

# Emergence of the Sikh Society: Niharranjan Ray Re-examined

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NIHARRANJAN RAY WAS THE quintessential social anthropologist and macro-sociologist, with a holistic approach towards the study of Indian history and society. He did not rest content with the study of the developments in any single region in isolation. He tried to look at the whole gamut of philosophy that had been taking place in the sub-continent as a whole, and even beyond, where such ideas had migrated and assumed a new shape, Burma and Sri Lanka being two such places to be taken into consideration.

Such a comprehensive approach helped him to link up the metamorphosis of ideas taking place in one region but having its roots in the developments of ideas in other regions as well. In 1967 he presented a Paper at an international seminar at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla, on 'Guru Gobind Singh, Sikhism and Indian society' and delivered a series of lectures at Patiala on the occasion of the quintcentennial anniversary of Guru Nanak in 1969, followed by yet another seminar paper in the same year at Patiala at an international seminar in commemoration of the same event. All these lectures were collected in the form of a book in 1975 with the title: '**The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society**'. These form the inspiration of my current study.

Situated in the north-west of Indian sub-continent, Punjab served as the gateway to repeated foreign invasions that targeted the fabled wealth of India at different ages. Ray has listed several, like those of the Acheimenids, Greeks, Sakas, Huns, Mongols and, finally, Ghaznavid. These interminable incursions left the jati-varna structure in Punjab permanently shaken.

The domination of the Brahmins at the head of India's caste structure was not to be seen here, and the Brahmins had withdrawn in shells (*kurma-vritti*). *Smarta Pauranik Brahmanism* (Brahmanic ideas of social norms based on *Smriti* and *Puranas*, the off shoots of Vedic literature) was on the retreat; a dozen and more Ghaznavid invasaions had left the social structure in total disarray. The only two classes who asserted their presence during such turmoil were the khattris (commercial classes and craftsmen) and the working classes or menials. As the economy and the society of the region recovered from the trauma of indiscriminate destruction accompanying foreign invasions, they needed the cooperation of the people in such efforts at recovery. As Brahmins would not help the new regime to colsolidate, the next level of society came to the fore. This, according to Ray, could explain the non-brahmin pre-eminence in Punjab - even before the rise of Sikhism. Along with non-brahmin assertion in administration, trade, commerce, art and crafts and agriculture went the dominance of their dialect in carrying on the day to day business of life and Lehndi Punjabi (western Punjabi) had been in widespread use in elementary education, simple accounts, even folk songs and folk conversation. Guru Nanak's use of this language, as the medium of religious communication, was a re-assertion of the prevalent norms of social practice in the region.

When Guru Angad started codifying the vocabulary used by Guru Nanak, he did not have to look for invention in the script already in use. It was simply a qualitative and poetical switch-over. Indeed the purpose of the Sikh Gurus was to reach the hearts of the common people in their own language. They skillfully employed the idiom to bring their FAITH within ambit of the ordinary folk, rather than make it the monopoly of Sanskrit knowing pandits.

Ray could also trace a similar continuity between the philosophy of Sikhism and the socio-religious ideas that had been developing in the sub-continent as part of an Indo-Islamic heritage. Confrontation with the aggressive monistic ideas of Islam had permanently shaken pre-Islamic belief in a multiplicity of gods and the practice of anthropomorphism. But Ray could trace the germs of anti-Brahmanic ideas questioning the validity of caste discrimination, multiplicity of gods, stress on ritualism and obscure scholasticism in earlier non-conformist doctrines, like Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, and esoteric cults like those of the *Kapalikas*, the *Avadhutas*, the *Aghorapanthis* and *Siddha Nathayogis*.

Guru Nanak's concept of the greatest fulfilment of human life in the union of the *atma* (self) with the *paramatma* (the ultimate) could be traced in the ideas of Buddhist Siddhacharyas. This *Sunya* or *Niranjan* was beyond good or bad, birth or death, sin or merit. It was a state of *samarasa* - absolute peace, equipoise, without wave or change. The esoteric cults had been popular with the common folk because of their simplicity but some of them fell into disgrace because of their abuse of *tantric* practices (like sexual orgies) to experience the ultimate fulfilment. These non-conformist traditions and ideas of a personal approach to God had filtered into the sant tradition of Kabir, Dadu and Buddhist Siddhacharyas. The *Sant* tradition in its turn borrowed from the *Bhakti* tradition evolved in the western part of the sub-continent by Namdev of Pandharpur, Tukaram, Ramanand and Ramanuj and the Sufi mysticism of Baba Farid.

Indeed Guru Arjun Dev's collection of the lyrics and couplets of various Bhagats in the *Adi Granth* points out to the rich intellectual heritage on which Guru Nanak had drawn upon. But Ray has found it curious that even after Guru Nanak's famed visit to Bengal and Jagannath Puri, and his inclusion of one or two couplets by the Bengali poet Jaydev, the rich and popular tradition of Sri Chaitanya is left out of the *Adi Granth*. Ray attributes this to the later return of the Goswamis of Vrindavan to the fold of Brahmanism. **As Guru Nanak had decided to give his faith a staunchly non-Brahmanic slant, he, according to Ray, had decided to leave out all reference to the ideas of Tulsidas, Mirabai and Sri Chaitanya, in spite of all the influence that they exercised on the intellectual climate of northern India in contemporary times, because of their close association with Brahmanic ideas.**

In Ray's analysis, Guru Nanak's message represented a systematized theology, blending the ideas of Brahmanical/Upanishadic Hinduism, the monotheism of Sankara, the protestations and non-conformism of Vajrayanis and Sahajyanis to the ideas of the Nathapanthis, the saints and Vaishnava Bhagats and the Sufis. He collected all the floating traditions of northern India and infused in them a distinct entity of its own.

Throughout his writings, however, Ray declared again and again that it was not his purpose to trace the intellectual roots of Guru Nanak's philosophy. He was more interested in examining its social impact or the way the Gurus' ideas had moulded Sikh society.

The most important result of the inculcation of the Guru's ideas was the cohesion and consolidation of the Sikh community around the ideas of the Guru. Guru Nanak used the word 'Guru' in various senses to mean Enlightener of 'Truth', 'God' or the Word of God. The

institutionalisation of the Guru, and the introduction of the spiritual succession of the Guru, rallied the Sikhs around the institution of the Guru and kept them together from all external spiritual onslaughts.

The termination of the idea of the human Guru, and the injunction on Vaisakhi of 1699 to look to the Guru Granth Sahib as the true Guru for spiritual and practical direction in all future dilemmas introduced a spirit of democracy in eighteenth century Punjabi society, which was quite unheard of in the socio-political context of the period. While the institution of the Dal Khalsa along with its five symbols was an attempt to tighten up the solidarity of the Sikh community, the introduction of the Guru-Mata, or the united counsel of the Khalsa, on a common issue affecting the community democratized authority into individual members of the community.

This was probably to encourage a sense of responsibility among the Khalsa who could always arrive at the correct decision by looking to the authority of the Guru Granth Sahib. Ray could notice the shadow of the Buddhist valorisation of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, in this elevation of the Sikh 'Trinity' of 'Guru, Guru Granth Sahib and the Khalsa', even if it was co-incidental. While many experts thought that Guru Gobind's abolition of the institution of Guru was a measure forced by the martyrdom of all his four sons, Ray thought that the act was deliberate, well-thought out and irrespective of the premature martyrdom of his sons. **Guru Gobind Singh must have decided that the Sikhs had reached such a crossroads of history where they should be able to dispense with the prop of a human Guru and the Khalsa should look unto itself as the repository of all ideas and energy, under the guidance of Guru Granth.**

