

## IIAS Annual Integration Conference on “Re-visiting Guru Nanak Dev, His Bani and Vision” at IIAS (25-26 November 2019)

### Concept Note:

Guru Nanak Dev is the founder of Sikhism, which has flourished as one of the four major dharma traditions of Indic Civilization (namely, Sanatan dharma, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism) rooted in the Indian Sub-Continent. The most remarkable thing about this Civilization is that it is dharma-centred and knowledge-oriented. It is also one of the most ancient and living civilizations of the world. The word dharma is a key concept with multiple meanings in Indian tradition. Its conceptual meaning is quite different from religion. Primarily, it refers to the cosmic moral order (Ritam) operating in the universe and a rightful way of living. All the above four dharma traditions exemplify an excellent model of 'unity in diversity'. They present an overall unified vision of reality, cosmos and human existence. They also construct the world view, way of life and core knowledge concerns of Indic civilization. As an eminent dharma pravartak of his times, Guru Nanak occupies a significant position in the Indic Civilization and its dharma traditions.

Apart from being the founder of a new faith, Guru Nanak is also a celebrated Saint-poet who imbibed the spirit of renaissance heralded by the Pan Indian Bhakti movement during the middle ages. This eventful era of Indian history signifies a powerful moment of cultural awakening and self-assertion of the Indian mind after centuries of subjugation and suppression at the hands of foreign invaders. (We have a considerable evidence of the genocide and forcible conversion of the native population at the hands of Arab, Turk, Mughal and Afghan occupying forces during this period.) Guru Nanak himself witnessed horrifying event of Babur's invasion at Saidpur (present-day Emanabad). He provides a graphic description of the large-scale destruction of this invasion in his Bani:

खुरासान खसमाना कीआ हिंदुसतानु डराइआ ॥

आपै दोसु न देई करता जमु करि मुगलु चड़ाइआ ॥

एती मार पई करलाणे तैं की दरदु न आइआ ॥१॥

(Having attacked Khurasan, Babar terrified Hindustan.

The Creator Himself does not take the blame,

but has sent the Mughal as the messenger of death.

There was so much slaughter that the people screamed.

Didn't You feel compassion? ||1||)

Guru Nanak compares his contemporary times to mythical Kaliyuga, the dark age of moral disintegration where dharma had taken wing and flown away:

कलि काती राजे कासाई धरमु पंख करि उडरिआ ॥

कूडु अमावस सचु चंद्रमा दीसै नाही कह चडिआ ॥

हउ भालि विकुंनी होई ॥आधेरै राहु न कोई ॥

(The Dark Age of Kali Yuga is the knife, and the kings are butchers; righteousness has taken 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.)

The Saint-poets and Sikh Gurus emerged on this scene as saviours of perennial values and humanitarian concerns of our civilization and culture. Their primary source of inspiration was classical wisdom of Indic knowledge tradition, lying dormant in folk memory. They propagated their message of spiritual enlightenment in the prevalent language of the people, which resulted in re-kindling the integrating and liberating power of universal love in popular consciousness. Guru Nanak was no exception.

Guru Nanak Dev was born in a Hindu Khatri family in 1469 in village Talwandi (now known as Nankana Sahib) situated near the city of Lahore in present day Pakistan. Sikhs around the world celebrate the auspicious occasion of Guru Nanak Dev 's birth anniversary on the full moon day (Puranmashi) in the Lunar month of Kartik (October-November). Guru Nanak Dev 's father, Mehta Kalu, was a trader by profession. Desiring his son to attain proficiency in trade, he arranged for learned teachers for his son's education. These teachers were well versed in traditional learning and classical knowledge available in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. Child Nanak was exceptionally bright. His contemplative mind had a deep interest in spiritual knowledge. He often surprised his educators by the depth and sublimity of his knowledge. His rational mind questioned the traditional religious practices and empty rituals. Although he did not condemn these practices and rituals, he sought to introduce the true spiritual meaning in them.

There is an interesting incident relating to this early period of Guru's life, recounted in his traditional biographies (Janam Sakhis). Guru's father, Mehta Kalu, wanted to test the newly acquired educational proficiency of his son. He sent him to a market place with a sum of twenty Rupees and asked him to make a true deal (sacha sauda) with it. What he meant was a profitable business deal. Nanak, with his spiritual bent of mind, spent the whole amount on the food for the needy. For him this was the true deal 'sacha sauda'. Mehta Kalu was obviously disappointed by this 'foolish' behaviour from a worldly point of view. In order to dissuade his son from

such world-negating tendencies and to make him a responsible worldly man he arranged for his marriage as well as employment.

