

The Future of Religious Leadership: The Sikh Perspective

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The advent of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of Sikhism, marks a watershed in the history of the Indian sub-continent. The Sikh tradition and Scriptures describe him as a divine preceptor who held a special relationship with God. Broadly speaking, the Sikh model of religious leadership owes its origin to Guru Nanak, which, with the passage of time, has evolved but continued to maintain its objectives. Guru Nanak's religious experience worked as a major catalyst to inspire Sikh leaders, especially the successive Sikh Gurus and their followers, to follow his mission. Significantly, the nature of Sikh leadership has remained deeply rooted in the religious and historical experiences of Guru Nanak and his successors. Before we enquire into this leadership, a brief discussion on the responses of Guru Nanak to his milieu is needed.

Introduction

The nature of one's religious experience is a major factor in determining the nature of his/her leadership. Many scholars have followed Max Weber's three categories of religious experience: ascetic, mystic, and prophetic.¹ The prophetic experience has been found radically different from asceticism and mysticism, as it involves neither acceptance of the world in its present state nor withdrawal from it.² In Weber's words, "The genuine prophet preaches,

creates or demands new obligations."³ According to Joachim Wach, "Owing to his contact with the deepest sources of life the prophet reacts vigorously against all disturbances of perversion of the civic or moral order, which is meant to reflect the divine will." He also feels that "The consciousness of being the organ, instrument or mouth-piece of the divine will is the characteristic of the self-interpretation of the prophet."⁴

Sikh leadership has remained deeply rooted in the religious and historical experiences of Guru Nanak

It has been observed that the prophetic experience always involves a sense that one is serving as a divine agent to challenge the evil order in the name of ultimate standards.⁵ It always emphasizes criticism of the evil social order and involves a call for struggle, not only to eradicate such a society but also to reconstruct it on a just and equitable basis. Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, a great Muslim scholar and mystic poet of the 20th century, remarks that the advent of a prophet is creative and tends to control the forces of history and thereby to create a fresh world of ideals.⁶

He is very emphatic to state that the desire to see his religious experience transformed into a living world force is

always supreme for the prophet.⁷ In the history of world religions, we come across various types of leadership such as the prophets, priests, reformers, and mystics, who left indelible imprints on the course of their respective religious traditions. Now we will see how Guru Nanak's status and role as a religious leader fits into the prophetic category.

A close look at the writings of Guru Nanak confirms that he was dissatisfied with the social order prevalent in India at his time. He was pained to see that the higher moral values of life had vanished from public life. He said, "In this age people have mouths akin to the dogs and carrion is their food. They utter falsehood and eat forbidden food. The virtues like righteousness, humility, self-control, piety, modesty and honor have disappeared"⁸ He found that people holding high offices were burning with egotism. He described the moral degeneration of the contemporary ruling class in terms of kaliyuga i.e., ignorance and degeneration. Guru Nanak remarked, "The kings behave like butchers, and righteousness has vanished. In the dark night of falsehood, the moon of truth seems to be nowhere."⁹

Question:

Does being a "prophetic" leader require faith in prophecy as a communication from God or can it be recognized, to some degree, in all forms of religious leadership?

Guru Nanak also referred to the unjust, tyrannical, and atrocious behavior of the rulers: "The rulers have become like tigers, and their officials conduct themselves

like dogs. They prey upon their subjects day and night and are interested only to suck their blood."¹⁰ Guru Nanak found that corruption in the administration was so rampant that there was no one who did not give or received bribes;¹¹ exploitation of the downtrodden was far from rare. Guru Nanak condemned those who usurped the rights of others. He said "To snatch others' shares is comparable to eating swine and cow for the Muslims and Hindus respectively."¹² Guru Nanak and his successors were distressed to see that unworthy persons of questionable character had assumed leadership roles in every walk of life, social, religious, and political.¹³ The vices and immoral practices that were rampant in the cotemporary society were largely responsible for the moral degeneration of public life at the individual and corporate levels. Guru Nanak's condemnation of these immoral practices suggests that he desired to eradicate them and to set the highest possible moral standards in public life.

Indian society was severely divided along caste-based, ethnic, and sectarian lines. Traditional Indian society was based on the highly discriminatory caste system. There was no social equality; social mobility was highly restricted. Guru Nanak rejected the divine sanction given to the caste system and instead emphasized the common origin of all human beings. Various types of evils such as untouchability, social inequality, discrimination against women, exploitation of the poor, forced labor, and violation of human rights had engulfed society. Blind faith in penances, rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, and magic had blurred the rational outlook of the masses.

I have searched out and am distressed to note that there is no way to get out of this age of ignorance and moral degeneration.”¹⁴

With the advent of Islam in India, significant cultural changes had occurred in Indian society. Chiefly because of bigotry or compelled by political exigency, the sultans of Delhi and some Mughal emperors occasionally followed a policy of intolerance towards non-Muslims. Guru Nanak was highly critical of rulers who imposed restrictions on the worship and religious freedom of Non-Muslims. He and his successors believed in peaceful co-existence and therefore were strong supporters of the multi-religious character of society.

The prophetic experience always involves a sense that one is serving as a divine agent to challenge the evil order in the name of ultimate standards

The two dominant sections of Indian society, i.e., the Muslims and the Hindus, were poles apart. They continued to move within their own orbits, which in turn gave way to exclusivism. Their social and religious differences were so acute and fundamental that a great barrier stood between them. The segregation and acrimony between the two were so sharp that the Muslims looked upon the Hindus as infidels, while Hindus castigated the Muslims as Malechas (unclean). The religious leaders of both communities cultivated a sense of distrust, ill will, and hatred towards each other. Communal

rivalries and sectarian animosities prevailed in India. In the words of Bhai Gurdas, a contemporary of the early Sikh Guru and a Sikh savant of late 16th and early 17th century, “The orthodoxy and conservatism of the priestly class of the Brahmins, coupled with the arrogant and bigoted outlook of the Muslim theologians, had totally landed the Indian society in a confused state of mind.”¹⁵

I. The Leader as an Instrument

Guru Nanak, the Founder

Guru Nanak’s response to the contemporary social order and his antidote to the ills of society were largely based on the nature of his religious experience. Our sources state that he was always in quest of truth. Moreover, he neither took any one individual as his guide, nor was he inspired by any human personality. On being questioned by the sidhas and yogis about the identity of his guru, Guru Nanak replied that God Almighty was the Guru that he had met.¹⁶ Significantly, he made God’s will known through the medium of bani, which is of divine origin. He confided,

What the wisdom the Lord has granted, so I speak. I am ignorant and have no power of speech in me. Whatever O! God you will so I express.¹⁷

He proclaimed that the Lord Himself revealed the Truth in actual words to him.¹⁸

Guru Nanak derived his spiritual authority from God alone, and a cursory look at his writings affirms that he intensely felt himself to be an instrument of God. Though

he never claimed to be an incarnation of God, he acted like God's mouthpiece. Like a genuine prophet, he neither advocated withdrawal from the world nor accepted it as it was. His criticism of contemporary religious leadership and political organization suggests he was completely dissatisfied with the prevailing social order. He was aghast to see that moral degeneration had gone deep into the public life. He remarked,

He exhorted, "One should have the courage to speak truth at an appropriate time."¹⁹ In the history of medieval India, Guru Nanak was perhaps the only person who unequivocally criticized the ruling class including Mir Babur, the Mughal invader, for atrocities committed against hapless subjects. He affirmed that he had nothing to do with the elite; his sympathies rested with the lowly and downtrodden.²⁰ His message was of a radical nature, and members of the higher castes disliked it, even declaring him an outcast possessed by an evil spirit. Like a true prophet, he wanted to bring about a radical change in the decadent social order.

