

Uniqueness of Guru Nanak's Philosophy: Difference from Vedanta Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Guru Nanak's philosophy is universal, dynamic and deeply humanistic and it provides perennial solutions for the emerging problems of human life. He enunciates the doctrine of oneness of God and universal brotherhood but this oneness does not mean uniformity rather recognition of diversity underlying unity. He does not advocate the philosophy of absolutism and religious totalitarianism but believes in the spirit of religious pluralism. Real religion means contemplation of Divine Name, righteous conduct and service of humanity and mere possession of religion without religiosity may lead to religious dogmatism, proving detrimental to the growth of any religion. This paper deals with three main issues viz. first, we need to understand the meaning and nature of philosophy in East and West to clarify the misconceptions about the relation of religion and philosophy in the East; and to see how the religious texts are not only a matter of faith but are the imperatives for the righteous way of living with a definite goal. Second, whenever we talk about uniqueness of any philosophy, the immediate thought that comes in our mind is uniqueness in comparison with the other faiths or philosophies. However, the word uniqueness should not be taken as claiming exclusive authority with an intention to undermine the others; but it points to the distinctive features of any religious tradition which are more conducive for self-progression and self-transcendence and to bring religious harmony. Though the eternal truths of all scriptures are universal yet the particularities, historical context and uniqueness of their preceptors' spiritual experiences are the stimulating factors within the given context. Third, often we find disagreement among scholars regarding the interpretation of Gurbani and often Vedantic interpretation of Gurbani is the most popular usage among many scholars. To avoid any misunderstanding, we should be clear about the literal meaning of Vedanta as well as the development of Vedanta as a philosophical school of thought.

INTRODUCTION

The term philosophy in the Sanskrit terminology refers to *darsana* and *tattva* which means vision of truth and the nature of reality. Most western scholars are under the wrong impression that western philosophy is alone the genuine philosophy as it deals with the systematic inquiry into the nature of things and other so called philosophies are 'no more than poetry, faith and ethics at best and mythology at worst'. As two well-known contemporary American philosophers write:

Few of the ancient people advanced far beyond the mythological stage, and perhaps none of them can be said to have developed a genuine philosophy except the Greeks. [9]

These Western philosophers regard only that system of thought as philosophy which takes into consideration the thought patterns of Western science. The Indian thinking, since the ancient times, has its holistic pattern of thought, different from the analytical approach of western philosophy. Hence Indian philosophy is often misunderstood as amalgamation of mythology and



religion. Philosophy, in ordinary sense, may be defined as the cultural pattern and integrated expression of different styles of thinking, feeling and behaviour of people. Any philosophical school is, indeed, a product of one's environment and its specific modes of cognitive,

intellectual, aesthetic, moral and religious experience. In order to understand man and his culture in any system we primarily need to understand its world-view. It is rightly observed that ‘unless the members of each culture approach the philosophy of others with an open mind and study them seriously, there will be neither the understanding of other peoples nor the enlightenment and enrichment of one’s own philosophy and culture that can only result from such understanding’. [6]

However philosophy deals with the fundamental problems of human existence and is invariably related with religion in India. The difference between Indian and Western philosophy lies in their different approaches; the Western philosophy’s approach to reality is analytical and it treats metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, social and aesthetical problems separately; but Indian philosophy, in its holistic approach, takes comprehensive view of reality and treats each problem from all perspectives.

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT REVELATION AND PHILOSOPHY

Often there is a misconception among several scholars that Guru Nanak Bani is a synthesis of Hindu and Islamic ideas, with a view to reconcile both.

Aziz Ahmad in his book ‘*Studies in Islamic Culture*’ used the term ‘syncretism’ [3] implying thereby that there is nothing original in it. On the contrary, Prof. M. Mujeeb in his Presidential Address (1969) at Punjab History Conference states:

A synthesis of prevailing beliefs is an intellectual process and has to be fortified with arguments. It may convince the intellectuals; it is not inspired and it cannot inspire. [5]

Another misconception is to regard Guru Nanak as a mere social and religious reformer. The reply to such perception is given by Prof J S Grewal when he says that Guru Nanak was a founder or originator ‘who speaks with the voice of authority which appears to spring directly from his moral and metaphysical convictions... (His) rejection (of contemporary religious belief and practice) is accompanied by a positive offer, the offer of one or another of his own ideals.’ [3]

PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH OF GURU NANAK

Guru Nanak has not given philosophical treatises in the technical sense of philosophy. But in his compositions, certain queries are raised and answered about the meaning of human existence, origin of man, cause of his suffering, nature of reality and man’s relation to fellow beings and his moral obligation for the other species and surrounding environment etc. In the beginning of *Jap*, the question is raised:

ਕਿਵ ਸਚਿਆਰਾ ਹੋਈਐ ਕਿਵ ਕੂੜੈ ਤੁਟੈ ਪਾਲਿ ॥

ਹੁਕਮਿ ਰਜਾਈ ਚਲਣਾ ਨਾਨਕ ਲਿਖਿਆ ਨਾਲਿ ॥੧॥

How to become truthful? How to break the wall of falsehood?

By attuning to the Will of God inscribed within.

AGGS, M 1, p 1 [1].

In *Raga Gaurhi*, the most significant mystery about the birth and death; bondage and release of man is raised with offering solution that all this happens in accordance with the natural laws but within specific scheme of continuity of impressions of mind:

ਜਾਤੋ ਜਾਇ ਕਹਾ ਤੇ ਆਵੈ ॥

ਕਹ ਉਪਜੈ ਕਹ ਜਾਇ ਸਮਾਵੈ ॥

ਕਿਉ ਬਾਧਿਓ ਕਿਉ ਮੁਕਤੀ ਪਾਵੈ ॥

ਕਿਉ ਅਬਿਨਾਸੀ ਸਹਜਿ ਸਮਾਵੈ ॥੧॥

.....

ਸਹਜੇ ਆਵੈ ਸਹਜੇ ਜਾਇ ॥

ਮਨ ਤੇ ਉਪਜੈ ਮਨ ਮਾਹਿ ਸਮਾਇ ॥

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਮੁਕਤੋ ਬੰਧੁ ਨ ਪਾਇ ॥

ਸਬਦੁ ਬੀਚਾਰਿ ਛੁਟੈ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਇ ॥੨॥

Man is born and dies; from where does he come? When does he take birth and where does he absorb? Why is he in bondage; and how is he liberated? How does he absorb in eternal state of equanimity?...

He comes and goes by Divine Cosmic Order; born by the desires of the mind and absorbs in it also. The Guruwards are liberated and are not bound; they find release by contemplation of the Word and through devotion to Lord’s Name.

AGGS, M.1, p.152

This type of deeper insights reveals the practical and pragmatic vision of the great Guru. He, nonetheless, raised his voice against rigid and abstract philosophical modes of argumentation about the nature of ultimate reality which according to him, can be experienced and not proved. He also denounced the elaborate theories about the creation of the universe as are given by the other existent philosophical systems. The rigorous types of discursive thinking, methods of reasoning and logical pursuits by the obstinacy of human mind are rejected by Guru Nanak.

Guru Nanak has not propounded any theories but proclaimed his message in the form of applied philosophy of truthful living which to him is higher than the mere knowledge of truth. In the Indian philosophical schools, the method of inquiry usually starts with *purvapaksa* (prior view); *khandana* (refutation); *uttarapaksa* (own view) and *siddhanta* (conclusion). Guru Nanak has deep acquaintance with the prevalent religious traditions. With his sagacious vision, he presented a detailed exposition of their beliefs, rites, rituals, ceremonies, mythology and legends; and rejected

those deep-rooted convictions, criticized the discrepancies in their behaviour patterns and has offered a new interpretation by his own philosophy of truthful living; by applying the practical methods; visiting their places of worship; and nullifying their arguments by convincing them about their futility on the rational and scientific grounds.

Guru Nanak's philosophy offers a particular world-view with its own metaphysics, axiology, epistemology and aesthetics. He has a definite mission in life and preached spirituality in action by integrating the spiritual and temporal aspects of human life. He offered a practical way of life with pragmatic vision to live detached amidst the worldly allurements. This innovative message of Guru Nanak, deviating from the prevalent religious philosophy, has consequently culminated in the creation of Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh. He was the founder of an original and innovative philosophical thought and he appointed his successor to disseminate his philosophy and to implement this message in the form of community.

