

SIKH TRADITIONS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES*

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INTRODUCTION

‘Tradition’ in dictionary simply means stories, beliefs, customs, etc. handed down from generation to generation. However, in theology ‘tradition’ means:

1. Among Jews, the unwritten religious code and doctrine handed down from Moses.
2. Among Christians, the unwritten teachings regarded as handed down from Jesus and the Apostles.
3. Among Muslims, the sayings and acts attributed to Mohammed and transmitted orally.

Validity of a tradition is accorded by the religious authorities, however, a tradition considered valid in any religion may not be valid according to the authorities of other religion(s) or it may be wrong according a scientist or a rationalist.

In Sikhism ‘tradition’ means different than that described above. The doctrine and philosophy revealed by Guru Nanak was written by him and was interpreted in writing by the next five Sikh Gurus who succeeded to the House of Nanak and was preached by all the next nine Sikh Gurus who succeeded to the House of Nanak. The doctrine and philosophy of Guru Nanak and also that of the four Sikh Gurus was compiled into a Granth by Guru Arjan, the Fifth Guru, in 1604 CE. Besides, Bani of the Bhagats, saints and Sufis of the Bhagati Movement in India collected by Guru Nanak and other Gurus was also included. Later the Bani of the Ninth Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur, was added by Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th Guru in Succession to the House of Nanak, in around 1705. Hence the present Granth, entitled as ‘Aad Guru Granth Sahib’ (AGGS), is an authenticated source of doctrine and philosophy of Guru Nanak.

The traditions in practice among the Sikhs are not very old like that of other religions. However, some of the traditions, like *Vaisakhi* and *Diwali*, may be many centuries old as cultural traditions of people of India, are also celebrated by the Sikhs. Similarly, Xmas is being celebrated along with their Christian brothers by the Sikhs in Western countries. Similarly, Eid is celebrated along with their Muslim brothers by the Sikhs in Islamic

countries. On the other hand some traditions, which were introduced by the Sikh Gurus, are only about 300-500 years old, while some of them may be less than 100 years old.

In this paper some Sikh Traditions and Social Responsibilities of the Sikhs have been discussed.

1. SIKH TRADITIONS

More than 300, 000 Sikhs make up a component of the South Asian Diaspora in Canada. In Sikhism there has always been emphasis on the distinctive identity and traditions since they are always under the pressure of being absorbed by the majority religions since 1699 back in their home of origin and in their new countries of domicile.

Although the Sikhs first arrived in British Columbia at the beginning of the last century, their presence after 1970s due to liberalization of immigration laws was felt as visible minority everywhere in Canada. They are also being felt as visible minority in USA, UK, Australia, and other countries. A number of Gurdwaras, their religious places, started to appear in almost every city in the world where a few hundred Sikhs settled. In metropolitan cities like Vancouver and Toronto the number of Gurdwaras may be as high as 10, even in Greater Montreal there are more than five Gurdwaras.

Dr Pashaura Singh [9] says that the social and religious activities of the Gurdwaras function as a bulwark against assimilative influences exerted by the exotic life of Western culture. Gurdwaras and other Sikh institutions play a central role in community life by making it more religiously and culturally distinct from other ethnic communities. They offer a wide variety of educational and cultural programs, such as the teaching and perpetuation of the Punjabi language and Sikh music and song among the new generations. Some Sikh organizations operate a Sikh version of Sunday school, where children are given formal instructions in the tenets of Sikhism; while others support Sikh charitable and political causes [9].

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I have picked a few Sikh traditions, which are based on Nanakian philosophy embodied in the Gurbani incorporated in the AGGS as follows:

1. Altruism: Unselfish concern for the welfare of the humanity is the first and foremost tradition in Sikhism as explained in the following verses:

a. Everyone is a child of the Almighty

ਸਫਲੁ ਜਨਮੁ ਹਰਿ ਜਨ ਕਾ ਉਪਜਿਆ ਜਿਨਿ ਕੀਨੋ ਸਉਤੁ ਬਿਧਾਤਾ ॥
ਸਗਲ ਸਮੁਹ ਲੈ ਉਧਰੇ ਨਾਨਕ ਪੂਰਨ ਬ੍ਰਹਮੁ ਪਛਾਤਾ ॥

AGGS, M 5, p 532.

