

Interfaith Dialogue: A Perspective from Sikhism

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Abstract

Interfaith dialogue is perceived as the best mechanism to build mutual understanding and respect among people of different faiths. Although the Interfaith movement can be traced back to the late 19th century, it gained an unprecedented prominence in the years following 9/11. In Western democracies, interfaith initiatives have been enlisted as part of wider multiculturalist responses to the threat of radicalization.

Despite, interfaith dialogue's recent emergence on the world stage, it has been an active component of ancient Indian religious traditions. Sikh Gurus' compositions, and their way of life, reveal that they were among the pioneers of interfaith dialogue in their time. They remained in continuous dialogue with other faiths throughout their lifetimes. For them, the real purpose of the interchange was to uphold the true faith in the Almighty Creator and to make it relevant to contemporary society. With this intent, they approached the fellow Muslims and Hindus and tried hard to rejuvenate the real spirit of their respective religions.

Guru Nanak's travels to various religious centers of diverse faiths; his life long association with Bhai Mardana (a Muslim); Guru Arjan Dev's inclusion of the verses of the saint-poets of varied faiths, in Sri Guru Granth Sahib; Guru Hargobind's construction of Mosque for Muslims; and Guru Teg Bahadur's laying down of his life for the cause of Hinduism, are just a few examples of the initiatives taken by the Sikh Gurus in this field. Herein, an attempt is made to describe the Sikh doctrines that encourage interfaith dialogue. Besides, incidents from the Sikh history, confirming the outstanding contributions made in this field, are enlisted. The practices in vogue currently among the Sikhs towards this cause, are also recounted.

Introduction

Even in the contemporary world, religion has a highly influential role in the lives of people. With the widely prevalent diversity of religions, ethnicities, and cultures among humans, they can live together by sharing virtuous values. It can be achieved only through dialogue. The word dialogue¹ is derived from the Greek “dia-logos” (literally “a word in-between”) which has the general meaning of “conversation” between two or more parties. At the heart of dialogue is inter-religious dialogue, because religion is the most comprehensive of all the human “disciplines”. The “public” launching of modern interreligious dialogue can be dated back to the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, USA. Well-known religious leaders: Hindu, Theravada Buddhist, Zen Buddhist, Confucian, Christians, Jews, and Muslims participated in the initiative. The term 'Interfaith Dialogue' refers to the positive and

cooperative interaction between people of different religions, faiths, or spiritual beliefs, to promote understanding between different religions to increase acceptance and tolerance².

Along with politics, poverty, and culture, religion is often cited as a source of conflict throughout the world. In contemporary times, inter-community conflicts are due to the parochial and shallow understanding of faith or faiths. The dialogue aims to identify the differences and similarities among people so they can learn and understand each other. It helps to build good relations and mutual trust without sacrificing their life principles. Thus, interfaith dialogue can break down walls of division and the barriers that stand at the center of numerous wars. It is decidedly essential to sustain the cohesion and harmony in a multicultural society.

Interfaith dialogue is not just words or talk. It includes human interaction and relationships. It can take place between individuals and communities and on many levels. For example, between neighbors, in schools, and in places of work: it can take place in both formal and informal settings. Each religious tradition holds a variety of moral and spiritual resources that can facilitate rebuilding trust, transform perceptions, and inspire a sense of engagement and commitment to the peacebuilding process. The last 127 years reveal a growing interfaith movement worldwide promoting peaceful and productive interactions between religious traditions. Interfaith dialogue, in fact, is a vital necessity, on which in large measure the future depends.

The Sikh Perspective

Sikh Gurus were the men preoccupied with Truth and the pursuit of Truth. "Truth is God" is the religious principle that ruled their life. The central concept of Sikh's philosophy is "Naam, Daan, Ishnaan". This phrase translates³ to mean "*Mindful Awareness of Divine Presence, Live out the Culture of Altruism when Seeking Divine Benevolence, Implement Ethics of Good Deeds that Cleanse Body and Mind*". Sikh Gurus believed that Truth is a goal that must be pursued persistently and continuously. In Sikh Guru's era, the world of 1469-1708, there were numerous religions or religious sects (e. g. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga, Siddhas, etc.) competing with one another, each claiming to have a monopoly on Truth. But for Sikh Gurus, a sure sign that one has lost touch with Truth is the claim that one's group has an exclusive right on it.

According to the ancient religious wisdom of India, Truth is a many-sided and multi-dimensional affair. It deserves to be viewed from many different perspectives; anyone's perception of Truth is limited and partial. Sikh Gurus believed that no person, group, or religion could claim to have full or total knowledge of Truth (or God). Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, reported the plurality of religions, present in his time, in his verses as enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib⁴⁻⁶ (SGGS).

