness with a higher

⁴⁰ Devotional singing

⁴¹ Naam Japo, Keerat Karo, Vand Chako

conscience, with a universal God who could not be divided on the lines of colour, caste, worldly wealth or religion, a God who permeated His entire creation, one who should not be sought in temples, shrines, or the solitude of snow-clad mountains and jungles for He resides within each one of His beings.

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The Story of Moola Keer and The Thief

As Guru Nanak's fame spread through the land, people began to flock to Kartarpur from near and far. Some came as visitors to take the blessings of the Guru, staying for a few days, weeks or even months, while others chose to never leave. The small community grew gradually, and the more it grew the more help was forthcoming to meet its increasing needs from amongst the Guru's followers. People made generous contributions of land, building material and manual labour to oversee the building of a *dharmshala* or rest house for travellers, a building where prayer meetings could be held, and another where everyone partook of the communal meal.

Amongst the residents of Kartarpur there lived a man named Moola Keer. He was a man of considerable wealth who had bought some land in Kartarpur, built himself a simple house and moved in with his family. He toiled in his fields by day and joined in the prayer meets at dawn and dusk, moulding his life in line with the Guru's teachings. One day, a traveller arrived at the door of his house, which was next to the community hall. The hour was late when Moola Keer answered the knock, his eyes heavy with sleep.

"Greetings," spoke the stranger standing outside. "I have travelled a considerable distance to meet the Guru.

His hymns are close to my heart, and I recite them day and night. I did not want to disturb anyone at the *dharmshala* at this late hour, so I came knocking at your door instead. I am looking for a place to spend the night until tomorrow when I can have an audience with the Guru.”

“Come in,” replied Moola amiably. “It is my good fortune that I can be of help to you. You must be hungry and tired from your journey. Let me offer you some food first before you retire for the night.”

The stranger was ushered into the kitchen and a mat placed on the floor for him to sit on. Moola Keer then went to rouse his wife, who quickly arranged a meal from the food left over from dinner and served it to their guest. After the meal, a glass of warm milk was brought for him and Moola Keer offered the stranger his own chamber to sleep for the night, while he slept with his wife in the courtyard outside.

Now, the man they had sheltered was not a traveller who had come to meet Guru Nanak but a thief from a nearby village. He had heard of Moola Keer’s devotion to Guru Nanak and knew that he was a very wealthy man. In the room he had been given to sleep, there was a carved wooden chest that had been part of Moola Keer’s wife’s dowry and was commonly used to store valuables. The thief patiently waited till the only sounds that came from without was the rhythmic breathing of the couple sleeping in the courtyard. He arose and walked to the chest. Inside it, tucked away under some clothes, was a small silver box that had some jewellery and money in it.

He quickly removed the contents of the box and untying the cloth around his waist placed the money and jewellery in it before tying it back. Going back to his bed, he waited until dawn to leave the house, for the door that led into the street was bolted and the couple slept beside it. Soon drowsiness overcame him and he fell fast asleep. He awoke with a start to see Moola Keer towering over him, shaking him by the shoulder. "It is time for the morning prayers. I will help you wash, my friend, and then we can go together."

'You go offer your prayers,' thought the thief to himself, relieved that he had not been discovered as he had feared for one terrifying moment. 'I shall make away with my loot at the first chance I am given.'

When they were ready to leave, the thief suddenly stopped, pretending to remember something.

"How foolish of me to forget! I have a relative on my mother's side who came to live in Kartarpur some months ago. I should find out where he lives, for if he learns that I have come to Kartarpur and stayed elsewhere, he will be very offended. Thank you for your hospitality. I will go now and look for his house."

As he spoke, he turned hastily to step over the threshold but tripped and fell. His waist cloth came loose, and the jewels and money fell out and scattered on the ground. The thief was too shocked to move. Moola Keer looked at his wife's jewellery and his money and then at the thief. The thief's eyes were wide with fear. He could hear voices approaching as the villagers were

awake by now and making their way towards the banyan tree growing at the edge of the village. Any attempt to escape was futile for he would easily be caught. He fell at Moola Keer's feet and began to plead.

"Forgive me, please forgive me! I am a poor man with a family to look after, please spare me! If you let me go, I shall never come near your village again!"

