

# The Idea of Service to Humanity in Sikhism

Dr. Arvinder Singh

Head, Department of Political Science, Ramgarhia College, Phagwara (Punjab)

Email: arvindersinghbhalla@gmail.com

## Abstract

Sikhism urged for a strong sense of fellow feeling in the society. The Sikh Gurus wanted to eliminate the ill effects of hierarchical social structures, racial arrogance and religious prejudices. In order to develop a sense of emotional belongingness and socio-cultural unity, Sikh Gurus pleaded for voluntary service to humankind. They strongly believed that the goal of socio-religious harmony could be achieved only if people rise above the parochial mindsets and prepare themselves to help other people irrespective of their caste, creed, colour, race, and ethnic background. Service to humanity inculcates social virtues and uplift the socio-economic status of weaker sections of society. It also reduces the social seclusion, self-centredness, social apartheid and religious intolerance and encourages the masses to be more generous, supportive and kind-hearted.

## Introductory Background:

The doctrine of Seva (voluntary service to the humanity) is the hallmark of Sikhism. Sikh Gurus were the greatest humanists. They preached humanism and love for humanity in theory and practice. To them, the spirit of service to humanity is the essential attribute of an ideal man. Since a person is the member of global fraternity and he is expected to perform his duties to his fellow-beings. No ethical and religious person could remain insensitive to needs of people. It is his socio-religious obligation to

serve the humankind in every situation.

The Sri Guru Granth Sahib (the Holy Sikh Scripture) envisaged a righteous, democratic, humanitarian and egalitarian society based on the ideals of Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of mankind, service to the humanity, mutual love, social harmony and cooperation. The idea of service to humankind is the inseparable part of the Sikh way of life as laid down by the revered Sikh Gurus. Sikhism is unique in stressing the aspects of selfless service to humanity and contribution to its welfare. It emerged as a new mode of humanitarian thought, heralding a new conception of Ultimate Reality and a new vision of the Universal Man, which led to a new outlook of human spirituality and a whole-life religious system based on the dual aspects of temporal and spiritual concepts, called Miri and Piri in the Sikh parlance (Shan, Harnam Singh, 20012)<sup>1</sup>. The word Seva is derived from Sanskrit root sev (to serve, wait or attend upon, honour, or worship), is usually translated as 'service' or 'serving' which commonly relates to work paid for, but does not convey the sense in which the term is used in the Sikh tradition. The word Seva has, in fact, had two distinct connotations; one, it means to serve, to attend to, to render obedience to; and the second, to worship, to adore, to reverence, to pay homage to (Neki, J. S., 2013)<sup>2</sup>.

Sikhism regarded the service to humankind as a way to seek the socio-spiritual development and divine bliss. Sikh Gurus inculcated the spirit of humanitarianism and humanism among their followers. They served meals in the Langars (common kitchens) with their own hands to the hungry and the visitors; they nursed the wounded; they carried bricks and mud on their head (kar seva) to build Sikh shrines; they raised the guest houses for the travellers; they constructed schools for the children and they built clinics for the sick (Kapoor, S. S. Kapoor and Mohinder Kaur, 2011)<sup>3</sup>. They made the service as a part of daily worship. Gurdwaras were converted into a sort of laboratories where service was actually practised as a matter of daily routine in order to prepare, in the long run, for service of the whole mankind. Sweeping floor or cleaning of utensils in the Guru's kitchen (The Temple of Bread) were intended to teach the art of true service which needed unassuming devotion and humility (Singh, Ranbir, 1982)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Voluntary (Seva) Service in Sikhism:**

The Sikhs conclude their daily prayer to God seeking welfare of all - sarbat da bhala. They see the love for God as the vis-a-tergo for love of humankind; and they express this love through Seva or voluntary service rendered unto others and such other philanthropic activities. Sikhism is in full agreement with St. James's assertion that "faith without works is dead." James 2:20); with their ethics of creative activism, they seek to realize the Gurus' vision of a society (Singh, Dharam, 2007)<sup>5</sup>.

In Sikhism, service is the natural offshoot of the love of God. 'Love me, love my

dog' is a popular proverb. Therefore, if you love God, you love His creation too. The Love of one's fellow men is exemplified by acts of service. So service of humanity is a practical way in which the devotee expresses his love for God. Moreover, service shows the oneness of life. God is present in every being and in everything. A God conscious man serves another because he sees God in him Mansukhani, G. S., 2003)<sup>6</sup>.