ਕੋਈ ਬੋਲੈ ਰਾਮ ਰਾਮ ਕੋਈ ਖੁਦਾਇ ॥ ਕੋਈ ਸੇਵੈ ਗੁਸਈਆ ਕੋਈ ਅਲਾਹਿ ॥..... ਕੋਈ ਨਾਵੈ ਤੀਰਥਿ ਕੋਈ ਰਜ
ਜਾਇ ॥ ਕੋਈ ਕਰੈ ਪੂਜਾ ਕੋਈ ਸਿਰੁ ਨਿਵਾਇ ॥ ਕੋਈ ਪੜੈ ਬੋਦ ਕੋਈ ਕਤੇਬ ॥ਕੋਈ ਓਢੈ ਨੀਲ ਕੋਈ ਸੁਪੇਦ ॥ ਕੋਈ
ਕਰੈ ਤੁਰਕੁ ਕੋਈ ਕਰੈ ਹਿੰਦੂ ॥ ਕੋਈ ਬਾਛੈ ਭਿਸਤੁ ਕੋਈ ਸੁਰਗਿੰਦੂ ॥

Koī bolai rām rām koī khudāe. Koī sevai gusāīā koī alāhi..... Koī nāvai tīrath koī haj jāe. Koī karai pūjā koī sir nivāe. Koī paṛai bed koī kaṭeb. Koī odhai nīl koī supeḍ. Koī kahai tūrak koī kahai hindū. Koī bāchhai bhisat koī surgindū.

Some call Him, 'Raam, Raam', and some call Him, 'Khudaa-i'. Some serve Him as 'Gusain', others as 'Allah'.....Some bathe at sacred shrines of pilgrimage, and some make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Some perform devotional worship services, and some bow their heads in prayer. Some read the Vedas, and some the Koran. Some wear blue robes, and some wear white. Some call themselves Muslim, and some call themselves Hindu. Some yearn for paradise, and others long for heaven. (SGGS, M. 5, P. 885)

Sikh Gurus believed that each religion is divinely inspired because each represents one manifestation of Truth. All religions are equal, though not "the same" – as each provides a unique path to Truth. Religions are not Truth themselves, but they direct us toward Truth. Truth is ultimate, and it is a reality larger than any religion. Sikh Gurus' practical approach to Truth is evident in the way they tackled interfaith dialogue. They did not dialogue with religions or with religious systems; they dialogued rather, with people who were struggling to live out their religious values.

The primary doctrines of Sikhism emphasize interfaith understanding, mutual respect, and harmony. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, proclaimed that the sharing of views and ideas should be a continuous process throughout one's life.

ਜਬ ਲਗੁ ਦੁਨੀਆ ਰਹੀਐ ਨਾਨਕ ਕਿਛੁ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਕਿਛੁ ਕਹੀਐ ॥

Jab lag dūnīā rahīai Nānak kichh sunīai kichh kahīai.

As long as we are in this world, O Nanak, we must listen to others, as well as express ourselves to others. (SGGS, M. 1, P. 661)

The Sikh Gurus possessed a natural openness to other religions. They emphasized tolerance and particularly religious tolerance. To be a Sikh, one must respect all other religions. In this context, one of the Saint-poets of SGGS⁴⁻⁶, Bhagat Kabir, articulates:

ਬੇਦ ਕਤੇਬ ਕਹਹੁ ਮਤ ਝੁਠੇ ਝੁਠਾ ਜੇ ਨ ਬਿਚਾਰੈ ॥

Bed kaṭeb kahhu maṭ jhūthe jhūthā jo na bichārai.

Do not say that the Vedas, the Bible, and the Koran are false. Those who do not contemplate them are false. (SGGS, Bhagat Kabir, P. 1350)

Sri Guru Granth Sahib teaches its followers to love all creation as God's manifestation. Acceptance of all faiths and interfaith tolerance and understanding are cardinal to the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The message of Universal fraternity and equality is emphasized in Gurbani as;

ਸਭ ਏਕ ਦ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਸਮਤੁ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖੈ ਸਭੁ ਆਤਮ ਰਾਮੁ ਪਛਾਨ ਜੀਉ ॥

Sabh ek dṛisat samat kar dekhai sabh ātam rām pachhān jīo.

Look upon all with equality and recognize the Supreme Soul (God), pervading among all.
(SGGS, M. 1, P. 446)

During recent times, many scholars⁷⁻²⁸ have reported on the initiatives undertaken and contributions made by Sikh Gurus and their followers in the field of interfaith dialogue. Kazi Nurul Islam⁷ reports that "Sikhism is a religion which was founded on the principles of interfaith understanding, mutual respect, and harmony. From the very beginning, the leaders and the followers of this tradition preached the principles of interfaith respect, dialogue, and understanding. To be a Sikh it is mandatory that he/she must respect and accept all other religions of the world and at the same time must protect, guard, and allow the free practice of the customs and rituals of others. The Guru Granth Sahib teaches its followers to love all creation as God's own manifestation. Acceptance of all faiths and interfaith tolerance and understanding are basic to the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib."

