

Sikhism: A Quest for Human Dignity

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Abstract

The quest for human dignity is deeply rooted in the Sikh socio-spiritual and political thought. Sikh Gurus had restored the human dignity, self-respect and self-confidence of demoralized masses in the darkest hours of history of humankind. Human dignity is a central theme of their divine compositions. They strived for the promotion and protection of human dignity. They pleaded the case of downtrodden, demoralized and dehumanized humanity. They gave the supreme scarifies to defend the self-esteem, dignity and honour of an individual. They took all the necessary steps to boost up the morale of women and depressed sections of society and motivated them to resist the any kind of disrespect and violation of their dignity and human rights.

Keywords: Dignity, Religious freedom, Human rights, Khalsa Panth.

Introductory Background:

The respect for human dignity is the essential feature of a liberal, democratic and egalitarian social, economic and political order. A just

and equitable socio-political system ensures the respect, protection and promotion of the human dignity. The word 'human dignity' is consists of two words. The word 'human' indicates the fundamental characteristics of human race. The word 'dignity' implies the state or quality of being worthy of honour or respect. The concept of human dignity is used in social, ethical, legal and political realms to signify that people have a fundamental right to be respected and be given the fair and dignified treatment. The sacredness of human life and of self-esteem, individual liberty, respect for human rights and the highest growth of human personality are central to the concept of human dignity. Social humiliation, political marginalization, economic degradation and moral

dehumanization are bound to create the disregard for self-esteem and honour of people. Human dignity demands the eradication of social discriminations, political oppression, economic exploitation and religious intolerance. The violation of human dignity and human rights is hostile to any attempt to create the free, fair and egalitarian social order.

Sikhism has played a historic and crucial role in restoration of human dignity of powerless, downhearted and vulnerable sections of Medieval Indian society. During Medieval centuries, in India, foreign invaders, Afghan and Mughal rulers were obsessed with racial arrogance and religious fanaticism. They did not give the due regard to the dignity of masses. Religious bigotry and sense of pride made them blind and consequently they did not restrain from transgression of the human rights. They did not respect the non-Muslims

and considered them as their slaves. They considered them as animals or second-class citizens. Sikhism raised the strong voice against dominant socio-religious and political forces and struggled for the protection of dignity of people. Sikh Gurus felt disturbed with the prevailing wretched socio-economic and political order. They denounced the religious fanaticism and racial arrogance of Mughal rulers. They criticised their cruel character and despotic rule. They fought against the contemporary rulers because of their cold-blooded and undignified treatment with defenceless, disheartened and weak masses. They taught their followers to defend their dignity and honour in all situations and inspired them to be prepared to give the supreme sacrifice to resist any attempt, which aimed at the violation of their dignity. In fact, the Sikh faith did not come into conflict with the Mughal imperialism just accidentally but as a

direct consequence of its ideological orientation as the support and the refuge of the suffering humanity, of the poor and the helpless. It is in this connection that the resolve of Guru Gobind Singh to train those destitute and lowly people into the art of statecraft, who never knew any human dignity by either their birth or their caste, becomes meaningful (Singh, Attar, 2011)¹. Guru Gobind Singh had laid emphasis on armed resistance to Mughal rulers to protect the honour and dignity of masses. He transformed the long-standing state of mind of Indian people and inculcated the spirit of nationalism among people by motivating them to fight against injustice and tyranny to defend their honour and country.

Sikh Vision of Human Dignity:

Sikhism is emerged as a socio-religious movement to emancipate the humanity, to defend the human dignity, individual liberty and to promote the

spirit of social justice. Sikh Gurus gave a very comprehensive vision of human dignity. To them, human dignity is an intrinsic and fundamental right of every individual. In Sikhism, human dignity is closely related with the ideals of religious freedom, socio-economic equality and political justice. Human dignity requires the freedom of expression, freedom of action, freedom of faith and worship and elimination of special privileges. Sikh Gurus firmly believed that the human dignity is the integral and fundamental right of an individual and to uphold the self-esteem and honour of a human being, the oppressive social, economic and political structures are needed to be abolished. In Sikhism, any violation and disrespect of self-esteem of an individual is considered as the transgression of fundamental rights. The Sikh history is a replica of Sikh movement for the defence of honour,

dignity and self-respect of a person. Sikh Gurus laid supreme sacrifices for the sake of preservation of self-esteem of people.

