
THE SIKH NOTION OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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Abstract:

Religious tolerance is one of the central themes of teachings of Sikhism. Sikh Gurus advocated the policy of religious tolerance to eliminate socio-religious conflicts, communal violence and religious fanaticism. They urged for multi-cultural society and strongly repudiated the victimisation of masses on religious basis. They emphasised on unity of humankind and social equality. To create a pluralistic global society, they motivated, trained and guided their followers to learn the art of living to live in multi-religious, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic social order.

Key words: Religious Tolerance , pluralistic global society, unity of humankind and social equality.

INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND:

Socio-religious harmony is the prerequisite for the socio-spiritual development of every member of a society. Religious intolerance, fundamentalism, violation of human dignity and human rights of minority communities is antithetical to an idea of plural, egalitarian and democratic socio-political order. Social and religious harmony requires that people should be broad-minded and learn to live with socio-cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversities. Religious dogmatism, intolerance and disregard for other's religious beliefs create hindrances in the way of creation of harmonious, plural, free and liberal society.

Religious fanaticism and unrestrained instinct to dominate the socio-religious, cultural, linguistic and ethnic minorities creates religious antagonism, ethnic hostility and clash among civilizations. Today ethnic clashes, religious extremism, social conflicts, and ideological differences are posing serious threat to humankind. Social prejudices, religious bigotry, racial arrogance and lack of spirit of coexistence create socio-cultural disputes and religious violence. The policy of religious intolerance also gives birth to sense of insecurity, alienation and marginalization among minorities. The majority communities have a numerical strength and tend to impose their belief system on the minorities, and sometimes politically and economically influential minority groups are in position to dictate the majority communities.

In the theocratic, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, the interference in socio-cultural and religious matters especially belonging to minorities is a part of state policy to demoralize, humiliate and dishearten the minorities to consolidate the power of ruling classes. During Medieval centuries, foreign invaders and foreign rulers in India were obsessed with religious

prejudices. They advocated the policy of forcible religious conversion of Hindus. They imposed the tax on Hindu population on religious grounds and demolished the large number of Hindu temples. The Majority of Hindu population suffered intolerable maltreatment, socio-religious discriminations, social humiliation and economic exploitation. Mughal rulers were parochial in their religious outlook and Muslim religious leaders guided, persuaded and justified them in giving the ill treatment to Hindus.

At the advent of Sikhism, there was no religious tolerance and the Hindus were being discriminated in every sphere of life. They were denied high posts in the government. The failure of their social and political leadership shattered the moral fibre of the Hindus. They developed an inferiority complex and a feeling of helplessness. They developed perverted social attitudes and became introvert, peevish and escapist. Unable to be frank and straight forward, they became hypocritical. During Aurangzeb's regime, his policy of intolerance and religious persecution that thousands of Hindus were forced to relinquish their faith for fear of oppression. The Muslim rulers' additional weapon was that they showered on converts, rare privileges and benefits— the non-believers, no doubt, were dealt with intolerable, political and economic impediments—therefore the masses, the poorer and lower classes of Hindus could ill-afford resistance of any kind.

The religious intolerance among Mughal rulers created the unbridgeable gulf between Hindus and Muslim population. In the gradual process, the communal tension between Hindus and Muslims ultimately played a decisive role in the partition of India on religious basis in 1947. In India, in the post independence era, there are several instances of religious violence and communal riots among various religious communities. Communal Riots (1947), Kota Riots (1953), Ahmedabad Riots (1969), Bhiwandi Riots (1970), Jalgaon Riots (1970), Meerut Riots (1982 and 1987), Aligarh Riots (1978), Hyderabad Riots (1983), Malegaon Riots (1983 and 2001), Hazaribagh Riots (1983), Anti Sikh Riots (1984), Merrut Riots (1987), Bhagalpur Riots (1989), Mumbai Riots (1993) and Gujarat Riots (2002) had exposed the hollowness of constitutional claims and government's willingness to curtail the increasing religious intolerance and communal conflicts in the Indian society.

