

550 Years of Reformation: Guru Nanak's Commitment to an Equal Society

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I am thankful to The Pothohar Association for inviting me to deliver this lecture, which I understand is your fourth annual lecture. It gives me great pleasure to share with you my understanding of the roots of Sikh religion and the legacy it has left behind for the world to appreciate and evaluate. It is a matter of great pride for us that we are celebrating 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, one of the enlightened and universal thinkers of the world. He is a rare prophet who is reverently addressed in different countries and languages. In Sri Lanka he is remembered with great respect as Nanak Chariya, in Nepal as Nanak Rishi, in Tibet as Nanak Lama, in Bhutan and Sikkim as Nanak Rimpochea, in China as Nanak Foosa, in Iran as Baba Nanak, in Saudi Arabia as Vali Hind, and in Turkey as Nanak Vali. History has evolved dramatically since he preached the quintessential human attributes of love, sharing, compassion, and kindness for a society based on cooperation, equality, and justice in the world paradoxically torn with conflicts, violence, inequality and oppression.

The question arises how do we celebrate Guru Nanak's legacy after five and half centuries? In my opinion the best way is to understand his core message and implement in our daily life.

Historically, Guru Nanak stands out as one of the few extraordinary individuals who appeared as universal thinkers on global horizon in the past three thousand years. He was a revolutionary in breaking from his contemporary two dominant religions by pronouncing the first few words after his legendary appearance from the rivulet Vayein: 'Na Ko Hindu Na Musalman '. If he challenged and rejected his Hindu heritage he did it completely. Guru Nanak advises the Pundit

to discover the philosophy in the sacred books rather than just reciting to their followers:

ਪੰਡਿਤ ਵਾਚਹਿ ਪੋਥੀਆ ਨਾ ਬੁਝਹਿ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ॥ ਅਨ ਕਉ ਮਤੀ ਦੇ ਚਲਹਿ ਮਾਇਆ ਕਾ ਵਾਪਾਰੁ॥
ਕਥਨੀ ਝੂਠੀ ਜਗੁ ਭਵੈ ਰਹਣੀ ਸਬਦੁ ਸੁ ਸਾਰੁ॥

The Pundits recite/read the sacred books for the people but never tried to discover and explain the philosophy in them.

Advising others for money is nothing more than conducting business for personal gain. The whole world (population) is wondering about the discussion of falsehood but do not try to live according to the (sabd) philosophy.

Guru Granth Sahib, M. 1, 56

Guru Nanak advises not to have faith on any teaching or philosophy before its proper evaluation:

ਸੁਣਿ ਮੁੰਧੇ ਹਰਣਾਖੀਏ ਗੂੜਾ ਵੈਣੁ ਅਪਾਰੁ॥ ਪਹਿਲਾ ਵਸਤੁ ਸਿਵਾਣਿ ਕੈ ਤਾਂ ਕੀਚੈ ਵਾਪਾਰੁ॥

Oh innocent devotee with inquisitive eyes of a deer!

Listen to the deep message of infinite wisdom.

First, evaluate everything then buy/accept.

Guru Granth Sahib, M 1, 1410.

Guru Nanak emphasizes using wisdom to find out what is right and what is wrong:

ਅਕਲਿ ਏਹੁ ਨ ਆਖੀਐ ਅਕਲਿ ਗਵਾਈਐ ਬਾਦਿ॥ ਅਕਲੀ ਸਾਹਿਬੁ ਸੇਵੀਐ ਅਕਲੀ ਪਾਈਐ ਮਾਨੁ॥
ਅਕਲੀ ਪੜ੍ਹਿ ਕੈ ਬੁਝੀਐ ਅਕਲੀ ਕੀਚੈ ਦਾਨੁ॥ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਆਖੈ ਰਾਹੁ ਏਹੁ ਹੋਰਿ ਗਲਾਂ ਸੈਤਾਨੁ॥

That wisdom which leads to arguments is not called wisdom.

