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## Guru Gobind Singh's Contribution to Indian History

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### Abstract

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 effort and perseverance. The lives of the Gurus show how they lived their lives according to their code of ethics. The advent of Guru Nanak in 1469 occurred at a time of socio-religious necessity. Religion then was in the form of ritual. He released people from the rut of formalism and the parrot-like repetition of scriptures. Guru Nanak challenged the division of men into classes, castes and communities. The Gurus brought a course of discipline to their Sikhs that lasted for a period of nearly 230 years till the creation of the *Khalsa Sikh*, the ideal man of the Tenth Guru- Guru Gobind Singh. He gave the message of unity, equality and fraternity to the people of India. While we delve into the history of India, he emerges as a savior of the nation, a person of exemplary courage, deep reflection and a personality who promoted justice and equality throughout. His most significant contribution is that he related the message of spirituality to the life of the people gave a new relationship between metaphysical and material thoughts and action and fought for stopping political corruption, social degradation and religious exploitation in this country. His teachings, if studied meticulously and applied in society, will help us in the task of national reconstruction promoting national unity and in the evolution of a self-respecting and well-knit society.

**Keywords:** Guru Gobind Singh, history, India, national integration, philosophy, Sikhism.

## Introduction

Sikhism distinguishes itself from other religions of the world not only in the religious practices accepted in the *Sikh Rehat Maryada*, but equally important, Sikhism's unique set of beliefs and philosophy and its integrated "Sikh way of life" – that stand different from the beliefs and philosophies of the other religions.

Guru Gobind Singh was born in India at a time when people were politically divided, religiously degenerated and economically exploited. He ushered in a new ideological era and enthused the inert and supine masses of his country with a vigorous attitude towards life.

Hindus had ceased to be a political power in the Punjab which was under the grip of the tyrannical rule of the Mughals. Hindus were mild and modest, and rigid to their faith and they had to be infused with a brave spirit so as to vindicate their injured honour and manhood. According to Purushottam Nijhaawan, "Even though Nanak was overthrowing all distinctions between man and man, he nowhere alienated himself from the quintessential Indian roots... Whereas Islam is generally puritanical, there are spheres in Hinduism in which extreme austerities and self-mortification are practiced. But rejecting both, Nanak went in for *Sehaj Yoga* .... And like the Buddha, he prescribed for his followers a strong ethical and moral code of life."<sup>1</sup> Guru Nanak and other predecessors of Guru Gobind Singh had considerably elevated the morals of the Hindus but the work of inspiring them with high political aspirations and fighting for their nation was reserved for Guru Gobind Singh. He had to prepare his nation to stand against political tyranny and religious intolerance of the existing rule.

"The Guru was a philosopher," says Cunningham, "and understood fully how the imagination of men could be wrought upon." He knew much of psychology. He realized that the Hindus were very mild by nature and that they had religious ideas but no national feelings. The only way to make a nation to them was to make nationalism their religion. He knew that the first element of nationalism is unity. He viewed religion as universal brotherhood and declared that nobody could call himself a true Sikh if he did not give up caste prejudice. He taught the people to abandon idol worship and meaningless rites and rituals.

The cruelties and political tyranny of the Mughals went unabated. The Guru synthesized *bhakti* (devotion to God) with *Shakti* (power) and changed Sikhs (disciples) into *Singhs* (lions). He blended devotion and piety with manly valour and pugnacity. He achieved this aim by daily teachings and special methods. He instructed his *singhs* to abstain for cutting of hair or beard, eating meat killed under torture, adultery and use of tobacco.

The contemporary rulers were growing conscious of and worried at the growing might of Guru Gobind Singh. But the Guru had no quarrel with any sect or religion or with the Government. History does not record a single instance of his taking initiative for a battle with the enemy. He has to defend his cause with the force of arms if on account of his faith a quarrel was forced on him. The use of arms was his last resort. He said, "Chun kar az hamah heelte dar gusasht halal ast burdan ba shamshir dast" (*Zafarnama*). He fought many battles for defending his casuse. He sacrificed all his four sons and a large number of his followers for the cause of the nation. He fought

with a gallantry that is unsurpassed in the annals of the history of the world. He faced a full army with a bare forty soldiers. He sent a historical letter called *Zafarnama* to Aurangzeb through Bhai Daya Singh and his five companions. This letter had a great effect on Aurangzeb. Towards his end, the Guru appointed Banda Singh Bahadur as his Commissioned disciple to defend the cause of the Faith. He lived only for a short span of 42 years but this period was fully crowded with remarkable events, which influenced Indian society greatly and changed the history of India.

