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Concept of Family in Sikhism

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Article History: Published Online: _Published_	Sikhism, a relatively young religion in the history of the world is premised on the belief that all humans are one family without social divides of caste, creed, or gender inequality. The concept of langar (community meals) and uniform surnames of <i>Singh</i> and <i>Kaur</i> reinforce the ideals of the founding gurus who advocated a life lived at the centre of family and community as the highest ideal of human life rather than an escapist spiritual retreat from the world in the quest of ultimate truth. All of the ten Sikh gurus lived as householders while engaging in the search for the divine and added their own understanding of the meaning of 'family' to the religious corpus of the emerging new order. The later Gurus held up by personal example, the exemplary sacrifice of family as the ultimate sacrifice one could offer for the welfare of the community and nation. This paper will explore the various connotations of 'family' enshrined in the scriptures and practice of Sikhism and their contemporary influences and legacies amongst Sikh families.
Keywords: langar, Sikh gurus, Religious corpus, sacrifice, scriptures and practice	



Introduction

Sikhism, derived from the principles initiated by Guru Nanak and the ten subsequent Gurus was consolidated into a formal religion by the establishment of the Khalsa by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who also discontinued the tradition of living gurus and instead collated the wisdom of the saints and seers into the Guru Granth Sahib, the scriptural work compiled by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev. For all purposes, Guru Gobind Singh affirmed the Guru Granth Sahib as his successor. It contains poetic hymns composed by the gurus as well as teachings of Indian saints, such as Ravidas, Ramananda, Kabir and Namdev, and two Muslim Sufi saints Bhagat Bhikan and Sheikh Farid.

Founding Principles of Sikhism

The word 'Sikh' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'siksha' which means teaching or instruction or 'sisya' meaning disciple both of which underscore the idea that the Sikh follower is a learner and disciple of the Guru who symbolizes a teacher who shows the path.

The three principle tenets of Sikhism are

Naam Japna Recite the name of God and practice the teachings of Gurbani in your daily life

Keerat Karna Work hard and earn an honest livelihood



Wand Chakna: Share your food/ earnings with others especially the underprivileged. Sikhs are enjoined to give out Daswanth ie 10 per cent of their earnings to those who need it.

Along with the above, since Sikhism is based on the principles of an egalitarian, casteless society, it enjoins its followers to shun caste discriminations and gender inequalities. The concept of *langar*; a community cooked meal eaten together with fellow devotees in the place of worship sets the tone for the familial relations advocated in the Sikh religion. Every gurdwara has a community kitchen where any volunteer is welcome to cook, serve and eat the community meal that is served to all the devotees regardless of religion, caste, sect, status or gender. Both men and women equally participate in the Sewa involved in cooking, serving, cleaning up after the meal and no one is barred on any grounds whatsoever. The entire exercise promotes fellow feeling, co-operation, teamwork, dissolves societal boundaries and elicits the enthusiastic participation of all- even from children and elderly- and sets the tone for viewing the world as an extended family. Another practice that reinforces the vision of a division less society is the injunction to use common surnames of Singh for men and Kaur for women so that entrenched caste discriminations embedded in the practice of naming are eliminated.

Sikh Beliefs about Family



The family is the first and most important social unit in human life. Numerous religions of the world have extolled the virtues of family living while simultaneously asserting that the people of the world are one big family. Hinduism, the font from which sprang the Sikh religion, also advocates the concept of “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” (Maha Upanishad VI.72).

अयंबन्धुरयनेतिगणनालघुचेतसाम्

उदारचरितानांतुवसुधैवकुटुम्बकम्॥

And Hitopadesha, 1.3.71:

‘ayam nijah paroveti ganana laghuchetasam
udaracharitanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbhakam’

The family is the cradle of human experience and within the Sikh religion there is no provision for an ascetic or celibate life. All the gurus themselves lived the life of married householders and enjoined their followers also to do so as they believed that one must participate in the world and not renounce it in order to understand it. The husband-wife form the core of the family and their oneness ensures domestic happiness and prosperity. “Bride and groom are not they who pose as one whole; bride and groom are they who are two bodies with one soul” (SGGS 788). The Sikh wedding ceremony is called Anand Karaj meaning joyous event and the couple encircle the Guru Granth Sahib four times as four hymns are sung to solemnize the marriage to indicate ascending stages of spiritual union with the divine. The hymns advise the couple to



maintain a selfless attitude and to treat the bond of marriage as both a physical and spiritual one.

Guru Nanak travelled the length and breadth of the country and as far as Baghdad, China and Sri Lanka but these journeys were undertaken as Udasis or sacred missions and not as escape from or abandonment of family life. He returned to the family home each time and spent his last years as a common farmer with his wife and children. All the successive Sikh gurus engaged in their spiritual quests as householders (except for Guru Har Rai who became the youngest guru at the age of 5 but died of small pox before reaching his eighth birthday).

