

# POLITICAL THOUGHT OF GURU NANAK

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## **Abstract**

***The paper addresses the view of Guru Nanak's thought regarding politics or Sikh view of politics. Politics as a basic and fundamental aspect of human life, no society can function properly unless it is bonded by some order. Just like the whole universe is bounded in a specific and proper order by the creator Himself. All though Guru Nanak was neither a politician or statesman nor participated directly or indirectly in any active politics. But His reactions to the contemporary political conditions have become the fountain head of his philosophy of politics. His concept has universal acceptability. His believes that an ideal political system or state should provide security to the people, fulfilment of peoples essential needs, deliverance of justice, safeguard of people's rights and for the protection of fraternity of all human beings. The paper also focusses on the relation between religion and politics, freedom of equality and no discrimination on the basis of religion.***

***Keyword: Guru Nanak, Politics, Religion, Ethics, Ideal State,***

## **1.INTRODUCTION**

Politics is regarded as one of the basic and fundamental aspect of human life. No society can function properly unless it is bounded by some order. For the betterment and welfare of any society, there is a need of a system and that system has been introduced by politics for the government of the society. Just like the whole universe is bounded in a specific and proper order by the creator Himself. Politics is not only indispensable but an essential part which can be used form for the betterment of any human society.

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion was the great humanitarian and there is no doubt about the fact that history will judge him as the most important person of the second millennium. Guru Nanak had the broadest vision and was a strong advocate of a global community. He was a man of peace and was always thinking over the betterment of society and unity of mankind. His message was based on the principle that there is only one creator. His message is not limited to any specific religion, caste, nation, race or colour but for the whole mankind. Guru Nanak unified people and came to liberate the oppressed and the downtrodden people of the earth. He was like a sun whose light dispelled the darkness of ignorance from the world.

Guru Nanak was not only a spiritual mentor but a social and religious thinker also. There is much misconception among people about him that He was merely a religious thinker and that He had nothing to do with political affairs of the people around him. Infact, He was neither a statesman nor a politician. He kept Himself aloof from active politics. He never coveted any political authority or power for himself but it is not necessary for a political thinker that he should also be a statesman or politician. Guru Nanak was, indeed, a great, liberal and enlightened thinker who attached due importance to all the positive aspects of human life. In fact, his reactions to the contemporary political conditions have become the fountain-head of his philosophy of politics. He was much aware of the politics of his times and was not satisfied with the political behaviour of the rulers of that time. That is why He was of the view to have such kind of political system or government which can be fruitful for the whole society.

Guru Nanak was primarily a social and religious thinker, but it is also suggested that even if he did not systematically probe into the affairs of the state it is possible to form an idea of his reaction to political authority.<sup>1</sup>Guru Nanak is such a political thinker in

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<sup>1</sup> J.S.Grewal, Guru Nanak in History,p.146

whose compositions, not only the contemporary political developments and turmoil but also his prompt reaction to them finds a reflection in abundance. In fact, his philosophy of politics can be studied only with reference to his contemporary political set-up.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore to understand Guru Nanak's philosophy of politics aright, it is necessary to have a view of the period in which he lived, what influenced his thinking and how he reacted to that influence "In the absence of reliable records of Guru Nanak's life, travels and encounters with people, we can understand all facts only by going to Guru Nanak's teachings also we can presume that he must have breathed his share of the religious, social and political atmosphere of the time and places in which he lived." Thus a clear understanding of the political, social and religious conditions prevailing immediately before and during Guru Nanak's times is essential for a proper understanding of his philosophy of politics.

## 2.POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS:

When Guru Nanak appeared on the scene in 1469 A.D., Delhi kingdom was being ruled by Bahlol-Lodhi, Sikandar Lodhi, Ibrahim Lodhi, and Babur. Sikandar Lodhi was a prosecutor of Hindus. Farishta remarks that he 'made a point of destroying all Hindu temples'.<sup>3</sup> Elliot and Dowson and according to Tarikh-i-Daudi, 'he utterly destroyed diverse places of worship of the infidel, and left not a vestige remaining of them'<sup>4</sup> It is also stated that he put a Brahman to death for the offence of saying that 'the religions of both Muslims and Hindus, if acted on with sincerity, were equally acceptable to God'<sup>5</sup>, such were the intolerant rulers of the times of Guru Nanak, but how he came into contact with the government organization? It seems probable that his contact with the machinery of the state was the period of his service at Sultanpur under Daulat Khan Lodhi. At this period it is also probable that Daulat Khan Lodhi might be trying for some higher position. The struggle for political ends on the one side by Daulat Khan Lodhi and on the other side, Guru Nanak's mind was agitated by spiritual queries and heard God's call to give his life for world uplift, guiding men on the right path to Him.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Khushwant Singh, Hymns of Guru Nanak, p. 19

<sup>3</sup> Briggs vol.I,P.586

<sup>4</sup> Vol.IV,P.477

<sup>5</sup> Briggs Vol. Iv p.464-465

Guru Nanak seems to have drawn moral and religious conclusions from the terrible incidents which he saw around him. In the fall of Lodhis, he saw.

