



Sikhism: Fusion of Socio-Spiritual Concerns

Singh Arvinder

Department of Political Science, Ramgarhia College, Phagwara, Punjab, INDIA

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Abstract

In the fifteenth century, Guru Nanak laid the foundation of Sikhism which is being regarded as one of the youngest religion in the world. Sikh Gurus brought change in the age old viewpoint towards life. They gave life affirming religion and repudiated the life negating spiritual path. They socialized the religion. To them, religion is not a set of abstract, mystic transcendental, and rigorous religious dogmas. In Sikhism, life for an individual is a rare opportunity of merger of free will of an individual with an Infinite and Supreme Will (God). To Sikh Gurus, life cannot be divided in water tight compartments. Religious doctrines, institutions and socio-spiritual ethics must address to the physical and spiritual needs of man.

Keywords: Asceticism, khalsacentricism, sri guru granth sahib.

Introduction

In the West, the architects of Renaissance and Reformation movements in 15th and 16th centuries neglected the spiritual sphere of an individual's life and in the Eastern civilization religions ignored the temporal needs of human beings. In a way, both Western and Eastern civilizations took two opposite extreme stands. In the West, scholars and academician began to consider the religion as threat to modernity and in the East, theologian and religious leaders firmly believe that earthly life is an irritant in the way of spiritual progress. In the fifteenth century, Guru Nanak laid the foundation of Sikhism and break down the dichotomy of spiritual and temporal spheres of life. To Him, both spiritual and social concerns are integral ingredients of life and requires due attention because the appropriate fulfillment of the worldly and spiritual needs make life a worth living.

The present research paper is a humble attempt to analyze the Sikh approach towards life. The objective of the present paper is to highlight the contribution of Sikh Gurus in breaking down the longstanding dichotomy of spiritual-secular spheres of life. For this purpose, historical and analytical method will be used to analyze the Sikhism as fusion of socio-spiritual concerns. The present research paper is divided into two parts. First part would highlight the shortcomings of prevailing approach to life till the advent of Sikhism. Second part would bring to light the Sikh contribution in harmonizing the spiritual and secular spheres of life. In third and last part the findings of analysis will be discussed in brief.

The Shortcomings of Prevailing Approach to life at the Advent of Sikhism

Human life is a combination of physical and spiritual elements. Whereas the physical element is something concrete, the

spiritual element remains intangible. One is the outer aspect and the other, inner aspect of human life. Since life begins and grows from some hidden and subtle sources it can be said that the basic element of man is spiritual. But the outward perception caused by human senses, creates an illusion for men so as to make them believe that the physical reality is the only real thing in life. All things that are perceived by senses seem to be very real, while the soul that is not physically perceived makes little impression. This temporary reversal of the perception of truth is called Maya. All men and their souls remain engrossed in this illusory effect throughout their lives until and unless their souls are awakened by a spiritual guide¹.

In Shankra's Vedanta, which has dominated the Indian religious thought for a very long time, the world is *Mithya* or 'unreal' It does not deserve to be taken seriously, since its existence is an illusion. Buddha looked at the world as a place of suffering².

When hard realities of worldly life are not taken into account by religion, then undoubtedly its appeal for a higher spiritual life meets with failure³. The views which relate to the sphere of spirit (soul) are generally termed as transcendental values represented by religion, whereas the views which relate to the sphere of body are generally termed as phenomenal values and are usually considered as out of the scope of religion. But as far as mankind is concerned, both phenomenal as well as transcendental spheres are equally important. Man wants both his bodily and spiritual to be satisfied⁴.

The dichotomy of the spirit and the object is, in a sense, a reflection or registration or articulation of the class-divide that occurred in human history. Non-communication of the spirit and body is another expression of the non-communication that occurred between the social divides, for example, between the touchable and untouchable communities in Indian context. By

isolating the spirit from the world and by making it to be in itself man 'despiritualises' the society and thus makes it a mere object. An object here means a raw material, instruments, and a thing which could be possessed, manipulated, exploited and oppressed⁵.

In order to be useful to man in his practical life, religion must give due recognition to worldly needs of the people and take positive interest in providing a satisfactory solution to the temporal problems of mankind. If religion continues to cater only to the spiritual needs of man, ignoring his temporal problems altogether, it is bound to lose its hold on its votaries since the primary concern of individuals mainly lies in their worldly problems⁶.

Sikh Contribution in Harmonizing the Socio-Spiritual Concerns

Generally speaking the life is divided into spiritual and secular spheres. In the most of religious traditions in the world, spiritual life is given preeminence as compared to earthly life. The Sikhism provides a balanced approach towards life. In Sikhism individual is a microcosm of macrocosm (God). Life of an individual cannot be divided into water tight compartments. Sikh Gurus denounced artificial separation of spiritual concerns from the secular life.

