

# Walking with Nanak: Travels in His Footsteps

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The author Haroon Khalid has stated the objective of writing the book, *Walking with Nanak: Travels in his footsteps* (2022, Vintage, pp. 272) right away in his introduction to the book, that, "he wasn't interested in Nanak the saint but in Nanak the son, Nanak the father, Nanak the philosopher, Nanak the poet and Nanak the wanderer" (p. xii). Obviously he does not admit of the 'mystic and miraculous' image of Nanak which resides deep into the minds of his admirers and the followers of Sikh religion. He is concerned with the rationalist and argumentative Nanak, and for this good reason proclaims of Nanak being a perfect teacher (p. 98)

Not denying the fact that the author has genuine curiosity and urge to know and appreciate the personality of Guru Nanak, still one is inclined to suspect his method and approach to present the living profile of the great man.

The author has a friend and mentor in Iqbal Qaiser who acts as a his willing companion and takes him along the projected travel path of Nanak running through the length and breadth of the West Panjab, now in Pakistan. One may presume that this book could not have been written without the active company and assistance of this friend whom he prefers to call his mentor. Having brought out a creditable book on 'Historical Sikh Shrines in Pakistan' the said mentor not only acts as his guide but also the interpreter of the happenings associated with Nanak. His influence on the building up of the image of Nanak in the book is significant in view of the total absence of the knowledge of written and spoken Panjabi on the part of the author. The declared unorthodox religious views of Iqbal Qaiser bear an unmistakable imprint on the personality of Nanak which unfolds itself through the tales associated with him.

The life of Nanak emerging in the book has little newness about it except the imaginative and subjective

interpretation of the known stories about him. Even the verses of Nanak interspersed in the book are interpreted by the author to serve his own ends. The author is quite selective as to which of the stories he is to believe and which to discard. He does it at will and in a way it suits the kind of Nanak he desires to portray. Quite often he picks up stories that ordinarise and belittle every other Guru except Nanak.

It goes to the credit of the author Haroon Khalid that being very inquisitive he strives to reach at the truth by engaging him in intensive conversation with Qaiser about the tales surrounding Nanak. Despite his not being conversant with the spoken native language, his passion and love for Nanak makes up sufficiently for his handicap of communication.

The journey of the author in search of Nanak uncovers some very interesting historical details as the story progresses. Iqbal Qaiser on occasions offers a running commentary on the historicity of places marking the footsteps of the great man. Being an integral part of the itinerary of the author he too walks with Nanak in the figurative sense of the word. At one place he would stop to tell the reader that the particular serai or inn was built by Sher Shah Suri and the fateful retinue of Humayun, when he was being chased by Sher Shah, had passed through this road.

It is pertinent to mention here that the abiding interest of Iqbal Qaiser had earlier manifested in the form of a book wherein he had brought the dilapidated condition of Gurdwaras in Pakistan to light. As a result his criticism of the Government had woken up the Aukaf Board of Pakistan to initiate some restoration and renovation of the neglected buildings of Sikh shrines. The author Haroon Khalid gives the geographical location and relative distances of the spots as he goes from one shrine to another following the path once treaded by Nanak.

Citing the reasons for the neglect of Gurdwaras the author tells us that for the new occupants these religious places were mere habitats without any sentiment

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attached to them. As a consequence the terrible structural changes and strange facelift of the places followed and shattered the original shape and glory of the shrines. This has tragically happened in this part of the Panjab as well where the village mosques were converted into Gurdwaras at numerous places. He spares no occasion to strike at the conduct of Hindus and their religion. To create a wedge between the Sikhs and Hindus he blames the Hindus residing in the west Panjab of turning the abandoned Sikh gurdwaras into Hindu places of worship (pp. 191-92)

During the absorbing journey the author sometimes stops to narrate the changes occurred with the march of time. He tells us the sordid story of cities, towns and places and how their shape underwent a change during the turns and twists of history. The town Bedian, where the prosperous Bedi families once lived, was later inhabited by the lowcaste converts, who once worked on their lands and served the household Bedi masters before the partition. It offers the writer a chance to speak for these hapless persons who are condemned to live the life of ignominy and insults in any case. The writer is harsh on Muslims and Sikhs who, even after the conversion of lowcastes to Sikhism and Islam, refused them an honourable place in the fold of their respective religions.

