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Sri Guru Gobind Singhji: Apostle of Universal Brotherhood

Key-note address delivered at Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi, 2008

By

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1. Introductory Remarks

At the outset I want to offer my sincere thanks to the principal, Dr Jatindar Bir Singh, the Faculty and students community of Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, Delhi for inviting me to deliver the keynote address for this seminar on the theme ‘Sri Guru Gobind Singhji: Apostle of Universal Brotherhood’. I understand this seminar is being held as a part of the Founder’s Day Celebrations of the college as well as in relation to the celebration of 300th year of Guruship of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It is indeed a privilege to be part in another such celebration. I have already taken part in a seminar connected with the same occasion, which was organised by the Department of Guru Nanak Studies, Madurai Kamraj University in South India on December 18, 2008, where I made a presentation on the theme ‘the Social Question in Sri Guru Granth Sahibji’.

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Having said this, I must also admit that as a student of Sikh religion my specialization is limited to the theology of Guru Nanak Devji based upon the study of his hymns in the ‘Adi Sri Guru Granth Sahibji’. But at the same time I do believe that the religious or theological content of Sikhism is rooted primarily in the teachings of Guru Nanak Devji, in spite of the fact that the sixth Guru Hargobindji and the tenth Guru Gobind Singhji gave new directions to the Sikh community.¹ On the basis of this my understanding of Sikh faith, I accepted the invitation to deliver this address. For its preparation I had to go through some of the primary as well as secondary sources which included parts of the ‘*Sri Dasam Granth Sahibji*’ and through this exercise, I have been personally benefited, both spiritually and knowledgewise, specially about the vision and mission of Sri Guru Gobind Singhji vis-à-vis about the ‘Universal Humanhood’ or ‘Universal Brotherhood’. Here I will prefer to use the expression ‘Universal Humanhood’ because of the emphasis laid on the gender balance in Sikh faith.

I have kept the structure and the method followed in the discussion of this address very simple. After a brief discussion on the context (political, religious and social) of Sri Guru Gobind Singhji’s times is in the next section, tenth Guruji’s vision and mission are stated in section three followed by the discussion on the ‘the institution of Khalsa’ as an instrument of establishing the ‘Universal Humanhood’ in section four. In the fifth section the continuing challenge of the Apostle of ‘Universal Humanhood’ to the *Sikh Sagat* and all those other who believe in the common ‘humanity’ is dealt with closing the address with a brief ‘concluding remark’.

II. Context at the Time of Guruji

Because a vision and mission is always linked with a human situation of a particular time, which includes, political, social and religious milieu, Guruji himself has offered us a help to know about the situation that existed both before his birth as well as that prevailed his lifetime. One of his most authentic composition is *Bachitra Nataka* (lit. meaning the ‘Wonderful Drama’), which contains his autobiographical information.² In *Bachitra Nataka* while giving his family tree, he gave a clear picture of the distorted conditions of the society not only of his time, but also of the time of the birth of Guru Nanakji. Particularly the religious situation, in this regard in one of the *Doharas*, he wrote: “*The (so-called) Brahmins became full of low instincts and Kshatriyas became traders (of their valour). The traders on account of their wealth started considering themselves mighty (Kshatriyas) and the low instigated people engrossed in evil propensities became leaders of the religious affairs (earlier undertaken by Brahmins).*”³

Then we see in *Bachitra Nataka* very clear picture of extreme form of political persecution of Hindus which included their forced conversion to Islam from the hands of the religious fanatic Emperor Aurangzeb. A summary of the holy sacrifice and how Guruji’s father Sri Guru Teg Bahadurji gave his life for others is given in one of the *Chaupais* in *Bachitra Nataka* where he says: “*The lord protected his glory and discipline (of serving the cause of others) and driven by his this feeling he enacted a great holocaust in this dark age (Kaliyuga). To protect the honour of the innocent he sacrificed (his life). He offered his head but never gave any expression of pain.*”⁴

This *chaupai* reveals to us the truth about the nature of Aurangzeb’s atrocities against the Hindus and the way Sri Guru Tag Bahadurji saved Hindu faith and fought for the religious freedom.

