

# Universality of Guru Nanak's Teachings

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EMINENT AUTHOR, H L BRADSHAW pronounces Sikhism as "the faith of the new age" and states "Sikhism is a universal world faith with a message for all men. It is the *summum bonum* for the modern man."

In modern time the world has progressively compacted it into a global village. Consequently, inspite of the critical cultural distinctions between people, the communities are learning to co-exist in a complex, multi-polar and multi-civilizational world. Simultaneously, the international polity is faced with resolving problems concerning terrorism, human rights, population explosion, environment protection, weapons of mass destruction, and so on. These confronting the humanity, as a whole, transcend geographical and demographic bounds of countries. At the same time, the post-modern liberties are leading the individual towards unrestrained materialism, individualism and unethical way of life causing wide spread social disorder.

It is in this milieu that the philosophy of Guru Nanak for a social revolution and universal brotherhood is relevant more than ever before. The religion propagated by Guru Nanak — Sikhism — is barely 535 years old. It is the youngest and the fifth major religion of the world. Quintessentially, Sikhism is a way of life and inheres a realistic and optimistic world view. By far the most penetrating insight of Sikhism is that the ultimate goal of human life, being the union of the soul with the Supreme Being, is to be achieved through the emergence of a race of God-conscious men, who remain earth-aware and thus operate in the mundane world of the phenomena, with the object of transforming and spiritualising it into a higher and ampler plane of existence. "The God-conscious man is animated with an intense desire to do good in this world"

The teachings of Guru Nanak focus on the upliftment of the downtrodden masses and their empowerment to live a life of dignity in a society of pious ambience.

*"Suchho ore sub ko upar such aachar"*

Truth is higher, higher still is truthful living

The religious horizon of Guru Nanak is universal. It encompasses the whole society as a moral arena. There is no exclusivity or particularism in the teachings of Guru Nanak. He is appreciative of other religious beliefs which preach corporate life of righteous deeds, but at the same level, rejects restrictive dogmas and superficial rituals.

*"Sarb dharam meh shreshtha dharam; Hari ko naam jap nirmal karam"*

The highest of all religions is to worship God and perform pious deeds.

Universal brotherhood, truthful living, pro-active social justice and comprehensive equality are the lodestars of Guru Nanak's message to humanity. These worthy goals were to be achieved through a massive social revolution.

**Social Revolution:** Guru Nanak was acutely aware of the deep rooted social evils that had permeated the Indian populace. The society suffered from coercive caste discriminations, internal and external religious persecutions, oppressive and cruel governance, demeaning gender bias against women and many other violations of human dignity. Such conditions had come to be tolerated passively and generally with a servile attitude.

Guru Nanak, through precept and practice, sought to elevate the masses and instill in them an honourable philosophy of life. This was conveyed through simple dictum: "*Kirat karo, vand chhako, naam japo*"

i.e., Earn thy livelihood by honest creative labour, share the fruits of thy labour with thy fellow beings and practise the discipline of *naam*. In a nutshell, these three tenets help man to become economically self-sufficient, ethically and spiritually awakened asset for the welfare and upliftment of man collectively and universally at social and spiritual planes.

Guru Nanak not only preached for an ideal construct of society for the entire human race but also demanded ultimate commitment for seeding a social revolution: "*Jo tau prem khelan ka chao; sir dhar talli galli meri aao*"

If you want to play the game of love, come with your head on your palm.

Guru Nanak envisaged that religion detached from social responsibility was a perversion. The Guru also realised that reforms initiated by him would require generations to mature. He, therefore, devised a unique system of succession of Gurus. The succeeding Gurus were known as Nanak two and so on till Nanak Ten. All the Ten gurus had common spiritual motivations — as stated in the hymn:

*"Sab me jot, jot hai soi, tis de chanan sab me chanan ho"*

All contain the Divine Light, and it is the same light.

In fulfillment of Guru Nanak's mission, the Fifth Guru sacrificed his life without deviating from the path of righteousness. The Ninth Guru achieved martyrdom defending the rights of Kashmiri Brahmins. It needs to be highlighted that this is a singular sacrifice of a religious prophet for the cause of protecting another religion. The Tenth Guru's own and his family's sacrifices are a saga of noble endeavour. It was also the Tenth Guru who passed on the obligation of Guru Nanak's mission to the Khalsa. The Khalsa inherited the tradition of martyrdom as a birth-right.

