

Multiculturalism: Rediscovering the Other from Gurubani

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Like most things in our postmodern world, 'multiculturalism' is a contested concept with multiple meanings at different societal levels. Multiculturalism has not yet been fully theorized. In part, the lack of a unifying theory stems from the fact that multiculturalism as a political, social and cultural movement has aimed to respect a multiplicity of diverging perspectives outside of dominant traditions. The task of theorizing these divergent subject positions does not easily accommodate the traditional genre of the philosophical treatise penned by one single great mind.

The close attention now being paid to multiculturalism or rather the labelling as multiculturalism of a range of issues relating to ethnicity, religious practice and cultural expressions, at first sight may appear to be a development of the late twentieth century which has arisen both as a consequence of the rapid creation of new nations and the accelerated pace of geographical mobility made possible through advances in transport technology.¹ On closer examination, however, this appearance may be deceptive since though the label and the slant of the discussion may be new, the issues themselves are historically familiar. The mobility of population is as old as the history of humanity itself and states and nations in the past have always had to confront the problems arising from the diversity of groups within one polity. Military conquest and subsequent territorial expansion are the ways most familiar to us through which ethnic groups have spread their cultural influence.

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1 C.W. Watson, *Multiculturalism* (New Delhi, 2005), p.87.

[I]

To facilitate our understanding of the meaning of multiculturalism, it is first necessary to understand what 'culture' stands for. 'Culture' itself is a catch-all word, but let us not get entrammelled here, in debates about its meaning and simply take it in this context to refer to a distinctive way of life. 'Culture' is above, everything a congeries of ways of thinking and acting. However, much they may appear to be the commonly shared experience of a collectivity of people, attempts made to define them as such are constantly being modified and transformed. Culture is a process of constant adaptation of people to historical circumstances which requires them as a condition of their own survival to engage sympathetically with new ways of understanding the world and responding to it. Thus culture must be seen as a dynamic process of the constant evolution of forms, institutional, textual and ethical, and must not be thought of as an unchanging and finite set of essential characteristics.

Multiculturalism, in its broader sense, while including issues of identity, ethnicity, religion and nationalism is a relatively new coinage but under different guises its implications have long been a matter of direct concern to postcolonial nations where diversity and heterogeneity have been the rule rather than exception. As the example of the countries of Africa, the Indian subcontinent and south-east Asia illustrate, arbitrarily created colonial political boundaries enclose within new and independent nations substantial populations which are ethnically distinct or at least regard themselves as such and their orientation, values and religious beliefs can often be at odds with each other.

History provides many examples of different communities and cultures living side by side within the same society, co-existing peacefully and sometimes even amicably. The ancient empires of Persia, Egypt and Rome were culturally diverse. In India, similarly people of diverse religions and languages have lived together for several centuries. The Ottoman Empire, while affirming Islam as its own religion, gave formal recognition to Greeks, Jews and others.

The co-presence of different communities within the same polity is therefore not a new occurrence. Cultural plurality has been a hallmark of many societies for a very long time. However, the presence of many cultures and communities within the same social space points to a plural social fabric but it does not betoken the presence of multiculturalism. The latter entails something more than the mere presence of different communities or the attitude of tolerance in society. Multiculturalism is concerned with the issue of equality; it asks whether the different

communities, living peacefully together co-exist as equals in the public arena.² It is this emphasis on equality that distinguishes multiculturalism from pluralism. So multiculturalism goes beyond the concern for peaceful co-existence.

Multiculturalism is the public policy for managing cultural diversity in a multiethnic society officially stressing mutual respect and tolerance for cultural differences within a country's borders. It is a policy that emphasizes the unique characteristics of different cultures especially as they relate to one another. The word was first used in 1957 to describe Switzerland but came into common currency in Canada in the late 1960s.

At the outset it may be said that it is a theory about the foundation of a culture rather than a practice which subsumes cultural ideas. Broadly speaking, the term is often used to describe societies which have many different cultural groups usually as a result of immigration. This can lead to anxiety about the stability of national identity, yet can also lead to cultural exchanges that benefit the cultural groups. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives them a feeling of security and self-confidence making them more open to and accepting of diverse cultures.

