

A Critical Review of NANAK AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

Edition by Devinder Singh Chahal

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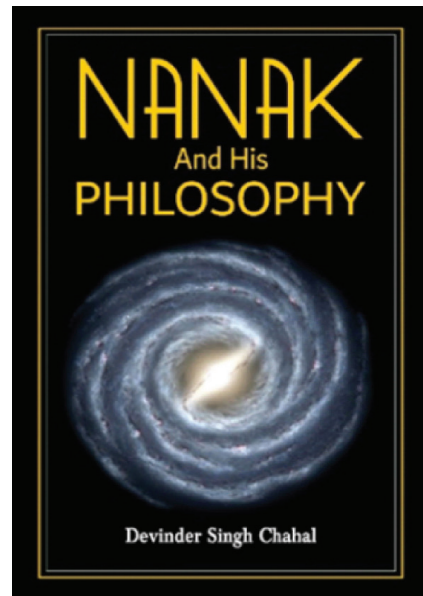
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**review**

NANAK AND HIS PHILOSOPHY: This Hardcover edition by Devinder Singh Chahal, published by Institute for Understanding Sikhism, pp.416.

Introduction

Nanak is known to many scholars and writers as a mystic, reformer, revolutionary, and the founder of Sikhism. However, Dr Devinder Singh Chahal discovered that Nanak, at the age of 9, refused to wear *Janeo* (sacred thread) and did not accept the Hindu religion, even though he did not find any religion at all. On the other hand, Nanak founded “Sikhi” (enlightening philosophy), and “Sikhism” was established later, especially by Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjun, as discussed in Chapter 12. For Dr Chahal, Nanak is a Guru, Satguru, and Natural philosopher in Chapters 2 and 4.

If someone wants to know the real Nanak and his philosophy, the answer lies in Chahal’s “*Nanak and His Philosophy*,” which boldly attempts to recontextualize

Guru Nanak’s philosophy, Sikhi (enlightening philosophy), within a framework that emphasizes educational logic, scientific reasoning, and a universal scholarly approach.

Chahal, a retired professor and microbiology researcher, approaches his task with academic thoroughness, which is evident throughout the book’s 416 pages. The book offers valuable insights and presents a fresh perspective on Guru Nanak’s philosophy, raising specific questions and concerns that warrant careful consideration.

Divided into 21 logical chapters

Chahal divides the book into 21 logical Chapters, which makes it easier to comprehend the presented material intellectually.

In the first four chapters, Chahal presents Nanak as **the new Nanak and Natural Philosopher** ever presented by any writer.

Chahal discovered that Nanak was at the top of the list of Natural Philosophers (chapter 4). After defining *Nanakian Methodology* and *Nanakian Philosophy* in Chapters 5 and 6, he discloses in Chapter 7 that Nanak has not claimed that *Bani was revealed to him by God* (the Eternal Entity-ੴ). This he conceptualized in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 discusses the **attributes of God** (the Eternal Entity-ੴ). Chahal first discusses the **Hukm** (the Laws of Nature/Universe) in Chapter 10. After that, he discussed in detail **Cosmology in Science and Nanakian Philosophy**. Chahal indicates that the cosmological study by Nanak is very similar to the scientific explanation of the cosmology of today in Chapter 11.

Chahal discussed in Chapter 12 that the **Sikh**, defined by Guru Nanak, was quite different from what is being defined today by the Sikh religious authorities. Although many Sikh scientists and theologians, and Sikh literature indicate that Guru Nanak was the founder of Sikhism (the Sikh religion), in fact, he founded **Sikhi** (enlightening philosophy) instead. However, **Sikhism** (Sikh Religion) was developed step by step by Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, and Guru Arjun, and culminated by Guru Gobind Singh.

Chapter 13 discusses that other Gurus have used **Nanakian philosophy**. Chapter 14 discusses that, in general, many Sikh scientists and theologians consider the Bani of Bhagat Kabir to be similar to that of Guru Nanak. So much so that some writers have claimed that Bhagat Kabir was the Guru of Nanak. On the contrary, Chahal discovered that the **Bani of Guru Nanak is much superior to that of Bhagat Kabir**.

Chapter 15 discusses that **Naam Japna and Naam Simarna** are considered very important by religious mentors; however, in the Sikhi of Guru Nanak, it is of no value. Instead, one must contemplate the Bani and adopt the message in one's life.

In Chapter 16, Nanak discusses the four Yugas, **Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali Yuga of Hinduism in his Bani**. Then he compared the number of years of these Yugas in the Vedic Periods with the periods of the **evolution of humans**, but there was no comparison at all. For example, when Rama and Krishna appeared in the *Treta* Yuga (2,165,124 years ago) and *Dvapara* Yuga (869,124 years ago), respectively, there were no humans (*Homo sapiens*), which appeared about 200,000 years ago.

