

# The Sikh Religious Movement as a Liberating Influence\*

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## PART II#

\* Editor's Note: This brilliant exposition by the late Prof. Anil Chandra Banerjee was first published in *The Sikh Review*, April 1973. A quarter century later, it bears repetition for the New Generation.

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For a rational reorientation of the prevailing social outlook changes other than the relaxation or abolition of caste were also necessary. Sikhism fostered a new concept of life in three directions. First, it rejected asceticism, a practice hallowed by Hindus and Muslims alike. Guru Nanak killed – by example as also by precept – the old idea that a householders' life was a barrier to spiritual process. He was, of course fully aware of the evil effect of "domestic entanglements":

Entanglements are mother, father, and the whole world;

Entanglements are sons, daughters, and women;

By the entanglements of worldly love and sin man perisheth.<sup>37</sup>

Instead of advocating escape from such "entanglements" through renunciation of worldly life, Guru Nanak asked man to "abide pure among the impurities of the world". Asked by *Siddha Charpat* how man can cross the ocean called the world, he replied:

As a lotus in the water remaineth dry, as also a water-fowl in the stream,

So by meditating on the Word and repating God's name, shall thou be unaffected by the world.<sup>38</sup>

**Thus a direct link was established between the daily life of the humble householder and the spiritual pilgrimage which had hitherto been considered as the special field for ascetics. Domestic life was given a new dignity; a new vigour was brought into society.**

It was in conformity with this new orientation of social outlook that Guru Nanak emphasized the importance of honest labour as an ingredient of religious life:

He who eats what he has earned by his own labour and gives some (to others) – Nanak, he it is who knows the true way.<sup>39</sup>

In a few simple words Guru Nanak urged the need for honest labour for livelihood, underlined the value of social co-operation and pointed out the easiest path of salvation for the common man. In the context of social conditions prevailing in his age this was a revolutionary concept of the duties of man. **It prepared the ground for the development of a community dedicated to work, fully conscious of personal and social responsibilities, and anxious to reconcile service to man with service to God.** Many bhagats, including Kabir earned their livelihood by taking up their respective caste professions, but none of them specifically urged respect for a householder's life or declared that it was "the true way". What Guru Nanak taught he practiced. When the period of his travels came finally to an end he settled at Kartarpur, "put aside all garments of renunciation" (as Bhai Gurdas said) and "found time to attend to agriculture".<sup>40</sup> Even then "the unstruck music (of devotional ecstasy) resounded endlessly".<sup>41</sup>

The degraded position of women among both Hindus and Muslims of Guru Nanak's days weakened family life and sapped the vitality of society as a whole. Gorakhnath is said to have described women as "tigresses" who are "in continual search of beautiful men whom they eat". Guru Nanak's concept of the position of women in society was fundamentally

different. **He offered women a new status of high respect and dignity as mothers and partners in life. Indeed, his recognition of the social status of women is a pleasant and meaningful departure from medieval ideas:**

Of a woman are we conceived,  
Of a woman we are born,  
To a woman are we betrothed and married,  
It is a woman who is a friend and partner of life,  
It is a woman who keeps the race going.

\* \* \* \* \*

Through woman are established social ties.  
Why should we consider woman cursed and condemned  
When from woman are born leaders and rulers?  
From woman alone is born a woman,  
Without woman there can be no human birth.  
Without woman, O Nanak, only the True One exists.<sup>42</sup>

This generous tribute to the role of women in the preservation and proper functioning of society is in complete accord with the position assigned to the householder in the Sikh religion. Those who seek salvation need not keep themselves aloof from women and treat their company as a sinful barrier to spiritual efforts. The concept of woman as a man's helpmate became one of the distinctive features of Sikh society. **This was the first step towards the liberation of women from crippling social restraints.**

In several hymns Guru Nanak speaks of God as a husband and of the devotee as a loving wife; spiritual bliss is likened to connubial happiness:<sup>43</sup>

A young wife sitteth at home her Beloved is abroad; she continually thinketh of Him and pineth away.

Apart from the deep meaning of such verses from the spiritual point of view they give us a glimpse into domestic bliss springing from happy partnership between man and woman. Such partnership was the basis on which a meaningful householder's life would rest. The idealization of connubial happiness and its utilization as a spiritual imagery could not but soften the rigours of daily life and show that heaven and earth could meet even in humble homes.

**There is no doubt that Sikhism served as a liberating influence in the religious and social spheres. It cut off old fetters which crippled the soul of man. It released new religious and social forces which aimed at creating an integrated and vigorous society.**

There were political fetters which urgently needed to be cut off. There were galling restrictions on the personal dress and movement of the Hindus as also on their social ceremonies. In Dera Ghazi Khan, it is said, a Hindu could ride only a donkey.<sup>44</sup> The crippling influence of foreign rule had weakened the moral fibre of the Hindus. "When Bhai Budha asked his father to drive away the invader who was destroying his fields, the latter could only shake his head and confess his inability to do so."<sup>45</sup> Guru Nanak found the demoralized Hindus trying to please their Muslim masters by mimicking their manners, by eating meat prepared in the Muslim fashion, and by adopting Muslim names. Even the Kshatriyas - the fighting caste - had lost their virility.

