

The Sikh Gurus' inimitable Art of Teaching

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THE SIKH GURUS WERE GREAT educators of mankind. By a paradox their pedagogic nobility and educational contribution have attracted very little attention of our scholars. In an age of mushrooming gurus, it is high time we focus our attention on Guru Nanak's unique educational contribution, the practical steps he undertook to enlighten the minds of the masses across Asia, and his art and methodology of teaching.

While teaching the people, Guru Nanak and his successor Gurus proceeded psychologically, from simple to complex - from known to unknown. They came down at the mental level of the masses, established perfect rapport with them and linked knowledge to be imparted with their daily lives. Their '*Bani*' accompanied by musical instruments changed many a '*Sajjan thug*'. The dramatic technique of teaching used by the Gurus had a quick and favourable response from the people. Their sense of enquiry and cross questioning succeeded in starting a train of thought and changing the minds of the people.

But the Gurus were neither class - room teachers in the present sense of the term, nor did they have specially designed and arranged classes to teach. They had a large following, a mass of people who would come to see them, and receive blessings, a word of advise or instructions from them or they themselves would move from place to place to convey their message to them. As such Gurus' methods of teaching others were more of informal, traditional and indirect nature than being formal, though the Gurus were very clear and certain about what they wanted to impart to their followers. They developed such effective ways of educating the people around them that we cannot help but take a careful note of them.

Celestial Music (or Kirtan): as the medium of the Message: Right from Guru Nanak, the Gurus clearly realized the importance of music and poetry traditionally recognized in India as an inseparable part of worship life. They would themselves sing their own poetic compositions and would ask their disciples to sing them too. Accompanied by instruments the songs sung in the praise of God and relating to the role of man as they were, had a marked impact upon the listeners.

With time, there came to be a class of men specially trained to sing '*Shabads*' (portion of Guru's compositions) in religious and semi-religious congregations. These devouts, with the sweetness of their voice, have all through been a powerful agent of effectively driving home to the masses Gurus' sacred words.

The Gurus changed many a hearts with the help of their musical hymns. That music helps to refine emotions is a psychological truth. It washes away from the mind the dust of every day life. It purifies the life and helps to link it with God. Musical lines are easy to remember. The Gurus were aware of this immense power of music and made its ample use in educating the masses.

The modern methodology of education lays great stress on the creation of suitable environment and motivation for the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities. The Gurus did not miss these prerequisites for learning. One could refer to Guru Hargobind's conscious effort to create a mental and emotional environment

that aroused and developed the manly qualities of his disciples. With the help of heroic songs, ballads and musical concerts in which minstrel Abdulla sang passionately, the Guru inspired the Sikhs for a life of heroic deeds by dispelling feelings unworthy of brave men. Instead of chanting hymns of passivity, the congregation heard ballads extolling feats of heroism and, instead of listening to religious discourses every evening, the Sikhs heard ballads extolling the deeds of warriors who had defied tyranny by the force of arms.

Guru Gobind Singh was a soldier poet and to instill heroism into the hearts of his people as he sang for them the glorious heroic achievements of their mythical gods and goddesses and of their human ancestral victors on the battle-field and their folk heroes. "A martial atmosphere came to pervade the court at Anandpur. In the court of Guru Gobind Singh, there were bards as well as poets. The former used to sing or recite ballads which aroused the martial spirit of the listeners. It is said that *Chandi-di-Var* came to be recited in '*diwans*' or special congregations. Each verse, each line and each syllable of *Chandi-Charitra* breathes fire of life in the dead, inspires the cowardly and infuses new courage in the blood of both the reciters and the listeners."

Guru Gobind Singh, with his associate poets, translated the "*Ramayana*", the "*Mahabharata*" and the "Puranas in easy vernacular. These heroic ballads were sung in his '*darbar*' by the bards to arouse martial spirit of the listeners. Dr. Ashta* is of the opinion that Bhushan's soul stirring poetry might have been recited in the '*darbar*' of Guru Gobind Singh.

Thus martial verse was knowingly sung in the court of the Guru to infuse valour into the hearts and minds of his fellow-soldiers. Such verses as "Blest is his life in this world who repeats God's name with his mouth and contemplates war in his heart" must have inspired Guru's disciples in their struggle against the unjust rule, as also within their mind.

Katha: The Sermon in Person

"bwbwxiAW khwxIAW pUq spUq kryn....."

"The stories of the great elders their worthy sons repeat.
And out of these accept what is pleasing to the Guru.
And do the like deeds."

says the third Guru.

To achieve this aim, the Gurus held congregations every morning and evening in the '*dharamsalas*' in which they taught their disciples religion, history and social ethics by story method. Biographies came to be written from the times of Guru Angad. Stories from the lives of preceding Gurus and Sikhs of their times were narrated. These biographical stories and ballads, apart from their religious and devotional aspect, made a popular appeal and inspired many for a life of courage and action. The stories of the '*upakhyan charitra*' with ethical themes provided examples of both good and evil, inspired the listeners to nobler conduct or warned them against the viles of the traditional story method as famous in *Hitopdesha*, was used by the Gurus with great advantage.