The author of ‘*Sri Dasam Guru Chamatkar*’, while describing the condition of India at the time of tenth Guruji’s birth, summed up the same for us in these words:

*“Aurangzeb was a fanatic Muslim and to enhance his political and religious position, he could go to any extent against the Hindus, which in fact he was doing. For the Hindus his rule was the rule of injustice and most troublesome.”*⁵

Besides the challenge of Emperor Aurangzeb’s fanaticism, the other challenge Gurjuji had was from the Sikh missionary order known as *masands* (representatives), which by that time had also become corrupt. After the death of Guru Teg Bahadurji the *masands* were in favour of maintaining the status-quo. They went to Mataji (honourable mother) and complained about Sri Guru Gobindji. They were not in favour of Guruji’s giving martial training to his Sikhs. They said to Mataji, *“On one side Guruji is in opposition with Aurangzeb, and on the other side now we will have enmity with the Hill Rajas (Hindu Hill Kings); in that case from all sides the Sikh congregations will stop coming; then from where we will get fund to take care of the needs of these soldiers and horses?”*⁶

About the kind of corruption, which had entered the lives of *masands*, the author of *Sri Dasam Guru Chamatkar* narrates a story about a leading *masand* Bulaki Das and a *palki* (palanquin). This story or event took place when Guru Gobindji was still in Patna and was planning to go to Panjab. Mata Nanakji, under the influence of *masands*, wanted Guruji to continue to stay in Patna. According to her, *masands* were able to take care of all their needs. But Guruji tried to explain to Mataji that these *masands* have become corrupt, keeping most of the donations of the Sikh congregations, with themselves and depositing only small portion of it of the treasury of Guruji. To prove his point, Guruji sent a word to one of the leading *masand* Bulaki Das to send Guruji one *palki* made of wood and 7000 grams gold. *Masand* Bulaki Das according to the order of Guruji made the *palki* and sent the same to Guruji. After receiving the *palki* Guruji ordered to bring dry woods on which he kept put that beautiful *palki*. Then Guruji set fire to those woods burning the entire *palki* and turning it into ashes. From the ashes the gold was separated and weighed, which was only 700 grams and the remaining 6300 grams was copper. This means out of all the gold that he collected from the Sikh congregations, *masand* Bulaki Das the remaining 90% he kept for his personal use. After this Guruji told Mataji that this was her most faithful and honest *masand* whose dishonesty with regards to the offering of Sikh *Sangat* (congregation) had been proved beyond doubt. *“These masands are indeed dishonest; they are not to be trusted any more.”*⁷

At present a numbers of studies are available on the problem of *masands* and the challenge that they posed to Sri Guru Gobind Singhji. Prof. Dr. Madanjit Kaur has summed the corrupted position of *masands* in these words: *“The Masands had deviated from their original assignment and Sikh ethics. They were indulging in evil practices and corruption and were misleading the Sikhs of their areas. Many masands had set themselves as Gurus in their districts and had begun to nominate their own successors. Instead of propagating Sikhism and forwarding the collation and offering for the devotees to the Guru’s treasury, they were engaged in money-lending and trading on the offering, which they extorted from the local Sikhs.”*⁸

In sharp contrast stands the concept with which the *masands* were appointed originally from the time of Guru Amar Dasji as representatives of the Guru *“to exercise spiritual authority on behalf of the Guru, to receive offering from the Sikh and to preach Sikhism in designated areas.”*⁹

