

THE WARMTH OF LAHORE

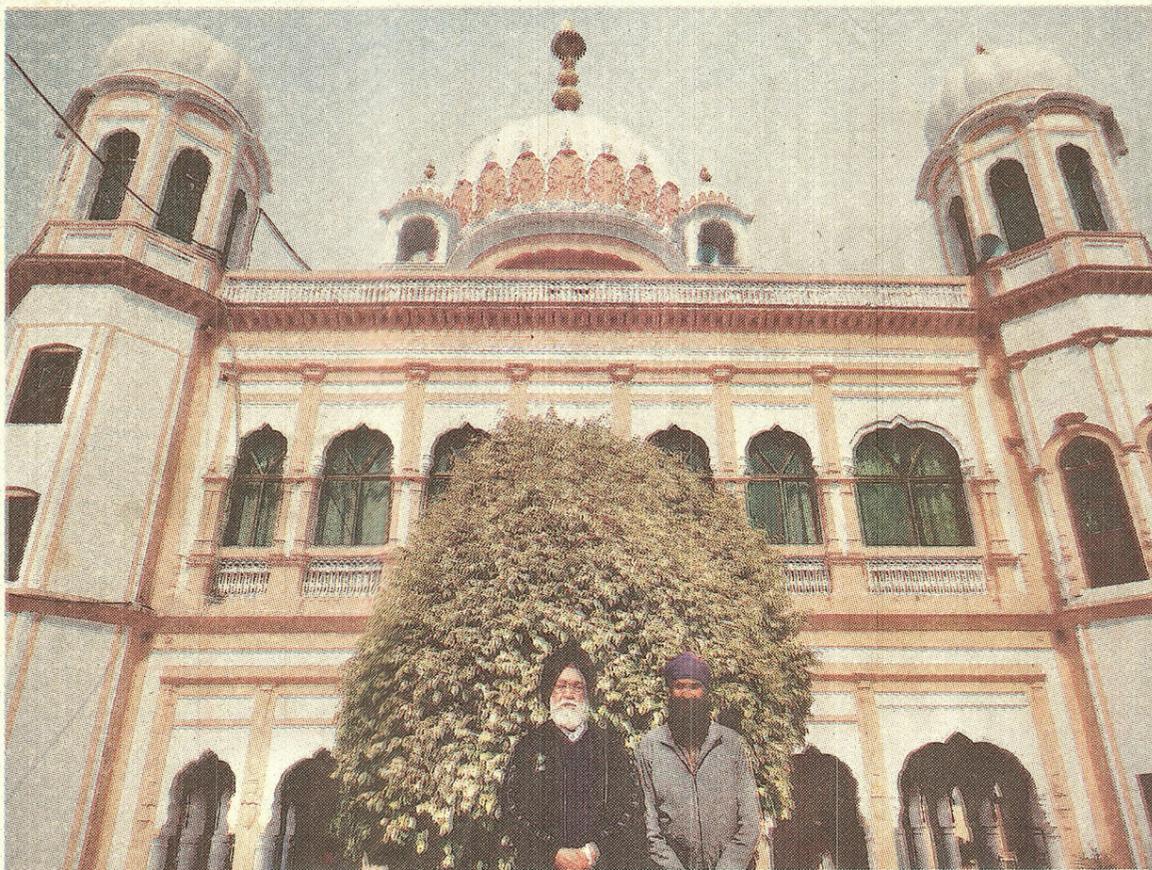
BESIDES EXPERIENCING THE MYRIAD COLOURS OF LAHORE, PAKISTAN, THE WRITER ACKNOWLEDGES THE ISSUES FACED BY TRAVELLERS EVERYDAY

travel DIARY LAHORE

When I was a little boy in Tarn Taran, a doggerel known to every Punjabi was oft quoted, "The man who has not been to Lahore, is not born." A second lesser known, but often said in verbal jousts ran, "The Donkey has been to Lahore, and now puts on airs."