The Kshatriyas has forsaken their religion and adopted the language of the *molecchas*.<sup>46</sup>

The exclusion of the Hindus from the aristocracy and the bureaucracy - from eminence in court, politics, and administration - crippled their capacity for management of practical affairs. It was - to quote pregnant words used by Sir Thomas Munro in 1824 on the question

of employment of Indians in the Company's service – a "sentence of degradation on a whole people".

The *bhagats* concentrated their eyes on heaven; the earth was a mere passing illusion and all that it could offer was suffering in various forms, convulsions which were a necessary element in the process of decay. Says Kabir:

Man is born and groweth up, and when he hath grown up he dieth;

We see that the world passeth away in this wise.<sup>47</sup>

When "the world passeth away" why should one take notice of even political strife which had serious repercussions on peace and security? The compositions of the *bhagats* do not refer to the political vicissitudes which affected the common man's life. These were irrelevant interruptions in the quest for spiritual bliss. "At the last moment", said Kabir, "nothing is thine."<sup>48</sup>

But Guru Nanak was not at all indifferent to the political environment.<sup>49</sup> Under Lodhi rule, he said:

There is no one who receiveth or giveth not bribes.

The king dispenseth justice when his palm is filled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Greed and sin are ruler and village accountant; falsehood is master of the mind.

Lust, his minister, summoneth and examineth men, and sitteth in judgment on them.

The *qazi* sitteth to administer justice;

He turneth over his beads and invoceth God

But he takes bribes and doeth injustice.

Unlike the leaders of the *bhakti* movement and Indian religious teachers in general, the founder of Sikhism was politically conscious in the sense that he recognized the impact of politics on the common man's life. He said: "This age is like a drawn sword, the kings are butchers." For these "butchers" he had no sympathy:

A kingdom that was a jewel

Was wasted by the dogs,

No one will mourn their passing.<sup>50</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Of Babur's invasion Guru Nanak spoke in piercing words:

With evil as his best man,

Bringing a crowd of sins as his bridal procession,

Like a bridegroom Babur hath hasted from Kabul,

To seize by force as his bride,

O Lallo,

The wealth of Hindustan.<sup>51</sup>

In the flow of blood and tears he saw the worthlessness of the rulers, the cruelty of the invaders, and the helplessness of the people. But never for a moment did he question the justice of the divine order or *hukam* which is beyond the comprehension of mortals:

Just and true is the Lord; just and true is His Judgment.<sup>52</sup>

Thus Guru Nanak's reaction to the greater political storm of his times leads us to the central point of his teachings: submission to the will of God and repetition of His Name. This would prepare the ground for the moral regeneration which would stimulate man's capacity for self-assertion and self-defence. Guru Nanak's immediate purpose was to develop the potentialities of man so that he could qualify himself for succour from God in the crises of life, personal as also general.

He taught man to be fearless. God Himself is “without fear and without hate” (*Mul Mantra*). He who adores the Fearless should be fearless too:

He who is imbued with the fear of the Lord becometh fearless, for one becometh like the one serveth.

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**The only fear which Guru Nanak recommends is the fear of God:**

Without the fear of God none can cross to the other shore,  
Fear of God preserves man’s love of God.

Fear of God burns away lesser fears within the body.<sup>54</sup>

It was in consonance with this teaching that Guru Gobind Singh said:

Take the broom of divine knowledge into thy hand, and sweep away the filth of timidity.<sup>55</sup>

In Guru Nanak’s days, as also in the days of his three immediate successors, the State was not hostile to the Sikhs; indeed, they even benefited from the liberality of Akbar. There was no direct occasion for the Gurus to think of political resistance to the State. Nor was the newly formed community morally and spiritually prepared for the terrible sacrifices which war with the Mughals was certain to involve. **The emergence of a compact, fearless, community, free from the traditional subservience to miracles, superstitions and meaningless rituals, was an accomplished fact by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.** By that time as Guru Arjun said:

The Guru hath cut the fetters of the feet and freed the captive.

The Fifth Guru spoke of moral and spiritual freedom. The question of political freedom was forced on the community by Jahangir’s crude intolerance leading to the first great martyrdom in Sikh history. The changed policy of the State underlined the need for a change in the Sikh way of life without in any manner deviating from the fundamental principles of the faith. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the defence of the faith against the repeated onslaughts of the State demanded resort to arms. By that time moral and spiritual preparations had made considerable progress; under the spiritual and temporal leadership provided by successive Gurus the fear of God had burnt away lesser fears within Sikh hearts. The community felt itself capable of defending its spiritual heritage by responding to Guru Nanak’s never-forgotten call for fearlessness.

