

Sikh Meditations
All Men are Alike
Anhad Naad

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By Harchand Singh

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Reviewed by Saran Singh

The ancient Indian wisdom had been largely dissipated in the quicksands of casteist divisions. By the middle ages, the moral grandeur of the Indus civilization had given way to passivity; the pious good men in Indian society preferred to withdraw to the quiet Himalayan retreats rather than risk confrontation with hordes of the Aibaks, Lodhis and the Mughals. That is when Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was born in the Land of Five Rivers. His advent profoundly affected the moral, social and spiritual lives of suffering humanity. What Guru Nanak taught to South Asia's masses – and far beyond, to Buddhism and Islam – had a universal appeal. His message focused on One God, all loving and just, in brotherhood of human being everywhere. He carried his message in song and poetry, of great beauty and popular appeal.

Sardar Harchand Singh has, in his translation of selected poetical hymns, captured some of the inspirational beauty and practical wisdom of Guru Nanak's verses, for Western as well as Indian readers. The appeal of his soulful translation evidently emanates from his deep personal understanding of the sacred writings and an age-long interaction with the people of faith in North America which has been his home for several decades. A comparative view of *Sikh Meditations* is embodied in Rev. Joseph N. Caulfield's succinct Foreword, best illustrated by his observation: "Christians who read these Meditations will be drawn closer to the awareness of God's presence." While the Bible is studded with stories of Moses and later Prophets, Guru Granth is pure poetry of devotion to the Divine spirit in multitudinous situations and moods, guiding the seeker to a life of moral grandeur and spiritual emancipation. This is best summed up in the Introductory essay. The nature and disposition of the Divine Being are explained in the subsequent chapter: Basic Formula that attempts a comparative study of the classical *Sankhya* philosophy and the basic Mool Mantra of Guru Nanak. The rest of the book explores the universals of the definitive scripture, Jap Ji.

Now, Jap Ji has a unique character among the world's gospels. In 38 stanzas of profound – but exquisitely simple vocabulary – prefaced by the Mul Mantra and ending with an epilogue as a *sloka*, "Japu" explores God's wondrous creation, calls on humanity to tread the path of Truth in a righteous frame of mind. Harchand Singh uses an unpretentious idiom and felicitous turn of phrase to interpret the text in all its liturgical import. In translating more than one stanza he becomes lyrical and gives the translation in verse. The 27th stanza, Cosmic Praise, he uses both poetry and prose to unravel the beautiful mystery of the Divine Grace. In a moralist, vein the writer exhorts Man to avail of the opportunity of his existence on Earth "for the advancement of his spiritual ends."

Anhad Naad, in Gurmukhi script and "*All Men are equal*", in English, are short hand-outs, of 40 pages each, that paraphrase the scriptural excerpts from Guru Granth Sahib and emphasize harmony of all faiths, illustrated by pithy quotes from the Holy Qur'an and the Christian texts.

The Giani Dit Singh Memorial Trust deserves our thanks in an abundant measure for bringing out this lucid interpretation in handy, economical volumes.

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THE ENQUIRING GURU: QUESTIONS BY THE SIKH GURUS AND THEIR VIEW

By Gurpal Singh Bhuller

Published by The Information Institute, Washington, DC, 2006

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Reviewed by Laurie Bolger*

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The Enquiring Guru is a thoughtful and incisive compendium of 130 questions and answers about life and its meaning, painstakingly parsed out of the Sikh sacred scriptures, Guru Granth. While the living, eternal Guru of the Sikhs certainly could never be pared down to a mere 130 questions and answers, this short but pithy book is a most useful catechism of the Sikh faith, as well as a springboard for delving into the treasure-chest of Guru Granth. It serves up quite a mouthwatering taste of the richness that is Gurbani, making many of its basic, recurring key words and concepts more understandable and accessible.

An articulate, thought-provoking Foreword by I.J. Singh firmly situates this work within the perspective of Sikh tradition. It highlights the amazingly modern method of “horizontal dialogue” used by Guru Nanak and his successors, “where not only is there information transfer, but the teacher-pupil interaction serves to generate ideas and wisdom.” **The preeminent role given by the Gurus to dialogue, discussion and debate is indeed “absolutely mind-blowing,” when one considers the predilection for “vertical dialogue” that was, and remains, a major feature of Indian society.**

Unlike some other works which seek to clarify the teachings of Guru Granth, this book is non-intimidating, user-friendly, and highly browsable. At least one answer is provided for each of the 130 questions. The original text is given in Gurmukhi script, accompanied by a smooth and readable English translation. Notations on authorship and the exact location of the citation in Guru Granth place the quote in context, and motivate the reader to further exploration.

This book is enriched by over 100 footnotes. They serve to not only explain the quotes, but provide insights into the depth of meaning of a particular word or phrase, as well as fascinating glimpses into Indian culture during the time of the Gurus. For example, the footnote to the phrase translated as “The Shabad is the Guru,” gives a reference to the key concepts of God as reflected in the Mool Mantar, along with the idea that God can be *experienced* through the “Word.” Another note, referring to the “soul-bride” who is still in the world of her father’s home (i.e., a person still attached to material attraction), enlightens the reader about age-old marriage customs.

The types of questions and answers that form this book give one an eyeful of the sublime facets of Guru Granth. Some of them appear deceptively simple and mundane, flashing only the merest hint of the layers of complex thought that shimmer invitingly beneath the surface. An example of this is a famous quote by Bhagat Ravidas, a low-caste cobbler, used along with an excellent footnote, where he parses **“the difference between me and You”**: **“You are me and I am You — what is the difference between us? We are like gold and the golden bracelet, or like water and the waves.”** Other citations tantalize readers with the stunning poetic imagery that permeates the sacred text. For instance, in thinking about how to stay in control, Guru Nanak asks: “How can one live in the palace, the

home of snow, wearing robes of fire?”

All the quotes, questions and accompanying notes propel the reader along the lifelong path of exploration of the infinitely rich Sikh tradition. As I.J. Singh acknowledges in his Foreword, “Sikhism asks every Sikh to delve personally into its magic and mystery.” This prolonged and repeated reflection, *vicchar*, is what Sikhi, which has been called “a religion of laypeople,” is truly all about. Indeed, the author of this compilation, Gurbal Singh Bhuller, is not a formally-trained Sikh scholar or theologian, but rather a dedicated lay follower of the faith. **He succeeds in inspiring the reader to join him on the quest all sincere spiritual seekers must make, the one of introspection that leads to self-awareness and a truly examined life.**

I wish Bhuller had added more discursive commentary throughout this book. However, its concise Q&A format necessarily precludes such elaboration. The footnotes, as mentioned above, do go a very long way to enlighten the reader and serve as a stimulus to further thought and discussion.

A somewhat more pressing need in this work is the one for better proofreading and editing. There are some glitches, such as missing footnote numbers in the text, as well as typographical errors. Furthermore, while the List of Headings at the beginning of the book appears in both English and Punjabi versions, the Index of Questions at the back is not translated into English, which would have been a very helpful addition for many readers.

However, these caveats do not detract from what is a short, but most useful, guide to the ethical framework for productive daily living given to us by Guru Granth. Gurbal Singh Bhuller’s work is indeed a most inspiring effort, at once satisfying and appetizing, which definitely deserves a place on the bookshelves of those looking for a valuable compass to help plot their own unique roadmap to an inner journey of exploration and discovery.

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[Emphasis in bold type is ours. - Ed. SR]