

Mysticism and Philosophy of Guru Nanak

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Abstract: *Mystical experience is a major form of religious experience which involves a mystic's direct communion with God. A few mystics have been blessed with the ability to achieve spontaneous unity of self with the Supreme Reality such that all other relations are merged in relation to their soul with Almighty. Such mystics have been called Prophets or Gurus. They have described the outcome of such experiences in terms of certain doctrines which have often laid the foundation of philosophy of a new faith. Guru Nanak was one such rare mystic who described his mystical experiences in the form of lyrics and himself sang them from time to time in musical measures (Ragas). These utterances of Guru Nanak, of which Japu Ji is the most famous, contain the doctrines of his mystical philosophy, are included in the Sikh holy Scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, and form the basis of the philosophy of Sikh faith. In this paper a few of the traditionally established mystical experiences of Guru Nanak, the resulting utterances associated with these experiences and the underlying doctrines of his philosophy have been described.*

Among monotheistic faiths mysticism is believed to be the experience of direct communion with the ultimate Reality*, God. Mystical experience, in every such religion, is understood to be a major form of religious experience. Procedures like practice of spiritual disciplines, study of scriptures and focusing one's mind on a point (meditation) have been prescribed in many religions in order to gain a direct insight into the nature of the Supreme Reality, and there are numerous examples in the history of the world religions where ordinary men and/or women, through practice of such procedures, have succeeded in attaining communion with God. However, in most such instances the experience of the mystic is short, spotty and limited. On the other hand there are some blessed souls who seem to have been bestowed upon the ability to achieve immediate feeling of unity of self with the Supreme Reality such that all other relations are swallowed up in relation of their soul to God. Such mystics have been called prophets. They have generally come out with the ultimate composition of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter, substance and attribute and fact and value. They have given a *priori* speculation upon questions that are unanswerable to scientific observation, analysis or experiment. Their descriptions and/or reasoning have been subtle, recondite and difficult to perceive by ordinary persons. In some cases such persons have propounded a whole set of doctrines (of mystical philosophy) that has led to the inception of a new faith. Guru Nanak can easily be included in the category of such blessed souls who, influenced by interiority and contemplation gifted by God, propounded the philosophy wherein the nature of reality appears to be prominently articulated. This laid the foundation of Sikh religion. Although all the utterances of Guru Nanak (and subsequent Gurus) included in Guru Granth Sahib are believed to be revelatory, in this short paper endeavor has been made to trace the traditionally accepted mystical experiences of Guru Nanak, his utterances associated with these experiences and the elements of his philosophy that crystallize out of these utterances.

Mystical Episode:

According to Sikh tradition when Guru Nanak was about 30 years of age and was employed at Sultan Pur as the store keeper of Nawab Daulat Khan Lodhi, one morning, as was his routine, he went for a bath at the Vein River along with his attendant Mardana¹. He entered the water, but did not come out for three days during which he was ushered into God's presence*. At the end of his audience with God he is said to have uttered what is now known as Japu Ji, the opening prayer in Guru Granth Sahib and is considered as the fount of Guru

Nanak's philosophy. Also as he came out of the river after three days the first statement that he made was, "There is no Hindu and no Musalman; all are God's children and therefore equal in His eyes.

It is interesting to note that the latest researches indicate that the human being originated in the continent of Africa and from there spread all over the world. In other words all human beings are brothers by blood relation. This has shattered the old myth of race and/or color superiority.

The same kind of statement is also associated with Guru Nanak² when he was visiting Baghdad. He was asked the question, "who is better, a Hindu or a Muslim"? His answer was, "It is the deeds and not the creed that make a person superior or inferior to others".

Let us now take a closer look at Japu Ji to see what elements of Guru Nanak's philosophy it comprises.

The very first stanza of this composition, known as the 'Mool Mantra' or the credal formula, describes the Supreme Reality and some of its important attributes. It is noteworthy how careful Guru Nanak was in giving the exact description of God or what he calls Ik Oankar < . His special emphasis is on its unity. In other words He has no other entity equal to Him or even close to Him. That is the reason why he has used the numeral "1" instead of a word (language). Mathematics is not only exact but it also does not change with time; while languages can change with time and even get extinct. Thus Guru Nanak's God, *Ik Oankar*, is one formless (oankar) who does not change with time. This lays the foundation of the strict monotheism of Sikhism.

Some other faiths also profess the existence of one God, but a closer study of their ethical systems indicates the existence of another force, call it evil, Satan or by any other name.

Among the attributes given in the Mool Mantra, Guru Nanak states that He is self-existent and it is remarkable to note that in his mystical experience Guru Nanak went past even the beginning of time". According to him '< 'was true in the beginning"', He was true when the ages (time) began, He is true in the present and shall be true ever in the future³.

