

GURU NANAK ASSIGNS HIS PHILOSOPHY A UNIVERSAL ROLE

ARTICLE

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CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

While recounting the universal scope and roles of Guru Nanak's message or his SABD theology, I bring in the irrigation role of the Continental Divide that irrigates lands around the Seward Peninsula in Alaska to the lands around the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans. The ocean waters, through the routes of cloud formations, give birth to glaciers, lakes, and rain. Those rains form brooks, creeks, and rivulets that flow through mountains and lands to irrigate vast territories on both sides of the continent worldwide. They originate at different locations, in other geographical areas, in different seasons, and in various formats, sizes, and strengths. They flow in different directions. They carry varied contents and compositions of nutrients and minerals through vast distances. On their way, the creeks pass through diverse ingredients that may give them different colors. However, they nourish widely differing soils and vegetation that give birth to various foliage and civilizations.

My stressing on the vastness and diversity among the rivulets was stimulated by a verse from the Guru Granth spoken by Guru Nanak, the Founding Light of Sikhi.

Ocean, Rains, and Rivulets of SABD Guru

There is a striking verse in Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS), the Sacred Sikh Scripture. Its author was the founder of Sikhi, sometimes known as Sikhi-sm. Guru Nanak wrote:

ਗੁਰੂ ਸਮੁੰਦੁ ਨਦੀ ਸਭਿ ਸਿਖੀ ਨਾਤੈ ਜਿਤੁ ਵਡਿਆਈ ॥

ABSTRACT

Sikhi is a universal philosophy as defined by its founder, Guru Nanak. However, neither its practitioners nor the clerics serving this religion have clearly explained to its practitioners or the religious world of today Sikhi's characteristics that qualify Sikhi as a universal philosophy. This article discusses how Guru Nanak employed examples of the continental divides, oceans, rain, rivers, creeks, brooks, and their surrounding lands, the universality of the water flow in the world, and how the Sikhism of SABD Guru may be practiced as the universal religion of the world.

Gurū samund naḍī sabh sikhī nāṭai jīt vadiāī. AGGS, M 1, p 150

The Guru, the Divine Wisdom, is the bottomless Ocean, and all of its WISDOM in the form of teachings originate out of this Ocean as rains and falling ice give birth to brooks and rivers, sometimes puddles. They are of many lengths and depths. When drenched through these rains and creeks, the whole earth is exalted.

The ocean and rivers here are used as metaphors: an ocean for Guru's Wisdom and rivers for institutions of dissemination and their observances. The Ocean of Sacred Knowledge is depthless. The water of Knowledge vaporizing from this Ocean creates clouds, raindrops, and snow. In turn, they descend on Earth through rain or snow. Finally, they all give birth to brooks, rivers, and sometimes, puddles all over the planet. When they are in the format of sabd using the language of Sikh tradition, they are said to form rivulets of Sikhi.

Thus, the brooks are metaphors describing practices of Sikhi doctrines and operation of Sikh strategies, some of which give birth to Sikhi institutions worldwide.

These institutions, in the form of creeks, flow in numerous variations to suit particular and varied landscapes. These landscapes consist of wide-ranging temperaments innately thirsty for the spiritual water flowing in streams of traditions, colors, and modes of things for their spiritual survival and the growth of their missions.

As rivulets vary in shape, size, speed, and quality of water they distribute, so are Guru Nanak's Sikhi doctrines and practices that spread. Both adapt to numerous variations depending on the terrains of particular geographical or cultural expanses. Expansive differing cultural landscapes and linguistic temperaments form their shape and external formats. But their purpose is to nourish the earth and its humanity with ONE Universal consciousness.

The intention is that the followers of Guru Nanak may nurture the divine creation in the schema of Divine Creativity.

Different landscapes receive the thirst-quenching waters in different ways, sizes, shapes, and colors to benefit each of the terrains in their own peculiar and varied forms.

Briefly, what these metaphors mean concerning the present and future of Sikhi is as follows.

Guru's Wisdom originating from sabd Guru or the Wisdom imbibed in the Guru's hymns applies to diverse populations and cultures. The recipients may be of various mindsets worldwide, varying from place to place. Guru Nanak's Wisdom is to be practiced in multiple ways, even under different designations, names, and titles.

Thus, Guru Nanak's teachings would overtly look and feel diverse, but inside, they are universal and carry the same fundamental doctrines and Wisdom. Their purpose is to nourish the human mind with one universal Knowledge towards ONE Universal Consciousness and ultimately take all humanity back to their source, the OCEAN, the Creator.

