

Guru Nanak: A Universal Prophet Without Borders

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Introduction

Why I add without borders in the title? We have Doctors without borders and Scientists without borders. But if we think of prophets, Guru Nanak qualifies to be the only one among prophets without borders! He travelled around the distant lands to preach his mission covering a distance of 28000 Miles in 28 years. Guru Nanak was ordained by God to preach the message of true divinity throughout the world. He was neither invited by any nor was he paid for this 28 year long trip. There were no Passports or Visas required for this journey. The passports were not generally required for international travel until the first world war. It was in the early 20th century that passports as we would recognise them today began to be used. The first modern British passport, the product of the British Nationality and Status Aliens Act 1914, consisted of a single page, folded into eight and held together with a cardboard cover [1].

Guru Nanak was born on April 15, 1469 at Rai Bhoi Ki Talvandi (present day Nankana Sahib, now in Pakistan). He was a precocious child who would spend most of his time in meditation. He was tutored by a Pundit and then a Maulvi both in Sanskrit and Persian, respectively. He challenged his teachers to teach him the meanings of Alphabets? When the teacher, Pundit Gopal, failed to explain, Nanak wrote some verses in the form of an acrostic, and showed them to his teacher. He was taken aback by what he saw written on the wooden slate (*Patti* or *Takhti*).

Nanak was said to be a precocious child with particular insights into religious teachings and philosophy. He would spend time alone in meditation and was living in isolation even as a child. Although he had a deep interest in religion, he also had a rebellious streak, not always accepting religious dogma. For example, at the age of ten, boys of his age are supposed to wear a sacred thread of being from a Hindu (Bedi) caste. But, Nanak refused to wear the thread (*Janeau*), if it is not made of mercy, contentment, continence and truth, and will not last till the end; arguing that caste should not be used as a means of judging a person. Nanak would often debate with religious pundits about the nature of God and true religious practice.

Guru Nanak taught that God was beyond religious dogma and external definition. He said he would follow neither the Muslim nor Hindu religion, but just God's path. He taught 'there is no Muslim, no Hindu'. This was of social significance because of the political and social conflict between Islam and Hinduism at that time. During his lifetime, Guru Nanak attracted followers from the Hindu, Muslim, and other religious traditions. Thus the Path of Righteousness that he showed to the peoples of the world as a divine gift of his Revelation was enthusiastically adopted by them, so much so that they did everything possible to disseminate far and wide its Pragmatic Spirituality, with love, care, reverence, material, and moral support [2].

Guru Nanak's advent into the mortal world is a divine blessing because he came along with a burning desire to spread the Message of God to all peoples inhabiting the globe who were groping in the dark, and stumbling time and again in the midst of meaningless rituals and

rites which the leaders of various religions misused to exploit teeming millions' innocence and gullibility. As Bhai Gurdas has aptly remarked Guru Nanak "*rose to accomplish emancipation of the whole world*". This is amply demonstrated in the long Missionary Journeys [*Udasis*] that the Guru embarked upon and travelled for over 28 years covering an incredible distance of 28,000 Miles. He and his lifelong companion Bhai Mardana travelled largely on foot through uncharted terrains, dreaded forests, under frightfully inhospitable conditions and circumstances. He is the most travelled Prophet in world history who fulfilled to a large extent Lord God's Edict-Fiat [*Hukm*] to turn misguided Humankind towards Divinity.

Odysseys (*Udasis*) of Guru Nanak

After his marriage, Nanak moved to Sultanpur Lodhi where Bebe Nanaki, elder sister of Nanak was married. He was inducted into the service of Nawab Daulat Khan Lodhi, as a Store Keeper (I/c *Modikhana*). One day, Nanak went for a bath in the rivulet *Kali Bein* but did not return for 3 days. When he returned, he was a transformed man who had received a vision of God and commanded to lead people to the true path of religion beyond religious dogma. His first sermon was '*there is no Muslim, no Hindu*' which was significant because of the political and social conflict between Islam and Hinduism at the time.

