

FORMULATING METHODOLOGY FOR INTERPRETING GURBANI

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ABSTRACT

The process by which theological texts are understood relies on a particular hermeneutical viewpoint. In the interpretation of a text, hermeneutics considers the original medium as well as what language says, supposes, doesn't say, and implies. The process consists of several steps for attaining the best of the Scriptural author's intended meaning(s). Some important steps [31] are outlined as under.

Lexical-syntactical (Gurbani *Viakaran*) analysis

This step looks at the words used and the way the words are used. Different order of the sentence, the punctuation, the tense of the verse are all aspects that are looked at in the lexical syntactical method. Here, lexicons and grammar aids can help in extracting meaning from the text. Prof Sahib Singh's Teeka (interpretation) of Sri Guru Granth Sahib [26, 11, 29] and Sikh Missionary College's approach [7] to interpret Gurbani fall in this category.

Historical / Cultural analysis

The history and culture surrounding the authors is important to understand to aid in interpretation. For instance, understanding the Gurus' and Bhagats' Lives and times (esp. social, cultural and political scenario during their times) increases understanding of Scripture. Understanding the connotations of terms such as the *Kazi*, *Mulla*, *Mukadam*, *Nath*, *Yogi*, *Iai Panthi*, *Kashi*, *Meghar* etc. helps us to know about what other thoughts have been expressed in Gurbani about such people and places. Most of the interpreters of Gurbani do take care of this aspect but not all interpreters are well versed with such terms and their meanings.

Contextual analysis

A verse out of context can often be taken to mean something completely different from the intention. This method focuses on the

importance of looking at the context of a verse in its stanza or *Pauri*, *Var* or *Raga* and even in Sikhi context. In present times, it has been observed that in print or electronic media, the interpretation of Gurbani is being reported by taking a verse out of context, often portraying a meaning completely different from the actual intention. For example, '*putin gandh pavai sansar*' (AGGS, M 1, p 143) is being portrayed by many preachers as confirmation of the auspiciousness of the birth of a male child in a family, whereas the intended meaning of the verse is contrary to the fact, in overall context of the related stanza of Gurbani (Hymns of AGGS).

Theological analysis

It is often said that a single verse doesn't make a theology. This is because Scripture often touches on issues in several Bani. For instance, several verses about creation have been described in *Jap*, *Sukhmani*, *Asa Di Var*, and *Maru Sohilee*. To take a verse from a '*Bani*' without taking into account the other passages (as available in other *Bani*) that deal with the same topic can cause a poor interpretation.

Special literary analysis

There are several special literary aspects to look at, but the overarching theme is that each genre of Bani (e.g. *Chhand*, *Dohra*, *Dotukke*, *Sloka*, *Pauri*, *Ashatpadi*, *Vaar*, *Raga* etc) has a different set of rules that

applies to it. In these, there are differing levels of allegory, figurative language, metaphors, similes and literal language. For instance, the apocalyptic writings and poetry have more figurative and allegorical language than does the narrative or historical writing. These must be addressed, and the genre recognized to gain a full understanding of the intended meaning.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief introduction to some basic hermeneutical principles - principles that we should strive to adhere to in the commentaries on Gurbani. A short bibliography and links to resources for additional research are provided at the end of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Those who accept Aad Guru Granth Sahib [29] (AGGS) as the embodiment of 'Sabd Guru' believe that Guru has spoken to us unambiguously. We believe that there is only one "right" interpretation of any given Gurbani hymn - the meaning divinely inspired author intended when he penned it. If this view is correct, it follows that of the many "different interpretations" available, there must be only one that is valid. That is, while a particular passage may have many applications, it must have only one meaning - the one the author intended.

