

Guru Nanak, the Green Prophet

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Wandering in the wilderness
I scale heights and go up the mountain.
I roam about in the jungle....

‘Sri Raga 1’ (57)

Thus spake Guru Nanak. This Guru did not only deliver the Lord’s word ‘as it descends’, he also delivered to us much about the Lord’s world that was his environment. Verse after melodious verse that he spontaneously sang seemed remarkably enriched with striking images drawn from the green natural world that surrounded him. Today to persist in pronouncing him to be a seeker and a sage is no longer enough. The poet who delighted in the seasons in the sun, observed the agony of the trapped fish and birds, noticed not only the enormous elephant but also the wee worm by the way side, is also one to be recognized for his ‘green’ verse. If Guru Nanak is considered as a philosopher, he then is a philosopher with a distinct difference. His philosophy, dealing as it does with sublime thoughts, can also be termed ‘verdant’ philosophy. In his consciousness of the environment that surrounded him, his repeated use of the natural imagery consisting of birds, beasts and the beauty of the seasons, Guru Nanak is, indeed, a crusader cast in a green mould:

Riches, youth and flowers are a few days’ guests
Like the leaves of a weed that withers even in water.

‘Sri Raga Sector 2’ (23)

Many events as related in the Janam Sakhis about Guru Nanak are shrouded in mystery; the incidents connected with the restoration of crops ruined by Nanak’s buffaloes, the stationary shadow of a tree cast on the sleeping guru, the cobra’s shadow sheltering the resting Nanak, the jackal and the food from God’s courts, Kir nagar – the city of insects, Duni Chand and the wolf, Panja Sahib – the place where the rock stopped, are all associated with the natural environment of Nanak. But owing to their miraculous nature they must be, as W. H. Mcleod claims in his *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, ‘relegated to the “possible” category’ (p. 77). Therefore, the present writer has mainly concentrated on the words of Nanak rather than the evidence of the Janam Sakhis about his life. Researching into nature as observed by Nanak has proved to be a rewarding experience, enriching me with a wealth of information about the green verses of the great Guru.

Life for Nanak in *bar* (upland region lying between the river valleys of Punjab) had essentially been a rustic existence. We learn from his exquisite verses about the enchantment of the rainy seasons and the delights of spring. In comparison, the summer and winter seasons proved to be intensely oppressive in their onslaught. The poet in Nanak responded with a rare sensitivity to the forests and fields around him, obviously delighting in the sensuous appeal of the remarkable variety of flora and fauna that thronged the countryside. In his wander-thirst, the Guru travelled far

and wide, 'all alone in wilderness' ('Gauri Chhant I' 243) he composed his green slokas in which the sublime blends readily with the natural, the meditative with spontaneous:

I've seen innumerable trees and plants.
Also the animals created by You.
So many serpents visited my hut
And many a bird I shooed away.

'Gauri Cheti I' (156)

In a manner remarkably reminiscent of St. Francis of Assisi, Guru Nanak has recognized the elements to be his relatives. His verse reminds us of St. Francis' 'Canticle to the Sun', St. Francis' praise of Mother Earth:

Air is the Guru, water the father.
And earth is the mother superior.
Day and night are the nursemaids
With whom the whole world plays.

Slok 'Japuji'. (1-8)

And in their 'fear' of God, the worshipper's awe at the absolute authority of God lies the connecting link in the green domain of nature. It is in their fear of the Lord's immense authority that the unity of nature is best perceived:

In fear the minds ever blow
In fear millions of rivers flow,
In fear the fire does its job,
In fear the earth is heavy under its weight,
In fear the moon moves its head,

'Asa' (469)

And it is this awe which leads true devotion, to pure love for the Master. Not only human beings, but also the elements of Nature offer true worship to God. This is green homage at its most spectacular:

The sky is the platter,
The sun and the moon are the lights
And the stars the jewels,
Sandalwood's fragrance is the incense,
The wind is the flywhisk,
And all the forests Your flowers.
What a wonderful arati it is!
The arati is what pleases God.

