

DHUR KI BANİ: What does it mean?

Dr Sarjeet Singh Sidhu, MBBS, FRCOG, FICS, LLB (Hons)
50, Jalan Bintang, Taman Sunrise, 31400 Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia
sarjeetsidhu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The expression 'Dhur ki Bani' has deeply religious connotations for the majority of Sikhs. This article attempts to rationalize some of the concepts associated with the phrase and is an effort to infuse Reason into what is actually a strictly faith based concept, and thereby offer an alternative meaning for the phrase.

INTRODUCTION

Assuming that they are even aware of it, the majority of Sikhs would think that a simple phrase like 'Dhur ki Bani' would be easily understood by all and would have the same meaning for all. And yet a perusal of the literature on the subject, or the debates / discussions on the Sikh Diaspora and Gurmat Learning Zone (GLZ) Forums will reveal that there is no agreement among the Sikhs. In a discussion on 'Dhur Ki Bani' on the Yahoo Groups "Gurmat Learning Zone" (GLZ) [3] several experts / scholars were at odds with one another as to what the phrase means, and some were accused of denying the special status of Gurbani (AGGS) on account of having been transmitted directly from the Divine.

Forum Discussion: Some Scholarly Views

Quoting from his work, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan: History, Memory and Biography*, Pashaura Singh (GLZ Message #44242) says that "Dhur Ki Bani" means "...the divine utterance from the beginning... the bani is portrayed as existing prior to the revelation, since the beginning of creation..." He says that this "popular expression", *Dhur ki Bani*, was introduced by Guru Arjan (AGGS, M 5, p 628) [1]:

He also quotes Guru Arjan again in the following verse:

*Miharvan maula tuhin ek, Pir paikambar sheikh
Dilan ka malak kare hak, Qur'an kateb te pak*
AGGS, M 5, p 897 [1]

Referring to the word "hak" in the above mentioned verse, Pashaura Singh says "In Punjabi culture, the word 'hak' refers to a 'direct call' made by a person at the time of summoning somebody. It faithfully describes the mode of direct communication in which Vahiguru reveals himself by uttering the divine Word in the heart, mind and soul of the Guru." Singh says that "Guru Arjan made the claim to the exclusive status of Sikh revelation in response to the challenge of contemporary religious pluralism". This is submitted by Pashaura Singh as evidence of the originality of Sikhism and, presumably,

as opposing the contention of some scholars that Sikhism is a "syncretistic" faith.

He further states: "To underline the distinctive Sikh notion of revelation through direct communication, Guru Arjan proclaimed:

"I myself do not know how to speak; I have only conveyed the order of the Lord."

AGGS, M 5, p 763.

This is in line with Guru Nanak's self-understanding of revelation:

"As the Word of the Lord comes to me so do I proclaim its knowledge, O Lalo!"

AGGS, M 1, 722 [1].

The second verse above (from page 722), on the face of it does appear to support the idea that Guru Nanak says that he proclaims the Bani as it is "transmitted" to him by God. However the verse is a part of a long Sabd which appears to be an eyewitness's description of the scene after the havoc wreaked by the invader Babar in 1521. It would appear that Guru Nanak was the eyewitness. Clearly this Sabd cannot be one that was communicated to Guru Nanak by God; it is his eyewitness account of the destruction. The verse should be read out of context and therefore cannot be ascribed the meaning that is so often given to that verse. [See Note at the end of the article.]

In any case, the inference drawn from Pashaura Singh's view is that "Dhur Ki Bani" was already in existence since the beginning of creation, is word for word transmitted by the Guru as "spoken" by God to him, without an intermediary. This is in contrast to the case of Islam wherein their tradition says that the text of revelation was dictated / communicated through an intermediary, the angel Gabriel. Whether directly communicated or via an intermediary such a view does not provide any room for error or contradiction in the scripture (message) since the Divine, by its very nature, cannot err. Nor does this permit room for editing or correcting the Bani, whatever the reason.

Yet, Jagpal Singh Tiwana (GLZ Message #44122) speaks of “some changes (by Bhai Lehna)” and “slight modifications” (by Guru Arjan). He defends this assertion by saying: “If Guru Arjan Dev ji did some minor modification accordingly it does not take away the status of Dhur ki Bani. Dhur ki Bani does not mean that hymns were revealed to Gurus exactly written in Gurmukhi script. They received divine concepts and they reproduced them in Gurmukhi”.

