

Gurus of the Sikhs: One Vision One Mission

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PART II®

* Excerpted from the *Guru Nanak Quincentennial Lecture* by the late Prof. Ray, the celebrated social, scientist delivered by him at Punjabi University, Patiala in 1969, when he was Director, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

® The first part was published in the April issue of *The Sikh Review*.

The Moral Law:

In the socio-religious and ethical code of any society, there is always a series of “do’s” “don’ts”, and the Sikh code was no exception. But in this code there was one item which is somewhat uncommon, namely, that one must not break a vow once taken, a promise once made. To this basic religio-spiritual and ethical discipline Guru Gobind Singh seems to have added another: the social imperative of developing fearlessness and courage, consciousness of strength and power, and absolute faith in the ultimate victory of the forces of good over those of evil. Frankly and clearly, he was seeking to integrate the ideal of ethical purity and spiritual aspiration of the *rshis* of the old Indian tradition with the aims and aspirations of the *kshatriya* of the same tradition. ***What is important to note here is that the Sikh code is altogether social and secular in its significance and rears up an image and vision of a faith which is deeply involved not only in religio-spiritual matters, but equally in matters socio-temporal.***

The *Rehatnamas* of Bhai Daya Singh and Bhai Chaupa Singh, for instance, which in parenthesis, are recognised as not so canonical, go on elaborating the basic ethical code of the Sikhs, laying down thereby a complete code of social behaviour of an individual Sikh, as much as of the Sikh community. Much of it is directed not only against the system of *jāti* and against the absolute authority of priesthood and sacred texts, as in Hinduism and Islam, but also against all external forms, rites and rituals of both Hinduism and Islam. **The latter were replaced by a much smaller set of new ones which were simple, direct and short, without any priest anywhere in any of these.** Besides, a Sikh was asked not to steal and indulge in gambling, not to cheat anybody and not to break a promise, but much more importantly, never to run away from his adversary in the battle field. Positively, he was required to contribute regularly a part of his income to the socio-religious community which he belonged to, practice charity in the name of the Guru, and help any body in need and distress in whatever way he was capable of. A most important injunction was that a Sikh must not make any distinction between the rich and the poor; on the contrary, he must consider the rich and the poor, the high and the low as absolutely of equal status. For closer integration the Sikh society encouraged connubium not only between Sikhs coming from various Hindu *jatis*, high and low, but also, not unoften, between Hindu and Muslim converts to the faith of the Gurus.

Toward a Unified Purpose:

Here was, thus, the mission of a unified and integrated society distinct in appearance and behaviour pattern from that of both the Hindus and Muslims. Individual members of this society were supposed to dedicate themselves to the service of God and men. **Pure of soul and pure of conduct, free of *samskaras* or sacraments, and free of all external formalities of social and religious**

behaviour, they were also supposed to be fearless and always prepared to fight against all forces of evil, and give up their lives if need be, in pursuance of such causes. He was also supposed to make no distinction between the high and the low, the rich and the poor and to consider every body as brother or comrade in a common cause. Whether an individual Sikh could live up to this ideal or not was immaterial; but that this ideal did build up a social mission of great significance and that countless thousands aspired to live upto it and successfully did so, history has enough evidence to show.

The social economy of the Panjab, as elsewhere in India, was basically rural agricultural, and the individual psyche of the average Panjabi was nourished and fostered by the fields of the village and by what they yielded from season to season in response to the only capital available to a peasant community, namely, hard manual labour put into the land, the seed they managed to save from the previous crop and the manure of cattle-dung and composts made at the backyard of their lowly homesteads. To mark the sowing and reaping and thrashing in the fields, the birth of a calf in the cattle-shed or a child in the family, or to fill up the time in-between all kinds of peasant activities, there were the seasonal festivities, the songs and the dances. There were also a few families of craftsmen and artisans in the villages; perhaps also a few tradesmen who lived mostly in the towns and shuttled between the towns and the villages. But whatever their professions and activities, their heart was on land and their main interest, in agriculture, and their life revolved round the village fields and meadows, the cycle of seasons and seasonal festivities, the cattle, and the simple domesticities of their lives.

