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Early Sikh Faith A Counter-religious Movement and Identity Formation

By

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I. Introduction: Two Case Histories

I want to begin this lecture by narrating two case histories taken from the Janam Sakhis (traditional biographies of the founder of Sikh faith, Guru Nanak Devji): First Case history: According to a Janami Sakhi, Guru Nanak visited a Hindu religious pilgrimage centre (Haridwar), where every day devotees go for a holy bath, but on special day devotees can be in thousands. The day Guru Nanak visited, a large number of people came to bathe in the Holy Ganges River. Guru Nanak started observing the people taking bath, who after taking their dip offered water to their dead ancestors.¹

Guru Nanak also entered the water to bathe, the people were worshipping with their faces towards the direction of the rising sun, but Guru Nanak began to bathe facing the direction of the setting sun. Other people were throwing water

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¹ Mcleod, W.H. (Ed): *The 40 Janam Sakhi*, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1980, pp.83-85

towards the rising sun. Guru Nanak began to throw water in the opposite direction.

When other people saw Guru Nanak throwing water in the opposite direction, they asked him, "To whom are you throwing water"? Guru Nanak replied, "At home I have a field, I am watering that field". But the people protested and asked him, "How can the water reach your field?" by which they meant your field in your home in Panjab is far away. Guru Nanak replied to them, "If my water will not reach my field from here, then how can it reach your ancestors?"¹

Second case history: According to the *Puratana Janam Sakhi* during one of his journeys, Guru Nanak visited Mecca, the holy place of Muslims, where one day he slept with his feet towards the holy place Kaaba. When a Muslim priest saw this, he asked Guru Nanak, "Why are you sleeping by stretching out your feet towards the house of God? This is an insult to the holy place Kaaba". Guru Nanak answered him, "You may turn my feet to that direction, where you think God or Kaba is not present". According to *Puratan Janam Sakhi*, when the Muslim priest turned Guru Nanak's feet in another (opposite) direction, he found the Kaaba revolving all around.²

These two case histories contain the essence of this lecture that to us the early form of Sikh faith was 'a counter-religious movement' means a movement of departure from the existing religious traditions. This is what happened with the Sikh faith. In this lecture we will see how this happened. But before that we have to deal with some basic issues raised by some scholars about the origin of Sikh faith as a religion including the different interpretations of the work of the founder Guru Nanak.

The discussion of this lecture will be centred on these two points or views about the early Sikh faith and the formation of Sikh identity. This discussion will be carried on under the following sub-heads: Counter Religious Movement and Formation of Sikh Identity and the lecture will end with brief concluding remarks on the continuing challenges to the Sikh identity.

II. Counter-Religious Movement

This lecture is based upon a thesis that all the religions before they took the final form or got organized, they began as a movement. At that initial stage the founder of such a religion will not even have a declared intention that he or she is going to start a new religion. This was true of Buddhism and Lord Buddha, Jainism and Lord Mahavira, Judaism and Moses, Christianity and Lord Jesus Christ, Islam and Prophet Mohammed and also Sikhism and Guru Nanak Devji. All these religions or faiths began, when their founders started asking questions and offering alternative answer or giving meaning to the existing symbols, names, rituals, practices etc. Sometimes they even said 'no' to the existing traditions and offer 'substitution'. That was the time in each case a 'movement' started taking

² Vir Singhji, Bhai Sahib Doctor (Ed): *Puratan Janam Sakhi* (in Panjabi), Amritsar, 1971, pp. 182-187

form, which later on became a 'counter-movement' (in the case of religion a 'counter-religious movement'). Here the expression 'counter' when added as prefix to 'movement', as the Concise Oxford Dictionary puts, denotes "movement or effect in the opposite direction".³

Two case histories narrated from the life of Guru Nanak, one about his visit to, a Hindu holy river Ganges in Haridwar and other about his visit to Kaba, a holy Muslim place in Mecca, in both these incidents through his actions, he rejected the existing practices and views, and replaced with the new meanings. Here he did not act just as ordinary reformer or revolutionary or 'in between, as understood to-day by many scholars. In fact the debate about Guru Nanak's being a reformer or revolutionary and even about the early Sikh faith that if it was a synthesis*of two existing religious traditions namely, 'Bhakti Hinduism' and 'Islamic Sufism' continues even today (Bhakti denotes devotion and 'Sufism' mysticism). A brief discussion on both these aspects is being offered to form our own view about the early Sikh faith.

