

Human Rights and Sikhism

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Human Rights have remained at the centre of human consciousness everywhere since time immemorial, and most of the mythological stories and wars of every culture and civilization are important pointers to this fact. However, Sikhism, being the youngest and most scientific religion of the world, has no mythology but history. The strong streak of human rights approach runs throughout its history from the very beginning. The history of Sikhism is, in fact, the story of struggle for human rights. This aspect of Sikhism is not much known to the outside world, therefore, misunderstanding about the Sikhs and their religion persist.

The beginning of the story of human rights is found in the Greek mythology in the story of Prometheus, of saving the human beings from the wrath of gods by stealing fire in order to save them from the death by freezing. In fact, it is the story in the defence of human rights and preserving humanity for further progression of civilization. With the advent of historic times, Aristotle (387-222 B.C) gave a concrete shape to this line of thinking. He refuted the illogical ideas and classification of human beings of his teacher, Plato, on the basis of the colour of skin of the people, saying, it is the human essence of human being, which identify them as a class, and not the colour of their skin. He argued against many of the principle ideas of human situation as projected by Plato in his major work, *The Republic* (370 B.C). The basis of human relationship, said Aristotle, is not the Power but Understanding. In his book, *Metaphysics*, Aristotle pressed the search for understanding with an intellectual energy, vision and lucidity saying, "All human beings by nature reach out for understanding", and has shaped the history of human rights of almost every era by initiating the process of scientific and philosophical inquiry.

The struggle for human rights continued for centuries till 1215 A.D, when the first victory was won through the Charter of Liberty, i.e. Magna Carta, exacting some human rights from the English King John. The royal whim of imprisoning and punishing the people was checked, and so called due process of law was put into operation. The supremacy of law was established over the whims of the persons in authority. Perhaps, it was the first milestone on the civilizational movement of human rights. Thereafter, large volume of literature appeared in different forms, focusing on the rights of the people. The aspiration of the people were aroused in this direction and it gave birth to the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, which compelled the British monarchy to pass The English Bill of Rights in 1689. Then the baton passed on to the American people to fight against the British to win back their freedom and basic human rights. The American Revolution which had begun in 1750's, ultimately culminated into America's independence in 1776, giving birth to a new nation, known as the United States of America, with enforceable Bill of Rights in its constitution. This was an upheaval in the sphere of human rights and had a profound influence on the world history. Reference deserve to be made to Thomas Jefferson's bill on religious liberty in 1779 as no other nation so far had provided for complete religious liberty, stating, **'that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions on matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.'**

The French followed with their Revolution in 1789 and The Declaration of The Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The other nations in their constitutions or Bill of Rights followed the American or the French model, as far as the human rights are concerned. The international concern for human rights arose after Two World Wars, with the birth of United Nations in

1945. Starting with Declaration of Universal of Human Rights in 1948 till 2005, constituting International Council of Human Rights, UN has produced large numbers of documents without evolving effect procedure for the implementation of human rights all-around the world.

The history of human rights of the western world is well documented in the books so far written on this subject. However, the Eastern movement's of human rights, due to ignorance or otherwise, finds no mention in the literature of human rights. One major human rights movement is that of the Sikhs and Sikhism, which started with the birth Of Guru Nanak in 1469 A.D. Apart from religion, the revulsion which Guru Nanak felt on the violation of basic human rights of the people is well recorded in his writings, which all are part of Guru Granth Sahib. The corrupt rulers and the dishonest people, who violate the rights of the other people, have been condemned in very harsh words. They have been called dogs, butchers, mischief-monger, hypocrite and ungrateful. When the western scholars had not fully comprehended the expanse and scope of human rights, and their social effect, Guru Nanak enunciated the role of respecting the basic human rights of the people for the whole society. He said:

*'No man shall coerce another;
No man shall exploit another.
Everyone, each individual, has
An inalienable birth-right to seek
And pursue happiness and self-fulfillment
Love and persuasion is the only law
Of social coherence and harmony.'*

(SGGS: 74)

Laying the foundation of human right of dignity and self- respect, he said:

If one goes on living the life of indignity,
Such life is not worth living.
For such life, all eating, is eating in shame.

