

Guru Nanak Devji's Teachings in the context of Inter-Faith dialogue

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Introduction: First, why I have avoided to use in this paper the expression 'the Composite Culture', which is even used in our Constitution of India to describe unified one culture of our country.¹ It is because such a demand is not only against one of the basic realities of our Indian way of life, it also goes against the Divine will, which was - and is - behind this created world with different shades and colours. In this regard the following observation made by Dr. Ram Singh is also noteworthy.

It is a debatable issue whether there is a separate entity called "composite culture" of India, or it is merely the interaction of various cultures which, instead of resulting into an integrated culture, are still in a position to maintain their separate identities.²

Besides what Dr. Ram Singh says, the reality is that multi or pluralism is part of our Indian or even Asian way of life. It is quite a different thing if some of us are not willing to accept this truth. But it is still there, in the form of multi-cultures, multi-languages, multi-religions and multi-ethnicities. Therefore, question of 'composite culture' is not only debatable, but also a doubtful principle, unless we are willing to take it as an eschatology reality. I do not intend to deal with this point in detail here, because of the time factor. But we may be able to come back to this question of 'composite culture, in our discussion if you will wish to do so.

Secondly, why I have included the expression 'Inter-Faith Dialogue in India' as part of my subject? It is because I strongly believe that it is one of the ways to live in a multi or pluralistic religious context, such as prevailing in our country. In fact in some form it always goes on in our various life situations every day. About the meaning of *Inter-Faith Dialogue*, Dr. Wesley Ariarajah says:

At the level of theology, dialogue affirms that this world is God's world. He made it. He remakes it. He is involved in its total history.... All religious communities are on a pilgrimage... its emphasis is not on religious or systems or ideas, its emphasis falls on people. It says that people are not simply objects for conversions... It is an attempt to understand them as partners with us in a pilgrimage.³

Now those of us who have read the life of Guru Nanak Dev Ji as narrated by various authors of the *Janam Sakhis*, and his teachings, which we find in his hymns contained in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, **will agree with me that Guru Nanak Dev's whole life and teachings are the best example of an Inter-Faith Dialogue and if taken seriously, his model can help us in dealing with the present most difficult context of our country.** It will not be possible to deal in detail Guru Nanak Dev's life experiences and teachings concerning our subject in this brief paper. But still an attempt is being made to state a few main points in order to initiate our discussion under the following sub-themes:

- a) Dialogue in Action
- b) Theological Basis
- c) Treatment of other Faiths and Ideologies

a) Dialogue in Action

As mentioned earlier, Guru Nanak Dev's whole life was a part of the process of Inter-Faith Dialogue, and this I call 'dialogue in action'. In this process of Inter-Faith Dialogue, one basic principle, one has to follow is that one has to pre-suppose that the Ultimate Truth is part of every one's faith, and no one can claim a monopoly over the Ultimate Truth. So in the process of dialogue, one can learn about the Ultimate Truth from others, and also one can offer constructive criticism about the views of others. **But mutual respect towards one another is a demand upon those who get involved in the process of dialogue.** But it also does not mean that we get led to syncretism. Now these principles of Inter-Faith Dialogue, we find functioning in the model of Guru Nanak's way of life. A few examples from his life will clear this point.

First example I want to refer to is Guru Nanak's dialogue with a Pandit teacher. The theme of this *Sakhi* connected with early life of Guruji is the real nature of study or learning. According to this *Sakhi*, Pandit was a master of his subjects according to our worldly standard. But young Guruji was not interested in that kind of learning. During the dialogue process, he makes his point clear, part of which, according to the *Janam Sakhi* is as follows, which he said to the Pandit:

Let your ink be made by burning (your) worldly affections, let inner love be your pen, and make (Your) mind the scribe. And what is written? The Name of God is written! His praises are written, and by the writing thereof all evil is wiped away.⁴

The second incident of Guru Nanak Dev's life, which I want to refer is well known to all of us. The editor of *Puratan Janam Sakhi* has named this incident *Vehin Parves*. According to this *Sakhi*, after his spiritual experience for some days Guruji kept quiet, but then finally on one day, he declared the essence of his new experiences in these words:

*Na koi hindu, na ko musalaman!*⁵

(There is neither Hindu nor Muslim)

Those of us who have read this *Sakhi* know how a controversy in the form of dialogue took place on Guru's this declaration, which later on ended in the mosque, and Guruji helped Daulat Khan's Qazi to understand the real meaning of *namaz* (prayer). During this dialogue in the form of *Shalok*, Guruji explained the real meaning of Muslim prayer in these words:

Make mercy your mosque, faith your prayer-mat,
And righteousness your Qur'an.

