

Preserving Precious MS of Guru Granth Sahib

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One of the greatest achievements of the illustrious Guru Arjun Dev was the compilation of the Adi Granth and its installation in the sanctum sanctorum of the Golden Temple in 1604. The Sikh community is singularly fortunate in so far as its scripture is concerned. The Guru not only supervised the compilation but also authenticated the first copy by inscribing the *Mool Mantra* (the primal creed) on its first folio in his own hand. Its first copy (in original) is preserved with the Sodhi family in Kartarpur near Jalandhar in a place known as Quila Sodhian.

Popular tradition has it that, after the completion of the Adi Granth, Bhai Bano, the Guru's devotee was asked to carry the manuscript to Lahore for binding. It is said that on the way Bhai Bano felt tempted to make a copy in a hurry. This resulted in some mistakes and additional hymns getting in. On learning about this sacrilege, Guruji showed great displeasure, and the *Bir* (volume) so copied never found approval with the community of believers.

Since printing or any other mode of making copies of the scripture was not available in those days, making handwritten copies of the Bir was considered an act of religious merit. Devotees spent months together in copying the Birs neatly for the benefit of the congregations. However, a survey of some of the rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs pertaining to seventeenth and eighteenth century shows that in spite of Guru's disapproval of the Bir copied by Bhai Bano some of the devotees also made its copies along with the Kartarpuri Bir. It may be mentioned here that in terms of length, the Bir consists of 974 large size folios (1948 pages).

Since the original Kartarpuri Bir was not given to Guru Tegh Bahadur by the Guru's rivals, Dheermal and his supporters, the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, had to prepare another version of the Guru Granth Sahib, popularly known as the Damdami Bir, which also included a few hymns of his father Guru Tegh Bahadur. It is this version of the Granth that provides the authentic text of the printed Guru Granth Sahib.

As regards the hand written *Adi Granth* manuscripts, it has been an established practice of the scribes to compare their copies with the original Granth, popularly called *Vadda Granth* (great Granth) inscribed by Bhai Gurdas. It was believed that a Granth corrected against the *Vadda Granth* becomes *Shudh* (correct and acceptable). Those who did not have access to the original Granth did so by comparing their copies with another Granth popularly called Jagana Brahamin's Granth, which is considered more correct than others.

With the tenth Guru's decision to elevate the Adi Granth to the status of Guru Eternal for the Sikh community before his death in Nanded in 1708 A.D., the Adi Granth came to be popularly known as Guru Granth Sahib and became a subject of veneration like a living Guru. Though the Guru Granth Sahib is not worshipped like an idol or a deity, it occupies a central place in any Gurdwara and is shown utmost reverence by the devotees visiting that place. In fact reverence for the Granth started from the days of Guru Arjun Dev. After the installation of the Adi Granth in the Golden Temple, he devised a practice whereby after the day's service the Granth was ceremoniously closed and taken in a palanquin to a place called Kotha Sahib in the Golden Temple precincts and rested at night. It is important to note that while the Granth was kept for rest in the palanquin, the Guru himself slept on the

floor to demonstrate respect for the scripture. Similarly the next morning the Granth was carried with great reverence to the Golden Temple and installed therein with due ceremony. With the passage of time, hundreds of handwritten copies of the Guru Granth Sahib were made for installation in the gurdwaras or for use by individual devotees. With the establishment of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule in Panjab and induction of eminent Pahari and Kashmiri painters and scribes into his court, some of the beautiful illustrated copies of the Guru Granth Sahib came to be made. Therefore, we find many illuminated Birs available in different repositories. The National Museum, New Delhi, has a number of illuminated copies of Guru Granth manuscripts.

One manuscript with 52 x 74 cm folio size is dated 1839 A.D. and is believed to have been got prepared by Sodhi Bhan Singh for presenting it to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. This Granth also has a sister Bir minus the illustrations presently in the custody of a private family in Quila Bagrian near Patiala. Takhat Patna Sahib, birthplace of Guru Gobind Singh, has the largest collection of Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts. Some of them are also illuminated. While the Granth in the National Museum is very well conserved, the one with the Bagrian family and the large collection in Patna Sahib need urgent attention of those looking after the rare manuscripts.

While a large number of Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts were available including some very rare ones such as the Kartarpuri Bir prepared under the direct supervision of Guru Arjan Dev, the Damdami Bir prepared under the direct supervision of Guru Gobind Singh and various other copies duly signed by the sixth, seventh, ninth and tenth Gurus, no catalogue or any such account of the Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts was prepared and kept under the control of Akal Takhat or any other central Sikh authority. As a result, with the passage of time some of the rare volumes either changed hands or simply disappeared. No one knows the fate of the first five volumes of the Damdami Bir got copied by Baba Deep Singh and sent to different Takhats (seats of temporal authority). Similarly one does not know for sure which is the Guru Granth manuscript, which was bestowed *Guruship* by Guru Gobind Singh before his death at Hazoor Sahib, Nanded, in 1708 A.D.

The first serious attempt at locating and cataloguing rare Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts was made by Sardar G.B. Singh, a high ranking official of the Indian Post and Telegraph Department. As an outcome of it, he published a book called, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Dian Prachin Biran*, popularly known as *Prachin Biran* (rare manuscripts). In his preface to the book, G.B. Singh writes that he became interested in the study of rare Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts when the Sikh *sangat* of Dhaka presented him with some rare *Hukamnamas* of Guru Tegh Bahadur during his visit to that place in 1915 A.D.

During his long tenure in the postal service he tried to locate and study some more rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs while travelling to different parts of India. Since facilities like xeroxing, microfilming or digitization were not available then, G.B. Singh took exhaustive notes in his own hand. Whenever he found any writings in these manuscripts in the hand of the Gurus he tried to make their copies faithfully by using the tracing paper and has reproduced these rare writings in his book referred to above.

