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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

SIKH ETHICS: THE HIGH ROAD TO EMANCIPATION OF MANKIND

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Abstract:

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism and his successor Sikh Gurus laid down the higher standards of social ethics. To them, for a religious man it is imperative to be a morally upright. Sikh ethical conduct transforms the evils into virtues. Sikh ethical code of conduct has both spiritual and sociological dimensions which paves the way for the upliftment of weaker and marginalized sections of society.To Sikh Gurus, for the socio-spiritual development of humankind, people are required to move on righteous path. Sikh Gurus laid down the ethical code of conduct with intension to ensure gender equality and social justice. Sikh ethics are based on idea of individual freedom and high regard for human dignity.

INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND

At the advent of Sikhism, Medieval Indian society follows two altogether different kinds of ethical codes of conduct. Islamic society follows the rigorous socio-religious and ethical doctrines as embodied in Islamic Shariat. On the other side Hindu society follows the ethical code of conduct as laid down by centuries old Varan Ashram Dharma. Sikh Gurus found that religion for people is confined to mere outward performance of rituals, wearing religious symbols and false sense of religious superiority. People were made a victim of cultural conflicts, caste based discriminations and economic exploitation. Moral degradation of society was at the peak.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion, had realized the necessity of upholding the moral laws 500 years ago. He declared ethics and morality as the basis of his religion. “Truth is the highest virtue,” he said, “but higher still is truthful living.” According to Guru Nanak, 'love' is the key to mental health and ideal social behavior. It should well up in the human heart and should be free from overtones of sexual indulgence, selfishness and malice. It should be based on giving rather than receiving. Sikhism does not permit any dichotomy of life or of any divorce of the individual from his society. Nor does it visualize that true religion and ethics can operate unconcerned beside an unjust social or political order; nor that spiritual freedom can coexist with religious dictation and political slavery. The Sikh Gurus take a very comprehensive view of religion.

Religion to Guru Nanak is no ism or institution; it is Ethics. To put it in these terms, ethics is religion in Guru Nanak's view. The ethics as advocated by Guru Nanak is such a code of conduct as exalts man to a transpersonal plane and makes him a man of righteousness, contentment, service mercy and truth. He is no more an ego centric, he no more cherishes the selfish interests rather he dedicates his life to the service of humankind. He raises above all parochial considerations and thinks and works for the welfare and uplift of humankind as a whole seeing only God in each and every being. The Sikh pattern is not only non-differential but is also non-individualistic; the stress is not on self-seeking individual liberation but on altruistic concern for the humanity as a whole (Sarbat da bhala). The Sikh ethics is, as such of corporate character. Religious ritualism is replaced by a live humanistic ethics in Sikhism; possibly, the Sikh Gurus considered that religious dialogue and unity of religions could not be achieved at the level of rituals and

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rites.

The absolute and the continuous identity of the ethical teaching from Guru Nanak's 'upar sach achar' to Guru Gobind Singh's 'Shubh Karman te Kabhu na taru' are easy to see and understand. The founders of the Sikh religion were, obviously, stressing the continuity of the ethical chain. And this was being done in defiance of the earlier notion that even the good actions or shubh karman bind the self to the sansara and, therefore, ought to be renounced or abjured. The Gurus have totally departed from the earlier Indian ethics in this respect. The law of Karma in the earlier Indian systems was the mainspring of the Varnasharama dharma, which provided support to the institution of caste and the impulse for withdrawal from social participation.

SIKH ETHICS

In Sikhism, God is the Ocean of attributes. Its ethics is basically social, because attributes have a meaning mainly in the social field. Where God is the succor of the helpless, the seeker has necessarily to accept social responsibility and consequently an ethics that is socially oriented. For example, the Sikh Gurus lay down the theological doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and also the logical ethical corollaries of the brotherhood of man and treating everyone as equal. Guru Nanak proclaimed his concept of the oneness of God (Ik Onkar) not only as a theological precept but also as a sociological principle that challenged the very basis of the hierarchical society, one manifestation of which was the caste system with differential ethics. Dharma as a complex of differential codes of ethics, different for different castes had degenerated into a disintegrating force it got rejuvenated as unifying force with the Nanakian concept of unity of Godhead.

The Sikh Gurus succeeded in evolving a new kind of political culture and a polity based on ethics is evident from the fact that in their own life-time they were able to establish an ideal society which neither craved for material indulgence nor suffered the agony of deprivation. Following ethics even in the thick of the war was essential, based on the principle of equal justice for all, the Gurus tried to create a fearless society. Wherein neither could one threaten others not could he be cowed down by bullies.

