

Chapter 2

Guru Nanak: A New Faith and a New Panth

1. Introduction
2. Denunciation of Contemporary Politics and Administration
3. Criticism of Contemporary Social Order
4. Response to Contemporary Religions
5. Guru Nanak's Religion
6. The Sikh Panth

1. Introduction

1.1 A study of the compositions (writings) of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) shows clearly his familiarity with contemporary politics, society and religion. He looked at the contemporary situation from the standpoint of a new ideology based on his own experience and understanding. A large number of people began to follow the path he advocated. A new *panth* came into existence.

2. Denunciation of Contemporary Politics and Administration

2.1 Guru Nanak was familiar with the politico-administrative arrangements made by the Afghan rulers, particularly in Punjab. This familiarity points to the importance he attached to the political situation. There is direct denunciation of contemporary rule. Guru Nanak says that the rulers were unjust; they collected *jizya* and pilgrimage tax from their Hindu subjects. The ruling class oppressed the cultivators of land and the common people. The rulers did justice when their palm was greased but not in the name of God. Guru Nanak compares the rulers with lions who prey upon their subjects and the *muqaddams*, like dogs, lick their blood.

2.2 Guru Nanak asked people to turn to God, the true king, the king of kings. His service alone was true service. He who finds a place with the true king does not have to look towards an earthly ruler. In a moment He can degrade the high and the mighty and raise the low to rulership. He protects the righteous against the wicked; He casts down the wicked and exalts the righteous.

3. Criticism of Contemporary Social order

3.1 The compositions of Guru Nanak reveal his familiarity with the socio-economic life of his times. It was his conviction that the entire universe was filled with the divine light. God alone is the giver of life upon all living beings. Caste distinctions and social differentiation did not harmonize with this conviction. God has no 'caste'; He gives no consideration to caste. None should be regarded high (*uttam*) on the basis of his birth or caste; and none should be regarded low (*nich*). Guru Nanak identifies himself with the lower castes and the untouchables. He says, 'I am with the lowest of the low castes, even lower than the lowest; I have nothing to do with the high'.

3.2 The pride of the Brahman and the Khatri was totally misplaced. Many of them had entered the service of the rulers. They learnt their language, that is Persian, read their books and adopted their dress. Many Khatri had also adopted their manners. They had become a part of the harsh administrative system.

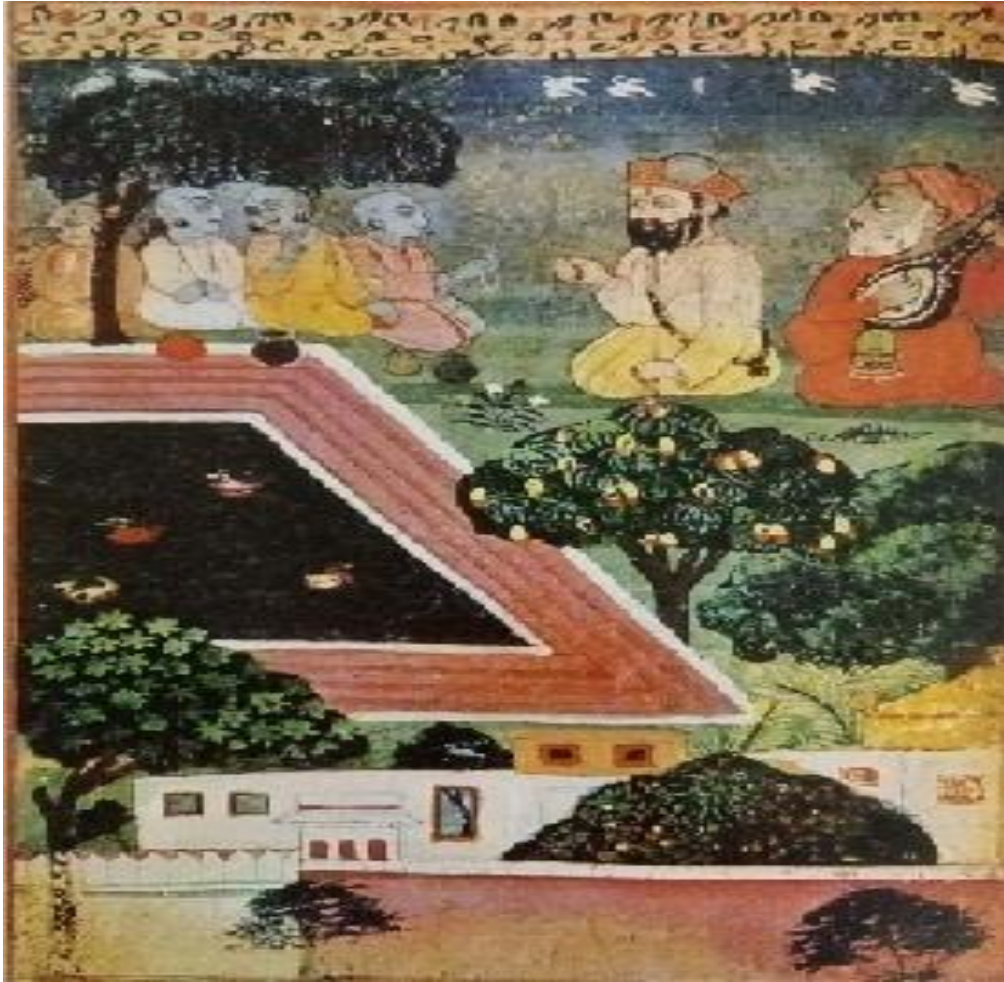
3.3 The social reality did not conform to the *varna* order. The actual role of the 'high castes' did not conform to the role prescribed for them. A true Brahman should attain to liberation through his conduct. A true Khatri should be a hero in martial action. These were no longer the roles of the Brahmans and Khatri.

