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THE GLIMPSES OF SIKH ETHICS

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Abstract:

In the fifteenth century, Sikhism was emerged as a socio-religious movement in the Northern India with view to uplift the socio-ethically degenerated humankind. Sikh Gurus observed that the various kinds of unethical and irreligious practices had crept in the Medieval Indian society. They found that people in general had moved away from righteous path and were excessively inclined towards outward religiosity, which made them egocentric and consequently they began to neglect the ethical norms in their everyday life. Sikh Gurus laid much emphasis on truthful, honest and virtuous living. They established the highest standards of morality to create an egalitarian, ethical and righteous social order. In Sikhism, an ideal man i.e. Gurmukh is virtuous person and is expected to observe the ethical code of conduct. Sikh Gurus, in fact, laid down the unique, dynamic and realistic way to merge with the Supreme Being through truthful living.

KEY WORDS:

Sikh Ethics , Medieval Indian society , divinize and democratize .

THE QUEST FOR ETHICAL LIFE IN SIKHISM:

During the Guru Period (1469-1708), the Sikh Gurus were keen to uplift the morally degraded Medieval Indian society. They not only laid down ethical code of conduct but also established various institutions to divinize and democratize the social order based on higher ethical principles. Sikh ethics open the door of spiritual salvation, social development and emancipation of humankind in letter and spirit. Looking at the helplessness of his fellow citizens, Guru Nanak discovered that moral degradation was at the root of it all. When asked by his companion, Bhai Mardana, why such a suffering had come to the people during the foreign invasion, he replied, 'It is ordained by the Creator that before coming to a fall one is deprived of one's virtue' (Asa). He felt sure that, as long as men were steeped in ignorance and corruption, nothing could be done for them. (Singh, Teja Singh and Ganda, 2006) . He found that humankind had forgotten the gist of religious scriptures and markedly engross in immoral deeds. He had rightly said that, "In words, we are good, but in deeds bad. Within mind we are impure and black, but white from without." (Singh, Manmohan., 1993) .

At the advent of Sikhism, the human being under their sway loses the power of judgement and discrimination. He is unable to distinguish between good and bad and is completely in the grip of the devil. The evil forces weaken him physically and mentally. He needs a remedy for his ailment along with a diagnosis of an expert physician. The ethics fulfils this requirement. The preceptor i.e. the Guru comes to the rescue of Jiva (human being) and prescribes a schedule for him. If he follows the schedule in right earnest, he recovers fully from the malady (Kohli, S. S., 2002) . Sikhism rejected the Western notion of secularism, which causes deviation from religious path and underplay the role of religion in the life of an

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individual. Secularism is incapable of reversing the present trend, or finding a solution of the existing malady. The causes for this failure have been stressed by the Sikh Gurus. Reason being a tool or limb of the egocentric man (manmukh) and being unconnected with the Universal Consciousness or spiritual-moral base of man, it can never make the individual spontaneously altruistic. Hence, any search for a humanitarian ethics through empiricism, communism or secularism is doomed to failure (Singh, Daljeet., 1991). In the present day world, unfortunately, due to excessive individualism, materialism and ignorance, human race has neglected the age-old social and ethical values and does not hesitate in committing the unethical deeds. The lack of true understanding of eternal message given by various religions and lack of enthusiasm and willingness among masses to develop the virtues have created numerous socio-economic and political dilemmas. In fact, ethical values hold a key place in the life of an individual. Ethical code of conduct is a platform, atmosphere and process for learning to know the God, seeking His Blessing, loving Him, finally, achieving union with Him. It is a set of ethical principles, which human beings follow for a harmonious life. It is a code, which one should follow for having balanced relationship with other fellow beings. It includes Godliness, spiritualism, ethics, nobility, generosity, benevolence, justice, discipline, humanism etc (Dilgeer, H. S., 2005). Genuine happiness consists in those spiritual qualities of love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, humility and so on. It is these, which provide happiness both for us and for others (Lama, T. G., 1999). Lack of contentment, which really comes down to greed sows the seed of envy and aggressive competitiveness and leads to a culture of excessive materialism. The negative atmosphere becomes the context for all kinds of social ills, which brings suffering to all members of that community (Ibid). In Sikhism, investment in morality is a vital part of the commitment to the religion. In addition, morality is essentially the standard of behaviour expected of man as a social being. Religion and morality are so interdependent that, according to Sikh belief, the goal of human life for contact with the ultimate spiritual reality is gained primarily through performance of righteous deeds (Grewal, G. S., 2005). In Sikhism, ethics and religion go together. The inculcation of moral qualities and the practice of virtue in everyday life is a vital step towards spiritual development. Qualities like honesty, compassion, generosity, patience, humility, etc. can be built up only by special effort and perseverance. The lives of the Sikh Gurus show how they lived their lives according to the code of ethics (Mansukhani, 1996).

