THE ROLE OF ISLAM AND SIKHISM IN CHECKING RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

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Abstract

In recent times, the biggest obstacle to ensuring the security and dignity of human beings is the rise of religious intolerance. The problem needs a broad explanation. There have been several reasons behind the increase in this problem. This study explores misconceptions and lack of knowledge about different religions as one of the principal reasons for the rise of religious intolerance. Misconceptions about secularism and pluralism also accelerate the problem. The present researcher considers that violations of human rights and lack of religious freedom are the root causes of the rise of intolerance and religious extremism. Religious norms and values, and the objective study of different religious faiths play a significant role in establishing a peaceful society. The present research tries to find out the notion of Islam and Sikhism, in resisting religious intolerance on the one hand and establishing communal harmony on the other. Human beings do not live only for material necessities. There is a strong need for the spiritual nourishment of every human being. In this perspective, religions convey the universal messages of peace, security, tolerance and the protection of human rights and dignity among all, irrespective of class, race, and caste. The current paper deals with liberal approaches of Islam and Sikhism that encompass the spirit of brotherhood, catholicity, equality, pluralism, tolerance, and peaceful co-existence among the followers of different faiths.

Keywords: *Religion, religious freedom, religious intolerance, Islam, Sikhism, brotherhood, equality, human dignity, pluralism, rights, secularism.*

Introduction

The world today, is facing challenges and becoming victims of persecution for decades because of political and religious insurgencies. Establishing equal rights among the people of diverse communities has

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become a big challenge in today's society. The current paper tries to unfold how the misconceptions and lack of interfaith knowledge increase the tendency of religious intolerance. In this regard, the purpose of the present study is to highlight the all-embracing teachings of Islam and Sikhism that uphold religious freedom and contribute to preventing religion-based intolerance and violence.

Islam and Sikhism, two monotheistic religions, aim at establishing unity of humankind through the concept of mutual respect and universal love and brotherhood. Islam has laid down numerous injunctions and prohibitions for ensuring human rights and dignity as part of an eternal and prosperous way of life. Sikhism also has shown many examples of religious pluralism and equality of all human races. It gives special priority to human rights and religious freedom for the people of all communities.

Individuals have fears and doubts about religious injunctions resulting from the degradation of human character and ignorance about different religions. This paper deals with the concept of liberalism and religious freedom in the light of Islam and Sikhism. It also analyzes the scope to which the rights and dignity of religious minorities are well-preserved in the theories and practices of these two religious faiths.

Background of the Study

All the religions of the world teach human beings to love each other, preach the messages of peace for the betterment of all humankind. Religious teachings reduce sufferings of human beings. In the history of human civilization, diverse religious faiths have been playing significant roles in uniting people and enabling them to live in peace and harmony. At the same time, shedding blood in the name of religion is also an undeniable reality. The world today is being torn by conflicts and corruption in the name of religion. Humanity is under threat due to worldly desires and the egoistic nature of human beings. Bigotry and distrust prevail among the people of different communities. Individuals need to be tolerant towards the followers of other faiths to keep society free from all these inhuman deeds. In this regard, both Islam and Sikhism have a universal outlook that inculcates the spirit of brotherhood, catholicity, equality, tolerance, and religious freedom.

In the past, societies were comparatively uniform in nature based on religion, race, or ethnicity. Today's world has become a global village with

the unprecedented development of technology, science, and transportation systems. These have improved situations and the media have contributed to increasing the human feelings of multiplicity in views and values systems. However, it is undeniable that societies composed of different ideologies, cultures, and religions are more prone to differences and conflicts. Despite this, human society is now facing the reality of diversity, especially religious and cultural diversity.

