

Historical and Religious significance of caring for the sick in Sikhism

Abstract

Sikhism was founded in the Punjab by Guru Nanak in the 15th Century CE and is a monotheistic religion. Sikhs think religion should be practised by living in the world and coping with life's everyday problems.

In the UK, there are approximately 700,000 to 1 million Sikhs in the UK according to official figures. In 2005, the NHS recognised that all of faiths should have provisions within chaplaincy departments in hospitals to help adherents of their faith meet their spiritual needs. This paper sets out the historical and religious significance of chaplaincy, caring for the sick within the Sikh faith and develops the case that it is an integral part of the Sikh faith. The paper is directed at Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, in order for them to better understand the importance of chaplaincy. For non-Sikhs, it provides an understanding of the under-pinning of chaplaincy provision which will be useful to better understand how to involve the Sikh community in chaplaincy work.

Introduction

This paper gives an account of the interactions of the Sikh Gurus, and prominent Sikh events in history that help us to better understand how through Sikhism the principle of caring for the sick without judgement evolved and became central to the Sikh faith.

Sikh History and chaplaincy

Guru Nanak

Guru Nanak was the founder of the Sikh faith. His principles helped set out and lay the foundations for the faith. Guru Nanak practiced and built communities which at their centre, promoted caring. A non-caring environment was not compatible with the philosophy of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak preached the elimination of negativity from ones heart, a theme carried on through the teachings of all the Sikh Gurus.

The need to protect the weak; to help the young; and to support women was central to the wishes of the Sikh Gurus; they denounced anyone who brought hatred and hardship to any innocent member of the community.

ਸਤ ਸੰਤੋਖ ਦਇਆ ਕਮਾਵੈ ਝਹ ਕਰਣੀ ਸਾਰ ॥ Practice truth, contentment and kindness; this is the most excellent way of life" (SGGS p 51).

Guru Nanak preached the compassion that is central to the core of chaplaincy practice. Being kind, understanding and non-judgmental remained central the Gurus philosophy. These principles underlie the fundamental practice today of chaplains who provide solace and understanding to patients.

For Guru Nanak, the Guru abiding souls are to give importance to others and keep kindness in their hearts. The caring of the weak and disadvantaged; the looking after of children and the young in the community; the protecting and guardianship of the weak and sick who are unable to take care of themselves; the support for the elderly who through infirmity, confinement or illness cannot do so themselves; the support and assistance for women who do not have a voice in the community are some of the vast spectrum of members in the community who need to be supported as per Gurmat values. This is a duty of each member of the community; not to be left to others or to the "community" itself.

The Guru warns us: "ਖਬਰਿ ਨ ਕਰਹਿ ਦੀਨ ਕੇ ਬਉਰੇ ਤਾ ਤੇ ਜਨਮ ਅਲੇਖੈ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥
You do not care for others, you are a religious fanatic, and your life is of no account at all. (1)(Pause)" (SGGS p 483)

The need to be supportive to others and to share resources is an important concept of Guru Nanak's humanity; the principle of Langar or free food for all and of Seva or free service to others are part of this concept of sharing. As we will see though, the practice of caring for the sick was at par with the concept of Langar. For Sikhs, these practices should be integral ways of life if they are to practice and live with Sikh principles at the heart of their beliefs.

However, the Guru reminds us that where there is a caring community, there will be the blessings of the Lord thus: "ਜਿਥੈ ਨੀਚ ਸਮਾਲੀਅਨਿ ਤਿਥੈ ਨਦਰਿ ਤੇਰੀ
ਬਖਸੀਸ ॥੪॥੩॥ In that place where the lowly are cared for - there, the Blessings of Your Grace rain down (4)(3)" (SGGS p 15).

So the establishment of a caring community is the beginning of a community which will thrive as the Blessing of God will fall upon such a caring society. In modern times, and especially in the west in which the demarcation of class divides and poverty is somewhat blurry, a caring society is one that ensures its sick are looked after well and tended for with all their needs both spiritual and non-spiritual being met. As the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak cemented these values that shaped the thoughts and practices of the Guru's throughout their succession.

Guru Angad

Guru Angad was the second of the Sikh Guru's. He can be seen as the first Sikh chaplain of the faith. For Guru Angad, the first duty he performed after his morning devotions and kirtan was to tend the sick and the needy. He enshrined this practice through two principles, the first of sewa, the second of a life in action.

