

## THE SIKH SOCIETY

( a philosophic perspective )

The Sikh community holds its scripture, the holy *Guru Granth* ( also called the *Adi-Granth* ), as its spiritual mentor equivalent to the Guru in person. Primarily and fundamentally, the message of *Guru Granth* is spiritual, and only secondarily is it social and secular. In its primary function of an emancipator of the human soul, *Gurbāni* presents a poetic transcription of the beatific vision of the supreme reality that the thirty-six authors of the *Granth* had individually intuited. But however lofty the vision and however high the object of such vision, if the spiritual content of the poetic compositions does contain a message, the message is unmistakably addressed to mankind. Spiritualism has value, not for God, but for man. The problem of God itself is man's problem. The human individual who, for sustenance and support, looks up to his companions and to the social order, sometimes looks beyond for that ultimate support which he considers divine and transcendent. He expects God's grace to descend upon him. He desires the Almighty to serve him, to render assistance in the realizing of his goals, to give him succour and solace, health and security, and what not. Religion keeps on reminding him that the Divine is primary and human being, secondary. But is he convinced ?

No doubt, Sikhism is a religious faith with its firm spiritualistic base, its puritan moral code and injunctions for the conduct of life—all geared to the attainment of the highest intuitional experience believed to transfigure the individual. All the same, Sikhism has a secular and institutional aspect, with a tradition of five centuries of social protest. I do not say that the Sikh faith offers an ideology of its own, on the pattern of socialism, radicalism or even nationalism. In spite of the elements of protest evident in the make up of this faith, it can hardly be asserted that Sikhism, structured on the foundations of *Gurbāni*, is a socio-political doctrine thriving on a rigid formula of social protest. If the Sikh movement has been protestant in spirit and outlook, it was on account of the socio-secular and not the spiritual dimension of the faith. " Indeed," says Dr. Niharranjan Ray, " the protestantism of the Sikhs was more total and all-pervasive. " This

community, because of its socio-temporal and activist attitude, grew up to be more and more socially and politically conscious, than the other protestant communities.<sup>1</sup>

A good number of scholars and interpreters of Sikhism are agreed that it has been a protestant movement from the beginning. Some compare it with the protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century Europe. In the West, the advent of modern science, and more particularly the Copernican revolution, brought about a decisive break with the medieval thinking. The parallel revolutionary break with the mentality of passivity, as also with the conventional way of life, occurred in our land under the impact of Guru Nanak's personality, during the early sixteenth century. Historians may differ as to whether the founder of Sikhism was a reformer or a revolutionary. Some might insist, as did Indubhushan Banerjee, that Guru Nanak protested against conventionalism, and not against Hinduism, and that, in the hands of the Guru, Sikhism was not an altogether new creed.<sup>2</sup> This line of thinking views 'Sikhism as a Hindu movement aiming at the national regeneration of Hindus', or 'as an offshoot of traditional Hinduism and a response to the challenge of Islam'.

### **The Character of Sikh Movement**

In the later history of the Punjab, there have been two moments of renaissance. The first, when Guru Nanak awakened the Punjabis from their deep slumber of conventionalism, passivity and fatalism, coupled with a rigid formalism and caste stratification. The second came more recently, when the Singh Sabha provided a momentum to the spread of enlightenment among the Sikh community of the Punjab. It is in regard to the first moment of renaissance that the opinions diverge. The theory that views the rise of Sikhism 'favourably', styling it as an 'institutionalized expression of Hindu nationalism', attempts to show the Sikhs as the vanguard of the Hindus, and Sikhism as the embodiment of Sikh reaction against Islam. While expounding this thesis, Gokal Chand Narang gives credit to the founder of Sikhism by saying that "Nanak left the Hindus of the Punjab immensely better than he had found them."<sup>3</sup> Niharranjan Ray puts a more liberal construction on the theory that the Sikh faith arose to "meet the challenge of the growing Islamic ideology in India." To begin with Sikhism,

was "just a way of life, simple, pure, transparent, divested of all dross rituals, totems and taboos, fetishes and sham distinctions of caste." This was certainly, a 'negation of Hindusim at the popular level', though the commitment to absolute devotion to one and only one reality "also an acceptance of the metaphysical interpretation of the *Brahman* at a higher level."<sup>4</sup>

