

Keynote Address:

Guru Nanak Dev : Present Perspective and Relevance

Jagbir Singh

Respected Mr. Chairman and dear Friends,

Good morning/Namaskar to Everyone.

First of all, I would like to welcome you all to the Two-Day National Seminar on Guru Nanak Dev, organized by Sahitya Akademi to commemorate his 550th Prakash Parva. The theme of the Seminar is "Guru Nanak Dev: Present Perspective and Relevance" Re-visiting a prominent Saint-Poet, like Guru Nanak Dev and his inspired discourse (Bani) is most relevant in the present perspective. This liberative discourse contains significant insights to enlighten us in our day to day existential situations and concerns. I am thankful to the organisers of the Seminar for providing me an opportunity to share my humble views with you on such a significant subject,

As we all know, Guru Nanak Dev is an eminent innovator and promoter of dharma (धर्म प्रवर्तक) of his times. He is the Adi Guru and founder of Sikhism, which has flourished as one of the four major dharma traditions of Indic Civilization (namely, Sanatan dharma, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism) rooted in the Indian Subcontinent. The remarkable thing about this civilization is that it is one of the most ancient and continuing civilizations of the world. This is, essentially a dharma-centred civilization. The word dharma is a key concept with multiple meanings in Indian tradition. It refers to the inherent quality of all substances, duty, obligation, rightful way of living as well as the moral correlate of all-pervading cosmic order (ritam) operating in the universe. All the above four dharma traditions have emerged as independent world religions. At the same time, they exemplify an excellent model of 'unity in diversity' in the Indian context. Having essential differences of panth and mat they also contain significant similarities relating to their worldview and way of life. Most importantly, all of these dharma traditions collectively share and participate in the core concerns of Indic Civilization. Guru Nanak Dev, his Bani and Vision, occupies a prominent position in the knowledge concerns of this civilization.

Apart from being the founder of a new panth, Guru Nanak Dev is also a celebrated Saint-Poet, who imbibed the spirit of renaissance heralded by the Pan-Indian Bhakti movement during the middle ages. This eventful era of Indian history signifies a powerful moment of cultural awakening and self-assertion of the Indian mind, after centuries of subjugation and suppression at the hands of alien Turk-Afghan-Mongol, invaders and tyrant rulers. Guru Nanak Dev was a personal witness to one such horrifying event, during Babur's

invasion. He was at Saidpur (present-day Emanabad) in West Punjab at that time. His Bani (poetic discourse) provides a graphic description of this holocaust:

खुरासान खसमाना कीआ हिंदुस्तानु डराइआ ॥

आपै दोसु न देई करता जमु करि मुगलु चड़ाइआ ॥

एती मार पई करलाणे तैं की दरदु न आइआ ॥१॥

(After sacking Khurasan, he (Babar) terrified Hindustan.

Not to take the blame on Himself,

Karta (the creator) sent the Mughal as messenger of death.

People are screaming in pain (O, lord)

Don't You have any compassion?)

Guru Nanak Dev compares his contemporary times to mythical Kaliyuga, the dark age of moral disintegration:

कलि काती राजे कासाई धरमु पंख करि उडरिआ ॥

कूडु अमावस सचु चंद्रमा दीसै नाही कह चड़िआ ॥

हउ भालि विकुंनी होई ॥आधेरै राहु न कोई ॥

(Kali is the knife, and the kings are butchers;

Dharma (righteousness) has taken wings and flown away.

I have searched in vain, and am so confused.

In this dark night of falsehood,

The moon of Truth is not visible anywhere.)

The Saint-poets and Gurus emerged on this scene as saviours of perennial values and humanitarian concerns of our civilization and culture. Their primary source of inspiration was classical wisdom of Indic knowledge tradition, lying dormant in folk memory. They propagated their message of spiritual enlightenment in the prevalent language of the people, which resulted in re-kindling the integrating and liberating power of universal love in popular consciousness.

