

## **Sikhism and Dalit Liberation**

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Religion, in the words of S. Radha Krishnan, is “the discipline which touches the conscience and helps us to struggle with evil and sordidness, saves us from greed, lust and hatred, releasing moral power, and imparts courage in the enterprise of saving the world.”<sup>1</sup> The evil with which the religiously awakened moral consciousness of man is motivated to struggle is not merely some metaphysical entity often associated with religious mode of consciousness but it is also a concrete existential reality. It exists in the form suffering, misery and degradation of the vast multitude of toiling masses, especially that of down-trodden and the oppressed people, suffering worst type of human indignities as a result of socio-economic injustice. Actually the exploitation or oppression of man by man is the root cause of this positive existential evil that has persisted in some form or other in every socio-economic formation during the entire human history.

Although the eradication of this evil is possible only by taking appropriate socio-economic and political measures, yet in a society like ours, which is predominantly religious in outlook and orientation, the necessary inspiration and motivation for such an action can be fruitfully generated by awakening religio-moral consciousness of the masses. Religion is not only a system of beliefs and practices involving supernatural powers or meta-physical entities but also a world-view and a way of life, which gives meaning and significance to human existence in the day to day concrete socio-cultural situations.<sup>2</sup> It has been characterized as embodying the most sublime of all human aspirations and a quest for final meaning of human existence. As J. B. Pratt has rightly observed, ‘Religion is the serious and social attitude individual or communities toward the power or powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their interests and destinies.’<sup>3</sup> Modern studies in the field of sociology of religion have amply demonstrated the significant role of religion in guiding and controlling the destinies of its adherents. It is a strange paradox of history that even the great humanizing and liberating

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force like religion has been used as an ideological weapon of class war. The ruling class in any given socio-economic formation has always tried, more or less successfully, to manipulate or distort the essential features or spiritual content of prevalent religious system in order to perpetuate the established hegemony of its own order.

Every new religion that emerged on the scene of this ideological warfare was originally wedded to the interests of the down-trodden and oppressed classes but gradually its progressive and revolutionary content was again sought to be distorted in the interests of the hegemonic order. As a matter of fact religion cannot remain neutral in any socio-political situation. In order to save it from becoming a reactionary force, in the hands of oppressors and exploiters, its true spiritual content must be redeemed from the clutches of manipulations and distortions.

The oppressed classes and their intellectual allies have an historic role to play in this regard. They must endeavor to construct a systematic theology of their respective religions in the context of contemporary socio-cultural concerns of the masses. This endeavor calls for a radical re-reading of their entire religious heritage from the perspective of the most oppressed people, as only the liberation of these marginalized sections of humanity can re-establish the true glory of any religious tradition. In the Indian context these marginalized and oppressed people are gradually adopting a new designatory term 'Dalit' (which literally means down-trodden, oppressed, broken and socially suppressed) for their new self-identity in place of various other terms like, Harijan, outcast, untouchable, Pancham etc. The term Harijan (children of Hari or god) was originally coined by Narsi Mehta, a famous Gujarati novelist and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi to refer to the so called 'untouchables'. But this term was rejected by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and also by various Dalit Movements because of its certain pejorative connotations. "Dalit has therefore become the mark of self-respect, self-identity and self-assertion by the ex-untouchable communities and their fighting slogan against de-humanizing caste- oppression."<sup>4</sup>

With these preliminary observations we come to the main theme of our paper. As mentioned in the title, we are concerned here with the Sikh view of Dalit liberation. For this purpose we shall examine the primary source/text of Sikhism, the Sikh scripture, referred to as the *Adi Granth* or *Guru Granth Sahib*. Compiled and edited by the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, the text of this holy book contains the poetic compositions of some of the prominent

medieval saint-poets belonging to the oppressed sections (the Dalits) of Indian society, apart from the Bani of Sikh Gurus and other saint-poets belonging to various geographical regions and linguistic communities of India. These Dalit poets include Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas and Sain among others.