Nanak says:

“Successful are those lives (devotees), who consider everyone the child of the Almighty. Those, who have realized the Almighty, take along with them all their colleagues across the sea of life.”

ividAw vIcwrI qW praupkwrl]

AGGS, M 1, p 356.

Nanak Says:

“That education is worth that is applied to the welfare of the humanity.”

jjyq jIA qyqy siB qyry ivxu syvw* Plu iksY nwhI]

AGGS, M 1, P 354.

All those living beings (on this earth) are yours. Without service, no one obtains any reward.*

What does ‘Sewa’* (Service*) means in the above phrase?

It is explained in the following verse as follows:

ਗੁਰ ਕੀ ਸੇਵਾ^੧ ਸਬਦੁ^੨ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ^੩ ॥ ਹਉਮੈ ਮਾਰੇ ਕਰਣੀ ਸਾਰੁ ॥
ਜਪ ਤਪ ਸੰਜਮ ਪਾਠ ਪੁਰਾਣੁ ॥ ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਅਪੰਰਪਰ ਮਾਨੁ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 223.

The service¹ to the Guru is to comprehend³ the philosophy² of the Guru.

What is that philosophy?

Kill your ego and do good deeds.

What is the benefit of good deeds and killing of ego?

Doing good deeds and knowing the Almighty is equal to all your meditation, austerities and reading of Puranas.

The theme of service to the Almighty is, comprehending the Sabd (Nanakian philosophy) and practicing what is given there. The main principle of the Nanakian philosophy given here is that killing of ego and doing good deeds for the humanity and yourself, is the greatest service of all.

b. Good Deeds

Practicing righteousness on this earth is the highest religion of all:

ਸਰਬ ਧਰਮ ਮਹਿ ਸ਼੍ਰੇਸਟ ਧਰਮੁ ॥ ਹਰਿ ਕੇ ਨਾਮ ਜਪਿ ਨਿਰਮਲ ਕਰਮੁ ॥

AGGS, M 5, p 266.

The highest religion of the human is to do good deeds.

That is equivalent to the repetition of God's name.*

*In some religions repetition of God's name or of certain deity or certain mantra is considered the highest of all religious duties. But according to Nanakian philosophy all such acts are of no avail. Conducting a good deed is the highest social responsibility.

2. Sharing of Material Wealth

Sharing of earning for the uplift of the humanity:

ਘਾਲਿ ਖਾਇ ਕਿਛੁ ਹਬਹੁ ਦੇਹਿ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਰਾਹੁ ਪਛਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਇ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 1284.

"Nanak Says:

The one, who earns with his sweat of brow and shares some of his earning for the welfare of the humanity, has recognized the real path of life.

It is not only sharing of the earnings but sharing of the philosophy/knowledge/wisdom with that of others and accepting the best ones and discarding the worst ones.

3. Sharing of Intellectual Wealth (Multiculturalism)

Guru Nanak developed a novel system of sharing intellectual wealth (wisdom) with other communities that may be equated to the multiculturalism adopted in Canada. Most of the peoples take the multiculturalism in a very narrow term as taking part in folk dances, social functions, religious holidays, etc. of other communities. Guru Nanak emphasized that one should not only share the material or cultural values of other communities, but should also adopt their virtues:

ਗੁਣਾ^੧ ਕਾ ਹੋਵੈ ਵਾਸੁਲਾ^੨ ਕਢਿ ਵਾਸਿ ਲਈਜੈ ॥

ਜੇ ਗਣ ਹੋਵਨਿ ਸਾਜਨਾ ਮਿਲਿ ਸਾਝ ਕਰੀਜੈ ॥

ਸਾਝ ਕੀਜੈ ਗੁਣਹੁ ਕੇਰੀ ਛੋਡਿ ਅਵਗਣ^੩ ਚਲੀਐ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 765.

If you possess² (a bag of)² wisdom/philosophy¹, open it to be shared with others. If your friends have good principles/philosophy adopt it. Only adopt good principles/philosophy and leave the others, which are not acceptable³.

4. Langar

The free community meal, "langar", begins after the service or concurrently in the basement hall of Gurdwara. Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike sit together to share a common meal of traditional Indian vegetarian food. One can easily recognize a powerful egalitarian

spirit in the meal and the way it is served and the way it is eaten together. This system is based on the doctrine of sharing of Guru Nanak.