Cloud Burst

Sikh historian Bhai Santokh Singh reported a beautiful story from the Guruship of Guru Ram Das.

A delegation of Hindu religious scholars under the leadership of Pundit Mohan Lal came to visit the Guru.

The members were well-known Pundits or leaders of Brahminical tradition. Their mission was to express their concern with the language and mode of propagation the Guru used to spread the Gurmat message among the people freely.

They loudly expressed their concern. They attempted to persuade the Guru to use the language of the religious elite, Sanskrit, to impart Guru Nanak's doctrines. Further, the same elites should be charged to impart sacred Knowledge.

The Guru rebuked the suggestion and used the same metaphor of rain as related above to make his point forcefully. Bhai Santokh described it as"

ਬੇਦ ਪੁਰਾਨ ਕੂਪ ਜਲ ਜੈਸੇ।ਬਰੇਸਾਇ ਕੇ ਕਿਤੀ ਜੈਸੇ

Bayd puraan koop jal jaisay | barosaa-i ko kitee jaisay

ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਬਾਣੀ ਮੇਥ ਸਮਾਨ।ਬਰਮੈ ਚਰੁੰ ਦਿਸਿ ਬਿਖੈ ਜਹਾਨ ॥

Satigur baaṇee maygh samaan | barasai chahu(n) dis(i) bikhai jahaan.

Vedas and Puranas, the sacred scriptures of Brahmans written in Sanskrit, are like water kept in a well. The divine message of Gurus' hymns, the Guru said, was like rain waters that reach every thirsty person or every germinating plant.

Divine Knowledge in classical languages like Sanskrit or Arabic is like water kept in deep wells. It takes effort to draw it and then quench the thirst of the person drawing it out or to irrigate crops of only those who possess the means of taking out water in this manner. Sharing was only possible as the quantity thus drawn may be sufficient to satisfy the needs of the bucket holder.

In contrast, the Guru's Wisdom, Gurmat, was manifested in Gurbani (Guru's repository of Knowledge and findings) in a language that served as a cloud burst. It turned the crops of everyone and in every field green; it reached mountains and valleys alike, birds and mammals alike, animals and humans alike, educated and uneducated alike, poor and rich. (See Santokh Singh, *Sri Gur Partap Suraj Granth, Raas 1, Part 46, p. 1518. Reprinted Amritsar, Khalsa Samachar, 1954.*)

The Guru's verdict was akin to a biblical parabola.

Jesus is known to say that when you light a lamp, place

it on a higher pedestal so that the light can reach everyone.

Diversity to be Welcome

The metaphor from the AGGS, as described above, also implied the appreciation of the great diversity observed in all civil societies and faiths. For example, As Guru Amar Das said, Diversity is Divine Order. Guru wrote,

ਮੇਰੈ ਪ੍ਰਭਿ ਸਾਚੈ ਇਕੁ ਖੇਲੁ ਰਚਾਇਆ ॥ ਕੋਇ ਨ ਕਿਸ ਹੀ ਜੇਹਾ
ਉਪਾਇਆ ॥

Merai parabh s̄achai ik khel rachāiā. Koe na kis hī
jehā upāiā

*My True Creator has staged a play. He has created no
one like anyone else.*

AGGS, M 3, p 1966

With the appreciation of diversity, universality can be practiced. Diversity provides a necessary opportunity to practice universality.

Guru Nanak's Sikhi Is Universal

The purpose of elucidating Guru Nanak's metaphor above is to illustrate the universal nature of Guru's message, *Sikhi*. The term "*Sikhi*," an enlightening philosophy that is different from Sikhism, a religion, has been defined by Chahal (2023).

There is a dynamic relationship between identity, community, and grace-awakened values, which are universal if they are authentic. Let us apply the dynamics of universality to Sikhi.

Operationalization of Universality in New Cultures

Sikhs are a nomadic nation, and Sikhi has new prospects for every continent. We are challenged to share the Sikhi universals everywhere and with every culture. Sikhi may be distributed out of Northern India and operationalized in new cultures of India or abroad to contest the time-worn universals of dominant societies. They may be in the context of the pan-Hindu Indian culture or the Christian-Secularism of the West.

Let us examine what exactly one means by "operationalizing and exporting Sikh universals."