The *Adi Granth* is a unique religious scripture in another sense. The religious discourse included in this scripture is presented in poetic composition and is set to classical Indian *raga*-s. Hence it is not that easy to reconstruct some sort of systematic/contextual theology based on this predominantly metaphysical poetic text. However considerable efforts in this direction have been made by various scholars, both traditional as well as modern. Let us attend to the text of Mool Mantra, which has been accepted as the canonical statement of Sikh theology. Following is the translated version of this Mool Mantra:

“(There is) One Absolute Being with True Identity, (who is) Creator Being, Without Fear, Without Enmity, the Eternal Being, Free from limitations of Human birth, Self-born (and is known) by the Grace of guru.”<sup>5</sup>

The doctrine of Ultimate Reality as reflected in the above statement also contains a fundamental socio-ethical model in the form of the two important ethical attributes of the Ultimate Reality, namely, “Without Fear, Without Enmity” which is most relevant in reconstructing the contextual theology from the ‘Dalit’ perspective. Fear and Enmity are the two aspects of the operation of oppressive mechanism in society. The oppressor’s hostility instills fear in the mind of the oppressed. The concept of Ultimate Reality (*param sach*) as being devoid of these attributes provides us with a model to live a life of human dignity without fear and enmity which threatens to destroy the very fabric of our social system and peaceful co-existence.

Next important issue of Sikh theology is man’s relationship with the Ultimate Reality. There are numerous passages in the text of *Adi Granth* where man has been defined both in his un-regenerate condition and in his condition of spiritually transformed ideal possibility achieved through grace of the Guru. The founder of Sikh faith, Guru Nanak says in ‘Japu’:

How shall man become true before the Almighty?

How shall the veil of falsehood be rent? <sup>6</sup>

In these lines, the ultimate possibility for man has been defined as become one with the Ultimate Reality, i.e. with Truth Itself. This Ultimate Reality has also been defined as Timeless Existence/Being. Let us consider the following lines of this text:

In the Beginning was the Truth,

Truth was though the ages

Truth is, Truth shall also be, O Nanak! <sup>7</sup>

The path of spiritual transformation of man from his/her un-regenerate condition to his highest possibility as delineated above in Sikh Scripture is primarily mystic-ethical. It emphasizes mystic union with the Ultimate Reality but does not recommend renunciation of legitimate worldly concerns of man. The ultimate ideal for man to achieve is a state of equipoise (Sahaj) which is an equivalent of Moksha (liberation), Mukti and Nirvana etc. This highest ideal is achievable by all human beings, without any distinction of caste, creed, color or gender.

If we re-read the above traditional theological framework of Sikhism in the light of “Dalit Liberation”, we come to the conclusion that the Sikh ideal of spiritual transformation of man is not denied to any individual, caste or class. The Dalit has the equal chance of his/her liberation. As a matter of fact, the discrimination on any ground what-so-ever, between man and man, is firmly rejected in the Sikh Scripture. For instance, the following poetic lines of Guru Nanak in the text of *Adi Granth*, amply illustrate the above context:

The lowliest of the low,

The lowliest of the low born,

Nanak seeks the company of them,

He does not emulate the elite,

For, where the weak are cared for,

There doth thy Mercy rain. <sup>8</sup>

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, has taken a clear-cut ideological position in favor of the oppressed (Dalit) rather than that of the elite. At another place, he has firmly rejected the very basis of caste distinction by recognizing only the 'Joti' and not the 'Jati'. Joti is a conceptual term in Gurbani, which points toward the eternal light residing in human beings without any distinction. It is the essence of all human beings. Guru Nanak says:

Recognize the eternal light in every being,  
 Do not enquire about his caste,  
 For, there is no caste in the presence of the Almighty.<sup>9</sup>