Sikhism is built essentially on ethical principles. The morality in Sikhism is inseparable from its spiritual core and history. Truth is achieved by living a life of faith, charity and courage. The key Sikh work ethics are kirat karni (earn a living by one's own labour), wand chhakna (share one's income with others) and Naam Japna (practice the discipline of Naam). They form part of fundamental principles which mould the Sikh attitude toward work. The individual should live like a lotus in a dirty pool and remain detached from the lure of the world.

The ethical objective of Sikhism is not only a holy life for an individual but also an ideal life for the society. Sikhism exhorts its adherents to maintain the harmony between religion and life, and develop materially and spiritually, to the advantage of the society. According to it the society should be homogeneous and its constituents profess identical spiritual conviction. The society should gain supremacy over the forces of nature and face the odds boldly. Sikhism provides an ethical code of human and social behavior.

The Gurus had no place for forms of spirituality, which emphasized enlightenment and liberation (mukti), without social responsibility. This is why they could be so severe on those who practiced austerity in their personal quest but did not give alms or serve others. The path they trod was one of selfishness and they themselves were filled with haumai (self - centeredness). To be a disciple of the Guru one had to be Gurmukh (one whose face is turned towards God).

As for social ethics, it is not much different from the personal ethics, because person is the basic of the society. For example the vices of bribery, injustice, inequality, lying, stealing, slandering, jealousy, violence, bickering, dishonesty etc. do not just concern with one's own person but also with others, and therefore, are social too. Besides condemning these social vices, Guru Granth Sahib also condemns the social vices of casteism, unsociability, social derogation of women and sannayas that is asceticism. Service (sewa) of humanity and love, compassion, equality and justice for all are considered the highest social virtues.

Sikhism raises ethical conduct to a higher and more independent, absolute status and makes it as the true expression of the harmony of human personality with the will of God. All ethical conduct, therefore, is not merely conducive to good results such as happiness, but it is primarily, an act of establishment of concord between the human personality and the Person of God. Since this concord is the highest end and the goal of human existence and endeavor, it is, therefore, the basic ingredient of highest activity of man, which is religion.

Janam Sakhis anecdotes illustrate practical lessons and lead to a moral, do well and avoid a bad act. It is through these parables from Guru Nanak's life that the lay folks are nurtured and introduced to the

ethical precepts of Sikhism. Here one learns the ethics of altruism, social service, dignity of labor, and absurdity of the claim that rich or high castes are better than poor or

low castes. It is here that asceticism and renunciation are rejected and social responsibility is stressed. The Guru Granth contains perennial philosophy, uncontaminated by temporal and secular considerations. It is not a code of ethical conduct or social organization like Semitic Scriptures, though it strictly postulates a social context for practice of religion and enjoins a strict ethical conduct.

A marked work- ethics in the Sikh society is the direct result of the teachings of and the precedents set by Guru Nanak and the other Gurus. For no society can thrive and flourish for long in health unless the dignity and necessity of work are accepted as a virtue and as a part of one's socio-religious responsibility. Consequently, there has, from the very start, been a clear rejection of the institutions of monasticism, asceticism, renunciation and other-Worldliness. Guru Nanak said, “With our own hands let us ourselves arrange our own affairs”. To him, “He who eats what he earns through his earnest labor and from his hand gives something in charity; he alone, O Nanak, knows the True way of life”. Guru Nanak also said, “(As) everything is underneath Truth, the living with the Truth is superior to all”. Sikh ethical code of conduct transforms the five evils viz., Kaam (lust), Krodh (anger), Lobh (greed), Moh (blind attachment) and Ahankar (ego) into five virtues viz., Giyan (wisdom), Niaon (justice), Dhiraj (patience), Nimarta (humility), Sabar or Santokh (contentment).

Sikh social ethics strictly prohibits adultery, any transgression of individual freedom, violation of human rights and contempt of human dignity. Guru Nanak said, “Nanak, another's right is swine for him (the Musalman) and cow for him (the Hindu). The spiritual guide and the prophet shall stand surety only then, if man eats not carrion. By mere talk man goes not to heaven. The deliverance is by the practice of truth alone. By putting condiments in the unlawful food, it becomes not lawful. Nanak, from false talk only falsehood is obtained”. Bhagat Kabir said, “Restrain thy fickle mind and never associate with lust and wrath”.

Sikh Gurus gave due regard to women folk who suffered lot in the male dominated society. In order to uplift the social status of women Sikh Gurus laid down very higher standards of morality and designed the Sikh social ethics in a way which restricts the male to degrade the position of women. Sikh Gurus accords very high position to women in society. Misogynistic attitude towards women was criticized by Sikh Gurus. In Sikhism, women got equal status with men in all spheres of life. Sikh Gurus were aware of human nature and his inner weaknesses. Therefore Sikh Gurus criticized those who practice adultery. Bhai Gurdas, a great Sikh theologian said, “The Sikh ought to treat women of others as his mothers, sisters, and daughters. Others' wealth for him is as beef for Hindu and pork for a Muslim”.

