

SIKH CRITIQUE OF DICHOTOMY BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS

Arvinder Singh



ABSTRACT

Sikh vision of relations between religion and politics is the embodiment of political concerns of Sikh Gurus, Sikh perspective of politics, integral view of life and repudiation of politics-religion and secular-sacred dichotomy by Sikh Gurus. Sikh Gurus reacted very strongly against prevailing political despotism and they disapproved the separation of religion from politics. To them, physical and spiritual needs of humankind can be satisfied only in God-centred social and political order. There is harmonious fusion of spiritual and secular spheres in Sikh way of life. God-oriented polity represents true model of welfare state based on truth, righteousness and harmony. Guru Nanak sows the seeds of unification of spiritual and temporal matters in his Divine compositions, which grow up at the time of Guru Hargobind and began to excel with the creation of Khalsa. Sikh statecraft is based on outline of the intrinsic moral law laid down by Sikh Gurus for the head of state and common man.

INTRODUCTION

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, is remembered as Jagat Guru (world teacher) who shook the age old religious traditions and revived the eternal message of Supreme Reality. He delivered his Divine message in the simplest manner which later on become a complete way of life for mankind. Some scholars highlight him as icon figure of Bhakti movement in India, to some he is the great social reformer and to some others he is the great revolutionary. His political ideas attract little attention. Nevertheless the socio-spiritual and political concerns of Guru Nanak's philosophy and observations laid the foundation of Sikh socio-political thought.

The present research paper is a humble attempt to analyse the Sikh vision of relations between religion and politics in the light of eternal teachings of Sikhism. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part is focused on analysis of Guru Nanak's political observations, second part deals with Sikh perspective of politics, and in the third part the contribution of Sikh Gurus towards fusion of spiritual-temporal concerns is discussed with special

reference to the concept of Miri-Piri.

GURU NANAK'S POLITICAL OBSERVATIONS

Guru Nanak was not a professional political theorist and was, largely, a religious and social reformer. He was a keen observer of the political scene and deep feelings and involvement in the problems of his times. Therefore, he reacted and responded to the contemporary situations and from these his political views can be inferred. [13] Unlike other religious reformers of medieval India he had a deep awareness of the political problems- maladministration and insecurity- that affected the daily life of the common people. This was natural for a teacher whose view of spiritual life centred round the ordinary householder and eschewed asceticism. [6] He was not an abstract theologian rather he was a man of masses. His mission was to liberate the humankind from the long-standing social inequalities, prejudices, empty ritualism and political absolutism. His Divines hymns not only provide vivid picture of medieval Indian socio-political conditions but also presents his intense concerns for

Dr Arvinder Singh, Head, Department of Political Science, Ramgarhia College, Phagwara.
Email: asbhalla@rediffmail.com

poor, helpless and deprived sections of society. He did not relish the foreign invasions and the cowardice shown by the people in submitting to them. He was deeply moved at the tyrannous march of the Mughals and the havoc they wrought upon the Punjab, especially upon the city named Sayyad Pur (modern Eminabad, now in Pakistan) and expressed his agony in his composition entitled Babar Vani which is in fact a soulful lament of the Guru at the cruelties perpetrated by Babar. [9]

The verses known as Babur-Vani contain among other things a political comment. The army of Babur is called the marriage party of sin, brides are demanded by force, and the rites of marriage are performed by Satan and not by the qazi or the Brahman. The reference clearly is to rape. No distinction was made between women of low and high caste, or between Muslim and Hindu women. Khurasan (Kabul) was occupied in a friendly manner but Hindustan was threatened, the Mughals descended as the agency of Death, the people cried in suffering.[10]

Guru Nanak was dissatisfied with the political rule of his time. He depicts the barbaric nature of political rulers of His times in His Divine hymns. Guru Nanak said, “The dark-age is the scalpel, the kings are the butchers and righteousness has taken wings and flown”. (AGGS, M1, p. 141). He also said, “A pauper is styled a king and the blockhead is termed a scholar. The blind man is styled as a seer. So do people talk, this mischievous one is termed a leader and the liar sits as a perfect man. Nanak, through the Guru alone it is known, that this is the (way) or (justice) of the Dark Age, The deer, the hawks and the officials; they are called learned and clever, When the trap is laid, they trap their own class, but hereafter find no refuge”. (AGGS, M1, p. 1288). To Him, “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. The subjects are blind and, without wisdom, they satisfy the Official's fire or greed with bribe carrion”. (AGGS, M1, pp. 468-469). In these Divine hymns, he highlighted the prevailing lawlessness, brutality of political rulers and plight of miserable people of his times.

