

DEBUNKED — SIKHISM SERIES
PART 1 OF 13

Origin and Identity

We are not what they say we are. Nor what we sometimes say we are.

Lovepreet Singh

An investigative debunk — 10 claims about Sikh origins, with named sources and Gurbani citations.

Writing About My Own House

This is a different book to write.

The previous eleven parts of *Debunked* were about claims made by other people about another tradition. I read carefully, cited every verse, named every minister, and tried to be fair. Some readers thanked me. A few were angry. That was fine. I was an outsider examining a neighbour's house, and an outsider's care has a particular shape.

This series is about my own house. I am a Sikh. The first turban my grandfather tied on my head was the colour of an early morning. I have stood barefoot in the parikrama at Harmandir Sahib at five in the morning. I love this tradition the way a person loves a parent — the love is not in question, but the love does not exempt the parent from the truth.

The truth, when applied to Sikhism, includes two kinds of claims that need careful undoing. The first kind are claims made *about* us, often by Hindutva writers, that try to absorb Sikhism back into the Hindu tradition we deliberately walked out of in 1469. The second kind are claims we make *about ourselves* — supernatural sakhis presented as history, scientific properties invented for the Five Ks, inflated battle figures that we repeat at school assemblies as if numbers were a measure of valour.

Both kinds are debunked in this series. Both kinds are debunked in the same plain language, with the same Gurbani citations, with the same care for the named source. I do not believe that loving Sikhi requires us to defend any specific claim that has been attached to her. I believe loving Sikhi requires us to remove the claims that diminish her.

Part 1 begins where the confusion begins — with the question of who we are. Are we Hindus? Are we Muslims? Are we both? Are we neither? Bhagat Kabir Ji's line on ang 1136 of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji gives the answer with two words. The chapters that follow give the answer with citations.

— Lovepreet Singh

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Every chapter follows the same six-step structure: **The Claim** • **Where It Came From** • **What the Sikh Texts Say** • **The Real History** • **The Debunk** • **The Honest Picture**.

"na hum hindu na musalman"
we are neither Hindu nor Muslim

Bhagat Kabir Ji, Raag Bhairo, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, ang 1136

— THE TWO WORDS THAT BEGIN THE ANSWER

Sikhism Is a Reformed Branch of Hinduism

THE CLAIM

Sikhism is not a separate religion. It is a reform movement within Hinduism, founded by Guru Nanak Dev Ji as a response to Islamic invasions and to clean up Hindu practice. Sikhs are essentially Hindus with kesh, kirpan, and a different prayer book.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The framing has two layers. The colonial layer came from European Indologists like **Ernest Trumpp** (*The Adi Granth*, London, 1877), who treated Sikhism as a sect of Hinduism. The modern political layer came from **V. D. Savarkar's** *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (1923), which defined every Indic religion — Sikh, Jain, Buddhist — as Hindu by geography. **M. S. Golwalkar's** *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) carried the framing forward. The Indian Constitution preserved it in **Article 25(2)(b), Explanation II**, which states that "the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion." Modern RSS literature uses the slogan "*ek panth, do kaaj*" (one path, two duties) to describe the relationship.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE SIKH TEXTS SAY

The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji settles the question directly. On **ang 1136**, in Raag Bhairo, Bhagat Kabir Ji writes:

"dayaa kapaah santokh sut jat gandhee sat vat / ehu janeu jia kaa hayee t paaday ghat" — "Make compassion the cotton, contentment the thread, modesty the knot, truth the twist. This is the sacred thread of the soul. If you have it, then put it on me."

The same ang carries Guru Arjan Dev Ji Dev's parallel declaration that the Sikh path is neither of the two. **Bhai Gurdas Ji**, the scribe of the Adi Granth, writes in *Var 1, Pauri 45* that Guru Nanak Dev Ji founded a "*nirmal panth*" — an unblemished, distinct path. Janamsakhi tradition records Guru Nanak Dev Ji refusing the janeu (sacred thread) at age nine, a deliberate break with Hindu Brahminical ritual.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — THE FOUNDATIONAL DATES

Guru Nanak Dev Ji: born 1469 CE at Talwandi (now Nankana Sahib, Pakistan), died 1539 at Kartarpur. Ten Gurus over 239 years, ending with Guru Gobind Singh Ji's death in 1708. Adi Granth compiled by Guru Arjan Dev Ji in 1604 at Amritsar. Khalsa formally established by Guru Gobind Singh Ji on Vaisakhi 1699 at Anandpur Sahib. Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji installed as the eternal Guru in 1708.

The Sikh community has been recognised as legally distinct in India since the **Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1925**, which placed Sikh shrines under the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and not under any Hindu temple authority. The 1881 British India census already had a separate Sikh category. The Anand Marriage Act was first passed in 1909 to register Sikh marriages separately, and was finally amended in 2012 to allow Sikh-specific marriage registration nationwide.

Scholars who have studied Sikh identity formation include **Hew McLeod** (*Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity*, Oxford University Press, 1989), **J. S. Grewal** (*The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Cambridge University Press, revised 1998), **Khushwant Singh** (*A History of the Sikhs*, 2 vols, Princeton University Press, 1963 and 1966), and **Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech** (eds., *The*

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

"Reform branch" requires the reformed body to remain part of the original body. By that test, Sikhism is not a Hindu reform. The points of departure are not surface; they are structural.

- **Theology:** Ik Onkar — one formless creator. No Hindu trimurti, no avatars, no incarnations of the divine. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji explicitly rejects the worship of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva as ultimate (multiple shabads, including Asa di Var).
- **Scripture:** Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is the sole authoritative text. It is not a Hindu scripture and is not derived from any.
- **Initiation:** Khande di Pahul (the double-edged sword amrit ceremony, 1699), not the janeu.
- **Caste:** explicitly rejected at the institutional level. Langar requires all to eat together regardless of birth.
- **Practice:** no asceticism, no monasticism, no idol worship, no pilgrimage to Hindu sites as merit, no Brahmin priesthood.
- **Eternal Guru:** the Granth itself, not a human acharya lineage.

Article 25(2)(b) of the Constitution is a legal convenience for personal-law purposes (Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act). It is not a theological claim. Sikhs have repeatedly resisted it, most notably through the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973) which demanded constitutional recognition as a distinct religion.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Sikhism emerged from the religious landscape of fifteenth-century Punjab, which included Hindu Bhakti, Sufi Islam, the Nath yogi tradition, and Sant poetry. Of course it shares vocabulary — *karma*, *dharma*, *maya*, *mukti* are Sanskrit-derived words used in Gurbani, often with new meaning. Of course it shares some poets — Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, Farid, Sain, Dhanna and twelve others are included in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji alongside the Sikh Gurus.

Emergence in a soil is not the same as derivation from a parent. Buddhism emerged from the Indian religious landscape too; we do not call it Hindu. Christianity emerged from the Jewish religious landscape; we do not call it Jewish. Sikhism is its own house, with its own door, built from local stone but built deliberately separate.

Sikhism Is Essentially Islamic Monotheism

THE CLAIM

Sikhism's strict monotheism, its rejection of idols, and its emphasis on one universal God show it is essentially Islamic. Guru Nanak Dev Ji adopted core Islamic ideas and added Indian dress. Sikhi is Islam in a turban.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

This framing has been advanced from two opposite directions. Some Muslim writers, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, claimed Guru Nanak Dev Ji as essentially Muslim because of his teachings on tawhid (divine unity). On the other side, some colonial scholars and modern internet commentators describe Sikhism as Islamic monotheism dressed in Hindu vocabulary. The British orientalist **Max Arthur Macauliffe** noted this conflation in his six-volume *The Sikh Religion* (Oxford, 1909) and rejected it. The "Islam-in-a-turban" line still circulates on social media.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE SIKH TEXTS SAY

The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji explicitly distinguishes Sikh thought from Islamic theology while respecting Muslim devotion. On **ang 1136**, Bhagat Kabir Ji says he is neither Hindu nor Muslim. The very first line of the scripture, the **Mool Mantar** composed by Guru Nanak Dev Ji on **ang 1**, reads:

"ik onkar sat naam karta purakh nirbhau nirvair akaal moorat ajoonee saibhang gur prasaad" — "One universal creative reality, whose Name is Truth, doer of all, without fear, without enmity, timeless in form, beyond birth, self-existent, realised by the Guru's grace."

The Sikh concept of **Ik Onkar** (one universal creative reality) is not the same as the Islamic Allah. Ik Onkar is genderless, has no prophets in the Islamic sense, no shariah, no exclusive revelation, no concept of an unforgivable sin against tawhid (shirk), and no eschatology of paradise and hell as central to ethics. Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji also includes the writings of Bhagat Farid Ji, a Sufi saint, alongside Hindu bhagats — making it the only major scripture in the world that includes the voices of both traditions while subordinating itself to neither.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

Guru Nanak Dev Ji met Muslim divines and Hindu pandits with equal interest and equal critical distance. The 1520 confrontation between Guru Nanak Dev Ji and Babur during the sack of Saidpur, recorded in **Babar Bani** shabads (Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, ang 360, 417 to 418, 722 to 723), shows the Guru openly criticising Mughal violence. He criticised Hindu ritual elsewhere with the same directness.

Sufi influence on the broader Sant tradition is real and documented — see **W. H. McLeod**, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (Oxford, 1976) and *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society* (Columbia, 1989). Influence, however, is not derivation. The Sikh framework, with its ten-Guru succession, its eternal Guru in scripture, its Khalsa institution, and its specific rahit, has no parallel in Islamic theology.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Test by structural features:

- **Prophethood:** Islam holds Muhammad as the final prophet. Sikhism rejects prophethood after Guru Gobind Singh Ji, and even the Gurus themselves are not "prophets" in the Islamic sense — they are messengers and teachers within a continuing tradition.

- **Scripture:** Quran is the literal word of God revealed through Gabriel. Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is the compiled writings of the Gurus and selected bhagats, edited by Guru Arjan Dev Ji.
- **Religious law:** Islam has shariah and fiqh. Sikhism has rahit, which is distinct in form and content.
- **Practice:** Sikhi has langar regardless of religion (including non-vegetarian food rules differing from halal), kirtan instead of azaan, no five daily prayer-times, no Ramadan-like fasting, no Hajj-equivalent obligation.
- **Position on idols:** rejected in both, but on different theological grounds. Sikhism rejects idols as obscuring formless reality (nirgun); Islam rejects them as shirk (polytheistic association).

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Sikhi shares with Islam a commitment to one formless reality, a critique of idol worship, and a deep respect for the names of God. Sikhi shares with Hinduism a vocabulary and a poetic landscape. Sikhi is not the sum of these shared features. It is a distinct path that emerged from a region where Hindu and Muslim worlds met, and answered the question "what is true?" in its own voice. Calling it Islam is as inaccurate as calling it Hinduism.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji Was Born a Hindu and Stayed One

THE CLAIM

Guru Nanak Dev Ji was born into a Hindu Khatri Bedi family. He never formally converted out of Hinduism. He remained a Hindu reformer all his life. The Sikh community was a later invention by his followers, not by him.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The claim sits on a genuine fact — Guru Nanak Dev Ji was indeed born in 1469 into a Hindu Khatri family of the Bedi sub-caste, at Talwandi (Nankana Sahib). The inflation comes when this fact is stretched into "therefore he never left Hinduism". The framing has been pushed by Hindutva writers since the early twentieth century. Modern versions include **Bhagwan Singh Gyanee's** writings and various RSS publications, especially after 1947.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE SIKH TEXTS SAY

The most famous moment of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's departure from Hindu ritual is recorded in multiple janamsakhi traditions: the **janeu episode**. At age nine, when a Hindu purohit came to perform the sacred thread ceremony, Guru Nanak Dev Ji refused, composing the shabad now preserved in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji on **ang 471** (Asa di Var):

"dayaa kapaah santokh sut jat gandhee sat vat / ehv janeu jia kaa hayee t paaday ghat" — "Make compassion the cotton, contentment the thread, modesty the knot, truth the twist. This is the sacred thread of the soul. If you have it, then put it on me."

This is not a Hindu reformer asking for a better thread. This is a public refusal to accept the ritual itself as binding. In **Japji Sahib**, the opening prayer of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Guru Nanak Dev Ji begins with "Ik Onkar Sat Naam" — a deliberate theological statement that does not invoke any Hindu deity or pantheon.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

Guru Nanak Dev Ji undertook four major udasis (long journeys) between roughly 1500 and 1521 CE, during which he met Hindu pandits at Hardwar, Sufi shaykhs at Pakpattan, Buddhist monks in Tibet, Sufi qazis in Baghdad, and the Siddh yogis at Sumer. In every encounter recorded by the janamsakhi traditions and reconstructed by historians like **Surinder Singh Kohli** (*Travels of Guru Nanak Dev Ji*, Panjab University, Chandigarh, 1969) and **Hew McLeod** (*Guru Nanak Dev Ji and the Sikh Religion*, Oxford, 1968), Guru Nanak Dev Ji positioned himself as outside both Hindu and Muslim frameworks.

By the end of his life at Kartarpur (1539), Guru Nanak Dev Ji had established a distinct community with its own gathering practice (sangat), its own community meal (langar), its own prayer (Japji and what would later become Sodra and Sohila), and its own succession (passing the Guruship to Bhai Lehna Ji, who became Guru Angad Dev Ji). These are not features of a Hindu reform sect. They are features of a new religious community.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

"Born a Hindu and stayed one" requires that Guru Nanak Dev Ji continued to identify as Hindu and to follow Hindu practice. Neither is supported by the textual record. Refusing the janeu, declaring "na hum hindu na musulman" (which the Granth places under his own seal of authority through Kabir's inclusion), composing Japji as the foundation of a distinct daily practice, and establishing a parallel

institutional structure at Kartarpur — these are not the moves of a Hindu reformer. They are the moves of a founder.

The parallel to draw is to **the Buddha**, who was born into a Hindu Kshatriya family at Lumbini, and whose teaching nevertheless founded a religion that we do not call Hindu. Birth and origin are different.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Guru Nanak Dev Ji was born into Hindu Khatri ancestry. His mother tongue carried Sanskrit-derived words. He knew the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Upanishads well enough to argue with their interpreters. He also knew the Quran and the Sufi tradition well enough to argue with their interpreters. Out of those conversations — and out of his own contemplation — he composed Gurbani, which is neither.

Calling Guru Nanak Dev Ji a Hindu erases the act of founding. Honouring him as the founder of Sikhi is the more accurate recognition.

Sikhism Was Founded to Be the Sword Arm of Hinduism

THE CLAIM

Sikhism's role in history is to be the sword arm of Hinduism — to protect Hindus from Islamic invasions. Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's martyrdom for Kashmiri Pandits proves this. Guru Gobind Singh Ji raised the Khalsa as defenders of dharma. Sikhs are the military extension of Hindu society.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

This framing has been central to Hindutva narratives of Sikh history. It draws on a genuine historical event — the 1675 martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji — and stretches it into a foundational mission statement for the Sikh community. The phrase "sword arm of Hinduism" appears in RSS literature from the mid-twentieth century onward and is repeated in modern political speeches.

STEP 2 — WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED IN 1675

Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji was approached by a delegation of Kashmiri Pandits, led by **Pandit Kirpa Ram**, who were facing forced conversion under Aurangzeb. Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji agreed to defend their right to religious freedom. He was arrested, brought to Chandni Chowk in Delhi, and executed on **11 November 1675**. Three of his companions — **Bhai Mati Das Ji**, **Bhai Sati Das Ji**, and **Bhai Dyala Ji** — were tortured and killed alongside.

What Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji defended was *the principle of religious freedom*, not Hinduism as such. He was not invoking Hindu doctrine, performing Hindu ritual, or accepting Hindu authority. He was defending the right of human beings to choose their faith. That principle — expressed in Gurbani on **ang 1356** and elsewhere — is Sikhi's position on freedom of conscience, applicable to any religious community, not specifically to Hindus.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY OF SIKH-HINDU RELATIONS

The Sikh community has fought wars against Hindu rulers as often as against Muslim ones. The **Battle of Bhangani (1688)** was Guru Gobind Singh Ji's first major engagement; his opponents were the Hindu hill rajas, particularly Raja Bhim Chand of Bilaspur and Raja Fateh Shah of Garhwal. The hill rajas, all Hindu, were the immediate Sikh military opponents through the 1690s.

The Sikh empire under **Maharaja Ranjit Singh** (reigned 1801 to 1839) included Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh subjects, and his ministers included **Diwan Mokham Chand** (Hindu), **Fakir Azizuddin** (Muslim), and Sikh generals alike. The empire was governed as a Punjabi sovereign state, not as a defender of Hindu dharma.

Sikh engagement with Hindu society has been characterised by both alliance and confrontation, in different historical moments, for different reasons. "Sword arm of Hinduism" is a single-direction reading that the historical record does not support.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

If Sikhism were founded as Hinduism's sword arm, three things would be true. The Khalsa rahit would defend specifically Hindu institutions. It does not — it requires the defence of all who are oppressed, regardless of religion. Sikh institutions would acknowledge Hindu religious authority. They do not — the Akal Takht is the supreme temporal seat of Sikh community decision-making. And the Sikh military tradition would have fought primarily for Hindu causes. It has not.

Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji's martyrdom is read more accurately through Sikh sources themselves. **Bachittar Natak** (in the Dasam Granth, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh Ji) describes his father's sacrifice as "*tilak janju raakhaa prabh taa kaa*" — he protected their right to wear the tilak and janeu. He protected the right, not the practice. The two are different.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Sikhs have historically stood up against tyranny when it presented itself, sometimes in alliance with Hindu communities, sometimes in alliance with Muslim communities, sometimes against both. The principle is not communal — it is ethical. The principle is that no one should be forced to abandon their conscience.

This is a more demanding position than "sword arm of any one religion". It asks the Sikh to defend the right to be Hindu, the right to be Muslim, the right to be Christian, the right to be nothing at all. It also asks the Sikh to walk away from claiming credit for being the protector of any particular community. We were never the sword arm of Hinduism. We were sometimes its ally and sometimes its critic. There is a difference, and it matters.

The Bhakti Movement Is the Same as Sikh Thought

THE CLAIM

The Sikh Gurus simply continued the Bhakti movement that began with Ramananda, Kabir, Namdev, and Ravidas. Sikhism is a rebranded Bhakti tradition. The inclusion of these bhagats in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji proves there is no real difference.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The Bhakti-equals-Sikhi framing has both Indian and Western academic roots. **Charlotte Vaudeville**'s work on Kabir (*Kabir*, Oxford University Press, 1974) emphasised the continuities. **W. H. McLeod** in *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1976) noted the strong Sant-tradition lineage. Hindutva writers have used this scholarly observation as the basis for a stronger claim — that the difference between Bhakti and Sikhi is cosmetic. Modern repetitions appear in publications from the Vivekananda Kendra and similar groups.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE SIKH TEXTS SAY

The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji includes the writings of fifteen bhagats and sufi saints — **Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, Farid, Jaidev, Trilochan, Beni, Ramanand, Dhanna, Pipa, Sadhana, Sain, Surdas, Parmanand, and Bhikan**. These compositions are not appended; they are integrated into the same ragas and woven through the same scripture. The inclusion is deliberate and structural.

However, the Gurus themselves marked the distinction repeatedly. Guru Arjan Dev Ji, in compiling the Adi Granth in 1604, included only those bhagat compositions that aligned with Sikh theology and excluded those that did not. This is well documented — some of Kabir's verses that survive in the Bijak (the Kabir Panth scripture) are not present in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, while other Kabir verses appear only in Gurbani.

More importantly, the Sikh institutional framework — Khande di Pahul (the Khalsa initiation), the Five Ks, the rahit, the Akal Takht (founded by Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji in 1606), and the doctrine of Miri-Piri (temporal and spiritual sovereignty held together) — has no parallel in the Bhakti movement. The Bhakti saints did not establish a community, a code, or a polity. The Gurus did.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

"Bhakti" is a broad current of Indian devotional poetry running roughly from the sixth to seventh century CE in the south (Alvars, Nayanars) to the seventeenth century in the north (Tulsidas, Surdas). It is not a single movement but a family of devotional traditions, ranging from Vaishnava bhakti (Ramananda, Tulsidas) to nirgun bhakti (Kabir, Namdev) to Krishna bhakti (Surdas, Mirabai). The shared feature is direct devotion to the divine over priestly mediation.

The Sikh Gurus' relationship to this stream is best described as *selective inheritance*. They drew on nirgun bhakti's rejection of idolatry and ritual; they did not adopt sagun bhakti's devotion to particular deity-forms. They drew on Kabir's plain-language critique of caste; they extended it into institutional langar. They drew on the Sant tradition's emphasis on the Guru; they made the Guru a specific institution with a specific succession.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Bhakti is poetry. Sikhi is poetry plus institution. The difference is enormous and historically consequential.

If Bhakti and Sikhi were the same, three things would be true. There would be no specifically Sikh community separate from the Kabir Panth, the Ravidassia community, or the broader Sant traditions. There would be no Khalsa institution distinct from the Bhakti saints' followers. And the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji would be a Bhakti anthology, not a scripture installed in 1708 as the eternal Guru.

None of these is the case. The Kabir Panth and the Sikh community are distinct, with distinct scriptures and institutions. The Khalsa is a specifically Sikh institution. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is the Sikh community's eternal Guru, not a curated collection of Bhakti poetry.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

The Sikh Gurus drew deeply from the Bhakti and Sant traditions and honoured those traditions by including their voices in our most sacred text. That inclusion is one of the most generous theological moves in religious history — we did not append the bhagats as appendices, we wove their words into our own. This is a gift, not a confession of derivation.

The Sikhs are not the Bhakti movement rebranded. We are a community that learned from the Bhakti movement and built something the Bhakti movement did not build: an institution, a code, and a sovereign tradition.

Sikhi Has Indus Valley and Vedic Roots Going Back 5,000 Years

THE CLAIM

Sikhi is not just five centuries old. Its roots go back to the Indus Valley civilisation and the Vedic period — ek-onkar is in the Vedas, the concept of Khalsa is anticipated in ancient texts, and the Sikh way of life is an ancient Indian way of life that Guru Nanak Dev Ji only restated.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The claim is unusual because it sometimes comes from Sikh sources themselves, pushed by writers eager to make Sikhi appear as ancient as Hinduism. It also appears in Hindutva literature, where the goal is the opposite — to fold Sikhi back into a deep Vedic past. Both directions converge on the same false claim. Modern sources include some Gurmat Prachar Lehar publications, certain dera literature, and various YouTube channels.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE SIKH TEXTS SAY

The Sikh Gurus were specific about when their tradition began. The opening of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji gives **Ik Onkar** as Guru Nanak Dev Ji's own formulation. The phrase does not appear in any Vedic text in this form. It is composed of *Ik* (one) and *Onkar* (the all-pervading divine), unified into a single iconic glyph designed by Guru Nanak Dev Ji himself. Sikh scholars from Bhai Vir Singh Ji onward have rejected the equation of Onkar with the Hindu Aum.

Guru Arjan Dev Ji, in compiling the Adi Granth in 1604, was explicit that he was creating a new scripture for a new community. The completion bhog at Ramsar (Amritsar) was a foundational event for the community, not a restatement of older revelation.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — WHAT "INDUS VALLEY" ACTUALLY WAS

The Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), also called the Harappan civilisation, flourished from roughly 3300 to 1300 BCE in what is now Pakistan and northwest India. Its script remains undeciphered. We do not know what its inhabitants believed, what they called themselves, or what gods they worshipped. To claim continuity from IVC to Sikhi (or to any modern Indian tradition) is to claim more than the evidence supports. See **Asko Parpola**, *The Roots of Hinduism* (Oxford University Press, 2015), and **Tony Joseph**, *Early Indians* (Juggernaut, 2018).

The Vedas were composed between roughly 1500 and 500 BCE. They contain hymns to specific deities (Agni, Indra, Varuna, Soma), elaborate ritual instructions, and a worldview in which Brahmin priests have ritual authority. Sikhi rejects almost all of this.

The historical record shows Sikhi beginning with Guru Nanak Dev Ji in 1469 CE. The Sikh community's documented institutions, scripture, and practice all date from the period 1469 to 1708 CE — a period of 239 years from Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birth to the installation of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji as the eternal Guru.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Ik Onkar is not in the Vedas. The Khalsa is not anticipated in any pre-Sikh text. The five Ks are not Indus Valley artefacts. The langar institution has no Vedic precedent. The rejection of caste has no Vedic precedent — the Vedas, particularly the Purusha Sukta (Rigveda 10.90), are foundational to caste theology, and Sikhi rejects them on this point.

The "5,000 year continuity" claim is the same shape as the Hindu claim of "5,000 year unbroken Hindu civilisation" that Part 7 of the original *Debunked* series addressed. The shape is wrong for both. Civilisations evolve, religions emerge at specific historical moments, and ancient continuity is rarely as ancient or as continuous as claimed.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Sikhi is a young religion. We are 557 years old, counting from Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birth in 1469. That is younger than Protestant Christianity. It is younger than the Mughal empire. It is much younger than Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, or Islam.

Being young does not diminish us. It places us. We are a religion that emerged in fifteenth-century Punjab, in the specific historical and political circumstances of late Lodi and early Mughal India. We carry forward what came before us in our soil. We are also distinctly ourselves. Both things are true. Neither requires us to claim five thousand years of pedigree.

All Religions Are Essentially the Same — Guru Nanak Dev Ji Said So

THE CLAIM

Guru Nanak Dev Ji taught that all religions are essentially the same. "Sab kuch ek hai" — everything is one. Therefore Sikhi is not really a separate religion; it is just a more inclusive way of saying what all religions say.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

This is the most common popular misreading of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, and it appears in two registers. The first is a sincere ecumenical move — readers genuinely moved by Guru Nanak Dev Ji's openness to Hindu and Muslim devotees alike conclude that he meant to dissolve distinctions. The second is a politically convenient move — if all religions are the same, then there is no special reason to treat Sikhi as distinct, which serves the Hindutva project of absorbing Sikhi back into a "Sanatan" frame.

STEP 2 — WHAT GURU NANAK DEV JI ACTUALLY SAID

Guru Nanak Dev Ji's most-quoted line for this view is "*na ko hindu na musalmaan*" — usually translated as "there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim". The line is preserved in early janamsakhi accounts and refers specifically to the spiritual state in which religious labels are transcended through union with the divine.

What Guru Nanak Dev Ji did NOT say is "all religions are paths to the same goal" or "follow any religion sincerely and you will reach God". Those are twentieth-century liberal additions. What Guru Nanak Dev Ji *did* say, in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, includes pointed critiques of both Hindu and Muslim practice. From **ang 471** (Asa di Var), criticising Hindu ritual:

"dayaa kapaah santokh sut jat gandhee sat vat / ehu janeu jia kaa hayee t paaday ghat" — "Make compassion the cotton, contentment the thread, modesty the knot, truth the twist. This is the sacred thread of the soul. If you have it, then put it on me."

From **ang 140**, Guru Nanak Dev Ji's critique of Muslim ritual: he names the requirements of true Islam (compassion, truth, modesty) and contrasts them with the actual practice of nominal Muslims of his time. Both Hindu ritual and Muslim ritual are subject to Guru Nanak Dev Ji's critique, not to his endorsement.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORICAL POSITION

Guru Nanak Dev Ji's relationship to other religions is best described as **discriminating respect**. He respected the sincere devotee of any tradition, criticised the hypocrite of any tradition, and taught a specific path that he believed was true. The path he taught was Sikhi — the practice of *naam*, *daan*, *ishnan* (remembrance, sharing, purification), under the guidance of the Guru, within the community of the sangat.

The scholar **Pashaura Singh**, in *The Bhagats of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji* (Oxford University Press, 2003), shows how the Gurus selected bhagat compositions not on the basis of "all religions are one" but on the basis of theological alignment with the Sikh path. Inclusion was not endorsement of all religious practice. It was recognition of the divine in specific voices.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

If all religions were the same in Guru Nanak Dev Ji's view, three things would be expected. Guru Nanak Dev Ji would not have refused the janeu — he would have accepted it as one valid path among

many. He would not have criticised either Hindu or Muslim practice — he would have embraced both. And he would not have established a distinct community with distinct practice — he would have urged people to continue in their existing traditions more sincerely.

None of these is what he did. He refused the janeu, he criticised both ritual systems, and he founded a distinct community. These are the actions of someone teaching a specific path, not someone teaching that all paths are equivalent.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Guru Nanak Dev Ji respected sincere devotion wherever he found it. He included the voices of Hindu bhagats and a Sufi shaykh in our scripture. He met with people of all faiths and was unafraid of any. These are all true.

He also taught a specific path that he believed was true. He refused rituals he believed were empty. He composed a daily prayer (Japji) for his followers to recite, distinct from any Hindu or Muslim prayer. He passed the Guruship to a successor, beginning a lineage that would last 239 years.

Respecting other paths is not the same as believing they are identical. Guru Nanak Dev Ji respected, and he distinguished. Both were part of his teaching. Flattening one into the other loses both.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji Was a Sufi

THE CLAIM

Guru Nanak Dev Ji was essentially a Sufi master. He travelled with a Muslim companion (Bhai Mardana Ji), visited Mecca and Baghdad, used Sufi vocabulary like haq and rab, and his teaching is indistinguishable from the broader Sufi tradition. Sikhi is a branch of Sufism.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The claim has appeared in three different historical layers. Mughal-era Muslim writers sometimes claimed Guru Nanak Dev Ji as a Sufi to bring him within Islamic acceptability. Some Sufi orders, particularly in undivided Punjab, included Guru Nanak Dev Ji in their genealogies of saints. Modern scholars who emphasise the Sufi-Sant interface, such as **Bruce Lawrence** and **Carl Ernst**, have written on the genuine cross-pollination. The popular "Guru Nanak Dev Ji was really a Sufi" claim is an overreach from these legitimate observations.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE SIKH TEXTS SAY

Bhai Mardana Ji, Guru Nanak Dev Ji's lifelong companion, was a Muslim Mirasi rebab player from Talwandi. Their relationship is one of the most important interfaith bonds in religious history. Gurbani includes three saloks attributed to Bhai Mardana Ji on ang 553 of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, within *Bihagre ki Var*.

However, Guru Nanak Dev Ji's theology is not Sufi theology. The Sufi framework involves *tariqa* (the path), *shaykh* (the guide), and *fana* (annihilation in God), within an Islamic doctrinal framework that affirms the prophethood of Muhammad and the centrality of the Quran. Guru Nanak Dev Ji's framework involves *panth* (the way), *guru* (a different category from shaykh, culminating in the Granth as eternal Guru), and union through naam — without affirming Muhammad's prophethood or the Quran's centrality.

On **ang 1136**, Bhagat Kabir Ji's "*na hum hindu na musalman*" sits alongside Guru Arjan Dev Ji's declaration that the Sikh path is its own. Neither writer claims a Sufi identity.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY OF THE MECCA VISIT

The janamsakhi tradition records Guru Nanak Dev Ji's visit to Mecca during his fourth udasi (c. 1518 to 1521). The famous story has the Kaaba rotating to face wherever Guru Nanak Dev Ji's feet pointed. As an event in religious history this is significant; as a literal physical occurrence it is in the same category as other miraculous sakhi narratives, and Part 2 of this series addresses it in detail.