Different but equal, this is the leitmotif of multiculturalism.³ While living with differences is a fact of our social existence, multiculturalism reflects upon the status of different cultural communities within a polity. Are diverse cultural communities accommodated as equals in the public arena? Do they receive equal respect and equal treatment in the state? Promoting cultural diversity, by removing cultural discrimination is deeply cherished within multiculturalism. It is seen as the essential precondition for equality of cultures. Multiculturalism assumes that diverse cultures can only flourish in a context where different cultures are acknowledged and accorded equal respect. Thus multiculturalism recognizes a positive value in diversity, a meaningful acceptance of the other and respect for their values, traditions and deep moral differences.

[II]

The medieval Punjab presents to one's mind the picture of a region at once the meeting place of different cultural traditions because of its geographical position.⁴ The action, reaction and interaction of these

2 Gurpreet Mahajan, *The Multicultural Path* (New Delhi, 2002), pp.14-15.

3 *Ibid.*, p.23.

4 K.A. Nizami, *State and Culture in Medieval India* (New Delhi, 1985), p.54.

diverse potential elements lend a peculiar charm to its history and forms a deeply interesting study from the sociological point of view. The cultural heritage of this land is thus multifarious and varied. Punjab was the battleground of the thickest meetings of Hinduism and Islam. No other land or people in India, it may be presumed, had so exhaustive an experience in multicultural living as the Punjabis and later the Sikhs. The birth of Sikhism in fact, is a grand response to the multicultural and multireligious reality of this region. Sikhism, the youngest of the major religions the world over, was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and the nine succeeding Gurus during the late medieval India. At the macro level Hinduism and Islam form the background of the origination of the Sikh faith. At the micro level, many socio-religious movements such as Vaisnava Bhakti, Nath Sampradaya, Shaivism, Sufism and the Sant tradition formed the religio-cultural multiplicity of medieval India. Sikhism emerged as a positive response to the pluralistic religious situation prevailing therein.

Classically religion has been defined as one which deals with the supreme metaphysical reality, that is, God and usually evaluates the mundane reality as something magical or sinful or place of suffering. It needs to be emphasized here that Sikhism transcends such a definition of religion and it not only deals with the metaphysical ultimate but also is a religion of active earthly life. It successfully integrates the spiritual and temporal realms of human life; on one hand, it intensifies that faith in the transcendental God and on the other, it identifies the idea and meaningfulness of the living reality. Sikhism, right from its inception thus has been concerned not merely with salvation of soul in the next world but also with the transformation of both society and state in this very world. It is very much concerned with the social, economic, political and cultural concerns of man, as much as the spiritual concerns of the soul. And it is this indisputable fact which brings Sikhism to the modern age. Ideas enshrined in the *gurubani* are intended to be universal and apply to every age.

The contemporary world situation has of late become complicated in terms of inter-religious and cultural relations, political leaders have exploited the religious feelings of the common people to serve their own selfish motives and talk of conflicts and *jihad*. Can Sikhism play a constructive role in these days of strained inter-religious and cultural relations? It is noteworthy to mention here that the Sikh Gurus had a deep understanding of the multiracial, multireligious, multicultural and multilingual pattern of the Indian society and attempted to evolve a social attitude which should not merely tolerate different forms of life and thought but would look upon them as part of a common heritage.

How relevant and important are their teachings to modern life and social needs is a significant point of enquiry.

Many modern age concepts of democracy, egalitarianism, ethnic equality, love, justice, liberty, equality, philanthropy are deeply embedded in Sikh thought as enshrined in the *gurubani* of the Sikh gurus. This paper seeks to examine the concept of multiculturalism as embedded and analysed in the *gurubani* especially in the context of Sikhism and Islam. In fact, the entire life and teachings of the Sikh gurus can be viewed as a unique experiment in multicultural relations. Through their teachings the Gurus endeavoured their best to contribute towards establishing a multicultural and multilingual society. Acknowledging diversity in cultures is a mode of enhancing liberty and self-knowledge. Learning about other people no matter how different or distant they may be from the self serves a practical and critical function. As we analyze the different ways in which human beings have organized themselves and the different prospects they have pursued, we become aware of the historicity of our existence.⁵ The life and teachings of the Sikh Gurus analyze the different ways in which human beings have lived and also make us aware of the historicity of our existence.