He was the founder of an ideal, secular, ethical, socialistic democracy, which has now been accepted as the basic principle of our great Constitution. He was the harbinger of the national upsurge which marked the end of the foreign Mughal rule in North Western India. His four ideals were to resolve Hindu Muslim differences to constitute four castes of Hindus into one, to uplift the lower castes and to convert the mute masses into herds of lions in this country. He is the first man in the history of India who organized an army and opposed the Mughal tyranny for the cause of saving Indian culture and Indian society. Muslims and Hindus fought along with the Sikhs, shoulder to shoulder against the Mughal army. Persons of all castes and creeds used to dine together in the community kitchen- Guru-Ka-Langar.

The people of India have learnt from him to stand against aggression with undaunted courage to maintain their faith and to serve the country with any amount of sacrifice. It was the Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh who stopped the invasions of Ahmed Shah Abdali and thus the suffering of millions came to an end. Besides awakening the people politically he spent his time in the advancement of cultural activities and in the production of high class works of poetry and literature. He had employed 52 poets of great repute. He himself wrote prolifically in Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi, Oadhi, Brij Bhasha and Punjabi. He wrote martial as well as lyrical poetry. His famous writings are the *Bachittar Natak*, the *Chandi-ki-Var*, the *Akal Ustat*, the *Sastra Nam Mala*, Lyrics in Punjabi and the *Zafarnama* in Persian. He writes in the *Bachitar Natak*, "For this purpose have I come in this world to up hold and propagate dharma in every place. And to seize and destroy the doers of sin and evil."

Many Gurdwaras built in his memory and his historical writings and weapons preserved in many museums remind the people of India of his living memory. Five sacred weapons of Guru Gobind Singh were brought from England by the Government of India. They were taken to many places in India and revived the living spirit of Guru Gobind Singh in the hearts of the people of India.

He gave the message of unity, equality and fraternity to the people of India. In the history of India he is a savior of the nation, a person of exemplary courage, deep reflection and a dynamic personality. His creation of the Khalsa is one of the most amazing mass phenomena ever accomplished in the history of the world. His largest contribution is that he related the message of spirituality to the life of the people gave a new relationship between metaphysical and material thoughts and action and fought for stopping political corruption, social degradation and religious exploitation in this country. His teachings will help us in the task of national reconstruction promoting national unity and in the evolution of a self-respecting and well-knit society. According to Dhavan, "The creation of *Khalsa*

is important for many reasons. Its foundational texts questioned every facet of the social and political hierarchies that dominated peasant life in the seventeenth century. Other than challenging the moral right of the Mughal Emperor to rule, *Khalsa* Sikhs, who were among the first to describe appropriate *Khalsa* practices, also questioned the hierarchies of caste and inherited privilege that dominated their world. ”<sup>2</sup>

### ***Dharam Yudh - Just War***

Sikhism has a concept of the Just War. It's called *Dharam Yudh*, meaning war in the defence of righteousness.

In such a war:

- The war must be the last resort - all other ways of resolving the conflict must be tried first
- The motive must not be revenge or enmity
- The army must not include mercenaries
- The army must be disciplined
- Only the minimum force needed for success should be used
- Civilians must not be harmed
- There must be no looting, territory must not be annexed, property taken must be returned.

This is similar to the ideas contained in Western Just War theory. Sikhs also believe that treaties and cease-fires must be honoured, places of worship (of any faith) should not be damaged, and soldiers who surrender should not be harmed. The crucial difference from Just War theory is that Sikhs believe that, if a war is just, it should be undertaken even if it cannot be won.

Sikhs are expected to take military action against oppression, and there is no modern tradition of absolute pacifism amongst Sikhs, although Sikhs are strongly in favour of action to promote human rights and harmony between religions and states.

The present-day life demands the most up-to-dated education. And the humanitarian sciences are also undergoing radical changes nowadays, shifting themselves to modern problems and social needs. It is understood that Indian universities, colleges and other educational institutions are coming forward to prepare our youth and students to another phase of development of our country, which goes with the name of globalization and global living. With a developed infrastructure of science and technology, with a new work ethics, and a fresh entrepreneurial spirit and a revised social policy of distribution of wealth, indeed at the threshold of 21<sup>st</sup> century, no country can remain isolated from the global processes.

However, slavish copying of western sciences, or industrial and managerial techniques, cannot transform us into a modern nation. We need a fundamental revolution in our ethos, mental attitude to meet the challenges of modernity. Culture and social ethos are the collective memory of the people which condition its members to move faster, as well as to be entailed in stagnation, to have a universal vision, or to be engulfed by narrow sectarian views. Social scientists and psychologists have identified that Indian mind has an accumulated kind of inertia which works against any radical change in our social set up, and has developed a type of passivity and limitedness which makes us stop before any fast growth. These values of inertia, passivity and inaction are related with the culturally conditioned ethos, and with certain trend of our age-old traditions, religions and philosophies. Of course, this is not the whole picture of Indian culture. However, we must acknowledge that some of our religions and philosophies have imbibed in us, deep in our consciousness a type of attitude, and a temperament which pulls us back before any global and universal thinking and living.

