

# Guru Nanak's *Japji*: A Work of Universal Relevance

Swami Sunirmalananda

*\* Eminent Monk of the Ramakrishna Paramhansa Order, currently Editor, Prabuddha Bharata, monthly Journal started by Swami Vivekananda. P.O. Mayavati. Via Lohaghat. Dist. Champawat. Uttaranchal. 262524.*

The world was blessed 500 years ago by the birth of one of the greatest jewels, one of the most illustrious sons of Mother Earth. That was Guru Nanak Dev. This article is about his glorious work, the *Japji Sahib*. This splendid work is not much known, not widely popular. Yes, true it is that sacred literature shouldn't be available on the street. But they should be available for the asking to those who are interested at least. Though written by one of the most magnanimous minds that the world has produced, this tiny book of 38 *paoris*, or hymns, or *shlokas* remains confined to some particular religion only. Not that Guru Nanak Dev wished it to be so. Not that Guru Arjun Dev wanted it to be so when he made it the first part of the holy *Adi Granth* in 1604. Neither it was that the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singhji, who declared exactly one hundred years later, in 1704, that after him the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* should take the place of the Guru, wanted the *Japji Sahib* to have limited access. But, unfortunately, this great work of spirituality is not known to one and all as widely as, perhaps, the Bible or the Koran, and has remained a religious text for a particular community only. Only the Sikhs, who recite it daily as part of their religious routine, know its worth, and there are some scholars and students of religion who are aware of it. That's all. It's not true that since it's in Punjabi it is inaccessible. The great scholar, Professor Puran Singh, translated it as early as in 1936. Professor Teja Singh translated it still earlier, in 1930 itself, with beautiful notes. Then there are a few other good translations also in English and other languages. Yet people aren't so aware of it as they are, perhaps, of the Bible. Should this be the destiny of a work of such nobility and grandeur?

Avatars, prophets, gurus, and such other teachers of humanity give their teachings to the world in their own ways. They come, lead glorious lives, show the right path to the suffering world through the most simple words, using the common dialect, and leave. Furthermore, almost all their teachings are the same: love God, pray, sing His glories, do good, be moral, be pious, know that truth is the way, etc. Before they come, the world will have given up such essentials of religion taught by earlier teachers, and will have given absolute importance only to the non-essential, secondary details. It will have thus begun wars, murders, looting, arson, etc, in the name of the so-called 'true religions'. Can we measure the amount of blood that has been spilled in the name of religion on this globe? And can we say such fights will end in the near future?

The prophet or *avatar* or teacher or guru teaches one thing; their followers understand another. It's they who take up the noblest teachings, make philosophies and books and cults and sects out of them, and limit the prophet or guru to some particular sect or religion or faith. And there it ends. Now there are people and people in this world. They may not understand a word of religion, but they will be ready to quarrel, fight, and kill in the name of their religion and their prophet. This they call religiosity. As if the guru or the prophet or the avatar needed someone like these fools to save them! Such is the nonsense going on in the name of the greatest blessing of God to human beings: religion!

Coming to the glory of the *Japji Sahib* now. Very rarely do we find a prophet or a guru writing down something out of compassion for humanity. They generally instruct verbally, their disciples note down the teachings, and that's how we get their teachings. But there are some singular and unique exceptions. Shankaracharya wrote commentaries and other works, Ramanuja wrote about bhakti, Chaitanya wrote the *Shiksha-ashtaka*, Vivekananda wrote. And so did Guru Nanak Dev. To sit down and write is certainly a clear manifestation of compassion. One of the reasons is, these great ones have no time. They are busy. We can't imagine the tremendous amount of work they accomplish during their lifetimes. Take Guru Nanak Dev's example itself, for instance. To travel long distances on foot for four times in life, and visit almost all the holy places of the world, is something inimitable. In these modern times, when people go on a tour by train or flight comfortably, they become tired. They return and say: 'I'm tired. Enough of this tour!' But Nanak Dev walked and walked. Isn't this an expression of compassion for suffering human beings? Then he composed inspired *shabads* by the hundreds. Babar's men also imprisoned him. He toiled and worked for the masses. He saved so many people from fall. He taught the glory of God's name. And he wrote. That was how *Japji Sahib* came into being.

