Bani of Guru Nanak as contained in the Adi Granth is a valuable source for the study of economic, social, political and religious life of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

From Guru Nanak Bani we learn about the kind of society that existed during those days. At the same time it also highlights Guru Nanak's vision of society viz. economy that should be evolved. He has suggested some codes of conduct in all the spheres of life in such a society.

Section 6.1 discusses the consumption pattern as envisaged by Guru Nanak; and his concern about economic inequalities is discussed in Section 6.2.

6.1 Consumption Pattern

Man is a being with increasing wants and demands. He always wants, and wants more. In other words man is a bundle of unlimited wants. The journey of an individual through life can take almost infinite number of paths; yet at every point in the journey - from infancy to old age - each individual seeks to fulfil his unique set of needs and wants. Many of these desires, such as the biological drives and instinct for sustaining life, are inherent; there are others which are ever expanding. Man must work to satisfy these wants through the use of scarce resources of
production. Economic activities of man, therefore, deal with the business of living and making a living.

Consumption is an activity directed towards the satisfaction of human wants. The goal of human actions is the fulfilment of wants which lead to production. Guru Nanak was of the view that the basis of our socio-economic life are human wants. It is an acknowledged fact that agricultural and industrial production are not an end by themselves. These are rather tools for satisfaction of human wants. Pattern of their distribution and consumption determines the human welfare. Human wants are unlimited but the means to satisfy these wants are limited and these means can be put to different alternative uses. Guru Nanak not only gave due importance to fundamental and necessary value of material pursuits and fulfilment of material needs but he regarded them as pure and pious. According to him:

Eating and drinking are pure,
for the Lord has given sustenance to all.¹

At other places he opines:
The corn is wholesome, the water is wholesome, and the fire and salt are wholesome.
When the fifth article clarified butter is added,
then the food becomes pure and sanctified.²

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* * * * *

Let us wear silks of virtues, make decorations of goodness and take possession of our arena.  

Guru Nanak not only admits clearly the significance of food and other basic requirements of life viz. clothing and shelter, but goes to the extent of sharply criticising those human beings (ascetics) who detest food and abjure other basic needs and treat these as impediments in the path of spiritual development and resort to various ways for their forced abandonment. To quote Guru Nanak:

He who eats not corn, loses the relish of life.

He who wears not clothes, endures calamity day & night.  

* * * * *

By practising stubborn self torture, the body wears off.
Through fasting and penance, the soul is softened not.  

* * * * *

Someone takes not food and tortures his body Without the Guru’s wisdom he becomes not content.
Guru Nanak favours the proper care and maintenance of human body and fulfilment of bodily needs, which is clear from his condemnation of giving up of food and clothes by the ascetics of his times.

His ideas have even been supported by Paul Brunton:

The body ought to be in healthy condition if the mind is to receive the illumination correctly and without hindrance.⁷

Guru Nanak stresses the need not only of food but of sufficient quantity of food of superior quality. He is against the consumption of food of inferior quality. He makes a scathing attack on those who take coarse food in the following verse:

He who eats filth, throws ashes on his head
He, the blind fool, loses his honour.⁸

Prof Puran Singh, highlighting the intrinsic significance of the material values, says:

"Wealth, material prosperity, or symbolically in one word Bread, is thus a reality not only to be reckoned with but to be respected and honoured......"⁹

The modern science of Nutrition condemns 'mal-nutritive' as well as insufficient under-nutritive food and underlines the importance of 'balanced-diet' taking into account its quantitative and qualitative
Man should eat to live and not live to eat. The risk of an exclusive involvement in material betterment has to be guarded against. In the opinion of Guru Nanak:

Cursed is the life that is led only to eat and swell the belly.\(^\text{11}\)

Amidst eating, drinking (milk or water), laughing and sleeping, one forgets death. Forgetting his Lord, man has ruined himself and rendered his life accursed. He is not to stay here.\(^\text{12}\)

****

An elephant eats a hundred monds of clarified butter and molasses and swallows five hundred monds of corn. He belches, blows and scatters dust and regrets when the breath leaves the body.\(^\text{13}\)

Guru Nanak did not set down any strict law in the matter of eating and wearing but he certainly laid down a yardstick i.e. food taken and clothes worn must not initiate an evil thought in the mind or harm the body.