The Khalsa was entrusted with a divine mission. It was to wage a perpetual struggle for *sarbat da bhala*, i.e., well being of the humanity. The Tenth Guru has ordained that the disciplined life of the Khalsa is dearer to him, above all other considerations. "*Rahit piari muj ko Sikh piara nahin*" - Above all else, I value the principled life.

**Universal Brotherhood:** In today's world, the divine is more distant. Therefore, the religious brotherhood generally encounters two reductive facts: firstly, in the post-modern psychological conceptions, there are no boundaries; there are no certainties and there are no easily defined identities. Secondly, the resurgent religious fundamentalist movements, partly overshadowing some of the major religions, tend to subsume the humanistic feelings. The concept and precepts of universal brotherhood in Sikhism are closer to divine in practice and transcend

religious boundaries. Guru Nanak saw and considered the human being in the multi-environmental context, who had his own innate and divine value and worth.

*“Ayee panthi sagal jamaati”*

The highest aspiration of your religious order let universal brotherhood be.

Thus, the religious labels of whatever description, assume secondary importance. The very first revelatory declaration of Guru Nanak after emerging from trance of divine communion is :

*“Na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman”*

There is no Hindu, there is no Musalman.

The slogan meant that:

(a.) All were human beings, sons and daughters of same Supreme Being. There are no distinctions, no categories and no denominations in His creation. (b.) It was a moral and spiritual slogan. It represented Guru Nanak's vision of harmony, tolerance and cooperation for mankind and its ultimate union with the Divine.

Sikhism, thus, does not acknowledge the monopoly of any one religion or people over Godhead. The Sikh religion does not entertain such a claim for itself either.

*“Awwal allah noor upaya, qudrat ke sab bande;  
Ek noor te sab jag upjaiya, kaun bhale kaun mande”*

God first created light and from it all creation, when everything is created out of that light, then there is none good or bad. Again: *“Ek pita ekas ke hum barak”*. There is one God, the father and we are all his children. This was Guru Nanak's clarion call postulating the ultimate Truth, the essenced and pinnacle of spirituality. It was also a challenge for universally transforming the prevailing religious and social thought and its supportive political and social structures.

### **Khalsa: The Human Ideal**

The Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, created the Khalsa — the immortal brotherhood of the pure — in 1699, and welded the disparate human elements of the contemporary society into an exalted model of man, namely *santsipahi* meaning Saint-Soldier. The elevation into the Khalsa fraternity was formalised through the Khalsa initiation ceremony called *khandey da pahul*, or *amrit*, meaning baptism of double-edged sword. The initiates accepted a code of discipline and a life dedicated to the service of humanity for universally upholding the principles of social justice.

After initiating the first five Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh asked them to initiate him into the Khalsa *Panth*. This was a unique happening in the history of religions. The supreme religious leader submitted himself to be baptized by the Khalsa, whom he had initiated. This act of the Guru introduced an unprecedented democratic principle:

*“I have placed my light in the Khalsa and all are witness to it.”*

As I mentioned earlier, *sarbat da bhala*, (comprehensive well being of the entire humanity) was to be the mission of the Khalsa. The Gurus had already prescribed the medium for this. The Fifth Guru, Guru Arjun Dev had pronounced this in the divine manifesto :

*“Hun hukam hoa meharban da, pey koi na kise rawandah  
sab sukhali vuthio, eho hoa halemi raj jio”*

The gracious lord has now promulgated His Ordinance;  
none shall domineer over other or cause pain to them.  
All shall abide in peace and joy,  
as the governance shall be gentle and compassionate.