What is historically defensible is that Guru Nanak Dev Ji engaged with Sufi practice, met Sufi shaykhs, and exchanged ideas with them. The claim that he *became* Sufi requires a doctrinal shift that no Sikh source records and that his subsequent founding of a distinct community contradicts.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Test by Sufi requirements. To be a Sufi, one must be a Muslim. The Sufi tradition emerges within Islam and affirms the prophethood of Muhammad as essential. Guru Nanak Dev Ji did not affirm Muhammad's prophethood as essential. Therefore Guru Nanak Dev Ji was not a Sufi by the tradition's own definition.

Test by practice. Sufi practice typically includes dhikr (formulaic remembrance of God), often within an Islamic ritual frame (five-time prayer, Ramadan, etc.). Sikh practice involves naam simran, which is distinct in form and content, and is not embedded in Islamic ritual.

Test by lineage. Sufi orders trace their lineage (silsila) to specific shaykhs and ultimately to Muhammad or his Companions. Sikh lineage traces to Guru Nanak Dev Ji himself and through ten Gurus to the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. The lineages do not overlap.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Guru Nanak Dev Ji knew the Sufi tradition intimately. He had Sufi friends and Sufi conversations. He used vocabulary that overlapped with Sufi vocabulary. He included the writings of Bhagat Farid Ji, a major Chishti Sufi, in the Adi Granth — four shabads and 112 saloks (the *Salok Sheikh Farid* section on ang 1377 to 1384 also carries 18 responding saloks by the Sikh Gurus themselves, making it a dialogic 130 in total). The Gurus did not just include Farid Ji; they answered him on the page. These are signs of deep engagement, not membership.

Engagement is not membership. Guru Nanak Dev Ji was a careful listener to Sufism who taught his own path. Calling him a Sufi flattens the specificity of what he taught. Honouring the specificity is the more accurate move.

Sikhism Is a Syncretic Mix of Hindu and Muslim Ideas

THE CLAIM

Sikhism has no original content. It is a syncretic blend — Hindu vocabulary, Muslim monotheism, Sufi vocabulary, Bhakti ethics, all mixed together by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. It is interesting precisely because it has no originality. It is a synthesis.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The "syncretic blend" reading was the dominant European academic view in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. **Joseph Davey Cunningham**, in *A History of the Sikhs* (London, 1849), gave a relatively balanced account but the framework was set. **Ernest Trumpp**, in *The Adi Granth* (1877), pushed the syncretic reading further and was openly dismissive of Sikh originality. The "syncretic" label has stuck in some textbook traditions even when nuanced scholarship moved past it.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE SIKH TEXTS SAY

The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji presents itself not as a synthesis but as a distinct revelation in its own right. The opening Ik Onkar formulation, the structure of Japji, the integration of bhagat voices within a Sikh theological frame, and the explicit instruction that the Granth itself is the eternal Guru — these are not the features of a synthesis. They are the features of a tradition with its own theological centre of gravity.

Compare Gurbani's treatment of avatar theology. Hindu tradition treats Vishnu's ten avatars as actual descents of the divine. Gurbani treats them as poetic figures who arise within the divine creative play and who are *not* equivalent to the formless reality (Ik Onkar). This is not Hindu avatar theology with a Muslim accent. It is a different theological framework.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY OF SCHOLARLY READING

Twentieth-century scholarship has moved decisively past the "syncretic mix" framing. **W. H. McLeod's** *Guru Nanak Dev Ji and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1968) was the major turn — McLeod argued that Guru Nanak Dev Ji inherited from the Sant tradition but built something distinct on that inheritance. **Pashaura Singh, Louis Fenech, Harjot Oberoi** (*The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, University of Chicago, 1994), and others have shown how Sikh distinctiveness was actively constructed by the Gurus themselves and by the Singh Sabha reformers of the late nineteenth century who clarified the boundary against syncretic blurring.

The Singh Sabha movement, beginning in 1873 in Amritsar, was specifically concerned with re-establishing Sikh distinctiveness against the syncretic blurring that had developed in some quarters. **Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha Ji's** 1898 polemic *Hum Hindu Nahin* (We Are Not Hindus) was the most pointed statement of this position. It is still in print.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

"Synthesis" implies a mixing of pre-existing components without anything genuinely new. The Sikh tradition fails this test on multiple grounds.

- **Ik Onkar** is not a Hindu concept, not a Muslim concept, and not the simple addition of both. It is a new formulation.
- **The institution of the Guru** — ten human Gurus succeeded by an eternal scripture-Guru — has no precedent in either Hindu or Muslim tradition.

- **The Khalsa**, formally instituted in 1699 with the Five Ks and the Khande di Pahul, is original. There is no Hindu or Muslim equivalent.
- **The Akal Takht**, established by Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji in 1606 alongside the Harmandir Sahib, holds the doctrine of Miri-Piri (temporal-spiritual sovereignty held together). No prior tradition holds this doctrine in this form.
- **Langar** as a binding institutional practice, requiring all to eat together regardless of caste or religion, is original to Sikhi.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Every religion is built from the materials available in its world. Sikhi was built from Punjabi materials — Sanskrit-derived vocabulary, Persian and Arabic loanwords, the Bhakti and Sufi poetic traditions, the political circumstances of late Lodi and early Mughal India. Acknowledging the materials is not the same as denying the building.

Sikhi is an original religion built from local materials. The synthesis framing erases the construction. Honouring the construction is what the historical record requires.

Sikhs and Hindus Are One People

THE CLAIM

At the everyday level, Sikhs and Hindus are one people. They share Punjabi culture, eat the same food, celebrate the same festivals, intermarry, share family names, and live in the same neighbourhoods. Religious distinctions are political constructs imposed on a single people.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The "one people" framing has been a recurring theme in Indian political discourse since the late nineteenth century. **Arya Samaj**, particularly through its *Shuddhi* movement after 1893, sought to bring Sikhs and other communities under a Hindu umbrella. The framing intensified during the 1941 census and the 1946 to 1947 partition negotiations, when Sikh political leaders including **Master Tara Singh** fought to keep Sikhs recognised as a separate community against attempts to fold them into a single Hindu bloc. The "one people" line has continued through the post-Independence period, including during the 1980s Punjab crisis.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE SIKH TRADITION SAYS

Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha Ji, the eminent Sikh scholar of the Singh Sabha era, published *Hum Hindu Nahin* ("We Are Not Hindus") in 1898 specifically to address this claim. The book is a careful theological and historical statement of Sikh distinctness, arguing that while we share cultural neighbourhood with Hindus, we are a separate religious community with separate scripture, separate institutions, and separate identity. The book has been continuously in print for over 125 years.

The **Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973)**, passed by the Shiromani Akali Dal, formally demanded constitutional recognition of Sikhs as a distinct religious community, separate from Hindu personal-law applicability under Article 25(2)(b). The resolution is the most important post-Independence Sikh political document.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

Sikhs were enumerated separately in British Indian censuses from **1881 onward**. The 1881 census recorded around 1.85 million Sikhs in Punjab; the 1941 census, just before Partition, recorded around 5.7 million. The Sikh Gurdwaras Act (1925) gave the SGPC legal control over Sikh shrines as a distinct community.

The **Anand Marriage Act** was passed in 1909 to register Sikh marriages under Sikh ceremony, though for decades Sikh marriages were also recorded under Hindu Marriage Act provisions. The amendment in **2012**, finally allowing direct nationwide Sikh marriage registration, was a long-overdue clarification of distinct legal status.

The shared Punjabi culture is real. Punjabi Hindus and Punjabi Sikhs do share language, food, music, family names (the Khatris, Aroras, and others are present in both communities), wedding rituals adapted from broader Punjabi practice, and many festivals. But shared culture is not the same as shared religion. A French Catholic and a French atheist share culture; they do not share religion.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

The "one people" claim conflates two things that are not the same:

- **Ethnic and linguistic identity:** Punjabi. This is genuinely shared across Punjabi Sikhs, Punjabi Hindus, and Punjabi Muslims (pre-Partition).
- **Religious identity:** Hindu, Sikh, Muslim. These are genuinely distinct, with distinct scriptures, distinct theology, distinct institutions, and distinct rituals.

The 1947 Partition forced the question. Punjabi Muslims chose Pakistan; Punjabi Hindus and Punjabi Sikhs chose India. The choice was made along religious lines, not ethnic ones. Within India, Punjabi Sikhs and Punjabi Hindus continue to share Punjabi ethnicity while maintaining religious distinction. Both facts are true. The "one people" framing collapses the second into the first.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab share neighbourhood, language, food, and many family names. We are not strangers. We have lived alongside one another for five centuries. Many Punjabi families have both Sikh and Hindu members. These are real bonds and they deserve respect.

What we do not share is a religion. Sikhi is its own house. The Singh Sabha reformers said it. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha Ji said it in 1898. The Anandpur Sahib Resolution said it in 1973. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji has said it from the moment Bhagat Kabir Ji's "*na hum hindu na musalman*" was inscribed on ang 1136.

Saying so is not a rejection of our neighbours. It is the honest naming of who we are. Honest naming is what every community deserves — ours included.

What Part 1 Tried to Do

The ten claims in this part all converge on a single question — the question of who Sikhs are. Are we a Hindu reform sect? A Muslim variant? A Sufi order? A Bhakti revival? A syncretic mix? Indus Valley descendants? Hindus by another name? The pattern across all the claims is the same shape: someone else's frame, applied to us, with our consent assumed.

The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji answers all ten claims with a single line from Bhagat Kabir Ji — "na hum hindu na musalman." This is not an isolated verse. It is the underlying theological declaration that runs through Sikh scripture, institutions, and practice. We are neither, and we are not the sum of both. We are ourselves.

This part deliberately did not attack any other religion. The Hindu tradition is rich, deep, and has its own integrity. The Islamic tradition is rich, deep, and has its own integrity. The Sufi tradition is one of the great mystical traditions of humanity. We owe debts to all three for vocabulary, for poetry, for the soil in which Sikhi grew. Naming our distinctness is not a denial of these debts. It is an acknowledgment that debts and identity are different things.

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What's Next

Part 2 turns to the founding figure himself — **Guru Nanak Dev Ji: Miracles and Travels**. We will look at the Kaaba rotating, the boulder at Panja Sahib, the cobra shading him at Sialkot, the three days in the Kali Bein, the Sumer Parbat encounter with the Siddhs, and the geographic impossibility of the four udasis as commonly described. The same six-step structure. The same care. The same refusal to inflate or to dismiss.

DEBUNKED — SIKHISM SERIES
PART 2 OF 13

Miracles and Travels

Guru Nanak Dev Ji — what actually happened is deeper than the miracle.

Lovepreet Singh

An investigative debunk — 10 sakhis from the life of the first Guru, with named sources and Gurbani citations.

Sakhi and History

A *sakhi* is a testimony. The word comes from *sakshi* — witness. That is what the janamsakhis were meant to be: the community's testimony about the man who began it.

But testimony written down a century and a half after the fact, by people who never met the witness, is not the same thing as a record. The oldest janamsakhi manuscripts we have date from roughly the 1630s onward. Guru Nanak Dev Ji died in 1539. That is a gap of about a hundred years, spanning three or four generations of oral transmission, in a period with no Sikh chronicling tradition and considerable sectarian competition over who owned the memory.

Part 1 of this series dealt with claims other people make about us. This part is harder, because the claims are ours. Every sakhi in this book has been told to me by someone who loved me — by grandparents, by granthis, by teachers I respected. I am not writing against them. I am writing about the difference between two ways of holding a story.

A story held as literature can survive anything. A story held as history can be taken from you by a nineteen-year-old with an internet connection and forty minutes.

That is the whole of my argument, and it is a practical one. When we present the rotating Kaaba as a historical event to a generation that will check, we are not defending Sikhi. We are handing someone a lever. And when the lever is pulled and the Kaaba story goes, the young person does not stop at the Kaaba — because they were never told which parts were load-bearing and which were decoration, they throw out the whole house.

So this part sorts. Ten of the most famous sakhis attached to Guru Nanak Dev Ji, each taken apart with the same six steps, each measured against what the sources actually say and when they were written. Some hold up better than I expected. Some do not hold up at all. One or two turn out to have real, dated, verifiable history sitting directly underneath them that we have somehow stopped telling.

There is one thing I want to say before the first chapter, because it governs everything after it. **Guru Nanak Dev Ji did not claim miraculous powers. He refused them.** The Sidh Gosht — his own composition, in his own words, preserved in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji from ang 938 — is a long dialogue with yogis who possessed, or claimed, exactly the powers we have since attributed to him. He declined the argument and declined the powers.

Every miracle we hang on him is therefore not simply an untrue detail. It is a contradiction of the man's own stated position. We have spent five centuries crowning him with the thing he put down.

— Lovepreet Singh

What This Part Covers

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Every chapter follows the same six-step structure: **The Claim** • **Where It Came From** • **What the Janamsakhis Say** • **The Real History** • **The Debunk** • **The Honest Picture**.

my tongue speaks the names that people have made for You — but Your own name is sat naam

Debunked — Sikhism, Part 2 *Guru Arjan Dev Ji, Raag Maru, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, ang 1083*

— THE MIRACLES ARE NAMES WE MADE; THE REAL NAME IS DEEPER

The Birth Prophecy and the Miracles at the Birth

THE CLAIM

When Nanak was born in 1469 at Talwandi in the house of Mehta Kalu Ji, the Brahmin Pandit Hardial cast the horoscope and announced that this child would be the Guru of Hindus and Muslims alike. The midwife Daultan said she had seen an unearthly light fill the room and had heard the sound of celestial music.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The annunciation is the single most standardised episode in world hagiography. A portent, a light, a wise man who reads the signs, a servant or shepherd who witnesses it: the pattern appears at the birth of the Buddha, of Mahavira, of Jesus, of the Prophet Muhammad, and of dozens of saints in every tradition on the subcontinent. It is a genre convention, and it is applied afterwards, by a community that already knows how the story ends.

In our case it enters through the janamsakhis, and their dates matter more than anything else in this book.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

Daultan the midwife hears no infant's cry but the sound of a grown man's laughter, and reports light in the room. Pandit Hardial casts the horoscope and prostrates. Rai Bular, the Muslim chief of the village, later recognises the child. The birth is placed at Rai Bhoi di Talwandi — today Nankana Sahib, in Pakistan.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — THE JANAMSAKHI SOURCES AND THEIR DATES

Puratan Janamsakhi — manuscript tradition, c. 1635 and later. **Bala Janamsakhi** — claims a companion's eyewitness authorship, but the surviving tradition is seventeenth-century and associated with the Hindali sect, which was hostile to the mainstream Panth. **Miharban Janamsakhi** — seventeenth century, from the Mina line, a rival claimant branch. **Gian Ratnavali**, attributed to Bhai Mani Singh Ji — early eighteenth century. Guru Nanak Dev Ji died in 1539. The earliest of these is roughly a century later, and each of the traditions was produced by a group with a stake in the outcome. W. H. McLeod's *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis* (Clarendon, 1980) remains the standard critical study.

What is solidly attested is a good deal more ordinary and a good deal more interesting. He was born in 1469 at Rai Bhoi di Talwandi. His father, Mehta Kalu, was a *patwari* — a village revenue accountant — in the employ of **Rai Bular Bhatti**, the local Muslim landlord. His mother was Mata Tripta. His elder sister **Bebe Nanaki**, married to Jai Ram at Sultanpur Lodhi, is the person who repeatedly moved his life forward.