Guru Nanak goes to the extent of forbidding such eating and wearing that leads to discomfort and anguish.
in the end. There is no restriction on food, drinks or
dresses of any kind. The only criterion of
ascertaining their suitability is that eating, drinking
and dressing should neither torment the body nor
pollute the mind.

Guru Nanak laid down a principle more effective
than simple Do’s and Don’t regarding eating and
wearing. He put them in a philosophical perspective:

Avoid the act of eating O’man,
That kills the joy of life.
That maketh body suffer
And puts evil in the mind.\textsuperscript{14}

\* \* \* \* \*

O Brother! the happiness of other
raiments is ruinous.
By wearing which the body is ground
and wickedness takes possession of the soul.\textsuperscript{15}

In the above lines, Guru Nanak has put restraints
on eating habits and advised a balance for a healthy
and useful social life.

In many of the earlier stages of civilization, the
sumptuary mandates of law and custom have rigidly
prescribed to the members of each caste or industrial
grade the style or the standard of expense up to which
their dress must reach and beyond which they must not
go.\textsuperscript{16}
Formerly in India too, a particular dress or a style of dhoti was prescribed for going to a religious place. Whereas the rich wore luxurious clothes, the poor had to wear rough clothes. But Guru Nanak was against all such inequalities. He removed all restrictions on outward appearance. He thought that union with God could be obtained through a virtuous life and not by any particular type of clothing. Gaudy or simple clothing did not obstruct or pave the way towards meeting God. He laid more emphasis on decent human behaviour than on outward appearance:

The Supreme Lord cares little for looks, dress or appearance.
A contrite heart, a pure life kindled with true devotion wins His approval. If I were asked how I would adorn myself to meet the Lord, my answer would be with sweetness of speech and cultivation of virtue.17

He was of the view that the luxurious make up and dresses of the riches are futile without the Lord’s Name. Guru Nanak puts this message in unequivocal terms:

I may apply otto of aloe wood and sandal to my bodylimbs.
I may wear and carry on my body
silk and silk clothes.
Without God's Name, where can I find peace?
What should I wear and in what dress
should I show myself?
Without the world Lord,
how shall I obtain comfort?\textsuperscript{18}

* * * * *
The intoxication of the essence of sandal,
aloen wood, camphor and worldly valuables,
removes man far away from the supreme dignity.
By forgetting the Name, he becomes
the falsest of all the false.\textsuperscript{19}

In the Guru Granth one finds it this way:

What can be achieved by eating
and what by dressing,
So long as that True Lord abides
not in the man's mind?
What is fruit, what clarified butter
and sweet molasses,
What fine flour and what meat?
What is raiment and what
comfortable couch,
to enjoy sexual intercourse and revelments?
Of what use is an army and of
what the mace bearers,
Servants and coming and dwelling in mansions?

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Nanak, without the True Name

The entire paraphernalia is perishable.\textsuperscript{20}

Guru Nanak advocates mental purity rather than physical one. According to him:

They are not pure who wash their bodies
They are indeed pure in whose hearts
He dwells.\textsuperscript{21}

\* \* \* \* \*

The contented, who meditate on God,
the truest of the true, do the real service.
They burst the worldly bonds
and live on a little corn and water.\textsuperscript{22}

Guru Nanak was of the view that too many desires only lead to sufferings which is clear from his following couplet:

Man's mind blind with desire
sows the seed of its own suffering,
In pursuit of indulgence of the self,
It forgets God and undergoes
endless suffering.\textsuperscript{23}

\* \* \* \* \*

Both wealth and youthful beauty,
which afforded them pleasure,
have now become their enemies.\textsuperscript{23A}

The key thought of the Guru in the verses above is
that one should restrict one’s wants to obtain happiness. This idea has also been supported by the noted British. Economist, Marshall, who says:

In every civilized country there have been some followers of Buddhist doctrine a placid serenity is the highest ideal of life; that it is a part of a wise man to root out of his nature as many wants and desires as he can; that real riches consist not in abundance of goods but in paucity of wants.24

Guru Nanak advised his fellowbeings to get out of the whirlpool of desires because they go on increasing as they are satisfied. To quote him:

The hunger of the hungry departs not, even though they may pile up loads of the world’s valuables.25

In the economy of Guru Nanak’s vision, material prosperity is, no doubt, essential for the general well-being of the society; but it is not the deciding factor for happy life of human beings and hence of the society. Ethical and spiritual considerations are more important than materialistic enrichment. Guru Nanak says:

Man may eat, wear and enjoy life
But without love and devotion to the Lord he wastes his life and dies in ignominy.26
Thus, Guru Nanak, while supporting the need of material prosperity, attaches primary importance to spirituality in human life as it imbues one with ethical values.

Guru Nanak never wanted human beings to die of starvation. On the other hand, he struck a balance between a luxurious and a subhuman life. To describe a proper consumption level, he used the word "chhako" which means that our genuine wants should be properly satisfied so that we can maintain proper health.

Guru Nanak warned against the multiplicity of wants and their further aggravation because they are the source of sufferings. At the same time, unfulfilled desires lead to frustration, discontentment and clashes in society.

Moreover the consumption level can't be allowed to go unrestricted for all times to come. The increasing consumption level for a section of society in the ultimate analysis, will mean denial of a subsistence life to another larger section of society.

6.2 Economic Inequalities

The economic inequality is the root cause of all the social evils. It is the consequence of the greedy nature of man. During the period under study, wealth was unevenly distributed. In fact it was concentrated in the hands of a few. On the basis of the degree of economic prosperity, society could be classified into
upper, middle and lower classes. The upper class included the kings, feudal chiefs, ministers, state officers and rich merchants. The former were enormously wealthy and the salaries of important civil and military officers in the sultanate period were very high. The officials and nobles lived in big mansions, were attended by an array of servants and rolled in wealth and luxury. The middle class, which consisted of the professional men and important clerks and merchants, was also fairly well-to-do. But the masses who of course formed the bulk of the population were poor and did not have enough to satisfy their needs. The government demands on the people's productive capacity and labour were exorbitant and the tiller of the soil was left with about one third of his produce. Though there was general prosperity, some people lived in abject poverty and had to resort to begging in order to maintain themselves. 27

During that time, every individual could be considered selfish. One wanted to enjoy a luxurious life unmindful of the way it was achieved. Lamenting on the declining character of man, Guru Nanak sang a hymn as under:

One coveteth another's woman and riches and is afflicted with the evil of I-am-ness.
Give up the evil and slanderous nature, 28
O man, and low born lust and wrath.
Taking into consideration the above mentioned facts about individual's character, how could society as a whole be better? Guru Nanak described the contradictions in the society very clearly as:

The fools call themselves scholars and with devices and cavils, they love to amass wealth.  

Guru Nanak tells us that during this period all the persons were seized by greed. The pandit was unintelligent and unreasonable, a person with no sense of discrimination between good and bad. The evil situation was because of the fact that those who were supposed to lead the society were ignorant and had contradictions in their own lives. Such people could only mislead and put the society on the wrong path.

The Hindu priest class had been keeping a firm hold on the people through ceremonies and rituals and exploited them. The character of the Brahmin himself was questionable and the true spiritualism was lost under the mask of meaningless expressions. Brahmans preached that man should control greed, anger, lust, attachment and I-am-ness, but he himself was a victim of these vices.

Guru Nanak wanted the people to discard the traditional orthodox ceremonies which were expensive.
and meaningless. He was against exploitation of others and emphatically warned his followers against ill-gotten wealth (black money). He said:

What belongs to others (land, property, business, house etc.)
is like beef for a Hindu and swine for Mohammedan.
The Guru will acknowledge those (as disciple) who don’t subsist on ill-gotten wealth.

He emphasized production through hard and honest work. He did not put any limit to the earning of wealth. But he was concerned with the means of earning it.

