

NORMS AND FORMS OF SIKHISM AND THEIR IMPACT ON SOCIETY

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Abstract

In this research paper, I discussed about how these norms and forms played the considerable role in shaping the social-religious and cultural life of Sikhs. The development and growth of Sikhism is based on Sikhs institutions. All policies which are started by ten Guru's like Sangat, Pangat, Manji system, Dasvandh, Khalsa Panth and other institutions which are the norms and forms of Sikhism. These norms and forms are the backbone of Sikhism. Without these institutions Sikhism cannot be kept the organization.

The norms and forms started for the betterment of society. It helped in teaching service, spread equality, removing untouchability and such other evils and prejudices. It is the sum up of the whole importance and role of norms and forms and without which Sikhism cannot exist as a unique religion.

Movements against casteism were initiated during *Bhakti* movement by Namdev, Kabir and other saints but they could not give any effective result. Therefore, Buddhism could not keep its roots intact in India since it was unable to challenge the caste system.¹

Later, Guru Nanak took the initiative to establish a new socio-political system while confronting social and political enemies for the same. Guru Nanak Dev's mission of spreading equality posed a huge opposition to the caste system which has been rooted in the society since ages because of traditional legitimisation. Guru Nanak always preached that no one is inferior to other, everyone is equal. To encourage people for truthfulness and spiritual achievement, Guru Nanak emphasised upon gaining knowledge. He strongly condemned idol worship and Brahmins who thrust people into this evil to plunder them. Guru Nanak voiced against absurd and worthless rituals of Brahmins. He exposed the stunt of *Sharadh* and other such rituals.²

Guru Nanak gave prominence to domestic life. He strongly opposed asceticism and celibacy like customs. To elevate the honour of women and to bring them at par with men he worked hard to achieve that goal. He rather emphasised upon moral values and preached that man should rise above animal instinct. Before this a woman was not allowed to live freely like her

counterpart, man. A woman hardly had any respect in *Hindus, Islam* and *Buddhism*. Guru discussed about respect for women while preaching about brotherhood.³

Sikhism which was born in northern region of Indian subcontinent, Punjab, is now extended to whole world. Today, *Sikhs* are well-known for their achievements in every region and business. Not only in India, but whole world has witnessed their efficiency. Punjabi *Sikhs* have inhabited the Trai region of Uttar Pradesh and dry areas of Rajasthan with their hard-work. They brought Green Revolution in Punjab which helped to promote stock of grains in the country.⁴

Till date, Guru *Sahiban* are leading *Sikh panth* as spiritual leader. But pertaining to contemporary situation, self- respect and spiritual existence of *Sikh Panth* seems to be in danger. Guru Hargobind had two options in that situation. Either surrender to brutality and injustice of Mughal Empire or oppose it. Guru Hargobind chose later. Latter then if *Sikh Panth* wanted to go against vice it was necessary for them to get united in an armed organisation. Before it could be done, military training and usage of weapons was taught to the *Sikhs*. Simultaneously, political and military leadership was also needed for them.⁵

Indian culture was greatly influenced by religion before *Sikhism* came into picture. Hindu as well as Muslim rulers had immense belief in divine rule. This gave them the status of a monarch. Hindu masses were chained in superstitions and *Karma*. Hence, they accepted the atrocities of rulers as part of *Karma*. Scholars believe that such superstitions were hurdle for the idea of fundamental rights to grow. The cruel concept of casteism bared the people of lower class to enter in political sphere. Guru *Sahiban* declined the very concept of division of society on the basis of castes and condemned its legitimisation based on *Karma* and divine rule. Nonetheless, principle of non-violence influenced them to attain spirituality but also contributed in divesting them from warrior skills like- tolerance, physical power, bravery, courage, etc.⁶

The term *Gurmatha* came into being with coherence of two words- *Guru* and *Mat*, which means decision of *guru*. According to Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, *Sikh Sangat* unanimously decided any issue and when a decision was taken, it was called *Gurmat*. *Gurmat* is also an important norm of *Sikhism* which united the community after Guru Gobind Singh.⁷