Young Nanak was married to Sulakhani of Batala and they had two sons, Sri Chand and Lakhmi Das. With the help of his brother-in-law, he obtained the job of a store keeper in Sultanpur at government's granary. After laps of some time, one morning, he went as usual down to rivulet Baini to bathe and meditate. It proved to be the most significant event in Guru Nanak's life. Guru Nanak entered the river and suddenly disappeared from the sight of his companions, who searched for him everywhere in vain. Fearing, Nanak had drowned, the companions dejectedly returned home. But a veritable miracle happened. After three days Nanak re-appeared on the river bank. He looked spiritually transformed. He remained silent for some time. Then suddenly he uttered an enigmatic sentence: "na koi Hindu na Mussalman" (There is no Hindu, no Mussalman)

Janam Sakhis have woven a mythical narrative around this event which symbolically highlights it as a moment of enlightenment. Nanak quit his job and distributed all that he had to the poor. Nanak set out on his spiritual journeys in four directions. He visited almost all the famous Hindu religious centres, spread over length and breadth of Indian Subcontinent as well as to far off places in South Asia, Tibet and Arabia, covering about 30,000 kilometres.

In the later years of his life, Guru Nanak founded a township of Kartarpur (presently in Pakistan) on the banks of river Ravi in Punjab and settled down as a householder. Here, he donned the robes of a peasant, earning his own honest living by cultivating the lands. Followers came from near and far to listen to the Master. He introduced the institution of Langar (free communal kitchen) at Kartarpur, establishing the basic equality of all people regardless of their social and economic status. Sometime before his demise, Guru Nanak installed his devout follower Bhai Lehna as next Sikh Guru.

Guru Nanak composed his poetic compositions in the genre employed by Bhakti poets, known as Bani or Gurbani in Sikh tradition. This Bani of Guru Nanak Dev is included in the holy text of Sikhism, known as Guru Granth Sahib. As we know, Guru Granth Sahib is an anthology of the poetic utterances, reflecting the philosophical meditations of the inspired souls. This holy anthology contains the Bani not only of Guru Nanak Dev and other Sikh Gurus but also those of other medieval Indian Saint-poets belonging to different religious and cultural traditions. Prominent among these Saint-poets are Jaidev, Namdev, Sheikh Farid, Kabir and Ravidas. Chronologically these Saint-poets belong to the vast expanse of five centuries (12th to 17th) and geographically they represent the regional and cultural diversity of the Indian Sub-Continent.

The Bani of Guru Nanak, as incorporated in Guru Granth Sahib, consists of about 974 hymns including some of the longer compositions like Japji

Sahib, Asa di Var, Barah Maha, Sidh Gosti and Onkar (Dakhni). The characteristic feature of his Bani is that its hymns are composed in various classical and folk literary forms and meters. These hymns tend to employ mostly the lyrical and the didactic modes of expression. They have been arranged in nineteen classical Indian ragas with indications of folk tunes here and there. In fact, poetry and music are integral elements of its discourse. They introduce a dimension of depth in the meaning and import of the message. However, the poetry of Guru Nanak cannot be taken as pure and simple poetry in the ordinary sense of the term. It is primarily a meditation on the nature and experience of Braham (Ultimate Reality):

गावहु गीतु न बिरहडा नानक ब्रह्म बीचारो ॥८॥३॥

(I do not sing just a song or a birhara O Nanak,  
I reflect upon Braham.)

In fact, Guru Nanak is a philosopher-poet. His meditation on the nature of Ultimate Reality (Braham) is a search for final meaning of human existence. But this consciousness of the Ultimate Reality (paramartha chetana) provides it a transcendent vantage point and a liberative vision to re-define the existential social concerns of human life. Guru Nanak takes the ideological position of the oppressed sections of society:

नीचा अंदरि नीच जाति नीची हू अति नीचु ॥

नानकु तिन कै संगि साथि वडिआ सिउ किआ रीस ॥

जिथै नीच समालीअनि तिथै नदरि तेरी बखसीस ॥४॥३॥

(Those who are low in caste, the lowliest of the low,  
Nanak seeks the company of those,  
Why should he try to compete with the great?

O Lord, thy grace is showered upon, were the lowly are cared for.)

The Bani or discourse of Guru Nanak presents the idea of the spark of divine light residing in the heart of everyone, as evidenced in the following verse:

जाति बरन कुल सहसा चूका गुरमति सबदि बीचारी ॥१॥

(The distinctions of jati, baran and kula are eliminated,  
When we contemplate upon the Word of the Guru.)

The Bani of Guru Nanak projects a philosophy of enlightened living. It is not just a metaphysical speculation. It turns out to be a philosophy of action which lays emphasis is on shared communal experience and on purposeful involvement in social concerns.

Guru Nanak recontextualises the Vedic conceptualization of Brahman, as one of its core tenets and follows the overall pluralistic vision of the Indic Civilization relating to truth and reality. It conceives of the Ultimate

Reality as both immanent and transcendent and lays great emphasis on moral virtues and truthful conduct (sachiar) more than on empty ritualism. The poetic discourse of Guru Nanak presents a radical humanitarian vision reality and society. It emerges as significant 'knowledge text' incorporating deep philosophical meditations on the eternal verities of human existence as well as a radical vision upholding human equality and dignity. The originality of this vision and its dialogical relationship with past and present establishes the unique identity of Sikhism.

