

SOME PITFALLS OF TRANSLATION OF AAD GURU GRANTH SAHIB INTO ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Besides a good mastery of English language and cultural practices of native English speakers, translation of Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) requires good knowledge of languages used in it, cultural practices of Punjab region/India and of mythologies of Indian subcontinent. There is significant symbolism used in AGGS which when literally interpreted changes the meaning. When a sentence taken out of context is translated the meaning can be entirely different. The subject of this presentation is to highlight some of the pitfalls that should be avoided during translation and to offer few suggestions regarding adaptation of right methodology.

Disclaimer

I claim to be no expert in this matter.

REQUIREMENTS FOR A GOOD TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH

Following are the basic requirements for translating AGGS into English.

1. Good knowledge of Punjabi & English.
2. Sufficient knowledge of the Languages used in AGGS.
3. Knowledge of cultural practices of Punjab region/ India and of mythologies of the Indian subcontinent.
4. Significant knowledge of Christianity and western cultural practices (present & past).
5. Knowledge of history of the time of Sikh Gurus. An added element in that, true history is difficult to find.
6. Sufficient knowledge of Hindu & Muslim scriptures, cultures & their practices.
7. Knowledge of prevalent religious sects and their philosophies & practices from the time of authors of AGGS.

Some common pitfalls that should be avoided during translations

There is significant symbolism used in AGGS which when literally interpreted can change the meaning. Thus, one needs to exercise caution in this regard. Also, when a sentence taken out of context is translated

the meaning can be entirely different. There are also issues of deeper spiritual meaning which are very difficult to translate and may require further explanations. Many words in AGGS and even in current Punjabi language have no equivalent words in English. Use of even some well-intentioned translation words in these situations can lead to misleading interpretation. Thus, care is required in such situations. Although, it is impossible to avoid personal bias, one must try one's best to avoid bias.

Gurbani translation is also made difficult by following factors

It is difficult to describe the experience of the ultimate bliss/union with God through meditation/Naam Simran, especially when one has not personally experienced it.

Since no punctuations other than full stop have been used in AGGS, one can split sentences in different ways to arrive at different meanings.

Being in poetry form, Gurbani sentences often violate grammatical rules and are difficult to translate.

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Gurbani spellings are often different than the current Punjabi spellings and that can be misleading.

Interpreting mythology as if it is history can be misleading.

Scientific appearing facts should not be interpreted as true science as applicable today.

Issue of multiple meanings of a word

Words can have multiple meanings, such as words like 'ਤੇ, ਦੇ, ਦੇਉ, ਦੇਹ, ਦੇਹੁ' can have entirely different meanings. For example, 'ਤੇ = ਤੋਂ, ਦੀ ਰਾਹੀਂ; ਅਤੇ, ਉਤੇ) in different situations. There are many more situations like this.

ਜਲ ਤੇ ਤ੍ਰਿਭਵਣੁ ਸਾਜਿਆ, ਘਟਿ ਘਟਿ ਜੋਤਿ ਸਮੋਇ ॥

AGGS, M 1, p 19-18

Depending on how the word “ਤੇ” is interpreted in the above sentence, there can be two different meanings of above:

From water, He created the three worlds; in each and every heart He has infused His Light.

He created the water and three worlds; in each and every heart He has infused His Light.

Out of context issue

If one or few sentences are taken out of context and interpreted, one can construe meanings that are entirely differently. Here are a few examples:

An individual taking one sentence out of context translated the following sentence like this:

ਜੈਸੀ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਿ ਬਾਰਿਕ ਅਰੁ ਮਾਤਾ ॥

AGGS, Namdev, p 1164.(1)

The affectionate bond between the Guru and the Sikh is similar to the bond between a mother and child. The Guru, like mother rears and nurtures his disciples.

However, if this line is interpreted along with the second line the translation is like this:

ਜੈਸੀ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਿ ਬਾਰਿਕ ਅਰੁ ਮਾਤਾ ॥

ਐਸਾ ਹਰਿ ਸੇਤੀ ਮਨੁ ਰਾਤਾ ॥

AGGS, Namdev, p 1164.

Like the love between the child and its mother, so is my mind imbued with the Lord.

The difference is obvious.

The same individual interpreted the following two sentences like this:

ਸੁਤੁ ਅਪਰਾਧ ਕਰਤ ਹੈ ਜੇਤੇ ॥

ਜਨਨੀ ਚੀਤਿ ਨ ਰਾਖਸਿ ਤੇਤੇ ॥

AGGS, Kabir, p 478.

The mother does not keep a count of the wrongs of her child however numerous they might be.

The Satguru too doesn't remember the wrongs of his Sikh (disciple). Uplift your life by following such a Satguru.

However, if above two sentences are interpreted along with the 3rd & 4th sentences the translation is like this:

ਸੁਤੁ ਅਪਰਾਧ ਕਰਤ ਹੈ ਜੇਤੇ ॥

ਜਨਨੀ ਚੀਤਿ ਨ ਰਾਖਸਿ ਤੇਤੇ ॥੧॥

ਰਾਮਈਆ ਹਉ ਬਾਰਿਕੁ ਤੇਰਾ ॥

ਕਾਹੇ ਨ ਖੰਡਸਿ ਅਵਗਨੁ ਮੇਰਾ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

AGGS, Kabir, p 478.

