

The Sikh Pathway to Peace

ONKAR SINGH*

**181 Mount Kailash, East of Kailash, New Delhi 110 065*

THE SIKH FAITH IS THE YOUNGEST OF world religions with a vibrant global presence of 25 million. It is secular and pragmatic with a universal appeal for inter-faith harmony. It has a catholic and tolerant attitude towards other religions. It envisages a vision of the future of mankind based on universal love and brotherhood and respect for the beliefs and faiths of others. It preaches worship of One God above all religions. What distinguish Sikhism are its monotheism and its doctrine of equality of mankind without any discrimination regarding caste, creed, class and gender.

The Sikh Faith has a scientific basis. Its basic tenets reflect a scientific temper. They are in harmony with laws of nature which are unfolding with time.

Sikhism is rational based on pure reason. It is against superstition, meaningless rituals and orthodoxy shorn of reason and logic.

It is against renunciation of the world. It advises, "Be in the world but not worldly." It firmly believes that a man must perform his duty as a member of the society in which he lives and lead a pious householder's life performing good deeds.

The universality of the Sikh religion is embedded in the Sikh Gurus' (spiritual teachers) word (*Gurbani*) enshrined in the holy Sikh scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the religious and spiritual guide of the Sikhs for all time. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is a unique scripture. It's universality lies in the fact that it not only carries the hymns of six Gurus but also those of the Hindu and Muslim holy men.

The emergence of the Sikh Faith as a major world religion and an independent faith in its own right is a significant landmark in the religious history of the world. It's a modern, separate religion with its own history, spiritual and moral philosophy, holy scripture and liturgy. It took up only some things from the old religions like beliefs in *Karma* (one's actions) and *Nirvana* (salvation from birth-and death cycle) and rejected so much from them like idolatry and caste-based discriminations.

The Sikh Faith emerged from the socio-religious cum political upheaval of medieval India when religious intolerance became a menace under some Mughal rulers. There was religious persecution, human repression and cruelty.

Guru Nanak appeared at a crucial time in the history of India, over five hundred years ago, when Babar had invaded India and there was endless persecution and torture in the wake of the invasion. The devastation caused by Babar's army and the suffering of the people moved the Guru profoundly. He was appalled by moral degradation that had set in under despotic rule.

In his superb poetic composition "*Babarvani*", Guru Nanak's sensitivity to the political upheaval is evident. He wrote:

"There is so much slaughter that the people screamed...This priceless country has been laid waste and defiled and no one pays any attention to the dead." Kings are tigers, the headmen dogs/They go and awaken those sleeping in peace.

An apostle of peace and love, Guru Nanak fearlessly fought against tyrants and tyranny even as he fought against tyrants within – hatred, cowardice and greed. Significantly, Guru Nanak raised his powerful voice not only against tyrants but also the religious leaders who indulged in corrupt practices and fake piety. Intrinsically aware of the moral degradation and corruption, he exposed with rare insight, the social abuses and the political and religious injustices of the times.

Guru Nanak had the prophetic vision of the Oneness of God and Oneness of humanity. His vision of one humanity transcends all distinctions of caste, creed, gender, race and region. The whole world is one family for him. According to him, the love of God follows the love of man.

Guru Nanak fervently preached that there is One God who is invisible and present everywhere and we are all His children. In God's eyes all are equal.

By his personal life and teachings, Guru Nanak inspired mankind to tread the righteous path and lead a moral and truthful life in the service of humanity without fear and narrow-mindedness treating all human beings as equal and with love and compassion. "*Truth is higher than everything but higher yet is the living of truth*", he said. The truthful living is all about having love for God's all creation including human beings. Man should maintain his purity in the midst of all impurities, he said.

Guru Nanak did not believe in asceticism nor in meaningless rituals, ceremonies and orthodoxy. He believed that life must be lived fully though he insisted on good deeds. He himself was happily married, loved his wife, children, parents and the only sister. He had two sons. Love of his family did not prevent him from going on long travels. After visiting holy Mecca and Baghdad in Arabia and Sri Lanka and traveling throughout India, he settled down at Kartarpur on the banks of river Ravi with his family and disciples.

In Kartarpur, everyone was expected to work in the fields and share the harvest. He farmed like everyone else. *Kirat karni, Vand chhakna te Nam japna*, i.e., to earn one's living by honest labour, to share one's earnings with others and to meditate on God's Name was Nanak's message to the world. "I have no miracles except the name of God", he repeatedly said. He created the concept of *Guru Ka Langar* (common kitchen) where everyone rich or poor irrespective of the caste and creed partook of the meals served there. To this day this tradition continues in Gurdwaras (Sikh shrines) where free kitchens are held on *Gurpurabs* (birthday celebrations of Sikh Gurus). He preached *Nam Simran* (absorption in God's Name). Also resigning to God's will.

A divine poet-philosopher and singer, Guru Nanak rapturously sang hymns in praise of the Lord, the Oneness of God, the Oneness of humanity, universal love and brotherhood, truthful living and equality of mankind which are deeply moving.

