

Exploring the Mission and Legacy of Guru Nanak

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ABSTRACT

Though Guru Nanak (1469–1539) shared the socio-cultural milieu with the Sants and Bhakts in medieval India, he was a different kind of religious preceptor because his Numinous experience belonged to the category of a prophet. He invoked Divine authority and addressed the people in the name of God. Like a true Prophet, he was utterly dissatisfied with the current degenerated social order, which was divisive and discriminatory but unfortunately had got religious sanction. He unequivocally denounced the denigration of women that was prevalent in society. Guru Nanak was highly critical of the moral degeneration of the ruling class and the curbs imposed on the freedom of worship. He dared to reprimand Babur for his invasion of India. The mission of Guru Nanak was to eradicate evil from all walks of life, besides establishing a fresh social order embedded in a holistic approach towards the issues concerning the society. It was a long-drawn process of spiritual awakening and social reconstruction, which turned the impossible into possible. Nonetheless, it was a challenging task, but it was made possible by the doctrinal, sociological, and devotional legacy of Guru Nanak that he had bestowed upon his successors.

Keywords: Guru Nanak, Prophet, Sant tradition, Nath-Yogi, Sufi, Sant Tradition, Hath-yoga, Vaishnavism.

"As the true Word of Lord descends upon me, so I express it, O Lalo... Nanak utters the word of Truth and intends to proclaim It there and then."

Introduction

The above quote taken from the sayings of Guru Nanak points towards the spiritual authority that he had invoked; and speaks about its intent that he desires to take up the cause of righteousness without any fear, delay, and consideration (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, hereafter SGGs, pp. 722–23). Thus, the mission of Guru Nanak was to eradicate evil from all walks of life, besides establishing a fresh social order embedded in a holistic approach towards the issues concerning the society. It was a long-drawn process of spiritual awakening and social reconstruction, which turned the impossible into possible.

Nonetheless, it was a challenging task, but it was made possible by the doctrinal, sociological, and devotional legacy of Guru Nanak that he had bestowed upon his successors. Besides looking into the spiritual authority of Guru Nanak, the present study attempts to explore the characteristic features of his mission and legacy.

Historically speaking, the medieval Indian society Guru Nanak inherited was governed by customs and practices sanctified by religion. It comprised of predominantly two sections viz. the Hindus and the Muslims. The Hindu society formed various castes, denominations, cults and sects. The Hindu social order driven by the caste system was socially divisive and thus discriminatory. It had put barriers to free and fair interaction between the people. The taboos of clean and unclean and untouchability had created a social and religious wedge. As a result, the ancient Indian religions, namely Jainism and Buddhism, were witnessing downfall, and both these religions had lost their significance and relevance to a large extent.

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The Muslim society formed two predominant sections of the Sunnis and Shias. The four major schools of *Shariat* viz. the Hanafi, Maliki, Shaafi and Hanbali differed over its interpretation, which was a matter of grave concern, especially their outlook towards the non-Muslims. Politically, the Muslims enjoyed authority, and subsequently, Muslim culture had come to enjoy State patronization. Overall, the Hindus and the Muslims were poles apart as the denigration of each other as *Kafirs* and *Malechhas* was not uncommon. Consequently, sectarian hatred and enmity had penetrated deep into the social fabric (Gurdas, 2012, p. 17). Thus, one can say that Indian society was passing through a period of strife and stress, which had resulted in a severe trust deficit crisis.

Before the advent of Guru Nanak, some of the Bhakts belonging to the so-called lower castes had preached their socio-religious message in different parts of India. Their approach towards God revolved around the *sarguna* and the *nirguna* mode of devotion. When Guru Nanak came on the scene, most of the chief exponents and stalwarts of Bhakti tradition had passed away. The Bhakti movement initiated by them had slowed down and eventually was on its way to elapse into the fold of Hinduism. A few scholars feel that Guru Nanak had preached his religion in the continuity of the Sant tradition of Northern India. Though there was no well-defined and historically consistent tradition of the name of Sant tradition, it has been proposed that it was a mixture of the precepts and practices taken from three traditions, namely Vaishnavism, Nathism, and Sufism (McLeod, 1968, p. 152). Understandably, to examine the above formulation, one needs to look into what Guru Nanak had said about himself, besides his attitude towards the Vaishnavites, Nath-Sidhas and Sufis. Before moving further, a brief discussion on Guru Nanak's observations upon the Vaishnavites, Nath-Sidhas, and Sufis deserves attention to put the issue in its proper perspective.

Significantly, in his compositions, Guru Nanak nowhere refers to any contemporary Sant, Bhakt, Sufi, Nath-yogi, etc., who was supposed to be his spiritual mentor. Contrarily, he was highly critical of the contemporary religious leaders, especially the Nath-yogis, priestly and religious class of both the Hindus and the Muslims, to betray the people (SGGS, p. 662). In medieval India, besides the minor Hindu denominations, Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism were the dominant religious sects prevalent at those times. In the Hindu Triad (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva), Vishnu was the preserver and Lord Rama and Lord Krishna were the seventh and eighth incarnations of Vishnu, respectively. They were the most popular deities. The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata had glorified

their feats. The idol worship in the temples dedicated to them and staging of *Ramlila* and *Krishnalila* by the devotees had made the *sarguna* mode of Bhakti quite popular. One can say that idol worship, coupled with loving devotion or adoration of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, were the prominent features of Vaishnava Bhakti.

