

Reflections on Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Philosophy in the Context of Some Contemporary Controversial Issues

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The present paper is planned to pose some questions and queries in the context of the present times in order to understand, explore, and discuss Guru Nanak Dev Ji's philosophy and teachings and its relevance in the contemporary scenario. Nowadays when the world is engaged in unstoppable development and advancement in almost each sphere of life, Guru Ji's philosophy can open up new spaces for literary and cultural discussions. Such a discussion can raise some controversial issues. Raising these questions is a means to rescue Guru Ji's teaching from the mainstream Sikhism (which is heavily political-oriented) and its rigid view of Guru Ji's *bani* (writings). The rigidity and conventionality of any society / culture / religion and region are crucial factors which confine the potentiality of an intellectual / philosopher / saint (Guru Nanak Dev Ji in the present context) to certain limitations and restrictive definitions. On the other hand an academic, literary, and educational understanding of the concerned intellectual transcend those boundaries and try to explore as many aspects as possible. Some questions can be asked in this regard: Can we understand Guru Ji and his philosophy apart from the mainstream Sikhism which is prevalent nowadays? Talking about the inclusiveness of Guru Ji's philosophy of life / religion / society, how far can we believe this inclusiveness is enacted?

In the era of globalization where the inter-nation, inter-state, inter-region, inter-religion, inter-linguistic, and inter-cultural connections are pervaded all over the globe, Guru Ji can be considered the best advocate of the globalization (if it means interconnections and interrelations of people belonging to different societies and cultures). He travelled faraway places and regions and gave the message of brotherhood, unity and harmony.

Focusing on some of the controversial issues which emerge with the development of humanity, especially in this era of globalization, Guru Ji's philosophy of life can enrich the mainstream Sikhism as well as the practices of globalization. The paper is planned to focus on two major developments in the era of globalization: gender revolution and posthumanism.

Gender revolution is one of the most alarming phenomena of globalization and the latter developments around the world. The emergence of alternative sexual preferences and gender expressions by the LGBTIQ communities problematize the conventional understanding of gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual desire. While talking about the inclusiveness of Sikhism some questions can be asked in relation to this emergent gender revolution: Can this inclusiveness acknowledge and accept the people who are considered sexual deviant and gender-bender? What is Guru Ji's understanding of gender? Can we say that Guru Ji is displaying the performative function of gender (Butler) through his writings while using a female persona to express his devotion to the Divine power? And not only gender alone, but all roles / performances of life?

As these brief examples show, *gender* is a much contested concept, as slippery as it is indispensable, but a site of unease rather than of agreement. If *gender* is used to mark the differences between men and women, portmanteau words like *gender-bending* or *gender-blending* call those differences into question, drawing attention to the artificiality of what we think of as 'natural' behaviour. (Glover and Kaplan IX)

The trouble which alternative genders make is discussed by Butler in full detail in her book *Gender Trouble*. Similarities between Guru Ji and Butler's understanding of gender can be found because both of them rejected any essence behind our identity and believe that it is learned, acquired, and performative. The female persona addressing the male God is one of the features which can be traced to almost all spiritual and mystic poetry. Acquiring the role of a female and expressing a feminine devotion, despite the fact of being male, is a practice which troubles the normal sense of gender roles. This confusion liberates the strict expressions and restrictive understanding of gender roles. The fluidity of gender and other roles is hinted at not only by Guru Ji but a lot of other mystic poets and saints. Sufi tradition is heavily loaded with such references. Guru Ji emphasizes the spiritual aspect of human life rather than any other. All other roles and performances are insignificant compared to the spiritual one. Ignoring all forms of differences among people, Guru Ji's philosophy of life teaches a spiritual path. When the focus is spirituality, none of the differences can hold any place in the teaching of Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

Another issue to be investigated is the posthumanism or posthuman condition. Guru Ji's philosophy is considered humanist where the human being is the focus of spiritual and inner improvement. Correlating Guru Ji's philosophy to the philosophy of Humanism might problematize both of them because in the era of globalization humanism is the target of

oppositions from all around the world. Humanism as a world view (ideology) has always been restrictive in its definition and understanding of human. In an era when and where this 'ism' is being critiqued from different sectors of the globe and by different socio-cultural groups how far is it right to call Guru Ji's philosophy as humanist.

If human is the center of humanism can it be said that Guru Ji's philosophy revolves around the human and not around the attainment of Divine Power by leaving behind the human / humanist ego? Humanist understanding of human is based on the difference of modern human beings from the irrationalities and superstitions of Middle Age human beings. The foundation of humanism, in this way, is based upon the rejection of other humans in the face of new human species which is scientific, rational, logical, and does not believe in the centrality of Divine Power as compared to the centrality of human power, "As for human beings in that godless universe, their moral and social coexistence has no basis to appeal to beyond their own resources – themselves the result of the evolutionary development of the species – of sympathetic fellow-feeling" (Davies 28).

