



# Guru Nanak: An Apostle of Social Integration

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## Abstract

Guru Nanak, a great campaigner of humanism of the medieval India is best considered as the epitome of religious harmony. He dedicated his whole life to upholding unity among people of different faiths. Dissimilar to an ordinary man, from his teenage Nanak started to search for the true meaning of life and a way to bridge the gaps among the followers of different religions. His teachings form the basement of Sikhism and he is regarded as the first Guru of the Sikh religious tradition. The teachings of Guru Nanak can be termed as the model for establishing universal peace by eliminating communal conflicts, which he himself wanted to accomplish throughout his life. In the middle of the fifteenth century when India was suffering from the inhuman caste system, when people were sunk into the oblivion of sin, when mutual respect among the adherents of diverse faiths was vanished and when the entire socio-political system (especially in northern India) was seeking a new reform in the entire cultural-religio sector necessitated the rise of a spiritual leader and social reformer at that hour of need Guru Nanak emerged as a new reformer in the soil of India.

**Keywords:** Harmony, Coherence, Philosophy, Religious, Apostle

## Introduction

Guru Nanak described the situation in more vivid way. He says: "Time is like a knife. Kings are butchers. Religion hath taken wings and flown... Modesty and religion have disappeared because falsehood reigns supreme. The Muslim Mullahs and the Hindu Pundits have resigned their duties".<sup>1</sup>

Even today the world is experiencing conflicts among the people of different faiths on the basis of religion. They even cannot tolerate the name of other religions. They are not true followers of any religion. There is no religion in the world which does not promote religious harmony and peace. But the true teachings of these religions have been

contaminated by these fanatics who do not try to understand their own religions in a proper way.<sup>2</sup> That is why the study of the philosophy of Guru Nanak is more necessary at present as before to promote world peace by eradicating misunderstandings among us. This present paper is an attempt to explore the teachings of Guru Nanak and to show whether his teachings can be termed as a model for interreligious harmony.

From his boyhood, Guru Nanak was interested in many things and at the age of, he started asking questions about the purpose of life. At the age of seven, he went to the village school which was run by Pundit Gopal Dasa. As usual, the Pundit started to teach him the alphabet but the young kid Nanak asked him about the inner meaning of each and every alphabet. The Pundit was puzzled when this young kid explained the inner meaning of each and every alphabet which was regarding human being, and realizing God in terms of alphabets. This is considered as the very first divine message of Guru Nanak.<sup>3</sup>

One day in the year of 1499, Guru Nanak had his first mystic experience while taking his ritual bath in the river. This is called 'communion with God' according to Sikh Religious Tradition where God gave him a cup of nectar to drink and charged him with a mission with the following words:

"Nanak, I am with thee. Through thee my name will be magnified. Whosoever follows thee, him will I save. Go into the world to pray and teach mankind how to pray. Be not sullied by the ways of the world. Let your life be one of praise of the word (nam), charity (dan), ablution (isnan), service (seva), and prayer (simian). I give thee my pledge; Let this be thy life's mission"<sup>4</sup>

And Guru Nanak recited as follows:

"There is one God. He is the supreme truth.

He the creator,

Is without fear and without hate.

He, the omnipresent pervades the universe.

He is not born

Nor does He die to be born gain.

By his grace shall thou worship him.

Before time itself

There was truth.

When time began to run its course

He was the truth.

Even now, he is the truth

And evermore shall truth prevail."<sup>5</sup>

After this incident Guru Nanak started roaming in different parts of the world to preach his teachings. He visited many parts of India and Pakistan like Bangladesh (at present), Asam, Mathura, Banaras, Gaya and other areas. He also visited Arabia, Baghdad, Srilanka, Nepal and Afghanistan as part of disseminating his ideas. During his visit Muslim Mardana and Hindu Bhai Bala used to accompany him.<sup>6</sup> Guru Nanak used to keep many Sudras during his visit especially to sacred places. After travelling many parts of the world from 1499 A.C. to 1522 A.C. Guru Nanak established Kartarpur on the bank of the river Ravi. Guru Nanak stayed at Kartarpur in his last years. The lifestyle of the Sikh people started to be institutionalized by the teachings of Guru Nanak during this time.