The grounds for the Sikh ethics can be traced right from Jap; the very first divine revelation through Guru Nanak. In this composition, he clearly pointed towards the ultimate aim of the human life. He pointed to certain moral duties in order to enter into the fold of the Sikh faith. He said, "God is truth but to be able to know the truth one has to follow a particular path of truth as guided by the true Guru" (Rohi, R. K., 2011). Guru Nanak said, "(As) everything is underneath Truth, the living with the Truth is superior to all" (Singh, Manmohan, 1993). Bhagat Jai Dev said, "If thou seek the way to good conduct, then give up spying, greed etc, and other's property and woman. Lay aside all evil deeds and evil inclinations and hasten to the sanctuary of Lord. In thought, deed and word embrace thou the devotional service of thy Immaculate Lord"(Ibid). In the Sri Dasam Granth Sahib, Guru Gobind Singh said, "Eat less and sleep less, cherish mercy and forgiveness. Practise gentleness and contentment and remain free from three modes. Keep your mind unattached from lust, anger, greed, insistence and infatuation, then you will visualize the supreme essence and realise the supreme Reality."

In Sikhism, to be a true disciple of the Guru, one had to be Gurmukh (one whose face is turned towards God). Bhai Gurdas described such a person as one from whom God, the Guru, 'eradicates his lust, anger and resistance and has his greed, infatuation and ego erased. (The five cardinal evils, according to Sikh teaching are, kam (lust), lobh (covetousness), moh (attachment), krodh (wrath), and ahankar (pride). Instead, the Guru makes him practise truth, contentment, kindness, dharma, which is (Nam), charity (Dan), and ablution (Ishnan) (Cole, W Owen, 2005).

The Sikh Gurus succeeded in evolving a new kind of political culture and a polity based on ethics is evident from the fact that in their own lifetime they were able to establish an ideal society, which neither craved for material indulgence nor suffered the agony of deprivation. Following ethics even in the thick of the war was essential, based on the principle of equal justice for all, the Gurus tried to create a fearless society. Wherein neither could one threaten others nor could he be cowed down by bullies (Singh, Kanwarjit, 1989). Guru Gobind Singh prepared Sikhs like Bhai Kahnaiya who extended his services even to the enemy. The war ethics inculcated into Guru Gobind Singh's Sikhs did not permit harming women, children or even the cowardly and those incapacitated through injury. Abusing the women or plundering is unknown in the wars of the Khalsa. Such discipline is taught to all great armies in the world, but Sikhs adhere to these high standards, because their basic training embodies saintliness and ethics (Singh, Jaswinder, 2004).

Three Pillars of Sikh Ethical Code of Conduct- Honest Labour, Meditation and Sharing:

Sikh ethical code of conduct is primarily based on the harmonious fusion of spiritual and temporal spheres of life. Sikh Gurus believed that this world is real and a place for practising righteousness. It is not mithya or a place of suffering, as described in some earlier faiths. Life is an opportunity for meeting the Lord. The goal of life is to be a Gurmukh attuned to the Will of God. The methodology comprises householder's life, earning an honest livelihood and sharing the fruits with others in need, truthful living, altruistic deeds, high morality, full social responsibility, service and sacrifice in the cause of justice, etc. Escapism and parasitism in the garb of asceticism and monasticism are condemned. Sikhism preaches a worldview, which is positive, life affirming and progressive (Singh, Kharak, 1991).

