

SPIRITUALITY WITH SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: A STUDY OF SIKHISM, ITS PRINCIPLES, PRACTICE AND INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT:

Sikhism, Sikh Religion, Sikh Movement, Sikh People are such terms which are used interchangeably to describe the history, principles, institutions, practices and practitioners of Sikh religion. This paper intends to study this young religion as a progressive social movement drawing its inspiration from the life and teachings of ten Sikh Gurus and the sacred compositions of Guru Granth Sahib. At the same time, its followers are not immune to social, political realities of South Asia and how they have negotiated with changing times in the region remains to be seen. With this objective, this paper attempts to provide a brief insight in to key principles and growth of Sikh movement.

KEYWORDS: *Sikhism, Gurus, Faith, Sgpc, Mughals, Misls, Gurdwara, British Colonialism.*

INTRODUCTION

Sikhism is a distinct religion of Indian origin. To understand what it is, many of its aspects need reflection. It is a faith system, a philosophy and a well-defined cultural identity. Sikhs are a people, a community, a nation and an ethnicity according to various interpretations. Sikhism is the youngest religion and Sikhs are one of the smaller minorities of the world. In spite of very small number and relatively small area of population concentration, they have a global presence. Study of Sikhism includes Sikh history, lives and teachings of the ten Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib and other Sikh Scriptures, Sikh institutions, 18th century Sikh struggles, rise of the Sikh rule, Gurdwara reform movement, Sikh literature and many more.

Fundamental Principles of Sikhism

Sikhism is a unique religion. It is the first monotheistic religion born on the soil of the Indian subcontinent. All other major monotheistic religions have their origin in Middle East, not Sikhism. It is a creative response to the institutions and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism (Siddhas) and Islam in medieval Punjab. We can learn about the core characteristics of Sikhism from the sacred compositions of Sikh Gurus and *Sants* of Bhakti movement included in *Guru Granth Sahib*. We can learn it from the lives of Sikhs Gurus and other prominent Sikhs. Guru Nanak's *Japu Ji* is the clear manifesto of Sikh religion.

Sikhism believes in formless God. It does not believe in a God which is born, grows up and dies. It believes in the idea of God who is not born, shall not die, and has no body or shape or form, who is not subject to the laws of time and space.

It believes that God is present everywhere and it is in all living and nonliving parts of this world. At the same time, it is not confined to living in its creation and is a transcendental being. Universe is the creation of God and it is infinite.

Sikhs have faith in ten Gurus only. Their teachings, their lives, places associated with their memories are sacred for Sikhs. Seven Gurus have composed sacred *Bani*, three Gurus (Guru Hargobind Ji, Guru Har Rai Ji, Guru Harikrishan Ji) have not. Life of all Gurus is source of inspiration for Sikhs. Two (Guru Arjan Dev Ji, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji) have sacrificed their lives voluntarily for the freedom of religion and faith and protection of the weak. All Gurus, except Guru Harikrishan Ji, were married and they led responsible family life. Three out of ten Gurus got *Gurta Gaddi* from their father. After Guru Gobind Singh Ji, there is no Sikh Guru in human form. It is blasphemous to treat a living being after Guru Gobind Singh as the Guru of Sikhs. This is similar to the Islamic principle of *Khatam-i-Nabuat*, that Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) is the last prophet. Guru Gobind Singh Ji is the last Sikh Guru, and Guru Granth Sahib is the Guru Eternal, in the form of word, not in the form of body.

Guru Granth Sahib occupies a central place in the Sikh faith. It is written in Gurmukhi, covering 1430 pages. It was compiled and edited by Guru Arjan Dev Ji in 1604. Originally, it included the sacred hymns composed by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Guru Angad Dev Ji, Guru Amardas Ji, Guru Ram Das Ji and Guru Arjan Dev Ji who is the single biggest contributor of this holy text. Guru Arjan Dev Ji included the sacred compositions of prominent names of Bhakti and Sufi movement like Sheikh Farid, Sant Kabir, Sant Raidas, Sant Namdev and many other glorious names. Originally, it was known as *Adi Granth*. In 1706, Guru Gobind Singh Ji added the compositions of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji also. Although Guru Gobind Singh Ji himself composed sacred hymns, he did not include these in *Granth Sahib*. In October 1708, he declared that the line of Guru in human form ends with him, and the *Granth* shall be the Guru Eternal for Sikh *panth*. Hence, it came to be known as *Guru Granth Sahib*. Since then the *Guru Granth Sahib* is considered to be a living Guru by the Sikhs. The Sikh sacred space is incomplete without *Guru Granth Sahib*. It is recited daily in Sikh households and Gurdwaras. It is part of morning and evening prayers. Its compositions are sung all day in Gurdwaras. All Sikh ceremonies of birth, marriage and death are performed by reciting *shabads* from *Guru Granth Sahib*. *Guru Granth Sahib* is a legal personality also. A Gurdwara is considered Gurdwara only when there is reciting of *Guru Granth Sahib* inside the place.

