Justice through Sword in Sikhism

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Abstract
Five hundred years ago, Guru Nanak established a new religion i.e. Sikhism based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. The Sikh history portrays the heroic armed struggle against political oppression, social injustice, religious intolerance, racial arrogance and fundamentalism. With the passage of time, Sikhism and justice became the two sides of the same coin. Sikh vision of justice is very close to the egalitarianism. In Sikhism, it is believed that social discriminations, political absolutism, economic exploitation, social apartheid and racial chauvinism are obstacles in the way of socio-spiritual development of an individual. Sikh Gurus justified the use of sword and urged the masses to fight against inequalities; injustice and social prejudices. They motivated people for armed resistance to political coercion, social injustice, religious fanaticism and economic exploitation. They heralded the free and equitable society in which there will be liberty, equality and justice in letter and spirit.

Introductory Background:
The notion of justice is a comprehensive and multidimensional. It is essentially aim at the welfare of human beings. It implies social equality, elimination of caste-class divisions and abolition of special privileges, protection of human dignity, and liberation of disadvantaged, exploited and marginalized sections of society. It involves a process through which society attains a more equitable distribution of power in the political, economic and social realms. Western and Eastern academicians, philosophers and political theorists focused on human rights, social equality, religious freedom, economic liberty, gender equality, social solidarity and human dignity as foundational principles of justice.

Sikhism conceptualizes the concept of justice in a broader sense. Sikhism is founded on the principle of social equality and its history is replete with examples showing strong resistance to socio-religious discriminations, inequalities and injustice. Guru Nanak through his Divine message awakened the people to step out of their individualistic existence, sectarian divisions and parochial mindsets and made them aware of their social responsibilities. He admonished their superstitious beliefs and inspired them to stand up against social injustice and tyranny. The masses were made aware of socio-religious values based on equality, social justice, human dignity, fraternity etc. In the gradual process, his successor Sikh Gurus brought a radical transformation of Sikh religious beliefs. They envisaged a revolutionary path of armed resistance to the cruel, unrighteous and barbaric socio-political system to defend the human rights, individual liberties and self-esteem of people.

The present research paper is a humble attempt to analyse the quest for justice through sword in Sikhism. The paper is divided in to three parts. The first part will briefly discussed the concept of justice. In second part, the role and significance of sword in Sikhism will
be analysed in relation to seek the social and political justice. The third and last part will be the concluding section.

(I)

The English term *justice* derives from the Latin word *jus*, which comes in turn from a Sanskrit word meaning “to join” or “to bind”. Similar terms exist in a number of ancient languages. In the Hebrew Bible, *mishpat* is a legal term meaning what a judge should decide, while *tzedek* is an ethical term that refers to a righteous person, and *tzedakah* refers to the abstract quality of righteousness. The early Greek term is *diké*, meaning what is right and implying an idea of order or balance that must be restored when disturbed. A person who did what was right was called *dikaios*. Later on Greek writers, including Plato, began to discuss justice as an abstract quality; they invented the term *dikaiosyné* to denote the quality displayed by a *dikaios*.

The abstract concept of justice thus makes its appearance in the extant literature with the advent of terms like *tzedakah* and *dikaiosyné*. ¹ Justice is a regulative or distributive principle. It metes out to individuals something or other, according to what the existing law declares or assumes to be equitable.² Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue, likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust. Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many.³

Justice demands that each individual and group within a given society has a right to civil liberties, equal opportunities, fairness, and participation in the educational, institutional, social and moral freedoms and responsibilities valued by the community. Inequalities and discriminations, subjugation and exploitation and excessive individualism and hostility are contrary to the idea of justice. Justice also involves equitable distribution of the primary social goods of distributed in society, including basic freedoms, political rights, power, authority, status, income and wealth, education and employment opportunities, housing, health care, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is an ancient commonplace that justice is the holder of a balance; and the visual representations of the personified figure of justice accordingly show her with a balance in her hand and with eyes blindfolded as a sign of her impartiality. On the argument here suggested that justice holds in the balance both the claims of persons to rights and the claims of different principles determine the distribution of rights, and she measures them both by the standard of the maximum development of the capacities of personality in the maximum number of persons.⁴ The figure of personified justice not only holds a balance; it also bears a sword; law, as the concrete expression of Justice, must also wield the sword: the words *gladius custos legis* are written on the gate of the Palace of justice in Paris.⁵ Sword is a symbol of justice, reason,
courage, dignity and self-respect. It also symbolises the urge for freedom and justice. It is essential for resistance to injustice and protection of the oppressed, exploited and vulnerable sections of society. It is also indispensable to punish the transgressor of human rights and to restore the human dignity. It creates the fear in the mind of those socio-political forces who violate the human rights and do injustice with poor, helpless and deprived people.

