

## How and Why the Message of Guru Nanak got distorted?

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Last year, during the 550th anniversary of Guru Nanak, large scale celebrations have been organised by Indian Council of Cultural Affairs (ICCR), a wing of Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Govt. of India at global level. I participated in this programme as a guest speaker in the universities of British Columbia (Canada). Punjab Govt. and SGPC are also involved in spreading the message of Guru Nanak by holding separate programmes to suit their agenda and convenience. Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) is also not left behind in holding International Conference on "Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak" at Mata Sundari College, Delhi on 6-7 December. Delhi Akali Dal (Sarna Group) put a feather in its turban by organising a procession from Delhi to Nankana Sahib and Kartarpur to install a Golden Palki at Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur.

This year too, a plethora of activities have been organised at global level in the form of Seminars and Kirtan darbars to spread the message of love, peace and humanism of Guru Nanak. Nearly half a dozen books have been published by celebrated authors on the life and teachings of Guru Nanak. I had the privilege to review some of these books and my reviews [1-3] have appeared in The Sikh Review during 2019-20. I consider these books as milestones to the spread of Sikh religion and propagation of the message of its founder in the modern context. Another milestone worth mentioning is the opening of Kartarpur Corridor between India and Pakistan which is expected to promote goodwill and harmony between peoples of Punjab.

During my tour of North America from May to September 2019, I had the opportunity to visit almost a dozen gurdwaras in USA and Canada. Chardi Kala Foundation, California, USA invited me to deliver a talk at San Jose gurdwara on 11th August on the theme

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"Relevance of Guru Nanak in Modern Scientific Era" [4]. I made liberal use of recent books authored by Bhai Harbans Lal (Texas) and SS Bhatti (Chandigarh) in my presentation [5, 6]. Some of the points of discussion were as follows:

- Guru Nanak's philosophy of interfaith understanding through dialogue is the only way to attain peace, progress, and unity in the world.
- It is imbued with a modern spirit, which finds its best expression in such values as democracy, pluralism, freedom, and individuality.
- Guru Nanak deals primarily with truths transcending the scientific or secular. It speaks of natural and supernatural truths, God and His creation, humanity and community, and social-cultural life.
- Guru Nanak used a logical and scientific approach based on *bibek buddhi* (intellect), revolted against futile rituals, superstitions and dogmas, and authoritarian rulers.

**1. Schisms in Sikhi:** How and Why the message of Guru Nanak got derailed or distorted is the topic for discussion in this essay? Both how and why are intermingled and it is not an easy task to differentiate between the two. Historically speaking, this derailment started just after the demise of Guru Nanak. Baba Sri Chand, the eldest son of Guru Nanak, did not follow in the footsteps of his father and started his own School of Asceticism (better known as *Udasi Matt*) as a parallel movement against mainstream Sikhi led by Guru Angad. This schismatic approach of the collaterals and descendants of the Sikh Gurus continued to hinder the progress of mainstream Sikhi till the instalment of Guru Teg Bahadur as the 9th Guru in Baba Bakala. The schismatic group of *Minas* (descendants of Pirthi Chand) was so strong that they became custodians of Harmandir Sahib (present day Golden Temple) for almost 80 years, so much so that none of the Gurus was allowed entry in to the holy precincts after Guru Hargobind left Amritsar and made Kiratpur Sahib his permanent abode.

The animosity of Pirthi Chand against his younger brother, Guru Arjun Dev, is well known in the Sikh circles. But very few Sikhs are aware that his descendants, Meharban and Harji, tried to confuse the gullible Sikhs by writing fake *banis* (*kacchi bani*) on the same pattern as the bani of Guru Granth Sahib using nom de plume (pen name) of Guru Nanak. Prof. Pritam Singh (Patiala) and JS Ahluwalia (Richmond, California) have compiled the *Mina* literature in ten volumes and I got the opportunity to read some of these volumes containing fake Sukhmani, written using the same metre and rhyme as used by Guru

Arjun Dev for *Sukhmani* of Guru Granth Sahib. Dr Dalvir Singh Pannu's book "***Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders***" [7] narrates the story of *Minas* and their influence in Punjab. Guru Harsahai in Ferozepur district was founded by a resourceful *Mina* Jiwan Mal, after the name of his son Harsahai. It is now a flourishing town inhabited by Sodhis and represented in Punjab assembly by Rana Gurmit Singh Sodhi, a Cabinet Minister in the ruling Congress party.

In addition to *Minas*, *Dhirmalias* and *Ramraias* were two other groups which played derogatory role during the era of Sikh Gurus. These schismatic groups were opposing the ministry of Sikh Gurus, betrayed the cause of Guru Nanak's mission and got favours from the rulers of the land by posing as agent provocateurs. Another hurdle in the mainstream Sikhi, the *Masand* system (for tithe collection) was discarded and their leaders were punished by Guru Gobind Singh. The Khalsa created by the tenth Guru fell into schisms of *Bandai* and *Tat* Khalsa. The other schismatic groups who got separated from the mainstream Sikhi are Kukas (Namdharis), Radhaswamis and Nirankaris. In the present day Punjab, the number of Deras and Sant Babas with following of thousands of Sikhs is beyond any reasonable count.