**It is only by** performing duties according to the moral laws that one can aspire to attain God's grace and eventual union with Him. For Guru Nanak, enlightenment and true spirituality should inspire man to dedicate his life and genius for the service of humanity. He even went a step further, over his ethics of activism, when he emphasised that every enlightened man or women should cease to live for him or herself and devote his or her life for the upliftment of humanity. Morality is the foundation of Sikh religion (Chopra, R. M. 2002)<sup>7</sup>. It is the performance of a deed of love and selfless service that contributes the work of one's hands to serving fellow human beings both within and outside the Sikh community. Seva is the highest ideal in Sikh ethics. Through Seva Sikh believers cultivate humility, overcome ego, and purify their bodies and minds (Nikky, G. K. S., 2009)<sup>8</sup>.

Either service to humanity may be rendered to the Guru in money or kind or duties performed or it may be directed to ordinary people. In the former case, it is normally focused on the Gurdwara and involves cash donations, contributions of food to the Langar, or such unpaid duties as reading the scripture, cleaning the premises, polishing the shoes of worshipers, or helping in the Langar.



The word can also be given a wider connotation to mean service to the community in the general sense (McLeod, W. H., 1995)<sup>9</sup>. Langar is a place of training in voluntary service and the practice of philanthropy and equality. Service is involved in the collection of fuel and rations, cutting of vegetables, cooking of food, distribution of meals, serving of drinking water, washing of utensils and dishes, and the cleaning of dining halls. It is a practical demonstration of hospitality and love of human beings (Mansukhani, R. C. Dogra and Gobind Singh, 1996)<sup>10</sup>. Guru Nanak's concept of service goes far, far beyond the service in the Langar or simple charity in the wider society. A Sikh must also be dedicated to opposing injustice and working for the uplift of humanity; to working for tolerance and actively opposing evil, risking torture and death in the process and yet preserving a love for all humanity. Guru Nanak referred to this difficult path of Sikhism in which love for and service to humanity were mandatory (Singh, Inderjeet, 1989)<sup>11</sup>.

New man of Guru Nanak relates to his concept of salvation, which did not mean extinction of human consciousness and personality through dissolution into God but return to the world in the transformed state of active selflessness and service to others (Singh, Attar, 2000)<sup>12</sup>. A Sikh must make Seva as the core of his/her life. The Seva can be provided both as an individual and a member of society. A Sikh must provide both of these services. As an individual, he/she must love others, help the needy, pay a tenth part of his/her earnings for the noble causes and render physical service in the upkeep of the Gurdwara and the Langar. As a member of the society, a Sikh must try to enforce the

social reforms recommended by the Sikh Gurus, must reject the caste system and must give equality to women to run the Sikh institutions (Kapoor, S. S. and Mohinder Kaur, 2011)<sup>13</sup>.

An ideal man in Sikhism is committed to Man and God. The outlook of the Sikh is marked by inclusivism; both theism and humanism find favour with him. It is not an approach of either this or that, of accepting one at the cost of the other. Faith in God to the exclusion of concern for man has never been the forte of the Sikh. The Sikhs have imbibed a spirit of service to humanity as well as contemplation of the Divine. As a religion Sikhism aims at humanisation of man. The essential core of the Guru's teaching is telling man to be more humane, to be more and more human (Singh, Wazir, 2000)<sup>14</sup>.

A Sikh, who has never participated in Seva, is an incomplete/dwarf Sikh. In fact, he/she is like a dead body. Seva, however, has to be done from the core of one's heart. One cannot do it for show or for credit. Secondly, if one discriminates while doing Seva, he is an impostor, hence guilty of further sin (Dilgeer, H. S., 2005)<sup>15</sup>. The true Sikh is his own proof and his very personality is the vindication of his own humanitarianism and the greatness of his Guru's Realisation. On a Sikh all human beings have an equal claim and he is the friend of all and is everywhere at home, The living altruism of his heart translates itself in his daily life into his complete self-abnegation in the service of u man, bird and beast & quot; and this alone is to him the greatest lesson of his faith and religion (Singh, Puran, 1908)<sup>16</sup>.

There is a thick coloration of humanism in the ideals and pattern of the Khalsa formation. The Khalsa formation did not leave the problems of world and man to be resolved in the symbolic - or psychological - realms, as is expected from a religious organisation. The Khalsa endows its members with enormous rights and responsibilities to meet the problems of earthly problems then and there.<sup>17</sup> A sovereign man, the Khalsa, fit to provide true leadership and meaningful service to society, must be a man of deep religious faith and humility and must be in possession of the power of arms to maintain his own integrity and to function truly in relation to society (Singh, Kapur, 2001)<sup>18</sup>. Since the Khalsa upheld the social values, it constituted a revolutionary force. The Khalsa was obliged to sacrifice its all at the call of the Dharma (righteousness). The service of humanity was its religion. In fact, Khalsa was meant to be an instrument of God for the fulfilment of humanity (Kaur, Madanjit, 2000)<sup>19</sup>.