Moola Keer looked at him, his eyes filled with compassion and pity.

"You have no reason to panic, my friend. Perhaps you have more need of these than I do."

Saying this, he gathered the valuables and bundling them into the cloth again, offered them to the thief.

"Here, take these with you. You have been my guest, and I cannot let you leave empty handed."

Moola Keer called to his wife and bidding the thief goodbye, walked away. The thief stood in the shadows of the doorway, clutching the bundle in his hands. He looked at the villagers passing by with unseeing eyes. Slowly, every step weighing him down as if he carried a heavy load, he started to walk behind them.

Guru Nanak sat under the banyan tree before the villagers, the Ravi flowing a stone's throw away. Her constant murmur lent its own music to the singing. Beside the Guru sat Mardana and his son Shehzada. The thief was there too, sitting at the edge of the congregation, with the loot clutched between his hands. Guru Nanak's words drifted towards him, and he

imagined they carried a message for him alone. He felt his burden become lighter and loosened his grasp.

*With each passing day, O Lord,
I offer myself as sacrifice before You,
You who can fashion angels from mere men
And do it without much ado.⁴²*

After the prayers were concluded and the villagers left, he approached Guru Nanak and placed the bundle at his feet.

“Please rid me of this burden, O Guru, for I cannot carry it any longer,” he pleaded. “I came to this village as a thief but have been robbed instead. The man I stole these from offered me food and shelter for the night, and when he discovered my theft, instead of punishing me he offered me these valuables willingly. His name is Moola Keer. I am too ashamed to face him myself. Please return these to him on my behalf.”

“I shall return these to him for you and rid you of the burden of this theft. But what of all the others you have committed in the past, for they weigh heavy on your shoulders still. If you ask God’s forgiveness for them with a sincere heart and resolve to make an honest living from this day on, you will never have to carry a burden like this again.”

“But how can I ever hope to be forgiven?”

⁴² SGGS, pg. Balihaaree gur aapanae dhiouhaaree sadh vaar...

“If Moola Keer can forgive you so can God, for He is the most magnanimous of all. You must promise to break honest bread from this day onwards.”

“I promise, I promise” said the thief passionately, tears rolling down his cheeks, but when they touched his lips, they tasted surprisingly sweet.



“Why did you let the thief escape, Moola Keer?” asked Guru Nanak.

“O Guru, he might be a thief for the world, but I saw your reflection in him. I let him get away with theft because I did not want the villagers to find out that anyone who claims to be attached to your *bani* should be caught stealing or doing anything that is unworthy, and to forgive someone who has wronged you is just as important as asking forgiveness for one’s own shortcomings.”

“By concealing his shortcomings, Moola Keer, you have concealed mine, and compassion is one of the foundations of a righteous life. It is easy to be compassionate towards someone you know or even someone weak and unfortunate, but to show sympathy towards one who has wronged you is as difficult as it is honourable. You are a true Sikh, Moola Keer.”



Baba Buddha

Guru Nanak walked towards a copse of trees at the far end of a field he had been toiling in. The afternoon sun was fierce and scorching. He sat under the shade of a tree and resting his back against its trunk, closed his eyes. The birds were chirping lazily from the branches and the wind brushed against their leaves as if whispering secrets that were meant for them alone. Guru Nanak was in deep reverie when he felt a touch on his shoulder and opened his eyes to see a boy kneeling before him with a bowl of milk in his hands.

“Where did you come from, young man?” asked Guru Nanak with a smile.

“I live in a village close by. I was grazing my cattle when I saw you walk towards these trees. I presumed you were very tired and thirsty from working in the fields in this blazing heat and ran home to bring you some milk.”

“You left your cattle unattended to fetch me milk?”

“God watches over them as he watches over everything else,” replied the boy.

“You have spoken the truth,” replied Guru Nanak. He drank the milk and handed the bowl back to the boy. “I thank you for your kindness. Now, what can I do for you in return?”

“Perhaps you can answer a question that has been puzzling me for a long time,” said the boy and gave a thoughtful pause before continuing. “When the invaders from the north passed through these lands, they destroyed our fields, lying flat the ripened crop as well as that which was still green. I thought to myself that they came like death comes, destroying the young and old alike and that no one can claim to have more time to live than another. How can one be freed of this fear of death forever?”

