

Bhagat Puran Singh
Gift to the Earth
From the Moon

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From the Moon

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Pingalwara :

A Home for the Homeless

My first encounter with the Punjabi institution Pingalwara happened on a wintry day in 2009. As I entered the compound, I was struck by the prevailing silence of the place. Outside the gate, the traffic from the heavily congested G.T. Road, the old Grand Trunk Road linking South Asia with Central Asia all the way back to the time of the Maurya Empire, was thundering by.

I had come back to India after many years of absence, and even if I had a rough idea about the history of Punjab, I did not know the first thing about Pingalwara, this amazing home and abode for the crippled, the abandoned, the mentally retarded and the sick. An enormous gift to the Punjabi people from a man called Bhagat Puran Singh, who lived till he was 88, and dedicated all his life to the unwanted and destitute people who came in his way.

Before I set out for India, I had collected some money that I intended to give to a good organization. I asked Vivek and his wife Kompal, my hosts in Amritsar, where I should go, and they immediately suggested Pingalwara. Vivek is from an old Amritsar family, the

Sarpals of the more than a century old pharmacy on Cooper Road.

«Look!», he said, as we waited in the Pingalwara museum, a neatly arranged photo gallery, for somebody to come and take my donation. «Here is a picture of my grandfather together with Bhagat ji». The photo was several decades old, and showed two elderly gentlemen, one neatly groomed and dressed in a European suit, the other in khaddi and wearing a loosely tied turban (a «paggar»). Theirs was a business association, medicines being a commodity in great demand at Pingalwara.

I should soon discover that the dedication to Pingalwara would run in generations: You somehow got attached to it and felt an urge to be part of «the Pingalwara Family», this extraordinary organization that would defy the all-pervading callousness and selfishness that defines the modern world and society of today.

Vivek and I had just been to an ATM and in my purse I carried a wad of notes that I was going to donate. The money was partly from me, and partly given by friends in Norway.

A young lady appeared and we were taken to a small office to the side of the portico. She accepted

my money, and gave me a detailed and meticulously written receipt. Then she offered me a selection of books and brochures. I asked about the price, but she smilingly shook her head: - «They are free».

I did not know it then, but this free literature thing was Bhagat Puran Singh's love-child: At Pingalwara's own printing press, he churned out articles and booklets on a number of topics that were close to his heart: environment, pollution, arms' race, population explosion, education of girls, etc. etc.

I was then taken to see the buildings and facilities. A young sikh called Inder Pal showed me around. Small groups of patients were everywhere; mostly girls and women. Some of them were engaged in different kinds of light work, others were just sitting. They watched me closely, and some of them offered greetings. The buildings had deep verandahs, but the day light and sunshine were never far away. A brand new bus was parked in the aangan: «A gift from NRI's» (non-resident Indians), Inder Pal explained. «To bring the children safely to school at Manawala», he added. Manawala is the big facility outside Amritsar, where they have all possible facilities needed to sustain a big family of around 1800 inmates/residents. «Bhaiya, how long have you been here», I asked.

The answer came without hesitation:

«I have always been here».

Inder Pal was not a man to waste too many words as he took me upstairs in one of the buildings, but through the years I have come to know a little more about him, and have learnt to appreciate him. He is 47 years old, is married, and has a son and a daughter. His son is now studying in Canada – an information that he shares with an enormous pride and happiness. Way back, his mother was a mental patient at Pingalwara, and could not care for herself and an infant. With regards to his father, he prefers to stay silent.

We entered a large room at the second floor. It was empty save for a couple of young women – and a tiny little girl lying on her stomach on a huge bed. The little child was very still, but at Inder Pal's calling: «Manjootha...?» she lifted her head eagerly in the direction of his voice. Inder Pal sat down at the side of the bed and gingerly stroked the back of her head.

I asked: «Who is this?»

The child was two, may be three years old, she was blind, and she had been abandoned on the street. Somebody found her and brought her to Pingalwara.

Some years later, her story found its way to three small children in a village in Norway, and a bond

was established across half the globe. From then on, the small hands of these eager Norwegian children would put a share of their pocket money in a separate purse to give to «Mayota»... (Manjota is difficult to pronounce for Norwegians). They have no idea where and what India is, but since three years they certainly know about Pingalwara!

Per 2018 Pingalwara was in charge of nearly 1800 patients with a wide range of diagnoses. The organization operates out of the head office in Thesilpura, Amritsar, and it has branch offices/complexes at Pandori, Manawala, Goindwal, Sangrur, Jalandhar, Palsora and Ludhiana, not to forget the overseas branches in Canada and USA.

But who was this Bhagat Puran Singh who started this heaven on earth for so many sick, destitute and helpless people? Pingalwara—which means «a home for the cripples»-clearly stands out not only in Punjab, or at the Indian subcontinent – but indeed in the whole wide world: It is driven solely by compassion, not by any sectarian interests; it is not politically motivated, it is not the work of some religious zealot, it does not distinguish between creeds and castes. It is run by sikhs, but is purely secular. Pingalwara has one and only one credo: To offer help to the suffering

humanity. Whenever a new patient is brought in, the management tries to register as many details about the person as possible, but often this is not easy: Some do not even know their own name, they do not know where they were born, and most have only a foggy notion of their own age. One thing is never asked, and that is the person's religious faith. Peoples' personal creed is never registered.

Pingalwara has now been operating for more than seven decades, and it is growing and growing.... despite the fact that 27 years have passed since Bhagat ji passed away.

The Saint of our Times

Let us take a closer look. Here is a few examples of how he was viewed by his contemporaries:

Retd. District and Sessions Judge (1957):

«He is a tall, shabbily dressed man, who may be found tramping with his wooden sandals or riding a rickshaw, along with an invalid. He always carries a brass bell hanging by his side and announcing his arrival. This man you may call a superman, even an angel.»

V.N. Narayanan (1991):

«He looks like the Rishis of old and the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh – a veritable combination of courage and compassion, a total embodiment of unselfishness and service. Bhagat Puran Singh is what India's distilled wisdom and rich heritage are all about.»

