

Poverty: A Sikh Viewpoint

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ਨਿਰਧਨੁ ਸਰਧਨੁ ਚੋਨਉ ਭਾਈ ॥ ਪੁਭ ਕੀ ਕਲਾ ਨ ਮੇਟੀ ਜਾਈ ॥

(SGGS:1159)

“The poor and the rich are like “brothers”, being human. This is Lord’s immutable design.” Since men and women are equal in Sikhism, “he” should be read as “he or she”, and “brothers” as “brothers and sisters”.

Sikhism is a way of life - styled as *Sikhi*. This word-concept is preferred to “Sikhism” to describe the Sikh faith or religion. Guru Granth Sahib is the Sikh holy Scripture. It is the Sikh belief that all ten Gurus possessed one spiritual Light (*Jyoti*) starting with Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion (1469 – 1539).

Ultimately, the Guru’s teachings (*Gurbani*) personify - as divine power as embodied in Guru Granth Sahib, revered as the Living Guru of the Sikhs. Due to the Sikh belief in One Guiding Light only, the Guru is a singular concept in *Sikhi*. The Guru shows the path of truthful living in the Lord’s Will (Hukam). It is the path of a working householder, who shares his earnings with those who are less well off.

Sikhi addresses the question of ‘poverty’ at religious, social, economic and political levels. Poverty and plenty are realities of life. The above quotation is from a *Shabad* (hymn) in Guru Granth Sahib (GGS), the Sikh holy Scripture. Says the Guru in this *Shabad*, “No one respects the poor. No matter how hard the poor man tries, the rich ignore him. When the poor man goes to the rich man, the latter turns his back on him. When the rich man goes to the poor man, the latter welcomes him warmly and offers him a seat with respect.” (GGS : 1159) Yet, the Guru continually associates Himself with the poor (the *gareeb*), for it is amongst the poverty stricken, the *gareeb*, that humility and respect for life is found. It is through the “experience” of poverty that one learns humility. That “experience” may be real experience in life; or, as in the case of Guru Nanak, in may be “felt” as a reality of human existence.

Guru Nanak, born in a high caste and a flourishing business family, openly discarded the Hindu sacred thread (*janeiu*) symbolising high caste, and associated himself with the poor, the *gareeb*. Therefore, in His *Shabads*, Nanak refers to Himself as *gareeb*. In fact he wanted to be called “Nanak, the *gareeb*”. He empathised with the condition of the poor. *Gareeb* also means “humble” and the Guru used the word in both senses.

So much is the Guru’s feeling for the poor that in His tenth human form (Guru personality), as Guru Gobind Singh, He persuades the rich and the powerful to accept the underprivileged (due to low caste and poverty) as their equals and as own brothers and sisters. At one time, sensing that His message for the creation of a just order in which all shared alike was falling on deaf ears, He went so far as to warn, that the poor shall take over as the rulers of the land (*In gareeb sikhian ko deun paatshahi* – Guru Gobind Singh addressing the hill rajas at Ravalsar in

Himachal Pardesh in Northern India.) This was also the Guru's indirect prediction of the socio-political disorder which would result from socio-economic inequalities.

Guru Nanak declined to sit and dine with the rich who did not *earn* their living by honest means and who did not *share* it with the less well off. He refused the invitation of such a rich man called Malak Bhago to a lavish banquet. Rather, he preferred to sit and eat with a poor carpenter called Bhai Lalo, who had received Him at his house with respect and humility.

Guru Nanak was born in a socially high caste but he condemned the divisive and humiliating Brahmanic caste system, which created inequalities in human society. This system relegated the low caste to a life of servitude which depended on charity and led to poverty. Therefore, Guru Nanak, was the *gareeb*, the low caste.

“Nanak seeks the company of those who are lowest of the low caste. He has no desire to compete with the rich and the powerful.”

Neechan andar neech jaat, neechee hoo att neech. Nanak tin ke sang saath wadhian seo kia rees (GGS :15)

Thus, poverty, and how to deal with it through sharing, (*wand chakna*) becomes one of the main themes of *Sikhi* (the Sikh way of life). Yet, whilst poverty is accepted as a human condition with which human beings may be afflicted through no fault of their own, *Sikhi* teaches constant effort to earn own living and to share with those who are not doing well. There is recognition in Sikh that poverty has many causes, some within and some without human control, but all in God's design (*kalla*).

The Sikh Institution of *Langar*, the Community Kitchen:

The Guru's life formula is:

“He who eats what he earns through honest work and shares with others, he alone O Nanak recognises (follows) the true path in life.”

