

# Religion in troubled times

“There is nothing personal; it is jihad. God is great”

- Indonesian cleric Imam Samudra, the alleged brain behind 2002 Bali suicide bombing.

THESE ARE TIMES OF RELIGIOUS bigotry and divisive politics. There is so much violence in the name of religion that a whole new generation feels insecure and uncertain, only too willing to retreat for safety into the cocoon of alien cultures.

Fanatical individuals and groups have been seized with a pathological and self-destructive urge to die for their religion, instead of living it in quest of peace. The *jehadi* and trishul wielding *swyam-sevak* are caught in a conceptual confusion that has the potential to unleash anarchic forces. Religion continues to be used as a force for evil when it is meant to benefit and bless all mankind.

In many ways, the metaphorical sayings of Guru Nanak are - incredibly - applicable to the contemporary situation. Guru Nanak repeatedly exposed the hypocrisy, implicit in the Brahminical practices of Hinduism, and the actions of arrogant and fanatical *maulvis* who stood as symbols of Mughal oppression. He castigated the leaders of invading hordes as well as the degenerate rulers of India, the former for their aggressive ambitions and the latter for rampant corruption.

Guru Nanak's remedy for conflict resolution invariably stressed faith in one God, Creator of the universe, and the strict observance of a Moral Code that is indeed at the core of every religion. Every debate that Guru Nanak engaged in, with Siddha Yogis in snowy retreats, Buddhist Lamas in Tibet, or the Islamic scholars in Baghdad, aimed at love of God and His creation, tolerance and reconciliation. He did not wish to score any debating points. In sermons of exquisite beauty he teaches us how to be good citizens, face tyranny and fight for social justice and for a humane society.

Speaking of priesthood, in the recent past, Pope John Paul II has had to deal with the problem of child abuse among celibate Catholic priests in USA. Close on its heels came the bizarre case of the Anglican Church's tacit approval of a gay Bishop.

In the context of priesthood Guru Nanak, centuries ago warned, “Physician, Heal Thyself.” For when religion is used as a garb to camouflage hypocrisy, its moral power is instantly dissipated. This is the underlying reason for Sikhism closing its doors to any formal priestly class. It is a pity that a hybrid form of self-serving *Mahants* and *Babas* have usurped this sacred territory of the Sikh religion.

The Sikhs have lately been victims of the problem of “mistaken identity” triggered by the media focus on the 9/11 tragedy. Obsessive dissemination of pictures of the bearded Osama bin Laden, in a white turban, spread fear among common folks in America. In an era of instantaneous communication, the Osama portrayal provided an excuse to some frightened - but ignorant - people to harass and victimize a peace loving section of America - the Sikh in colourful turbans. The larger purpose of focussing on bin Laden got obscured. People in USA became intolerant (patriotic?). A post 9/11 summit of Christian Ministers ardently affirmed: “American founding fathers expected our nation to be (on the whole) Christian, *and our government to reflect that bias.*” This is strange logic.

Now, basic to the Christian faith is the Ten Commandments, including one that enjoins: "Thou shalt not kill." Guru Nanak too advocated compassion as the cornerstone of human society. He rebuked Babar for invading India from the Northwest, and letting loose his hordes to persecute innocent citizens.

In March 2003, however the US establishment had no qualms in invading Iraq in total disregard of the United Nations charter. This U-turn in policy was sought to be justified by means of a selective and doctored presentation of UN inspection documents and intelligence reports.

We are reminded of a similar concoction, way back in 1605, by the Mughal authority for the arraignment of Guru Arjun Devji, the Fifth Guru (see *Dabaistan-e-Mazahib*) on trumpeted up charges of winning over Muslims (vide *Tozuk-e-Jahangiri*). The suffering and martyrdom of the Fifth Guru bear uncanny resemblance with the crucifixion of Jesus during the Roman rule in Judaea. Like Jesus, Guru Nanak speaks of God as *Sacha Patshah* - the True King experienced through Love and Grace; for Him serving the poor and the downtrodden is the highest virtue.

Over five hundred years, and more, Sikhism has shown an extraordinary penchant for survival in the most hostile milieus. Despite their bloodcurdling history during the 18th century, the Sikhs exhibited boundless energy and an inquenchable optimism. Indeed, the rise of Sikh Kingdom in 1799 coincided with the decline and fall of the Mughal rule in India.

In the modern times, however, the destiny has been as harsh as the leadership has been weak and wavering. The quality of vision and unity that are the touchstones of leadership has been conspicuously lacking, as also the charisma and statesmanship which had distinguished Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

The recent mushroom growth of sant-Babas and *deras* has only added to the confusion. An ugly tussle between Jats and Dalit Sikhs over control of resources of a Gurdwara in Jalandhar district, last summer, spelt the twin danger of caste based politics and the gross misuse of charity funds.

Sikhs have paid a grievous price for these shortcomings, losing to the state repression a whole young generation in the last quarter of the 20th century. But frustration does not figure in the Sikh lexicon. Rather than press the panic button, the Sikh intelligentsia must once again turn to the power of God and *Gurubani*, and organize themselves for a revivalist movement in cities and towns across India, and the rest of the world.

Revitalisation of faith and reassertion of its moral values in the humanist spirit is bound to prove fruitful and provide the much needed psychological reassurance to the emerging young Sikhs, who are our future Khalsa - "*Akal Purakh ki Fauj*."

