

# Karam - The Grace Abounding

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The biggest impediment to furtherance of knowledge is the human faith in the correctness of one's convictions. Wherever the scholarly pioneers have wanted to expand the horizon of knowledge, people have stood up to defy all such attempts and snubbed, ridiculed and tried their best to silence the progressive voices of dissent. Old dogmas and precepts, thus, continue to hold their own, even when people realize the triviality of those doctrines and affirm to be adherents of the new divergences in philosophy.

Guru Nanak came to us with such a new and advanced philosophic mission. He gave new dimensions to the misspelled doctrines. He inspired deeper and fresh investigations into the speculative theories of old religions. He picked fresh connotations in the universal beliefs. After five hundred years, his approach remains modern and logical. But ironically, the man-in-the-street likes to live his life by set rules and traditions, of habit and routine, to avoid logic and reason. Yet he would like to be counted in the circle of intellectuals. The Sikhs, literally 'the scholars' are supposed to explore the truth in fuller detail, yet they seem to prefer remaining ensconced in the discredited old traditions and routine and are thoroughly confused. This attitude was severely criticized by none else than Guru Nanak in his sabds. For instance, *Gau Brahmin ko kar lavo, gobar taran na jai.*(SGGS: 471)

One wonders, to what consequence have those long arduous journeys of Guru Nanak and his successor Gurus resulted since the Sikhs continue to think and act in line with the old interpretations to the unique doctrines of Guru Nanak. It is an accepted fact that Guru Nanak did not consider the Vedas, Shastras and Koran as the last word in metaphysics, although the flight of imagination attempted by those seers is, indeed, scholarly. The Upanishads make very interesting reading. The hypothesis and assumptions were remarkable for that age. But the resulting *varna-ashram*, with its inflexibility as well as the intra-caste structure, which was the outcome of all that study and the foundation of the Hindu society, was frankly rejected, even condemned. The Hindu emphasis was on covering the deficiencies of man by cleansing - on the strength of the Vedic chants and sacrificial fires, to remove the ill-effects of bad actions as a sort of protective umbrella.

Atma and Parmatma were agreed to, whereas the Jains repudiated it and Buddhism stayed clear of it. On the other hand, the individual in Sikhism was placed under an overall discipline and orderly harmony of Parabrahma. Man was the object of study by our Gurus, but with a view to containing his waywardness, and to tame him for the role of a good citizen, a useful and gentle person attuned to love of God and his creation, not to serve the demands of a raw, untrained, self-centered ogre. As each soul struggled to come to terms with the order and harmony of the Supreme Being, the Guru (sabd-Guru) assisted the individual to graduate from the state of gross ignorance of an ego-centric being, a *manmukh* to the sublime objective of the God-oriented, the *Gurmukh*.

Thus, the entire humanity was divided into two groups, namely, the *manmukh* and *gurmukh*. Unlike the old division, into the rigid compartmentalization of castes and sub-castes by birth, any person was to be freely promoted or demoted from the position of *manmukh* to *gurmukh*, and vice-versa, the emphasis being on the precondition of good societal behaviour and actions to qualify to the fraternity of the *gurmukhs*, a stage, where a person consistently remained merged in God.

**The above stipulation clearly delineates the departure of the Sikh stance from the basic Hindu posture.** Consequently, there should have been a clear departure from the Hindu postulates to be eschewed. In practice, the same old stereotyped assumptions are being touted, unhindered, about the cause of a birth, life cycle and death of a self-willed brute, as well as the post-death Hindu speculations. It has become customary with our Bhaiji, the priest to invoke Almighty to seek a place for the deceased in the lotus feet of God and keep it from the cycle of rebirths! Has God lotus feet? Is there really an abode out there in the skies? **What is the value or purpose of such sham prayer to grant absolution to every one from the so-called cycle of rebirth, without merit?** Does such a prayer work at all, without reformation of a vicious person into leading a virtuous life? Does God adopt human standards of judgment? *Gurubani* finds it a puzzle how someone may sleep cozy under cushions while the other person stands guard.(SGGS: 471). What is this great enigma? This theme reappears at several places in the Guru Granth Sahib in the banis of Guru Nanak,(SGGS 566): Guru Amar Das,(SGGS 644) and Guru Arjun Dev (614). The mystery persists; instead of adopting the traditional solution of action and reaction, *karam-bhog*. Guru Arjun Dev in Canto 21 of the celebrated Sukhmani challenges the concept of *Karm-Bhog*. There is, indeed, mention of reincarnation and Heaven and Hell fires in their sermons, obviously for consumption of the congregations with Hindu and Muslim participants who perhaps had not yet formally adopted the Sikh way of life.

The very purpose of Guru Nanak's philosophy is stated clearly on the first page of the Guru Granth Sahib: **to become attuned to godly qualities**, and that the whole creation is acting in accordance with His Will. God is our role model, our utopia, our *beau-ideal*. Nothing prospers, or, let us say, even happens that is against His command and He represents harmony in divine order. Therefore, the discussion about one's karma is rendered obsolete. It is confined to *sakta* who hanker after the supremacy of individual's Will. Karma rules over the lives of those societies.

