

Human Rights – A Core Concern in Sikh Doctrines

[PART-II]

*DR. DEVINDER PAL SINGH**

Sikhism is the world's fifth-largest religion. It was founded during the late 15th century in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent. Its adherents are known as Sikhs. Currently, there are about 30 million Sikhs worldwide. Most of them live in the Indian state of Punjab. As per Sikh tradition, Sikhism was established by Guru Nanak (1469–1539) and subsequently led by a succession of nine other Gurus. Before his death, the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708), bestowed the status of Guru to the sacred scripture of Sikhs, Adi Granth, which is presently known as Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) [1].

The Adi Granth was first compiled by Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, in 1604. Its second and final version has been the handiwork of Guru Gobind Singh, who added the hymns of his father, Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru [2], at Damdama Sahib, Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, in 1705. The holy Sikh scripture, SGGS, contains 1430 pages of text in poetry form. In addition to the hymns of the six Sikh Gurus and four Sikhs, it includes hymns composed by fifteen saints (Bhagats) and eleven poet laureates (Bhats) of the Guru's court. Muslims and Hindus, Brahmins, and "untouchables" all come together in one congregation to create a universal scripture. It is a compendium of mystic, metaphysical and religious poetry written or recited between the 12th and 17th centuries in the Indian sub-continent [3].

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, through its comprehensive worldview, offers a perfect set of values and an applicable code of conduct. Its cardinal message is addressed to the welfare of all humans irrespective of their caste, color, creed, culture, and religion. SGGS emphasizes love, respect, empathy, and acceptance of others' existence. It prohibits us from infringing on the freedom and rights of others. The life and works of the Sikh Gurus exemplify the practicability of these ideas. Their inter-faith dialogues highlighted that human unity and oneness could be achieved through tolerance, communication, and respect for others [4].

**Director, Center for Understanding Sikhism, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada.
Web: www.c4usikhism.com*

Besides a matchless elaboration of spirituality, Sri Guru Granth Sahib enshrines a powerful expression of the message of revolutionary ideals of social welfare, human rights, multicultural distinctness, and religious freedom. In the present era, when the threats and fear of interfaith conflicts, military aggression, terrorism etc., have overpowered the human sentiments, the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib are even more relevant to resolve all these problems.

Gender Equality emphasized

Having noted several rituals and traditions of his time, Guru Nanak comprehended that men frequently degraded women. Women were thought of as property and considered as lowly and unworthy. He condemned these practices. Guru Nanak spoke against gender discrimination in India's highly male-dominated environment [18]. He opposed established orthodoxy with the radical assertion that women were worthy of praise and equal to men. Besides, God is gender neutral. It is both man and woman, and its creative aspect is portrayed as that of a mother:

ਆਪੇ ਪੁਰਖੁ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਨਾਰੀ ॥
Ape purakh ape hi nari.

God is both man and woman. (M. 1, SGGS, p 1020)

Guru Nanak proclaimed that the same divine essence pervades through both men and women.

ਨਾਰੀ ਪੁਰਖ ਸਬਾਈ ਲੋਇ ॥
Nari purakh sabai loe.

Among all the men and women, God's essence is pervading. (M. 1, SGGS, p. 223)

Bhagat Kabir articulates that man and women are all forms of the Creator (God).

ਏਤੇ ਅਉਰਤ ਮਰਦਾ ਸਾਜੇ ਏ ਸਭ ਰੂਪ ਤੁਮ੍ਹਾਰੇ ॥
Ete aurat marda saje e sabh roop tumhare.

You have fashioned all these men and women, O Lord! All these are Your Forms. (Bhagat Kabir, SGGS, p. 1349)

Gur Nanak emphasized that rather than being denigrated and mistreated, women should be cherished and respected. Guru Nanak proclaimed:

ਭੰਡਿ ਜੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਨਿੰਮੀਐ ਭੰਡਿ ਮੰਗਣੁ ਵੀਆਹੁ ॥ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਦੋਸਤੀ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਚਲੈ ਰਾਹੁ ॥ ਭੰਡੁ ਮੁਆ ਭੰਡੁ ਭਾਲੀਐ
ਭੰਡਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਬੰਧਾਨੁ ॥ ਸੋ ਕਿਉ ਮੰਦਾ ਆਖੀਐ ਜਿਤੁ ਜੰਮਹਿ ਰਾਜਾਨ ॥ ਭੰਡਹੁ ਹੀ ਭੰਡੁ ਉਪਜੈ ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਝੁ ਨ ਕੋਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ
ਭੰਡੈ ਬਾਹਰਾ ਏਕੋ ਸਚਾ ਸੋਇ ॥

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Bhand jammiai bhand nimmiai bhand mangan viahu. Bhandahu hovai dosti bhandahu chalai rahu. Bhand mua bhand bhaliyai bhand hovai bandhan. So kio manda akhiai jit jameh rajan. Bhandahu hi bhand upjai bhandai bajh na koe. Nanak bhandai bahra eko sachha soe.