On close examination of the writings of Guru Nanak, one can vouchsafe that unity of Godhead and the brotherhood/sisterhood of human beings were the two basic principles of his mission. He desired to bring people out of the age of ignorance and utter chaos, which was very much visible in all walks of life. He wanted to establish a fresh world order wherein higher values, such as truth, equality, brotherhood, love, and well being of all should flow in the veins of people like pure water. Guru Nanak endeavored to build an integrated personality, an ideal person who would serve as a tool to

achieve the above objectives. On the basis of his experience of the numinous, Guru Nanak propounded a set of ideals that are very relevant to our current discussion on the issue of leadership. For example he proclaimed:

1. God is one and He is the ultimate source of knowledge.
2. The world created by God is not an illusion but a reality within its own limits.
3. Among living beings, human beings enjoy special status and carry an element that is of divine origin.
4. The union of the human soul with God is mystically possible in this world and beyond it.
5. The ultimate aim of human life is to realize a state of union with God, and to achieve the summum-bonum of life requires neither renunciation nor withdrawal from the world.
6. Control over the self (ego), meditation upon the Name of God, and truthful living offer a path to God realization.
7. Enlightened people should come forward to lead, in order to check the spread of evil in all its forms and manifestations.
8. Social values, such as equality, brotherhood/sisterhood, justice, love, service, human dignity, and the well-being of all, are of utmost importance for the establishment of a healthy society.

These were the guiding principles or objectives that Guru Nanak set for the future Sikh leadership.

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Guru Nanak's relationship with God placed him in a unique position as a religious leader. Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru, explained that there is no difference between Guru Nanak and God.²¹ The same idea finds expression in the words of Guru Arjan, "The divinely inspired Preceptor is endowed with all the faculties and Nanak, the Preceptor, is ever present in the presence of Supreme Lord."²² Such thinking places Guru Nanak in a special relationship with God and suggests that he was not a mere person but carried the divine spirit, which elevated him to the status of a Divine Preceptor. Other passages in the Sikh Scripture read like a tribute to Guru Nanak as a religious leader. Guru Arjan says, "that Guru Nanak's greatness as a religious leader is very much visible in the form of his religion all over the world."²³ He refers to him as a lamp lighted in the darkness of ignorance.²⁴ Elsewhere he alluded to Guru Nanak as the world teacher. His message was unique and of universal value for all the people of this world.²⁵ Numerous passages in the Sikh Scripture and other authoritative writings place him in the category of the great prophets who had the divine sanction to propound a new world order. In order to fulfill his mission, Guru Nanak employed his own sacred writings for the purpose of devotion and established the institutions of Dharamsal (religious centre), Sangat (congregation), Langar (community

kitchen), and Guruship (seat of spiritual authority). A successive line of nine Sikh Gurus succeeded Guru Nanak. In fact the institution of Guruship established by Guru Nanak set the pattern of future religious leadership in Sikhism.

II. Types of Leadership

The Personal Guru-ship: The Sikh Gurus

The concept of the Guru occupies an important place in Sikhism. In the religious experience of Guru Nanak, the traditional Indian concept of guru-ship found a new dimension. Sikh Guru-ship had been spiritual, a whole-life system. According to Sikh tenets, the ultimate source of knowledge is God. In Sikhism, the status of Guru has been strictly assigned to God, Sabd or bani (the revealed Word) with Guru Nanak and the Sikh Gurus succeeding Him. A personal Guru was always at the head of the Sikh community until the demise of the tenth Master in 1708 A.D. While selecting his successor, Guru Nanak put both prominent Sikhs and his own sons through a series of trials. Ultimately, he nominated Bhai Lehna, later known as Guru Angad, to the seat of Guru-ship. Guru Angad was the spiritual heir of the founder of the Sikh faith, whose religio-spiritual authority came to be invested in him at the time of his succession. The legitimacy of the successor was that he had shared the religious experience of Guru Nanak in its totality and had identified mystically with him. The bards at the Guru's court whose writings are enshrined in the Sikh scripture and Bhai Gurdas emphatically

and repeatedly proclaimed that though bodily the Sikh Gurus are different, they possess the same spirit (jyoti).²⁶ As a lamp lights another lamp, similarly the spirit of Guru Nanak has come to commingle in the successive Sikh Gurus.

*Guru Nanak derived his spiritual
authority from God alone*

Even the Sikh Gurus, while translating their religious experience into writings, did not make use of their personal names; instead they called themselves 'Nanak,' a fact observed, as well, by non-Sikh contemporary writers. In this way, the Guru in his person was an embodiment and vehicle of the spirit of 'Nanak.' Hence, the idea of unity of Guru-ship was established and the spiritual authority of Guru Nanak came to be vested in the successive Gurus and it ensured the continuity of his mission. The works of Guru Nanak's successors can be interpreted as steps in the realization of his mission.

In addition to being the Divine Preceptor, the Guru also provided leadership in religious and secular affairs. With few exceptions, all Sikh Gurus have composed hymns, and the knowledge contained in them is treated as the divine word that descended over them while they were in direct communion with God. These hymns are not understood merely as products of speculation or of religious imagination but as revelations received directly from God. They made the will of God known to the people through the medium of their hymns. The fundamental purpose of these bani (hymns of the Gurus)

is to enlighten the people about the acts of divine grace and to orient them towards mystical union with God. Thus the role of the Sikh Gurus was very similar to that of the great prophets of Semitic tradition.

Under the Sikh Gurus, teaching and preaching the mission went hand in hand. The Gurus both underlined the theological standpoint of Sikhism and also took a keen interest in preserving its originality. They preserved the Sikh scriptural writings for posterity, when it was under serious threat of corruption. They thwarted the attempts of their rivals who were bent upon confusing the spirit of Sikhism,²⁷ and they transmitted the message of Sikhism in its authentic form to successive generations. They explained and interpreted the Sikh tenets through discourses and dialogues, and they underlined the social, moral and religious boundaries within which the Sikhs were to operate. In that way the Sikh Gurus were the instruments of preserving the Sikh tradition.

