CHAPTER VII

GURU'S ECONOMIC THOUGHT
- ITS IMPACT AND RELEVANCE IN TODAY'S LIFE

An attempt has already been made to study Guru's thoughts on different aspects of economy viz. production, exchange, consumption, distribution and public finance. It is imperative to find out to which school of thought he belonged to, i.e. Feudalism, socialism, capitalism or democratic socialism. Section I presents the school of thought to which Guru Nanak belonged to. Section II discusses the impact of Guru's thought on modern life and Section III presents its relevance.

I. SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Business system is essentially an organised economic activity. Economics and business management are inter-twined. Both deal with business and the way business operates in the economic scene. It is true that economics is the study of the whole economic system and the way it operates in satisfying the wants of society. It is also true that business management is the study of the operation of a business concern most effectively. But it is also important in business management to know the working of the economy, because the economic system prevailing in any area has a big impact on any business. It is, therefore, desirable to briefly study the economic systems prevailing during
Feudalism is a stage in the evolution of socio-economic system, which lies in between slavery and capitalism. The word 'feudalism' is derived from the Latin word, 'Feudum', which means a piece of land which is granted in return for services. It means an organisation of society, where all are bound together from top to bottom with the grant of land by the Master and rendering of services by the vassal. It was an arrangement between feudal aristocrats - a lord and his vassals. The peasants had no part in such an arrangement.

Capitalism is an economic system controlled chiefly by individuals and private companies. The Government follows laissez-faire policy i.e. no interference by the government in the economic system of a country. In this system, individuals and companies own and direct most of the resources used to produce goods and services. It stresses private economic choice. Under capitalism, consumer is sovereign. The free enterprise means hard and intense competition.

Socialism is an economic system based on public ownership of means of production. In this form of organisation all the resources are owned by the state and economic activity is also organised by the State. Karl Marx believed that the whole history is replete with a series of struggles between the ruling and
working classes. He felt that capitalism would be replaced by socialism. He predicted that ruling class would be overthrown. The victorious working class would then set up a society based on common ownership of means of production, not on profit motive.

Today's socialism is known as democratic socialism. It is characterised by public ownership of at least the strategically important means of production, but also by free choice of consumption and of occupation.

During those days under study the economic system prevalent was Feudalism. As a true mirror of medieval India, we find that Guru Nanak's hymns are surcharged with rare pathos that describe the lurid condition of India at the time of Babar's invasion. He saw the depth to which India had sunk and he would invoke no one else but the Supreme One Himself to set right the supreme equilibrium.

Guru Nanak said that the rulers were indulging in luxury; they had untold wealth which was a curtain between them and the Supreme One. This is why miseries followed.

The hymns of Guru Nanak show that this seer, who was born in medieval India, was certainly not like the seers of the Vedic times who considered this world an illusion and life an empty mirage. Guru Nanak was first and foremost a realist and this work-a-day world
was to him as important as the ideal world of which this is an image. It is, therefore, that unlike other saints, contemporary or ancient, the Guru indulged at great length on the political condition of India. This was necessary, as Guru Nanak returned not only to condemn the existing order but to cure it of its malady.

The whole of sikh history is thus a carefully laid and carefully executed design of Guru Nanak in which the day-to-day conditions of India received effective treatment.

Here it must be mentioned that the Guru rightly stressed that the salvation of India lies not in devotion to illusory sciences, such as magic or astrology but in the cultivation of self confidence and knowledge which are the backbone of a nation. In other words what was wanted and was emphasized by Guru Nanak was scientific equipment side by side with self sacrifice.

Socialism is a doctrine of the working class. The Guru had a constructive and sympathetic attitude towards the workers. "Ghall Khai" and "Kirat Karo" are expressions that indicate Guru’s abiding faith in physical labour. One who earns his livelihood by hard physical work knows the right way.

