

1. A Vision For Equality

Why in News?

- As we celebrate the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev, saint-composer and amongst the great spiritual leaders, his ideas, thoughts and teachings assume far greater relevance today than ever before. They can promote peace, equality and prosperity across the globe.

Who is Guru Nanak?

- Guru Nanak (1469-1539) is the greatest thinker, philosopher, poet, traveller, political rebel, social leveller, mass communicator and spiritual master the land of Punjab has produced. He was born in a village, near Lahore which was renamed later as Nankana Sahib.

Teachings of Guru Nanak:

- Guru Nanak was a **great champion of equality**. For him, the differences and multiple identities based on caste, creed, religion and language were irrelevant.
- He had said, “**Preposterous is caste, vain the distinction of birth**. The Lord gives shelter to all beings”. He aimed at **creating a casteless society** in which there is no hierarchy.
- **Respect for women and gender equality** is another important lesson to be learnt from Guru Nanak’s life. Referring to women, the Guru says: “How can they be inferior when they give birth to men? Women as well as men share in the grace of God and are equally responsible for their actions to Him.”
- For him, the whole **world is God’s creation and all are born equal**. There is only one universal creator.
- **Echoing the Sanskrit saying “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”** that describes the whole world as one family, Guru Nanak Dev goes on to say:
- When he stops thinking in terms of ‘mine’ and ‘yours’/Then no one is angry with him./When he clings to ‘my own, my own’/Then he is in deep trouble./But when he recognises the Creator Lord/Then he is free of torment.”
- **This spirit of living together and harmoniously working together is a consistent** thread of thought that runs through Guru Nanak hymns.

- What is remarkable about Guru Nanak is the fact that he not only **formulated the principal doctrines of Sikhism**, but took care to ensure that his teachings would endure.
- **He used the language of the masses, Punjabi, to preach his ideas.** This was in sharp contrast to that of the Hindu priests and the Muslim clergy, who used Sanskrit and Arabic respectively.
- **The ideal of equality was given a concrete institutional form in the community meal, “langar”,** where all devotees, irrespective of caste, creed, region and religion sit in a row called “pangat” to share a meal.
- The place of their meeting, called “dharmsal”, is regarded as sacred and the common religious congregation — “sangar” — was open to all.
- **These institutional structures are an eloquent testimony to the Guru’s timeless vision of equality and non-discrimination.**
- This spirit of equality began with Guru Nanak’s clear recognition that there is no distinction between a Hindu and Mussalman. For him, no country was foreign and no people were alien.
- It is worth noting that **Guru Nanak initiated inter-faith dialogue** way back in the 16th century and had conversations with most of the religious denominations of his times.
- The world needs such spiritual leaders who can engage in a **meaningful dialogue to exchange ideas in order to promote peace, stability and cooperation.**
- Guru Nanak’s vision was pragmatic and holistic. It was not a vision of renunciation but of active involvement. Between the ascetic and the epicurean, **Guru Nanak chose the middle path — the Grihastha Ashram or the life of a householder.** It was an ideal path as it offered opportunities for social, material and spiritual growth of an individual.
- Work, worship and share (kirat karo, naam japo and vand chhako) was the motto he placed before his disciples. Earn by honest labour and share the earnings with the needy.
- He suggested that one should share one’s prosperity with others who needed help. He advocated the concept of “daswandh” or donating one-tenth of earning among needy persons. His written compositions were included in the Adi Granth compiled by Guru Arjan (1563-1606), the fifth Sikh guru.
- This came to be known as Guru Granth Sahib after the additions made by the 10th guru Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708).

- He included in the Granth the teachings and writings of all the five Sikh gurus but also the contributions made between the 12th and 16th centuries by many Hindu bhakts and Sufi saints such as Baba Farid, Sant Kabir, Guru Ravi Das and Sant Namdev.

Conclusion:

- In the last phase of his life that Guru Nanak spent at Kartarpur Sahib, he provided a practical demonstration of building a community based on strong egalitarian values of cooperative agricultural work and innovative social institutions of **langar (collective cooking and sharing of food) pangat** (partaking food without distinctions of high and low) and **sangat** (collective decision making).

