

# Calamities, 2005:

## An Instrospection

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Juxtaposed disasters in calamitous 2005 have shown the helplessness of human beings in the face of nature. First and foremost, the quake induced tsunami struck South Asia followed by the tremors across Northern India and Pakistan, soon to be followed by Hurricane Katrina on the American coastline. All these phenomena of nature caused widespread havoc and devastation to people and property which has proven beyond doubt that humans have no control over nature despite the upsurge in science and technological advancements since the advent of the Industrial Revolution way back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Natural calamities are God-willed and unavoidable. One should learn to accept this bare fact. Acceptance of God's will is the only panacea of stress free living.

Is God, through the vagaries of nature, transmitting a vital message in the wake of these calamities to a world turning, at a fast pace, materialistic and excessively violent beyond justified comprehension? When a calamity, either natural or man-made, strikes, one's caste, creed, nationality, color or religion seems absurd and of no consequence. At such times the only bond which connects people is the compassion which flows from one person to another on a one to one personal basis. During a life and death struggle, the *Namaaz* of the Muslims, the *Nitnem* of the Sikhs, the blowing of the conch or the ringing of the bells of the Hindus, or the ceremonial Sunday singing of carols at the church of the Christians is soon forgotten. The only priority that remains is how to save oneself and seek shelter and provide food for one-self and the family. And no sooner are they met that man rebounds into the bandwagon of daily chores of work, eat, make merry and sleep. Ritualistic religions are of no significance and importance. In fact it appears baseless during the threat to one's life from nature related catastrophes. What gives inner strength and forbearance to the victims is the essence of the *shabads* (Holy Words) which get ingrained in one's psyche and consciousness over a regularly followed discipline of meditation and contemplation which outpours at such times making one realize that life is nothing but a journey and we humans are only travelers destined to live the time allotted to us by the grace of God. When natural calamities occur, those unscathed by the Grace of God harbor no second thoughts in helping those affected depending upon their willingness and spending capacities.

During a threat to one's life, the only priority that exists is how to save one's skin and emerge out alive. In danger one forgets everything mundane and becomes extra alert and alive. In daily routine one's aliveness and alertness recedes due to the monotony arising out of set duties and responsibilities. No wonder that one looks forward eagerly to the approaching Sunday and weekends when one can relax, laze around, sleep, do as per one's liking, or simply just do nothing. When the monotony bubbles up to around boiling point, one feels like taking a break and going on a holiday or an excursion. What brings joy in a holiday is the aliveness and alertness which one feels throbbing in one's heart and being, while journeying onto unknown and uncharted lands. The excitement arises out of the adventure undertaken which breaks the monotonous actions of everyday life.

There is always an element of risk and uncertainty while setting foot outside the home to foreign lands and imagine the risk and trouble which Guru Nanak undertook during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when there were no motorized means of travel nor sufficient safety to life and property. This shows the outstanding qualities of Guru Nanak – a person of extraordinary grit, determination, boldness and fearlessness. The only advantage in the past

was the non-existence of visa and passport formalities which at the current times proves quite troublesome. Land-barriers and borders were only created then for land revenue and people's governance and not for restricting peoples' movement as such.

Guru Nanak was a prophet of rare spirituality, a God's messenger in the truest sense who traveled extensively in his four journeys (referred to as *udasis* in Sikh terminology) to the four earthly directions covering Assam, Sikkim, Bengal, Orissa and Bangladesh in the east, Sri Lanka across the southernmost tip of India, Gujarat in the west, and beyond the west up to Mecca and Baghdad, besides Mansarovar and Nepal. Had He traveled across to Europe, America and African continents, Sikh history, nay world history, would have been of a different hue.

A journey undertaken alone and a journey undertaken with a companion makes a lot of difference. A journey undertaken with a companion having more or less the same wave length and with a common vision and direction, becomes highly exciting, fulfilling and uplifting. The exchange of thoughts, feelings and emotions which takes place between them becomes a learning experience wherein one's naturalness emerges and the veil of falsehood which one wears in daily life activities is shed off and a spontaneous feeling arises which makes me recollect, at this juncture of the thoughts bubbling up in me, the shabad of Third Nanak Guru Amar Das Ji, "*Munn tu jyot sarup hai apna mool pehchaan.....*". It gives one a feeling of reaching inwardly to the depths of one's soul and heart and makes you feel as if you are standing nude in front of a mirror with neither falsities nor conditioning, provided a true, frank, sincere and committed communication takes place. Does such a relationship need the sanctity of societal acceptance and need to be provided with a name?