Even the date is not what we think. The gurpurab is celebrated on Kartik Puranmashi, in November. A substantial body of scholarship, working from the earliest sources, places the birth in **Vaisakh** — April. The Kartik date became fixed through later custom. We are, in all likelihood, celebrating on the wrong month, and it has not damaged the celebration in the slightest, which is itself a useful lesson about what these things are for.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

- **The chain of transmission does not exist.** Daultan's testimony reaches us through a manuscript written roughly 150 years after she would have died, with no named intermediary. That is not a weak source. It is not a source.
- **The form gives it away.** Light at the birth, music in the air, a wise man reading portents — if the same three elements appear at the birth of every founder in every tradition, they are telling us about the genre, not about the night.

- **The horoscope contradicts the man.** This is the deepest problem. The claim asks a Brahmin's astrological reading to certify the authority of a teacher whose life's work included refusing the janeu at nine, dismissing ritual specialists, and writing compositions that strip auspicious days of any magical power. Validating Guru Nanak Dev Ji by horoscope is like validating a fire-safety officer by the quality of his fireworks.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Take the light out of the room and look at who is actually standing in it.

A Hindu Khatri family works for a Muslim landlord in a Punjabi village. The father keeps the revenue accounts. The son turns out strange — gives away the money he is sent to trade with, refuses the sacred thread, worries everyone. The father complains. And the person who defends the boy, repeatedly, over years, and eventually grants land to the family, is **Rai Bular** — the Muslim.

That is the annunciation. Not a Brahmin with a chart, but a Muslim chief who looked at a Hindu clerk's difficult son and saw something worth protecting. Rai Bular is a real, locally documented figure, and the land his descendants held is a matter of record. He recognised Guru Nanak Dev Ji from across the religious line, decades before the man said anything about Hindus and Muslims.

The whole argument of the life is already there, in the first thing that happens. We replaced it with a horoscope.

Mecca and the Turning of the Kaaba

THE CLAIM

Arriving at Mecca, Guru Nanak Dev Ji lay down to sleep with his feet pointing towards the Kaaba. The qazi seized his feet and dragged them away in anger — and whichever direction the feet were turned, the stone Kaaba itself swung round to stand in front of them.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

Here I have to correct something I assumed before I checked. This is not a late accretion. The episode appears in **Bhai Gurdas Ji's Var 1** — our earliest Sikh narrative source, written by the scribe of the Adi Granth, within roughly a century of the events. The mullah is named. The turning is described.

That means the honest question is not "when was this invented?" but "what kind of text is a var, and what did its author think he was doing?"

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

He arrives in the dress of a pilgrim — blue clothes, a staff, a book under his arm, a prayer mat, a water jug. He sleeps with his feet towards the Kaaba. Jeevan, in some versions Rukn-ud-Din, wakes him and demands to know how he dares point his feet at the house of God. He answers: *then turn my feet in the direction where God is not*. The building follows.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — WHAT A VAR IS

Bhai Gurdas Ji's *Var 1* runs to forty-nine pauris and covers Guru Nanak Dev Ji's mission and travels, including Mecca, Baghdad, and the debates with the Nath yogis. Bhai Gurdas Ji (d. 1636) was the scribe of the Adi Granth and the nephew of Guru Amar Das Ji — as close to the centre of the tradition as a person can be. But a *var* is a heroic ballad. Its purpose is to praise, and its conventions include magnification. Reading a var as though it were a court chronicle is a category error, and it is our error, not his.

Could he have gone to Mecca? Probably, yes. Punjab was connected to the Hijaz by heavily used trade and pilgrimage routes, and Punjabi Muslims made hajj routinely. Entry to the Haram was restricted to Muslims, but the European traveller Ludovico di Varthema reached Mecca in disguise in 1503, which shows the restriction was porous in exactly this period. Travelling with Mardana, a Muslim companion, in the dress of a faqir, arrival is not difficult to imagine.

One source must be dropped from our arguments. The so-called *Siyahto Baba Nanak Fakir*, a diary supposedly kept by one Haji Tajuddin and lodged in a library at Medina around 1512, is quoted constantly in popular Sikh writing as independent proof. It has never been produced, catalogued, photographed or examined by any scholar in any language. We should stop citing it.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

The Kaaba is a masonry cube roughly fifteen metres high, standing on foundations, in the most continuously observed courtyard on earth. It does not rotate.

And this is the rare claim where the argument from silence is overwhelming. Islamic scholarship documents the Haram in extraordinary detail — every repair, every flood, every reconstruction, every dispute over the Black Stone, across fourteen centuries. If the Kaaba had physically moved in front of pilgrims, it would be the best-attested event in Islamic history. It appears in no Islamic source at all.

But the fatal objection is theological, not physical. Look at the reply again: *turn my feet in the direction where God is not*. That sentence works only if God is in every direction and no place is privileged. If the building then

chases his feet, the building has just been treated as the location of God — which is precisely the idea the sentence was demolishing. **The miracle refutes the punchline.** A story cannot make its own point and destroy it in the same breath.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

The line is the miracle. It always was.

A Punjabi faqir walks into the holiest enclosure in Islam, is challenged by its custodian, and answers with a single question that leaves nowhere for the challenge to stand. He does not argue that the Kaaba is unimportant. He does not insult it. He points out that a God who can be offended by the direction of a sleeping man's feet is too small to be God, and he does it in one sentence, in someone else's sacred space, without raising his voice.

Bhai Gurdas Ji, writing a hundred years later in the ballad form of his time, added a rotating building because that is what ballads do. We can keep his poem and still say plainly that the stone stayed where it was. The sentence needs no help.

Panja Sahib and Wali Kandhari's Boulder

THE CLAIM

At Hasan Abdal, the Muslim faqir Wali Kandhari, living on the hill, cut off the water of his spring out of spite and then rolled a huge boulder down at Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The Guru raised his open palm and stopped the rock, leaving the print of his hand pressed into it, and a spring of water burst from the place.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

Unlike the Mecca episode, this one is not in the earliest layer. It is absent from the oldest janamsakhi material and enters the tradition late. The shrine's prominence is later still: Gurdwara Panja Sahib as a major institution dates from the patronage of **Hari Singh Nalwa** and the Sikh empire's expansion into the north-west in the 1820s and 1830s. The site became important, and then the site's story became important.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

Mardana, thirsty, is sent three times up the hill to ask the faqir for water and is refused, the third time with contempt for his master. The Guru lifts a stone at his feet and water flows; the faqir's spring on the hill runs dry; the faqir, enraged, pushes down the boulder; the Guru stops it with his hand.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — HASAN ABDAL

A town at the foot of the hills on the Grand Trunk Road, about forty kilometres from Rawalpindi. It has been a staging post for as long as there has been traffic on that road, and the reason is water: the site has strong natural karst springs fed by the limestone hills behind it. Those springs are why Mughal emperors built gardens there, why a settlement exists at all, and why any traveller in any century would have stopped. They were flowing long before 1469 and they are flowing now.

That he passed through the region is entirely plausible — the route north-west towards Kabul and beyond runs directly through it. Baba Wali Kandhari is remembered locally as a Sufi of the area, and his shrine sits on the hill above.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

- **The spring was already there.** This is the quiet problem with the story. Hasan Abdal exists *because* of its springs. A miracle that produces water at the one place in the district famous for water is a miracle with nothing to do.
- **Hand and footprints in stone are a global relic-form.** The subcontinent and the wider Muslim and Buddhist world hold hundreds of them — footprints of Vishnu at Gaya, of the Buddha across Asia, of Adam in Sri Lanka, of the Prophet in several cities. When a form is that common, the form is the evidence of the form, not of the event.
- **Rock does not take a handprint.** Stone deforms by fracture, not by impression. A palm-shaped hollow in rock is either carved, or a natural weathering feature that the eye completes — the same faculty that finds faces in clouds.
- **The story is late and the site is later.** Absent from the earliest sources, prominent from the 1820s.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

There is a real moral image inside this sakhi and it is not about a rock. It is about a man on a hill controlling the water and refusing it to thirsty people below. In the dry north-west, that is not a metaphor; it is a description of how water has been fought over for as long as there have been settlements there. The story says: holiness that hoards water is not holiness. That teaching does not need the boulder.

And there is something else at Hasan Abdal we have almost stopped telling, which is documented to the day.

On **30 October 1922**, a train carrying Sikh prisoners was scheduled to pass through Hasan Abdal without stopping. The sangat at Panja Sahib had prepared langar for them. When the authorities refused to halt the train, Sikhs lay down across the railway line in front of it. The train did not stop in time. **Bhai Karam Singh** and **Bhai Partap Singh** were killed under it, and the train halted, and the prisoners were fed. It is remembered as the Saka Panja Sahib.

Two men stopped a train with their bodies at that site, and we tell the story about the palm print.

The Cobra That Shaded His Face

THE CLAIM

As a boy, sent out to graze the buffaloes, Guru Nanak Dev Ji fell asleep in a field. When the sun moved onto his face, a black cobra came, raised its hood over him, and stood holding the shade until he woke. Rai Bular, the chief of the village, saw it with his own eyes.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The serpent canopy is one of the oldest pieces of visual grammar in South Asia. Mucalinda, the naga king, raises his hood over the meditating Buddha in the rain. Shesha spreads his hoods over Vishnu. The seven-headed naga arches over Parshvanatha in Jain sculpture. Before the story was ever told about Guru Nanak Dev Ji, every viewer in the subcontinent already knew what a snake-hood above a sleeping figure meant: *this one is marked*.

The image was available. It was applied.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

The janamsakhis place the episode at Talwandi, in the boy's grazing years, with Rai Bular riding past and witnessing it. Later retellings drift the location — Sialkot is common in modern versions. That drift is worth noticing on its own: a story firmly anchored to a real event does not change districts between tellings.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — WHAT A COBRA ACTUALLY DOES

Naja naja, the Indian cobra, is ectothermic — it has no internal temperature regulation and must manage heat by behaviour. In the middle of a Punjab summer day it seeks shade, crevices and burrows; direct sun for a prolonged period is dangerous to it. Hooding is not a resting posture. It is a threat display: energetically expensive, held for seconds or minutes, and abandoned as soon as the threat passes. A cobra standing motionless in full sun, hood spread, for the length of a boy's afternoon nap, is behaving in a way no cobra behaves.

What is real here is **Rai Bular Bhatti**. He was the Muslim chief of Rai Bhoi di Talwandi, the employer of Mehta Kalu, a locally documented figure whose family held land in the area for generations afterwards. Sikh tradition consistently remembers him as among the first to recognise the child's stature and as the man who defended him against his own father's exasperation.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

The animal cannot do it, and the witness cannot be reached. Rai Bular died in the sixteenth century; the earliest text reporting what he saw was written in the seventeenth, by someone with no stated line of transmission back to him. Between the event and the page lie four or five generations of retelling in a community that had every reason to remember its founder as marked from childhood.

Add the borrowed iconography and the wandering location, and there is very little left standing. This is not a case where the details have been exaggerated. It is a case where a ready-made image from the surrounding religious culture has been fitted onto a childhood we know almost nothing about.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Strip out the snake and Rai Bular is still standing there, and he is the better story.

A Muslim landlord watches his Hindu accountant's son grow up odd — giving away goods, refusing rituals, sitting in fields when he should be working. The father wants the boy disciplined. The landlord protects him instead, and keeps protecting him, and grants land to the family.

Everything Guru Nanak Dev Ji would later say about religious boundaries had already been done to him, quietly, by a Muslim, before he said a word about it. The first person to see what he was did not share his religion. That is not a decoration on the life. It is the thesis of the life, arriving before the life starts.

We swapped it for a snake we borrowed from someone else's iconography.

Three Days in the Kali Bein

THE CLAIM

At Sultanpur Lodhi, Guru Nanak Dev Ji went into the Kali Bein to bathe and vanished beneath the water for three days. He was taken to the court of Akal Purakh, given the cup of amrit, and sent back. When he surfaced, his first words were: "na ko hindu na musalman."

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

This is the hinge of the whole biography and it is present across every janamsakhi tradition — Puratan, Bala, Miharban, Gian Ratnavali. Nothing else in his life is so uniformly attested. The site itself returned to public attention in our own time through the campaign begun in 2000 by Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal to clean the badly polluted Bein, which is one of the more genuinely remarkable things any Sikh has done in the last fifty years.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

He goes to bathe at dawn, as he does every day. He does not come out. His clothes are on the bank. The town searches the water and finds nothing; his employer's men drag the stream. On the third day he reappears. He is silent for a further day, and then speaks the sentence. He gives away his possessions, resigns his post, and leaves.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — SULTANPUR LODHI, C. 1499

He was about thirty. Through his brother-in-law Jai Ram he held a real job: keeper of the *modikhana*, the state granary and store, for **Daulat Khan Lodhi**, the governor. He was married, with two sons. Mardana, the Muslim rabab player from his own village, was with him. This is the most settled and conventional period of his life — a government storekeeper with a family and a salary — and it is the period he walked away from.

Whatever occurred, the outcome is fixed and datable in its consequences: he left the job, left the town, and began the travels. Every janamsakhi agrees that a three-day disappearance preceded the change.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Three days submerged is not a borderline claim. Human beings lose consciousness within a few minutes without air; the world records in static apnea, achieved by trained specialists breathing pure oxygen beforehand, sit in the region of minutes, not days. There is no version of this that is physiologically open.

But notice what the sources actually say, because the difference is important. They say he **disappeared** for three days. They do not require him to have been underwater for three days. A man who walks into a river at dawn, walks out somewhere else, and spends three days alone before returning is doing something entirely possible — and the janamsakhi accounts, read plainly, support that as easily as they support the other reading. The submersion is an inference that hardened into a claim.

The famous sentence needs one further correction, and it is uncomfortable. "**Na ko hindu na musalman**" is **not in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji**. It comes to us from the janamsakhi tradition, not from Gurbani. The line closest to it in scripture is Bhagat Kabir Ji's "*na hum hindu na musalman*" at **ang 1136** — the epigraph of Part 1 of this series. The most quoted sentence in Sikh history is not among the recorded words of the man we quote it from.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Something happened at Sultanpur. A thirty-year-old civil servant with a wife, two sons, a salary and a respectable brother-in-law disappeared for three days and came back a different person — then resigned, gave

away what he had, and spent the next two decades on the road. Every source we possess, from every rival faction, agrees on that shape. In a tradition where the factions agree on very little, that unanimity is worth more than any single detail inside it.

And the content of what he brought out is not a matter of testimony at all. It is printed on **ang 1**. The Mul Mantar and Japji Sahib open the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, and anyone can read them tonight.

We do not need him to have breathed underwater. We need only to notice that a man in a secure government post walked out of it at thirty, which most people find considerably harder to imagine.

Sidh Gosht on the Summit of Sumer Parbat

THE CLAIM

During his travels Guru Nanak Dev Ji ascended in his physical body to the summit of Sumer Parbat — identified with Mount Kailash — where the Siddh yogis have lived for thousands of years in deathless bodies. The conversation he had with them there became the bani known as Sidh Gosht.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The janamsakhis place a meeting with the Siddhs on a mountain. The identification of that mountain with Kailash is a later gloss, added by retellers who wanted a location that could be pointed to on a map. The immortality of the yogis is drawn from the Nath tradition's own claims about itself — the Naths held that their masters, Gorakhnath and Machhindarnath among them, had conquered death.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

He climbs beyond the snow line. He finds an assembly of Siddhs seated in a place no ordinary body can reach. They question him about the world below and about who his master is. He answers, at length, and the answers become the composition.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — SIDH GOSHT AND THE NATHS

Sidh Gosht sits in Raag Ramkali, **angs 938 to 946** of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji — seventy-three stanzas of formal dialogue with Nath yogis. The Naths were not a legend. They were the dominant renunciate order of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Punjab and the hills, with major establishments at **Tilla Jogian**, at **Gorakhmata** in the Himalayan foothills — renamed Nanakmata after his visit — and at **Achal Batala**, where the tradition records his best-known encounter with them. These are ordinary places, reachable on foot, and several are still standing.

