

THE QUEST FOR EGALITARIAN ECONOMIC ORDER IN SIKHISM



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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

Socio-economic equality is the hallmark of teachings of Sikhism. Sikh Gurus tried to reinvigorate the socio-economic structures to create an equitable economic order. They found that generally common people had no enthusiasm for active participation in the economic activities because manual labour was considered as the inferior activity in the caste ridden Medieval Indian society and foreign invaders, corrupt administrative functionaries and economically dominant classes plundered the hard-earned income of people. People suffered the multiple economic exploitation and discriminations. Sikh Gurus

preached the path of ethical and truthful way of earning. They glorified the manual labour and elevated the status of working classes. They persuaded the masses to earn their income through righteous deeds, meditate the Infinite Reality and help those who are in need. They made the voluntary contribution to poor and helpless people as the supreme socio-religious obligation for their followers.

KEYWORDS

Egalitarian Economic ,socio-economic structures ,economic activities.

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INEQUITABLE ECONOMIC ORDER AT THE ADVENT OF SIKHISM:

In the fifteenth century, Sikhism was emerged as a ray of hope for downtrodden, poor and marginalized sections of society. Sikh Gurus raised the strong voice against socio-economic inequalities, parasitism, economic exploitation and violation of dignity of working classes. They uphold the cause of weaker, helpless and deprived masses who were the victims of apathetic and despotic rulers and lustful economically dominant classes. At the advent of Sikhism, people are compelled to live in subhuman socio-economic conditions. The large chunk of society was exploited in the name of either religion or hierarchical social structures. The authoritarian political rulers were engrossed in mutual rivalry and they pay no attention to the welfare of masses. Political tyrants, feudal lords and wealthy people were at the helm of affairs and the poor masses were completely mistreated. The socio-religious, economic and political conditions of people in India were terrible. People were impoverished due to the frequent foreign invasions. There was no sense of just, fair, equitable and accountable socio-political and economic order in those barbaric conditions. People were at the mercy of outrageous, unreasonable and unkind socio-religious and political rulers.

The socio-economic interactions among the various sections of society were governed by the caste rules as laid down by the high caste Brahmins. There was a high regard for asceticism. Hindu socio-religious leaders generally preached that this world is unreal and materialistic comforts are the barrier in the way of spiritual growth. Consequently, people became sluggish and apathetic because either of over emphasis on renouncement of materialistic comforts or they lost all hopes of economic growth due to economic exploitation, political uncertainty and bad state of law and order. Higher caste groups became parasitic and they exploit the working classes with the help of clever and parochial interpretation of various religious texts. The main feature of Medieval Indian economy was production, chiefly for local consumption. The peasant or the cultivator was the backbone of this economy. He tilled the soil, worked hard throughout the year, yet lived in utter poverty and hardships as are evident from a number of couplets in Guru Nanak's Bani (Sagoo, H. K., 1992).

The Idea of Egalitarian Economic order in Sikh Thought:

A religion, which does not take into account the socio-economic problems of human beings and encourages persons to shut their eyes to the hard realities of life, shall definitely lose its hold on the masses. Hence, it becomes imperative on the part of religion to take into account the worldly problems of humankind and to find out their solutions. Then and then alone will religions appeal for higher spiritual life have any meaning for its followers (Singh, Harbans, 1986). In this sense, Sikh Gurus provided an extremely practical, pragmatic and dynamic socio-religious philosophy. They took the due notice of spiritual as well as earthly socio-economic needs of masses. They were deeply concerned about the upliftment of temporal economic conditions because they strongly believed that earthly economic hardships create obstacles in the spiritual growth of an individual. However, this world is accepted as unreal and duality deviate the attention of masses from their real objective of life i.e. the merger with the Infinite Reality yet the Sikh Gurus maintained that the materialistic needs of this world play a vital role in the life of a human being. Therefore, the earthly needs cannot be ignored. Poverty and defeatist living have no place in the planning of a Creator who crammed this world to overflowing with riches and blessings beyond description. It is man who has messed up the supply of goods

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to all. By his crude interference with the laws of Divine abundance, both socially and personally, he merely exists when all around him are values, not simply in sufficient supply but in abundance. Such a simple thing as the giving of self, of thought, of money or time, of helpfulness, starts it flowing. This is the secret of the Law of abundance, and it can change anyone's situation (Bumra, P. S., 2001).

