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Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
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Institute of Religious Peace Research / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik
Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

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The Lord of the Sikhs: Adi Shri Guru Granth¹

By

Edmund Weber

The name of the Holy Book of the Sikhs is Adi (Primordial) Shri (Radiating) Guru (Master) Granth (Book) Sahib (Lord).

Shortly before his death, the great reformer of the Sikh religion, Guru Govind Rai Singh (1675-1708) declared the extended version of the Granth as his successor to the guru-ship.

The Granth is a poetic work that does not contain any prose. Only some authors of this Holy Book belonged to the Sikh community: Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, his successors Angad, Amar Das, Ram Das, Arjan Dev, Hargobind, Hari Rai, Hari Krishan, Tegh Bahadur and Govind Rai Singh.² Other authors, the so-called Bhagats (Saints), such as the Sufi Kabir, a weaver by profession, or the Krishna poet Sur Das belonged to other religions. And lastly, the other co-authors of this Holy Book were a few Bhattas (bards), for instance, Haribans or Ganga.

¹ First published in: Edmund Weber: Hindu India. Frankfurt am Main 2006.

² The teachings of Guru Gobind Singh are compiled in Dasham Granth.

Besides the multi-religious authorship, yet another special characteristic of the Granth is its multi-linguistic aspect. Various parts of the original text of the Granth have been written in different languages and dialects such as Hindi, Sanskrit, Marathi, Persian, and Arabic. Although Guru Nanak and his successors were Punjabis, they spoke a dialect, which was according to E. Trumpp a mixture of Hindi and Punjabi. But Guru Govind Singh wrote in pure Hindi.

The script of the Granth is Gurmukhi, which Guru Nanak is supposed to have developed for writing his part of the Granth. The Granth as a whole consists only of usable liturgical texts, psalms and hymns.

However, the main characteristic of the Granth is that it received the status of Guru-ship, an authority which until Govind Singh was only applicable to persons. The replacement of human Gurus by a Holy Book may have had several reasons.

Firstly, since Guru Ram Das (1574-1581) the personal guru-ship became the hereditary property of the Sodhi family; this hereditary guru-ship was so deeply rooted in the minds of the Sikhs that they couldn't imagine any non-hereditary successor. If such a non-hereditary succession would have taken place, it could have led to a serious crisis within the Khalsa³ community of the initiated Sikhs founded by Guru Govind Singh.

On the other hand, the permanent persecution of the rebellious Sikh Gurus and their followers by the Muslim Moguls and their governors, recommended to enthrone an authority which was less vulnerable to attacks. A book guru could be learnt by heart and worshipped internally. A persecution of such a guru who was living in the hearts of the people produced no effect.

The protection of the religious authority by the egalitarian Khalsa community became even more necessary as the Sikhs underwent changes under Guru Govind Singh in two ways.

Firstly, this Guru put an end to the hegemony of the urban Khattris castes together with their clergy, who were interested in making a compromise with the Muslim rulers; he replaced them by Jat peasants who belonged not only to a lower caste but were also prepared to fight.

Secondly, he declared the use of weapons as a legitimate means to defend the Sikh religion and the Good of the world; thus moving significantly away from Guru Nanak, the founder.

Guru Govind Singh secured both the changes institutionally by creating the Khalsa (1699), the group of Sikhs who were ready to go to war.

Govind Singh summarized his reformation of the Sikh religion in the following words: "My spirit is immersed in the Khalsa and the Granth. One who wishes to listen to my opinion, should read the Granth". Thus, the Granth was canonized and the community was entrusted with the canon and worship. The community was granted the Guru-puja, the veneration of the Guru which is common in India.

³ The Pure One

The Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth comes alive in the cultic recitation of the believers: mornings, evenings, before going to bed, in the Gurudwara i.e. Guru's Door. On special occasions, for instance an opening of a shop, a recitation called Akhand Path, which can even last 48 hours, is performed; for which one likes to call five professional reciters, the so-called Granthis. If this is not possible, one can go to the Gurudwara and request the Granthi, the keeper and reader of the Granth to perform a rogation service.

