

# Theological Critique of Guru Nanak's Virtuous Philosophy

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**Abstract-** All societies and cultures have in the past developed some conception of rights and principles that should be respected and some of these rights and principals have been considered universal in nature. The struggle for the recognition of human rights and the struggle against political, economic, social and cultural oppression, against injustice and inequalities, have been an integral part of the history of all human societies. The conception of the rights which every human being is entitled to enjoy by virtue of being a member of the human species has evolved through history in the course of these struggles. The origins of the contemporary conception of human rights can be traced to the period of the Renaissance and later of the enlightenment of which humanism may be said to be the heart and soul. Guru Nanak with universal approach is aiming at forging common bonds in the human race without discrimination of caste, creed, sex or nationality. Guru Nanak repeatedly emphasizes contemplation and service to humanity, equality of mankind, love and respect for all human beings, and peace and harmony. Right to equality was firstly advocated by Guru Nanak, later on this right was granted by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights everyone is to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without the distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language. The Constitution of India has also introduced the right to equality in its fundamental rights.

**Keywords:** Consciousness, Dignity, Contemplation, Theology, Compassion, Inalienable

## INTRODUCTION

Human Rights are a special sort of inalienable moral entitlement. They attach all persons equally by virtue of their humanity, irrespective of race, nationality, or membership of any particular social group. They specify the minimum conditions for human dignity and a tolerable life. The term Human Rights covers the series of often desperate rights and freedoms for people's enjoyment of a life based on the centrality of human dignity proponents of human rights regard

them as being inherent, inalienable and universal; inherent in the sense that they are the birth right of all human beings and people enjoy them simply by virtue of their human existence and as such, they do not have to be granted to them by any superior or sovereign authority; inalienable in the sense that people cannot agree to give up them and universal in the sense that they do not just apply to individuals as citizens or groups but to all persons regardless of their group identities. The nature of migration can be examined at various levels. These levels are migrations of survival, subsistence and voluntary migrations. The study emphasized on the awareness of the migrants regarding their Human Rights.

Human Rights are generally defined as the rights which every human being is entitled to enjoy and to have protected. All societies and cultures have in the past developed some conception of rights and principles that should be respected and some of these rights and principals have been considered universal in nature. The struggle for the recognition of human rights and the struggle against political, economic, social and cultural oppression, against injustice and inequalities, have been an integral part of the history of all human societies. The conception of the rights which every human being is entitled to enjoy by virtue of being a member of the human species has evolved through history in the course of these struggles. The origins of the contemporary conception of human rights can be traced to the period of the Renaissance and later of the enlightenment of which humanism may be said to be the heart and soul. The revolutionary movements that began to emerge from about the last quarter of the eighteenth century to oust despotic and authoritarian political regimes made rights of man which they considered inalienable and sacred as the fundamental basis of their struggle as well as of the new order that they sought to build.

The two most important declarations which inspired revolutionary movements the world over were the American Declaration of independence and the French Declaration of the Right of Man and citizen. The main concern of these movements was the ending of despotic rule, establishment of democratic politics, (though women continued to be excluded from it for long) and the protection of the liberties of the individual. A new element to the evolving concept of human right was added by the socialist movement which emerged in the nineteenth century with its stress on the 'abolition of class rule' and the establishment of social and economic equality.

The history of the almost entire first half of the twentieth century is characterized by the prevalence of colonial rule in large parts of the world, the rise of authoritarian governments in many countries and the establishment of fascist barbarous and aggressive regimes in some countries on the one hand and the rise of national liberation movements in the colonies and of movements of democracy and social progress in various countries in the other. The twentieth century also saw the two devastating wars in human history- the twenty years of 'peace' between the two being mainly a period of preparation for the Second World War. Because of this the period from 1914, when the First World War broke out, to 1945 when the Second World War ended has been described as the age of catastrophe. It was during the closing year of the age of catastrophe, during the war against fascism that the conceptualization and articulation of human rights in their present meaning took place. The most significant feature of the new conceptualization was its universality. It was reflected in various declarations of the war aims proclaimed by countries allied against fascism and militarism. It was expressed in the charter of the United Nations which began with the following words, "we the peoples of the united nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom."<sup>1</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human

Rights(1948) which was proclaimed in a little over three years after the UN charter, as elaborate list of human rights intended as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, is the contemporary statement of human rights which are intended to be universally applicable.

