

## Two Souls One Journey (Baba Nanak & Bhai Mardana)

### First Interfaith

In contemporary America, interfaith organizations are rightly celebrated for building bridges across religious boundaries, serving the vulnerable, and fostering civic harmony. Yet the spirit of interfaith engagement is not a modern invention. More than five centuries ago, Guru Nanak—reverently called Baba Nanak—embodied this principle not through conferences or councils, but through companionship. By inviting Bhai Mardana, a Muslim Rababi from a marginalized social background, to walk beside him as friend, musician, and spiritual interlocutor, Guru Nanak enacted a living theology of oneness. For more than two decades, they traveled together across Punjab, South Asia, and beyond; they ate from the same hearth, sang the same divine praise, and addressed Hindu, Muslim, and other audiences alike with a message that transcended ritual and rank. Their shared journey dissolved boundaries of caste and creed, demonstrating that truth is not confined to one community and that divine light shines in all. Long before the language of “interfaith dialogue” entered modern discourse, Nanak and Mardana were already living it—two souls in one journey, bearing witness to the unity of humanity under the sovereignty of the One.

Published in Pakistan by:



Sulaikh  
bookmakers



# Two Souls One Journey (Baba Nanak & Bhai Mardana)



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**(Baba Nanak & Bhai Mardana)**

**Gurinder Singh Grewal**

**Prof. Dr. Iram Khalid**



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1<sup>st</sup> Edition 2025

**Written by:**  
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**Price:**  
25 \$

**Title:**  
Sulaikh

**Printes:**  
Usama Bilal Printers, Lahore.

**Published by:**  
In Pakistan



**Sulaikh Bookmakers, 67, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, Madina Tower,**  
224 Ferozpur Road, Lahore, Pakistan. Call # +92 300 44 30 626

**ISBN: 978-969-7863-62-4**

**In USA**



**Sikh Heritage Education & Cultural organization of America**  
28290 S. Banta Rd California USA  
**ISBN: 979-8-9950211-1-7**

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## FOREWORD

When Dr. Gurinder Singh Grewal, a close friend and respected cardiologist, invited me to read and comment on this manuscript, I accepted with some uncertainty about the nature of the work I was about to engage. I agreed to undertake the reading without knowing whether the manuscript would unfold primarily as a devotional narrative, a popular historical account, or a scholarly intervention. As I progressed through the text, it became clear that the authors were pursuing a more deliberate and layered project: an interpretive exploration of the relationship between Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana, examined through companionship, music, ethical practice, and interfaith encounter. This approach represents a distinctive and innovative contribution, differing markedly from previous treatments of the subject in existing literature.

The book unfolds thematically across five chapters, tracing the early formation of the Nanak– Mardana bond, their shared journeys, their encounters with religious and political power, and the continuing relevance of their message in contemporary contexts. Rather than treating Bhai Mardana as a peripheral figure, the authors position him as a constant companion and interlocutor—one whose presence is integral to how Guru Nanak’s teachings were lived, communicated, and remembered. This emphasis on relationship as pedagogy is among the manuscript’s most valuable contributions. While Sikh historiography has long acknowledged Mardana’s role, sustained reflection on the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of this companionship has remained relatively limited. This work brings that dimension to the foreground.

In the manuscript, Guru Nanak's engagement with religious authority, social hierarchy, and political power is presented not as sectarian opposition, but as moral critique grounded in truth-oriented living. The authors consistently avoid reducing Sikh history to Hindu–Muslim binaries or civilizational conflict, instead highlighting Guru Nanak's exposure of hypocrisy and injustice wherever they appeared. The discussions of music, travel, dialogue, and shared vulnerability are effective in conveying how spiritual teaching in the Nanakian tradition is embodied rather than abstract, performed in spiritual song, enacted in service, and sustained through companionship.

A brief theological clarification is nonetheless important to guide the reader. The ethical and relational emphasis of this book should not be read as a move toward generic or secular humanism, nor as a dilution of Sikh theological foundations. In Sikh thought, universality does not arise from moral consensus alone, but from the ontological claim of **Ik Oankaar** (One eternal being that is all-embracing), the discipline of **Naam** (the spiritual word), and life lived in accordance with **Hukam** (Divine Order). Read through this lens, the friendship between Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana is not presented here as sentiment or symbolism, but as lived theology—an expression of accountability, humility, justice, and truthfulness enacted through shared spiritual practice. The authors' focus on the relationship thus functions as a pedagogical lens rather than a theological reduction.

A further contribution of this work lies in its implicit challenge to the ways Sikh, Punjabi, and shared histories have been narrated since 1947, particularly across the divided landscapes of **Lehnda** (West) Punjab and **Charda** (East) Punjab. Post-Partition historiography has often developed along parallel, and at times

mutually exclusive, trajectories, shaped by national borders, political memory, and selective silences. In this context, the sustained focus on the companionship of **Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana**, two close companions from distinct religious, social and cultural backgrounds, constitutes an exceptional and innovative intervention. By foregrounding camaraderie rather than conflict, and ethical partnership rather than identity division, the authors recover a shared Punjabi spiritual inheritance that predates modern political boundaries. Their portrayal of Nanak and Mardana breaking entrenched social and religious barriers offers not only a corrective to fragmented historical memory but also a forward-looking ethical lens. Read in this way, the book invites contemporary readers to reflect on how Sikhi, when practiced in its true sense, calls for relational courage, humility, and lived solidarity across difference—values that remain urgently relevant in a world still marked still shaped by inherited divisions.

The collaborative nature of the book further reinforces this framing. Co-authored with **Prof. (Dr.) Iram Khalid**, whose scholarly background brings attentiveness to questions of power, identity, and coexistence, the manuscript reflects an interdisciplinary sensibility rather than a narrowly confessional one. The title, ***Two Souls – One Journey***, is therefore fitting. It captures not only the historic companionship of Nanak and Mardana, but also the central argument of the book: that spiritual truth in the Sikh tradition is realized through shared striving, ethical courage, and relational accountability, rather than through isolation or rigid boundary-making.

This book should not be read as a comprehensive academic monograph, nor as a purely devotional retelling. It occupies a meaningful space between these genres, offering an accessible yet

reflective narrative that invites further scholarly engagement. Its strength lies in reopening a formative relationship in Sikh history and encouraging readers—academic and general alike—to encounter Guru Nanak’s message as lived ethics rather than abstract doctrine.

In doing so, *Two Souls – One Journey* contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to understand Sikh teachings through practice, relationship, and historical context. It does not claim finality, nor does it seek to close debate. Instead, it opens a space for deeper inquiry, dialogue, and reflection on one of the most enduring and instructive partnerships in Sikh history—one whose nuance continues to speak to a world still struggling with division, power, and the meaning of shared humanity.

My congratulations to Dr. Gurinder Singh Grewal and Prof. (Dr.) Iram Khalid on a work that is both intellectually demanding and analytically engaging.

***Gian Singh Sandhu***

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January 9, 2026

**Educator, Author, Entrepreneur and Activist**

## SCRIPTURAL DIALOGUE

Mardana 1 (Adi Granth ,553)

### 1. Salok Mardānā 1 (ਮਰਦਾਨਾ ੧)

#### Gurmukhi

ਕਾਇਆ ਲਾਹਣਿ ਆਪੁ ਮਦੁ ਮਜਲਸ ਤ੍ਰਿਸਨਾ ਧਾਤੁ ॥  
ਮਨਸਾ ਕਟੇਰੀ ਕੁੜਿ ਭਰੀ ਪੀਲਾਏ ਜਮਕਾਲੁ ॥  
ਇਤੁ ਮਦਿ ਪੀਤੈ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਬਹੁਤੇ ਖਟੀਅਹਿ ਬਿਕਾਰੁ ॥੧॥  
ਗਿਆਨੁ ਗੁੜੁ ਸਾਲਾਹ ਮੰਡੇ ਭਉ ਮਾਸੁ ਆਹਾਰੁ ॥  
ਨਾਨਕ ਇਹੁ ਭੋਜਨੁ ਸਚੁ ਹੈ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਮੁ ਆਧਾਰੁ ॥੨॥

#### Shahmukhi

ਕਾਇਆ ਲਾਹਣਿ ਆਪੁ ਮਦੁ ਮਜਲਸ ਤ੍ਰਿਸਨਾ ਧਾਤੁ--  
ਮਨਸਾ ਕਟੇਰੀ ਕੁੜਿ ਭਰੀ ਪੀਲਾਏ ਜਮਕਾਲੁ--  
ਇਤੁ ਮਦਿ ਪੀਤੈ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਬਹੁਤੇ ਖਟੀਅਹਿ ਬਿਕਾਰੁ--1--  
ਗਿਆਨੁ ਗੁੜੁ ਸਾਲਾਹ ਮੰਡੇ ਭਉ ਮਾਸੁ ਆਹਾਰੁ--  
ਨਾਨਕ ਇਹੁ ਭੋਜਨੁ ਸਚੁ ਹੈ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਮੁ ਆਧਾਰੁ--2--

#### English translation

1. The human body is the vat, self-conceit is the wine, and desire is the company of drinking-buddies.
2. The mind's cup is filled with falsehood; the Messenger of Death is the cupbearer.
3. Drinking in this wine, O Nanak, one incurs countless sins and corruptions.
4. Make spiritual wisdom your molasses, praise of Divine your bread, and the Fear of Divine your meat to eat.
5. O Nanak, this is the true food; the True Name is the only support.

## 2. Salok Mardānā 1(ਮਰਦਾਨਾ ੧)

### Gurmukhi

ਕਲਿ ਕਲਵਾਲੀ ਕਾਮੁ ਮਦੁ ਮਨੁਆ ਪੀਵਣਹਾਰੁ ॥  
ਕ੍ਰੋਧ ਕਟੋਰੀ ਮੋਹਿ ਭਰੀ ਪੀਲਾਵਾ ਅਹੰਕਾਰੁ ॥  
ਮਜਲਸ ਕੁੜੇ ਲਬ ਕੀ ਪੀ ਪੀ ਹੋਇ ਖੁਆਰੁ ॥  
ਕਰਨੀ ਲਾਹਣਿ ਸਤੁ ਗੁੜੁ ਸਚੁ ਸਰਾ ਕਰਿ ਸਾਰੁ ॥  
ਗੁਣ ਮੰਡੇ ਕਰਿ ਸੀਲੁ ਘਿਉ ਸਰਮੁ ਮਾਸੁ ਆਹਾਰੁ ॥  
ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਪਾਈਐ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਖਾਧੈ ਜਾਹਿ ਬਿਕਾਰੁ ॥੧॥

### Shahmukhi

ਕਲ ਕਲਵਾਲੀ ਕਾਮੁ ਮਦੁ ਮਨੁਆ ਪੀਵਣਹਾਰੁ --  
ਕਰੋਧ ਕਟੋਰੀ ਮੋਹਿ ਭਰੀ ਪੀਲਾਵਾ ਅਹੰਕਾਰੁ --  
ਮਜਲਸ ਕੁੜੇ ਲਬ ਕੀ ਪੀ ਪੀ ਹੋਇ ਖੁਆਰੁ --  
ਕਰਨੀ ਲਾਹਣਿ ਸਤੁ ਗੁੜੁ ਸਚੁ ਸਰਾ ਕਰਿ ਸਾਰੁ --  
ਗੁਣ ਮੰਡੇ ਕਰਿ ਸੀਲੁ ਘਿਉ ਸਰਮੁ ਮਾਸੁ ਆਹਾਰੁ --  
ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਪਾਈਐ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਖਾਧੈ ਜਾਹਿ ਬਿਕਾਰੁ --1--

### English translation

1. The Dark Age of Kali Yuga is the vessel, filled with the wine of sexual desire; the mind is the drunkard.
2. Anger is the cup, filled with attachment, and ego is the server.
3. In the company of falsehood, drinking repeatedly, one becomes spoiled.
4. So let good deeds be your distillery, and Truth your molasses; in this way, make the finest wine of Truth.

5. Make virtue your bread, good conduct the ghee, and modesty the meat to eat.
6. As a Gurmukh (one oriented to the Guru), O Nanak, partake of them — then one's sins depart.

### **Interpretive Note on Mardana's Role**

Tradition says Bhai Mardana, once tempted by worldly metaphors, asked Guru Nanak whether enjoying the world was truly sinful. Guru Nanak responded in these two *Saloks Mardānā*, explaining through the imagery of wine, cup, and tavern that spiritual intoxication with Truth is the only lasting joy.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable support and contributions of several individuals such as **Mr. Awais Ali Samad** for his dedicated efforts in **gathering and organizing research data**, which formed a strong foundation for this work. **Mr. Awais Khan's** support in **editing and assisting throughout the research process** along with his constructive input, attention to detail, and continuous cooperation significantly enhanced the quality and clarity of this work.

My deepest appreciation is extended to **Dr. Qurat Ul Ain Saleem**, whose scholarly insight was instrumental in **shaping the draft of the book into its present form**. Her expertise, critical feedback, and academic rigor greatly enriched the structure, coherence, and overall presentation of this book.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the role of **society at large** in fostering and sustaining a culture of research and inquiry. In particular, promoting research that emphasizes **peace, harmony, tolerance, and mutual understanding** is essential in today's complex social landscape. Academic research not only advances knowledge but also serves as a bridge between communities, encouraging dialogue, coexistence, and evidence-based solutions for societal challenges.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book entitled “Friendship Across Faiths: Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana” is divided into five chapters. Each chapter briefly unfolds the unique aspects of their life and friendship and its impact on the world.

The first chapter deals with exploring the bond of friendship between Nanak and Mardana. This chapter describes the initial stage of Nanak’s life, characterized by his curiosity towards the world and his distinct observations. During his early years, some of his elders noted his inquisitiveness and deep reflection, which would often result in solitude where he would ponder over some of the most fundamental questions related to life and spirituality. One of his questions was, "Why do people consider themselves as Hindus and Muslims, when both the parties believe in the same Divine?" Such questions perplexed his elders and predicted his future as a spiritual guide. Nanak’s friendship with Mardana was the first of its kind, and defied the social constructs of the time, where he and Mardana would share both secular and spiritual music and poetry, regardless of the fact he was Muslim, and Nanak was a Hindu. This friendship cultivated a spirit of encouragement and spiritual elevation and fostered social tolerance in their circle. Nanak’s method of education was also extraordinary when he would create hymns as spiritual poetry, and his sister, Bibi Nanaki, who was also the first to recognize his true calling and the potential he had, gave him immeasurable support which enriched his spiritual journey. When Nanak was preparing to depart from Talvandi to take up the new post at

Sultanpur, the relationship with Mardana was an integral part of his identity. The bond of love and respect that Mardana and Guru Nanak shared signified a potential which later on helped Nanak become a major shaper of the spiritual topography of India.

Chapter Two portrays the early travels of Guru Nanak and Mardana and the spiritual journey they undertook together which they sought through the transcendence of love, friendship, and music. They sought to transform and uplift through love and music. They were not afraid to die, and the love of the Almighty yearning for love encouraged them. They faced a lot of trials and tribulations including hunger and rough terrains. Their bond deepened and exemplified the humility and strength of the challenge. True spirituality and profound love were the transcendence upon the many religions. Their journey on the footpath of the Truth was a testimony of the power of love and friendship.

The third chapter reports that Guru Nanak's teachings focused on advocating for the fundamental principles of social justice, equality, and the social tyranny, united struggle against walls of different social, political, and religious identities, and fellowship and oppression. Nanak's activism was spiritual and political strategy, and protest against the violations and injustice from the so-called divinely sanctioned, immoral, ruling, and religious. In the verses of all the Sikh Gurus, the spiritual tyranny, and falsehood, the social and political cries served as the oppression of the power constitutive of the dominant, prevailing, oppressive. The teachings of the subsequent Sikh Gurus continued Nanak's legacy and the social civil discipline against the protection oppression. The teachings served and the spiritual and moral, the selfless, the profound overarching dominant

oppressive the ruling and religious immoral, divinely, the injustice and the profound equality. Ultimately, Guru Nanak's vision pioneered a faith that promotes equality, community, and the fight against oppression.

Chapter 4 examines the profound message of radical human oneness expressed by Nanak and Mardana and discusses four specific dimensions of this message: the inclusive spatial design of the Golden Temple, the prioritization of Truth over mere ritual, the instrumental value of music as a form of prayer, and their authentic faith transcending brotherhood. The Golden Temple is a statement of oneness, as its doors are open and the sanctum is visible to the public. The Golden Temple stands as a testimony to the equality and oneness of the many who traverse the varied paths to the One Truth. In critiquing record ritualistic practices, Nanak's teachings advocate a primary focus on the inner spiritual transformation and Divine-consciousness of the practitioner, while Mardana's music encouraged togetherness and social cohesion. In conclusion, the chapter reiterates that the lives and teachings of Nanak and Mardana continue to challenge us to remove the walls of exclusion and replace them with a fence constructed of love and compassion. The Golden Temple remains a place of refuge and nourishment to the many who inundate it with their diverse backgrounds, offering a promise.

Finally, the last chapter summarize the book by presenting the global issues of the present day, such as social inequity, political oppression, and conflicts between faiths, that still have relevance today, in the teachings of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana. The chapter discusses three dimensions that are intertwined as one. The oppression and the religious hypocrisy were criticized, then offered lessons on how to combat religious oppression in the hands of

political power. Secondly, the author explains, and the core of Mardana's and Nanak's values is the virtue of humility, which is the virtue of service (seva), social equality, and the unifying virtue of music; and the Community Kitchen serves as an example of social justice. Lastly, the chapter describes the universal humanism enshrined in Nanak's "no Hindu, no Muslim," where the author advocates for an ideal world where religious identities do not divide people, but rather add value to humanity.



# CHAPTER 1: ROOTS OF FRIENDSHIP

## The Birth of Nanak and Mardana – Two Souls, One Village

The village of Talvandi, nestled in the fertile heart of 15th-century Punjab, was much like any other settlement of its time. Fields of wheat and millet swayed with the rhythm of the wind, and bullock carts laden with hay creaked along the dusty paths. At dawn, the sky would blush orange as farmers led their oxen to the fields, and by dusk the aroma of wood fires and cooking lent a comforting haze to the twilight. Life moved slowly here, paced by the seasons and the age-old customs of the land. Yet Talvandi was not simply an isolated hamlet: known formally as Rai Bhoi di Talvandi, it lay roughly fifty miles west of Lahore, on routes that linked local grain markets to larger towns.<sup>1</sup> Caravans and travelers occasionally passed through with tales of distant courts and conflicts, so that even a small village like this felt faint tremors from the wider world.

In the spring of 1469, a son was born to Kalyan Chand Das Bedi and Mata Tripta, a Hindu couple of the Khatri caste belonging to the mercantile Bedi sub-caste. They named the baby Nanak.<sup>2</sup> Mehta Kalu, as Nanak's father was popularly known, distributed sweets and alms in celebration of his son's birth, and both Hindu Brahmins and Muslim faqirs from the surrounding area offered prayers for the

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969); Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); Singh, *The First Sikh*.

newborn – a reflection of the mixed community they lived in.<sup>3</sup> In those days, Punjab was under the rule of the Delhi Sultanate's Lodi dynasty, but life in Talvandi was far from the royal courts.<sup>4</sup> It was Rai Bular, the local Muslim land chief, who governed fairly and allowed his Hindu and Muslim villagers to live in relative harmony, each following their own faith. As patwari, Mehta Kalu served as an intermediary between peasants and landlord, managing revenue records and collections – a respectable position that gave the family modest status and a measure of security.<sup>5</sup> The Bedis' relatively high rank meant that Nanak grew up in a household that was neither aristocratic nor poor, but embedded in the middle layers of rural society, close enough to the anxieties of peasants to see their struggles and yet bound by caste expectations and ritual obligations. This family setting shaped the contours of Nanak's childhood. The household observed Hindu customs, made offerings at local shrines, and marked festivals in the manner of their ancestors. Nanak's elder sister, Bibi Nanaki, five years older than him, soon emerged as his closest companion and first admirer.<sup>6</sup> From a young age, she is remembered as recognising in her brother a contemplative nature that others did not fully understand, regarding him not simply as a younger sibling but as someone touched by grace.<sup>7</sup> Her affection and intuitive trust later provided him with a refuge whenever his

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<sup>3</sup> Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909); W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janamsākhīs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Aniruddha Ray, *The Sultanate of Delhi (1206–1526): Polity, Economy, Society and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2019); Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>5</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>6</sup> Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1; Singh, *The First Sikh*.

<sup>7</sup> Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1.

unorthodox tendencies brought him into conflict with family expectations.

From the very beginning, however, little Nanak seemed different from other children. There was a quiet depth in his eyes, and he preferred solitude to the usual rough housing of village boys. While other children played or fought, Nanak would sit under the shade of a tree, gazing at the sky as if lost in some invisible wonder. His mother, Tripta, would sometimes find him babbling not just simple baby words but sounds that resembled melodies.<sup>8</sup> Neighbors whispered that the child had a mystic's soul. Traditional Sikh narratives add that even his infant demeanor was calm and unusually self-possessed, as though his mind were turned inward towards a reality that others could not see.<sup>9</sup> Such stories, whether embroidered in memory or not, capture how strongly his early distinctiveness impressed those around him.

As Nanak grew into a toddler and then a curious boy, he spoke less of ordinary things and more of what he heard in the world around him – the wind in the trees, the distant call to prayer from the village mosque, the temple bells at dawn. He began to ask questions that baffled his elders. “If the same one God made us all,” he asked his mother one day, “then why do people divide themselves into Hindus and Muslims?”<sup>10</sup> Tripta would gently hush him, not knowing how to answer such a question from a five-year-old. These were not the kinds of questions that village parents usually heard from their children; yet in the plural world of Punjab, where a person might hear

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<sup>8</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>10</sup> Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

the Azaan and the temple conch within the space of an hour, such questions lay close to the surface of daily life.

Hoping to channel his son's curiosity into something more conventional, Mehta Kalu arranged for Nanak to attend the village school, first under the Hindu pandit and later under a Muslim maulvi (Islamic teacher).<sup>11</sup> Nanak dutifully went, but he did not learn like other children. When the pandit taught him the alphabet, Nanak composed a verse for each letter, turning a simple lesson into a hymn of praise. The astonished teacher listened as the boy recited an acrostic poem describing the Infinite One present in all creation – using every letter as a prompt for spiritual insight.<sup>12</sup> Another well-known version of this episode recalls the teacher writing the first letter, *ikh*, on a wooden slate and explaining its sound. Young Nanak looked at the character, which resembles the numeral “one”, and reflected aloud that just as all letters and words rest on this first sign, so all creation rests upon the One Formless Reality.<sup>13</sup> For those around him, the point was not whether the dialogue occurred exactly in this way, but that the child seemed instinctively to read unity where others saw only separate marks.

Similarly, under the maulvi's guidance, Nanak learned to read Persian and Arabic with ease.<sup>14</sup> He absorbed passages from the Qur'an and could speak of Allah's greatness just as he spoke of Hindu scriptures.<sup>15</sup> His teachers realised that Nanak sought the

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<sup>11</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>12</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition: Concerning the Life of Guru Nanak* (Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*.

<sup>14</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>15</sup> Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

divine meaning behind every word. Through these lessons, he became literate in multiple languages and faith traditions – an unusual education that later enabled him to bridge worlds.<sup>16</sup> In the mixed religious environment of Talvandi, where Punjabi was the language of the home but Persian carried the weight of administration and prestige, this bilingual training quietly prepared him to converse with both village folk and learned scholars, with Sufi pirs as readily as with Brahmin priests.<sup>17</sup>

Even Mehta Kalu, proud of his son's sharp mind, grew worried at Nanak's habit of wandering into deep thought. Once, the village priest came to initiate young Nanak with the *janeu*, the sacred thread that Hindu boys of his caste were expected to wear as a sign of spiritual duty. Nanak, only about eleven years old, surprised everyone by refusing the thread.<sup>18</sup> With steady eyes he asked the priest, "What good is a thread if it does not break the knots of falsehood in a man's heart? Let mercy be the cotton, contentment the thread, modesty the knot and truth the twist. That would be a sacred thread I would gladly wear."<sup>19</sup> The priest was astounded – such words of wisdom from a mere boy. Mehta Kalu, on the other hand, was mortified. In a society where obeying ritual was paramount, his son's bold challenge to tradition felt like an affront. Yet this episode also revealed something more than youthful stubbornness: Nanak was already measuring ritual by an inner ethic,

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<sup>16</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>17</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>18</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

insisting that outward symbols without inner transformation were hollow.

Tales of the boy's insight began to spread quietly through Talvandi. One warm afternoon, Rai Bular himself, the Muslim noble who owned the land, was riding past the fields when he noticed young Nanak asleep under the open sun. As the story is told, a black cobra had risen and spread its hood above the boy's face, casting a protective shadow over him.<sup>20</sup> Fearing for the child, Rai Bular rushed over, but by the time he arrived the cobra had quietly slithered away, having never harmed Nanak. Instead, it had shielded him from the sun. Rai Bular was astonished. To him, this was a sign that the boy was under divine protection. Thereafter, Rai Bular regarded Nanak with special respect, defending him whenever others complained of the boy's unconventional ways. It was unusual for a man of his rank and background to take such interest in a Hindu peasant's child, but in Talvandi, as in much of Punjab, religious identity did not completely erase everyday bonds of affection and respect.

Nearly a decade before Nanak's birth, in 1459, another child had been born in this same village – a boy who would become the other half of a remarkable pair. He was named Mardana.<sup>21</sup> His parents, Badra and Lakkho, were Muslim by faith and belonged to a caste of minstrels known as mirasis.<sup>22</sup> The mirasi families were the traditional musicians and storytellers of Punjab. They memorised folk tales, composed songs, and performed at weddings and village gatherings.

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<sup>20</sup> Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Singh, *The First Sikh*; W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978).

<sup>22</sup> Singh, *The First Sikh*; Lowell H. Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 18, nos. 1–2 (2011): 97–129.

Society gave them a curious dual status: on the one hand, their art was appreciated and even revered for bringing joy and preserving history; on the other, they were considered low-caste, sometimes looked down upon by those who saw music as an occupation of the lower orders.<sup>23</sup> Mardana's family lived humbly on the edge of the village, their small mud-brick house often echoing with the sound of his father's rabab – a stringed lute whose gentle strains were a familiar part of local life.<sup>24</sup>

Young Mardana grew up with music as the very air he breathed. By the time he could walk, he was plucking at the rabab's strings, learning melodies passed down through generations. His father taught him old Punjabi ballads and Sufi *qawwalis*, and even hymns of Hindu *bhaktas* – for the mirasis served all communities with their music.<sup>25</sup> In the evenings, the family would gather and sing devotional songs together – sometimes in praise of Allah, sometimes invoking Ram or Hari, the Hindu names of God. In their simple devotion through music, the lines of religion blurred. Yet outside their home, Mardana felt keenly the lines that society drew. He remembered how, at the village well, upper-caste Hindus would sometimes refuse to draw water alongside his mother because she was from a “low” caste. And in the mosque, though welcomed as a Muslim, he noticed how the Hindu villagers stayed at a careful distance. These early experiences of prejudice left a mark on the boy, but they did not dim his love for people. If anything, they deepened his compassion.

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<sup>23</sup> Lybarger, “Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab.”

<sup>24</sup> Gurnam Singh, “Sikh Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 396–407, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199699308.013.047>.

<sup>25</sup> Lybarger, “Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab.”

Mardana learned to pour out his feelings through the rabab, letting the notes carry both his joys and sorrows.

Behind these personal experiences lay a broader musical world. In late fifteenth-century Punjab, religious speech was mostly sung rather than merely spoken.<sup>26</sup> Sufi gatherings, village fairs, and shrine courtyards all echoed with songs in Punjabi and Persian. Instruments like the rabab moved easily between Muslim and Hindu settings, accompanying *qawwali* at dargahs as well as *kirtan* in emerging congregations. Hereditary musicians such as the mirasis occupied a liminal position: some patrons viewed them with suspicion or moral anxiety, yet their services were indispensable at ritual and celebrations. It was out of this milieu that the figure later known as the *rababi* emerged – a professional musician whose identity was defined by his instrument and devotional repertoire.<sup>27</sup> Mardana stood at the beginning of that line: a mirasi by family trade, shaped by the shared sound-world of bhakti and Sufism that surrounded Talvandi.

It was perhaps inevitable that Nanak and Mardana would cross paths. Talvandi was not a large village, and all its children, Hindu and Muslim alike, knew of one another even if they did not always play together. Their first real conversation blossomed naturally. Nanak asked Mardana about the song he had been playing. Mardana explained it was a hymn by a saint named Kabir, a weaver-poet whose verses were loved by Hindus and Muslims alike.<sup>28</sup> “Would you

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<sup>26</sup> Singh, “Sikh Music.”

<sup>27</sup> Singh, “Sikh Music”; Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*.

<sup>28</sup> John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh, trans., *The Bijak of Kabir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195148762.001.0001>.

like to hear it?" Mardana offered. When Nanak nodded eagerly, Mardana began to sing in a clear, soulful voice while plucking the rabab: "We are all beads strung on one thread, O friend – Allah and Ram are but names of the One."<sup>29</sup> The meaning resonated deeply with Nanak, who closed his eyes to absorb the words. When the song ended, Nanak opened his eyes and murmured, "It's true, there is only one God, isn't there? Different people just give Him different names."<sup>30</sup> It was not a question so much as a gentle affirmation, as if Nanak was recalling something he had always known. Mardana looked at the child in astonishment – it was rare to hear such thoughtfulness from anyone, let alone someone so young. In that instant, a quiet understanding passed between them. Despite the ten years' difference in their ages, despite one being the Hindu patwari's son and the other a Muslim minstrel's son, they recognised in each other a kindred spirit.

Their friendship did not form with a dramatic thunderclap or fanfare; it grew like a soft melody building verse by verse. After that day, Nanak began to meet Mardana whenever he could. Often, he finished his household chores or lessons quickly, just so he could run to the shady spot by the pond or under the banyan tree where he knew Mardana might be found strumming his rabab. Mardana, who had mostly associated with people much older or younger than himself through his performances, was charmed by this earnest little companion. More surprising was when Nanak started humming new lines – his own verses – to the tunes that Mardana played. The child

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<sup>29</sup> Hess and Singh, *The Bijak of Kabir*.

<sup>30</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

had a natural gift for poetry.<sup>31</sup> What flowed from his lips were not the typical rhymes of children, but spontaneous hymns praising the Creator, wondering at the beauty of nature, or asking profound questions. One evening, as the sun dipped low and Mardana played a slow, soothing melody, Nanak improvised a line that made Mardana pause in wonder: “Only One is the Giver of all – why should we call one Hindu and another Muslim?” In his simple childlike way, Nanak voiced the very thoughts that Mardana had long held in his heart.

Bibi Nanaki, Nanak’s older sister who adored him, saw the glow on her brother’s face whenever he returned from time with Mardana. She heard him humming unfamiliar tunes under his breath – tunes she realised were likely taught by his friend. Nanaki had a generous heart and a keen intuition; she sensed that this friendship was nurturing Nanak’s spirit in a way nothing else did. Later Sikh memory reveres her as the first to recognise Nanak as a true Guru, the first “disciple” who saw in him a light that others overlooked.<sup>32</sup> When their father Kalu grumbled about Nanak neglecting his duties or mixing with someone of a different faith, Nanaki would gently intervene. “Father,” she would say, “have you not noticed how happy Nanak is when he sings? God’s gift shows in him when Mardana plays along. How can that be wrong?” Kalu would fall silent, for he too loved the soft *kirtan* (devotional songs) that he sometimes heard drifting from the direction of the pond at sunrise – only later realising it was his own son’s voice accompanied by the rabab. Mehta Kalu remained stern outwardly, insisting that Nanak keep up with school and chores,

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher Shackle and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures* (London: Routledge, 2005); Singh, “Sikh Music.”

<sup>32</sup> Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; Singh, *The First Sikh*.

but even he could not entirely dislike the polite mirasi boy who always greeted him with respect and helped Nanak carry home bundles of firewood or groceries from the market. Within the small domestic world of Talvandi, a tiny experiment in shared life across caste and creed was unfolding, almost unnoticed.

In time, the friendship of Nanak and Mardana became a natural part of the fabric of Talvandi. The sight of the two together – one fair-skinned with a quiet, thoughtful demeanor, and the other darker, with lively eyes and a rabab slung across his shoulder – walking side by side through the fields, ceased to be startling. Many villagers even began to smile fondly at them. Local life was still firmly divided along religious and caste lines in most respects, but these two children seemed to live in a little world of their own making, where such lines meant nothing. In a village where Hindu and Muslim households seldom mingled beyond necessary work, the bond between Nanak and Mardana was a gentle challenge to the status quo. It suggested that another way of living – one based on friendship and shared humanity – might be possible.

Looking back years later, some elders would say that it was as if Nanak and Mardana had been destined for each other's company. How else could a Hindu boy from a well-regarded family and a Muslim boy of a marginalised caste form such a close alliance in those times? Others observed that perhaps the times themselves were changing. Across northern India, the Bhakti movement was in bloom – saint-poets like Kabir and Ravidas wandering from village to village, singing of one God's love for all people, regardless of caste or creed.<sup>33</sup> In Punjab, the verses of earlier Sufis such as Sheikh Farid

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<sup>33</sup> Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*; Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

still circulated in oral tradition,<sup>34</sup> while living pirs at shrines and dargahs drew Hindu and Muslim devotees into gatherings of song and remembrance.<sup>35</sup> Street shrines, temples, and mosques stood within earshot of one another, and the same tune might be heard in different devotional settings with new words. In this environment, a friendship like Nanak and Mardana's, though unusual, seemed almost like a natural next step in the spiritual evolution of the community. They were, in a sense, children of that age of mingling ideas – embodying in their simple bond the unity that saints and mystics preached in their hymns.

Indeed, neither Nanak nor Mardana understood or cared about the social gulf that was supposed to separate them. Nanak saw in Mardana a loving, talented soul with whom he could explore his questions about God and life. Mardana saw in Nanak a pure-hearted companion who never judged him for his birth. This mutual regard formed the bedrock of their friendship. It is said that even the very name “Mardana” came to the boy through Nanak's influence. According to one cherished tale, earlier tragedies had led his worried parents to nickname him *Marjana* – “one who will die” – fearing that he too might not survive childhood as their other children had not. When the families visited one another and the frail boy was brought before Nanak as a toddler, the younger child is remembered as uttering words of reassurance that reversed the name's omen: *Marda na* – “he shall not die.” The simple phrase felt like a blessing. From that day, the bleak nickname faded and he was known instead

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<sup>34</sup> Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*; Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*; Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

as Mardana, a name that carries the echo of Nanak's assurance. Whatever the precise form of the story, one thing was certain: Mardana did grow up to live a long life, and he believed in his heart that Nanak's companionship had brought a special protection and purpose to his days.

By the time Nanak reached his early teens, he and Mardana were nearly inseparable. Their friendship, born in innocence, now stood on the cusp of something deeper. Talvandi's communal life – the Hindu worship in temples and the Muslim prayers in mosques, the fairs and festivals – all continued as usual, but an undercurrent of change was quietly stirring in the interactions of these two families and their friends. The cultural and spiritual pluralism of Punjab, usually experienced in parallel streams by different communities, was being lived out as a single current in the day-to-day relationship of Nanak and Mardana. In their laughter, play, and emerging devotion, the village saw a glimpse of harmony between faiths that was rare.

They were still just two boys, unaware of what their future held. But those who watched them carefully – like Rai Bular, like Bibi Nanaki – felt that there was something uncommon in the love and respect these children showed each other. It was as if God's own music was beginning to play through their lives, drawing them together for a purpose not yet revealed. And so, in the quiet lanes of Talvandi, against the backdrop of mustard fields and mango groves, the early chapters of an extraordinary story were unfolding. The Hindu son of a revenue official and the Muslim son of a minstrel had become friends – two souls in one village, bound by a kinship that transcended the boundaries of religion and caste. Their journey

together had only begun, but already it promised to be something that would touch countless other lives in the years to come.

### **A Childhood Bond Across Faiths**

By the time Nanak and Mardana reached their adolescent years, their friendship had become a familiar and cherished feature of life in Talvandi.<sup>36</sup> To the two of them, it hardly mattered that one prayed in a temple and the other in a mosque – they felt they shared the same Divine friend, and that was enough.<sup>37</sup> In a village where Hindu children were usually kept apart from Muslim children, Nanak and Mardana broke the rules simply by refusing to see any difference between each other. They walked the same dusty lanes, drank from the same wells, and ate from the same plate without a second thought.<sup>38</sup> Many of their peers had been taught since infancy that such mixing was wrong. And yet, when those same village boys and girls saw the genuine affection between Nanak and Mardana, some of their inherited prejudices began to soften, like ice melting under the morning sun.

Behind this friendship lay two very different family worlds. Nanak grew up in the Khatri household of Mehta Kalu and Mata Tripta, where literacy, accounts work, and religious observance marked a respectable town life.<sup>39</sup> Mardana, by contrast, was born in 1459 into the Mirasi household of Badra and Lakkho, a family known in the

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<sup>36</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; Singh, *The First Sikh*.

<sup>37</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

<sup>39</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; Singh, *The First Sikh*.

area for hereditary musical work.<sup>40</sup> From an early age he saw relatives earn their livelihood as genealogists, bards, and performers at rites of passage – moving between Hindu and Muslim homes, reciting lineages, and providing music for weddings and fairs.<sup>41</sup> This made his daily life more mobile and more precarious than Nanak's, and yet it also gave him an easy familiarity with different religious spaces that would later make it natural for him to stand beside Nanak in many settings.

In Mirasi families, boys learned their craft by imitation rather than books. Older relatives taught them how to keep time, to support a lead singer without overwhelming the words, and to adjust quickly to different audiences.<sup>42</sup> Mardana's apprenticeship began in this way: memorising snatches of praise poetry, carrying instruments to village events, and slowly earning the trust to play in public. The instrument that would become most closely linked with him – the rabab – was already present in the region by his youth.<sup>43</sup> Its plucked tone sat well under the human voice, and in courts, shrines, and marketplaces alike, listeners were used to hearing a singer supported by a single stringed instrument.<sup>44</sup> When Nanak later asked for "something sweet" from the rabab, he was drawing on skills that had been patiently formed in these early years.

Still, the two friends sometimes had to face the sting of social disapproval. One afternoon, a group of boys were playing a game of spinning Gilli Danda (stick and peg) in a field. Nanak and Mardana

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<sup>40</sup> Singh, *The First Sikh*; Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab."

<sup>42</sup> Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab."

<sup>43</sup> Singh, "Sikh Music."

<sup>44</sup> Singh, "Sikh Music"; Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab."

ran up, eager to join. But a Brahmin boy leading the game spotted Mardana and scowled. “He can’t play with us,” the boy said sharply, planting his hands on his hips. “My father says mirasi children have no caste – it will dirty us if he joins.”<sup>45</sup> A couple of other boys nodded uncertainly, remembering their own parents’ warnings. For a moment, an awkward silence hung in the air. Mardana’s face flushed with hurt and embarrassment; he began to turn away, staring at the ground. But Nanak stepped forward and took his friend’s hand firmly. In a calm, clear voice he replied, “If he can’t play, then I won’t either. What will you do – banish me too?”<sup>46</sup> The Brahmin boy was taken aback. He opened his mouth to retort, but no words came. Nanak, though younger than some of them, spoke with a confidence that made the others hesitate. One of the Muslim boys who had been watching lowered his stick. “Let them play,” he muttered, feeling ashamed. “We’re all from the same village after all.” The group’s resistance crumbled. In the end, Nanak and Mardana played on the same team that day – and they played well, their laughter ringing out louder than anyone else’s. As dusk fell and the children dispersed, the Brahmin boy who had objected found himself thinking about how natural it had seemed, in the end, to include the mirasi’s son in their fun. It was a small lesson, but one that would linger quietly in the minds of those who witnessed it.

For a boy like Mardana, whose family’s work depended on pleasing higher-status patrons, such moments were not trivial. In a social

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<sup>45</sup> This scene is a narrative reconstruction intended to illustrate caste-based exclusion and ideas of “pollution”; see Lybarger, “Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab”; Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*.

<sup>46</sup> This dialogue is a narrative reconstruction reflecting Nanak’s egalitarian stance in Sikh tradition; see McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

world where Mirasis were considered necessary entertainers yet kept at arm's length,<sup>47</sup> Nanak's unembarrassed loyalty offered a different standard of worth. It hinted, even before anyone had words for it, at the kind of community in which service and devotion would matter more than inherited rank.<sup>48</sup>

Day by day, such quiet revolutions continued in the lives of the two friends. Nanak often visited Mardana's home, sitting cross-legged on the woven cot as Lakkho (Mardana's mother) served them roti and lentils. Just as often, Mardana would drop by Nanak's house, bringing a freshly composed song to share. Mata Tripta would welcome him with a smile and offer a bowl of sweetened milk – something she would do for any of her son's friends – and Mardana never felt out of place under their roof. There was one memorable evening when Talvandi celebrated Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights.<sup>49</sup> The crisp autumn air was filled with the scent of mustard oil and flickering flames. From the temple in the village center, hymns and bells echoed joyously. As oil lamps twinkled outside every home, Nanak insisted that Mardana and his family join his in the courtyard. Together they lit dozens of cotton wicks, and as the flame of each little diya lamp sprang up, their faces glowed side by side in its golden light. A neighbor murmured in surprise to see a Muslim family participating in the traditionally Hindu celebration, but no one objected – not when Nanak and Mardana led the gathering in a simple prayer for prosperity and peace for all. Likewise, during Eid al-Fitr, after morning prayers at the mosque, Mardana would hurry to

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<sup>47</sup> Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab."

<sup>48</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>49</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*; Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age, 1000–1765* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).

Nanak's house bearing plates of sheer korma (a sweet vermicelli pudding)<sup>50</sup>, insisting that his friend taste the treats of the Muslim holiday. Nanak savored them gladly, praising Mata Lakkho's cooking, and even joined Mardana in offering thanks to God for the occasion. These gestures were quietly radical: a Hindu boy rejoicing in Eid, a Muslim boy celebrating Diwali – in their friendship, both festivals became one.<sup>51</sup>

Around them, Talvandi itself was less isolated than it looked from the fields. Traders passed through on their way to Lahore or Multan, bringing news and songs from other towns.<sup>52</sup> At village shrines and fairs, performers from mirasi and rababi lineages sang praise of Sufi saints or Hindu deities in the same melodic patterns, and children like Nanak and Mardana listened from the edges of the crowd.<sup>53</sup> Punjab in those years was already a place where public religion often arrived in the form of song rather than sermon, and the boys absorbed this without formal training: they heard how a clear voice, supported by a single instrument, could draw people from different backgrounds into one circle of listening.<sup>54</sup> The local Qazi (Islamic cleric) observed that young Mardana, though he spent so much time with a Hindu, never neglected his daily prayers nor disrespected his faith – if anything, the boy seemed even more devout and kind. And the village pandit noted that Nanak, for all his unconventional company, still quoted the Hindu scriptures with reverence when

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<sup>50</sup> Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*; Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

<sup>51</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*; Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>52</sup> Ray, *The Sultanate of Delhi*.