Sikh Gurus established a close relationship between right to religious freedom and human dignity. To them, freedom of faith and worship is the necessary condition to live in dignified manners. Any kind of hindrance in the way of right to religious freedom poses a serious threat to self-esteem of people. Sikh Gurus fought against religious intolerance and religious fundamentalism of Mughal rulers. It was an irony of the fate that minority Muslim ruling class denied the right to religious freedom to the majority of Hindu population. Hindus were not free to practice their religion and Mughal rulers enforced the several restrictions on them and forced them to convert to Islam. Sikh Gurus gave the supreme sacrifices to uphold the religious freedom. Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Tegh

Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh gave the unprecedented sacrifices for the preservation of freedom of faith, worship, conscience and expression to live in the dignified manners. Sikh Gurus ushered for multicultural society based on interfaith dialogue, spirit of peaceful co-existence, unity and mutual respect. In such a plural society, there will be no place for any coercion, domination, fundamentalism, empty ritualism and disregard for human dignity.

In Sikhism, fearlessness is the essential attribute of Infinite reality. Sikhism is in fact a way of life to inculcate the Godly attributes among human beings. It is imperative for an ethical and God-oriented person to be fearless and it is a true that person can be fearless only if he urged to live in the dignified manners. A demoralized person living under heartbroken conditions cannot maintain his dignity and honour. It is

the fundamental socio-religious obligation of a person to fear not and frighten not because the sense of insecurity diminish the self-confidence and trim down the dignity of an individual. Sikhism justified the use of force as the last resort to maintain human dignity and freedom. When confronted with unfairness and oppression, Sikhism encourages the armed resistance. Here, it does not mean that Sikhism has justified any sort of violence. Sikh Gurus granted the permission to raise arms only to deal with the misrule, absolutism and coercion to maintain the dignity of masses.

Guru Hargobind Sahib, the sixth Sikh Guru, told the Sikhs not to compromise their dignity. He taught them to fight against injustice howsoever powerful may be the enemy of Justice and Righteousness. Guru Sahib imbued the spirit of bravery, courage and chivalry among

the people. The people, who had always surrendered before every aggressor and accepted his slavery, now decided to fight against not only foreign invaders but also every tyrant and unjust person. Sikhism told them not to fear (nor even to frighten) anyone (Dilgeer, H. S., 2000)². In the 1699, Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa Panth to create a nation of self-respecting people. The Khalsa *conscientizes* the Man and elevates him to a conscious level. It makes known the rights to which a man is entitled. The Khalsa makes the man aware of oppression to which he is exposed for ages. The Khalsa energises the human beings to honest labour and dignified living. The *Kirpan*, a Khalsa Sikh wears, renders him a tremendous power of self-dignity and self-respect (Mohan, N. M., 2003)³. He gave sword in the hands of Khalsa to fight against unjust rulers to uphold the self-esteem

of people. *Kirpan* (sword) in Sikhism represents the self-dignity, honour and urge for socio-political emancipation and commitment to resist the tyranny, injustice and disrespect of dignity. Guru Gobind Singh inculcated the martial spirit among Sikhs and liberated the masses from physical and mental slavery. He encouraged, motivated and trained the people to give the supreme sacrifice in their struggle against any kind of violation of human dignity. It is the impact of his eternal message that Sikhs emerged as sovereign political rulers in the North-India in the later 18th century.

In Sikhism, there is also a close linkage between social equality and human dignity. Sikhism preaches the social egalitarianism and gives the highest place to self-esteem of an individual. Sikh Gurus visualised an ideal, just and equitable society in which there will be no place for social inequalities, discriminations and

economic exploitation. Human dignity is the foundation of the Sikh vision of an ideal social order. Sikh vision of an ideal social order presumes the greatest regard for the dignity of people irrespective of their caste, creed, colour, race, gender etc. Sikh Gurus strongly believed that the violation of human dignity and any harm to individual's personality is the reflection of social inequalities in the society. To them, the loss of human dignity is equal to social injustice.