The Tribune (March 30, 1991):

«...It is just not the unattended, uncared, mentally retarded, raped, sick, infirm and crippled people he reaches out to. He is wont to publish as much material as possible on such themes as ecology, environment, (over)population, pollution and so on. The Pingalwara has its own printing press, (and he)... insists that one should strive to know more and more about everything.»

Khushwant Singh (The Tribune, March 17, 1990):

«No one says no to Bhagat Puran Singh because they know that every paisa goes to feed the hungry, buy medicines for those who can't afford them.»

Bibi Amrit Kaur (The Sikh Vision, 1992):

«Bhagat Puran Singh is well-known for his selfless service and dedication to the aged, the infirm, the poor and the crippled..... His aim is to add dignity and a spark of happiness to their anguished hearts.

.... Pingalwara has become a place of pilgrimage for both Sikhs and and non Sikhs alike. My head bowed in admiration for this man of great magnitude who is so scientific and modern in thinking yet deeply rooted in the soil of our glorious history, culture and religion.»

Principal Teja Singh:

«Bhagat Puran Singh is an example of a man reaching the highest level of thought, while practically associating himself with the realities of life.»

Khushwant Singh (The Indian Express, August 15, 1992):

«...Bhagat Puran Singh was no ordinary mortal, but undoubtedly the most loved and revered man in northern India! I once described him as the bearded Mother Teresa of Punjab. Mother Teresa had the backing of the powerful Roman Catholic Church, the English press and innumerable foundations to give her money. Bhagat ji had nothing, except his singleminded

dedication to serve the poor and the needy. And yet he was able to help thousands of mentally and physically handicapped and the dying. His name will be written in letters of gold in pages of the history of the Punjab.»

I.J. Singh (New York University 1992):

«Every age has known such men and women. In strife-torn Punjab in India, one such man has towered over others for the past 50 years: Puran Singh, affectionally known as Bhagat Puran Singh, is now 88 years old and in the evening of his life.

In much of India, even today, the only fate for a severely handicapped person is abandonment; a quick death would be more charitable. In 1934, Puran Singh adopted a four years old crippled child. This was the beginning of a life-long mission to serve and save millions (sic) of India's crippled people.

The landscape of Punjab is dotted with crudely constructed collection boxes bearing the Pingalwara name and logo. The rich and the poor alike contribute coins, goods and services as their spirit moves them. In a country as poor as India, Pingalwara's collection boxes remain sacrosanct, they are rarely rifled or looted. Bhagat Puran Singh has translated the Sikh teaching of love and service to mankind into a credo of action.»

Mehtab's Gift to the Earth

In order to understand Bhagat Puran Singh, I think it is a good idea to take a closer look at his mother, a diligent and compassionate person, a woman of almost mythical dimensions. In a greater perspective, I think Pingalwara really started with her.

She was born in a Jat Sikh family in 1885, and she was given the name Mehtab: the Moon. At a tender age, she was married to a young man who had the misfortune to pass away before he and his young bride came of age and could consummate the marriage.

There she was, a child widow, with her future in ruins. Nobody would touch her now, to marry a widow was socially unacceptable, and out of the question—even if she was a capable and beautiful young girl—and a virgin.

Mehtab was a pious girl, and did what was expected of her—and also so much more. She got up long before dawn and swept and scrubbed the floors of the village gurudwara, and she worked in the langar, not only cooking, but cleaning the big pots and utensils as well. As she had a strong yearning for learning, she sought out granthis, pujaris and maulvis to learn about the different religions. What she learnt was that there was one concept common for all the religions: the

principle of sewa, and that God was one; there were only different paths leading to the same truth.

As part of the sewa, she worked laboriously at the village well, drawing water for passing humans and animals. And indeed, this compassion for seeing to the needs of animals also, has rendered a special shine on Pingalwara's activities to this day.

The story goes that Mehtab and Chibu Mal, a man much older than her and already married, met at this well. Here they started a conversation that culminated in some sort of semi-marriage: Chibu Mal offered to «take her under his chaddar», and being a widow, it was all she could hope for—and anyway, they were very much attracted to one another...

In the beginning of the twentieth century, Indian society frowned upon inter-caste marriages and the remarriage of widows, but allowed polygamy. But a lot of factors were at odds in this union; for the first thing, Mehtab was a Jat Sikh, whereas Chibu Mal was a Hindu Khatri. He had two grown children, and very strict in-laws, who resented this liason very much. Mehtab got her parents' permission to be taken under Chibu Mal's chaddar, and she moved into his house—much to Chibu Mal's wife Basanti's grief.

The conditions were harsh: Mehtab became the

second wife (of a kind), but she would not be allowed to bear a child (!), as Chibu Mal feared that the caste distinction between them would create problems in matrimonial alliances for their children and that there would later be property disputes between his elder son and Mehtab's child, if her child was a boy.

Three times a foetus was removed from Mehtab's womb by the village midwife, each time a hard blow for Mehtab and her natural instincts, and a cruel and insensitive one at that. The fourth time she said she would rather die than abort another child. Chibu Mal agreed only reluctantly, and it was only after Mehtab had renounced the child's birthright to any inheritance from his father, that he allowed this foetus to live. A boy was later born and was given the name Ramji Das, later to be known by the name of Bhagat Puran Singh – Bhagat (devotee); Puran (whole); Singh (lion) - the saint of Punjab.

A story from the hazy mythology of the Ramayana or Mahabharata? A fairy tale from thousands of years ago?

No. Bhagat Puran Singh was born in 1904—one year after my own father! And as we shall see, he becomes more and more real as the story evolves....

Chibu Mal was a prosperous man at the time he

met Mehtab. He had a big haveli, and he also had money to spare, so in addition to being an agriculturalist, he became a moneylender. He prospered as an agriculturalist when the monsoon was plentiful, and he prospered as a moneylender when the rains failed. But the good times didn't last. When the rains failed in 1913, famine struck at the very roots of Chibu Mal's family too. Within a year the family was reduced to paupers as Chibu Mal went bankrupt. From then on, they both had to do menial work for others to survive. Mehtab proved to be the stronger one, and scrubbed floors and washed utensils for all of four years before moving to Mintgumri at some doctor's residence as a maid servant. Chibu Mal also accompanied her but couldn't do menial job as he was not used to it. Soon he came back to village. And thus—his father leaving his mother alone to fend for. This was something Bhagat ji could never forgive...