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Simultaneously they worked on the consolidation and expansion of Sikhism. They frequently traveled both inside and outside the Punjab and developed close relationships with the general public. Wherever they visited, they engaged in public works and were thus instrumental in establishing dharamsalas (religious centers), wells, and pools, which reflect their concern for the general public. They initiated the new entrants into Sikhism and organized them

into congregational circles, and they founded new cities and towns, thus contributing to the urbanization of the Punjab.

They took concrete measures for the integration of their disciples into a well-defined social-religious body. To organize the Sikhs and to make them conscious of their separate religious identity, they developed religious ceremonies and customs to be observed by the Sikh community. At the same time, they did not allow dissenters to erode the doctrinal originality and organizational unity of the Panth (community) in any way.²⁸ To carry out the Sikh mission to distant places, they brought into existence the missionary network known as the manji (diocese) and masand (agent of the Guru) systems. They also looked after the arrangement of langar (community kitchen), the collection of offerings, and religious services, such as the recitation of hymns and the playing of divine music (kirtan).

The Gurus led the Sikhs in their prayers, but whenever confrontations arose with anti-Sikh forces, these same religious masters assumed the role of military leader. The sixth Guru developed the concept of Miri- Piri, i.e., the temporal as well as the spiritual head of the community. The sixth and tenth Sikh Gurus engaged in armed struggle in the course of their missions; their decisions to take up arms were based on the conviction that their cause was just. This has been depicted beautifully in a dialogue that Maratha Saint Samrath Ramdas had with the Sixth Guru over the keeping of arms. The Guru replied, "Internally a hermit and externally a prince; arms mean protection to the poor and destruction to the tyrant."²⁹ For

Guru Gobind Singh, the use of arms was not the only means but only the last resort to redress an issue. Whenever the situation demanded it, the Gurus assumed the role of defender of the Sikh community. In the eighteenth century, we find a number of saint-soldiers who took upon themselves to protect the Sikh community from the onslaughts of their opponents.

The Guru was a perfect man whose way of life was an example to follow

Similarly, like true statesmen, whenever the situation demanded it, the Gurus negotiated with the Mughal authorities to resolve the issues at stake. They were not even averse to discussing the secular affairs of the people with the authorities. For the Sikhs, the Guru was not merely a divine preceptor, but a perfect man whose way of life was an example for them to follow. By personal example, they demonstrated how one could lead a life of detachment amidst plenty. The bards whose compositions form part of the Sikh Scripture, eulogize the Gurus for leading the life of saintly kings (raj yoga), Bhai Nand Lal, a devout Sikh and poet at the court of tenth Master, depicts him in the light of a philosopher- king (Badshah Darvesh) who is a great friend of the helpless people. This is the arch-type of Sikh religious leadership, which the future leadership is supposed to follow.

The institution of Guru-ship was the pivot of community life, and both the unification and the cohesion of the Sikh community depended on it. It worked as a

bulwark against the disruptive forces that were active in disrupting the social unity of the Sikh Panth, and it was the rallying point for mainstream Sikhs and thus contributed to strengthening the central organization of the Panth. From the inception of Sikhism, the Gurus pushed for the transformation of human beings into ideal persons, and they subsequently played the role of agents to transform real society into an ideal one. In addition to teaching and preaching, the Gurus contributed much towards the consolidation, organization, unification, preservation and, protection of Sikhism, so that their mission of establishing a fresh world order based on the ideal of social justice could be fulfilled. All these factors suggest that the role of Guru-ship in Sikhism, which continued to be performed by the Gurus personally until the death of Guru Gobind Singh, was multifaceted. Thereafter, personal Guru-ship was abolished and it came to be vested in the collective body of Guru Granth (Sikh Scripture as Guru) and Guru Panth (Community as Guru).³⁰

Scripture, the Guru

Guru Nanak made the Holy Word known through the medium of his bani (sacred writings), not merely a product of poetic imagination but related to the revelation of God. "As the bani of the Master comes down to me, so I proclaim the knowledge," said Guru Nanak.³¹ Sikh sources reveal that the liturgy that came into vogue under the guidance of Guru Nanak at Kartarpur was based on the sacred hymns composed by him. Guru Angad underlined the character and significance of bani is in

that it reveals the essence of God. It has come through the God-oriented Guru to be understood by Guru-oriented persons. Guru Amar Das, the third Master highlighted the significance of bani to by claiming that it is for the enlightenment of the world. He exhorted, "O! Dear Sikhs come and sing the true bani of the True Guru, which is the highest kind of revelation."³² It is the genuine voice of Truth. Even he elevates the bani to the status of formless God. He equated the God, Guru, bani and the sabad (Word, logos) in such a way that investiture of bani with Guru-ship was imminent.³³ Guru Ram Das reiterated "O! Sikhs believe in the truthfulness of the bani of True Guru as God himself put it in the Guru's mouth."³⁴ Early Sikh literature informs us that public reading of gurbani (sacred writings) was an essential part of Sikh liturgy that had evolved during the time of Guru Ram Das. Interestingly Guru Ram Das had assigned the role of Guru to bani in such a manner that investiture of Scripture with Guru-ship was not far away.³⁵

*Sikh Scriptures are the Sikhs'
perpetual Guru*

Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, Guru Arjan proclaimed, "I do not speak from my own self, I utter what had been ordained by the God, Creator of the world";³⁶ in his words, "The pothi (volume of sacred writings) is veritably the abode of God."³⁷ This foretells the role that the Sikh Scriptures are was going to play as the Sikhs' perpetual Guru. On the basis of the above, one can understand that the sacred writings

enshrined in the Sikh Scripture hold the status of Holy Word that originated with God and enjoyed the status of Guru.

The line of personal Guru-ship came to an end when Guru Gobind Singh conferred upon the Granth Sahib the Guru-ship for all time to come. In this manner the Holy Word, the very origin and source of Sikh Scripture was elevated to the status of perpetual Guru, which proved to be a defining moment in the history of Sikh Panth. As long as the Sikh community is present on this planet, the Guru Granth Sahib would continue to command the same honor and reverence that had been enjoyed by the human Gurus. No Gurdwara can be called a Sikh place of worship if it has not installed Guru Granth Sahib in it. Similarly no Sikh religious assembly has any religious sanction unless it is held in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib.

Guru Granth Sahib is the living Guru from which the Sikhs seek guidance to formulate their response to secular and religious affairs. It is the fountainhead from which the Sikh concept of life – social, religious, cultural, and intellectual – derives meaning and authority, and it has left an indelible imprint on the institutional organization of Sikhism. It is the Supreme canon, which sets apart good and evil, right and wrong, virtues and vices in no uncertain terms. It is a perpetual source, which upholds the Holy path that has been revealed and authenticated by the Gurus themselves.

During the troubled times of 18th century, when the Sikhs were fighting for their very survival, Guru Granth Sahib was their prized possession, and they continued

to seek counsel from it as an Eternal Guru. The Sikh Commonwealth (the Misl) used to hold its meetings (Sarbat Khalsa) at Akal Takht in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, and, like a living Guru, Guru Granth Sahib presided over the meetings. The resolution (Gurmata) adopted in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib was taken as Guru's Order and it was binding on all the Sikhs. Whenever they found themselves in a dilemma, they approached Guru Granth Sahib for guidance, and Sikh history is a witness to the fact that even contentious issues were resolved in the above fashion.

