

# **‘Kirat karo’ - cardinal principle of the Sikh Social Morality**

**Dimpy Gurvinder Singh\***

\* Associate Editor, *The Sikh Review*. Email: rajenter2003@yahoo.co.in/dimpygs@yahoo.co.uk

Guru Nanak laid down three cardinal principles of living for Sikhs, indeed for all humans hailing from any geographic region in the five continents belonging to any culture, class or sect. In fact one can truly claim that these are the three most essential and invaluable principles of societal living. Scholars of Sikhism have oft referred to them as the three pillars or foundations of the movement started by Guru Nanak which, in due course of time, spread over a span of over two centuries encompassing the lives of the Ten Gurus, took the shape of a dynamic way of living for a community called Sikhs. Of the trinity: *Kirat karo*, *Naam Japo*, and *Wand Chhako*, the first is the central theme of this essay. *Kirat* means ‘labor’ and *karo* means ‘to do’. So *kirat karo* means ‘to do labour’. Wealth earned by honest labor has no stigma attached to it. There is nothing wrong if one earns money or creates wealth by doing labor. Labor can be broadly classified into physical or manual, and intellectual. Physical labor is associated with productive physical exertion. That work which involves bodily movements in which lots of energy is spent and which does not often require the use of the mental faculties, are associated with physical labor. People in professions like carpentry, plumbing, mining, tailoring, factory foremen, etc. can be deemed as doing physical labor, i.e. exerting of one’s energies physically. Physical labor is that which does not require much use of the intellect. It involves coordinated use of the physique and intellect or brain. Mental labor also expends energy but relatively less than that involved in physical labor. Both these labors are inter-dependent and one without the other cannot exist in isolation. Persons in professions like medical, accountants, company secretaries, management cadre personnel, stock brokers, clerical job holders, music directors, writers, etc. can be grouped into the class of mental or intellectual laborers.

According to Guru Nanak anyone who is expending energies for a living, whether physical or mental, can be termed as doing labor or *kirat karna*, provided the labor is done on honest and truthful lines. *Kirat* in Sikhism occupies a higher status in the sense that *kirat* is associated with doing labor honestly.

The honesty and truth factor is of the utmost importance in *kirat karna*. Guru Nanak’s hymn as recorded in page 62 of SGGS says, “*Sachoh oorai sabh ko upar sach achaar.*” – “Truth is high but higher still is truthful living.” Truthful living, in a deeper sense, denotes that there is harmony in our thoughts, speech and actions. Whatever one thinks or contemplates are given shape in one’s speech, and whatever is spoken is transformed into deeds. Many a times it so happens that what we think is different from what we speak and what we speak is different from what we do. So long as one does not attain the unity of thoughts, speech and deeds, the inner harmony, or what we refer to as *sehaj* in Sikh terminology, is next to impossible. Guru Nanak’s visit to the house of the poor (instead of the rich and exploitative Mallik Bhago) put across a worldly message to his followers that income earned through honest labor and truthful means in which no exploitation of the fellow beings has been done is *kirat karna* which all have to explicitly undertake in life.

No wonder that money earned or wealth created through dishonesty has no place in Sikhism. Sikh history has recorded how Sajjan ‘Thug’ or Sajjan the robber who used to earn through stealing got transformed once he came into the charismatic *sangat* of Baba Nanak. Guru Nanak formulated the unique concept of putting across the divine messages or instructions of living harmoniously in society, or a group or sect, through the medium of

music. This concept of hymn singing accompanied with music was carried forward by the next four Gurus, culminating into the living treasure called **Aad Granth Sahib**. Music has the great potential of transfixing the listener and transporting him or her to immense heights or into the depths of one's soul, or *mun*, wherein one feels ecstatic, and the *soorat* or concentration of the listener is fully attuned to the musician striking the string chords as well as to the singer exercising the vocal chords. The unique combination of human sounds blended with that of the instruments has far reaching effects so far as the intake of the messages or instructions, divine in nature, are concerned.

Guru Gobind Singh while 'baptizing' the Sikhs with *Amrit* at Anandpur in 1699 A.D. broke the centuries old slavery of hereditary professions in which the then Hindu population was segmented by the Sage Manu who created four-tier caste system, viz., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Shudras and Vaishyas. A person born into a particular caste was doomed to live the years so allotted by the divine creator in that particular caste segment, not allowing any transitions. A person's capabilities were not the deciding factor in choosing one's profession, only the birth determined the place of that person in society. The doctrine of *Kul-naash* of Guru Gobind Singh broke man or woman free from the clutches of the caste system, and thus was laid the foundation of a casteless society, giving due respect to all the professions, whether involving physical or mental labor. Caste has no significance at all in Sikhism.

Sikhs are ordained to choose any profession as per one's liking, taste, inclination and capabilities. If one wants to be a warrior, one is free to join the armed forces. If one wants to become a preacher one is free to become a *granthi*, *pracharak* or *kirtania*. If one wants to do business one is free to indulge in trade related activities. If one wants to do manual labor, one is free to choose any industry from the multiple choices available today. There is no dearth of the options available with the advancement of sciences and technologies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The originality and boldness of Sikh Gurus was unfettered in freeing humanity from the evils of the caste system. If one observes today, one can in reality say that, over the years, the caste system of the Hindus has automatically - or through default - been eroded and the castes have little significance today. The question of caste is often raised now only while forging marriage alliances which is, regretfully, also observed by quite a number of Sikhs too, particularly those settled in India. Scanning the matrimonial columns in any Indian newspaper will reveal this glaring and ugly fact.

Imagine the impact of the revolution of the illustrious Gurus brought about at a time when the Sikhs were a minority juxtaposed between the Hindus and Muslims. As far as the minority status of Sikhs are concerned there is not much change since 1699 A.D. Even today the Sikhs are listed in the minority class in India, along with the Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Zoroastrians. More recently the Supreme Court of India recommended discouragement of listing religious groups as minority communities and also eventually the doing away with the existing list of minorities on the ground that this will hinder social justice for all, whether in minority or in majority. Rejecting the Jain community's demand of according it minority status reveals the 'Hinduization' policy, under influence of Hindutva elements. The said recommendation, if accepted, will gradually result in the sucking in of the minorities into the Hindu fold.

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