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THE SIKH VISION OF RIGHT TO RESISTANCE

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Abstract:

The urge for right to revolt and the struggle against the political authoritarianism, social injustice, religious fundamentalism and economic exploitation is deeply rooted in the Sikh socio-spiritual and political philosophy. Sikh Gurus were revolutionary in their approach. They repudiated their contemporary socio-religious leaders and felt distressed with the unforgivable wrongdoings of tyrannical Mughal rulers. They were, in fact, the harbingers of human rights movement, social egalitarianism and vanguard of vulnerable sections of society. They fought against the caste prejudices of upper caste Hindus and racial arrogance of Mughal rulers to liberate the masses. They laid the emphasis on restoration of self-esteem, honour and morale of Indian people and inspired them to confront the transgression of human rights and violation of human dignity. They believed that it is paramount socio-religious obligation of Saint-Soldier to defy the discriminatory social customs, laws and unjust socio-politico-economic structures. He should strive for the protection of civil liberties and promote the respect for self-esteem of an individual.

KEY WORDS:

Sikh Vision ,Sikh socio-spiritual and political philosophy.

INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND:

It is evident from the history of India that for centuries the foreign invaders used to the plunder the Punjab and afterwards they reached Delhi to establish their rule. Since the close of the tenth century up to the Guru Nanak, successive waves of Muslim hordes had poured into India from the North-West. As many as about sixty foreign invasions had taken place in the five hundred years up to the times of Guru Nanak, thus on an average one invasion occurring every eight years. As the highway to Delhi and the rich Ganga valley lay through the Punjab, the greatest suffering was caused to the people of this province. The Turks and Afghans established their rule here. They governed through fear and force alone. They were brutes and showed no mercy to the conquered people. People were either deprived or demoralised and were incompetent to an extent that they preferred to remain spectators. Foreign rulers were not respectful to the dignity and honour of Indian people. They exploited them and forced them to live in sub-human and dejected conditions. Though the downtrodden were large in number, yet they had neither ability nor right to resist against the unkind rulers. Kashtriya caste group had a social and moral duty to defend the country but they refrained from fighting with invaders. Brahmins were amateur in warfare activities. In the changed scenario, Brahmins and Kashtriyas had lost their age-old social and political status and downtrodden felt contended to see that the foreign rulers brought down their old oppressors. Due to the exploitation of depressed sections, inability of Kashtriya caste group, empty ritualism practiced by Brahmins and frequent foreign invasions gave birth to an era of mental and physical slavery of Indian people.

It was only in the fifteenth century, Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, raised the strong objections and shown displeasure with the prevalent heartbroken conditions. He criticized the Lodi Sultans, Kings and

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rulers of His times. He found that religious bigotry and false sense of pride made them malevolent towards weaker and oppressed people. He deplores the Kings in His Divine hymns. He said, "False is the King, false the subjects and false is the entire world." He also criticized the self-centred people because they were completely ignorant of the prevailing conditions. He said, "The subjects are blind and, without wisdom, they satisfy the Official's fire or greed with bribe carrion." He compared the prevailing political conditions with Dark Age. He said, "The dark-age is the scalpel, the kings are the butchers and righteousness has taken wings and flown. In this no-moon night of false-hood, the moon of truth is not seen to rise anywhere." He did not only criticize the rulers alone but he also condemned the role of personnel who assists and advises the King in carrying out unjust decisions. He said, "The kings are tigers and the courtiers dogs, they go and harass or awaken the sitting and the sleeping ones. The king's servants inflict wound with their nails. The king's curs lick up the blood and bile of the poor subjects." He also 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."

Bhai Gurdas, a great Sikh theologian, also described the prevailing situations at that moment, "O. God, in Kalyug, the mentality of the jiv (man) has become like the mouth of dog which always seeks the dead to eat. The kings are sinning as if the protective fence were itself devouring the (crop in the) field."

Sikhism was in fact, emerged as a socio-religious movement against political tyranny, social discriminations, religious fanaticism and economic exploitation of vulnerable sections of society. Guru Nanak and his successor Gurus tried to boost up the morale of helpless, demoralized and downtrodden sections of society. They taught, trained and inspired them to revolt against the social discriminations, caste system, religious prejudices, gender injustice and political absolutism. They revolted against disrespect of human dignity and violation of human rights. They justified the use of arms and physical force to fight against injustice if no peaceful, constitutional and democratic methods brought the desired results. They reinvigorated the dying spirit of India to build a new kind socio-political order wherein there will be a respect for human rights and the honour of people. They envisaged a new revolutionary social and political order based on the ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. They wanted equal rights for all irrespective of their caste, creed, colour, race, gender and economic status; abolition of social privileges of upper caste Hindus; elimination of economic disparities and end of religious fanaticism. They wanted to reinstate the dignity, honour and self-esteem of masses. They wanted to build a righteous, egalitarian and God-centred society consisting of self-respecting people. Sikhism does not preach any abstract mysticism. Sikh Gurus gave very practical, dynamic and unique way of life based on egalitarian and democratic principles.