Guru Nanak Dev was born in a Hindu Khatri family in 1469 in village Talwandi (now known as Nankana Sahib) situated near the city of Lahore in present day Pakistan. Sikhs around the world celebrate the auspicious occasion of Guru Nanak Dev 's birth anniversary on the full moon day (Puranmashi) in the Lunar month of Kartik (October-November). Guru Nanak Dev 's father, Mehta Kalu was a patwari and trader by profession. Desiring his son to attain proficiency in trade, he arranged for learned teachers for his son's education. These teachers were well versed in traditional learning and classical knowledge available in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. Child Nanak was exceptionally bright. His contemplative mind had a deep

interest in spiritual knowledge. He often surprised his educators by the depth and sublimity of his knowledge. His rational mind questioned the traditional religious practices and empty rituals. Although he did not condemn these practices and rituals, he sought to introduce the true spiritual meaning in them.

There is an interesting incident relating to this early period of Guru's life, recounted in his traditional biographies (Janam Sakhis). Guru's father, Mehta Kalu, wanted to test the newly acquired educational proficiency of his son. He sent him to a market place with a sum of twenty Rupees and asked him to make a true deal (sacha sauda) with it. What he meant was a profitable business deal. Nanak, with his spiritual bent of mind, spent the whole amount on the food for the needy. For him this was the true (profitable deal) 'sacha sauda'. Mehta Kalu was obviously disappointed by this 'unwise' behaviour from a worldly point of view. In order to dissuade his son from such world-negating tendencies and to make him a responsible worldly man he arranged for his marriage as well as employment.

Young Nanak was married to Sulakhani of Batala and they had two sons, Sri Chand and Lakhmi Das. With the help of his brother-in-law, he obtained the job of a store keeper in Sultanpur at government's granary. After laps of some time, one morning, he went as usual down to rivulet Vain to bathe and meditate. It proved to be the most significant event in Guru Nanak Dev's life. Guru Nanak Dev entered the river and suddenly disappeared from the sight of his companions, who searched for him everywhere in vain. Fearing, Nanak had drowned in the stream, the companions dejectedly returned home. But a veritable miracle happened. After three days Nanak re-appeared on the river bank. He looked to be in deep trance and spiritually transformed. He remained silent for some time. Then suddenly he uttered a sentence "na koi Hindu na Mussalman" (There is no Hindu, no Mussalman). This enigmatic sentence pointed towards contemporary situation of two major religious traditions, whose followers had deviated from the spiritual core of their respective traditions.

Janam Sakhis have woven a mythical narrative around this event which symbolically highlights it as a moment of enlightenment. Interestingly, this narrative of Guru Nanak's life can be compared with Buddha under the Bodhi tree. The mood and attitude of such a momentous event as this is beautifully expressed in one of his poetic compositions:

हम आदमी हां इक दमी मुहलति मुहतु न जाणा ॥

नानकु बिनवै तिसै सरेवहु जा के जीअ पराणा ॥१॥

अंधे जीवना वीचारि देखि केते के दिना ॥१॥ रहाउ ॥

सासु मासु सभु जीउ तुमारा तू मै खरा पिआरा ॥

नानकु साइरु एव कहतु है सचे परवदगारा ॥२॥

जे तू किसै न देही मेरे साहिबा किआ को कढै गहणा ॥

नानकु बिनवै सो किछु पाईए पुरबि लिखे का लहणा ॥३॥

नामु खसम का चिति न कीआ कपटी कपटु कमाणा ॥

जम दुआरि जा पकड़ि चलाइआ ता चलदा पछुताणा ॥४॥

जब लगु दुनीआ रहीऐ नानक किछु सुणीऐ किछु कहीऐ ॥

भालि रहे हम रहणु न पाइआ जीवतिआ मरि रहीऐ ॥५॥२॥

Henceforth the quest for knowledge (param gyan) and truth (param satya) became the abiding concerns for Guru Nanak. Knowledge, here is no ordinary knowledge. It is a knowledge that liberates. In the words of Bhagavad Gita, it is a knowledge which is a great purifier (नाहि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमहि विद्यते). Similarly, the truth, here refers to is the realization of ultimate reality of all existence.