“*Ghaal khai kish hathon day. Nanak rah pehchaanay say*” (GGS : 1245)

That means, one who earns own livelihood and gives something to the needy, follows the true path. Living on charity is not the Sikh way. Sharing is through the social system symbolised (and practiced) in the Sikh community kitchen (*Langar*) at Gurdwaras. It is a pointer to the establishment of a community-wide system for sharing with, and giving shelter to, those in need. The idea is not to make others dependent on charity but to enable them to receive help from a social system set up for the purpose, with dignity. Therefore, all, the rich and the poor (Sikh and non-Sikh), without distinction, are required to sit side by side in the *Langar* at a Gurdwara and partake food. *Langar* is the Guru's educational institution giving first lessons in sharing, service, humility and equality. Even giving and receiving of so called “charity” must not detract from human dignity. It must be given and accepted in humility, without any sense of pride (*haomai*) in the giver, or loss of personal dignity in the receiver. In this sense the *Sikhi* concept of “charity” may be unique amongst world religions.

In *Sikhi*, experience of poverty, real or felt, teaches us humility. However, poverty is not a virtue in itself. A Sikh lives within the system based on the “community kitchen”, the Sikh institution of *Langar* to which he should contribute (pay *daswandh* i.e. one tenth of earning regularly); and from which he may feed himself. *Langar* is

also symbolic of the Sikh welfare system. That welfare system is a model for the human society. Otherwise, *Sikhi* is based on continuous effort to earn own livelihood; begging and dependence on charity are forbidden.

Sacha Sauda: True business

One of the oft quoted teaching episodes in Guru Nanak's life relates to feeding the poor and the hungry. He had been given some money by his father to do business. Instead he spent this money to feed the hungry and regarded that as a "true bargain" (*sacha sauda*). It is true that a business cannot remain viable without making profit. However, in *Sikhi*, short term gains should not be at the expense of creating long term inequalities in the human society. Therefore, social systems, state policies and longer term business aims need to complement each other to ensure that the underprivileged are not forgotten. That is true business (*sacha sauda*), a concept accepted by many modern large businesses. Today's businesses need prosperous and stable societies based on equality principles in future to thrive.

God's *kalla* (system or design) of the brotherhood of the poor and the rich is the reality of life. The rich and the poor are both brothers (*Nirdhan sardhan dono bhaaee* – (SGGS: 1159). The brother who is better off cannot afford to ignore his poor sibling. This leads on to the global socio-political goals of *Sikhi*.

Socio-political Goals of Sikhi:

World peace and survival of humankind in the long run depend on the egalitarian principles of equality and sharing on this earth, also referred to as the "Great Mother" in Guru Granth Sahib (*Mata dharat mahat*), who feeds her children. All human being are brothers and sisters and must learn to share, and live in peace and with dignity.

For this reason, the Sikh socio-political objectives are described in three words in the Sikh slogan, "*Degh, Tegh, Fateh!*"

Degh is the cauldron symbolising community kitchen and the principle of sharing with dignity. This leads on to welfare, social and economic objectives.

Tegh is the sword of justice and equality which protects the weak and creates an egalitarian order so that "No one inflicts pain on another in a *Halemi raj*, or global benign regime." (GGS:74).

And so the socio-political objective of the *Khalsa Panth*, the Order of the *Khalsa* (those directly linked with the Guru), laid down by the Tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, is that *Degh* and *Tegh* shall ultimately prevail on this earth, this "Temple of God". (*Degh Tegh jaag meh doun chaalay*)

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa

Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh

(The Khalsa is of the Wondrous Enlightener.
To Him the victory.)

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Strength through Unity

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HISTORICAL EVIDENCE REVEALS that division among Sikhs promotes tyranny at the hands of their enemies. The Third Holocaust of Sikhs (1984-1994) was mostly state sponsored but caused by disunity between political and religious leaders specifically . These leaders did not consult Sikhs inside and outside of India. Innocent Sikhs living in the villages were pawns in the hands of these leaders. Rural Sikhs, excited by the hope of a Khalsa Homeland, did not thoroughly understand the repercussions of the Sikh Holocaust. Therefore, they had to bear the brunt of government and police crackdowns during the day, and raids by sympathizers at night. The Sikhs living inside of the Punjab and throughout India are the core and their protection is the responsibility of all the Sikhs around the world.