Another line of argument traces the impact of Islam on Sikhism but does not claim the latter to be an offshoot of Islam. It draws attention to several points of contact; for instance, the monotheistic faith, non-practice of idolatry and ritualism, similarity of the *jihad* and *dharam judh*, and the congregational mode of prayer. At best, the supporters of this theory, notably Arnold Tonybee, characterise Sikhism as a suynthesis of Hinduism and Islam. Khushwant Singh puts the case of hybridization in the metaphor; "Sikhism was born out of a wedlock between Hinduism and Islam."<sup>5</sup> Macleod's discussion of the subject also gives a like impression, but he is careful enough to 'state categorically' that he does not deny the originality of Guru Nanak's thought.<sup>6</sup> At any rate, the argument in favour of the synthesis theory has been best examined by Dr. Paul B. Courtright, who, as he says, is "trying to dispel the simplistic notion that Sikhism is a conscious syncretism or that it is primarily an attempt to reconcile Hinduism and Islam." He believes that the formation of Sikhism "was a protest against pride of worship, scripture, and caste. It was a protest against conventionalism, and not against Hinduism and Islam as such."<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Courtright's case deserves a fuller presentation. He sets out to examine the validity of categorising Sikhism in the way of syncretism, against the picture of Punjab torn by "confusion, the breakdown of social and political order, the conflict of armies, religious fanaticism, and ethnic transition" in Guru Nanak's period. Hinduism was retreating into orthodoxy and becoming more insistent upon ritual and the authority of the scriptures. Guru Nanak adopted the reformist response to the perversion and chaos of the times. It was out of the milieu of inter-religious contact of *Bhakti* and *Sufism* that Sikhism was born. "The main thrust of Guru Nanak's message was not theological and credal." His famous saying 'There is no Hindu, there is no Musalman', "simply means that the communal identities are secondary to the worship of the true God."

Thus Sikhism developed its own 'scriptural tradition' with Guru Nanak's writings at its centre. If there are affinities with Sufism in Guru Nanak's thought, these are the results of a process of interpenetration which had already been going on before his time in the Bhakti tradition and Sufism. Subsequently Sikhism developed institutions of its own. These "developments show Sikhism's greatest originality and uniqueness." The institution of the *guruship* secured religious authority for the Sikhs outside Hindu and Islamic sources of authority. The use of vernacular in the writings of the *Adi-Granth* "brought a separate identity to Sikhism and helped establish a new literary tradition outside Sanskrit."

Disagreeing with Khushwant Singh's 'intriguing' argument of an infant Punjabi nationalism, Courtright explains the formation of the *khalsa* in terms of new brotherhood of believers. In a defensive response to Muslim persecution, Sikhism sought its own identity as a religious and political community. "Its organizational structure is more secular than it is patterned after the organizations of the Bhakti or Sufi cults." Courtright is rightly of the opinion that, to do justice to the Sikh tradition, it is imperative to recognise 'the unique circumstances in the development of its identity as a genuinely new and original religious expression.' Guru Nanak need not be seen as a reconciler and a synthesizer. "He was a purifier of the popular religious expression of both traditions." Formation of Sikhism was an "attempt at simplification of religious worship and the concentration on the Name one God". "Consequently, to classify Sikhism as a syncretic religion will be a distortion."<sup>8</sup>

So much for the character of the Sikh movement. Needles to say that the foregoing assessment of the movement is broadly acceptable to the Sikh intellectual whose emotional make-up is tempered, as a matter of course, by affinities with Sikh culture.

### Foundations of Sikh Institutions

What is the true nature of Sikhism which, apart from its ethico-spiritual dimension, is admitted to be a 'social' movement? We have to look for the answer in several directions, meeting some of the difficulties involved in the process. "The major impediment in understanding the true nature of Sikhism so far has been the

