

HOW LONG WAS GURU NANAK'S TRAVEL TOWARDS MIDDLE EAST?

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ABSTRACT

There is no record of definite dates of travels of Guru Nanak towards Middle East so much so that one historian says that Guru Nanak started his travel in 1521 while the other says that he ended his travel in 1521 in the same source of information, *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, published by the Panjabi University, Patiala. In this article it has been attempted to find out the length of period of his travel in Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

Although it is well established fact that Guru Nanak (1469-1539 CE) has traveled extensively throughout the South Asia and Middle East. Fauja Singh and Kirpal Singh, Sikh historians, have collated the information from various sources into three major travels as follows [5]:

1. From Talwandi to Sultanpur to Benaras to Dhubri to Assam to Dacca to Ceylon to Ujain to Mathura to Talwandi.
2. From Talwandi to Kailash (Sumer) Parbat to Talwandi.
3. From Talwandi (some say from Kartarpur) to Hinglaj to Mecca to Baghdad to Kabul to (Talwandi) Kartarpur.

Besides the above travels there are many short ones in Punjab and adjoining areas. The irony is that no definite dates for any travel have been given by them.

Donald G Dawe [6, Entry – Nanak, Guru] also reported in Encyclopedia of Sikhism that it is difficult to establish an exact itinerary of Guru Nanak's travel. Customarily they are grouped into four lengthy journeys (*Udasis*) to the east, south, north, and west. He further said that Guru Nanak's traveling ended around 1521 CE with the establishment of Kartarpur. He had also mentioned that Guru Nanak was an eyewitness to the havoc created during the invasion of Saidpur (Now Eminabad) in district Gujranwala, Pakistan by Zahir ud-din Muhammad Babar in 1520/1521 CE.

According to Sahib Singh Sethi [6, Entry - Babarvani] the year of destruction of Saidpur is 1521. This is based on his interpretation of so-called *Babarvani* (*Babarvani*). I used the word 'so-called' because there is no such title for any of three Bani (Sahibs) compiled in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib [2] in which the attack of Saidpur and its destruction have been described by Guru Nanak. Although Donald G Dawe and Sahib Singh Sethi reported the dates of attack on Saidpur as 1520 and 1521 but Sri Ram Sharma [6, Entry- Babar, Zahir ud-din Myhammad] said that Babar

entered in Punjab in 1523.

On the other hand Major Gurmukh Singh [6, Entry, Eminabad] wrote that according to Bhai Bala *Janam Sakhi* after leaving Sultanpur and before setting on his long travel Guru Nanak accompanied by Bhai Mardana first visited Eminabad when this town was sacked by Babar in 1521.

Just imagine how conflicting dates of Guru Nanak's travel towards Middle East are reported in the same source of information, Encyclopaedia of Sikhism [6]. Two scholars reported the ending of Guru Nanak travels at Saidpur in 1521 while the other reported the beginning of the travel towards Middle East in 1521.

The detailed information about the route of Guru Nanak's travel towards the West (Middle East) has been reported by Fauja Singh and Kirpal Singh [5] and Dr Trilochan Singh [7] without mentioning any dates.

Dr Trilochan Singh [7, p-383] reported about Guru Nanak's stay in Baghdad according to *Makke di Gosht* as follows:

“...These dialogues show two things. Firstly they reveal a very close affinity between monotheism and ethical and spiritual doctrines of Islam and Sikhism, a fact which has been clouded by unhappy political relations between the Sikhs and Muslims of Punjab some time past, and serious estrangements after partition of the country (India). Secondly they reveal Guru Nanak's profound knowledge of the doctrines of Islam. He was able to establish that his religion was something quite distinct and different from the popular orthodox Hinduism. As it had a close affinity to Islam, they also felt he was reviving the original spirit of Islam in his own way. These dialogues also show the immense spiritual power he exercised over the people of that period.”

Rukn-ud-din has written a lot about Guru Nanak and in one of his writings he pays following glowing tribute to Nanak's learning, fearlessness, and character [7, p-390-391]:

“Nanak Faqir attained proficiency in all knowledge and especially in the literature of Islam, and the commentary on Koran, the religious beliefs and Arabic and Persian literatures, and was thoroughly advanced in them. He fought to finish oppression which was prevailing in the world. He was the standard-bearer of Truth and eradicator of the false. He would get the poor his rights and smash the vanity of the proud. He was the best specimen of piety and of a traveller.” (Plate VI in Ref. 7).

