

Guru Nanak and Sikhism - Issues In News

Relevance of the topic:

On November 12, 2019, the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism was celebrated throughout the world. It is called variously as Guru Nanak Dev Ji GURPURAB or Guru Nanak's Prakash Utsav and Guru Nanak Dev Ji Jayanti. The celebrations also coincided with the opening of the 'Kartarpur corridor' just a few days before the celebrations.

Introduction:

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak, some 550 years ago. He was followed by 9 other gurus. Each of the ten masters added to and reinforced the message taught by the previous, eventually resulting in the creation of the religion that is now called *Sikhism*. Sikhism is open to all, through the teachings of its ten Gurus, enshrined in the Sikh Holy Book, *Adi Granth* or *Guru Granth Sahib* (GGS). The sacred volume has been accorded the status of a 'juristic person' by the Supreme Court of India.

The GGS contains 1430 pages and is a collection of devotional hymns and poetry which proclaims God, lays stress on meditation on the 'True Guru'(God) and lays down moral and ethical rules for development of the soul, spiritual salvation and unity with God. The writings of the Gurus appear chronologically. Each of the Gurus signed their hymns as *Nanak*. GGS has 3,384 hymns, of which Guru Nanak contributed 974 hymns including *sloks* and *pauris*, Guru Angad contributed 62 *sloks*, Guru Amar Das contributed 907 hymns including *sloks* and *pauris*, Guru Ram Das contributed 679 hymns including *sloks* and *pauris*, Guru Arjan Dev contributed 2,218 hymns including *sloks* and *pauris*, Guru Tegh Bahadur contributed 59 hymns and 56 *sloks*, while Guru Gobind Singh contributed one *slok*. It also contains *Bhagtas* of Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, Sheikh Farid, Trilochan, Dhanna, Beni, Sheikh Bhikan, Jaidev, Surdas, Parmanand, Pipa and Ramanand.

The holy volume was compiled and ceremoniously installed in the inner sanctuary of the Harmandir (Golden Temple) by Guru Arjan (5th Guru) on Aug 16, 1604 and was appointed as Guru for perpetuity in 1708 by the Tenth Guru Gobind Singh just before he passed away terminating the line of personal gurus. Thus, the Sikhs accord the *Guru Granth Sahib* the same respect and reverence as they did to the human form Gurus and derive their guidance and inspiration from it. Since then, the GGS has unequivocally been their sole sovereign.

According to the Sikh Gurudwaras Act, 1925, 'Sikh means a person who professes the Sikh religion'. The official Sikh ethical code known as the *Rahit Maryada* defines a Sikh as: 'Any

human being who faithfully believes in i) One Immortal Being, ii) Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Sahib to Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, iii) The Guru Granth Sahib, iv) The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus and v) The baptism bequeathed by the Tenth Guru; and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion, is a Sikh'.

1. Guru Nanak

Early Life of Nanak:

Nanak was born in Talwandi (now known as Nankana Sahib in Pakistan) in undivided Punjab on October 20, 1469, about 550 years ago and he subsequently birthed the Sikh religion. His mother; Tripta, was a pious woman, and his father, Kalyan Chand, worked as an accountant for the local Muslim landlord. He was named after his elder sister, Nanaki. When he grew up he went to live with his sister, Nanaki and her husband, Jairam, in Sultanpur Lodi, to work for a Muslim employer. He was married to Sulakhni and had two sons, Sri Chand and Lakhmi Das.

In his twenties, he had a revelatory experience of the singular divine being-*Ikk Oan Kar*. He named that one as *Sat Nam*. Thereafter, he travelled with his Muslim companion Bhai Mardana, and at times with both Bhai Mardana and Bhai Bala to places far beyond Punjab such as Varanasi, Baghdad and even Mecca. They met holy men from diverse religious backgrounds. While Mardana strummed on his *rabab*, a divinely inspired Nanak would burst into song. Eventually, he settled in Kartarpur, a village he founded on the banks of the river Ravi. (The recently inaugurated Kartarpur Corridor connects the Dera Baba Nanak Sahib Gurdwara in India's state of Punjab to the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur shrine in Narowal district of Pakistan's Punjab province. It runs across the river Ravi. The Gurdwara Darbar Sahib was ordered by Maharaja of Patiala between 1921-1929).

A community of men and women calling themselves 'sikhs' (disciples or seekers) grew around him at Kartarpur and created the blueprint for Sikh doctrine and practice. In his own lifetime, he appointed a successor (Lahina who was renamed Angad), who was followed by 8 more, culminating with the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666-1708).

