

# **Avatar: The Divine Spirit is above Incarnation**

**GAJINDAR SINGH\***

\* 2983, Phase VII, Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar, Chandigarh, Punjab. 160062.

IN ANCIENT TEXTS, GENERALLY, there are ten incarnations of *Prajapati Brahma* as was known earlier, replaced in the later texts by Vishnu as a more favourite god. Avatars were generally, the dwarf, the fish, the tortoise, the boar, Narsimha, Rama son of Dasrath, Krishna, Buddha, etc. There is considerable difference in various scriptures about the identification of the incarnations and there is no unanimity about it. Sometimes the list stretches to twenty four incarnations. However, the avatar may be of three distinct varieties, wholly divine, partially divine or, of one time duration. It is firmly held that Vishnu incarnates from time to time for the good of the world at large, although, it may be intriguing that all such incarnations have taken place in *Bharatvarsha*, the Indian subcontinent only, and nowhere else.

It may be noticed that an Avatar is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu, either in human form, like Sri Rama, Krishna, and Buddha; in animal form, like the Fish or Tortoise, the Boar, or semi human shape, like Narsimha. In whatever form, Vishnu's spiritual energy is fully embellished in each of the incarnations. Here the Hindu speculative mind runs riot, as the animals, trees, rivers and hills, all are supposed to be endowed with human mind, human intelligence and human speech. Vishnu incarnating in sub-human, or animal forms, thinks like human beings and one wonders the need for Vishnu to take on the garb of that species, as Vishnu is a powerful god, perhaps a supreme deity in his own right.

Incarnation, therefore, means taking birth and performing acts with a human mind, though it is divinity of Vishnu which is at play. The idea of God's incarnation for solving problems of the world in human form has been popular throughout, in various religions. Christ as son of God is a firm dogma as well as the divine position of Moses and later on, of Mohammad as the last prophet sent by God as his messengers, is an indisputable assertion, though it may strictly fall short of the theory of incarnation.

In contrast to this, the ancient *Jaina* philosophy subtly acknowledged the limitations of various species as not bestowed with all the five senses, which were available by nature to human beings and animals. In addition to it, humans were endowed with the faculty of thought, what came to be known as *Mind*. However, *Jainas* do not accept that animals, with their five senses, have a mind too; they consider it as the exclusive prerogative of humans. Animals have, in fact, to a limited extent Mind and memory, though it is not as developed as in the case of humans. Anger, affection, revenge, love and reward are animal instincts, fairly well developed in most of the animals. Loyalty is a predominant trait, more than humans, in some species of animal kingdom. There is mention in the Indian lore of an elephant not obeying the mahout to trample Bhagat Kabir, whom he was directed to kill; also of elephants known for deep rooted memories and their reaction later to take revenge; of a lion who not only spared but fondled lovingly, Androcles when let loose in the arena to devour him, even though he was hungry, because of a thorn which was extracted by Androcles at an earlier date. Loyalty of dogs and horses is

well known. It shows not only registering in their mind of kindness extended to them but a long memory. Guru Tegh Bahadur's couplet states it:

ਸੁਆਮੀ ਕੇ ਗਿਹੁ ਜਿਉ ਸਦਾ ਸੁਆਨ ਤਜਤ ਨਹੀ ਨਿਤ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਇਹ ਬਿਧਿ ਹਰਿ ਭਜਉ ਇਕ ਮਨਿ ਹੁਇ ਇਕ ਚਿਤਿ ॥

[SGGS: 1428]

*As the loyal dog abandons not  
His master's house ever,  
Nanak, so meditate on Lord's name,  
With deep absorption and concentration.*

Man can, of course, discern and measure time scale in mind, past, present and future, whereas animals have a limited mind function. Maternal love is not an exclusive human trait but is much more pronounced among all animals. The little sparrow may not be able to save its eggs and fledglings from the marauders, but raises a shrill wail over such atrocities. The animals have a natural instinct to protect the little ones, and not calculate rewards at a later stage for rearing the children which is a normal human expectation. Still the extent of possibilities of developing the human mind is immense. It is a different matter that majority of human beings fail to draw maximum utilisation of the five senses which can only be sharpened with the right knowledge. The instincts of anger, affection, love, revenge and reward in man, are his links with the savage state from which he must rise by the right knowledge to make him a superior entity, lifting him above the animals.