The infrastructure of the Economy of Guru Nanak’s vision is founded on the productive work (manual or mental) of each and every individual. In it, every
individual - a man or a woman, a rich man or a pauper, a master or a servant, a ruler or the ruled - has been enjoined upon to earn his/her livelihood with the sweat of his/her brow. Everyone is supposed to make his/her due contribution to the production of the State. None is exempted from productive work. No body is permitted to depend upon the earnings of others for his livelihood or sustenance. Otherwise, he gives nothing to the society but takes everything from it, required to cater to his needs, and this practice leads to the operational imbalance or unevenness in the proportion of production and consumption in the economic order of the State. Therefore, the input of one's productive work is the essential pre-requisite of the output of one's sustenance or livelihood.

In this way, the word Ghaal which is generally called Kirat, is the anti-thesis of the unproductive, uncreative, useless or worthless practices and activities like renunciation of the active worldly life, habitual begging, stealing, bribe-taking, undue profiteering, black-marketing, adulteration etc. There is no place for idlers in Guru Nanak's economic order of the State. The idlers become parasites on the output of the State. They consume the produce of the State without contributing to its production. They in stead of giving a fillip and impetus to the growth and development of the economy give a set-back to it, due
to their non-productivity accompanied by consumption of
the produces of others. That is why Guru Nanak's
concept of economy has no room for the practice of
renunciation of active worldly life and asceticism
which imply the life of passivity, and is based on the
life of a householder which implies the life of
activity engaged in productive work.

Guru had a clear idea regarding the ownership of
means of production. Though he did not absolutely
reject one's right to own property or business, he
certainly pleaded for collective ownership of means.
Whenever he stood by one's private right to property,
he exhorted the owner to treat it as a trust.

"The God's riches (land) belong to all.
It is worldly (people)
who create distinctions.
But for this we are ourselves to blame,
we know not how to manage God's riches".¹

The above mentioned ideas clearly indicate Guru's
preference for common ownership of land, rivers,
forests and other goods produced in nature by God.

The Guru was against the individual over
attachment to property and his claim of an inalienable
right to its possession. He knew that ultimately land
and property belonged to society. He made this point
clear in the following words:

"The tentacles of attachment enmesh all creation."
Salvation is attained by freeing the self from attachment. Listen: Father and mother, son, daughter and wife, daughters in law and other children are chains that bind mankind. The cultivator who produces and contributes to the revenue of the State, the trader who works for profit and the banker who hoards money are all bound by attachment. All actions, all duty performed in the interest of self, become the cause of bondage.

Guru Nanak tried, in his own way, to establish a classless society. In those medieval days, economic classes and castes were interwoven and one represented the other. In the old orthodox Hindu society people were classed into four groups or varnas: Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisshyas and Shudras. The people belonging to Shudra varnas were at the lowest rung of society. This class could be termed as have-not’s, deprived of property rights and positions of privilege. They were not only exploited to the maximum by the other three classes but also kept at a distance. By and large they were treated as untouchables and the orthodox Hindus avoided even their shadows.

"Now atleast we are setting ourselves seriously to enquire whether it is necessary that there should be any so called lower class at all, that is whether there need be large number of people doomed from their birth to hard work in order to provide for others their
requisites of refined and cultured life; while they themselves are prevented by their poverty and toil from having any share or part in that life”.3

Analysing this sordid state of affairs, Guru Nanak tried to save the society. He attacked the caste system and tried to establish a classless society, based on equality and justice.

Once in Ujjain on a day of Kartik Purnima when the festival of lamps was in progress, Guru Nanak, while addressing the audience, decried caste distinctions in the following words:

Kshatrya, Brahmin, Vaishya, Shudra,
Men belonging to a thousand
and one castes can light this lamp
and cross the ocean of death.4

All thinkers agree that the caste system was born out of the immediate need for division of labour, and work was distributed as to suit each one’s taste & ability. It is only in the medieval period that caste, by tradition, came to be associated with birth and not actions. Emphasizing that caste should be determined by man’s actions and not by his birth, Guru Nanak said:

Actions determine caste,
Man exalts or lowers himself
by his own actions.5
Guru Nanak made, no difference between man and man, either on the basis of caste or religion. To him, both Hindus and Muslims were like brothers.

The broad outlook of socialism can be traced back to Sikh scriptures. Sikhism, in fact, was an outcome of the oppression and exploitation of the people in the medieval period, and it represented the hopes and aspirations of the poor.