Make humility your circumcision, uprightness your fasting, and so you will be a (true) Muslim.⁶

Again, as it is a well known fact that Guru Nanak's major part of life was spent on travels known as *Udasis*. It is during these *Udasis* one finds in real sense, 'dialogue in action'. During these travels Guruji visited all the major religious places of major religions of his time, i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, etc. His visits were

not only limited to our own country's four directions, North, South, West and East, but he even went in the South up to Sri Lanka, and on the west upto Middle East. It was these visits and travels when Guruji not only offered constructive criticism to various rituals and practices of other faiths, but these also deepened and enriched his religious experience, which later, one can see in the contents of his hymns, in the form of using different divine names and languages. Guruji did not directly attack any religion and did not make an attempt to convert anybody, instead of that he always tried to strengthen other's faith as part of one's own religion. Here, two such well known examples are cited in support of this agreement:

For example, during his visit to Hardwar, when he saw people throwing water toward the sun in order to send it to their dead forefathers, instead of arguing and correcting people's folly, he started throwing water towards his fields in Panjab. When people questioned him about his action, during the dialogue he answered and pointed to them:

"My friends", said Baba (Nanak)Ji,

"If water will not reach my field (from here) then how can it reach you forefathers?..."

Take, for example, another incident which took place during Guruji's visit to Mecca. When Guruji slept, keeping his feet toward holy place and, on questioning by a Muslim priest, he replied:

*Jit val khudai
ate ka'ba nahin
tetu vali merai pair ghasiti kari chadu*

(whichever direction you think of God and Ka'ba is not, you may drag my feet toward that direction)⁸

Time and space will not permit me to quote more examples to show how Guru Nanak's whole life was a model of Inter-Faith Dialogue. Therefore I now move to the next section of my paper.

b) Theological Basis

While giving the meaning of Inter-Faith Dialogue (which has been already referred in the Introduction) Dr. Ariarajah said, "At the level of theology, dialogue affirms that this world is God's world. He made it" This fact is equally true in Guru Nanak's teachings about Creator and creation. In my work "*The Doctrine of Ultimate Reality in Sikh Religion*", I have devoted a full chapter on this subject based upon Guru Nanak's hymns.⁹ Therefore, here I am referring only a few verses of Guru's one of the hymns on creation. This hymn is found in *Maru Raga* (SGGS page 1035). The following verses in English translation will serve our purpose for discussion.

There was neither earth nor sky;
(only) the infinite (beings) Will was there...
when He willed (*bhana*), He made the world;
and without support stretched out the vast expanse...
He made the creation and see it;
And His Order ran through the Universe...¹⁰

There are a number of important points which one needs to note in the Doctrine of Creation in the hymns of Guru Nanak Dev, which needs to be explained, underlined, and reiterated for the benefit of our situation. There is, first, the assertion that God has created this universe out of nothing and this He did according to His will (*bhana*), voluntarily. Creation, according to Guru Nanak, is the work of a sovereign God. We are, because God is. With this truth, two things become clear that without God either human beings or this cosmos would be inconceivable. Secondly, all of us are accountable to a higher authority, which means the authority of God. This means the way we, as human beings, exercise our stewardship over creation and the manner in which we treat each other, has ultimate consequences which we can not escape.

Guru Nanak Dev's doctrine of creation and human being also reveals another important point for us: that we all are created by One Creator. We, all men and women, are His creation and therefore are equal before Him. We all are members of one and only human family. It also implies that both, in our situation, the oppressors and the oppressed are of the same species. Human life, therefore, is to be pursued not selfishly, but cooperately, as a human venture. Now, again, I did not have the time to spell further this point based on Guru Nanak's doctrine of creation, but possibly we will be able to discuss this together.

c) Treatment of other Faiths and Ideologies

Already references have been made to Guru Nanak Dev's treatment of other faiths. Here, without spelling out I am quoting below one of Guru Nanak Dev's hymns, which tells us how he treated all faiths equally. This hymn is actually part of Ramkali Ki Var (SGGS page 951) and here I am using an English translation of this hymn quoted by Dr. Hari Ram Gupta in one of his papers:

Hindu is born to a Hindu,
He wears the sacred thread,
He wears it, but continues to do evil deeds.
He does not purify himself thereby.

A Muslim feels proud of being a Muslim,
Without a proper guide, he does not find the true path.
He gropes in the dark.
He cannot enter paradise without performing good deeds.

A son of a Jogi becomes a Jogi;
He wears ear-rings;
and wearing them roams about.
God is everywhere: He has created us all.
He who realises this is a true Hindu or a Musalman.

All others are hypocrites;
All shall have to answer for their actions.
Good deeds will bring salvation.
Truth alone shall prevail in the end;
Nothing else will be a substitute for it before God." 11

Conclusion: Through this brief discussion, I have tried to show that Guru Nanakji's life and teachings do not encourage us toward a 'composite culture', because the implied meaning of 'composite culture' is a 'unified culture' or 'one

culture', or even 'cultural nationalism.' **Guru Nanak Dev, as we have seen, has recognised the existence of diverse religions, cultures, ideologies, etc.** and he strengthens the concept through his constructive and positive criticism. The latter, to me, is possible through Inter-Faith Dialogue approach, which need to go on at all levels in our pluralistic society on the model, which Guru Nanak Dev Ji invites us to follow.



References

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