Sewa

Guru Angad believed in the service and well-being of all mankind and not just of his own followers. He laid stress on character building rather than observance of rituals and formalities. The path which Guru Angad pointed out to his Sikhs for achieving enlightenment was through service and good actions and devotion and worship of one God. He asked his followers to win Divine

grace by prayer, singing His praises, cultivating humility, a spirit of service and submitting at all time to His will. Paying a fine under pressure, does not bring either merit or goodness. That alone is a good deed, O Nanak, which is done by one's own free will. Sewa has to be done selflessly.

Eliminate your conceit and then perform service to humanity, only then you will be get honor - Guru Angad Dev

Life of Action

He held firmly that physical austerity was not necessary and that spiritual development was not dependent on ritual and external wanderings. "austerity and everything come through immersing oneself in the meditation of the Lord's Name. All other actions are useless. O Nanak, believe in the One who is worth believing in. By Guru's Grace, he is realized."

Guru Angad was at once a spiritual teacher and a man of action. To Guru Angad, religion was not only a spiritual experience but a way of life. Every action must have an impact of spirituality, humility and love. This can be achieved if one is always conscious of the presence of God. Guru Angad insisted that there should be harmony between thought and action and purity in life. "Doing something unwillingly or doing under pressure from someone does not bring either merit or goodness. That alone is a good deed, O Nanak, which is done by one's own free will."

"Mortals are known by their actions; this is the way it has to be. They should show goodness, and not be deformed by their actions; this is how they are called beautiful. Whatever they desire, they shall receive; O Nanak, they become the very image of God." -Guru Angad Dev

"O Nanak, the worldly achievements and glory is worthy of being burnt in the fire if it causes one to forget God. Usually these worldly things have caused mortals to forget the Name of the Lord. Not even one of them will go along with you in the end." - Guru Angad Dev

In these principled, Guru Angad, enshrined the essence of what has now evolved in the west as modern day chaplaincy.

Guru Har Krishan Ji

For many Sikhs, Guru Har Krishan represents the embodiment of Sikh values and principles when dealing with the Sick. Through his life, and his actions, he has embedded values of caring for others, and for using faith to heal the sick.

Guru Har Krishan Ji (Gurmukhi: ਗੁਰੂ ਹਰਿ ਕ੍ਰਿਸ਼ਨ) (Wednesday, 23 July 1656 - Saturday, 16 April 1664) was the eighth of the Ten Gurus of Sikhism. Guru Har Krishan was of a small age when he attained the leadership of the Sikh people. There are very few devotees of God in human history who have achieved a high level of spirituality in such small age. All other Sikh Guru's sat on the "Gaddi", the "throne of Guruship" when they were over the age of 12, but only Guru Har Krishan sat on the Gaddi when he was just 5 of age.

At the time, a severe epidemic of cholera and smallpox was ravaging Delhi. The young Guru began to tend to the sufferers irrespective of their cast and creed. Particularly, the local Muslim population was so impressed with the purely humanitarian deeds of the Guru Sahib that they gave him the nickname of Bala Pir (child prophet). Even Aurangzeb did not try to disturb Guru Har Krishan Sahib sensing the tone of the situation but on the other hand he never dismissed the claim of Ram Rai.

While serving the suffering people from the epidemic day and night, Guru Sahib himself was seized with high fever. Suddenly one day Guru Har Krishan was taken ill with a fever. The fever turned out to be the beginning of an attack of smallpox, which confined him to bed for several days. The Guru's tender body was ravaged by the disease. Saddened by this turn of events, the Guru's mother, Mata Sulakkhani said:

"Son, you occupy the gaddi of Guru Nanak, you are the dispeller of the world's sorrows and sufferings, and your very sight removes the ailments of others so why do you lie sick now?" Guru Har Krishan replied, "He who has taken this mortal frame must go through sickness and disease. Both happiness and suffering are part of life. What is ordained must happen. This is what Guru Nanak taught. Whatever He does is His order. One must walk in the light of His command."