Economically, rural Sikhs in Punjab are becoming poorer day by day due, in large part, to the wrong and unsympathetic leadership. The present Sikh leadership continuously seeks financial and political gains at the cost of common Sikhs. According to Professor Chamkaur Singh, each newborn child in Punjab is burdened with a debt of Rs. 23000, as the Punjab owes Rs. 70 Billion. The Sikh leadership is engaged in pleasing non-Sikhs and the central government in order to increase their personal fortunes. Sikh principles of service have been discarded by many leaders. It is evident by the following factors: prevailing poverty in villages due to the continual division of family land holdings, extremely low educational standards, pervasive drugs and alcohol use among Sikh youth, disappearance of Sikh *Bana-Bani* at a very fast rate, and overall decrease of the Sikh population due to ultrasound used to negatively impact the ratio of girls to boys. This further adds to the situation of the continuous influx of Biharis and Christian challenges to the Sikh identity. Lastly, the problems created by the Third Sikh Holocaust (1984-1994) for the families of victims still linger.

The present religious leadership is indecisive in the face of such issues as seating in langar halls, ladies touching Guru Granth before Sukhasan, Keertan by ladies at Darbar Sahib, Sikh Marriage and Gurdwara Acts, the selection of the President of SGPC and Jathedars, etc.

Guru Nanak describes poor leadership as follows:

How can a person be an enlightened leader if he has not found truth himself?
Nanak says how can the blind show the right way and not ruin ones followers?
When all are rebuffed, how can he call himself an enlightened leader?

(SGGS: 140)

In another Shabad, Guru Nanak characterizes corrupt leaders:

A person uttering falsehoods eats carcass,
Yet how is it that he still gives instructions to others?
One misleads himself
His associates are robbed of goodness
Nanak says such people are pretenders

(SGGS: 130-140)

After the Third Sikh Holocaust (1984-94), it is imperative for Sikhs to upgrade SGPC and Shiromani Akali Dal because both of them are unidirectional, under the direction of Shiromani Akali Dal President. Such power vesting is injurious to the progress of the Sikhs and Sikhism. It is better to follow consensus or decide unanimously to avoid conflict.

The Takht Jathedars were selected by the Sarbat Khalsa collectively upto 1990. Now, mainly, the president, Shiromani Akali Dal appoints Jathedars at his own discretion. Similarly, the SGPC President is appointed, and is not elected by consensus or unanimously. SGPC and Akali Dal Party should develop bylaws, policies and procedures for management and get them approved by Sarbat Khalsa. Such policies should be followed continuously, updated and approved every year. Authoritarianism is actually abuse of authority. Any decision by SGPC and Takhts must be unanimous after consulting Sikhs over a period of time.

The SGPC President and Takht Jathedars should be appointed unanimously by SGPC membership with the full involvement of Sarbat Khalsa. Their supervisor is SGPC and they must follow policies and procedures, including selection, activities, termination, job description, etc. Their term should last a fixed tenure, and normally not exceed five years over the course of their life time. They should be top Sevadars, experts in Sikh scriptures and tradition, have high character and experience in preaching of Sikh religion. These sevadars must have relentless consistency, enhanced ideas of improvement, a willingness to change, and practice new ideas for better performance and to seek new opportunities for Sikhs. They must be evaluated each year to check progress, including implementation of new techniques to spread Sikh religion and develop plan for the next year and master plan for the next five years. They must not enhance their own personal motives and selfishness. Deviation from Sikh ideology or policies should not be tolerated as the Gurus did not tolerate Minas, Pirthias, Ramrayas and Dhirmalias,

The Akal Takht Jathedar is the first among equals as Jathedar. However, as a rule, he consults other Jathedars before deciding religious matters. No Hukamnama should be announced without the approval of SGPC and Sarbat Khalsa.

Historical evidence of unity and the decision making process: The Guru conferred leadership on the Khalsa, *thus the loyalty is owed to the cause of Khalsa and not to an individual*. Five Khalsa brothers (*panj piara*) can make decisions because Guru is present in them. Such spirit can even now be applied at any organizational level. Sikhism unites Sikhs together to strengthen their cycle of understanding, leading them to touch lives to change for the betterment. In Sikhs, spiritual leadership comes from the Guru Granth Saab, where as temporal leadership is guided by the Panth. Thus, Sarbat Khalsa or Panth controls all Sikh affairs. Sikh religion progressed due to cohesion in Sikhs, their unity and strength of purpose. Inspired and determined leadership was provided by Gurus in the beginning and devoted Sikhs after the Tenth Guru. Common people were attracted to join the Sikh religion embracing equality, liberty and fraternity. Thus, Khalsa is made of common people, i.e. a plebeian society and still exists as such.

