

## Society of Medieval Punjab as Reflected in the *Bani* of Guru Nanak

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The Persian word Punjab literally means 'five rivers' by implications, the land of five rivers. The term Punjab came into currency during the reign of Mughal emperor Jalaluddin Mohammad Akbar (1556-1605 A.D.). In the Mughal period's documents, we find the use of the terms *Sarkar-e-Punjab* and *Suba-e-Punjab*. These terms do not refer to any geographical entity; they refer simply to the Mughal province of Lahore.<sup>1</sup> Of all the Indian provinces the Punjab alone had the longest period of Mughal rule and suffered from the largest number of foreign invasions from the north-west. About 450 years before Guru Nanak, Punjab had become an integral part of the Muslim world.<sup>2</sup> The first Arab fleet appeared in Indian waters in 636 during the Caliphate of *Umar*,<sup>3</sup> very soon the eyes of the Muslim fell on Sind across the Arabian Sea. This province was at that time ruled by Raja Dahir, son of Chach, the founder of Brahman dynasty. In 711 Al Hajjaj, the governor of Basra, deputed his son-in-law, Muhammad bin Qasim, a young and ambitious general, to launch an attack. The Arabs captured the territories of Sind and Multan<sup>4</sup>. Stanley lane Poole describes Arab rule in Sind 'as an episode in the history of India and of Islam, a triumph without results.'<sup>5</sup>

Historians do not attach much importance to Arab rule in Sind, but it was remarkable in many ways. It strengthened Arab trade on the west coast of India and encouraged more Arabs to make new settlements on the east coast and even in South-East Asia.<sup>6</sup> The Arabs rapidly assimilated local customs and manners. They adjusted Arab tribal life to Sindi tribal pattern. In 886 the Qurān was translated into Sindi on the request of a Hindu Chief. On the other hand, Sanskrit works on astronomy, medicine, ethics and administration were introduced by the Sindi intellectuals to the translation bureau at the Abbasid court. The Arab conquest sowed the seed of Islam on Indian soil. The Muslim population began to grow until Sind became one of the Muslim majority provinces. On their part, the Arabs were also greatly influenced by the culture and civilization of the Hindus.<sup>8</sup> Henceforth Muslim influence grew rapidly. They welcomed as traders and apparently facilities were given to them to settle and acquire lands. Before the tenth century was far advanced they had spread over the whole of the western coast of India.<sup>9</sup> The political condition of India was substantially different on the eve of Mahmud's invasion in 1000 A.D as compared to the time of the Arab invasion two centuries earlier. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century when Mahmud invaded India there were two Arab kingdoms viz. Multan and Sind in north in addition to the Arab colonies on the southern coast of India particularly in Malabar. Multan was ruled by Fateh Daud, a Karmathian while Sind was ruled by the Arabs.<sup>10</sup>

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Sultan Mahmud (999-1031A.D.), the son and successor of Subuktgin, was a great warrior. He is famous for his Indian conquests. During the twenty seven years beginning 1000 he led as many as seventeen raids into India. He was a great ruler of his time. By virtue of his military genius he built up his empire which extended from Iraq and the Caspian Sea to the river Ganges. His actual rule in India however was confined to the Punjab and some parts of Sind. During the course of his invasions Mahmud never lost a war.<sup>11</sup> In spite of all his achievements, Mahmud was not a nation builder and left no permanent institution. The Ghaznavid rule in the Punjab lasted much longer than in Khurasan and was not subject to the vicissitudes of Ghazni. It was free from external invasions for at least 150 years. The governors generally belonged to the Ghaznavid royal house. The contemporary sources do not discuss the administrative framework of Ghaznavid royal house.<sup>12</sup>

The Ghurid conquest of northern India led to the vital changes in the political, economic and social life of the country. The multistate system which had come into vogue during 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries gave way to a centralized system. The real cause of the defeat of the Indians lay in their social system and caste distinctions, which rendered the whole military organization weak. Caste taboos and discriminations killed all sense of unity-social or political. Even religion was the monopoly of a particular section.<sup>13</sup> Shahabuddin Ghoris (1175-1206 A.D.) within 30 years the entire region between Indus and Brahmaputra conquered. After the Ghoris, the Slaves, Khilijis, Tughlaq, Sayid and Lodhi dynasties continued to bring more territories under their control.<sup>14</sup>

During Delhi Sultanate's period the Punjab was inhabited by four main tribes. The Jats comprised the Hindus in the south-east, the Sikhs in the centre and Muslims in the west. The Rajputs, both Hindus and Muslims were distributed all over the province. The jats were in every respect the most important of all the agricultural tribes in the province.<sup>15</sup> politically; Punjab at this time was divided into several parts. The society was divided into two major sections, the Hindus and the Muslims. The Hindus were not only divided into four main castes of the Brahmans, Kashatrias, Vaishyas and the Shudras, but these four castes were further divided into sections and sub-sections. According to Daulat Rai the members of different castes and sections had neither one religion, nor one desire. Their standards of morality were not the same, their worlds were different, and their language was different. The people had their worthless beliefs and prejudices. The absence of education led to ignorance. Idolatry became common. Every city, every town, every village or even a home had its own deity or gods.<sup>16</sup>

The task of correcting the harmful customs was taken up by the saints who appeared in all parts of India. They taught the people that true religion could be tested by good conduct and not by false beliefs. God helped only those who loved truth and service to human beings. The earliest Bhakti leaders were Shankracharya, Ramanuja, Namdev and Ramannad. Among the most notable Bhakti leaders of Guru Nanak's time were Kabir (1440-1518) Vallabhacharya born 1449, Mira Bai born 1449, Chaitanya, (1485-1553), Tulsidas 1532 etc. All these reformers stimulated the people to get rid of priest hood, and caste system. In Punjab disappointment, despair and depression prevailed everywhere. It is believed that Bhakti movement had reached Punjab through Nam Dev during the closing years of the thirteenth century. Baba Sain Das set up a centre at Gujranwala. His

successors established branches at a number of places in Punjab and Jammu reign. Guru Nanak might have heard about them during his journey.<sup>17</sup> The work of giving relief to the afflicted mind of Punjabis was taken up by Guru Nanak.<sup>18</sup>

Muslim society in Punjab was ridden by racial prejudices. For nearly five hundred years some Muslim soldiers, administrators, traders, scholars, men of letters and learned and pious men had been adopting the Punjab as in their home. The Muslim society in Punjab, as in some other parts of India, was marked by sectarian divisions as by racial differences. The sectarian differences were important to the contemporaries to whom it mattered much whether one was a Sunni, a Shia an Ismaili or a Mahdavi. The Sunnis formed the largest proportion of Muslim population in the Punjab.<sup>19</sup> The ulema controlled the religious and social life of the Muslim society. They generally supported the rulers. Ziauddin Barani, the famous historian, admitted that they wrongly interpreted the Holy Quran to meet the wishes of the rulers. The Muslim masses bribed them.<sup>20</sup>

Due to the conversion to Islam of Rājputs, Jats and other tribal groups even in areas predominantly Muslim such as western Punjab from Hinduism, class division penetrated into the Muslim ranks.<sup>21</sup> The most important forms of Muslim religious life in the Punjab, as elsewhere by this time were embodied in the beliefs and practices of the Sufis, the mystics of Islam.<sup>22</sup> Several Sufi orders had come to flourish in India. Already before the mid-sixteenth century the influence of the Sufis had been penetrated nearly all the strata of Indo-Muslim society. The influence of Sufis in the Punjab during the late fifteenth and the sixteenth century was as real and pervasive as in any other part of India.<sup>23</sup>

Both in Asia and Europe the state of affairs as it was made the fifteenth century a period of singular mental ability. Important preparations had been in the fourteenth century, when the Christian reformers, Walter Lollard and John Huss preached and suffered death for their opinions; when after the overthrow and expulsion of Buddhism from India by astute and powerful Brahmans, there flourished the exponents of Indian monotheism, the saint Kabir and the Ramanand.<sup>24</sup> In India the activities of these thinkers and reformers resulted in the spread of Bhakti movement which starting from south, travelled towards north and on to the Punjab changing its character into Sikhism. The term *Sikh* literally means a *learner, a disciple*. The name was for the first time given to the followers of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh faith in the Punjab in the fifteenth century. Sikhism was founded, like Buddhism, as protest against the spiritual despotism of Brahmans and as a revolt against the restrictions of the caste system and the exaggeration of Hindu ritual. It aimed at teaching social equality and universal brotherhood, abolishing sectarianism and denouncing superstition.<sup>25</sup>

Nanak was born on 15 April 1469, at *Rae Bhoi ki Talwandi* now known as *Nankana Sahib* in Shaikhupura district in Pakistan about 65 kilometers west of Lahore. His father's name was *Kalu* a *Khatri* of the subcaste *Bedi* and mother's name was *Tripta*.<sup>26</sup> He was married to *Sulakhmi*, the daughter of Mula of Batala, district Gurdaspur. He had two sons namely Sri Chand and Lakmi Das. He visited the holy places of Hindus and Muslims both impressed upon the leaders of both the religions to do away with all formalism and ritualism and understand the reality. In the later part of his life he settled at Kartarpur on the banks of Ravi and there he died in 1539.<sup>27</sup>