I hadn't been to Lahore for many years, and thought mid-February the perfect time to visit friends. A night stay at the Guru Nanak University was a pleasure. A better-kept campus with rich plantation can hardly be seen anywhere else. A visit to the Golden Temple, in the mid-day warming sun, was as always exciting.

The drive to Attari-Wagha was interesting. Just out of Amritsar, was the bronze statue of Sardar Sham Singh Attariwala. Thirty years ago, as a young commissioner, I dreamt of putting up such monuments, but the time was not right. On both sides of the road, I saw excellent wheat and the yellow mustard of Mulik Raj Anand's short stories. At the Attari Border, I saw hundreds and hundreds of laden trucks, waiting to cross over. I questioned people. They were carrying many kinds of vegetables. I asked of the waiting time, and was horrified to know that it is generally a week, sometimes even more! I enquired if it was as bad on the Pakistani side. I learnt that they were better. Why was it so on our side? It appears that the perpetual Indian curse of distrust and lack of common sense led to the filling of multiple forms, and many useless enquiries. From my experience, I can say that most of the policies and reforms are reduced and sometimes nullified by bureaucrats, who see a devil under every bed, and think that form filling is the solution to it all. The robust Punjabis on the Lahore side are inclined to use their common sense more, than the big rulebooks. To cap it all, trucks pass from 9 am to 2 pm, after which, the police on both sides practice its aggressive evening parade. It is strange that vital commerce is allowed only for a



few hours, the rest of the day being given over to the promotion of aggressive parades.

I will give a parallel example. The Amritsar-Lahore bus was started with great fanfare many years ago. The day I crossed, the bus too had gone to Lahore, absolutely empty, except for the driver and the cleaner. It seems this happens all the time, and everybody is pretending that a great confidence building action has been taken. I am from the Tarn Taran village. I had said publicly many years ago that the bus would fail unless there was a Pakistan visa office in Amritsar and an Indian one in Lahore.

I think they existed, but were shut down after the 1965 war. The bus requires the man from my village to come to Amritsar in the morning, get a 24-hour visa stamped, go to Nankana Sahib and cross back in the evening. Punjab people have to fill half-a-dozen forms, which are sent to half-a-dozen ministries, mainly home and police agencies, and they are lucky if they get a visa in six months. All this to take a day-trip to Lahore, 30 miles across the border.

The system being followed is meant to nullify the initiative, no less. Strangely, more

than ₹1,000 are charged for this 30-mile trip.

Lahore people suffer equally. Pakistanis get a visa to go direct to Delhi and are not allowed to get down at Amritsar to visit the Golden Temple, or for cheaper medical treatment, in a familiar Punjabi environment. The Delhi-Lahore bus also zips through Punjab, escorted at our cost, but no Punjabi can get on it.

On the Pakistan side, many people welcomed us, and we stayed with Cambridge friends. In 1974, Dr Rashid Amjad was doing a PhD in Cambridge when I was writing a book on the Punjab Green Revolution success. He is the only one I know who married a pretty girl, took her to Cambridge, and still managed to study other irrelevant matters and somehow get a PhD!

The Mall Road and the wide thoroughfares were a delight. The silk cottons were already bursting into potential blooms. For centuries, Punjabis have lived with invaders, and the doggerel is known to all of us: *Khada Peeta Lahe Da, Baaki Ahmad Shahe Da*. Eat and drink what you can, the rest belongs to Ahmad Shah Durrani. So, every evening there had to be a massive

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meal hosted by a gracious lady. One evening we were taken to Andaaz Restaurant in Old Lahore, overlooking the beautifully lighted Badshahi Mosque, Ranjit Singh's tomb, and the fort built by Akbar. Of course, I played a round of golf. In the pavilion verandah, I found four old bodies, indulging in plates of fried eggs, tomatoes, toasts, cheese and mushrooms. I went across to greet them. They tried hard to ruin my cholesterol levels, and were anxious to take me to dinner. Another golfer passing by was introduced to me as a past federal secretary.