In his *First Udasi*, Guru Nanak covered the east of India and returned home after spending about six years. He started from Sultanpur in 1499, and went to his village Talwandi to meet and inform his parents about his long journey. The old parents wanted comfort and protection from their young son and persuaded him not to go. However, he convinced them of his divine mission by saying that it was God's command that I must travel in various directions in the country and abroad to spread His message to innumerable people who were in dire need of spiritual solace, love, and salvation. The Guru pleaded with his parents for their blessings to undertake the onerous task, "There is a call from Heaven that I must go and I ask for your blessings." With their permission he set out on his first travel of God-assigned Humane Mission.

- During his first journey (1499-1507): Guru Nanak covered most parts of present day India and Pakistan.
- Second journey (1507-1514): Guru Nanak visited most parts of South India and present day Sri Lanka.
- Third journey (1514-1518): Guru Nanak travelled to the North passing through places like Kashmir, Nepal, Sumer Parbat, Tibet and Sikkim in the Himalayas.
- Fourth Journey (1519-1521): He travelled to the West, visiting places like Mecca, Medina, Baghdad and most other parts of the Middle East.
- He was accompanied by Bhai Mardana (a Muslim) in most of his journeys.

Guru Nanak returned to Kartarpur where he put aside his attire of a hermit. He was engaged in farming to earn his livelihood. Putting on a householder's dress, he sat on a cot and executed his mission. The daily prayers based on the recitation of the compositions of the Guru, followed by the *langar*, which involved communal cooking and sharing food, served as agencies of internal solidarity as well as distinction from others such as Shaivites, Vaishnavites, Shaktas, Sufis, and Sunnis. Thus Guru Nanak saved the people from the clutches of tantra, mantra and Atharvaveda.

