

Guru Granth Sahib: Inclusion of Bhagat *Baani* A dialogue with Khushwant Singh

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Khushwant Singh: Having spent the best part of my life working on Sikh History and translating selected passages of Gurbani, I felt I owed it to myself to read the Guru Granth Sahib. Many questions rose in my mind. Knowing the bigoted, unintelligent approach of the self appointed custodians of matters scriptural, I'll not start a public debate. But there are some historical and linguistic aspects of the *Gurbani* which need elucidation. To start with, I would like scholars to compare the hymns of Kabir and Namdeo as they appear in the Granth Sahib with those in Hindi and Marathi. How did they travel from Varanasi and Maharashtra to Amritsar where the Fifth Guru Arjun compiled the scripture. Kabir *dohas* in Hindi are different from his language in the Granth Sahib. How could he have composed the *acrostics* based on *Gurmukhi* at a time when the alphabets had yet to be finalised?

The case of Namdeo *baani* is equally puzzling. I recall the late PN Oak, then Secretary, I & B Ministry, asking me to give him Namdeo *baani* in the Granth Sahib. Oak was a Maharashtrian studying writings of Maharashtrian saint-poets. He went through the material and said, "It is Namdeo but vocabulary is different." Did Guru Arjun re-write both Kabir and Namdeo's works before incorporating them in his compilation?

That reminds me of another work whose origin still intrigues me. Some time ago, I translated Mahatma Gandhi's favourite hymn "*Vaishnav jan tau taine kahiye*" said to be a composition of Narsi Mehta who lived in the 19th century. When my translation was published, S. Saran Singh, Editor, *The Sikh Review* of Calcutta drew my attention to one of Guru Arjun Dev Ji's *ashtpadis* on which Narsi Mehta's was apparently based. It could not have been a mere coincidence that the Gujarat's Saint had almost identical message for humanity that the Guru gave almost three centuries *earlier*.

Rajinder Singh: A very important question has been raised by you with which I have been trying to deal in my articles which appear every month in the *Sant Sipahi* (Punjabi) periodical under caption '*Bhagta kee chaal Niralee*.'

A beginning in this regard had been made by the great scholar, late Prof. Sahib Singh, when he discussed Baba Farid in his monumental work '*Guru Granth Sahib Darpan*' (in ten volumes) while connecting the *Shabad* of Farid (*Bera bandh naa sakyoo bandhan kee bela*) with Guru Nanak's *shabad* (*Jap tap ka bandh berula*) which is a reply to the former's *shabad* in the same vocabulary and in the same *raga*. This prompted me to go deeper and try to link the Bhagat Bani with the Guru Bani. I made a beginning with Namdev Ji, who treaded this earth 200 years *before* Guru Nanak, and who is admired both by Kabir Ji and Ravidas Ji and the Gurus in their verses in the Granth Sahib, and by Meera and others elsewhere. Namdev Ji's *Vithal* is Guru Arjun Dev Ji's *Beethal* also. I have also gone through Namdev Ji's Hindi and Marathi verses. Like Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Namdev Ji also travelled far and

wide in the country and visited places of pilgrimage. His last twenty years were spent in Punjab, at Ghuman, a town in Gurdaspur District. His followers were Jats of Ghuman subcaste after which the place has been named. Later on, the tailors of the province owned him as he happened to belong to their profession. Here he composed his verses which find a place in Guru Granth Sahib. Though the language used in many *shabads* is full of local Punjabi words, it has Marathi and Sadhubhasha touch. The travels and interaction with the saints and the people all over the country, helps in developing a vocabulary which enriches the language of one's writing or preaching, being a vehicle of communication.

Unlike the common belief held by scholars hitherto, it is amply clear that Guru Nanak himself collected the verses of other Saints when he visited them, or met their followers. Is it a coincidence that Namdev Ji lived last two decades of his life on the eastern side of the Ravi, and Guru Nanak Dev Ji lived the last two decades of *his* life on the western side of the same river, 200 years later? He collected the verses of Namdev Ji and the influence of these verses can be found in hundreds of verses of the Gurus. The Research Scholars of repute have held the view that most of the verses (*Abhangs*) composed in Marathi and attributed to Namdev Ji are not his own. His disciples and others went on adding to the original text. **It has also been held that only the verses contained in Guru Granth Sahib retained their originality as there was no scope for interpolation.**

As regards variation in the Marathi, Hindi and Punjabi versions, the logical answer is that Namdev Ji would not have talked differently on religious and social matters whether he spoke in Marathi, Hindi or Punjabi. When Namdev Ji composed his verses during the last two decades of his life, he had behind him the long and rich experience of interaction with people of different schools of thought and religions. **Similarly, Guru Nanak evidently wrote many of his verses during the last two decades at Kartarpur, keeping in view his interaction with people in various parts of the world. Eminent scholar Dr. Mohanty found (in his interaction with Dr. Trilochan Singh, who had written a scholarly article on this in *The Sikh Review*, over 40 years ago) that “*Gagan mai thaal ravi chand deepak bane.... (Guru Nanak's Aarti)* contains many Oriya words, as it was composed and recited in front of the Singhdwar of Jagannath Temple at Puri, where he was not allowed to enter as he did not say that he was a Hindu, and Non Hindus cannot enter this shrine even today.**

The Bhagats and Gurus used a vocabulary which was understood by very large number of people in and outside the country. Naturally Namdev Ji sang his hymns in a language which could be understood by his listeners in that part of the country where he lived for 20 years.