Sikhism considers the social phenomenon as manifestation of the Real. It affirms the reality of the historical action in time. The recognition of historicity of human action in the social context is an original contribution of Sikhism. The Sikh Gurus have preached the reality of social life. Prior to the emergence of Sikhism some ascetic traditions regarded phenomenal world as bondage and hindrance in the way of self realization. They almost ignored or negated the social aspect of the self. In contradistinction to it, Sikhism holds the view that the social aspect of self is to be developed. When the narrow self is harmoniously regulated and sublimated, the individual will identifies with Divine will. The self becomes emancipated from the dissipating effects of mundane desires⁷.

The primary aim of Sikhism is to transform man with a view to stringing him with the socio-spiritual unity of mankind. It advocates that spiritual living and worldly life are inseparable. The principle of internal relation is spiritual love which forges unity among men. The loving devotion for God is reflected in social relationships. The chief impact of devotion to one God was that it postulated equality of mankind and service to humanity⁸. The Guru regards this world the dwelling place of the True one, an emanation from Him, linked with Him as a ray is linked with sun. All the objects of world including men are linked with one another and with Him in familial bonds⁹.

In Sikhism, true worship is the means to union with God even in a man's life time his salvation consists in this union. However even after this mystical experience one is expected to attend to

ones worldly duties. In the thought of Guru Nanak there is deep commitment to one's personal and social obligations. He denounces renunciation in unmitigated terms. In His Bani there is a clear preference indeed for the life of a house holder over the life of a recluse¹⁰. He humanized spiritual reality so that there remained no unbridgeable gap of the kind that existed earlier between man and an aloof, transcendental God (as impersonal being) admitting of no personal relationship with human beings. Further, Guru Nanak Dev socialized human reality so that man's life and activity came to have a societal aspect, and social activity came to possess a humanistic character¹¹.

The most fundamental implication of the Gurus spiritual system is an inalienable combination between the spiritual life and the empirical life of man. They have stressed that there can be no spiritual progress of man, unless spirituality is expressed in life and deeds. This is essential, because God himself is informing and working the world, and the spiritual man can neither remain indifferent to, nor step aside from, the mainstream of life. Its necessary implication is that there can be no progress in empirical life, unless it is linked to the Spiritual base which is the source of all values and morality¹².

Guru Nanak socialized religion into mighty revolutionary force for collective amelioration of society and state. Sikh religion, as such, as doctrinally concerned as much with soul's relation to God (*Palt*) as with mans relation with society and state (*Halt*). The spiritual concerns of soul and the temporal concerns of man, both are taken care of in Sikhism, but the two domains have been kept as distinct from each other on institutional level. The distinction of the two domains enjoying relative autonomy in their respective jurisdictions has played historical role in secularizing Indian polity¹³.

Guru Ram Das, fourth Sikh Guru said, "My faction is the Lord, who embellishes all, my world and the next"¹⁴. Guru Arjan Dev, fifth Sikh Guru, said, "The Exalted Lord has embellished my world and the next one, and all mine affairs are adjusted."¹⁵. He also said, "The Exalted Lord has embellished my world and the next one, and all mine affairs are adjusted"¹⁶. To Him, "Here and hereafter, the Lord is my savior. The Divine True Guru is merciful to the meek"¹⁷.

For Guru Nanak, the physical world is in some sense sacred and capable of enshrining goodness. Hence he was against renunciation as commonly conceived leaving the world and withdrawing from worldly duties¹⁸. Guru Nanak's purpose of truth did not divide the world into spiritual and secular. Political and social order is for him inseparable from the universal order a divine harmony in which every part has its role to play its dharma. Humans who forget God abuse earthly power. The fundamental issue is spiritual not political. All authority is ultimately God¹⁹. Sikhism repudiates the men made and superficial compartmentalization of spheres of life into physical and metaphysical, and secular and sacred. Sikh Gurus firmly

believed that only God loving and God fearing individual can ably carry out his socio-political role in the society. Guru Nanak took a comprehensive view of life, of society and of the need of the individual to have a positive relationship with the Divine. Keeping in mind the historical fact that Indian society at that time was manacled by caste, and the ruling Muslim class considered all non-Muslims as subordinates, any attempt at rocking these false foundations was met with harsh criticism and treatment. But Guru Nanak was a charismatic religious teacher who took on the establishment by introducing simple, life-affirming principles. This approach is best encapsulated in the aphorism "*Kirt Karo, Naam Japo, Vand Chakko*" introduced by him and encouraged and emphasized by all the succeeding Gurus²⁰. Guru Nanak's message of honest labor, meditation of one God and sharing with all has everlasting sociological-spiritual significance which ushered a new value and behavior pattern in the Medieval India.