(SGGS:142)

Corruption, which is the root cause for the violation of human rights, finds condemnation in his *bani* (writing) at many places. His often quoted quote reads as under:

*Nanak, depriving people of their rights,
Is like eating pork for a Muslim
And beef for a Hindu.
Spiritual Mentor would support a person
Only if he is not corrupt.*

(SGGS: 141)

Guru Nanak warned the people of the dangerous effects of corruption at a much earlier time and advised them to live an honest life. Meditate on the name of Almighty, to earn living by honest means and share eating with others, were made the fundamental principles of his new creed, i.e. Sikhism. He started the tradition of *langer*, i.e. common community eating, which is serving the basic human need all around the world in the *Gurdawars* started by his Sikhs. He enjoined his followers to stand up for their rights as well as for the rights of others. Justice, which is the greatest interest of man on earth and is ligament for holding the civilized human beings and nations together, also forms the corner-stone of his creed. He passionately argued that the principles as laid down in his new creed should be defended at all costs, even at the cost of one's life, which are, in fact, the basic human rights .His

clarion call in the defence of basic human rights is crystal clear, when he says:

jxu txu pR[m K[IN ka caxu . isru Wir tll gll m[rl Aaxu .

ietu marig p{ru Wrij{ . isru wlj{ kaiN n klj{ . [SGGS: 1412]

(If you desire to join me in this game of love, in defending the principles as I have down in my new creed, then ever remain ready even to sacrifice your life for that cause.)

The other nine Sikh Gurus followed the master plan in every aspect of life as prepared by the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Devji. The first great occasion in defending the religious human right arose during the life time of the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjun Dev. The Mugal emperor Jahangir felt annoyed at the popularity which Sikhism was gaining among the people. He ordered Guru Arjun Dev to convert to Islam or be ready for death. The Guru refused to convert to Islam, saying that religion is a matter of one's conscience and there cannot be any coercion. He preferred martyrdom to the forced conversion and became the first martyr at the alter of a basic human religious right in the history of Sikhism, perhaps in the history of the world. The sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind, following the teachings of Guru Nanak of respectful living and standing up for your human rights, took up arms against the tyrannical conduct of the Mugal emperors who were violating the human rights of the people. The Sikhs were ordained to use weapons in their and other people's defence and not for any kind of offence.

Then again during the life time of the ninth Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur, Mugal emperor Aurangzeb started the policy of Islamisation of Hindustan, which the Guru opposed as a matter of basic human right's principle. The conflict was natural. First, the Brahmins of Kashmir were chosen for forced conversion. They, in utter helplessness, approached Guru Teg Bahadur for help. The Guru sent the message to Aurangzeb that he should convert the Brahmins only if he succeeds first in converting the Guru to Islam. The challenge was accepted. The Guru was arrested and tortured in order to compel him to accept conversion. The Guru stoically suffered with his five followers but did not accept conversion to Islam. Therefore, the Guru along with his followers was martyred in Delhi on Nov. 11, 1675. This was the second martyrdom in the history of Sikhism in the defence of human rights, but it was different and unparalleled in the history of the world because the Guru suffered martyrdom to uphold the basic human right of religion and freedom of conscience of his ideological opponents.

This was in line of Guru Nanak's teaching as, in Sikhism one is supposed to act to get justice for himself as well as for others. Then came the turn of the tenth and the last Sikh Guru, to play his role on the canvass of history. The Guru was only nine years old when he succeeded as Guru after the martyrdom of his father and Guru in 1675. The times were difficult. However, the Guru conducted himself as per the teachings of his predecessors and the traditions of Sikh history. Before the creation of

Khalsa in 1699A.D, he thought for long years to give a distinctive (Nirala) look to the Khalsa in order to infuse an unyielding spirit in them so that they may play their role in the defence of human rights as per the spirit and teachings of Sikhism. It was a revolution with the slogan: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, based on the unity of humanity. '*Manas ki jaat, sabe eko pehchan-bo*' (Recognize all humanity as one), he said in the Aristotelian sense. Along with the five Ks, turban was bestowed on the Sikhs. The turban of the Sikhs is not only a headgear for them, it is also a symbol of Equality, Fraternity and connective distinctive identity with their Guru.