It is true that the Guru conveyed his spiritual message in business terms. He frequently used such terms as capital, profit, investment, and stock-in-trade. But at the same time, he decried the exploitation of the poor by the rich, the shopkeeper, the businessman and the trader. The Guru treated the business class as a parasite on society. The pertinent question is why Guru Nanak encouraged trade and industry? It was because he wanted true followers of these occupations to earn profits for the common cause of society rather than for selfish motives. In a socialist economy the role of trade and industry is to serve the society and not to indulge in unfair trade practices to serve self interests.

Guru Nanak wanted to create a class of Gurmukh in order to bring about a new social order. Drawing the distinction in a philosophical manner, the Guru called them Gurmukhs who have preference to the standard of life, those who surrender themselves to the dictates of God through the Guru and the dictates are to live or
die for others. Such people may have a simple standard of living but their thinking is very high. Guru Nanak wanted to create a band of such workers who could devote their resources (time, energy and money) to the upliftment of the sufferings of the low caste and the poor. The Gurmukhs would cooperate according to the philosophy of the Guru, in building a society where human beings have the maximum welfare.

A good man does not wrap himself in indifference. He returns good for evil, his heart is empty of hate and envy. He suffers when others suffer. He is happy when others are happy, while a man who is not good hates others, is indifferent to the sufferings of others and cannot bear to see anyone prosper.

Thus, Guru Nanak envisages a type of economy based on viable economic values coupled with ethical values. It upholds productive work as involving dignity and disallows all sorts of unproductive activities like begging and stealing etc. under all circumstances. It indicates that even poverty should be overcome through reliance on God, the Supreme Provider, and productive work. There is no place for unearned or ill-earned money in it. Such an economic approach infuses the entrepreneur with dynamism, that is why the Sikhs have proved themselves very good entrepreneurs. The principle of "Kichh Hathhon Dei" allows one to make only a judicious use of one's earnings. It also averts
concentration of wealth in a few hands which is root cause of all economic problems.

The socialist economy strives for fair distribution of wealth among the masses, Guru Nanak strongly criticised the economic inequalities prevalent during those days and tried in his own way to bridge the gap between rich & poor. He gave priority to the principle "wand ke chhako" i.e. sharing with others. He also advocated the concept of langar in order to equalise and socialise individuals.

According to Guru Nanak, one should submerge one's individuality in the wider personality of society. Evils like greed, lust, I-am-ness, anger and attachment are to be weeded out. Thus, only through perfect and sacrificing individuals, social order can be achieved.

Guru Nanak criticised the system of feudalism. He advocated the economic system based on ethical values which would provide for progressively higher standard of living for all, economic freedom and security for individual, production of such goods and services which consumers want and equitable distribution of income and wealth. Thus, Guru Nanak was in favour of the principles of commune life.

II. IMPACT OF GURU'S THOUGHT ON MODERN LIFE

Guru Nanak sowed the seed of spiritual democracy. The process of its germination and growth is still in progress and will continue to flourish, for his message
Now the question arises: is there any relationship between the dominance of a religion and economic development? Or, in other words, has Sikhism influenced the economic development of Punjab? The answer is 'yes', though religion is not the only factor responsible for the economic development of Punjab.

A common feeling is that religion and economic development are two things apart, and if there is any relationship, it may be negative. But this is not really so with Sikhism. A religion which does not take into account the social and economic problems of human beings and encourages persons to shut their eyes to the hard realities of life shall definitely lose its hold on the masses and meet with failure. Man is considered to be social by nature and he is mainly concerned with worldly life which largely consists of social and economic problems and their solutions. In the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, those persons have been treated as "less than human who remain isolated from society, since they neither prove useful to society, nor do they benefit from social experience of others."  

Hence it becomes imperative on the part of religion to take into account the worldly problems of mankind and to find out their solution. "If religion is for man, it has to embrace the whole man and cannot ignore his material needs. Religion has its
obligations not upon the clouds but in the midst of everyday life. A truly religious man has to live in the midst of the common people ministering to their needs and facing their problems."

"Sikh thought takes a keen interest in life, which vitally affects the spiritual and moral life of man. Man has much to do with his present life and the problems in hand, and he cannot be easily persuaded to bargain his worldly life for the anticipated life in heaven".