ਹਰਖੁ ਸੋਗੁ ਜਾ ਕੈ ਨਹੀ ਬੈਰੀ ਮੀਤ ਸਮਾਨਿ ॥

ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਸੁਨਿ ਰੇ ਮਨਾ ਮੁਕਤਿ ਤਾਹਿ ਤੈ ਜਾਨਿ ॥

[SGGS: 1427]

*He who minds not happiness or sorrow,  
Nor differentiates between friend or foe,  
Says Nanak, consider such a person as liberated.*

Various systems have suggested sets of rules and philosophies in order to bring about the desired change in man. However, mere rejoicing in the superiority of a resurrected being and declaring him an avatar is of no avail even as an incarnation of Vishnu, until and unless it improves the mind and character of the masses.

It does not, however, extend to the concept of *Parabrahma*, which is an attribute-less and formless entity. Sikhs have their own interpretation of the knowledge of progression of diabolic and inferior persons to godly sublimity. It is definitely not dependent on the advent of an avatar, but the individual's sincere efforts to earn godly attributes and shedding of the savage traits. Guru Nanak in his definitive exposition of Supreme Lord in the *Mul mantra* emphasises that God is not born of a womb, *Ajyoni*. The concept is further confirmed by Guru Arjun Dev in his *sabd* in Raga *Bhairon*:

ਸੋ ਮੁਖੁ ਜਲਉ ਜਿਤੁ ਕਹਹਿ ਠਾਕੁਰੁ ਜੋਨੀ ॥

[SGGS: 1136]

*That mouth may burn which defines  
The Supreme God as born of womb.*

Sikhs should not, therefore, have any truck with the incarnation theory involving the Divine Being whether of Brahma or Vishnu. Sikh religion is firmly monotheist and the deity is the Supreme All Pervading God- *Parabrahma*. Yet, the Sikh precepts notwithstanding, the most sacred Sikh shrines like Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, Takht Patna Sahib and such major centres, in their prayers to celebrate birth anniversaries of the Gurus mention that the Gurus, did incarnate as *Avatar!* Pray, *Avatar* of whom? Surely not of Vishnu, nor of the Supreme God, who according to the Gurus themselves does not incarnate. Or is it that the priests are not only imitating the symbols of other religious cultures, without understanding the import of their utterances, but have never taken interest to reflect and arrive at the correct stance of Sikh doctrines. Sikhs in general cannot be faulted when their gurdwaras and *sant deras* perpetuate the myth of incarnation of Vishnu in diverse forms which may number at least ten or upto twenty four. Sikhs have dumbly aped the tradition of Hindus against which the Gurus waged a relentless struggle for 239 years, to rid their psyche of the bane of fanciful frills of the ancient religion. Guru Gobind Singh, in order to reduce the stranglehold of the Brahmins on Hindu society, undertook a gigantic task to get the Hindu scriptures translated into vernacular for the benefit of the down trodden peoples, who were strictly debarred from even listening to the Sanskrit texts of the *shastras*. Yet, he unequivocally stated that he did not believe in these tales and that his God was without a shape, colour, sign or *varna* or caste.

mY nw gnysih ipRQm mnwEUN ]  
 ikSn ibsn kbhUM nw iDAwEUN ]  
 kwn suny pihcwn nw iqn so ]  
 ilv lwgl myrl pg ien so ]

Chopai P.10.

*I do not accept Ganesh as the prime deity  
 Nor meditate on Krishna or Vishnu,  
 I have heard of them but recognise them not,  
 I have adopted for me the feet of God.*

That should be enough to silence the *scientific* scholars about his declared and known definition of God.

c~kR ichn Aru brn jwiq Aru pwiq nihn ijh ]  
 rUp rMg Aru ryK ByK koaU kih n skiq ikh ]  
 P.10

Jaap

*There is no symbol or sign or class or caste of God,  
 No form or colour, line or shape which describes God.*

The Sikhs create confusion where it is not required by holding that Lord God took birth in human form in the case of the Gurus; and this, in spite of Guru Arjun Dev's stricture against people who insisted on defining God as taking birth, born of the *yuni*.

We find that Sri Krishna overcame all hurdles effortlessly from the moment of his divine incarnation, when the *Jamuna*, in spite, receded to let him be carried over to the other bank to safety in a stormy night, while the guards of the prison, for that duration, fell asleep helplessly. Look up his triumphs over the serpent, lifting of the hillock, saving honour of *Draupadi* and miracles galore. Similarly, about Sri Rama's

exploits with the demons as a lad to bring peace to the meditating *rishis* in their ashrams, finally subjugating the ten headed monster, *Ravana*.

