

‘The Lover and the Beloved’ Paradigm in Guru Granth Sahib

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THE MOST STRIKING ASPECT of the *Guru Granth Sahib* is its popular base and personal approach. The inspired compilers of both the *Adi Granth* and the *Dasam Padishah ka Granth* apparently tried to subsume the primal human emotions, as reflected in the songs sung by the common people – the farmer in the field, the artisan on his job, the grazier with his herd, the woman in her kitchen or the roaming bards entertaining people with ‘epic’ poetry. The *Adi Granth* did not merely embody the compositions of the first five and the ninth Gurus; Guru Arjun Dev included not less than 937 hymns and *saloks* (stanzas) of several other popular *bhagats* of northern India whose ideas coincided those of the Gurus themselves.

The most extensive contributions are from Kabir (1440-1518), who was said to have been raised by a weaver, and later accepted by Ramanand as a disciple. The *Adi Granth* contains 225 *shabads* arranged under seventeen different *ragas*. The *Guru Granth Sahib* included only such hymns as were, in the words of Karine Schomer, “appropriate to a solid, moral, God-fearing religious community of householders.”¹ But the other hymns going under the name of Kabir in *Kabir Granthavali* and the *Beejak* with a more ascetical and mystical slant were excluded by the Gurus. The Gurus were receptive to any noble idea, with a popular appeal and included the *saloks* of Ravidas, a cobbler, Sadhana, a butcher of Sehwan in Sind, Namadeva, a saint of Maharashtra, who had earned fame in northern India when he visited Vrindavan, Sain, a barber in Rewa, or Dhanna, the Jat. A substantial number(about one hundred and twelve) of *shabads* by *Shaikh* Farid, the *pir* of Pakpattan were also included probably because they were written in Multani Punjabi (Lehndi), which made them easily intelligible by the common people and greatly added to their popular appeal.

These devotees looked upon God as intensely personal as well as immanent, and begged Him to draw them close to Himself. Some of them, indeed, preceded the Sikh Gurus in terms of chronology and their ideas and styles were already popular across the Gangetic plains. Significantly Guru Arjun Dev gave them a new authenticity and lease of life when he made room for their hymns in his compilation of the *Adi Granth* along with the verses of the Gurus. In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that in a good many of these hymns the authors have used the feminine symbol to create familiar images of devotion, affection, attachment and yearning to explain the relationship with God. The use of such images, as Mircea Eliade remarks, “bring men together... more effectively and more genuinely than any analytical language.”^{1a}

Of all human emotions love is the most pervasive. The bride’s love for her husband has a poignancy of its own. At the physiological level, having newly attained puberty, the uninitiated bride would be in awe, even confusion, how to win the affections of the newly

wedded husband. The question of her future marital status and her station in life are all related to her success in endearing herself to this unknown and — in a sense — mysterious person. Guru Nanak has, time and again, used these simple and elemental emotions to introduce poignancy and depth in man's endeavour to attain the Grace of God :

ਆਵਹੁ ਭੈਣੇ ਗਲਿ ਮਿਲਹ ਅੰਕਿ ਸਹੇਲੜੀਆਹ ॥
ਮਿਲਿ ਕੈ ਕਰਹ ਕਹਾਣੀਆ ਸੰਮੁਥ ਕੰਤ ਕੀਆਹ ॥
ਸਾਚੇ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਸਭਿ ਗੁਣ ਅਉਗਣ ਸਭਿ ਅਸਾਹ ॥੧॥

“Come my sister
Let us embrace!
Come beloved friend
Let us speak of love!
Let us sit together
And talk of our (Divine) Husband
Our Perfect, powerful Lord —
Lord, thou art the Truth,
Thou the repository of all beauty and goodness,
We, poor mortals are the repositories of pretence,
Thou art the Creator
And all is within Thy power
By the One Name we abide
When Thou art there
Why need we think of anyone besides?”²

Using such worldly allegories Guru Nanak leads his disciples into profound truths about the attitude one should assume in life to be able to reach out to the much sought after divinity—

“Go ask the happy spouse,
What virtues earned you favour of the Lord?
(she will tell thee)
'It's the gentle path of *sahaj*, calmness of manner and
Sweetness of tongue.'
If you hearken unto the Guru's Word
You will meet your Master, the Lord of Love.”³

On the one hand, the Guru is introducing the romantic image of a man-woman union, yet in the very next sentence he is alerting his listeners/ readers/ devotees to the futility of all fleshly pleasures. Underlying the metaphor is the eternal quest of the individual soul for the Divine one —

“If I offer my body as if it were a bride
The Lord will take it as if He were the groom
Love not a mortal who, you know
Is here for a while as in a passing show
The saintly blend with the Lord
The virtuous share His Embrace and become one with him.”⁴

The same sentiments are echoed by Guru Arjun Dev when he brings up the image of eternal love, without the fear of separation –

“The spouse of the Lord is a happy bride,
And enjoyeth every pleasure;
She shall not become a widow; for her lord is immortal;
No sorrow can touch her as she contemplates her Master;
Blessed and fortunate is such a woman
She sleepeth in peace and loseth all her sins;
She awaketh to new delight and to love of the Name
She remaineth absorbed in the Lord’s love
She weareth the divine Name as her jewels;
The words of the Beloved sound sweet in her ears.”⁵

The individual is assumed to be suffering his mortal existence through *Maya* or illusion. Once the smokescreen of illusion is dispelled, one can hope to be united with the Supreme or Universal Self from whom all Creation has emanated. The Guru’s writings mirror such an eternal craving of the human soul –

