

Moral Tradition & the Sehajdhari Debate

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SEHAJDHARI IS A PHRASE WIDELY prevalent in Sikhism, the origin of which is obscure for the general public as to when, how and where it sprang from and what it denotes. It is, however, attracting greater notice, so that, today the community is in the midst of a heated debate about the status and station of the *sehajdharis*, and whether the Panth should allow them official status, rights and privileges in the Sikh collectivity, as a *Quam*. A few decades ago, this term was simply confined to non-baptized Sikhs who wanted to slowly converge on the path of baptism but wanted not to rush into it, on some pretext. Now, quite a flood of such "reluctant" Sikhs has erupted and it seems that they are keen to take centre stage and push back the main-stream adherents to a side role. In their eagerness to defend their stance as correct and pertinent, they are coining and inventing arguments, small and trite, and at the same time have shed the previous resolve to partake of baptism sooner or later.

In a *Hukamnama* to Kabul *sangat*, as well as his messages to Sikhs at the advent of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, the Tenth Master expressed his desire that the Sikhs get baptised *en masse*, and even at the time of the initial baptismal ceremony in March, 1699, he asked the general house assembled to take to 'baptism.' Thousands complied with this injunction on the very first day. It should be enough for a person who wants to be categorised as a *Gur-sikh* to shed his small ego and unquestioningly follow the dictates of his Guru. Liberty to question the bona-fides of the Master is the height of incensing behaviour. Sikhism has been a historical process evolving through the Ten Masters, till Guru Gobind Singh gave it a final shape and declared the sanctity of Guru Granth and *Guru Panth*. To start with, therefore, there is absolutely no scope for the disciple to stand up and question the credibility of the Guru to shape the basic structure. In fact, those who stood up and tried to find fault with the ceremony of *khande di pahul* in March 1699 were cast away from the main body of Sikhs, till they humbly submitted to be taken back into the fold. The tendency to use the limited knowledge and resources to cast doubts in the minds of laity is pure mischief, casting aspersions which can not be a constructive effort to progress Guru-wards. Guru Granth Sahib is full of instructions to the Sikhs to cut down personal ego and to accept as truth and final, what the Guru defines and states.

The Guru has separated *Gurmukhs* from the *manmukhs*, and explained that while the former are in the mode of swans, the latter are like the lowly cranes and crows who exist only for small, mundane gains.

Manmukhan nu phir janam hai

SGGS 450

The egocentric will remain in the vicious circle of re-births.

A *manmukh* who does not surrender his ego and self-centred stance cannot be termed as a Sikh. In other traditions, there is no ambiguity about the position of one who defies the Faith and does not have full belief in the truths of the creed. Jews, Christians, Moslems have to take unflinching vows and affirm faith in the dogmas of their respective religions without raising doubts. A Sufi has to take to heart the

utterances of his *murshid* as the final truth. Sikhs tend to follow the liberal debates and discussions of the ancient seers, who were without exception great minds and who wanted to go deep into the speculated theories of other Hindu preceptors but within the basic dogmatic limits of Vedas and *smritis*. Sikhism is a revealed religion, which has stuck to the basic Truths as irrefutable doctrines. Take it or leave it, but there is no scope of amending it to suit every one's convenience like a private vehicle. In Hinduism, Buddhism and later creeds, debates and counter views are permitted, but then the basic Vedic or Buddhist creeds have always been within the limits of the supporting texts, acknowledging them as heavenly/sacred scriptures.

It is interesting to note that Sikhism in the last five hundred years has been subjected repeatedly to evolve compromises, and making room for the doubting Toms by labelling them as *sehajdharis*. The meaning of this word is in itself a controversial matter. *Sehaj* was coined in ancient texts as the path of spontaneous love, a stage where mind frees itself from duality and illusion; the mind enters vacuity and soars beyond the *tri-gunas*.

The term *sehajdhari* is not, therefore, coined by Sikhs.

There have been many splinter groups in the past, in India, which virtually revolted against the puritan religions and eventually gained ground, due to laxity of the parent movements, or in order to gain mass adherents like Buddhism, or incursion of influences of the other systems, or even due to half-hearted conversions. These trends led to dilution of catholicity enjoined by the founding Masters in their times. Jainism, due to its rigidly held doctrines, suffered the least, while Vaishnav, Buddhist and other great religions were mauled by the *sahjayas*.