As one reads through the *Adi Granth* one can indeed reconstruct with the help of images and symbols, similies and metaphors, words and phrases, the visual image of the manscape and landscape of the Panjab of the first five Gurus. One can also, through the *Baramahas*, all but experience the seasons in the lineaments of one's senses, and can reconstruct the outline of social and domestic life, of religious and economic practices, of articles of food and dress and amusement, of means of communication, irrigation, etc. and of the various professions.

Earth-Bound Idealism:

To this down-to-earth, but God-loving simple Panjab peasant, well-nourished from his childhood by milk and butter-milk, *ghi*, bread made of fresh corn, and fresh vegetables from his fields and gardens, Guru Nanak and his successors offered a new message and a new mission, both simple, direct and straight-forward. **The message consisted in the recognition and acceptance of one and only one God in place of hundreds of gods and goddesses.** He also told them that this God could be reached, not through the intermediary of priests but by one's own honest efforts, through love and devotion and through God's grace, but following a rigorous course of discipline, He gave them a prayer and a routine as keys to this disciplined way of life and the life of a householder given to practical activity in matters of the world as much as in the matters of the spirit.

The mission consisted in rejecting all external forms and practices of religious and spiritual exercises, meaningless rites and rituals, base and degrading social abuses and practices. Positively, it also consisted in the acceptance of the dignity of

manual labour, and the social duty of making no distinction between the rich and the poor and of fighting the forces of evil. Here was a simple and straight-forward message and mission easy to understand and worthwhile following in practice and holding up as an ideal.

That this message and mission would, in the socio-religious situation that prevailed in northern India during those centuries, increasingly draw more and more people within its folds, is not difficult to understand. That the charisma of personalities like Guru Nanak, Guru Arjun, Guru Hargobind, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh would also attract more and more people around them, especially against the background of systematic persecution of the Hindus by Muslim ruling authorities after the martyrdom of Guru Arjun and Guru Tegh Bahadur, is also easily understandable.

Khalsa - As Divine Dispensation:

But what held these countless numbers of people together was neither the message by itself nor the mission by itself, not even by the two operating together. It was, to my mind, the institutionalization of both, and the organisation that was built up stage by stage by the Gurus, one after another, an organisation well-knit and efficient enough to engage the loyalty and devotion of thousands of men and women towards effective articulation of the message and the mission, and towards translation of both in terms of effective practical action. The leadership and the charisma of the Gurus served only as incentives and gave the necessary inspiration and guidance.

What I have just said is best proved by Guru Gobind Singh's organisation of the *Khalsa* by which he 'replaced' the Guru. It was a significant decision taken by a man of experience, insight and wisdom at a very critical stage not only of Sikhism and Sikh society but also of medieval Indian history and culture. It is well known that the concept and institution of the Guru were all but integral to all early and late medieval protestant and non-conformist socio-religious ideologies and communities, in northern India, at any rate. What was it that prompted and led Guru Gobind Singh to renounce altogether, if not the concept itself, the institution at least of the Guru? In the context of the time and the place, this was indeed a very revolutionary step; yet this was the step the great Guru chose to take, and if we have to go by whatever records are available, he took it deliberately and with cool, objective calculatedness.

Scripture as Guru:

First, he must have considered that while the guruship of Guru Nanak was derived directly from God, if one has to go by the evidence of Guru Nanak himself, with Guru Angad and his two immediate successors it could not have been so direct and immediate. Indeed, with them the words and message of the Guru as transmitted to them were considered as Guru, guruhood being supposed to have been transmitted to them through the words and the message and the mission that went with them. Guru Arjun became Guru because of having been the son of Guru Ram Das, and it was from his time that guruhood became hereditary, a principle which, conceptually speaking, was against the very concept of the institution of Guru. Guru Gobind Singh could not but have noticed the violation of the original concept. I have a feeling that even Guru Arjun may have noticed it. When one remembers how and why he compiled the *Adi Granth* and the immense trouble he

took for it, the loyalty and devotion he wanted to be attached to it since it recorded not only the words and the message of the corporeal Gurus, including those of himself, but what was more important, the words and the voice of God himself as well, as transmitted to Guru Nanak, one can perhaps imagine that he had at the back of his mind the idea of the recognition of the Book itself as the Guru, he himself being the Guru Regent as it were.

