

# A BUS TO NANKANA

M.S. GILL BEGINS A FORTNIGHTLY COLUMN

BY M.S. GILL



**Y**esterday was Guru Nanak's birthday. All over this country, and around the world, people gathered to celebrate this remarkable figure of the Sufi-Bhakti tradition. Guru Nanak strove with all his might to promote the unity of God, the brotherhood of man and the equality of men and women. He exposed the absurdities of caste, and organised priesthood. He was born just across the border in Nankana Sahib, 30 miles from Lahore. For all his followers, and they are not just turbaned Sikhs, this is their Mecca.

It is an accepted human norm that all people everywhere should be freely allowed to go to their Meccas. There is turmoil in Palestine since long. Jerusalem is home to three of the most important world religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I have been there a number of times. Whatever their differences, all three religious groups are allowed to freely worship at their shrines. We Indians believe

there are many paths to salvation, and are happy to show our respect to all faiths. For me certainly it was a dream come true to first go to the Church of the Resurrection and show my respect. I paid equal homage at Al Aqsa and the Wailing Wall.

In India, for the last many years, the national government has been spending about Rs 200 crores annually to send 80,000 odd Muslim brothers to Mecca, free, in comfort, by air. For convenience, flights have been started not only from Delhi but from Srinagar and elsewhere. If this is the national policy, so be it.

But looking at the total situation I find a strange policy prevailing even 57 years after Partition, as regards Guru Nanak and Nankana Sahib. Punjab was engulfed in the Partition turmoil, but was not the prime mover for it. The difficult situation in those early years led to rigid controls even over visits for worship. India-Pakistan agreements provided for four annual visits of very limited, specified numbers, approved by the home min-

istries of the two countries to Sikh shrines in Pakistan. Somehow, this settled into a semi-permanent policy, and has continued. And so this is the only faith that even in the 21st century has to visit their Mecca in specified numbers on specified occasions after government permission from both countries.

We all want peace, the Punjabis more than anyone else. The Partition affected them. The 1965 and 1971 wars as well as the recent unnecessary massing of troops on the borders, all hurt them very badly. I know, because I was very much a part of the 1965 and 1971 affairs. Today, thank God, doors are opening, howsoever slowly. The Pakistan Prime Minister was here this week, and we all

met warmly. It cannot be otherwise. Whatever the political boundaries now we are after all one historical people with a common past of thousands of years.

It is good to see a sudden loosening of restrictions. Last week, some hundreds of Pakistani musicians and artists were in Jalandhar to celebrate a common heritage. An equal number were in Amritsar doing the same, and holding seminars in Guru Nanak University. I read in this week's Punjab papers, that some thousands are coming in a few days, invited by my friend Nirmala Deshpande for a peace mela, again in Jalandhar. We read every day of dele-

gations of lawyers, judges, fashionwalas, sports people, writers, and what have you, all rushing across to have a good time in Delhi, or in Lahore. This is all welcome, and can only push the two governments towards better understanding and lasting peace. The people will perhaps drive the politicians in the desired direction.

But I find it strange, and not understandable, that while dancers, poets, actors, judges, athletes *et al* can cross borders easily now, those who wish to go to their Mecca in Nankana Sahib have to still, six decades after Partition, undergo the same harassment and the same permis-

sions for small numbers. Punjab papers showed last week people fighting to get into the *jatha* of 3,000 worshippers going to Pakistan for Guru Nanak's *janamdin*. Others protested publicly at the refusal of 750 visas by Pakistan. I also read of the Pakistan consulates in the UK being difficult about giving visas to visitors to Nankana Sahib. Why should this happen in this new century? Is it not a basic human right that all people should be able to go freely to their Meccas wherever they be? Yes, one must get a passport, and of course a visa from the host country, which cannot be refused if one is not a bad fellow. Why should people be forced to go in specified *jathas* under supervision? I

should be able to go with my family or friends for a day or a week. Pakistan will earn from this religious tourism, as we do when they come to Ajmer Sharif. Both governments should assist and not hinder.

**A** regular India-Pakistan dialogue is currently going on. I have written on this issue to our Prime Minister and the foreign minister again and again. While I get the standard comfort responses, I see little substance. I find it strange that while we have a proposed 80-odd confidence building measures for discussion, the Amritsar-Lahore-Nankana Sahib bus does not figure anywhere formally. I have suggested it should be on the agenda, but have not succeeded. A bus is going from Kolkata to Dhaka and another from Tripura to Bangladesh; we are striving hard for a Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus and a Khokhrapar-Minabao train in Rajasthan, but the Amritsar-Nankana door is nowhere near opening. I had proposed and hoped for a token bus on

Guru Nanak's *janamdin*, but to no avail.

I am a Punjab member of Parliament, and it is my duty to bring out into the open the sentiments and concerns of the people there. But Guru Nanak is not just for Punjab or the turbaned Sikhs. Perhaps Mr Advani is a better follower than I am. Surely the governments of Pakistan and India need to look at this little matter of faith and sentiment, and give comfort, without delay, to a very large number of people, without hurt to anyone!

People in authority do not understand the human drama of Partition. Sadat Hassan Manto of Amritsar, the greatest short story writer ever, did. The contradictions of Partition will never end. For the last many weeks, we have Muslim *kiranyas* singing in Punjab and Delhi *gurdwaras*, to large admiring *sangats*. Will the two governments apply a little imagination to this human problem?

■ M.S. GILL is a Congress Rajya Sabha MP from Punjab. He has served as Chief Election Commissioner

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