The story of how Nanak Dev had illumination is quite interesting. It was a glorious morning in the history of the world, when Guru Nanak did not return home after his usual daily bath in the River Bein. Everyone thought he had drowned. But Nanak had a splendid spiritual communion. In a state of deep ecstasy, he was given a cup of nectar to drink by the Almighty. The Lord exhorted Nanak to teach others the repetition of the name of God (*naam*). He also graciously revealed the *mul mantra* to Nanak. This *mul mantra* forms the first verse of *Japji Sahib*. This glorious mantra says: **'There is but one God. He is all that is. He is the creator of everything and all pervading. He is without fear or enmity. He is timeless and self-existent. He is the Enlightener. He can be realized through His grace alone. He was in the beginning; He was in all ages. The true One is, was, and shall forever be.'** *Ek Omkar* is the first phrase of this mantra.

Then the Lord declared: 'Nanak, those who remember you, remember Me too.' What a grand commandment! By saying this, the Supreme had commanded that Nanak has the supreme authority to teach the world. And the humble Nanak Dev replied: **'O Lord, I cannot glorify Thy name even though I may live for millions of years, with air as my food and drink, with life in a cave, immersed in endless meditation; alas, I would still not be able to measure Thy greatness. ...'** This is the devotee's humble submission. In the literature of all religions you find such remarks by devotees. They reveal their humility through such words. But God had plans for Nanak Dev. He *made* Nanak Dev sing His glories everywhere, so that people, crawling in darkness, should awaken. Nanak remained in an exalted state for days. And he returned, a changed person, with a message: 'There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.'

'What is this apparently confusing statement?' one may ask. 'There *are* Hindus, and there *are* Muslims.' What's the meaning? This was a statement made to remove differences between human beings. By 'Hindu' and 'Mussalman' Guru Nanak Dev was targeting the bane of humanity, religious differences. And this was the foundation for the advent of a religion, which was to have tremendous implications in the history, culture, and civilization of India in particular, and the world in general. Nanak wanted oneness. Distinctions such as 'Hindu', 'Muslim', 'Sikh', 'Christian', etc are all manmade and of very limited, rather evil, consequence.

They are meant to create differences and divisions in the world. See a row of ants moving on the wall. How many of them are Christians? How many Hindu? How many Muslim? We too are like that. But we keep on creating divisions.

Anyway, it was when Guru Nanak Dev had such a unique realization that he composed the *Japji Sahib*, which is perhaps the cream and gist of Religion. Says Prof Gurmukh Nihal Singhji: 'It is with it [the *Japji Sahib*] that the Sikh scripture of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* begins, and from one point of view the rest of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* may be regarded as an exposition of the philosophic doctrines and religious teachings contained in the *Japji*' [quoted from Puran Singh, *Japji Sahib* (Tarn Taran: The Sikh Religious Tract Society, 1936), p. 5].

The *Japji Sahib* is not mere poetry: there's a world of difference between poetry and the writing of realized truths. In Sanskrit, those who are true poets (*kavi*) are called *kranta-darshi*, 'the seer of the Beyond.' You can see many people writing about God nowadays: their words are so superfluous, shallow, and so confusing. Why, because there's no experience behind. There is no life behind. When there is the life and experience behind something, that work will become a masterpiece, and will inspire peoples for all time to come. A seasoned poet, reading a realized soul's writings, may feel that the language is not good, there could have been some refinement here, there could have been some remodelling there, etc. When St Francis of Assisi dictated the rules of his Order on his deathbed, one of his 'practical' disciples changed the whole thing, saying that the dictation wasn't practical at all. When it was read out to Francis, the latter was hurt immensely. In fact, Francis had seen Lord Jesus himself come and dictate that rules to him. He wrote once again, as dictated by Jesus Christ, and that also was changed. That's the world.

Though it's foolishness pure and simple, like carrying coals to Newcastle, if we try to describe what the *Japji Sahib* contains to the Sikhs, the non-Sikh world would be keen to know what it contains. We have made a small attempt to awaken the non-Sikh's interest in the *Japji*. As we said, the *Japji Sahib* has 38 hymns or *shlokas* or *pauris* (meaning 'steps') leading to the Infinite. We shall use *pauri* here. These *pauris* are written in Punjabi, the common dialect of the people of Nanak's area. In these 38 *pauris*, the glory of God, the glory of His *naam*, the glory of service, the glory of realization are all covered brilliantly. We shall give only a gist of what each *pauri* contains. We have used Puran Singh's translation.

