

MEAT EATING AND REHIT MARYADA

GURBAKSH SINGH*

Meat eating has unnecessarily become a controversial topic among the Sikhs. The usual question asked is, “Is eating of meat permitted for a Sikh ?” The expected answer is “yes” or “no”. Unless explained properly, each answer, whether “yes” or “no”, can cause a problem. Both answers have, therefore, been analysed in the light of *Gurbani*.

Interpretation of the Rehit Maryada Instructions

The decision of the *Panth* on the issue of meat eating, according to the *Rehit Maryada Bulletin*, is : “Eating *kuthha* is prohibited for a Sikh. *Kuthha* is meat of animals slaughtered in the Muslim way.”

There are no instructions in the booklet regarding eating or not eating of other meat. Unfortunately, there are very strong and opposing opinions about eating non-*kuthha* meat.

- Some Sikhs, in view of the prohibition of *kuthha*, assume that eating non-*kuthha* meat (which is usually called *jhatka*) is not prohibited. Accordingly, they conclude that Sikhs are permitted to eat *any* meat, beef, pork, poultry, etc., provided the animals have not been slaughtered in the Muslim way.
- Other Sikhs do not agree with the above interpretation. They say *kuthha* means a dead animal, hence Sikhs are not allowed to eat any kind of meat. They argue that both methods, *kuthha* and *jhatka*, involve taking away the life of an animal, which according to them is a sin. Therefore, all kinds of meat are prohibited for a Sikh.
- A few Sikhs have a third view. They say being vegetarian is a Hindu Vaishnav philosophy. To break away from that and to become a Sikh, one *must* eat *jhatka* meat.

Many articles and even books have been written by each side to justify their opinion and to prove the other side to be wrong. Of course, both sides support their view by quoting *Gurbani*. This issue has, thus, divided Sikhs regarding the interpretation of *Gurbani*. Supporters of each view pick up a few hymns and interpret them out of context to authenticate their own opinion.

* Gurdwara Sahib, Kanthala, Opp. Tribune Chowk, Chandigarh,

They translate hymns literally and ignore the real meaning. The present attempt is to understand the correct message of the hymns related to the subject, and discuss the meat issue under a wider perspective of *Gurmat* philosophy, with *Gurbani* as the guiding light.

Literal Translation Misleading

Different meanings obtained from the same hymn are the result of interpreting it literally and ignoring the context in which a word or a phrase has been used. Here are a couple of examples.

- i. ਤੈ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਕੀ ਬਾਤ ਜਿ ਆਖੈ ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਕਿਆ ਦੀਜੈ ॥
ਸੀਸੁ ਵਢੇ ਕਰਿ ਬੈਸਣੁ ਦੀਜੈ ਵਿਣੁ ਸਿਰ ਸੇਵ ਕਰੀਜੈ ॥

Guru Granth Sahib, p. 558

If someone speaks to you about the Lord, chop off your head and request him to sit on it. Then serve him without the head on your body.

- ii. ਜਲ ਕੈ ਮਜਨਿ ਜੇ ਗਤਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਨਿਤ ਨਿਤ ਮੋਡੁਕ ਨਾਵਹਿ ॥
ਜੈਸੇ ਮੋਡੁਕ ਤੈਸੇ ਓਇ ਨਰ ਫਿਰਿ ਫਿਰਿ ਜੋਨੀ ਆਵਹਿ ॥

p. 484

If bathing could save a person, the frog bathes a lot. Anyone, who, like a frog, takes bath again and again, will be reborn again and again.

- iii.ਗਾਵਹਿ ਖਾਣੀ ਚਾਰੇ ॥

Jap Pauri 27

The four *khanis* (categories of living beings) sing (His praises).

ਕੇਤੀਆ ਖਾਣੀ ਕੇਤੀਆ ਬਾਣੀ.....

Jap Pauri 35

The *khani* and *bani* (kinds of speech) number is beyond count.

