

Epoch-making Life and Times of Guru Nanak

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God, according to Nanak, is Nirankar - formless and beyond description. But this should not prevent us from our pursuit of Him, whom he describes as Sat to mean both Truth and Reality,. God thus becomes both a spiritual concept and a code of life. So a good Sikh would not only believe in one God but also conduct himself in a manner that would help his fellow human beings by doing good deeds and sharing his earnings. 'Truth is high indeed but higher still is truthful living,' said Guru Nanak. Charity for its own sake was not enough. 'What avail is the giving of alms to one who sins by day and gives in charity at night?' said Nanak of the bloodthirsty king, Ibrahim Lodi. Nanak however stated 'Use your intelligence in seeking God and in gaining merit; use your brains to read and understand what you read and how you give in charity. This is the only ..." (Quoted in Khushwant Singh's translation of 'Hymns of Guru Nanank" Orient Longman, 1991 edition)

The Sikh way to God lay ultimately in complete and selfless surrender to God and chanting (and meditating) upon his Name contained in the *mool mantra* of his composition, a conclusion he came to in a moment of enlightenment.. 'I have no miracles except the name of God' said Nanak 'which destroys the suffering of evil deeds, gives glory and enables one to become truthful, contented, enlightened and which is like bathing at 68 places of pilgrimage.' This recitation would create cosmic vibrations enabling one to find God within oneself. But first one had to conquer the 'mind and you will (then) conquer the world'. To help discipline the mind Nanak advocated listening to hymns about God, dawn being the ideal time to do so at which time communication with God was at its best. For only then 'would the mind become repository of the Name, Truth enter the soul and the cycle of birth and death end with union with God.' He believed, unlike the mainstream of Hindu thought, that such an opportunity must be taken up immediately as it may not appear again. Of supreme importance for realizing God was the guidance of a Teacher or Guru, in whom one should never lose faith. The Guru would not only help us understand the existence of God but to master all that was necessary to attain perfection: self control, patience, knowledge of God, both fear and then love of God, earnest prayer and faith in God. Although God had created the conditions from which emanate both good and evil, man's role according to Nanak is to choose one and avoid the other. The Guru played a vital role in this choice and in keeping man on the right path. The Guru however is to be loved, consulted, respected and revered but never worshipped. The Guru was not to be regarded as an Avatar under any circumstances. There was to be no priestly class and pilgrimage was unnecessary - God's name being the 'real' pilgrimage place.

The Age of Darkness:

Guru Nanak blazed the path to a new religion during Punjab's critical transition from the Afghan to the Mughal rule. In this, the darkest of ages (kaliyug), the lot of the Hindus across the subcontinent was indeed pathetic. Not only had they lost their country, they were in danger of losing their identity. Punjab had been invaded at regular intervals since Sultan Mahmud Ghazni (998-1030) first came in the 11th century. His slaughter

of thousands at Somnath set the tone for Muslim barbarity for centuries. Between the 11th and 16th centuries there were about sixty invasions. Men were butchered, women and children enslaved and temples and libraries destroyed. In the late 15th century and early 16th century Nanak was to witness both cruelty of the local Lodhi kings and the atrocities of the invading army of Babar in 1526. Hindus were ill-treated and systematically converted so that by Nanak's time they constituted only half of Punjab's population. However, once the futility of conversion by force was recognized, the task was taken over by the Sufi's who tried to bridge the gulf by presenting a more civilized and human face of Islam. Although Sufism at its best tried to reproduce that frame of mind which had made it possible for Mohammad to receive the revelations of God and which he was to put into the *Quran*, there was a political and proselytising element, and so the Sufi's projected those aspects of the *Quran* and *Hadith* which brought Muslims and Hindus closer to enable the latter to convert. 'Whatever ye turn, there is the face of Allah's (Quran 2: 109) was substituted for example for the more aggressive. 'There is one God, and Mohammad is the Prophet'. They further promised equality. Their attempts, though valiant and bearing some fruit, were to be less successful than expected. This was true also of a similar movement from Hinduism to Islam, the Bhakti movement which under Ramananda even had Hindu and Muslim followers. But the rift between the two communities was too deep for any meaningful and fundamental impact, this being exacerbated under the later Mughal emperors notably Jehangir and Aurangzeb in the 17th century. But while Islam did offer 'brotherhood' and could show its 'superiority' with the elevation to high ranks of (a very limited number) of lower caste Hindus and even Untouchables, Hinduism, the 'defeated' religion appeared to offer no succour at all. Evils like *sati* and the harsh treatment of widows went hand in hand with a rigid and divisive caste structure. Brahmins, who reigned supreme had made Hinduism extremely hierarchical and ritualistic. The scriptures were in language impossible to assimilate and in any case, an elitist approach did not encourage the spread of understanding. The kind of religion which gave spiritual sustenance simply did not exist.

