

GURU GOBIND SINGH

Social Reform

He took in hand reforms in the social structure with a similar single mindedness and devotion. This task was very difficult, beset as it was with insurmountable impediments. Here too his achievements are outstanding and unequalled by any other social reformer. At that time the Hindus were miserably caught in the web of social divisions based on the invidious caste system. The social conditions of a people are strongly affected by their religious environs. The Hindus were no exception. Changes in the religious sphere cause attendant changes in the social structure. Divisions and sub-divisions in the religious sphere were on the increase owing to Brahminism. New gods and avtaras were invented and introduced; foundations were laid of numerous man-made sects which further affected traditions, rites and rituals. The well-being of those who lived on others, lay in the proliferations of sub-castes. Their ever-increasing wants and luxuries could be supplied only through the multiplication of sub-castes. The Brahmins divided and sub-divided people on the basis of religious differences. This process continued for a very long period with the result that by the times of Guru Gobind Singh the number of such sects had swelled to thousands.

One caste had no dealings or fellow feeling with another. The Shudras had nothing in common with Kashatris; the Brahmins had nothing to do with other castes. The Brahmins and Kashatris among themselves were further sub-divided innumerable. These sects and sub-sects could not inter-marry or dine with one another. They were poles apart. The members of one caste or section could not eat the food cooked by others. And these social bindings were so very iron-cast that merely by eating food prepared by others would make a man an outcaste and deprive him of his religious standing. Religion had been reduced to a narrow code of eating and drinking taboos. Differences were apparent even in the kinds of foods and eatables. Such fine distinctions led to mutual hatred and much bickerings and strife everyday. How could love for one, another survive in such a suffocating atmosphere? How could unity take place under differences and distinctions so varied and sharp? Eating and drinking with one another was a taboo, the infringement whereof resulted in the loss of one's caste and religion. Such was the sorry state of affairs that people of different castes could not eat together while sitting at the same floor. These fuelled traditions of untouchability and had touched levels of ridiculous superstition. It played havoc with the sense of brotherhood and nationalism among the Hindus.

Guru Gobind Singh wanted to wipe out these distinctions and bring Shudras at par with the high castes. He wanted to inculcate in all a sense of equality in consonance with the natural law of the Lord Akal. He exerted to widen the narrow confines and bounds prevalent at the time so as to

include the Shudras in the religious and social fold. *He desired to make religion allembicing so that it facilitated the entry of people of other sects and religions.* Without removing these crippling and deadening restrictions Shudras could not be brought in. The divisions ushered in by these restrictions had weakened the social structure and sapped the strength of the country and the nation. The numerous castes, sub-castes, sects and sub- sects had no love and sympathy for one another. This emboldened the Muslim invaders to vanquish them one by one. Instead of coming to the succour of their neighbours, they watched their downfall with undisguised glee. Now they had reached a state just short of their obliteration and of their Dharma.

Since the low castes could not be admitted to the high ones, it was not possible to get the work of high castes done through the low castes. This was one of the greatest disadvantages of the caste system which was creating innumerable hurdles in the path of progress and national integration. The farsighted and sagacious Guru held it imperative to lift the low castes to the level of the high ones, so that the former could regain their sense of dignity and manhood and work for national reconstruction instead of just doing menial chores for the high castes. During the days of Brahmanic ascendancy and the Kashatri reign the plight of the Shudras was very miserable. They were treated at par with cattle and beasts of burden, though they were the original inhabitants of the country. There is **no doubt** that they were worse off than the ancient slaves that were bought and sold like animals and than even under Muslim oppression.

Manu, the ancient law-giver of the Hindus, had ordained that the Shudras were born to serve others. The Manu-code had made it a legal binding so that the high castes could press them into menial service but the food cooked by them was not to be touched. All such injunctions of Manu were not followed very strictly. But under the Brahmins their observance **and** hold was tightened to an inhuman degree. When persons of the same caste were not allowed to eat with one another, it was impossible to imagine that any person of a high caste could be allowed to eat the food of the Shudras. Even a Brahmin could not eat of another Brahmin and the same rule applied to the other high castes. Some of the black injunctions of Manu are given here :

- During the days of distress and destitution, the members of a caste can engage in the work of lower caste, but under no circumstances is he to undertake the work of the higher caste. (Chapter X/99-100)
- The Shudras is forbidden to study, the Vedas, the Shastras and the scriptures. (ChapterX/127-128)
- It is reprehensible for a Brahmin to study the Vedas before a Shudra. (Chapter IV/99)

- The Shudra should be fed the left overs of his master's food and clothed with his tattered and discarded dress. (ChapterX/25)
- The Shudra is not allowed to amass wealth. (ChapterX/129)
- If a Shudra abuses a man of higher caste, his tongue should be cut off. (ChapterVIII/270)
- If a Shudra sits near a Brahmin on the same floor, the flesh of his bottoms should be sheared off. (ChapterVIII/281)
- If a Shudra talks of religious matters to a Brahmin, molten lead or boiling oil should be poured in his mouth and ears. (Chapter VIII/272)
- The atonement for the killing of a Shudra is the same as that for killing of a cat or a dog or a frog or a lizard or other animals.

It is not necessary to dwell on such ordinances. These few highlight briefly the sad plight of the Shudras under the Brahmans, and Hindu rule. They were severely forbidden to rebel against such unjust and inhuman injunctions. Such was the fate status of the Shudras when Guru Gobind Singh embarked on his mission. They were treated like dogs and cattle. They could not rise higher up in the scale and do the work of Kashatris. If per chance a Shudra attained some worthwhile stature in the political arena, he could under no circumstances be admitted to a higher caste. No amount of wealth or personal status of political nature or courage or scholasticism could raise a Shudra to a higher caste. What is shocking and highly damnable is that all this was done in the name of religion and God, supported by the so-called gospels of God. It was necessary to cut asunder the shackles binding the hapless Hindus in the dark dungeons of superstition and to bring them out in the open, to exalt them to the dignified stature of human equality.

No nation can progress, for that matter no religion can prosper, if it is bound down by many restrictions. Naturalness is a must for independence and is an asset without which no man, no people, no country can forge ahead. The Vedic Dharma had bestowed natural freedom to man. But its explanations, annotations, exegesis and instructions and laws as given in later scriptures had curtailed and extremely limited this freedom. The Hindu, to all outward appearances a free man, was hedged and hemmed in on all sides, hardly able to breathe freely. The result was that he was left with no national character, if ever he enjoyed the possession of any such thing; it was a matter of the hoary past. Now he was a prisoner of mental slavery which further enslaved his heart and soul. Despite all this the Hindu was highly averse to any change in his food, eating habits, dress habits, ways of worship, etc. Any change in any of the above ways of

living was attended with the danger of losing his caste and being ostracised. It was necessary that the Hindus, who had become slaves mentally and physically, should be jolted out of their miserable stupor. The sad plight of the Hindus in the political field was largely responsible for this predicament.