Guru Har Krishan had himself taken out of Mirza Raja Jai Singh's house to a camp put up on the bank of the Jamuna. The Sikhs wondered why the Guru suffered thus. Why was this darkness surrounding the sun itself? They were in despair and wondered who would take the gaddi after him. Guru Har Krishan, as says the Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth, instructed them in this manner:

"The Gurgaddi, Guru Nanak's throne, is eternal. It is everlasting and will command increasing honour. The Granth is the Lord of all. He who wants to see me, let him with faith and love see the Granth. So will he shed all his sins.

He who would wish to speak with the Guru, let him read the Granth with devotion. He who practises its teachings will obtain all the four padarathas, (4 most cherished objects) of human life. He who has faith gains all. He who is without faith acquires but little. None in this world liveth forever. The body is mortal. In the Granth abides the Guru's spirit. Daily bow your head to it. So will you conquer your passions and attain liberation."

Tears filled the Sikhs' eyes as they listened to what sounded like the last words of the Guru. Then mother Sulakkhani came forward. With tears in her eyes, she spoke, "How shall I live without thee, son? I was blessed when I came into this family married to the late Guru. I was blessed when you were born. Now I am cast into a bottomless ocean of sorrow. Who would be my rescuer? How does a fish live separated from water?" "The body is perishable," said Guru Har Krishan. "As you learn to have faith in God's Will, you will attain to realms sorrowless. Eternal peace will be yours."

Today Delhi's Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, stands where Guru Harkrishan ji had stayed during his time in Delhi.

Bhai Kanhaiya

Bhai Kanhaiya ([1648](#) - [1718](#)), was a [Sikh](#) of [Guru Tegh Bahadur](#) For Sikhs, his example shows us that we should not only focus on caring for just Sikhs, but we should view everyone as equal and the whole of humanity on par.

From a very young age Bhai Sahib used to keep coins in his pocket so he could give them to anyone he saw who was in an unfortunate position. The locals were astonished at the compassion and thoughtful nature of someone so young. As he grew a little older he began to help the poor in other ways. He would wait on the paths of the village and when seeing a poor person carrying a heavy load he would offer to carry the weight for them for a few miles. He would do this every day, carry the heavy weight poor people were forced to carry on their heads for many miles back and forth from the village. When Bhai Kanhaiya's mother found out she was worried that people would think poorly of a rich trader's son doing such menial labor. But Bhai Kanhaiya was adamant, insisting he was unable to see the suffering of others and would do anything in his power to alleviate some of their hardships even for a few hours. This shows

that Bhai Shaib had compassion and a desire to help others from a very young age.

After Bhai Sahib's father passed away, Bhai Kanhaiya Ji took over the family business. While trading one day he came across a devotee of Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji called Bhai Nanua Ji. Bhai Nanua was a loving Sikh who woke up early at Amritvela to recite Gurbani. One morning Bhai Kanhaiya sat with Nanua Jee and was captivated with the Shabads that he heard:

One Universal Creator God. By The Grace Of The True Guru: Raag Gauree, Ninth Mehla: Holy Saadhus: forsake the pride of your mind. Sexual desire, anger and the company of evil people - run away from them, day and night. ||1||Pause||One who knows that pain and pleasure are both the same, and honor and dishonor as well, who remains detached from joy and sorrow, realizes the true essence in the world. ||1||Renounce both praise and blame; seek instead the state of Nirvaanaa.O servant Nanak, this is such a difficult game; only a few Gurmukhs understand it! ||2||1||

Sorat'h, Ninth Mehla:O dear friend, know this in your mind. The world is entangled in its own pleasures; no one is for anyone else. ||1||Pause||In good times, many come and sit together, surrounding you on all four sides.But when hard times come, they all leave, and no one comes near you. ||1||Your wife, whom you love so much, and who has remained ever attached to you, runs away crying, ""Ghost! Ghost!"" , as soon as the swan-soul leaves this body. ||2||This is the way they act - those whom we love so much. At the very last moment, O Nanak, no one is any use at all, except the Dear Lord. ||3||12||139||

One Universal Creator God. By The Grace Of The True Guru: Salok, Ninth Mehla: If you do not sing the Praises of the Lord, your life is rendered useless. Says Nanak, meditate, vibrate upon the Lord; immerse your mind in Him, like the fish in the water. ||1||