An examination of Guru Nanak's sacred writings confirms that he does not subscribe to the idea of *Avtarvad*, i.e., the incarnation of God, idol worship, intercession of priestly class, belief in the epics, and ritualism associated with Vaishnava mode of Bhakti. Epistemologically speaking, it was a radical departure from the Sanatan Hindu tradition of India. On the Vaishnavite ideas and practices, Guru Nanak holds that their enactments of the role of Lord Krishna and Lord Rama had turned it into an entertainment festivity, besides a vocation to earn a livelihood of the devotees (SGGS, p. 465). Guru Nanak had also noticed that Vaishnavite ritualism and practices have eaten up into the true spirit of Dharma (SGGS, p. 470).

A close look at the Hindu religious tradition suggests that its world-view was highly God-centric and other-worldly. The world was considered *Maya* or an illusion. For spiritual pursuits, renunciation of family and society was required. Due to it, asceticism and monastic culture had got social and religious legitimacy in India. Besides the Hindu ascetics of various hues, the Nath-Sidhas, who were interested in self-control leading to self-illumination, had emerged on the scene. Subsequently, *hath-yoga* practices had got prominence. They lived in groups at secluded places but were dependent upon the householders for their livelihood. Guru Nanak was well aware of Nathism and its practices. His dialogue with them, known as *Sidh Gosti*, is well-preserved in the Sikh scripture. It offers his critique of Nathism and their *hath-yoga* practices, besides providing glimpses into the nature of his spirituality. During his sojourns in different lands, Guru Nanak had interacted with the Hindu ascetics of various denominations. He had found them utterly ignorant, who had no qualm to convert their houses into private shrines, and some of them were good for nothing and for want of food roaming as Nath-yogis. For them, religion was not a spiritual pursuit, but it had become a profession for livelihood (SGGS, p. 1245).

On the other hand, for spiritual pursuits and to achieve summum-bonum, Guru Nanak did not subscribe to asceticism. According to him, the world created by God is not an illusion but sacred and a reality. As God dwells in its creation, consequently, the whole of this world is holy like a *dharmasala* (SGGS, pp. 7, 464). There is no need to despise and renounce it, but one needs to live a detached

life amidst worldly pleasures (SGGS, pp. 662, 730). It was a quantum leap in the Indian spiritual tradition as it had thrown open the doors for liberation to householders that had remained shut up for them.

We also find that the major Sufi orders had established their *khanqahs* in different parts of India. Some of them viz. Chishtias and Qadarites were quite liberal in their outlook, whereas Naqashbandias and Suhrawardias were more orthodox and intolerant towards non-Muslims. Similarly, they also differed in their attitude towards the Muslim rulers. The Sufis of Chishti order did not aspire for State patronage, whereas the Suhrawardias had no hesitation in getting revenue-free grants. They intermingled freely with the Muslim nobility (Nizami, pp. 240–48). The Muslim rulers used to visit the *khankahs* of Sufi Pirs to get their blessings. It was beneficial for both the parties as it was bound to enhance their respect and status in the eyes of Muslim subjects.

During his sojourns in and outside Punjab, Guru Nanak had interacted with Muslim Sufis belonging to different orders. Once, the Sufis of Multan tried to dissuade him from entering into Multan and, with this objective in mind, they sent to him a bowl full of milk, signifying that there is no place for him in the city as it is already full of Muslim divines. Guru Nanak had wisely responded to it symbolically by putting petals of jasmine flowers on the surface of the milk (Gurdas, 2012, p. 37), suggesting that he could accommodate himself there without disturbing them. He had found that the majority of the Muslim divines and the Sufis were full of ego, chiefly because of their association with the Muslim ruling class. For example, he remarks that the Qazis, Shaikhs and Fakirs in religious garbs consider themselves highly revered; however, they are full of ego and thus are suffering in pain (SGGS, p. 227). It is significant to note that Guru Nanak had even questioned the spiritual authority of the Sufis, who were well inclined towards the ruling class. He remarks, “Those who confer ceremonial hats upon the others are fools, and similarly, those who receive them have no shame. It is just like a mouse that tries to enter into a hole with a basket tied around its waist” (SGGS, p. 1286). In the eyes of Guru Nanak, the Sufi Pirs who enjoyed state patronage and in return showered blessings upon the rulers were assuring them to make impossible to happen possible.

Evidence at hand suggests that Guru Nanak was not a disciple of any Sant, Bhakt, Sufi, or Nath-Jogi, nor has he taken any one of them as his spiritual mentor. On being questioned by the Nath-Sidhas once as to who his guru was? He had replied that “Transcendental Lord, the Supreme Essence is the Guru that he had met” (SGGS,

p. 559). Evidently, he derived his spiritual authority from the self-illuminating Eternal Truth. While describing his Divine mission, Guru Nanak calls himself a Divine minstrel whose chief avocation is to sing the glory of God (SGGS, p. 150). Similarly, he equates himself with the Divine drummer, whose occupation is to inform the people about their obligation to the Divine Will (SGGS, p. 142). He had made God’s Will known through the medium of his sacred hymns, which was of Divine origin (SGGS, p. 722). He reiterates that “Whatever wisdom the Lord has granted, so I speak. I am ignorant and have no power of speech in me. Whatever O God You like, so I express. O my Lord! I am ignorant; I cannot describe the Indescribable. Whatever O Lord pleases Your Will, so I speak” (SGGS, p. 795). At another place, Guru Nanak proclaims that the “Lord Himself has revealed the holy Truth to him” (SGGS, p. 150). He was very emphatic in his claim that “He sings nothing else except the revealed Word recorded in written form” (SGGS, p. 1171). It suggests that his religious experience’s nature was radically different from that of the Sants and Bhakts of Sant tradition of Northern India. There was no mentor or mediator; he stood in direct relation with God. It places him in the category of a Prophet who addressed the people in the name of God. He worked as a mouthpiece of God and invoked Divine sanction for his mission. This type of Divine claim was very unique, which distinguished him from the Sant tradition of those times.

