

Transcendentalism and Pragmatism in Guru Nanak's Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The uniqueness of philosophy of Guru Nanak has been discussed in this paper on his transcendental and pragmatic approach to address the humanity.

INTRODUCTION

Uniqueness of Guru Nanak's philosophy lies both in his approach and contents of his thoughts. His life is his message and his message is his philosophy. The uniqueness of Guru Nanak's philosophy lies in (i) *Ecumenism*, (ii) *Revolutionary nature of his thoughts*; (iii) *Efforts for reconciliation*; (iv) *Theory of Unity in Diversity*; (v) *Concept of spiritual equality with emphasis on gender equality*; (vi) *Idea of freedom of conscience, with attitude of humility, seva and purity of heart*; (vii) *Political thought – rejection of tyranny, and advocating a caring and sharing governance*; (viii) *Rejecting all forms of exploitation – political, economic, social and religious; -advocating human dignity, self-respect and feeling of patriotism*; (ix) *Theory of spiritual socialism, rejecting riches concentrated in a few hands. Advocating Kirat Ki Kamai and wand chhako (earning one's bread through legitimate means and sharing the produce with others).*

I believe there are 3 angles from which Guru Nanak's philosophy can be approached. (i) The ideas to reform Hinduism – its rituals and mythological traditions. Educate the Ruling Muslims to shun their feudalistic exclusiveness. (ii) Transform actual men and women---Hindus, Muslims, Yogis and Siddhas through preaching his new thoughts. (iii) Transcendentalism i.e. the spiritual angle. His approach was pragmatic all along.

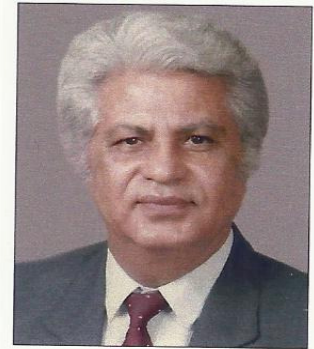
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There were three prominent movements at the time of Guru Nanak:

- i) Bhakti Movement.
- ii) Sufi Cult and
- iii) Sant Traditions.

Guru Nanak also noticed the *Siddha* criticism addressed to the institutionalization of devotional culture into temple culture. Ideology of the Bhakti movement was: (i) Loving Devotion, (ii) Renunciation (iii) Asceticism. The Bhakti movement was against: (i) Ritualism (ii) Casteism (iii) Brahmans and Qazis. It rejected Sanskrit and Persian which were the languages of the elite. The Bhakti Saints used local

language in their teachings and prayers. The Sufi culture among the Muslims tried to resolve through intuition (rather reasoned argument) the conflict of religions dividing people. However, Guru Nanak appreciated the positive achievement of Islam as well as the Sufi criticism of feudalization of Islam.



Philosophy

There are two dimensions of Guru Nanak's philosophy, which have been somewhat ignored by scholars and inadequately appreciated by the historians. Guru Nanak had created a unique social awareness about religion and the society. This social awareness is an important part of his legacy and it remains the key to a proper understanding of his transcendentalism. Guru Nanak's successors had carried forward his institutions and also created new ones in consonance with this legacy.

Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1] begins with Guru Nanak's 'Commencing Verse' (commonly called as Mool Mantra), which is the basic creed of Sikhism.

- (i) Unity of God (as One) is mentioned at the very beginning to wean away disciples from the worship of many gods and goddesses, which the Hindus used to do. It is an example of his transcendentalism and pragmatism
- (ii) The emphasis on timeless, formless, birthless and ever-existent Truth was meant to discourage the re-incarnation theory and idol worship. This is another example of transcendentalism and pragmatism in Guru Nanak's philosophy.
- (iii) God creates, destroys and preserves. His command is final. His light illuminates everything *Teri gat mit to hi jane, Nanak Dass sada kurbane* (But God alone knows his ways). AGGS. M5, p.268 [1]

Guru Nanak rejected rituals of various religions, which were artificially institutionalized by priests of every religion. These rituals had nothing to do with the idea of God. Mere assuming the forms of a particular creed or robes of a particular Order is no religion, and it is of no use. Belief in God – no outward show, no marks of holiness, any dancing and jumping of jogis, no ceremonial piety and pilgrimage for show off.