All along Mehtab was toiling to keep her son in school and secure his matriculation. Herself an illiterate, she was hellbent on her son's education, she was convinced that this would be his only way out of misery, and become the key to future happiness and prosperity. But Bhagat ji, who died as one of the most well read persons in all of Punjab, failed twice in his

exams... and later his life took a different turn.

Bhagat ji was a forgiving man, but in his «Unforgettable Memoirs of my Life» he wrote: «If my mother had died, my father would never have done what my mother did for me.... He was not ready to go through any hardship to help me in my studies.»

The bonds between him and his half-brother were never good. The elder Ramji Das resented very much the birth of his younger brother, and his hostility grew as this new born sibling came of age. Mehtab thought it better to put up her son in a hostel, rather than expose him to his elder brother's animosity and be negatively influenced by this. After completing his primary school studies in the village, Ramji Dass the younger was shifted to Anglo-Sanskrit High School, Khanna, which was situated 8 miles from Rajewal. He then used to come home for week ends and vacations, and when he was home, he helped his mother draw water from the chauraste di khui, the well at the cross roads where his mother used to give water to the cattle. The examination was held in Ludhiana. After exam he used to come back on foot from Ludhiana to Khanna. On the way he experienced something that was forever going to change his feeling of belonging: At a modest wayside gurudwara, the Gurudwara Reru

Sahib, where he stopped to rest, the granthi received him warmly and welcomed him to partake in the langar. The contrast to the Shiva temple on the way where he had been treated like a stranger and was not given anything to eat, was amazing. He was deeply impressed by the all-pervasive atmosphere of kindness, sewa and humbleness in the gurudwara, and that night Ramji Das, soon to be known by the name of Puran Singh, decided to join the Sikh faith.

The curvilinear movement of life took him from his place of birth in a well-to-do Hindu family from the vicinity of Khanna, through hard times and with little formal education, to Gurudwara Dehra Sahib in Lahore.

From 1924, he worked zealously in the Dehra Sahib, doing whatever was needed, and tending to the sick and hungry who came to the gurudwara for food, solace, and succour.

One may wonder why he failed in his exams, for he was an avid reader. In his spare time, he read everything he could lay his hands on, even scraps of newspapers and magazines that had been used for wrapping fruits and vegetables. Whenever he could, he visited libraries. This thirst for knowledge and information would follow him till the day he died in

1992, 88 years of age.

Mehtab Kaur died in 1930. Bhagat ji nursed her to the last, but under very difficult circumstances. She spent the last couple of years in and outside of the Gurudwara on various cots and string beds, in verandas and lawns. His was the task of nursing her and cleaning her up. She died on a rug outside the Chherta Sahib.

One would think that she would die with the happy cognizance in her heart that she had given birth to this magnificent son. But as she approached death, she was marred by the ghosts of her three aborted babies. Even if these abortions were carried out under coercion, and she had had no choice...

There is a female ward in the name of Mata Mehtab Kaur.

Here they come, the mothers with a troubled background; mothers giving birth on the street; mothers who cannot take care of themselves; rape victims; poor mothers with sick babies... They are heartily welcomed by the staff of the Mother Mary of the Sikhs:

Mehtab Kaur, the moon shining on earth—always offering relief, light and hope....

She gave to the earth the biggest gift of all.

How He Came Under The Influence of Sikhism

He was born in a Hindu family in the district of Ludhiana. His father was a Khatri Hindu, his mother a Sikh. From his village, the distance to the Gurudwara of the younger sons of Guru Gobind, who were mercilessly murdered brutally at a tender age, was only around twenty miles. In this area, a huge congregation commemorates the martyrdom of the boys at Fategarh Sahib. When Bhagat ji was fourteen, and still went by the name Ramji Das junior, he visited Fatehgarh Sahib on the Gurpurab as a fair only. That fair went on for two-three days in the middle of the winter season. He knew that some women from his village had got married in Fatehgarh Sahib, and he knew he could seek shelter for the night in their house.

There was a young man present with a double turban and full beard rolled beautifully, who made a profound impression on him. As the old Maharaja, Bhupinder Singh, sat down, this young man went and stood near the awning and kept his gaze on the Maharaja all the time in case he would be called to do some work. This act of devotion made a deep impression on Ramji Das, who was wonderstruck by the whole environment and the ceremony. He wrote:

«In my village, there was very little knowledge about Sikhism, and this festival was my first insight into the Sikh religion. The handsome young man and the solemn congregation gave me a great lesson, and I came back home with a new direction for steering my life.»

On the last day, there was a huge procession from the Gurudwara Fatehgarh Sahib to Gurudwara Jyoti Sarup, the place where the last rites of the Sahibzadas were performed. The Maharaja also joined the procession, and walked barefoot fanning the fly whisk on Shri Guru Granth Sahib all the time. There was a group of female devotees singing Gurbani in front of the procession. They were from the girls' school. When the procession reached Gurudwara Jyoti Sarup, the place where the Sahibzadas were cremated, I felt myself trembling.

The whole congregation and the environment was a wonderful spectacle. Having been born in an anonymous village with no preaching of Sikhism, that first wonderful glimmer of Sikh culture was the first show of religious splendour he had ever experienced.

He immediately reported back to his mother that he wanted to keep hair... Mehtab told him to wait till after passing his matriculation. The incidence in

Gurudwara Reru Sahib, when he decided to become a Sikh, was still some distance into the future...but the following words would keep reverberating in his heart and mind:

* May God grant to the Sikhs the gift of faith; the gift of uncut hair, the Kesh; the gift of discipline; the gift of spiritual discrimination; the gift of mutual trust; the gift of self-confidence and the supreme gift of all gifts: The Communion with Waheguru, the Name, and the gift of taking a holy bath in the Golden Temple in Amritsar. May the administrative centres, banners, the cantonments of Khalsa ever remain inviolate. May the cause of truth and justice prevail everywhere at all times, utter O Khalsa, Waheguru!

«May the cantonments of Khalsa ever remain inviolate.....»