Secondly, Guru Gobind Singh may have realized that any hereditary institution, particularly of a socio-religious nature and of an increasingly expanding society, was liable to deteriorate in character and to become authoritarian. There is evidence in the compositions of Guru Gobind Singh himself to show that if not the Gurus themselves who immediately preceded him, their representatives, at any rate, the *Masands*, had actually turned authoritarian and used to indulge in corrupt practices that led to the exploitation of the poorer fellow-Sikhs.

Guru Gobind Singh chose one particular day, the *Vaisakhi* day of 1699A.D., dramatically it seems, to effect a revolutionary change in the concept of guruhood and in the organisation of that institution and at the same time of the Sikh society itself. As one recalls what happened on that fateful day at Keshgarh near Anandpur, one is apt to imagine that the momentous decision was taken on the spur of a moment, somewhat romantically, and carried out in a manner that was intended to bring about a dramatic effect. Far from it, to my mind. Here was a decision which could not have been taken without a great deal of serious thinking over days, weeks and months, without serious heart-searching and without taking into confidence a small handful, at least, of his most trusted lieutenants. Every step that he took, from the preparation of the background and the first call of sacrifice, to his own initiation at the hands of the *panj piyaras* and the final step of the declaration of the *Khalsa* and the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* as together replacing the corporeal and hereditary Guru, seems to have been thought out very carefully and worked out systematically.

Continuity:

What Guru Gobind Singh did was, to my mind, the logical culmination of the process that was started by Guru Nanak himself. Guruhood was meant to be selective; but when Guru Ram Das made it hereditary he brought in a process that contradicted the original principle. Guru Arjun seems to have noticed this contradiction and when he compiled the *Adi Granth* which came to be regarded, if not explicitly at least by implication, as the spiritual Guru as if it were side by side with the corporeal, temporal Guru he seems to have all but exposed this contradiction. Guru Gobind Singh by taking the final step seems to have completed the process: **he abolished altogether the institution of corporeal Guru and installed the Book as the Guru. The organizational and administrative aspects of the institution he chose to vest on a body corporate which he called the *Khalsa*; its mission was to carry out the spiritual and secular message that resided in the Book. It was therefore supposed to consist of only those who were loyal, devoted and dedicated to their mission.**

Stroke of Genius:

Here was thus a step taken, which was unique in the history of the medieval feudal India; in the context of the time and space it was a most democratic step,

socially and politically effective. By one stroke of genius, it did away with the charismatic leadership of individual Gurus and placed it on a symbol, on the one hand, and on a body corporate, on the other. At the same time it showed to the medieval feudal world of India that power and strength, whether spiritual or temporal, originated from and resided in the people and their symbol, in the people imbued with a sense of mission, in the symbol that was pregnant with meaning, and hence significant.

For the Buddhists of old, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha were the three well-known refuges. The Buddhists did not recognize the reality of the conception of God; His place was therefore taken, figuratively speaking, first by the historical Gautama, the Buddha, but at a later stage, by the conception of Buddhahood. Since he had no difficulty in recognizing God as conceived by Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh accepted the great inheritance of the conception of God, without reserve. The Buddhist concept of Dharma in so far as Guru Gobind Singh was concerned, came to be symbolised by the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* since it contained, for him and his followers, all the main tenets that were supposed, like the Dharma, to guide and regulate the religious and spiritual as well as the secular and temporal life of men and women. And finally, the *Khalsa* can certainly be equated with the Sangha of the Buddhists.

