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The Political Philosophy of Guru Nanak
and Its Contemporary Relevance[*]

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the political philosophy of Guru Nanak and its contemporary relevance. It traces that philosophy by readings of the Guru's *bani* in Guru Granth Sahib that have a political focus. Having identified five salient political dimensions, these are theorized and presented in the contemporary language of politics. The paper then contextualizes the origins of these dimensions in history through a brief overview of some comparative events. Finally, it examines the influence of the Guru's philosophy in transforming many religio-political and socio-cultural aspects of history in India. The paper concludes by analyzing the continuing impact of Guru Nanak's political philosophy in terms of developing new potential for transforming people and events in India and abroad.

Keywords: Guru Nanak, political philosophy, reform movements, contemporary politics.

Introduction

There is a large body of spiritual, biographical and historical literature available in various forms on the life and philosophy of Guru Nanak. The most authentic and direct source of the Guru's philosophy is his *bani,* that is, compositions comprising the founding segments of the sacred Sikh text, Adi Granth/Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS, 1604/1708; Grewal, 1990). Guru Nanak's *bani* is comprehensive and multi-dimensional, involving religio-spiritual, socio-cultural and historical contents. Its linguistic, metaphorical and cultural forms reflect the geo-political and socio-economic context of 15th-16th century India. Guru Nanak mainly used the Punjabi language and Gurmukhi script for composing and sharing his message.[1]

The paper's selection and interpretation of philosophical dimensions of Guru Nanak's teachings highlights their spiritual and social nature (Singh, K, 1999; Mandair, 2014). Having identified the key political dimensions of Guru Nanak's political philosophy, the paper provides a contextual framework for understanding

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[*] This paper is revision of a piece written to mark the 550th birth anniversary of the founder of the Sikh religion, Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji (Guru Nanak). The initial paper, 'The Political Philosophy of Sri Guru Nanak Dev ji and Its Contemporary Relevance' was presented at the 6th Dr. Jasbir Singh Saini Chair in Sikh Studies Conference at the University of California, Riverside, and the Punjab Research Group Conference held at the University of Oxford. That paper, in English and Punjabi, was published by Singh Brothers Amritsar in 2019, dedicated to the 550th Anniversary.
[1] Guru Nanak was very likely familiar with Sanskrit, Persian and other languages, which he used in his wider discourse during travels across South and West Asia (Bhardwaj, 2013).

its development. It offers a brief comparative overview of the origins of, and some parallels between, the Sikh and Protestant political philosophies across India and Europe. It also considers the conceptual and linguistic evolution of the philosophical principles which have influenced the development of contemporary Sikh/Punjabi/Indian politics.

Salient Dimensions of Guru Nanak's Political Philosophy

My reading of Guru Nanak's *bani* in Guru Granth Sahib identifies five salient dimensions of the Guru's political philosophy. The theorization of these dimensions explains its contemporary relevance and application, which is analyzed in subsequent sections. The understanding of the philosophy is facilitated by a brief comparative overview of the historical circumstances in India and Europe in Guru Nanak's era. Some significant and parallel, though initially unconnected, events in history, influenced by the rise of Sikh and Protestant reform movements in India and Europe, enhance understanding and clarification of the respective political philosophies. These philosophies have continued to inspire and drive many thinkers, campaigners and reformers in history. Their initiatives and efforts have enlightened and encouraged people to take control of their circumstances. They mobilized resistance, respectively challenging excesses of the dominant religio-political regime of Mughal imperialism in India, and that of hegemonic practices of Roman Catholicism in Europe. These hegemonies were challenged by emphasis on teaching, learning and discourse, shifting the dominant focus from antiquities and objects of ancient times, to understanding religious texts, and to literature and education.

I identify the following five salient dimensions of Guru Nanak's political philosophy set out in contemporary language of politics:

1. Geo-political power, security, impact and wellbeing of Hindustan/India and its people

Guru Nanak's *bani* asserts a universal concern for the well-being of humanity. Within this philosophical framework, the Guru unequivocally voices his deep anguish and condemnation of Baber's invasion, the brutalities of his *Khuraasani* forces and their violent oppression. Guru Nanak in his *bani* highlights the inability, powerlessness and helplessness of people to safeguard themselves, defend their assets, protect their honour, dignity and integrity (SGGS, pp 360, 417/8, 623, 722; Singh, F, et al., 1969; Singh, G, 1979; Grewal, 1990; Dhaliwal, 2004).

