

# The *Miri-Piri* Principle: Social Activism is Integral to Sikhism

*The Late Brig. Gurdip Singh Grewal\**

Ever since his retirement in late 1980's retired Brig. Gurdip Singh Grewal, VSM has poured forth scintillating essays on the socio-political aspects of Sikhism in general and about Punjab in particular. Possessing an incisive mind and a well-honed intellect, he made commendable contribution to the success of Vishwa Sikh Sammelan held at Amritsar in 1995, and later worked closely with the statesman-jurist Sr. Kuldeep Singh (former Judge of India's Supreme Court) who was elected President, World Sikh Council, Due to Various centrifugal forces, the WSC became a pawn in the politician's hands, and while the distinguished judge gracefully stepped away from the mess, Gurdip Singh Grewal continued to write to forge unity of purpose. Just when we picked up the following Essay for publication, we learned of the untimely and sad demise of Brig. Gurdip Singh. We hope our readers will find the essay illuminating. The Sikh polity has lost a brilliant exponent in the passing away of Brig. Grewal.

– Ed. SR.

The concept of *Miri-Piri* in Sikhism has a theological, ideological and empirical base. Unlike certain other activist religions, this concept has prevailed as a categorical constant, without any dilution in philosophical or realistic terms in the history of the Sikh people. The concept of *Miri-Piri* is of the nature of a covenant and the *idos* (ideal, essence) of the concept is of a spiritual and sociological relativism. The cognition of such a relativism is best expressed in the words of the eminent scholar late Sr. Kapur Singh "Sikhism, unlike most other world religions, is not merely a church of worship but is simultaneously a church of social policy also." Prof. Nirbhai Singh expresses similar thought "...Sikhism does not limit itself to the Aristotelian definition of man as a sheer 'political animal'. In Sikhism man is also a spiritual micro-reality". Prof. Nirbhai Singh adds "The primary aim of Sikhism is spiritual transformation of man with a view to harmonizing him with the socio-spiritual unity of the social group, either in the *Sangat* or the *Khalsa*" (*Sikh Dynamic Vision*, 2003 edition page 268 and 327). It may only be added that the "socio-spiritual unity" rightly encompasses *Sarbat* (total) humanity, the ordained sphere of activity of the "empowered" *Khalsa*.

Conceptually, *Miri-Piri* fusion involves morality in social transactions. The fusion at sentient level of an individual is gestative for objective and principled virtue concerning sacred inviolability of human being, which finally manifests as politics subsumed in ethics. *Piri* is fount of moral principles at metaphysical level mutating as cognitive latent force coextensively overruling materialistic impenetrability. *Miri* is the application of such principles in the extant social environs. Therefore, to bind *Miri* and *Piri* in absolute unity at the level of authority, institution, and bureaucratic control would not only be an impiety but also social solecism because the sacrilized piety of religious high idealism cannot accommodate politically embedded reality of compromises. It would sufficiently serve a rational purpose if *Miri-Piri* induces ethical considerations in politics and prevent their exile or alienation. Thus the relationship of *Miri-Piri*, as explicated here, makes the rational outcome in expectation neither utopian nor immoral. And the fusion of *Miri-Piri*, without a prior condition of "stratum" would be a contradiction of the terms.

As such *Miri* and *Piri* are not only two organic but also autonomous (autonomy not in the sense of imperium or sacerdotum, but stratified) components of the society. Both *Miri* and *Piri* can, metaphorically be labelled as Janus - faced, or of double dual dimension in the following sense:

- **Piri** - Infusive of ethico-spiritual piety in individuals.
- effusive of ethical values influencing
  - Miri** - absorptive of inspiration as receptive from Piri
  - empirical prudence for social, civic and political practices.

We have earlier covered about the two natural attributes of man, that is, spiritual or religious and rational or political. It is the sublime integration of these two “basic natural gifts” innate in man, that Sikhism’s Founding Gurus as never before, divinely ignited and inspired the Khalsa - elevating him to supra-human endeavour for equalitarian and universal social justice.