In the present day scenario, the Sikh notion of religious tolerance has a significant potential and role to create the socio-religious harmony and social unity. Five hundred years ago, Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, preached the policy of peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance. His successors Sikh Gurus raised the forceful voice against religious intolerance among Mughal rulers and advocated an idea of plural, harmonious and tolerant society in which everyone enjoys the freedom of faith and worship. They fought against Mughal rulers in order to seek the elimination of religious chauvinism and religious narrow mindedness. They helped, inspired and trained their followers to strive for socio-spiritual liberation and urged them to respect the all religions. They firmly believed that right to religious freedom is needed for creation of open-minded, peaceful and harmonious society.

The Sikh Vision of Religious Tolerance:

Today's world is beset with violence and conflict caused primarily by mutual mistrust and hatred, the desire to dominate and monopolies, lack of tolerance and accommodation. The social life is marked by inequalities and injustice, violation of basic human rights and the fundamental freedom of man. Religious majorities have ever been on the look out to subdue or assimilate unto themselves the religious minorities in the name of homogenization, thus causing

a sense of alienation and bitterness among the minorities. One religion is waging war against the other; brothers are fighting with brothers on the plea of differences of opinion regarding the means to salvation. Bloodshed, falsehood, hatred, intolerance and bigotry have often been preached in the name of religion while the vital offices of religion, the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, are set at naught.

Sikh Gurus were much ahead of their times. They laid the foundation of liberal and democratic way of life in India during the darkest hours of history of humankind. Liberalism, among other things, means tolerance, receptivity to and respect for opposite opinion, open-mindedness to first listen to the ideas and views of the other and only then to respond and react as stressed by Guru Nanak. This is how a rapport is established with the other – a rapport in which the other is mirrored in Me and the me in the other, realizing the luminous state of mind expressed by Guru Arjun, the fifth prophet of Sikhism, in the following sacred words: (In holy communication, I am estranged with no one, nor is any one alien to me). Religious tolerance in essence implies the willingness to co-exist with others, to accept the right to disagree of others, to acknowledge the socio-cultural and religious diversities. Tolerance theologically means being tolerant, especially of views, beliefs, practices etc of others that differ from one's own or to say freedom from bigotry or prejudice. A tolerant person does not feel angry or upset. He keeps cool in times of excitement or anger. Every Sikh is a saint-soldier. Tolerance is the hallmark of the Sikh, being a saint. The multi faith environment in which the Sikh tradition emerged and developed provided unique opportunities for understanding the true meaning of belonging to one human family. This pluralistic environment endowed the Sikh community with tolerance and a desire to learn from other religious traditions. It also generated a new climate for translating the message of diversity in God's kingdom into reality. The Sikh religion teaches tolerance, love and peace. It teaches how to love others and there is no place of hate in this religion. The Sikh Gurus praised the good features of others and ignored their faults, they highlighted other people's qualifications and spared their disqualifications.

Sikhism is a social religion, non-ethnic, ecumenical, grounded in a political society, directed and committed to propagation and establishing of a plural world society, tolerant, open, progressive and free in character. Guru Nanak was perhaps the first personage in the religious history of humankind who initiated inter-faith dialogue and proclaimed that no individual, caste or creed can claim monopoly over truth: revelation cannot be religion-specific, region-specific or caste-specific. He was of the view that listening first to the other's point of view and then giving forth your own was the only way to reach the ultimate truth. When Guru Nanak got enlightenment in 1496, he came out of the rivulet after three days-uttered his message in a low voice: 'Na koi Hindu, na koi Musalman'. It means there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, meaning that: all are human beings, sons and daughters of the same Supreme Being. It also meant that both Hindus and Muslims were not following their religions and therefore, no one was a true Hindu or a true Muslim. His mission in life was to reconcile the two communities to enable them to live together in peace. It was his ideal, which he followed throughout his life. It represented his vision of harmony, tolerance and cooperation for mankind and its ultimate union with the Divine.