His Philosophy and teachings:

His philosophy is found in the 38 stanzas of the Japji, the opening hymn in the Guru Granth Sahib. While praising the transcendent one, Nanak denounced fasting, ritual bathing, pilgrimages, incarnation, idolatory, ascetic practices and their coordination with specific days, contingent on the movement of planets and called these acts a pretentious. He discarded traditional belief in horoscopes and astrological charts specifying special hours and days. He also did not elaborate on what happens after death unlike Hindu, Buddhist or Jain texts. According to Nanak, Man is not merely made in the image of 'God' but God seeks to see His own image in Man too. Being and becoming depend entirely on the divine glance.

And so according to Nanak, it is through actions that we win the Divine gaze and free ourselves from the cycle of birth and death.

He considered rituals as futile and highlighted truthful living amidst family and society on a daily basis. His message to everyone was to live sincerely by synchronizing their inner values with their outward behaviour. He gave importance to righteous action with stress on the divine name, generosity and routine of cleanliness (inner and outer). For Nanak the 5 senses can turn into *virtues* (truth, contentment, compassion, righteousness and patience) or into *vice* (lust, anger, greed, attachment and pride), hence the need to rein in the senses.

Nanak was the founder of the 3 important socio-religious institutions of Sikhism namely, *seva* (voluntary service), *sangat* (congregation) and *langar* (community meal) apart from the *guru*. He initiated a new alphabet (Gurmukhi) and appointed a successor (Guru Angad) during his own lifetime which demonstrates his resolve to establish his legacy. Guru Angad developed and standardized the script, and it is widely used by Sikhs.

Nanak's teachings are primarily in the Punjabi language. He also used a variety of local languages like Siraiki (the language of south west Punjab), Khari Boli (the language of the Delhi region and the basis of Hindi and Urdu) apart from Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. He identified himself as a 'songster' (dhadhi) and as a 'poet' or 'seer' (shair).

His compositions are found in the form of four-stanza (caupada), eight stanzas (ashtpadi), four stanzas of six verses (chhant) and even sixteen-stanzas (solaha). The Japji is regarded as his 'single greatest composition'. His other compositions include Pahare, Barah Mah (Barahmasa), Thintin, Pati Likhi, Dakhni Oankar, Siddha Gosht etc. Kuchaji and Suchaji are unique Nankian compositions. His Babarvani hymns briefly describes Babar's rule in India after overthrowing the Lodis. The *Akbarnama* written by *Abul Fazl*, one of Akbar's courtiers records that the emperor even paid a visit to the Sikh Guru. To spread his teachings, he adapted the narrative style of the folk ballad (Var). Ragas like Majh and Tukhari were invented by him. From his expansive writing we come to know of his awareness about myth, history, society, economics, body and psychology.

Sikhs believe that God is monistic or non-dual. He is the creator of the universe, whose existence and continued survival depends on His will. God is both Saguna (with attributes) and Nirguna (without attributes) and is called by names such as Sat (truth), Sat Guru (true Guru), Akal Purkh (timeless being), Kartar (creator) and Wahi-Guru (praise to the God). Sikhism does not believe in the incarnation of God in human form. However, belief in the ten Gurus or spiritual guides is the essential element of Sikhism. It disapproves asceticism and self mortification as path to enlightenment. The only way to achieve liberation (mukti) from the cycle of birth and death is being God-conscious (gurmukh). Sikhs follow the path of japa i.e., recitation of hymn, devotional prayers (keertan) and singing the names of God (Nam Simran).

Other Gurus: Their Contributions

2. Guru Angad:

Earlier known as Lahina, Guru Nanak renamed him Angad and appointed him as his successor. Nanak in his life time had initiated a new alphabet (Gurmukhi). Guru Angad developed and standardized the Gurmukhi script which became the script of the masses very soon. The GGS is written in the Gurmukhi script and this scripture became the basis of the Punjabi language too. Guru Angad was known for his self-less service and showed the masses the way to devotional prayers. He was responsible for increasing literacy as he opened a number of schools for children. For the youth he started '*Mall Akhara's (gymnasiums)*', where physical and spiritual training was imparted. He wrote the first biography of Guru Nanak after collecting the facts from Bhai Bala (*Bhai Bale Wali Janamsakhi*). He wrote 62 sloks that were included in GGS. He popularized and expanded the institution of 'Guru Ka Langar' (free community kitchen) started by Guru Nanak.

3. Guru Amardas:

Guru Amardas fought against caste prejudices, caste restrictions and untouchability. He further strengthened the tradition of Guru Ka Langar and promoted social equality by asking his followers, irrespective of their socio-economic background to partake meals together. He introduced the *Anand Karaj* marriage ceremony for the Sikhs, replacing the Hindu form. He also completely abolished amongst the Sikhs, the custom of Sati and Purdah (veil).