We all are born of women; we are conceived in a woman's womb. To a woman, one is engaged and married. One makes friendship with a woman; future generations are born through women. When a woman (wife) dies, a person marries another one; we are bound with the world through woman. So why should we talk ill of her? From her, kings are born. From a woman, a woman is born; without women, there would be no one at all. O Nanak, God alone is without a woman. (M. 1, SGGS, p 473)

Guru Nanak and his successor Gurus ardently advocated women's participation in worship, society, and the battleground, as equals. They promoted freedom of speech, and women were urged to participate in all religious activities, including the SGGS's reading. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, allowed equality to women by admitting them into the *Sangat* (congregation) without any reservations or restrictions. He declared that his message is as much for women as for men. His successor, Guru Angad, the second Sikh Guru, encouraged the education of all Sikhs, both men and women. The third Sikh Guru, Guru Amar Das, disapproved of the use of the veil by women. He inspired women to take up a leadership role in society. As a practical measure, he entrusted women with overseeing some communities of disciples. Furthermore, he forbade the practices of Sati (custom of widow burning) and female infanticide and encouraged remarriage of widows. Guru Amar Das proclaimed:

ਸਤੀਆ ਏਹਿ ਨ ਆਖੀਅਨਿ ਜੇ ਮੜਿਆ ਲਗਿ ਜਲੀਨਿ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਤੀਆ ਜਾਣੀਅਨਿ ਜਿ ਬਿਰਹੇ ਚੋਟ ਮਰੀਨਿ ॥
Satia ehi na akhian jo marhia lag jalannih. Nanak satia janiianih je birhe chot marannih.

Do not call them 'sati' (means: truly faithful), who burn alive on their husband's funeral pyre. Nanak says: They alone be called 'sati', who die from the shock of separation. (M. 3, SGGS, p. 787)

Noting that the custom of dowry, which led to various social evils, was highly prevalent in the strong patrilineal culture of India, the Sikh Gurus strongly condemned it. The fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das, proclaims it as:

ਹੋਰਿ ਮਨਮੁਖ ਦਾਜੁ ਜਿ ਰਖਿ ਦਿਖਾਲਹਿ ਸੁ ਕੂੜੁ ਅਹੰਕਾਰੁ ਕਚੁ ਪਾਜੇ ॥
Hor manmukh daj je rakh dikhaleh so kurh ahankar kach pajo.

An arrogant person, who offers dowry and makes a show of it, indulges in only false egotism and a worthless exhibition. (M. 4, SGGS, p. 79)

The sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind, bestowed great respect upon women by declaring, "woman is the conscience of man." The tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh made the Khalsa initiation ceremony open, both to men and women, proclaiming a woman being just as worthy [19]. He bestowed the honorific "Kaur" (meaning princess) to all the baptized women. Furthermore, he accorded parity among the Khalsa, men or women, by allowing them all to keep the 5 K's. He directed the Khalsa fraternity to avoid the company of *kanyapapi* (a person who sins against a woman). He also interdicted Sikhs to exercise any proprietary rights over women captured in battle; they could not be kept as enslaved people or wives but were to be treated with the utmost respect. Sikh doctrines also assert that both women and men carry the same divine spirit. So, they both have an equal right to cultivate their spirituality and attain salvation. Women can participate in all social, cultural, secular, and religious activities. In 1870s, during the Sikh revival movement, the Singh Sabha raised its voice against the female infanticide, child marriage, the practice of dowry, extravagant expenditure during marriage ceremonies, purdah system, sati practice and poor condition of widows.

Gender equality has always been one of the hallmarks of Sikhism. Several women have made important contributions in the past. Sikh history is replete with such instances which portray women as equal to men in devotion, service, bravery, and sacrifice. A few examples are the extraordinary contributions made by Bibi Nanaki Ji, Bibi Bhani Ji, Mata Khivi Ji, Mata Gujari Ji, Mata Sahib Kaur, Mai Bhago, Rani Sada Kaur, Rani Sahib Kaur, and Maharani Jind Kaur in various domains of life. And this progress is continuing even today. Now a days, Sikh women are playing leadership roles not only in leading congregations but in several diverse fields. They join the *Sangat* (congregation), work with men in *Langar* (community kitchen), and participate in other religious and social activities in the gurdwaras. Furthermore, they enjoy the same voting rights as men to elect the members of the Gurdwara Managing Committees, which administers Sikhs' places of worship. Thus, Sikhism strongly supports the human right to equality for all irrespective of one's class, status, caste, race, religion, or gender.