When Guru Gobind Singh asked Bhai Kanahiya that why he offered water to the enemy's wounded. He is said to have replied thus: "since thou have taught me not to distinguish between man and man, I see no friend or foe but I see only thy face in each one of them". They Guru was pleased with his reply and allowed him to continue with his mission. What Bhai Kanahiya did on the battlefield in early 18th century was a sort of prelude to what Red Cross has come to stand for in 20th century. This is also indicative of the Sikh stress on the values of love, compassion, seva (selfless service), etc (Singh, Dharam, 1998)<sup>20</sup>.

#### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that it is the impact

of the eternal message of Sikh Gurus that the Sikh community always ready to help generously to all irrespective of their caste, creed, class, colour, race, gender etc.

A true Sikh participates in social service and philanthropic activities to seek the Divine grace and state of tranquilly. Service to humanity for a Sikh is a way to transcend the evils and to develop the virtues. Service to needy, downtrodden and helpless creates a sense of belongingness, harmony and spirit of brotherhood in society and opens the doors of socio-economic and spiritual development.

#### **References:**

- [1] 1 . Shan, Harnam Singh (2002). The Faith of New Age, *The Sikh Review*, 50 (578). p. 35.
- [2] 2 . Neki, J. S. (2013). Seva in Harbans Singh (Ed.). *Concise Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Patiala: Punjabi University. p. 587.
- [3] 3 . Kapoor, Sukhbir Singh Kapoor and Mohinder Kaur (2011) *The Sikh Religion and The Sikh People*, New Delhi: Hemkunt Publishers Pvt. Ltd., p. 166.
- [4] 4 . Singh, Ranbir (1982). *The Sikh Way of Life*, New Delhi: India Publishers. p. 101.
- [5] 5 . Singh, Dharam (2007). Guru Granth Sahib and Religious Pluralism in J. S. Neki (ed.). *Guru Granth Sahib and Its Context*, New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan. p. 283.
- [6] 6 . Mansukhani, Gobind Singh (2003). *The Quintessence of Sikhism*, Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. p. 224.
- [7] 7 . Chopra, R. M. (2002). Ethical Basis of Sikhism, *The Sikh Review*, 50 (583). p. 15.



- [8] 8 . Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur (2009). *World Religions Sikhism*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers. p. 30.
- [9] 9 . McLeod, W. H. (1995). *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, London: The Sacrecrow Press Inc, London. p. 184.
- [10] 10 . Mansukhani, Ramesh Chander Dogra and Gobind Singh (1996). *Encyclopaedia of Sikh Religion and Culture*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Private Limited. p. 285
- [11] 11 . Singh, Inderjit (1989). Unity of Sikh Thought in Jasbir Singh Mann and Harbans Singh Saraon.(ed.). *Advanced Studies in Sikhism*, Irvine, CA: Sikh Community of North America. p. 113.
- [12] 12 . Singh, Attar (2000). Guru Nanak's Vision of Religious Humanism, *Global Religious Vision*, 1(1). p. 34.
- [13] 13 . Kapoor, Sukhbir Singh Kapoor and Mohinder Kaur (2011). *Op. cit.*, p. 179.
- [14] 14 . Singh, Wazir (2000). *Humanism, Theism & Sikh Faith*, *Global Religious Vision*, 1 (1) p. 24.
- [15] 15 . Dilgeer, H. S. (2005). *Dictionary of Sikh Philosophy*, Waremm: Sikh University Press. .p. 219.
- [16] 16 . Singh, Puran (1908). *Anecdotes From Sikh History Sketches From Sikh History*, Lahore: Khalsa Agency Publications. pp. 28-29.
- [17] 17 . Mohan, N. Muthu (2003). *Essential Postulates of Sikhism*, Patiala: Punjabi University, Publication Bureau. p. 89.
- [18] 18 . Singh, Kapur (2001). *Parasaraprasna*, Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University. p. 40.
- [19] 19 . Kaur, Madanjit (2000). Cultural Perspective of the Creation of the Khalsa in Madanjit Kaur (ed.). *Guru Gobind Singh and Creation of Khalsa*, Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University. p. 11.
- [20] 20 . Singh, Dharam (1998). *Dynamics of the Social Thought of Guru Gobind Singh*, Patiala: Punjabi University. p. 20.