

# LIFE OF GURU NANAK

## CHAPTER I

To recapitulate what has been more fully stated in the Introduction, Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, was born, according to all ancient Sikh records, in the early morning of the third day of the light half of the month of Baisakh (April–May) in the year A.D. 1469; but for convenience sake his anniversary is now observed by the Sikhs on the occasion of the full moon in the month of Kartik (October–November). His father, who was called Kalu, was accountant in the village of Talwandi in the present Lahore District of the Panjab, and his mother was Tripta, memorable in Sikh writings for her devotion to her son.

The Sikh biographers recount in minute detail all the circumstances of the birth of Guru Nanak. Daulatan, a midwife, assisted on the occasion. When next morning interrogated by the astrologer Hardial, who came to write the child's horoscope, as to the nature of the voice uttered by him at birth, she said it was as the laughing voice of a wise man joining a social gathering; and she expressed herself at her wits' end to comprehend the child's nature. The astrologer desired to see him, but his mother refused owing to the chillness of the weather. He pressed the matter, and the child was brought to him in his swaddling clothes. The astrologer on seeing the infant is said to have worshipped him with clasped hands. He declared the child should wear the umbrella, the symbol of regal or prophetic dignity in the East. At the same time he regretted that he should never live to see young Nanak's eminence, worshipped as he should be alike by Hindus and Musalmans, and not merely by Hindus

as in the previous human manifestations of the Creator. The child's name should resound both in earth and heaven. Inanimate nature should cry out 'Nanak, Nanak!' He should have power over matter so as to traverse unscathed the depths of the ocean. He should worship and acknowledge but one God, and the creature he should treat as a creature. In other words he should be a monotheist, not a worshipper of minor deities and idols.

At the unripe age of five years Nanak is said to have begun to talk of divine subjects, and to have fully understood the meaning of his language. Great trust was reposed in him; and both Hindus and Musalmans lavished on him their characteristic language of religious adulation.

At Nankana<sup>1</sup> every place with which Nanak had any association is deemed sacred. On the spot where he used to play with children of his own age and subsequently spend nights in devotion, there was a small tank constructed by Rai Bular, the landlord of the village, in affectionate remembrance of the childhood of the Guru, at a time when his fame had extended far and wide. The tank was greatly enlarged by Kaura Mal, the Diwan or financial minister of Zakaria Khan, who was satrap of Lahore. Kaura Mal was an enthusiastic admirer of Guru Nanak, and lent his great material and political influence to the amelioration of the condition of the Sikhs. The spot is called Balkrira or the child's playground.

When Nanak was seven years of age, his father in the manner of Hindus asked the village astrologer to select an auspicious time for the commencement of the boy's education. The schoolmaster thought the time had arrived. The school appears to have been a humble one, and the tuition fees not exorbitant. Kalu's wife and not, as in modern times, the village money-lender was the custodian of the wealth of the house. Kalu took from her a coin corresponding to three

<sup>1</sup> By which name Talwandi is now known.

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farthings of English money, some betel-nut, and rice, and presented them to the schoolmaster with his son. In India wooden tablets painted black are employed in teaching children the letters of their language. The schoolmaster writes the letters with a kind of liquid chalk on the tablet; and the children repeat their names aloud with much noise and energy. The schoolmaster wrote the alphabet for Nanak, and the latter copied it from memory after one day.

It is said that on that occasion the young Guru made an acrostic on his alphabet. As in similar compositions in other languages, the letters were taken consecutively, and words whose initials they formed were employed to give metrical expression to the Guru's divine aspirations, his tenets, and his admiration of the attributes of the Creator.

The acrostic called the patti or tablet in the Rag<sup>1</sup> Asa is as follows:—

- S. The one Lord who created the world is the Lord of all.  
 Fortunate is their advent into the world, whose  
 hearts remain attached to God's service.  
 O foolish man, why hast thou forgotten Him?  
 When thou adjustest thine account, my friend,  
 thou shalt be *deemed* educated.
- I. The Primal Being is the Giver; He alone is true.  
 No account shall be due by the pious man who  
 understandeth by means of these letters.

