

# What Guru Nanak means to non-Sikhs

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I SELECTED THIS TOPIC PURPOSELY keeping in mind the variegated and colourful gathering in Dhanbad that is comprised of Sikhs and non-Sikhs: businessmen and industrialists, administrators and intellectuals, political leaders and state officials of this renowned coal mining heart land of India.

Having decided to speak on the topic a question came to my mind, viz, "Who am I to speak on Guru Nanak? Am I going to speak on Guru Nanak as a Sikh or as a non-Sikh?" Well, I am a Tamilian. However, I have 15 years of experience of learning and teaching Guru Nanak's message, conducting a post-graduate Diploma course in Madurai Kamaraj University on Sikhism, a paper in M.A. philosophy and Religion on Sikhism, another paper on Sikhism in M.Phil Comparative Religion, guiding several research scholars for their Ph.D in Guru Nanak Studies. In short I feel blessed by the Great Master.

It was Guru Nanak who gave the Sikh an identity, a distinct philosophy and character. Guru Nanak gave the Sikhs a way of Life, a history and a spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity. We know from the recent and modern history that the Sikhs were predominantly an agricultural people, hailing from the richest agricultural lands of this country. Sociologists would say that the agricultural people are usually conservative, ritualistic, closed and passive. This assumption may be true about the peasants in general, may be about the peasants of south India and possibly of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. But the wonder that was done by Guru Nanak and other Gurus in Punjab is that they turned the otherwise passive peasants of Punjab into the most dynamic and modern entrepreneurs. There is a saying that goes with the name of Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Master of the Sikhs that he desired to transform the sparrows into eagles. The Sikh Gurus really did this historical metamorphosis. The Sikhs are found active, hard working, generous and pious wherever they go and settle, whether it is California or Canada, Malaysia or Australia, Dhanbad or Coimbatore.

There is a tradition in recent Indian History writing that the freedom movement of India started from East India, from the Bengali intellectuals, that the modern renaissance of India began with Raja Rammohan Ray, Keshab Chandra Sen, Vidyasagar and Rabindranath Tagore. I have nothing against the Bengali intellectual initiatives that they opened up the Indian heritage to the Europeans to see. However, it is equally true that the Freedom Movement and Mass Indian Renaissance started from the North West India, particularly from Punjab. Many of us may not know the Namdhari Movement that was started by the Sikhs who raised first the Swadeshi boycott of European goods and services and hoisted the flag of freedom from the British. Then again the Singh Sabha movement and Gurdwara Reform movement which mobilized lakhs of people for democratic reforms in the worship places and in society. The Ghadar Party and the Kamagata Maru episode electrified the people all around India and inspired them for consecutive waves of freedom struggles all over the country. It was these movements which could finally give us a Shahid Bhagat

Singh who became the symbol of dynamism and sacrifice in the freedom movement of India. In the post independent India too the dynamism of the Sikhs had helped them to transform their land into the wonderland of Green revolution and White revolution.

How fine it would be if all of India equaled Punjab in development, and the Sikhs in dynamism and mobility! The Sikhs rightfully owe this spirit of development, dynamism and mobility to their beloved Gurus.

I also think of the relevance of Guru Nanak and the Sikh Gurus when I look at the inter-religious situation that is prevailing in India today. We should agree that the present religious situation in India is not all right. In the very recent past, religious sectarianism is in ascendance all over India. The people are not at all comfortable with the religious conflicts and clashes that are cropping up every day in various sensitive regions of the country. Vested interests are instigating people for religious conflicts. Our industry, business, education and finally our entire culture are affected by these happenings. It is interesting to take note what Guru Nanak was preaching and practicing in this regard. After all, we should understand that Guru Nanak lived and preached in a region where the most intensive interactions between the Hindus and Muslims occurred in Indian History. Punjab region during the period of Guru Nanak was thickly populated with Muslims and Hindus. Guru Nanak had friendship and following with both Muslims and Hindus. Guru Nanak had a very big attachment and passion to Bhagat Kabir and Baba Farid, equally he had love and affection for Ramananda and Bhagat Ravidas. Not only that, Guru Nanak took up four great *udasi yatras* all over India and beyond India, went and met the different communities of people inhabiting this vast land, stretched his hands broadly towards various religious worships and ways of living of people. He visited Boddhgaya and Benaras, Puri and Rameshwaram, Kashmir and Tibet, Mecca and Baghdad. They were all inter-religious pilgrimages stretching to the entire breadth and length of the known world then. The variety and diversity of religions and ways of life that Guru Nanak encountered during his journeys form the core of the religiosity the Guru has proposed and have found registered in the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Nanak founded a religion with inter-religious spirituality as its foundation. He called his God with Hindu and Islamic names although the God is nameless and formless. Guru Nanak describes his God with Sanskrit and Arabic appellations. Guru Nanak mingled with the Nath Yogis and Sufis alike, learnt and debated with them. Guru Nanak called his God religionless (*Adharam*) or beyond religions. He declared that there was no Hindu and there was no Mussalman but only one Humanity. He called every people to keep searching and thinking of that One God who is the ultimate Truth. Guru Nanak asked the Hindus to be true Hindus and the Muslims to be devout Muslims. He reasoned no scope for conflict when both are religiously pious and devoted to their Gods. There can not be any conflict between people if every one is in the spiritual search.