Guru Nanak left this immortal world on September 22, 1539 A.C. in the early hours of the morning which he loved most and used to ascribe as amrit-vela (early morning, before Sunrise). His death also represents his long-cherished endeavor to promote communal harmony among the people. When Nanak was about to die, the Muslims said: 'We shall bury him' and the Hindus said, 'we shall cremate him'<sup>7</sup>. Guru Nanak understood the following problem and said: 'You place flowers on either side, Hindus on my right, Muslims on my left. Those whose flowers remain fresh tomorrow will have their way.'<sup>8</sup> Then the people gathering started to pray for him according to the directions of Guru Nanak.

In the following morning, both parties found their flowers fresh but the body of Guru Nanak missing. This incident is mysterious indeed. This incident is marked by the endeavor of Guru Nanak to avoid a direct confrontation between the Hindus and the Muslims. The situation could be dangerous regarding the burial or cremation of Guru Nanak but a miraculous incident helped the history itself to avoid a communal riot and to promote inter-communal harmony. Still today Guru Nanak is remembered in Punjab as holy man who is 'Guru' to the Hindus and 'Pir' to the Muslims.

Though his dead body was missing, his Hindu devotees built a temple and the Muslim devotees built a graveyard in his name. But within one year both the Temple and the Mosques were destroyed by the erosion of the river Ravi. This incident also helped the people to avoid any inter-communal clash.<sup>9</sup> Besides the life of Guru Nanak, his principal teachings are discussed below.

Guru Nanak was a great advocate of monotheism. It is true that some of his followers used to believe in the incarnation of God but Guru Nanak directly rejected that sort of ideas. According to him, God cannot be confined within the Limit of birth and rebirth. He does not need to possess human character to establish law in this world. Nanak rejected the idea of idol worship because people used to worship the idol instead of considering it as a

symbol. He holds that a man-made idol cannot be God. As God is infinite, therefore, He cannot be defined by human words. About God Guru Nanak says:

“Thou hast a million eyes, yet no eyes hast Thou.  
 Thou hast a million forms, yet no form hast Thou.  
 ... With such charms, o Lord, hast thou bewitched me.  
 Thy lights pervade everywhere.”<sup>10</sup>

In this connection, a historical incident may be mentioned. One day Guru Nanak was staying at a Mosque at Mecca. He fell asleep and his feet were towards the Kaba. The care-taker of the Kaba, Qazi Qutubuddin came to him and rebuked Guru Nanak a lot for directing his feet towards the house of Allah. Guru Nanak asked him to turn his feet towards another direction where there is no Allah. Then Qazi Qutubuddin asked him whether he was a Muslim. In reply, Guru Nanak said: “I don't know whether I am a Muslim but I know it is really difficult to be a Muslim”.<sup>11</sup>

“To be a Musclem is not easy  
 Only he who is one should make the claim.  
 He should first follow in the footsteps of the holy  
 And accept their bitter words as sweet.  
 Rid himself of worldly goods As sandpaper rids iron of dust.”<sup>12</sup>

The key feature of the universal philosophy of Guru Nanak is: God does not belong to any particular nation, rather He is for all. That is why human being is one.<sup>13</sup>

Guru Nanak put emphasis upon the "Sabd" or word and the recitation of the 'Naam' or name of God which is essential for all. Once Guru Nanak was asked regarding his own Guru. Nanak replied: "The word is my Guru." And he was anointed by the word of God. There are two kinds of names; attributive names of God depicting his mercy, power or other qualities and the True name or satnama which is the comprehensive name of God. Reciting the names of God purifies one's soul. Guru Nanak says:

"In the name the Lord's Spirit abides,  
 May the name in me be in dwelling  
 Without the Guru we walk in darkness  
 Without the word we understand not life.”<sup>14</sup>