The liberating influence of Sikhism in the political sphere operated slowly, for in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Mughal power was at its zenith. In a well-known *pauri* of Bhai Gurdas we are told that Guru Hargobind was called upon to “support a burden intolerable to others.”<sup>56</sup> He took the first steps toward militarization; but his purpose was defensive, for the Mughal State was then too powerful, and an offensive was beyond the capacity of the Sikhs. The transition provoked misgivings within the Sikh community, as we find in the *pauri* of Bhai Gurdas, and Pertab Mal hinted (as Mohsin Fani tells us) that under the guidance of Guru Hargobind the Sikhs were degenerating into buffoons.<sup>57</sup> But the wise patriarch, Bhai Gurdas, knew that “the truth within him cannot possibly be concealed.”

The Mughal Empire delivered its second great blow at the struggling community in 1675. Guru Tegh Bahadur “suffered martyrdom for the sake of freedom of his religion” (as Guru Gobind Singh wrote in his *Bachitra Natak*):

He gave his head but uttered not a groan.<sup>58</sup>

It was now for the disciples to come forward and prove that their Gurus had not died in vain. It was under the Tenth Guru’s leadership that they responded to the call of history. He gave institutional expression to the Sikh community’s mounting urge for self-expression in the military-cum-political sphere. He claimed direct divine sanction for his mission. The True

Lord told him, he wrote:

I have cherished thee as My Son,  
And created thee to extend My religion  
Go and spread My religion there,  
And restrain the world from senseless acts.<sup>59</sup>

Sikhism was no longer on the defensive; it was now prepared for an offensive role. What Guru Hargobind had kept implicit was made explicit through the creation of the Khalsa. For Guru Gobind Singh, God was the Subduer of countries, the Destroyer of the armies of the wicked.<sup>60</sup> **His own role he conceived to be that of “spreading the faith, saving the saints and extirpating all tyrants”.**<sup>61</sup> His predecessors had never spoken in such challenging terms.

There was, however, no real deviation from the essence of Guru Nanak’s teachings. In the Tenth Guru’s compositions we find “the same insistence on the worship of the One True Lord, the same idealization for devotion and surrender, and the same glorification of the Name” as we find in Guru Nanak’s hymns. **The core of Sikhism remained unaffected by the political turmoil through which its votaries passed under Guru Gobind’s leadership.** Indeed, the Tenth Guru’s call evoked splendid response because the twin foundations of the new system – spiritual fervour and freedom from fear – emanated directly from the founder’s teachings. It was with the “broom of divine knowledge”, the Tenth Guru said, that the “filth of timidity” was to be “swept away”.

Blest is his life in this world who repeated God’s Name with his mouth and meditated war in his heart.<sup>62</sup>

Again:

He who repeateth night and day the name of Him whose enduring light is  
unquenchable, who bestoweth not a thought on any but the one God;

\* \* \* \* \*

And in whose heart the light of the Perfect One shineth, he is recognized as a  
pure member of the Khalsa.<sup>63</sup>

Thus war against tyranny was made an integral part of religious life. This was the prelude to the war of liberation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in the establishment of the Sikh State on the ruins of Mughal and Afghan imperialism. The emergence of Banda lay in the logic of Sikh history; the war of liberation was not exotic. It was because of their spiritual fervour that the Sikhs could take every defeat as “a sword slash through a pond”. For the complete reduction of the Sikh power, the great conqueror Abdali said, it would be necessary to wait until their religious fervour had evaporated. That moment did not arrive in his lifetime or even during the reigns of his successors, Timur Shah and Zaman Shah. The unfriendly Muslim author of the *Jangnama* paid a well-deserved tribute to the valour and chivalry of the Sikh warriors: **In no case would they slay a coward or put any obstacle in the way of a fugitive. They do not plunder the wealth and ornaments of a woman.**”

What Ranade said about the Maratha war of independence is no less applicable to the Sikh war of independence: “Mere freebooters and plunderers never could have obtained success in such a war against such a foe. It was a higher moral force which brought out all the virtues of the best men of the nation.” That “higher moral force” was drawn from, and sustained by, the teachings of the Sikh Gurus.

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concluded

References

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41. *Ibid*.
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43. Khushwant Singh, *Hymns of Guru Nanak*, p. 181.
44. H.R. Gupta, *A Life of Guru Nanak*, p. 7.
45. Teja Singh, *The Growth of Responsibility in Sikhism*, p. 2.
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48. *Ibid*.
49. Macauliffe, vol I, p. 232.
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51. *Ibid*, p. 96.
52. *Selections from the Sacred Writings of the Sikhs*, p. 97.
53. *The Panjab Past and Present*, Guru Nanak Quincentenary Volume, p. 419.
54. Khushwant Singh, *Hymns of Guru Nanak*, p. 101.
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56. Macauliffe, vol. IV, pp. 76-77.
57. *Dabistan*, Troyer and Shea, vol. II, p. 113.
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59. Macauliffe, vol. V, pp 296-299.
60. *Ibid*, p. 286.
61. *Ibid*, p. 301.
62. Macauliffe, vol. V, p. 167.
63. Macauliffe, vol V, p. 314-315.