“Why, you look like a child but talk like an old man. What is your name?”

“My name is Bura,” replied the boy.

“I shall call you Baba Buddha,” said Guru Nanak kindly, patting the boy on his head.

“I am from Kathu Nangal, a village not far from here. We belong to the clan of Randhawa Jats. Where do you live, Sir? Are those your fields you were ploughing?”

“Yes, they are my fields. I live in the village of Kartarpur. You should pay it a visit. Perhaps you will find the answer to your questions there.”

“If that is so, I shall certainly come,” replied Baba Buddha.

After his meeting with Guru Nanak, Bura or Baba Buddha became a regular visitor at Kartarpur. He was surprised to discover that the old man he had met by the woods was the famed Guru Nanak everyone talked about. He began to spend more time in Kartarpur than he

did at his own village and devoted his life singularly to the Guru's words and teachings.

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Lehna of Khadur

It had been some years since the passing away of Mehta Kalu and Tripta. Sri Chand, the Guru's older son, who had adopted the spiritual path like his father had renounced the world and was away on a long pilgrimage. Lakhmi Das, in turn, had married and settled down with his family in Kartarpur.

When the Guru sang his hymns now, his voice wavered imperceptibly and Mardana's fingers, as they strummed his beloved rebab, had lost some of their agility. Even so, when they sat down to play and sing together, it was as if not just the people before them listened, but the wind, birds, trees, and flowing waters of the Ravi too stopped awhile to take heed. The stories Mardana so animatedly related to the villagers of their travels together became interwoven into the conscience of the growing village. The villagers repeated them amongst themselves and recounted them to travellers. Each time an event from their lives was retold it acquired the individual perspective of the narrator, vacillating between reality and imagination, truth, and fiction. The hymns the Guru sang, however, were passed on unaltered and unchanged.

The fierce raider of darkness was completing his daily stride across the blue sky and the wind that had blown hot all day became merciful with his descent. As the birds came back to roost, Guru Nanak was making his way home from the fields along a dusty road. Sweat

poured down his ageing brows and the feet that had carried him across mountains and deserts had now grown more measured. The village lay ahead but the sounds of a horse's hooves slowed Guru Nanak's steps. When they came nearer, a voice asked,

"Listen Sir, can you guide me to the house of Guru Nanak?"

Guru Nanak turned around to see a young man in his twenties reining in his horse. He stared at the newcomer's face and smiled, his eyes shining beneath his ageing, greying brows.

"Allow me to lead your horse," said he, and taking the reins of the horse in his wrinkled hands began walking towards the village. The villagers they met along the way greeted him with folded hands and stared curiously at the stranger on the horse their Guru was leading himself. They passed a few houses and reached the *dharmshala*. Some volunteers working in the kitchen outside turned around to greet them. Large vats were bubbling away on fires and being stirred continuously by long wooden spatulas. They, too, were filled with curiosity about the identity of the newcomer beside Guru Nanak.

Sulakhni was waiting at the door as usual and her face lit up in a smile at the sight of him. She did not notice the stranger until they stopped before her.

"You have returned!" she said now and glanced at the stranger questioningly. Guru Nanak now turned towards his charge and said,

"You have arrived and I am Nanak."

The stranger stared in disbelief. This was Guru Nanak himself! The stories he had heard related about him had led him to believe that when he did come into the Guru's presence he would have to display as much reverence as one does before a king. But here he was, Lehna of Khadur, the son of a simple merchant, who had travelled to Kartarpur to meet the writer of those verses that had moved him so profoundly that he had known no peace by day or rest by night until he decided to travel to Kartarpur himself. It was the time of year when he led a group of pilgrims on their annual pilgrimage to the temple of Jwalaji. Since the time was at hand and the pilgrimage could not be postponed, he had left his village one morning at the head of a small group of pilgrims. On their way, they had stopped at a place for the night which he knew was not far from the village of Kartarpur, so, leaving the rest of the company, he had set out to meet the Guru alone.