The year 2019 marks the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak. Various institutions are celebrating this auspicious occasion. The government of India has also decided to commemorate this event at a national as well as international level. This historical event at this juncture is a worthwhile occasion to revisit his biographical accounts, his Bani and philosophical and social vision to understand their significance in our contemporary context.

## **1. Aims and objectives**

Some of the aims and objectives of this seminar will be

- a) To Understand and recontextualise the philosophy and ideology of Guru Nanak Dev in the contemporary situation.
- b) To understand the socio-cultural and spiritual paradigms of Guru Nanak Bani.
- c) To decode the folk traditions and hagiographical accounts of Guru Nanak Dev.
- d) To generate a narrative about the life and teachings of Guru Nanak Dev in order to  
revisit the literary, cultural and philosophical traditions of India.
- e) To understand the nature, structure and dimensions of Guru Nanak Bani's literary and musicals expression.
- f) To understand linguistic devices and semantic structures of Guru Nanak bani.
- g) To understand and appreciate Guru Nanak Dev's contribution to Indic Knowledge Tradition.

Guru Nanak Dev is the founder of Sikh Panth (Sikhism) and upholder of universal Dharma. He is a self-confessed poet and a philosopher. He travelled far and wide and visited prominent places of worship and spiritual learning in the Indian subcontinent and Middle East. As a poet-philosopher, he is also one of the prominent personalities of medieval Indian Renaissance. This era of Indian history is known as a moment of re-awakening of the spirit of Indic Civilization and Its knowledge tradition.

The Bani of Guru Nanak Dev can rightly be considered as an epitome of Indic Knowledge Tradition. The proceedings of the Seminar will hopefully generate a fresh insight about the charismatic personality Guru Nanak Dev, his world view and humanitarian vision. The contemporary relevance of Guru's philosophical vision and its radical socio-cultural significance can hardly be over-emphasised. The discourse on the biographical and spiritual texts of Guru Nanak Dev will help in creating a new narrative about Guru Nanak Dev in the context of contemporary spectrum of Indian Society. This Seminar will also help in understanding Guru's life and his universal humanitarian message from the Pan-Indian and Pan-Asian perspective.

**Some of the suggested topics:**

1. Guru Nanak: Socio-Religious Biography
2. Guru Nanak: A Spiritual Spectacle
3. Guru Nanak: PAN Indian and Pan-Asian spiritual Discourses
4. Poetics of Guru Nanak Bani
5. Raga System of Guru Nanak Bani
6. Socio-Cultural significance of Guru Nanak Bani
7. Mystico-ethical aspect of Guru Nanak Bani
8. Guru Nanak: Founder of Socio-Religious transformation
9. Humanitarian Ideology of guru Nanak Dev
10. Semantics of Conceptual Structures in Guru Nanak Bani

IIAS Annual Integration Conference on "Re-visiting Guru Nanak Dev, His Bani and Vision" was organized at IIAS from 25-26 November, 2019. Professor Jagbir Singh, Former Professor and Head, University of Delhi and Professor Paramjit Singh Sidhu, Former Professor and Chairman, GNDU, Amritsar were the conveners of the conference. The Welcome address delivered by Professor Makarand R. Paranjape, Director, IIAS. Keynote address was given by Professor Jagbir Singh, Convener of the conference. Professor H.S. Bedi, Chancellor, H. P. Central University was given remarks by Guest of Honour. Valedictory address was delivered by Professor Guralp Singh Sandhu, Panjab University, Chandigarh. Vote of thanks was proposed by Col. Vijay K. Tiwari, Secretary, IIAS

**Participants:**

- Professor Kuldeep Chand Agnihotri, Vice-Chancellor, H.P. Central University, Dharamshala.

- Professor Jasbir Singh Sabar, Former Chairman, Department of Guru Nanak Studies, GNDU, Amritsar
- Dr. Manmohan Singh, I.P.S., IB, Chandigarh
- Dr. Harpal Singh, Former Associate Professor and H.O.D, Sikh National College, Banga, Punjab
- Dr. Ravinder Singh , Associate Prof. Dyal Singh College, New Delhi
- Sh. Amarjit Singh Grewal, Ludhiana
- Sadhvi Yoganjali Chaitanya Puri, Traditional Scholar of Hermeneutics of Gurbani
- Dr. Manjinder Singh, Assistant professor, School of Punjabi Studies, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar
- Dr. Ramanpreet Kaur,CUP, Bathinda
- Professor Ananta Kumar Giri, Madras Institute of Development Studies  
Professor Karamjit Singh, Registrar, P.U. Chandigarh
- Prof. Sudhir Kumar, Professor of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh
- Dr. Nivedita Uppal, Professor, Department of Music, Former Dean and Head, P. U. Patiala
- Professor Gurpal Singh Sandhu, DES-MDRC, Panjab University, Chandigarh