

A STUDY OF GURU GRANTH SAHIB
Doctrine, Social Content, History, Structure and Status

By J.S. Grewal

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*A Review by Dr. H.S. Virk**

Dr J.S. Grewal is a doyen among the Indian historians and certainly the tallest figure among Sikh historians today. He has more than two dozen publications to his credit on diverse themes but I consider three of them outstanding and relevant to the Sikh religion and its Gurus, namely, *Guru Nanak in History*, *From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh* and the present volume, 'A study of Guru Granth Sahib' under review. One may easily conclude that the author has reached the pinnacle of glory in his latest book on Guru Granth Sahib written in commemoration of the Tercentenary celebrations of the vesting of Guruship in the Granth Sahib in 1708.

The book under review consists of 7 Chapters. An interesting feature of the book is an eighteen page glossary covering almost all the terms used in the *bani* of Sikh Gurus. Glossary is followed by a comprehensive introduction to the volume. The author refers to the seven traditions of interpreting Gurbani as given in the book by Taran Singh, "*Gurbani dian Viakhia Parnalian*." The author is fully conversant with the influence of Singh Sabha Movement which provided great impetus for the study of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Chapter I: "Social Awareness" deals with the concern of Sikh Gurus with contemporary social order, polity, the Brahmanical /Islamic /Ascetical traditions, reflecting their social awareness. This awareness springs essentially from their conception of God and the concept of liberation-in-life (*jivan mukti*). Guru Nanak is highly critical of prevalent social order of the day. Some social practices advocated and mediated by Brahmans in self-interest are not commendable in the eyes of Guru Nanak. The author has given a detailed account of these rituals based on the *bani* of Guru Nanak and his successors. "The social order is inegalitarian. Guru Nanak takes notice of the ideal of the four *varnas* and talks of the Brahmans, the Khattri, the Vaishya and the Shudra. There are outcastes like the *Chuhras*, *Chandals* and *dhanaks*. Guru Nanak shows no appreciation for the distinctions of caste because there is no consideration for caste in God's court. Guru Nanak identifies himself with the lowest of the low".

The author gives a vivid description of the metaphors and similes used by the Sikh Gurus to bring home their message of social awareness. Metaphors and similes are drawn from conjugal life, e.g., *duhagan*, *suhagan*, *suchajji*, and *kuchajji*. Guru Ramdas uses metaphors and similes of trade and agriculture, and the same is true of Guru Arjun. *Asa di Var* of Guru Nanak is a beautiful commentary on the social degradation of Indian society during the times of Guru Nanak. The verse known as *Babur-vani* contains among other things a political comment. Guru Nanak is critical of the rulers and the ruling classes, as well as the clergy which promotes the interests of the ruling class. The author has established the distinct path of the Sikh Gurus in comparison with Brahmanical / Islamic/ Ascetical traditions. On page 67, the author emphatically states: "Guru Nanak and his successors have no appreciation for any of the contemporary systems of religious beliefs and practices. Guru Arjun does not identify himself with Hindus or Muslims. The contemporary social order had lost its legitimacy; it was in need of utter regeneration through a new spiritual and moral

message. Guru Nanak and his successors provided the basis for regeneration and its result was the emergence of a new social order in the form of the Sikh Panth.”

Chapter II, ‘Conception of God’ is a core topic for discussion in the Sikh religion. The author says: “The conception of God put forth in the *Japuji* and *Asa di Var* is reinforced and amplified in the rest of Guru Nanak’s compositions.” The qualities of God described in the *Moolmantar* (preamble) are amplified by other Sikh Gurus in their *bani*. The concepts of Guru, *Shabad-Bani* and *Nam* are beautifully explained by the author. The equivalence between all these terms is well established (page 97): “Thus *Shabad* and *bani* become synonymous and tend to become synonymous with *nam*. Reflection on *Shabad-bani* is a way of meditation on the Name.”

Chapter III deals with penultimate aim and objective of human life, concept of liberation. The author explains (page 101) the obstacles on the path of liberation, namely, *maya*, *mamta* and *haumai*. There is a wonderful commentary on the Sikh mode of *bhagti*, which is different from Vaishnava *bhagti* and *bhagti* of the Sants (I presume author means *sant-mat*). The role of *sadh-sangat* as a vehicle for *bhagti* is stressed upon by the author. The concept of liberation-in-life (*jivan mukat*), rather than liberation after death, is what the Sikh Gurus preached and practiced.

‘The Emerging Panth’ is Chapter IV of this book. The author refers to the divine sanction behind Guru Nanak’s dispensation (page 137): “Guru Nanak looked upon the new dispensation as distinct from the known religious traditions.” “For Guru Nanak, the way to liberation in *Kaliyuga* is the one advocated by him: appropriation of the Name, recognition of *hukam*, and living in accordance with the divine will.” On page 140, the author sums up: “The Guru and *Gurbani*, together with the congregation, represent a new beginning in the socio-religious history of the world. The *bani* of Guru Angad becomes a profound interpretation of Guru Nanak’s dispensation.” The road map prepared by Guru Angad is followed by Guru Amar Das leaving no doubt that the dispensation of Guru Nanak was meant to transcend all the known religious traditions (p.143). The author tries to explain the concept of *halemi raj* of Guru Arjun (p.153) and in his concluding remark makes a terse comment on Sikh historians (p.156): “Historians of Sikh movement refer to the Sikh Panth as a ‘state within the state’ in the early seventeenth century. They look at the situation from outside. Seen from inside, it is *halemi raj*, not ‘a state within the state’ but a parallel dispensation not bound by any territorial boundaries.”