Time and Space:

In one of his hymns Guru Nanak has further elaborated the condition before the beginning of time (and space):

"For innumerable span of years only darkness was prevalent; when neither earth nor heavens (existed) but only the limitless Divine ordinance existed. Then neither day or night (time), nor Sun or Moon existed, the Creator was absorbed into unbroken trance. Neither forms of creation nor speech, neither wind nor water existed then. There was neither creation or disappearance or transmigration. There was no continents or regions or the seven seas; nor the rivers with water flowing.

Then existed neither heaven nor the mortal world or the nether worlds, neither hell nor heaven or 'time' that destroys – no one came or departed (no birth or death). Then neither was there Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva; no one other than the sole Lord existed.

He created the world as it pleased Him. He sustained the expanse without any supporting power. He Himself made his ordinance operative and watched over it⁴".

Creation:

On the question of how God created the universe, Guru Nanak says, "He created the whole expanse by uttering one single word⁵. As a result millions of waterways came into existence (and started flowing). Guru Nanak seems to emphasize the omnipotence of God by saying that he created the whole universe by uttering a single word⁶.

On the question of when did this event (the creation of the universe) happen, Guru Nanak is quiet. He says, "Only God Himself knows when He created the universe". Not only that but

the Guru adds that no one other than God Himself can know the time or date of the occurrence of this event⁶.

In his mystical experience Guru Nanak perceived millions of worlds⁷, a claim that the modern science has been able to prove only relatively recently. It is mind boggling to think that, over five hundred years ago, in his mystical experience Guru Nanak could perceive the secrets of nature considered at that time the blasphemy according to some faiths.

Guru Nanak has also given a hint regarding the start of life in the world:

“From the Creator came air and from air was formed water and with water the Creator created the three worlds”⁸⁸ (Ibid P.20.)

Guru Nanak’s mystical experience seems to have reached the apex when he delineates the steps, in the last few stanzas of Japu Ji (34 through 37) explaining how any seeker can, by following these steps, gradually progress spiritually and, finally, reach the **Realm of Truth** which is the abode of the Supreme Reality. In other words the procedure for attaining emancipation or union with Akal Purakh, which is the goal of human soul, is given in these steps.

According to Guru Nanak, to achieve this goal one has to, first of all, realize that the purpose of human life is not the accumulation of wealth or indulging in worldly comforts, but to achieve emancipation or escape from the cycle of death and birth. One, then, has to recognize what his duties are and has to start discharging them to the best of his capacity and ability. So far one is abiding in the realm of duty, or ‘**Dharam Khand**’ according to Guru Nanak’s terminology. At this point one realizes that, to effectively discharge one’s duties, one needs sufficient (spiritual as well temporal) knowledge.

The next step therefore is to acquire necessary knowledge to understand the duties of a human being in the world and carry them out honestly and effectively. At this stage one has reached the realm of knowledge or ‘*Gian Khand*’.

The acquisition of knowledge leads one to realize how insignificant one’s existence is with respect to the over all plan of Akal Purakh. One then feels humble. The assumption of humility is indicative that one has stepped into ‘Saram Khand’ or the realm of endeavour.

According to Guru Nanak’s perception, at this stage one becomes worthy of the grace of Akal Purakh, or has entered into the ‘*Karam Khand*’ or the realm of Grace.

The next step is spontaneous. One acquires a state of equipoise and is ‘*Jiwan Mukta*’ or liberated even while living in this world. His transmigration is ended and his abode is ensured in ‘*Sach Khand*’ or the realm of truth – his union with Almighty is ensured.

Here it is felt necessary to point out an important difference between the realm of Grace or ‘*Karam Khand*’ described by Guru Nanak and the grace believed by some other faiths.

While in some faiths the mere expression of devotion to the prophet (of that faith) is believed to be sufficient to entitle one to attain to God’s grace irrespective of one’s conduct, In Sikhism (according to Guru Nanak’s philosophy) one has to work hard, i.e., pass through the three stages, Dharam Khand, Gian Khand and Saram Khand before one becomes worthy of God’s grace.

References

* Faiths like Buddhism do not subscribe to such a definition because they are silent towards the existence of God.

--- According to Bhai Gurdas (Var 1, Pauri 24), “First of all, Baba Nanak attained to the door of Grace (of the Lord), thereafter he went through the rigorous discipline of mind and body”.

1 *Puratan Janam Sakhi*, P.15.

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This is only symbolism. According to Sikhism God is not confined to any particular place. It actually means that wherever Guru Nanak was for those three days at that time, he had this mystical experience.

2 Bhai Gurdas, Var 1, Pauri 33.

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According to the Big Bang theory, which is a corollary of the theory of Relativity, time as well as space came into existence simultaneously.

We are creatures of space and time and need a frame of reference. To denote time (although it cannot be called time) that he is using the term 'aad' or 'in the beginning'.

3. Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), P.1.

4. Ibid. P.1035.

5. Ibid. P.3.

§ The actual word used by Guru Nanak in Japu Ji is 'kawao', which means sound.

6. Ibid. P.3.

7. Ibid P.3.