Craig Philips enunciates⁸: "One of the beauties of Sikhism, and indeed a feature relevant for interfaith work, is that it holds a clear idea of "the religious other," something I find in common with my own Islamic faith. Just as the Qur'an speaks of Jews, Christians, Sabians, and others, the sayings of Guru Nanak and passages of the Guru Granth Sahib speak of, and to, Muslims and Hindus. From these passages, it is clear that the society was well acquainted with the religious other, probably much more so than we are with our "religious others" today. Sikh scripture encourages Hindus and Muslims to be the best that they can be."

Devinder Singh Chahal^{9,12} has described that interfaith dialogue definitely leads humanity to understand world religions in their real perspective and enabling their followers to resolve world problems amicably. Hardev Singh Virk^{10,25-26} has reported that Guru Nanak's aim of interfaith dialogue was neither subjugation, nor domination, nor conversion, nor degradation of other traditions but to make them visualize the kernel of truth and implement it in their life for spiritual transformation. Nirmal Singh²⁷ articulates "Some authors have termed SGGS as an interfaith scripture. It is respectful of all faiths and their sacred texts."

Guru Amrit Kaur Khalsa²⁸ expresses "I believe that Sikhs are uniquely positioned to play a role in interfaith efforts, because of our rich interfaith history, our strong interfaith ethic, our love of *Seva* (service) and our commitment to manifesting the common good through the concept of *Sarbat da Bhala* – blessings and prosperity for all." Some main contributions of the proponents and followers of Sikhism, in this field, are outlined hereafter.

Four Levels of Interfaith Dialogue

An eminent theologian M. Thomas Thangaraj has reported²⁹ the four levels of Interreligious or Interfaith dialogue as (i) The Dialogue of Life (ii) The Dialogue of Action (iii) The Dialogue of Theological Exchange and (iv) The Dialogue of Religious Experience. It is interesting to note that since the inception of Sikhism, the Sikh Gurus and the Sikhs have been actively participating and contributing at all the four levels of interfaith dialogue, as is evident from the following discussion.

1. The Dialogue of Life

According to Thomas Thangaraj, the dialogue of life denotes²⁹ the state where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joy and sorrows, their human problems, and preoccupations. Sikh Gurus broke social ranks based on faith, caste, gender, or race. They envisioned God as a formless force running through the cosmos and beyond. The Sikh doctrines urge the adherents to follow the concept of fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individuals and the unity of the nations. Guru Nanak proclaimed;

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਏਕ ਦ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖਹੁ ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਸਮੇਈ ਜੀਉ ॥

Gurmukh ek darisat kar dekhu ghat ghat jot samoī jīo.

As *Gurmukh* (God-conscious truthful being), look upon all with equality; in each and every heart, the Divine Light is contained. (SGGS, M. 1, P. 599)

Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, articulated:

ਨਾ ਕੇ ਬੈਰੀ ਨਹੀ ਬਿਗਾਨਾ ਸਗਲ ਸੰਗਿ ਹਮ ਕਉ ਬਨਿ ਆਈ ॥

Nā ko bairī nahī bigānā sagal sang ham ka'o ban āī.

None is my enemy; no one is a stranger to me. I get along with everyone. (SGGS, M. 5, P. 1299)

Guru Nanak shared this vision with humanity. He took to the road selflessly. Accompanied by Mardana³⁰, a Muslim, the Guru traveled from Punjab to Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Baghdad and Mecca in the West. Prevalent Hindu thoughts, at his time, advocated that no dialogue was possible with Abrahamic religions. Guru Nanak turned that orthodox thinking inside out back then. Guru Nanak had very cordial relations with many Muslims, e. g. Rai Bular Bhatti³¹, of Talwandi, and Bhai Mardana, etc., throughout his life. Guru Nanak, and Guru Amardas, prohibited the *sati* (a traditional Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre) and *purdah* (a religious and social practice of female seclusion prevalent among some Muslim and Hindu communities) practices involving women. Guru Amardas³², in line with Guru Nanak's egalitarian principles, made Emperor Akbar sitting on the floor with the commoners to partake in the *Langar* (the community meals). Guru Arjan chose a Muslim saint, Hazrat Mian Mir³³ of Lahore, to lay the foundation of Sri Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple), Amritsar. Guru Har Rai had very good relations³⁴ with Muslim Prince Dara Shikoh. Guru Gobind Singh had many Hindus and Muslims in his service and also as his ally, e. g. Bhai Nand Lal³⁵, Pir Budhu Shah³⁶, Gani Khan³⁷, and Nabi Khan³⁷, Nihang Khan³⁸ of Ropar, etc. He had also enlisted 500 Pathan soliders³⁹ in his service on the recommendation of Sayeed Budhu Shah³⁶, a celebrated saint of Sadhaura, District Ambala, Punjab.

