

Remembering Poet-Philosopher Ragbir Singh Bir : My Experience of His Writings *Maj. Gen. Iqbal Singh Sethi (Retd.)**

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Co-sponsored by Atam Science Trust and Gurmat Prachar Trust, both funded by late Sr. Rabghbir Singh Bir, the Lecture series was instituted in early 1980's. Among guest speakers, over these two decades, are HH The Dalai Lama, Dr. Manmohan Singh, ex-Justice Kuldeep Singh of the Supreme Court and Dr. Khem Singh Gill. - Ed. SR

THE GREATEST gift of the glorious Gurus to humanity as a whole, is the DIVINE MESSAGE OF Guru Granth Sahib - the universal scripture that is timeless. The wisdom of ages, covering every aspect of life, is enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib. Rarely do we come across a Jeevan-Mukta - i.e. one who attains the pinnacle of spiritual awareness during his lifetime. Raghbir Singh Bir was one such Jivan-mukta. He records it thus:

pyRm, SrDw qy Bwvnl nwl gurbwxi

f inq piVAW, suixAw qy

ivcwirAW swf vwihgurU jl qy pUrw ivSvws ho jWdw hY [

As luck would have it, I did not have the good fortune of meeting S. Ragbir Singh Bir in person. However, I have read all his writings, over and over again, and sincerely feel as if I knew the philosopher - theologian in flesh and blood!

Family Background:

He belonged to the distinguished family of Jawahar Mall Ahluwalia, the chief engineer in charge of the arsenal of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He was born at Lahore on 7 Oct. 1896.

He lost his mother in infancy, and was brought up and groomed by his grandmother Bibi Bishen Kaur. At the age of 4, under the guidance of his grandmother, the young child began to practice Simran. He continued Simran Abhiyas all through his academic career at Khalsa College, Amritsar.

Married as a teenager, his youthful wife passed away after two years. Being much too young, Bir Sahib was married to Rawel Kaur, who remained his life-long companion till his own demise on 14 April, 1974.

Raghbir Singh passed High School from Lahore and completed his graduation from the prestigious Khalsa College, Amritsar in 1918.

Migration to Calcutta:

During turbulent times after Jalianwala Bagh tragedy and at the start of Gurdwara Movement, he joined Baba Kharak Singh's Akali Dal. But pursued by police he moved to Calcutta during 1922, and established a flourishing business controlling a fleet of taxis. However, there was no let up in his Simran Abhiyas for he followed Guru's Hukam:

xUOt b{Ot s]vt nam . khu nank jn k{ sw kam .

[SGGS : 286]

During 1935, following a series of tough challenges he became critically ill. But the illness turned around his life as it reminded him of the promise - given by him to his grandmother - that he would dedicate his life for religious studies and betterment of

society.

In 1939, Bir Sahib started a spiritual monthly Journal "ATAM SCIENCE" which soon became popular and thousands became its readers. Thereafter he joined hands with S. Niranjna Singh Talib, founder - editor of daily "*Desh Darpan*", the only newspaper outside Punjab.

With World War II raging in 1940, he closed down his business at Calcutta and returned to Lahore. He now wrote his classic, *Bandagi Nama*, first published from Amritsar. Since then thirteen editions of *Bandagi Nama* have been published and close to two lakh copies have been sold, unheard of in non-fiction Punjabi literature.

Bandagi Nama

is testament of soul searching into the *Sikh Sidhanta*, as enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib. It explained, the path to the Divine, using simple language and a scientific approach. It helps readers overcome their doubts and in instilling full faith in Gurbani, a prelude for Self Realisation. "*Bandagi Nama*" is his masterpiece and is a practical guide for earnest seekers of truth. In this book Bir Sahib has emphasized that Naam of the Merciful God alone can redeem human sufferings and bring peace and prosperity in this world.

Literary Contribution:

Bir Sahib began his career as a revolutionary poet, a favourite youth of Baba Kharak Singh, in 1920's - later turning into a social reformer, educationist, and poet of popular standing, besides being a deeply religious person. Bir Sahib, at an early age had made up his mind to work towards self Realisation:

ikv sicAara h]eIA{ ikv kUz{ tuo{ pail .
hukim rjael cINa nank iliKAa nail .