Every religion has its specified norms to become a part of it. For instance, in Hinduism to wear the *Janeyu* and to do *Mundan*, in Islam the *Sunnat* custom, Christians perform baptism, *Budhists* wear saffron clothes and do *Mundan* whereas Jains wear a mask on mouth etc. Similarly, *Sikhism* also adopted certain norms or *Sanskar*. *Sanskar* means to purify. Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha explained “any work done as per the norms of religion which leaves an impact on mind is called *Sanskar* (Norms).” In other words, *Sanskar* means certain acts done in life which makes a man achieve his goal in life.⁸ According to Bhai Jodh Singh, man wants to express his emotions to

others and does it through sounds. These sounds take the form of words, poems and melody. When such sources doesn't work, man takes the help of figures, signs and images. After a prolonged period of time, when a sound is associated with a sign it gives a long lasting effect on our conscious. When a feeling is associated with a figure it is called norm.⁹

Every human being holds his share of rights in the society and to protect these rights is his fundamental right. The two swords called *Miri* and *Piri* showed the religious and political path to the *Sikh* community. Consequently, *Sikhs* had not to seek more permission from any authority else than the *Akal Takht* to realise its political interests or protection of rights.¹⁰

To uphold the piousness of any religion it is important that its norms shall remain pure. Before *Sikhism* came into picture, norms were present but sans self-honour and freedom. With the coming of Guru Nanak Dev the history of self-honour and freedom began and went upto the time of tenth guru Guru Gobind Singh. With the establishment of *Dharamshala*, organisations like *sangat* and *langar* came into being. According to Kahan Singh Nabha, one of the organisation which played a vital role in social integration of *Sikhs* was *Langar* custom. The contribution made by this organisation for the purpose of propagation of *Sikh* culture worldly and implementation of *Sikh* norms could not be ignored. The very purpose of this research is to carve out the importance of *Langar* custom for consolidation of *Sikhism*. *Sikh* sources prove that when Guru Nanak Dev established first *Dharamshala* at Kartarpur, *Sikh* followers used to prepare *Langar* collectively. It helped in constructing a new structure in society.¹¹

Guru Nanak Dev didn't advocate the path of asceticism. He taught that one need not to renounce the world and do penance for spiritual growth. He called the present world as "place of action" for people. Therefore, *Sikh* sect does not believe in division of society as per pure and impure form of work. Ethically, *Sikhism* motivated the society to observe divine values, to progress and play a positive role in society. A message was given that man should contribute towards performing his duties and welfare of society and humanity. Undoubtedly, every *Sikh* desires to propound peace, harmony and brotherhood in world.¹²

In order to realise its political power, the newly populated society was needed to be united in a strong organisation. Gradually, *Sikh* thought became popular. Its followers were increasing day by day and very soon the need was felt to open helping centres for the same. To cater that need Guru Amar Das initiated the *Manji* custom. Guru Amar Das divided whole *Sikh* community into 22 *Manjis*. Those 22 *Manjis* came out to be 22 branches of *Sikh* community whose centre was Goindwal and the leader was Guru Amar Das. *Sikh* community was established to far-off places.¹³

Akal Takht Sahib emerged as a powerful body of *Sikh* community. Both *Guru Granth Sahib* and *Akal Takht* grew invincible, whose collective power could not be conquered. That was the reason that *Mughal* Empire and their supporters the Brahmins initially opposed *Guru Granth Sahib* and later *Akal Takht*.¹⁴

Guru Arjan has given a holy scripture to the *Sikhs* which not only helped in betterment of society but also provided a direction to the people and came to be known as *Guru Granth Sahib*. It was compiled in 1604 A.D. This holy book contained the writings of *Hindu Bhaktas* as well as *Muslim Sufis*. At that point of time, the country was going through a transition phase of modernisation and religion was a significant factor for its modernisation.¹⁵

At such crucial period, *Guru Granth Sahib* acted as a catalyst since it provided the idea of rationality, reason and faith for natural development of humanism. It emphasised about importance of teacher in making human life successful. Not only *Guru Granth Sahib* but other holy books as well discarded the notion of injustice and exploitation of man by man. *Guru Granth Sahib* describes idea of rationality and humanism in following words, "That *Granth* was repository of the word of Divine truth mediated through the Gurus. As such, it inherited the light they shared. Invested with final authority, the *Guru Granth Sahib* becomes the object of ultimate sacrosanctness."¹⁶