4. Guru Ramdas:

Guru Ram Das founded the city of Amritsar and started the construction of the famous Sri Darbar Sahib or Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) at Amritsar on the land donated by Emperor Akbar. The lake adjoining the temple was also dug up during his time. He requested the, Muslim Sufi, Mian Mir to lay the cornerstone of the Sahib. The temple remains open on all sides and at all times to everyone which indicates that the Sikhs believe in One God who has no partiality for any particular place, direction or time. The Sikh marriage ceremony (Anand Karaj) is centered on the *Lawan*, a four stanza hymn composed by Guru Ram Das. The marriage couple circumscribe the Guru Granth Sahib as each stanza is read. The first round is the Divine consent for commencing the house holders life through marriage. The second round states that the union of the couple has been brought about by God. In the third round the couple is described as the most fortunate as they have sung the praises of the Lord in the company of saints. In the fourth round the feeling of the couple that they have obtained their hearts desire and are being congratulated is described.

5. Guru Arjan Dev:

Guru Arjan Dev was the third son of Guru Ram Das. He was a saint-cum-scholar and

compiled the Adi Granth and wrote the Sukhmani Sahib. To make it a universal teaching, he included in it, hymns of Muslim saints as well those of low-caste pariah saints who were never permitted to enter various temples. He also completed the construction of Sri Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) at Amritsar. He became the first great martyr in Sikh history when Emperor Jahangir ordered his execution.

6. Guru Hargobind:

Guru Hargobind was the son of Guru Arjan and was known as a 'soldier saint'. He organised a small army with the belief that extreme non-violence and pacifism would only encourage evil and that it was necessary to take up the sword in order to protect the weak and the oppressed. Thus, he was first of the Gurus to take up arms to defend the faith. At the age of 13, Guru Hargobind erected the *Sri Akal Takhat Sahib*, ten feet above the ground (during those days only kings and emperors were allowed to sit on a raised platform, called a takhat or throne) and adorned two swords, Miri and Piri, representing temporal and spiritual power. He built the famous fort of Lohgarh. He rebelled against Emperor Jahangir who imprisoned him for 10 years and later released him.

7. Guru Har Rai:

A man of peace, he spent most of his time in meditation and preaching the teachings of Guru Nanak. But he never disbanded the armed Sikh Warriors (Saint Soldiers), who earlier were maintained by his grandfather, Guru Hargobind. He always boosted the military spirit of the Sikhs but never personally indulged in any direct political or armed controversy with the Mughals. He cautiously avoided conflict with Emperor Aurangzeb and continued the grand task of nation building initiated by Guru Hargobind.

8. Guru Har Kishan:

Guru Har Kishan was the youngest of the gurus and became Guru at the age of 5 years. He astonished the Brahmin Pundits with his knowledge and spiritual powers. He died of smallpox at the age of 8 yrs while serving and healing the epidemic-stricken people in Delhi. He was nicknamed '*Bala Pir*' (child prophet) by the local muslim population who were impressed with his purely humanitarian service. To the Sikhs he became a symbol of service, purity and truth.

9. Tegh Bahadur:

Guru Tegh Bahadur was born at Amritsar and founded the town of Anandpur. He took the title of 'Sachcha Padshah' or True Sovereign. He was a firm believer in the right of people to the freedom of worship and opposed the policy of forcible conversion of the Hindus by Emperor Aurangzeb. On his refusal to convert to Islam he was tortured and killed in 1675. Later, the Sikhs built a Gurudwara to mark the site of his martyrdom (Gurudwara Shishganj,

10. Guru Gobind Singh:

Guru Gobind Singh became Guru after the martyrdom of his father Guru Tegh Bahadur. He created the concept of '*Khalsa*' (the Pure) on the Baisakhi day of April 13, 1699 at Anandpur Sahib, changing the Sikhs into a saint-soldier order with special symbols and sacraments for protecting themselves. He established this new fraternity with 5 followers (later known as Panj Pyares), who were baptized with amrit as Khalsas. The Khalsa symbolised coalescence of serenity and strength, purity and power, shaastra (scripture), shastra (weapon), jnana shakti (power of wisdom) and kriya shakti (power of action). It was made obligatory for every Sikh to wear the Five K's-Kesha (long hair), Kangha (comb), Kara (steel bracelet), Kaccha (short drawers) and Kirpan (sword). He gave the Sikhs the suffix Singh (lion) and Kaur (princess). He fought many battles against the armies of Aurangzeb and his allies. He lost his parents and 4 sons to Mughal tyranny. The *Zafarnama* is the letter written by the Guru to Aurangzeb in which he indicted the Grand Mughal with his treachery and godliness, after which the attacks against the Guru and his Sikhs were called off. On October 3, 1708, Guru Gobind Singh appointed Guru Granth Sahib as the Guru and decreed: "*Let all bow before my successor, Guru Granth. The Word is the Guru now.*" He supported Muazzam (later Bahadur Shah I) in the war of succession which followed Aurangzeb's death. The guru was assassinated at Nanded in Maharashtra in 1708.