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THE 4TH OF JULY: SIKHS CELEBRATE A SELF-EVIDENT TRUTH

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My heart is still aglow with the magic of the sparklers. The bridge on Charles River between Boston and Cambridge held something special for me. It was the 4th of July, 1976. Two centuries after we had declared to the world, among other convictions, our firm belief in the 'self-evident' truth that all men are created equal.

For me, the magic in the air extended beyond the spirit of the day. The sparklers represented the glow of universal equality that Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh Faith, had enunciated over five centuries ago.

I was now at a place where equality was not even an issue. Nobody thought about it more than one thought about breathing. In a world where one has to constantly struggle for equality, and often has to pay for it with one's life, I experienced equality that was priceless and came without a price. Coming from a different culture, a different language, and a continent halfway across the planet, I was a part of everybody. There was no stranger in the crowd. The tightly packed crowd not only hugged me from all sides, it touched my soul like almost nothing ever had.

Guru Nanak's message in founding the Sikh Faith was: neither is one Hindu, nor Muslim - thus stating that we are all just human beings. Siri Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh Scripture) starts with *'Ik Oankar'*, meaning that there is One Universal Creator whose children we all are, and are all thus equal - irrespective of religion, gender, caste, color, social status or the like.

When asked if it was a Hindu or a Muslim that was better than the other, Guru Nanak emphasized that it was only one's deeds that mattered. The Sikh creed is simple: if you are a Hindu, be a good Hindu; if you are a Muslim, be a good Muslim; if you are a Christian, be a good Christian; if you are a Jew, be a good Jew. The Sikh Gurus emphatically disapproved of looking down upon others in the name of religion.

Siri Guru Granth Sahib is equally clear on the invalidity of the caste system: (as translated) *'recognize One light in all, and ask not the caste - the caste is not recognized hereafter'*. The caste system does not emanate from the Creator and carries no meaning in the eyes of the Creator.

The Sikh Gurus strongly admonished treating women as inferior to men: *'we are born of a woman... how can we call her inferior who nurtures the emperors...none, except the Everlasting One, can even be created without a woman'*. Their writings repeatedly emphasize that men and women are manifestations of the same Divine light. Siri Guru Granth Sahib describes the play being enacted by the Creator on the world stage: *'the dancers are women and men, but it is none other than the Creator who is manifested in them all; doubt it not; shed all skepticism; it is the same Creator that speaks through women as through men'*. The Creator is beyond gender and is described both as our mother and our father. The Gurus abolished many practices prevailing against women at the time, such as the practices of *sati* (burning a widow alive on her husband's pyre) and killing of baby girls.

Diversity is to be cherished, not despised. Different skin colors are like roses of different colors in an orchard, none superior to another. The same Divine light permeates in us

all. When a black and a white bottle are filled with water from the same source, the water in one does not become better than that in the other. Similarly, when the same Divine light dwells in two bodies of different colors, it is not superior in one than in the other.

To emphasize practicing unconditional equality, the Sikh Gurus started the institution of *langar* (Guru's kitchen). Everyone, unfettered by the moulds of religion, caste, gender, social status and such, is welcome to *langar*, and eats sitting together at the same level. Even Akbar, the then Emperor of India, had to sit on the floor and eat in *langar* with everyone before he could have audience with Guru Amardas (the third Sikh Guru) in 1567.

The message of the Sikh Gurus is clear - discrimination of any kind is an affront to the Divine. *'All have emanated from the same Divine light - how can one be superior, and another inferior'*. In looking down upon others, we insult the Creator, who has created them, and who dwells in them all.

The Sikhs have lived the revolution of *Ik Oankar* under the most brutal of conditions, having to bear indescribable torture and persecution for defending their own as well as others' right to equality. They must now remain vigilant not to falter on this difficult path. They need to engage in constant introspection to avoid pitfalls that lead them astray from the revolution of Guru Nanak.

Similarly, we need to strive our best to live by the 'self-evident' truth enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. We have traveled far since the 4th of July 1776. Our significant and heartening achievements include amendments XV (the right of African Americans to vote) and XIX (the right of women to vote), and electing an African American as the President of our country. But the journey is still unfinished. We need to go further. We surely would hit road bumps as we move along. Let those road bumps strengthen our resolve rather than slow us down.

"(We) have promises to keep, and miles to go before (we) sleep" (Robert Frost). Promises that our forefathers made to us, and that we must make to our forthcoming generations.

Let the sparklers light the deepest corners of our hearts this 4th of July. Let us embrace the spirit of the day. We can see the fulfillment of a 'self-evident' truth on the horizon.

We will not let it be a mirage.