Many oppressions and dictatorships have taken place in the name of religion. At present, religion is being used to seize power in some countries of the world. However, the question is: is religion the only tool of dictatorship in the world? Hitler, Mao Tse-tung, Franco, Malan, and many other heads of the state did not rule in the name of religion, but they were the pioneers of the authoritarian government. In the twenty-first century, human society is mostly free from the domination of religion, but authoritarian regimes have evolved in many countries during this period. Misconceptions and lack of proper knowledge about different religious injunctions regarding human rights and dignity have turned society into a more unstable situation. The education system is also responsible for the rise of intolerance. Interfaith learning is not included in the education system of many countries of the world and is not encouraged at any level of education. As a result, being ignorant about other faiths, people are often intolerant of the followers belonging to different views and religions.

Methodological Approach

The present research has followed the qualitative method in describing, explaining, and analyzing the collected data. In this qualitative research, secondary sources have been used to collect relevant data and information regarding the research problem. This research has used secondary data mainly from the English translations and interpretations of Qur'an, Hadith, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji and previous works relevant to this field. In order to develop the conceptual framework of the research, various verses of the Holy Scriptures have been explained and analyzed in depth. The current paper generates the idea of how the teachings of Islam and Sikhism play a role in checking religion-based intolerance. In this regard, the present paper explores several components of Islam and Sikhism that contribute to ensuring communal harmony in society. A detailed explanation of this problem is needed. The current paper has followed the discourse analysis of different related books, journals, and online-based research articles to

attain cognitive knowledge about this problem.

Understanding Religion and Religious Intolerance

Religion is one of the most powerful regulators in the social control system. It is an inevitable aspect of social life because religious beliefs, practices, values, and injunctions motivate human activities (Alam, 2018; McGuire, 1997). To practice religion in a peaceful environment is considered one of the fundamental rights of human beings. The term 'Religion' derives from a Latin term 'Religare' where 'Re' denotes 'again' and 'Ligare' means 'bond'. So, Religare or Religion means 'bond again'. This definition contains the message of brotherhood and unity among the people of different societies and cultures. Religion enriches human life through its moral and practical injunctions. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes said that "religion is the human adjustment to the realities of existence in life-enriching ways" (Swidler & Mojzes, 2000, p. 5). All the religions convey the messages of justice, equality, and morality that make individuals ideal humans. That is why the present researcher defines religion as a set of beliefs and practices combining some rules, regulations and prohibitions through which a man can lead a moral life. Religious intolerance is now a global problem. Intolerance does not mean the particular type of discrimination or violations of religious freedom, it refers to human attitudes that prompt such type of violations. "Intolerance refers to conduct manifesting hatred or prejudice based on religion or belief as well as to a state of mind, underlies descriptions of various human rights violations" (Sullivan, 1988, p. 505).

Role of Islam

Islam is a complete code of life that encompasses mutual respect, universal love and brotherhood. It is committed to establishing a happy and prosperous society. Islam has laid down numerous injunctions and prohibitions for securing human rights and dignity as part of an eternal and comprehensive way of life. The Qur'an is the essence of tolerance, interfaith communion, and religious freedom. "Of the three monotheistic religions developed by the Semites, Philip Khuri Hitti observes, "the Islam of the Koran is the most characteristic and comes nearer the Judaism of the Old Testament than does the Christianity of the New Testament. It has such close affinities with both…" (Hitti, 1970; Haider, 2013). To promote religious freedom, Islam suggests treating others with sensitivity and

kindheartedness irrespective of religion, caste, or colour. Islam teaches individuals to be more compassionate to each other. It fosters the utmost self-restraint and also stimulates man to abstain from hatred and violence.

There should be no compulsion in religion (The Holy Qur'an: 2:256). Islam emphasizes individual freedom in matters of religion. Compulsion is not compatible with religion. Religion depends upon faith and will, and these should not be imposed on individuals by force. The Qur'an also says: "We know of best what they say; say, and you (O Muhammad SAW) are not a tyrant over them (to force them to Belief)" (The Holy Qur'an: 50:47). The concept of religious tolerance is intimately related to the spirit of Islam. Islam proclaims that the residing subjects and the temporary visitors have a guarantee regarding their safety and the liberty of their conscience (Hamidullah, 1992). It has shown a liberal attitude towards establishing a friendly relation among the followers of different faiths. It suggested a respectful and dignified attitude towards individuals even 1450 years ago. Islam prescribes, "And certainly We gave to the children of Adam excellence and dignity, and We gave them a means of transportation on land and in the sea" (The Holy Qur'an: 17: 70). This view has given special features and uniqueness to human rights in Islam.

