

GURUS AND THE BANI - THE BASIC MESSAGE

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Sardars B.S. Dilawari, Harchand Singh and Ramesh Singh have raised some ideological issues in the Sikh Review of September 1991, February 1992 and June 1992, respectively. Dr Chahal in his letter of July 13, 1992, has also asked a few related questions. In sum, these questions are:

1. Does the *hunt* of the *bhagats* and *bhatts* raise any ideological problems, namely, does it accept Lords Krishna and Rama as *avtaars* ? And is their religious system binding on the Sikhs?
2. Is the worldview of the *bhagats* whose *bani* is in the Guru Granth Sahib, binding on the Sikhs? And are the *bhagats*, Gurus for the Sikhs?
3. Do the references to some stories or myths mean that the Gurus accept their historicity?

These questions are indeed basic, and are in essence and by implication linked with the very independence and identity of the religion of the Gurus. We shall try to answer these questions in two parts! The first part deals with the rationale, and the second part with the related hymns.

I

On having a look at the entire religious history of man, we do not find a single instance, where a system has had more than one prophet. Sikhism has the singular distinction of having ten prophets with an unrivalled unity of their spiritual thesis, a Scripture authenticated by the Prophet himself, and the prophets having demonstrated the principles of their religion with their lives and martyrdoms over a period of about 240 years. The Tenth Master formally organised the Panth, and gave the Sikhs their *kakkas*, declaring Guru Granth Sahib as their sole Scripture and their Guru. Further, he made a complete break with the past by his *Nash* doctrine of *Dharam nosh*, *Karam nosh*, *Bharam nosh*, *kul nosh* and *krit nosh*. It

is indeed painful that we still find Sikhs quibbling about what is Sikhism and what are its principles and injunctions. The very fact that Ten Gurus have lived and preached with singularity of purpose, their system for 240 years, emphasises three things: that the traditional systems had ceased to be helpful to the people, that there was need of a new and independent system; and that their religion was radically so different, that the Gurus had again and again to demonstrate its principles, so as to explain and bring home to the people their system. As such, the Gurus' lives are of fundamental importance in order to understand their *bani*. The Guru says that those who know His Will, carry it out. "Wonderful is His Will. If one walks in His Will, then one knows how to lead the life of Truth." Accordingly, for the understanding of our egoistic consciousness, it is important that we accept the historical lives of the Gurus as a model of those who are imbued with His Will. It is in this background, and with a sense of humility, that we approach the issues.

1. The first point of study of the *bani* of the Gurus is to find if there is any contradiction in it. In the Guru Granth Sahib there is repeated emphasis on the unity of thought of the Gurus. The very use of the word Nanak for the hymns of all the Gurus means this. Second, there are many hymns of *bhatts* which call the different Gurus one in spirit. Third, there is the statement of the Tenth Master that there can be no spiritual understanding or success, unless the unity of spirit of all the Gurus is realised. In fact, a study of the *bani* gives one a growing realisation of the truth of the Gurus' statements about the unity of their *bani* and their system.

As to Vaishnavism, the system of Lords Rama and Krishna, even a casual student of religion knows that their system and Sikhism belong to different categories of religion, and in most of their basic principles they are poles apart. Vaishnavism is a salvation religion that believes in *monasticism*, *sanyas*, withdrawal, celibacy, downgrading of women, *ahimsa* and rigid adherence to the caste ideology in the empirical field. For, it is unquestioned that Lord Rama cut the head of Shambuka, a Sudra, for having violated the caste prohibition against the study of Vedas by a Sudra. Similarly, Lord Krishna proclaims that He is the Creator of the Four *varnas*, and that it is more meritorious for a Sudra to follow, even though inefficiently, the

duties of his own caste, than for him to do efficiently the duties of another caste. But Sikhism does not accept any of these principles. Besides, the Gurus clearly reject *avtaarhood*, by calling God *Ajuni* (who does not incarnate). The Fifth Guru says that cursed be the mouth that states God incarnates. Therefore, the ideology of Lords Rama and Krishna has no relevance for us, nor can they be regarded as Sikh Gurus. All this emphasises the independence of Sikhism and explains clearly where we have to seek and search for truths laid down by the Gurus, namely, in their *Bani* as lived by them.

