

## CONCEPT OF GOD IN SIKHISM

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The concept of God is the fundamental which forms the entire structure and world-view of a religious system. God has been described in numerous ways, but there are seven significant aspects which need particular mention in order to explain the concept of God in Sikhism. The understanding of these aspects is extremely essential, because these have a far-reaching effect and consequence in governing the life of the Sikh and in following the significance, origin and course of Sikh traditions, institutions and practices.

### CREATOR

God is the Creator (Creator-Person) of the universe, which is His creation. The universe is in time and space, and is changing and becoming. God is not identical with the universe. The Creator is different from the creation which is limited and conditioned. God is uncreated, free and unlimited and thus different from His creation. God is not the material cause of the universe. But, no independent *Prakriti* is assumed. He creates everything.

The universe is not illusory or unreal. Since God is Limitless and Omnipresent, the creation is in God, but not God. The very concept of a Creator-God implies a universe as the creation of God and different from Him. "God created the world of life and planted *Naam* (Immanent God) therein."<sup>1</sup> "The Self-Existent God manifested Himself into *Naam*. Second came the creation of the world. He permeated it and reveals in His creation."<sup>2</sup> "He created all, fills all, and is yet separate."<sup>3</sup> There are many hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib which mention that God was there even before He created the universe, He being Transcendent Himself starts the creation. "He is the Sole-Creator. There is no second one"<sup>4</sup> "For millions of aeons the Timeless One was by Himself." "God was by Himself and there was nothing else."<sup>5</sup> "There was no love or devotion. Nor was His creative power in operation."<sup>6</sup> Again, in answer to the question of the *Yogis*, "When there was no sign and no form, where was the Word (*Shabad* or Logos) and how was He identified with Truth?"<sup>7</sup> The Guru replied, "When there was no form, no sign, no individuation, the Word in its Essence abided in the Transcendent God; when there was no earth, no sky (time or space) the Lord permeated everything. All distinction, all forms, then abided in the Wonderous Word. No one is pure without Truth. Ineffable is this gospel."<sup>8</sup>

The Gurus say that before He created form, He was all by Himself; before He was Immanent He was Transcendent only; and yet all immanence, expression, creativity, were inherent *in* Him and so was His Word, in essence. "In the religion of Truth, God creates perpetually, watches His creation with a Benevolent eye. He is happy about it and deliberates over it, directing it with

His Will."<sup>9</sup> It means God is Ever-Creative. He has been called Ever-New, Ever-Fresh and Blooming (*Nit-navan, Navtan*).

The above gives a clear idea of the creative activity of God and the cosmological aspect of His creation which is distinct from Him.

#### TRANSCENDENT AND IMMANENT

God is both Transcendent and Immanent. He is both in the universe and outside it. The Self-Created or Transcendent God was always there.

TRANSCENDENT: While time and space, force and change are the aspects of the becoming universe, God is Eternal, Self-Existent and cannot be conceived or explained in empirical terms. His being Limitless and Timeless cannot be understood in terms of space and temporal time. He is beyond space and beyond time. The first Guru describes the state of God when there was no universe of time and space. It only shows God's Transcendent character. *InSidh Gosht*, in answer to a question as to where was the Transcendent God before the stage of creation, Guru Nanak replied, "To think of the Transcendent Lord in that state is to enter the realm of wonder. Even at that stage of *Sunn* (Void), He permeated all that Void."<sup>10</sup> The Guru, in effect, means that to matters that are beyond the spacio-temporal world, it would be wrong to apply the spacio-temporal logic, and yet man knows of no other logic or language. Therefore, he has to be explained, however inadequately or symbolically, only in terms of that language. That is why the Gurus have cautioned us against the pitfalls and inadequacy of human logic to comprehend the Timeless one<sup>11</sup>. He is Entirely Different. All the same, the Guru has mentioned the state when the Transcendent God was all by Himself and there was no creation. "When there was no form in sight, how could there be good or bad actions. When God was in the Self-Absorbed State, there could be no enmity or conflict. When God was all by Himself, there could be no attachment or misunderstanding."<sup>12</sup> "For millions of aeons, the Timeless One was by Himself. There was no substance or space, no day or night (i.e., no time), no stars or galaxies, God was in His Transcendence."<sup>13</sup> That state of God is not to be envisaged in terms of limitless space or time but in terms of spacelessness and timelessness, i.e., something beyond the categories of space and time, something beyond a relative world. Actual space and time are the dimensions of a becoming, relative or changing universe. With these categories we understand and assess the universe in which we live. The nature of God transcends all known categories with which we describe the universe. The Gurus again and again describe Him as Wondrous, Infinite, Unfathomable, Unknowable, Undescribable, Ineffable and Immeasurable by human categories of thought and perception. We at best can only assess things by our own standard and measures which are of a limited and relative character, being the categories of a becoming universe. We, therefore, cannot completely comprehend God who is beyond us and unconditioned and unfettered by

those dimensions and limits. God, who is the Creator of these limitations, cannot be judged by the yardstick of those created limitations within which we move, perceive, conceive, live and assess. Ultimately, the Guru calls Him Wondrous, the Wonder of Wonders, i.e., He is beyond description and comprehension or, 'Wholly Other' as described by Otto. "The mind alone can never know Him".

