

Forever the Teacher: Concept of *Shabad* as Guru

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GURU GOBIND SINGH, THE TENTH and the last personal Guru of Sikhs, at the end of his mortal life, appointed Guru Granth Sahib as the perpetual and ever-lasting 'living Guru' of Sikhs in the form of Guru's word (*Shabad Guru*) in 1708 A.D. Guru Gobind Singh had ordained this realising, that after the fourth Guru Ram Das, the ascendancy to '*Gur Gadi*' (Guruship) had been a matter of contest by members of the Guru's own family as his son Guru Arjun had to contend against his brother Prithi Chand, and then Guru Gobind Singh's own father Guru Tegh Bahadur had been raised to '*Gur Gadi*' in preference to the descendants of his elder brother, and his cousins had never forgiven him for what they called the usurpation of their title. Guru Har Gobind's grandson, Dhirmal and Guru Har Rai's son, Ram Rai had surprisingly become favourites at the Mughal Court which was then opposed to the Sikhs. So such dissensions in the family could have been a contributing factor in Guru Gobind Singh's discarding the practice of any more 'personal' Gurus for Sikhs.

During the time of Guru Gobind Singh, copies of Guru Granth Sahib had already been installed in most gurdwaras in the country; therefore quite naturally Guru Gobind Singh declared the end of the line of succession of Guru and he told his followers henceforth to turn to Guru Granth Sahib for guidance and look upon it as the symbolic representation of the Ten Gurus.

History records that when Guru Gobind Singh felt that his hour was approaching, he asked for a coconut and five *paise* as per centuries old tradition which he placed before the Holy Granth and enjoined the Khalsa that from then onwards Guru Granth Sahib shall be their sole as well as eternal Guru who shall ever protect them and guide them in all matters.

Sikhs should never accept any Guru other than Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Gobind Singh's injunction was that Sikhs should ever remain steadfast and true to their faith and Guru Gobind Singh will be there in spirit with them when his Five Sikhs gather and these Five Sikhs shall be vested with the authority to administer '*Amrit*' (*Pahul*) to the seekers and make them members of the Khalsa Fraternity.

So in this manner the sagacious and farsighted Guru Gobind Singh ended the cycle of succession to Guruship. The devolution of the power of bestowing '*pahul*' was a great democratic step which saved Sikhs from the ills of Gurudom which had eaten into the vitals of Hindu Dharma invested with the multitudes of Gurus in the form of Brahmins.

Guru Granth Sahib is a humanist scripture as it enshrines the ideals and institutions of a modern and universal religion as well as of an excellent and comprehensive ethical system which covers the entire human race, its welfare and uplift in view, and gives the healing outlook of life. It has brought forth a new order of democratic polity, a new conception of ultimate Reality, a new vision of the universal Man and a new pattern of non-discriminatory society based on equalitarian and pluralistic concepts, as expressed in its following verse: "God is our only Father, we all are children of that One Father, and neither is any my foe, nor I am enemy of any, I have made all my loving friends and I am a friend of one and all".

The hymns which have been included in Guru Granth Sahib are only of the first five Gurus and the ninth Guru and the rest of the hymns are of Hindu Bhaktas and Muslim Sufis, namely, Jai Dev of Bengal, Farid of Punjab, Nam Dev, Trilochan and Parmanand of Maharashtra, Sadhna of Sindh, Beni and Ramananda of Uttar Pradesh, Dhanna of Rajasthan, Pipa, Sain, Kabir, Ravidas, Bhikan of Uttar Pradesh and Sur Das, the blind poet of Oudh. The greatest hymns are those of Muslim weavers of Varanasi, Kabir and Farid, the Sufi mystics of Pak Pattan.

As such, Guru Granth Sahib combines the greatest writings of holy persons belonging to different faiths, castes or creeds with that of six Sikh Gurus. A striking deviation from tradition was the inclusion of shabads in large numbers of those who were regarded and treated as outcastes and untouchables for centuries together. No other religion or scripture perhaps shows this catholicity of outlook in bringing together views of such diverse hues. Sikhs 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 that of a Muslim, Sheikh Farid, bow before Guru Granth Sahib. Therefore, the religion of Guru Granth Sahib is a universal and practical religion.