Guru Nanak was highly critical of the ruling class for its moral degeneration, indulgence in corruption, injustice and atrocities on the public (SGGS, pp. 145, 1288). He had outrightly rejected restrictions on the freedom of worship, discrimination against the people on religious grounds, and the use of State power to patronize and promote the religion of the ruling class (SGGS, p. 1191). His compositions, known as *Babarvani*, confirm that he was an eyewitness to the death and devastation caused by the Mughal invasion of India. He condemned the Mughal Emperor Babur in severest terms for outraging the modesty of women at the hands of the Mughal army (SGGS, pp. 417–18). We notice that Guru Nanak was the only person in the history of medieval India who raised his voice against the invasion of Babur on India and lamented with soulful tears upon the sorrows and sufferings of the people. Such sympathy for the people and a hard-hitting critique of despotic rulers is hard to find in medieval India’s devotional literature. Again, it puts Guru Nanak apart from the ilk of Sant tradition of medieval India.

As mentioned earlier, Guru Nanak had found that ritualism, blind faith, ignorance, sectarianism, etc., had spoiled the true spirit of Dharma. He was very categorical in

his assessment that religious leaders were responsible for this mess (SGGS, p. 662). A close look at the sacred writings of Guru Nanak reveals that he was utterly dissatisfied with the prevalent social order. Besides, he was disenchanted with the moral degeneration in public life and was distraught to note that, "In this age of darkness, the kings are the butchers and righteousness has taken wings and flown. In this age, there is no moonlit night, and falsehood has descended everywhere. The moon of truth does not seem to rise anywhere. In this darkness, I find no path. I have searched out time and again, and distressed to note that there is no way to get out of this age of ignorance" (SGGS, p. 145). We may vouchsafe that he was an awakened person who was always in quest of Truth. He possessed the courage to call a spade a spade and "desired to utter truth there and then" (SGGS, p. 723).

We observe that Guru Nanak was deeply concerned with social injustice prevalent in various forms in Indian society. He was candid enough to acknowledge that "He has nothing to do with the elite. His sympathy rested with the lowly and the oppressed strata of society" (SGGS, p. 15). He refers to the difficulties that he had encountered while delivering his message of equality and brotherhood. As a minstrel of God, he used to intermingle freely with the people irrespective of their caste. His vision of society was radical, which was opposed to the Brahmanical stranglehold on the social order. Consequently, people of higher castes not only disliked it but also considered him (Guru Nanak) as an outcast (SGGS, p. 468). He alludes to a critical situation when people, instead of believing in his message, "Thought him of a person possessed by an evil spirit" (SGGS, p. 991).

Guru Nanak's response to the contemporary milieu was driven by his Numinous experience, prophetic in character. Like a genuine prophet, he was not inclined towards withdrawal from society, nor did he accept the social order as it was (Wach, 1944, pp. 343–350; Webber, 1947, pp. 360–61; Mohammad, p. 129; Yinger, pp. 146–47). In addition to that, Guru Nanak's spirituality was not concerned with the realization of God alone. It was all-inclusive in its approach towards the social and political concerns of society. For him, there was no dichotomy between the spiritual and the temporal domains of human personality. He urged the people to strike a balance between these two concerns. In doing so, there should be no compromise with the Evil, whether it is social, religious, or political. He unequivocally criticized the contemporary evil social order in all its forms and manifestations. He enjoined his followers that imbibe and practice the virtue of truthfulness while living a family life (SGGS, p. 62). He inspired them to live a life of dignity

and self-respect (SGGS, p. 142). Interestingly, he sanctified death for a just cause (SGGS, p. 579) and desired the people to stand up and be ready to sacrifice their lives in the cause of righteousness (SGGS, p. 1412). In this way, he sowed the seeds of political awakening wherein reasoned and fearless response, even dissent on social and political issues, were not far away. Later on, when the need arose for confrontation in self-defense and revolt to overthrow the despotic and repressive Mughal rule, the successors of Guru Nanak were not in a state of ideological wilderness.

The uniqueness of Guru Nanak's spirituality lies in the fact that neither it subscribes to otherworldliness nor confines itself to personal liberation. In equal measures, it takes care of both the worlds, *Deen* (spiritual) and *Duniya* (secular) (SGGS, p. 1280). His elan was that don't spoil your Dharma in worldly temptations (SGGS, p. 45). It is all-inclusive in its approach, which manifests in the welfare of society. In his vision, religion is for the well-being of humankind (SGGS, p. 1245). It had ushered an era that was wedded to the value of truthful living. It aimed at spiritual awakening at a mass level, a prelude to the social reconstruction based upon brotherhood, equity, equality and justice. At the metaphysical level, it had opened up the doors of liberation to the householders, including the *Shudras*. Doctrinally speaking, it was a huge paradigm shift in the Indian spiritual tradition because, according to the Sanatan Hindu tradition, householders were not entitled to liberation. Satta and Balwand, ministers at the court of Sikh Gurus, looked upon it in the form of a spiritual empire, the fortress of truth" (SGGS, p. 966). People were astonished to note "How the Guru had made the Ganges flow upstream" (SGGS, p. 966). Along with God-realization, Guru Nanak had brought the welfare of humankind into a sharp focus of his religion. It was an extraordinary accomplishment in the face of a God-oriented medieval vision.