At the age of twenty, Ramji Das Junior became a devout Sikh, Puran Singh. That happened after his experience in Reru Sahib, where he was welcomed in such a manner that he decided for conversion there and then. He celebrated Sikhism and Sikhism's glory, the Sikh sense of duty and the prevailing principle of seva—the spiritual satisfaction of rendering service to the needy.

Bhai Gurdas ji described the path of the Gursikh:

«A Guru-devoted Sikh gets up early in the morning and takes bath at a well or in a pool. Then he recites the godly hymns composed by the Guru and goes to attend the congregation in a gurudwara. Quite lovingly he listens to the holy hymns enunciated by the Guru. He throws away any doubts in his mind and serves the followers of the Guru. He toils hard to earn his living and brings meals to be distributed in the congregation. First he distributes the meals in the congregation, and later, he eats what is left.... Man's life is fruitful only if he makes full use of his faculties.»

Moreover, one should give one tenth of one's income to the poor—the dasvand.

Bhagat Puran Singh admired the Sikhs' sense of patience and beauty, and liked the use of the turban; especially multicolored turbans: «This would make the Sikhs stand out like a bouquet of flowers in the Indian landscape! «

(An interesting observation: The English word «turban» stems from the word «tulip»-the flower. Here, Bhagat ji refers to an article in the Statesman, Kolkata, written by its English editor.)

Moreover, he maintained that Sikh boys should

use a patka only up to the age of seven. From then on, they should wear a proper turban.

Like many, many other Sikhs, Bhagat ji was deeply hurt by the Operation Blue Star which desecrated the Golden Temple by the Government's invasion of the premises in 1984 to bring out Bhindranwale and his men and thus killing innocent people also.

Khushwant Singh had promptly returned his Padma Bhushan in protest against the operation, and Bhagat ji, hurt and offended, returned his Padma Shri, which had been awarded him by the Indian Government in 1981.

His Sources of Inspiration

Mahatma Gandhi was his great inspirator. He took to the idea of wearing khaddar (homespun cotton) only, and Gandhiji's uncompromising ideas and principles greatly appealed to him. Gandhiji's strictness, Gandhiji's compassion for all the downtrodden suited his nature and ways of thinking.

«...I made up my mind to devote my life to awaken my countrymen from slumber, to eradicate poverty and unemployment by adopting rural industry and wearing hand-spun and hand-knit clothes as advised by Mahatma Gandhi. With patriotic feelings, I had watched the Independence Movement of India from the year 1920 to 15 August 1947...»

Also, Gandhiji's frugality appealed to Bhagat ji. Gandhi ji said:

«Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed...»

Another source of influence came from England, and it came in the shape of The Salvation Army and its founders William and Catherine Booth. The Salvation Army came into being in London in 1865, under the name of The Christian Mission. Their focus was on those who had been rejected by the traditional churches, and all were welcome– including the impoverished

and disadvantaged that nobody wanted.

From 1878, the name of the organization changed to The Salvation Army, and today they are operating in more than 130 countries. By the 1880ies, there were Salvation Army pioneers all over the world, and India was no exception: On the Internet you can easily find a picture of Frederick Booth-Tucker wearing a neatly tied turban, and wearing a version of the Salvation Army uniform that was specially tailored for India, along with a group of Sikhs with turbans and their traditional outfits. (Were they helpers or converts, I wonder?)

Then there was Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), universally commemorated as the first professional sick-nurse in history. She will forever be remembered for her work at the field hospitals during the Crimean War (1853-56). She transformed nursing into a professional occupation—previously, this had been an occupation for unskilled ruffians. In 1859 she opened the first school of professional nursing in London. «The Lady with the Lamp» has during the years acquired almost mythical dimensions—I can clearly see how she must have appealed to Bhagat ji. The wonder of it is how he came across her in the first place – his reading and thirst for knowledge knew no

boundaries.

And he put his new-found knowledge into practice, and became a capable paramedic himself: He saw how medicines alone will have a very poor effect if the patient is transported back to the unhygienic place he hailed from. He understood about bacterias and their adverse effect on the flesh and body, and learned how to distinguish between troublesome ones and lethal ones. He knew that horse dung was dangerous when exposed to open wounds and infections, and horse dung was everywhere.

People were infected with maggots, a deadly and extremely painful condition. When a mixture of chloroform and turpentine oil was applied to the sores (holes) in the skin, the maggots would start coming out of the holes, and would have to be removed with a pair of tweezers. A very slow and time consuming process. Maggots were transferred from faeces lying everywhere on the ground, on to new hosts all the time. He tried to get people to go elsewhere to defecate, and he tried to make them wash their hands with soap before eating.

Another inspirational source was Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), the French theologian, medical doctor, philosopher and musician. He

established a hospital in French Congo in Africa, which he built and ran out of his own private economic sources and economic initiatives. His aim was to create better human conditions for the people in the colonies, and improve their lives from a humanistic perspective. He propagated the abolition of racial differences, and his first and foremost principle was respect for life and for every living being.

His deep relationship with Mahant Bhai Teja Singh, the Mahant of Dehra Sahib in Lahore, should also be mentioned. Teja Singh became his mentor and a father figure, and he was devastated on the day he died.

One might say that Maharishi Rabindra Nath Tagore's philosophy became Bhagat ji's first and foremost credo:

«Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with man. This means that God keeps the hope alive that one great man or the other will keep on taking birth for getting the wrongs righted.»

A tall order indeed, but Bhagat ji did not hesitate: He took on this task unflinchingly. He translated the Sikh teaching of love and service to mankind into a credo of action.

Be Good to the Animals!

Bhagat Puran Singh was among the first to speak up for the animals. He was of the firm belief that anyone who was cruel to animals, would also be cruel to human beings. There are numberless episodes from his life where he takes up this issue, by scolding or literally hitting a person who misbehaved with animals. He stopped wearing leather sandals at a very early stage in his life, after learning about the cruelty imposed on animals in the slaughter houses, and he scolded people who put too heavy loads on their working animals.

He is reported to have physically attacked a tonga driver who was clearly overburdening a lame horse. The horse was also bleeding from one of the hooves. Bhagat ji jumped down from his own tonga and gave the driver a slap on his head - Damn you, can't you see that the poor animal is bleeding? He hit the man on the head again, and went on to scold him severely: - Get that poor horse's leg treated first thing, or....!»

