

CONSISTENCY WITH GURMAT IS A MUST FOR AAD GURU GRANTH RENDITIONS

Harbans Lal



ABSTRACT

Because of its poetic format and its use of many languages, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) text is bound to have frequent blind spots in its interpretation. To deliver its universality and eternally relevant message, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib hymns employ various kinds of figures of speech or poetic devices, particularly metaphor, apostrophe, personification, idiom, simile, euphemism, hyperbole, litotes, metonymy, and symbols. To translate or interpret the hymns, the scholar must ensure that the translation of the original text transmits the meaning or sense of the Gurmat, with all its universal applications. The scholar must not only circumvent the blind spots but also ensure that his/her expositions conform to the internal evidence of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, its textual evidence as well as the main doctrines advocated by the founder of the Gurmat. Verses from various Aad Guru Granth Sahib hymns are selected to illustrate the blind spots, inconsistencies and ambiguities encountered by scholars while translating or interpreting the hymns. Some guidelines are provided to how the scholars may capture the meaning and spirit of the original text in their translations and interpretations.

INTRODUCTION

The **Gurmat** is the term Guru Nanak employed for the right way of life and the way of transcendence he promulgated. Literally, it means the Guru's vision or Guru-given wisdom. Specifically, it refers to philosophy, theology, doctrines and teachings contained in the verses of Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS).

AGGS verses are not set out as text, philosophical treatise, or codes for life styles; they are poetical hymns to be sung or recited individually and in groups, aiming to engage the devotee's or reader's heart and mind in their multiple meanings and the spirit enshrined in them. The Granth authors aptly advise the reader to fully comprehend the message before acting on its wisdom:

ਭਾਈ ਰੇ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਬੁਝੈ ਕੇਇ ॥

ਬਿਨੁ ਬੁਝੇ ਕਰਮ ਕਮਾਵਣੇ ਜਨਮੁ ਪਦਾਰਥੁ ਖੇਇ

॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ

O Siblings of Destiny, there are only a few wisdom-oriented ones who would cognize

and comprehend (the Granth); Any ritual or deed done without one's fully understanding it may waste a precious opportunity of one's life. ॥1॥

AGGS, M 3, p. 33.

According to the annals of Sikh history, Guru Arjan while performing his first exegesis on the historic occasion of the first opening of the Aad Granth is reported to have said, ਪਾਠ ਸਮਸਤ ਕਰੈ ਬੁਧਿ ਸੋਂ (Sri Guru Suraj Parkash, Ras 3, Asu 50, 1-12, 2140-41, taken from Khalsa Samachar 1984) which is translated as "all of the faithful are advised to recite the Granth with intellect."

Similarly, the scribe of the Granth emphasized the thoughtful reading of the Granth.

ਜੈਸੇ ਲਾਖ ਕੋਰਿ ਲਿਖਤ ਨ ਕਨ ਭਾਰ ਲਾਗੈ ਜਾਨਤ ਸੁ
ਸ੍ਰਮ ਹੋਇ ਜਾ ਕੈ ਗਨ ਰਾਖੀਐ .

Just as writing figures representing millions and billions amounts of wealth bears no weight unless equivalent quantity of currency is provided.

Harbans Lal, PhD, DLitt (Hon.), Professor and Chairman Emeritus, Department of Pharmacology and Neuroscience, University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth, USA. and President, Academy of Aad Guru Granth Studies. Email: Japji08@yahoo.com

ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਕਰੈ ਪਾਈਐ ਨ ਅਮਰ ਪਦ ਜੋ ਲੈ ਜਿਹਾ ਕੈ ਸੁਰਸ
ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਨ ਚਾਖੀਐ

Just as repeatedly uttering the word Amrit Amrit does not bestow one with immortality unless elixir is actually imbibed in.

ਬੰਦੀ ਜਨ ਕੀ ਅਸੀਸ ਭੂਪਤਿ ਨ ਹੋਇ ਕੇਉ ਸਿੰਘਾਸਨ ਬੈਠੇ ਜੈਸੇ
ਚਕ੍ਰਵੈ ਨ ਭਾਖੀਐ ।

Just as praises by a bard does not make any one a king unless he sits on throne and become known as a king with vast empire.

ਤੈਸੇ ਲਿਖੇ ਸੁਨੇ ਕਰੇ ਪਾਈਐ ਨਾ ਗੁਰਮਤਿ ਜੋ ਲੈ ਗੁਰ ਸਬਦ ਕੀ
ਸੁਜੁਕਤ ਨ ਲਾਖੀਐ ॥

Gurdas Kabit – ੫੮੫.

Similarly, one cannot obtain the wisdom of True Guru by just writing, listening or reciting unless the message of Guru Sabd is not comprehended and practiced,

The Guru and Bhai Gurdas so advised because the hymns of AGGS force their own form of logic, giving rise to a distinctive mode of thinking, lucidity, and reasoning. They are not like mantras to be recited mechanically. On the contrary they were compiled to recite intelligently for content to impart guidance for day to day living in this world.

All of this must be taken into account while reading or listening to the hymns or in formulating the AGGS exegesis.