Till such time that the self, atma, is given all importance, as is the case with the ancient faiths, the debate about right and wrong, to the benefit of the individual and his atonement by the Vedic yagnas, *vidhis*, *havans* or *puja*, *archa*, *vandana*, will maintain their validity. There will be no difference in going to a gurudwara in stead of the temple. The hopes and prayers of the unrestrained egotist will be the same as were practiced in the pre-Nanak times. The alternatives as suggested by the six schools of Vedanta or the breakaway Jainism and Buddhism will continue to be operative in the life of our people. They are even asking about the significance and new dimensions of the Nankian dynamism! We are told that in the Guru period, many ordinary Sikhs were knowledgeable enough to put forth the Sikh point of view, to the stupefaction of the learned enquirers. **Many missionaries from the times of Guru Nanak preached the Sikh philosophy far and wide and created sangats all over the sub-continent and beyond.** With the shrinking of the missionary activities, the uniqueness of the Sikh panth tends to be even less appreciated in the very cradle of our faith, in Punjab itself. **There is paucity of good scholars and the traditional point of view of the Brahmin, based on his scriptures and speculations is easily swallowed and readily dispensed by our priests and sant babas.**

In act, all ancient religions did their best at those times and situations. Those theories and assumptions and presumptions are now outdated, no more potent. We are easy prey to disinformation. It is no use pointing finger at the squeezing embrace of the old society, as we are perpetuating the act ourselves in stark ignorance.

In Sikhism, the exercise emphasizes converting base stock, the *manmukh* to the supreme state of *gurmukh*. Instead of avoiding the issue, by renunciation, running away

from the problem or *vidhis*, the *puja* as a post-event surface-dressing, **the Guru teaches the Sikh to face adversities by adopting virtues, discarding vices, maintaining calm and poise in all events, fighting weaknesses of character, to become a helpful member of the society** and recognizing the divine principle of harmony with nature. Whereas the traditional prophet, or *avatar*, propounds doctrines in God's name, to his flock as strictly laid down by him, Guru Nanak had prepared for his mission by his study and enquiry of the various schools of divinity and deep meditation, to evolve a mature, well considered thesis. Besides all the rich tomes of the past literature in India, he had occasion to study in, depth, the Islamic and older versions of the biblical theories. Many a time, Guru Nanak refers to not only Koran but to 'Kateban', in plural, the other holy books of the Semitic stock. **In his sojourn in the Middle East for upward of two years, it is not possible that he did not come across or notice the grim rivalry of the Christian, Jewish and Islamic bid for supremacy, staying in hot spots like Madina, Baghdad and Turkey. There is definite semblance of the Guru's thought beyond the current Hindu and Moslem stance, with the Christian doctrine of Grace, the search by the Church of the basic moral values rather than blindly accepting the traditional value systems,** like flogging, stoning, beheading, and their treatment of sins and pride and covetousness as the main evils, as well as the Buddhist postures about consciousness, detachment and *Naam*, among others.

That there is no direct mention about Christianity or Judaism in his writings is due to negligible presence of these systems in India during Guru Nanak's period and his addresses mainly to the Hindu and Moslem congregations and assemblies. **Similarly, there is little mention of Buddhism, because, there were hardly any numbers of that faith in India at that time.** On the other hand, there are strong references to Jainism which was then quite active in western and northern India. The interaction of Guru Nanak and his successors with Buddhists was, in fact quite intimate **in the Indo-Tibetan regions where Guru Nanak is still remembered in Buddhist monasteries**

and their periodic pilgrimages even now to some of the Sikh historical shrines.

There is an interesting Surah Wakiah in the Holy Koran where God says that many generations of estranged people were given opportunity repeatedly, to revert to Godly ways, but they did not. There are, therefore, three queues of people. Those on the right are one who will be passable to heaven, and those who fully deserve to cross over to all luxuries therein, **but those on the left, who were unresponsive to the prophets, are destined by providence to perpetual Hell and no advocacy from any angel or prophet will ever redeem them.**

There are two points to be noted: Firstly, it divides hopelessly the faithful from the *kuffar*. This has been followed to the hilt by the faithful who are guided by the wrath of Almighty to the lot of unbelievers. Secondly, God has evidently given up on this wretched multitude without a chance of redemption. It is extraordinary that the Sikh philosophy should likewise divide humanity in the right and left grouping, but, of course, with the addition that anyone and everyone is allowed compassion and a chance at any time to cross over from left to the right and claim the privilege to enter the heavenly state. Those who still do not heed to the opportunity are comparable to demonetized, base coins destined to be put through the process of resurrection, whatever it means, the perpetual Semitic hell fire, or the long drawn cycle of reincarnation of the Indo-Buddhist speculation. Also mark the rigidity of the Islamic justice comparable to the grossly inflexible Hindu theory of transmigration through what is a veritable hell of 8.4 million rebirths to each soul for all acts, fair and foul.

Notwithstanding these controversies, there is total change in the Sikh definitions of hell

and heaven, from physical destinations to spiritual moorings, like the torturous mental sufferings of the *manmukh* compared to the tranquility of the saintly company. Our *ardas*, the earnest prayer is sufficient to motivate virtues and dispel vices, over mechanical reading of scriptures and ritualist practices of other systems being increasingly propagated and confused with the Sikh philosophy by the unsophisticated preachers and sant-babas.