Sikhism criticised the hierarchical social structures of Medieval Indian society. Sikh Gurus disproved the social stratifications and artificial social distinctions and considered them as the obstacles in the way of dignified living. They regarded the human birth as an extraordinary and precious occasion to seek the merger with Supreme Being. Any disregard of human life and human dignity is the basic hindrance in the way of creating

the egalitarian society and in the way to achieve the highest goal of life i.e. socio-spiritual development of human being. They reacted very sharply against caste system, economic exploitation of working classes, socio-ethical degeneration, social inactiveness and disrespect of women. They criticised the double standards of upper caste Brahmins and Kashtriyas and their behaviour and viewpoint towards lower caste groups. They strongly condemned all those social customs, religious practices and political policies of contemporary rulers, which deteriorated the self-respect and honour of any individual. They understood the plight of women and marginalized sections. They made harsh comments on the socio-religious and political leaders for their hypocrisy, discriminatory and misogynistic attitudes towards women.

Sikh Gurus were indeed the harbingers of gender equality and

women rights. They were the defenders of her dignity. They took the due notice of plight and disrespect of woman in the Medieval Indian society. They paid a rich tribute to women and elevated her status in the society. They criticised those social customs, religious practices and misogynist attitudes, which undermined her position in the Medieval Indian society. They gave her equal rights and liberated her from age-old male chauvinism. They praised her feminine features and found that her intrinsic characteristics are needed to attain the spiritual salvation. They gave the equal opportunities to women to participate in social, economic and political affairs.

Guru Nanak severely criticised Babur and his army for misbehaviour with women. The early Sikh Gurus repudiated the Indian social customs that denied women an equal place in society. They spoke out against the

Hindu custom of suttee, in which a widow had to sacrifice her own life at her husband's cremation. They dismissed the Islamic practice of *purdah*, whereby women had to veil their faces and bodies in public. In addition, they rejected the custom of female infanticide, in which newborn girls, thought to be less valuable than boys, were put to death (Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur, 2009)⁴. They uphold her pivotal role in family and society. In their Divine hymns, they pleaded the case of women. In the Sikh socio-religious institutions women get emancipation, freedom and dignity.

Sikh Gurus had also shown the highest regard for the working classes and repudiated those who exploit the labour class. In Sikhism, there is no place for parasitism and economic exploitation. A true Sikh works hard and earns through the honest deeds. Exploitation and disrespect of labour class is antithetical to the spirit of

fundamental teachings of Sikh Gurus. It is the evident from the life sketches of Sikh Gurus that they took the side of labour class and promoted the work culture to enable a person to uplift his/her socio-economic status and to live in the dignified manners by reducing their dependences on others. To promote the spirit of dignity, self-confidence and honour, Sikh Gurus wanted that a person should be self-reliant. They had established the dignity of labour. In the traditional Hindu system, those who served were considered inferior, and those to whom service was rendered were reckoned superior. The Gurus sought to reverse this. They exalted those who served and disapproved those who shunned serving others (Neki, J. S., 2004)⁵. Guru Nanak taught that every human being-even though he was a poor man with a menial occupation, had dignity and value in the sight of God, consequently, every person had the

inherent right to change his religion, his occupation or his station in life, if he so wished. Not only that, the Guru himself, on occasions, performed manual labour, and by his example he demonstrated that every honest occupation was honourable (Wylam, P M., 2000)⁶.

Sikh Approach towards Restoration of Human Dignity:

Sikh Gurus urged for an egalitarian and fair society in which the honour and self-esteem of an individual have very significant place. Sikhism, indeed, ushered for humanitarian society in which there will be self-respect of people will be protected at all costs. Sikh Gurus firmly believed that to abolish the social inequalities, religious bigotry and political tyranny there is immense need to create a society of self respecting people.

Guru Nanak and his successors Sikh Gurus had socialized the religion

and advocated the harmonious fusion of social and spiritual affairs. They rejected the asceticism and preferred the householder life. They found that asceticism leads to escapism, social apathy and parasitism. Sikhism is, in fact, a householder's religion. Sikh Gurus believed that dependence on others to seek the satisfaction of earthly needs and submission to political tyranny ultimately reduce the dignity of an individual. They criticised those religious practice, which persuade a person to escape from social responsibilities. They wanted the active social participation and due performance of socio-religious obligations. An ideal man in Sikhism always strives for human dignity and prepares himself to fight against those who violate his dignity. He also take care of dignity of his fellow-beings and if need arises, he goes in for armed resistance to political oppression.