As pointed out earlier, the traditional Indian world-view had been that of *Maya* or illusion. Besides its impact on the religious outlook, it had a negative effect on the political attitude of the people. For spiritual enlightenment, one has to practice renunciation. Consequently, monastic culture, which was mainly parasitic, had got socio-religious legitimacy. Instead of taking an interest in improving their social environment, a sense of indifference to worldly prosperity prevailed among the people, which ultimately impaired their capacity to resist foreign invaders. (Vaidya, 1921, p. vi). Moreover, the medieval Indian vision was extremely God-centric, wherein human efforts were of negligible significance. Psychologically, because of the theory of *Karma*, people had come to believe in

fatalism resulting in pessimism. The ultimate aim of life was liberation (*Mukti*), which was otherworldly in its approach and objective. To a great extent, the belief in the retribution of *Karma* had prevented the development of reasoned philosophy of human rights in India (Altekar, 1958, p. 56; Vaidya, 1921, p. 113). The Indian tradition of spirituality was more concerned about enlightenment at the internal and individual level, resulting in the otherworldliness attitude towards life and social concerns. It was nonetheless political apathy, which gave birth to withdrawal from society's social and political concerns. It reflected their attitude of submission and reconciliation with the prevalent evil social order. No one was there to raise a voice against tyranny, oppression, discrimination and injustice.

Guru Nanak had observed the rigidity of the orthodox form of caste system from close quarters. It was not only a social stigma but a stumbling block in the way of social unity and mobility as well. He also witnessed the social injustice of being meted out to the so-called lower castes under this system. According to the *Laws of Manu*, the ancient Indian rulers were duty-bound to uphold the caste system (Buhler, 1888, pp. 221, 307). Anyone found violating the social order ordained by the Brahminical system was liable to be punished (Al-Bairuni, 1969, p. 365). Moreover, under the *Laws of Manu*, the higher castes had been given several privileges and immunities from the working of common law (Buhler, 1888, pp. 313–321). Consequently, there was no equality before the law, and the State virtually had become a party to deny social justice and political rights to the lower castes.

No doubt some medieval Indian Bhakts were quite critical against the caste system and resulting social inequality. They were sincere in their approach towards social equality and wanted to eradicate the evil of caste and its stigma. However, they fell short in proposing any social change in the existing social structure. The reason being that they had not envisioned or evolved any institutional backup to support, implement and sustain their social ideology. The Sants/Bhakts and their followers continued to follow the age-old *varan-ashram-dharma* and its passage of rites and customs for their social and religious affairs. For these very reasons, Sant/Bhakt tradition had fallen short in offering an alternative model that could have replaced India's divisive and discriminatory orthodox model.

Guru Nanak has envisioned a new social order, inspired by his Numinous experience, coupled with a deep understanding of the contemporary environment. The essential features of it were social equality, brotherhood,

equity and justice. It was an alternative model to caste and creed that were the distinctive features of the Hindu and Muslim social orders, respectively. The Hindu model of social order was caste-driven, divisive, and discriminatory. Lower castes were deprived of their access to fundamental rights, social mobility, and participation in public life. On the other end was the Muslim social order, which was supposed to be egalitarian in its stance, but it had lost its original stand on equality and brotherhood. The Muslim ruling class comprised mostly of the Turks, Pathans and Mughals, and thus it was thriving upon ethnic and tribal loyalty. For an ordinary Muslim of Indian origin, it was impossible to enter into the higher echelons of society. The interpretation of Muslim law, which was the monopoly of the *ulemas*, had rendered the non-Muslim subjects into second-grade citizens (Nizami, 1974, p. 158; Ashraf, 1974, pp. 104–105). Because of intolerance and an exclusive approach, the pluralistic character of Indian society was under stress and strain. These factors were primarily responsible for communal outlook and strife in India. The Hindu and Muslim models of social order in the Indian environment were divisive and discriminatory, whereby ordinary people were pushed to the margin irrespective of their creed.

Guru Nanak's approach towards social concerns was an all-inclusive and comprehensive one. Moreover, it was well-integrated into his doctrinal standpoint relating to God, the World, and the ultimate aim of human life. Besides the social evils of various kinds, Guru Nanak was fully aware of moral degeneration in public life, including the polity (SGGS, pp. 145, 350, 471, 951, 1242–43, 1288). He was genuinely perturbed over the restrictions imposed upon the freedom of worship of non-Muslims (SGGS, pp. 470, 971). He was not against the spread of any religion but certainly disapproved of patronization of a particular culture by the State. Furthermore, he was highly perturbed over the hypocrite and slave-like attitude of the Hindu ruling class vis-à-vis the Muslim rule. Guru Nanak thought it was an unholy alliance that the Hindus had entered into with the Muslim culture due to vested interests (SGGS, p. 471). It suggests that Guru Nanak had envisioned a caste and classless social structure wherein there was no privileged class and no monopoly over any profession by any caste and ethnicity. It suggests that he wanted to liberate the people from the age-old stranglehold of the caste system and thereby desired to open up new avenues for social mobility.

In the caste-ridden Indian environment, coupled with religiously legitimized social order, it was an uphill task. Guru Nanak worked upon his idea of social reconstruction both at metaphysical as well as ethical plane. Doctrinally

speaking, he believed in the Oneness of God (SGGS, pp. 838, 931). His first and foremost allegiance was towards God alone. For him, God was the Creator, the common source of origin of humankind, i.e., the Father of the whole of humanity. He rejected the theory of the incarnation of God. As mentioned earlier, epistemologically, it was a radical departure from the *Sanatan* Hindu tradition of India. Guru Nanak had outrightly rejected the idol worship, false rituals and intercession of the priestly class of Brahmins. He urged the people that God responds to sincere supplications. There is no need for the priestly class to invoke the Divine (SGGS, p. 355). It was a great effort to bring God nearer to human beings.