In fact, the concept of multiculturalism reflects awareness towards the challenges that the world faces today especially in terms of ethnic tensions, ethno-religious confrontation and religious fundamentalism. Through the medium of multiculturalism, the self-identities of different cultural traditions, their beliefs, moorings and lifestyles can be comprehended to bring about intra-cultural understanding and accommodation on the basis of recognition of equality and respect for the autonomies of different cultural groups. It is pertinent therefore to examine the social and collective dimensions of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus especially in the context of India's diversity in general, and Punjab's diversity, in particular. How did they envisage a harmonious interaction between diverse groups as in existence and what was their attitude towards the Other.

At the outset it may be said that teachings of the Sikh Gurus underline the co existence of different cultural traditions in peace and harmony with each other and attempt to resolve the paradox of diverse cultures rather successfully. "Multiculturalism requires from all of us a receptivity to difference, an openness and ability to recognise our familiar selves in the strangeness of others."⁶ Within multiculturalism

5 Gurpreet Mahajan, *op.cit.*, p.77.

6 C.W. Watson, *op.cit.*, p.110.

equal access to one's religion and culture is valued. "Most multiculturalists believe that there is something admirable in all cultures. Each incorporates qualities that are valuable and worthy of our respect and are therefore equal. And because, it has something valuable to offer to us it must be cherished, protected and preserved. Each culture must be appreciated in terms of its uniqueness because it has an individualised particularity."⁷

It is significant to mention here that the *gurubani* does not offer a conceptual study of the idea of multiculturalism. However, a perspectival view of the concept can be made by collocating relative ideas found therein.

Anecdotal evidence generates the argument that traditional societies used tolerance as the connective tissue of their existence.⁸ Tolerance also develops from the inherent fact that no one person, group or institution within traditional civilization possesses the Absolute. The absolute values and qualities that generate and animate Other outlooks are transcendent. It is noteworthy to mention here that the Sikh faith from its inception adopted a tolerant and open attitude towards the Other. Tolerance and equal respect for all religions was the keynote of the Gurus' teachings which kindled in the hearts of men the fire of faith and conviction.

Tolerance signifies a receptivity to and respect for opposite opinion, an open-mindedness to first listen to the ideas and views of the other and only then to respond and react as stressed by Guru Nanak,

ip br [d[Bhnrkjhn?
BkBe feS [; [Dhn? feS ejhn?

This is how a rapport is established with the Other — a rapport in which the Other is mirrored in Me and the Me in the other realizing the luminous state of mind as expressed by Guru Arjan,

Bk e' p?oh Bjh fprkBk
;rb jw eU pfBnrkjh

(In holy communion I am estranged with no one, nor is anyone alien).⁹

As contended by Sikhism, the self-manifesting spirit is revealed in different religions in different times and places. All revelations of the

7 Gurpreet Mahajan, *op.cit.*, p.70.

8 Zia-ud-din Sardar, *Post Modernism and the Other* (Pluto Press, n.d.), p.289.

9 J.S. Ahluwalia, *Liberating Sikhism from Sikhs* (Chandigarh, 2003), p. 17.

Divine are co-valid. No religion can claim to be the one and final expression of the Absolute owing to the inexhaustibility and infinity of the attributes of God and relativity of the modes of perception. This also rules out any room for dogmatic assertion of fullness and futility of any single religious revelation. The Sikh Gurus never recommended that their path was the only one for salvation. Guru Amar Das thus stated “Oh God, save man through whichever door he cometh to you.” Thus all religions are equal in status. The Sikh Gurus through religion and spirituality conveyed the message of equality of all cultures as well.

Further, Sikhism believes in monotheism or the oneness of God. The Sikh *mulmantra* which appears at the very beginning of the Guru Granth Sahib starts with the numeral ‘*Ik*’ which stands not only for the oneness of God but also for the oneness of the entire existence. What was the need for emphasizing this oneness of God by Guru Nanak? This need arose as a response to the prevalent beliefs in Hinduism and Islam with diverse names and forms of God. To conceive separate gods to various creeds, according to Guru Nanak is a superstition. “Saith Nanak, when the Guru hath removed superstition. Allah and Parabrahman are seen the same.”¹⁰

In several of the hymns the unity of God is emphasized. Guru Nanak uses both the Hindu names and Muslim names to call the one God. The following Hindu names of God occur often in his hymns — Bhagwan, Vishnu, Brahm, Gobind, Gopal, Han, Ishwar, Keshav, Krishna, Mulri, Parabrahman, Parveshwar, Rahu, Ram. Similarly, he calls his God with Islamic names as well — Allah, Kabir, Karim, Khuda, Malik, Rahim, Rahman, Sahib etc.