Actually, those who followed the true path should be called true Brahmans and those who fought bravely in action the true Khattris. Degeneration was not peculiar to the Brahmans and the Khattris. Guru Nanak invited people to come out of the shells of their castes as individuals to tread the path of truth; he encouraged the lowest of the low to feel confident of spiritual regeneration. One should do good deeds and think of oneself as low; think of everyone else as high, because 'there is none who is low (*nich*)'.

3.4 The idea of equality and opportunity for spiritual progress are the two sides of the same socio-religious coin. For spiritual progress Guru Nanak placed the Brahman and the Khatri at par with the so-called Shudra and the untouchable. Similarly, the woman is placed at par with man. For Guru Nanak, the differences of caste and gender, like the differences of country and creed, were irrelevant for liberation.

4. Response to Contemporary Religions

4.1 Guru Nanak was interested in all the major forms of contemporary religious belief and practice, whether 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'. He knows what the *'ulama* and the *shaikh* stand for; he knows what the *pandit* and the *jogi* represent; he is also familiar with the Jain monks and the practices of those who worship Krishna and Rama. It is important that in his compositions Guru Nanak does not identify himself with any of the contemporary religious systems.



Guru Nanak and Mardana with *Siddhas* at Achal Batala
From B-40 *Janamsakhi* (1733 CE)

4.2 The Jain monks are described graphically. They were renunciates. They did not hurt any living being. Guru Nanak also says that the Jain monks did not observe the Brahmanical rites.

4.3 In Guru Nanak's conception of God none of the Hindu deities could be equated with the Supreme Being. God created Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh; Shiva-Shakti is God's creation too. Everything was the creation of God. The human incarnations of deities could add nothing to God's greatness. Only a

handful of people knew Sanskrit which was the language of the *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Smritis*, and *Shastras*. Therefore, people gained nothing by listening to them.

Guru Nanak (1469-1539)

Guru Nanak was born in 1469 at Talwandi Rai Bhoa (Bhoe) (the present Nankana Sahib in Pakistan). He was sensitive and inquisitive. He got married at Batala. Then he moved to Sultanpur where he worked in the Modikhana of Daulat Khan Lodi. A spiritual experience turned him into an advocate of new ideology. Around 1500, he began his *udasis* (travels), visiting important religious centres and debating religious issues with the representatives of various religious systems. After 1520 he returned from his travels and founded Kartarpur (opposite present Dera Baba Nanak) as the centre of Sikh Panth. The Guru and his Sikhs had their own distinct ideas and practices. In 1539 Guru Nanak installed as the Guru the most devoted of his Sikhs, Bhai Lehna (Guru Angad); in his own place. On this extraordinary decision of Guru Nanak the Sikh became the Guru and the Guru became a Sikh. This became the basis of the idea of unity of Guruship in Sikhism.

4.4 Guru Nanak rejected traditional modes of worship and religious practices without spiritual involvement. In the same way, according to him, there was no gain in pilgrimage to sacred places. On this basis he saw no merit in idol worship, ritual reading of scriptures, the performance of *hom*, and ritual charities.