He clearly remembered that fateful morning when he had been sitting in his courtyard saying his daily prayers with profound earnestness. He had been sitting with his eyes closed in deep meditation when these words floated towards him, resonating in the stillness around him and reverberating through his very being.

*There is one God,
His name is truth,
He is the Creator,
He is without fear and without hate,
He is beyond time immortal,
His spirit pervades the universe,*

*He is not born,
Nor does he die to be born again,
He is self-existent,
By the guru's grace shalt thou worship him.*⁴³

Lehna opened his eyes slowly. His neighbour's voice continued repeating the words, and each time it seemed as if he was hearing them for the very first time. As the darkness lifted and the rising sun illuminated the world around him, each line of this profound prayer had etched itself in his memory until he was sure he could repeat it himself. As his neighbour's voice died, Lehna quickly made his way to his house and asked him where he had learnt that prayer. Jodha, his neighbour, had just returned from Kartarpur where a distant cousin of his lived. He had been deeply influenced by Guru Nanak's teachings and hymns and had learnt the *Mool Mantar*, as the prayer was called, before his return. He told Lehna all about the egalitarian society of Kartarpur, imbued with the love of a sublime and supreme consciousness.

Lehna had decided to visit Kartarpur in search of the Guru, but the Guru had found Lehna himself.

Days followed one another in succession and Lehna forgot all about the pilgrimage and remained in Kartarpur, becoming a part of the small yet growing community. Wherever help was needed, Lehna was first to volunteer. He could be seen stirring the heavy cauldrons of curry in the community kitchen, repairing a falling wall, helping in the fields, looking after travellers,

⁴³ SGGS, pg. Khushwant Singh, Hymns of Guru Nanak, pg 14

carrying bricks, or serving langar. There were countless instances of his unquestioning devotion to Guru Nanak. Whatever the Guru asked of him, Lehna offered willingly.

One day, Lehna was returning from a visit to his family in Khadur. His wife had lovingly and skilfully stitched him a shirt made from the finest silk she could find in the neighbouring market town. When the time came for him to leave, she insisted that he wear the shirt and he obliged her affectionately. As he neared Kartarpur, he saw Guru Nanak standing in the fields with a few followers by his side. An unexpected rain shower had soaked the fodder meant for the cattle. Guru Nanak was telling them to carry the bundle home, but they were hesitant, reasoning with the Guru that the hay was completely soaked and thus useless. Lehna, upon hearing the Guru's words, jumped down from his horse and picked up the bundle of wet, muddy hay to place it on his head and turned towards Guru Nanak asking him to lead the way.

When they neared the Guru's house, Sulakhni, who was waiting by the door as usual, saw the condition of Lehna's shirt and exclaimed,

“What a beautiful silk shirt that was, and now it is completely ruined. Why did you not find anyone else to carry the wet hay home?” she chided her husband.

“He alone is worthy of carrying this burden.”

The seeds of religious and communal reforms Guru Nanak had planted needed careful nurturing to grow into

a tree that would one day bear the fruits of tolerance, righteousness, compassion, courage, and morality. When the time came for him to choose a successor for this momentous task, he overlooked his own sons, much to their displeasure, and chose Lehna instead, giving him the name of Angad which meant ‘part of one’s own self.’

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Discourse With the Siddhas at Batala

In the district of Batala lay the village of Achal. On the day of *Shivaratri*, which marked the birth of Lord Shiva, a grand fair was celebrated here every year that was attended by thousands of devotees and holy men belonging mostly to the Nath *siddha* yogic sects, who came here to hold religious discourses amongst themselves. As Achal was not far from Kartarpur, Guru Nanak decided to visit the fair. Only this time, he was accompanied not just by Mardana but Lehna as well.

Amongst the visitors to the festival every year was a group of musicians who were called *Rasdharis* or *Bhagatis*, for they sang songs of devotion. As these musicians sat down to sing, they placed before themselves a bowl in which passersby and others who sat to listen placed offerings of money.

Guru Nanak's name and fame had travelled everywhere and his arrival at the fair with his companions in tow created quite a furore. A clan of *siddhas* who had monopolized the attention of the people until then saw their audience hastening towards this newcomer who they noticed was dressed as a householder.