SIKH PERSPECTIVE OF POLITICS

During the Renaissance and Reformation movements, Western world experienced the great revulsion of religion in the history of humankind. Western scholarship began to examine the social and spiritual phenomenon in binary relationships. They argue for reason, scientific approach,

extreme empiricism, profit oriented market economy with minimum state interference and restricted sphere of State. They discarded the religious beliefs and began to believe that the existence of Church (religion) is a threat to the modernity.

The new belief system gave birth to Church–State conflict during the Europe in 15th and 16th centuries. Church-State controversy changed the basic character of politics in the Europe. God centred politics was replaced by power centred politics. The sense of God's fear was replaced by unrestrained appetite for power. In gradual process, the unrestrained obsession for scientific approach led them far away from religion and mysticism. The emergence of modern day liberal-democratic political systems, industrialization and modernization on the one hand and on the other side cynicism, clash among various ethnic groups, decay of ethical values and unbridgeable gulf between haves and have not's are extreme offshoots of church-state controversy in the West.

Contrary to Western conception of modern day politics Guru Nanak rejected out rightly the fundamentals of Machiavellian politics. The Sikh thought spurns Machiavellianism where power is the end and not the means and any means are justified in order to acquire power.[14] The condemnation of contemporary politics and government by Guru Nanak springs from his belief in the ideal of justice, an ideal which appeared to be flagrantly violated by the holders of political power in his days. He denounced the pursuit of political power if it ran counter to the path of salvation. He did not denounce power consecrated to the cause of justice and human welfare. This positive aspect of his outlook on politics has been generally ignored amidst too facile an insistence on his condemnation of contemporary politics. [11]

In Sikhism, excessive individualism, epicurean way of life, power oriented politics, any zeal for politicization of religion or secularization of politics are the irritants in the way of socio-spiritual development of man. State and religion serve the physical needs spiritual needs of man respectively. Although religion and state have different domains, yet both are inseparable. The human life cannot be rigorously compartmentalized in secular and sacred spheres. Therefore, Sikh vision of politics is based on harmonious fusion of spiritual and temporal powers. In Sikhism, the relationship between religion and politics, between religious authority and secular polity, cannot be cognized in terms of the unity/separation dichotomy' it is of the nature of neither monistic unity nor simplistic separation, the two domains are distinct from each other and

internally autonomous, without any subordination of the one to the other, they are differentiated, though not dissociated from each other. The relation between the religious and the secular polity is analogous to that between soul and body, soul without body is an abstraction while body without soul is only dead matter.[3]

It was only the Sikh movement that positively reacted to the medieval challenge of socio-political alienation through its ideal of temporal sovereignty and aim of a new polity [4]. It is the faith of Sikh Gurus that religion and all its aspects of social life, including economic and political, cannot be separated. In fact, it is the lesson of Sikh history that the separation of religion and politics will not only mean their enervation and atrophy but also lead to stark materialism, individualism and chaos in the social life of man. The history of Sikh struggle, from the times of Gurus to-till date provide a clear lesson that the combination of both aspects of life is not only most fruitful but also essential.[7] Sikhism conceives of the relationship between the two authorities as of the nature of correlation. This is the essence of what is called the unity of politics and religion in Sikhism. It is unity in the sense of correlation and not coalescence or subordination of the one to the other. [1]

SIKH VISION OF CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

The Guru does not assert that this perpetual dichotomy and antagonism of the Church and the State must be resolved, or even that it is capable of being resolved, by the suppression of subjugation of the one by the other, rather, he appears to recognize their eternal antagonism and character and in this antagonism see the hope and glory of Man, the social and political context in which the Sikh way of life is to be practiced. The Church must perpetually correct and influence the State without aiming to destroy or absorb it. [21]

There were two means, which, Guru intended, should be applied as a ferment and lever for the upliftment of human mind, so that they may become a suitable vehicles for the creation and sustenance of this fraternity. One was his passionate conviction that the principles of politics which govern relations between the rulers and the citizens, and relation between the Church and the States should be so revolutionized as to bring them in complete accord with the principles of ethics.[19] According to Guru Nanak authority in every sphere ultimately derives its validity from God. Like many thinkers in medieval Europe, he was of the view that the secular as well as the spiritual evolve

from the same source God. [16]

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. In this perpetual struggle between the state and the church, for the exclusive possession of the soul of man, a man of culture and religion, shall not lose sight ever of his primary allegiance.[20]