Gurdwaras form an essential and vibrant part of Sikh community. In historical times, the place where Sikhs gathered as *Sangat* for *Kirtan* and reciting the name of Guru was called *Dharamsal*. Guru Amardas Ji appointed a number of Sikhs as *Manjidars* to preach the teachings of Gurus among the Sikhs of remote cities. (Seetal 2014: 90-92) The first *Dharamsal* developed around these places. Guru Hargobind Ji visited the places associated with the memories of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. These were the first Gurdwaras outside Punjab. Guru Tegh Bahadur's visits in east India also revived the memories of sacred sites associated with the name of Guru Nanak. Guru Arjan Dev Ji had established an institution of *Masands* for the federalization of the Sikh community. These *Masands* initially played a great role in securing religious and community space for the

Sikhs in all such cities, away from Punjab. Later on, a majority of *Masands* began to misuse their influence and tried to emerge as alternative centres of power among Sikhs. The institution of *Masands* was abolished by Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1699 by establishing *Khalsa panth*. The rise of *Dal Khalsa* and later day rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh played great role in providing land grants to Sikh sacred places. The responsibility of looking after this space lay with *Nirmala* and *Udhassi sants* who provided Gurmukhi education to children, provided medicine, food and shelter for the needy and preached the message of *Guru Granth Sahib* among the *Sangat*, but they also developed corrupt practice after the decline of Sikhs Empire and emerged as a class loyal to British imperialism. In 1920, as result of corrupt practice of such *Mahants*, the Gurdwara reform movement started under the leadership of Akali Dal. As a result of collective struggle of the Sikh *panth*, Gurdwaras were liberated from *Mahants* and began to be run according to the rules and regulations of the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee* (SGPC). SGPC is the only religious body in the world which is elected according to the principles of representative democracy. Gurdwaras in India and abroad have now emerged as lifeline of Sikh community.

Sikhism does not accord a privileged position to any class or caste in the matters of performing religious duties. Everyone can recite from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, everyone can perform *Ardas* on behalf of the *Sangat*, everyone can distribute *parshad* in *Sangat*, and everyone can perform *kirtan*. However, there is a very small minority of priests, who have special responsibilities at Golden Temple, Five *Takhats* and other historical Gurdwaras.

Worship of the dead is a part of traditional folk religions. Sikhism, however, does not believe in it. Under the influence of Sultani faith system, which is a mixture of Islam and folk religion, people of Punjab began to worship some tombs or *samadhs* of *Pirs*, *Faqirs*, *Naugazis*, etc. Among Hindus also, there was practice of worship of *Dehura* or *Muth*, a place where a *Jogi* is buried. Guru Arjun Dev Ji especially prohibited Sikhs from indulging in such practices of worship at tombs. Guru Gobind Singh Ji wrote that his Sikh shall not have faith in grave, tomb or the burial site of *Jogis*. He taught this lesson to his Sikhs by example. When he paid obeisance to the tomb of Dadu Dayal at Naraina (Rajasthan) in 1707, he was fined by Sikhs for committing the act of worship of the dead.

Sikhism is very often considered a variant of the Bhakti movement. It is true that both share the basic premises of devotion for God without the need for mediation by a priestly class, but Sikhism has a fundamentally distinguished identity. Sikhism, unlike Bhakti, is a movement of social change as well.

Bhakti has preached equality of all before the eyes of God, irrespective of caste, colour, etc. It has no clearly defined program of realizing that equality in society. Bhagat Namdev has put this aspect in his sacred composition where, addressing God Beethul, he said that if you give salvation after death, nobody cares for such salvation. Sikhism through multiple institutions like Langar, Khande Ki Pahul, collective struggle against rulers, democratic participation in the affairs of community and Gurmukhi based prayers books has made great dent in the caste and privilege based character of prevalent society. It still suffers from limitation like caste based endogamy. Caste based Gurdwaras are new problems of Sikhism, but these only reflect the existing reality of village society and do not have any sanction from the scriptures. SGPC has started a movement for termination of caste based Gurdwaras in villages.