The ingredient of universal commonwealth has also been stressed by Bhagat Ravidas :

*“Begumpura sehar ka nao, dukh andoh nahi teh thhao”*

*Name of that divine kingdom is sorrow-free country;  
There is no trouble or hardship at that place.*

Guru Gobind Singh organised the Khalsa towards these ideals. The Khalsa was to combat the bigotry and repressive political and social structures. The Gurus fired the Sikh imagination and spirit with new vision, ideology and motivation. The Order of the Khalsa was inspired to wage the struggle for securing justice and freedom for all human beings. It has to be noted that the Order of the Khalsa was not merely dedicated to the achievement of political ends but to transform the entire human race into an egalitarian and universal brotherhood.

The scriptural watchword for the Khalsa is “neither should he act aggressively, terrorising others, nor should he accept aggression from anybody else.” In pursuit of this endeavour Guru Gobind Singh legitimized the defensive use of force - as a last resort:

*“Chu kar az hama heelte dar gujasht;  
halal ast burdan ba-shamshir dast”*

When affairs are past beyond all other means;  
it is just and righteous to draw the sword.

The salutation amongst the Khalsa is an eloquent expression of his dedication and humility:

*“Waheguru jee ka Khalsa; Waheguru jee kee fateh”*

*Khalsa belongs to wondrous Lord God  
and all triumphs are attributable to Lord God.*

Guru Gobind Singh poured his soul and spirit in the Khalsa and declared :

*“Khalsa mero pind pran; Khalsa meri jaan ki jaan”*

*“Khalsa akal purkh ke fauj; pargataio Khalsa parmatam ki mauj”*

The Khalsa is image, I ever abide in the Khalsa.

The Khalsa is my body and soul, the Khalsa is the life of my life.

The Khalsa is God's own legion; the Khalsa has manifested at God's pleasure.

**Sikhism in synch with the Tamil Culture:** While delivering this key-note address at Chennai, I would be found wanting, if I do not mention some commonality of Sikh ethos with Tamil culture. Rameshwaram, in Tamil Nadu, was sanctified by Guru Nanak during his missionary travels in Southern of India and Sri Lanka. The

gurdwara at Rameshwaram perpetuates the revered memory of Guru Nanak's imprint.

All Indians should be familiar with the work of Subramanaya Bharathi dedicated to Guru Gobind Singh. The Tamil poet got a lot of inspiration from the bravery of the Sikh community as a whole, and particularly from Guru Gobind Singh. In his song, *Guru Gobindar*, Bharathi has narrated the miracle that forms the core of the Khalsa, namely, the selection of *panj pyaras*, the goals and social ideals of the Khalsa, and the brave deeds of Guru Gobind Singh.

Today, the Kamaraj University at Madurai has a very reputed Guru Nanak Devji Chair; it has organised scholarly studies on Sikhism and Tamil culture, i.e., *SEEKIYAMUM TAMILUM*. It would be appropriate at this occasion to quote Dr N Muthu Mohan, who heads the Guru Nanak Devji Chair at Madurai. In his article *Sikhism and Tamil Tradition*, he writes:

“Though Tamilnadu has many religious sects, the basic principle among them coincides with the substance of Sikh tradition, which affirms the importance of socio-spiritual activism in metaphysical, conceptual and moral spheres. Both the traditions follow *iti marga*, which is opposed to *neti marga* of Vedic tradition which considers the world and worldly activities as *maya*, to reach the metaphysical reality. *Iti marga* proposes to affirm both God and the world, not at the cost of the other, to interplay with each other to form an ever-changing reality.”

**Conclusion:** What needs to be highlighted is that the Sikh way of life is not circumscribed by any regional particularism or confined within man-made inflexible anachronisms. For a practising Sikh, the spiritual pursuits are complementary to the temporal obligations. There is no “middleman” or mediator between a Sikh and the Supreme Being. Sikhism in essence is a socio-cultural ethos of the highest moral values. The teachings purport to create a global dimension of trust amongst the entire human brotherhood and generate social capital in favour of *sarbat da bhala*. It is extremely significant that a practising Sikh concludes his prayers every day with:

*“Nanak naam, chardi kala; tere bhane sarbat da bhala”.*

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## Guru Nanak's Legacy of Enlightenment

GIRISH BHANDARI

***“Though more than 500 years have passed since the birth of Guru Nanak, his life and teachings still hold great power and meaning for humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This annual Sikh observance reminds all Americans that throughout our history, we have drawn strength from many religious institutions and people of diverse faiths have made important contribution to the life of our nation.”***