We find that Guru Nanak, in his writings, had attributed God with very unique and novel epithets. His God is the God of truth, justice, righteousness, etc. At the same time, He is the Protector of the lowly and Destroyer of the tyrants (SGGS, pp. 59, 421, 934, 992, 1028, 1042). Significantly, Guru Nanak's God is the God of down-trodden and socially marginalized people. It offered great solace and hope for the people who had been oppressed for centuries together. For Guru Nanak, the Oneness of God was not only a dogma but a spiritual and a social value that manifests in brotherhood, equality, and solidarity. It opened up the way for freedom of human beings from the slavery of animate and inanimate things. Socially, the idea of Oneness of God, the Common Father, was a great unifying and integrating force resulting in the spirit of co-existence.

There were privileged castes in Indian society, which had oppressed and exploited the lower castes for a long time. Guru Nanak had questioned the legitimacy of the caste system on metaphysical as well as ethical planes. He had realized that for establishing a new social order, rejection of the divine origin of caste was the prerequisite. Denouncing the religious legitimacy of the caste system, Guru Nanak proclaimed that at the Divine court, human beings' status is measured only in terms of good deeds (SGGS, pp. 83, 663, 1330). It was no less than a radical departure and a significant attempt to break away from the orthodox social order of Hinduism. Besides addressing it at the doctrinal level, Guru Nanak went on to take practical measures to break the stranglehold of *varna ashram dharma*. As mentioned earlier, Guru Nanak had envisioned a caste and classless society; and to realize it, he had brought into force the institutions of Guruship, *Dharamsala*, *Sangat* and *Pangat*, which ensured the continuity of its mission till its climax. These institutions provided the platform where lower castes intermingled freely with the Sikhs drawn from socially higher ranks. An examination of Guru Nanak and

his successors' sacred writings reveals that their followers belonged to the lower rung of society, such as workers, farmers, traders, artisans and other professional groups. We find that limitations and constraints, namely social and cultural environment, coupled with the economic disparity, were a stumbling block in applying Sikh ideology on the social plane. Though the religions like Buddhism and the medieval Indian Bhakti movement had registered their strong protest against the caste system, social injustice and inequality, they could not bring in social change to the extent that the religion of Guru Nanak had accomplished.

Guru Nanak's social order was free from social evils and prejudices born out of gender inequality. He denounced the age-old social evil of denigration of women sanctified and propagated in India's quasi-sacred, devotional, and literary works. The Guru not only stood for gender equality but was also a staunch supporter of dignity and respect for women in public life. He argued that the idea of the human race could not be conceived without women (SGGS, p. 473). We notice that the proverb, 'all is fair in love and war' has got the currency world over whereby to outrage women's modesty and to take them away as war booty had got justified that it was the usual custom of wartime. We find that Guru Nanak has outrightly rejected this heinous crime against the women. He reprimanded the Mughal Emperor Babur in severest terms because his soldiers had indulged in outraging the modesty of women (SGGS, pp. 360, 417–18, 723). In his opinion, even during the war, women must be treated with respect irrespective of caste, creed, and ethnicity. We come across only Guru Nanak, who was a staunch supporter of gender equality during those times worldwide. He stood for the dignity and respect for women in public life, which was totally unthinkable in those times.

It is a fact that people were suffering under despotism, tyranny and injustice. The idea of human rights and values of self-respect and human dignity were nowhere on the horizon. Guru Nanak thought it prudent to propound a religion embedded in the values of equality, equity, justice, truthful living, enmity to none, and goodwill of all. He was a strong votary of freedom of worship and desired to protect the pluralistic character of society. He had set on his mission with a radical call that "There is no Hindu and no Muslim," emphasizing that don't divide the community on a communal line. He celebrated the diversity (SGGS, p. 142); and proclaimed that all those devoted to God look alike to him (SGGS, p. 1168). He wanted to liberate humanity from all types of discrimination, oppression and tyranny. Guru Nanak has found that people, in

general, were spiritually dead and thus were the victim of ignorance (SGGS, p. 469). In society, unworthy persons of dubious character were at the helm of affairs. To bring about a change, he desired to groom the people in the tradition of knowledge. He wished that people ought to respond to the socio-religious issues rationally and independently. He infused the spirit of courage, moral strength, and fearlessness; and urged them to stand up in the cause of righteousness and justice.

As explained earlier, Guru Nanak's world-view was very much relevant to his social philosophy. His was a life-affirming and practical faith. It was a whole life system and did not divide the world and human personality into two mutually antagonistic domains of *Deen* and *Duniya*. According to him, the temporal and the spiritual are the two domains of human life. The *Dharma*, i.e., the higher values of truth, equity, equality, justice, goodwill, selfless service, etc., helps to strike a balance between the two (SGGS, p. 1280). For Guru Nanak, the ultimate aim of human life was to live a life in God. Therefore, he enjoined upon his Sikhs to observe the highest moral standards in public life. He wanted to develop an ideal personality (*Sachiar*), which was supposed to be free from ego (*Haumai*) and other external constraints of life. Along with truthful living and spiritual enlightenment, such a person was supposed to imbibe the values of self-respect, dignity and flair to speak truth there and then. Agreeably, this type of person proved an asset in the development of Sikhism and virtually played the role of a trailblazer in critical times.

