**Nanak Dev: The Truth Seeker**

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Nanak Dev (1469-1539), the first Mentor of the Sikhs, was born toHindu parents on 15 April 1469, in a small village called Talwandi forty miles from Lahore, Pakistan. There are numerous anecdotes certifying that Nanak exhibited an unusual amount of maturity for his age. He was largely self-taught and very fond of asking incisive questions about Hindu rituals that he did not understand, often in a dramatic manner. He communicated with masses, confronting them with the absurdity of their wrong beliefs. Nanak once visited Benares considered holy by devout Hindus to bathe in the river Ganges. He saw folks pouring water with folded hands to the rising Sun, a ceremony called ‘Surya Namaskar,’ an offering to the dead ancestors. Nanak turned his back and started pouring water in the opposite direction. When questioned about his insane act, Nanak replied that he was watering his fields in the state of Punjab thousands of miles away. Asked to explain this folly, Nanak continued, “If you can throw water to the dead in Heaven, it should be easier for me to send water to a place on Earth.” There are several such examples of intuitive empiricism practiced by Nanak in search for the truth. Science the powerful tool to establish the verifiable truth did not exist then; Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) the father of modern scientific thought, was not born yet. He too practiced empiricism but with emphasis on precise measurements involving carefully designed experiments to disprove wrong inferences drawn by Aristotle (the teacher of Alexander the Great) using erratic thought processes; there are too many to be described here. Galileo invented the telescope making it possible to observe planets move in their orbits and study detailed features on the Sun such as the sunspots. Modern empirical science is a great accomplishment of our civilization and a gift to it. It is a process for evaluating many diverse ideas, weeding out those that fail necessary tests, and modifying those that need improvement. Sometimes the process may take a century or more. There is a crucial difference between Nanak and the modern empirical science approaches to the search for the truth. The scientific approach requires a mastery of Natural laws and availability of resources to build complex instruments to carry out crucial observations to search for the truth. This requires a peaceful civilized society, absent in India when Nanak lived.

The notion that ‘might is right’ was widely prevalent in Nanak era. At the age of 56 he witnessed Babar’s invasion of India from the northwest at Eimanabad, Pakistan. He saw first-hand the tyranny that followed the victory of the Mughals. He was so moved by the suffering of the masses and indiscriminate slaughter of the weak that he personally remonstrated with God as follows, “CREATOR! you belong equally to all. If a strong man were to attack and fight his equal, there need be no sorrow or anguish. But when a tiger destroys a herd of cattle, it is the Master of the victims WHO is held accountable for their destruction.” Other insights expressed by Nanak:

* Truth is higher than everything but truthful living is higher still.
* Where Self exists, God is not. Where God exists, there is no Self.
* One is conceived by a woman. One is born to a woman. To a woman one is

betrothed and married. It is a woman who is a friend and a partner in life. It is the woman who keeps the race going. Another companion is sought when the life-partner dies. Through women are established social ties. Why is then women to be considered a curse and condemned? From women are born leaders and rulers. From a woman alone is born another woman. There can be no human birth without women. Without women, sayeth Nanak, only the True One exists.

* Nanak’s definition of a true Muslim: “Let compassion be your mosque, faith

your prayer-mat and honest living your Koran; let modesty be your circumcision contentment your fast then you are a good Muslim. Let good deeds be your Kaaba and truth your prophet and let your prayer be for His grace; let your rosary be of His will, then sayeth Nanak the Lord will be your Protector.”

