

MACHHIWARA:

MEDITATIONS OF GURU GOBIND SINGH

By Danielle Gill & Harjit Singh Gill

Published by : Harman Publishing House, New Delhi (2004)

Pages: 253. Price: Rs. 800

A Review by Dr. Hardev Singh Virk*

For those who are not familiar with the Sikh History, the title of the book may look strange, if not without meaning. However, for every Sikh, young and old, Machhiwara is a household word which puts him/her in direct communion with the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh. So authors are justified in choosing this title for their masterpiece. There is no introduction or preface to the book; indeed there is hardly any need for this ritual. The authors are well established in the field of modern linguistics: Madam Danielle Gill who has rendered *Jaap Sahib* into French has a doctorate from the University of Paris, and Harjeet Singh Gill is a scholar of international repute in the field of linguistics. He was instrumental in setting up a School of Anthropological Linguistics in Punjabi University, Patiala and is currently Emeritus Professor of Semiotics in JNU, New Delhi.

Dr. Harjeet Singh has more than a dozen books to his credit and his masterpiece on 'Baba Nanak' is a unique contribution to Sikh literature. He is a master craftsman in translating Guru's word. One sociologist friend of mine remarked, "Harjeet Singh has put himself in the garb of Mardana while writing on Baba Nanak."

Guru Gobind Singh Ji left Anandpur, fought a pitched battle at Chamkaur and reached Machhiwara on the bidding of his 'Five Beloved' Khalsa when there was no hope of survival against heavy odds. The book is written in free verse and its opening stanza focuses on the concept of saint-soldier introduced by the Guru to usher in a revolution in Indian Society:

"In the wilderness of Machhiwara
the saint of Patna, the soldier of Anandpur,
the son of Teg Bahadur, was meditating
on the destiny of men and martyrs
He reflected upon the revolutions
which were destined to fail
which had no beginning, no end.

The author uses a forceful narrative to describe the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur for the sake of Hindu Dharma, for freedom and dignity of Indian people. The young Guru Gobind had no options. The revolution started by Guru Nanak for social and cultural transformation of Indian society was brought to a climax by Guru Gobind Singh by creating the Khalsa. The author stresses the use of 'sword of truth' as a necessary construct (pages 9-10):

When the tyrant was too arrogant,
to listen to the wisdom of the sages,
when love and generosity were brushed aside,
when the tyrant believed only in his tyranny,
it was the time to raise the sword of truth,
the sword of absolute purity and sublimity,
it was the time to administer the baptism of the sword.

The author takes a detour at page 11 and narrates the events related to Sikh Gurus, viz. travels of Guru Nanak, establishment of Harimandir by Guru Ram Das, preparation of the Adi Granth by saint scholar Guru Arjun, creation of Akal Takht by Guru Hargobind and the concept of *miri* and *piri*. Regarding compilation of Adi Granth, the author elucidates its role in the following stanza:

The Adi Granth, continued to be the main guide,
in spiritual and social conduct,
the civil society was based on the principles of truth and justice
on the hymns of love and generosity
the brotherhood of humanity.

The author has correlated the creation of Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh with the ideals of Guru Nanak conceptualized in Adi Granth. As Puran Singh writes somewhere, “ The sword of Guru Nanak was unsheathed by Guru Gobind Singh”. The author also conveys a similar message (page 49):

The baptism of the sword was also the baptism of love,
Guru Nanak had said, if you are ever engaged in love,
If you yearn for the union of hearts,
come to my path, my abode, with your head on your hand,
if you ever take a step in this direction,
you must sacrifice every fibre of your being.

And again on page 56, the author brings into focus the ‘baptism of the sword’ by Guru Gobind Singh:

The baptism of the sword, by the sword,
was a new beginning,
a new effort to infuse the spirit
of dignity, of honour, of sacrifice,
what was the sense of living like fossils,
like the living dead.

Dr. Gill has not created any distrust or distortion in his narrative when he describes the events at Anandpur for creation of ‘Five Beloveds’ (*panj pyare* in common parlance). The martyrdom of young sons of Guru Gobind Singh is described in most poignant terms. The revolution created by the ‘baptism of the sword’, writing of Zafarnama to Aurangzeb as epistle of victory and the mission of the Khalsa, are vividly narrated by the author. Guru Gobind Singh was a saint-soldier and a scholar – poet well versed in Persian and Sanskrit. All the scholarly works and poetic fancies of the Guru find a mention in the Machhiwara.

The second part of the book is devoted to Jaap Sahib, its English translation by Harjeet Gill followed by its rendering into French by Danielle Gill, his wife. Both the translations are in simple language and correspond to the original text in a perfect manner. Perhaps, it is the first rendering of Jaap into a foreign language other than English. Since I have working knowledge in both French and English, I enjoyed every stanza of Jaap in *Machhiwara*.