Islam guarantees the rights and dignity of non-Muslims. All kinds of political, economic, social, and intellectual rights exist in the Islamic view of human rights. Similarly, all these rights are applicable to all Muslims and non-Muslims, irrespective of race, color, and language. Islam emphasizes on respect and forgiveness towards non-Muslims. The Qur'an says: "Say (O Muhammad) to the believers to forgive those who do not believe in the days of Allah (His recompense), that Allah may recompense individuals for what they have earned" (The Holy Qur'an: 45:14). Islam has given several directions in ensuring the rights and dignity of non-Muslims. The victims of social, religious, political, economic, and of any other persecutions have always found refuge and shelter in the land of Islam. The Qur'an declares: "And if any one of the pagans seeks thy asylum (O Muhammad), then give him asylum…and then convey him to his place of safety…" (The Holy Qur'an: 9:6).

Islam asserts the principles of the unity of humankind. Since the Almighty Creator is one and since the whole mankind is one, the divine messages that have been revealed from time to time to guide people on the right path must also be universal and the same (Sayem, 2008). The

Qur'an says, "Mankind was one community, and Allah sent Prophets with glad tidings and warnings, and with them, He sent the scriptures…" (The Holy Qur'an: 2:213). Allah has sent messengers to every nation. "…And there never was a nation, but a warner had passed among them" (The Holy Qur'an 35:24). Islam also guarantees the adherents of diverse faiths the free exercise of their rites and rituals. "For every nation, We have ordained religious ceremonies…which they must follow" (The Holy Qur'an: 22:67).

Islam introduced a community of believers based on the unity of God that was inspired by the concept of brotherhood and social integrity (Zaman, 1970). The most significant and far-reaching reform of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was to establish a peaceful society by eliminating inequality among the followers of different communities. Discrimination based on racial origin, social status, or economic affiliation is strictly forbidden. Allah prescribes the Islamic concept of universal brotherhood: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other" (The Holy Qur'an: 49:13). This verse signifies that since the whole human race has ultimately come from the same source, we need to know each other. The Qur'an also says: "Say (O Muslims), we believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Abraham, Ismael and Isaac, and Jacob and his tribes, and that which has been given to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them" (The Holy Qur'an: 2:136). Thus Muslims believe not only in Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) but also in all other prophets. Such Qur'anic instructions can be the model for resisting discrimination in the name of religion.

All-embracing teaching of Islam is the commandment that a Muslim should collaborate even with the enemy in a state of war! The Qur'an states, "…and let not the hatred of a people who have stopped your going to the inviolable mosque (The Holy *Kaaba*) incite you to transgress; but help ye one another unto charity and piety" (The Holy Qur'an 5:2). Islam prescribes, mutual help and respect should not be limited to Muslims only but should apply equally to the entire humanity regardless of religion or caste. The persecution on non-Muslims has been harshly criticized in the *Hadith*. Saying of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) reported by Abu Dawud is: "Whoever oppresses the non-Muslim subjects, shall find me to be the advocate on the day of the resurrection against the oppressing Muslims" (Hamidullah, 1992, p. 206).

Anti-racist messages of Islam still resonate today from the 7th century CE. The Charter of Medina is widely considered to be the first written constitution in the world. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) mentioned the standpoint of Islam centering religious freedom and minority rights in the Charter: "The Jews, Christians, pagans, and Muslims of Medina are all citizens of one country and all have equal civil rights. Everyone will practice his own religion. No one can interfere in the practice of the religion of others" (Islam D. M., 2005). After the conquest of Makkah, Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) used to work with the people from all tribes. During that time, Muslims developed friendly relations with Christians and Jews. Muhammad (p.b.u.h) himself made agreements with several Christian tribes to guarantee their security and free exercise of religion along with their traditional rituals (Arnold, 1913). Hazrat Muhammad (p.b.u.h) criticized the prevailing communalism based on the superiority of different castes, tribes, or religions. In his Farewell Hajj speech, Muhammad (p.b.u.h) opposed discrimination based on language and racism and declared the right to equality of all humankind:

"All human beings are descended from Adam and Eve. There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a non-Arab over an Arab, and no superiority of a white person over a black person or of a black person over a white person, except based on personal piety and righteousness" (Rahman M. M., 2016, p. 146).

