

Poetics of Guru Granth Sahib*

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Guru Granth Sahib is the Guru in perpetuity of the Sikhs. The holy Scripture was completed by Guru Arjun, the fifth Guru at Amritsar circa 1604. He felt that a religion cannot develop and a community cannot grow until and unless it had a scripture of its own. The British historian and author MA Macauliffe wrote, "if the independence of the Sikh race was to be established it was essential that they should have an independent religious book". The Adi Granth was completed by 1601 AD but it was installed at the Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar, in August 1604 AD with Bhai Buddha as the Head Granthi. Guru Arjun had with him his own and his father Guru Ram Das's hymns but he had to make great efforts to get hold of the hymns of previous three Gurus which Baba Mohan the son of Guru Amar Das had with him in two 'pothis' (Manuscripts). Guru Arjun's immediate problem was to get the genuine composition of his predecessors and to weed out the spurious writing which had been introduced by some of the unsuccessful aspirants to Guruship and their followers. Guru Arjun also invited followers of other religious denominations and contemporary writers of religious verse to send in contributions for consideration and thus Guru Arjun was able to collect sacred writings of 36 holy men both Hindu and Muslim of the Indian sub-continent. These saints ranging from the 12th to the 17th century hailed from all directions and religions of India. They were associated with various communities, castes and creeds. Hymns of 16 Hindu Bhagtas and Muslim Sufis are included in the Guru Granth Sahib. In chronological order they are Jai Dev of Bengal, Farid of Punjab, Nam Dev, Trilochan and Paramanand of Maharashtra, Sadhna the Sindhi, Beni and Ramanand of Uttar Pradesh, Dhanna of Rajasthan, Pipa Sain, Kabir and Ravi Das of Uttar Pradesh and Sur Das, the blind poet of Oudh. Of these the greatest number of verses are those of the Muslim weaver of Varanasi, Kabir and Farid of Punjab. Among the Sikh Gurus only the first five Gurus and the ninth Guru contributed their hymns. The largest number of hymns, 2218, were of Guru Arjun followed by Guru Nanak 974, Guru Amar Das 907, Guru Ram Das 679, Guru Tegh Bahadur 115, and Guru Angad 62. Sri Gokul Chand Narang, author of the book *Transformation of Sikhism* writes that 75 per cent of the authors of the Guru Granth Sahib were Hindus by faith as well as by birth. As such Guru Granth Sahib is a unique anthology of 5894 hymns. No other scripture of any religion of the world contains any kind of writings of holy men belonging to a faith caste or creed other than that of its own, much less of those and in such a large number, who were regarded and treated as outcastes and untouchables for centuries together. No other religion or scripture shows this catholicity of outlook in bringing together views of such diverse hues, even when they are diametrically opposed to the tenets of the faith whose scripture they now form an integral part and to which all adherents of that faith bow daily in reverence without thinking for a moment to this day whether they are paying their obeisance to the holy utterances of their own prophet Guru Nanak or to a Muslim Sheikh Farid. As such, Guru Gobind Singh, just before his death did the right thing to bestow eternal Shabad Guruship on Guru Granth Sahib in 1708 AD. -

Poetry and Musical Modes of Sri Guru Granth Sahib

Sri Gokul Chand Narang writes that the language of the Adi Granth is a mixture of almost all the Aryan language current then in India. K.S. Duggal writes that the Adi Granth as a literary work, has some superb pieces of poetic excellence both from the viewpoint of form and content. The language varies from Sanskrit and Persian to the Punjabi spoken in those times in the form of various regional dialects. The poetic forms are as varied as they are

original. They invariably reflect the mood of the text and succeed in communicating it eminently. The Gurus and the Bhaktas take ample liberty with the form and do not seem to observe the rigidities of the traditional poetic moulds. The Sikh Gurus, in order that their compositions become popular preferred the measures and the tunes of the folk ballads and folk songs. These have helped us to sing the hymns in their proper tunes. Khushwant Singh in his book *A History of the Sikhs* writes that the hymns of the Bhaktas and Sufis in the Granth Sahib do not correspond strictly to the versions now current in Hindi, Marathi, or other languages in which they had been originally written. Apparently by the time they came to be known in Punjab, they had undergone linguistic alterations.

The hymns of the Granth Sahib are not arranged by authors or subject matter but divided into the following 31 Ragas or musical modes in which they are meant to be sung. These are Sri Rag, Majh, Gauri, Asa, Gujri, Devganthari, Bihagra, Vadhans Sorath, Dhanasari. Jaitsri, Todi, Berari, Tilang, Suhi Bilawal, Gaund, Ramkali, Nat Narain, Mali Guara, Maru, Tukhari, Kedara, Bhairo, Basant, Sarang, Malar, Kanra, Kalyan, Prabhati and Jaijavanti. Those Ragas which aroused any kind of passions were omitted. For example Megh and Hindol were not used because of their jubilant tone or extreme joy. Similarly Jog and Dipak was rejected for their sadness or melancholy. Each of these sections begins with an invocation to God and then follows the hymns of the Gurus in their succession as Mahalla I, Mahalla II and so on and each one calls himself by the common appellation of Nanak. What the Sikh Gurus wished to emphasise more than the way of good deeds (*Karma Marga*) was the path of worship of the name (*Nama Marga*). They considered divine worship through music the best means of attaining that state of bliss (*vismad*) which resulted in communion with God.