Let me begin by defining what a universal is. A universal is something -- maybe a concept, an idea, a feeling, etc. -- that may be practiced across different cultures and languages. It can be readily spread

beyond the domain in which it originated. You have defined Universal two times, highlighted in yellow color. Please keep one which good one.

For example, Christians have exported the idea of "God, or 'religion' beyond its origins in the Middle-Eastern and Greek-Roman context. Further, western secularists have exported the notions of democracy beyond its European and American context. Buddhists and Hindus have exported the concepts of dharma, karma, meditation, yoga, even Gandhi-ism, etc., beyond India. There are many more examples.

The original medium for transporting an idea is language. Translating into a new language has never been an irresolvable problem for these religions or cultures. However, there are examples. Beliefs originating in one language have flourished in different linguistic, cultural, and ethnic contexts.

You can gauge this success by the fact that terms such as yoga, karma, ashram, avatar, Guru, etc., can be found in the English dictionary -- and remember that the dictionary is a repository of words and concepts concurrent in the Anglophone consciousness.

So these foreign words and concepts of Hinduism or Buddhism, despite their foreignness, have become rooted in different soil.

But to take root in new soil, a concept must alter the relations between itself and other notions native to that new soil. To take root in a new ground is to transform connections between the words and concepts of a new culture.

So, religious transformation is not a simple and transparent process. As much as it involves adjustment and integration in new soil (i.e., accepting the conceptual rules of the new language and culture), it also consists of resisting the new ground. That means taking the laws of the unique culture and language, especially where these rules require surrendering a concept's difference (surrendering its sovereignty).

The seed dies in the new soil if its sovereign difference is absorbed and made precisely like the new soil that receives it. To live on, to take root, and to survive, the seed has to alter the composition of the new earth. The earth isn't removed. It is re-shuffled in a way that makes it conducive

for the roots to grow in their new environment.

If it grows, the new flower can share its fragrance, essence, and scent with the new culture, thereby enriching that culture without threatening it.

That is one way of thinking about what is involved in theological translation. It means that translations should contain an intellectual resistance against the cultural hegemony of new soil. An example is a Western culture, whose metaphysics is a significant component of its soil, or the older cultural soil of India, which Hindu metaphysics has dominated, or Islamic metaphysics.

These two different soils threaten to suffocate and strangle minority cultures. They do so by asserting their absolute universality and counteracting the potentially universalizing aspects of the minority cultures. Those are the aspects that Sikhi culture, though a minority culture, might be able to share with a majoritarian culture.

The analogy shouldn't be exaggerated, but it does help.

Now, let's consider the case of Sikhi. There is a firm conviction that Guru Nanak did not want his message confined to a narrow ethnic context. He traveled across cultures and religions. His teachings may have emerged within the North-West soil of India. Indeed, the teachings of every great spiritual master began their lives in a particular area.

But the message of Guru Nanak is such that it is meant to be shared by all humanity. It was intended to be translatable and exportable to different cultures. We are pleased to find translations of the Sikhi literature in the modern languages.

Guru Nanak himself traveled widely beyond his native place of birth, nearly 38 thousand kilometers. There is, of course, a lingua franca shared by many cultures across the areas of his visits. There was a purpose for the Guru going much further than the borders of this lingua franca.

So, to converse and get his message across to non-Indians and non-Asians, he would have had to either speak in their language or, most probably, improvise linguistically where necessary. One can't envisage him going to the trouble of teaching Punjabi to non-Punjabis. He did not have the luxury of time at his disposal to do so.

There is another firm conviction. It is universally believed that the message of Gurbani is such that it has the power not merely to be understood and comprehended but actually to be re-experienced beyond its linguistic context. That's where the true power of a universal concept lies. Experiences carry beyond their original contexts.

The question, though, is how?

One school of thought says that universals can only travel if they are grounded in metaphysics. It means that they must point to something beyond this world, which is a world of time. That is, the universals must be grounded in something like an eternity. It is what Christian, Muslim, and Hindu metaphysics tell us in different ways. We beg to differ.

As the term is used practically, a universal must be based in this time and space, in this world. It must be based on life, the element of which is a temporal experience. A true universal arises from and is grounded in our sensible relation to the world. It cannot be grounded in a transcendent entity or law.

Instead, the true universal is intimately related to our aesthetic sense, which all humankind and non-human entities can share in the organic and inorganic world.

Let us take some illustrations as to how this idea may be tied down to Sikhi.

