

PREAMBLE



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE UNIQUENESS OF GURU NANAK'S PHILOSOPHY



The *Institute for Understanding Sikhism (IUS)* Canada, in collaboration with the *Department of Guru Nanak Studies*, Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar held a successful three-day **International Conference: Uniqueness of Guru Nanak's Philosophy** from 22-25 February, 2011. The Welcome Address was presented by Professor Dr Ajaib Singh Brar, Vice Chancellor, GNDU, Amritsar. This was followed by an Introduction to the Department of Guru Nanak Studies by the Dean of Faculty, Prof Dr Shashi Bala, who also elaborated on the objectives of the Conference. Some universally acceptable principles of Guru Nanak's philosophy were presented by Dr Jaspal Singh, Vice Chancellor, Punjabi University, Patiala. The Keynote Address was presented by Prof Dr Devinder Singh Chahal, President, IUS. The Vote of Thanks was given by Dr Gursharanjit Singh, Head of Department of Guru Nanak Studies.

This academic International Conference was specifically held to highlight, discuss and generate scholarly debate on the theme of the UNIQUENESS OF GURU NANAK'S PHILOSOPHY. Thirty papers were presented by as many scholars in three days of hectic Schedule. Eight scholars from UK, USA, Canada & Malaysia, and the rest from eight different states of India, including Amritsar actively participated. The dynamic nature of the Conference gathering is perhaps best highlighted by the fact that probably for the first time participants/Paper Readers assembled, hailing from different inter-disciplinary fields: academics, medical, law, literature, politics, researchers, students, interfaith, Sikh Scholars and some members of Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. All the papers as received were printed in the form of preliminary **Proceedings** without editing by the Department of Guru Nanak Studies and were distributed to all the participants. The papers submitted in the required Format were reviewed and edited and are being printed as final **Proceedings** in the current issue of *Understanding Sikhism: The Research Journal*.

Although this conference has attracted more than thirty papers from scholars of various universities and Sikh Institutes, however, there were very few research oriented papers specifically discussing the uniqueness and originality of Nanakian Philosophy. This could possibly be due to the fact that the very definition of the term

'Uniqueness' is being understood differently by different authors. For example,

1. Dr Sarjeet Singh Sidhu writes that to say that Guru Nanak's philosophy is unique is to say that that his philosophy "...has distinctive characteristics, that there is no other [philosophy] like it and that it has no equal." However, the last portion of the... proposition, 'that it has no equal', is likely to be perceived as presumptuous, if not out rightly arrogant, and therefore not likely to sit well with non-Sikhs. A more toned-down proposition would be: "*In key areas, [Guru Nanak's philosophy] is so distinctively different from other religions in its approach to Deity and Mankind, that it can justifiably lay claim to uniqueness without making claims of being the only answer.*" This latter proposition is actually not just reasonable but the appropriate way to go. To justify the claim of 'uniqueness of Guru Nanak's philosophy' it has to be shown, through the verses in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS), the key areas wherein the philosophy has distinctive characteristics when contrasted with other faiths, especially Hinduism and Islam, which were the predominant religions of Guru Nanak's time.
2. Prof Shashi Bala opines that the word 'uniqueness' should not be taken as claiming exclusive authority with an intention to undermine the others but it must indicate to the distinctive features of any religious tradition which are more conducive for self-progression and self-transcendence and to bring religious harmony. She pointed out the prevailing disagreement among scholars regarding the interpretation of *Gurbani* and misconceptions regarding the most popular usage of Vedantic interpretation of *Gurbani*. She stressed on the need to analyze the literal meaning of the term Vedanta and the development of Vedanta as a philosophical school of thought. Elaborating the differences between the non-dualistic philosophy of Shankara and Qualified monism of Ramanuja, she stressed on the distinctive aspects of Guru Nanak's philosophy. However, she has mentioned in her paper that rigorous system of Shankara was criticized by Ramanuja in the 12th century by propounding a different school of thought known as *Visistadvaita* or qualified monism.

3. Some authors have tried to portray uniqueness of Sikh scriptures by quoting the following two famous phrases:

ਜੈਸੀ ਮੈ ਆਵੈ ਖਸਮ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ ਤੈਸੜਾ ਕਰੀ ਗਿਆਨੁ ਵੇ ਲਾਲੇ ॥

Guru Nanak

And

ਪੁਰ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ ਆਈ ॥ ਤਿਨਿ ਸਗਲੀ ਚਿੰਤ ਮਿਟਾਈ ॥

Guru Arjan.

4. The custodians of other religions also claim similar status for their holy scriptures. This is the area in every religion which conflicts with science and rational thinking; therefore, this concept is also to be looked into seriously by Sikh theologians and researchers.
5. Readers will also note that same phrase, stanza or verse from the AGGS has been interpreted differently by different authors in spite of the fact that there could only be one right interpretation,

Let us have a look into the definition of ‘Uniqueness’ online:

1. Being the only one of its kind.
2. Without an equal or equivalent; unparalleled.

Usage Note: For many grammarians, *unique* is the paradigmatic absolute term, a shibboleth that distinguishes between those who understand that such a term cannot be modified by an adverb of degree or a comparative adverb and those who do not. These grammarians would say that a thing is either unique or not unique and that it is therefore incorrect to say that something is *very unique* or *more unique* than something else. Most of the Usage Panel supports this traditional view. Eighty percent disapprove of the sentence *her designs are quite unique in today's fashions*. But as the language of advertising in particular attests, *unique* is widely used as a synonym for "worthy of being considered in a class by itself, extraordinary," and if so construed it may arguably be modified. In fact, *unique* appears as a modified adjective in the work of many reputable writers.

(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/unique>)

Therefore, it is evident from the nature of discussions presented at the Conference that exploring the ‘uniqueness’ of Guru Nanak’s philosophy poses a number of difficulties for many Sikh theologians and researchers. This is particularly pertinent when addressing sensitivities arising from a critical evaluation of the philosophies of other traditions. Nevertheless, the point to note is that although Vedantic philosophers have contradicted Vedic philosophy (Vedic polytheism, Epics and Puranic mythology) and a Vedantic philosopher, Ramanuja, contradicts the other Vedantic philosopher, Shankara, then why would it be difficult for the Sikh scholars to demonstrate the philosophy of Guru Nanak as UNIQUE to that of others?

Now the question is:

Did this International Conference achieve its objective in discussing the uniqueness of the philosophy of Guru Nanak?

The readers of this present issue of *Understanding Sikhism: The Research Journal* will be the best to judge to answer this question. Interestingly, although a number of papers have aimed to bring out in the limelight some unique features in Guru Nanak’s philosophy; many others present the challenges when setting apart Guru Nanak’s philosophy from the key thinkers of the period. Nevertheless, it is very encouraging that this was **the big step forward** to understand the ‘**Uniqueness about the Philosophy of Guru Nanak**’ as is evident from the Resolution passed unanimously that such conferences should be held very often. It is envisaged that future Conference themes will build on many of the lively discussions that took place during this thought-provoking three-day Conference.

Devinder Singh Chahal
Editor-in-Chief

DECLARATION

Every author is responsible for her/his views expressed here. It is not necessary that such views are endorsed by the Institute for Understanding Sikhism.

Devinder Singh Chahal,
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