

Sikhism and Challenges of Twenty-First Century

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SIKHISM IS ONE OF THE FIVE MAJOR world religions. It has the unique distinction of being the only one that arose in the second millennium. Sikhism, a modern religious philosophy propounded by our Gurus, is not an individualistic religion meant for personal salvation. It is meant to usher world peace by its moral authority. The "Guru Granth Sahib" is a philosophy for total emancipation of mankind.

Arnold Toynbee has observed that Sikh religion had the potential of ushering in a new, higher civilization qualitatively different from the earlier Indic and Hindu civilizations. The potential of Sikh religion, its *elan vital*, can play a dominant role in shaping the 21st century society. There are numerous problems that confront people of all religions. Some of these (as listed below) pose serious challenges to the followers of Sikh religion in the present century.

Casteism and Sikh Society

A well-known aspect of Hinduism is Varna or Caste System, which divides the society vertically into a rigid society, based on one's birth. This system considers caste status above economic and/or political status. A person born into this system has virtually no way out. Indeed the

average Hindu does not seek a way out. He views his caste standing as preordained and inescapable—the result of his past deeds (*Karma*) in prior existence. This religious teaching of Karma has millions of people locked into perpetual poverty and injustice. One historian of Hinduism noted "the lower castes (*Sudras*) were denied almost every human right other than the right to eat and procreate".

The Caste System was from the very inception totally rejected in Sikhism. The Sikh Gurus declared that all persons were entitled to complete equality. They considered this to be the fundamental moral principle for regulating social relations and communications. Promulgation of equality and the categorical rejection of the caste system and other symbols of inequality are attempted systematically and comprehensively in the Sikh scriptures: *Guru Granth Sahib Ji*.

Guru Nanak says: "the pride of caste and pride of glory are vain as it is the Lord alone who gives shape to all".

Guru Ram Das says: "Whosoever contemplates of God, caste or no caste, he is a perfect man of God".

(SGGS, Basant Mohalla 4, p 1178)

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Guru Amar Das says: "It is only fools (*Murakh Gavara*) who have the pride of the caste (*Jati Ka Garb*). It creates many evil tendencies (*Vikara*)".

Guru Gobind Singh, while invoking Akal Purkh, pronounces that God is without caste (*Varan Jati*) and subcastes (*Pati*).

The idealistic social system of Sikhism acclaims universal brotherhood. This is based on equality of all human beings. The Guru by starting the tradition of *langar* (eating food together) in the Gurudawara totally eliminated all taboos related to the concept of untouchability.

Guru Gobind Singh consummated this brotherhood - Khalsa, a body devoted to the service of humanity. To ensure complete severance from previous caste, cultural and tribal groupings, *Amritdharie* code of conduct mandated all entrants into the order of Khalsa to forsake their caste or tribal names and take the name of "Singh" - for males and "Kaur" for females. The theory of separate duties for different castes was replaced by a doctrine that proclaimed the same ethical and religious duties for all persons. Thus the fundamental equality of all persons was ensured by free and voluntary admission to the brotherhood of the Khalsa through *Amrit* ceremony. The rejection of Caste system is also incorporated in the code of conduct, the Sikh *rahit maryada*, compiled under the warrant of SGPC, Amritsar.

The Sikh teaching and Sikh practice, however have been two different things. Since the end of the Guru period the caste system has been creeping into the Sikh society. Even though Sikh community has eliminated most symbols and practices of caste system, its practices in social relations, especially in marriages, continue to persist very strongly. The caste and sub-caste system is still prevalent in Sikhs. By assiduously fighting for the inclusion of Sikh Scheduled Castes among the beneficiaries of Scheduled Castes for whom reservations have been made, we have made a mockery of our casteless society. We still want our marriages, our Gurudwaras, our *bhaicharas*, our functions and our common heritage of Sikhism to be divided into Pothohari, Ramgarhia, Bhallas, Bedis, Sethis and Gills, etc. With the dawn of the new century we should have a fresh look at this

'*Manmati*' practice among the Sikhs and should take suitable steps to follow the '*Gurbani*' in true spirit so that the gap between the Sikh teachings and Sikh practice is bridged over.