IMMANENT: The Immanent aspect of God has been variously described as His Will that directs the universe, His Word that informs the universe and His *Naam* that not only creates the entire universe but sustains and governs the creation. According to the Gurus, God creates the universe, then becomes Immanent in it, being at the same time Transcendent. "He that permeates all hearts (Immanent) is Transcendent too."<sup>14</sup> "He pervades and is yet detached."<sup>15</sup> He creates all, fills and is yet separate."<sup>16</sup> "Having created the world, He stands in the midst of it and yet is separate from it."<sup>17</sup> In Sikhism God is believed to be both Transcendent and Immanent. In Islam God is supposed to be only Transcendent, even though the Immanent aspect of God appears to be recognised when it is said, "God is nearer to you than your jugular vein". In Christianity, the Immanent aspect of God is clearly accepted and emphasized. This Immanence of God does not mean that God has two stages; but it is only a symbolic way of expressing God's connection with the world. Naturally, when the world is not there the question of His Immanence does not arise. That is why when there was no form, the Word (immanence) in essence abided in the Transcendent God."<sup>18</sup>

The Gurus' statements about the Immanence of God are just to emphasize the spiritual and meaningful character of life and the universe, and its capacity for relationship with God. They envisage only one God who has various characteristics as indicated in the *Mul Mantra*. Just as the Transcendent and Immanent aspects of God, all description of Him seeks to define Him as "Wholly Other". The Immanent aspect indicates the same God's love for His creation. As in any theism, in Sikhism the Immanent aspect of God, called His *Naam*, Will and *Shabad*, is of great importance. On the one hand, it gives relevance, authenticity, direction and sanction to the entire moral and spiritual life of man and his institutions and goals. On the other hand, it emphasizes God's capacity for revelation and nearness to man and His deep and abiding interest in the world. It is almost impossible to conceive of a theistic system without the Immanence of God. It is on the assumption of the Immanence of God that most of the theistic institutions are based. In any system where God is only Transcendent, all moral and spiritual life and yearning would become pointless, irrelevant and superfluous.

Here, a few words of clarification. When we say that God is both Transcendent and Immanent, it does not at all mean that there are two parts or phases of God. It is the Transcendent God who is everywhere, in each heart,

place and particle. It is He who is both *Sargun* and *Nirgun*. "The same God is *Sargun* and *Nirgun*, *Nirankar* and Self-Absorbed (*Sunn Samadhi*)."<sup>19</sup> "God is near, not far away."<sup>20</sup> "He is in the Creation, He is the EK *Onkar* and no other permeates everywhere."<sup>21</sup> The Gurus repeatedly emphasize that He is One and we only give Him different names. But it would be highly inappropriate to confuse the Gurus' concept of *Sargun* and *Nirgun* (i.e., One Transcendent-cum-Immanent God) with the Advaitic connotation of these terms as also of *Ishvara*. These Advaitic concepts have distinct connotation of phases, stages or transformation. These have been clearly repudiated by the Gurus by their concept of One God. Shankra deems *Ishvara* to be a lower stage of God which has to be transcended to reach the higher stage of Brahm. For Ramanuja God is virtually pantheistic. The world, souls and *Ishvara* are three eternal principles. The world and souls are the body and qualities of Brahm. The three eternal principles of *Ishvara*, souls and the world constitute the Brahm, which is an entirely different concept from that of the One Creator, God of the Gurus, who is simultaneously Transcendent, Immanent and Everything. The Gurus never accept the Advaitic concepts of *Sargun* and *Nirgun*. Similarly, in the hymn of *Sach Khand*, the Guru calls the *Nirankar* as One who resides, deliberates, creates and directs. He is Benevolent, Gracious and is delighted to see His Creation. But, *Nirankar* literally means the "Formless One" and similarly, has distinct Advaitic meanings. The hymn referred to above repudiates all those concepts and adds that *Sach Khand*, the abode of God, is full of endless numbers of forms, universes and regions.