4.5 The *pandit* or the priest, who was the guardian of such beliefs and religious practices, came in for criticism. He does not believe that the 'God is within him'. Therefore, there is no gain from the religious ceremonies performed by him. Rather, his own gain is connected with these. Guru Nanak emphasizes

that without the true belief the sacred thread, the sacred mark on his forehead, the spotless *dhoti* and the rosary in hand are useless.

4.6 Guru Nanak gives as much attention to the *jogi* as to the *pandit*. He was equally familiar with the beliefs and practices of the Jogis. Guru Nanak has no appreciation for their aspiration to gain supernatural powers. He does not accept the idea that one can attain to liberation by hard mental and physical exercises. Nor does he appreciate the *jogi's* idea of renunciation for liberation. Guru Nanak tells him that constant devotion to God is real *sahaj-samadhi*; absorption in the *Shabad* of the Guru is real meditation; the Name is the great nectar. Thus, an alternative way is suggested to the *jogi* by Guru Nanak.



Guru Nanak with Gorakhnathi Jogis
An Early 19th Century Drawing by a Pahari Artist
Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh

4.7 The few references to the *avatars* in the compositions of Guru Nanak indicate only his disapproval of the beliefs and practices of their worshippers. Guru Nanak does not believe in incarnation. There was no gain in the performance of dance for worship. For Guru Nanak the whole universe is moving in praise of the Creator.

4.8 While addressing the Muslims, Guru Nanak shows his preference for the path of the Sufis over that of the '*ulama*' (scholars of Islam). The '*ulama*' praise the *shari'at* (Islamic Law) which they study, but God's true servants become His slaves to see His Face. They who wish to become true Musalmans should first adopt the path of the Sufi Walis. They who wish to become true Musalmans should accept God's order most willingly, believe in God as the true Creator and subdue their self. Only then might they receive His grace.

4.9 This relative appreciation of the path of the Sufis does not mean, however, that Guru Nanak gave his complete approval to their ways. A true *darvesh* abandons everything, including his 'self', to meet the Creator, placing his complete trust in Him. But many Sufi *shaikhs* subsisted on revenue-free land granted by the rulers. Presuming to be sure of his own place of honour with God, the *shaikh* gave assurance to others as well, and distributed 'caps' among them to authorize them to guide still others. Considering their earthly pursuits, Guru Nanak reminds the *shaikhs* of their own belief that God alone is everlasting. The earth and the heaven shall perish; only God, the only One, remains for ever.



Guru Nanak and Shaikh Ibrahim at Pakpatan
A Janamsakhi Drawing by a Guler Artist (last quarter of the 18th Century)
Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh

5. Guru Nanak's Religion

5.1 To understand Guru Nanak's religion, it is important to know that he regards himself as God's herald (*tabal-baz*) to proclaim His Truth. He also uses the word *dhadi* (minstrel) for himself. He says that he was a *dhadi* 'without an occupation'. God ordered him to sing his praises, gave him the gift of the Name (Naam) which is the means of liberation. Now the *dhadhi's* job is to openly proclaim the glory of the Word (*shabad*). In other words, Guru Nanak says that he was assigned by God the task of propagating the religion of Truth, the Name and the Word.

5.2 Guru Nanak emphasizes that God is Formless. He has no material sign. He is beyond the reach of human intellect. He is boundless, beyond time,

beyond seeing, infinite, eternally constant, and beyond description. He never takes birth and is not subject to death. God created the universe and acquired attributes which becomes the means of understanding him. He is Himself Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and He Himself performs everything.

5.3 God is One; there is no second; there is no partner. God possesses unqualified power and absolute authority. He can turn flowing rivers into sand-dunes, and He can create deep waters in place of deserts; He can confer rule upon an ant, and He can reduce whole armies to dust. God is omnipresent and immanent as well as omnipotent.

5.4 God's light that shines in the creation; His light is in everything and in everyone. Wherever you look there is He; He is everywhere, and there is no other. He is not far, He is near. He fills all the three worlds. The ocean is in the drop, and the drop is in the ocean. He is the speech, the speaker and the listener. All is He. He is 'within' and He is 'without'.