At present, there are several different 'Tikas' (interpretations) of AGGS available [7-8, 11-14, 24, 26-27, 33], which contain a widely different range of interpretations for the same Gurbani hymn (e.g. even for 'Jap' Bani, the first *Bani* of SGGGS, as many as 8 different interpretations / commentaries are available). Similarly, a psalm should often be interpreted differently from a prophecy e.g. *aan athetre jan stanvey* (AGGS, M 1, p 722); *jo upjio so binas hai*, (AGGS, M 9, p 1429). A proverb e.g. *'nivee so gaura hoae'* should be understood and applied differently from a law e.g. *bhae vich suraj, bhae vich chand* (AGGS, M 1, p 464). But this is not the case for most of the interpretations. This causes an undesirable confusion in the mind of the followers. Thus Gurbani hermeneutics - the science of properly interpreting the various types of literature found in AGGS, is the dire need of our times. Using sound hermeneutic principle [1-2, 5, 10, 15-21, 28, 33] is not optional for the true disciple of Sikhism.

Gurbani Hermeneutics

Gurbani hermeneutics is the science that teaches the principles and methods of interpreting the Sabd Guru. It provides us tools to help ensure that we are basing our interpretations on the truth as Gurbani has revealed it, while avoiding error to the greatest degree possible. Thus the science of Gurbani Hermeneutics -

in all its varied "schools" - seeks to provide a methodology to help us to know how to interpret, understand, and apply the Gurbani.

The most important law of Gurbani hermeneutics is that the AGGS should be interpreted literally. Literal Gurbani interpretation means we understand the Gurbani in its normal/plain meaning. The AGGS says what it means and means what it says. Many make the mistake of trying to read between the lines and come up with meanings for Gurbani that are not truly in the text. Yes, of course, there are some spiritual truths behind the plain meanings of *Bani*. That does not mean that every verse of Bani has a hidden spiritual truth, or that it should be our goal to find all such spiritual truths. Gurbani hermeneutics keeps us faithful to the intended meaning of *Gurbani* and away from allegorizing and symbolizing *Bani* verses and passages that should be understood literally.

A Second Crucial Law of Gurbani Hermeneutics is that a verse or passage must be interpreted historically, grammatically, and contextually. Historical interpretation refers to understanding the culture, background, and situation which prompted the text. Grammatical interpretation is recognizing the rules of grammar and nuances of the various languages and applying those principles to the understanding of a passage. It is worth noting that although the majority of the language of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib is the Punjabi dialect prevalent at that time, but some hymns are also found in Persian, medieval Prakrit, Hindi and Marathi, Sanskrit as well as Arabic. All of these hymns are written in the standard Punjabi script known as Gurmukhi.

Contextual interpretation involves always taking the surrounding context of a verse / passage into consideration when trying to determine the meaning. Some mistakenly may view Gurbani hermeneutics as limiting our ability to learn new truths from Sabd Guru or stifling the AGGS's ability to reveal to us the meaning of Gurbani. This is not the case. The goal of Gurbani hermeneutics is to point us to the correct interpretation which the great Gurus have already inspired into the text. The purpose of Gurbani hermeneutics is to protect us from improperly applying a Gurbani verse to a particular situation. Gurbani hermeneutics points us to the true meaning and application of the Scripture.

Cultural / Historical Perspective

When attempting to interpret Gurbani, it is important to remember that Gurbani was written in a specific culture - the medieval ancient Indian or "Oriental" culture of the East. Our culture - the post-Modern Eastern culture - is vastly different from that of the authors of Scripture; we will sometimes find deep differences in what we take to

be "givens" in a specific area of knowledge and what the Gurbani writers took as their "givens." The Gurbani writer's history, culture, customs, environment, and language are diverse and removed from our culture and way of life.

There is another issue that great gaps exist between Eastern and Western culture; therefore we also need some help in bridging these gaps. The Sikhs, who are born and brought up in the West, find themselves separated from the AGGS culturally, geographically, historically and especially by language.