The third major challenge, which all the Ten Gurus faced, was of caste or *Varna* or the entire caste issue. The Hindu society particularly the Hill Rajas like Bhim Singh, was full of pride of being high caste. This can be seen in Raja Bhim Singh’s statement made during the controversy about the *‘Parshadi Hathi’* (an elephant given to Guruji as show of his devotion by a King), which reads as *“The farmers (Jats) of lower caste, illiterate people, ironsmiths, traders, water*

carriers, haircutters, weavers, etc. are his Sikhs. We on the other hand are Rajputs of high Caste. After becoming his followers we will not have any honour."¹⁰

A biographer of Sri Gobind Singhji, Sardar Surinder Singh Johar portrays a very clear picture of caste system as practised at the time of Guruji. After describing the issue of the atrocities committed by Emperor Aurangzeb and the problem of *masands*, he writes about the caste situation of Guruji's time: "Besides these factors, the Guru witnessed with his own eyes the fighting of the Hill Rajas among themselves without any cause whatsoever. They were not fighting for any principle. It was a fight among slaves for the retention of slavery and for the achievement of their personal ends. They sought assistance against their co-religionists from the Emperor. It was the height of degradation. Caste was dividing the entire race. The people thought only in terms of caste. The so-called low caste people were hated and were not allowed even to enter any honourable professions. We know that once the Pandits of Banaras even refused to teach Sanskrit to the Sikhs, as they thought it was below their dignity to teach them, for they belong to the low caste."¹¹

Before we reflect on his vision of 'Universal Humanhood', let us recount the three major challenge faced by the tenth Guru. These were: "*To end/resist in full, the tyrannical rule of Emperor Aurangzeb based upon the principle of religious fanaticism; to abolish the corrupted order of the masands; to eradicate or abolish caste practices among the Sikhs.*"

III. Guruji Vision of Universal Humanhood

After the martyrdom of the ninth Guruji as the rate of forced conversion of the Hindus and others into Islam increased, it became imperative for the tenth Guruji to do something concrete to stop Aurangzeb from committing extreme forms of atrocities. To meet such a huge challenge an inclusive, astute and uncompromising ideology was needed, based on which an united force could be raised. With this in mind he introduced the idea of *Dharam Yudh* (a battle of life, of ideals, righteousness, justice and truth),¹² that would draw even those who belong to other faiths including Hinduism and Islam. In the writings of Tenth Guruji in *Sri Dasam Granth Sahibji* we encounter this clear vision of his with regard to *Dharam Yudh* that is both resolute and universal in its approach.

We are actually concerned here with the vision and mission of an "Apostle", the first question that may come to our mind is that who is an 'apostle', and why give this title to Sri Guru Gobind Singhji? The expression 'apostle' originally comes from the Greek language which derived from a verb '*apostolo*'. In secular usage it was used for 'a person sent on a specific assignment or mission'. In Greek it also sometime means 'ambassador', 'delegate' or 'messenger'. Later it got religious connotation and came into common usage in the Jew and Christian traditions. But the important point here for the purpose of our discussion is to note that one of the very essential qualifications of an 'apostle' was/is the 'divine call'¹³, behind his mission. This qualification of an apostle applies to Sri Guru Gobind Singhji without any doubt, because according to his own testimony in *Bachitra Nataka*, the divine Ultimate Reality (*Akal Purakh*), has sent or given a call to Guruji to spread *dharma* (righteousness) in the world. In a *chaupai*, this is stated as follows: "*I have established you as my son and have created you to spread dharma. Go from this place to that one, move the cycle of dharma and stop people from committing evil deeds.*"¹⁴

After telling about his 'divine call' Guruji also stated the objective of his coming into this world. We have actually Guruji's mission statement in *Bachitra Nataka*. The English translation of his mission statement reads as:

The Objective of my coming to this world is dharma and the Guru (Lord) has sent me for this purpose. Spread religion everywhere and throw down the knaves. For this very purpose I have taken birth O Saints, this much you should understand well. I am born to spread religion, emancipate the saints and to wipe out the whole lot of wicked ones."¹⁵

