

# FUTURE LANGUAGE FOR TRANSMISSION OF WISDOM FROM THE AAD GURU GRANTH SAHIB

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## ABSTRACT

***Although teachings of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1] are universal and suitable for all times to come, their dissemination will be a challenge to Sikh scholars and Sikh clergy in the emerging global society. The knowledge-based disseminating will require consideration of the language to be employed in the future. The emerging language of the global village, particularly in the West, will be English for some time to come. Gradual adoption of English alongside Punjabi will be a consideration for Sikhs consistent with the policy that their founders adopted but still a step towards meeting our future needs.***

## INTRODUCTION

With the forthcoming Quadricentennial of Compilation of the Aad Guru Granth in September 2004, there is concern on transmitting the Aad Guru Granth Sahib's teachings to the evolving global village. Either the language of a culture or the mother tongue of an individual is essential to promote any idea. The AGGS based ideas, in the past, have been best communicated to 100 million Punjabi speaking people in the world. But if we continue to use only Punjabi, the Sikh ideology and any knowledge of the Guru's Wisdom will not be communicated effectively to 500 million Urdu speaking people, a billion of each Hindi, Spanish, or Chinese speaking people, or twice as many English speaking people in the West, whether of Indian origin or others—unless it is done in a local language, the language people learn from their surroundings and not have to go to a Gurdwara school to learn.

## PUNJABI AND OTHER LANGUAGES

There is a difference between information and knowledge. Whereas information can be easily translated and transmitted in any language and is stored as well as propagated in any language, knowledge, on the other hand, cannot be imparted effectively in a language other than the mother tongue. Mother tongue is a language,

which is acquired without requiring formal instructions in a school or from a tutor.

The children of the future world would not know the relevance of the AGGS in their life unless they learn it through language, which can effectively impart this knowledge to them. At present, English is the most spoken language and the language of 75% printed material in the world.

If you do not believe me, then tell me how many of you can understand advantage of Macintosh over Windows in any language other than in English. Why are all technologists even in Hindi speaking India making all software in English, why not in Hindi or Punjabi?

We Sikhs take a lot of pride in the universality of the message of the Gurus meaning that our Guru revealed their religion for benefit of all peoples and all communities. Our clerics and our leaders miss no opportunity to emphasize this characteristic of our message. Similarly, we speak of our Gurdwaras and other congregational functions open to every one in the global village. But we fail to realize that by trussing Sikh practices far too tightly with Punjabi language and life style, we totally refuse to share our religion with the rest of the world.

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***Editorial Note:*** Prof Chahal in his article (p-7) explains the importance of Punjabi to give its due status along with other languages because the Sacred words of Sikh Gurus and Bhagats of India have been written in that language. Therefore, it is necessary to have good knowledge of Punjabi to understand the philosophy, embodied in the Bani incorporated in the AGGS, in its real perspective. However, Dr Harbans Lal explains the importance of English and other languages for the dissemination of that philosophy of the Sikh Gurus and that of the Bhagats embodied in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib to the humanity of the world. DSC

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Failing to share our heritage with others is far too obvious in our religious practices. Traditionally we limit our congregational services and prayers only to the language of our ancestors, and in doing so we virtually close doors to others. We even make it harder for our life partners to connect to our faith if they happened to be born outside Punjab.

Similarly, we disfranchise even our children and the young Sikhs growing up in the West from having full access to the Guru's teachings. It is not difficult to see a parallel with the days of racial discrimination in America. When the white population wanted to disfranchise a black population from their birthright to vote, they used the hurdle of literacy in a language that black population had difficulty to be proficient in.

Strict adherence to any one language of a predominant religion was not the case at the time of our Gurus. Guru Nanak and his successors traveled to all accessible lands to spread the Word; they unreservedly used whatever language would get their message across. In particular, they defied tradition set by Brahmins and Mullahs, who insisted on Sanskrit and Arabic to teach theology; in contrast, the gurus used the spoken language of the people as medium of their mission.

