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CHAPTER I

THE MILIEU

'Religion' is derived from the Latin *religare*, which means to tie [back](#)¹. But in its institutionalised form, religion refers to an institution with a recognised body of communicants who gather together regularly for worship and accept a set of doctrines offering some means of relating the individual to what is taken to be the ultimate nature of [reality](#)².

Sikhism is also a religion, which aims at reunion of the individual with the Ultimate Reality. But in this process of reunion Sikhism does not negate the world which, though, impermanent, yet holds some meaning. According to Sikhism living in this world in a rightful manner is a part of the path leading to reunion with the Ultimate Reality. To achieve the goal the Sikh Gurus did not advocate seclusion from the society. Thus the Sikh view of life is active participation in various spheres of activities of life in a rightful manner. One comes across many evils of society but Sikhism advises not to close one's eyes to these but to attempt boldly to face and eradicate worldly evils. The fifth Guru, Arjan Dev, writes:

Orighteous man, speak up: Why are you silent so?

For, you have seen with your eyes the treacherous ways of

Maya!

Adi Granth, p. 547 (Hereafter quoted as A.G.)

Contrary to the prevalent practice of denouncing the world in order to realise the Truth or to become a true Yogi, the Sikh Gurus believed that the world was worth

living and it was possible to live pure among the impurities of life. Guru Nanak says:

Yoga is not abiding at the tombs or the crematoriums, or in entering into a pseudo-trance.

Yoga consists not in roaming the world, nor in bathing at the pilgrim-stations.

Only in remaining Detached in the midst of attachments, one attains to the (True) state of Yoga. A.G., p. 730

Guru Nanak and his all the nine successors were householders and advocated that it was possible to attain spiritual bliss while enjoying worldly comforts provided one does not forget the Lord. The fourth Guru, Ramdas, makes it clear when he says:

Blessed are the eats, wears and riches of those who are imbued with the Lord's Name.

Blessed are their homes, temples, palaces and rest houses, dedicated to the Devotees and mendicants of God.

Blessed are their horses, saddles and horse-cloths, which are yoked to the Service of the Saints.

Pure are all their deeds who utter ever the Lord's True Name. A.G., p. 648

Rather than advocating and supporting the traditional living of a yogi the Gurus emphasised *Raj-Yoga*. In this context a dialogue between the Sixth Guru, Hargobind, and a contemporary Maratha Saint Ramdas, the preceptor of Shivaji, is worth quoting here:

"Once the Guru was staying in Kashmir. There came a Sadhu to see him. He was a Deccani, Ramdas by name. Riding a horse, the Guru had returned from a hunt. Many Sikhs were there with him. He asked him, "I had heard you occupied the *gaddi* of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak was a tyagi *Sadhu*—a saint who had renounced the world. You are wearing arms and keeping an army and horses. You have yourself called *Sacha Padshah*—A true King. What sort of a Sadhu are you?" Guru Hargobind said,

"Internally a hermit, and externally a prince; arms mean protection for the poor and destruction for the tyrant. Baba Nanak had not renounced the world but had renounced *Maya*, the self and ego". Ramdas was pleased (to hear this) and said, "This appealeth to my mind."

(Sakhi 39, Pothi Panjah Sakhian)

So the Sikh Gurus did not discard any positive aspect of life but forcefully denounced the evils of life. The political situation of their times was no exception to it. They denounced evils of the contemporary politics and taught us the clean and the pure one.

That is why the Sikh Gurus responded to the social as well as political situation of their times. They did not turn a deaf ear to these happenings of their times. They boldly pointed out the weaknesses of society as well as political set-up. Their response finds expression in the scriptures in direct or latent form. Though, primarily, Sikh Gurus were religious thinkers and did not give us any systematic political treatise as such unlike those of Plato and others yet we can infer their political ideology from their references to the prevalent political system and metaphorical usage of the contemporary political phraseology. So it is unfair to contend that the Sikh Gurus did not give any political thought or the Sikh scriptures contains no distinct political ideology, simply on the pretext that the term 'politics' and 'political' have not been used as such.