Like many mistakes the son commits and his mother does not hold them against him in her mind;

I am Your child, O God, why not destroy my shortcomings? ||1||Pausell

Again, the difference is obvious.

Taken out of context, the following sentence is often misinterpreted by many:

ਲਖ ਖੁਸੀਆ ਪਾਤਿਸਾਹੀਆ ਜੇ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਨਦਰਿ ਕਰੇਇ ॥

This sabd is often recited to celebrate certain occasions such as birthdays and the implied meaning is: “May God shower Hundreds of thousands of princely pleasures with His grace”.

However, the actual meaning when translated along with the next sentence is as follows:

ਲਖ ਖੁਸੀਆ ਪਾਤਿਸਾਹੀਆ ਜੇ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੁ ਨਦਰਿ ਕਰੇਇ ॥

ਨਿਮਖ ਏਕ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮੁ ਦੇਇ ਮੇਰਾ ਮਨੁ ਤਨੁ ਸੀਤਲੁ ਹੋਇ ॥

AGGS, M 5, p 44.

Hundreds of thousands of princely pleasures are enjoyed, if the True Guru even for a moment through his glance of grace bestows the Name of the Lord through which my mind and body are cooled and soothed.

It is common practice to use the following Sloka to excite the passion for battle to fight a religious war.

ਗਗਨ ਦਮਾਮਾ ਬਾਜਿਓ ਪਰਿਓ ਨੀਸਾਨੈ ਘਾਉ ॥

ਖੇਤੁ ਜੁ ਮਾਂਡਿਓ ਸੂਰਮਾ ਅਬ ਜੂਝਨ ਕੇ ਦਾਉ ॥੧॥

ਸੂਰਾ ਸੋ ਪਹਿਚਾਨੀਐ ਜੁ ਲਰੈ ਦੀਨ ਕੇ ਹੇਤੁ ॥

ਪੁਰਜਾ ਪੁਰਜਾ ਕਟਿ ਮਰੈ ਕਬਹੂ ਨ ਛਾਡੈ ਖੇਤੁ ॥੨॥੨॥

AGGS, Kabir, P 1105.

The battle-drum beats in the sky of the mind; aim is taken, and the wound is inflicted. The spiritual warriors enter the field of battle; now is the time to fight! ||1|| He alone is known as a spiritual hero, who fights in defense of religion. He may be cut apart, piece by piece, but he never leaves the field of battle. ||2||2||

It is well known that Bhagat Kabir was not a warrior. In this sabd, he is not advocating war against others rather against evils within us for spiritual advancement.

Language and Culture Issues

Words like "salvation", "redemption", "liberation", "saving" can have different meanings in different religions. Word "Saint" has a very different meaning to Christians than what is generally implied in English translation of AGGS by many authors. In Christianity, Sainthood is a title that is imparted by the Pope after one's death when certain criteria are met. In the following translation of one sentence, Sant Singh Khalsa has misinterpreted the meaning of word "ਬੀੜੀਆ" as "lipstick", but the actual meaning is "crude cigarette".

ਪਾਨ ਸੁਪਾਰੀ ਖਾੜੀਆ ਮੁਖਿ ਬੀੜੀਆ ਲਾਈਆ ॥

AGGS, M 4, p 726.

Those who eat betel nuts and betel leaf and apply lipstick.

It is difficult to translate "ਸਾਧ/ਸੰਤ, ਵਾਰੀ-ਜਾਣਾ/ਬਲਿਹਾਰੀ ਜਾਣਾ, ਚਰਨਾ ਦੀ ਧੂੜ" into English. Translation of "ਚਰਨਾ ਦੀ ਧੂੜ" as "dust of feet" does not convey the same meaning to a Westerner.

Issue of Symbolism in AGGS

The AGGS is full of symbolism.

Following is an extreme example of symbolism in Gurbani. In this sabd Kabir is describing "spiritual ignorance" as his bad first wife who died and got replaced by a new good wife "spiritual wisdom". Otherwise, one can imply that Bhagat Kabir had two wives, the first was bad and she died and the second was a good one.

ਪਹਿਲੀ ਕਰੂਪਿ ਕੁਜਾਤਿ ਕੁਲਖਨੀ ਸਾਹੁਰੈ ਪੇਈਐ ਬੁਰੀ ॥

ਅਬ ਕੀ ਸਰੂਪਿ ਸੁਜਾਨਿ ਸੁਲਖਨੀ ਸਹਜੇ ਉਦਰਿ ਧਰੀ ॥੧॥

ਭਲੀ ਸਰੀ ਮੁਈ ਮੇਰੀ ਪਹਿਲੀ ਬਰੀ ॥

ਜੁਗੁ ਜੁਗੁ ਜੀਵਉ ਮੇਰੀ ਅਬ ਕੀ ਧਰੀ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

ਕਹੁ ਕਬੀਰ ਜਬ ਲਹੁਰੀ ਆਈ ਬਡੀ ਕਾ ਸੁਹਾਗੁ ਟਰਿਓ ॥

ਲਹੁਰੀ ਸੰਗਿ ਭਈ ਅਬ ਮੇਰੈ ਜੇਠੀ ਅਉਰੁ ਧਰਿਓ ॥੨॥੨॥੩॥

AGGS, Kabir, P 483.