Tickling of *Tantracism* in Vedic practices led to the erosion and eclipse of almost entire original Vedic rituals and replaced by *tantric* modes. In its turn, the *Tantric-Vedic* traditions seeped into Buddhism in a big way which changed the very fabric of the puritan Buddhism, which in its turn influenced *Brahmanic* practises. The liberal movements of non-conformation in Vaishnav religion assumed the name of *sahaj-vaishnavism*. Accordingly, *Sahaj movement* entered into Buddhist vitals along with tantric practices, to the extent of the offshoot of *Guhya samaj*, and its laxity struck the death knell of pure Buddhism in India. Sahjaya likewise humbled and degraded the spiritual heights of Chaitanya's *Krishna leela*, so that spiritual *rasa* became a physical game of love, the male representing Krishna and female partners as *gopis*.

Eventually, the term *Sahaj* has been defined in every age as the defiance of enjoined religious practices, non-observance of abstinence or self regulating regimes and discipline of the parent religion, in the name of freedom to reach the crux of the central essentials. Once adopted, the historical experience has repeatedly been to find short-cuts and shedding of puritan values. It will be clear by illustrating the havoc wrought up by the *guhya samaj*, the secret society of Buddhist conclaves, which appeared within three hundred years of the passing of the Great Buddha.

They claimed that the scriptures held sacred by them were Buddha's, but kept purposely secret from the Buddhist mainstream. It followed that the emancipation did not depend on bodily suffering and abstinence of worldly enjoyments, rather on the satisfaction of all desires. *Guhya samaj* made the matters simple compared to the Mahayana and Hinayana severe routines, involving many births to attain Buddhahood.

Guhya samaj made it simple, attainable in one birth! They admitted *sakti* as divine energy introducing *tantric* mode of sex into Buddhism. The preceptor takes the hand of a beautiful girl and gives it to the disciple as initiation with *Sakti*, citing *Tathagata* as witness. Buddhism is said not to be attainable except by the union with *sakti*, never to be abandoned in life, '*vidyavrata*.' They abandoned the *vidhi marg* of injunctions and prohibitions, study of *shastras*, fasting, bathing, sacrifices, and obedience to rules of the society. They held that instead of temples and gods, their own body was the abode of god-head and no injunctions were necessary to follow. They gave up restrictions on food and drinks, claiming every thing to be a product of God. Use of non-vegetarian items like animal flesh, (some times even human flesh and animal blood) and wines of any quality were freely allowed. It forbade erection of temples, to repeat sacred texts of Buddhism, and stopped even offering articles of worship to the three jewels – *Buddha*, *Dharma* and *Sangha*. It allowed any number of falsehoods, to take things which did not belong to one, and even to commit adultery. The lay people obviously were drawn to this simplified *sehaj* methodology. People at any time and age covet easy material gains than high psychic, mystical rewards. And the latest to fall into the *Sehjaya* snare is Sikhism! The seed is sown and the crop will take, maybe, a few centuries more to ripen, as per the experience in the past.

Efforts to splinter Sikh movement started with the separatist *udasi* cult of Baba Sri Chand which was total negation of Guru Nanak's societal path and looked backwards to ascetic foundations. *Prithias* and *Dhirmaliyas* tried their best to provide alternative *sehj* theories to damage Guru Nanak's Sikhism. One of the urgent causes to compile *Adi Granth* by Guru Arjun Dev was to protect the genuine *Bani* of Gurus and Bhagats from the mischief of those inimical elements to the House of Nanak. Baba Ram Raya displayed laxity in basic principles. It was necessary to debar such trends in future, for which Guru Gobind Singh had to take safeguard against splinter groups exploiting the lay members of the Sikh society by offering simplistic alternatives. Right from Guru Nanak's advent, the total emphasis has been on strictly living the Truth in all fields of life, fearlessly and without prejudice. Guru Nanak asked for total surrender of a person wanting to be a Sikh, and to adopt truthfulness as the only mode of life. Any one who tried to become a Sikh without the strict adherence to truthfulness was discarded and compared to a base coin, a greedy, filthy crane exploring for fish, or a kite descending from high altitudes to the stink of the dead. Guru Gobind Singh asked the people claiming to be Sikhs to take oath of purity.

Sehajdhari 'Sikhs' hold that spiritual emancipation does not necessarily depend on the discipline of body and mind, abstinence from the purely mundane enjoyments which may, in fact, harm the progress of the initiate, as well as his spiritual and moral upliftment, which was the basic necessity to float a new religion by Guru Nanak, when he declared that Truthful living was higher than even the concept of Truth, i.e. God. The principle at the root of *Amrit* proffered and enjoined by the Tenth Master was the same, i.e. to bind the Sikh into the discipline of Truthful Living. The *sehajdhari* does not desire to fall in line or be bound by any laws, social or moral, and for this reason starts controversies and questions the bona fides of the prophets themselves.