“His morality was like a pure soul containing chosen and transparent gems, and his soul was so transparent as if it was unconcerned, having no connection whatever with insipid and tasteless things of the world. The Baba's charming and animate talk still rings into my ears. He would cure the sick, and serve the fakir and the learned.” (Plate VII in Ref. 7).

He used to compose poems in Arabic and liked men of letters and poets. His thoughts provided basis to every literature and every poet, the glory of which is reflected in his poems. The rhyme itself was attracted towards his thoughts as if they were a magnet.”* (Plate VIII in Ref. 7)
*The irony is that no such poems of Guru Nanak written in Arabic or Persian are available except a few reported by Dr Trilochan Singh in his book [7].

However, if we look into information in *Makke di Gosht* as reported by Dr Trilochan Singh and glowing tribute for Guru Nanak as reported by Rukn-ud-din it becomes clear that Guru Nanak might have stayed in Baghdad (Middle East) for a considerable long time.

Dr Trilochan Singh [7] reported that there is a stone not far from the Tigris, on which Guru Nanak sat everyday and delivered his inspiring sermons. Every day, the Dastgir Pir, and Bahlol Dana, another Sufi saint, sat near the Master, imbibed every word of his wisdom. There were illuminating discussions, inspiring songs, and mystic communion between the Master and his admirers. When Guru Nanak came away Pir Bahlol Dana never forgot that the vision and mystic illumination and he sat there in front of the stone with a few personal relics that the Guru had left, for sixty long summers and winters. When he died he asked to be buried near the place sanctified by the holy feet of his Master, Baba Nanak. On the stone his disciples engraved the story. There were two inscriptions one out side the shrine and one on the stone. The one on the stone is still there and the other has faded away or gone with the demolition of the wall. The present inscription is in Arabic and Turki as shown in following Figure 1.



Fi. 1. The above inscription is seen two times on the inside wall of the shrine as shown in Plate II in Ref. 7. Therefore, this inscription is not on the stone used by Guru Nanak to sit as described by Dr Trilochan Singh.

Its free translation given by Dr Trilochan Singh is as follows [5]:

“Behold, a wish has been fulfilled by Holy and High Providence. That the building of Baba Nanak has been newly built with the help of seven aulat (great walis). That the happy murid of God (Baba Nanak) has started a fountain of grace issuing new water in the land.” 917 Hijri.

The same translation has been reported on Internet, which is based on the papers by Sewaram Singh and Manjit Singh in 1969 [1, 4]. But Major Gurmukh Singh [6, Entry– Baghdad] has interpreted it differently:

“Look what was wished by the Glorious Lord in His Majesty—that a new establishment be built for the saint Baba Nanak—The seven gave help and there came this chronogram: The blest disciple performed a meritorious work. May He then recompense it?”

I got this inscription transliterated in Latin Alphabet by Dr Ali Ulvi Mehmedoglu and Dr Yurdagul Mehmedoglu, Professors in Faculty of Divinity, Marmara University, Uskudar, Turkey, as follows in Turkish language:

Gör ki murad eyledi Hazret-i Rabbı Mecid
Baba Nanak fakir ola ta ki imaret-i cedit
Yediler imdad edip geldi ki tarihine
Yaydı tevvab-ı icrayına inni müridun said
Hicri – 917

Note: The letter ‘C’ without any accent is pronounced as ‘J’ in Turkish language.

The above inscription was translated into English by Drs Mehmedoglus as follows:

Allah the Almighty willed that this monument or building

of humble Baba Nanak will be a new benevolent foundation for dissemination of wisdom. Seven saints came to help to erect this building on Hijri 917.

Note: The numeral 'seven' (7) is auspicious number in Sufism.

The translation by Drs Mehmedoglus is quite different than that of given by others. I think the translation by Drs Mehmedoglus is more appropriate for Guru Nanak's mission for dissemination of wisdom.

The date Hijri 917 is equivalent to 1511 CE according to the Date Conversion System [3]. This has also been confirmed by Dr Ali Ulvi Mehmedoglu from the writings at the end of the inscription. It means that this inscription was inscribed either during the time of Guru Nanak's stay or after that when he left Baghdad.

Major Gurmukh Singh [6, Entry Baghdad] has tried to mess up the date by reading it as 927 instead of 917 Hijri. He has really messed up with the dates of travels of Guru Nanak since he reported starting date as 1521 CE at Eminabad (6, Entry Eminabad) and then he reads date of Baghdad as 927 Hijri which is 1520 CE. How it could be possible. Is it not strange that in the same very important source, Encyclopaedia of Sikhism [6], on Sikhism there is so much contradiction on the dates of Guru Nanak in Middle East.

