

# GURU NANAK'S CONCEPT OF GOD (ABSOLUTE REALITY)

Prof Hardev Singh Virk, PhD  
#360 Sector 71, SAS Nagar (Mohali) -160071  
Email: hardevsingh.virk@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

*It is unfortunate that Nanakian Philosophy failed to impact at global level despite its unique world-view. Nanakian Philosophy dialectically unites the ideas of God and the World created by Him. No school of Hindu philosophy believes that God is Karta Purkh in the same sense as implied by Nanakian Philosophy. Guru Nanak discarded the worship of the whole pantheon of gods and goddesses of Hindu religion. He laid the foundation of a strictly monotheistic religion in India for the first time. Guru Nanak's God is absolute, formless one, inscrutable, boundless, self-existent, ineffable and beyond time. Guru Nanak's God is both transcendental and immanent, pervading the macrocosm as well as the microcosm. The idea of divine self-expression in the World is another revolutionary theological concept introduced by Guru Nanak. The concepts of Truth (Sach), the Name (Naam), the Word (Sabd), the Divine Preceptor (Guru), and the Divine Order (Hukm) form the key-concepts of divine self-expression. Guru Nanak is the first prophet of God in the history of world religions who removed the dualism and dichotomy between the spiritual life and empirical life of man. We may conclude that Guru Nanak's vision of God was far more scientific/logical and comprehensive than his predecessors both in the East and the West.*

## INTRODUCTION

According to Bhai Jodh Singh [4] the well known Sikh savant, philosophy depends on the conclusions reached by human reason and thought but religious truth depends upon the intuitive experience of the individual, who reveals it to the world in human language as far as possible. But in India, religion and philosophy went hand in hand. All the six schools of Indian philosophy discuss the existence of God, the creation of the Universe, the nature of human soul, its redemption and how to achieve it. The testimony of the Indian *rishis* or the intuitive experience recorded in Vedas and Upanishads was considered to be a valid proof.

Guru Nanak was not a philosopher, as understood by its generic meaning, but essentially a religious man who proclaimed to the world what he experienced in his own soul. He was a messenger of God who narrated what he received in his divine communications:

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

AGGS, M 1, p 722 [1].

*As the Word of the Lord comes to me, so do I express it, O Lalo.*

He had this intuitive experience and came face to face with the supreme reality as has been recorded allegorically in his earliest biography and by Bhai Gurdas, too, in his first *var*. Guru Nanak himself described his encounter with God in his own words in as follows:

ਹਉ ਢਾਢੀ ਵੇਕਾਰੁ ਕਾਰੈ ਲਾਇਆ ॥  
ਰਾਤਿ ਦਿਹੈ ਕੈ ਵਾਰ ਧੁਰਹੁ ਫੁਰਮਾਇਆ ॥  
ਢਾਢੀ ਸਚੈ ਮਹਲਿ ਖਸਮਿ ਬੁਲਾਇਆ ॥

*I was a minstrel jobless and He (God) put me to this work. Sing my praises day and night was the order from his presence.*

*The True God summoned the bard to His palace.*

*He got the robe of honour of singing His everlasting attributes,*



and was provided the ambrosial food of the Name.  
The minstrel proclaimed what he was ordered through the Word.  
Those who praise the Truth meet the Perfect (God )  
Nanak.  
AGGS, M 1, p 150.[1]

Guru Ram Das also repeats the same prayer in a similar vein in Sri Rag:  
ਹਉ ਢਾਢੀ ਹਰਿ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਖਸਮ ਕਾ ਹਰਿ ਕੈ ਦਰਿ ਆਇਆ ॥  
ਹਰਿ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਸੁਣੀ ਪੁਕਾਰ ਢਾਢੀ ਮੁਖਿ ਲਾਇਆ ॥  
*I am a minstrel of the God, and;  
I have come to the God's Door.  
The God has heard my sad cries from within;  
He has called me, His minstrel, into His Presence.*  
AGGS, M 4, p 91.[1]

In Hinduism the concept of god is complex and depends on the particular tradition. The concept spans conceptions from absolute monism to henotheism, monotheism and polytheism. A study of Vedic hymns shows that the early *rishis* believed in polytheism. They deified the forces of Nature and suggested to carry out *yajnas* (sacrifices) to placate gods to secure their goodwill, granting mundane happiness and a delectable heavenly life after death. The principal Vedic gods Pusan, Visnu, Indra, Rudra, Agni later on gave place to Brahma (the creator), Visnu (the preserver) and Siva (the destroyer). These three gods formed the Trinity of the Hindu faith, when Guru Nanak was born in Punjab. Guru Nanak discarded the polytheism of Vedic *rishis* and rejected the hierarchy of gods and goddesses (Vedanta) of Hindu faith. Guru Nanak preached the worship of one God in truth and spirit.