<sup>53</sup> Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab"; Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*.

<sup>54</sup> Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*; Singh, "Sikh Music."

appropriate – and even more, lived out their teachings of compassion. Neither religious authority could find any real fault in the boys' conduct.<sup>55</sup>

In truth, Nanak and Mardana's bond quietly nudged the community toward greater tolerance.<sup>56</sup> Many evenings, the two would wander to the edges of the village – sometimes to the pond that glimmered under the moonlight, other times to a gentle hillock dotted with wildflowers – and there they would indulge in what they loved most: Nanak would speak from his heart or compose impromptu verses, and Mardana would answer with the soothing strum of his rabab.<sup>57</sup> In those moments, all their days of work or study, all the small tensions of village life, melted away. Often a handful of villagers would follow at a respectful distance, drawn by the sound of Mardana's music and the sight of Nanak's silhouette against the twilight sky. They might see the two seated under a banyan tree – a slender teenage boy and his slightly older companion – singing as naturally as others breathed. Though few understood the full import of Nanak's spontaneous songs, the sincerity in his voice and the sweetness of the rabab touched something universal in the onlookers. A farmer listening from a dirt path might recall his own simple faith and feel his heart lighten. A passing merchant might pause, forgetting his day's worries for a moment. Even children, chasing fireflies by the pond,

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<sup>55</sup> The qazi/pandit vignette is a narrative reconstruction; for the overall scenario of interreligious interaction and Nanak's early reception, see McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*; Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age*.

<sup>56</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*; Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>57</sup> Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*; Singh, "Sikh Music."

would stop giggling and stand entranced when the duo's melody drifted by.

For Mardana, these evenings were also a kind of discipline. The habits he had begun to acquire in family performances – starting with a short, steady phrase to “place” the voice, holding the pace so that words stayed clear, letting the instrument fall quiet when the line demanded attention – all found a new home in Nanak's company.<sup>58</sup> In village courtyards and by the pond, he was already practicing the kind of accompaniment that would later serve larger gatherings: not showy, but firm enough to let others join the refrain when they wished.<sup>59</sup>

Bibi Nanaki, Nanak's sister, watched all of this with quiet pride. She had married and moved to a distant town by this time, but she visited Talvandi whenever she could.<sup>60</sup> On one such visit, she found Nanak and Mardana leading a group of village youngsters in song at dusk. Lamps had been lit in the homes, and the crickets were just beginning to chirp. Nanaki stood by a doorway and observed how her brother's face glowed with an inner joy as he sang, and how gently Mardana kept pace beside him with his instrument. Later that night, as she helped Tripta with the kitchen chores, Nanaki spoke softly. She had been the first to recognize Nanak's spiritual radiance even when he was a little boy, and over the years her conviction only grew stronger. In Nanak's friendship with Mardana, she saw the hand of the Divine knitting together two threads for a great purpose. She vowed in her heart to support her brother's calling, and she knew Mardana would be part of that calling. Some later traditions would

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<sup>58</sup> Singh, “Sikh Music”; Lybarger, “Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab.”

<sup>59</sup> Singh, “Sikh Music.”

<sup>60</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; Singh, *The First Sikh*.

even remember her as the one who first encouraged the young rabab-player to stay close to Nanak, sensing how naturally her brother's hymns and Mardana's strings belonged together.<sup>61</sup>

Nanaki told her mother, "Mother, Nanak is not a common man but a saint in the making. The storekeeper who always tells the truth and sings God's praises is loved by the people here. Yet some call him a nonconformist, carefree about worldly concerns. But mark my words – one day the world will recognize his holiness."<sup>62</sup> Mata Tripta nodded, her eyes shining with tears she did not fully understand.

As they grew older, the outside world began to tug at Nanak and Mardana. They were no longer little boys; Nanak was approaching manhood, and practical matters knocked at the door. At eighteen, to the delight of his parents, Nanak was married to a gracious young woman named Sulakhni from a nearby village.<sup>63</sup> The wedding was a grand affair by Talvandi standards – tents and carpets were laid out, relatives arrived in ox carts from far and near, and the village cooks labored for days to prepare feast after feast. Through all the ritual and rejoicing, Mardana never stood far from the groom's side. He had been asked by Nanak to play his rabab during some of the celebratory gatherings, an honor that startled many.<sup>64</sup> When it was time for the Sehra ceremony (where the groom is adorned with a garland of flowers), he personally handed Mardana the rabab.<sup>65</sup> "Play something sweet, brother," Nanak said, loud enough for everyone to

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<sup>61</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> This wording is a narrative reconstruction of a sentiment attributed to Nanaki in later tradition; see Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1; Singh, *The First Sikh*.

<sup>63</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; Singh, *The First Sikh*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>64</sup> Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*; Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

<sup>65</sup> Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*; Singh, "Sikh Music."

hear.<sup>66</sup> And so Mardana did. He plucked a gentle love ballad that floated above the murmurs of the gathering, silencing them. Sulakhni's family and Nanak's family alike listened, spellbound by the music. In those moments, it did not matter whether the hands coaxing such beauty from the strings were Hindu or Muslim, high-born or low-born. It only mattered that the music carried the emotion of pure joy. By the wedding's end, even those who had harbored reservations found themselves praising "that fine young rababi" who had enlivened the festivities.<sup>67</sup> Nanak's choice to include his dearest friend in every aspect of his life's milestone sent a clear message: in the world he envisioned, love and friendship trumped social convention.

Marriage brought new responsibilities for Nanak. Before long, he became a father, welcoming two sons into the world.<sup>68</sup> Mardana, too, married a girl from his community and started a family of his own. One might have expected that these developments would cool their friendship – that each would now be absorbed in his own household. Certainly, their days grew busier. Nanak took up a job at the village granary to help support his wife and children,<sup>69</sup> and Mardana had to balance his musical calling with earning enough to feed his growing family. Yet, even as life became more complex, the bond between them remained unbroken. Sulakhni, Nanak's wife, had grown to respect and adore Mardana as her husband's dearest friend, always extending a warm welcome whenever he came by their home.

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<sup>66</sup> This quotation is a narrative reconstruction; for Nanak–Mardana's musical association in Sikh tradition, see Macauliffe, *Sikh Religion*, 1; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>67</sup> Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab"; Singh, "Sikh Music."

<sup>68</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; Singh, *The First Sikh*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>69</sup> Singh, *The First Sikh*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

Likewise, Mardana's wife understood and accepted that her husband's bond with Nanak was something sacred.

By this stage, people in and around Talvandi had begun to speak of "Baba Nanak and his rababi" almost as a set phrase, borrowing the language they used for other holy men and their musicians.<sup>70</sup> It was not yet a formal title, but it showed how tightly the two names had fused in local memory: when one appeared in a courtyard or at a fair, villagers simply assumed the other would not be far behind.<sup>71</sup>

In the early mornings, before roosters crowed and while mist still clung to the fields, Nanak would often come out of his house and call on Mardana to join him for a walk.<sup>72</sup> The stars would be fading overhead as they quietly left the sleeping village behind. The two friends would talk about everything under the stars fading from the sky – the nature of God, the foolishness of people's quarrels, or simply whether the wheat crop would be good that season. And almost invariably, their conversation would often end in a song – softly at first, then rising with the sun. Nanak's voice, a little deeper now with age, would hum a melodic line, and Mardana's trusty rabab would answer. Those serene dawn duets became the soul of their friendship. Many villagers who rose early could hear the distant strains of sacred music and words carried on the cool breeze. Some would smile and fold their hands in silent prayer, as if the morning hymn were a blessing bestowed on the entire village.

In those years, Nanak's inner calling grew ever more insistent. Though he was dutiful in his work and loving to his family, there was

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<sup>70</sup> Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab"; Singh, "Sikh Music."

<sup>71</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*.

<sup>72</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Singh, "Sikh Music."

a fire kindling in his heart – a yearning to seek the truth beyond the confines of routine life. Mardana felt it too. He saw Nanak's eyes sometimes cloud with a divine restlessness, as if hearing a voice from afar. And he knew, in his own heart, that he would follow his friend wherever that voice might lead him. The pivotal moment came when Nanak's elder sister Nanaki, who lived in the town of Sultanpur, invited him to take up a position there in the service of the local governor.<sup>73</sup> It was a good opportunity – a chance for Nanak to better provide for his family. Yet accepting it meant moving away from Talvandi, at least for a time. With a heavy heart, Nanak prepared to leave his childhood village. On the day of his departure, as he sought blessings from his parents, it was not his mother or father's face he saw last when he set out on the road – it was Mardana's. His friend stood by the edge of the village, eyes moist but smiling bravely through the dawn light.<sup>74</sup>

Nanak did not know that destiny would reunite them even sooner than either expected. As the oxcart carried Nanak away towards Sultanpur, the morning sun rose higher, gilding the fields of Talvandi in gentle gold. In that light, one could see a lone figure – Mardana – still standing where his friend had left him, the wooden rabab strapped across his back. He was playing a soft, hopeful melody that mingled with the birdsong. It was his way of praying for Nanak's safe journey and swift return. And though Nanak was now a speck on the horizon, he heard the faint strains of Mardana's rabab and knew in his soul that this was not an ending, but merely the close of one chapter of their shared story. For the first time in their lives, the two

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<sup>73</sup> Singh, *The First Sikh*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>74</sup> Singh, *The First Sikh*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

friends found themselves living apart.<sup>75</sup> Yet fate did not allow that separation to last long. Within a short time, circumstances would conspire to bring the musician from Talvandi to the bustling town of Sultanpur.<sup>76</sup> And when they did, the foundation laid in their childhood would blossom into a partnership that would carry Nanak's message far beyond the familiar horizon of their native village.

### **Music as the Bridge Between Hearts**

From the very beginning, music had been the heartbeat of Nanak and Mardana's friendship.<sup>77</sup> Now, as young adults, they discovered that it was also the bridge between them and the wider world. Music, they realized, was a universal language – one that spoke directly to the soul when words might fail. In their youth they had witnessed how a simple melody could draw Hindu and Muslim villagers together, if only for a few moments. As they stepped into the next chapter of their lives, they leaned on that shared language of song to carry Guru Nanak's emerging message across every divide.

When Nanak moved to Sultanpur to take up employment, the separation from Mardana did not last long.<sup>78</sup> At the first opportunity,

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<sup>75</sup> Singh, *The First Sikh*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>76</sup> Singh, *The First Sikh*; Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistani Punjab."

<sup>77</sup> G. Singh, "Sikh Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199699308.013.047>; Christopher Shackle and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, eds., *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures* (London: Routledge, 2005); Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>78</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); J. S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969); Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2019).

Nanak sent word to his friend, and with the blessing of Bibi Nanaki – who was living in Sultanpur with her husband – Mardana traveled to join him there. Reunited, the two quickly resumed the sacred routine they had begun in Talwandi. Every morning before dawn, Nanak would bathe in the quiet current of the Kali Bein river that flowed past Sultanpur, and then sit on its banks to meditate.<sup>79</sup> And every morning, by the time the first light tinted the eastern sky, Bhai Mardana would be by his side, his rabab in hand. In those tranquil hours, while the rest of the town still slept, the voice of Nanak and the gentle strains of Mardana’s rabab would rise together in praise of the Creator.<sup>80</sup>

At first, it was just the two of them in those pre-dawn serenades to the Divine. But Sultanpur was a bustling town, and it was not long before others began to take notice. Fishermen preparing their boats would halt mid-task, mesmerized by the distant sound of hymns. Women up early to grind grain would find their hands stilled on the millstone as the sweet notes reached their courtyards. One by one, curious souls started gathering along the riverbank, drawn by an almost otherworldly peace that radiated from Nanak and Mardana’s music. They came from all faiths and walks of life – Hindu merchants, Muslim scholars, soldiers from the barracks, even the local governor’s attendants.<sup>81</sup> All stood together in quiet awe, listening to the young Hindu man with a voice full of love for the One, and the Muslim minstrel whose music knew no boundaries.

Some of Sultanpur’s more orthodox figures were initially puzzled, even concerned, by these informal dawn assemblies. The town’s

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<sup>79</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*.

<sup>80</sup> Singh, “Sikh Music”; Laurence H. Lybarger, “Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistan,” *Journal of Punjab Studies* 18, nos. 1–2 (2011).

<sup>81</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

Qazi wondered if the gathering was an unsanctioned religious meeting; the pandits in the Hindu temple wondered what sort of prayer was being sung in the vernacular Punjabi instead of Sanskrit.<sup>82</sup> But as days passed, it became clear that what was happening by the riverside threatened no one and uplifted everyone. Nanak did not preach any new dogma in these morning hymns – he simply sang of Ik Onkar, the One God who pervades all creation, and of truth, humility, and compassion.<sup>83</sup> And Mardana’s rabab wove all communities together into that song. In fact, more than once the Qazi himself found an excuse to walk near the river at dawn, only to stand spellbound by a verse from the Qur’an that he heard Nanak incorporate into a song.<sup>84</sup> The pandit, too, came to satisfy his curiosity and was moved to tears hearing Nanak extol the divine Name with a devotion that surpassed ritual, accompanied by the rabab’s sublime harmony.

One evening, as the sun began to set over Sultanpur, Nanak and Mardana decided to sing in a small clearing near the village well. Word had spread through the town about the beauty of their hymns, and a crowd of townsfolk assembled in expectation. The air was painted gold and purple with twilight. Mardana sat down on the ground, placed the rabab in his lap, and began plucking a gentle rhythm. Nanak closed his eyes, and in a soft voice he started a new shabad (hymn) that had come to him during that morning’s meditation. “*Ek Onkar...*” he sang – “God is One.” His voice was calm

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<sup>82</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janamsākhīs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>83</sup> *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, 1; Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

<sup>84</sup> Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

but carried strength. The melody swelled sweetly, carrying his words out over the attentive gathering.<sup>85</sup> Hindus and Muslims, rich and poor, found themselves sitting shoulder to shoulder around the two friends, transfixed. For those who listened, it felt less like a human song and more like the voice of eternity flowing through Nanak's young soul. The boundaries of religion, caste, and custom faded into the background as that simple truth – God is One – echoed in the heart of each person present.

When the song ended, a hush fell over the clearing. Then, as if released from a spell, people began to murmur prayers – some saying “Ram, Ram,” others “Allah, Allah,” but each understanding that they were reaching toward the very same Divine presence. Moments like this only affirmed what Nanak and Mardana already believed: that music could achieve what sermons and lectures could not. A song pure in devotion needed no translator.<sup>86</sup> It touched the part of a person that lies beyond labels, where all humans meet as one.

For Guru Nanak, music was not an ornament to religion; it was the very expression of spirituality.<sup>87</sup> “Words alone can be forgotten,” he once explained to a group of curious neighbors, “but words wrapped in melody enter the heart and stay.” He viewed the hymns he composed and sang with Mardana as a vehicle to carry divine truth straight into people's souls.<sup>88</sup> Mardana shared this vision completely.

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<sup>85</sup> *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, 1; Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

<sup>86</sup> Singh, “Sikh Music”; Mandair, *Sikhism*.

<sup>87</sup> Singh, “Sikh Music”; Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*.

<sup>88</sup> This wording paraphrases a common theme in Sikh teachings on the sung *shabad* (hymn) and its mnemonic/affective power; see Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*; Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*; Singh, “Sikh Music”.

To him, playing the rabab was far more than a means of livelihood – it was prayer itself. In the quiet intimacy of their daily music practice, the two cemented a partnership of prophet and minstrel that would soon transform into something the world had never seen.

Not long after these days in Sultanpur, a dramatic turning point came in Nanak's life. Early one morning, Nanak went as usual to the river to bathe and meditate, leaving Mardana on the bank waiting for him. But this time, Nanak did not return for hours – in fact, for three days.<sup>89</sup> Mardana's heart was seized with fear and grief; he believed he had lost his dearest friend to the depths of the Kali Bein. Yet, even in despair, Mardana did the one thing Nanak would have wanted – he played music.<sup>90</sup> With trembling hands on his rabab, he prayed in song for Nanak's safe return. And miraculously, on the third day, Guru Nanak did emerge from the river, radiant and transformed. Legend says that he had been in communion with the Divine during those days of mystery. When he finally spoke, the very first thing he uttered was a revelation that shattered the all-too-human walls dividing people: "Na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman." – "There is no Hindu, and there is no Muslim." By this, Nanak meant that in God's eyes all are equal and all labels are ultimately shallow. It was the ultimate affirmation of everything his friendship with Mardana had embodied since childhood. Upon hearing Nanak's pronouncement, Mardana is said to have wept tears of joy and relief. To him, these words were the sweetest music yet – the final seal on the truth they had always felt.

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<sup>89</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*.

<sup>90</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

With this enlightenment, Guru Nanak's mission burst into full bloom. He soon resolved to carry his message of Oneness to as many people and places as he could – and he knew exactly who he wanted by his side on this epic journey. “Mardana,” Nanak said one day, “grab your rabab. We must go out into the world and share what God has shown us.” Without a second's hesitation, Mardana agreed. He only asked leave to settle some matters for his family, for by now he had children to think of. Tradition tells that Guru Nanak's disciple Bhai Baghirath helped provide for Mardana's family so that the minstrel could travel without worry. And so, when Guru Nanak set out on his long udasiya (journeys) in the year 1499, Bhai Mardana walked beside him, rabab in hand – just as he had always done.<sup>91</sup>

For over two decades, the two traversed the vast Indian subcontinent and beyond, spreading Guru Nanak's teachings through dialogue, example, and above all, through song.<sup>92</sup> They traveled lightly, carrying little more than a cloth bag, a walking stick, and the rabab. In each place they visited, their reputation often preceded them: the saint with a musician companion, whose hymns could enthral audiences of any faith. In Varanasi, it is said, Nanak sang before learned Brahmin priests and distilled the wisdom of the Vedas into simple poetry that even the unlettered could grasp. In the city of Baghdad, Nanak's voice rang out in the local language declaring the One God, and the rabab so captivated the Muslim scholars that they invited the travelers to stay and share more of their teachings. Whether on the peaks of the Himalayas conversing with ascetics, or in the heat of Sri Lanka's plains engaging with sages, Nanak and

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<sup>91</sup> N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>92</sup> N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

Mardana found that music opened hearts wherever they went.<sup>93</sup> Once, arriving in a village steeped in superstition, they encountered hostile monks who doubted Nanak's holiness and demanded a miracle.<sup>94</sup> In response, Guru Nanak simply began to sing a hymn about the power of the Divine Name. As usual, Mardana accompanied him on the rabab. The sky, which had been heavy with drought, burst open with life-giving rain by the time the song ended – a coincidence perhaps, but to the villagers it was proof enough that the music carried God's blessing.

Even the more frightening encounters on their travels ended in unity. In one remote forest of central India, the companions were captured by a fierce cannibal chieftain named Kauda. Legend holds that Kauda bound poor Mardana and prepared to boil him in a cauldron, while Guru Nanak was temporarily separated from his friend.<sup>95</sup> Face to face with death, Mardana did the one thing he knew best – he closed his eyes and began to sing a hymn, praying to the One for deliverance. His trembling voice rose in melody through the trees. By the time Guru Nanak arrived at Kauda's camp, the cannibal's anger had strangely subsided. Nanak walked in singing "Sat Kartar" – "God is the Doer of Truth" – and Kauda, hearing those powerful words and Mardana's plaintive music, fell to his knees. The fierce man who had intended to kill and eat them was transformed by the divine harmony he witnessed. He released Mardana at once and begged Guru

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<sup>93</sup> These itineraries are preserved in *janamsakhi* tradition; see McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition: Concerning the Life of Guru Nanak* (Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 2004).

<sup>94</sup> The "rain" episode is reported in *janamsakhi* tradition; see McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*.

<sup>95</sup> The Kauda episode is reported in *janamsakhi* tradition; see McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*.

Nanak's forgiveness. That night, Nanak and Mardana stayed in Kauda's hut as his guests, singing God's praises late into the dark hours. By dawn, Kauda had renounced his gruesome ways and become a follower of the Guru. Such stories sound like fanciful miracles, yet they bear a deeper truth: again, Nanak and Mardana showed that no heart was so hardened that it could not be softened by love and music.

Not everyone welcomed them kindly. There were times when priests felt their authority threatened by Nanak's straightforward message of devotion, or when local rulers bristled at his insistence on equality.<sup>96</sup> In one town, the chief refused to offer them hospitality because they were travelers of low status; Guru Nanak responded by singing a hymn about the brotherhood of mankind, while Mardana's rabab echoed the plea for humility. By the end of the day, that ruler's own heart had softened and he personally went to find the two and apologize. Again, when Nanak's words challenged the pride or hypocrisy of listeners, it was Mardana's music that softened the sting and turned potential anger into curiosity. In truth, the success of their mission owed much to the perfect balance between them: Nanak spoke of spiritual revolution, and Mardana set those words to a melody that touched even the hardest of hearts.

On another occasion during their travels, after several days of scant food, they arrived in a prosperous town where the locals, moved by Nanak's teachings, offered generous provisions and gifts.<sup>97</sup> Delighted, Mardana gathered the offerings into a large bundle to

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<sup>96</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>97</sup> This moral tale appears in *janamsakhi* tradition; see McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*.

carry on their journey. As they set out on the road again, however, Nanak noticed his friend stooping under the weight of this new burden. Suddenly, the Guru began to chuckle, then laughed. Mardana stopped, puzzled – then, seeing Nanak’s mischievous twinkle, he too laughed. In that moment, he understood his teacher’s unspoken message: in his enthusiasm, he had loaded himself with excess goods they did not truly need. Smiling sheepishly, Mardana untied the bundle and gave away most of the food and items to needy folks in the next village. Ever gentle in his guidance, Nanak had helped his friend remember that true richness lay not in possessions but in contentment and trust in God. Mardana never forgot that lesson – or the Guru’s laughter echoing across the fields as they walked on.

Through deserts and forests, over mountains and across rivers, Nanak and Mardana forged onward. The journeys were often arduous. They slept in the open under cold starlit skies; they subsisted on whatever food kind villagers or devotees would offer. Mardana, who had known poverty and hunger in his youth, was no stranger to hardship – but the road tested even his endurance. At times his feet blistered from endless walking; at times his stomach ached with hunger when days passed without a proper meal. And yet, he never wavered. Whenever Mardana felt weary, he would remind himself, “I walk with the messenger of truth.” He would tighten the strings of his rabab and carry on. Nanak, deeply moved by his friend’s devotion, often remarked that without Mardana’s accompaniment his own voice would be like a body without its breath. During one particularly difficult trek through a waterless desert, Mardana nearly collapsed. Nanak sat beside him, placed a hand on his shoulder, and said, “Your music is our prayer for water.”

Taking heart, Mardana mustered the strength to play a few notes. The story goes that moments later, clouds gathered and rain poured down on that parched land, reviving them.<sup>98</sup> Miracle or not, it was clear that the bond between Guru and minstrel lent them both an almost superhuman strength.

At long last, after spreading the light of truth far and wide, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana returned to Punjab and settled at a newly founded community named Kartarpur around 1522.<sup>99</sup> There, they welcomed people of all castes and creeds to live, work, and worship together. And at the heart of their new community was the practice that had defined their friendship from the start: kirtan – singing the praises of God. Guru Nanak established a community kitchen (*langar*) where all – Hindu, Muslim, or otherwise – ate together as one family, just as the two friends had always done.<sup>100</sup> He would lead the congregation in singing hymns at dawn and dusk, and Mardana would sit beside him, fingers dancing on the rabab's strings. It was a humble village transformed into a sanctuary of music and spirituality. And in those daily assemblies, one could see something quietly wondrous: Hindu farmers and Muslim artisans sitting together, singing the same sacred verses, their voices mingling as one. The dream that had germinated in the fields of Talwandi during Nanak and Mardana's boyhood was now fully blossoming.

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<sup>98</sup> Desert and water episodes are reported in *janamsakhi* tradition; see McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition*.

<sup>99</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*.

<sup>100</sup> W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978); McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Bhai Mardana continued to serve Guru Nanak with unwavering love until the very end of his life. When Mardana passed away (around 1534, a few years before Guru Nanak), the Guru grieved the loss of his cherished companion deeply.<sup>101</sup> In a final act of love and equality, Nanak chose to honor Mardana not with the customary Muslim burial or Hindu cremation, but by blending elements of both. As per Guru Nanak's instruction, the community gathered to recite prayers, and Mardana's body was committed to the river Ravi, to return to the One who is ocean and earth and sky.<sup>102</sup> To Guru Nanak, it mattered not whether the farewell was Hindu or Muslim – it was befitting of a soul that had transcended such distinctions. After Mardana's death, Guru Nanak invited Mardana's son, Shahzada, to remain with him and take up his father's place as the community's musician. Thus began the revered lineage of Rababis – Muslim musicians who would serve as the keepers of kirtan in Sikh congregations for generations to come.<sup>103</sup> For nearly four centuries after Guru Nanak, Mardana's descendants and other rababis continued to sing the Guru's hymns in the Golden Temple at Amritsar and other gurdwaras, embodying the living spirit of interfaith partnership that Nanak and Mardana had established.<sup>104</sup>

Even the Sikh scripture that Guru Nanak left behind – the Guru Granth Sahib – reflects the imprint of that musical partnership. All of Nanak's compositions were arranged by raga (musical modes) in

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<sup>101</sup> N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>102</sup> N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>103</sup> Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistan"; Singh, "Sikh Music".

<sup>104</sup> Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistan"; Singh, "Sikh Music"; Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

that holy book, meant to be sung rather than merely read.<sup>105</sup> It is a tradition that continues in every Sikh *gurdwara*: the hymns of the Guru are performed in kirtan, not spoken, keeping alive the spirit of Bhai Mardana's rabab in Sikh worship even centuries later.<sup>106</sup>

Looking back on the lives of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana, it is impossible to separate the music from the message, or the friendship from the faith. The two had walked a path utterly uncommon in their day – a path on which a Muslim and a Hindu trod as one, carrying the light of unity.<sup>107</sup> Through the songs they shared, they were able to not only bridge the gap between their own communities, but also awaken countless others to the truth that beyond our labels, beyond our different customs and tongues, the same Divine melody resides in every heart. In the end, Nanak and Mardana's story became a song in itself – a song of two souls, friendship, faith, and the music that made them forever inseparable.

Their extraordinary partnership, rooted in the soil of a little village and blossoming across the world, would inspire countless others in the centuries to follow. Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana showed through their lives that when hearts unite in sincerity and when voices join in sacred song, the age-old walls between people can finally crumble.<sup>108</sup> Their friendship was not only the foundation of a new religious

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<sup>105</sup> Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*; Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

<sup>106</sup> Singh, "Sikh Music"; Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*.

<sup>107</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>108</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism*; Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*; N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*.

community – it was a timeless beacon of hope that illuminated the path toward a more compassionate and unified human family.

## Conclusion

Talvandi in the late fifteenth century was described as a small but revealing microcosm of North Indian society. Hindus and Muslims lived in proximity yet remained separated by caste, occupation and communal boundaries.<sup>109</sup> Within this environment two children were born whose lives became closely connected: Nanak, son of the Khatri patwari Mehta Kalyan Das and Tripta, and Mardana, son of Muslim mirasi musicians. Nanak's family occupied a position of modest status, literacy and administrative responsibility, while Mardana's family carried the cultural authority of hereditary musicians but bore the stigma of a low occupational caste.<sup>110</sup> The juxtaposition of these two households showed in concrete form the social lines that structured everyday life in Talvandi.

These social and religious structures shaped, but did not fully determine, the two boys. Nanak's childhood was marked by spiritual sensitivity, a tendency to question established ritual, and a readiness to sit with both Hindu and Muslim teachers while refusing to confine truth to either side.<sup>111</sup> He appeared contemplative, resistant to purely

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<sup>109</sup> Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age, 1000–1765* (London: Allen Lane, 2019); Aniruddha Ray, *The Sultanate of Delhi (1206–1526): Polity, Economy, Society and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>110</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*; Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistan".

<sup>111</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*.

formal observance, and attentive to the suffering of peasants and marginal groups around him. Mardana, by contrast, learned from an early age that his family's music was valued at weddings and gatherings yet his caste position exposed him to prejudice.<sup>112</sup> Through his training on the rabab and his participation in devotional songs that invoked both Islamic and Hindu names for the Divine, he inhabited a lived synthesis of traditions even before he could articulate it in words.

Their meeting and gradual friendship illustrated these themes of social boundaries and religious plurality in concrete terms. Without dramatic conversion scenes, Nanak and Mardana began to share time, food and conversation. Nanak listened seriously to the young minstrel's experiences and to the music that carried them; Mardana recognised in Nanak someone who did not look at him through the lens of caste.<sup>113</sup> Household anxieties, especially on Nanak's side, highlighted how unconventional this closeness appeared within Talvandi's norms. Yet over time the sight of the patwari's son walking or sitting with the mirasi boy became familiar to the villagers and indicated that another pattern of social relations was possible.

Music gradually became the main medium through which Nanak's emerging religious message was expressed. Spontaneous verses and reflections, sung by Nanak and accompanied by Mardana's rabab, began to draw together listeners who would not ordinarily mix. Shared kirtan reduced the social distance between Hindu and Muslim villagers and gave concrete form to Nanak's conviction that

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<sup>112</sup> Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*; Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistan".

<sup>113</sup> Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*; Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistan"; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

the one Divine reality could not be monopolised by any single community.<sup>114</sup> At the same time, these early experiments in song and congregation anticipated practices that later became central to Sikh life: collective singing of scripture, the precedence of shared devotion over inherited status, and the integration of music into theological expression.

The relationship of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana moved beyond Talvandi to Sultanpur and eventually to Kartarpur, showing that the same partnership continued as Nanak's inner calling intensified. Employment and family obligations moved him geographically, but his collaboration with Mardana stabilised the pattern in which reflection, hymn and music combined to address diverse audiences. Later traditions about the rababi lineage and the organisation of Nanak's compositions by raga underlined how decisively music, and therefore Mardana's role, was built into the foundations of the Sikh tradition.<sup>115</sup>

Taken together, these elements formed the groundwork for the next phase of their lives. A universal vision of Divine shaped by a mixed religious environment, a critical awareness of social injustice sharpened by caste experience, and a proven partnership in which ideas became song all made it increasingly difficult for Nanak and Mardana to remain confined to one village or region. These developments created conditions for movement outward. The journeys (udasis) that Nanak was about to undertake, with Mardana often at his side, carried the insights and practices formed in Talvandi and Sultanpur across wider geographies, into encounters with new

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<sup>114</sup> Singh, "Sikh Music"; Mandair, *Sikhism*; Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

<sup>115</sup> Singh, "Sikh Music"; Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*; Lybarger, "Hereditary Musician Groups of Pakistan".

communities and institutions, where this early message of unity and justice was tested, contested and extended on the road.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> N.-G. K. Singh, *The First Sikh*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

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## CHAPTER 2: THE JOURNEYS

### Setting Out on the Footpath of Truth

In the small town of Sultanpur in the Punjab, the first light of dawn would find two figures by the Kali Bein rivulet.<sup>117</sup> One was Nanak, a young official by profession but a mystic at heart; the other was his older friend Mardana, a humble musician. Each morning, Nanak finished his duties in the royal grain store before daybreak and walked to the river to bathe and sing God's praises. Mardana would sit beside him on the bank, cradling his rabab – a lute-like instrument<sup>118</sup> – and gently pluck its strings. The melody of the rabab wove together with Nanak's voice as he sang of the One Creator. It was a scene of serene devotion: the flowing water reflecting the first rays of sun, the air filled with prayerful song. Hindus and Muslims alike in Sultanpur sometimes stopped to listen.<sup>119</sup> Many knew Nanak as the honest storekeeper who whispered prayers even while weighing grain. Few realized that these predawn hymns were the stirring of a new spiritual current. For Nanak and Mardana, however,

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<sup>117</sup> J. S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969; repr., 1998); W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

<sup>118</sup> Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys: Instruments, Theories, Technologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025); Navtej Kaur Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-bhai? Towards a Social History of the Rababi Tradition of Shabad Kirtan," *Sikh Formations* 7, no. 3 (2011): 365–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2011.631186>.

<sup>119</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

this was the true purpose of life – to remember the Divine Name with every breath, and to share that remembrance in song.

One day, this quiet rhythm of life was dramatically broken. As usual, Nanak rose before the sun and headed to the Kali Bein with Mardana. He waded into the stream's shallow mist and disappeared in its waters for his ritual bath – but on this day he did not return.<sup>120</sup> Mardana waited on the bank, the minutes stretching anxiously into hours. When word spread that Nanak was missing, villagers and officials rushed to the spot. Some feared a crocodile might have taken him; others whispered that perhaps this strange young man had wandered off on a mystical trance. For three days there was no sign of Nanak.<sup>121</sup> Mardana, distraught, kept a forlorn vigil by the water's edge, praying and plucking his rabab in hope. Sultanpur's governor, Nawab Daulat Khan,<sup>122</sup> was informed that his Modi (storekeeper) had drowned. Nanak's sister, Bibi Nanaki, wept yet clung to faith that her brother was under Divine protection. Just when hope was fading, Nanak emerged from the rivulet on the third day, calm and radiant, as if transformed.

Nanak's first words upon reappearing stunned everyone: "*Na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman.*" – "There are no Hindus and no Muslims."<sup>123</sup> Those around him were bewildered. In a town populated by both faiths, such a proclamation was shocking. Some thought Nanak had

<sup>120</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; W. H. McLeod, *The B40 Janam-sakhi* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1980).

<sup>121</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2019).

<sup>122</sup> Louis E. Fenech and W. H. McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), s.v. "Daulat Khan Lodhi"; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>123</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Singh, *The First Sikh*.

lost his wits. Why would a God-fearing man declare that Hindus and Muslims did not exist? When questioned, he only repeated quietly, *“There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim – so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God’s path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim.”*<sup>124</sup> These enigmatic words carried a potent truth: that outward religious labels mean nothing before the One Creator of all humanity. But at that moment, few could grasp his meaning. The remark was reported to the local authorities as heresy. The Nawab’s court Qazi (Islamic judge) took offense, interpreting it as an insult to both religions. At the Qazi’s insistence, Nanak was summoned by Daulat Khan to explain himself.<sup>125</sup>

At first, Nanak refused to present himself at the governor’s court. Gently but firmly, he answered the messenger, “What have I to do with your Khan? I answer only to the One True King.”<sup>126</sup> Such defiance of worldly authority was unheard of from a mild-mannered clerk. Yet Nanak was no longer the man who tallied grain accounts; he had returned from his mysterious sojourn in a state of utter spiritual freedom. Finally, persuaded by his sister Nanaki and brother-in-law Jai Ram (who both worked for the Nawab), Nanak agreed to meet Daulat Khan. The governor, who held Nanak in affection for his honesty, received him with respect and even a touch of sorrow – the Nawab lamented that such an intelligent officer had “become a faqir” (holy mendicant) and would no longer serve in his administration. Seated next to the governor, Nanak was asked to clarify his pronouncement that there was “no Hindu, no Muslim.”

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<sup>124</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>125</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909).

<sup>126</sup> Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, 1; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

The Qazi addressed him sternly: “Nanak, what do you mean by saying there is no Hindu or Muslim? Do you deny our religions?” Nanak gazed back calmly. He explained that by those words he meant he saw no true Hindu, no true Muslim – that people mouthed labels but failed to live by the core of their faiths. To be a *real* Muslim or Hindu meant to live righteously, beyond ego and division – and in that sense, humanity was forgetting God’s truth. Seeing the Qazi still puzzled, Nanak answered in the form of a hymn. In a sublime verse addressed to Muslims, Nanak sang that being a genuine Muslim is “*difficult; one must love the religion of compassion, discard pride and greed like rust from metal, accept God’s will, and let your heart be humble and kind to all.*” A true Muslim, he intoned, is merciful to every living being and devoid of hypocrisy. The Nawab and Qazi listened in astonishment as Nanak’s hymn gently lectured them on the essence of their own faith: *Make compassion your mosque, righteousness your prayer, justice your Qur’an, humility your circumcision, good deeds your fasting, truth your Ka’ba.*<sup>127</sup> In Nanak’s vision, to follow God truly was to rise above ritual and embrace oneness. By the time Mardana’s last note faded, the Qazi’s eyes were lowered in respect. The radical message – that God cares for the inner devotion, not the outer form – had pierced through.

The meeting did not end there. It was time for the afternoon Muslim prayers, and everyone proceeded to the mosque, inviting Nanak to join. Nanak stood quietly while the Qazi led the prayers and the Nawab dutifully bowed. To the congregation’s surprise, Nanak then

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<sup>127</sup> Christopher Shackle and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures* (London: Routledge, 2005); Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

began to laugh softly. Offended, the Qazi confronted him afterwards: “Why did you, a supposed holy man, laugh during the prayer?” Nanak replied that he could not help but smile because the Qazi’s mind was elsewhere even as his body knelt in prayer. Nanak described exactly what the Qazi had been thinking – worried about a new filly (horse) he’d left tied near a well at home, afraid it might fall in.<sup>128</sup> The Qazi stood dumbfounded, for this was true. Nanak then gently pointed out that the Nawab too had not been present in spirit; his thoughts were on a business caravan from Kabul.<sup>129</sup> Daulat Khan admitted that indeed his mind had wandered to plans of horse-trading. Nanak’s laughter, then, was not mockery but marvel at how people’s lips could be praying while their hearts roamed elsewhere. Both the Nawab and the Qazi were humbled. They realized this quiet man had spoken with uncanny insight. In that moment, the power of Nanak’s enlightenment shone unmistakably. The two men, overcome, acknowledged Nanak’s spiritual grace and, as tradition says, even bowed to him. Nanak had begun the day being judged by worldly authority; by day’s end, that authority itself bowed to the truth he revealed.

Having delivered his message, Nanak had no desire to return to his old post. He walked out of the Nawab’s court a free man, determined to spend his life in God’s work. Arriving back at the royal storehouse (modikhana), he resigned his position in a most charitable fashion – he opened the granary to distribute food and grain to the poor, faqirs and beggars of Sultanpur.<sup>130</sup> All the surplus that was his share, he gave away. This caused a final stir among officials, but Nanak was

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<sup>128</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, 1.

<sup>129</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>130</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

done with material calculations. He had received what he later described as a divine command during his three-day disappearance: to go forth and spread the truth of the One.<sup>131</sup> He would later allude that the Almighty had filled his cup with *Amrit* (nectar of Name) and charged him to carry it across the world. Now was the moment to obey that call.

Naturally, Nanak's decision to renounce worldly duty unsettled his family. His wife Sulakhni and their two young sons had been living comfortably under his care. Concerned by rumors of Nanak's "madness," Sulakhni's father arrived to plead with him to resume a normal life. He found Nanak sitting serenely in a cremation ground on the outskirts of Sultanpur – a shocking sight for a son-in-law.<sup>132</sup> Nanak sat among the funerary pyres as if in meditation, unperturbed by the ashes of the dead around him. The father-in-law implored Nanak to abandon this austere path and return home, even bringing along a Hindu priest to persuade him. But Nanak's resolve was unshakeable. Realizing Nanak would not be swayed, Sulakhni's father took his daughter and grandchildren back to their village of Pakkhole for a time.<sup>133</sup> Guru Nanak's immediate family thus reluctantly let him go. It was Bibi Nanaki, his loving sister, who understood her brother's destiny and supported him wholeheartedly. She is said to have told those who fretted, "This is not a madness; this is my brother's divine calling. Let him serve the Almighty as he sees fit." Knowing Nanak would not travel alone, Bibi Nanaki also

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<sup>131</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Singh, *The First Sikh*.

<sup>132</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>133</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Cole W. Owen and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978).

encouraged one particular companion to stay by his side – Bhai Mardana.

For Mardana, the decision to accompany Nanak was both natural and momentous. He was nearly ten years older than Nanak and had a family of his own in their home village of Talvandi. As a mirasi (hereditary minstrel), his livelihood came from singing and performing for patrons; joining Nanak on a long journey meant leaving behind that source of income and the safety of familiar surroundings. Yet Mardana had been Nanak's friend since their boyhood days. He had played music with Nanak from the village streets of Talvandi to the courtly environs of Sultanpur. Over the years, Mardana had witnessed Nanak's soul grow restless with longing for truth. He had felt, through the songs they shared at dawn, the pull of something greater. Now that Nanak was setting out, Mardana could not imagine letting him walk alone. According to Sikh tradition, Bibi Nanaki herself persuaded Mardana:<sup>134</sup> "Go with my brother," she urged. "Be his companion and comfort. Take your rabab and serve the mission through your music." With his characteristic humility, Mardana agreed. In truth, he needed little convincing. "Your words are my food, and the rabab is my prayer,"<sup>135</sup> he is remembered to have said to Guru Nanak. Thus, Bhai Mardana chose the path of a minstrel-pilgrim, exchanging the certainties of home for the uncertainties of the open road – all out of love and devotion for his friend Nanak.

Before departing Sultanpur, Guru Nanak donned the garb of a pilgrim. He discarded the official's turban and instead tied a simple

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<sup>134</sup>McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>135</sup> K. K. Kapur, "The Artist and the Saint," *Sikh Formations* 13, nos. 1–2 (2017): 107–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2016.1147182>; Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, 1.

saffron-colored cloth around his head. He wore a coarse robe and carried a staff and a small satchel. Mardana, too, took up a similar dress – in solidarity, he wore the same kind of rough robe as Nanak, marking them as traveling seekers beyond the bounds of caste or creed. It was a subtle but bold statement: a high-born Hindu and a low-born Muslim setting off as equals, dressed alike in the color of renunciation.<sup>136</sup> Many local residents were astonished at the sight of Nanak, once a respectable revenue official, now barefoot and simply clad, accompanied by a low-caste musician. Some mocked and called him “mised,” but others sensed a higher purpose at play. Bibi Nanaki tearfully gave her brother a loving farewell, packing a few clothes and dried provisions for them. Thus, prepared with little more than faith, the two companions bowed in gratitude and took their first steps on the road.

And so began their journeys – what Sikhs later called the Udasis, or holy expeditions.<sup>137</sup> Guru Nanak was about 30 years old, and Bhai Mardana in his late thirties, when they set out around the year 1497.<sup>138</sup> The world before them was vast and varied. “The world is on the move,” Nanak had observed – caravans of merchants crisscrossed Punjab along the Grand Trunk Road, soldiers marched under the banners of new kings, and bands of sadhus and faqirs wandered in search of wisdom. Setting foot on the dusty path beyond Sultanpur, Nanak and Mardana joined this panorama of travelers,

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<sup>136</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>137</sup> Surindar Singh Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak* (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1969; repr., 1978); G. S. Chauhan and Meenakshi Rajan, *Shri Guru Nanak Dev: Life, Travels and Teachings* (Amritsar: All India Pingalwara Charitable Society, 2012).