Sumeru or Meru is the cosmological world-axis of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain cosmology. It is not a peak that anyone has surveyed; asking for its coordinates is a category error. **Kailash**, the mountain later substituted for it, is 6,638 metres, has never been summited by anyone in history, and is closed to climbing by agreement out of respect for its sanctity.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

- **The destination is mythological.** Sumer Parbat is a cosmological structure, not a geographical one. Reading it literally is like asking which country heaven borders.
- **If you substitute Kailash, the claim gets worse, not better.** It then requires an unclimbed 6,638-metre Himalayan summit to have been reached in the sixteenth century in ordinary clothes.
- **The deathless yogis are the Naths' claim about themselves** — a claim Guru Nanak Dev Ji spent the composition disputing.
- **The sakhi contradicts the bani it is attached to.** This is the heart of it. *Sidh Gosht* is, from beginning to end, a refusal to accept miraculous power as the measure of spiritual attainment. The Siddhs press him on *ridhi-sidhi*, the supernatural attainments, and he sets them aside as worthless beside the Name. Wrapping that composition inside a story where he arrives by supernatural means turns the author into the thing he is arguing against.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

The real encounters are better documented than almost anything else in his life, because the transcript survives in his own words in our own scripture.

He went to the places where the Naths actually were — Achal Batala, Gorakhmata, the hill establishments — and argued with the most formidable renunciate order of his age on their own ground. They were not straw men. They had institutional power, popular awe, centuries of prestige, and a coherent philosophy. He took them on in public, in Punjabi, in verse, and the exchange is preserved across nine angas.

His core position in it is the one that made Sikhi different from everything around it: you do not have to leave the world to reach God. The householder, working and earning honestly, is not spiritually inferior to the ascetic on the mountain.

Which makes the sakhi doubly strange. To honour the man who said *you do not need the mountain*, we put him on the mountain.

Eminabad — Bhai Lalo's Bread and Malik Bhago's Feast

THE CLAIM

At Eminabad, Guru Nanak Dev Ji took Bhai Lalo's coarse millet bread in one hand and a dish from Malik Bhago's thirty-six-course feast in the other, and squeezed both. Milk ran from the poor carpenter's bread; blood dripped from the rich official's food.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The janamsakhi tradition, and it has thrived because it is superb teaching material. It is instantly graspable, it needs no theology to explain it, and it lands with a child as hard as with an adult. It is also, in the strict sense, a parable that has been read as a report.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

Guru Nanak Dev Ji stays with Bhai Lalo, a low-caste carpenter, and eats his plain food. Malik Bhago, the local revenue official, is offended that a visiting holy man has ignored his own lavish table, and summons him. Asked to explain, the Guru performs the squeeze. Bhago's wealth, he says, is wrung from the labour of others; Lalo's bread is honest earning.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — EMINABAD, 1520-21

Eminabad, then Saidpur, was sacked by **Babur's** army during the invasions that ended with Panipat in 1526. Guru Nanak Dev Ji was there, and he wrote about it. The hymns known as **Babarvani** — Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, **angs 360, 417–418 and 722–723** — are his eyewitness account of the destruction of the town, the killing, and the treatment of its women. He calls the invading force a marriage party of sin. He also puts the question directly to God, and does not soften it: why was this permitted?

Historians of the period use the Babarvani as a source. It is one of the very few descriptions of the Mughal invasions written from underneath by a named, datable contemporary who was standing in the town when it happened.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Bread does not contain milk. Cooked food does not contain the blood of the labourers whose work paid for it. The squeeze is a physical impossibility, and it is obviously an image — the kind of compressed visual metaphor that oral teaching runs on. Someone, at some point, stopped saying "it was as if" and the "as if" never came back.

Neither Bhai Lalo nor Malik Bhago is independently attested outside Sikh tradition. That does not make them fictional — a carpenter and a mid-level revenue officer in a small Punjabi town are exactly the sort of people who leave no other trace — but it means the episode rests entirely on sources written a century or more later.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

The teaching is not in doubt for a moment, because it is in his own recorded words rather than in a sakhi. *Kirat karo* — earn by honest work — is stated plainly across his compositions, alongside the sharpest condemnations of exploitation in the scripture of any tradition of that century.

But consider what else Eminabad gives us, and what we have chosen to tell instead.

In the same town, in the same few years, a Punjabi poet watched an imperial army destroy a civilian population and wrote it down — the burning, the dead, the women dragged from their homes — and put it into a scripture that is still read aloud daily, five centuries later. At almost the same moment, the emperor responsible was

composing his own memoirs of the same campaign from the other side of the sword. Both texts survive. Both can be read today.

We have a first-hand account of a Mughal invasion written from below, by our own founder, and we tell the one about the bread.

The Baghdad Inscription and the Journey Through the Netherworlds

THE CLAIM

An ancient stone inscription survives at Baghdad which directly proves that Guru Nanak Dev Ji was there. And it was at Baghdad that he ascended and descended in his physical body through the seven netherworlds and the seven skies, taking the son of the local pir with him.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

Two separate things have been fused here, and they need separating.

The travel itself is early: **Bhai Gurdas Ji's Var 1** records that Baba Nanak reached Baghdad with Mardana and stayed outside the city, and describes a discourse with a pir there. The **inscription**, by contrast, entered Sikh consciousness in **March 1917**, when Sikh soldiers serving with the Indian Army during the Mesopotamian campaign found a stone with an Arabic text near a shrine and read it as a record of the Guru's visit. It has been treated as decisive proof ever since. The **patal-akash journey** comes from the janamsakhis.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

Mardana gives the call to prayer and the city falls silent. The pir — called Dastgir or Bahlol in different versions — challenges him about the nature of creation. To answer, the Guru takes the pir's son by the hand and travels with him through the seven underworlds and seven heavens, returning in an instant with a bowl of sacred food as evidence.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — THE BAGHDAD STONE

The inscription is set into a wall inside the reputed tomb of Bahlol, near the tombs of Sitt Zubayda and Yusha' Nabi, between the modern airport and Baghdad West station. Its date figures were read in the earliest photographs as **927 AH (1520–21)**; the second figure was subsequently damaged, and the date is now commonly read as **917 AH (1511–12)** — nine years apart, in two different journeys under any reconstruction of the itinerary. The text has been examined and published in scholarly literature, including in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, and both its reading and its dating remain disputed.

Punjab and Baghdad were connected by long-established trade and pilgrimage routes, and Punjabi merchants used them. A faqir travelling west with a Muslim companion is not an extraordinary proposition. The travel is plausible and it is attested within a century by a serious source.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

- **A disputed inscription is not "direct proof."** Its date is read two ways nine years apart, its text is contested, and it surfaced in a wall in 1917. Every one of those facts individually weakens it; together they disqualify the word "proof."
- **Even at its strongest it would prove the wrong thing.** An inscription demonstrates that someone erected a memorial. Memorials are erected long after the fact, and by people with their own reasons.
- **Drop the diary.** The *Siyahito Baba Nanak Fakir*, supposedly kept by Haji Tajuddin and lodged at Medina, is quoted everywhere online as independent confirmation. No scholar has ever seen it. It should not appear in our arguments.
- **The netherworld journey inverts his own line.** *Patal* and *akash* are the levels of Indian cosmology, and Guru Nanak Dev Ji uses them himself — in Japji Sahib, pauri 22, **ang 5**: "*paataalaa paataal lakh aagaasaa aagaas*", "there are hundreds of thousands of netherworlds beneath netherworlds, and skies above skies."

The entire point of the line is that the count cannot be reached or known. Using it as evidence that he toured the place is a precise reversal of what he wrote.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

He probably did travel west. Bhai Gurdas Ji says so within a hundred years, and Bhai Gurdas Ji is not a careless witness. The routes existed, the companion was a Muslim, and a wandering faqir was an unremarkable sight on those roads.

What we do not have is proof, and we do not need to manufacture any. This is the part that concerns me most in the whole book: **a tradition that invents evidence for a claim that may well be true does more damage to that claim than its opponents ever could.** When the Baghdad stone is finally settled one way or the other by people who read Arabic epigraphy for a living, the ones who staked everything on it will have to move, and they will take the plausible parts with them when they go.

Say what we can support. He very likely reached Baghdad. There is a stone there that some read as remembering him. The seven netherworlds are a figure of speech that he wrote himself, and he wrote it to say that the universe is beyond counting — not to file a travel report.

The Geographic Impossibility of the Four Udasis

THE CLAIM

In four great journeys over about twenty-one years, Guru Nanak Dev Ji walked some 28,000 kilometres — in many tellings 50,000 — reaching Assam, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Mecca, Medina and Baghdad, on foot.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The map with four coloured arrows radiating from Punjab is a twentieth-century object. So is the kilometre total. The janamsakhis describe journeys; they do not organise them into four numbered udasis with a mileage figure attached. That framework was imposed later, by modern writers building a coherent itinerary out of scattered episodes, and the distance was then computed by joining the claimed sites with lines.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

They say he travelled a great deal, in several directions, over many years, with Mardana for much of it. They do not agree with each other about the routes, the order, or the destinations. Different traditions send him to different places in different sequences.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — THE FIXED POINTS

Born **1469**. At Sultanpur Lodhi until about **1499**. At Saidpur/Eminabad during Babur's assault, **1520–21** — fixed by his own Babarvani, not by tradition. Settled at **Kartarpur** from about 1521–22 and lived there for roughly his last eighteen years, farming, holding sangat and composing. Died **22 September 1539**. The travelling window is therefore about 1500 to 1521 — twenty-one years at the outside.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Let me begin by conceding the objection everyone reaches for first, because it is the weak one.

The distance is not impossible. Twenty-eight thousand kilometres over twenty-one years averages under four kilometres a day. Put another way: at a sustainable twenty-two kilometres on a walking day, the total needs about 1,200 walking days — a little over three years of actual walking, leaving eighteen years for stays, teaching and rest. Medieval pilgrims and traders covered comparable ground. Arithmetic does not refute this claim, and we should stop pretending it does.

What fails is everything else.

- **The itineraries contradict each other.** The janamsakhi traditions do not agree on where he went or in what order. McLeod's *Early Sikh Tradition* (1980) works through the discrepancies in detail. A route reconstructed by combining incompatible accounts is not a route; it is a composite.
- **Many sites are attested only by a later gurdwara.** A shrine built in the eighteenth or nineteenth century marks where Sikhs later lived and travelled, which followed migration, military service and trade — not necessarily where the Guru walked.
- **Some destinations cannot be visited.** Sumer Parbat is cosmological. Kailash has never been climbed.
- **The dates collide.** The Baghdad inscription is read as 1511–12 or 1520–21; the Mecca journey is popularly dated 1518–21; and he is independently placed at Eminabad in 1520–21 by his own hymns, settling Kartarpur immediately afterwards. These cannot all be accommodated in one itinerary, and the usual response is to quietly stop counting.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

He travelled, extensively, for about two decades. That is attested by Bhai Gurdas Ji and by every janamsakhi tradition, and it is not seriously questioned by anyone. What cannot be defended is the poster: the four arrows, the pinned sites, the total in kilometres.

And the number is doing something we should notice. It converts his greatness into mileage — as though the achievement were the walking, and the further he walked the greater he was.

He spent his last eighteen years in one small place on the Ravi. At Kartarpur he farmed his own land, ate with whoever came, established the practice of langar and sangat in a working settlement, tested and chose a successor from outside his family, and composed a great deal of what we now read. **Sikhi was not built on the road. It was built after he stopped walking.**

We made a poster of the journeys and left out the eighteen years that produced the religion.

Jyoti-Jot and the Flowers Beneath the Sheet

THE CLAIM

When Guru Nanak Dev Ji passed away at Kartarpur, his Hindu followers wished to cremate the body and his Muslim followers to bury it. They argued through the night. In the morning the sheet was lifted and the body was gone — only flowers lay beneath it. Each community took half: the Hindus burned theirs, the Muslims buried theirs.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The janamsakhi tradition, where it functions as the closing episode of the genre — a resolution story, designed to answer the question the whole life had raised. It is the perfect ending, which is a reason to look at it carefully rather than a reason not to.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE JANAMSAKHIS SAY

He asks both communities to place flowers beside him — in some versions, whichever group's flowers remain fresh by morning may perform the rites. He covers himself with a sheet. In the morning both sets of flowers are fresh, the body has gone, and the sheet is divided.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — KARTARPUR, 22 SEPTEMBER 1539

At Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur, in Narowal district, Pakistan, there stand today both a **samadhi** and a **grave** — a Hindu memorial and a Muslim one, side by side, at the same site. The Ravi repeatedly flooded and shifted its course over the centuries, destroying the earlier structures, which were rebuilt more than once. The succession had already been settled before his death: **Bhai Lehna**, a disciple, had been installed as Guru Angad Dev Ji, and Guru Nanak Dev Ji's own sons, Sri Chand and Lakhmi Das, were passed over.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

A body does not become flowers. But the more interesting point is that the physical evidence at Kartarpur quietly contradicts the story it is supposed to support.

If the body had vanished and been replaced by flowers divided between two communities, we would expect one shared memorial, or a story about the flowers. What actually stands there is a grave and a samadhi — two full memorials, one for each rite, built side by side. That is not what a miracle leaves behind. It is what a **negotiated settlement** leaves behind: two communities with a genuine claim on the same man, who could not agree, and who resolved it by each doing their own thing in the same place and continuing to live next to each other.

That is a harder and better ending than the flowers, and it is standing in Narowal district where anyone can go and look at it.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Notice what the flowers story is actually about. Two communities each insisting he was theirs — which is the exact claim Part 1 of this series spent ten chapters answering. The absorption argument does not begin in a nineteenth-century pamphlet or a twentieth-century political speech. It begins at his funeral, among people who loved him.

His own answer had been given decades earlier and was not ambiguous. He was neither, and the path he had opened was neither.

But the real ending of this life is not the funeral at all. It is the succession, and it is the most radical thing he ever did.

He tested his followers over years. He passed over both of his own sons — in sixteenth-century Punjab, where authority descended through the male line as a matter of course. He chose a disciple, renamed him **Angad**, "of my own limb," installed him publicly, and then *bowed to him*.

A founder who makes succession a matter of merit rather than blood, and who demonstrates it by placing himself below the man he has appointed, has done something structurally extraordinary. It is the decision that made ten Gurus possible instead of one family business, and therefore the decision that made everything in Part 3 of this series possible.

The flowers are a beautiful story about two communities. The bow is the reason there was anything left to argue over.

What Part 2 Tried to Do

The ten sakhis in this part converge on one point: **Guru Nanak Dev Ji's greatness does not stand on miracles.**

Turning the Kaaba, stopping a boulder with a palm, a cobra holding shade, three days alive under water, immortal yogis on a summit, milk and blood wrung from bread, a bodily tour of the netherworlds, twenty-eight thousand kilometres on foot, a corpse become flowers — these are layers of the janamsakhi tradition. They are not historical events, and several of them contradict the compositions they are attached to.

He refused the miraculous himself, in his own words, in Sidh Gosht, on ang 1 we can open tonight. He staked his authority on the Name and on nothing else. The Guru who put down *ridhi-sidhi* is the same Guru whose forehead we keep trying to crown with them.

None of this makes the janamsakhis worthless. They are our memory and our devotional literature, and some of them are magnificent as literature. But **a janamsakhi is not a chronicle**, and the confusion between the two is not harmless. It is the specific weakness that a hostile reader will always find first, and it is the reason a young Sikh who discovers that one sakhi does not hold sometimes concludes that nothing does.

Keep both, and keep them in their own places. The sakhi as spiritual literature. The historical record as history. That is not a loss of faith; it is a refusal to build faith on ground we know is soft.

And what is left when the decoration comes off is not thin. It is a man who walked out of a secure job at thirty, argued down the most powerful renunciate order of his century in public verse, stood in a sacked town and wrote down what an emperor's army did to civilians, farmed his own land for eighteen years, ate with everyone, and handed his authority to someone else's son rather than his own.

