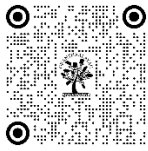


GURU NANAK DEV: THE TORCHBEARER OF RELIGIOUS AWAKENING

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.4209](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.4209)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

In the beginning of the 16th century, when Guru Nanak lived and preached his message of love and equality, Punjab was part and parcel of the Delhi sultanate which was ruled by Sultan Sikandar Lodhi. Politically, it was an oppressive and unjust regime, marked by exploitation and injustice. Socially, it was a divided house wherein a large part of humanity was denied even the fundamental rights. Non-Muslims were made to live like second class citizens. The ruling class had lost all sense of justice and the order of the day. The moral and spiritual degeneration was also keeping pace only too well with the political disruption from which the country had been suffering.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the 16th century, when Guru Nanak lived and preached his message of love and equality, Punjab was part and parcel of the Delhi sultanate which was ruled by Sultan Sikandar Lodhi. Politically, it was an oppressive and unjust regime, marked by exploitation and injustice. Socially, it was a divided house wherein a large part of humanity was denied even the fundamental rights. Non-Muslims were made to live like second class citizens. The ruling class had lost all sense of justice and the order of the day. The moral and spiritual degeneration was also keeping pace only too well with the political disruption from which the country had been suffering.

When Sikhism originated, Indian religious scene was dominated by two religions. Besides Hinduism and Islam of course, there were Buddhism and Jainism also which formed Part of the Indian sramanic tradition, but they were numerically a small minority. Buddhism which is believed to have originated as a reaction against Brahmanism soon becomes extinct. Even Hinduism was an amalgam of various sects and subsects with different and sometimes mutually opposing faith beliefs. Hinduism and Islam ran parallel to each other with scarce points of meeting; rather they stood in opposition to each other on many issues. As there were castes among the Hindus so there were sects among the Muslims. Useless conflicts prevailed among them. The Ganga and Benares were sacred to the Hindus and Mecca and Ka'aba to the Muslims. For Hindus religion meant the Holy thread and the Forehead mark, for Muslims Circumcision. Ram and Rahim were the same one God. Yet two divergent courses were drawn from him. The Hindus neglected the teachings of their books and Muslims those of their scripture. Both had succumbed to worldly temptation. The Brahmins and the Mullas squabbled endlessly and the truth was passed by.

The people were ignorant and steeped in superstition and had deep rooted prejudices. Huge sums were spent on worthless ceremonies even if one practically lived on subsistence and could not afford them. "The spirit of both Hinduism and Islam were hidden beneath a mass of formalities and extraneous observances."² The spirit of religion had got completely lost in the web of formalism. Religion had got separated from man's social life.

The Mohammedan king was considered the "Deputy of God" on earth. The Muslim subjects were the favorite children of the state. The Hindus, who were considered infidels, had no place under the sun and were treated as Jimmis. They had to pay additional taxes, like jazia and the pilgrimage tax.³ Idol worship was prevalent among the Hindus. Those who regularly led a sinful life thought that all their crimes and sins could be washed away by just a dip in the Holy Ganges. So also the sacred thread worn round the neck was supposed to have put on them the hallmark of high character and piety. Money earned by foul means was not considered bad.

At that time the Hindu Bhaktas and Muslim Sufis had proclaimed the ideal of purity of devotion as well as of conduct and indicated the way to religious reconciliation and regeneration. The Bhakti movement in Hinduism and Sufism in Islam shared these principles and become the instruments for their wide dissemination. This resulted in a welcome lessening of the orthodoxy and the establishment of new channels of communication and understanding. The signs of a new age, of a new society in birth were becoming evident.

Both Bhakti and Sufism had marked similarities and were characterized by a liberal and eclectic theosophy. Though Sufism and Bhakti in their purest form concerned themselves mainly with private experience of the individual soul and could not as such become the religion of the common man, they had intuitive sympathy for him and opened his mind to a new way of thinking and feeling. They stirred the still waters of the contemporary stream of life and broaden its course. Sufism and Bhakti were beckoning to new developments in the life of the community as a whole.

The creative impulse of the times met with its fullest expression in Guru Nanak and received from him a definite stamp and direction. Affirmation and integration were the qualities of the religious prophecy embodied in his teachings. He presented a living and intensely realized ideal of faith and spiritual deliverance and of human equality and justice.

