

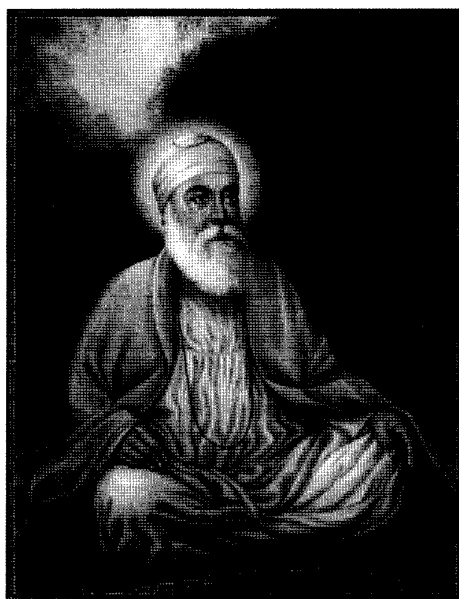
# SIKHISM -



## A Philosophy without Myth

Devinder Singh argues that Sikhism is based on Guru Nanak's religious philosophy rather than myth or ritual, and that renewal of Sikhism must rid Sikhism of these cultural accretions to return to the Nanakian philosophy of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS), which is compatible with the scientific worldview.

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) laid the foundation of Sikhi (Sikhism) during the Renaissance, when scientists were challenging some of the concepts of the Church in Europe. It was difficult and risky to challenge religious authorities at that time. Roger Bacon, the 13th century Christian monk, had spent the final 14 years of his life in a dungeon for writing that in the quest for truth, experimentation and observation are valid challenges to the uncritical acceptance of spiritual and secular authorities. In the spring of 1633, the Christian church imprisoned Galileo for challenging the concept that the earth was the centre of the universe.<sup>1</sup> It took time for the scientific outlook to become accepted, and it was only recently that the Vatican apologized for its arrest of Galileo, gingerly acknowledging evolution to be 'more than just an hypothesis'. While the tensions between science and religion remain in Christianity, and popular piety can and does ignore Darwin, generally speaking the technological advancements that science has



promulgated a scientifically and logically sound philosophy with universal applicability, which is known as Nanakian Philosophy. It was preached and enriched by the nine succeeding Sikh Gurus to the House of Nanak, the Nanakian School. The follower of his philosophy is known as 'Sikh' and the philosophy is called 'Sikhi' in Punjabi. The word 'Sikhi' gave rise to the modern anglicized word 'Sikhism'. The term 'Nanakian Philosophy' translates a Punjabi word, *Gurbani* as described by Bhai Kahn Singh.<sup>2</sup>

If today, after five centuries, we examine the effect of Nanakian Philosophy on the Sikhs, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that what most Sikhs are doing is contrary to his philosophy. This is so because Sikhism has been represented by theologians, historians and scholars who failed to cleanse their minds and their thought of the earlier mythology and ritualism on which they were weaned. The irony is that Sikhs are still being continuously bombarded with ancient mythology and rituals by the *Biprans* (people who work against Nanakian Philosophy). Both the preaching of *Gurbani* (the Holy Granth's

Nanakian Philosophy) and Sikhism and also control of the Sikh institutions fell into the hands of the *Biprans* after the time of Banda Bahadur's leadership (from 1708 to 1716), when most of the Sikhs were living in the forests. This situation continued even during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (from 1799/1801 to 1839) and thereafter.

It was only during the 1930s and 1940s that some concerned Sikhs considered the deteriorating conditions

### there is no place for mythology in Sikhism

achieved mean that it has gained the upper hand. We are generally thought to be in a Scientific (or Technological) Age, and any unscientific or illogical principle that is taught in religion is unlikely to last.

However, in the 15th century, during this period of religious control and scientific development, Guru Nanak challenged the ancient mythology and rituals in which the peoples of South Asia had been shackled for centuries. He

of Sikhism and reflected on how Sikhism had been misconstrued by *Biprans*. Subsequently, the Singh Sabha movement (which had been inaugurated in the 1870's to counter attempts to convert Sikhs to Christianity or, later, to Hinduism) started a renaissance of Sikhism. However, it was not long before members of the Singh Sabha holding authoritative positions resisted this reform. Still under the influence of *Bipreets* (customs contrary to Nanakian Philosophy), they started to put hurdles in the way of preaching *Gurbani* and true Sikhism. In my view most of the Sikhism promulgated in writing or preached in the gurdwaras in those days and subsequently, was heavily saturated with myths and rituals. Consequently, the originality and uniqueness of Nanakian Philosophy is being lost and Sikhism is appearing as a mythical and ritualistic religion.