Sikh thought co-relates the values of the 'church' and those of the 'state' where the function of the 'church' is to import moral direction to the 'state' in order to facilitate the functions of the latter for ensuring equality, justice welfare etc. to mankind in every possible way. In Sikhism the ideology of Miri Piri has not been restricted to a particular person or a particular class (just as in the case of the Pope, the Khalifa and the Brahmin class) rather, it represents an ideal way of life where each and every Sikh is required to strictly follow the moral codes of religion while living his daily temporal life. In other words, the foremost duty of a Sikh is to protect 'righteousness' (dharma) with the right use of his martial capacity. This mode of life is often termed as 'Saint-Sipahi' in Sikhism that is to be a 'saint' and a 'soldier' at one and the same time.[18]

After the martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606, Guru Hargobind decided to adopt martial measures for self defence. Symbolically, he girded two swords. One of spiritual leadership (Piri) and then other of temporal leadership (Miri). To conduct the temporal affairs of the community of his Takht or the immortal throne close to the Harimandar but clearly separate from it. The Harimandar was meant for nothing else but the worship of God. The Akal Takht was meant for all temporal affairs.[12] Guru Hargobind, combined piety and moral courage with the bravery of the soldier. It was under his guidance that the Sikh community acquired the colour of military vanguard of the people. He synthesized the saintly and soldierly virtues, and placed before the community an ideal that came to be known as 'Sant-Sipahi'. Guru Hargobind also wore two swords on his person, those of Miri and Piri. These were again symbolic of his plan to lead life of a sadhu (spiritual) and of a prince (temporal).[23] Miri (practical Politics) and Piri (Spirituality) brought a complete system of a holy and practicable life. It signified that spirituality has practical accountability associated with it. At the same time, practical life needs to be accomplished with its roots in spirituality, without which it becomes

impossible to establish honesty and Justice within the society. Thus, prayers were practicable to all parts of human life. [17]

Akal Takht Sahib is the throne of the Almighty. It represent the Sikh concept of oneness of Miri (temporal) and Piri (transcendental). It implies that in the court (or at the throne) of the Almighty a man of Piri cannot escape from his role of Miri (and vice versa) on the plea of separation of scope or domain. According to the Sikh concept of oneness of Miri and Piri sovereignty in both domains (spiritual and temporal) is not distinguishable. It is not unity of Miri and Piri but it is oneness of the both. According to the concept of Akal Takht Sahib, Miri (temporal part) has duty to impart Dharma (righteousness) and Piri (transcendental part) must not be a silent spectator to injustice tyranny and inhumanity. In the concept of oneness of Miri and Piri, these two domains do not stand distinguishable, but they are a one whole. [8]

The nature of the authority of Sri Akal Takht as envisaged in Sikh doctrine, and as wielded by it in Sikh history, can be best comprehended in the context of the basic postulates of Sikhism. Sikhism attributes to Godhead both spiritual and temporal sovereignty. God is deemed as 'Sacha Patshah' (True King) in the world here and the hereafter. For the first time in the history of religious thought, Sikh philosophy brings forth the concept of God-in-history. God's descent in time, that is, history, is through the vehicle of the Guru who as such partakes of the temporal as well as the spiritual sovereignty and authority.[2]

The unity of religion and politics in Sikhism (which makes the Sikhs a religious group as well as a political community) is essentially of the nature of correlation of the two sovereignties—spiritual (Piri) and temporal (Miri). Accordingly, the relationship between religious institutions and secular institutions is not of the type of coalescence of the two, or of subordination of the one to the other. As such, in Sikhism, the state and the church have their distinctive autonomous existence and role in their respective domains, being correlatively determinate expression of God-in-history. For this reasons the Sikh polity, with its ideal of Halemi Raj, is of non-theocratic character, there is no merger of the religious and the secular power in a single person or in a single institution.[5]

A Sikh lives two lives at the same time, the mundane and the spiritual. He earns to live and live for God realization. He combines within himself the worldliness and saintliness. On one band, he is a man of the world, working hard for the welfare of family, the society and the state and on the other hand he rises above mere worldliness, living the life of a saint. He is

a like a lours born and bred in water but rising above the surface of water. As a man of the world he is a fruitful partner, loving parent truthful dealer and a sincere worker. Though outwardly attached with all his dealings and duties, he is inwardly working for his ultimate goal. He attends to his normal work as well as the holy congregation. The swords of Miri (worldly grandeur) and Piri (Spiritual greatness) worn by the sixth Guru are his ideal. He is a Raja Yogi in this sense. He lives a full life, activating both the body and the soul.[15]