'Dhanasari' (633)

Guru Nanak's *arati*, this ode to God, was composed outside the Jagannatha Temple at Puri where rigid adherence to rituals, even today, continues to be the be-all and end-all of worship. And the Guru had rightly realized the possibility of the real essence of devotion evaporating in the crowded ritual-infested atmosphere of worship. And Nanak's rejection of mere rituals replacing true bhakti or inner devotion has, unfortunately, yet to convince all keepers of religion even in the twenty-first century of our civilization.

For the Guru meditating on the Divine Word was the way 'to cruise across the dreaded ocean' (Sidh Gosht 5). He recommends that 'one should opt for loneliness', (Sidh Gosht 5):

The way a lotus lives in water unfringed
Or a duck swims against the current,
One should meditate on the Divine Word.

'Sidh Gosht' (5)

Significantly enough, Nanak recommends in 'Gauri Bairagan I' that all creatures, great and small, 'merge their flicker in His flame' (157); whether bird, beast or reptile, each one is living a life which is completely absorbed in becoming 'a sacrifice unto Him!' (157):

Had I been a doe
I would live in a dale,
Eating leaves and grass
With the Guru's grace I would find my Lord...
Had I been a koel
I would live in a mango tree
Ever meditate on His word....
Had I been a fish
I would dwell in water...
My Lord lives on this bank and that,
I would stretch my hand and gain His touch.
Had I been a snake,
I would live in a pit,
Absorbed in the Guru's Word...

'Gauri Bairagan I' (157)

Having realized that 'God lives in every living creature' ('Gauri I' 228), Guru Nanak lovingly observes the details of their habitat. That the humble and inarticulate, the dumb and the helpless creatures of the natural world all attain God is an object lesson to us with our burdens of books and bickerings over religion:

You may read and read and load yourself like a cart...
You may read for years...
You may read as long as you live.
You may read as long as you breathe...
'Raga Asa Slok' (143)

Unlike us mortals, Nanak could also share the sky with the bird and the water with the fish. In his compilation like 'Malar I' we come across aspects of the Guru's travelling which have a marked bearing to those out-of-the-body responses undergone by the realized ones undertaking astral travelling:

I take a flight and soar in the sky
I do it with the blessing of my mighty Lord.
I behold the sea and the land,
Mountains and riverbanks.
In every nook and corner I find my Master
'Malar I' (1257)

The importance of water in Nanak's verses cannot be ignored; the image of water turns up again and again in his works:

O Lord! Grant a drop of water of Your grace
To Nanak the thirsty bird,
So that he finds solace in Your name.

'Dhansari I Arati' (663)

Keeping in mind Nanak's initiation in the river while he was bathing, water, not surprisingly, forms an important symbol in sloks:

The Guru is like an ocean laden with pearls.
The swans of saints sitting on its shore peck at the pearls.
They partake of the elixir of His name if He so pleases.

'Dhansari I Sector 2' (685)

It is said that when the messengers of God had transported Nanak to the divine court he was commended to drink from the cup of Nam; this was the cup of amrit which God had ordered him to drink. That is why, perhaps, Nanak's verses about water are often steeped in mystical overtones:

Says Nanak, a mouthful of water cleanses
If one knows how to do it.
For the wise, the mouthful of water is knowledge,
For the yogi it is sanctity...
Water is the source of all creation
And it is in water that everything dissolves.

'Raga Sarang, Slok I' (1240)

This water is also intimately connected with the process of agriculture—a process which Nanak's verses celebrates with startling clarity:

Let your mind be the peasant that does the farming,
Hard work be the water and your body the field.
Let his name be the seed...

'Raga Sorath' 595

One of the ways that man utilizes and most of the times exploits nature, is because of the process of agriculture. Nanak did not forget the seasonal harvest even in his search for the supreme:

I understand the rabi crop for remembering His name,
Also the kharif crop for meditating on the True Name.