2. A considerable part of what we have said above, is also relevant in giving the answer to the second question, namely, whether the worldview of the *bhagats* whose *bani* is in the Guru Granth Sahib, is binding on us. There is little doubt that the *bhagats* had variant faiths. For the Muslim saints, Quran and the Islamic Shariat were binding and Prophet Mohammad was the seal of prophets. Similarly, the Hindu Vaishnavites like Jaidev and Ramanand, believed in *sanyas*, caste, ritualism, celibacy, downgrading of women, *ahimsa*, etc. It is well known that Ramanuja, the chief exponent of Vaishnavism, would not admit a woman as a Vaishnava. *bhagats* like Namdev, Kabir and others, had their own separate ideologies. Without meaning any criticism, all these saints were quietists and had faith in withdrawal and *ahimsa*, and they did not believe in the equality of man and woman. Without going into details, it can be affirmed broadly that the *bhagats* were quietist saints in the sense that none of them accepted social responsibility, or advocated use of force for a righteous cause or resistance against aggression, nor did they organise any society or Panth.

All students of religion know that there is a clear demarcation between whole-life religions and what may be called quietist or salvation system. In whole-life religions of Judaism, as laid down by Moses, or Islam, as laid down by prophet Mohammad, or of Sikhism, as lived by the Gurus, a householder's life is accepted, as also social responsibility, for the discharging of which a society is organised. The use of minimum force to help the weak and the oppressed is sanctioned. For over a period of hundred years five Gurus have demonstrably wielded the sword for righteous causes, and a sword has been prescribed as one of the *kakkas* for a Sikh. It is well known that

monasticism, *sanyas*, celibacy, withdrawal, a lower status of woman, and non-violence, are integral values in quietist systems. The Gurus prescribe complete equality between man and woman, social responsibility, both for the sustenance of life, involving work and fair distribution of wealth, and confrontation with those who oppress or are unjust to the weak. In Sikhism these are values. In a whole-life system, apart from the sanction of force for a righteous cause, the prophets organised societies, since social and political aggression cannot be resisted by individuals. It is extremely relevant and meaningful that whereas quietist prophets, saints or mystics only cater for individual salvation, whole-life religions lay down not only the spiritual principles of their systems, but simultaneously organise a Panth or society, as did the Sikh Gurus. The world over, no quietist saint has ever recommended the use of force for a righteous cause. This clear distinction between quietist systems and whole-life systems, with marked difference in their values, goals, ethics, approach to life and social responsibilities is too bold, glaring and well-known to be disregarded by any student of religion. In a whole-life religion the love of God and the love of man are virtually synonymous. Thus the love of man, involves succour and sacrifice for those who are weak, oppressed, discarded or discriminated against. For, God showers His Grace where the weak are helped,⁷ and Guru Nanak's God destroys the 'evil' and the 'demonical'. In the Japuji Sahib, the execution of the Altruistic Will of God is the goal prescribed by Guru Nanak. Hence, in Sikhism neither withdrawal, nor celibacy, nor *ahimsa* has been recommended as inviolable values. Again, it is Guru Nanak who complains to God, when there is oppression and butchery of the weak, meaning thereby that injustice and oppression violate the Order of God, and that the *gurmukh* cannot remain neutral or unconcerned about it. The Sikh history is a clear and classic demonstration of the role God-conscious men have to play, when oppression in society is done.

Undeniably, the world-view of the *bhagats* is different from that of the Gurus. Accordingly, as in the case of Lord Rama and Krishna, the question of the Sikhs accepting their ideologies, outside Guru Granth Sahib, cannot arise. It is unthinkable that having started a new society and demonstrated their ideology, they would in their

Bani confuse us, or ask the Sikhs to follow systems which were well-known to be different. For, if the earlier ideologies had to be accepted, the entire Sikh history of the Gurus' period, would seem to become without purpose or aim. In fact, to us, the very suggestion of any identity with earlier systems would seem to be irrational and self contradictory. Often it is our own failure to understand the difference, or incapacity to follow the Sikh path, that creates the confusion. It is evident that the Gurus neither ask us to accept the variant and old ideologies, nor have they involved any contradiction by the inclusion of the *bhagat bani*. The *bhagat bani* in Guru Granth Sahib, is a selection. It is a fact that most of the *bhagat bani* is outside Guru Granth Sahib, and expresses variant ideologies. The hymns of the *bhagats* selected by the Guru, to the extent of the ideas they convey, were considered by the* Guru to be congruous with their own *bani*. This is clear from the connected commentaries of the Gurus on their hymns, where they felt there could be a possibility of misunderstanding.