This was exacerbated by poverty and helplessness. In Nanak's words:

"The age is like a knife, kings are butchers...,
Decency and laws have vanished, falsehood reigns.....,
The vocation of priests is gone and the Devil reads the marriage vows,
Praises of murder are sung. Blood is shed instead of saffron."

Further

"There is none who receives nor gives not bribe,
Even the king distributes justice when his palm is greased."

And

".. true men speak the truth and suffer for it,
when penitents cannot perform penance,
when he who repeats God's name meets obloquy."

And he concluded

"In the black night of deceit,

The moon of truth is nowhere to be seen...
I find no way out of this darkness."

[
*Sikh Gurus, Their lives and Teachings*_K.S.Duggal, UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd.,
New Delhi. 1993]

Quest for Unity in Truth:

This was the background to Nanak's quest. An evolved soul like Nanak would have, in any case, searched the depths of his soul at a personal level in whichever age he was born. But how could a man searching for the Truth ignore the wretched condition the people found themselves in. Nanak's religion reflected this and was therefore both a quest for God and a reaction to the environment. And despite this earlier pessimism, Nanak did find a way out of the darkness and had an answer to his quest in a message which he was to spread throughout north India and elsewhere.

The idea of one God was not new to Hinduism or Islam but Nanak emphasized it and unlike Islam where Mohammad was the (only) Prophet, Nanak's message was for all. The idea of charity, present in Hinduism but more formally in Islam in the form of giving alms (*zakat*) to the poor, is something Nanak emphasized as fundamental. Further *langar* or free food for the poor (and others) was a revolutionary way of putting this idea into practice as it was of removing differences between castes and classes. The requirement for humility in Islam (and Hinduism) symbolically brought about by prostrating oneself in a mosque (or temple) was taken a step further with the concept of *sewa* or service to ones fellow human beings. The idea to perform ones duty, fight for what is right and live joyfully is based on similar Hindu concepts.

Guru Nanak's genius lay in his instinctive ability to recommend Devotion as the most effective way to enlightenment or seeking the Truth. The *Gita* had propounded three ways to selfrealisation- the ways of Knowledge, Asceticism and Devotion. Nanak was aware that knowledge of scripture, life and God would be uplifting as would be the path of asceticism with a proper Guru as guide, but he instinctively and correctly chose the path of Devotion as the most suitable especially for the constituents he had in mind-the largely poor and illiterate population of Punjab. Of course, it worked equally well for the others!

The pursuit of God and salvation was therefore to be found not by asceticism but by living in the community as a householder albeit in a detached manner. Detachment simply meant doing away with those matters that exclude the entry of God into ones heart- excessive desires, the lust for money and acrimonious family matters. It was not to be at the expense of caring for the family. 'Be of the world but not worldly' Nanak had said. His revolutionary act was to give the *mool* mantra to all who followed him and any others who cared to listen. There were always two problems in this quest of any Hindu -first to find a worthy and evolved Guru, a quest which could take a lifetime of trial and error, before actually meeting one, if at all. Secondly, it was with great difficulty and after years of 'readiness' that (even) an upper caste Hindu would receive a *mool mantra* from a Guru. And very often it had to be kept secret even from those closest in the family thus restricting its societal usefulness. Nanak gave it to the world freely and, as with the *mool* mantra received by Hindus, this would be a powerful tool for this path of Devotion being pursued as a householder! It is interesting to note that the *mool* mantra,

if chanted diligently and in a congregation, would have the required effect of 'detachment' anyway. The problem of having a Guru was 'solved' for the duration of Guru Nanak's life. In another stroke of genius, he took away the problem of looking for a Guru by appointing one- Angad, was to succeed him. Angad was appointed over his sons much to their disappointment particularly so for the very pious Sri Chand. He thus started a tradition of appointment by merit and therefore ensured stability at the top, essential for the growth and survival of any new religion.

