

## Human Rights – A Core Concern in Sikh Doctrines

[PART-III]

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Sikhism is the world's fifth-largest religion. It was founded during the late 15th century in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent. Its adherents are known as Sikhs. Currently, there are about 30 million Sikhs worldwide. Most of them live in the Indian state of Punjab. As per Sikh tradition, Sikhism was established by Guru Nanak (1469–1539) and subsequently led by a succession of nine other Gurus. Before his death, the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708), bestowed the status of Guru to the sacred scripture of Sikhs, Adi Granth, which is presently known as Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) [1].

The Adi Granth was first compiled by Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, in 1604. Its second and final version has been the handiwork of Guru Gobind Singh, who added the hymns of his father, Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru [2], at Damdama Sahib, Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, in 1705. The holy Sikh scripture, SGGS, contains 1430 pages of text in poetry form. In addition to the hymns of the six Sikh Gurus and four Sikhs, it includes hymns composed by fifteen saints (Bhagats) and eleven poet laureates (Bhats) of the Guru's court. Muslims and Hindus, Brahmins, and "untouchables" all come together in one congregation to create a universal scripture. It is a compendium of mystic, metaphysical and religious poetry written or recited between the 12th and 17th centuries in the Indian sub-continent [3].

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, through its comprehensive worldview, offers a perfect set of values and an applicable code of conduct. Its cardinal message is addressed to the welfare of all humans irrespective of their caste, color, creed, culture, and religion. SGGS emphasizes love, respect, empathy, and acceptance of others' existence. It prohibits us from infringing on the freedom and rights of others. The life and works of the Sikh Gurus exemplify the practicability of these ideas. Their inter-faith dialogues highlighted that human unity and oneness could be achieved through tolerance, communication, and respect for others [4].

Besides a matchless elaboration of spirituality, Sri Guru Granth Sahib enshrines a powerful expression of the message of revolutionary ideals of social welfare, human rights,

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multicultural distinctness, and religious freedom. In the present era, when the threats and fear of interfaith conflicts, military aggression, terrorism etc., have overpowered the human sentiments, the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib are even more relevant to resolve all these problems.

### Right to Association

One of the fundamental human rights is the freedom of association. This right ensures that every individual is free to form, organize, and participate in groups, either formally or informally. The concept of *Sangat* is central to the Sikh way of life [31]. *Sangat* is a term that denotes a group of persons (men, women, and children) with similar feelings, ideas, and values. Guru Nanak initiated the institution of *Sangat* in Sikhism. He laid great stress on *sangat* which he called *Sat Sangat* or *Sadh Sangat*. Wherever he went during his travels, he asked the people to establish Dharmshala or a place of Sikh worship. He nominated devout Sikhs as *Sangatias*, who used to officiate in the *Sangat* in place of the Guru. To perpetuate this tradition, Sikh Gurus established Manjis and Masand system. Guru Hargobind introduced congregational prayers.

Bhagat Kabir, a saint-poet of SGGS, emphasizes that one should associate with spiritually wise and virtuous people. He asserts that only such an association can be everlasting.

ਕਬੀਰ ਸੰਗਤਿ ਕਰੀਐ ਸਾਧ ਕੀ ਅੰਤਿ ਕਰੈ ਨਿਰਬਾਹੁ ॥  
*Kabir sangat kariai sadh ki antt karai nirbahu.*

Kabeer says: associate with the Holy people. Only such an association can be everlasting. (Bhagat Kabir, SGGS. p. 1369)

Guru Nanak elaborates on the role of a *Sadh Sangat* (association of holy persons) as:  
ਸੰਗਤਿ ਮੀਤਿ ਮਿਲਾਪੁ ਪੂਰਾ ਨਾਵਣੈ ॥  
*Sangat meet milap pura navno.*

O friend, association with the Holy is the perfect cleansing bath (for the human mind). (M. 1, SGGS, p. 687)

Guru Arjan proclaims the benefits of being a part of *Sadh Sangat* as:  
ਸਾਧਸੰਗਿ ਪੂਰਨ ਸਭਿ ਕਾਮਾ ॥  
*Sadh sang puran sabh kama.*

In association with the Holy, one's all works are brought to fruition. (M. 5, SGGS, p.189)

But he also cautions us to be beware of the company of self-conceited or self-centered persons. He articulates:

ਤਿਨ੍ਹ ਸੰਗਿ ਸੰਗੁ ਨ ਕੀਚਈ ਨਾਨਕ ਜਿਨਾ ਆਪਣਾ ਸੁਆਉ ॥  
*Tinh sang sang na kichai Nanak jina apna suaao.*

Nanak says: Do not associate with those who are overly concerned with their own desires, needs, or interests. (M. 5, SGGS, p. 520)

The existence of various Sikh societies and associations, such as Sikh Educational Society, Chandigarh, Chief Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar, All India Pingalwara Charitable Society, Amritsar, Eco Sikh, USA, Khalsa Aid, U. K., United Sikhs, USA etc. caters to various needs of the community and public. Thus, Sikh doctrines and practices actively support the human beings' right to association.

### Right to Assemble

All humans have the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. However, no one may be compelled to belong to an association [5, 11]. Assembly means a group of people associated or formally organized for a common purpose, interest, or pleasure. At Kartarpur (now in Pakistan), Guru Nanak regularly conducted the assembly of his disciples. Other Sikh Gurus followed the tradition in their daily lives. Thus, the human right to assemble has been explicitly commended by Sikh Gurus. Guru Amar Das inspires us to be a part of the holy congregation. He states:

ਸਤਸੰਗਤੀ ਸਦਾ ਮਿਲਿ ਰਹੇ ਸਚੇ ਕੇ ਗੁਣ ਸਾਰਿ ॥  
*Sat sangti sada mil rahe sache ke gun sar.*

Remain forever merged with the Sat Sangat (the holy congregation); Dwell upon the Glories of the True One (God). (M.3, SGGS, p. 35)

Guru Nanak encourages us to associate with the spiritually wise persons. He says:

ਸੰਗਤਿ ਮੀਤ ਮਿਲਾਪੁ ਪੂਰਾ ਨਾਵਣੋ ॥  
*Sangat meet milap pura navno.*

O friend, association with the spiritually wise is the perfect cleansing bath (for the human mind). (M.1, SGGS, p. 687)

Guru Nanak cautions us to avoid the company of naïve persons.

ਅੰਧਾ ਝਗੜਾ ਅੰਧੀ ਸਥੈ ॥  
*Andha jhagda andhi sathai.*

The assembly of naïve people argues in naivety. (M. 1, SGGS, p. 1241)

In Sikhism, the establishment of the institutions of *Sangat* (holy congregation) and *dharamsal* (gurudwara) affirm this assertion. Almost all the Gurudwaras generally have large Diwan Halls, wherein Sikhs often assemble to discuss/take decisions about the crucial issues facing the community. This practice of the Sikhs fully endorses the human right to assemble.

Sikh history is also replete with numerous examples, wherein Sikhs have successfully put in practice the human right to freedom of assembly and association. For instance, during the Gurudwara reform movement (1920-25), Sikhs made unparalleled sacrifices to liberate their places of worship from the clutches of the corrupt priestly class, which was supported by the colonial state, by organizing various *morchas* (peaceful demonstrations) [32-33]. These practices of the Sikhs fully endorse the human right to assemble and protest peacefully.

The Kisan Morcha (farmers' protest) on Delhi's borders, against the current Indian government, during 2020-21, attracted many ordinary people, including a large number of Sikh and non-Sikh farmers, both men and women, agricultural and industrial workers. The protest developed through speeches, slogans, and *Seva* (voluntary service) was molded in that tradition [34].

### Right to democracy

Democracy is widely defined as the "rule of the people." Nowadays, democracy is a common practice in most countries of the world. There are four basic principles [35] of democracy, also commonly called pillars of democracy. These pillars are basic guidelines that help learn how democracy works. These four pillars are Freedom (Liberty), Equity (Equality before law), Justice, and Representation.

**Freedom:** All citizens have their fundamental freedoms such as the right to free speech, religion, travel, and the right of assembly, etc. protected by law.

**Equity:** means that every man, woman, and child is given the same opportunity to succeed and be what they wish to be and do what they want to do. It also means that all citizens can participate fully in the democratic process regardless of income, gender, religion, race, or ethnicity.

**Justice:** It means all citizens are equal before the law. They have the right to a fair trial, and governments are subject to the rule of law.

**Representation:** This principle of democracy means that every citizen must possess the opportunity to vote for their representatives in the conduct of the government. Every

person has their own political views that they should freely express, and electing the representatives is a practical implementation of these views.

In 1628, England's Parliament passed the Petition of Right, which established certain liberties for subjects. Great Britain's first Parliament was established in 1707, after the merger of England and the Kingdom of Scotland. The American Revolution led to the adoption of the United States Constitution in 1787. It provided for an elected government and protected civil rights and liberties for some (about 6% of the population). But Guru Nanak raised his voice in favor of these rights of people as early as the early sixteenth century. As described above, he attempted to make people aware of their rights of Liberty (Freedom) and Equality (Equity). For the third pillar of democracy, i.e., Justice for all, he proclaimed:

ਰਾਜੇ ਚੁਲੀ ਨਿਆਵ ਕੀ ਪੜਿਆ ਸਚੁ ਧਿਆਨੁ ॥  
*Raje chuli niaav ki parhia sach dhiaan.*

For the king, cleansing is justice; for the scholar, it is true meditation. (M. 1, SGGS, p 1240)

He urged people in power to deliver justice to all by following the path of truthfulness.