Gurbani not a Text

Central to the study of Sikhi or Gurmat traditions is the Aad Guru Granth and its contents known as 'Gurbani.'

We must realize that Gurbani is designated as a scripture and is not a text in a conventional sense. As the compiler of the AGGS, Guru Arjun stated:

ਲੋਗੁ ਜਾਨੈ ਇਹੁ ਗੀਤੁ ਹੈ ਇਹੁ ਤਉ ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਬੀਚਾਰ ॥ AGGS, M
5, p 335.

People may consider the Gurbani as just a song, but it is actually revelation of the Divine Truth.

INTERPRETATION OF GURBANI

If the Gurbani is labeled a scripture, then the question is:

How should we translate it or interpret it?

The answer is: First, know its literal meaning; then decipher its metaphoric or figurative language; and then recognize and focus on sacredness characterizing the hymns. It is postulated that the Creator inspires scriptures to rescue human beings from narcissism and despair by imparting complex heights of truth and

love.

Scriptures are central to the understanding of Truth in human cultures and are integral to the vision for a world community. Through the Sikh Scripture we hear the voice of the creation, and of the Creator in the people's language. Through it, we find ways to think, to talk to one another about our existence and our role in this world. Through scriptures the seekers are motivated to order their life so that they may live in tune with the Truth. And through the scripture of the AGGS we find the courage and delight to follow the Gurmat path and find strength to share it with one another.

The Sikh Scripture, as we perceive it, can be understood only in relation to a community of persons. This human component, when taken seriously, raises the question of transcendence and immanence in a new form.

There was a time when Western scholarship approached each of the world's scriptures as an object — a text — directly descended from the Creator in line with the followers' ideology's orthodoxy. They demanded their conviction on scripture's text as virtually unchallengeable, and their objectivity as the best way to understand everything, the only correct way.

In their so-called objective approach to the world scriptures, the Western scholars either ignored the human involvement in the scriptures, and their scriptural quality, or explained or dismissed those scriptures by calling in the contemporary West's concept of "believing." This notion in its modern form -that "believing" is what religious people basically do - is pitted against the notion of secularism, which was introduced as a way of reducing religion in general to a subjective concept in (other) people's minds.

One of the West's initial responses to the world scriptures in modern times was to become seriously aware of the panorama of other cultures' sacred books. These scholars saw the scriptures without a transcendental meaning in contrast with a previous transcendent sense of its own Bible as a unique scripture.

To place the Aad Guru Granth in the family of world scriptures is a task not yet undertaken by our religious scholarship.

THE CONTEMPORARY EXEGESES

There are well-established and vibrant traditions currently prevalent of oral exegesis of the Aad Guru Granth. They are often referred to as *gurmat vichar* or *gurbani viakhia*. They expound the Aad Guru Granth's core teachings using conventional modes of reasoning. They often show no respect to continually changing

social, technological and religious contexts.

Since the Sikhs are spreading out in the global village, and there is wide availability of electronic search engines and media, a number of healthy debates on the meaning of the AGGS message are beginning to emerge. They are mostly between traditionalists and reformers, but there are also some emerging among Sikh intellectuals.

More recently, as a result of multifarious efforts, a vast body of secondary literature is being created to expound and explicate the teachings of the AGGS. These efforts are through modes of reasoning that is set to conform to various social and religious contexts.

CHALLENGES

Those of us involved in interpreting and disseminating the Gurmat based on the Aad Guru Granth must consider many challenges from a broader perspective. Some of them are discussed below.

Compulsive Commitment to Traditions

Current Sikh exegetical traditions in general formulate a thinking based on a devotional logic prevalent in the religious traditions found in Guru Nanak's time. They were mostly the *Sanatan dharma* and various other Hindu theological formats. Also, there were popular Islamic exegetical traditions that were inherited by Guru Nanak's followers.

The Sikh institutions, thus, emerging out of the *Sanatan Dharma* and Islamic traditions, inherited the latter's blossoming exegetical traditions and readily participated in them and often embraced them. As a result, as is presently the vogue, Sikh institutions are invariably found following or adopting these Hindu and Islamic exegetical traditions.

Sikhs have a sorry record, one might say, in comprehending and appreciating the role that Hindu and Islamic exegetical traditions have played in developing Sikh exegetical traditions. In fact, during the colonial and post-colonial revivals, influence of the *Sanatan Dharma* and its scriptural exegesis strengthened among the newly emerging Sikh exegetists.

In this sense, some Sikh enthusiasts began to inappropriately feel honored when of late some neo-Hindu institutions such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) began to call the Aad Guru Granth as "the Fifth Veda" or "the Vedic Granth."

It is only recently that the Sikh scholars mostly in the West are becoming aware that the present exegetical

traditions of the AGGS may not reflect the transforming Gurmat and its modern logic.

Thus a serious effort is needed to interpret AGGS teaching in the sense that the Gurus meant to impart and that conforms to modern logic and not contradicted by the facts of history or science.