Sikh Gurus were the liberator and champion of the weak and the oppressed sections of society. Their teachings focus on the upliftment of the downtrodden masses and their empowerment to live a life of dignity in a society of pious people. The idea of egalitarian economic order is the foundational principle of Sikh Socio-economic thought. Sikh Gurus had witnessed economic discriminations with poor, weak and helpless masses. Economic injustice had weakened the spirit of nationalism. The deprived sections became spectators at the time of foreign invasions. They had neither capacity nor ability to defend the country. They were sharply classified in stratified structures and there was no idea of unity among them. Sikh Gurus reacted very sharply against such economic divisions, discriminations, inequalities, exploitation and injustice in the medieval Indian society.

Guru Nanak took due notices of marginalized sections of society. He tried to uplift the wretched people. Thus, Guru Nanak was much in advance of His time in his thoughts. He was a friend, philosopher and guide of the poor and the downtrodden. He was a socialist to the core. He was a practical saintly philosopher. Much before the introduction of the 'earn your bread' policy enunciated by modern scholars, Guru Nanak insisted that one must not be dependent on anybody (Bhattacharya, V. R., 1988). He envisaged a new way of life in form of Sikhism and revolutionary socio-religious philosophy. He tried to reinvigorate the socio-economic structures to liberate the humankind from socio-economic exploitation, economic inequalities and parasitism. He emphasised on welfare of all, self-reliance and upliftment of working classes. His successors Sikh Gurus also broke the barriers of the caste system, which had divided the people into high and low and handed over the actual steering power in the hands of ordinary men to regulate both their social and economic life. They encouraged the people to open their own businesses and buy their own land for agriculture (Kapoor, S. S., 1994). They denounced the social injustice and economic discriminations. They urged for fair, egalitarian and classless socio-economic order, which will ensure the dignity of labour and fulfilment of minimal economic needs of all. There will be no place for parasitism and maltreatment with working classes. They advocated the abolition of unjustifiable socio-economic privileges of dominant caste groups.

Guru Nanak was against ill-gotten (black money) wealth. Once he remarked 'the rights of others are the flesh of the cow to one and the flesh of swine to the other.' He emphasized production through hard and honest work. He did not put any limit to the earning of wealth He was only concerned with the means (Das, J. R. 1988). He said, "He who eats what he earns through his earnest labour and from his hand gives something in charity, he alone, O Nanak, knows the True way of life." The Sikh tradition evolved a threefold formula for the ideal conduct of life. It consists of Namm Jaap or meditation; Kirat or earning ones livelihood by honest means and labour; Wand ke Chhakna or sharing ones food and belongings with the needy. The formula covers three important aspects of human life, viz psycho-spiritual, economic, and social (Singh, Wazir, 1999). The first cardinal principle of Sikhism is Kirat Kamai (honest earning). A Sikh must earn his livelihood by honest means. He/she cannot earn his/her livelihood by fraud, begging, smuggling, stealing or any other unethical means. A Sikh has an obligation to lead a truthful life (Dilgeer, H. S., 2005).

The first of the 'commandments' forbids parasitism in any form, since the stress is laid on kirat i.e. honest productive labour This covers the production aspect of economic activity. The second

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commandment sums up the consumption and distribution aspects, when exclusive emphasis on sharing the fruits of labour is laid while not denying the enjoyment of the produce to oneself. The third part of the formula covers the non economic aspects of one's life. Here contemplation is upheld implying the avoidance of an imbalance that may be caused by an excessive interest in economic activity (Singh, Wazir, 1969).

By Kirt Karo, it is meant every individual must engage himself in honest creative work. One might adopt any profession—farming, trading or so-called menial professions; but one must be honest and truthful. In Guru Nanak's views, it is tantamount to committing sins if we look down upon those persons who adopt the professions of sweepers and scavengers. Guru Nanak says, "There is no intrinsic merit in professions. All are alike." Parasitism in any form or shape is anti-social and anti-religious as well. This precept also ensures that there shall be no exploitation of man by man with capital, that is, the accumulated wealth shall not be employed as an instrument of exploitation (Gandhi, S. S., 2009)

The Gurus condemned the exploitation of poor by rich in any form as worst sin. They could not tolerate that the earnings raised by sweat of labour should go into the coffers of the rich and exploiters. As we know Guru Nanak himself preferred to stay at poor carpenter's (Lalo) home and declined the invitation of a rich merchant Malik Bhago to partake of food served from his ill-gotten income. Malik Bhago exploited the poor and sucked the human blood. Guru Nanak reproached those people who never refrained from exploiting the human beings (Kaur, Nirmaljit, 2006).