Kirat Ki Kamai and wand chakko implies bread labor theory. Community living, community eating, community prayers and culture of *Sangat* for communal harmony are a philosophy of spiritual socialism. This is an example of transcendentalism and pragmatism.

Guru Nanak advocated name, *Bhakti*, *Sewa*, God's grace, *Guruprasad* and righteous deeds. In a hymn (AGGS.M1,p.1037) in **Rag Maru**, Guru Nanak says:

“Our own deeds are the cause of our own misery.”
This is an example of transcendentalism and pragmatism.

Guru Nanak rejected all manners of injustice and exploitation – political, economic, social and religious. He advocated freedom of conscience. Guru Nanak rejected discrimination on the basis of belief and practice. It was unfortunate that gods and temples were taxed at that time. Guru Nanak considered this as an infringement of Divine Order.

Guru Nanak promised no paradise or heavenly luxuries for ritualistic practices. There was no coercion or earthly inducement to bring others to his path. He was against the so-called asceticism. However, he was not against normal pleasures of life; happy and healthy life for the individual and for the society. He appreciated prosperity of the land. His religion is the religion of the householder. His approach was pragmatic. He rejected the earlier Indian philosophies which held the external reality and its rich variety as *Maya* and illusion. Towards the end, he lived with his own family, tilling his land and giving his transcendentalism a practical shape at Kartarpur.

Transcendentalism

Here, transcendentalism is not the description of the other world, dismissing the temporal one. Guru Nanak's transcendentalism does not lie in negating the temporal world as chaos and contradiction.

Transcendentalism does not imply the make-belief of paradise after death, with rivers of milk and honey. Guru Nanak's transcendentalism is spiritualism which goes beyond **Plato's** logic of social morality.

Guru Nanak has given in his own words his ideas about (i) The Supreme Reality, (ii) Creation of the Universe, (iii) Human soul, (iv) The object of life, (v) The means to achieve it, (vi) Theory of Karma, (vii) Salvation and (viii)

Transmigration. These are the various aspects of his transcendentalism. He tried to implement his transcendentalism into practice. Such as implementing the concept of spiritual equality of man through *sangat*, *langar*, community eating, working, singing and living like children of one God.

Pragmatism

Guru Nanak was not an ivory-tower philosopher. His approach was pragmatic. His *Udasi Yatras* were amazing episodes. He had encountered Gorakhnath Yogis, Buddhists and hundreds of tribes in the Indian subcontinent. Guru Nanak's mission was regeneration of mankind, preaching, teaching, awakening spiritual consciousness and bringing back humanity to truth. Guru Nanak went to the people not to preach an already preconceived philosophy but to know, learn and organically unite all thoughts. *Udasi* was a temporary going out of routine life and not a complete abandonment of the same. *Udasi* was not at all asceticism, much less renunciation. He had more experience, more travels, and more interactions in a multi-religious and multicultural milieu than any other spiritual leader hitherto in human history.

What Guru Nanak preached, he practiced. His life was his message and his message was his philosophy. He taught the Siddhas at *Gorakhmata Temple* the right meaning of religion, the right meaning of asceticism, the significance of righteous deeds, duty towards the family and the society. Guru Nanak asked: how you can serve the society by renouncing and denouncing the society.

Guru Nanak's pragmatic approach is thoroughly evidenced in numerous episodes. For instance, (i) He rejected *janeo* ceremony at the age of eight and explained his point of view to the family priest Hardyal. (ii) He explained the true meaning of knowledge to Gopal Panda, the Village school teacher. (iii) In reference to offering *namaz* and prayer at the instance of the Qazi at Nawab's court, Guru Nanak insisted on unqualified devotion to the Lord and not just a ritual. (iv) At Saidpur, he rejected the hospitality of the rich Malik Bhago and welcomed the poor Bhai Lalo's food. (v) He succeeded in converting Sajjan Thug at Caravan Sarai. (vi) He explained the truth, underlying vegetarian and non-vegetarian food at Kurukshetra. (vii) At Haridwar, he exploded the ritual of giving water to the Sun God. (viii) From Panipat to Delhi, where he refused to work a miracle. (ix) At Virandavan, he explained that *Raslila* was a sheer waste of breath. (x) Towards the East, he visited Gorakhmata, interacted with the devotees of Gorakhnath and explains to them, the true meaning of asceticism. (xi) At Kamrug district of Assam, Guru Nanak dismissed the black magic of *Nur Shah*, a witchcraft woman. (xii) Guru Nanak converted