Use of Modern Media

Guru Granth Sahib enshrines the ideals and institutions of a modern and universal religion as well as of an excellent and comprehensive ethical system, which has the entire human race its welfare and uplift in view. Arnold Toynbee claimed it to be "part of mankind's common spiritual treasure". "It is important", he says,

"that it should be brought within the direct reach of as many people as possible". *Gurbani*, with which we have been blessed, is not the sole possession of a particular set of people, but is meant for the whole humanity and its serious students should have access to it. As we enter the Twenty-first century, we have an opportunity to share the Divine message of *Gurbani* with the rest of the world, as well as with our future generations through creative use of the newest technologies and media. Modern high-tech media such as CD-ROMs and the Internet with sophisticated support for text, audio and video, provide powerful new avenues for delivering the message of Sikhism and for interactions within the community.

Modern media includes Print Media (Newspapers, Magazines, Books etc.) and Electronic Media (Radio, TV, Electronic devices like PC, CD-ROM, Internet, E-mail) and Audio-Visual devices like Movies, films, Theater, etc. Almost all modern electronic gadgets and media, should be put to use for the promotion of *Gurbani* for preaching and practicing Sikhism.

But it is sad to note² that we have not been able to use print media fully as yet. A daily English newspaper at national level with its Punjabi, Hindi and International editions, is required. Sikhs and their institutions have the resources for the same. Sikhs lack good public relations and are suffering from negative image. A daily English newspaper is the immediate need of the day.

Technology:

Adaptation of modern technology for propagation of the Sikh religion is a positive sign. The Audio Cassettes of Sri Guru Granth Sahib have come into vogue. The availability of 'kirtan' (Devotional music) of the 'Shabads' (Hymns) on Audio/Video Cassettes is a common thing. Radio broadcasting and telecasting of *Gurbani* has become order of the day. Broadcasting of the programs from the Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar is a regular feature. *Gurbani* cassettes are a bed-side need for the lovers of *Gurbani*. Efforts are on to install Guru Granth Sahib into the computer. Soon it is likely to become available worldwide on the computer (Electronic) network. The *Gurbani*, as individual *Shabads*, is already reaching people through this medium. The Project to prepare compact discs and also to make the scriptures and the Sikh literature available on C.D. Rom (The discs for Computers) are under active planning by various Sikh organisations. Thus these technologies, encompassing PCs, CD-ROMs, multimedia and the Internet, provide unlimited opportunities to serve the needs of the Sikhs in new and creative ways.

Archives:

But much more is needed to preserve our history, culture and literature. The Golden Temple Library should prepare back-up material through microfilming and electronic technology. Such storage could have saved priceless documents lost through mindless invasion in 1984. Nu-

merous original manuscripts, including those of the Gurus, have been permanently lost. The coming generations and the world have been deprived of this heritage by our negligence. Preparation of the electronic data-base in the *Gurbani*, and the Sikh literature is a project of great import to facilitate research. For making the printing of *Gurbani* and even of Guru Granth Sahib, one hundred percent accurate and fault-free, special computer software should be prepared. The computer software on *Gurbani* should have printing ability so that the insertion of quotations from Guru Granth Sahib into literary or research works becomes easy.

On computer, Guru Granth Sahib may be installed³ in the form of different chapters like "Sainchis". The computer work may have chapters, headings, sub-headings but page and line numbers should tally with the Guru Granth Sahib to eliminate confusion. To make *Gurbani* available to millions and to promote it at a reasonable cost, it is justified to accept the revolutionary printing and to use the ever advancing technology. The Sikh organisations, like S. G. P. C. and D.G.P. C., should have a separate Electronic Block to house independent Electronics Library, Electronic Network, Electronic Printing Facility, Electronic Record Office, Electronic Hall –modern and very well equipped.

The new technologies and media offer tremendous opportunities, but they also raise some challenging issues⁴. A few

such issues are: When we have the whole Guru Granth Sahib in a CR-ROM or available on a web site and a Sikh sits in front of a computer to read it, should one take off one's shoes and cover one's head? What are the new rules to be followed? Can a notebook computer, loaded with a *Gurbani* CD-ROM, take the place of a traditional book version of the Guru Granth Sahib during a religious service? What about *Prakash* and *Sukhaasan* in that case? Do you stand up and do the *ardaas* before switching the computer on or off?

Moral issues:

Clearly, we have to strike the right balance between adopting new technology and maintaining valuable traditions, between embracing the future and preserving the past. The key is to use modern high-tech media and technology to supplement traditional forms, not to replace them. The high-tech information explosion of the 21st Century will travel in cyberspace on info-highway. Young Sikhs have to become comfortable with these new modalities of teaching and learning. The fundamentals of Sikhism can be taught by a variety of new tools—from Jig-saw puzzles and Scrabble to interactive video and computer games. Other religions are adapting such techniques to their use, so should we⁵. An International standard museum on Sikh history and culture, making use of all the modern technologies is need of the hour to spread the message of Sikhism in its true perspective.

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Environment Conservation:

The Sikh scriptures teach us the importance of living in harmony with Mother Earth and Nature. According to Sikhism the Absolute *qua* Spirit, pulsates the Cosmos: the Divine pulsation holistically binds man and nature in unity and inter-connect- edness⁶. Man and Nature are no more seen as external to each other, being in- volved in inter-dependent network rela- tionship, reciprocally conditioning the life of each other. Guru Nanak stresses this kind of relationship at the end of his com- position 'Japji':

'Air is the Vital Force, Water the Pro- genitor, the Vast Earth the Mother of All, Day and Nights are nurses, fondling all creation in their lap.'

Do human beings consider Earth as their Mother and treat her with respect? Perhaps, not. With the advance of indus- trialization man has forgotten to respect her. We have become indifferent and ar- rogant in our treatment of our Mother. Modern civilization is colliding violently with our Mother Earth (our planet's Eco- system) with horrific consequences⁷.

The "Green House" effect, the Global Warming, the Depleted Ozone Layer, the Deforestation, Air pollution, Water-pollu- tion, Noise Pollution and Soil-pollution etc caused by the needs of ever increasing industrialization, urbanization and large population of the world has put a serious strain on the natural resources of our planet. If this trend is not checked in time,

it is likely to result in collapse of critical biological system destroying all life. Keep- ing this fact in view—making a pollution free environment/Society should be a new Ideology for all of us.

The entire process of degradation and devastation of environment is often invis- ible. Common man remains unaware of the dangers human beings are facing. All of us especially leaders, social workers, teachers, priests, preachers, institutions and communities have to take immediate action to save Mother Earth

The concept of inter-relatedness of man and nature places tremendous re- sponsibility on Sikhism for addressing the problems of safety and protection of earth, its eco-system and of life on this planet. By creating awareness about this serious threat to human beings. This can be done by taking up various kinds of environment related and anti-pollution activities such as organising seminars/symposia/ poster competitions/ Quiz competitions/tree plantations/participating in Green Move- ments etc by individuals as well as by in- stitutions and organisations. Let the Sikhs help in saving Mother Earth from death and devastation. This could be our great- est contribution to the mankind.

Moral and Ethical Dilemmas

Sikhism is a modern religion which has proved to be robust enough to maintain its moral and social values and yet liberal enough to embrace the innovations of sci- ence and technology of the twentieth cen-

ture. However the innovations of technology on the threshold of twenty-first century have brought us face to face with the moral and ethical dilemmas which until now had been considered contradictions of the Western religions.

The pre-natal tests performed in the name of choice (boy or girl) and the wide spread acceptance of a procedure called abortion, have brought forward the conflict in Sikh religious doctrine and its profession by the Sikhs. Unfortunately, the Sikh clergy have not risen to the challenge and have pronounced little on these important social issues. Abortion is not the first, or the last, controversial issue. The issues of test tube fertilization, artificial insemination for infertile couples and human cloning are bound to arise in the coming years. Though Sikhs have to embrace modern technology to their advantage, yet religious guidance should be provided before the technology overtakes the moral and ethical questions⁸.

Similarly the rise of capitalistic materialism of the twentieth century has given rise to a number of problems facing the society today. Sikhs being an essential part of such a society cannot ignore the realities. We have to confront such problems as the dowry system, pre-marital sex, incompatible marriages resulting in divorce from a religious perspective. The challenge of the twenty-first century exhorts us to develop a support infrastructure of trained clergies who can provide moral and spiritual guidance and coun-

seling on the important social and moral issues of the day.

Educational Reforms - Need of the Hour:

The Khalsa, created by our great Guru Gobind Singh Ji, was envisaged as a Divine dynamic force to lead the Human race to strive to achieve excellence in Human relationship for establishing a society of equals without any discrimination of caste, creed and country. It is in this context that the Khalsa spirit becomes relevant to the present day world. For achieving this aim we will have to educate and train our youth to imbibe the Khalsa spirit and achieve highest levels of excellence in various professional fields.

But, the present scenario of our educational set-up presents a dismal picture⁹. For achieving excellence in any field, Sikh students need a wholesome, qualitative school education to build up their sound base, both for the professional growth and Khalsa spirit. Our present school education set-up in Punjab is facing a serious decline in the teaching-learning process. Starting from primary and secondary schools, it has now eroded the qualitative base in colleges and universities, which should be taken as a danger signal. Punjab state ranks 17th in India in order of Quality and Quantitative measures. Good public schools are mainly in cities and towns. Most of the schools in rural areas are centers for copying and money making, having no relevance to quality education. The main impact of this dismal picture is on the Sikhs who form

the major section in rural areas.

Except for a few good public schools run by Sikh missionary organisations, other private schools are serving the role of drag-lines. Large scale copying in the Board examination, and the lack of public awareness against this evil, has eroded the whole quality base in schools. Increasing reliance on '*Sifarishbazi*' and open graft in civil/subordinate services and teacher recruitment, have further worsened the situation. An ordinary student in a school or college, having no hope of justice on merit, looks to other means or becomes a drop out.

Mass Mobilization:

The Sikh youth is yearning for adventure and action. Unless we direct their energies through qualitative education and moral guidance, there is fear of their being "used and abused" or getting into drugs and crime. It is the need of the hour for the Sikh scholars and policy makers to understand it and find ways and means to provide proper guidance and quality education to the Sikh youth. There is a dire need for a well organised effort by top Sikh organisations, such as S.G.P.C., Chief Khalsa Diwan and D.G.P.C. in the field of religious education, or missionary work among Sikh students. An all-out effort should be made by the Sikh organisations to start a mass movement for improving the quality of education being given to our Sikh students. Immediate efforts must be made by Sikh

organisations for identifying the brilliant students with Khalsa spirit. They may be guided and helped for achieving their highest level of excellence in the professions of their choice so that they are able to play their historic role in the Twenty-first Century with true Khalsa spirit.

The Sikhs have to wrestle with the reality of being a minority, struggling not only to keep its identity alive but also to give leadership to the state and country to make better human beings. They have to rejuvenate themselves with a vengeance by working hard and doing better in the fields of agriculture, commerce, technology, fine arts, medicine and above all, politics. The principles, values and religious fervor of the Sikh heroes of the eighteen-century can be role models for our children while striving to imbibe the strategies of the twenty-first century¹⁰.

At present, we are passing through the age of gene mutation, of technology, of space exploration, of computer miracles, of energy crisis and of environmental pollution. But nothing can save humanity as surely as the humane principles enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib. The religion of the Guru Granth Sahib is a universal and practical religion. The world needs its message of peace and love more than ever before. Let us face the challenges that are before us boldly so that we emerge successful in carrying the message of our Great Gurus to every nook and corner of the world in the 21st century.

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