2. The Dialogue of Action

The dialogue of action, denotes²⁹ the state in which persons of all religions collaborate, for the integral development and liberation of people. They take up various activities for the well-being of humanity such as (i) to safeguard the rights of individuals (ii) to promote people's aspirations for happiness (iii) to protect nature (iv) to show solidarity with the victims of injustice and (v) to struggle for peace and justice.

According to Sikhism, God is not a tribal patriarch but the benign and benevolent God of the entire Creation, notwithstanding the climes, terrains, and geographical or political divisions. The hymns of SGGS include the prayer for the well being of all creatures:

ਸਭੇ ਜੀਅ ਸਮਾਲਿ ਅਪਣੀ ਮਿਹਰ ਕਰੁ ॥

Sabhe jī'a samāl apṇī mihar kar.

By Thy grace, oh God, save and sustain all creation. (SGGS, M. 5, P. 1251)

The daily *ardas* (prayer) of the Sikhs is concluded with the couplet⁴⁰;

ਨਾਨਕ ਨਾਮ ਚੜ੍ਹਦੀ ਕਲਾ ॥ ਤੇਰੇ ਭਾਣੇ ਸਰਬੱਤ ਦਾ ਭਲਾ ॥

Nanak Naam Chardhikala, terye bhanye Sarbat da Bhala.

Nanak implore for love of God (which provides well being and bliss), Lord! with your mercy, let everyone prosper. (Sikh Ardas)

The history of the Sikhs reports a remarkable consistency in the pursuit of this ideal. It describes a consistent struggle, on their part, in defense of the right to free worship, for peoples of all faiths. Guru ki Maseet⁴¹ is a historical mosque that was constructed by Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Guru, at the request of local Muslims of Sri Hargobindpur. Situated in Sri Hargobindpur town on the banks of River Beas, it is recognized, as a historical site, by UNESCO. Similarly, Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, laid down his life for the protection of the right of Hindus to freely practice their religion without interference or hindrance.

Inspired by the Sikhi ideology, particularly – "Sarbat da Bhalla" (well-being for all), and to reach out to those in need, S. Ravinder (Ravi) Singh founded Khalsa Aid International⁴², in 1999, on the occasion of the 300th birth anniversary of the Khalsa. At present, Khalsa Aid International, a UK-based humanitarian relief charity, provides support around the world to the victims of natural and man-made disasters such as floods, earthquakes, famine, and war, regardless of race, religion, borders.

The Sikh doctrines exhort the adherents to earn their livelihood by honest means and share their earning with others. It emphasizes that this is the path of righteousness, and, in this way, one can make an outstanding contribution to encourage an environment of peaceful co-existence among other members of the society.

ਘਾਲਿ ਖਾਇ ਕਿਛੁ ਹਥਹੁ ਦੇਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਰਾਹੁ ਪਛਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਇ ॥

Ghāl khā'e kichh hathahu de'e. Nānak rāhu pachhāṇeh se'e.

He, who earns his living by honest means and shares his earnings with others, has discovered the path of righteousness, says Nanak. (SGGS, M. 1, P. 1245)

SGGS urges Sikhs to share their virtues, too, with others for the benefit of all.

ਜੇ ਗੁਣ ਹੋਵਨਿਹ ਸਾਜਨਾ ਮਿਲਿ ਸਾਝ ਕਰੀਜੈ ॥

Je guṇ hovniḥ sājnā mil sājh karījai.

If my friend! one has virtues, one must share them with others. (SGGS, M. 1, P. 765)

Sikhs are encouraged to maintain good relations with all, despite the difference of caste, color, or creed.

ਸਭੁ ਕੇ ਮੀਤੁ ਹਮ ਆਪਨ ਕੀਨਾ ਹਮ ਸਭਨਾ ਕੇ ਸਾਜਨ ॥

Sabh ko mīt ham āpan kīnā ham sabhnā ke sājan.

I am a friend to all; I am everyone's friend. (SGGS, M. 5, P. 671)

Several Sikh organizations are engaged in the dialogue of action for the betterment of the contemporary world and to encourage peace in world society. A few examples may suffice. The Sikh Coalition⁴³, U. S. A., is an active and enthusiastic participant in interfaith dialogue. Its goals are not only to learn about other faith traditions and create Sikh awareness but also to find common ground to prevent and end hate crime, school bullying, employment discrimination, and racial profiling. It also devotes its activities towards the realization of civil and human rights for all people. World Sikh Organization⁴⁴ of Canada, another non-profit organization, is also actively dedicated to foster understanding and goodwill towards all nations, creeds, persuasions, and faiths, in Canada since 1984. United Sikhs⁴⁵ is yet another U. N. affiliated, international non-profit, non-governmental, humanitarian relief, human development, and advocacy organization aimed at empowering those in need, especially disadvantaged and minority communities across the world. United Sikhs, with its chapters in America, Asia, and Europe, is pursuing projects for the spiritual, social, and economic empowerment of underprivileged and minority communities since 1999.