Guru Nanak was against feudalism. Rai Bular, a land-lord of his village, offered three wells for the maintenance of a common kitchen, but Guru Nanak rejected the offer, by saying that only the small devotees’ earnings would suffice to maintain the system. Similarly, whenever any rich man or feudal lord invited the Guru, he declined the invitation giving the same reason.

Guru Nanak and other saints like Farid were shocked at the prevailing economic inequalities which were leading to general degradation of society. They had great concern for the poor and expressed themselves
against the prevailing economic differences. To quote Farid:

There are some who are holding
the flour for future
While there are many who don't possess
even a pinch of salt
Justice may be done in future
and the guilty may be punished.\textsuperscript{31}

The prevailing inequalities are also clearly evident from the incident which is described below. Guru Nanak was passing through Lahore and was deeply distressed to see the narrow and dirty streets and a large number of animals slaughtered for meat for the rich inhabitants. The unrelieved poverty of the working classes and the ostentatious luxury of the rich pained him so much that he exclaimed in agony:

"The city of Lahore seethes with poisonous oppression".\textsuperscript{31A}

The wide chasm between the rich and the poor has been described by Guru Nanak as under:

One is a beggar, who lives on charity
and one a king who remains
absorbed in himself.\textsuperscript{32}

\* * * * *

Some are beggars born and
some hold huge courts.\textsuperscript{33}
None of the kings and nobles, nor any of the poor, the rich and beggars is to stay here. When comes one's turn, then no one remains stable here.\textsuperscript{34}

Once, near Delhi, the Guru saw a palatial mansion. It was like a fort being guarded by watchmen on all sides. Inside the huge building, a trader lived a life of extreme luxury. When the rich man heard about the arrival of Guru Nanak, he sought the Guru's presence and blessings in his house. Guru Nanak declined the invitation, saying that his wealth was not earned honestly and that it smelled of the exploitation of the poor.

Guru Nanak dreamt of an ideal state, where there is no exploitation, and livelihood is earned through honest means. Marshall was also of the same opinion:

And in the world in which all men were perfectly virtuous, competition would be out of place; but so also would be private property and every form of private right, men would think only of their duties and no one would desire to have a large share of comforts and luxuries of life than his neighbours\textsuperscript{35}.

The preachings of Guru Nanak are modern though there was no Marx or Sismondi or Gandhiji during his time. He preached the principle of collective
ownership of land and trusteeship in the field of industry and commerce. At several places, he advised the banker, the trader and the producer that they should not claim inalienable right to property.

Guru Nanak saw that the contemporary economic system of the world is not just. While a few live in luxury, millions are denied the primary needs of human life. He worked for a society in which there should be no economic inequality and economic exploitation. He was against human parasites.

He wanted to put an end to exploitation of all sorts in all the spheres of life and advocated the cause of the oppressed sections of society. He declared that honest earning was the sacred milk while huge wealth earned by employing dubious and unholy means was like dirty blood. He explained,

If a cloth is stained with blood.
We call it dirty.
How can then the mind of those
who suck others blood be called chaste.36

Guru Nanak was not against the rich enjoying a full materialistic life, provided they also looked after the poor. He expected love, affection, care and better working conditions from the rich for the poor labourer by saying:

Where the lowly are treated with loving care,
there do Thy Mercy and Thy Grace descend.

Blessed is the God-conscious being
and riches he hath.
Yea, they who expand their riches
in God’s way are blessed in the giving.
And they who dwell on the Lord’s name
are never in want. 37

The last two lines of the verse throw caution to
the rich. It is a warning that their riches and
luxuries, their ruling over the others can all be
tolerated provided they are balanced by a concern for
the ‘have-nots’.

In the words of Marshall, "So long as wealth is
applied to provide for every family the necessities of
life and culture and an abundance of higher form of
enjoyment for collective use, so long as pursuit of
wealth is a noble aim; pleasures which it brings are
likely to increase with growth of the higher activities
which it is used to promote". 38

Guru Nanak was firm on the principle of earning
one’s bread by the sweat of one’s brow and to part with
one’s earnings for the needy fellows. It is evident
from Guru’s Bani that he had a constructive and
sympathetic attitude towards workers. Guru said:

He alone, O Nanak, knoweth the way
Who earneth with the sweat of his brow,
and then shareth it with others.39

Its crux lies in 'Kirat Karo - Nam Japo - Vand Chhako'.