Obviously, the above literal translations either do not make sense or convey a wrong message, which does not agree with *Gurmat*. However, if we study words and phrases according to the context of the hymn, there is no problem of understanding the correct message. The message of the above three hymns is clear and all of us agree with it when we do not stick to their literal translation :

- i. A Sikh should show maximum respect and make highest sacrifice to serve the person, who speaks about the virtues of God. (The hymn does not ask a Sikh to literally chop off his head. It is a phrase to express complete submission and highest sacrifice.)
- ii. The hymn does not mean that bathing makes one to be reborn again and again. Actually it tells that repeated physical bathing has no spiritual benefit (bathing does not clean the mind). Those, who believe that just bathing at sacred places will benefit them, are ignorant and, therefore, they remain in the cycle of birth and death.
- iii. The numbers of *khanis* mentioned in the two *pauris* do not agree. In *pauri 27*, Guru Nanak does not mean to say that only four *khanis* of living beings sing His praises. The mention of the number four means *all* the *khanis* (which according to the Guru are innumerable as stated in *pauri 35*.) The Guru here is using the old Indian terminology (the whole

hymn refers to the Hindu mythology related to creation) which classifies all life into four *khanis*.

What is Meat Eating ?

Guru Nanak has given a very unique definition of “meat eating”. He says that taking away the rights of others is the worst kind of sin, because it is like sucking the blood of human beings.

- i. ਹਕੁ ਪਰਾਇਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਉਸੁ ਸੁਅਰ ਉਸੁ ਗਾਇ ॥ p. 141

Any person who takes away the rights of others is extremely sinful, like a Muslim who eats pork or like a Hindu who eats beef.

ਜੇ ਰਤੁ ਲਗੈ ਕਪੜੈ ਜਾਮਾ ਹੋਇ ਪਲੀਤੁ ॥

- ਜੇ ਰਤੁ ਪੀਵਹਿ ਮਾਣਸਾ ਤਿਨ ਕਿਉ ਨਿਰਮਲੁ ਚੀਤੁ ॥ p. 140

A dress stained with blood is considered polluted. How can the mind of those who suck the blood of human beings (make dishonest earnings, it does not mean literally drinking of actual blood of people) be pure ?

ਕੂੜੁ ਬੋਲਿ ਮੁਰਦਾਰੁ ਖਾਇ ॥

p. 139

Telling lies (cheating people and taking the rights of others) is eating a corpse.

The message of *Gurbani*, thus, is that taking the rights of others is “sucking their blood”, that is “eating their meat”. Hence, it is sinful to take away the rights of other people.

- ii. Other hymns, which endorse the above statement, i.e., to take away the rights of the weak or helpless by the misuse of authority (religious or political) is un-pious and sinful, are given below :

ਮਾਣਸ ਖਾਣੇ ਕਰਹਿ ਨਿਵਾਜ ॥ ਫੁਰੀ ਵਗਾਇਨਿ ਤਿਨ ਗਲਿ ਤਾਰਾ ॥ p. 471

Literally, the hymn says that a *Mullah*, though performs *Nimaz*, (an essential religious act for a Muslim), but devours human beings. A *Brahmin* wears a holy thread (to show himself to be a religious person), but carries a dagger (to get blood of the people).

Neither a *Mullah* devours human beings nor is a *Brahmin* going around killing people with a dagger. These words ਮਾਣਸ ਖਾਣੇ and ਫੁਰੀ are phrases, and both mean to take away the rights of the weak. The Guru used strong words to severely criticise religious hypocrites, because they perform rituals only to maintain their credibility among their followers. Actually, such persons are most sinful, because they extract donations from the naive believers and make false promises of assuring them heaven after their death. Guru Nanak says that extracting donations from the people is “eating meat of the people” and declares it to be a most sinful act.