<sup>1</sup> Indian writers enumerate six principal Rāgs or musical measures, namely, Sri Rāg, Bhairav, Mālkaus, Hindol, Dipak, Megh. To these are allotted 'wives' and 'sons', which are modifications of the principal airs, and are often sung differently in different provinces of India. The hymns of the Granth Sāhib were composed to as many as thirty-one such musical measures, the names of which are as follows:— Sri Rāg, Mājh, Gauri, Āsa, Gūjari, Devgandhāri, Bihāgra, Wadhans, Sorath, Dhanāsari, Jaitsari, Todi, Bairāri, Tilang, Sūhi, Bilāwal, Gaund, Rāmkali, Nat, Mālīgaura, Māru, Tukhāri, Kedāra, Bhairo, Basant, Sārang, Malār, Kānra, Kaliān, Prabhāti, Jaijāwanti. For further information see Rāja Sir Surindra Mohan Tagore's learned works on Indian music. The Rāgs in European musical notation will be found at the end of the fifth volume of this work.

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- U. Praise Him whose limit cannot be found.  
They who practise truth and perform service shall obtain their reward.
- N. He who knoweth divine knowledge is the learned pandit.<sup>1</sup>  
He who knoweth the one God in all creatures would never say 'I exist by myself'
- K. When the hair groweth white, it shineth without soap.  
King Death's hunters follow him who is bound by the chain of mammon.<sup>2</sup>
- KH. The Creator, Lord of the world, giveth sustenance to His slaves.  
All the world is bound in His bonds; no other authority prevaieth.
- G. He who hath renounced the singing of God's word, is arrogant in his language.  
He who fashioned vessels made kilns in which He put them and burnt them.
- GH. The servant who performeth the Guru's<sup>3</sup> work, who remaineth obedient to His commands,  
Who deemeth bad and good as the same, shall in this way be absorbed in Him.
- CH. He who made the four Veds,<sup>4</sup> the four mines,<sup>5</sup> and the four ages,<sup>6</sup>  
Hath been in every age a Jogi, a worldly man, or a learned pandit.

<sup>1</sup> Pandit means a learned man, but the title is now appropriated by Brāhmans versed in Sanskrit literature.

<sup>2</sup> Māyā. In the sacred writings of the Sikhs this word has two meanings—one is mammon, as the word is here translated; the other is illusion or God's mystic power by which He created matter.

<sup>3</sup> The word Guru means great. Here it stands for God. In a secondary sense it is applied to a great religious teacher.

<sup>4</sup> They are the Rig, Sām, Yajur, and Atharv, composed in the most ancient form of the Sanskrit language. In Sikh literature they are named the white, the red, the yellow, and the black Veds.

<sup>5</sup> In the East four sources of life are enumerated. It is there said that animals are born from eggs, wombs, the earth, and perspiration.

<sup>6</sup> The Sat, Tretā, Dwāpar, and Kal, corresponding to the golden, silver, brass, and iron ages of Greece and Rome.

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CHH. God's shadow is over everything ; doubt is His doing.

O God, having created doubt, Thou Thyself leadest man astray. They whom Thou favourest meet the Guru.

J. Thy slave, who wandered in the eighty-four lakhs<sup>1</sup> of existences, beggeth and prayeth for divine knowledge.

There is One who taketh, One who giveth ; I have heard of none other.

JH. Why die of grief, O mortal ? What God hath to give He continueth to give.

He giveth, beholdeth and issueth His orders how living things are to obtain sustenance.

N. When I look carefully I see no other *than God*.

The one God pervadeth all places ; the one God dwelleth in the heart.

T. O mortals, why practise deceit ? Ye shall have to depart in a ghari<sup>2</sup> or two.

Lose not the play of your lives, run and fall under God's protection.

TH. Comfort pervadeth the hearts of those whose minds are attached to God's feet.

They whose minds are so attached are saved, *O Lord*, and obtain happiness by Thy favour.

D. O mortal, why make display ? all that existeth is transitory.

Serve Him who pervadeth all things, and thou shalt obtain happiness.

DH. He Himself destroyeth and buildeth ; He acteth as He pleaseth.

He beholdeth the work of His hands, issueth His orders, and saveth those on whom He looketh with favour.

N. He in whose heart God dwelleth singeth His praises.

<sup>1</sup> It is believed in the East that there are 8,400,000 species of animal life through which the soul may wander in transmigration. A lākḥ is one hundred thousand.

