

Inter-faith Dialogue and Re-reading of Guru Granth Sahib

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Respected Chairperson, Prof. R. P. Singh, esteemed Guest of Honour, Father Tom Kunnunkal and Dear Friends, first of all, I would like to thank the organizers of today's meeting, Prof. M. M. Verma, President, Interfaith Foundation, India and Prof. Razi Ahmed Kamal, Head, Department of Islamic Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, for inviting me to participate in this Colloquium. The theme of the Colloquium (which stands for "an informal meeting for the exchange of views") is 'Interfaith Dialogue: Towards a Better Society.' The importance of interfaith dialogue and understanding in our contemporary situation can hardly be overestimated. Ours is a multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious country, populated by adherents of diverse cultures and faiths. In the prevalent contemporary situation of increasing communal mistrust and tensions generated by clever machinations of divisive forces in our society, the need for such a dialogue and understanding has become imperative. In place genuine religion, we are witnessing a rise of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism which is inherently intolerant of the other religions. We also witness the spread of global terrorism associated with religion in some way or other. These tendencies are threatening the very survival of humanity and civilized society.

What is to be done in such a scenerio? Obviously, the religion in itself is not to be blamed for this crisis. Religion has been a great humanizing and enlightening force in human societies. It enters into the unconscious depths of being and affects our day to day behaviour in a significant manner. It leads to spiritual awakening and ethical consciousness. It has such a great motivating force that people can live and die for it. This tremendous motivating force of religion can also misused for destructive purposes. And this is precisely, what is being done in our contemporary world. Its power potential is being put to negative uses by clever politicians for their narrow interests. As a result, the enlightening mission and liberating vision of religion is constantly being clouded by these dark forces. The well-meaning people of every faith are looking around for some ray of hope.

The essential spiritual core of every religion is deeply humanitarian. It is a way of life which is primarily concerned with man's search for final meaning and purpose in life. How

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can such a search be evil and destructive. No religion advocates or justifies ruthless killings of the innocent people in the name of religion. Who is then responsible for this state of affairs? Who turns peace-loving ordinary people into terrorists and motivates them for suicidal destructive activities? Irony of the situation is that terrorism has no religion but every terrorist turns out to be a member of one religion or other. Sometimes he turns out to be a ‘Sikh’, at other time a ‘Muslim’ and we always tend to blame the entire community for the terrorist acts of such individuals. Obviously it cannot be justified on any account. Once we are caught in the vicious circle of teaching each other a lesson, it becomes very hard to put an end to it. It leads to greater and greater misfortune and tragedy in which the whole nation has to suffer.

No doubt, the motivating force employed by the perpetrators of these acts of violence, is that of ‘religion’ which is used (rather misused) for misdirected political purposes. But in order to reverse this unfortunate turn of events, we have to look deeper into the anatomy of terrorism and its real causes also. We cannot blame the whole community or its religion for individual acts of terrorism and violence. Anatomy of terrorism and counter-terrorism is very complex. Sometimes there are socio-cultural and economic factors responsible for alienation of a community which is often utilized by communal forces. As a matter of fact, terrorism or communal violence is a disease affecting the health of a community/country. It is a disease born out of ignorance, mistrust, egoism and false consciousness. The cure lies in liberating religion from the clutches of communalism and restore its essential humanistic glory. It applies to all the religions. As Lord Krishna says in *Bhagvad Gita* “Knowledge is the greatest purifier”

“Of all purifiers like taking bath in the Ganga, doing remedial action, repeating the name of God, etc., knowledge is the greatest purifier. The basic impurity of ignorance can be removed only by knowledge.”¹

We need real knowledge to purify us and dispel darkness and mistrust born out of ignorance. What is required, is the re-reading of our religious texts in the light of our contemporary concerns. We also need to have some knowledge of the basic tenets of our contemporary faiths as well. Only then can we enter into a fruitful dialogue with other faiths. In this context, we are reminded of one of our prominent medieval saint-poets, Bhakta Kabir, who says –

वेद कतेब कहो मत झूटे, झूटा जो ना विचारे

In order to remove the falsely created environment of mistrust among different faiths, contextual re-reading of the scriptures of world religions is needed. Only by rediscovering the true essence of religion and by emphasising the humanitarian moral values of these religious traditions, we can create such an atmosphere of mutual understanding and harmony.

Interestingly the existential situation of the medieval Indian society, in which the text and discourse of *Guru Granth Sahib* participates, is very much similar to our present times. There is a plurality of contending religious beliefs and practices represented by various sects of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Islam. The socio-cultural reality is reflective of these plural world outlooks.