Guru Ram Das, the Fourth Guru, regularized this tradition based on the above philosophy of altruism. Now in some Gurdwaras the Sikhs are also contributing towards the Central Food Banks in various cities.

5. Other Traditions

The central feature of every Sikh ritual and ceremony is always around the Aad Guru Granth Sahib when installed ceremoniously every morning in the Gurdwara [9]:

1. When a **child is to be named**, the process of "taking God's word" (*Vaak*), the random selection of a verse from the scripture provides the first letter of the chosen name.
2. The initiation ceremony, or "*Amrit Sanskar*", must take place in the presence of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib.
3. A Sikh wedding, according to the "*Anand*" (bliss) rite, also takes place in its presence, and the performance of the actual marriage requires the couple to circumambulate the AGGS four times.
4. The hymns of the AGGS are sung at **funerals**. This is followed by a reading of the entire scripture (*Akhand Paath*).
5. The celebration of the anniversaries of the births and deaths of the Sikh Gurus (*Gurpurbs*) is marked by an "unbroken reading" (*Akhand Paath*) of the scripture by a relay of readers in approximately forty-eight hours on weekends (although this practice is against the basic doctrine of Guru Nanak).
6. The initiation ceremony, known as "*khande da amrit*", in which sweetened water is stirred with a two-edged sword and sanctified by the recitation of five liturgical prayers, is conducted by five Amritdhari Sikhs representing the original "Five Beloved Ones." All Sikhs initiated into the brotherhood of the Khalsa (pure) must observe the *Rahit* (code of conduct) as enunciated by Guru Gobind Singh and subsequently elaborated. They must take the surname 'Singh' (lion) in the case of men and 'Kaur' (princess) in the case of women. However, it has become a convention to use the name of one's 'got' (clan, or exogamous group within the 'zat', or caste) as a last name, reserving Singh and Kaur as middle names. The most significant part of the *Rahit* is the enjoinder to wear five items of external identity known from their Punjabi names as the five Ks. These are **unshorn hair**, symbolizing spirituality and saintliness; **a wooden comb (Kanga)**, symbolizing order and discipline in life; **a miniature sword ('kirpan')**,

signifying divine grace, dignity, and courage; **a steel bangle (Kara)**, symbolizing responsibility and allegiance to the Guru; and a pair of **short breeches (Kachhera)**, symbolizing moral restraint. The five Ks are understood as outer symbols of the divine word. Putting on the five Ks along with the turban (in the case of male Sikhs) while reciting prayers symbolizes that the Khalsa Sikhs are dressed in the word of God. Their minds are thus purified and inspired, and their bodies girded to do battle with the day's temptations. They are also prohibited from four gross sins: cutting the hair, using tobacco, committing adultery, and eating meat that has not come from an animal killed with a single blow [9].

Although the wearing of the five Ks has been supported in principle under the Canadian Charter of Rights, the Khalsa Sikhs have sometimes had problems in wearing the *kirpan*, which is wrongly thought to be a weapon by many Canadians [8]. In a recent case, for instance, a lower court in Ontario has asked the Supreme Court of Ontario to decide whether a board of education may prevent a Sikh teenager from wearing a *kirpan* to school [7]. But in some other cases schools have quietly allowed the practice as long as it is not misused. In this connection, John Spellman makes the following observation:

The turban and the sword are at least equal to the crucifix for Christians. They identify, they remind, they teach and symbolize.... The kirpan worn by Sikhs is a sacred symbol and is no more to be used to attack someone than a crucifix.... There are practically no cases on record of any Sikh ever having been convicted in Canada of using his kirpan as a weapon [10].

The proposal of Royal Canadian Mounted Police Commissioner Norman Inkster that Sikh Mounties be allowed to wear turbans instead of flat-brimmed Stetsons stirred strong emotions in western Canada [6].

Sikhs are aware of, and worried about the host society's unfavorable attitude toward their religious traditions. Though the Sikh community must bear some of the responsibility for not explaining their culture to mainstream society, negative reporting in the media has exacerbated the problems.

Problems of Identity

a. Mistaken Identity

The heinous crime committed on September 11 was declared by President George Bush as '*Attack on America*'. In fact it was '*Attack on Humanity*' as several thousand innocent persons of various religions, nationalities, races and ethnic groups lost their lives without any of their fault. The terrorists hijacked four planes, slammed two of them into the twin towers of

WTC, third into the Pentagon building and crashed the fourth into the ground in Pennsylvania. The gruesome attack totally destroyed the Twin Towers, partially damaged the Pentagon building and had a significant negative impact on the US economy whose ripple effect was felt globally.

