

GURU GRANTH SAHIB: THE GURU ETERNAL

By Dr. Mohinder Singh

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National Institute of Panjab Studies, New Delhi

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*A Review by I.J. Singh**

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NB: The emphasis is by the Editor, SR

To my mind this the finest example of a coffee table book, but my heart rebels at such a moniker for it. It is much, much more than that; it is indeed a labor of love, with a lot more to teach us than simply being a delightful eye-candy!

The year 2008 marks exactly 300 years since Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Sikh Master, invested the over-1400 page tome that was the Adi Granth as the Guru Granth – eternal living Guru of the Sikhs and the repository of their entire spiritual heritage.

Sikhism is a young religion. The period of its founder, Guru Nanak, parallels that of Reformation and Renaissance, and an era that saw great ferment of ideas in the world. And we do live in interesting times: we have experienced many important commemorations in a very short span. The 500th anniversary of Guru Nanak's birth in 1969; tercentenary of Guru Gobind Singh's birth in 1966, and of the Khalsa in 1999; four centuries of the Adi Granth in 2004; and now 300 years of Guru Granth.

The book opens with a commendatory remark by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India. He pointedly notes that **"The vision of Guru Granth Sahib embraces the whole of humanity – its concerns are universal and transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries"**.

The Introduction, by eminent philosopher Dr. J.S. Neki, that is both rigorously scholarly and movingly devotional, sets the tone for this magnificent tribute to the Guru Granth. In it, he very aptly quotes Arnold Toynbee, the celebrated historian, as saying, **"In the coming religious debate, the Sikh religion and its scripture, the Adi Granth, will have something of special value to say to the rest of the world."**

Neki is at his most inspiring here, when exploring the nature of revelation in the mystical experience that is common to the world's great religions. He reminds us that Sikhism makes no claims to exclusivity in revelation, and that the doctrinal emphasis unchangingly remains on the universality of the divine. **He goes on to note that Guru Granth remains perhaps the first, if not the only, sacred scripture that was compiled by the founders of the faith.**

Significantly, Guru Granth contains the writings of 36 authors, but only six of the ten Founder-Gurus. Three are Muslim holy-men, 12 are Hindus (5 Brahmins, 3 Rajputs, 4 low-castes); 4 honored Sikhs, and 11 are minstrels and bards (*Bhatts*). This makes Guru Granth a monumental interfaith scripture, and thus, unique. Another highly unusual feature is that most of the poetry in Guru Granth is set in the notes of classical Indian musicology. **This, then, makes music an inseparable part of and integral to Sikh worship, where**

Word is the revelatory medium.

Seven inspiring chapters follow the Introduction.

The first chapter, *Sikh religion & the Sikh Scripture*, explores the life and enlightenment of Nanak, and follows that with a brief summation of his message, including *Japjee*, the primal creed, and the institutions he founded, including *keertan* as well as the community kitchen (*langar*). It then reminds us that “Of all religions the best religion is to utter the holy Name with love and do good deeds.”

The next chapter, *From Pothi to Guru Granth Sahib*, traces the colorful history and compilation of the Adi Granth in 1604, as well as its contributors and how they came to be included.

The following chapter, on *Installation of the Adi Granth in the Harimandir Sahib* recapitulates some interesting history: how, in 1604, Guru Arjun escorted the Adi Granth (the precursor to Guru Granth) with great ceremony, respect and adoration to the Harimander. It is a protocol that is followed to this day. Doors to the Harimandir open at 2:30 AM to the sounds of keertan. Guru Granth is ceremoniously escorted in from the Akal Takht at 4:30 AM. Keertan continues all day; finally at 10:30 PM Guru Granth is carried back to the Akal Takht for the night. In a sense then, Guru Granth holds Court all day for its disciples.

I found the fourth chapter — *Contributors of Guru Granth Sahib* — extremely enlightening. It summarizes very nicely what we know of the lives of those whose writings were honored by inclusion. We know so little of so many *bhagats* and bards. We know that the writings of these Hindu and Muslim contributors are also set to ragas, but who did the setting? Was it Guru Arjun or was it the author, even though several of the authors preceded the Gurus by a considerable period? I still wonder — this monumental work provides no hint or answer.