These *siddhas*, who had become *sanyasis* in the pursuit of spirituality, were indignant at the foolishness of the people who they thought should know better than

to go after a man who had not even the courage to renounce the world. They were entirely convinced that one could not begin to tread the path of spirituality without severing all ties with one's family and the rest of the world, for its cares and affairs were like quagmire, constantly pulling a man into an abyss of vice and moral depravity. A householder could never aspire to walk the road to salvation in their opinion, yet here was this man they called Guru Nanak, who sat before these fools who had flocked to him like sheep in their ignorance. The *siddhas* decided to teach him a lesson.

The musicians, too, went to sit before Guru Nanak when he began singing his hymns. They were mesmerised by the simple yet profound words that had been strung into beautifully poetic verses and they marvelled at the Guru's mastery of ragas and Mardana's skill at the rebab. None of them spared a thought for the bowl, however, and it lay abandoned where they had been sitting under the makeshift canopy of bamboo and straw supported over wooden poles. The *siddhas* conspired amongst themselves to steal the bowl. When the musicians discovered that the bowl was missing, they were distraught at having lost all their earnings and approached the *siddhas* for help as they were known for their clairvoyance.

"We are mere yogis," replied their leader who called himself Bhangar Nath. "You should go and ask where your bowl of money is from that great sage you were listening to who wears the garb of a common man.

Perhaps his powers are greater than our own,” he said in a voice laced with sarcasm.

The musicians went to Guru Nanak and entreated him for help. He told them that their bowl was hidden in the hollow of a tree that grew nearby. The musicians retrieved their earnings and thanked him profusely. The *siddhas*, however, were irate. They had meant to humiliate Guru Nanak but failed. Bhangar Nath now confronted the Guru and asked arrogantly,

“You cannot stake a claim to greatness by merely finding a bowl of money. You lead the life of a householder and yet fool these people into calling you a holy man. Why, a householder like yourself claiming to be a sage and hoping for salvation is like milk that is curdled and spoiled and still calls itself milk.”

“It does not matter whether one renounces the world or lives as a part of it. If one’s character and conscience are pure and untainted one can still aspire to achieve salvation. God lives within every heart. If one renounces ego and cultivates the consciousness of God within one’s self, then it does not matter whether he is a yogi or householder, he can cleanse his mind of the poisons of anger, hatred, lust, greed and egoism to find a state of calm in the midst of the troubles and turmoil of this world. How can you rebuke a householder when you yourself live on his charity? The grains you receive in alms are the fruits of a householder’s labour.”

“You can proffer any argument you like, but the truth remains unaltered. What householder can perform the

miracles that we perform? Even if we live on their charity, our achievements are greater than theirs for we have mastered our senses and achieved mystical powers.”

“If you persist in extolling your own virtues you must remember that the greatest of yogis, nonetheless, was born to a householder. If your father and mother had renounced the world before your birth how then could you stand before me and laud your own greatness?”

Bhangar Nath was silenced. After a few moments had passed, he spoke in a stifled voice, and the imperceptible tremor in it was like a delicate gossamer veil that concealed his inner turmoil.

“How can you put a commoner on the same pedestal as us? To live as a part of this world and its cares is to try and chew wax with teeth of fire. It is like living in a palace of snow wearing robes of fire. How can one live in the world and still meditate upon the Lord without distraction? In what recesses of the mind can one seek sanctuary from the cares of this world and remain unperturbed?”⁴⁴

“O yogi, just as a black koel is made beautiful with the sweetness of its song, so do words become more powerful when they are adorned with music. Come Mardana, play your rebab. Listen, O yogi, for this is the way,” and Guru Nanak began to sing.

*By relinquishing one's self-esteem and egoism,
Man unites with God by erasing all dualism,
The world is cumbersome for a self-willed man,*

⁴⁴ SGGS, pg. 943, Dialogues from the Siddha Gosht

*By earning the boon of the Guru's word,
chew iron one can,
To acknowledge God's presence within and without,
If God's will decrees, the worldly fire is put out,
Fear of the true Lord annihilated all pride,
Know that He is one and in Him let your mind reside,
For when His Word is in your heart enshrined,
Imbued in His love your body and mind will comfort find,
The fires of lust, anger and dishonesty shall be
suppressed,
With God's grace, O Nanak, shall one then be blessed.⁴⁵*

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⁴⁵ SGGS, pg. 943, Ho ho mai mai vichahu khovai...

