

Guru Nanak's Ideals of Multiculturalism

Ashima Sahni

Asst Prof, Department of Political Science

Kanya Maha Vidyalya (Autonomus College), Jalandhar

Abstract

India of present century almost having seventy two years of federal democratic experience has not been able to free itself from cultural prejudices. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing equal cultural freedom and the professed commitment of the state to bridge the cultural gap, still there are reports of cultural discrimination in varied forms across the country. Cultural rights are equally important as are economic, political and social rights hence it is important to address issues of conflict originating from different world views and represent the interest of all groups in society for promotion of social cohesion, toleration and composite culture as it provides base for national unity in multicultural society and nourishes the democracy. Since religion is one of the significant components of cultural diversity therefore it is important to study multiculturalism from religious perspective along with ideological and other related viewpoints. Many modern age concepts like democracy, egalitarianism, ethnic equality, Justice, liberty, equality etc. are deeply embedded in the Gurbani. In fact the entire life and teaching of Sikh gurus in general and particularly life of Guru Nanak symbolizes an experiment in multicultural relations. Sikhism has firmly consolidated its practical approach in providing solutions to political, social, economic problems faced by mankind both theoretically through Sikh religious scriptures and practically by practicing these ideals in their daily lives and through their institutional practices. It is in this context that Guru Nanak's ideals of multiculturalism has a comparative advantage to understand issues, concerns and challenges of modern society and to provide and alternative solutions to problems proliferating from narrow cultural dogma. The objective of this paper is thus to comprehend Guru Nanak's philosophy of multiculturalism as emerges from Guru Nanak's verses and to study about practical application of multiculturalism by Guru Nanak during his Guru-ship period.

Keywords

Guru Nanak, Culture, Peaceful Co-existence, Multiculturalism, Pluralism, Equality

Methodology

For this study historical, method is used. The study is based on secondary sources. Secondary sources include books, research journals, periodicals and official studies.

Introduction

The idea of Multiculturalism came into light in late 1950's and got momentum round in 1970's yet the root of this can be traced in the teachings of Guru Nanak .Guru Nanak was much ahead of his times when he favored what we today call multiculturalism and diversity to bring about understanding and harmony amongst people belonging to different cultures, languages, creed, caste, races and religions. Guru Nanak as the first personage in the religious history of mankind to initiated inter-cultural dialogue and proclaimed that no individual, caste, or creed can claim monopoly over truth: revelation cannot be religious-specific or caste-specific. His philosophy of multiculturalism teaches man to develop a trans-personal outlook and to transcend the boundaries of culture and races.

Multiculturalism in India has evolved over the centuries, through a continuous process of adaptation and amalgamation of the diverse cultural influxes coming with the hordes of invaders e.g. the Aryans, the Sakas, the Huns, the Pathans, the Mughals and the Europeans. J. L. Nehru in his book, the discovery of India remarked that. "We are an old race, or rather an odd mixture of many races and our racial memories go back to the dawn of history. " ¹ Warf and Vincent examined the religious diversity at the global scale by using measure of diversity and found china, India, Russia, japan and Indonesia amongst the world's most religious diverse state.² As per 2011 census, Hindus are 79.80%, Muslim 14.23%, the Christians 2.30%, the Sikh 1.72%, Buddhist 0.70% Jains 0.37 and others 0.66 ³thus, India could be rightly considered the epitome of diversity in world. Within Indian states there are multiple contenders for most religiously diverse state in India like Maharashtra, Assam, Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Gujarat however Punjab got the opportunity to experience multicultural living and later on Sikhs much more as compared to other regions of India. Punjab is unique example as historically it has been one of regions in the sub-continent that was most tolerant of diversity and supportive of plurality. In medieval era Punjab was once a region known for meeting place of different cultures traditions because of its geographical position⁴

Concept of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a concept with multiple meanings and divergent interpretations. Multicultural encapsulates wide range of claims involving religion, language, ethnicity, nationality, and race. It

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, (2002) "The discovery of India", New Delhi: J Nehru Memorial Fund and Oxford University Press, p. 55

² Barney Warf & Peter Vincent, "Religious diversity across the globe: geographic exploration", Social and Cultural Geography, Vol. 8, Issue 4, 2007, pp .597-613, published online www. tandfo online. com.

