

Divine inspirations: Homage to the Guru

Today may seem like any ordinary day. And for most purposes and obvious reasons, it indeed is. But at the same time, it is a very special one too. On this day, many times and climes ago, a man – nay, a Guru – was born, who launched an idea, a philosophy, faith; Sikhism.

This day marks the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikh religion.

In our country, perhaps the most visible embodiment of Sikhism is the large and prominent gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) at Nilkhet Road in the campus of Dhaka University. If not anything else, at least the magnificent dome must have caught your eye.

But of course, that's not all that there is.

"There are two in Dhaka, two in Chattogram, and one in Mymensingh," says Parash Lal Beghi, President of Gurdwara Management Committee Bangladesh.

You have certainly heard of the aforementioned prominent one, known as Gurdwara Nanak Shahi. What about the other one, though?

The other one, Gurdwara Sangattola, is located at Old Dhaka's Shirish Das Lane in Bangla Bazar. The building is relatively small and unpretentious.

Regarding its past, renowned historians such as Syed Muhammed Taifoor and Muntassir Mamoon quoted the tradition, which says that the ninth Guru (during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb) visited Dhaka and built this centre. The prominent historians also note that the original building has long disappeared.

The gurdwara at DU campus is older. According to a plaque attached on one of its walls, Gurdwara Nanak Shahi was 'originally built by Bhai Natha, A Missionary who came to Dhaka during the time of the 6th Guru.'

But, once again, let us go beyond that – saving the 'best' (most prominent) for the last!



Curiously enough, history whispers of yet another Sikh establishment in Dhaka, which is non-existent today.

All we can do, then, is paint a blurry picture with our imagination, relying on age-old accounts.

It was located around half a mile away from the Eidgah in Dhanmondi's Satmasjid Road.

"Out in the waste, half hidden in bramble growth, a well and a broken arch are the only visible signs of the Sikh monastery that once flourished here," wrote F B Bradley-Birt, in the Romance of an Eastern Capital (1906). There is a local tradition that the great teacher (Guru Nanak) once visited Dacca and drank from this well, to the waters of which miraculous properties have ever since been attributed."

Later, by the time of the renowned historian Ahmad Hasan Dani, the structures were probably all gone: in his 1962 book, "Dacca- A Record of its Changing Fortunes," he wrote that the "Sikher Mandir and Guru Nanak's well" are 'not traceable.'

But while you marvel of a lost Dhaka, the accounts also prompt you to appreciate the cultural and the religious diversity of our city.

And Gurdwara Nanak Shahi at Dhaka University campus is a shining example of that.

As you walk through the main gate, you will quickly realise that the compound is quite spacious, with a front yard and a number of buildings. And along with the crown of the gurdwara, i.e. the dome, the rest of the structure too — with arches and perforated screens — immediately comes in clear sight.

The beautiful arched doorways and other elements add to the ambience and give a sense of antiquity. The men wearing the traditional turban and the bracelet and carrying the dagger, and religious symbols prevalent all around the place, sets the ambience.

But perhaps, when you take the first steps inside the gurdwara — any gurdwara — your attention will generally be immediately directed to the focal point, a treasure every Sikh place in the highest reverence — Guru Granth Sahib.

On a raised platform, the large and majestic Guru Granth Sahib, the Holy Scripture, is often referred to as the 11th Guru (after the 10 Gurus in human form,

starting from Guru Nanak, down to Guru Gobind Singh who died in 1708).

A devotee walks to the Guru and bows down in front of it, paying the utmost respect. S/he then joins the mass sitting on the floor. The programme begins.

On one side is a small setup from where kirtan is sung as the devotees listen intently.

As the prayers go on — the recitations, the chants, the mantras — the air in the crowded hall gets thick with an energy that is heartfelt and unexplainable; a feeling hard to explain, but an experience you feel when you are in the presence of a large group of people where everyone has gathered for the same purpose, and are united by a common love and loyalty.

During the ceremony, at times, everyone listens in silence to the person reciting. And at other times, everyone joins him, and the hall reverberates.

Hymns sung. Prayers said. The programme draws to an end. A morsel of traditional prasad (a kind of halwa) is offered, which the followers receive on cupped hands. Finally, food is served (for free) at the 'langar' or community kitchen.

At Gurdwara Nanak Shahi, this course of extraordinary events occurs weekly, on Fridays, from around 11AM. "Everybody is welcome, regardless of cast or creed," says Parash Lal Beghi, President of Gurdwara Management Committee Bangladesh.

When asked regarding the events that will take place on 12 November for the birth anniversary of the first Guru, he informed that the main prayers and celebrations will take place at the gurdwara on Friday 15 November.

So, if you are planning a visit — to celebrate the birth of the founder of this great religion or simply to witness the activities of a gurdwara, or to just see a gurdwara itself — why not this Friday!

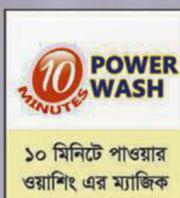
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