His real and permanent bequest is his bani — Japji Sahib, Asa di Var, the Babarvani, Sidh Gosht, the Mul Mantar that opens the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji at ang 1. Those are his own words, preserved, checkable, and read aloud somewhere in the world at this moment.

Miracles fade with the age that needed them. Bani stays awake.

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What's Next

Part 3 turns to the eight Gurus between Nanak and Gobind — **The Eight Silent Gurus: Sakhi and History**. The invention of a script. Twelve years of penance on one leg. An emperor in the langar queue. A city given as dowry. A Sufi's hand on a foundation brick. A smile on a hot iron plate. Fifty-two kings and a cloak with fifty-two tails. A herb that cured a prince. A touch that cured smallpox. A headless body that walked. The same six-step structure. The same care. The same honesty. The same respect.

— *End of Part 2* —

DEBUNKED — SIKHISM SERIES
PART 3 OF 13

The Eight Silent Gurus

From Guru Angad Dev Ji to Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib Ji — what actually happened is deeper than the miracle.

Lovepreet Singh

An investigative debunk — 10 sakhis from the lives of the eight Gurus between Nanak and Gobind, with named sources and Gurbani citations.

The Eight Silent Gurus

Sikhism is usually introduced through two Gurus. Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who opened the path. Guru Gobind Singh Ji, who gave it the Khalsa. Thick books have been written on both lives, and rightly so.

Between them stand eight more.

One hundred and thirty-six years of unbroken succession runs through those eight men — from Guru Angad Dev Ji's installation in 1539 to Chandni Chowk in 1675. They built Goindval and Amritsar. They dug the sarovar and raised the Harmandir. They gathered, edited, authenticated and sealed the Adi Granth. They put a second sword on the belt and called it miri, and left the first one there and called it piri. One of them was executed in Mughal custody at Lahore in 1606. Another was beheaded in Chandni Chowk in 1675 for a community that was not even his own. In between, a seven-year-old carried water to the dying in a Delhi epidemic and caught what they had.

I call them silent because we say less about them, not because they said less.

We are Sikhs. These eight are the spine of the tradition, and the same miraculous plaster that was laid over Guru Nanak Dev Ji's udasis has been laid over their lives too. Part 2 of this series scraped that plaster off the founding figure. This part does the same work for the eight who followed, using the same six-step structure, the same named sources, the same refusal to either inflate or dismiss.

Ten sakhis are examined here. The invention of an alphabet. Twelve years of penance on one leg. An emperor sent to sit on the floor and eat. A city gifted as dowry. A Sufi's hand on a foundation brick. A smile on a hot iron plate. Fifty-two kings and a cloak with fifty-two tails. A rare herb that cured a prince. A touch that cured smallpox. A headless body that walked with its own head.

Some of these sakhis are broadly historical and have been decorated. Some are decorations with no history under them at all. A few are almost certainly nineteenth-century additions that have been retold so often we now assume they are ancient. In every case there is a real event underneath, and in every case I have found the real event to be the more demanding of the two. That has been the pattern of this whole series and it has not broken yet.

When I say Sai Mian Mir did not lay the foundation brick of the Harmandir Sahib, I am not saying the story is worthless. I am saying that the meaning of that story never depended on the event. It depended on us, and on what we decided the story was for. A tradition that can only hold its meaning by being factually true is a tradition standing on one leg.

Part 1 examined the claims other people make about us. Part 2 examined the sakhis we tell about Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Part 3 is about the eight who built quietly, in the long middle of our history, where the greatness is not in the miracle but in the labour.

— Lovepreet Singh

What This Part Covers

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Every chapter follows the same six-step structure: **The Claim** • **Where It Came From** • **What the Tradition Says** • **The Real History** • **The Debunk** • **The Honest Picture**.

truth is the highest of all; but higher still is truthful living

— STAND ON THE TRUTH, NOT ON THE SAKHI

Guru Angad Dev Ji Invented the Gurmukhi Script

THE CLAIM

Guru Angad Dev Ji created the Gurmukhi script from nothing. He designed a brand-new alphabet so that Sikhs would have a script of their own, free of Devanagari and free of Brahmin control, and gave Punjabi its written form for the first time.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

This is not a Hindutva claim or a colonial one. It is ours. The sentence "Guru Angad Dev Ji invented the Gurmukhi script" appears in Punjab school textbooks, in SGPC-published biographies, in almost every English-language introduction to Sikhism, and in the kathas delivered every year on his gurpurab. It gained its present force during the **Singh Sabha** period (1873 onward), when establishing Sikh distinctness was urgent work and a separately invented alphabet was excellent evidence for it. The motive was honourable. The word was wrong.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

Guru Angad Dev Ji (1504–1552, Guru from 1539) settled at Khadur Sahib. He taught children himself, prepared a primer of the letters for them, established schools, ran a wrestling arena for the young, collected and preserved the hymns of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, and composed sixty-two saloks of his own that stand in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji today. The tradition holds that the letters he taught came to be called *Gurmukhi* — "from the mouth of the Guru."

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — THE SCRIPT FAMILY

Gurmukhi belongs to the Brahmi family. Its line runs Brahmi → Gupta → **Sharada** (Kashmir, c. eighth century CE) → the **Landa** and **Takri** scripts of the Punjab hills and bazaars. Landa (literally "clipped") was the shorthand of Punjabi traders and accountants — Mahajani, Sarrafi, Khojki and others. It was fast, and it was unreliable, because it carried almost no vowel notation. A trader reading his own ledger could fill in the vowels from context. A stranger reading a hymn could not.

The decisive evidence sits inside our own scripture. **Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Patti Likhi** — Raag Asa, **ang 432** of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji — is an acrostic of thirty-five stanzas, one for each letter, composed by the first Guru, years before Guru Angad Dev Ji held the guruship. From roughly the ninth to the thirty-third stanza the sequence matches the order Gurmukhi uses today. An acrostic is only possible when the alphabet already exists *and* when the audience already knows its order well enough to feel the pattern. Guru Amar Das Ji later composed his own *Patti* on ang 434, and Bhagat Kabir Ji's *Bawan Akhri* uses the same device.

The earliest surviving Gurmukhi manuscripts are the **Goindval Pothis**, compiled around the 1570s under Guru Amar Das Ji, followed by the **Kartarpuri Bir** of 1604. Comparative palaeography — the letter-by-letter comparison of shapes — places Gurmukhi's characters alongside their Landa, Takri and Sharada cousins. Several are effectively identical.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Invention means bringing into existence something that was not there. Standardization means fixing something that was there but varied. Everything we have points to the second.

- **The letters predate him.** They descend from Sharada through Landa, and their shapes show it.
- **Guru Nanak Dev Ji wrote an acrostic in them.** You cannot write an alphabet poem in an alphabet that has not been invented yet.

- **He never claimed it.** Not one of Guru Angad Dev Ji's sixty-two saloks mentions creating a script. **Bhai Gurdas Ji**, who praises him at length in *Var 1*, does not mention it either — and Bhai Gurdas Ji was not a man who left achievements out.
- **What he actually did is documented.** He fixed the order, settled the forms, and — the change that mattered most — gave the script full vowel notation, the *lagaan matra* that Landa lacked. He then taught it to children rather than to a priestly class.

That last point is not a technicality. A mis-vowelled shabad is a mis-read shabad. Scripture cannot be entrusted to a script that leaves the vowels to guesswork. The compilation of the Adi Granth in 1604 was possible because sixty-five years earlier someone had made the script exact.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Standardizing a script is not the lesser achievement. William Caxton did not invent the Latin alphabet; he fixed English spelling with a printing press, and no one thinks less of him for it. Guru Angad Dev Ji took a merchant's shorthand and turned it into a vehicle capable of carrying revelation — then handed it to farmers' children at a time when Sanskrit was gate-kept by caste and Persian was the language of the court.

Every Punjabi who reads Punjabi today reads because of that decision. Every Punjabi newspaper, every school primer, every ang of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji sits on it. This is an enormous thing to have done, and it is entirely true. It does not need the word "invented" holding it up.

Guru Amar Das Ji Stood on One Leg for Twelve Years

THE CLAIM

Before he became Guru, Bhai Amar Das performed twelve years of severe penance at Khadur — standing on one leg, going without sleep, punishing the body — and it was this tapasya that earned him the guruship.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The one-leg detail is not in the mainstream Sikh account. It is a **Puranic motif** imported into a Sikh biography. Standing on one leg for years is the signature image of penance in Hindu narrative literature — Dhruv, Bhagirath, Ravana and dozens of lesser figures all do it. When Sikh lives were retold in nineteenth and twentieth-century popular literature, and again in the children's books and colour-plate calendars of the last fifty years, the motif attached itself to the twelve years Guru Amar Das Ji genuinely spent at Khadur. It also does useful work for the absorption argument examined in Part 1: a Guru who performs tapasya is legible as a Hindu ascetic.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

The mainstream Sikh account is specific and quite different. Amar Das of Basarke was a Vaishnav who made some twenty pilgrimages to Haridwar and came home each time unsatisfied. In his sixties he heard **Bibi Amro** — Guru Angad Dev Ji's daughter, married into his extended family — reciting Guru Nanak Dev Ji's bani at dawn. He asked to be taken to her father. From roughly 1540 to 1552 he served at Khadur: carrying water from the Beas, about five kilometres away, before dawn for Guru Angad Dev Ji's bath, walking the return journey backwards so as never to turn his back on the Guru. He also washed dishes, ground grain, carried bricks and fetched fuel. He was installed as the third Guru in 1552, at seventy-three.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — GURU AMAR DAS JI AT A GLANCE

Born 1479 at Basarke, near Amritsar. Guru from 1552 to 1574. Founded Goindval on the Beas and built the baoli there with its eighty-four steps. Created the **manji** system — twenty-two preaching seats, several headed by women — which is the first administrative structure in Sikh history. Made langar a precondition of audience. Spoke against sati and against purdah. Composed the *Anand Sahib* in Raag Ramkali. His hymns in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji are commonly counted at 907, the third-largest body in the Granth.

Nothing in the contemporary or near-contemporary record — not Bhai Gurdas Ji's vars, not the Goindval Pothis, not the early janamsakhi material — describes penance of any kind. What they describe is *seva*: sustained physical labour performed for others. The line most often quoted from this period is Guru Angad Dev Ji's public defence of him when a village woman mocked him as "the homeless old man who carries water" — *he is not homeless; he is the shelter of the shelterless.*

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Gurbani does not merely fail to endorse tapasya. It refuses it, by name, in the opening prayer of the tradition. Guru Nanak Dev Ji, *Japji Sahib*, pauri 21, **ang 4**:

"tirath tap dayaa dat daan / je ko paavai til kaa maan" — "Pilgrimage, austerity, compassion and charity: whatever honour these bring is worth no more than a sesame seed."

Guru Amar Das Ji's own compositions carry the same rejection of ritual self-punishment. A man who spent his life arguing that God is not reached by austerity did not reach God by austerity.

Then there is the body. Standing on one leg for twelve years is not a difficult feat; it is a physiological impossibility. Sustained unilateral weight-bearing on that scale would destroy the joint within months, and no such case exists in the medical literature or in any reliable historical record anywhere.

The deepest problem is that the substitution reverses the meaning. **Tapasya is suffering directed at yourself. Seva is labour directed at someone else.** They are opposites. The sakhi takes the second and quietly swaps in the first, and in doing so it deletes the entire point.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

A sixty-one-year-old man walked five kilometres before dawn, every day, for twelve years, carrying water on his head so that another man could bathe. He walked home backwards out of respect. He washed dishes. He ground flour. He did this in old age, with no promise of anything, and at seventy-three he was handed the guruship by a Guru who had watched him do it.

That is the teaching, and it is a hard one: greatness in this tradition is available through ordinary unglamorous work, done late, done for others, done without withdrawing from the world. Replace it with a man balanced on one leg and you have not made the story bigger. You have returned him to precisely the tradition he walked out of, twenty pilgrimages later, when he finally heard something worth staying for.

Akbar Was Made to Stand in the Langar Queue and Was Rebuked

THE CLAIM

Emperor Akbar came to Goindval to meet Guru Amar Das Ji and was refused an audience until he had sat on the floor in the pangat and eaten langar with the poorest people present. In the stronger versions, the Guru also rebuked him to his face for his pride.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The episode is Sikh in origin and reaches English readers chiefly through **Max Arthur Macauliffe's** *The Sikh Religion* (Oxford, 1909), which drew on Sikh informants and earlier Punjabi accounts. It travels because it is perfect: one scene, one emperor, one floor, and the whole doctrine of equality delivered without a word of theology. It is told at every school assembly and in most gurdwara kathas. The rebuke element is the part that has grown — the earliest tellings have Akbar complying willingly and cheerfully, not being scolded.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

In 1567, travelling towards Lahore, Akbar halts at Goindval. He asks to see the Guru. He is told the rule: *pehle pangat, pichhe sangat* — first the row, then the congregation. He removes his shoes, sits on the floor in a line with everyone else, and eats coarse langar food. Afterwards, impressed, he offers a jagir — the revenue of several villages — to endow the kitchen. Guru Amar Das Ji declines, saying the langar must live on the small offerings of ordinary people and nothing else.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

Here the evidence needs sorting into two piles, and they are not the same size.

What the Mughal record documents: Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnama* records Akbar at **Goindval in 1598**, on his return from Lahore, where he met **Guru Arjan Dev Ji** — two Gurus later — and remitted the year's land revenue for the region because the harvest had failed. That meeting is in the imperial chronicle, dated, with a policy consequence attached.

What the Mughal record does not document: the 1567 visit to Guru Amar Das Ji. It appears in neither the *Akbarnama* nor the *Ain-i-Akbari*, both of which are unusually detailed about Akbar's movements and about his meetings with religious figures — Abu'l Fazl records the Jain teachers, the Zoroastrians, and the Jesuit mission of Rodolfo Acquaviva by name. The Goindval langar episode rests entirely on Sikh sources of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

DEFINE — SULH-I-KUL

"Peace with all" — Akbar's stated policy of religious accommodation, formalised through the Ibadat Khana debates that began in 1575 and the abolition of the jizya tax in 1564. A ruler with this record stopping to meet a well-known Punjabi teacher is entirely in character. The policy makes the visit plausible; it does not make it documented.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

Two claims are bundled here and they deserve different verdicts.

The langar rule is solid. That Guru Amar Das Ji required everyone — every rank, every caste, every visitor — to eat in the pangat before the sangat is attested across the sources and is visible in the institution itself, which has never had a second queue. This is not in doubt.

The specific scene is not. No contemporary record, Mughal or Sikh, places Akbar on that floor in 1567. And the rebuke version carries the fingerprints of improvement in transmission: the visitor changes between

retellings, the degree of humiliation rises with each generation, and the Guru's words get sharper the later the source. An anecdote that gets better every time it is told is an anecdote being edited.

There is also a problem with the punchline. Akbar eating on the floor with commoners was not the extraordinary humbling the sakhi needs it to be — he did this kind of thing habitually, and made a public virtue of it. The story quietly requires an emperor who would never stoop, and Akbar was not that emperor.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

The rule never needed the emperor. What makes langar radical is not that a king once obeyed it. It is that the rule applied identically to everyone, every day, whether or not a king was in the room — in a society organised around who may not eat with whom, in a century when that organisation was not questioned.

And the better fact is the one we almost never tell. Guru Amar Das Ji refused state revenue for the kitchen. An institution funded by the sangat cannot be leveraged by the state, cannot be withdrawn as punishment, and cannot be used as a lever in a negotiation. That is a structural decision about independence taken four centuries before anyone had the vocabulary for it — and it is worth considerably more than the image of a humbled emperor sitting on a floor.