'Malar I, Slok I' (1286)

In 'Raga Prabhati' (I) Nanak talks of the various crops that graced the green fields of his environment in a song that is unique in its symbolic associations as well as lyrical intensity:

Bless me with the rice of chastity and continency
And the wheat of compassion
And the leafy plate of corn.
Endow me with the milk of Your mercy...
Forgiveness and patience are my milch-cow
And poise the calf that drinks its milk...

(1329)

It is not only milk or wheat that crops up in Nanak's green verse. He, it appears, had a very sensible viewpoint where meat is concerned:

They slaughtered a rhinoceros for their sacred feast,
This was the way of the gods.
Those who give up eating meat
And hold their nose to shut out its smell,
Swallow human being in the dark...
Born out of the blood of the mother and father
And yet they eat no fish nor meat.

'Raga Malar, Slok I' (1289-90)

This was part of the celebrated slok sung by the Guru when surrounded by angry yogis who were scandalized at his attempt at cooking and partaking of meat near a sacred tank where a fair was being held in Kurukshetra. It is not the making of meat or the searching for fruits and roots that are really important. Meditation on God is the answer:

One should opt for loneliness
And concentrate on the Absolute...

'Sidh Gosht' (5)

Another animal-related custom, that of donating animals, is also mentioned by the Guru. According to Nanak, it is not through donating but in right living that one progresses in spiritual life:

You may donate citadels of gold, horses and elephants,
You may donate land and comely cows,
You may still be petrified with pride...

'Sri Raga I' (62)

Images of domesticated elephants and cows have cropped up elsewhere in this perceptive poet's verses:

Truthfulness lies neither in living in jungles nor in caves; ...
It lies not in elephants kept chained at your house,
Nor in droves of grazing cows.

'Slok I' (952)

Not only domestic animals like cows and dogs but also wild creatures turn up again and again in the Guru's verse:

Tigers, hawks and the like carnivora
You make them eat grass.
And those who are grass-eating
You feed them on flesh...
Says Nanak, as it pleases the True One
He provides sustenance to His flock.

'Raga Majh, slok!' (144)

Even more fascinating is the Slok I under 'Raga Malar' (1286) because in Nanak's slok there is a magnificent use of the literary device of contrast; under the roof of one slok the poet places the mighty besides the meek, the daring beside the

delicate. The details about the enormous elephant are truly impressive for the marvellous word pictures they conjure up. This crowding of visual, auditory as well as tactile and olfactory images is, indeed, Nanak the poet at his best and greenest:

The elephant eats a hundred maunds of clarified butter and molasses,
And another five hundred maunds of com.
He belches, blows and raises dust,...

The small sparrow, the terrible tiger, and the chirping cricket are then followed by the fly with its weakness for sweets:

Pecking half a corn, the sparrow chirps, flying high in the sky...
The mighty tiger kills hundreds of deer which others eat.
Overbearing, he wouldn't enter his den.
Whom does the blind beast impress with his roar? ...
The milk-weed cricket adores the milk-weed.
And eats its leaves perching on it...
The fly gives its life for its weakness for sweets.

If there are frequent uses of animal images, can birds be far behind? In his many images of the swan and the crane, Nanak reminds us of St. Francis's marked fondness for all birds, big or small...

You may be a swan or a crane
If it please Him
He may turn the swan into a crane.

'Sri Raga Slok I' (91)

For some reason the swan for Nanak was mightier than the crane and his admiration for the swan is explicitly expressed in 'Dhanasri Sector 2':

The wretched crane bathes in the puddle;
Rather than cleaning itself, it acquires filth...
A swan never leaves the ocean.
He merges with the Lord with devotion and love.
The swan is the ocean and the ocean is the swan.