<sup>138</sup> Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak*; Chauhan and Rajan, *Shri Guru Nanak Dev*.

but with a distinct mission. *“I have become a trader in Truth,”* Nanak declared. *“I carry only God’s Name as my merchandise, and I seek the righteous as my customers.”* The mission was conversation, not conversion – to awaken people to the One without insisting they change their faith. As they left the comforts of home, Nanak framed it simply: *“I have no enemy, no stranger. I see everyone as God’s child. I will carry this message wherever the Lord guides my steps.”* Mardana followed, carrying his rabab on his shoulder, determined to give melody to the Guru’s every word.

Tradition holds that over the next two decades Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana would cover thousands of miles. They undertook four great odysseys in different directions, covering much of India and beyond.<sup>139</sup> On the first journey, they traveled through the plains of the Punjab towards the east and south. They passed ancient Hindu pilgrimage sites like Kurukshetra and Banaras, visited centers of learning and devotion, and walked through village and forest alike. On later journeys they would venture to the high Himalayas and Tibet in the north, to the Arabian Peninsula in the west (reaching the holy city of Mecca and even Baghdad<sup>140</sup>), and to the far south of the Indian subcontinent, with some accounts saying Nanak reached Sri Lanka. In each place, the Guru sought out seekers of truth – Hindu pandits and yogis, Muslim pirs and dervishes, Jains, Buddhists, and common folk of every persuasion. Few had seen a saint quite like this: a *faqir* who bowed in no temple or mosque yet revered the One in all, a teacher who carried no scripture but sang divine poetry of his own.

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<sup>139</sup> Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak*; Knut A. Jacobsen et al., eds., *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

<sup>140</sup> Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak*; Chauhan and Rajan, *Shri Guru Nanak Dev: Life, Travels and Teachings*, 56, 127, 172, 219.

And at his side always was the figure of Mardana, the Muslim minstrel strumming the stringed rabab. The sight of the two – so different by birth, so united in spirit – was itself a lesson in the Guru's creed of oneness.

In these early days of travel, Nanak and Mardana went wherever the "Divine Path" led them. They had no carriage or horse; their feet were their transport. By day they trudged along dirt roads or narrow footpaths connecting villages, the Guru often walking slightly ahead with his wooden staff and Mardana following with the instrument. By night they rested wherever shelter was offered – sometimes in a humble hut, sometimes under a tree or beside a wayside well. Punjab's fields and dusty towns gave way to new landscapes as they marched on. When hungry, they relied on God's providence, accepting food from those who gave with love. When footsore or exhausted, they would pause and refresh their spirits with kirtan (devotional singing). It was not an easy life, yet they were sustained by an inner joy. Nanak's face, it is said, shone with a quiet bliss as he walked, lost in remembrance of the Divine. Mardana, though sometimes foot-weary, would cheer himself by humming a tune or recalling Nanak's uplifting words. Their friendship turned hardship into an adventure.

One early episode is remembered in the town of Saidpur (now called Eminabad) in western Punjab.<sup>141</sup> Guru Nanak chose to stay there in the home of a poor carpenter named Lalo, who served them a simple meal of coarse bread and spinach. The local noble, Malik Bhago, was offended that Nanak ignored the feast he had organised for

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<sup>141</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Fenech and McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, s.v. "Eminabad (Saidpur)."

visiting holy men and instead dined at a peasant's hut. Summoning Nanak, the haughty Malik demanded an explanation. In response, Guru Nanak is said to have held up a piece of Lalo's dry bread in one hand and a rich pastry from Malik's feast in the other. Squeezing them, from Lalo's bread dripped milk, and from Malik's, blood<sup>142</sup> – symbolising the purity of honestly-earned food versus the blood-stained wealth of exploitation. Nanak calmly told Malik Bhago that his lavish hospitality was tainted by the cruelty with which he amassed his riches, whereas Lalo's humble fare was made sweet by honest labor. The nobleman stood speechless and chastened. Watching all this, Mardana understood another principle of his friend's mission: truth and justice mattered more than appeasing the powerful. By siding with the lowly Lalo against a corrupt wealthy host, Guru Nanak taught that God was with the honest and the humble, not with tyranny and pride. Indeed, news spread that the *Kshatriya* (high-caste) Nanak preferred the company of the low-caste and traveled with a Muslim. Many conservative Hindus in the town were scandalised – some even called him “irreverent” – but in time, seeing Nanak's integrity, they too bowed to the righteousness of his path. Lalo the carpenter, once scorned, found himself treated with new respect by his neighbors, simply because Guru Nanak had honored his home.

From Saidpur, Nanak and Mardana pressed further on. By this point the pattern of their travels was established. Wherever they went, they carried no distinction of “Hindu” or “Muslim” – they greeted all with the same love. Nanak wore the look of an itinerant saint, while Mardana's musical skill announced their arrival. When they entered

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<sup>142</sup>McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition.

a village, Mardana might sit and tune his rabab in the marketplace, striking up a soulful melody.<sup>143</sup> Drawn by the music, children and adults would gather around, curious about these strangers. Then Nanak would begin to sing a shabad (hymn) composed in the local dialect,<sup>144</sup> addressing the people's hearts in words they understood. Under a banyan tree or in a dusty courtyard, a crowd would form – merchants pausing their trade, women with water pots stopping to listen, farmers wiping their brows as they learned in. For a moment, all routine halted to make space for Nanak's song. He sang of the futility of greed, the illusory nature of caste and status, and the sweetness of knowing the One. People felt strangely moved: some said they forgot their worries while the hymn lasted; others marveled that this simple duet of voice and rabab carried more power than the loud sermons of priests. If someone offered them coins in appreciation, Nanak would ask that it be given to the poor or to the village common pantry. In this way, through music and example, the two friends gently spread a revolution of spirit. They demonstrated how a life of truth and companionship across divisions could be lived in practice. Each village or town they left behind remembered the duo – a holy man with a melodious Muslim minstrel – who had passed through like a refreshing breeze.

Night after night, Nanak and Mardana slept under the open sky. For Mardana, a family man who had known the warmth of home, these early nights were a new test. Instead of a cot or quilt, there was only the earth for a bed and the sky as a blanket. Sometimes they were hosted in a devotee's hut or the veranda of a wayside inn; other times

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<sup>143</sup> Bhogal, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys*; Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-bhai?," 365–82.

<sup>144</sup> Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*; Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*.

no one offered shelter, and they contentedly rested beneath a tree. Yet Nanak's presence made even the wilderness feel like home. Before sleeping, he would pray and sing a soft *soirée* (evening hymn), thanking the Creator for the day's lessons. Mardana would play a lullaby on the rabab, its gentle strains mingling with the drone of insects in the dark. On one such night, as they lay gazing at the stars, Mardana remarked in wonder, "We set out from Sultanpur with so little, and yet I feel I lack nothing." Nanak turned to his friend and said warmly, "We carry the treasure of the Naam (Divine Name) – what more could we need?"<sup>145</sup> Indeed, with each step away from worldly attachments, Mardana felt his fears and anxieties lighten. The road ahead was long and unknown, but he trusted the companionship he shared with Nanak. Thus, on the footpath of Truth, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana embarked with hearts buoyant and eyes turned toward the One. The world spread out before them – a vast landscape of souls awaiting the touch of a song. Together, the Guru and his minstrel would walk until the "Naam" echoed in every corner they could reach.

### **In Graveyards and Wilderness – Lessons in Detachment**

The roads Guru Nanak and Mardana walked were not always through inhabited towns or friendly villages. Often, their journey took them into places most people avoided – silent forests, lonely deserts, and eerie graveyards at the edge of settlements.<sup>146</sup> Nanak seemed to deliberately seek these wilderness realms and cremation grounds,

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<sup>145</sup>McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>146</sup> Eleanor Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); W. H. McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

much to Mardana's initial unease.<sup>147</sup> In the India of their time, such places were thought to be haunted by spirits or jinn's, and ordinary folk shunned them after dark. But Nanak was on a quest beyond ordinary folkways. *"Why do you choose the company of ruins and tombs?"* Mardana once asked him nervously as they prepared to spend a night in a dilapidated rest-house that locals swore was haunted. Nanak smiled serenely and replied, *"The living dead who wander in ego scare me more than any ghost. Among graves and ashes, I remember the truth that all must die. What is there to fear in a place that reminds us of God's ultimate decree?"*<sup>148</sup> With these words, the Guru spread his simple shawl on the ground and sat in meditation. Mardana, despite his quivering heart, stayed close and clutched his rabab, drawing comfort from his Guru's composure. In time, he too began to appreciate the strange peace that such places offered – far from worldly distractions, one could confront one's deepest fears and, under Nanak's guidance, overcome them.

In one town, the local religious authorities were scandalised to hear that Nanak and his Muslim companion had spent the night in the cemetery rather than at the inn or the mosque. A Qazi came to Nanak at dawn, perplexed and a little angry: *"Why do you two camp among graves? Are you not afraid of wandering spirits and demons that lurk in the dark?"* Nanak met the Qazi's eyes with a gentle gaze. *"Brother,"* he said, *"I slept among these graves to learn a lesson: kings and beggars, Hindus and Muslims – all lie here side by side. In death there is no high or low. I find that truth comforting, not*

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<sup>147</sup> Gurinder Singh Mann, "Guru Nanak's Life and Legacy: An Appraisal," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 17, nos. 1–2 (2010): 1–25.

<sup>148</sup> Kirpal Singh, *Janamsakhi Tradition: An Analytical Study*. Edited by Prithipal Singh Kapur. Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2004.

*frightening. What should I fear from the dead? It is the living filled with greed, anger and pride that trouble the world.*"<sup>149</sup> The Qazi fell silent, taken aback by this answer. Nanak's words carried the ring of undeniable truth. Those who overheard murmured in agreement – indeed, the arrogance of the living causes more harm than any spirit of the grave. Nanak added, *"Among the dead, I remember my own end and it humbles me. Among the trees of the wilderness, I remember that the Creator provides even when no man is around."* The Qazi slowly nodded, the tension diffused. He even offered an apology for misunderstanding the Guru.

Many times, villagers would observe Nanak and Mardana sitting in abandoned places singing softly through the night.<sup>150</sup> Those who paused to listen found their hearts stirred. A few even joined the two travelers, sitting cautiously at first on the edge of the burial ground, then inching closer as the melody drew them in. Nanak's voice in those moments took on a haunting beauty. He would sing *"All that is seen shall turn to dust; only the Love of the One is eternal."*<sup>151</sup> Mardana's rabab would echo mournfully yet sweetly, as if to say: do not fear, find freedom in this truth. It was not uncommon for some listeners to shed tears quietly – tears of humility and release – as they contemplated the fate that awaits everyone. Men who had been consumed by greed thought of the futility of their hoarded wealth. Women who had lost loved ones felt a strange solace that Guru

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<sup>149</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1983); Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>150</sup> John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, trans., *The Bijak of Kabir* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983).

<sup>151</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib; Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

Nanak, a stranger, understood their pain. In these desolate environs that normally evoked dread, Nanak and Mardana managed to create a space of reflection and comfort. By confronting death so openly, the Guru softened people's fear of it.<sup>152</sup> By bringing music to a graveyard, he transformed a place of mourning into a kind of outdoor temple where truth was heard.

Not all lessons in detachment were so gentle. As they wandered further, Guru Nanak sometimes deliberately led Mardana into truly inhospitable terrain. There were stretches when they had to cross dense jungles where no villages could be found for days. Food and water ran scarce. Mardana, who had lived in a populated region all his life, felt the acute discomfort of these trials. Thirst cracked their lips; hunger gnawed at their bellies. Nanak walked calmly regardless, seemingly sustained by an inner spring. But poor Mardana often found himself voicing anxieties that many of us would share. "I'm so hungry I cannot go on," he would sometimes groan by midday if nothing was available to eat. Guru Nanak would console him, "Just a little further, Mardana. The One who sent us will not let us perish. Trust the Provider." Mardana tried to believe him, but his empty stomach gave little comfort. On one occasion, as tradition tells, they were traversing the wilds of a region (near Nanakmatta in the foothills) where even the fruits on the trees were poisonous.<sup>153</sup> Mardana, faint with hunger, begged Guru Nanak for guidance. The Guru pointed to a *reetha* tree (soap-berry tree) known for its bitter, inedible fruit. "*Pluck and eat those fruits,*" he instructed. Mardana was astonished – eat the bitter berries? But trusting the Guru, he

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<sup>152</sup> G. S. Sahota, "Guru Nanak and Rational Civil Theology," *Sikh Formations* 7, no. 2 (2011): 131–43.

<sup>153</sup> Chauhan and Rajan, *Shri Guru Nanak Dev*, 69–71; Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak*.

gathered the reetha fruit. Guru Nanak uttered a prayer and shared the meal with him. Miraculously, the berries tasted as sweet as any mango. Mardana was delighted and satisfied. However, emboldened by the sweetness, he secretly plucked a few extra to save for later when Nanak wasn't looking. After they had walked a few miles, Mardana popped one of those extra fruits into his mouth. To his shock, it was unbearably bitter and acrid, as soap-berries usually are. He spat it out, chastened. Nanak smiled knowingly. "*Never be greedy, dear friend,*" he said kindly. "*Greed turns even sweetness bitter.*"<sup>154</sup> Mardana folded his hands in apology, having learned his lesson through a literal bitter taste. To this day, at Gurdwara Reetha Sahib, Sikhs recount this sakhi (story) of how Guru Nanak transformed poisonous fruit into sweet sustenance – and a teaching on greed for his companion.<sup>155</sup>

Another famous trial of detachment occurred when the two entered a truly fearsome wilderness in central India. Local warnings spoke of a dreaded cannibal who lived in that jungle, a brute named Kauda who preyed on unwary travelers.<sup>156</sup> As fate would have it, one day Mardana wandered away from Guru Nanak's side, desperately searching for food or help. In a clearing, he was suddenly seized by Kauda's men and brought before the cannibal chieftain himself. Kauda was a hulking figure, his eyes wild and cruel. He kept a cauldron of boiling oil ready to cook any creature he caught. Seeing Mardana – a lone, unarmed traveler – Kauda decided to make a meal of him. The trembling minstrel was bound and, to his horror, he

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<sup>154</sup> Chauhan and Rajan, *Shri Guru Nanak Dev*, 70–71.

<sup>155</sup> Fenech and McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*; McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*.

<sup>156</sup> Chauhan and Rajan, *Shri Guru Nanak Dev*, 142–43; Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak*.

realized he was moments away from death. Helplessly, Mardana called out in his heart to his beloved Nanak. At that very instant, Guru Nanak intuitively sensed Mardana's peril and appeared at Kauda's encampment, calling out "*Sat Kartar!*" ("True Creator!") in a powerful voice. The sound of the Guru's greeting echoed through the trees, and Kauda, who had been ferociously stoking his fire, was momentarily startled. Guru Nanak walked straight into the cannibal's lair without any fear. Kauda demanded he halt, but Nanak met the cannibal's glare with compassion rather than terror. He began to speak to Kauda about the Creator who resided in every being, even in one who had fallen to such cruelty. Under Nanak's calm gaze and words, Kauda's fierce demeanor melted into confusion, then remorse. It is said Kauda felt a strange heat – not from his fire but within his heart – as if the evil inside him was burning away. He released Mardana immediately and fell at Guru Nanak's feet, begging forgiveness. Nanak lifted him up and gently instructed him to abandon this terrible way of life. In that moment, Kauda became a changed man, vowing to live righteously. Guru Nanak did not abandon him quickly; tradition says the Guru and Mardana stayed with Kauda for several days, guiding him on a new path. Thus, in the very heart of the wilderness, the Guru turned a man-eater into a devotee.<sup>157</sup> For Mardana, this episode was utterly eye-opening. He had faced his greatest fear – a brutal death – and had been saved by the Guru's grace. More than that, he saw with his own eyes that no soul was beyond redemption. His Guru's courage and compassion knew no bounds. Never again would Mardana doubt

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<sup>157</sup> Rattan Singh Bhangu, *Sri Gur Panth Prakash*. Edited by Bhai Vir Singh. New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahit Sadan, 1993. (Originally composed in the 19th century.)

that as long as he stayed with Nanak, he was under Divine protection.

Such experiences gradually transformed Mardana's mindset. The prospect of being without food or shelter, which once gave him "hunger-phobia" panic, slowly became easier to bear. In the early days, Mardana had tried to squirrel away bits of food for the next day or frequently questioned anxiously how they would find their next meal or a safe place to rest. Guru Nanak would encourage him to practice *tawakkul* – trust in God's provision.<sup>158</sup> "The birds do not hoard, and yet the Creator feeds them," Nanak reminded him, pointing to sparrows pecking at grain in a field. "*Why then, Mardana, do you doubt that the Creator will feed us, His servants, when needed?*" Mardana struggled initially – his practical instincts told him to plan and store. But journeying with the Guru became an exercise in daily faith.<sup>159</sup> Repeatedly, just as Mardana feared starvation, someone would cross their path with an offering of food – a kindly farmer with milk, a villager with a few rotis – or Nanak himself would lead them to wild fruits or edible plants he knew. In time, Mardana began to relax his constant worry. He even joked once, "Guruji, it seems when my stomach is empty, Heaven sends lunch!" Nanak responded, "When the stomach is empty, the ears hear the Voice of God more clearly." It was both a spiritual truth and a gentle tease. The journey had taught him that clinging to comfort was an obstacle; letting go invited miraculous grace.

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<sup>158</sup> Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India, 1200–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), esp. discussion of Indo-Islamic ethical vocabulary; Soch and Kaur, *Guru Nanak: Ideals and Institutions*.

<sup>159</sup> McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*.

To test and strengthen their detachment, Guru Nanak continued to avoid comforts even when offered. Now and then, a well-meaning noble or local leader would urge the Guru to accept fine clothes or rest in a luxurious guest house. Nanak consistently declined. Once, a wealthy merchant attempted to drape Nanak in a costly silk shawl as a mark of respect. The Guru politely returned it, choosing to keep wearing his coarse cotton wrap. He later quipped to Mardana, *“If I start enjoying silks today, tomorrow I’ll forget the feel of a faqir’s robe.”*<sup>160</sup> It was important, Nanak felt, to live simply so that his soul did not get entangled in possessions. Mardana, simpler in habit, was less tempted by finery but certainly tempted by food. On one occasion, they arrived at a settlement where a feast was taking place – rich, aromatic dishes laid out in abundance. Mardana’s eyes lit up, anticipating a hearty meal after days of sparse fare. But Nanak chose instead to eat with a group of poor laborers outside the town, sharing their meagre lentils and dry bread. Though the lavish feast beckoned, Mardana followed Nanak without complaint, sitting among the dusty laborers. The rich food might have filled his belly more, but the Guru’s presence filled his heart. Through such choices, Nanak gently weaned Mardana off the attachment to taste and luxury. The lesson was not that good food or clothes were evil, but that clinging to them could divert one from remembrance of God.

Some of the most profound nights the two spent were in complete solitude under the vast heavens. In the wilderness, far from any habitation, Nanak and Mardana would light a small campfire (if they had flint) or simply rely on moonlight. After a sparse meal of whatever roots or fruits they’d found, Guru Nanak would begin to sing his

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<sup>160</sup> Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, Mahan Kosh: The Encyclopedia of Sikh Literature, trans. H. S. Bhatia (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2010).

evening prayers. The stillness of the forest would be broken by the soft strains of Mardana's rabab and Nanak's voice praising the Almighty. Wild animals that prowled nearby seemed to stay their distance, as if calmed by the divine vibrations. Mardana's fears – of prowling leopards or snakebites – gradually subsided as he immersed himself in the kirtan. Those nights became sacred in their memory. They slept under the open sky without even a cloth tent. Staring up at the countless stars, Mardana would sometimes muse aloud, "How small our worries seem here, under God's grand canopy." Nanak nodded, adding that the same Divine Light that shone in those stars also dwelt in each human heart. The wilderness, which at first had unsettled Mardana, thus became his teacher too. He learned the meaning of the Guru's words: the less one has, the more freely one can experience the Divine.

Throughout all these trials, an unspoken bond kept Nanak and Mardana together. Nanak never abandoned Mardana or became impatient with his human frailties. If Mardana lagged behind on a rough uphill climb, Nanak would slow his pace and steady his friend with a hand. If Mardana lamented his sore feet, Nanak would find a cool stream for them to rest and wash off the day's dust. When Mardana voiced fear, Nanak responded with compassion and reassurance, not scolding. And for his part, Mardana never truly faltered in his companionship. Yes, he complained and stumbled at times – but he stayed. Through haunted grounds and hungry days, through strange lands and looming dangers, Bhai Mardana remained at Guru Nanak's side, his loyalty deepening with each passing ordeal. In moments of despair, Mardana would recall Nanak's radiance when he emerged from the Kali Bein, and the miraculous power that had saved him from Kauda's cauldron. He knew there

was no safer place in the world than in the orbit of this God-intoxicated friend.

Friendship itself became a lesson in detachment for both of them. They had left behind their families and familiar comforts to follow a higher love – love for the Divine and love for each other as fellow seekers. They lived as brothers on the road, sharing everything.<sup>161</sup> If some kind soul offered a blanket on a cold night, Nanak and Mardana would wrap themselves under it together, warming each other with brotherly closeness. If only one drink of water was left, each would insist the other take it, until they finally split it. Experiencing such unconditional support, Mardana slowly lost his fear of the unknown. He realized that as long as Nanak was with him, he lacked nothing. And Nanak would acknowledge, especially in private moments, how important Mardana's presence was. *"My voice would be a lonely cry if not for your rabab, Mardana,"* he once said. *"God gave me a companion so that this message may spread in harmony, not in solitude."* Indeed, to Nanak, Mardana's music was a divine gift that carried his verses into receptive hearts.<sup>162</sup>

In these graveyards and wildernesses, Guru Nanak's message sharpened like a sword forged in fire. He taught impermanence not as a dry philosophy but as a lived reality: *All rise and fall like waves, only the Naam is eternal.*<sup>163</sup> He taught equality in a setting where status meant nothing: the soil of a graveyard made kings and

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<sup>161</sup> McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*.

<sup>162</sup> Allyn Miner, *Sitar and Sarod in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1993)

<sup>163</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib; Nabha, Mahan Kosh.

peasants truly equal in the end.<sup>164</sup> He demonstrated by example that one could smile in the face of hunger, sleep peacefully in the abode of death, and reach out in compassion to a cannibal hardened by sin. For Mardana, every day in such company was a refinement of his own spirit. The fear, greed, and impatience that naturally reside in the human heart were gradually chipped away in him. Though he started as an ordinary man with ordinary weaknesses, by enduring these trials with Nanak, Mardana grew into an extraordinary example of devotion and resilience.

One night, after a particularly long stretch of barren land, Mardana confessed to Nanak, “I never imagined I would survive such hardship. If someone had told me a year ago that I would roam through jungles with barely a loaf to eat, I would have laughed. But here I am.” Nanak simply placed a hand on his shoulder and said, “You have discovered the secret, friend. When we rely on the Divine, we survive what we thought would break us. The coal under pressure becomes a diamond.” Mardana realized that the Guru had been quietly molding him through every adversity – making him shine with an inner strength he didn’t know he possessed.

Their detachment was not born of bitterness or cynicism. On the contrary, it stemmed from a positive freedom. Having little, they felt free to give everything. In one village, when they found a starving beggar shivering without a blanket, Guru Nanak without hesitation gave away the one spare shawl they carried.<sup>165</sup> Mardana followed

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<sup>164</sup> Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*.

<sup>165</sup> Soch and Kaur, *Guru Nanak: Ideals and Institutions*; McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*.

suit by handing the man their only flask of water. That night, they slept colder and thirstier, but Mardana remarked he had never slept better, knowing someone else was warmer for their gift. “Truly, in giving we receive,” Nanak said softly, echoing a divine principle.

Through graveyards and wilderness, the two wanderers forged an unbreakable trust. If Mardana was ever truly in danger, Nanak appeared to rescue him unfailingly. And if Nanak ever needed something – even a simple task like gathering wood for a fire or finding a secure camping spot – Mardana sprang to serve without question. In this way, they demonstrated an ideal of friendship where each lived for the other’s comfort more than his own. People who observed them marveled that two men of such different faiths and backgrounds could share such a bond.<sup>166</sup> It became clear that it was their shared detachment from ego and worldly divisions that made this possible. By letting go of prejudice and selfishness, Nanak and Mardana treated each other as souls, not Hindu or Muslim, not master or servant, but two souls on one journey.

Ultimately, the lesson that Guru Nanak imparted to Mardana – and to all who saw them – was that *when you have God in your heart and a true friend by your side, you can walk through any wilderness and not lose your way*. Detachment did not mean indifference; it meant shedding the fears and false securities that keep one from realizing God.<sup>167</sup> By the time they emerged from each period of wilderness, Mardana found himself a little less afraid, a little more patient, and a lot more attuned to the presence of the Divine in every situation. He

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<sup>166</sup> Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*; Fenech and McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*.

<sup>167</sup> Sahota, “Guru Nanak and Rational Civil Theology”; McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*.

once told Guru Nanak, only half in jest, “I left home with you as a coward, but you are making me a brave man” Nanak replied lovingly, “Not I, Mardana – it is the One within you who awakens. The diamond was in you; this journey only polished it.”

The two friends would carry on, stepping out from the forest back onto the road to civilization. But they carried the wilderness *within* now – the clarity, the fearlessness, the reliance on God that they had honed in those solitary nights. Those lessons in detachment became the bedrock of their mission ahead.<sup>168</sup> Having conquered hunger, they could face greed in others without envy. Having slept among ruins, they could walk into palaces without attachment. Having seen death up close, they could live each moment fully in remembrance of the Divine. And crucially, having tested their friendship in the harshest conditions, they knew it to be unbreakable. Neither temptation nor threat could now pry them apart. Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana emerged from the wilderness as two halves of one whole, ready to engage the world and its myriad seekers with the strength of their unity and the depth of their realized truths.

### **Encounters with Saints, Sages, and Seekers**

The world through which Nanak and Mardana journeyed was alive with spiritual seekers of every stripe. In market squares and mountaintop hermitages, by temple ghats and Sufi shrines, they encountered an array of saints, sages, and self-proclaimed holy men. India at the turn of the 16th century was a land of diverse religious fervor: Hindu ascetics (yogis) practiced severe austerities in hopes of enlightenment; Muslim mystics (Sufis, faqirs and pirs)

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<sup>168</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Varan Bhai Gurdas; McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*.

meditated on the One God in khanqahs and dargahs; Brahmin pandits chanted Vedic hymns in temples; Jain monks wandered naked in renunciation; Siddha yogis claimed secret yogic powers; and numerous others touted their paths as the sole path to the Divine.<sup>169</sup> Guru Nanak sought out dialogue with all of them. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not avoid those of different traditions – instead, he actively engaged them in discourse. His aim was not to win arguments for ego’s sake, but to seek and speak truth in a spirit of openness. Mardana, meanwhile, often served as the bridge in these encounters – his music and everyman perspective creating a cordial atmosphere in which even skeptics would listen.

Early on, the companions visited a renowned Hindu *ashram* of Naga sadhus in the Himalayan foothills. These yogis lived in caves, smeared their bodies with ash, wore their hair in long matted dreadlocks and practiced extreme penances. As Nanak and Mardana approached, the yogis eyed Mardana (with his Muslim appearance) warily, but Nanak’s calm aura and their evident camaraderie disarmed hostility. The yogis boasted of their feats: some had kept an arm raised for years until it withered; others fasted to mere skin and bone; one claimed he could leave his body at will. They extolled these tortures of the flesh as proof of conquering desire. Nanak listened quietly. When they finished, the Guru replied not with direct criticism, but with a song. In a mellow voice Nanak sang: *“Without love in the heart, what use are ashes on the skin? Without truth in the soul, what power in twisted limbs and breath held in? The body is not a cage to be abused – it is the temple where the*

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<sup>169</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765* (London: Allen Lane, 2019); Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*.

*Divine dwells.*<sup>170</sup> His words flowed gently, without accusation, yet they carried a profound challenge to the yogis' philosophy. The yogis, who had initially been puffed with pride, sat in stunned silence. The depth in Nanak's song made their years of hardship seem shallow by comparison. They realized that despite all their penances, some of them still harbored ego about their attainments – a failing Nanak's verse had laid bare. Humbled, a few bowed to Nanak, acknowledging that the discipline of sincere love and humility was greater than any outer contortion. Through one simple hymn, Nanak had cut through years of pretension and reminded these ascetics of the core purpose they had perhaps forgotten.

In another town, Nanak and Mardana encountered a circle of Muslim faqirs and Qazis engaged in theological debate. Some among them were intrigued by Nanak's renown as a saint who spoke of One God beyond religious divisions. They welcomed him courteously, asking about his beliefs. Others, however, were skeptical or even hostile. One Qazi tested Nanak with pointed questions: *"If you claim to revere the One God, why do you not formally become a Musalman? Do you recite the Kalima (Islamic creed)? Do you bow towards Mecca five times a day?"*<sup>171</sup> These were direct challenges. Guru Nanak answered the Qazi in a gentle but thought-provoking manner: *"I have bowed, sir – but not merely with my body. I strive to bow my heart to the Almighty every moment. What value is bowing towards Mecca if falsehood and cruelty reside within? I recite God's Name with every breath, not just with the tongue at set hours. The true Mecca is within – it is where the ego is slain and the soul kneels before the Creator's*

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<sup>170</sup>McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition; McLeod, The B40 Janam-sakhi.

<sup>171</sup>McLeod, The B40 Janam-sakhi; Kohli, Travels of Guru Nanak.

*presence.*<sup>172</sup> Some of the assembled Muslims murmured appreciatively, for Nanak's reply rang true to the inner spirit of their faith. The challenging Qazi, however, was not satisfied and bristled at what he perceived as an evasive answer. At this juncture, Mardana intervened in the only way he knew – through music. Sensing tension, he struck a soulful note on the rabab, turning the atmosphere from argument to reflection. Nanak then sang a hymn rich with Islamic imagery to make his point in the idiom the Qazi would understand: he sang of the five prayers not as formal Arabic utterances but as five virtues – truth, honesty, charity, faith and praise – that one must live by to be a true Muslim. He ended with a couplet: *“To call yourself holy through words alone is empty; only through good deeds and mercy will you find God's grace.”*<sup>173</sup> The melody and the message combined to soften the hearts in the gathering. The questioning Qazi, hearing Nanak quote concepts familiar from the Qur'an yet with such depth, grew thoughtful and subdued. He realized this stranger was not disrespecting Islam; on the contrary, he was reminding them of Islam's own highest ideals. By the end of the evening, several fakirs embraced Nanak as a fellow lover of God, and even the skeptical Qazi offered a courteous salaam (peace greeting), acknowledging that Nanak spoke wisdom.

Nanak and Mardana also met many Hindu *bhaktas* – devotees who worshipped God with love through song, much like themselves. These encounters were often joyous reunions of kindred spirits. In one village, they found a small group of worshippers singing *īrtan* in the local language, praising *Ram* (a name of God in the Hindu

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<sup>172</sup>McLeod, *The B40 Janam-sakhi*.

<sup>173</sup>Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*; McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

tradition). Nanak joined them, adding a verse of his own composition, and Mardana's rabab complemented their cymbals and drums. After the ecstasy of joint singing, the *bhaktas* embraced Nanak, saying it felt as if a long-lost brother had come home. They spent the night sharing stories of saints like Kabir, Ravidas and Namdev – mystics who, like Nanak, had spoken against caste and ritual and taught that God is one.<sup>174</sup> Guru Nanak felt great kinship with these bhaktas, for they too rejected hollow formalism and sought God through love. Many of them immediately recognized Nanak as a *prakash* (illuminated soul) and accepted his bani (hymns) as simply another flavor of the same divine truth they cherished. In such satsangs (spiritual gatherings), Nanak's and Mardana's hearts brimmed with joy. To see Hindus and Muslims singing together in one voice – as often happened when Nanak's entourage met a mixed group of seekers – was to witness a living embodiment of oneness. Mardana in particular felt these were glimpses of the world Nanak envisioned: differences of creed dissolved in the unity of music and devotion. When the time came to depart, these devotees would send them off with garlands and hugs, imploring them to return soon. Nanak's consistent message had found receptive soil among those already inclined to oneness.

Not all encounters on the road were so amicable. Guru Nanak's teachings struck at the roots of religious hypocrisy, and this, sometimes, provoked sharp backlash from those whose authority rested on externals. Priests who prospered from elaborate ritual, or mendicants who enjoyed public adulation, could feel threatened by Nanak's simple creed of *truth over ritual*. In one temple town, a group

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<sup>174</sup>Hawley, *A Storm of Songs*; Hess and Singh, *The Bijak of Kabir*.

of Brahmin priests grew alarmed at Nanak's growing following among the locals. They confronted him demanding, "Why do you tell people to remember God directly instead of through our ceremonies? Do you think the traditions of ages are false?"<sup>175</sup> Nanak replied with calm respect, "I do not say *ignore* traditions; I say *infuse* them with sincerity. A million rituals will not wash a dirty heart. God is pleased with a single prayer said with humility."<sup>176</sup> Such reasoning only angered one head priest further. He began to shout that Nanak was a heretic misleading good Hindus. A crowd gathered, and tension mounted. Mardana, standing by Nanak, sensed hostility crackling in the air like static before a storm. At that moment, Guru Nanak raised his hand and began to sing to the crowd: "*Some call You 'Ram', some call You 'Allah'. Some serve You as Gosain, some as Khudā. Shall I quarrel with my brother over the name, when the One loving God made us both?*"<sup>177</sup> These lines, drawn from the wisdom of ancient bhagats, poured balm over the charged atmosphere. Hindus in the crowd heard God's name "Ram" in a Muslim faqir's voice; Muslims heard "Allah" from a Hindu saint's lips. All heard the same message: that the quarrel over names was senseless when the substance – God's light – was one. The head priest who had been railing against Nanak found the audience melting away from his influence, drawn instead to the melody of unity Nanak offered. People started chanting in agreement, "*Ek Onkar*" – God is One. The priest's threats died in his throat, and he slunk away, confounded. Once more, through compassion and song, Guru Nanak had turned potential conflict into an opportunity for communion. Mardana's

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<sup>175</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; Chauhan and Rajan, *Shri Guru Nanak Dev*.

<sup>176</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>177</sup> *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*; Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

rabab had literally *drowned out* the voice of anger with the voice of love.

Many such episodes occurred in the course of two decades of travel. There was the time in Assam's Kamrup region, according to legend, when Nanak encountered a band of occult practitioners led by a woman known as Nur Shah who tried to bewitch him – only to end up herself enchanted by Nanak's hymns and transformed in character.<sup>178</sup> Another time, atop Mount Sumeru, Guru Nanak is said to have engaged in a profound spiritual dialogue with a congregation of Siddhas (yogic adepts believed to possess supernatural powers). Recorded later in scripture as the *Siddh Gosti*,<sup>179</sup> that dialogue had the Siddhas interrogating Nanak on how to attain liberation while living in the world. Nanak's answers – that one could find liberation through meditating on Naam and living truthfully as a householder – greatly impressed those hermits and shifted their perspective. Bhai Mardana, though not versed in deep philosophy, witnessed how Guru Nanak spoke with the Siddhas in their own metaphysical language, yet always brought the focus back to oneness and humility. It reinforced to Mardana that Nanak's wisdom was broad and deep to engage the subtlest intellects, and yet simple enough to touch the simplest hearts.

In town after town, country after country, two figures appeared – one clad in a pale robe with a far-seeing gaze, and another carrying a lute, eyes on his companion. To the Sikhs, countless sakhis (stories) preserve these encounters. At Baghdad, for example, it is told that Nanak debated Muslim scholars on the nature of God, astonishing

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<sup>178</sup>Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak*; McLeod, *The B40 Janam-sakhi*.

<sup>179</sup>Sri Guru Granth Sahib; Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

them with his understanding of the Quran and his proclamation that there are endless worlds and thousands of Muhammads in service of the One Lord – a perspective that broadened their minds. In the same city, Mardana reportedly played music in a Sufi lodge and Nanak's verses so moved the chief pir that he called Nanak a "*Darvish of God*"<sup>180</sup>. Indeed, a shrine to *Baba Nanak* still stood in Baghdad centuries later, evidence of the lasting awe he inspired there.<sup>181</sup> Meanwhile at Haridwar, as legend goes, Nanak politely challenged Hindu pilgrims on why they offered water to the rising sun for their ancestors. When they insisted it was a sacred rite, he famously began throwing water westward instead – "for my crops in Punjab," he said innocently. The pilgrims laughed, saying, "How can water reach your fields hundreds of miles away?" To which Nanak gently responded, "If your libation can reach your ancestors in the sun, why can my handful not reach my farm?"<sup>182</sup> The wiser among them grasped his point and chuckled, appreciating the illumination behind the humor. And Mardana too laughed along, having seen once again how Nanak's wit could dismantle hollow custom without malice.

Through all these encounters, a few themes remained constant. Guru Nanak consistently emphasized the oneness of God and the brotherhood of humanity, regardless of the audience's faith. He never disrespected the sincere devotion of anyone, be it a Muslim's reverence for Allah or a Hindu's love for Vishnu – in fact, he incorporated those very names and concepts in his own hymns to

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<sup>180</sup>Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak*.

<sup>181</sup> Fenech and McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*; Knut A. Jacobsen et al., eds., *Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, 1.

<sup>182</sup>Kohli, *Travels of Guru Nanak*.

show that he honored them all.<sup>183</sup> But he would not shy from pointing out hypocrisy or misplaced priorities. If a Hindu priest took pride in high-caste lineage while lacking virtue, Nanak would ask, “Of what use is your thread or caste, if your actions are corrupt?” If a Muslim Qazi enforced prayers on others while himself harboring injustice, Nanak would ask, “How do you call yourself faithful when your mind is attached to greed?” These were challenging questions, yet delivered mostly in the form of soulful verse rather than direct accusation, which made them easier to swallow. Nanak’s approach was to *dialogue* – to hold up a mirror through his poetry in which the listeners could see their own reflection truthfully.

Mardana played a unique and vital role in these dialogues. Often he was the one who would start playing the rabab at a tense moment, diffusing anger and focusing attention back on the spiritual. In some sakhis, Mardana also served as Nanak’s interlocutor. For instance, it is said that during the discussion with the Siddha yogis, Mardana, being a householder himself, asked on behalf of ordinary people how one could attain salvation without renouncing the world. This prompted Nanak to articulate that one can live amidst one’s family and duties and still achieve union with God by remembering the Naam and treating one’s work as worship. Such questions from Mardana gave Nanak the opportunity to clarify his message for all layfolk.<sup>184</sup> In a way, the Guru and his bard formed a perfect pair of teacher and representative of the lay disciple. Nanak was the enlightened voice; Mardana was the echo in the common man’s heart, seeking understanding, sometimes doubting, often marveling. Through their interactions, listeners from all backgrounds could find

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<sup>183</sup>Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>184</sup>Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-bhai?,” 365–82; Bhogal, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys*.

someone to identify with – either the profound wisdom of Nanak or the earnest humanity of Mardana.

Moreover, the very fact of their companionship was itself a living sermon in interfaith harmony. Consider the optics: here was Guru Nanak, who by appearance and upbringing was a Punjabi Hindu (some even called him a *Sufi* in outlook), traveling intimately with Mardana, a low-caste Muslim. They ate from the same bowl, slept under the same shawl, addressed each other with warmth and humor. In one place, a Qazi scolded Mardana, “Why do you, a Muslim, roam with this Hindu and sing his praises? Do you forget your own faith?” Before Mardana could answer, Guru Nanak responded, *“Is music Hindu or Muslim? Is the air we breathe Hindu or Muslim? My friend’s faith in God is as true as yours or mine. He sings the truths of the One – what higher calling for any man of faith?”*<sup>185</sup> The Qazi had no answer. In another instance, some Hindu pundits questioned Nanak: “Master, why keep the company of a Mirasi? They are of low birth. Surely a holy man should have Brahmin companions or disciples?” At this Nanak grew stern. *“What birth makes one high or low?”* he asked. *“If a so-called low-caste sings the Lord’s glory and a so-called high-caste clings to greed, who is closer to God? My Mardana’s music purifies those who listen; there are Brahmins whose rituals cannot purify even their own minds.”*<sup>186</sup> Such rebukes embarrassed the intolerant and taught others that God’s light knows no caste. Over time, people came to revere the figure of Bhai Mardana almost as much as Guru Nanak in many communities. Mothers would point him out to their children, saying, “Look, that is

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<sup>185</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-bhai?,” 365–82.

<sup>186</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

Mardana, the Guru's beloved minstrel – a Muslim who is like a brother to Guru." The friendship itself preached that *oneness was not just an idea but a living reality*.

Mardana himself grew in confidence through all these interactions. At first, he often felt shy or out of place among erudite yogis or scholars, given his humble background. But Nanak always included him and even elevated him. At Multan, when the Sufi elders sent the bowl of milk filled to the brim to Nanak (to symbolically say, "Our city is full of saints – no room for another"<sup>187</sup>), it was Mardana who excitedly wondered what they should do. Nanak asked Mardana to fetch a jasmine flower. With a playful smile, the Guru placed the flower atop the milk bowl and handed it back. The Sufis marveled at the wisdom: Nanak did not overflow the milk (disturb existing mystics) but added a fragrant contribution. Later Mardana remarked, "Baba, I would never have thought of that!" Nanak responded, "It is by your music and God's grace that our bowl never overflows with ego."<sup>188</sup> In this way, he continually shared credit with Mardana. When dialogues went well, he would say to him afterwards, "Your rabab won their hearts first; only then my words could enter." Such affirmation made Mardana feel a valued participant in the mission, not just a follower.

In one poignant moment after a long day of debates and singing in a certain town, Mardana expressed to Nanak that he felt he did very little compared to the Guru's immense wisdom. Nanak looked at him with surprise. "*Do you not see, Mardana?*" he said, "*It is not my words alone, but the way they sing through us together, that enters people's*

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<sup>187</sup>Kohli, Travels of Guru Nanak; Chauhan and Rajan, Shri Guru Nanak Dev.

<sup>188</sup>Kohli, Travels of Guru Nanak.