The Sikh philosophy advocated the removal of inequalities related to social, economic, political, and religious rights. Such egalitarian spirit of the Sikhs provided equal treatment for all its members. Sikh leadership was passed onto the most deserving Sikh, serving the community and not to a rich person or having the most votes. *There are no dictators in the Sikh religion. Equality of all Sikhs is inherited in Sikhism*. The idea developed by the whole Sangat has higher value. When the Sikhs call one another by the name of Bhai (brother), they are all equal in status, showing the spirit of brotherhood, and fraternity. Such devoted ones serve all the Sikhs equally for all of them are the image of Guru or God.

There are several examples in Sikh history showing that division leads to failure. For example, 'Tat Khalsa' separated from Bandai Khalsa after Banda Bahadar and Bhai Mani Singh brought them under one umbrella of Sarbat Khalsa in 1721. On the other hand, Kapur Singh became the next Sikh leader due to his service to the Sikhs in 1733. After first Sikh Holocaust (Chhota Ghalu Ghara) of 1746, only a few Sikhs were left. It is evident from the Sakhi of Buta Singh and Garja Singh which occurred in 1739 near Tarn Taran. Whenever two Sikhs met, they used to feel very happy. An old saying of that time still prevails among Sikhs today:

Whenever two Sikhs met

Two eyes of one and the two eyes of the other one – became four

Thirty-two teeth of one and thirty-two teeth of the other Sikh – became sixty-four

Ten fingers of one and ten fingers of the other – became twenty

Thirty-five million skin hair of one and thirty-five million of the other

– stood still with happiness!

At present there are more than 24 million Sikhism in the world, who still respect one another by saying – *Sat Sri Akal* and feel happy seeing one another and come together.

Possible Solutions: Public service (*seva*), or volunteerism is supreme in Sikhism. Minor differences in purpose and need do not deter Sikhs from getting involved in solving mutual problems. Extension of pardon, trust, common touch, humility and forgiveness are the best healers, and these practices are healing the Sikh motherland after the third Sikh Holocaust. Sikhs have to realize where they come from, where they are today, and where they are going tomorrow. In-depth analysis of the facts will help Sikhs to find what they did, where they failed, and how to find ways to be successful next time. However, they must resolve internal differences before taking over monumental tasks. The Sikhs have to honor sevadars who work with their hands and hearts to move forward. They must be brought into the front lines to manage SGPC and Gurudwaras. The state or federally elected officials should not get involved in local religious places. The religious places should be handled similar to the Vatican City, the religious body of the Catholic Church. The governments can help but cannot take sides of politicians.

Historically, Sarbat Khalsa managed all the affairs of the Sikhs after the Gurus. However, times have changed. SGPC should be made stronger in which Sarbat Khalsa, including all Sikhs and organizations, can participate. It can be managed independently of the government and general politicians as the Vatican City controls all Catholic churches around the world.

SGPC is a prestigious organization of all Sikhs living inside or outside of India. No state or federal government should create a separate organization, as Haryana is trying to pursue. The grievances of Haryana Sikhs should be solved immediately.

SGPC members must be elected according to merit and not according to the number of votes received. SGPC must support education, open schools for Bachelor degrees in nursing, dental, pharmacy, computer science, basic science, etc., to help practice Bani – Bana, promote Sikh news media, promote Sikh religion and political awareness among the Sikh masses, provide financial help to poor Sikh families to open businesses on a returnable basis, etc., build and maintain hospitals, and clinics in villages, send Sikh preachers to perform *Amrit* ceremony, and send

preachers throughout the world to help stop alcoholism and drug abuse as churches help anybody seeking help. Influential and educated Sikhs do not get involved due to fear of offending anyone and retaliation. However, they should be encouraged and listened to.

Sikh candidates for SGPC should represent a variety of professions. Election procedures should be reviewed for the removal of political pressure; Sikhs can follow the selection process used by the Catholic Church in electing a new Pope. SGPC candidates should be screened, continuously, year after year, for service, *Bani – Bana*, and experience. Candidates' names should be released to the whole concerned membership. All projects should be completed on schedule. The schedule must be developed by the SGPC, not by federal or state governments. The only help needed from the state government at the request of SGPC is to have police along with SGPC sevadars at polling stations to avoid conflict and violence. Quality and character of SGPC members should be screened. Gurdwara funding promises of candidates should never be considered in the election process. The president of the SGPC may be selected unanimously in an open meeting, first by nomination and seconding by at least five people. Then the whole membership should unanimously approve one of the candidates as president. Similarly, the Jathedar of the Akal Takht should be selected.

