

Guru Nanak's Musical Path to *Ananda*

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IDOL WORSHIP, CASTE AND ASCETIC austerity had no place in Nanak's religion. He believed in one God, *Ek Onkar*, singing His praises was the best way of devotion. He advocated listening to *kirtan* or hymn singing and set his compositions to music in suitable *ragas* or melodies.

Guru Nanak was 27 when he went out to spread the Name of God expounding the message of 'true path'. With Mardana as companion, he travelled throughout the country, going as far as Tibet in the north and Sri Lanka in the south. He even visited Mecca. Wherever he went, his hymn-singing drew large crowds. Mardana would faithfully reproduce notes on the *rabab* as Nanak sang his way to the hearts of the listeners. There was complete rapport between them. Whenever Nanak conceived a hymn and it was in the process of versification, he would call out: "Mardanya! *Rabab chhed, bani aye*" (Mardana, strum the *rabab*, word is descending).

Nanak, while returning from Mecca in 1520-21 sat under a tree on the outskirts of Baghdad and started singing his composition in Persian, to the strains of Mardana's *rabab*. This attracted a curious crowd since praying through music is forbidden in Islam. Pir Dastgir, the high priest of Baghdad told Nanak: "Music tends to divert the mind towards enjoyment of the senses. It is therefore not proper to use it for holy communion." Nanak replied: "Musical sound originates from God. It is holy in every sense. The best way to worship God is to blend the divine word into holy music." The head priest was much impressed by this explanation and extended his hospitality to the Guru.

Guru Nanak's successors continued his mission of spreading the Name of God through music. Guru Amar Das talked of the celestial melody. Guru Ram Das said, "Of all the *ragas*, brother; that one is the best/Through which the mind gets attuned to God..." Guru Arjun said: "Blessed are the notes of the *ragas* which put the mind in a tranquil mood." He explained, "Individual recitation of word is like water supply from a well which can irrigate the field (enlighten the mind of one person), whereas *shabad kirtan* is like a cloud-burst which turns crops green in many fields. But the effect of discourse on the *shabad* is like sustained rain. The effect is enhanced when discourse is interspersed with *shabad kirtan* which elevates the mind to spiritual heights and illuminates the soul with the inherent meaning of the Word.

To ensure that music for the hymns was appropriate to the spirit of the text, Guru Arjun established *Gurmat Sangeet* or Guru's school of music, laying down the principles. He insisted that a *ragi* or singer should be of saintly disposition. In the *Var Ramkali* he says: "Doubly blessed is the *ragi* who is sought by God himself/How fortunate is that *ragi* who dwells at His True Door."

The *Adi Granth*, or *Guru Granth Sahib*, the presiding Guru, contains hymns of the six Sikh gurus and other Hindu and Muslim saints, written in *Gurmukhi* script. The hymns are arranged by 31 *ragas* in which they are meant to be sung. The exception is *Japji* which is in the beginning and is to be recited slowly and quietly. The *ragas* of the Holy Granth were carefully selected not to include those arousing passions of jubilation or melancholy. 'Raga Sri' occupies the first place because it is traditionally considered pre-eminent for worship.

The instructions to the *shabad* singers were, not to indulge in the exposition of the intricacies of the *ragas* but to sing them in such a way that meaning of the words was clearly and gently conveyed to the listeners. For, it is the Word that uplifts the mind; poetry and music are brought in only to magnify the emotional appeal and enliven the recitation. **The aim of music in shabad kirtan is to produce a feeling of *anand* or divine bliss.**

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What is Spirituality?

