

The Reincarnation Theory: A Viewpoint

SWAMI PARTHASARATHY*

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SOME THINKERS BELIEVE THAT when a person dies, nothing remains. That death is the end of his personality, and that there is no trace of him thereafter. Others disagree with this view. They do not consider death as finality. They believe in the continuity of life. And that the present incarnation is only a link in the chain of one's entire life. Yet others posit the existence of imaginary realms of heaven and hell where they believe humans go after their death. These beliefs are not based on rational analysis and derivation. Instead, you must collect relevant data, study them carefully and draw intelligent conclusions from them. Only then would you get a clearer idea of the phenomenon of birth and death.

When a person dies, his gross body perishes in that form. The material of the body merges with earth. Science declares that something cannot pass into nothing. So states the law of indestructibility of matter, the law of conservation of energy. The same law should apply to the subtle body that comprises his thoughts, feelings and desires, resulting from his mental and intellectual forces. His inner energy comprises subtle matter. The energy of the subtle body however cannot vanish at the time of death. In this world births and deaths are innumerable. The mental energies of all those persons cannot disappear or appear all of a sudden. That would be against the laws of science.

Life is a series of experiences. The progression of life is determined by desires. Desires drive you from one experience to another. In philosophic terms an experience is dead and another born, every moment. Thus your desires drive you through a continuous procession of birth and death. This procession will continue in perpetuity until the desires are eradicated from your personality. Desires are the cause and the experiences of life are the effect. At the moment of death a person is left with innumerable, unfulfilled desires. To prevent further manifestation, these desires have to be made extinct. The cause has to be removed to erase the effect. Once the desires are completely exhausted, the birth-death cycle ends. That is the state of self-realisation or God-realisation.

Different types of people are born with distinct tendencies, inclinations, desires. Every human being enters the world with his pattern of thought, feeling, desire. And people are born with a variety of desires. These variegated desires could not have emerged from nowhere. To accept that they have come out of nothing would again be as irrational as to presume that they disappear suddenly. Such presumptions would be violating the code of science. Hence the great thinkers of the past made a careful scrutiny of this world and found hordes of desires disappearing and appearing perennially. After a thorough analysis of this phenomenon they managed to somehow connect the unaccounted gain of desires of the born to the unaccounted loss of desires of the dead. They conducted what was a sort of audit of the accounts of life. They applied the law of causation which governs the entire universe at all times. They took the desires of the dead as the *cause* and linked them to the desires of the born as the *effect*. This observation is in accordance with the law of indestructibility of matter, the law of causation, the law of *karma*. This ingenious correlation of cause and effect projects the theory of reincarnation. It is only a

scientific deduction from the available data, but cannot be proved experimentally. Hence, it is presented as a theory.



Guru Granth Sahib: The World-view in Sikhism

DR. DHARAM SINGH*

* Head, the prof. Harbans Singh Mem. Deptt. of Encyclopedia of Sikhism, Punjabi University, Patiala 147 002, Punjab.

SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB¹ is not just a Scripture or the holy book, or an anthology of hymns for the Sikh religion; it is a lot different and much more. It is the spiritual mentor, the preceptor, the Living Guru for humanity. The Sikhs revere it², and not worship it. It is the presiding spiritual and moral guide in every Sikh shrine but it is not meant to be the object of ritualist worship at an altar. It is the guiding principle for a Sikh in all spheres of life: he seeks guidance from and prays to it while starting a new venture, for the successful completion of an auspicious ceremony in one's life or family, to tide over a crisis in individual or communal life, and so on.

It was Guru Arjun Dev, Fifth Guru of the Sikh faith, who completed the task of compiling, canonizing and codifying this scripture for the Sikh faith. He put together, in a highly organized manner, his own compositions as well as those of his predecessors and of certain holy men of Hindu and Muslim traditions. Bhai Gurdas, the well known Sikh exegete, acted as his amanuensis and completed the job on Bhadon *vadi ekam* Bikrami 1661 (1 August 1604). The volume was soon thereafter installed in the newly completed building of the Harimandar (now popularly known as the Golden Temple) and Bhai Buddha was appointed the first *granthi* or officiant. At that time it contained compositions of the first five Gurus, from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Arjun Dev, apart from those of some other holy men. It has since then remained unaltered except that the hymns of the ninth Guru were included therein by Guru Gobind Singh before he bestowed on it the Office of the Guru.

