

At Baba Nanak's *dwar*, in Pakistan

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I WAS born in Aldinpur, a kilometre from Tarn Taran, Punjab. The township was founded by Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, who stayed there for 25 years, till tortured and martyred by Emperor Jahangir in Lahore. I believe Guru Nanak is the daata of everything in Sikhism, but Guru Nanak and Sikhism would have disappeared a century after him but for the compiling of Guru Granth Sahib by Guru Arjan. His father, Guru Ram Das, initiated the construction of Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, but died soon after. Guru Arjan compiled Guru Granth Sahib, completed the Darbar Sahib, and installed Guru Granth Sahib there. If there were no Guru Arjan and Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak's teachings would have faded.

His field of action was West Punjab, beyond the Ravi, in a pre-dominant Muslim population. I prefer to call him Baba Nanak, a more loving and affectionate term. None of the later Gurus were so addressed. I said in Parliament and repeat, that the partition was not of India, but of Punjab. We lost all the rich canal colonies and were cleaned out from the West. The Sikhs with their fortitude made a new life in the East, in poor and limited land.

What was the Muslim feeling for Baba Nanak? I have been to Pakistan a number of times. I asked to be taken to Kartarpur. It was not open to the Sikhs and there was no keenness on either side to do so. On my visit, I travelled alone, with no security, just a friend, to Kartarpur. I asked the local MP that I wanted to meet at least 400 people from the surrounding villages. He was happy to oblige. I believed that Baba Nanak was for the masses, most of all the poor.

Therefore, I wanted to meet the Muslim population.

The gurdwara was small, in a few acres; it had five Sikhs for service and stood in isolation away from any village. The villagers had come in large numbers; *pilao* had been made and *charpais* laid out. I wanted some singers of Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah and others. Three men sang for me. Baba Nanak, without the Sikhs, still had his *sharthalus*. They came regularly, in large numbers, to seek his solace. Baba's *dwar* continued to have *ranaq*.

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When I became MP in 2004, I went for the first time to Dera Baba Nanak, on our side, in Gurdaspur. I was shocked. People came, bowed in the dust, cried and went home. In the Punjab Government, officers like me, and all ministers simply ignored Dera Baba Nanak. Once I realised what I had missed, I began to make continuous propaganda in all language papers and in any other way. I demanded that the 4-km path be opened, with security wire put on the sides, and police on duty on either side. The Sikhs should be allowed, without passports or visas, to walk across, pray and come back. There was indifferent silence on both sides. When I went to Pakistan, I was interviewed as a former Chief Election Commissioner. I always asked to speak on Kartarpur. I put it to them that the Indian Government was sending Muslim pilgrims to Mecca at state cost and deliberately said that all world faiths can visit there "Meccas" and why then were they not allowing Sikhs to walk over to Kartarpur, our 'Mecca'. As it happens, Baba Nanak's main shrines, Nankana Sahib, Kartarpur and Panja Sahib are all in Pakistan. I believed this was an issue even for the UN, as we were the only people so punished.

I am giving this past not to claim anything. I believe Baba Nanak is doing this for us, in this year of remembrance. Our prayers have been heard. I thank the people of Pakistan for finally seeing the light. The work on both sides and the tremendous world interest will only promote what Baba Nanak preached. First, "Naa koi Hindu, Naa Musalman", we see no other. "Sabna jiyaa kaa ik daata", let me not ever forget, says Baba Nanak. In our morning, evening prayers, in our ardas, our final prayer, is, "Nanak Naam Charli Kala, Tere Bhane Sarbat Daa Bhala." Remembering your Name and your highest being, I pray for the benefit of all.

— The writer is a former MP and CEC