MEANING OF VEDANTA

The literal meaning of the term Vedanta is the end of the Vedas, the concluding part of the Vedas, 'the culmination of the Vedic teaching and wisdom.' Hence the term originally refers to the Upanishads the last literary work of Vedic Period and later on this term included all subsequent interpretations of Upanishads. The Vedic religion may be seen as it progresses from polytheism to monotheism and ultimately reaches its climax i.e. monism and philosophical non-dualism. The Upanishads reveal the fundamental concepts and their meaning in terse and aphoristic statements and in didactic and dialogic style but are not systematic philosophical records. The systematic interpretation of the Upanishads was first attempted by Badarayana in the text known as *Brahma-Sutras*, which nonetheless, brief and epigrammatic, is called the cornerstone of all Vedantic thought. However, there emerged three main schools of Vedanta: *Advaita* of Sankara (non-dualism); *Vishishtadvaita* of Ramanuja (Qualified non-dualism) and *Dvaita* of Madhva (Dualism). [7]

Now the question arises, can we club all Indian philosophical and religious literature (based on early Vedic polytheism, Epics, Puranas, sectarian religious literature etc.) under one common title 'Vedanta'? So the word Vedantic interpretation, in the real sense, implies interpretation in accordance with the Vedanta school of thought based on the philosophy of Shankara. Hence this term cannot be applied for the earlier Vedic polytheism, Epics and Puranic mythology as well as for the popular religious literature of Hinduism which are not in compliance with the non-dualistic philosophy of Shankara. Here a brief glimpse on the main philosophical insights of

Shankara makes clear the distinctive aspects of Guru Nanak's philosophy.

ADVAITISM OF SHANKARA

The philosophy of Shankara, is defined in Indian terminology as *advaita* or non-dualism which envisages the pure unity of one being devoid of any multiplicity. He distinguishes two standpoints for viewing the absolute being. From the transcendental point of view, Brahman is *nirguna* (without any attribute), *niskriya* (without any activity), *nirupadhika* (unconditional and absolute), *nirvisesa* (having no distinguishing element in it). From the empirical standpoint, Brahman is *Ishvara* embodying *sarguna* aspects i.e. creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world; having the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience etc. In its essential nature Brahman is beyond all descriptions; impersonal and self-luminous; pure being, pure consciousness and pure bliss that can neither be worshipped nor prayed to. The *sarguna* Brahman is real only at the lower level and can satisfy the emotional urges of the ignorant aspirants but is unreal for the enlightened ones.

The creation of the world is explained by *maya* which occupies a key position in Shankara's system. He formulated the theory of *vivartavada*, which states that the world is not a real transformation of God into world; it is a misreading due to the ignorance of *jiva*. Just as a rope appears snake only in dim light, similarly world appears real in ignorance of our knowledge of Brahman. He envisages three levels of truth namely, *paramarthika*, *vyavaharika*, *pratibhasika* dealing respectively with Brahman, objective world and illusions of an individual. Just as a dream becomes unreal by the waking experience, similarly the world of sensible objects appears unreal on the realization of the knowledge of transcendent reality. Shankara stresses on the identical relation of individual soul and Brahman and bondage means obliviousness about this reality. Hence he believes in *svrupamukti* which will enable one to get oneself absorbed in Brahman. When ignorance (*avidya*) is dissolved by knowledge (*vidya*) there is complete absorption of names and forms of parts of person, which merge in elements and afterwards merge in Brahman, along with elements.[2]

The 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. He says that the material world and the selves are related to Brahman as parts to the whole. The three essential attributes of Brahman are *satyam* (reality), *jnanam* (consciousness) and *anantam* (Infintude). Ramanuja denies the distinction between two levels of Brahman –*Sarguna* and *nirguna*. However, Ramanuja believes in the incarnation of divine being who manifests

himself in five forms viz., the highest *Parabrahman* or *Narayana* (who dwells in the city of Vaikuntha); *Vyuhas* (Vasudev, Sankarshan, Pardumna, Aniruda), *Antaryamin* (dwelling in heart); deity, who dwells in idols and images. [4]

Unlike Shankara, Ramanuja admits the reality of the world and stresses the personal aspect of Brahman. To him, devotion is more fruitful than intellectual knowledge for attaining salvation. He believes in the theory of *parinamavada* i.e. creation is real manifestation of God and he defines two stages of Brahman that is causal state (*karana-brahma*) and the effect state (*karya-brahma*), which is termed as un-manifest and manifest state. He defines the relation of the individual soul to God after enlightenment as neither extinction of individuality, nor identity with God but a state of eternal bliss in which the self may realize its God-like properties. It may be similar to God but cannot become God, lacking the capacity of creation, dissolution and divine grace.

