

TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE DIVINE WORD (SABD) A Focus on the Mystical Dimensions of Sikhism

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ABSTRACT

The doctrine of the Sabd or divine Word, enunciated by Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus, occupies central place in the Sikh tradition. According to this doctrine, Sabd is the vehicle of communication between Akal Purakh (the "Timeless One," God) and an awakened individual. Indeed, the inspired utterance of the Guru (Gurbani) embodies the divine Word. As such, it has the power to transform the consciousness of human beings who are able to experience harmony with the divine Word. This paper examines this process of transformation through which one's spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical faculties are sharpened. The divine Word becomes manifest in the life of a person based upon the cultivation of eight-fold ethical virtues of continence, tranquility, intelligence, knowledge, fear, austerities, love and the nectar (Amrit) of divine Name (Naam). In the last stanza of Jap Guru Nanak employs the celebrated metaphors of furnace, crucible and mint to describe the purgatorial process, from which the redeemed emerges purified like metal in a smelting operation. In fact, it is described as the coining of the divine Word (ghariai sabd) in the true mint (sachi takasal). In this whole process of spiritual development, personal effort and divine grace go hand in hand, although the latter is of primary importance and the final arbiter.

INTRODUCTION

The sacred scripture of the Sikhs, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1], conveys a consistent message that liberation can be achieved only through the meditation on the divine Name (*Naam*) and the music of the divine Word (*Sabd*). These two key terms, *Naam* and *Sabd* must be understood in the context of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Guru Nanak employs the word *Naam* to express the nature of divine revelation in its totality. Accordingly, the *Naam* reflects the manifestation of divine presence everywhere around us and within us, yet the people fail to perceive it due to their *haumai* or self-centeredness. The Punjabi term *haumai* ('I, I') signifies the powerful impulse to succumb to personal gratification so that a person is separated from *Akal Purakh* (the "Timeless One," God), and thus continues to suffer within the cycle of rebirth (*sansar*). However, *Akal Purakh* who is the sole Creator of the entire universe looks graciously upon the suffering of the people. He reveals himself through the Guru by uttering the *Sabd* ("divine Word") that communicates a sufficient understanding of the *Naam* ("divine Name") to those who are able to "hear" it. The Guru is thus the "voice" of *Akal Purakh*, mystically uttered within human heart, mind and soul (*man*). The *Sabd* is the actual "utterance" and in "hearing" it a

person awakens to the reality of the divine *Naam*, immanent in all that lies around and within one [26].

The philosophical meaning of the key expression *Sat Naam* indicates that the Being (*Sat*) of God is evoked by the spoken syllables of his revealed Name (*Naam*) [28]. Indeed, the divine *Naam* contains in seed form all revelations. It is the material cause of the world and has identity with the "divine sound" (*Sabd*) from which all things spring. The devotees evoke this omniscient knowledge and power by chanting the "seed form" (usually "*Vahiguru*," meaning "Praise to the Eternal Guru," is employed in actual Sikh practice). The sound vibrations of this "seed form" of the divine *Naam* are supremely powerful. They resonate with and awaken the vibrations of the various hymns of the AGGS. To chant God's Name, therefore, is to say "in short form" all that is written in full in the AGGS. The devotional practice of chanting the divine *Naam* or singing the hymns of the AGGS leads a devotee to the same mental and spiritual state experienced by the Guru [19].

As pure Being or Truth God is impersonal-Absolute which cannot articulate Itself. Thus there is a need for a mystic (Guru) through whom the undifferentiated sound of the Absolute becomes differentiated. The Guru is an

awakened individual who has a clear vision of the Absolute and it is through him that the Word-Absolute articulates itself. Such a Guru has given up his individual identity based on self-centeredness (*haumai*) and is merged with God. Indeed, the words he utters come forth spontaneously without any effort on his part. Such words are to be distinguished from words and Names produced by human effort. Thus the words of the Guru (*Gurbani*) are of a different order of language. They are special revelation (*Sat Naam*) because they refer to something that is real and true (*Sat*). It is no wonder that *Gurbani* occupies a unique place in the Sikh tradition. In fact, this is the philosophical basis of the adoration of the AGGS [20].

