

# RITUALISTIC AKHAND PAATH - A PLEA FOR SANITY

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## ABSTRACT

***It is human psychology that whenever an activity is done over a very long period of time, that activity (in respect to Sikhs) starts appearing as valid and correct though it may be contrary to the teachings of Guru Nanak! Practice of Akhand Paath is the result of such activity of the past.***

## INTRODUCTION

Upon my recent visit to Delhi, I happened to be at Gurdwara Rakab Ganj at around 11.30 p.m. on the day of Guru Tegh Bahadur's Shaheedi Divas; the spectacle, which I witnessed on the first floor premises, was something which made me shudder to think that this was the way we Sikhs have chartered our courses! There was a long row of *Palkis* having the Aad Guru Granth Sahibs (AGGSs) and the *Paathis* (reciters) were doing the *Paath* (reciting). Families who had paid them to undertake the tasks were absent! Not a single person was present except for my Uncle and myself! I was shocked! After sitting for 10 minutes, I happened to listen to these lines, which a Paathi was reading:

myrw qyrw j wncqw qb hl qybdw ]  
gjr kwtl AigAwncqw qb CtkyPdw ]2]  
j b l guhkmun bllqw qb hl l audKIAw ]  
gjr imil hkmupCwixAw qb hl qysKIAw ]3]

AGGS, M 5, p 400 [1].

*He is concerned with 'mine and yours', and so he is held in bondage.*

*Through knowledge my ignorance was dispelled,*

*Then the noose of death was cut away from my neck. 2.*

*As long as he does not understand the command, he remains miserable.*

*By getting knowledge, he comes to recognise God's will, and then he becomes happy. 3.*

I wondered whether the families who had arranged for these Paaths were happily snoring away in their air-

conditioned homes and waiting for the 48 hours to be over so that they would be free from this occasion! I was wondering what benefit these families were going to obtain by arranging these Akhand Paaths! I was wondering whether the Paathis who were doing this service were aware that it was a *Karam Kaand* (ritual) they were promoting! I wondered whether the Head Granthi ever had the courage to tell the family that when the Paath is in progress it was necessary for them to be present there so that they could at least be able to grasp one Sabd in the 48 hours of the marathon reading in progress!

Is there any Granthi who has the courage to say no to such families and stop the Akhand Paath there and then, regardless of whether it is completed or not! After descending to the main hall below I met the Head Granthi and asked him the progress of the Gurdwara seeing some construction work-in-process and the reply I got was:

*"Bhaee Sahib, tuanhu kee dasiey! Akhand Paatha dee ainee demand vadh gayee hai ke , sanu hum ik hor floor paanee peh rahi hai! Asi hor paathian noo appoint karan gey te hor birs rakan gey! Ais de naal sadi waiting list thori ghat jayegi !"*

"Brother, what to tell you! The demand for Akhand Paaths has increased so tremendously that now we are compelled to construct another floor! We shall be appointing more paathis (reciters) and keep more *Birs* (AGGS)! With this our waiting list shall be reduced to

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**Editorial Note:** This article is in continuation of our crusade against the illogical rituals in Sikhism. Ritualistic Akhand Paath is one the illogical rituals which is on the increase and has become a source of income for the Gurdwaras and the paathis (reciters) but without any spiritual or economic benefit to the clients. First a question was raised by Mr Sukhminder Singh, Anchorman, Ankhila Punajb, Toronto, and Editor of Sanj Swera, Toronto on which a short article by Prof D S Chahal appeared in UNDERSTANDING SIKHISM – The Research Journal. 3 (1): 34-35, 2001. Now Mr Dimpy Gurinder Singh, Associate Editor, The Sikh Review, Kolkata, has discussed this illogical ritual in more depth. DSC

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some extent!"

According to the Sikh Rehit Maryada, Chapter VII, Article IX on Akhand Paath, it is mentioned that, "*The non-stop reading of the Guru Granth is carried on.....The non-stop reading implies continuous, uninterrupted reading.....*"

What is a Ritual? According to the New Pocket Oxford Dictionary, a ritual is, (1) " a religious or solemn ceremony involving a series of actions performed to a set order; (2) a series of actions always followed by someone without variation". According to Irving Hexham's Concise Dictionary of Religion, " Ritual: Sacred custom or any Form of repetitive behaviour which is fixed by tradition. In the study of Religion it means - traditional religious behaviour or actions."