'Naam' is the central theme of Guru Grantham Sahib and it is regarded as the cure of all sufferings. In Guru Grantham sahib, Naam is another name for God. It is the source of everything- physical and spiritual. Nanak believed that by recitation of the names one can conquer one's own ego which is the greatest devil. Human ego is the principal obstacle on the way to attain salvation and there is no way to eliminate egoistic attitude without reciting the names of God. If a person can win over ego, that person can automatically win over lust, anger, greed, attachments and pride which are derived from ego.<sup>15</sup> He says:

"When the clothes are soiled and rendered impure,

*They are cleansed with soap.*

When the mind is defined by the sin

It is rendered pure by the love of His Nam."<sup>16</sup>

Guru Nanak had a profound respect for the other religions and in the followers. According to him, every human being is equal and one must not be judged because of one's difference of religion. Guru Nanak had a deep respect towards the religious texts of other religions like the Vedas or the Bible. He warned those who criticize these sacred texts. He asked them not to call these texts false; rather those who call them are themselves live in world of falsehood.

He said to the Muslims and the Christians that it not enough to read the Quran and the Bible, rather they have to own the teachings of the Quran and the Bible in their hearts and restraint all their sensory organs. To the Muslims and the Christians, Guru Nanak advised: "Practice within your heart the teachings of the Qur'an and the Bible; restrain the ten sensory organs for straining into evil. Tie up the demons of desire and restore faith, charity and contentment, and you shall be acceptable."<sup>17</sup>

Guru Nanak used to say that the prerequisite to be his follower was to respect other religions and to take care of everyone so that they can perform their respective religions without any disturbance. The Sufis and the Bhaktas emphasized on having a spiritual guide but Nanak emphasized more on having a Guru for salvation. Guru Nanak regarded guru as a spiritual guide. A guru can be respected but cannot be worshipped anymore. Nanak claimed himself as a teacher of the humanity, not a prophet. The Guru is understood in different allegories by different people. He installs 'naam' in the mind of the devotee.<sup>18</sup>

A guru can help a devotee to make him understand the way of salvation and the way to call God. But a guru is neither a prophet nor a savior. God reveals the divine light to human being through the Gurus. Guru Nanak says:

"The Guru is the giver,

The Guru is heaven of peace.

The Gum is the lamp that lights the three worlds".<sup>19</sup>

Guru Nanak had two sons named Sree Chand and Laxmi Dasa. The former accepted asceticism leaving his family and the later was reluctant to the spiritual affairs. Guru Nanak refused the life of an ascetic and he also understood that both of his sons were incompetent to carry his legacy and teachings. That is why he did not nominate any of his sons as the next Guru. Among the close disciples of Guru Nanak, Bhai Lehna was one of them who came from a Kshatriya of Trehan sub-caste. Guru Nanak was satisfied with his spiritual activities and found qualities of leadership in him. Finally Guru Nanak nominated Lehna as the next Guru and gave him the name Angad (of my own entity). This incident has got deep significance. The path of scriptures was open to all and one had to achieve it with one's works and dedication. Being the son of Guru, one could not proclaim as Guru.

Guru Nanak was against any sort of division among people on the basis of any religion or birth or color or wealth. He believed that human beings are one nation and any kind of discrimination will violate the unity of people. God has created mankind from His love and to Him neither is superior nor inferior. From his boyhood, Guru Nanak raised his voice against the prevalent inhuman caste system of the Hindu society. When he was young he refused to wear 'paita' or sacred thread to avoid the possibility of growing pride in him.<sup>20</sup>