Sikhism accepts the present life to be the reality and advocates to work for upliftment of man's lot. It endeavours to make the world worthy to live in. It has an earthly touch. It believes in this world rather than the world beyond. Such a religion will hold the producers, the householders and the traders in high esteem and strive to bring God's (just) kingdom on earth. "Guru Nanak's genius lay in the fact that he tore himself away from this atmosphere of negation and declared himself positively in favour of worldly life of acceptance of the duties and obligations of the human individual to the temporal and the material, and, at the same time, of equal acceptance of the duties and obligations of religious discipline and spiritual quest for the ultimate. After long centuries, he gave back to the people of India the idea and ideal of Balance Life".
Thus religion is a sphere of knowledge, which influences the human mind and it is through the human mind that it shows its impact on people's beliefs, customs and practices. It is not physical but it is the human resources of the society, which determine the course of its economic development. People have languished in utter poverty in the midst of great natural resources, while there have been those who have lived in a life of luxury, even in an unfriendly environment. It appears that the Sikh religion influenced the economic Institutions, religious practices, the pattern of life and other working habits in the field of agriculture and industry, as a result of which, Punjab came to achieve the present high level of economic advancement.

Marshall observed that the races in which these qualities (sympathy, affection, self-sacrifice, religious ideals) are most highly developed are sure, other things being equal, to be stronger than others in war and in contests with famine and disease and ultimately to prevail. Thus the struggle for existence causes in the long run these races of men to survive in which the individual is most willing to sacrifice himself for the benefit of those around him.11

The Sikhs make very good example to fit the explanation given above. Such was the strong impact of Sikhism on the life of the people at the time, and it continues even today in one way or the other.
Punjabis have developed strong working habits. They can work continuously for hours together and the result is that what they produce is much more than their counterparts in other parts of the country. The mobility of Punjabis and their business-like behaviour have made them successful traders both inside and outside the country. Whether it is transport, banking or power sector, it is the Punjabis that control them in most of the states in the country.

Sikhism sanctifies labour. The comparative prosperity in Punjab is due to the healthy influence of Sikhism which preached work as worship. Compared with the east provinces of India, Punjab suffers from many handicaps. It is quite deficient in mineral resources like coal and iron which are very essential for the growth of industry. It is far detached from the sea, the nearness of which helps in the expansion of trade. The monsoons almost get drained to their last drop when they reach Punjab. All these natural and climatic factors had been quite adverse to the progress of agriculture and the development of industry in Punjab. But the love for work instilled into the people of Punjab by the philosophy of Sikhism, has raised this once trampled and trodden province into the most prosperous and virile state of India.

Natural calamities and political upheavals have failed to demoralize the people of Punjab. Not the
slightest scar of the holocaust of the partition is visible anywhere though more than four million people got uprooted in 1947 and the best hands were left in Pakistan. Yet in a brief period of four decades or so Punjab has again become the granary of India. Not a single dislocated person took to begging. Every town is booming with industry. There is no field of national activity in which Punjab is not leading.

The green revolution affected Punjab more than any other state and all Indians benefitted from Punjabis prosperity. It is rightly termed as the 'grain bowl' of India. It has the highest contribution of wheat (61%) and rice (43%) towards the Central pool. This is enormous contribution despite covering only 1.5% of the country's geographical area. It is a matter of satisfaction that Punjab produces 2% of wheat, 1% of rice and 2% of cotton of the whole world.

Punjab leads India in many spheres. With only 1.5% of total geographical area of the country, it produces 23% of wheat, 9% of rice and 24% of cotton. Punjab has the highest per capita income of Rs. 6227. It has the highest per hectare yield of wheat (3668 kg.) and the highest per hectare yield of rice (2772 kg.). Punjab also has the highest growth rate and the highest per capita consumption of power.