Similarly, in the *Akal Ustat* of Guru Gobind Singh many Muslim names of Allah are mentioned — Razakar (Provider), Aruv (Pardoner), Salamai (Peaceful), Karim-ur-Rahim (Generous in Mercy), Husn-ul-Chirag (Beauteous light), Garib-un-Niwaj (Merciful to the Poor), Kamal Karim (Perfect in Mercy), Razak Rahim (Gracious Provider), Bihisht-un-Niwas (Dweller in Heaven), Hamesh-us-Salam (Ever Peaceful), Ganim-us-Shikast (Breaker of Tyrants), and Garib-ul-Parast (Protector of the Poor). But despite all this great variety in names, God in actuality is one and neither is there a Hindu God or a Muslim God.

In a similar vein is the utterance attributed to Guru Nanak in one of the *janamsakhis*. “There is no Hindu and there is no Musalman” thereby emphasizing that no religion or culture is superior, but all are equal: Guru Arjan in one of his hymns states,

10 Guru Granth Sahib, p.826.

I am neither a Hindu nor a Musalman,
My body and soul belong to him,
who is called God of Muslims
and the Lord of Hindus.¹¹

The creation of the *Khalsa* by the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, in 1699, must not be misrepresented as a crusade against Islam. In the *Akal Ustat* Guru Gobind Singh very clearly emphasized that,

Hindus and Muslims are all one
Have each the habits of different environments.

But all men have the same eye, the same body, the same form, compounded of the same four elements — Earth, air, fire and water, Thus the Abekh of the Hindus and the Allah of Muslims are one.

The Kuran and the Puranas praise the same Lord
They are all one form,
The one Lord made them all.

While living with differences is a fact of our social existence, multiculturalism reflects upon the status of different cultural communities within a polity. Different but equal, this is the leitmotif of multiculturalism. This concept is echoed in the following verse of Guru Arjan

Some remember Him as Ram,
others call him Khuda
Some worship him as Gosain
other bow to him as Allah
He is called Karan Karan (cause of all causes)
Kirpa Dhar (merciful) and Rahim (compassionate)
Some bathe at sacred rivers, other perform Hajj
Some engage in *Puja*,
others bow to him in *Namaz*
Some study Vedas, some the four books
Some wear blue clothes, other white
Some call themselves Turks, others Hindus
Some desire *Bahisht*, other *swaraga*
But he alone, O Nanak, who attunes
himself to His will, knows the secret of the Lord.¹²

11 *Ibid.*, p.1136: Bk jw fjzd {Bk w [;bwb] nbj okw e/fgzv [gokBN]o}.

The distinguishing features of each cultural group is well-recognized but there is no sign of any discrimination. The tenth Guru repeated the same in his *Akal Ustat*.

The temple and the mosque are the same,
The Hindus and Muslim way of worship does not make any
difference.

Men are the same all over though they look different.
Gods and Demons, Yahshas and Gandharvas, Hindus and
Turks look different,
but the difference is only of dress, custom and country.

Thus the Sikh Gurus did not believe in any cultural discrimination nor in the superiority of any culture. In fact, they were against anyone quitting his own religion. On the contrary, they suggested only deeper penetration of one's own religion in thought, devotion and action.

To the Sikh Gurus, culture is the basis to identity and development of a community to its fullest length. It includes preservation of customs, traditions and way of life, language and the values of a particular community. A community is always sensitive to its own heritage and behaviour and codes of conduct.¹³ The Gurus were of opinion that man should be free to follow the culture of his choice and to speak the language he liked. There should not be any interference by the state. Guru Nanak not only condemned the rulers of his time for imposing their culture and language on the public but even condemned the Hindus for changing that culture and language under the influence of the ruling Muslim class. To quote Guru Nanak:

The ablution pot, the prayer, the prayer-mat, the call to prayer
have all assumed the Muslim garb: even God is now in blue
And men have changed their tongue and the Muslim way of
greeting prevails.¹⁴

