



E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
IJPSG 2025; 7(4): 107-111
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 25-02-2025
Accepted: 26-03-2025

Jitendra Kumar Lalvani
Assistant Professor, Vasanta
College for Women, Rajghat,
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh,
India

Political philosophy of Guru Nanak

Jitendra Kumar Lalvani

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i4b.489>

Abstract

This paper addresses Guru Nanak's political philosophy that contains a deep synthesis of justice, ethical leadership, and egalitarian values, and presents a visionary view for civic order and how his reaction to contemporary political conditions have become a fountainhead of his political philosophy. As a reaction to the socio-political and religious hierarchies of India in the 15th century, his teachings confronted entrenched caste systems, religious exclusivity, and autocratic forms of governance. Promoting universal brotherhood, economic equality, and unselfish service, he painted a picture of a political system in which leadership is established through moral character and responsibility. His doctrine of Miri-Piri, later institutionalised by Guru Hargobind, emphasized the coexistence of spiritual illumination and worldly power, reaffirming the necessity of righteous political action. Guru Nanak's focus on social justice, virtuous statecraft, and opposition to tyranny still resonates as an abiding model for governance, providing a philosophical basis for building a just, equitable, and morally enlightened polity. This paper also focuses on social responsibility, welfare, governance and moral authority and how to rule and get ruled.

Keywords: Guru Nanak Dev, Sikh gurus, Sikhism, socio-spiritual, popular sovereignty

Introduction

Political philosophy is called the guiding principle and to run a society in order, it is an essential component. For the betterment and welfare of any society a need for a proper system is required and that will be introduced by politics and government. Religion influences societal governance by shaping legal systems, legitimizing authority, and reinforcing social norms. It provides moral frameworks for laws, justifies leadership, and fosters social cohesion or conflict. Modern governance balances religious influence through secularism, theocracy, or hybrid models, affecting policy and societal order. Religion like Sikhism helps maintain an orderly society by providing moral guidance, fostering social cohesion, and influencing legal systems. It promotes ethical behaviour, encourages charity and deter crime through beliefs in divine justice. Sikhism integrates politics and religion through the concept of Miri-Piri, introduced by Guru Hargobind representing balancing spiritual (religion) and temporal (political) authority. To Sikh Gurus, temporal attractions and possessions are short-lived phenomena ^[1]. Guru Nanak emphasized just governance, while Guru Gobind Singh institutionalized the Sant-Sipahi (saint-soldier) ethos representing the Sikh duty to engage in politics when necessary to defend righteousness ^[2].

Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism, propounded universal brotherhood, morality, honesty, and selfless service. Guru Nanak exhorted the faith that man is equal and must live together with love and respect for each other, irrespective of religious caste and gender. His teachings rang true for living a truthful and moral life, where men earn a livelihood through honest means without exploitation, and help those in need. One of the doctrines was *Vaand Chhako*: "sharing with others", especially with the less fortunate. He always believed that whatever one receives must first be shared before being consumed, in order to bring into culture generosity and foresight for others. His very practical emphasis on *Kirat Karo* helped in working hard and honestly, so that no one would exploit or harm the being working for his own personal gain. Guru Nanak also gives an expression to the idea of *Sarbat Da Bhala*,

Corresponding Author:
Jitendra Kumar Lalvani
Assistant Professor, Vasanta
College for Women, Rajghat,
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh,
India

¹ Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang p70

² Mohan N.M., Essential Postulates of Sikhism, (Dharam Singh, Ed.) Patiala: Punjabi University, 12 (2003)

Which means the well-being of all; People were not only to pray for their own ease, but they were to pray for the well-being and prosperity of all ^[3]. This concept is sung in the Sikh prayer, where blessings are so sought for all on earth. Furthermore, Guru Nanak stressed the chanting of the name of God, i.e. *Naam Japo*, for coming one to peace within oneself and mastery over the human ills of greed, anger, and ego. His spiritual world vision was very deeply founded on equality and justice, so as to create instead a society based on kindness, humility, and service to others. His teachings, recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib, are a beacon of light for millions and continue to give them directions on a life full of righteousness, selflessness, and devotion to humanity. In order to understand the social, political and religious condition of India prevailing just before the time of Guru Nanak is essential for understanding his political philosophy.