There is no denying that the ideas of the Sikh Gurus have influenced the life of the people to a great extent.
III. RELEVANCE OF GURU'S THOUGHTS IN TODAY'S LIFE

The history of Punjab is as old as the history of India. And from time immemorial, Punjab has been the most prosperous and coveted region. The excavations of Harappa and Mohenjodaro reveal the avant-garde civilisation which flourished here hundreds of years ago. Even then, as now, it was the grainbowl of India. It was also the epicentre of all culture and commerce. History is a witness to the fact that whoever conquered Punjab, managed to overpower India. It is Punjab which has always borne the brunt of foreign invasions. This mystifying mixture of prosperity and culture on the one hand and war and blood bath on the other, has made Punjabis one of the most hardy and enterprising races of the world.

The present day Punjabi is also an amalgamation of all these qualities. That is precisely why he manages to reap a record breaking harvest year after year.

The message of all-embracing brotherhood and equality by Guru Nanak was not limited to thought alone. The Sikh Guru translated these principles into action and there was no gulf left between practice and precept. The pages of Sikh history are replete with such examples.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was an apostle of love, equality and brotherhood. He was born when the times were out of joint. Social injustice and
caste prejudices were the order of the day. The corrupt rulers were drunk with power and there existed a yawning gulf between them and their subjects. In such a world, Guru Nanak preached the gospel of universal love and brotherhood to create a casteless society.

The Langar or the community kitchen was started by Guru Nanak and was continued by the successive Gurus. It was used as a powerful institution for the upliftment of the down-trodden who had been groaning under the yoke of socio-economic-cum-political inequalities and religious discriminations prevalent in the society at that time.

Community kitchen formed a part of the monastic order of the Buddhists and the Jains. Islam with its pronounced emphasis on social equality, laid stress on inter-dining. The reformers of the Bhagti movement also championed the cause of social inter-communion. But these earlier efforts were not institutionalised attempt at breaking the barriers that divided the people.

Guru Nanak understood that the real cause of the misery of the people was their disunity born out of social prejudice and social barriers. He started the langar as a crusade against social injustice, oppression and tyranny of the caste system.

Sikhism has its distinct contribution to the transformation of the Indian society. Sikhism released
the soul of the people from slavery of superstitions. Once the human mind becomes free, it endeavours to break all shackles of social domination, political discrimination and economic exploitation. The new order in fact marked the growth of nationalism in India. For the time people forgot their castes, felt a sense of oneness, realised their obligations towards the society, repelled the aggression and forged themselves into a highly disciplined society. Upto then, whosoever had invaded India from North-West easily trampled over this land, ransacked her religious places, dishonoured her women and humiliated her people. But after the birth of Khalsa, the tide turned its course. Not only foreign aggression was repelled but Indian forces reestablished their supremacy upto Peshawar. Sikh soldiers became a proverb for bravery and self-restraint. People in Punjab enjoyed themselves religious equality, political stability and economic security under their own rule for the first time after centuries of foreign domination.

To the Sikhs religion is not a form of worship but a way of life, a vehicle for the transformation of society to its new role. Religion is a passion in which each sikh must imbibe the spirit of service and unity. It is not something separate from other aspects of human life.

According to Guru Nanak, Sikhism means to keep the
individual must respond to the contemporary reality even when it is in its most cruel form and also respond to his inner self. It is his duty to liberate himself and his fellow beings simultaneously.\textsuperscript{13}

'Their minds greatly emancipated and they were now more fit to enter on the career of national progress to which Guru Nanak's successors were destined to lead them. The seed had been sown. It had fallen on good soil, and with careful nursing it was bound to yield a plentiful crop when the time became ripe for it.'\textsuperscript{14}

The socio-economic environment has not changed much over the time. It has rather deteriorated. Thus, the need to apply ethical principles in economic sphere of life is all the more pressing. The temptations of lust for power are strongest in this sphere.

Guru Nanak was more in favour of a system which ensures social, economic and spiritual upliftment of mankind. He did not allow the division of society on the basis of religion, caste, sex, colour or area, rather he divided the entire humanity on the basis of quality of men i.e. Gurmukh and Manmukh. He emphasised that Sikh must be pure at heart and sweet at tongue, but at the same time, dignity or honour must be restored even at the cost of losing one's life. But individuals of today are like 'Manmukhs'. The five ills (lust, anger, greed, attachment and I-am-ness) defied by the Guru, have taken a strong hold of present
consumption and distribution aspects, when exclusive emphasis is laid on sharing the fruits of labour, while not denying the enjoyment of the produce to oneself. The third part of the formula covers the non-economic aspects of one’s life.