Another hymn of the Guru repeats the same message for the leaders of the three major religions, *Kazi*, *Brahmin*, and *Yogi* :

ਕਾਦੀ ਕੂੜੁ ਬੋਲਿ ਮਲੁ ਖਾਇ ॥ ਬ੍ਰਾਹਮਣ ਨਾਵੈ ਜੀਆ ਘਾਇ ॥

ਜੋਗੀ ਜੁਗਤਿ ਨ ਜਾਣੈ ਅੰਧੁ ॥ ਤੀਨੇ ਓਜਾੜੇ ਕਾ ਬੰਧੁ ॥

p. 662

- iii. The Guru also protested against the unjust and tyrannical rulers by calling them blood-sucking beasts (they were drinking the blood of the poor by taking away their rights).

ਰਾਜੇ ਸੀਹ ਮੁਕਦਮ ਕੁਤੇ ॥

p. 1288

These hymns give a clear message of *Gurmat*, that taking away the rights of others is a most sinful act, it is “eating flesh of human beings”. This “meat eating” is unambiguously and strictly prohibited for a Sikh. However, we rarely talk about it. There is no organization which campaigns against this kind of “meat eating”, that is, taking away the rights of the weak.

The *sakhi* of Bhai Lalo and Malik Bhago is told to show the greatness of Guru Nanak; he squeezed milk from the bread of Bhai Lalo, an honest worker, and blood from the delicious food of Malik Bhago, a corrupt official. We miss the lesson to be learnt from this *sakhi*, that honest earnings are the path of a Sikh. One should enjoy the earnings of hard labour and avoid dishonest earnings, which is like sucking the blood of innocent people. Therefore, we should give priority to preach and practise honest living, that is, “*not eating human meat*” or not usurping the rights of others.

Meat Eating — A Non-Issue

According to *Gurbani*, one can lead a pious life without getting involved in the controversy over meat eating.

ਮਾਸੁ ਮਾਸੁ ਕਰਿ ਮੁਰਖੁ ਝਗੜੇ, ਗਿਆਨੁ ਧਿਆਨੁ ਨਹੀ ਜਾਣੈ ॥

ਕਉਣੁ ਮਾਸੁ ਕਉਣੁ ਸਾਗੁ ਕਹਾਵੈ, ਕਿਸੁ ਮਹਿ ਪਾਪੁ ਸਮਾਣੈ ॥

p. 1289

A fool, without knowing the truth, unnecessarily quarrels (argues) about eating or not eating meat. Who knows what is ਮਾਸ (meat) and what is ਸਾਗੁ (vegetarian food)*? Further, who can say where does the sin lie, in eating meat or in eating vegetarian food?

Attachment Prohibited

Gurbani says attachment (addiction, weakness for anything) is wrong. Here is the hymn which explains that attachment not only to meat, but also to many other things of daily use is wrong.

ਲਬੁ ਕੁਤਾ, ਕੂੜੁ ਚੂਹੜਾ ਠਗਿ ਖਾਧਾ ਮੁਰਦਾਰੁ ॥

ਪਰ ਨਿੰਦਾ ਪਰ ਮਲੁ ਮੁਖਿ ਸੁਧੀ ਅਗਨਿ ਕੋਧੁ ਚੰਡਾਲੁ ॥

ਰਸ ਕਸ ਆਪੁ ਸਲਾਹਣਾ, ਏ ਕਰਮ ਮੇਰੇ ਕਰਤਾਰ ॥੧॥

ਬਾਬਾ ਬੋਲੀਐ ਪਤਿ ਹੋਇ ॥

ਉਤਮ ਸੇ ਦਰਿ ਉਤਮ ਕਹੀਅਹਿ ਨੀਚ ਕਰਮ ਬਹਿ ਰੋਇ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

ਰਸੁ ਸੁਇਨਾ ਰਸੁ ਰੁਪਾ ਕਾਮਣਿ ਰਸੁ ਪਰਮਲ ਕੀ ਵਾਸੁ ॥

* Milk is the changed form of the blood of the cow. Is it meat or not? We cannot decide, we can only argue about it. Those who are vegetarian and drink milk give 101 arguments to justify drinking milk, but the fact remains that milk is a changed form of cow's blood, red cells are sieved out and fat is added to it.

