

Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Indian Culture

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Gurbani is part of the glorious heritage of the Punjabi/Indian Word-culture of medieval times. Although, basically Gurbani is revered as religious belief and devotion, for a student of literature, it is a poetic work of the highest order. It is for this reason that the historians of literature have taken Gurbani as Gurmat-poetic-thought. The word 'Gurmat' is indicative of a special thought process and the guide to live a healthy life. The founder of this thought process was Guru Nanak who enjoys a special place among the saints who transformed the religious life of the people. Facing the spiritual challenges of their times, the Gurus and the Saints provided spiritual and cultural lead to the people and gave them a philosophy which is accepted as the basis of Sikhism. But this philosophy of Gurmat is not in the form of a shastra but in the form of poetics or hymns. This is clearly specified in Guru Nanak's bani

The poet Nanak says thus

O true sustainer! 2.

Treading the path shown by Guru Nanak, the succeeding Gurus, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur also wrote Gurubani, as a result of which, the strong tradition of Gurmat poetics was established. When the fifth Guru Arjan compiled the Gurbani into a single volume, he had before him the basic principles of Gurbani as a touchstone. Going by the same touchstone, he also included the bani of his contemporary and the other saints, including Sufi saints in the holy Bir of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which is the Holy Book of its own kind. The main idea behind the inclusion of the hymns of the saints and sufi faqirs was only the similarity between the teachings of the Gurus and these saints. In a way this is the extended worldview of Guru Nank which pervades this compilation. The geographical limits of this thought process are as far spread as Bengal (Bhagat Jai Dev), Maharashtra (Bhagat Nam Dev) and the time extends from the twelfth century to the sixteenth century.

The problem for consideration before us is the extent of contribution of the composer of poetry of such an importance Guru-poet (Sri Guru Nanank Dev) to the development of the common culture. To find a an authoritative answer to this question, it would be necessary to

sort out certain basic problems. Guru Nanakbani appears to be the wonderful combination of faith and poetics. Many hymns aiming at moulding the different aspects of human life in the meaningful way into a value system, are found at work in Guru Nanak's bani which establish it as the unique writing of Word-Culture. In other words, the study of Guru Nanka's bani can be linked at various levels.

- Considering it as the poetry of purely religious nature, it can be accepted as the spiritual means of communication.
- Taking it as the poetry of the highest order, its poetics can be studied and analysed
- It could be studied as a cultural text and analysed accordingly. While the first two points needing our attention are single in nature, the third point is indicative of all-embracing type under which Guru Nanakbani can be attempted to be analysed in the context of its multi-dimensional approach. In this paper, an attempt has been made to relate our study to the third aspect.
- To study Guru Nanak Bani in the form of a cultural text, it would be better to define the cultural concept. In the context of the present day knowledge system, emphasis has been laid on considering the cultural values as part of the original and unique attainment of man. Thus culture is that basic aspect of human existence which easily separates it from the totality of creatures. While all the other beings live their life from birth to death in the state of nature, the human being in the vast expanse of universe, because of its creativeness, builds a new world of meanings, values, dreams and memories and aims which depicts his entire conduct as meaningful. This human created world is the world of culture, where the material world comes to the fore assuming the form of reality. In his capacity as cultural being, the human being defines his basic instincts, through meanings, values and ideals and moulds his way of life in accordance therewith. Thus the culture comes to represent the way of life and it can be called as the symbol of humanity. It is formulated through art, faith, philosophy, morality, etc. This cultural system of human life is not born out of vacuum; its foundation is laid firmly under the social-economic structure which, passing through the pace of historical development, always goes on changing. In this way, culture, in any social set up becomes part and parcel of its evolutionary process.