Chapter V: “The structure of the Guru Granth Sahib’ deals with the classification scheme adopted by Guru Arjun for compilation of the Adi Guru Granth in 1604. The author took up cudgels to differentiate between the Guru and the *Bhagat* (p.168): “The fundamental distinction between the Guru and the *Bhagat* defined the basic structure of the *Adi Granth*.” Quoting Gurinder Mann and Bhai Gurdas, the author states: “Only the most prominent *sants* like Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, Dhanna and Sain were on an equal level with the Sikhs of the Guru.”

Chapter VI: “The Guru Eternal’ is the most important Chapter of this book. The author traces the historical origins of Guru Granth Sahib starting from its compilation as *Adi Granth* (Kartarpur Pothi) and its investiture as ‘*Shabad Guru*’ of the Sikh Panth by Guru Gobind Singh Jee in 1708. The author has established the relationship between Guru Granth and Guru Panth, both explicitly and implicitly on the basis of historical records. The author falsifies the claims of *Namdharis* in promoting the culture of living Gurus (p.195): “The Guru Granth Sahib alone is to be recognized as the visible body of the Gurus, says Baba Ram

Singh in one of his letters.” The author makes a bold suggestion at the end of this chapter that Guru Granth Sahib is not only relevant but exceptionally relevant for interfaith dialogue.

‘A study of Guru Granth Sahib’ by Professor J.S. Grewal is a unique contribution to the Sikh literature. In my view, this book will not only serve as a standard reference work but a ‘light house’ for budding Sikh scholars who want to understand the relevance of ‘The Guru External’. I congratulate the author for delineating the message of Sikh Gurus without any distortion, Professor P.S. Kapoor for motivating the author to write this book and Singh Brothers for this wonderful publication of 21st century.



MY SEVERAL HEAVENS

By Dr. Kulwant Singh Khokhar (USA)

Printed in February 2009, by Singh Brothers (at Printwell, 146 Industrial Focal Point, Amritsar, Punjab, India)

Five hundred pages (in hard cover) with impressive family pictures.

Price: Complimentary to celebrate SGGS: 300

*A Review by Dr. Bhai Harbans Lal, D.Litt**

This book is the autobiography of Dr. Kulwant Singh Khokhar, eye surgeon retired from India, now living with his son at 12502, Chester, VA 23836, USA. He dedicates this book to his wife, late Mrs. Bhagwant Kaur, who left for her heavenly abode on December 12, 2002. Indeed, Dr. Khokhar (and his family) distributed the book as gift on 300th Gur-Gaddi Divas of Guru Granth Sahib. 2009.

The narration starts from the lives of author’s grandfather, Bhagat Boorra Mall (ancestral town Batala, District Gurdaspur, Punjab), and his saintly father, S. Mela Singh Khokhar who was a Railway Officer. He traces his maternal roots from his mother Ishar Kaur of Banguwani - his role model.

In youth, the writer was influenced by Sant Suraj Singh Tapasvi of Chooheval; Sant Jaswant Singh, Sufi Lachhman Parshad (Editor of Mastana Jogi, Lahore), Sobha Singh - famous artist in Andretta, Himachal; Sant Nischal Singh of Jagadhri; and pioneering Sikhs savants. Dr. Khokhar remains actively in touch with many personalities (including our distinguished common friend, Dr. Mann Singh Nirankari) I was introduced to Dr. Khokhar some 20 years ago - have admired him since. There is always something on *Gurmat* to learn from him; he himself is a practitioner of *simran* under the inspiration of *Gurbani*.

The narrative is basically socio-cultural and intensely subjective - speaking of his extended family, marriage, profession, children, and practice of his faith discussing real life experiences of meditation, i.e. *Naam-Jaap*: and of the Holy Scripture. He has candidly discussed what he learnt from others who were practicing people and has not held in secret his own spiritual ascent.

Through this book one may experience an intimate life of a Gursikh who spent his lifetime in the company of his Guru and others of similar inclination. This makes the book a ‘manual of self-development’, for adopting an ethical life and evolving spiritual path to ‘cross over the ocean of life’. I believe that everyone reading it will be benefited in one or the other constructive way.



ibKu mih AMimRqu
[Bikhu meh Amrit] in Punjabi
A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

By Sirdar Kapur Singh

Published by Baldev Singh, A-32Sector 50, Noida. UP

Price: Rs. 35 Pp 88

This booklet is a reprint of some of epochmaking essays by the Late Sirdar Kapur Singh, ICS, on fundamental issues concerning Sikhs during the tumultuous decades following Partition. The author - one of the most eminent Sikh leaders has long been dead, even though the issues he raised continue to evoke varying emotions, *The Sikh Review*, has over the last five decades of 20th Century, published many of his original writings, including those relating to "betrayal" of Sikhs in 1947, the Second Partition (re-organisation) of Punjab and loss of its capital Chandigarh - that had led to the gruesome - Shwdq - by starvation - of Sr. Darshan Singh Pheruman.

It is a sad commentary on the Panthic leadership that all sacrifices have gone in vain. Indeed, the Sikhs have been losers on every front - political, economic, social or religious. Even the clause in Art. 25 of the Constitution, that lumps Sikhs together with the caste-ridden Hinduism, continues to tarnish the sovereignty of the Gurmat Principle.

The booklet needs to be read widely by the 21st Century intelligentsia.

- S.S.

