

# Linguistic & Cultural Background of Sri Guru Granth Sahib

## Part I

**DR. SUSHIL KAUR\***

\* *Daughter of the late Dr. Trilochan Singh, D.Litt. Address: 15(GF), Prem Vihar, SBS Nagar, Pakhomal Rod. Ludhiana.*

THE LAND OF FIVE RIVERS WAS IN the grip of cultural crisis before the advent of Guru Nanak. The unresolved conflict which emerged between the rulers and the common people brought forth a continuous crisis on the religious, political and social scene. The Muslim conquerors firmly refused to mingle with the common people and continued to maintain a superior attitude towards the indigenous cultural traditions of the land. Guru Nanak during his missionary sojourns of fourteen years, across the country and beyond, eye-witnessed the religious bigotry of Pundits and Mullahs. It was at that crucial moment that Guru Nanak emerged as the Protagonist of the oppressed common-folk and brought a cultural renaissance through his numinous poetry by adopting multi-lingualism.

The stream of the Punjabi poetic-traditions of the Sikhs and Islam were drawn closer to each other because their theme centred around the protest against religious particularism and the prevalent priestly ritualism of their respective religions. It is remarkable that Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, established linguo-cultural atmosphere on the broader horizon of India through his religious sermons with various sects and the ruling class. Besides this, Guru Nanak Dev delineates his acquaintance with Naatha and Siddha Yogis and his Knowledge about their practices, teachings and attributes through his *bani Siddh Gosht*. The *bani* of the Sikh Gurus and Bhaktas revolves around the theme of Transcendentalism – The Absolute Reality. In Sri Guru Granth Sahib Transcendentalism is depicted through mythological, historical, cultural and religious experience in the common speech of Punjabi people. It was transcribed into Gurmukhi script – a potent vehicle of written expression of the new linguistic idiom forged by the House of the Gurus.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, in a way, analytically examines the meaning and significance of the vast panorama of Indian culture from 12<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century diverse variety of lingua-franca. “The master-mind of Guru Nanak pre-planned the whole structure of language, prosody, music, poetic-forms and unitive thinking, all marked by infinite freedom, variety comprehensives, perfection of execution, aromatic sweetness and transmutive radiation.” The tradition of multi-lingualism involving the blending of different linguistic and literary styles into a new mould, as set by Baba Farid, was carried forward with great zeal by Guru Nanak and his successors. Of course, the Gurus adopted Braj vocabulary but at the same time they preserved the authenticity of their own idiom. The seeds of new Punjabi stylistic experimentation were sown in their distinct choice of Gurmukhi script. This sprouted out into the conspicuous form of poetic language, greatly influenced by Persian and Arabic, lexicon of the Semitic tradition. Interestingly, the exigencies of Gurmukhi script transformed these elementary *tada* into *bhava* forms, making them as integral part of the personality of Punjabi literary expression.

Likewise, the script performed the function of taking into its fold a large variety of Sanskrit words coming from the mainstream of Indian religio-philosophical tradition and maintaining them in their original tatasama forms. For the structure of the language Guru Nanak Dev evolved the arrangement of Gurmukhi alphabets in an exquisite manner and confined its sphere only to 35 alphabets including vowels and consonants and Guru Angad, later on standardised the script and made it possible to use the script for writing languages other than Punjabi.

Basically, the poetry of the Sikh Gurus and Bhaktas compiled in Sri Guru Granth Sahib is related with The Absolute, though, of course, the theme is manifested in the poetic form replete with replete use of mundane imagery and vocabulary.

Various types of languages and their regional forms intermingle with each other giving rise to an idiom marked by a pan Indian system of Communication breaking the delimiting barriers of geographical regions, classes and castes. It is a known fact that the Bhaktas whose *bani* is enshrined into Sri Guru Granth Sahib, belonged to a variety of regions spread in the length and breadth of India. For example, Jaidev belonged to Bengal, Baba Farid to Punjab, Namdev and Trilochan to Maharashtra, and Kabir and Ravidas to some parts of the present Uttar Pradesh, while Bhakta Dhanna and Pipa belonged to the present Rajasthan.

If we give a closer look to the situation in which the ruling classes on the one side, and the common masses on the other, were related to each other, we can clearly observe a state of non-communication between the two, which had been completely alienated from the common man and had distanced themselves from the common people. Interestingly, the analysis of the imagery which Guru Nanak used, portraying the utterly selfish, inhuman and beastly nature of the rulers on the one hand, and the completely subjugated and oppressed people on the other, this gap of communication could be understood in a meaningful perspective. The kings are depicted as by blood sucking creatures like tigers, dogs, and vultures, and masses like herd of cattle, innocent birds and animals who are, in a way, helpless. The one is aggressive, living far away from human habitations, blood thirsty of other creatures, and the other belonging to the subject people, trying to save itself from the aggressiveness and cruelty of the beastly world. This represents a complete lack of any kind of interaction or mutual response based on a relationship of social and civil response to each other.