In the old texts of the ancient faiths, one point is common: that is, punishment against bad acts. Acts of vices, however, are always far more than the virtues, good acts, due to the inherent baseness born of ignorance in human nature. It is presented as a horror story to put the fear of reprisals into the die-hard criminal. Yet the effect is nominal, as only those respond who are either good by nature or weaklings. The remedial measures to correct the anomaly have proved to be inadequate, which is, of course, admitted universally by the old religions. The reasons seem to be that:

- a) The importance of strengthening the basic human character and its responses is meager, secondary to the preliminary routine of dedicational practices,
- b) More emphasis placed on circumventing the weaknesses in character by additional load of repetitive prayers, meditations, invoking heavenly pardon, ignoring the primary need of eradication of flaws and their essential rectification to the benefit of the society. The routine prayers, the harsh body tortures of Hath yogins, the tantric-magical mantras and special readings of scriptures did not yield the results.

Whereas the Indo-Buddhist schools rigidly affirm the indispensable course of payback of all actions, good and bad, the Semitic emphasis is on redeeming the transgression by means of prayers and simple remembrance of God's name. The Sikh point of view is that salvation is not possible; howsoever one may meditate on God's name, and good deeds do not compensate or wash away the bad ones, until the vices are converted effectively to virtues, beneficent to the society. (Without virtues, devotion is impossible-Jap: 21) Once the faults are removed from the character of a *manmukh*, he emerges as a perfected soul. Also, anyone and every one, irrespective of community, caste, class or gender may be able to effect this change of attitude and characteristics at any time and accomplish the transformation. Another difference in the Sikh reckoning from earlier systems is that such a being is automatically resurrected beyond any charge-sheet of his earlier misdemeanors, his status being a *jiwan-mukt*. (SGGS 614: 1348:698:38)

Whatever happens to those who are not perfected souls? *Gurmukhs* are a rarity, but the much reformed souls who have crossed over from the stark stage of self-centered egoists, are assured of being protected by liberated *gurmukhs*, as guides and masters, (they take many with them to the state of liberation-Jap) For those dedicated Sikhs, at any stage, firmly committed to the path to perfection, the charge-sheet is obsolete and ineffective, which is affirmed in the Guru Granth Sahib. 'What will the Dharamrai ever do when the charge-sheet stands annulled' (SGGS 614).

One point needs to be clarified is that in Sikhism, it is neither the function nor the privilege of a heavenly appointed prophet, nor the prerogative of a liberated soul, or God's angels, to secure allowance to an unworthy soul to sneak through by the strength of their witness or pleadings into *devlok* or the Garden of Eden. **To a *gursikh*, therefore, the philosophy of Karma, as defined in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism or Islam does not apply.** How our priests blindly acquiesce to it is neither correct nor permissible. It is a system wherein the scholar (Sikh) learns the values of good over evil and sets about shaping his life in accordance with the heavenly discipline, (*raza*). How it may be achieved is in tempering his personality by the positive yoking of the five tendencies, namely, desires, wrath, pride, avarice and egocentricity to contain them. Instead of man's helpless reaction

to these vigorous urges, overwhelming him and driving him wild, one has to harness and control these powers to the best effect. The whole matter is reduced to the proposition, whether one remains a hapless witness to his destruction by these forces, inherent in his nature, defined as weaknesses, for which the ancients chanted mantras as antidote, or, to be the wielder of the moral sword to cut them down to size and to one's emancipation as the *gurmukh*.

**Karam, is therefore, used by Guru Nanak predominantly as a heavenly opportunity to perform righteous deeds.** That was its earliest connotation when in the Vedic period it stood for pious and religious acts. It was the later corruption when it was qualified as *kukaram*, bad deeds and *sukaram*, good deeds. **In Persian, karam is benevolence, grace, kindheartedness and a good turn. Karam in the Sikh parlance, thus, means heavenly grace, gracious act and kindness.** It has been also used simply as an act or deed. It depends on the interpreter how it is correctly construed. It is possible to totally go haywires in narrow-minded explanations, depending on the stretch and vision of the scholar. But it should be clear that the '*karam-phal*' syndrome of 'action-and-reaction' as defined in the ancient religions does not pertain to the Sikhs of the Guru, who are steered by heavenly discipline and live in God. They are protected by the Creator who is also the Doer and the Sikh understands it while going about his chores.

**After all, to be good, does not need inducements of bonus or rewards.** It is the sacred duty of all of us to do good and act for the improvement and betterment of the society in general. Let others roast in hell or bask in heavenly comforts for their bad and good deeds, but a Sikh lives a pure life in step with God as his role-model and there is no need for such devices creating threat or fear psychosis at motivation. It is not rarely that one comes across such peaceful and contented Sikhs who create serenity and harmony wherever they happen to be, in whatever situation, as they remain merged in God. Gurbani exhorts the Sikhs to search for such company of the saintly so that evil is routed and truth prevails.

