

Guru Nanak Dev Ji and Dawn of New Age: A study of divinity society and polity of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Life

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Abstract

The paper attempts to map out the various socio-political trajectories which Guru Nanak witnessed during his life time. It is imperative to understand that Nanak divinity was an outcome of his meditation on the plight of the masses, his soul searching endeavour for the way ahead and a charter of deep philosophical and social 'vanis' which would take the ruler and the subject on the righteous path. His monotheistic understanding of Almighty arose in his consciousness against the Brahmanical diktats and Islamic religious bigotry .The paper argues that Nanak's philosophy was equally spiritual as well as social and political as it was rooted in the socio- political firmament of its times.

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The chief contention of this paper is to chronicle all the socio-political churning that took place in fifteenth century amidst which a startlingly original messianic voice emerged, which would change the civilizational discourse of human race. The messianic voice of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji (29 November 1469 – 22 September 1539) was a distinct entity as it heralded the birth of the pious, liberating and humanitarian and monotheistic religion –Sikhism. The etymological understanding of the word ‘Sikh’ denotes a person who immerses himself as a disciple, as an ardent seeker or learner in pursuit of *IkOnkar* (the omnipresent prayer for the Almighty).

Amidst the troika of political uncertainties, societal decadence and moral depravity, the birth of Guru Nanak Dev ji came as a beacon of hope to the masses. Guru Nanak Dev ji's birth showed the way ahead from the abysmal, stifling, deplorable existence which had trapped the human soul. The freedom and freshness which Guru Nanak Dev ji's verses brought to the society had an impact across the socio-cultural moorings as well as within and about the political establishment. The common man finally saw a light at the end of a dark tunnel. The existing religious discourse which was being practised by the Brahmanical orthodox priestly class left the psychic of the masses deeply disturbed. Rituals and religious discourse thrived on the ignorance of the masses as the Brahmanical tradition created a cleavage between different strata of society for their own benefit.

The political terrain of the 15th century, Hindustan was divided into four important regions i.e. Delhi sultanate of Ibrahim Lodi, Rajputs of Mewar (Rana sanga), Bahadur Shah of Western India, and Bahamani Kingdom (Shia kingdom) of South India. Guru Nanak Dev ji was born in 1469 in Punjab at Rai Bho di Talwandi (known as Nankana Sahib, now in West Pakistan) in a well-off Bedi Khatri family. As early as the age of 6 or 7, when other children are just growing out of the state of infancy, still to be dependent on their parents for their needs, his mind had already begun to ponder the meaning of truth and genuine religion. At the young age of fifteen, Guru Nanak Dev ji went to his sister's house to earn a livelihood. While growing up in his sister's place, he became familiar with the nitty gritty of the administrative structure set up by Lodhi rulers especially in Punjab. During his lifetime, Lodhi dynasty collapsed and in its place Mughal dynasty was established. Behlol Lodi (1451- 1489 AD), Sikandar Lodi (1489 - 1517 AD) and Ibrahim Lodi (1517 - 1526 AD) were the contemporary rulers of Sultanate of Delhi and Punjab was under their control. Guru Nanak Dev ji observed the Behlol Lodi and his successors and realised that the ruling class was fanatic, unjust and they discriminated against non-Muslim community. Under their rule,

temples were destroyed and in its place, mosques were built. People were forbidden to perform pilgrimage. The Islamic rule saw a draconian diktat being imposed on non-Islamic believers the “*Jizya*” in which a pilgrimage tax was imposed on them. Guru Nanak Dev ji asserts:

“At this time only the reading of Quran is acceptable”.

He further adds:

“For the Muslim rulers all human beings other than Muslims are of one caste that is Kafir”.

The existing political climate coupled with the dogmatic oppressive social structure led him to a deep contemplation on the human existence and its true worth. He was possessed by an urgent desire to save his brethren and deliver them from the clutches of political tyranny and the vagaries inflicted by the Brahminical caste ridden Hindu social order. To protect his fellow countrymen, he travelled far and wide on foot along with his friend *Bhai Mardana* to awaken people and make them aware of the essence of human existence which was that of harmony within and a society free of discrimination and stigma. A historical and objective analysis of his utterances which were later compiled as verses provided a revolutionary signpost, to masses. His verses call for an unending struggle against the unfairness of ruling class and weakness in contemporary political administrative set up. Whereas on one hand, his composed verses provided a vivid depiction of his comments on existing system on other hand he elaborated on ways and means to improve the society. The inherent compassionate and realistic exploration of human nature both those of the ruling class and the general masses by Guru Nanak Dev ji led him to reflect upon the sorry state of affairs. The sordid saga of Mughal tyrannical rule made him to comment that:

“The rulers are slaughter who suck greedily human blood, Just like the lions who seize upon their victim, the king seize upon their unfortunates subject all along with their bureaucrats, who were similar to dogs. They stumble upon the people day and night. The representatives of kings inflict wounds and the blood is licked by the dogs”.

Nanak chastises the common man in these words:

“if a farmer does not give revenue to the ruler, then he would have to experience the punishment”.

