

BOOK REVIEW

SABD GURU TO GRANTH GURU An In-depth Study

By Devinder Singh Chahal

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Reviewed by: Dr Hardev Singh Virk

Professor Devinder Singh Chahal had a long innings as a research scientist in the field of Microbiology. After his retirement in 1996 from University of Quebec at Laval (Montreal), he set up Institute for Understanding Sikhism and is Editor of its house journal. He has created a niche for himself for his scientific and logical interpretation of Gurbani. The book under review has been written keeping in view the Quadricentennial Celebration of Compilation and Installation (*Parkash Dives*) of Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS). The book was released by Bibi Kiranjot Kaur, Executive member of the SGPC and the Official Representative of the SGPC as the *Guest of Honor* to Dr Harjit Singh, President of *Canadian Sikh Council* during the Fourth International IUS Seminar – 2004 held to celebrate *Quadricentennial of Compilation and Installation (Parkash Divas) of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib*, to coincide with the global celebrations. His book on “*JAP: The Essence of Nanakian Philosophy*” was released last year and has been reviewed in The Sikh Review (August issue of 2004).

In his foreword, Dr Dharam Singh of Punjabi University Patiala has defined Sikhism as a monotheistic religion and evaluated the role of Sabd Guru. He laments that most of the Sikhs stop at reciting the hymns from the AGGS without making any effort to comprehend their meaning or to put that into practice. They treat it like an idol and perform various rituals by way of its worship. The scripture is venerable, but is not an idol to be worshipped.

Dr Chahal took up cudgels to promote the concept of Sabd Guru and organized an International Seminar at Laval (Montreal) in September 2002 on this theme. His paper “Sabd Guru to Granth Guru” presented at this seminar forms the nucleus of this monograph. In the introduction,

the author mentions about his mission in writing this monograph (p.1). “The time has come to analyze the causes of Sikhism becoming a ritualistic religion. There could be many causes but I think that the intrinsic values of ‘Sabd’, and ‘Guru’ have not been understood by Sikh theologians, Sikh researchers, and the Sikhs at large. Consequently, with the passing of time more and more attention started to be paid towards rituals around the Granth Guru (AGGS) than on deliberation and comprehension of the “Sabd Guru”. He quotes Gurbani in support of his thesis (p.52):

ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਨੋ ਸਭੁ ਕੋ ਵੇਖਦਾ ਜੇਤਾ ਜਗਤੁ ਸੰਸਾਰ ॥

ਡਿਠੈ ਮੁਕਤਿ ਨ ਹੋਵਈ ਜਿਚਰੁ ਸਬਦਿ ਨ ਕਰੇ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ ॥

AGGS, M 3, p 594.

“All the human of the world desire to behold the true Guru. One does not get salvation by merely seeing (The True Guru), unless one deliberates / contemplates on Its Sabd (Word)”.

In Chapter 1, the author has taken the trouble to explain ‘Nanakian Methodology’ for better understanding of Gurbani and Nanakian Philosophy, a term coined by the author. This chapter serves as a guide to interpret Gurbani correctly. Guru Nanak has stressed that deliberation of Bani in the AGGS will be rarely discussed/deliberated to understand it:

ਬਾਣੀ ਬਿਰਲਉ ਬੀਚਾਰਸੀ ਜੇ ਕੇ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਹੋਇ ।

ਇਹ ਬਾਣੀ ਮਹਾ ਪੁਰਖ ਕੀ ਨਿਜ ਘਰਿ ਵਾਸਾ ਹੋਇ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 935.

“Only rare Guru – oriented will deliberate / contemplate on the Bani (word). This Bani (word) is of the pre-eminent preceptor, That is to be imbibed in one’s own mind.”

Chapter II explains the concept of 'Sabd Guru'. Dr Chahal elaborates systematically the meanings of 'Sabd', 'Bani', and 'Guru' to hammer his concept of 'Sabd Guru'. Gurbani verses are quoted profusely to explain the meanings and mutual relationship between these terms. The conclusions of Chapter II are quite interesting (p 29): 'Sabd has many meanings depending on the context in which it has been used. For example, word, sound, speech, conversation, philosophy, purifier, vehicle to realize God and it also means Guru. 'Sabd' and 'Bani' are interchangeable words, therefore 'Bani' is 'Guru' and 'Guru' is 'Bani', and it is the Guru who says the Bani. Consequently 'Sabd' realized by Guru Nanak, is the 'Guru'. Guru Nanak himself has declared that 'sabd' is his 'Guru' during his debate with the Sidhas recorded in AGGS under the title 'Sidh-Goshit':
ਸਬਦੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਧੁਨਿ ਚੇਲਾ ।

(AGGS, M 1, p 943)

"Sabd is Guru, consciousness and intention toward it make one its disciple (Sikh)."

