

# A Psychological Study of Guru Nanak's Teachings\*

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RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND PROPHETS are known to be keen observers of human behaviour. They not only understand the workings of the human mind, but are also very sensitive to human suffering and actively engaged in its alleviation. Christ was deeply moved by the plight of the common people of his time and sacrificed himself in his fight with oppressive rulers on behalf of the people. Buddha could not bear the sight of human suffering and forsook his kingdom and family to find the 'right path' which would lessen the pain of the suffering humanity. His emphasis on "the middle way" had a psychological meaning. Excess of desire would result in more frustration in the event of loss or failure than intermediate level of wants. Mohammed saw the increasing feuds between tribes in the Middle East and helped them to come together under the banner of Islam. His emphasis on eating together and other activities had a psychological effect in bringing these tribes together. The 'reincarnation' view in Hinduism states that whenever there is oppression and injustice, and deception and corruption become rampant, God comes to this earth in the human form to save humanity from these ills and to put them on the right path.

## Human Nature:

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism was particularly adept in understanding human behaviour. His insights into human conduct, his psychological approach to problems and his sensitivity to human suffering and its causes would surprise many trained psychologists. Throughout his life, he approached people, including his critics and opponents, in a way which would not offend anyone. More often than not, the critics and opponents would be converted to his viewpoint. He used forceful arguments, employed the language of the people and made use of similes from the daily life of the people in his verses. His writings are all in verse and are set to music. No modern psychologist would deny the greater impact on people of poetry and music than of prose. The poetry and music have emotional appeal but when the thoughts and ideas expressed in them are also rational and logical, their effect is doubly reinforced. In this article, I will attempt to present the psychological aspects of Guru Nanak's teachings.

It is a well-established principle of psychology that people tend to identify easier with those who speak their 'language' and talk about things which are part and parcel of their life and, thus, interest them most. The following two passages from Guru Nanak are typical examples of the use of similes from daily life:

These are the secrets of true husbandry,  
The body is the field; the mind be the ploughman,  
Good deeds thy ploughing,  
Let thine honest strivings be the runnels  
That irrigate the field.  
Sow the seed of the Holy Name  
Make the clods of the field  
level with contentment;

Wear, as a farmer, the peasant garb of humility.  
“These are the secrets of honest shop-keeping;  
Our transient life is our shop,  
And the Holy Name is the merchandise  
With which we are entrusted;  
Alertness of mind and purity of deed  
Are the warehouses in which to store the Name.  
Let thy dealings be with the saints;  
They are sound, reliable customers.  
Take a fair profit and be happy.”

### **Ritualist Trap:**

During his travels, Guru Nanak observed several instances of superstition, but always convinced people of the uselessness of their ritualistic ways, which were perpetuated by the priestly classes for their own benefit. A typical example is an incident, which occurred at Hardwar. At that sacred place, on the banks of Ganges, he saw people throwing water towards the east. When asked what they were doing, they replied that they were offering oblation to their ancestors in the other world. Nanak thereupon started throwing water towards the west. When asked what he was doing, he answered, “I am a farmer from Kartarpur to the west of here (250 miles), and I am watering my fields over there.” When people laughed at this, he asked them, “If your water can reach millions of miles in the other world, cannot mine reach even 250 miles on this earth?” This indirect approach had a psychological effect on people and they realized the folly of their act. If Nanak had criticized them directly, it would probably have infuriated people and not achieved the desired effect.

### **Egalitarian Sociology:**

Guru Nanak did not subscribe to the traditional caste distinctions and believed in the oneness of humanity. He usually stayed with the low caste people during his travels. Once, he stayed at the house of a carpenter, Lalo by name, and thus invited the wrath of the local high caste Hindus. In their opinion, he was lowering the esteem of his father’s faith by dining with a Sudra. One of them, Malik Bhago, arranged a big feast and invited Nanak to partake of it. At last, the Malik, who was also a local official, asked his servants to bring Nanak to his presence by force. When Bhago asked him why he had refused his invitation and why he was eating with a Sudra, Nanak replied, “Your bread contains the blood of the poor, while Lalo’s bread, who earns by the sweat of his brow, is sweet like milk.” Thus, he brought home the lesson that it is not the high or low caste, but the deeds, which determine one’s status in life.