Guru Amar Das is known to rebuke a delegation of religious scholars who came to persuade him to use the language of the religious elite, the Sanskrit, in order to impart his message. According to Bhai Santokh Singh [4], Guru Amar Das told the visitors a metaphor to make his point. He said, "God's theology is like water to a thirsty person. Divine knowledge in Sanskrit or Arabic is like water in deep well; it takes effort to draw it and then irrigate crops of only those who own the land and the means. Guru's teachings must be in a language that serves like a cloud burst which turns the crops of every one and in every field green; it reaches mountains and valleys alike, birds and mammals alike, animals and human alike, poor and rich alike." (English translation from original Punjabi by the author.)

Guru Amar Das's response was similar to a popular biblical parabola where Jesus said that when you light a lamp; place it at a higher pedestal so that the light can reach every one. Requiring especially made colored glasses to see the light will contradict the essence of this parabola.

There are some Punjabi compositions in the AGGS, but mostly they are written in many other languages of India as well as Middle Eastern and South Eastern countries [3] (*Editor: Please also see Chahal's article on page 7 about the language and script of the AGGS*). Guru Gobind Singh mostly used Braj Bhasha (the language of

Bihar), Persian and Arabic, but not Punjabi in his compositions. The Sikh rulers similarly used Persian to conduct their day-to-day business. Maharaja Ranjit Singh, only two centuries ago, used Persian and so did Banda Bahadur, a contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh. He issued coins of the Sikh kingdom with Persian inscriptions.

The language of the AGGS, the Eternal Guru of the Sikhs, is so different from modern Punjabi that most Punjabi speaking people of today do not understand much of it. I have difficulty myself in understanding the Punjabi text that is currently being used by Sikh scholars in India to explain the doctrines in the AGGS. No wonder that their books find only negligible circulation in North America or Europe. Even in India they are not read as is evident from a meager number of prints that are made of books on Sikhism published in Punjabi.

History is a witness, that if the Gurus were here in North America today, they would depart from the past and use English to communicate. They would use a language in which more than three fourth of all the printed material is produced.

Most of the progressive elements in every religion now use English to communicate. The cyberspace technology as the medium of future communication began to require that we speak the cyberspace language or be eclipsed from the wired communities. Our youth exclusively use only this language to conduct their daily lives both at home and at work. It will be wise not to resist the trend for propagation of our religion among this generation.

I personally visited many places where Sikh identities were totally wiped out of existence by the third or fourth generation primarily because their immigrant parents would not impart their religious inheritance to their children in the language of their adopted country. That left only the rituals or ceremonies of their faith for the children to relate to and those lost their meaningless appeal within a generation. You may not have to go far to see this trend continues even today.

In many communities of North America today, the only thing children recall to a visitor is the memory of their grand parents being Sikhs, the term that they can often not even pronounce correctly. These children usually preserve, besides photographs, one or two of their parents' "prayer books" as the museum pieces in their homes. It breaks my heart when I visit homes of this generation. But all I can do is to show some love towards them and promise to relate their message to

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our first generation community here. Many of them do ask me if I can send them some Sikh literature in English.

I am pleased to see that Sikh congregations in Pakistan use *Shahmukhi* script and Urdu language to publish the Sikh literature. The newly converted Caucasian Sikhs in North America use English and Spanish as medium in their Gurdwaras. A very tiny but gradually growing population of Sikh children of Punjabi parents in North America is getting bold enough to break from the tradition and improvise the religious liturgy in English.

**For the conclusion, I would like to quote Dr Indermohan Singh of the Sikh Foundation. He recently wrote, “There are very good reasons for Sikhs of Punjabi origin to want to preserve their language and culture. There is also no question that for those who can understand it, Gurbani in its original language is much more beautiful and meaningful. It is very hard to**

**capture the beauty and poetry of the original in a translation. But I believe we should be very clear about differences between the religious versus cultural and linguistic issues. And we should make an effort to share the Guru’s Word using every language and medium that is available.” [2].**

#### 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).
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