

Political Ethical Values of Sikh Gurus

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Abstract: Guru Nanak had a wider vision of India before his eyes.. He was a keen observer of the socio-political happenings of his period. His descriptions of the political institutions and practices of his time as pictorially described in “*Babarvani*” are extremely revealing. While condemning the misdeeds of his contemporary rulers, we find in the *Adi Granth*, verses stating that Guru Nanak has started a rule of truth and he is said to have enjoyed *rajyoga* in clear reference to *Raja Janak*.

After the martyrdom of the fifth Guru, the values and principles for which he gave his life were not surrendered. The sixth Guru then took up the sword to uphold, and protect them, and the light, that was thought to have been extinguished, flared up into a big blaze which ultimately consumed its antagonists. In the tradition of Guru Nanak, the contribution of Guru Gobind Singh towards national reconstruction is unique. His aim to found *Khalsa* was to make people strong, both in body and mind. It was the time to resort to arms to fight against tyranny and injustice. Guru Gobind Singh’s writings were imbued with nationalistic spirit. Guru Gobind Singh founded the national militia in the form of the *Khalsa* for the defence of the country. With the rising of the *Khalsa*, the long dark night of ruthless persecution and inhuman treatment came to an end.

Keywords: Ethics, feudalism, hegemony, injustice, instability, khalsa, political, religion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sikhism originated in the sixteenth century as a new revolutionary force, aimed at the spiritual rejuvenation and the social emancipation of people. On one hand, it confronted the dogmatism and religious formalism of the priest-dominated and caste-ridden society. On the other, it challenged the political oppression of the contemporary rulers.

Sikhism is qualitatively different from Hinduism and other religious philosophies and practices, both in its metaphysical postulates and social dynamism. In the quest for mysticism, Indian experience had been one of self-negation and self-abstraction on the psychological level. On the political level, it had been one of passive acceptance, a kind of self-surrender, a fatalistic capacity for suffering that centuries of persecution had shaped. What the Indian mystics preached was usually a means of other-worldliness, a lament on life's futilities rather than a programme of reconstruction of the world-order. They deemed the amelioration of man's social condition unworthy of any religious thought. Guru Nanak propounded a positive philosophy of life and world affirmation and brought about a far-reaching transformation in the outlook of the people.

Sikhism is not concerned with divinity in abstraction from human reality. It holds out the ideal of a multi-dimensional human personality, which actively seeks and realises the fullest expression of all the faculties latent in man. This all-embracing ideal assumes active responsibility for the world in which man lives and operates. Inner fulfilment can be attained along with commitment to the demands of the outer world, here and here and now. Thus the dichotomy between the worlds here and hereafter, between the physical and the metaphysical, between the empirical and the sacred, is broken. Such a view advocates a healthy blend of the two realms.

At the time of Guru Nanak’s birth, the Muslim rule had already been firmly established in India and the imperial hegemony of Tughlaqs and Khiljis had put its stamp on the entire sub-continent. The small principalities continued to

fight among themselves over petty matters but lacked strong will and determination to face the foreign aggressor. Co-ordinated action was lacking. People did not think of the country at the national level. National spirit was lacking and people thought of only in their own individual terms.

When Guru Nanak was born in 1469, Lodhis were ruling over northern India. Bahlal Lodhi was on throne. He was succeeded by Sikandar Lodhi and Ibrahim Lodhi. It was as a matter of fact, a transitional period. The old Delhi Sultanate was heading towards decay. It was a period of disintegration, disunity and political turmoil. The central authority was getting weaker and the centrifugal forces were gradually raising their head. There was great confusion and chaos in Punjab. There were uninterrupted scenes of tyranny and bloodshed. The country had turned utterly weak and disintegrated. Feudalism was the order of the day. The rigidity and injustice of the caste system were eating away the society. Caste, creed and false conception of religion were dividing Indians. There was no purity of heart. Hindus and Muslims had degraded themselves into groups observing formalities, rituals and ceremonies. True spirit of religion was forgotten. Hypocrisy prevailed. Guru Nanak found his region in the depths of degradation. The Punjab which had once been the land of wisdom had through successive raids of the foreigners become utterly helpless. People had become physically and morally bankrupt.

Guru Nanak had a wider vision of India before his eyes. He stood for the well-being of all human beings and not for any person belonging to a particular caste or creed. Only high moral character could enable the people to defend themselves against the aggression, Guru Nanak felt. He was a keen observer of the socio-political happenings of his period. His descriptions of the political institutions and practices of his time as pictorially described in "*Babarvani*" are extremely revealing. In Guru Nanak's estimate, the then rules did not come up to his ideal and fell short of it.¹ They were cruel, unjust and avaricious. They did not have with them the sympathies of the large majority of the masses. They drew their legitimacy from military power. Many of his utterances suggest that there was political instability. Attitude of the Muslim rulers towards Hindus was discriminatory.² Their culture was being effaced.