<sup>2</sup> A ghari is a period of twenty-four minutes.

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The Creator blendeth men with Himself, and they are not born again.

T. The terrible ocean<sup>1</sup> is deep, and none findeth its end.

We have no boat or raft ; we are drowning ; save us, O Saviour King.

TH. He who made all things is in every place.

What do men call doubt ? What mammon ?  
That which pleaseth God is good.

D. Impute not blame to any one, *but rather* to thine own karma.<sup>2</sup>

I have suffered the consequences of my acts ; I may blame no one else.

DH. He who made things after their kinds holdeth the power *in His own hands*.

All receive what He giveth under His most bountiful order.

N. The Master ever enjoyeth pleasure ; He cannot be seen or grasped.

I am called a married woman, my sister, *but in reality* I have never met my Husband.<sup>3</sup>

P. The King, the Supreme God, made the play *of the world* to behold it.

He seeth, understandeth, and knoweth everything ;  
He is within and without *His creation*.

PH. The whole world is entangled with a noose and bound by Death's chain.

They who by the Guru's favour have run to God for protection, are saved.

<sup>1</sup> In Sikh writings this world is likened to a terrible and stormy ocean which can only be traversed with difficulty, and in which man is ever liable to founder without spiritual guidance. The Guru supplies a boat for salvation.

<sup>2</sup> *Karma* are acts which follow the soul in its transmigration and hinder its progress to Nirvān.

<sup>3</sup> The Gurus speak of God as a husband and themselves as His wives ; and spiritual happiness they liken to connubial bliss. This belief has to some extent a parallel in Greek mythology. Psyche, the human soul, having forfeited the love of Eros, the divine soul, endured various sufferings to regain the affection of her lover.

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- B. God began to play by making the four ages His chaupar board.<sup>1</sup>  
He made men and lower animals His dice, and began to throw them Himself.
- BH. They who search and feel fear by the favour of the Guru obtain the fruit *thereof*.  
The perverse, fools that they are, wander and heed not, and so transmigrate in the eighty-four lakhs of animals.
- M. God destroyeth worldly love ; is it *only* at death man is to remember Him ?  
Other thoughts possess man and he forgetteth the letter M.<sup>2</sup>
- Y. If man recognize the True One, he shall not be born again.  
The holy man uttereth, the holy man understandeth, the holy man knoweth but the one God.
- R. God pervadeth all the creatures He hath made.  
Having created creatures He appointed them all to *their* duties ; they to whom He is kind take His name.
- L. He who appointed creatures to their duties, made worldly love sweet.  
He giveth eating and drinking equally to all, and ordereth them as He pleaseth.
- W. The Supreme Being who created the vesture of *the world* to behold it,  
Seeth, tasteth, and knoweth everything ; He is contained within and without the world.
- R. Why quarrel, O mortal ? meditate on God, under whose order is *creation*.  
Meditate on Him ; be absorbed in the True One ; and be a sacrifice unto Him.
- H. There is no other Giver than He who created creatures and gave them sustenance.  
Meditate on God's name ; be absorbed in God's

<sup>1</sup> Chaupar is the Indian draughts.

<sup>2</sup> The initial of Madhusūdan, one of the names applied to God. It may also be the initial of the Arabic word *maut*, death.

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name, and thou shalt night and day derive profit therefrom.

- A. What God who made *the world* hath to do He continueth to do.

He acteth and causeth others to act ; He knoweth everything ; thus saith the poet Nanak.

Nanak appears to have continued to attend school for some time. One day he was observed to remain silent, and not apply himself to his books. The schoolmaster asked him why he was not reading. Nanak inquired, 'Art thou sufficiently learned to teach me?' The schoolmaster replied that he had read everything. He knew the Veds and Shastars,<sup>1</sup> and he had learned to cast up accounts, post ledgers and daybooks, and strike balances. Upon this Nanak said, 'To your accomplishments I prefer the study of divine knowledge'. He then composed the following hymn :—

Burn worldly love, grind *its ashes* and make it into ink ;<sup>2</sup>  
turn superior intellect into paper.

Make divine love thy pen, and thy heart the writer ; ask  
thy guru and write his instruction.

Write *God's* name, write His praises, write that He hath  
neither end nor limit.

O master, learn to write this account,  
So that, whenever it is called for, a true mark may be  
found thereon.

