

## Human Rights – A Core Concern in Sikh Doctrines

[PART-I]

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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].

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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, 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.

### Human Rights

Human rights are benchmarks that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings. These rights are essential to all humans, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, race, language, religion, or gender. They comprise the right to life and liberty, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom from slavery and torture, the right to education and work, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights without discrimination [5].

Sikh Gurus called for universal freedom and the establishment of the benevolent rule of justice for all. Their unique, revolutionary, and liberating philosophy of universal humanism emphasizes primal human rights, e.g., freedom, equity, dignity, and justice for all [6-8]. It also supplements our current understanding of human rights.

### Right to Life

Right to life means that nobody, not even the Government, can try to end one's life. It also implies that the Government should take apt measures to safeguard life by making laws to protect all and, in some circumstances, by taking steps to protect the person if his/her life is at risk [5]. Sikh doctrines strongly endorse this view about the right to life for all. Sikh Gurus proclaimed that human life is precious as it is God's gift; thereby, nobody has the right to terminate it. Guru Amar Das states:

ਗਰਿ ਕੈ ਭਾਣੈ ਜਨਮੁ ਪਦਾਰਥੁ ਪਾਇਆ ਮਤਿ ਉਤਮ  
ਹੋਈ ॥

*Har kai bhanai janam padarath paiea  
mat uttam hoie.*

By the pleasure of the Lord's Will, the prize of this human birth is obtained, and the intellect is exalted. (M. 3, SGGS, p. 365)

Guru Nanak emphasizes that both birth and death happen as per the command of God. Thus, none has the right to interfere in this natural process.

ਜੰਮਣੁ ਮਰਣਾ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਪਛਾਣੁ ॥

*Jaman marna hukam pachaan.*

Understand that birth and death take place according to God's Will. (M.1, SGGS, p.412)

## Right to Food

The right to adequate food states that every man, woman, and child, alone or in a community, should always has physical and economic access to adequate food or means for its procurement [5]. According to Sikh doctrines, this right for accessibility of food to everyone is a God-given right to all, so none should be devoid of this right. Guru Ram Das proclaims it as:

ਵਿਚਿ ਆਪੇ ਜੰਤ ਉਪਾਇਅਨੁ ਮੁਖਿ ਆਪੇ ਦੇਇ  
ਗਿਰਾਸੁ ॥

*vich ape jant upaian mukh ape deie  
giras.*

He (God) created the beings here (on Earth), and He also makes the food available to them. (M.4, SGGS, p. 302)

## The Right to Water

Pure, clean, and good quality water is second only to oxygen as the most crucial nutrient for sustaining human life. It has an essential action in almost all primary functions of the human body. It regulates body temperature and carries oxygen and nutrients to cells. Water is a major component of blood and lymph. It greases the walls of the arteries, cushions joints, and is crucial for metabolic reactions. It regulates the body's temperature by absorbing heat produced by physical exercise and cell metabolism. It cleans the body tissues by removing wastes and toxins. Seventy

percent of our body is water. It is essential for life. Without it, one would die within days. The average person requires from 1.5 to 3.0 liters of clean, unpolluted water daily. Without this, our bodies slowly become dehydrated. A dehydrated body is open to disease and degenerative conditions [9].

The right to water has been recognized as being derived from the right to an adequate standard of living. Therefore, it is implicitly contained in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It has also been recognized as a legally binding right in many national constitutions. The right to water includes the availability of sufficient water for personal and domestic uses, physical access within or near each household, affordability, and adequate quality of water [10]. Access to water is also an element of other rights. It can be essential to realize the rights to food and secure livelihoods for farmers or others who rely on water for their daily work. Water is a dire necessity for life to flourish. This crucial role of water is pointed out by Guru Nanak as;

ਪਹਿਲਾ ਪਾਣੀ ਜੀਉ ਹੈ ਜਿਤੁ ਹਰਿਆ ਸਭੁ ਕੋਇ ॥

*Pahila pani jio hai jit haria sabh koe.*

Firstly, water is fundamental to life. All living beings flourish by its usage. (M. 1, SGGS, p.472)