One can understand God only by using the intellect; and by using the intellect one attains honour.

With the intellect, one should read to discover the truth.

In addition, one should use the intellect to evaluate the cause before donating charity for that cause.

Nanak Says: This is the real path; all other preaching lead to devilish actions.

Guru Granth Sahib, M 1, 1245

Guru Nanak realized that there would be very few of his followers who would contemplate the philosophy embodied in his *bani* as he says:

ਬਾਣੀ ਬਿਰਲਉ ਬੀਚਾਰਸੀ ਜੇ ਕੋ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਹੋਇ॥ ਇਹੁ ਬਾਣੀ ਮਹਾਪੁਰਖ ਕੀ ਨਿਜ ਘਰਿ ਵਾਸਾ ਹੋਇ॥

Only the rare Guru-oriented deliberates/contemplates on the bani.

This bani is of the pre-eminent preceptor, is imbibed in one's own mind.

Guru Granth Sahib, M 1, 935.

He denounced all superstitious beliefs and practices and shunned caste system and untouchability, the pillars of Hindu social order. Even though he revealed his understanding of the universe, social order and polity in his *bani*, he mastered his learning from the existing knowledge, more so by engaging in dialogues with his contemporary seers, sants and thinkers. He travelled extensively and gathered the pearls of wisdom from wherever he visited and whosoever he met. Due to multicultural experiences of the Guru, Sri Guru Granth Sahib truly embodies his pluralistic vision. He thus proved himself to be a fine archivist, leaving behind with his successors what he had collected all along. *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred text of the Sikhs, comprises the compositions of six of the 10 Sikh Gurus and contributions of 15 Sikh bards and 15 non-Sikh *sant* poets of various social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds including eminent Muslim Sufi, Sheikh Farid. This makes the sacred text an inclusive expression of spirituality in the history of world religions. The multiple authorship of Guru Granth Sahib symbolizes the democratic and pluralistic prudence of the Sikh culture. Heterogeneity as a fact of Indian life finds powerfully recorded in Guru Granth Sahib.¹ Spread over 1,430 pages, called *ang*s (limbs), *Guru Granth Sahib* seeks to build up spiritual awareness and search through a life-long process of living and learning for the most liberating, empowered condition of human life. One possible way to reach out to the essence, the core of its message is to see it as a part of the 'philosophy of liberation'.

Guru Nanak says that a person who considers everyone equal is religious and Guru willed. On the other hand considering oneself superior to the others makes the individual narcissistic and irreligious. God does not have a caste says Guru Nanak:

ਜਾਤਿ ਅਜਾਤਿ ਅਜੋਨੀ ਸੰਭਉ ਨਾਤਿ ਸੁਭਾਉ ਨ ਭਰਮਾ॥

Akal Purkh is casteless, unborn, self-illuminated, and free of doubt and desire.

Guru Granth Sahib, 597

¹ N. Muthu Mohan, "Guru Nanak Dev: Redefining Religion" available at <https://nmuthumohan.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/guru-nanak-dev-redefining-religion/>

Let us try to see the position of the Sikh gurus as far as Brahmanical social categories of *jati* and *varan* are concerned. Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh religion, attacked the caste ideology and emphasised equality:

ਸਭੁ ਕੋ ਉਚਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਨੀਚੁ ਨ ਦੀਸੈ ਕੋਇ॥ ਇਕਨੈ ਭਾਂਡੇ ਸਾਜਿਐ ਇਕੁ ਚਾਨਣੁ ਤਿਹੁ ਲੋਇ॥

Call everyone high, none appears to be low;

Everyone has been moulded from the same matter;

And the same source of energy is found in all.