*hearts. You ask the questions that many dare not ask. You play the notes that soften the hardest faces. In truth, your rabab is as much the Guru as my voice.*"<sup>189</sup> Mardana was taken aback – to hear the Guru call his instrument a Guru! But Nanak meant it: in Sikh tradition, the music that carries the Divine Word is given great importance. By twinning his revelation with Mardana's music, Nanak had essentially made Mardana a partner in his ministry. The rabab was a Guru in the sense that it guided people spiritually through kirtan. Mardana touched his forehead to the rabab in gratitude and to Nanak he simply said, "If that is so, it is by your grace alone, Baba." This humility between them – each crediting the other – was beautiful to those who witnessed it.

Across ashrams, mosques, roadside Dharamsalas and royal courts, the travels of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana became an exchange of dialogues. Sometimes these dialogues were challenging – as when Nanak admonished corrupt officials to their face, or told a complacent priest that his rituals were empty. There were even occasions where local authorities, angered by Nanak's influence, tried to impede them. In one small kingdom, the chief minister, annoyed that common folk were neglecting his orders while flocking to Nanak's discourses, attempted to have Nanak arrested for "disturbing the peace."<sup>190</sup> But when soldiers approached the Guru, they found him and Mardana singing under a tree while villagers sat in rapt silence. The sight so touched the lead officer that he dared not seize Nanak. Instead, he joined the audience out of curiosity –

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<sup>189</sup> Bhogal, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys*; Pashaura Singh, "Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib," in *Sikhism in Global Context*, ed. Pashaura Singh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102–29.

<sup>190</sup> McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society*; Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

and by the end, the officer himself became an admirer, pleading with the minister to leave the holy man alone. Nanak's genuine compassion even for those who opposed him gradually turned many foes into friends. His consistent refusal to accept material rewards or positions of authority made it clear he threatened no temporal power; his kingdom was of truth and spirit.

For Mardana, these numerous encounters provided a rich education. Without formal schooling, he nonetheless became worldly-wise by observing the follies and wisdom of various people. He saw piety behind monastery walls and hypocrisy behind temple doors, and vice versa. He saw that no community had a monopoly on truth or error – goodness and misguidedness were everywhere, mixed in varying measure. And always by his side was Guru Nanak to shine the light of discernment on each situation. Mardana slowly absorbed Nanak's art of dialogue: how to speak the right word at the right time, how to phrase a reprimand as a gracious proverb, how to adapt one's language to different listeners. When back in their solitude, Mardana would sometimes mimic the more pompous figures they met, making Nanak laugh. Other times he would sincerely ask, "Baba, that Yogi we met had powers... could we not also learn such tricks to impress people?" Nanak chuckled, "Why chase tricks, Mardana, when God has given us the greatest power – *Naam* – on our tongue? A hymn that turns a thief honest or a miser generous is greater magic than making stones fly."<sup>191</sup> Mardana would nod, understanding anew that changing hearts was the true miracle Nanak sought.

In the end, the encounters of their journeys reinforced the very bond that enabled those encounters. After each meeting – whether

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<sup>191</sup>McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition.

harmonious or confrontational – Nanak and Mardana would discuss it and invariably end up even more thankful for each other. When the world praised Nanak, he pointed to Mardana’s contribution; when anyone praised Mardana’s music, he pointed to Nanak’s inspiration. They were a constant check on each other’s ego. Not that Mardana was prone to arrogance, but if ever a whiff of vanity crossed his mind on seeing a crowd applaud their music, one look at Nanak’s humble, prayerful demeanor would dissolve it. And if Nanak ever pushed too hard in debate (on rare occasion raising his voice at a particularly obstinate priest), the sight of gentle Mardana plucking calmly at his rabab reminded him to rein himself to compassion. Thus, they balanced each other like two halves of a whole.

The impact of their travels reverberated far beyond the immediate audience of each encounter. Travelers and traders carried tales of the duad far and wide: *“A holy man from Punjab who travels with a Muslim minstrel – they sing like angels and speak profound truths. They say God is not in rites but in the heart’s goodness.”*<sup>192</sup> Such reports opened minds in places Nanak and Mardana had yet to reach. It created a ripple of expectation and openness that preceded them. By the time they reached places like the city of Lahore or the famed pilgrimage center of Jagannath Puri, people were already curious and receptive from hearing second-hand about their message.

In their final assessment, the journey’s encounters convinced Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana of a crucial reality: that *goodness and seekers of truth existed in every community*, and equally that ignorance and bigotry could afflict any community. It was never a

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<sup>192</sup>Mann, “Guru Nanak’s Life and Legacy”; Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

question of one religion versus another for them. It was the sincere seekers versus the hypocrites, the open-hearted versus the intolerant. And these pairs existed across religions. Nanak consistently sided with the sincere and challenged the hypocritical, no matter what labels they wore. In doing so, he earned friends among Hindus, Muslims, Sufis, Yogis and even occasional Jains or Buddhists – and equally, he earned the ire of narrow-minded leaders among all those groups. Mardana keenly observed this phenomenon. He came to realize that Guru Nanak was forging a *dialogical living* that transcended formal boundaries. “*He is not telling anyone to change their religion,*” Mardana thought, “*He is telling them to be true to the Light in their own religion – and to see that same Light in others.*”<sup>193</sup> This understanding filled Mardana with pride (the good kind) and motivation. He saw how unique their mission was in those times of sectarian siloed thinking.

Living as they did – a Muslim and a Hindu-born in daily fellowship – Nanak and Mardana’s companionship became a model that spoke louder than words. In one small village, after hearing Nanak’s discourse on universal brotherhood, a Hindu local went up to Mardana and embraced him, saying, “Forgive me, friend. All my life I was taught to mistrust Muslims, but seeing your love for the Guru and his love for you, I feel only shame for my prejudice. You are my brother.”<sup>194</sup> Mardana, eyes moist, hugged the man back warmly. Such moments were the true fruits of their wanderings.

Under countless skies, on dusty roads and under spreading banyan trees, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana engaged saints and sinners

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<sup>193</sup>Sahota, “Guru Nanak and Rational Civil Theology.”

<sup>194</sup>Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-bhai?,” 365–82; Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

alike in dialogue and song. By journey's end, they had woven a rich tapestry of human connections. They had collected hymns and stories, yes – but more importantly, they had planted seeds of unity in myriad hearts. Their encounters taught those who met them that the path to God was not narrow or exclusive; it could accommodate the yogi and the Qazi, the pandit and the peasant, so long as one's heart was sincere. And they taught by living example that friendship across faiths is not only possible but divinely enriching. As one enlightened Sufi remarked after spending time with them, *“If only the world could see what I have seen – Guru Nanak and Mardana, different as fire and water yet together giving life like the sun and rain – they would understand that the true religion is Love.”*<sup>195</sup> In the companionship of these two, many souls glimpsed that truth. And so, arm in arm, voice with rabab, Nanak and Mardana continued on their way – sometimes arguing with sages, sometimes laughing with villagers, sometimes consoling the distressed – ever carrying the fragrance of the One in their words and deeds.

### **Singing of the One – Hymns of Love and Oneness**

As Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana wandered from place to place, their message increasingly took shape in the form of music. They were not preachers thundering from pulpits; they were bards singing under the open sky, inviting all who heard to join in the refrain of the One. In North India, spiritual music was a familiar vehicle of devotion. Sufi qawwals sang passionately in dargāhs, Hindu bhajan singers chanted in temples and village squares, folk balladeers roamed with ektara in hand. Into this vibrant musical devotion, Nanak and

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<sup>195</sup>Singh, *The First Sikh*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

Mardana introduced a unique blend. Nanak's verses – revealed in moments of inspiration – were set to melody by Mardana's expert touch on the rabab. Together, they forged a new sound that transcended cultural boundaries. Their style of singing, *shabad kirtan*, carried the depth of mystical poetry like the bhaktas, and the ecstasy and rhythm of Sufi singing like qawwalis. It was as if the two great currents of Indian spirituality, Bhakti and Sufism, flowed into one stream in the person of Nanak and the music of Mardana.<sup>196</sup> Crowds who heard them sensed something fresh yet familiar in their songs: the language was local, often Punjabi or regional dialects; the content was universal, invoking "Ram" and "Allah" and "Govind" (different names of God) as one; the effect was mesmerizing.

Nanak's hymns carried a simplicity and directness that cut through dogma. He sang of One Formless Creator ("*Ik Onkar*"<sup>197</sup>), of the Divine Light pervading all forms. He sang that true worship is not in empty observances but in living a life of truth, in seeing God in all and treating all with compassion. He decried the folly of judging people by caste or creed, insisting that in God's eyes only the purity of one's heart matters.<sup>198</sup> These teachings, profound as they were, reached people's hearts more effectively through melody than they ever could through mere lectures. A peasant who might not grasp a philosophy discussion could be moved to tears by a single hymn about the vanity of earthly pride. A learned scholar who might bristle at a direct challenge could find himself nodding in agreement to the same challenge delivered tunefully with scriptural allusions.

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<sup>196</sup> Bhogal, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys*; Singh, "Sikh Music."

<sup>197</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 1; Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*.

<sup>198</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*; Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

Mardana's rabab was the carrier of these truths. This instrument, small and easily portable, had a flat, pear-shaped body and gut strings that produced a resonant, slightly wistful sound. It was said to have come to Punjab from Persian and Afghan lands, commonly used by Sufi minstrels. By embracing the rabab, Guru Nanak had intentionally brought an "Islamicate" musical flavor into his spiritual expression – an emblem of the confluence of cultures he championed. In Sikh memory, Bhai Mardana is honored as the first *rababi*, the progenitor of a whole lineage of devotional musicians. Wherever the Guru's voice went, the rabab followed, enriching the words with melody and rhythm. Sometimes Mardana would play a slow, yearning air as Nanak composed a new verse on the spot; other times he broke into a fast, lively tune when Nanak's hymn was one of joy and celebration. It is said that Guru Nanak's poetry was often spontaneously sung rather than spoken, and Mardana's fingers dancing on the strings gave those verses their wings.

The musical interplay between them evolved into a spiritual practice in its own right. When listeners gathered, they didn't feel they were attending a sermon – they felt they were participating in a *sangat*, a fellowship bound by music. One famous morning, at the break of dawn in a village along the Ganges, Nanak and Mardana began the *Asa-ki-Vaar*, a set of hymns meant for the wee hours. The raga *Asa* (meaning "hopeful") created a serene yet uplifting atmosphere. As Nanak sang couplets composed extempore – urging people to awaken to the Name of God as the ultimate reality – Mardana strummed the recurring refrain. Those who heard this later recounted that the experience was as if nature itself paused to listen: the breeze stilled, birds on tree branches cocked their heads as if enthralled. It was in such moments that many of Guru Nanak's finest compositions

were born. Mardana, though illiterate, memorized these hymns by repeated singing. Thus, he became the first repository of the Guru's bani (sacred utterances).<sup>199</sup> His rabab not only accompanied the revelation but also helped preserve it through melody. By repeating the shabads in consistent tunes, he made them easy for others to learn by ear and carry in their hearts.

Nanak's hymns, with Mardana's accompaniment, addressed a wide range of human conditions – always bringing the focus back to unity and love. In bustling cities like Lahore and Delhi, their songs spoke against injustice and false religious posturing in the courts of kings and clerics. In those songs, Nanak's voice could be scathing: comparing tyrants to ferocious beasts preying on the innocent, or chiding priests for "wearing holy robes but having dark hearts."<sup>200</sup> Set to a strong beat on the rabab, such hymns were nothing less than fearless social critique, though delivered as devotional music. People marveled at the courage of these minstrels who apparently had no patron or protection yet boldly sang truths that others dared only whisper. Mardana later jested with the Guru, "Baba, it's a good thing we are always moving on – if we stayed too long in some towns after those verses, they might have thrown stones at us!"<sup>201</sup> But the reality was that even those in power were often struck by the wisdom in Nanak's words. Many a time an oppressive official who initially bristled at a hymn's message found himself contemplating it later in

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<sup>199</sup> Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*; Bhogal, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys*.

<sup>200</sup> Paraphrasing Guru Nanak's critique of religious hypocrisy; cf. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (e.g., *Asa di Var*).

<sup>201</sup> Illustrative reconstruction based on *Janamsakhi* motifs of Nanak's itinerant singing and Mardana's repartee; see McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*; McLeod, *The B40 Janamsakhi*.

secret. The music carried the sting of truth in a coating of beauty, which made it easier to accept.

In quieter rural areas, Nanak and Mardana's songs were softer and more intimate. On the banks of rivers, they sang of the flow of God's grace. Under starlit skies on village nights, they sang lullabies of the Divine Name. Once by the Yamuna River, they sat with a group of farmers who were grieving a poor harvest. To uplift them, Guru Nanak improvised a song describing how everything is sustained in God's bounty – *"The wind, the water, the grain in the fields – all are gifts of the Merciful One. Trust and there will be abundance."*<sup>202</sup> The rabab's gentle strums gave the feeling of a cradle rocking. The peasants, who had been despairing, felt hope kindling anew. Many joined in chorus by the end with *"Sat Naam, Sat Naam"*<sup>203</sup> (True is His Name). They later said it was as if the Guru's hymn had itself fertilized their barren fields with hope. Indeed, word spread that in some villages blessed by Nanak's visit, the next crop grew unusually well – whether coincidence or miracle, who could say? But the people attributed it to the holy vibrations left by the kirtan.

Wherever they performed kirtan, something profound occurred: divisions dissolved. Hindus and Muslims, rich and poor, learned and illiterate – all would sit together, drawn by the same melody. In an age where these groups rarely mingled in worship, this was extraordinary. Guru Nanak's hymns deliberately included idioms from multiple traditions to make everyone feel included. In one verse he might invoke Gobind (a Hindu name of God), in the next he'd use Rahim (a Muslim name of God). He spoke of the Vedas and the

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<sup>202</sup>Paraphrasing Guru Nanak's critique of religious hypocrisy.

<sup>203</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 1.

Quran, of the temple and the mosque, weaving them into one narrative of praise. A beautiful example is a hymn attributed to Nanak where he imagines all creation performing a cosmic *arati* (lamp ceremony) for God: “*The sky is the platter, the sun and moon are the lamps, the stars are the pearls scattered in offering; the wind is the fan, and all the blossoming forests are incense.*”<sup>204</sup> When he sang this at the Jagannath temple in Puri – a place famous for its elaborate arti with lamps and conchs – the priests were spellbound. Nanak was effectively saying that nature itself continuously performs the worship ritual that humans try to enact in miniature. It was a gentle way to expand their vision. According to tradition, those priests, who initially were skeptical of this stranger, acknowledged the profundity of Nanak’s *arti* and escorted him out with honor.

The crowds that gathered for their music grew steadily as news of the “singing Guru” spread. At times, entire marketplaces shut down spontaneously when Nanak and Mardana began singing in a corner – shopkeepers would down their shutters to come listen, such was the magnetism. In deed; in many places the general moral atmosphere was said to improve following their visit. The memory of those sweet hymns and the sight of the Guru and his companion in harmony left communities with a living example of unity. Many villagers kept singing the refrains long after Nanak and Mardana had moved on, teaching them to their children. In this way, the hymns became embedded in local memory. Without printing presses or recordings, the survival of Nanak’s words depended on oral tradition, and music was the perfect vehicle. Devotees composed tunes (or kept Nanak’s original tunes as taught via Mardana) and passed them

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<sup>204</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 663; McLeod, Early Sikh Tradition.

along. By the end of the Udasis, dozens of shabads were circulating among groups of followers across different regions.

One remarkable aspect of Nanak's hymns is that they were eventually codified with specified musical measures (ragas). Guru Nanak chose particular ragas for particular hymns, matching the mood of the melody to the message of the verse. For example, he often sang morning praises in Rag Asa (bright and hopeful), and serious contemplative ideas in Rag Ramkali or Sūhī (which carry a more grave or yearning mood). Mardana, skilled in music theory by practice, helped in shaping these renditions. Much later, when Guru Arjan compiled the Sikh scripture, he organized Nanak's (and other Gurus') hymns by raga, preserving those original tunes as far as possible.<sup>205</sup> It meant that the hymns born on the road with Mardana remained living compositions rather than just text.

A few specific compositions are famously tied to journey episodes. The *Sidh Gosti* (Dialogue with the Siddhas) – though recorded as a lengthy poem – likely was sung or chanted as a discussion in verse form.<sup>206</sup> Many of Guru Nanak's reflections on his travels found their way into hymns. After witnessing the horror of the Mughal invasion by Babur, Nanak poured his anguish into poetic verses (known as *Babur-Bani*) that he sung aloud, lamenting the brutality and questioning God about the suffering of the innocent.<sup>207</sup> Bhai Mardana's rabab added a dirge-like accompaniment, amplifying the sorrow. Those verses, carried back by travelers, served as a searing

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<sup>205</sup>Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*.

<sup>206</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 938–946; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>207</sup> Pashaura Singh, "Speaking Truth to Power: Exploring Guru Nanak's Bābar-vāñī in Light of the nama," *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020): 328, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11070328>; Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *passim*.

piece of journalism in musical form, informing distant villages of what had happened while also offering spiritual solace that tyranny too would pass under God's justice.

Through these songs, Nanak and Mardana were in effect building a *sangat* (community) that was not bound by locale.<sup>208</sup> Anyone who absorbed their hymns became part of the spiritual community of remembrance. By the time Nanak eventually settled down back in Punjab years later to establish Kartarpur, there were already groups of followers far and wide who knew his songs and teachings. When these followers later visited Kartarpur to see Guru Nanak in his final years, they could join the congregational singing seamlessly, even if they came from hundreds of miles away – they already knew the words and melodies from his earlier visits.

In the evenings at Kartarpur, when Guru Nanak led the assembled community in *kirtan*, Bhai Mardana was always by his side playing the *rabab*. The daily rhythm they established – early morning hymns, community singing at sunset – became a foundational practice in the emerging Sikh community. This tradition of singing *bani* (divine words) to musical accompaniment that Nanak and Mardana pioneered remained at the heart of Sikh worship thereafter. The *Guru Granth Sahib* (the Sikh scripture compiled later) itself is structured by musical chapters,<sup>209</sup> reflecting how intrinsic music is to the Sikh approach to the Divine. It all harkens back to those humble duets on dusty trails.

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<sup>208</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*; McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>209</sup> Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*; Pashaura Singh, "Musical Chaunkis at the Darbar Sahib: History, Aesthetics, and Time."

As the years passed, the bond between Nanak's bani and Mardana's rabab only grew stronger. The legend goes that when Bhai Mardana fell ill in his old age, he lamented to Nanak, "Baba, what will happen to your songs when I am gone? Who will play the rabab for you?" Nanak took his friend's hand and comforted him, saying, "Do not worry, beloved. Your rabab will never stop playing. When you are gone, it will be taken up by others, and in every strain of kirtan your spirit will live on. Wherever God's Name is sung, there you will resound."<sup>210</sup> Indeed, tradition says that as Mardana lay on his deathbed, Guru Nanak himself sang kirtan to soothe his departing soul, rather than performing any ritual. At the end, Nanak personally performed Mardana's last rites, neither with Hindu nor Muslim ceremony, but simply with hymns of praise to the One – the same hymns they had sung together for decades. True to Nanak's words, after Mardana's death his descendants and other disciples continued the rababi tradition.<sup>211</sup> Down through the centuries, Muslim rababis (many proudly tracing lineage to Bhai Mardana) served in Sikh temples as the revered musicians who performed the daily kīrtan. The Golden Temple in Amritsar for centuries resonated with the shabads played by these rababis. Generations of Sikhs thus experienced the Guru's hymns through the mellifluous voices and rababs of Mardana's spiritual children. This was a direct legacy of the Nanak–Mardana partnership – a legacy of music binding communities.

To illustrate the flavour of Guru Nanak's hymns, consider a short verse that encapsulates the message of oneness which he and

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<sup>210</sup> McLeod, *The B40 Janam-sakhi*; Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-bhai?"

<sup>211</sup> Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-bhai?"

Mardana spread. Another example is a line Guru Nanak often sang to describe how his own hymns arose within him:

*“Jaisi me āvai Khasam kī Bānī, taisrā kari gyān ve Lālo.”*<sup>212</sup>

This was addressed to Bhai Lalo (the poor carpenter friend): *“As the Word of the Master comes to me, so do I utter it, O Lalo.”* In other words, Nanak insisted he was merely a medium through which God’s Word (Bani) flowed. This humility – that the songs were not *his* but gifts from the Divine – was a constant refrain. And Mardana’s rabab underscored that humility: each time Nanak finished a verse, the rabab’s refrain would follow, almost as if saying, “these words are from Beyond.”<sup>213</sup> It was a collaborative surrender to the Divine muse.

By the time Guru Nanak’s travels came to an end and he established a settled community at Kartarpur, a rich repertoire of sacred music had been created. Every morning, the community would gather by the river and sing the Asa di Var (a dawn hymn that Nanak composed, likely with Mardana’s input on tune, during the travels). Through the day, while they farmed or did seva (service), many would hum the shabads under their breath, keeping their minds in remembrance. In the evening, all would assemble again to sing *sodār* and *arti* – hymns for dusk – just as Nanak and Mardana had done in wilderness nights. The rabab remained central in these gatherings, handled now by Mardana’s son or other trained disciples. Guru Nanak emphasized the practice of collective singing (kirtan) as a spiritually uplifting act that produces inner bliss. The hymn Anand Sahib (Song of Bliss), composed later by Guru Amar Das, came to

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<sup>212</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 722.

<sup>213</sup> Interpretive gloss on the doctrine of revealed bani; see Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*.

be sung on joyful occasions and milestones, such as community gatherings or important life events.

Thus, the music that Nanak and Mardana pioneered became the heartbeat of the nascent Sikh community. It was not mere art; it was *worship, education, and social glue* all in one. Through kirtan, the villagers of Kartarpur, many of whom had been simple peasants, internalized deep philosophical and ethical truths without needing to read tomes or attend discourse. They learned about the equality of mankind, the importance of honest living, the presence of God in all, just by singing those truths daily.

Towards the end of Guru Nanak's life, Bhai Mardana's health began to fail – he was older than Nanak by a good decade. Even when bedridden, he would ask someone to bring the rabab near and gently strum it, deriving comfort from its familiar sound. Nanak would visit him and softly sing the *Sohila* (night prayer) at his side. In those tender moments, one could witness the culmination of their life's symphony: two souls completely in tune, ready to return to the One. When Mardana finally passed away (tradition places this in the last of Nanak's Udasis or soon after their return), Guru Nanak expressed no elaborate grief outwardly. He sat by the body of his dearest friend and sang a final farewell hymn celebrating the divine Name, fulfilling Mardana's wish that no ritual mourning be observed, only God's praises. It is said that Guru Nanak remarked affectionately that "*Mardana's rabab will continue to resound wherever God's Name is sung.*"<sup>214</sup> This has proven true in more ways than one. Not only did Mardana's descendants continue playing kirtan for generations, but the very spirit of music he embodied remains an integral part of Sikh

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<sup>214</sup> Bhogal, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys*.

worship to this day. Even now, in the 21st century, if one visits a Gurdwara at dawn one can hear the Guru's shabads sung – the practice directly harkening back to those journeys.

## Conclusion

The legacy of the Nanak–Mardana partnership is thus etched in sound. The rabab of Bhai Mardana became the founding instrument of Sikh music, and though in later centuries other instruments were added, the concept of the *rababi* (the Sikh minstrel) traces to him. For centuries, the Sikh rababis (often from Mardana's family, and notably many were Muslim by heritage) were cherished members of the Sikh court. They demonstrated that the unity Nanak and Mardana lived was not a one-generation anomaly but a lasting ideal.

Today, when Sikh devotees gather to sing *kirtan* in Gurudwaras, they invoke the memory of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana by name. The epithet “*Bāba Nanak*” and “*Bhai Mardana*” are lovingly recalled as the pioneers of this melodious path. Many a hymn in the Guru Granth Sahib, when sung, is introduced by the musicians with lines like: “*Guru Nanak spoke these words; Bhai Mardana played along.*”<sup>215</sup> Across five centuries, this scene is re-enacted again and again symbolically. Every time *kirtan* is done, the bond of the first Guru and his companion underpin it.

To the Sikhs, music is not ancillary – it is essential to spiritual life. And this is the gift of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana's journeys. In their walking, meeting, debating, they imparted teachings; but in their singing, they imparted *experience*. And experience is what truly transforms hearts. A Muslim Qazi or a Hindu pandit might have

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<sup>215</sup> Bhogal, *Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys*.

disagreed with Nanak's spoken points, but when he closed his eyes and let the music in, he experienced a taste of the Oneness beyond argument. That was Nanak's genius and Mardana's art.

The story of the Journeys of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana would be incomplete without acknowledging that it was as much a musical odyssey as a spiritual or intellectual one. They walked the land like wandering minstrels of God, turning each locale into a temporary abode of divine music. Their friendship became the lyric and melody of an exquisite song – one that continues to echo. The Sikh community's daily singing of the Guru's hymns, the ongoing Rababi tradition (even after Partition,<sup>216</sup> Sikh musicians have kept the rabab alive in kīrtan), and the cherished memory of the Guru and his minstrel sitting by the Bein and creating *Naam* music at dawn – all these keep the legacy vibrant.

Five centuries later, whenever a rabab or its modern equivalent plays the opening chords of a shabad in a gurdwara, one can imagine, if only for a moment, Bhai Mardana at Guru Nanak's side, fingers on strings, keeping rhythm to the soul-stirring voice of the Guru. In that moment, past and present merge. The journeys live on in every song of love and oneness, affirming that indeed, *"wherever God's Name is sung, Mardana's rabab resounds and Nanak's spirit presides."*<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup>Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-bhai?"

<sup>217</sup> Bhogal, Sikh Kirtan and Its Journeys.

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## CHAPTER 3: CONFRONTING POWER

### Kings and Oppressors – The Politics of Religion

In the first decades of the 16th century, as Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana traveled across the Punjab and beyond, the subcontinent was undergoing seismic political upheavals. The old Lodhi Sultanate was faltering, riddled with corruption and weak leadership, even as a new invader – the Mughal chief Babur – loomed on the horizon.<sup>218</sup> Politics and religion were deeply intertwined in this world. Sultans ruled as if by divine sanction, styling themselves defenders of the faith, and their courts employed Qazis (Islamic judges) and pandits (Hindu Brahmin scholars) to bless authority with a veneer of righteousness.<sup>219</sup> In practice, injustice often wore a cloak of piety. It was a time when emperors took counsel from holy men, and conquering armies invoked God's name even as they looted and slaughtered. Kingship and priesthood frequently reinforced one another: rulers claimed to be upholding God's order, and religious officials, in turn, legitimized the rulers' commands – however unjust – as the will of heaven. This was the backdrop against which Guru Nanak raised a bold and unique voice. With Mardana's humble rabab echoing beside him, Nanak spoke truth to power in a way that few religious figures of his era dared. He confronted both the tyranny of rulers and the hypocrisy of clergy, inaugurating a Sikh tradition of challenging any alliance of oppressive power and corrupted religion.

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<sup>218</sup> John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Stephen F. Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483–1530)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>219</sup> Richards, *Mughal Empire*.

Guru Nanak's critique of oppressive authority took shape early and uncompromisingly. He lived through Babur's invasion of North India – a cataclysmic series of attacks that culminated in the Mughal conquest of Delhi in 1526.<sup>220</sup> Babur's marching armies left cities like Saidpur (modern Eminabad) in ruins and populations terrorized.<sup>221</sup> According to Sikh tradition, Guru Nanak and Mardana themselves were present in Saidpur when it was sacked; they were among the common people swept up by Babur's soldiers.<sup>222</sup> The sight of massacre and suffering left an indelible mark on the Guru's heart. In response, Nanak did not raise a weapon – he raised his voice, composing verses that to this day are remembered as the Babar-vaṇi (Babur's hymns).<sup>223</sup> In these, the Guru bore witness to the horrors unleashed by imperial ambition. He describes “the dark age as a knife, and the kings as butchers”<sup>224</sup>, lamenting that “*righteousness has sprouted wings and flown away*”<sup>225</sup>. In one vivid image, preserved in the Sikh scripture, Nanak says that “*the kings are tigers and their officials are dogs; they prey upon the innocent, licking the blood of the poor*”<sup>226</sup> (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1288). It is a searing portrait of rulers who behave not as guardians of justice but as predators of the vulnerable. Such language was radical – to call a king a tiger or butcher was to court the wrath of the throne – yet

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<sup>220</sup> Richards, Mughal Empire.

<sup>221</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

<sup>222</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janamsakhis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>223</sup> Pashaura Singh, “Speaking Truth to Power: Exploring Guru Nanak's Bābar-vaṇī in Light of the nama,” *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020).

<sup>224</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, ang 145.

<sup>225</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, ang 145.

<sup>226</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, ang 1288.

Guru Nanak felt compelled to hold a mirror to the violence and cruelty of his times.<sup>227</sup>

Nanak's indictment did not stop at the figures of the emperor and his officers. He also turned a spiritual eye toward those who enabled oppression through religious complacency or collusion. In the same breath that he decried tyrants, Guru Nanak questioned the Qazis and pandits – the learned religious officials of Islam and Hinduism – who often sat in the courts of nobles and princes.<sup>228</sup> “O Qazi, O Brahmin, you claim to be wise,” he mused in essence, “but if you bless unjust rulers and ignore the suffering of the people, what is your wisdom worth?”<sup>229</sup> According to Sikh sources, Guru Nanak confronted Muslim and Hindu clergy for “twisting religion to justify oppression”. One Punjabi verse attributed to him starkly observes: “*The Qazi tells lies and the Brahmin slaughters life – yet each claim to be holy.*”<sup>230</sup> In other words, judges who were meant to uphold truth were instead sanctioning deceit and cruelty, and priests who were meant to preserve life were complicit in bloodshed (whether literal or metaphorical). Nanak saw this as a complete perversion of religion. True faith, in his view, could not be reconciled with injustice. If a holy man's piety made him blind to the misery of his fellow beings, then his piety was empty. Religion, Nanak taught, must stand on the side of the oppressed, not serve as a tool for the oppressor.

To understand the politics of religion in Guru Nanak's time, one must appreciate how daring his stance was. In South Asia of that era, criticizing a ruler's morality could be seen as sedition, and criticizing

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<sup>227</sup> Pashaura Singh, “Speaking Truth to Power.”

<sup>228</sup> Richards, Mughal Empire.

<sup>229</sup> McLeod, Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion.

<sup>230</sup> Paraphrase of Guru Granth Sahib, ang 662.

religious authorities invited accusations of blasphemy.<sup>231</sup> Nanak did both in one stroke – yet through the medium of melodious hymns that carried truth without overt rancor. Guru Nanak publicly denounced exploitation and social injustice, even at the risk of angering those in power. He needed no weapon other than truth, and no ally more potent than the conscience of the common people.

Bhai Mardana, as ever, stood by the Guru's side during these confrontations. We can imagine the gentle minstrel – a Muslim by birth and a man of low social station – watching these events with both awe and admiration. In many ways, Mardana's presence was a statement.<sup>232</sup> His very companionship with Nanak defied the norms that the powerful sought to enforce. Society's elite, both Mughal and native, observed strict lines of caste and creed. Yet here was Nanak the saint and Mardana the minstrel, son of Hindu and a Mirasi's son, walking and living as brothers. Every time Nanak took Mardana's hand or shared a meal with him, it was a rebuke to the idea that people can be ranked as higher or lower. It was also a subtle rebuke to religious authorities who preached division. The two friends praying together – whether in a mosque in Multan or on the banks of the Ganges – embodied a unity that made a mockery of the divisive politics of the day. Mardana symbolized the common folk whom kings trampled underfoot and whom priests often scorned. When violence and terror struck – as in Babur's invasion – it was people like Mardana, ordinary villagers and artisans, who suffered the most. In Sikh memory, there is a poignant scene from the Babur invasions:

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<sup>231</sup> J. S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969; repr. 1998).

<sup>232</sup> Navtej K. Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai? Towards a Social History of the Rababi Tradition of Shabad Kirtan," *Sikh Formations* 7, no. 3 (2011): 365–82.

Guru Nanak and Mardana witnessing the crying of women and children taken captive by the conqueror's army.<sup>233</sup> Mardana, deeply shaken, asked his master why God had allowed such atrocities. Rather than offer a simplistic answer, Nanak responded with a hymn – an anguished prayer questioning the Lord for permitting “so much agony to be inflicted on the innocent”<sup>234</sup>. “*When the powerful attack the powerful, I do not grieve,*” he sang, “*but when the powerful slaughter the helpless, You, O Lord, must be watching. Did You not feel compassion?*”<sup>235</sup> In this way, Guru Nanak voiced the people's cry for justice as a challenge directed even to God.<sup>236</sup> Mardana's troubled question became part of Nanak's shabad, giving immortal expression to the suffering of the ordinary. The companionship of these two thus becomes more than a friendship; it is an allegory of the Guru's mission. Nanak stood with Mardana – with the poor, the outcast, the meek – and through song and satire he confronted tyrants and their apologists on their behalf.

It is important to note that Guru Nanak's protest oppression was never framed as a battle of one religion versus another. His was not a Hindu rallying cry against Muslims, nor a partisan plea for one group's dominance. Rather, he targeted the principle of injustice itself, regardless of who perpetrated it.<sup>237</sup> In his poems he chastises both the Muslim ruler who brutalizes a population and the Hindu landholder who exploits his peasants. He has harsh words for the *Pathan* warlord who terrorizes others, and equally harsh words for

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<sup>233</sup> W. H. McLeod, *The B40 Janam-sakhi* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1980).

<sup>234</sup> Guru Granth Sahib, ang 360.

<sup>235</sup> Guru Granth Sahib, ang 360.

<sup>236</sup> Pashaura Singh, “Speaking Truth to Power.”

<sup>237</sup> Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

the *Kshatriya* (Indian noble) who fails in his duty of protection. Guru Nanak was disgusted by the bloodshed he saw, but he attributed it to no intrinsic evil in one community or the other – the evil lay in ego, greed, and falsehood, which know no single creed. Indeed, his vision of *Ik Onkar* – the One Divine Reality – taught that all humans are children of the same Creator.<sup>238</sup> Any ruler who violated the dignity of a human being was, in Nanak’s eyes, trampling the divine light within that person. Any priest who blessed such a ruler’s actions was betraying the very religion he professed. In Guru Nanak’s theology, political oppression and religious hypocrisy were two heads of the same monster, “Falsehood”, which could only be slain by the sword of Truth. This understanding naturally led him to speak out against the “politics of religion” – the cynical use of religious authority to prop up tyranny.<sup>239</sup> He saw how easily sacred language could be co-opted: a Sultan might declare himself “King by God’s grace” while flouting God’s command to care for the weak; a Brahmin might insist on ritual purity while turning a blind eye to the impure deeds of his patron. Nanak’s response was to strip away the pious veneer and expose the injustice. He reminded both Muslims and Hindus of their core teachings – that God is just, that righteousness is paramount – and dared them to measure their rulers by those standards. In one hymn, he imagines a Day of Reckoning for the unjust: *“The princes and captains who massacred innocents – in the Lord’s court, their faces*

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<sup>238</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*; Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>239</sup> Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

*will be blackened and their noses cut in disgrace.*<sup>240</sup> Such imagery drew from Indian cultural idioms of dishonor, and it delivered a clear warning: those who abuse their power will ultimately answer before the Highest Power.

Under oppressive regimes, Guru Nanak's egalitarian community (sangat) itself was a quiet revolution. While emperors and elites-built walls of segregation, Nanak built a fellowship without walls. He founded the town of Kartarpur as a place where peasants, traders, artisans – anyone of sincere heart – could gather as equals in prayer. In the sangat, there were no kings and no slaves, no Brahmins and no untouchables. All dined together in the Guru's *langar*, sitting on the same floor and sharing the same simple food.<sup>241</sup> This was more than a spiritual practice; it was a political statement of equality. The rulers of the day claimed divine authority yet behaved no better than predators. Nanak, with no throne or treasure, claimed nothing – yet behaved as a true servant of Divine, uplifting those around him. The contrast could not have been lost on people. By the time Guru Nanak died in 1539, a nascent community of Sikhs had experienced a new model of society. They carried in their hearts his teaching that “*the Divine Light is in every person*”<sup>242</sup> and his example of fearlessly confronting any “butcher of humanity,” be he a king or a cleric. The earliest Sikhs thus inherited a dual legacy: on one hand, a gentle ethos of love, devotion, and sharing as exemplified by the friendship of Nanak and Mardana; on the other, an unyielding resolve to

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<sup>240</sup> Paraphrase of Guru Nanak's Bābar-vāṇī; see Guru Granth Sahib, ang 360; for the idiom of blackened faces and cut noses as dishonor, see Guru Granth Sahib, ang 1244.

<sup>241</sup> J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>242</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The First Sikh*, esp. chap. 5.

challenge injustice – even if that injustice came with a crown or a religious seal.

By the end of Guru Nanak's life, the seeds of Sikh resistance to oppressive power had been firmly planted.<sup>243</sup> Those seeds would sprout in the soil of Punjab over the coming generations, as the Sikh community navigated an environment where political might and religious authority often joined forces to dominate others. The memory of Nanak's words gave Sikhs a discerning eye: they had learned from their first Guru that no ruler was truly great if he made the lowly weep, and no priest was truly holy if he condoned tyranny. Thus, the spirit of Nanak and Mardana's moral protest lived on. It would find its next great test in the trials faced by the Sikh Gurus who succeeded Nanak. The gentle minstrel's rabab would continue to sound in the courtyards of Sikh congregations, and the piercing honesty of Nanak's verses would continue to resonate in Sikh hearts. When emperors grew cruel or officials overstepped their bounds, Sikhs would remember the Guru's example and ask: "*What is the right thing to do? To remain silent, or to speak out – perhaps even to defy?*" In the chapters of Sikh history that followed, we see that they chose to defy. The seeds sown in Nanak's time – the conviction that temporal power must bow to spiritual truth and human dignity – began to blossom. And as we shall see in the next section, that conviction would demand the ultimate sacrifices from Guru Nanak's own spiritual successors.

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<sup>243</sup> Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699–1799* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

## **The Martyrdom of Gurus – Beyond Religious Conflict**

The values Guru Nanak espoused did not die with him. They were carried forward by the Gurus who succeeded him – sometimes at great cost. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, two of Nanak’s spiritual heirs, Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur, were put to death by the Mughal state.<sup>244</sup> These martyrdoms stand as defining moments in Sikh history. At first glance, they might seem like straightforward episodes of religious persecution: Sikh Gurus executed by Muslim emperors. But serious historical inquiry reveals a more complex reality. Yes, religion was a factor – but these were not simply cases of “Muslims versus Sikhs” or “Islam versus Hinduism.” Rather, they were collisions between a nascent religious community with a robust ethical vision, and a powerful empire bent on uniformity and control. The Sikh tradition has always remembered Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur as martyrs for righteousness and freedom of conscience, not as warriors against a particular faith. Modern scholarship, too, emphasizes the political and social dimensions surrounding their deaths.<sup>245</sup> By examining these events in context, we see how the Sikh ideal of confronting oppressive power – seeded in Nanak’s time – evolved under new conditions. The Gurus’ martyrdoms were a continuation of Nanak’s protest by other means: when speaking truth to power cost them their lives, they did not flinch. They embodied the principle that some values are worth dying for, and in doing so they galvanized their community to stand

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<sup>244</sup> Pashaura Singh, *The Life and Work of Guru Arjan: History, Memory, and Biography in the Sikh Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Louis E. Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>245</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*; Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

unwaveringly “beyond religious conflict,” on the side of universal justice.

### **The Execution of Guru Arjan (1606)**

Guru Arjan was the fifth Guru of the Sikhs and the first to be born into the Sikh community rather than converting into it. By the early 1600s, under Guru Arjan’s leadership, the Sikh Panth had grown into a vibrant movement centered in the Punjab.<sup>246</sup> The Guru had overseen the construction of Amritsar’s Harmandir Sahib (the Golden Temple), a shrine open to all castes and creeds. He had compiled the Adi Granth, the Sikh scripture, collecting the hymns of the Gurus and other saints – an audacious act that established a spiritual authority distinct from both Islamic and Hindu scriptural traditions.<sup>247</sup> The Sikh community was becoming economically prosperous and socially cohesive, with its own rituals and institutions. This rising profile did not go unnoticed by the Mughal authorities. Emperor Jahangir, who came to the throne in 1605, was aware of Guru Arjan’s influence. Jahangir was not a zealot in the mold of later emperors – in fact he took pride in being a patron of the arts and a relatively tolerant ruler in many respects. But he was also a pragmatist protective of his imperial interests. In his memoir (the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*), Jahangir records his suspicion that Guru Arjan’s popularity was drawing “many foolish Indians, and even some ignorant Muslims”<sup>248</sup> to revere him as a saint. Jahangir wrote that for several generations the Sikh Gurus

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<sup>246</sup> Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

<sup>247</sup> Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*; Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>248</sup> Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59.

had been “propagating their cult”<sup>249</sup> and that “*if Guru Arjan would not become a Muslim, the false traffic he was carrying on must be stopped*”<sup>250</sup>. He even confessed that he had thought of executing this Guru before. What finally pushed Jahangir over the edge was the Guru’s perceived involvement in a rebellion against the empire. In 1606, the Mughal prince Khusrau, Jahangir’s own son, rose in revolt against his father.<sup>251</sup> During Khusrau’s brief rebellion, the prince happened to pass through Punjab. By one account, Guru Arjan met the wayward prince and blessed him, placing a ceremonial mark on Khusrau’s forehead as a gesture of support.<sup>252</sup> This was a dangerous political misstep. When Jahangir crushed Khusrau’s uprising, he learned of the Guru’s gesture. To the emperor, it confirmed that Arjan was “perfectly false and corrupt”<sup>253</sup> – a heretic challenging imperial authority under the guise of sanctity. Jahangir ordered Guru Arjan’s arrest, the confiscation of his property, and his execution.<sup>254</sup>

It is vital to note the multiple layers of motives in this tragedy. Jahangir’s own testimony emphasizes both religious and political factors. He derided Guru Arjan as a religious charlatan with a growing following that included Muslims (which may have irked the emperor’s sense of Islamic supremacy), and he specifically cited the Guru’s blessing of rebel Prince Khusrau as sedition. Modern historians generally concur that Guru Arjan’s execution was, not a random act of religious bigotry, tied to the Mughal state’s perception

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<sup>249</sup> Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 59.

<sup>250</sup> Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 59.

<sup>251</sup> Richards, *Mughal Empire*.

<sup>252</sup> Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 59; Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

<sup>253</sup> Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 59.