Discussing Guru Ji's stand in relation to humanist stand also involves the clash of egoism. Guru Ji's strong belief in the Divine Power and humanist belief in human power troubles the attempt to correlate both of them. Humanist emphasis on the central position of the human is a practice which involves the manipulation, organization and control of people in order to differentiate human from non-human and proper human from improper ones. When such subtle politics is the base of a metanarrative such as humanism, how far is it right to talk about humanism in the era of mini or micro-narratives. Humanism as a metanarrative also defines human on the basis of binary gender and sexual differences, on the basis of certain ethnic and racial grounds by overlooking innumerable others. Alternative gender and sexual differences have not been acknowledged by the traditional humanism, and the rights of natives, blacks, and other ethnic minorities have always been at stake in this ideological framework of humanism.

Guru Ji's attitude towards the people who are different on the basis of their religion, region, language, caste, class, gender, creed, race, etc is welcoming as can be seen in his message to the humanity. Avoiding differences and bringing people under one banner is one of the practices which Guru Ji practiced. *Langar Pratha* (communal dining) is one of the implementation of this practice. Taking into account Guru Ji's liberal and egalitarian outlook, it becomes contradictory to correlate humanist understating of humans to Guru Ji's. The differences between Guru Nanak Dev's views and those of humanism are apparent when closely followed. A general overview of humanism is considered an ideology which favors

the welfare of human beings. But the internal politics of this ideological framework of is deeply embedded with biasness, partiality and discrimination. Females, racial, sexual, and ethnic minorities have been actively critiquing the discourse of humanism since the latter half of twentieth century. Their differences have not been acknowledged in the mainstream humanism. That's why Leotard talked about metanarratives and mininarratives in his discussion of the postmodern world.

Similarly the condition which is known as posthumanism brought to humanity by the technical and scientific advancements. Technological and scientific inventions have made it possible for the human beings to have artificial body implants and sex reassignment surgeries. These two cases troubled the conception of naturalness of life, "the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born" (Hayles 3). Human life, just like all other life forms, is considered natural because it is determined by natural world to a great extent. But the human intervention to change and recreate the creation of nature is a phenomenon which emerges in technically advanced scenario in the era of globalization.

Troubling the concept of human, human life, and human authenticity is a posthuman intervention in the humanist tradition. Closely confined understanding of human beings as rational, scientific, having body unified and God-given bodies, authentic soul and mind etc. are challenged by those people who do not fall under these definitions.

In an era when different societies and cultures are simultaneously influencing and being influenced by one another, it becomes difficult to maintain the differences and boundaries intact. While trying to understand Guru Nanak Dev's teachings in the context of globalization, how far can we talk about some of the major aspects / developments in the era of globalization such as gender and sexual revolution, posthuman condition, and cultural-politics?

All these aspects of globalization are closely connected to one another. With the technical advancement the health and life of human beings increase to a great extent. The intervention of technology in the body-reinvention and health-maintenance for the human beings, as can be observed in the case of cyborg (as Donna Haraway discusses) and sex reassignment surgery, poses challenging questions about the natural existence and essence of human beings. In such a scenario where the natural authenticity of human beings is losing day by day and the technical advancement is engulfing human life and expressions from all sides, the idea of human is changing rapidly. With this change the humanism has also lost its

significance in the face of posthuman condition. Darwin explained biological determinism by arguing how the life forms are determined by the biological factors. Technological determinism is the new development in the world where most of the life forms are determined and maintained by technology.

Humanism and traditional belief in the binary gender and sex are closely embedded in one another. The patriarchal and heterosexist biasness of the humanism is not something which can be called discreet. All these discourses have tried to describe human life in limited terms to maintain the status quo where the white, middle class, male figure is the dominant and authoritative agency in the socio-cultural politics.

Discussion of Guru Nanak Dev's philosophy / world view in relation to all these manifestations of the era of globalization can open up Guru Ji's holistic, emancipatory, egalitarian, and liberal understanding to such an extent where these new emergence can also be incorporated. But at the same time it can also contradict, confuse, trouble as well as compliment, supplement and enrich the mainstream Sikhistic interpretation of Guru Ji's writings.

Proposing troubles which can be found in the conventional view of Sikhism and orthodox understanding of Guru Nanak *bani*, the present paper is an effort to point out the grounds which can be explored in further research project on a greater scale. As Guru Ji himself was a revolutionary intellectual person in his own times, who opposed all conventions and orthodoxies, his revolutionary spirit can also be used to understand the subversive and controversial issues of the contemporary times.

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