

Sikh Faith: The Highway to Emancipation

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The genesis of Sikhism is attributed to Guru Nanak (ce 1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh faith. The Indian society was on the crossroad of medieval ages and modern times. It emerged at a time when medieval period was ending and modern era was setting in. The Sikh movement ushered in modern trends of inter-faith harmony. It was a vanguard for restoring social justice, self-respect of man and freedom of the depressed masses. It reaffirms the social realities and historicity of human action. From the existential standpoint, man is considered a concrete unit in the society struggling for self-dignity and freedom of man. The Gurus tried to make man perfect as an emancipator of humanity and guarantor of social and political justice. The Sikh movement came as a robust revolt against the existent social and political malpractices. The Sikh Gurus tried to put to 'use' their ideals into praxis. They preached their revolutionary ideas and practiced them in their life times.

Social Justice: Sikh faith is reinterpretation and reaffirmation of the societal realities that were negated in the medieval ages in the false hope for the otherworld. It was a social revivalist movement of the conscience for ushering in societal harmony based on egalitarian social order. The classical caste oriented hierarchical social structure was ruled out. In the new social order man was projected as key unit in the society and the historical time. His action in the history is real. It is expected to be detached from the worldly seductions. His actions are to be free from dogmatism, fanaticism, and fossilized beliefs. The Sikh faith represents catholic and tolerant attitude towards other religions and traditions but it was critical of the degenerated forms of religious practices. The underlying idea was to yield social harmony in the composite religious culture of India. It propounded the ideology of tolerance, coexistence of the faiths on the Indian soil. 'Live and let live' is the motto of the Sikh faith. Welfare of all is the creed of Sikhism (*sarbat ka bhala*). It advocates reinterpretation of other religious scriptures without digressing from their fundamental truth. It has adopted liberal attitude towards other scriptures and persons of other faiths.

The Sikh Doctrine: is a concrete idealistic and realistic system. It is rooted inspiritualism because ultimate nature of reality is spiritual. It is idealism because it is grounded on the transcendent consciousness. It is realistic because the external world is considered real. Sikhism being an idealistic and realistic system it should be interpreted from the spiritual standpoint in which spiritual values are given priority over empirical facts. The dynamic ideology of the Sikh Gurus reflects societal structure (*sangat*) constituted of individuals that is a miniature representation of Akalapurakh on the earth. Man as an integral unit in the social network is projected as concrete person in temporality. His historical actions are real and the societal relationships are based on the principles of equality, fraternity, and freedom. The Sikh Gurus critiqued earlier prevalent Hindu and Muslim societies, which were based on hierarchical caste-based

social structures. The subaltern masses were marginalized. The common masses were devoid of spiritual values in theory and practice. Thus, social philosophy of the Sikh Gurus is based on the societal relations and the holy assembly (*sangat*) and the militant social order (Khalsa). The revival of human dignity and self-respect was the objective of the Sikh Gurus.

The sangat is the holy assembly or the social group where *Naam* is recited. Guru Nanak created *sangats* in different parts of India to propagate Sikh tenets to the Sikhs *sangat*. *Wadī* and *choti sangat*s were created by Guru Nanak, and *manjī* system was introduced by Guru Amardas. Further, Guru Amardas established *manjīs* (dioceses) in which the experts of the Sikh doctrine were appointed to explain the Sikh ethos to the *sangats*. Guru Arjun Dev supplemented the *masandas* to the *manjīs* whose duty was to preach the Sikh tenets. And *masand* system added by Guru Arjun Dev had been a centrifugal force for the devotees. The *masands* (deputies of the Gurus) were intermediaries between the Guru and the *sangat*. Their duty was to collect voluntary tithe (*daswanda*), one tenth of their honest and hard earnings from the Sikh *sangats* and to make over to the Guru on the auspicious festivals of Basakhi and Divali at Amritsar.