Upon hearing the above Bani written by Guru Tegh Bahadur Jee Bhai Kanhaiya's soul was awakened. He had not thought about the reality of death and the importance of meditation. Although he had carried out many good deeds he realized he had missed the essence of Naam and Gurbani too. Then upon hearing the following:

The Naam remains; the Holy Saints remain; the Guru, the Lord of the Universe, remains. Says Nanak, how rare are those who chant the Guru's Mantra in this world. ||56||

Bhai Kanhaiya asked Bhai Nanua to let him know the Mantra of the world. Bhai Nanua directed Bhai Kanhaiya Ji to visit Guru Tegh Bahadar Ji to discover more so Bhai Kanhaiya immediately left.

His quest ended when he met [Guru Tegh Bahadur](#) and accepted initiation as a Sikh at his hands. Here Bhai Sahib stayed and continued to serve the Sangat. Bhai Kanhaiya was the designated water carrier for Guru Ji and afterwards in Langar. He also looked after Guru Sahib's horses as a stable hand. While serving the horses one day, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji visited Bhai Kanhaiya and blessed him, advising him that his future should be filled with serving humanity at large.

Kanhaiya established a Dharmshala at Kavha village in the present Attock district of Pakistan which he turned into a preaching centre. His special mission was selfless service of humanity with no distinction of nationality, caste or creed. In 1704/5, he was on a visit to [Anandpur](#) when the city was attacked by a combination of Rajput hill troops and their [Mughal](#) allies.

During the frequent sallies and skirmishes between the Sikhs and the enemy around [Anandpur](#), Bhai Kanhaiya was often seen carrying a mashak (a goatskin water pouch), serving water to anyone who was thirsty, quenching the thirst of the dying and wounded soldiers.

He did this [sewa](#) (selfless service) with love and affection without any discrimination, giving water to both friends and foe. His acts of compassion stirred up stern criticism amongst his fellow Sikhs, who complained to

[Guru Gobind Singh](#) Ji, pointing out that Bhai Kanhaiya Ji was even serving the fallen [Hindu](#) and [Mughal](#) attackers.

Bhai Kanhaiya's benevolent actions eventually led to a summon by Guru Ji who explained that he had received a complaint about his actions on the battlefield.

Guruji said, ***"These brave Sikhs are saying that you go and feed water to the enemy and they recover to fight them again – Is this true?"***

Bhai Kanhaiya Ji replied ***"Yes, my Guru, what they say is true. But Maharaj, I saw no Mughal or Sikh on the battlefield. I only saw human beings. And, ... Guru Ji, .. they all have the same God's Spirit? – Guru Ji, have you not taught us to treat all God's people as the same?"***

The Guru was very pleased with the reply. Bhai Kanhaiya Ji had understood the deep message of [Gurbani](#) correctly. Guru Ji smiled and blessed Bhai Kanhaiya. Guru Ji said, ***"Bhai Kanhaiya Ji, You are right. You have understood the true message of [Gurbani](#)"***. He then continued and told the Sikhs that Bhai Kanhaiya had understood the deeper message of the Gurus' teachings correctly and that they all have to strive to learn lessons from the priceless words of [Gurbani](#).

Guru also gave Bhai Kanhaiya Ji medical Balm and said ***"From now on, You should also put this balm on the wounds of all who need it"***

Then turning to the sangat Guru Ji said, ***Saadh sangat ji, Bhai Kanhaiya is a God-fearing saintly soul. His impartial and non-biased behaviour towards others has led him to achieve Sehaj-avastha. Let him carry on with his mission. Many more will follow in his footsteps in the years to come and keep the tradition of [Nishkam sewa](#) alive."***

His example, as a forerunner of the present day Red Cross, is a tribute to the universal message of compassion and kindness to all.

While the world hails Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, as the first humanitarian at the service for the care of war victims, Sikhism produced Bhai Kanhaiya, more than 100 years before the inception of the Red Cross.

Conclusion

This paper and the narrative included in it serve to provide the reader with an understanding of how Sikhism, its practice and its principles are in correlation with the practice of chaplaincy. Caring for the Sick, without judgement and looking at others and provided selfless service for them regardless of their faith are the essential qualities that are required to make a successful chaplain. These same qualities are enshrined in Sikhism and in the narratives given in this paper from various times and events in Sikh history.