When the first Pingalwara building was to be constructed, the Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee offered to support the works. But Bhagat ji wanted the building to be raised by public support,

because this work should not be carried out for a particular religion, but for the sick and handicapped persons of the entire humanity—without interference from any part. Even if an animal with a broken leg came to the Pingalwara, it would not be turned away. Two bullocks with broken legs spent years of their handicapped life in Pingalwara before they died.

Bhagat Puran Singh's love for animals and birds was instilled by her mother. When Bhagat Puran Singh was a child, his mother asked him to go on the roof top and feed birds with grains. So he developed affinity for birds and in later life He loved birds and animals.

Bhagat Puran Singh was born in Hindu family. His mother used to celebrate a ritual known-as Kanjkan (ਕੰਜਕਾਂ) in which boys used to pay respect to unmarried girls. Mata Mehtab Kaur wished that her son to believe in chastity and he should learn to respect women. So, according to Bhagat Puran Singh, his mother used to call small girls at home. On his birthday used to tell Ram ji das Junior to wash there feet and delicious food to than. Bhagat Puran Singh imbibed that character to the extent that he adopted celibacy throughout his life.

The caring attitude towards animals, cultivated in him by his mother, was there from the beginning, but became more pronounced as time went by. In his childhood, Ramji Das would spend the afternoons tending to the cattle together with his mother. He recalled:

–As I saw them drinking water, a great surge of happiness would course through my being. An unfamiliar coolness would descend on me,- as if it was my own thirst which was being quenched.

When visiting the 34 acres' big Manawala premises outside Amritsar, go see the Gaushala! The 120 cows that are kept there could not be happier in Heaven—and they have a big pool (a sarovar) of clean water to drink from, anytime!

When Piara Entered the Scene

Let us go back in time, let us take a look at what happened in Dehra Sahib in Lahore a couple of decades into the 20th century.

In Lahore, the old illustrious capital of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, and since 1849 in the clutches of the British, destiny had been waiting since God knows when in the disguise of a multi handicapped 4-year old boy. Puran Singh (Bhagat ji) had at that time been a sewak in Gurudwara Dehra Sahib for about fifteen years. His mother had died in 1930, and he was all alone in the world, except for the people in Dehra Sahib, whom he regarded as his family.

Before moving to Lahore, Mehtab had been working in a doctor's house in Montgomery for four long years. In Lahore she started working at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, but soon she started working for a banker and mill owner, Harnam Singh. He invited Bhagat ji to come and stay with him, and theirs proved to be a good and lasting relationship. He remained grateful to his mother for the rest of his life for the hardship she endured on his behalf, and for the good advice she had offered.

After he was blessed by Mahant Bhai Teja Singh, he started working in the langar hall of Dehra Sahib.

His duties consisted of kneading the flour, lighting the fire, cleaning the hall and washing utensils.

Many years after, a young crippled boy about four years old, was brought in by two male relatives. His mother had died, and the father absconded. The wives of the men bringing him to Dehra Sahib had been adamant: «Leave the child in some orphanage. No orphanage occupied child then they thought to leave the child in Gurudwara Dehra Sahib, he is so seriously handicapped that we don't know what to do, we simply can't handle him». But the granthi said that there is no arrangement to look after such children and told the relatives that they would have to take the child back with them.

The boy was later found at the stairs outside Dehra Sahib, and the relatives were gone. Dehra Sahib was built in memory of Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth guru, who was murdered on the orders of Emperor Jahangir.

What to do? The crippled and mentally impaired child was on the verge of dying. Somebody tried to feed him by giving him buffalo milk, but this resulted in grave diarrhoea, and the boy's condition went from bad to worse.

Puran Singh (Bhagat ji) sat in deep thoughts in

Gurudwara Dehra Sahib and his mind was wandering. Then he made a crucial decision: When he was asked by head granthi to do sewa of this child and prayer was recited. Puran Singh said:

«This child will from now on be my responsibility».

He cleaned him up and nursed him back to life, and he gave him the name Piara—the beloved. The year was 1934, and he had been alone since his mother died in 1930.

Piara was not the first person taken on by Bhagat Puran Singh. But he was the first to be adopted like a son and lavished his love on to the extent that since the child could not walk, he carried him on his back wherever he went. Piara was to be followed by thousands upon thousands of destitutes, crippled, abandoned and sick. It is a blood curdling thought: If Mehtab hadn't dug her feet in during her fourth pregnancy and put her life at stake (telling Chibu Mal that if she weren't allowed to give birth to this child, she would rather die), all those thousands of people who were later saved by her son would have perished without mercy. And basically it had been a matter of money: If Mehtab hadn't been willing to degrade herself in the eyes of society by declaring that her son was born out of wedlock and was not the son of Chibu

Mal, and thus for all future, renounce her son's claim to any paternal inheritance, - well, then.....

The love that Bhagat ji felt for Piara, was of a divine character. For 13 years to come, he roamed the streets of Lahore with Piara on his back. For this, he was derided by some, and admired by others.

In 1947, when India got her freedom from the British, and the division of the country resulted in East-and West Pakistan on two flanks of the Indian Union, a forced migration started which quick as lightning evolved into a holocaust that would cost several hundred thousands—some say a million-of lives. The number of casualties differ in the different history books.

Gurudwara Dehra Sahib had been Bhagat Puran Singh's home for 24 years. As the riots started, he hesitated to leave. Where would he go? Another sewadar, Heera Singh, who was already on board the truck leaving for Amritsar, shouted: - Puran Singh, think about Piara, come on – climb!

When Bhagat ji left Lahore, he left with no baggage, only a few clothes, a begging bowl, and wooden sandals on his feet and Piara on his back.

The distance from Lahore to Amritsar is only some 25 km. But for the refugees thrown helter skelter

out of the new Paktistan, it was a long, painful trek that took days. They were about 45 people in that lorry, and there was hardly any food. People were starving, and people were dying. The surviving lot was scared and in a state of shock.