³ <https://www.Census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/3-Punjab.html>.

⁴ JaspalKaur, "Multiculturalism: Rediscovering the other from Gurbani", Pakistan Journal of History & Culture, vol.27, No.2, 2006. P-27

is term that has both descriptive and normative forms. The existence within a society of two or more groups whose beliefs and practices generate a distinctive sense of collective identity of their own, which refers to cultural diversity, is descriptive form. As a normative form, multiculturalism calls for a positive endorsement of communal diversity. Multiculturalism signifies the approach, which tries to give as much representation as possible, within legal, political and educational institution, to minority culture.⁵ Scholars like Will Kymalica, Bhikhu Parekh, Gurpreet Mahajan, Charles Taylor, Brian Barry, Joseph Raz, Rajeev Bhargwa, Neera Chandhoke and others have tried to capture the essence of multiculturalism in their own way. Multiculturalism is concerned with equality; It asks whether the different communities, living peacefully together, co-exist as equal in the public arena"⁶ There is no denying a fact that term has come to encompass a variety of prescriptive claims, however the proponents of multiculturalism reject assimilation and the melting pot image as an imposition of the dominant cultures, preferring such metaphors as the salad bowl or the glorious mosaic in which each ethnic and racial element of the population maintains its distinctiveness.⁷ Multiculturalism as a term originated in 1957 to refer to the diverse language, culture & religion of the people of Switzerland however Canada was the first country to recognize that multiculturalism was integral to its national identity and adopted it as its national policy in it as its national policy in 1960, possibly first time it was used in 1960 Possibly first time it was used in speech by Charles Hobart an American sociologist, to Canadian Council of Christians and Jews in Winnipeg, M. Manitoba in 1963 which congratulated Canada for its multiculturalism in contrast to America's "Melting pot" was quoted by Paul Yuzyk, a Canadian Ukrainian ancestry in a speech in the Senate of Canada March 1964 Yuzyk is sometimes regarded in Canada as father of Multiculturalism⁸ Multiculturalism aims to construct a nation state that can present and accommodate diverse conceptions of good life. Multiculturalism assumes that diverse cultures can only flourish in the context where different cultures are acknowledged and accorded equal respect thus multiculturalism recognizes a positive value in diversity.

Guru Nanak's philosophy of multiculturalism

Guru Nanak's philosophy does not offer any conceptual study about the idea of Multiculturalism. However, a perspectival view of the concept can be found in his basic teachings. The Janamsakhis, the ballads of Bhai Gurdas and Sikh scripture confirm that Guru Nanak brought a new message of Oneness to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious medieval Indian society.⁹ The urge for multicultural social order in Sikhism starts with famous saying of Guru Nanak i.e. *Na koi Hindu, Na koi Musalman* that reached its climax in the form of creation of Khalsa Panth. The Khalsa Panth created the bedrock of true multicultural social order. The Institution of Khalsa Panth promotes religious harmony, social unity and eliminates cultural barrier that stands in way of peaceful living¹⁰ Guru Nanak validates the religious plurality of his

⁵ Roger Scruton, Dictionary of Political Thought, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007 .p. 455

⁶ Gurpreet Mahajan, "The Multicultural Path: Issues of Diversity and Discrimination in Democracy", New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2000, p. 11.

