

Words pregnant with meaning

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I HAVE A SEHAJDHARI FRIEND FOR close to thirty years. He is both dedicated and knowledgeable. He does not like Gurbaksh Singh Kala Afghana all that much but from the controversy swirling around Kala Afghana's writings he has picked up something he likes.

My friend quoted to me from Guru Granth - lines also cited by Kala Afghana - clearly asserting that the true "amrit" is the nectar of the Name of God, or to put it another way, to acquire God-consciousness. It clearly followed then, according to my friend, that when we initiate Sikhs into the order of the Khalsa, the rite should not be labeled "Amrit-sanskar" and using the word "amritdhari", would be totally inappropriate.

It put me in a bit of a fix - throughout my life I had heard and respected the label "amritdhari". Let me be equally clear that such feeling did not always translate into automatic respect for every person so labeled. People often fall short of the titles and epithets that describe them.

But the lines from the Guru Granth leave no doubt of their meaning. My friend was also correct in his interpretation of the lines from Guru Granth. How then to reconcile the two.

Words are the currency of thought. Words may become deeds but primarily they are pegs to hang ideas on. Words dress up ideas and in doing so they can both enhance or degrade their beauty. They can bring ideas into sharp focus or they can obscure and hide them. Without words ideas remain like spirit or soul - hardly comprehensible, barely approachable.

Yet language remains inadequate. We like to think that words have specific meaning that are absolutely invariant under any circumstances. But that is rarely so. Look in any dictionary and ordinary words acquire very specific meanings under some circumstances and become rather flexible at other times. Meanings change with time and usage as well. But then we say - yes, all this is true with ordinary words in the language of common usage. It certainly can never be true in the meaning of divinely inspired poetry that is the Guru Granth. The meanings of words of gurbani are fixed for all time and under all circumstances, we insist sometimes. In fact I have heard such formulations proclaimed from the gurdwaras more times than I can remember. (This reminds me of how fundamentalist Christians view the Bible in its literal meaning!)

But is it really true that a word in gurbani has only one meaning and can have no other application?

I look at a simple word like "Ram". It occurs in the Guru Granth over 5000 times. Most often it refers to God, even though Guru Granth grants that humans have used a million names for God. Why did the Gurus use the word "Ram" for the concept of God when they also clearly said that God transcends all description and any descriptive epithet will remain inadequate? Clearly, this was a useful name drawn from the language, mythological history and religion of most of the people of India

that came to the Gurus. One must teach in the language and conceptual framework of the student, or else the lesson would be lost.

But then, in many places within the Guru Granth, the Gurus also referred to the historical "Ram" of Indian culture and mythology. There is no clear evidence that establishes the historical Ram and he may be only an Indian cultural construct. Also, in Hindu belief there is no separation between Ram of supposedly historical reality and Ram as the name of God.

The Gurus, however, draw a clear distinction between the two concepts. When reading the Guru Granth, if one understands the difference no confusion occurs and both usages of the word can coexist. If one does not, clarity is lost and understanding is impossible. Such uncertainty and misunderstanding are easily visible in the case of many Hindu scholars who insist that Sikhism is just an extension of Hinduism. They merely count how often Hindu and Hindi names of God and deity are used in Guru Granth, and the number is large.

Similarly, I see that in Guru Granth the "*Thakur*" is sometimes used to speak of a master, at other times of God, and then again it may refer to the stone idol often used in Hindu worship. The last concept has no place in Sikh view or practice.

I have given only two examples. Discerning readers can find many more in all languages.

When Guru Nanak speaks of the remembrance of God being the only "Amrit" he is pointing to an inner reality - of a God that is within each one of us, and that has to be discovered and nurtured by prayer and grace.

To live a life imbued with such amrit is the recommendation in Sikhism. Living such a life means that the internal life of the awareness of the Infinite within each of us is reflected in the worldly life that we live.

I know that many (including my sehajdhari friend) look at the initiation of the Khalsa in 1699 and refer to the rite as Khandey-Batey di Pahul, and that is a literal rendering of the mechanical process. In this they are correct. Their next step is to insist that the terms "amrit" or "amritdhari" are inappropriate and there are no such entities, and finally they end by casting doubt on the rite of initiation into the Khalsa and on its entire philosophy. For this reason they do not wish to speak of "amritdhari" Sikhs. And in this they are dead wrong.

When we speak of the rite as amrit we look beyond the perfunctory steps to the rite. When we speak of amrit as the rite that binds us to our history we refer to the dramatic events of 1699 that created a nation. The promise of this process is to put us on a path in which the external reality of a Sikh is merged with the internal reality of his life dedicated to divine purpose. In calling it the rite of amrit the focus is shifted to a seamless merging of the internal and external realities. I realize that in living either reality - internal or external - the seeker's path is non-linear and there will be many a misstep. In intent or meaning the two interpretations of the same word are not contradictory, and in application the emphasis is complementary. Words acquire meanings with usage. That's the beauty of a living language. Sikhs have evolved two different applications of the same word (amrit) of the two most important and germinal concepts that lie at the root of Sikhism and define it - one enunciated by

Guru Nanak, the other by Guru Gobind Singh. In reflecting on the meaning of the text the context is all-important.

For anyone who chooses the Sikh path, the two ideas are like body and soul - inseparable until the last.