[SGGS : 1]

As a rationalist, Bir Sahib did not believe in blind faith. He decided to explore all his doubts (*Shankas*) about the truth of Gurbani by adopting a scientific approach. He researched Guru Granth Sahib, Raag by Raag, and theme by theme, until every doubt became clear. He says, for this, it took him 20 to 25 years. Thereafter he reposed his mind totally in God's will (HUKAM) and enjoyed Supreme Bliss (Sat - Chit - Anand).

rMg lwgq lwgq lwgq hY Bau Bwgq Bwgq Bwgq hY [
An;wu BieAa m[rl mae[sitgurU m{ paieAa .

[SGGS : 917]

For propagation of teachings of Guru Granth Sahib, Bir Sahib established Atam Science Trust in 1957 founded a Sikh 'convent, Dagshai Public School in 1957, and set up Gurmat Prachar Trust at Delhi in 1969.

Bir Sahib's writings are based on the principles (Sidhanta) of Sikh Theology. These help in removing doubts about Gurbani, generate and strengthen faith in Guru Granth Sahib, the essential prerequisite for Self Realisation and puran bliss (AnMd).

His stress is on the essence of Gurbani and purity of life. His writings have inspired a large number of Seekers of Truth across the world, including North America.

The humility and frankness of Bir Sahib would be apparent when we listen to what he

says about himself in his introduction (Buimkw) of 3rd edition of Bandgi Nama.

"I am a Guru's ordinary family man, an Amritdhari Sikh who spends his time in understanding the ESSENCE of Guru Granth Sahib's teachings. I try very hard to live by them. I am fully convinced that the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib give us true and complete guidance about leading a perfect life."

"The concepts of Gurmat fully meet the scrutiny of scientific approach."

"At my home, the family together holds regular Satsang and recite Kirtan."

"I have human weaknesses too, and am often ashamed of those. However, to overcome these, I devote more and more time to Simran and am confident that the Lord will help me out (His Chardi Kala)."

"Through Naam Simran and Gurkirpa, I have realized my Self and now, I know that truly I am a Jyot - Atma - Soul - a spark of God."

"I am convinced that inspite of the chaos and repression of unjustified application of worldly laws, God is in overall command. He delivers perfect justice to one and all without favour or prejudice. Thus, everything happens in his Will (HUKAM)."

pUra inAaxu kr[krtaru . Apun[was kxu raKnharu .

[SGGS : 199]

guir kihAa j] h]je sBu pRB t[. tb kaza C]id Aic;t hm s]t[.

[SGGS : 1140]

His Convictions in Gurmat:

He says, "I respect all religious scriptures, be it the Bible, Bhagawat Gita or the holy Koran. But I love Guru Granth as the sum total of harmony, devotion & humanism. I believe in Him, whose Will, not ours, will be done."

"I believe that without assistance of God, one cannot succeed, and with His assistance none can fail."

"I believe I am a humble servant of my Heavenly Father."

"I believe in Prophets and their missions, as they are messengers of God and bring love and light to the suffering humanity."

"I believe in the concept of Universal Brotherhood."

"I believe in Truth and Truthful living."

Bir Sahib lived all these values throughout his life and thus is a true role model for all of us.

The Poetic Spirit:

The carnage at Jallianwala Bagh in April 1919 and the then prevailing environment in Punjab, had a deep impact on Bir Sahib's sensitive mind. He declined a lucrative job offered to him by the British Government and instead plunged into the freedom MOVEMENT which was in full swing under Baba Kharak Singh Ji.

During the 'Saka' of Nankana Sahib and Guru ka Bagh, he wrote passionate patriotic verse INSPIRING AND EMOTIONAL POEMS AT ALL IMPORTANT PLACES, TO AROUSE AND PREPARE THE Sikh masses for the non-violent struggle against the

self appointed Mahants, to liberate SIKH GURDWARAS. These hereditary Mahants were being supported and aided by the Britishers. These activities continued over a long time during the Akali Movement, culminating in the constitution of Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee and handing over the keys to Darbar Sahib.