⁷ Roy Moodie and Deane Curling, "Multiculturalism" in Yo Jackson(Ed.). Encyclopedia of Multiculturalism Psychology, Sage Publication, Inc., London, 2006. P. 324

⁸ Garth Stevenson, "Multiculturalism" in George Thomas Kurian(Ed.). The Encyclopedia of Political Science, CQ Press, Washington, DC. 2011 p. 1064

⁹ Nikky –Gurinder kaur singh(2011), "Sikhism an Introduction London I.B. Tauris UK P.p. 20-21

¹⁰ Arvinder singh ,(2015)Sikh Political Thought Chandigarh: unistar Publication p. 114

day: Ram and Rahim occupy the same position - *ram rahim ikk thai khaloi*¹¹ Guru Nanak stresses the primacy of human spirit being the primary identity that partakes of the divine essence. The secondary identity (or identities) depending upon the variables of time and space are also significant, as the primacy essence becomes determinate in and through a network of secondary identities-religious, ethnic ,cultural, etc. For the same reason, these secondary identities should not be homogenized into a single all-embracing identity¹² During Guru Nanak's period; India was plagued by caste and communal hatred. Culture was being used by its practioners to gain narrow ends of life, and feed and strengthen their baser instincts and passions, Muslims being in power had the upper hand. Strenuous efforts were being made to crush Hindu culture. Guru Nanak not only condemned the rulers of his time for imposing their culture and language on the public but even condemned the Hindus for changing their culture and language under the influence of the ruling Muslim class. Guru Nanak worked towards bringing all creeds, in particular, Hindus and Muslims, together in a spirit of reverence and cordiality. He tried to create harmony between the communities, even as he called upon rulers and potentates to desist from repression and exploitation of the common people.¹³ Nanak's Philosophy rejects all types of divisions of human being on the basis of different races, caste and cultures .It cements the ties of unity in diversity. Guru Nanak avers:-*One God moves concealed in all diversity of creation, though no one form resembles another*¹⁴.*Himself He assumes numerous guises-thus expresses the humble Nanak the vision*¹⁵ since the light of one creator pervades all being howsoever diverse they may be, the sense of brotherhood of Man is the natural outcome of this all-pervasiveness of God in his creation .He condemns the Hindus for wearing the blue (Islamic) attire and reading Islamic scriptures curbing their own conscience. He writes in Asa divar:-*Wearing blue the ruler's approval they seek; with money derived from Miechhas the Puranas they worship*.¹⁶ Though Guru Nanak is not against learning of any language, yet he condemns the adoption of the language of the aliens under pressure. He criticizes suppression of other's faith even though he himself does not believe in the faith, rites and practices of the Hindus. He simply raises his voice against the forcible suppression of anyone's feelings. He condemns such tax in these words:-*Ah: tax is levied on the temples of gods such a practice has come into vogue*¹⁷ Guru Nanak criticizes such rulers who tried to impose their faith and culture he criticized Hindus of his times also for adopting the Islamic language instead of their own language. To quote him:-*In every house all the persons say 'Mian'*(Islamic Language) your language has become different, O man(Hindu)¹⁸ All these comments of Guru Nanak are indicative of the duty of government to protect the people's multicultural rights. The Government authorities will not impose their own religion, culture and thoughts upon the people; rather they will ensure liberty of conscience to the people, thus it can be inferred from Guru Nanak's verses full of poignant criticism of such kings who, during his times, imposed their culture and faith on their subjects. The Muslim rulers mulcted the Hindu temples and their religious rites and practices.

¹¹ Nikky –Gurunder kaur singh(2011),''Sliikhism an Introduction London I.B. Tauris UK P. 13

¹² Jagroop Kaur, "Multiculturalism and National Integration: Finding Answers from the Gurbani", Journal of Government and Political Studies, vol.24, No.1(2005)p54

¹³ Arvinder singh ,(2015)Sikh Political Thought Chandigarh: unistar Publication p 118

¹⁴ Guru Nanak, Adi Granth, p.596

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 350

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 472

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 1191

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 1191

Nanak and Multiculturalism in Practice

Guru Nanak played significant role in enriching, refreshing, and rejuvenating the multicultural practices in the Indian subcontinent. Udasis (his travels), dharamshala (gurudwara), sangat (congregation) and the pangat (langar, the practice of dining together), these practices and institutions played important role in shaping cultural life of Sikh community as well as gave new life to multiculturalism in the Indian subcontinent. Hence, Nanak firmly consolidated spirit of multiculturalism by his preaching and practically by practicing the ideals of Sangat & Pangat through institution of Dharamshala now known as Gurudwara.

