

HUMAN HARMONY THROUGH SANGAT AND PANGAT

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1. Religion Perceived as Source of Conflicts

The world is today experiencing rapid socio-cultural transformations which do not, however, occur at a uniform pace. This unequal developmental process has resulted in the differentiating of various countries and regions. Modern man is clearly aware of the conflictual aspect of this unequal process of transformation and considers it a hindrance in the achievement of his fundamental human aspirations which include harmony, peace, liberty, dignity and possibility of personal fulfilment. It has put the economically poor and socially backward at odds with the affluent and the socially and politically advanced. The latter have come to adopt diverse kinds of ways to progress that tend to suppress and exploit the former. This gives birth to conflict and disharmony in society. Besides, a fundamentalistic and even fanatical approach to one's religion and use of political power for self-advancement are often responsible for the lack of peace and harmony in our society.

Inequalities between men and nations, gross violations of human rights, injustice and oppression meted out to the lowly, and fresh manifestations of discrimination are the order of the day. Disbelief, fear, conflict and violence are gradually taking the place of faith, harmony and peace. There is a widespread sense of frustration and revolt, and the use of violence and its concomitant is on the increase. Strengthening of the sinews of peace in the modern world of conflict and violence is the need of the hour.

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However, this also implies the strengthening of the sinews of religion because both peace and religion are complementary and neither can exist without the other.

History of mankind stands witness that religion has in certain ages acted or, more precisely, has been used by the "ecclesiastical authorities, social institutions and political powers in different parts of the world for the exploitation and persecution of people, denying them their basic rights and freedom."¹ Religious majorities endeavour to subdue or assimilate unto themselves the religious minorities causing in consequence a sense of alienation among the latter and the unwanted bitterness among the societal relations in general. However, at the same time we cannot deny that religion has also acted as a powerful force in bringing about the moral and spiritual regeneration and elevation of human society and in effecting unity, solidarity and integration among the people of different races and cultures. This dialectical role of religion has perhaps been the result of how religion is understood, whether the truth of religion lies in living it or in entertaining a set of beliefs concerning the mysteries of existence and goal of life. This latter approach has resulted in making many discords in the name of religion and inciting men of one religious persuasion to act violently against men of other religion and religious groups. However, such discords and violent conflicts were never the creation of religion, but more often than not they have been laid at the door of religion.

II. True Scope of Religion

It becomes thus pertinent for us first to try and remove the misconceptions about what really constitutes religion. It is wrong to assume religion as merely a divine experience without referring to its social correlates. No doubt, religion is permanently spiritual and

¹ R.S. Misra, "Religion and Human Unity", in N.S.S.Raman and K.N.Misra. eds. *Religious Language and Other Papers* (Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University. 1979). p.66.

psychic experience correlating the essence of human life to a mystical entity recognized as God, but this is not the whole truth. Nor is religion, as says Nordskog, simply a social phenomenon dwelling only on "promoting the virtues of social service, neighbourliness, and humanitarian or social ethics"² True religion besides its metaphysical and psychical aspects should generate socially relevant behavioral persuasions in the faithful.³ By virtue of this twin-dimensions-one relating to human consciousness and the other to social practice, religion has been influencing human society in different ways ever since the dawn of civilization. Religious praxis does not remain circumscribed to prayers and worship of deity in personal solitude alone but is so intimately related to the practical social life of man that it shapes and gets itself shaped by the historico-political process of society.

Taken in this context, religion does not restrict itself to the salvation of individual soul only; it aims at human liberation in social praxis as well. According to the provocative theology emerging from the Latin American Church, the "theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society".⁴ Since man is the protagonist of his own liberation, he, especially if he belongs to the oppressed class, must raise his voice and express himself directly and creatively in society. Asceticism is no way to liberation, either spiritual or material.

III. Secular Approach of Sikhism

Sikhism, the youngest of the world religions, takes man as a whole, and seeks in his improvement the advancement of society. The Sikh approach to life is two-fold and it envisages a "close inter-

² John Eric Nordskog, *Social Change* (New York: McGraw Hill University, 1960), p. 288.