My first wife (spiritual ignorance) was ugly, of low social status and bad character; she was evil in my home, and in her parents' home. My present bride (spiritual knowledge) is beautiful, wise and well-behaved; I have taken her to my heart. ||1||

It has turned out so well, that my first wife has died. May she, whom I have now married, live throughout the ages? ||1||Pause||

Says Kabeer, when the younger bride came, the elder one lost her husband. The younger bride is with me now, and the elder one has taken another husband. ||2||2||32||

Following is another example of symbolism in Gurbani:
ਸਬਦਿ ਮਰੈ ਤਾ ਉਧਰੈ ਪਾਏ ਮੋਖ ਦੁਆਰੁ ॥

AGGS, M 3, p 33.

If one dies through the Sabd, then salvation is obtained, and one finds the Door of Liberation.

Here "ਮਰੈ" does not mean actual death, but means giving up ego.

Deep Meaning Issues

On the surface it may seem simple, however, it is not easy to translate "ਨਾਮ/ਸਤਿਨਾਮ, ਸੁਣਿਐ, ਮੰਨੈ" etc. ਸੁਣਿਐ what? ਮੰਨੈ what? "ਨਾਮ/ਸਤਿਨਾਮ" is not what we generally imply. We can debate the meaning of "ਸਬਦ" and may not reach a consensus.

Issue of Personal Bias

There is no easy way to translate mystical subject and it is difficult to avoid personal bias in this regard. A closed mind that presupposes certain outcomes may never see the truth.

If one tries to find, fundamental truths are often reflected in many religions. However, over time, truths often get wrapped in falsehood and rituals and are difficult to filter out.

It is not easy or possible to develop a fool proof methodology. However, a well-designed methodology can be very helpful in being as accurate as possible..

Some Suggestions for Adopting Right Methodology

Important terms should be recognized and their meanings resolved.

Stick with simplicity. The essence of Gurbani is its simplicity. The spiritual truths are generally simple. Translations often tend to complicate matters.

When in doubt, look for preponderance of evidence within AGGS.

Interpretation of Gurbani in the context of Sikh history and *Maryada* (code of conduct and practices) itself is a huge problem. For example Guru Nanak rejected empty rituals of his time, but over time many rituals have evolved among Sikhs that in essence are no different than Hindu rituals. Many of the *Sakhis* (stories) that are preached in Gurdwaras bear no historical proof and if

taken on face value are bound to create confusion in the interpretation of Sikh history with some affect on interpretation of Gurbani.

One should avoid interpreting scientific appearing facts as true science in the present day context.

The AGGS is not a book of science but a scripture that talks about higher truths. (See editorial note at the end.) Many of the common scientific appearing facts used in Gurbani have been derived from previous knowledge of the time including Vedas and other scriptures. For example words “ਪੰਜ ਤਤ” have been used a number of times. If we interpret this word as “scientific elements” then there is a huge conflict with scientific truth that these are not even elements. As per Hindu mythology the Universe is thought to be made of five basic components “ਪੰਜ ਤਤ”. Those are described as "earth, heaven, air, fire, water". With current knowledge we know that these five are not elements and that the elements that we currently know are more than 100 (~117). However, the use of “ਪੰਜ ਤਤ” words from a philosophical point of view does not change the meaning.

Similarly, there is no scientific proof of the time periods (a) ਸਤਯੁਗ (b) ਤ੍ਰੇਤਾ ਯੁਗ (c) ਦ੍ਵਾਪਰ ਯੁਗ (d) ਕਲਿਯੁਗ as often referred to in AGGS. Besides, Gurbani, these time periods are also described in “Purans, Maha Bharta & Ramayan”. As per “Mahan Kosh” the length of time of above periods is (a) 1,728,000 (b) 1,296,000 (c) 864,000 (d) 432,000 measures when each measure equals 360 years. Thus total of these is 8,640,000,000 years. With today’s knowledge we know that whole human existence is around 2 million years.

REFERENCES

1. AGGS. 1983. Aad Guru Granth Sahib, . Amritsar, Punjab, India: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee). (M = Mahla, i.e., succession number of the Sikh Gurus to the House of Nanak, M is replaced with the name of Bhagat/ Bhatt for their Bani, p = Page of the AGGS

Editorial Note

The Editor agrees with the author that "the AGGS is not the book of Science" since there was no Science at the time of Guru Nanak. However, Guru Nanak is the founder of "Natural Philosophy" which became SCIENCE later. Some information about "Natural Philosophy" has been discussed by Prof Chahal in his two papers on "Application of Science and Logic in Interpreting Gurbani".