### **Psycho-Analysis:**

As a clinical psychologist, I have been interested in understanding the factors which cause mental illness or emotional problems. Until 1950, the dominant theory of psychopathology was Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. According to this theory, the functional emotional disorder (where there is not organic pathology involved or the organic factors play a secondary role) is caused by an overly strict superego (conscience) which is instrumental in the repression of an individual’s instinctual wishes and impulses. The ideas and memories associated with painful conflicts are actively buried from awareness (repressed) by certain powerful forces within the personality. The symptoms represent the ego’s unsuccessful attempts to defend against the “return of the repressed.”

As the important determiners of man's adjustment are, in Freud's view, buried in the unconscious, his view of man is that of a helpless creature, a plaything of the unconscious forces. Freudian theory has come under fire from several quarters since the early 1950's. Behaviourists, following Pavlov's work with conditioning, consider the socialization and the process of habit formation as very important factors determining the adjustment or maladjustment of a person.

While Freud considered strict superego as the culprit in the etiology of mental illness, Mowrer considers that the violation of the moral code, the acts of irresponsibility result in emotional difficulties.

Mowrer's thesis is that "in psycho-pathology the primary, basic cause is deliberate, choice-mediated behaviour of a socially disapproved, reprehensible nature which results in emotional disturbance and insecurity. The 'symptoms' which then ensue represent ways in which the individual is trying to "defend" himself against and hide his 'disturbing' and suspicion-arousing emotions."

Until now, we have been accustomed to placing the blame on others: "the parents, friends, wife or husband has treated the patient badly." Mowrer's theory puts the blame back on the individual himself, where it belongs. Thus, as opposed to the Freudian view that the neurosis is caused by an overly strict superego, Mowrer's position is that neurosis is caused by something against the rules of the conscience or superego and then concealing the wrong-doing.

The first link in a chain of events leading to the neurosis is the "foolish", unthinking, harmful or immoral behavior of the individual. This type of behavior makes the individual socially vulnerable. So, he starts hiding his deviant acts from others. In order to hide, he has to tell lies. Thus, he becomes entangled in a game of lies, cover-ups, and becomes more and more secretive, seclusive and alienated.

### **Alienation by Delusion:**

There are two ways open to such an alienated person for the reduction of the dissonance in his personality. Either he can reveal his real self and become an open person or, he can start believing his own lies and his unreal world. The second alternative leads to the typical syndromes of schizophrenia. The world of delusions and hallucinations becomes the real world for the individual and the world of reality (his real self) becomes "unreal" to him.

Guru Nanak emphasized the importance of truth and true conduct in the following lines:

There are many dogmas,  
there are many systems,  
There are many scriptural revelations,  
Many modes to fetter the mind;  
But the saint seeks for release through Truth;  
Truth is higher than all these, and higher  
Still is the life lived in Truth.  
Truth makes us free, Truth destroys doubts,  
Truth destroys every sickness of the soul.

Guru Nanak's emphasis on truth is in line with the major focus of humanistic psychology, the emphasis on social interaction, based on truthfulness, honesty and openness. Several techniques, such as encounter groups, sensitivity training, T-groups, etc. are employed to

help a person to be truthful and open and to know and experience himself through interaction with others. Guru Nanak not only recognized the importance of knowing and controlling the self, but also emphasized the value of interpersonal relationships. Wherever he went, he asked people to establish sangat (congregation) and pangat (community dining). He decried asceticism and withdrawal from life and enjoined upon his disciples to fulfil their responsibilities to their families and communities. The Sikh is required to live in this world like a lotus flower:

“As the lotus flower  
Does not drown in the pool,  
As the duck  
Is not made wet by the pond.  
As the flower thrusts upwards,  
As the duck swims,  
So with the mind intent  
Upon the Word of the Guru  
One can safely cross  
The great sea of life.

As opposed to the psychoanalytic view of a helpless man, Guru Nanak's view of man is that he is master of his will and can decide for himself the nature of his actions and reactions, as he is made in the image of God. Only by realizing his true nature, can he find the true path.