Mardana Breathes His Last

Autumn had arrived, and the leaves on trees fell to shroud the earth in robes of yellow and gold, attempting to lend it warmth against the approaching winter. Sulakhni sat in the courtyard on her spinning wheel, rotating the drive wheel with one hand and handling the yarn with another. The soft sounds of the rotating wheel were in tandem with her deft hands as she sat, her brows knit together in concentration.

“Mata ji!”

Sulakhni looked up with a start. Shehzada stood at the door, a stricken look on his face, trying to catch his breath for he had been running.

“Where is Guru Nanak?”

“He has gone to the fields as usual. What is the matter?” asked Sulakhni, apprehensively.

“Father is asking for him,” replied Shehzada, turning his face aside to hide a tear. “I must hurry!”

He ran towards the fields to find the one he sought.

“Baba ji, father is asking for you!” His voice broke on the words as tears ran down his face unchecked. “He says his time has come.”

Guru Nanak threw his shovel aside and hurried after Shehzada. Mardana’s health had been declining over the past few days and his fingers, once so nimble with the

rebab, could barely lift it now. He could no longer go with Guru Nanak to the daily prayers, but the Guru visited him every day. The man who had walked thousands of miles by Guru Nanak's side, now spent his days laying on a cot in his yard turning towards the door at the sound of every step, waiting for it to be his friend's. When the latter came, they would talk about their travels for hours, laughing together. Mardana's rebab was still by his side on the cot for he would not hear of parting with it.

"Come and sit beside me, Nanak, and let me see your face for the last time," he said now as he saw Guru Nanak standing at the door.

"Dear brother, are you going to leave me?" asked Guru Nanak sorrowfully.

"All those years we spent travelling across oceans, forests, rivers and mountains, Nanak, I never wondered once where we were going or how the day would end because I had you by my side. But this journey is my own, brother, and I must go without you. I am glad you are here and the last thing I shall see is your dear face. I will go now with a heart full of gratitude. Sing one of your hymns for me, Nanak, and even though my fingers have lost their strength, the fluttering wings of the angel of death that I can hear now will lend music to your voice."

Guru Nanak held Mardana's feeble hand in both of his and began to sing.

*Air bestows the breath of life, the water nurtures and this
earth is like a mother to all,
Night and day are both like nursemaids, in their lap does
the world play and crawl,
Over good deeds and bad, God's judgement shall
preside,
The righteous shall then be nigh the Lord as
the wicked are cast aside,
The toil of those who have worshipped
Him shall bear fruit in the end,
With radiant faces shall they meet their Lord, and to
many others salvation lend.⁴⁶*

As Guru Nanak's voice dwindled into silence, a tear rolled down his face and fell on Mardana's hand, which had now grown cold and stiff.

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⁴⁶ SGGS, pg. 8, Pavan Guru paanee pitaa maataa dharat mahat...

A New Dawn

Lehna, now pontified and given the title of Guru Angad by Guru Nanak, walked through the sleeping lanes of Kartarpur towards the Ravi. The Hindus and Muslims of the village had constructed two separate structures as memorials to the Guru a day before. As his eyes swept over the river's banks, he saw not a sign of either of them and smiled poignantly, staring into the dark waters of the Ravi with unseeing eyes. He had been instructed by Guru Nanak to leave for Khadur taking with him a few faithful followers who had accepted the Guru's decision and Lehna's succession unquestioningly. The others, however, had wanted Sri Chand as the Guru's spiritual successor and refused to accept Guru Angad in his place.

As another dawn broke over the horizon, it illuminated the waters of the Ravi, and they gradually lost their mysterious shadows. There was another light, however, which rivalled that of the rising sun and it was the light in Guru Angad's eyes, for the sun only dispels the darkness in the world outside, but the light in his eyes had a brilliance that could dispel the darkness within, because it had been lit by the everlasting, inextinguishable flame of Guru Nanak's love, compassion, humility, wisdom and unwavering spirituality.

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