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Guru Nanak Devji's Teachings in the Context of Inter-Faith Dialogue in India

By

James Massey*

Introductory Remarks

First, why I have avoided to use in this paper the expression 'the Composite Culture', which even is used in our Constitution of India to describe unified one culture of our country.¹ It is because such a demand is not only against one of the basic realities of our Indian way of life, it also goes against the divine will, which was and is behind this created world with different shades and colours. In this regard the following observation made by Dr. Ram Singh is also noteworthy:

It is debatable issue whether there is a separate entity called "composite culture" of India, or it is merely the interaction of various cultures which, instead of resulting into an integrated culture, are still in a position to maintain their separate identities.²

Beside what Dr. Ram Singh says, the reality is that multi or pluralism is part of our Indian or even Asian way of life. It is quite a different thing, if some of us are not willing to accept this truth. But it is still there, in the form of multi-cultures, multi-languages, multi-religions and multi-ethnicities. Therefore the question of 'composite culture' is not only debatable, but also a doubtful principle, unless we are willing to take it as an eschatology reality. I do not intend to deal with this point in detail here, because of the time factor. But we may be able to come back to this question of 'composite culture, in our discussion if you will wish to do so.

Second, why I have included the expression 'Inter-Faith Dialogue in India' as part of my subject? It is because I strongly believe that it is one of the ways to live in a multi or pluralistic religious context, such as prevailing in our country. In fact in some form it always goes on in our various life situations every day. About the meaning of Inter-Faith Dialogue, Dr. Wesley Ariarajah says: At the level of theology, dialogue affirms that this world is God's world. He made it. He remakes it. He is involved in its total history ... All religious communities are on a pilgrimage ... its emphasis is not on religions or systems or ideas, its

emphasis falls on people. It says that people are not simply objects for conversions...It is an attempt to understand them as partners with us in a pilgrimage.³

Now those of us who have read the life of Guru Nanakji as narrated by various authors of the Janam Sakhis, and his teachings, which we find in his hymns contained in Sri Guru Granth Sahibji, will agree with me that Guru Nanak Dev's whole life and teachings are the best example of an Inter-Faith Dialogue and if taken seriously, his model can help us in dealing with the present most difficult context of our country. It will not be possible to deal in detail Guru Nanak Dev's life experiences and teachings concerning our subject in this brief paper. But still an attempt is being made to state a few main points in order to initiate our discussion under the following sub-themes:

- a) Dialogue in Action
- b) Theological Basis
- c) Treatment to other Faiths and Ideologies

After dealing with these three sub-themes, at the end I have added a few concluding remarks also.

- a) Dialogue in Action

As mentioned earlier, Guru Nanak Dev's whole life was a part of the process of Inter-Faith Dialogue and to this I call 'dialogue in action'. In this process of Inter-Faith Dialogue, one basic principle, one has to follow is that one has to pre-suppose that the Ultimate Truth is part of every one's faith, and no one can claim a monopoly over the Ultimate Truth. So in the process of dialogue, one can learn about the Ultimate Truth from others and also one can offer constructive criticism about the views of others. But mutual respect towards one another is a demand upon those who get involved in the process of dialogue. But it also does not mean that we get lead to syncretism. Now these principles of Inter-Faith Dialogue, we find functioning in the model of Guru Nanakji's way of life. A few examples from Gurujī's life will clear this point.

First example I want to refer is Guru Nanakji's dialogue with a Pandit teacher. The theme of this Sakhi connected with early life of Gurujī is the real nature of study or learning. According to this Sakhi Pandit was a master of his subjects according to our worldly standard. But young Gurujī was not interested in that kind of learning. During the dialogue process, he makes his point clear, part of which, according to the B40 Janam Sakhi is as follows, which he said to the Pandit:

Let your ink be made by burning (your) world affections, let inner love be your pen, and make (your) mind the scribe. And what is written? The Name of God is written! His praises are written, and by the writing thereof all evil is wiped away.⁴

The second incident of Guru Nanak Dev's life, which I want to refer is well known to all of us. The editor of Puratam Janam Sakhi has named this incident *Vehin Parves*. According to this Sakhi, after his spiritual experience for some days Guru kept quite, but then finally on one day, he declared the essence of his new experiences in these words:

*Jo na Koi hindu hai
Na ko musalaman⁵
(There is neither Hindu
nor Muslim)*

Those of us who have read this Sakhi know how a controversy in the form of dialogue took place on Guru's this declaration and which later on ended in the mosque and Gurujī helped Daulat Khan's Qazi to understand the real meaning of *namaz* (prayer). During this dialogue in the form of Shalok, Gurujī explained the real meaning of Muslim prayer in these words:

Make mercy your mosque, faith your prayer-mat,

*And righteousness your Quran.
Make humility your circumcision, uprightness your fasting,
and so you will be a (true) Muslim.⁶*

Again as it is a well known fact that Guru Nanak's major part of the life was spent on travels known as *Udasi*. It is during these *Udasi* one finds in real sense 'dialogue in action'. During these travels Guruji visited all the major religious places of major religions of his time i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism etc. His visits were not only limited to our own country's four directions, North, South, West and East, even he went in the South upto Shri Lanka and other side up to Middle East. It was these visits and travels when Guruji not only offered constructive criticism to various rituals and practices of other faiths, but these also deepened and enriched his religious experience, which later, one can see in the contents of his hymns, in the form of using different divine names and languages. Guruji did not directly attack any religion and did not make an attempt to convert anybody, instead of that he always tried to strengthen other's faith as part of one's own religion. Here two such well known examples are cited in support of this argument.

