

# The Man for All Seasons

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THE SIKHS HAVE SOME remarkably different - even contradictory - ways of looking at their Gurus. Their religion says that God is free from the cycle of human birth, hence is never born nor dies. We also believe that God speaks to us through the Gurus and their teaching. What then of the divinity of the Gurus from Nanak to Gobind Singh? If Jesus was the son of God, how about Guru Nanak or Guru Gobind Singh? For that matter, how about you and I? When Guru Arjun and Guru Tegh Bahadur were martyred, did they not feel the pain? Did Guru Gobind Singh not suffer the loneliness of war and desertion, or the anguish of every parent when he lost his sons in battle?

These and other questions were brought home to me sometime back. I had been asked to formulate a series of questions based on a book on Guru Gobind Singh Ji for a discussion group. One general question asked: "What kind of a man was he?" Some Sikhs who had a preview of the questionnaire took offence. Guru Gobind Singh, they insisted, should not be referred to as a man for he was divine. My words were blasphemy to them. I hid behind a verse of Bhai Nandlal, the poet who knew and traveled with Guru Gobind Singh, and who referred affectionately and reverently - to the Guru as "A man — nonpareil." ਦੀਨ ਓ ਦੁਨੀਆ ਦਰ ਕਮੰਦੇ ਆਂ ਪਰੀ-ਰੁਖਸਾਰ-ਏ ਮਾ ॥ ਹਰ ਦੇ ਆਲਮ ਕੀਮਤ-ਏ ਯੱਕ-ਤਾਰ ਮੁਏ ਯਾਰੇ-ਏ ਮਾ ॥

We recognize, at a certain level of awareness, that men like Jesus Christ, Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh were special — beyond human understanding — so much so that we, unnecessarily, free them of all human experiences, particularly those that are universally recognized as painful or noxious.

The epitome of such reasoning is seen in Christianity, where in order to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus, theologians have recast his birth and death in terms which deny him his humanity. To be virgin-born is not human, nor is it to be raised from the dead. The claim of virgin birth is not unique to Christianity; it is found much earlier in Egyptian mythology and in the life of Buddha as well. Similar reasoning is encountered when Christ is viewed as the only son of God, begotten, not made like you or I. If God does not assume human forms, such claims cannot be taken literally. It seems to me that as sons or daughters of God you and I are no less, the difference between Jesus and us may lie in the inadequacy of our lives and surely it is a quantum difference.

In Guru Gobind Singh's words, God said to him: "I ordain you as my Son. Go forth . . .". **Such words in Christianity and in Sikhism need to be interpreted with some sensitivity and intelligence not transliterated. In very blunt language, Gobind Singh also directed his followers not to worship him as God.**

Such claims as we make on behalf of our prophets and seers are simply indicative of our own very human inadequacies and insecurities. These claims are unnecessary, and to dismiss them would not diminish any great men of God. The uniqueness of Christ, Buddha, Guru Nanak or Gobind Singh lies in how they lived and what they taught, not in how or where they were born or what happened to them after they died.

If, at martyrdom, Guru Arjun and Tegh Bahadur felt no pain then they did not suffer! If they did not suffer as we lesser mortals do, what can they tell us about human suffering? How can they show us the way? Christ was not without suffering when he wailed: "Father, why have thou forsaken me?"

**When Guru Arjun was tortured 1600 years later, he felt the pain though he did not lament his suffering. God the Father had not abandoned him. Instead, Guru Arjun essentially said: "Thy will be done."** His words at that time were of cheerful acceptance of the will of God and the wish always to be imbued with the love of God.

Guru Gobind Singh saw his two young teenaged sons go to war, never to return. He knew when his two younger sons were bricked up alive but did not recant their faith. His answer speaks of the man: "What if I have lost four sons, there are countless more." He was pointing to his followers then. Surely, he knew a father's pain. Certainly, the Gurus shared our human experience but were able to transcend it. Otherwise, they would have little to show us and nothing to teach us. If they felt no pain, what can they tell us about it? If they faced no temptation, they can hardly teach us how to manage ours.