Just as it is unknown in human history to have ten successive prophets of a religion, it is equally unknown for a prophet to include the *Bani* of another system in its own scripture. There is a reason for so doing. Sikhism is universal and non-exclusive in its approach. For that reason it gives due respect to other systems, and is willing to co-operate with them. Ecumenical efforts or approach among religions is a very recent or modern phenomenon. But, Guru Nanak in the *Sidh Gosht* clearly proclaims that his mission in life is, with the help of other God-conscious men, to steer man across the sea of life. It is in that spirit and with that purpose in view, that the Fifth Master has included the hymns of *bhagats* in the Guru Granth Sahib. It does not at all mean an identity of ideologies; but it is a step for co-ordination and co-operation with like-minded *bhagats*. Pir Budhu Shah sacrificed his sons for the righteous mission of the Tenth Master, but that did not mean that he had lost faith in Islam or Prophet Mohammad. Therefore, the inclusion of the *bani of bhagats* is an ecumenical measure indicating the presence of like-minded strands in other faiths, thereby requiring the Sikhs to be co-operative and universal in their approach. This is the context which explains that when the Sikhs got power, there was no attempt at conversion or persecution of the Muslims.

Thus, while all reverence is due to *bhagats* and prophets of others religions, it would obviously be contrary to the *bani* of the Gurus and their lives, if we either call them God-incarnate or the Gurus of the Sikhs. While everything in Guru Granth Sahib is *bani*, the Gurus of the Sikhs are only the Ten Masters and Guru Granth Sahib who represent a complete unity of spirit, thought, and deed.

3. The third question is about the myths and stories which find mention in the Guru Granth Sahib. Without meaning any disrespect to anyone, it is known that Ramayana and Mahabharata are among the great epics of the world in which most of the stories are mythical and have hardly any historicity. And, yet, these stories being current, have their values for the purpose of clarifying religious propositions, and making them linguistically understandable to the people who were conversant with them and the concerned idiom. Their reference is mostly symbolic, idiomatic or allegoric, and involves no acceptance of their historical reality. For example, the Gurus who repeatedly goad man to make moral decisions with a view to spiritual progress, certainly deny the concept of the determined fall or regression, from *satyug* to *kalyug*. In fact, they clearly convey the idea of evolution, in their hymns, "God created first Himself, then *haumain*, third *mayo*, and the fourth higher state of *gurmukh* who lives truthfully." Therefore, references to myths and stories do not, by implication or otherwise, accept their historical truth, or their literal meaning. All great teachers of the world have made use of the current myths, parables and stories to bring home to the people, the truth of what they wanted to convey, which otherwise would have been difficult for the people to understand. In literature, and more especially in moral literature, where the purpose is to motivate and condition the emotions of the people, an effective means is by reference to examples, parables and tales, which are within the ken and experience of the masses. The stories in the *Panch Tantra* and George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' are tales of animals depicted to express human thoughts, sentiments, viles, failings and foibles. The importance of the stories is in the lessons they seek to bring home, and not in their historical or literal truth.

Guru Nanak's system was so radical, new and independent, that the Gurus felt that mere expression and communication of their

doctrines in the *bani* could be misunderstood. Had this not been Gurus Nanak's assumption, there would hardly seem to be need for subsequent Gurus and their historical roles over the centuries. Actually, it is Guru Nanak in his spirit who has lived for 240 years. The Gurus very well felt that in view of the thousands of year old Indian tradition of *sanyasa*, monasticism, celibacy, downgrading of women, *ahimsa*, etc., it would not be enough to bring home to the people their revolutionary system by merely laying it down in a Granth. The fact is that even after the compilation of the Adi Granth, five Gurus lived, kept armies, struggled and martyred for over a hundred years. Later, the prescribing of a *kirpan* as a *kakka* represents a spiritual principle or a truth in the Sikh theology. It cannot be treated as a redundant remnant of what was once necessary.

The real difficulty is the human tendency to misconstrue, especially because of our own prejudices. It is for this reason that Guru Nanak, who lived in spirit, for almost two and a half centuries, had to demonstrate its meanings and implications. The *kakka* of *kirpan* represent the principle of social responsibility, including struggle against injustice and oppression. By their lead and blood, the Gurus have explained what for, when and to what extent the *kirpan* or force has to be used. Had the Gurus not done it, the position could be the same as in the case of the Hindu scriptures, which are so variably interpreted by K. Bhatt, Sankara, Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhava, Vallabha and Swami Dayanand. It is to avoid such a state, that the Gurus lived to demonstrate the meaning of their *bani*. Yet we go on wrangling about it. And, there are interpretations of self-justification, as in the Parnalis of Udasis or Nirmalas.

II

We have emphasized that by losing sight of the historical perspective and hastening to go by the literal interpretation, we may so often miss the very meaning of the *bani*. For this reason the lives or the Gurus are of fundamental importance, so as to enable us to understand the real import of the words of the Gurus. For example, *In asa di Var*, the Guru sings:

"Sache tere khand sache brahmand,

Sache tere loe sache akar".

and again:

"Kur raja kurpraja kursabh sansar."