Guru Granth Sahib, M1, 62

Caste blows up an individual's ego. If one belongs to a higher social caste, he regards himself as being better than others. Guru Nanak admonishes us against this view:

ਜੇ ਅੰਤਰਿ ਸੇ ਬਾਹਰਿ ਦੇਖਹੁ ਅਵਰੁ ਨ ਦੂਜਾ ਕੋਈ ਜੀਉ॥ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਏਕ ਦ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖਹੁ ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਜੇ ਤਿਸ ਮੇਈ ਜੀਉ॥

Akal Purkh is within and seen outside as well. There is no one, other than It.

As Guru oriented, look upon all with the same eye of equality because in each and every heart, the same Divine Light is contained.

Guru Granth Sahib, M. 1, 599

Guru Nanak, born in an upper caste family, identified and aligned himself with the lowest, the outcaste untouchables. It is the most revolutionary idea when he says:

ਨੀਚਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਨੀਚ ਜਾਤਿ ਨੀਚੀ ਹੂ ਅਤਿ ਨੀਚੁ॥ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਤਿਨਕੈ ਸੰਗਿ ਸਾਥਿ ਵਡਿਆ ਸਿਉ ਕਿਆ ਰੀਸ॥

ਜਿਥੈ ਨੀਚ ਸਮਾਲੀਅਨਿ ਤਿਥੈ ਨਦਰਿ ਤੇਰੀ ਬਖਸੀਸ॥

I am the lowest of the low castes; low, absolutely low;

I am with the lowest in companionship, not with the so-called high.

Blessing of God is where the lowly are cared for.

Guru Granth Sahib, M. 1, 15

And he talks about his followers who join his creed:

ਜਾਤਿ ਵਰਨ ਤੇ ਭਏ ਅਤੀਤਾ ਮਮਤਾ ਲੋਭੁ ਚੁਕਾਇਆ॥

They rise above social status and colour, and rid themselves of possessiveness and greed.

Guru Granth Sahib, 1345

The philosophy Of Guru Nanak is carried forward by successive Gurus. Guru Amar Das (1479-1574) equally castigates the caste pride:

ਜਾਤਿ ਕਾ ਗਰਬੁ ਨ ਕਰਿ ਮੂਰਖ ਗਵਾਰਾ॥ ਇਸੁ ਗਰਬ ਤੇ ਚਲਹਿ ਬਹੁਤੁ ਵਿਕਾਰਾ॥

Do not be proud of your social class and status, you ignorant fool!

So much sin and corruption comes from this pride.

Everyone says that there are four castes, four social classes.

They all emanate from the drop of God's Seed.

Guru Granth Sahib, 1127-1128

Guru Ram Das (1534-1581) also emphatically denigrates caste pride and distinctions:

ਨੀਚ ਜਾਤਿ ਹਰਿ ਜਪਤਿਆ ਉਤਮ ਪਦਵੀ ਪਾਇ॥ ਪੂਛਹੁ ਬਿਦਰ ਦਾਸੀ ਸੁਤੈ ਕਿਸਨੁ ਉਤਰਿਆ ਘਰਿ ਜਿਸੁ
ਜਾਇ॥੧॥ ਹਰਿ ਕੀ ਅਕਥ ਕਥਾ ਸੁਨਹੁ ਜਨ ਭਾਈ ਜਿਤੁ ਸਹਸਾ ਦੂਖ ਭੂਖ ਸਭਲਹਿ ਜਾਇ॥੧॥ਰਹਾਉ॥
ਰਵਿਦਾਸੁ ਚਮਾਰੁ ਉਸਤਿਤ ਕਰੇ ਹਰਿਕੀਰਤਿ ਨਿਮਖ ਇਕ ਗਾਇ॥ ਪਤਿਤ ਜਾਤਿ ਉਤਮੁ ਭਇਆ ਚਾਰਿ ਵਰਨ
ਪਏ ਪਗਿ ਆਇ॥੨॥ ਨਾਮਦੇਅ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਿ ਲਗੀ ਹਰਿ ਸੇਤੀ ਲੋਕੁ ਛੀਪਾ ਕਹੈ ਬੁਲਾਇ॥ ਖੜੀ ਬ੍ਰਾਹਮਣ ਪਿਠਿ ਦੇ
ਛੇਡੇ ਹਰਿਨਾਮ ਦੇਉਲੀਆ ਮੁਖਿ ਲਾਇ॥੩॥

When someone of low social class [jati] chants the Lord's Name, he obtains the state of highest dignity.