The edifice on which Guru Nanak built his new path to salvation was based on strict discipline and total submission of the seeker to Master's wisdom. He illustrated it by the example of Bhai Lehna, who qualified to succeed him as Guru. Along with the total and unqualified obedience, Guru Nanak taught him the wisdom of Truth, so that Angad became equal to Guru Nanak in the proficiency of Law. It contained humility, sweetness, discarding personal gain and greed, avarice and I-ness. To acquire that position, a good and true Sikh of the calibre of Bhai Lehna was required. Unfortunately, the so called modern system of education of Sikh youth, like all others, teaches them to be individualistic, have their own preferences and choice of convictions, without, of course, having developed maturity and acumen on moral, spiritual and social matters. Thus, the *Sehajdhari* is standing on the opposite banks of the river, coveting the fields on this side, where humility, ego-shedding and total obedience and surrender, along with the five evils of lust, anger, greed, worldly attachment and ego, and the three *gunas*, *satyo*, *rajo* and *tamo*, are the foundation of the life of a disciple to attain spiritual heights.

Guru Nanak himself proclaimed the doctrine of *sehaj* over *tantric* and Vedic *karm-kand*, and made the spiritual and moral path very easy. Yet the basic discipline had to be inculcated in the disciples and devotees to avoid the pitfalls into which earlier attempts of Vaishnava, Buddhist, Nath and Yogi *sehayas* floundered.

Sehajdhari Sikhs draw a favourite comparison, of a kind man of sweet demeanour, humble, hymn singing, devout *sehajdhari* against a mean, angry, greedy, totally worldly, baptised *Khalsa* and if such a *sehajdhari* as above is not a better selection? In their ignorance, they bypass the injunctions of Guru Gobind Singh that *Khalsa* is only defined as a selfless, humble, kind, committed, hymn singing, sweet tempered person who has battled and won over the five evils and is ever attempting to subjugate the three *gunas* to achieve the *turiya guna* state of bliss, and is deeply in love with God and God's creation.

The tradition of a pupil putting his total faith in the Teacher is a universal principle. Any where, the child has to belong to a school, be proud of the traditions of the institution, observe discipline of its rules and regulation, have total faith in the teacher and be ever willing to practically demonstrate his proficiency. A young man biologically and physically matures as a man, but his metaphysical development is not in keeping with his body frame. For igniting the brain, he has to undergo a discipline which is well defined in Indian traditions, but it may be totally averse to the modern parameters of education. Herein lies the difficulty. There is no question of East or West. Even in India, the present educational system, aped senselessly from West, has caused havoc, as the youth are totally baffled, lost to their roots without growing any substitute for spiritual and moral upliftment.

Ham kiya Hum kareh ge, hum murakh gawar

SGGS 39

We did that, we will do so; (this utterly shows) how foolish we are, the brutes.

During initiation of *Khalsa* ceremony, Guru Gobind Singh did what had come down as a hallowed tradition from antiquity- the *Diksha* rite.

Diksha had three parts of the rite. First step was the vows of the initiate, the *kriya diksha*, in which the disciple, by strict spiritual discipline and full of devotion, offered himself to the preceptor, and was invested with the physical insignia of the initiate.

Second step was the grant of *Mantra*, in this case the holy word, 'WaheGuru' which mystifies the initiate to total acceptance of the omnipresence of Almighty.

The third stage is of *Vedha diksha*, the imparting of the Knowledge, which is a continuous process on the journey to Perfection.

This process is similar to the universal rules and organisational procedures in any institution and society, government and commercial undertaking, armed forces as well as civilian. Even in cults like Free Masonery, investiture ceremonies are sacred. The novice surrenders his freedom of views, subordinating his scant knowledge to the universality of the Master's comprehension.

Sikh sabha dikhya ka bhao; gurmukh sunana sachha nao

SGGS 350

Love of Gurus initiation in the Sikh congregation,
And hearing of truthful Name of the Lord!

And

*Pretonh kiton devta, tin karnehare sabhe sikh ubarian
Prabhu kaj swarey*

SGGS 323

Turning devils into gods, God the doer resurrects all the Sikhs
And accomplishes their task with perfection.

Of course, *Sehajdharis* are an important segment of Sikh family and there should not be any doubt of their contribution in the past and in future also, but they have to devotedly look up to the infallibility of our Ten Great Gurus and Guru Granth Sahib, and imbibe the qualities enumerated above. In due course, with their whole-hearted love of God, they will get the divine sign to complete their cycle by taking *guru-diksha* of double edged sword and soar ever high into the realm of Truthful Living.

Hamre mastak daag dagana, hum karaj Guru bahu sadhe

SGGS 171

I'm heavily indebted to the Guru
and have got my forehead branded (as Guru's vessel)

Kabir Ji has explained this phenomenon very clearly:

Daghe hoe so ran meh jujhe bin daghe bhag jai

SGGS 978

Those branded fight battles with zest
Unbranded turn away as renegades.

