

Guru Nanak's Vision of Eternal Human Quest: Significance of *Dharti*, *Dharma* & *Dhuri*

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Life's experiences can be so compellingly intriguing that we all, ever so often, wonder as to what are we doing here, what is our destination and how do we get to it. What is the larger purpose of life? We also know, that broadly, the inner craving of people of all persuasions is that their life should be a morally, ethically and spiritually enhancing experience which brings them closer to feel the underlying unity of this abiding creation, taste its real bliss and partake in joyous appreciation of the mysteries and miracles of life. The quest for such spiritual progression is universal and common to all men.

The Sikh struggle for spiritual ascent has to be pursued living in this world - *dharti*. The destination is union with – *dhur*- the Primal Lord. The path is – *dharma* – the precept and praxis of persuasion. We will attempt to understand the essence of Guru's vision in regard to these as evidenced from Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

God, His Creation & Dharti - the Earth: Guru Granth preaches that there is only one God. He is the God of all – one, true, creator, sans fear and enmity, eternal, self-created. There is none above Him. He is kind, caring, loving, benevolent, sustaining, just and forgiving.

For eons upon eons there was only God. At some point He willed and the creation came into being. On the earth abide beings of myriad hues and forms. Of all living beings God has given humans extra merits. Even as the other beings have their own place and purpose in God's scheme, they also fulfill the purposes of man.

Dharti & Dharma: The world that we live in has been characterized as *dharti dharamshal* at several places in the Sikh scriptural literature. The first reference is in *pauri* 34 of *japji* where Guru Nanak says: *in the midst of nights, days, weeks, seasons; wind, water, fire and nether regions, God established the earth, an abode for dharma.*

This *dharamsal* operates per God's will and the time window for *dharam* is our individual life span. In this setting, God gives us the freedom to make our choices, guided by our free will, and we will be judged by our deeds and actions - sifting the ripe from the raw, the good from the bad, the worthy from the unworthy.

The word *dharma* has been variously interpreted in multiplicity of its use in the Granth. For example, the word has often been used to mean faith, religion or persuasion or to convey the sense of justice, righteousness, honesty or merit. It has also been interpreted to mean code of conduct for the individual; assigned role and duties of various societal segments and the balancing and harmonizing force in creation.

Thus the concept of *dharma* is multi-dimensional. Its broad core meanings and dimensions in different contextual settings emerging from the limited sample presented include persuasion/faith, code of conduct, duty/role, balancing/harmonizing force, righteousness, justice, honesty and merit.

Related Attributes: We also find that some other attributes are often mentioned in association with *dharma*, suggesting the range of related factors that bear on its core concept. These include virtues and qualities such as purity, contentment, compassion, truthfulness, self-restraint, forbearance, austerity, continence, as well as prayerful,

meditative disposition and refined intellect [wisdom], control of evil propensities and well-directed personal will. One may therefore infer that such attributes along with *dharam*, in its multi-dimensional meaning, form the paradigm that informs a person's propensities for action choices and thus his potential for spiritual advancement.

Dharma through the Ages: There is another commentary on *dharam* that may be considered now. Traditionally we believe that the world has passed through three ages and we are presently in the early fourth millennium of the fourth age, *kal jug* – a total period of over two million years. Guru Nanak says that in *sat yuga*, human disposition was guided by contentment [chariot] and *dharam* was the lead instinct or social ethos [charioteer]. Over the ages the human disposition has transited from a state of contentment to flaming desire in the present day. This stands out as progressive erosion – controlled initially by self-restraint and then by more severe discipline of denial and austerity before complete capitulation in the contemporary age. The lead human instinct or social ethos has likewise changed from *dharmic* motivation to falsehood.

What we gather being said is that, over time, the people's disposition and social ethos has suffered severe degradation. Instead of worshiping the divine we seem to pray to the god of mammon. Debate and argument appear to get precedence over understanding of the true reality. Evidently the paradigm of awareness and values to enable living by *dharam* has to be such as to promote spiritual ascent in the living environment.

Man's Spiritual Ascent – to Dhur: Now if we go back to the quote from *Japji* regarding *dharti dharamsal*, we find that the context is the description of the stages of spiritual ascent by man. *Dharam khand*, the realm of *dharam*, is seen as the first stage in the soul's progress to its source. The Guru has named the next higher plane as *gyan khand*, the realm of knowledge followed by *saram khand*, the realm of aesthetics and ecstasy, then *karam khand*, the realm of Grace and finally *sach khand*, the realm of Truth where the True One resides.

Dharam Khand: In this hierarchy of stages of spiritual progress Nanak considered *dharam khand* as the first step in man's ascent on the spiritual path. In this phase man is busy carrying out the functions assigned by the Creator as well as his mundane obligations. Placed in the diverse and complex setting of the creation, man's choice of actions will be influenced by his understanding of *dharam* and ability of his consciousness to choose between the right and wrong, good and bad based on his received knowledge and learning. Those whose performance is acceptable and who are bestowed with God's grace will be received with honor while others will continue through the cycle of birth and death.