Word of God: No doubt, the Adi Granth came to be called and regarded as the Guru Granth Sahib only after Guru Gobind Singh had formally bestowed on it the status of Guru just before his passing away in 1708, but indications were available earlier as to this future development. There are several references within the text itself which declare *bani* or Word as the Guru³. In the Sikh tradition also there are instances when the person-Guru showed great reverence to the Granth Sahib, or more precisely, to the Word as contained therein. It is said that when the Scripture was ready and it was installed in the Harimandar, Guru Arjun Dev placed it on the *manji sahib* (i.e. a higher platform) and himself slept on the bare floor (i.e. the lower platform). This is unlike the Christian concept which holds that the Word became flesh, that is, incarnate in the person of Jesus who as such became the central point of faith and worship. In Sikhism, the Word does not become incarnate in flesh, rather it is the Spirit that becomes determinate in the Word. In other words, the Guru in his spirit being is immanent in the *bani* or Word which is envisioned as the Guru Eternal.

The Sikh scripture is an attempt to put into popular language intelligible to people in a particular spatio-cultural context what has been revealed to the preceptors and what they uttered without any addition or alternation on their part⁴. These utterances

describe as well as prescribe the human ideal: the Scripture as a whole provides the general framework of structure in which that ideal is to be achieved. The Khalsa as created by Guru Gobind Singh in fulfillment of Guru Nanak's mission is the agency to which the task of social transformation has been endowed. However, both the structure and the agency must function in harmony to bring about peace and co-existence, love and compassion, equality and justice in human social affairs⁵.

Divine Omnipresence: Sikhism is a way of life lived according to the world-view enunciated by its spiritual preceptors in their hymns as contained in the Scripture. In the Sikh world-view the material manifest world we live in is not *mithia* or *maya* which hinders man's spiritual progression and thus need be renounced. This medieval tendency stands rejected, rather one can see the dominant overtones of divinizing the mundane world as the abode of the Lord⁶: since God resides in this world, man must not renounce it, rather efforts be made to transform it into *sach khand*. This presence of Divine in this manifest world implies that this world is also true like its Creator, though it is not everlasting like Him. Since God is believed to be present in the created phenomena, the idea of searching for him in forests and mountains is futile: it is like going away from God. **This forms the basis of the Sikh stress on householder's life vis-à-vis asceticism. Rejecting the idea of life-negation and world-negation, the Scripture advises man to aspire and strive for his spiritual ideal while living a normal life of familial and social obligations⁷.** Instead of renouncing the world, man must have total commitment to God and should ever remember Him as the sole power in each being and behind each action. He should ever feel and realize His presence in each being and at every place. This would mean spiritual enlightenment or inward illumination having its natural corollary in a certain specified social behaviour marked by the values of love, equality, justice, altruism and service.

However, I must hasten to add that the divine presence in the created phenomena is *qua* spirit, it is not physical. In fact, the Sikh metaphysics stresses the unity of God and He is taken as one, with no co-equal or rival. He is self-existent and the only One not subject to *kal* or time. Thus, the idea of divine incarnation in human or in any other form is rejected. This manifest world, and all that we find in this world including humans, gods, *et al.*, are creations of God who is not only the creator of everything and every being but is also immanent in the creation, thus lending them essential divinity. As creator, He is transcendent but He becomes immanent as He manifests Himself, as Spirit, in His creation. In the transcendent state, He is formless (*nirakar*) and without attributes (*nirgun*) but assumes attributes (*sagun*) as he manifests himself in different forms of His creation.

