

# Guru Nanak as a Man and a Social Reformer

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## Abstract:

Guru Nanak has a unique place amongst the religious prophet of the world. His teachings have a universal appeal and they hold good for all ages. He has deeply influenced the lives, thinking and conduct of a large number of people. In order to enlighten humanity as a whole, he delivered his message of love, peace, devotion, social justice, religious tolerance and universal brotherhood. He preached about the 'Oneness of God', the equality of all people, the futility of empty ritualism through hymns called 'Shabads'. Nanak eventually established a village where he continued to preach and shape what later became the Sikh tradition. The present paper critically analyzes much on Guru Nanak's message.

**Keywords:** Social Vision, Guru Nanak, Reformation, Peace, Brotherhood, Savior, Redeemer

## 1. Introduction

Guru Nanak Dev the founder of Sikhism, is widely known and highly respected as a prophet. A seer, a saint, a savior, a redeemer, a divine master, a spiritual preceptor he was. The religious minded of his own country and community, calling him Nanak Deva, interpreting Devas as 'God', considered him God on the earth or an Avatar that is an incarnation of God. He was acclaimed as pir-i-hind in the Muslim world abroad, and his name still stands inscribed as Hazrat Rab-i-Majid Baba Nanak Faqir Aulia on a memorial in Baghdad, the citadel of Muslim culture. At home, while, his Hindu devotees called him Satguru Nanak Dev; the Muslim called him Hazrat Nanak Shah.

His biographer, the highly learned Bhai Gurudas Bhalla (1551-1637 AD), has described him as Vadda Purukh (i.e., Great Man Akal roop i.e., Godlike), Guran Gur (i.e., Preceptor of the preceptors) and Jagat-Gur-Babai.e., The Divine World Teacher. He was very near to God rather one with Him, yet he was a man, though a unique man, indeed! As a matter of fact, he did not claim for himself anything more than a human being. So much so, that he himself is stated to have proclaimed.

I am composed of five elements

And my name is Nanak

He thus always preferred to be known as a ‘man’, a man along men, about whom, including himself he once said:

We are human of but one breath,

And do not even know

The span of our existence

And the time of our death.

His great emphasis on oneness, immanence and transcend of God, and his creed of the Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man are more than enough to prove that he never even thought of poisoning himself to be anything like that. His well known definition and description of God which later became the basic creed of Sikhism and the Corner-stone of Sikh belief, reads:

There is but one God the Supreme Being

His name is Eternal Truth

He is the creator of the Universe and Immanent Reality.

He is devoid of fear and rancor.

He is form Eternal, Unborn and Self-existent.

He is realized by the Grace of the Holy preceptor.

He never claimed himself as a Devine or gifted with supernatural powers. He was a fakir, said he, ‘before the threshold of God’. Thou art the incorporeal creator and Nanak is the slave: Tue hae Nirankar Kartar, Nanak Banda Tera’ was the theme of the good hearted, pious Nanak. Thus he frequently used two very typical and expressive names of God. Viz. Kartar (i.e., the Creator) and Nirankar (i.e., the formless).

But Guru Nanak did not stop just there. He not only asserted the oneness of god and his relation with Him on the man and – master level, but also abhorred vehemently the very idea of His supposed incarnation, and opposed all those who ever claimed any Divinity or Godhead. He demolished the very doctrine of divine incarnation, both by word and deed; and thus “surpassed every other reformer”. Their lies the distinctive superiority of Guru Nanak’s who, on the one hand, never gave utterance to the sacrilegious idea that he was himself God ; and asserted, on the other hand, with all vehemence that:

That the most peculiar quality of God is

That there is none other like Him;

There never was, nor ever be other

Once after taking a holy dip in the 'Vain Nadi' he realized that the almighty was calling him to dedicate his self to the service of humanity and the utter amazement of all his historic trumpet – blast:

There is neither a Hindu,

Nor a Mussalman.

(All are human beings born of the one Supreme Being)

From thereon he started undertaking long travels and started on his historic tour, spread over a long period preaching his unique and divine doctrine, and shook entire surroundings with his radical ideas and revolutionary actions for about twenty five years, and directed one after another towards east, south, north and west. The Siddhas asked him:

Why have u forsaken your home and become a recluse?

Why are you donning the garb of a mendicant?

What is the merchandise that you seek to trade in?

And how will you ferry your associates across?

The Guru answered:

I left my home in search of the righteous and enlightened; and allowed this course to evolve a new philosophy of life. Being a peddler of truth I am out to Trade in Truth: And I shall ferry my associates across by the grace of God and guidance of the Holy.

