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Sri Guru Granth Sahib: A Unique Scripture

By

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1. Introductory Remarks

At the outset I want to offer my sincere thanks to the Management, Chairperson, Members, Principal, Dr. (Mrs.) Satnam Kaur, the faculty and student community of Mata Sundari College for Women, New Delhi for inviting me to present this paper in this seminar on the theme ‘Sri Guru Granth Sahib: A Unique Scripture’. I understand this seminar is being held to commemorate the Tercentenary of Gurta Gaddi of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It is indeed a privilege to be part of this celebration and for this I am once again grateful to you all.

Now concerning the paper, which I have been asked to present on the subject, ‘Sri Guru Granth Sahib: A Unique Scripture’, I want to say that my reflection on this subject will be limited to the two main sub-heads namely ‘ecumenical aspect’ and ‘holistic message’ of Sri Guru Granth Sa-

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hib. But before that a brief reference needs to be made to the context of a time, when the message was received by Gurus and various *Bhagatas*, which today is part of Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

2. The Context

Guru Nanak Devji in *Var Majh Ki*, in one of the Sloka (Verse), gave a very clear visible overview of the context of his time as follow:

*Kali-Yuga is turned knife, rulers butchers;
Righteousness on wings is flown.
This is the dark night of evil;
The moon of truth is nowhere visible, nor risen.
For light have I searched to distraction—
No path in this darkness is visible.
Humanity in egoism involved, in suffering wails.
This Nanak seeks to know: How may liberation then be found?*¹

Bhai Gurdas, whose *Vars* (writings) are considered as the key (*Kunji*) to understand Sri Guru Granth Sahib, has summed up the conditions before the birth of Guru Nanak Devji as follows:

*Masters, the Dark Age is the vomit of dog which feeds on the flesh of corpses.
Kings commit sinful deeds and fences consume the crops they are meant to protect.
The people have become blind; devoid of understanding they utter evil and falsehood.
It is disciples who play the music, brothers and the guru
who in so many ways dance (to their tune).
Servants remain at ease in their homes while the master arises
and goes to their houses.
The qazis have become corrupt, taking bribes and ignoring the rights (of the people)
Women's love for men is only money, regardless of its source.
Sin prevails throughout the entire world.*²

Bhai Gurdas' *vars* are the commentary on the text of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, therefore this verse of his *var* is self explanatory. So we will move to the discussion on 'Ecumenical Aspect'.

3. Ecumenical Aspect

Sri Guru Granth Sahib presents in real sense the ecumenical spirit in its content, because among 36 authors, are included 6 Gurus, 15 Bhagats (Hindus and Muslims), 11 Bhats (all Hindu Brahmins) and 4 others (3 Muslims and one Hindu).³ The authors, particularly the *Bhagata* writers, they came not only from different regional backgrounds of India, but they belonged to various castes: even five of them belonged to the so-called lower castes. This added to the richness of the ecumenical spirit of this Holy Book. Dr. C. H. Loehlin describes the principles that Guru Arjan Deviji used in the selection of various writings that were to be included in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib: "It is said that Guru rejected hymns of self deification; those derogatory to women; those which advised the concealing of God's message from men; and those disparaging life and its struggles"⁴ The quotes given in later discussion will show how these principles became operative in the Text. As we will be referring to the hymns of Gurus and of those authors who were considered untouchables in our later discussion later, we shall like to give here two examples, one from a Hindu Bhagat and one from a Muslim to elucidate my point.

Two hymns of Bhagat Jaidev (1201-1245) are included in the text of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. He was a Hindu Brahmin, who in one of his hymns condemns the value of ‘wealth and beauty’, but lays stress on the contemplation of Lord. He says:

*My self! Contemplate the Lord, else shall thou in regrets have to fall,
My sinful self, given avarice!
know, in a day or two shalt thou depart.
In attachment to greed lost thou wasted thy life,
And by Maya–illusion deluded.
Be not proud of wealth and beauty:
Know, like a piece of paper shall thou turn pulp.
The day that Yama, grasping thee by the heir, overthrows thee,
Powerless shall thou be .
As in contemplation, devotional chant, compassion hast thou not been engaged,
On thy face shalt receive buffets.⁵*

Hymns of Baba Farid (1175-1265), who was by faith a Muslim (*Qureshi*), also included along with the writings of other *Bhagatas*. Few of his *Slokes* (*verses*) are given here as examples, in which he laid emphasis on forgiveness as virtue and looks towards the Lord for help. He says:

*Farid, strike not back those strike thee blow;
In utter humanity and forgiveness turn towards thy home.
Farid ! Time when thou couldst garner merit,
wast thou engrossed in the world.
Now with death’s foundation firmly laid must thou depart,
When thy sack is loaded.
Look, Farid! What has befallen thee?
Thy beard turned grey,
Thy end approaching, the past far behind.
Look, Farid! What has come to pass?
Life sweet as sugar is turned to bitter poison.
To whom to relate my tale of sorrow but the Lord?⁶*

4. Holistic Message

It must be said categorically that it is the ‘holistic message’ of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which gives to this Holy Book a rare uniqueness. If one carefully goes through the content of the hymns in it, one will find that it covers all the aspect of human life including human being’s relationship with God, the Ultimate Reality, and the salvation or liberation of human beings. The authors of Sri Guru Granth Sahib have dealt with the basic contextual issues of their times by specially questioning the atrocities committed by the tyrannical rule of Mughals, the evils of caste system and the status of women. While addressing these and other issues in their prophetic messages, the Gurus and *Bhagatas* made a complete paradigm shift. I shall like to give a few examples to illustrate my point.

4.1 Creedal Statement

At the time of Guru Nanak Devji, many different views about the nature of God were existing. Keeping in mind all the prevailing views and definitions in the opening book of Sri Guru Granth

Sahib, Guruji made a basic statement of his faith, which later became the fundamental creedal statement for the Sikhs known as *Mool Mantra*, which reads as:

*He is Sole Supreme Being; eternal manifestation;
Creators, Immanent Reality; Without Fear;
Without Rancour; timeless Form; Unincarnated;
Self-Existent ;realized by grace of the holy Preceptor.*

After stating this basic faith-statement about the nature of Ultimate Reality and how one attains the knowledge of the same, Guru Nanak Devji raised some other basic questions, but before that he summarized the existing prescribed ways to achieve the salvation, as follows:

*In primal Time, is all Time, was the Creator;
Nothing is real but the Eternal.
Nothing shall last but the Eternal.
Ritual purification; though millions-fold,
May not purify the mind;
Nor may absorption in trance still it, however long and continuous.
Possessing worlds multiple quenches not the rage avarice and desire.
A thousand million feats of intellect bring not emancipation.*

In this way Guru Nanak Devji has reflected on all the possible traditional methods or ways to solve or answer the basic question of human quest, which he put in his own words as:

*How then to become true to the Creator?
How demolish the wall of illusion?*

Guruji's own answer to this is:

Through obedience to His Ordinance and Will.⁷

Guru Nanak Devji further in *Japuji Sahib* discussed different aspects of the same question, but his firm conviction was that it is only through the grace of God that one can get salvation. In this regards he says:

*By man's actions is acquired the vesture of human incarnation;
By God's grace is attained the Door of liberation.⁸*

4.2. An Alternative Social Order

All through the text of Sri Guru Granth Sahib social equality among human beings is upheld fully. It rejects completely the caste based distinctions, as well as rituals based on *Karma* or deeds. For example, in *Japuji Sahib*, Guru Nanak Devji had declared that before God all are equal:

*Saith Nanak:
All before Him are alike —
None high or low.⁹*

Guru Nanak Devji totally rejected the caste exclusiveness and declared his complete solidarity with those considered outcastes (*neech*) — or today's Dalits — by declaring himself:

*The lowest among the low-caste;
those still lower and contemned —
Nanak is by their side;
He envies not the great of the world.
Lord! Thy grace falls on the land
where the poor are cherished.*¹⁰

Guru Amar Dasji while arguing against the caste system declared that false ideas behind the so-called certain castes only gives rise to human pride, which is actually harmful for achieving the final life-goal. Therefore Guru Amar Dasji strongly recommended:

*Pride of caste let none entertain:
One realizing the Supreme Being is alone a Brahmin
Thou ignorant fool, entertain not pride of caste!
By such pride manifold mischief arises.*

Guru Amar Dasji again emphasizes this point by making it clear that all human beings are created from the same source. He said;

*All talk of the four castes:
Know that all creation from the Divine
Essence has arisen.
The whole universe from the same clay has appeared:
The potter however, in numerous forms the vessels.
For five elements is made the form of the body—
Who may consider which has less of these or more.*¹¹

Sri Guru Granth Sahib rejects outright the castes-based social order or caste practices. Its compiler Guru Arjun Devji has even included the hymns composed by the so-called untouchable saints in it. This shows that in the eyes of the Gurus, out-castes considered untouchables, were not only welcome to receive religious ministrations, but they were also offered the place of a teacher, which at that time was forbidden even to higher castes other than the Brahmins. Three such examples of untouchable (Dalits) saints are: Kabir, a weaver; Ravidas, a cobbler and Namdev, a dyer. Guru Arjan Devji believed that “in each vessel does the Lord abide”¹² I shall quote from the hymns of Ravidas and Kabir based on their experiences.

In the following hymn Ravidas vehemently condemns the maltreatment given to him on his first visit to a Hindu temple. When the so called upper caste devotees realized that he was a low caste washer man, they pushed him out from the temple. Pained by this treatment, he retired to the courtyard behind the temple and there he had an intimate experience with God, as a result of which the door of the temple turned towards him. He narrated this experience thus:

*In a cheerful mood to Thy temple I came,
While performing devotion, was Nama pushed off.
Lord of Yadava race! low is my caste.
Why didst thou give me birth in a dyer's home?
Picking up my woollen sheet, back I turned,*

*And sat in the temple's rear.
While Nama the Lord's laudation was uttering
The temple door towards the devotee turned.¹³*

A low caste considered Muslim, saint Kabir, has gone still further and attacked the so-called high caste Brahmins from the front and asked them if they can really prove they are different from other human beings. He argued:

*In the lodgement in the womb exists neither family pride nor caste:
All beings from the Divine essence have created.
Say thou Pandit! When did Brahmins originate?
Do not make waste of thy human incarnation,
By boasting of thy Brahmin origin.
If thou doest claim to be a Brahmin by thy birth from a Brahmin woman,
Why was thy birth not from a different source?
How are you Brahmins and we Sudras?
How were we made of mere blood, and you of milk?
Saith Kabir: Among us is he alone known as Brahmin, who the Supreme Being contemplates.¹⁴*

These are the few examples included in Sri Guru Granth Sahib about the issue of caste. We will close the discussion of this sub-section with a quotation from one of Guru Nanak Devji's hymns, in which he has not only rejected the caste system as a whole which labels some as low caste or untouchable or outcaste, but he has also revealed who in truth are "the real untouchables." Part of this hymn reads as:

*Evil – doing, hard- heartedness, slander, violence—
These are the real untouchables.
How is your cooking-space pure with these low-caste women beside you?
True ritual of purity is truthfulness;
Good actions your kitchen- bounds;
Prayer, true holy bath.
Saith Nanak: With God such only are considered noble,
As preach not to others sinful ritual.¹⁵*

Thus Sri Guru Granth Sahib has not only completely rejected the caste based distinctions and practices, it has also laid down the foundation of an alternative 'social order' based upon the principles of 'purity of truthfulness', 'good actions', and 'prayer'. Here we also see the basis of three fundamental concepts, *Kirt Karo* ('work' with one's own hands), *Namjapo* ('meditate' on Divine name) and *Vand Chako* ('share' your food with others). In this way the authors of Sri Guru Granth Sahib (particularly Gurus) did not only reflect on caste based 'social order', they in fact laid down the foundation of Sikh praxis, because they demanded actual action with the reflection.

4.3 Paradigm Shift in Many Other Areas

In Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the integrity and sacredness of the whole creation is fully upheld. This can be felt because of the very presence of the Creator in every created things of this world: and that includes the human beings as well. In this regard Guru Nanak Devji has said in *Var Asa*:

*His self He created, and manifested His Name.
Then the second object, expanse of the universe He made;
Settled in His cushion, in joy He beheld it.¹⁶*

Guru Nanak Devji as a prophet after seeing the upheaval created by Babar's invasion, challenged the Creator God and even questioned Him by saying:

*The Lord from Babar's invasion protected Khorasan,
And on Hindustan let loose the terror.
The Lord Himself punishes not:
So the Mughal Babar He sent down,
Dealing death as Yama.
As in their agony of suffering the people wailed,
Didst Thou feel no compassion for them?¹⁷*

In a number of places, Sri Guru Granth Sahib reveals that the religious leaders of different religions of Guruji's time even have lost their integrity. Therefore Guruji offered the alternative meaning of faith and asked everyone to follow these. For example to the Hindu Brahmins he told about the real holy thread (*Janeoo*), which they should put on themselves. Guruji said to them:

*Make compassion the cotton, contentment the yarn;
Continnence the knot and purity the twist;
Such is the true sacred thread of the self.
Thou Brahmin-priest! Put this on me shouldst thou have it.¹⁸*

In other place Guruji told to the Muslims the virtues of a true Muslim. Guruji said:

*Hard it is to deserve the name of Musalman—
Only one truly so, may such be called.
First, must be hold in love the way of the holy;
Like iron on grindstone should be cast off his possessions.
In the way of the Preceptor should he have faith,
And banish illusion of death and life.
To the lord's will should he be obedient:
With faith in the Creator as commissionate he becomes.
May he be called a Musalman.¹⁹*

The status of women is the other main concern, which in Sri Guru Granth Sahib has been taken seriously. Because they were considered very low, inferior and impure at that time, Guru Nanak Devji, while questioning this position of theirs in the society, bestowed upon them, the highest status by saying in *Var Asa*:

Why revile her of whom are born great ones of the earth?²⁰

About *Sutak*, a belief according to which a number of days woman was considered impure after the child birth, Guruji declared this practice an evil tendency of the mind.

The mind's sutak is avarice, the tongue's falsehood;

*The eye's sutak coveting others' womenfolk's beauty and others' wealth.
The ear's sutak is listening to slander.
Saith Nanak: By such practices selves of human beings caught,
To Yama's demesne in bonds are taken.*²¹

Suttee was on the other practice, according to which women were forced to get cremated together with their husbands' on their funereal pyre. Other Gurus condemned this evil practice also. Guru Amar Dasji while condemning this evil, gave a new meaning to the expression *suttee*. He said:

*These be not the true suttees who burns themselves in logs of wood,
Saith Nanak: True suttees are those that bear the suffering of separation.
These be the real suttees that abide in good conduct and contentment;
Who served their Lord, and after ever cherish his memory.*²²

5. Concluding Remarks

In Conclusion, I want to emphasise again that Sri Guru Granth Sahib is not only a unique Scripture that ecumenical in nature, but above all that it has a 'holistic' universal message, because it offered on one side a holistic approach to the human life, on other side its message which is equally preponderant meant for all the times including that of our own. Besides dealing with the doctrinal clarity the issue of caste and its evils, it has dealt with other important issues as well, such as the integrity of whole creation, the status of women, *Suttee* etc. The education and awareness in these and other issues, related to women specially, needs more attention today, because the ratio of women as compared to men are dwindling lower and lower in most developed states in India. The evil of the female foeticide has increased at present. Then, the caste issue is something which continues to challenge the society: not only in most cases our marriages are taking place on the caste basis, even our worship places (including Gurudwaras) are being built on the same basis.

I want to close this reflection by quoting the English translation of a part of one of the stanzas of *Var* by Bhai Gurdas, who was the first Sikh theologian. It reads as:

*In the Dark Age (with its multitude of deities) he revealed that
there is but one, the Supreme God.
(He made firm) the bases of the four pillars of dharma,
and the four varnas he created one.
He regarded king and beggar as equal
and caused the virtue of humility to be practiced in the world.
Behold the manner in which God reverses accepted orders,
how he makes heads (which are held high) to bow to the feet!
Baba (Nanak) redeemed the Dark Age by proclaiming the mantra of the True Name
Guru Nanak came for the redemption of the Dark Age!*²³

References

- ¹ *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (SGGS), p.145. (English translation of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* translated by Gurbachan Singh Talib, published by Punjab University, Patiala used throughout this paper).
- ² Ganda Singh (Ed.): *The Punjab Past and Present* (Parts I and II), Punjabi University, Patiala, 1969, p.36.

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- ³ See for details in: Talib, Gurbachan Singh: *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (in English Translation), Vol. One, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1984, Introduction p. xxxviii. And also see: Loehlin, C.H: *The Sikhs and Their Scriptures*, Lucknow, 1964, pp 31-36.
- ⁴ Loehlin, C.H.: op.cit., p.32.
- ⁵ SGGS, p.1106.
- ⁶ SGGS, p 1378.
- ⁷ SGGS, p.1.
- ⁸ SGGS, p 2.
- ⁹ SGGS, p.7.
- ¹⁰ SGGS, p.15.
- ¹¹ SGGS, p.1128.
- ¹² SGGS, p.747.
- ¹³ SGGS, p.1164.
- ¹⁴ SGGS, p.324.
- ¹⁵ SGGS, p.91. (See Introduction, Vol. One, P. IXXXIII).
- ¹⁶ SGGS, p. 463.
- ¹⁷ SGGS, p . 360.
- ¹⁸ SGGS, p. 471.
- ¹⁹ SGGS, p. 143.
- ²⁰ SGGS, p. 473.
- ²¹ SGGS, p. 472.
- ²² SGGS, p. 787.
- ²³ Gand Singh (ed.): op.cit., p. 33.