(II)

At the advent of Sikhism, social, religious, political and economic conditions in India were miserable. The country was mostly under the Muslim rule. With but a few exceptions, the rulers were ferocious bigots and savage tyrants. Their officials were corrupt and unscrupulous. There was little of justice for the weak and the poor, and next to none for the Hindus. Islam was being propagated with a free use of the sword, persecution, persuasion, and every other means, fair or foul Hindu temples were being demolished and replaced by mosques; erection of new ones was prohibited, and religious observances and pilgrimages were banned.  

The majority of population was Hindu and minority Muslim ruling class denied them all rights and liberties and treated them unequally. Religious intolerance, Brahminical traditions, political absolutism and economic exploitation of working classes created a social-political environment that was occupied with social injustice, prejudices, discriminations and inequalities for every section of society.

People suffered political tyranny, social injustice, religious fanaticism, political chaos, oppression and all kinds of corruption and high headedness in all spheres of life. People were living in the politically disunited, socially fragmented, religiously degenerated and economically exploited society. In cases of brute force, violence has to be met by violence. Tyrants are like mad dogs and the sword is neither to be used for conquest nor for wreaking vengeance. The sword is meant only for self-defence or for the good of the people. In cases of injustice and intolerance, the refusal to use the sword may do more harm than good.7

After the death of fifth Sixth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, his son and the sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind Sahib played a key role in the militarization of Sikhs. He ushered a new era in the history of Sikhs and validated the use of force to resist the unrighteous Mughal rulers. He wore the two swords. The sword of piri symbolized the spiritual power of Guruship; the sword of miri symbolized earthly power. Together the swords represented the joining of the heavenly and earthly aspects of Sikhism. With that action a new era began. Armed resistance replaced the meekness and gentleness that had characterized the Sikh population.8 He declared that the subject of the Supreme Sovereign could not be subject of an earthly ruler. He said the earthly rulers had no right to govern the minds and he bodies of the subjects of God. A man of Miri has an obligation to impart Dharma (Righteousness) and a man of Piri must not be a silent observer to injustice, tyranny and in-humanism. A Sikh is expected to be a "saint-soldier" i.e. a man of Miri' as well as Piri.9

The kirpan represents the call to uphold justice and protect the weak. Sikhs sometimes link it to the word kirpa (‘grace’), to underline the fact that it is not
an offensive weapon. Certainly, it should not be translated by the word 'dagger', which has unwelcome connotations of furtive dastardly assault.  

Kirpaan (sword) is a combination of two words: Kirpaa (mercy) and Aan (honor). Thus, the Sikh Kirpaan means: "the defender of the honour of a person." It is a specific Sikh concept. Sikhism grants very high status to Kirpaan but it has to be "soaked in mercy." Kirpaan can never be used as a weapon of offence. Kirpaan represents Sikh's duty to defend the poor and the oppressed. An initiated Sikh must have Kirpaan, on his person, all the time, throughout his life.11

Some look at kirpan as uncivilized. They forget that for the Khalsa, the kirpan is not an object left behind in time, but a symbol of positive expression of Guru’s grace, always living with us. The deeper spiritual meaning of the kirpan is that it is symbolic of the triumph of transcendent knowledge over ignorance and darkness. The sword in the mind, cuts at the roots of ignorance, evil and worldly attachment and destroys these utterly. As an emblem of power and self-respect, the sword has been given the foremost place in the Sikh prayer (Ardas). 12 Kirpan-in Sikhism signifies two fundamental tenets of Sikhism namely that it is the basic responsibility of a Sikh to confront and resist injustice, and that asceticism, monasticism or escapism of any kind is wrong. Thus, Kirpan, on one hand is a constant reminder to the Sikh of his duty, and on the other hand, is a standing guard against reversion to pacifism and otherworldliness.13

For a Sikh, the sword is not a combat weapon for offensive or defensive action; it is, rather, a symbol of liberated being, of sovereignty of man homologous to the right of a sovereign people to keep the arms. Being symbols, what is important is not their external ritualistic display on the body, but the inculcation in the mind of their significance, their essence, animating the attitude, the deed, the very life of the faith-followers. These are the symbols reminding their wearer that he is to be sachiar (truthful living) in his obligation towards God; a jizqhar (fearless fighter for a righteous cause) in his obligation towards society and a rahit-dhar (imbiber of enlightened code of conduct) in his obligation towards the community.14

The sword also symbolises the values of freedom justice and sovereignty in Sikh religion. When we study it from this angle, we find how, during the Mughal rule restrictions were imposed on non-Muslims (leaving a few) for carrying arms as these we retreated as symbols of self-respect, freedom and sovereignty. Arms thus were exclusively reserved for Mughals. To give back to their followers the sense of self-respect, freedom and sovereignty, the sixth and the tenth Guru picked up the sword and directly challenged the unjust orders of the state.15