ਲਾਹਾ ਸਚੁ ਨਿਆਉ ਮਨਿ ਵਸਾਈਐ ॥  
*Laha sach niaao man vasaiai.*

It is advantageous to enshrine Truth and justice in mind. (M. 1, SGGS, p 420)

ਅਦਲੁ ਕਰੇ ਗੁਰ ਗਿਆਨ ਸਮਾਨਾ ॥  
*Adal kare gur gian samana.*

One must administer justice by being absorbed in the spiritual wisdom of the Guru. (M. 1, SGGS, p 1040)

The fourth pillar of democracy, representation, find expression in the life activities of Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus, wherein through the governance of the institutions of *Sat Sangat*, *Langar* and *Gurudwara* was vested in *Sikh Sangat*. The institution of *Panj Piaras* (Five Chosen Ones) was established and is in practice to date to guide and direct the Sikh community's affairs. Any adherent to Sikhism can participate in any of the above institutions without any discrimination based on caste, color, gender or status. All Sikhs have the right to participate in the election of members of S.G.P. C., Amritsar and D.S.G.M.C. New Delhi is a shining example of their representation in the governance of various Sikh institutions. Thus, Sikhs not only endorse an individual's right to democracy but also implement it in their life practices.

## Right to Justice

Social Justice is the wish to create a socially mobile and fair society through equality of opportunity for personal development, protection of human rights and wealth distribution. To achieve social justice is the bedrock of the Sikh faith and teachings. The central message of SGGS is of humanism and universal fellowship. It is an excellent source of inspiration for those who seek social justice, the equality of all people, the empowerment of women and the underprivileged [36]. People have a right to be protected from violent crime and a right to justice when they are their victims. Sikhism vouches for the right to justice for all. Guru Nanak proclaims that the administrators of justice must use their spiritual wisdom while delivering justice.

ਅਦਲੁ ਕਰੇ ਗੁਰ ਗਿਆਨ ਸਮਾਨਾ ॥  
*Adal kare gur gian samana.*

One must administer justice by being absorbed in the spiritual wisdom of the Guru. (M. 1, SGGS, p 1040)

Bhagat Kabir, a saint-poet of SGGS, declares that delivering justice to the needy is as pious a work as a prayer to God.

ਨਿਵਾਜ ਸੋਈ ਜੋ ਨਿਆਉ ਬਿਚਾਰੈ ....?  
*Nivaj soei jo niaao bicharai kalma aklahi janai.*

(For a Judge) to administer justice, should be like a prayer (to God). (Bhagat Kabir, SGGS, p. 480)

Guru Arjan Dev laments if injustice is done to anyone. He says:

ਤਉ ਕੜੀਐ ਜੇ ਅਨਿਆਇ ਕੋ ਮਰਤਾ ॥  
*Tao karhiai je aniae ko marta.*

We should feel sad if someone dies from injustice. (M. 5, SGGS, p. 1140)

Sikhism declares that the main objective for humanity is to live in harmony with the whole creation. To strive for a life of communion with all also implies supporting individual rights. It is the life that works against injustice toward anybody and anything. For the Sikhs, justice requires the participation and inclusion of all in obtaining and enjoying the fruits of God's creation. Justice achieved through cooperative effort is desirable. The ideal for the Sikhs is to strive for justice for all, not merely for themselves.

## Right to Freedom from Slavery and Torture

All of us have the right not to be enslaved and tortured. It is one of our fundamental rights. No one could ever take away these human rights. But unfortunately, some people

who violate other people's rights will tell their victim not to tell anyone. Unfortunately, once their victim has been forced to agree, things get terrible [37].

Not with standing the different religious backgrounds of humans, treating them all as spiritually same and ethnically equal is imperative for maintaining a harmonious relationship between other communities and nations. Suppose we want the world to be set free from the siege of distrust, disharmony, oppression, violence, and the reign of terror. In that case, we must see others as our siblings. We must learn how to affirm our own identity without threatening the identity of others. The holy Sikh scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, proclaims:

ਭੈ ਕਾਹੁ ਕਉ ਦੇਤ ਨਹਿ ਨਹਿ ਭੈ ਮਾਨਤ ਆਨ ॥

*Bhai kahu kao det neh neh bhai manat aan.*

Don't threaten others nor be afraid of anyone. (M. 9, SGGS, p 1427)

It affirms the spirit of universality as:

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

*Na ko bairi nahi bigana sagal sang ham kao ban aei.*

No one is my enemy, and none is stranger; I am in accord with everyone. (M. 5, SGGS, p 1299)

The ideals of the Universal fellowship of humans and the Universal Parenthood of God, as laid down in SGGS, are of prime import to settle all conflicts of man.