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- 12 Gum Granth Sahib:
e'Jh p'h? okw okw e'Jh y[dkf].
e'Jh ;t? r[;Jhmk e'Jh nbkf].
ekoD eoD eohw. foegk Xkfo ojhw.
e'Jh Bkt? shofE e'Jh ji ikfJ.
e'Jh eo? g{ik e'Jh f;o[fBtkf].
e'Jh gV? p?d e'Jh es/Dk. e'Jh UY? Bhb e'Jh ;[g/d.
e'Jh ej? s[oe[e'Jh ej? fjzd{. e'Jh pkS? fG;s [e'Jh ;[ofrzd{.
ej[BkBe fifB j[ew[gSksk. gqG ;kfjDk dk fsfB G/d[iksk. (okwebh wL õ)
- 13 Gurdeep Kaur, *Political Ethnicity of Guru Granth Sahib* (New Delhi, 2000), p.162.
- 14 Guru Granth Sahib, p.119.
e{ik pKr fBtki. w [;bk Bhb o{g pbtkoh]

In *Asa Di Var* also, Guru Nanak condemns the change of culture by the Hindus. He says:

Who (Hindu) decked himself in (the Muslim dress) blue and assumed the attributes of a Turk and a Pathan. They seek approval of the Muslim rulers by wearing blue.¹⁵

Again,

In every house all the person say *Mian* (Islamic language)
Your language has become different O, men (Hindu)¹⁶

Thus, the people were urged not to use an alien language and follow blindly the ways and forms of life of the ruling class.

Nowhere do the Gurus in their teachings ask either Hindus or Muslims to give up their faith and embrace another. The Sikh tradition of dialogue with the Other originated with Guru Nanak himself who during his journeys in the Indian subcontinent and beyond, held discussions with his contemporary saints and *sufis*, scholastic exponents and practitioners of other faiths and exhorted them to rediscover the internal significance of their beliefs and rituals without discarding their chosen path.¹⁷ He exhorted a Hindu to be a true Hindu and a Muslim to be a true Muslim and laid stress on practical life of inward purity. That is why he insisted upon inner content of the outer forms of religious worship.¹⁸ About the ideal conduct of a Muslim he stipulated:

A Muslim can only be called a Muslim if he considered the Grace of the Lord as his mosque, faith as his prayer-mat, the rightful earning as the Quran, the effort as the circumcision and the character as the fast.

Make right conduct your *Ka'aba*, truth your *Pir* and good deeds your *Kalima* and prayers.

They *tasbih* is that which is pleasing to God. So will God preserve your honour, says Nanak.

Another person's right is as swine to the Muslims and the cow to the Hindu.

The *Pir* and the Prophet shall only stand surety for a man who has not eaten carrion.

15 *Ibid.*, pp.470-72.

16 *Ibid.*, p.119: xo xo whnk ; GBK ihhK p'bh nto s[whoh

17 J.S. Ahluwalia, *op.cit.*, p.33.

18 Surinder Singh Kohli, *A Critical Study of the Adi Granth* (Delhi, 1976), p.123.

A man does not go to heaven by performing lip service.¹⁹

Knowledge of the Quran must result inwardly in spiritual growth and outwardly in compassionate behaviour. “Wise is he who cleans his mind. A Muslim is one who removes his impurity thus. He reads and acts upon what he reads. Thereupon he becomes acceptable.”²⁰

To achieve this is not easy but it is possible. To be a Muslim is difficult. Only those who really are Muslims should be given the name. First, he should regard as sweet the religion of the Lords’ devotees and have self-conceit effaced as if with the file that escapes a mirror. Becoming the true follower of the prophet, let him put aside all thoughts of life and death.

He should heartily submit to the Lord’s will, worship the creator and efface his self-conceit.

Then, if he is also merciful to all sentient beings he shall be called a Muslim.²¹

Sikhism was critical of religious hypocrisy, hollow ritualism and orthodoxy both Hindu and Muslim. All through Muslims are treated as a part of the Indian culture and exhorted to outgrow narrowness and fanaticism and to imbibe the ethical qualities enjoined by their faith. “Exhortation towards discovering and practising the ethical and spiritual essence of religion, as against its external thrust of formalities are scattered all over the teachings of the *gurus*.”²²

Islam is a religion to be embraced not for reasons of political and social expediency but in order to attain the truth which is God. Overt in the above stated verse is a plea for tolerance in the sense not of

19 Guru Granth Sahib, p.140-41.
fwjo wwhfs f;de w [;bk je jbk b e [okD
;ow ; [zBfs; hb o’ik j’o w [;bwkD
eoDh ekpk ;u [gho[ebwk eow fBtik]; b’e[wL õññ
s;ph ;k fs;[Gkt;h BkBe oy? bki]õ]

20 *Ibid.*, p.662.