On the other hand, we believe that the message of 'Sabd Guru' is universal in meaning and application. We believe that the 'Sabd Guru' will reveal all truth to us, particularly with regard to the Gurbani. Many of the new generation Sikhs (born in the West) do not understand the language of the Gurbani, yet the Sikh religious authorities expect them to understand the truth of the Sikh scriptures when translated into other languages. But this doesn't mean that we may safely ignore the cultural, historical, and language differences between us and the Gurbani writer. The enlightened Gurbani authors illuminate Gurbani ideals to those who earnestly seek its truth, but interpretation is properly the responsibility of individual Sikhs.

VARIOUS SCHOOLS OF GURBANI INTERPRETATION

During the last few centuries, people have recognized the value in using principles for interpretation. But, humans the way we are, have developed a number of different principles and methodologies [1-2, 5, 10, 15-21, 28, 32]. Here's a brief summary of the more popular hermeneutic "schools".

The Allegorical Schools of Interpretation:

The allegorical school teaches that beneath each verse of scripture (beneath the obvious) is the "real" meaning of the passage. Hidden in each sentence or statement is a symbolic spiritual meaning. This method of interpretation was developed by Amir Bhandar (Sampardai Prampara), who was strongly influenced by Vedic philosophies. Sampardai Teeka [27, 12] of Aad Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji by Sant Kirpal Singh, confirms to this school of interpretation, who viewed the Scripture, as being symbolic rather than literal. Those holding to the principles of the logic and rationality generally regard this method of interpretation as undermining the power and impact of the literal Word.

The Devotional Schools of Interpretation

The devotional schools emphasize the edifying aspects of the scripture and its interpretation, with the goal of developing one's spiritual life. This method often advocated the reading of the scripture as a means of obtaining a mystical experience. The Gurbani is said to be useful for devotion and prayer, but need not be studied. Critics of the devotional school argue that while the Gurbani is uniquely able to spiritually edify and is the primary means to by which 'Sabd Guru' leads us to the union with God, this school's methodology can lead to idiosyncratic interpretations which have little to do with the truth of Scripture.

The Literal Schools of Interpretation

The literal method of interpreting the Gurbani is to accept the literal rendering of each sentence. The spirit of literal interpretation is that we should be satisfied with the literal interpretation of a text unless very substantial reasons can be given for advancing beyond the literal meaning. This is one of the most important school of interpretation that many scholars with rational and scientific bent of mind [4, 6, 22-23, 30] are applying to their study of Gurbani. Prof D S Chahal's interpretation [4] of Gurbani belongs to this school of thought.

The Liberal Schools of Interpretation

Theological liberalism is prevalent today. Liberal theologians [25] (e.g. Prof Pashaura Singh etc) do not accept the Gurbani as the infallible 'Sabd Guru' and reject the divine inspiration of the Gurbani (*Dhur ki Bani aae*). This is not the place to provide a thorough critique of liberalism in Gurbani Studies and its various critical methods (Source, Form, Historical Critical, etc.). I note here, however, that once one abandons the divine inspiration of the Gurbani, one's own intellect becomes the determining factor in questions of truth. Relativism is the inevitable result, which, when extrapolated to its logical conclusion, is unable to prove anything with certainty, let alone one's preferred liberal interpretation.

The Principles of Gurbani Interpretation

There are certain principles that will help us to accurately interpret the hymns of AGGS. These principles are embedded in the scripture itself. We do not need to go beyond the boundaries of the AGGS to discover these laws and maxims that are used to determine the meaning of scripture. The AGGS interprets itself (scripture interprets scripture).

Principle #1: The Literal Interpretation Principle

We take the AGGS at face value. We generally take everyday things in life as literal or at face value. This is a common sense approach. Even symbols and allegories in the AGGS are based on the literal meaning of the scripture; thus the literal meaning is foundational to any symbolic or allegorical meaning. The golden rule of

interpretation is: "When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense." Therefore, take every word at its primary, usual, meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise. For example '*Jini kami na hi gun, tee kamde visaar*' (AGGS, Seikh Fareed, p 1381) (Fareed, those deeds which do not bring merit - forget about those deeds).