Important Hukumnamas & Nisans comprise the next chapter. The word Hukumnama means an edict or command. Occasionally, in response to a particular purpose or need, the Guru would issue a letter, like an encyclical, to the congregation, which would respect and obey it like a royal edict. Many genuine hukumnamas have survived the ravages of time and they provide a critical window into Sikh history and religion of that time. Obviously they are not included in Guru Granth but some of these, including one by Mata Sahib Devan, are explored in this chapter.

Obviously, for Guru Granth to become incorporated into our lives, it is necessary that we understand the Word. But the Word was written over 300 to 500 years ago. Also, the languages in Guru Granth are many, and there are myriad references to Hindu and Islamic mythology. The next chapter, *Interpretations and Translations of Guru Granth Sahib*, focuses on the many translations and expositions that are now available in numerous languages, such as French, German, Urdu, Hindi, and others. In Punjabi there are many. Even in English there are more than one, starting with first attempt by Ernest Trumpp that was not well received.

Some historical hand-written recensions of Guru Granth exist, but India does not yet have the tradition of preservation and restoration of such material. **The last chapter of the book, *Conserving Rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs*, focuses on the need to digitize and preserve our heritage. The need is critical; the time for action is now. The author, Mohinder Singh, has taken the lead in initiating the process of digitization of our treasured manuscripts; he deserves to be commended and supported.**

I have devoted ample space to summarizing and presenting to you the contents of the written chapters. They are but a small part of this work, however. The most eye-catching

and significant portion of the contents is the art — it cannot be described, only experienced. I have not seen anything better.

William Baker's photograph of the Harimandir taken in 1864-65 is absolutely stunning, as is William Simpson's 1860 water color of the Akal Takht. The credits include some of the legendary photographers and artists, including Raghu Rai, Hardev Singh, Malkiat Singh, Sondeep Shankar, and many others, including the USA-based Gurumustuk Singh, founder of the internet forum, Sikhnet. Painters of this and last century, such as Sobha Singh, Devender Singh, and Kirpal Singh also find a place of pride.

Most of the art and artists are identified. Sometimes, though, it is difficult to put the two together. There are artistic representations aplenty, of the Gurus and others, who have found a place in the Guru Granth or in its history. But how true are they? We know that no credible pictures or paintings of the Gurus exist. I imagine the story is not much different when we speak of Kabir, Farid, Bhikan, and other bhagats, nor are there any images of Bhai Mardana, Baba Buddha, Bhai Gurdas or Bhai Mani Singh. So where do all the representations come from? Some explanation — even hypotheses — would surely have been timely.

Baba Buddha, the first *granthi* at the Harimandir in 1604 is identified as "Head Priest." I find that troublesome, because in Sikhi there is no priestly institution with its associated ecclesiastical authority. A granthi is more like a 'church elder' than a priest.

These minor caveats aside, this book is a straightforward account of Guru Granth and associated events of Sikh history, minus the cunning passages and contrived corridors that are the hallmarks of any historical narrative.

The strength of the book is its unmatched collection of art and photographs, and its lavish printing. **It is impossible to peruse this book and automatically not bow to the Gurus for their wisdom and sagacity – not feel a quiver of devotion and respect.**

The author, Dr. Mohinder Singh, is no stranger to our readers. His scholarly credentials include an unmatched history of the Akali Movement that has shaped Sikh politics – its national and international consciousness – for better than 70 years. As Director of the National Institute of Panjab Studies, he has been a resurgent intellect in how Sikhi defines its place in the modern world. Another of his milestones was the publication of *Guru Arjan Dev: Life, Martyrdom and Legacy* in 2005, coauthored with Professor Prithipal Singh Kapur. Mohinder Singh's publications are many and much valued, but this one on the Guru Granth is in a class by itself.

