

Inter -faith Dialogue and Guru Granth Saheb

It was in London in 1996 that I spoke for the first time in a conference on Inter-faith dialogue arranged by the Archbishop of Canterbury entitled 'how far can we go together'. Since then I have spoken in several inter-faith conferences and have come to realize that on our journey our goals may be very different – the manner of our dialogue also alters from person to person – still we share a huge amount in common as fellow travellers. But there are people who overstate the divergence and undermine the common ground and say that there are as many paths as there are faiths and the basic principles of great religions of the world are quite different from each other and it is practically impossible for one who understands and believes in his one even to understand the other and therefore without understanding how could there be dialogue!

However, if we are committed to our faiths our destination becomes the same – to receive the grace of God. God's love and compassion extends to people of all races, classes and creeds. Our paths can be different but we share the same purpose and therefore it is a shared journey of common humanity and one can affirm that all paths are different but at the same time they are same because one does not know from which path God's grace will come to him. On this axis of one and many revolves the whole question of multi-faith dialogue.

Guru Nanak's meetings with the holy men of both Hindu and Muslim tradition, as he set out in his preaching odysseys after receiving revelations, to have dialogue with them and the stress on mutual dialogue (i.e. listening to the others viewpoint and then presenting one's own) in the sikh scripture can be put forward as perhaps the first empirical evidence in this respect of multi faith dialogue. From diverse paths we reach to one and the same destination. Guru Granth Sahib accepts religious diversity and

from diversity moves to Ek Onkar Sat and in that way gives us the clue to One Supreme.

Guru Granth Saheb is a multilingual text; it includes Bhagat Vanis, the utterances of 15 medieval Indian poets of sant, sufi and bhakti origin belonging to different religious heritage along with the compositions of Sikh gurus and the most surprising thing is that there are many Bhagat vanis included in the Adi Granth which go against the philosophical views of the Gurus. For example Gurus differ from both kabir and Sheikh Farid on the issue of the primacy of divine grace over personal effort in spiritual progress. The Sikh view is that spiritual progress is a matter of divine grace, not of one's efforts alone. This is an excellent example of catholicity, mutual respect for each other's view point and diversity of opinion.

This unique text belongs to an age when on one side inter-faith understanding for each other's religion was an important aspect of the utterances of devotional poets in almost every language of India but on the other side because of class, caste, political ideology and religious obstinacy of the orthodoxy both the state and religious authorities spoke a biased language of power, prejudice and domination. Guru Granth Sahib, out of the sense of 'goodness without any calculation', holds that in this kind of a situation for the sake of righteousness and justice one should protest and fight, even if it is not related to one's own particular religion or social group.

Guru Tegh Bahadur set a healthy model of goodness of human reality during the medieval period when fanaticism ruled supreme in India and laid down his life for the safety of Hindu society and faith of which he was neither a member nor had he ever accepted its tenets. It was the urge to defend ethical values, justice and religious freedom, which inspired him to put his head under the tyrannical ruler's sword.

The Adi Granth is a text which for the first time, inter alia, speaks of a global ethic based on a passion for justice and affirmative toleration of a much higher degree than we have known in any period of human history. It transmits a message of religious plurality and love for humanity.

But at the same time this experiment of religious pluralism does not mean to create a holistic religious universe. Holism no doubt means a creed of synthesis which is against any kind of exclusiveness of form, symbols and ideas. However, holism also indicates stagnancy but Guru Granth Saheb is not a stagnant text, it is ever lively therefore Adi Granth's greatness lies in a holism which looks, on one side, at things holistically but at the same time, adds to its text the idea of continuity. In fact, one of the reasons for the inclusion of Bhagat Vani in Adi Granth is to historically contextualize it so that a pre- history to Sikh panth is created implying a sense of continuity and to prove that it is an ever existent text.

But if the plurality of religion does not open the ways of understanding and communication then this can put us into difficulty. Most of the times we purposefully don't want to transcend our diversities for building up a common ground. To transform different religious monologues into a dialogue we need a common ground, some common thought patterns between the participants as well as a willingness to listen to each other. And such common factors like compassion, love, truth and service to mankind come in life by surrendering oneself to the will of God. In Sikhism one prays to the Supreme that he does not want kingdom or renunciation but just complete dedication and constant priti at the lotus feet of the Lord. He at the same time says that O Lord, you make me free from the chain of birth and death so that I may do service to mankind:

Raj na chahu, mukti na chahu

Man priti charan kamal re. and

Janam maran donhu te mukte jan

Paropkari aye.