Guru Nanak preached equality of all religions and of mankind. Bhai Gurdas reiterates this view as he says in one of his compositions:

"Guru Nanak hath appeared, Lo! mist hath vanished and light hath shown in the world. Even as the sun shines, the stars disappear. And darkness gets resplendent with light."⁵ When Guru Nanak appeared, the fog of spiritual ignorance dispersed, and light shone in the world as when the sun rises the stars disappear and darkness fades away or as when the lion roars in the forest, the timid deer incontinently disappear. When the Guru placed his foot, there was established a seat of worship.

Guru Nanak found that the people were steeped in ignorance and superstition, that corruption was rampant, that knowledge was at its lowest level, everyone thought only of himself. The Guru realized that the first step in the upliftment of the people was to remove their ignorance and superstition and give them an ideal to work for.

As important as the new manifestations of thought and life flowing from it was the person of Guru Nanak gentle, humble and full of love and human kindness, melting into contemporary consciousness, through, his poetic utterance and straight forward example, the message divinely laid upon him like the Bhaktas and the Sufis, Guru Nanak proclaimed love of God and through it, communion with him as the primary aim of religion, Guru Nanak believed in one supreme God.

Islam had brought to India concept of strict monotheism which not only affirmed that there is one God and none other, But rejected the belief that there can be any incarnation or Avatars of the Supreme being.⁷ The Islamic monotheism rejected even the installation of images of God as being contrary to the ideas belief in the unity of God hand. But the Hindu concept possessed such a great measure of elasticity that there was practically little differentiation discernible between monotheism and polytheism. Some sects believed in monotheism and others in polytheism. But Guru Nanak's religion is based on his concept of one God, commonly called the unity of God. Nanak was a strict monotheist. He refused to accept any compromise on the concept of unity of God. In this he disagreed with the Bhaktas, who despite their profession of monotheism, believed in the reincarnation of God and of His Avatars.⁸ Nanak disapproved to the worship of idols because people tended to look upon them as God instead of symbolic representation.

Guru Nanak regards God as one. Ram, Rahim, Allah, Akalpurakh, Sat Guru, and the like are just forms of addressing the same one God. In reality God is one. In the Japu (popularly known among the devotees as the Japuji Sahib), he contemplates the beauties and glories of the divine personality. "The one eternal being the creator and nourisher of the Universe."

Guru Nanak's religion is based on his concept of God, commonly called the unity of God. Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture, starts with the numeral which comes before the word Om, pronounced Onkar. Onkar means God and

the preceding Numeral one means that there is one God. If the prefix one (ik) signifies oneness of God, the suffix kar to the word Om signifies the latter's creative aspect.

In the Japu, The Guru says this hymn: There is but one God. True is His Name, creative His personality and immortal His form. He is without fear, sans enmity, Unborn and self-illuminated By the Guru's grace (He is obtained) Embrace His meditation He is Omnipresent Guru Nanak believed in the Omnipresence of God. But while denouncing the ceremonies, he exploded the myth of orthodox religionists that God was Present only at sacred and holy places. Here the event of Mecca Provides an interesting example. During the course of his holy trips he once visited Mecca (Arabia) it so happened that he slept there out of doors with his feet turned inadvertently towards the Ka'aba. The place was considered the house of God. When the Mullah, the Chief priest, came in the morning to the mosque for his prayers and found Nanak asleep with his feet towards the Ka'aba, he got annoyed, shook Nanak rudely and said, "O man of God, thou has thy feet towards Ka'aba the abode of God. Why hast thou done such a thing?" The Guru very softly replied, "Is it so? Then turn my feet in the direction where there is no house of God." A popular version of this incident adds that when the Mullah turned Nanak's feet in the opposite direction, he was surprised to see that Ka'aba also moved to the same direction. So it proved the Omnipresence of God. Wherever the Guru went he spread the message of the almighty. He communicated his creed of love.

Guru Nanak thus emphasized the internal relationship between God and man and spiritual equality of his devotees to lead a simple life based on hard work and self earning and give out of their earnings to the needy. This leads a person to the ideal path of life. He who eats what he earns through his earnest labour and from his hand gives something in charity, he alone, O Nanak knows the true way of life.

The religion which Nanak founded consisted, in the words of Dr. Hari Ram Gupta, of the love of God, love of man and love of Godly living. Nanak's God was the true Lord, creator unborn, self-existent, immortal, Omnipresent formless and Omnipotent, yet he possessed many attributes of personality.