Presently, we are concerned with the study of *Guru Granth Sahib*. We will be studying the models of inter-faith dialogue and understanding provided by the saints and gurus in this holy scripture. In this connection I would like to quote a very significant passage from *Guru Granth Sahib*:

मिहर दइआ करि करनैहार ॥

भगति बंदगी देहि सिरजणहार ॥

कहु नानक गुरि खोए भरम ॥

एको अलहु पारब्रहम ॥५॥३४॥४५॥²

‘Allah’ and ‘Braham’ are the prime signifiers of the two religious traditions (the Muslim and the Hindu). The discursive strategy of the text of *Guru Granth Sahib* here is inclusiveness. By indicating the spiritual unity/oneness of these signifiers, peaceful co-existence and communal harmony is emphasized. Such a unifying consciousness emerges only in an atmosphere of inter-faith dialogue and understanding. This is precisely the ideological position of the gurus, saints and sufis whose *bani* has been included in this sacred text.

कोई बोलै राम राम कोई खुदाइ ॥ कोई सेवै गुसईआ कोई अलाहि ॥१॥

कारण करण करीम ॥ किरपा धारि रहीम ॥१॥ रहाउ ॥

कोई नावै तीरथि कोई हज जाइ ॥ कोई करै पूजा कोई सिरु निवाइ ॥२॥

कोई पड़ै बेद कोई कतेब ॥ कोई ओढै नील कोई सुपेद ॥३॥

कोई कहै तुरकु कोई कहै हिंदू ॥ कोई बाछै भिसतु कोई सुरगिंदू ॥४॥

कहु नानक जिनि हुकमु पछाता ॥ प्रभ साहिब का तिनि भेदु जाता ॥५॥९॥³

In this passage the belief-systems, the religious practices and conceptual categories of the major religions (Hinduism and Islam) are placed in a composite frame of reference and the signifiers of both the traditions used to construct a meaning that emphasizes unity in diversity. At the same time, the discourse recognizes, accepts and celebrates the religious and cultural differences. In this manner, the text tries to resolve the outward/manifest differences of the two traditions and emphasize the essential unity of divine experience. We can find no better example of inclusiveness and harmony than this.

Similarly, in ‘Sidh Gost’ composition of this *Granth*, we find an excellent example of constructive dialogue between the Sidha’s way of life and the Gurmat way of life. *Guru Granth Sahib* is a vast repertory of discourses touching the various aspects of human existence. These discourses tend to employ signifiers and codes of human inter-personal relations, of social institutions and of cultural practices. For instance they often use the language of love and marriage conveying the man’s emotional relationship with the divine (the ultimate self-image of man). Semiotic reading of such a vast text is a tremendous task. For a proper analysis and interpretation of *Guru Granth Sahib*, we also need to attend to the semiotic strategies employed by its discourse for the production and communication of meaning. For this purpose, we need to look at it as a discursive practice. In fact, the concept of discourse is very significant for semiotic studies. The discourse is always linguistically constructed and socially situated. Therefore both of these aspects are to be taken into consideration for proper understanding of discourse.

When we look at the discourse of *Guru Granth Sahib*, we find that its language is predominantly metaphysical. It employs the transcendent signifiers of the various religious and philosophical traditions to construct final meaning of human existence as well as to resolve the prevalent social, cultural and religious conflicts. In this manner, it provides us with significant insights to construct a model for engaging in an inter-faith dialogue and understanding, which is the urgent need of contemporary reality.

¹ *Bhagvad Gita* – 38.

² Be kind and compassionate to me, O Creator Lord.

Bless me with devotion and meditation, O Creator.

Says Nanak, the Guru has rid me of all doubt.

Allah and Parbrahm are the same. ||5||34||45||

³ Some call Him as 'Ram, Ram'; others call Him, 'Khudai'

Some serve Him as 'Gusain', others as 'Allah'. ||1||

He is the Cause of causes, the Generous Lord.

He showers His Grace and Mercy upon us. ||1||Pause||

Some bathe at sacred shrines of pilgrimage,

Others make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Some perform devotional worship, and some bow their heads in prayer. ||2||

Some read the Vedas, and some the Koran.

Some wear blue robes and some wear white. ||3||

Some call themselves Muslim, and some call themselves Hindu.

Some yearn for paradise and others long for heaven. ||4||

Says Nanak, one who realizes the Hukam of God's Will,

Knows the secrets of his Lord and Master. ||5||9||