Guru Arjan Dev sought to abolish the distinction between the haves and the have-nots, the caste hierarchy that permeated the economic field, those who laboured and those who exploited them. He did not attach great importance to contemplative life if it had to be sustained on the sweat of the neighbour's brow. He advised that one must work and earn one's earnings with others (Kaur, Gurdeep, 2000). Guru Teg Bahadur was of the opinion that a good ruler must bestow happiness on his subjects by removing sorrow. He must do justice without discrimination. His duty is to protect the life and property of his people. In addition, a good king must not tax his subjects severely. He should levy reasonable revenue and spend it on the people's projects (Das, J. R., 1988).

Guru Nanak stressed on equality between man and man, religious, social as well as economic. All Sikhs are required to give food, clothing etc, to the needy and set apart at least ten percent of their income for such purposes. This is termed system of 'Dasvandh' 'Wand Chhakna' that is, first distributing and then eating implies the principle of economic equality and uplifting others to one's own level. It also implies the service of others. Service of humankind and humility are virtues, which please God (Singh, Ishar., 1985). In Sikhism, Guru Nanak established the tradition of Dasvandh to inculcate the sense of belongingness and to motivate the people to be benevolent towards disadvantaged sections of society. Dasvandh in literal terms implies a tenth part refers to the practice among Sikhs of contributing in the name of the Guru One Tenth of their earnings towards the common resources of community. This is their religious obligation- a form of Seva or humble service so highly valued in the Sikh system (Singh, Harbans, 1993). The tradition of Dasvandh is endowed with spirit of fellow feeling. These institutions inspire human beings to realize his social responsibilities and contribute towards the upliftment of humankind. A Sikh must spend about one tenth of his income for religious, social or the humanitarian purposes. If a Sikh cannot afford money he/she may contribute his time or his services for the nation. For a Sikh, Dasvandh is a debt that must be paid as early as possible. Dasvandh makes one an integral part of brotherhood and useful member of community in particular and humanity in general (Dilgeer, H. S., 2005).

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Dasvandh is a tradition, which inspires, teaches and trains a man to work honestly and share the fruits of his earning with others in the Name of God for the social and spiritual development of society. It is believed that 'Guru Ki Golak Gareeb Ka Muh' i.e. Mouth of the poor or needy is equal to charity box of the Guru. It is integral part of Sikh ethos to fulfil the needs of deprived and vulnerable sections of society. It is the part of Guru Nanak's religious teachings for His followers to donate at least one-tenth of their earnings for the welfare of other so that the objective of welfare of all can be successfully achieved. Dasvandh is voluntary contribution for social welfare. Dasvandh gives rise to a new system of pooling such contributions at a central place for spending on preaching of Sikhism and on the collective welfare of the Sikhs at large and the needy Sikhs in particular (Chahal, D. S. 1999). Giving a part of one's income for social welfare or charitable purposes is a practical way of showing one's concern for one's fellow men and an opportunity to serve the less fortunate members of the community. According to the Rahat-nama (Sikh code of conduct), it is compulsory for the Sikh to donate Daswand for charitable and religious purposes (Mansukhani, R. C. Dogra and Gobind Singh, 1996).

CONCLUSION:

Sikh Gurus urged for an egalitarian socio-economic order and made numerous efforts to uplift the socio-economic status of people. They promoted the strong work culture and denounced the idea of renunciation of this temporal world. They inspired their followers to work honestly and to share the earning with needy, weak and downtrodden sections. They restored the dignity of labour and repudiated the parasitism and exploitation of working classes. They envisaged socialist economic system in the letter and spirit. They attempted to divinise the economic order wherein an individual work to satisfies his needs while remembering the Supreme Reality. This kind of ethical and divinised economic order inculcates the spirit of fellow feeling, unity and sympathy for vulnerable sections of society.

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