5.5 For entering into a meaningful relationship with God it is necessary to know that He stands revealed in His creation. God's creation is not an illusion but it is not everlasting. God alone is eternal. To attribute all creation to God is to recognize the Truth. Man becomes 'true' only when he acts in accordance with the Truth. Equally important is to appropriate the Name (*nam*) and the Word (*shabad*). There is no fulfilment without the Name. In the Name is real power, the might of the army, and the sovereignty of the Sultan. Having no form, colour or material sign, God is revealed through the Word. The Name and the Word are the revelation of the divine preceptor (*guru*). The Truth is recognized through the divine preceptor's instruction. Without the True Guru one wanders in the

darkness of ignorance. The recognition of God's will (*hukm, bhana, raza*) is equally essential. Whatever happens is in accordance with God's will.

5.6 In Guru Nanak's compositions, liberation (*mukti*) is not possible without God's grace (*nadar, kirpa, karam, prasad, mihr, daya, bakhsis*). It is through the True Guru's *grace* that ignorance is removed and the light of the Truth is perceived. One receives the Truth through God's *karam*. The gift of the Name is received through God's *nadar*. Through His grace comes the recognition of the divine order. Guru Nanak's idea of God's grace negates all presumption to liberation by human effort alone.

5.7 Human effort is not sufficient, but it is absolutely necessary. Loving devotion and dedication to God is true *bhakti* without which there is no liberation. Bracketed with *bhakti* is *bhai* or *bhau*, that is awe, so that the term *bhai-bhakti* is many a time used as one idea. They alone can offer *bhakti* who have God's fear lodged in their hearts. God's fear is the remedy for the fear of death. He who lodges God's fear in his heart becomes fearless.

5.8 In contrast to the 'truth' of God, His creation is 'false' and, therefore, a trap. So long as man remains attached to the creation he suffers from the misery of *dubidha* (dual affiliation). Attachment to earthly things is bound to shut out the Truth. *Maya* attracts man to itself due to his lust, greed, attachment to earthly things, anger and pride. These five enemies of man are difficult to subdue. But there can be no compromise, because man's attachment with *maya* and his devotion to God can not go together.

5.9 One of the five adversaries of man, namely pride, becomes much more formidable in the form of self-centeredness (*haumai*). In fact, pride springs from

this self-centeredness. Man attributes things to himself rather than to God, in opposition to Truth and the divine order. *Haumai* is thus opposed to God being all powerful (omnipotent); it is a psychological barrier between man and God.

5.10 In Guru Nanak's conception of the path to liberation 'the law of *karma*' is set aside. He makes use of this notion to emphasize the need for good acts. He says, 'Do not blame others; you receive the reward or punishment for what you yourself do.' The 'law of *karma*' is invoked by people also to explain the differences of birth. But, according to Guru Nanak, the 'law of *karma*' is not independent of God's *hukm*. The superiority of God's *hukm* over *karma* is not without significance. Submission to God's *hukm* becomes the means of release from the 'law of *karma*'. The chain of karma obviously cannot bind God; rather His grace breaks the chain of karma. Human acts acquire added importance in this context. Indeed, for Guru Nanak there is nothing so important as the ethical conduct.

6 The Sikh Panth

6.1 Concerned with showing to others the path he had discovered for himself, Guru Nanak acted as a guide. Disciples began gathering around him. He imparted regular instruction to his disciples and the visitors. He asked them to discard trust in external forms and status based on caste or wealth. He wanted them to be completely devoted to God.

6.2 At Kartarpur, a regular discipline was evolved for the adoration of God. The early hours of the morning were devoted to meditation. All the disciples and visitors joined Guru Nanak in singing the praises of God in the evening as in the

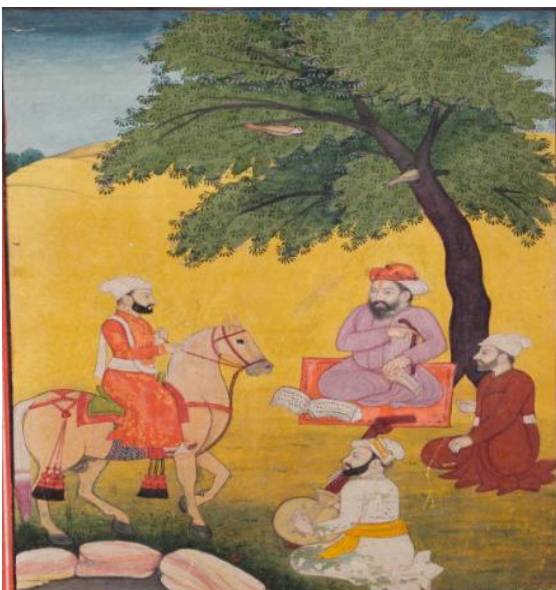
morning. There is a good deal of emphasis in the compositions of Guru Nanak upon 'true association' (*sat-sangat*) or association with the true devotees of God. This ideal found concrete expression in congregational (collective) worship. The disciples and the visitors ate communal meal (*langar*), irrespective of differences of caste for which the believers in the new faith made contribution in cash, kind or service.