It is the most authentic and highest spiritual authority that has guided the Sikh Panth to reinterpret itself in the light of eternal truth. Significantly, despite crises at various stages of history, it has stood the test of time in preventing disruptive forces from disturbing the unity and cohesion of the Sikh tradition.

Question:

The Sikh model of considering Scripture in terms of leadership seems unique. Does it have analogues in other traditions?

Under most adverse circumstances, when seeking spiritual solace or resolution of the socio-religious issues confronting the community, Sikhs have always focused their attention on the institution of Guru Granth.

Collective Leadership/ The Mystic Body of the Khalsa

Sikh sources reveal that, during his travels, quite a few persons felt attracted to Guru Nanak and embraced his faith. Wherever he found such disciples, he organized them into congregational circles popularly known as sangats. Early disciples of the Gurus were known as Nanak-Panthis (disciples of Nanak), but in due course they came to be identified as Sikhs or Gursikhs (Sikhs, disciples of the Sikh Gurus). The meeting of two Sikhs was known as a religious congregation whereas convergence of five or more Sikhs enjoyed the status of holy assembly.

*The leadership of the community lay
in collective wisdom*

The sangat was believed to be the embodiment of both Guru and God. In that capacity, sangat was a divine assembly that possessed the spiritual authority to intercede in religious affairs and also was considered a most appropriate forum in which to deliberate and decide secular issues concerning the community. The author of Dabistan-i-Mazahib affirms that, whenever a Sikh had a particular matter to supplicate, the sangat was requested to join the prayer so that his wish could be fulfilled.³⁸ With the development of Sikhism, the responsibilities and activities of the sangat increased in many ways and gradually attained a status superior to the Guru's. The institution of sangat was the forerunner of the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh. The doctrine of Guru Panth that he promulgated at his demise has its

roots in the pre-eminent role of Sikh sangat in early Sikhism.

Before his demise in October, 1708, Guru Gobind Singh ended the line of personal Guru-ship, and the succession passed to the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Scripture in perpetuity. The Sikh Scripture was invested with spiritual authority, whereas the Panth (community) was given temporal authority. In the future, Khalsa Panth was to be the leader of the Sikhs in secular affairs. Guru Gobind Singh told the Sikhs:

... I have bestowed the Guru-ship on
Khalsa.
... Khalsa is my very self and I always will be
present in the mystic body of the Khalsa.
... It is due to them that I am holding an
exalted position.
... I was born to serve them.
... Through them I have achieved eminence.
... What would I have been without their kind
and ready help?
... There are millions of insignificant fellows
like me.³⁹

Obviously, Guru Gobind Singh elevated the Khalsa to a status superior to his own. He is well known for having empowered the socially deprived people to become the rulers of Punjab. As a collective body, the Khalsa was made the supreme authority amongst the Sikhs in all the matters. A decision taken by the Khalsa in accordance with the spirit of Sri Guru Granth Sahib was religiously and morally binding on the Sikhs and was treated as a divine commandment. No Sikh leader, however great, could challenge the authority of the Khalsa Panth; the Sikh leaders of the 18th century enjoyed a great deal of political authority, yet they

regarded themselves as the servants of the Khalsa Commonwealth. Inscriptions on the official seal and the coins of the Sikh rulers confirm that they ruled and functioned in the name of Khalsa;⁴⁰ the leadership of the community lay in the collective wisdom. All decisions were taken through a process in which two institutions – the Sarbat Khalsa and the Gurmata – were important components. The Sarbat Khalsa was the grand Khalsa Council in which all the Sikh chiefs participated and which was held in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib at Akal Takht, either on the eve of Divali or Baisakhi every year. Before the beginning of the meeting a presidium of five Sikhs was selected. One of them was chosen as a leader (Jathedar), but all decisions were taken through consensus. These decisions in fact reflected the collective will of the Sikh nation. The decision arrived at was taken as Matta, i.e., resolution, which was announced in the Grand Council for the purpose of approval. To put a seal of divine sanction on it, prayer was performed and thereafter a hymn from the Sikh Scripture opened randomly was taken as a holy command. Then it was approved as a Gurmatta, i.e., the resolution agreed upon in the presence of the Guru. However with the assumption of absolute power by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, these two institutions of collective leadership were rendered dysfunctional and defunct.

Question:

Ascribing leadership to Gurus, Scripture and community suggests an ideal balance. Can such a balance be successfully maintained? What are the lessons from other traditions?

The origin of the Singh Sabha Movement, which introduced social, religious and educational reforms in the Sikh Society in the late 19th century, was inspired by the idea of collective leadership in its organizational set up. Similarly the Gurdwara Reform Movement, which aimed at to liberate the Sikh shrines from the control of corrupt and immoral mahants, was deeply rooted in the Khalsa ideals of collective leadership. The S.G. P. C., which manages the Sikh shrines, is an elected body of the Sikhs. It represents the whole Sikh nation and thus sometimes called the mini Sikh parliament.

Enlightened/Charismatic Sikhs

Another category of Sikh leadership that played a very significant role in Sikhism belonged to the enlightened or divinely inspired Sikhs. The Gurus had questioned the Indian tendency to divide human personality into two distinct compartments, the sacred and the profane.

As from God, the Gurus conceived the human personality as a single coherent entity that cannot be split into two different and opposing realms, the temporal and the spiritual. In fact they endeavored to build a perfect integrated personality, free from the internal as well as the external contradictions of life. The Sikh ethos does not allow human beings to behave differently in their public

and private lives. Spiritual and ethical values form the core of the Sikh way of social and cultural life. The Sikh ideology does not prohibit a religious person from taking interest and participating in the secular affairs of society. An ideal man, even in most adverse circumstances, does not shun responsibility but keeps his mental balance intact, to serve society to the best of his ability. Accordingly, a divinely inspired person (Gurmukh, Sachiar, Gursikh) has every right to challenge the forces of evil, and his intervention against the evil social order is not considered an unethical or irreligious act.

Question:

Repeatedly, Sikhism teaches an integration of the spiritual and physical domains of life. Yet, its leadership has not been able to maintain such integration. What are the broader lessons of this fact?

