

Guru Nanak - A Science In His Spirituality

—Dr. D. P. SINGH

Guru Nanak occupies a unique place amongst the spiritual leaders, reformers and saints of India. His teachings have a universal appeal and they hold good for all ages. He was a great thinker, a wonderful mystic and a distinguished social reformer. He was a revolutionary prophet, a litterateur of high calibre and a person of extraordinary foresight. In addition to all this, Guru Nanak was a prophet with a scientific attitude.

A person endowed with a scientific attitude tries to find out the cause and the rational justification of an event objectively. He is free from all prejudices and make-beliefs. The attitude of questioning the established irrational beliefs, superstitions and illogical traditions is a typical characteristic of such a person. He is willing to forsake authority and the security it brings, in his search for truth. He has a firm faith in the right to question and be questioned by others. A dogmatic attitude reflects a mind that belongs to the past, in that, it is closed to any new experiences that the present might bring. A scientific mind is anything but dogmatic.¹

Guru Nanak exhibited an anti-dogmatic attitude even in his childhood. On his tenth birthday, his father Mehta Kalu had arranged Nanak's *Janeu* ceremony² with customary, festivity. When the family priest moved forward to Nanak with *Janeu* in his hands, 'the boy caught the thread with his hand and asked the priest what he was doing, and what advantage there was to put a thread of that description on him.' The priest replied that "the *janeu* was the basis of the Hindu religion, that without it a man would only be a *shudhra* (a low caste) and that by putting it on, greatness should be obtained in this world and happiness in the next". Nanak appears to have been expecting this because he immediately came out with the rejoinder.³:

Daya kapah santokh sut Jat gandhi sat vat.

Ih Janeu ji ka hai ta pande ghat.

Na ih tute na mal lage na ih jale na jai.

Dhan so manas Nanaka jo gal chale pai.

Chaukarh mul anaya beh chauke paiya.

Sikha kan chadaia gur brohmin thia.

On moa oh jhad paiya vetage gaiya.

From Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS),

(Asa di Var, Salok Mahala I.p. 471)

Out of the cotton of compassion, Spin the thread of contentment; Tie the knot of continence; Give it the twist of virtues; Make such a sacred thread, O Pundit, for your innerself. Such a thread will neither break, nor get soiled, burnt, or lost. Blessed is the man, O Nanak, who makes it a part of life. This cotton thread, for a penny you buy, sitting in a square, mud plastered, and you put it around the necks of others. In the ears some words you whisper, O Brahmin, and claim to be spiritual teacher! With the death of the wearer falls the thread, Thus without the thread he departs from the earth!

In spite of the attempts of Pandit Hardayal to prevail upon Nanak to accept the *janeu* in the name of religion, Nanak did not accept the thread and pointed out the hypocritical nature of the ceremony by saying,

'Tag na indri tag na nari. Bhalke thuk pve nit darhi.

Tag na pairi tag na hathi, tag na jehva tag na akhi.

Vetaga ape vate. Vat dhage avra ghatte.

Lai bhad kare viaho. Kadh kagal dase raho.

Sun vekho loka iho vidan. Man andha nao sujan.'

There is no string for the sexual organ, there is no string for the women to restrain themselves; so that man everyday disgraces his beard. There is no string for the feet, there is no string for the hands; There is no string for the tongue; there is no string for the eyes; without such strings the Brahmin wandereth away. He twists strings for the neck and putteth them on others. He charges price for performing marriage ceremonies. He putteth out a scroll, and showeth the fate of the wedded pair. Hear and see, ye people, it is strange that, 'while mentally blind, a man is called wise.

Thus the creative and questioning mind of Nanak comes out clearly from the above episode of his life. It is this attitude that forms the essence of both science and 'true religion'. The very premise of science, by its definition, condemns belief in authority, be it scientific or theological.

A custom introduced for whatever reason may be, over a long period becomes a superstition or a mere ritual. A true scientific spirit has no place for superstitions and sentimental beliefs. The life of Guru Nanak was a powerful protest against superstitions and narrowness of all kinds.

This is seen in his actions at Kurukshetra and Hardwar.

During his first *udasi* Guru Nanak and Mardana went to attend the fair in connection with the solar eclipse at Kurukshetra², considered holy because of its association with the Mahabharata. On that day, Kurukshetra would attract a large number of pilgrims and Nanak did not want to miss the opportunity of exposing the taboos and shams introduced by the priests to increase the revenues so as to fill their coffers.