The idea of post-medievalism found in Sikhism suggests us also to discuss about the theme of the type of renaissance or enlightenment India had when it was entering into the historical period of modernity. The modern age coined the ideas of democracy and egalitarianism. The very same concepts are deeply embedded in Sikh thought. The composition of Sikh scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, is the best evidence of its democratic basis. It is free of any sectarianism in religious matters. It contains the hymns and songs of not only the Sikh Gurus but also those of the *sufi* saints, the *Vaishnava Bhaktas* and 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.

Sikhism is modern not only because it transcends the communalism of Indian religious history but also by its wise understanding of the inevitable problems of the modern way of living. In European history, modernism reaches its end in consequence of its over-centredness at the individual. Among recent western philosophies, existentialism pays special attention to the sufferings, anxiety, fear and desperateness of the individual. It indicates how much the cherished European ideal of individual is split and alienated. The interesting fact is that Sikhism at its core condemns the egocentric way of living. *Haumai*, the I-ness of the individual, has been identified as the major source of evil. Fallenness and liberation are understood in Sikhism in terms of *haumai* and its dissolution. Sikhism proposes community living and collectivism as the alternatives to the ego-centric way of living. Guru Amardas says:

In egoism is the world ruined, further and further declining.<sup>3</sup>

Another critical bearing of Sikhism is unflinching resistance to religion serving political dominance. Sikhism had very painful experiences with the later rulers of the Mughal empire and it opted to fight it out. This experience had turned Sikhism in to assume a critical approach to any form of political dominance, particularly political leadership mobilizing the public support in the name of religion for its coercive interests. Guru Nanak Dev was as well against religious debates turning into conflicts of civilizations. Sikhism is against crusades when they are aimed at

political hegemony and totalitarianism in global politics as well as in national politics. On the other hand, Sikhism is not shy of politics when it is grounded upon justice. It is this subaltern religiosity that makes Sikhism ever alive in history.

The present world suffers from the problems of mutual distrust and disharmony, oppression and violence, and if we have to set the world free from these and such other evils, we must “see others as our brothers and sisters; we need to discover how to affirm our own identity...without threatening the identity of others.”<sup>4</sup> This happens to be the central message of the Sikh faith, which says that the idea of God’s love for all teaches us to accept and value the other in his or her otherness. It considers all religions and their revelations valid, appreciates other faiths but at the same time adopts dialogue to convey its differences on whatever points, makes love for God the *vis-a-tergo* of love for mankind and express this love through *seva* and such other philanthropic activities.

The Sikh stress is on ethics of creative activism aiming at the realization of an ideal social structure of the Gurus’ vision- a structure wherein love and equality prevail, the otherness of the other and human dignity are respected, and oppression is replaced by justice mingled with compassion. But the need of the hour is that we must not limit ourselves to words alone, rather we must try and put them into practice and live the idea in our practical social life. “The teachings of Guru Gobind Singh are truly secular in nature and highly relevant for every man who is opposed to evil and wedded to virtue....His ideas are the heritage of mankind; these should be spread like fragrance all over the globe.”<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Never before in the history of the world a Master has been known to have turned himself into a disciple of his own initiated ones, considered them superior to himself, sought their favour thus, sat at their feet, got himself initiated that same way at their hands and merged his entity with his self-created community, claiming no higher privileges than those he had bestowed upon them. Guru Gobind Singh also interchanged thereby his august position with the collectivity of his disciples, that is the *Khalsa* Fraternity, as one entity. He “enunciated thus”, says Dr. Hari Ram Gupta, “ninety years earlier, the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity which formed the bedrock of the French Revolution.”<sup>6</sup> According to Arnold Toynbee, he anticipated Lenin by two centuries by infusing democratic spirit and temper in his people.<sup>7</sup> He similarly anticipated, thereby, two and a half centuries earlier, the ideals, intentions and aspirations of the United Nations, as proclaimed on 26 June 1945, reaffirming “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human beings in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small;” establishing “conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations.... can be maintained”; and “promoting social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.”<sup>8</sup> So much so that the cardinal principles on which Guru Gobind Singh based that ‘New and Novel Order’ are the same which formed the basis of the Preamble the Constitution of the Free India, adopted and enacted on 26 November 1949, resolving “to

constitute India into a Sovereign Democratic Republic and to secure to all its citizens Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.”<sup>9</sup>

Sri Aurobindo sums up the achievement of the Guru thus, “The Sikh Khalsa was an astonishingly original and novel creation, and its face turned not to the past but to the future. Guru Gobind Singh’s aim as a leader was not to lead the people in the context of contemporary circumstances but also to make them conscious of their role, even in the times to come.”<sup>10</sup>

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