At the time of Guru Nanak, people were so much circumscribed in the antiquated religious beliefs and the illiteracy was prevalent to such an extent that they could not easily appreciate any innovation in their customs and receive the reforms willingly. They were holding fast to the centuries old convention, which had become rusty. But the people did not seem to have any intention to cast those shackles away. During his tours the Guru adopted an extraordinarily intelligent way for reforming the misdirected and misguided. He used the weapon of demonstration and made it easy for the People to understand their weaknesses and shortcomings. He did not take to giving long discourses nor did he contest or insist for convincing others. He did not irk the people. But in a humorous way demonstrated all of their weakness.

During his Udasis, Guru Nanak visited all the major centres of Hinduism and Islam and had discourses with their religious leaders. Guru Nanak Dev observed that: The subjects are blind and without wisdom they satisfy the official's fire of greed with (bribe) or (carrion).

He held that the root cause of miseries of the people was ignorance. Therefore, the Guru exhorted people to acquire true knowledge. At Panipat, at the tomb of a Muslim saint, Guru Nanak was greeted with the usual as-salam-alekum (peace be upon you). The Guru said in reply, "salamalekh" (Homage to the unseen) thus pointing out oneness of God.

At Mithankote the Guru had spiritual discussion with Sheikh Mian Mitha whose first point as verified by Guru Nanak was that the first name is of Khuda (God), then of the Prophet. If Nanak recites Quran, he will be accepted in the Divine court, the Shaikh had said, Guru Nanak replied! first comes Khuda's name, prophets stand at his door. O Shaikh! Cultivate nobility, only then will you earn acceptance.

This reply of Nanak convinced Main Mitha that God alone is true and no prophet or saint could be bracketed with him. Guru Nanak attacks superstition and blind ritualism then prevalent in Hinduism. During his tours he criticized the meaningless practices. He taught the people of true love and worship of God; lies not in blind ritualism and primitive form of idol worship. The main object of Nanak's visit was to draw the attention of erring humanity from the unreal and from external ceremonies to inner purification.

During his journeys when Guru Nanak reached Kurukshetra, the holiest of the holy, Hindu places of worship. Here on the occasion of the solar eclipse, the Guru asked the people not to waste their time and energy in futile ceremonies and worship only one God, the Creator and the Destroyer.

At all these places he saw with his own eyes people practicing futile ceremonies. His object was to bring out to the people the essence and purity of religion which had become more a matter of superstition, dogma and ritual. He preached that true religion consisted in the love of God and in the love of human beings.

Guru Nanak holds that Guru was essential for the realization of God. God manifested himself in some teacher or Guru for the salvation of mankind. It was through a Guru that one could have communion with God. In the words of Macauliffe, "Man shall not be emancipated without the Guru's instruction see and ponder upon this even though man performed

hundreds and thousands of ceremonies all would still be darkness without the Guru. Without the Guru one wanders in the darkness of ignorance. "Without the Guru, there is pitch darkness and without the Guru, Understanding is obtained not.

Wherever the Guru went he spread the message of the Almighty. He communicated his creed of love, service to humanity and adoration and oneness of God in a simple and easy to understand language. In the Bani of Guru Nanak, there is repeated mention of "There is no other, God is for him simply, Ek, the only one.

God is confined in sea and land. On the way he met several men of learning Brahmins, Sufis, faqirs and ascetics. He convinced them of futility of their hypocritical lives of thought and asked them to follow the Path of reality, free from force and unrealities. In the case of the Siddhas and Yogis, Guru Nanak, like Kabir and a few other Bhagats, took a serious notice of their insistence of *bhekh* (the outfit of a recluse) to the total or near exclusion of the substance underlying the *bhekh*, but whereas others stopped there, Guru Nanak went further and denounced them, Guru Nanak went further and denounced the whole idea of retirement from worldly life. In one of his hymns he has said,

Yoga is not in the patched coat, nor the yoga is in staff, nor yoga is in smearing the body with ashes yoga consists not earrings, or in shaven head and yoga nor even in the blowing of horn Abide pure amidst the worldly impurities. Thus shalt thou find the way to yoga. Elaborating the idea he has said: Only by service in the world can one get a seat of honor in the lord's court.