That which inspired, Sri Guru Gobindji to work relentlessly for his mission was in fact his vision of the 'Universal Humanhood'. This vision of the unity of all human beings or humanity was as such common to all the ten Gurus. For example, in Japji Sahib, Guru Nanak Devji had declared that before God all are equal: "*Saith Nanak: / All before him are alike / None high or low.*"¹⁶

The third Guruji Amardasji made it clear that all human beings are created from the same source. He said: "*All talk of the four castes:/ Know that all creation from the divine / Essence has arisen. / The whole universal from the same day has appeared..*"¹⁷

As all the Gurus were the extension of the same Nanak, so was/is their vision of 'Universal Humanhood.' In *Akal Usati* we find the tenth Guruji's vision of 'Universal Humanhood' in still more comprehensive and clear terms, which he stated as: "*Some people (in the world) call themselves mundia, some sannyasi (ascetics), some yogi and some yati (celebrates). Some call themselves Hindu, some Turks (Muslim), some Hafzi and other Imamsafi. But the entire human kind should be recognised as one. The same one (Lord) is Creator, Compassionate Provider of bread, Munificent. He has no co-eternal, no dualism: we must never accept any duality. To serve the only one is our duty. He alone is the Guru of all. All mankind be taken as one manifestation of His Light.*"¹⁸

Guruji's vision of the 'Universal Humanhood' is rooted in his vision of *Akal Purakh* about whom he said in the opening the *Chhapai Chand* of Japji: "*You have no specific physical appearance, nor do you have any varna, caste or sub-caste. Nobody can describe your features, complexion, your outlines, or your garb.*"¹⁹

The length of this address will not allow us to go deeper into the 'vision and mission' of Sri Guru Gobind Singhji, therefore now we will steer our discussion to the next section which is on the formation of the 'institution of Khalsa'.

IV. The Institution of Khalsa

In response to the three fold challenge enumerated above Guru Gobind Singhji laid down the foundation of a 'new human order' based on his vision of 'Universal Humanhood'. This foundation was the 'institution of Khalsa'. How this 'institution' or 'instrument' was created. We have number of sources both primary and secondary which gave very concrete information about the formation of this institution. I shall recount here briefly the event leading to this formation as described in '*Sri Dasam Guru Chamtkar*'.²⁰

On the Baisaki day of 1699 (*Samat* 1756), Guruji summoned a large gathering of Sikhs and when the *Sangat* or congregation was at its full swing, Guruji got up from his throne with his sword taken out from the sheath and addressed to the Sikh congregation, asking "Is there any of my beloved Sikh, who is willing to give his head to me?" In the beginning nobody responded to Guruji's call. He repeated three times his call. Then one Sikh named Bhai Daya Ram, a *Khatiri* of Lahore stood up and offered his head. Guruji took him inside a tent pitched for this purpose. Then Guruji repeated his call four times more, in response to which, second Sikh Bhai Dharm Das, a *Jat* of Delhi, came forward. Third Sikh who came forward was Bhai Mohkarm Chand, a *washerman*, the fourth Sikh was Bhai Chand of Bider a *barber* and the fifth Sikh was Bhai Himmat of Jagnath, a *water-carrier* by caste. That which at once flashes in our mind regarding

these five Sikhs, whom Guruji later on called his five Beloved Ones (*Panj-Payares*), is that two of them were from the so called high caste while the other three were from the so called low caste. This event reminds us of the first Sikh theologian Bhai Gurdas, who said in his first *Var* about Guruji Nanak Devji: “(He made firm) the basis of the four pillars of dharma, and of the four varnas (castes) he created one. / He regarded king and beggars as equal / And caused the virtue of humility to be practised in the world.”²¹