2. The characteristics, quality and standard of government, governance and administration

Guru Nanak's concept and expectations of government, governance and administration are amply reflected in his harsh critique of rulers and their oppressive rule, abuse of power in exploitation of people. The Guru noted the harm that was being inflicted on ordinary people by the regime and its failure in delivering their duty and responsibility of providing for basic human needs. The Guru rejected the regime and its functionaries' attitude and behavior towards the people, making their lives a misery (SGGS, pp 767, 1045, 1288; Singh, K, 1999; Singh & Fenech, 2014).

3. Work, welfare and worship

This is one of the basic but most fundamental principles which Guru Nanak established, preached and practised. The value of honest hard work, contribution to the common good, and the freedom of worship/belief (meditation on the name of the One and only God) was emphasised for individual and collective social and spiritual development. The Guru promoted egalitarian principles for the welfare of all, and emphasized the value of teaching, learning and discourse as essential to becoming enlightened and free from the burden of indulgence and rituals. (SGGS, pp 97, 356, 595, 1245; Singh, A, 1970; Singh, I, 2005; Sodhi, 1993).

4. Leadership with vision, values, direction and strategy

Guru Nanak's *bani* identified the highest possible standards for leaders and leadership that people deserve. A visionary and strategic approach based on truth and truthfulness, are fundamental requirements of leaders and leadership at all levels. The Guru boldly analyzed strengths and weaknesses of contemporary religious, civic and judicial leaders who lacked values, integrity and ethics in their conduct. The Guru claimed only a humble status for himself and rejected any patronage of the powerful, and rich, who were seen as sustaining themselves unfairly by exploiting ordinary people. (SGGS, pp 62, 229, 662, 776; Singh, K, 1999; Singh, J, 1999; Sangha, 2011).

5. A fair, inclusive and just society

Guru Nanak's teachings promote personal, social and spiritual liberation, self-sufficiency and dignity (of individual, family, community and society), to raise morale and self-confidence. The Guru's core social guidance is to rise above personal and social prejudice and discrimination caused by caste, creed, gender, faith, race, wealth, power or status. Only then can fairness, inclusivity, social

justice and progress be ensured. The Guru's idea and practice of *seva*/selfless service underpins these principles in the best interest of universal wellbeing and welfare of all - *Sarbat Da Bhala* (SGGS, pp 25, 468, 474, 663, 942; Singh, W, 1981; Singh, H, 1998; Dusenbery & Tatla, 2010; Singh, I, 2014).

Origins of the Sikh and Protestant Political Philosophies

A comparative overview of historical events in northern India and northern Europe around Guru Nanak's era shows some similarities. These provide theoretical insight into the political processes involving the rise of the Sikh movement which challenged Mughal imperialism, and the Protestant movement which challenged hegemonic Roman Catholicism. The Sikh movement played a role in uprooting the Mughal regime, and the Protestant movement brought about reformation in Christianity. The Sikh faith emerged as a new religion and the Protestant reformation emerged as a new faith form within the broader Christian tradition. Observation of this parallel is not new. For example, Jeffrey (1986, p 51) notes "The relationship between politics and the foundation of the Sikh religion has led foreign observers to draw parallels with the Reformation in Europe. They have described the Sikhs as 'the Protestants of India' and pointed out that the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak (1469 – 1539) was a contemporary of Martin Luther (1483 – 1546)." However, the focus of this paper on political philosophy defines its contribution to exploring this broader comparison.

In Europe, the life and work of thinkers and reformers such as Desiderius Erasmus (1466 – 1536), Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527) and Martin Luther led the 'Renaissance' and became the catalyst for the 'Protestant Reformation.' In India, the impact of Guru Nanak and his nine successor Gurus between 1469 and 1708 was also profound. But unlike the work of many European thinkers and reformers, the work and impact of the Sikh Gurus remains under-researched, under-reported and under-interpreted within and outside India. While aspects of the Protestant political philosophy flourished with the expansion of British colonial influence across the world, the focus of Guru Nanak's Sikh political philosophy in India first challenged and resisted the Mughal and then British imperial hegemonies. So, in history, the Sikh reformation developed more as a resistance movement, and less as a ruling formation. However, the journey of this unique longitudinal movement was founded, firmed-up and sustained by many of the values, reflected in Guru Nanak's political philosophy. Throughout the history of humankind, the work of master thinkers such as Guru Nanak and his successors, has inspired and guided

people to become aware, analyze, promote and enact what is true and good, their every art, inquiry, action and pursuit have encouraged reform. [2]