Right to Education

The right to education encompasses the right to free and compulsory primary education and increasing access to secondary, technical, vocational, and higher education. Based on verifiable data, it is realized that people's right to education reduces their vulnerability to child labor, early marriage, discrimination, and other human rights abuses. It also increases their opportunities to realize other human rights, including the right to health and participation in public affairs.

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Education as a fundamental human right is central to UNESCO's mission. The right to education is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) [20]. Education is an empowering right. It is one of the foremost tools by which socially and economically marginalized persons and children can take themselves out of poverty and participate fully in society. Having recognized education's potential to develop our most excellent abilities, Guru Nanak encouraged his disciples to acquire it to learn about all spheres of life. However, he emphasizes that learning must include apt understanding. He asserts.

ਮੁਕਤਿ ਨਹੀ ਬਿਦਿਆ ਬਿਗਿਆਨਿ ॥

Mukat nahi bidia bigian.

Liberation (from ignorance) does not come from learning without understanding. (M. 1, SGGS, p 903)

ਗਿਆਨ ਖੜਗੁ ਲੈ ਮਨ ਸਿਉ ਲੁਝੈ ਮਨਸਾ ਮਨਹਿ ਸਮਾਈ ਹੇ ॥

Gian kharag lai man sio lujhai mansa maneh samaee he.

With the sword of knowledge, one must destroy evil thoughts and selfish desires inherent in the mind. (M. 1, SGGS, p 1022)

The ability to read opens worlds for an individual. Without literacy, the exposure to new ideas is minimal, as is one's ability to communicate their thoughts and participate in society. The ability to read enhances the ability to access ideas and information from outside of one's own experiences, promoting cross-cultural awareness and understanding other points of view. According to many experts, education is crucial in alleviating poverty and fostering development. Guru Nanak inspires us to be well educated. He articulates:

ਜਹ ਗਿਆਨ ਪ੍ਰਗਾਸੁ ਅਗਿਆਨੁ ਮਿਟੈਤੁ ॥

Jah gian pargas agian mitant.

Wherever spiritual wisdom appears, ignorance is dispelled. (M. 1, SGGS, p. 791)

Guru Nanak emphasizes that wisdom thus acquired should be used for the benefit of society. He encourages us to adopt a generous attitude towards needy and proclaims that only through selfless service to others can one attain inner peace. He proclaims:

ਵਿਦਿਆ ਵੀਚਾਰੀ ਤਾ ਪਰਉਪਕਾਰੀ ॥

vidiaa vichari ta(n) parupkari.

Contemplate and reflect upon knowledge, and you will become a benefactor to others. (M. 1, SGGS, p 356)

ਸੁਖੁ ਹੋਵੈ ਸੇਵ ਕਮਾਣੀਆ ॥

Sukh hovai sev kamaniaa.

You shall find peace, doing selfless service. (M. 1, SGGS, p 25)

Guru Angad was an ardent advocate for education and built several schools for children to learn, read and write. To carry forward his mission, several Sikh organizations, e.g., SGPC, Amritsar; DSGMC, New Delhi; Sikh Educational Society, Chandigarh; Chief Khalsa Diwan Charitable Society, Amritsar; Akal Academy, Baru Sahib (Himachal Pradesh), and Sikh Education Society, Hyderabad etc. have taken great measures to make education easily accessible to all. Following Guru Angad's footsteps these organizations are running over 260 schools, more than 70 colleges and four universities to date. Thus, Sikhism is largely instrumental in actively supporting the right to education for all.

Right to Work

The right to work implies that people have a right to engage or work in productive employment. They should not be barred from doing so. The right to work is contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, it is recognized in international human rights law through its inclusion in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The right to work emphasizes social, cultural, and economic development [11-12, 21]. In his hymns, Guru Nanak emphasizes that the Creator of the world has itself assigned some work to every being. Thereby, it is a fundamental human right. He says:

ਤੁਧੁ ਆਪੇ ਜਗਤੁ ਉਪਾਇ ਕੇ ਤੁਧੁ ਆਪੇ ਧੰਧੈ ਲਾਇਆ ॥

Tudh ape jagat upae kai dudh ape dhandhai laiaa.