Till the last tenth Guru, charismatic personality of the Gurus had been source of forging unity among the Sikhs. By introducing juristic moral conduct (*rahit maryada*) the Sikh *sangat* was knit into the Khalsa militant social order. The philosophical activity of the Sikh Gurus was that they reaffirmed social reality that was negated in the medieval periods. It promoted social harmony. In the above quotation of Guru Amardas the reality of the external world is reaffirmed. The world mirrors *Akalapurakh*, the all-inclusive Being. It is certain that the Guru accepts the societal relations as stark reality. It analyzes the social phenomenon as a living fact.

Before the advent of the Sikh movement the Indians did not have practical sense of history. They lacked sense of historical time. It was only after the coming of the Turks that a sense of historical time was picked up by the Gurus and the same was applied on the Indian social structure. We were living in the world of mythical and speculative philosophies. We were preoccupied with the quest to find out meaning of human life in the other world. Historicity of human action was negated. We have been trying to find out meaning of human life from the hagiographic literature (genre) of *Jatak* stories of the Buddha and the Puranas or the epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Guru Nanak also demolishes naïve realism as well as a purely speculative idealism and the myths. For him *Brahman* as a metaphysical assumption is a pure speculative make-belief. It is to be translated into 'usefulness' in practice. If Brahman is all-inclusive reality, it should reflect in practical life as well. (Killing of sentient beings is discouraged. For example, killing of a hen is negation of life. Thus, negation of existential beliefs would automatically demolish the practical workability of truth-judgments as real and false. This is the highest good of every religion and Sikhism in particular.

Critique of Otherworldliness: Guru Nanak was critical of renunciation, or the other world, because it negated social realities. Sikhism has made a singular contribution to

the field of social thought from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh (1469-1708). It reaffirmed social realities that were negated in the medieval ages in the false hope of the otherworld (heaven or *bahisht*).

Guru Nanak also wooed back to reality the Siddhas, yogis, and mendicants who withdrew from the social responsibilities. When Siddhas enquired of Guru Nanak the cause for his wandering about, he replied that he was in search of the ideal man (*gurmukh*) who can discharge social responsibilities. His *gurmukh* is a householder. He was against asceticism and celibacy for the simple reason that *Siddhas* and *sannyasis* withdrew themselves from the social, moral, and political responsibilities and became parasites on the society. For their food they had to beg from door to door with beggars' bowls in their hands. Guru Nanak, in this context, castigates the ascetics who called themselves *gurus* and *pirs*. One should not bow at their feet because they were parasites (...*guru piru sadaç managn jai / ta kai muli na lagiai pai* (SGGS, p. 1245). Social thought of Sikh Gurus steers a middle path between otherworld and this world. It steers clear of gross materialism and Vedantic abstract idealism that negate the phenomenon world as illusory (*maya*).

Human Deal: With this background the Sikh Gurus envisaged an ideal man and social unity, which could be concretized in the course of history. It is based on ontic intrinsic human nature. At the initial stage man is incomplete. He requires continuous development from within and without. Man is the only species which can become perfect with his creative and rational faculties. His helplessness needs help of his parents and other members of the society. He is not born free, but is to become free. He develops human values and virtues in the family and in the holy social group (*sangat*). He is the concrete unit in the social structure.

In this paper I use 'social thought' as a normative analysis of the social structure society with special reference to the Sikh ideal based upon the Sikh scriptures and the Sikh tradition. It will be pertinent to point out that the primary sources of the Sikh social ideas are enshrined in the Guru Granth, which were authenticated by the Sikh Gurus themselves. The tenth mentor, Guru Gobind Singh, in ce 1708 apotheosized the Sikh scripture as a living *sabda-guru*, It is for eternity for the welfare of humanity. It is an eternal fount of *ipse dixits* of the contributors of the Guru Granth."