He is equally critical of the common man falling prey to corruption. In his words :

“If a man lives a tainted life, then all that he munches is haram”.

Guru Nanak Dev ji emphasizes:

“The subjects are sightless with no knowledge, they are like carcasses occupied in fire”.

Guru Nanak Dev ji preached resistance at two levels. The first was based on the goodness inherent within the human soul and the other was to voice opinion against the political class if it so required. He continuously insisted that the people need to evolve themselves to the highest level of progression and live a truthful and awakened life. Moreover people should resist the cruel rulers, if the rulers violated human rights of people. This called for a change in the political structure. So the people must be aware of their rights and prepare for the proper use of it whenever the need arises.

Guru Nanak Dev ji was equally appalled by the behaviour of Muslim clergy -the *Qazis*, who were supposed to be the interpreter of the divine decree mentioned in their holy book. During that time, *Qazis* were considered exceptionally holy, a man of veracity, a custodian of Islamic law. He laments:

“Becoming Qazi, he sits to administer justice, but by taking bribe he does injustice, and if someone challenges his judgement then he quotes from the religious book to justify himself”.

He further states: *“Qazi tells lie and eats filth by corruption.”*

He feels: *“Qazi's personality is not without a blemish. The shariat instead of dispensing justice has increased the disputes”.* He later says :

“Qazis administered justice only when their hands were greased”.

He denounces the conduct of the priestly class on grounds of amorality as they conspire with the political class to maintain the oppressive rule.

To him, *“The Qazi is unfit to be a judge since he has vanished all the qualities of life”.*

The Muslim aristocracy in its idolatry hating spree demolished many temples so as to break the back of *kafirs* (non-Muslim community). The hatred was open, violent and morale breaking. For Guru Nanak Dev ji both the communities were at fault. The Muslim was an idol breaker and the Hindu was an idol worshipper. The Muslim act was based on deep distrust of the other whereas the Hindu act was couched in superstition and dogma. He says that the superiority of the *Brahmins* and *Khatris* over the period of time had lost its value as both had adopted many norms and values of Islamic tradition to please the political class of the time. He says:

“Many Brahmins eat bread offered by the rulers, read their books and adopt their dress, manners and language. They even submitted to levy the tax on their gods and shrines”. In home they do worship, but in community they accept Muslim way of living and study Muslim

books. By wearing blue clothes They would like to win favour of the Muslim rulers, and by accepting wages from them they worship the Puranas”.

He further articulates:

“The khatristoo have renounced their religion and have started speaking language of Muslims”.

In this way, he depicted clearly the acceptance of Muslim culture by Hindu ruling class. He exposes the double speak indulged in by Hindus too as a sign of moral turpitude .Guru Nanak Dev j’s aggrieved spirit laments at the fact that the erstwhile pristine glory of the country has been lost .

Guru Nanak Dev jiw as equally appalled by Babur’s invasion of India.He condemned the barbarism shown by Babur and his soldiers on the innocent masses. In *Babur-Vani*, his verses offers a glimpse into the changing of political dynasty and resultant , atrocities and devastation which was inflicted on the people of the region . Guru Nanak Dev jisays:

“Having attacked Khuraasaan, Babar terrified Hindustan. The Creator Himself does not take the blame, but has sent the Mugal as the messenger of death”.

The barbaric brutalities indulged in by Mughal army deeply aggrieved him and he wondered aloud to Almighty:

“There was so much slaughter that the people screamed. Didn't You feel compassion?”.
“You are the Master of all. If some powerful man strikes out against another man, then no one feels any grief in their mind. But if a powerful tiger attacks a flock of sheep and kills them, then its Master must answer for it”

Guru Nanak Dev jifurther says :

“This priceless country has been laid waste and defiled by dogs, and no one pays any attention to the dead”.

It means that the ‘dogs’ (Lodhi rulers) have ruined the valuable jewels (country), and no one feels concerned about the dead.

Pointing to the death and murder, Guru Nanak Dev jiremarks:

“Princes were cut to pieces and rolled in the dust. Women, whether of high or low families and castes, whether Hindu or Muhammadan, were dragged by the hair in the dusty streets, beaten, outraged, and forced amid tortures to disclose their hidden jewellery and valuable property. Women and children were led into captivity”.

The invasion and brutal acts of by Babur's forces enrage Guru Nanak Dev ji and he remarks:
"The function of Qazis and Brahmins is over, now the marriage rites are performed by Satan".

Nanak also is philosophical as he ponders about the inevitability of suffering in common man's life as if it is the will of fate,

"When the women got married, they had handsome bridegrooms near them. The brides came seated in palanquins ornamented with ivory. Water was scattered over their heads to protect against evil, and sparkling fans were waved over them. Lacs of rupees were given to them as gifts. They would eat coconut, dry dates and enjoy the bed. At this time , ropes are put around their necks and their pearl necklaces are broken. Both wealth and beauty which gave them enjoyment have become their adversaries. The soldiers were allowed to dishonour women and take them away. In powerless and hopelessness, Muslim women call upon God and equivalent is the case with Hindu women".