UNIQUENESS OF GURU NANAK'S PHILOSOPHY

The Ultimate Reality, according to Guru Nanak, is not an abstract metaphysical unity but it finds expression in plurality of creation. Both the *nirguna* and *saguna* aspects are taken as two phases of one ultimate reality. Guru Nanak's monotheism repudiates the doctrine of incarnation and idol-worship. He stresses on the absolute supremacy of One God and denies any absolute authority to the concept of *trimurti* prevalent in the Hindu society. To Guru Nanak, the Supreme Reality is One Absolute Being that is Formless but manifests Himself in His Attributive Aspect. Though God is defined as Transcendent and immanent; Impersonal and Personal; *Nirguna* and *Saguna* but it is explicitly stated:
ਅਵਿਗਤੋ ਨਿਰਮਾਇਲੁ ਉਪਜੇ ਨਿਰਗੁਣ ਤੇ ਸਰਗੁਣੁ ਥੀਆ ॥

From the Formless, the Lord assumed the Immaculate Form and from Nirguna, He became Saguna.
AGGS, M 1, p 940.

According to Guru Nanak, God has Himself created the world play and Himself realizes its reality. The world is real being a creation of God but is unreal due to its transitoriness. The world is a place to practice righteousness. It is a rational order, systematically arranged and has a specific plan and purpose. In the *Gurbani*, there is an explicit description of the state before creation i.e. *dhundhukara* (indescribable darkness), *sunm smadh* (abstract meditation) and His *Hukam* and then the beginning of creation as He desired (*bhana*). Though Immaculate and incomprehensible, yet He is all-pervasive in the universe
ਨਾਨਕ ਸਚ ਦਾਤਾਰੁ ਸਿਨਾਖਤੁ ਕੁਦਰਤੀ ॥

Guru Nanak has defined Nature as the revealing symbol of God.

AGGS, M 1, p 141.

Nature is portrayed not as an unconscious object alien to human existence and to be treated as merely a means for man's material well-being. There is a feeling of reverence for nature and a hint of sanctification of all natural phenomena. Nature has no independent entity because this wonderful play of nature is working within God's Will. God alone knows the limits and extent of all living and non-living phenomena. The five elements are often sanctified and termed as *gurmukh*. In *Jap*, air is portrayed as Guru, water as father and earth as the great mother or source of nourishment of all living beings. The earth is also taken as a *dharamsal*, a place where man comes to practice righteousness. The equilibrium of eco-systems is found in many compositions of Guru Nanak which manifest nature in all its cosmic and humanistic aspects. In *Raga Dhanasri*, the co-relation of eco-system is defined in an exalted vision of divine prayer to the Almighty:

ਗਗਨ ਮੈ ਬਾਲੁ ਰਵਿ ਚੰਦੁ ਦੀਪਕ ਬਨੇ ਤਾਰਿਕਾ ਮੰਡਲ ਜਨਕ ਮੋਤੀ ॥

ਧੂਪੁ ਮਲਆਨਲੋ ਪਵਣੁ ਚਵਰੋ ਕਰੇ ਸਗਲ ਬਨਰਾਇ ਫੁਲੰਤ ਜੋਤੀ ॥੧॥

ਕੈਸੀ ਆਰਤੀ ਹੋਇ ਭਵ ਖੰਡਨਾ ਤੇਰੀ ਆਰਤੀ ॥

ਅਨਹਤਾ ਸਬਦ ਵਾਜੰਤ ਭੇਰੀ ॥੧॥

Here the firmament is mentioned as salver, sun and moon as lamps, galaxy of stars as pearls, woods of sandal as incense, breezes blowing as celestial fan, flowers and forests as offerings, unstuck music as sound of temple drums.

