Relevance of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's Concept of Social Harmony in Contemporary Times

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to highlight the relevance of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's concept of social harmony in the contemporary times. As modern societies are getting increasingly intolerant and disharmonious in character, promoting the teachings of a saint like Guru Nanak Dev ji who emphasised on oneness of the human race despite differences in race, gender, ethnicity, language, culture and religion is crucial. Guru Nanak, a great proponent of humanism in 15th century is seen as a model of interfaction cooperation who devoted entire life to promote unity. He gave the ideology to bridge the divide between followers of other religions and his teachings are considered a paradigm for achieving universal peace and social harmony in society of varied beliefs, hence he is harbinger of a democratic society without any discrimination. Guru Ji, through his Bani, foregrounded the spiritual dimension of the term 'harmony'. The paper undertakes a detailed discussion of Guru Ji's teachings regarding the concept and its relevance in the contemporary times.

Before undertaking a discussion regarding the concept of social harmony as expounded by the first Guru of Sikhs, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, it is pertinent to define 'society', which has been a widely negotiated term in the academic context. Sociologists use the term in a very specific and precise manner which is markedly different from its common usage. From anthropological perspective, a 'society' refers to a group of people whose relationships and interactions with each other are governed by a set of norms laid down by the group itself. It comprises "a group of people who live in a particular territory, are subject to a common system of political authority, and are aware of having a distinct identity from other groups around them" (Giddens 746). A closer look reveals society to be a collective expression of a group of people with individual natural orientations, motivations, abilities, capabilities, perspectives, and ambitions or to put it another way, desires. Marion J. Levy defines society as "a system of action in operation that (1) involves a plurality of interacting individuals of a given species (or group of species) whose actions are primarily oriented to the system concerned and who are recruited at least in part by the sexual reproduction of members of the plurality involved, (2) is at least in theory self-sufficient for the actions of this plurality, and (3) is capable of existing longer than the lifespan of an individual of the type (or types) involved" (113). Hunter gatherer societies, Pastoral societies, Horticulture societies, Federal societies and Industrial societies have all evolved into Post-Industrial or digital societies. Throughout the journey of evolution, human societies have had cooperation and conflict as their basic elements as Maclver and Page state: "society is cooperation crossed by conflict" (1971). Conflicts among members of a society or societies have taken place due to diverse reasons which may be personal, moral, economic or related to power. Modern human societies being more diverse in nature as compared to the earlier ones are vulnerable to conflicts bearing out of the diversity and flood of information/misinformation. But at the same time, humans have made conscious attempts to create social harmony which is state of a society in which people from diverse religions, cultures, races and economic background can live peacefully with a sense of mutual respect and trust. The most important condition for a society to function smoothly is that the uniquely talented individuals work together in a harmonious fashion by maintaining social contract amongst themselves without challenging or demeaning others. Sharma corroborates: "Harmony helps in generating collective consciousness among individuals, groups and organizations to prove unique and valuable services for the whole. Harmony will create the spirit of unity in diversity and the collective consensus to solve the urgent problems that face the world today. Simply put, harmony is our common value and common human heritage practiced as the oldest form of collective philosophy" (152). Sharma further elaborates the features of a harmonious society and defines the building of harmony as a "process of valuing, expressing and promoting love, trust, admiration, peace, respect, harmony, generosity and equity upon other people in any particular society regardless of their national origin, weight, marital status, ethnicity, colour, gender, race, age and occupation etc. among other aspects" (2015). Thus, the term is loaded with social, political and moral wisdom.

The issue of 'social harmony' is frequently discussed at different pedestals now-a-days, not because it is all
pervasive, but because it is fading under the looming shadows of religious, ethnic, and cultural intolerance. It is expected to be a natural outcome of human co-existence, but history testifies that it is not a simple phenomenon to result spontaneously from mere co-existence. Its conspicuous absence from majority of civilized human societies all over the world is an indicator that our understanding of the concept is quite superficial. Harmony can definitely not be attained through organisation of humans in accordance to their class, occupation, caste, gender, or physical features. It is also certainly not to be attained through material prosperity or power. Had it been so, the modern societies would not be becoming more and more exclusive in character despite growing levels of formal education, prosperity and attempts at removing disparities borne of religious, cultural or gender identities. A society is supposed to simultaneously liberate and control the activities of its members. However, in total contrast, an exhibition of gross misuse of liberties that societies extend and breaking through the control mechanisms by their members can be observed all around. Various types of inadequacies, unjust and violent behaviour unleashed by its members towards each other is apparent among human societies all around the globe and human societies are struggling to establish harmonious relationships. Disharmony also hinders the lives of humans to attain the ultimate truth as McLeod says:

Disharmony is the normal condition, but it does not lead to Truth and its inevitable consequence is continued movement within the cycle of transmigration, with all the attendant sufferings of this condition. Submission, on the other hand, leads to union, the consequence whereof is freedom. He who recognizes the divine Order perceives the truth; and he who, having recognized it, brings his life into conformity with it ascends to that eternal union with God which is the ultimate beatitude. (202)

A deeper probe into the roots of social disharmony would reveal that a failure to adhere to the structure and functions of a society in its true spirit is to be held responsible. Societies are crumbling under the weight of mal-intended structures that are bound to get dysfunctional. The disquiet and violence brewing in such dysfunctional societies calls for an urgent redressal that lies in a mixture of congenial political rhetoric, carefully crafted policies of governments, education, material progress, agitations for all types of rights. Moreover, an aspect which has been largely ignored in the pursuit of modern societies to attain harmony is spiritual in nature. The unyielding human desire to attain the exalted state of complete harmony appears to be socio-political in nature, but it has a very subtle and profound spiritual dimension which must be paid attention to.

Regarding the issue of social disharmony in the context of Indian society, it is apparent that the nation is facing enormous challenges at multiple levels: social, political, economic and religious. There is an urgent need to counter the menacing threats from communal powers, rigid nationalism, and social divisions on the basis of caste and class. The burgeoning population which has increasing economic aspirations, mindless westernisation of the society, indifferent policies of successive governments which have largely served their own parochial interests, large scale commercialisation of essential services, race of consumerism, growing religious, cultural and linguistic fundamentalism have been choking a society that was once regarded as the fountain head of spiritual and ethical values. A society that was culturally and spiritually rich; and whose members were socially bonded, morally strong, and emotionally well-rooted has been thoughtlessly and blindly heading on the path of earning economic gains and material riches at all costs. A closer analysis of India's much acclaimed journey towards modernization and economic would reveal that it has lacked vision on the part of the policy makers, and the social price paid for it has been exorbitant. An all-pervading sense of disquiet resulting from plummeting social-moral-cultural standards have set up the Indian society for grave internal conflicts among its various constituents in the wake of menacing powers of communalism, rigid nationalism, and social divisions on the basis of caste and class. The rich Indian cultural heritage is being slowly and surely subordinated by western value system and life style. At a complete loss, Indians are either looking up to political demi-gods or fake spiritual leaders to guide them through growing insecurities and alienation in personal and social spaces; or they are trying to escape the reality by leading a life of transient hedonistic pleasures. All this necessitates awakening of moral consciousness so that the social and political fabric of the society can be saved from getting irreparably damaged. Thus, there is an urgent need to re-orient several aspects of the contemporary Indian society in order to make it harmonious.

Sahib Singh opines that “development of moral consciousness in an individual is most desirable, such a person has the capacity to accept the responsibility for any wrong doing” (207).

India, as a society stands at a juncture where it is must to travel back and collect the pearls of wisdom strewn by saints like Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Born in the mid of the 15th century in Rāi Bhoi Ki Talwāndī (present day Nankana Sahib, Punjab, Pakistan) near Lahore, Nanak lived through an age that can be compared to the contemporary one in very subtle terms. The times in which Nanak lived were marked by social and political unrest caused by the downfall of the Delhi Sultanate and the rise of the Mughal Empire. Social unrest caused by religious factionalism had set in much before when the Mughals invaded India and began to occupy territories. They demolished the sacred sites of
Hindus in order to spread Islam. The two communities were engaged in regular confrontations.

On the social front also, there was chaos all around and vices such as corruption, robberies, murders, materialism, superficiality and duality of character had crept in. Honour and justice were traded like commodities. Deteriorating moral standards and growing inhumanity and factionalism necessitated reforms. Much before Guru Nanak though, social reforms had been ushered in by the teachings of saints like Ramananda (13th-14th Century) and Bhakt Kabir (15th Century) in North, Bhakt Namdev (early 14th Century) in Maharashtra, and Basavanna (12th Century) in South protested against this second-rate treatment of the poor and the so-called ‘untouchables’ by people from the upper strata of the society consisting of Brahmmins and Kshatriyas.