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were brother Gills. All Punjabi peasants are Gills, Chatthas or Waraichs. We are tribal people from the north, religious variations came to us later and our past overrides all these. We hugged each other and numerous photographs were taken. He said I had made his day. I knew he had made mine.

The next day I went to Kartarpur, some distance from Narowal, two hours from Lahore. People think only of Nankana Sahib, where Guru Nanak was born. My take is different. The miracle child lived the first 15 years at Nankana, the next 15 at Sultanpur Lodhi in Kapurthala, working in the Lodhi governor's office. At 30, he gave it all up and became a Sufi *fakir* in search of the ultimate. He travelled to Baghdad, Mecca Madina, Assam, Tibet, Sri Lanka and a lot of other places. After 20 years of having sat with the *sants, sadhus*, and Sufis of

the world, he came back at the age of about 50, set up a farm on the banks of Raavi and spent the next 20 years preaching what he knew. Guru Nanak's teachings are all from Kartarpur. He passed away there. Muslims and Hindus argued over burial and cremation. As the legend goes, they found only flowers under the *chaddar* — half were buried, half cremated. To me Kartarpur, from where a mature Guru Nanak preached Sikhism, comes first and his place of birth second.

Sadly, in 1947, independence came to both countries, but marooned the Mecca-Madina of the Sikh people. For the past 64 years, we are allowed limited permission for a few thousand each year, by the Home/Police Ministries of the two countries for pilgrimage only to go to Nankana Sahib, Lahore, and Panja Sahib near Islamabad. Guru Nanak's Kartarpur was locked away, and it fell into disrepair. Now, the Pakistan Wakf has repaired it and opened it for limited privileged visitors.

In the early winter morning, we drove across the wheat and yellow mustard fields through the pleasant countryside, passing villages

and small settlements. I did not see too many boys, and particularly girls, on the road going to school. At Kartarpur, we suddenly turned a bend in the road and there was the Gurdwara, elegant and standing alone in a vast green rural landscape. I paid my obeisance and climbed to the top to look across at the eucalyptus trees on the Dhussiband across the Raavi. So close and yet so far.

I had wanted to meet people, real people, peasants, the salt of the land. I had met enough of the upper crust in Lahore. A large number had come. We sat on *charpais*. Deghs of biryani had been brought. Everyone ate. Three leading singers from the area were there. Each sang to his heart's content, and my delight.

They sang of Guru Nanak, Bulle Shah, Heer Ranjha and Farid. I then spoke to them, and made it clear that Guru Nanak was for the people. Therefore, for me to come and do isolated prayers, and not meet the people, amongst whom he is still revered as a great Sufi, was not possible.

At Nankana Sahib, the next day, I discovered that the Gurudwara has improved. The inner com-