To infer political theory of the Sikh Gurus we have to study the milieu in which they lived and the situations they responded to.

Guru Nanak, the founder, was a contemporary of five monarchs—Bahlul Lodi (1469-89), Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517) and Ibrahim Lodi (1517-1526) and Mughal rulers—Babur (1526-1530) and Humayun (1530-1539). But Guru Nanak does not mention the name of any of these rulers except Babur while attacking their unrighteous policies. Whenever he points out or criticises some policy he attributes it to the general term 'ruler'.

The most important event that took place during the days of Guru Nanak was the invasions of Babur and subsequent establishment of Mughal rule in India. In Guru Nanak's reaction to the political events of his time Babur's invasion of India figures

prominently. His compositions pointing to this event are known as *Babar-Vani*. 'In 1520 AD Babur crossed river Chenab and occupied Sialkot without much resistance. Then he marched on Sayyidpur (Eminabad) which was taken by assault and put to the sword³.

Guru Nanak reacted against the atrocities committed by the armies of Babur. He condemned excesses committed by his soldiers. Guru Nanak says while addressing Lalo:

Bringing a bridal procession of sin (Babur) hath hasted from Kabul and demandeth wealth as his bride, O Lalo.

Modesty and Religion have vanished; falsehood marcheth in the van, O Lalo.

The occupation of the Qazis and the Brahmans is gone; the devil readeth the marriage service, O Lalo.

Musalman women read the Quran, and in suffering call upon God, O Lalo.

Hindu women whether of high or low caste, meet the same fate as they, O Lalo.

They sing the paeon of murder, O Nanak, and smear themselves with the saffron of blood.

Nanak singeth the praises of the Lord in the city of corpses, and uttereth this commonplace.

A.G., p. 722

In the *Babar Vani* Guru Nanak gives a vivid description of the havoc brought by the armies of invaders led by Babur and describes how the soldiers dishonoured the innocent women. Further while the Guru made a scathing attack on Babur and his army of sinners but in keeping with the higher spiritual values he believed that everything happened according to Lord's will.

The Guru was equally opposed to the idea of either the invaders imposing their culture on the subjugated populace or the people copying the culture of the ruling elite. With the advent of Muslim rule the Hindu culture started acquiring the Islamic tinge because of the pressures of the ruling elite. To quote Guru Nanak:

Now that the turn of Sheikhs has come, the Primal Lard is called Allah

And the (Hindu) gods and temples have been taxed: such is the current way
 The ablution pot, the prayer, the prayer-mat, the call to prayer,
 have all assumed the Muslim garb
 even God is now robed in blue (like the Muslims did)
 And men have changed their tongue and the Muslim way
 of greetings prevails.

A.G., p. 1191

It becomes clear that Guru Nanak did not like the imposition of elite culture on the subjects and equally the acceptance of alien culture or language under pressure. This he indicates clearly in *Asa ki Var* when he says:

In the time of Atharva Veda, or the *Kali*-age, Allah became the name of God.
 The Hindus wear the (Islamic dress) blues and follow the suits of the
 Turks or Pathans.

A.G., p. 470

Another comment on the situation of his time is:

The kings are like whores, the courtiers like dogs:
 For, they awaken those that asleep in God's Peace.
 The king's servants tear (the docile subjects) with their nails.
 And, like curs, lick up all the blood that they spill.

A.G., p. 1288

This clearly indicates the type of rulers and administrative machinery of his time. Kabir also refers to the low ebb of morality of the administrative officials of his time. Though he uses the terms as metaphors yet the latent meaning is clearly discernible when he says:

The nine Assessors and the ten Judges leave no one (subject) in Peace;
 For, they measure not the Farms honestly, and want their palms to be greased.