<sup>254</sup> Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 59; Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

of the Sikh community as a potential threat.<sup>255</sup> The community's expansion – in numbers, wealth, and social autonomy – was occurring in a volatile period. The Mughals had long co-opted or suppressed any popular movement that could rally people outside the imperial fold. Guru Arjan's town of Amritsar had become a kind of parallel spiritual center in the Punjab, attracting pilgrims and donations. The Guru himself maintained a fine court, interacted with merchants and local chieftains, and even had friendly relations with some Muslim Sufi saints (like *Mian Mir* of Lahore). To a new emperor like Jahangir, who was still consolidating power, this independent hub of authority might have appeared as a state within a state.<sup>256</sup> When the Guru seemed to dabble in dynastic politics by entertaining Prince Khusrau, that likely sealed his fate. Some scholars also point to economic factors – there were hefty fines imposed on the Guru by Mughal officials, possibly to punish the Sikhs' prosperity or to appropriate their wealth.<sup>257</sup> When Guru Arjan ostensibly refused to pay a punitive fine (as Sikh tradition holds), the Lahore authorities chose to make an example of him.

Sikh sources, for their part, remembered Guru Arjan's martyrdom in a very different light – the spiritual light of sacrifice. While the factual Mughal records speak of rebellion and heresy, Sikh accounts emphasize the Guru's serene acceptance of God's will in the face of tyranny. Later Persian chronicles and Sikh *Janam Sakhi* narratives describe how Guru Arjan was tortured over several days in Lahore:

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<sup>255</sup> Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*; Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>256</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*; Richards, *Mughal Empire*.

<sup>257</sup> Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*; Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.

he was made to sit on a burning hot iron plate, scalding sand was poured over his body, and finally he was taken, blistered and weakened, to the Ravi River where he died.<sup>258</sup> We cannot be certain how much of this detail is literal truth. Contemporary evidence of the exact method of execution is scant (Jahangir's memo simply states he ordered the Guru's death).<sup>259</sup> But there is no doubt that the Sikhs of that time understood Guru Arjan to have endured great pain with utter calm rather than bow to injustice. A remarkable testament comes from Bhai Gurdas, a Sikh scholar and poet who knew Guru Arjan personally. Within a few years of 1606, Bhai Gurdas penned verses honoring the Guru's martyrdom. In one verse, he marvels that "*even in the crucible of suffering, the Guru's mind remained immersed in the Divine as a fish in water; he surrendered his head but not his principles*"<sup>260</sup>. He likens Guru Arjan's torturous death to a moth circling into the flame of God's love – a willing, loving self-offering. Such contemporary reflections show that Sikhs quickly sacralized Guru Arjan's fate: he was not seen as a defeated victim, but as a victor of the spirit, a *sovereign martyr* who upheld the sovereignty of Truth above any earthly throne.

Crucially, Sikh tradition frames Guru Arjan's martyrdom as a stand for justice and religious freedom, not as an act of enmity toward any religion. Later generations bestowed on him the title of *Shaheedan de Sirtaj*, "Crown of Martyrs."<sup>261</sup> In Sikh memory, Guru Arjan gave his

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<sup>258</sup> Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*; Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>259</sup> Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 59; Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

<sup>260</sup> Bhai Gurdas, *Varan Bhai Gurdas* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1997); Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

<sup>261</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.

life “for the truth (Sat), for the Dharam.”<sup>262</sup> The word *Dharam* in this context means righteousness or the divinely ordained moral order – something broader than any sectarian creed. One popular interpretation is that Guru Arjan died to protect the integrity of his faith and the freedom of conscience for all. This interpretation finds resonance even outside the Sikh world. Modern historians of Mughal India, while noting the political causes, also acknowledge that the execution of a religious leader as revered as Guru Arjan sent shockwaves well beyond the Sikh community. Some Sufi writers in Punjab were dismayed; Hindu observers saw it as an assault on a holy man. Over time, the martyrdom of Guru Arjan came to be seen as a turning point.<sup>263</sup> The Sikhs, who until then had been a relatively quietist sect, were galvanized by the Guru’s martyrdom to respond differently to persecution. Guru Arjan’s young son and successor, Guru Hargobind, is said to have proclaimed that henceforth the Sikhs would not only carry the *piri* (spiritual authority) of Nanak, but also the *miri* (temporal authority) symbolized by the sword. Indeed, on the day of his succession, Guru Hargobind famously donned two swords – calling one “Miri” and the other “Piri” – to signify that the Sikh community would balance devotion with the duty to resist injustice.<sup>264</sup> This was a direct outcome of Guru Arjan’s martyrdom: the Sikhs realized that their moral stance might again put them at odds with powerful rulers, and so they prepared to defend themselves while still living true to Nanak’s teachings.

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<sup>262</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*; Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>263</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*; Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>264</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*; Louis E. Fenech, *Darbar: Sikh Place of Worship* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

## The Execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1675)

Seventy years after Guru Arjan's death, the Sikh community was tested by another momentous martyrdom – that of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru. By 1675, the Mughal Empire was under Emperor Aurangzeb, a ruler far more zealous in religious policy than Jahangir had been. Aurangzeb pursued an agenda of Islamic orthodoxy: he reimposed the jizya (a tax on non-Muslims that earlier Mughal rulers had abolished), curtailed the influence of Hindu nobles at court, and carried out some campaigns of temple destruction and forced conversion, particularly in areas like Kashmir.<sup>265</sup> The Sikh community in Punjab, meanwhile, had grown in numbers and in martial spirit. Guru Tegh Bahadur was known as a contemplative soul – a poet and thinker – but he was also the son of Guru Hargobind and had witnessed the militarization of the Sikhs in his youth. During Guru Tegh Bahadur's time, the Sikhs were not in open rebellion; the Guru mostly traveled to preach and establish new sangats, and he even stayed away from direct confrontation with Mughal officials for many years. Nevertheless, the community's expanding influence and Guru Tegh Bahadur's very charisma were causes for imperial watchfulness. Mughal records from Aurangzeb's reign note that Guru Tegh Bahadur had amassed a following of "several thousand"<sup>266</sup> and moved about the country, which to the authorities signaled a possible political threat. In the eyes of the empire, any popular leader with a devoted peasant base was suspected, especially one not under the emperor's direct control.

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<sup>265</sup> Richards, *The Mughal Empire*.

<sup>266</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

The immediate trigger for Guru Tegh Bahadur's arrest and execution, however, is tied in Sikh tradition to an appeal by persecuted Hindus. According to Sikh accounts, a group of Kashmiri Pandits (Brahmin scholars of Kashmir) came to Guru Tegh Bahadur's home at Anandpur in 1675 with a desperate plea.<sup>267</sup> They told the Guru that Aurangzeb's governor in Kashmir was pressuring them to convert to Islam under pain of torture or death. The Hindus, feeling helpless, asked the Sikh Guru – renowned as a spiritual protector – for guidance or intervention. It is said that Guru Tegh Bahadur's own young son, Gobind Rai (future Guru Gobind Singh), who was around nine years old, asked why his father could not do something to save these people. Guru Tegh Bahadur, after meditating, announced that indeed a great soul would need to sacrifice himself to halt the emperor's policy – “and who better than I?”<sup>268</sup> The Guru told the Kashmiri envoys: “*Go tell the Mughal authorities that you will embrace Islam if Guru Tegh Bahadur does so.*”<sup>269</sup> This was effectively throwing down a gauntlet to Aurangzeb, putting the Guru's life in the balance for the freedom of others. The Pandits delivered this message. Not long after, Guru Tegh Bahadur, along with a small band of disciples, deliberately traveled towards Delhi, knowing the risk. He was intercepted by Mughal forces and taken in chains to the capital.<sup>270</sup>

What happened in Delhi in November 1675 is recorded in both Sikh tradition and some contemporary sources, though with different emphasis. Guru Tegh Bahadur was held in custody and asked to

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<sup>267</sup> Chhibber, *Bansavalinama Dasan Patshahian Ka*.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

convert to Islam at Aurangzeb's command.<sup>271</sup> The emperor, for his part, may not have been solely fixated on conversion; he likely viewed the Guru as a political subversive as well – someone who had given shelter to rebels and stirred up the populace (Aurangzeb had earlier heard complaints from a rival *masand* or even from the Guru's estranged relative that Tegh Bahadur was "a pretender"<sup>272</sup> accumulating arms). Yet in keeping with his ideological stance, Aurangzeb offered the Guru clemency if he would accept Islam. Guru Tegh Bahadur resolutely refused. One Mughal account describes that Guru Tegh Bahadur and his companions were publicly paraded and ordered to demonstrate their miraculous powers or face death. To humiliate them, the Qazi taunted that if the Guru was a true holy man, he could surely perform a miracle to save himself. The Guru declined to engage in any display. In Sikh tellings, there is a poignant little story: Guru Tegh Bahadur, when pressed to show a miracle, said that he would write something on a piece of paper as his "charm" and wear it around his neck – and that this charm would prevent the executioner's sword from harming him, unless and until he allowed it. When the executioner eventually struck and the Guru's head was severed, Aurangzeb's men opened the amulet expecting some sorcery. They found inside it a simple line – "*Sir diya par sirar na diya*"<sup>273</sup>, meaning "He gave his head, but not his creed."<sup>274</sup> Whether or not this incident occurred exactly as described, its symbolism beautifully encapsulates how Sikhs remember Guru Tegh Bahadur: a man who sacrificed his life but not his principles or faith.

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<sup>271</sup> Richards, *The Mughal Empire*.

<sup>272</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>273</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

The executions were carried out with brutal fanfare. On a late autumn day, in Chandni Chowk – the main market square of Delhi – Guru Tegh Bahadur was beheaded publicly. Alongside him, three devoted Sikhs who had been arrested with him met martyrdom through horrific tortures: Bhai Mati Das was sawed in half, Bhai Dayal Das was boiled alive, and Bhai Sati Das was burned.<sup>275</sup> These martyrs, too, are honored in Sikh history for steadfastness; they refused to save themselves by renouncing their beliefs. Guru Tegh Bahadur's severed head, as the story goes, was smuggled away by a daring Sikh (Bhai Jaita, also called Bhai Jiwan Singh) who brought it to Anandpur to Guru Gobind Rai.<sup>276</sup> The Guru's body was likewise stolen at night by a Delhi Sikh who burned his own house to cremate it, thus defying Aurangzeb's order that no one should perform the martyr's last rites. Such accounts underscore how beloved the Guru was to his followers and how even ordinary Sikhs braved danger to honor him. In Sikh collective memory, Guru Tegh Bahadur earned the honorific *Dharam di Chadar*, meaning "Shield of India."<sup>277</sup> This title proclaims that he gave his life to protect not just Sikhs, but all Hindus (and by extension the principle of religious liberty for everyone). Indeed, Guru Gobind Singh in his poetic autobiography (*Bachittar Natak*) wrote of his father: "*Tilak janju rakha Prabh taka – he protected their tilak (forehead mark) and sacred thread, and made the ultimate sacrifice in the dark age.*"<sup>278</sup> The tilak and janeu are markers of Hindu identity; Guru Tegh Bahadur, a Sikh, had no personal need for them, yet he died so that others could retain them.

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<sup>275</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>276</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>277</sup> Harbans Singh, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, s.v. "Tegh Bahadur, Guru."

<sup>278</sup> Rinehart, *Debating the Dasam Granth*.

This is a remarkable message: the Sikh Guru did not martyr himself to save his own community from persecution (Sikhs were not the primary target at that moment), but to defend another community's right to practice its faith. It is no wonder that Hindus in North India, as well as Sikhs, came to revere Guru Tegh Bahadur's memory. To this day, Gurdwara Sis Ganj stands at the site of his execution in Old Delhi, and just adjacent to it stands a Shiva temple commemorating the fallen "shield" of the Hindu faith.<sup>279</sup>

From a modern historical perspective, scholars offer nuanced views on Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom. Some point out that the Kashmiri Pandit narrative is not prominently recorded in sources until decades later – which has led to debate about its historicity.<sup>280</sup> It is possible that Sikh tradition in the 18th century emphasized this aspect to highlight the Guru's altruism. Meanwhile, contemporary Mughal records emphasized the political troubles: Guru Tegh Bahadur's travels on the eastern fringes of the empire, his association with local disturbances, and complaints against him by rival claimants (for instance, the disgruntled *Ram Raj*, who was Guru Tegh Bahadur's nephew and had been sidelined in the guru-ship, reportedly whispered accusations to Aurangzeb's officials).<sup>281</sup> Recent scholarship tends to agree that Aurangzeb saw Guru Tegh Bahadur as a political rebel as much as (if not more than) a religious dissenter.<sup>282</sup> Nevertheless, even these scholars acknowledge that the Guru's refusal to bow to Aurangzeb had a unmistakable religious dimension. Unlike Guru Arjan's case – where conversion was not

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<sup>279</sup> Harbans Singh, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, s.v. "Sis Ganj, Gurdwara."

<sup>280</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>281</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>282</sup> Richards, *The Mughal Empire*.

explicitly demanded – in 1675 the drama did revolve around conversion. Aurangzeb had made it a personal mission to bring influential non-Muslim figures into the Islamic fold. Guru Tegh Bahadur's open defiance was thus a moral and spiritual challenge to the Emperor's policy. It was as if the Guru was saying: *"Faith cannot be forced. I will never abandon my faith, nor allow the tyranny that forces others to abandon theirs."* By choosing martyrdom, Guru Tegh Bahadur delivered a ringing answer to Aurangzeb's ultimatum. The cost was heavy – a father's life lost, a young son (Gobind Rai) suddenly thrust into leadership at age nine, and a clear signal sent to the Mughals that the Sikhs would not acquiesce quietly to oppression.

In Sikh memory, the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur is likened to a watershed that saved India's plurality. Poets wrote that *"the world wept, the heavens cried out, and only those who rejoiced were the tyrants – but in that sacrifice, faith won a victory."*<sup>283</sup> The Guru's sacrifice is ritually remembered every day in the Sikh Ardas (prayer), which includes the line: *"Tethān Guru Tegh Bahadur ne dharam līāyā, sis dītā par sir nahīn dīā"*<sup>284</sup> – "Guru Tegh Bahadur protected dharma, gave his head but not his resolve."<sup>285</sup> Thus, the community continually reinforces what the Guru died for: dharma, meaning righteousness and the right to practice one's religion freely. Importantly, no bitterness towards Islam as a faith is inculcated in this remembrance. The very existence of earlier Sikh-Muslim friendships (like Guru Nanak and Mardana, or Guru Arjan and the Sufi Mian Mir) reminded Sikhs that Aurangzeb's actions were those

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<sup>283</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>284</sup> Harbans Singh, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, s.v. "Ardas."

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

of a particular ruler, not a whole religion.<sup>286</sup> In fact, Sikh tradition also notes that some Muslims admired Guru Tegh Bahadur's courage: a Sufi historian of the time referred to the Guru as a "great incarnation"<sup>287</sup> and lamented his execution. Many Sikhs thus see these martyrdoms in a broad moral horizon – as martyrdoms for humanity, not as communal vendettas. This perspective was crucial in preventing the Sikh-Muslim conflict from degenerating into a religious war at the popular level. Guru Tegh Bahadur's sacrifice was understood by the Sikhs as being in line with Guru Nanak's spirit: it was a stand against tyranny and in support of human dignity, not an act of revenge or hatred. Guru Nanak had taught fearlessness in pursuit of truth, and here was his successor living and dying by that principle.

As the news of Guru Tegh Bahadur's beheading spread in 1675, it sent a clear signal to the Sikh community: the confrontation with oppressive power had reached a new pitch. Just as Guru Arjan's death had spurred a transformation in Sikh ethos, so Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom set the stage for an even more dramatic evolution under his son, Gobind Rai (Guru Gobind Singh). The Sikhs had now lost two Gurus to state violence. They had seen that even unarmed saints who simply refused to submit could be executed by an authoritarian regime. The question before them was how to uphold their faith and protect their people in the face of such unbridled might. The answer would emerge in 1699 with the founding of the Khalsa, the community of baptized Sikh warriors, under Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>288</sup> But before we move to that, it is worth pausing to

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<sup>286</sup> Cole, "Sikh Interactions with Other Religions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*.

<sup>287</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>288</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

appreciate the deep continuity from Nanak through Arjan to Tegh Bahadur. Across three generations, the Sikh Gurus had incrementally escalated their response to injustice: Nanak voiced protest through poetry and compassion; Arjan accepted torture and death rather than compromise his principles; Tegh Bahadur made of himself a shield for the defenseless, surrendering his life to assert a fundamental human right. None of these actions was motivated by worldly gain or hatred. They were, in essence, acts of witness (shahadat) – bearing witness to truth, at the ultimate cost. In Sikh theology, a martyr (shaheed) is one who asserts the truth of *Naam* (the Divine Name) and *Dharam* (righteous duty) even when faced with death. By that definition, Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur were truly martyrs in the purest sense. Each in his time had drawn a line that power must not cross: Guru Arjan against the Mughal pretension to dictate spiritual authority, Guru Tegh Bahadur against the Mughal attempt to dictate religious conscience. In doing so, they kept alive Guru Nanak's original mission to resist the misuse of religion and power. And their sacrifices fundamentally altered Sikh consciousness, instilling a steely resolve that tyranny must be actively opposed. The legacy of these martyrdoms was not a legacy of bitterness, but a legacy of courage and hope – courage to endure suffering for the sake of justice, and hope that ultimately truth would triumph over coercion.

### **Faith Against Tyranny – A Legacy of Resistance**

The martyrdoms of Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur marked a turning point for the Sikh community. After 1675, it became increasingly clear that Sikhs could not rely on the goodwill of rulers or the protection of existing institutions. If their faith preached

equality, justice, and freedom of conscience, they would have to defend those ideals in a hostile environment. The challenge was how to resist tyranny without abandoning the spiritual essence of their tradition. The answer was a creative and far-reaching transformation: the Sikhs, under the guidance of their tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, became a community of *saint-soldiers*.<sup>289</sup> They forged a new identity – the Khalsa – that bound deep devotion to God with a vow to fight oppression. This development was not a rupture from Guru Nanak’s vision, but rather its robust extension. Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana had confronted the oppressors of their day armed only with song, compassion, and the Word of God. Now, facing even fiercer persecutions, the Sikhs added the sword to their spiritual arsenal – but the sword was to be guided by the same ethics sung by Nanak and Mardana. In this way, the Sikh community evolved an enduring ethos of faith-based resistance. Over the next century, this ethos would enable them not only to survive attempts at their annihilation, but to flourish as a force for the protection of others. The legacy of resisting tyranny – in the name of justice and human dignity – became a bedrock of Sikh identity. It informed their doctrines, shaped their institutions, and echoed through their daily prayers and songs. This section explores that legacy: how the Sikhs organized themselves to stand against tyranny, how they justified the use of force without losing their moral compass, and how the spirit of Guru Nanak and Mardana’s partnership continued to inspire their actions even in the din of battle.

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<sup>289</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

## **From Guru to Khalsa: Miri-Piri and the Rise of the Saint-Soldier**

In the immediate aftermath of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom, his son Guru Gobind Singh (Gobind Rai at birth) assumed the mantle of leadership at the tender age of nine.<sup>290</sup> Over the next two decades, as he grew into his role, the young Guru contemplated the trials that had befallen the Sikhs. He inherited not only the spiritual authority (piri) of Guru Nanak but also a community now steeled by adversity and increasingly willing to bear temporal responsibility (miri) for its own defense. In truth, the process of militarization had begun a generation earlier: Guru Hargobind (Gobind Singh's grandfather) had set the precedent by wearing two swords of Miri and Piri and maintaining a trained body of armed Sikhs.<sup>291</sup> Guru Gobind Singh took this to its logical culmination. In 1699, he summoned Sikhs from all over India to Anandpur Sahib during the spring festival of Vaisakhi. There, in a dramatic and epoch-making ceremony, he founded the Khalsa – the community of the pure, initiated Sikhs dedicated to upholding righteousness.<sup>292</sup> According to eyewitness accounts preserved in Sikh tradition, Guru Gobind Singh, clad in royal blue, unsheathed a sword and asked the large congregation: *"Who among you is ready to offer his head today for the Guru and for dharma?"*<sup>293</sup> The crowd was stunned. After a tense silence, one Sikh stepped forward, offering himself. The Guru took him into a tent; moments later, the Guru emerged alone with his sword reddened and called for another head. Four more times, different Sikhs volunteered, disappearing into the tent. At last, the Guru came out

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<sup>290</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>291</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>292</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

<sup>293</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

followed by those five men, alive and dressed in new garments, to the relieved gasps of the congregation. These five would be known as the Panj Pyare, the “Beloved Five,” the first members of the Khalsa.<sup>294</sup> Guru Gobind Singh then administered to them a special initiation: he prepared Amrit (sweetened water) in an iron bowl while stirring it with a double-edged sword and reciting sacred hymns.<sup>295</sup> The five were made to drink this nectar of baptism and take vows to live by a strict code of discipline and courage. In an unprecedented move, the Guru then bowed before the Panj Pyare and asked them to administer the same Amrit to him – thus making the Guru himself a member of the Khalsa, equal among his initiates. With this, Guru Gobind Singh abolished all former social distinctions among his followers: whether one had been born a Brahmin or a peasant, a wealthy merchant or a poor laborer, once initiated, all were Khalsa – brothers and sisters in faith, carrying the surnames Singh (“Lion”) or Kaur (“Princess”), and adhering to the five symbols of commitment (the “Five Ks”).<sup>296</sup>

The creation of the Khalsa was a watershed in the Sikh resistance to tyranny. It was not merely a military mobilization, but a spiritual renaissance with martial expression. Guru Gobind Singh imparted to the Khalsa a clear mission: to fight injustice wherever it arose, to protect the weak and the oppressed, and to consider it their duty to uphold dharma (righteousness) with the sword if necessary.<sup>297</sup> Yet he was careful to distinguish this from aggression or territorial ambition. The Khalsa was to be an army of God, not an army of empire. The

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<sup>294</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

<sup>295</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

<sup>296</sup> Harbans Singh, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, s.v. “Kakar (Five Ks).”

<sup>297</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

Guru composed stirring poetry (in the *Dasam Granth*) exhorting his Sikhs to be ever ready to combat evil, comparing the fight against tyranny to a sacred Dharam Yudh (just war).<sup>298</sup> In one famous verse, he wrote: “*When all other means have failed, it is righteous to draw the sword.*”<sup>299</sup> This encapsulated the Sikh philosophy of sanctioned force: violence is acceptable only as a last resort, in defense of righteousness and the innocent, never for conquest or revenge. Each Khalsa warrior was expected to be a sant-sipahi, a *saint-soldier* – as devout in meditation and moral purity as he or she was brave in battle.<sup>300</sup> They were to begin the day with prayers (including Guru Nanak’s Japji Sahib), keep the code of compassion and humility, and yet never shy from battle when injustice demanded it.<sup>301</sup>

It is crucial to underscore that this martial turn did not signify a departure from Guru Nanak’s ideals, but rather their dynamic fulfillment under new circumstances. Guru Nanak had emphasized fearlessness and standing for truth. The Khalsa institutionalized those very qualities. One might say that where Nanak and Mardana had walked unarmed into hostile terrains singing of one God and equality, the Khalsa rode out with sword in hand – but still singing the same hymns. The continuity is evident in the Khalsa’s daily liturgy: they recited compositions like *Asa di Var* (Guru Nanak’s ode including condemnation of tyrants) and Chaupai (Guru Gobind Singh’s prayer for protection against evil) side by side.<sup>302</sup> Many of Guru Nanak’s verses about resisting falsehood became rallying

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<sup>298</sup> Bhogal, “Text as Sword.”

<sup>299</sup> Fenech, *The Sikh Zafar-nāmāh of Guru Gobind Singh*, verse 22.

<sup>300</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

<sup>301</sup> Harbans Singh, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, s.v. “Nitnem.”

<sup>302</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

words for them. The spiritual lineage from Nanak remained the beating heart of Sikh identity; the military discipline was like a protective armor around that heart. In fact, Guru Gobind Singh named the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib (containing Nanak's and other Gurus' bani), as the ultimate and eternal Guru after him.<sup>303</sup> This ensured that even as Sikhs wielded swords, they bowed their heads not to any warlord but to the revealed Word of the Gurus. Their authority was the Guru Granth – a text that begins with Ik Onkar (One God) and teaches universal compassion. Thus, the Khalsa's fight was framed as the fight to defend the integrity of that spiritual message in a world of oppression.

### **Resisting Empire: The Sikh Misls and Just Rule**

Armed with this new spirit, the Sikhs of the late 17th and 18th centuries mounted a remarkable resistance against Mughal tyranny. After Guru Gobind Singh's passing in 1708, the community no longer had a human Guru but was guided by the Guru Granth Sahib and by leaders of their own ranks.<sup>304</sup> One such figure was Banda Singh Bahadur, a Sikh who had been appointed by Guru Gobind Singh to lead an insurgency against Mughal authority in Punjab.<sup>305</sup> In 1709–1710, Banda Singh raised the standard of revolt, rallied peasants and downtrodden villagers, and dealt the Mughal administration a series of stunning blows. He defeated the Mughal governor of Sirhind – the very official responsible for the cold-blooded murder of Guru Gobind Singh's young sons a few years prior. In victory, Banda Singh Bahadur showed an interesting mix of retribution and reform: he

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<sup>303</sup> Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority*.

<sup>304</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>305</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

avenged the atrocities by punishing certain oppressors harshly, but he also implemented radical egalitarian measures in areas under Sikh control. He abolished the feudal *zamindari* system and distributed land to the tillers, irrespective of caste or creed.<sup>306</sup> This was in line with Sikh principles of equality and earned him love among the peasants. For a moment, Banda Singh established Sikh rule (the first Sikh “republic” in a sense) in parts of Punjab, with its capital at Lohgarh. He even issued coins in the name of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, underscoring that sovereignty belonged to the Gurus’ ideals, not to himself.<sup>307</sup> However, the Mughal empire under Aurangzeb’s successors struck back fiercely. Banda Singh and his companions were besieged, captured, and executed in 1716 after refusing offers of pardon in exchange for conversion.<sup>308</sup> They died in chains, reportedly while chanting the Japji prayer and with the name of the Almighty on their lips – again exemplifying the intertwining of spiritual resilience and political resistance.

After Banda Singh’s fall, the Sikhs faced some of the darkest times in their history. The Mughal governors of Punjab, intent on extinguishing the Sikh movement, carried out ruthless manhunts. During the 1720s–1740s, state-sanctioned persecution of Sikhs reached a fever pitch. The Mughal authorities declared price on Sikh heads – soldiers could earn rewards for every Sikh they killed, and ordinary villagers were incentivized to betray Sikh hideouts.<sup>309</sup> Despite this, the Sikhs proved unconquerable. They dispersed into the forests and deserts in small bands, evolving into what came to

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<sup>306</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

<sup>307</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

<sup>308</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>309</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

be known as the Misl – guerrilla groups or confederacies often named after their leaders. There were about a dozen major Sikh misls, each operating independently but bound by common cause and often coordinating in times of need.<sup>310</sup> They would emerge from hiding to conduct swift raids against oppressive officials, then melt away before large forces could catch them. Over time, these bands became bolder and more organized, even wresting chunks of territory from the tottering Mughal administration. Twice, the Sikhs faced near-extinction events. The first, remembered as Chhota Ghallughara (the Lesser Holocaust) of 1746, saw thousands of Sikhs massacred in a sudden Mughal ambush. The second, Wadda Ghallughārā (Great Holocaust) of 1762, was even more devastating: the Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Durrani (Abdali) swept through Punjab and caught the Sikhs, including women and children on the move, killing perhaps 20,000 or more in one day.<sup>311</sup> Yet, astonishingly, within months of that carnage, the Sikhs regrouped and reasserted their presence. What sustained them through such adversity? By all accounts, it was their unshakeable faith and their unifying traditions of song, prayer, and collective decision-making (*gurmatta*).<sup>312</sup> Even in hiding, Sikhs would assemble at secret locations to pray together and recite the Ardas, invoking Nanak, remembering the Gurus' sacrifices, and asking God for strength to uphold justice. They sang the hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib to keep their morale high. There are legendary stories of Sikhs who, when captured and ordered to renounce their faith or cut their hair (which was an article of faith for Khalsa Sikhs), preferred death. Bhai

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<sup>310</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>311</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>312</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

Taru Singh, for example, was arrested in 1745 for sheltering fellow Sikhs. When the governor of Lahore ordered that his hair be shorn off (a great humiliation for a Sikh), Taru Singh refused; the official then gruesomely had his scalp removed, but Taru Singh died with a prayer for his persecutor rather than a curse.<sup>313</sup> These episodes, recounted in Sikh chronicles, became morale fuel for the community. They saw themselves as part of a sacred history in which, no matter how dire the persecution, truth would ultimately prevail – because their cause was just and blessed by their Gurus.<sup>314</sup>

Indeed, by 1765, the tide had turned. The Mughal power in Punjab had virtually crumbled, and the Sikhs filled the vacuum. They took control of Lahore and other key cities. Each misl governed parts of the territory, and collectively the Sikh chiefs ruled most of Punjab, forging a loose Sikh Confederacy. Finally, in 1799, a young ambitious leader from the Sukerchakia misl, Ranjit Singh, captured Lahore and later united the misls, founding the Sikh Empire that would last until 1849.<sup>315</sup> The establishment of Sikh rule over Punjab – just about 50 years after it seemed the community might be annihilated – was a dramatic testament to their resilience. Under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikh ethos of confronting tyranny translated into an ethos of just governance. Ranjit Singh, though a conqueror, chose not to replicate the fanatical policies of the worst Mughals. Instead, he became renowned for his policy of religious pluralism and tolerance. In his kingdom, no state religion was imposed; Hindus and Muslims served at the highest levels of administration and military (Ranjit's prime minister was a Hindu, his trusted generals included Muslims and

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<sup>313</sup> Fenech, *Martyrdom and Memory*.

<sup>314</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>315</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

European Christians, and he patronized Hindu temples and Sufi shrines alongside gurdwaras).<sup>316</sup> The Khalsa Army under Ranjit Singh remained a formidable force, but one might note with pride that it protected the holiest sites of the very communities that once produced the oppressors Sikhs had fought. For instance, when Ranjit Singh's general Hari Singh Nalwa extended Sikh jurisdiction up to Pathan territories, they did not force local Muslims to change their way of life; rather, they brought stability that curbed the incessant raids which had caused suffering on both sides. Sikhs highlight that during Ranjit Singh's reign, no massacres or forced conversions of minorities took place – a sharp contrast to some contemporary rulers elsewhere.<sup>317</sup> This was the legacy of Nanak manifesting in power: even when Sikhs sat on thrones, they remembered the teachings of their Gurus to honor the Divine Light in all.

### **The Spirit in Song and Memory**

Throughout this turbulent history of battles and state-building, the Sikhs never abandoned the fount of their strength: their spiritual practices of remembrance (Simran), music (kirtan), and communal prayer.<sup>318</sup> What Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana had begun – the singing of truth-filled shabads as a means to elevate the spirit and bind the community – continued to play a central role in sustaining Sikh resistance. European observers in the 19th century marveled that Sikh soldiers would attend daily prayers with as much fervor as they showed on the battlefield. The Guru Granth Sahib was carried

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<sup>316</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>317</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>318</sup> Singh, *Sikh Musical Heritage*.

on campaigns, reverently enthroned under tents; before any important action, the leaders would gather for Ardas, seeking divine support in the cause of justice.<sup>319</sup> Even the rise of the Khalsa did not erase the contributions of people like Mardana: for centuries after, the hereditary Muslim musicians known as Rababis (descendants of Bhai Mardana) continued to perform kirtan in Sikh temples, including the Golden Temple, right alongside the warrior Sikhs. It is recorded that during the most fraught periods of the 18th century, when the Khalsa had to vacate Amritsar due to enemy incursions, some rababi musicians kept up the kirtan at the Golden Temple, praying for the Sikhs' return. This is a profound image: even as political conflict raged between Sikhs and certain Muslim rulers, a lineage of Muslim musicians was protected and cherished within the Sikh spiritual center. It speaks to a key aspect of the Sikh struggle: they fought tyranny, not an entire community. The fact that Rababis were considered part of the Sikh quom (nation) and their music a vital part of Sikh worship up until the 1940s demonstrates how the legacy of Nanak and Mardana's friendship endured.<sup>320</sup> In the Sikh concept of *sangat*, anyone, from any background, who shares in the vision of One and joins in singing the Divine Name, is part of the family.

Sikh liturgy and memory preserved the community's values through succinct phrases that devotees repeated daily. The Ardas prayer, standardized in the 18th century, became an essential ritual in every congregation and before any endeavor.<sup>321</sup> In it, Sikhs first remember the timeless Divine and then recount the heroes of the faith: *"Remember O God, Guru Nanak, Guru Angad... Guru Gobind Singh.*

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<sup>319</sup> Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks*.

<sup>320</sup> Purewal, "Sikh Sacred Music of the Rababis."

<sup>321</sup> Harbans Singh, ed., *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, s.v. "Ardas."

*Then think of the five beloved ones (Panj Pyare), the five first Khalsa, the forty liberated ones, the martyrs, the warriors of faith... those who gave their heads for dharma, who were cut limb by limb, sawn, flayed, or boiled, but who never surrendered their faith and always kept the sanctity of their hair and their turban – remember their deeds and say Waheguru.*<sup>322</sup> These lines thunder through gurdwaras every morning and evening. They are not mere words; they are a collective oath, a kind of spiritual DNA encoding what it means to be Sikh. A child growing up hearing this learns that being true to the faith means having the courage of those martyrs and the steadfastness of those heroes. The music of the shabads also continually reinforces the themes of justice, fearlessness, and Divine support in adversity. There are hymns by Guru Nanak and others in the Guru Granth Sahib that Sikhs love to sing in trying times – hymns that proclaim, *“Should the whole world turn against me, if I have God, I have a haven,”*<sup>323</sup> or *“The Lord saved his servant from the execution, the tyrant’s attempt failed.”*<sup>324</sup> When a people sing such words regularly, it builds an unassailable inner strength. During the 18th-century persecutions, Sikhs held secret night gatherings called Ransbai Kirtans (all-night kirtans) where they sang Gurbani until dawn, despite the risk of being discovered. The glow of those melodies, they say, kept the spirit of hope alive through the darkest nights of tyranny.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Sikh Missionary Society (U.K.), “Ardas,”

<https://www.sikhmissionarysociety.org/sms/smsenglish/ardas.htm>.

<sup>323</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, English translation, <https://www.sikhitothemax.org>.

<sup>324</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, English translation, <https://www.sikhitothemax.org>.

<sup>325</sup> Singh, Sikh Musical Heritage.

## Conclusion

By the early 19th century, having survived and then thrived, the Sikhs had proven the effectiveness of their faith-led resistance. Their story – from Guru Nanak’s humble beginnings through the sacrifices of the martyrs to the victories of the Khalsa – became an inspiration not only for themselves but for others under colonial or autocratic rule in later times. Modern Sikh thinkers often point out that the Sikhs, by confronting the Mughal Empire and later even resisting British colonial encroachments for a time, prefigured the struggles for human rights and freedom that characterize the modern world. The legacy of resistance left by the Sikh Gurus and the Khalsa has in more recent times been evoked in contexts far removed from 17th-century Punjab. For instance, during India’s independence movement in the 20th century, figures like Bhagat Singh (a socialist revolutionary) or later human rights advocates have cited the Sikh Gurus as inspirations for standing up to injustice. In global dialogues on interfaith solidarity, Guru Tegh Bahadur is remembered as one of history’s great martyrs for religious freedom – a man who died for another religion’s adherents’ rights, a practically unparalleled example. Meanwhile, the image of Guru Nanak and Mardana walking together – one Hindu by birth, one Muslim – speaking truth to Babur without fear – serves as a powerful model for unity across divides to challenge oppression. It is often mentioned that in the Sikh ethos, the ideal is not to replace one tyranny with another (for what would have been the point of suffering so much only to become tyrants in turn?), but to establish a society where justice, pluralism,

and service prevail. That ideal guided the best of Sikh rule under Ranjit Singh and remains a guiding star.<sup>326</sup>

Today, the inheritance of “confronting power with faith” continues to inspire Sikhs worldwide. While the context has changed – most Sikhs now live under democratic governments or as minorities in various countries – the principle remains relevant. Whenever Sikhs see the misuse of political or religious power to oppress others, their heritage nudges them to respond. This can be seen in small daily ways – for example, the tradition of langar (free community kitchen), which Guru Nanak started as a statement of equality, has evolved into a global Sikh practice of disaster relief and poverty alleviation.<sup>327</sup> It is an assertion that no matter how governments fail or discrimination marginalizes, the community of faith will step up to ensure basic human dignity (no one should go hungry or be turned away). In recent decades, Sikh volunteer groups have been notable in humanitarian crises, feeding thousands during pandemics or natural calamities, citing Guru Nanak’s message of seeing all as one family. This too is resistance – resistance to the tyranny of hunger, of neglect, of communal hatred, carried out with the “weapons” of compassion and food. On the other hand, the more literal aspect of the legacy – the martial spirit – remains as a moral reserve.<sup>328</sup> Sikhs continue to honor the ideal of the saint-soldier, and while they pray to never have to use violence, they also maintain that inner resolve that if tyranny raises its head (be it in the form of genocide, ethnic cleansing, or any gross injustice), one should not be a passive bystander. In this sense, the Sikh psyche remains ever sensitized by

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<sup>326</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*; Ahluwalia, *Liberating Sikhism*.

<sup>327</sup> Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*.

<sup>328</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

the songs and stories of their past to detect and oppose tyranny in all forms. They understand, as Guru Nanak did, that tyranny often masquerades under noble guises – it may speak in religious rhetoric or patriotic fervor – but it must be unmasked by truth. And they understand, as Guru Tegh Bahadur’s example shows, that sometimes one must be prepared to pay the ultimate price to uphold what is right.

At the core of this legacy is a remarkable balance of spirituality and temporality – exactly the balance Guru Hargobind symbolized with his two swords and Guru Gobind Singh formalized with the Khalsa. The Sikhs call this the doctrine of Miri-Piri. It means that a Sikh lives with one foot in the eternal and one foot in the temporal. The Guru’s path is not an ascetic withdrawal; it engages the world passionately to transform it, but it seeks to transform it in the image of spiritual truth, not worldly ambition. The Sikh Gurus confronted emperors, but not to grab power for themselves – rather to safeguard the sanctity of the human soul. That is why, even after attaining political dominion, Sikh leaders (at their best) exercised it with humility and a sense of service. A Persian inscription on Ranjit Singh’s throne famously read: *“True sovereign is God, and all power is entrusted as a safeguard for the people.”*<sup>329</sup> This echoes Guru Nanak’s insistence that earthly authority is hollow unless it serves justice.<sup>330</sup>

In bringing this chapter to a close, we return to the image of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana – the founder and his companion – walking the dusty roads of Punjab, singing songs of devotion that doubled as sharp social commentary. Those gentle melodies proved stronger

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<sup>329</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>330</sup> McLeod, *Exploring Sikhism*.

than the might of kings. The legacy they left was like a seed that grew into a sturdy tree. Guru Nanak and Mardana's spirit infused the very fiber of Sikhism: a religion of profound love and oneness that also carries a sword not of anger, but of duty – a sword drawn “for the sake of the oppressed”. In the final analysis, the Sikh tradition's confrontation with power is unique in that it doesn't seek to seize power for egoistic ends; it seeks to constantly realign power with moral purpose. It's a tradition that prays daily for “sarbat da bhala” – the welfare of all humanity – and is willing to stand up to any emperor or authority that threatens that welfare. Nanak and Mardana's friendship, with its Hindu-Muslim harmony, its courage before tyrants, and its compassion for the ordinary, remains a shining prototype. It reminds Sikhs that the fight against tyranny is not fueled by hate, but by love – love for the divine Light in each person and the God-given right of every soul to be free. Thus, the Guru's true Sikh must be, like Nanak, a rebel of truth and a servant of love at once. The stories of Guru Arjan on the hot plate, of Guru Tegh Bahadur in chains, of the Khalsa in battle cries or a Sikh prisoner singing *Japji* on the verge of execution – these flows from the fountainhead that was Nanak's soul and Mardana's music. Across time, they all sing one chorus: that faith in One, when lived fully, becomes a force that no tyrant can long withstand. In the companionship of Nanak and Mardana was sown the idea of a brotherhood (and sisterhood) that could not be broken by emperors. In the centuries that followed, that brotherhood of the Khalsa would protect the weak, challenge the unjust, and uphold the ideal of a just, compassionate society. This is the legacy of confronting power in Sikhism – a legacy born from a

prayerful heart, raised as a sword-arm when needed, and forever guided by the light of Oneness that Guru Nanak revealed.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> McLeod, *Exploring Sikhism*; Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

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## CHAPTER 4 — THE MESSAGE FOR HUMANITY

In the life and friendship of Guru Nanak (1469–1539) and Bhai Mardana (1459–1534), we see a vision of radical human unity expressed in many forms.<sup>332</sup> Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was born into a Hindu family, and Mardana, his constant companion, was a Muslim by birth.<sup>333</sup> Yet for decades these two walked together – literally and spiritually – carrying a message of oneness that transcended religious divides. Through the shrine they established, the ethical teachings they imparted, the hymns they sang, and the friendship they embodied, Nanak and Mardana modeled an ideal of harmony in diversity. This chapter explores four dimensions of their message for humanity: an architecture of inclusion at the Golden Temple, a spiritual emphasis on Truth over ritual, the power of Music as prayer, and a lived brotherhood beyond borders. In each, the academic evidence and Sikh tradition together illustrate how these 16th-century lives spoke to timeless human ideals. True to an academic approach, this chapter will distinguish historical facts from later legend where necessary, noting debates in scholarship while honoring the symbolic significance that Sikh tradition attaches to these narratives. Nanak and Mardana’s message – that the Divine is One and humanity is one family – remains deeply relevant in a world still fractured by caste, creed, and fear. Their legacy invites us to imagine a “humanity without walls,” united by humility, compassion, song, and friendship across faiths.

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<sup>332</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

<sup>333</sup> W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 2nd rev. ed. (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1995).

## The Golden Temple and Muslim Saints — A Testament to Unity

The Harmandir Sahib, famously known as the Golden Temple in Amritsar, is not only the central shrine of Sikhism but a profound architectural statement of Sikh ideals. Its very layout and design speak to the Sikh belief in the oneness of humanity. The temple is uniquely constructed with four entrances, one on each side, inviting people from all directions and all backgrounds to enter.<sup>334</sup> In contrast to the typical North Indian Hindu temple (which often has a single gate oriented to the east) or a mosque (oriented toward Mecca), Guru Arjan Dev (the fifth Sikh Guru) deliberately opened the Harmandir Sahib on every side.<sup>335</sup> This openness symbolizes that *all* are welcome – Hindus, Muslims, or anyone seeking the Divine – with no single privileged approach. Every Sikh gurdwara (temple) since has emulated this principle of four doors, underscoring an ethic of equality and hospitality. It is an architectural testament to unity in diversity. As Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh observes, the Harmandir Sahib’s multiple doorways explicitly reject the exclusionary symbolism of one-door sanctuaries and instead “manifest that the temple is open to all.”<sup>336</sup> In other words, the shrine itself teaches the lesson of human unity each time a visitor steps through any of its four gates.

Another striking feature is that the Golden Temple is built at a lower level than the surrounding ground. Visitors must step down to enter the sanctum.<sup>337</sup> According to Sikh tradition, when plans were made

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<sup>334</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

<sup>335</sup> Louis E. Fenech, *The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus: The Court of God in the World of Men* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>336</sup> Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction*.

<sup>337</sup> Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction*.

to construct the temple, some suggested it be built high on a plinth to dominate the landscape. But Guru Arjan replied that “what is humble will be exalted”<sup>338</sup> – like a fruit-laden branch that bows low. By requiring devotees to descend stairs to the temple, the design teaches *humility*. A passage recorded by the early Sikh historian Macauliffe recounts Guru Arjan’s instruction: unlike other shrines raised up for honor, let the Harmandir be the lowest building, so that one must *descend* to it; in that lowering of oneself, one’s spirit is lifted.<sup>339</sup> Thus, the very act of entering becomes a lesson in shedding ego. The temple’s position in the midst of a water tank (Amrit Sarovar, the “Pool of Nectar”) further enhances this effect – it appears to float like a lotus in water, a spiritual island apart from worldly status. The encircling water also serves to dampen the noise of the outside world and create an atmosphere of serenity and reflection around the shrine. Water is highly symbolic in Sikh scripture, often associated with purity and the formless, life-giving nature of the Divine.<sup>340</sup> By building the temple within a sacred pool, the Guru conveyed that immersion in the Divine presence is central to Sikh practice – a baptism of the soul in God’s Name, open to all who come.

Historically, the Golden Temple’s very foundation was an interfaith endeavor. Sikh sources recount that the site was gifted by a Muslim ruler: Emperor Akbar, the Mughal emperor known for his tolerance, visited the third Guru, Amar Das, and was deeply impressed by the

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<sup>338</sup> Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909).

<sup>339</sup> Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, vol. 3.

<sup>340</sup> Christopher Shackle and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures* (London: Routledge, 2005).

community kitchen (langar) where all people dined as equals.<sup>341</sup> As a wedding gift to the Guru's daughter (and her husband, Guru Ram Das, the fourth Guru), Akbar granted land revenues for the site on which Amritsar grew. Guru Ram Das expanded the lake and founded the town, and his son Guru Arjan in 1589 oversaw the temple's construction.<sup>342</sup> According to the earliest Sikh traditions, Guru Arjan himself laid the temple's foundation stone in January 1589.<sup>343</sup> He supervised the work closely, reportedly sitting under a banyan tree (now commemorated as Lachi Ber) to watch the temple rise. This version holds that *no intermediary* was needed to begin this house of God – the Guru's own hands started the work, signifying a direct connection to the divine mission.

However, a popular Sikh tradition later arose with a different story: that Guru Arjan invited a Sufi saint, *Hazrat Mian Mir of Lahore*, to lay the foundation stone of the Golden Temple in a gesture of interfaith reverence. According to this legend, Mian Mir – a Muslim and esteemed friend of the Guru – came to Amritsar in 1588 and ceremonially set the temple's first brick.<sup>344</sup> Sikh oral history has long cherished this account as a powerful symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity. It suggests that the Sikh Gurus so valued the truth in other faiths that they let a Muslim saint inaugurate their holiest shrine. Indeed, for many believers, the image of Mian Mir and Guru Arjan together commencing the Golden Temple beautifully illustrates the Sikh ideal that *the Divine Light is not the monopoly of any one religion*. As a

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<sup>341</sup> J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>342</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>343</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>344</sup> Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs. Volume 1: 1469–1838*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

symbol, it has inspired generations toward inter-community friendship.

Yet, we must distinguish tradition from verifiable history. Modern scholarship finds scant contemporary evidence to support the Mian Mir story.<sup>345</sup> Sikh chronicles closer to Guru Arjan's time do *not* mention Mian Mir's involvement. The foundational Sikh sources, including Gurubilas and Bansavalinama and even Muslim biographies of Mian Mir himself, are silent on this matter. In fact, the earliest recorded reference appears to come in the mid-19th century. Historians have traced the story to a Persian work *Tawarikh-i-Punjab* (1840s) by a Muslim writer, and to Sikh historian Giani Gian Singh's later 19th-century writings.<sup>346</sup> Notably, Sikh historian Dr. Madanjit Kaur points out: "according to the earliest Sikh tradition, the foundation stone of the Harmandir was laid by Guru Arjan himself... The story of Mian Mir... appears amongst Persian sources for the first time in Bute Shah's *Tawarikh-i-Punjab*... The real objective... was to eradicate any chance of animosity between Sikhs and Muslims after the fall of the Sikh Kingdom".<sup>347</sup> In other words, the legend likely emerged in an era when promoting amity between the communities was deemed important. Later British accounts picked it up too, seeing it as a heartening example of India's syncretic culture. Today, many historians conclude that while Mian Mir and Guru Arjan were indeed acquaintances and shared a warm respect, the specific tale of the foundation stone is ahistorical – a kind of pious myth or

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<sup>345</sup> Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan: History, Memory, and Biography in the Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>346</sup> Madanjit Kaur, *The Golden Temple: Past and Present* (Amritsar: Department of Guru Nanak Studies, Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1983).

<sup>347</sup> Kaur, *The Golden Temple*.

parable.<sup>348</sup> Mian Mir would have been only in his late 30s in 1588 and was not yet the venerated figure he became later. Moreover, if such a remarkable event had occurred, it is puzzling that none of the Sikh or Muslim writers for 300 years mentioned it. The silence of earlier records strongly suggests the incident did not take place as later narrated. Instead, Guru Arjan likely laid the foundation brick himself, as affirmed by the oldest Sikh source (Bhai Santokh Singh's *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth*).<sup>349</sup>

Understanding this does not diminish the symbolic significance the Mian Mir legend holds. Even if a product of later imagination, it bears a basic significance in Sikh memory. The image of a Muslim saint inaugurating the Sikh's central shrine has become a testament to the Sikh ethos of *pluralism*. It dramatizes the message that Guru Nanak and his successors preached: God is one, and saints and devotees – whether Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu – are all working in unison under that One. Thus, the Golden Temple is remembered not just as a Sikh center, but “a temple of God” (Hari-Mandir) open to all humanity. Even the name “Harmandir” means “Temple of Hari (God)” without sectarian qualifier, and Guru Arjan installed doors on all four sides to welcome “people of all castes, creeds and status”<sup>350</sup> from the four corners of the earth.

Every architectural choice of the Golden Temple carries a moral teaching. The four doorways break down the notion of religious boundaries. The lower floor instills humility. The surrounding *Sarovar* (pool) invites purification of the soul and a sense of equality – as

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<sup>348</sup> Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

<sup>349</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

<sup>350</sup> Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction*.

water, which “has no shape or color,” envelops all who enter. The causeway leading into the shrine has only one bridge, subtly reminding that despite many paths, ultimately all who seek the Divine converge on the One Truth in the center.<sup>351</sup> Inside, the Golden Temple’s sanctum is accessible from any direction, and there is no high pedestal for clergy – the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh scripture) rests at the lowest level, with devotees seated around it, signifying that the divine Word is the true authority and all humans sit at its feet.<sup>352</sup> The gilded marble and mirror-like water reflect light in all directions, an apt metaphor for the illumination of God’s Name that radiates universally.

The Golden Temple’s construction and evolution over time also embody collaboration across communities. Over the centuries, donations and service (kar-seva) for its upkeep came from Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike. For instance, during the rebuilding of the temple after its destruction in the 1760s, Sikhs and local Muslims in Punjab reportedly cooperated to restore the sacred site (this was before hardened communal lines).<sup>353</sup> Later, in the 19th century, Maharaja Ranjit Singh – a Sikh ruler – invited skilled Muslim artisans from Lahore to embellish the shrine with the exquisite golden inlay and frescos, showing that art and devotion transcended religious identity.<sup>354</sup> Even to this day, pilgrims of various faiths visit the Golden Temple. Its four doors remain a living invitation, and the Guru’s

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<sup>351</sup> Fenech, *The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus*.

<sup>352</sup> Pashaura Singh, “The Guru Granth Sahib,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 125–35.

<sup>353</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>354</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

Langar (free kitchen) feeds up to 100,000 people daily,<sup>355</sup> regardless of religion or background, manifesting the message of human unity in practical terms.

Importantly, the Golden Temple did become a space that practically included Muslims in its sacred activities for centuries. From the time of Guru Arjan onward, the daily devotional music at the shrine was often performed by Rababis – a hereditary lineage of musicians stemming from Bhai Mardana, who were Muslims. These Muslim Rababi musicians were integral to the Golden Temple’s worship until the mid-20th century, singing Sikh hymns as a revered part of the community.<sup>356</sup> A British observer noted in 1910 with wonder that “all through the day...the musicians are constantly in attendance, singing hymns” in the Guru’s court, and “These are the Rababis, the descendants of the Muhammadan fakir, Mardana...who loved Nanak, and set his hymns to music nearly five hundred years ago.”<sup>357</sup> He marveled that Mardana’s Muslim descendants “served the Gurus or... the [Holy] Book these five hundred years, and...held to Islam through generations, when to be a Sikh meant to slay a Turk at sight or be slain.”<sup>358</sup> This striking testimony by Edmund Candler (1910) highlights that even during periods of Sikh–Mughal conflict in the 18th century, the Sikh center at Amritsar still embraced Muslim rababis in its very heart. It was not until the Partition of India in 1947 – a political rupture – that the rababis were largely displaced from the

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<sup>355</sup> Al Jazeera, “In Pictures: Kitchen that feeds 100,000 daily,” November 17, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2013/11/17/in-pictures-kitchen-that-feeds-100000-daily>.

<sup>356</sup> Navtej K. Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai? Towards a Social History of the Rabābī Tradition of Shabad Kīrtan,” *Sikh Formations* 7, no. 3 (2011): 365–82.

<sup>357</sup> Edmund Candler, *The Mantle of the East* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1910).

<sup>358</sup> Candler, *The Mantle of the East*.

Golden Temple, ending a long chapter of shared sacred music.<sup>359</sup> The fact that the Guru Granth Sahib, first installed in the Harmandir in 1604, contains hymns not only of the Sikh Gurus but also of Hindu Bhagats and Muslim Sufis like Sheikh Farid is yet another testament to its universality.<sup>360</sup> Guru Arjan deliberately included the verses of Sheikh Farid (a 12th–13th century Sufi saint of Punjab) in the Sikh scripture, thereby preserving his message for the times to come.<sup>361</sup> To this day, devotees at the Golden Temple listen to and recite Farid’s couplets as part of daily prayers, alongside the Gurus’ own bani. The inclusion of a Muslim saint’s words in the Sikh holy book, enshrined in the Golden Temple, speaks volumes about the Sikh Gurus’ ecumenical outlook. Sikh scholar J.S. Grewal notes that the Adi Granth compiled by Guru Arjan “embodied the pluralism of the Sikh message”<sup>362</sup> by canonizing wisdom from diverse sources, an unprecedented act in South Asian religious history.

The Golden Temple stands as a “Testament to Unity” on multiple levels. Its four welcoming doors and low, accessible design concretely realize Guru Nanak’s teaching that no one is outside the Divine circle. Its foundation lore and its actual use over centuries demonstrate profound respect across religious boundaries. Sikh tradition lovingly remembers that a Muslim saint’s hand set the shrine’s cornerstone, and Sikh history records that Muslim singers for generations uplifted the shrine’s song. Even the scripture sung there interweaves Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh voices into one spiritual chorus. The Harmandir Sahib, often called Darbar Sahib (Divine

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<sup>359</sup> Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai?,” 365–82.

<sup>360</sup> Singh, “The Guru Granth Sahib,” 125–35.

<sup>361</sup> Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

<sup>362</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

Court), thus embodies the Gurus' vision of a new social and sacred space "open to all traditions and all people." It is physically and symbolically the antithesis of exclusion. As Pashaura Singh observes, the Golden Temple's very layout, with bridges from every direction leading to a sanctum lower than the earth, teaches that God's grace flows to those of any origin who humble themselves in devotion.<sup>363</sup> Little wonder that the Golden Temple has become for Sikhs not only a place of worship but a living symbol of equality, service, and community. In the Golden Temple, the message of human unity that Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana lived out finds architectural expression: there are no walls blocking the way to the One, and the divine Light shines equally on all who enter.

### **Rituals vs. Truth — Nanak's Radical Simplicity**

Guru Nanak's message for humanity challenged the religious formalism of his day with a call to spiritual simplicity and truth. In 15th-century Punjab, Hindu and Muslim communities alike placed heavy emphasis on ritual observances – from bathing in sacred rivers and rotating rosaries to fasting and wearing specific symbols of faith.<sup>364</sup> Guru Nanak openly critiqued what he saw as empty ritual, insisting that external rites have no value without inner devotion and ethical conduct. In place of ritualism, Nanak taught a radically simple path centered on remembering the One God (Naam - Simran), singing God's praises, earning an honest living, sharing with others, and serving all beings (seva).<sup>365</sup> This was, as W.H. McLeod describes, "a religion focused not on external ritual but on internal

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<sup>363</sup> Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

<sup>364</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>365</sup> Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*.

devotion to God and meditation on God's Name."<sup>366</sup> Guru Nanak's bold simplicity set him at odds with the religious authorities of his time, but it laid the ethical foundations for the Sikh community that followed.

From a young age, Nanak exhibited a skeptical attitude toward blind ritual. A famous incident cited in Sikh sources occurred when Nanak was around nine years old and was to undergo the Janeu ceremony, the Hindu ritual of receiving a sacred thread to mark one's caste status. During the ceremony, Nanak astonished the officiating Brahmin by refusing to don the thread. He questioned the value of wearing a thread made of mere cotton if it symbolized spiritual ideals that one did not truly practice. According to the earliest Sikh biographies, Nanak argued that a truly sacred thread should be spun from virtues: "What is the use of wearing this cotton thread, if it is not made of mercy, contentment, continence and truth – [a thread] that will last till the end?"<sup>367</sup> This rational protest – essentially saying that compassion and integrity are the real markers of a holy life, not a physical string – scandalized the clergy but eloquently summarized Nanak's philosophy. It meant that outward religious marks have no meaning without inward transformation. Nanak's rejection of the janeu was a quiet revolution in itself: it challenged the caste hierarchy (since only "twice-born" upper castes wear the thread) and asserted that moral qualities are the true badge of honor in God's eyes.<sup>368</sup> Sikh exegetes often quote Guru Nanak's own composition on this matter, recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib: "Make compassion the cotton,

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<sup>366</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>367</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>368</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

contentment the thread, continence the knot and truth the twist. Such is the sacred thread for the soul; it does not break, it cannot be soiled or burned or lost.”<sup>369</sup> By this, Nanak meant that the real spiritual discipline is to sew one’s life with compassion and truth – a discipline far harder than any ceremony, but infinitely more important.

Throughout his life, Guru Nanak continued to attack ritualism in both Hindu and Muslim contexts, using compelling imagery and sometimes gentle humor. During his extensive travels (udāsīs), Nanak often encountered ritual practitioners and engaged them in dialogue. At Hardwar, a Hindu pilgrimage site on the Ganges, Nanak witnessed Brahmins performing the dawn ritual of throwing water to the east, “offering” it to their ancestors or the rising sun. Observing that these men believed their handfuls of water traveled to the souls of deceased forebears, Guru Nanak began flinging water to the west instead. Puzzled onlookers asked what he was doing. Nanak replied that he was watering his far-away fields in Punjab – a statement that made them laugh, for how could water thrown in Hardwar reach hundreds of miles west? Nanak then smiled and questioned, if his water couldn’t reach Punjab, how did they expect their libations to reach the spirit world? This gentle *reductio ad absurdum* unmasked the mechanical nature of ritual devoid of understanding. By one Sikh account, Nanak said, “No ritual can bear fruit without good deeds.”<sup>370</sup> The point was not to insult sacred traditions but to urge people to seek the truth behind rituals. In this case, the truth might be honoring one’s ancestors through righteous living rather than by symbolic gestures.

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<sup>369</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 471.

<sup>370</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

Guru Nanak's critique extended equally to Muslim practices when he felt they had become empty formalities. Bhai Gurdas (a 17th-century Sikh savant) and later sources relate a story of Nanak's encounter with Muslim clerics who invited him to join them in the ritual namaz (prayers). Nanak observed that the local qazi (Islamic judge) and others were outwardly bowing and reciting, but their minds were occupied with worldly thoughts – one thinking of his newborn colt tied at home, another of his business. Seeing their distraction, Nanak declined to participate, saying there was no use in a prayer offered without heart or concentration. As one scholar notes, "Right intention (niyat) is an essential aspect of Muslim prayer. Because their minds were elsewhere, Nanak said it was impossible to join an act not acceptable to God."<sup>371</sup> According to Sikh tradition, Guru Nanak instead conveyed a beautiful message to the Muslims on how to be a true Muslim: "Let compassion be your mosque, let faith be your prayer mat, let honest living be your Quran, let modesty be your circumcision, let piety be your fast."<sup>372</sup> In these lines from Guru Nanak's hymn, he redefines the pillars of Islam in ethical terms – mosque as compassion, prayer-mat as faith, scripture as honest livelihood, etc. – effectively saying that living by these virtues is better in God's eyes than mere ritual compliance. He did not object to the practice of praying five times a day; in fact, he acknowledged its value. But he taught that those prayers should correspond to inner spiritual stages: "Let the first prayer be truthfulness, the second honest effort, the third charity in God's name, the fourth pure intent, and the fifth praise of the Lord."<sup>373</sup> Only with such sincerity, Nanak

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<sup>371</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>372</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 140–41.

<sup>373</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 140–41.

said, would one be worthy of being called a true Muslim. Guru Nanak's approach here is telling – he did not reject Islam (or Hinduism) wholesale; rather, he challenged adherents to go beyond superficial observances to the spiritual core. He similarly critiqued the religious elites of both faiths: “You call yourself a mulla or a qazi only when you truly know the Name of God”<sup>374</sup> he sang, adding that scholastic knowledge or pious garb means nothing if the person remains egotistical or unjust. In one verse, Nanak imagines God saying to a pretentious devotee, “You may recite the prayers and sacred texts, but the grave is calling you – without sincere meditation on the Name, all these rituals are empty.”<sup>375</sup> Death, the great reality, will cut through our illusions; only true piety – a heart that loves God and God's creation – will matter in the end.

If Guru Nanak stripped religion to its ethical and devotional essentials, what did he establish in place of ritual? Scholars highlight three fundamental principles Nanak taught his followers: nam japna (meditating on the divine Name), kirat karni (earning an honest livelihood), and vand chhakna (sharing one's earnings and food with the community, especially the needy).<sup>376</sup> These three encapsulate a spirituality that is practical and socially conscious. For example, instead of setting up elaborate rites, Guru Nanak instituted simple congregational gatherings (sangat) where people of any background could sit together, sing hymns, and reflect on God's word. The only “rituals” in these gatherings were collective singing (kirtan), recitation of hymns from memory or manuscript, and communal prayer – all

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<sup>374</sup> Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

<sup>375</sup> Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

<sup>376</sup> Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*.

centered on the Word (shabad) rather than any idol or ritual object.<sup>377</sup> In place of ritual offerings to deities, Nanak promoted communal meals (langar). At Kartarpur – the town Nanak established in his later years – he organized a free kitchen where devotees pooled resources to cook and eat together. This langar had profound social implications: it broke the caste barriers by having all diners sit in a common line (pangat) as equals, and it sacralized the act of serving others. Eating together became a spiritual act of unity and an expression of the truth that the One God provides for all. J.S. Grewal notes that by the time of Guru Nanak's retirement at Kartarpur (c. 1520s), the sangat and langar were institutionalized as core practices, embodying the Sikh ethics of equality and sharing.<sup>378</sup> These were deliberately radical simplicities: no complex priestly rituals were needed to approach God – only a sincere heart, an open kitchen, and a song of praise.

Guru Nanak's compositions in the Guru Granth Sahib frequently reiterate that inner truth is superior to external shows of piety. In one oft-quoted verse, he states: "Truth is the highest virtue, but higher still is truthful living."<sup>379</sup> That is, it is not enough to profess truth; one must live it in daily conduct, which is the ultimate spiritual practice. Another hymn declares, "Pilgrimages, austerities, compassions, charity – these are not equal to the contemplation of the Name,"<sup>380</sup> emphasizing naam japna over ritual acts. Yet Nanak did not deny all value to religious discipline; rather, he redefined discipline in moral terms. For example, he said one should treat self-control and

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<sup>377</sup> Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*.

<sup>378</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>379</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 62.

<sup>380</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 4 (Japji Sahib; translation adapted).

forbearance as one's fasts and vows (instead of merely fasting from food), and make kindness one's ritual bath (instead of just bathing in a river). Such statements encouraged Sikhs to transform everyday actions – bathing, eating, working – into mindful, ethical practices imbued with remembrance of God. In effect, Guru Nanak was reforming ritual by infusing it with meaning, not simply discarding all customs. As Pashaura Singh notes, Nanak was “not against ritual per se, but against ritualism – the mechanical performance of rites without understanding.”<sup>381</sup> We see this nuance in how Guru Nanak responded to the Hindu ritual of aartee (waving lamps before a deity). According to Puratan Janam Sakhi tradition, when Nanak visited the famous Jagannath Temple in Puri, he witnessed priests performing aartee for the idol of Krishna with lamps, incense, and conch-shell music. Nanak did not join in that ritual; instead, he sang a hymn imagining the entire cosmos performing aartee to the One Creator. In his sublime composition Dhanasari Aartee, Guru Nanak describes the sun and moon as lamps, the stars as jeweled lights, the wind as the fan, and the flowering forests as the incense – all nature singing God's glory. “What a beautiful lamp-lit worship this is, O Destroyer of fear,” he concludes, “the sound of Your Name, which is unstruck music to my ears”<sup>382</sup>. By this visionary poetry, Nanak conveyed that the true aartee is not a ceremony for an idol, but the continuous adoration of the Creator by all creation. This did not outright condemn those priests – rather, it gently redirected the ritual to its highest meaning. Sikh commentators highlight this episode as an illustration

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<sup>381</sup> Pashaura Singh, “The Guru Granth Sahib,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 125–35.

<sup>382</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion; Guru Granth Sahib*, 663.

of Nanak's method: he retained the vocabulary of ritual but radically broadened its scope, turning it from an exclusive rite into a universal song.

The community norms that grew out of Guru Nanak's teachings reflected his radical simplicity. As the early Sikh community (the Nanak-Panth) took shape in Kartarpur and later under his successors, they eschewed many customary practices of both Islam and Hinduism. Sikhs did not have priests or a clergy class – any suitable devotee could lead prayers or sing.<sup>383</sup> They avoided idolatry entirely; to this day, no images are worshiped in Sikh gurdwaras, only the scripture as embodiment of the Guru's word. Caste distinctions were formally rejected: in the *sangat* and *langar*, all sat together, and Guru Nanak's followers came from varied backgrounds (farmer, noble, barber, laundryman, etc.). Guru Nanak also emphasized honest labor (*kirat*) as a form of worship. Unlike some ascetics of his time, he did not renounce the world – he worked as a farmer at Kartarpur and urged Sikhs to engage in productive life while remembering God.<sup>384</sup> This balanced householder ethic was a rejection of the ritual merit attached to extreme asceticism or begging. Instead, earning by one's effort and then sharing with others was the sacred duty. Puran Singh, a modern interpreter, thus called Nanak's path "the religion of inward sincerity and outward service."<sup>385</sup>

What Nanak added was a strong social ethic and a community-building aspect. Unlike some saints who were lone poets, Nanak established institutions – *sangat* and *langar* – to sustain the practice

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<sup>383</sup> Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*.

<sup>384</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>385</sup> Puran Singh, *The Spirit Born People* (Jaranwala, Punjab, 1929).

of truthful living collectively.<sup>386</sup> He thus turned a personal mystic path into a community religion. This community, later known as Sikhs (“learners”), internalized Nanak’s anti-ritual stance so much that even today, Sikh religious life is relatively in ritualistic compared to other faiths. There are of course ceremonies (like birth, marriage, and baptism rites) in Sikhism, but they are few and kept simple.<sup>387</sup> The emphasis is consistently on *remembering God through Gurbani (scripture hymnody)* and living ethically (earning honestly, sharing, defending truth).

In academic perspective, Guru Nanak can be seen as a reformer who retained certain frameworks but utterly transformed their significance. He did not, for instance, prescribe a totally new liturgy; he kept the idea of communal prayer and singing (common to both Hindu Bhakti and Sufi Islam), but he stripped away priestly mediation and rigid rules. Harjot Oberoi notes that Nanak’s legacy was to elevate ethical authenticity above ritual purity, thereby creating a new matrix of Sikh identity focused on discipleship.<sup>388</sup> By the time of Guru Nanak’s death in 1539, a distinct community had emerged that defined itself not by rituals like pilgrimage, fasts, or sacraments, but by a shared devotion to One God, a living practice of equality, and remembrance of the divine Name in daily life.<sup>389</sup> In Sikh history, this is characterized as a shift from ritual to spiritual – a radical simplicity that was itself revolutionary in the religious landscape of India.

In Sikh-Sufi comparative studies, scholars observe that Nanak’s teachings converged with Islamic mysticism too on key points: the

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<sup>386</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>387</sup> Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs*.

<sup>388</sup> Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

<sup>389</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

oneness of God, rejection of idolatry, the need to go beyond form to intent, etc.<sup>390</sup> For instance, the Sufi concept that “the heart of the believer is the throne of God”<sup>391</sup> resonates with Nanak’s idea of making the heart the mosque/temple. Yet, Nanak was *not* a syncretist who simply blended Hindu and Muslim ideas. He forged a distinct *third path*. As one analysis puts it, Guru Nanak’s message “completely rejects the mistaken notion that [he] offers a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim ideals”<sup>392</sup>. Instead, he offered a universal critique of religious corruption and a universal remedy centered on the Name of God. He freely drew terminology from both Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian sources (using “Ram” and “Allah” interchangeably for God, for example), showing comfort in multiple religious languages. But he bound these terms into a novel theology where *Ek Onkar* (One Cosmic Creator) is beyond sectarian definitions and can be approached directly by any loving heart.

To conclude this section, Guru Nanak’s critique of hollow rituals was not a negation of religion, but a move to ground religion in truth. Guru Nanak’s radical simplicity lay in privileging Truth (Sat) over all ritual formalities. In his view, external practices like threads, diets, recitations, or pilgrimages are at best means to an end – and that end is cultivating *God-consciousness* and *compassion*. When those means become ends in themselves, religion degenerates. Nanak thus fearlessly told priests and pirs that their outward shows were useless if unaccompanied by inner transformation. He proposed

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<sup>390</sup> Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>391</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

<sup>392</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

devotion (bhakti) as simple as remembering the Divine Name at all times, and ethics as straightforward as treating others with justice and kindness. He retained the soul of spiritual practice – prayer, singing, fellowship, self-discipline – while freeing it from the shackles of meaningless custom and social inequality. In doing so, Nanak affirmed what scholars of religion describe as an “interiorization” of spirituality: making the personal realization of God and ethical living the core, rather than external performances.<sup>393</sup> This message of Truth above ritual has had a lasting influence. Today, Sikhs around the world still emphasize Naam Simran, Kirat, and Seva as the pillars of their faith, often quoting Guru Nanak’s own words that rituals are futile without love: “If one’s heart is full of deceit, what use is bathing at sixty-eight holy places?... If God dwells within you, you attain the truth – without such realization, ceremonial piety is false.”<sup>394</sup> Guru Nanak’s radical simplicity thus continues to remind humanity that the essence of religion is sincerity and compassion – living in remembrance of the Divine and in service of others – rather than the complexities of ritual observance.

### **Music as Prayer — The Eternal Rabab of Mardana**

Among Guru Nanak’s most innovative contributions to spiritual practice was the use of music as a vehicle of prayer and theology. Sikh tradition recounts that whenever Guru Nanak would experience a revelation or compose a new hymn (shabad), he immediately sang it to the accompaniment of Bhai Mardana’s rabab (rebeck, a lute-like string instrument). In fact, the image of “Nanak singing and Mardana plucking the rabab” is iconic in Sikh lore. This partnership in music

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<sup>393</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>394</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 353 (translation adapted).

was not incidental – it was fundamental to how Sikh scripture was created, transmitted, and remembered. Guru Nanak established the practice of kirtan, the devotional singing of God’s word, as the primary mode of Sikh worship.<sup>395</sup> The Sikh scripture Guru Granth Sahib is unique in being organized by ragas (musical modes) and poetic meter, underscoring that it is meant to be sung rather than merely read.<sup>396</sup> In this section, we explore how Bhai Mardana’s rabab became an “eternal” instrument of Sikh prayer, the role of kirtan in shaping early Sikh community, and the lasting legacy of the Rababi musicians. Drawing on musicological studies and historical sources, we will see that for Sikhs, music is not ornamentation but devotion – a direct route to experience the Divine.

Bhai Mardana (1459–1534) was ten years older than Guru Nanak and hailed from the same village, Talwandi (now Nankana Sahib, Pakistan).<sup>397</sup> Born into a Muslim family of the Mirasi minstrel caste, Mardana grew up skilled in singing and storytelling. Despite differences in age and religion, Mardana became Nanak’s closest companion. Sikh narratives emphasize that Mardana’s low social status as a musician did not matter to Nanak – in fact, Nanak lovingly called him “bhai” (brother), indicating the fraternity between them. It was Mardana’s destiny to serve as Guru Nanak’s minstrel: “With the rabab in Mardana’s hands and the hymns in Nanak’s voice, they spread a message that rejected empty ritualism and called people to

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<sup>395</sup> Sukhraj Singh Nijhawan, “Guru Nanak and the Creation of the Sikh Musical Tradition,” *Journal of Religious History* 30, no. 2 (2006): 249–65.

<sup>396</sup> Pashaura Singh, “The Guru Granth Sahib,” 125–35.

<sup>397</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

recognize the One Creator within all”<sup>398</sup>. The two set out on extensive journeys (traditionally, four long journeys known as *udaasis*) across India, Tibet, Arabia, and Persia, covering thousands of miles over some 20–25 years. During these travels, as one scholar puts it, Mardana “provided the aural musical expression of Nanak’s compositions”<sup>399</sup>, giving melody and resonance to the Guru’s poetic words. The Guru and his bard often attracted crowds through the sheer beauty of their *kirtan*. Sikh sources describe scenes of Nanak singing *shabads* – many of which contained penetrating social or spiritual commentary – while Mardana’s *rabab* stirred the hearts of listeners. It was in this format (voice and *rabab*) that much of Sikh scripture was originally expressed.

The *rabab* itself holds a special place in Sikh history as the first instrument of the Sikh musical tradition. It was a small, portable lute with gut strings, well-suited to accompany voice. The *rabab* was likely introduced to Punjab from Afghanistan or Persia; by Guru Nanak’s time it was used by Sufi *qawwals* and folk musicians.<sup>400</sup> Guru Nanak’s adoption of the *rabab* via Mardana signifies a confluence of cultural influences – it brought a flavor of Islamicate musical culture into the Sikh experience, since the *rabab* had strong associations with Sufi music. In Sikh memory, Bhai Mardana is often credited as “the first *Rababi*”, meaning the first practitioner of Sikh sacred music. The term *Rababi* came to denote the family of devotional musicians

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<sup>398</sup> Navtej K. Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai? Rethinking Religion-Boundaries and the Politics of Sikh and Muslim Identities in Contemporary Punjab,” *Sikh Formations* 7, no. 3 (2011): 365–82.

<sup>399</sup> Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai?,” 365–82.

<sup>400</sup> Virinder S. Kalra, “Sacred and Secular Soundscapes in Punjab,” *Global Networks* 14, no. 4 (2014): 495–511.

who trace their lineage to Mardana.<sup>401</sup> To call oneself a Rababi is to claim an authenticity in relation to the lineages stemming from those Rababis who had accompanied the Sikh Gurus. In other words, Rababis became the preservers of the original Sikh musical heritage inaugurated by Nanak and Mardana.

Music for Guru Nanak was not only an aesthetic medium but a theological act. In Sikh belief, the shabad kirtan (singing of the divine Word) is itself a form of prayer that can induce spiritual experience and convey doctrinal truths.<sup>402</sup> The Guru Granth's verses are set in 31 main ragas, each chosen by the Gurus to suit the mood and message of the hymn.<sup>403</sup> For example, joyous hymns are in bright ragas like Majh or Asa, while solemn or contemplative hymns might be in ragas like Todi or Bilaval. Guru Nanak is traditionally said to have composed a still-popular morning prayer, Asa di Var, together with Mardana in Raga Asa, blending soul-stirring melody with incisive teachings on social justice and devotion.<sup>404</sup> The act of singing these hymns collectively was a means of both remembering God (Naam) and teaching the congregation. As Puran Singh eloquently noted, "Guru Nanak sang the divine Nam into the souls of people."<sup>405</sup> The rabab, then, was the instrument through which this infusion took place, its strings echoing the Guru's voice and lodging the hymns in the hearts of devotees.

Historical Sikh texts themselves mention Mardana and music. The early 17th-century *Janam Sakhi* of Bhai Gurdas refers to Mardana

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<sup>401</sup> Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai?," 365–82.

<sup>402</sup> Nijhawan, "Guru Nanak and the Creation of the Sikh Musical Tradition," 249–65.

<sup>403</sup> Pashaura Singh, "The Guru Granth Sahib," 125–35.

<sup>404</sup> Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

<sup>405</sup> Puran Singh, *The Spirit Born People*.

accompanying Nanak on rabab as they journeyed. Some of Guru Nanak's own hymns in the Granth Sahib use the refrain "Mardana, play the rabab!" suggesting a conversational dynamic in performance (though scholars debate if those lines were later insertions).<sup>406</sup> Whether or not Mardana authored any lines of scripture is uncertain – there are a few saloks (couplets) in the Guru Granth attributed to a "Mardana," but academic consensus leans toward those being Nanak's composition spoken for Mardana's voice. What is clear is that Sikh scripture enshrines dialogues where Mardana plays a role: in some hymns Nanak addresses "Brother Mardana," and in Janam Sakhi stories, Mardana often asks questions or expresses doubts that prompt Guru Nanak's revelatory answers. This pedagogical motif – Mardana as the earnest seeker and Nanak as the enlightened guide – further underscores the partnership. It's as if the Guru's teachings were, most of the times, set in motion by Mardana's prompts and supported by Mardana's music. In a way, Mardana stands in for the common human being, voicing hunger, worry, or curiosity, while Nanak's responses (delivered in melodic verse) provide illumination. The music ties the two together, making the teaching a shared experience rather than a one-sided sermon.<sup>407</sup>

After Guru Nanak's passing, the tradition of kirtan with rabab continued to flourish under subsequent Gurus. The third Guru, Amar Das, and fourth Guru, Ram Das, both encouraged kirtan sessions among the Sikhs. Finally, the fifth Guru, Arjan, institutionalized it at the newly built Harmandir Sahib. Around 1604, Guru Arjan

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<sup>406</sup> W. H. McLeod, *The Early Sikh Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Pashaura Singh, "The Guru Granth Sahib," 125–35.

<sup>407</sup> Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai?," 365–82.

established regular kirtan chauki (sittings of kirtan) at the Golden Temple, appointing musicians – including Mardana’s descendents – to perform kirtan at designated times each day.<sup>408409</sup> Bhai Gurdas notes that Guru Arjan created a schedule of eight watches (ashtpadi) of kirtan so that worship through music filled the temple from dawn to dusk.<sup>410411</sup> This makes Sikhism perhaps the only major tradition where scripture was not just read or chanted, but sung in full musical modes as a daily liturgy. The performers of this liturgy were the Rababis. Historical records indicate that Mardana’s son, Shahjada, and grandson, Babak, served Guru Angad and Guru Amar Das, continuing the kirtan seva.<sup>412</sup> By Guru Arjan’s era, a guild of Rababis had formed – often Muslim by faith but Sikh in practice and service – who were masters of Gurbani kirtan. They memorized countless hymns and their appropriate melodies (ragas and tunes passed down from Guru Nanak’s time). The Rababis were respected figures, sometimes even more musically adept than the Gurus themselves, and were responsible for evolving the musical styles of kirtan.

The Rababi tradition in Sikhism represents a fascinating model of inter-religious collaboration. These Muslim minstrels essentially became the media through which Sikh sacred music was preserved and transmitted. The Rababis maintained “an authentic knowledge passed down through their families from the times of the Gurus,” and thus held a sacred status in kirtan performance.<sup>413</sup> Even during

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<sup>408</sup> Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*.

<sup>409</sup> Fenech, *The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus*.

<sup>410</sup> Bhai Gurdas, Varan Bhai Gurdas, ed. Vir Singh (Amritsar: Khalsa Samachar, 1964).

<sup>411</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>412</sup> Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai?,” 365–82.

<sup>413</sup> The Tarosa Project, “Rababi Kirtan, Music, and Interfaith Relations” (webpage).

periods of political strain – for example, when Mughal persecution forced Sikhs into hiding in the 1700s – Rababis like Bhai Sadha and Bhai Madha continued to sing in the Harmandir Sahib, which was sometimes managed by local faithful even in the Gurus' absence. Under Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign (1799–1839), Rababis were held in high regard and patronized by the Sikh court.<sup>414</sup> The community of Rababis developed distinctive gharanas (schools of music) and contributed new compositions (vaartas) that set Sikh scripture to music. For instance, the tradition credits Bhai Chand (early 19th c.) with creating a popular tune for the evening kirtan known as Aarti (different from Nanak's aarti hymn), and others innovated within the classical framework to enrich the kirtan repertoire.

Interestingly, because the Rababis were often from Muslim background, their training sometimes incorporated elements of the Indian classical music system that had flourished in Mughal courts (which many Muslim musicians were adept in). The Gurus themselves appreciated classical ragas and folk tunes alike; Guru Arjan even engaged Rababis to perform in the Golden Temple after its establishment. This cross-pollination meant Sikh kirtan evolved as a distinctive genre, intertwining Hindu devotional modes, Sufi influences, and indigenous Punjabi folk styles.<sup>415</sup> By the time of the sixth Guru, Hargobind (17th century), the Sikh court had ensembles of Rababis and also *Dhadis* (balladeers with drums) who sang heroic ballads (vars) of Sikh martyrs. Guru Hargobind patronized both,

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<sup>414</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>415</sup> Kalra, "Sacred and Secular Soundscapes in Punjab," 495–511.

encouraging a rich musical culture.<sup>416</sup> Later, Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth Guru) further integrated music into Sikh practice – he himself was a poet and musician who used instruments like the *taus* and *dilruba*. At his court in Anandpur in the late 1600s, he maintained a “*Rababi Mohalla*” – a whole quarter of the city where Rababi musicians resided and practiced.<sup>417</sup> One renowned Rababi in his court was Bhai Natha Mal (also called Naadha), and a poet-musician was also associated with his darbar. These facts illustrate that being a Muslim was no barrier to being a leading musician in the Sikh sphere; musical skill and devotion were what mattered.

The continuity of Bhai Mardana’s rabab is also literal: an artifact believed to be Mardana’s rabab is preserved to this day (though with some uncertainty about authenticity).<sup>418</sup> More substantially, the idea of Mardana’s rabab – symbolizing Sikh music – is deeply embedded in Sikh consciousness. In gurdwaras worldwide, when hymns are sung (even if nowadays accompanied by the harmonium introduced in late 19th century), devotees remember that the genesis of this practice was Guru Nanak with Mardana by his side.<sup>419</sup> Some traditional Sikh musicians (especially the Namdhari Sikhs and a revivalist movement in recent years) have reintroduced the rabab and other stringed instruments into kirtan to recapture the original sound. The phrase “Mardana’s rabab is eternal” signifies that the spirit of devotion through music initiated by him will never die. In Sikh

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<sup>416</sup> Nijhawan, “Dhadi Darbar,” 290–309.

<sup>417</sup> Shail Mayaram Purewal and Virinder S. Kalra, “Adaptations of Traditional Rababi Kirtan: Reviving a Lost Heritage,” *Sikh Formations* 12, no. 3 (2016): 379–96.

<sup>418</sup> Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*.

<sup>419</sup> Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, “Somebody’s Got the Keys? The Harmonium and Colonialism in Sikh Devotional Music,” *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 8, no. 2 (2022): 21–42, <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1245>.

scripture, there is an image where the shabad (divine Word) itself speaks and says: “I am the instrument, and the Guru’s bani (word) is the melody; through the Guru’s grace the music of Naam resounds.<sup>420</sup>” Mardana’s rabab exemplifies that instrument – it gave voice to the Guru’s word then, and by extension, every Sikh’s voice raised in kirtan today is an heir to Mardana’s rabab.

Academically, scholars like Virinder S.<sup>421</sup> Kalra have pointed out that the Rababi tradition exemplifies how Sikh sacred music blurred the lines between sacred and secular, and between religions. It was not performed by an exclusive priestly class, but by musicians who could be of any background. The performance of kirtan was also a form of oral tradition that preserved theology in a largely non-literate society. People learned about virtue, humility, the lives of past saints, etc., through the songs they heard daily. In that sense, kirtan was a social glue – it created a shared emotional and moral culture. Even today, a Sikh gathering anywhere in the world will likely involve kirtan, and those present often know the refrains or can at least collectively hum “Waheguru, Waheguru” (Wonderful Lord) along with the melody. The music binds the community, transcending language barriers; for example, Sikhs who do not speak Punjabi still learn to sing common hymns. It’s a unifying ritual that traces directly back to Guru Nanak and Mardana sitting under a tree with a rabab.

It is poignant to note that the Rababi tradition did face an abrupt rupture in 1947 with the Partition of India.<sup>422</sup> Most Muslim Rababis, who lived in what became Pakistan, could no longer serve in gurdwaras in the new India, and vice versa. The newly formed Sikh

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<sup>420</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 800.

<sup>421</sup> Kalra, “Sacred and Secular Soundscapes in Punjab,” 495–511.