The ethical ideal of Sikhism is to maintain the harmony between religion and life. It synthesises the practical with the ideal and can satisfy both the spiritual and temporal aspirations of man. It provides an ethical code of human behaviour, which represents a very high yet perfectly attainable ideal. In other words, to become a good Sikh is to become a good man. It is humanness at its best. Morality and religion are intimately connected in the teachings of Guru Nanak. According to him, morality constitutes the primary test of a true religion. In fact, the intrinsic value of a religion is judged not by its metaphysical thoughts but by its ethical principles (Chopra, R. M., 2002). He emphasized his ethics of Creative Enlightenment and Activism, in which he demanded that every enlightened person should cease to live for himself and work for the betterment of society. The discipline enunciated by the Sikh Gurus is a universal discipline and requires the disciple to perform his worldly duties along with his spiritual responsibilities (Bagga, B. S., 1991). The morality in Sikhism is inseparable from its spiritual core and history. Truth is achieved by living a life of faith, charity and courage. The key Sikh work ethics are kirat karni (earn a living by one's own labour), wand chhakna (share one's income with others) and Naam Japna (practice the discipline of Naam). They form part of fundamental principles, which mould the Sikh attitude toward work. The individual should live like a lotus in a dirty pool and remain detached from the lure of the world (Singh, Narindar, 1996).

In Sikhism, the concept of kirat karna signifies one of the cardinal rules of social and ethical behaviour. Kirat literally means work and karna denotes "to do." The principle of kirat karna has greatly contributed to forging social awareness among the Sikhs. Guru Nanak said that those who depend on the earnings of others and exploit them for their own selfish gratification lead a worthless life (Kalsi, Sewa Singh, 2005). Naam Japna is a process, which facilitates the individual to develop the virtue in his personality which are prerequisite for his spiritual emancipation. Nam does not take the place of other acts but it is the source from, which all ethical action comes. According to Guru Amar Das, "Chastity, truth, continence, all are contained in nam; without contemplation on nam, one does not become pure" (Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur, 2009). In addition to earning through the honest means and remembering the Supreme Being, a true Sikh is ready to share his hard-earned fruits of his labour with the other members of society. Sharing one's earnings, as well as wealth, is basic to Sikh culture. A Sikh has an obligation to earn honestly, and, he must share his prosperity with others. To help the needy and the poor is the foremost duty of a Sikh. To avoid helping needy persons is alien to Sikh culture. A Sikh cannot be selfish. A Sikh does not live for himself only. Sikhism is essentially a commune religion (Dilgeer, H. S., 2000).

Sikh ethical values have multilayered mystic, sociological and economic and political dimensions. Sikh Gurus, in fact, wanted to build an ethical society consisting of sterling, self-reliant, self-respecting and sovereign people. They strongly believed that it is necessary for people to be morally upright to resist the unrighteous and tyrannical political rule and to eliminate the socio-economic exploitation of masses. They had a firm belief that unethical person cannot defend his country from foreign invaders and corrupt political rulers because he lack moral courage to confront the socio-political challenges. Unless people are virtuous in their deeds, it would remain distant dream for them to live in the dignified manners. To defend the human dignity, to promote spirit of social justice and to eradicate the social inequalities, there is immense need to focus on ethical living. Sikh Gurus envisaged the path of socio-spiritual emancipation through their urge for virtuous conduct.

In Sikhism, meditation, honest labour and sharing with others are closely interrelated. In Sikhism, it is believed that through manual labour a person comes to realize the hardships of working classes and through meditation he observes the presence of the Supreme Beings in human beings and find it easy to share the fruit of his hard earned income and sources with the vulnerable and helpless sections of society.

CONCLUSION:

Guru Nanak and his successor Sikh Gurus laid down the higher standards of socio-spiritual ethics. Sikh ethics are based on the liberal, democratic and egalitarian principles and have high regard for

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individual liberties, human dignity and social justice. Sikhism aimed at creation of an ideal man who is truthful, compassionate, courageous and virtuous in his conduct. In Sikhism, for a religious man it is very essential to be a morally upright. To Sikh Gurus, for the socio-spiritual progress of humankind, people are required to move on righteous path. Sikh ethical code of conduct inculcates the virtues in human being to make them more humane. Sikh ethics have both spiritual and sociological dimensions, which paves the way for the socio-spiritual development of humankind and upliftment of demoralized, weaker and marginalized sections of society. Sikh Gurus laid down the ethical code of conduct with intension to build the free and fair society.

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