3. The Dialogue of Theological Exchange

The dialogue of theological exchange²⁹ happens when specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. During one of his travels, Guru Nanak visited⁴⁶ Mecca, the holiest place of the Muslims. Muslim religious leaders in Mecca, asked him, what still is a prime question locking civilizations in perpetual conflict: "Which of them is greater or truer - the Muslims (Abrahamic) or the Hindus (Indian/non-Abrahamic)?" Guru Nanak's response to them, in the hub of Islam, was radically egalitarian. "None," he replied. "Both sulk, caught as they are in meaningless rituals and not in meaningful deeds."

ਪੁਛਨਿ ਫੇਲਿ ਕਿਤਾਬ ਨੇ ਹਿੰਦੂ ਵਡਾ ਕਿ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਨੇਈ। ਬਾਬਾ ਆਖੇ ਹਾਜੀਆ, ਸੁਭਿ ਅਮਲਾ ਬਾਝਹੁ ਦੇਨੇ ਰੋਈ।

Puchhan phol Kitaab No Hindoo Vadaa Ki Musalamaanoe / Baabaa Aakhay Haajeeaa Subh Amalaan Baajhahu Dono Roe /

They asked Baba Nanak to open his book and let them know whether Hindu is virtuous or the Muslim. Baba replied to the pilgrim Hajis, that, without good deeds, both will be lost. (Varaan, Bhai Gurdas, Var 1, Pauri 33, P. 3-4)

He urged his audience to rise above conventional beliefs and follow the true religion of Universal humanism, which unites the human race as one family. For example, he explained the true meaning of the five prayers and what is required to become a true Muslim.

ਪੰਜਿ ਨਿਵਾਜਾ ਵਖਤ ਪੰਜਿ ਪੰਜਾ ਪੰਜੇ ਨਾਉ ॥ਪਹਿਲਾ ਸਚੁ ਹਲਾਲ ਦੁਇ ਤੀਜਾ ਖੈਰ ਖੁਦਾਇ ॥ ਚਉਥੀ ਨੀਅਤਿ
ਰਾਸਿ ਮਨੁ ਪੰਜਵੀ ਸਿਫਤਿ ਸਨਾਇ ॥ਕਰਣੀ ਕਲਮਾ ਆਖਿ ਕੈ ਤਾ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣੁ ਸਦਾਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਜੇਤੇ ਕੂੜਿਆਰ
ਕੂੜੈ ਕੂੜੀ ਪਾਇ ॥

Panj nivājā vakḥaṭ panj panjā panje nā°o. Pahilā sach halāl du°e tījā khair khudā°e. Cha°uthī nī°aṭ rās man panjvī sifaṭ sanā°e. Karṇī kalmā ākh kai tā musalmāṇ sadā°e. Nānak jeṭe kūrī°ār kūrhai kūrī pā°e.

The five prayers for the five times of day have five different names. Make truthfulness the first prayer, honest living the second one, the practice of charity the third one, cleansing the mind of evil thoughts the fourth one, and contemplation on God's excellence the fifth one. And let good deeds become your kalma, the foundation of your faith. If a person practices the above, only then he/she is a true Muslim. Nanak says that otherwise practicing hypocrisy, one becomes false through and through. (SGGS, M. 1, P. 141)

Guru Nanak laid immense stress on virtuous conduct in worldly affairs. He emphasized on truthful living. In his hymns, he proclaimed;

ਸਚਹੁ ਓਰੈ ਸਭੁ ਕੇ ਉਪਰਿ ਸਚੁ ਆਚਾਰੁ ॥

Sachahu orai sabḥ ko upar sach āchār.

Truth is higher than everything, but higher still is truthful living. (SGGS, M. 1, P. 62)

During his interaction with a Hindu priest, Guru Nanak articulated:

ਸਾਲ ਗ੍ਰਾਮ ਬਿਪ ਪੂਜਿ ਮਨਾਵਹੁ ਸੁਕ੍ਰਿਤੁ ਤੁਲਸੀ ਮਾਲਾ ॥ ਰਾਮ ਨਾਮੁ ਜਪਿ ਬੇੜਾ ਬਾਧਹੁ ਦਇਆ ਕਰਹੁ
ਦਇਆਲਾ ॥

Sāl garām bip pūj manāvahu sukriṭ tulsī mālā. Rām nām jap beṛā bāṇḍḥahu da°i°ā karahu da°i°ālā.