As we said, the first *pauri* speaks about the Infinitude of God and, in a way, the essence of the Sikh faith. God is true. This is a fundamental axiom. It means several important things: (a) God is the Truth; (b) the idea of God is not false; (c) we should hold on to truth in order to know Truth, which is God; (d) there is immense value to truth, and so on. It gives the gist of Nanak's religion: God's Oneness and Infinitude, and the glory of *naam*. The next *pauri* teaches us how to know God. How can we know God? By meditation? By smearing ashes all over the body? By performing miracles? Nothing will be of any avail. '*Hukam razai chalna*, to live according to His Will' is the only way for everyone in the world. All prophets say almost the same thing. All the prophets have repeatedly said: 'Don't go to bring down God by your spiritual practices, yoga, prayer, exercises, etc. Follow His will. It is by His grace alone that He can be realized.' The third *pauri* tells us what God's Will is. What is His will? His Will is love. It's indefinable. Everything is His will. The world moves the way it does, the air blows, the river flows, all according to His

sweet Will. And all this happens because of God's love. Nothing happens without His sweet Will. So the way for us is to surrender. Let His will be done!

The next *pauri* further clarifies what God's true greatness is. The supreme Lord is such that He has built and taken back millions of universes as our own. Millions have tried to sing His glories. But can anyone comprehend His greatness? No, but there is a key to obtain His grace. That is *naam*. Repeat His name while sitting, standing, eating, and walking. And thus His grace descends on us. This is what is stressed in the fifth and sixth *pauris* also. It's only fools, abject idiots, who say God is this much only, and try put a limit to Him. Who can say what God is? Who can ever understand Him fully? Whoever can gauge His glory? Richness, name and fame, going on pilgrimages—everything is utterly useless. Nothing counts. Only His grace can be of help, says the seventh *pauri*. 'Beggar becomes noble, his clothes worthy of all praise,' if he has devotion to God. If not, what's the use of everything else? What's life if we don't have love for God and serve His devotes, and repeat His *naam*?

What happens when even an iota of God's grace descends on us? This is the idea of the next hymns. The 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> *pauris* say that that person alone is great who has God's grace on him or her. Because such people are freed from all sins, Death is helpless before them, and 'the door of life opens up' for them. This may awaken a question in us: 'Is the compassionate One partial to some then?' Not at all. He is like the sweet-water ocean. Everyone can go to this ocean and drink however much they want. He calls everyone: 'Come, my child! Come to me!' Everything benevolent comes to us if we merely sing His *naam* and surrender to His Will. What, after all, does the Supreme want from His creation? Love and love alone. To repeat His *naam* with love is all that He wishes. And even that is not for His sake, but for our own good!

The tenth *pauri* says that we can't measure God. 'God is this much only,' is fool's talk. The ocean may have limits, but God is a million oceans put together, and much, much more. A sesame seed worth of His glory, however, is manifested when He created the universe. In the 12<sup>th</sup> *pauri*, Nanak Dev prays to the Infinite like a humble devotee, thereby teaching humanity how to pray to Him. He says in that prayer that all paths are the same; all lead to the one Infinite God only. The next *pauri* continues in this strain, and Nanak Dev says that the human being is too frail to know anything. So 'Thy Will, O Beautiful, is Good!' Out of His great Will, this great Author of the universe has written everything that we see and experience. Nanak Dev compares the glory of the Lord, this universe, to the alphabets in the 14<sup>th</sup> *pauri*. Such a glorious God will, out of His great compassion, cleanse the sins of his humblest servants when he or she calls on Him with love, by repeating His *naam*, says the 15<sup>th</sup> *pauri*.