The Sikh faith founded by Guru Nanak is strictly monotheistic in its belief system. This means that God is believed to be the One and the sole Reality in the Universe, and there is no other entity worthy of worship. All other worship is false and a waste of precious human life. God in Sikhism is believed to be eternal. All else that is visible, had a beginning and will end. God alone is Timeless (*Akal*). *Akal* is one of the key concepts in Sikh spiritual thought introduced by Guru Nanak. Its spiritual and philosophical signification in Sikh religion is unprecedented in Indian philosophy.

According to Wikipedia [7], Nānak's interpretation of God is that of a single, personal and transcendental creator with whom the devotee must develop a most intimate faith and relationship to achieve salvation. Sikhism advocates the belief in one God who is omnipresent and has infinite qualities. This aspect has been repeated on numerous occasions in the Aad Gurū Granth Sāhib and the term *ik ōankār* signifies this. In the Sikh teachings, there is no gender for God. Nānak further emphasizes that a full

understanding of God is beyond human beings. (contradicting the encounter between Guru Nanak and the God expressed earlier) However, Nānak also describes God as being not wholly unknowable. God is considered *sarav vi'āpak* (omnipresent) in all creation and visible everywhere to the spiritually awakened. God in Sikhism is depicted in three distinct aspects, viz. God in himself, God in relation to creation, and God in relation to man. During a discourse with Siddhas (popularly known as *Siddh Goshit*), Hindu recluses, Guru Nanak in reply to a question as to where the Transcendent God was before the stage of creation replies:

ਆਦਿ ਕਉ ਕਵਨੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੁ ਕਥੀਅਲੇ ਸੁੰਨ ਕਹਾ ਘਰ ਵਾਸੇ॥  
ਆਦਿ ਕਉ ਬਿਸਮਾਦੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੁ ਕਥੀਅਲੇ ਸੁੰਨ ਨਿਰੰਤਰਿ ਵਾਸੁ ਲੀਆ ॥  
*What can you tell us about the beginning? In what home did the Absolute dwell then?  
"To think of the Transcendent Lord in that state is to enter the realm of wonder. Even at that stage of sūnn, he permeated the entire void"*  
AGGS, M 1, p 940. [1]

#### GURU NANAK'S CONCEPT OF GOD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Guru Nanak defines the concept of God through His attributes:

ੴ ਸਤਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਅਜੂਨੀ ਸੈਭੰ ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ॥

AGGS, *Manglacharan* (Commencing Verse), p 1.  
*The One Supreme Being; Eternal Reality; the Creator Person; Without Fear; Without Rancour; Unborn; Self-Existent; Realized through Divine Grace.*

The interpretation of these attributes in Sikh spiritual tradition and literature will lead us to the true significance of Sikh belief and its idea of God. It is unfortunate that most of the Indian and foreign scholars of Sikhism have tried to misinterpret the originality of Guru Nanak's concept of God because of the theological terms used by him. According to Grewal [3]: "The impression that Guru Nanak's religious ideas present a great deal of similarity to the ideas which one can easily discover in contemporary Islam and Hinduism has a strong basis in the terms and concepts used by Guru Nanak in his compositions; but this impression is quite misleading. In the context of his theological thought, current terms and concepts undergo a significant change, so significant indeed that they acquire a new meaning." For example, the term *Ram* has been used by the Sikh Gurus for God in AGGS [1] and whenever they use it for *Rama*, the

king of Ayodhya, the distinction is made crystal clear to remove any confusion. Talib [6] has further resolved this conflict: “Sikh Gurus adopted the names like Rama and Krishna derived from Indian mythology for God as these were current among the Indian people and had become synonymous with God in common speech. In AGGS, *Ram-Nam* means literally God’s name and implies devotion, prayer, meditation.”

The concept of God as Creator Person (*Karta Purakh*) of the world has far reaching implications in the religious history of India. A positive relationship between God and the world is a revolutionary postulate in Sikh religion. God is both Transcendent and Immanent. Transcendence shows that God is prior to and distinct from the world. Immanence of God is a symbolic way of expressing God’s connection with the world. God himself transforms into creation, i.e., changing his *nirguna* form into *sarguna* form.