The compositions of the Gurus are always considered sacred by their followers. Guru Nanak said in his hymns, "the true Guru manifested Himself because they were composed at His Orders and heard by Him" (Var Asa). The fourth Guru Ram Das said "Look upon the words of the True Guru as the Supreme Truth, for God and the Creator hath made him utter the words." (Var Gauri). Guru Arjun while selecting the hymns of Bhaktas and Sufis for inclusion was careful in choosing only those with an ideology that suited to the Sikh tenets. Guru Arjun was not prepared to compromise on the basic teachings of the Sikhs. For example he examined the compositions of four religious leaders, Kahna, Chajju, Shah Hussain and Pilo but he did not give any of their 'slokas' a place in his Granth as they did not suit the ideals and ethics of the proper Sikh canon. M.A. Macauliffe wrote that Guru Arjun asked the four of them to recite their choicest couplets and their verses were rejected because of the ideological differences. As such Guru Arjun the fifth Nanak, not only compiled a canon but also gave it the form of Supreme Granth. It became for Sikhs a source book for the ethical doctrines of the Gurus. The Granth as the only text for Sikhs became the Ultimate Bliss for them and gave an authentic contour to the Sikh movement. All kinds of racial and national differences were set aside caste, creed, sex and other sacred and economic disparities of the authors were completely ignored. There is little wonder that when the Mughal Emperor Akbar examined the Granth he described it as "the greatest book of synthesis" and the "worthy of reverence: The contents of the Granth are primarily spiritual and secondarily philosophical." The Gurus idea was to present the world a book which should serve as a text book of universal religion and something which is essential and common to the truly religious side of a faith. The social, practical, secular and ritual aspects of a religion are relative to time, place and other environments. These things change and should not, according to the Guru, "form the subject matter of a holy book whose teachings are to guide men to spiritual peace at all times and in all countries." This

author also writes “The objective of the Granth Sahib was not to lay down any clear cut system of philosophy nor to place before us a definite set of rules for ritual practices or social observation.” He adds that the Adi Granth throws light on the path leading to the highest goal of spirituality. In the Granth ‘philosophy’ is propounded through the songs of love and devotion. The historian S.S. Kohli writes “The messages of love, truth, contentment, humility, fatherhood of God, brotherhood of man, restraint on passions, mercy on living beings, purity of mind and body, search for the self and higher soul, equality of man and woman, service of others, liberalism in the matter of food and clothing make the religion of the Adi Granth a Universal Religion. The essential teachings of the Granth form a coherent and uniform whole. The main appeal of the Granth Sahib as a scripture is its non-esoteric character and its utter simplicity.

Modern Technology and the Guru Granth Sahib

Dr. Brij Pal Singh, Editor in Chief of the *Akal* Journal of Spiritualism ‘writes that Guru Granth Sahib is for us everything on earth. It is God Himself. It is the sacred word whose reading with comprehension and love, whose singing rendered to music and whose very presence sends waves and feelings of goodness, Godliness, purity of speech, thought and action into an inner being, a heavenly fragrance that cannot be described in words: Guru Granth Sahib is the life, blood, bones and veins of the universe, created by God, handed over to Gurus who were God incarnate and the Gurus left the Guru Granth Sahib for the Sikhs as their own embodiment. He adds that our big use of modern audio, video and communication technology is of no avail unless it awakens within us the love of the Guru and humility of our own being. Audio or Video singing of ‘Gurbani’ in our homes, in our cars or in our mobiles sets while we continue to gossip at the same time amongst ourselves does not constitute “*Paath*” or “*Kirtan*” in any sense: In the same way “*Waheguru Simran*” playing on cassettes, CDs, television, radio is not remembering God unless one’s own mind and body are completely in tune at that very moment and unless our own tongue joins.

The poetry of Guru Granth Sahib is a mine of philosophic thought. It is highly revealing and reflects a way of life which is as simple as it is ennobling. Every word of it inspires and elevates. It has equal appeal for the erudite scholar as for the least literate reader. What is needed is the attitude of devotion. It must be understood that paper and the printed word are not the Guru they are only a vehicle. The Guru is what is contained in it. What one imbibes by reading the text, the revelation, the vision, the ecstasy. However, the fact remains that while the container that holds the nectar may not be nectar itself, it is no ordinary container. Every Sikh should remember Guru Gobind Singh’s Words:

As ordained by the Lord Eternal
A new way of life is evolved
All the Sikhs are asked
To accept the Holy Granth as the Guru
Guru Granth Sahib should be accepted as the Living Guru
Those who wish to meet God
Will find him in the Word.

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