

Guru Gobind Singh's Idea of Good Governance

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Abstract

The idea of good governance is deeply embed in the Sikh socio-spiritual and political thought. Sikhism emerged as a revolutionary movement against bad governance. Sikh Gurus laid the strong foundation of liberal, democratic and God-centred governance. Guru Gobind Singh's vision of good governance is based on the higher standards of socio-religious and ethical values. Ethical and truthful conduct, in the Sikhism, is a prerequisite to achieve the highest goal of life i.e. reunion with the Supreme Being. Guru Gobind Singh believed that good governance plays very decisive role in the creation of those favourable socio-political and economic conditions, which would facilitates the socio-spiritual and economic development. To him, good governance ensures the protection of human rights and human dignity; promote the spirit of social equality, religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence and liberate the masses from economic exploitation. In the Zafarnamah (a letter of victory), he severely criticized the brutal, unjust and cold-blooded Mughal emperor Aurungzeb. He pleaded him to follow the message of Holy Quran to be fair, broad-minded, humanitarian and benevolent towards masses especially the non-Muslims. He wanted that the political rulers and administrative functionaries should be the God oriented, enlightened, God-fearing, truthful, righteous, ethical, compassionate, philanthropic and accountable.

Keywords:

Aurangzeb; Good Governance; Zafarnamah

Introductory Background:

The idea of good governance has become a catchphrase in the contemporary liberal-democratic world. Academicians, bureaucrats and political rulers embark on good governance as a key to the socio-economic development of masses. The good governance is considered as a feasible way to get rid of red-tapism, incompetence, ineffectiveness, absurdity, arbitrariness etc on the part of administrators and political rulers, which often creates fuss, inconvenience, anxiety and chaos. Bad governance is an offshoot of wide spread corruption, functional inefficiency, political insensitiveness, administrative deadlocks and undesirable delay in the formulation and execution of public welfare policies. In essence, *governance* means the process of decision-making and the procedure by which decisions are carried out or not carried out by those who govern. It is distinguished from *government*, which refers to an institution consisting of a set of instruments through which people of a state govern themselves by means of laws, rules, and regulations enforced by the state apparatus. Good governance is a subset of governance, and its essential ingredients depend on such fundamental values as accountability, transparency, justice, fairness, equity, and ethics as practiced in a liberal democratic polity. Good governance is also part of a government's goal of sustaining a good quality of life for its public.¹ It also involves the maximum people's participation in the policymaking and is based on principle of rule of law, righteousness, answerability and impartiality.

The idea of good governance holds a significant place in the Sikh socio-ethical, spiritual and political philosophy.

Sikh Gurus made very harsh comments on bad governance of their contemporary oppressive, despotic and unjust foreign rulers. They gave supreme sacrifices to create an ideal socio-political environment, which would facilitate the humankind to achieve the highest goal of their life i.e. reunion with Supreme Being. They were egalitarians in their approach and pleaded the cause of suffering humanity in the era of Mughal rulers in India. They envisaged a model of ideal, moderate, egalitarian and God-oriented governance.

The present research paper is an attempt to analyse the Guru Gobind Singh's vision of good governance in the light of the teachings of his predecessor Sikh Gurus and Sikh ethics with special reference to *Zafarnamah* (a letter of victory written by Guru Gobind Singh to Mughal emperor Aurangzeb). This research paper is divided into three parts. The first part highlights the attitude of Sikh Gurus towards the bad governance under the Mughal rulers. In the second part, the idea of good governance is explored in the light of socio-ethical teachings of Sikh Gurus. In the third and last part, Guru Gobind Singh's ideas on good governance will be discussed with special reference to *Zafarnamah*.

(I)

During the Guru Period (1469-1708), the socio-religious, political and economic conditions in India were not contributing to socio-spiritual progress of an individual. Social discriminations, political coercion, religious fanaticism and political despotism had created disorder, uncertainty and social disharmony. Sikh Gurus took the due notice of the political oppression of Lodi Sultans and Mughal emperors. They found that the rulers and administrative functionaries were obsessed with racial arrogance and superiority complex; and they gave ill treatment to non-Muslims, demoralized and poor masses. The Muhammadan rulers were plundering their homes, lifting their

women, desecrating and demolishing their temples, making thousands of them relinquish their faith, and subjecting them in innumerable indignities and debasing tyrannies.² Political exploitation, brutality and injustice were common. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, said, "The dark-age is the scalpel, the kings are the butchers and righteousness has taken wings and flown."³

Bhai Gurdas, a famous Sikh theologian, described the prevalent state of bad governance in his vars. He said, "The kings are committing sins, contrarily the fence is devouring the field. The subjects are blind without the knowledge, who utters lies and falsehood from their mouths."⁴ Guru Nanak also made harsh comments on lawlessness and exploitative nature of Mughal rule in India. He said, "Both avarice and sin are the King and Minister and falsehood is the Master of Minit. Lust, the assistant official, is summoned and consulted and they all sit together and chalk out evil plans."⁵ He found that "The kings are tigers and the courtiers dogs, they go and (harass) or (awaken) the sitting and the sleeping ones."⁶ He observed that, "The King administers justice only if his palm is greased. In the name of God none is moved."⁷

