

Concept of Social Justice in Sikhism

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It is a half-truth to describe Sri Guru Granth Sahib as a scripture of the Sikhs. Half- a truth is less than whole truth. There is a popular perception that the Sikhs are its sole custodians. In 2003, I happened to visit the Swami Narayan Temple, at Mohammad Ali Jinnah Road, Karachi, Pakistan

. Within the temple premises in an enclosure, three volumes of Sri Guru Granth Sahib are seated on a high pedestal in an exclusive separate hall just like in Gurdwara. These three volumes are in three different scripts, i.e., Gurmukhi, Sindhi and Urdu. Upon my enquiry I was told that no Sikh visits that place nor resides in that area, and that only the Non-Sikhs residents of that area recite Guru Granth Sahib. Many more such instances are found through out the world. Particularly Sindhi Hindus have deep faith, and they have built Sat Sang Darbars by different names and kept Sri Guru Granth Sahib as their main worshiping object. This reveals the fact that it is not confined to the Sikhs alone, but in fact it is the only Scripture of the world, which has Humanism clubbed with Spiritualism. At the same time Sikhs are the rightful heirs of this Guru Tradition and are the true symbol of its teachings as such they both are one and inseparable. And every Sikh is supposed to be its living spirit in a personal form. Thus I will confine my paper to the concept of Peace & Social Justice in Guru Granth Sahib and in practice by the Sikhs, which naturally deals with humanism.

The history of the world religions establishes the fact that any new religion coming into existence not only denounces the earlier religions and their practices, but also declares them to be misleading, to establish its own validity. This concept leads them to campaigning to convert the people into their own religion, generally based on hatred about the religion in which they were born. But the approach of Sikhism is altogether different. It has not only denounced religious conversions but has vehemently opposed it even by sacrifices and force. This concept has made the Sikhs as Saint-Soldiers, without which they could not have fulfilled their mission of humanism. Sikhism has emerged in appraisal of the conflicts among different religions and castes, especially among the warring Muslim invaders and conquered Hindus of Indian soil. This faith has given an altogether new concept to secularism, peace, equality, social justice and co-existence among all living creatures including animals and plants. The contributors of the text of its scripture Sri Guru Granth Sahib is speaking evidence that no person is high or low by birth but his deeds will make him high or low in this world and also in the Court of God Almighty.

The Sikh Gurus

Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, his nine successors during a span of 239 years and their scriptures have made the Sikh a perfect human-being above the barriers of religion, caste, creed, gender and a God believing true secular person. But the historians have made Sikhism a religion. About his own religion Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji said in Sri Guru Granth Sahib on page No.353 that, "My religion and caste is the true name of God. Self Control, Dharam (righteousness), and love of truth are my rituals and customs".

His followers were called Sikhs (disciples), Nanak Panthis (followers of Nanak) or Nanak Prasath (worshippers of Nanak in Persian). To remove this misconception, his 9th successor

Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji finally described them as “ Wahguru Ji Ka Khalsa “ (people of Magnificent God). He said in “ Akal Ustat “ on page No. 19 of “ Dasam Granth Sahib “ that, “ Some call themselves Hindu, some Turk (Muslim), some Rafzi and some Imam Shafiyee. But the entire human race should be recognised as one community”.

This has eradicated all doubts about its compartmentalisation as a religion or any other religion’s off shoot, and established a true, separate and independent identity as Khalsa. The founder of this ideology Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji was born in village Talwandi, which was named after him as “Nankana Sahib” now in Pakistan. Though he was from a high caste Khatri family of Hindus, but refused to wear the Janevu (Hindu sacred thread) when he was 11 years of age, in accordance with his conviction of the doctrine of humanism above all religions.

One of my friends Mr. Sayeed an architect has visited and done a Video recording of a place where Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji stayed and had discourses with the Muslim divines of Baghdad then the top most Islamic Centre. There is an inscription commemorating the visit of Baba Nanak-I-Fakir and a place is built beside a Mosque, which is looked after by a Muslim father and son. Upon asking about the history of the place, he was told by them that this is built in memory of Guru Nanak’s visit. They further added that he was not a Hindu, but his followers have become Hindu. The Baghdadi ruler conferred on Guru Sahib a Baghdadi Choga (flowing dress), with verses from Qoran written on it. It is known as Qoranic Chogan and is presently at Gurdwara Dera Baba Nanak near Amritsar. It was customary for Baghdadi rulers to confer Qoranic Chogas in high appreciation. Another such Qoranic Choga conferred by the ruler on Shaikh Badiuddin Shahmadari is available at Manakpur near Kanpur.

Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji was not an incarnation of God (this concept does not exist in Sikhism), nor a founder of any religion or a mere spiritual preacher. He was the greatest revolutionist and humanist the world has ever produced. He had an in-depth study of the Scriptures and the religious practices adopted by the Hindus, Muslims, Jains and Buddhists visiting their religious centres and interacting with them all over the world. His mission was to unite all human beings and eradicate the discrimination of caste, creed, gender, language and geographical boundaries. He was a social reformer, political rebel and pioneer of the Indian Nationalism. He revived the life in the dead souls of Indian Society and successfully motivated his followers to resist the oppression at the cost of their life and property for the sake of social justice, and to protect the dignity of all human beings, and motherland.

It is a total misconception of the historians that the Indian Sub-continent was never one. It was divided into parts and recognised in the name of the states, and that only the British rule has united the country. More than five hundred years back Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji described Babar as an invader on a country. In his hymns narrating this fact included in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, he said “*Khurasan Khasmana Kiya, Hindustan Drayaa*” i.e., O God, you have made Khurasan (country from where Babar has come) the husband, and harassing Hindustan. He was very much balanced in making the statement that, “*Mughal Pathana Bhai Ladaayi*” i.e., there is quarrel between Mughals and Pathans and not with the Hindus.

Concept Of Social Justice

The concept of social justice is based on equality of all human beings. In an unequal society no peace or justice can prevail. For eradicating discrimination and establishing social justice in spiritual and religious sphere Guru Nanak Dev Ji made an enlightening and revolutionary statement saying that *Na ko Hindu, Na Musliman* – there was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. He in the process asserted universal humanism; everyone is the child of One God. When he said so, he was giving expression to the very quest of human community that we strive

today. He was not asking men to ignore their religious beliefs in the search for human community. Nor did he advise a kind of cautious mixture of elements from all traditions so that men could accept some new religion without stress. His intention was far more radical. He urged every man of faith to penetrate more deeply into his own traditions to find within them that core of moral and spiritual truth, which is basic to all human religions. His call to transcend communal differences has stemmed from a deep sense of *God* and not an indifference to human religious effort. His concern was not with changing man from one religious community to the other. Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji was concerned about change from the superficial religion of ceremonial to a deeper religion of moral transformation. All the Ten Guru's life as well as their teachings, reflect a spirit of true humanism, spiritualism, socialism and secularism. And they are more relevant today than five hundred years ago and will continue to be equally relevant for all the times to come.

Justice With The Labour And Untouchables

Since thousands of years till today, in Indian society, people who live on *Bhiksha* (charity) are treated as revered and honourable, where as those who work for the necessities of life are looked down upon and regarded as untouchables. This is price for their sweat and labour in the service of the society. In his travels, Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji preferred to stay and dine with these class of people alone and declared that, "Nanak is found among the lowest caste, what he has to do with the high and mighty? Where ever the lowliest are looked after, there lies the grace of Almighty God" (SGGS p15).

He declared that, "He, who earns livelihood with earnest labour and distribute it among fellow beings, can only know the path of Almighty God" (SGGS p 1245).

His three basic commandments are very famous. 1- *Nam Japo* (always remember God in memory), 2- *Kirat Karo* (do honest labour), 3- *Vand Chako* (distribute among fellow beings, later it got termed as *Daswandh*, distribution of one tenth of the earning). The concept of charity does not exist in Sikhism. As this is instrumental in creating a superiority complex of the donor with his hands

high, and infusing inferiority complex in the recipient with his hands down and spread. It is novel idea of maintaining social equality between the donor and recipient by the concept of distribution of wealth.

Shri Guru Granth Sahib is the genius and efforts for 135 years of First Five Gurus. They collected the hymns of the Muslim Sufis and Hindu Bhagats of India who lived during a span of 500 years. Bhagat Sadana Ji was a Muslim butcher, who used to slaughter the animals and sell their meat. Bhagat Ravidas Ji was a cobbler and used to stitch the old shoes and chappals. Bhagat Kabir Ji was a Muslim weaver. Bhagat Sain Ji was a barber by profession. Bhagat Namdev Ji was a washer man and deemed to be untouchable. All these were combined with a king Bhagat Pipa, other high caste Hindu Bhagats and Sikh Gurus and their hymns are included in Shri Guru Granth Sahib.