Guru Nanak wanted the people to give up the illegitimate way of living. Besides awakening their conscience, he asked them to hold tightly to the cause of justice and righteousness. He enjoined upon his followers to live a life of detachment amidst worldly temptations. He believed that it was unlawful to usurp the rights of others (SGGS, p. 140). In this manner, he prepared the ground for the moral regeneration of people. It stimulated their urge for truthful living, which resulted in the making of an ideal person dedicated to the well-being of humanity. Guru Nanak's approach to liberate society from all the evils and establish a fresh social order rested upon regenerated human beings, who were the persona of internal and external purity.

Guru Nanak's social vision was not a utopia but a workable model. He had put it into practice while living in Kartarpur. For evolving a new social order, he delineated a way of life of *Kirat Karo*, *Naam Japo*, *Wand Chhako*, which were its principal values. Besides the above triad, selfless service was another essential feature of the Sikh

way of life, which inspired everyone to participate voluntarily in the community work. Before Guru Nanak, menial labor was the duty of *Shudras*, but he alleviated it to the level of Divine worship (SGGS, pp. 287, 1245). It was bound to enhance the value of dignity of labor and hit hard at the stigma attached to menial work in Indian society. We may say that these social values are an antidote to the ills of humanity all over the world and are very much relevant for sustainable development. One may find in them the essential ingredients for establishing a holy, healthy, happy, and self-reliant society anywhere in the world.

Conclusions

To recapitulate, we can remark that the advent of Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism, marked a watershed in the history of Punjab in particular and of India in general. With him emerged on the canvas of history, a new community, i.e., the Sikh Panth. It had left an indelible imprint on North-west India's social, religious, and political life. Moreover, his mission was an epoch-making development in the Indian spiritual tradition because its doctrinal, devotional, and sociological expression and institutional backup were quite distinct and unique from that of the religious denominations that had appeared in India before him.

He unfolded a new social order, the spiritual pursuits of which were intimately blended with the social-political concerns of the people. It was not otherworldly but a life-affirming system, which differentiates him from the Sant tradition of medieval India. Although we can say that Guru Nanak had shared the socio-religious and cultural milieu of Sant tradition, his approach towards society's socio-political concerns was well-defined and had far-reaching consequences. His Numinous experience was of a prophet, which places him on a pedestal, a unique spiritual authority than the Sants/Bhakts/Nath-Sidhas/Sufis of the Sant tradition. The essence of his mission consists in its being a force for the liberation of humankind. Though his focus remained centered upon devotion to God, his teachings were equally concerned with the welfare of humanity. He was interested in spiritual perfection, which was not limited to individual enlightenment but was inclusive in its objective.

He introduced a new set of ideals and institutions to throw out the degenerated form of social order. He wanted to develop a new paradigm of relationship between God and man, man and the world, temporal and the spiritual, society and polity, morality and polity.

But unfortunately, history is a witness to the fact that the Sant tradition of Northern India and its forerunner, the medieval Indian Bhakti movement, lost their vigor and were thrown into oblivion over the years. In contrast, the Sikh Panth founded by Guru Nanak successfully retained its originality and vitality and emerged into an independent religion under the watchful eyes of his successors.

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

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Appendix

Note:—

All the references used in this article, correspond to the list below.

