

Naam: The Pilgrimage Within

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FOR SIKHS LIVING IN ANY PART OF the globe, a visit to Amritsar is incomplete if they don't pay obeisance at Sri Darbar Sahib, popularly known as the Golden Temple. In fact, they visit Amritsar with the foremost motive of experiencing spiritual bliss at Sri Harmandir Sahib (as it is also often called) — isnân in the holy Sarovar, listening to Gurbani Kirtan, doing Sewa in Guru Ram Dass Langar and partaking of a community meal in the Langar.

This is the case despite the fact that Sikhi attaches no ritual importance to visiting and bathing at holy places of worship. Rather, it stresses the need to meditate on Naam.

ਤੀਰਥਿ ਨਾਵਣ ਜਾਉ ਤੀਰਥੁ ਨਾਮੁ ਹੈ ॥

ਤੀਰਥੁ ਸਬਦ ਬੀਚਾਰੁ ਅੰਤਰਿ ਗਿਆਨੁ ਹੈ ॥

— Dhanasari, Mahla 1, chhant
[SGGS 687]

“Why should I bathe at sacred shrines of pilgrimage? Reflecting on the Name of the Lord, is the sacred shrine of pilgrimage.

My sacred shrine of pilgrimage is spiritual wisdom within, and contemplation on the Word of the Shabad.”

March 26, 2009, a day I was blessed to pay obeisance at Sri Darbar Sahib, happened to be Amavas or “moonless night” for the month of Chet. I only realized this after reaching there. Seeing large numbers of devotees walking along the Parikarma and long queues for paying obeisance at the Sanctum Sanctorum, I enquired from one of the elderly devotees, “Is it some important day in the Sikh Calendar?”

He looked at me with astonishment and said, “Don't you know it is Cheti Masia?” I thanked him and moved on.

“Cheti Masia?” The words rang a bell in my mind.

‘Masia’ is the last day of the dark half of the lunar month, when the moon is hidden from view. The lunar month is subdivided into two fortnights called Vadi and Sudi. In the former, the half moon wanes, while in the latter, it waxes. The full moon day and night is called Puranmashi.

In Hindu belief, these two days, i.e., Masia and Puranmashi, are most auspicious. Hindus visit holy places, give offerings in temples and take a dip in ponds and holy rivers like the Ganges, Yamuna and Godavari.

However, Gurbani teaches us that all these so-called “special” times — Vadi and Sudi, Masia and Puranmashi — have absolutely no importance or significance for Sikhs.

So I was wondering, “Are we Sikhs also blindly following the age-old rituals, contrary to Gurmat principles — the same rituals that our Gurus rejected as being no more than superstitions? Are some days really more important than others?”

Answers to these queries came to me while I was reciting from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, a few days after the visit to Amritsar.

ਪੰਦ੍ਰਹ ਥਿਤੀ ਤੈ ਸਤ ਵਾਰ ॥
ਮਾਹਾ ਰੁਤੀ ਆਵਹਿ ਵਾਰ ਵਾਰ ॥
ਦਿਨਸੁ ਰੈਣਿ ਤਿਵੈ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ॥
ਆਵਾ ਗਉਣੁ ਕੀਆ ਕਰਤਾਰਿ ॥
ਨਿਹਚਲੁ ਸਾਚੁ ਰਹਿਆ ਕਲ ਧਾਰਿ ॥

— Bilaaval, Mahala 3 [SGGS 842]

“Fifteen lunar days, seven days of the week,
Months and seasons repeat themselves endlessly;
So do the days and nights.
That is how the world goes.
Coming and going is by the Creator’s Will;
The Creator alone is Truth immutable.”

Guru Nanak preached and practiced against all kinds of rituals, and stressed leading an honest and truthful life, while meditating on Naam. **All days are of equal importance for Sikhs. A day is never good nor bad, if we humans know the true purpose of life.**

ਨਾਨਕ ਸੋਈ ਦਿਨਸੁ ਸੁਹਾਵੜਾ ਜਿਤੁ ਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਆਵੈ ਚਿਤਿ ॥ ਜਿਤੁ ਦਿਨਿ ਵਿਸਰੈ ਪਾਰਬ੍ਰਹਮੁ ਫਿਟੁ ਭਲੇਰੀ ਰੁਤਿ ॥

— Salok, Mahala 5 [SGGS 318]

**“O, Nanak, that day is beautiful, when God comes to mind.
Cursed is that day, no matter how pleasant the season,
When the supreme Lord God is forgotten.”**

If the mind is soiled with evil thoughts, ritualistic actions such as bathing at sacred rivers and ponds are not only futile, but also counterproductive.

ਤੀਰਥਿ ਭਰਮਸਿ ਬਿਆਧਿ ਨ ਜਾਵੈ ॥
ਨਾਮ ਬਿਨਾ ਕੈਸੇ ਸੁਖੁ ਪਾਵੈ ॥

— Ramkaali, Mahala 1 [SGGS 906]

“By wandering around at places of pilgrimage, the disease is not taken away.
Without Naam, how can one find peace?”