I. HERMENEUTIC APPROACHES TOWARDS SCRIPTURAL WORDS

First of all, we must take cognizance of different hermeneutic approaches to study the sacred scriptures of the world. Let us begin with the definition of “hermeneutics.” In its basic sense, hermeneutics is a systematic, procedural approach towards the texts of our cultural past. It is a mode of interpretation or exegesis. There are two different hermeneutic approaches to understand the inspired words of the scripture. One approach places emphasis on the “meaning” of textual words by following what is called “dualistic understanding” of language. The dualistic ideology of language “privileges reference, semantic meaning, the arbitrariness of signifier and signified, and the context-free cognitive qualities of the text at the expense of the sound properties of the words themselves.” [23]. The Singh Sabha scholars adopted this approach to scriptural interpretation that was primarily guided by the rationalistic influence of Western education. It is normally understood to reflect the ‘modernist perspective’ based upon the scientific paradigm of the Enlightenment.

The second hermeneutic approach is generally known as “non-dualistic understanding” of language. It is ‘context-sensitive’ approach, and is linked to the practical efforts of “reading, listening and singing” the hymns of the scripture. Indeed, sonic form itself is regarded as sacred and listening to sacred sound as transcendental. The non-dualistic ideology, therefore, places great emphasis upon the sacredness of the “sound” of the scriptural words. According to this approach, the sacred sounds of *Gurbani* have transformative power only if they are replicated exactly as they were first enunciated by the Sikh Gurus. That is why the hymns of the AGGS are sung in particular ragas in the central devotional practice of *kirtan* in Sikhism. In devotional singing, the Guru’s hymns gain their full evocative power in the aesthetic experience of both performers and listeners.

The oral experience of scripture has received much attention in recent scholarship. Both scholars and common people are now involved in a process in which they make an attempt to recapture the spirit of ‘personalism’ that has been lost in the transition away from oral/aural language. Not surprisingly, dualistic hermeneutic approach has come under fire in a postmodern critique of context-free objective scholarship. It should, however, be emphasized that the Sikh experience implicitly challenges analytic dichotomies that rigidly oppose oral and written texts, or sound and meaning, or that which foresees an inevitable evolutionary movement between them [24]. Scholars and lay people have successfully applied both dualistic and non-dualistic hermeneutic approaches in actual practice in understanding the message of the AGGS. Even the Gurus themselves placed greater emphasis upon the understanding of the meaning of *Gurbani* rather than the mindless ‘ritualization’ of religious practice.

II. ENGAGING IN A LIVING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIVINE WORD

All the hymns of the AGGS reflect the “lived experience” of the Gurus, Bhagats and the Sikh bards. To engage with those hymns means to enter into a “living relationship” with the divine Word that transforms and unify one’s consciousness. In the following sections, therefore, we will attempt to focus on the four types of religious practices through which one engages actively with the actual recorded hymns of the Sikh scripture.

1. Chanting, Listening and Singing of Gurbani

Oral recitation of *Gurbani* has always played a significant role in Sikh life since the days of Guru Nanak. It began during the Kartarpur period in individual and corporate settings as part of daily discipline. Indeed, the first testimony about the Kartarpur period comes from Bhai Gurdas (ca. 1558-1633) who refers to the “devotional chanting of *Jap* [‘Recitation’] in the ambrosial hours of early morning and the singing of *So Dar* [‘That Door’] and *Arati* [‘Adoration’] in the evening” (1:38) [25]. He further testifies: “Every Sikh house had become a place of worship (*dharamsal*) where *kirtan* was regularly performed like the celebration of Vaisakhi festival” (1:27). Indeed, one could listen to the melodious “songs of Guru Nanak (*Baba*) being sung to the accompaniment of the music of the *rabab* [‘rebeck’] and the rhythm of *mridang* [‘drum’]” (24:4). Thus both chant and music played a significant role in the transmission of scriptural Word in the early Sikh community. A bard named Gayand specifically refers to the well-established tradition of “chanting, listening and singing” of sacred hymns among the Sikhs during

the period of Guru Ram Das (1534-1581) [18].

