

GURU GOBIND SINGH

Religious Reform

From the very beginning the Hindus have held the Dharma as supreme, a pious binding duty nearer to the heart than everything else. At no time in their history had they turned their back on it or esteemed it less. They were able to keep it alive during Buddhist onslaught and even after seven hundred years of Muslim atrocities. Their country, property, wealth, lands and families were seized, their libraries and books burnt and their lives taken. In short they saw everything perishing before their very eyes, but they kept their Dharma alive. They enshrined it in the deepest recesses of their hearts where not even the most tyrannical hand could reach it. They bore torture, endured hardships and sorrows but somehow kept their Dharma alive, because it was most dear to them. They defended it with streams of their blood and millions of their lives. They proved equal to the occasion, though they were a divided lot, various sects warring with one another. Due to sectarian differences they came to be sub-divided into groups and sub-groups.

Their existence was like the flickering light of a dyeing lamp. This flickering light was about to be extinguished by the storm of intolerant fanaticism let loose by Aurangzeb when *Guru Gobind Singh shielded it with his hands and saved it from extinction*. The sad plight of the Hindus was evident from the fact that even in one family various ways of diverse religious practices were followed. While one worshipped Ganesh, the second prayed to the Sun, the third was a devotee of Shivji, the fourth – a votary of Vishnu, the fifth, the follower of Ram, the sixth devoted to Bhairo, the seventh worshipped Hanuman, the eighth admired Krishan Leela (Amours), the next was a Vedanti and so on. And added to this emaciating division was mutual animosity and hatred. Thanks to these fissiparous tendencies, the Hindus had no common language. Their religious books were different. There was no unanimity on any religious issue. They were not united in any one thing. How could there be any feeling of oneness, mutual sympathy and patriotic feeling among them? There was no social intercourse and fellow-feeling among the Hindus.

Disunity, friction and animosity were rife. The religious structure was in disarray and loose. The South had no love for the North. The Hindus of the North had no truck with the denizens of the South. Both of them were unconcerned about the eastern people. And none of them had even a single practice in common with the West. No one trusted the others. The country was full of corrupt and deceitful people. *Their religion was not the same, their morality different, their aims different, their hopes different, their living different, their habits different, their habiliments different, their prayers different, their gods different, their temples different, their rites and rituals different, their desires different, their food different, their ways different, their tempers different, their hells different, their heavens different.*

There was no one-ness in their thoughts, in their actions. They followed ways not only different but often sharply conflicting with one another. They had neither love for one another nor shared the grief of others. They never felt inclined to succour one another.

The Hindu kings were hostile to one another. The subjects were out to harm one another. The religious sects were thirsty for the blood of one another. How could then the Hindus survive or prosper? Why should not they have decline and downfall? Why should not they suffer and be despondent? Why should not their humiliation and disgrace be apparent? Why should not their honour and self-respect be well nigh extinct? Why should not their nations' dignity and destiny be different? Why should not they be termed cowardly and docile, semi-civilized or savage rabblement?

The position of religious sects and sub-sects had become worse. Their number could be counted in thousands. Normally the Brahmins were the founders of these sects and groups. In addition to them were different sects following diverse saints and fakirs. *Things had come to such a pass that every village had its own rites and rituals, gods and sects quite different from all others.* Some Hindus had slid still lower by following certain Islamic sects and Muslim Pirs (holymen) who considered them heathens, fit only to be bled. Some of the founders of the sects deified themselves as the supreme Lord, while some others claimed direct descent from him.

If the play of Maya was eulogized at one place, the world and its goods were described as ephemeral and transitory at another and people advised renunciation. All of the founders and leaders of sects had opened shops, were extolling their own religious wares and were worried about selling them. Liberation was going cheap and selling for a song. The fasting of a day, just one bathing at a *Tirath*, *the recitations of a couple of words and incantation of some names were claimed to wash away the sins not only of this life but also of the sum total of thousands previous births, as well as those of one's forefathers and relatives.* Over and above all this they entitled one to emancipation and transported him to heaven (Swarga). The variance in religious affairs applied even to tilaks (marks on foreheads). The tilaks were different, their contours different, their positions different. All this was done to enable the agencies of the gods to recognize their respective devotees, after their demise. The rosary and its beads were different. The materials used and their colours were diverse. It is not possible to tabulate all the ramifications of their diverse creeds.