The other tragic consequence of this horrendous attack was a sudden blow to the peaceful co-existence of people of different religions and ethnic background not only in the North America but also in Europe and far away Australia and New Zealand. Soon it was declared that the terrorists belonged to Al-Qa'ida, an organization of Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian exile in Afghanistan. As soon as the picture of Osama bin Laden was flashed on the TV screen in the North America and rest of the world, the general public in USA, Canada, and UK started to hate all the persons with beards and turbans [3].

For an average American anybody with beard and turban looks like an Afghan or a Muslim. The irony is that there are very few Afghans or Muslims with beards and turbans in the North America, but many Sikhs keep beards and turbans as their religious symbols. People started to hate and kill any person with beard and turban without identifying whether the victim is a Sikh or an Afghan or a Muslim. Most of the victims of this mindless and vindictive frenzy turned out to be the Sikhs due to the 'mistaken identity' with Afghans or Muslims. Similarly, the Sikhs were also ill treated at airports, railways and buses, and even on streets and shopping malls. Their houses and shops were damaged and some have been shot dead. Read more about assaults on the Sikhs reported by Barrier [2].

b. Recognized Identity

The recent incidence of victimization of the Sikhs due to their 'mistaken identity' with that of the Afghans or the Muslims has threatened the uniqueness of the *Sikh identity* due to their beard and turban. Contrary to this situation during 1984 immediately after the assassination of Mrs Indra Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, by two Sikhs, the majority Hindus started killing the minority Sikhs throughout India because of their 'recognized identity', i.e. the beard and turban from which the Sikh were easily recognized for killing. Tens of thousands of Sikhs were killed or burned alive, and their shops, houses, businesses were burned down throughout India. Maximum killing and property damage was done in Delhi, the seat of Government of India.

c. Similar Identity

Let us go back to 18th and 19th centuries when the Moguls killed the Sikhs because they were having

'similar identity', i.e. beards and turbans, similar to those of the Muslims but were practicing the faith of Guru Nanak that was different than that of Prophet Mohammed. Thus, it appears that the Sikhs have been killed because of either 'mistaken identity', or 'recognized identity', or 'similar identity' (beard and turban).

Now the French Government is banning religious symbols, including turban, in Government schools in France. Conspicuously display a pupil's religious affiliation is prohibited. It would apply also to Jewish skullcaps, large Christian crosses and the Sikh turban [5].

2. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The social responsibilities of the Sikhs and of everybody are to consider the earth as the realm of righteousness; and other most important responsibility not only of the Sikhs but also of everybody to preserve the resources on this earth for the welfare of the whole humanity. I have quoted a few examples to explain these responsibilities:

Natural Resources and Phenomena

Guru Nanak explains that the earth is a place to practice righteousness. On this earth God has supplied all the natural resources and necessary phenomena (day and night; and different seasons) for sustaining all types of living beings. One is judged as an ordinary or elevated one according to the deeds performed. In the court of Ever-Existing (God) only those are honored who have been blessed because of their good deeds. Therefore, it is a social responsibility of every person to conduct good deeds on this earth as explained in his following verse:

ਰਾਤੀ ਰੁਤੀ ਥਿਤੀ ਵਾਰ ॥ ਪਵਣ ਪਾਣੀ ਅਗਨੀ ਪਾਤਾਲ¹ ॥
 ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਧਰਤੀ ਥਾਪਿ ਰਖੀ ਧਰਮ ਸਾਲ ॥
 ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਜੀਅ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਕੇ ਰੰਗ ॥
 ਤਿਨ ਕੇ ਨਾਮ ਅਨੇਕ ਅਨੰਤ ॥ ਕਰਮੀ ਕਰਮੀ ਹੋਇ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ ॥
 ਸਚਾ ਆਪਿ ਸਚਾ ਦਰਬਾਰੁ ॥ ਤਿਥੈ ਸੋਗਨਿ ਪੰਚ² ਪਰਵਾਣੁ ॥
 ਨਦਰੀ ਕਰਮਿ ਪਵੈ ਨੀਸਾਣੁ ॥ ਕਚ ਪਕਾਈ ਓਥੈ ਪਾਇ ॥
 ਨਾਨਕ ਗਇਆ ਜਾਪੈ ਜਾਇ ॥ ੩੪ ॥

AGGS, Jap 34, p 7.