The Land of Amritsar Was Akbar's Dowry Gift

THE CLAIM

The land on which Amritsar stands was a gift from Emperor Akbar to Bibi Bhani, daughter of Guru Amar Das Ji, on her marriage to Bhai Jetha — later Guru Ram Das Ji. The Harmandir Sahib therefore stands on ground donated by a Mughal emperor.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

This one is ours as well, at least originally. Nineteenth-century Sikh accounts record an imperial grant, and the detail was flattering: it showed the Guru's household honoured by the throne. It has since hardened into examination-paper fact — "which Mughal emperor donated 500 bighas of land to Bibi Bhani?" is a stock question in Indian competitive-exam guides. It also does quiet political work in both directions today, appearing in composite-culture framings where the site's origin becomes a story about Mughal generosity, and in arguments that Sikh institutions were dependent on imperial patronage from the start.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

Bibi Bhani married Bhai Jetha of Lahore, an orphan who sold boiled grams and who would become the fourth Guru. Akbar, in the version told alongside the langar episode of Chapter 3, is so impressed by Guru Amar Das Ji that he settles a jagir on the Guru's daughter — the revenue of several villages, or five hundred bighas of land, depending on the telling. On that land Guru Ram Das Ji later excavated the sarovar, and the settlement that grew around it was called Ramdaspur, then Amritsar.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — THE COMPETING SIKH ACCOUNT

A second version, equally traditional, says the land was **purchased** — bought from the zamindars of the neighbouring village of **Tung** for **700 rupees**. Some accounts place the purchase in Guru Amar Das Ji's time, some in Guru Ram Das Ji's. Excavation of the sarovar is generally dated from 1577. Note that this is not a Sikh account against an outside account. It is two Sikh accounts against each other.

The chronology is the problem. Bibi Bhani's marriage is conventionally dated to about **1553–1554**. Akbar acceded in **February 1556**, at thirteen, and did not govern in his own right until the regency of Bairam Khan ended in **1560**. A wedding gift given in 1553 by a man who became emperor in 1556 and ruled from 1560 is not a difficult claim to assess.

The second problem is paper. The Mughal revenue administration was a documentation machine: *madad-i-maash* grants, jagir assignments and imperial farmans generated records, and large numbers of them survive across northern India. No sanad, farman or deed for this grant has ever been produced. Historians of Amritsar have concluded that in the absence of an authentic deed, Akbar's donation of this land cannot be established.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

- **The dates do not permit it.** If the grant was a wedding gift, Akbar was not yet ruling. Moving the grant later to fix this breaks the "dowry" framing that is the whole claim.
- **The document does not exist.** In an empire that recorded grants meticulously, this absence carries weight.
- **The rival account is more specific.** Named sellers (the zamindars of Tung), a named price (700 rupees), a named transaction. Vagueness is a property of invented history; specificity is expensive to fake.
- **We know what a real Mughal concession to the Gurus looks like in the record.** Chapter 3's 1598 revenue remission is in the *Akbarnama*: dated, chronicled, with an administrative consequence. The Amritsar grant has none of these features.

None of this touches the sanctity of the place. It touches the story we tell about ourselves, and that story turns out to be better without the gift.

If the land was bought, Amritsar was paid for by the sangat — small contributions, daswandh, the ordinary money of ordinary people. That is the same mechanism Guru Amar Das Ji protected when he refused imperial revenue for the langar, and the same one Guru Arjan Dev Ji later formalised. Three Gurus in a row holding one policy: build with your own money, and owe the state nothing. The dowry story quietly cancels that policy and replaces it with patronage.

This is not a point against Akbar. His documented act — waiving a year's land revenue for a famine-struck district in 1598 — is real, generous, and worth remembering accurately. We do not need to invent a second gift from him. We need to stop forgetting the first one.

Sai Mian Mir Laid the Foundation of the Harmandir Sahib

THE CLAIM

In 1588, Guru Arjan Dev Ji invited the Sufi saint Sai Mian Mir of Lahore to Amritsar and asked him to lay the foundation brick of the Harmandir Sahib — a deliberate act of interfaith respect, placing a Muslim's hand on the first stone of the Sikh world's holiest building.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

This is the most loved story in this book, and I do not enjoy writing this chapter. It is repeated by SGPC guides, printed in tourism literature, quoted by politicians of every party, and taught to children as the founding gesture of Sikh pluralism.

It is also traceable, almost to the year. **Dr Madanjit Kaur**, in *The Golden Temple: Past and Present* (Guru Nanak Dev University, 1983), followed the trail. The first Sikh writer to name Mian Mir as the layer of the brick is **Giani Gian Singh** — and only in the *third* edition of his *Panth Prakash*, published at Lahore. In the first edition (Delhi) and the second (Amritsar), he does not say who laid the first brick at all. In the third he says Mian Mir did, cites no source, and gives no explanation for the change. Among Persian works the story surfaces first in **Bute Shah's** *Tawarikh-i-Punjab* (1848).

Between 1588 and the late nineteenth century — roughly three hundred years, during which Sikhs wrote a great deal of history — not one Sikh writer records it.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

Mian Mir (1550–1635), the Qadiri Sufi of Lahore, is summoned by the Guru and lays the brick. A mason, watching, thinks it has gone in crooked and quietly resets it. The Guru sees this and says that because the brick was disturbed, the shrine will one day be pulled down and rebuilt.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — THE HARMANDIR CHRONOLOGY

Sarovar excavation begun under Guru Ram Das Ji from about 1577. Construction of the shrine begun by Guru Arjan Dev Ji in 1588 and completed around 1601. The Adi Granth, compiled 1604, installed inside with Baba Buddha Ji as the first Granthi. Four doors, one to each direction. Built below the level of the surrounding ground, so that the worshipper descends to enter — the inverse of a temple on a plinth.

The contemporary and near-contemporary sources are silent on Mian Mir. **Bhai Gurdas Ji** — who lived through the construction, scribed the Adi Granth, and wrote at length about Guru Arjan Dev Ji's works — does not mention him. Nor does *Sri Gur Sobha* (1711), nor the *Bansavalinama* (1769), nor the Gurbilas literature. Madanjit Kaur's conclusion from the earliest tradition is that **Guru Arjan Dev Ji laid the foundation himself**.

The silence runs on the other side too. Mian Mir was a major figure with a substantial Persian hagiography, including *Sakinat-ul-Auliya* (1642), a whole book devoted to him and his circle by **Dara Shikoh**, his own disciple. That literature records no such event. A Sufi master's biographers do not normally omit the day he founded another religion's central shrine.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

What makes this case unusual is that we can watch the story enter the record. It is absent from the first edition of a book, absent from the second, and present in the third, sourceless. That is not a tradition being transmitted. That is a tradition being added to.

The crooked-brick prophecy is the second tell. It exists to explain the destruction of the Harmandir Sahib by Afghan forces in the eighteenth century — the demolitions of 1757 and 1762. A prophecy that predicts an event which had already happened when the prophecy was first written down is doing retrospective work. It also dates the composition: after 1762, not in 1588.

Three centuries of silence, a sourceless late insertion, a back-dated prophecy, and nothing from the Sufi side. On any standard we would apply to someone else's claim, this does not stand.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Here is what hurts, and what helps: **the building already says it.**

Guru Arjan Dev Ji gave the Harmandir Sahib four doors, one facing each direction, so that it could not be entered from a single privileged side, and so that all four varnas had a way in. He set it below ground level, so that every person approaching it walks downward — the opposite of every temple architecture in the subcontinent, which raises the sanctum above the worshipper. Inside it he installed a scripture containing the hymns of Muslim and Hindu bhagats of low caste alongside those of the Gurus, which no other tradition on earth had done.

The interfaith statement is in the stone, the level, the doors and the book. We borrowed an anecdote to make an argument we were already standing inside. And Mian Mir does not need it either — the real friendship between Sufi and Sikh in seventeenth-century Punjab is documented well enough without a brick that nobody saw him lay.

Guru Arjan Dev Ji Sat Smiling Silently on the Hot Plate

THE CLAIM

Guru Arjan Dev Ji was tortured for five days at Lahore — seated on a red-hot iron plate while burning sand was poured over his body — and throughout it he sat serene and silent, without a sound of pain, reciting "tera kia meetha lage."

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The martyrdom is beyond dispute. The tableau is a later composition.

The earliest appearance of the red-hot pan and burning-sand imagery in connection with the Guru is in an apocryphal salok appended to the epilogue of the **Banno recension** of the Adi Granth, prepared in **1642**. **Professor Sahib Singh**'s textual analysis attributed the Banno apocrypha to the **Hindalis** — a schismatic group that followed a rival claimant, opposed Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji, and had aligned itself with the Mughal administration at Lahore. **Pashaura Singh** ("Understanding the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 12:1) reads the passage as a possible oblique attack: how could a servant of God have been treated so, and if he was, what does that say about him? The imagery is fixed for later Sikh writing by **Kesar Singh Chhibbar's Bansavalinama** (1769), and becomes standard in the nineteenth century.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

Five days of torture in the summer of 1606. The hot plate, the burning sand, the cauldron of boiling water. Mian Mir arrives and offers to destroy the empire; the Guru forbids it. On the last day he asks to bathe in the Ravi, walks into the river, and does not come out. Throughout, the same line: *tera kia meetha lage* — "what You do is sweet to me."

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

Four independent sources survive from within four decades of the event. They agree the Guru was killed in Mughal custody. None of them describes a hot plate.

- **Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*** (the emperor's own memoirs). He writes that too many Hindus and Muslims had been drawn to "this shop of falsehood," that the Guru had blessed the rebel prince Khusrav, and that he ordered the Guru's property confiscated and the man himself executed — *siyasat o yasa*. This is the executioner's written confession.
- **Bhai Gurdas Ji, *Var 24, pauri 23*** — the only contemporary Sikh account. It treats the death as a hero's death. It does not describe the method.
- **Father Jerome Xavier**, letter in Portuguese from Lahore to the Provincial at Goa, **25 September 1606**, three months after the event, printed by Fernão Guerreiro. He records the arrest after the prince's flight, a fine of a hundred thousand crusados, a wealthy surety who then stripped the Guru's household — furniture, and the clothes of his wife and children — to recover it, then "beaten with slippers," food withheld, and death from the accumulated ill-usage.
- ***Dabistan-i-Mazahib*** (1640s): the Guru was tied and kept in the open in the desert around Lahore, and died "owing to the strong sun, summer heat and the injuries inflicted by the collectors."

DEFINE — SIYASAT O YASA

Yasa is the Mongol legal code of Chingiz Khan; *siyasat* is political punishment. In Mughal usage the pair meant capital punishment inflicted with torture and confiscation. It is worth setting beside one line from the same memoir: Shaikh Nizam Thanasari, a Muslim cleric, met and encouraged the same rebel prince — and Jahangir exiled him to Mecca with travel expenses. Same offence. Different religion. Different sentence.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

That the Guru was tortured is not in question — it is explicit in the sentence itself and in the Dabistan's "injuries inflicted by the collectors." What is not supported is the specific scene. The nearest source in time and place, written in Lahore that same season, gives beating and starvation. The Persian account gives exposure, heat and injury. The iron plate enters the record thirty-six years later, in a text prepared by a hostile sect, and hardens over the following century.

The recited line needs the same care. *Tera kia meetha lage* is Guru Arjan Dev Ji's own composition — Raag Asa, **ang 394** of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. It was written before, not improvised on a plate. Attributing it to that moment is devotional framing, and it is beautiful framing, but it is not a transcript. No one was taking dictation in a Mughal custody chamber.

The last problem is the one we should mind most. Later tradition moved the blame onto **Chandu Shah**, a Hindu official cast as the surety who tortured the Guru to recover his money — and Xavier's letter shows exactly how that reading became available. But Jahangir's memoir names the decision as his own. A version in which a private Hindu enemy is responsible lets an empire off the hook for a judicial execution it recorded itself.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Very few martyrdoms in world history are confirmed in the handwriting of the ruler who ordered them. This one is. We do not need the plate.

What actually happened is this: a state executed a religious teacher because his influence had grown across both religious communities and because he had blessed the wrong prince; it applied a foreign penal code to do it; it exiled a Muslim cleric to Mecca for the identical offence; and it confiscated everything the man owned. The Guru died in that custody in the Lahore summer of 1606 — observed on Jeth sudi 4, dated in various accounts to 30 May or 16 June.

His composure under it is the theological centre of the event, and nothing in the historical record contradicts it. But the composure is not a demonstration that a body can be immune to iron. It is a demonstration that a man can be held in the will of God while an empire kills him — which is harder, and truer, and is the thing his sons and grandsons actually inherited.

Bandi Chhor — Exactly Fifty-Two Kings Were Freed

THE CLAIM

Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji refused to leave Gwalior Fort unless the fifty-two imprisoned Hindu rajas were released with him. Jahangir agreed that only those who could hold on to the Guru's cloak might walk out, so the Guru had a cloak made with fifty-two tassels. All fifty-two were freed. Sikhs mark the day as Bandi Chhor Divas.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

The imprisonment is historical. The number and the cloak are not from the same century as the imprisonment.

Dabistan-i-Mazahib (1640s) records Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji's detention at Gwalior. The fifty-two rajas and the tasselled cloak appear in the *Gurbilas Patshahi Chhevin* — a text whose dating is disputed, with serious scholars placing it in the **mid-nineteenth century** — and then in **Bhai Santokh Singh's** *Suraj Prakash* (1843) and **Giani Gian Singh's** *Twarikh Guru Khalsa* (late nineteenth century). The name *Bandi Chhor Divas* as a distinct Sikh festival is largely a **twentieth-century** consolidation, promoted during and after the Singh Sabha and Akali reform period, when giving a Sikh name to a day Sikhs already observed was a live political need.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

Jahangir imprisons the young sixth Guru at Gwalior — in some accounts over the unpaid fine levied on Guru Arjan Dev Ji, in others over the fortification of Amritsar and the raising of an armed force. Sai Mian Mir and Wazir Khan intercede. The release order comes. The Guru refuses to leave alone. The condition of the cloak is set, the cloak is made, and fifty-two detained rulers walk out holding it. He returns to Amritsar on Diwali, and the city is lit for him.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — WHAT IS ACTUALLY FIXED

Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji (1595–1644), Guru from 1606 at eleven, wore two swords — *miri* and *piri* — and built the Akal Takht facing the Harmandir Sahib. He was detained at Gwalior Fort, the empire's principal state prison for political detainees, including Mughal princes. Beyond that, the sources disagree substantially. The Sikh tradition dates the imprisonment to about 1611–1612; the *Dabistan* suggests roughly 1617–1619. Its length is given as forty days in some accounts, two years in others, and twelve years in a few. That spread is itself evidence of how thin the underlying record is.

Jahangir's *Tuzuk* — a memoir in which he freely records ordering the execution of this Guru's father — says nothing about detaining or releasing the son. And there is no imperial record anywhere of fifty-two detained rulers being released together, which would have been a significant political event.

The Diwali connection also predates the story. **Guru Amar Das Ji** had already instructed Sikhs to gather before the Guru at fixed points in the year, Diwali among them, which is why there was a large sangat at Amritsar on that day in the first place. **Bhai Gurdas Ji** uses the festival as an image in *Var 19* — "on the night of Diwali the lamps are lit" — writing in the sixth Guru's own lifetime, without attaching it to any release.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

- **The precision is the tell.** An exact count paired with a garment engineered to match that count is the architecture of a folk tale. Fifty-two recurs across North Indian narrative as a conventional "complete set" number, in the way forty and seven do elsewhere.