Sikh Gurus also attempted to divinise the social and political order. To them, an ideal ruler should respect the sentiments of people and treat with them in the honourable manners. They strongly believed that political rulers should be God fearing and God-oriented and they should strived for those conducive social, economic and political environment wherein a person can live with respect, honour and make progress in a life. They established a close relationship between religion and politics. They wanted that politics should be based on certain ethical principles.

In the Sikhism, it is a strong belief that human birth is the rare opportunity to realize the Ultimate Reality. Human dignity is essential for the development of personality of an individual to seek the socio-spiritual salvation. Sikh Gurus did not only advocate the cause of human dignity through their teachings but they also

took some practical measures to promote the uplift the demoralized and weaker sections of society. To promote the sense of social solidarity and to defend the dignity of an individual, Guru Nanak and his successors established some socio-religious institutions like *Dharmsal*, *Sangat* (holy congregation) and *Langar* (common kitchen) wherein people not only listen the divine sermons but also can practice the teachings of Sikh Gurus in everyday life.

Guru Nanak launched a crusade against the caste divisions and declared that God had no caste. He despised the exclusion of low-caste people from entering and worshipping at Hindu temples. He introduced the traditions of *sangat* (communal worship) and *langar* (communal meal) to transmit the message of the oneness of God. He also preached the significance of *kirat-karna* (earning

one's living through honest means) and *wand chhakna* (sharing the fruits of one's labour with others) (Kalsi, S. S., 2005).⁷

Sikh Gurus gave also due attention to lay down the structural design of the Sikh Gurdwaras to uphold the dignity and honour of all sections of society. In the Hindu temples, priests welcome the selective people belonging to high caste groups and deny the equal religious freedom to untouchables. Muslim Mosques put restrictions on the entry of women. In the Sikh Gurdwaras, there is no place for social divisions. Men and women equally participate in the socio-religious matters and downtrodden people get equal respect and honour. People belonging to various socio-religious and economic backgrounds are welcomed in *Dharmsal*. The rich and poor; influential and subaltern; and king and beggar are treated alike in the *Dharmsal* i.e. abode of

righteousness. In *Dharmsal*, person learns to discard the parochial attitudes, selfishness and ego. In the *Sangat*, people belonging to different classes, castes, colours, races, genders and regions are directed and trained to serve the society. They are motivated to prepare to offer the supreme sacrifice for the promotion and protection of justice, rights and liberties of human beings. *Dharamsala* has emerged as centre for worship, socio-spiritual development and social cohesion.

In the *Langar*, people sit in the rows to eat together. The institution of *Langar* played a key role in the exclusion of the irrational, inhuman and artificial social divisions, which were antithetical to spirit of Sikhism and respect for human dignity. The institution of *Langar* ensures the social egalitarianism and social solidarity in practice. It is the most effective step to eliminate the caste prejudice and

exclusiveness. It inculcates the spirit of self-confidence among depressed and demoralised people. It provides equal opportunities to all to interact with others by rising above the unjustified social divisions. It plays crucial role in the improvement of the social, economic and political status of the untouchables. It ensures better treatment with the poor and the under-privileged sections of society.

Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa Panth in 1699 to eliminate the superficial social divisions to inculcate the spirit of equality, brotherhood and unity among masses. He abolished all kinds of manmade social distinctions, which had deteriorated the social status of vulnerable sections of Hindu social order. The lower castes and classes were, as such, provided an opportunity of vertical mobility up to the highest level. The new normative principle of social organisation, introduced by the baptismal *amrit*,

made people realise their essential humanistic identity with a sense of horizontal solidarity as co-equal members in the Order of the Khalsa, which does not admit of fixed, stratified role performance, nor the caste-based differentiation of connubial and ritual functions (Ahluwalia, J. S. , 2001)⁸.

Conclusion:

Human dignity is the first and foremost concern of Sikh Gurus. They emphasised on dignified and truthful living. They believed that to live with honour and self-respect is a prerequisite of socio-spiritual development of a human being. They taught the humankind to fight against political absolutism, social inequalities and religious fundamentalism. In Sikhism, any compromise with self-esteem and individual's honour is antithetical to the eternal teachings of revered Sikh Gurus. It is a socio-religious duty of a Sikh to live with

dignity and honour and to defend the
honour of all members of society.

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