Guru Amar Das asserts that water is essential for the perpetuation of life; without it, none can survive. He articulates:

ਇਹੁ ਜਲੁ ਮੇਰਾ ਜੀਉ ਹੈ ਜਲ ਬਿਨੁ ਰਹਣੁ ਨ ਜਾਇ ॥  
*Ih jal mera jio hai jal bin rahan na jae.*

This water is essential to my life; I cannot survive without water. (M. 3, SGGS, p. 1283)

Guru Ram Das states that water is one of the blessings bestowed upon us by the Creator. Therefore, it implicitly endorses the fact that each of us has a fundamental right to the accessibility of water to maintain our lives and good health.

ਸਭੁ ਜੀਉ ਪਿੰਡੁ ਮੁਖੁ ਨਕੁ ਦੀਆ ਵਰਤਣ ਕਉ ਪਾਣੀ ॥  
*Sabh jio pind mukh nak dia vartan kauo pani.*

He gave all beings souls, bodies, mouths, noses, and water to drink. (M. 4, SGGS, p. 167)

### Rights to Marry and have Family

Without any limitation due to nationality, race or religion, men and women of full age have the fundamental human right to marry and have a family. They are authorized to have equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. The intending spouses shall enter marriage only with free and full consent [11-12].

In Sikhism, marriage is regarded as a sacral bond of mutual help to reach the pinnacles of worldly and spiritual life. It denotes a unity of mind and soul. It is a means to achieve spirituality. The fundamental goal of marriage in Sikhism is the union of both souls with the Almighty Lord. Therefore, the Sikh Gurus had very high regard for the institution of marriage, and they themselves entered matrimony. They asserted that marriage is not merely a social or civil contract but that its most ideal and highest purpose is the union of two souls so that they become spiritually inseparable. Guru Amar Das states:

ਧਨ ਪਿਰੁ ਏਹਿ ਨ ਆਖੀਅਨਿ ਬਹਨਿ ਇਕਠੇ ਹੋਇ ॥  
 ਏਕ ਜੋਤਿ ਦੁਇ ਮੂਰਤੀ ਧਨ ਪਿਰੁ ਕਹੀਐ ਸੋਇ ॥

*Dhan pir ehi na aakhian bahan ikthe hoe. Ek jot due murti dhan pir kahiai soe.*

Don't call them husband and wife, who merely sit together. A couple can genuinely be called husband and wife, who is consciously one (united) despite separate bodies. (M. 3, SGGS, p. 788)

The family is a fundamental and natural unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State. Family is also a primary social group in the Sikh community. Besides the endorsement of the right to marriage, family life has been encouraged by the Sikh Gurus. SGGS encourages Sikhs to live as a family unit to provide for

and nurture children. Guru Arjan Dev states that one's birth in a family happens as per God's will.

ਜਾ ਤਿਸੁ ਭਾਣਾ ਤਾ ਜੀਮਿਆ ਪਰਵਾਰਿ ਭਲਾ ਭਾਇਆ ॥

*Ja tis bhana ta jammia parvar bhala bhaia.*

According to His (God's) Will, a child is born, in a blessed family. (M. 3, SGGS, p. 921)

ਮਾਤ ਪਿਤਾ ਭਾਈ ਸੁਤ ਬਨਿਤਾ ਤਿਨ ਭੀਤਰਿ ਪ੍ਰਭੂ ਸੰਜੋਇਆ ॥

*Maat pita bhai sut banita tin bhitar parabhu sanjoia.*

God has placed you among your mother, father, brothers, sons, and wife. (M. 5, SGGS, p. 77)

Thereby, Sikh doctrines advocate the God-given right to have a family life for everyone. Guru Arjan Dev articulates:

ਗਿਰਸਤੀ ਗਿਰਸਤਿ ਧਰਮਾਤਾ ॥

*Girsati girsat dharmata.*

The householders affirm their faith in family life. (M. 5, SGGS, p. 71)

Furthermore, he encourages us to maintain cordial relations with our family members and others too, to lead a peaceful life.