O, Brahman! why do you worship a salgram (stone idol)? Make honest work your rosary of Tulsi (an aromatic plant, Ocimum Sanctum, revered by Hindus), Make contemplation

on God the boat to take you across the ocean of the corrupting influence of the world. Pray for mercy to the Merciful one. (SGGS, M.1, P. 1170)

Guru Nanak's interaction with Yogis, Muslim Judge, and Hindu priest, reveals that he urged them to promote universal humanistic values.

ਸੇ ਜੇਗੀ ਜੇ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਪਛਾਣੈ ॥ ਗੁਰ ਪਰਸਾਦੀ ਏਕੇ ਜਾਣੈ ॥ ਕਾਜੀ ਸੇ ਜੇ ਉਲਟੀ ਕਰੈ ॥ ਗੁਰ ਪਰਸਾਦੀ ਜੀਵਤੁ ਮਰੈ ॥
ਸੇ ਬ੍ਰਾਹਮਣੁ ਜੇ ਬ੍ਰਾਹਮੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੈ ॥ ਆਪਿ ਤਰੈ ਸਗਲੇ ਕੁਲ ਤਾਰੈ ॥

So jogī jo jugat pachhāṇai. Gur parsādī eko jāṇai. Kājī so jo ultī karai. Gur parsādī jīvaṭ marai. So barāhman jo barahm bīchārai. Āp tarai sagle kul tārai.

A *yogi* is that, who recognizes the right way (Truth) and understands God through enlightenment. A *qazi* (Muslim Judge) is the one who remains unaffected by the corrupting worldly temptations and carries out justice in the light of Truth. A Brahman is the one who contemplates on the excellences of God. Such a Brahman enlightens himself and all his kin. (SGGS, M. 1, P. 662)

The Sikh Gurus exemplified the best in Sikhism and felt at home with all religions. They did not merely respect the other religion, but also included writings of Muslim Sufi saints and Hindu devotees in the holy Sri Guru Granth Sahib⁴⁷ - the sacred scripture of the Sikhs. The compositions included in it are not only of the six Sikh Gurus but of many other prominent medieval saints and mystics (Jaidev, Namdev, Trilochan, Parmanand, Sadna, Ramanand, Kabir, Pipa, Beni, Dhanna, Sain, Farid, Surdas, Bhikhan, and Ravidas, etc.), belonging to diverse social, religious and cultural traditions. Through this compilation the Sikh Gurus, exhorted the devotees of Islam, Christianity and all the four categories (*varnas*) of Hindus, that despite the adherence to their respective religions, they must lead a virtuous life of a God-conscious truthful being (Gurmukh);

ਕੁਰਾਣੁ ਕਤੇਬ ਦਿਲ ਮਾਹਿ ਕਮਾਹੀ ॥ ਦਸ ਅਉਰਾਤ ਰਖਹੁ ਬਦ ਰਾਹੀ ॥

Kurāṇ kateb dil māhi kamāhī. Das aʼurāt rakḥahu bad rāhī.

Practice within your heart the teachings of the Koran and the Bible; restrain the ten sensory organs from straying into evil. (SGGS, M. 5, P. 1083)

ਬੇਦ ਕਤੇਬ ਸਿਮ੍ਰਿਤਿ ਸਭਿ ਸਾਸਤ ਇਨ੍ਹੁ ਪੜਿਆ ਮੁਕਤਿ ਨ ਹੋਈ ॥ ਏਕੁ ਅਖਰੁ ਜੇ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਜਾਪੈ ਤਿਸ ਕੀ ਨਿਰਮਲ ਸੋਈ ॥ ਖੜ੍ਹੀ ਬ੍ਰਾਹਮਣ ਸੂਦ ਵੈਸ ਉਪਦੇਸੁ ਚਹੁ ਵਰਨਾ ਕਉ ਸਾਝਾ ॥ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਜਪੈ ਉਧਰੈ ਸੇ ਕਲਿ ਮਹਿ ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਨਾਨਕ ਮਾਝਾ ॥

Bed kateb simriti sabḥi sāsat inḥ pariṁā mukaṭ na hoī. Ēk akḥar jo gurmukḥ jāpai tis kī nirmal soī. Khatrī barāhman sūd vais updes chahu varnā kaʼo sājhā. Gurmukḥ nām japai udḥrai so kal mēh gḥat gḥat Nānak mājhā.