Go and ask Bidar, the son of a maid; Krishna himself stayed in his house.

Listen, O humble Siblings of Destiny, to the Unspoken Speech of the Lord; it removes all anxiety, pain and hunger.

Ravi Daas, the leather-worker, praised the Lord, and sang the Kirtan of His Praises each and every instant.

Although he was of low social status, he was exalted and elevated, and people of all four castes came and bowed at his feet.

Naam Dev loved the Lord; the people called him a fabric dyer.

The Lord turned His back on the high-class Kh'shaatriyas and Brahmins, and showed His face to Naam Dev.

Guru Ram Das, Guru Granth Sahib, p. 733

Guru Arjun Dev (1563-1606) is equally dismissive about these man-made distinctions:

ਜਾਤਿ ਵਰਨ ਤੁਰਕ ਅਰੁ ਹਿੰਦੂ॥ ਪਸੁ ਪੰਖੀ ਅਨਿਕ ਜੋਨਿ ਜਿੰਦੂ॥

ਸਗਲ ਪਾਸਾਰੁ ਦੀਸੈ ਪਾਸਾਰਾ॥ ਬਿਨਸਿ ਜਾਇਗੋ ਸਗਲ ਆਕਾਰਾ॥

Social classes, races, Muslims and Hindus; beasts, birds and the many varieties of beings and creatures; the entire world and the visible universe- all forms of existence shall pass away.

Guru Arjun Dev, Guru Granth Sahib, 237

Moreover, the Guru says God does not recognise such divisions:

ਆਦਿ ਨਿਰੰਜਨੁ ਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰਾ॥ ਸਭ ਮਹਿ ਵਰਤੈ ਆਪਿ ਨਿਰਾਰਾ॥

ਵਰਨੁ ਜਾਤਿ ਚਿਹਨੁ ਨਹੀ ਕੋਈ ਸਭ ਹੁਕਮੇ ਸ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਉਪਾਇਦਾ॥

The Primal, Immaculate Lord God is formless.

The Detached Lord is Himself prevailing in all.

He has no race or social class, no identifying mark.

By the Hukam of His Will, He created the entire universe.

Guru Granth Sahib, 1075

The gurus practiced what they preached; hence the gurus became the exemplars of their message. Guru Nanak's lifelong companion was low-caste Muslim Mardana as he also preferred to be with the poor Lalos than with affluent Bhagos. Guru Nanak felt that the real cause of the misery of the people was their disunity born of caste prejudices. In order to do away with caste differences and discords, he laid the foundation of *Sangat* and *Pangat*. *Sangat* means 'congregation'. *Pangat* stands for people sitting and eating together in the same row. No special places were reserved for people of high rank or caste. The *pangat* institution was paid special attention and was strengthened by Guru Amar Das and he encouraged everyone to partake of the simple food when coming for *sat sangat*. The orthodox Brahmans and Khattris were so alarmed by these 'revolutionary' practices that they made complaint to Emperor:

Guru Amar Das of Goindwal hath abandoned the religious and social customs of the Hindus, and abolished the distinction of the four castes... He seateth all his followers in a line, and causeth them to eat together from his kitchen, irrespective of caste— whether are Jats, strolling minstrels, Muhammadans, Brahmans, Khattris, shopkeepers, sweepers, barbers, washermen, fishermen, or carpenters.²

The creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 was the culmination of the radical Sikh movement. The Khalsa made a clear break with the caste society. Only one of the five *Panj Pyaray* (beloved ones) belonged to a high caste while the other four were members of low castes. The Guru got them to partake of the *amrit* (ambrosia) from the same steel bowl by turns as he also got the same from their

² Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1963 (Reprint), Vol. II, p. 105

hands, thereby abolishing the existing hierarchy of Guru and Chela. He saw to it that his creed should be well-defined and not be confused with the beliefs and practices of other religions. He gave five freedoms (viz. *dharm nash*, i.e. to sever connection with one's previous religious belief, *karam nash*, i.e. to free oneself from former rites, rituals, customs, etc.; *kul nash*, i.e. severance of all ties with lineage and birth, the fundamental basis of caste society; *shram nash*, i.e. obliteration of stigmas attached to trade or occupation, which gave the convert a sense of self-respect and dignity of labour; and *bhram nash*, i.e. discarding superstition, taboos and notion of pollution) to his Khalsa signifying a clear break with the past religious systems, traditions, and customs. By giving 5 distinct symbols of *kesh* (uncut hair), *kangha* (comb), *kirpan* (sword), *kara* (iron bangle), and *kachha* (short breeches) the Guru was keen that the Khalsa should be distinct from the Hindu and the Muslim.³

McLeod, after a careful reading of the Sikh Scripture, takes a position that the Gurus "accepted the notion of varan, but never as a system of high and low status. All were equal when it came to access to liberation and to this extent it can certainly be claimed that Guru Nanak and his successors preached the end of the Hindu caste system, at least for those who were their Sikhs."⁴ We get a direct testimony from Bhai Jaita, a legendary dalit Sikh, who was rechristened as Jeevan Singh, in his epic poem *Sri Gur Katha*⁵ which was composed after the Khalsa formation and before his death in 1705. The "Rahit" given by Bhai Jaita in fact opens up with strong denunciation of caste:

Now listen to the *rahit* of the Singhs,

³ For details see J. D. Cunningham, *History of Sikhs: From the Birth of the Nation to the Sutlej Wars*, London, 1849, pp. 305-10

⁴ W H McLeod, "The Sikh Concept of Caste", *Essays in Sikh History, Tradition, and Society*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 173

⁵ Giani Nishan Singh Gandiwind, *Shaeed Baba Jiwan Singh: Jeevan, Rachna te Viakhia*, Amritsar: Bhai Chatar Singh Jeevan Singh, 2008, p. 174. This important writing by Bhai Jaita had come to light only in the second half of the twentieth century. It was first published in Naranjan Arifi's *Ranghrehitian da Itihas (Adi kal ton 1850 tak)*, Part I, Amritsar: Literature House, 1993, pages 396-424. Then it was published by Gurmukh Singh in *Bhai Jaita Ji: Jiwan te Rachna*, Amritsar: Literature House, 2003, pp. 49-82. Baldev Singh also gives this poem at the end of his novel *Panjwan Sahibjada*, Ludhiana: Chetna Prakashan, 2005, from 465 to 501 pages.

The Singh should pray the God keeping the war in mind.
When a sufferer and needy beseeches help,
The Singh should remove suffering forgetting his own comfort.
Not bringing in mind differences of high and low caste,
The Singh should consider all humans as children of God.
Abandoning the Brahmanical rituals and customs,
The Singh should seek liberation by following Gurus' ideas.⁶

There are three revolutionary moments during Gurus' period as far as abolition of caste discrimination and establishing an egalitarian society is concerned. The first is in Guru Nanak's most radical composition "Neecha andar niich jati..." where he de-castes himself by completely merging with the lowest castes. Second, is an appeal of Khatri and Brahmans of Lahore to Emperor Akbar against Guru Amar Das who had abolished the caste differences. The third is the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh who merged all castes into one by giving new identity of Singhs. In those days no one except Kshatriya Rajputs could dare use the surname of Singh. No wonder it led to the fourth revolution of the Sikhs within a short time, namely Banda Bahadur's Sikh victories over the mighty Mughals. Not many people appreciate the fact that it was the first democratic revolution in the world. It was brought about by the poor, disadvantaged, peasants and workers as landlordism came to be abolished during the short lived Sikh revolutionary government. An eyewitness account of Muhammad Qasim about Banda Bahadur's revolt in 1709-10 carries references how a large number of Dalits had joined his army. He says: "Troop after troop of unfeeling sweepers surround the city [Sirhind], in the manner of a thorn-bush enclosing a flower garden, and laid their insolent hands on people's possessions and proceeded to dishonour both the small and the big."⁷