Gyan Khand: In this progression the next level is *gyan khand*. That – *gyan* – is not just a reflection of one's education or learning is stressed. The awareness of man in this stage broadens to seek an understanding of the larger canvas of multiple persuasions, schools of thought, worlds beyond our own and the play of knowledge in the variety of personalities and precepts encountered.

The effectual essence of development to this stage is that the human comprehension, intellect and reason further help the man to stay the course of *dharam*. The sense of duality is departed, desires are tempered and the inclusive understanding developed further refines man's attitude and responses and enhances his inclination for virtuous activity. The choice determinants now being the understanding of *dharam* at the person's elevated plane of knowledge and reason are likely to lead to actions that may be more acceptable in the God's court. He is becoming a *khoji* – searcher.

Saram Khand: In the realm of *saram khand* the all-pervasive attribute is beauty and harmony. By this stage the understanding, insight and intuition of the man are so developed

that he is empathetically sensitized to start perceiving the ineffable wondrous beauty, harmony and balance in the creation.

When in this realm, the man's heart is totally drenched with love. He is in a state of inner peace and harmony. He is not inimical to or overly attached to any body or any thing. He is in a state of bliss and thankful for God's benevolence.

Persons at this level of awareness are truly God oriented, contemplative and focused on altruistic activities. Their actions, thoughts and choices now are rooted in their holistic understanding of *dharam* through deep contemplation – *vichar* - and thus would meet the criteria for favorable disposition in God's court. They have ascended to the level of *gurmukh, brahm gyani, khalsa, sant sipahi*.

Karam Khand: The elevation to *karam khand* brings to end the cycle of birth and death. One reaches this door of deliverance only by God's grace - effort and spiritual evolution is needed but by itself is not enough.

The key to be blessed with Grace is the person's spiritual intensity - total involvement with *naam*. Abiding in this realm are the heroic [men] and gracious [women] whose [brave] hearts are totally and firmly imbued with the love of the Lord. Those in this stage have no fear and enjoy a constant state of bliss – *anand, vismad*. Such grace may descend on some even while alive; a state named *jivan mukta*. Such a person lives completely submerged in *naam*, content with God's will and totally devoted to God's purpose.

Sach Khand: The abode of God is *sach khand, dhur*. Residing here God joyfully looks at His creation; takes care of it; makes it operate as He wills; orders the lives and actions of beings and is happy with what He sees and does. It is far or near depending upon where we are for God is indeed very close to us if only we have reached the stage where we can connect with His immanent presence. In fact says the Guru, the dear Lord has fashioned the body as His temple and He continues to dwell there. In the end we have to seek Him within.

The Guru's Way: This progression through various *khands* to heightened awareness has to be achieved by a Sikh, in a communal setting, while living a productive, self-supporting, sharing and prayerful life. The Sikh precepts are built to guide the believer to be able to strive for spiritual ascent in spite of the constraints of the life of an average working person living in real time, in the midst of real people, handling real situations and facing real challenges. Deliverance then, if it comes, says the Guru, is not only for the individual but for all those associated too.

In this paradigm, all are equal in God's scheme. No merit is attached because of birth, gender, class, caste or any other reason. The path to merge with the Lord is open to all. No one persuasion is supreme. Those who follow another persuasion are not gentile, *malechh* or *kafir* – they all are His children. What is important is to be a good person of faith and live by the precepts of one's chosen path. Merely observing rituals, practicing austerities or performing pilgrimages is not an index of spiritual progression or enough for deliverance.

The believers are persuaded not to shy away from taking righteous positions. Do not elect the option of inaction in the face of coercion, tyranny, and exploitation. Strive for removal of injustice, discrimination and exploitation especially of the weak and the under privileged.

Love is important to achieve unity with God. The apex yearning in the enlightened person is not for power or deliverance but the love of God's lotus feet. Search, reason, reflection and faith are key and with love in your heart will open up the mysteries of bliss, *anand*

Never be short on endeavor, and retain sense of optimism - *chardi kala*- spurred by the belief that God wants the good of all. Understand that no one can fathom His ways and keep faith that if one serves His will, he will be blessed with His grace.

Good *karam*, at least gives the hope of being blessed with human incarnation, possible glimmer of another chance!

The path the Guru has shown embodies universal values - living life naturally as God intended; in harmony with the rest of humanity and God's creation; no denials and austerities; an ethical, productive life lived in its fullness sharing the rewards that honest labor brings in love and thankfulness. Guru Arjun seems to sum it up saying - *Nanak satgur bhetiye poori hovai jugat, hasandeya, khelandeya, painandeya, khavandiya viche hovai mukt* - meeting the true Guru, says Nanak, one is shown the way to achieve liberation even as one lives a participating life: laughing, playing, wearing finery and imbibing delicacies.

One can be saved from the consequences of one's *karam* if one completely surrenders to the Guru. Let us seek Guru's guidance - the source is Sri Guru Granth Sahib, our living Guru. Let us also pray that this centenary motivates us all to become *guruwallas* and in humility seek God's blessings and beneficent mercy for one and all – *sarbat da bhala*.

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