This was the darkest period of India's history when the people were absolutely divided and demoralized. In addition, the priests had reduced religion to a mockery. The public was blind in its faith, and governed by superstitions. Seeing all this, Guru Nanak started building a nation of self-respecting men and women, devoted to God and their leaders, filled with a sense of equality and brotherhood.

Apart of India, he also went as far as Tibet in the North, Ceylon in the South, Arabia and Afghanistan in the West, and Burma and China in the East. He is believed to have travelled, thus, over a greater part of the land and for a greater period of time than any other prophet or founder of a religion. In fact he may

be called as an Indian Ibn Batuta. These long and incessant travels went a long way in bringing about the desired reformation and regeneration, and in spreading his universal message far and wide.

The man in the Nanak did not sit at rest on his return home after such extensive and arduous journey. He settled on the right bank of the Ravi at Kartarpur and resumed living there as a full fledged householder. According to Bhai Gurudas, his first and most reliable biographer:

When Guru Nanak returned to Kartarpur  
 He put off the pilgrim dress;  
 And wore the simple garments of a family man.  
 He sat down on the manji (cot),  
 And continued his spiritual instructions to all.

The personality of such a man would indeed, have been exceedingly impressive, rather highly captivating. And it did wonderfully well on all occasions, at all places, in and outside India. His holy touch, sight and word alone converted robbers into friends of humanity, man-eaters into citizens of the world, ascetics into devoted householders and tyrants into servants of the society.

Guru Nanak's main doctrine was that God is formless. The Guru remarked: Hukmi Hovan Akar, 'That forms are created by the Devine will', i.e., they are not eternal. Then, 'Hukmi Hovan Ji, i.e., 'souls are created by the Devine Will'. About the nature of the Devine Will his remarks was brief and pithy. He said, Hukum Na Kahiya Jai, 'The Devine Will cannot be described'. He said, I do not collect for my knowledge words from the soil in which they were buried. His environment was the soil. His intense wish to better the lot of the people was the seed. There was a social urgency in his thoughts. He condemned outright all those who lived on alms.

He raised his voice against begging and declared:

Ghali khaay kichhu haththu dehi  
 Nanak rahu pachhanhi say.

Eat only what you earn by the sweat of your labour. Even out of it give something to others. Those who follow this path will find the true path.

“About Yogis he was equally critical”:

Makhtoo hoi kai kann paraay

The man who is unfit to earn his livelihood gets his ears split (becomes yogi)

The above denunciation was about the men who are indolent and lazy, but there was another category, the rich people renouncing and taking to a beggars life. He says:

Rovhi raje kaan paraay

Ghar ghar maghi bhikya jay

The rajas now weep (repent). They beg from door to door. They are the men who got their ears pierced.

He was equally critical of the Muslim Mullah:

Gian vihoona gawai git

Bhuke mulan ghare masti

The Mullah devoid of knowledge converts his home into a mosque (to attract aims). He sings songs (to excite pity).

It will thus be clear that this was one great distinguishing feature of Guru Nanak. He did not fall in line with other medieval saints, some of whom applauded a beggar's bowl and others encouraged asceticism. Guru Nanak's mission was different. It was not to get away from society but to reform it, to abolish caste barriers. That was his intense desire. He was against the wearing of the sacred thread, a symbol of belongings to the higher castes.

In Guru Nanak's bhakti, the component of social reform was an integral part and that is why Sikhism ultimately emerged as a new dispensation with all the vigor of a new face.

## 2. Social Reforms

As a social reformer Guru Nanak Dev Ji upheld many causes, helping the poor, the outcasts, and the down trodden and championed equality for women. He composed 947 hymns including Japi Ji Sahib, Asa Di Waar, Bara Maha, Sabd Kosh. Guru Nanak Dev always opposed caste system. He preached that human race has only one caste, then why people fight for lower and higher caste. Guru Nanak Dev said, "When you reached the abode of God, he will not ask you your caste, but you will be asked for your deeds. So instead of caring for any caste and creed, you should only concentrate for the welfare of society".

Guru Nanak combined deep spiritual yearnings with ideas of social reforms that were far ahead of his times. He emphasized equality at all levels – social, economic. He spoke strongly against superstitions and rituals which had no rationality.

What is most remarkable is that Guru Nanak was able to preach radical social reforms not only in those areas where he had many followers, but in addition even in entirely new areas. He travelled thousands of miles, reaching as far as Baghdad and Mecca (apart from covering very vast areas in the subcontinent). Even in areas he was visiting for the first time and hence had no followers, he was able to challenge superstitions and mindless ritualism, and this too without evoking any violent reactions.