You Yourself created the world, and You Yourself put it to work. (M.1, SGGS, p. 138)

ਜੰਤ ਉਪਾਇ ਧੰਧੈ ਸਭ ਲਾਏ॥

Jant upae dhandhai sabh laey....

Having created its beings, He (God) has put them all to work. (M.1, SGGS, p. 434)

Guru Amar Das declares that the Creator of us all encourages us to do work.

ਆਪਿ ਕਰਾਏ ਕਰਤਾ ਸੋਈ ॥

Ap karae karta soee.

The Creator Himself inspires us to work. (M.3, SGGS, p. 124)

Guru Arjan Dev recognizing the fundamental nature of the human right to work urges us to lead a life of action and earn one's living to lead a worthwhile life. He articulates:

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ਉਦਮ ਕਰੇਦਿਆ ਜੀਉ ਤੂੰ ਕਮਾਵਦਿਆ ਸੁਖ ਭੁੰਚੁ ॥
Udam karedia jio tu(n) kamavdia sukh bhunch.

Live a life of action. Do work, earn your living, and thereby lead a comfortable life.
(M.5, SGGS, p. 522).

The core message of SGGS is *Naam Japna* (Contemplation on God), *Kirt Karni* (the honest labor) and *Wand Chhakna* (sharing of earnings). It proclaims:

ਘਾਲਿ ਖਾਇ ਕਿਛੁ ਹਥਹੁ ਦੇਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਰਾਹੁ ਪਛਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਇ ॥
Ghal khae kichh hathahu dei. Nanak rahu pachaneh seie.

Nanak says a person who earns his/her living working arduously; and shares it with others has discovered the path of righteousness. (M. 1, SGGS, p 1245)

Not only the right to work is recognized in SGGS, but all are encouraged to choose the right (honest work) type of work for a living. Guru Arjan says:

ਸੋਈ ਕੰਮ ਕਮਾਇ ਜਿਤੁ ਮੁਖੁ ਉਜਲਾ ॥
Soi kamm kamae jit mukh ujla.

One must do only that work, which shall bring commendation from others. (M.5, SGGS, p. 397)

Thus, Sikh Gurus were supporters of right actions and good deeds. They not only preached but also lived what they preached. For example, after his long travels, Guru Nanak settled himself at Kartarpur Sahib. Therein, he, for almost two decades, worked hard to earn his living via farming. His actions set up an example for others to follow. Thus, the life examples of Sikh Gurus and Sikh doctrines emphatically support human beings' right to work.

Right to Freedom of Thought and Expression

The Human Rights Act's Article 10 protects our right to hold our own opinions and to express them freely without government interference [22]. It includes the right to express our views aloud (for instance, through public demonstrations and protest) or through published leaflets, articles, books, television or radio broadcasting, works of art, the internet, and social media. The law also protects our freedom to receive information from other people by, for instance, via reading a newspaper or being part of an audience.

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, was a strong proponent of these ideas. He encouraged people to adhere to the right of freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship for all. Guru Nanak articulates that sharing views and ideas (Freedom of thought and expression) must be a continuous process.

ਜਬ ਲਗ ਦੁਨੀਆ ਰਹੀਐ ਨਾਨਕ ਕਿਛੁ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਕਿਛੁ ਕਹੀਐ ॥

Jab lag dunia rahiai Nanak kichh suniai kichh kahiai.

Nanak says that as long as we are in this world, we must listen to others and express our views too. (M. 1, SGGS, p 661)

Bhagat Kabir, a saint-poet of SGGS, recommends that one must share one's views with others and learn from spiritually wise persons.

ਸੰਤੁ ਮਿਲੈ ਕਿਛੁ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਕਹੀਐ ॥

Sant milai kichh suniai kahiai.

On meeting a spiritually wise person, talk to him, and listen. (Bhagat Kabir, SGGS, p. 870)

Guru Arjan Dev, however, makes us aware that one must not misuse the right to freedom of thought and expression. He emphasizes:

ਕਰਨ ਨ ਸੁਣੈ ਕਾਹੂ ਕੀ ਨਿੰਦਾ ॥

Karan na sunai kahu ki ninda.

Neither one should slander anyone nor listen to such talk. (M. 5, SGGS, p. 274)

Right to Religious Freedom

Religion has an important place in society. People and religious organizations need physical, social, and legal space to practice their religion and exert its positive influence. In addition to being just private worship, religion involves public expression on moral and social issues [23].

Religious freedom is defined as the right to have religious beliefs of one's choice, declare these beliefs openly, manifest these beliefs through worship and practice, or by teaching and dissemination without any fear of hindrance or reprisal [24]. The right to religious freedom is vital for protecting the conscience of all people. It permits us to think, express and act upon what we deeply believe. Freedom of conscience or religious freedom is crucial to the health of a plural society. It allows different beliefs and faiths to flourish. This fundamental human right protects the rights of all groups and individuals, including the most vulnerable, whether religious or not [23].