Guru Nanak as the Acknowledged Guru
An Early 19th Century Drawing by a Pahari Artist
Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh

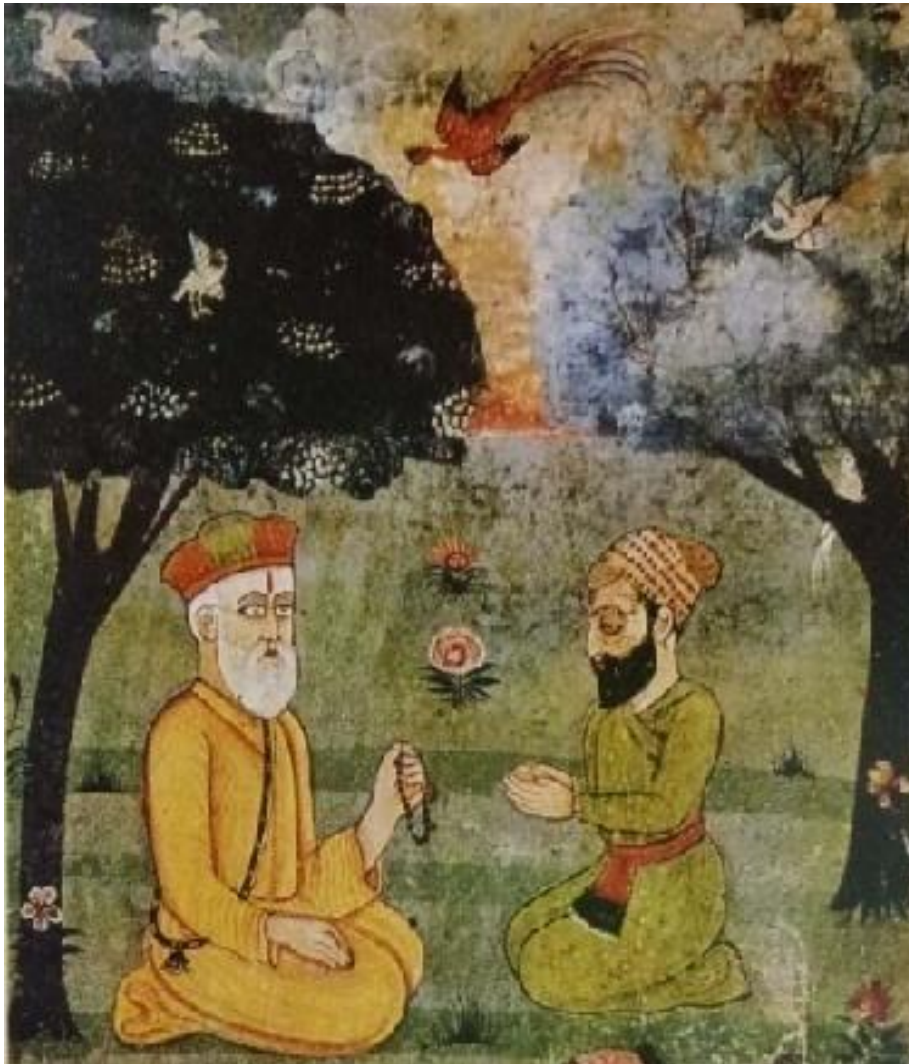
6.3 It is difficult to estimate the number or the social background of the followers of Guru Nanak. There is no doubt, however, that Khatrijs were rather numerous among his followers in cities. They were petty traders, shop-keepers, agents of merchants, and itinerant salesmen. It is equally certain that cultivators of land were among the followers of Guru Nanak, and most of them were Jats in the villages. Then there were some artisans and craftsmen, bond-servants and slaves. The followers came from towns and the countryside. Most of them belonged to the lower classes, and all of them were house-holders. Among themselves they thought they were all equal. Guru Nanak says, 'We are not high, or low, or the middling; we have taken refuge in God, and we are His people.'