The divine Bani incorporated in Siri Guru Granth Sahib is eternal. The Gurus did not impose any time-static doctrines or commanded a code for mundane administration of society like the Torah of the Jews or the Sharia of the Muslims. Therefore, the hermeneutics of the dynamic philosophy of the Gurus harmonizes with time and space. It also establishes that the Sikh Gurus did not preach any transgression between church and state, neither did they visualize the human society in two “vast communities” of Augustine’s vision of “Earthly City” and “Heavenly City”.

Simultaneously, as has been rightly accepted, that Sikhism is a religion with the most *valued ethical mandate* for the humanity as a whole (Quote here) then its sphere of social altruism cannot be proscribed by chains of sib, group, community or any other narrow social liturgies. Love of humanity must also transcend some other obtrusive sentiments like overzealous and biased motivations which concomitantly inhere conflict with others outside the limited social bonds or bounded imaginations.

The historical evolution of the concept of Miri-Piri originates from the times of Guru Nanak himself who instituted and illuminated this doctrine in his famous hymn:

ਜਦੁ ਤਉ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਖੇਲਣ ਕਾ ਚਾਉ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਧਰਿ ਤਲੀ ਗਲੀ ਮੇਰੀ ਆਉ ॥  
ਇਤੁ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਪੈਰੁ ਧਰੀਜੈ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਦੀਜੈ ਕਾਣਿ ਨ ਕੀਜੈ ॥

[SGGS: 1412]

This forceful dictum demanded ultimate sacrifice for commitment to ‘play the game of love’. This is a clarion call to his devotees to tread the path of service to humanity for social justice even at the cost of sacrificing their lives.

It must be added that the meaning of “love” here has religious purpose for ethical attitudes in social relations. This is best expressed in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, “In part the religious ideal of love is fed and supported by viewing the soul of the fellowman from the absolute and transcendent perspective. Your neighbor is a son of God, and God may be served by serving him”. He goes on to add “Love must strive for something purer than justice if it would attain justice.” (*Moral Man and Immoral Society* - reprint 2001 pages 58 and 266)

Guru Arjun too advises in similar spirit:

ਪਹਿਲਾ ਮਰਣੁ ਕਬੂਲਿ ਜੀਵਣ ਕੀ ਛਡਿ ਆਸ ॥  
ਹੋਰੁ ਸਭਨਾ ਕੀ ਰੇਣੁਕਾ ਤਉ ਆਉ ਹਮਾਰੈ ਪਾਸਿ ॥

[SGGS: 1102]

The emphasis by Guru Nanak on the obligation of individuals, specifically those that are spiritually elevated, is unequivocally expressed when he castigates the “*yogis*” who had renounced the existential world in pursuit of personal spiritual salvation. This admonition for disavowal of social and political responsibility, has been stated thus “s’c cMdRmw Kud AMiDAwxw; is’D, C’p bYTy prbwSn; kaun jgq ko pwr auqwrw [”]; translated it reads “And Sires, you

are the guilty ones, for, society cannot be guided and sustained without men of high sensitivity and culture, but you, who possess it, have become escapees". The essence of Guru Nanak's message was the sublime prescience of the grandeur of human life in the ambience of temporality and spirituality.

To elaborate this point further, in the words of Prof. Nirbhai Singh, "Ecstasy (*Sahaj avastha*) in Sikhism is not cut off from the societal realities. The transcendental state of consciousness is integrated and harmonized through social relations with other fellows. This is reconciliation of eternity with temporality, and spiritualism with secularism" (*Sikh Dynamic Vision*, edition 2003; page 327).

The visible and formal growth of Miri-Piri occurred in physical form during the pontificate of the Sixth Guru through his wearing of two swords (one for Miri and the other for Piri) and the erection of Sri Akal Takht Sahib, an institution of temporal seat, separate from but adjunct to, Sri Darbar Sahib.