The Khalsa was created by Guru Gobind Singh because, after the martyrdom of his father Guru Tegh Bahadur, the civilisation in India had reached its lowest ebb. The tyrannical rule of the Mughal Empire had absolutely degraded and its climax was that hundreds of thousands of innocent Hindus were put to death for the only fault that they did not embrace Islam as ordered by the then Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. So, therefore, in the midst of the wreckage of a collapsing order, the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur triggered a zeal in his son Guru Gobind Singh to consummate Khalsa Panth to check the onslaught of the Mughal rule and the design the ideal society.

Guru Tegh Bahadur already held the view that no mighty power, or political authority, anywhere had a right to annihilate the prevalent cultures. So Guru Tegh Bahadur in world's history has the unique distinction of sacrificing his life for others.

Sikh Gurus never believed in idol worship or rituals which the Hindus observe. As Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, even at the age of nine years, repudiated the formality of wearing a sacred cotton thread called '*janeu*' around his neck which the Brahmin priest wanted him to do, and the precocious Nanak challenged the priest with these words: "make mercy thy cotton, contentment thy thread, continence its knot, truth its twist, that would make a '*janeu*' for its soul, if thou have it, O Brahmin, then put it on me. It will not break or be burnt or lost. Bless the man, O Nanak who goes with such a thread on the neck".

Guru Tegh Bahadur, anticipating the modern concepts of protection of human rights and democracy irrespective of the creed, belief, ideology, thought in the medieval age that the right to wear '*janeu*' or frontal marks by Hindus should not be banned which Aurangzeb had enforced. So Guru Tegh Bahadur went to the extent of sacrificing his life to protect the rights of a community other than his own. He was the apostle of human rights.

The great act of sacrifice by Guru Tegh Bahadur left an imprint on the mind of his young son, Gobind, then only nine years old. Gobind deliberated on this for 24 years and then only he completed the mission of his life to establish the Khalsa Panth, with

its pristine identification. The five “symbols” of Sikhs, namely are *kesh* (unshorn hair), *kangha* (comb) to keep the hair clean, *kachera* (knicker-shaped underwear), *kara* (bracelet of steel) on the wrist and *kirpan* (sword) hanging on the left side as a weapon of defence and hope, they were not conceived as ends in themselves as when they did not fulfill the purpose for which they were symbols became dead and lifeless. The main object of the Khalsa, by these symbols, like that of Salvation Army, is to propagate Dharma and Righteousness.

The Khalsa which Guru Gobind Singh created is an organised unit of Brotherhood based on disciplinship yoked to the service of the whole mankind. He clearly said '*Manas ki jaat sab eke pehchanbo*' - meaning 'treat the whole mankind as one. He said all human beings, though appearing different with different influences, are essentially the same. And every Sikh in his daily prayer seeks '*Sarbat ka bhala*' - the welfare of all. Guru Gobind Singh also said that a Sikh is dear to me not because of his name or form but because of his or her character. The above five “symbols” are means or aids for promoting moral and spiritual development.

For 'shabad Guru', Guru Gobind Singh said that although the spiritual tutelage of the Guru is said to be an integral part of Guru Nanak's teachings, yet Guru Gobind Singh felt that a living mentor could now be dispensed with, provided he could be replaced by some institution which discharged the same functions. It is recorded that even before the creation of the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh had four sons of his own, but he felt that it would be better to end the line of personal Gurus and invest the Guruship in something permanent and inviolable. Khalsa is a classless society. In essence, Sikhism is the same as of Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus. By investing the Guruship in the Granth, it becomes immortal and permanent - till eternity. So Sikhs do not look upon the Guru Granth Sahib as just a Holy Book but worship it as the eternal Shabad Guru and embodiment of the word of God and the Holy Spirit as well as the living presence of their Ten personal Gurus.

