

Gurmukhi - the key that unlocks the Truth

Let us be 'Guru -Lingual'

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Recently I visited India from USA and, as in the past, this time also I went to Amritsar for *darshan*. During my earlier visits I did not get to spend much time in Amritsar, but this time I spent few days there.

One day I was taking a walk in a park and overheard a young Sikh boy sitting on a swing asking his mother to give him a push, so he could enjoy his swing ride. The striking thing which I observed was that the youth and his mother were talking to each other in Hindi.

I was in for utter surprise because I was expecting that, at least in Punjab, where Punjabi is the official language and taught in schools and spoken in market place, it would be flourishing. But this was not the case. Indeed it was painful to see that the *Guruan di dharti*, and the cradle of our culture and ethos was losing hold of our language. I have also seen that, in places like Delhi where the Sikhs kids go to Sikh schools and learn Punjabi at school, and can read from Guru Granth Sahib, still talk to their friend and parents in Hindi. In case of Delhi, I have heard parents justify the use of Hindi in homes because they are taught in Hindi in school and if they speak in Punjabi the kids misapply Punjabi words in their School work - and it affects their grades!

Cultural Deprivation: Living in America I had experienced a similar scenario with the Sikh kids. As the first immigrants the parents' full efforts were directed at fully securing themselves financially. However, for their children they wanted to 'mainstream' them as far as possible, so they would only converse with their children in English. In the process of excelling academically, the children have been deprived of the privilege of being well versed in another language. **But in our efforts to equip our children in language skills of the academic world, and level the field of competition for them, we have deprived them of their heritage, culture, social and emotional bonds.**

The well known poet, author, and naturalist, Diane Ackerman says; "Whatever languages they (children) hear become indelible part of their lives, providing the words they'll use to know and be known. If two languages are spoken at home, they'll become bilingual." Here she is providing us with a clear case to expose children to multiple languages simultaneously. She further adds; "A bonus of bilingualism is that it forces a child to favor one set of rules while ignoring another, and that trains the brain early on to focus and discriminate, to ignore what's irrelevant and discover arbitrariness of words." As she has pointed out, the MRI studies of brain show that Broca's area is the speech center of the brain. When the children learn a second language as toddlers, they use same part of Broca's area for both. According to Ackerman; "To the brain, they are one language."

This is precisely the reason, that the children may mix the words from two languages and use it interchangeably. It is for this reason that the parents opt to teach the children one language so that it will make them excel at school and help them become successful later in life. We, as parents, think that we can introduce the child to additional language at the later stages of life. We are not only making our task difficult but also the toddler's task challenging. Because during the first few years the brain is plastic, so busily reconstructing itself that it can almost "inhale a language" - in the words of Ackerman.

Mental Plasticity: However, an effort to teach a language later in life takes more brainwork

as it has to recruit other parts of brain for help. I can attest to it from my personal experience: while in school we were required to learn three languages (English, Hindi, and Manipuri), but our parents expected us to excel in the fourth one, Punjabi, at home. Although I would not claim to have done the very best in the languages, but I believe that I acquired enough proficiency that I could manage well. Ackerman adds; "Learning a language as grown-ups is heavy hitting. Language is so difficult, only children can master it."

Again, I can testify to this statement based on my own experience in Korea, where my children - without being taught a single word of Korean - far excelled in Korean compared to us, the parents. In fact, during our shopping trips there many times when they would act as our interpreters.

It is imperative that we see, even if the toddlers take a little longer to master a language because they are being multilingual, the benefits far outweigh the efforts to expose them to another language at a later age. In fact, it may never materialize as the grown children may have their own agenda, priorities, and learning their mother tongue may not be appearing rational to their thinking. They may also find excuses because they have to prepare for this entrance examination, or for college admission, that they do not have time to allocate the requisite resources for their mother tongue.

Early Exposure: As children start identifying sounds by the time they are six months old, it is the right time to expose them to Guru's given language-*Gurmukhi*, along with other education that we expose children to. When children get ready to go to school they are not just equipped to grapple with challenges of education, but equally proficient in *Gurmukhi* and Punjabi. **It is this association of early childhood that will keep the child connected to his roots and rich heritage. This association and connection, like a centripetal force, will keep the child from being thrown out of Guru's orbit by the forces that child will be exposed to in school and college.** It can be argued that the child can still be connected to the Guru as the translation of Guru Ji's *shabads* and teachings are readily available in English, Hindi and other languages. Yes! The translations are there, and they will definitely provide the essence. But how can the translations provide the emotions, feelings, meter of poetry, or the state of mind that Guru Ji is expressing? Diane Ackerman says: "A poem records emotions and moods that lie beyond normal language that can only be patched together and hinted at metaphorically." **In this case this is not just poetry but also thought, feelings and description of the Creator's wondrous universe.**

In Guru Granth Sahib we have melody on top of the poetry which has the energy of an entirely different scale which cannot be translated. In fact, the entire Guru Granth Sahib is in poetic form, for us to experience the splendor of its music, along with the plethora of emotions to inspire us, counsel us, and guide us towards the goal of spiritual development.

Heritage: Let us therefore make our children 'Guru-Lingual' if we want them to lead a successful, balanced life, and be alive with Guru's wisdom. **If the learning of vernacular was not important enough then those westerners who embraced Sikhism later in their lives would not have put the kind of effort to learn the language in order to absorb, feel and relate to Guru Ji's message. Their experience should help us realize what we are in the process of losing our rich heritage and soul uplifting connection if we fail to take advantage of Guru provided endowment.**

The connection and relationship have to be created early and there is no other effortless way than to expose the children to Guru Ji's words, *shabads* right from birth. Even before the children learn to speak they build association with the sound. Let their association be with Guru given words and sounds. So, if they build up this foundation that their emotional

bonding will be so strong, which when nurtured properly will crescent to become the guiding light of their lives. This will blossom into a unique and unparalleled lifestyle. The Guru Ji has only spoken what God the almighty has spoken through them. Guru has testified to it in these words:

“ijh ibiD gur aupdyisAw so sunu ry Bwel]”

(SGGS: 727)

Meaning: Whatever the (Lord! The Almighty!) Guru has preached, (I am saying) so listen to the Teachings; O Siblings of Destiny.

By building on this relationship a blossoming of love through the *Gurbani* takes place as Guru Ji has described:

“AMqir pRymu prwpiq drsnu] gurbwxl isau pRliq su prsnu]”

(SGGS:1032)

Meaning: One who has love within, obtains the Blessed Vision of the Lord. One, who enshrines affection for the Word of the Guru's Bani, meets with Him.

Kindling the spirit: Thus, for a Sikh becoming a 'Guru-Lingual' is not a matter of just becoming proficient in another additional language because there is much more to it. **It is to create an environment of life style transformation culminating in the ultimate meeting with the Lord.** Let this provide us with incentive and impetus to connect to the wisdom of the Gurus. We will not just be saving a language from withering away, but make it motive force for transformation of lives.

As parents we have a duty towards our children and let us connect them to the Guru's wisdom and prescribed life style by making our children Guru-lingual. Let us not leave a legacy that we were the generation responsible for the withering away of our language, the heritage and knowhow for the exploration of 'the inner world', and coming out of cycles of reincarnation. Let us redouble our efforts and go down in the history as a generation that saved the treasury from extinction. It is time to marshal our resources and, as parents, form support group to rekindle this light - not for our coming generation but for entire mankind.

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References

1. Shri Guru Granth Sahib, (727 and 1032.)
2. Diane Ackerman, *We Are Our Words*, *Parade Magazine*, May 30,2004.