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## ANTHROPOLOGY OF ECONOMY AND THE SIKH CONCEPT OF *KIRAT KARNĪ*

### ABSTRACT

The article ‘Anthropology of Economy and the Sikh Concept of *kirat karnī*’ describes one of the most important concepts of the youngest monotheistic religion – Sikhism, concerning the ethos of work in a wider context of economic anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Sikhs, often called “the protestants of India,” do not follow the cast system of Hindu society, instead choosing the path of equality and aiming at the improvement of the economic status of people. The research is based on the canonical texts included in the holy book of Sikhism and interpretations of scriptures that were written in the span of over 200 years. The paper explains the philosophical and practical meaning of *kirat karnī* in Sikhism along with its understanding and development in the contemporary Sikh society in Indian Punjab.

**Keywords:** Sikhism, Kirat Karni, Economic Anthropology

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<sup>1</sup> The term “anthropology of economy” is often used interchangeably with “economic anthropology.”

Connecting Sikhism with economic anthropology may appear odd for anthropology scholars, some may even object if such a connection can possibly be traced as any common ground is hardly visible. The main aim of this text is to open a discussion and present possible connections between the features of economic anthropology and the Sikh concept of life. Much research has been done so far on different aspects of Sikhism, including its religious sources, development of its doctrines, its impact on politics in micro or macro scale and its role in the reasons for Sikh migration.<sup>2</sup> However, the anthropological approach to some economic principles of Sikhism has not been discussed or established yet.

Anthropology of economy is a relatively new discipline<sup>3</sup> which has become very vivid during the last decade. Its sudden development is not only a result of globalization, but also of opening to a diverse perspective which anthropology can provide in the field of the prevailing economic theory that is no longer tenable.<sup>4</sup>

Sikhism is considered as one of the youngest monotheistic religions of the world. It appeared on the map of the world religions in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the north-west province of India – Punjab. Its founder, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), was influenced by both the Hindu and Muslim traditions, namely by the reformist movements (bhakti and sufism) which respectively evolved from Hinduism and Islam.<sup>5</sup> Sikhism is founded on the three basic principles: contemplation of God (*nām japo*), hard work and earning one's living in toil (*kirat karnī*), living one's life as an inspiration and a support to the entire community (*vand chako*). These concepts developed in the span of over two centuries. They finally crystallized in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

The main source for this research is the holy book of Sikhism – the Adī Granth (AG), which is also called Sṛī Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī. The book consists of hymns of Sikh teachers and other holy men of medieval India between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. The book is written in Gurbānī – the holy language of Sikhism, which is in fact a mixture of old languages and dialects spoken in Northern India with a major role of medieval Punjābī and Hindī dialects.<sup>7</sup>

In the contemporary Sikh writings, the term *kirat karn* is often used interchangeably with *dharm dī kirat karn* (literally: work hard for religion) and *kirat kar* (literally: work hard!). The first term emphasizes the role of religion (*dharm*) and the second one is used in the imperative mode and is a synonym of *kirat karn*.

The concept of *kirat karnī* was introduced by Nānak who was also the first teacher of

<sup>2</sup> Singh Gurdev, *Perspectives on the Sikh Tradition*, Amritsar 1996, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> S. Gaudeman, *The Anthropology of Economy. Community, Market, and Culture*, Malden, Mass. 2001, pp. 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Networks: Antropology of Economy Network*, Easa, at <<http://easaonline.org/networks/economy/index.shtml>>.

<sup>5</sup> H. Singh (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, Vol. 3, Patiala 1998, p. 426.

<sup>6</sup> Singh Gurdev, *Perspectives...*, p. 348.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Sikhs. In fact, he did not use the exact words *kirat karnī* in his hymns incorporated in the AG, but he laid a strong foundation for the future creation of the concept itself. On page 1245 of the AG we find the following words written by Nānak.

ਘਾਲਿ ਖਾਇ ਕਿਛੁ ਹਥਹੁ ਦੇਇ, ਨਾਨਕ ਰਾਹੁ ਪਛਾਣਹਿ ਸੇਇ  
/ghālī khāi kichu hathahu dei; nānaka rāhu pachānahi sehi/<sup>8</sup>

What translates as: “One who toils for sustenance, and gives others some of what he has earned – O Nānak, he knows the Path.”<sup>9</sup>

In the most important prayer known by each Sikh by heart, *Japu Jī*, we find another words of Nānak emphasizing the importance of hard work on the way to salvation:

ਜਿਨੀ ਨਾਮੁ ਧਿਆਇਆ ਗਏ ਮਸਕਤਿ ਘਾਲਿ, ਨਾਨਕ ਤੇ ਮੁਖ ਉਜਲੇ ਕੇਤੀ ਛੁਟੀ ਨਾਲਿ  
/jinī nāmū dhiāiā gae masakati ghālī; nānaka te mukha ujale ketī chutī nālī/<sup>10</sup>

What is translated as: “Those who meditate on God’s Name, toil for sustenance – O, Nānak – their faces are glowing.”