Social, Political and Religious conditions

Sikhism emerged in the late 15th century as a response to the rigid social and religious structures of India. Guru Nanak, born in 1469 in Punjab, founded this movement with teachings centered on monotheism, equality, and the rejection of ritualistic practices that dominated both Hinduism and Islam. His vision was to liberate people from the strict caste system and the dominance of Brahmanical priesthood, promoting a simpler, more inclusive spiritual path. During Guru Nanak's time, North India was under the rule of the Delhi Sultanate, followed by the early Mughal emperors like Bahlol Lodhi, Sikandar Lodhi, Irahim Lodhi, and Babar ^[4]. The region was marked by deep religious divides, caste-based discrimination, and the exploitation of the lower classes by both Hindu priests and Muslim rulers. Brahmanism had established a rigid social order where caste determined one's fate, and religious practices were largely controlled by priests. Idol worship, superstitious rituals, and extreme asceticism dominated Hindu religious life, while Islam, under rulers like Sikandar Lodi, was becoming increasingly intolerant toward non-Muslims. Frequent invasions from Central Asia and oppressive taxation systems further worsened the conditions of the common people, leaving little room for social mobility and intellectual freedom.

Guru Nanak's teachings directly challenged this social order. He emphasized the oneness of God, drawing inspiration from both Hindu and Islamic monotheistic traditions ^[5]. He rejected the caste system and welcomed people from all backgrounds into his spiritual community, advocating for the fundamental equality of all human beings. He also condemned idol worship, meaningless rituals, and the dominance of priests, instead encouraging a direct connection with the divine through devotion and selfless service. His core principles honest work (*kiratkaro*), sharing with others (*vandchakko*), and meditating on God's name (*naamjapo*) formed the foundation of Sikh ethics ^[6]. Unlike radical revolutionaries, Guru Nanak's approach was peaceful and spiritual, using poetry and hymns to spread his message. These teachings, later compiled in the Guru

Granth Sahib, laid the foundation for Sikhism. Over time, his movement evolved into a distinct religious identity under his successors, ultimately leading to the militarization of Sikhism under Guru Gobind Singh in the 17th century. Thus, Sikhism emerged as a powerful spiritual and social movement, challenging the hierarchical and oppressive structures of medieval Indian society and promoting an orderly society.

Core Principles of Guru Nanak's Political Philosophy

Guru Nanak's political philosophy is rooted in several key principles that reflect his spiritual and social vision. These principles include:

At the heart of Guru Nanak's philosophy is the concept of equality among all human beings, irrespective of caste, religion, gender, or social status ^[7]. He vehemently opposed the discriminatory practices prevalent in the society of his time, challenging the caste system and advocating for the equal treatment of all individuals. Guru Nanak emphasized that all people are born equal and possess the same divine light within them, making them inherently worthy of respect and dignity. This belief in equality naturally extended to his political views, where he envisioned a society free from oppression and injustice, where everyone had equal opportunities and rights.

He states:

"When God raises one caste above others, those not raised do not like it. Greatness is in the hands of the Great One; He gifts to whom He pleases. He sees that His rule obtains everywhere, He brooks no delay".

This highlights that divine grace does not discriminate and that human social hierarchies are meaningless in the spiritual realm ^[8].

He also reinforces the idea of universal equality:

"He who sees all mankind as equals can be deemed to be a yogi".

This suggests that spiritual enlightenment comes from recognizing the inherent equality of all people.

Kingship

Sikh Gurus denounced the Divine origin of the state and kingship. Guru Nanak said, "If He cast an angry glance, He makes monarchs as grass blades. Even though they may beg from door to door, they receive no alms" ^[9]. Guru Ram Das said, "All the monarchs, bankers, kings, nobles, dukes and chieftains that there are, they are all the creation of the Lord. Whatever God makes them do, that alone do they. All of them are the Lord's mummies" ^[10]. Guru Arjan Dev, "He is whose mind is the pride of kingship, becomes a hell dweller and a dog" ^[11].

Guru Arjan Dev said, "The sovereigns and nobles, in an instant, He reduces to worms. Patronizing the poor, the Lord makes them kings" ^[12]. He also said, "In an instant He can make a groveling worm a king. The Transcendent Lord is

³ Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang p1100

⁴ Tarikh-i-Farishta; (Briggs), vol. I,

⁵ Griffin, L. (1901). Sikhism and the Sikhs. The North American Review, 172(531), 291-305

⁶ Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang p 489

⁷ Khushwant Singh, Hymns of Guru Nanak, p. 19

⁸ Khushwant Singh, Hymns of Guru Nanak, p20

⁹ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, 472 (1708)

¹⁰ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, 851 (1708)

¹¹ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, 278 (1708)

¹² *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, 1071 (1708)

the Patronizes the humble”^[13]. Kabir said, “A beggar, He makes rule an empire and a king, He turns into a beggar”^[14]. The rise of demise, ascendancy or decline of worldly powers is according to incomprehensible cosmic law. But this does not give the kings a divine right to be cruel. Indeed, the theory of divine rights of the kings as advocated by the Stuart kings does not find support in the sacred verses of the Guru^[15].