The meaning and the intended message is obvious.

Principle #2: The Contextual Principle

Carson [3] has been quoted as saying, "A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text." By "proof text," of course, Carson means the abuse of a single verse or phrase taken out of context to "prove" a particular view. For example '*nachan kudan man ka chao*' (AGGS, M 1, p 465) is being portrayed to approve and encourage sports and other similar activities whereas the intended meaning in the context of the stanza is quite different.

The word "text" is derived from the Latin word, which means to "weave." The context is that which accompanies the text. The Gurbani text, be it a *Dohra*, *Chhand*, *Sloka*, couplet, stanza or *ashatpadi* is a perfect unit. The scriptures cannot be broken; they all hang together, a perfect unity. We must look and consider the verses immediately before, after, and around the passage. We must consider the whole of the AGGS and the section of the AGGS in which the passage occurs. The AGGS must be interpreted within the framework of the AGGS. Prof Sahib Singh [11, 26] and Sikh Missionary College's approach [7] to Gurbani interpretation holds on to this principle.

Principle #3: The Scripture Interprets Scripture Principle

We may rest assured that Gurbani authors did not reveal an important doctrine in a single, ambiguous passage. All essential doctrines are fully and clearly explained - either in the immediate context, or somewhere else in the AGGS. This principle is best illustrated by what is known as "topical AGGS study." There are two essential 'rules' for applying this principle: 1) The context of the two passages must be the same; and 2) The plain passage must be used to guide our interpretation of a less clear passage - not the other way around! For example ideas about the various aspects of the Creation are spread over several *Bani*.

Principle #4: The Accommodation Principle

The AGGS is to be interpreted in view of the fact that it is an accommodation of Divine truths to human minds: God the infinite communicating with man the finite (*Dhur ki Bani aae*).

It is worth noting that there are three obstacles that stand in the way of correctly interpreting the Gurbani. Although it is written in Gurmukhi script, yet it is written in different languages e.g. Braj Bhasha, Sahaskrit etc (and of course various dialects as well). We live approximately five hundred to 1000 year later, and we bring different expectations to the text. Additionally, we approach the reading of the Granth with significantly different literary expectations than those in reading other forms of literature and writing.

The AGGS was also created in space, in time, and in history so that man could understand it. The mystical experience of enlightened authors made contact with the human mind at a common point, the AGGS, to make God (and, indeed, all of reality) knowable. We must be careful, then, not to push accommodating language about God and His nature to literal extremes. God is not our literal Father in the same sense our earthly father is.

Principle #5: The One Interpretation Principle

Every verse in the AGGS has only one interpretation, although that verse may have many applications. The one correct interpretation is that which mirrors the intent of the inspired author.

Principle #6: The Harmony of Scripture Principle

No part of the AGGS may be interpreted so as to contradict another part of the AGGS. The Sikhs presupposes the inerrancy and harmony of Scripture as a necessary result of perfect enlightened authors revealing their divinely inspired thoughts to Mankind. Proper application of hermeneutical principles will resolve apparent conflicts. The key here, of course, is the word "proper," for exegetical fallacies can easily result from a zealous but ill-informed attempt to "save" Scripture from an apparent contradiction.

Principle #7: The Genre Principle

Genre is a literary term having to do with the category or "genus" of literature under consideration. The meaning of the literary expression of the Gurbani is best learned by a thorough knowledge of the languages in which the original text of Scripture was written, and by acquaintance with the Scriptural way of speaking, including the various customs, laws, habits and national prejudices which influenced the inspired writers as they composed their respective *Bani*.