In the thinking of Guru Nanak, it is imperative for all people to work hard and earn their living and not to depend upon others. The begging of alms was disapproved even for those who are called Gurus and Pirs. The Faqirs, Siddhas, Yogi's and others, too who took to begging were all denounced. Guru Nanak says, "One who delivers sermons but begs alms from door to door is blind of mind and devoid of self respect. No respect ought to be shown even to the Guru or Pir who goes a begging for his livelihood." In another scriptural hymn it is said that only they realize God who work with their hands and then share their earning with the needy.

Guru Nanak denounced belief in magic and mantras and the irrational notions of defilement by touch and impurity said to attach to occasion such as child birth. Men were all equal and there was, according to him, no question of one born in a certain class being polluted by the touch of him born in another. He said: If the principle of impurity be admitted, then there is impurity everywhere. In cow-dung and wood there are worms. As many as are the grains of corn, none is without life. In the first place there is life in water, by which, all are made green. How can impurity be warded off? It falls on our own kitchen Nanak, impurity is not removed like this. It is washed away by divine knowledge.

In his wanderings when Guru Nanak visited Mecca, the Qazis and the 'Mullahs', enquired of him as to which of the two religions were superior-Hinduism or Islam.¹⁷ The Guru said that both Hindus and Muslims would suffer without the noble deeds such as righteousness, truth etc. Both sects are jealous of each other. The Hindu insists on saying 'Ram' and the Muslim 'Rahim'. But they know not God. The Guru implied that those who do good are good people listening to this, the Haji's remained silent.

At Baghdad the high priest Pir asked him who he was and to what sect he belonged. The Guru told him that he had rejected all sects and he was God's man and knew only one God. Guru Nanak felt that the real cause of the people's misery was their disunity born out of the diversity of beliefs. Therefore wherever he went, he left behind a *Sangat* institution. The organization of the *Sangat* system by the Guru Nanak was a revolutionary step. It practically helped in leveling down distinctions of caste, creed and color in the society. It worked for equality and brotherhood of mankind and elevated the spiritual life of the people. Guru Nanak laid great stress on *Satsang* or congregation as, in their view, only *Satsang* could initiate one in the worship of the *Nam* *Satsang* could remove all the evils of one's emotions and so effect the purification of our soul. The foundation of his institution was laid by Guru Nanak who started *Sangat* and God *dharma* sala's built during the course of his travels for the congregation of his followers.

During his life time; Guru Nanak undertook four great tours. During these tours he converted people to his beliefs and started *Sangat* wherever he went. Guru Nanak visited several sacred places in the country. He visited the notorious robber Shaikh Sajjan and converted him to his views.¹⁹ It is said that the first Sikh temple was constructed on the spot where this conversion took place.

Guru Nanak's religion by definition is a programme to integrate the people in the bonds of harmony, love and respect for one another. The main impact of the Preaching's of the Hindu Guru Nanak was too aware the Muslims and other social groups, that the truth belonged to all and it was not the monopoly of any one religion or social group. He rejected otherworldliness and asceticism as the basis of life and also as the true path to bliss. Guru Nanak regarded life as the top creation of God and the world the nicest place to live in. He called this world as 'Great Garden of God' and the man as microcosm of Macrocosm. Activities of the world were regarded as 'must' by him. Activities would not cause degeneration

of man only if they were done honestly without exploiting any one and with full faith in God. Guru Nanak fixed a new goal before the people, the goal of establishing global society on the basis of social equality, honest.

Creative labor, and faith in oneness of God. The precepts of equality and honest creative labor naturally evoked new aspirations and hopes among the majority of the people and they began to view the future with hope, confidence and optimism.

He thus set out to create a society that believed in brotherhood and succeeded in uniting together as one family to work for its own upliftment and progress. To build the individual and national character, he taught the practice of purity, patience, fear of wrong, love for fellow beings and uttering the Divine name. The Guru made them realize that there was a divine spark in their hearts which could be lit by them selves alone with the Name of God.

His teaching was addressed to all men for this, or for any other purpose he recognized no differences of caste, race or religion. He treated all sects and communities alike. He spoke to Hindus and Muslims, Siddhas and Sufis in the same tone. He attacked sterile ceremonial forms, but never any religion.²⁰ In his spirit of tolerance and consideration towards the faiths of other men, Guru Nanak showed a remarkably modern sensibility. His conception of reform in religion was liberal. It was broader than that of a Bhakti teacher or a cultic reformer. He broke new ground in contemplating not only the removal of certain abuses, but, ultimately the unity of religion. In calling upon Hindus to become better Hindus and upon Muslims to become better Muslims he was pointing towards a new religious culture.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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