6.4 The most important aspect of the mode of worship adopted by Guru Nanak for himself and his followers was the use of his own compositions. The *Japuji*, *So-Dar* and many other compositions were recorded in writing by Guru Nanak himself. This aspect of his work became the basis of vital developments under his successors.



A King Pays Homage to Guru Nanak
From B-40 *Janamsakhi* (1733 CE)

6.5 Guru Nanak lived at Kartarpur as a house-holder, with his wife (Mata Sulakhani) and his two sons (Sri Chand and Lakhmi Das). From this it became clear that he did not support the idea of renunciation (*udaseenta*). He said that only he can recognize the path of truth who makes an honest living and who can give something to others as well. This reflected the idea of welfare of others (*par-upkar*). This carried a great significance for the future.



Guru Nanak and Guru Angad
From B-40 *Janamsakhi* (1733 CE)

6.6 In 1539, Guru Nanak chose his successor from amongst his followers, setting aside the claims of his sons. Nomination of a successor from amongst one's own disciples was not a new thing; it was known to some other religious orders of the times. But the nomination of Bhai Lehna by Guru Nanak was regarded as unique, because Guru Nanak himself placed Bhai Lehna as the Guru. His name too was changed from Lehna to Angad, meaning 'a limb' (*anga*) of the Guru. This gave rise to the idea that the position of the Guru and his disciple (Sikh) is interchangeable. There was no difference between the founder (Guru Nanak) and the successor; they represent one and the same light. The community called Gur-Sangat, Gursant-Sabha, or Sikh Sabha in the compositions (*bani*) of Guru Nanak, came to be known as the Sikh Panth.

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EXERCISES

Part-A

1. Objective-type questions:

Multiple choice questions

- i) Which of the following dates is associated with Guru Nanak?
a) 1451 b) 1461 c) 1469 d) 1559

ii) Guru Nanak had a spiritual experience at which place?

- a) Sultanpur b) Batala
- c) Talwandi Rai Bhoa d) Kartarpur

iii) Among the Muslims, Guru Nanak shows his preference for whom?

- a) *Muqaddams* b) Administrators
- c) Ulama d) Sufis

iv) Who was Guru Nanak's successor?

- a) Sri Chand b) Lakhmi Das
- c) Bhai Lehna d) Bhai Mardana

Fill in the blanks:

- i) Guru Nanak was familiar with the politico-administrative arrangements made by the _____ rulers.
- ii) According to Guru Nanak liberation is not possible without God's _____ .
- iii) Social reality did not conform to the _____ order.
- iv) On his return from travels, Guru Nanak founded _____ as the centre of Sikh Panth.

Right / Wrong

- i) The Afghan rulers collected pilgrimage tax from the Hindus.
- ii) Guru Nanak was not aware of the beliefs and practices of the Jogis.
- iii) Guru Nanak placed woman at par with man for spiritual progress.
- iv) In Guru Nanak's eyes the lowest of the low could follow the spiritual path.

Very Short Questions (from one word to one sentence):

- i) Where was Guru Nanak born?
- ii) What was the name of Guru Nanak's wife?

- iii) Name two compositions of Guru Nanak.
- iv) According to Guru Nanak whose light is in every person and thing?
- v) With which section of society did Guru Nanak identify himself?
- vi) For Guru Nanak what is the psychological barrier between man and God.
- vii) What are the two words used by Guru Nanak for the grace of God?
- viii) What are the five enemies of man according to Guru Nanak?
- ix) Did Guru Nanak support the idea of renunciation?
- x) Where is Kartarpur located?

Part-B

2. Short Answer Questions (35-40 words):

- i) What are Guru Nanak's views on caste?
- ii) What was the opinion of Guru Nanak about the Jogis?
- iii) What was the attitude of Guru Nanak towards the Ulama?
- iv) Did Guru Nanak fully approve of the Sufi Shaikhs?
- v) Why did Guru Nanak criticize the Khatris?
- vi) What was the significance of the nomination of Bhai Lehna as the successor of Guru Nanak?
- vii) What was the social background of the followers of Guru Nanak?

Part-C

3. Long Answer Questions (100-150 words):

- i) What was Guru Nanak's view of the Administration of his time?
- ii) What was Guru Nanak's criticism of the society of his time?
- iii) Comment on Guru Nanak's response to contemporary religions.

- iv) What is Guru Nanak's conception of God?
- v) What are the main features of Guru Nanak's religion?
- vi) What do you know about the Sikh Panth at Kartarpur?