First we have to discuss the question about Guru Nanak, if he was a 'reformer' or a 'revolutionary'. There is one group among which Gokul Chand Narain and Payne belong to; according to them Guru Nanak was only a reformer, who did not reject the basic principles of Hinduism, because he only wanted to remove the social and religious evil practices of Hinduism.⁴ According to the second group of scholars, which includes M.A. Macaliffe, Teja Singh and Bhai Kahan Singh, Guru Nanak was a revolutionary, because they believe he wanted to destroy the old Hindu societal structure and replace it with a new one.⁵ There is a third group; its leading name is Kirpal Singh Narang, who hold the view that Guru Nanak was neither a reformer nor a revolutionary, but was 'in between'. According to him Guru Nanak's new religion, though it was different from some of the basic teachings of Hindu religion, was not totally against it.⁶

Here in these views reference has been made only to Hindu religion, but as seen in the second case history, Guru Nanak was equally concerned about Islam and its followers. Because these were the two major religions which were followed by the masses of people of Guru Nanak's time. It is also true that Sikh faith in the beginning was part of the world wide re-wakening and revival movement of the middle ages (15th and 16th century). On the Indian sub-continent during this period, because majority of the people showed dissatisfaction to the old and rigid and ritualistic ways of religions, therefore a movement known as Bhakti both among the followers of Hinduism and Islam was in full swing. Among the Hindu Bhakti movement, leaders included Shri Krishna Chaitanya and Mira Bai and Muslim mystic leaders including Sheikh Farid and Kabir. Guru Nanak had many common teachings with the Bhakti Hindu saints as well as with the

³ Soanes, Catherine & Angus Stevenson (Eds): *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, Revised, Oxford, 2007, p.326

⁴ Narang, S. Kirpal Singh: *Guru Nanak- Shudarak Jan Krantikari* (n Punjabi) in *Panjabi Dunia*, Guru Nanak Ank (Part One), Patiala, n.d., pp. 61-62

⁵ Ibid, pp. 63-65

⁶ Gupta, Dr. K.C.: *Guru Nanak-Krantikari* (n Panjabi), op.cit, pp. 162-63

Muslim Sufi saints. They all used the common language, reject the caste distinctions and also they rejected rituals and ceremonies. They all stressed on the morality and purity of hearts. It may be because of these commonalities with both the groups, Ethne K. Marengo concluded his views about Guru Nanak and said: "The culmination of the Sufi movement of the Muslims and Bhakti movement of the Hindus was to be found in the doctrines of Guru Nanak".⁷

There are views also expressed by some scholars, who reject the idea of Sikh faith as a synthesis of Hindu Bhakti and Muslim Sufism. Among these scholars, a well known scholar is W.H. Mcleod. According to him these two religious traditions had a marginal effect on Guru Nanak's teachings; instead the major influence upon Guru Nanak was of Sant (Saint) traditions which followed the Vaishnava Bhakti, who rejected all forms of idol worship, rituals, temples, pilgrimage and caste. They also used local language.⁸ But Mcleod's understanding of Nath tradition or Sant traditions is also questionable because Nath Yogi (an ascetic), who demanded a complete physical discipline and it is true they outwardly admit God and call him Krishna and Chaitanya as Vaishnavas do, but in truth they had no concern with God. Each Yogi was God in the universe of his body.⁹ Now such thought will have no place in Guru Nanak's teachings. Guru Nanak has even basic difference with the Bhakti Saints and Sufis, who stressed more on the renunciation of this world, but Guru Nanak stressed on family life. Guru Nanak towards the end of his life appointed his successor to keep the continuity of his faith, which no other Bhakti or Sufi saint has done. All this clearly indicate that early Sikh faith even from the start was in real sense a counter-religious movement, which to-day has taken the form of a full fledged religion, though young in age as compared to other world religions, yet a religion of its own right. But how this happen, a brief discussion is offered in the next part of this lecture.