Another revolutionary change the Gurus introduced was throwing open the doors of literacy to the all interested. Reading and writing was picked up by sudras and untouchables. There are said to be a dozen poets from untouchable castes in Guru Gobind Singh's court. I have already mentioned Bhai Jaita's writing of *Sri Gur Katha*. Generally, the writers of *birs* of Granth Sahib did not write their names but in

⁶ ab rahit sunuh gur singhan ki, hari dhian dhare ur judh chitare|| jab arit aye pukar karenh, nij sookh taje tin dookh nivare|| nahi jaat sujaat bichar kareh, ar poot khudaye janahen sabare|| rahu reet geh nahin bipran ki, ar gurmat prapat mokh duare|| Giani Nishan Singh Gandiwind, op. cit. p. 181 (my translation)

⁷ "Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh, and the Revolt under Banda Bahadur, 1709-10 & 1713-16 from Muhammad Qasim "Ibrat", *Ibratnama*", translated by Irfan Habib, in J. S. Grewal & Irfan Habib ed. *Sikh History from Persian Sources*, New Delhi: Tulika, 2001, p. 116

some cases they would put their names at the end of the *Bir*. One such *Bir* came to be identified as having written by one Kehar Singh Ravidasia in 1736.⁸ Thus Sikhism had great potential for ushering in a new civilization as it introduced a new concept of man, of society and state in its historical dimension. But, as observes Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia: “the vision of Sikhism for a new civilization... could not be realized owing to the feudalization of the Sikh movement soon after the Banda Bahadur period, with the correlative process of Brahminization of the Sikh society and Vedanticization of the Sikh doctrine.”⁹

Thirty years was a trying time for Sikhs after the execution of Banda Bahadur and other Sikhs. Constant persecution posed a great threat to the Khalsa Panth. But after weakening of the Mughal power, they reassembled in mid-1740s and formed 5 combatant *jathas* (bands). The Guru’s message was so powerful that one of these *jathas* was composed of Dalits, commanded by Bir Singh Ranghreta. But in 1760s when there arose several *misals* of Sikhs for a sovereign power, the role of Dalits in the Sikh ascendancy was pushed to the margins. Bir Singh and his comrades were treacherously eliminated. The period of feudalization of Sikh society thus began with their rise to political power. This is when Brahmanization of Sikh doctrine also started taking definite shape. Its first textual expression is best available in Kesar Singh Chhibber’s *Bansavalinama*, completed in 1769.¹⁰ Chhibber belonged to a Brahman family of Jammu. He attributes the Guru Gobind Singh’s power and success to the worship of the goddess and gives more importance to Brahmans in his account of the Sikh gurus. Naranjan Arifi offers a close examination of Chhibber’s work in over 118 pages and lashes out at him, saying that the work is ‘a complete conspiracy against gurus’ philosophy as its purpose is to introduce Brahmanical ideas.... Even if it is a bundle of lies in which 80 to 90 percent dates are wrong, the

⁸ Ravidasias were Chamar Sikhs.

