

# Reverence for Life in Sikh Theology

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## PART III

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SIKHISM BELIEVES THAT WHATEVER and whosoever exists in this world is the creation of God and whatever happens in this world, including the birth and death of a human, is under the will of God: nothing ever happens outside His will. God is not only the creator of all but also permeates all. Thus, the human body is the house of the divine particle within. Torturing and harming the body in any way implies harming and injuring the Creator within. Doing so even by way of practising austerities and penance for any spiritual gain stands rejected. There are numerous passages in the Sikh scripture which reject all *hath-yogic* practices as of any spiritual significance. For example, talking of fasting, Guru Nanak says that going without food is nothing but causing torture to the body (SGGS, I, 905). Kabir is also equally explicit in stating that man can concentrate on and recite the Name Divine only if he has tasted and relished the food: one cannot realize God by abandoning food. In a sarcastic tone typical of Kabir, he condemns those who practise fasting to please the Lord and says that he who abstains from food loses his honour in the three worlds (SGGS, Kabir, 873). Thus, human body which has God residing in it deserves to be treated with reverence.

Sikhism clearly states that man is essentially one with God and the ultimate aim of his life is to realize this oneness. This is what we call God-realization or self-realization, and this state of liberation also marks an end to the process of transmigration. There are several scriptural hymns wherein a human being is chided for not having worked towards the realization of this objective and for having wasted life in worldly pursuits. The idea is reiterated several times with the help of an imagery - comparing this human body with the earth wherein seed of Name Divine is to be sown (SGGS, III, 1048). This no doubt implies that this human life is a gift from God and it has been endowed with a specified aim before it. Man can work toward the achievement of this prescribed ideal only through the medium of his body. This gives birth to the doctrine of the sanctity of human life. However, it may not be possible to resolve, from what we find in the scripture, in any satisfactory manner whether this doctrine implies special value in the life of "a member of our species" [a mere sentient being] or special value in the life of "a person" [a rational and self-conscious being]: it remains open for debate among theologians.

All beings that we come across in this world are the creation of God. He is the sole creator of all. He is also solely responsible for their preservation and annihilation as well. Since giving life is in the hands of God, any human attempt at terminating one's own life (suicide) or of someone else would imply going against the will of God. In medieval India when Sikhism originated, there were (and in a way still are) prevalent customs like *santhara* (some of the Jain monks resort to it as they 'voluntarily' give up eating and drinking till death overtakes them), female infanticide (killing of the female infant at the time of birth), *sati* (burning of a widow on the pyre of her husband), etc. The practice of *santhara* is still prevalent, especially among the *sadhus* and *sadhvis* of the Svetambar sect of the Jains, and the person resorting to it is lauded by the followers. The practices of female infanticide

and *sati* have their basis in the unenviable position of woman in society. She occupies a subordinate position in the patriarchal society, but her position becomes worse in the poor societies especially in India where she suffers oppression as a woman and as a member of the oppressed caste or class. This sexist discrimination and oppression denied her an independent personality of her own which in a way forced her to commit *sati* after the death of her husband.

The Sikh Gurus first provided ideational basis in their hymns for equality between man and woman. Guru Nanak in one of his hymns says that she deserves respect as mother of humankind. They also undertook several concrete steps to improve her position in society and for her socio-religious rehabilitation. She was assigned an active role in the socio-religious life of the community and she acted both as a preacher as well as a soldier during the Guru-period. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikh faith, has used Bhagauti, a name with a clear feminine implication, for God, perhaps to complement the exclusive masculinity of the Divine image. In his autobiographical *Bachitra Natak* also, he designates God by a composite name Mahakal-Kalika (the masculine Mahakal is juxtaposed to Kalika which is feminine). Obviously, references here to Bhagauti or Kalika or Bhavani are not references to the Puranic goddess, but to the Creator-Lord: the One who created this entire universe came to be known as Bhavani, says the Guru (*Chaubis Autar*).

The Sikh tradition, supported by the Rahitnama literature (formularies of Sikh spiritual-ethical code), lays clear injunctions against female infanticide, *pardah*, dowry and *sati*. Some of these Rahitnamas claim to have been written under the personal directive of the Tenth Master, or at least some of the authors were contemporaries of the Guru. The Rahitnamas also permit widow remarriage for her rehabilitation in social life. These denounce any kind of marginalization of woman. Chastity and fidelity, two important constituents of the sanctity of family life as well as of social relations, are no more the virtues expected of woman alone: they apply to women as much as they apply to men and even to the rulers. Guru Gobind Singh, in one of his hymns, asks man to love his spouse and never ever dream of sharing his bed with another woman. Bhai Nand Lal, a devout Sikh of Guru Gobind Singh and a poet in Punjabi and Persian, has to his credit three works which also happen to be the first in the category of Rahitnamas. Herein man is advised to abjure adultery and prostitutes. Similarly, there are Rahitnamas which advise man to shun female infanticide and even recommend social ostracisation of those who indulge in this evil. Similarly, customs of *pardah*, dowry and *sati* are also condemned.