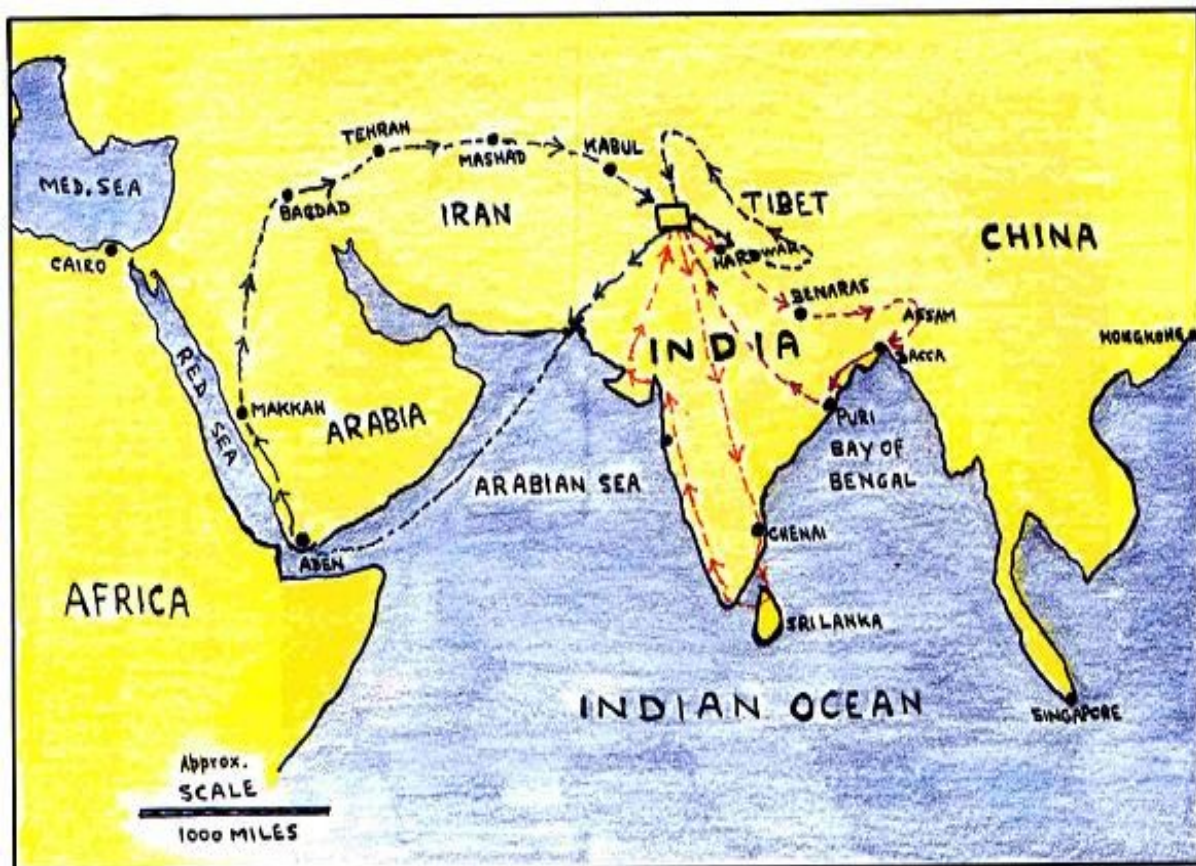


Fig. 1: Route Map of Guru Nanak's Journeys during his four *Udis* (Wikipedia).



Fig. 2: Guru Nanak on his way to Mecca during 4th *Udi* (Source: *Tajjudin Diary*)

Guru Nanak's Revolutionary Teachings

Puran Singh [3] emphasises in his preface of "Spirit of the Sikh": "Guru Nanak embodied in himself a revolution – religious, social and political. It is remarkable that he invokes no concept God. He calls forth the great one cosmic spirit of the universe. Guru Nanak was not understood, since the whole country was steeped in religious ignorance and superstition. It is remarkable that the Guru's mind was modern in outlook and he abhorred the outworn forms of religiosity".

One of the prominent features of Guru Nanak's teachings is the overwhelming concern in it of a humanitarian, compassionate attitude towards all humanity, which militates against cruelty, and injustice and thus aims at the establishment of a just society. The rich aristocracy and the unjust rulers have been criticised vehemently for their malafide actions. Guru Nanak identifies himself with the poorest of the poor [4]:

ਨੀਚਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਨੀਚ ਜਾਤਿ, ਨੀਚੀ ਹੂ ਅਤਿ ਨੀਚੁ।
ਨਾਨਕੁ ਤਿਨ ਕੈ ਸੰਗਿ ਸਾਥਿ, ਵਡਿਆ ਸਿਉ ਕਿਆ ਰੀਸ।
ਜਿਥੇ ਨੀਚ ਸਮਾਲੀਅਨਿ, ਤਿਥੇ ਨਦਰਿ ਤੇਰੀ ਬਖਸੀਸ ॥

*Nanak seeks the company of the lowest of the low class, the very lowest of the low.
Why should he try to compete with the great? In that place where the lowly are cared for,
there, the Blessings of Your Glance of Grace rain down.*
(SGGS, M. 1, P.15)

Guru Nanak has expressed deep anguish at the prevailing evil and injustice in society, which he has expressed through the symbol of dark night [5]:

ਕਲਿ ਕਾਤੀ ਰਾਜੇ ਕਸਾਈ ਧਰਮੁ ਪੰਖ ਕਰਿ ਉਡਰਿਆ।
ਕੂੜਿ ਅਮਾਵਸ ਸਚੁ ਚੰਦਰਮਾ ਦੀਸੈ ਨਾਹੀ ਕਹ ਚੜਿਆ।
ਹਉ ਭਾਲਿ ਵਿਕੁੰਨੀ ਹੋਈ। ਆਧੇਰੈ ਰਾਹੁ ਨ ਕੋਈ।
*The Dark Age of Kali Yuga is the knife, and the kings are butchers; righteousness has
sprouted wings and flown away.
In this dark night of falsehood, the moon of Truth is not visible anywhere.
I have searched in vain, and I am so confused; in this darkness, I cannot find the path.*
(SGGS, M. 1, P.145)

Guru Nanak preached against ritualism in society. He stressed on the truthful conduct of his followers, rather than visiting holy places or bathing on auspicious occasions to placate gods and goddesses. According to Guru Nanak [6] :