III. Formation of Sikh Identity

The Sikh movement began with its founder Guru Nanak, who was born on 15th April, 1469 A.D., in the village Nankana Sahib, which is about 65 kilometres from Lahore (now in Pakistan). As a young boy he studied under a Hindu and a Muslim teacher. He was always interested to spend time with religious saints belonging to different religious groups. But nobody could satisfy his inner quest. So one day he left his home. He prayed and meditated. He thought about the bitter differences between Hindus and Muslims. It's at that stage of his life he was led to a very radical belief; which he stated thus: "There is no Hindu, there is no Musalman."¹⁰ After this enriching experience he took two companions, one, a Muslim named Mardana and the other a Hindu farmer (Jat) called Bala. He

⁷ Marengo, Ethne: *The Transformation of Sikh Society*, New Delhi, 1936, p.24

⁸ Mcleod, W.H.: *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Delhi, 1975, pp 6-7

⁹ Bhattacharyya, Haridas (ed): *The Cultural Heritage of India*, volume IV, (The Religions), Calcutta, 1983, p.280

¹⁰ Vir Singh, Bhai Sahib Doctror (ed.): *Puratan Janam Sakhi* (in Panjabi), Op. Cit, P.43

called them 'bhaf' meaning brothers. Mardana was a musician. Guru Nanak used to compose his messages which Mardana set to music and then they would sing. Guru Nanak used the local dialect or language. His simple teaching appealed to the Panjabi villagers, therefore within a few years Guru Nanak had many disciples.

There were nine other Gurus after Guru Nanak.

Guru Nanak appointed one of his disciples named Lehana as his successor. Lehana's name was changed to Angad which means 'limb' and which indicated that he was the extension of the former Guru. Each Guru further strengthened the Sikh movement started by Guru Nanak and also made specific contributions to the growth of the Sikh religion, which later on helped in establishing a distinct Sikh identity. The second Guru Angad (1539-1552 A.D.) popularized the Gurmukhi script, which helped the development of the Panjabi language. This was the script which was used later for the writing of the Sikh Scriptures. It was different from the Devanagiri script, which was used to write Sanskrit, the language of the priestly class of Hindus and is currently being used to write Hindi.

Guru Angad appointed as his successor one of his disciples named Amar Das. He served as Guru for twenty years (1552-1574). By the time of this Guru the Sikh movement spread all over rural Panjab. Particularly farmers of the Panjab accepted the Guru's faith. In the future to come, these Jat villagers contributed much to the growth of the Sikh faith. Now as the Sikh faith was spreading, a proper organisation was needed. In order to fulfil this need Guru Amar Das organised 22 centres and appointed lay preachers to take care of each centre. He also commissioned 146 well trained missionaries, out of which 94 were men while 52 were women."¹¹ This was indeed a bold step on the part of Guru Amar Das, particularly giving an equal status to women and men. He also made popular the institution of the Langar or free kitchen in Gurdwaras (Sikh temples) where all castes and classes of people had to share common meals. He also founded for the Sikhs a centre of pilgrimage at Goindwal on the bank of the river Beas in the Panjab. He introduced forms of Sikh marriage ceremonies and festivals, which were different from those of the Hindus. These steps were to add toward the beginning of a separate Sikh identity.

After Guru Amar Das, the fourth Guru Ram Das' main contribution was very significant. He laid the foundation of the Sikh holy city of Ramdaspur, which later on came to be known as Amritsar.