- The 11 concept of culture can be applied to any human society, in the context of time and space. For example, the culture of the people living in a geographic or linguistic region, nation, nationality, class, tract or country, can be examined taking it as a unit. India is a vast land mass of the Asian continent wherein language, religion, class and region depict the co-existence of the above factors. When we talk of the common culture of India, the feeling of tracing in it the unity in diversity arises. This cultural model of unity in diversity has come out of historic necessity. Right from the prehistoric age, countless cultures and civilizations have been existing simultaneously, the first glaring example of which comes to the fore in the 15th century BC as can be seen in the Aryan and pre-Aryan cultures. This happening in the pre-historic age gave birth to an intermingling arising out of the initial conflict which became the foundation of the common culture. After this, in the cultural field, it was this process of communication and togetherness as a model which seems to go on moving ahead.
- On reaching the Guru Nanak age, this Aryan/pre-Aryan cultural cohesion had been established. In North India, the noteworthy example could be seen in the tradition of Siddha-Natha yogis. The basic inspiration of this Word tradition can be traced to the Sahej or Budhist tradition which is considered as having been established with the cohesion of Aryan/pre-Aryan cultures. This Siddha-Natha Bani tradition in itself depicts a special kind of cultural /philosophical thought process. The tradition begun with the bani of Siddhas, passing through the hymns of Nath Yogis, reached the Sant bani. A very deep relationship is perceived between this bani and Nanak bani (or the entire Gurbani) because many of the basic tenets of this tradition come to the fore in the Gurmat poetry. Still it does not mean that Guru Nank bani simply follows the pure Siddha-Natha-Sant bani. Actually, Nanak bani/gurubani holds a dialogue with this tradition and appears in its original and distinct form.
- The common feature of Siddha-Nath-Sant bani is that instead of being guided by the Vedas, Shastaras or other Brahmin scriptures, it considers this body as the place of pilgrimage and lays emphasis on knowledge based on experience. In other words, accepting the model of 'Trishna Nivaran' (Desirelessness), speaks of the non-vedic source of inspiration. Within the ambit of this, supreme bliss, equanimity, nirvavna or moksha (liberation) require the guidance of a Guru because in the entire bani tradition, the mystery of spiritual quest is inherent. Therefore this tradition can be

linked to the path of Gurmukhta (guru-ward-ness). Secondly, according to this tradition, the paths of supreme attainment are different according to Sidhas, Nathas and the saints.

- The Siddhas, in their bani, have presented a concept, to do away with the cause of pain ie craving, of supreme bliss, and equanimity or removal, it is called parivirti marg or the great path, which lays emphasis on restrained use of worldly comforts. 2 The main argument in this behalf is that ‘bhava’ or the world is something, the indulgence in which in an unrestrained manner can cause pain or be the cause of death but indulging in the same with proper restraint can lead to the supreme bliss. In this parviti marga of the Siddhas, when, with the acceptance of indulgence, it began to have a tilt, it gave birth to the Nath-Yogi cult. This new cult, accepting the basic definition, presented its contradiction in the way of life. In other words, they laid emphasis on yoga instead of on indulgence, and on nivirti instead of parviti. The Nath-yogis, taking ‘trishna’ as the main cause of suffering, through the curbing of aspirations, suggested the path of practicing restraint, physical, mental and even of breathing, which came to the fore as the path of detachment instead of attachment and nivirti instead of parviti. In this way, in the Sidhas and Nathas’s suggested way of life arguments and counter-arguments can be clearly seen. The Sant Mat (devotional faith) (and of course Gurmat) toe the middle path between these two extremes, that is the balanced view or cohesion.⁴ The best example of this is found in Gurbani where attachment-detachment, pravirti-nivirti, householder-recluse, where countless instances of balancing of the two are found. In the composition ‘Siddha-Goshta’, this assertion of Guru Nanak Dev, in the course of his dialogue with the Sidhas, is worthy of note –

‘As the lotus remains detached like water-fowl
One can verily get across the ocean of life
Sayeth Nanak, by dwelling on His Name’ 5

It means that while abiding in this world, one can keep detached from worldliness as the lotus dwelling in water remains unaffected by it and the fowl diving in the river does not let its feathers get wet, it remains free of the effect of water. In this way, Gurbani, joining the dialogue, arising with the claims and counter claims of the Sidhas-Nathas-Saints, keeps intact

its distinct character-building as a way of life. Its basically distinct character can also be determined from the fact that whereas the Sidha-Nath bani is non-vedic, Guru Nanak bani and Saint bani (including entire Gurbani) relates itself also to the Vedic thought, although the godly concept here is with regard to a formless and attributeless God. Thus Guru Nanak bani once again appears to be trying to find a cohesion between the Aryan (Vedic) and Non-aryan (pre-vedic) sources, rising above the inter-mingling of Nath-Sant tradition. This can be regarded as an important step towards evolving a common culture.