Almost all of Guru Nanak's hymns as recorded in the Holy Granth of the Sikhs ( named as Guru Granth Sahib which has been ordained by the Tenth Nanak to consider it as the 'Shabad Guru' for eternity) is based upon the dialogues He had with numerous persons, spiritual or otherwise, from all walks of life depending upon the circumstantial situation. Whatever Guru Nanak experienced and observed in his travels accompanied by his companion resulted in spiritual outpouring in the form of divine revelations shared with Bhai Mardana and communicated to the *sangat* in the style of poetry which today the Sikhs sing to the tune of various *raags* as *Shabad Keertan* both at times of happiness or sorrow.

It was due to the tenacity and sincerity of Bhai Mardana ( the Muslim rebeck player ) that Guru Nanak was able to achieve an Herculean task and wherever He set foot left an imprint not only on the minds of the oppressed and neglected class but lifted them on to a higher plane morally as well as spiritually. Bhai Bala's companionship remained till they reached Bala Kota now in Pakistan where he settled down to preach the Nanakian philosophy. An interesting outcome of Guru Nanak's travels to distant places was the sprouting up of *Dharamsals* ( later became popular as Gurdwaras ) by his resourceful and economically well-off transformed followers. This resulted in the expansion of the House of Nanak and the further spread of the Sikh way of living known as three cardinal principles ( *kirat karna, naam japna tey wand chhakna* ) of Sikhism preached by Guru Nanak. It is an observed fact that a widely traveled person's outlook on life changes and personality levels are enhanced, which optimizes the confidence levels. The interaction one has with a varied cross-section of people from different cultures and backgrounds opens up the mind's vistas influencing the continuous arising of the thought patterns. One learns a lot from the dialogue arising out of such interaction which has an overall impact on the pattern of living making the person come out of the narrow-mindedness mentality and broadens the horizon of the person. Another interesting point to note is that whoever came into contact with Guru Nanak ( rich or

poor, having vices or virtues or of criminal bent of mind or otherwise ) got transformed in the sense that virtues started replacing the vices hitherto dominant in one's lifestyle.

One vital fact which has hit the bull's eye of humans emerging out of the recent natural disasters is the factor of interdependence. Humans are dependent upon each other for survival either at times of peace or at times of distress. Nobody can live in isolation for long. Human contact is inevitable. Everyone depends upon another to sustain life. A child depends upon parents, a student upon teachers, a worker upon employers, a preacher upon followers, a beggar upon almsgivers, a shopkeeper upon customers, and so on. In the wake of these natural calamities, countries and governments have come forward to help the affected nations and their people irrespective of the religion professed. The reason is simple – because of the no-escape factor from natural disasters.

I can't help but remember the *wand chhakna* (sharing one's meals) cardinal principle of Guru Nanak at such perilous times. Guru Nanak's stress upon the need for *wand chhakna* is based upon the edifice of interdependence of humans which helps one in overcoming the vice of selfishness. The virtue of caring for others emerges in one's personality by the implementation of the concept of *wand chhakna* of Guru Nanak. To give a practical shape to the '*Wand Chhakna*' principle, Guru Nanak introduced the *Langar* (common community kitchen) serving food to all, irrespective of caste, creed, color or sex in which Sikhs were ordained to keep their kitchens open at all times to those hungry and in need and to partake of food with whosoever were house guests. The novel concept of *langar* was taken a step further by the Second Nanak, Guru Angad Dev Ji who institutionalized it making it mandatory in all Gurdwaras. The revolutionary *langar* concept helped to a greater extent in eradicating the social evils prevalent at those times – that of caste discrimination and untouchability issues. Nowadays one observes other communities in India having adopted the

*langar* concept of Guru Nanak which can further reduce the caste consciousness.