The mere reading of the holy books (e. g. Vedas, the Bible, the Simritees and the Shastras, etc.) cannot bring salvation. One who, as a God-conscious truthful being

(*Gurmukh*), contemplate on the love of God, leads a virtuous life. This teaching is common to the people of all the four categories (*varnas*) i. e. *Kshatriyas*, *Brahmins*, *Sudras*, and *Vaisyas*. A person is released from the ill-effects of worldly passions if, as a *Gurmukh*, he/she imbibes the love of God (*Naam*) in one's life. Nanak says that in the present age (*Kali Yuga*), God is permeating the hearts of every being. (SGGS, M. 5, P. 447-48)

The *Sidh Gohst* (Dialogue with the Sages), as enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib⁴⁻⁶ (P. 938-946), is a unique example of interfaith dialogue. It recounts a meeting of Guru Nanak with a group of Hindu ascetics (*siddhs*) who had renounced the world and were living in the caves of the Himalayas. They believed that mental and physical exercises were necessary for acquiring magical powers (known as *siddhis*) that would lead to the attainment of salvation. In this dialogue, Guru Nanak repudiates the very idea of renunciation, as generally understood, portraying the acts of going to a forest and abandoning the needs of the body as mere stunts. In a highly convincing manner, he opines that the true renunciation lies in self-less love towards God, which alone has the power to free us from the shackles of the material world.

4. The Dialogue of Religious Experience

According to Thomas Thangaraj, the dialogue of religious experience denotes²⁹ the state, where persons, rooted in their religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance about prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute Truth.

Sikhs believe that there is one and only one Eternal Truth or God. To fulfill our lives and rightly flourish, we need to connect to God, who is the epitome of all virtues. God loves humans and reaches out to all through Grace (*Gurprasad*) or the True Guru. By eradicating *haumai* (ego or 'me-ness'), a person can turn from being a *manmukh* (ego-centric) to a *Gurmukh* (God-conscious Truthful being). Guru Arjan Dev asserts;

ਘਰਿ ਬਾਹਰਿ ਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਸਭਨੀ ਥਾਈ ॥

Ghar bāhar parabḥ sabḥnī thā=ī.

Inwardly and outwardly, God is everywhere. (SGGS, M. 5, P.1340)

As God reaches out to all humans, everyone is equal and religious identity is meaningless. Advocating the parenthood of God, Sikhism urges its adherents to treat everyone equally. Guru Arjan affirms such a viewpoint as;

ਏਕੁ ਪਿਤਾ ਏਕਸ ਕੇ ਹਮ ਬਾਰਿਕ..... ॥

Ēk piṭā ekas ke ham bārik.....

The One God is our father; we are the children of the One God. (SGGS, M. 5, P. 611)

An exemplar for this, from Sikh history, is Bhai Kanhaiya⁴⁸, who was a disciple of Guru Tegh Bahadur and was requested to establish the Sevapanthi order of the Sikhs by Guru Gobind

Singh. He was known for pouring water for all the wounded soldiers of the battlefield, no matter whether they were Sikhs or fighting against the Sikhs (whether Muslims or Hindus).

Religions at best can point the way to God, but from the Sikh perspective, this cannot be confused with God. *Naam Japna* (mindfulness of God's presence) is opening oneself to the way of God. In the Sikh worldview, what counts is how people live, not what they believe. Distinctive features of Sikhi include the equality of women and men, rejection of priesthood, belief in one and only one Unborn God (as in Judaism and Islam) combined with a belief in rebirth, samsara, the Void and the Middle Way (as in Buddhism).

As Sikhs believe that the world is to be continually improved, so the Sikh ideal is a saint-soldier, a saint allowing the love of God to shine through them and a soldier connecting with others to reduce darkness (of evil forces/passions) in the world. As a community, Sikhs have championed progressive social, political, and economic change in India and around the world, due to the teachings on equality, democratic decision-making (the Khalsa⁴⁹ institution), the dignity of labor, and the importance of sharing and social justice.

Sikhi began with the teachings of Guru Nanak, which were composed, in the context of but distinguished from, Hinduism and Islam of his day. An example of it is that he names Azrael as the angel of death. Though it is a name found in the Book of Tobit, yet Azrael is a significant personality, both in the Old Testament and the Qur'an too. At the same time, Guru Nanak talks about Yama, a god of death mentioned in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures.

Though Sikhs regard their ten Gurus as the exemplar for everything spiritual, yet some Sikhs, too, act as role models to them in specific ways. Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred Sikh scripture encourages the Sikhs to do selfless service to effect the maximum social benefit and to meet together to inspire each other. Some outstanding examples, who followed/follow this guidance are Bhagat Puran Singh⁵⁰, the founder of All India Pingalwara Charitable Society, Amritsar, Sant Balbir Singh Seechawal⁵¹, the Eco-Baba, and Ravinder (Ravi) Singh⁵², the founder of Khalsa Aid.

In terms of society Sikhs are taught that,

ਨਾ ਕੇ ਮੇਰਾ ਦੁਸਮਨੁ ਰਹਿਆ ਨਾ ਹਮ ਕਿਸ ਕੇ ਬੈਰਾਈ ॥

Nā ko merā dushman rahiā nā ham kis ke bairāī.