After declaring the five Beloved Ones as *Panj-Payaras*, Guruji addressed them saying: “I wish you all to embrace one creed and follow one path, obliterating all difference of religion. Let four Hindu castes, who have different rules for them in the *Shastras*, abandon them altogether and , adopting the way of co-operation, mix freely with one another .Let no one deem himself superior to another . Do not follow the old scriptures. Let none pay heed to the Ganga and other places of pilgrimages which are considered holy in the Hindu religion, or adore the Hindu deities, but all should believe in Guru Nanak and his successors. Let men of the four castes receive my baptism, eat out of the same vessel, and feel no disgust or contempt for one another.”²²

On the next day Guruji baptised the five Beloved Ones by administering them *amrit* (Sugar water, stirred with double-edged sword) out of the same bowl. In turn the Guru was baptized by them. After the baptism Guruji declared the five Beloved Ones as the *Khalsa* meaning pure ones, and gave them new names with suffix ‘Singh’ (meaning Lion) for the males and ‘Kaur’ (meaning princess) for the female. Then the Guruji made them take oath to observe and wear the five Ks: *Kesh* (hair) *Kanga* (Comb), *Kara* (a bracelet), *Kachha* (a pair of shorts) and *Kirpan* (a sword). They were also told not to smoke tobacco, consume alcoholic drinks, nor to eat meat slaughtered in the Muslim fashion (*halal*), but eat only *Jhatka* meat (that is when the animal is killed outright with one blow) and not to have any extramarital relationship. After the baptism Guru greeted the five Beloved Ones with these words “*Wah Guru ji ka Khalsa – Wah Guru ji ki Fateh*” which means “The Khalsas are the chosen people of God – Victory be to God.” Thus the Khalsa brotherhood was founded, which in future was to be an instrument as well as a model for the ‘Universal Humanhood’.

Let us now look at some of the views expressed by different scholars on Guruji’s creating the institution of Khalsa. On one extreme is the view reflected by the authors of the ‘*Encyclopedia of Sikh Religion and Culture*’ who say that, “The *Khalsa* was founded by Gobind Rai, later Gobind Singh (tenth Guru). He preached the doctrine of the Khalsa. His teachings were calculated to convert the followers of Guru Nanak into a militant body without affecting their relationship with the Hindus, from whom the Sikh emerged, and to whom it was intended to protect. It is for this reason that the Hindus did not look upon Sikhism as a separate religion or social group”.²³

Opposite to this view are the views of Miss Sahib Kaur, which we find in her work on ‘*Sikh Thought*’. She writes:’ “In its origin Sikhism has been an off-shoot of Hinduism. The most prominent characteristic of Hinduism is the caste system. The relation between one caste and another has been that of higher and lower, so that there is inequality between men belonging to different castes. From the very beginning the Gurus have worked against casteism among Sikhs... Realizing that evil of casteism was again polluting the minds of Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh’s attack on casteism went much further. His baptism of the double-edged sword (*Khande-di-pahul*) was open to all, irrespective of caste. The holy water (*Amrit*) prepared for mass conversion was given to those who were taking initiative into the Khalsa Panth without any consideration of caste.”²⁴

There is a third view too, which Sardar Piara Singh ‘Padam’ has expressed in his work in Panjabi ‘*Rahatnama*’. His emphasis is on the problem of *masands*. To quote from this work: “Reason is

very clear, because in the time of early Gurus, in every area *masands* were appointed to be the leaders of the Sikh congregations. But soon their personal characters got corrupted, because they started using the *giving of Sikhs* (one tenth) for their personal needs. In this way their order got distorted. After seeing such bad condition Guru Gobind Singhji took a revolutionary step and brought a complete change of Sikh congregation by bringing them directly in his hands and to this process Guruji named *Khalsa*.²⁵

The best holistic views about the *Khasla* we get from Prof. Puran Singh, which he has given in his work namely '*The Book of the Ten Masters*' he says: "The creation of the Khalsa in India is the culmination of Guru Nanak's genius, and the written character of his Word. The Amritam of the Tenth Master completely transmuted the men drawn from a low or high caste of India, drawn from the Hindus or the Musalmans. After the Amritam, the Khalsa resembles no parent type of his own. For making the universal nation of man-for the evolution of one united family of men on earth, Gobind Singh had shown the way in his Khalsa."²⁶