A.G., p. 793

Guru Nanak makes another general statement about the political situation of his

times:

Kings are butchers, cruelty their knife,
 Sense of duty has taken wings and vanished.
 Falsity prevails like the darkness of darkest night,
 The moon of truth is visible nowhere.
 I have tired myself in Search, but,
 In the darkness of the Age,
 No path (of righteousness) is visible.

A.G., p. 145

Guru Nanak makes many indirect references to the contemporary political situation. This may be inferred from the metaphorical use of the prevalent political terminology. It has been remarked recently that "Guru Nanak had a first hand knowledge of the condition of the people under the Lodis and of the behaviour of the ruling class towards the subject [people](#)."⁴ "The number of passages often quoted by writers in illustration of Guru Nanak's political concerns is not more than ten. But there are other verses, which have a bearing on the subject and the number of such verses is by no means small. Altogether, they suggest Guru Nanak's familiarity with contemporary politics and bureaucratic set up. This may be inferred from the occurrence, in these verses, of such phrases as *sultan, patshah, shah-i-alam, takht, taj, hukm, amr, pathaniaml, wazir, diwan, naib, lashkar, umara, khan, malik, shiqdar, qazi, chaudhari, muqaddam, raiyat*, for instance. Also, there are references to the court and palaces, royal canopy, elephants, armour, cavalry, trumpets, treasury, coins, mint, salary (*wajh*), taxes and even to revenue-free [land](#)."⁵

Bhai Gurdas is another important contemporary source. He mentions the political milieu of Guru Nanak's times. He tells us that at the times of Guru Nanak the kings were unrighteous and did not look after their subjects rather harassed them. For Bhai Gurdas it was just like the fence, which is meant to protect the fields, eating the crop. The subjects were also blind or lacking proper knowledge and wisdom (Var 1:30). This expression of the situation finds confirmation in the Bani of Guru Nanak:

Avarice and Sin are the king and the minister, and Falsehood is their chief:

And Lust is the adviser, and so they all confabulate.
 Their subjects too are blind, without wisdom; and like the dead,
 they dance to their tune.

A.G., pp. 468-69

Bhai Gurdas also mentions the religious discrimination during the Muslim rule. He tells that the Hindu temples were razed to the ground and Muslim mosques were built at those places and all over there was injustice—Var, 1:24. On the whole, Guru Nanak saw in his contemplation that the entire world was in agony—Var, 1:24. The second Guru, Angad Dev had similar opinion. He comments:

The beggar is called the king; the fool is termed wise;
 The blind man is called the seer; yea, so are the words bandied about.
 The mischievous ones and those addicted to falsehood secure the first place in life.
 This is what the Guru teaches that in the *Kali*-age men discriminate but
 indiscriminately.

A.G., p. 1288

This was his general statement about the *Kali*-age and not that particular short period. The following hymn of the third Guru, Amardas, aptly describes the agony of the contemporary world:

The world is on fire: O God, Save it Thou in Thy Mercy,
 Through whichever Door it comes unto Thee, Save it that wise, pray.

A.G. p. 853

Similarly the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev, refers to the rulers indulged in lustful pleasures and pastimes:

He (the king) rules in ten directions
 And with numerous females indulges in pleasure and merry-making...

A.G., p. 176

From the martyrdom of the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev, the situation changed. The Gurus themselves were actively involved in the contemporary political situation. This is

evident from the Sixth Guru wearing two swords and thereby clearly indicating the combination of religion and politics but with a vital difference that politics was to be subservient to religion. This also shows that the Guru was introducing a new type of politics based on ethics.

There was no confrontation between the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev and the emperor Jehangir as such. Actually the emperor tried to placate the Muslim orthodoxy which led to his ordering persecution and ultimately death of Guru Arjan Dev. But a careful perusal of the later period of Jehangir's reign shows that he was wearing the cloak of fanaticism as a political expediency in order to gain support of the Muslim orthodoxy. But later as a result of the reversal of Emperor's policy cordial relations between Jehangir and Guru Hargobind were established.

