

Akhand Paath – Reciting in Adoration: Inception, Significance and Present Status

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The author of the monograph – an eminent civil engineer, sadly passed away on November 07, 2006. He was a devout Gursikh, a life member of this journal and noted philanthropist. We convey our deep sympathy to Mrs. Harbans Kaur Hooghan. - Editor, The Sikh Review

In the history of the Sikh Nation, the period, starting from the Martyrdom of Baba Banda Singh Bahadur to the time when Nadir Shah was injured in an attempt to destroy the DARBAR SAHIB in Amritsar, was probably the darkest and the most difficult period for the Sikhs. Many a Sikhs migrated to Northern Rajasthan and present-day Himachal Pradesh to avoid harassment by the Mughal rulers in the state of Punjab. This was the time when the Guru's teachings and the martyrdom of innumerable Sikhs were still fresh in the minds of the Sikhs. During this time, the heads of the Sikhs were priced at Rs. 50 each. The Khalsa slept in the saddles of their horses.

"*Ek Gharee Aadhee Gharee adhee hoon tey Aadh.....*" was the usual thought in the minds of the Khalsa, when they were being hunted by the forces of the Mughal rulers of that time. In pursuance of this desire, the Khalsa started the practice of an uninterrupted Paath for a couple of days, whenever they had respite from being chased by the Mughal forces. It was during this time that the Khalsa would take a chance to go in for an uninterrupted recital and listening of the Gurbani. These could be an occasion like Anand Karaj, birth or celebration of a victory in a skirmish, battle or at later stage in history a '*Morcha*' during British regime. Therefore, Path was a joint effort by the community and for the congregation ensuring a mass involvement. It would always start with an Ardas for *Nirvighan Samapati* and end with thanks to the Waheguru for the same. The *Parampara* of Ardas and Thanksgiving still goes on, in spite of having had only one occasion when the Path was interrupted at Jaito during the regime of the British. In those days, the copies of Sri Guru Granth Sahib were hand written. This was the period which saw the launch of the Akhand Paath (According to Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha - the Parampara of Akhand Paath was started by the Budha Dal). This period of chaos and anarchy lasted roughly up to the time when Maharaja Ranjit Singh became the ruler of Punjab with Lahore as the capital of the kingdom.

The period of comparative peace and prosperity for Punjab started with Maharaja Ranjit Singh and so also started the launch of technology of printing which came from Europe gradually. Hence the copies of Sri Guru Granth Sahib were more easily available after the era of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. As the availability of the copies of Sri Guru Granth Sahib increased, we came from a public/family Akhand Path to one in any household, which could afford to have a room designated for this purpose.

With the growing lack of courtesy towards Sri Guru Granth Sahib as per laws of supply and demand, we are overwhelmed by Brahminical practices introduced Akhand Path, like:

- Lighting of a Jyot:
- A pitcher of water, with a piece of red cloth and a coconut in it.
- Offerings of cloths etc. to the *Granthis* and *Paathis*.
- Holding of an Ardaas (Called *Madh di Ardas*) midway during the recital of Akhand Path.

All the above practices have been declared contrary to Gurmat by our Panth *Parvanit Reht Maryada* by Sri Akal Takht Sahib.

Now we shall look into the reasons of holding an Akhand Path:

- a) *Shukrana*- It is there but pretty rarely when we feel happy for all that, GOD has bestowed on us and we respond by an Akhand Paath. *Shukrana* is most welcome and it should always be observed.
- b) We have Akhand Paath on the occasion of House warming ceremony (*Makaan Di Chatth*), a child's Dastaar Bandi or Naam Karan or the opening of a business project.
- c) Akhand Paath is also held to celebrate Gurburab and the Barsi of the Great men.
- d) Any other prominent - but comparatively rare-occasion is when we are asking for favours from Waheguru, more so, when asking for a son! Here we go against Gurmat Philosophy per se, besides being guilty of "*Sewa Thori Maangan Bahuta*".

Mostly Akhand Paaths are performed at homes and it is almost a 48 hours process. Many a time, due to a lack of adequate space or manpower at home, the Paath is performed at a local Gurdwara. By and large, the family initiating the Akhand Paath is in attendance at the opening time of the Akhand Paath, Maddh di Ardaas, and the Bhog ceremony. There is hardly any motivation and desire to listen to the Gurbani during the Akhand Paath. Of course, we go to the market and buy the best 'Roomalas' we can afford.

How many of our young, and for that even older women, know how to prepare "Karah Parshad", but then the feeling is there that, why do it when the Gurdwara is ready to supply the "Karah Parshad" for the Akhand Path done at home, on a suitable payment, of course.

Unfortunately, there are Gurdwaras where you can pay the charges and get a date on which the Ardas will be performed in your name. No one bothers whether you attend the Akhand Paath and the Ardas or not. This fact of Ardas is sometimes advertised in periodicals.

Oh my lord! How low can we go in Sikhi, please help us see the light! The "Parshad" is sent to you by post! Dear Brahmins!! Beware your Sikh counterparts, i.e. our Granthies, are out to beat you at your own game. Although we have been exhorted by Sikhi practices to "Baani Parhnaa, sunnana and Veecharnaa" in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, nowhere it is recorded that we can, or should, get it recited on payment of cash and/or kind, or otherwise! In "Asa di Vaar", it is bluntly pointed out "*Aapan Haththi Aapnaa Aapey hee Kaaj Sawareeyey;*" every Sikh should always keep this in mind.

Types of Akhand path Today: The normal Akhand Paath that takes about 48 hours to complete by a panel of 5 *Paathies* who recite scripture for about 2 hours, by turns. The same Paath, with Japji Sahib being recited on another "rehl" simultaneously.