- **No contemporary source gives any number.** Not the *Dabistan*, not Bhai Gurdas Ji, not the Mughal chronicles. The number arrives with the nineteenth-century texts.
- **No list exists.** If fifty-two ruling houses had a raja freed by the Sikh Guru, we would expect several of those houses to have remembered it in their own chronicles and genealogies. No princely family has ever identified an ancestor among the fifty-two, and no accepted list of the names has ever been produced.
- **The festival link is later.** Sikhs were gathering at Amritsar on Diwali before the imprisonment, on Guru Amar Das Ji's instruction.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Strip the tassels off and what remains is the part that was always doing the work: **a man refused freedom that was offered to him alone.**

Whether the detainees numbered fifty-two or twelve or five, the principle does not move a millimetre. Liberation that stops at yourself is not liberation; it is a private arrangement with power. That is the doctrine, and it is entirely consistent with everything else this Guru did — the second sword, the Akal Takht built to face the Harmandir Sahib, the insistence that spiritual authority must answer temporal power rather than retreat from it.

Bandi Chhor, in Sikh usage, is a name for God: the one who releases the bound. Applying it to a man who would not walk out of a prison alone is not decoration. It is the highest compliment the tradition has. It does not need a cloak with fifty-two tails to hold it up.

Guru Har Rai Sahib Ji Cured Dara Shikoh With a Rare Herb

THE CLAIM

Aurangzeb poisoned his brother Dara Shikoh with a powdered tiger's whisker. The physicians found only one cure: two ounces of chebulic myrobalan and a clove weighing one masha. Neither could be found anywhere in the empire. They existed only in Guru Har Rai Sahib Ji's herbal storehouse at Kiratpur, and the Guru gave them freely, saving the prince's life.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

Sikh tradition, reaching wide circulation through **Macauliffe** and the twentieth-century devotional literature that followed him. It is a well-built story, because it is fastened at both ends to things that are true: Guru Har Rai Sahib Ji genuinely ran a dispensary at Kiratpur, and Dara Shikoh genuinely came to him for help. It also performs a useful explanatory job — it accounts for why Aurangzeb, once victorious, took an interest in the Guru's household.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

The prince is dying. The court physicians name two ingredients. Agents search the bazaars of the empire and find neither. The prime minister remembers the Guru at Kiratpur, who keeps the finest collection of medicinal herbs in India. The Guru hands them over without conditions and without being asked twice. Dara recovers.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — GURU HAR RAI SAHIB JI

1630–1661. Seventh Guru from 1644, grandson of Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji. Based at Kiratpur in the Shivalik foothills. Maintained a standing force of 2,200 mounted men and never fought a battle with it. Ran a herbal dispensary at Kiratpur that treated whoever arrived. In 1661 he sent his elder son **Ram Rai** to Aurangzeb's court, and disowned him when Ram Rai altered a line of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's bani — *mitti musalman ki* — to avoid offending the emperor. He never saw his son again, and passed the guruship instead to his five-year-old younger son, Har Krishan.

Documented: Dara Shikoh's defeat at Samugarh in May 1658 and his flight through the Punjab; the seventh Guru's assistance to him, recorded in Sikh sources and referred to in later Persian material; and Aurangzeb's summons of Ram Rai to Delhi in 1661, which is best explained by exactly that association.

Not documented: the poisoning and the cure. Dara Shikoh is among the best-recorded figures of the seventeenth century — the *Padshahnama*, the travel accounts of François Bernier and Niccolao Manucci, his own substantial writings, and the records of his trial. None of them records a poisoning by Aurangzeb followed by a miraculous recovery. Aurangzeb's actual disposal of his brother required no poison at all: capture in 1659, a trial for apostasy, and public execution in August of that year, all fully chronicled.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

The story fails on the pharmacy counter.

Chebulic myrobalan (*Terminalia chebula*; harad, haritaki) is not rare. It is one of the most widely used drugs in the subcontinent, the first of the three fruits in triphala, stocked by every apothecary and most kitchens in seventeenth-century India. **Cloves** were among the highest-volume commodities in the Indian Ocean spice trade, and the Mughal court was the wealthiest purchaser of spices in the world. The claim requires the imperial household, with unlimited money and the entire trade network of an empire, to be unable to obtain harad and a clove.

The specification is what does the trick. "A clove weighing one masha" — about a gram, an unusually large one — converts a bazaar commodity into a rarity by adding a requirement. This is a standard mechanism in miracle stories: take a common object, attach a precise and arbitrary condition, and the ordinary becomes unobtainable. The tiger's whisker is a folk-poison belief of the region rather than a pharmacological fact, and appears as a narrative device rather than a documented cause of illness.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Here is what actually happened, and it costs the Guru far more than the herb did.

A Sikh Guru ran a free clinic in the foothills and treated whoever walked in, including the losing side of a Mughal civil war. When the fugitive heir came through the Punjab, he helped him. Then the other brother won.

Aurangzeb summoned the Guru's household to account for it, and the Guru sent his elder son. That son, standing in front of an emperor, changed one word of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's bani to make it palatable — and his father cut him off permanently, handed the guruship to a five-year-old, and died without seeing him again.

That is the story: a man who gave medicine to whoever needed it, and who would not give up a single line of scripture to keep his own son. Nothing in it needs a poisoned prince.

Guru Har Krishan Sahib Ji Cured Smallpox by Touch

THE CLAIM

During the Delhi epidemic of 1664, the seven-year-old eighth Guru cured the sick by his touch and by his glance. Thousands who were dying of smallpox and cholera recovered because he laid a hand on them. The water he gave from the well at Jaisinghpura carried the cure, and carries it still.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

Devotional literature, gurpurab katha, and the enormous body of children's material produced in the last century. There is also a live modern layer: water from the sarovar at Gurdwara Bangla Sahib is widely described as curative, and pilgrims carry it home in bottles for the sick. The story is generally told alongside the Panjokhara episode, in which the young Guru is challenged to expound the Gita and has an unlettered water-carrier do it instead — a second miracle claim from the same short tenure.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

Guru Har Krishan Sahib Ji is summoned to Delhi through Raja Jai Singh, in connection with Ram Rai's rival claim, and stays at the raja's bungalow at Jaisinghpura — the site of Gurdwara Bangla Sahib. The city is in the grip of smallpox and cholera. He refuses to withdraw, serves the sick himself, draws water from the well for them, and heals by touch. He then contracts smallpox, and dies on **30 March 1664**, aged seven years and eight months, having named his successor only as "Baba Bakala."

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — WHAT SMALLPOX WAS IN 1664

Variola major killed roughly three in ten of those it infected and left most survivors scarred. There was no treatment anywhere in the world. Edward Jenner's vaccine is 1796; variolation was practised in parts of India and China earlier, but was neither available nor applicable during an outbreak in progress. Cholera, the other disease in Delhi that season, kills through dehydration and can be survived in a large proportion of cases if the patient is given clean water and kept hydrated.

The uncontested facts are these. There was an epidemic in Delhi in 1663–64. The Guru was in the city, at Jai Singh's residence. He did not leave. He served the sick, and water from that well was distributed. He caught the disease and died of it at seven. Before dying he pointed to Bakala, which is how the Sikhs found Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib Ji.

STEP 4 — THE DEBUNK

The claim contains its own refutation, and it is a gentle one. **A touch that cures smallpox cannot fail on the person doing the touching.** The Guru died of the disease he is said to have cured in thousands of others. Either the power existed and was withheld from himself for a reason no source offers, or it was not that kind of power at all.

The second problem is arithmetic. In any epidemic most infected people recover — roughly seven in ten with smallpox, and a large share of cholera cases where fluids are available. Anyone who spends weeks among hundreds of sick people is necessarily surrounded by hundreds who get better. Attribution follows presence. This is not cynicism about the Guru; it is a description of how healing claims are generated everywhere, in every tradition, including ones we do not belong to and judge easily.

Third, the Sikh position on miracle-working is not neutral. Guru Nanak Dev Ji's refusal of the siddhis in *Sidh Gosht*, examined in Part 2 of this series, is not a one-off. The Gurus consistently declined to make supernatural power the evidence of spiritual authority, precisely because it makes authority contingent on performance.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

Now look at what he actually did, in the light of what we now know about cholera.

He gave the sick **clean water**, in an epidemic, in a crowded city, and he stayed with them. Clean water and fluid replacement are, to this day, the primary treatment for cholera — oral rehydration is one of the highest-impact medical interventions of the twentieth century. Food, shelter, attendance and clean water were, in 1664, not the poor substitute for a miracle. They were the entire body of effective medicine then available, and he supplied all four.

The sakhi asks us to believe in a healer who unaccountably failed to heal himself. The history offers a seven-year-old who walked into a plague city that adults were fleeing, would not leave it, did the only useful thing anyone could do, and paid for it with his life within weeks. He has no compositions in the Granth. He built no institutions. He held the guruship for under three years and did not reach eight years of age. What he had was one decision, taken at seven, about whether to stay.

That is the version worth telling a child, because a child can copy it.

Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib Ji's Headless Body Carried Its Own Head

THE CLAIM

After the beheading at Chandni Chowk, the Guru's headless body rose to its feet, picked up its own severed head, and walked away through the crowd — in some tellings all the way towards Anandpur — before the Mughal soldiers could seize either.

STEP 1 — WHERE IT CAME FROM

This is not the mainstream Sikh account. It is a **jhujhar** motif — the headless warrior who fights or walks on after decapitation — which is one of the most widespread hero-figures in North Indian folk religion, with hero-stones and shrines across Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab. The motif attaches easily to any celebrated martyr, and it has attached to this one mainly through forwarded messages, devotional video content and some popular children's literature of recent decades. It also appears in retellings that recast Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib Ji inside a Hindu miracle idiom, which is the absorption move examined in Part 1 arriving by a different door.

STEP 2 — WHAT THE TRADITION SAYS

The Sikh account has no walking body in it. It has two men and an enormous amount of risk. **Bhai Jaita** — later Bhai Jiwan Singh — took the severed head and carried it more than three hundred kilometres to Anandpur Sahib, where the nine-year-old Gobind Rai received it, and where the words *Rangretta Guru ka beta* are traditionally spoken. **Bhai Lakhi Shah Vanjara**, a transport contractor with carts and a reason to be on the road, took the body concealed in a load, brought it to his house at Raisina, and cremated it by burning his own house down so that the fire would not be questioned. Gurdwara Rakab Ganj stands on that spot.

STEP 3 — THE REAL HISTORY

DEFINE — DELHI, NOVEMBER 1675

Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib Ji, born Amritsar 1621, ninth Guru from 1665, founder of Anandpur. Approached by a delegation of Kashmiri Pandits led by Kirpa Ram of Mattan, seeking help against forced conversion. He went to Delhi. He was arrested with his companions and held at the Kotwali. **Bhai Mati Das** was sawn in two, **Bhai Dayala** boiled, and **Bhai Sati Das** wrapped in cotton and burned, in front of him, before his own public beheading at Chandni Chowk. The date is given as 11 November in the Nanakshahi calendar and 24 November in the older reckoning; the difference is calendrical, not factual.

The earliest account of the martyrdom comes from the person closest to it. The *Bachittar Natak*, attributed to **Guru Gobind Singh Ji** — his son, then nine years old — records it directly:

"saadhan het itee jin karee / sees deeyaa par see na uchree" — "For the sake of the holy he did this much: he gave his head, but never a groan."

"theekar for dilees sir prabh pur keeyaa payaan / teg bahaadar see kriaa karee na kinhoon aan" — "Breaking the earthen vessel of his body on the head of the ruler of Delhi, he departed for the abode of God. None other has ever performed a deed like Tegh Bahadur's."

The *Bansavalinama Dasan Patshahian Ka* (Kesar Singh Chhibbar, 1769) and the later Gurbilas literature carry the account forward. The Mughal record confirms the arrest, the detention at the Kotwali and the public execution in Delhi in November 1675.

- **The nearest witness is the son, and he describes no such thing.** Guru Gobind Singh Ji's account is precise, unsparing and proud, and states plainly that his father *gave* his head. A headless body walking through a Delhi crowd is not a detail a nine-year-old omits from his own father's martyrdom, and not a detail any later Sikh writer would have left out either.
- **The motif is regional, not specific.** The jhujhar appears attached to dozens of local martyrs across northern India. A story that fits many people equally well is usually about none of them in particular.
- **It erases the two bravest acts in the episode.** If the body walked itself out, Bhai Jaita did not need to carry a head three hundred kilometres past Mughal patrols, and Bhai Lakhi Shah did not need to burn his own house down to cremate a body. The miracle version deletes the human courage that makes the event Sikh in the first place.
- **The body cannot do it.** Decapitation ends coordinated movement immediately. This needs one sentence and no more.

One caution on sources, offered in the same spirit as the rest of this book: the authorship of parts of the Dasam Granth is genuinely disputed among Sikh scholars, and this series will deal with that dispute properly in a later part. The *Bachittar Natak's* account of the martyrdom is nonetheless the earliest we possess, and it is the account the Panth has read as the son's own for three centuries.

STEP 5 — THE HONEST PICTURE

The meaning of this martyrdom rests entirely on a single fact: **he did not have to be there.**

He was not a Kashmiri Pandit. He did not share their theology — the whole of Part 1 of this series is an argument about how far Sikhi stands from it, on the janneu, on caste, on ritual, on the nature of God. The Pandits were asking him to defend a religious practice that his own tradition had deliberately set aside.

He went anyway, and lost his head in a public square for their right to keep a thread he himself would not wear.

I do not know of another martyrdom in world history quite like it — a religious leader executed not for his own faith but for someone else's right to theirs. A corpse that walks adds nothing to that. It cannot. His son said it once, in a single line, and there has been nothing to add since: *he gave his head, but never a groan.*

What Part 3 Tried to Do

Ten sakhis, eight Gurus, one hundred and thirty-six years. Read together, they fall into three groups.

Some are **true events that have been decorated**. Guru Angad Dev Ji did transform a script — we simply used the wrong verb. Guru Amar Das Ji did serve for twelve years — we replaced labour with penance. Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji did refuse a private release — we added a number and a cloak. Guru Arjan Dev Ji was tortured to death in Mughal custody — we furnished the room.

Some are **additions with no event under them at all**. The foundation brick at Amritsar. The walking body at Chandni Chowk. The clove that could not be found in an empire built on the spice trade.

And some are **borrowed shapes** — motifs from the storytelling grammar of the wider region, pressed onto Sikh lives because they were the available forms. The ascetic on one leg. The headless jhujhar. The saint whose touch cures.

What strikes me, having done the work, is the direction of the loss. In every single chapter, the decoration made the Guru *smaller*. A man who invents an alphabet is less impressive than a man who takes a merchant's shorthand, adds the vowels, and hands literacy to farmers' children. A saint who cures by touch is less impressive than a seven-year-old who stays in a plague city and dies there. A body that walks is less impressive than Bhai Jaita walking three hundred kilometres with a head. Every time we reached for the supernatural, we put down something better.

There is a reason for that pattern, and it is not accidental. This tradition was built by people who explicitly refused to make miracles the proof of authority. When we decorate their lives with miracles, we are not merely adding untrue details. We are contradicting the thing they were arguing for.

None of this is an argument for reading these lives coldly. I do not think the sakhis should be discarded, and I do not think the people who tell them are foolish. A tradition needs its stories, and stories carry meaning in shapes that facts cannot. But a story told *as a story* and a story told *as history* are two different objects, and the second one can be taken from us by anyone who bothers to check. The first cannot.

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What's Next

Part 4 turns to the last of the ten — **Guru Gobind Singh Ji and the Khalsa: Sakhi and History**. Vaisakhi 1699 and what the sources actually say about the five who stood up. The arithmetic of the battles, and where our numbers come from. Chamkaur and the forty. The blue horse and the white hawk. Sarbloh, the Five Ks, and the invented sciences attached to them. And the question of what the Dasam Granth is, which this part has already touched and cannot keep postponing.

The same six-step structure. The same named sources. The same refusal to inflate or to dismiss.

— *End of Part 3* —