Now a days, to speak about the social justice has become a fashion of the day. In India, it was not imaginable four centuries back when the society was worst stricken by the caste discrimination. At such peak period of hatred and discrimination between the communities, Shri Guru Granth Sahib was compiled as a model mosaic of social and spiritual equality of all human beings. And the Sikhs are bowing their heads in front of them in their holiest place of worship.

Where as, even today low caste Hindus and non-Hindus are not permitted to enter most of the temples. Smt. Indira Gandhi then Prime Minister of India, a Brahmin by birth, was not permitted to enter the Temple of Lord Jaggan Nath at Puri, Orrisa. On the pretext that she denounced Hinduisim, by marrying Parsi gentlemen Mr. Feroz Gandhi. Shri Rajiv Gandhi

was also not permitted, though he posed himself wearing Janevu (Hindu Sacred Thread) over his clothes at the pyres of his mother, because of his mixed parentage. In Jew temples non-Jews and in Zoroastrian temples non-Zoroastrians are prohibited to enter. In Churches, non-Christians are not entitled for receiving the sacred bread and wine during Communion Service. In the holy cities of Mecca and Madina, non-Muslims are not allowed to enter.

Social Equality

Guru Sahib did not confine only in preaching social justice, but implemented it in practice to be adopted by his followers. For continuity of that purpose, he introduced three institutions. 1- *Sarovar* (common bathing tank, in those days low caste people were not permitted to take water from common source). 2- *Sangat* (a congregation without any discrimination). 3- *Pangat* (to dine while sitting in a row in Langar i.e., free food). The 3rd Guru Sri Guru Amar Dass Ji went a step further in refusing to give audience to any body unless he takes the Langar prepared by *Seva* (voluntary service) rendered by the common people irrespective of caste and creed.

In 1571 Emperor Akbar visited Sri Guru Amar Dass Ji at Govindwal. He had first to take food in *Guru Ka Langar*. It was on this occasion that the Emperor offered the Guru Sahib a large estate for the maintenance of *Langar*. But Guru Sahib politely declined his offer and said that, "I have already obtained enough from the Creator. The people are my lands and estates. Enough, that daily we get the bread from God. And that the *Guru Ka Langar* should be of the masses, by the masses and for the masses". But as a token of his appreciation the Emperor presented it to Bibi Bhani daughter of Guru Sahib, saying that he is gifting it to her treating her as his own daughter and Guru Sahib could not resist this offer. Later Guru Sahib established a township for the betterment of common man on that land, where today stands the famous city of Amritsar.

Love with the enemies

Social Justice is not exhibited in Langar and Sarovar alone, but also in the battlefield. Once a Sikh Bhai Kanhayia was produced before the 10th Guru Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, with the complaint that though he was entrusted with the work to look after our soldiers, but he was providing water even to the wounded enemy soldiers, thereby reviving life and who were again fighting against us. As an explanation he submitted that, in view of Guru's teachings, he couldn't make out any difference between a friend and a foe. The Guru Sahib was pleased, embraced him, conferred upon him the title of Bhai and provided him a first aid kit and asked to continue with this most humane mission.

Ardas is a formal supplication recited at conclusion of every congregation, prayers and functions. It is prayed in that, "wherever Khalsa is there, grant us the boon of protection of the oppressed and leniency towards the oppressors". This shows the Sikh tradition of social justice to all sections of the society, victims as well as the culprits.

Justice With The Women

Right from the days of birth of human race, women were treated as inferior to men and subjected to all kind of atrocities. Today we claim to be the most civilised and modern society, but a woman is still treated as impure during her period of menstruation. She is forbidden from performing any religious rites and even entering any places of worship. Moreover in Hindu tradition during this period, which is described as *Sutak* (impurity), she is treated as untouchable.

There is an Ayyappa Swami Temple located on Sabarimala Hill in Patthanam Thitta district of Kerala in South India. In this temple women in menstruation period are not permitted to climb even the hill. Once a lady Collector and District Magistrate was prohibited to climb the

hill for supervising the arrangements as a part of her official duty.

Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji raised his voice against this ill treatment of the women folk. He said it all happens by the will of God. It is due to the nature and physiology, and not due to her fault, then how do you call her impure? He made people realise the social status of women, by establishing her supremacy in a pleasant and meaningful departure from the universal presumptions. In his noble words he expressed, "Of a woman are we conceived. Of a woman we are born. To a woman we are betrothed and married. It is woman, who is friend and partner of life. It is a woman who keeps the race going. Another companion is sought when she dies. Through woman are established social ties. Why should we consider woman impure, cursed and condemned, while from woman are born saints and rulers? From woman alone is born a woman. Without woman, there can be no human birth. Without woman, O Nanak, only the True One God exists (SGGS p 473)".