Even in modern times Sikh parents make an effort that their children learn Guru Nanak's *Jap* and other prayers by heart in childhood. A key principle here is the Sikh belief that the recitation of daily prayers by heart has the power to transform and unify one's consciousness. In this context, Harold Coward perceptively remarks: For the Sikh, as for the Hindu, participation in the divine word has the power to transform and unify one's consciousness. The purifying power of the sacred scripture is understood as a combing of negative thoughts from one's heart and mind that occurs as a regular part of one's daily discipline." [21]. Through this personalized experience one is able to understand the subtler levels of meaning of various scriptural passages.

The Sikh congregational worship consists mainly of devotional singing (*kirtan*) of scriptural hymns set to melodic modes (*ragas*) with the accompaniment of musical instruments. Through such *kirtan* the devout Sikhs attune themselves to vibrate in harmony with the divine Word and thereby immerse themselves in the deeper levels of its meaning. It is based upon the assumption that the melody in the singing of hymns evokes the divine Word of which it is an earthly resonance. As Coward observes: "A direct correspondence is seen as existing between the physical vibration of the phenomenal chant and the noumenal vibration of the transcendent. The more the physical vibrations of the uttered chant are repeated, the more transcendent power is evoked in experience until one's consciousness is purified and put into a harmonious relationship or even identity with the Divine." [22]. For instance, Guru Nanak's *So Dar* hymn presents his personal experience of heavenly joys in the company of all liberated ones, who sing in eternity the praises of Akal Purakh's glory at the door of his ineffable court.

2. Reflection on the Divine Word (*Sabd Vichar*)

Guru Nanak himself placed great emphasis on the understanding of the meaning of *Gurbani* as the fundamental characteristic of the life of a person who has turned towards the Guru (*Gurmukh*). In his *Oankar* in the melody of *Ramakali Dakhani*, for instance, he proclaims: "Rare is the one who contemplates the meaning of the *Bani* ("divine Word") and thus turns towards the Guru. This *Bani* belongs to the Exalted One and makes one realize one's true self." [2]. Guru Nanak emphasizes the point that a vast majority of people usually do not care to understand the full richness and depth of meaning contained in the *Bani*. He adds that those rare ones who care to do will certainly have their reward in achieving their true

spiritual status.

The process of understanding *Gurbani* begins at the discursive level, at which one deals with the literal sense of a particular word, but goes deeper and deeper as one contemplates the divine mysteries by gradually penetrating into subtler levels of its meaning. In this case, understanding involves the fusion between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. Not surprisingly, Guru Nanak proclaims: "Not by reading (but) through understanding is the secret found" (*piVA nIhl Bd biJA pIvxi*) [3]. Throughout the AGGS there is a great deal of emphasis upon the "recognition of the Guru's Word" (*gr kI sbd pCIX*), "analyzing the self through the Word" (*sbd cInih*), "meditative contemplation on the Word" (*sbd Ki j*) and the "practice of the Word" (*sbd kmIelA*). In all these interior reflective practices, the role of *surat* or "focused attention" becomes primary.

Traditionally, listening and reading have always been regarded as "passive skills." Nothing could be further from truth. This myth, that "listening is a passive act" fails to account for the interpretations listeners make as they "hear" the spoken text according to their own purposes, their expectations, and their own store of background knowledge. Modern research has shown that listening is not only "active" but also very demanding. This dynamic skill can be learned as part of "work" related to listening activity. One has to really work hard to learn the art of listening with focused attention (*surat*). Here one can truly appreciate, for instance, Guru Nanak's emphasis on the value of "pondering" and "listening" in the *Jap* [4]: "From listening sin and sorrow disappear" (*sixA dK pIp kI nIS*).