There<sup>3</sup> greatness is obtained, everlasting joys, and ever-  
lasting delights.

They in whose hearts is the true Name, have the marks  
of it on their brows.

<sup>1</sup> Sanskrit works on the six philosophical systems of the Hindus. They are—the Nyāya founded by Gautama, the Vaisheshika by Kanāda, the Sāṅkhya by Kapila, the Yoga by Patanjali, the Mimāṃsā by Jaimini, the Vedānt by Vjās. The six systems have been learnedly expounded by Max Müller in his *Indian Philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> At that time in India ink was made from burnt almond-rind and gum.

<sup>3</sup> Corresponding to *ékēi* in Greek, the next world.



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By God's mercy men obtain it and not by idle words.

One man cometh, another goeth ; we give them great names.<sup>1</sup>

Some men God created to beg, and some to *preside over* great courts.

When they have departed, they shall know that without the Name<sup>2</sup> they are of no account.

I greatly fear Thine anger ; *O God*, my body pineth and wasteth away.

They who have been called kings and lords are beheld as ashes.

Nanak,<sup>3</sup> when man departeth all false affections are sundered.<sup>4</sup>

Upon this the schoolmaster became astonished, did Nanak homage as a perfect saint, and told him to do what he pleased.

Nanak, having thus shown his scholastic proficiency, left school and took to private study and meditation. He remained for long periods in the same attitude, whether sleeping or waking, and associated continually with religious men.

The scholastic ignorance of the founders of great

<sup>1</sup> Literally—we call them commanders. This refers to the custom of parents giving their sons high-sounding names.

<sup>2</sup> In the Sikh writings the word Name is frequently used for God. A somewhat similar practice was known to the ancient Jews (Amos vi. 10). At a time too early to be traced the Jews abstained from pronouncing the name Jehovah for fear of its irreverent use, and uttered instead Adonai or Lord. In connexion with this we may say that the repetition of God's name is one of the principal forms of Sikh worship. Set forms of prayer are apt to be repeated mechanically or ostentatiously ; and it was believed that by the constant heartfelt repetition of God's name man should be eventually absorbed in Him, and thus obtain the supreme object of human birth after countless transmigrations.

<sup>3</sup> In Oriental poetical works it is usual for the poet to insert his real or assumed name—*takhallus*—in the end of a composition or section of a composition. This practice is unknown to European poets except in the case of professed imitators of Oriental poetry. Were we therefore to omit the word 'Nānak' wherever it occurs, we should be consulting the taste of European readers, but the Sikhs do not desire such an omission.

<sup>4</sup> Sri Rāg.

religions has been made the subject of many a boast on the part of their followers. The object, of course, is that the acquirements and utterances of the religious teachers may be attributed solely to divine inspiration. We see no reason for ascribing a want of education to the founder of the Sikh religion ; and the manner in which his learning was acquired is not difficult to understand. Had he remained at the humble village school, there is no reason to suppose that he would have acquired any considerable knowledge, but in the dense forests around Talwandi were to be found ascetics and anchorets who sought the extreme retirement of the locality for the combined objects of undisturbed prayer and escape from the persecution of bigoted Moslem rulers. All the Janamsakhis are unanimous in stating that Nanak courted the retirement of the forest and the society of the religious men who frequented it. Several of them were profoundly versed in the Indian religious literature of the age. They had also travelled far and wide within the limits of Hindustan, and met its renowned religious teachers. Nanak thus became acquainted with the latest teachings of Indian philosophers and reformers. The satisfaction which he derived from spiritual thought and religious association he thus expressed :—

Let Jogis practise Jog,<sup>1</sup> let gluttons practise gluttony,  
 Let penitents practise penance, and rub and bathe themselves at places of pilgrimage ;  
 But let me listen to Thy songs, O Beloved, if any will sit and sing them to me.

The names of the men with whom Nanak associated in the forest and who sang to him the songs of the Lord are all lost, and their excellences merged as

<sup>1</sup> *Jog*, connected with the Greek *ζυγόν*, originally meant the union of the soul with God, and may be compared with the etymological meaning of the word 'religion'. They who practised Jog were called Jogis. The word Jog is now applied to certain practices of the Jogis which are detailed in the *Aphorisms of Patanjali*.