The initiation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh was the next visionary measure in concretizing the concept of Miri-Piri. The ceremony of "*Khande dai pahu*" synthesized the spiritual and temporal ideals. The evolution of the Khalsa has been succinctly stated by Prof. Nirbhai Singh "Guru Nanak conceived the concept of *saca khanda* and the tenth mentor Guru Gobind Singh materialized it in history. Thus the Khalsa ideology is a concrete socio-spiritual ideology, which mirrors Akal Purakh in history. It is based on the interlinked configuration of the baptized Khalsas. The cementing force is the *dharma*, which is developed within the self. It manifests through love (*prem*) among human beings" (*Sikh Dynamic Vision*; edition 2003, pages 341-2). The sparkle of this "love" has been explained earlier. The ethico-spiritual dynamic society of Khalsa Panth nurtured by the Sikh Gurus is as nearly a unique occurrence as the codification of Sri Guru Granth Sahib which was then concomitantly covenanted as the doctrine of Miri-Piri.

The glorious Gurus embodied the principle of Miri-Piri in their divine person. Therefore the tradition of Miri-Piri was everlastingly bequeathed to the Khalsa by the Tenth Master, canonizing the doctrine of Guru Granth (spiritual) and Guru Panth (temporal). In other words, *Adhiaatam Guruta* - spiritual Guruship - vested in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and *Vivharic Guruta* - worldly affairs - vested in Guru Panth. The "*Chardi Kala*" of the Khalsa was the spirit of the Akal Purakh (piri) steeped in his consciousness through the baptized sense of the sacred. The immortalized ideological motivation and corporification of the concept of Miri-Piri, after the Guru - period, is gloriously evident from the exalted individual role of Baba Deep Singh and from the corporate conduct of the Dal Khalsa of the Misl-period; and in the state apparatus, from the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The heroic deed of Baba Deep Singh has immortalized the inherency of Miri-Piri in the character of a human being. Deeply immersed in spirituality at *Guru Ki Kashi* but not unconnected with worldly affairs, Baba Deep Singh valiantly took up arms to fight against the desecration of Darbar Sahib and sacrificed his life in one of the most courageous battle-field encounter in the Sikh history. This historic epic needs no elaboration. It must, however, be cited as an ideal example of a truly inspired Saint-Soldier.

The constitution of the Dal Khalsa was a predicatively pre-eminent initiative in many respects. The Dal was ethically idealized redemptive community invested with political ideology and an outreach far beyond the community. However, limiting it to the topic of Miri-Piri, it was a singularly representative organization of Guru Panth inhering motivations of Guru Granth. Every ardent believer of Sikh faith was a member of the Dal Khalsa. But only the fighters, from amongst them, who were proficient in the use of arms could be members of any of the Misls. The Sarbat Khalsa, which was a chosen body of the leaders

of the Dal Khalsa, met twice a year at Sri Akal Takht Sahib, and took decisions on behalf of the commonwealth, but only after seeking divine guidance from Sri Guru Granth Sahib. This was the true adherence to the doctrine of Guru Granth and Guru Panth. Hari Ram Gupta describing the constitution of the Dal Khalsa writes "Thus a kind of federal union was established and the supreme leader of the Dal Khalsa was looked upon as the head of the Church and State" (History of the Sikhs Vol II - fourth edition 1992, page 93). The Sikh sentiments of the times of Dal Khalsa would not uphold the correctness of the above statement in full. The accepted doctrine of Piri in the spiritual realm, vested the absolute authority in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The symbolism of "head of the Church" had therefore been rendered a pleonasm. No doubt the members of the Dal Khalsa, under their chosen leader were zealous defenders of the faith but they would not grant the status of "head of the Church" to the "leader". The authority of Sri Guru Granth Sahib was equally and freely accessible to all. In the achievements of the Dal Khalsa - means and ends of the collective ideology - simmers a magnificent and valorous display of the doctrine of Miri-Piri.

The rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh assiduously observed the doctrine of Miri-Piri in all its complexities. His state was "Raj Khalsa", his government was "Darbar-e-Khalsa. The minted coins in the reign of the Maharaja pledged allegiance and ultimate sovereignty to the Sikh Gurus. Above all, he personally was a devout Sikh and humble follower of Sikh religious disciplines. Yet his governance was not that of a "theocratic state". This would have been contrary to the Khalsa ideology itself, which does not seek to obliterate other religiously benign inspirations. Religion remained the source of moral motive and guide. The administration was secular. In secular administration the Maharaja equally respected other religions. In human affairs too he did not heed any distinction beyond the merit. Historically, "Raj Khalsa" is indeed a rare example of a 'State' adhering to the doctrine of Miri-Piri.

In democratic form later, the constitution of the two prime Sikh entities of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee and Shiromani Akali Dal was representative of the religious authority and the political authority respectively. The Shiromani Akali Dal was created as political arm of the Sikhs by the religious body during the resurgent movement at the beginning of twentieth century. The virtuous religious influences were the sacred and moral mandate intrinsic to the existence of the Shiromani Akali Dal. Unlike other political parties, the Shiromani Akali Dal could be subjected to political civility through injunctions from the Panthic institutions, having the character of *jus cogens*: that is, overriding principles which cannot be set aside. Politics sans moral motive is anti-thetical to Sikh world view. One devoid of the other would be 'contrarion' to the conscious fact of historic and organic life of the Sikhs.

All activist religions concerned with the state of society institutionalize generic spiritual motivations for redemption of society against historic inadequacies. Such motivations are necessary to overcome despair in the face of conservative forces. The history of Sikh people has provided a shining example of spiritually elevated superhuman struggle against tremendous odds and in a short period established "*Halemi Raj*" under Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

In "Bachchitar Natak" we find categorical illumination of the doctrine of Miri-Piri by Guru Gobind Singh when he says "*Babe ke Babar ke dou*". meaning... . The Sikh concept of Miri-Piri had been grasped by the famous Muslim philosopher-poet Mohammad Iqbal when he says "*Khalsa Shmsheer-O-Qurran ra burad*", meaning: "The advent of Khalsa was through the sword and the sacred book". Iqbal has also stressed "If you separate religion from politics, what is left is *changezi* (barbarity)."

The virtue of 'wholesome' life of the Khalsa, in its full magnificence, was presciently

captured by a prepotent British historian, J.D. Cunningham who had the opportunity to observe the “lofty” Sikh characteristic in situations of war and peace. He writes “A living spirit possesses the whole Sikh people, and the impress of Gobind (Guru Gobind Singh) has not only elevated and altered the constitution of their minds, but has operated materially and given amplitude to their physical frames”. The genesis of this “constitution” of “minds” of the Sikhs has also been explained by him as a, ...” longing for social freedom and national ascendancy, the proper adjuncts of that purity of worship which had been preached by Nanak (Guru Nanak)”. And on this foundation of Guru Nanak Gobind (Guru Gobind Singh) saw what was vital, and he returned it with Promethean fire”. (*A History of The Sikhs*, 1972 edition page 75). This indeed is a rare tribute to the assimilation of Miri-Piri in the Sikh character. And it is in such spiritual roots that the salutation of “Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh” has been impregnant in the Sikh psyche.

The seeds of equalitarian social justice – and ultimate commitment for pursuing this objective by the Sikhs for the total human society – were theologically planted by Guru Nanak. The nascent crop of this philosophy and life strategy was nurtured, in its true spirit, by successive Gurus. The fruit of this divine cultivation, on maturity, were bequeathed by the Tenth Master, as an eternal ideology, to the inspired Khalsa in the form of Guru Granth and Guru Panth. □