Prof Dr. Madanjit Kaur's recent work has brought the whole concept of the Khalsa closer to our present Indian society. She writes: "The basic idea behind the institution of the Khalsa, as conceived by Guru Gobind Singh, was to wipe out all invidious distinction between man and man and arouse the consciousness of human dignity even among those people who had all along been as fit only to occupy the fringes of society (*the Dalits*). Guru Gobind Singh's contribution was to give these ideas an institutional status... The socio-political context of the *amrit* ceremony is also clearly plebeian experiment. Three of the five beloved ones were *Dalits*. Even the Jats (Dharam was a Jat) in those days were considered only a cut above the *dalits*... By asking the Sikhs to sip *amrit* from the same bowl, Guru Gobind was, in a way, inflicting the evil practice of Untouchability a fatal blow."²⁷

With these views of Dr. Madanjit Kaur, who has rightly shown the relevance of the creation of *Khalsa* by the Apostle of 'Universal Humanhood' to our time, we move to our next section.

V. Continuing Challenge of the Apostle of Universal Humanhood

I want to close the discussion of this address by re-affirming that the vision and mission of the Apostle of Universal Humanhood were most relevant to face the threefold challenge of his time. But this threefold challenge in some form continues in our time too.

The first challenge which Guruji had was from the political forces like the fanaticism of Aurangzeb. To protect the religious freedom of people of his time Guruji launched his mission. This challenge is continuing in our time, because there are millions of Indians citizens who even today are not enjoying their fundamental and constitutional based religious freedom which is given in articles 15 and 25 of our Constitution.

Second challenge that tenth Guruji faced was with regards to the corruption of *masands*. To eliminate the corruption he brought the affairs of Sikh *Sangat* in his hands and after him this responsibility he left with the *Khalsa*. The problem of *masands* in all the religions in some form or the other is prevalent even today.

Third challenge before Guruji was of caste. All of us are very much aware that in our Society this cause is a continuing reality even today. Even all the egalitarian faiths, which include, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, got infected with the caste problem. In some places in South India, there are different Christian Churches and grave yards for different caste Christian Communities. It is also true with the Sikh faith. Sardar Khushwant Singh in his book '*The Sikhs Today*' writes about the contemporary society of Sikhs saying, "Although all Sikhs have access to all

Gurudwaras (where they sit together, and on festivals eat together), in the villages, the Sikh Harijans castes (*Mazahis*) still suffer from discrimination. Amongst the ‘upper’ castes, there is little or no distinction except when it comes to arranging marriages.”²⁸ Similar views about the caste position among the Sikhs are expressed by authors W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi in their book *The Sikh – Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*: “Though Sikhs will eat together in the *langar*, worship together and share *Karah parshad*, marriages are still usually arranged between members of the same subgroup be it Arora, Ramgarhia or Jat.”²⁹

VI. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I want to emphasise only that the message and challenge which we receive from, the Apostle of Universal Humanhood, Sri Guru Gobind Singhji through his vision and mission, which he has embodied in ‘the Khalsa’ for the establishment of ‘Universal Humanhood’, is very much relevant even today and can make ‘another world possible’ for us - as against the forces of evils, that want to establish ‘unipolar world order’ by controlling the economic, cultural and political powers by using their modern militarism - provided we are willing to work towards that end by taking one another as equal partners. The best example for this can be seen in Bhai Kanhaiya’s model role, who when was asked, why he was offering drinking water to the wounded soldiers of enemy, he replied to Guruji “I always remembered your message and I am doing according to that only. In all the living beings which include ‘friends or ‘enemies’ I see my guru’s face everywhere.”³⁰

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