Guru Nanak’s God is conceived as without any form and designated as *Nirankar* or *Nirakar* and Guru Nanak himself called Nanak Nirankari. No image or idol or any figurine can represent God, or be worshipped as God. All creation is God’s visible form (*sarguna roop*), but no part of it is a substitute for God. God is also *nirguna*, without physical attributes and unattached to *maya*, manifested by its three *gunas*. Guru Nanak has employed some other terms to represent God, for example, *Brahm* or *Parbrahm*, *Gurudev*, *Satguru*, *Thakur*, *Sahib*, *Swami*, *Parmeshwar*, *Prabhu*, *Sacha*, *Pritam*, etc.

An equally important attribute of God or Absolute Reality defined in AGGS is its Time-transcendence (*Akal-Murt*). According to Ahluwalia [2], “This new conception of God marks a qualitative change in the cognition of the ultimate Reality from Being to Spirit. This revolutionary change, heralded by the Sikh metaphysics in the history of Indian religious thought, leads to a new conception of Time”. It is unfortunate that most of the Sikh scholars have failed to realize the significance of Sikh doctrine and interpreted attributes of God in Vedantic terms. It was Professor Puran Singh [5] who first of all realized the unique contribution of the Sikh Gurus in re-interpreting the concept of God: “Guru Nanak does not take the Vedantic conceptions as real. He calls them dead matter and they are good only for the museum of human thoughts”.

Concept of *Sahaj - Bhakti* was introduced by the Sikh Gurus as distinct from prevalent *Bhakti* cult of India. It is also known as *nirakar bhakti*. One great departure is made by the Sikh Gurus in calling God as a bridegroom and individual souls as brides of God. The seeker views him in the character of a loving wife, patiently waiting for reunion with her Lord. The imagery used by Sikh Gurus is

the same as that of mundane love, though its inner meaning is spiritual and not physical. The greatest example of divine poetry is Guru Nanak’s *Baramaha Tukhari* in AGGS, in which the soul pines in sorrow of separation as months and seasons roll by. God as Beloved is one of the important modes of conceiving Him in the spiritual poetry of the Sikh faith:

ਮਿਲਿ ਸਖੀਆ ਪੁਛਹਿ ਕਹੁ ਕੰਤ ਨੀਸਾਣੀ ॥

ਰਸਿ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਭਰੀ ਕਛੁ ਬੋਲਿ ਨ ਜਾਣੀ ॥

*I meet with my companions and say, "Show me the insignia of my Husband God".*

*I am filled with the sublime essence of His Love, and I do not know how to say anything.*

AGGS, M 5, p 459.[1]

### Concept of Absolute Reality in AGGS

The *Manglacharan* (the Commencing Verse of SGGs) is a philosophic testimony of Guru Nanak’s poetic and scientific vision of the Supreme Reality. Reality is one and non-dual. Hence the *Manglacharan* commences with the numeral 1 before ‘*Open Oora*’, which represents Existence or Being. It is followed by *Satt Naam* which means the Supreme Reality is true and it is manifested in Truth, Existence and Being. The other features of Reality are its transcendence and immanence, creator person, without fear or hatred, beyond time and space, self-existent, transcendental cosmic spirit made manifest by grace of the Guru. *Thus Guru Nanak projects the nature, potentialities and characteristics of Supreme Reality or God of his vision. This concept of Reality is unique, scientific and revolutionary and it differs in its connotation from the Vedantic concept.* (Please, review this sentence in relation to earlier version of *jaessi mae aavae khasam ki bani. What kind of Khasam Guru Nanak is talking about?*

The very first *sloka* after *Manglacharan* elaborates further the nature of ultimate reality:

ਆਦਿ ਸਚੁ ਜੁਗਾਦਿ ਸਚੁ ॥

ਹੈ ਭੀ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਹੋਸੀ ਭੀ ਸਚੁ ॥

AGGS, Jap, p 1.

*Reality or God was in existence before the commencement of creation and time (yugas) during the epoch of cosmic void. God existed at the beginning of this universe, i.e., creation of space and time. God exists now and will also exist in the future (even when the universe is annihilated).*

The Sikh philosophy dialectically unites the ideas of God and the world. Transcendence shows that God is prior to and distinct from the world. Immanence of God represents God’s connection with the world. God himself transforms into creation, i.e., changing His *nirguna* form into *sarguna* form:

ਸਰਗੁਨ ਨਿਰਗੁਨ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰ ਸੁੰਨ ਸਮਾਧੀ ਆਪਿ ॥

ਆਪਨ ਕੀਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਫਿਰਿ ਜਾਪਿ ॥

*The Formless God is attributed and un-attributed;  
And gone into absorption in the cosmic void.*

*Saith Nanak: He has made creation, Himself on it meditates.*

AGGS. M 5, p 290.[1]