Astral Spirit: In the creation, man on planet earth is both the central player for achieving God's purpose. His status is high because he is the only "conscious" being with potential to develop his consciousness to such a level as to realize his true self and achieve mystical unity with the Divine. Like other creation, man is also, in essence, divine: there are references in the Sikh Scripture to the effect that human body is made of five perishable material elements, but God has put in it a sixth element⁸ which is the Life Force of body and which is not perishable like the other five elements which constitute the body. This everlasting sixth element, called *atman*, is also called a divine particle⁹. Thus, human body becomes the temple of God, and the Scripture advises man to keep it pure – in thought, word and deed. It is

this body which is going to serve as means for the soul to realize God. This explains for the Sikh preference for the proper upkeep of body rather than put it to any hard penances.

Metaphysics: Let this be clarified here that human soul is divine in nature, but it is not identical with Divine. The often quoted example in the Indian religious literature to connote the difference or relationship between individual soul and the supreme Soul is that of sea water and the water contained in a pitcher. The scripture also uses the example of sea water and the waves: the latter are born of the water, but show their distinct existence for a while only to merge back into sea water¹⁰. The human soul is essentially related to the supreme Soul, gets separated from it to live brief bodily existence(s) and to finally coalesce with it. The scripture explains it by saying that God places his *joti* in human body, human being lives a short span of life in the mundane world to realize his divine potential, and then this *joti* once again is reabsorbed in its original source. Guru Gobind Singh, in his *Akal Ustati* (87), has explained this relationship between *jivatma* (individual soul) and *paramatma* (supreme Soul) with the help of a beautiful extended metaphor:

*As out of a single fire
Millions of sparks arise;
Arise in separation
But come together again
When they fall back in fire.
As from a heap of dust
Grains of dust swept up
Fill the air, and filling it
Fall in the heap of dust.*

*As from a single stream
Countless waves rise up;
And, being water, fall
Back in water again.*

*So from God's form emerge
Alive and inanimate things;
And since they rise from Him,
They shall fall in Him again.*

What, according to the Sikh metaphysics, is the spiritual ideal of man? It is neither the acquisition of a kingdom nor the achievement of *mukti* or liberation – the former is the highest objective man can aspire for in mundane life, whereas the latter is the highest spiritual ideal according to most of the world religions. **Rather, the ideal before the Sikh is love for God¹¹. And, the Sikh way of life shows that there is no inherent mutual contradiction between love for the Divine vis-à-vis *mukti* or liberation. Man's union with Divine in an expression of selfless love implies a stage of consciousness when he lives a bodily existence in this world but is ever mystically one with God.** When such a man discards his bodily vestures, his soul coalesces with Divine and he is free from the process of transmigration. The former stage is *jivan-mukti*, and the latter *videh mukti*. In other words, the former is synonymous with love for the Divine and the latter is a natural corollary of the former. This explains the Sikh preference for the former. As for the

Sikh preference for Divine love vis-à-vis *raj*, we must emphasize that it does not imply renunciation of the world, rather Sikhism exhorts man to live an active and robust but a **righteous** social life.

The Sikh concept of God being that of an ultimate Reality which is indescribable and incomprehensible, *nirakar* and *nirgun*, how can one express one's love for the formless God and how can one become the object of His love and grace? If the former is the Sikh spiritual ideal, the answer to the latter can be found in the Sikh way of life. The Sikh metaphysics stresses, alongside the unity of God, the spiritual unity and ethnic equality of man. God is the creator of all, and implicitly all humans have within them the same divine particle. There is considered no inherent inequality among mankind, whatever their apparent difference caused by regional and cultural reasons. On the other hand, all human beings are taken as essentially one with God and equal among themselves as well as in His eye. **The best way to love God or realize God is to love the mankind – only they realize God who love, and the best way to love God is to love the beings created by Him and in whom He pervades qua spirit.** In the inverse manner, injuring or harming a fellow human is like injuring the Divine. This determines the human social behaviour and helps man cultivate the moral and ethical values of mutual love, equality, compassion, and human dignity.