Throughout Sikh history, we come across charismatic Sikh personalities who were molded in the Sikh way of life. They were endowed with rare type of personal qualities and skills that they utilized to resolve the problems and tensions that had descended upon the Sikhs. They were of uncommon quality and were held in high esteem by the Sikhs. Some of them were contemporaries of the Gurus and enjoyed their confidence, and they were given important assignments relating to the organization and preaching of Sikh mission. They had considerable influence on the Sikh people and had the capacity to unite the Sikh

masses for a common cause; they performed varied types of tasks and proved very useful to the Sikh Panth. From the ranks of these people arose the theologians Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Mani Singh, who were very versatile personalities and performed various functions. In addition to preaching the Sikh mission, they were scholars par excellence, and respectively they were associated with the compilation and final canonization of the Sikh Scripture. Moreover, they were excellent exegetes of the Sikh Scripture. Whenever the Sikhs needed an authentic interpretation of their theology, they relied upon their works. As well, there emerged a variety of people who provided leadership to the Sikhs at different times. We may include in this category the Sikh martyrs, religious teachers (Bhais, Gianis) of repute, custodians of Sikh shrines, holy men, reformers, educationists, and social workers.

Political leaders

After the demise of Guru Gobind Singh, spiritual authority was vested in the Sikh Scripture, whereas the temporal authority rested in the collective body of the Panth, which was supposed to resolve its issues in the light of Scripture. The Sikh leaders of the 18th eighteenth century were highly inspired by the Khalsa ideals and for them the welfare and service of the people were of the utmost importance. When they assumed political authority, they exercised it in the name of the Guru, but the political ascendancy and subsequently the emergence of Sikh ruling class were of no consequence to lead the community in its religious affairs.

By the second decade of the 20th century, the Sikhs had come under the spell of the Indian freedom movement spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru, and others. The Sikh elite, who had been in forefront of leading the Sikhs in their social, religious and political affairs, lost relevance, because they did not wish to oppose the British Government. The Sikhs already had agitated against the British in the form of Gurdwara Reform Movement, which aimed at liberating of Gurdwaras from the control of corrupt and immoral mahants (head of religious establishment). In that scenario, Akali Dal, a political as well as religious outfit of the Sikhs, assumed the Sikh leadership. With the passing of the Gurdwara Act of 1925, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee came into being. It is an elected body whose primary aim is to manage Sikh shrines and to spread the message of Sikhism. It has provided religious leadership to the Sikhs all over the world. The Sikhs seek its opinion in social and religious matters, but Sri Akal Takht Sahib, Amritsar, is the highest temporal and religious seat of the Sikhs that is authorized to take decision on the contentious issues concerning them.

Qualities of the Leaders

In addition to the ten Sikh Gurus, we come across other Sikh religious leaders – Bhai Gurdas, Baba Budha, Bhai Mani Singh, Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, Baba Dip Singh, S. Kapur Singh, Giani Dit Singh, and Bhagat Puran Singh – who are held in high esteem. They have left an indelible imprint on the Sikh psyche, and their works and

achievements form a part of the rich Sikh legacy. They are remembered in the daily Sikh prayers and have become role models simply because they were uncommon and unique personalities and were decorated with the following qualities:

1. Their first and foremost allegiance was to God alone.
2. They had unflinching faith in the Sikh ideals.
3. They led the Sikh community by personal example.
4. There was complete unison in their thoughts, words, and deeds.
5. They observed the highest moral standards in public and private life.
6. They imbibed the higher values and were ever attuned with God.
7. They were free from selfish interest and were ever ready for the highest kind of sacrifice.
8. Though the circumstances were unfavorable, they did not compromise with evil forces.
9. They exhibited a great spirit of sacrifice for the welfare of humanity and were ready to assume martyrdom.

Accountability

According to Sikh doctrine, everyone is accountable for his or her actions. One must take responsibility for one's actions and face their consequences. As said earlier, Guru Nanak was not a follower of any religious leader. His own writings and Sikh scriptural sources affirm that he was a divine preceptor and thus derived his religious authority directly from God. Nanak was not only a person but a "Spirit," which commingled with the successor on his nomination to his spiritual seat. The idea of unity of Guru-ship extended the authority of Guru Nanak to his successors. The Gurus carried a deep sense within their hearts that they are accountable to God for their decisions and the actions resulting from them. According to Sikhism, accountability at religious level begins in the inner-self or conscience of a person. The Gurus stressed the virtues of self-realization, self-appraisal, and self-examination, which are immensely valuable for taking stock of one's deeds. One's conscience helps a person to distinguish between good and evil.

In community affairs, the Gurus adopted the traditional Indian system of panchayat (council of elders). They told the Sikhs that the assembly of five pious Sikhs carries divine sanction, and they held that the spiritual authority of the Guru is twenty parts whereas the sangat possesses twenty-one parts. Guru Gobind Singh at the time of the creation of Khalsa, selected the Five Beloved Ones (Panj Piyaras) and, after baptizing them, invested them with his authority. He even went through the same process to be baptized at the hands of the five Khalsa Sikhs. We also find examples when the Sikh sangat prevailed upon the Gurus to honor their opinions in some cases they even held

themselves accountable to the Sikh sangats. The deputies or representatives appointed by the Gurus to preach the Sikh mission were accountable to them. According to the Sikh tradition, Guru Gobind Singh was very harsh with those masands who had been found guilty in their treatment of the Sikhs. Even the Sikh chiefs who enjoyed a great deal of political authority were not allowed to transgress the Sikh code of conduct. Whenever the Sikh chiefs violated the Sikh ideals, the Khalsa imposed upon them religious punishment (tankhah). No one was above the collective will of the Khalsa. Even today that type of accountability is prevalent in Sikh society. It has helped the Sikhs maintain the doctrinal originality of their faith intact and perpetuate social unity..

Failed Leadership

On a few occasions when Sikh society stood at the crossroads, the religious leadership failed to deliver the desired results. The Masands, who were the deputies of the Gurus and headed the Sikh congregations at the town and regional levels developed vested interests, and they started misappropriating money received as charity and exploiting the poor Sikhs. They even became partisans to play into the hands of the Gurus' detractors. Their lack of commitment to the ideals of Sikhism became questionable, and as a resultant, Guru Gobind Singh abolished the system altogether and replaced it with the collective leadership of the Khalsa.

Besides performing the role of Sikh missionaries, the Udasi Mahants played an

important role in looking after the Sikh shrines. During Sikh rule, large revenue-free grants were assigned to these shrines. With the passage of time, they became rich, their lifestyle changed greatly, and their office became hereditary. In order to appropriate maximum offerings, they even installed idols in the Sikh shrines. Some of them became notorious for their immoral activities. Consequently, they were no better than the feudal landholders and were totally unfit to lead the Sikhs in their religious affairs. Subsequently, the Gurdwara Reform Movement initiated a peaceful agitation to liberate the Sikh shrines from the control of these Mahants (heads of religious establishments).

Sikh religious leadership must undergo sincere introspection to evaluate whether it is competent enough to resolve the tensions that have come to grip Sikh society

The early 20th-century Sikh elite who were not ready to oppose the British government on the above issue and hesitated to join the Nationalists lost their appeal and influence among the Sikh masses. Nowadays only a very thin line distinguishes the S.G.P.C. leadership from the Sikh politicians belonging to the Akali Dal. All the ills of political life slowly and gradually are seeping into Sikh religious life. At this point, the Sikh religious leadership must undergo sincere introspection to evaluate whether it is

competent enough to resolve the tensions that have come to grip Sikh society.