At \$120.00 many would find the book prohibitively expensive, but it is well worth the price. It would be an acquisition of lasting value for libraries – both institutional and personal.



THE GRANTH AS THE ETERNAL GURU **A UNIQUE SPIRITUAL DECLARATION MEANT FOR HUMANITY**

By Dr. Malkiat Singh Rahi

Published by Singh Legal Foundation

58, Lawyer's Chambers, Punjab & Haryana High Court, Chandigarh

Pages: 36 Price: Rs. 200/= (India) £ 5.00 (abroad)

A Review by Dr. Harbans Singh Chahal*

The Granth as the Eternal Guru - A Unique Spiritual Declaration Meant for Humanity is a recent book by Dr. Malkiat Singh Rahi who is reputed for Sikh scholarship, with two important books, entitled: *Racial Discrimination, The Sikhs and their Future* and *Guru*

Granth Sahib in the Eyes of Non-Sikh Scholars to his credit. Notwithstanding its small size, it is extremely significant in its subject-matter and profound in its treatment of the subject. **The publication marks the historical occasion of the tercentenary of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, an appropriate occasion for the Sikhs to review, refresh and remember their historical achievements and draw inspiration for present times from the invaluable teachings of the great Gurus.**

Dr. Rahi's book presents a bird's eye view of the history of the Sikh Gurus and a pithy statement of basic tenets of the Sikh philosophy. It is interesting to view this book in contrast to Dr. Rahi's earlier book *Guru Granth Sahib in the Eyes of Non-Sikh Scholars*. While the earlier book presents an outsider's ("outsider" in the sense of non-Sikhs only; otherwise nobody is an outsider for humanitarian philosophy of the Sikh Gurus) view of Sikh philosophy, the recent one attempts to present an insider's view of the matter. However, both the books address the global readership with a view to make the unique Sikh philosophy available for comparative study with the other religions of the world. That is why both these books have been written originally in English and, keeping in view the requirements of the target readers, the size of both these complementary books has been kept handy.

Dr. Rahi assumes both diachronic and synchronic approaches to his topic. Focusing on the history of the Sikh Gurus, he briefly describes the distinguished contribution made by each Guru towards the Sikh faith. Guru Nanak Dev Ji, according to Dr. Rahi, was not only a saint but also a revolutionary who worked for the salvation of the whole society (and whole humanity), and not that of the individual alone. With his message of humanism and social justice, Guru Nanak Dev Ji proved a "phenomenal force of Renaissance in India." He did not only preach his teachings (of *kirat karna*, *Naam japna* and *wand ke chhakna*) in theory but also put them into practice during his stay at Kartarpur. Guru Nanak Dev Ji's *Japuji* remains the fundamental and central exposition of the Sikh faith, which was further elaborated, and expanded by the later Gurus. According to Dr. Rahi, there is no contradiction between Guru Nanak Dev Ji's peaceful humanitarian approach and Guru Gobind Singh Ji's resorting to arms for self defense or for protection of the innocent.

While discussing the Sikh Gurus' contribution in its historical perspective, Dr. Rahi pays special attention to the history of Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Shabad Guru), right from its compilation by Guru Arjun Dev Ji in 1604 AD up to its final acquiring of the Guru's status in 1708 AD. He has also described the basic tenets of the Sikh faith, such as honest labour (*kirat*), praise of the Almighty (*Naam*), *Langar* (distribution of one's earnings among the needy), protecting the rights of the innocent, standing for equality, freedom and fraternity of all human beings in harmonious attitude to the cosmos, etc. But the book with a limited size cannot be expected to do full justice to an extremely vast topic like the Sikh philosophy.

The Granth as the Eternal Guru by Dr. Malkiat Singh Rahi, however brief, is important as it touches many important issues related to Sikh history and philosophy. It is a well-documented book. Its tone often becomes argumentative and polemical, which is quite natural for it is an attempt to justify Sikh philosophy and practice in comparison to other faiths of the world. This book needs to be welcomed as it addresses the need of this historical hour (to the fulfillment of which the Sikhs have often been lagging far behind the general expectations of the masses) to spread the humanitarian message of the great Gurus around the globe.