Was the Buddhist Trinity – the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha – ever at the back of the mind of Guru Gobind Singh when he set up the Sikh Trinity: the God, the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and the *Khalsa*? Maybe, it is an idle speculation, an accidental parallel; maybe not. But the fact remains that what Guru Gobind Singh did, has been, to a very large extent, responsible for making Sikhism and Sikh society what it is today. He decided on a mission just as did the founder Guru, and both saw to it that their respective missions were carried out to their logical end. That they achieved what they wanted to, no one would doubt, I am sure.

A while ago, I described Guru Gobind Singh's creation of the *Khalsa* as a 'democratic' act. I would plead that I did not use the word in its exclusively political, but did so in a general social sense, meaning thereby, that the Guru showed through this act a consideration for his followers, the Sikhs, which was somewhat unusual in the medieval feudal situation of India. I also tried to bring out the social significance of one or two items in the ethical code of Sikhism and Sikh society, that enjoined upon every member of the community individually and upon all of them collectively, not to make any distinction between the rich and the poor, the high and the low, between *jati* and *jati*, between creed and creed, and to have particular care and consideration for the lowliest and the lost, for the distressed and the dispossessed. To what extent these injunctions were adhered to, respected and practiced by individuals and the community at large, it is difficult to measure, but that the intentions of the Gurus and the social ideal of the Sikh society were conceived sincerely, and that besides being merely humanitarian in attitude, these were directed towards a new kind of collectivism of the ordinary people as *sangat*, and this in a social sense, I do not find any reason to doubt.

Social Ethics:

I would request you to recall to your mind the importance I tried to make out of the ethical and social injunction of manual labour on the part of every Sikh to enable

him to earn his daily bread. I would also like to point out, in this connection, the attitude towards begging (begging is indeed looked down upon in Sikh society) that exists even today amongst the Sikhs and must have been in existence through the centuries. Strange as it may sound, but nevertheless it is true to say that beggary, as a social institution, is still unknown and unrecognized among the Sikhs. This kind of attitude towards manual labour and begging, considered together (economically and sociologically they go together, I believe), suggests to me, at any rate, that the Sikh Gurus had, from the outset, the vision of a different kind of society, different from what they had known before. It was the vision of a society in which no one should be reduced to a stage when one should be obliged to beg for one's barest needs, and in which one must do some amount of manual labour. This vision presupposed a new conception, a new approach to those who constituted the under-privileged sections of the society, to the people in general whom one calls the common mass, which may at once be a social attitude and a religio-spiritual attitude.

To use a modern economic concept, Guru Nanak came from what one calls today, a middle class family. In deep humanity of spirit, he is recorded to have once said - in the context of caste system:

"I am the lowest amongst the lowly
as low as one can be;
My associates are the lowly.
And with the great I have nothing to do.
For where the lowly are looked after,
There! There, verily, is the gift of Thy grace."

And again he says elsewhere:

"My stand is with the lowly,
What have I to do with the rich
and the vainly great?"

He was also very much against exploitation of man by man, particularly in the name of religion:

"Look at the mockery of religion:
That the man-eaters are offering
prayers to God after the Muslim fashion
And the butchers are putting on
the sacred thread of Hinduism."

The *Guru Granth Sahib* condemns living by exploitation, bribery and corruption, again and again; exploitation for a Sikh, it says, is like eating a dead man's flesh. And Bhai Gurdas is on record to have said that the Gurus pronounced themselves very strongly against exploitation, particularly of the poorer sections of the society. He pointed out that, for a Hindu to live by exploitation was like taking beef; for a Muslim, it was like taking pork.

Virtue of Work-ethic:

From such stray, casual references as these, it is clear that the Sikh Gurus tried to build up a new image of the society of their vision in which earning one's living by hard labour, and giving part of one's earning in charity were considered to be the highest virtues, and in which there should be no exploitation of man by man. There is

that well-known anecdote about Guru Gobind Singh who, feeling thirsty and craving for a glass of water, refused it when offered by a rich prince whose hands were clean and soft and well-kept. But he accepted the drink when it was offered to him by a poor stable boy, saying that “blessed and pure were the hands of a labourer who worked for his living”. Guru Gobind Singh was indeed echoing the words of the founder Guru.