New World Realities

World religions placed in the global village are realizing that erstwhile exclusivist religious groups will not flourish, so they should find it in their interest to open up themselves and their traditions to learning from others, even from their erstwhile "rivals." Here I am talking about the interpretation aspect of their theology.

Such realization will spread faster in the Diasporas than in the children of the soil. A significant population of Sikhs is Diasporas even in India, particularly those who were forced to migrate as a consequence of partition of the erstwhile united India. We ought to begin grasping this realism. Most Sikh exegetes continue to take positions that the non-Sikh views of reality and world order were simply wrong, their own dogmas being obviously right. This is not the Guru's view, and this will not help the Sikh life style or their Gurmat mission if interpreted rightly.

As peoples and cultures of the world increase their contact with one another, their religious claims and teachings gradually become cumulative and modified. And much in the same way our claims and our teachings, which may be at loggerheads with those of others at home, will be modified by our association with the others. It is especially real with the Western world. In doing so, we must take into account and begin to appreciate the multicultural and more contemporary interpretations of all world religions.

With further exposure to the post-colonial Western world, we may move beyond the past. We must move toward an enhanced realization of what new discernments have been made possible by what has been attained thus far and indeed made necessary. Fortunately, this is beginning to happen, though very slowly.

Living in a global village as we are moving towards now, we need to realize that we as civil societies, despite our religious and cultural differences, belong to one human race and share the same earth. By understanding the implications of this interconnectedness, we should accept that this interconnectedness is going to modify our belief system and gently or slowly enable us to make our beliefs relevant to our lives in the present. We should note that the 21st century world is light years away from the times in which Sikhi was born. Perhaps this was in the authors' minds when they composed the Aad Guru

Granth in a language and metaphors that the posterity will continue to find attractive, challenging, new, and open to new interpretations.

SECULARISM

Secularism may be defined in several ways. Here is one commonly acceptable definition: “As a doctrine, secularism is usually used to describe any philosophy which forms its ethics without reference to religious dogmas and which promotes the development of human art and science” ([Austin Cline](#), About.com Guide).

Secularism as a philosophy is the product of the Western culture. One can argue it started in the rise of Humanism – which started with the end of the middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance movement. Humanism marks the Western culture’s turning away from the other worldliness, life-in-the-hereafter, to the life in the present, life of this world. Secular means “*of this world*” in Latin and is the opposite of *religious*. Religion in the West (meaning Christianity) concerned itself more with the life-in-the-hereafter until the end of the middle Ages.

As people began to appreciate and enjoy their accomplishments in their own life time, as they started enjoying the fruits of science and technology, as they began to appreciate their own place and power and rights in society, and as democracy grew, secularism and humanism became very attractive. This is rendering religions and religious institutions less powerful, less important, than before. The result was an ongoing battle between religion and secularism, religion and science, religion and humanism. Secularism posed a challenge to religion right from the beginning.

Without going into the long history of secularism, we should ask: How does Sikhism respond to or cope with the challenge posed by secularism?

Secularism has come to be accepted as the mighty movement of the human spirit today. Secularist presuppositions have permeated the thinking of virtually all Westerners and of many outside the West, because of the dazzling success of the natural sciences, technology, and medicine, as well as the material progress of the world.

Secularist movements present a challenge by asserting their right to be free from religious rules, teachings, and beliefs. In the political and social realms, the most important impact secularism makes on our lives is through the separation of church and state. And here lies the significance of secularism to Sikhism and all

minority religions in any country that allows the practice of a religion whose adherents are not in power.

Through the separation of church and state law, Sikhism has the freedom to grow, Sikhs have the freedom to practice their religion, and the state does not interfere with it. Without this separation, the state will have a state religion supporting the main stream religion and society and curbing the minority religions, including Sikhism. Then, India, the USA, the UK, Canada, and all other democratic countries will treat Sikhism and other minority religions as the Middle-Eastern and many other countries do.

Enlightenment, with emphasis on secularism, as an intellectual movement in the West got under way with a debunking of Christianity and Islam. The Church leaders in Christianity, and Mullahs in Islam, were equally disparaging of non-Christian or non-Islamic religious movements. This might happen against the Gurmat also, but we are not in the Middle Ages; we have come a long way in our social and political development.

Secularism and religion both have to recognize that vital revisions are in order in some of their apparently central inherited theories or positions. They need to recognize the mutually complementary strengths they have, and they have to explore and find ways to support humanity complementarily, not antagonistically. This is to be taken in account when interpreting the Gurbani for the modern world.

GLOBAL VILLAGE LANGUAGE

The Aad Guru Granth language is largely universal and metaphorical. The gurus composed their ideas, visions and wisdom in the languages of the people spreading far and wide in the Indian-subcontinent and Asia. They employed a wide variety of metaphorical or figurative language, which the future generations of readers will interpret according to their backgrounds and their resources.

Translations of metaphors will be greatly impacted by the local languages and cultures of the civil societies. Today if we want to fully understand and translate the AGGS, we should explore how the meaning of the Aad Guru Granth hymns is impacted by modern culture, science, scholarly and artistic developments. How is it impacted by our own knowledge, especially our understanding of the Granth metaphors in light of our knowledge of the civil societies and our resources.