Nanak had two passions, namely the search for truth and empowerment of downtrodden masses (particularly women). He stressed that one should always seek the truth but there was no objective way to separate truth from untruth in Nanak era. To make matters worse, folks were uneducated since secular educational institutions did not exist. Rote learning of religious texts was the order of the day. One could not question veracity of thoughts dispensed by (mostly uneducated) priests. Since Nanak could not get satisfactory answers to his poignant questions locally, he spent fifteen years traveling all over India and the Mideast as far as Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the holy place of Muslims, indulging in sophisticated discussions with reputable scholars and philosophers along the way and keeping a meticulous record of the ensuing interactions. A Muslim musician Mardana (a childhood friend) was always by his side. When Nanak felt inspired to express a thought he would do so musically with Mardana playing the ‘Rakab’ (a crude string instrument); singing hymns in the Sikh place of worship (the Gurudwara) is a common practice. It must be emphasized that Nanak practiced mystic empiricism feeling inspired from time to time by thinking about the CREATOR and expressing the thoughts lyrically. Whenever Nanak encountered a complex situation, given a lack of real knowledge, he ascribed it to the WILL of the CREATOR whom he defined as, “One, absolute, unchanging, formless, omnipresent God in whom the TRUTH resides, devoid of fear, without enemies, timeless, unborn, Himself His Own Being.” He insisted that an appreciation of the CREATOR is only had by interactions with enlightened mentors. This is the essence of an all-inclusive, progressive faith practiced by Nanak’s students (Sikhs).

Since no certification is required to self-assume titles like Guru, Baba, Yogi, Pir, to claim the mantel of being an ‘enlightened mentor,’ charlatans feel empowered by Nanak’s assertion that appreciation of the CREATOR is only had by interactions with enlightened mentors. These charlatans mislead the Sikh community into embracing false beliefs, founding sects, factions, cults, etc. A recent notorious tragedy was staged by ‘Sant’ Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1947-1984) who fancied himself to be the ‘second’ coming of Gobind Singh (last Sikh Mentor). He led the Sikh community into a confrontation with the Government of India on some trumped-up grievances of the community from the campus of the Golden Temple in Amritsar; avoidable escalation led to heavy material losses to the Temple property including a library containing historic manuscripts and tragic deaths of countless ‘martyrs’ resulting in pain and suffering for a large number of families. The community should be on guard that such instances do not recur, denying the charlatans an opportunity to prey upon unsuspecting victims.

The Sikhs are advised to remember the Creator always, lead normal lives, raise families, earn livelihood through honest means, and share their largesse with the less fortunate ones. Nanak’s composition ‘*Japji’* (the meditation) contains 974 hymns. It forms the opening chapter of ‘*Adi Granth’* the holy book of the Sikhs. The hymns describe Nanak’s intuitive definition of the truth synonymous with the existence of the Creator. Nanak did not found a new faith nor did he organize a new community, instead he inspired a sense of equality and brotherhood for all, mostly Hindus and Muslims; there is no evidence that he was aware of the existence of Christians and Jews. Nanak spent the last fifteen years of life as a farmer at Kartarpur now in Pakistan. His followers came to be known as the SIKHS (students) who called Nanak ‘GURU’ (teacher). He was successful in bringing Hindus and Muslims together. Guru Nanak died at the age of 70 years. At the insistence of the Sikhs, he chose his devoted disciple Lehna his successor (ignoring his two sons) to continue to promote his teachings to the masses. This action by Nanak speaks volumes emphasizing merit over inheritance as a quality to be cherished in choosing ‘enlightened mentor’. Nanak founded a school with Lehna (Guru Angad) as the successor Mentor. Guru Angad invented the Gurmukhi script in which ‘*Adi Granth’*, composed by the fifth Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606), is written.