Guru Nanak refers to monarchy, the then prevalent form of government. It has nowhere been deprecated as an institution. Rather it is thought to be indispensable for administering justice to the people.³ He makes references, with approbation, to the just and benevolent kings of ancient India. While condemning the misdeeds of his contemporary rulers, we find in the *Adi Granth*, verses stating that Guru Nanak has started a rule of truth and he is said to have enjoyed *rajyoga* in clear reference to *Raja Janak*.⁴ From all this it becomes evident that monarchy as an institution was not rejected by Guru Nanak.

We find certain references to the state of administration in Guru Nanak's time. The impression which one gathers is that of a feudal social structure and political instability with all its shortcomings. He views Babur's attack on Hindustan as a sinful venture⁵ because he had resorted to a ruthless rampage and plunder of the rich and the poor. At the social plane he finds the reasons of the fall of the rulers in their indulgent living devoid of all the virtues necessary for their vocation. They became the blind followers of mundane as a result they lost all righteousness. This is the law of God, says Nanak, that to whom he has to punish, He takes away his virtues. Had they remained God-fearing and virtuous, the misfortunes, the punishment would have not befallen them.⁶

Dr. J.S. Bains⁷ is of the view that for Guru Nanak "the state should create conditions which may help the individual to further his personality. The good of the human beings is the first duty of any constituted authority, the state is there for the individual and not vice versa, an ideal ruler must, therefore, be an embodiment of divine wisdom and he should always cater to the needs of people." We do not find any verse of Guru Nanak in *Adi Granth*, wherein it may have been suggested that the state should take upon itself the responsibility of making the people moral or good. At the best the king can set an example by leading a clean and virtuous life. In what good life consists is not to be determined by the rulers.

On the political ideal of Guru Nanak, G.S.Deol states that "Like Plato's philosopher king, Guru Nanak declared that the king rules by the strength of his virtue and in accordance with the will of representatives of the people."⁸ This was, he asserts, a very democratic and progressive principle which Guru Nanak enunciated and advocated in the 15th century. According to Guru Nanak, political power should not be the ultimate goal of a man. Ultimate goal of man is to develop a *Naam*-character, the realization of the God in man. Political power without this goal may make its wielder proud, indulgent, avaricious, concupiscent, greedy, cruel and ever dissatisfied. But this does not mean that he preached against the evil results of becoming the worshippers of worldly power and not viewing it as an opportunity to serve the people. Possession and exercise of political power for righteous cause has nowhere been denounced. We can say that Guru Nanak

was not indifferent to political problems. He expresses his concern about the socio-political evils in most unambiguous and forceful language. He not only denounces that what was wrong with body politic of his day but also initiates a program of action.⁹ In this sense, he is the founder of a liberation movement, which fructified about two centuries after his death.

About the sharp social consciousness that characterised the Gurus, Niharanjan Ray writes, "Any student of Sikhism and Sikh society cannot fail to notice how the Sikh Gurus, especially Guru Nanak, Guru Arjun and Guru Gobind Singh, were very sensitively awake to and critical of not only the social but also the political abuses and consequent miseries of people, which is another aspect of their attitude of social criticism and protest."¹⁰ Castigating the ruling class of the day, Guru Nanak called "the rulers ferocious tigers and their officers, hounds."¹¹ He worked not only for religious uplift but also for social regeneration. "The followers of Guru Nanak could no longer be a mere fraternity holding advanced views on religion and attempting to work their ideals through some recognised institutions of their own but their outlook perforce had to be broadened and made to take in its purview all important aspects of social life."¹²

His was the first voice after almost one thousand years of slavery, that was raised against tyranny and injustice at Eminabad during Babar's invasion of India. He not only protested against the high-handedness and tyranny of the aggressor-invader, but also remonstrated against the Delhi *Pathans* who could not protect and save the precious country under their charge. He also remonstrated with the subjects for submitting like sheep and dead men without realizing their responsibilities and he also complained to the Creator for bringing about the scourge on a helpless people. The mission of the Guru was to change this mentality of helpless imbecility, and to bring about manly qualities of self-respect, self-help, self-reliance and service to the needy, with a will and conviction not to bow before brute force, injustice, tyranny, or high-handedness. The noble saintly virtues and Godly values were to be protected with even our lives, by offering sacrifices, and if called upon, by wielding the sword. With anchor in one God, the evil and evildoers were to be extirpated, and the land and ultimately the universe made safe for good and God-conscious men. It took the Sikh Gurus four generations to do the brainwashing, when the spiritual re-awakening, regeneration of 'man', resurrection of human values and restoration of consciousness of the self, and mental, moral, and social uplift was complete.