Guru Nanak conceiving God as the king and the universe as his kingdom or state puts forth his concept of an ideal state. At some places, he uses the image of a state for human body that of a ruler for human mind and that of the *panches* for the five senses, and thus evolves the conceptual structure of the state. Therefore it is from the metaphorical usage of the political phraseology interspersed profusely in his verses that his political ideas can be inferred^[16].

Sikh Gurus concern for an ideal human society did not allow them to shut their eyes to the political setup of society or in other words the political values concrete references are available in Guru Granth Sahib which favour a righteous rule and in which special emphasis has been put on the conduct, duties and responsibilities of a ruler so as to ensure a just rule. The concept of the duties of a ruler corresponds with the ancient Hindu concept of Raja Dharma. But the Sikh political thought differs from the ancient Raja dharma in so far as it enjoins on every Sikh to strongly oppose an unjust rule in order to secure justice for the people^[17].

It was believed that as unjust king disturbed the equilibrium of society and created all round chaos, while his injustice, greed and avarice resulted in calamities like famine, scarcity of rainfall, economic and political crises and shedding of innocent blood¹⁸. If any ruler becomes corrupt in delivering justice to his subjects, he loses his right to be a ruler “Guru Nanak even goes to the extent that if the subjects obey the orders such corrupt ruler, who has failed to deliver justice or who takes bribe for delivering justice. It is the fault more of the subjects than that of the ruler. It is just like the habit of a dog who obeys the just or unjust orders of his master only for a piece of bread^[19].”

Liberty

Guru Nanak believed in individual spiritual freedom and rejected religious orthodoxy and superstitions. He gives so much stress on the idea that people should be given rights in every field. He declares:

"Religion lieth not in the patched coat the yogi wears, not in the staff he bears, nor in the ashes on his body. Religion lieth not in rings in the ears, not in a shaved head, nor in the blowing of the conch-shell. If thou must the path of true religion see, among the world's impurities, be of impurities free. "Guru Nanak believed that people should have the

right to choose their own government. He emphasized that self-determination is essential for a fair and just society. Every country should function like a well-run federation where all people are treated equally.

He stood up against oppressive rulers and strongly supported freedom of speech and religion^[20]. According to him, no one should face discrimination based on religion, caste, race, gender, or social status. Human rights are not something that governments "give" to people; they are natural rights that every person has simply by being human. The government's job is to protect these rights and ensure that no one, whether a ruler or an ordinary person, violates them.

Guru Nanak also believed that education was key to people understanding their rights. In his time, many people suffered under oppressive rulers simply because they didn't know they had the right to resist. He encouraged education so that people wouldn't just accept injustice but would stand up against it. For example, imagine a corrupt leader today who misuses power to silence those who speak against him. Guru Nanak would have encouraged the people to come together, raise their voices, and demand justice.

He also made it clear that no one is superior or inferior based on wealth or social background. Everyone should be treated equally under the law. More importantly, if a ruler becomes oppressive and stops serving the people, then the people have the right to resist and demand change. Just like in history, when people have protested against dictators and fought for their rights, Guru Nanak would have supported such movements against injustice.

In short, he stood for a world where fairness, equality, and freedom were for everyone not just a privileged few. This emphasizes that true liberation does not come from external rituals but from internal purity and self-awareness.

Popular Sovereignty

Guru Nanak speaks of divine sovereignty and the futility of human power structures:

"Ye have no power to live or die, you have no power to acquire wealth and dominion, to compel the mind to think or reason, to escape the world and fly. He, who hath the pride of power, let him try and see. O Nanak, before the Lord there is no low or high degree^[21]."

This suggests that human rulers have no real power, and true sovereignty belongs only to the Divine. Guru Nanak's philosophy, the ultimate Sovereignty rests with God Himself. He says:-

He alone is the lord, Immutable, holy...

Eternal his greatness.

He acts as is His pleasure command him none may!

Saith Nanak: He is the king of kings Abiding by His will is best^[22].