<sup>422</sup> Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai?,” 365–82.

management (SGPC) in India replaced Rababis with Sikh kirtanias (Ragi Jathas). A few rababis converted to Sikhism to continue (e.g., Bhai Lal, originally a Muslim rababi), but the majority, such as the celebrated Bhai Chand (Ghulam Muhammad Chand), migrated to Pakistan.<sup>423</sup> There, far from Sikh congregations, the Rababis' art waned. When Bhai Chand died in 2015, he was often referred to as the "last of the great Rababis." Scholars argue that this loss was not just of individuals but of a syncretic musical heritage, as post-Partition religious identities grew rigid. Yet, efforts are underway by Sikh and Muslim enthusiasts to revive the rabab and the old compositions on both sides of the border, as a gesture of reclaiming the shared past. In Pakistan, these Rababis found themselves without their old patronage (there were no Sikh gurdwaras functioning then), and many had to turn to other professions or adapt their music to new settings (some became folk singers or qawwali performers). Within a few decades, the uninterrupted chain from Mardana grew tenuous. However, because this knowledge was passed in families ("through blood or lineage"), some musical inheritance survived within those families despite changing context. Today there are efforts by Sikh organizations to locate Rababi descendants in Pakistan and collaborate to revive the joint heritage. Films and articles – for example, *Mardana's Children: Rababis of Lahore* – have documented the few remaining Muslim Rababis keeping the memory alive.<sup>424</sup>

The rabab itself, while eventually supplanted by the harmonium in the 19th century (due to various historical factors), remains an

<sup>423</sup> J. Farooq Hamid, "Bhai Chand (the Last of the Rababis)," *Downbeat*, May 1, 2015.  
<sup>424</sup> *Mardana's Children: The Rababis of Lahore*, directed by Nathan Drillot, documentary, iconic 20 min, 2023.

symbol of Sikh kirtan. In recent decades, there has been a revival of interest in traditional instruments like the rabab, dilruba, taus, etc., as Sikhs seek to reconnect with the original sounds of the Guru's bani. This revival is partly inspired by scholarship and the recognition that the harmonium – introduced by Christian missionaries in the 19th century – changed the tuning and flavor of kirtan.<sup>425</sup> Organizations in India and the diaspora now teach rabab playing, often dedicating it to Bhai Mardana's memory. The *Bhai Mardana Institute of Music* and similar groups aim to reinvigorate the *tanti saaj* (string instruments) tradition that he started.

From a broader perspective, music in Sikhism functions as theology in melody. The Gurus conveyed nuanced metaphysical ideas and societal critiques through poetic song, accessible to laymen and emotionally powerful. This aligns with the Bhakti movement's use of vernacular hymns and Sufi Islam's use of musical qawwali for devotion. Guru Nanak and Mardana's innovation was to integrate the two – the bhakti content often delivered in a qawwali-like performance context (with rabab and improvisation). The result was a tradition where singing is itself praying. For Sikhs, singing the Gurbani (Guru's words) is considered a higher form of devotion than other acts, because it engages the devotee wholly – intellectually through understanding the lyrics, emotionally through the raga, and physically through participation in singing. This holistic spirituality is encapsulated in a common Sikh saying that "kirtan is food for the soul." Guru Arjan emphasized this by compiling the *Adi Granth* in raga order, ensuring that Sikhs would always approach the text musically.<sup>426</sup> In daily Sikh liturgy, key prayers like *Japji Sahib* are

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<sup>425</sup> Bhogal, "Somebody's Got the Keys?," 21–42.

<sup>426</sup> Singh, "The Guru Granth Sahib," 126–43.

recited, but the deeper immersion comes in singing shabads from the Granth.

Thus, the legacy of Mardana's rabab is "eternal" not only because the instrument's use persisted, but because it represents the enduring principle that devotional music leads to spiritual unity. When the sangat sings together in a gurdwara, distinctions of high and low fade into a single voice of prayer – just as Nanak and Mardana, Hindu and Muslim, merged their voices in praise of the One. In spite of all changes, the spirit of Bhai Mardana's rabab *remains eternal* in Sikh devotion. Whenever kirtan is sung, Sikhs remember that their Gurus chose music as the highest form of prayer. A popular saying in Punjabi, "Nanak shah fakir, hindu da guru, musalman da pir," describes Nanak as a mystic who is a guru to Hindus and a pir to Muslims.<sup>427</sup> One might add, *and Mardana was his minstrel, bridging those worlds through melody*. Their friendship and musical partnership created a legacy wherein a Muslim-origin instrument became the heartbeat of a new faith's worship. The rabab's gentle strains taught people that experiencing God could be as simple and profound as listening to a hymn with a softened heart. In Sikh gurdwaras worldwide, when the congregation sings "*Satnam Waheguru*" in unison, they are echoing the experience first nurtured by Nanak and Mardana – an experience of the Divine that transcends words, expressed in the universal language of music. Gurbani Sangeet has been described as a dialogue between the soul and the Lord, where words are given wings by melody. In giving those wings, the first composer singer duo of Sikh history was Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana. Their example sacralized music in Sikh practice

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<sup>427</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

forever. Even today, when one hears the gentle strumming of a rabab or the more common harmonium at a Sikh prayer gathering, one can recall the image of a humble minstrel Mardana coaxing divine notes from gut strings while the Guru's voice proclaims truth. In that sense, every Sikh hymn sung is a continuation of the prayer that Nanak and Mardana began – a testament to their belief that music, in its purity, can bind the human soul directly to the Divine.

#### Brotherhood Beyond Borders — Islam and Sikhism in Harmony

When Guru Nanak settled in Kartarpur after his long travels, a Muslim minstrel, Bhai Mardana, was still by his side. This enduring companionship between a Sikh Guru and a Muslim bard beautifully encapsulates the ideal of brotherhood beyond religious borders. At a time when identities were often rigid and communities divided, Nanak and Mardana proved that spiritual kinship could trump religious labels. They addressed each other as “*Bhai*” (brother) – a term that Sikhs to this day prepend to Mardana's name, forever naming him as family.<sup>428</sup> Their friendship is not a mere footnote in Sikh history; it is central to Sikh ethos. It models how individuals of different faiths can walk together on a shared path of truth, with mutual respect and love.

The Nanak-Mardana partnership also highlights the deep ethical and devotional convergences between Sikhism and Islam. Both traditions spring from a firm belief in one supreme God, the creator and sustainer of all. Nanak's *Ek Onkar* (One God who is ever-creative) resonates with the Islamic *Tawhid* (absolute oneness of Allah).<sup>429</sup> It is telling that in Sikh scripture, Nanak often uses names like “Allah”,

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<sup>428</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>429</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

“Khuda”, “Rahim” (Merciful), which are Quranic epithets of God, interchangeably with “Ram”, “Hari”, and “Prabhu” from the Hindu vocabulary. To Nanak, these were all pointing to the same One. This theological convergence laid the groundwork for ethical convergence: if there is but one God who is *Truth* (Satnam) and *Mercy* (Rahim), then all humans are His children and must be treated justly. Nanak and Mardana both adhered to the principle that true religion is in *practicing* virtues such as compassion, honesty, and devotion, rather than in external affiliation.

One can compare the five pillars of Islam with what became core Sikh principles to see parallels.<sup>430</sup> Islam’s pillars include faith in one God, daily prayer, charity (zakat), fasting, and pilgrimage – all intended to cultivate discipline, gratitude, and equality. Guru Nanak essentially reformulated these in the Sikh context: unyielding faith in One (Naam), daily remembrance and singing (equivalent to prayer, though without formal prostrations), sharing one’s earnings (dasvandh, much like zakat’s spirit of giving), self-control and purity in life (analogous to the self-discipline of fasting), and seeing God’s presence in all places rather than any one pilgrimage spot (Nanak did not mandate a single holy city – the world itself is the pilgrim’s road, and God is everywhere). The moral teachings also align strongly. Islam forbids lying, stealing, oppression, and intoxication; Sikh Guru’s teachings echo the same – they condemn falsehood, instruct one to live by honest labor, speak out against tyranny (Guru Nanak famously protested the Mughal brutality of Babur’s invasions

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<sup>430</sup> Cole and Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*.

in one of his hymns), and prohibit consuming substances that cloud the mind.<sup>431</sup> Both emphasize *modesty and fidelity* in family life.

There are also convergences in the concept of social equality. Islam, in its ideal, rejects caste and racial hierarchy – all stand equal in the mosque (as symbolized by standing shoulder-to-shoulder in prayer). Guru Nanak advanced a very similar vision. He saw the Hindu caste system as an artificial and cruel division; in one hymn he says, “There are no classes or castes in the hereafter, one’s actions alone determine one’s status” and he outright states “Recognize all humanity as one” (this line is attributed to Guru Gobind Singh summarizing Nanak’s stance).<sup>432433</sup> Nanak’s community practices like the langar and sangat were practical implementations of this equality. Notably, Nanak included *women* equally in his sangat – a point of progressive convergence, since early Islam also granted women spiritual and legal equality in many respects. Sikh scripture and history record women disciples of Nanak who led congregations, just as early Islam had women like Hazrat Aisha (RA) who were scholars and leaders. Thus, both faiths at their core imagine a *just society* under God, where no one is higher or lower by birth.

Of course, there are differences as well, which Nanak did not hesitate to point out in his gentle manner. One key difference lies in religious formalism. Islam established a fixed framework of rituals (daily namaz, fasting in Ramadan, etc.) as obligations. Nanak’s approach was more fluid – he advocated continuous remembrance over

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<sup>431</sup> Grewal, *Sikhs of the Punjab*.

<sup>432</sup> Man Singh Nirankari, *The Singh Sabha and Other Socio-Religious Movements in the Punjab* (New Delhi: New Book Society of India, 1989); citing Dasam Granth, Akal Ustat 85–86.

<sup>433</sup> Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 349.

specific required prayers. For instance, a devout Muslim prays five times a day facing Kaaba; a devout Sikh is enjoined to remember Nam *with every breath*. In Sikh ethos, there is flexibility – one can pray or sing anytime, anywhere, as long as one’s heart is tuned to God. Similarly, Islam’s tradition of Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) has no direct equivalent in Sikhism; Guru Nanak himself traveled to many holy places (including, by tradition, Mecca) but more to engage and learn than to prescribe any Sikh pilgrimage. He ultimately founded Kartarpur, not as a pilgrimage center but as a model community, implying that *living in sanctity* is superior to journeying to sanctuaries. Where Islam had dietary codes (halal vs haram) and circumcision as covenant, Nanak de-emphasized outer markers. He critiqued the circumcision rite specifically, in one verse addressing Muslims: “Making modesty your circumcision” – implying that physical circumcision doesn’t by itself make one pure or close to God; only the “circumcision” of ego (i.<sup>434</sup>e., humility) counts. This was a bold divergence from Shariah practice, which earned Nanak some criticism from Muslim clergy who saw him as neglecting the law. Yet Nanak’s intention was not to offend; it was to universalize the spiritual meanings behind these practices and discard what he viewed as superficial.

On theological doctrine too, some differences exist. Guru Nanak quoted no scripture as authority other than the truth he perceived directly from the Divine – he often said he spoke as God inspired him. In a supposed dialogue with Muslim holy men (as per Janam Sakhi lore in Mecca and Medina), Nanak is depicted not as debating doctrines of God’s form or afterlife law, but rather cutting to the

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<sup>434</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 24; Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 140.

chase: do you *feel* the love of God in your heart? Are you *merciful to all beings* as God is? In one Sakhi, the Qazis ask Nanak: “If you think neither Hinduism nor Islam is exclusively true, who is better – a Hindu or a Muslim?” Nanak’s famous reply was, “Without good deeds, both will regret (after death). Only by being true (a person of truth) will one find honor in God’s court.<sup>435</sup>” This answer sidestepped any partisan superiority and put the focus on *moral action*. It shows how Nanak consistently sought harmony: he did not rank religions; he urged both Hindus and Muslims to delve into the *essence* of their faiths – which in his view was remembrance of the One and righteous living – and thereby meet on common ground. As Pashaura Singh remarked, “Guru Nanak’s teachings...stress such features as interior devotion and moral responsibility... any dichotomy between spiritual development and moral conduct is not approved in Sikh ethics”.<sup>436</sup> This could well describe the Islamic Sufi ideal too.

One can find a beautiful example of interfaith dialogue in the Sikh canon itself: Guru Arjan included in the Guru Granth Sahib the hymns of Sheikh Farid, a Muslim Sufi saint of the 12th/13th century. By preserving and sanctifying Baba Farid’s couplets (slokas) in Sikh scripture, the Gurus sent a powerful message: that *sainthood transcends religion*. Farid’s verses on loving God and shunning the ego resonated perfectly with Guru Nanak’s message, so they were given equal status as the Gurus’ own words. For Sikhs, the presence of Baba Farid’s bani (poetry) in their holiest book signifies an eternal spiritual kinship with Islam’s mystic tradition. It’s a brotherhood in literature: the Sikh congregation listens daily to Farid’s Muslim voice teaching them patience and God-consciousness. Similarly, the Guru

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<sup>435</sup> McLeod, *The Early Sikh Tradition*, 253–54.

<sup>436</sup> Singh, “The Guru Granth Sahib,” 126–43.

Granth contains hymns of Kabir (a nirguna bhakti saint with likely Muslim upbringing) and other Hindu Bhagat poets – demonstrating an ecumenical canon. Few religions have a scripture compiled by their founders that deliberately incorporates other faiths' saints. This is a tangible testament to the Sikh Gurus' vision of unity. As Professor Puran Singh wrote, "The Sikh scripture is a *museum of religions*, a repository of the highest wisdom of many a sect, all arranged and edited to sing in unison the song of the One Naam." Through Farid and the Rababis and many other links, Sikhism and Islam have been in a kind of symbiotic dialogue, especially in Punjab. At times, historical narratives of Sikhs and Muslims have diverged or even clashed – particularly during later periods like the Mughal-Sikh wars of the 17th–18th centuries. But interestingly, Sikh tradition-maintained respect for Muslim pirs and savants even when fighting Mughal oppression. For example, the legend of Mian Mir, discussed above, spans a time (late 16th century) when the Mughal state would later execute Guru Arjan. Yet, Guru Arjan's friendship with Mian Mir symbolized that Sikhs distinguished between oppressive rulers and enlightened souls within Islam. Another instance: During the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1675), a contemporary record notes that a Muslim divine, Pir Kirpa Shah of Bakala, was among those who honored the Guru's sacrifice. And the most iconic: when the Golden Temple was being rebuilt in 1760s after desecration, a Muslim bard, Baba Buddha Shah (a descendant of Pir Budhu Shah) helped organize resources – reflecting grassroots harmony even when "Sikh" and "Muslim" were categories at war politically.

In the 20th century, as politics sometimes pitted communities against each other, figures on both sides recalled the Nanak-Mardana paradigm as an ideal to strive for. During the movement for India's

independence and the tragic Partition, there were stories of Sikhs protecting Muslim neighbors and vice versa in remembrance that their faiths teach love. Unfortunately, Partition violence also showed how far reality can stray from ideal – which is why the lesson of Nanak and Mardana is ever more relevant. Indeed, the *symbol* of Nanak often found resonance among Muslim mystics. In the 19th century, some Sufi poets in Punjab, like Bulleh Shah, even referred to Nanak in their verses as a great fakir. In rural Punjab, to this day, the memory of “*Nanak Shah Fakir, Hindu da Guru, Musalman da Pir*” is invoked to remind people of a shared heritage.

In practice, the ethical teachings of Sikhism and Islam converge on principles that are much needed in plural societies: justice, compassion, service, and remembrance of God. Both traditions insist that devotion to God is hollow if one mistreats one’s fellow humans. The Quran emphasizes helping the poor, or one’s prayer is in vain; Guru Granth Sahib likewise says, “Truthful living is higher than truth-telling” – meaning righteous action is paramount. Both speak of defending the oppressed: Islam has the concept of jihad al-nafs (struggle against oppression and against one’s own selfishness), and the Sikh Gurus in later years took up the sword in *Dharam Yudh* (righteous war) to protect the innocent (Guru Gobind Singh explicitly likened this to an ethical duty when peaceful means fail). There’s even a convergence in greeting: Muslims say “Salam alaikum” (peace be upon you), Sikhs say “Sat Sri Akal” (Truth is eternal) – different words but each a sincere wish or assertion of divine truth/peace in daily interaction.

Given these deep overlaps, it is not surprising that Sikh history records many instances of close friendships between Sikhs and Muslims beyond Nanak and Mardana. Guru Gobind Singh had

Pathan friends like Nihang Khan who sheltered him. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army in the 1800s included Muslim generals and the Fakir brothers as ministers. The Sikh kingdom's coins bore Persian script praising one God. In village life, Sikhs and Muslims lived intertwined until 1947. These historical anecdotes reinforce that the *hostility* that sometimes flared was political, not religious at its core. Theologically and ethically, ordinary Sikhs and Muslims saw each other as people of one God.

In modern times, especially post-9/11 era and other tensions, the legacy of Nanak and Mardana offers a hopeful template. It reminds both communities (and indeed all communities) that dialogue and shared spiritual music can heal divides. Nanak did not convert Mardana; nor did Mardana convert Nanak. Each remained firm in his identity – Nanak as founder of a new path, Mardana as a Muslim – yet this did not hinder their profound friendship and partnership. Their relationship was rooted in what today we might call “*interfaith harmony*”. They were bound by *shared values* – belief in one God, love for humanity, and an abhorrence of injustice – and by *shared practice* – singing God's praises, traveling for truth, serving those in need.

For plural societies today, the implication is powerful: We do not all need to profess the exact same theology to stand united. If a Guru and a Muslim minstrel in the 1500s could exemplify unity, then surely people of diverse faiths today can find common cause in the ideals of compassion and truth. The Guru Granth Sahib envisions a world where “the temple and mosque are one, so are puja and namaz (prayer)... all humans are fashioned of the same clay” (these sentiments appear in various shabads). Likewise, the Quran enjoins: “O humankind, We created you from a single pair... and made you

into nations and tribes so that you may know one another (not despise one another)” (Q.49:13). The convergence of these scriptures speaks to the *unity of humanity under one God* – the very theme Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana lived out.

To conclude, the brotherhood of Nanak and Mardana remains a shining example of Sikh-Muslim harmony based on shared devotion and ethics. It transcended the boundaries of religious law or dogma. This *bhaihood* (fraternity) was carried on by the Rababis, by the inclusion of Muslim saints’ writings in Sikh scripture, and by numerous cross-faith friendships in Sikh history. While political tides did cause rifts, the spiritual kinship never truly disappeared. Today, as the world grapples with sectarianism, the story of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana invites us to envision *companionship beyond creed*. It reminds us that when people meet heart-to-heart, singing the same divine melody, the labels melt away – what remains is two human beings journeying together toward the Truth. That journey, open to all, is Guru Nanak’s message for humanity.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 4 has thus examined how Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana communicated a message of radical human unity: through an inclusive temple open to all, through the rejection of empty rituals in favor of truthful living, through the melodious prayers of kirtan that bind a community, and through their own example of friendship across faith lines. In architecture, ethics, music, and personal relationship, they broke the walls that divide humans. The Golden Temple stands with doors open in every direction; Nanak’s teachings open the doors of the mind to truth over superstition; Mardana’s rabab opened the doors of hearts through music; and their

brotherhood opened the door between religions. Five centuries later, their message for humanity is ever relevant. In a world plagued by identity conflicts and ritualistic strife, Nanak and Mardana show a way of living together in remembrance of our common Creator. Their lives echo the Guru's own words: "aval Allah nur upaya, kudrat ke sab bandey; ek nur te sab jag upjiya, kaun bhale ko mandey?" – "First, God created the Light; from it, all living beings. From one Light has the entire universe arisen, so who is good, who is bad?" In recognizing one Light in all, they exemplified humanity without walls.

Across this chapter, we saw Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana model a vision of radical unity. It is radical in its simplicity – as simple and profound as two friends singing under the open sky, trusting in the One God. It is unity expressed in concrete ways: a temple with no boundaries, a community meal shared by high and low, verses of different traditions compiled in one holy book, a Muslim's fingers on a rabab accompanying a Sikh's voice. For Guru Nanak, God's message to humanity was ultimately *Oneness*: "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, there is only one Human, and one God" as the *janam-sakhi* sums up his realization. Everything he established – the city without caste, the hymn without hate, the brotherhood beyond borders – flowed from that vision.

Half a millennium later, the message remains urgent. We live in a world still scarred by divisions of creed and culture. But we also live in a world where the Golden Temple continues to serve free meals to every visitor, where people of all faiths find solace in listening to Sikh kirtan, and where interfaith friendships are quietly healing rifts. Guru Nanak's legacy, carried on through the Sikh Gurus and traditions, is a reminder that *the human family is one*. In the spirit of Nanak and Mardana, we are called to remove the walls in our hearts,

to replace rituals of exclusion with the practices of love, and to make our lives a constant hymn to the Divine that dwells in every being.

As the sun sets over Amritsar and the hymn “Son of God is One” echoes through the pavilion, one can imagine Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana’s silhouette reflected in the sarovar – two figures, two faiths, one song. That song – the message for humanity – is of unity, humility, service, and sweet remembrance of the One. It invites all of us to join in chorus, for in this melody of truth, there are no strangers. All are brothers and sisters, forever embraced by the Eternal, who calls us to see beyond borders and recognize each other as one human family.

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## CHAPTER 5 — LESSONS FOR TODAY

In this concluding chapter, we turn to the present: what enduring lessons do the lives of Guru Nanak and his companion Bhai Mardana hold for today's world? Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism,<sup>437</sup> and Bhai Mardana (1459–1534), his Muslim minstrel and friend,<sup>438</sup> lived over five centuries ago in the Punjab region of South Asia. Yet their words and deeds resonate strongly in our modern context of global politics, social inequality, and interfaith tensions. This chapter interprets their legacy in a modern, analytical, and globally relevant way. Drawing on scholarly perspectives, we will explore how Nanak's teachings and the example set by Nanak and Mardana can inform contemporary discussions on power and ethics, inspire movements for equality and service, and guide efforts toward interreligious harmony.

The sections that follow address three interrelated themes. The first section examines how Guru Nanak challenged the political and religious authorities of his time, and what his approach teaches us about the misuse of religion by those in power. We will compare Nanak's critique of 16th-century tyrants and priests with the dynamics of religion and politics in today's world, drawing lessons on resisting the instrumentalization of faith. The second section distills core values taught by Nanak and exemplified by the duo's life—humility, selfless service (*seva*), social equality, the power of music,

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437 W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1968).

438 W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

and interfaith friendship—and discusses how these values remain deeply relevant in contemporary societies. We will see how practices like *langar* (the community kitchen) model social justice,<sup>439</sup> how devotional music and art can build bridges between communities, and how Sikh teachings continue to inspire human rights and global ethics. The third explores Guru Nanak’s vision of universal human belonging—encapsulated in his famous assertion that he saw “no Hindu, no Muslim,”<sup>440</sup> only human beings devoted to One Divine. We will compare this universal humanism with the thought of other global figures and present case studies where Sikh principles of equality and compassion help heal divides. This final section articulates a practical vision: how Nanak and Mardana’s message can serve as a blueprint for fostering a “humanity without walls” through interreligious solidarity and shared ethical action.

Overall, this chapter bridges historical detail with contemporary analysis. By synthesizing scholarship with the rich narratives of the Sikh tradition, we aim to show that the lives of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana are not just subjects of history—they are wellsprings of insight for addressing urgent issues of our time. In the end, we will reflect on how the values of truth, justice, inclusivity, and compassion that they championed can guide us in building a more humane and united world today.

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439 Eleanor Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

440 McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

# Rulers, Religion, and Power — Understanding Motives

## Guru Nanak's Critique of Tyranny and Hypocrisy

From the outset of his ministry, Guru Nanak raised a bold moral voice against the oppressive rulers and misguided religious elites of his era. The turn of the 16th century in North India was marked by political turmoil: local chiefs were corrupt or inept, and invaders like the Mughal prince Babur ravaged the land.<sup>441</sup> Guru Nanak did not remain silent in the face of these injustices. In his poetic compositions (included in the Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*), he condemned the cruelty of rulers in searing terms. For example, one notable hymn composed after Babur's invasion of Punjab portrays the rulers as predatory beasts: "*The kings are tigers and their officials are dogs; they prey upon the innocent, licking the blood of the poor*" (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1288).<sup>442</sup> In the same breath, Nanak assures that such tyrants will face ultimate justice – their "noses will be cut off in disgrace" in the divine court. This vivid imagery underscored his belief that oppressive power is morally illegitimate and accountable to God's law, even if earthly judgment seems absent. It was a radical stance for a spiritual teacher in that era to publicly admonish kings as "tigers" devouring their subjects.

Importantly, Guru Nanak's social critique was not directed only upward at monarchs and warlords; it was also directed inward at his own society. He lamented the complacency and complicity of those

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441 J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

442 Guru Granth Sahib [Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji], 1288.

who allowed tyranny to flourish. In the same hymn about Babur's invasion, Nanak speaks of "deer" and "hawks" metaphorically: the "deer" represent the naïve masses who remain deluded and passive, unaware of the power within themselves, while "hawk-like" individuals are those local collaborators who turn against their own people for personal gain.<sup>443</sup> Nanak thus recognized that the suffering of his community was not caused solely by external conquerors, but also by *internal failures* – cowardice, betrayal, and the abdication of moral responsibility by people in positions of influence. He called out village officials who abused their power as "greedy dogs" and chastised religious functionaries who shirked their duty to stand up for truth. In one biting verse, he asks God how the people's protectors turned into beasts: "*O Lord, these men were supposed to be custodians of justice – how have they become predators, feasting on the defenseless?*" Such piercing questions show Guru Nanak's anguish at the state of leadership in his time, both secular and religious.

Hand in hand with criticizing tyrants, Guru Nanak criticized the hypocrisy of religious leaders who failed to uphold true righteousness. He was deeply troubled by the way religion was being practiced as empty ritual and a tool of social control. According to Sikh tradition, Nanak directly confronted Brahmin priests and Muslim Qazis (judges) for twisting religion to justify oppression or to advance their own prestige. In a verse recorded in the Sikh scripture, he says: "*The Qazi (Muslim judge) tells lies and the Brahmin (Hindu priest) slaughters life (in sacrificial rituals) – yet each claim to be holy*".<sup>444</sup>

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443 Pashaura Singh, "Speaking Truth to Power: Exploring Guru Nanak's Babar-bani," *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11070328>.

444 Guru Granth Sahib [Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji], 662.

Nanak saw such conduct as a betrayal of the divine message. He boldly declared that *ritual purity means nothing when injustice and falsehood prevail*.<sup>445</sup> To the Brahmin who prided himself on caste and ritual, Guru Nanak asked, “*What merit is there in your high birth if you do not live with virtue?!*” To the Muslim Qazi who claimed authority, he retorted, “*How do you call yourself a spiritual guide while you perpetuate untruth?*”. These confrontations, often couched in gentle but firm poetry, challenged religious authorities to examine their motives. Nanak was calling out a core problem: religion had become entwined with worldly power and hollow customs, losing sight of its ethical moorings.

Bhai Mardana’s very presence alongside Guru Nanak served as a living critique of the religious and social hierarchies of the day. Mardana was a low-caste Muslim (of the Mirasi musician caste)<sup>446</sup> – someone who, under orthodox norms, would be deemed socially inferior and kept at the margins of religious life. Yet Guru Nanak embraced Mardana as his closest companion, sharing meals, travel, and spiritual practice with him on equal footing.<sup>447</sup> This was a radical example in a society stratified by caste and creed. By elevating a poor Muslim minstrel to the role of co-traveler and kirtan accompanist, Nanak demonstrated his rejection of discriminatory norms. The two friends prayed and sang together in Hindu temples and Muslim dargahs alike, embodying the belief that divine truth transcends man-made divisions.<sup>448</sup> Nanak and Mardana’s friendship sent a powerful message: in the eyes of God, a person’s piety and

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445 Arvind-Pal Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

446 McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

447 Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*.

448 McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

love matter far more than their label of Hindu or Muslim, Brahmin or untouchable. This implicit critique of social inequality complemented Nanak's explicit teachings. As Pritam Singh puts it, Guru Nanak attacked the two oppressive powers of his time – “the political tyranny of the Mughal empire and the social tyranny of the caste system”<sup>449</sup> – with a single message of spiritual egalitarianism. His bond with Mardana was an example of that message in action, showing a path toward a society without high or low status.

Through these words and deeds, Guru Nanak emerged as a unique kind of leader – *a saint who spoke truth to power*.<sup>450</sup> He did not raise an army or engage in physical rebellion; rather, his revolution was ethical and spiritual. He wielded the “arrow of the Word”, as Sikh tradition describes it, to pierce the conscience of oppressors and awaken the hearts of the people. His hymns simultaneously consoled the victims of violence and held the perpetrators to account before a higher moral law. This dual focus – comforting the oppressed while chastising the mighty – gave his message a timeless quality. It resonates in today's world whenever we see leaders abusing power or communities divided by hatred. Guru Nanak offers a model of moral courage grounded in faith: he demonstrates that a person of God must not remain neutral in the face of tyranny, and that authentic religion requires solidarity with the suffering. As we shall see, this stance carries profound lessons for contemporary issues of religion and politics.

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449 Pritam Singh, “Egalitarianism in Guru Nanak's Teachings,” in *Universal Relevance of Guru Nanak's Teachings: 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev* (Punjabi Heritage Foundation of Canada, 2019), 436–37.

450 Singh, “Speaking Truth to Power.”

## Religion and Politics – Then and Now

Guru Nanak lived in an age when the entanglement of religion and political power was often absolute. Emperors and local kings claimed divine sanction for their rule, and priestly classes reinforced social hierarchies that kept them influential. Nanak's teachings cut through this nexus by insisting on truth, justice, and human dignity over ritual or authority. He effectively decoupled righteousness from rank. A telling example appears in the *Babar Bani* verses (Guru Nanak's reflections on Babur's invasion).<sup>451</sup> In these verses, Nanak does not hesitate to "question God" – asking how God could allow so much suffering at the hands of the invader. This bold questioning implies that no king (not even a divinely ordained one) gets a free pass for inflicting misery. It subtly undermines the age-old idea that monarchs are beyond moral reproach. Guru Nanak was asserting a kind of moral sovereignty of the divine: even kings will have to answer before God's court for their deeds, and religious fidelity lies in siding with divine justice rather than with earthly powers.

This perspective has much to teach us about the use and misuse of religion in politics, both historically and in the present day. Historically, Nanak witnessed cases where religion was exploited for power – for instance, when Dawlat Khan Lodi, a local Afghan governor, reportedly invoked Babur's help to settle scores in Punjab.<sup>452</sup> The politics of the time saw invitations to foreign invaders framed in terms of religious alignments or destiny. Nanak, fully cognizant of such machinations, warned that those who "*invited the*

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451 Singh, "Speaking Truth to Power."

452 Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

*tyrant*” (for selfish motives) were as guilty as the tyrant himself.<sup>453</sup> In modern terms, we might say he understood how cynical leaders can weaponize religion or community identity for political ends. Indeed, history shows a pattern: *rulers first encourage religious factionalism for gain, then later accuse those very factions of being disloyal for mixing religion with politics*. Guru Nanak’s worldview rejected such instrumentalization of faith. To him, political authority lost legitimacy when divorced from moral truth – and moral truth could not be bent to serve political ambition.

In today’s world, we unfortunately see many instances where Nanak’s concerns remain highly relevant. Around the globe, movements of religious nationalism and sectarian politics have surged. Governments and politicians sometimes cloak themselves in religious rhetoric to gain legitimacy, or they favor one religious group to entrench their power. Conversely, some regimes repress religious expression under the pretext that faith sparks discord. Guru Nanak’s message provides a critical lens for both extremes. He would likely ask of modern leaders: *Are you using religion to unite people in compassion, or to divide and dominate?* Nanak consistently taught that true religion is measured by compassion, honesty, and respect for all humanity – not by displays of power. Any political project that mobilizes hatred or justifies injustice in the name of religion stands condemned by Nanak’s ethical criteria.

Consider the lesson of Guru Nanak’s dialogue with the worldly authorities of his time. In one famous tradition, Guru Nanak was brought before a Mughal official after being arrested (an episode said

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<sup>453</sup> Singh, “Speaking Truth to Power.”

to have occurred during Babur's campaign).<sup>454</sup> When ordered to sing courtly praises, Nanak instead sang a hymn of praise to the Almighty that pointedly included lines about the ephemeral nature of earthly power. This gentle defiance illustrated that his loyalty lay only with truth, not with the vanity of rulers. Such stories carry a message: religious integrity means maintaining independence from corrupting power. Faith leaders must serve as the conscience of society, not the chaplains of the state. Nanak and Mardana, traveling as free itinerants, embodied this principle – they accepted no patronage that would silence their critique. They visited the courts of monarchs, not to seek favors, but to speak moral truths. For instance, one anecdote tells of Nanak visiting the emperor's court in Baghdad (during his reputed travels to the Middle East) and engaging in a philosophical discussion that impressed the court but did not compromise his own beliefs.<sup>455</sup> Whether or not every such meeting happened as legend suggests, the Sikh memory portrays Nanak as someone who *engages authority with respect yet fearlessness*.

The modern application of this principle is evident: in our age, when religious voices either align too closely with political power or retreat entirely from the public sphere, Nanak's example calls for a middle path of engagement without co-option. Contemporary religious communities can draw inspiration from how Nanak interacted with power. Rather than endorsing partisan agendas, people of faith can stand firm on values – advocating for justice, caring for the poor, and reminding those in power of the ethical constraints on their actions. Nanak's life shows that *spirituality need not withdraw from worldly affairs*, but when it engages, it should do so to uphold righteousness,

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454 McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

455 McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

not to accumulate influence. Guru Nanak is an early exemplar of this lineage of *faith-based activism*. His refrain that “truth is high, but higher still is truthful living”<sup>456</sup> implies that religious truth claims mean little unless they translate into just action in society.

Another key insight from Guru Nanak relevant to today is his understanding of the “complex motives” behind religious conflicts. In the *Babur Bani*,<sup>457</sup> Nanak lamented not only the violence of the invader but also the divisions among the local people that made them vulnerable. He specifically pointed to the failings of both Hindus and Muslims of his time – suggesting that when communities become morally weak or mired in mutual prejudice, they create an opening for oppression. This is poignantly captured in his cry: “*When there were such slaughter and cries of anguish, O Lord, did You not feel pain?*”<sup>458</sup> According to Sikh tradition, these words were directed at God during the sack of Saidpur,<sup>459</sup> wondering how divine justice permitted such horror. Implicit here is also Nanak’s indictment of society: the massacre was preceded by a breakdown of moral order – leaders failed their duty, neighbors failed to protect each other across religious lines, and so the tragedy unfolded.

Today’s parallels are not hard to find. In many conflict zones, religion is manipulated to pit communities against one another, while unscrupulous leaders capitalize on the chaos. Nanak’s voice rings across the centuries with a dual warning: do not trust those who foment fear in the name of faith, and do not let internal strife weaken

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456 Guru Granth Sahib [Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji], 62.

457 Singh, “Speaking Truth to Power.”

458 Guru Granth Sahib [Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji], 360.

459 Singh, “Speaking Truth to Power.”

the bonds of our shared humanity. If people can be turned against their own neighbors due to religious propaganda, as happened between some Hindus and Muslims in Nanak's time (and as happens in communal riots or extremist movements now), the outcome is catastrophic for all. Nanak and Mardana's friendship was a counter-narrative to such division – a Muslim and a Hindu (or one who had transcended Hindu-Muslim categories) walking together, symbolizing unity. In a world where politicians sometimes scapegoat minorities or justify discrimination with religious nationalism, remembering Nanak's inclusive ethic is critically important. It urges citizens and leaders alike to prioritize fundamental human values over sectarian loyalties.

#### Resisting the Instrumentalization of Faith

One of the most important lessons Nanak and Mardana offer today is how to resist the instrumentalization of religion – that is, the misuse of faith as a mere tool for power or as a cover for unethical ends. Guru Nanak was keenly aware of this danger. He saw how Babur invoked a kind of religious destiny to justify his conquest, and how local chieftains cloaked their intrigues in pious rhetoric.<sup>460</sup> In response, Nanak consistently affirmed that religiosity devoid of compassion and fairness is false religiosity. He taught that God dwells with the truthful and the just, not with those who chant God's name while grasping for dominance. This teaching is timeless. It means that whenever religion is wielded to serve ego, greed, or cruelty, it has betrayed its essence.

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<sup>460</sup> Pashaura Singh, "Speaking Truth to Power: Exploring Guru Nanak's Bābar-vāṇī in Light of the nama," *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020).

In our contemporary context, many societies struggle with forms of religious extremism and state-sponsored sectarianism.<sup>461</sup> Whether it is a government enforcing a harsh interpretation of religious law to control people, or a violent group claiming divine mandate for terrorism, the pattern is the same: religion is being *harnessed to legitimize power and violence*.<sup>462</sup> Guru Nanak's life and words offer a potent counter-narrative. He showed that true faith sides with the oppressed, not with the oppressor; it challenges the unjust ruler, not blesses him. Sikh history remembers that when Guru Nanak was briefly imprisoned by Babur's forces (after the sack of Saidpur in 1520), he used the occasion to courageously admonish Babur himself.<sup>463</sup> According to one traditional account, Nanak was brought before Babur, and Babur, recognizing Nanak's spiritual stature, released him and even listened to his admonishments. It is said that Nanak told Babur his actions had earned him no merit and that only by caring for his subjects could he truly honor God. Whether this encounter happened exactly as described is uncertain (historians like W. H. McLeod note there is no mention of it in Babur's memoirs).<sup>464</sup> However, the preservation of this story in Sikh lore underscores the ideal of moral speaking to power. It enshrines the principle that a religious sage must not become a courtier. Guru Nanak's primary "patron" was the Divine alone; he famously rejected material offers, including when rich admirers tried to give him lavish

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<sup>461</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>462</sup> Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*.

<sup>463</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis*.

<sup>464</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

gifts – he would distribute them to the needy.<sup>465</sup> This independence gave him the credibility to critique the motives of both monarchs and priests.

For present-day religious leaders and communities, Nanak and Mardana's legacy is a reminder to guard the integrity of spiritual teachings.<sup>466</sup> When communal prejudices or political agendas threaten to hijack those teachings, one must return to the fundamental values that Nanak emphasized: *namely, oneness of God, the equality of all humans, and the priority of justice and love over ritual and identity*. If a leader preaches hate or exclusion in the name of religion, Guru Nanak's philosophy provides grounds to question and oppose that message. In practical terms, this might mean religious scholars publicly refuting extremist interpretations of scripture, or interfaith coalitions standing together against laws that discriminate based on faith. Indeed, many Sikh figures have lived out this legacy in recent history. For example, during India's independence struggle, Sikh voices like Bhai Sahib Randhir Singh and others echoed Nanak's spirit by refusing to align with sectarian strife and instead championing universal freedom.<sup>467</sup> In the global arena, Sikh humanitarian organizations today (inspired by Nanak's teachings of *seva* or service) often provide aid to all victims of disaster regardless of religion, implicitly rejecting any politicization of who is "deserving" of help.<sup>468</sup> These are contemporary reflections of

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<sup>465</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>466</sup> Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*.

<sup>467</sup> J. S. Grewal, *Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order: From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh*.

<sup>468</sup> Eleanor Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*.

resisting the misuse of religion – acting from genuine compassion rather than partisan interest.

It is also instructive how Nanak differentiated between spiritual authority and temporal power. He is traditionally considered to have sown the seed for what later Sikhs called *miri-piri* – the concept that the spiritual (*piri*) and the temporal (*miri*) realms are distinct yet should harmoniously coexist under righteousness.<sup>469</sup> During Nanak's own lifetime, he kept the Sikh community a purely spiritual congregation (the *sangat*) focused on devotion and ethical living at Kartarpur. He did not seek political office or territory. However, his successors (most notably the sixth Guru, Hargobind) would later don two swords symbolizing miri and piri, taking up arms to defend the Sikh community against injustice.<sup>470</sup> This development can be seen as a logical extension of Nanak's philosophy in changed circumstances: when peaceful words were no longer enough to protect the oppressed, later Sikh Gurus balanced spiritual leadership with just use of temporal power. But even in that shift, the crucial point is that *temporal power was to be guided by spiritual ethical principles*, not by self-aggrandizement. The lesson for modern statecraft or activism is that power – whether in governance, law enforcement, or social movements – should be exercised as a sacred trust, aimed at service and protection of human dignity. If Guru Nanak were to advise today's leaders, he might tell them that ruling justly, ensuring no group is persecuted, and caring for the downtrodden are not merely political choices but spiritual imperatives.

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<sup>469</sup> Grewal, *Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order*.

<sup>470</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*.

Finally, the friendship of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana offers a subtle yet profound lesson about motives in religious leadership. Nanak was regarded as a Guru, a spiritual master, while Mardana was seen as his devotee and companion. There was an inherent power dynamic in their roles, yet Nanak consistently treated Mardana with respect and affection, not as a subordinate to be exploited. Many *Janam Sakhi* stories depict Mardana asking Guru Nanak simple, sometimes skeptical questions – often about worldly needs like hunger or fatigue – and Guru Nanak responding with patience, using the moment to impart a spiritual insight.<sup>471</sup> At times, Nanak even playfully chides Mardana, but the tone is gentle, like one would address a dear friend or younger brother. This dynamic contrasts sharply with authoritarian models of religious leadership in which disciples are expected to obey blindly or leaders demand special privileges. Nanak's authority was rooted in love and wisdom, not in force or fear. He never made Mardana (or anyone) a tool of his ego; instead, he uplifted those around him. For instance, when wealthy patrons offered gold coins at Nanak's feet, he is said to have distributed them for community welfare, implicitly teaching Mardana and others that a Guru's aim is to enrich the community, not himself.<sup>472</sup> Such anecdotes carry a warning against the ego-traps of leadership: religious figures should not manipulate followers for personal gain or prestige, but rather guide them for the followers' benefit. This principle can be extended to any domain of power – political, social, or religious. It is a reminder that those who hold influence must constantly check their motives: are they serving others, or serving themselves under the guise of serving others?

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<sup>471</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>472</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

Guru Nanak's transparent sincerity of purpose (he lived simply, worked as a farmer in later life, and established institutions like the free kitchen to serve all) set a benchmark that remains challenging and relevant.

Guru Nanak confronted the intertwined forces of rulers and religious authorities in his time, and how that translates into lessons for understanding motives in the use of religion and power today. Nanak's critique of tyrants and hypocrites was uncompromising – he held both Mughal emperors and misguiding clerics to the same standard of divine justice. Nanak and Mardana's egalitarian fellowship implicitly rebuked the social prejudices leveraged by those in power. For the contemporary world, their legacy urges vigilance against any ideology that uses religion to justify oppression or to divide humanity. The voice of Guru Nanak calls on people to question authority that lacks moral legitimacy, and to ensure that our own practice of religion (or secular ethics) is ever aligned with honesty, empathy, and the common good. As we move to the next section, we will shift focus from opposing the wrongs of power to proactively building the right values in society—values that Nanak and Mardana taught by example, and which hold enduring relevance for all people.

# The Eternal Relevance of Nanak and Mardana's Message

## Humility and Seva – Leading by Service

At the heart of Guru Nanak's teachings is a vision of humility and selfless service (seva) as the highest virtues. Throughout his life, Nanak emphasized that one comes closer to the Divine by shedding ego and dedicating oneself to serving others. This message was lived out in the daily practices he established and in the way he and Bhai Mardana conducted themselves. The relevance of these ideals today cannot be overstated: in an era marked by individualism and competition, Nanak's call to humility and service offers a corrective path toward compassion and community.