**2. Shabad Guru Versus Granth Guru:** When Guru Nanak was accosted by the *Sidhas* to reveal his Guru during the famous debate recorded in Guru Granth Sahib under the title "*Sidh Gosht*", he replied, ਸਬਦੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਧੁਨਿ ਚੇਲਾ ॥ "*Shabad is my Guru, upon whom I lovingly focus my consciousness*". Guru Gobind Singh, before leaving his mortal frame at Nander in 1708, enshrined the "*Shabad Guru*" in the form of Guru Granth Sahib as the everlasting Guru of the Sikhs. Dr Devinder Singh Chahal of Montreal has written his book "*Sabd Guru to Granth Guru: An In Depth Study*" [8]. The author has come to the conclusion: "The original message of Guru Nanak has been distorted and instead of contemplation on *Sabd Guru*, the Sikhs have started the worship of Sri Guru Granth Sahib as an idol". In my view, Guru Granth Sahib is a holy Sikh scripture and a treasure house of *Shabad Guru*, hence deserves our respect but it is not to be worshipped as an idol. The Sikhs have been misled to worship the Guru Granth Sahib by adopting various types of practices and rigmaroles as being promoted by the custodians of Sikh institutions.

Bhai Harbans Lal and Roshan Attrey are also of the opinion [5]: "The object of worship or meditation for the Sikhs is not the deity Guru in its physical form, but the Word or *Shabad* enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib". The authors refer to the Sikh prayer (*ardas*) and reiterate that *paath deedar* is clearly a new way to approach God and central to Sikh

worship."When practiced faithfully and regularly, *paath deedar* opens up our consciousness to new vistas of the divine power working in us and to let the True Guru dwell in our heart".

**3. Puja of the Relics of Sikh Gurus:** In all religions, the relics of Prophets are objects of worship for their followers. The *Shroud of Turin*, also called the Turin Shroud, is a length of linen cloth bearing the negative image of a man believed to be Jesus Christ. Historical and scientific evidence points to it being a medieval creation. In Srinagar (J&K Union Territory), the Hazratbal Shrine is dedicated to a relic, believed by many Muslims of Kashmir to be Prophet Muhammad's hair. The Buddha's relics are found in many countries enshrined and worshipped in *stupas*. It is claimed that King Ashoka divided the relics into 84,000 portions and had *stupas* built over them throughout his kingdom. That is how idol worship of Buddha started in many countries and his message got corrupted after centuries, so much so that Buddhism became extinct in India, its place of birth.

It is strange that worship of relics has taken roots in Sikhi just after the Guru period. In the present day Sikh society, we have numerous gurdwaras set up to celebrate the sanctity of relics associated with Sikh Gurus, without knowing their validity as real or fake? "Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders" by Dalvir Pannu [7] has a Chapter dedicated to "*Gurdwara Sachi Manji*" in the village Haft Madar presently in district Nankana Sahib of Pakistan. It has become famous for three historic relics associated with the visits of Guru Nanak, Guru Amardas and Guru Arjun. The relics are a cot (*manji*), a pair of shoes (*jora*), and a walking stick (*khundi or soti*) having association with the three Gurus, respectively. The owners of these relics used to collect offerings (*bheta*) from the Sikh pilgrims. In my view, the relics must be placed in Sikh museums, rather than constructing gurdwaras to celebrate them. I believe this worship of relics need to be discarded by an edict of Akal Takhat as it makes a mockery of Guru Nanak's mandate to follow the "Shabad Guru" enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, both in letter and spirit. Giani Harpreet Singh, Jathedar Akal Takhat, in a meeting held on 21st October proposed to ban the sale and worship of idols and photos of Sikh Gurus. But he was not sure how to deal with murals and paintings of Sikh Gurus inside the premises of historical Gurdwaras.

In modern day Punjab, several gurdwaras exist in our towns and villages named after trees, such as *Amb, Beri, Tahli, Jand, Peepal, Bohar, Jhar and Harianbelan*,

consecrated to the memory of the Gurus. The gurdwaras named after *Beris* are more popular and sacred in Sikh memory, for example, gurdwaras *Ber Sahib* in Sialkot and Sultanpur Lodhi are associated with the visits of Guru Nanak. During my recent visit to Sultanpur Lodhi, I was surprised to find pilgrims circumambulating the *Beri* behind the building of main Gurdwara and offering prayers. There was lesser crowd inside the main building of Gurdwara where hymn singing (*kirtan*) was going on. I was curious to know about the history of this *Beri*. A metal plaque was on display but the story seemed to be a concocted one to mislead the pilgrims and to make believe. Since these relics, real or fake, are a source of abundant offerings by the gullible Sikhs, the Gurdwara managements are not in a mood to dissuade pilgrims to worship these relics.