ਰਸੁ ਘੋੜੇ ਰਸੁ ਸੇਜਾ ਮੰਦਰ ਰਸੁ ਮੀਠਾ ਰਸੁ ਮਾਸੁ ॥
 ਏਤੇ ਰਸ ਸਰੀਰ ਕੇ ਕੈ ਘਟਿ ਨਾਮ ਨਿਵਾਸੁ ॥੨॥

p. 15

Essence : Holy people are honoured in His court. They, who commit vices, have to repent there. O man, therefore, speak those words (perform those actions), which will bring honour to you (in His court).

In the first part of the hymn, the Guru names some common vices (greed, cheating, anger, etc.) in society and tells us how they hurt people.

In the second part, he mentions some routine human needs (wealth, spouse, meat eating, etc.), which also become vices, if one gets attached to them. In the last line, the message is clear. How can a mind attached to (addicted to) so many worldly pleasures (eating meat is only one of them) enjoy the taste of *Naam* ?

The theme of the hymn is that God provides human beings with the necessities of life. However, if one gets attached to them (i.e., gets addicted to them, uses them not for need, but suffers from a weakness for them), they become vices. Addiction to anything, including meat, therefore, is wrong.

We know that earning money honestly is not prohibited for a Sikh. Love of wealth (addiction to wealth) is, however, prohibited, because the mind devoted to wealth cannot be devoted to God. Further, addiction to wealth leads one to collecting it even through dishonest means.

No one disagrees with this interpretation. The whole hymn needs to be interpreted in the same spirit. Some other aspects of life, riding horses, marrying, living in palaces, eating tasty foods, meat, etc., have also been mentioned in the hymn. Obviously, not their use, but addiction to them is prohibited in this hymn. We should have no difficulty to conclude from this hymn that not eating meat, but craving for meat (addiction to eating meat) is prohibited for a Sikh.

Keeping in view the above message of *Gurmat*, we can say that those, who crave meat and eat it to calm the craving for it, commit a sin. However, if a person eats meat as just another food, (because he is hungry), he does not do anything against the *Rehit*.

This explains why *Rehit Maryada* does not say whether one should or should not eat meat. It is not the meat which matters, it is the reason for eating meat which matters.

Message of the "Meat Prohibiting" Hymns

The following hymn is often quoted to support the view that a Sikh should not consume meat.

ਕਬੀਰ ਭਾਂਗ ਮਾਛਲੀ ਸੁਰਾ ਪਾਨਿ ਜੋ ਜੋ ਪ੍ਰਾਨੀ ਖਾਹਿ ॥
 ਤੀਰਥ ਬਰਤ ਨੇਮ ਕੀਏ ਤੇ ਸਭੈ ਰਸਾਤਲਿ ਜਾਹਿ ॥੨੩੩॥

p. 1377

Bhagat Kabir says that those who consume *bhang* (marijuana), fish (*machhali* is also a name given to a kind of drug), or alcohol, will lose the

benefit of practising ਤੀਰਥ ਬਰਤ ਨੇਮ, the holy rituals.

However, *Gurbani* repeatedly says there is no benefit at all of ਤੀਰਥ ਬਰਤ ਨੇਮ like actions.

ਬਰਤ ਨੇਮ ਸੰਜਮ ਮਹਿ ਰਹਤਾ ਤਿਨ ਕਾ ਆਚੁ ਨ ਪਾਇਆ ॥

ਆਗੈ ਚਲਣੁ ਅਉਰੁ ਹੈ ਭਾਈ ਉਂਹਾ ਕਾਮਿ ਨ ਆਇਆ ॥

ਬਰਤ ਨੇਮ ਤੀਰਥ ਸਹਿਤ ਰੰਗਾ ॥

p. 216

p. 1305

Should we, therefore, conclude that one loses nothing by eating fish and drinking alcohol? This interpretation, of course, does not agree with the message of *Gurmat*.