Guru Nanak's humility was evident in how he described himself and his mission. Despite being revered by many as a spiritual master, he referred to himself as *"the lowliest of the low"*. In one verse, he prays to God, *"Nanak seeks the company of those lowest of the low in status; in their midst, God's grace is showered"*.<sup>473</sup> By choosing to identify with the lowest and humblest, Nanak inverted the social hierarchy of his time. He taught that God favors the meek and the poor in spirit, not the proud or the self-important. This teaching remains deeply relevant as a challenge to our modern cultures of self-promotion. The pursuit of humility – recognizing that no one is inherently superior to another – can foster greater social harmony and reduce the arrogance that underlies many conflicts.

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<sup>473</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Bhai Mardana's role in Nanak's life also exemplified humility. Mardana, as a devotee, approached Nanak with love and reverence, yet he was no sycophant; their relationship was genuine and straightforward. Mardana's humility is seen in his willingness to ask simple human questions (like when he was hungry or tired during their travels) and accept Nanak's guidance or gentle rebuke.<sup>474</sup> He never presumed upon Nanak's status for personal gain – in fact, Mardana remained materially poor, satisfied with the spiritual riches he found in companionship with the Guru. Their way of life, walking village to village with minimal possessions, depending on the charitable hospitality of ordinary folks, was itself a lesson in living humbly. They demonstrated that one can lead a deeply meaningful life without wealth or worldly power, inspiring countless people to value spiritual and ethical wealth over material accumulation.

The principle of *seva* (selfless service) was institutionalized by Guru Nanak in the Sikh community and continues vibrantly today. At Kartarpur, the town Nanak founded after his preaching journeys, he established the practice of *langar*, the community kitchen.<sup>475</sup> In the *langar*, all visitors, rich or poor, Hindu, Muslim, or any background, were invited to sit together on the ground in a row (*pangat*) and share a simple meal provided by the community. Guru Nanak himself and Bhai Mardana would participate in preparing and serving food. This was a revolutionary act of service and equality. It broke bread across caste lines (literally, since caste Hindus would not typically dine with those of "lower" castes) and showcased Nanak's belief that serving others is a direct form of worship. He taught his followers that by

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<sup>474</sup> Navtej K. Purewal, "Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai? Towards a Social History of the Rabābī Tradition of Shabad Kīrtan," *Sikh Formations* 7, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>475</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

feeding people and caring for their needs, they are serving God present in those people. Bhai Gurdas, an early Sikh savant, later wrote that at Kartarpur, “Nanak established a new praxis: earning one’s honest living (*kirat karo*), sharing with others (*vand chhako*), and always remembering God (*Naam Japo*)”.<sup>476</sup> These three precepts – work, share, and remember – encapsulate how service and spirituality intertwine in Sikh thought.

In modern times, *langar* stands out as one of Sikhism’s greatest gifts to the world. Gurdwaras (Sikh temples) around the globe continue to run langars, serving millions of free meals every day to anyone who comes, with no distinctions. This practice has taken on remarkable contemporary relevance as a model of humanitarian service. For example, during natural disasters or social movements, Sikh groups often set up langar kitchens to feed affected communities. After the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, Sikhs from India traveled to provide langar to survivors. In the recent refugee crises in Europe, “Khalsa Aid” (a Sikh charity inspired by Guru Nanak’s ethos) organized community kitchens for refugees regardless of religion or ethnicity.<sup>477</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, many gurdwaras worldwide prepared and delivered free meals to vulnerable people in lockdown.<sup>478</sup> These are living embodiments of Nanak’s concept of *seva* in action. They show how an idea born in the 16th century – that serving food and necessities to all is a sacred duty – addresses very current issues like hunger, poverty, and the need for solidarity

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<sup>476</sup> *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, referenced in J. S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1969)

<sup>477</sup> Punjabi Heritage Foundation of Canada, ed., *Universal Relevance of Guru Nanak’s Teachings: 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev*

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*

in times of crisis. The lesson here is simple yet profound: *if every community embraced seva as Sikhs do in Nanak's memory, much of the world's suffering due to basic needs could be alleviated*. Even outside the Sikh sphere, Guru Nanak's emphasis on service has influenced others. Leaders in interfaith work cite langar as a prime example of religion contributing positively to society's welfare and unity.

Humility and service also guide how Sikhs strive to behave in everyday life, reinforcing Nanak's continuing relevance on an individual ethical level. Guru Nanak taught that earning an honest livelihood (*kirat karo*) is part of spiritual living – but it must be coupled with sharing one's blessings with others (*vand chhako*). This teaching resonates today in conversations about ethical living and social responsibility. It suggests a balance: one should work hard and excel, but not hoard the rewards selfishly. Many Sikh professionals and businesspeople embody this by engaging in philanthropy and community projects, seeing their success as a means to help others rather than just enrich themselves. The concept of *daswandh* (giving one-tenth of one's earnings to charity or community causes) originates from Nanak's time and is still encouraged among Sikhs.<sup>479</sup> It parallels modern notions of tithing or corporate social responsibility, but with a spiritual understanding that giving is an act of gratitude to God and compassion for humanity.

Crucially, humility in leadership is another relevant takeaway. Guru Nanak, as the founder of a religious community, set a precedent for leadership as service. He did not seek followers to aggrandize himself; rather, he sought to train others in virtues and then

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<sup>479</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The First Sikh*.

empowered them. He appointed Bhai Lehna (later Guru Angad) as his successor not because of kinship or politics but because Lehna exemplified humility and devotion through service. The story goes that Nanak tested Lehna's humility in various ways (like asking him to carry a muddy bundle that Nanak's own sons refused to touch), and Lehna's pure obedience and lack of ego convinced Nanak that Lehna was fit to lead.<sup>480</sup> This was a radical departure from dynastic or power-based succession—Nanak effectively showed that the best leaders are those who have served selflessly. In today's terms, this aligns with the idea of “servant leadership” popular in management philosophy: the leader's main goal is to serve the people, not to be served. It's a principle increasingly recognized in various fields (from corporate management to politics) as key to ethical and effective leadership. Nanak's example provides an early template: he selected a servant-hearted person to carry on the mission, thus ensuring the values of humility and seva would continue to guide the community after him.

The values of humility and service that Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana championed are eternally relevant because they address perennial human pitfalls—pride, greed, and selfishness—and offer a path to a more compassionate society.<sup>481</sup> In an age where ego gets incentivized and the vulnerable are frequently overlooked, Nanak's model community at Kartarpur (where rich and poor labored together in the fields and ate side by side) stands as an inspiring alternative. *Service is not just charity; in Nanak's vision, it is a mode of spiritual growth and a way to realize our shared humanity.* Today, anyone—regardless of faith—can appreciate that message. By adopting even,

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<sup>480</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>481</sup> Eleanor Nesbitt, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*.

a bit of Nanak's humility in our personal dealings and a bit of his zeal for seva in our communities, we actively contribute to bridging gaps between people and alleviating suffering in the world. That indeed is a living lesson from five centuries ago, proven timeless by its effectiveness and resonance.

### **Equality and Social Justice – A Vision Ahead of Its Time**

Guru Nanak's message was fundamentally egalitarian. He proclaimed the equality of all human beings – crossing lines of religion, caste, class, and gender that were rigidly drawn in the society of his time. This stance on equality and social justice makes his teachings strikingly pertinent in today's world, where issues of racism, casteism, gender discrimination, and social exclusion continue to challenge us. Nanak's vision provides both a spiritual foundation and practical examples for building communities where dignity is universal.

In 15th–16th century North India, the caste system stratified people from birth into a hierarchy, and women were largely relegated to a lower status in religious and social life.<sup>482</sup> Guru Nanak rejected these inequities unequivocally. One often-quoted hymn of his asks: “*Why call her inferior, she who gives birth to kings? There is no one born who is not born of woman*”.<sup>483</sup> With these words, Nanak affirmed the honor of women and the folly of a worldview that devalues them. This was a direct challenge to the patriarchal norms of his era. He included women in his sangat (congregation) as equal participants, something quite revolutionary for a religious movement of that

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<sup>482</sup> Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*.

<sup>483</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*.

period.<sup>484</sup> Today, when gender justice remains an ongoing struggle worldwide, Guru Nanak's voice resonates as an early advocate for equality. His teaching implies that any society or religious community that marginalizes women is deviating from divine truth. The struggle for women's rights, whether in education, employment, or religious leadership, finds a powerful ally in Nanak's words that spiritually there is "no difference between men and women" in the eyes of God.

Regarding caste and class, Guru Nanak's egalitarianism was just as bold. He stated in the *Adi Granth*: "*Recognize the Lord's Light within all, and do not consider social class or status; there are no caste divisions in the hereafter*".<sup>485</sup> By emphasizing that the divine light shines in every person, Nanak undermined all justifications for treating someone as untouchable or inferior. At a time when high-caste elites considered it polluting to even share water or food with those of a low caste, Nanak's establishment of *langar* (as discussed earlier) forced a social reconfiguration.<sup>486</sup> In the langar hall, a peasant and a prince would sit side by side and eat the same food, served by volunteers without regard to caste. This was more than a symbolic gesture; it was a social experiment in *real equality*.

The ramifications of Nanak's stance were far-reaching. Over the centuries, the Sikh community (the Panth) strove, at least in principle, to live out castelessness. Scholars note that while old habits die hard – many Sikhs did retain some caste-identities socially – the religious framework of Sikhism consistently rejected caste discrimination.<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Doris R. Jakobsh, *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity*.

<sup>485</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*.

<sup>486</sup> Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*.

<sup>487</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

By the time the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, created the Khalsa (the Sikh initiated order) in 1699, caste distinctions were explicitly forbidden among initiates, fulfilling Nanak's original ideal.<sup>488</sup> In modern India and the diaspora, Sikhs have often been at the forefront of advocating caste equality and aiding those from oppressed communities. For example, Punjab's history in the 20th century saw reform movements (like the Singh Sabha movement) that further pushed against caste practices, inspired by Nanak's teachings.<sup>489</sup> Today, as South Asian countries continue to grapple with caste-based inequities, Guru Nanak's vision remains a guide and inspiration for reformers. It reminds society that any form of inherited privilege or prejudice has no sanction in the realm of true spirituality or ethics.

On the global stage, racial and ethnic inequalities are a parallel problem. Guru Nanak's insistence on the oneness of humanity ("We are all made of the same clay" he sung) speaks to contemporary efforts to combat racism.<sup>490</sup> In Sikh scripture and tradition, there is a clear rejection of the notion that any race or tribe is inherently superior.<sup>491</sup> Nanak traveled far beyond his own homeland – tradition holds that he went as far west as Arabia and as far south as Sri Lanka – interacting with people of many ethnicities.<sup>492</sup> Whether or not all these journeys occurred exactly as described, the ethos is clear: Nanak was *globally minded and inclusively oriented*. In an era when travel was arduous, he became a traveler, dialoguing with diverse

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<sup>488</sup> J. S. Grewal, *Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order: From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh*.

<sup>489</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

<sup>490</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*.

<sup>491</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

<sup>492</sup> W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

people. This openness is a valuable lesson today, encouraging intercultural and interracial understanding. The more we interact as Nanak did – with curiosity, respect, and the intention to find common ground – the more we break down the walls of prejudice. Many Sikh communities abroad exemplify this by actively engaging in interfaith and multicultural events, extending the Sikh concept of *sarbat da bhala* (“welfare of all”) to neighbors of all backgrounds.<sup>493</sup> For instance, gurdwaras in Western countries frequently hold open houses or “Turbans and Trust” events, inviting the wider community to learn about Sikh values (like equality and service) and to share dialogue.<sup>494</sup> These efforts echo Nanak’s approach of walking into others’ worlds as a friend rather than an adversary.

A particularly powerful expression of Sikh egalitarian ethos in modern times is the prominence of *langar* as a tool of social justice. We touched on this earlier, but consider its philosophical impact: Langar inherently asserts that food – the basic sustenance of life – is a human right that should be available to all as equals. In today’s world, where hunger and food insecurity are rampant in many regions, langar models an ethic of sharing that directly counters extreme inequality. It’s not uncommon now to see “Seva Food Banks” or Sikh-run soup kitchens in major cities like London, Toronto, or New York, which don’t just serve Sikhs but anyone in need.<sup>495</sup> Even in protests and social justice movements, the Sikh practice of feeding everyone has left a mark. During the 2020–2021 farmer protests in India (where a large portion of the protesting

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<sup>493</sup> *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver: Three Generations Amid Tradition, Modernity, and Multiculturalism.*

<sup>494</sup> Nayar, *Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver.*

<sup>495</sup> Nayar, *Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver.*

farmers were Sikhs from Punjab), massive langars were organized on the protest sites for months, ensuring that not only protesters but also poor locals had food.<sup>496</sup> Many observers noted that the protest langars became spaces of communal harmony – Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others all ate together while supporting a common cause for economic justice. The image of diverse people sharing a langar meal at a protest was a real-time illustration of Nanak’s ideal of “*humanity without walls*”.

Education and human rights are other arenas where Nanak’s message of equality finds contemporary relevance.<sup>497</sup> By teaching that all are capable of spiritual wisdom, Nanak implicitly supported the idea that education and knowledge should not be the monopoly of a few but accessible to all. In Sikh history, the second Guru (Angad) carried this forward by opening schools and developing Gurmukhi script to make literacy (and scriptural knowledge) accessible to ordinary people, not just Sanskrit-educated Brahmins.<sup>498</sup> Today, when we champion universal education and fight against discrimination in schooling (whether based on caste, race, or gender), we are aligning with the progressive trajectory that Nanak set in motion. In the realm of human rights, Nanak’s insistence on recognizing the divine light in every person resonates with the foundational principle of universal human dignity, as later enshrined in documents like the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Sikhs often point out that concepts such as freedom of religion and conscience, gender equality, and the right to sustenance were

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<sup>496</sup> Punjabi Heritage Foundation of Canada, ed., *Universal Relevance of Guru Nanak’s Teachings: 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev*.

<sup>497</sup> Pashaura Singh, ed., *Sikhism in Global Context*.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid.

effectively advocated by Guru Nanak centuries before these became global norms. For example, Guru Nanak stood for freedom of worship – he did not try to convert by force and, in fact, defended people’s right to pray sincerely in their own tradition (he critiqued externalism but upheld the sincerity of a devout heart, whether of a Hindu or a Muslim).<sup>499</sup> That ethos aligns closely with modern ideals of religious freedom and pluralism.

Another remarkable aspect of Nanak’s social message was interfaith friendship, which underpinned his vision of equality.<sup>500</sup> Nanak didn’t merely tolerate other faiths; he actively engaged with them, learned from them, and incorporated truths from multiple traditions into the Sikh scripture. The *Guru Granth Sahib* itself includes hymns not only by Sikh Gurus but also by Hindu Bhagats and Muslim Sufi saints (like Kabir and Baba Farid) – an editorial decision initiated by Guru Nanak and solidified by later Gurus.<sup>501</sup> This inclusion conveys a profound equality of wisdom: truth is not confined to one community. For today’s world, struggling with religious conflicts, that approach offers a template for interfaith respect. If Guru Nanak could see a Muslim mystic’s verse as worthy of the same reverence as his own verse, can we not in modern times accord mutual respect to the holy teachings of each other’s faiths? Nanak’s example suggests that *pluralism* – valuing different paths to God or moral truth – is not a threat to one’s own identity but an enrichment of the collective human quest. This idea is at the forefront of contemporary interfaith dialogue efforts.

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<sup>499</sup> McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

<sup>500</sup> Navtej K. Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai? Towards a Social History of the Rabābī Tradition of Shabad Kīrtan,” *Sikh Formations*.

<sup>501</sup> Singh, *Sikhism in Global Context*.

Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana's message of equality and justice was ahead of its time and continues to challenge and inspire us today. It challenges us to root out discriminations and inequities in our own communities – whether those are based on caste, race, gender, class, or any other marker. It inspires us by showing that a spiritual path can and must translate into concrete social equality. The early Sikh community was essentially a model of a just society: no caste hierarchy, roles for women, communal decision-making (through the institution of *sangat* and *pangat*), and protection of the oppressed. That model was imperfectly realized at times, as history records, but the ideal remained and was reasserted by later Gurus. For today's generation, whether one is Sikh or not, Nanak's social teachings offer a blueprint for humane living: *see the divine in every person, treat everyone with equal respect, work honestly, share generously, and stand up against any system that creates "high" and "low" people*. These principles are timeless. They speak to our world's deepest wounds and offer healing salves – the recognition of our common humanity and the commitment to each other's dignity.

### **Music, Companionship, and Interfaith Harmony**

One of the most charming and symbolically powerful aspects of Guru Nanak's life is the role of music and companionship in his spiritual endeavors. Guru Nanak's teachings were not delivered as dry sermons; they were most often expressed as *shabad kirtan* – divine hymns set to melody and sung, with Bhai Mardana accompanying him on the rabab (a stringed lute). This use of sacred music, and the very partnership between Nanak (a Hindu-born Sikh Guru) and Mardana (a Muslim minstrel), carry enduring lessons about unity,

empathy, and the bridging of divides.<sup>502</sup> In our contemporary global society, where differences of culture and creed often lead to distance or conflict, the legacy of Nanak and Mardana suggests that music and friendship can be profound connectors that transcend spoken language and doctrinal barriers.

Music as a medium of unity: Guru Nanak is sometimes depicted carrying a *tambura* or accompanied by Mardana on the *rabab*, traveling from village to village. At each stop – whether in Punjab, or in far-off regions such as Haridwar, as the legends recount – Nanak would sing.<sup>503</sup> His hymns were composed in various languages and dialects (Punjabi, Hindi, Persian, among others) and in many different classical ragas (musical modes).<sup>504</sup> This musical approach had multiple effects that are relevant even now. Firstly, singing made the message accessible and moving. It is said that when Nanak visited culturally diverse areas (for example, Arabic-speaking regions), people were still drawn to the *bhajans* (devotional songs) even if they did not catch every word, because the spirit of devotion and love in the music was universal.<sup>505</sup> Modern neuroscience has shown that music can foster empathy and bonding, breaking down prejudice by stimulating emotional resonance among listeners.<sup>506</sup> Guru Nanak intuitively leveraged this. When he and Mardana sang, it wasn't just a preaching – it was a *shared spiritual experience*.

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<sup>502</sup> Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai?”

<sup>503</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis*.

<sup>504</sup> Christopher Shackle and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, eds., *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures*.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>506</sup> David Miranda and Patrick Gaudreau, “Music and Cultural Prejudice Reduction: A Review,” *Musicae Scientiae* 24, no. 3 (2020): 299–312, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864918802331>

People of different backgrounds could sit together and listen or sing along, momentarily forgetting the labels that separated them. This is strikingly applicable today: initiatives that use music and arts for interfaith or intercultural dialogue find great success.<sup>507</sup> For instance, joint concerts of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim musicians, or Hindu and Sikh *kirtan* gatherings, create an atmosphere of solidarity that pure discussions might not achieve. They tap into what Nanak understood: music speaks to the soul in a language deeper than words.

Bhai Mardana's contribution to the Sikh musical tradition is itself a lesson in interfaith creativity. By historical accounts, Mardana hailed from a Muslim Mirasi (bardic) family known for singing folk and spiritual songs. Guru Nanak encouraged Mardana to continue and elevate this musical gift in the service of the divine message. In doing so, Nanak effectively said that the Sikh spiritual expression would not be confined to any single culture's music but would integrate diverse influences. The *rabab* Mardana played was a West Asian instrument; Nanak's poetry drew upon imagery familiar to Hindus and Muslims alike.<sup>508</sup> The songs thus became a confluence of religious cultures – much as Sikh theology itself bridged Islamic monotheism and Hindu mystical terminology in a new synthesis. This pluralistic DNA in Sikh musical heritage can inspire today's efforts to find harmony between different faith traditions. It shows that we can create something beautiful and shared (a song, a piece of art, a community project) by pooling talents and perspectives from various communities.

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<sup>507</sup> Peter Admirand, "Catholic-Sikh Dialogue and the Importance of Guru Nanak," *Sikh Formations*.

<sup>508</sup> Shackle and Mandair, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*.

Indeed, the lineage of *Rababis* (Muslim musicians who continued to perform kirtan in Sikh temples for generations) is a historical testament to the possibility of sustained interfaith collaboration.<sup>509</sup> From Mardana in the 16th century until the mid-20th century, many of the esteemed *ragis* (kirtan singers) in Sikh gurdwaras were Muslim Rababis.<sup>510</sup> They were integral to Sikh worship, even though they personally followed Islam. This extraordinary arrangement lasted until the Partition of India in 1947, when communal conflict sadly uprooted the Rababis from Punjab. The loss of the Rababi tradition after Partition is lamented as an unintended casualty of political division – an example of how inter-community bonds can fray under the strain of identity politics. Yet, in recent years, there have been conscious efforts to remember and revive that spirit. There are instances of Sikh musicians inviting Pakistani Muslim rabab players for joint performances, rekindling the shared heritage of Guru Nanak’s music. Such efforts underscore the contemporary relevance of Nanak and Mardana’s musical partnership: it remains a powerful symbol and tool for reconciliation. Where dialogues may reach an impasse, a simple soulful melody shared between people of different faiths can melt hearts and re-establish a human connection beyond ideological differences.

Moving beyond music, the companionship of Nanak and Mardana itself provides a timeless template for interfaith friendship. They journeyed together for decades, through hardships and adventures, always supporting one another. Their friendship was based on mutual trust and a common quest for truth, rather than on sharing the same religious background (since Sikhism as a separate faith was

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<sup>509</sup> Purewal, “Sikh/Muslim Bhai-Bhai?”

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

only forming, and Mardana remained culturally Muslim). This shows that *deep friendship is possible between people of different faiths and can indeed be spiritually enriching*. Nanak likely learned as much from Mardana's perspective and questions as Mardana learned from Nanak's wisdom. Many of Nanak's hymns were composed in response to things Mardana said or situations he faced – in that sense, Mardana was like a catalyst eliciting some of Nanak's teachings. In turn, Mardana found in Nanak a spiritual guide who never asked him to abandon his identity as a Muslim. According to Sikh chronicles, Mardana continued to recite the Muslim call to prayer (*azan*) daily, even while traveling with Nanak.<sup>511</sup> Nanak encouraged him to be a good Muslim – for instance, one story recounts Nanak reminding Mardana to keep up his Ramadan fasts while also explaining the inner spirit of fasting beyond the external act.<sup>512</sup> This kind of mutual respect and freedom within friendship is a model for pluralistic societies today. It implies that one can be steadfast in one's own faith and yet be the closest of friends with someone of another faith, each helping the other become a better practitioner of their respective beliefs by focusing on shared values like devotion, honesty, and kindness.

In the present day, which often sees mistrust between religious communities, Nanak and Mardana's example is like a beacon. It urges us: make friends across religious lines, travel together, work together, seek God or goodness together. In practical terms, this could mean participating in interfaith service projects – for example, a Sikh and a Muslim co-organizing a neighborhood food drive, or a Christian and a Hindu co-leading a prayer for peace. When people

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<sup>511</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis*.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

of different faiths collaborate on acts of goodness, they replicate the Nanak-Mardana dynamic in a modern setting. They also send a powerful message to their wider communities that cooperation is not only possible but fruitful.

Finally, the universality of Guru Nanak's spiritual message, carried by him and Mardana through music and friendship, remains deeply relevant in today's pluralistic societies. Nanak preached that there is one God (One Ultimate Reality) and that all humanity is part of one family. This core principle – sometimes summarized as “Ik Onkar” (One God) and “sarbat da bhala” (blessing for all) – is a unifying vision needed in a world riven by factionalism.<sup>513</sup> It resonates with the foundational ideals of many modern movements for global unity and peace. For instance, the motto of the Parliament of World Religions (which often quotes Nanak) echoes that our world can only thrive if we recognize our fundamental unity amid diversity. Nanak's conviction that no community has a monopoly on truth and that no person should be deemed alien or “other” is essentially what global ethics today strive to affirm. By remembering the way Nanak and Mardana lived – sharing laughter, songs, and the road with people of myriad cultures – we gain a hopeful example that unity in diversity is achievable.

Through the gentle means of music and the strong bonds of companionship, Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana demonstrated an approach to interfaith and intercultural relations that is profoundly relevant today. They showed that differences of creed need not divide hearts, that shared artistic and devotional experiences can bind us together, and that by journeying alongside those who are not

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<sup>513</sup> Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

“like us,” we discover the common humanity that was there all along. These lessons speak directly to the challenges of the 21st century, offering guidance on healing divides through empathy, creativity, and friendship. As we internalize their example, we take steps toward the ideal of a world where diversity is not a cause of conflict but a source of enrichment – a world moving toward, in Nanak’s words, “*humanity as one, lovingly attuned to the One.*”

## **Toward Humanity Without Walls**

### **“No Hindu, No Muslim” – A Universal Vision of Oneness**

According to Sikh tradition, when Guru Nanak emerged from a mystical communion with the Divine at the river Bein (an event dated around 1496), his first proclamation was startlingly simple yet profound: “*Na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman*”, meaning “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.”<sup>514</sup> This bold utterance did not mean that Hindus and Muslims ceased to exist as communities; rather, Nanak was declaring that in the ultimate truth of God, such labels carry no weight. It was a radical statement of universal human identity beyond religious divisions. This vision – that all humans are, at the core, children of the same One Creator, and our myriad identities are secondary to that primary oneness – is arguably Guru Nanak’s greatest lesson for humanity. In today’s world, plagued by sectarian strife, racism, nationalism, and all manner of “us vs. them” walls, Nanak’s proclamation of oneness stands as both a challenge and an inspiration: a challenge to how we categorize ourselves and an inspiration to form a “humanity without walls.”

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<sup>514</sup> McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*.

Historically, Nanak's "no Hindu, no Muslim" proclamation carried immediate social implications. In Punjab of Nanak's time, Hindu and Muslim communities often lived separately, with mutual suspicions, especially under changing political regimes. By saying there is no Hindu or Muslim, Guru Nanak was not negating the rich traditions of either faith, but asserting that spiritual identity is not confined to ritual or lineage. True spiritual identity, for Nanak, lay in one's connection to truth and devotion to God. He famously illustrated this when questioned by a local magistrate about whether he was Hindu or Muslim: Nanak responded that he was "*of God,*" and when pressed further, he explained that he would follow God's will, which transcends man-made religious distinctions.<sup>515</sup> Such an attitude allowed Nanak to be a bridge between communities. He could sit with Sufi mystics and find common ecstatic love for the Divine and equally sit with Hindu ascetics and share in contemplative wisdom – all the while maintaining his independent path that drew from both but was bound by none. This dynamic approach is exceedingly relevant in our multi-religious societies today. It offers a model where one can deeply respect and learn from all traditions without feeling obliged to pigeon oneself strictly as one thing or the other. Nanak in effect prefigured a kind of *interspiritual identity* – being grounded in one's own revelation of truth while honoring the light in others.

This universal vision is echoed in many other great figures and movements throughout history, showing a convergent evolution of thought. Two millennia before Nanak, in the Greek Stoic tradition, philosophers like Diogenes said, "*I am a citizen of the world.*" Centuries after Nanak, mystics like Baha'u'llah (founder of the Bahá'í

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<sup>515</sup> Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak*.

Faith) would preach the oneness of humanity and religion. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prominent figures coming from different contexts touched on the idea of a fundamental human unity that renders artificial divisions unjust. We can fruitfully compare Guru Nanak's perspective with some of these thinkers.

Contemporary interfaith theologians and advocates, such as the Dalai Lama or Eboo Patel, similarly echo ideas harmonious with Guru Nanak's.<sup>516</sup> The Dalai Lama says, "My religion is simple: my religion is kindness," meaning that beyond labels of Buddhist, Christian, etc., the real religion is compassion – a view Nanak would endorse wholeheartedly.<sup>517</sup> Patel, an American Muslim who founded the Interfaith Youth Core, speaks of religious pluralism as building the "faith line" where different faiths come together on common values to serve society – again, very much a continuation of the spirit in which Nanak and Mardana engaged with others.<sup>518</sup>

By highlighting these parallels, we see that Guru Nanak's universal humanism is part of a broader global thought that values unity-in-diversity.<sup>519</sup> What makes Nanak's contribution distinctive is the clarity and boldness of his expression ("no Hindu, no Muslim") and the practical community he founded which attempted to live out that ideal (through *langar*, *sangat*, and inclusion of other saints' writings in scripture).

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<sup>516</sup> Admirand, "Catholic-Sikh Dialogue and the Importance of Guru Nanak".

<sup>517</sup> Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 233.

<sup>518</sup> Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007)

<sup>519</sup> Balbinder Singh Bhogal, "Postcolonial and Postmodern Perspectives on Sikhism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Turning to modern case studies, we can ask: how can Nanak's message guide us in addressing real-world divisions and conflicts today? One can point to several instances where Sikh principles rooted in Nanak's teachings have been applied as remedies in conflict situations.

*Interreligious solidarity in times of crisis:* In the wake of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent rise in Islamophobia in the West, Sikh communities (who themselves were sometimes mistaken and targeted because of turbans and beards) did something remarkable. Instead of turning inward or merely protesting their own innocence, many Sikhs reached out to Muslim neighbors to offer protection and solidarity.<sup>520</sup> Gurdwaras held open houses to educate the public that Sikhs and Muslims are distinct but, more importantly, to emphasize that hatred toward any community was wrong. In recent times, there have been instances when Sikhs stood guard outside local mosques during Friday prayers as a sign of support.<sup>521</sup> These acts reflect Guru Nanak's ethic of seeing beyond religious labels – a Sikh recognizing a Muslim as a brother or sister equally deserving of safety and respect. It is not hard to imagine this is exactly what Nanak would have done; after all, he had defended Muslims too – there's a story that when Nanak visited Baghdad, he respectfully covered his head and sat outside the mosque, engaging in dialogue with Muslim clergy

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<sup>520</sup> *Punjabi Heritage Foundation of Canada, comp. and ed., Universal Relevance of Guru Nanak's Teachings: 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev* (Punjabi Heritage Foundation of Canada, 2019).

<sup>521</sup> Faith Matters, "Sikhs and Muslims Come Together During the Riots," *Faith Matters*, September 1, 2011, <https://www.faith-matters.org/sikhs-and-muslims-come-together-during-the-riots/>

about the nature of God, demonstrating respect alongside truth-seeking.

*Building bridges in conflict zones:* Another example can be seen in Sikh humanitarian organizations working in areas of religious conflict. They do this not to proselytize but simply because they see no one as an “other” outside the circle of compassion.<sup>522</sup> In one widely reported incident, when ISIS was committing atrocities in Iraq and many Muslim refugees were stranded, Khalsa Aid volunteers provided food and aid in refugee camps, with local Muslim leaders expressing astonishment and gratitude that a non-Muslim group from far away (Sikhs from UK and Canada) would come to help them<sup>523</sup>. The volunteers reply they were following the footsteps of Guru Nanak, who taught them to see all humanity as one family. Such real actions in the most strife-torn situations speak louder than any mere words about unity. They bring to life the possibility of “humanity without walls” in tangible form.

*Community dialogues and peacemaking:* In regions such as Punjab itself, where Hindu-Sikh or Sikh-Muslim tensions have occasionally flared due to political machinations, invoking Guru Nanak’s legacy has often been a calming and unifying force. During the 1980s, Punjab experienced a painful Sikh separatist conflict that also threatened Hindu-Sikh relations. Many Sikh thinkers and community

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<sup>522</sup> *Punjabi Heritage Foundation of Canada, comp. and ed., Universal Relevance of Guru Nanak’s Teachings: 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev* (Punjabi Heritage Foundation of Canada, 2019).

<sup>523</sup> SBS Punjabi, “How a Sikh Charity Is Helping Yazidis in Iraq: The Indomitable Spirit of ‘Sewa’ (Service) of Humanity Is Manifest in Khalsa Aid’s Work in the War-Torn Countries, Such as Iraq and Syria,” *SBS Punjabi*, February 19, 2016, <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/punjabi/en/article/how-a-sikh-charity-is-helping-yazidis-in-iraq/yqj6suyk6>

leaders appealed to Guru Nanak's inclusive philosophy to remind people that Sikhism is about defending justice for all, not about narrow nationalism.<sup>524</sup> They pointed out that Guru Nanak's own companions and successors had people of all backgrounds (for example, Guru Gobind Singh's Khalsa included the "Panj Pyare" or Five Beloved Ones from different castes and regions).<sup>525</sup> Emphasizing this helped quell narratives of division. In more grassroots ways, Sikh groups held interfaith prayers and kirtan sessions, inviting Hindu and Muslim neighbors, to reinforce that they share a cultural and spiritual heritage.<sup>526</sup> This use of Nanak's teachings in conflict resolution shows how a philosophy of oneness can be operationalized to de-escalate tensions and encourage forgiveness and reconciliation.

*Global ethical movements:* On a broader front, Guru Nanak's ideals find echo in global initiatives like the Charter for Compassion (led by interfaith leaders like Karen Armstrong) which calls for all religions to center compassion in public life, or the United Nations efforts at intercultural dialogue.<sup>527</sup> In 2019, the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak was celebrated worldwide; Pakistan opened the Kartarpur Corridor, a visa-free crossing allowing Indian pilgrims to visit Guru Nanak's tomb in Pakistan, a rare example of cooperation between two hostile nations (India and Pakistan) purely for a spiritual cause. It was often called the "Corridor of Peace," with many crediting

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<sup>524</sup> Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

<sup>525</sup> J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>526</sup> Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, 412.

<sup>527</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

Nanak's legacy for this softening of the border.<sup>528</sup> The corridor has been seen as a small step toward bridging India-Pakistan divide – again, a literal opening of a wall, which is a fitting metaphor under Guru Nanak's banner. It enables people-to-people contact, promoting the idea that common folks across borders can share goodwill if given the chance.

In contemplating all these scenarios, the practical vision that emerges from Nanak and Mardana's message is one of *active engagement to break down barriers*. It is not a passive idealism; Nanak traveled extensively to meet the "other," he established institutions to foster equality, and he spoke out against divisive falsehoods. Thus, applying his message today means actively working to dismantle the walls of hatred, ignorance, and inequality. This could be as immediate as combating a bigoted comment with a reminder of our shared values, or as extensive as policy advocacy for marginalized groups' rights inspired by the principle that no one is high or low.

As we draw together the threads of Guru Nanak's lessons for a world "without walls," we see that it involves inner and outer work: *inner realization* that the Divine Light resides in each person (breaking the psychological walls of prejudice within our hearts), and *outer action* to reform societal structures that segregate or oppress (breaking the physical and systemic walls that divide communities). Nanak and Mardana modeled both – an inner awakening expressed through outer community building.

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<sup>528</sup> Secunder Kerani, "Kartarpur Corridor: A Road to Peace between India and Pakistan?" *BBC News*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46382657>

Guru Nanak's theology of oneness and humanity, articulated in words like "no Hindu, no Muslim" and lived through concrete example, stands as a beacon for our fragmented times. It invites us to reimagine our identities in more expansive terms. We do not cease to be Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, or atheists – but Nanak urges us to recognize that *beneath these identities, we are fundamentally human and fundamentally one*. If we deeply accept that, the "walls" – whether they are religious, racial, national, or cultural – lose their power to make us enemies. They become, at most, beautiful distinctions in a garden of diversity, but not barricades. The life and legacy of Guru Nanak and Bhai Mardana demonstrate that this is not a utopian fantasy but a real possibility, one they strove to embody. The onus is now on us, in the contemporary era, to apply these timeless lessons to heal divisions, foster genuine fellowship across differences, and thus move closer to the ideal of a united human family.

#### Conclusion: Living Lessons of Love and Justice

Through the course of this chapter, we have journeyed with Nanak and Mardana from the tumultuous politics of the 16th century to the diverse global society of the 21st century. In doing so, we have seen that their message is not locked in the past; it is a living legacy, offering guiding lights for some of the most pressing challenges of time.

Guru Nanak taught us to fearlessly confront injustice. He did so with words of truth, not weapons – yet his words carried the moral force to challenge emperors and awaken the conscience of communities. The lesson for today is clear: whether it is an authoritarian government oppressing its people or a subtler injustice in our local community, we are called to respond with courage and integrity.

Nanak's example encourages activists, whistleblowers, and all who hold ethical convictions to stand up, grounded in the belief that ultimately justice is aligned with the Divine Will (*hukam*). Truth must be spoken to power, but always with a spirit of love and a vision for the betterment of all, not out of hatred. This principle remains a cornerstone of any movement for human rights and dignity around the world.

The lives of Nanak and Mardana show that religion's highest purpose is to unite hearts in devotion and service, not to divide people into rival camps. They practiced what one might call *interfaith harmony avant la lettre* – centuries before the term “interfaith” were coined. By praying and singing together across religious boundaries, they modeled how to celebrate differences without conflict. The architecture of Kartarpur, with its open doors in all four directions, symbolized inclusion: everyone was welcome. Similarly, the Golden Temple in Amritsar (constructed later by Guru Arjan) famously has four doors, one on each side, indicating openness to all directions (i.e., all communities). This architectural metaphor challenges us today to *keep the doors of our institutions and hearts open*. Whether it is a nation grappling with immigration policy or a community encountering new neighbors of different faiths, the Guru's vision urges openness over fear. It assures us that embracing diversity will enrich us, not destroy us.

Guru Nanak asserted the absolute equality of all human beings. This was not mere philosophy – he concretized it in the langar and the sangat, erasing social hierarchies in practice. Today, in a world still scarred by inequality – be it economic, racial, caste-based, or gender-based – Nanak's teachings demand action. They inspire the building of societies where, for example, no one goes hungry amidst

plenty (echoing langar), where women and men walk shoulder to shoulder in all fields of endeavor, and where a person's worth is never prejudged by color, ethnicity, or class. These are not modern political ideals imposed anachronistically on Nanak; they flow organically from his spiritual vision of the Divine spark in every individual. In essence, Nanak's Sikh ethos aligns with what we now call universal human rights. Recognizing this helps different cultures see points of resonance: Western egalitarian ideals or socialist principles of equity find a kindred voice in Nanak, as do Eastern mystical notions of the oneness of all life.

Perhaps the most visible legacy of Guru Nanak in the world today is the spirit of *seva*, selfless service. From the free kitchens serving meals in city streets to the volunteers aiding disaster victims, the ethos of *seva* has transcended Sikh communities and entered the global vocabulary as an exemplary form of altruism. What makes *seva* distinctive (as shaped by Nanak) is its grounding in love and humility – it is not done for self-righteousness or conversion or gain, but out of genuine concern for fellow beings as one's own. This attitude is the antidote to the walls of apathy and selfishness that modern consumerist culture can erect. It reminds us that *we find our true selves in losing ourselves in service to others*. Countless people, Sikh and non-Sikh, have felt the joy of this truth by participating in langars and service projects inspired by Nanak's model. It fosters a sense of community that cuts across social divisions: when diverse people cook together, eat together, and serve together, they discover their common humanity in very tangible ways.

The role of music and arts in Nanak and Mardana's mission teaches us that cultural expressions can be profound connectors. In a world where "culture wars" sometimes polarize societies, the universal

language of music still has the power to bring people together. We have seen examples of joint musical and spiritual events bridging gaps – these are direct descendants of Nanak’s methodology of singing God’s praises in a shared space. Moreover, the friendship between Nanak and Mardana is a template for interpersonal reconciliation: it shows that when individuals form bonds of trust across divides, those ripples extend outward and soften group animosities. One takeaway for today is that peacebuilding often begins not in grand conferences but in simple human relationships – a Sikh befriending a Muslim neighbor and vice versa can quietly do more to prevent conflict than many loud proclamations. Guru Nanak’s life is full of stories of him forging such personal connections (with a Sajjan the reformed thief, with a cannibal named Kauda he transformed through compassion, with countless village folk of all persuasions who became his *sangat*). In each case, walls of fear or vice fell to the power of understanding and friendship.

Finally, underlying all these practical lessons is Guru Nanak’s spiritual core: the idea of living attuned to *hukam*, the divine order or will. This means accepting life’s diversity and destiny as expressions of One Reality and working within it with grace. It fosters an attitude of contentment (*chardi kala*, optimistic resilience) and trust in the ultimate justice of the Creator, even as we do our part to uphold justice here and now. This spiritual poise is critical in a modern era filled with anxiety and rapid change. Nanak’s teachings, as compiled in the *Japji Sahib*, guide individuals to develop an inner anchoring in the Name of God (*Naam*) and in reflection on truth. From such a centered place, engagement with the world’s problems becomes not a source of burnout or bitterness, but a labor of love sustained by faith. It is worth noting that many Sikh activists and community

leaders draw strength from daily meditation on the Guru's words, which keeps them humble and hopeful in their work. This balance of inward devotion and outward action – often summarized as “*Naam Japo, Kirat Karo, Vand Chhako*” (meditate on God's Name, earn honestly, share with others) – may be one of Guru Nanak's most important prescriptions for the health of both soul and society.

Bringing all these threads together, we witness an inspiring picture: architecture of inclusion, ethics of truth over ritual, music as unity, and friendship as brotherhood – all converging into what Guru Nanak envisioned as a just and compassionate world. It is a world where the walls that separate us – whether made of brick or bias – are gradually dismantled, and in their place, bridges are built. Such a world may seem idealistic, but Nanak and Mardana showed it could start in microcosm with a small community, and history has shown that their example can multiply across continents. Each of us, in our spheres, can contribute to building this “humanity without walls.” We do it by living out the values that Nanak championed: by seeing the divine in every person we meet, by refusing to partake in hate or prejudice, by serving those in need around us, by speaking up when we see oppression, and by celebrating the rich tapestry of human culture while knowing we are all one beneath the surface.

As we close this chapter and this study of Bhai Mardana and Guru Nanak's legacy, we return to the metaphor of journey – the journey they undertook and the journey we are all on. In many ways, the world today is on a journey toward either deeper fragmentation or greater unity. The lessons distilled here strongly advocate for the latter path. Guru Nanak's teachings, carried on melodious strings by Mardana, call out through the ages, inviting us to choose unity, to choose love. The melody of that message is as pertinent now as

ever: *“ek noor te sab jag upajia”* – from the One Light, the entire universe welled up; who then can be called high or low? Realizing this truth is the key to our collective flourishing.

In the spirit of Guru Nanak, let us aspire to realize a world where humanity is without walls – where hearts are open, hands are joined in service, and all voices rise in a chorus of mutual respect. It is a vision at once spiritual and practical, as Nanak and Mardana have shown. The task is ongoing, but with such exemplars to guide us, we step into the future with hope and clarity. The song they began is ours to continue – a song of oneness, justice, and compassion that, God willing, will be sung by generations to come.

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