³ *Ibid.* p.288.

⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), p.307.

connected relationship between the spirit and the body".⁵ It does not consider this world a mere *maya* something to be shunned by whosoever wants to attain the metaphysical object of life. On the other hand, this world is said to be the abode of the True Lord.⁶ Since the religious and spiritual life of man is embedded in society, the need to raise his moral and ethical standards is inherent without which the attainment of spiritual goal is not possible.

The call which heralded the Sikh ministry symbolized the integrative intuition of the founder. "There is no Hindu and there is no Muslim". This vision of common integrated humanity at a time when the society was torn by conflict was very significant, a vision that transcended all barriers of caste, creed, colour or community. In a world beset with strife and disharmony, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, spoke of a single humanity. His hymns point towards unity and equality of human kind, towards healing the prevailing discords between people and nations, towards bringing about a spirit of tolerance and co-existence. Even Bhai Gurdas, the first exegete of the Sikh Scripture who also acted as Guru Arjan's amanuensis when the latter compiled the scripture, says in one of his *Vars*, or ballads, that the role of the Sikh faith is that of the needle which sews together the fabric of religious life torn as under by Hindu and Muslim scissors.⁷

Guru Nanak's idea of unity of mankind did not seek to bring about a syncretistic union between different religious denominations and traditions, but he aimed at bringing together the different and in some ways contradictory culture forms in a common fold of spiritual and social brotherhood. He wanted mankind to form a single community with a true spirit of fraternity and fellowship, of fearlessness and rancourlessness, with that deep moral and ethical commitment which expresses itself in concern for fellow human beings. He never tried to establish the superiority of the religion over the other, rather he impressed upon every man of faith to discover for

⁵ Dalip Singh, *Universal Sikhism* (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1979), p.24.

⁶ Guru Granth Sahib, p.463.

⁷ Bhai Gurdas, *Var* 33.4.

himself the essential meaning of his religion. He considered different religions as different paths leading to the Divine Portal,⁸ there by declaring all religions equally valid in so far as they help man reach the pinnacles of glory spiritual as well as social. The same idea is reiterated by Bhai Gurudas when he condemns the behaviour of the adherents of both Hinduism and Islam without condemning their scriptures: the implicit meaning here is that the basic spirit of each religion as enshrined in its scripture is the same, but he is critical of the manner in which they have strayed from the truth enshrined in these scriptures.⁹

Communal harmony can only be based on the inter-religious and intra-religious equality of man. Sikhism lays great emphasis on the ethnic equality of man. Each human being is declared to be, in essence, the same: none is higher or lower than the other. The idea of the same Divine spark shining forth in each being identifies humans with one another on the one hand and with the Supreme One on the other - *anek hain phiri ek hain: Japu*. All differences between man and man on the basis of caste, colour or creed are only man-made, without any divine sanction behind them. The real worth of a person depends not on his caste or creed but on his deeds.¹⁰ Each human being has the same divine spark within and none is superior or inferior to the other.¹¹ If the Sikh Scriptural literature serves as a constitution to provide theoretical guidelines for mankind to build an equitable and egalitarian social order, the creation of the Khalsa Panth by Guru Gobind Singh on 30 March 1699 was the establishment, in microscopic form, of such a just, equitable and egalitarian social structure.

Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture, is itself the best example of religious plurality, tolerance and co-existence. The scripture is in verse written to thirty-one different *ragas* or musical measures. The contributors to it include besides six of the ten Sikh

⁸ Guru Granth Sahib, p.853.

⁹ Bhai Gurudas, *Var* 1.21; 21.4.

¹⁰ Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1330.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Kabir, p. 1349.

Gurus more than thirty saints and mystics from both the Hindu and Muslim traditions. Some of them belong to the lower castes, eg., Kabir was a weaver, Ravidas a shoe-maker, Sadhna a barber, Dhanna a peasant and Namdev a calico-printer. These saints whose compositions preach values identical with those of the Sikh Gurus come from different parts of India. For example, Kabir belonged to Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Jaidev to Bengal, Sadhna to Sindh, Namdev, Trilochan and Parmanand to Maharashtra, Farid to Punjab and Pipa to Kota. All compositions in the Sikh scripture irrespective of their authorship command equal respect among the Sikhs who hold them in equal reverence and do not give precedence to a verse say of Guru Nanak over the verse of say either Kabir or Farid or Ravidas or Dhanna.