Sampat Paath - In this Paath, a *vaak* is taken, and the *Shabad* so gifted is recited before each Shabad in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. This system has a panel of about 10 *Paathies*, takes about 9-10 days to complete.

Att Akhand Paath - This form of Akhand Paath is very rare. This is performed by a single person, without getting up from the duty of continuous recitation for 48 hours from Sri Guru Granth Sahib. [*Mahan Kosh* – 52-1974 edition]

A Sikh's professed aim in one's life-span is to develop his/her self to such an extent that there is no problem in the process of "*Nanak Leen Bhaeyo Gobind Sio Jio Paani Sang paani*" to be obtained by the practice of THREE TENETS of the SIKH FAITH, i.e. *Naam Japna, Wand Chhakna, Dharam Dee Kirt Karnee*. **Naam Japna** - means singing the praises of Nirankar so that, in the long run, we develop and attain the qualities, attributes of our Creator, i.e. the qualities of "*Nirbhau and Nirvair*". We develop ourselves on such lines that we could ultimately manage to merge in the Almighty. **In Sri Guru Granth Sahib, we are advised to not only to recite and listen to Gurbani but also to meditate on it so that Gurbani can permeate our lives to make good.** Gurmukh Sikhs out of us, and we start living our lives.

Wand Chhakna - means to share with others whatever we have earned honestly. **Dharam di Kirt Karnee** - means to earn one's livelihood by honest means. In the absence of these three tenets everything and every effort becomes worthless i.e. "*Phokat Karam*", doing us no good. Please note that Baani is meant for our spiritual and moral development. GOD is supreme PERFECTION. We cannot dream of being perfect (as some one said Man is not perfect but is improvable) but we can definitely endeavor for improvement and there is no end to the improvement, a human being can undergo. Let us see what we expect to gain from Akhand Paath as such and what we actually do. Gurbani exhorts us to attain "*Sehaj Avastha*", wherein we are happy with whatever HE bestows on us or whatever he takes away from us.

Again, let us have a critical look at the normally performed Akhand Paath. From a run of the mill no one gains anything spiritually, e.g. the host who undertakes the exercise, the Paathies who recite the Paath, the public who some time drops in to listen to Gurbani or pay a courtesy visit to the host's family. **None of them gains anything but someone does lose something.** Let us now consider the people referred to above separately.

The Host: The host in a normal middle class family: Once the decision is taken to have an Akhand Paath, the whole family converges to chalk out the logistics, and layout of the menus of the different meals to be served during the designated 48 hours. The housewife ensures that the service is as good as it can be to all and sundry, including the Paathis and Granthis, who will be regularly consuming tea and milk, with dry fruit thrown in for good measure. The housewife is mostly in the kitchen preparing and supervising the preparations for most of the time, so much so that she is totally exhausted at the end of the designated 48 hours, and in between she hardly ever gets a chance (or the strength) to sit down and listen to the Paath for a couple of hours. Therefore, in 6 to 8 cases out of 10 she hardly gains anything spiritual from the Akhand Paath.

The same goes for the head of the household who is busy looking after the guests and the Paathies, Granthies at home and is also busy doing shopping. He can hardly give any cursory attention to the Paath and normally misses to have a dip in 'the spiritual Ganga' of Gurbani. If this is correct, then what has he gained spiritually by the Akhand Paath at his home?

Coming to the Paathies and Granthies; they are sometimes (During the season) and even otherwise so busy in participating in the Paath activities at different places, and locations, that they have no personal interest in the Paath that they recite, which is carried out because they have been promised some money, clothes etc. according to the capacity of the host. So spiritually, they also gain nothing.

The third in this group are the visitors who drop in at the Arambh of the Akhand Paath and at the time of the Bhog ceremony, or even at a couple of other times, not because they are interested to listen to Gurbani *per se* but because it is the social norm.

Hence, we see that they also come in empty handed and go back empty handed from this holy exercise. So, now, we see that there is hardly anyone who has spiritually benefited by Akhand Paath.

The only beneficiaries are - if at all (that too monetary benefits) which accrue to the Paathies and Granthies who accept cash and/or kind, clothes, etc. The other beneficiaries are the shopkeepers who supply the various requirements to make the function a success and the caterers. The situation is worse in case the Paath is performed at the Gurdwara, where the Paathies are usually accused of turning a number of pages at a time to skip some pages, and dozing off.

Finally, we have to take a look at the people who really suffer, they are the children in their

formative years who, when they see their parents going through the exercise only to maintain their dignity, i.e. "*Nakk Rakhn layee*" - go a step further away from Gurbani and Sikhi, and a process which is irreversible takes place in their lives. Then we have the cheek to say "Don't know what is going wrong with today's generation". "*Ajj di paneeree nu ki ho giya hai*".

Some of my honourable readers may be cursing me as "Sattriya-Bahatariyaa" (I am 75 years old) and say that as it has been happening for about 200 years, how dare we stop it! I am not against Akhand Paath *per se* but only request my honourable readers **to ensure that we gain something spiritually from the whole process**, otherwise I say that it is an exercise in futility/showmanship/one-upmanship. I do believe in the Adage: "*Sat Sangat Mille so tariyaa*". So let us have Sat Sangat in our houses, if possible. We will have to take some trouble as there is no free lunch in this world! We could meet occasionally, regularly in our homes, recite Paath, try to cultivate "*Shuddh Uchchaaran*", and if we could have "Steek for the Baani under review we could try to understand it so that we could become better Sikhs. The interpretation of the Gurbani by Prof. Sahib Singh ji is highly recommendable. As far as the number of participants is concerned it is often said "*Ek Sikh Doey Sadh Sangat Punj Parmeshar*" Be choosy about the participants. Do not worry about the crowd.

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