He wrote and published three books of patriotic poems, the first one being "BIR - DE - TEER", which became the favourite of those turbulent days. The other two books were "KHALSA SHAAN" and "RAMZA".

Let me share the opening stanza from one of his famous poems:

bwjw vwilAw qyry skUI AMdr lokl kihx ik lgdl Pls koel nw]
hoieAw iesy iKAwI qy mYN dwKI dyxy pYxgy bls qy qls koel nwh]
jw ky ivc jmwq dy vyikAw kl, pVx vwilAw dy DVI sls koel nwh]
qVP rhy lgy jYsy murg ibsiml, kr skdw ijnw dl rls koel nwh]
Impact of Enlightened Souls:

S. Raghbir Singh Bir narrates an interesting incident thus: "An old faqir used to sit on a pavement in a Bazaar in Calcutta. One day, I gave him 4 Paise. He threw 2 Paise behind his back and with the other 2 paise purchased his food from a Tandoor and had a hearty meal.

After a few days, again I met the same faqir in the Maidan and gave him 10 paise. However, without looking at me, he kept 2 paise and threw away the remaining. He walked towards a Dahaba, purchased and ate his food and started walking away. I followed him and asked respectfully as to why he threw away rest of the money, since he could have kept it, for the night, or the next day's meal. At that juncture, the faqir looked at me for the first time and said "You foolish man, will God not take care of me the next day?" I was wonder-struck! With what fearlessness he said those words to me, I can never forget them. These were mystic words and they had awesome power in them! I felt his great soul looking down on my lack luster worldly soul. This changed me in a moment and I considered myself a penniless faqir and him as king of kings. I apologized and came back. But I shall never forget the magic of that Muslim faqir."

Beside this Muslim faqir, Bir Sahib was inspired and motivated by his grandmother Bibi Bishen Kaur, Baba Kharak Singh Ji, Baba Attar Singh ji, Baba Nand Singh ji and Bhai Veer Singh ji.

Sharing his Experience:

Having achieved 'Self Realisation', Bir Sahib was keen to share his experience with others.

Kavih Krcih ril imil Bael .

t]io n Aav{ vWw] jael .

[SGGS : 186]

jnu nanku WUiz m;g{ itsu gurisk kl j] Aaip jp{ Avrh namu
jpav{ .

[SGGS : 306]

He delivered DISCOURSES in India and abroad (Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore). He wrote scores of small tracts and his 14 famous books. "BANDGI NAAMA, Communion with the Divine" being his masterpiece.

This book has inspired a large number Seekers of Truth, who, then led successful lives.

Simran Mehma

Sikh intelligentsia have many queries, doubts and questions about Simran. Bir Sahib has explained all issues convincingly and scientifically in his book "SIMRAN MEHMA". The salient clarifications and emphasis is on:

- Cultivate a habit of doing Simran and never miss it at any cost. Only discussing about it will not help much.
- Simran is love for the Lord in our hearts; this can and should always be done all the times, even when engaged in various worldly duties.

nama kh{ itl]cna muK t[ramu s;m\ail .

haT paxu kir kamu sBu cltu inr;jn nail .

[SGGS : 1376]

[SGGS : 1372]

- Simran is the antidote to Home (Ego).

hxum{ wlrG r]gu h{ warU BI iesu maih .

ikrpa kr[j[AapNI ta gur ka sbwu kmaih .

[SGGS : 466]

- It bestows the state of Sat - Chit - Anand.
- It helps to turn foes into friends.

na k] b{rl nhl ibgana sgl s;ig hm kxu bin Aael .

[SGGS : 1299]

Simran helps to overcome weaknesses and fills us with the powers of Almighty.

nv inWI AOarh isWI ipC{ lgIAa iPrih

j] hir ihrw{ swa vsaie .

[SGGS : 649]

Concept of "Sachiara" in Gurbani:

In his book "SAPHAL JIVAN", Bir Sahib has totally clarified the concept of Sachiara. He has taken up cases of businessmen, the poor, the sick, the Government servants and high officials in separate chapters and has explained that for the achievement of the goal of life, i.e.

g]ib;w imlN kl ieh t[rl brIAa . [SGGS : 12] we all have to accept the will of God and live a life of total truth. There cannot be an iota of falsehood or wrong doing. Total purity in thought and action alone ensures salvation.