India offering aid to Pakistan, and vice versa, in the wake of earthquakes of enormous intensity whose tremors were felt over a major part of Northern India and Pak-occupied Kashmir, and acceptance of such aid by either country has shown the fallacy of dividing oneself into a Hindu and a Musalman since the gory partition of 1947.

For natural disasters occurring, borders of countries are irrelevant. God is one! Earth is one! It is we humans who, in order to satisfy the power lust over the masses, create boundaries. And boundaries not only divide nations but also people. The boundaries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tibet, Nepal and Sri Lanka have created a wedge between its inhabitants. It is high time we realize that fanaticism can never usher peace into our lives. And any religion for that matter never proclaims violence against the other. It is only the wrong interpretations which has brought the world to the brink of another world war which, if it happens, will be based upon fanaticism. It is only love, affection and care we shower upon each other which can herald the much awaited peace in the Indian sub-continent and the rest of the world.

When a baby emerges out of the womb of a mother, religion is of no consequence or importance to the newly born. What the baby needs is physical nourishment from the mother's breast and the unconditioned love, affection and care from the mother. The underlying factor of human survival is the need for affection, love and care which one soon forgets as the winds of the religion one's biological parents adheres to starts blowing or, rather I should say, being superimposed by them on the growing baby and the child soon cloaks upon itself the garb of religion and forgets that human life is the gift of God and starts wearing outward symbols like the *cap, tikka, janeu, turban* to proclaim one's religion

embarking upon the road of mad rat races and diehard competitions with fellow travelers right from childhood days. Someone remarked the other day at a social gathering of friends, "In life never compare yourself with another and if you have to compete, always compete with yourself rather than competing with others." Has not Guru Nanak said, "*Ekas key hum b a r i k ...*" (we are children of the One God) ? Being a Hindu, Musalman, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Jew, Christian is nothing but labeling one's ego and developing a subtle proudness (*haumai*) of being one-up upon the other resulting in a superiority complex. The coining of phrases like "*Hume maan hai ki hum Hindu Hain*" and "*I am proud to be a Sikh*" shows the divide that we humans have created in our lives in the name of religion. It's the fear factor that has resulted in these coinages which one hears as public pronouncements at religious *sammelans* and sees as stickers stuck at the back of cars and other vehicles.

No sooner were people recovering from the shocks of natural disasters that the world witnessed a man-made disaster- Delhi being rocked four days before Diwali celebrations by the serial bomb blasts at three crowded markets, killing, injuring and maiming scores of innocent men, women and children hailing from various communities. When a bomb blasts it does not see who is going to be hit, whether a Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Christian, Jew or a Sikh. What needs to be done is research into the mental framework of such a person commonly named as a militant, or rather one should name them appropriately as madmen or fanatics. The serial bomb blasts on the eve of Diwali at New Delhi is nothing but the outbursts of frustration of the fanatics who are not willing to come out of their hate syndromes since partition of the land, traversed by Guru Nanak, into Pakistan and India.

Labeling oneself as a Sikh is good so long as one embarks upon the path to be treaded by a Sikh. Which path is this? The path of living in total freedom which is based upon the foundation of fearlessness. Even Guru Nanak has remarked, "*Itt marg pair dhareejai sirr deejai kaan na keejai.....*".

Rituals and superstitions are based upon the fear factor which the priestly class took advantage of and exploited the common man for selfish monetary gains. Guru Nanak by rejecting in toto all the rituals and superstitions of Hindus and Muslims sowed the seeds of fearlessness among his puny band of followers who in the span of ten Gurus lifetimes emerged as a strong force to be reckoned with – Sikhs, always in optimistic spirit (*chardi kala*).

A glaring fact is that the minorities recognized in the Constitution of India, viz. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists as well as those not given due recognition legally, like the Jains and Parsees, are very much a part and parcel of India and are in no way lesser Indians than the majority Hindu inhabitants. The minorities have to urgently come forward on a common platform and become directly involved in politics and governance not under the shadow of existing ones like the Congress or C.P.I., etc. but by floating a Democratic Alliance of Minorities, the suggestive flagship political party, based upon the axiom of freedom to profess one's religion, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of action and freedom from fear, to live and co-exist in India as first class citizens like any other Indian. This can help in the conceptualization of the golden era: srb klw bx Awel be to all humanity.

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