Sikhism does not treat religion and politics as separate spheres. Sixth Guru Hargobind Ji announced the concept of Miri (Political Power) and Piri (Spiritual power) by wearing two swords. He built Akal Takhat to declare that Sikhs are under the authority of Akal Purukh only. Sikh Gurus did not confine themselves to the finer questions of Spritualism but they had active engagements with the social and political issues of their times. It started with Guru Nanak's criticism of Babur in his sacred compositions collectively called 'Baburvani' and continued up to Guru Gobind Singh's Persian letter to Aurangzeb 'Zafarnama' in 1705. With Baba Banda Singh establishing himself as the first Sikh ruler of Punjab (1711-1716), it reached practical conclusion. Sikhs paid heavy price for setting rule in this brief period. Eighteenth century Sikh struggles also drew their motivation from the blessings of Gurus. The establishment of Shiromani Akali Dal in 1920 was firm declaration that the idea of MiriPiri shall continue to guide the Sikh politics.

Apart from the philosophy of Spiritualism, 'this worldly ethics' is part and parcel of Sikhism. Sikh philosophy does not treat this world as an illusion or source of evil. It believes that this world is created by God himself and it the living abode of God. One should live with honor in this world and perform one's duties towards the society and family. One should engage with the world and its responsibilities positively. When too much attachment with the pleasures of this world stands in the way of reciting the name of God, then one should keep a balance.

Medieval society did not treat women as full human beings. They were considered as possessing inferior capacity for reason, greater vulnerability to evil, not capable of performing the role of leadership or social responsibility. They were not considered fit to attain spiritual upliftment. Sikhism changed this perception about women. Guru Nanak Dev Ji wrote ins sacred compositions about the virtues of women and he also strongly censured any taboos relating to birth and pollution. Guru Angad Devji 's wife Bibi Khivi Ji played great role in organizing the institution of Langar at Khadoor Sahib. Guru Amardas ji censured the practice of Sati in his Bani and discouraged the women from the practice of parda(screen). He appointed women among the first preachers of Sikhism. Sikh history remembers its brave women personalities like Mata Bhago Ji, Bibi Harsharan Kaur, Rani Sahib Kaur, Rani Sada Kaur with great reverence.

Sikh Guru strictly prohibited the practice of renunciation and celibacy. Marriage and responsibility towards family are essential and one can attain spiritual salvation while leading the life of householder. While Buddhism and Nath Siddha tradition considered women as impediment to the path of salvation, Sikhism treats women as respectable partner in all walks of life. Guru Amardas ji issued a special injunction against leading the life of Udhasi. Householder is supposed to earn his living with honesty and share its proceeds for the service of community and needy.

Observance of purity and pollution is prohibited in Sikhism. Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Asa di Var is best statement on such issues. He criticized the practice of Sutak (pollution due to birth) as the process of birth is taking place everywhere in the nature continuously. Such rejection of idea of pollution relating with women was a great service of Sikhism to the cause of women up-liftment. Guru Gobind Singh ji asked his Sikhs not to believe in the concept of Patak. If someone dies in the bed, without touching earth, it is believe that the deceased shall not attain salvation. The house where such death takes place is considered polluted with Patak. Sikhism does not believe in such pollution.

Guru Nanak Devji rejected the idea of religious practices and symbolism if these were not based on truthful conduct. He exposed the hollowness of sacred rituals of religion when he found that the followers of these regions were doing all this without having faith or sincerity in what they were doing. As a result, Sikhism does not consider ritualism as sacrosanct beyond the value of cultural practices

Unlike all major religions of the world, Sikhism is free from the practice of auspicious fasting. It believes that the human body should not be denied food and water to attain spiritual salvation. On the other hand, it believes in the balanced fulfillments of the natural needs of body. Various shabads in Guru Granth Sahib declare that we don't believe in vrat (Hindu way of fasting) or ramzan (Islamic month of fasting). It should be remembered that fasting in certain religious systems is not voluntary but compulsory.

Sikhism believes in mercy towards animal and living being. But it believes that life and death is according to the will of God and man cannot pretend to be savior of life of animals in the name of vegetarianism. Both herbivores and carnivores are the creation of God and life is present everywhere. Even water is a living organism (Pehla Pani Jio ha jit harya sabh kish hoye: Guru Nanak Dev Ji). The only eating taboo in Sikh rehat maryada is regarding Kuthha that is meat prepared according to Islamic manner. Sikhs are not Vaishnavites either.

Apart from Kutha, Tobacco consumption is a major taboo for Sikhs. Tobacco was introduced in India by Portuguese during the reign of Akbar. Very soon it became popular with all walks of Indian society. According to Satbir Singh, Guru Har Rai Ji was the first Guru who asked his Sikhs to avoid tobacco. (Singh 2004:312) Guru Gobind Singh ji made it a special point to spread awareness among people regarding its ill effects. He included consumption of tobacco among five sins (Kuraht).