On reaching Kurushetra, Nanak immediately made himself conspicuous by choosing to fight "the holy" on a point, which was sure to agitate them very much. Macauliffe says that Guru Nanak actually cooked a deer, which a disciple had presented to him. When the Brahmans objected to cooking during the solar eclipse and that too the cooking of flesh, Guru Nanak invited all the Brahmans for discussion on their "horror at the use of flesh" by declaring,

*'Gainda mar hom jag kie devtian ki bane,
Mas chhode bais nak pakdai rati manas khane'
(Var Malhar Ki, SGGS, p. 1289)*

It was the custom of gods to kill rhinoceroses, roast them and feast upon them. They who forswear flesh and hold their noses when near it, devour men at night.

He further elaborates,

*'Mas Purani mas Katabin chauh jug mas kamana.
Jaj kaj vihar suhave othai mas samana.'
(Var Malhar Ki, SGGS, p. 1290)*

Flesh is allowed in the Puranas, Flesh is allowed in the books of the Mussalmans: flesh hath been used in the four ages. Flesh adorneth sacrifice and marriage functions; flesh hath been associated with them.

Then he made use of the people's focus on him to explain "that the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars were all suspended in the air, ever moving and running on their natural course. The eclipses were nothing but natural shadows on the light of the sun and the moon. He emphasized that the custom of making offerings on the occasion was nothing beyond a selfish invention of the priests to increase their own revenues. To hammer home the point that the Brahmans were completely ignorant, Nanak told the Pandit (who was claiming the greatest learning and who was the most voluble on abstaining from flesh) that he was wasting

his energy in foolish squabbles. Point was not that you must eat flesh or must not eat flesh. Real point was whether you lived for fun & tastes alone or for deeper meaning of life. He said,

*'Mas mas kar murakh jhagre gian dhian nahin janen.
Kaun mas kaun sag kahave kis mehn pap samanen.*

Fools wrangle about flesh, but know not divine knowledge or meditation on God. They know not what is flesh, what is vegetable or in what sin consisteth.

Adding further:

*Ap na bujhe lok bujhae pande khara siana.
Pande tu janai hi nahin kithon mas upanna.
Toio ann kamad kapahan toio tribhavan ganna.
Toa akhe haun baho bidh hachha toae bahut bikara.
Ete ras chhod hove sanniasi Nanak kahai vichara.
(Var Malhar Ki, SGGS, p. 1289-90)*

Thou understandest not thyself, yet thou instructest others; O Pandit thou art very wise! O Pandit, thou knowest not from what flesh hath sprung; Corn, sugarcane, and cotton are produced from water, from water the three worlds are deemed to have sprung. Water saith, 'I am good in many ways', Many are the perversions of water. If thou abandon the relish of such things, thou shall be real good recluse, saith Nanak wisewords.

From Kurukshetra, Guru Nanak left for Hardwar. Here also, he drew the attention of the people gathered at that place in great numbers, to himself with a seemingly innocent act, but which really amounted to a challenge to one of the age-old practices and find real meaning of life.

He quietly walked into the waters of the Ganges and instead of throwing water towards the East, as others were doing, put his hands together to form a cup and began to throw water towards the West. Almost all those who saw him doing that, gathered around him to enquire of him the reason of that unusual behaviour.

He replied that he was trying to send water to his fields at Talwandi, so that they might remain green and not dry up. Obviously when he made that reply, he meant to hammer into their heads the futility of the practice of trying to propitiate the Sun god for the salvation of one's ancestors by throwing water towards the East, and by implication and extension the hollowness of most of the religious rituals, observances and practices.

As in the ethos of science, a person of scientific vision has the capacity to challenge established theories/customs if they happen to conflict with facts of life. During his stay at Puri, Guru Nanak spoke against the efficacy of the Padamasna in winning the Lord. He exposed the claim of the Brahman "who kept his eyes and nose closed" and claimed that "in that state he with his mental eyes saw the secrets of the world". Guru Nanak hid the Brahman's *lota* while he was in the *asna*. When the Brahman, on opening his eyes, could not find the *lota*, he witted him on "his want of omniscience" as:

*'Ant seti nak pakdeh soojhate tin lo.
Magar pachai kach na sujhe iho padam alo.'*
(Rag Dhansari Mahala I, SGGS, p. 663)

Thou closest thy nose with thy thumb and the first two fingers, and sayest that thou seest the three worlds; But thou seest not what is behind thee! This is a strange Padam Aasan of Yoga!

Guru Nanak exhibited a scientific temper and discipline in all his dealings. He was against supernatural powers and superstitious customs. His reaction to such customs forms a very interesting and delectable fare.