In his recent book, *'Religion and the Specter of the West'*, Prof. Mandair discusses various examples of universals that are pertinent to Sikhi, but there is one that focuses on the concept of SABD-guru, meaning the Gurus' Wisdom imbibed in the Guru's hymns. SABD-guru is a significant term.

Its obvious meaning is that the bani is the Guru, and the Guru is the bani. Bani here means the hymns contained in AGGS, which implies that bani carries sovereign authority.

But the implications of SABD-guru go well beyond this. It points to the notion that anyone can experience what the Gurus experienced, that their experience is open to all humanity, providing that each of us learn the practice of self-surrender or learn to 'kill' the narcissism.

SABD-guru is universal because it works both conceptually and effectively. And, because it refers to a principle of sovereign experience, it goes beyond being a narrowly 'religious' term. Remember that the word 'religion' reflects a shallow universality modeled on Christian metaphysics or theology.

Instead, *SABD-guru* goes well beyond the narrow meaning of 'religion.' It radically disrupts the Western religion-secular binary because it points to disenchantment or secularity to which the West alone claims access.

Because of its connection, on the one hand, to ego-loss and the mechanism for achieving ego-loss, and on the other hand, its intimate connection to the language (*sabd*) as poetic consciousness. That is the mark of divinity and proper secularity, which is universal in the true sense, according to Mandair.

In this way, *SABD-guru* may appeal to and be experienced beyond the Punjabi domain by all humanity because it also connects to shared humanity through our shared morality. In his recent book (2017), Dr. Mandair explains the connection between ego loss, language, and mortality.

Thus, the impact of *SABD-guru* is both secular and religious, but equally, non-secular and non-religious. It is a paradox. In other words, it cannot be encompassed within the language of Western metaphysics/theology, which is responsible for setting up the oppositional binary between secular and religious. It represents the uniquely Sikh way of going beyond secularism and the criticisms of the nation-state.

Thus, to operationalize *sabd-guru* is to release it from the traps of Islamic, Christian, and Hindu hegemony and allow it to create new relations with whatever soil it encounters and sets roots in. Then only will it be branded as universal.

CONCLUSION

Several centuries ago, Guru Nanak used the Ocean metaphor for the divine Wisdom that serves humanity as the nourishing water of creeks all over the earth.

Calling Sikhi rivulets, the founders were explicit: Sikhi would never formally align Guru Wisdom with one denomination, political party, geographical area, or ethnicity or allow someone to use a Sikhi rivulet to ignore laws of civil societies, sciences, or of colors and diversities of the same institutions. As far as we know, that was the intent.

Describing divine Wisdom as the Ocean of Truth and rivulets as routes of its dissemination, Guru Nanak continued to say all those who bathe in those rivers of Divine Wisdom will evolve to higher awareness.

ਨਾਨਕ ਸਾਹਿਬੁ ਮਨਿ ਵਸੈ ਸਚਾ ਨਾਵਣੁ ਹੋਇ ॥

Nānak sāhib man vasai sachā nāvaṇ ho^oe. ||1||

Says Nanak, an authentic cleansing bath is experienced when the Divine dwells within human consciousness.

AGGS, M 1, p 146.

ਅੰਤਰਿ ਨਾਵਣੁ ਸਾਚੁ ਪਛਾਣੈ ॥

Anṭar nāvaṇ sāch pachhāṇai.

One who cleanses himself within knows the True Lord.
One who takes an internal bath in Divine Wisdom comprehends the Truth.

AGGS, M 1, p 414.

Sikh institutions and scholarship are given the responsibility to 'operationalize and export' the Wisdom to all civil societies. The specifics of 'operationalization and exporting' need extensive discussions. Here, it suffices to conclude as follows. Don't just be satisfied with the place on the library shelf provided for Sikhi by the West. Similarly, don't blindly worship it like a totemic object, as most Punjabis do.

DO SOMETHING WITH IT. Do that which the Gurus wanted you to do with it. Experience it and allow yourself to be transformed by it. Those who bathe in those rivers of Divine Wisdom will evolve to higher awareness and recognition. Then, change the culture around you so others may seek Guru Nanak's message.

"A rivulet is a minority if you look at it one at a time, but it is a majority if you look at it "connected to the source along with others and its ending into the ocean with all others." Then, you are part of a vast majority.

In short, the followers of Guru Nanak stand at a new juncture, a new crossroads today. They can either realize a form of subjectivity that is genuinely plural. This way, they

encounter the coming waves of global uncertainty with confidence and optimism. Or they can retreat into the usual kind of romantic self-emulation.

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