The review process will not be complete if some discrepancies are not pointed out in the text. On page 16, the author gives free verse translation of Guru Nanak’s composition in *Ragga ‘Maru Solhe’* describing Guru’s vision on cosmology, under the title of Sri Rag which is not correct. On page 75, the author mentions that Guru Gobind Singh addressed his *Zafarnama* to Aurangzeb from Machhiwara. In fact, it was written and addressed to from Dina Kangar at a later stage. On page 93, *panth parchar karke* should be read as *panth parchar karbe*. The word ‘ascender’ (P 46 and 108) should be replaced by ‘asunder’.

On the whole, *Machhiwara* sums up beautifully the meditations of Guru Gobind Singh on the epistemological conceptualizations of Harimandir, Adi Granth, Akal Takht and the ‘Baptism of the Sword’ in the historical progression, as claimed by the author on the blurb of the book. The book will prove to be an anchor for Sikh youth of diaspora who want to explore heritage of Sikh culture in search of their roots. I congratulate the authors for transcreating the spatial and temporal entity of Machhiwara wilderness into a transcendental

reality in the form of meditations of Guru Gobind Singh.



bhai gurdas ji - jeevan te Rachna

VOL. 1 & 2 (Vas 1-19 & 20-40)

**Original in gurmukhi, with transliteration &
english translation**

By Dr. Ujagar Singh Bawa

**Published by The Washington Sikh Center, PO Box 7061,
Gaithersburg, MD. 20898-7061, USA.**

Pp 510+504 Price: US\$ 20+20

Understanding The Sikh Ethos: A Review

This incredible work of over a thousand pages comes from pen of a retired professor of Economics who taught at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. The unlikely writer, Professor Bawa, Ph.D. (Cornell) is a reputed specialist in agricultural economics of developing countries. With a longish stint in the Indian Planning Commission, which turned out to be the forerunner of the 'Green Revolution' in India, stands out as a many splendoured scholar. Evidently genes have eventually prevailed over the careerist professionalism. Prof. Bawa, as a descendant of Sri Guru Amar Das ji has nurtured a love of the Sikh lore over long years. The opportunity to write treatises on Gurbani has come to him at regular intervals during, and beyond, his professorial stint. From his pen has come an astonishing cascade of evocative writings focusing on the philosophy of Sikhism, its turbulent history and ethos, its literature and poetry, sociology and volatile politics.

More to the point, and abiding in value, are Professor Bawa's Commentaries & translation of *Sukhmani Sahib*, *Asa-di-Var*, *Jaap Sahib* and *Nit Naym*, not to speak of the English rendering of selections from Bhai Vir Singh. This voluminous output would arguably demand a separate treatment altogether.

The epic poetry of Bhai Gurdas has many facets. Part theology, part history and chronicle, it vividly recalls the core message of Guru Nanak and successor Gurus upto Guru Har Gobind Sahib. It traces the evolution of the Sikh ethos over an astonishingly long span of time. Its authenticity and eloquence are traceable to Bhai Gurdas' kinship with Guru Amar Das ji. As a cousin of Bibi Bhani, consort of Guru Ram Das ji, and trusted confidante of Guru Arjun Dev ji, he was both a witness to - and participant in - the evolution of the Sikh polity. Scholar of scholars Bhai Gurdas has been aptly called the 'VedaVyasa' (and the 'St. Paul') of Sikhism.

No wonder Prof. Bawa has taken several years to render, compile and collate the epic *Vaars*, *Kabits* and *Sadds*, consisting of some 900 stanzas, aggregating 7000 lines. Language of *Vaars* reflects the classicism of Punjabi, Braj Sanskrit and Persian, in the archaic 17th century diction. The *Vaars* also provide countless word pictures of the social cultural and political mores of the early period of Sikh history.

One can get a clear idea of the customs social practices, overlaid by influence of ancient Hindu thought. There is mention of the jealousy and hypocrisy of 'Meenas' (the dissembling rogues) out to undermine early Sikh ethos; the reason why Guru Har Gobind 'deviated' from the peaceful Bhakti movement to adoption of sword as symbol of Shakti – The confluence of *Miri* (temporal glory) with *Piri* (spreading Divine Light).

The translation succeeds in conveying the reason for the Sikh faith's 'whole-life' philosophy as a natural corollary of the emancipatory message of Guru Nanak. Significantly, in the *Vaars*, there is no mention of the martyrdom of Guru Arjun Devji. This omission is intriguing unless one assumes that Bhai Gurdas did not wish to stun the devotees with news of the

trauma and tragedy that marked the event in 1606. Another reason could be Bhai Gurdas' unwillingness to assume the role of a historian. He must have been witness to the Mughal monarchy's oppressive policy after Akbar's death, the Hindu noblemen's collaboration, servility to ruling oligarchy, and distanced himself deliberately as a scholars and devotee.

Volume 1, under review, gives a striking biographical sketch of the times and life of Bhai Gurdas, his early life, the extraordinary care with which Guruvani Manuscripts (Pothi Sahib) had been procured and preserved and the story of Emperor Akbar's visit to Punjab. Prof. Bawa adheres to the scientific methodology of paraphrasing each Canto (Vaar), using modern day terminology. The present exposition and translation constitute a notable contribution to the growing body of modern literature on the Sikh ethos and religion.