Sikh Gurus discouraged their Sikhs from developing any faith around performance of miracles. According to Kartar Singh Duggal, the working of miracles is not looked upon with favour in Sikhism (Duggal 2009:86). Like Islam, Sikhism considers performance of miracles below the dignity of Spiritualism. Guru Angad Dev ji at Khadoor Sahib discouraged Guru Amardas ji from paying any attention towards the demands of farmers for miracles. Guru Har Rai ji asked his son Ram Rai not to perform such things like miracles before Aurangzeb. Ram Rai ignored this advice and he was dismissed from the Guru's household. Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji refused to perform miracles before his martyrdom, because for him, it was matter of dishonor for the spiritual persons. Guru Gobind Singh ji at Agra declared that the best miracles can be performed with the use of sword only. He was suggesting that power is the greatest miracle and sword is the source of all power. Although some instances of miracles have been associated with the lives of Gurus due to the influence of folk religion, the history of Gurus makes it amply clear that miracles have no religious sanction in Sikhism.

Growth of Sikh Movement

Sikhism was not a religious movement like Bhakti movement only. It was a kind of conscious program to bring social change in Indian society. It was due to this success with social change, that Sikhs emerged as people with distinct culture and separate identity. Establishment of Sikh rule under Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, then rise of Sikhs misls and the glory of Lahore kingdom under Maharaja Ranjit Singh was sufficient to prove that Sikhs were sovereign people. This

distinct identity was achieved after a long and unequal struggle against the might and oppression of Mughal empire, especially after the death of emperor Akbar in 1605. It started with the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Devji in 1606, the first martyr of Sikh history.

After the death of Akbar, Jahangir developed a policy of animosity towards Guru Arjan Devji. He declared that Guru Arjan Devji had supported prince Khusrou in his rebellion against Jahangir. He accused Guru ji for bringing Hindus and Muslims into the fold of his faith. Guru Arjan Devji was arrested, fined and tortured according to Mongol law of Yasa va Siasat. He attained his supreme martyrdom in Lahore on the banks of river Ravi on May 30, 1606 and his martyrdom started new chapter of resistance against Mughal authorities. Guru Hargobindji declared to wear two swords, one to symbolize religious authority and other to symbolize political authority. He built Akal Takhat in 1609 and began to lead Sikhs towards the path of Sovereignty. He started new militarization of Sikhs to fight against any potential threat coming from Mughal Empire. He was detained at Gwalior fort for a very long period. As a result of militarization, Sikhs came in to conflict which resulted in number of battles (1628, 1630, and 1634). Guru Har Raiji sent his Sikhs to provide a safe passage to Dara Shikoh while he was being chased by Aurangzeb's armies. Mughal authorities always suspected that Guru Tegh Bahadurji was trying to raise rebellion against the state. He was detained on different occasions and finally he was arrested at Malikpur while he was proceeding to Delhi for advocating the cause of religious freedom of Kashmiri pundits. At Delhi, he was martyred along with three Sikhs, Bhai Mati Das, Bhai Sati Das and Bhai Dyal Das, on November 11, 1675. Guru Gobind Singh ji realized that a major transformation of Sikhs is required to fight against the oppression of Mughal state and to conserve a separate identity of Sikhs. He asked them to keep unshorn and wear arms on their bodies. With the formation of Khalsa Panth (1699), he kindled hope of political sovereignty among Sikhs. According to Jaspal Singh, author of Raj da Sikh Sankalp, many researches clearly point out that establishment of Khalsa Raj was the main objective behind Khalsa Sajna (Singh 1990: 222) He had to face armed conflict with surrounding hill states. A long siege of Anandpur Sahib by the joint forces of Suba Sirhind Wazir Khan and other Mughal generals along with an alliance of hill principalities forced him to leave the city which resulted in the enormous tragedy of martyrdom of young Sahibzada Zorawar Singh and Sahibzada Fateh Singh and death of Mata Gujri ji on December 22, 1705. At Nander, in September, 1708, Guru Gobind Singh ji sent Baba Banda Singh Bahadar, along with five Sikhs, to open rebellion against Wazir Khan of Sirhind. Baba Banda Singh swooped the skies of Punjab like a hawk and destroyed the city of Sirhind after the victory of Chaparchiri (May 12, 1710). Very soon he established the rule of Khalsa in the vast expanses of Punjab. This rise of Baba Banda Singh ended in tragic and steep decline after the siege of Gurdas Nangal in December 1715. It took three Mughal emperors to defeat the rule established by Baba Banda Singh. He was martyred at Mehrauli along with his infant son. (Narang 2009:108). 700 Sikhs captured at Gurdas Nangal were slaughtered at Delhi. Their faith in the Guru was so firm and flawless that it became subject of praise in the contemporary accounts by Persian writers and officials of East India Company. Sikh movement after Baba Banda Singh faced enormous persecution by Mughal authorities. Being unshorn became an unlawful activity. In order to distinguish Hindus from Sikhs, Bahadur Shah had issued a royal proclamation that non Muslims of royal court must shave off their beards. A special drive took place where non Muslim officials were forced to remove their beards and sometimes their costly cloths also. (See Kes History of Sikhs 2020)