For example during his visit to Hardwar, when he saw people throwing water toward the sun in order to send it to their dead forefathers, instead of arguing and correcting people's folly, he started throwing water toward his fields in Panjab. When people questioned him about his action, during the dialogue he answered and pointed to them:

*"My friends", said Baba (Nanak) Ji,
"If water will not reach my field (from here),
then how can it reach your forefathers? ..."⁷*

Take for example another incident which took place during Guruji's visit to Macca. When Guruji slept, keeping his feet toward holy place and on questioning by a Muslim priest, he replied:

*Jit Val Khudai
Ate Kaba nahin,
Tetu Vali nerai pair Ghasiti Kari cadu.
(whichever direction you think God
and Kaba is not,
you may drag my feet toward that direction)⁸*

Time and space will not permit me to quote more examples to show how Guru Nanak's whole life was a model of Inter-Faith Dialogue. Therefore I now move to the next section of my paper.

b) Theological Basis

While giving the meaning of Inter-Faith Dialogue (which has been already referred in the Introductory remarks) Dr. Ariarajah said, "At the level of theology, dialogue affirms that this world is God's world. He made it..." This fact is equally true in Guru Nanak's teachings about Creator and creation. In my work "The Doctrine of Ultimate Reality in Sikh Religion", I have devoted a full chapter on this subject based upon Guru Nanakji's hymns.⁹ Therefore here I am referring only a few verses of Guru's one of the hymns on creation. This hymn is found in Maru Raga (A.G. page 1035). The following verses in English translation will serve our purpose for discussion.

*There was neither earth nor sky;
(Only) the infinite (Beings) will was there...
when he willed (bhana), He made the world;
and without support stretched out the vast expanse...
He made the creation and sees it;*

*And his Order ran through the Universe...*¹⁰

There are number of important points which one need to note in the doctrine of creation in the hymns of Guru Nanak Dev, which needs to be explained, underlined, and reiterated for the benefit of our situation. There is firstly the assertion that God has created this universe out of nothing and this He did according to His will (*bhana*), voluntarily. Creation, according to Guru Nanakji is the work of a sovereign God. We are, because God is. With this truth, two things become clear that without God either human beings or this cosmos would be inconceivable. Second, all of us are accountable to higher authority, means the authority of God. This means the way we as human beings exercise our stewardship over creation and the manner in which we treat each other, has ultimate consequences which shall not be escaped. Guru Nanak Dev's doctrine of creation and human being also reveals another important point for us is that we all are created by One Creator. We, all men and women are his creation and therefore are equal before Him. We all are members of one and only human family. It also implies that both in our situation, the oppressors and the oppressed are of the same species. Human life therefore is to be pursued not selfishly, but corporately as a human venture. Now again I did not have the time to spell further this point based on Guru Nanakji's doctrine of creation, but possibly we will be able to discuss this together.

c) Treatment to other Faiths and Ideologies

Already references has been made to Guru Nanak Dev's treatment to other faiths. Here without spelling out I am quoting below one of Guru Nank Dev's other hymns, which tells us how he treated all faiths equally. This hymn is actually part of Ramkali Ki Var (AG pages 951) and here I am using an English translation of this hymn quoted by Dr. Hari Gupta in one of his papers:

*Hindu is born to a Hindu,
He wears the sacred thread,
He wears it but continue to do evil deeds.
He does not purify himself thereby.
A Muslim feels proud of being a Muslim.
Without a proper guide, he does not find the true path.
He gropes in the dark.
He cannot enter paradise without performing goods deeds.
A son of a Jogi becomes a Jogi;
He wears ear-rings;
and wearing them roams about.
God is everywhere: He has created us all.
He who realises this is a true Hindu or a Musalman.
All others are hypocrities;
All shall have to answer for their actions.
Good deeds will bring salvation.
Truth alone shall prevail in the end;
Nothing else will be a substitute for it before God.*¹¹

Concluding Remarks

In my concluding remarks what I want to add is that through the brief discussions in this paper, I have tried to show that Guru Nanakji's life and teachings do not encourage us toward a 'composite culture', because the implied meaning of 'composite culture' is a 'unified culture' or 'one culture' or even 'culture nationalism'.

Guru Nanak Dev, as we have seen, has recognised the existence of different religions, cultures, ideologies etc. and he strengthens through his constructive and positive criticism. The latter to me is possible through Inter-Faith Dialogue approach, which need to go on at all level in our pluralistic society on the model, which Guru Nanak Devji offers us to follow.

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