But Guru Gobind Singh went further. He says in his *Tankhanama* that the spirit of the people was the spirit of God himself and those who caused suffering to the people was bound to incur the wrath of God. People as a collective entity seems clearly to have come to enter into his social consciousness. **Indeed, if Bhai Gurdas, and the *Rehatnama* of Desa Singh are to be believed, the great Guru came to identify himself completely with the Sikh community and to glorify them collectively as his master and his source of strength and inspiration, and individually as his friends and comrades.**

Nothing seem to have disturbed him more than to see his people being exploited not only by the ruling authorities, the Muslim and Hindu priests, princes and landlords, but also by the *Masands* of the Sikh Gurus themselves. What steps he took to crush the *Masands* and how he abolished the *Masand* institution altogether, is known to any student of the history of Sikhism and Sikh society. But the manner in which he describes the inhumanity of the *Masands* is evidence enough of how Guru Gobind Singh felt for his people and how he reacted to the rapaciousness of the *Masands* who happened to be the representatives of the Gurus, local guardians so to say, of the Sikhs and collector of the contribution of the *sishtyas*:

“If any one go to the *Masands*,
they will tell him to bring all his property at once and give to them.

If any one serves the *Masands*, they will say:

‘Fetch and give us all thine offerings.
Go at once and make a present to us
Of whatever property is in thy house.
Think of us night and day
And mention not others even by mistake.
They put oil into their eyes to make people believe
that they are shedding tears.
If they see any of their own worshippers’ wealth,
they serve up sacred food
and feed him with it.
If they see him without wealth, they give him nothing, though he beg for it;
they will not even show him their faces.
These beasts plunder men,
and never sing the praises of the Supreme being.”

Humility of Guru Gobind Singh:

But no document is so telling, so pregnant, with social significance as the one in which Guru Gobind Singh sings the praise and glory of his people in full-throated voice, his love and concern for the common man. This story of the *Dasam Granth* has often been repeated and the relevant passage quoted oftener. Yet it bears repetition, as the testimony of a seventeenth century leader of men in India, **to the**

great power and grace that he thought, originated from and resided in the people, and this at a time when Indian society was essentially feudal and authoritarian and the common people were considered as nothing more than dumb driven cattle.

A prominent *brahmana*, Kesho Datt, once came to Anandpur to have a meeting with the Guru. Being a *brahmana*, and a man of local eminence, he obviously expected special treatment at the hands of the Guru's attendants; this was not perhaps forthcoming, not quite up to his expectations, at any rate. Kesho Datt evidently felt angry and crushed his Sikh attendants, calling them low caste rabbles who were being given by their Guru better treatment than was meted out to the *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas*. The Guru heard it, but seems to have kept his temper in check. Quietly, he said: "Please do not blame me for your imagining that I have ignored you; all are equal in my eyes. I shall send you the bedding and whatever else you need; but please do not say anything against my inspired disciples". And as they appeared before his vision he burst forth to tell the haughty Kesho Datt who these people were:

"All the battles I have fought against tyranny,
I have fought with the devoted backing of these people,
Through them alone have I been able to deserve gifts,
Through their help I have escaped harm:
The love and generosity of the Sikhs
Have enriched my heart and home.
Through their grace I have attained all learning;
Through their help in battle, I have slain my enemies.
I was born to serve them, through them I reached eminence.
What would I have been without their kind and ready help?
There are millions of insignificant people like me.

True service is the service of these people,
I am not inclined to serve others of higher castes.
Charity will bear fruit in this and in the next world
If given to such worthy people as these.
All other sacrifices and charity are profitless.
From head to foot, whatever I call my own.
All I possess or carry, I dedicate to these people."

Kesho Datt, on hearing this, reports Guru Gobind Singh, 'became ablaze with malice and started burning in wrath 'as dry grass burns in fire.'

Guru Gobind Singh's words were certainly formed by a sharp social consciousness, so rare in those days in India, and one may imagine that his voice at that moment was surcharged with a deep emotion of love and affection for his people.

[concluded]