On 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nation adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The list of Human Rights elaborated in the Declaration provides a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. Considering the world- wide historic significance of this Declaration, 10 December is observed as the World Human Rights Day every year. It is said in the charter that all men are equal and no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Here the main consideration is Human Rights enshrined in Indian Constitution. During the struggle for freedom the foreign yoke, which included the struggle against the Indian Princes, the people of India evolved their vision of independent India. "This vision found its articulation in the various programmes, resolutions and activities which were adopted by the Indian National Congress which led the struggle and included the resolve to establish a democratic and secular polity based on adult franchise, the reconstruction of Indian society and economy on the principles of social justice and egalitarianism and recognition of and pride in India's cultural diversity and variety."<sup>2</sup> It had inherited the rich heritage of the social reform movements which had started in the nineteenth century to rid Indian society of many traditional ills which plagued it. The fight for civil liberties had been from the beginning an integral part of the Indian freedom movement. The Indian freedom movement also developed an internationalist outlook and visualized the Indian struggle as a part of the world wide struggle for freedom, democracy and social progress. The ideals of the freedom movement were sought to be reflected in the Indian constitution which was framed by India's constituent Assembly which began its task in September 1946 when India was still not free and completed it on 26 November 1949. This task was completed under the titles Preamble to the constitution and parts of Part III on Fundamental Rights and Part IV on Directive Principles which together have been described as forming the core of the constitution, and which together reflect the basic

principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

#### Guru Nanak and his Virtuous Philosophy

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, witnessed the transition from Afghans to the Mughals. Guru Nanak led a simple but extraordinary and remarkable life. One major human rights movement started with the birth of Guru Nanak. During the time of Sikh Gurus, Human Rights

were dangerously crushed by despotic Muslim rulers. Muslim foreigner's attacks were disturbing the whole pattern of society. The people were being demoralized and forced to embrace Islam. Guru Nanak fought for the preservation of human rights and raised his voice against social injustice, inequality, religious repression, exploitation of women and degradation of human values. The religious, political and social conditions prevailing in his times were an assault on human rights. People were become selfish, narrow minded, proud and cynical. Humanity was being used ever as a mean and never as an end. Inequality, injustice, degradation, hatred, dishonesty, deception and exploitation were vices which eroded the basis of society.

In such a horrible, repressive and violent circumstance one cannot dream of existence of Human Rights. "Guru Nanak wanted to show the people the path of salvation and awaken them against political, economic and social tyranny. He also strongly advocated Human Rights for human beings. In Guru Nanak's vision, all human beings have Human Rights simply due to the very fact of their being human."<sup>3</sup> The state does not grant these rights, but it ensures the non-violation of these rights either by the ruler or from any other quarter. It was not easy task to bring about a change in the mindset of a society as a whole that had forgotten the meaning of self-respect, honour and dignity. But Guru Nanak followed a more positive approach by suggesting how a benevolent ruler should perform his duties and what should be the obligations of ruling elite.

#### Social Equality

The most important right which was advocated by Guru Nanak was right of equality which implies equality of all individuals in the state. No discrimination made against anybody on account of his/her religion, caste, colour, creed, race, sex or

descent etc. In India, since the Vedic period the Hindu society has been divided into four Varnas like Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, but at that time, people were free to change their Varna. Everyone had the right to adopt the dharma of a particular Varna at his will. After some time, the Varna came to be determined from the birth of an individual, and gradually it took the form of a religious principle. All the four Varnas were classified into four castes. The duty of the Brahmins was to study and to teach the Vedas to perform and officiate at the performance of Yajnas (Sacrifices). The Kshatriyas were to study the Vedas, learn the art of fighting and defend the country. The Vaishyas could read the Vedas and their duty was to carry on trade and industry etc. The Shudras were required to serve all the other Varnas without a question. They were treated just like the slave. Guru Nanak also raised his voice against such division of Varna and gave right of equality to all men, without discrimination of caste, creed, sex or nationality.

Nanak established the equality by breaking up the caste system and achieved liberty from the age-old customs and traditions and brought about fraternity by striking at the root of the sense of the high and low. Guru Nanak rejected the caste system. According to him all human beings are equal. It is the deed of man that makes him high or low, good or bad. By birth everybody is free to do any job of his/her choice provided that he/she has the ability and competence to do it. To quote Guru Nanak: Caste and dynastic pride are condemnable nations; The one Master shelters all existence. Anyone arrogating superiority to himself of shall be disillusioned, Guru Nanak: "Superiority shall be determined by God. Guru Nanak believes in equality of the whole humanity and discards any root of division, distinction and discrimination created by Varna dharma. Guru says in Japuji."<sup>4</sup>

Nanak, before the Lord there is no lower or high degree. Guru advocates the equality of all human beings, irrespective of birth and gender. It rejects all distinction of caste and colour. Guru Nanak rejects casteism totally and vehemently. Guru Nanak further sets an example when he calls himself the lowest of the low as:

"He is the lowest among the lowly,  
he is their companion and had nothing  
to do with the so-called rich elders."<sup>5</sup>

So, the pride of caste is of no avail as it is said by Guru Nanak:

“Know people by the light illumining them and do not ask for their caste and names.”<sup>6</sup>

because hereafter, caste is not considered and no one is differentiated by his caste. Similarly:

“God does not mind our caste and birth, so let us learn the way of truthful living. For it is one’s deeds that proclaims one’s caste and respect. Guru Nanak preached egalitarianism or classless society by obliterating the class distinctions.”<sup>7</sup> Guru Nanak abolished all the barriers of caste system by introducing the institution of Langar. The rules of Langar require that all should sit together at one place and partake of the same food without any distinction of high or the low. Such an uplifting of lower caste was a novel experiment upon the Indian masses. Guru Nanak says that all men are equal because they all are of one seed, as from the clay we can make pots of different shapes but the clay remains same, so the body of man which is made from five elements, how can one amongst them be higher and another low. Guru Nanak with universal approach is aiming at forging common bonds in the human race without discrimination of caste, creed, sex or nationality. The Guru Nanak repeatedly emphasizes contemplation and service to humanity, equality of mankind, love and respect for all human beings, and peace and harmony. Right to equality was firstly advocated by Guru Nanak, later on this right was granted by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights under article 2 according to which everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without the distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language. The Constitution of India has also introduced the right to equality in its fundamental rights.

#### Women Privilege

Guru Nanak also raised a forceful voice against injustice towards women. He pleaded for equal rights to women. The condition of women, at the time of Guru Nanak, was very deplorable. According to him, a woman has the same rights as man has. There is no scope for any discrimination against women because of their sex. They are fully at par with men. The position of women in Indian society during the early Vedic period was good accepting the stray incidents of unwelcoming the female child. But it was not a general practice and the sacred writings were against it. During the early Vedic period, even widow remarriage used to

take place. Women freely participated in religious rites and practices. Women were given the education to train them to lead a successful married life. It was only afterward that the position of the woman started deteriorating. She was deprived of the right of practicing religion. The woman started being treated as property. During this period there was a relative downfall in the position of women. The birth of a girl was considered to be the cause of all sufferings and hardships. Their rights and privileges were curtailed to a great extent. Manu has expressed his woman views as, “In childhood, a female must be a subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently even in her own house. So, a woman was never fit for independence. She was so humiliated that she was considered no better than a creature. Sankaracharya had called women the gateway of hell. Tulsidas had classed them with the cattle and anti-culture and had prescribed rough behaviour for them. Siddhas and Nathas considered women as the source of many evils.

The effects of such thinking are visible even today in Indian society where the women even in 21st century have not attained the desired equality of status with man. Before Guru Nanak, the Aristotle says that male is by nature superior and female inferior, woman is weak and incapable of independence of character. Her best condition is quiet home life. At the time of Guru Nanak, thinkers like Socrates and Aristotle have a very little to say in favour of social status of women. Muslims had imprisoned their women within the four walls of the house, open air and other outside gifts of nature were denied to them. They were allowed under a thick covering of burqa.

The birth of a daughter in a family was indication of misfortune. The Hindus considered the woman a very inferior thing, a sort of possession and device for sexual pleasure. She was kept within the four walls of the house. She was denied of her rights and was treated as a slave. In Islam women were not admitted to prayers in a mosque with their menfolk. Guru Nanak could not tolerate this sad plight of Indian women. He strongly advocated that women must enjoy the same rights as men enjoy. Guru Nanak unequivocally condemned the low status given to the woman of his time and said: “In a woman man is conceived, from a

woman man is born, with a woman he is engaged and then married, through a woman new friendship are reformed, from the woman one continues his race, when one woman dies another is sought, one's tradition through woman is carried on, why call her low, from whom the kings and men of power are born.”<sup>9</sup>

Guru Nanak denounced the idea of considering a woman impure during the period of her menstrual cycle. He attaches no impurity to it as it is a natural cycle. He attaches impurity not to the natural bodily functions but to the bad qualities and bad habits like that of telling lies he says: “As occurs women's menses again and again, so abides falsehood in the liar's mouth. That ever brings ignominy to him. The mind's Satak is avarice the tongue's falsehood, the eye's satak coveting another woman folk's beauty and other's wealth.”<sup>10</sup> He also condemned the idea of attaching impurity at the time of delivery of a child and the period after it. There was a system to keep the mother separate from the rest of the family for the specific period after the child birth. In this way Guru Nanak does not find any logic in the idea of satak and discards it only as an illusion of mind. To quote Guru Nanak: All belief in satak (i.e., impurity contracted by touch is illusion) that induces in man worship of someone other than God. Birth and death occur by Divine ordinance and all beings come and go by Divine will. All food and drink are pure. For, God himself has granted these for our sustenance. They who realize this truth, by the Guru's, guidance, are not affected by this sort of impurity.”<sup>11</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Guru Nanak took initiative for the advocacy of the women's Rights and later on Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Similar provision has been made in the Constitution of India. He holds steadfastly to the values of justice, equality, freedom and human dignity through actions and deeds. Guru Nanak gave us a unique philosophy that is scientifically and logically sound having universal acceptability. Guru Nanak his nine successors worked to redefine the religions, political and social values for mankind. Modern age has created such a problem that needs immediate solution. In this context Guru Nanak's message is relevant to play a creative role. So man needs to have a fresh look at the whole situation. It is the dire

need of the hour to understand and implement the philosophy of Guru Nanak. This is the only way to keep human race from degeneration.

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