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RESOLUTION

A three-day *International Conference on the Uniqueness of Guru Nanak's Philosophy* was held by the *Institute for Understanding Sikhism* (IUS), Laval, Quebec, Canada in collaboration with the *Department of Guru Nanak Studies, Guru Nanak Dev University* (GNDU), Amritsar at Conference Hall, Guru Nanak Bhawan, GNDU, Amritsar on February 23-25, 2011. Renowned scholars from different disciplines from four foreign countries (Canada, Malaysia, United Kingdom, and United States of America) and eight Indian States and scholars from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjabi University, Patiala, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, and Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamilnadu made profound presentations on different aspects of Guru Nanak's Philosophy. The conference unanimously resolved that:

1. Holding of such like conferences/seminars be made a regular feature.
2. To encourage more research facilities be resourced to widen the scope of the study of Guru Nanak's Philosophy.
3. There is an urgent need to interpret Gurbani in order to meet the challenge of the present and times to come.

4. The message of Guru Nanak be widely disseminated as a panacea for communal harmony and peaceful co-existence.
5. Study circles for serious comprehension and greater understanding of Guru Nanak's Philosophy and his message be set up in schools and colleges in India and abroad.
6. The need of the hour is for serious comprehension and greater interaction among scholars from interdisciplinary fields.
7. All resources, Government, Corporate and Private be tapped to strengthened the endeavour of research and dissemination of Guru Nanak's Philosophy and his message in the best interest of the nation and the world, given that Guru Nanak's message has assumed a great relevance in the current inter-religious and intercultural society.

This resolution was moved by Dr M M Verma, President, Interfaith Foundation, New Delhi, India and seconded by Prof Dr Shashi Bala, Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Religious Studies, GNDU, Amritsar and was passed unanimously by the speakers and the audience.

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the headhunter Kauda. (xiii) From Assam via. Orissa, he visited the Jagannath Temple at Puri and rejected formalism, ritualism and ostentation. (xiv) At Lahore, Guru Nanak converted Duni Chand, a very rich man, by offering him a needle and asking him to return it to him after his death. How could it happen, ask Duni Chand. (xv) In the South, Guru Nanak had met king Shivnabh and the two girls. Guru Nanak dismissed them completely by ignoring their physical charm. (xvi) In Mecca, Guru Nanak revealed the truth that God is on all sides. He taught that no one religion is better than the other. At the end, it is the deeds of a person that matter and not his caste and creed. (xvii) While returning from Mecca, he taught a lesson to Wali Qandhari, who refused to give water to Madana, Nanak's companion.

(xviii) Guru Nanak's garb was composite by nature. He dressed up like Turks, Pathans, while visiting their countries. (xix) While returning from Baghdad, Guru Nanak visited Multan, an important Sufi Centre. The Darveshes sent a bowl full of milk to Nanak, who was camping outside Multan. Guru Nanak put a jasmine petal on milk and returned the same to the Sufis, conveying the message that there was no end to knowledge. (xx) While returning from Afghanistan, Guru Nanak and Mardana reached Saidpur. Guru Nanak protested against the abuse of women (mostly Muslim from rich landlord families)

and barbarity committed by Babar's soldiers. Guru Nanak condemned this exploitation and tyranny. Nanak and Mardana were taken prisoners, and presented to Babar by the jailor. Babar was also moved after hearing Nanak.

CONCLUSIONS

Guru Nanak presents a distinct dispensation. As a result, a new social order came into existence with its own ideology, institutions, organizations and laws, based on the concept of oneness of God and brotherhood of mankind- a common humanity irrespective of caste, color, creed, gender and nationality. Guru Nanak's philosophy is a prayer for all. No one is excluded. No nation is excluded. Righteous men of all nations share in the life eternal. Holiness is found among followers of all religions. Guru Nanak's philosophy is a cathedral of universal humanism. Guru Nanak philosophy has played and is playing a constructive role in the present inter-religious situation because of its pluralist theology and ecumenism. Transcendentalism and pragmatism are the two inseparable aspects of Guru Nanak's spiritual philosophy.

REFERENCES

1. AGGS=Aad Guru Granth Sahib. 1983 (reprint). Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. (M = Mahla i.e. succession number of the Sikh Gurus to the House of Guru Nanak. M is replaced with the name of Bhagat /Bhatt for their Bani; p = page number of the AGGS).