The description of the times in which Nanak lived is conspicuously similar to the contemporary India that claims itself to be a modern-day democratic republic. Not only it is engaged with strategic, territorial and trade related conflicts with its neighbours like Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bangladesh and others, but within the country also, increasing religious fanaticism and intolerance, social and economic divide between the rich and the poor, unrelenting caste-related prejudices, atrocious crime against women etc. are contributing to widening social discord. Successive governments, as mentioned above, have made token attempts to create social harmony, e.g. the government of India set up National Foundation for Communal Harmony in 1992 with the primary objective of providing assistance for the physical and psychological rehabilitation of the child victims of communal, caste, ethnic or terrorist violence with special reference to their care, education and training besides promoting communal harmony. Success of such programmes, however, has been limited. A disharmonious society is what the power-hungry politicians feed on. Their divisive policies stem from a knowledge of fragile identities based on several types of discriminations practiced in the societies.

Despite constant efforts by governments, national and international organisations, small scale social groups, families, and individuals, the Indian society has been becoming more and more disharmonious. Conflicts at every level, political, social, moral, religious are refusing to settle down. It suggests that there is something amiss in the attempts that have been made to create harmony. Complete ignorance of the spiritual dimension of the issue can be considered as a primary reason behind the failure of all other attempts at creating harmony. It is observable that spirituality that was once the hallmark of the life of Indians has been displaced by greed for power and pelf at all costs.

Guru Nanak, born around 550 years back, poured out wisdom in his poetry referred to as ‘Bani’. It is the gravest need of the hour not only to read or recite Nanak’s poetry, but to practice his teachings and work towards attainment of harmony he prescribed. Though these acts of reading and reciting appear superficial but these have undeniable impact on mind and behaviour of people. It is Nanak’s philosophy that served as the foundation of the Sikh religion which was formalised by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji about two centuries later in 1699.

The first guru of Sikhs called upon humanity to attain harmony, not only with each other, but also with other species and with nature, the root of all creation. Explaining the significance of the elements of nature in a culturally and psychologically appealing manner, he says:

\[ \text{Air is the vital force; Water the Progenitor; the vast Earth the Mother of all... (22)} \]

Though the focus of the present paper is on understanding Guru Nanak’s teachings about social harmony, it is extremely relevant to acknowledge his vision of complete harmony in life. The concept of harmony is principally defeated if we talk about it in the context of individual aspects.

Birth, life, and death of Guru Nanak are the simplest of the ways to understand what harmony means. He was the son of a Hindu trader who went on to work at the store house of a Sultan, got married, had children, read widely and interacted with the saints and sages of diverse faiths, travelled far and wide to acquire wisdom, came back home, remained engaged in agriculture for years, lived the life of a family man and practiced spirituality simultaneously, died only to be claimed by all faiths as their own. So, here is the lighthouse, Guru Nanak Dev Ji whom we can look up to for solution to our lives that are in total disarray. His closest companion, Mardana was a Muslim. He himself was influenced by Buddhism. The place where he breathed his last, has a temple and a gurudwara both. So who or what do we think we can ignore about Baba Nanak? He laid the foundation of a religion, the foundation stone of whose most important temple (the Golden Temple) was laid down by a Muslim, Mian Mir at the behest of the 4th Guru, Guru Ram Das Ji. All the Gurus took Nanak’s philosophy forward and fought against the ill-practices rampant in Hinduism and also against the unfair and partial ways of the Mughal rulers. Not just philosophising, the Gurus fought battles to keep the spirit of harmony alive. Was it not Baba Nanak’s vision of social harmony and call for rejection of religious/ caste/class/gender biases that the Gurus lived for and laid their lives for?