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, also observed that the Mughal administrators and political rulers were engaged in either lavish living or fighting with each other. They were hardly concerned with the welfare of poor masses. Religious leaders misguide them and rulers cleverly justify their actions and misdeed by quoting religious scriptures. Political rulers and religious leaders joined their hands in exploiting the society. They forget their duties and do not feel concern about eternal message of their scriptures. Guru Gobind Singh did not tolerate this kind of bad governance based on social, economic and political injustice. He not only raised the strong objections against reckless and cruel contemporary ruler Aurangzeb but also laid the socio-ethical

foundations of democratic, righteous, responsive and accountable governance.

(II)

Sikh Gurus made incredible efforts to reinvigorate the prevailing political conditions to create suitable environment for creation of an egalitarian and just social, political and economic order. They repudiated the idea of departure of politics from the religion. To them, social, economic and spiritual concerns of human race can be satisfied only in God-centred socio-economic and political order. God-oriented governance represents true model of good governance and welfare state based on truth, justice and harmony. They strongly believed that the principles of Politics, which govern relations between the rulers and the citizens, and relations between the states and states, should be so revolutionized as to bring them in complete accord with the principles of ethics.⁸ Guru Gobind Singh and his predecessors advocated the harmonious fusion of spiritual and temporal matters in their socio-political philosophy. They strongly believed that secular or earthly sovereign is not the ultimate authority to differentiate between good or bad, truth and false, and right and wrong. They wanted that earthly rulers should be God fearing and God oriented man and they should think and act in the larger interests of the masses to uplift their standards of living through the good governance.

Sikh Gurus were keen to lay down the principles spirituo-ethical basis of statecraft. When Babur, the founder of Mughal dynasty, sought the blessings of Guru Nanak and asked the Guru for instruction suitable to his position. The Guru said, 'Deliver just judgments, reverence hold men, forswear wine and gambling.

The monarch who indulges in these vices shall, if he survives, bewail his misdeeds. Be merciful to the vanquished, and worship god in spirit and in truth.'⁹ Similarly, When Mughal emperor Akbar partook of the Guru Arjan Dev's hospitality, and prayed to be

allowed to contribute to his large expenditure, so that thereby he might secure spiritual and temporal welfare and happiness. The Guru replied, 'The welfare and happiness of monarchs depend on cherishing their subjects and doing justice. The monarch whose subjects are happy shall himself be happy in this life, and in the next obtain praise, glory, and honour.'¹⁰

Guru Gobind Singh laid down the ethical code of conduct, which paves a way to an individual to be an ideal in all spheres of life as well as facilitates the ruler to be generous, helpful and humanitarian towards masses. He strongly believed that it is a paramount duty of religious person in general and for a ruler in particular to inculcate the five virtues viz., truthfulness, compassion, humility, contentment and love for humanity. He tried to divinise the political order by emphasising on need of strict observance of ethical values. He also believed that Sikh ethical values enable a person to overcome the evil passions, which often deviates him/her from the righteous path. He strongly felt that for the socio-spiritual development of humanity, people are required to be virtuous and honest in their actions. He dream of an ideal ruler who rules in accordance with the universal message of Supreme Reality (God). In the Sikhism, an Ideal ruler is the embodiment of higher standards of moral values. An ideal administrator and ruler is a liberal in judgment, moral in action and God fearing in approach. He is a Saint-Soldier and act as custodian of underprivileged and weaker sections of society. He has high regard for human dignity, individual freedom and human rights. He does not aim at creation of theocratic state rather he provides religious freedom to all irrespective of their religious beliefs. He follows the virtuous path and remains truthful and committed to cause of general welfare of masses.

(III)

Guru Gobind Singh was born with divine mission under divine plan. He was

deputed by God to restrain people from doing evil and committing sins, and to bring them on to the path of goodness and piety; to root out sin, tyranny, high-handedness, injustice, and brutality; and to plant, instead, the sweet virtues of justice, mercy, all-embracing love, brotherliness, and purity; to reform all sinners and evil-doers, to extirpate the oppressors and tyrants who were spreading terror in the world; and to help and lift the righteous, the good, and the kind, those who contended against evil and the doers of evil.¹¹

His life is a saga of struggle against the bigot and degenerate rulers, both Hindus (as in the case of certain chieftains in the Shivalik foothills) and Muslims (the Emperor of Delhi and his deputies in various provinces in the Punjab) who acted against the established ethical code of human equality, dignity, love, justice, righteousness, etc. based on the principle of Divine manifestation in all beings and at all places. The Guru was of the view that the observance of the above ethical code was necessary, on the one hand, for the spread of righteousness in human affairs and, on the other, for the realization of the Divine in personal life.¹²