Why sin? What is sin? This is the theme of the 16<sup>th</sup> *pauri*. Guru Nanak Dev takes up the karma theory in this *pauri*. One simple sentence says it all: 'The man reaps as he sows.' If we sow good seeds, by performing good deeds—repeating His *naam*, serving saints and other fellow beings, performing charity, etc—we shall reap good harvest. These seeds will bear good fruits in time—during this birth itself, or in the next. If we are paupers today, it's all because of our karma. We shall soon change if we do good deeds.

The 17<sup>th</sup> *pauri* is about God's beauty. Where to look for God's beauty? In His glorious creation. See the world and its splendour and understand God's splendour. All this is the beauty of the

Infinite, says Nanak Dev. Write a thousand more Puranas, a thousand more scriptures, let the yogis sit in the hot sun and meditate for ages, but they all cannot even gauge the glories of God fully. All will fail. Why is this so? In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> *pauris*, Nanak Dev declares that human knowledge, however great, is limited. Unless the grace of God flows, there's no hope of our obtaining Him. 'If anyone says he knows God, he is but a fool,' declares Nanak Dev. This is precisely what saints and prophets of other religions, who have experienced God, have been telling at the top of their voices. But who listens? We keep on fighting about the greatness of our god and your god, saying that my god is the greatest and yours is the lowest! It's like little children fighting over petty things. As if we have understood all God! So Nanak Dev says: 'All knowledge of the human being, and his or her thousand books proclaim but one Truth, that there is but One Substance of which all this is made.' What a great and universal concept and vision!

After glorifying God and his name, after mentioning how futile all our *yogas*, *sadhanas*, etc. are in knowing Him (this is in order to show the infinitude of God and not to decry *sadhanas*; for if we don't perform *sadhanas*, shall we sit and eat and drink and enjoy always?), after mentioning that the grace of God only is the greatest asset, Guru Nanak Dev proceeds to tell human beings what their duties are in this world. In the 20<sup>th</sup> *pauri*, he speaks of human duty. What is our duty? 'To lose ourselves in His worship and adoration.' That is why we are born. We are not born here to become big officers, businesspeople, etc. We are here to lovingly worship and adore Him. You will ask now: 'Then, is what all we are doing simply a waste? Is all this nothing at all?' Nanak Dev says in the 22<sup>nd</sup> *pauri*, after once again reminding us of human limitations in the 21<sup>st</sup>, that everything that's going on here is God's play only. If there is a sick individual, if there is a rich individual, if there is someone who is dying of hunger, everything is God's Sport. So what are *we* doing, after all? We are mere puppets. Therefore does Nanak Dev repeatedly say: 'Surrender to His Will. Let His Will be done.' Once we allow His Will to be done instead of our little ignorant wills, we shall be the happiest people on earth.

The next two *pauris*, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, once again glorify God. Vedas, Puranas, *tantras*, gods and goddesses, all are incapable of describing the glorifying Him. The simple meaning of this is: He is beyond everything. And this is what the Vedas, Puranas, etc also say. They speak of God, all right, but say that He is beyond all words and thought, all scriptures and books. 'Thou art as great as Thou canst be!' says Nanak Dev. It is such an Infinite Truth that Nanak Dev aspires to know in the 25<sup>th</sup> *pauri*. He asks: 'Where are Thou, O Lord? Where is Thy Door?' Nanak Dev himself answers this question in the next hymns, the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>: everything that we see in this universe is He alone. The rivers, the solar systems, the planets, everything appears to sing His praise and glory only. Everything moves by His will.

To know such an Infinite God through our little intellects and little knowledge is as impossible as is our attempt to drink the ocean in one gulp. There are false people everywhere, pretending to be great knowers of God. Every religion has cheats and thugs, who wear religious robes for the sake of their stomachs. It is to such that Nanak Dev addresses his next *pauri*, the 28<sup>th</sup>. He asks: 'Of what avail are thy earrings, O yogi [meaning, the *Ai-yogis* of those days]? Better adorn thy mind with peace.' Instead of false dresses and attires, let the heart be cleansed of impurities, and let the mind aspire after the Truth, is the meaning. The ideal (says the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> *pauris*) is to conquer the Self. That is the only true achievement. By surrendering to His will, we can overcome all our weaknesses and by repeating His *naam*, we can purify ourselves of all our sins and omissions.