The very fact that Guru Arjan, who compiled the Sikh scripture in 1603-04,¹² included therein the compositions of all these Hindu and Muslim saints, and that Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the tenth and the last of the personal Gurus in Sikhism, ended the institution of personal guruship and conferred on the scripture, known in Sikhism as the Guru Granth Sahib, the pontifical status for all time to come implies that the Sikh Gurus felt that a synthesis of all religious forces was possible and theirs was perhaps the first attempt in that direction. Guru Granth Sahib is a unique compilation in this respect. No other religious scripture belonging to any tradition has ever made an attempt at religious synthesis with a view to bringing about communal harmony and uniting the whole of mankind.

¹² The original manuscript of the Guru Granth Sahib written in the hand of Bhai Gurdas who acted as an amanuensis with Guru Arjan at the time of the compilation of the Scripture is still preserved at Kartarpur (Punjab). However, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) later on incorporated therein the hymns of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru of the Sikhs. It was this latter version which was bestowed upon the pontifical status.

IV. The Sikh Call to Harmony

The Sikh Gurus aimed at establishing a new world of freedom and fearlessness, peace and harmony. For this purpose, they not only gave great spiritual ideals but also put these ideals into practice. The Sikh institutions of *sangat* and *pangat* which began in the time of the Gurus are still an important part of the Sikh culture and are the living examples of human equality and unity. There is no taboo in Sikhism on remembrance of Divine Name (*nam japna*) in private but it lays special emphasis on congregational or communal worship. All are equal in the congregation and anybody can lead the congregation. Similarly, the institution of *langar* or community kitchen not only provides food to the needy from any caste or creed but is also aimed at creating a fellow-feeling among those who partake of food there: everybody, however high or low, sits in the *pangat* or row and partakes of the food cooked in the *langar*.

Love, peace and goodwill were to be the watch-words of a true religion as defined by Guru Nanak. God in Sikhism is a source of love and grace and is also recognized as the ground of entire existence. Among the divine attributes mentioned in the Sikh scripture are rancourlessness (*nirvair*) and fearlessness (*nirbhau*).¹³ This is basic to the Sikh thought as well as to the tradition. The ideal state of man, both individually and socially, is described in the Guru Granth Sahib when it is said, "May I hold none in fear, nor may I own to the fear of anybody".¹⁴

The first part of this statement stands for the cessation of aggression, exploitation and highhandedness as it advises man not to hold anybody in fear, not to dominate or demean the other. This abnegation of aggression, etc., is necessary to bring about peace and harmony in society, because "peace in its true meaning does not

¹³ The words with which the Sikh Scripture opens is translated into English, read as follows: God is one; His Name is Truth; He is the creator; He is fearless and rancourless; He is beyond Time; He never incarnates Himself; He is self-existent; He can be realized only with the grace of the Guru.

¹⁴ Guru Granth Sahib, p.1427.

comprise solely physical security or absence of war and conflict".¹⁵ This condition is only a limited and passive aspect of the wider concept of peace. Non-violence itself is not identical with peace; it may as the example of Mahatma Gandhi has shown, be a method of warfare applicable and successful only with a certain type of adversary.