RIGHT TO RESISTANCE AND THE SIKH WAY OF LIFE:

Right to resist holds a significant place in the Sikh movement for human rights. Sikhism advocated the right to revolt against all kinds of social divisions, religious intolerance and political despotism. Sikh ethos upholds the truthful and dignified living at the highest pedestal. In Sikhism, it is not only the right of a people to resist unethical and tyrannical rulers but it is also their social and religious obligation to do so. Saint-soldier can be either sovereign or rebellion. Either he rules in accordance with the eternal message of Sikh Gurus or he is striving for the appropriate socio-economic and political conditions to practice the teachings of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Between these two extreme positions, there exists a physical and mental slavery and disrespect of dignity, which is hardly acceptable to the Saint-soldier. He can die in the struggle against discriminations and autocracy but he cannot lay down his arms to unjust rulers.

Sikh Gurus throughout in their life advocated and practiced the higher standards of morality and heroism. They laid down the rigorous socio-spiritual and ethical way of life. Sikhism gives preference to householder life. Sikh Gurus combined the social, economic, religious and political spheres together. They rejected the philosophy of Varnashrama dharma, asceticism, escapism, and tolerance of injustice. They integrated the spiritual and temporal matters. To them, an ascetic in gradual process becomes escapist and lethargic. Such an indolent person loses the moral courage and capability to confront the invaders, cruel rulers and unfair socio-religious customs. In Sikhism, there is no place for any kind of escapism. A true Sikh has to develop his skill and attitude to be perfect in the mundane and spiritual spheres. Sikh Gurus firmly believed that an individual who is reluctant to earn his livelihood honestly through hard work could not defend his rights and he has to face the exploitation and inequalities. In order to defend his family and country, to maintain human dignity and to attain economic independence, one has to overcome his sluggishness and dependence on others. In a way, Sikh Gurus promoted the work culture and restored the dignity of labour and working classes.

Linkage between the Right to Resistance and War of Faith in Sikhism:

Sikh Gurus called for revolution against atrocities of rulers of their times. They visualized an image of an ideal man i.e. saint-soldier, an embodiment of Sikh ethos. Saint-soldier possesses the Godly attributes and has sufficient potential to counter the adversaries in the battlefield. He is a moral in action, liberal in outlook, liberator of humankind and guardian of marginalized sections of society. A saint-soldier is entrusted a socio-religious obligation to defend the rights, individual liberties and honour of people. He is prepared to struggle for the protection of defenceless, deprived and helpless sections of society. The ideal man in the Sikhism is expected to move on virtuous path and to act in accordance with the teachings of Sikh Gurus and participate in holy war against those who create obstacles in the way of socio-spiritual progress of humankind.

Right to resistance in the Sikhism is closely associated with concept of Dharma Yudh (war of faith). In the words of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib: It is duty of a Sikh 'to always utter the Name of the Lord (from mouth) and always be prepared for a war for Righteousness'. Guru Nanak Sahib had reminded the same in the poem wrongly known as 'Babur Vaani'. Dharma Yudh presupposes that the war must be a genuine struggle for Righteousness, and, secondly, the Sikh war-ethics must be strictly followed during the course of such a struggle: there should not be feeling of revenge or enmity; the ambition should not be acquiring power only; the participants must join it for promotion of justice and not for material gains.

In Sikhism, war of faith is justified for the socio-political amelioration and upliftment of those who suffer political oppression and social injustice. The Dharma Yudh in Sikhism does not aim at mere victory over the opponents to expand the territory of the state. It aims at to emancipate the victims of maltreatment, discriminations and unfairness. Sikhism does not favour passive non-violence and any surrender to undemocratic political order. Saint Soldier is expected to struggle until death in Dharma Yudh against religious bigotry, social disparities and political authoritarianism. Dying for the sake of faith in Sikhism is not merely a religious obligation for a Saint-soldier but an honour and divine bliss. Bhagat Kabir said, "He alone is known to be a warrior, who fights for the sake of his religion. He dies cut piece by piece, but deserts not the battle-field ever." A Saint-soldier is forerunner of war of faith. A true Sikh not only pray for the welfare of all but also strives for those ideal conditions, which facilitates the socio-economic development of society. It is his religious duty to participate in the war of faith, which aims at establishment of righteous rule. He is the torchbearer of revolution and custodian of human rights. He is expected to take the initiative in the direction of commencement of war of faith to establish the realm of truth and morality on this earth to eliminate the unrighteousness.

Sikh Gurus were apostle of human dignity, individual freedom and human rights. They stood firmly against the tyrannical regimes. They strongly resisted the Mughal Emperors' policy of religious persecution and even laid down their lives to redeem the freedom of belief. They stood firmly for the freedom of an individual to practice the faith of his choice. There are innumerable examples in the Sikh history, which lucidly depicts the heroic characters of Sikh martyrs. Sikhs played a commendable role in the history of humankind. Guru Arjan Dev was the first martyr of the Sikh history who resisted the Mughal emperors to protect the freedom of religion. Four hundred years ago, much before the UN declaration of Human Rights, he upholds that every citizen has the fundamental right to practice and spread his or her religion peacefully. The Mughal ruler directed him to make some changes in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. He refused to act in accordance with the instructions of Mughals. He did not like any political interference in religious matters of masses. He was prosecuted and killed by fanatic Mughal ruler Jahangir in 1604.