Guru Ram Das said, “Renounce sexual pleasures, wrath, falsehood and calumny, forsake worldly valuables and dispel pride”. Guru Arjan Dev said, “Abandon lust, wrath, avarice and worldly love. Thus be rid of both birth and death”. He also said, “Thou hast abandoned thy own wife and casted evil eye on another's woman. Wearing religious garb, the Lord is attained not and one becomes very miserable”. To him, “As is the companionship of a venomous serpent so is the ravishing of another's wife”. He also said, “Other's wealth, other's woman and slander of others, forsake thou thy craving for these. Having the main-stay of thee perfect Guru, adore thou the lotus feet of God in Thy mind”.

In order to protect the poor and helpless masses from political tyranny, Guru Nanak gave message to Islamic community. He wants that Muslim should be true Muslim in accordance with eternal message given by Prophet Muhammad. He calls Muslims to follow righteous path and discard the sense of racial arrogance and religious bigotry. He said, “Make mercy thy mosque, faith thy prayer-mat what is just and lawful, thy Quran, modesty thy circumcision and civility thy fast. So shalt thou be a Moslem. Make right conduct thy Mecca, truth thy spiritual guide and pious deeds thy creed and prayer. Rosary is that, what is pleasing to Him. Thus the Lord shall preserve thy honor, O' Nanak”.

Guru Nanak appeal to people to follow path of humility, service of mankind and meditation of Supreme Being (God). To enable them to move on this pathway, He said, “Make thy mind thye ploughman, good deed the farming, modesty the water and thy body the field. Let Lord's Name be thy seed, contentment the earth-crusher and garb of humility thy fence. Doing deeds of love, the seed shall germinate and flourishing then thou shalt see such a home”.

Sikh ethical conduct is based on spirit of social equality and social justice. Sikh Gurus denounced the age-old hierarchical structure of Hindu society. They rejected the Varanashram Dharma which prescribes various ethical conducts for various caste groups. Sikh Gurus while formulating ethical conduct for society uplifted the status of those marginalized sections of society who were victim of social discriminations and social injustice.

Guru Nanak said “Call every one exalted, none appears to be base. The One Lord has fashioned the pots, and One Light is pervading the three worlds”. He also said, “Nanak seeks the company of those who are of low castle among the lowly, nay rather the lowest of the low Why should he (he has no desire to) rival

the lofty". To him, "He who deems bad and good as the same, He in this way gets absorbed in the Lord". Guru Arjan Dev said, "All are called partners in Thy grace. Thou art seen alien to none".

Sikhism is a saint-soldier's religion. On the one hand Sikh Gurus lay down the ethical conduct for people to follow in day to day life. On the other side if circumstances force the individual to use the arms the individual is expected to follow the Guru's instructions in those conditions also. The war ethics inculcated into Guru Gobind Singh's Sikhs did not permit harming women, children or even the cowardly and those incapacitated through injury. Abusing the women or plundering is unknown in the wars of the Khalsa. Such discipline is taught to all great armies in the world, but Sikhs adhere to these high standards, because their basic training embodies saintliness and ethics.

Sikh ethical conduct taught the mankind to respond the evil with humbleness. Sikhism is a way of life which prefers to win over the hearts of others with unparallel humility, truthful conduct and self sacrifice rather than harming and conquering the others in the name of religion. One should try to follow the modesty not only in peace times rather he should be morally upright in adverse conditions also. Guru Arjan Dev said, "The Guru-beloved ever think of doing well to others. They wish not ill to any". Bhagat Farid said, "Farid, do thou good for evil and harbor not wrath in thy mind". He also said, "Farid, they who beat thee with fists; turning round, beat thou them not. Kiss thou their feet and go to thy own house".

Sikh Gurus established various socio-religious institutions like Sangat-Pangat, Dharmsal, Guruship, Manji, Masand, Khalsa, Gurmata etc. to train and educate the people to lead an ethical life. Sikh Gurus knew very well that mere understanding of the Divine hymns would not bring desired results unless people are motivated to learn and trained to practice the eternal message given in Holy Adi Granth. Sikhism is a religion of continuous practice and Sikh religious institutions provide an opportunity to masses to divinize their life through observing the ethical code of conduct as lay in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, a holy religious scripture of Sikhs.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis it can be sufficiently concluded that Sikh ethics aimed at moral development of human race. The Sikh Gurus were keen to uplift the morally degraded Medieval Indian society. They not only laid down ethical code of conduct but also established various institutions to divinize and democratize the social order based on higher ethical principles. Sikh ethics, truly speaking, open the door of spiritual salvation, social development and emancipation of mankind in letter and spirit.

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