ਨਾਵਣ ਚਲੇ ਤੀਰਥੀ ਮਨਿ ਖੋਟੈ ਤਨਿ ਚੋਰ ॥
ਇਕੁ ਭਾਉ ਲਥੀ ਨਾਤਿਆ ਦੁਇ ਭਾ ਚੜੀਅਸੁ ਹੋਰ ॥
ਬਾਹਰਿ ਧੋਤੀ ਤੂਮੜੀ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਵਿਸੁ ਨਿਕੋਰ ॥
ਸਾਧ ਭਲੇ ਅਣਨਾਤਿਆ ਚੋਰ ਸਿ ਚੋਰਾ ਚੋਰ ॥

— Soohi, Mahala 1 [SGGS 789]

“They go and bathe at sacred shrines of pilgrimage, when their minds are evil and their bodies hypocritical.

Some of their filth is washed off by these baths, but they only accumulate twice as much.

Like a gourd, they may be washed off on the outside, but on the inside they are still filled with poison.

The holy man is blessed even without such bathing, while a thief is a thief, no matter how much he bathes.”

In contrast, Gurbani teaches us to purge our mind of sinful and wicked thoughts, as well as other spiritual impurities, by cleansing it with Naam through meditation on the Shabad, the Divine Word. Our consciousness is thereby elevated, leading us on the path of liberation.

ਮਨੁ ਮੰਦਰੁ ਤਨੁ ਵੇਸ ਕਲੰਦਰੁ ਘਟ ਹੀ ਤੀਰਥਿ ਨਾਵਾ ॥
ਏਕੁ ਸਬਦੁ ਮੇਰੈ ਪ੍ਰਾਨਿ ਬਸਤੁ ਹੈ ਬਾਹੁੜਿ ਜਨਮਿ ਨ ਆਵਾ ॥

— Bilaaval, Mahala 1 [SGGS 795]

“My mind is the temple and my body is the simple cloth of a humble seeker; deep within my heart, I bathe at the sacred shrine.

The one Word of the Shabad abides within my mind; I shall not come to be born again.”

God is omnipresent and the Divine Light resides within His entire creation, but some world religions believe that He can only be found at a particular “holy” place or in a specific direction. In Hindu belief, God dwells at Puri (Orissa); Muslims claim that Allah lives in Mecca. Pilgrimages are undertaken accordingly, with the aims of meeting God, attempting to please and appease Him, atoning for sins, asking for fulfilment of worldly desires and obtaining salvation.

However, Bhagat Kabir ji has befittingly debunked these erroneous notions.

ਕਬੀਰ ਜਨ ਕਾਬੇ ਹਉ ਜਾਇ ਬਾ ਆਗੈ ਮਿਲਿਆ ਖੁਦਾਇ ॥ ਸਾਈ ਮੁਝ ਸਿਉ ਲਰਿ ਪਰਿਆ ਤੁਝੈ ਕਿਨਿ ਫੁਰਮਾਈ ਗਾਇ ॥
— Salok, Kabir ji [SGGS 1375]

“I, Kabir, was going on pilgrimage to Mecca, and God met me on the way. He scolded me and asked me, “Who told you that I am only there?”

ਦਖਨ ਦੇਸਿ ਹਰੀ ਕਾ ਬਾਸਾ ਪਛਿਮਿ ਅਲਹ ਮੁਕਾਮਾ ॥
ਦਿਲ ਮਹਿ ਖੋਜਿ ਦਿਲੈ ਦਿਲਿ ਖੋਜਹੁ ਏਹੀ ਠਉਰ ਮੁਕਾਮਾ ॥

— Prabhati, Kabir ji [SGGS 1349]

“The God of Hindus may live lives in the Southern lands, and the God of Muslims in the West.

Better search your hearts, look deep into your heart; this is the home and place where God lives.”

In a misguided attempt not to be left behind, Sikhs are also indulging in similar futile practices. Embarking on a yatra to Hemkunt is one example of this. (It is believed by some that the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singhji, meditated at this place during a supposed previous incarnation.)

Gurbani, on the contrary, reiterates that these types of undertakings are of no avail whatsoever.

ਨਾ ਤੂ ਆਵਹਿ ਵਸਿ ਤੀਰਥਿ ਨਾਈਐ ॥

— Pauri, Mahala 5 [SGGS 962]

“No one can bring you under control by bathing at holy places.”

No particular place, day or time is more auspicious than another for Sikhs. The only auspicious acts are to love and serve all mankind as equal, uplift and empower the downtrodden, fearlessly fight injustice, and stand up against all forms of tyranny and discrimination. The Gursikh who is constantly meditating on Naam is always ready to act in a just and fair manner.

Truthful living, Naam Simran, honest labour, and sharing with all those in need are the only sure means to achieving peace of mind and spiritual salvation. Only when we are immersed in the Nectar of Naam, through His Grace, may we embark upon the one true pilgrimage — the pilgrimage within!



References

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Translations from SGGS 687, 789 courtesy *Sikhi to the Max*. Other Gurbani translations by Dr. Sant Singh Khalsa.