The janamsak his recount Guru Nanak embarking on odysseys to the east, south, north, and west; Pluralist Nanak actively reaching out to the people of different faiths. He traveled in four directions, he visited the sacred spaces of the many groups of Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhist, and converse with them about their respective scriptures and philosophies¹⁹. His encounter with other faith and ethnicities is fundamental in shaping multicultural social order in Sikhism. Guru Nanak had developed a novel system of sharing intellectual wealth (wisdom) with other communities that may be equated to the multiculturalism adopted in Canada.

Guru Nanak established the institution of Dharamshala, later on which was renamed as Gurdwara, a unique place of worship in which a person belonging to every caste, creed, region and race can enter and worship²⁰ According to janam sakhis, accounts of the life of Guru Nanak (1469-1539). The Guru wherever he went, enjoined his followers to build or set apart a place where they should meet regularly to sing praises of the Lord and to discuss matters of common concern. Dharamsalas grew up in far flung places in the wake of Guru Nanak's extensive travels. Besides providing opportunities for devotional worship and humble service, dharamsalas functioned as religious asylums providing food and shelter to travellers and the needy. After the installation of the Holy Book, Guru Granth Sahib, in dharamsalas from the seventeenth century onward, they came to be called gurduaras or gurdwaras, portals of the Guru, though the word dharamsala is still current in popular speech.²¹ In accordance with the Sikh traditions in the earlier days the priests or other persons placed in charge of various sangats or dharamsals, following the advice of Guru Nanak, did not look upon the offerings as their personal property. Instead, they utilized them for the welfare of the community²². Guru Nanak laid the foundation of institutional framework with noble intensions to encourage the future generations to constantly work for multicultural social order. The Hindu and the Muslims and highest caste Brahmans and the lowest of the low shudras, were all brought to common societal level and here in sangat and, the equality and fraternity were learnt in practice and all divisions and distinctions discarded²³. In his own words, Sat Sangat is the congregation where the Lord's attributes are ever spoken of Nanak, by eulogizing the lord's Truth. ²⁴ No distinction on the grounds of birth or status etc. is exercised. The following words of Guru stand surety to it: '*Brahmas and Indiras, Gopies and Krishna shiva and the supreme Yogis- all attempt His greatness to utter*'

¹⁹ Nikky –Gurunder kaur singh(2011),''Sikkhism an Introduction London I.B. Tauris UK Pp13-14

²⁰ Arvinder singh ,(2015)Sikh Political Thought Chandigarh: unistar Publication p 123

²¹ <https://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/traditional-sikh-schools/dharamsala>

²² Gurmat Martand, Vol Iip, 687

²³ aurvinder singh,(2014), "Guru Nanak a quest for social justice''p192

²⁴ Guru Nanak, Adi Granth, p, 1280

*Scholars(Pandits), seers(Rakhisars), alongwith their scriptures, in all ages, and the charming damsels of the heavens, earth and Netherlands-all are singing thy Praise*²⁵ In these sangats the disciples mixed together without consideration of caste, creed or statu. The Sikh sangat was thus the melting- pot for people of all strata of society. It was a new fraternity emerging as the participant's response of discipleship to the Guru. He introduced the practice of community kitchen where people from all castes and creeds sat together to eat without any distinction of social hierarchy. Guru Nanak's establishment of langar is a fundamental step towards bonding humanity together, regardless of the difference in race, gender, caste and class²⁶ Langar teaches the etiquettes of sitting and eating in community. This system continued to gain an importance during time of successive gurus and played a great part in upholding multicultural values and it translates the principle of multiculturalism in practice. The Institution of langar was started with dual purpose of feeding the poor and eliminating discrimination based on caste, culture etc. Guru Nanak took practical steps to break the vicious hold of caste by starting free community kitchens or guru ka langar in all the centers and persuading his followers irrespective of their caste, to eat together. Langar in short helps in teaching service, spread equality, removing untouchability and such other evils and prejudices as spring social and racial distinction. The institution of langar is as old as Sikhism²⁷