ਸੁਖਿ ਬੈਸਹੁ ਸੰਤ ਸਜਨ ਪਰਵਾਰੁ ॥

*Sukh baishu sant sajan parvar.*

O Pious ones! Sit in peace with the family and friends. (M.5, SGGS, p. 185)

### Right to own things

In everyday life, we use many essential things that are ours. For example, everyone has the right to own property alone or jointly with others. None shall be arbitrarily divested of their property. It is a fundamental right because a person needs to be able to own what one wants without having it forcibly taken away. Without this right, one wouldn't be able to possess things [11-12].

Sikh doctrines emphasize that God has blessed us with the gifts of life and property. Guru Teg Bahadur states it as:

ਤਨੁ ਧਨੁ ਸੰਪੈ ਸੁਖ ਦੀਓ ਅਰੁ ਜਿਹ ਨੀਕੇ ਧਾਮ ॥

*Tan dhan sampai sukh dio ar jih nike dham.*

He (God) has given you your body, wealth, property, peace, and beautiful mansions. (M. 9, SGGS, p. 1426)

According to the Sikh Gurus, to deprive others of their rights amounts to injustice. Even to covet other's things or property is sin. Guru Nanak says:

ਹਕੁ ਪਰਾਇਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਉਸੁ ਸੁਅਰ ਉਸੁ ਗਾਇ ॥

*Hak paraia nanka us suar us gaie.*

To take what rightfully belongs to another must strictly be taboo as pork eating

is for a Muslim and beef-eating is for a Hindu. (M.1, SGGS, p. 141)

Guru Arjan encourages us to repudiate what is rightfully others.

ਪਰ ਧਨ ਪਰ ਦਾਰਾ ਪਰ ਨਿੰਦਾ ਇਨ ਸਿਉ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਿ  
ਨਿਵਾਰਿ ॥

*Par dhan par dara par ninda in sio parit  
nivar.*

Others' wealth, others' wives, and the slander of others - renounce your craving for these. (M. 5, SGGS, p. 379)

Thus, Sikh doctrines strongly endorse the human's right to own things.

### Right for Human Dignity

The cognition of innate dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all humans is the foundation of freedom, justice, and world peace. A human being's dignity is not only a fundamental right but constitutes the genuine basis of fundamental rights. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1 states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Thus, human dignity isn't something that people earn because of their race, caste, class, social status, or any other distinction. All human beings are born with it. Just by being human, all people deserve respect. Human rights naturally spring from that dignity [13].

The concept of human dignity isn't

restricted to human rights. For centuries, world religions have recognized human dignity as we now understand it. Most religions teach that humans are essentially equal on one account or another. In Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, it's because humans were created in the image of God, becoming children of God. Dignity is something that a divine being gives to people. In Catholic social teaching, this term is explicitly used to support the church's belief that every human life is sacred. In Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively, dignity is inherent because humans are manifestations of the Divine. In the Shvetasvatara Upanishad, it is stated, "He is the one God, hidden in all beings, all-pervading, the Self within all beings [14]. Buddhism begins with the understanding that humans are "rare" because they can make choices that lead to enlightenment. Our dignity arises from this responsibility and ability, uniting all humans in their quest [15].

One's dignity includes having a sense of control, making one's own decisions, experiencing hope and meaningfulness, feeling valued as a human being, and being in a treasured and nurturing environment. When everyone is equal, they are all equally deserving of basic respect and rights. Guru Ram Das emphasizes that God's essence is pervading among us all. Thereby dignity is inherent as all humans are manifestations

of the Divine. He states:

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

*Sabh ek darisat samat kar dekhai sabh  
atam ram pachaan jio.*

Look upon all with equality and recognize the Supreme Soul (God) pervading among all. (M. 4, SGGS, p. 446)

