

The Idea of Religious Pluralism in Sikhism

Ms Ashima sahni

Astt Prof, Department of political science

Kanya Maha Vidyalaya, Jalandhar, Punjab, India; PIN-1440022

Abstract

Current social, political and economic scenario at large is causing a serious challenge to the spirit of religious pluralism both at local and International level. The ongoing first quarter of 21st century is enriched with technological advancement and other positive transformation in almost every field however the present day world order continues to suffer from narrow minded practices of religious intolerance, religious terrorism, religious fundamentalism and many more such related issues. It is in this context that it is important to explore social and religious practices to ensure social harmony and to make global village free from these evil. Sikh philosophy in general and particularly Sikhism as a modern religion has a vast potential to guide the humanity for peaceful co-existence in a multicultural society. Sikhism is living legacy of actually practicing and adopting high ideals mentioned in Guru Granth Sahib Je to enrich and promote spirit of religious pluralism worldwide.

Keywords: Pluralism, Religious Pluralism, Sikhism, Democracy

Introduction

In today's religious plural world for a peaceful life it is imperative to develop healthy attitudes towards other religions, faiths and communities. Contemporary complex multipath and multicultural world order is unavoidable therefore leadership at global, National and local level needs to play a very constructive role to tackle multifold problem related to religion. This is not a new situation for a mankind as earlier too societies have been marked by these social problem however today these problems have become very intense because of globalization and other technical advancement, any such action is bound to have strong reactions all over the world [1] India is a multi-cultural and a diverse nation with a flourishing history of pluralism that has been thriving for thousands of years. Warf and Vincent examined the religious diversity at the global scale by using measure of diversity and found china, India, Russia, japan and Indonesia amongst the world's most religious diverse state. [2] Many states in India like Maharashtra, Assam, Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Gujarat are diverse states however Punjab is unique example as historically it has been one of regions in the sub-continent that was most tolerant of diversity and supportive of plurality It is here that we first encounter the phenomenon of ethnic, religious, social and cultural diversity clearly testified by ancient literature. Advent of Sikhism in Punjab played a significant role in giving a new life to decaying principle of religious pluralism under Mughal rule. Sikh Gurus were much ahead of their times when they favored what we today call religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue to bring about understanding and harmony amongst people belonging to different religions and races. [3]

Concept of Religious Pluralism

'Religious pluralism'' is a contested concept across national, political and disciplinary context. However it can be understood within four perspectives; theologically religious pluralism assumes that other religious paths are true, sociologically it means religious diversity, philosophically religious pluralism means valuing diversity intrinsically finally it refers to a political ideals of peaceful interaction among individual and group of different religious faiths, as well as non-believers. Religious pluralism is the notion that no single religion can claim a monopoly of the truth.[4] According to the Encyclopedia Wikipedia religious pluralism/diversity is the co-existence and the peaceful relations of multiple religions and the worldview systems(Views of truth)As a synonym for religious tolerance, which is a condition of harmonious co-existence between adherents of different religions or religion or religious denominations[5] Seena Fazal argues that religious pluralism is the theory that the great world religions constitute varying conceptions of, and response to, the one ultimate, mysterious divine reality.[6] Migration and globalization has generated a new religious pluralism as more global religious identities have encouraged inter-religious dialogue and greater religious engagement around the question of international development and conflict resolution at the same time ,more intense inter religious completion has contributed to controversy over the meaning and scope of religious freedom.

Sikh Concept of Religious Pluralism

The religion-political viewpoint of Sikh Gurus can be inferred from Guru Granth Sahib jee and the biographies of Sikh Gurus. In the vision of the Sikh Gurus, a sane human society was essentially a plural one in which each community was afforded the opportunity to work out its genius to the fullest possibilities and potentialities [7] In Sikh scriptures many reference to diversity of religion has been made. Guru Nanak in one of his hymns included in the Guru Granth Sahib had earlier said that the Lord-Creator prevails on the entire earth and sea; the Real One manifests Himself in a variety of forms, but still retains His unity thus, the plurality is created beings is essentially one with the ultimate Reality, though the former does not constitute, either singly or

collectively, the whole of Him [8] Guru Nanak advocated religious freedom and accepted the diversity of faith. For him all religions have a fundamental unity of purpose and goal. The temple and mosque are the same. All religion has an element of truth; they are like different paths leading to the mansion of God [9] Guru Gobind Singh, in one of his composition, Manas ki Jat sabai ekai pahichanbo [10] means that followers of all these diverse religions are one. Religious labels are temporary and wither away with bodily vestures. [11]