desire to explain it as a historical phase of the Hindu religious thought of medieval India.”—This is the opinion of Sirdar Kapur Singh.<sup>9</sup> He proceeds to examine the nature of Hindu culture itself and locates its roots, firstly, in the hymns of Rig Veda with its recognition of social hierarchy, caste system and exclusive stress on ceremony and formal conformity of conduct. The other root is found in the reflections of the Upaniṣads, which recognise human equality in the spiritual sphere, and insist on the necessity of the inner culture and *sādhana*. “The Hinduism which was shaken to its very foundations by the Muslim impact was, in the five centuries preceding the rise of Guru Nanak, a body of customs and a body of ideas.” The birth of Guru Nanak coincided with one of the most critical periods of the history of the Hindu race. “The organism of Hindu society and Hindu culture had for the first time in its history, failed to absorb the shock of a foreign impact of Islam, and to assimilate it.” Guru Nanak set upon his “appointed task of laying down the foundations of a new society” insisting that a life lived in a social context and on an ethical plane is necessary for salvation. He placed his new society on a sound philosophic base. The content of salvation was not merely individual but collective and social. “These teachings of Guru Nanak entail fundamental and far-reaching social and political consequences, and the history of Punjab, henceforth inevitably becomes, the Sikh history.”<sup>10</sup>

Sirdar Kapur Singh’s assessment of the founder of the ‘historical upsurge and movement known to history as Sikhism’, reveals the Guru in a new perspective. “Guru Nanak was neither a *bhakta* in the historical sense of the word, nor an exponent of the Bhakti school of medieval India.” His approach was one of ‘transvaluation’ of the existing faiths and cults; he ushered in a new spiritual era as well as a social and political era for the mankind.

Most of the practices and institutions of the Sikhs are founded upon the teachings of Guru Nanak and his spiritual successors. The psychological discipline of *Sādhana* is the purely religious aspect of the scheme, distinct from morality and ritual. “Its primary interest is centred around the problem of the quality of living and the transformation and evolution of the human mind and experience.” Another principle of fundamental importance for the Sikh way of life is ‘Kirat’ related to the problem of creation

and possession of wealth. Here Sirdar Kapur Singh compared Guru Nanak's injunction with the Marxian theory of economic value. All material possessions acquired through dishonest means and exploitation of labour are not only sinful, but morally illegitimate and unjustified. The tenet of 'sharing' one's belongings with others deals with the problems of the distribution of wealth and organization of power. Earnings of an honest, creative labour are to be socially owned, since "no individual is spiritually complete unless he considers himself as a part of the society as a whole," that is, the community or Sangat, which is placed one step higher than the Guru himself.<sup>11</sup> This last injunction brings to fore the problem of social organization.

Mankind has experimented with several forms of social organization and philosophers have toyed with still greater number of theories, both utopian and practicable. The question is not 'why' ought one obey the social authority at all? For, "men do not choose to live in society, they are born into a society and into one of a particular structure. In rare instances they are in a position to exchange one form of society for another." If there is to be a society, there must be some form of social organization some set of institutions, some recognized machinery for taking decisions which will count as the decisions of the group as a whole. "The machinery need not be democratic, but it must exist. This is a logical necessity... The only question which arises is what form of social organization to have."<sup>12</sup> Should the organization be based upon some sort of divine revelation and religious authority, or should it grow out of a secular basis? The Western protestant reformation did not support the Church in matters concerned with the organization of society. Philosophers like Hobbes and Locke, Kant and Hegel, Bentham and Marx offered a variety of theories, like social contract and kindgom of ends, utilitraianism and historical determinism, apart from the anarchists who refuse to recognize the obligation to obey any political authority.

The rise and growth of Sikhism has been seen as a 'reaction to the monolithic, rigid and close society' of the sixteenth century. "It corroded the fossilized social base of the political authority in the Punjab. Starting as a reform movement, it became an organized well-knit, yet an open society during the Guru period."<sup>13</sup> Till the time of Guru Arjun, the Sikh movement continued as peaceful religio-social movement; thereafter it acquired the colour of a

