

CASTES IN SIKH RELIGION

Dr. V. P. Singh

Sikh religion originated after the arrival of Guru Nanak in this mortal world. This was the time when disparity amongst human beings was at its peak, whether it is based on caste or religion.

As far as Hindu religion is concerned, the most ancient scriptures, Vedas, place very little importance on the caste system, which is prevailing even now a days, mentioning caste only sparingly and descriptively. Indeed, the only verse in the *Rigveda* which mentions all four *varnas* is 10.90, the *Purushasukta*. A hymn from the *Rigveda* seems to indicate that one's caste is not necessarily determined by that of one's family:

—*I am a bard, my father is a physician, my mother's job is to grind the corn.* . . . Rig Veda 9.112.3

In the Vedic period, there also seems to have been no discrimination against the Shudras (untouchables) they were fully participating in all

rituals, something which became progressively restricted in the later times.

Manusmriti, dated between 200 BCE and 100 CE, contains some laws that codified the caste system. The Manu Smriti belongs to a class of books that are geared towards ethics, morals, and social conduct - not spirituality or religion.

With time caste system became so predominant in Hindu religion that *shudras* were not allowed to enter the temples and perform *puja*. It is said, if a *shudra* listens the shlokas (hymns), his ears should be filled with molten lead. During the times of Mahabharata, when Eklavya, a shudra learnt the art of shooting by putting statue of Dronacharya before him, brahmin Dronacharya, took his right hand thumb as a gurudiksha (sort of fee).

Sikhs, most of them were converted from Hindu religion and carried the legacy of caste system in spite of teachings of Sikh gurus.

Guru Nanak Dev took a bold step of challenging this legacy, by taking along with him, a shudra bard, a Muslim Bhai Mardana on his travels (udasis). He condemned caste system as:

ਫਕੜ ਜਾਤੀ ਫਕੜੁ ਨਾਉ ॥ ਸਭਨਾ ਜੀਆ ਇਕਾ ਛਾਉ ॥ ਆਪਹੁ ਜੇ ਕੋ ਭਲਾ ਕਹਾਏ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਤਾ ਪਰੁ ਜਾਪੈ ਜਾ ਪਤਿ ਲੇਖੈ ਪਾਏ ॥ ੧ ॥ ॥

i.e. pride in social status is futile; pride in personal glory is useless. The One Lord gives shade to all beings.

You may call yourself good; O Nanak, this will only be known when your honor is approved in God's Account. || Var Sri Rag Mehla 1, p.83 SGGGS.

Guru Amardas ji strengthened his ideology and started community kitchen system (*langer*), where people were required to take food without any caste discrimination.



In Sikh religion, cast is only as a person pursue the profession and it has nothing to do with his ancestry. In fact caste system originally started from the nature of job, one was performing, but Manu divided this in to four major communities. According to Sikh religion, one who is literate is a Brahmin, a soldier is *kshatri*, a business man is *vaishya* and who earns by serving others is *shudra*. If a person, who belongs to shudra father, is literate and does a preaching, is a Brahmin. Guru Amardas ji, while condemning caste system

ਨਾਮਾ ਛੀਬਾ ਕਬੀਰੁ ਜੋਲਾਹਾ ਪੂਰੇ ਗੁਰ ਤੇ ਗਤਿ ਪਾਈ ॥
ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਕੇ ਬੇਤੇ ਸਬਦੁ ਪਛਾਣਹਿ ਹਉਮੈ ਜਾਤਿ ਗਵਾਈ ॥ ॥

Naam Dav a Maharashtra saint, and Kabir a weaver, obtained salvation through the Perfect Guru. Those who know God and recognize His Shabad (words) lose their ego and class consciousness. Their Banis are sung by the angelic beings, and no one can erase them, O Siblings of Destiny! || 3 || SGGGS p.67.

Guru Nanak Dev ji says, one who does not recite the name of God is the person with low caste and not one born in low caste. God does not determine the caste of a man/woman before sending him or her to this mortal world. Their Banis are sung by the consciousness.

ਖਸਮੁ ਵਿਸਾਰਹਿ ਤੇ ਕਮਜਾਤਿ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਨਾਵੈ ਬਾਬੁ ਸਨਾਤਿ ॥ ੪ ॥ ੩ ॥
SGGS P.10.

Guru Gobind Singh the tenth Guru has clearly told his Khalsa, to use the title Singh with his name and not the caste or gotra. He clearly told his Sikhs that all human beings are same. Sikh religion does not believe in caste system is very clear from the above discussions. But it is a sorry state that we are still clinging with Hindu legacy of caste system. Our ignorant leaders like Master Tara Singh asked for reservation for Sikh low caste. This has encouraged casteism in the community and has nowhere helped the religion as well as Sikh community. Britishers also promoted this by making a light Sikh infantry, which aligned scheduled caste Sikhs from rest of community. Such Sikhs who get selected based on reserved vacancies are not treated respectfully. It is sad that in the villages of Punjab, casteism is very dominant and our Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee has totally failed to eradicate this evil. Rather they also reserved few seats for scheduled caste Sikhs, which also encourages casteism in Sikhs.

Even now we have in army, Sikh infantry different from Light Sikh infantry, maintaining the legacy of Britishers which should be protested by Sikhs. We feel Continued on page 10