After the martyrdom of the fifth Guru, the values and principles for which he gave his life were not surrendered. The sixth Guru then took up the sword to uphold, and protect them, and the light, that was thought to have been extinguished, flared up into a big blaze which ultimately consumed its antagonists. The finality to this mission was brought about by the Guru in his tenth form, when in his hand the two swords of *Miri* and *Piri* which were separately worn by the sixth Guru, merged into one double-edged sword called *Khanda*. It became the creator of a liberated new order when of this *Khanda*, the *Khalsa* and then the Guru himself took the *Amrit* in 1699, and the Guru became the Sikh and the Sikh the Guru. This took two hundred years to build a nucleus of society, a living organism, with instruction to grow and prosper and perpetually evolve, guided by commonsense and *Shabad*, i.e., the Omnipresence of the Guru, and capable of propagating itself without waiting for any prophets and *avtars* to appear.

The martyrdoms of the fifth and ninth Gurus are the pinnacles of this resurrection, regeneration, and rediscovery of character and manly virtues. It should be noted that both of them had prepared their sons and successors to wield the 'Sword', because if passive and non-violent effort and sacrifice failed to cut ice, it must not mean surrender of values and principles. When other means had failed it became incumbent to use force. The sixth Guru was 11 years and the tenth was 9 years of age when they succeeded to the Guruship. This spirit generated by Guru Nanak and the way of life nurtured and established by his nine successors had come to stay.

The revolution stemming from the creative vision of Guru Nanak reached its highest pitch under Guru Gobind Singh, who started the final phase of the development of Sikhism in the Guru period. Through his prophetic vision, the Guru had imbibed the spirit of a free, creative and spiritual life. As a true saint, his moral reaction to the policy of persecution was reflected in the will to resist and sacrifice. Pulsating with human love and spiritual robustness, the Guru responded to the crying need of the hour to restore justice and harmony in the human affairs. The Guru created the *Khalsa* -a disciplined body of the Sikhs. This gave them a distinct look, a community name, *Singh* (Lion) and symbols, the five *K's*-*Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kangha* (comb), *Kara* (steel bangle), *Kirpan* (Sword) and *Kachha* (short reeches). The inner unity of faith was strengthened with external uniformity. The Guru also furnished the order of the *Khalsa* with the institutions of '*Panj pyaras*' (Five Beloved Ones) and *Daswandh* (voluntary contribution of one-tenth of one's income to the exchequer of the

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panth). The succession of personal Guruship also ended with Guru Gobind Singh. Henceforth, the function and authority of the Guru was vested in the *Granth Sahib* and the corporate decisions of the community, the *Khalsa Panth*. Thus, the spiritual sovereignty was bestowed on the *Granth Sahib* and temporal sovereignty on the *Panth*. The Guru brought “a new force into being and released a new dynamic force into the arena of Indian history.”¹³ Declaring the ‘Select Five’ to be the nucleus of the new order, the *Khalsa Commonwealth*, Guru Gobind Singh, then, himself stood up before them and sought to be baptized likewise and admitted to its fold and included in their brotherhood.

Never before in the history of the world a Master has been known to have turned himself into a disciple of his own initiated ones, considered them superior to himself, sought their favour thus, sat at their feet, got himself initiated that same way at their hands and merged his entity with his self-created community, claiming no higher privileges than those he had bestowed upon them.

In Sikhism, peace is not identical with inaction or non-violence. When a person or a group of persons gives up faith in the divine unity and ethnic equality of man, the desire for peace comes in direct conflict with human rights.

2. CONCLUSION

In the ultimate analysis, it can be said that ‘it is the nature and type of citizenry which constitutes the foundation of a state, and provides it content, meaning and direction’. It is, therefore, imperative that a public-spirited, enlightened and vigilant citizenry should be cultivated to give meaning and direction to the state. A mere constitution or a political formulation cannot succeed until and unless there is an enlightened citizenry to make that system operative. No perfect political system can be of any use to the imperfect (even if not the degenerate) mankind. It was perhaps keeping this in view that the Sikh Gurus gave mankind a distinct ontological precept with a view to making man in the image of God. It was for such realized selves (*Khalsa Panth*) that they gave a distinct polity which could ensure the establishment of an ideal socio-political structure.

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