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Sikhism and National Integration

Integration of different strands of social fabric was and still remains a major concern of the Sikh faith. The founder of Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, appears to have arrived at the conclusion quite early in his career that the segregatory instinct had become an in-built part of the Indian ethos and two important factions were contributing substantially towards the perpetuation of that state of affairs. These were: (a) the availability of religious validation to invidious distinctions between man and man, on the basis of birth, and (b) absence of any meaningful dialogue and understanding between different faiths.

A Historical Note

From Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Guru, concrete steps were constantly undertaken to expose and counter the elitist claim that caste-system, the progenitor of untouchability, was a divinely-ordained dispensation. Simultaneously, several bridges of understanding were built to span the chasms that divided one religion from the other. During the process of breaking the stranglehold of *varṇāshramadharmā* and developing accommodative consideration towards other religions, Sikhism acquired certain features which seem to be unique not only in the history of Indian Integration, but also in the history of World Religions. I propose to draw the pointed attention of the learned seminarians to a few such features here, leaving the rest to be dealt with at the end of my paper:

- a. All Sikh places of worship are required to make arrangements for free board and lodging for those who may care to avail of these facilities. It should be clear that non-consideration of caste, creed, colour, country, sex or status in this programme was a direct attack on *varṇāshramadharmā*.
- b. The holiest of the holy Sikh shrines, the Harimandir of Amritsar, is provided with four doors, unlike the conven-

tional one-door entry of the Hindu shrines. These doors symbolize free and unrestricted access of all castes and religions to the Sikh house of God.

- c. The compiler of the holy book of the Sikhs, Guru Arjun, included in it, besides his own complete works and those of his four predecessor Gurus, the selected works of a number of well-known and not-so-well-known saints, some of whom belonged to the then untouchable castes. Every time a Sikh bows his head before the Holy Book, he bows it not only before his Gurus but also before Kabir, the weaver, Ravi Das, the cobbler, and Sadhna, the butcher.
- d. In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh introduced the baptismal ceremony among his Sikhs. It required each aspirant, present in a particular session, to sip the steel-stirred and chant-charged water from the same bowl. The new recruits are told by the Master of the Ceremony that from that moment onwards, they have to forget all about their obligations to their previous castes, high or low, because they have become the sons and daughters of Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Sahib Kaur.

Such are some of the unorthodox steps that the founders of Sikh faith took to smash the religion-backed, birth-based system of segregation and to make social integration a part of Sikh religious ethos.

Inter-religious Understanding and Toleration

I shall now take the other facet of integration, namely, inter-religious understanding and toleration. It may be noted that while Sikhism is intolerant towards a birth-based, multi-caste social set-up, because it is violative of the unity and dignity of mankind, it is tolerant towards a multi-religious society, because of its moral and integrative potentialities. While the former is wholly unacceptable, the evils of the latter are considered to be rectifiable through appeals to norms. "One who considers Hinduism and Islam to be equally valid will be able to solve many of his problems, but he who considers the other religions to be irreligious, will single himself (in the fire of hatred)," says Guru Nanak in his *Var of Rag Majh*. The following are some of the steps undertaken by the founding fathers of Sikhism to achieve inter-religious amity:

- a. All accounts of Guru Nanak, nearest to him in time, agree that the Guru went far and wide to meet the leaders of various religious denominations at their headquarters, exchanged views with them, held discussions on philosophical-cum-theological themes, preserved by him in certain cases in his compositions. Dialogues and discussions are the safety-valves of a multi-religious society and it is these that the founder of Sikhism often made use of, indicating that explorative understanding of the others' point of view should be the aim of comparative metaphysics, rather than scoring points over them.
- b. The first thing that Guru Nanak is reported to have done after his trance-tryst with God was to express his utter dissatisfaction with the un-Hindu and un-Islamic life-styles of his Hindu and Muslim contemporaries, respectively. His immediate reaction was not that of inviting them to join the faith which he was founding, but of advising them to become true, honest and sincere members of their respective faiths. It is clear that this approach concedes redemptive validity to all faiths on the basis of their original normative claims, "Share the good qualities of others, leaving alone their bad ones", recommends Guru Nanak in *Rag Suhi*. In *Rag Gauri*, he says, "(On the face of it), there are two highways—the Hindu and Muslim, but their Lord is the same." Guru Amar Das, Guru Nanak's second successor, goes a step further. "Grant me redemption, O Lord," says he, "(if not through the door that I have selected), through the door of your own choice." Guru Arjun puts forward the same idea in a different way: "Make it clear, O Nanak, that it is the Guru who removes the pall of falsehood and shows how Allah and Parabrahma are the same" (*Rag Ram-Kali*).
- c. It may also be relevant to refer to *Guru Granth Sahib* in this section of my paper, because the compiler included in it the selected works of certain Hindu and Muslim saints who lived even prior to his birth. The Sikh scripture seems to be the only sacred book of a major religion of the world in which integrative impulse has gone to the extent of incorporating the devotional works of the writers of religions other than its own.

- d. Developing an attitude of respectful accommodation towards other religions may be very helpful to the principle of integration, but laying down one's own life for the worshipping rights of a religion other than one's own, belongs to the category of a much higher plane of altruism, and this is what Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru, did in 1675 in Delhi. "Nobody has ever equalled the action of Guru Tegh Bahadur," declares Guru Gobind Singh. This uniqueness lies in his martyrdom for the defence of the "sacred thread and the distinguishing mark on the forehead" of the Hindus. While Guru Nanak had urged Musalmans to be good Musalmans and those belonging to Hindu denominations to be true to their respective faiths and Guru Arjun had made the hymns of saints belonging to other religions a part of his own hymnal, Guru Tegh Bahadur enlarged the area of integration by offering his life for the freedom of others' conscience. Like peace, conscience is also indivisible and any danger to it from any quarter must become everybody's concern. That is what the Guru's action amounts to.

Such are some of the most unusual efforts made by the founders of Sikhism to create a climate of integration in a caste-and-religion-torn society. It may be noted that I have not yet qualified integration with the adjective "national". I have done so deliberately, because Sikhism prefers to treat this problem at its most comprehensive human level. The rise of the concept of nation-countries as political units is a later phenomenon and has brought to the fore some new identity-problems, which find occasional eruptive expression on the issues of nationality, language, etc. It is possible to work out the attitude of Sikhism towards such problems also on the basis of comments made by Guru Nanak and other Gurus in their compositions. For example, Guru Nanak chastises his people for being purblind towards the need of preserving the purity and identity of their language, their own culinary and sartorial styles and their forms of address. He was a poet and loved the region of his birth, its people and their culture with the inspired passion of a poet, but that did not stand in the way of his patriotism. Of all the medieval poets, it is he who takes the contemporary Pathan rulers to task for having lost the "gem" of a land, that is India, to Babur, "who came as the head of a party of sin from Kabul to secure the hand of the bride (India) by force."

Sikhism and Nationalism

There are people in India for whom the idea of "national integration" is synonymous with the idea of "one country, one nation, one language and one culture," the last being a wishful euphemism for "one religion". The Sikh response to such a slogan of national integration will always be negative because at the back of this attractive slogan lies concealed the goal of uniformity, not unity, merger, not coalition, surrender of identity, not co-existence. Decimation of minority-opinion can never mean normalization of social relations and is not in keeping with the Sikh concept of integration. The question is: Is it imperative to induce our people to develop total amnesia towards their natural, distinct and historically-evolved consciousness about their nationalities, languages, religions, etc. in order to inculcate in them a sense of common belongingness? If history has any relevance, then the Sikh answer will be a plain "No" and five hundred years of Sikh history will confirm the rectitude of the Sikh stand that unity in diversity, not absolute conformity or uniformity should be the goal of all multi-racial, multi-national, multi-lingual and multi-religious societies.