Historically, both the Sikh and Protestant movements in India and across Europe have impacted political theories and practices, with a lasting influence and impact on the language of politics and social change. The political language emanating and evolving from them have shaped modern attitudes and values, but the underlying principles remain rooted in their philosophical origins. Many of the contemporary political ideas and practices in democratic, plural and social welfare driven societies have developed from post medieval resistance and reform movements such as the ones considered in this paper.

Context and Influence of Guru Nanak's Political Philosophy

One of the major developments during Guru Nanak's life was Zahiruddin M Babar's invasion of India in 1524, which the Guru challenged and for which he was subsequently imprisoned. Grewal (1990) documents that Guru Nanak sharply condemned Babar and his forces for causing indiscriminate deaths, destruction and human sufferings. The Guru also highlighted the atrocities and persecution which had taken place during the transition from Turko-Afghan to Mughal rule in India. His *bani* extensively questioned and criticized the oppressive regimes which damaged the social and cultural fabric of India and shattered the lives of indigenous

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[2] German born biblical scholar, theologian and campaigner Martin Luther was a significant figure in initiating and leading Protestant reform. Just as Guru Nanak's spiritual, social and cultural leadership founded a new resistance movement in North India against Mughal oppression, Martin Luther's writing, preaching and activities in North Europe exposed oppression and corrupt practices in Roman Catholicism. Pope Leo excommunicated Martin Luther from the Church; in return, Martin Luther further intensified his preaching and campaigning - triggering not only a major change in Christianity but also a peasants' rebellion. The point of his message was that the Bible, not the Catholic establishment, should be the source of religious authority in Christianity (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1977; Jeffrey, 1986; Bragg, 2011). Martin Luther followed a similar path to that of Guru Nanak, whose message emphasised that learning is the source of contemplative enlightenment and wellbeing: *Vidiya Vichari tan Parupkari* (SGGS, p356). Like the rise of the Sikh movement in North India, the Protestant Reformation in North Europe inspired intellectual, cultural and religious reform, laying the foundations of the modern political philosophy (Watson, 2000; Levene, 2010). Other contemporaries, such as Desiderius Erasmus, also promoted active learning and teaching of theology instead of staying in the monastery, questioning traditional wisdom and applying critical reasoning in conversations with the leading thinkers of Europe and he published his views. Niccolo Machiavelli, who practised administration in internal and external affairs of the Florentine Republic, worked closely with leaders including Louis XII of France, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian, Pope Julius II and Cesare Borgia. He studied their thoughts and actions and developed a philosophy of how political power can be achieved and retained. The Machiavellian political philosophy was controversial because of the nature of its underlying intentions and its justification of the use of instruments of state power to gain control and to remain in leadership.

people at all levels of society. Sikandar Lodhi (1469 – 1517) destroyed temples and allowed the execution of Hindu religious leaders. State patronage was confined to learned Muslims who received stipends in cash or revenue-free land for developing and maintaining mosques. Non-Muslims, under the Lodhi Sultans (as under their predecessors), were forced to pay a tax called *jizya.* Hindus had to pay a pilgrimage tax (SGGS, p1191), and indigenous people were required to learn Persian to work for a regime which had no checks and balances against the exploitation of people. Much of India remained under the occupation of Turkish and Afghan rulers for five centuries. The dominant Turko-Afghan tribal lords enslaved indigenous manual workers to do their general and domestic work, many of whom changed their faith for convenience or under coercion (Grewal, 1990; Singh, H, 1997). Many of these inequities persisted under the Mughals, with various forms of resistance (Singh, F, et al., 1969; Cole & Sambhi, 1978; Singh, G, 1979; and Padam, 1987).

Guru Nanak's response involved enlightened critical discourse, which formed and consolidated a spiritual and philosophical basis for the consequent socio-cultural reform movement. He questioned the conduct of the self-serving Muslim, Hindu and other religious and civic leaders for tolerating these injustices (SGGS, p 417, Singh, K, 1999). The Sikh Gurus promoted individual and collective morality and ethical practices to underpin social wellbeing, along with the maintenance of a strong identity and the security of society (SGGS, Padam, 1987; Grewal, 1990).