Situation may arise when peace becomes definitely immoral as, for example, when human rights come in direct conflict with the desire for peace. Peace and communal harmony will certainly prevail if all men agree to hold none in fear, but the problem arises when a person or a group of persons tries to subjugate others and holds them in fear. In such circumstances, the Sikh advice is not to own to anybody's fear for the sake of keeping peace. However, the resistance must be non-violent to begin with, but when all other means fail, resort to arms is declared valid and advisable.¹⁶ However this resistance or fight is never for personal or narrow gains; it is for the sake of righteousness of *dharma*. It is somewhat like the teachings of Islam which recommends man to "fight in the cause of Allah against those who fight against you, but do not transgress. Fight until prosecution ceases and religion is freely professed for the sake of Allah alone."¹⁷ Peace is of profound significance, but justice in human affairs is an overriding value for which even the price of peace is not considered too high. Sikh history is full of such examples when they suffered in their peaceful resistance to the unlawful aggression or oppression but took to the sword when all other means failed. Martyrdom of Guru Arjan and of Guru Tegh Bahadur and the creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh have to be read in this light.

For peace and harmony in society, economic and social equalities must case. Sikhism lays a lot of emphasis on this aspect. We have already discussed the Sikh view of ethnic equality of man. To that might be added a hymn of Guru Gobind Singh which is not only very equivocal in its assertion that the whole of mankind has the same

¹⁵ Sir Zafrulla Khan, "The Fundamental of Peace", in Homer A. Jack, ed. *Religion for peace* (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1973), p.55.

¹⁶ Guru Gobind Singh, *Zafarnamah*.

¹⁷ Quran 9:91, 193, 194.

origin and returns after death to the same source, but which is also worth-quoting for its sheer poetic beauty:

As out a single fire
Millions of sparks arise;
Arise in separation But come together again
when they fall back in the fire.

As from a heap of dust
Grains of dust swept up
Fill the air, and filling it
Fall in a heap of dust.

As out of a single stream
Countless waves rise up
And, being water, fall
Back in water again.

So from God's form emerge
Alive and inanimate things
And since they rise from Him
They shall fall in Him again.¹⁸

Similarly, Sikhism also emphasizes on the value and dignity of work as well as on a fair distribution of the rewards of labour. *Kirat Karni* (working with one's own hands), *vand chhakna* (sharing with others the fruit of your labour) are two of the three cardinal virtues of Sikh; the third being *nam japna* (meditating upon the name of God). Sikhism favours a householder's life to that of a recluse. There are instances in Sikh history when the Sikh Gurus themselves preferred the company of those who lived a moderate life earning whatever little they could by honest means to the company of those whose affluence was earned with dishonest means and by exploiting the weak.¹⁹ Similarly, Guru Gobind Singh also once refused to accept a glass of water from a youth who had never worked with his own hands.

¹⁸ Guru Gobind Singh, *Akal Ustati*. English translation taken from the Unesco publication *Selection from the Sacred Writing of the Sikhs*.

¹⁹ The oft-quoted instance is that of Guru Nanak's rejection of Malik Bhago's invitation to lunch in favour of Bhai Lalo's: the former was a corrupt but high-ranking official whereas the later was a poor but honest carpenter.

Sikhism is a universal religion and any religion which can be termed a universal one must aim not only at the salvation of individual soul but also at the liberation of the whole mankind. Every member of the Sikh community voices this wish everyday - singly and in congregations, in their homes and in their holy places: the Sikhs conclude their morning and evening prayer or prayer said at any other time as part of personal piety or of a ceremony with the words: *Nanak nam charhid kala tere bhane sarabat da bhala* (May Thy glory, O God, be ever in the ascendance, and in Thy will may peace and happiness come to one and all in the world, says Nanak). This prayer for universal peace and welfare has been institutionalized in Sikhism and forms an essential part of Sikh liturgy.

Religion in the Sikh sense does not remain a private affair. Even as regards individual liberation, Sikhism does not hold that inculcation of all moral, spiritual and ethical virtues is meant only for one's own salvation. The inculcation of these virtues enables man not only liberate himself but also to bring liberation to his fellow-beings.²⁰ Sikhism holds that religion is best expressed in transforming the life of man, both individually and socially, by love and justice and that it must be ethically applicable to the daily issues of human life. Mere mystical quest is not the Sikh goal; it makes practical virtue an essential ingredient of piety. It attaches highest merit to moral and just action²¹ and to actions done in the service of mankind.²²

²⁰ Guru Granth Sahib, p.3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.62.

²² *Ibid.*, p.883.