The president as well as the Jathedars should be independent decision-making entities supervised by the SGPC. They can work together in service of the whole Sikh community. A person as well as ones relative having two positions gives rise to conflict of interest. SGPC related individuals should not get involved in any kind of political struggle at a SGPC site or at any Gurudwara site. The SGPC employees or members should not be allowed to run for any election. Should they choose to run, for state or federal election, they should be required to first resign their SGPC position. On the other hand, no political candidate, (MP or MLA), should be allowed to run for SGPC membership. Such persons should resign their position in order to run for the SGPC. It is possible another Singh Sabha movement may be needed to improve the SGPC.

SGPC should take charge of its affairs. Only Gursikhs should be made SGPC members. In order for any Sikh to be a valid voter for the SGPC, that person's name and his/her parents' names must contain Singh or Kaur in it. Only Sikhs should be voters and candidates for SGPC and Akali Dal positions. Other religious people *must not* participate in Sikh body elections. *Bribery in the form of money, drugs and alcohol should not be allowed during election time.* Further, the government at any level should not get involved in SGPC affairs. Government officials should only become involved when a crime is committed, so a thorough investigation can be done.

A person winning or losing the election must know he still has an obligation to support the majority cause. He must not throw mud on the opponent. Such is the essence of democracy. Law of the land must be followed by Sikh leaders as well.

A visitor to any Gurdwara can see the extent of the funds being collected. Therefore, no Gurudwara should be in the deficit. The present leadership should use these funds for purchasing land and helping other Sikh causes. *Debt of Gurudwaras, job discrepancies, leasing land to favorable trusts at low prices.*

Damage to life, property, liberty and defamation of character, fighting on the stages, removing of turbans on the stages, stopping traffic, protesting, unfortunately, reflect poorly on the whole Sikh community. Such activities must be stopped by court action. Sikhs should conduct debates to understand the issues with respect in order to reach a conclusion with collective wisdom, specifically involving disengaged Sikhs who suffer innocently.

The stages in all the Gurudwaras and Takhts, belong to all Sikhs. A single party can't control freedom of speech at any Sikh shrine. Hired hitmen (in the garb on Sikh Bana), who draw kirpans and sticks in pious places, can be dealt with in the courts. The victims should file cases against such people and ask for jail terms and compensation. The top leaders of the party of attackers should also be included in such cases.

Conclusion: Getting rid of "I Am" ness, or *haumai*, and developing a committed team of sevadars (volunteers) in all spheres will move all Sikhs forward. These sevadars should endeavor to demonstrate the following team qualities: having a clear purpose, applying the given strengths of each member, working together as a group toward a common goal, solving problems together, achieving desired results, working to meet the needs of Sikhs, striving to exceed expectations, having fun while completing assigned tasks, celebrating success after finishing a project, having a clear head sevadar, having open and free discussions, supporting each other on the way to a shared dream, working through conflict, being kept informed of all aspects and information, taking personal responsibility for performance and quality, not letting individual members have their own way, deciding consensus as compared to voting, not to try to seek credit at the expense of other sevadars' hard work and recognizing other members for their contribution.

There are several Sikh organizations and individuals calling for unity. Highly intelligent, educated and concerned Sikhs should start working together and encourage the SGPC, Akal Takht and the Akali Dal with the help of the Sikh masses to take action on one problem at a time. Few devoted Sikhs can pursue this pious task. Sikh leaders must place Sikhs and the Sikh religion ahead of themselves, be honest with people so the problems can be solved collectively, involving the ethical responsibility, individual respect and collectively.

The Sikhs are known to come together to solve problems. There is a real revolution of modernization going on in India. Sikhs should not miss the boat due to inside fighting and disunity.

Unity is the future for all Sikhs. The future vision is: one day all Sikhs will work together by consulting one another and accomplish goals as a united people with a united voice. Now is the time to set aside differences. Sikhs come from different regions and different countries. There is a need to come together with a common purpose and a shared dream. Sikhs will achieve higher goals with a united voice. Sikh unity is the key to the future.

NOW is the time to work together and create an open environment to discuss challenging issues and create positive solutions. Sikhs need support from one another to create an environment of unity in which their children may have a better future along with others leading to 'Sarbat da Bhalla.'