Volume 2 (Vaars 20-40) examines the layout and objectives, with thumbnail sketch of each Vaar, to provide the background for the text and translation in vivid, matter-of-fact language. This set of two volumes, reasonably priced (as donation to Sikh Youth Forum in USA) that embodies exceptional devotion will be particularly useful for educational institutions, libraries and Gurdwaras across the world, as a basic guide to professional preachers and 'priesthood', even as keen students of Sikhism will find it a treasury of ruby-studded wisdom.

- Saran Singh

sikh ardaas (PUNJABI/ENGLISH)

Rendering by Dr. (Mrs.) Satpal Kaur Sodhi

Published by Bhai Chattar Singh Jiwan Singh, Amritsar. 143 001.

Pp 160. Price: (Hardcover) Rs. 450.00

Prayer is one of the most fundamental urges in a human being. The Sikh *Ardaas*, in its authorized version, has been invoked in congregations for over three centuries. Its soulful appeal transcends the historical references, even as its piety and reverential supplication to the one-and-only God invokes universal peace and amity, while providing comfort to the stressful mind.

On an individual plane the *Ardaas* is both challenging and insightful, particularly when the supplicant asks God for "deep humanity and an enlightened frame of mind" 'mnu nlvW miq aNUucl ||

The translator is eminently qualified not only as a life long teacher and wife of a clinical psychologist of longstanding, Dr. S.S. Sodhi of Halifax, Nova Scotia (Canada) but also in her own right as a practicing Sikh and esteemed educator. Her rendering of the text into English is logical, persuasive and conceptually appealing. The value of the book is enhanced by its format: original text in Punjabi appears on the left, while the English rendering on right-hand side, in colourful calligraphy.

The relatively expensive price tag is perhaps pardonable because the tacky volume is targeted at the English knowing affluent society of the Sikh diaspora. In any case, the urge to pray does not admit of any cost:benefit ratio.

- Saran Singh

guru nanank (Spiritual Masters Series)

By Harish Dhillon

Publishers: Indus Source Books, PO Box Malabar Hill PO, Mumbai 400 006.

(www.indussource.com)

Pp 226. Price: Rs. 195.00

A review by Saran Singh

In his definitive scripture Japji, Guru Nanak establishes the vital link between ethics and the

human spirit (ਵਿਣੁ ਗੁਣ ਕੀਤੇ ਭਗਤਿ ਨ ਹੋਇ ॥), paving the way for the ascent of man to rise up to divinity. During his amazing and perilous travels across south and west Asia, he used the love of God as his armour-plate, ever willing to engage in dialogue with the holy and the powerful personages: with Babur in 1521 at Eminabad, Siddha Yogis of Gorakhnath school in high Himalayas, the Raja of Sri Lanka, and the high priests in Puri as well as in far-off Mecca and fabled Baghdad.

This attractive and compact book comes in an evocative new series on 'Spiritual Masters'. Written by an eminent educator and teacher, the narrative sensibly guides the reader through the tumultuous times and milieu that witnessed the advent of Guru Nanak, his unconventional childhood and mystical encounters with the ruling Lodhi Nawab, even as he won the admiration of Rai Bular, the village chief, as a strong willed but magnetic youngman.

In modern times, the honorific 'Guru' has been so outrageously devalued by the western writers that it is just as well the author discards the title, as was done in another similar book by Navtej Singh Sarna in *The Book of Nanak* (SR Aug. 2004). The conversational style and lucid diction used by the author in narrating many of the fascinating 'Saakhis' (lit. eye-witness account) lend the book a special flavour that should attract the new generation. But, then, the younger generation hardly read books!

The stories reveal Guru Nanak as the messenger of God, a fascinating teacher and prophet, in tune with divine truth, willing to build bridges with all faiths, dismissive of shibboleths and superstition. Harish Dhillon's wood-pictures and turn-of-phrase being to life many a historic figure: Rai Bular who was the Guru's earliest devotee, Bhai Mardana, the gifted musician, and even the teeming masses who suffered privation and persecution. High or low, those who came in contact with the glorious Guru Nanak underwent a shining transmutation.

Over the last five decades of *The Sikh Review*, we have been privileged to see a steady stream of books on the life and times of Guru Nanak. We recall Sir Jogindra Singh's chaste biography of Guru Nanak, stories of Guru Nanak by Raja Sir Daljit Singh, Baba P.L. Bedi's fascinating book and, of course, 'Hymns of Guru Nanak; by the evergreen Khushwant Singh, who had also led the Sikh scholars' team to bring out UNESCO'S *Sacred Writings of the Sikhs*.* What distinguishes the "Indus Source" Publisher's present offer is Harish Dhillon's informal, down-to-earth style wherein the times of Guru Nanak come alive in vivid word-pictures.

* Published by Orient Longman (Copies available at SR at concessional price)