In India, before Guru Nanak, history records the rise of the *Bhakti* movement as contributory to the spiritual awakening of people; Singh, K, (1999) notes that *Bhakt* Ramanand allowed Hindus and Muslims of lower castes to join him in worship; *Bhakt* Kabir (1440-1518) raised socio-spiritual awareness, and the influence of *Bhakts* and spiritual messengers such as the *Bhakts* Ravidass, Nam Dev, and Trilochan began to influence people more than the orthodox Brahmanical leadership of Hinduism. *Bhakt* Kabir described himself as being the child of Rama and Allah, espousing that there could only be one God. He did not mince his words in condemning the caste system and thus was perceived as an outcast. However, none of these individuals addressed social and political issues head on.

Guru Nanak's role after this juncture in history proved pivotal; he transformed multi-faceted and fragmented religious preaching into a composite social and spiritual guidance for all. Guru Nanak's *bani* extensively condemned and protested against Khuraasani Babar's invasion of India and terrorisation of its people: *'Khuraasan Khasmaana Keeaa Hindustan Daraea…'* (SGGS, p360). Babar of Khuraasan (a larger area of east and north-east of the Persian Empire including parts of Central Asia) invaded India during Guru Nanak's life-time in 1526. The Guru expressed his deep anguish and concern over the threats and challenges to the

people of Hindustan. It was being shredded, torn apart and he called for its protection: '*Kaia Kaprh Tuk Tuk Hosi Hindustan Smalsi Vela…*' (SGGS, p 623).

It was Guru Nanak who first, five hundred years ago, articulated the threats and challenges to the geo-political entity, existence and security of Hindustan/India and its people. His *bani* poignantly confronts the behaviour of Babar's forces, referring to the various atrocities, infliction of harm, suffering, looting of wealth, and threats to the honour and dignity of Hindustan and its people: '*Pap Ki Junv Le Kablon Dhaia Jorin Mange Dan Ve Lalo…*' (SGGS, p 722). [3]

Guru Nanak reached out to people; his *bani* enlightened them on the conditions and circumstances of the time. His successor Gurus and followers further inspired, encouraged and organised them into a reform and resistance movement between 1469 and 1708. The process of enlightened reform and the rise of a spiritually, socially, culturally and geographically inclusive *Khalsa Order of the Sikh Panth* in 1699, continued to expand its influence across North India - particularly in Punjab. [4] Khalsa forces, through various battles, resistance and consolidation during the 18th century, did not only deter and put an end to the raids and invasions of India from the west, but also established the sovereign Sikh *Raj* of Punjab (1799 – 1849) under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Guru Nanak's teachings laid the foundation of the development of the Sikh reform and resistance movement which contributed to the uprooting of the Mughal Empire.

Guru Nanak communicated with people in their everyday language of Punjabi. Moreover, the Guru offered his thoughts using real life vocabulary from

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[3] Dr. Jodh Singh, Editor-in-Chief of Encyclopaedia of Sikhism and the first vice-chancellor of Panjabi University, asserts that SGGS (1604/1708) is the first sacred religious scripture in which the word Hindustan was used (Sikh Philosophy, 2018). Hindustan literally means the land of the people of Hindustan - the Persian Islamist invaders had been describing the people of this land as Hindus and their land as Hindustan (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1977). The word Hindustan did not originate from *Veds, Prans, Upnishds* or any other ancient Hindu religious texts; its roots are in Persian literature. Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha (1930/2006, pp 274 – 75) documents that Hind is a Persian linguistic transformation of Sindh. The land and people of Hindustan stretching from the Himalayas to the sea: 1900x1500 mile, 13 times bigger than Great Britain and geographically equivalent to the European continent. The 1921 census provided data on people of Hindustan as inclusive of AdiVasis, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Parsi, Sikhs and others.
[4] Much of the original Punjabi literature in Gurmukhi script - including religious, social and cultural poetry, and biographies of the Sikh Gurus and Saints – has assumed a Punjabi identity since Guru Nanak's period. Guru Nanak, his successors and followers, compiled most of their work in the Punjabi language and Gurmukhi script.
Thus, modern spiritual poets like Professor Puran Singh, have linked the land of five rivers of Punjab with the Sikh Gurus and emphasised that '*Punjab Jionda Guran De Nam Te*' – Punjab lives with the name of the Gurus (Singh, P, 1974).