- *Nights, seasons, days, and weeks;*
- *Wind, water, and fire in Patal¹ (in the center of earth);*
- *Amidst of these natural phenomena and resources, the earth is placed as a venue to practice righteousness.*
- *Thereon are various types of living beings.*
- *And their names and kinds are uncountable.*
- *By their deeds their destinies are judged.*
- *The court of the Ever-Existing (God) is true.*
- *In that court only nobles² are accepted.*
- *This honor of acceptance is achieved by the blessing*

of the God. Nanak says:

- *Whether one is ordinary or elevated is sent for judgment and is judged in the court of God.* 34. [4]

1. *Patal*: Here Patal means the center of earth according to Dr Bachan [1].

Realm Of Righteousness

Keeping in view the previous verse Guru Nanak the earth has been declared as the realm to practice the righteousness:

ਧਰਮ ਖੰਡ ਕਾ ਏਹੋ ਧਰਮੁ ॥

AGGS, Jap 34, p 8.

The earth is the Realm of Righteousness. [4]

Natural Resources

Guru Nanak sums up in the following verse that God has provided all the natural resources, i.e. air, water and earth; the necessary phenomena - day, night, and seasons; and the necessary environment for all the living beings on this earth. Therefore, the earth provides all types of resources and environment. The one who would practice righteousness will be near or far away from salvation according to their deeds conducted by them.

ਪਵਣੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਪਾਣੀ ਪਿਤਾ ਮਾਤਾ ਧਰਤਿ ਮਹਤੁ ॥

ਦਿਵਸੁ ਰਾਤਿ ਦੁਇ ਦਾਈ ਦਾਇਆ ਖੇਲੈ ਸਗਲ ਜਗਤੁ ॥

ਚੰਗਿਆਈਆ ਬੁਰਿਆਈਆ ਵਾਚੈ ਧਰਮੁ¹ ਹਦੂਰਿ² ॥

ਕਰਮੀ ਆਪੇ ਆਪਣੀ ਕੇ ਨੇੜੈ ਕੇ ਦੂਰਿ ॥

ਜਿਨੀ³ ਨਾਮੁ ਧਿਆਇਆ ਗਏ ਮਸਕਤਿ ਘਾਲਿ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਤੇ ਮੁਖ ਉਜਲੇ ਕੇਤੀ ਛੁਟੀ ਨਾਲਿ ॥ ੧ ॥

AGGS, Jap Slok, p 8.

- *Air is like a Guru, water like a father (both represent environment), and earth like the great mother (which provides all types of resources and food).*

- *Both day and night are like male-nurse and female nurse, respectively, and the whole humanity plays in their laps.*

(Means the humanity enjoys these natural environment and resources provided by God.)

(It is the duty of humans to practice righteousness.)

- *(Now) your virtues (good deeds) and vices (bad deeds) are evaluated under² the Laws of Universe¹.*

- *Since people are honored according to their deeds, therefore, some will come near to salvation while others will remain away from it.*

Nanak says:

- *The faces of those nobles³, who have comprehended God, glow with happiness and attain liberation from their troubles. And with the association of such nobles many others can attain salvation.* [4]

CONCLUSIONS

1. Most of the traditions practiced by the Sikhs are based on the Nanakian philosophy found in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib.
2. All these traditions are for altruism and for conducting good deeds for the humanity.
3. Some of the traditions, which have been practiced as cultural traditions for centuries in India, are also being practiced by the Sikhs.
4. The Sikhs are also picking up some of the traditions of the majority in the countries of their domicile.
5. Some traditions are most recent ones, created by the Singh Sabha Movement during the later part of the 19th and early part of 20th centuries.
6. The Sikhs are facing a great problem in maintaining their traditions and identity and are always under pressure being absorbed by the majority religions in their countries of domicile.
7. It is the responsibility of not only of the Sikhs but also of everybody to practice righteousness on this earth and exploit the resources of this earth for the welfare of the whole humanity.

Finally a question to be considered seriously is:

Should the religious traditions/identity be considered as human right?

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