All great religions it seems to us contain a belief that a certain control of the instincts is necessary for our civilized living – a belief that the cultivation of certain positive emotion, e.g. compassion and concern for other people are necessary outcome of one's sense of religiosity. The dog-incident at the end of Mahabharata when Lord

Indra invited Yudhisthir to come to heaven but the dog, who was his companion in the long journey would not be allowed then Yudhistir's words uttered at the threshold of heaven, 'O. Indra, I cannot leave this dog for my happiness' was perhaps the highest expression of compassion and concern for others. Guru Nanak, on one side talks of *Sat*- the one ever existent unchanging reality and, on the other, speaks of *Dharma* which is born of compassion(dhaul-dharam daya ka put) and dharma or righteous action brings satisfaction (santokhu thapi rakhiya jinni suti) and gives balance in life. With love of *Nama* one can clear one's mind from any sin and achieve balance. This existential framework discloses the true meaning of Sikh dharam which solely rests on the foundation of devotion, service to man with its constituents of charity, compassion and forgiveness.

These common factors are the basis of interfaith dialogue that ultimately reveal love and understanding for each other. Guru Nanak's *bhakti* is nothing but to spread the message of love and harmony which binds you with other The love in your mind makes you hear the unheard words in the sound of the kettle drum- anhat sabad bajanta bheri- which announces the arrival of the Lord.

But most of the time the followers of different religions speak the language of persuasion and to persuade one needs the backing of a conceptual framework or theology and hence Gurus of Sikhism had always discarded theology and spoke the language of love which is easily shared by everybody and which is an element of our common humanity. Guru Grantha Saheb rejects elements of tradition like rituals, caste system and undemocratic brahmanic structure of the society and goes for a life of devotion, love, service to people, peace and supreme bliss.

Adi Granth is historically linked with a genuine experiment of religious pluralism. Right to our religion does not give right to look down other religion and hence in inter-religious communication a personal and direct communication takes place between an individual of one faith and an individual of another faith with the aim to know each other. The effort is mutual and held in an atmosphere of openness of relationship as says Guru nanak, *Ek jyoti te jag upja kaun bhale kaun mande*. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa says, allow everybody to follow his religion. If he has

acute urge to know God with all sincerity then let him allow moving peacefully. He will one day get him.

The biggest thing of this communication is understanding with sympathy. This is possible when you share another religion. Sharing does not mean entering but understanding it. This can't be a language of proposition like God exists; God created the world; man has an immortal soul. The language used in inter-faith dialogue is the language of worship, devotion prayers, and hymns in its entire range of symbolic words and symbolic acts as of Nanak, which is not a language of theological description but of invocation, not propositional but existential as can be realized in the arati of Guru Nanak:

Gagan mein thalu rabichandra Deepak bane

Tarika mandal janak moti

The use of cosmic metaphor which charmed Tagore is recited in the Jagannath temple of Puri indicating that religious symbolism can cut across any barrier and embrace all religion.

Ultimately in inter-faith dialogue one talks only of the grace of God. Just by thinking of Divine a song will arise in you. Just singing that song you will be united with the Divine. This is the message of transcendental realization which leads you to a holistic religious universality and then one comes out of one's limited life and becomes the part of unlimited expanse of life.

All world religions seem to include a belief that purely external circumstances cannot constitute the be-all and end-all of human existence- a belief that the world we see with our senses is not all that there can possibly be. Thus to people to be religious contain a belief that people can experience more than they do. However in the past, encounters between religions did not take place in a spirit of dialogue. Such encounters mostly took place in the context of proselitization, for refuting something by way of apology not with reference to understanding. Moreover, historical forces did not allow any kind of communication.

The hagiographical literature pertaining to Guru Nanak, and his hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib make it explicit that the Guru was in continuous discussion with the pedantic *pundits*, the *maulvis*, the *yogis* and a host of *pirs* and *faqirs*. Not only that, he, putting away the idea of mere toleration, flashed before the world a new idea of acceptance of the greatness and truthfulness of others irrespective of caste, colour and creed. One's acceptance fills others with love for one and all, and then one enjoys the spirit of dialogue with the others.