Considering the Hindu stock from which majority of converts to Sikhism hailed, and the awe experienced by the people in general about these magical feats of many gods and goddesses, which were part of their old religious practices for long, it is obvious that such Sikhs wanted to have similar powers demonstrated in the persons of the Gurus to feel pride, confidence and awe, and qualify them at par with the old gods. As stated earlier, our semi-literate and shallow *bhaijis*, and the equally unqualified pseudo-sants, feed this disinformation to the gullible Sikhs, weaving fanciful tales of miracles, in the *puranic* vein, which is lapped up by the eager audience to whet their incredulence about matters divine. Guru Nanak has commented in clear terms about these exploits of the incarnating avatars of Vishnu, as under:

ਨਾਨਕ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰੁ ਹੋਰਿ ਕੇਤੇ ਰਾਮ ਰਵਾਲ ॥

ਕੇਤੀਆ ਕੰਨੁ ਕਹਾਣੀਆ ਕੇਤੇ ਬੇਦ ਬੀਚਾਰ .

[SGGS: 464]

*Nanak, He is Invisible Fearless God,  
How many Ramas gone in dust,  
How many tales of Krishna,  
How many are the discourses on wisdom of Vedas.*

Again:

ਪਉਣੁ ਉਪਾਇ ਧਰੀ ਸਭ ਧਰਤੀ ਜਲ ਅਗਨੀ ਕਾ ਬੰਧੁ ਕੀਆ ॥

ਐਧੁਲੈ ਦਹਸਿਰਿ ਮੂੰਡੁ ਕਟਾਇਆ ਰਾਵਣੁ ਮਾਰਿ ਕਿਆ ਵਡਾ ਭਇਆ ॥

*God created air and planet earth,  
He balanced water and fire.  
The ten headed monster foolishly lost his neck,  
What was so great about killing one Ravana! (for many others survive).*

And

ਆਗੈ ਐਤੁ ਨ ਪਾਇਓ ਤਾ ਕਾ ਕੰਸੁ ਛੇਦਿ ਕਿਆ ਵਡਾ ਭਇਆ ॥

[SGGS: 350]

*No one can reach the limits of God,  
What is so great in killing of one Kansa?*

The deliberation with which Guru Nanak dismisses these episodes, being of minor import, when weighed against the limitless horizon of the omnipotent God's divine capacity. In Guru Nanak's scheme of unquestionable and uncompromising monotheism, the perpetuation of these legends and the awe-struck treatment afforded to Raslila and Ramlila were of little consequence. There are adverse remarks about the singers and performers of such acts in his *Asa di Var*.

Guru Nanak preferred to meditate in quiet, without fanfare and display of drama, which was the popular medium to attract man in his elementary stage of spiritual awakening. Guru Nanak had witnessed the mode of popular worship in Jagannath Puri as well as in Mathura where the cult of Chetanya Mahaprabhu was at its zenith,

before it lost its sheen with the derogation to sensualism; the high ideal of *Krishnalila* by crass imitators.

ਵਾਇਨਿ ਚੇਲੇ ਨਚਨਿ ਗੁਰੁ ॥ ਪੈਰ ਹਲਾਇਨਿ ਫੇਰਨਿ ਸਿਰ ॥  
ਉਡਿ ਉਡਿ ਰਾਵਾ ਝਾਟੈ ਪਾਇ ॥ ਵੇਖੈ ਲੋਕੁ ਹਸੈ ਘਰਿ ਜਾਇ ॥  
ਰੋਟੀਆ ਕਾਰਣਿ ਪੂਰਹਿ ਤਾਲ ॥ ਆਪੁ ਪਛਾੜਹਿ ਧਰਤੀ ਨਾਲਿ ॥  
ਗਾਵਨਿ ਗੋਪੀਆ ਗਾਵਨਿ ਕਾਨ੍ ॥ ਗਾਵਨਿ ਸੀਤਾ ਰਾਜੇ ਰਾਮ ॥  
ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰੁ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਮੁ ॥ ਜਾ ਕਾ ਕੀਆ ਸਗਲ ਜਹਾਨੁ ॥  
ਸੇਵਕ ਸੇਵਹਿ ਕਰਮਿ ਚੜਾਉ ॥ ਭਿਨੀ ਰੈਣਿ ਜਿਨ੍ ਮਨਿ ਚਾਉ ॥  
ਸਿਖੀ ਸਿਖਿਆ ਗੁਰ ਵੀਚਾਰਿ ॥ ਨਦਰੀ ਕਰਮਿ ਲਘਾਏ ਪਾਰਿ ॥

[SGGS: 465]

*In Ras lila, disciples play on instruments and Masters dance,  
They synchronise foot movement and tilt their heads,  
They merely raise dust which settles on their heads,  
Public sees all this and laughs (at them),  
They dance to rhythm for earning their bread  
And fall tired on the earth in the process!  
They act as gopis and Krishna,  
They act as Sita and king Rama,  
But there is only One who has no shape, is afraid of none,  
He has created the entire universe,  
Those may serve the Lord who are blessed,  
Their nights are sweetly peaceful who are enthusiastic to serve Him,  
Those who have imbibed this wisdom by Grace of the Master,  
Only they are blessed and are ferried across this worldly ocean.*

With the above in view, how could Gurus Nanak-Gobind Singh ever be proclaimed avatars? And pray, avatars of whom?