III. Systemic Challenges

From its very inception Sikh religious leadership had to face much internal and external opposition.

Preservation of Doctrinal Originality and Social Unity

When appointing his successor, Guru Nanak ignored the hereditary norms. Succession to Guru-ship was spiritual, and the successor was not necessarily a son of his predecessor, but the descendants of the Gurus aspired to Guru-ship, which led to schisms in early Sikhism. The descendants of the Gurus not only laid claim to Guru-ship but also went on to establish their own seats of authority.⁴¹ The sectarianism that developed was a major crisis with which the Sikh religious leadership had to cope throughout its history. For example the rivals of the Sikh Gurus, namely, the Minas, Dhirmalias, Ramraiya, and others, hobnobbed with the Mughal authorities in order to usurp the Guru-ship of Sikh Panth. Nowadays some heterodox sects – e.g., Nirankaris, Namdharis, Radhasoamis, Sacha Sauda, and Divya Jagran Jyoti – have appropriated the Sikh symbols and Sikh scriptural writings for their own interests, which caused a lot of tension both inside and outside the Sikh Panth and can spoil the peaceful atmosphere of Punjab any time.

Inter-locking of Religion with Politics

The policy to militarize the Sikh Panth also created a lot of tension and problems for the Sikh religious leadership. After the martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606, Guru Hargobind, in order to defend the Panth, decided to arm the Sikhs. He developed the doctrine of Miri-Piri and girded himself with two swords symbolizing, that he combined both the spiritual and temporal authorities. The two-swords theory was an attempt to convince the Sikhs that temporal responsibilities were an integral part of their religious leadership. Thereafter, interlocking of religion and politics became a characteristic feature of Sikhism, but his decision to militarize the Sikh Panth received severe criticism at the hands of his detractors within the Panth.⁴² Some blamed him for deliberately departing from the basic spirit of Sikhism, and even the Mughal state did not relish what he had done. Similarly, when in 1699 Guru Gobind Singh created the order of Khalsa and wearing the sword was made an integral part of the Sikh code of conduct, the Mughal authorities took serious note. They had to work hard to convince the Sikhs that use of arms for self-defense and to oppose the tyrants is religiously sanctified. In fact inter-locking of religion with politics in Sikhism has been a major factor that effected the relation of the Sikhs with the State in a very serious manner.

Personal Guru-ship

Before his death in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh abolished the personal line of Guru-ship and invested Sikh Scripture with the authority of the Eternal Guru of the Sikhs for all the times to come. But some of

the heterodox Sikh sects mentioned above and some Sikh orders still believe in personal Guru-ship. Some Sikh orders worship the Scripture just like a living Guru, but they do not hesitate to promote the personal cult. For them, their heads are no less than the Sikh Gurus. Time and again, all these factors have created serious tensions within Sikh ranks.

Khalsa Code of Conduct

Guru Gobind Singh's promulgation of the Khalsa code of conduct produced little commotion in Sikh circles. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Sikh reformers had to push very hard to preserve the unique and separate religious identity of the Sikhs. In fact, promulgating a common code of conduct throughout the Sikh world and motivating the Sikhs to adhere to it has been a serious challenge to the religious leadership through out the history of Sikhism.

Politicization of Sikh Institutions

The present Sikh leadership, especially the S.G.P.C., is susceptible to pressure from the politicians, though this is disliked by the devout Sikhs all over the world. The Sikh politicians, who have assumed the role of religious leaders, are largely responsible for the mismanagement of Sikh religious affairs. The Sikh clergy, who are authorized to manage the affairs of Sri Akal Takht, the highest temporal and spiritual seat, often has come under attack for lack of commitment and transparency. It is worth noting that the persons who are appointed to the seats of religious affairs often lack vision, are poorly trained, ill-

equipped, and short of skills. As a result, instead of resolving issues, they often have compounded them by sweeping them under the carpet.

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Interference in Sikh Affairs

External crises and problems have not been insignificant for the Sikh leadership. Members of other religions questioned the legitimacy of Guru Nanak's faith, and some resented the spread of Sikhism as it was entering their space. With the development of Sikhism, the status and influence of the Sikh Gurus among the people increased, but the provincial Mughal officials disliked it. In order to undermine the Sikh leadership, they encouraged the dissenters within the Panth and created misunderstandings in the official circles. The assumption of royal symbols by the Sikh Gurus and their policy to arm the Sikhs were taken as an affront by the state and brought the parties into armed confrontation. Subsequently, the Sikhs suffered religious persecution at the hands of the Mughal state. Even in modern times, the policy of the state toward the Sikhs has been a serious concern for the Sikh leaders.

IV. Contemporary Challenges

In recent years, information-technology has turned the whole world into a global village that none can escape. Interdependence of peoples and nations has increased, and the recent economic recession a stark reality in this regard. The policy of exclusivism or isolationism to prevent the flow of outside ideas cannot hold sway any more. Sikhism originated in the Punjab, and the majority of its followers dwell in that part of the country, but many Sikhs reside in other areas of India. Moreover, the Sikh religious leaders cannot ignore the existence of a strong Sikh diaspora in various parts of the world. The problems and tensions of the diaspora Sikhs are different from those of the native Sikhs. The age of modernity, especially the era of globalization, has imposed a great challenge to the Sikh tradition, which is under pressure to adjust itself to the changing scenario. Among the challenges facing the Sikh religious leaders are:

Doctrinal Erosion

For some people, the Sikh religion is not a way of life or a means to serve humanity; rather, it has become a tool to exploit people emotionally for self-aggrandizement. Various types of self-styled holy persons such as Sants and Babas have mushroomed both inside and outside the Punjab. Their preaching and actions have seriously threatened the doctrinal integrity of Sikhism. They do not follow strictly the Sikh tenets and code of conduct, and instead of motivating the people to tread upon the path laid down by the Sikh Gurus, they promote their personal cult, which has no validity in Sikhism. Faithfulness or allegiance is not

towards God but to the persons in authority. Values and traditions of Sikh congregational life are disappearing daily. Such trends are a serious challenge to the doctrinal originality and survival of Sikhism.

Holy Men

For devotion, the Sikh Gurus emphasized the constant recollection of God's Name as a kind of love devotion, which leads to realization of God in one's heart in a mystical manner. The person who meditates on the Name of God has been appreciated very much in the Sikh tradition, and their spiritual perfection has caused them to be respected and revered. The charismatic Sikh leaders referred to earlier belonged to this group, but in modern times numerous people roam about the Sikh world in the garb of holy men, and their space in religious matters has increased greatly. Often they do not subscribe to the decisions taken at collective level. Day by day they are eating up the resources of Sikh community. As a resultant, the cult of the Sant Babas has grown in size, status, and influence. These people hold considerable influence in political circles, and some of them have joined political parties and are active in politics. A nexus between these so-called holy persons and the politicians has come to exist, and they prey on the religious sentiments of the Sikh masses for their own ulterior motives. Similarly, some Sikh orders are promoting their own code of conduct. Some heterodox sects that have drawn heavily from the Sikh tradition also have emerged. They use the sacred writings of the Sikhs to mislead innocent Sikhs. As a result,

fragmentation of Sikh society into different sects is not far off.