To some the two views might appear contradictory. In fact, they complement each other, contributing to a balanced world-view. The former regards the world as real, and pleads for responsible participation in its affairs. The latter reminds one of its evanescent nature, to deprecate accumulation of power and wealth. The goal of life, prescribed by Guru Nanak in the Japuji, is to carry out the Altruistic Will of God. This is properly understood only if we carefully study the lives of the Gurus, and see how they worked, struggled and made supreme sacrifices for the achievement of this goal. The Tenth Master, almost from his childhood, was engaged in an intense strife involving pressures, anguish and tragedies of unprecedented magnitude, which would have crushed the spirit of any individual, not inspired by that lofty goal. In the context of such intense struggle, it would be naive to conclude that the Gurus considered life to be *mithya* or false and unreal. In the absence of a close study of the lives of the Gurus, it is not possible to be clear about so many subtle nuances and depths of the *bani*. Hence the fundamental importance of the exemplary lives of the Gurus in Sikh hermeneutics. The *Bani* says that those who know His Will, carry it out. It was His Altruistic Will the Gurus were following in their lives.

It is in this background that we study the place of Lord(s) Rama, Krishna, and other gods and goddesses, in Sikhism. In *Asa di Varthe* Guru writes that God alone is without fear, and that there are innumerable deities like Rama, dust of His feet, numerous being the stories of Krishna. (AG p464). We need hardly rub the point further. But students of Guru Granth Sahib know what is the status of gods and goddesses in the *Gurbani*, as well as the hymns of *bhagats* Namdev and Kabir (AG pages 637, 894, 953, 954). Many a time the word *ram* or *morari* in the *bani* only means God, and not any individual of that name. And, wherever there is a story of any grace having been bestowed in response to any prayer, the Guru's real reference, despite the mention of a human name in the story, is to God's power, or His benevolent response to prayer. For example, the

Ninth Master, while referring to God's or *Ram's* graciousness in response to the prayer of Daropadi, writes, "*Panchali ko raj sabha mem Ram nam sudh aai*". (AG p 1008). Evidently the incident relates to the story of Lord Krishna and Daropadi. But for the Guru the grace bestowed is by God, here named *Ram*. The absence of the word Krishna is very significant. It shows that statements in the *Gurbani* of incidents of grace, as narrated in the current stories or myths, neither confirm their historicity, nor confine their meanings to particular individuals named therein, but those seek only to explain to the devotee the power of God through the medium of myths, parables or idioms with which he is familiar. In sum, both in *Gurbani* and the *bani* of the *bhagats*, the Power which answers the prayer, or is Gracious, is, in each case, God, and not any living being.

A related question could arise regarding the *bani* of *bhatts*. They want to praise and describe the Gurus as the greatest beings of all times. They regarded the *avtaars* as the greatest they knew of. Accordingly, they use the then current idiom to extol the Gurus by calling them greater than anyone in any age. Their comparison with the mythical persons does not indicate, much less establish, the historicity of Janak, Paras Ram or the rest. For, Bhatt Kall sings that Jogeshwar, Parasram with the mythical axe, many Avtaars, Kapil, Janak, Bidar, Mahadeo and others of all ages, are ever singing praises of Guru Nanak. (AG pp 1389-90). This is just a poetic or allegoric way of expressing the Bhatt's belief in the lofty stature of the Guru. It does not at all mean the historicity of the persons mentioned, nor that those who lived in ages gone by, were still living and singing the praises of the Gurus. Everyone knows the mythical character of Parasram and his axe, which is supposed to have killed all the Kshatriyas in the land.

Now, a few words about S. Ramesh Singh's reference to Kabir Sahib's hymn, "*Etc aurant mardan saje eh sabh rup tumhare; Kabir pungra Ram Allah ka sabh gur pir hamare*" The hymn ends with the words "*Kewal naam japo re prani tab hi nehchai tarna*." (AG p. 1349). We wonder how a serious student who has gone through the entire Shabad (which emphasises the immanence of God and salvation only through *Naam*) can conclude that the hymn means that everyone (which includes Sakhi Sarvar, Sital Devi, Gugga Pir, and thousands of other deities and devitas, preaching diverse cults) is the guru or pir

of a Sikh. It is the same Kabir who writes, "*Kabir Bahman guru hai jagat ka, bhagatan ka gur nahi.*" (AG p. 1377). To us the interpretation of S. Ramesh Singh appears a distortion.