Guru Nanak wanted balanced and fullest development of the individual, covering every aspect of his life, physical, temporal, moral and spiritual. Himself perfect, he set out to create a perfect society of perfect individuals, basing his philosophy on the unity of God, the Sole Loving Creator²¹. Guru Nanak's genius lay in the fact that he tore himself away from this atmosphere of negation and declared himself positively in favor of worldly life, of acceptance of the duties and obligations of the human individual to the temporal and the material and at the same time of equal acceptance of the duties and obligations of religious discipline and spiritual quest for the Ultimate. After long centuries he gave back to his people of India the idea and the ideal of a balanced life²².

Sikhism and the making of the Sikh scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, represent the return of the democratic spirit allied with the interests of the common masses of people. The Guru Granth Sahib exemplifies the social yearnings and spiritual expectations that emerged from below. The Gurus gave shape to those aspirations and anticipations of the people. The Scripture of the Sikhs is the embodiment of this process. The making of Sri Guru Granth Sahib as a Scripture is an attempt to lay the foundations of a Scriptural tradition open to all the people²³.

In the Sikh scripture, human life is declared the crown of all life - better than even that of gods who are also said to yearn for human life. It is the only opportunity for the individual soul to attempt and achieve oneness with the Supreme Soul: union with God can be realized while still living a robust and righteous life of filial and social obligations²⁴. Guru Nanak's philosophy offers a particular world-view with its own metaphysics, axiology, epistemology and aesthetics. He has a definite mission in life and preached spirituality in action by integrating the spiritual and temporal aspects of human life. He offered a practical way of life with pragmatic vision to live detached amidst the worldly allurements²⁵.

The Guru's religion is a whole-life religion and aims at full development of the individual as well as society, physically, mentally, morally and spiritually. The Guru rejects the dichotomy of spiritual and temporal life, and stresses the primacy of spiritual values in temporal activities. Guru's follower is a householder, an active participant in social life, a saint as well as a soldier ever ready to fight for justice and a righteous cause. Guru's followers are expected to carry out the Will of God through altruistic deeds, which is not possible in isolation of an ascetic. They are enjoined upon to participate fully in social and political activities²⁶.

The Life-affirming thesis of Guru Nanak meant that one should live in the social world and build it on the bedrock of a combination of the spiritual dimension of man with his empirical dimension. Thus participation in the social life involved four sets of responsibilities, namely of ensuring justice and equality between man and man, and between man and woman, of creating production and sharing it equitably, and fourthly of reacting against every injustice and wrong in the socio-political field both as an individual and as a society²⁷.

Sikhism gives one a healthy outlook on life. It is used not only to derive personal comfort for oneself or one's family but also to give comfort to society. Sikhism gives one a healthy outlook on life. It is a faith concerned with now and here, the realization of God within us now and here, not after death. It is life affirming, not world denying, philosophy of. Sikhism recommends an active life-life of householder-in society, not in isolation. Worldly duties are to be performed side by side with search for the Truth. It lays emphasis on social obligations and it believes that the man, being a part of society, has to work for its uplift²⁸.

Sikhism, which evolved, into 'Khalsacentric living,' an assertive way of life, attempted to decrease the dichotomy between spiritual life and empirical life. It challenged the initial structure through 'structural inversion' and 'negation of the negations'. In Khalsacentric living, Sikhs reject the unreality of life, withdrawal from life, indulgence in asceticism or *sanayas*, rejection of *Varnas* caste systems, ritualism and *avtarhood*. The Sikh Gurus indeed developed a life affirming system and advised Sikhs to model life as a venture of love, honesty and assertive living²⁹.

According to the Sikh Gurus religious, moral and spiritual activity covers then totality of life of the individual as well as of the society. For life is one whole and cannot be arbitrarily split up into separate religious social and political spheres nor can it be ignored or left to take care of itself. For them religion has to meet all the problems and challenges thrown up by life. Each and every activity of man is either God oriented or self oriented -viz., it is either for the uplift of man and his society or it is destructive. There cannot be a neutral position³⁰.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be adequately concluded that teachings of Sikh Gurus have transformed the long-established attitude of mankind towards human life. The outstanding aspect of Sikhism is that it caters the needs of body as well as of spirit or soul. Sikhism has emerged as harmonious blend of socio-spiritual concerns of individual. Sikh Gurus are in favor of positive and balanced approach towards life. One of the greatest contributions of Sikh Gurus is that they encouraged the active life and rejected the pessimism, idleness and spilt individuality. They advocate the full participation of man in all walks of life. This led to social awakening and spiritual growth of society.

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