And Encyclopaedia Britannica says, "Ritual is the performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition or by sacerdotal decree. Ritual is a specific, observable mode of behaviour exhibited by all known societies. It is thus possible to view ritual as a way of defining or describing humans."

Now, let us come to what Guru Nanak spoke about rituals as recorded in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1]:

ਆਸਾ ਮਨਸਾ ਬੰਧਨੀ ਭਾਈ ਕਰਮ ਧਰਮ ਬੰਧਕਾਰੀ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 635 [1].

*Hopes and desires are chains; O brother;*

*Rituals and religious ceremonies chain one's mind.*

In the same Sabd, Guru Nanak says:

ਸਾਸਤੁ ਬੇਦੁ ਬਕੈ ਖੜੋ ਭਾਈ ਕਰਮ ਕਰਹੁ ਸੰਸਾਰੀ ॥

*"Brother, standing you speak from the Vedas, keep on reading or doing paath, But these are worldly deeds which you keep on doing "*

This means that according to Guru Nanak one has to liberate oneself or break off the chains of rituals that enslave our minds!

Guru Nanak, right from childhood, spoke against rituals, which were not based upon reasoning or logic. In fact a ritual, almost always, is based upon superstition! Let us recollect a few incidents from Guru Ji's life:

- Guru Nanak refused to wear the sacred thread or *Janeu* from his family priest;
- Guru Nanak by not accepting or performing Idol Worship, automatically by default rejected all the multifaceted and meaningless rituals associated with it;
- Guru Nanak in a dramatic fashion, by offering water to his fields in the Punjab during his visit to Hardwar, a Hindu place of pilgrimage indicated to the

pilgrims the mockery - or futility - in their ritual of offering water to their ancestors in the eastern direction.

Let us now seek the answer from our Sabd Guru, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, as to how we as Sikhs are to read the Holy Words! Guru Nanak says:

ਸਮਝੈ ਸੂਝੈ ਪੜਿ ਪੜਿ ਬੂਝੈ ਅੰਤਿ ਨਿਰੰਤਰਿ ਸਾਚਾ ॥

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਦੇਖੈ ਸਾਚੁ ਸਮਾਲੇ ਬਿਨੁ ਸਾਚੇ<sup>੧</sup> ਜਗੁ ਕਾਚਾ ॥੨॥

AGGS, M 1, p 930.

*If one understands, realizes and comprehends what one reads and studies, then in the end he/she shall realize that the Ever-Existing Entity dwells deep within his/her nucleus. The Guru-Oriented sees and contemplates the Ever-Existing Entity<sup>1</sup>; Without Which<sup>1</sup> the world is false.*

This sabd of Guru Nanak is applicable not only to the Hindus (to whom he is addressing) but to persons of all faiths! Since Aad Guru Granth Sahib speaks of Universal Truth, it is applicable to all irrespective of which religion one belongs to!

We Sikhs while reading this sabd have to ask ourselves, "*Are we also behaving like the Brahmins or pundits do?*"

*"Do we also keep on reading the Aad Guru Granth Sahib as the pundits or the orthodox Hindus who keep on reading the Veda Mantras?"*

*"Do we try to understand, realize, comprehend or practice what we read, or do we just read on ritualistically?"*

*"When we do Akhand Paath don't we do contrary to what Guru Nanak has taught us?"*

*"Are we not enslaving ourselves or chaining ourselves into Karam Dharam Bandhkaaree?"*

In Jap Guru Nanak has mentioned the word *Vichaar* in the sabd as,

*"Sach Naa Vadiaee Vichaar"*

What is *Vichaar*?

*Vichaar* is reflection, discussion or contemplating upon what is read and comparing the message so obtained with our current lifestyle – asking ourselves:

*"Am I doing it or not ?"*

*"Am I following it or not ?"*

So *Vichaar* is contemplation or understanding, realizing and comprehending the *Tat* (essence or central idea) of the Sabd so read! This means that when we are undertaking a continuous and uninterrupted reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, *Vichaar* will never be possible to do! Impossible! I was just wondering whether the persons responsible for starting Akhand Paath were in fact copying the Hindus who while doing *Havans* undertake the continuous reading of the Slokas or Mantras uninterruptedly!