The Sikh social order is derived from the dynamic philosophy of the Gurus. The reality of the fluxional social phenomenon is a logical necessity of the dynamic thought of Sikhism. It is to be seen how far their social order is capable of reconciling eternity and temporality. The social philosophy of the Sikh faith is a development from Guru Nanak's ideology of *sacakhanda* to the creation of the Khalsa-panth. Sikhism agreed with the Buddhist dynamic philosophy of social involvement for the welfare of the common people. Time (*kala*) for the Gurus is not a mythical concept but a historical real time. *Akala* in the Sikh onto-theology is not vacuous of temporality but plenum of time. Thus, *Akalapurakh* signifies eternity inclusive of temporality. It justifies dynamic ontology of the Sikh Faith. It will also imply that societal dynamic relations are real because social

phenomena are real. This ideal was carried out by the Gurus through their philosophical activities in the society and validated it through confirmation in praxis.

Guru Nanak reconciled historicity of the prophetic or Syrian historical real linear time with the Indo-Greek cyclic time, which is the basis of dynamic view of human life. Guru Nanak places man in the existential concrete historical time. In simple words, it was a reaffirmation of the micro-reality of the *homo sapiens* as concrete individuals in the societal space in history. Personal identity is to be developed from the matrix of *jiva* ('me') through esoteric discipline in the historical time.

The social relations are useful in guaranteeing freedom, human dignity, and other human virtues and values. Basic issues for the Gurus were social and moral responsibilities, solidarity, virtues and values, *sangat* and *pangat*, free kitchen (*langar*), *sevâ* (voluntary service), synthesis of *theoria* and praxis. All these are offshoots of the Sikh social harmony, which was envisaged by Guru Nanak and developed by other Gurus.

Affirmation & Identity: In order to adhere to the dynamic view of life historical action was reaffirmed. For discharging moral responsibilities for the emancipation of humanity, the 'personal identity' of the individual self as a free subject in the society was restored. Without freedom of the self, good moral deeds (*subha karma*) can't be rationally upheld. Without freedom of will it shall be a contradiction in terms. **Hence, 'personal identity' for the restoration of social realities is the key concept in the pronounced non-dual dynamic onto-theology of Sikhism. If it is set aside, then discharge of moral responsibility is impossible to perform.** In order to make man a responsible person toward other fellow beings, his self-developed personal identity and free will were upheld in the existential situations. Both are not given finished facts. Personal identity is to be developed in the society from within the undeveloped self (*jiva*). Different religious traditions have propounded different means and ways to reach out this goal. Once personal identity in its fullness is realized, the self starts living the eternal life and enjoys ontic freedom. Ravidâss's concept of *begampura* is an ideal social structure in which the self is free in the true sense of the term (SGGS, p. 345).

Commitment: The positive attitude toward the world enjoins upon man commitment for moral, social and political responsibilities for the welfare of humanity. It is argued out in the Sikh Scriptures that the phenomenal world is a battlefield (*dharmasala*) for culling out one's essential self. It is concerned with the 'now' without dittoing the past. It, however, continues in the form of a tradition which determines to some extent the present. Man's creativity can revitalize the past in a restructured form. And the future is all in the dark. It is only the mystic who transcends seductions of the mundane world and peeps into the future and the past. From the point of view of philosophy it is difficult to do its rational justification. However, man can create a space of his ideal world and strive to actualize it through the vicissitudes of history.

Dalit Dignity: With the realization of ontic identity of the 'self', the charismatic hallowed personality of the personal guruship was demolished in the Guru Granth. The higher

classes in Sikhism are no more recognized as gifted and chosen offspring of God. The subaltern (*dalit*) masses were motivated to regain equality and self-dignity in the society. Medieval sufis, bhaktas, Sikh Gurus, *et al.* have been instrumental for the uplift of the sons of the dusty soil. The 'wretched of the earth' had been victims of atrocities of the upper strata of the society. Guru Nanak has gone to the extent of identifying himself with the *dalits*. He refuses to have any truck with the higher castes (see, *nica andari nica kar nica hu ati nici / nânakû tina kai sangi sathi vadia siu kia risa* (SGGS, p. 15). For instance, in the hagiographic tradition (*Janamam'khî sanpard'î*) Bhai Lalo is a poor carpenter who earns his livelihood with the sweat of his brow. On the contrary, Malik Bhago is a feudal chief who exploits other poor and socially marginalized people. Hence, wrenching of blood from the bread of Bhago and milk from Lalo's bread are symbolic of the exploiter and the earnest person, respectively. Guru Nanak's hermeneutics would contend that all experiences of truth are dynamically interpretive in essence.

Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus practically identified themselves with the subaltern masses. The creation of the khalsa is the micro-identity of Akalpurakh in the micro-identity of the individual realized self in history. He is likened to Kierkegaard "knight of faith" on the earth. He is, above all, the parochial groove of communalism, casteism and sectarianism. Principle of love as a cementing force of mankind is the essence of the Khalsa identity. The social structure of the Khalsa Panth is built on the matrix of individual Khalsas. It is possible through identification of feeling or empathy with other fellow beings. As with one candle other candles are enlightened, similarly one realized self enlightens other selves. Guru Gobind Singh identified himself with the entire Khalsa both individuals and the social order of the Khalsa.

When the self is one with the creative cosmic truth (*hukam*), then the *âtman* consummates its flight into the supreme reality (*nirankâra*). The ultimate goal of self-transcendence is identification with the transcendent consciousness. It is a dialectical creative process of going beyond the clutches of the world without withdrawing from the responsibilities of the world. This is the quintessence of Sikhism. The Numinous is reflected in the heart of the individual self. Guru Nanak proclaims, in his identification with the Akalapurakh, he assumes consciousness of the 'Formless Form' (*âtam cîna bhae nirankarî* SGGS, p. 415). It is realization of one's intrinsic ontic identity.

The fundamental question is: how to translate the ideals in practice? Earlier there was a lack of practical sense of history. The Gurus had this sense of time. They had positive approach towards time and history. But the Gurus created new value system of reconciliation of the ideals of moral and social commitments with practice. From this standpoint martyrdom of Guru Arjuna Dev was the most significant event in the Sikh history. It was a turning point in the Sikh history. **The Sikh movement was a revolt of the conscience against evil in the society. The martial spirit in Sikhism was a logical and existential necessity for eradicating evil in the society for restoring justice and peace.**

We are confronted with another question: whether there was a deviation in the Sikh social philosophy from Guru Hargobind to Guru Gobind Singh because martial spirit was added into spirituality. My answer would be that there was no doctrinal deviation in the Sikh movement. It lands us into interpretation of another existential socio-political problem of power. Sikhism accepts neither over indulgence in the temporal power nor does it want to withdraw cowardly from the historical commitments and active resistance to tyranny. It advocates indolence. In this context Guru Arjun Dev, Vth Guru, says:

"Seek I neither kingship nor liberation,

Let my mind repose at Thy lotus feet."¹

The Gurus continued the above ideal of renunciation (*sannyasa*) from the temporal power and active disinterested struggle in the world for righteousness in history. It was fully realized in the Dasam Granth. Now, it is self-evident that in Sikhism power is not to be exploited for worldly gain or to harm the enemies. In the Sikh faith, use of force for the welfare of humanity is the highest form of *ahimsa* (non-violence). The use of sword as a defensive weapon is used for restoring social justice in the society. It is not used for encroachment on others' territories and grabbing their wealth and property. This was a *sui generis* contribution of the Sikh Gurus for the social harmony of Indian society. So force is a defensive tool for giving new lease of life to the all and sundry.

In this context the most important point to note is simultaneous self-surrender and retaining one's historical identity. It is continuation of Ramanuja's doctrine of self-surrender (*sarnagati*) and the Tantric reaffirmation of reality of the human person. In Buddhism and the Vedanta the human body was negated. Earlier we also find that practically Buddhism and the Vedantists negated historical identity of the self as an actor (*karta*) in the temporal world.