1. Sri Guru Granth Sahib., Standard version of 1430 pages published by SGPC, Amritsar, hereafter cited as SGGs, pp. 722-23.
2. ਚਾਰਿ ਵਰਨਿ ਚਾਰਿ ਮਜਹਬਾਂ ਜਹਿ ਵਿਚਿ ਹਿੰਦੂ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣੇ ॥ ਖੁਦੀ ਬਖੀਲਿ ਤਕਬਰੀ ਖਿਚੋਤਾਣਿ ਕਰੇਨਿ ਧਿਛਾਣੇ ॥ ... ਬੇਦ ਕਤੇਬ ਭੁਲਾਇ ਕੈ ਮੋਹੇ ਲਾਲਚ ਦੁਨੀ ਸੈਤਾਣੇ ॥ ਸਚੁ ਕਿਨਾਰੇ ਰਹਿ ਗਿਆ ਖਹਿ ਮਰਦੇ ਬਾਮੁਣਿ ਮਉਲਾਣੇ ॥ Bhai Gurdas, *Varaan*, 1.21.
3. W. H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, OUP, Clarendon, 1968. pp. 152.
4. SGGs, p. 662.
5. Ibid. p. 465.
6. Ibid. p. 470.
7. ਗਿਆਨ ਵਿਹੁਣਾ ਗਾਵੈ ਗੀਤ ॥ ਭੁਖੇ ਮੁਲਾ ਘਰੇ ਮਸੀਤ ॥ ਮੁਖਟੂ ਹੋਇ ਕੈ ਕੰਨ ਪੜਾਏ ॥ ਫਕਰੁ ਕਰੇ ਹੋਰੁ ਜਾਤਿ ਗਵਾਏ ॥ ਗੁਰੁ ਪੀਰ ਸਦਾਏ ਮੰਗਣ ਜਾਇ ॥ ਤਾ ਕਿ ਮੂਲਿ ਲਗੀਐ ਪਾਇ ॥ Ibid. p. 1245.
8. ਪਵਣ ਪਾਣੀ ਅਗਨੀ ਪਾਤਾਲ ॥ ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਧਰਤੀ ਥਾਪਿ ਰਖੀ ਧਰਮ ਸਾਲ ॥ Ibid., p. 7., also see p. 464.
9. ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਕੀ ਐਸੀ ਵਡਿਆਈ ॥ ਪੁਤ੍ਰ ਕਲਤ੍ਰ ਵਿਚੇ ਗਤਿ ਪਾਈ ॥ Ibid., p. 661., also see p. 730.
10. K. A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India*, Idarah-i-Adabiyat, Delhi 1974, pp. 240-248.
11. Bhai Gurdas, *Var*, 1.44.
12. ਕਾਜੀ ਸੇਖ ਭੇਖ ਫਕੀਰਾ ॥ ਵਡੇ ਕਹਾਵਹਿ ਹਉਮੈ ਤਨਿ ਪੀਰਾ ॥ SGGs, p. 227.
13. ਕੁਲਹਾਂ ਦੇਂਦੇ ਬਾਵਲੇ ਲੈਂਦੇ ਵਡੇ ਨਿਲਜ ॥ ਚੂਹਾ ਖਡ ਨ ਮਾਵਈ ਤਿਕਲਿ ਬੰਨੈ ਛਜ ॥ Ibid. p. 1286.
14. ਅਪਰੰਪਰ ਪਾਰਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਪਰਮੇਸਰੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਗੁਰੁ ਮਿਲਿਆ ਸੋਈ ਜੀਉ ॥ Ibid. p. 599.
15. Ibid. p. 150.
16. Ibid. p. 142.
17. Ibid. p. 722.
18. ਤੂ ਸੁਲਤਾਨੁ ਕਹਾ ਹਉ ਮੀਆ ਤੇਰੀ ਕਵਨ ਵਡਾਈ ॥ ਜੋ ਤੂ ਦੇਹਿ ਸੁ ਕਹਾ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਮੈ ਮੂਰਖ ਕਹਣੁ ਨ ਜਾਈ ॥ ... ਜੋ ਕਿਛੁ ਹੋਆ ਸਭੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਤੁਝ ਤੇ ਤੇਰੀ ਸਭ ਅਸਨਾਈ ॥ ਤੇਰਾ ਅੰਤ ਨ ਜਾਣਾ ਮੇਰੇ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਮੈ ਅੰਧੁਲੇ ਕਿਆ ਚਤੁਰਾਈ ॥ ... ਜੋ ਤੁਧੁ ਭਾਵੈ ਸੋਈ ਆਖਾ ਤਿਲੁ ਤੇਰੀ ਵਡਿਆਈ ॥ Ibid. p. 795.
19. ਆਪੇ ਜਾਣੈ ਸਰਬ ਵੀਚਾਰ ॥ ਅਖਰ ਨਾਨਕ ਅਖਿਓ ਆਪਿ ॥ Ibid. pp. 150.
20. ਅਖਰ ਲਿਖੇ ਸੋਈ ਗਾਵਾ ਅਵਰ ਨ ਜਾਣਾ ਬਾਣੀ ॥ Ibid. p. 1171; also see p. 1022.
21. Ibid. pp. 145, 1288.
22. Ibid. p. 1191.
23. Ibid. pp. 417, 722-23.
24. ਕਾਦੀ ਕੂੜੁ ਬੋਲਿ ਮਲੁ ਖਾਇ ॥ ਬ੍ਰਾਹਮਣੁ ਨਾਵੈ ਜੀਆ ਘਾਇ ॥ ਜੋਗੀ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਨ ਜਾਣੈ ਅੰਧੁ ॥ ਤੀਨੇ ਓਜਾੜੇ ਕਾ ਬੰਧੁ ॥ Ibid. p. 662.
25. Ibid. p. 145.
26. ਸਚ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਆਖੈ ਸਚੁ ਸੁਣਾਇਸੀ ਸਚ ਕੀ ਬੋਲਾ ॥ Ibid. p. 723.
27. ਨੀਚਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਨੀਚ ਜਾਤਿ ਨੀਚੀ ਹੂ ਅਤਿ ਨੀਚੁ ॥ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਤਿਨ ਕੈ ਸੰਗਿ ਸਾਥਿ ਵਡਿਆ ਸਿਉ ਕਿਆ ਰੀਸ ॥ Ibid. p. 15.
28. ਹਉ ਢਾਢੀ ਕਾ ਨੀਚ ਜਾਤਿ ਹੋਰਿ ਉਤਮ ਜਾਤਿ ਸਦਾਇਏ ॥ ਤਿਨੁ ਮੰਗਾ ਜਿ ਤੁਝੈ ਧਿਆਇਏ ॥ Ibid. p. 468.
29. ਕੋਈ ਆਖੈ ਭੂਤਨਾ ਕੇ ਕਹੈ ਬੇਤਾਲਾ ॥ ਕੋਈ ਆਖੈ ਆਦਮੀ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਵੇਚਾਰਾ ॥ ਭਇਆ ਦਿਵਾਨਾ ਸਾਹ ਕਾ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਬਉਰਾਨਾ ॥ Ibid. p. 991.
30. For the characteristic features of Prophetic Experience, see Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion*, pp. 343-350; Max Webber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1947, p. 360-61; Mohammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Oxford University Press, London, 1934, p. 129; J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, MacMillan, London, 1970, pp. 146-47.
31. ਸਚੁ ਓਰੈ ਸਭੁ ਕੋ ਉਪਰਿ ਸਚੁ ਆਚਾਰੁ ॥ SGGs, p. 62.
32. ਜੇ ਜੀਵੈ ਪਤਿ ਲਥੀ ਜਾਇ ॥ ਸਭੁ ਹਰਾਮੁ ਜੇਤਾ ਕਿਛੁ ਖਾਇ ॥ Ibid. p. 142.
33. ਮਰਣੁ ਮੁਣਸਾ ਸੂਰਿਆ ਹਕੁ ਹੈ ਜੋ ਹੋਇ ਮਰਨਿ ਪਰਵਾਣੇ ॥ Ibid. p. 579.
34. ਜੋ ਤਉ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਖੇਲਣ ਕਾ ਚਾਉ ॥ ਸਿਰ ਧਰਿ ਤਲੀ ਗਲੀ ਮੋਰੀ ਆਉ ॥ ਇਤ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਪੈਰ ਧਰੀਜੈ ॥ ਸਿਰ ਦੀਜੈ ਕਾਣਿ ਨ ਕੀਜੈ ॥ Ibid. p. 1412.
35. ਪਰਵਿਰਤਿ ਨਿਰਵਿਰਤਿ ਹਾਠਾ ਦੇਵੇ ਵਿਚ ਧਰਮ ਫਿਰ ਰੈਬਾਰਿਆ ॥ Ibid. p. 1280.
36. ਦੁਨੀਆ ਕਾਰਣਿ ਦੀਨੁ ਗਵਾਇਆ ॥ Ibid. p. 45.
37. ਘਾਲਿ ਖਾਇ ਕਿਛੁ ਹਬਹੁ ਦੇਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਰਾਹਿ ਪਛਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਇ ॥ Ibid. p. 1245.
38. ਨਾਨਕ ਰਾਜ ਚਲਾਇਆ ਸਤ ਕੋਟਿ ਸਤਾਣੀ ਨੀਵ ਦੈ ॥ Ibid. p. 966.
39. ਹੋਰਿਓ ਗੰਗ ਵਹਾਈਐ ਦੁਨਿਆਈ ਆਖੈ ਕਿਕਿਉਨ ॥ Ibid.
40. C.V. Vaidya, *History of Medieval Hindu India*, Vol. I, Poona Oriental Agency, Poona, 1921, p. VI.
41. Ibid. p. 113; A. S. Altekar, *State and Government in Ancient India*, Moti Lal Banarasi Dass, Delhi, 1958, p. 56.
42. *The Laws of Manu*, (English Tr. G. Buhler), Vol. XXV, Moti Lal Banarasi Dass, Delhi, 1970, pp. 221, 307.
43. Al-Bairuni, *Al-Hind*, (Pbi. Tr.), Department Languages, Patiala, 1969, p. 365.