Khushwant Singh: I was not aware of Namdev being in Punjab for some years. I assume there is some documentary proof to substantiate it. I also have some explanations of Kabir's Baani in the Granth Sahib – none of which I found convincing. One is that Kabir was succeeded by two other “Kabirs” who used the same poetic name and it is the third Kabir's works found in our Scripture. Another is that Guru Angad adopted the works of the first Kabir in Gurmukhi. Why did scholars like Bhai Kahan Singh or Bhai Vir Singh, or any of the translators of Gurbani, not deal with these questions?

Rajinder Singh: As regards, documentary proof about Namdev Ji's years in the Punjab, suffice it to say that the flourishing town of Ghuman was founded by him. Namdev Ji travelled throughout the country. His first round was in the company of renowned saints of Maharashtra, like Gyaneshwar. On the second round, he appears to have gone alone, the first place he visited in the Punjab, after passing through many places in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, (about which reasonable evidence exists) was Bassi Pathana (Sirhind) where a shrine exists, and its history is available in the Patiala State records. Thence he travelled towards Lahore and a place called Marhari in the present Amritsar District. One of his followers there, Bohar Das, a Khatri, became his disciple who went with him to the present Batala region in Gurdaspur District. He founded the town of Ghuman. It is quite interesting to note that there are four shrines in this town connected with Namdev Ji. Tapiana Sahib, is managed by the general Sangat, particularly Jats. The Darbar Sahib is managed by the Bawas, the descendants of Bohar Das, the third one, "Charan Kanwal" is managed by the "Tailor" community who now call themselves Tank Kshatrias. The fourth one is Tapasthan, at Bhattiwal, in the outskirts of the town and it is managed by the Maharashtrians! This empirical study I conducted en route to Dera Baba Nanak in January last and detailed reports appeared in the periodical that I edit, i.e. "Khushkhabri" ["^us^brl"]

You may recall that at the time of Tercentenary celebration of Khalsa in 1999, when you were awarded *Nishan e Khalsa*, Jathas came from all the five places to which the 'Panj Piara's belonged. Bhai Mohkam Singh came from a place near Dwarka where his ancestors had come to settle from Maharashtra. (Today a grand building has come up under the care of a Sikh Saint, in collaboration with the Shiromani Committee, in memory of Bhai Mohkam Singh). In 2000, to participate in the concluding function at Anandpur Sahib, a *jatha* of 5000 Maharashtrian followers of Namdev Ji, led by a savant Ram Bhau Bagare, visited Punjab and, before going to Anandpur Sahib on the Vaisakhi day, they were given a warm welcome by the SGPC.

Then they were in Ghuman from 1st April, and a ten-day seminar was organised by Sant Namdev Federation. After Kirtan in Marathi, followed by Gurbani Kirtan, two eminent scholars (University Professors, Vice Chancellors, from Amritsar, Patiala, Kurukshetra Varsities) delivered lectures, in Hindi, for the benefit of Maharashtrian Sangat, on the life and teachings on Namdev Ji. I, too read my paper in Hindi, which, translated into English by me, appeared in *The Sikh Review of July 2002*. During this ten day programme, most noteworthies like the Chief Minister, his Cabinet colleagues, etc. participated and gave liberal grants for the development of the area.

Going back a bit, the main shrine here was got rebuilt by Rani Sada Kaur and Prince Sher Singh, and earlier a large tank was dug and built by Sardar Jassa Singh Ramgarhia.

Guru Hargobind Ji at the time of founding the city of Sri Hargobindpur in the area, visited this place, along with his mother Mata Ganga Ji. The Revenue records and the *jagirs* attached to the shrine, bestowed by the Sikh Sardars and the Maharaja, bear ample testimony to this being the place where Namdev Ji lived for about two decades.

Several publications, one of the Punjab Bhasha Department, and three by Maharashtrian literary authorities and researches, Dr. Machve (Poona University), Dr. Wankhede (Poona University) and Dr. NK Mirajkar, currently teaching in Delhi University, vouchsafe for this. I have personally met Dr. Mirajkar and discussed with him his book on Namdev Ji which is being serialised in our periodical. In Dr. Machve's book, published in Delhi, Namdev Ji's verses (*Abhangs* in Marathi, *Bhajans* in Hindi, with the language and style of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and *Shabads* from Guru Granth Sahib) are discussed. The Hindi and Punjabi versions are very much alike, the difference being in words of local nature and their typical pronunciation. Thus *shabads* included in Guru Granth Sahib contain good many Punjabi words in addition to Marathi and *Sadhbhashi*.