In Chapter 17, Chahal reports that many Sikh theologians accept several Mantra systems so much that

they have declared the Commencing Verse (ਅਰੰਭਿਕੀ ਵਾਕ in Punjabi) also as the Mool Mantra. However, Guru Nanak's Bani rejects the Mantra System developed by the Sikh scholars.

In Chapter 18, **Ardas (prayer)** to God for the grant of wishes is very common in the psyche of the Sikhs. Many phrases from the Sikh Gurus support the idea that the wishes of every person are accepted through Ardas to God. However, Guru Nanak has given many examples through his Bani that God cannot grant their wishes since every action and reaction in Nature/Universe is carried out by the **Hukm** (the Laws of Nature/Universe) of God. Moreover, some clinical studies about the well-being of sick persons by Ardas did not improve their health. Similarly, Albert Einstein, a Physicist, wrote to a schoolchild that God cannot grant any prayer because He works according to the Laws of Nature.

Chapter 19 discusses various **food fads** among the Sikhs, particularly about eating meat. The phrase of Guru Nanak, **Fools struggle about eating of meat, but they do not know if sin lies in eating plant or meat since plants are also living organisms** is very commonly cited. Some plants eat insects by trapping them in specialized leaves. Biology and Guru Nanak divide animals according to their food requirements. Guru Nanak says God has created **chhatti** (36) *patharaths* (foods) for humans. **Biologically, humans are omnivores because their teeth are such that they can tear meat and grind grains**.

Chapter 20 discusses **Life after Death**, whether a person after death is going to heaven or Hell. Although there are many phrases in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib about the Dharam Raj and his two angles, Chandar and Gupt, who keep the record of good and bad deeds, and finally, Dharam Raj, with consultation of God, decides if one goes to Heaven or Hell. Thus, people try various rituals to make a reservation in Heaven. On the other hand, Guru Nanak says it is not known where a person goes after death, despite multiple methods of disposal of the dead body.

Finally, Chahal discusses **Some Basic Principles of Sikhi (Enlightening Philosophy) of Nanak** in Chapter 21.

Strengths of the Book

- **Emphasis on Logic and Reason:** Chahal's primary strength lies in his commitment to presenting Guru Nanak's philosophy as a rational and logical system of thought and his teachings. Besides, he contends that Sikhism is not mysticism or esotericism. He focuses on Sikhi's philosophical, practical, and universally applicable aspects as qualified by Guru Nanak's Bani.

This approach makes the book attractive and accessible to a broader audience, including those who may not be familiar with Guru Nanak's Sikhi (enlightening philosophy).

- **Scientific Approach:** As a scientist, Chahal brings a unique perspective to studying Guru Nanak's philosophy. He parallels scientific principles and Guru Nanak's philosophy, highlighting the compatibility between spirituality and scientific understanding. This approach is particularly refreshing in an era where science and religion are often seen as mutually exclusive.
- **Comprehensive Coverage:** The book covers a wide range of topics related to Guru Nanak's life and teachings, including his concept of God, his views on social justice, his emphasis on ethical living, and his rejection of rituals and superstitions. Chahal also delves into the historical and social context in which Guru Nanak lived, providing a deeper understanding of the factors that shaped Guru Nanak's philosophy.
- **Clear and Concise Language:** Despite dealing with complex philosophical concepts, Chahal writes in a clear and concise style that is easy to understand. He avoids jargon and technical terms, making the book accessible to readers from all backgrounds.
- **Challenging Traditional Interpretations:** Chahal does not shy away from challenging traditional interpretations of Guru Nanak's Bani. He questions certain practices and beliefs that have become ingrained in Sikhism, encouraging readers to critically examine their understanding of the faith. This critical approach is essential for the growth and evolution of any religion.

Concerns and Criticisms

- **Oversimplification:** While Chahal's emphasis on logic and reason in interpreting the Bani of Guru Nanak is commendable, traditional theologians believe his analysis does not always capture the complexities and nuances of Sikhism.
- **Lack of Engagement with Existing Scholarship:** Some readers may feel Chahal's book does not adequately engage with the existing body of scholarship on Guru Nanak and Sikhism. This is because this book deals only with Nanak and his Philosophy, but not Sikhism (Religion).
- **Selective Use of Gurbani:** Some Sikh theologians consider that Chahal's interpretation of Guru Nanak's

teachings is based on a selective use of Bani. This selective approach raises questions about the objectivity of his analysis. However, readers must remember that Chahal selected only the Bani of Guru Nanak, representing his Sikhi (enlightening philosophy) on his discussed topic.