God is incomprehensible and God's designs too are unknown to humans. So Guru Nanak says that don't arrogate with your limited knowledge of God and don't claim that your religion is the monopoly possessor of all knowledge of God. Humans must recognize and reiterate that God truly is great. The humans must develop true humility before God. Humility is the path to reach anything divine. Guru Nanak simplified religiosity and made it close to the immediate and basic needs of the

believing people. Guru Nanak refused to accept ritualism in place of religiosity and called to intensify their religiosity in terms of inner purity and ethical acts. Every act in society is a spiritual act if it is just and ethical. Every act in society is pleasing to God if it is just and ethical. Guru Nanak spiritualized the secular realm in the sense that our secular activities must assume ethical and communitarian meaning. Guru Nanak spiritualized the secular realm when the secular life was dominated by power thirst and overwhelming corruption. The spiritualization undertaken by Guru Nanak was an antidote to the evils of secular life.

However, Guru Nanak neither asserts that the world is worthless to live. Humans have to accept that the world created by God and the life offered to humans is a precious gift that must be lived ethically and actively. It is true that there is a lot of corruption and evils in the earthly life. There is pride of power, status and wealth that makes earthly life horrible and despotic. However, it is the duty of the people to encounter the evil and construct a pious life on earth. The spirituality minded people should not defy the temporal life and seek *mukti* or *moksha* in secluded ashrams. Guru Nanak was not happy with the individual ascetics who declared that the life was worthless and preferred to go aloof to achieve spiritual solace. The Guru called the people to work honestly, earn their bread and share the wealth with the needy. Guru Nanak wanted a mass awakening, a mass ethical awakening, a voluntary commitment to honest labour and make earth the place of justice and peace. He named the earth as the *Dharamsala*. I sometimes wonder how least of our ancient literatures speak about honest labour, an honest and unexploitative labour. It is a question about our culture how much we have a work ethics. It is a question about our culture how much we disown the unearned privileges offered to us by birth or status or power. We must pick up such moments from our history and culture and then only we can inculcate a new morality. After all, social change and progress cannot be achieved just by enacting legislation and ordinances. On the other hand, there needs unconstrained and willful participation of people in the process of social and ethical reconstruction. No body's right should be curtailed and transgressed. Not with coercion you can achieve development. People's awareness and commitment have to be mobilized for development. Guru Nanak addressed to this people's energy and consciousness. He represented a new culture. The rulers must have belief in the potentialities of the people. The rulers must inculcate democracy among people. Not with orders you can mobilize the people. Only the voluntary commitment of the people can achieve wonders.

According to Guru Nanak, the entire world is the realm of God. God is all the where in the world, God is immanent in the world, the world that has the imprints of God is sacred, the world is rooted in God, God is the ultimate seed of this temporal life. Life is a beautiful garden, God has a personal interest in its well being. The humans must cooperate with God to make it worthy to live. The humans cannot say that they have no responsibility to the evils or corruption of life. Every one is accountable. And every one must assume the responsibility to change the things too. Sikhism offers the human model of Sant-Sipahi, saint-soldier, a person who is adorned with spiritual qualities and soldierly capabilities to target and accomplish the ends. He or she must be an enlightened person, enlightened socially and spiritually.

Guru Nanak addressed at least to two important problems of our society that they had to be examined even today with all care. One is the age-old system of casteism

that had eroded the moral fibers on Indian society. We do not know for sure how it originated and what was the purpose it served in history. However, we are sure that the caste system has outlived its times and that it has become the greatest disintegrating factor in Indian history. The caste system has built unsurpassable economic and cultural barriers among our people and it hampers any free communication among our people. Unfortunately some of the religious writings in this land have justified and safe guarded the system by rendering cunning arguments for its prevalence. Even today there are vested interests in this country who give all kind of justification to this ugly system. Guru Nanak out rightly denounced that any writing that justifies caste system cannot be a religious writing. He declared that he had nothing to do with the upper castes and volunteered himself to be the lowest of the low. He rejected to wear the sacred thread meant for the so called twice born and thus preferred to remain all along in his life an only once-born sudra. It was a revolutionary act he performed symbolically to be always with the marginalized people of this land. Bhai Gurdas, the saintly elder of the Sikh tradition and the one who lived during the life times of so many Gurus sees the greatest merit of Guru Nanak in blending the four *varnas* into one. The tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh abolished the caste appellations of his Sikhs and asked them to have the common name of Singh and Kaur for the males and females respectively. Every Sikh Guru called their followers to cook and share the same food. The *langar* practice was created in the Gurdwaras to abolish the food taboos existing in the caste culture and to give reality to a non-caste communicative culture. The people share the food and become one in blood. The Sikh Gurus made the oppressed people of that region to overcome their mental and physical inertia caused by years of caste slavery and imbibed into them the ideal of fearlessness (*Nirbhai*) by weaponizing them. All these and other acts in terms of abolition of caste system have living significance even today. India has not overcome this problem of casteism. We are going to think and fight this great shame of our culture, may be, for many more years. Guru Nanak shall render the moral inspiration in the struggle against casteism.

The second issue Guru Nanak encountered intensively is the problem of political power manipulating the religious sentiments of the common masses. Guru Nanak was categorically against such a practice. Some of the Moghul rulers of those days showed themselves as the active defenders of their religion brought havoc to people of other religions and to the common masses. The religious leaders became not only moot spectators of such a development but also blessed the political rulers in their atrocities. Guru Nanak spoke and acted against this type of alliance between religion and politics. The Guru countered it with another type of alliance between religion and politics that was: religion mobilizing the common masses to fight out the despotism of the political rule. Religion is justified as a mass ideology when it energizes the people in the struggle for justice and religion loses all legitimacy when it plays devastation against people and serves the interests of the ruling classes. It is an emancipatory declaration that the teachings of Guru Nanak spelt out.

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