

BOOK REVIEW

SABD GURU TO GRANTH GURU An In-depth Study

By Devinder Singh Chahal

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Review by Dr Sukhraj Singh Dhillon, PhD

Dr Chahal, who is known to blend science and logic with theology, attempts to clear misconceptions in understanding of 'Sabd', 'Guru', 'Sabd Guru' and 'Granth Guru'. He emphasizes, for example, that 'Sabd' and 'Bani' are interchangeable and can be equated with Guru. The book gives an in-depth understanding of these terms according to Nanakian Philosophy. He explains the intrinsic values of 'Sabd', 'Guru' and 'Sabd Guru' to understand the status of the 'Granth Guru'.

The book consists of five chapters: chapter 1, Nanakian Methodology; Chapter 2, Sabd Guru; Chapter 3, Granth Guru; Chapter 4, Deceptions; Chapter 5, How to Address The Holy Granth of the Sikhs? The chapters are followed by References & Notes, Glossary, and Information 'About the Author', and 'About the Institute for Understanding Sikhism'.

In Chapter 1, he describes methods used to express Gurbani. He discusses types of expressions used in Gurbani to interpret it properly: allegories, metaphors, and similes; questioning-answering system; use of practical methods; use of established concepts, ancient philosophy. He uses examples from Gurbani to explain these types of expressions used.

He uses his scientific skills to clarify the concept of *patal* (nether worlds) and *agas* (sky) which has been misinterpreted by theologians who lack scientific knowledge. This example shows that Dr Chahal does not hesitate to use scientific explanations that he believes are needed to interpret Gurbani in its real perspective. He believes the philosophy of Guru Nanak has no contradiction with modern science. His scientific approach is obvious, the way he sites reference. He gives

full reference, when applicable, whether opinion is similar to his own or is different.

In Chapter 2 Dr Chahal warns the faithfuls who equate Guru Nanak with God. The Gurbani defines God that cannot be incarnated in human form. He points out, if Nanak is taken as the Image of God/Lord, then it defies the Nanakian Philosophy since God does not come into anthropomorphic form (incarnated into human form). He is not out of order, because all the avatars and gurus ate, breathed, got sick, reproduced, died etc. - all typical human characteristics.

He warns against worshipping the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) as a replacement of many deities in Hinduism. In Chapter 3 he says that commonly used phrase, "*Guru maneo granth*" has lead the Sikhs to treat Granth as their deity. He cites differences of opinions if Guru Gobind Singh declared Granth as the Guru in 1708 or it was later declared as the Guru. He further discusses if Sabd is the Guru or Granth is the Guru. He believes that Granth was declared Guru (*pothi pamesar ka thaan*. AGGS, M 5, p 1226.) by Guru Arjan ipso facto the 'Sabd Guru' is enshrined in the 'Granth', and addition of Bani of Guru Teg Bahadur does not change anything in basic Nanakian Philosophy embodied in the Bani incorporated in the Holy Granth. He continues in Chapter 4 to say that it would be wrong to say that Guru-ship was bestowed onto the Granth by Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 at the time of his demise since it was already declared 'Guru' by Guru Arjan in 1604. In fact Guru Gobind Singh reiterated the Guru-ship onto the Granth in 1708 when he was asked by the Sikhs that who is their Guru after him? However, the most important declaration in 1708

of Guru Gobind Singh is the renunciation of family lineage of Guru-ship and end of Guru-ship on any person.

In chapter 5, Dr Chahal discusses various title of the Granth such as 'Guru Granth', 'Guru Granth Sahib', 'Sri Guru Granth Sahib', 'Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji', 'Aad Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji', and finally justifies the title 'Aad Guru Granth Sahib' (AGGS) as the most appropriate.

Since science and religion have traditionally been treated like oil and water - they don't mix. Dr Chahal's interpretation will not be immune to this traditional thought. The reason for this polarization is embedded in the idea that religion is a form of subjective fundamental belief whereas science is objective verifiable phenomenon. He tries to break these barriers and this book by Dr Chahal is just one of the examples.

However, it is difficult to eliminate the elements of subjectivity in interpretation. Some of the readers are likely to differ with some of his suggestions. However, there are many thought-provoking interpretations. The Sikhs with open mind will find a refreshing change towards Gurbani and its interpretation in this book. For the orthodox, it will take time to accept this approach, if they ever do.

Since Dr Chahal has laid the foundation stone for scientific interpretation of Gurbani, it is likely that more scientific interpretations of Gurbani would appear in the future to propagate the Nanakian Philosophy of Sikh religion for the benefit of emerging global society of the twenty-first century. Otherwise the Sikhs as a global

community are likely to alienate the younger generation in the absence of scientific approach towards Gurbani. Dr Chahal's book can help them discover spiritual humanism aspect of Sikhism - a universal religion for the 21st century.

He doesn't shy away from saying that the Sikhs have conformed very strict rituals to be followed for respecting the Aad Guru Granth Sahib and are practicing the code of conduct formulated by SGPC? He points out that continuation of fights in Gurdwaras and preaching of ritualism and mythical Sikhism has already alienated many young Sikhs and many more will be alienated in the near future. Gurbani (Nanakian Philosophy), which has universal acceptability, if not preached scientifically and logical, will remain wrapped in silken cloths forever.

Dr Chahal is genuinely concerned and critical of the dilution of Sikh doctrine and practice. He wants a crusade through academic writings to set right the aberrations that have crept into Sikh belief and practices. The degeneration in the Sikh's personal and communal life and the aberrations in Sikh practices in Sikh religious places are the special focus of his concern. His book, *Sabd Guru to Granth Guru*, takes up these and allied issues, discusses them threadbare in the light of scriptural hymns and highlights the need for understanding and following the true spirit of the Sikh faith. He always has a quotation ready in support of his thesis. Written in an easily comprehensible idiom, the book should prove an eye-opener for many. It should be of immense help and value in making the reader understand the true Sikh doctrine and practice vis-à-vis the concept of 'Sabd Guru' and 'Granth Guru'.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF PROF DEVINDER SINGH CHAHAL President of IUS.

Prof Devinder Singh Chahal has published many articles on scientific and logical interpretation of Gurbani and representation of Sikhism in many proceedings of the various conferences, various journals and magazines, and multi-author books of the world. He has also written a few critical analyses of some works on Sikhism and *Gurbani*. He is the Founding President of the *Institute for Understanding Sikhism (IUS)* and the Founding Editor-in-Chief of *Understanding Sikhism: The Research Journal*, which is published twice a year since 1999.

Professor Chahal has written the following chapter of its own kind which has not been discussed so far in Sikh literature.

Chahal, D S. 2004. *Sikh Perspectives on Bioethics*. In John F Peppin, Mark J Cherry, and Ana Iltis (Eds.), **Annals of Bioethics: Religious Perspectives in Bioethics**. Taylor & Francis, The Netherlands, Leiden, London, and New York.

He has also published two books:

1. Chahal, D. S. 2003. **JAP: The Essence of Nanakian Philosophy**. Publishers: Institute for Understanding Sikhism; Distributors: Singh Brothers, Amritsar
2. Chahal, D. S. 2004. **SABD GURU TO GRANTH GURU: An In-depth Study**. Publishers: Institute for Understanding Sikhism; Distributors: Singh Brothers, Amritsar