The above description about Guru Nanak's stay given by Dr Trilochan Singh is very confusing since he said that Bahlol Dana had spent sixty (60) summers and winters (means 60 years) after Guru Nanak left that place and he was buried at that place. According to Dr Trilochan Singh [7] following writing was written by Guru Nanak: " ... *The above verse was composed when I came to the mausoleum of Bahlol Dana 'Abbasi' and stayed at 'Abhasiya Takiyah in Mullah Sihayat-ul-Khizram' on my way back from Mecca on 17th Rab-ul-Awwal, 917 Hijri. I stayed up to the month on Rajab and then in the company of my dear friend Rukn-ud-din I started towards Hindustan.*" (Plate XII in Ref. 7) .

This shows that Guru Nanak visited mausoleum of Bahlol Dana in 917 Hijri.

The above description also give the date as Hijri 917 which is 1511 CE. If it is so then the mausoleum of Bahlol Dana was already built when Guru Nanak came to this place. Now the question arises. How could it be possible to write such a praise about Guru Nanak in the inscription shown in Fig 1. before the visit of Guru Nanak at the mausoleum of Bahlol Dana.

On the other hand Dr Trilochan Singh [7] still mentioned another date of 1517 CE when Guru Nanak was in Baghdad (or in Mecca) narrating about the vastness of

universe. Now here again there is a great confusion about the date of visit of Guru Nanak with Bahlol Dana in Baghdad. There is a difference 6 years between 1511 and 1517.

However, the date Hijri 917 (1511 CE) in that inscription (Fig. 1) is a proof strong enough to show that Guru Nanak was in Baghdad around that year (1511 CE).

Let us discuss another episode of Guru Nanak:

It is well established fact that Guru Nanak was in Saidpur (Eminabad) when Zahir Ud-din Mohammad Babar destroyed this town. The so-called Babarbani of Guru Nanak describes in detail the destruction of this town. It is also mentioned at the end of this Bani that it happened in 1521 CE and the non-Sikh history also supports this date of attack on Saidpur by Babar. So it is quite safe to say that when Guru Nanak was returning from the Middle East travel he was in Saidpur when Babar attacked this town in about 1521. It is also mentioned that Guru Nanak was in the captivity of Babar during this period at Saidpur [6].

Now if we take the date 1511 CE in the inscription of Baghdad as true and then the date of Guru Nanak's description of Babar's attack on Saidpur (Eminabad) around 1521 CE also as true, then it means Guru Nanak was in Middle East and around for about 11 years (1511-1521).

Besides Syed Chan Shah Pir Qadri [8] reported about Guru Nanak as follows:

"The Udasis or accounts of the travels of Baba Nanak Sahib tell us that he traveled to Mecca for the Haj. He is also said to have spent six long years in Baghdad, which was then a major centre for the Sufis. Here he studied with many leading Sufis of his day, and it is said that he was presented by the Sufis of the city with a turban as a token of respect and honor. In Baghdad, in the courtyard of the shrine of Hazrat Bahlol Danaai, a famous Sufi, there is a shrine which mentions that Baba Nanak Sahib stayed there. The shoes, the Muslim-style prayer mat [ja-namaz] and the blanket of Baba Nanak and the copy of the Holy Qur'an which he used to regularly read, are also preserved there."

Still in another article, "Guru Nanak Was he Muslim?" Ajmad Qurashi reported Guru Nanak's stay in Baghdad for about 12 years (www.yanabi.com)

The above information of six years or 12 years of stay in Baghdad supports our findings that Guru Nanak could have stayed in Middle East at least for 11 years.

This is the longest period of his travel in the Middle East

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(Islamic countries) but very little is known about his contributions about this area and Islam in any of his writings except the Babarbarani [2]. Even the so-called *Mekke Ki Gosht* is not available now and it has not been seen by Dr Trilochan Singh. However, some of the writings of Rukn-ud-din and some of the so-called writings of Guru Nanak as reported by Dr Trilochan Singh [7] are worth to analyse to find out more about Guru Nanak's mission in Middle east.

CONCLUSIONS

- The above critical study clearly indicates that Guru Nanak was in the area of Middle East for at least 11 years.
- He attained good knowledge of Arabic, Persian, and Kor'an.
- Nanak was known as *Baba Nanak Faqir* ('Baba' means 'father' or 'elder' and 'Faqir' means 'a man full of humility').
- It also indicates that during this long stay of 11 years Guru Nanak must have visited the shrine of Maulana Jalal ud-din Rumi in Konya and Istanbul in Turkey, although no evidence could be found till today (Please see Research Report at pages 7-23).

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