Besides discussing Guru Nanak's holding a dialogue with the earlier cultural heritage, it would be worthwhile to have a look at his relationship with the contemporary thought. In India of Guru Nanak days, with the Islamic invasion, a new type of culture enters the Indian scene which can be termed as semitic culture. From the eighth-ninth century up to the fifteenth-sixteenth century this semitic culture had reached a state of confrontation with the Hindu/Aryan culture. Historians have called this age the age of Hindu-Muslim cohesion. At the cultural level, the Hindu-Muslim cohesion was once again strengthened in medieval India. The saints, bhagats, and Sufis played a very important role in blossoming it. The collective efforts of these all gave rise to the renaissance which kindled a new life into the contemporary social order and culture with regard to basic human concerns. On the one hand the saints and savants raised their voice against the traditional ritualistic practices of Brahmins and their caste-system and communal fanaticism and showed the path of devotional love and mysticism, which rejected the artificial distinction of high and low and supported the people-oriented values of life, on the other hand, the Sufi saints rejected the outward show of faith by the Muslims and their fanaticism showing the path of real love (ishq haqiqi), tried to re-define the true import of the Qur'anic teachings. Free of communalism, both of the paths preached the mystic oneness of both man and God, the direction of which was supposed to open the door to all embracing common cultural spread. This spirit of Hindu-Muslim cohesion, is clearly discernible in Guru Nanak bani. Some lines are given below as an instance –

‘Baba, God is beyond reach, limits.

Holiest of the holy is His Name

The True sustainer of us all.’ 6

‘God is un-describable, beyond reach
 The Creator, Omnipotent and Kind
 Transient is the entire world, lasting is He.
 He is for ever Who is not accountable
 Sky and earth would go, but He would last.’⁷

In these lines the concepts and symbols of both the cultural legacies have been presented in a manner which can be considered as the living example of cohesion. In Guru Nanak bani, a liberal use has been made of the vocabulary used in different scriptures for the divine power which symbolizes common culture. Thus Guru Nanak bani holds dialogue with the best of the contemporary traditions and those of the earlier times and establishes its living relationship with the Indian culture. Besides, seeing the cultural crisis, it tries to give it a revolutionary turn, by which the future possibilities come to light. In this process, there lies hidden a concept of cultural revolution which comes to the fore trying to assume the form of fresh and people-friendly values.

For the fulfillment of the above, we would have to study Guru Nanak’s bani in the scriptural context, poetics and cultural scene i.e. inter-disciplinary frame work. The reason therefor is that Guru Nanak bani presents the reality of life in accordance with the medieval consciousness in which are combined the elements of faith and poetry. As a whole, the discourse of Guru Nanak bani aims at re-establishing the reality of ‘word’. In the building up of a culture, the creative power of ‘word’ is well known. When, for some reason, word loses its living power and capability, a crisis arises in the human relationships. An attempt has been made in Guru Nanak bani to link together the vocabulary of different faiths and cults giving it a new meaning and rekindling a new light in it. Some examples are cited here in this context-

‘The qadi speaks the untruth, eats trash.
 The Brahmin bathes, eats living ones.
 The Yogi knows next to nothing
 All three lead to destruction’⁸

In this way the decline at the three levels has been spotlighted but an attempt has also been made to bring to life again these aspect, as in these lines-

'A yogi is the one who knows the way
 With Guru's Grace, he knows the One
 A qadi is the one who resists temptation
 And with Guru's Grace, he lives in death
 A Brahmin is the one who thinks of Brahm
 Himself salvaged, he salvages the lineage.
 The wise one cleanses his mind indeed
 And a true Muslim gets free of filth. 9

In the same strain, a householder 10, a recluse 11, sacred thread 12, Namaz 13, Musalman 14, Hindu 15, etc. all these conceptual words have been endowed with moral-spirituality and meaning in an attempt to mould it into live power of the 'word.' The inspiration for such a thought process can only be the consciousness of the common culture wherein instead of rejecting the basic distinctness of different concepts, the common and level ground has been sought to be searched.