Little did Bhagat ji know that when he started out from Lahore to reach Amritsar, the only one of his beloved family (his family) that he was not going to lose, was Piara. He ended up at the gate of the Khalsa college, Piara in his arms. This beautiful building and tree-lined campus was now swarmed by around 25000 emaciated and hungry refugees, and the Principal, Bhai Jodh Singh, did his utmost to administer this unprecedented crisis, but of course the situation was desperate. The lawns were crowded by sick and ailing people, many of whom had been abandoned by their children in the journey from Pakistan. Many were too weak to take care of themselves, and there was no one to tend to them. Soon a wave of severe gastroenteritis swept the camp, and then followed an epidemic of cholera. Bhagat ji worked from morning till late night cleaning people and washing their soiled clothes, and arranged the cremation of those who died. One of the biggest problems in the camp was the poor functioning of the distribution of the rations of food. Many of the

inmates were too sick or severely handicapped to make it to the distribution points, and their share was often taken by the able-bodied. Bhagat ji helped those people.

By the time the camp was dismantled, on the last day of December 1947, Bhagat ji had helped hundreds upon hundreds of people, and he had also learned a lot about how to administer an organization under not only difficult, but outright horrible conditions. When he strode out in the cold morning of December 31, with Piara on his back, and with a dozen sick and mentally retarded people trailing after him, he knew that his first priority would be to find some sort of shelter for them.

It did not prove easy. The city of Amritsar was already overburdened with the influx of afflicted refugees, and what was on offer were ruins, roofless buildings, and shacks.

Bhagat ji and his unwanted family of disabled people ended up in the compound of Amritsar railway station. Without a roof above their heads. But with a water tap that enabled him to wash peoples' soiled clothes and clean up his sick proteges.

This was the beginning of Pingalwara. A harsh start where every conceivable amenity was missing,

and in surroundings that were more or less as those of a war zone....A cold water tap was an unexpected luxury.

Not until the number of helpless and sick persons in his care exceeded 22, did he hire two sevadars to help him in his daily chores.

Twenty-two became thirty-two became a hundred and thirty-two....then several hundreds; the list of desperate and dying people in his care grew longer and longer... I could mention the disabled boy Kalu, who couldn't even crawl away from his own excreta, or the old Nihang Sikh dying from maggots. Not to forget Jeeta and his mother, who died of tuberculosis, or the mentally deranged woman who suffered from an advanced stage of syphilis. Behind these few examples, there were thousands. And they were everywhere.

The thought has struck me: Bhagat Puran Singh must have been the most stubborn person ever born on this planet....

In the longer perspective, I think we can also safely say that Pingalwara started on the day when mata Mehtab, in her fourth pregnancy, decided that she had had enough, and declared that she would bear this child, come what may.

Getting a Permanent Home at Last

On 6 March 1957 the All India Pingalwara Society was formally registered. So far, Pingalwara had only barely got by in makeshift accommodations, i.e. the abandoned cinema hall with the annexe for TB patients. Padam Chand Bhandari, the Executive Officer of the Amritsar Municipal Committee, became a frequent visitor and helped out financially as much as he could. There was desperate need for additional space, and this space was provided by Bhandari.

The chief Minister of Punjab, Mr. Gopi Chand Bhargava, was aware of Bhagat ji's work. He was profoundly impressed, and he secured the plot of land at the Grand Trunk Road (where Pingalwara's main office is found even today) in 1951. As there was no money to start construction of new buildings with, Pingalwara had to remain in the abandoned cinema hall until 1957. In 1958, Bhagat Puran occupied vacant inn (sarai made by Rai Bahadur Kalyan Singh trust) for patients.

Bhagat Puran Singh was able to purchase the present site of the head office at G.T. Road in Amritsar. Till then, he and his family (patients) had tossed from one decrepit place to another for eleven years.

To be able to put up his boards and collection

boxes (the black boxes) in the Gurudwaras, Bhagat ji had to seek permission from the leader of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader, Tara Singh, who also went by the name of Master Tara Singh, Tara Singh (1885-1967) was a powerful political and religious leader in the first half of the 20th century. He was instrumental in organising the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) and in guiding the Sikhs during the Partition of India. He was ardent in his desire to promote and protect the cause of Sikhism, S.G.P.C. was a partly political so Bhagat never liked the interference of such body in his institution. Because Master Tara Singh's obsession was with the creation of the Punjabi Suba so might have divorced him completely from charitable duties, was Bhagat ji's fear.

With good reason, and past experience at Jalandhar Bhagat ji was wary of politicians, and didn't want any deals that compromised his sovereignty. He said:

–If I had accepted your offer, the Pingalwara would have become institutionalized and belonged to the SGPC alone. The growth and development of Pingalwara, its very existence, would have been dependent on the changing policies and the constraints of the SGPC. It would not have had an existence of

its own. Pingalwara must belong to the sangat, and every member of the sangat who makes a contribution, no matter how small, becomes a shareholder in my endeavour. In this way I will ensure that not only will the Pingalwara have an independent existence..... besides, I want the Pingalwara to be an organization of all men and for all men, irrespective of caste and creed. By bringing it under the wings of the SGPC I would have made it an exclusively Sikh institution, and men of other faiths might be suspicious of it.

As it was, Tara Singh acquiesced; the boards were put up, first in the Golden Temple, and then in the other major Gurudwaras, then the black boxes were distributed, and soon money started coming in....

Bhagat ji ended up getting his will in this matter, but I imagine that the result of his dealings with Tara Singh was a narrow escape...

The constitution of the society remains today more or less the same as it was on the day it was registered: The Society has seven members, and each member has a clearly designated area of functioning and responsibility. The President remains president for life. At the time of registration, it was Bhagat ji who became the president. Dr. Inderjit Kaur, president since Bhagat ji's demise in 1992, explains:

«He had learnt from an unfortunate earlier experience what could happen when a society's aims get bogged down in sordid politics and factionalism».

So many high characteristics and praise have deservedly been lavished on Bhagat Puran Singh's name: - A rock; the most humble of God's servants; a totally selfless man; the Saint of Punjab; Father Teresa of Punjab; and many, many more..... What about adding this: The most accomplished head hunter there ever was!

Look at this: In 1975, a long association began between a Sikh family of Sangrur and Bhagat Puran Singh. Initially, it was only a matter of donations and receipts for the same. The relationship became closer, and it resulted in Dr. Inderjit Kaur (born 1942 to Dr. Harbans Singh and wife) being formally adopted by Bhagat ji as his daughter. Before his death, he handed over all his cares and responsibilities to her.