By the above two examples, we wish to convey that it would be extremely erroneous and misleading to introduce old Indian or Advaitic concepts and meanings while interpreting the ideas and terms of the Gurus. In their hymns, they have made every term and concept used by them unambiguously clear. The Guru Granth Sahib is the best authority and interpretation to understand and convey the meanings of the concepts and terms used by the Gurus.

#### GOD OF ATTRIBUTES

The third aspect of God as flowing from the Immanent character of God is His being the 'Ocean of Attributes, Values and Virtues'. This aspect of God is of extreme significance to the validity and direction of moral life in the universe. Since all attributes are only relative, a God of Attributes indicates and lays down the standard and ideals for which man has to work. God has been described as full of all values, as Father, Mother, Friend, Brother, Enlightener, Protector, Shelter of the shelterless, Loving, Benevolent, Beneficent and Helper of the poor and weak, etc., "My Lord is ever fresh new; He is always benevolent."<sup>22</sup> "You are my Mother, You are my Father, You are my Protector everywhere."<sup>23</sup> "He relieves the sufferings of the downtrodden;

Succour of the succourless.<sup>24</sup> "God is Eyes to blind, Riches to poor, Ocean of virtues."

This theistic aspect of the Immanence of God is extremely important and inextricably links God with the universe. It establishes beyond doubt the character and direction of God's Will and Immanence. This leads to four important inferences. First, Attributes and Values can have a place only in a becoming, relative or spacio-temporal world, since all perfection is static and all qualities are relative. A God of Attributes has, thus, a meaning only in relation to the changing world of man. Evidently, for the expression of attributes, a changing universe is essential, and becomes an integral part of the plan of God. In other words, God and universe are conjoint and inter-linked, the latter depending on the former, because it is impossible to think of a God of Attributes or His Immanence in the absence of a relative or changing world. This is why, when God was by Himself, the question of 'love and devotion', of good or bad actions or of saved or Saviour, could not arise, there being nothing other than Him. Secondly, and this is the most important inference, virtues and attributes emphatically indicate, apart from the standards of ethical values and moral life, the direction in which human efforts should be made because these point out the purposes for which the Will of God works. Thirdly, it indicates the benevolent and perpetual interest of God in man and the universe. It, in a way, gives status and authenticity to life and the universe which is decried or downgraded in many other religious or mystic traditions. In addition, there is the benevolent character of God; since not only is He the Creator and Sustainer of it, He nurtures and develops it with a loving care. This gives optimism, hope and confidence to man in the achievement of his ideals and goals; because man knows the direction in which he should move, and he has also the assurance that there is someone to guide and help him with love in the achievement of those goals, God "rewards even an iota of good." "God helps the erring, it being His Innermost Nature."<sup>27</sup> "He rewards your efforts and acknowledges your deeds; Life of life."<sup>28</sup> "God rewards all efforts to become divine."<sup>29</sup> "If you go one step towards God, He comes near you by ten steps,"<sup>30</sup> says Bhai Gurdas. All this shows the encouragement and aid received by man in his journey towards his goal. It also ensures a logical and deep interest of God in His created world and beings. This aspect of God is the most significant for man since it gives prominent meaning to Him and full assurance of God's help for direction and aid in man's march towards his goal. God has also been called the "Enlightener" (Guru or Guide) of man. Lastly, it gives validity and spiritual sanctity to moral and ethical life in the world. In many religious systems, moral life is deemed only as an entanglement in the world, and at best some systems accept it as a preparatory method of purity for the spiritual life to be attained. But, in Sikhism, this Attributive aspect of God gives spiritual character to moral life *per se*. This is a fundamental implication of God being a God of Attributes.

## GOD OF WILL

The Gurus' God is a God of Will, everything is governed by His Will. This is the burden of so many hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib. "Everything happens within the ambit of His Will."<sup>31</sup> The concept of a God of Will also points out and emphasizes some of the aspects of God mentioned already. He, being a God of Will, the entire universe is created, sustained, and moved according to His Will and Purpose. A God of Will naturally presupposes that He wants the universe to move not chaotically but with a purpose. Just as in the case of a God of Attributes, God's Will, too, can be exercised only in a changing world and towards a goal, since the very idea of Will implies a direction and an aim. This, too, re-emphasizes the same features and points as stated in regard to a God of Attributes, namely, God is guiding life towards a direction and purpose. The direction is governed by the Attributes of God and the purpose is to evolve a God-centred man from a self-centred individual. God being, in this view, a God of Will, the highest goal of life is naturally to carry out His Will. The superman thus becomes on this earth the instrument of God's Will and Creativity. Here a word of explanation. A God of Will does not at all mean a deterministic world, because God is creative and all movement in life is towards a creative freedom.