Thus, every human being has been granted dignity by God as a human right. When God has given that right, taking that right away or restricting it is a crime against humanity. The gist of freedom is that humans should not have sovereignty over humans. When someone dominates another person, it leads to the dignity loss for the other person. Such a person loses the opportunity for self-determination becomes a victim of hopelessness and worthlessness. The repressed person becomes a victim of the violation of his/her personal life. Such a situation enhances one's sense of disconnection and alienation. Baba Farid, a saint-poet of Sri Guru Granth sahib, opines that it is better to die than lose one's sovereignty. He states:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਬਾਰਿ ਪਰਾਇਐ ਬੈਸਣਾ ਸਾਈ ਮੁਝੈ ਨ ਦੇਹਿ  
॥ ਜੇ ਤੂ ਏਵੈ ਰਖਸੀ ਜੀਉ ਸਰੀਰਹੁ ਲੇਹਿ ॥

*Farida bar paraiai baisna sa(n)ee  
mujhai na deh. Je tu evai rakhsi jio sarirahu  
lehi.*

Fareed says: O Lord! do not make me live at the mercy of others. If this is my fate, it is better to let me die. (Shaikh Farid, SGGS, p. 1380)

Thus, Sikh doctrines strongly advocate the right to human dignity.

### Right to Equality

The right to equality connotes the absence of legal discrimination based on caste, race, religion, sex, and place of birth. It ensures equal rights for all citizens. The egalitarian principle [16-17], as laid down by Guru Nanak, advocates all human beings' equality, regardless of gender or birth. It disapproves of all distinctions of caste and color. Guru Nanak vouched for the right to equality for all by raising his voice against demarcation based on religion, race, and gender. He urged treating everyone in the same respectful way. He articulates:

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਏਕ ਦ੍ਰਿਸ਼ਟਿ ਕਰਿ ਦੇਖਹੁ ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਜੋਤਿ  
ਸਮੋਈ ਜੀਉ ॥

*Gurmukh ek darisat kar dekhhu ghat  
ghat jot samoi jio.*

As Gurmukh (Guru oriented person), look upon all as equal; in each heart, the Divine essence is contained. (M. 1, SGGS, p 599)

ਜਾਣਹੁ ਜੋਤਿ ਨ ਪੂਛਹੁ ਜਾਤੀ ਆਗੈ ਜਾਤਿ ਨ ਹੇ ॥

*Janhu jot na puchhahu jati agai jat na he.* SGGS, p. 345)

Recognize God's essence within all and don't discriminate on the basis of social class or status. There are no classes or castes in the world hereafter. (M. 1, SGGS, p 349)

Guru Ram Das emphasizes unity in diversity by proclaiming:

ਏਕੋ ਪਵਣੁ ਮਾਟੀ ਸਭ ਏਕਾ ਸਭ ਏਕਾ ਜੋਤਿ ਸਬਾਈਆ ॥

*Eko pavan mati sabh eka sabh eka jot sabaia.*

All inhale the same air. All are made of the same clay. The life essence within all is the same. (M. 4, SGGS, p 96)

Bhagat Ravi Das, a saint poet of Sri Guru Granth Sahib denounces the class or caste division among people as:

ਕਾਇਮੁ ਦਾਇਮੁ ਸਦਾ ਪਾਤਿਸਾਹੀ ॥ ਦੋਮ ਨ ਸੇਮ ਏਕ ਸੋ ਆਹੀ ॥

*Kaim daim sada patisahi. Dom na sem ek so ahi.*

God's Kingdom is stable, steady, and eternal. Therein none has second or third status; all are equal there. (Bhagat Ravidas,

In the egalitarian society as enunciated by Sikh Gurus, all are equal, the lowest to the highest, in the creed as in the race, in religious hopes and political rights. In this approach, women enjoy equal status with men. Sikh Gurus sought to release the people from the bondage of caste tyranny by emphasizing the unity of humankind. It has been given an explicitly social character through a series of measures adopted by the Gurus. The establishment of the institutions of Sangat (a corporate body of the devotees), Pangat (seating of the devotees in rows on the same level), Dharamsala (a place for public worship), Kirtan (collective singing of hymns) and Langar (community kitchen) has led a powerful movement to release people from the stranglehold of the ritualistic, caste-ridden, priest-dominated and a retrogressive social order. The establishment of the institutions of langar, pangat, sangat and dharamsal are outstanding examples of social equality among the Sikhs.

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**- End of Part I [To be continued]**



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