The fifth Guru Arjan (1581-1606) was born in 1563 at Goindwal. He was the youngest son of Guru Ram Das. He was a great builder. He built the famous Golden Temple in Amritsar, which now is the main pilgrimage place for the Sikhs. The foundation for this great temple was laid by a Muslim saint. Besides being a good builder, Guru Arjan was a born poet and scholar. His greatest work was the compilation of the Adi Granth (Sikh Scripture) in 1604. It includes the writings of the first four Gurus along with his own. But he also included therein

¹¹ Singh, Trilochan: *Guru Nanak- Founder of Sikhism*, Delhi, 1969, p. 11

the writings of both Hindu and Muslim saints. The compilation of the Adi Granth was a major step for the future of the Sikh religion. This Holy Scripture for the Sikhs is the base for all religious and other matters. By Guru Arjan's time the Sikh community had grown in number and had become stronger. The Moghul Emperor Jahangir did not like this. He arrested the Guru and tortured him to death in Lahore in 1606. Thus Guru Arjan became the first most important martyr in Sikh history.

After Guru Arjan's death his son Hargobind became Guru in 1606; he lived till 1645. During his time as Guru, a turning point in Sikh history came. Guru Arjan's execution by a Muslim Emperor, growing hostility towards the Sikh movement forced Guru Hargobind to prepare his followers to defend themselves by military means. In fact Guru Arjan already had prepared him for this and had asked some Bhai Budda to train Hargobind as a soldier-saint. After becoming Guru, in order to give the lead to his followers, he himself wore two swords, a symbol of the spiritual (Pin) and the temporal (Min) powers. He also combined the symbols of service, the Deg (the cauldron to serve to the needy), and Tegh (the sword to defend the helpless). He asked his followers to adopt this as their life principle. This, according to Ganda Singh, was the first step towards the transformation of the Sikh religion and by extension the community into a militant church.¹²

The seventh Guru, Har Rai, was Guru from 1645 till 1661. He further developed a fighting force of 2,200 horsemen, and also organised the missionary preaching work outside the Panjab.

The eighth Guru, Har Krishnan, was only five years old, when he became the Guru. He went to Delhi in response to the summons of Emperor Aurangzeb where he contracted small-pox and died in 1664. His last words were: "Baba-Bakale" which means that his successor should to be found at a place in the Panjab.

The ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, was the youngest son of Guru Hargobind; he became the Guru in 1664. He was a zealous preacher. Guru Tegh Bahadur was a great champion of religious freedom. To get freedom of worship for the Hindu Brahmins, he incurred the wrath of the Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb, who asked the Guru to either accept Islam or face death. But the Guru refused, and he was beheaded in Delhi on 11th of November, 1675.

After his father's martyrdom, the ten years old Gobind Singh became the Guru in 1675. Therefore he spent some years in studying Persian, Sanskrit, Punjabi, and Hindi and in learning the art of war.

At last came the greatest day of Sikh history. In March 1699, at the time of Baisakhi festival, the Guru assembled his followers at Anandpur Sahib and selected in a dramatic manner five beloved ones known as Panj Piyaras. The Guru baptized these five by administering them Amrit (sugar water stirred with double-edged sword) and out of the same bowl, the Guru in turn was baptized by

¹² Singh, Ganda: *The Sikh -A Historical Interpretations in Religion and Society*, ISRS, Vol XI, No. 1, March 1964, p.24

them. After the baptism, the Guru declared the five beloved ones as the Khalsa, meaning pure ones, and gave them new names with a common suffix ('Singh' for a man meaning lion and 'Kaur' for a woman meaning princess.) The Guru also made them take an oath to observe and wear what came to be called the five K's: Kesh (hair), Kanga (comb), Kara (bracelet), Kachha (a pair of shorts), and Kirpan (a sword). After his baptism the Guru greeted the five beloved ones with these words "Wah Guruji Ka Khirisa - Wah Guruji Ki Fateh" which means "Khalsa are the chosen people of God, victory be to God." Thus the Khalsa brotherhood was founded and the final stage of militarization of Sikhism was completed. But we must remember that the Guru himself never waged a battle first. He always fought to protect his followers. While writing to Emperor Aurangzeb, he wrote in his Epistle of Victory known as the Zafarnama: "Helplessly, as a last resort, I came forward and took arms. When all other means have failed, it is lawful to resort to the sword" (21:22).