Such developments led to envy among *Hindus* since this community was a challenge to the suzerainty of former. They began to incite *Mughal* Emperor Jahangir against Guru Arjan Dev. Major reason for Guru Arjan Dev's martyrdom was the ever-growing power of *Sikhism* which was belittled by *Mughal* Emperor Jahangir, mentioning it as prudery. After that whole incident *Miri* and *Piri* became a very strong organisation of *Sikhism* which led to emergence of *Sikhs* as warriors.¹⁷

The two swords called *Miri* and *Piri* showed the religious and political path to the *Sikh* community. Consequently, *Sikhs* had not to seek more permission from any authority else than *Akal Takht* to realise its political interests or protection of rights. Moreover, *Akal Takht* was the major reason that Guru Hargobind was imprisoned and many battles were fought with *Mughals*.¹⁸

Next and last strong organisation of *Sikhism* was *Khalsa Panth*. As we move on to Guru Gobind Singh and the foundation of the *Khalsa* order, it was an enormously influential period for *Sikhism*. *Khalsa Panth* has provided many optimistic effects to the society like- difference between castes, rich and poor was reduced and they all became at par. The former has given a different identity to *Sikhs*. At present, a *Sikh* observes a fine dress code differentiating him from other communities like wearing a turban and having beard and moustaches.¹⁹

While women also wear a turban or *dupattas* on head. They religiously go to *Gurudwaras* and enthusiastically take part in preparing food (*Langar*) for a large crowd of *Sangat*. *Sewa* or service is known as utmost virtue among *Sikhs*. *Sikhs* perform *Sewa* by different acts like serving in preparation of *Langar* at *Gurudwara*. Service could be in any form and has same effect. The only condition for this is it should be done whole-heartedly and without self-interest. The act of *Sewa* is a matter of pride for them and one could witness thousands of *Sikhs* doing *Kar Sewa* (selfless or unpaid work). Among them there are people coming from distinct span of society. Such a scenario looks as if *Sikhs* want to surpass every other person in doing good deeds.²⁰

Sikhs also follow the concept of 'sharing with others.' They feel it as moral responsibility of helping others and giving their share of income to needy and helpless. They are into social activities to the extent they can and does not walk away from their duties.²¹

Gurudwara is a sacred centre for *Sikhs*. It is an abode of God where they go for worship. They learn different virtues there like brotherhood. *Saran* (inn) and *Langar* hall makes essential part of it. Where *Langar* provides food, *Saran* provides shelter to the travellers and other needy people. A *Sikh* walk on the path shown by his Gurus. Gurus did many welfare works like building *Sarovars* (tanks), *Baolis* (deep tanks) etc. Similar is expected from the *Sikhs* and they are performing their duty well. Their duty include many things like earning honestly; sharing with others; serving the humanity; defending the weak, the poor and the sliffered contributing *Daswandh* (tithe) ; achieving prosperity by doing hard work, efforts and struggle; fighting against injustice and tyranny; doing job sincerely; working hard to provide food to the people performing duty honestly; always telling truth; practicing honesty in every situation; never cheating, stealing or snatching; never encroaching upon other's rights; never tolerating nor being a party to injustice; always being polite; never hurting the feelings of others; always contributing for service of mankind is the real *Sikhs* way of life.²²

A *Sikh* has its own way of worship. He does not believe in idol worship or hypocritical worship or rituals. In *Sikhism*, there is no mediator to achieve union with God. A *Sikh* is a direct subject of God. Practicing truthful life, loving human beings, living in the fear of God is the *Sikh* way of life. *Sikh* is diligent, enthusiast, spirited and vivacious person. He wakes up early, takes bath daily, joins the *Sangat* in *Gurudwara*. A *Sikh* is not expected to be lethargic and unconcerned about other people. The region of Punjab is inhabited by several castes and communities e.g. *Chamars*, *Sainis*, *Mazhabis*, *Khattris*, *Kamboj*, *Jat* etc.