Nanak quit his job and distributed his worldly belongings to the poor and needy. Wearing the robes of a recluse, Nanak set out on a spiritual journey. He traveled far and wide in four directions. He visited almost all the famous religious places and centres of learning, spread over length and breadth of the Subcontinent. He also traveled to far off places in South Asia, Tibet and Arabia. He covered about 30,000 kilometres in these journeys and became one of the most widely traveled religious leaders.

In the later years of his life, Guru Nanak Dev founded a township of Kartarpur (presently in Pakistan) on the banks of the river Ravi in Punjab and settled down as a householder. Here, he adopted the profession of a peasant, earning an honest living. Followers came from far and near to listen to his liberative discourse of truth and truthful living. He introduced the institution of Langar (free communal kitchen) at Kartarpur. Every one, regardless of his social and economic status, was welcome to this langar. Here he breathed his last. Sometime before his demise, Guru Nanak Dev chose Bhai Lehna, one of his devout

followers, to carry forward his spiritual mission. He installed Bhai Lehna (Guru Anagad Dev) as next Guru.

Guru Nanak Dev was a prolific poet. He composed his poetic compositions in the genre employed by Bhakti poets, known as Bani or Gurbani in Sikh tradition. This Bani of Guru Nanak Dev is included in the holy text of Sikhism, known as Guru Granth Sahib. As we know, Guru Granth Sahib is an anthology of the poetic utterances, reflecting the philosophical meditations of the inspired souls. This holy anthology contains the Bani not only of Guru Nanak Dev and other Sikh Gurus but also those of other medieval Indian Saint-poets belonging to different religious and cultural traditions. Prominent among these Saint-poets are Jaidev, Namdev, Sheikh Farid, Kabir and Ravidas. Chronologically these Saint-poets belong to the vast expanse of five centuries (12th to 17th) and geographically they represent the regional and cultural diversity of the Indian Sub-Continent.

The Bani of Guru Nanak Dev, as incorporated in Guru Granth Sahib, consists of about 974 hymns including some of the longer compositions like Japji Sahib, Asa di Var, Barah Maha, Sidh Gosti and Onkar (Dakhni). The characteristic feature of his Bani is that its hymns are composed in various classical and folk literary forms and meters. These hymns tend to employ mostly the lyrical and the didactic modes of expression. They have been arranged in nineteen classical Indian ragas with indications of folk tunes here and there. In fact, poetry and music are integral elements of its discourse. They introduce a dimension of depth in the meaning and import of the message. However, the poetry of Guru Nanak Dev cannot be taken as pure and simple poetry in the ordinary sense of the term. It is primarily a meditation on the nature and experience of Braham (Ultimate Reality):

गावहु गीतु न बिरहड़ा नानक ब्रह्म बीचारो ॥८॥३॥

I do not sing a song or a birhara, O Nanak,
I reflect upon the nature of Braham (Ultimate Reality).

In fact, Guru Nanak Dev is a philosopher-poet or poet-philosopher. His meditations on the nature of Ultimate Reality (Braham) is a search for final meaning of human existence. This consciousness of the Ultimate Reality provides us with a vantage point and a liberative vision to re-define the existential social concerns of human life.

The Bani of Guru Nanak Dev projects a philosophy of enlightened living. It is not just a metaphysical speculation. It turns out to be a philosophy of action which lays emphasis is on shared communal experience and on purposeful involvement in social concerns.

In his philosophical quest for knowledge and truth, Guru Nanak employs dialogue as mode of communication and expression. His Bani seems to be in a constant creative dialogue with Indian knowledge tradition as well as with contemporary reality.