The production function as envisaged by Guru Nanak places more emphasis on physical output. Marx also observed that only manual work produces surplus values in the form of tangible goods, which fight inflation. Same observations have been made by Christ and Gandhi. Guru Nanak’s production function ensures surplus production, economic security, economic justice and harmonious society.

In the field of exchange, Guru Nanak instructed the traders to adopt fair trade practices, to measure and weigh properly, not to hoard, ensure the supply of goods at reasonable prices. He also exhorted the bankers and moneylenders not to be oppressive.

Guru Nanak laid more emphasis on fair distribution of wealth. The wide disparities between rich and poor is because of low moral values and indifferent attitude of the State. The solution to such inequalities, which Nanak suggested then, are useful even today. The Guru put a condition to our level of consumption and this condition was ‘priority distribution’. Besides Guru Nanak exhorted the rich not to think that the wealth they possessed was their own but that they should think
that it belonged to all.

Regarding taxation Guru Nanak lamented that even the State was working as an institution to exploit its subjects. Even now situation is no better. Direct and indirect taxes have burdened the common man. As a consequence, the working class is losing its purchasing power and is being reduced to a subhuman existence. To meet such a situation Guru Nanak wanted the ruler to be a true ruler to take care of the interest of the poor.

Material comfort unaccompanied by ethical values may prove unworthy of a man. Guru Nanak emphasised economic security for each individual and family coupled with a balance between material comfort and spiritual growth. Some of his verses in Sri-Raga are notable for their picturesque presentation of the attractions of life that tend to impede one's progress towards spiritual fulfilment.

Were my palace build of rubies,  
were it jewel-inlaid;  
were it full of pleasing flavours,  
were it fragrance made;  
Let me not be lost in these  
lest I forget thy Name.17

Guru Nanak never wanted human beings to die of starvation. Rather he struck a balance between a luxurious and a sub-human life. He warned against multiplicity of wants and their further aggravation.
because they are the source of sufferings.

To quote him:

By eating man increases his filth
and by wearing he disgraces his family.

By prating and prattling,
he sets on foot strifes.

Know, thou, O man, that without the Name,
everything is but poison.18

The controversy, whether economic satisfaction or
spiritual elevation of man is of primary importance,
can hardly be resolved by siding with either to the
extreme. A solution seems to be in between that is, in
combining the two in a way most conducive to the
enrichment of human experience. Guru Nanak’s accent on
the cultivation of personality, through control of the
impulsive part and through conscious development of the
social part of man’s nature, underlines the need of a
balanced outlook on the material and ideal aspects of
life.

Guru undertook to reform and remodel the social
and communal relations of the late fifteenth century
India, yet the relevance of his message of balance and
equi-poise can’t be under-rated even in the present
age.

It is the way of life that the Guru wanted people
to cultivate assiduously. The ‘way’, according to him,
comprises a human and earthly life, yet detached from
the world just as the 'lotus flower floats in the pool', without getting wet or drowned; a life of discipline and control of passions, for 'lust and wrath waste the body, as borax melts the gold'; a contemplative life that rests not on reading cart load of books, which is simply the 'fret and fever of the egoistic minds', but on understanding the secret of freedom from bondage.

Guru Nanak preached collectivism in the field of agriculture and the trusteeship principle in the field of commerce and industry. At several places he preached to the banker, the trader and the producer that they should not claim in-alienable right to property. He said they should treat their property and a gift of God (society) and themselves as its custodians or managers. Believing agriculture to be the best of occupations, Guru Nanak advocated collective cultivation and community living, with a common kitchen. His preachings are very common, though during his time there was no Marx, no Sismondi and no Gandhi. He not only preached collective life but also practised it himself, to set a living example.

In addition to these major ideas, Guru Nanak made his observations on usury, factors of production, land, labour, capital and the duties of the State. They are certainly relevant in the present social context.
REFERENCES

1. Adi Granth., p. 171.


5. Ibid., p. 180.


7. C.E.M. Joad, Philosophy For Our Times, pp. 308-9.