Guru Nanak believed that God exists in all human beings, which means that every individual has their own worth and importance. However, an individual is also a part of the Sangat (a community), where everyone is equal, regardless

¹³ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, 277 (1708)

¹⁴ *Shri Guru Granth Sahib*, 1252 (1708)

¹⁵ Singh Kehar, "Political Ideas of Guru Nanak" in K. Singh (Ed.), *Perspectives on Sikh Polity*. New Delhi: Dawn Publishers & Distributors, 34 (1993)

¹⁶ Brar G.K. *Guru Nanak's Philosophy of Politics*. Bathinda: Mahant Bani Tirath Singh Sewa Panthi, 13(1994)

¹⁷ Singh Arvinder, Sikh Vision of an Ideal Ruler, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences* 2319-3565 Vol. 2(3), 46-49, March (2013)

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Singh Kanwarjit, *Political Philosophy of the Sikh Gurus*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers And Distributors, 21 (1989)

²⁰ Trumpp, Ernest. *The Adi Granth: The Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*. London: Wm. H. Allen & Co., 1877, p. 658.

²¹ Khushwant Singh, *Hymns of Guru Nanak*

²² Guru Nanak. *The Adi Granth: The Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*. Translated by Dr. Ernest Trumpp, London: Wm. H. Allen & Co., 1877, p. 14

of caste, colour, religion, gender, or social status. This means that a person has two roles one as an independent individual and another as a member of a larger group where everyone has equal rights and participation.

Guru Nanak also taught that it is within the Sangat (holy gathering) that people can truly feel the presence of God. He emphasized that by joining a holy company and following the guidance of a true teacher, one can connect with God. His idea of sovereignty (supreme power) is similar to the modern idea of popular sovereignty, which means that power lies with the people. It is the people who decide how their country should be governed. This idea is similar to the philosophy of Rousseau, a Western thinker, who believed that the people hold all the power, while the government is only a servant that carries out their wishes.

Furthermore, because God exists in everyone, all individuals are equal. There should be no discrimination based on caste, gender, race, birth, or status. Since everyone is equal, Guru Nanak believed that each person is also sovereign in their own right, meaning they have their own dignity and power.

Guru Nanak philosophy-social responsibility, welfare state, good governance and moral authority

Guru Nanak stressed the importance of social responsibility and the welfare of all members of society. He believed that rulers and individuals alike had a duty to care for the less fortunate, to ensure that everyone had access to basic necessities, and to promote the common good. This concept of social responsibility is evident in the Sikh tradition of Langar, a communal kitchen where free meals are served to all, regardless of their background. Guru Nanak's emphasis on social welfare reflects his vision of a society where everyone is cared for and no one is left behind. Guru Nanak advocated for ethical governance and the importance of moral authority in leadership^[23]. He believed that rulers should be just, compassionate, and guided by moral principles in their decision-making. Guru Nanak criticized the corruption and tyranny of the rulers of his time, emphasizing that true leadership comes from serving the people and upholding righteousness. His teachings emphasized the importance of honesty, integrity, and selfless service in governance, laying the foundation for a political system based on ethical principles^[24].

Guru Nanak promoted religious tolerance and harmony among different faiths^[25]. He believed in the fundamental unity of all religions, emphasizing that the path to God is open to all, regardless of their religious beliefs. Guru Nanak respected and incorporated the teachings of various religious traditions into his own philosophy, promoting dialogue and understanding among different communities. This emphasis on religious tolerance is crucial in his political philosophy, advocating for a society where people of different faiths can coexist peacefully and respectfully.

Guru Nanak openly challenged tyranny and oppression, advocating for resistance against unjust rulers. He believed

that it was the duty of individuals to stand up against injustice and to protect the rights of the oppressed. It was believed that an unjust king disturbed the equilibrium of society and created all-around chaos^[26]. Guru Nanak's bold criticism of the rulers of his time, even in the face of potential persecution, demonstrates his commitment to justice and his willingness to challenge those in power. This principle of resistance against tyranny is a significant aspect of his political philosophy, inspiring his followers to fight for their rights and to oppose oppression in all its forms^[27].

Guru Nanak condemned the tyranny and corruption of the rulers of his time, highlighting their disregard for the welfare of their people^[28]. He criticized the rulers for their greed, their abuse of power, and their failure to uphold justice. Kings are appointed to rule, but they have no right to indulge in tyranny^[29]. Guru Nanak's condemnation of tyranny reflects his belief that rulers should be accountable to their people and should serve their interests, rather than exploiting them for personal gain, they have also the right to punish and even remove the ruler if he fails to perform his duty and acts against the law^[30].