Harmony is a universal and undisputed principle of Islam based on which social welfare is primarily dependent. Humanist philosophy is a vital aspect of Islam. The motto of Islam is to uphold peace and harmony between religion and human life (Rahman S. , 1956). It is said in the *Sahih Al Bukhari* as cited in Haider (2013) that "the meaning of peace with human beings is- leading one's life in such a manner so that it does not become the cause of ruin to peace of any other human being" (p. 164). Islam advocates catholicity and tranquility among all people regardless of caste, creed, gender, colour, and language. In this way, it emphasizes both the spiritual as well as the material well-being of human beings.

Role of Sikhism

Sikhism has a universal outlook that inculcates the spirit of brotherhood, catholicity, equality, tolerance, and peaceful co-existence among the followers of different faiths. It is a religion with the spirit of solid humanism.

Sikhism prescribes that every human being should be entitled to equal political, social, and religious rights. Humanism appreciates ethical norms, reason, and justice for the interest of all humankind. Religious freedom is a vital right for every living being. Sikhism promulgates religious freedom, and it never emphasizes conversion to Sikhism. It suggests individuals to be better human beings following their religious ideology properly.

Nanak (1469-1538 CE.), the founder of Sikhism, was born in Punjab, a region of northwest India. During that period, Punjab was a place of diverse cultures, and many foreign traders and officials had regular visits there. As a result, Guru Nanak was familiar with diverse cultures and personalities from different religious and cultural backgrounds. He was born in a Hindu family, but from the very beginning of his childhood, Nanak was keen to know the religious and cultural values of other communities. In his youth, he made himself well-known with the popular customs of both Islam and Hinduism. That is why he gained a general knowledge of the Qur'an and Brahmanical Shastras (Center, 1990). In addition, before Nanak from the tenth century CE., India was dominated by the Muslim Mughal rulers, but it is still now a country of Hindu majority. Because of having remarkable differences between Hinduism and Islam, the followers of these two religions were often hostile and frequently involved in violence. Some pioneer figures had sincere attempts to unite the believers of Hinduism and Islam into a common understanding. In this aspect, Kabir, a renowned Muslim saint, was one of the best reformers and was very familiar with his Hindu neighbors (Hopfe, 1991). Nanak was a later contemporary of Kabir and was influenced by the ideology of Kabir. In addition, because of the mixed culture of the region, Nanak's childhood teacher was a Muslim, and undoubtedly he was influenced (Ibid., 1991). The world today remembers Guru Nanak for his preaching of the essential unity of Islam and Hinduism. He also played a significant role in resolving the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India.

Sikhism has shown the highest importance on the equality of humankind. Guru Nanak rejected the caste system, slavery, economic and political exploitation and firmly stood for equality of the human race (Sidhu, 2006). It was the main attempt of all Sikh Gurus to understand all that One Supreme Creator dwells in the heart of all. Sikhism asserts: "Everyone looks up to You. You dwell in every heart true. One and all are equal in Your eyes" (Guru Granth Sahib: p. 97). Guru Nanak himself introduced every dress, every kind of diet, all ways that lead not only to one God but also to one humankind (Singh D. G., 1988). Sikhism has a