⁹ *Liberating Sikhism from ‘the Sikhs’: Sikhism’s potential for World Civilization*, Chandigarh, 2003, 45

¹⁰ Kesar Singh Chhibber, *Bansavalinama Dasan Patshahian Ka*, ed. Rattan Singh Jaggi, (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1972)

imaginary characters are introduced and the principles and traditions of the gurus are coloured with Brahmanism'.¹¹ Professor J.S. Grewal is also highly critical in his response to Chhibber's work and calls it 'Brahmanizing the Tradition'. He concludes: 'Whether consciously or unconsciously, Kesar Singh Chhibber makes a consistent and an earnest attempt at Brahmanizing the Khalsa tradition'.¹²

Henry Steinbach, a European soldier in Ranjit Singh's army, made an astute observation about a definite change: "The assumption of irresponsible power by Ranjeet Singh destroyed, in some degree, the potency of the Khalsa."¹³ That Hindu practices were fast creeping into Sikh culture during Ranjit Singh's time was also observed by another European traveller in 1836, Baron Charles Hugel, who noted that "like every other religion grounded in deism, the faith of the Sikhs is already deteriorated; image worship and distinction of castes are gradually taking place of the precepts enjoined by their original institutions."¹⁴

Darbar Sahib (the Golden Temple) at Amritsar had assumed such an importance in the religious and political life of the Punjab that Ranjit Singh abolished the system of collective management and arrogated to himself the right to appoint a Temple manager. This precedent was used by a subsequent 'ruler' of Punjab, Lieutenant-Governor Sir Robert Egerton, in 1881 to appoint its own Temple manager.¹⁵ By that time, the Mahants had already introduced non-Sikh practices in the precincts of Darbar Sahib, so much so that the Commissioner of the Amritsar Division, Robert Needham Cust could foresee in 1858 what was in store for the faith as he observed that "Unsupported by the State, plundered by its own guardians, in

¹¹ Naranjan Arifi, *Ranghrehitian da Itihas*, 145. His examination of Chhibber's work spans pages 37-145 of his book.

¹² J.S. Grewal, "Brahmanizing the Tradition: Chhibber's Bansavalinama," in *The Khalsa: Sikh and Non-Sikh Perspectives*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 85-86

¹³ *The Punjaub: Being a brief Account of the Country of the Sikhs*, (1846; reprint, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1976), 159.

¹⁴ Major T. B. Jervis, trans., *Travels in Kashmir and Panjab containing a Particular Account of the Government and Character of the Sikhs*, (1845; reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2000), 283

¹⁵ Ian J. Kerr, "British Relationships with the Golden Temple, 1849-90", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 21, 2, (1984): 140.

due course of time the temple will fall to ruins; the sect which was founded by Baba Nanak will cease to exist; the nucleus of nationality which was created by Guru Gobind Singh will be dispersed, and proselytising and fanatic Sikh will fall back into the ranks of the lethargic and uninspiring Hindu.”¹⁶ Idols were placed in the Darbar Sahib and Dalits were prevented from bathing in the *sarovar*. In 1877, there was consternation among the Temple authorities as some Mazhabi soldiers and their families attempted to bathe in the Golden Temple tank.¹⁷

‘Untouchability’ was sanctioned by the *Sanatani* Sikhs which is best reflected in an authoritative manual *Khalsa Dharam Sastar* (1914) as quoted below:

From Braman to Nai [barber], including Chhippe [calico-printers] and Jhivara [water-drawers], all those belong to the fourfold caste system are not allowed to partake food cooked or touched by outcastes. This implies that just as the four Hindu castes can be polluted by the untouchables, similarly in the Sikh Khalsa religion all persons belonging to the four castes can be polluted too. Those Sikhs who belong to the untouchable groups (like the Mazhabi, Rahita and Ramdasia Sikhs) constitute a separate caste. These untouchable castes do not have the right to proceed beyond the fourth step in Sri Amritsar [at the Golden Temple]. Members of the high castes should take care not to mix with persons belonging to the lower castes. If someone seeks to do so he forfeits his claim of belonging to the high castes.¹⁸