The *Manglacharan* in the AGGS is an expression of Guru Nanak's intuitive insight into the metaphysical realm, which presents an integrated view of the basic Reality that is monistic, but whose manifestation is pluralistic:

inrMkwr Awkwr Awip inrgun srgun eyk ]

eykih eyk bKwnno nwnk eyk Anyk ]

*He Himself is formless, and also formed; the One God is without attributes, and also with attributes. Describe the One God as One, and Only One; O Nanak, He is the One, and the many.*

AGGS.M1,p.250 [1]

The conceptual framework of the *Manglacharan* is comprehensive enough to include some of the most significant attributes of the Absolute (Supreme Reality). Even the manifest aspect of Reality, namely, the physical universe, defies measure and count:

AMq n jwpY kIqw Awkwru ]

AMqu n jwpY pwrwvwru ]

*Limitless the creation;*

*Limitless the expansion.*

AGGS, Jap, p 5.[1]

Perhaps, God alone can contemplate the vastness and totality of the cosmic existence. The Guru assures us that the light and grace of the Absolute are ever with man in his search for Supreme Reality. A person of cosmic consciousness (*brahm gyani*) can experience Reality and all his doubts are dispelled:

jw kY irdy ibsIws pRBu AwieAw ]

qqu igAwnu iqsu min pRgtwieAw ]

*He, who receives faith of Lord in himself,*

*His mind is illumined by the Reality of the Real.*

AGGS, M 5, p 285.[1]

Ultimate Reality is subtle and incomprehensible but can be realized through Guru's Word (*sabd*) unconsciously:

hir jI sUKmu Agmu hY ikqu ibiD imilAw jwie ]

gur kY sbid BRmu ktIAY AicMqu vsY min Awie ]

*The God is the subtle, unfathomable entity; so how is one to attain Him? It is through Guru's Word that our doubt is dispelled and the self-dependent Being cometh into our minds.*

AGGS, M 3, p 756.[1]

Guru Nanak has combined the symbol *Satt* with *Naam*, which literally means 'Name'. When we refer to the world of names and forms, we refer to the concrete, empirical

Universe, which we know in our ordinary experience and discover through the agency of science. In short *Naam* is Truth, or the knowable aspect of Reality. *Naam* is immanent in the universe and its practice is the only formula prescribed by the Sikh Gurus to realize God. In fact, whatever is created is *Naam*:

jyqw kIqw qyqw nwau ]ivxu nwwY nwhI ko Qwau ]

*All that is created is His manifestation.*

AGGS, Jap, p 4. [1]

Guru Nanak was always antipathetic to any view of the world, which denigrated its reality or made the world illusory. He was, therefore, firm on the principle that the creation is as real as the creator -- it includes, besides material existence, the culture of man, his thoughts and his values. Guru Nanak discards the Vedantic conception of Reality in *Asa-di-Var*, and proclaims that this universe is real, not an illusion:

scy qyry KMf scy bRhmMf ]

scy qyry loA scy Awkwru ]

AGGS, M 1, p 463.

*Real are Thy continents; Real is the universe;*

*Real are these forms and material objects;*

*Thy doings are Real, O God.*

AGGS. M1, p. 463 [1]

The Guru calls this vast Universe as His mansion:

iehu jgu scY kI hY koTVI scy kw ivic vwsu ]

*This moving universe is the divine mansion of the true God;*

*And the true one lives therein.*

AGGS, M 2, p 463[1]

Guru Nanak has identified the manifest Reality with Nature:

nwnk sc dwqwrw isnwKqu kudrqI ]

*Nanak, the beneficent Lord alone is true and He is revealed through His Nature.*

AGGS. M1, p.141 [1]

God transformed Himself from *nirguna* to *sarguna*, created *Nam(u)* and *Kudrat(i)*, i.e; Nature:

AwPInY Awpu swijE AwPInY ricE nwau ]

duXI kudriq swjIAY kir Awsxu ifTo cwau ]

AGGS, M 1, p 463.

*His-self He created and manifested His Name;*

*And then He created Nature and abiding within it,*

*He reveled in His wonder.*

The description of Nature by Guru Nanak in *Asa-di-Var* is a new dimension in the history of religious thought:

kudriq idsY kudriq suxIAY kudriq Bau suK swru ]

kudriq pwqwlI AwkwsI kudriq srb Awkwr ]

(Continued on page 72)



the period which were later handed over to Guru Angad.