Guru Nanak proclaimed the modern concept of secularism by showing respect to all religions. Secularism does not mean absence of or disrespect to any religion but rather tolerance and understanding of men whose faith is different from one's own. Moreover, he never told anyone to change his faith or accept him as his spiritual guide. He advocated religious freedom and accepted the diversity of faiths. For him all religions have a fundamental unity of purpose

and goal. The temple and the Mosque are the same. All religions have an element of truth; they are like different paths leading to the mansion of God. In his spirit of tolerance and consideration towards the faiths of other men, He showed a remarkably modern sensibility. His conception of reform in religion was liberal. It was broader than that of a Bhakti teacher or a cultic reformer. He broke new ground in contemplating not only the removal of certain abuses, but also, ultimately, the unity of religion. In calling upon Hindus to become better Hindus and upon Muslims to become better Muslims, he was pointing towards a new religious culture. He challenged the fanaticism and intolerance of the Muslims, of his time. During his visit to Mecca, he made the Kazis realise that God's house is everywhere and not only in the direction-of the Kaaba. Similarly, Guru Nanak also exposed the meaningless ritual and caste prejudices prevalent among the Hindus. He demonstrated to them the fallacy of feeding Brahmins at the time of the performance of the Sharaadha. At Hardwar, in a very amusing way, he exposed the folly of offering water to the manes of ancestors.

Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur laid the unprecedented sacrifices in their fight against religious fundamentalism for the sake of freedom of faith and worship. They fought bravely against the religious intolerance, communalism and religious persecution of minority communities. The Sikh Doctrines preached by Guru Nanak fully blossomed into the concept of the order of the Khalsa, which was to be an closely-knit society of voluntary members and selected on the basis of special qualifications, disposition and characters, pledged to make the Sikh way of life prevail with the ultimate objective of establishing a plural, free, open, global society grounded in a universal culture. The order of the Khalsa is the first human society in the world-history, organized with the deliberate object of and pledged to bring about an ecumenical human society, grounded in a world –culture, which represents a free and organic fusion of the various strands of the spiritual heritage of Man. Religious, cultural and political pluralism is the message of Sikhism for the contemporary world afflicted by the growing trends of State totalitarianism, political Unitarianism and religious-cultural homogenisation. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is one of the greatest living examples of pluralism. Sri Guru Granth Sahib is free of any sectarianism in religious matters. The holy scripture contains not only the hymns and songs of Sikh Gurus but also that of the Sufi saints, the Vaishnava bhaktas and some other saints of the period. This strange but democratic spirit of tolerance and respect to the viewpoints of other religious saints is a unique phenomenon in the history of religion. No other scripture of any religion in the world includes in itself the hymns of saints of another religion. The concept of social order as envisaged in Sikhism is essentially that of a pluralistic, egalitarian society. The variety of cultural milieus of the peoples in various parts of the world necessitates a pluralistic world society in which the positive, creative individualities of the constituent social units could co-exist and co-develop into an organic wholeness. Religious pluralism is to be an essential feature of such a pluralistic world society envisioned by Sikhism. The Guru establishes that the one and the multi-centres are in harmony, there is no clash. The multi-centres are under his kind glance. They are not to be folded, except when the folding occurs according to the will, or in the cosmic system, as our scientists would say. In simple words, no centre can be abolished according to the pleasure of a human being, howsoever powerful he or she is. Each centre is radiating the divine command, manifesting a dimension of higher life .without the resonance of this command, the music of life is incomplete.

CONCLUSION

From above analysis, it can be inferred that Sikhism advocated the path of religious tolerance, peaceful coexistence and religious harmony. Sikh Gurus laid the supreme sacrifices to resist the religious intolerance of Mughal emperors. They envisaged a plural society in which there will be no place for religious antagonism, communal violence and sectarianism. International community can learn from the teachings of Sikh Gurus to create a pluralistic global society, which is based on principle of liberty, equality and fraternity.

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