44. *The Laws of Manu*, pp. 313-21.
45. K. A. Nizami, op. cit. p. 158; H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, *History of India*, Vol. I, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1969, pp. 176, 182; K. M. Ashraf, *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan*, Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 104-105.
46. SGGS, pp. 145, 350, 471, 951, 1242-43, 1288.
47. Ibid. pp. 470, 971.
48. ਗਉ ਬਿਰਾਹਮਣ ਕਉ ਕਰ ਲਾਵਹੁ ਗੋਬਰ ਤਰਣੁ ਨ ਜਾਈ ॥
ਧੋਤੀ ਟਿਕਾ ਤੈ ਜਪਮਾਲੀ ਧਾਨੁ ਮਲੇਛਾਂ ਖਾਈ ॥
ਅੰਤਰਿ ਪੂਜਾ ਪੜਹਿ ਕਤੇਬਾ ਸੰਜਮੁ ਤੁਰਕਾ ਭਾਈ ॥ ਛੋਡੀਲੇ ਪਾਖੰਡਾ ॥ Ibid.
p. 471.
49. ਏਕਮ ਏਕੰਕਾਰੁ ਨਿਰਾਲਾ ॥ ਅਮਰ ਅਜੋਨੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਨ ਜਾਲਾ ॥ Ibid.
p. 838; see also p. 931.
50. ਸਚਾ ਅਰਜੁ ਸਚੀ ਅਰਦਾਸਿ ॥ ਮਹਲੀ ਖਸਮੁ ਸੁਣੇ ਸਾਬਾਸਿ ॥ Ibid.,
p. 355.
51. Ibid. pp. 59, 421, 934, 992, 1028, 1042.
52. Ibid. pp. 83, 663, 1330.
53. Ibid. p. 473.
54. Ibid. pp. 360, 417-18, 722-23.
55. ਸਭ ਦੁਨੀਆ ਸੁਬਹਾਨੁ ਸਚਿ ਸਮਾਈਐ ॥ Ibid. p.142.
56. ਨਾਨਕ ਵੇਚਾਰਾ ਕਿਆ ਕਹੈ ਸਭੁ ਲੋਕੁ ਸਲਾਹੇ ਏਕਸੈ ॥ Ibid. p. 1168.
57. ਅੰਧੀ ਰਯਤਿ ਗਿਆਨ ਵਿਹੂਣੀ ਭਾਹਿ ਭਰੇ ਮੁਰਦਾਰੁ ॥ Ibid. p. 469.
58. ਪਰਵਿਰਤਿ ਨਿਰਵਿਰਤਿ ਹਾਠਾ ਦੇਵੇ ਵਿਚ ਧਰਮ ਫਿਰੈ ਰੈਬਾਰਿਆ ॥ Ibid.
p. 1280.
59. ਹਕੁ ਪਰਾਇਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਉਸੁ ਸੂਅਰ ਉਸੁ ਗਾਇ ॥ Ibid. p.141.
60. ਸੇਵਾ ਕਰਤ ਹੋਇ ਨਿਹਕਾਮੀ ॥ ਤਿਸ ਕਉ ਹੋਤ ਪਰਾਪਤਿ ਸੁਆਮੀ ॥ Ibid.
p. 287.
- ਘਾਲਿ ਖਾਇ ਕਿਛੁ ਹਥਹੁ ਦੇਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਰਾਹੁ ਪੜਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਇ ॥
Ibid. p. 1245.

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