In part II of his book G.B. Singh mentions about the rare manuscripts that he was able to go through during his research. This includes such rare manuscripts as the Kartarpuri Bir, the Damdami Bir, Bhai Bano Bir, Bura Sandhu Bir, Pindi Lala Bir (destroyed during the army action in the Golden Temple in 1984), Dehradun Bir and other rare manuscripts at Agra, Mirzapur, Lucknow, Ayodhya, Allahabad, Burhanpur and Patna.

Even though the fifth Guru did not approve of Bhai Bano's action of copying the Adi Granth

it is interesting to note that the devotees kept on making its copies since the original Bir now known as Kartarpuri Bir had gone into the hands of the descendents of Dheermal who did not allow its access to anyone. Under the circumstances the devout Sikhs were left with no option except to make copies from the Bano Bir which was easily available. Therefore, we find many manuscripts of the Bano recession. According to popular belief, the original Bhai Bano Bir was kept with a family of Bhai Bano in village Mangat, District Gujarat (now in Pakistan). After the partition of the country this Bir was temporarily kept in the house of one Bhai Mastan Singh in village Barot, District Meerut (U.P.). It was here that this Bir was examined by Bhai Randhir Singh, a Gurdwara Inspector of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandak Committee. Later on, this Bir was installed in a Gurdwara built in the memory of Bhai Bano in Jawaharpur, Kanpur. Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi, has six manuscripts of Bhai Bano Bir pertaining to different periods.

While no one knows the exact number of Guru Granth manuscripts presently available whether copied from Kartarpuri, Bano or Damdami Birs, there are scholars who have tried to locate them and have worked on different Birs available with different institutions and individuals. Most notable among them are Prof. Pritam Singh, Prof. Piar Singh, Dr. Pashaura Singh, Prof. Gurinder Mann and Dr. Jeevan Deol. While these scholars have done commendable work in their own fields, none of them has prepared a detailed catalogue of the extant Birs available at different places. **With a view to filling this gap the National Institute of Panjab Studies, New Delhi, has taken up a project – “Locating, Cataloguing and Digitizing rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs” with the help of the National Mission for Manuscripts, Department of Culture, Government of India. As per a preliminary survey apart from different individuals, the following institutions have very useful Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts, which need to be catalogued and digitized on an urgent basis:**

- Takht Sri Patna Sahib, Patna (Bihar): This is perhaps the biggest repository of rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs and Hukamnamas including some illuminated Birs signed by Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh.
- Takht Sri Hazoor Sahib, Nanded, (Maharashtra): It was at this place that Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and the last Sikh Guru, bestowed Guruship on Guru Granth Sahib before his death in 1708. As per Sikh tradition, Baba Deep Singh prepared five copies of the Bir for five Takhts and it is believed that one of the copies of that Bir is still preserved in the collection of Takht Sri Hazoor Sahib in addition to the various other Birs.
- Takht Damdama Sahib: as per popular Sikh belief, it was at this place that Guru Gobind Singh prepared the Damdami Bir which has since become authentic and the accepted format for printing Guru Granth Sahib Birs throughout the world. Many rare Birs are lying at this Takht.
- The Harmandir Sahib Museum has several rare Birs. Also in *Toshakhana* is lying the *Shahidi Bir* of Nankana Sahib. It needs urgent steps towards conservation. On the first floor at Harmandir Sahib one handwritten Bir is being used for daily service which also needs conservation.
- Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar has nearly 23 rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs. The Punjabi University, Patiala has 3 rare Birs including two illuminated ones. Dr. Balbir Singh Sahitya Kendra, Dehradun, has some rare Birs in its collection. The Language Department of Panjab has some rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs which need conservation. Punjab State Archives, Patiala, has a rare Bir pertaining to the period of the ninth Guru. National Museum, New Delhi, has some rare Birs including some illuminated

ones. So also the Museum of Union Territory, Chandigarh.

In addition to the above institutions, some rare Birs are also believed to be available with various individuals prominent among them being the following:

1. Collection of Giani Gurdit Singh, Chandigarh.
2. Collection of Prof. Pritam Singh, Patiala, which is being taken care of by the National Manuscripts Mission.
3. Collection of Prof. Vikram Singh, Patiala.
4. Collection of rare Birs with Capt. Amarinder Singh, New Moti Bagh Palace, Patiala.
5. Rare Birs and the Gutka (prayer book) of Guru Gobind Singh with the Bagrian family in Quila Bagrian.
6. A rare Guru Granth Sahib Bir in the Dera of Mahant Ram Kishan, Patiala.
7. Some rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs in the Dera of Guru Ram Rai in Dehradun.
8. The Sethi family in Delhi has a unique Bir which has *Banis* not according to Ragas but according to Gurus and Bhaktas. This also has the Dasam Granth appended to it under the Bani of tenth Guru. This Bir needs urgent attention and conservation.
9. Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi, has a number of Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts, including a very rare Bir popularly known as Bahawal Bir which is believed to be one of the drafts of Adi Granth prepared by Guru Arjan Dev. The Sadan also has a mini Bir of 1"x1-1/4" used by the Sikh soldiers during World War II.
10. Recently a reference has been made by the National Manuscripts Mission that as per message received by them from the Indian High Commission in Dhaka, a rare Guru Granth Sahib Bir corrected in the hands of Guru Arjun Devji himself is lying in a Gurdwara in the Dhaka University area.

A concerted effort should be made to conserve the valuable heritage by digitizing the MS through the good offices of the National Mission for Manuscripts.

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