Tiwana does not think that any modifications to Bani made by Guru Arjan Dev take away the ‘Dhur ki Bani’ status of the Bani. But obviously this cannot mean that the Bani we now have is an exact copy of the one in existence before creation and at the beginning of creation (the way Pashaura Singh believes). Tiwana also says that ‘Dhur Ki Bani’ refers merely to the “divine concepts” which the recipients (Gurus) transmitted in Gurmukhi. One presumes that he holds the view that this transmissions of the concepts were, however, absolutely accurate, and again without error. But concepts need elaboration and explanations by the person in possession of the concepts (the Gurus in this case); these will of course need to be done in the words of the one explaining. The definition of ‘Dhur Ki Bani’ here is thus different from Pashaura Singh’s.

Prof Devinder Singh Chahal (GLZ Message #44139) seems to somewhat agree with Tiwana in relation to changes / modifications when he says “However, it is acceptable that 'Kanna' as written today was not there but it was there as dot ‘.’ instead. This is modification of the script not of the Bani. Similarly, changing the laga matra to make the word to fit the rhythm, but not changing the meanings, is not the modification of Bani.”

In a similar discussion on the Yahoo Form, Sikh Diaspora (SD) [5] Prof Chahal says: “I cannot explain what “Dhur ki Bani” is, however, I understand that it is taken as the “The Bani directly communicated by God to Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus and Bhagats including Bhattas or in other words, “Every word in the AGGS” (SD Message #46399). Note that Prof Chahal here says that this is how the expression ‘Dhur ki Bani’ “is taken as” by many believers; he does not say that that is how he takes it.

What, in effect Prof Chahal seems to say is that the minor changes effected by Guru Arjan, the introduction of the lagan-matran, does not change the original meaning of the Bani, but that the phrase *Dhur ki Bani* does not mean Bani directly communicated by God in the way so many Sikhs understand the phrase. In other words in Prof Chahal’s opinion *Dhur ki Bani* means something else.

Jarnail Singh (GLZ Message #44151) believes “the *DHUR KI BANI* is “concepts” that Guru Ji came to

deliver to Humanity”, in agreement with Tiwana, and further adds “...some parts of which concepts had already been delivered earlier” and that “Dhur ki Bani also came to the BHAGATS....Sheikhs..and Bhattas...etc. There is ample “evidence” that Guru Ji “corrected”/ modified some of this earlier “Dhur Ki Bani”....there are such corrections in Sheikh Farid Jis sloks by Guru Ji”. Again, the concepts received (from God) by the Bhagats would have to be explained by the Bhagats in their own words.

Dhur ki Bani, then, is akin to the word ‘**Revelation**’ as taken by the other revealed religions.

Discussion of the Above Views

Effectively we have here three broad views:

First, Pashaura Singh’s view which states that *Dhur ki Bani* means that the Bani is an exact copy (the use of Gurmukhi notwithstanding) of a pre-existing Bani that is with the Divine.

The second view accepts that some changes to the “received” Bani were made by the Gurus; therefore the Bani we have is not an “exact copy”.

The third view is that the revelation was not word-for-word but in the form of concepts.

The first view, held by Pashaura Singh as stated here, is a powerful statement of faith; it implies that the Bani uttered by the Gurus is directly from the Divine and revealed as it existed in the original form prior to creation. And **that** is exactly how it is understood by the Sikh masses. Such a view, however, has many pitfalls: Does this mean that the Bani existed in a physical form (a book) that is in the possession of the Divine? An obvious conclusion of such a belief is that the Scripture (AGGS here) cannot have any errors. Devout Sikhs obviously will have no quarrel with such a contention: that the AGGS is without error or contradiction. But what if there **is** some error or contradiction in such a scripture, how can it be explained? The Divine cannot admit to error or contradiction, for such is His nature, such are the attributes assigned to Him by religion. Any verses alluding to apparent scientific fact, if now found to be contrary to the evidence, will then have to be explained as being metaphorical / allegorical and interpreted to circumvent the contradiction or obvious error. Yet surely in the past, at the time the verse was written and thereafter for a long time, it must have been taken as literally true.

The second view which accepts that some changes did take place, and are acceptable, but do not take away the status of the Bani being *Dhur ki Bani* (Tiwana’s view). This view too is not tenable. We are all aware that the meaning carried by any sentence without punctuation marks can be interpreted differently, albeit subtly, by

introducing punctuation marks at different parts of the sentence. By the same token, wherein the vowels (that is how I understand the 'lagan-matran') were introduced later, it involves a change. So, if such was done to the "received" scripture, which originally lacked certain punctuation marks or vowels, did it cause a change in meaning? Add to that the fact that originally the words in the AGGS were continuous, without any break, as in "without-any-break" ("Larhidar"); but now we have the AGGS with the words separated ("Pad Chhed Birs"). The meanings of some verses may well have changed. It cannot really be the same as the "original".

The third view that the revelation was not word-for-word but in the form of concepts, appears to be, in my opinion, more realistic. It can more easily fit into the view proposed below wherein the person "receiving" the Divine message is merely expressing what he felt when he had "contact" with the Divine. In any case the 'concept' will of course have to be explained to the masses in clearer terms. Even if the concept is transmitted in poetic form, as in the AGGS, it will have to be in language that the recipient of the concept is familiar with; but to do that he would have to be limited to the science and vocabulary of his time. If this is accepted as such, it is not without its drawbacks.

The Problem of Revelation

All faiths refer to their own scriptures as God's Word or Divine Revelation; religion is based on revelation. What exactly does this mean or imply? A conveniently available definition/explanation, though it's in reference to Christianity, nevertheless applies to other faiths: "*Revelation is supernatural communication from God to man, either oral or written, though usually restricted to its written aspect, that is, to the whole contents of Holy Scripture... All Scripture is revelation...*" [6]

"A revelation is not something man could know on his own. It is not something man could arrive at by logically studying the facts." [2] Throughout this discussion it is important to keep in mind that the Divine, by Its attributes according to religion, cannot err or contradict Itself.

In similar fashion, Sikhs generally accept that it was the "supernatural communication from God to man (the Gurus)" which has been recorded in the AGGS, and that "...the whole contents of (AGGS)" are revelation. That is what they understand by *Dhur ki Bani*: a Divine Revelation. Discussions on the Yahoo Group "Sikh-Diaspora", and the strong opinions expressed therein, reinforce this assertion.

Effectively, therefore, revelation means that God "TALKS" to the person to whom God reveals

something. Whilst such a concept would have been easily accepted in the distant past, it cannot sit easy with any rational being today. It "...cannot be that God literally speaks to the recipients of revelation, whether directly or through a conduit. In each case the founders of religions will have had some kind of contact with what they considered a Divine Being, felt inspired by this Being, and thereafter made pronouncements which they must have felt were necessary to 'commune' with that Being. They would then have been 'inspired' to order a certain mode of life, which in turn may well have necessitated a code of conduct, to enable an individual to reach a state of 'spiritual bliss'. The faithful of any religion, thus, have to have faith in the preceptors of their religion in that what they (the founders) reveal is Divine revelation..." [4].

That this is the general feeling of at least some Sikhs today is evidenced by Dr V S Grewal's view (S D Message # 46404). He says: "...with a little common sense one can imagine that God does not communicate through any language per se... It simply means that Guru Nanak in his fourth state of *Sehj* had some kind of spiritual experiences... which later on he put in to his own words and wrote with the addition of his daily practical experiences of interaction with others like his dialogue with *Sidhas*. It is also true with others, whose writings are included in AGGS."

If this view is accepted as representing *Dhur ki Bani*, i.e. God did not literally speak to Guru Nanak, but that, following his mystical experience, he later wrote his *Bani* (scripture) in his own words, based also on his daily practical experience, then it is possible that the *Bani* has limitations in its message. It is possible, and for now conceded, that the full message, in all clarity, was received but not transmitted in its entirety on account of Guru Nanak's *human limitations*. He was, after all, a creature of his times, hamstrung by the limited science and vocabulary of the times.

There are, of course, pros and cons to taking such an approach. The most obvious plus-point is that it makes more sense and is thus easier to digest as opposed to a "talking" God. It also allows for plausible explanations for contradictions, or obvious errors, in relation to what has been seen as scientific fact in scripture. Further, it makes it easier to accept that much of what is written may be metaphorical or allegorical. In fact most scientists actually interpret scriptural verses keeping this consideration in mind. Such an approach may be seen as intellectual dishonesty by some, but is far preferred by many a believer than a literal interpretation.

The downside to this is that the Scripture (AGGS in this case) may not be infallible, and thus certainly not immutable, as we have been brought up to believe. Once

this infallibility is admitted to, a whole series of problems will arise; it cannot be God’s Word, for God or Its Word cannot admit to error.

There will always be some who will see the AGGS as literally the immutable Word (Sabd) of God, revelation, which humans should not question. Others will see it as a book which contains God’s message, one written by divinely inspired humans, but nevertheless flawless, much the way many Christians see the Bible. Still others have accepted, or sooner or later will, that the Word is inspired as in the latter case, but will entertain the possibility that it may on account of the human writers and their limitations have flaws. The first two groups will hold their divergent views and will consistently and completely disagree over the interpretations of the holy verses, but will nevertheless be able to sit together. The third group, should it even try to present its thoughts as no more than an intellectual exercise, will be mercilessly flayed: such is the stranglehold of religion on free thought. Still the third opinion is being put forth in this paper as a plausible option.

CONCLUSION

‘*Dhur ki Bani*’ cannot mean a direct word-for-word dictation from God, for that would call for subscription to the view that God “talks” to chosen individuals. It can at best mean that the person who transmits this ‘*Dhur ki Bani*’ actually only explains what he felt when he was, as he felt, “one with the Divine” or “in communication” with God; it is an experience that is personal to him and cannot be expressed or understood by another. Under these circumstances such a person may believe that his words are guided by God and so are in that sense “direct” from Him. But this interpretation of the expression can have serious consequences for the believers; consequences that they will not be able to accept. That is what religion is all about: a matter of Faith, not of Reason.

REFERENCES:

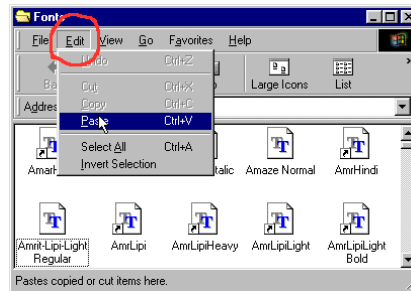
1. AGGS = Aad Guru Granth Sahib. 1983 (reprint). Publishers: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar. (M = Mahla, i.e. succession number of the Sikh Gurus to the House of Nanak, M is replaced with the name of the Bhagat/Bhatt for their Bani, p = Page of the AGGS).
2. Blaylock, Thomas E Jr. 1999. *Honest Man’s Philosophy*, Chapter 21. <http://www.jovialatheist.com/hmp21.html>
3. Gurmat Learning Zone: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/learning-zone/>
4. Sidhu, Sarjeet Singh. 2007. *Religion and Science: Is Conciliation Possible?* Understanding Sikhism Res. J. 8 (1), p 11-12
5. Sikh Diaspora: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Sikh-Diaspora/>
6. Truth for Today: <http://www.tecmalta.org/tft102.htm>
7. **Note:** My attention to the placement of the verse in that particular Sabd was drawn by Prof Chahal. Having then read it in context I am compelled to draw the conclusion I have spelt out above. I am grateful to Prof D S Chahal for this.

(Continued from page 52)

ready for use through your programs. You may now close open windows to tidy your desktop.

10. If you also need to make use of Non-Unicode Gurmukhi fonts, use the same technique to install the fonts from inside the “Fonts TrueType (NonUnicode)” folder.

Users of MS Word 2003 or 2007 may also easily install needed fonts as follows: Double click on the document “Install TrueType fonts by simply opening me.doc” on the Gurbani-CD-Uni folder, to open it. In most cases this will install the embedded fonts.



What is on the Gurbani-CD-Uni

The computer data on the Gurbani-CD-Uni includes:

- * Text of Siri Guru Granth Sahib, Nitnem Banis and Bhai Gurdaas's Banis in Gurmukhi (in different formats).
- * Text of Siri Guru Granth Sahib, Nitnem Banis and Bhai Gurdaas's Banis in Devanagari (in different formats).
- * Translation of the Text of Siri Guru Granth Sahib by Singh Sahib Sant Singh Khalsa, MD (in the customary Siri Guru Granth Sahib format and sentence by sentence Gurmukhi/Devanagari to English translation).
- * Translation of the Text of Siri Guru Granth Sahib in Punjabi (Guru Granth Darpan) by Professor Sahib Singh. The typed text of this is made available by S. Avtar Singh Dhani, which is then formatted for computer use by Dr. Thind.
- * Phonetic transliteration of the Text of Siri Guru Granth Sahib in common English characters in different formats and in customized characters (in customary layout).
- * Many types-faces (fonts): many are variations of Gurmukhi, a few of Devanagari & 1 of GurbaniRomanizing. This Gurbani-CD that is named “Gurbani-CD-Uni, by Dr. Thind” also contains Unicode Gurmukhi fonts and documents prepared with such fonts.
- * A number of databases of Siri Guru Granth Sahib text in different formats including alphabetized databases.
- * “MahanKosh” in pdf format (courtesy of Bhai Baljinder Singh of Rara Sahib).
- * “SGGS Kosh” by Dr Gurcharan Singh, PhD.
- * A number of photographs of many of the historic Gurdwaras and of the associated artwork in color.
- * A valuable document “Maansarovar” compiled by Dr. Kulwant Singh.
- * A useful 263 page long document (from a 291 page book) on Sikh Religion written in English by Sikh Missionary Center, PO BOX 62521, Phoenix, Arizona 85082 (current address). The lives of the ten Sikh Gurus and the basic Sikh philosophy are nicely depicted in this document.
- * Many more documents.