- **Potential for Misinterpretation:** Chahal's attempt to present Guru Nanak's philosophy logically and scientifically may be considered a misinterpretation of the Sikh faith by traditional Sikh theologians. This is because the traditional interpretation has been going on since 1883, the time of Nirmalas' first interpretation of the Sikh Scriptures, which was done under the influence of Vedic and Vedantic philosophies.
- **Limited Appeal to Traditional Sikhs:** Chahal's critical approach to certain Sikh practices and beliefs may not be well-received by traditional Sikhs. His questioning of established norms and rituals could be seen as a challenge to the authority of religious leaders and institutions. **That is why a book like *Nanak and His Philosophy* is needed to tell the truth that Sikhi (enlightening philosophy) is quite different from Sikhism (religion).**

Overall Assessment

Despite these concerns, "*Nanak and His Philosophy*" is a valuable contribution to the study of Guru Nanak's Sikhi (enlightening philosophy). Chahal's book offers a fresh perspective on Guru Nanak's teachings, emphasizing their logical and scientific basis. It is a thought-provoking work that challenges readers to critically examine their understanding. However, readers should know that this book deals only with **Guru Nanak's Sikhi (enlightening philosophy), but not the Sikhism (religion)** developed after him. It is vital to engage with other scholarly works on the Sikhi of Guru Nanak and Sikhism to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Sikh faith.

Recommendations

Future editions of the book should include a more thorough engagement between the existing body of scholarship on **Sikhism** and Guru Nanak's **Sikhi (enlightening philosophy)**. Although it will be a big project, this would strengthen the book's academic credibility and give readers a more balanced perspective.

Conclusion

"*Nanak and His Philosophy*" is a bold and thought-provoking book that challenges readers to update their understanding of Guru Nanak and his philosophy. It is a valuable contribution to the field and a must-read for

anyone interested in exploring the depths of Guru Nanak's philosophy. By approaching Guru Nanak's teachings with an open mind and a critical spirit, readers can gain a deeper appreciation for the universal relevance of Guru Nanak's message. The reviewer believes that once readily available and read, it will stimulate further research and writing on Guru Nanak's teachings and his unparalleled efforts.

Author's Biography

Dr. Devinder Singh Chahal

was born in 1932 and received BSc and MSc degrees from the Punjab University, Chandigarh. He worked for his PhD program at the Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, and Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Ill, USA. He was a Professor and Head of the Department of Microbiology at Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, India, Fulbright Fellowship in 1974 at the Department of Food Science and Chemical Engineering, at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA and then visiting scientist in the Department of Chemical Engineering at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.



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In 1982 he moved to the Institut Armand-Frappier, Université du Québec, Laval, Québec, and retired as a Professor of Industrial Microbiology in 1996. His work is on using cellulosic waste materials to produce food, feed, and fuel. He is the inventor of "Solid state Fermentation" to produce cellulases, which has been quoted by many scientists (332 + 84) worldwide.

Since 1999, he has been the Founder and the President of the Institute for Understanding Sikhism and the Editor-in-Chief of Understanding Sikhism: The Research Journal, a Member of the Advisory Committee of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Study Centre at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, since 2011, and a member of World Sikh Council, UK. He has been one of the 100 Top Most Influential Sikhs of the World from 2012 to 2016 as a writer. He was honored by Shiromani Gurdwara

Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar, India, in 2004 and the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC), New Delhi, on Khalsa Fateh Divas on March 8-9, 2014.

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About the Reviewer

Dr. Bhai Harbans Lal,

Professor and chair emeritus of Pharmacology and Neuroscience at the University of North Texas Health Science Center, USA, has served as Editor-in-Chief of Drug Development Research and been honored as Distinguished Neuroscientist by the Society of Neuroscience. His education includes, besides other degrees, a Ph.D. in Pharmacology from University of Chicago, USA.



BHAI DR. HARBANS LAL: Neuroscience; Science, Religion, Media, and Literature, Inter-religious engagement Hindu, Islamic and Judeo-Christian etc.

He has devoted his life to serving and promoting Sikhi causes. His latest book, with Dr. Roshan Attrey as coauthor, is *Guru Nanak's Religious Pluralism and Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (2019).

His numerous recognitions include the honorary title "Bhai Sahib" conferred by the All-India Sikh Students Federation and by *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak* Committee. Guru Nanak Dev University has recognized him with the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature; Anandpur Foundation has honored him with "Nishaan-e-Khalsa."

Presently, Dr. Lal serves on the editorial boards of many Sikh journals, and is writing a blog "Seeking Wisdom." He lives in Arlington, Texas, with his wife Amrita Lal.

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