

A Tribute to Sri Guru Nānak and *Gurbāni*

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Guru Nānak, a name known to all, had set the foundation of Sikhism. Sikhism is a very practical and a very logical way of life. I do not call it a religion which often makes a person somewhat fanatic and very narrow-minded. Sikhism, we believe, is a way of life.

The very word ‘Sikh’ means *shishya* or disciple. That is to say, one who has accepted the teachings of the Guru. Sikhism is based on the teachings of the ten Gurus beginning with Guru Nānak and culminating in Guru Govind Singhji. Following this, the place of the Guru is given to the *Guru Granth Sāhib*, the holy book of Sikhism, by Guru Govind Singhji. He gave instruction to all Sikhs,

*Sabh Sikhan ko hukam hai, Guru māniyo Granth;
Guru Granth māniyo pargat Guran ki deh.*

It means hereforth after Guru Govind Singhji, the Sikhs will not have a Guru having the physical frame, but the holy book of the Sikhs—the *Guru Granth Sāhib*—will be the Guru. This is why when you visit a Gurudwara you will find the *Guru Granth Sāhib* placed on the high altar which receives all the obeisance and honour due to a Guru. The *Granth Sāhib* is revered as the manifest body of the true Guru.

The *Granth Sāhib* has 1429 pages which we term *angas*, ie limbs. Why? Since the *Granth Sāhib* is our Guru, the pages are his limbs. The *Granth Sāhib* is composed of thirty-one *rāgas*. Each of the hymns

contained in the *Granth* is based on a *rāga* or classical Indian music system and based on its notations. With each *rāga* is mentioned the *ghar*, such as *ghar chauthā*, *ghar tistrā* etc which indicate the *tāla* or rhythm of the *rāga*. *Ghar* means *mātrās* or beats. It can be of four *mātrās*, ie *ghar chautha*, or of three *mātrās*, ie *ghar tistrā*. *Tistrā* is three. Similarly *Ghar chauthā* would mean *tāla* of four *mātrās*. Thus you can very well imagine or comprehend how thorough knowledge they had of the classical Indian music. Indeed, the whole of the *Gurbāni* is music-based. Each *shabad* or hymn is composed in a particular *rāga* and, for that, specific *mātrās* have been mentioned.

These hymns of the *Granth Sāhib* were composed by all the Gurus of Sikhism. That is why we term these *Gurbāni*, or the words (*vāni*), of the Guru or preceptor. This is not a poem composed by any poet. As the Vedas are the revelations of the Supreme Being to our ancient sages, similarly these *vāni* of Gurus were revealed to them by the Almighty. It was only when these were revealed that the Gurus would burst into some mystic flow of the divine urge or would be filled with some divine power to compose them, set to verse and style them into music. That is why we say,

*Dhur ki bāni āi tin sagli chint mitāi
daial purakh meharvānā har Nānak sāch
vakhānā*

That is, a divine order from God came by

His grace and Nānak speaks about that Truth.

Whatever be the occasion, we have a hymn for it. Whether it is happiness or grief, marriage, birth or death, for every experience of life we have a *shabad* or hymn. We sing the hymn when we celebrate a happy occasion. We do the same when we want to mourn the loss. Hymns are also there for other occasions.

The opening prayer of the *Granth Sāhib* is the *Japji Sāhib*, considered to be the first composition of the first Guru of Sikhism, Guru Nānak Devji. He was enamoured of the magnanimity of the Almighty. He was simply God-intoxicated and from this divine inebriation came out the *ustat* of the God and that is *Japji Sāhib*.

The *Japji Sāhib* has thirty-eight *paudis* which mean thirty-eight verses. And the Sikhs try to begin their day with the singing of the *Japji Sāhib*. The first *paudi* (verse) is known as the *mulmantra*, ie root or the basic *mantra* or *tattva*. The *mulmantra* ie ‘*ik omkār*’, which means one Creator; ‘*satnām*’, Truth is Thy name; ‘*kartā purakh*’, Doer of everything; *nirbhau*, free from fear, ‘*nirvair*’, free of any ill-will toward anybody; ‘*akāl murat*’, eternal, not subject to causation of time. The mortal beings are all subject to time, death and rebirth. But the Creator is not. He is ‘*ajuni*’, unborn, and self-existent. But we will have to transmigrate. It is said that eighty-four lakhs of transmigrations we have to undergo. ‘*Saibham*’, Self-existent; ‘*Gur prasād*’, by His grace one realises the truth; ‘*jap*’, repeat God’s name, meditate on His name; ‘*ād sach jugādi sach*’, true in the primal beginning; ‘*hai bhi sach*’ true now and true for all time; ‘*Nānak hosi bhi sach*’, Nānak says, God will remain true for ever and ever. So the complete *shabad* is:

*Ik omkār sat nām karatā purakh nirbhau
nirvair akāl murat ajuni saibham gur
prasād jap ād sach jugād sach hai bhi sach
nānak hosi bhi sach.*

Metaphorical darkness

Five hundred and forty-eight years ago there was no pollution, no global warming, no smog, but there existed a metaphorical darkness over our land. This darkness was the darkness of ignorance, *ajnānatā*, illogical religious practices, divisions on the basis of caste and inequality in society. The common masses were ruled according to the whims of and fancies of the rulers. And in this period of metaphorical darkness came light—the light in the form of a divine being. And this divine being came to this earth through Mātā Triptāji and Kalyandas, the mother and father of Guru Nānak Devji. His light tore away the veil of darkness. Bhai Gurudasji was raptured by this light of Guru Nānak and composed the following *shabad*:

*Satguru Nānak pargatia miti thud jag
chānan hoa
Jeon kar suraj nikliya tārāy shupai andhar
paloa*

With the emergence of the true Guru—Nānak, the mist cleared and the light spread everywhere, as with the sunrise, the night of darkness is dispelled and the stars go into hiding. With the roar of lion in the forest, the herd of deer lost their endurance. Wherever Bābā Nānak put his feet a religious place was established. All that is related to him has now been renamed with Nānak’s name. Every home became a place of *dharma* and religious singing. Bābā Nānak influenced and showed the path to salvation. His name spread in all directions—in the east, west, north and south. Nānak is a *gurmukh* who emerged in the dark age of *Kaliyuga*.

I mentioned the term *gurmukh* Nānak. In Sikhism, the words *gurmukh* and *manmukh* are of great importance. *Mukh* means direction, *guru* means teacher, and *man* means inclinations of an undiscerning mind. So a human being is given two choices of being *gurmukh* or *manmukh*. Now, who is a *gurmukh*? *Gurmukh* is one who listens to his guru and follows his words, and who turns his way of life towards his guru's preachings and in turn earns the blessings of his guru. And who is a *manmukh*? *Manmukh* is one who follows his mental inclinations and allows himself to be led by those tendencies without using discretion. What happens to such a person? The Guru says, you followed the whims of your mind, so reap its consequences.

So everything depends on us, whether we wish to become a *gurmukh* or a *manmukh*, whether we wish to follow the words of our guru and lead our life accordingly, or to become a *manmukh* and unwittingly get trapped in the worldly whirlpool. When we face adversities in life we lay the blame on our *karmas*—past and present. Our birth itself is an effect of our past actions, and we do reap their banes and boons. However, our present *karma* is also in our hands and hence we are given a choice. We may perform such *karmas* as to negate the good and bad effects of the past *karmas*. We may also choose to bind ourselves with their good and bad effects.

That is, a selfless action would free us from the effect of *karma*, while an action done with a sense of 'I', the doer, and with a selfish motive would bind us to its effects, good or bad, and we will go on repeating the cycle of birth and death. So Nānak, like all other saints, advises us to hold onto *nāmajapa* (repetition of His name) without a moment's loss. This will enable us to disentangle ourselves from the snares of birth and death.

How far is death?

Once Nānak was on his way to a certain place with his disciples, Bālā, Mardānā and others. He first asked Bālā: Bālā, tell me how far death is away from you? Bālā replied: Guruji, I have witnessed the morning today, I do not know whether I shall see tomorrow's morning or not. Nānak then said: So, according to you, death is that far.

Nānakji then put the same question to his other disciple, Mardānā. Mardānā replied: Today's morning I have seen; I do not know if I shall see today's evening too.

Nānak then said: Death is only away at a distance of your outstretched palm and four fingers, ie from the nose to the heart. You do not know whether the breath you just inhaled will come out or not. So, with this little time at your disposal you should not lose a moment. You should repeat mindfully His name all the time.