According to Sikh thought, it is the union of meditation and power, which can sustain the world. Guru Gobind Singh rejected both complete renunciation and extreme power. He had created a saint who could wield the sword against injustice and tyranny. For a saint to wield a sword is not new to the history of world religions. In Hindu religion, both Rama and Krishna were Kashtriyas and in their own times played the part of war heroes to save good from evil.16 The use of the ‘sword’ by Guru Gobind became necessary. When
someone read the life of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, there also one, find the sword. The same sword. The sword of Kansa was not different from the sword of Krishna, so for as the material was concerned. The difference was that one was the sword of Dharma and the other of adharma. One was raised to uphold righteousness, the other for perpetrating tyranny. Similarly, there was no material difference between the sword of Lord Rama and that of Ravana. The only difference was the purpose for which it was used.

At the time of creation of Khalsa Panth the use of double-edged sword, symbolise the "Wealth of faith in Righteousness" and a real weapon in the struggle for justice: it is for this glorious role of the Sword. It is used to dissolve the sugar-pieces in pure cold water' while preparing the amrit in the Sikh tradition. It is implied that a Sikh is expected to possess the "Wealth of faith in Righteousness' and commit himself in the struggle for justice. It was this Amritam that changed the docile, poor, fearful disciples into the leonine name of the new Khalsa: Saint-soldiers, who were taught to salute the God and the Master with a naked sword swung high in air, and to practise the Simran of Mantram of Wah-Guru. Arms were thenceforward the symbol of a disciple's fervour of soul.

Traditionally, the sword is an index of sovereignty and strength. Guru Gobind Singh justified the use of the sword when all peaceful methods failed and for the protection of a good or righteous cause. He regarded it as a scourge of the tyrant and the wicked. He praised the sword: "In the beginning remember the Lord of the sword and then meditate on Guru Nanak". Sword-is all-powerful like God. Guru Gobind Singh's veneration of weapons is justified for they represent the All-Steel God and the victory of right over might. He took the campaign to its logical conclusion and established the Khalsa society—a society of saint-soldiers who were inspired by the highest moral ideals, always prepared to defend those ideals of justice and basic social, religious, political and human rights even at the cost of their lives. He justified the use of the sword, i.e., force, when all other means of obtaining freedom and justice failed.

In his Zafarnama, a detailed letter of victory to Aurangzeb, against whose tyrannical rule, he fought several battles, sacrificed his father and all the four sons and numerous beloved Sikhs, he mentioned that he was not willing to take up the arms. But when all other means to settle a matter amicably, failed, it was justifiable to take up the sword (arms) as a last resort.

For the pacifists, the use of the sword, even for a righteous cause, is self-defeating, since no just order, they feel, can be built by the force of arms. Those who believe in a religion of personal salvation, find it difficult to reconcile Guru Nanak's attack on formalism with the subsequent Gurus' deliberate attempt at creating new institutions, culminating in the creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh.

The sweepers, barbers and confectioners, who had never so much as touched the sword and whose whole generations had lived as grovelling slaves of the so-called higher classes, came, under the stimulating leadership of Guru Gobind Singh, doughty warriors who never shrank from fear and who were...
ready to rush into the jaws of death at the bidding of their Guru.\textsuperscript{24}

The Sikh sword is not meant to be brandished right and left to be struck where it could and at whosoever came in its way. It is a symbol of his \textit{dharma} to resist aggression, tyranny, and injustice. It is a symbol of self-reliance, self-confidence, self-help and self-protection. It is meant to sweep aside obstacles that obstruct the performance of his \textit{dharma} (duty) and to uphold what is good, and punish who is bad and bane to human society. It is meant to destroy evil and evil doers and extirpate tyrants and suckers root and branch.\textsuperscript{25} The Khalsa wields the sword as a shield to defend and protect the weak and the oppressed, to uphold truth and righteousness, and to defend the country. Sword in Sikhism has never been used for the gratification of ‘self, for material gains at the cost of sufferings of others. It has always been used for freedom of conscience, freedom of worship and for protection of Dharma.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{(III)}

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that sword in Sikhism is a ray of hope for victims of injustice, exploitation and tyranny. Sikh Gurus justified the use of arms to defend the weak, powerless and subjugated masses to get the justice for them. Sword in Sikhism symbolises the aggression against evil, corrupt and brutal political or der to protect the honour, rights and freedoms of people. It is a socio-religious obligation of every true Sikh to live and fight for justice and to make the use of sword to shield the suffering humankind.

\section*{References:}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 177.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Mansukhani, G. S. (2003). \textit{The Quintessence of Sikhism}, Amritsar: SGPC. p. 196.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Dilgeer, H. S. (2000). \textit{Who Are the Sikhs?} Denmark: Sikh Educational Trust. p. 30
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