Guru Hargobind maintained a regular army, of which he himself was the supreme commander. He had his own source of income through the system of *Daswand*—one tenth of the income to be donated by every Sikh. He acted as Chief Justice for the Sikhs. He used to hold courts at Akal Takhat. His followers called him *Sacha Patshah*—the true king. With this almost 'a state within the state' came into existence which can never be tolerated by any government and is treated as a rebellion in the legal sense.

After the demise of Jehangir, his son Shahjehan ascended the throne. Relations between the new ruler and Guru Hargobind developed strains after some time. There was open confrontation also. Four battles were fought. According to the Sikh chronicles the Guru fought all the battles decisively and was victorious. However Mohsin Fani, a contemporary Persian writer differs regarding the first battle at least. But Sikh chroniclers' claim of success of the Guru in the battles to an extent cannot be [discounted](#)⁶. Macauliffe stands by the view of Sikh chroniclers.

From the detailed account of the battles fought by the Guru we can easily infer his fighting tactics and war strategy and also the code of ethics to be followed during the battle, i.e. the laws of war. Detailed accounts of battles are available from various sources such as *Gurbilas Patshahi 6* written by Kavi Sohan in about 1718 AD, the famous *Suraj Prakash Granth* written by Kavi Santokh Singh, *Panth Prakash* of Giani Gian Singh etc. After Guru Hargobind's battles, the next important historical

event, which took place was the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru. His son, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Sikh Guru took to sword. He himself has written about his mission on this earth in his autobiography, the *Bachitra Natak*:

The divine Guru sent me for religion's sake
On this account I have come into the world
'Extend the faith everywhere,
Seize and destroy the evil and the sinful'.
Understand this, ye holy men, in your souls.
I assumed birth for the purpose
Of spreading the faith, saving the saints,
And extirpating all tyrants.

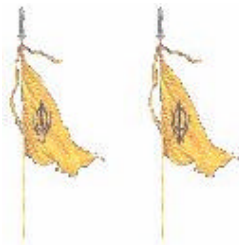
6: 42-43

During the time of Guru Gobind Singh, Aurangzeb was the ruler who was very fanatic. He was following policy of persecution of non-Muslims. His was the age of utmost hatred, religious intolerance, bigotry and discrimination. All this was against the principles of justice and humanity. The Guru faced the challenge militarily. Firstly he fought some battles with the Hindu hill-chiefs, which were puppets of the central ruler. Then he fought battles with the royal armies. The Guru gives a vivid description of his battles in his autobiography, the *Bachitra Natak*, and the *Zafarnama*—his epistle of victory written to Aurangzeb. These two are the most dependable sources to understand Guru's philosophy relating to war and politics. He was of the firm opinion that moral principles must be followed even during war. One more thing we can understand from his philosophy is that his enemy was not any individual but the element of the unrighteousness. This is borne out from the incident of Bhai Kanahiya as told in Sikh chronicles. Some of the Guru's soldiers complained that while serving water Bhai Kanahiya made no distinction between the soldiers of the army of the Guru and those of the enemy. When asked to explain his conduct Kanahiya replied that he saw the Guru's image in every being. The Guru was so impressed by the altruistic spirit of Kanahiya's thought that he gave him a small box of ointments saying that the latter could apply these also to the wounds of the soldiers in both the camps while serving

water. This incident can be called a precursor to the modern concept of Red Cross.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Webster's Third New Encyclopaedic Dictionary.*
2. W.L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, p. 488.
3. *The Babur-nama*, I, 429.
4. Ganda Singh, Presidential Address, Panjab History Conference, Patiala, 1969, 77.
5. J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History*, p. 147.
6. Indubhusan Banerjee, *Evolution of Khalsa*, Vol. 2, pp. 21-25. Indubhusan Banerjee, *Evolution of Khalsa*, Vol. 2, pp. 21-25.



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