In the book "Freedom at Midnight" the authors Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins have on page No.424 of the fourth reprint 2000 quoted that: " The Sikhs' tenth *Guru* has specifically enjoined his followers against sexual intercourse with Moslem women ". As a mark of respect for the women and morals for the disciples, adultery is strictly prohibited in Sikhism. And particularly mentioning about the Muslim women shows his deep regards for the people fighting against him. Another reason appears to be, as most of the Hindus who have been persecuted by the Muslims and have embraced Sikhism might settle their scores. And that they should not be allowed to be revengeful towards the Muslim Women, which generally happens in the event of battles with the people of other side.

In the year 1802 Lion Of Punjab Maharaja Ranjit Singh was awarded a punishment by Akali Phula Singh, Jathedar Sri Akal Takhat Sahib, Golden Temple, Amritsar for having sexual relation with a Muslim girl by name Moran. It was awarded that the Maharaja should be tied to the tree and slapped with hunter on his naked back. When Maharaja got himself tied with the tree for receiving the punishment, the remaining portion of punishment was waived.

In Sikhism, effective widespread and practical steps are taken for socio-religious equality of woman. There is no separate code for women in Sikhism, they are on par with men in all respects and can become the priest and empowered to administer *Amrit* (Sikh way of baptism). Widow remarriage is permitted whereby the widow can be rehabilitated, if so desired. Both man and woman should regard adultery as immoral. A Sikh ought not to marry when his first wife is alive. Divorce is not desirable. It has prohibited 1- The custom of *Satti* (immolation of the widow with the deceased husband either voluntary or forcible). 2- Wearing of veils by women. 3- *Dowry system*. 4- Female infanticide (killing of new-born females).

In accordance with the teachings strict measures have been adopted to prevent these evils in the Sikh Reht Maryada i.e., The Code Of Sikh Conduct And Conventions. Such individuals shall be liable to chastisement involving automatic boycott, who gives off son or daughter in matrimony for a price or reward. And any one maintaining relations or communion with the killers of female infants. On 18-4-2001 a Hukumnama (edict) has been issued by Sri Akal Takhat Sahib, that anybody aborting on knowing it to be female child should be treated as female infanticide and liable to be ex-communicated.

The Tenth Master Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji invited his wife Mata Sahib Kaur to put *Batase* (sugar puffs) into the water of which he was preparing *Amrit* stirring with *Khanda* (double edged sword) and reciting Gurbani i.e., the holy hymns. Mata Bhag Kaur and others fought battles shoulder to shoulder along with Guru Sahib. Mata Khivi wife of 2nd Guru Sri Gruru Angad Dev Ji served and supervised the Langar. The 3rd Guru Shri Guru Amar Das Ji

established 22 Manjian (Missionary Seats), out of that 2 seats were headed by ladies Bibi Mathon Murari and Bibi Bhago Ji.

In March 1999 and again in October 2004 the election of Bibi Jagir Kaur a woman as President of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee the highest body to look after the administration of religious shrines is a shining example to testify the equality between man and woman advocated by Sikhs.

The Mutuality of Guru Sikh Relationship

Traditionally all Gurus have respected their Sikhs and often listened to their advice.

As per the prevailing practice the 4th Guru Sri Guru Ram Dass Ji has declared that. “ There is no difference between Sikh and Guru, both are one and the same “ (SGGS p 444). The 10th Guru Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji after giving *Amrit* to the 1st *Punj Piyaras* (five beloveds) has bowed before them to take *Amrit* from their hands. Thus the Guru Sahib himself was baptised by his own baptised Sikhs, creating a history of equality between the founder and disciples, moreover he established supremacy of collective leadership.

It will not be out of place to mention one incident of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji. In 1707 while going south he happened to pass by the Dera of Dadu Ram Bairagi. Here, he lowered his arrow in salutation before the tomb, in contravention of prohibition of grave worship, an act that he had done to test the courage of his Sikhs. Here the Sikhs had proved themselves to be capable of becoming the true successor by pronouncing Guru Sahib guilty and imposing a fine of Rs.125/-. All these and many more glaring examples of the fact that what the Gurus preached, they also practised in life for maintaining social justice in the society. They had set value-based traditions to be followed by their Sikhs. Beyond doubt Shri Guru Granth Sahib is the finest example of practicing and preaching of Social Justice and the Sikhs are the living example of administering the Social Justice in the human society across the world.