political movement. A full, comprehensive and critical reconstruction of the development of Sikhism during the Guru period has been attempted by Indubhushan Banerjee who finds several features of 'exceptional interest' in the movement. From the organizational point of view the most important step taken by Guru Nanak was the nomination of Angad as his successor. This succession marked the first cleavage between the Hindus and the Sikhs.<sup>14</sup> Gokal Chand Narang appears to suggest that the founder of Sikhism approached the problem from the national point of view, though by the nature of things he had to restrict the immediate scope of his work to the spiritual and moral education of his people. Guru Arjan gave the Sikhs their scripture, which "served as a code of sacred as well as secular law."<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, the foundations not only of the Sikh institutions, but of the overall economic progress made by the Punjabi community as also of the relative freedom from meaningless taboos in the Punjab, are to be traced in the outlook and attitudes of the poet-philosophers of Guru Granth, in regard to matters of the spirit, society and state. The problem, in the end, revolves round the personality of the Gurus and Bhaktas who composed the inspired poetry of the Granth. The person of Guru Nanak, for instance, is not the ordinary, egocentric individual, in the sense of a natural biological category. The differentiation of his 'person' may perhaps be described best in terms employed by Nikolai Berdyaev. "The personality is a spiritual category," he says. "The personality is the direct expression of the impact of the spirit on man's physical and psychical nature. "The personality is above all an axiological category: it is the manifestation of an existential purpose". "It is sensitive to all the currents of social and cosmic life and open to a variety of experience, but it takes care not to lose its identity in society or in the cosmos." Personality supposes creative action and the 'conquest of self'. It is capable of both joy and suffering. The true personality is attained only through conflict and an ascension into the realm of spirit. "Man is everlastingly solitary beneath his disguise." But, from a metaphysical standpoint, "the personality is social because it feels the need of communicating with others." Personality concentrates in itself the whole 'mystery of Being, of creation.'<sup>16</sup> The characteristics of personality, revealed by Berdyaev's philosophic insight, belong in full measure to Guru Nanak and the rest of the authors of Guru Granth.

### The Protestant Spirit of Gurbani

*Gurbāni* may broadly be viewed as a critique of life. It touches all aspects of human life, solitary and individual, moral and social, sectarian and humanistic. It portrays man in the roles of householder, of thinker, of devotee; he may be a preacher and pedant, ruler and leader, *Gurmukh* and *Brahman-gyāni*. *Gurbāni* depicts man in a variety of social contexts and situations; its range is as wide as the whole span of human life, from infancy to death, from ego-centricity to God-realization, Man's follies and sins, his customs and policies, his predicament and alienation—nothing escapes the synoptic vision of the seers and sages of the *Adi-Granth*. In the course of all this description of human affairs, they have produced and bequeathed to us a literary treasure full of high social relevance. If ethico-spiritual is one major theme of the thought-content of *Gurbāni*, socio-cultural is the other. Both share a common objective, namely welfare of man.

Is the man of religion essentially a social creature, according to *Gurbāni*? In what consists the religious quest? One answer is that religion in its 'purest sense' is separated from its social and ethical content. "It is the *adhyātam vidyā* of the Upaniṣadic sages," says Kapur Singh. He recalls A. N. Whitehead's expression in regard to what he calls the loftiest conception of religion in the West.<sup>17</sup> In fact, "Whitehead's famous characterization of religion as 'what the individual does with his own solitariness' has been much quoted and much misunderstood". Professor John E. Smith's interpretation of the saying makes an important point. "Whitehead tells us that the statement was intended to deny the claim that religion is primarily a *social* fact. It is not that religion is unrelated to the social character of every reality, but rather that religion has to do with the person considered *in himself*. The formula expresses more than the vague sense that religion demands quiet and solitude." He adds: "Every person takes on a universal character in the sense that, having a worth in himself, he does not derive it from being a member of some special group."<sup>18</sup>

Hartshorne, who has applied some of the key-concepts in Whitehead's philosophy to theological studies, sharply criticizes those who rejoice in the aloofness of God. "The true God is instead the eternal sympathizer who is concerned for man and the struggle in which he is engaged". Hartshorne's argument



proceeds on these lines; "If God is unqualifiedly absolute and complete in himself, then it is difficult to understand how He can love and how He can care. As perfect in the simple sense, God can be immutable substance but not person." Then follows his bold stroke : "being perfect in the sense of excluding the imperfect", is "inferior to a perfection that includes both. In being internally related to the world, including man and his tragedy and evil along with his progress in self-realization, God surpasses himself in the sense of abstract, eternal, nonrelative perfection." Love, says Hartshorne, defined as social awareness, taken literally, is God.<sup>19</sup>

I have referred to the "solitary" character of the religious man and to the "social" nature of God, in two of the influential modern thinkers, in order to bring home the intent of *Gurbāni* on the themes of a loving and gracious super Being, and the essentially non-attached man of the world, completely in tune with the absolute Person. The God of spiritual devotees and the Gurus is the benevolent, indulgent, God, conceived on the pattern of man, sharing with him emotions that are human. The *Bhaktas* would not communicate with an incommunicable Deity, rapt in Himself, indifferent to the lot of his people, pleading ignorance of what goes on in the world below. They pray to Him, firmly convinced that He would listen; they offer Him their loving devotion in good faith, and are prepared to act according to his bidding.