The practice of Infanticide, especially a female infant or foetus is immoral and irreligious. The question arises whether abortion (killing of embryo or fetus) is ethically a valid act. In the Indian context, abortion is resorted to, broadly speaking, in two kinds of situations - unwanted pregnancy resulting from adulterous relations and female fetus. It is difficult to find a direct answer to the question in the scripture, but the message seems clear: the *rahitnamas* speak against adultery and female infanticide, whereas the latter evil has now taken the form of female foetus. Passing prohibitory laws against abortion or foetus will be of no avail unless we follow, as recommended in the Sikh canonical and formulary literature, a life committed to chastity and raise the position of woman equal to that of man. Polemics on issues whether fetus is a human being or when a human life begins is like splitting hairs whereas the need is to eradicate the causes behind these evils. As for the question of embryo experimentation and the use of fetal tissue for medical purposes, there may not be a direct answer to their ethical validity or otherwise. However, Sikhism assigns man the responsibility to work for the welfare and betterment of mankind and society at large; and

we have to see whether this experimentation and research is for the fulfillment of the above purpose.

Besides the killing the foetus in the womb, there are frequent instances of men killing other men, and even seeking validity for suicide, as a gesture of mercy (euthanasia), or killing animals to satiate one's palate (meat-eating). In tribal societies, killing an innocent member of the tribe was a serious crime, with the implicit meaning that killing a member of the other tribe was acceptable. However, in modern-day nation-states this protection has generally extended to all within the nation's territorial boundaries. It is only in cases like self-defence, war and capital punishment that taking life has been declared morally defensible, and even capital punishment has been done away with in several countries of the world. Sikhism favours peace and wants to base it on the inter-religious and intra-religious equality of man, and it implies cessation of aggression, exploitation and oppression and neither holding anybody in fear nor submitting to anybody's fear. Peace in Sikh thought is of paramount significance but justice in human affairs is an overriding value for which even the price of peace is not considered too high. Sikh history is full of examples when they suffered in their peaceful resistance to oppression and injustice but took to the sword when all other means failed: the latter is justified but only as a last resort, says Guru Gobind Singh. This resistance however has to be for a righteous cause and with the aim of perpetuating lasting peace. War for the sake of acquiring territory or power or any such personal gain is not approved of in the Sikh tradition.

Generally, one thinks of ending his life by suicide or euthanasia only when he finds it unbearable. This may be the result of an incurable disease or some other disaster. There has in the recent past been campaigning in favour enacting laws allowing voluntary euthanasia. Voluntary euthanasia, to my mind, is scarcely distinguishable from assisted suicide. There are also voices asking for involuntary (when the patient refuses to give consent) and non-voluntary (when the patient is incapable of making a decision) euthanasia. The body is the field of actions and one reaps what one sows, says a scriptural hymn (SGGS, V, 78). The deeds done even while within the four walls of the house become known throughout the four realms: he who practices virtue and righteousness goes by the name of a virtuous/righteous person and he who commits sinful deeds is known a sinner (SGGS, II , 138). In another longer hymn, the scripture says that the moon has not been able to efface the stigma of his misdeeds even though he abides on Shiva's forehead and ever bathes in the Ganga; Siva, the destroyer of many sins and said to be the master of the three worlds could not get rid of the effects of the sin of cutting of Brahma's head even though he wandered from one centre of pilgrimage to the other; sea cannot remove the saltiness caused by its own deeds even though nectar, the moon, the elysian cow, Lakshami, miraculous tree, sun's steed and the shrewd physician Dhanantar arose from it; Hanuman failed to get rid of his loin-cloth which he got because of his deeds although he was otherwise strong enough to have burnt the fortress of Lanka, uprooted the garden of King Ravan, brought the healing herb for Lakshman and thus pleased Rama; thus the effect of deeds done in the past cannot be effaced except by facing its effects (SGGS, Trilochan, 695).

Thus, trying to put an end to life either through suicide or euthanasia is against the laws of Nature. Man must willingly accept the will of the Divine. Any human intervention in the divine scheme of functioning is treated as blasphemous. We can here give the instance of Baba Atal, son of Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru of the Sikh faith, who once innocently revived a dead friend. When the Guru came to know of this, he is said to have chided his

young son for having interfered in the Divine will. This example could be further extended as an argument against human attempt to give or take human life either by suicide or euthanasia.

The use of animals for food is probably the oldest and the most widespread form of animal use. In recent times, animals have also begun to be used for medical experimentation. There are other ways also in which animals are tortured and ill-treated but the former two are the examples of large scale, systematic speciesism. The Sikh scripture no doubt speaks clearly against the consumption of all kinds of intoxicants including smoking, but it does not say much about the eating habits of man. Perhaps the best comment in this regard is Guru Nanak's advice not to eat anything the consumption of which produces pain in body and evil thoughts in mind (SGGS, I, 16).



**(End of Part III)**  
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