Punjab, Sikhism and Religious Pluralism

Punjab underwent religious transformation from 8th century to 11th century in the aftermath of Arab invasion from the South and the Turks intrusions from the North, the Afghans and finally the Mughals. Muslim rule had its moment of glory during the reign of Emperor Akbar when faith whether of the ruler or the ruled was not allowed to interfere with affairs of the state. Before Akbar Baba Guru Nanak, a true son of the soil and a great seer, emerged who while combining the finest elements of Hinduism and Islam challenged the ritualism of the both. His teachings and practice inspired a new faith now known as Sikhism based on ideals of all-inclusive equality, no distinction on basis of creed, caste, color, sex or race. Before Guru Nanak's birth, India was plagued by caste and communal hatred. Political and religious fanatics were distorting and misusing the eternal values of life. Religion was being used by its practitioners to gain narrow ends of life, and feed and strengthen their baser instincts and passions. Hindus and Muslims were two societies, which were poles apart culturally and mentally, Muslims being in power had the upper hand. Strenuous efforts were being made to crush Hindu culture. The Sikh Gurus who tried to remove mutual enmity, doubts and superstitions of the people and asked them to live like brother. They spoke against it and took some concrete steps to do away with the evils of division of society on the basis of religion, caste, sex, etc. Sikhism does not consider man inferior or superior, good or bad on the basis of religious affiliations. Sikh Gurus and their followers had laid sacrifices for the sake of religious freedom. Sikh history is replica of ceaseless struggle against those authoritarian rulers who violates the religious freedom of vast majority of population. Sikh vision of religious pluralism can be analyzed in the light of Sikh Guru's divine compositions and their struggle against the religious fanaticism during fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Guru Nanak proclaimed the modern concept of religious pluralism by showing respect to all religions as religious pluralism also means tolerance and understanding of men whose faith is different from one's own. Guru Nanak never told anyone to change his faith. For him all religions have a fundamental unity of purpose and goal. In order to eliminate the manmade social stratification and religious divisions, Sikhism gave the message of Unity of Mankind. The divine compositions of Sikh Gurus and Bhagats in Sri Guru Granth Sahib clearly show that they tried to create harmonious society wherein there will be no place of violation of religious freedom and religion based discrimination. They repudiated false sense of pride of being a member of any particular religious community. To them, all religions contain the universal and eternal message. To them all people are equal and equally entitled to get equal rights and opportunities to make progress in all sphere of life. Sikhism aimed at creating pluralist society ensuring equally for all the individuals freedom of religious belief and practice [12] The first occasion in defending the culture of religious pluralism arose during lifetime of the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjun Dev to convert to Islam or be ready for death, Guru refused to convert to Islam, saying that religion is a matter of one's conscience and there cannot be any coercion. He preferred martyrdom to the forced conversion and became the first martyr at the altar of a basic human religious rights in the history of Sikhism. Later on to uphold the culture of religious pluralism and religious freedom, Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, had come to defend Hindus, whom Muslims rulers were forcing to convert to Islam. Hindu Brahmin came from Kashmir to ask Guru Tegh Bahadur to help and defend the Hindu Communities, and when he assisted them the Guru came to be known as Savior of the Hindus. For his stand on religious freedom, Guru Tegh Bahadur was imprisoned and beheaded in 1675 under the order of the Muslim emperor [13] His martyrdom has a peculiar significance as he laid down his life for religious freedom of another faith as it was a universal cause for him. Sikhism wanted to create a society where adherence to religion, religious tolerance, social equality, were accorded equal importance, adherence to one's religion and faith is no crime but disrespect and intolerance to other religious faiths was certainly a sin [14] Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, took the campaign to its logical conclusion and established the Khalsa society- society of saint- soldiers who were inspired to defend culture of religious pluralism even at the cost of their lives.