## GOD DOES NOT INCARNATE

Another concept about God is that He does not come into the human form and is not born, nor incarnates. In the *Mul Mantra* God has been mentioned as one who never takes birth or form. The Fifth Guru says, "May that mouth burn which says that God has incarnated."<sup>32</sup> "God alone is not born of a woman."<sup>33</sup> "The Lord incarnates not."<sup>34</sup> "God is Self-Existent, without form and incarnates not."<sup>35</sup> The Gurus have definitely decried belief in the theory of incarnation, and in order to dispel such ideas, have stated that He created countless Brahmans, Shivas, Krishnas and Ramas<sup>36</sup>. Here, too, the idea that God never takes the human form has a distinct meaning and import. First, it shows that God is "Wholly Other" than man. For a God that is Transcendent and Unknowable, the question of His taking the human form does not arise. Secondly, all pantheistic and life implications as flowing from the idea of a God who takes human form have to be shed. Besides, the concept has three other corollaries, too. First, that man can never become God. This also involves that God and man are not identical but are different. Secondly, that the aim of spiritual effort is not merger in God as under some systems, but the ideal of man is to have a union or relation with Him. This, therefore, has a crucial significance in determining the human goal and in showing that the entity of man is distinct from that of God, and the two can never be one. Thirdly, it shows that spiritual activity is not stopped after the final achievement, and the superman has a role to perform in carrying out the Will of God. Consequently, so long as the universe is there and the Will of God is in

operation, the activities, role and duties of the superman, too, do not come to an end.

#### GOD OF GRACE

In the *Mul Mantra*, God is called Gracious and Enlightener. A God of Will and a God of Grace have a meaning only in a becoming world wherein alone His Grace and Will can operate. In addition, it also stresses the love and benevolence of God towards man and the universe which are different from Hun. For, a Gracious being can bestow his Grace only on something other than Himself. It has been emphasized again and again that all "final approval of man is an act of Grace of God."<sup>37</sup> "All merits, miracles, intuition, penance, goodness are of no avail; only Grace works."<sup>38</sup> "Myriads of good actions, heroic acts and losing life are vain without Grace."<sup>39</sup>

The Grace aspect of God also fortifies the truth of the other implications as described earlier in relation to a God of Will and Attributes. In addition, it implies that God is Wholly Other, Free and Creative. He is not governed by any empirical law known to us. His activity is, therefore, incomprehensible except in terms of His Grace or Freedom.

#### GOD WITH PERSONALITY

Another aspect of God is His Personality. In fact, the heading of a couple of hymns is specifically given as: "That Person" (*So Purakh*), wherein He is described "That Person is Pure, that God Person is Pure, God is Fathomless and Limitless."<sup>40</sup> A God of Will, Freedom, Grace, Purpose and Attributes, i.e., a Controller, and Director of the universe, can be conceived only in terms of a Personality. In the hymn of *Sach Khand*, God is mentioned as Creating and Deliberating. He is Benevolent and is Delighted with His creation. The emphasis on prayer and love towards God is there in almost all the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib. This can only mean that God is a Being with a Personality, to whom prayer can be directed and devotion and love expressed. Thus, the Creator, a God of Will, of Grace and of Attributes, who is Immanent in the world and controls it, can be conceived only as a God of Personality. Evidently, these aspects of God are only in relation to the world. Nor is a God of Personality conceived in terms of the limited personality of man, who is a finite being in a becoming universe.

The Gurus describe numerous attributes of God, including social, political, aesthetic, metaphysical, ethical and moral ones. But, we have mentioned only these salient aspects and features of God, as would be very relevant to our discussion. True, He is wholly beyond our description, but the above is only a symbolic and inadequate way of expressing His Nature. Every student should be greatly concerned with these ideas, and concepts of God in understanding the ideological and practical implications of Sikhism. Many

of its distinguishing features are deeply and directly connected with these theological aspects and concepts of God. They have a far-reaching effect in shaping and governing the life of the Sikh and the course of Sikh institutions, ethos and tradition.

## REFERENCES

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### **SUPERSTITION**

The general root of superstition is that men observe when things hit, and not when they miss; and commit to memory the one, and forget and pass over the other.

- BACON

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Superstition is the religion of feeble minds.

- BURKE

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I die adoring God, loving my friends, not hating my enemies, and detesting superstition.

- VOLTAIRE

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Religion is not removed by removing superstition.

- CICERO

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There is in superstition a senseless fear of God.

- CICERO

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