These words are put at the end of this basic prayer to sum up all orders given to Sikhs which they have to obey. They also show the basic principle of the Sikh religion.

In the times of Nānak this kind of statement was a revolutionary one, especially in the Indian society dominated by the caste system. It was targeted at Brahmins, members of the highest caste of Hinduism, and it clearly showed that there is no difference between people. It was a very brave indication that all members of the society should be treated equally. This concept soon became the basis for the foundation of Sikh communities and the development of the honest work ethos. The words of *Japu Jī* considerably influenced Nānak’s followers, leading to the development of this concept in later texts of the AG.

Nanak had 9 successors in the span of 170 years. In the words of the third Sikh teacher, Amardās (1479-1574), we find an evidence that the concept of hard work became more clear in his times. As he says about his disciples:

ਸਚੁ ਸੰਜਮੁ ਕਰਣੀ ਕਿਰਤਿ ਕਮਾਵਹਿ ਆਵਣ ਜਾਣੁ ਰਹਾਈ<sup>11</sup>  
/sacū sājamū karanī kirati kamāvahi āvanā jānu rahāi/

“Having truth as the method of practicing good deeds, your comings and goings are over.”

At that time, the fulfillment of *kirat karnī* appeared to be one of the conditions for the release from the circle of reincarnations. It means that apart from its social, economical and ethical dimension it also became a religious principle.

In the teachings of the fourth Sikh teacher, Rāmdās (1534-1581), there are similar expressions concerning the exigency of hard and honest work:

ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਆਖੈ ਸੁ ਕਾਰ ਕਮਾਵਨਿ ਸੁ ਜਪੁ ਕਮਾਵਹਿ ਗੁਰਸਿਖਾਂ ਕੀ ਘਾਲ ਸਚਾ ਥਾਇ ਪਾਵੈ<sup>12</sup>  
/satiguru ākhai su kāra kamāvni su japu kamāvahi gurasikhā kī ghāla sacā thāi pāvai/

<sup>8</sup> AG, p. 1245.

<sup>9</sup> All of the quoted translations from gurbānī are done by the author of this presentation.

<sup>10</sup> AG, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> AG, p. 1234.

<sup>12</sup> AG, p. 317.

„As the True Gurū tells them, they work and meditate on God's Name. God accepts the hard and honest work in the truth of his disciples.”

From this quotation we can clearly see that the concept was not only fully incorporated in Sikh religious practices but first of all, it is strongly promoted by Ik Oankār, the Creator.

Since the concept was approved by Nānak's followers it became a part of the daily routine and since then it has had a big impact on the process of establishing a new Sikh community.

It is difficult to say when the exact words *kirat karnī* were used for the first time and by whom. According to Janam-sākhī,<sup>13</sup> Nānak, during one of his wanderings, summed up the Sikh tenets in the above-mentioned precepts of *kirat karo*, *wand chako* and *nām japo*. However, we cannot find them in the AG or any other canonical texts of Sikhism.<sup>14</sup>

According to Sikh scholars the notion of *kirat karnī* must have been introduced by the last Sikh teacher, Gobind Singh (1666-1708), who founded the Khālsā brotherhood in 1699. Before he died, he passed his leadership of the Sikh community to the Holy Book – the Adī Granth. Since then, the Book has played the role of the only spiritual teacher and leader of the Sikh community.

Due to different interpretations of the canonical texts and teachings of the Sikh teachers, for more than two centuries Sikhs did not develop a common code of conduct for all members of the community. In the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century an attempt to produce a modern standard Sikh code of conduct was made by the Shromanī Gurudwārā Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.).<sup>15</sup> Sikh theologians and scholars worked on the document which was officially accepted as the *Sikh Rahit Mariādā*, the Sikh Code of Conduct.

The first principle of the Sikh Rahit Mariādā is honest earning and truthful living, *dharm dī kirat karnī*. It shows explicitly that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this concept became the basic foundation of the Sikh way of life. Its influence on the Sikh community resulted in the development of a very strong, self-sufficient and economically independent society.

The historical evidence suggests that this concept, along with other basic Sikh notions of a perfect society and Sikh value system strengthened the society and helped Sikhs survive persecutions. The sense of alienation from the rest of the Indian society led to the idea of creating the Sikh country called Khālistān. This plan was never carried out due to complicated political reasons and finally the partition of India in 1947.