All norms like *Shabad*, *Guru*, *Sangat*, *Pangat*, *Dasvandh* and *Dharamsal*, which came into being during initial days of *Sikhism*, made immense contribution in converting *Sikhism* into a community. *Dharamsala* became a central institution by scheme of *Sangat* and *Pangat* through *Dasvandh*, where people used to gather. Due to this, *Sikhism* transformed from a philosophy to a

religion. Till date *Sikhs* follow the principle of '*Ape Gur Chela*' to pass through any difficulty in life and maintain these institutions efficiently.

Guru Nanak Dev never accepted the division of community on the basis of caste and predetermined occupations based thereon. *Sikh* religion does not determine a specific occupation or employment for a specific class of society on the basis of religion. Human beings have been advised to do the business with honesty and humility and help the needy. Secondly, a person is free to engage in any evocation of any type. For the safety of nation and community, not any specific class, but all citizens have been considered equal partners in any responsibility. The word *Sikh* had originated from the *Sanskrit* word *Shisya* (Pupil) and the necessity of Guru was felt after the origin of that word only. Without Guru, the existence of a *Sikh* is not possible.²³

From the analytical study of *Gurbani* (Verses written by Guru) in the context of Guru, the entire methodology can be understood, although in many contexts; discussion has been done about the necessity of the Guru through many allegories and adorned poetry but valued thoughts also emanated there from. In *Gurbani*, apart from the importance of Guru, details are also available about the complexion, traits and tasks of the Guru.²⁴

The saying of Bhai Jodh Singh, regarding the initiation of *Sikh* community, appears correct that whenever the propagation of *Sikh* religion started, its followers increased slowly; however in the first brotherhood meeting, the transformation set in steadily. That very principle gave birth to too many new institutions.²⁵

Sat-Sangat (religious congregation) is such conglomerate of those religious persons who recite the glory of the Almighty and believe in mutual brotherhood and remain in the order of God, spend their life under His commandment and will. In *Sikh* style of living, Guru Nanak Sahib attached much importance to Guru's ordainment and will. The subsequent Gurus after Guru Nanak, established the institutions of religious congregation more prominently. In the beginning, the congregation of the followers used to take place as per the order of the Guru but later on wherever five or more persons of religious thoughts converged that was given the name of *Sangat*.²⁶

Sat Sangat is a great pilgrimage. In *Gurbani*, *Sat Sangat* had been given the status of a pilgrimage. According to *Mahan Kosh*, pilgrimage is such a pious place visiting, that one is saved from sins. One should embark upon a pilgrimage with a religious feeling to ward off all sins.

Guru Amar Das had stated in one of his verses that pilgrim places say that 'devotees give their sins and dirt to us and our dirt gets washed away by the dust of their feet.' Meaning thereby that the greatness of *Sangat* is very much and the result is best of all.²⁷

'Ganga, Jamuna, Saraswati te karhe Udhamdhur Sadhu ki tai.

KibikhmaelbhareparrehamraewichHamlimael Sadhu ki Dhoor Gawai.

In *Sikh* faith, the meaning of *Sangat* is *Sat-sangat* which means sincere love, company of saints and noble persons. While giving the definition of noble people, Guru Nanak has said one thing in totality that only the ensemble of noble persons converged to practise the recitation of the name of Almighty can be called as *Sangat* or *Sat-Sangat*. Instructions are available in literary code of conduct regarding safeguards to be observed in cleanliness and sanity while preparing and serving of food for *Langar* (free kitchen). The *Sikh* serving the *Parshad* (sweet offering) among devotees had instructions to talk less while doing service, do not scratch body, and thoroughly wash hands before serving the *langar*.²⁸