During medieval times, the woman to whom a child was born was considered ceremonially impure and unclean for ten days. The period of impurity, popularly known as *sutak*⁴, was different, for women of different castes. During the period of *sutak* (impurity), the woman was not permitted to touch any vessel or to cook food in the kitchen. Even the very touch of women in *sutak* was supposed to defile all the cooked food, making it impure for consumption. Similarly for ten days (the exact number varying according to caste rules), the family and the house in which the death occurred was considered to be ceremonially impure. The period of impurity was popularly known as *patak*. During *patak*, no food was cooked or fire burnt in the hearth and the relations provided the family with subsistence. The family slept on the floor on a bed of leaves. During all the ten days certain ceremonies were performed to help the soul of the deceased to reach its destination.

Guru Nanak was very critical of such futile and superstitious practices prevalent in the society. He strongly condemned the idea of *sutak/patak* and said³,

*If we admit the idea of impurity by birth or death,
impurity will be found in everything.
There are worms in dung and wood;
There is no grain of corn without life.
Water is the primary element of life,
by which everything is made fresh and green.
How can we keep away this impurity?
It will enter into our kitchens.
Nanak, we cannot remove impurity in this way;
It can be washed away by true knowledge.*
(Asa di Var, SGGS, p. 472)

He further elaborated,

*Sabho sutak bharam hai duje lage jaie,
jaman marna hukam hai bhane aave jaie.
Khana pina pavitar hai ditone rijak sambahai.
Nanak, jini gurmukh bujhia tina sutak nahe.*

All such contracted with touch is superstitious. Birth and death are ordained; we come and go by His will. All eating and drinking, which God gave as sustenance, is pure. Nanak, those who have realized this through the Guru do not believe in this impurity.

A stereotype is essentially a myth that gains in strength and creditability due to its acceptance on a socio-cultural level. Stereotyping is a common malaise in all social systems, affluent or otherwise. Stereotyping occurs when particular attributes or qualities are abstracted and applied on a general scale, and allowed to perpetuate over a relatively long period of time. For example, when it is said that, 'A woman's place is in the kitchen,' a particular activity, viz., cooking, has been abstracted and isolated as the singularly most important duty of a woman, thereby creating a stereotype. The woman is then expected to play the role of a housewife, regardless of her other capabilities. Science and technology have been instrumental to a large extent, in weakening some rigidly held stereotypes (such as, women are inferior to men in all respects' and 'woman is a child-bearing non-entity' etc.), particularly in the emancipation of women¹.

During medieval times⁴, several stereotypes such as 'a woman is a living picture of lust and sexual gratification', 'the common sense of a woman lies in her heels', 'animals, beasts, rustic (vulgar), *Shudhras* and women need constant censor' and 'women may never be allowed in religious deliberations' were prevalent. Guru Nanak vehemently

defended woman against those who insisted on relegating her to an inferior position merely on the basis of her sex. He gave back to the woman her personal share in the domain of religion. Guru Nanak's path of salvation was open to women. In this sense, she was certainly placed at par with man, just as the *Shudhra* was placed at par with the Brahmin. In *Asa di Var*, he says :

*It is by woman, the condemned one, (that we are conceived),
and from her that we are born;
It is with her that we are betrothed and married.
It is woman we befriend and (she who keeps the race going).
When one woman dies, another is sought for;
and it is with her that we get established (in the society).
Why should we call her evil, from whom great men are born?
It is also from the woman that women are born;
there is nobody who is not born of woman.
Nanak, only the one Ultimate Truth, God is independent of woman.*

(Asa Di Var, SGGGS, p. 473).

Thus Guru Nanak played a vital role in opposing and weakening many rigidly held stereotypes of the medieval society. The pragmatic response of Guru Nanak to the prevalent stereotypes confirms his scientific bent of mind.

J. Arthur Thompson, a renowned scientist and author in his book. *Introduction to Science* remarked, "Science is not wrapped up with any particular body of facts, it is characterised as an intellectual attitude. It is not tied down to any particular methods of inquiry, it is simply critical thought, which admits conclusion only when they are based on evidence." Similarly to quote Eric Ashby, "The greatest single contribution which scientific thinking has made, is to set Man free from despotic authority in intellectual matters." In this perspective Guru Nanak's life and his ordained systematic & scientific Godly way of life confirms his critical thought, intellectual attitude and revolt against meaningful authority. In the light of the above discussion, it is concluded that Guru Nanak exhibited a scientific spirit in his spiritual life as well as in his dealings with the world.

REFERENCES

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Through the culture of science man has opened into new horizons of knowledge, into deeper truths of Nature. But since he has not been able to attain sufficient psychological development, he has failed properly to manipulate the vast potencies of the universal Force released by science, with the result that they are made to satisfy the insensate earth-grabbing of power-intoxicated peoples, and the whole world is thrown into a vortex of the dark Forces.

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