

Pilgrimage – A Sikh Perspective

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TIRATH YATRA – PILGRIMAGE HAS always been recognised as a religious activity in almost all religious traditions – Hindu, Muslims, Buddhist and the Christians, although in terms of origin development and role, its connotation is not the same.

Ample references are found in the Vedic literature as regards *Tirath Yatra* (Journeys to sacred ford). The great Epic Mahabharata assumes an already well established practice of Hindu pilgrimage closely conforming to the literal meaning of *Tirath* (sacred ford) *Yatra* (tour). A pilgrim itinerary in the Mahabharata traces the outline of grand pilgrimage of India in a general clockwise direction beginning at Pushkar in Rajasthan and after a traverse of different parts of India ending at Paryag (modern Allahabad) at the triple confluence of the Ganga, the Yamuna and the invisible mythical Saraswati. In Puranic literature too-pilgrimages have been referred to frequently. *Tiraths* have been categorised variously in Hindu literature as for instance Puranic tradition divides them into four categories according to the origin of their sanctity: *daiva* (divine) *asura* (demonic) *Arsa* (sage) and *Manusa* (human). By another classification these are water associated sites and Mandir Tirathas (temple sites). At the former self-purification by ritual bathing and the performance of rites or ancestors are the most prevalent pilgrims' activities. At the latter devotees generally seek to establish a relational and reciprocal proximity to the deity. Hindu literature also recognises the sacred kshetras (areas) such as Kurukshetra – where the manifold activities of the deities such as battles, hunts, and sports occurred, continue to unfold and reactualise. The Hindus also recognise holy persons as *Tirath* and consequently they perform pilgrimage.

Beside the Hindu tradition, pilgrimage is equally popular in Christian, Muslim and Buddhist traditions and indeed in every religions tradition and there are thousands of pilgrimage centres.

Among the Hindu pilgrimage centres idols of deities are installed, some have been recognised at an all India level while a lot of them venerated at local levels. The deity may be Lord Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, Krishna. Sometimes places, rivers and mountains are considered as pilgrimage centres. According to one assessment, principal pan – Hindu Tiraths are associated with rivers such as the Ganges, Sarswati, Narbada and Krishna. The Pilgrimage, whether of Hindu or of any other tradition has been considered a great artifice to vicariously persuade pilgrims to imbibe social culture which a particular pilgrimage centre reflects. It also engenders as well as intensifies communal consciousness around certain religious and social beliefs. Another motive has also been ascribed to pilgrimage and that is that pilgrimage is undertaken to quench the quest for spirituality and purification in the reactualised cosmic events of profound religious import. It is also held that by making appropriate blood sacrifice (for example the Kali temple in Calcutta and the Jawala Mukhi temple in Himachal Pradesh), to deities or at certain places, the mundane problems are solved.

In Sikhism any pilgrimage system, especially of the Hindus, the closest proximity to it, has not been given any importance. The reasons are obvious. One, quite a

number of pilgrimage centres are associated with ancestral worship. Second, at most of the pilgrimage centres, different deities, some human, some female, some animalistic were venerated and essentially these could not engender, much less evoke a sense of piety and spirituality. At best, they could galvanise the quest of pilgrims into narrow channels, thereby preparing grounds for cults, sects, and animism, etc. Third, even the group consciousness was fed on wrong notions and beliefs. Instead of experiencing liminality supposed to be born out of felt contact with the Divine, the said consciousness is always bereft of sound basis of spirituality. Fifth, in the time of the Gurus, these pilgrimage centres had passed into the control of the corrupt priests, expert in cunning to exploit the innocence/ignorance of people and misguide them by forging multiple varieties of schemata including inculcating of false beliefs among them. All these things were clear to the Gurus and from the time they incepted their dispensation they had been conscious of the inappropriateness of the role pilgrimages played or were likely to play in times to come. Hence they condemned them some times directly, sometimes indirectly but all the time disapproved of them. Understandably they considered pilgrimage out of tune with their religion, which required no meditation to achieve the highest goal of being *Sachiara* or the Khalsa. Through the path of NAME God could be realised or God consciousness could be attained. Significantly enough structure of pilgrimage did not fit in the Sikh-frame. Pilgrimage encouraged belief in deities, miracles, efficacy of rituals sacrifice while the Gurus' dispensations of cornerstone was God, its oneness, its unicity which could be reached or realised through devotees' efforts instead of resorting to priests who had been rejected as those mediating between God and his devotees or to any priest craft or to any miracle or miracle-maker.

In Guru Granth Sahib as also in various compositions of Guru Gobind Singh, the term *Tirath* (pilgrimage centre) has been referred to. But in terms of its definition and cannnotation it is different from that used in Hindu literature or in any other tradition.

According to Guru Ram Das, attainment of true knowledge is the true pilgrimage. Through true knowledge the illusions are removed and verily, one considers himself to have taken bath in the pool of immortality. Guru Amar Das also reiterates the same thing, although in different words. He says that remembrance of God is the best centre of pilgrimage equal to sixty eight pilgrimage centres of the Hindus including their four Dhams such as Badri Nath, Somnath, Jagan Nath and Kedar Nath. In Guru Nanak's reckoning, *Tirath*, in fact, is realisation of NAAM the comprehension and contemplation in Divine Word (as embodied in Guru Granth Sahib) to acquire true knowledge to feel the presence of God every time and everywhere, the utterance of the Guru. Mind engrossed in appropriate mundane activities cannot feel emancipated. For it, dirt of attachment, avarice, etc will have to be washed away. Says the third Guru. "Make tour to pilgrimage centres umpteen times, emancipation can not be achieved unless one is rid of I-am-ness or ego-centricity." This outlook was equally shared, sponsored and propogated by Guru Gobind Singh.

"Men perform millions of ablutions at pilgrimage stations, make offerings and endure great fasts. Dressed like penitents and putting on long hair, they wander about in countries from one place to the other but have failed to find the Beloved. They make postures of contemplation, different prostrations and make so many efforts with blackened faces. But without meditating on the deathless Lord who is also compassionate to the poor, they go at last to the abode of death (Akali Ustat)."

The aforesaid deliberations lead us to the definitive conclusion that Guru Gobind Singh as also other Gurus preceding him did not consider pilgrimage as spiritually meritorious and since Sikh metaphysical thought has to be reflected in the world, seen and unseen, manifest and unmanifest pilgrimage as a social meta-structure was not recommended. The latter decision seemed to have been arrived at probably because it promotes conservatism and retards/blocks upward evolutionary process which man is to undergo to realise self or expand its self to be Self-Conscious.

Closely related is the question as to why the Sikhs undertake pilgrimage to places such as Hari Mandir, Kesgarh Sahib or other such places, when the Gurus did not recommend such practices. The answer is not difficult to find. First, the Sikhs do not undertake pilgrimage in the sense it is generally understood. They visit their religious places to celebrate certain venerable historic events to awaken their dormant spirits so as to reinvigorate their faith. Secondly, their pilgrimages never partake of ritual i.e. it is not a ritual as it is with, say, Hindus going to Hardwar, or with the Haj pilgrimage among the Muslims. The Sikhs all the time are aware that they can get the benediction of God through high conduct at individual as well as social levels in a spirit of sacrifice and love-inspired *seva*. This being so, in Sikh parlance such tours are equated as congregational (*Jor Mela*) partaking of the nature of Sangat or Panth.

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