Fraud is the king, Fraud are the subjects, Fraud are all the circumstances.

Fraud is the palace; Fraud are the very tall buildings,  
Fraud the indwellers.

Fraud is the gold, Fraud is silver,

Fraud is the weaver.<sup>7</sup>

Guru Nanak also points that leaders used to take possession of what belonged to others by the method of deceit as,

False is his speech and he usurps what is not his?

And yet he goeth to preach to others;

He, who himself is beguiled, will beguile his company too;

(But) such, Nanak, today are the leaders of men.<sup>8</sup>

So the political situation was in great turmoil\_ all were holding daggers in hands to cut the throats of the masters. Human values were lost. During that period, conflicts were everywhere and these conflicts have led to deeper introspection of the human soul with the ultimate result that truth, love and non-violence have received a fuller confirmation. Under this government, great tyrannies and barbarities were perpetrated against them. The people were disgusted of this rule but were terribly afraid of it. None dared raise a voice of protest against it. The government inflicted tortures upon the people but did not allow them even to have a sigh of distress. This government has been called by Guru Nanak wicked as it had failed to maintain good relations

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Ajit Singh Sikka, Facets of Guru Nanak's Thought,p.145-146

<sup>7</sup> ibid.

<sup>8</sup> ibid,p.148

with its subjects. The rulers had only contact with the upper class only. They had lost their character. The people too had forgotten God and only performed lip worship. The rulers and high officials squandered public wealth in self-indulgence. By plundering the poor, the rulers were buying their luxuries and comforts. For this reason also, the people were miserable and they wanted to come out of this situation. Corruption spread everywhere. There was anarchy and injustice everywhere. In short the Lodhi Government had become hollow from within. Brahmin leaders were anxious to please their masters. Nobody cared for poor masses. But the question naturally arises as to what kind of Government Guru Nanak wanted and what was his thought regarding politics:

### 3.POLITICAL THOUGH OF GURU NANAK:

The political thought of Guru Nanak starts with these fundamental principles :

#### **Sovereignty:**

Guru Nanak's philosophy, the ultimate Sovereignty rests with God Himself. He says:-

He alone is the lord, Immutable, holy...

Eternal His greatness.

He acts as is His pleasure-

Command Him none may!

Saith Nanak: He is the king of kings-

Abiding by His will is best.<sup>9</sup>

According to Guru Nanak, God, the True sovereign, pervades exists in all human beings, therefore an individual is a sovereign as well. But an individual is a member of Sangat also wherein he/she is equal, in status, with others and has equal rights for participation in all the proceedings of the sangat irrespective of his/her caste, colour, creed or sex. An individual is, thus,

an individual as well as unit of the Sangat. He/she enjoys the double status of this type.

But it is only in the Sat-Sangat, Sadh-Sangat or Sangat that God's presence in all beings can be perceived by one. Guru Nanak avers:-

In holy company is found the Lord, by devotion to Him through the Master's guidance.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Guru Nanak's concept of sovereignty is quite similar with that of popular sovereignty. The doctrine sovereignty implies that the supreme power in the state rests with the people. It is they alone who decide as to how the administrative machinery of a country has to be worked.

Rousseau also advocated the sovereignty of people. He took pains to show that sovereignty rests with general will, which is the will common to all the people. His view was that the repository of all the powers in the state, and the government was merely a servant who carried out the will of the state.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, God's presence in each being makes each individual equal to another. There is no distinction on the basis of one's caste, colour, Creed, Sex, race, birth or status etc. Since all beings are equal, therefore, everyone is individually sovereign according to Guru Nanak's concept of Sovereignty.

In the words of Dr Darshan Singh, "it is for the first time in the history of mankind that an individual is given so much recognition and importance. An individual is a ruler as well as ruled one. Each individual is thus a sovereign as well. It is in this context that later on the concept of king in every saddle came into being."<sup>12</sup>

### 4.FREEDOM AND EQUALITY:

Guru Nanak's concept of an ideal state is a not only his idea but a universal concept also in which freedom of conscience is upheld through cooperation and welfare of one another. In His idea, He gives so much stress on the thing that people should be given their right in every field, social justice should be prevailed, liberty to profess a religion of their own choice, equality and freedom of speech. It should be based on moral principles and the whole politics should be for the welfare of society. Freedom of thought, expression and freedom of speech

<sup>9</sup> Guru Nanak, Adi Granth,p.6

<sup>10</sup> ibid,p.905

<sup>11</sup> Paul Brunton, The spiritual Crises of Man,p.206

<sup>12</sup> Guru Nanak, Adi Granth,p.467

should be given to all the people. There should be no oppression, no military might, and no abuse of power.

