

Guru Nanak Dev: 1469 – 1539

In the long history of man one comes across numerous occasions when a particular person appears on scene in whom the aspirations and the dire needs of a generation seem to be crystallized. Such folks leave an everlasting imprint on the sands of time. It is appropriate to call such persons 'God-men.' Nanak, the founder of Sikh faith, was one such God-man. He was born to a Khatri Hindu, well off, family (his father was a government official) on 15 April 1469, in a village called Talwandi in the northwestern India, now in Pakistan.

Nanak was a gifted child. There are numerous childhood anecdotes certifying that Nanak exhibited an unusual amount of maturity for his age. He was largely self-taught and very fond of asking questions about the rituals that he did not understand, often in a dramatic manner. He enjoyed sophisticated discussions with scholars and philosophers but he could also communicate with the masses, confronting people with the absurdity of their wrong beliefs. STORY of THE SACRED THREAD, quotation from Asa di Var, p. 471, SGGS! Asa di Var, often sung in the Gurudwaras in early morning hours, suggests how ordinary men/ women may elevate themselves to the status of servants of God. Hearing its recitation is a pleasurable experience!

One day while bathing in a stream in his hometown of Sultanpur, where he worked for a scion of the Lodhi family, he felt the calling to preach. He was found uttering a strange message, "There is no Hindu or Musalman." It caught the attention of a Muslim preacher (Qazi) who did not like what Nanak was implying and challenged him to a debate. You know the story! Nanak was able to impress the Qazi with his unusual insights into matters pertaining to faith. At the end of discussion, Qazi asked Nanak point blank, "Who are you?" Nanak is said to have replied, "If I say I am a Hindu, you will be disappointed. But I am not a Muslim either. I am a person composed of five elements who has come into this world to witness the work of God." Here the reader is reminded that Science did not exist then (Newton was not born yet!). Ancient Hindus and Greeks wrongly believed that matter existed in five states, namely: Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Spirit. The concept of elements as the building blocks of matter did not exist then. The message that Guru Nanak uttered at the beginning of his mission became the cornerstone of his thinking for the rest of his life! He criticized the ritualized form of religious devotion practiced by both Hindus and Muslims. Nanak protested against the forced conversion of Hindus to Islam by the fanatic Muslim rulers. I do not wish to go into other social ills that plagued Indian society then. Nanak was not the first to realize that Indian society needed to be reformed. Before him there were other philosophers who tried to preach reforms, like Bhagat Kabir, Baba Farid, etc. Later, Guru Arjan Dev incorporated some of their thoughts in Shri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS). Collectively, these men are the leaders of the BHAKTI movement that spanned over centuries. There have been others who have tried to preach reforms since Nanak's time. But there is an important difference. Guru Nanak's teachings led to lasting social and religious reforms over a period of time, in northern India. Others, however, left behind local cults with limited scope.

At the age of fifty-six Nanak witnessed Babbar's invasion of India from the northwest at Eimanabad, also in Pakistan. He saw firsthand the tyranny that followed the victory of Mughals. He was so moved by the suffering of the masses and indiscriminate slaughter of the weak that he personally remonstrated with God as follows, "Creator you belong equally to all! If a strong man were to attack and fight his equal, there need be no sorrow or anguish. But when a fierce tiger attacks and destroys a herd of cattle, it is the Master of the victims WHO is held accountable for their destruction."

Nanak was a great traveler. He spent fifteen years traveling all over India and Mideast,

as far as Mecca, the holy place for the Muslims. Nanak spent the last years of his life at the village of Kartarpur, also in Pakistan. His followers came to be known as SIKHS (students) who called Nanak ‘Guru’ (teacher). Guru Nanak died at the age of seventy after anointing his favorite disciple Lehna his successor to continue to preach his teachings to the masses, both Hindu and Muslims. It should be emphasized that Nanak passed over his two sons when he chose Lehna to succeed him. This procedure to choose the successor Guru was repeated nine times subsequently; it resulted in the choice of nine very able Gurus, one after the other. The dedicated work of the succeeding Gurus laid a firm foundation for a very progressive monotheistic religion now known as Sikhism. Its followers number in tens of millions and are to be found in every corner of the world. Sikhs are encouraged to remember their Creator always, lead normal lives, raise families, earn livelihood through honest means, and share their largesse with the less fortunate ones, irrespective of caste, creed or color. In later tracts, we shall outline the contributions of the nine other Gurus and describe in some detail the development of Sikhism under their courageous leadership. We shall also describe the achievements of the Sikhs and how they changed the fate of the northern India and what led to the choice of SGGS as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs. Thereby, transforming the Sikh community into the people of the Book.

Some Thoughts Preached by Guru Nanak

Definition of the Creator, considered to be an *essence* of the Sikh faith, is called, ‘ Mool Mantra.’
 “ One, absolute, unchanging, formless, omnipresent God, the lord of hundreds of known gods and goddesses, the creator of all, devoid of fear, without enemies, timeless, unborn, Himself His Own Being.”

“ As fragrance abides in a flower, as reflection is in mirror, so does the lord abide within you. Why do you then search him outside?

Where Self exists, God is not. Where God exists, there is no Self.

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“ Of a woman we are conceived. Of women we are born. To a woman we are betrothed and married. It is a woman who is a friend and partner in life. It is the woman who keeps the race going. Another companion is sought when the life-partner dies. Through women are established social ties. Why is then a woman to be considered a curse and condemned?

“ From women are born leaders and rulers; from a woman alone is born another woman. Without women there can be no human birth. Without women, sayeth Nanak, only the True One exists.”

“ Be it men or be it women, only those who sing of his glory are blessed and are radiant with God’s beauty. In His presence and with His grace they appear with a radiant face.”

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Nanak’s interaction with the QAZI continued with Nanak’s definition of a true Muslim.

“If compassion be your mosque, faith your prayer mat and honest living your Koran;
 If modesty be your circumcision contentment your fast then you are a good Muslim.
 Let good deeds be your Kaaba and truth your prophet and let your prayer be for God’s grace;
 Let your rosary be of His will, then sayeth Nanak God Himself will keep your honor!”

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H.S. Ahluwalia, Professor of Physics, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM. 87131.