The Sikh Gurus' concern of religion centres around the clean and honest, virtuous and fearless life, wherein their Protestant attitude towards all kinds of sham and shibboleth in religion, society and politics forced them to establish a new religion – Sikhism, which purified the parasitic existence of other religions. Guru Nanak and Guru Arjun were keenly aware of the social and political abuses as well as miseries of the people which compelled them to compose few hymns in its protest and social criticism. "Works of Guru Nanak are replete with sharp attention being focused upon the life here and now. For instance, Babar's invasion of India and the reign of loot and plunder, rape and murder let loose upon the vanquished people in its wake evoked powerful emotions which Guru Nanak tried to articulate in a number of exquisite hymns."<sup>2</sup>

Guru Nanak, thus, emerged as the first reformer during the age of Bhakti movement, who dared to expose the corruption and moral degradation of the ruling

class and the religious leaders through his revolutionary hymns, wherein he agonised over the human sufferings and humiliation. The major factor behind this state of non-communication was due to the refusal of tribalist Muslim conquerors to get assimilated in the native culture of the common strata, which resulted into this alienation, tension plunder and a continuing crisis.

Guru Nanak Dev has painted the crystallised picture of the horrible massacre during the invasion of Babar in few of his hymns in an emotional and protesting tone.

**ਖੁਰਾਸਾਨ ਖਸਮਾਨਾ ਕੀਆ ਹਿੰਦੁਸਤਾਨੁ ਡਰਾਇਆ ॥**

Terrible has been the slaughter.  
Loud have been the cries of the sufferers,  
Did this not awaken pity in Thee, O Lord?  
If the powerful attacks another warlord,  
No one would grieve, none would complain,  
But when the fierce tiger preys on helpless cattle,  
Thou, Herdsman must answer for it.

[SGGS: 360]

Furthermore, "Guru Nanak Dev vividly portrayed the religious bigotry of Mullahs and Pundits, the timidity of the religious leaders of Bhakti movement, the cynical and pessimistic attitude towards life and society of the yogis. In the face of the intense religious and cultural divisions, he established fellowships, brotherly intercourse and spiritual understanding between diverse religious ideologies and cultures and spiritual ideals."<sup>4</sup> Guru Nanak Dev has preserved these historical facts in a few of his compositions. He has very strongly pointed out the state of non-communication when he says:

**ਰਾਜੇ ਸੀਹ ਮੁਕਦਮ ਕੁਤੇ ॥ ਜਾਇ ਜਗਾਇਨੁ ਬੈਠੇ ਸੁਤੇ ॥**

The Kings are blood-thirsty tigers,  
And the ministers are like blood hounds,  
They torture and insult the conscience of humanity,  
The officials bleed the innocent people with  
their claws of avarice and greed,  
Ministers like dogs, drink their blood.<sup>5</sup>

All the Gurus and Bhaktas through their *bani* have made serious attempts to preserve crisis, the religious social and cultural identity of the people. The whole community has been taken into consideration for the preservation of the culture. Somewhere the numinous poetry of Sri Guru Granth Sahib delineates the agony of the suffering humanity and their helplessness on an analytical worldly pattern.

Against such a situation which we call a state of non-communication between the rulers and the masses and the religious leaders and the common people respectively, the Sikh Gurus tried to restore a relationship of two-way communication between two sides. With a view to forging an effective idiom the Gurus attempted to evolve new mould of communication which would transgress the narrow boundaries of regions and shifting language from one region to another. Their attempt was to restore a pan-Indian nature of literary communication through their sacred hymns. While observing the distinctive multilingual nature of the sacred language of the

Sikhs, Christopher Shackle notes that the “prevailing idiom of Adi Granth varies between the western Hindi-based religious lingua-franca of the Sant preachers of the later medieval age whereas Northern India usually referred to a ‘*Santbhasha*’ or *Sadhukari*, and various types of Punjabi proper.” [South-Western elements in the language of ‘Adi Granth’ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African studies*, XL, I 1977 p. 36]

The adoption of multi-lingualism by the great Gurus, as the main principle of creativity, was responsible for the revival and restoration of dialogue in the Indian society at different levels of communication. In this effort, the use of diverse regional languages merging into new patterns of communication played a significant role in the promotion of a healthy climate of mutual tolerance and understanding, whereas Guru Nanak wrote in four or more languages, Guru Angad Dev and Guru Amar Das used Sant Bhasha tinged with Punjabi in their divine verses. “But Guru Amar Das’s Punjabi is interspersed with Hindi vocabulary, though its total structure is that of Punjab. His Majhi (Punjabi) had assimilated a large number of words of Persian origin such as *Nadar*, *Sahib*, *Dargah*, *Kumam* etc. Obviously, they have retained only Majhi idiom in their compositions.<sup>6</sup> Guru Ram Das made greater use of Hindi in his Punjabi of Majha and Lehna dialect, Guru Arjun Dev composed most of his *bani* in the South-Western style. Somewhere he has adopted eastern Punjabi, Lehndi, Sindhi, Pothohari and many more regional dialects. Guru Arjun, like ninth Guru later, was also greatly influenced by Western Hindi, though traces of Persian, Arabic and Punjabi are also available.

ਮੀਰਾਂ ਦਾਨਾਂ ਦਿਲ ਸੋਚ ॥

ਮੁਹਬਤੇ ਮਨਿ ਤਨਿ ਬਸੈ ਸਚੁ ਸਾਹ ਬੰਦੀ ਮੋਚ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

ਦੀਦਨੇ ਦੀਦਾਰ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਕਛੁ ਨਹੀਂ ਇਸ ਕਾ ਮੋਲੁ ॥

ਪਾਕ ਪਰਵਦਗਾਰ ਤੂ ਖੁਦਿ ਖਸਮੁ ਵਡਾ ਅਤੋਲੁ ॥੧॥

[SGGS p.724]

[End of Part I]

(To be concluded)



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