Unity in Diversity: The idea of love and equality is not simply an intra-religious issue in Sikhism which extends these values to the inter-religious and inter-community relations as well. In modern-day society of religious and cultural pluralism, man must learn to live peacefully with other faiths and faith-communities. The attitude of religious exclusivism is sure to cause bad blood in inter-religious relations which no one can today afford, because, as says Hans Kang, there can be no peace among the nations without peace among religions. **Sikhism is a pluralistic religion which acknowledges the validity and genuineness of each faith and appreciates all prophets irrespective of their spatio-cultural affiliations.** It does not condemn any scripture, rather condemns those who do not reflect on them and act upon them. It is also critical of some of the arid and effete practices prevalent in some traditions. It rejects polemics, and instead recommends dialogue to sort out intra-religious or inter-religious issues. It recommends first listening to the ideas and views of the other before expressing your own. We need to revive the spirit, I stress the spirit, of institutions like *sarbat khalsa* and *gurmata*.

Ego & its Remedy: Man is in essence one with God, but in his ignorance and under the influence of *haumai*, he fails to realize this essential oneness, rather he develops an egotistical attitude of dualism. This causes his differentiation from God and consequently from other human beings. *Haumai* makes man degenerate – spiritually as well as morally. Spiritually, it keeps *jivatma* separated from the *paramatma*, thus keeping it in bondage leading to man's continued transmigration; socially, it causes man's differentiation from other beings, leading to strife among individuals and communities/nations. This separation, both spiritual and social, denotes a mental state, a sort of veiling of the consciousness of man, resulting in man's duality from God as well as from other beings. Such a person is called *manmukh* or self-oriented in the scripture. However, the Scripture calls *haumai* two-pronged: it is both the **malady** and the **remedy**. It is flexible to lean to the other side as well – towards God, to feel His presence and realize His will. In this situation, the

veil of darkness melts away and the malady gets transformed into remedy and blessing. The darkness of ignorance is gone, sense of duality ceases and man can see and realize the Lord.

The **pentad** of evils – *kam, krodh, lobh, moh, and ahankar* – are the corollaries of *haumai*, and man is advised to guard himself against these five evils which ‘break into the human body and plunder the nectar of Divine Name’¹². All actions performed under the influence of *haumai* or its correlates go against the will of God whereas it becomes man to make continuous volitional efforts to negate the individual will’s egoity vis-à-vis the Divine will and instead identify the former with the latter. This connotes a mental state when man gives credit for whatever he does to the Divine. Following the tenets of the Scripture, he feels and realizes the divine presence in all places and beings and he is ever sure of the Divine working through him in all his social actions and behaviour. This identification of two wills also implies one’s spiritual unity with Divine as well as with other human beings.

Meditation: The Scripture recommends *nam-simran* as the only means to achieve this end. For this man will have to eradicate *haumai* because it stands in binary opposition to *nam*. No doubt, *nam-simran* has been a key concept in the scripture, but it has not been explicitly defined or explained anywhere therein. We agree that like any other feeling, it is also beyond perfect definition, yet different scholars have given different definitions. It is certainly not the repetition of one or the other names of God or just reciting one *bani* or the other. Of course, reading and reciting *bani* is necessary, but it has to be followed by understanding of the text and then by trying to **live** those precepts in one’s social life.

As we said earlier, God in Sikhism is both transcendent and immanent, *sagun* (with attributes) and *nirgun* (without attributes). Human mind has invented various attributes for God because his object of his love and adoration whom he has to remember and attune himself with must obviously be a personalized entity. **However, this entity in Sikh metaphysics is not a deity: the idea of idol-worship or divine incarnation stands rejected in Sikhism.** On this spiritual sojourn, man needs the guidance and help of Guru¹³. The guidance and help of the Guru is essential, but this does not mean taking the seeker to a higher stage of spirituality as if by miracle or on a crutch. **The Guru simply guides, but the seeker has to tread the path himself.** Man can do so by following the Guru’s advice and not by a mere affirmation of faith in a particular Guru. In other words, Guru does not intercede with the Divine on behalf of man, but gives him the blessing of *nam-simran* which can transform the *niané* (ignorant ones) into *siané* (enlightened ones), which can help man progress inwardly and outwardly.