ਸਚੁ ਓਰੈ ਸਭੁ ਕੋ, ਉਪਰਿ ਸੱਚੁ ਆਚਾਰੁ।
Truth is higher than everything but higher still is truthful living.
(SGGS, M. 1, P. 62)

The most famous divine utterances attributed to Guru Nanak are: There is only ONE God without a second—omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient—and that all human beings can have direct access to Him with no need of getting into the rigmarole of meaningless rituals, and without the intervention of misleading priests. His most radical social exhortations denounced the caste system and stressed that all human beings are equal, regardless of their castes, creeds, colours, gender, self-avowed nationalities, cultural prejudices, and ethnic eccentricities.

Guru Nanak's teachings can be summed up as follows:

- *Guru Nanak's teachings contributed to the unity of Hindus and Muslims to some extent.*
- *He condemned slavery, racial discrimination, caste system and preached equality of all mankind.*
- *Guru Nanak contributed to women empowerment in India. Guru Nanak appealed to his followers to respect women and to treat them as their equal.*
- *Guru Nanak rejected asceticism and supported the lifestyle of a householder.*
- *He taught his followers the methods to attain salvation without recourse to any priests, dogmas, rituals and superstitions.*
- *Guru Nanak always stressed the inner spiritual awakening through Meditation on the Naam (Ultimate Reality).*

Guru Nanak was the first and last Prophet who pleaded for equality of both sexes. He wrote an Ode to Womanhood in *Asa di Var* [7]:

ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ ॥ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦੋਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ ॥ ਭੰਡੁ ਮੁਆ ਭੰਡੁ ਭਾਲੀਐ
ਭੰਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਬੰਧਾਨੁ ॥ ਸੋ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਊਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਝੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ
ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਏਕੋ ਸਚਾ ਸੋਇ ॥

From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all. O Nanak, only the True Lord is without a woman.

(SGGS, M. 1, P.473)

Relevance of Guru Nanak in Modern Scientific Era

In my presentation "Relevance of Guru Nanak in Modern Scientific Era" made on August 11 in San Jose under the aegis of Chardi Kalaa Foundation [8], I summed up my views as follows:

- *Guru Nanak's philosophy of interfaith understanding through dialogue is the only way to attain peace, progress, and unity in the world.*
- *It is imbued with a modern spirit, which finds its best expression in such values as democracy, pluralism, freedom, and individuality.*

- *Guru Nanak deals primarily with truths transcending the scientific or secular. It speaks of natural and supernatural truths, God and His creation, humanity and community, and social-cultural life.*
- *Guru Nanak used a logical and scientific approach based on bibek buddhi (intellect), revolted against futile rituals, superstitions and dogmas, and authoritarian rulers.*

A recent survey about *Belief in God* reported [9]: "Most Americans believe science and religion are incompatible, but a recent study suggests that scientific engagement can actually promote belief in God. These findings suggest that scientific engagement does not always erode belief in God. Instead, science-inspired awe can increase representations of God as a mystical cosmic force or as being beyond imagination". Harmony in Science and Guru Nanak Bani is a hallmark of Sikh faith and we need to project the teachings of Guru Nanak in a new paradigm [10].

In sharp contradistinction to the popular belief prevalent worldwide that Politics must not mingle with Religion, Guru Nanak Dev presented a global vision of a higher order of civilisation with his model fashioned from his Revelation in which Service of the teeming millions rather than Rule over helpless-hopeless-hapless humanity became the directive principle. He founded the Sikh Faith based on his Revelation as an ideal alternative of holistic living encompassing *Dharma, Artha, Kama*, hailing the life of a householder in which *Moksha* was possible to achieve through a committed enactment of the three-pronged formula: *Kirat Karo, Vand Chhako*, and *Naam Japo*. He brought about a bloodless revolution in which the paupers rose to be princes—and demonstrated by Maharaja Ranjit Singh how state could be politically administered by using the dictates of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* that is the socio-political and psycho-spiritual Constitution of the Sikh Faith [2].

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