(685)

There are exquisite verses about pond-related life in the green realms of Nanak's verse. Quite often he mentions in a tone of appreciation about the lotus and the fish that nestle in the waters of the pond:

Man! You should love God the way the lotus loves water.
Buffeted by waves, it still blossoms,
And longs for it.
Born in water, it withers without water...
Man! You should love God the way the fish loves water;
The more the water the happier she is.
Her heart and soul at peace,
She lives not a moment without water.
God alone knows the craving of her heart.

'Sri Raga I' (59-60)

The other birds that Nanak mentions in the same verse are the pied cuckoo's love for the rain water and the shelduck with its marked fascination for the sun:

Man! Love God the way the pied cuckoo loves rain.
Not a drop of water it drinks
From the overflowing lakes and green pastures.
His grace alone grants him the raindrop; ...
Man! Love God the way the shelduck loves the Sun
She sleeps not for a moment
Lest she is distanced from her lover.

Images of fish are also to be found in Nanak's melodious verses. The fish, it seems, is a favoured creature like the swan:

You are like an ocean.
I am a fish...
I know neither the fisherman nor the net...

'Sri Raga, Sector 4' (25)

The ignorance of the fish about the trap of death, about the net cast by the fisherman, is emphasized elsewhere in Nanak's verse as well:

In the unfathomable, brackish waters of the ocean
The fish noticed not the net,
Overconfident of her charm and wit
She fell into the trap and was caught...
In the manner of the fish
You'll be caught in this net unawares.

'Sri Raga I' (55)

Like the fish, birds trapped and terrorized in the net also stirred this sensitive poet and philosopher. The fish image is repeatedly used again as a prophetic warning to the traveller on life's journey:

The crow is again caught in the net;
He regrets it but it's too late.
Even trapped, he pecks at the feed
But tries not to understand...
Like a fish you are caught in a death-trap
Without the help of the benevolent Guru
There is no deliverance...

'Ramkali I' (935)

Even the sandalwood tree did not fail to impress the poet favourably. He, very likely, came across these trees in the course of his journey down south India:

The sandalwood tree exudes fragrance
The way man breathes.

'Malar I' (1256)

'Barah Mah' under Rag Tukhari constitutes, perhaps, Guru Nanak's greatest tribute to nature. It is his ode to the seasons, and has all the charm and sensuousness of a Keatsian composition. In addition, there is in this composition an interesting note of sublime philosophy, sensuous seasonal details dovetailed with the passionate outpourings of a bride-like religious aspirant (Nanak himself) awaiting the Master's presence. The month of Chet, for instance, is described in vivid, visual and auditory images:

(The month of) Chet is welcome,
It comes with spring and the pretty bumblebee,
The plants in the orchard are in blossom,
My Lord should now come home!
Without the spouse, how can the bride feel happy?...
With the kokil singing her melody in the mango tree,
The ache in my body becomes unbearable.
The bumble-bee flitting the flowering bough... (5) (1108)

Chet is followed by Baisakh and even more startlingly haunting images appear from the green domain of natural bounty:

Baisakh is pleasant
With bough laden with fresh leaves.
The bride wistfully looks at the door
Waiting for her God-lover to come home, (6) (1108)

The verse about Jeth, however, does not contain the natural details as in the examples of the other months. The description of Asad, however, more than makes up for the previous paucity of descriptive detail:

Frightful is (the month of) Asad
When the sun blazes in the sky,
The earth is in agony
Packed with burning fire;
They worry themselves to death
And yet the sun doesn't relent.
Its chariot moves on as the bride looks for shade,
The grasshoppers wail in the forest... (8) (1108)

Sawan is the one month which has preoccupied the poets's attention to a great extent. Time and again he mentions Sawan as a season which ushers in both rejoicing and pangs of hunger for the beloved's presence:

Sawan is the month of rejoicing.
It is the time when dark clouds pour.
I long for my Love but my Lord is away; ...
The lightning flashes and frightens.
All alone in my bed I grieve,... (9) (1108)