Likewise there was prohibition upon using left-over water, although motivation has also been given to keep a look on the cleanliness of the kitchen while cooking food. But according to *Brahmin* tradition, no need has been felt to paste the kitchen with cow-dung. They try to become modern in their own self and absolutely free themselves from the impact of traditional *Brahmanism*. That was the reason that, despite having population of *Sikhs* in the old villages of *Malwa* (a region in Punjab), cemeteries and tombstones of old monks, hermits and religious lords are found which are formally worshipped by people on the occasions of *Sharads* (a season), and other such specific days. But there was no scope of such thing in those newly-populated cities and these cities proliferated under pure *Sikh* influence and had become centres of *Sikhism*. In addition to that, the spirit of *Sikhism* was far more among the old industrious people in those cities than the other people and the impact of *Brahminism* was almost non-existent.²⁹

It becomes clear from the study of religious history of the world that every religion had made efforts to strengthen its organisation and made their lives better. It was due to such efforts that different religions, moral principles and propriety had developed in society. Every religious thinker, according to his wisdom, had tried to enliven and analyse different aspects of life. *Sikh* Gurus were also such religious thinkers who had full enlightenment of social, religious and political aspects. Guru Amar Das, by establishing the concept of *Manjis* (cots) had divided the task of propagation of religion into many parts. It was difficult for the propagators of *Manjis* to come back once by leaving the work in the midway. Neither the Guru Sahib got full knowledge of the circumstances in time, nor the remuneration reached to the propagators promptly.³⁰

Through his farsightedness, Guru Ram Das devised a plan that the propagators of the crematoriums should not be uprooted but there must be an institution which could make them aware of the new thought line in *Sikhism* and provided financial assistance to them in time for the increased work-load. *Langar* was continuing as per the routine. The number of devotees was increasing day by day. The construction of new inns was in progress. In Amritsar, the work of

completion of magnificent *Sarovar* (holy pool) was in progress, money was required to make arrangement for the food for devotees working there and *langar* for the visitors. Many households had inhibited in Amritsar from outside regions. Money was promptly required to accomplish all those tasks.³¹

Sikhism had come out of its nascent age. The fear of opposition to marquees, *Udasis*, hermits had somewhat lessened but there was dire need to communicate solid argument to the general public in that regard. A major reason was that, keeping in view the then prevailing thinking, Guru Ram Das and Baba Budha felt that if they wanted early accomplishment of on-going projects in Amritsar, they would require sufficient amount of money. Therefore, Guru Sahib sent his emissaries to different places to propagate *Sikh* religion and collect offerings from devotees for onward submission to Guru's treasury, so that planned tasks could be completed in time. Thus, according to Macauliffe, such an institution came into existence, which was later known as *Masand* (a sofa or throne) tradition. The originator of *Kabistani* religion wrote that *Masands* are also called Ram Das. These people did their own trade and business and collected the offerings of *Satguru* and took the yearly collection to the *Satguru* on the occasion of *Baisakhi* (a Punjabi festival related to harvesting of wheat) According to Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, a *Masand* is one who is associated with the *Gaddi* (Throne), those persons who collect *Daswand* (one tenth of one's income) and donations for religious projects from *Sikhs* and propagate *Sikhism* were called *Masands*.³²

As per Gokal Chand, out of 22 *Manjis in Sikhism*, the problem of collection was solved by appointing *Masands* or collectors for each *Manji*. It was the duty of every *Masand* that he collected the offerings and presented the same to Guru Sahib in Amritsar where Guru used to organise huge congregation in which all the prominent *Sikhs* participated. The number of *Sikhs* had so much increased that there was hardly any city where few *Sikhs* did not live. They were bound to the social activities and made offerings with respectful sentiments which gave inspiration and courage to Guru Hargobind for the establishment of *Akal Takht*.³³

Although *Sikh* Gurus had been raising their voice from time to time against atrocities and injustice during contemporary politics but till that time, they did not ask *Sikhs* to tread the path of armed struggle for self-defence in an organised and institutionalised manner. It was but natural that due to the policy of armed struggle, encounter with establishment was inevitable at any point of time. Therefore, Guru Hargobind, before organising the army power, made the *Sikh* community an exponent in maintaining coordination between religion and politics as per the principles of *Miri and Piri* (politics and spirituality). To formally provide institutional shape to the principles of *Miri and Piri*, the establishment of *Akal Takht* was a dire necessity.³⁴

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