Conclusion

Guru Nanak's Philosophy of multiculturalism propounded by him centuries ago in his poetic composition, has all relevance in the 21st century as well. In multicultural social order of his vision, all people irrespective of their caste, color, creed, culture, status, sex etc. enjoys liberty, equality and fraternity in its true sense. Guru Nanak while discouraging hatred, discrimination and violence, it encourages social and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding which are vital ingredients for multiculturalism.²⁸ The Pluralist society as envisioned by Guru Nanak envisages the unfettered flowering of the respective self-identities of all sections of society. This necessitates a pluralistic polity in which the institutions and structures of the minorities would get their legitimate role and place so that the minority groups could participate in their corporate being in the body politic of society...in this struggle humankind can fruitfully look up to ideas and ideals of Guru Nanak²⁹. Guru Nanak had developed a novel system of sharing intellectual wealth (wisdom) with other communities that may be equated to the multiculturalism adopted in Canada³⁰ Guru Nanak has definitely given a solution to the multicultural problems of society by envisaging a new type of cultural approach but the need is to make an intensive study of his thoughts and formulate his philosophy of multiculturalism. Hence the cultural issues needs to be resolved amicably both by state and civil society and other mechanism also needs to be explored As no single factor can exclusively contribute to resolve these issues. Primary Sources

²⁵ Guru Nanak, Adi Granth pp.-6

²⁶ Nikky –Gurunder kaur singh(2011), "Sikhism an Introduction London I.B. Tauris UK p-87

²⁷ Daljeet Singh essential of Sikhism Singh brother's bazar mai sewan, Amritsar 1994 p.104

²⁸ Jaspal Kaur, "Multiculturalism: Rediscovering the other from Gurbani", Pakistan Journal of History & Culture, vol.27, No.2, 2006 p-29

²⁹ Jasbir singh Ahluwalia,(2000),"Sikhism and 21st century society", The Sikh Review, vol. 48 .no. 560 .p p 54-

³⁰ Arvinder singh ,(2015)Sikh Political Thought Chandigarh: unistar Publication p 117