If we are not following the teachings or commands as mentioned in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, then we have to

endeavour to change ourselves! This is what being a Sikh is all about! A Sikh is a person who is endeavouring to apply the message of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib to his life! And a Gursikh is a person who has applied this message. Bhagat Kabir says:

ਕਿਆ ਪੜੀਐ ਕਿਆ ਗੁਨੀਐ ॥ ਕਿਆ ਬੇਦ ਪੁਰਾਨਾਂ ਸੁਨੀਐ ॥

ਪੜੇ ਸੁਨੇ ਕਿਆ ਹੋਈ ॥ ਜਦੁ ਸਰਜ ਨ ਮਿਲਿਓ ਸੋਈ ॥੧॥

AGGS, Kabir, p 655.

*What are we to read; what are we to sing?*

*What are we to listen to in the Vedas and the Puranas?*

*Of what use is reading and listening, if one does not attain Sehj or celestial peace by doing so?*

*Sehj* is also referred to as the state of bliss or the state of enlightenment! By undertaking the 48 hour marathon reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, are we following the commands of Guru Nanak or Bhagat Kabir? Has anyone ever claimed to have attained *Sehj* by doing Akhand Paath?

Guru Nanak always used logic and reasoning throughout his life! That is why rituals were unacceptable to him. Guru Nanak was not a person who was going to follow anything blindly! Ritual is performing an act not out of understanding but out of fear that non-performance of that act shall lead us into some misfortune or calamity or loss. Ritual is followed blindly and has no significance whatsoever. In other words, a ritual is meaningless. If one follows rituals without understanding, it is like closing one's mind and that leads to blind faith!

Was Akhand Paath prevalent from 1604, the time of compilation of the AGGS, to 1708, the time of demise of Guru Gobind Singh? The answer is definitely No!

This custom did not start during the times of the Sikh Gurus! How could they start a ritual and contradict their own teachings? There is no Hukmnama issued by the Sikh Gurus nor is there any Hukmnama issued by any Sikh religious body like the Akal Takht! Then, how come this practice has become a part of a Sikh's religious activity and very much a part of the Gurdwara activities all over the world?

*The possible reason is that while drafting the Sikh Rehit Maryada, the Sikh scholars erred - indeed blundered - by including Akhand Paath in the Constitution of the Sikh Nation! Maybe, they did not realize that Akhand Paaths would create obstacles in the path of spirituality! Maybe, they did not realize or anticipate that the Sikh Sangat would make mockery of it by paying for the Paath but not listening to it! Maybe, they did not visualise the fact that a day would come when more importance would be given to the reading and not to Vichaar, understanding and contemplation! Maybe, they were unaware that Akhand*

*Paath was in fact a chain, which enslaves the minds of the Sikhs!*

What happened in due course of time was that the Gurdwara management committees all over India started multiplying the Paathis and *Palkis* for the numerous *birs* of the AGGS to cater to the demand of Akhand Paaths of the naive Sikhs! And why won't they do so? Since money was flowing into the coffers of the Gurdwaras and the Paathis were also being paid handsomely by the families who were organising the Akhand Paaths. The Sikh Sangat started believing that by doing such an activity (no one told them that it was a *Karam Kaand*) they would benefit monetarily and spiritually! What an illusion! "*Karam Dharam Bandhkaaree*"

What is bothering me is that if the Sikhs become enlightened and start shying away from the Akhand Paaths, what would happen to the various Paathis who are solely dependent upon this promotion of the Karam Kaand? Furthermore, what will happen to the incomes of the Gurdwaras is that it will be drastically reduced. How would they fund the deficit? A much more matter of concern is that should the Rehit Maryada (The Constitution of the Sikhs) be urgently reviewed in the light of present occurrences?

Is the income of the Gurdwara more important or the teachings of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib? Is the livelihood of the Paathis more important or the sayings of our Sabd Guru? Do we have the courage to break off the chain, which has enslaved ("*Karam Dharam Bandhkaaree*") us for the last 300 years?

If Akhand Paath is a ritual, taking into view the sayings of Guru Nanak and Bhagat Kabir, then how are we to read from the Aad Guru Granth Sahib?

In the Sikh Rehit Maryada reference is also given to *Sadharan Paath*, which does not have any time restrictions! It can be done at the ease and convenience of the seekers or the students or we Sikhs! One can read one sabd daily and will also be able to do Vichaar and contemplate upon it! No problems!

Akhand Paaths or Sadharan Paaths? - A choice we have to make ourselves!

## REFERENCES

1. AGGS = Aad Guru Granth Sahib. 1983 (reprint). Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. (M = Mahla, i.e., succession number of the Sikh Gurus to the House of Guru Nanak, p = Page of the AGGS). M is replaced with the name of the Bhagat.

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