

# A message neither time nor custom can stale

## Guru Nanak: His Life and Teachings

by Roopinder Singh.  
Rupa & Co., New Delhi.  
Pages IX+83. Rs 295.

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**W**HY should we have another book on Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion, when there exists already a vast literature on his life and teachings? There would indeed be a justification for a new study of Guru Nanak and his life, if some hitherto unknown facts relating him are found, or a reinterpretation of existing literature on him is required.

Generally, for the progress of disinterested research, there subsists a close relationship between the author and the choice of his subject. The author makes just a modest claim that his work is a "small window to the world of Guru Nanak."

This work is not a recital of the principal events connected with Guru Nanak's life nor is it a compendium of his teachings. Historians and biographers use evidence for the reconstruction of their subjects from different angles.

With his artistic sensibility, penetrating insight and narrative skin, Roopinder has portrayed Guru Nanak as one of the greatest humanists who gave his message of love, the brotherhood of man and charity with passionate ardour. He kindled a spirit of courage and fortitude for the tortured humanity to wrestle with the problems of human existence. By interspersing his narrative with appropriate quotations, drawn from Guru Nanak's basic teachings as contained in the Guru Granth Sahib and Janamsakhis, and relating them to their historical context, and illustrating them through appropriate reproduction of paintings and sketches, Roopinder has produced an exquisite portrait-gallery of Guru Nanak, his life, and teachings.

The broad facts of Guru Nanak and his life are too well known. From this study, Guru Nanak emerges as a great and successful institution-builder, who had conceived the ideas of kirtan, sangat, pangat, and gurdwara. He chartered a new course. Endearing many hearts by his message, he drew followers, who, imbued with a spirit of dedication, devoted themselves to the service of humanity.

There are certain specific

features of Guru Nanak's personality and message that need to be highlighted because these have a special relevance to our own time. Those who cry loud today for the necessity of following secularism as a panacea for the ills of our society and regarding it a precious legacy of the European enlightenment of the post-French Rev-

## OFF THE SHELF

olution period should look up to Guru Nanak, who had laid down unequivocally his doctrine of human fraternity.

He had said, "There is no Hindu, nor Mussalman." His closest associates were Bala, a Hindu, and Mardana, a Muslim. Roopinder rightly says that Guru Nanak's religion was not merely for the individual but for the multi-cultural society. As a witness to the misrule of the Lodhis and the invasions of Babur, Guru Nanak realised the futility of warfare, which he condemned as a manifestation of human cupidity. He stood for the demolition of all castes. According to him, the caste of a person is what one does.

This study shows that throughout his life, Guru Nanak did not indulge in metaphysical abstractions or recondite analysis of various religious thoughts. Abhorring theological speculations, he did not commend renouncing the world and living the life of a recluse. He emphasised that life has to be lived in this topsy-turvy

world, and for leading a purposeful and creative life, Guru Nanak produced a value system which neither time nor custom can stale.

However beautiful a sermon may be, it is not going to help anyone unless it is listened to and acted on. Like Jesus Christ, Guru Nanak practiced what he preached in order to ensure its adequacy for society and its welfare. What could be better for the mitigation of cast-consciousness than through the institution of langar, where men and women, irrespective of their caste and religion, eat together. This concept of langar cultivates among the people a strong bond of community-consciousness, self-help

and service.

Idle recitations of mantras for seeking Divine favour, he abjured. Idol worship, he thought, breeds ignorance and superstitions beliefs. Like Christ, he regards love as the highest and the greatest virtue for the happiness of mankind. Roopinder emphasises the great value of Guru Nanak's basic dictum "Kirat karo, nam japo, vand chakko (engage in human labour, recreate the name of God and share what you have).

But that was not enough for Guru Nanak. He went further than the worship of God and a complete surrender to Him. Social progress, he thought, was vitally as important as the moral and spirited regeneration of society.

On the basis of the Janamsakhis compiled during the 17th-19th centuries, the author has identified by maps the places that Guru Nanak had visited in India and abroad, including Hardwar, Puri, Kurukshetra, Rameshwaram, Mecca and Baghdad. In this connection, Dr Kirpal Singh's recent study of the Janamsakhis is also relevant. Dr W. H. McLeod is sceptical of the information cited in the Janamsakhis. Even if some account in the Janamsakhis is apocryphal, essentially in



**COVER PICTURE:** Guru Nanak envisioned as a teacher. Illuminated and painted folio from a series of paintings of the 10 Gurus. Opaque water colour and gold. Paper. From a Kashmiri workshop of the Punjab. Early 19th century.

this genre we meet a form of history that depends upon reporting and modes of transmission. Such stories might be truer in spirit than what can be established as absolutely correct and documentarily established.

Before Guru Nanak died in Kartarpur on September

7, 1539, he installed Guru Angad as his successor than any of his sons, which shows his fierce impartiality and his recognition of merit. The Epilogue provides a synoptic survey of the growth of Sikh faith and its consolidation in one of the most turbulent periods

of the Indian history.

The task that Roopinder Singh had undertaken was arduous, but in this short and unpretentious work, he has performed it brilliantly with economy of thought and precision. More strength to his elbow to take up henceforth, Guru Gobind Singh.