In the medieval Indian context, the emergence of Sikhism symbolizes the culmination of the process of a significant Cultural Revolution beginning with the teachings of Buddha, whose rejection of Brahmanical caste-system and ritualism influenced the poetic discourse of the Siddhas, the Nathas, the Sants and the Sikh Gurus. Nihar Ranjan Ray has rightly observed thus, in the above context:

“There is no doubt that the protestant and non-conformist spirit and attitude towards the system of caste, rigid ritualism, and barren scholasticism, worship of countless number of gods and goddesses, meaningless socio-religious customs and practices, etc. of Brahmanical Hinduism that characterize the teachings of Kabir and Guru Nanak, were all derived from the older protestant and non-conformist sects and cults as transmitted to them by the Nathpanthis in the main.”<sup>10</sup>

The hymns of Dalit saints like Kabir, Ravidas and Namdev as part and parcel of the Sikh Scripture are equally vocal in their rejection of caste system. The following verses of Kabir Bani illustrate our point in an effective manner:

In the dwelling of the womb, there is no ancestry or social status.  
 All have originated from the Seed of God. ||1||  
 Tell me, O Pandit, O religious scholar: since when have you been a Brahmin?  
 Don't waste your life by continually claiming to be a Brahmin. ||1||Pause||

If you are indeed a Brahmin, born of a Brahmin mother,

Then why didn't you come by some other way? ||2||

How is it that you are a Brahmin, and I am of a low social status?

How is it that I am formed of blood, and you are made of milk? ||3||

Says Kabir, one who contemplates God, is said to be a Brahmin among us. ||4||7||<sup>11</sup>

Bhagat Ravidas is very much conscious of his dalit position in society but he is also conscious of the new-found self-respect as a man of God:

My poverty-stricken condition is such

That everyone laughs at me,

But your Grace, O God, has given me fame far and wide.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Bhagat Namdev, whose Bani is included in *Adi Granth*, has also expressed himself in a similar strain, where his dalit consciousness is reflected with dignity and self-respect. Clearly this shows revolutionary impact of anti-Brahmanic ideology projected by the contemporary Bhakti movement in India. The poetic utterances of these Bhaktas and Sikh Gurus were addressed to the multitude of toiling masses oppressed by the prevalent socio-economic system and its caste-ideology. Their discourse is composed of the signs and symbols drawn from the spiritual idiom of the times reflecting the spirit of Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis generated by a creative dialogue between Hindu Bhaktas on one side and Muslim Sufis on the other. This spirit of dialogue and harmony lays the foundations of an ideology committed to liberal humanist concerns of life as well as creating an atmosphere for a composite culture to flourish in India.

In contemporary context of increasing communal tensions and cultural conflicts between various religious communities generated by the clever machinations of the politicians for their narrow political gains, this model of inter-faith dialogue has become all the more relevant. Such a dialogue is only possible by treating the plurality of faiths on an equal footing and sympathetic treatment and appreciation of each other's beliefs and practices, which was done by our medieval Indian Saints. From the perspective of dalit-liberation also, this dialogical model is most relevant. It promotes sympathetic understanding between different religious/cast communities. It

creates an awareness of mutual respect and equality by emphasizing the principle of unity in diversity. Dalits' role in bringing about such a cultural/religious understanding is also very significant as most of these Saints and Sufis were either themselves from the oppressed section of society or they had transcended the elite ideology of their own class/caste in favor of the down-trodden. In this context Guru Nanak's following verses can be quoted:

After contemplation on the word of the Guru,

The considerations of caste, color and elite-status have ceased to exist.<sup>13</sup>

The text of Adi Granth contains elements of an emergent progressive/revolutionary ideology which stands in clear opposition to the rigid, orthodox and oppressive ideology of the prevalent social system. The so-called Brahmanical system had perpetuated the myth of caste-superiority. In this hierarchical caste-system the *brahman* was at the top ladder and the *shudra* at the lowest. The so-called *shudras* (dalits) were subjected to worst type of human indignities. They were even denied the right to education. Inequality based on false ideas of purity/pollution in relation to castes coupled with socio-economic injustice was instruments of dalits' oppression. The Sikh Scripture has successfully countered this ideology by propagating counter-ideology wedded to ideals of equality, fraternity and justice. By way of an illustration, the following passage of Adi Granth can be quoted:

In the beginning God created Light,

Which created all human beings?