However, this does not mean that we shall abandon all our work and duties and sit without doing any work and say that I am engaged in *nāmajapa*. Here a verse of Sant Nāmdev is very significant.

*Man rām nāmā bedhiale,
jaise kanik kala chit manhdiale.*

My mind has been pierced by the Name of the Lord like the Goldsmith whose attention is held by his work.

Guru Ramdasji

Now let us move on to the *shabad* by Guru Ramdasji, our fourth Guru. Guru Ramdasji set up the city of Amritsar—which is also known by the name of Ramdaspur. The Harmandir Sahib or the Golden Temple is situated there. This temple has four doors signifying the four directions—east, west, north and south. That means all people from all the four directions are welcome there.

The central point there is the *Granth Sāhib*. That means, to all people coming there, the goal is to reach the Guru and through him to attain salvation. If you see the Golden Temple, on the top of the dome you will see the symbol of an inverted lotus. What does an inverted lotus signify? Lotus is considered to be a favourite flower associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. We all keep running after wealth. But in the Guru's house it is an inverted lotus. Wealth has no place there, while your loving devotion to God has.

In the *Granth Sāhib* whichever Guru composed the *shabads*, each *shabad* ends with Guru Nānak's name as '*Nānak kahe*' because he is the founder Guru, and all other gurus have the light of Nānak in them. The following *shabad* expresses the yearning of a devotee to meet the Beloved Lord. It says,

*Mai prabh milan prem man āsā
Gur purā milāvai merā pritam hau
vār vār āpne guru kau jāsā*

That is, the perfect Guru leads me to my Beloved Lord. I sacrifice myself to my Guru. My body is overflowing with misdoings and corruption. How can I meet my perfect Beloved. The virtuous ones obtain Him. But I do not have those virtues. O, Lord, tell me how can I meet You. I am tired of making so many efforts to meet You. O Lord! please protect Nānak, the poor meek one.

Nānak calls himself *garib* (poor), expressing his humility. This humility is the characteristic of a rich soul.

With the passage of time, as Nānak grew up, he became engrossed more and more in the holy Name of God. Once Nānak was asked by some sadhus as to what kept him so intoxicated. Nānak replied,

*Bābā mān mātvaro nām raspivai,
Sahaj rāng rach rahiā.*

It means, it is the hangover of the Lord's

Name that intoxicates me day and night. In this river of *Nāma* Nānak drowned himself. Words of praises for the Almighty came from the depths of his heart.

He was also against the ill practices prevalent in those days in society. Therefore many of his lessons relate to different aspects and values of life. All these thoughts and emotions in Guru's mind took the form of *āsā divār*, another composition of Guru Nānak. This has got twenty-four *paudis* (verses) and this is sung in the blissful hours of the morning which is called *amritvelā*. It is sung in every gurudwaras in the morning in a particular style called '*Tunde asrāje ki dhuni*'. There was a king called Asrājā. In Punjabi language *tunda* means a person who has only one arm. In his court the bards and the poets would sing his praises in a particular style. That style of singing has been adopted for singing the *Āsā divār*. I give you a *paudi* from this composition, *āsādivār*. It says:

*Sach tā par jāniai jā ridai sachā hoi
kur ki mal utarai tan kare hashā hoi.*

The verse says, one knows the truth only when the truth is in the heart. And then, with this truth, filth of all sorts departs and the body is cleansed. One knows the truth only when he bears love for the true Lord. Hearing the name, the mind is enraptured and one attains the gate to salvation. One knows the truth only when one knows the true way of life. Preparing the field of the body he plants the seed of the Creator. One knows truth only when he shows mercy and indulges in charity. His soul itself is the sacred shrine of his pilgrimage. One who sits and receives the instructions of the true Guru and lives according to the Will of the Almighty finds the truth. Truth is the medicine for all. It removes and washes away our sins. Nānak utters this prayer to those who have truth in their laps.

Nānak was known for his humility. He saw the light of the divine in all. He considered no one bad and, at the same time, he did not consider himself to be good. How unlike us! We always say we are good, and the others bad. But Nānak says,

*Hum nahi change burā nahin koye
pranavat Nānak tāre soye.*

Prays Nānak, the Almighty alone is our redeemer. This *shabad* is a composition by Guru Nānak himself. In this *shabad* he says that the Lord alone abides deep within the self. Do not go outside to look for Him. Why are you wandering about in rituals seeking Him? You have given up the *amrit*—the ambrosial nectar and eating poison. Nānak says, O my mind, meditate on such spiritual wisdom and become the slave of the true Guru, of the true Lord. Everyone speaks of wisdom and meditation, yet bound in bondage. The whole world is wandering around in confusion. One who serves the Lord is His servant (*chākara*).