The discussion on all metaphorical devices employed in the AGGS will require a book-length study, so here I am limiting myself to only a few introductory discussions of Gurbani metaphors. The purpose is to illustrate how and why the Granth readers working on translations need to

focus on interpreting metaphors at a deeper level rather than superficially or literally. This is an attempt to sensitize them to this need.

METAPHORIC LANGUAGE OF THE AAD GURU GRANTH

Metaphor is the most often used figure of speech in the AGGS. As a matter of fact, it would be hard to find a single hymn in the Aad Guru Granth without a metaphor of one kind or another.

“A **metaphor** is a figure of speech that describes a subject by asserting that it is, on some point of comparison, the same as another otherwise unrelated object”.

Metaphor is a type of analogy and is closely related to other rhetorical figures of speech that achieve their effects via association, comparison or resemblance including allegory, hyperbole, simile, or other forms of metaphors. Analogy is a type of metaphor that draws a comparison between two dissimilar things in order to draw attention to some form of similarity.

A common definition of a metaphor can be described as a comparison that shows how two concepts or objects that are not alike in most ways are similar in another important way. They explain how a metaphor is simply an understanding and experience of one kind in terms of another. It is thus an opening in the beginning to translate the teachings described in one culture to the audience of different culture using a common article of comparison in their culture.

Allegory (an extended metaphor), catachresis (a mixed metaphor), and parable (an extended metaphor) are specialized types of metaphor.

What makes the use of metaphor indispensable is that it transcends its literal meaning. In the development of language, the role of metaphor is of critical importance. It becomes a significant tool to extend the boundaries of expression, to express abstract thought in a concrete way.

The artists and authors need metaphorical language when complexity and abstraction increase in human thinking and feeling, whether in material or spiritual realm. They can describe the material phenomena in expository prose without needing to use metaphors, but when it comes to describing humanities, culture, way of living, or the divine or spiritual universe, they are bound to use metaphorical language. One has to ponder how to describe God's glory, how to imagine God's *nirgun* and *sargun* natures, how to conceive and describe the laws of creation and living, the world order and civil societies for all times to come.

To do so, our natural language is never adequate. Therefore, the Gurus chose to employ metaphorical or figurative language so that readers may understand the teachings and their relevance in a particular time and culture, and their relation to the reality of that Being we worship as the Creator.

To circumvent the limitations of the natural languages, Guru Nanak and other authors of the Aad Guru Granth expressed their spiritual and divine experiences and their wisdom in a metaphorical language. They have alerted about this style in the AGGS itself as follows:

ਪ੍ਰਭ ਕੀ ਅਗਮ ਅਗਾਧਿ ਕਥਾ ॥

ਸੁਨੀਐ ਅਵਰ ਅਵਰ ਬਿਧਿ ਬੁਝੀਐ ਬਕਨ ਕਥਨ ਰਹਤਾ ॥

Theology is profound and unfathomable. It is heard in one form but understood in different forms. It is beyond conventional description by natural languages.

AGGS, M 5, p 498-9.

For the Aad Guru Granth message to be universal the metaphorical style is indispensable.

ਰੂੜੋ ਠਾਕੁਰ ਮਾਹਰੋ ਰੂੜੀ ਗੁਰਬਾਣੀ ॥

Universal is my God, His linguafranca is universal, and His word is written in the languages of the time.

AGG, M 1, p. 421

First, we must translate the Gurbani literally, and then analyze and interpret the metaphors or figurative language in order to understand its intrinsic, deeper meaning that transcends time and history. The difficult part of Gurbani translations is how to interpret and understand the metaphorical language.

There are twenty-two languages composing the AGGS. To those is added the liberal use, a complex layer, of metaphorical or figurative language, which includes metaphors and other figures of speech related to metaphors, such as allegories, similes, personification, hyperboles, and other symbolic expressions, which were necessary to deliver the Guru's universally relevant message. The power or effectiveness of these forms in a hymn or poem depends on the power of their association, comparison, or resemblance.

All hymns of the Granth use metaphors or metaphor-related poetic devices uniquely.

The reader/follower should also note while translating or interpreting the AGGS that one of the primary functions of the metaphor in natural languages is to establish that its use in natural languages may have different meanings in different contexts.

The metaphorical processes allow meanings and structures of natural language to be altered and expanded

beyond the alterations possible within the scope of formal languages. Metaphorical processes allow natural languages to transcend many of the limitations of formal languages, resulting in greater flexibility of expression for natural languages than is possible for formal languages. Thus, a liberal use of metaphors by the Aad Guru Granth authors enriches the Sikh Holy Book beyond measure and creates possibilities of diverse interpretations of the text.

To explicate the role of metaphor in language is, in part, a response to the question: "How can one describe, using the basic terms given in a language, situations or meanings that are not covered through the explicit definitions of those terms?"

In formal languages, this question may be precisely posed. The terms, "basic terms," "explicit definitions" and "meanings" are well-understood and well-formulated. In natural languages, asking this question presumes issues involving the existence of hidden terms and of non-metaphorical definitions of terms.

It is, however, precisely this question that literal translations cannot satisfy.

Below are given examples of metaphors and metaphor-related figures of speech that the Granth authors used to express their wisdom. We have the freedom to interpret them according to our knowledge, background, and effect they have on our hearts and minds.

EXAMPLES of METAPHORS in the AAD GURU GRANTH

GURMAT DISSEMINATION AS SHABAD LANGAR

Langar is the term used in the Sikh religion or in Punjab in general for common kitchen/canteen where complementary meals are served usually in a Gurdwara to all the visitors without distinction of background, caste, social or political status, or religion. At the Langar, only vegetarian food is served, to ensure that all people, regardless of their dietary restrictions, can eat as equals.

By carefully choosing the term Langar for use in the AGGS, Guru Arjan's courtier poet-scholars called attention to the fact that the Guru's message imbibed in the AGGS was meant to be for people in the four corners of the world. It was available to share freely without any distinction or prejudice throughout all places and to all civil societies.

In the Aad Guru Granth, the term "Langar" is used metaphorically to emphasize liberal and unrestricted distribution of the Gurmat knowledge. That consists of

our public display of the Sikh tradition of sharing and serving.

In the AGGS, langar is referred twice and each time it refers to the liberal dissemination and sharing of the Guru's hymns with others.

It further implies that its supplies of knowledge were given by the Creator to be shared and never to run out. Rather, the Sustainer God has amply stocked its supplies; the more they are shared, the more would they be replenished.

ਲੰਗਰੁ ਚਲੈ ਗੁਰ ਸਬਦਿ ਹਰਿ ਤੋਟਿ ਨ ਆਵੀ ਖਟੀਐ ॥
ਖਰਚੇ ਦਿਤਿ ਖਸਮ ਦੀ ਆਪ ਖਹਦੀ ਬੈਰਿ ਦਬਟੀਐ ॥

Langar, the free kitchen of the Guru's teachings, is always open and on the go. Its supplies never run short. Its supplies were given by the Creator to be shared and never to run out. Rather, the Sustainer God has amply stocked its supplies; the more you share them, the more will they be replenished.

AGGS, Balvand and Sata, p 967.

In the above quote, Balvand and Satta use the term Langar as a metaphor that transcends the literal meaning of langar as free kitchen at the Gurdwara. As the literal langar is used to sustain our bodies after the religious service, so can the langar of the Guru's teachings nurture our hearts and minds.

LIGHT OF SPIRITUAL VISION

An example of light to indicate vision and knowledge appears in the following verse.

ਉਗਵਣਹੁ ਤੈ ਆਬਵਣਹੁ ਚਹੁ ਚਕੀ ਕੀਅਨੁ ਲੋਆ ॥
ਜਿਨੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਨ ਸੋਵਿਓ ਮਨਮੁਖਾ ਪਇਆ ਮੋਆ ॥
ਦੂਣੀ ਚਉਣੀ ਕਰਾਮਾਤਿ ਸਚੇ ਕਾ ਸਚਾ ਢੋਆ

The Guru meant to spread the Light from the direction of sunrise to sunset in all continents. Those who do not serve the cause of the Guru in this way are selfish, and they may die in shame. It is a miracle of God that the Light of wisdom will increase manifold when it is spread.

AGGS, Balvand and Sata, p 968.

In the above verses, the authors use the word "light" as metaphor for the Guru's knowledge and wisdom. Light in a normal, literal sense emanates from the sun or the electric light bulb or tube, or such other material sources, but metaphorically the Guru's wisdom is the light that emanates from his teachings and, by God's grace, spreads in all directions, meaning throughout the globe. The authors ask the reader/follower not to be selfish by withholding the Guru's wisdom, but in order to spread it the Divine has ensured that its stock will increase manifold with its use.

METAPHOR TO DESCRIBE DIVINE SPLENDOR

Here is a hymn that celebrates God's glory, His supreme power to accomplish that which no human or non-human natural power can accomplish. It goes:

ਸੀਹਾ ਬਾਜਾ ਚਰਗਾ ਕੁਰੀਆ ਏਨਾ ਖਵਾਲੇ ਘਾਹ ॥

ਘਾਹੁ ਖਾਨਿ ਤਿਨਾ ਮਾਸੁ ਖਵਾਲੇ ਏਹਿ ਚਲਾਏ ਰਾਹ ॥

ਨਦੀਆ ਵਿਚਿ ਟਿਬੇ ਦੇਖਾਲੇ ਥਲੀ ਕਰੇ ਅਸਗਾਹ ॥

ਕੀੜਾ ਥਾਪਿ ਦੇਇ ਪਾਤਿਸਾਹੀ ਲਸਕਰ ਕਰੇ ਸੁਆਹ ॥

ਜੇਤੇ ਜੀਅ ਜੀਵਹਿ ਲੈ ਸਾਹਾ ਜੀਵਾਲੇ ਤਾ ਕਿ ਅਸਾਹ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਜਿਉ ਜਿਉ ਸਚੇ ਭਾਵੈ ਤਿਉ ਤਿਉ ਦੇਇ ਗਿਰਾਹ ॥੧॥

Tigers, hawks, falcons and eagles - God could make them eat grass.

And those animals which eat grass - He could make them eat meat.

He could make them follow His way of life.

He could raise dry land from the rivers, and turn the deserts into bottomless oceans.

He could appoint a worm as king, and reduce an army to ashes.

All beings and creatures live by breathing, but He could keep us alive, even without the breath.

O Nanak, as it pleases the True Lord, He gives us sustenance. ॥1॥

AGGS, M 1, p 144.

The author uses a sequence of hyperboles, a kind of metaphor, in a series of juxtapositions of contrasting realities in order to show the power of God. The Guru wants to convey the almighty nature of God, His power to do the impossible, His supreme power to change the natural reality as humans know it. Since this extraordinary nature of divine power cannot be adequately expressed in simple natural language, the author uses figurative language.

To describe God's endless and boundless power to create and alter reality as we know it, Guru presents a series of naturally impossible situations and tells us by using hyperboles that God can make them possible. If God wishes, for instance, He can change the carnivorous creatures into grass-eating animals. The Infinite Wisdom, God, if so wishes, can create dry land in the midst of rivers and rivers in the midst of deserts, enthrone the lowliest creature as king and reduce an army to ashes, keep us alive without our breathing, and thus give us sustenance and life.

Use of hyperboles, thus, renders the hymn powerful and effective, affecting the reader emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Anyone attempting to translate or interpret this hymn cannot adequately do so without paying attention to its literary composition, that is, without explaining the use of metaphorical

language.

EVAPORATION OF NARCISSISM

Take another example of the natural language word, "evaporate" in the following verse from the Gurbani.

ਭਾਇ ਭਗਤਿ ਜਾ ਹਉਮੈ ਸੇਖੈ ॥

Through loving devotion, their narcissism evaporates.

AGGS, M 3, p 124.

In saying that "His narcissism evaporated," if "evaporate" is defined as "turning into vapor," or even as "disappearing like vapor," the sentence is not, strictly speaking, true. This would be a literal translation of the above verse.

To translate the verse in a meaningful sense it can run as: "His narcissism evaporated" may actually be put as something like this, "The person was exclusively attached to his own image in self-love, and through divisionary practices he gradually lost that self-love".

So while both senses of the word "evaporate" are useful and understandable in appropriate contexts, the former is simply incorrect in this context, and the latter, while used and considered proper, is also, strictly speaking, incorrect.

If one attempts to create many definitions (rather than metaphorical uses) of the word "evaporate," each appropriate to a certain context, the contexts must then be defined and categorized, and definitions of words must be formulated for each context. However, given the number of possible contexts, including those yet unknown, this is an absurd solution. Metaphor, functioning as a means of both creating and altering meanings to fit contexts, is necessary if languages are to describe experiencing. Words, as components of metaphor, cannot, in natural languages, have constant and well-defined meanings.

It is for this reason that the AGGS uses metaphors very liberally. Let me give a couple of more examples. Here metaphoric terms are underlined>.

TO OPEN A RIGID DOOR

In the following verse the stubborn human mind is described with a metaphor of a rigidly closed door.

ਹਉਮੈ ਮਾਰਿ ਬਜਰ ਕਪਾਟ ਖੁਲਾਇਆ ॥

Subduing narcissism, the rigidly shut doors are opened

AGGS, M 3, p 124

Here the tightly shut door is a metaphor for the rigidly closed mind which needs to be opened to the intelligence and knowledge of the Truth. The goal is accomplished by destroying the narcissistic state of mind.

EYE OINTMENT

In the following example the Aad Guru Granth describes enlightenment of the mind by the metaphor of eye ointment used to treat the blind eye of ignorance.

ਗੁਰ ਗਿਆਨ ਅੰਜਨੁ ਸਚੁ ਨੇਤ੍ਰੀ ਪਾਇਆ ॥

*The Guru has applied the true **eye ointment** of spiritual wisdom to my eyes.*

Guru Amar Das, AGGS, p.124

In another verse, the Guru metaphorically describes ignorance as the darkness seen by a blind eye. The blind eye is cured to bring in the light of enlightenment through the Guru- given knowledge.

ਅਗਿਆਨ ਅੰਧੇਰਾ ਮਿਟਿ ਗਇਆ ਗੁਰ ਗਿਆਨੁ ਦੀਪਾਇਓ ॥੨॥

The darkness of ignorance has been dispelled; the Guru has lit the lamp of spiritual wisdom.

Guru Arjan, AGGS, p. 241.

STUBBORNNESS DESCRIBED AS TAIL OF THE DOG

ਅਪਨਾ ਆਪੁ ਤੂ ਕਬਹੁ ਨ ਛੋਡਸਿ ਸੁਆਨ ਪੂਛਿ ਜਿਉ ਰੇ ॥੪॥

You can never escape from your own inner tendencies, like the crooked tail of the dog.

AGGS, M 1, p 990.

The Guru is telling us in the north Indian vernacular that one's inner self is hard-wired, not easily changeable, much like the dog's tail, which despite many attempts to straighten out may still remain curled or crooked. The unquoted part is obvious to the reader – which simply says that our inner predispositions and instincts control our thinking and behavior and resist all attempts to change.

The use of analogy is intended to intensify the degree to which our inner self can be crooked, hard-wired, and controlling. This analogy is also a simile saying that our inner tendencies are like a crooked tail of a dog.

THIRSTY RAIN-BIRD

Here is another powerful verse which we cannot comprehend without understanding the use of metaphor in it. The deeper meaning of the verse hinges on our interpretation of the two metaphors that hold it:

ਤੇਰਾ ਨਾਮੁ ਬੂੰਦ ਹਮ ਚਾੜ੍ਹਕ ਤਿਖਰਾਰੇ ॥

*Your Name is the drop of water, and I am a thirsty **rain**-bird.*

AGGS, M 5, p 528.

The verse contains two metaphors. The first one equates God's name with the drop of water that gives life to the thirsty; the second equates the self/devotee with a thirsty rain-bird waiting for rain, for a drop of

water. The interpretation of the verse depends on how the reader/devotee receives or is affected by the metaphors. Literal translation of the line will be woefully inadequate.

DANCING GIRLS

The following verse exemplifies the use of figure of speech that is both a metaphor and an analogy:

ਦਸ ਪਾਤਉ ਪੰਚ ਸੰਗੀਤਾ ਏਕੈ ਭੀਤਰਿ ਸਾਥੇ ॥

The ten senses are the dancing girls, and the five passions are the chorus; they sit together within the one body.

AGGS, M 5, p 884.

The verse emphasizes the seductive power of our “ten senses” by equating them with sensual “dancing girls” and calling the “five passions” the “chorus.” Ten senses are five physical senses and five cognitive senses. They engage our attention away from the real purpose of our life journey.

GURMAT RELEVANCE

The exegesis of the Gurbani must conform to the Gurmat, which is defined by the internal textual documentation and evidence from the AGGS. Currently, there are in vogue translations of a Gurbani verse which may literally be correct but inconsistent with the established teachings of the Gurmat. Some examples are as below.

HUKAM DOCTRINE - BABAR BANI

To be brief, I will comment only on the beginning verses and leave the rest of the hymns for future rendition. A Babar Bani hymn is entered in Aad Guru Granth Sahib as follows:

ਖੁਰਾਸਾਨ ਖਸਮਾਨਾ ਕੀਆ ਹਿੰਦੁਸਤਾਨੁ ਡਰਾਇਆ ॥

ਆਪੈ ਦੋਸੁ ਨ ਦੇਈ ਕਰਤਾ ਜਮੁ ਕਰਿ ਮੁਗਲੁ ਚੜਾਇਆ ॥

ਏਤੀ ਮਾਰ ਪਈ ਕਰਲਾਣੇ ਤੈਂਕੀ ਦਰਦੁ ਨ ਆਇਆ ॥੧॥

Guru Nanak, AGGS, p.360

The traditional exegetes are heard describing the traditional meaning as:

Having attacked Khuraasaan, Baabar terrified Hindustan. The Creator Himself does not take the blame, but has sent the Mogal as the messenger of death. There was so much slaughter that the people screamed. Didn't You, O God, feel compassion.

In the traditional translation as above, Guru Nanak is shown to protest or bitterly complain against what God did by sending the messenger of death, Babar, to India. Babar butchered people ruthlessly, looted their possessions, and violated their women.

If Guru Nanak really did complain, it will certainly be against his own teaching of *Bhaana Manana* or obeying

the Divine Will. It is Guru Nanak who wrote,
ਗਣਤ ਨ ਗਣੀ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਪਛਾਣਾ ਬੋਲੀ ਭਾਇ ਸੁਭਾਈ ॥

I do not attempt to calculate the account; I accept the Hukam of God's Command. I speak with intuitive love and respect.

AGG, M 1, p 1344

ਹੁਕਮਿ ਉਛਲੈ ਹੁਕਮੇ ਚਰੈ ॥

ਹੁਕਮੇ ਦੁਖੁ ਸੁਖੁ ਸਮ ਕਰਿ ਸਰੈ ॥

By the Hukam of the divine Command, people move about; by the Lord's Command, they remain still.

AGG, M 1, p 962.

There are many verses that support the Gurmat doctrine of unquestioned obedience to God's Will or Hukm. So complaining against any of God's actions and questioning God why he did not feel the pain of this action will be a contradiction of the Gurmat doctrine on Hukm.

However, if the above traditional translation is replaced with one that is consistent with the Guru's doctrine, one would come up with the following.

Babar became king of Khurasan, and then he frightened India. He was able to intimidate India because of the weakness of Indian people. The Indian people should admit their weakness and not blame the Creator for their defeat in the hand of the Mogul king who had marched on the Indian soil.

Babar was born in a small town called Khurasan. He became the king (Khasmana Keya) of that area. That encouraged him to intimidate India, and he marched on to conquer it. There he inflicted harsh cruelty to Indian people. Indian communities suffered the onslaught of Baber on account of their own weakness, their (Indians) own shortcomings, and they shouldn't blame any one else including the Creator.

He is beyond all suffering and enjoyment, hence He won't feel any pain or pleasure regardless of who is yelling for HIM. The words Tein Ke (ਤੈਂ ਕੀ) shouldn't have been broken the way it is. It should have been together read as (ਤੈਂਕੀ) Teinke meaning for to you it is the same.

Thus the correct meaning must be relevant and consistent with the Gurmat doctrines.

MEANING CONTRADICTS SOCIO-POLITICAL NORMS

We have to be wary about translations that appear to be grammatically and linguistically correct, but run counter to the socio-cultural norms of world order.

Here is an example of such translation of a hymn by

Baba Farid:

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਜੇ ਤੈ ਮਾਰਨਿ ਮੁਕੀਆਂ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ ਨ ਮਾਰੇ ਖੁੰਮਿ ॥

ਆਪਨੜੈ ਘਰਿ ਜਾਈਐ ਪੈਰ ਤਿਨ੍ਹਾ ਦੇ ਚੁੰਮਿ

AGGS, Farid, p 1378.

The translation by popular exegetes goes like this:
Farid, do not turn around and strike back those who strike you with their fists.

Rather, kiss their feet, and return to your own home.

The above translation is defective, why? In the Guru time, when any Guru was physically attacked, he did not go to the home of the enemy to lick his feet. If such were the case, the society as we know it would cease to exist. People who commit crimes will take over.

In reality, to protect the social system, the culprit of a crime must be appropriately corrected and not appeased. There we must accept the meaning consistent with social order and Gurmat. So the revised translation, supported by common sense and social norms, should be as follows:

Farid, why don't you strike those back who strike you? (Note: It is a challenge not to tolerate who are striking you.) Who are they?

Five evils, particularly anger.

Farid through his verse in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib is asking us to go back to our Guru-given belief system and our own resources. Then you are asked to kiss those qualities which equip you to fight those that nag you to surrender to the evil.

HISTORIC FACTS

Sometimes the AGGS scholars have let errors creep in their translation simply because they did not read the text appropriately. Their reading was misled by the typesetter, and they failed to catch it. Though grammatically and linguistically correct, their translation did not square with historical facts and developments in the history of Gurmat. However, the translation continued to be popular without a critical look that it might be contradicting historical facts.

One such glaring illustration comes from the following verse, which can be typeset two different ways, but one way falsifies a historical fact:

ਤਾ ਤੇ ਅੰਗਦੁ ਅੰਗ ਸੰਗਿ ਭਯੋ ਸਾਇਰੁ ਤਿਨਿ ਸਬਦ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਕੀ ਨੀਵ ਰ
ਖਾਈ ॥

AGGS, Bhat Kirat, p 1406.

As is type-set above, its meaning implies that Guru Angad laid the foundation of the *sabd surat* doctrine. We all know that it was Guru Nanak who promulgated the *sabd surat* doctrine. Reference to that effect is clearly

available from Sidh Goshat of Guru Nanak as it is included in the Aad Guru Granth.

ਕੀ ਨੀਵ ਰਖਾਈ should have been typeset as ਕੀਨੀ ਵਰਖਾਈ to **mean** that Guru Nanak's successor Guru Angad nurtured the *sabd surat* doctrine (which was laid by the First Guru).

The prevalent hymn with faulty typeset contradicts the historical truth that it was Guru Nanak, not Guru Angad, who founded the doctrine of Sabd Surat.

CONCLUSIONS

The Gurbani is neither history nor mythology, nor a collection of incantations. Its contents are spiritual revelations, the vision of the cosmic order and exhortation to the truthful life. It is for contemplation and for application to secular aspects of everyday living. Its wisdom is infinite and everlasting for generations to come. It was deliberately not translated by Guru Nanak or his successor Gurus so that it does not become confined to a certain fixed meaning. Further, this may be the only scripture, which corroborates modern scientific theories in the domain of cosmology.

As seen in the above discussion, the AGGS is often being translated without adequate regard to many factors some of which are outlined above. It is now a challenge to the community of Sikh scholars and exegetes to rectify the drawbacks in translations.

The community was similarly challenged a century ago by Max Arthur Macauliffe. While paying tribute to his centennial, we should accept his challenge and the challenges presented by the progress in science and technology. Guru Arjan gave this matter highest priority while compiling the AGGS.

Here is how Sikh scholar of the highest repute Bhai Gurdas expressed his sentiments on the same challenge. He used a powerful metaphor to stress about the worth of the proper rendition of the AGGS and the proper exposition of its message:

ਜੈਸੇ ਸਤ ਮੰਦਰ ਕੰਚਨ ਕੇ ਉਸਾਰ ਦੀਨੇ ।

ਤੈਸਾ ਪੁੰਨ ਸਿਖ ਕਉ ਇਕ ਸ਼ਬਦ ਸਿਖਾਏ ਕਾ [

Gurdas, Kabit 673.

To teach accurate comprehension of Gurmat Lexicon contained in a Aad Guru Granth hymn surpasses giving in charity seven temples constructed with gold.