No one is my enemy, and I am no one's enemy. (SGGS, M. 5, P. 671)

Sikhs believe that God is not limited to one person, religion, or language. Therefore, there should not be boundaries as we are all part of one humanity – there are no outsiders. It is visible in the Langar (community kitchen). Anyone belonging to any religion, ethnic background, social class or gender, is welcome to eat the same food as everyone else for free.

Guru Tegh Bahadur⁵³, the ninth Sikh Guru, led a non-violent political campaign, against the tyranny of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. He sacrificed his life to protect three fundamental human rights: (i) to secure for everyone the liberty to worship; (ii) to uphold the inviolable dignity of every person's private and personal point of contact with God and their right to observe dharma and (iii) to support every virtuous person's imprescriptible right to pursue their

vision of happiness and self-fulfillment. It is, therefore, fair to say that Sikhs believe in individual human rights: freedom of worship, freedom of conscience, and the right to pursue happiness. Sikhs believe that progress in the world will be based on the spiritual sovereignty of the individual.

In terms of politics, there is an emphasis on persuasion and consent. Sikhs reject coercion or force as a method of government. They, therefore, reject the justification of oppression. In 1606 Guru Arjun became the first Sikh martyr⁵⁴ and was executed by the Mughal Emperor Jehangir. It followed the Guru's refusal to pay taxes in support of ordinary people who could not afford to pay taxes due to a poor harvest. The Emperor felt he had the divine authority of a ruler; the Guru would not accept this point.

Sikhs have an active obligation to disobey any law that violates these principles. For example, Guru Nanak Dev broke a ban on music in Baghdad, and Guru Hargobind Ji commanded Sikhs to bear arms and ride horses in violation of Islamic law on dhimmitude⁵⁵, which reserved these activities for Muslims.

In terms of economics, the idea that people have the right to pursue happiness and self-fulfillment is related to the proposition that "no one shall exploit another." Until one humanity perspective is accepted, economic injustice will continue. Guru Tegh Bahadur asserted that no one should exploit anyone.

ਭੈ ਕਾਹੂ ਕਉ ਦੇਤ ਨਹਿ ਨਹਿ ਭੈ ਮਾਨਤ ਆਨ ॥ ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਸੁਨਿ ਰੇ ਮਨਾ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਤਾਹਿ ਬਖਾਨਿ ॥

Bhai kāhū ka'o det neh neh bhai mānaṭ ān. Kaho Nānak sun re manā gi-ānī tāhi bakḥān.

One who does not frighten anyone, and who is not afraid of anyone else - says Nanak, listen, O mind! call him spiritually wise. (SGGS, M. 9, p 1427)

Thus, in the world adorned with religious pluralism, Sikhs acknowledge, appreciate, and actively participate in interfaith dialogue, at its all level, to help enable people to coexist without sectarian strife or persecution of religious minorities.

Conclusion

There are plenty of resources within the religious realm to promote peace, good governance, and human rights around the world. When there are divisions between religious communities and there are no avenues for engagement between them, this exacerbates distrust that can lead to violence, and so there is a need for creating relationships between communities as a way to prevent violence from occurring. There are many ways through which we can approach interfaith dialogue, but it is essential that in all its forms, we must involve a certain amount of patience and humility. Dialogue should begin by focusing on things we have in common and on practical things we can do together. The power of religion can be used to unify divergent factions/diverse faith communities by establishing and maintaining constructive channels of communication and sustainable collaboration. Thus, interfaith dialogue can play a major role in the promotion of global peace.

Evidently, Sikhs welcome inter-faith dialogue and actively engage in such endeavors, as the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev did take part in it hundreds of years ago. Sri Guru Granth Sahib contains the record of his debate with the Siddhas, and the accounts of his life (*Janam Sakhis*) discuss his meetings with Hindus and Muslims. Guru Nanak's collection of the hymns of saints from a variety of traditions, his establishment of the institutions of *Sangat* (a congregation of holy persons), *Pangat* (sitting in a row at the same level as in taking Langar) and *Langar* (provision of free vegetarian food to all), and his insistence that people of any faith could know the Truth (God), meaning that inter-faith dialogue has always been a part of the Sikh ethos. It is symbolized in the widely held belief that the foundation stone of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) was laid by a Muslim saint, Sai Mian Mir. Thus the Sikhs welcome the modern world of religious pluralism and the emergence of humanism, these values being inherent within their traditions. They acknowledge that in the present era, inter-faith dialogue and cooperation are crucial, as only this concept carries the promise for a peaceful future of the contemporary world. Currently, many Sikh organizations are consistently striving for this much-cherished goal of humanity, by actively participating in / contributing to interfaith dialogue activities throughout the world.

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