Sikhism envisages multicultural social order based on inter faith dialogue, mutual love and religious harmony. The composition of the Sikh Scriptures, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, is the best evidence of its basis for religious pluralism. The Holy Scriptures contains not only the hymns and songs of Sikh Gurus, but also those of Kabir, the Sufi saints, the Vaishnava bhaktas and other saints of the period, and many contributors were Hindus and Muslims. This spirit of tolerance and respect to the viewpoints of other religious saints is a unique phenomenon in the history of religion. Sikhs are happy to accept the popular tradition that, at Guru Arjan, s request, the Muslim saint Mian Mir laid the foundation stone of the Harmandir Sahib. Guru Gobind, in Sri Dasam Granth Sahib, has said that, " some call themselves Hindu, some Turks some Hafzi and others Imam-safi. However, the entire human kind should be recognized as one created the Khalsa Panth in 1699 with a view to defend the Individual.

The followers of the Guru Nanak had to bear the brunt of Mogul wrath due to the perceived political challenge they posed. But there was also a section of Muslim political and religious elite sympathetic to the Sikh cause which included luminaries such as Hazrat Mian Mir, Prince Dara Shikoh and Bulleh Shah. Sikhism had its moment of political glory during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the early 19th century. Ranjit Singh, like Ashoka and Akbar, tolerated religious diversity and did not persecute the

other faith-based communities in the Punjab. After the annexation of Punjab by the British colonialists in 1849 we see the emergence of yet another faith based community, the Christians who are by now significant in number. The converts came from the most oppressed segment of Punjabi society. No surprise that they saw a ray of hope in Christianity, the religion of the colonialists that apparently held the prospect of a better socio-economic life for the wretched of the earth. Punjab has been and still is home to many a religion. Religious diversity is not the problem per se. It is the stance of the state that creates or eliminates the space for religious diversity. Lack of tolerance for a multi-faith society in Punjab reflects the state policy that has created conditions where bigotry is flaunted as virtue causing the spiritual asphyxia. —

Relevance of Sikh Notion of Religious Pluralism

Sikh vision of religious freedom and concept of religious pluralism is highly relevant in the present day world for reason of contemporary 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. Sikhism is in fact a ray of hope for those who suffer religious discrimination and lack of equal opportunities to seek socio-spiritual development due to lack of right to religious freedom. Sikh history lucidly depicts heroic struggle of Sikh Gurus and their followers for creating comprehensive vision of religious pluralism and for this they devoted their lives. They resisted bravely against those forces, which were responsible for transgression of right to religious freedom and religious pluralism. As the world's largest democracy, India presents a unique opportunity to understand a long and multifaceted heritage of religious diversity. India is today recognized as largest democracy in the present day world order, and constitutional protection of religious freedom has contributed to India as a leading developing country. Ever since the birth of Sikhism till date it has firmly consolidated its practical approach in providing solutions to political, social, economic problems faced by mankind both theoretically through Sikh religious scriptures and practically by practicing these ideals in their daily lives and through their religious Institutional practices some of them being institution of langar system, Khalsa panth, Sangat & pangat. In-depth analysis and scientific exploration of Sikh philosophy of religious pluralism is imperative to show the practical path to humanity to protect global village from global challenges of religious terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and religious fanaticism in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Pluralism is answer to challenges of co-existence between different communities, diverse religions, multicultural, linguistics, multi regions and multi ethnic entities. It provides existential conditioned of peace and harmony. It recognizes and respect diversities in a given society and provides social and political space for the expression of and articulation of multiple identities. Guru Nanak taught that all religion were only different exposition of the same one reality, that there was only one God, the Father of all humanity.[15]The Sikh religion with its cosmopolitan spirit and universal principles encourages the spirit of religious pluralism. It recognizes not only the co-existence but also the co-equality of different religious and ethnic groups.[16] Abdul Aziz sachedina of university of verginia has rightly observed, each religion claims a patent on Devine revelation, espousing supremacy rather than accommodation when faced with another religious viewpoint this lack of religious pluralism the assertion by each religion that it alone is the only religion, which renders competing traditions false and valueless, is biggest problem and result is clash between cultures and dehumanization. Constructive religious engagement and response is a need of an hour, it is in this context that Sikhism, being modern religion has a comparative advantage to understand issues, concerns and challenges of modern society and to provide and alternative solutions to problems proliferating from narrow religious dogma as Sikh community have proved globally their unbiased service to humanity both in their actions, deeds and philosophy.

“The Religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in the context of religious pluralism” [17]

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