He recontextualizes the Vedic conceptualization of Brahman, as one of its core tenets and follows the overall pluralistic vision of the Indic Civilization relating to truth and reality. He lays emphasis on moral virtues and truthful conduct (sachiar) rather than on empty ritualism. The poetic discourse of Guru Nanak Dev presents a radical humanitarian vision reality and society. It emerges as significant 'knowledge text' incorporating deep philosophical meditations on the eternal verities of human existence as well as a radical vision upholding human equality and dignity. The originality of this vision and its dialogical relationship with past and present establishes the unique identity of Sikhism.

In the present context the relevance of Guru Nanak Dev, his Bani and vision is three-fold - individual, social and universal. Firstly, on the individual plane, the great Guru visualizes an ideal man as an enlightened being. In one of his celebrated poetic texts, he defines an ideal man in the following words:

इकि कहि जाणनि कहिआ बुझनि ते नर सुघड़ सरूप ॥

इकना नादु न बेदु न गीअ रसु रसु कसु न जाणंति ॥

इकना सिधि न बुधि न अकलि सर अखर का भेउ न लहंति ॥

नानक ते नर असलि खर जि बिनु गुण गरबु करंत ॥१५॥

(There are people who know how to speak,
and understand what they are told.

They are wise and accomplished.

There are others who have no knowledge of sound (*nada*) sense (*veda*)

And they have no esthetic appreciation as well.

They are not blessed with sublime intellect;

they do not grasp the mystery of the Word.

O Nanak, they are donkeys in the real sense,

They feel proud of themselves, but have no virtues at all.)

Meditating on the mysteries of life and death, Guru Nanak Dev presents the image of man in search of final meaning of human existence, standing at the threshold of self-realization. The above image is beautifully presented in following verses:

पउणै पाणी अगनी का मेलु ॥ चंचल चपल बुधि का खेलु ॥

नउ दरवाजे दसवा दुआरु ॥ बुझु रे गिआनी एहु बीचारु ॥१॥

कथता बकता सुनता सोई ॥ आपु बीचारे सु गिआनी होई ॥१॥ रहाउ ॥

देही माटी बोलै पउणु ॥ बुझु रे गिआनी मूआ है कउणु ॥

मूर्ई सुरति बादु अहंकारु ॥ ओहु न मूआ जो देखणहारु ॥२॥

जै कारणि तटि तीरथ जाही ॥ रतन पदारथ घट ही माही ॥

पड़ि पड़ि पंडितु बादु वखाणै ॥ भीतरि होदी वसतु न जाणै ॥३॥

हउ न मूआ मेरी मुई बलाइ ॥ ओहु न मूआ जो रहिआ समाइ ॥

कहु नानक गुरि ब्रहमु दिखाइआ ॥ मरता जाता नदरि न आइआ ॥४॥४॥

(The union of air, water and fire - the body is the play-thing of the fickle and unsteady intellect. It has nine doors, and then there is the Tenth Gate. Reflect upon this and understand it, O wise one. ||1|| The Lord is the One who speaks, teaches and listens. One who contemplates his own self is truly wise. ||1||Pause|| The body is dust; the wind speaks through it. Understand, O wise one, who has died. Awareness, conflict and ego have died, but the One who sees does not die. ||2|| For the sake of it, you journey to sacred shrines and holy rivers; but this priceless jewel is within your own heart. The Pandits, the religious scholars, read and read endlessly; they stir up arguments and controversies, but they do not know the secret deep within. ||3|| I have not died - that evil nature within me has died. The One who is pervading everywhere does not die. Says Nanak, the Guru has revealed God to me, and now I see that there is no such thing as birth or death. ||4||4||)

Secondly, On the sociological plane, Guru Nanak Dev takes the ideological position of the oppressed sections of society. In this context the following verses can be quoted:

नीचा अंदरि नीच जाति नीची हू अति नीचु ॥

नानकु तिन कै संगि साथि वडिआ सिउ किआ रीस ॥

जिथै नीच समालीअनि तिथै नदरि तेरी बखसीस ॥४॥३॥

(Those who are low in caste, the lowliest of the low,

Nanak seeks the company of those,

Why should he try to compete with the great?