Elemental Simplicity:

Further evidence of his genius lay not only in the simplicity of his message but the simple and effective delivery of it. What he taught was pure Hinduism but without the frills and negative aspects. To keep the message simple he rejected the pantheon of Hindu Gods even though he fully realized their usefulness and the depth of the message behind each deity. They were simply not conducive to a simple and direct message which he was trying to project through his religion. He took his belief of the concept of *Karma* from Hinduism. He stressed the positive aspects- that man was a producer, architect and master. Indeed these were the very aspects stressed by Hinduism but with the corruption of religion, were no longer evident among Hindus who appeared to have become victims and slaves of their destiny. The *Gita* says that success comes not from luck but from perfect action which is self created. By delving into ones own Being infinite potential is released and the more access one gains to the subtler aspects of ones personality the more powerful, dynamic and fulfilled one becomes. Meditating and recitation of the Name would according to Nanak, ensure this. His belief in equality before God made him reject caste completely as also the differences between Hindus and Muslims. He was to put this into practice in a very effective way. He started a practice of eating collectively formalized under *Angad* as the system of *langar* where people of all castes and religions ate together and also his insistence that he would not give an audience to anyone who had not eaten (with everyone else) at the *langar*. What emphasized equality further were his insistence on hymn singing in a congregation and his experiment with community living in Kartarpur which he founded and which was to become the backdrop where he translated 'the theological and ethical ideas in his hymns into reality' so that Kartarpur was not 'a passive backdrop for an individual's search for liberation'. (The Making of Sikh Scripture by Gurinder Singh Mann, Oxford India Paperbacks, 2003). This was furthered by his insistence on the individual's obligation to work towards collective liberation.

God's Ministry:

Guru Nanak was to travel the length and breadth of the country and abroad - to Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Mecca and Medina struck by *wanderlust* and a desire to spread his message. He set up *Manjis* cells) both in India and abroad, where a hard core of individuals strove to spread his teachings. But it was in Punjab where the new religion took its roots. This was principally because his message, a complex mix of regional dialects- *Apabhransha* (a later dialect of *Sanskrit*), *Braj* Bhasha (the language of the Braj region around Mathura, *Hindui* (the language of Delhi) and a heavily Persianised Punjabi, was in the lingua franca (which was to become 'Punjabi') and understood by common people! (The Making of Sikh Scripture by Gurinder Singh Mann, Oxford India Paperbacks, 2003). Guru Nanak also spent the majority of his 'enlightened' time in Punjab after he had traveled the world and his ideas had matured,

being in Kartarpur for the last 15 years of his life. The poetic nature of the hymns too contributed to the popularity of the message. The poetry was quite beautiful. One is reminded of Umar ibn al Khattab, an early passionate opponent of Islam who responded to the sheer beauty of Muhammad's poetry 'When I heard the *Quran*, my heart softened and I wept and Islam entered into me...' (Islam, A short history by Karen Armstrong, Phoenix Press 2001). Indeed Nanak had always preferred to call himself a poet rather than a Teacher! But what was unique and entertaining about his poetry was that it could be sung to music in prescribed Ragas, Nanak benefiting from the willing help and talent of his traveling companion, Mardana, the *robab* player.

Guru Nanak's sweetly commanding personality added to his appeal. He always kept his dignity which added to his stature. He, for example, refused to perform miracles at the instance of the Delhi king, Ibrahim Lodhi. Later when Babar, after mistakenly imprisoning him, offered him bhang (marijuana) from his own special pouch, thus treating him as an equal, he refused saying he was already intoxicated with the name of God! His penetrating dark eyes sparkling of the divine, his sense of humor by which he gently undermined the negative aspects of ritual, phony beliefs and the behavior of priests; his friendship with Hindus and Muslims alike, his insistence that the whole world was one family, was refreshing. Most of these ideas were not necessarily new but Nanak's genius lay in his emphasis. As a whole therefore Sikhism came to be something unique.

Nanak's legacy would not be forgotten. He was, and would be revered by all communities. When he died the Hindus wanted to cremate him and the Muslims bury him. As the saying goes :

'Baba Nanak Shah Fakeer
Hindu ka Guru, Musalman ka peer.'

