

# IK OANKAR SOME REFLECTIONS

ARTICLE

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In 1901, an Indian nationalist from an Anglo-Irish family delivered a convention lecture in Madras. The subject was 'Sikhism'. The audience and subsequent readership consisted of Theosophists, people drawn to a religious philosophy that excitingly offered a new fusion of the 'wisdom of the East'. Annie Besant, the lecturer who followed Madame Helena Blavatsky as leader of the Theosophical Society, was also a passionate supporter of Indian and Irish nationalism. Her published lecture concludes with a selection of passages from the Guru Granth Sahib, supporting her interpretation of Sikhism as a translation of the ancient Indic wisdom of the Upanishads into the vernacular. Annie Besant was herself a student of Sanskrit, and for her selection of Gurbani, she acknowledged the assistance of two Sikh translators, Harbans Singh and Umrao Singh (the father of India's star artist, Amrita Shergill).

In Besant's publication, the translation of the opening words of Sikh scripture is 'One *oankar*.' In other words, she followed her Sikh assistants in recognizing the untranslatability of this key concept into English. Only the numeral representing '*ik*' could be accurately conveyed in English.

However, the most widespread English rendering gives no hint of the challenge facing would-be translators. The statement 'There is one God' rings out confidently and chimes with the central tenet of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Shaken but also galvanized by the

organized outreach of Christian evangelism in Punjab, some Hindu, Muslim and Sikh intellectuals were determined to show that their faiths were at least equal in stature to Christianity. Singh Sabha activists, including Kahn Singh Nabha, promoted the Sikh faith as distinctive, ethical, socially engaged, and above all, monotheistic – a vital requirement for inclusion at the pinnacle of European models of the evolution of religions.

Kahn Singh's friendship with the Irish translator, Max Macauliffe, was formative in Macauliffe's magnum opus, *The Sikh Religion*. This presents the whole Sikh scripture, not continuously but interspersed and contextualized by a narrative of the Gurus' lives from the Suraj Prakash and *gur bilas* literature. The words 'There is, but one God' (Macauliffe 1909: 35) ring out.

'There is, but one God' rings out too from Dorothy Field's slimmer publication in 1914, *The Religion of the Sikhs* (Field 1914:64). Both Field and Macauliffe were convinced that what British India needed was the resurgence of the Sikh religion, so providing a courageous, disciplined, physically fit population of staunch monotheists, loyal to the Crown. Their writing was intended to alert the British government to Sikhism's potential for strengthening British India. In this version *ik oankar*, 'There is, but one God', clearly united the rulers and those they ruled.

More recently, however, translations by eminent scholars render *ik oankar* as 'There is One Being' (Nikky Singh 1995:

47) and 'One, Manifest as Word' (Shackle and Mandair 2005: 4). Perhaps – to use Western terminology – Guru Nanak's combination of the first numeral and the first Gurmukhi alphabetic character is an assertion of monism: the essential oneness of everything, so wiping out such binary distinctions as between 'God' and 'creation' or between 'good' and 'evil'. All is one.

However, what follows in Japji Sahib expands this assertion rather differently, and with different implications, from Western expositions of monism. In particular, '*nirbhau*' (without fear) and '*nirvair*' (without enmity) are not simply apophatic adjectives expressing what *ik oankar* is not. As internalized by faithful Sikhs in daily devotion, they are a basis for Sikh ethics, inspiring courageous, compassionate lives of service. They suggest a God or Ultimate Reality who (or which) is without what are usually deemed to be human attributes, indeed almost universal responses, the emotions of fear and enmity.

In a recent publication, the Sikh educator Gopinder Kaur's reflection, headed 'Everything begins with Ik', concludes: 'In the end, there is no substitute for returning to the shape and sound of the original'. As she points out, 'the numeral [ik] transcends differences of geography, gender and culture, and impressions tied to different religious identities and traditions' (Harinder Singh 2022: 2). Oang [sic] 'represents the energy of the Creator's presence, with its sacred vibration resonating everywhere' and 'Kar is also a line which marks a protected zone, evoking how everything is lovingly held together by Divine grace – as indicated by the symbol's elegant overhead arch, whose tip points to infinity' (ibid.).

So, not only is the spoken '*ik oankar*' supremely powerful, including as it does the resonance of the ancient Indic *om*, but the visual symbol is potent too. While visually encapsulating Guru Nanak's primary teaching, it conveys the conviction, over successive centuries, of the *panth* (those following the Guru's way), and so it has become a signifier of Sikhs worldwide. In a religiously diverse world, emblematically, '*ik oankar*', interchangeably with the weapon-based *khanda* symbol of the Khalsa, stands alongside the Christians' cross. Muslims' crescent and Hindus' *swastika* and *om*.

Sikhs' very identity and the seminal spiritual insight expressed by '*ik oankar*' are inseparable – inseparable, too, from a call to humanitarian service. To quote best-

selling author and motivational speaker, Simran Jeet Singh:

*Ik oankar* refers to the oneness of reality, the one divine force that connects us all. This concept is the basis of core Sikh values, including love, equality, service, and justice. (Simranjeet Singh 2022: 302)

As he posted on his Facebook page:

In embracing the message of *ik oankar*, we recognize that there is a divine spark within each and every one of us, regardless of our backgrounds or beliefs. We are all interconnected, and our actions have the ability to impact the larger fabric of humanity. By practicing *ik oankar*, we can see the divine light in others and treat them with respect, compassion, and love. (Simranjeet Singh, 3 July 2023)

What is clear is that *ik oankar*, both visually as a symbol and logo and orally as a reverberating statement and invocation, not only unites today's Sikhs but also connects Sikhs across the generations from the days of Guru Nanak and that it will continue to do so on into the future. May *ik oankar* continue to illuminate and reflect the questing of Sikhs and other spiritual seekers.

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