Like Nanak, Amar Das had an enquiring mind. He visited the places of Hindu pilgrimage every year and invited a stream of holy men to his house. Amar Das married Mansa Devi at the age of 23. They were blessed with two sons (Mohan and Mohari) and daughters (Dani and Bhani). His nephew was married to Guru Angad’s daughter Amro. One morning as he passed his niece-in-law’s house, he heard her singing Japji in a melodious voice. He lingered outside her house, intently listening to verses and was deeply moved at the wisdom contained in them. He asked Amro where did she learn those hymns. She told him that her father taught her Japji as she was growing up. Amar Das requested Amro to take him with her when she visited her father next. She accepted his request. When Amar Das arrived at Khadur, Guru Angad was delivering a sermon to the Sikhs. It had a calming effect on his restive mind. He felt that his life-long search for a Mentor was over. Amar Das was 63 years old when he met Angad. He took upon himself the daily routine of bathing Angad. Amar Das was anointed the third Sikh Mentor at the passing of Guru Angad (29 March 1552) at the age of 73, he lived to be 95. Guru Angad’s older son Datu was upset at hearing the news. He arrived at Goindwal while Amar Das was delivering a sermon to the masses. He rushed to where the Guru was seated and kicked him, accusing Amar Das of having usurped his inheritance. The Guru got up, touched Datu’s feet and said, “Your foot must have been hurt after it struck my hard-old bones! Please extend your leg so that I can massage your foot to assuage the pain.” The whole congregation broke into admiration for Amar Das. He was an important Sikh Mentor and made several memorable contributions to consolidate the Sikh faith, introducing lasting social reforms among Sikhs leading to a cultural and social revolution in Punjab. The marriage and death ceremonies were simplified by requiring that ‘gurbani’ be recited on such occasions. He forbade the practices of Purdah (women wearing veils) and SATEE in which widows threw themselves on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. He allowed widows to remarry and encouraged inter-caste marriages. Thereby, he strengthened the social structure of the Sikhs and turned them into a progressive community. At that time Sikhs were scattered all over India. In order to develop cohesion among these far-flung communities, Amar Das set up 22 local units called ‘MANGEES’ headed by a ‘Masand’ who acted as Guru’s agent to coordinate the religious activities and do missionary work. Women headed many such units, emphasizing an equality among Sikh men and women. He also strengthened the institution of Langar (community kitchen), requiring all Sikhs (himself included) to sit down on the floor in queues and eat meals together, irrespective of the caste, creed, color, gender or social status. Even Emperor Akbar had to go through this routine when he visited Amar Das at Goindwal on his way to Lahore. This tradition is unique to Sikhs. It leads to bonding among the community members. Amar Das turned the small town of Goindwal into an important Sikh pilgrimage center. He contributed 907 verses to Adi Granth, including ‘Anand Sahib’; they were written between the age of 73 when he became Guru and 95 when he passed on. He mentored Ram Das from a very young age to succeed him. Sikh beliefs took an institutional form under guidance of Ram Das and his younger son Arjan Dev who succeeded him; Guru-ship became hereditary following Guru Arjan, with a male member of the family always inheriting the title.

Ancient Greeks and Hindus wrongly believed that matter existed in five states, namely: Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Ether; the concept of elements as the building blocks of matter did not exist then. Aristotle (384-322 BC), the teacher of Alexander the Great, popularized this erroneous notion and Nanak inherited this insight from the Hindus who probably learned it from the Greeks when Alexander invaded India (323 BC). A choice of the four entities is interesting; Earth is solid, Water is liquid, Air is gas, Fire is plasma. Together they represent the four states of matter in the universe. The existence of Ether was invoked in several different contexts but was disproven in an important experiment in the 20th century. Sadly, Aristotle was a great philosopher but a very bad scientist!

According to Richard Feynman (Physics Nobel Laureate, 1965), “*Religion is a culture of faith; science is a culture of doubt.”* Doubts spur enquiring minds to search for the truth. The search must continue until doubts are overcome. Nanak was not the founder of a faith but an enlightened Mentor to the Sikhs. We live in a golden age of mankind when pen is mightier than sword. Humans are getting ready to colonize other worlds such as the Moon and Mars! Amazing discoveries being made in the pharmaceutical industry and 3D printing may make it feasible to manufacture human body parts in laboratories in not too distant future, making it possible for humans to live long, healthy, creative lives. The North Indians, Pakistanis, Afghans, Iranians and Turks are descended from the Aryans who routinely planned for a lifespan of over 100 years, neatly divided into bins of 25 years for specific roles in life for an age up to 100 years. This expectation is now becoming possible for the humans, globally; currently Japan has the largest percent of 100 year olds. The challenges posed by the artificial intelligence, nano-technology, genetic engineering would have amazed Nanak. But considering his passion for the search for truth, it may be stated that Nanak would be very pleased and satisfied if his students (the Sikhs) were to make great strides in uncovering the truth about how the universe came to be and where it is headed; at present science is only able to account for less than 5% of matter in the universe. I like to think if Nanak had the benefit of modern scientific insights, he may have defined the Creator differently and encouraged the Sikhs to pursue careers in science. He would have strongly encouraged them to acquire higher education in sciences and zealously pursue the ongoing search for the truth with gusto!