

Rashmi Talwar Saanjh-Togetherness SAANJH-TOGETHERNESS

19 MAR

BETWEEN AMRITSAR & LAHORE by Dr. Manohar Singh Gill MP Rajya Sabha

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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: plenty of people from every corner of India, and queues, to get in over the narrow causeway. I talked to many in the Parikarma. Even I was astonished, at the presence of all of India. I met Tamils, Andhrites, families from Odisha, others from Bihar and Bengal. This was just a sample. Everything sparkled in the bright sun and clear air, and the mood was one of joy.

The drive to Attari-Wagha was interesting. The many laned road is perfect. 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 ripe. On both sides of the road, I saw excellent wheat, and the yellow mustard of Mulk Raj Anands' 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! This is hardly smooth commerce, and I could imagine the suffering of the drivers in the cold, and the loss to the transport companies, in efficient utilization of the trucks. I enquired, if it was as bad on the Pakistani side. I learnt that they were better! Why was this so on our side? It appears that the



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Manohar Singh Gill, Member Parliament

perpetual Indian curse of distrust, and lack of common sense, leading to the filling of multiple forms, and many many useless enquiries. I am clear from my long experience, that most good 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 big rule books. To cap it all, trucks pass from 9A.M. to 2P.M. after that the police on both sides, practice their evening aggressive 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 and negative attitudes. The fact is both the police and the people are relaxed, and not with this goose stepping.

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, entirely 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 a Tarn Taran village. I had said publically many years ago that the bus will fail, unless there is 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 needs a man from my village, to come to Amritsar in the morning, get a 24 hrs visa stamped, go to Nankana Sahib, and cross back in the evening, dining with his family. 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 then a thousand rupees are charged for this 30 mile trip.

I will also say, that the Lahore people suffer equally. I could quote numerous examples, of high dignitaries, and professionals begging around our embassy in Islamabad. Their request

sometimes, for my help embarrasses me. 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 too, zips through the Punjab, escorted at our cost, but no Punjabi can get on it! I wish somebody would explain the rationale to me.

On the Pakistan side, many people welcomed us, and we stayed with Cambridge friends. In 1974 Dr. Rashid Amjad, newly married, was doing a Ph.D. in Cambridge, when I was writing a book, on the Punjab Green Revolution Success. He is the only case that I know, who got married to a pretty girl, took her to Cambridge, and still managed to study other irrelevant matters, and somehow get a Ph.D.! Manzoor had worked with me in Nigeria for four long years, but never given up the Rishta. The Mall Road and the wide thoroughfares were a delight. The Silk cottons, were already bursting into potential blooms, ancient plane trees touching the sky were everywhere. 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 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 Akbar built Fort.

Of course, I played a round of Golf. I could not compete with the idle of Lahore, distinguished high public servants they might have been, but I did not disgrace myself. In the pavilion Verandah, I found four old bodies, tucking into plates of fried eggs, tomatoes, toasts, cheese and mushrooms. I went across in a wicked mood 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. He gave me a knee touching greeting, in honour of the Indian Election Commission's past work. I had been there once.

In that society of the well to do, I suddenly spied, an Aam Aadmi, a peasant, sixtyish, white Punjabi Chaddar, and white Punjabi Turban in a jaunty village style, that I know. He had a broom and was sweeping tree leaves. He was looking longingly, at the only Sikh on the horizon. I walked across and greeted him. We soon learnt that we were brother Gills. All Punjabi peasants, are Gills, Chatthas, Waraich etc. We are a tribal people from the North, religious variations came to us later, and our past over rides all these. We hugged each other, and numerous photographs were taken. He said I had made his day. I knew that 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 his first 15 years at Nankana, the next 15 at Sultanpur Lodhi in Kapurthala, working in the Lodhi Governors office. At age 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 elsewhere. 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 the 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, and 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 last 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 2004, I had gone to Dera Baba Nanak, a small township, where Baba used to come across the Raavi, from his right bank Ashram, to preach to the people: hence the name Dera Baba Nanak. I stood on the Dhussiband on the Raavi, and saw Kartarpur 2 kms across. I found that Sikh men and women came everyday, in their hundreds, to bow in the mud, cry a little, and go back home. They could only glance at Kartarpur with longing eyes. It is strange that the Sikhs are the only people in the world, who are denied free and liberal access to their Mecca-Madina. I believe that the indifference on both sides, has given this punishment to the Sikhs since independence.

In the early winter morning, we drove across wheat and yellow mustard fields, through the pleasant countryside, passing villages and small settlements. The agriculture is good but frankly could be better. I did not see too many boys, and particularly girls, on the road going to school. In our Punjab thousands of girls on cycles, rushing to lots of schools is a happy sight. I missed that. 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. A large number of people were waiting to greet me. 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. The experience will live with me, as it will with them.

At Nankana Sahib, the next day, I found that the Gurudwara is much improved. The mud inner compound is elegantly marbled. There are many double storeyed 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. Rai Bolar took to this miracle child, and Sikhs have plenty of stories of Rai Bolar's great love for Guru Nanak. So do the Bhatti family. The family were gracious and kind, the final proof, Saag and Makki Roti in a big spread.

I went to Aitcheson 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. This outstanding school, is putting a thousand boys and girls into Pakistan society every year. Girls and boys were in equal numbers, the girls better dressed than our Delhi ones. There were many Libraries and cafeterias. They had tried to give a Cambridge atmosphere. I believe this school will impact, Pakistan's future in a positive way. Someone on my side should have a look, and start something similar in the Punjab.

Since 2004, I have been campaigning at every level, for direct and free access to Kartarpur, from Dera Baba Nanak, without visas etc. 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. In the 21st Century, it is time good and caring people in both countries, looked at this, to give comfort to the Sikhs.

Dr. Manohar Singh Gill

Member of Parliament

Contact No- 011-23792953 / I thank Dr MS Gill for sending this write-up for Saanjh.wordpress.com... Regards Rashmi Talwar for Saanjh-Amritsar Lahore Blog

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