Chapter III is devoted to Granth Guru. The author is highly critical of Sikh theologians, historians and translators of Gurbani (AGGS), who deliberately introduced distortions to replace the concept of 'Sabd Guru' with 'Granth Guru'. He has quoted from available sources of Sikh literature and tried to clear the mist using his scientific and logical method of interpretation. On page 34, the author states: "Nevertheless, when I examined the information (data) given in *Sri Gur Sohba, Gurbilas Patshai 6, Rahit Namay*, other historical evidence, and Gurbani, a new picture appeared that originally 'Sabd' was accepted as Guru but later 'Sabd Guru' was changed to 'Granth Guru' and then bestowing of Guru-ship was ritualized steadily and stealthily." The author believes that 'Sabd Guru' was installed by Guru Arjan when he declared (p38):

ਪੰਥੀ ਪਰਮੇਸਰ ਕਾ ਥਾਨ॥

(AGGS, M 1, p 943)

"The Pothi (Granth) is equated to the Enlightener / Guru".

The central theme of this chapter, declaration of Granth as Guru, is summed up as follows:

"It means, the day in 1604 CE the Granth was compiled it was equated to the Guru because of the fact that 'Sabd' was already called as 'Guru' by Guru Nanak in his teachings. Since the preaching of Sabd was carried on from this Granth by Guru Arjan and by all other Gurus who succeeded to the House of Nanak, therefore, the Granth is 'Guru' ipso facto the 'Sabd Guru' is enshrined in it".

Chapter IV deals with deceptions or distortions introduced in the conceptual framework of the Sikh

congregations by misinterpretation of historical evidence or willfully by priestly class, motivated by Brahmanical traditions prevalent in cultural environment of Sikh Society. The author laments (p 49). "The irony is that the Sikhs are following the historical information where the 'Sabd Guru' has been successfully changed to 'Granth Guru' to 'Visible Body of the Guru' to 'Darshan Guru'. Consequently, the Sikhs started to pay more and more attention to ritualistic aspects of the 'Granth Guru' than to the deliberation of the philosophy given in the Sabd Guru."

The author has identified the couplet from the *Rehit Nama* Bhai Prahlaad Singh as the root cause of this distortion, namely, promoting 'Granth Guru' vis a vis 'Sabd Guru' in Sikh society. This couplet is recited in almost all Gurdwaras and it is attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Master who declared Guru Granth as 'Sabd Guru' of the Sikhs.

ਅਕਾਲ ਪੁਰਖ ਕੇ ਬਚਨ ਸਿਉਂ, ਪ੍ਰਗਟ ਚਲਾਯੋ ਪੰਥ।

ਸਭ ਸਿਖਨ ਕੋ ਬਚਨ ਹੈ, ਗੁਰੂ ਮਾਨੀਅਹੁ ਗੁੰਥ ।

"With the order of God the Panth was created. It is ordained to all the Sikhs to accept the Granth as their Guru."

(Rehitnama Bhai Prahlaad Singh)

In my critical review process, I have been impressed by the analytical approach of the author to establish the concept of 'Sabd Guru'. However, I do not agree with his thesis that Guru Granth was declared as Guru of the Sikhs by Guru Arjan in 1604 CE. It was Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 at Nander, who closed the chapter of Personal Guru-ship and bestowed the Gurugaddi upon Guru Granth as 'Sabd Guru' and 'Khalsa Panth' as 'Visible Body of the Guru'. I also feel that author takes some liberty in interpretation of Gurbani, only two examples will suffice to prove my point (On p 21):

ਨਾਨਕ ਜਿਨ ਕਉ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਮਿਲਿਆ ਤਿਨ ਕਾ ਲੇਖਾ ਨਿਬੜਿਆ ॥

AGGS, M 3, p 435.

"Those to whom Nanak, the True Guru, has imparted his philosophy their deeds have been accounted for."

Again on page 39, the author translates the message of Guru Hargobind to Guru Har Rai as follows:

ਰਹੀ ਜਾਮ ਨਿਸਿ ਜਾਗਨ ਕੀਜੈ ॥ ਮੱਜਨ ਨਾਮ ਵਿਖੈ ਮਨ ਦੀਜੈ ॥

Gur Bilas Patshai 6, p 796.

"By contemplating day and night he (Nanak) realized the collyrium Naam (philosophy)"

Mahan Kosh of Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha helps us to translate this stanza correctly as follows:

"My son, rise one pehar before the sun rise (Amritvela) and meditate on Naam with full concentration of mind."