21 *Ibid.*, p.14.
w [;bwkD[ejktD w[;eb[ik j’fJ sk w[;bwkD[ejkt?
ntfb nT[fb dhB [efo fwmk w;eb wkBk wkb[w[;kt?
j’fJ w[;bfw[dhB w[jkD? woD ihtD ek Gow u[ekt?
op eh oikfJ wzB/ f;o T[gfo eosk wzB/ nkg[rtk?
sT BkBe ;op ihnk fwjozwfs j’fJ s w [;bwkD[ejkt?]õ].

22 G.S. Talib, *The Impact of Guru Gobind Singh on Indian Society* (Patiala, 1999), p.73; J.S. Grewal, *From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Essays in Sikh History* (Amritsar, 1972), p.23.

difference but of acceptance. The true Muslim is considered to be one who can see truth in the religion of others and whose level of belief goes beyond the outward observances of Islam. Islam is thus portrayed by Guru Nanak as a path by which the truth could be reached.

The Sikh Gurus replaced religious ritualism by alive humanistic ethics. About the five prayers (*Namaz*) the Gurus stated,

Five prayers, five times, five their names

Truth is the first, rightful earning the second.

God's grace for all the third, sincere mind the fourth and the praises of the Lord the fifth.

Let practice be the repetition of the *Kalima* in order to be called a Muslim.²³

The *Kalima* is recited by a Muslim as the basic foundation of practice, but the Guru wants the practice of the five virtuous prayers for a true Muslim as his *Kalima*.

From the above, it is clear that Guru Nanak knew the crux of Muslim literature as well as Muslim rituals and practices prevalent therein. However, he “poses the ethical thematics very consciously against all types of ritualism as well as against all types of scholastics, sophistry and elitism in religious matters.”²⁴ The decentering of the transcendental occurs in Guru Nanak in favour of the primacy of the ethical. Kapur Singh states, “Sikhism raises ethical conduct to a higher and more independent, absolute status and makes it as the true expression of the harmony of human personality with the will of God.”²⁵

In one of the *janamasakhis* when Guru Nanak was questioned as to who was superior Hindu or Musalman, the Guru's reply was that without good deeds both would suffer. So his message is clear. All religions and cultures were equal; it is the deeds of men that decided their status.

The composition of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Holy scripture, itself is an expression of a broad religious understanding and tolerance. It contains the hymns and verses of thirty six saints of which only six are

23 Guru Granth Sahib, p.14.
gzfi fBtkik tys gzfi gzik gzi/ BkT{
gfjbk ;u[jbk d{fJ shik y?o y [dkfj
uT[Eh Bhnfs okf ; wB
gzith f;cfs ;BkfJ
eoDh ebwk nkfy e? sk w{;bwkB ;dkfJ

24 N. Muthumohan, *Essential Postulates of Sikhism* (Patiala, 2003), p.132.

25 Kapur Singh, *Sikhism: An Oecumenical Religion* (Chandigarh, 1993), p.129.

the Sikh Gurus. The remaining thirty authors are non-Sikhs belonging to Hindu and Muslim traditions. The latter included Shaikh Farid and Bhikam who were Muslim *Sufi faqirs* and also Kabir who is said to have been a Muslim weaver. Besides these, it also includes the hymns and songs of Vaishnava *Bhaktas* and some other saints of the period. "This strange but democratic spirit of tolerance and respect to the viewpoints of other religious saints is a unique phenomena in the history of religion. No other scripture of any religion in the world includes in itself the hymns of saints of another religion."²⁶ Thus, the Guru Granth Sahib is free of any sectarianism in religious matters. When we bow to the Guru Granth Sahib we in fact are bowing in equal respect to the Sikh Gurus, and also the Hindu and Muslim saints whose verses lie enshrined in it and are an integral part of the Sikh scripture. Similarly, the two institutions of *Sangat* and *Pangat* gave an added impetus to the concept of egalitarianism amongst the followers of Sikhism. Everyone was enjoined to partake of the free community kitchen on the basis of equality without any discrimination of caste, creed, religion or culture. Continuing since the time of the first Guru both the institutions are a significant part of the Sikh ethos today.