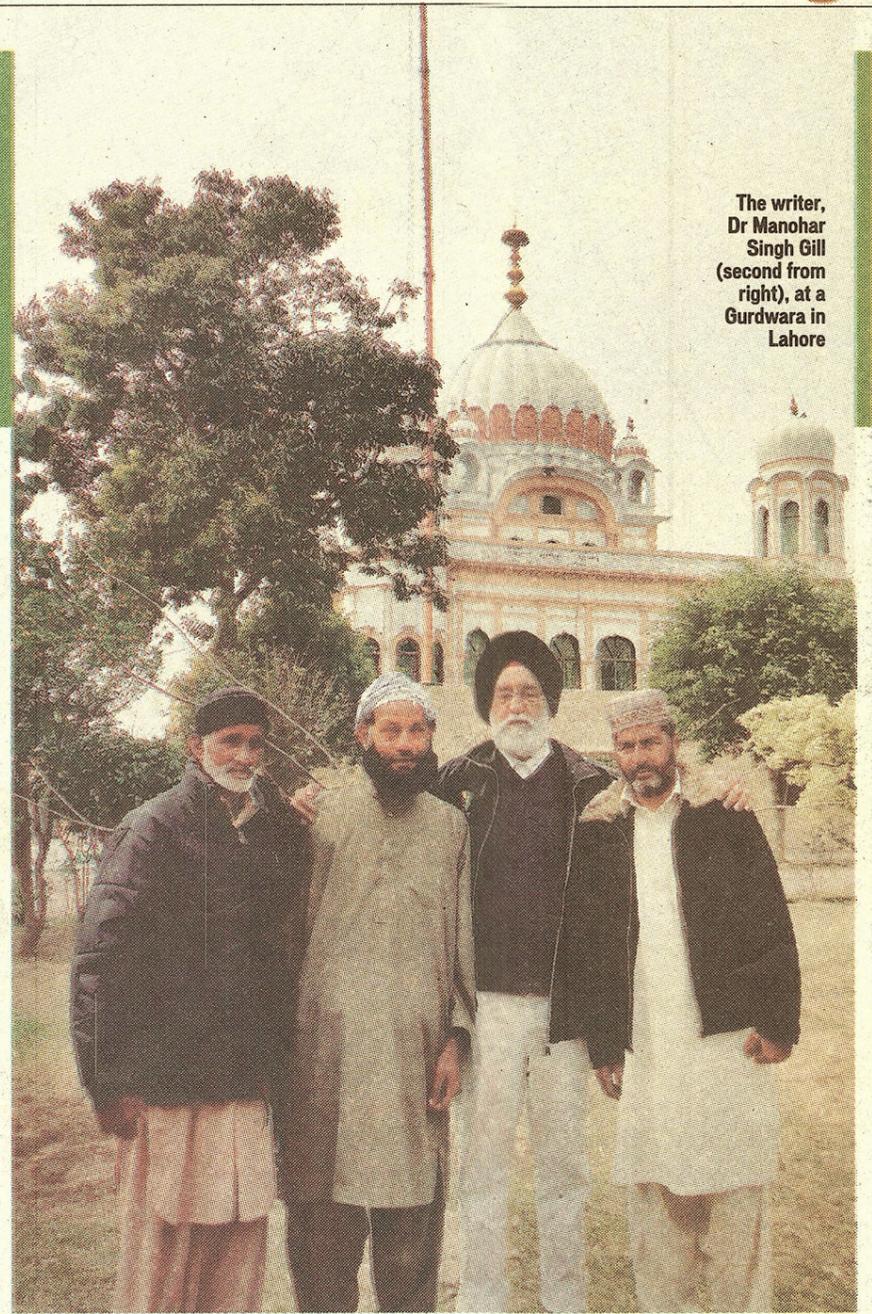
pound is elegantly marbled. There are many double-storey rest houses for pilgrims and a sarovar.

There is also an excellent Guru Nanak School nearby, where a thousand students study. My wife and I had lunch with the family of Haroon Bhatti. He is the 16th descendent of Rai Bolar, the zamindar of the area in 1469, when Guru Nanak was born.

I went to Aitchison College and spoke to the boys. I visited the Lahore School of Economics, set up by my friends, the two Chaudhary brothers, both Cambridge alumni.

Since 2004, I have been campaigning at every level for a direct and free access to Kartarpur, from Dera Baba Nanak, without visas. The idea is simple. We can walk barefoot, two kilometers across a boat bridge over the Raavi, built post monsoon, do our prayers and come back. The path could be cordoned on both sides with barbed wire, with police in attendance. Security will be satisfied and the Sikh people of India will have full access to their Mecca as all other faiths have to theirs.

The writer, Dr Manohar Singh Gill, is a Member of Parliament



The writer, Dr Manohar Singh Gill (second from right), at a Gurdwara in Lahore