Dialogue during Celebration of Festivals: In keeping with the tradition, the Gurus held congregations, fairs and celebrated national festivals, like Diwali,

Vaisakhi and Maghi so that the people from different parts of the country might get together. At such gatherings, the Gurus would address the people. Not only they organized fairs and festivals for teaching the masses, they also attended the fairs, festivals organized by the people at their holy places. "Baba (Nanak) visited the places of pilgrimage. He went round seeing them all on festival days.

At such gatherings the Gurus found an occasion to educate the masses. Guru Nanak visited Haridwar, Kurukshetra, Jagannath Puri at such festive occasions. His encounter with the people at Haridwar is quite well known.

Dramatic Techniques: In order to impress upon their disciples the great lessons of life, the Gurus would dramatize situations. The impact of dramatization was always good.

When encountered with challenging situations, Guru Nanak created a countersituation, which provided food for thought. Guru's visit to Multan was resented by the Pirs of Multan who would not want another to add to their already swelling ranks. They filled a cup with milk to the brim and sent it to Guru Nanak to tell him indirectly that there was no place for him. Multan was full with Pirs, another one could not be accommodated. The Guru gently placed a jasmine flower on the milk. His presence would not be a burden on Multan already full with Pirs. The dramatization of situations in Haridwar and Mecca are too well known. These dramatic situations are coupled with a sense of good humour as well.

What a dramatic technique charged with emotion on one Vaisakhi day at Anandpur Sahib did the people witness! Five men, one by one, came forward for sacrifice in response to the demand of Guru Gobind Singh. What a regret for those who feared death even for a noble cause! And what an indescribable joy for those who willingly volunteered to die at the bidding of the Guru! How an enraged group of the followers demanding punishment for Bhai Kanhaya who had served water to the wounded - both Hindus and Muslims - was pacified and made to respect Bhai Kanhaya for his service to all the needy shows how the Gurus, like practical psychologists, would educate people indirectly without the usual coercion exercised by teachers.

Regard for Individual Differences: The Gurus came down to the mental level of the people. They taught the masses in a simple way in their own language and took practical illustrations from their life situations. Their first hand experience of the life of the masses, their hopes and fears, their aspirations and ideals and their successes and failures made them understand the disciples, and help them accordingly. But when they had to deal with the Pandits, the scholars, they would argue with them on a much higher level. We read of many instances of Gurus having thought-provoking dialogues, discussions and debates with the learned scholars, yogis and Sidhas.

Down to Earth Discussion and Debates: The Gurus would not impose their views on others simply because they were held in esteem by them or they were taken by the masses as their spiritual guides. They would indirectly pose a point and involve the people in discussion. By patiently, sweetly and convincingly arguing, they would establish a point. The '*Siddha Goshth*' is a beautiful collection of discussions of Guru Nanak held with Yogi Sidhas. Bhai Gurdas highlights these encounters when he says, "Guru Nanak met all Sidhas, Nathas and followers of avataras, and after discussion, made them realize the futility of their doctrines."

McLeod gives many such instances of discussions and debates of Guru Nanak with many a learned scholar. In Banaras, "Guru Nanak held discussions with Chatur Das, a learned Pandit. A discourse ensued ending with a complete recitation of the lengthy work entitled 'Onkar'". On another occasion, in the village of Achal Batala, the Guru had a memorable discussion with many Yogis gathered for the annual Shivratri fair. The Guru is said to have defeated them in discussion. Many disputations must have been held with Nath Yogis, for the members of this sect are addressed directly in several polemical compositions recorded in Guru Granth Sahib. These discussions were a regular feature of the Guru's educational work. In the congregational gatherings, open discussions were held where individual doubts were resolved.

Quest and inquiry: The method of teaching of Gurus is not merely theoretical. They seem to be more modern in their approach as their method of teaching stresses quest and inquiry, a sense of experimentation and dignity of labour.

The Gurus asked their pupils to adopt a spirit of quest and inquiry in learning. Then alone they could gain real education and become creative personalities. They stressed upon them to question the truth of prevailing customs, traditions and practices.

"A person of real research
becomes a creative man.
But a talkative one who indulges,
In mere prattle, destroys himself."

The Gurus enkindled a spirit of inquiry among their followers and encouraged them to analyze traditional ideas critically. They emphasized the acceptance of truth only after rational examination. They wanted to develop scientific or rational attitude on the part of their disciples.

Realism in Activity Method: Training in arms became an integral part of the Gurus scheme of education from the times of Guru Hargobind. The needs of the time demanded it for self-defence. The Gurus took practical steps to impart training to their disciples in the skill of arms and techniques of fighting.