For example, I am a school teacher. I do my duties as a teacher. I take orders from the principal, but I am the servant of the Lord alone, I bow my head to Him alone, and thinking thus I try to spend my life.

The Lord prevails everywhere, in land, water and in the sky. And this is the message of this *shabad*. It inspires us to learn to appreciate. While listening to this *shabad*, words of Swami Vivekananda come to my mind. He was very impressed by the personality of Guru Nānak. He says (in his *Complete Works*, Vol. III, p. 366): ‘Here it was that in later times the gentle Nānak preached his marvellous love for the world. Here it was that his broad heart was opened and his arms outstretched to embrace the whole world, not only of Hindus, but of Mohammedans too.’

Sri Guru Nānak was born in the sacred

land of India. He gave the message of love and peace and preached the same thoughts through his teachings. He was full of affection for everyone, and his arms were always outstretched as if to embrace the whole world. There was no difference between a Hindu and a Muslim for him. He was a common guru to all, the guru of the human race. And that is what we need. We need the guru of the human race. We do not need guru of any religion. Religion tears us apart. Spirituality brings us together. Today the world wants spirituality and that Guru Nānak gave us 548 years ago. We are blessed.

Guru Govind Singh

Now I shall say something about Guru Govind Singhji. His father, the ninth Guru, Guru Teg Bahadur Singhji sacrificed his life to curb the atrocities on the people on the grounds of religion. The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Devji, had also sacrificed for the same cause. However, Guru Govind Singhji came as a soldier saint termed as ‘Sant Sipāhi’. He established the ‘Khalsa’, the *akāl fauz*, and history is witness to it. His compositions, his *shabads* take us to a different level. He was well versed in the Persian language. His *vāni* gives one strength, encouragement and hope in the most difficult of times.

Swami Vivekananda was in praise of Guru Govind Singhji. When he was in Lahore he said:

Here it was that one of the last and one of the most glorious heroes of our race, Guru Govinda Singh, after shedding his blood and that of his dearest and nearest for the cause of religion, even when deserted by those for whom this blood was shed, retired into the South to die like a wounded lion struck to the heart, without a word against his country, without a single word of murmur. (op. cit.)

And as I say this, I am full of gooseflesh. I do not know about you!

Now a *shabad* from the Guru's composition which is a favourite with every Sikh. When the *shabad* is sung, the call of Guru Govind Singhji is—'bole so nihāl', and the response is—'sat sri akāl'. This response means the Almighty is the Truth. It is termed as *jaykāra*—the call of victory. The *shabad* is:

Deh Shiva var mohe ihai subh karman te kabhu na taron! Na daron arrseo jab jāye laron nishcaya kara apni jeet karon. Arr Sikh ho apne he mann ko, eh lālach hou gun tau ucharon. Jab āv ki audh nidān bane att he rann me tabha joojh maron.

It means: Grant me this boon, O Lord! may I never refrain from the righteous acts in life's battle. May I fight with all confidence and courage and achieve victory.

* This article is based on the transcription of a talk that went side by side with Bhai Pritpal Singh Bedi and Group's 'Katha Kirtan' at the Institute on 11 November, 2017. These words were delivered by Paramjeet Kaur who acted as a compère.

May Your glory be ingrained in my mind, and may my highest ambition be to sing Your praise. When this mortal life comes to an end, may I face everything with limitless courage.

In the *shabad* mentioned above, one tastes *veer rasa*. However, Guru Nānak's favourite *rasa* is the *bhakti rasa*. There is a beautiful couplet from one of Guru Nānak Devji's *shabads* in which he says:

visaran nāhi dātār apanā nām deho gun gāva dīn rāt nānak chāo eho.

He says, it is the heartfelt desire of Nānak to sing Your glorious praise day and night; never forget me O Lord. Please bless me with Your *Nām* (name). *Wāhe Guru* is a very precious word. *Wāhe* means glory to Him, and *Guru* is he who takes you out of darkness. ■

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