- (h) He stirred the feelings of the listeners through music and discussions. This is the unique method of effective communication of Guru Nanak
- (i) To instill confidence and will to stand against injustice among the downtrodden and to remove fear from the minds of all. He was not afraid of facing the ferocious Lodi king at Delhi or Babar at *Saidpur*. Likewise he stood firm at his viewpoints while facing Pundits at Kurukshetra, Hardwar, Banaras, Allahabad, Ajodhya or Mullahs at Mecca and Medina.
- (j) While communicating with the learned he adopted their colloquial vocabulary to reply in their own language.
- (k) Methodology of communication started with creation of suitable calm, serene, environment for peaceful dialogue in sweet voice and polite tone touching the heart instantaneously; spread of magnetic aura, simple, straight and to the point delivery; and closed with poetic deliberations accompanied by lilting music. The magnetic effect of this delivery was instant acceptance. It was further firmed in by actual activity and actions to exhibit the suitability of application of what he sang.
- (l) Giving the message of unity and Supremacy of God, Love and remembrance of God, equality fraternity and brotherhood, truth and truthful living, service to humanity, earning and sharing and performing meditation or remembering God while performing normal duties without going to secluded place and doing any hard penance.
- (m) Whatever he preached he put the same into action. There was no duality. This won over the confidence of the people and caused attraction and a multiplier effects of his words.
- (n) He preached with love, sweetness, politeness with a sense of belongingness. His actions created inquisitiveness and magnanimity.

#### REFERENCES

1. AGGS = Aad Guru Granth Sahib. 1983 (reprint). Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. (M = Mahla, i.e., succession number of the Sikh Gurus to the House of Nanak, M is replaced with the name of Bhagat/ Bhatt for their Bani, p = Page of the AGGS).

(Continued from page 76)

*All that is visible is His Nature; All that is heard too is His Nature....In the nether regions and skies is the manifestation of His Nature; Of His Nature are all the manifestations.*  
AGGS.M1, p.464 [1]

In a way, scientific study of Nature is sanctioned in Sikh religion in an identical manner as it was pursued by Kepler and Newton in the Christian world. (Do you need this sentence to validate Nanak's philosophy?)

To sum up the concept of Supreme Reality as presented in AGGS is unique, scientific and revolutionary. It is not a mere abstraction. Its realization is possible through the practice of *Sabd* and *Naam*. Guru Nanak was blessed with the vision of God or Reality in Nature:

ਸਾਂਤਿ ਪਾਵਹਿ ਹੋਵਹਿ ਮਨੁ ਸੀਤਲ ਅਗਨਿ ਨ ਅੰਤਰਿ ਧੁਖੀ ॥

ਗੁਰ ਨਾਨਕ ਕਉ ਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਦਿਖਾਇਆ ਜਲਿ ਥਲਿ ਤ੍ਰਿਭਵਣਿ ਰੁਖੀ ॥

*demolishing inner cravings with attained realization, and mind being at peace; The God's presence was revealed to Guru Nanak in the three worlds; In the woods, waters and over the earth.*

AGGS. M5, p.617 [1]

#### CONCLUSIONS

Guru Nanak's concept of God is unique but it needs to be interpreted in modern scientific context. The originality of Guru Nanak's concept of God has been over-shadowed because of the theological and mythological terms used by him. *Ik Oankar, Karta Purkh and Akal Murat* delineate some unique features of Supreme Reality. Guru Nanak's concept of God is more universal and can prove to be a harbinger of World peace. Spiritual and empirical domains are not opposite poles of Reality as propagated by Vedanta School of Philosophy.

#### REFERENCES

1. AGGS = Aad Guru Granth Sahib. 1983 (reprint). Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. (M = Mahla, i.e., succession number of the Sikh Gurus to the House of Nanak, p = Page of the AGGS. M is replaced with the name of Bhagat or Bhatt with their Bani.)
2. Ahluwalia, J.S. 1985. Akal Murat. In: The Concept of the Divine, G.N.D. University, Amritsar, pp.100-113.
3. Grewal, J.S. 1982. From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Guru Nanak Dev University, University, Chapter 5, p. 31.
4. Singh, Bhai Jodh, 1977. Indian Philosophical and Religious Thought and Guru Nanak. In: Teachings of Guru Nanak (ed. Taran Singh), Punjabi University, Patiala, pp.1-10.
5. Singh, Puran, 1981. Spirit of the Sikh, Punjabi University, Patiala, Part II, Vol. 2, p.141.
6. Talib, G.S. 1977. The Idea of Supreme Being (God) in Sikhism. In: Teachings of Guru Nanak (ed. Taran Singh), Punjabi University, Patiala, pp. 22-32.
7. Wikipedia, Conceptions of God. Section 3: Eastern Religions (3.2, Hinduism).