How could he achieve this? Certainly, built on great moral strength and the courage that come with it, had an important role in this success, but at the same time we should not neglect an important factor – Guru Nanak’s great communication skills from which present-day communication experts can still earn a lot.

When Guru Nanak visited Hardwar, he saw a lot of people engaged in the ritual of offering water to their ancestors. He did not oppose them, did not say a word against their ritual, but quietly started offering water in another direction. The people gathered there, questioned him as to what he was doing. Nanak was actually waiting for just this kind of question. He replied innocently that he is irrigating the fields in his village. People laughed and said how fields located so many miles away can be irrigated by dropping water here. People thought they were making fun of Nanak but Nanak was waiting actually just for this stage. He now replied as innocently as before. “If the water offered by you can reach your ancestors who are in heaven, then, surely the water offered by me can reach my village which is much nearer”.

This incident shows how great communication skills can be used to challenge empty rituals without causing any offence. No direct offence was caused, yet the message against ritualism was effectively delivered.

In another often-quoted incident, Nanak in the course of his long travels was very tired and fell asleep under a tree. He was suddenly woken up by a mulla who angrily told him that his feet should not be in the direction of the mosque. Nanak quietly told him to change his feet in that direction where God doesn’t exist. As the mulla also agreed that God is present everywhere, he just could not decide in which direction Nanak’s feet should be moved and so left him in peace.

These great communicative skills of Guru Nanak were certainly very helpful in his tireless efforts to take the message of bhakti and social reforms to more and more people, but we should never forget that Guru Nanak’s amazing achievements were based mainly on his tremendous moral strengths. That is what enabled him to confront even invading armies. At the time of Babur’s invasion, for example, he mixed among people providing solace.

The strength of Guru Nanak's moral and spiritual achievements enabled him to create a firm foundation for social reforms so that even his radical messages could be accepted without any violence. There is much that the social reform movements can learn from Guru Nanak even today.

Guru Nanak Dev started the custom of community Langar, where all sit together and eat there without any disparity. Everyone, from upper to lower class, rich or poor, sit in line and take their food called "Prasada ji". This custom of Langar is being observed in all Gurudwaras till today with full faith and devotion, keeping in view the service and quality to the human kind.

According to the other view, Guru Nanak was a Revolutionary who "aimed upsetting the cherished institutions of the society in which he was born, bringing about social cataclysm. He condemned the caste system which was the very basis of Hindu society. He also suggested positive steps to ignore the caste system altogether.

During the foreign tyranny the effect of oppression was greatest of the Indian females. She had no personal religion, no spiritual responsibility, no calm, and no part in the law of God too. Guru Nanak felt for the suffering womankind and gave them their full share in the goodness of God. She was declared (See Var Asa, XIX) to be directly responsible for her morals to God. Religious congregations were open to them,. They were to partake freely in the any religious and secular observance, and no social custom was to hinder them in doing so.

During his travels to China's Nanking also he saw the females in the society were living in abject repression , humiliation and subjugation. Guru Nanak decided to oppose and resist these glaring injustices and to accord equal status to the women. He mandated the equality of the female sexes to his followers.

Guru Nanak was fully alive to the effectiveness of music as a means of communication all over the then known world. He wrote his message to the humanity in the form of verse, but those verses into tunes based on classical Raagas and folk tunes based on the classical music. Before starting his surmons, Guru Nanak preferred to sing his own hymns before the audiences. This made his message more effective.

Guru Nanak opposed the rampant inequalities in status in the society and abolished the source of the "Caste System". Throughout his life he opposed injustice and superstitions and preached the equality of mankind. His message was "Kirat Karo" (work Hard), "Naam Japo" (remember God), and "Wand Chhako"(share your wealth with the needy).

### 3. Conclusion:

Guru Nanak Dev Ji's life and teachings contributed an amazing perspective specifically, tentatively and authentically real having across the board value. He is the real guardian of Humanism. Guru Nanak, and

entire Sikhism endeavored to reexamine the overall characteristics for Humanism. According to Payne, the aim of guru Nanak “was not to sweep away Hinduism but to restore it to its ancient purity. Like Luther , he came to protest against the idolatry, the blind superstitious and the empty rituals, which had so longer estranged religion from morality and the hearts of men from their Creator”.

It goes without saying that Guru Nanak occupied a place of pride not only in the History of the Punjab or India but also of the whole world. Guru Nanak was one of the prophets of the world. He gave to the world gospel of love, goodwill and reconciliation. He profoundly influenced the History of the Punjab. According to Dr. Gokul Chgand Narang, “Nanak left the Hindus of the Punjab immensely better than he had found them”.

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