This advice indicates Guru's abiding faith in physical labour. One who earns one's livelihood by hard physical work knows the right way.

Guru Nanak advocated voluntary sharing of one's earnings with the less fortunate brethren. It was his considered opinion that moral life can only subsist on a healthy, physical and material foundation. He was in the forefront in paying attention to the physical and material side of life and in removing the deep-rooted misunderstanding that spiritual life consists in blindly negating and suppressing physical and material desires. Contrary to this contention, Guru characterised the legitimate economic activities of the individual and his efforts to earn his livelihood for his dependents as the highest form of religious virtue, and advocated a system of economic and social principles for regulating and enjoying the worldly existence.

Guru Nanak's principle, 'Kichh Hathon Dei' does not limit the amount of voluntary contribution or donation only to the one-tenth of one's income, but it requires the whole of surplus income to be donated for charitable purposes. Every earning hand is enjoined upon to consume his produces or income only up to the
'sufficiency limit' i.e. sufficient for satisfaction of his essential needs and he must spare a considerable amount of his earnings/income. The income spared by him is his surplus income. This surplus income is not to be accumulated as it spoils one's mind and that is why it may be termed as the 'spoiling limit' of income.

Moreover, wealth does not accompany anyone; rather it belongs to none. To quote Guru Nanak:

O father, wealth goes not with the man.\(^{40}\)

And:

The man amasses and hoards riches and gives to none.
The fool thinks that all is his own.
Golden Ceylon and gold palaces remained not with Ravana.
The riches belong to none.\(^{41}\)

This surplus or 'spoiling limit' of income is to be donated by everyone with the sense of service to humankind. It is to be contributed to the State Exchequer and Langar. Every donor is to feel contented by bearing it in mind that whatever he has given, belongs to God. Guru Nanak says:

In the mind of generous,
Contentment is produced.
They always think of giving.\(^{42}\)
Guru Nanak said that individuals should treat their property as a gift from God and themselves as its custodians. He pleaded for collective ownership of the means of production.

"To make use for all things in this world and not to deem them one's own but only God's property".43

In the field of agriculture, which he regarded as the best occupation, advocated collective cultivation and community living with a common kitchen. The guru advised his followers to construct a Dharamsala, a common property of the people where they could sit together and discuss philosophical and religious aspects of life and undertake other common projects.

Amassing wealth without working for it honestly is not permitted under the teachings of Guru Nanak. Moreover, chasing wealth results in misery to both the collector and the deprived. To quote him:

"On account of this wealth many were destroyed, Many were in miserable plight"44

To bring about an equitable distribution of resources is a problem evading solution and it has always remained so inspite of several efforts made in the past and even at the present. From total annihilation of the rich by the proletarian forces, to a peaceful method and the use of legal measures and
progressive taxation, all have failed to bring about a
desired distributional system.

Guru Nanak had his own way of tackling the problem
by positive and negative motivation. Guru Nanak said
that the right to private property enforced through the
law of inheritance is the cause of all the economic
inequalities. With each generation, the gap between the
have and have-nots was widening. Guru Nanak advised to
overcome this situation as under:

You my brother should consider yourself the
custodian of wealth and use your power so that the
have-nots may share the reward of your labours. He who
earns and gives know the way. Human use gives value to
gold, so make your wealth of some use, for he who earns
it knows how to spend it usefully and those who receive
it easily know how to squander it.45

Guru Nanak was an effective organiser who
translated his ideas into actions. He was the first to
experiment with commune life, four centuries before the
Russian Revolution. He settled in Kartarpur and set up
a commune. In this collective farm, Guru ploughed,
reaped and worked together with his sangat. Whatever
was reaped was brought to the common kitchen where Guru
used to dine along with the sangat. In the evening
they used to discuss common problems and programmes for
the next day. They lived, worked and worshipped
together. It was used as a powerful institution for
the uplift of the downtrodden who had been groaning
under the yoke of socio-economic-cum-political inequalities and religious discriminations prevalent in the society at the time. The caste system led to divisions and as a result, social inequalities crept into the Indian society. The Brahmans, intoxicated with class arrogance, refused to intermix with lower classes and introduced the sacred lines of the 'chowka'. They exploited this agency for their personal ends and created dissensions, social discrimination, hatred and untouchability in the society.