Guru-poet has identified the established anti-human aspect of the times and criticized it sharply –

In this scissor like dark-age,
 The rulers have become butchers.
 The righteousness has taken wings
 The Amavas of falsehood pervades
 And the moon is not visible at all.
 I have been searching endlessly
 And groping in the dark 16

'The rulers have become tigers, officers, dogs
 They go about and disturb the people's peace
 The government servants injure the people
 Bleed them and lick their blood like dogs. 17

In this way Guru Nanak's bani peeps into the Politico-administrative set up. Guru Nanak's bani also presents before the people a model to change the situation. The worldly rulers and administrators have been termed as 'false' people and God has been called a True-Emperor. This concept condemns the untrue-emperors (the set up) in order to make the state power realize their responsibility to their people. Right, truth, justice are the values which a model state should imbibe and treat them as the basic need of governance. Though no alternative form of political power seems to have been advocated in Guru Nanak bani, certainly a model of ideal governance is defined.

To keep a balance in the social life, while a just governance is needed, the personal life also, through truthful living, is required to be lived truthfully. To achieve this end, Guru Nanak bani aims at creating such a human being, who, taking care of his dignity, gets in tune with the universe and tries to live accordingly. The best form of expression of this end is seen in these lines –

How can we be held truthful
 And how can the wall of
 Untruth be made to crumble?
 By bowing before His Will
 It's preordained, Sayeth Nanak

In these lines, in question-answer style, the ideal of human life has not only been identified, the way to achieve it is also shown. To be held truthful means to conform to righteousness-truth, but it also depends on being in tune with the universe created in 'His Will'. Thus Guru Nanak bani seeks to present such a form of human personality where enmity, opposition, discrimination and alienation lose significance. Such a concept of a human personality can be held to be the best form of the Indian culture. Guru Nanak bani has made an attempt to search this from the teachings of all faiths. In this manner, to develop a common social order and to make it flourish, Guru Nanak's contribution is of great importance. To develop this all embracing culture, Guru Nanak has laid down a methodology, which is a true model of human relationship free of rancour, of a dialogue, as under –

'So long as one lives in the world, sayeth Nanak

One should listen to others, and speak to them.

No one has been found to live for ever

One should keep in mind death while living.

Creating the awareness of death as the reality of life, the importance of dialogue which has been given here, is relevant even today.

References.

- SGGS P.660
- Dharam Vir Bharaati, Siddha Sidhant, P.91
- Ibid, p. 92.
- Jabir Singh, Madhkali shabad-sabhyachar, p;.23
- SGGS, P.938
- Ibid, 53
- Ibid, 64
- Ibid, 662
- Ibid, 662
- Sol Nigrahi jo nigraha karai Japu tap sanjam bhikhya karai Punn daan ka karai sarir So girhi ganga ka neer. (SGGS P.952
- So audhuti jo dhoopai aap. Bhikhya bhojan karai santap. (ibid, P.952 So udasi jo palai udaas Ardh-urdh karai niranjan vaas. Chand Suraj ki payai gandh Tis udasi ke parai na kandh. (ibid, P.952
- Daya kapah santokh soot Jat Gandhi sat vatt Eh janeyoo jia ka Hai tan pandai ghat. (ibid, P.471)
- Panj niwaja wakhat panj Panja panjai nao. Pahla sach, hilal doe Tija khai khudai. Chauthi niyat raas man Panjwin sifat sanai Karni qalma aakh kai Tan Musalmaan sadai. (Ibid, P.141)
- Musalmaan kahawan mushqil Ja hoe taan Musalmaan kahavai Awwal aul deen kar mitha Maskal maana maal musavai Hoe Muslim deen muhanai Maran jivan ka bharam chukavai Rabb ki razai manai sir oopar Karta manai aap gawavai Tau Nanak saraab jia meramat hoe Taan Musalmaan kahavai. (Ibid, P.141)
- Hindu salahi salahen Darsan roop apaar. (Ibid, p. 465)

- SGGS P.1454
- ibid, P. 1288
- Ibid, P. 1
- Ibid, P.661