18th century after the death of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur and establishment of Sikh kingdom under Maharaja Ranjit Singh symbolizes the phase of collective sufferings of Sikh community. Why Sikhs were targeted by state and its agencies for torture and oppression?

18th century Sikh struggle symbolized Sikh's suffering for upholding a particular value system. They were fighting for religious identity; they were resisting the oppressors, fighting for the protection of weaker and striving towards gaining political sovereignty:

1. Religious Identity: Sikhs suffered for protection of their freedom of faith (of their and of others).they fought for faith:

a. Articles of faith: for example Bhai Taru Singh sacrificed his life but did not allow his hair to be shorn. Sikhs with long hair and beard were killed by authorities and their long haired heads were prized. (See Gill 2020)

b. Places of worship: Every foreign invader made it a point to desecrate Harimandir Sahib and defile sacred pool. Baba Dip Singh laid down his life for the protection of Harimandir Sahib in 1757. Bhai Mani Singh gave up his life to protect the right of Sikhs to assemble at Harimandir Sahib in 1738.Killing of Massa Ranghr in August 1740 by Bhai Mehtab Singh and Sukha Singh was also linked with the honour of Harimandir Sahib.

2. Resistance to oppression

18th century struggle revolves around apparatus of oppression by Mughals and their vassals and the resistance shown by Sikhs. Sikhs did not comply with the oppressive order of authorities . Bhai Taru Singh of Van village and Baba Garja Singh Bota Singh episodes are clear evidence that Sikhs were fighting against state repression almost single handed. The first Sikh Ghallughara (1746) also had its background in the Sikhs refusal to suffer the unjust orders of Lakhpat Rai.

3. Protection of Weaker

18th century Sikh struggle did not confine itself to problems of Sikh community only. It considered itself as the chosen people in their fight against oppressors. They fought for weaker sections of all religions. Bhai Taru Singh of van fought to protect the honour of poor fisherman Rahim Bux's daughter from the clutches of Jafar Begh, army official of Patti. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and other leaders of Dal Khalsa recovered 2200 prisoner women from the custody of Ahmed Shah Abdali in 1760.

4. Empowerment

Sikh movement in 18th century was a movement of empowerment of peasants, menial classes, so called untouchables and women also. These were the people who were traditionally considered non-warrior classes were defeating the so called warrior races like Afghans and Turks. A Kalal (Liquor distiller caste) like Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, a shepherd like Tara Singh Gheba, a carpenter like Jassa Singh Ramgarhia were fighting against Asia's most powerful authorities. Sikhs without any central authority were learning to handle their collective national issues through a loose institution like Sarbat Khalsa held at Akal Takhat twice every year.

5. Political Sovereignty

Sikhs believed that Punjab naturally belonged to them and the right to rule over Punjab was given to them by Guru Gobind Singh Ji himself. These Sikhs were people of common origin, had

no royal connection, had no idea of political power in history, rejected the Mughal governor Zakaria Khan's offer for Nawabi, because they believed that Guru Gobind Singh ji had promised them patshahi. In 1748, Sarbat Khalsa at Akal Takhat declared the formation of Dal Khalsa and began a systematic struggle for the establishment of Sikh rule. In 1799, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was declared the Maharaja of Punjab and with him, Sikhs began to be recognized as a ruling power in India and Europe.

In 1849, Sikhs came under the yoke of British colonialism. But British recognized their talent for army and they opened new opportunity for recruitment. Through recruitment, Sikhs used colonialism as an opportunity for gaining exposure to foreign lands like South East Asia, Europe and Canada. In First World War, when Sikh population was one per cent of India, their share among the Indian army fighting abroad was more than ten per cent. This exposure made them admirer for west and they began to adopt lands like US and Canada as their future home. Today there is sizeable presence of Sikh in western hemisphere and turbaned men and women are serving these nations at offices of great responsibilities. Currently, Sikhs have global presence and global recognition in all spheres of life like politics, business, culture and economy. They have emerged as the brand ambassadors of Guru Nanak's Dev's ideal of selfless service.

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