universal appeal, and its philosophy is for the welfare of all regardless of caste or religion. That is why one unique aspect of the daily prayer of a Sikh is to seek for *Sarbat Da Bhala* (Goodness or betterment for all) (Dhillon, 2005). It is reported again in the Sikh Holy Scripture: "God is no body's father's property, He enjoys Himself in all hearts" (The Guru Granth Sahib: p. 658). So, it should not be discriminated against God's creations. To reduce discrimination and disunity among the adherents of different castes and nations, Guru Nanak founded two effective institutions -*Sangat* and *Pangat*. These two concepts represent the true essence of the Sikh ideology of pluralism and religious freedom. *Sangat* is the congregation of people from different castes and faiths, and *Pangat* signifies sitting together in the same row. In *Sangat*, people from all communities sit together as equals to sing the praise of the Lord, their Common Father addressing Him by all names with equal love. In *Pangat*, to share their feelings of brotherhood, they take food together in *Guru-Ka-Langar* (Common Kitchen), irrespective of any caste, creed, or religion. To serve the purpose of these two institutions, on every Friday, Sikh Gurdwara is open for the people of all communities. These institutions always play a vital role in uniting people of different religious communities.

Sikhism always respects the religious sentiment of the followers belong to other faiths. Guru Nanak suggests the Muslim to be a good Muslim, the Hindu to be a good Hindu, who is a good Muslim his Namaz (prayer) and Roza (Fasting) is pure or who is a good Hindu his Puja (prayer) and sacrifice is pure, his quest for God is genuine, then he is a good Sikh too, and then his writings may be included in the Sikh Holy Scripture (Dhillon, 2005). Such a revolutionary idea has put the position of Sikhism on a firm foundation in preventing religion-based intolerance.

Sikhism does not care about the supremacy of any particular worship place of the respective religion. That is why Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th and last Guru of Sikhism, states:

> "The temple and the mosque are the same, the Hindu Worship and the Muslim prayer are the same, all men are the same; it is through erroneous judgment they appear different…all men have the same eyes, the same ears, the same body, the same build. A compound of earth, air, fire, and water...let no man, even by mistake, suppose there is a difference" (Islam K.N., 2017, p. 6; Khan, 1967, p. 227).

Sikh Scripture, Guru Granth Sahib Ji, is one of the best living examples

of liberalism. It is free from bias and animosity. The Scripture was written by 36 distinguished writers of different castes and religious faiths. Besides the writings of six Sikh Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib includes the hymns of 23 Hindu Bhaktas and 7 Muslim Sufis from several parts of India (Singh D. , 2010). To demonstrate the idea of religious pluralism, it contains verses of Dhana, a farmer from Rajasthan; Sadhna, a butcher from Sindh; Sain a barber from Rewa; Ravidas, a cobbler from Benares; Namdev, a calico printer from Maharashtra; Jaidev, a Brahman from Bengal and Farid and Kabir who were Muslims (Sidhu, 2006). In order to introduce a harmonious society, such kind unthinkable and sagacious outlook of Sikhism is immensely praiseworthy.

Sikhism profoundly respects the leaders and Holy Scriptures of other faiths. The foundation stone of the Harimander (Golden Temple) is said to have been laid by Mian Mir (1550-1635 CE.), a renowned Muslim Qadiri Sheikh of Lahore. He had a good relationship with Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Hargobind. Mughal Emperor Akbar had a good relationship with Guru Amar Das (Dhillon, 2005). Moreover, Guru Nanak had boundless love and respect for Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (p.b.u.h). It is said in the *Janam Sakhi* of Bhai Bala as cited in (Islam, 2017) that Guru Nanak says: *"dikha noor Muhammadi, dikha nabi rasool.Nanak qudrat dekh ke, khudi ghei sab bhool"* (p. 8). It generally means "I have seen the light of Muhammad (with my mind's eye). I have seen the prophet and the messenger of God in other words; I have understood his message or imbibed his spirit. After contemplating the glory of God, my ego was completely eliminated" (Ibid., 2017, p. 8). Guru Nanak had profound respect towards the sacred texts of all other religions. He forbade claiming any religious text to be false, rather those who do not contemplate them are false (Islam K. N., 2011).