Caste prejudice and the practice of ‘untouchability’ being central to the Brahmanical ideology, any individual, organisation, or ideology, questioning it was always seen as an enemy, and all efforts were made to eliminate the challenge. In the context of Sikh religion, Barstow observed in the 1920s that “Hinduism, to its wonderfully assimilative character, had thus reabsorbed a good part of Sikhism, as it had absorbed Buddhism before it, notwithstanding that much of these religions is opposed to caste and the supremacy of the Brahmans.”¹⁹ Bhagat Lakshman Singh (1863-1944), a Sikh scholar and intellectual, believed that the Sikh creed was ‘Hinduized’ after the establishment of Sikh rule. The high caste Hindus had made advances

¹⁶ Cited in *ibid.* 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 145; also see J. S. Grewal, “Contest over the Sacred Space,” in *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 229-260

¹⁸ Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Oxford: OUP, 1994, 106.

¹⁹ A. E. Barstow, *The Sikhs: An Ethnology*, 1928; reprint Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993, 19.

for reconciliation with the new power, and a compromise was affected by which the Sikhs abandoned their 'revolutionary program'. Sikhism began to lose its distinct identity.²⁰ Khushwant Singh is blunt in admitting that "Sikhism did not succeed in breaking the caste system.... and Sikhs of higher castes refused to eat with untouchable Sikhs and in villages separate wells were provided for them."²¹

A notice must be taken of Dr B R Ambedkar's efforts to bring 6 crore Dalits into the fold of Sikh religion. After he had pronounced that he will not die as a Hindu, Dr Ambedkar took serious steps in this direction in mid-1930s which somehow came to naught. Without going into the details of that failure one can safely hazard a speculation. Had it been a successful move, the country would not have been divided and the Punjab would have escaped the large scale holocaust and displacement of its people. 1984 would not have happened so easily as well. The Sikh religion would have emerged as a powerful religious current on the global scale.

Conclusion:

On this day of 550 years celebration I am saddened that in spite of clear cut rejection of caste and untouchability Sikhs have not been completely able to implement the doctrines of Sikhism in their entirety. One can say that it is largely due to the cultural influence of Hindus that also came through historical windings.

Let me summarise my argument. Guru Nanak was a prophet and thinker who launched a tirade against inequality and oppression. His message was so powerful and successful that the Sikhi emerged as the only religion of the Book that arose from within the Indian soil. Let me quote Guru Arjun on the global significance of Guru Nanak as he says:

²⁰ J. S. Grewal, *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi: Manohar, 1998, 71

²¹ Khushwant Singh, *The Sikhs*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1953, 45-46.

ਬਲਿਓ ਚਰਾਗੁ ਅੰਧਾਰ ਮਹਿ ਸਭ ਕਲਿ ਉਧਰੀ ਇਕ ਨਾਮ ਧਰਮ॥

ਪ੍ਰਗਟੁ ਸਗਲ ਹਰਿ ਭਵਨ ਮਹਿ ਜਨੁ ਨਾਨਕੁ ਗੁਰੁ ਪਾਰਬ੍ਰਹਮੁ॥

Nanak, the Guru, and an image of Infinite God, has appeared in the whole world as a light to dispel darkness (ignorance) from the whole world under one religion of righteousness.

Guru Granth Sahib, M 5, 1387.

The Sikhi ushered in a radical transformation of society, economy and polity. It opened the door of literacy and education for all so much so that the poets and writers from all sections including Dalits appeared on the public platform. But as happens with most of ideas and philosophies, the Gurus' message also witnessed degeneration in its implementation with the passage of time. There is still a need of radical reformation in the Sikh religion. A critical engagement with the past, based on rational and judicious approach, is the need of the hour. Sikhism has all the potential to be a 21st century global religion with equality, justice, and compassion as its core values.

Let us all pledge today that we shall all follow the true message of Guru Nanak and shall not discriminate on the basis of caste, gender or colour. I think this pledge will be the biggest tribute to one of the greatest revolutionaries of all times.