In the case of our Gurus, moral discipline, whole-hearted devotion, common sense and in-depth knowledge were essential for the Sikhs to qualify for their emergence as role models for the new community, which was hard pressed to dissociate itself from the fanciful myths of the supernatural and miraculous powers, to realise the natural pitfalls and the obstacles and to deal with them for the development of the strength of character in life. By breaking the shackles of misplaced expectations of the Vedic *karm kand* rituals, the Sikhs were being prepared to cultivate self-reliance on the strength of their convictions to face adversities in life. No god or prophet could intercede, or be of help, unless the individual adopted Truth as a way of life. And these old rituals only made man a helpless pawn waiting for some providential escape from the reality by seeking the aid of *havans* and the assurances of wily priests.

In spite of romanticising of Guru's life by historiographers, the misconceptions are still not so deep-rooted and can be readily resolved. Guru Nanak himself spent most of his first thirty years of life in discovering Truth from whichever source he could, before he decided to go out on his long travels and tours, where too, he joined in serious discussions with religious leaders of various sects, like Brahmins, Naths,

Yogis, Vaishnavs, Shivaites, and Muslim and Sufi schools. He had undertaken rigid austerities (for instance at Rori Sahib) and is said to have joined with Chaitaniya in dancing from Cuttack to Puri, and also experimented with Yogic practices. He himself provides the clue, '*Koi akhe bhutna, kou kahe betala.*'

Guru Nanak remained at Baghdad for many months for meaningful interaction with the *Dervishes*, *Fakirs* and Muslim divines. Baghdad was a centre of Muslim and Occidental philosophy. Most of the Greek works of Philosophy were first translated into Arabic before they found their way into the European languages. It was also a hot bed of inter-action and controversies raging between Muslim, Jewish and Christian dogmas. In those eventful years of stay at Baghdad and his travels in Middle East, Guru Nanak could not have escaped the religious implications as well as political conditions of the region, with its impact on hapless Indian scene. When Guru Nanak chided the corrupt and inept Lodhi government and ruthless administrators, it was definitely not mere ranting and wailing of a helpless mendicant but his superiority of vast knowledge and experience of various rulers and states and the conditions prevailing therein.

Guru Nanak never claimed any special prophetic or divine status for himself. His arguments were lucid and simple and were based on healthy, every day logic. It was necessary as he wanted the people to adopt the same simplicity of argument and decide on the right and wrong of the old practices. He did not allow any sentimental or emotional considerations to cloud his judgement in selection of his successor. He went strictly by the yardstick of merit and checked the capability of each person who was associated with him. It was a test of rigorous discipline, surrender of self and Ego, total submission and unquestioning faith and a capacity to imbibe Master's knowledge to become one with Him. Such was the character building exercise of *Lehna*, who succeeded him as Guru *Angad* and was elevated to the seat of Guru Nanak.

Each time a successor was selected, it was by rigid tests and standards set by Guru Nanak. Succeeding Gurus were picked up on the touch-stone of competence, total compliance and austerities in control of Ego. History records the success of the process of selection as the standard remained as matchless as initiated by Guru Nanak, which the exemplary trials and tribulations of the succeeding Masters demonstrated. There were pressures from family factions, political adversaries and religious bigots who wanted this unique movement to fizzle out, but the foundations of the new faith were made of truth which withstood the test of times without any state patronage and in spite of the bitter resentment of the conservative older religions.

With the usual reliance on the supernatural powers of an Avatar, Hindus developed apathy towards action, but the Gurus awakened the Sikhs to acknowledge that they had to endeavour directly to overcome the hurdles in their path by super-human effort and robust common sense and not keep waiting for the miracle of any *kalki* avatar who should have appeared by now to stem the rot in the world as the materialism, selfishness and self-centred traits have reached their nadir. Our Gurus defined meditation on God as the only way to salvation:

*Kal mein kirtan Hari nama.* - SGGS

*In Kali age, sing the name of Lord God.*