Empowerment of Women and Dalits

Though the Sikhs do not believe in segregation of society by caste, class, or race, divisions among the Sikhs exist regarding caste, regional, ethnic, urban, and rural factors. They have divided the Sikhs into various groups, and consequently the social unity of the Sikhs is in jeopardy, which has direct bearings on the religious vitality and collective strength of Sikh society. Some Sikhs belonging to the so-called lower castes are living a miserable life and have been given minimal space in the Sikh religious affairs. Similarly, the involvement of women in the Sikh religious bodies and their participation in public life of the Sikh community are not proportional to their numerical strength. The Punjab, where the majority of Sikhs live, has witnessed an alarming decrease in the number of female children. The lack of inclusion of the Dalits and women in Sikh public life are serious issues that demand resolution

Preservation of Religious Identity

In modern times, apostasy among the Sikhs is on the rise. The young Sikh generation is not enthusiastic about bearing the religious symbols in public. Moreover the unique religious identity of the Sikhs often has been misunderstood. In some parts of the world, Sikhs have been subjected to hate crimes, and therefore wearing Sikh symbols in public has not been a positive experience for some. Occasionally the law of the land

does not allow the Sikhs to wear a turban, which is an integral part of the unique Sikh identity. In such contexts, it is difficult to motivate young Sikhs to observe the Sikh code of conduct and to preserve their unique religious identity. Sikhs are spread all over the world, but they are a minority in every country of their residence. As such, they are prone to the cultural influences of the majority communities. The young Sikhs residing in foreign lands feel cultural pressure in a much more intense manner. They are sandwiched between the two cultures, and it has affected the development of their personalities. This, too, is a serious issue that needs proper handling by the religious scholars and leaders.

Dissemination of Knowledge about Sikhism

The Sikh scripture is written in the Gurmukhi characters of the Punjabi language. Most of the sources of Sikh history, religion, and literature are also in the above script, and Sikhs residing outside the Punjab are not well versed in it. As a result, developing a system to transmit knowledge about the Sikh Scripture, religion, language, literature, and culture of Sikhism is the need of the hour. Otherwise the authoritative and authentic understanding of Sikhism will be beyond the reach of the Sikhs.

Militancy or Terrorism

Despite spectacular advancements in the fields of science and technology, the problem of evil has been magnified in a much more alarming manner. Other issues that challenge stable, world peace include: outbreaks of organized violence in different parts of the world and their use to solve international issues, escalations in sectarian and ethnic violence, a mad competition among nations to build ever more lethal armaments, and super-powers' plans to establish political hegemony over weaker nations. One should not forget that the Sikh tradition has sanctified the use of the sword for self-defense and protection of the oppressed. No religious restriction prevents Sikhs from participating in a "just war." These paradigms have shifted a lot, and nowadays civil society does not permit violent means to resolve every contentious issue. In the last quarter of the 20th century, a segment of the Sikhs has adopted militant means, which were aimed at securing its religious and political rights. How the Sikh idea of the just use of force can be integrated into the modern way of life is another issue that requires the attention of the Sikh religious leaders.

Moral Degeneration and Social Evils

We observed above that moral degeneration has penetrated deep into the Sikh social and political life, which does not augur well for the future of the Sikh community. Social inequality and economic disparity have not yet been removed, while indulgence in extravagance and ostentation has increased. Per capita consumption of liquor is highest in the Punjab. Media reports

indicate that daily massive quantities of heroin and contraband drugs are smuggled into the Punjab. The ground water table of the Punjab has receded. The rivers of the Punjab are not free from pollution, and their water is not fit for human consumption. In the Punjab HIV cases are not unheard of, and such evils have put a question mark on the very future of the Punjab, the land of the origin of Sikhism. Fortunately, the Sikh ideology has the capacity and the vigor to eradicate evil from all walks of life. They are still relevant and can perform a useful role to mitigate the sufferings of mankind. But where is the leadership that must address these issues?

Inter-faith Understanding

Sikhism strongly favors peaceful co-existence, and to that end, the Gurus and their followers have made great sacrifices in order to preserve the multi-religious and multi-cultural character of Indian society. From the time of Guru Nanak, the Sikh Gurus interacted freely with the religious personalities of other faiths. Guru Nanak set a wonderful example to reach out to the centers of other religious faiths, and both Muslims and Hindus honored him. Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, made the supreme sacrifice for the sake of religious freedom of the Kashmiri Brahmins. The Sikh Scripture has preserved the most authentic writings of the Hindu Bhagats and the Muslim Sufis as a part of its own. It presents a living model of how we can adjust and live together.

Religion has been used to fan sectarian animosities and communal rivalries all over the world, and recently religion has been employed as an instrument of terrorism and acts of terrorism in its name have become very common. The slogans of holy wars have brought us to the threshold of a clash between civilizations, which poses a very serious threat to world peace. Inter-faith understanding holds great merit for the resolution of such conflicts and can remove many of the misgivings that one community has about another. The Sikh religious leadership not only should participate in inter-faith conclaves but should also come forward to host these types of assemblies, which would certainly be a great contribution towards the world peace.

The Management of Sikh Religious Centres

Sikh religious centers, the Gurdwaras, are the fountainhead of Sikh spirituality and culture, but Gurdwara politics all over the Sikh world has played havoc with the sanctity and serenity of these centers. Clashes to control the management of these Gurdwaras are very common, and sometimes unscrupulous persons are elected as part of the management. The Sikh leaders must propose a serious and effective mechanism to improve the Gurdwara administration.

Training

No Sikh institution and absolutely no curriculum provides training to the religious leaders. Most Sikh institutions and

organizations run courses on musicology and on scriptural studies with a view to providing human resources to perform the Gurdwara services. The traditional method of training and developing teacher-disciple relationships is still in vogue in some Sikh religious establishments. The institution of family and its environment also have played important roles in the upbringing of Sikh leaders. Similarly, experience in public life has stood in good stead in the training of Sikh leaders. Some modern Sikh educational institutions, such as Khalsa College, Amritsar, where instructions in the doctrines of Sikhism was included in the curriculum, have produced a number of Sikhs who served the society in a very significant manner. In fact training and education of the Sikh religious leadership is a gray area that requires serious and urgent attention.

V. Leadership for the Future

In appointing his successor, Guru Nanak did not follow the traditional Indian norm of hereditary succession. He selected his successor purely on the basis of ability, commitment, and dedication. Before that he tested his sons and other prominent Sikhs through a series of trials and found that Bhai Lehna, later on known as Guru Angad, is the most suitable person to head the Sikh mission. He set the pattern that a successor need not to be a son of the Master. Because leadership is spiritual, legitimacy of the successor depended upon the fact that he shared the religious experience of his master in its unadulterated form and identified himself mystically with Nanak's spirit. On the basis of the above formulation, we can say

that future Sikh leadership should be an embodiment of Sikh spirituality.