The world is changing daily. In these circumstances, the people are blessed by the capacity given to them by Guru Nanak to have government according to their own wishes. In every case, the self-determination is needed in the brotherhood of man in every country of the world to run a smooth federation.<sup>13</sup>

Guru Nanak showed the way to freedom of speech against the cruelty of the rulers and preached freedom of religion to everyone. There should be no discrimination on the basis of religion. All human beings have human rights simply due to the very fact of their being Human. The state does not grant these rights; but ensures the non-violation of these rights either by the ruler or from any other quarter. Guru Nanak forcefully advocates for the individual's right to freedom. The right includes certain freedoms which are very essential for the development of an individual. No discrimination will be made against anybody on account of his/her religion, caste, race, sex or descent etc. Guru Nanak emphasises the education among all the people so that they become conscious and aware of their rights and duties. He believes that it was due to lack of education among the people of his times that they meekly tolerated the oppression wielded by the rulers on them and dared not to resist it. There should be no inferiority or superiority, no division on the basis of people's economy. Everyone should be treated equally before law.

To Guru Nanak, People should also be given the right to resist the oppressive and tyrant ruler. It implies that people have the right to resistance of the authority of the oppressive and tyrannical rulers or ruler who fails to serve the people. Guru Nanak condemnation all type of oppression and brutalities exercised by the rulers of his times on their subjects. People should also be given the right to resist the oppressive and tyrant ruler.

## 5.RELATION OF RELIGION AND POLITICS:

In order to understand Guru Nanak's perspective on the relationship between State and Religion aright it is necessary to know that what Guru Nanak means by religion. According to Guru Nana Ethics and Religion are two sides of a coin. Service to humanity is religion of Nanak. To put it in terse The Ethics as advocated by Guru

Nanak is such a code of conduct as exalts man to a transpersonal plane and makes him a man of righteousness, contentment, service, mercy and truth. He is, no more, an ego-centric, he no more cherishes the selfish interests and rather he dedicates his life to the service of humankind. He thinks and works for the welfare and uplift of humankind as a whole seeing only God in each and every being.

Religion (Dharma), according to Guru Nanak, is the offspring of mercy (Daya) which is the sublime ethical virtue. To quote him:-

The Bull of Dharma is son of Mercy

Contentment holds the creation together.<sup>14</sup>

Guru Nanak's view regarding the relationship between Religion and State does not mean that He is in favour of claim of any formalised faith by the state at its own religious faith. State authority cannot suppress people to follow the states religion but He believes in the fundamental unity in the ethics of all religions. No government has the right to stop the pupil for performing any kind of religious practice as far as their religion is concerned. The state according to Guru Nanak would not be a theocratic state. The Basic purpose of Guru Nanak's thought regarding politics shows that he does not uphold the Divine Rights of kings according to which the rulers are directly answerable to God alone and the laws made by the kings are considered to be the laws of God Himself and the king is regarded as an incarnation of divinity. People have the right to elect or reject any ruler according to their own wish but on the basis of good morals and character.

In the political system of Guru Nanak's vision, the ruler will have no divine rights; rather the right to govern the state will be bestowed upon him by Sangat viz. the people who, however, are the representatives of God on the earth. The laws in the state of his vision will not be made by the ruler himself but through Sangat. God pervades in all the individuals, so all people have the same status before God and nobody has any superiority upon other. To Him, State and Religion are inseparable; they cannot be separated with each other. In His state,

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Ajit Singh, Facets of Guru Nanak's Thought,p.153

<sup>14</sup> Guru Nanak Adi Granth,p.3

politics and ethics must go side by side but political power will not be used as a tool for upholding, protecting, promoting and spreading any particular faith. However, the spirit of religion will be promoted. In the political system of Guru Nanak, the ethical principles of religion will reign supreme.

The Gurus were well aware that no vision, however noble or ideal, is of any use unless some practical measures are taken to realize it in this very life and in this very world. Thus, they made their vision viable and realizable, and the Sikh history has been a saga of struggle and sacrifices to see this vision actualised. Since political power is perhaps the most potent legitimate means to help transform that vision into reality, this brings us to the all-important question of the relationship between politics and an analysis of the value-oriented Sikh polity.<sup>15</sup>

According to Sikh point of view, religion and politics are interrelated with each other. Rather they can serve as complementary forces and can work for the uplift and betterment of society. Hence, Politics which is primarily a game of power could, unless balanced by the saner influence of religion and religious values. It is generally accepted that religion provides ethico-moral values, but it does not suit the men in power that these values should override the political fabric because they serve as a potent check and save it from turning into an unscrupulous and unprincipled game played by self-seeking persons in the name of public life.

## 6.CONCLUSION:

It can be concluded from the above discussion that Guru Nanak's thought has universal acceptability. His view of politics can be summarised in this way; An ideal political system or state should provide Internal and External security to the people, Fulfilment of people's essential needs, check of concentration of wealth, public service, deliverance of justice, safeguard of the peoples human rights and also work for the protection of Fraternity of all human beings. So, it is necessary for all of us to adopt this universal message of peace and love. No matter where we live, what religion we practice, what culture we cultivate, at the heart of everything we are all humans. Our cultural, religious and political differences should not provide the backbone to invoke conflicts among us

that can bring nothing only sorrow and destruction to our world.

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<sup>15</sup> Dharam Singh, *Understanding Sikhism*, p 179