The Guru and his Sikhs played their role well in defending the human rights of the

people against the mighty Mugal Empire with the spirit, which is unparalleled in the history of the world. The Guru sacrificed whole of his family in the cause of humanity, so that the people may live the life of freedom as per their conscience. The Sikh history of 239 years of Guru period is unique in the history of the world as no other people or faith has given such a sacrificial and persistent fight in the cause of human rights. While paying true tribute to the personality of Guru Gobind Singh and his struggle and sacrifices in the defence of human rights, Lala Daulat Rai - a writer - of eminence said:

Agar na hote Guru Gobind Singh

Tau sunat hotee sab kee!

(If Guru Gobind Singh had not been there then the whole of Hindustan would have been forcibly Islamized)

Perhaps, there cannot be more precise and accurate tribute to the historical role played by Guru Gobind Singh on the canvass of Indian history. It needs fresh analysis of history and recognition of the role played by the Sikhs in the cause of human rights.

After the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 A.D, the Sikh history took a different turn .Banda Bahadur Singh's victory was very short lived and there after serious persecution of the Sikhs continued for more than half a century. However, they fought valiantly for the protection of their life and liberty as well as of others, as per the teachings of Sikhism — never submit to injustice. Their persistence and grit bore fruits and they became victorious to establish their own rule in the land of five rivers i.e. Punjab. Their only monarch Maharaja Ranjit Singh, ruled for forty years and brought peace and prosperity to his kingdom by closing Khyber pass to the foreign invasions after almost twenty three centuries, when Darius, a Turkish king, had attacked India in 5th century B.C. Human Rights of the people were respected in his kingdom and there was complete freedom of religion and its practice. After annexation of Punjab by the British in 1849, the energy of the Sikhs was used for the maintenance of the British Empire. They took part in the Two World Wars on behalf the British to defend democracy with their blood and deaths. Their contribution in those World Wars has not been properly recognized as it finds scant mention in the large number of books written on these wars.

Much need not be said about human rights involvement of the Sikhs after India won freedom in 1947, except the discrimination and violation of their culture-religious rights. 1984 proved a watershed in the history of India as well as of the Sikhs, as on the roads of New Delhi, the life and liberty, which is protected as per the provisions of the Constitution of India, were violated. The genocide of the Sikhs took place. There is sorrow in the heart of the Sikhs, because the people who protected the rights of others now find their own human rights being violated in spite of the fact that protective laws are there at national and international level.

The situation at the international level has become more grave with the passing of the law by the French Parliament in 2005, which bans the turban of the Sikhs in the schools of France. After France, the turban controversy has spread to Belgium, Ireland and America in 2007, which is matter of serious concern for the Sikhs all over the world. The tragedy of whole issue is: that in 21st century, those very founder members of the United Nations are taking U-turn on human rights to which they made solemn commitment while putting their signatures on United Nations Charter in 1945 and thereafter on every Human Rights Declaration and Covenants issued by UN from time to time.

In summing up, it only requires to be said that reversal on human rights at the advent of 21st century is dangerous for future of civilization, world peace and harmony. When the world has become a small village, what is required is understanding and not intolerance of

each other's religious practices and way of life. The Sikhs are troubled all over the world because their basic human religious right regarding turban is being violated through the process of law in many countries in total contravention to the laws of the United Nations. Since UN's charter in 1945, many declarations and numerous covenants on the subject of human rights have been issued, but their implementation is most unsatisfactory. It needs serious consideration of the United Nations to save the people, like the Sikhs, from continuous harassment and humiliation at public places due to violation of their basic human rights. Lastly, the Sikh leadership spread all over the world in every walk of life cannot be absolved from the share of their responsibility of predicament in which the Sikhs find themselves in many countries of the world.