Grace: The last - but a very crucial - factor in enabling man realize the ideal is the divine grace. Of course, Sikhism does not view divine grace in isolation from human love for God which is best expressed through deeds of love and altruism for mankind in general. **Implicitly, human endeavours become complementary to divine grace for the attainment of spiritual objective, thus distinguishing it from the Christian concept which treats it as all-inclusive and self-sufficient.** In Sikhism, the pre-requisite is no doubt divine grace because it blesses man with the perception that enables him to understand the Word and thus discern God within and around himself. The Divine grace reveals the way, Guru guides him on the way, but it is the man who has to tread that path, who has to participate in social activity –

sharing his perception with others and in the process cleansing the society of all evils and building a social structure which is conducive to let this perception flourish. In fact, it is this human quest, human endeavour which leads to the spiritual ideal revealed to man by the divine initiative. This has been beautifully explained in the *Japuji(ji)* with the help of *Panj Khand* wherein the seeker's quest ends with his arrival in *Sach Khand*, the last and the apex of the integrated multi-dimensional progress where he realizes oneness with God as also with entire mankind.



References

1. Granth means a volume and Guru means the spiritual preceptor; both *sri* and *sahib* which have been used as prefix and suffix, respectively, are just honorifics.
2. The Sikhs bow before it, cover their heads in its presence and remove their shoes in veneration for the holy Word. All this does not amount to a part of ritualistic worship.
3. Guru Granth Sahib, IV 982 (*bani guru guru hai bani vichi bani amaratu sare/ gurbani kahai sevak jan mania pratakhi guru nistare*)
4. Guru Granth Sahib, I, 722 (*jaisi mai avai khasam ki bani taisara kari gianu ve Lalo*)
5. N. Muthumohan, *Essential Postulates of Sikhism*. Ed. Dharam Singh (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2003) 128
6. *Ibid.*, II, 463 (*ihu jagu sachai ki hai kothari sache ka vichi vasu/ ikna hukami samailae ikna hukame kare vinasu*)
7. *Ibid.*, I, 522 (*nanak satiguri bhetiai puri hovai jugati/ hasandia khelandia painandia khavandia viche hovai mukti*)
8. *Ibid.*, I, 1030 (*panch tatu mili kaia kini/ tis mahi ram ratanu lai chini/ atam ramu ramu hai atam/ hari paiai sabadi vichara he*)
9. *Ibid.*, Kabir, 871 (*kahu kabir ihu ram ki ansu/ jas kagad par mitai na mansu*)
10. *Ibid.*, III, 441 (*man tu joti sarup hai apana mulu pachhanu/ man hari ji terai nail hai gurmati rangu manu*)
11. *Ibid.*, V, 534 (*raj na chahahu mukti na chahahu manu priti charan kamalare*)
12. *Ibid.*, III, 600 (*isu dehi andari panch chor vasahi kamu krodhu lobhu mohu ahankara/ amaratu lutahi manmukh nahi bujhahi koi na sunai pukara*). There are numerous such other references wherein these five are referred to in a variety of ways; at places it also makes reference to certain other evils along with these and they include kusangat, trishna, ninda and others.
13. In the scripture, Guru stands as much for the human teacher or preceptor as for Divine and we find the word used in both senses. However, this identification of the Guru with God is not the identification of the person of the Guru with God, but Guru conceived as *sabda* or word as revealed by Him. It is Guru's Word (believed to be revelation and thus making Guru, Word and God synonymous) which leads man on the way to mukti. Also, in Sikh tradition Guru means the ten spiritual preceptors, from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh; no other person however pious or enlightened can claim or be accepted as such. After Guru Gobind Singh, the office of Guru is occupied for all times to come by the Guru Granth Sahib or more precisely by the Word as contained therein.