*The Institute for Understanding Sikhism* is working for the renaissance of Sikhism, seeking to restore it as a philosophy devoid of mythical accretions. Some basic principles of Nanakian Philosophy, on which Sikhism is founded, are set out below to show that there is no place for mythology in Sikhism. All the principles cited here have been taken from the Holy Granth of the Sikhs, which is now called the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS)<sup>3</sup>, the only original source of Nanakian Philosophy.

## Some Basic Principles Of Nanakian Philosophy

The following basic principles of Nanakian Philosophy show that there are no myths or rituals in Sikhism.

### A. Concept Of God

In Nanakian Philosophy God is an Abstract/Eternal/Transcendent Entity but exists. The existence of God has been reported even before the beginning of the time and space:

"Was in existence before the beginning of the time and space;  
Was in existence in the past;  
Is in existence in the present;  
Will remain in existence forever (in the future)."  
(AGGS, Jap, P 1 & AGGS, M 5, P 285)

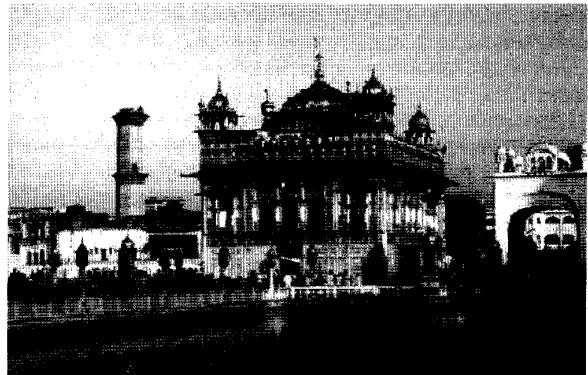
Note that no descriptive or specific name has been used for God. In some religions God is incarnated in human form with different names at different times and in most instances the incarnated god has a wife or a consort. Guru Nanak rejects a mythical incarnation of God into human form. Accordingly, God does not appear in any anthropomorphic form in Nanakian Philosophy. A number of names have been assigned to God by some religions. However, in Nanakian Philosophy no descriptive or specific name has been assigned to God because of Its Abstract/Transcendent Entity. This is supported by this verse:

"Your tongue recites the descriptive names of That (the Almighty).  
(In fact no descriptive name can be assigned because)  
That existed even before the beginning of the time and space.  
(Therefore) Its name is Ever-existing Entity (sat)".  
(AGGS, M 5, P 1083)

Under these circumstances Guru Nanak preferred to use non-descriptive, non-specific names that do not indicate any gender, e.g. 'Oh, You, Yourself, One, You, Inaccessible, Infinite'.

If God exists then the question arises, what is the precise definition of God in Nanakian Philosophy? The first verse, which is commonly just called *Mool Mantar* (Mantra) by the Sikhs at large and by almost all Sikh scholars of the AGGS, actually defines God. Chahal<sup>4</sup> has argued in detail that the first verse of the AGGS clearly indicates that it is not a *Mool Mantar* but a precise and concise definition of the Abstract/Transcendent Entity:

"The One and Only, Oh, the Infinite;  
Exists; Creator;  
Without fear (not governed by any other);  
Without enmity;  
Timeless (without effect of time and environment);  
Neither takes birth nor dies;  
Created by Itself;  
Enlightener; and Bounteous."



### B. The Laws of Nature

According to Nanakian Philosophy, God was created by Itself (as discussed above) when It (God) created the universe/nature. Right at the time of creation of the universe, It (God) created the Laws of Nature (the Laws of the Universe) under which every action and reaction in the universe and in every living organism is governed by these Laws:

"In trance It created the universe according to Its Order (hukm) (Laws of Nature).  
It creates and then watches Its Own crea-tion (vadi ai).  
It works by Itself and makes the others to work (according to the Laws of Nature),  
and It pervades in Its Own Order (hukm) (Laws of Nature)."  
(AGGS, M 3, P 1043)

Nanak again emphasizes in the following verse that everything is under these Laws of Nature:

"Everything is in interiority of the hukm (Laws of Nature),  
Nothing is in exteriority of the hukm.  
Nanak says:  
If one can realize/comprehend the above fact (Laws of Nature),  
One can get rid of egoism."  
(AGGS, Jap 2, P 1)

Science, for a Sikh, is a 'natural theology'.