Equally unsustainable appears to be the observation of S. Bhagwant Singh Dalawari, "I do not consider any difference between Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh, Krishna, Rama, Jesus or Moham-mad, because they give me the message of the Lord." The statement could be only partly true, since the message in each case is not identical. For Guru Nanak, his Lord is also the Destroyer of the evil-doer, and the Sikh Gurus wielded the sword for 102 years, and a *kirpan* is prescribed as a part of the essential wear of every Sikh. Whereas the Sikh Guru prays to God to save the burning world by any way He may be gracious enough to do, the Christian message is of salvation only through Christ, and the Sermon on the Mount is strictly pacifist. Islam also shares this exclusivism. Similarly, Lord Krishna claims to be the author of the Caste ideology, involving strict adherence to one's caste duties and prohibition against any mobility in caste profession. Logically it gives sanction to the concept of pollution. It requires purification of a temple after a Sudra had happened to visit it, or the washing of the statue of Sampurananand with holy Ganges water, after Jagjivan Ram, a Scheduled Caste Deputy Prime Minister of India, had unveiled it. Dalawari Sahib's statement may be a good speech from a political platform. However, it is difficult to identify the ideology of the Gurus, with the earlier preachings of *shastras* and other scriptures, and thus to uphold Sardar Dalawari's claim. Of course, respect for all religious leaders and scriptures, is understandable, and has been amply demonstrated in the *bani*. It is also not true that steps for military confrontation were taken only by Guru Gobind Singh. Actually it was decided by the Fifth Master several decades earlier.

Conclusion: In the end we should again like to re-emphasize the very special position of Sikh hermeneutics. We humans have no access to the actual spiritual experience of the Gurus, nor can we be aware of the deliberation consequent to that experience in the consciousness of the prophets. We are distantly aware only of the expression of the decisions made by the prophets. The expression is either in the form of words or deeds. Here comes the major difference. In

the case of almost every other system, the scripture is a *post-facto* man-made construction, recorded decades or even centuries after the disappearance of the prophets. Debate has continued as to how far the record could be true, considering the known human weaknesses to remain subservient to personal or social influences. This handicap does not exist in the case of the Guru Granth Sahib, which stands authenticated by the Guru himself. The second point is that expression in the form of deeds has always been considered clearer than words. This is for two important reasons. The expression in words can at best be general or theoretical in nature. For, this expression for that very reason, must seek to cover all possible eventualities that may arise in the future, and which possibilities can never be guessed completely. In short, word is only the penultimate step in the expression of the spiritual perceptions of which the deed is a concrete, unambiguous and final step in a comparatively specific flux of events. For this reason, it is easier to understand and less liable to misinterpretation than the word. The second point about the word is, that it is a borrowed mode of expression, and for that matter, it can never be as clear and concrete as the deed. Language, at any time, is already an existing vehicle of expression. It has its own changing nuances and has its roots extending many a time to a distant cultural past. Obviously, language being a second-hand vehicle of expression, its truth is more liable to misinterpretation than the deed which is not only particular to the author, but is also closely related as a response to known or identifiable set of events. For this reason it is simpler and easier to comprehend.

In the above context let us see what Guru Nanak did for us to reduce all possibilities of misunderstanding or misinterpretation. In the case of the words, the Guru himself authenticated it. As to the clearly understandable expression of deeds, Guru Nanak lived for us for 240 years. He lived, worked, struggled, organised a Panth, and sacrificed and martyred, while facing all sets of events, eventualities, and milieus, social and political. The above are the two unique steps Guru Nanak has taken to make his system clear to us and to solve our problems of hermeneutics.

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| 1. Guru Granth Sahib | P991 |
| 2. Ibid. | P940. |
| 3. Ibid. | P966. |
| 4. Macauliffe. MA. | "The Sikh Religion" Vol. V P 295. |
| 5. Guru Granth Sahib | P 1136. |
| 6. Murthy. H.V.S. | Vaisnavism of Shankradeva and Ramanija" pp 201-202. |
| 7. Guru Granth Sahib | P15. |
| 8. Ibid. | PP 224. 1228. |
| 9. Ibid. | P 1 |
| 10. Ibid | P113 |

P 1-p113. Banish Fear

Lodge fear of God in the mind, this will banish all other fears from it.

— Guru Nanak Dev ji (Guru Granth Sahib, p 151)

When the Leader is Blind

When the leader is blind, the followers are surely moving towards doom.

- Bhai Gurdas (Var 34)

Real Asses

Real asses are those men who, without merit, are full of pride.

— Guru Nanak Dev ji (Guru Granth Sahib, p 1411)