Under 'Raga Malar, Slok I' the poet once more meditates on the contrary responses that the rainy season arouses in the natural world and the human one:

Says Nanak, if it rains in the Sawan,
Four species are overjoyed:
The snake, the deer, the fish
And those fond of merry-making.
Says Nanak, if it rains in the month of Sawan,
Four species suffer separation:
The calf, the poor,
The wayfarer and servants. (1279)

There is a small but significant image of the rainy season under 'Raga Wadhans I, Sector 2' (557-58):

The peahen sings.
It is the rainy season.
I feel a stab in my heart.
Your charm is irresistible.
I will die if I see You not.

The next month is, of course, Bhadon with its flooded plains and overflowing pools. The verse overbrims with visual, tactile and auditory images:

There is water in pools and plains,
The rainy season is for rejoicing.
It rains during the dark night;
How can the young bride be at peace?
The frogs and peacocks cry aloud.
The pied cuckoo calls to her sweetheart.
Snakes sting at every step.
Mosquitoes bite and the pools are brimful. (10) (1108)

The month of Assu is then dealt with in some detail by Guru Nanak:
Come my Lord, it's the month of Assu!
Your love pines for You....
How can a dry reed blossom?
Having weathered summer, I've winter in store; ...
The boughs all around the ten sides are in bloom,
That which ripens steadily is sweet. (11) (1108)

In the month of Poh it snows and Nanak presents the month in sharp, brief details:

In the month of Poh it snows.
The trees and grass are sucked dry.
Why don't You come, my Lord? (14) (1108)

Although Phagun in Barah Mah does not contain a wealth of details, Nanak describes Basant in great detail elsewhere. He is, like Blake, a mystic poet par excellence:

Among the months most auspicious is Basant
That marks the advent of spring;
Meditating on the Master
I am ever in bloom.
Sister, innocent one! ...
Your deeds are the tree, God's Name the branch,
Your faith the flower, and revelation the fruit.
Meeting the Lord are the leaves
And getting rid of pride its thick shade...
The months and seasons come and go,
You must do good deeds.
Says Nanak, those who are devoted to Him,
They remain ever green, they never die.

'Basant I, Sector I' (1168)

Nanak's environmental awareness has until now been largely overlooked by the scholars. His response to his surroundings was not only sensitive but also significantly refreshing. On analysis, his spiritual philosophy is an arresting amalgam of the green and the sublime. The Fakir Balol, one of his distant disciples, describes the Guru very effectively as a dawn-lit honey rose. Like this fragrant blossom, Nanak's environmental awareness seems to permeate his poetry with the scent of a healing, thriving green. Like the beauty of the budding honey rose, the natural images of his sloks add a remarkable richness and vividness to his philosophical verse. Without the predominance of the natural Nanak as a poet would not have been as successful a preacher as he has proved to be. Being a convincing green crusader helped Nanak to establish himself as a significant seeker and a saga of his era. The saintly Balol's poem is a tribute not only to his message of the spiritual path but also to his prophecy of the spring Eternal:

Upon this simple slab of granite didst thou sit.. O Guru Nanak, ...
What song from the source of the Seven
Waters thou didst sing to charm the soul of Iran!
What peace from the Himalaya's lonely caves and forest didst thou carry to the
vine-groves and rose gardens of Baghdad!
What light from Badrinath's snowy peak thou didst bear...

[This poem was part of a collection of English verses, 'Snowbirds', published in 1919 by Swami Ananda Acharya. He had read an Arabic inscription containing this poem in a shrine outside Baghdad. The inscription was dated 912 Hejira.]

To quote Nanak himself-the true devotees 'remain ever green, they never die'. If deeds, as the great mystic Guru has pointed out, 'are the tree' and we 'must do good deeds', then life must become all good deeds and green trees. In other words, go green and grow green again and again!