agricultural and commercial environments to inspire and encourage people to connect with society through work, welfare, *seva* or service, and spiritual congregation. For example, Guru Nanak presents the human mind as a cultivator and human body as a field for growing the crop of good virtues and deeds: '*man hali kirsani karni saram pani tan khet…*' (SGGS, p 595). The Guru held those in high esteem who work for what they consume and offer some of it to others in need: '*…ghal khae kish hathon deh nanak rah pashane sae…*' (SGGS, p 1245). The integration of the mind, body, spirit and society should be rooted in truthfulness. '*nanak mel na chukie sache wapara…*' (SGGS, p 1009) - the merchandise in form of truth and spirituality can enhance truthfulness, which can continue to develop '*sacho wakhur ladie labh sda sacho ras…*' (SGGS, p 55).

Applicable stanzas of Guru Nanak's *bani* and observations on the practice of *seva* (selfless service) arising from his teachings show that the idea and tradition of 'selfless service and welfare' is a basic principle of the Guru's philosophy. This value underpins the followers' social and spiritual journey. From Guru Nanak's time the tradition and practice of *seva* has been socially inclusive, involving participation of all people irrespective of their social identity or status. *Seva* goes beyond the call of normal social duty, involving contribution of *daswand* (a tenth or affordable proportion of earnings) for the wider needs of people across the society. This tradition has driven the notion of *sarbat da bhala* (welfare for the wellbeing) of all. It is integral to all Sikh religio-social practices, which inspires individuals, families, community and institutions to support and sustain religious, social, healthcare and educational charities. Arguably for example, the modern idea of taxation to provide welfare services such as the provision of Health Service, Social Care and Education is a secular form of *seva.* S*eva* is central to all Sikh religious practices, engaging people regardless of age, status, gender and background. Guru Nanak's followers worldwide are driven by the spirit of *seva* which inspires them to provide, deliver or contribute to a wide variety of social welfare projects. The Guru introduced the socio-political principle of egalitarianism and social justice through the tradition of selfless service and welfare (Singh, H, 1998; Dusenbery & Tatla, 2010; Singh, I, 2014).

Guru Nanak's political philosophy and the underpinning tradition of *seva* and spirituality have universal applicability. They are as relevant to the contemporary world as they were during Guru Nanak's era and the subsequent history. Guru Nanak's philosophy is concerned about the universal welfare of humanity, notwithstanding social barriers or geo-political considerations. However, the Guru was pragmatic enough to be concerned about the people, heritage and land of Hindustan. He was absolutely forthright in raising his voice against invaders, oppressors and exploiters in the best interest of the people of Hindustan.

Many contemporary geo-political, ultra-ethno/communal/nationalistic tensions, conflicts, social conditions and globalisation can be analyzed in terms of theory and practice arising from Guru Nanak's political philosophy. The quality of attitudes, behavior and performance of local, regional, national and international state institutions can be studied by applying various dimensions of the Guru's political philosophy. How far do the contemporary institutions, their leadership and functionaries match the aspirations and expectations of the Guru's philosophy? How effective are international agencies in encouraging and supporting peace, prosperity and protection of humanity across the world? How much do the contemporary institutions of India, and its elites, protect human rights of minorities and disadvantaged people to ensure popular commitment for collective security and sovereignty? Guru Nanak's political philosophy also teaches to question and resist, any oppressive and exploitative measures of rulers in all settings, and to challenge any malpractice in administrative, social and economic structures of society. (Singh & Thandi,1996).

Evolution and Contemporary Relevance

The impact of Sikh and Protestant philosophies can be identified and analyzed in terms of the transformation of politics, political activism and the evolution of language which articulate the varying processes in the two traditions. Much of the language of contemporary politics emanates from the religio-political philosophical principles and the social conditions, which were instrumental in raising awareness for political activities in the course of history. At their core, politics and political processes, in operational and structural terms revolve around acquiring power, which Duverger (1972) defines as the ability and capacity to make and implement decisions and to do something - whether in social, financial, legal, military or other settings.