The Institution of Miri-Piri and Akal Takht (undying or timeless throne) worked as political fortification against unjust, cruel and barbaric Mughal rule. Guru Hargobind intentionally elevated the height of Akal Takht up to 12 feet as against the instructions of emperor that no throne should be beyond the three feet height. Guru Hargobind made it clear to his counterpart in Delhi that political unfairness would not be tolerated in times to come. These institutions signify the urge of Guru Hargobind to establish the rule of God on this earth. Guru Hargobind gave practical shape to teachings of Guru Nanak, transformed the Sikh religion into political force and aroused new hopes in the hearts of demoralized masses. Later on Guru Gobind Singh created Khalsa as personification of teachings of his predecessor Sikh Gurus. The Khalsa is the fulfilment of Guru Nanak's dreams of God centred polity, equitable and fair society. He preached that religion and politics, though separate, have an interacting relationship, and should move hand in hand to serve the society. Faith provides the motivation for serving the people morally, while politics creates a social structure for providing security and lawful governance. In other words, the common objective of the two institutions is to provide service and render justice to create better living for the people. [22]

CONCLUSIONS

From the above analysis, it is concluded that Sikh approach towards dichotomy between religion and politics denies any clash between spiritual and temporal authorities. Sikh perspective of politics visualizes philanthropic, benevolent, God-fearing and God-oriented political ruler who moves on righteous path and remain committed to the cause of socio-spiritual development of man. The ruler in Sikhism is expected to be Gurmukh i.e. God ward directed, ethical in conduct, humanist in approach and saint-soldier in action. He should operate as an agent of True King i. e. God while performing his temporal duties. In Sikhism, politics should be guided by Sikh religious doctrines and religion should take care of social, political and economic needs of society. In a way in Sikhism, spirituality authority and temporal authority are not hostile to each other rather corresponding to each other.

REFERENCES

1. Ahulwalia, Jasbir Singh. *Liberating Sikhism From The Sikhs*. Chandigarh: Unistar, 2006, p.81.
2. Ahulwalia, Jasbir Singh. *Liberating Sikhism From The Sikhs. Op. cit.*, p. 80.
3. Ahulwalia, Jasbir Singh. "Religious And Secular Polity in Sikhism" in Kehar Singh (ed.). *Perspectives on Sikh Polity*, New Delhi: Dawn Publishers's Distributors, 1993, p.68.
4. Ahulwalia, Jasbir Singh. *The Sovereignty of The Sikh Doctrine*. Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2006, pp. 204-205.
5. Ahulwalia, Jasbir Singh. *The Sovereignty of The Sikh Doctrine. Op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.
6. Banerjee, A. C. *The Sikh Gurus And The Sikh Religion*. Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal Pvt. Ltd., 1983, p.118.
7. Dhillon Gurdarshan Singh. *Religion and Politics: The Sikh Perspective*. Patiala: Guru Nanak Dev Mission, 1992, p. 44.
8. Dilgeer, Harjinder Singh. *The Sikh Reference Book*. Edmonton: The Sikh Educational Trust, 1997, pp. 87-88.
9. Gandhi, Surjit Singh. *History of Sikh Gurus Retold*. Vol. 1 New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2009, p.191.
10. Grewal, J. S. *A Study of Guru Granth Sahib*. Amritsar: Singh Brother, 2009, pp.47-48.
11. Grewal, J. S. *Miscellaneous Articles*. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1974, p. 149.
12. Grewal, J. S. *Sikh Ideology, Polity And Social Order*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers And Distributors, 1996, p.129.
13. Kaur, Gurdeep. *Political Ethics of Guru Granth Sahib*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 2000, p.46.
14. Kaur, Gurdeep . *Op. cit.* p. 178.
15. Kohli, Surinder Singh. *Sikhism and Guru Granth Sahib*. Delhi: National Book Shop, 1990, p.60.
16. Sagoo, Harbans Kaur. *Guru Nanak And Indian Society*. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1992, p.155.
17. Singh, Amandeep. *Celestial Grace*. Amritsar: Naad Pragaas, 2010, p. 36.
18. Singh, Harbans. *Degh Tegh Fateh*. Chandigarh: Alam Publishing House, 1986, p. 59.
19. Singh, Kapur. *Parasarapasna*. Piar Singh and Madanjit Kaur (ed.). Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2001, p. 36.
20. Singh, Kapur. *Parasarapasna. Op. cit.*, pp. 193-194.
21. Singh, Kapur. "The Church and the State" in *Perspectiives on Sikh Polity*, Kehar Singh (ed.). New Delhi: Dawn Publishers and Distributors, 1993, p. 60.
22. Singh, Teja. *Understanding Sikhism*, <<http://www.gurmatveechar.com>> p. 63.
23. Singh, Wazir. *Sikhism Philosophy and Culture*. Delhi: National Book Shop, 1999, p. 79.