He used his innate poetic insights to express his divine feelings that find an exquisite expression of an inner heartfelt experience.

His language was simple, direct and forthright meant for the common man. It was not just Punjabi but a mixed tongue termed *Sadhu Bhasa*, a literary speech of his times and understood then as now all over northern India. A true seeker of Truth, his muse is essentially spiritual.

The praise and love of God that emerges from reading his *Japji* Sahib, a celestial morning prayer in verse, one of his literary creations, is itself a contemplation of Truth and Worship of God. Its opening rhyme that delineates the concept of God as the One God, the Spiritual Truth, Creator, Without Fear and Hate; Omnipresent is the *Mool Mantra* (characteristic) of the Sikh Faith. The Sikhs address God as *Waheguru* meaning the Wondrous God. A poet of prophetic vision, his poetry is all about love-love of God and love of humanity.

Guru Nanak's inspired teachings and ideals of fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man and selfless service of humanity were nurtured, zealously practiced and preached by the nine successive illustrious Sikh Gurus (spiritual teachers). Sikhism thus has ten Gurus beginning with Guru Nanak, the first Guru and founder. They were of the same spirit, illuminating various facets of the same truth. Guru Nanak had transferred his own light to them like one candle successively lighting others.

They had courage, determination and fervent faith in the Divine. They rejected celibacy, asceticism, caste system and ritualism. They lived a truly ethical family life. They raised the status of women as equal to men. They believed in hard work and honest living. They were committed to social and moral responsibilities for the welfare of humanity. They believed in humility and friendship for all without any discrimination and respect for all faiths. They preached fearlessness. Oppression was unacceptable. Injustice and cruelty must be met. They made sacrifices to root out injustice and struggled for a free and just society at all costs. The ninth Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur made the supreme sacrifice of his life to uphold human dignity and everyone's right to unfettered freedom to practice one's chosen faith.

While conveying in essence the same message, each Guru made a distinctive contribution under compulsions of changing times. For example, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Guru, brought to the aims of Guru Nanak its ordained consummation. He skillfully amalgamated the saintly and peaceful aspects of the founder's teachings with the need for a martial spirit if the circumstances so demand. He created the Khalsa. It was a fraternity of the pure in spirit, unalloyed with any false pretensions of class or caste. It was dedicated to peace, harmony and the service of humanity. Yet willing to dare and ready to die fighting for a righteous cause. The Guru made it mandatory to wear five K's – *Kesh* (unshorn hair), *Kangha* (comb), *Kara* (steel bracelet on the right wrist) as a charm against evil, *Kuchha* (shorts) and a *Kirpan* (sword). These were the symbols to identify them as belonging to the Khalsa fraternity. Thus Guru Gobind Singh pre-eminently shaped the Sikh mind and its characteristic outlook.

The creation of Khalsa brought about a revolutionary change in the minds of men given to docility and submission. It sharpened the socio-religious character of the Sikh brotherhood and rekindled the spirit to live with dignity and to rise against social injustice. They were to do this with faith as their sheet anchor courting death where necessary. Guru Gobind Singh defined the Khalsa as one who helped every human being irrespective of the religion he professed. Himself a man of piety he enjoined upon the Khalsa to devote themselves to a life of piety, prayer and truthfulness. He exhorted them to consider all human beings as equal and to treat women at par with men. Legend has it that when a Sikh, Bhai Kanhiya, gave water to the wounded

Mughal soldiers on the battlefield, the Guru was much pleased. He gave ointments also to him to apply to the fallen friend or foe equally.

Guru Gobind Singh advised the Khalsa neither to cause fear nor be afraid of anyone.

The emergence of the Khalsa laid the foundation of a fight against religious intolerance and human oppression. It opened the way to resist subjugation and to stand up for values of freedom and human dignity.

With the growing influence of religious fundamentalism and terrorism around the world, man has lost the key to harmony and peace. Religion is no longer a unifying force. The misuse of the power of religion has led to a great deal of destruction. We have no universal values. There is need to rediscover our spirituality to find the spiritual to combat religious intolerance and terrorism and to foster inter-faith harmony.

The Sikh religion is endowed with religious beliefs that give sanctity and moral sanction to live in mutual trust and harmony, abjuring hate and violence. It lays stress on basic values of *sat*, *santokh*, *daya*, *dharma* (right action, forbearance, compassion and performance of one's duty). These are the values that need to be instilled in every human being to make the world a better place to live in amity and peace.

The relevance of Guru Nanak's teachings and the very compelling message he has left behind of universal love and brotherhood, especially its belief in the one and only God above and beyond divisive religions and, above all, the oneness of all humanity should serve as guideposts to the world.

In India Guru Nanak has equally influenced both Hindus and Muslims. His teachings strike a universal chord. A man no matter what religion he belongs to will respond to it.

The world needs a reaffirmation of Guru Nanak's compelling message of love and harmony. The *Gurbani* makes us conscious of our moral and social responsibilities towards our family, society and the world at large.

The Sikh Faith is not only the key to spiritual bliss but also to inter-faith harmony and universal peace.