The Sikhs love their homeland, the Punjab, intensely; their attachment to Punjabi language is emotionally surcharged and their sacrifices for their religion are known all the world over, but all their fascination for their homeland, language or religion notwithstanding, the contribution of the small Sikh community to the liberation of India from the foreign yoke, in terms of hangings, life-imprisonments, fines, attachment of property, confiscations and physical tortures undergone by its members, far exceeds the percentage of other communities for the same punishments, even when the Sikh sacrifices during the pre-British period are not taken into account. I regard Sikhism as a standing tribute to the principle of integration; it is a living monument of cohesion; it is a model of large-hearted toleration. Had that not been so, the hagiographic stories depicting Guru Nanak's equal post-mortem acceptability among Hindus and Muslims (Hindus cremating one half of his flower-turned remains and Musalmans burying the other half), could not have become popular. Even now Hindus and Musalmans acknowledge him as their own. I cannot vouchsafe for the authenticity of the story that Hazarat Mian Mir, a Muslim Sufi, laid the foundation-stone of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, but the very fact that the

story is accepted by the Sikhs as a fact and is repeated with pride by them, should be sufficient to prove their bonafides for bringing about integration.

Allied Principles of Solidarity

As promised earlier, I shall now draw attention to a few more principles of solidarity which we are advised to cherish in Sikhism :

- a. The abolition of the system of classifying society into a hierarchy of castes has to be done not as a merciful concession to the so called untouchable or dispossessed classes by charitably-disposed privileged classes, but as a daring righteous action by people who have become inseparable limbs of the dispossessed, like Guru Nanak, who says, "What have I to do with the high-caste people ? You may always find me mixing with the meanest among the lowest of the low castes."
- b. Introduction of a system in which socially useful physical labour becomes an inseparable part of everyone's life-style is recommended. According to Guru Nanak, "It is social service alone which can ensure a berth in God's Court" (*Siri Rag*). The emphasis on social service is based on the belief that physical work for the common good is the best social leveller.
- c. Women constitute about half of Indian society, as of any other society in the world. Unless women are made its equal and respectable part, integration will remain an unrealized dream. I quote from Guru Nanak, "Why do you look down upon woman who has the honour of mothering even the highest among men ? . . . It is God alone whom she does not give birth" (*Rag Asa*).
- d. The genuineness of the leaders of all religions and, for that matter, of all organized bodies, should be judged by the extent to which they enthuse the people around them with the passion of making friends with all. "Ever since I came into contact with my Guru", says Guru Arjun, "all animosities have been washed out of my heart. Now nobody is an enemy or a stranger and my relations with everyone have become cordial" (*Rag Kanara*).

- e. "The ruler must take a vow to be strictly fair and just towards his people" (Guru Nanak in *Var Sarang*). This is an essential pre-condition for the success of the policy of integration. Much friction between individuals and groups arises from the unequal treatment meted out to them by the functionaries of the state. The state must not only be equidistant or equi-near from all sections of society but be honestly and benignly just to all of them, if it wants to further the cause of integration. And, finally,
- f. Intensive campaigning has to be resorted among the people at large to impress upon them their essential unity underlying their apparent diversity. This is how Guru Gobind Singh elaborates this point in his *Akal Ustat* :

Let all human beings understand that they belong to the one and same caste. . .

The temple and the mosque are the same;
There is no basic difference between Hindu and Musalman worship.

All mankind is one, though it gives the false impression of being many.

Even the differences between *devatas* and *adevas*, the *Yakshas* and the *Gandharvas*, the Hindus and the Musalmans, are the natural outcome of physical conditions of different countries.

Is everyone not endowed with similar sets of eyes and ears, a similarly-constituted physique made of a mixture of the same soil, air, fire and water ?

The Hindu and the Muslim Gods are the same;
The Hindu and the Muslim sacred texts give, in essence, the same message. . . .

Before closing, I should like to say that like all wars and disputes, their resolutions are also born in the minds of men, and Sikhism lays great emphasis on the correct treatment of the maladies of mind, such as pride, prejudice, hatred, anger and avarice that serve as stumbling blocks in the way of all integration, including national.