Taking on a Huge Responsibility

Dr. Inderjit says:

«It is a long period, 1975 to 1992. I was with him through most of his period of sickness and campaigns. He became the father I had lost. Perhaps my decision not to marry and my doing the paath every day is what appealed to him».

But Dr. Inderjit (Bibi Kaur) must also possess an extraordinary organizational talent, considering what Pingalwara is today, 26 years after Bhagat ji's death! Bhagat Puran Singh would have been so happy, so gratified and so proud to see how wondrously his Pingalwara has prospered and expanded more than he could ever have dreamt of!

Dr. Inderjit elaborates: «If Babaji had not built into the Constitution that the President was for life, perhaps I too would not have survived the maneuvering that was attempted against me». And she also concedes that it was hard sometimes to live up to Bhagat ji's sky high standards and expectations.

I have visited Pingalwara's main office in Amritsar may be 12 or 13 times. Each time I have been struck by the serenity and calmness of the place. And the spotless cleanliness in every corner. And, above all, something very unusual very quickly came to my

notice: When you walk through the gate at G.T. Road, who will you find seated around a big table directly in the courtyard? On cheap plastic chairs and no frills?

The top management! They are right there, Dr. Inderjit Kaur (President), Col. Darshan Singh Bawa (second in command), Sardar Mukhtar Singh (secretary and honorary architect), Tilak Raj (manager), and many more. They are right there, hands on, and ready to handle every crisis stumbling in through that portico! No fancy offices, no absence of responsible people. The management will not constantly be gone for meetings, leaves, or on repeated vacations—they are just simply there! Right on the spot, ready to answer your queries and do their job.

A guide will show you around the premises—for most of the time, the before mentioned Inder Pal. At Manawala, the 34 acres Pingalwara property eight km from Amritsar, several other people will be doing the same thing. At Manawala, the guide assigned me by Area Manager Jai Singh, was Rajwant Kaur, a sweet young lady who took me on a round tour to most of the wards.

The Manawala Complex outside Amritsar is a very impressive place indeed. Here is what is on offer: Printing press; administration block; sewage

treatment plant; adarsh school; physiotherapy, prosthetics, vocational centre; residential block; auditorium; cook house; childrens' ward; dhobi ghat (laundry facilities); male ward; generator room; guest house; special school; gurudwara; two residential blocks; lalvani ward; girls' hostel; TB ward; dairy farm; boys' hostel for juniors; boys' hostel for seniors; school for the deaf; apna ghar 1 and 2 («our own» houses); hostel for the deaf.

India frequently offers sights and things that will assault your nerves and be difficult to erase from your mind. There is so much suffering – just around the next corner, right under your nose. At Pingalwara, you are usually quite «safe» – everything is taken neatly care of, no suffering will go unattended here. But wait: all of a sudden, here too, sheer, naked grief will catch you unaware and glare you right in the face:

A sweetfaced young girl stood by a wall holding a small baby, nursing it calmly and quietly. I smiled at her, but Inder Pal commented sotto voice: «That young girl gave birth to her child in the street, someone brought her here a short while ago». I said: «Well, how fortunate for her, she will be safe here, then».

But Inder Pal frowned and had a sombre look

on his face. Then he said: «The baby has cancer, she is terminal. There is nothing we can do».

I stopped dead: The young girl was giving birth to her child on the street, which means she had nothing, absolutely nobody and nothing, in this whole world – and now she was losing her baby too? I was appalled, and true to my nature, I frantically started thinking about all sorts of fixtures and ways to mend this outrageous injustice: I asked Inder Pal: What will happen to her when the baby dies? But he had no answer.

I thought about Mehtab and her three forcedly aborted children; Mehtab planted trees, three at a time, always three trees together: A neem, a peepul and a banyan. A meagre solace, but what could she do? People called the trees «Mehtab's children», and may be this was the start of her environmental orientation, one that she indeed passed on to her son Ramji Das junior – Bhagat ji.

The next day I visited Manawala, the grand thirtyfour acres complex outside of Amritsar where Pingalwara has its big orchard alongwith the center of all kinds of services.

The thought of the little mother and her terminal baby had been nagging me ever since I saw her the

day before, and I could not refrain from asking Mr. Jai Singh, the manager, about the fate of this girl. Again I ventured:

«What will happen when the baby dies? Will she be given another baby?»

S. Jai Singh merely looked at me and answered calmly: «She will be put in charge of looking after the other infants that we have here».

I said: «But that is not the same thing—what about giving her a motherless child?»

Sometimes my ideas are just too stupid, they jump out of my mouth without really thinking of the consequences: A baby given to a young girl living on the street? What on earth was I thinking about?

S. Jai Singh was not at all moved by this silly proposal:

«All our adoptions go through our adoption office, and are carefully validated».

And this is Pingalwara's essence: They will not be carried away by unpremeditated and useless suggestions. They sure know what they should and should not do – they are true experts at handling crises and misery. And compassion is the fundamental principle of whatever they are doing.

Awareness in Big Matters

The Pingalwara Press was always a great priority with Bhagat ji. Today, they have modern printing facilities at Manawala. This was not always so: It started humbly and poorly with leaflets and newsletters stenciled on the backside of discarded paper from elsewhere. Bhagat ji has been derided and criticised for this priority, but this has been his way of communicating with the world, and this has been his gift to poor people: free access to news and information. He used discarded papers to save trees as trees are cut to make paper. The topics varied from arms' race, oil crisis, pollution, environment, population explosion, forestry impact of industrialization, nuclear warfare, the dowry problem, drugs, destruction of forests, family planning, hygiene, care of animals, unemployment and many more. These pamphlets were distributed free of charge throughout Punjab.

Perusing some of his old writings, one can't help being deeply impressed by his enormous and detailed knowledge about a huge range of matters in a India as well as in a world perspective. He saw right through fancy presentations and hard sell rhetoric: Thermal power plants? The Bhakra dam? Bhagat ji was not amused – he foresaw big problems looming. Undauntedly, he published his «Khabardars!» on any

project – totally fearless.