The Gurus wanted to build up a community of strong and sturdy people. They made a conscious endeavour in this direction. Guru Angad Dev was very keen on physical fitness of his disciples. He asked them to take part in drill and competitive games after the morning assembly. He organized wrestling arena attached to it. He started a tradition which made it easy to raise troops of able men among the disciples.

Guru Hargobind turned his sole attention to give a martial basis to the Sikh community. He organized various martial exercises like wrestling, riding, archery and hunting expeditions. He welcomed the gifts of arms and horses, gave his Sikhs training in arms and had a standing army at his disposal.

Guru Hargobind watched feats of physical strength such as wrestling bouts and *gatka* play and supervised lessons in horsemanship and swordsmanship. In between he would find time to organize hunting excursions, then, considered the best mode of imparting war manoeuvres.

His successor, Guru Har Rai was not lagging behind him in this direction. "In the afternoon, he used often to gird his sword, equip himself with his bow and arrows, mount his horse and proceed to the chase. He maintained two thousand and two hundred mounted soldiers."

Guru Gobind Singh made it a religious duty of his disciples to get training in the skill of arms. He made sword as a part of their uniform. "Martial exercises and sports were resumed with redoubled vigour. Hunting expeditions and competitions in horse racing, musket shooting and archery became a common feature of life at Anandpur. A great part of the day was spent in weapon - training, drills, athletic competitions and martial training. The Guru was especially fond of organizing mock battles. During those days when most of the battles were fought by soldiers riding on horse, horsemanship was a must for everybody, especially the warriors. Hunting expeditions were organized to give practical training to the disciples.

Guru Gobind Singh got made a big war drum named '*Ranjit Nagara*'. The Sikhs at Anandpur Sahib were trained to observe their daily programme to the beat of this drum. This trained them in regularity and military discipline. The hills around Anandpur began to echo to the beating of war-drums and military commands. The Guru welcomed the gifts of weapons and horses and distributed them among his disciples. He raised a huge army.

Thus the Gurus (especially Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh) organized martial exercises, weapon training, horse riding, hunting expeditions, archery, musket shooting and mock-battles to train their disciples in the skill of arms. By these activity methods, they awakened the dormant energies of a vanquished people and made them stout-hearted soldiers. The practical training in arms became a permanent feature of the Sikh community after Guru Gobind Singh and produced mighty warriors like Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Nawab Kapur Singh, Baba Ala Singh, Hari Singh Nalwa, Akali Phula Singh, Sham Singh Attariwala and Maharaja Sher Singh, to name but a few.

Outreach to Distant Audiences: In the past, great importance was attached to travelling as a means of education. Rousseau, the philosopher, wanted Emile "to travel when he attained youth so as to gain knowledge of actual life." Travelling is a book which one must read. Although the Gurus have not advocated this method of teaching overtly, yet from their own lives, we draw the inference that they valued travelling for the purpose of understanding people and places to re-educate them in religious culture. Guru Nanak spent about twenty years of his life in travelling far and wide. "I have seen places of pilgrimage on river banks, the nine regions of the earth, shops, cities, markets." The other Gurus also took extensive journeys. This must have added to their breadth of knowledge and outlook and provided them opportunities to re-educate masses.

Not only the Gurus themselves took long journeys but also sent their ardent disciples to go out, learn from others and share their own knowledge with them. Bhai Budha, Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Paro, Bhai Lalo, Bhai Banno, Bhai Lalu and Nihal, Bidhi Chand, Pera, Jetha, Pirania, Mati Singh, Bhai Nand Lal, Mani Singh and Santokh Singh - all enriched their experiences through travels and dialogues with others.

Individual Versus Collective Method of Teaching: According to McLeod, "A second feature of the Kartarpur pattern would have been the regular instruction

imparted by the Guru. Such instructions would frequently have been given to individual followers, but the form in which we find it recorded in the Adi Granth will correspond more closely to the instruction delivered in the regular gatherings of his disciples.”

Dr. Ahuja resolves the conflict. He is of the opinion that the Guru gave individual instruction to those who sought it, and mass instruction to those who gathered around him in the morning and evening congregations. Thus, we find while educating the mass of people, the Gurus would not ignore the special needs of the individuals. There was quite a close touch between the Gurus and the masses.

All Embracing Love & Compassion: By far the most important method of education with the Gurus was their love for the disciples. With utmost sympathy, patience and understanding they would drive home their point. Intensely human, they would treat their followers with kindness. They encouraged the seeker and had compassion for the erring. It was with sweet persuasion, love and sympathy that Guru Nanak reformed Sajjan Thug and Kauda Rakash. The Gurus respected human personality and appealed to the good in man. That is why destructive criticism is not found in them. They asked the Hindus to become good Hindus and Muslims to become good Muslims.

Miracle of the Teacher’s Art: When all is said, the fact remains that the Gurus gave great place to the teacher. A good teacher would evolve his own methods of teaching suiting his circumstances. The living touch of a good teacher works wonders. The Gurus again and again have dwelt upon the qualities of the teacher so that he can make use of all possible opportunities to guide and instruct his pupils properly.