Sikhism has positively reinterpreted the concept of renunciation (*sanyasa*). It gave birth to the Sikh faith. Guru Nanak reinterpreted the cipher of Indian concept of *sanyasa*. It is a key concept in the Indian philosophy, which has been reinterpreted by him. In the medieval times this concept had created a chasm between this world and the created space of the otherworld. This chasm does not fit in the pronounced dynamic onto-theology of Sikhism. It does not permit negation of human body and the external world. The self realizes its true ontic nature in the world. Human body is a raft, which helps him to reach the coveted purpose of life. There is no need to aspire for the otherworld. It is true that consciousness is a precondition of all knowledge and judgments. It is how 'me' as (*natura naturata*) is transformed into 'I' (*natura naturans*). If the external world is negated, then historical reality of human action can't be accepted. Like medieval ages people would start withdrawing from the societal realities and arduous responsibilities of human life.

Guru Nanak in the *mulmantra* of his "Japuji" used a hyperbole of two terms '*nirbhau nirvair*', meaning thereby without any extraneous control that implies freedom from the fear of death. It warrants freedom of action and commitment for solidarity with other

fellow beings. When any type of cruelty occurs against any person(s), it is our moral duty to resist against a cruel person. Thus, the idea of active resistance to overcome evil and tyranny was already existent in the Sikh Canon. The sixth Guru and subsequent Gurus only accentuated it. It was only a development toward realization of the ideal social order of the Khalsa.

It was a movement for creating social harmony on the Indian soil, against exploitation and hoarding. There is no room for drones like feudal lords and exploiters, celibates and ascetics in the Sikh faith. As a voluntarist it was incumbent on the part of a true Sikh/Khalsa to earn his hard-earned bread and share with others. For this reason the Gurus evolved social institutions of free kitchen (*langar*), *pangat*, *seva*, and sharing one's earnings with others. The Gurus preached and lived up to this ideal.

Therefore, the three-pronged scheme of meditative remembrance of the divine *Naam* (*nama japnâ*), honest hard earnings, (*kirt karnâ*), and sharing goods with others (*wand chakna*) are well known in the Sikh social philosophy. He says, (*ghâl khâai kichu hathhua dei/nanak rahu pachhanai seh/SGGS, p. 1245*). Therefore, *nama-simran* and *kirat-karnâ* should go hand in hand. *Nâma-simran* has been democratized and secularized in the medieval Bhakti cult and this wave was continued in Sikhism. There are no caste and gender barriers in Sikhism.

It implies that mere spirituality and meditation will not do. One must do hard and honest labour with the sweat of one's brow. One is to work in the field as farmer or tiller of the land. One should produce for others and share with them. One should not be only a consumer but also be a producer for others. One should lead an optimistic and dynamic way of life with altruistic ethical values (*nânak nama caradî kalâ, tere bhâne sarbat kâ bhalâ*). *Guru kâ langar* (free kitchen) and *pangat* are based on the principle of equality, which are practised in the Sikh tradition irrespective of caste, colour, sex or gender, creed and any other discriminatory considerations.

The ultimate aim of Sikh way of life is to make the world an abode of peaceful and blissful living in the society. When he transcends his selfishness, he becomes altruist in his practical life. He gets rid of the sense of possessiveness and identification with the bodily self; he is a true Sikh or khalsa. He rather identifies with others and is motivated to be kind to sentient and insentient beings. It is his deed that makes him realize the purpose of human life. He discovers deep meaning of life in the world. He becomes saviour of all beings.

Thus the essence of the Sikh faith is emancipation of the common masses. It is committed to social and moral responsibilities toward humanity. It is an endeavour to create an ideal man who could mirror eternity on the earth.

1 . *raju na cahau mukti na cahau, mani priti carana kamala re / brahama mahesa sidha muni indra mohi thakur hi darsaré. SGGS p.534*