From the point of view of the economic anthropology, the concept of *kirat karnī* was the most essential one for the development of the Sikh society. In the times of Nānak it played a revolutionary role on the social level, as it helped to in-

<sup>13</sup> Janam-sākhī – the stories of life and teachings of Nānak.

<sup>14</sup> *Vārā Bhāi Gurdās Jī* – a collection of hymns composed by Gurdas (1551-1636) who is the most important commentator of the prayers prescribed by the first Sikh teachers. *Srī Dasam Granth Sāhib Jī* is another religious text believed to be written by Gobind Singh (1666-1708), the tenth Sikh teacher.

<sup>15</sup> Siromani Gurdwārā Prabandhak Committee – a body consisting of elected representatives of Sikhs whose main task is managing the sacred Sikh gurdwārās (temples).

roduce changes in the society by rejecting the prevailing concept of the fixity of caste and inequality of people. The Sikh leaders taught their disciples that only by honest and hard work they can achieve the state of a peaceful mind and eventual salvation. At the very beginning this concept functioned as a typical religious precept but later on it developed a new social dimension in the Sikh community where the compatibility between religious precepts and economics is a common phenomenon.

This way of thinking, in terms of economy was rehabilitated in India by attributing the superior role not only to the earthly activity of human beings but also to the sphere of religious actions. In this context we may state that Sikhs – the protestants of India – played an important and instrumental role in the development of Indian economic thought.

Sikhism has envisioned a new socio-economic order that emphasized principles of equality and justice without any discrimination. Labor is seen as the matrix of all values – both spiritual and material ones. Doing their share according to their abilities, members of the group are equal partners in the commonwealth of values.

The second pillar of Sikhism – *vand chako* – which is another crucial concept in the teachings of Nānak, explains the necessity of sharing goods with other people in the community. It is closely connected with the concept of *kirat karnī* as, according to the teachings of the Sikh guru, the goods which are to be shared with others must be earned by hard work. There can be different forms of *vand chako*: these which involve money usually involve supporting the poorest members of the community by paying for their basics living needs, but if financial means are not involved, such an act has its particular term in Sikhism which is called *sevā* – service. This form of work is performed mostly in *gurdwārās* (Sikh temples). Each Sikh should regularly participate in *sevā* by cleaning the *gurdwārā*, preparing and serving food in the communal *gurdwārā* kitchen (*langar*) or working in a place called *jor ghar*, a part of *gurdwārā*, situated near the entrance and where the shoes of the visitors are deposited. Such a type of selfless service is also called “the left hand of Sikh spirituality” where remembering that God is considered the “right hand” of the spiritual development.

In the multicultural society of Punjab where the Sikh community constitutes about 65% of the entire population of the region,<sup>16</sup> the Sikh message of equality and hard work is widely accepted in Punjabi villages. The division caused by the Hindu caste system is not so vivid and visible as it is in other states of India. However, work distribution in Punjabi villages is still based on the caste rules. Traditionally, Sikhs converted from Hinduism still bear their caste name but they treat each other equally among themselves. The largest number of Sikh population comes from a caste called *jāt*,<sup>17</sup> members of which are mostly village proprietors or peasants whereas the castes

<sup>16</sup> According to the recent census of 2013, Punjab is inhabited by Sikhs (62,95%), Hindus (34,46%), Muslims (1,18%), Christians (1,11%) and other religions (0,3%). *India 2013. A Reference Manual*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi 2013.

<sup>17</sup> K.R. Qanungo, *History of the Jats. A Contribution to the History of Northern India (upto the Death of Mirza Najaf Khan, 1782)*, Delhi 2003, pp. 1-21.

of *khatri*s and *aror*ās are mostly involved in trading or business, and *ramgarhi*ās are involved in the development of small sector industries. There are many subdivisions into more specific caste jobs e.g. *tarkhans* – carpenters, *kumhars* – potters, *mehra*s – water carriers or *chhimba*s – tailors.<sup>18</sup>

The Sikh concept of *kirat karni* plays a significant role in the development of the Sikh community not only in India but also among Sikhs who live in the Diaspora in the West. The practical use of the three pillars of Sikhism, especially *kirat karni*, seems to be a useful tool for adjusting to the new social environment and for the improvement of the economic status of the people. We may claim that on a general level the *kirat karni* concept forms a seed of the endogenic way of thinking in terms of economy and – in a broader sense – of the anthropology of economy in the Sikh world.

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<sup>18</sup> K.S. Singh (ed.), *People of India*, Vol. 37: *Punjab*, New Delhi 2003, pp. 39-41.

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