### C. Sikhi (Sikhism)

The following verse explains that *Sikhi* (Sikhism) is philosophy:

"Sikhi (Sikhism) is the advice/principles of the Guru's philosophy."

(AGGS, M 1, P 465 [1])

The irony here is that much of Sikhism is not. About 80 % of the Sikhism that is being preached and taught is custom, based on the information available in the inauthentic old literature rather than on what is found in the Gurus' philosophy incorporated in the AGGS, the only authenticated source. But who is the Guru in the above verse? Guru Nanak explains that the '*Sabd*' (the word) is the Guru:

Sabd (word) is Guru, consciousness and intention toward it make one its disciple (Sikh)."

(AGGS, M 1, P 943)

According to this verse '*Sabd*' is the 'Guru' for the Sikh. The same principle, '*Sabd Guru*' was taught by the Gurus of the House of Nanak in their Bani, a document that has been incorporated into the AGGS. Similarly, Guru Gobind Singh reiterated in 1708 that *Sabd* of the Sikh Gurus of the House of Nanak, incorporated in the AGGS, is the Guru of the Sikhs. Indeed, some writers have declared the Granth (AGGS) as the *Deh* (the biological body) of the Guru. Consequently, Sikhs are more involved in the rituals around the Granth rather than in understanding and practising the wisdom of the *Sabd*.

This has happened because the following basic tenets of Nanakian Philosophy are being overlooked or ignored in the writings and preaching of Sikhism.

#### 1. Evaluation of Things/Philosophy

"One must first evaluate the things / philosophy, if convinced, then adopt / follow it."

(AGGS, M 1, P 1410)

#### 2. Importance of Deliberation/Discussion

"Deliberation / discussion on the Sabd (philosophy) of the Guru is highest of all (actions/deeds)."

(AGGS, M 1, P 904)

#### 3. Freedom of Expression

There should be complete freedom of expression in Sikhism. And expression/discussion can only be held if one listens to others and then expresses one's views to the others:

Nanak says:

"As long as one lives in this world one must listen to others, and express oneself to others (to find the truth)."

(AGGS, M 1, P 661)

#### 4. Discriminating Intellect

There are many people who may be called intellectuals but very few who have the discriminating intellect to distinguish between good and bad, true and false, right and wrong.

i) "Those who have discriminating intellect can understand things in their real perspective."

(AGGS, M 5, P 285)

ii) "The one who has the discriminating intellect, is wealthy in knowledge (wise)."

(AGGS, M 5, P 1150)

### 5. Importance of Research

"The researcher progresses while the other (discursive and aimless) perishes..."

(AGGS, M 1, P 1255)

In spite of this, *Sants* (saints), preachers, *Kathakaars* (narrators), and *Kirtanias* (Hymn singers) and even by many scholars teach that one should recite Gurbani again and again, but without the need to apply any discriminating intellect or to conduct any research to understand the philosophy given in it. Consequently, Sikhism is becoming a mythic and ritualistic religion.

Finally, I would like to quote a couple of verses to emphasize that *jap* (repetition of mantra or a verse), *tap* (mortification), magical formulae, magical hymns, mystic characters, and religious hypocrisies are of no avail to comprehend God according to Nanakian Philosophy:

i) People have grown weary of repetition of mantras, or verses; and practising mortification and performing persistent rituals, still could not comprehend God (reach the Inaccessible city of the Inaccessible)."

(AGGS, M 1, P 436)

ii) I (Nanak) do not believe in magical formulae, magical hymns, (including diagrams of mystical characters – *yantar-mantar*) and religious hypocrisies, because my mind is imbued with the Almighty). The teaching of the Guru is the collyrium [substance (antimony) used to make eyes see better and look beautiful] that made (me) capable of understanding the Almighty through the teachings of the Guru.

(AGGS, M 1, P 766)

Nanakian philosophy allows its followers to be critical, to do research, to use their intellect, and to evaluate things through debate. This is quite compatible with the contemporary approach to truth, and commends Sikhism as a scientific and logical system. Sikh theologians do it a disservice, as the church did to Galileo, if they separate it from science, preferring a mythical and ritualistic approach.

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3. AGGS = *Aad Guru Granth Sahib*. Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, 1983 (reprint). (M = *Mahla*, i.e., succession number of the Sikh Gurus to the House of Guru Nanak, P = Page of the AGGS)
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