The liturgy for Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth in the Gurudwara clearly shows the royal but even the divine magnificence of the Holy Book. The worship of the Granth is a court ceremony as it is or was common in the courts of the rulers and in the Hindu and Buddhist temples. In the Gurudwara the believer approaches the royal throne with the canopy on which he rests with folded hands and lowered eyes; the throne is decorated with silver embroidery that rests on the royal throne with a baldachin. The believer bows his head before Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth, touches his forehead to the cloth which covers the Granth and steps back to join the other believers. In this way, the divine and royal splendour of Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth is made evident.

On the other side this solemn liturgy is nothing else than a worship of a gurudev, a guru puja. The liturgy in the Gurudwara is such a puja to gurudev Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth, done by the Sikhs i.e. his 'disciples'.

The recitation of the Granth is not only done by the Granthis, the official liturgists, but the Holy Book has to be read by all the Sikhs. But as it is written in Gurmukhi, it is expected that each Sikh family learns the script privately or in the temple. Thus, the first day on which a child begins to read the Granth is a great day for the family and the community.

The Lord and Guru in shape of a Holy Book is the fundamental Murti of the Sikh religion, its central object of veneration. Its importance can be seen in the various Sikh ceremonies. A Sikh marriage ceremony takes place before the Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth in the temple; the couple getting married goes around the throne four times while the Granthi is reciting the Holy Book. During the funeral ceremony only the Granth is recited. And during Sikh processions Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth is driven around on a decorated seat in a vehicle as a Murti, accompanied by enthusiastic, rejoicing Sikhs riding horses, bicycles and motor cycles as well as the Panj Piyaras with drawn swords.⁴

Since the death of Guru Govind Singh no visible human representative of Divine Truth has existed, instead only a visible scriptural one endures. This one, Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth, shows the way to God's name about which it is said: "There is no place without His Name" or "Nanak, the devotees hunger to praise You, the True Being, Your Name is their support"; or "When I worship God's Name, I live, if I forget Him, I would die. Difficult is the way, to speak the True Name unceasingly and with devotion in prayer. One hungers after the True Name, yet when one may eat hungrily from it, so one is free from all suffering."

⁴ The Five Beloved Ones, i.e. the first five members of the Khalsa.

In conclusion, the Holy Book of the Sikhs, Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth, has been written by Sikh Gurus, Hindus and Muslims as well as bards in different languages. Out of their writings, Guru Govind Singh compiled the final text. He also appointed Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth as the sole and everlasting Guru. This Lord has the Khalsa as his community, an intentionally egalitarian community of initiated men and women. Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth is worshipped as the sole Murti in the Gurudwara, at home and outside. Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth is the only mediator between his own disciples, the Sikhs, and the eternal God. The Lord is as Guru the only representation of God on earth.⁵ The Lord's mouth are the reciting Granthis and the other reciting Sikhs. In this way Lord Adi Shri Guru Granth sings the praise of the name and mercy of God: "Great is His Name, high is His abode, above all exalted is His Name; only (that one)he, who is as exalted as He, can recognise the Exalted One. How great He is, only He knows; Nanak, we all receive gifts out of God's kindness, who looks at us with mercy."⁶

⁵ Cf., Ray, Nirharranja: The Message, Lecture Two, Guru Nanak's Birth Quincentenary, 10th Monthly Function, The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society, Panjabi University, Patiala 1969, p. 29: "The third step was taken when Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Guru in succession, abolished the institution of a human Guru and in its place set up the Book which was the embodiment of all Gurus recognized by the sishyas or the Sikhs, he called the Book *Guru Granth Sahab*; the Book was Guru, the Lord."

⁶ All originally German quotations of the Granth are taken from Thiel-Horstmann, Monika: *Leben aus der Wahrheit - Texte der heiligen Schrift der Sikhs* (Life out of the Truth - Texts of the Holy Scripture of the Sikhs), Zürich 1988