He believed that there are two forces, which claim allegiance of men's souls on earth, the truth and morality as religion, and the state as embodiment of mere utilitarianism and secular politics. The primary allegiance of man is to the truth and morality, and those who fail in this allegiance, suffer under the subjugation of the earthly state, unnourished by the courage and hope, which is born through unswerving adherence to their primary allegiance.¹³

He laid emphasis on ethical and moral principles in statecraft and in life generally. Without this foundation of *Dharma*, there could be no true happiness and society could not hold together. The aim was social welfare, not only the welfare of a particular group or caste but of the whole world.¹⁴

By creating the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh institutionalised politics by creating new parameters for the political system in contrast to the contemporary secularised state order. He linked politics with religion and through religious inspiration and perception aimed at bringing about a revival of Guru Nanak's philosophy of a theological state. This was not merely an ideal but something to be practised by the Panth in the sense that the state was to be governed by the norms provided by the Gurbani. In this way, true to the Indian tradition as also the teachings of the Gurus, the concept of the state was given a new orientation in line with the Miri-Piri ideology.¹⁵

Guru Gobind Singh sojourned widely in South-East Punjab. From Dina, a village in present-day Faridkot district, he wrote to Aurangzeb a letter in Persian verse called *Zafarnamah*, the Epistle of Victory. He stressed in the composition how the ethical principle should have supremacy in matter of public policy as well as of private behaviour. Victory and defeat were to be judged by the ultimate standards of morality, and not by temporary material advantage. The epistle was a severe indictment of Aurangzeb, who was repeatedly upbraided for breach of faith in the attack made by his troops on the Sikhs after they had vacated Anandpur on the solemn assurances of safe passage given them by him and his officers.¹⁶ The *Zafarnamah* emphatically reiterates the sovereignty of morality the affairs of the state as much as in the conduct of individual human beings and regards the means as important as the end. It stresses that absolute truthfulness is as much the duty of the sovereign as of any of the ordinary citizens.¹⁷ The essence of *Zafarnamah* is that in order to be just and virtuous and human one be righteous and truthful and never be misled by temptations of power and pelf. This is the timely warning to those who seek unfair and violent means to secure influential positions in the handling of political power

and public trusts to their personal aggrandizements.¹⁸

The *Zafarnamah* stressed the centrality of truth in statecraft, and underscored the importance of rulers abiding by the same moral principles they expected of the ruled. Guru Gobind Singh's communication to the emperor was a reaffirmation of his own commitment to the democratic ideal of openness and accountability. No less unique for those times was his ethical conviction that integrity of purpose and openness - or 'transparency' - were essential in the conduct of relations between the ruler and the ruled.¹⁹ In this letter of victory, he condemns what is unjust and cruel and extols what is true and morally correct. Victory and defeat are to be judged by the ultimate standards of morality, and not by temporary material advantage. The epistle was a severe indictment of Aurangzeb who was repeatedly chided for breach of faith in the attack made by the Mughal troops on the Sikhs after they had vacated Anandpur on solemn assurances given them by him and his officers (verses 13, 14). For the candid and unambiguous terms in which the Emperor and his policies are castigated in it, the *Zafarnamah* should easily be the most forthright essay in diplomacy known in history. It emphatically reiterates the sovereignty of morality in the affairs of state as much as in the conduct of individual human beings and regards the means as important as the end. Absolute truthfulness is as much the duty of a sovereign as of any one of the ordinary citizens.²⁰ The Guru pleaded for open diplomacy, and the practice of moral values in political matters. Spirituality is moral life in action. True religion is in reality a struggle for upholding moral values and vindication of justice, equality and freedom.²¹

The Guru makes several comments about what a king should or should not do. A king must be cognizant that God could not have wished for him to create strife but instead to promote peace, harmony and

tranquillity among the people. (65) Nor should the ruler use his strength, power and resources to harass, suppress or deprive the weak. This will only weaken the society, erode his ability to rule effectively and make the State unsafe. (109) He should not recklessly shed blood of others lest heaven's rage should befall him. (69)²²

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it can be inferred that there exists a close linkage between the Sikh ethical values and good governance. Sikh Gurus did not condemn the Mughal rulers because they were the Muslims. They criticised their rule because of their bad governance, unkindness, religious intolerance, violation of human rights and disregard to human dignity. Guru Gobind Singh gave a comprehensive and dynamic model of good governance based on the higher ethical principles and denounced the power-centred Machiavellian statecraft. He firmly believed that unethical and irreligious ruler is a hypocrite, wicked, corrupt, cruel and unaccountable. To him, good governance is possible only when the rulers and administrative functionaries observe certain moral principles and remain truthful, compassionate, answerable and honest to public.

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