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SPIRITUALITY IS THE STAGE OF complete harmony where the human soul (Atma) and God's Soul (Paramatma) come near and finally the one merges into the other. The qualities, characteristics and attributes of God as succinctly mentioned in the Sikh credo, *Mool Mantra*, reflect in and illuminate the human soul, allowing the individual to shed desire and pain. Such an enlightened being is without pride, wants no praise, has no enmity, is not afraid or aggressive, and above all remains calm. He is no longer trapped by the lust, wrath, avarice, infatuation or the ego. God himself dwells in such a person. In Sikhism this stage is known as "*Sehaj*" and the enlightened person is known as "*Jivan Mukh*" or "*Brahmgyan*". But the *Jivan Mukh* is not a mere spectator of life but one who struggles actively for righteousness and to stands against oppression when the occasion demands.

A study of Guru Arjun Dev's *Sukhmani Ashtapadis* 8 to 9, and Guru Teg Bahadur's *shabad* "*Jo nar dukh mein dukh nahin mane,*" can help elucidate the essence of the essential state of equanimity, wherein spirituality becomes a reflection of God's love, mercy and grace. It is the free flow of divine love; benevolence and benediction bestowed freely on God's creation, especially humankind. Persons who prove worthy to receive God's grace are highly evolved spiritually and ready to unite with the Almighty. There is no yardstick to know or to measure why, when or who wins God's grace. Even agnostics or evil people can be favoured if God so wills. This could be one's *karma* and the result of good actions carried forward from previous lifetimes. *Asa di Var* says:

Some by His grace He unites with Himself

Others by His will He dooms to death.

Some by His grace are kept safe, while others make
their home in worldliness.

One cannot even tell whom He may favour.

(Stanza 3)

The concept that a living guru is needed for spiritual attainment is not entirely correct. According to the *Mool Mantra* 'guru' is also one of the attributes of the Formless God. Guru Gobind Singh authenticated this by saying that the one ever-present prophet, i.e. God is his guru "*Ad-ant eko avtara soi guru samjhio hamara.*" Guru, like God, is formless and its eternal form is *shabad* (Word) - "*Gur moorat gur shabad hai*" and only a formless entity like *shabad* or *bani* can help to unite with the Formless Being.

Unfortunately, more often than not our commitment to *shabad* and *bani* has been limited, even superficial. We do not recite or hear it attentively. We neither accept it as truth nor do we mould our life accordingly. Should a devotee say his prayers with love and devotion, the guru may enlighten him: “*Gurbani kahe sewak jan mane, partakh guru nistare.*” It would be fruitful to seek company of noble souls and to attend holy congregations where God is remembered “*Harkirtan sadh-sangat hai sir karman ke karma*”

Age is no bar for achieving spirituality. Baba Farid lamented that he who does not mediate when still young will not do so when he turns gray. Guru Amar Das who ascended ‘Gur-gaddi’ at the age of 62 corrected him by saying that God’s grace is ever present irrespective of age provided one remembers Him from the core of his heart.

Education, wisdom, scholarship and intellect, without a spiritual perspective are all vanity. None of the prophets, gurus and bhagats was formally educated. Prophet Mohammed was called as “Omiya” - illiterate. Bhagat Prahlada had refused to learn anything except to recite Ram-Naam. Nor did Guru Nanak have formal education, but his proficiency in Sanskrit and Persian is evidenced in the Adi-Granth. Education is, therefore, not a prerequisite to achieve spirituality. Knowledge can be available to liberated souls who can draw from spiritual archives whatever is needed.

Spiritualism is a matter of soul and the heart and not that of the body. Renunciation, wearing of ascetic garb, visiting sacred places, bathing, observing silence, nakedness, practicing rites and rituals, etc. are mere affliction and tribulation to body and are, as such, of little consequence on the path of spirituality. **Human body is primarily meant for meditation (*simran*) and service of humanity (*sewa*).**

A sure indication that a person has achieved admission into the spiritual world is that he lives truthfully (*Sat*); is contented in every respect and remains in high spirit under all circumstances (*Santokh*); is aware of God’s doings and His will (*Gyan*) and above all is absorbed in His ambrosial Name (*Amrit Naam*). *Naam* is the liberating and sustaining force of the entire cosmos: “*Naam ke dhare sagle jant, Naam ke dhare khand brahmand.*”