Other References

Books

- 1 Ahluwalia, Jabir Singh. "Essential Postulates of Sikhism and their Sociological significance in Balkar Singh" (ed.) *Essential Postulates of Sikhism*, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1988.
- 2 Bakshi, H. S. Bhatia and S.R. (ed.) *Political Ideology of the Sikhs*, Deep and Deep Publication, New Delhi 2002.
- 3 Banerjee, A.C. *Guru Nanak and His Times*, Publications Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2000
- 4 Basta Fleiner, L. H. Bhattacharaya, T.Fleiner, S.Mitra, (eds.), *Rule Of Law and Organization of the state in Asia: The Multicultural Challenge*, Institute of Federalism, Helbing and Lichtenhahn, Bale, 2001.
- 5 Bhargava R., "Introducing Multiculturalism", Bhargava R., in Bagchi, R. Sudarshan, (eds.), *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.
- 6 Bhattacharaya H., *India as a Multicultural Federation: Asian Values, Democracy and Decentralization (in Comparison with Swiss Federalism)* Institute of Federalism, Fribourg 2001.
- 7 Brar, Gurdip Kaur, *Guru Nanak's Philosophy of Politics*, Mahant Bani Tirath Singh Sewa Panthi, Bathinda, 1994.
- 8 Curling, Roy Moodley and Deone. "Multiculturalism" in Yo Jackson (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Multicultural Psychology*, Sage Publications, Inc., London 2006.
- 9 Deol, Gurdev Singh, *Social and Political Philosophy of Guru Nanak Dev. and Guru Gobind Singh*, New Academic Publishers Company, Jullunder, 1976.
- 10 Dhillon, Dalbir Singh, *Sikhism Origin and Development*, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi 1988.
- 11 Dharam Singh, Ed., *Interfaith dialogue: Different Perspectives*, Patiala: Punjabi University, Patiala, 2003.
- 12 Hansrao, Gurdev Singh, *Ideology of Sikh Gurus*, Hansrao Publishers, Ropar, 1990.
- 13 Jabir Singh Ahluwalia, *the Sovereignty of the Sikh Doctrine*, Singh Brothers, Amritsar 2006.
- 14 John L. Esposito, Ibrahim Kalin (*Islam phobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*, Oxford University Press, and USA, 2011.
- 15 Kaur, Gurdeep, *Political Ethics of Guru Granth Sahib*, Deep and Deep Publication 2000.
- 16 Kaur, Madanjit. "Terrorism, Religion and Our Future" in Madanjit Kaur (ed.) *Co-Existence in Pluralistic Society*, Guru Nanak Dev. University, Amritsar, 1991.
- 17 Kymlicka, Will. *Multiculturalism: Success, Failure and the Future*, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, DC, 2012.

18. Mahajan, Sucheta, "Problematizing Multiculturalism", in Bipin Chandra and Sucheta Mahajan(Ed), *Composite Culture in a Multicultural Society*, Pearson Longman, India 2007.
19. Mahajan, Gurpreet, *Identities and Rights: Aspects of Liberal Democracy in India*, Oxford, New Delhi, 1998
20. Newbiggin, Lesslie, 2000, *the Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, London: SPCK- Gurinder Kaur Singh, *World Religions Sikhism*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York 2009.
- 21 Radtke, F.O. "Multiculturalism: Sociological Aspect." In Neil J. Smetser and Paul B. Baltes (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Elsevier Science Ltd, Berlin 2001.
- 22 Ray, Niharranjan, *the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society: in Jodh Singh (ed.) Multifaieth Society. Publications Bureau, Punjabi university, Patiala, 1997.*
23. Sabar, Jasbir Singh. "Identity in the Multifaieth Society." In Jodh Singh (ed.) *Multifaieth Society. Publications Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1997.*
24. Singh, Darshan, "Relationship between Religion and Politics the Sikh Perspective." In Madanjit Kaur (ed.) *Coexistence in Plural Society*, Guru Nanak Dev. University, Amritsar 1991.
25. Singh Devinder. "Rule of Law and Role of Sikhism in Communal Harmony" In Madanjit Kaur (ed.) *Coexistence in Plural Society*, Guru Nanak Dev. University, Amritsar 1991
26. Singh, Dharam. "Guru Granth Sahib and Religious Pluralism" in J.S.Neki (ed.) *Guru Granth Sahib and its Context*, BhaiVir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi 2007
- 27 Thapar, Romila, 2002, *The Penguin History of Ancient India*, New Delhi: Penguin

Journals

- 1 Chahal, Devinder Singh, "Intra- Religious Dialogue on Sikhism: Re- Discovering the originality and uniqueness of Guru Nanak's Philosophy", *The Sikh Review*. Vol. 57. No.662. (2009)
- 2 Chand, Randhir Singh. "Political, Social and Religious Conditions in the Times of Guru Nanak." *The Sikh Review*, Vol.19. No.217 (1971)
- 3 Jammu, Parkash Singh, "The Sikh Institution of Congregation (A Sociological Study)," *The Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol.14, No.1 (1986).

Census

1. *Census of India, 2001 and 2011.*
2. *Statistical Abstract of Punjab, 2010-2011.*