The process of reflection on the divine Word (*sbd vlCIR*), however, goes much beyond simple reciting or reading; it takes on the aspects of inquiring, investigating, and contemplating. Indeed, *Gurbani* contains rich metaphors, allusions and hints; it is a subtle code that requires probing and deeper levels of understanding. Once again, Bhai Gurdas testifies to the strong tradition of debates and discussions during the Kartarpur period of Guru Nanak's life when he settled down as the head of a newly emerging religious community: "He (Guru Nanak) gave utterances to words of divine wisdom, bringing light and driving away darkness. He imparted understanding through discourses and discussions (*igaIn gsit crC sdI*), and the un-struck music of devotional ecstasy resounded endlessly"(1:38). Thus deliberations on the meaning of *Gurbani* have always been part and parcel of the living experience of the Sikh community.

3. The process of "dying to the self" by means of the

divine Word

The meditative reflection on the divine Word leads one to attain the ideal of spiritual liberation within one's lifetime (jlvn mkiq). This achievement is possible if one "dies to the self" while remaining physically alive. This is an important theme in the writings of the Gurus and Bhagats. For instance, Guru Amar Das proclaims [5]: "Through the process of 'dying to the self' by means of the divine Word, you shall live forever, and you shall never die again." (sbid mrh iPir jlvh sd hl qv iPir mrx n hel]). Again, he describes his 'lived experience' as follows:

hm sbid me sbid miv jlv l Biel sbd hl mkiq pvel]
sbd mn qn inrml hA hir visA min Avel]
sbd gr diq ij q mn riq hir isa rihA smiel]2]

AGGS, M 1, p 601.

I have died to the self by means of the divine Word (Sabd),

Through the Word, I am dead while yet alive, O brother;

Through the Word I have been liberated.

Through the divine Word my mind and body have been purified,

And the Lord has come to dwell within my mind.

The divine Word is my Guru and the source of all gifts;

My mind is imbued with it, and I remain absorbed in the Lord.

Here, Guru Amar Das defines his own vision of the mystic theme of "dying to the self" by means of the divine Word. On the basis of his personal experience of human nature he asserts that *haumai* is the root cause of one's maladies and that this needs to be slain so that one becomes "dead while alive." Only then can one attain the state of spiritual liberation within one's lifetime by accepting the divine Word (*Sabd*) as Guru and the source of all spiritual achievements. To accept the *Sabd* as Guru is in fact to establish a "living relationship" with the divine Word in a most personal way. It is to experience the "eternal Guru" as an intimate companion of one's soul. In this context, Guru Arjan proclaims:

gr k bcn bs jIA n l]

jil nhl Fb qskr nhl lv Bih n s k j l]1] rhwa]

AGGS, M 5, P 679.

The Word of the Guru is an intimate companion of my soul.

It does not sink in water; thieves cannot steal it, and fire cannot burn it. || 1 || Pause ||

Indeed, the Guru is present in the sacred Word and contemplating on its mysteries is thus tantamount to meeting the Guru; it is a moment of great religious intimacy.

4. Coining of the divine Word in the True Mint

A careful examination of the last stanza of Guru Nanak's *Jap* reveals a context of engagement where one is not only encouraged to read the Morning Prayer as part of daily routine but inspired to get transformed by it:

j q p h r D l r j s i n A r]

A h r i x m i q v d h q l A r]

B a K l A g i n q p q a]

B l f B i a A i m q i q q F i l]

G V I A s b d s c l t k s l]

i j n k a n d i r k r m i q n k r]

n n k n d r l n d i r i n h l]38]

AGGS, Jap 38, p 8.

Let continence be the forge and tranquility the goldsmith,

intelligence the anvil and knowledge the tools.

Let fear [of God] be the bellows, austerities the fire, and love the crucible in which nectar is poured.

In such a true mint the divine Word is cast, and this is the daily task for all who receive divine grace.

They who receive this grace, Nanak, are blessed with a joy transcending all.

Here, Guru Nanak is describing his self-understanding of how the divine Word (*Sabd*) becomes manifest in the life of a person based upon the eight-fold discipline of ethical virtues of continence, tranquility, intelligence, knowledge, fear of God, austerities, love and the nectar (*Amrit*) of divine Name. In this whole process of spiritual development, personal effort and divine grace hand in hand.