In order to eliminate this caste system Guru Nanak established two systems; Sangat and Pangat (religious congregation). The former means that everyone is equal and will be treated equally irrespective of religion, caste and creed. And the latter means a system of food which will be cooked at the Gurduara (holy temple) will be presented to all in same plates simultaneously. No one will be served with food. Guru Nanak had two sons named Sree Chand and Laxmi Dasa. The former accepted asceticism leaving his family and the later was reluctant to the spiritual affairs. Guru Nanak refused the life of an ascetic and he also understood that both of his sons were unable to carry his legacy and teachings. That is why he did not nominate any of his sons as the next Guru. Among the close disciples of Guru Nanak, Bhai Lehna was one of them who came from a Kshatriya of Trehan sub-caste. Guru Nanak was satisfied with his spiritual activities and found qualities of leadership in him. Finally Guru Nanak nominated Lehna as the next Guru and gave him the name Angad (of my own limb). This incident has got deep significance. The path of Guruship was open to all and one had to achieve it with one's works and dedication. Being the son of Guru, one could not proclaim as Guru.

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The Mughal emperor Akbar visited one of the Gurduaras in Punjab. But he was treated like the common people. When he was served food, he was not given any precious plate. Rather he was given an ordinary plate made of the leaves of tree and he was given an ordinary floor mat to sit. Watching this sort of strange activities, the associates of Akbar became furious but the Akbar stopped them. Firstly Akbar wanted to understand the underlying philosophy of this Pangat system and when it was explained to him by the Guru, he was delighted indeed. Akbar realized that this system of equality can establish unity in the society and enhance peace among the people. Akbar was really amazed at these teachings of equality by Guru Nanak.

Then Akbar wanted to know whether they had any demand from him. The Sikhs asked for a piece of land from him and to this satisfaction Akbar gave them five hundred Bighas (chunk of land) of land. Later on, Amritsar city and the Golden Temple were founded on this ground. The Sikhs got the Golden Temple inaugurated by a Muslim Pir named Mir Mia.

So Guru Nanak had two major targets to establish the system of Sangat and Pangat to eradicate the Hindu caste system and to establish a classless society on the basis of love where religion cannot be a barrier. Guru Nanak says:

“Once we say the pure is thus unclean.

See that in all things there is life unseen.

There are worms in wood and cow dung cakes,

There is life in the corn ground into bread.

There is life in the water which makes it green.

How then be clean when impurity is over the kitchen spread?

Impurity of the heart is greed, of tongue, untruth,

Impurity of the eye is coveting

Another's wealth, his wife, her comeliness.

Impurity of the ears is listening to calumny."<sup>21</sup>

Another historical incident is important. One day Guru Nanak was invited by Malik Bhago who arranged a big feast to show his richness. Guru Nanak rejected his invitation and attended another program which was arranged by a lower caste Hindu who was poor. After attending at the program, he took a little food and went to the house of Malik Bhago where many people gathered. When Guru Nanak sat with others, suddenly he stood up and on one hand he kept the food of the poor and on the other the food of the rich man. Then he put pressure on his hand and the crowd witnessed that blood was flowing from the food of the rich, and milk is flowing from the food of the

poor. This incident has two significances; everyone is equal and the unrighteous earning is harmful and strictly prohibited.<sup>22</sup>

There is no place of asceticism in Sikhism. Guru Nanak spoke against this tradition of Hinduism. There is no way to escape from the works of world. Everyone has to work and through good deeds one can attain salvation and reach *God*. Guru Nanak's life is the vivid example of his stand against any kind of asceticism. He had a family. He served the humanity actively, not in a passive way. He could live in isolation but rejecting this path, he worked for the humanity. He walked hundreds of miles to teach people and finally he settled with his family at Kartarpur. Guru Nanak says:

"Religion lieth not in the patched coat the yogi wears,  
not in the staff he bears,  
Nor in the ashes in his body.  
Religion bob not in rings in the ears,  
Not in a shaven head,  
Not in the blowing of the conch shell.  
If thou must the path of true religion see  
Among the world's impurities, be of impurities free".<sup>23</sup>

Guru Nanak had a dream to form distinct religious Text endowed with the writings of the Indian Humanists and God-loving people. But during his time, his dream did not come true. Guru Arjan Dev started to compile a book and named as the 'Adi Granth'. This was completed by the tenth Sikh Master, Sri Guru Gobind Singh and named it as the 'Guru Granth Sahib'.<sup>24</sup>