**On the other hand, I look at the political divisions and factions in our young Sikh community. I have come to see how difficult it is to knit our vibrant Sikhs into a unified group and lead them towards a common goal in a single direction. The Gurus created a pride of lions, not a flock of sheep — a nation of individuals, fearless and not afraid to go alone. Yet, these same Sikhs who follow no man, willingly and freely followed their Gurus through pain, suffering, war and often to certain death; and now hundreds of years later, in the name of their Gurus, they still walk that road and the extra mile.**

I wonder if there can be a more vivid proof of the Gurus' divinity. I think in fruitless arguments about the humanity or divinity of the Gurus we miss or devalue the essential elements of their teaching.

The core of Sikh teaching — how to live and die with dignity -had to be taught by example. Mere words would lose relevance with time. The Gurus taught that salvation does not lie in renunciation but in a life of involvement as a householder. Marry, have a family, make an honest living, share the rewards of life with your fellow beings, and spend a life with your mind attuned to the infinite reality within. In a life devoted to truth, be prepared to lay your life on the line for honesty, integrity and honor. These are the essentials of a useful, productive life.

All Ten Gurus - and Guru Granth Sahib - teach us that empowerment of a people occurs only when they have learned the essentials of a God, centered life where God is sought through a responsible, ethical life of honest self-effort and service to mankind. **The inner life must be consistent with, and effortlessly merged with, the external reality of action in the society and this world. Worship no one but the Infinite within, serve no master but truth, live a productive life within the community, taught the Gurus. Truth and truthful living were the first lessons of Sikhism that Guru Nanak gave.** He taught the way to responsible, ethical, honest family life. By example and by teaching the Gurus rejected the caste system, elevated women to equal status, taught people to share, and so on.

The Gurus lived at a time and in a society where life and liberty of the subject people - mainly Hindus - were not safe. Social evils such as caste-system, female infanticide and *sati* dominated Hinduism. A multi-dimensional struggle for a just society was necessary.

However, much as one does not entrust a bankbook to a child, or a car to one who cannot drive, Guru Nanak did not ask his followers to forthwith take up arms against tyranny and injustice. They had to develop maturity, judgement, and discipline for that. Before you pick up a weapon you must know what it is to die. Before you acquire power you must learn what it is to be powerless, lest you become a despot. To command one must learn to serve. Each Guru added a chapter to this book of lessons started by Nanak; each lesson added another dimension to the Sikh — the new man, a man for all seasons.

It is one thing to preach and quite another to do. The Gurus, therefore, truly lived what they taught. Now as long as Sikhs remember their history, they will retain the lessons.

The lives of Gurus teach us how to lead a life of service. Guru Arjun and Tegh Bahadur have shown us how to die with dignity - for a principle. **Guru Hargobind and Gobind Singh could now ask this new man — the mature Sikh — to maintain weapons but use them only if absolutely necessary for justice.** By the time that the Sikh was given the power of a giant he had learned not to use it like one. Guru Gobind Singh's life was a demonstration-lesson on what it is to be completely human and a complete man in all of human dimensions — a man for all seasons.

Guru Gobind Singh showed a different yardstick. He lived the family life, married and had children. His sons were loyal and noble, and lived a life of rectitude and bravery - who died for basic values. What more can a father ask? Guru Gobind Singh was an inspiring leader. He created a productive, fearless and honest nation out of powerless people at the fringes of society. He created leaders out of ordinary men, and then subjected himself to the will of his followers. **He created a nation and then credited his followers for all that he had accomplished.** His door was open to the powerless as well as the elite of the day. What greater administrative skills and dedication to the public good can one have?

The Tenth Master was a philosopher, a writer, a poet *extraordinaire*. To pen over a thousand pages of verse in a variety of languages is no mean achievement. To dictate the whole Guru Granth — all 1430 pages — from memory is no ordinary skill. A connoisseur of the arts, 52 poets and many musicians sought his patronage. Guru Gobind Singh's life illustrated all the dimensions of the human existence. And he lived for only 42 years — an age at which many of us are still finding ourselves. Where most of us once dead are soon forgotten, three hundred years after Guru Gobind Singh, people argue about whether he was divine. Now that is a yardstick for the measure of a Man.

Sikhism holds for a state of impermeable equanimity like that achieved by a candle in a windless place, where one is in tune with the vibrations of divine music — suffused with bliss, undiminished by joy or sorrow, loss or gain, unaffected by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. **The ultimate measure of one's divinity lies in one's humanity. To be completely human - by developing all that is human and noble is to become divine.**

That is the only Divinity, the only eternity, the only immortality open to Man.

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