

# GURU NANAK - HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS

By Roopinder Singh

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**A Review by Soumen Mukherjee\***

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The distinctiveness of Guru Nanak Dev's teachings lies in his exhortation on living a life in accordance with Divine Will while not relinquishing one's worldly responsibilities. And indeed, in this his own life provides the example par excellence. In this book under review the author, a professional journalist, gives a bird's-eye-view of the life and teachings of this great exemplary preacher-saint who eventually came to establish a religion that teaches us above anything else that life is no meandering journey towards a certain 'distant' ocean of spirituality.

Guru Nanak's efforts at institutionalization – making Kartarpur the center of his activities – was designed to create no reclusive monastic order, but a "God oriented" community with firm social commitment, aiming to root out the odious social anomalies, and resting on the three pillars of *langar* (communal meal), *pangat* (sitting together in rows for dining) and *sangat* (holy assemblage).

Through a dozen chapters (not counting the preface and Epilogue) the author narrates the birth of the 'Guru', his extensive travels in South and West Asia to spread the Word, foundation of a religious order, his dialogues with holy – men and saints of other faiths, and his efforts to rescind socioeconomic and gender inequalities

The writer has used the hagiographical *Janamsakhi* literature, some scholarly secondary works and oral tradition as basic sources. His style is simple and lucid, and the approach often anecdotal. In fact, he uses not just the oral tradition of the Sikhs, but even interesting local anecdotes.

For instance, we are told that in Sikkim cultivation of paddy is associated with one 'Nanak Lama' and a chain of 108 small lakes in that state is called *nai mal*, evidently representing the beads of Guru Nanak's *mala* (P.-47). Besides, the connoisseur might find delight in the reproductions from rare eighteenth century miniature paintings, the Guler family sketches and the nineteenth century *Janamsakhi* series.

However, if the apparent simplicity of the narrative is good news for the non-specialist reader, the cynical student of History is likely to discover in it traits that stand in contradiction with some known facts. Thus at one point the writer claims that Guru Nanak was not a product of the Bhakti movement and that the Guru's influence on other *bhagats* led to a certain conceptual evolution about God: from *Sargun* (God in visible forms) to *Nirgun* (the formless God); this, according to the writer, is evidenced by the facts that the former concept reigns supreme in the earlier works of these *bhagats*, and the latter in their later works (P.-5).

This is utter oversimplification of some not-so-simple matters. Ideologically and even when it came to the means of propagating their message – the monotheists (the Nirguna Bhaktas) shared much in common between themselves, so much so that it would be ahistorical to say that any one of them influenced all the others. If anything, Kabir – one of the senior contemporaries of Guru Nanak, who is often said to have influenced Guru Nanak instead – was as much seamlessly eclectic and monotheist as Nanak was.

For the Nirguna bhaktas of the time – many of whom were "low caste" preachers it was as much a social struggle as religious. Treading a path independent of both Hinduism and

Islam they would thus attack – and often in sharp contrast to the “Saguna Bhaktas” like Tulsidas – some elements of orthodox Brahmanism, eg. the caste hierarchy. For the Punjab and Sikkim in particular, add to this factors like the growing corruption among the Khattris – who were mostly collaborators in the civil administration of the Lodis – and desire for upward social mobility of the economically powerful yet socially subservient Jat population. One would have immensely benefited had the writer ventured to present a little diluted version of the more serious academic contributions focusing on the politico-socio-economic specificities of medieval Punjab – from Indubhusan Banerjee, W.H. McLeod, through J.S. Grewal and down to Sunita Puri – in his characteristic lucid style. Likewise, while admittedly there is no specific mention of Guru Nanak in the *Baburnamah*, a certain tradition has it that Guru Nanak’s condemnation of the oppressive Lodis and his message had a decisive role in bringing Babur – who had met the wandering Guru against the Afghans. True or not, the writer could have just touched upon this ‘episode’ when he talks about the Guru’s imprisonment at the hands of Babur (Pp.-52-53), if only to show that not all traditions or hearsay about the Guru revolved round the theme of ‘religion’. Given the importance of the non-religious factors in the evolution of this community, this would not have been an inflection, and more so as the writer himself is at pains to show the Guru’s take on the contemporaneous political developments.

[Courtesy: *The Statesman*]

## **GUR jaisa nahi ko dev**

**By Satnam Kaur**

**Published by Gurbani Class**

**Price: Rs. 30/-**

***An Appreciation by Avtar Singh\****

Bibi Satnam Kaur is a well-known name among *Satsangis* in Mumbai. She has dedicated her life to a mission of spreading light of *gurmat* among the younger generation through the Gurbani classes, which she regularly conducts with the help and active co-operation of likeminded persons. She has experimented with various projects to spread out the holy message of Gurbani among the general public. The one in which she got the slogan “SATNAM WAHEGURU” written on the bodies of the BEST buses in Mumbai was a great success. Apart from her physical SEWA she has an instinct for writing, which she has proven earlier when she released her maiden book “Daily Gurbani Routine” – a pencil-sketched guidebook with gurbani quotation for children in particular and for others in general. Her latest book “Gur Jaisa Nahi Ko Dev” is an excellent work to give the basic elementary information about the concept of Guru – as per *gurmat* - to our children. The book has been thoughtfully divided into four sections and each section has depth of information on the subject matter - in an easy to understand language - supported with appropriate gurbani quotations. The brief information related to the history and the role played by the Sikhs gurus, to uplift the human society, makes it more valuable. The book may be small in size but it covers almost every aspect from the meaning of word Guru to its importance in life and the achievements one can attain by studying and following the *gurbani* (Guru’s teaching) as a daily routine. Another good thing about the book is that it has been appropriately written bilingually that helps its readers to understand the contents more convincingly. Ms Mondira Mondal has given the book an attractive look with an artistic touch to the cover page.



collaborators, who bend over backwards to please the ruling class in every era. The diary records, for instance, the infamy of the official custodians of Golden Temple, in 1919, conferring honours on General Dyer and governor Michael O'Dyer shortly after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, for which sycophantic deed the petty fogging manager became "Sir Aroor Singh". The diary also mentions how Sikh prisoners at the Cellular Jail, Port Blair ( *Kala Pani*) devoutly recited *Sukhmani* every morning before partaking of their meal, Baba Kartar Singh leading the way, and inspiring harmony among "Lifers" including Vir Savarkar. It is another matter that the Baba and some other leaders were released as part of amnesty on the eve of the Governor General appointing the Hunter Commission of Enquiry. The Jathedar's moral reassurance to prisoners had worked wonders long before dawn of freedom in 1947. His courage and compassion come out in the book as qualities that are touchstones of leadership.

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