Sikhism puts especial emphasis on secularism and religious pluralism. In the concept of secularism, Sikhism reports: "All have equal rights in affairs, all are partners, nobody is an outsider" (Guru Granth Sahib: p. 97). Secularism doesn't mean 'devoid of religion' but such a concept where the rights of people belonging to other faiths are duly respected. Secularism from a religious perspective can be defined as an attempt to address all human beings with equality, mutual respect, goodwill, morality, equal opportunity, religious tolerance and openness in administration (Sidhu, 2006).

Fanaticism and the Lack of Interfaith Knowledge

Fanaticism is an attitude that involves a person with excessive and irrational emotions. Fanaticism is one of the biggest problems in today's world. This is not a new problem. It exists in every sector, including politics, religion, and individual ideals. A fanatic is a person who considers a particular ideology as the only truth, especially for religious or political causes. Fanatics perceive that they have to act or infer everything in their own way. Most of them seek to resist their own views and the absolute rightness of their cause at all costs. When they are not able to perceive alternatives in such obdurate intolerance in religious or political beliefs they can lead to the use of violence regardless of the consequences (Whittaker, 2002).

Fanaticism is the motivation for terrorism. It includes ideological dogmas about a compulsion to stir up the political system to a practice proposed by religious values through violence (Arena & Arrigo, 2005). The fanatics think that their ideas and point of view are unquestionable and beyond any doubt. Religious fanatics recognize only the beliefs and values of their own religion and cannot accept or tolerate the differences. They are against any kind of liberal thought. Religious fanaticism is the extreme view regarding personal religious views and the views of others. It is sometimes defined as the unilateral attitude of religion, which simply means there is one truest religion in the world, where other faiths are considered to be null and void. In this perspective, it is to be mentioned that individuals are often reluctant to learn about other's religious faiths. This, in turn, gives rise to misconceptions in individuals about the religions of others. One should understand the meaning of pluralism and the co-existence of different faith-based religions to prevent religious intolerance. Individuals or groups cannot impose any restriction over any particular faith. This is the monolithic view that causes the rise of intolerance and extremism. In this aspect, understanding the proper teachings of different religions can motivate a person to adopt a non-violent policy, and thus a peaceful society may be established.

Concluding Analysis

Religion-based intolerance is destabilizing the entire world specially the South Asian regions. The study propounds salient aspects that dispel misconceptions about Islam and Sikhism centered on the concepts of

religious freedom, liberalism, pluralism, unity of mankind and minority rights, etc. The education system in recent times is responsible for the increase of intolerance and religious extremism. Interfaith knowledge is not included in any level of the education system in most countries of the globe. People are often intolerant against individuals or groups belonging to different views and religions because of being ignorant about other faiths. As a result, fanaticism, prejudices, and misconceptions in the name of religion contribute to the rise of intolerance in society.

All religions teach us mutual respect and tolerance. The teachings of liberalism and communal harmony in Islam and Sikhism can properly be realized by universal messages of the Qur'an and the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) and Guru Nanak were great instances of humanism because irrespective of any caste, creed, and nation based on equal rights and dignity they wanted to establish a peaceful society. Their practice of humanism can be a role model for today's modern society. They used to demolish hatred by love. People in this world now are engaged in hatred, backbiting and hypocrisy. The primary mission of Islam and Sikhism was to remove hatred and hypocrisy from the mind of the people. So, the core teachings of Islam and Sikhism are universal love and brotherhood and the equality of humankind, which are inevitable components for establishing interfaith and intercultural harmony. It has been clarified in this paper that religious values and the objective study of different religions have great importance in establishing communal harmony.

The tendency of religious extremism must be resisted with a firm hand. Provocations and rumors in the name of religions also has to be resisted strictly and vigorously. Government and mass media should play a contractive and significant role in this regard. The print-media and the discipline of religious studies in different institutions should seriously highlight the religious tenets of love, compassion, moderation, and restraint. It goes without saying that this is a vast area of research, and it is implausible to cover all the aspects of Islam and Sikhism that impede rising religious intolerance. Hence, the current study recommends interfaith dialogue as a field of further research, without which it is unlikely to resolute communal discontent.

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