Proper interpretation must take the general literary category of any given passage into consideration. Are we dealing with *Dohra* or *Chhand*; *Pauri* or *ashatpadi*; Couplet, Sloka or stanza; and Psalm or *Vaar*? Are we dealing with history or prophecy? It is important that when we interpret Gurbani, we understand as much as possible the author's intent. For example, if the author is

writing about historical event – e. g. Babar Bani - it would not be proper to interpret a single reference as a poetic personification, unless a variety of contextual markers compelled us to do so. For example ‘*hor ve uthsi marad ka chela*’ (AGGS, M 1, p 722) to be called as reference to the rise of Sher Shah Suri or to the rise of Khalsa unless such a conclusion is confirmed by various contextual markers in AGGS.

Principle #8: The Grammatical Principle

The AGGS was originally written in various languages (The majority of the language of the Guru Granth Sahib is the Punjabi dialect, some hymns are also found in Persian, medieval Prakrit, Hindi and Marathi, Sanskrit as well as Arabic. All of these hymns are written in the standard Punjabi script - Gurmukhi.). While we have some very good translations of the AGGS in English, all translation involves a certain amount of interpretation on the part of the translator. Thus, the study of word meanings, grammar, and syntax of the original languages is important for a proper understanding of Scripture. This doesn't mean that every student of the AGGS must learn these languages. There are a number of tools available - lexicons, Gurbani dictionaries, detailed exegetical commentaries - that can provide a deeper understanding of crucial passages.

Principle #9: The Historical Background Principle

The AGGS was composed in a specific culture at a particular point in time. While they are universal in application, the truth in the AGGS can most fully be realized only when taking the surrounding culture and history into account. For example, when Guru Nanak uses the term ‘Babar Bani’ in his hymns (Raag Aasaa, M 1, Ashtapadees, Third House, AGGS, p 417), we may have some understanding of this, but a study of Guru Nanak's socio-historical background during the fifteen century can provide a deeper understanding of why Guru Nanak chose to use this term, as opposed to another term with the same general meaning.

Principle #10: The Progressive Revelation Principle

The AGGS is to be understood from the page 1 to page 1430 as a lotus unfolding its petals to the morning Sun. Divinely inspired authors initiated revelation, but they did not reveal ‘His’ truths all at one time. It was a long and progressive process. Therefore, we must take into account the then-current state of revelation to properly understand a particular passage. For example, an interpretation of a passage in Jap Bani, which assumed a fully delineated view of the “spiritual enlightenment”, would not be sound until we also consider the ideas as expressed in other *Bani* of the AGGS.

Some Common Exegetical Fallacies

Unfortunately, each of the principles of interpretation we have considered may be abused in various ways. Fortunately, the remedy for the resulting misinterpretation is generally as simple as recognizing which principle has been abused and the proper reapplication of that principle to the passage in question. Here are some common exegetical fallacies resulting from the misuse of hermeneutic principles.

Taking Figurative Language Literally

When Guru Arjan says “*Tu mera pita, tuhee mera mata*” (AGGS, M 5, p 103), a few would take him literally. Some, however, take figurative language, such as ‘*Tu mera pita*’ to mean that God is his (and our) Father (and thus, a physical body). The phrase was a figurative expression in Oriental cultures in medieval times, signifying a position of authority.

The Literal Interpretation Principle does not mean that we woodenly take every word in the AGGS literally, but rather that we approach it as we would any other book, taking figurative phrases, hyperbole, poetic personifications, and other figures of speech into account in our interpretation.

Over-Contextualizing - While we must safeguard against taking words or phrases out of context, there is no warrant for taking an absolute statement and confining it to immediate context. For example in the Sloka of ‘Jap’ ‘*pavan guru, pani pita mata dhart mahat*’ (AGGS, Jap Sloka, p 9), Guru Nanak describes the creative elements’ (*Panch tattva*) role for the nurturing life on Earth. Extending it to the concept of hydrological cycle or global warming will be over-contextualizing.