Guru Nanak Dev ji mentions:

"Rape and misery was not limited to any particular community of women. Women of all castes viz. Hinduani, Turkani, Bhattiani and Thakurani, they were all dishonoured and undergo suffering at the hands of the Mughal army".

Discussing about the reasons by which Lodhis were defeated and subjugated, Guru Nanak Dev jistates:

"The wealth and sensual loveliness had inebriated them, and they have vanished their wisdom in merry-making".

In his *Babur-Vani*, Guru Nanak Dev ji presents some glances of the battle fought between the Mughals and the Lodis,

"The swords of Mughals and Pathanscollided in the battlefield. The Mughals aimed and fired their guns, and the Pathans advanced with their elephants. They who lost their lives were destined to die.The ceremonial dress of some Muslim, Hindu and Rajput womenwere torn from head to foot , while some died. How could those women have passed the night whose handsome husband did not come home?"

For Guru Nanak Dev ji , the existing society of his times was extremely regressive and moral bankruptcy on the part of political class as well as clergy of both Hindu and Muslim fold was quite obvious. To add salt to the injury of the masses, Babur invasion sounded a death knell,an aggression which according to Guru Nanak Dev jiw as an epitome of brutality and a cruel onslaught on all that was infused with divinity.In fact, due to a fractured polity and the

competing sibling rivalries amongst the Lodi, for Babur, the invasion of Delhi was an easy conquest. Guru Nanak Dev ji implicitly remarks that pursuit of power and riches had divided the Lodi brothers. Because the pursuit of temporal power and riches has become the sole concern of the rulers, they were bound to be defeated. Here again Guru Nanak Dev ji affirms his faith that unrighteousness cannot last long. Guru Nanak Dev ji was of the view that not enough was done by the Lodhi rulers to protect the country. He held Lodhi dynasty responsible for the miseries of the common man. In Northern India rulers took help of holy men and magicians, because they believed that their spells and charms could defeat the army. But this did not happen so.

For Guru Nanak Dev ji, the downfall was complete. The political class had failed in its responsibilities while the Brahmanical orthodoxy blinded the rulers from their true course of action. A potpourri of charms, superstitious beliefs held sway over the political class. For Guru Nanak Dev ji both had escaped from the responsibility of governance and worship in their truest form as endowed by Almighty God.

The major angst which he had towards Babur invasion was not that it was an Islamic invasion but he critiqued the brutality inherent in the invasion. Guru Nanak Dev ji states that Babur was an invader and not the ruler of land. He was the only one in those times to dare to ask Babur as *Zabur* and criticise him for his inhuman acts. Guru Nanak Dev ji was the only spiritual leader who associated himself with the subjugated and felt the miseries of the people.

To elaborate on the political viewpoint of Guru Nanak Dev ji, it is important to bring forth certain uniqueness of his understanding. To begin with he was a fearless critique of the unjust ways of the political class. Despite being a keen observer of the existing political debauchery, his political vision had clarity. He took pains to point out the evils and ills of contemporary politics and set certain norms of behaviour to be followed by the political monarch. He did not ascribe divinity to a king and held him accountable and punishable for his misdeeds. In his opinion a ruler derives his authority from God, so the sovereignty does not belong to the ruler but to God. For Guru Nanak Dev ji, the link between politics and society is intertwined and if the political system does not reform itself to meet the challenges of its time the social climate too would take a nosedive for the worse. According to Guru Nanak Dev ji, the norms of succession based on hereditary, caste, religion and tribe was fallacious. To him, a ruler should be endowed with a vision which would go on to improve the lives of the masses. The citizen should not be a victim of fate but should assert its voice if

the political class faltered. His sympathies cut across all political and religious barriers. Guru Nanak Dev ji in all his criticality had absolute faith in God's omnipotence and justice. It was this belief which led him to establish a new divine path which would deliver mankind from Brahmanical dogma, superstitious assertions and would critique every form of unjust authority. For Guru Nanak Dev ji, the monarch should be a God-fearing ruler imbued with virtues of common good, and who would indulge in the wellbeing of his state and people rather than personal sensual pleasures.

Summing up Guru Nanak Dev ji's political ideas, "the state should create conditions which may help the individual to further in personality. The good of the human being is the first duty of any constituted authority. The state is there for the individual and not vice versa. An ideal ruler must, therefore, be an embodiment of Divine Wisdom and he should always cater to the needs of the people. If he fails to fulfil his duties, he loses the mandate of God and his removal from power may be considered as a religious and moral duty". Whereas the political and religious class of the period indulged in double speak to serve their ends, Guru Nanak Dev ji provided a robust polemic for the rulers and masses. He dwelled on a comprehensive approach to improve the human beings day to day condition along with inner spiritual realisation. His philosophy of wellbeing was created with amalgamation of spiritual thought, righteous conduct and a harmonious ambience for humans to realise their true worth. He in his contemplation mused upon the true meaning and worth of being human. For him all his understanding was to craft a different future for mankind. In all his verses, one can hear the echo of ethical righteous impulse, which pulsates till date, guiding mankind across the boundaries of time and space.

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