[III]

This type of humane, brotherly attitude and a spirit of openness and tolerance for the Other is found throughout the entire history of Sikhism. Guru Nanak is known to have had a Muslim, named Mardana, as his companion on his travels. This Mardana was a historical character; some (*Sloks*) verses in his name appear in the Guru Granth Sahib along with Guru Nanak.²⁷ This companionship was symbolical of the future attitude of the Sikhs towards the Muslims. The Muslim was to be treated as a friend, with equal regard and love.

There is an authentic tradition amongst the Sikhs that Guru Arjan while laying foundation of the Darbar Sahib or Golden Temple at Amritsar called in the famous Muslim saint of Lahore, Hazrat Mian Mir to bless it. This is another of the cardinal facts which have determined the direction of the Sikh attitude to the Muslims, The Muslim, as the Other, has been well treated.

The fact is well known of Sikhs having spared the small territory of the Muslim Nawab of Malerkotla when during the eighteenth century all the area around was overrun by the Sikhs. All through the Sikhs respected the territory of Malerkotla because Nawab Sher Muhammad

26 Guru Granth Sahib, p.553.

27 N. Muthumohan, *op.cit.*, p.92.

Khan was said to have protested against the assassination of the sons of Guru Gobind Singh at Sirhind.

Guru Gobind Singh accepted Mughal rule as a fact of history, just as he would accept any other rule that might have happened to be established. That the Guru's attitude towards the ruling Mughals was neither that of a rebel nor a sworn opponent is evident from the following lines of *Bachhitar Natak*:

There are two houses — the Baba Nanak's and Baber's
Both these are ordained by the Lord himself
This one is leader in faith, while in that one
inheres the sovereignty of the earth.

In the battle of Bhangani, a few miles above Paonta, the Guru was assisted by the Muslim saint, Pir Budhu Shah of Sadhaura along with his sons and disciples. When years later the Guru was being pursued by Mughal soldiers after the battle of Chamkaur, he was given shelter and safety by two Muslims, Nabi Khan and Ghani Khan. They had dealings with the Guru in horses and obviously looked upon him as a person to be revered and protected. Later still, he was sheltered by the Muslim chief of Raikot, named Rai Kullar in whose family was kept one of the Guru's swords as a proud heirloom. Similarly, the creation of the *Khalsa* must be seen as an endeavour of the Guru to lay the foundation of a new society based upon justice and freedom of conscience. Its purpose was to sow the seeds of transformation in all Indian culture and to uphold the ideals of equality and close brotherhood as well as to infuse a military spirit into the people to fight against political tyranny and injustice. There is no proof to say that his fight was against the religion of Islam as such.

In a similar vein, Maharaja Ranjit Singh did not declare Sikhism as a state religion nor sought to follow a theocratic system. The Lahore Durbar presented a non-sectarian picture with key portfolios being given on considerations other than those of religio-communal nature. His Prime Minister was Dogra Dhian Singh, while Faqir Azizuddin was in charge of external affairs and the home department was handled by Faqir Nuruddin. Similarly, the Muslims fought as bravely for the Sikh kingdom during the wars with the East India Company (1846 and 1849) as the Sikhs. One of the most moving laments, on the fall of the Sikh kingdom is contained in the *var* or ballad of Shah Muhammad, a Muslim, for whom the fight was between two mighty kingdoms of the Punjab and Hindustan and not between the Sikhs and the British in which the Muslims might stand indifferent. The liberal and tolerant policy of the Maharaja towards the Other was primarily due to the influence of the

pluralistic and multi-cultural pattern of state and society as envisaged in Sikhism which heralded a new universalistic value pattern. The liberalism of Ranjit Singh flowed out of the pluralistic Sikh tradition itself and of giving equal regard and respect to the Other, without any discrimination.

Social groups are the decisive forces shaping human history, present realities and future situations. The state therefore must evolve such a system which is equitable to all, where there is no discrimination but equal space is provided for the exploration of the cultural traditions of the Other, a tolerance and openness for the Other which will help in the emergence of truly multicultural societies. And in this context, the message of the *gurubani* providing equal recognition and respect to all cultures is relevant, and significant. While discouraging hatred, discrimination and violence, it encourages social and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding which are vital ingredients for multiculturalism. It teaches us to accept and value the Other in his or her Otherness.