Thus Guru Gobind Singh gave the final form to the Sikh religion. He had already transferred the physical leadership of the Sikh movement to the representatives of the community, elected or selected on the basis of their devotion to the Gurus teachings. Along with this, before his death, he also announced that he would have no human successor. Instead of that, the Guru Granth Sahib (the Adi Granth) will be the only Guru of the Sikhs. He added to The Adi Granth 116 hymns written by his father Guru Tegh Bahadur and one of his own. This revised Adi Granth is known as Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. In this way the process which had begun about two hundred years back was completed now and at this stage the Sikh faith also became the religion of the Book.

It is true that the three factors: a regular and recognised succession, the permanent form of the teachings of Gurus and other saints (Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji) and the founding of the Khalsa were major steps toward building a separate and distinct Sikh identity.

However, at the same time a number of the followers of Guru Nanak known as Nanak-Panthis did not accept the baptism of Guru Gobind Singh and therefore they did not become also Keshdhari (having hair), instead, they continued to be Sahajdhari Sikhs (without hair). Also there were no rigid dividing lines between the Keshdhari and Sahajdhari Sikhs. In this regard Rajiv Kapur says: "In the everyday socio-religious life of the Sikhs, however, the acceptance of Khalsa baptism did not set the Keshdhari Sikhs apart from the Hindu community. Even when the Khalsa Sikhs established a powerful Kingdom in the Panjab, their rulers continued to observe Hindu rituals and traditions in addition to Sikh practices."¹³

¹³ Kapur, Rajiv A: Sikh Separation - The Politics of Faith, London, 1986, pp S-6

IV. Concluding Remarks

It is true early Sikh faith began as a 'counter religious movement' with an open declaration about the existing two major religious traditions that: "There is no Hindu, there is no Musalman". Besides what all the Gurus contributed in the formation of Sikh identity, the three major factors: namely a regular and recognized succession, the permanent canonized scripture (Shri Guru Granth Sahibji) and the founding of the Khalsa, contributed by Guru Nanak Devji, Guru Arjan Devji and Guru Gobind Singhji respectively, gave the final forms to an independent identity as a religion. Therefore Sikh faith as it stands today is a religion at its own right with its very distinctive identity.

Nevertheless, one fact needs to be noted: as in case of all other living religions, Sikh faith also continues to face challenges both within and outside right from its beginning. For example, caste is one such issue against which all the Gurus attacked both in words and actions. The very fact among the first five members of Khalsa, four were from the lowest castes and tenth Guru Gobind Singh addressed an untouchable Bhai Jiwan Singh as "Guru Ka Beta" (son of a Guru). The purpose behind to give a single common name to all male Sikh with 'Singh' (lion) and female Sikh 'Kaur' (princess) was to get rid of the caste distinction forever. But sadly, separate caste based Sikh Gurudwaras (temples), living in separated colonies particularly in Panjabi villages, and marriage within the caste based communities continues to pose challenges to the Sikh identity or Sikh community as a whole. Towards the end of nineteenth century, reformation started to deal with such issues which gave birth to a society in 1873 (Singh Sabha), but the problems mentioned here still continue among the Sikhs.

The other serious challenge is of more political nature particularly in the present time. For the sake of staying in power many political Sikh leaders continue to compromise even with their faith identity. In one way this was also a continuing problem as Rajiv Kapur has pointed out about some of the Khalsa Sikh rulers in the past. Even today some time similar mistakes are being made while interpreting the article 25 of the Indian Constitution, where Sikh Gurudwaras are equated with the Hindu temples.

Finally new challenges are coming, brought out by the processes of modernization and globalization, through which new classes in the every human society are getting introduced and the dividing line between rich and poor are increasing. New value systems as human standards are being introduced. To this new situation every living faith community has to respond. It will be seen still how the Sikh community will respond to this new situation.