In contemporary democratic political systems, the exercise of power for transformational change is better tolerated and accepted if the ruler or executive leadership in governance who exercise it, are perceived as fit for the purpose and suitably command popular consent. Popular democratic consent provides the essential authority for exercising political power. This is consistent with Guru Nanak's principles for the suitability of a ruler, *takhat bhe takhte ki laik* (SGGS, p 1039; Nabha, 1930/2006, p 570) – provided they are morally and ethically driven. Leftwich (1984, p 123) identifies power as "…an important element in the process of trying to make sense of political ideas, practices and their relationship to the larger life of which they are a part". Ohmae (1996, p 148) goes a step further in his assertion, "The goal, after all, is not to legitimise this or that political establishment or power arrangement. But it is to improve the quality of life of people, regular

people – us, no matter where they live. People came first; borders came afterwards." The politics for power, where it has been immoral, unethical and without values, has entailed terrible calamities throughout history and in the contemporary era. Guru Nanak's guidance was that once our sights are raised above the pain of past horrors (as he encouraged and enabled people to do generally, and the victims particularly, after the early 1520s aggression of Babar), human endurance and intellectual capacity proves itself to be profoundly resilient in improving circumstances.

Guru Nanak's concern for humanity recognised no boundaries; he transformed his experience of Babar's invasion, its impact on society and his resistance, into a wider socio-spiritual discourse. He deepened and widened his message through spiritual metaphors and intuition rooted in the conditions of his people, place and time. One can grasp the political essence of Guru Nanak's messages from *bani* in its relevance and application to contemporary socio-political conditions: if one's mind feels unconnected and alienated, then one may have a sense of displacement and may feel a foreigner: *'man pardesi je thie sabho des paraya…'* (SGGS, p 767). Guru Nanak's message is well placed in the socio-political environment of his era. The Guru's *bani* reflects on the significance, impact and consequences of the exercise of power and influence by rulers. The Guru suggests the nature and style of their governance which sets the direction and affect people's living conditions: *'jis hi ki sirkar tishi ka sbho koe…'* (SGGS, p 27). The Guru cautions that deficit of morality and ethics in a ruler's leadership can damage people and place, unless driven by enlightened vision and virtue: *'andha agu je thea kio padhr jane…'* (SGGS, p 767). Guru Nanak's *bani* critiques rulers' and administrators' behaviour of his era in terms of their impact on the people: *'raje shihn mukadam kute, jae jagaen bethe sute…'* (SGGS, p 1288). The loss of their humanity and values, he warns are bringing on a dark age of ignorance and social butchery: *'kal kati raje kisai dharam punkh kar udrea, kurh amavas sach chandrma dise nahi charihia…'* (SGGS, p 1045). Notably, Guru Nanak's popular democratic instinct did not absolve the people of their responsibility either. The Guru's teaching asserts that unworthy rulers spread falsehood which degrades humanity and pollutes the world *'kurh raja kurh parja kurh sbho sansar…'* (SGGS, p 468).

Guru Nanak aspires for political leadership to embody the highest qualities and virtues of all: *'tis bin raja avar na koi…'* (SGGS, p 939). A good leader is one who can humbly serve the people and earns appreciation for so doing: *'wich dunia sev kmaea ta dargeh besan paie…'* (SGGS, p 25). Such leadership, the Guru asserts, can command universal support and admiration: *'har jan gur pardhan duare nanak tin jan ki renh hre…'* (SGGS, p 1014). Good political leadership and its supporters will have an enlightened alliance based on positive vision and values for making

progress: '*sanj krije gunha keri shod awganh chalie…*' (SGGS, p 766). Guru Nanak leaves no doubt about the individual and collective responsibility of people in the process: *'ape bije ape hi khae…'* (SGGS, p 25). Reform and progress, he believes, is in the hands of the people and he calls on them to resolve their own affairs through self-effort: '*apne hathi apna ape hi kaj swarie…'* (SGGS, p 474).

Guru Nanak's *bani* and its impact in the form of enlightenment and the rise of the Sikh movement was pivotal in shaping the history of North India after the 15th century. *Bani* is deeply intuitional and reflective of the circumstances of the Guru's time, place and people. It remains inspiring and motivational for social and spiritual change in the interest and wellbeing of all. Its teachings have guided followers to dispel illogical and superstitious thoughts, and to eradicate discriminatory religio-social practices rooted in caste, communal and sectarian divisions. Guru Nanak reached out to people by travelling extensively to engage in discourse with followers of different persuasions, beliefs and faiths. The Guru recommends the quest for truth and adoption of truthful living and conduct as essential for developing a discerning mind (SGGS, p 52). Guru Nanak and his nine successor Gurus developed and provided an inclusive vision, values and direction for the common good of all people over the 16th and 17th centuries. Guru Nanak's political philosophy, theory and practices laid the foundation for transformation of society across North India. However, unlike the spread of the Protestant political philosophy which took root in North Europe and had global influence, the impact of Guru's philosophy remained confined to North India, especially Punjab. However, it relentlessly inspired resistance and reform in the face of successive invasions of India and imperial suppressions of people across India.