Like Guru Nanak, Namdev also sang his verses in different Ragas (18). Guru Nanak had a minstrel with him, Bhai Mardana, the *rababi*, while Namdev sang to the tune of one string instrument which he played himself. The Great Bhagat had to say the same thing to his audience everywhere, in their own language, by and large. Hence the Punjabi touch in his songs. This perhaps meets Mr. Oak's misgiving.

As to why Bhai Vir Singh and Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha did not deal with these questions (Punjabi words in Kabir's verses, etc.), it is a very important point. These great Scholars worked very hard to enrich the Gurmat Literature. Their research work has also been a valuable addition to the Sikh history and thought. Bhai Kahan Singh's *Encyclopedia* is a great work indeed. Besides being scholars and researchers, they were also deeply devoted Sikhs. So their approach remained somewhat subjective. They conveniently concluded that only those verses were included in the Holy Granth which conformed to the Guru's own philosophy. They perhaps avoided to say that Guru Nanak and other Gurus were greatly influenced by the teachings of these Bhagats, and that is why Guru Nanak himself collected their valuable *Baani*, studied it, he and the Gurus following him commented on it, and elaborated it with great reverence.

Wherever verses of *Bhagats* appear in the Guru Granth Sahib, invariably a *Bhagat's* name has a suffix of respect *Ji* or *Jio*. But our great scholars even today, when they say something about Guruji, they refer to him as "*Patsha Farmaunde Han*," and in the same para, if there is mention of a Bhagat, they write: "*Kabir Kahenda hai, Namdev Kahenda hai*." In a *shabad* '**Govind, Govind Govind sio Namdeo....., Guru Arjun Dev recounts, with utmost respect, the names and holy deeds of Bhagats starting with Namdev Ji and ending with Dhanna Ji. Kabir Ji admires Namdev in his verses. So does Ravidas ji. In those days of absence of means of communication, Namdev Ji, (or for that matter Kabir and Ravidas) reached many nooks and corners of the country, and their verses became proverbs in the lingua of the masses.**

The lukewarm attitude of our scholars and writers resulted in unfortunate alienation of followers of these Bhagats, or those who belong to their castes. While in Delhi, for fifty years, I never came across a Gurdwara in the name of Kabir Ji, Ravidas Ji or Namdev Ji. Here in Punjab I was painfully surprised to see that in every town *separate* Gurdwaras have come up. The Gurus brought *together* all the Bhagats, belonging to all the communities, in one place in the Guru Granth Sahib. But our narrow thinking and shortsightedness has resulted in this type of drift. It is heartening however, that the SGPC has recently

seen the writing on the wall, and decided to celebrate the birthdays of all the Bhagats of Guru Granth Sahib officially at Manji Sahib. It has also issued a *Hukumnama* that no new denominational Gurdwara may be set up. Better late! (Some Universities have established Chairs in the name of Bhagats and it is hoped that the research in the works of these Saints would throw a flood of light on the issues so far not dealt with).

Gurmat is the second name for Sikh Panth, and “*Gurparsad*” is the ultimate aim of a devotee, as enunciated by Guru Nanak Dev Ji in the *Mool Mantra*. Both the expressions appear in the verses of Namdev Ji composed two hundreds years earlier than Gurbani.

In this Fifth centenary year of Guru Angad Devji, and Fourth centenary of Prakash of (Guru) Granth Sahib Ji, lot of research work on development of Punjabi language and role of the Gurus in it and the process of compilation of Guru Granth Sahib is coming to the fore (A very good article by Dr. Mohinder Singh has appeared in the *July 2004* issue of *The Sikh Review*). Also, there is an important finding about how Kabir speaks about *Gurmukhi* alphabets in *Bawan Akhari*, with their Punjabi pronunciation, like *kakka*, *khakha*, *gagga*, while in Hindi it is *ka*, *kha*, *ga*, only. Bhagats, like Kabir, travelled far and wide, as Guru Nanak did, and came to Punjab also, and their verses had significant Punjabi component. Others like Jai Devji who didn't come to this part of the country, their language retained its own character, Sanskritic, or local.

There is a very strong inter-state interaction. People of Punjab, mostly from Jalandhar, have built a massive shrine in Varanasi where a controversy had arisen; the locals wanted to install an idol of Ravidasji in the place of worship, but the Punjabis (not all Sikhs) wanted the Granth Sahib, as Ravidas Ji had no faith in idols. Ultimately, the Punjabis carried the day. Similarly, at the birth place of Namdev Ji, Narsi Nam Dev in Hingoli District of Maharashtra, Punjabis, mostly NRIs, and those from Ludhiana, have undertaken a massive construction work with the collaboration of the State Govt. and the shrine with Guru Granth Sahib has come up. The Govt. of Maharashtra's Archaeological Department has approved the model and plan of the National Monument being built around the house of Namdev Ji. The subject nonetheless needs much deeper study in an objective manner.

Khushwant Singh: The evidence of Sant Namdev's Punjab connection seems conclusive. Thanks you for enlightening me a key issue.

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