Turning to saints like Nanak remains the only way to live a harmonious life. His life stories or Janam Sakhis is a very simple yet profound source of the realisation that no sacrifices are too big if the reward is a harmonious
existence. A reminder, here, is that in the present times when nations, societies, and individuals are governed by selfish interests, reveling in material victories; but choking with coldness of relationships and absence of love at the same time; the only answer is opening the hearts to love for one and all without criteria, living in consonance with nature, and bending our egos to give way to a sense of surrender to One God. Until the inner self of the people is at peace, it is impossible to attain social harmony. Society, after all, is a group of individuals only. Guru Nanak’s vision is the ultimate answer in the form of the Mool Mantra, the fundamental hymn. Every single word of which radiates with a sense of harmony. All we need to do is to immerse ourselves in the ocean of Bani:

He is the Sole Supreme Being; of eternal manifestation;
Creator, Immanent Reality; Without Fear;
Without Rancour; Timeless Form; Unincarnated;
Self-Existent; Realized by grace of the holy preceptor;
Japu (Prayer-Chant)
Adi sachu, jugadi sachu (1)

This is a top-down approach towards to talk about Baba Nanak’s philosophy for attainment of social harmony. Realisation of the ‘single God’ and total surrender to His supremacy opens the doors for assimilation of the ‘other’ into the ‘self’. Nothing remains in between. One of the biggest hurdles, especially in the Indian society, has been caste based discrimination. People in every society are endowed with diverse abilities and talents. But differences have gradually grown into discrimination. Guru Nanak was one of the torch bearers to end caste based discrimination from the society, the evil of rich v/s poor and called upon humanity to see the divine in the poor. K. Ishwaran (qtd. by Dr. Ajit Singh) points out that "At the social level, (Guru) Nanak was quite a divine in the poor. K. Ishwaran (qtd. by Dr. Ajit Singh) points out that "At the social level, (Guru) Nanak was quite a revolutionary since he attacked two of the most serious social evils - Communalism and Casteism" (143). He reminds:
Caste and dynastic pride are condemnable notions;
Anyone arrogating superiority to himself shall be disillusioned. (174)

Guru Ji points out the inadequacy of human intelligence in maintaining social harmony and says:
Pride of caste let none entertain;
One realizing the Supreme Being is Alone a Brahmin.
Thou ignorant fool, entertain not pride of caste!
By such pride manifold mischiefs arise.
All talk of the four castes:
Know that all creation from the Divine
Essence has arisen.
The whole universe from the same clay has appeared:
The potter however, in numerous forms makes the vessels. (2292)

He emphasises on the need for introspection, without which the complete truth does not reveal. He says:

Full of demerits am I, without one merit:
Thus, how with the Spouse may I find union? (1561)

As a social reformer, Nanak fearlessly proclaims that anyone who takes pride and considers himself superior to others is disillusioned because superiority is determined only by God.
With the eternal abode is not asked caste or birth
- know this:
Caste and honour by deeds come! (2667)

So, knowing about one’s caste and family background is immaterial. All that is important is the quality of one’s deeds!

Nanak focuses on the importance of work ethics, sharing of food (in fact sharing of resources) and remembering the one God as he says, “Kriti Karo, Work legitimately and honestly; Naam Japo, Remember His name all the time; and Vaand Chhako, he calls for an equitable distribution of not only food but all the resources.

Those who eat the bread of their labour and give away something in charity,
Saint Nanak, truly recognize the way. (2509)

Baba Nanak introduced the concept of 'langar', the community kitchen where people of all religions, castes or creeds eat together. Guru Nanak’s mission was carried forward by the succeeding Gurus who reinforced the doctrines of equality, selfless service, justice and opposition of oppression. Even now, not forgetting the great tradition, Sikh Gurdwaras continue to build upon the concept given by Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

Another very relevant contribution made by Guru Nanak is his endorsement of women’s rights. He became a pioneer in championing the cause of women’s liberation. An increasingly misogynistic society which has reduced a woman to a mere body needs a reminder of Baba Nanak’s reverence for women. Guru ji says:

Why revile her of whom are born great ones of the earth?
From man is born woman, no human being without woman is born.
Saint Nanak: The holy Eternal alone with woman can dispense. (1004)

The phrase highlights the role of a woman as a mother, a sense of motherhood that is there is every woman. Though critics do analyse such phrases by saying that it
does not recognise the human identity of a female and reduces her to a body designed only to give birth, that too to male kings. But it is imperative to take the times and the type of society into cognizance while critically analysing a great thinker and philosopher like Nanak. In his Bani, he equates all humanity to a woman who is eager for a spiritual communion with her Lord, the God!

To build an egalitarian society, he promoted education for all men, women, and children by contributing towards developing the Gurmukhi script to make it accessible to all. His teachings of love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, forbearance, and mutual respect flowed from his teachings of love for God through the 'naam' or the 'Word'. Overall, he called for a sense of assimilation, cohesion, and harmony to create an inclusive society and an unprejudiced world.

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