The continuity of the Sikh movement was driven by the Gurus' far-sighted inclusive philosophy, socio-spiritual vision, strategic resistance, and succession involving the ordination of Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) in 1708. The influence of the transitional Sikh movement after the Gurus' period (1708 - 1799) was sustained by relentless revolutionary campaigns of warriors like Baba Banda Singh Bahadur and the subsequent leadership of the Sikh *Misls* who continued to defend North India, liberate people from Mughal domination and aggressions from the Northwest. The rise of Sikh *Raj* in geo-historic Punjab (1799 – 1839) was, however, short-circuited and curtailed by expanding British colonial rule across India, which annexed this territory after the Maharaj's death in 1849.

The Sikh movement's political influence expanded and sustained until the end of Sikh *Raj*; from then on, it began to fragment due to the absence of a structured succession, cohesive political plan, and strategic direction. Nevertheless, the underlying core principles of Guru Nanak's philosophy and its work re-surfaced in

the form of numerous organic religio-cultural, social and political initiatives from the 19th century onward (Tully & Jacob, 1985; Singh, K, 1999).[5]

Guru Nanak's life and teachings continue to inspire leadership and people in India and Pakistan to improve communication, liaison and collaboration (despite various wars, incidents of terrorist infiltration and violence). Prime Ministers Narendra Modi of India and Imran Khan of Pakistan and their respective governments initiated development and opening of 'the corridor of Faith' connecting Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan and Dera Baba Nanak in India to facilitate pilgrims and tourists from 2019. On the occasions of laying the foundation stones, India's Vice-President V. Naidu said that this initiative should be a passage for humanity, humility, faith and universal brotherhood. It should usher in prosperity and peace and progress which can only be achieved if there is religious harmony all around (*The Tribune News Service*, November 26, 2018). Former Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, reminded us (quoting the poet Dr. Allama Iqbal) how Guru Nanak's voice from Punjab stimulated and mobilised the people of India for liberation. He emphasised that the principles of hard and honest work, sharing of earnings with others and meditation are relevant today. Dr. Singh reminds us that the Guru's strategy of equity and social justice, caste and gender equality transcend barriers of borders and creed (*Tribune New Service*, November 23, 2018). "Are we Indians existing in conditions of freedom, equality and dignity?" asked Rajan Gogoi, Chief Justice of India (*Tribune News Service*, November 27, 2018). In Punjab (and widely), a reflection on present circumstances shows that the people

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[5] These include various Sikh reform movements, especially the Singh Sabhas and modern Shiromani Akali Dal, as well as struggles for greater democracy and democratic decentralization in independent India. Particularly noteworthy were the events of 1984, as Tully and Jacob (1985) noted "She [Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India] was killed [in 1984] because some Sikhs were convinced that she had deliberately and unjustifiably waged a war on their most sacred shrine (*Sri Harmandir Sahib*/the Golden Temple, Amritsar). The danger of alienation of a large section of the Sikh community was magnified by the government's failure to control violence against Sikhs after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination…" Guru Nanak's political philosophy recommends enlightened truthful dialogue, fairness, justice, apology, forgiveness and reconciliation. Likewise, the authors Tully and Jacob emphasized that if a greater understanding among Sikhs and Hindus of the complex forces that were at work in Punjab (during the 1980s) develops, then it will surely strengthen the hope of reconciliation, which will improve conditions for establishing truth, fairness and justice for all. India's national identity is complex and diverse which is also its pluralistic strength for it underpins fundamental rights, relative freedom and democracy. Many politicians and political groups however, continue to scrupulously exploit and trade on caste divisions, communalist ideology, religious bigotry and regionalism to mobilise voters to gain power. This is inconsistent with Guru Nanak's political philosophy, because beyond the politics of minority rights and identity, the communalist, regionalist, separatist, minority – majority nationalistic divisions breed fascist tendencies.

are in distress, which makes Guru Nanak's message evermore valuable and applicable.