BOOKS RECEIVED

MAHALLA NAWAN: Bani of Guru Tegh Bahadur [English/Roman/Punjabi]

Tr. by Dr. Gopal Singh. Compiled & ed. by Mrs. Inderjeet G Singh & PS Bawa, Pp 35 + 76. Price: Rs. 125 (Paperback)

Published by Allied Publishers, New Delhi

This is a handy volume of Guru-vani of the illustrious Guru Tegh Bahadur, in 15 Ragas, and 57 shlokas, lovingly put together, along with the life story of the Ninth Guru (culled from Late Dr. Gopal Singh's HISTORY OF THE SIKH PEOPLE) and an analytical essay by our friend, Sr. Paramjit Singh Bawa, IPS (Retd.) former Director General of Police, Delhi. English-Hindi knowing readers could benefit vastly from the Romanized text and translation of some of the most inspiring and poignant poetry ever written by the reclusive Guru who sacrificed his life so that India should live forever.

GURU NANAK'S 'BARAMAHA' IN RAAG TUKHARI

Punjabi-English in the interpretation

Sampuran Singh Narang

C-4-98/2 Safdarjung Dev. Area, New Delhi 110016.

Pp. 50, Price (Paperback) Not mentioned.

It is fascinating how Guruvani rivets the reader's attention on the basic ethical and spiritual issues sby dwelling on Nature, changing seasons, months of the calendar, and indeed on phenomenal universe. This bi-lingual booklet is an aid to understanding the mystical poetry of Guru Nanak in so far as it relates to the myriad moods inspired by subtle seasonal changes, helping us to probe the Divine mystery in all its splendour.

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For a quarter of a century and more, the Guru Nanak Foundation has been disseminating scholarly information on Sikhism. The Foundation was established by the late Sardar Inderjit Singh, Founding Father of Punjab & Sind Bank. The issue in hand embodies some of the most eloquent writings, notably, by Dr. Harnam Singh Shan. Dr. S. Vanathu Antoni and the Calcutta based Dr. Ms Chhanda Chatterjee. The latter, (teaching at Vishwabharati University Santiniketan) probes herein, the exploits of fabled Banda Bahadur in early 18th century. She recalls, in this context, the epic poetry of Rabindranath Tagore celebrating Banda's heroism. The Journal also features articles by some of the most respected contemporary scholars of the Sikh lore: Dr. Harbans Lal (USA), Sr. Manohar Singh Batra, Sr. PS Bawa (mentioned earlier) and Dr. Ms Satnam Kaur. The Journal deserves a wider circle of readers, particularly in Indian and foreign universities.

ਸਿੱਖ ਪਛਾਣ ਵਿਚ ਕੇਸਾਂ ਦਾ ਮਹੱਤਵ

(Kesh - integral to the Sikh Identity) Punjabi

By Gurmit Singh Sidhu

Published by Adab Prakashan. Patiala.

Pp. 136. Price: Rs. 150 (Hardcopy)

The author of this thought-provoking book is a lecturer in the Deptt. of Encyclopedia of Sikhism, Punjabi University, Patiala. In five lucid chapters, he encapsulates the inspiration behind the Sikh *persona* from as many angles: cultural, historical, psychological and sociological, concluding with a bird's eyeview of the challenges of modern age and the response - as well as opportunity - to re-assert the Divinely crafted ਸਾਬਤ ਸੁਰਤ as a hall mark of the Sikh nation. Studded with scriptural quotations, and written in felicitous Punjabi,

the author confronts the new generation with the challenge of rising above the “compulsions of modern life”. Finally, the author brings up the scientific basis for preservation of the body hair, in step with the treatise of Sarup Singh Alag. He concludes with a bold plea for upholding the Kesh-dhari tradition; sharply castigating Indian media and Hindi films for caricaturing the Sikh *persona*. The challenges of so-called modernity calls for a determined - across the board - response from every Sikh, particularly the youth.

- S.S.