Differences and contrasts were the order of the day. Rites, rituals and religious acts differed from man to man. In the religious field transactions were aglore. The rules for returns of religious dealings were defined; rules for sale, purchase and mortgage were laid down and enforced. One person would worship god, do penance and give in charity and another could reap the rewards. Give a man some pice and take away the gain entailed by his prayers, recitations and incantations. Sin and commit

crimes of all kinds. Then give a professional in the religious field some money, get a religious book read, get a couple of mantras recited by a rosary a number of times and have your sins washed away. Appease your particular god by offering him some flowers, Coconut, patashas (sugar-candies) etc. When absolution was so cheap and readily available, why should a man bother about morality, engage in the hard task of worship and prayers and study of the scriptures? Why cleanse the inner self with the rigours of austerities and abstinences? Why should one think of social welfare or unity or turn towards one God?

When the rewards of here and hereafter could be obtained with a handful of coins, where was any place for virtuous acts of this and earlier lives? Not only were one's rites, rituals, customs different in this world but in the next also. Every god had his own special heaven and hell. When the gods were at variance with one another, how could there be peace among their followers? The Hindus even denigrated the Almighty Lord Himself. First of all they parceled Him into gods like Brahma, Vishnu etc. Later on He was made to manifest Himself not only in form of human beings but also of animals like the Crocodile, the Tortoise, the Boar and what is even worse of a man-animal Narsingh (Half lion, half man). They started idol-worship and carved idols of the gods. But their idols too, were different.

One idol was headless, another without feet. While some idols were made of stone, others were hewed out of logs of wood. Even the stones were of diverse shapes and kinds, round, chiseled etc. Mostly the idols of Kaam (Eros) and of Kishna were worshipped. It is most surprising that the idols of the Tortoise, the Boar and Crocodile were made and worshipped.

Many tortuous austerities and different physical tortures were undergone in the name of religion. Some considered it a pious act to die while being sawn apart in a well at Kashi, while some desired being trampled to death under the Chariot of Jagan Nath. But it is surprising that the cutting off one's nose or ears had not come into vogue then, though piercing them was considered propitious. Most bizarre things were done. While one tried to impair his arm the other kept standing on one leg to proclaim his religious fervour yet another hung downward and still another tried to ape the animals in his stance. The religious garbs were of diverse colours, of different shapes. The hair style and modes of keeping hair of the head, the beard and the moustache were different.

This immoral and irreligious tide was responsible for the birth of Buddhism. The power of the sword had led to the spread of Budh Dharma and also to its downfall. Its good points became extinct in India with its ouster but its evil practices were retained as a legacy by Hindus. Animal sacrifice was considered a fit offering to the gods and goddesses, and human sacrifice was deemed still more virtuous. The priests of the temple of Bandar Bashi proudly claimed that animal sacrifice was offered in such abundance that blood never dried on the sacrificial altar. Eating of filth was the special trait of

one religious sect. The followers of Bhairo indulged in drinking to please their god. The votaries of Shivji took to opium, charas and hemp as an act of devotion. The followers of Shakti or Devi ate meat and drank liquor as a religious duty towards their deity. Certain sects revelled in eating with dogs. Salvation could be had by merely serving the saints and sadhus and at the soulful glance of a guru.

The Brahmins were the originators of all religious ills. They had forbidden the non-Brahmins from studying Vedas and Shastras. In due course of time the field of education became their preserve and they refused to teach others. They opined that Sanskrit was the language of the gods and of all the people of the world only Brahmins were privileged to study it. They were the editors and rehashers of Shastras and the makers (writers) of Puranas, as well as the creators of all religious sects. Despite being worsted, humbled and humiliated, they were loth to forego their acquired position of authority. They were never willing to let go off a thing over which they claimed their birth right and divine right. Therefore, it was well nigh impossible to interface in any one of their affairs. They were incensed by such interference and considered it more hurtful than the Muslim atrocities. You can fully apprehend the state of affairs if you go through the various injunctions they had incorporated in the religious books (Shastras) to perpetuate their pre-eminence, dominance and self-acquired authority over others. Their number is great, but just a few are given below:

1. All the world and all that it contains is the property of the Brahmin. All things have been made for him. Manu I Chapt/96,100,101.
2. The Brahmin can annihilate a king with his army, horses and elephants, with the power of his mantras. Manu 9/213.
3. The Brahmin can create many worlds like our own, rulers of Kingdoms, new gods, new human beings and many other perishable things. Manu 9/315. (This can be true as he had created many new kings and kingdoms with small capitals of their own by setting the Rajputs against one another. He had created countless new gods, and was busy creating more every day).
4. The Brahmin deserves greater respect and reverence than a king. Manu 2/139.
5. Very serious crimes committed in order to save his body and soul, are not punishable in the case of a Brahmin. Manu 9/205, 208, 232; 4/69,165; 8/281, 283.
6. Any crime against the person of a Brahmin or against his property deserves ten times the ordinary punishment in such cases. Manu 7/367; 8/378, 379.

7. It is the imperative duty of a king to appoint a Brahmin as his trusted minister and advisor. Manu 7/58.
8. The working of courts should be entirely entrusted to the Brahmin. Manu 8/1, 9, 10, 11.
9. In a Yajna the Brahmins should be fed and given plenty of gifts and fees spiritual services rendered. In case these are insufficient all lives, progeny, animals, good name and blessings (joys) of now and hereafter of the person performing Yajna are destroyed. Manu 3/133 to 146; 11/39,40.
10. Atonement for not doing worship, pilgrimage and Tirath- bathing can only be obtained by liberal cash donations to a Brahmin. Manu 11/117, 139.
11. No tax of any kind can be charged from a Brahmin. Manu 7/(132), 133.
12. If someone steals an animal belonging to a Brahmin, his feet should be cut off from the ankles. Manu 8/325.
13. A shudra should preferably serve a Brahmin and in case of non-availability of a Brahmin master, he should serve a Kashatri. Manu 8/334.

It is not necessary here to dwell at greater length on such references; these few are enough to establish the pre-eminence of the Brahmins in all aspects of life. Everything was under their control. Their right even to create new gods had been accepted. They interpreted the Shastras to suit their selfish ends of the moment and established such rites, rituals and traditions as were consonant with their own material welfare. They had already debarred the common mass of non-Brahmins from the study of Sanskrit. Now they forbade them to learn Arabic and Persian, on the plea, that the study of the language of the Malechhas (a term of contempt for the Muslim invaders) was against the injunctions of the Shastras. Whosoever commenced the study Persian are even to-day considered Shudras in India. The Brahmins completely enmeshed the Hindus in mental slavery which is even worse and more damaging than physical slavery.

The Hindus were enslaved mentally by the Brahmins on the hand and physically by the Muslims on the other. Guru Gobind Singh decided to free them from both these kinds of slavery. Opposition to the freeing of the Hindus from mental slavery was expected from the Brahmins, but the Hindus themselves were ready to oppose him and they did so. But Guru Gobind Singh gave a clarion call for the freedom of the Hindus despite opposition from these ungrateful people. And he forcefully exhorted the people for the worship of the Akal.

First of all he turned to reform in the religious sphere. Being a spiritual leader he preached the gospel of Lord-devotion and taught the people to spurn polytheism and to shun the following of manmade religious sects. He forcefully rebutted the plurality of god. Following the precepts of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, He forcefully denounced and forbade the worship of idols. He censured the custom of observance of obsequies and described the worship of gods as a fraud, termed the concept of Avtars as antinature, condemned Tirath-bathing as a hoax, criticized the religious garbs as dresses of deceit, delivered people from the worship of men, animals, vegetations and minerals. He pulled people out of the bog of superstition, and decried the symbols of religious distinctions. He drew the attention of the people to the One Creator, who is Formless and Eternal. He eulogized supreme glory of Truth.

In short he took people away from small, slimy, stagnant and filthy fountains to the shores of the infinite Ocean of Lord-devotion. Given below are some Kabits of Guru Gobind Singh culled out of his numerous verses epitomizing the beauty of his gospel, the depth of his Lord-devotion and the extent of richness of his thought. It is hoped that the readers will relish them: