

THE 300TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE GURGADDI DIWAS

SIKHISM AT CROSSROADS

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The proclamation from our tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, could not have been clearer, unambiguous and straightforward – *Sab Sikhian ko Hukam Hai Guru Maneo Granth*. Yet, living up to and following his simple mandate has been anything but simple for the Sikh community. And this lapse has been entirely of our own making.

This year, Sikhs all over the world, are celebrating the 300th anniversary of a unique event in our history. Three hundred years ago, on an autumn day in October of 1708, our tenth Guru made the conscious choice of discontinuing the line of human Gurus and bestowed the Guruship to our holy scripture – Guru Granth Sahib – in eternity. This was no ordinary event as it was a significant departure from the practice of selecting a successor, which had been the process for the previous 239 years. It was, and continues to be, a novel concept as there had been none before and there has been none since in the history of mankind. Certainly, it was a major turning point in the evolution of the Sikh faith, and no doubt was expected to have a profound mark on how the young religion would adapt and grow in the future.

In this brief paper, I would like to address four fundamental questions. I am not claiming that I have the correct answers for these; far from it. It is my hope that by posing these questions and providing you with my own thinking on the subject, I will be successful in starting a dialogue that will hopefully, lead to a better understanding of the issues and a lasting solution to the problems we face as a community.

First, why is the consecration of our holy scripture so important? What aspect of it makes it unique and special? Second, is it possible to understand what circumstances, events, or other factors may have prompted our tenth Guru, in his eternal wisdom, to decide this new direction for us? While we can only speculate, understanding the possible motivations is important if we are to recognize why we have deviated from his simple message in the short span of a few centuries? I refer to 300 years as a

short time period as Sikhism is the youngest of the major world religions compared to others that are all at least more than a thousand years old. If we do not understand why we drifted from the simple message, I dread to think where we will be in a thousand years. Third, how have we drifted from this simple instruction? Finally, what is it that we need to do to get back on track? I will try to tackle some of these issues in my paper and I invite you in the end, during our discussions, to come up with suggestions, recommendations and a possible course of action to reverse the current trend.

So, what is unique and special about bestowing Guruship to what was then Aad Granth? At the very core, this act separated the spiritual and temporal role of our Guru. Guru Granth Sahib became our spiritual guide, embodying the spirit and message of the living Gurus and saints who contributed to it. Prior to this, Sikhs looked up to the Guru for both – spiritual and temporal guidance. Starting with Guru Nanak and ending with Guru Gobind Singh, each of the ten Gurus addressed both the temporal and spiritual needs of the community. With the consecration of the Granth, it was obvious that some other entity would have to take care of the temporal needs of the community. This responsibility was shifted to the Brotherhood of the Khalsa. The Khalsa Panth as a whole would make the day-to-day decisions affecting the community in a democratic manner, after taking into account the contemporary social environment. With social development and change, in any society, human intervention and human decisions will remain important. The Guru recognized that the temporal aspect could not be etched in time, and would no doubt have felt comfortable that the community had matured enough in the course of the previous 200+ years to shoulder this responsibility. On the spiritual side, however, the Guru saw completeness in the spiritual guidance contained in the Aad Granth. It was therefore only logical to instruct the community to seek spiritual insight and guidance from the Granth and look up to it as the Guru, just as they had done for the living Gurus for the past 200+ years. This would ensure

the sanctity of the writings contained therein. Granting of *gurgaddi* to our scripture is also momentous as up until then, the word Guru had only been associated with a living human being. The notion that religious sermons could be made indistinguishable from a human Guru was indeed a novel concept. Despite the fact that many other religious texts predate the Aad Granth, none of them were elevated to the status of a Guru or spiritual guide. Thus, according to Guruship in the Granth, Guru Gobind Singh departed from the accepted norm of continuing the line of human Gurus and changed our perspective and definition of who a Guru is.

Let us look at the second question as to why Guru Gobind Singh may have chosen this new direction for us. Before going into the possible motivations for this change, I would like to point out that there is enough evidence to suggest that this was a conscious and deliberate decision on the part of the Guru and not something that he decided at the last moment. We often hear in sermons in the Gurdwaras as well as from scholars that the Guru made this decision just before he left for his heavenly abode, thus implicitly suggesting that perhaps this was a decision taken without much thought. There is enough evidence to indicate that Guru had been preparing for it for several years prior to proclaiming the Aad Granth as the eternal Guru in 1708. One only has to look at the events from 1699. Founding the Khalsa Panth was the first step in establishing a means of separating the temporal and spiritual roles that a living Guru had performed up until then. One can easily raise the issue as to why did Guru not consecrate the Aad Granth in 1699 simultaneously when the Khalsa Panth was established. Certainly, there was a possibility for this transition to have occurred in 1699. However, had he done so, there would have been more confusion, for he himself was already the Guru of the Sikhs with both temporal and spiritual powers vested in him. The opportune time had to be just prior to his departure from this world. By bestowing Guruship to the Aad Granth, Guru also fulfilled the vision of his forefathers. A number of hymns in the Granth lead us to believe that this step was a natural progression and inevitable. For example, Guru Ramdas says,

bwxI Guru Guru hY bwxI ivic bwxI AMimRqu swry]
Guru bwxI khY syvku jnu mwnY prqiK Guru insqwry]
5]
AGGS, M 4, p. 982 [1].

The Word, the Bani is Guru, and Guru is the Bani. Within the Bani, the Ambrosial Nectar is contained. If His humble servant believes, and acts according to the Words of the Guru's Bani, then the Guru, in person, emancipates him.

Thus, the message that there is no distinction between the Guru and the Bani, and that they are synonymous was proposed early, as evident from the above hymn. One only has to act according to the guidance of the Bani and one will realize the presence of the Guru.

Again, Guru Arjan proclaims,

poQI prmysr kw Qwnu]
swDsMig gwvih gux goibMd pUrn bRhm igAwnu]1]
AGGS, M 5, p. 1226 [1].

This Holy Book is the home of the Transcendent Lord God.

Whoever sings the Glorious Praises of the Lord of the Universe in the Saadh Sangat, the Company of the Holy, has the perfect knowledge of God.

Now to the question – why did Guru depart from the accepted practice of appointing human Guru as the successor? What motivated Guru Gobind Singh to declare the Aad Granth as Guru in eternity? Khushwant Singh, in his book *A History of the Sikhs*, provides a possible explanation [2, p-81]:

“Belief in the spiritual tutelage of the Guru was an integral part of Nanak’s teachings. But Gobind felt that a living mentor could now be dispensed with, provided he could be replaced by some institution which discharged the same functions. The examples of Prithi Chand, Dhirmal, Mehrban, and Ram Rai, each of whom had disputed the succession in their time and set up as rival Gurus, were no doubt the deciding factor in Gobind’s mind. Although he had four sons of his own, he felt that it would be better to end the line of personal Gurus and invest the Guruship in something permanent and inviolable. There was the Granth Sahib, by then well established as the book par excellence for people seeking spiritual guidance. On matters other than spiritual, there was the institution of the panchayat, with which all Punjabis were familiar. All that was needed was to adapt the panchayat to the need of the time. Between the two, i.e. the Granth and the elected representatives of the community (Panth), both the spiritual and secular functions of the Guru could be taken care of: the Granth could become the spiritual Guru, the Panth itself the secular Guru, and the combination of the two, the mystic entity, the Guru Granth Panth.”

Thus, as I noted earlier, Guru Gobind Singh had decided on this course of action early on and had prepared the Khalsa for this change. The Khalsa brotherhood was an adaptation of the *panchayat* that Khushwant Singh refers to in his observation.

In addition to the distinct possibility that succession in future generations could prove to be problematic, as had been the case in the past, there was also the very real possibility that in the future some unscrupulous people may manipulate the process and acquire the Guruship. This could happen not only from within the community but from outside as well. This posed an even bigger danger as the person vested with this authority could very well strike at the very foundation of Sikh philosophy. One only has to look at the difficulties that Guru Arjan had to go through, and the care that he had to exercise, to ensure that spurious writings did not find their way into the Aad Granth. A number of authors were turned away by Guru Arjan when compiling the Granth as their writings were not consistent with the philosophy espoused by Guru Nanak. These efforts could easily be undone by any individual in the future. By bestowing the Guruship on the Granth, Guru Gobind Singh addressed both these issues simultaneously – he avoided the possibilities of future succession squabbles as well as ensured that the Granth would remain sacred and inviolable.

Let us now turn our attention to how we have drifted from the simple mandate that we should look up to the Granth for our spiritual guidance. To do so, one has to only look at the plethora of so-called *Sants* and *Babas* who have established their *deras* all over the world, especially in Punjab. The recent controversy in Punjab is a case in point. This was the very problem that Guru foresaw and acted proactively to solve by giving gurgaddi to the Granth. One can only imagine how these so-called *Sants* and *Babas* would have ruptured the very fabric of our community if we did not have Guru Granth as our eternal Guru. There still are a significant number of individuals in the community who toe the line of these self proclaimed religious leaders to make it both economically and socially viable for them to pursue their objectives. Their existence, and the fact that they have significant following, strikes at the very foundation of our belief that Guru Granth is our Guru in eternity. Their efforts have to be neutralized to ensure future growth of our community. It is not the intent to imply that every single one of these *Sants* and *Babas* has misguided intentions. However, it is certainly true that a large number of them are there to potentially misguide innocent individuals and take advantage of them.

The problem, however, does not rest with only those who have deviated from the mandate of ‘*Guru Maneo Granth*’. Even those of us who are devout and strictly adhere to the edict of the tenth Guru have faltered. Guru Granth Sahib has been objectified. There is rampant ritualism in how we accord reverence to our Guru. Guru Granth is not revered so much for the fact that it embodies the spirit and teachings of our Gurus but

appears to be revered more as a living Guru or a “*deh tari Guru*”. We have forgotten the simple fact that “*Bani Guru, Guru hai Bani*.” Many of the practices we observe in the Gurdwaras go against the philosophy of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak spoke out extensively against idol worship. Yet, we go out of our way to objectify and worship Guru Granth as though it were an idol. These Brahminical practices will erode our philosophical foundations if we do not check their encroachment. Over time, many of these practices have come to be regarded as acceptable by even those who are well versed with Sikh theology. Either they believe that there is no cause for alarm or they are afraid to speak up for fear of being ostracized. However, if we don’t speak up now, we will pay the price in the long run.

Finally, let me address the last issue. How do we get back on track? The solution is simple but its implementation will prove to be a huge challenge. The first step is education. We need both our current and future generations to understand Sikh philosophy in its true form, without contamination and outside influences. To this end, two things can be done. For those who are more intellectually oriented and are prepared to invest their time and energy, conferences, seminars, discussion forums and other such avenues should prove to be very effective. But these intellectual scholars should be enjoined to take the message to the average individual. The other educational thrust should be to ensure that the custodians of our Gurdwaras, the *Granthis*, are formally trained in Sikh philosophy by pursuing an educational program at the college or university level. These individuals should then be allowed to exercise their authority so that they can stop ritualistic practices in the Gurdwaras. In addition, they should also be in a position to check those who give discourses in the Gurdwaras. Too often, we have speakers and *kathakars* who use the stage in the Gurdwaras to promote their own interpretations of the Gurbani using anecdotal examples, and very often they end up speaking contrary to Sikh philosophy. In my observations in many Gurdwaras, I have observed that management often ignores and overlooks the ritualistic practices being followed, and compromises in the interest of accommodating the wishes of individual congregational members. This is unfortunate as it is our responsibility to educate these individuals rather than accommodate their incorrect belief systems. Remember, each time we compromise, we are chipping away at the very foundation of our philosophy.

The second step is to check the spread of *deras* and the mushrooming of *Sants* and *Babas*. Perhaps the best approach here again is education. As people become more familiar with the true practices of Sikhism, they will move away from toeing the line of these individuals

over time. A drop in following will reduce the incentive for such unscrupulous individuals to pursue their selfish objectives. Gurdwaras can also play a significant role in this regard by doing their due diligence and ensuring that they do not become inadvertent accomplices by opening up their facilities to them. On a proactive approach, Gurdwaras should educate the *sangat* on a regular basis about how toeing the line of such individuals is inconsistent with our philosophy.

(Continued from page 3)

Dinner time was started with a beat of *Dhol* (drum) played by Master Vicky Kaura. During Dinner a Poetic Seminar was arranged by Mr Surjit Singh Pahwa on SABD GURU.

The readers will find a lot of diverse opinion on various topics in the papers presented by various authors. The editors are of the opinion that each author has the right to express his/her views but they must follow the format of the IUS Journal. The IUS is following a scientific research format of International Journals on Biology and other Life Sciences and strictly maintains this system. Mr. Gurdev Singh Sangha was unable to submit his paper in English since he was too busy in writing his PhD Thesis. However, the Abstract of his paper is appearing in the Journal.

The readers must note that it is not necessary that the views expressed by the authors are endorsed by the IUS. For example, different views about '*Dhur ki Bani*', '*bestowing of Guruship onto the Granth*' and meanings of '*Sabd Guru*' have been expressed by some authors. Moreover, the same Bani has been interpreted differently by various authors. We feel that the study on Gurbani and Sikhism is passing through a critical stage where every individual author is trying to force his/her views on others. That is not the way to study Sikhi. The IUS has adopted a very novel method where the Editor works with each author to help him/her to modify the paper according to the format of the Journal. To maintain consistency and

As we celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Gurgaddi Diwas, let us rededicate our efforts to get back on track and live by the edict "*Guru Maneo Granth*."

REFERENCES

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

continuity of the theme, cross references are checked and duplication or author's own contradictory statements are removed. It must be noted that the IUS hold no authority to declare any statement of any author as wrong or right and it is true with any other individual scholar and Sikh Organizations. However, if there is any statement which is considered contrary to the basic principles of Nanakian Philosophy a note by the Editor-in-Chief is added at the end of the paper but the statement of the author is not changed.

It is true that no body has authority to decide what is right and what is wrong. This problem has not been resolved during the last 404 years since the time of compilation of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) that who is the final authority to declare any interpretation right or wrong. And it is difficult to say how long it will take to decide whose interpretation is right. The editors of the IUS Research Journal believe that only the collective effort of at least five scholars expert in each of the following fields: Physical and Natural Sciences, Philosophy, Psychology, Neuroscience, Sikh History, Languages, especially the Archaic Punjabi, etc. may be able to interpret Gurbani that may be very close to the real theme/philosophy of Guru Nanak.

Devinder Singh Chahal
Editor-in-Chief

Avtar Singh Dhaliwal
Associate Editor

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9. Ganda Singh, ed., *Bhai Nand Lal Granthavali* (Malacca, Malaysia, 1968), p. 192 [*jo sikh guru darsan ki chahi/ darsan kare granth ji ahi/...jo mam sath chahe kar bat/ granth ji parhe sune bichar sath/jo mujh bachan sunan ki chai/granth ji parhe sune chit lai/mera rup granth ji jan/ is me bhed nahi kujh man*]
10. 10. The *Rahitnama* by Prahlaad Singh says: *akalpurakh ke bachan siun pragat chalayo panth/sabh sikhian ko bachan hai guru maniahu granth*. See Piara Singh Padam, *Rahitname* (Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 1974 [rpt. 1995]), p. 67
11. AGGS, M 1, p 660: [*nanaku sairu ev kahatu hai sache paravadgara*]
12. AGGS, M 1, p 722: [*jaisi mai avai khasam ki bani taisara kari gianu ve lalo*]
13. AGGS, M 5, p 628: [*dhur ki bani ai/jin sagali chint mitai*]
14. AGGS, M 4, p 982: [*bani guru guru bai bani vichi bani amaratu sare*]
15. Kesar Singh Chhibbar, *Bansavalinama Dasan Patshahian Ka* [Ed. Piara Singh Padam] (Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 1997). p. 161 [*adi guru hai granth/ih asadi hai khed juda rahe man manth*]
16. AGGS, Satta and Balvand, p 966: [*joti oha jugati sai sahi kaia pheri palatai*]
17. AGGS, M 5, p 1156: [*koti bisan kine avtar/koti brahmand ja ke dharamsal/koti mahes upai samae/ koti brahme jagu sajan lae/aiso dhani guvindu hamara/barani na sakau gun bishthara*]
18. 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, but M is replaced with the name of Sufi or Bhagat, p = Page of the AGGS).