When each pore of our body and each thought of our mind repeats the name of God, we become one with the Lord; we are one with the Supreme. There is no other way, asserts Nanak Dev.

Be that as it may, how many ever listen to such sane advice? The worldly-minded have their ways. So in the 31<sup>st</sup> *pauri*, Nanak says that human beings think too much of themselves and behave like fools. We think we are great, our achievements are great, our deeds are great. Foolish that we are, we don't even know that we can't escape from the wheel of birth and death that is endlessly crushing us. We don't know how to overcome suffering. So Nanak Dev declares: 'Not by my own power can I a beggar be, or a king.' What a statement! Everything is in the hands of the Lord. He adds: 'All human beings are same—no more, no less—when seen from the Eternal.' Our differences, quarrels, fights, superiority complexes are all silly and manifestations of abject stupidity. We are all the same because (as the 32<sup>nd</sup> *pauri* declares), day and night, seasons, winds and waters, the earth and the heavens, all were made by that One God. What are we then? We have only a little freedom—to act. Our actions alone will come with us.

There is one doubt now. If we are what we are as a result of our actions, if we have to suffer due to our past bad actions, where is God's compassion? So Nanak Dev declares in the 33<sup>rd</sup> *pauri*: 'God is merciful! His judgement rules over the realm of action!' If we repeat His *naam*, he will indeed protect us and shower His grace on us. Nanak Dev then speaks of the Cosmic Mind, where all limitations vanish. The Cosmic Mind is the creation of that One God too, and it is in this Mind that all creation remains, as in a storehouse. All the thousands of Krishnas, Shivas, and Ramas, endless forms and dresses are in that supra-cosmic Mind. This is a subtler way of expressing the glory of the Divine. In the next *pauri* (the 34<sup>th</sup>) also, Nanak Dev repeats the same idea of the glory of the supra-cosmic Mind. In the 35<sup>th</sup> *pauri*, the splendour of spiritual experience is mentioned in glowing terms. The state of illumination has simply no equal to anything in this world. The greatest joy of this world is mere dust there. And once such a bliss has been attained, 'no death nor delusion is for them any more, in whose heart He liveth!'

The next hymn, the 36<sup>th</sup> *pauri*, is about those who have known the Truth by His grace. Nanak Dev figuratively speaks of the hearts of such saints, saying that in their hearts the Supreme Realm is seen. This hymn is to glorify the greatness of the illumined saints. By their grace, our sins can vanish, and we can become true children of the Lord. The 37<sup>th</sup> *pauri* is a metaphorical explanation of the ideal way of life that we should lead in order to know God. We should work selflessly, we must control our speech and actions, we must glorify His names. In fine, we must not love the transitory but give our love and whole heart to God only. This is because, as the final and 38<sup>th</sup> *pauri* declares, we all shall stand before the Great Judge in the end. 'It's our actions which will either take us nearer to Him, or farther away from Him.' Those who have their minds fixed on the Lord's *naam* alone are saved and may be called worthy human beings. They shall become blessings to the world. How? 'In the joy of one liberated soul will many more be, through His great love, made free.'

A true saint, who has attained the knowledge of God by His grace, is a blessing to the world. He or she is an embodiment of divine knowledge. By serving him or her, we too shall become blessed. By listening to his or her words, by following his or her advice, we too shall become liberated.

This, in essence, is the glorious *Japji Sahib*. To a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu or anyone else, all these words of Nanak Dev appear to be like the words of their own spiritual masters. This is because all spiritual leaders of the world speak the same way. All speak of the same God. It's we, with our limited minds, that create differences and dissensions. Did Guru Nanak Dev come to divide human beings? Did Christ or Mohammed come to bring dissensions amongst human beings? Did they want that human beings should keep on quarrelling and fighting? Did they want human beings to fight over the greatness of this god or that god?

So we read the *Japji Sahib*. Ah! What a wonderful treasure, and how little is known about it! Instead of quarrelling over each one's superiority, let's spend our free hours in spreading such glorious messages for the benefit of everyone. This is yet another *seva* that we can do to the world. Without expecting anything from anyone, let us tell the others, who perhaps don't know about such things, that there's a wonderful scripture which contains the same things which every other prophet has said, and that by loving Him our misery and suffering will go. There is no other way.