(Then) How can we make distinctions between the good and the evil?<sup>14</sup>

The most significant dalit poet of the Sikh Scripture, Bhagat Ravidas stresses the same mystical oneness of man and the Divine in the following verses:

O God, you are me and I am you. Where is the difference?

(It is) like between the gold and the ornament,

Like between the water and the wave.<sup>15</sup>

The passages quoted above amply illustrate the equality and fraternity of all human beings before Ultimate Reality. This is a radically different world-view from that of the Brahmanical ideology with its rigid hierarchical caste-system. In the mystic-ethical world-view of Sikhism, there is no place for artificial distinctions of caste, color and economic status. It lays the foundation of an ethical vision which promises liberation for all the oppressed peoples of the world.

The available biographical (hagiographical) accounts of the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, also contain certain interesting facts and incidents where Guru's solidarity with the dalit is clearly demonstrated. For instance, Guru Nanak took a 'low caste' Muslim (*mirasi*) as his friend and companion during his spiritual journeys to the centers of various faiths (in India and abroad). At another place we come across an account of Guru Nanak's visit to Bhai Lalo, a poor artisan. He accepted hard earned simple bread rather than accepting the invitation of a wealthy upper caste Malik Bhago for a sumptuous dinner. Such incidents/accounts corroborate our main contention that Sikhism stands for liberation of the dalit classes/castes. With a minimum of change in the context we can build a comparable liberation theology by re-reading the text of *Adi Granth* from the perspective of the dalit.

Unfortunately, the real inner spiritual core of Sikhism is also being presently distorted and manipulated by the elite classes in their own interests. As a consequence of which caste hierarchies have again sprung up in Sikh society in various forms. The Sikh dalits are not treated at par with the people of other castes in actual social practice. This is very much contrary to the teaching of Sikh Gurus and insights of the Sikh Scripture. It is here that we feel a greater need for concerted effort by dalits of all faiths to organize themselves for their liberation in the socio-cultural sphere. It is also true that the Sikh dalits are not so much alienated in Sikh society. At least openly it is not so. The Sikh community has a glorious tradition of professed ideals of equality and justice in the ideology Sikh Scripture. Only we have to restructure a theology committed for dalit liberation in the real sense. This can only be achieved by contextual re-reading of the Sikh Scripture in the light of present day concerns. This contextual re-reading can provide us an ideological weapon to fight against the forces of oppression, exploitation and injustice so that the glorious heritage of Sikhism wedded to the ideals of human liberation in true sense of the term can be realized in practice.