The author has made history, fiction and travelogue move together in the book. This method of building the narrative makes it dramatic, interesting and informing, but at the same time it offers enough scope for introducing subjective perspectives and interpretations by the writer.

The author when faced by stark facts of history, often tends to fail the test of objectivity. While he is candid enough to remember the Mughal and Afghan invaders as marauders, he takes care to dilute the political brutality of Aurangzeb and omits his policy of forcible conversions altogether (pp. 114-116). Similarly he does not view the emperor Jehangir as bigoted and narrow minded in sharp contrast to the view held by respectable historians (229). These historical references occur when the events relating to Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Arjan are discussed by the author.

The atheistic and leftist orientation of the author and his mentor quite often distracts, obstructs and distorts his narrative. It happens when the writer cannot suppress his urge for questioning the veracity of Sakhis or stories associated with Nanak. He does so in polite words hiding his intentions under thick wraps. Indulging in demystification of Nanak is tantamount to the denial of real Nanak.

Viewing Nanak in complete isolation of the successor Gurus is a criminal act of misreading the essential spirit of Sikh religion which maintains that the core teachings and doctrine of Guru Nanak is no different from Guru Gobind Singh and rest of the Gurus. In an effort to soothe

the Sikh psyche he wishes the reader to understand the conflict between Sikhs and Islam in the right perspective. This advice to the Sikhs aims at absolving the Mughal rulers of wilful wrongdoings and oppression.

Many Gurdwaras located in remote places have been given an Islamic look by those using them as dwelling places. They have done it by removing or obliterating the visible identification marks of a typical Sikh shrine. (p. 170) The book is replete with stories constructed through street talk to counteract or discard the living image of Nanak recorded in Sakhi literature.

Haroon Khalid questions the authenticity of the spot venerated as Panja Sahib. He does not support the story of a serious dialogue between Nanak and the Muslim spiritual saint Qandhari and denies its very basis by citing questionable evidence (pp. 238-40). He glorifies the Nanak of his own making and the unsuspecting reader falls for his deceptive portrayal. The author goes to the extent of rejecting the firmly held belief that Guru Nanak ever having met Babur and Malik Bhago. It may be recalled that Guru Nanak had refused the invitation to the royal feast extended by the Malik and preferred to stay at the house of the humble carpenter Lalo.

The writer is least impressed by the successor Gurus as vehicles of Nanak's ideas and continuation of the Sikh religious tradition whereas J.D. Cunningham views all the successor Gurus as an embodiment of single soul, spirit and purpose. This observation is endorsed by Sir Gokul Chand Narang through a more profound, philosophical and convincing analogy.

The book is written in the style and passion reserved by the author for Nanak. The rule of Lodhi Pathans and Mughals runs parallel to the lives of the Gurus and the relations between them remained uneasy and precarious for most of the time. The writer has tried to strike a balance by taking care that Sikh sentiments are not hurt. On the other hand he exhibits a hostile attitude towards Hindus and their religion. He tries in vain to create an impression that the Sikh people and their religion have affinity with Islam rather than the Hindu beliefs and practices. He is not bothered whether the Sikhs buy his arguments and viewpoint or not.

It deserves a reading for the reason that it gives an insight into the mind of the Pakistani nation which promotes distorted history as part of its education system (p. 251). The author prefers to ignore or omit confronting all such situations where Nanak and the Islamic values stand face to face against each other. After all he is not oblivious to the fact that it is primarily the Sikh readership which will in the end receive the book with unabated enthusiasm.

Here and there the reader is benefitted by valuable references known only to keen scholars and observers. It

is heartening to note that the facade of Gurdwara Rori Sahib was designed and executed by Bhai Ram Singh, the great architect -son of the Panjab (pp. 99-100) who had also created the marvelous building of the Khalsa College Amritsar. The author does not forget to tell the reader that the reputation of Ram Singh as an artist was well recognised when he was asked to design the Darbar

Hall in the Osborne House palace of Queen Victoria. The book *Walking with Nanak* in elegant print is brought out by Penguin-Vintage. It is a must read for all those who are anxious to see Guru Nanak in the eyes of a Pakistani scholar who accepts the founder of Sikh religion in full glory but in complete isolation of the rest of the Sikh Gurus and the ancient Indian culture and civilization.