“Tell me in what street I shall find my Beauteous Lord?
O saint of God, show me the way I should follow.
The words of the Beloved fill my heart with sweetness,
And I long to follow this pain. Though I am short
And my hair is dishevelled, if the Lord desireth me
Even I become beautiful and I melt in His Embrace.
There is but one Beloved; all souls are as brides that seek His Love;
She who winneth the Lord’s love is beautiful.
What can the slave Nanak do,
But walk in the Way
That pleaseth the Lord?”⁶

The psychologist Sudhir Kakar has noticed that the transcendence of the boundaries of gender was quite common in devotees of the *bhakti* cult. He mentions the case of two saints, the fifteenth century Gujrati saint, Narsi Mehta and the Tamil poet, saint Nammalvar, who wrote with the ‘assumed personality’ of a woman of the emotions typical of a woman.⁷ The self-effacement and the surrender of the ego, which the Gurus aimed at could be versified only if they obliterated their gender identity. Thus Guru Nanak is found to be saying —

“Lord, to Thee I surrender my body and my mind
Thou art my Master.
Lord, destroy Thou my self- esteem
And let me mingled be in Thee”⁸

In some of the hymns the Gurus spoke of a deep longing for the divine consort which could only be expressed through the vocabulary of a woman. Thus Guru Ram Das is found to be pining —

“As a thirsty man yearneth for water
So longeth deeply my soul for the sight of the Lord
Love of the Lord like an arrow, hath pierced my heart.
Only my Beloved knoweth my pain and how I suffer within”⁹

Sardul Singh Caveeshar, in his commentary on Sikhism spoke of the Gurus' ceaseless efforts to get rid of the *haumain* (Caveeshar has translated it as 'I'ness) was only possible through the superimposition of a feminine identity on that of the male.¹⁰ The Gurus express their anguish to attain union with the divine with that of the fish, the lotus or the *chatrik* bird for the water. As Nanak sings in Sri Rag —

“Lord, Thou mighty River, all-knowing, all-seeing,
And I like a little fish in Thy great waters,
How shall I reach Thy shores?
Wherever I go, I see Thee only,
And snatched out of thy waters I die of separation.
I know not the fisher,
I see not the net
But flapping in my agony I call upon thee for help.”¹¹

Or

Listen, my heart: love God ceaselessly
As the fish loveth water:
The deeper the water
The happier and more tranquil the fish
God alone knoweth the suffering
Of fish separated from waters.

O my heart, listen:
Love God even as the Chatrick bird loveth the raindrops
Rivers in spate and the drenched uplands
Are of no avail to the Chatrick;
Nothing but the raindrops can quench its thirst
As a man sows, so shall he reap
That which the Lord ordaineth must come to pass.”¹²

The Gurus advise the devotee to look for union with the Universal spirit as a fish would look for the depth of the water, or a lotus would try to stay close to waters, unruffled by the disturbances of the ripples or like a Chatrick bird who would be satisfied with nothing but a shower of raindrops.

All the Gurus, from Nanak to Arjun Dev insisted on fidelity to God, as a chaste woman would be true to her husband. The analogy of man–woman relationship came to be exploited by the Gurus in the context of attachment to God in all its usual nuances and intensity —

“We are His wives; we adorn ourselves for Him.
We dress ourselves in bright red to gain His attention
But love is not won by bargaining; a counterfeit coin
Gilded with gold is soon found out and spells ruin.
How does a woman win the attention of the Lord?
Lord, she who is pleasing to thy sight is in nuptial bliss;
Thy mercy is her adornment.
The Guru's Word is her adornment, her body and soul
Are with her Lord.
With hands clasped she waits on Him; her prayer

Comes from the truthfulness of her heart
She is immersed in his love, she lives in fear of the
True One;
And when dyed with His love, her colour is fast and true
She is counted among the followers of the Beloved
She is recognised as one of His hand-maidens
Her love is not sundered; the True One unites her with Himself.
Her soul is plaited with the Word
I am ever a sacrifice unto Him.”¹³

This insistence on steadfastness recurs in the poems of the other Gurus too. Guru Amar Das uses the word ‘*sati*’ to single out loyalty to God as something parallel to a woman’s total loyalty to her husband even after his death —

“It is not they who burn themselves alive
With their husband’s dead bodies, who are *satis*,
Nanak, they rather are the *satis*,
Whom the shock of separation from their husbands kill;
They also are known as *satis*,
Who abide in modesty and contentment;
Who wait upon the Lord
And ever rising in the morning remember Him.”¹⁴

The theme of steadfastness returns in Guru Arjun in the allegory of a woman lamenting the wastage of beautiful hours of love tryst in sleep symbolising neglect or forgetfulness —

“O peace-giving night, prolong thyself,
For I am in love with my Lord;
O wretched sleep shorten thyself,
That I may always clasp His feet
I long for the dust of His feet
And I crave for the Holy name of the Lord
For the love of which I have given up the world;
Forsaking all my evil ways.”¹⁵

Such complaints can also be traced to Guru Nanak —

“Why did you waste the dark night in sleep?
How will you pass the hours without your Lord?
Woman, your bosom shall be afire, your body burn,
And your mind aflame.
A woman not loved by her Husband wastes away her Youth
Her husband is on her couch; but she sleeps and knows
Not of His presence.
I sleep while my Beloved is awake; to whom shall I
Turn for advice?
Sayeth Nanak, the True Guru teaches how to fear and love God
And thus be united with him.”¹⁶

Such inversions of the devotee’s self, to indicate a total surrender of the Ego, and submergence of the individual soul in the Supreme was not something unheard of in pre-Nanak - as well post-Nanak - Indian Bhakti literature. The Sikh Gurus made a subtle use of

the erotic to point to a divine union of the individual soul, eternally in agony by its separation from the Universal Soul, and its ultimate attainment of bliss.

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