In this hymn, the words, ਭਾਂਗ ਮਾਛੁਲੀ ਸੁਰਾਪਾਨਿ are used as a phrase (which does not mean these three specific things, but it means all vices), and refer to a vicious life in which people do not restrain themselves. Today, such persons are mentioned as *shrabi-kababi*, i.e., living a vicious life.

Similarly, in the second line, ਤੀਰਥ, ਨੇਮ, ਬਰਤ, do not mean just these three rituals, i.e., visiting holy places, daily rituals, and fasting, but refer to all kinds of rituals.

The meaning of the hymn, therefore, is that one does not benefit at all by performing holy rituals or doing religious deeds, if one continues to lead a vicious life (sinful life). The message is that one must give up vices to benefit from religious practices. This hymn, thus, prohibits a vicious life, which has been explained in the hymn above, it does not say anything for or against eating meat.

Why Prohibition of Kuthha ?

Some argue that *kuthha* is prohibited because the animal suffers a lot during slow killing. This is not the reason. We know that birds and animals, when shot by a gun, may not die immediately. They do suffer pain after being hit by a bullet till they breathe their last. Even by *jhatka* method, the animal does not die immediately, it does suffer pain for some time. In some cases, the animal may walk a few steps (as a reflex) even after losing its head.

Kuthha (*halal*, sanctified meat according to the Muslims) is prohibited for a Sikh, because it is fed to non-Muslims to convert them to Islam, as it is sanctified by Muslim ritual.

Conclusion

In the end, for the information of the readers, it may be stated that eating or not eating meat has a religious sanction in all major faiths; for example, *Kosher* is allowed for Jews, *Halal* for Muslims, *Bali* for Hindus (killed in the name of the goddess). Secondly, some religions prohibit meat of certain animals; pork is prohibited for Muslims and Jews, and beef for Hindus. Some prohibit eating meat, or a particular kind of meat, on some days.

Sikh faith is unique in not prescribing any such condition for eating

meat, if it is needed to meet the hunger of a Sikh. Addiction (ਚਸਕਾ, ਰਸ), not only to meat, but even to ‘things’ of daily use (spouse, wealth, affluent life, etc.), is prohibited.

The purpose of this article is to explain, in the light of *Gurbani*, the correctness of the injunction of the *Rehit Maryada*, prohibiting only *kuthha* meat (meat of animals slaughtered in the Muslim way) and not saying anything about other meat. I do not eat meat, not even eggs, but I feel hurt when some Sikh preachers declare that meat eating (actually a non-issue) is a cardinal sin (ਬਜਰ ਕੁਰਹਿਤ) by misinterpreting the meaning of *Gurbani*. This creates unnecessary and undesirable divisions and bitterness among Sikhs. These preachers are requested to preach, with the same enthusiasm, Guru Nanak’s message ਹਕੁ ਪਰਾਇਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ, ਉਸੁ ਸੁਅਰ ਉਸੁ ਗਾਇ (taking away the rights of others is as sinful as eating beef by a Hindu and pork by a Muslim.)

If a Sikh lives an honest life and is known not to take away the rights of others (is not corrupt, is not a liar), people will hold such a Sikh in high esteem, and the community will be respected by everyone. Let, therefore, all the *sants* and preachers vigorously advise Sikhs not to take “ਹਕੁ ਪਰਾਇਆ”, it being the greatest sin; it is “ਰਤੁ ਪੀਵਹਿ ਮਾਣਸਾ”, drinking human blood. The unnecessary controversy about eating meat may be avoided, and preference be given to the preaching of truthful living (ਉਪਰਿ ਸਚੁ ਆਚਾਰੁ).