AGGS, M 1, p 663.

At several places in the *Gurbani*, there are clear references which intimate relation of the absolute identity of soul and God but this relation is like a drop of water and a ray of the Sun, which may merge in the ocean and in the Sun respectively, yet cannot become itself the ocean and the Sun. Similarly, the devotee may merge in the absolute; still he cannot become the Absolute. A similar view is expressed by Taran Singh as 'God or the cosmic consciousness is perfect, absolutely perfect and full, without any impediment or flaw, while human soul, howsoever evolved, remains imperfect and lacking qualitatively as well as quantitatively.....A *jiva* is created entity, God is not. Even after salvation or liberation, a *jiva* is to stand and wait for the Will of the Lord'. [8] The main stress of Guru Nanak is not on emancipation here or hereafter but on communion with the Almighty:

ਦਰ ਦਰਸਨ ਕਾ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਮੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਮੁਕਤਿ ਬੈਕੁੰਠੈ ਕਰੈ ਕਿਆ ॥

The devotee demands neither heaven nor salvation hereafter; but he prays for the divine vision or in other words, the reflection of divinity.

AGGS, M 1, p 360.

Guru Nanak rejects the dichotomy between the moral and the spiritual and stresses on the integration of the two for the realization of the highest goal of life. Any deviation from the path of morality may lead to an endless disaster in the spiritual sphere. Mere acquaintance with the moral principles will not suffice unless these become an inseparable part of life and issue forth in man's character. His ideal is not to grasp the Ultimate Truth intellectually but to realize it in one's own experience.

ਸਚਹੁ ਓਰੈ ਸਭੁ ਕੇ ਉਪਰਿ ਸਚੁ ਆਚਾਰੁ ॥

Realization of Truth is higher and above everything yet higher than truth is truthful living.

AGGS, M 1, p 62.

Guru Nanak's philosophy is based on ethical and spiritual values and its distinctive spirit lies in its holistic, humanistic, liberal, dynamic and universal philosophy of self-transcendence, way to the spiritual through the societal aspect and emphasis on complete emancipation of man at the individual, social and spiritual level. Guru Nanak has strongly recommended the life of householder who can attain liberation while performing his duties in detached way. No such renunciation is admitted in his philosophy which indicates a spontaneous participation of man in life that neither neglects personality nor mundane affairs but is the experience of full and complete life. The enlightened man (*jivan-mukta*) is supposed to live in society and remain detached amidst the worldly attachments like a lotus and to serve as an ideal for others. Guru Nanak set the practical example when he stayed at Kartarpur in the later period of his life, and initiated the institution of *langar* to emphasize the notion of universal brotherhood.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The relevance of any philosophy can be seen from its view of the phenomenal existence representing not only the perceptible world but also the cultivating world i.e. the world of being and happening. Unlike Shankara, Guru Nanak enunciates the pluralistic manifestation of One Reality. To realize the purpose of life, we must know the character of total environment and must connect it with the needs of our human nature in its universal search for happiness. Man's thought affects his behavior and self-centered thoughts lead to moral deviations.
2. The philosophy of Guru Nanak is neither a belief in life beyond death nor it indicates any idea of life-negation nor encourages self-denial, but is indeed, a philosophy of life-affirmation as well as of world-affirmation, with its strong emphasis on the art of detached living in the mundane world. He stresses on the integration of the spiritual and the temporal. Shankara explains the three levels of reality as *paramarthika*, *vyavaharika* and *pratibhasika* and

considers the first alone as the real and ignored the relevance of empirical reality.

3. Guru Nanak has given an emphatic emphasis on the philosophy of action, coordination of belief and practice, cultivation of individual and social values for truthful living to realize the meaning of human existence. The seeker has to tread the path of spirituality through community life. No such scope for morality and spirituality is found at the *paramarthika* level of Shankara's philosophy.
4. Guru Nanak stressed on the coordination of knowledge, devotion and action, whereas Shankar stressed on knowledge alone to remove ignorance and to realize one's pristine nature.

On the basis of the above stated points, we can say that we should be cautious about the use of terms in the comparative study. Any attempt of comparative study may leads to certain misconceptions, if the conclusions are drawn on the generalized basis without apprehending the real meaning.

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