Throughout his teachings, Guru Nanak emphasized man's social responsibility and importance of truthful interaction with his fellow beings. Guru Nanak's emphasis on "brotherhood with every man is very much relevant for today's world, torn by wars, riots, different political ideologies, and religious and racial tensions.

In my use of behaviour modification technique, I have found that 'positive reinforcement' is more effective than 'negative reinforcement'. The depth of Guru Nanak's psychological understanding and insight is evident from his positive approach in describing what a Brahmin, a Yogi, a Hindu, or a Muslim should be like.

The modern behaviourists stress the role of actions and reactions in the formation of adaptive and non-adaptive habits. The behaviorists and other psychologists, however, would sometimes, lose sight of the role of morality in their attempts at behaviour modification. Mowrer discusses the role of morality and considers violation of social and moral codes (acts of irresponsibility) as significant factors in the causation of mental illness. Guru Nanak, while emphasizing the role of behaviour, does not lose sight of the moral principles. Like a good psychotherapist, he first diagnoses the problem. He sees people committing acts of extreme irresponsibility against their fellow beings:

In this age of darkness,  
Men have become as dogs,  
They eat the ill-gotten gains,  
And bark out their lies;  
Giving no thought to righteousness  
They have no honour in life,  
And leave an evil name after death.

Guru Nanak emphasized that a "person does not become a sinner because someone says so." It is his deeds, and not words, which determine his behaviour. According to Guru

Nanak, "mind is the paper and our actions (are) the ink. Virtue and vice are the two writings inscribed thereon. We are driven into paths determined by our past actions."

### **Divinity in the Spirit of Man:**

Guru Nanak laid the foundation of man's uplift, not on such short-cuts "as mantras, miracles, or mysteries but on man's own humanity, his own character." He raised the spirit of man "with a belief that he was not a helpless creature in the hands of a Being of arbitrary will, but was a responsible being endowed with a will of his own, with which he could do much to mould his own destiny."

Though man inherits tendencies from his own past as well as that of his family and race, which contribute to the formation of his character, he is given a free will with which he can modify the inherited and acquired tendencies of his past and determine his future conduct.

The similarity with the modern view in psychology should be noted with references to the role of heredity and environment in the development of personality. The role of heredity and environment is considered to be that of interaction. The behaviourists also emphasize the fact that behaviour, including inherited and acquired tendencies, can be modified.

In this article, I have tried to look at the teachings of Guru Nanak, from a psychological point of view. I have indicated how Guru Nanak, by practical application of psychological principles, was able to convince people about the futility of their ritualistic and dogmatic practices. I have also described some current trends in psychology, especially the new behaviorism with its emphasis on behaviour (actions) and humanistic psychology, with its emphasis on social interaction based on truthfulness, honesty, openness, sensitivity and appreciation of beauty.

I have particularly referred to Mowrer's theory of psycho-pathology, viz., the violation of the social and moral code and concealment of the violation(s) leading to the development of emotional maladjustments. Comparing these trends with psychoanalysis, I have shown how these theories view man as a rational, self-willed being, capable of 'self-actualization' as well as 'self-destruction', as opposed to pessimistic view of psychoanalysis, which states that human actions are determined by inherited biological tendencies and by unconscious forces over which the individual has no control. Guru Nanak is in accord with the positive trends in modern psychology. **His emphasis on truth and truthful living, honesty and frankness (as exemplified by him in his life) are values which lead to the development of a healthy and creative personality.**

Guru Nanak's criticism of withdrawal from life, of idle meditation, of ritualistic and superstitious religion, and of various orders of asceticism and his emphasis on man's social responsibility, and on *sangat* and *pangat*, contributed to the formation of Sikh character. His concept of social interaction involves interaction with all human beings, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, national origin or any other similar distinction. He preached the idea of universal brotherhood, taught respect for other religions and reminded man of his divine origin. He laid emphasis on actions (behaviour), pointing to man's free will in choosing his actions. He reminded him of the consequences of a wrong choice, while at the same time showing him the 'right path', which would free him from his egoism (I-am-ness) and lead him towards realization of his true self.

He criticized evil practices in man, oppressive policies of rulers, and exploitation in the name of religion, and taught everyone the love of one's fellow beings - a love based on truthfulness, honesty, justice and openness.