Guru Gobind extended the meaning associated with the word family by sacrificing his entire family for the sake of the community. He exhorted his father, the ninth Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur to sacrifice his life to protect Kashmiri pandits from forcible conversion. The message of religious brotherhood, respect and honour of all religions, earlier set by the foundation stone laying at Amritsar by Sufi saint Sain Mia Mir, at the request of the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Dev, was furthered by the supreme sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur. The tenth Guru Guru Gobind Singh instilled courage and determination in his children and steeled his own heart to sacrifice four sons, the youngest only six years old, to asset the right to practice one's chosen religion.

Attitudes towards Women



The Sikh tenets advocate a high place for women- To woman we married, of woman are we born, of woman conceived, by woman is the civilization continued. It is by woman that the entire social order is maintained. “So kyon manda aakhiye jit jamme rajan (why call her bad, from whom kings are born ? (SGGS 473). There is no place for gender inequality in the tenets of the Sikh faith. There are no scriptural restrictions on women during menstruation and they are not segregated or viewed as polluted or unclean during their cycle.

Attitudes towards the Elderly

The mother of Guru Gobind Singh-Mata Gurjari- set the standard for Sikh grandparents when she held up the spirits and determination of her two grandsons aged 6 and 8 to not buckle under bribe, torture and even death. She instilled pride and fierce independence in the boys who were bricked alive after spending sleepless nights imprisoned in a cold tower without any quilts in bitterly cold December nights. Mata Gurjari is held up as an exemplary woman and grandmother for all Sikhs.

Elders in Sikh households are venerated and respected and considered the spiritual educators of the younger generations. Their struggles and sacrifices are recounted to children while they themselves narrate incidents from the lives of the ten gurus to youngster to build mental and emotional strength from an early age. The grandparents help the new generation to cope with the



pressures generated by the distinct Sikh appearance and the verbal and emotional taunts faced by sikh boys. They are instrumental in developing acceptance and pride in the Sikh way of life and stabilize the impetuosity and irritability of the adolescents impatient to participate in the modern world by adopting the normative appearance and hairstyles.

The elders urge attendance at gurudwaras, learning of Gurmukhi and tabla/harmonium, kirtan, gatka in order to build a sense of community, to instill Sikh values and to develop a sense of pride in the Sikh heritage.

Contemporary Problems

Intercommunity and inter religious marriages were earlier not frowned upon but with increasing fundamentalist attitudes, there is a hardening of stances and drawing of boundaries which goes against the very grain of a faith that was established by drawing up men from five of the most underprivileged and marginalized sections of society. The Panj Pyaras or the first five baptized into the Sikh religion were asked by the Guru to induct him into the faith. It is regrettable that certain regressive ideas are creeping into a progressive faith that shunned idol worship, casteist divisions and gender disparities.

Sexist attitudes and patriarchal views are hard to break despite five centuries since the teachings of Nanak were first propagated. Patriarchy exerts a strong hold even within Sikh households and it



would be incorrect to assert that women in all Sikh families enjoy equal status with men and that gender discrimination does not persist. Despite the injunctions for a simple, honest life without avariciousness problems like dowry and sex selection plague Sikh households too.

The Gurus injunction to place faith in the Granth Sahib is also violated by people erecting unscrupulous and immoral Godmen as living Gurus only to be shocked and disillusioned by investigations revealing sordid details of their activities. The directive to adopt Singh and Kaur is also not observed and most Sikh persist with caste names that discriminate between high and low castes.

The challenges posed by the unique appearance of the Sikhs especially post 9/11 are growing. The younger generation chafes under the rigours of maintaining long hair and turban tying and would rather prefer the homogeneity of a smooth and suave global physical appearance that does not single them out for taunt and ridicule. This problem is especially acute for second generation diasporic Sikhs who remain cutoff from mainstream participation and influence and who cannot understand the relevance and need for age old customs. This tendency is being countered by closing of ranks among diasporic Sikhs who are constructing more and more gurudwaras and organising cultural and religious activities that serve to connect the youth and generate a cultural resurgence.

Conclusion



As is seen with all religions, the basic tenets undergo fossilization as the faith undergoes institutionalization and formalization of its core practices. The outward forms are observed more strictly and made apparent while certain essential injunctions are either ignored or violated. Such role models are detrimental to the youth who seek logical reasoning and secular global attitudes in their own lives. They give more importance to spiritual growth rather than formalized ritual practices and religious observances. The growing menace of loneliness, drug abuse, deviant behaviour and technology addiction among the young can be countered by a renewed recognition and adoption of practices from all religions that emphasize familial relations, community celebrations, peaceful co-existence and mutual inter-faith understanding.

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