William J. Clinton, former US President

THE TIMES OF GURU NANAK DEV, over five hundred years ago, were unsettled. India was then a fragmented entity, suffering from a lack of political cohesiveness as well as coherent religious beliefs. It was caught in a strange kind of drift. No central power existed. Superstition and a plethora of obscurantist beliefs had replaced the mainstream Hindu religious thought and vedantic truths. The weaver-poet and saint-

reformer Kabir had challenged superstition four-square. From his loom he had, with the single-mindedness of a master craftsman, woven a fabric of revolt. Challenge to status quo was the warp, and strident criticism of the decadent values its weft.

Guru Nanak was product of such times. He himself described the situation brilliantly: **“The age is like a knife. Kings are butchers. Religion hath taken wings and flown. In the dark night of falsehood I cannot see where the moon of truth is rising”**.

Tradition has it that he spent some time with Kabir – that dynamo of change. However, Nanak softened the edge of Kabir with compassion, because man was central to his belief. While defining the Supreme as One and indivisible, all pervasive, all encompassing, the only truth, timeless, he advocated the oneness of all religions. Essentially his message was a synthesis of the basic tenets of Vedantic thought and Islam. His closest friend was Mardana, a Muslim, and he had sound knowledge of Persian and Arabic.

He rightly diagnosed the ills of the times. A fatalism, allied to superstition, had eaten into the vitals of a dynamic race. The sleeping culture needed a wake-up call. While this was given as a rap on the knuckles by Kabir, it was as a gentle touch on the shoulder by Guru Nanak Dev.

For the rural masses he communicated simply and directly *“kirat karo, naam japo, vand chakho”*- work hard, remember God and give in charity. He wanted that fatalism and a deterministic mindset should give way to positive thinking which will establish demonstrably the triumph of will over circumstance.

Guru Nanak was a great traveller, in the tradition of Adi Shankara, and made four great journeys. He visited the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Tibet and Sri Lanka. He was thus uniquely qualified to observe and lay down the principles of a great faith which harmonised the basics of all religions. This produced an array of truly great gurus, coming to efflorescence in the person of that very great man – the tenth guru – Guru Gobind Singh. It speaks volumes for the seer Guru Nanak Dev, that he bequeathed a tradition that was to shape a personality like Guru Gobind Singh – saint, soldier, scholar, writer, savant, ever compassionate, ever ready to challenge untruth and tyranny.

The writings of Guru Nanak Dev were compiled by the Fifth Guru in what has become an immortal classic, Sri Guru Granth Sahib or Adi Granth, to distinguish it from the Dasham Granth, a composition of the last Guru.

There are three main versions of the Guru Granth Sahib, compiled at different times. The last includes compositions of Guru Teg Bahadur also. The Guru Granth Sahib is a unique compilation. It contains the writings of the first five Gurus and the 9th Guru as well as of fifteen other bhaktas like Jaidev, Surdas, Farid, Dhanna, Namdev, Kabir, Ravidas. It is a large, painstakingly compiled book of about 6,000 compositions set to 31 ragas. Guru Nanak's contribution is 974 verses. Kabir's is the next largest.

Surprisingly the compilation contains no story, no tale, no mythology. It is overall a code of “Right Conduct”. It is ever relevant, as all truth always is. It is universal in its appeal, as all pure thought ever is. What were the fundamentals Guru Nanak Dev spoke of? That there is one God. Truth eternal is His attribute. He is the maker of all

things. He fears none, has no enmity against anyone. Timeless is He. Not born. He is of His own being.

Guru Nanak Dev held that people would be judged by their deeds alone, and not by rituals. Service to humanity was the true religion. Verily it is said, "*Nanak naam jehaz hai, charhe so utare paar*". (Nanak is the ship which once you board will carry you safely across the turbulent sea of this transient world).

Wrote he:

"From the store-house of compassion

Seek knowledge for thy food.

Let thy heart-beat be the call of the conch-shell blown in gratitude".

To celebrate Guru Nanak Dev's *Jayanti* is to celebrate enlightenment itself.

[Courtesy: ***Times of India***]