Guru Nanak employs the celebrated metaphors of furnace, crucible and mint to describe the purgatorial process, from which the redeemed emerges purified like metal in a smelting operation. In this process of transformation one's spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical faculties are sharpened. It should, however, be emphasized that images of refinement and purification in a furnace recur in almost all the religious traditions of the world.

III. FIVE STAGES ON THE MYSTIC PATH OF THE DIVINE WORD

The central focus in Guru Nanak's teachings is on the discipline of meditation on the divine Name, a process that involves the cultivation of virtues like patience, contentment, charity, and forgiveness. Indeed, the list of virtues can be extended to include love, humility, fear of Akal Purakh, wisdom, purity, and true living. In fact, the discipline of *Naam simaran* ('remembrance of the divine Name') involves three levels, ranging from

the repetition of a sacred word (usually “*Vahiguru*”), through the devotional singing of hymns in the congregation to sophisticated meditation on the nature of Akal Purakh (God). The first and the third levels of this practice relate to private devotions, while the second refers to corporate sense. On the whole the discipline of *Naam-simaran* is designed to bring oneself into harmony with the divine order (*hukm*). Thus one gains the experience of ever-growing wonder (*vismad*) in spiritual life, and achieves the ultimate condition of blissful “equanimity” (*sehj*) when the spirit ascends to the “Realm of Truth” (*sach khand*), the fifth and the last of spiritual stages in which the soul finds mystical union with Akal Purakh.

The process towards mystical union with Akal Purakh begins with living a meaningful and creative life in the world. The first stage of mystical experience is known as the “Realm of Duty” (*dharam khand*). Here, *dharam* represents the law of cause and effect that applies in both the physical universe and moral sense. In fact, Guru Nanak describes this earth as a “place of earning righteousness” (iqs ivic Drql Qlip rKl Drm swl j). It is the physical existence on this planet where “time and space” play crucial roles in the form of ‘nights and seasons and dates and days’, including all the elements – ‘air, water, fire and earth’. All the colorful species add to the beauty and wonder of this world: “In it are colorful beings and their lifestyles; infinite are their Names and infinite their forms.” [6]. In her interpretation of this verse, Nikky Singh adds an important observation: “Although there are innumerable varieties of species, all are interconnected, and there is no implication of any disjunctions or divisions of gender, race, and class in this organic Earth. We are all provided the opportunity to act ethically and purposefully. Earthly existence is not to be shunned but to be lived fully and intensely.” [27]. The seeker who follows the guidance of the divine Word (*Sabd*), acknowledges that divine justice is based upon the retributive model, a model which follows closely the law of cause and effect in both the moral and the physical world: “Each must be judged for the deeds one performs by a faultless judge in a perfect court. Those who are justified stand in glory, bearing upon them the mark of grace.” [7]. Not surprisingly, understanding scientific laws and discoveries and following ethical rules deepen one’s appreciation of Guru Nanak’s description of the first stage of mystical experience.

The second mystical stage is referred to as the “Realm of Knowledge” (*gian khand*). It is marked by two experiences of awe simultaneously, one by the widening of one’s intellectual horizons chiefly due to a

developing appreciation of the vastness of creation, and the other by the process of “dying to the self,” resulting in the shattering of one’s self-centered pride (*haumai*). Guru Nanak [8] describes this experience as an outburst of a sudden illumination: “Knowledge blazes in the Realm of Knowledge. Here is where one experiences the music of the divine Word (*nad*), wonderful sights, myriad sports, and joys of bliss.”. The intuitive experience of this knowledge goes far beyond any scientific discoveries or information gathered by means of rational thought processes.

The third stage is the “Realm of Effort” (*saram khand*) where the beautification of human faculties and sensibilities takes place by means of the divine Word (Srm Kf kl bixl rp j) [9]: “There are fashioned creations of surpassing wonder. None can describe them. Were one to try one would rue the effort.” Indeed, the nature of the mystic experience in this realm is indescribable. Nevertheless, Guru Nanak [10] further describes the indescribable: “There consciousness (*surat*), reason (*mat*), mind (*man*) and discernment (*budh*) are honed; there the understanding of a divine hero or a mystic is developed.” On the whole the mental, aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual faculties of the mystic are sharpened in this realm. Throughout this process of transformation the divine Word (*Bani*) plays the central role.