After the death Guru Arjan Dev, his son and sixth Guru of Sikhs, Guru Hargobind Sahib amply understood the need of hour. He established the close linkage between religion and politics. He established the harmonious fusion between spiritual and temporal matters. He wanted that religion of people must not be confine to the outward religiosity and abstract moral principles. He wanted that religion should address to the socio-political needs of people. He inculcated the martial spirit among depressed people and motivated them to get much needed military training to confront the barbaric rulers. He organised an army of dedicated Sikhs and fought with oppressive and mighty Mughal Empire.

Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, established the unprecedented example in the history of humankind by giving supreme sacrifice in Delhi in 1675 for protecting the freedom of faith and worship. Bhai Dayala, Bhai Mati Das and Bhai Sati Das along with Guru Teg Bahadur were martyred in 1675 on their refusal to accept Islam. Guru Teg Bahadur advocated the right to religious freedom. He stood firmly against the religious bigotry of Mughals. He upholds the right to religious freedom of people. His sacrifice is unique in the sense that he resisted the religious intolerance to protect the dignity of Hindu population in India. He preferred the death and did not compromise with his individual liberty and honour.

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, in his autobiography admitted that he took birth with Divine mission to overthrow the sinful, cruel and oppressive socio-political order to pave the way to the rule of pure and righteousness. He created the Khalsa Panth in 1699 to reinstate the human dignity, respect for human rights and to inspire the disheartened masses to resist the policy of religious persecution of Mughal

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emperor Aurangzeb. He trained his followers to fight for righteousness, right to religious freedom and justice. His message was not meant only for his followers. He himself gave the incomparable sacrifice of his four beloved sons in the war of faith to resist the Mughal tyranny. After his death, Sikhs fought against the savageness of Mughal rulers, infringement of human rights, ill-treatment, dishonour and injustice. Countless Sikh martyrs gave the unparalleled and supreme sacrifices to save the honour and dignity of masses. During the Indian freedom struggle movement against British Empire, Sikh community played a significant role. Before the Independence in 1947, Sikhs constitutes merely 1.5% of population. Though they were in very small number, yet their contribution to the freedom struggle was remarkable.

In fact, in the Sikhism, love for God and love for his creation are two sides of one coin. In the service of humanity and love for fellow-beings, a Sikh has to be prepared for the war of faith. The fight against injustice is equal to meditation and love for God. It is not possible for a Sikh to tolerate humiliation and meditate the Lord Almighty at the same point of time. Guru Arjan Dev said, "Accept thou death first, abandon the hope of life, and be the dust of the feet of all, then alone come thou to me." For a Sikh, the dignified life is prerequisite to seek the spiritual salvation. Guru Nanak said, "If thou yearn to play the game of love, step on to my path, with thy head placed on the palm of thy hand. And, once thou settest thy feet on this path, then lay down thou thy head and mind not public opinion"

Due to the lack of true and comprehensive understanding regarding Sikh ethos and Sikh history, some people began to feel suspicious and frightened about Sikhism. Guru Nanak taught that although it was evil to practise the violence for gaining power for its own sake, it was also evil to let violence prevail through passiveness of its victim, and he, therefore, enjoined that before violence becomes successful enough to clothe itself in trappings of morality, it should be resisted and defeated, destroyed or contained by all good men, by violence, if necessary. Sikhism teaches that surrender to a violence amounts to an abetment of the evil of violence and not, as the Gandhi would say, avoidance of the evil of violence. The Biblical position with regard to the sword and violence is well-known: 'Those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword.' It is this insight in the Sermon on the Mount: 'The meek shall inherit the earth'. The Sikh understanding of the laws of survival and death does not accept this position. The Sikh insight is that 'those who surrender rather than resist, shall perish'. Sikhs are neither habitual lawbreakers nor anarchists. A true Sikh cannot remain aloof from prevailing discriminatory state of affairs. If any Sikh turns away from his socio-religious duties, it would be considered as deviation from the Sikh ethos, his integrity will be questioned, and he will become an object of criticism. A true Sikh has a moral duty to dedicate his life for the protection of rights and self-respect of masses.

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that Sikhism has educated, trained and motivated the humankind to resist against disparities, exploitation and injustice. Sikhism gives due importance to dignified living. For a Sikh, social humiliation, social deprivation, economic exploitation, religious fanaticism and political injustice are highly objectionable and intolerable. Saint-Soldier is entrusted a divine mission to carry out the struggle to defend the self-esteem, dignity and rights of marginalized and demoralized sections of society. History tells us that wherever there is oppression, violation of human rights and discriminations, Sikh are the first to stand firmly against the deplorable socio-economic and political order.

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