ਏਕੁ ਪਿਤਾ ਏਕਸ ਕੇ ਹਮ ਬਾਰਿਕ ...?

*Ek pita ekas ke ham barik.*

One God is the father of all, and we are His children. (M. 5, SGGS, p. 611)

One God is the father of all, and we are His children, happens to be the central message of SGGS. The concept of God's love for all beings teaches us to value others in their otherness. It makes love for God the sine qua non-factor for humanity and seeks the expression of this love through selfless service (Seva, philanthropic activities). Following these doctrines of Sikhism, several Sikhs such as Bhai Ghanaya Ji, Baba Nidhan Singh, Bhagat Puran Singh, Bibi Inderjit Kaur, Baba Balbir Singh Seechawal, Baba Labh Singh, Anandgarh and Baba Sewa Singh Khandoor Sahib have made notable contributions in the fields of universal fellowship and service to humanity.

In 1699, the tenth Sikh Guru established the Order of the Khalsa. The members of the Khalsa Order practice the spiritual discipline of Sikhism. In addition, they are committed

to ensuring the preservation and prevalence of a World Society. During the last 325 years, the Khalsa fellowship has stood up for the rights of the oppressed and dis-enfranchised, even at a considerable cost to its members. The Khalsa's vision of the World Society is:

ਹੁਣਿ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਹੋਆ ਮਿਹਰਵਾਣ ਦਾ ॥ ਪੈ ਕੋਇ ਨ ਕਿਸੈ ਰਵਾਣਦਾ ॥ ਸਭ ਸੁਖਾਲੀ ਵੁਠੀਆ ਇਹੁ ਹੋਆ ਹਲੇਮੀ ਰਾਜੁ ਜੀਦਿ ॥  
*Hun hukam hoaa miharvan da. Pai koe na kisai rañanda. Sabh sukhali vuthia ih hoa halemi rajjio.*

Now is the merciful God's ordinance promulgated: Let no one exploit or coerce another; Let all abide in peace, under this Benevolent Rule. (M. 5, SGGS, p 74)

Indeed, these ideals carry within themselves an injunction against arbitrary rule and a model that conforms to the present-day concept of a welfare state with secular credentials of co-existence and guaranteeing fundamental human rights. Guru Nanak elaborates the above position in one of his hymns.

ਤਖਤਿ ਬਹੈ ਤਖਤੈ ਕੀ ਲਾਇਕ ॥ ਪੰਚ ਸਮਾਏ ਗੁਰਮਤਿ ਪਾਇਕ ॥  
*Takhat bahai takhtai ki laik. Panch samae gurmat paik.*

Only such a worthy person be seated on the throne, who, by attaining the spiritual wisdom, has subdued the five demons (lust, rage, greed, attachment, and narcissism) and has become God's foot soldier. (M. 1, SGGS, p.1039)

Since its birth, Khalsa has opposed any force that has threatened the freedom and dignity of human beings. In the eighteenth century, it battled the oppressive rulers of northern India and invaders from Afghanistan. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it struggled against the oppression by European colonists and Indian governments. Khalsa's ideal is not only to fight for the right to freedom from slavery and torture but also to strive for justice to all, not merely for themselves.

## Conclusion

Human rights are moral principles or norms that describe specific standards of human behavior. These are regularly protected as legal rights in municipal and international law. Everyone born in this world has human rights that the law must protect. Sri Guru Granth Sahib, through its comprehensive worldview, offers a perfect set of values and an applicable code of conduct, which fosters human rights remarkably. SGGS's cardinal message is addressed to the welfare of all humans irrespective of their caste, color, creed, culture, and religion. It emphasizes love, respect, empathy, and acceptance of others' existence. Furthermore, it prohibits us from infringing on the freedom and rights of others.



Sikh Gurus' life and works exemplify the practicability of these ideas. Besides a matchless elaboration of spirituality, SGGS enshrines a powerful expression of the message of the revolutionary ideals of social welfare, human rights, multicultural distinctness, and religious freedom. In the present era, when the fears and threats of interfaith conflicts, military aggression, and terrorism are galore, the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib are even more relevant to resolve all these problems.

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