Philosophy of Naam:

In his book "SARAB ROG KA AUKHAD NAAM", Bir Sahib explains that all illnesses of body and mind occur when we give up Simran.

prm[sr t[BuilAa: ivAapin sB[r]g .

[SGGS : 135]

jnmu ibRTa jat r;ig maieAa k{ .

[SGGS : 12]

Conversely, Naam jap becomes a panacea when:
ismir ismir guru sitguru Apna sgla wUKu imoaieAa .
tap r]g ge[gur bcnl mn ieC[Pl paieAa .

[SGGS : 619]

The scientific explanation for this is that when our mind gets totally ingrossed in Naam, all negative and bad thoughts are expelled. As a result of this, sin (

pwp) or wrong acts will not take place.

Guru Nanak's Gurbani is replete with the message that if anyone adopts the path of TRUTH in his life, he shall have no fear, worry, illness or want of any nature.

Bir Sahib brings out this lesson in a very interesting way to the seekers of truth from his story 'Anandpur' in his book "Ramzi Kahanian".

Anandpur is a must read story besides others in the book "RAMZI KAHANIAN."

In Chardi-Kala:

Bir Sahib throws light on how our Gurus and the Sikhs of the days gone - by used to face all types of difficulties, problems ill-treatments and unfairness from various quarters with Chardi-Kala.

wUKu nahl sB suKu hl h{ r[e[k{ e[kl n[t{ .
bura nhl sB Bla hl h{ r[har nahl sB j[t{ .

[SGGS : 1302]

Gurmukhs, he explains, accept Waheguru as their Father, Sahib or Malik and undertake all their duties based on full faith in His benevolence.

maNu inmaN[tU; WNI t[ra Brvasa .

[SGGS : 396]

Since God himself maintains Chardi-Kala, we, His children, likewise must live life in Chardi-Kala.

tU; m[ra iptā tU;h{ m[ra mata .
tU; m[ra b;Wpu tU; m[ra BRata .
tU; m[ra raKa sBnl Tael
ta Bxu k[ha kaza jlxu .

[SGGS : 103]

Bir Sahib gives an appropriate SIMILE when he says just as a Kiran, a ray of sunshine, has all the qualities of the Sun, likewise we, being the children of God, do possess all His qualities and powers. However, we need to realize our latent potentialities. This can happen only through NAAM SIMRAN.

pRB k{ ismrin iriW isiW nxu iniW .

pRB k{ ismrin igAanu iWAanu ttu buiW .

[SGGS : 262]

Nature of God:

In "ARDAS SHAKTI" (Power of Prayer), Bir Sahib explains the nature (

suBwv) of God in great details. God being infinite, we cannot understand Him totally. However, we can merge with Him by Love, Bhagti and Swas Gras Simran. When this is done sincerely, He showers all his graces, comes to our rescue in all our difficulties and problems and solves them.

xUca Agm Apar pRBu kTnu n jaie AkTu .

nank pRB srNagtl raKn kxu smrTu .

[SGGS : 704]

j] sais igrais iWAae[m[ra hir hir s] gurisKu gurU min Bav{ .

[SGGS : 305]

God's laws the Hukam or Neeyam is everlasting. He delivers perfect justice based on our Karams without any favour or prejudice.

For our Ardas to be accepted by Him, four preconditions need to be fulfilled. These are:

- Complete faith in the power of God to do everything.
- Our request/Ardas should be fair and positive. Wait with full hope for fulfillment of our Ardas.
- He helps all including the hopeless.

Faith in Gurbani:

In Guru Granth Sahib, words darkness (hnyrw) and chanan (roSnl) have occurred a large number of times. Bir Sahib, in his book GURMAT CHANAN explains and clarifies that this darkness pertains to the state of mind wherein ignorance and doubts about Gurbani persist despite our ritualistic prayer (pwT pUjw) The word Chanan implies that state of mind wherein all doubts and ignorance about the truth of Gurbani are totally dispelled.

[SGGS : 700]



- Simran is to instill in our hearts what God is like. We have to become one like him.

hir jnu A{sa cahIA{ j{sa hir hl h]ie .