Allowing the Implicit to Explain the Explicit

Allowing the implicit to explain the explicit - the possible to explain the certain - is not a sound interpretive principle. Scripture indeed interprets Scripture, so long as clarity explains ambiguity, and not the other way around.

Problems Relating to Literary Genre

There are several special literary aspects to look at, but the overarching theme is that each genre of Bani (e.g. *Chhand, Dohra, Dotukke, Sloka, Pauri, Ashtapadi, Vaar, Raga* etc) has a different set of rules that applies to it. Of the genres found in Scripture, there are: narratives, histories, prophecies (e.g. *aan ahtre jaan satanve, kai var pasrio pasar*), *apocalyptic writings* (*sunne upaji sunn samani; jo upajeo so binas hai*), poetry, psalms and letters.

In these, there are differing levels of allegory, figurative language, metaphors, similes and literal language. For instance, the apocalyptic writings and poetry have more

figurative and allegorical language than does the narrative or historical writing (AGGS, Vaar Of Raamkalee, Uttered By Satta and Balwand The Drummer: p 966). These must be addressed, and the genre recognized to gain a full understanding of the intended meaning. To properly take genre into consideration, we must first understand the genre in its historical context. In most cases, this is not difficult. However, some genres - such as "Dohra", "Chhand", "Sloka" "proverbs" - offer some considerable challenge. Careful exegesis is necessary to resolve this and other apparent contradictions, and such exegesis depends in no small part on the proper understanding of genre.

Misunderstanding Proper Application of Grammar

A wide range of fallacies can result from a misunderstanding or misuse of grammatical tools. For example, a simplistic approach to "word studies" can produce a number of problematic interpretations. A common misuse of lexicons or Gurbani dictionaries is to assume that the "literal" or "original" meaning of a word pertains in a given context. While word studies are important to proper interpretation, we must be careful to use them as a part of an overall methodology that takes all aspects of the text - including then-current word usage - into account

Idiosyncratic Interpretation

The view that all one must do is pray and read the AGGS, and the Akal Purukh (God) will provide the proper interpretation, or the view that one's own, idiosyncratic interpretation of Scripture is just as valid as that any other, renders the interpretation non-falsifiable. That is, if I say that the God provided me with the interpretation, or my interpretation, it is impossible for anyone to demonstrate that I have wrongly described the 'Sabd Guru'. The "truth" I have arrived at is self-contained and ultimately incommunicable to you. You will have to "experience" the same personal revelation, and even then, we will wonder if our two experiences really were identical, or if there were subtle differences that may affect our interpretation. This hermeneutic methodology (or really lack of methodology) provides ample opportunity for me to twist Scripture to my own destruction, and to that of any others who would follow my interpretation.

Conclusion

It is pointed out that any authentic interpretations of Gurbani must incorporate exegesis into a fourfold mode that should emphasize the distinction between the letter and the spirit of the text. This schema should be an essential part of the various ways of interpreting the text utilized by the various authors. The fourfold mode of the schema is;

The Literal sense of Scripture: denotes what the text states or reports directly.

The allegorical sense: explains the text with regard to the doctrinal content of Sikh dogma (a principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true), so that each literal element has a symbolic meaning.

The moral application: of the text to the individual reader or listener.

The Spiritual indicative: draws out of the text the implicit allusions it contains to secret metaphysical and eschatological knowledge, or gnosis ('spiritual knowledge' in the sense of mystical enlightenment or 'insight').

However, it is concluded that interpretation of Scripture will never be an exact science [3,9]. The beliefs we bring to the text - our theological presuppositions - will inevitably color our interpretation to some degree. In fact, "pretended neutrality" (the attribution of bias to one's opponent while implying that one is theologically neutral) though common in apologetic circles, is an exegetical fallacy as potent as any other. By applying the principles delineated in this paper, we can minimize the possibility of error and bias. We can never eliminate our presuppositions (nor should we, if they are scripturally sound), but we can "test all things" - including our interpretations - and "hold to what is good".

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