The student of the social history of the Punjab during the time of Guru Nanak is confronted with two major social entities; the Hindu and the Muslim. None of these can be treated as a unified whole, for both formed a part of much larger entities in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>28</sup> Guru Nanak's response to his social milieu is a complicated question, more even than the problem of his political concerns. Guru Nanak is generally depicted as a great social reformer. It is believed that he preached liberal social doctrines; he upheld the ideal of equality and advocated a casteless society.<sup>29</sup> He was an apostle of 'universal brotherhood' and he condemned caste and class. A notable aspect of the 'social improvement' effected by him was the emancipation of women. For him, men and women were equal not only before God but also before one another.<sup>30</sup>

Some writers like Macauliffe, Bhai Kahan Singh and Teja Singh are of the opinion that Guru Nanak was a revolutionary because he tried to destroy all the prevalent religious institutions as well as the structures of society of his time. They hold that Guru's bitterest attack was aimed at the annihilation of caste system, and he tried to build a new society in place of the old one.<sup>31</sup> According to Ganda Singh that Guru was not a mere reformer but the founder of a new religion.<sup>32</sup> In the light of these remarks we will try to analyze Contemporary society of Medieval Punjab reflected in the Bani of Guru Nanak.

Guru Nanak left a large number of compositions which now form an integral part of the Adi Granth, the Sacred Scripture of the Sikhs. A considerable number of his verses contain references to contemporary politics and society as well. Our limited aim here is to try to understand his Bani in terms of his contemporary society. It must be recognized first that the core of Guru Nanak's message is religious.<sup>33</sup> A careful perusal of Guru Nanak's compositions reveals his familiarity with many of the socio-economic aspects of life in the Punjab. The Baburbani of Guru Nanak describes the violent attack of Babur upon the Punjab and the general massacre of the innocent people.<sup>34</sup> With the help of Khurasan, Hindustan (India) was frightened; The blame lies with us and not the creator, who hath sent the Mughal (invader) as the angel of death.<sup>35</sup>

The Kings are like lions and their officials like dogs who disturb the restful people. The officials are like nails (of Kings) which make wounds, (The remnants of the prey) the blood and liver are licked by the dogs. Guru Nanak makes a reference to the social and religious customs, practices and usages of the time. At any rate, Guru Nanak is believed to have condemned many social evils before launching a positive programme of social reform: disparity, caste, sati, slavery of women for instance.<sup>36</sup>

The Hindu comes to the house of a Hindu. He puts the sacred thread around his neck and reads the scriptures. He puts on the thread, but does evil deeds. His cleansings and washings will not be approved. The Muslim glorifies his own faith. Without the Murshid or a spiritual teacher, no one is accepted. They may be shown the way, but only a few there. Without the karma of good actions, heaven is not attained.<sup>38</sup> Guru Nanak's ideal man is a householder and discharges his duties towards himself, his family and society. He is friendly and sympathetic towards the welfare of others. Guru Nanak does not show any appreciation for *bairag*.

Guru Nanak's attitude towards contemporary Islam is very similar to his attitude towards Hinduism. It has been noted that the Muslim and Hindu scriptures are often equated by him; quite often Muslim and Hindu beliefs or practices are mentioned

together.<sup>39</sup> In Rag Asa for Guru Nanak illustrates the variety of those who are in search of God by referring to the *jogis*, the *sannyasis* and the *pundits*; in the middle of this passage, he refers also to the representatives of Islam: *the darvish*, the *pir* and the *Paighambar*.<sup>40</sup> Guru Nanak's familiarity with Islam does not necessarily imply an appreciation for contemporary form of Muslim belief and practice.

The religious leaders of both the communities had become blind towards their true path and were following the path of false hood, violence etc. The Muslim Qazi (Judge) tells lies and accepts bribe.<sup>41</sup> The theology of Guru Nanak was not formal; his sole object was to bring about social and moral reforms. Sikhism remained a pacific and tolerant cult until the social tyranny of the Hindus and political friction with Muslims transformed it into a militant creed.<sup>42</sup> Guru Nanak preached no complicated philosophy. He spoke to the people in the language of the people and explained his ideas to them with examples drawn from the everyday life of the common people.<sup>43</sup>

The *Bani* of Guru Nanak related mostly to the spiritual uplift of mankind and social goodwill and understanding among people of different creeds and classes, based on the common fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man. According to Guru Nanak, these are but one God who is all-truth and the immortal, unborn and self existing creator, fearless and without hate. Guru Nanak's compositions may not prove a radical departure from the existing social order in social of Punjab, but a radical departure would be justified by his compositions.<sup>44</sup>

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