**4. Exegesis (*Katha-Vichar*) of Guru Granth Sahib:** Despite its all-embracing universal character Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) remains confined to the boundary walls of Gurdwaras only. There has been a long tradition of Gurbani exegesis since the times of Sikh Gurus. Dr. Taran Singh has mentioned different schools of SGGS interpretation and exegesis in his book [9]. The first complete *Teeka* (exegesis) of SGGS is known as *Faridkot Wala Teeka* [10] done by Giani Badan Singh of Nirmala sect. Most of the earlier exegetes were Nirmalas and Udasis, who were well versed in Sanskrit and Hindu religious literature. Hence, their interpretation of SGGS was based on Vedanta. Professor Puran Singh [11] lamented that due to Brahmanical environment, the Guru's message has been misinterpreted: "*It is to be regretted that Sikh and Hindu scholars are interpreting Guru Nanak in the futile terms and dissecting texts to find the Guru's meaning to be same as of the Vedas and Upanishads. This indicates enslavement to the power of Brahmanical traditions*".

It may be pointed out that Christian Saints who succeeded Jesus Christ played a sterling role in the spread of message of Bible and Christianity throughout Europe. Nothing of this sort could happen for dissemination of the message of Sikh Gurus. The historical era between Banda Bahadur's martyrdom at Delhi and the coronation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh at Lahore was most gruesome and the Sikh religion was facing extinction. The control of Gurdwaras was left to the care of Mahants who were not competent to interpret Guru Nanak's message in the true perspective. The writings of Nirmala scholars like Kavi Santokh Singh and Pundit Tara Singh Narotam proved to be retrograde as they interpreted the message of Sikh Gurus enshrined in SGGS using tools of Vedanta.

It is interesting to know that Sikh Scholars have started using modern tools for interpretation of Gurbani. Sarjit Singh Sandhu [11] in his essay "Sikh Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Gurbani" has recommended the application of Hermeneutics to resolve some of the fundamental issues of correct interpretation of SGGS, the Sikh scripture. Dr Gopal Singh [12] also laments: *"Sikhism is the most modern, yet the most misunderstood of all the religions..... The confusion of interpretation has occurred because the Sikhs themselves for historical and other reasons, have never seriously attempted a scientific and cogent exposition of the doctrine of their faith, based on the word of the Guru-Granth and related to the lives of the Gurus who uttered it..... It has never occurred to the community to define its basic tenets, and to answer the seeming contradictions in these tenets, in short to attempt an integrated account of the Sikh view of life"*.

**5. Need to Re-interpret Guru Nanak:** It is unfortunate that the revolutionary message of Guru Nanak has been misinterpreted by Indian and foreign scholars due to the following reasons:

- Guru Nanak had been looked upon as a social reformer within the fold of Hinduism. Sikhism was interpreted as a syncretic movement born out of a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam. It has been wrongly interpreted as a part of medieval Bhagti tradition of India.
- It is unfortunate that History has played a dominant role in Sikh theology to interpret Guru Nanak and his mission, which lead to wrong conclusions.
- Some scholars believe that the Sikh Panth originated with Guru Nanak but the doctrinal and institutional development of Sikhism was left to the succeeding Gurus.
- Most of the scholars believe that Sikh religion was a reworking of the Sant/Bhagti tradition, thus challenging the validity of Guru Nanak as an original thinker and founder of a new religion.
- For correct appreciation of Guru Nanak's mission one is required to look into his own writings which are preserved in its original form in the Sikh Scripture.

What is the solution of this riddle? The problem of re-orientation of mode of Sikh preaching is colossal. The Sikh psyche has been tuned to the narrative of exegetes (*kathakars*), ballad singers (*dhadis*) and rituals and superstitions created by our Sant Babas over centuries. It involves managements of all Gurdwaras under SGPC, DSGPC,

Singh Sabhas, private trusts and other religious bodies having affiliation with Sikh organisations. Individual efforts are being made by some Sikh Scholars [14-16] to interpret the message of Guru Nanak in a scientific and logical manner. These efforts are welcome but no visible impact has been made till date on the mood and mode of Sikh preachers. The Sikhs are in the habit of putting blame on others for their failures. The role of Sikh leadership and shenanigans of its splinter groups have been discussed in a separate publication [17].

I made some suggestions in my previous article [18]. I appeal to Jathedar Akal Takhat to issue an advisory forbidding the worship of Idols, Images and Relics. It is well known that holy precincts of Golden Temple were cleared of Hindu idols during 1920s after historical Gurdwaras were liberated from the clutches of *Mahants*. The rules of Sikh worship in Gurdwaras must be laid out discarding superfluous rituals. Sikh Rehat Maryada need to be made simple and implemented uniformly in all Gurdwaras. Let us make a beginning from the Golden Temple. A conclave of Sikh Scholars may be held under the aegis of Akal Takht to discuss this issue threadbare.



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