The fourth stage on the mystic path is the “Realm of Grace” (*karam khand*) where the power and authority of the divine Word (Krm Kf kl bixl jr .) is established in the life of the mystic [11]. This is the abode of “divine heroes and mighty warriors” who pass beyond error and transmigration. They are in full control of themselves since they have conquered their “self,” an achievement that goes beyond the conquest of nations and people (min j lq jg j lq j) [12]. In fact, the saintly people (*bhagat*) of all continents enjoy this ‘Realm of Grace’ [13]: “They know eternal bliss, for the True One is imprinted on their minds.” Such people speak with the “authority and power” of the divine Word.

The fifth and final stage is the “Realm of Truth” (*sach khand*) [14]. This is the true dwelling-place of the “Formless One” (*nirankar*). It is here where the soul of the mystic finds mystical union with Akal Purakh. Indeed, this is the ultimate climax of the search for Truth, for in this stage one achieves complete harmony with the divine Order (*hukam*): “As the divine Order, so too the deed!” This condition, however, can be known only through personal mystic experience [15]: “To describe it, O Nanak, is as hard as steel.” Here, the divine Word (*Bani*) is identified with the “Formless One” (*nirankar*) [16]: “Hail, hail the *Bani*, which itself is the “Formless

One" (*nirankar*). There is nothing else its equal." Thus the divine Word (*Bani*) is represented here not as gross speech but as subtle impulses of sound reverberating forth from the "Formless One" (*nirankar*). In other words, the divine Word functions as the "living voice" of Akal Purakh that resounds throughout creation. In the "Realm of Truth" there are countless "continents, worlds and universes whose limit cannot be told." It is no wonder that the divine Word functions in the form of primordial wisdom as a living force and the immediate source of creation.

IV. CONCLUDING SUMMARY

In concluding the discussion of this paper, it is instructive to underline the fundamental premise of the Sikh Gurus that the sonic forms of the scriptural words are supremely powerful. They resonate with and awaken the vibrations of the various hymns of the AGGS. To chant God's Name, therefore, is to say "in short form" all that is written in full in the AGGS. The devotional practice of chanting the divine Name or singing the hymns of the AGGS leads a devotee to the same mental and spiritual state experienced by the Guru.

The process of the meditation on the divine Name (*Naam simaran*) begins with the recognition that the human body is a field in which the seed of the divine Name is to be sown. Understanding and practicing the teachings of the sacred Word sanctify the whole life of the individual in much the same way as a seed "sprouts" with continuous watering and "grows" into a beautiful tree in a garden. It involves the cultivation of virtues like patience, wisdom, contentment, charity, humility, love, fear of God, purity and true living. This process makes a person virtuous in thoughts, words and deeds. It results in experiences that develop progressively as meditation draws the individual nearer and nearer to God. At the highest stage, the process becomes internalized in which *Naam simaran* goes on automatically (*ajapa jap*). It is here where one listens to the music (*dhuni*) of the divine Word within one's own self. Guru Nanak [17] describes this experience as a kind of musical mysticism: "There, the drum of the divine Word (*Sabd*) resounds, with the accompaniment of the melody of five musical instruments. In that spiritual state shall be revealed wondrous continents, regions, lands and zones. The King of the Universe sits on the true throne, where the celestial strain resounds to the accompaniment of stringed instruments."

In sum, there is a need to apply both dualistic and non-dualistic hermeneutic approaches to understand the transforming power of the divine Word in the living experience of the Sikh community. If, however, emphasis is placed upon only rationalistic

understanding of *Gurbani* by following a dualistic approach, then the Sikh tradition will meet the same fate as a religious tradition is robbed of its soul and is reduced to "barren intellectualism." In the postmodern world it is the "living experience" of a religious tradition that is far more important than any theological construction of the tradition based upon preconceived intention. Thus both informative and performative practices occupy the central place in the Sikh tradition.

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