At Kartarpur, Guru Nanak introduced the system of langar (common kitchen) and pangat, (persons-sitting together to eat formed the pangat) to give practical shape to his teachings. Here he himself dined with all castes and classes, high or low. In the langar all dined together sitting on the ground without any distinction of caste, creed, religion or social status. Everyone from a prince to a pauper was given the same treatment and was served the same food, prepared in the same kitchen and distributed in the same manner. A spirit of sacrifice, service and brotherhood was developed and the langar became a symbol of equality, fraternity and brotherhood. His ideal of equality found practical expression in the common meals (langar) as well as the corporate worship (sangat) of the community at Kartarpur.
Thus, Guru Nanak started the langar as a crusade against hunger, social injustice, oppression and tyranny of the caste system. The ‘Guru-ka-Langar’, thus, grew into an institution where lessons in social service and practical ethics were given and practised.

He characterised the legitimate economic activities of the individual and his effort to earn livelihood for his dependents as the highest form of religious virtue and gave to mankind a system of economic and social principles for the regulation of worldly existence.

Guru Nanak tried to inculcate the high ideals of love and service in the sikhs. To quote Guru Nanak:

One should serve mankind in this world
for a better life in the next.

* * * * *
The whole creation is the kingdom,
but none can achieve anything
without service.

Guru Nanak rejected the idea of denouncing the world and on the contrary pleaded for married domestic life from where one learns the values of sacrifice. Guru Nanak, himself a house-holder with wife and children, strengthened and preached the sikh philosophy of not renouncing the world.

He wanted man’s character to be ideal as only this could get the society rid of evils.
Guru once worked as a store-keeper with one of the Lodhi Governors. It was alleged that Guru Nanak had distributed everything and the store was empty. It was then explained that when the 13th point was reached in weighing or counting, he would go on saying “Tera” (which meant both ‘thirteen’ and ‘yours’) and gave away more. It does not mean that Guru Nanak was ignorant of the next number or forgetful. What he wanted to convey was that whatever belonged to the king, wealth or property, did not in fact belong to the crown but to the people at large. It is because people paid taxes to the king. In fact, he was educating the public that it was not a favour but their right.

The social world which Guru Nanak was seeking to create was one of complete understanding and equality between rich and poor, high and low, men and women – an outcome of the realistic and positive thinking, and free from rituals. Thus his keen mind, free from all ancestral prejudices, led Guru Nanak to open a new path for the Indian society and build a new social order.

The aim of Guru Nanak was to level the social and religious thoughts of the Hindus and to improve the general tone of their moral, spiritual and socio-economic life. He was very keen that his work should continue even after his death.

It was with this object in view that he appointed Lehna, one of his disciples whom he preferred to his
own sons as his successor. Lehna had shown, by his exemplary character, extra-ordinary piety and unflinching devotion, his fitness to occupy this position.

Guru Nanak transformed the lives of thousands of men and women who had come in personal contact with him. By his noble life and inspiring techniques he created a new atmosphere in the country in which everyone can be healthier and stronger in spirit.

In the words of Gokal Chand Narang, "Guru Nanak left the Hindus of the Punjab immensely better than he had found them. Their belief had been ennobled, their worship purified, the rigidity of caste considerably relaxed".

Economic justice is the fundamental principle on which the economic order in the state of Guru Nanak's vision rests. According to Guru Nanak, the moral dictates of religion are indispensable for the maintenance of this economic order. He suggests that it is by arousing the sense of truth, contentment and voluntary sharing of one's surplus income with others that the economic equilibrium is maintained in the society and the ideal of an exploitation-free society can be realised.
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