Conclusion

Guru Nanak's political philosophy is a comprehensive and inspiring vision for a just, equitable, and compassionate society. His emphasis on popular sovereignty, equality, social responsibility and harmony, good governance, Universal peace, religious tolerance, and resistance against tyranny continues to resonate with individuals and communities around the world. While challenges and criticisms exist, Guru Nanak's teachings provide a valuable framework for addressing the complex political and social issues of our time and for building a more harmonious and sustainable future. His legacy endures as a guiding light for those seeking to create a ideal state where everyone is treated with dignity and equity, and where the welfare of all is prioritized. Through the teaching and life of Guru Nanak Dev, many nations-state can short out their complication which hurdles for to be a developed nation. He also worked on social and religious harmony through connect people with humanities, so he is also called forerunner of peaceful society.

References

1. Deol G.S., *Social and Political Philosophy of Guru Nanak Dev and Guru Gobind Singh*, Jullundur: New Academic Publishers Company, 1976
2. Das J.R., *Economic Thought of The Sikh Gurus*. New Delhi: National Book Organisation, 1988
3. Singh Kharak, *Saint-Soldiers*. In DS Singh (Ed.), *Sikhism and Its Philosophy and History*. Chandigarh: Institute of Sikh Studies, 1997.

²⁶ Sagoo HK. *Guru Nanak and Indian Society*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 23 (1992)

²⁷ Singh A. *Sikh Vision of an Ideal Ruler*, International Research Journal of Social Sciences 2319-3565 Vol. 2(3), 46-49, March (2013)

²⁸ Singh A. *Sikh Vision of an Ideal Ruler*, International Research Journal of Social Science ISSN 2319-3565 Vol. 2(3), 46-49, March (2013)

²⁹ Hansrao GS. *Ideology of Sikh Gurus*. Ropar: Hansrao Publishers, P93 (1990)

³⁰ Hansrao GS. *Ideology of Sikh Gurus*. Ropar: Hansrao Publishers, P-94 (1990)

²³ Guru Nanak. *The Adi Granth: The Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*. Translated by Dr. Ernest Trumpp, London: Wm. H. Allen & Co., 1877, pp. 75, 114.

²⁴ Singh Arvinder, *Sikh Vision of an Ideal Ruler*, International Research Journal of Social Science ISSN 2319-3565 Vol. 2(3), 46-49, March (2013)

²⁵ Guru Nanak. *The Adi Granth: The Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*. Translated by Dr. Ernest Trumpp, London: Wm. H. Allen & Co., 1877, p. 94.

4. Kaur M. The Creation of the Khalsa and prescribing of the Sikh Symbols in *JS Mann and HS Saraon* (Ed.), *Advanced Studies in Sikhism*. Irvine: Sikh Community of North America, 1989.
5. Singh K. *Political Philosophy of the Sikh Gurus*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1989.
6. Kaur G. *Political Ideas of Sikh Gurus*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1990.
7. Kohli SS. *Sikhism and Guru Granth Sahib*. Delhi: National Book Shop., 1990.
8. Chahal DS. Sikhism from Guru Nanak 1469 to Vaisakhi 1999 and Beyond Vaisakhi 2000, *Understandings Sikhism*, 1999.
9. Mohan N.M., *Essential Postulates of Sikhism*, (Dharam Singh, Ed.) Patiala: Punjabi University, 2003.
10. Sagoo HK. *Guru Nanak and Indian Society*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1992.
11. Singh Harbans, *Degh Tegh Fateh*. Chandigarh: Alam Publishing House, 1986.
12. Brar, Kaur G, *Guru Nanak's Philosophy of Politics*; Mahnat Bhai Tirath Singh 'Sewapanthi' Tikana Bhai Jagta Ji Sahab, Goniana Mandi, Distt. Bathinda, May 1994.
13. Singh, Dhamram, *Understanding Sikhism*, Singh Brothers Bazar Mai Sevan, Amritsar-143 006, January, 2012.
14. Singh, Dharam, *Sikhism (Norm and Form)*, Brahmraj singh, Vision & Venture, Patiala and New Delhi, 1997.
15. Sikka, Dr. Ajit Singh, *Facets of Guru Nanak's Thought*, Bee Kay Publications, Sati Sudan Street, Books Market, Ludhiana, 1972.
16. Joshi LM *Sikhism* (Edited version English), Dr. SS Khehira, Registrar, Punjabi University, Patiala, Printed at Ram Pintograph (India) New Delhi, 2009.
17. Grewal JS. *Guru Nanak in History*, RK Malhotra, Punjab University Chandigarh, 1969.