Conclusion

This essay identifies five salient dimensions of Guru Nanak's political philosophy and its contemporary relevance. A brief comparative overview of the historical circumstances in India and Europe in Guru Nanak's time shows unconnected but illuminating parallels. There were significant developments inspired and driven by the great thinkers, campaigners and reformers of the period. Their initiatives and efforts enlightened people, encouraged and motivated them to take control of their circumstances. They mobilised resistance, challenging excesses of the dominant religio-political regime of Mughal imperialism in India, and that of hegemonic Roman Catholicism in Europe. There was comparative emphasis on teaching, learning and discourse, shifting the dominant focus from the antiquities and objects of ancient times, to religious texts, literature and education.

In Europe, "Historians tend to go for 'Renaissance' – literally 'rebirth' – a major revival of interest in ideas from antiquity…It had an enormous impact on every area of intellectual life not just art and architecture but also literature, politics, science, religion and philosophy…All those certainties of the past – one Church, with the King ruling by divine right as God's representative on earth had broken down by the seventeenth century. In England there was the Civil War… throughout Europe there was ongoing conflict between Catholics and Protestants…. Such thinkers as Hobbes and Locke often had to take themselves to other countries … (for) producing major works of political philosophy" (Levene 2010, pp 82, 88). Bragg (2011, p 335) comments "Democracy, as it took root and developed in Britain and then in America in the 17th century, owed an essential debt to the Reformation and to the King James Bible – which was printed in English in 1611 and changed and moulded the English-speaking people"

It is an under-researched historic parallel and significant coincidence in the world history that the medieval *Bhakti* movement involving spiritual awakening and the rise of Sikh religious and socio-cultural movement in India, culminated in the compilation, editing, installation and ordination of the sacred Sikh Scripture (Adi Granth/Sri Guru Granth Sahib) between 1604 and 1708. This development in India was almost contemporary to the publishing of the King James Bible in Britain. The variation was that the SGGS was a unique new and original religious compilation initiated by Guru Nanak, edited by Guru Arjan Dev, and ordained by Guru Gobind Singh over a period of two centuries in adverse conditions of Mughal repression. The teaching, learning and discourse tradition surrounding the advent of SGGS

brought the issues and concerns of human suffering, social conditions and religio-political oppression to the forefront.

Guru Nanak's life, work and travels initiated and laid the foundations for a new religion and socio-cultural reform which was completed by his nine successors. This process was underpinned by the *Khalsa Panth* order, established by the tenth successor Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The rise of 18th century Sikh reform and liberation movement mounted a relentless resistance and campaigns during that century. The Khalsa forces of the movement did not only put an end to the invasions of India, but also uprooted the Mughal empire - providing a new vision, sense of freedom and direction in the history of India. However, unlike the study of the rise and influence of the Protestant movement, the significance and impact of Guru Nanak's philosophy and its political dimensions remain under-researched, under-analysed and under-referenced.

Contemporary trends in politics arising from the fractured vision and poor strategic direction of inward looking, narrow, selfish and ultra-nationalistic forces continues to threaten peace, stability and prosperity. Grayling (2007, p 177) identifies this tendency as "…evil… causes wars. Its roots lie in xenophobia and racism, it is a recent phenomenon – an invention of the last few centuries…Disguised as patriotism and love for own country, it trades on the unreason of mass psychology to make a variety of horrors seem acceptable, even honourable. Nations are artificial constructs, their boundaries are drawn on the blood of past wars (and colonial partitions)… religious devotees who feel so embattled and embittered by questioning or rejecting beliefs that they are prepared to cause violence and mass killings by mixing fanaticism with resentment and ignorance." This perspective can also be applied to understand and analyse other forms of conflict causing death, destruction and human suffering.

It is clear that the Guru's teachings and their contemporary interpretations are as relevant and applicable now as they were in the past. Guru Nanak's spiritual pronouncements from his travels within and outside India remain alive and relevant because of their universal concern for humanity. The diversity of ideas, principles and tastes among people is very great, as is the fixity of their notions and reluctance to change. However, master-thinkers and reformers whose mighty works have deeply inspired and guided people have resulted in providing politically significant visions, values and directions (Grayling, 2011). The philosophy of Guru Nanak is one such example in India, which should continue to trigger on-going change and transformation for the good of all (SGGS, pp 83-84, 97, 724).

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