## Notes and References:

- <sup>1</sup> Radha Krishnan, S. (1947). *Religion and Society* George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London. P-42.
- <sup>2</sup> “Religion has the character of a deep inner sense of communion, carrying with it implications of guidance and security and giving meaning to the whole life.”  
Grensted, L. W. *Psychology of Religion*, p-8.
- <sup>3</sup> Pratt, J. B. *The Religious Consciousness*, p-2.
- <sup>4</sup> Prabhakar, M. E. ‘Missions in a Dalit Perspective’ in V. Devesahyam (ed.), *Dalits and Women* p-72.
- <sup>5</sup> “ੴ ਸਿਤ ਨਾਮੁ ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ ਅਜੂਨੀ ਸੈਭੰ ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ” The basic creedal statement of Sikhism, Mool Mantra.
- <sup>6</sup> “ਕਿਵ ਸਿਚਆਰਾ ਹੋਈਐ ਕਿਵ ਕੂੜੈ ਤੁਟੈ ਪਾਲਿ ॥  
ਹਕੁਮਿ ਰਜਾਈ ਚਲਣਾ ਨਾਨਕਿ ਲਿਖਿਆ ਨਾਲਿ ॥1॥” *Adi Granth* - 1.
- <sup>7</sup> “ਆਦਿ ਸਚੁ ਜੁਗਾਦਿ ਸਚੁ ॥  
ਹੈ ਭੀ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਹੋਸੀ ਭੀ ਸਚੁ ।।” *Ibid* – 1.
- <sup>8</sup> “ਨੀਚਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਨੀਚ ਜਾਤਿ ਨੀਚੀ ਹੂ ਅਤਿ ਨੀਚੁ ॥  
ਨਾਨਕੁ ਤਿਨ ਕੈ ਸੰਗਿ ਸਾਥਿ ਵਡਿਆ ਸਿਉ ਕਿਆ ਰੀਸ ॥  
ਜਿਥੈ ਨੀਚ ਸਮਾਲੀਅਨਿ ਤਿਥੈ ਨਦਰਿ ਤੇਰੀ ਬਖਸੀਸ ॥4॥3॥” *Ibid*- 15.
- <sup>9</sup> “ਜਾਣਹੁ ਜੋਤਿ ਨ ਪੂਛਹੁ ਜਾਤੀ ਆਗੈ ਜਾਤਿ ਨ ਹੇ ॥1॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥” *Ibid*. 349.
- <sup>10</sup> Ray, Nihar Ranjan, *The Sikh Gurus and Sikh Society*, P.U. Patiala p- 55-56.
- <sup>11</sup> “ਗਰਭ ਵਾਸ ਮਹਿ ਕੁਲੁ ਨਹੀ ਜਾਤੀ ॥  
ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਬਿੰਦੁ ਤੇ ਸਭ ਉਤਪਾਤੀ ॥1॥  
ਕਹੁ ਰੇ ਪੰਡਿਤ ਬਾਮਨ ਕਬ ਕੇ ਹੋਏ ॥  
ਬਾਮਨ ਕਹਿ ਕਹਿ ਜਨਮੁ ਮਤ ਖੋਏ ॥1॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥  
ਜੋ ਤੂੰ ਬ੍ਰਾਹਮਣੁ ਬ੍ਰਾਹਮਣੀ ਜਾਇਆ ॥  
ਤਉ ਆਨ ਬਾਟ ਕਾਹੇ ਨਹੀ ਆਇਆ ॥2॥” *Adi Granth* – 324.
- <sup>12</sup> “ਦਾਰਿਦੁ ਦੇਖਿ ਸਭ ਕੇ ਹਸੈ ਐਸੀ ਦਸਾ ਹਮਾਰੀ ॥  
ਅਸਟ ਦਸਾ ਸਿਧਿ ਕਰ ਤਲੈ ਸਭ ਕ੍ਰਿਪਾ ਤੁਮਾਰੀ ॥1॥।।” *Ibid* – 858.
- <sup>13</sup> ਜਾਤਿ ਬਰਨ ਕੁਲ ਸਹਸਾ ਚੂਕਾ ਗੁਰਮਤਿ ਸਬਦਿ ਬੀਚਾਰੀ ॥1॥ *Ibid* – 1198.
- <sup>14</sup> ਅਵਲਿ ਅਲਹ ਨੂਰੁ ਉਪਾਇਆ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਕੇ ਸਭ ਬੰਦੇ ॥

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ਏਕ ਨੂਰ ਤੇ ਸਭੁ ਜਗੁ ਉਪਜਿਆ ਕਉਨ ਭਲੇ ਕੇ ਮੰਦੇ ॥ 1 ॥ *Ibid* – 1349.

<sup>15</sup> “ਤੋਹੀ ਮੋਹੀ ਮੋਹੀ ਤੋਹੀ ਅੰਤਰੁ ਕੈਸਾ ॥

ਕਨਕ ਕਟਿਕ ਜਲ ਤਰੰਗ ਜੈਸਾ ॥ 1 ॥” *Ibid* – 93.