The author Khushwant Singh (a great admirer of Bhagat ji) thought this was all in vain, as «nobody would read them», but I do not agree: What about all the poor people for whom it would be out of the question to spend money on newspapers and books, but who have a thirst for learning, like Bhagat ji himself. As mentioned before, when Bhagat ji was young and poor like a church mouse, he read whatever he could on discarded newspaper and magazines used for wrapping etc.

Today, the Pingalwara Press will print beautiful books and brochures with detailed information about the current activities in all the branches. Which of course is of topmost importance in order to spread the word of Pingalwaras work, and thus secure more funds. The Internet cannot at all compete with an informative, professional brochure or book that people can take with them and read again and again and show to other people.

And stop for a while: Small things may cause unthinkable damage when ending up at the wrong place. Bhagat ji's mind was broad enough to encompass every living being, small and big, people and insects, and if you venture into his universe, you can't avoid being influenced:

Awareness in Small Matters

It has been mentioned so many times that Bhagat ji's mother Mehtab taught her son to always pick up sharp objects from the road so that nobody, man or beast, would get hurt by broken glass, small bits of metal, etc. It has been written so many times that I thought that I might not include it in this book as well.

But Bhagat ji obviously understood the power of reiteration: When people hear about a thing often enough, it will eventually work its way into their mental structure, and they will sooner or later act accordingly: They will pick up this bit of glass, this sharp nail or this metal piece—and somebody will avoid getting it into his foot or paw.

One evening I was unwinding my saree to go to bed. The safety pin in the folds stuck, and ended up tearing a small hole in the fabric. Irritated I managed to disentangle it, and did what dutiful visitors from the West will do: I threw it into the dust bin.

Then I stopped dead: What happens to garbage in India, is not what happens to garbage in Europe. There, the different kinds of waste will be thrown into separate bins, to be sent to destruction. In India, most of the contents from garbage bins will end up in a

heap at the next corner, and this heap will more likely than not be the fodder tray of dogs, cows, birds, sheep and more.

Hence, I picked up that safety pin and put it in my suitcase. I decided to bring it safely back to Norway and put in the special bin for metal scrap and glass.

Thank you, Bhagat ji, for reminding me! Thank you for never being too big for the small things. (As we know, the devil is in the details.)

The Gaushala at Manawala reflects Bhagat Puran Singh's attitude towards animals. I reckoned it would be so, but I nevertheless wanted to have a look.

A young man took me to the cows, and, expecting the typical Indian answer «kafi hein...» I asked: «How many cows do you keep?» But he answered without hesitation:

«One hundred and twenty»!

Loh! No sloppiness with neither man nor beast. And the premises of the animals were so shinningly clean that they could not be better in Heaven...

Sewadars at Home and Abroad

Last November I did not make it to Amritsar, my days ran out in Delhi, Jalandhar and Sangrur (the Literary and Heritage Festival). But again I had money to donate (given by friends in Norway) – and some of this money was from the children in Norway, Stine, Silje and Fredrik, who wanted their personal receipt with a stamp on it (for their scrap books). So my hosts in Jalander, Advocate Narender Pal Singh and Mrs. Rubi took me to the Jalandhar branch at the Makdoom Pura, Dhobi Mohalla, a branch that accomodates around 40 male patients. We were cordially received by the branch incharge, Mr. Sangat Singh, and I had to tell him about these children in Norway, who three years ago had started collecting money for Pingalwara in India. Part of this money was pocketmoney, another part was money they got from the parents whenever they shed a tooth and put it in a glass of water to see how it mysteriously transformed into coins (the Tooth Fairy at work). They will also collect bottles and sell in the local store. They are very proud of their little business concept! (These children are presently 8, 9 and 14 years old, and they have altogether collected almost 4000 rupees for Pingalwara).

Pingalwara has branches in five cities in India, and also three overseas branches, one in Canada, one in the USA and one in England.

The branches in India are situated at the following places:

Amritsar and Manawala=main offices. Then there are the Pandori Warraich Branch (9 km from Amritsar), Goindwal Branch, Jalandhar Branch, Sangrur Branch, and Chandigarh Branch.

Also not to be forgotten are the Pingalwara sewadars in UK, who do a great job spreading awareness and collecting funds.

The All India Pingalwara Charitable Society is purely secular, but Bhagat Puran Singh has translated the Sikh teaching of love and service to mankind into a credo of action.

Bhagat Puran Singh has been widely honored in his home country. In 1980, the Indian government awarded him the Padam Shree. (This he returned in 1984 after the Indian government's invasion of the Golden Temple – the Operation Blue Star). In 1981, the Punjab government awarded him its Lok Kala Academy Award. In 1991 he got the Bhai Ghanhaiya Award from the Punjab Human Rights Organization,

and the same year the Indian Government again acknowledged Bhagat Puran Singh's work by giving him the Harmony Award.

Pingalwara has become a place of pilgrimage for both Sikhs and non Sikhs alike. No wonder, - look at Pingalwara today, it has been a home and a safe haven for thousands upon thousands of needy people for more than seven decades. Seeing the impressive buildings with their lofty rooms, it is hard to believe that this is the work of a man who never even had his own room – in fact, he didn't even possess a private cupboard....

His last years he spent at the Golden Temple. There he sat at the temple entrance, with loads of paper around him. In front of him sat a small brass vessel. Visiting devotees to the shrine would stop, pay silent obeisance, put some cash into the bowl, and move on. There he sat, as anonymously and humbly as 70 years before, in the Dehra Sahib in Lahore. However, in the early 1990ies, he had a history behind him saving thousands upon thousands of lives, and had a big humanistic organization running. Running in the steady hands of his adopted daughter, Dr. Inder Jit Kaur, fondly called Bibiji, and the great number of

Pingalwara's devoted helpers.

In July 1992, Bhagat Puran Singh suffered from intestinal obstruction and was shifted to the P.G.I. Hospital. Dr. Inder Jit attended upon him day and night and prayed for his recovery. But his time had come. He breathed his last on 5th August 1992 – 88 years old.

All his life Bhagat Puran Singh remained sternly true to one single vocation. It can be summed up in one short sentence:

In Service of the Suffering Humanity.

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