Guru Nanak was highly critical of traditional Indian religious leaders because he found them largely responsible for the ignorance, chaos, moral degeneration, and other evils that prevailed in the contemporary society. He and his successors noted with deep concern that inefficient, incapable, corrupt, and unworthy persons of questionable character assumed the roles of religious leaders. Guru Nanak remarked that if an ignorant person leads society, it cannot be saved from disaster. He was of the firm opinion that only a worthy person has the right to lead the people. Furthermore, the leader should be an embodiment of divine wisdom in order to distinguish between good and evil. The higher values such as justice, truthfulness, love, good will of all, and service should be reflect in both his public and life. Instead of behaving like an animal, he should conduct himself as a true human being. He should be an integrated personality and an ideal person and should not lose his balance of mind in any situation. He should have the courage to speak truth without any hesitation or constraint. Enmity to none and friendship with all should be the principles of his life. Similarly "Fear not and frighten not" should be the watchwords in dealing with the others. For the sake of humanity, protection of the poor and the oppressed, and in order to uphold the principles of Dharma, he should have the courage to intervene on their behalf. Unfortunately, many of the social ills that Guru Nanak sought to combat have crept back into Sikhism over the generations. The only way to combat them is through a return to the spirit of Guru Nanak.

*No Sikh institution and absolutely
no curriculum provides training to
religious leaders*

Moving from the more abstract plane of return to the core ideals and the ultimate goal of the tradition, one may also make some concrete observations regarding leadership for the future. Regrettably, many present day leadership posts are occupied by people who lack the qualities listed above. Instead, people who are conversant with the Sikh Scripture or are proficient in sacred music are appointed to run Sikh religious affairs. Clearly, this is not a healthy situation. Of course, grounding in the Sikh tradition is a necessary condition, but the appointment of leaders must also take into account individual talent. More significantly, as suggested by the long list of challenges facing contemporary Sikh leadership, today's leaders are charged not only with the maintenance of rituals and temple life but with the preservation of Sikh identity and with forging the way for the Sikh community under unprecedented conditions. This requires deep understanding of the processes currently taking place. Education and deep understanding of today's world must play a large role in the future selection and training of Sikh leaders. Further to what was suggested above, I would like to highlight some points that seem to me fundamental to the task and training of future Sikh leadership.

1. Application of the Sikh values of forgiveness, selfless service, and altruism for the benefit of society at large. As we

have seen, leadership is a form of service, but all too often the service dimension of is lost. Service is a personal drive and a vision; without it one cannot be a true leader.

2. Reach out to the people of other faiths for collaboration. Broadening the horizons of education includes the ability to communicate with people of other faiths for collaboration in resolving contemporary issues. Following Guru Nanak, Sikhs have always considered themselves a meeting point of harmonious coming together of diverse religious traditions. If Sikh leadership is to resolve the contemporary challenges it faces, it must do so through returning to this same spirit of inter-religious collaboration that is so fundamental to the spirit of Sikhism.
3. From all the above emerges a significant educational vision. Formidable challenges that face us can only be met through improvement of the quality of education that future religious leaders receive. This includes the development of educational curricula, a deepening of knowledge in Sikh sources, and providing sounder knowledge in the varieties of disciplines needed for understanding today's world and its challenges.
4. Finally, religious leadership is not only about teaching; it also concerns the life of the community and its institutions. Organizational management was a skill upon which the Sikh Gurus built their foundation. From the organizational perspective, we note the existence of multiple Sikh bodies that lack adequate

coordination. Future training of leaders must therefore take into account the organizational challenges of what it

means to guide and direct Sikhs worldwide in the 21st century.

Aspiration for the Future

In suggesting a prayerful conclusion to this essay, I would like to appeal to one of the core tenets of Sikh faith, the unity of all humanity. All of us have been created by the same singular Supreme Being, the Creator of all, Whose will, wish, and law must be the same for all humanity, how so ever differently it may have been explained in different scriptures.

I would therefore like to end in the words of tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh, whose words remain as relevant today as they were when first announced:

There is but one God whom all worship.

All people are similar and similar souls abide in them.

All shrines and worship are the same.

Hindu and Muslim worship is fundamentally the same.

All mankind is one though it appears variously.

Geographical diversities create the differences.

All humans are made similarly.

And all are made of the same elements.

God of all is the same and similar are their scriptures.

Similar are the forms and preachings of all religions.

(Akali Ustati,86).

Notes

- 1 Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1944) pp. 343-378.
- 2 J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (London: MacMillan,, 1970) p. 146.
- 3 Max Weber, *The Theory of Economic and Social Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947) p. 361.
- 4 Joachim Wach, op.cit., p. 354.
- 5 J. Milton Yinger, op.cit; p.147.
- 6 Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Delhi :Taj Publishing House, 1970) p. 12
- 7 *Ibid*; p.89.
- 8 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, pp. 1242-43.
- 9 *Ibid*; p.145.
- 10 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1288.
- 11 *Ibid*; pp. 350, 951.
- 12 *Ibid*; p. 141.
- 13 *Ibid*; p. 1258.
- 14 *Ibid*; p. 145.
- 15 Bhai Gurdas, *Vaaran*, 1:31
- 16 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 559.
- 17 *Ibid*; p. 795.
- 18 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 150.
- 19 *Ibid*; p. 723.
- 20 *Ibid*; p. 15.
- 21 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 442.
- 22 *Ibid*; p. 802.
- 23 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 611.
- 24 *Ibid*; p. 1387.
- 25 *Ibid*; p. 1001.
- 26 *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, pp. 966-67; Bhai Gurdas, 1:46-49.
- 27 Bhai Gurdas, 26:33.
- 28 Bhai Gurdas, 26:33, 36:2-10.
- 29 Ganda Singh, "Guru Hargobind and Samrath Ramdas," *Panjab Past and Present* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1979) p. 241.
- 30 Ganda Singh, *Guru Gobind Singh's Death at Nander and Examination of Succession Theories*, Sikh Review Calcutta, 1972, pp. 1-47.
- 31 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 722.
- 32 *Ibid*; p. 920
- 33 *Ibid*; p. 39.
- 34 *Ibid*; p. 308.
- 35 *Ibid*; p. 912.
- 36 Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 763.
- 37 *Ibid*; p. 1226.
- 38 'Dabistan-i- Mazahib', *Makbuz - i- Tawarikh-i- Sikhan* (ed.) Ganda Singh, Amritsar, p. 48.
- 39 Guru Gobind Singh, *Gian Pabodh, Swayya*, 645.
- 40 Bhagat Singh, *A History of Sikh Misals* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1993) pp. 411-13.
- 41 Bhai Gurdas, 26:33.
- 42 Bhai Gurdas, 26:24.