O Lord, thy grace is showered upon, were the lowly are cared for.)

The Bani or discourse of Guru Nanak Dev presents the idea of the spark of divine light residing in the heart of everyone, as evidenced in the following verse:

जाति बरन कुल सहसा चूका गुरमति सबदि बीचारी ॥१॥

(The distinctions of jati, baran and kula are eliminated,
When we contemplate upon the Word of the Guru.)

Thirdly, the relevance of Guru Nanak and his Bani is tremendous on the universal plane. It relates to interfaith dialogue in the present context. The issues of inter-faith dialogue and understanding have assumed a very vital significance in the contemporary world threatened by global terrorism and violence in the name of religion. We are facing unprecedented challenges of communal tensions, cultural conflicts and unwarranted 'clash of civilizations. Such conflicts and clashes often occur due to lack of understanding and trust among the followers of different faiths. In the words of a contemporary thinker Dr. Hans Küng, "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions".

Recognition and acceptance of one another's beliefs and practices is a precondition for communal harmony and peaceful co-existence in a socio-cultural sphere. Unfortunately, the atmosphere of traditional communal harmony is presently under grave threat due to clever machinations of the global players as well as due to misguided elements in our own society. These elements are creating an atmosphere of mistrust and tensions in our society. We are witnessing the spread of religious fundamentalism, communal hatred, and irrational violence. These activities are detrimental to peace and harmony among communities and nations and are threatening the very survival of humanity as a sane society. In a plural society like ours, composed of diverse cultural and religious identities, the need for interfaith dialogue and understanding has become all the more important. Unfortunately, all this is being done in the name of religion. In fact, consciously or unconsciously, the agency of 'religion' is being employed by these forces as a motivating force. This association of religion with these acts of terrorism and violence is a real cause for concern.

The philosophical basis of interfaith dialogue lies in the recognition and acceptance of multiple paths to the realization of one Ultimate Truth. All the faiths of Indic Civilization subscribe to this view which can be considered as the core tenet of these *dharma* traditions. This oft-quoted core tenet is expressed for the first time in *ôgveda*, the most ancient scriptural text of Indic Civilization: *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*. (Truth is one, but the learned refer to it by different names) Guru Nanak expresses the same spirit of pluralism in his Bani:

एका सुरति जेते है जीअ ॥ सुरति विहूणा कोइ न कीअ ॥

जेही सुरति तेहा तिन राहु ॥ लेखा इको आवहु जाहु ॥१॥

(One is the awareness among all beings. No one has been created without this awareness. As is their awareness, so is their way). Whichever path a person takes in life ultimately depends on the state of its awareness. Pluralism is an article of faith. It is not just toleration or acceptance of diversity. It is an engagement with the diversity of co-existing faiths in society. In real sense of the term, pluralism means active participation in a two-way process of interaction for gaining knowledge and understanding of each other's faith.

Dialogue in the real sense is possible among the equals. To engage 'the other' in a genuine dialogue process, we need to treat him as our equal, which is the most conducive attitude for a meaningful dialogue on matters of faith. The discourse of *Guru Granth Sahib* deals with the idea of 'the other' from a philosophical perspective. In Rag Gauri Guru Nanak states:

दूजा कउणु कहा नही कोई ॥सभ महि एकु निरंजनु सोई ॥१॥ रहाउ ॥

(Who is the other? and where he is? There is on one. There is only one Supreme Being who is all-pervading).

This metaphysical concept of the unity of all existence is the foundation on which the whole edifice of Sikh worldview is raised. This unitive consciousness does not treat anyone as alien or other. Recognizing the Supreme Being as creator and sustainer of the created universe inspires us to treat all beings as equals. The year 2019 marks the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev. It is worthwhile to revisit his charismatic personality, his Bani and his vision as it seems to be most relevant in our contemporary context.