Because of its teachings and history, Sikhism has a particular commitment to religious freedom. The freedom to choose and practice religion is at the foundation of Sikhism. Sikhs believe that there are many paths to God and many avenues to seek the truth. Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Teg Bahadur, and several Sikhs [25-28] laid down their lives for the

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right of freedom for all. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, favored taking a stand against the misrule or any discrimination, be it on a religious basis. The subjects must be prepared for it and not let the ruler misuse his authority. He, even, proclaims the right to die while facing the challenge for a righteous cause. He says:

ਜਉ ਤਉ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਖੇਲਣ ਕਾ ਚਾਉ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਧਰਿ ਤਲੀ ਗਲੀ ਮੇਰੀ ਆਉ ॥ ਇਤੁ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਪੈਰੁ ਧਰੀਜੈ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ
ਦੀਜੈ ਕਾਣਿ ਨ ਕੀਜੈ ॥

Jao tao prem khelan ka chao. Sir dhar tali gali meri aao. It marag pair dharijai.

If you wish to play this game of love (of God), then adapt my way of life only if you are ready to sacrifice your life for the cause. On adopting this way of life, don't bother about public criticism even if you may have to lay down your head for it. (M. 1, SGGS, p. 1412)

Guru Nanak appreciates the sacrifice of the warriors for a righteous cause. He articulates:

ਮਰਣੁ ਮੁਣਸਾ ਸੁਰਿਆ ਹਕੁ ਹੈ ਜੋ ਹੋਇ ਮਰਨਿ ਪਰਵਾਣੈ ॥

Maran munsa suria hak hai jo hoe maran parvano.

A warrior's death is commendable if it is for a righteous cause. (M.1, SGGS, p. 579-80)

Bhagat Kabir emphasizes that a person who lays down his life for the cause of religion is a true spiritual warrior.

ਸੁਰਾ ਸੋ ਪਹਿਚਾਨੀਐ ਜੁ ਲਰੈ ਦੀਨ ਕੇ ਹੇਤ ॥ ਪੁਰਜਾ ਪੁਰਜਾ ਕਟਿ ਮਰੈ ਕਬਹੂ ਨ ਛਾਡੈ ਖੇਤੁ ॥

Sura so pahichaniai jo larai deen ke het. Purja purja kat marai kabhu na chhadai khet.

Recognize only him as a true warrior (spiritual hero) who fights in defence of a righteous cause (dharma). Such a warrior may be cut apart, piece by piece, but he never leaves the battlefield. (Bhagat Kabir, SGGS, p. 1105)

The fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, had the boldness to challenge the contemporary ruler's oppressive ways and faced martyrdom [25-26]. Finally, Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru, had to resort to military action for the purpose [29]. Ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur did not accept the oppressive policy of the ruler of his time and stood against the religious persecution and reign of terror let loose on those who did not conform to the state's religious policy. The Guru, who believed in the freedom of religion, voiced his protest against the policy of Aurangzeb of forcibly converting Hindus to Islam and laid down his life in 1675 to uphold the principle of religious freedom [27-28].

His son and successor, Guru Gobind Singh, created the Khalsa and fought against the unjust rule of Aurangzeb, the then ruler. He devoted the best part of his life to fighting

against oppression. Clearly stating his non-submissive policy towards the royal oppression, he writes [30] in the Zafarnama, the epistle of victory:

ਚੁ ਕਾਰ ਅਜ ਹਮਰ ਹੀਲਤੇ ਦਰਗੁਜ਼ਸ਼ਤ ॥ ਹਲਾਲ ਅਸਤ ਬੁਰਦਨ ਬ ਸ਼ਮਸ਼ੀਰ ਦਸਤ ॥੨੨॥

Chu Kaar Aza Hamah Heelte Dar Guzasht. Halaal Ast(u) Burdan Ba Shamsheer Dast [22]

When all attempts to restore peace prove futile and no words avail; Then, lawful is the flash of steel, and right is the sword to hail. V.22 (Patshahi 10, Zafarnama, 22/1-2)

For him, it is better to die while facing such a challenge than to submit to repressive and unjust policies of the rulers. Moreover, the examples of the sacrifices of Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Teg Bahadur inspired several Sikhs to lay down their lives for the right of freedom for all. Thus, the right to religious freedom is one of the core principles of Sikh theology.



End of Part - II
[To be Continued]

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