It is Guru Granth Saheb which revealed to us this unique truth that in inter-religious communication, one's task while adhering to a religion, and having faith in other religions, is not to be tolerant of another religion because tolerance smacks of personal ego- as if I am tolerating your behaviour. On the contrary, accepting it and showing respect for it, i.e. what you are saying can also be true, this is acceptance. This is intellectual and emotional welcoming- acceptance of diversity- a key factor of human unity or universal humanism. In the words of Bhai Gurdas in his first *var*, Guru Nanak considers the *siddhas* much more full of will power and capacity, and perhaps that is why the Guru is said to have told them that if the *siddhas*- like people would remain hidden in the caves of the mountains then who would lead the people in the world below _ *Sidh chhapi baithe parbati kaunu jagati kau par utara* ? If the dialogue is initiated with the intention of giving proper recognition to the other person, the results of such a dialogue would be meaningful and constructive. Sikhism has this tradition of inter-faith accordance, love and respect for other's view as revealed in their dialogues.

This does not mean that all religions are really one- this kind of a slogan that all religions are really one is an expression of an intellectual refusal to accept the diversity. However, it may also mean that the core structure is one which can be interpreted as spiritual humanism. The elements of spiritual humanism are

Devotion,

Service to man,

Sacrifice and

Faith in religious pluralism.

This leads us from a position of reaction to one of response. It leads one to a network of relationships- from limited life, from hadda, to behadda, to the expanse of this universe unless you love your fellow beings, the question of loving God does not arise.

In this great scripture, the base of a worthy life is the doctrine that one should have partnership with the virtues of the people and should keep away from mischiefs _ sanjh karijai gunah kerh chhodi avagan chaliai.

The last point is that did these kinds of meetings of religions resolve the dismal scenario prevailing in this world or is there any chance in the future. After the end of cold war, we all presumed that peace would now dawn on this world, but, on the contrary, we found a considerable increase in conflicts arising out of considerations of regional autonomy and national sovereignty, linguistic and ethnic equality, religious fanaticism and ethnic rivalries, terrorism and post-colonial international interventions. Today not only dialogues between religions but some kind of activism is essential for propagating the message of love and peace of Guru Nanak and others which is the most potent way for conflict resolution.

In this respect I shall like to refer to a Hindi film Veer-Zara, it is not a great film just a good one of an Indian man and a Pakistani women and offers the possibility to India and Pakistan of moving beyond the partition. It shows how a movie can become the crystal seed of rapprochement, of creating new narratives of healing. It replaces the old myth of partition as a genocidal narrative of violence, displacement and vivisection with a new creation myth of reconciliation. No theoretical analysis of conflict resolution, management, settlement and reconciliation can match with the message of this love story of two lovers separated by family, state and history and yet reunited after 23 years by a young Pakistani lawyer, a human rights activist.

What we realize after watching this film that it is love which deals with the root causes of the conflict and settles it in a human way and is the most profound strategy of conflict resolution and is talked about by practically every religion, sufi faqirs and medieval saints of India like Guru Nanak and by Mahatma Gandhi and by many thinkers of the present time. Love is a primary, directing force that floods the soul and flows outward towards the other. Love is always rooted in the field of other. The final sense is one of coming together – becoming and being dialectically united. This is the crowning strategy of conflict settlement making way for reconciliation without which there cannot be any genuine peace in the world. Love goes beyond the monocultures of industrial and technological civilization. Monocultures look at things as binary opposites hence in these culture after 9/11 tragically every Muslim is a suspect. Love, on the contrary, creates the landscape of harmony, safer far for life of all kinds than the landscape of monoculture. And we should not neglect to notice that, whereas the monocultural landscape is totalitarian in tendency, the landscape of harmony is democratic and free which does not set the goals on the principle of an eye for an eye but on tolerance, solidarity and dialogue to settle differences and heal wounds. It is the human love for each other which harmoniously rejoins us and is the most potent strategy of conflict resolution particularly in comparison to any other strategy. It paves the way for the establishment of the culture of peace in the world.

Peace is more than the absence of conflict. It encompasses protection of democratic ideals and human rights. India has always spoken in the language of peace and human fellowship. In her 5000 or more years of documented history, India has passed through every gamut of human experience, prosperity and adversity, victory and defeat, freedom and subjection. India has learnt from these experiences and acquired a spirit of gentleness, fellowship, tolerance and universality. The result of this learning was a complete absence of the aggressive spirit in India's long history. Her voice has been the voice of peace and tolerance. Her great children like Guru Nanak, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi have proved, through the manner of

conducting their life and work and the manner of accepting their death that there voice is not a voice of weakness but of strength.