This Guru Grantha Sahib was compiled with the writings of 36 contributors and only nine of the contributors were the Sikh Gurus. Some were from Muslim tradition and some were from Hindu tradition. Kabir was a weaver; Sadhna was a butcher, Namdev was a tailor, Dhanna was a farmer, Sain was a barber, Ravidas was a cobbler, Farid was a Muslim Sufi. Here is shown the catholicity of Sikhism to give equal status to all men irrespective of their caste or religion. And this was the dream of Guru Nanak.<sup>25</sup>

According to Guru Nanak, there are five prayers which are mandatory for all. These are truthfulness, to take only what is one's due, goodwill towards all, pure intention and praise of God. He emphasized on Kirtkaro, Namjapo and Vandshako meaning work, worship and charity.<sup>30</sup> According to Nanak, the whole world is groaning in sorrows. Happiness is transitory and sometimes happiness leads towards more sorrows. Suffering is truth and universal. According to Nanak, there are five kinds of sufferings. These are: sorrow of the separation from the beloved ones,

sorrow of hungry stomach, sorrow of tyranny and death, sorrow of bodily ailments and sorrow of mental and spiritual diseases. Man can conquer suffering by attaining salvation that is free from the cycle of rebirth. To purify one's own heart, one must seek the love of God. And obviously Guru Nanak's prime consideration was man. Human life is a grand opportunity and a great challenge for the goal of self-realization. As Guru Nanak emphasized on action, therefore, man is the sole cause for his reward or punishment. He says:

"Why blame others, blame your own deeds

For one receives the fruit of what one sows".<sup>26</sup>

In order to eliminate the social problems it is essential to consider directions of Guru Nanak.<sup>27</sup> These directions are:

- i. Do not speak ill of others;
- ii. Treat your enemy as your friend;
- iii. Be modest and consider others as virtuous;
- iv. Do not think of others bad;
- v. Do not treat others as inferior;
- vi. Do not treat others inferior due to this birth;
- vii. Always try to do good works ;
- viii. Keep aside from evil thinking;
- ix. Treat everyone as your family member as we live in the family of God;
- x. Practice universal brotherhood as we live in this world;

This thinking will help us to establish brotherhood amongst society. Guru Nanak emphasized the importance of righteous deeds on which the spiritual assessment of a man depends on. This idea is repeatedly reflected in the many hymns of Guru Nanak like, "Through virtue is one enlightened."<sup>28</sup> Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, was an apostle of peace, unity, love and human brotherhood. He is loved and respected all over the world by followers and scholars of all persuasions- Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christians, Sikhs and others for his unique contribution to the moral and spiritual progress the mankind evolved. His religion is universal in character. Guru Nanak as a revolutionary strongly condemned the corrupt and evil practices and superstitions prevailing in the religious and social institutions and the exploitation of the ignorant masses by the clever and greedy Brahmins and Mullahs.

Now we live in a global village where we bound to know each other Because of the rapid technological advancement. We have a great opportunity to know each other within a second staying at our home. This is high time we must realize the teachings of Guru Nanak who dedicated his entire life to establish interreligious harmony among the people. But unfortunately we people do not pay proper respect to humanity. We always try to portrait

ourselves as great, our religion as the best. No matter one is a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew, everyone can take lesson from the teachings of Guru Nanak regarding his endeavor to establish interreligious harmony.

Guru Nanak used to say that he was neither a Muslim nor a Hindu. Rather he emphasized on being a true man which may seem very difficult to be. But it is not impossible. He showed us the path to love each other. That is why his teachings can be a true model for establishing interreligious harmony among the people of different religions of the world. It can be expected that human being will show proper respect to one another, none will be treated as inferior because of one's caste and thus no communal conflict will be taken place in the world. We can establish peace in the world by disseminating the true lessons of the world religions, Sikhism being one of the world religions.

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