The poet-philosophers of the *Adi-Granth* are essentially non-conformists; they adhere to free thinking and express their thoughts and sentiments without hindrance. One who is obliged to act in conformity with the established custom, sectarian practice or political authority, under any type of coercion, accepts for himself, a role in which he cannot act conscientiously. He is forced to lead an inauthentic life, with little scope for raising the voice of protest. However, the spirit of protest in the case of a poet-philosopher or *bhakta* takes on a form quite distinct from the forms it assumes in statesmen, political leaders and revolutionaries. The social protest in *Gurbāni* is singularly free from the spirit of violence, or ill-will against any kind of authority, or bad faith in general. In some cases, the tone is mild and gentle but in a few instances the protest is quite loud, vociferous and altogether convincing.

The Gurus and *Bhaktas* are not only poet-philosophers, they are profoundly religious and moral in their make-up. They legislate

not only for themselves, but also for their fellow-men, indeed for humanity. The poet of *Guru Granth* is not merely an individual, he is properly a 'person', assimilating in his personality somethings of the supra-personal. He is in a position to speak for other and to others, with a unique sense of responsibility. To qualify for this role, he acquires that 'fulness of life' which integrates all his faculties. "In religious reality the person has concentrated himself into a whole, for it is only as a unified being that he is able to live religiously."<sup>20</sup> This observation of Buber is fortified by Father Lotz, for whom philosophy is characterized by a loving knowledge, and religion by a knowing love.

The man of religion, with the poetic sensibility and philosophic vision of the order of *Gurubāni*, would address himself to the problem of man and society from a perspective marked with balance and profundity. In their poetic compositions, the authors of the *Adi-Granth* have occasionally turned attention to the social challenges of their times and tackled them in a protestant spirit. In their criticism of life and its flaws, they speak the discontent of their age. In their poetic protest, they voice the feelings and urges of the lowly and down-trodden, the exploited and oppressed sections, indeed the suffering humanity.

The whole social outlook of the Sikhs is shaped by the values and virtues enunciated in the *Adi-Granth*, even though the customs and rituals have come to be established under the impact of tradition that is older than the advent of Sikh ideology. Certain local factors have also influenced the forms of cultural observances of the community in the different regions of the Punjab and elsewhere. But the greatest single factor common to all the various ritualistic patterns, is the allegiance to the teaching enshrined in the *Granth*, in regard to the emanation of all values of life from the one supreme Creator-person, and in regard to the melioristic orientation of the Sikh view of life with its motto of *sarbatt dā Bhalā* (i. e. welfare of all mankind).

Department of Philosophy  
Punjabi University, Patiala.

WAZIR SINGH

#### NOTES

1. Niharranjan Ray (Ed.), *Sikhism And Indian Society*, Simla, 1967, p. 9.

2. Dr. Fauja Singh ( Ed. ), *Historians and Historiography of the Sikhs*, New Delhi, 1978, p. 260 ( Dr. J. S. Grewal's comments ).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 267-285 ( Dr. Fauja Singh's comments. )
4. Dr. N. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 7
5. *A History of the Sikhs*, Vol. I, p. 17
6. Cf Dr. Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 308
7. Paul B. Courtright, *Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh*, ed. Harbans Singh and N. G. Barriu, Patiala, 1976, p. 424.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 418-431.
9. Sirdar Kapur Singh, Guru Nanak Commemorative Lectures—1975, in *Nanak Prakash Patrika*, Patiala, June 1977, p. 9
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-32
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-37
12. A. J. Ayer, Philosophy & Politics, in *Metaphysics and Common Sense*, 1973
13. *Historiography*, *op. cit.*, p. 212. ( Reference is to Muhammed Latif by Dr. S. K. Bajaj. )
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 243-248 ( comments by A. C. Bangerjee ).
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 269-271 ( Dr. Fauja Singh's Comments )
16. N. Berdyaev, *Solitude and Society*. ( Selection reprinted in *A modern Introduction to Metaphysics*, ed. D. A. Drennen, 1968 ).
17. Sirdar Kapur Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 11
18. John E. Smith, in *Religion* ( Princeton Studies ) ed. Paul Ramsey et. al. 1965
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 444-445
20. Martin Buber, in Drennen ( Ed. ), *op. cit.*,

