

A Semiotic Reading of Guru Granth Sahib

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Guru Granth Sahib (also called the Adi Granth) is primarily a sacred scripture of the Sikh faith. But apart from being a religious scripture it is also a significant cultural text produced in the medieval era of Indian history. The purpose of this paper is to attempt a semiotic reading this Granth. This semiotic model needs some clarification. As we are aware, semiotics is a methodology and a strategy of reading as applied to literary and cultural texts. In simple terms it deals with texts as structures of meaning and tries to understand how we mean, what we mean. As a discipline of study it has its origins in the structuralist mode of thinking based on the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. But since then lots of developments have taken place in the field of semiotics.

The initial structuralist phase was concerned only with the synchronic analysis of the sign-systems operating in a text to unravel the rules of its function. The focus of this procedure was only on the structural relations of the signs and codes operating in a text whereas the context of textual production was purposefully left out of consideration. In a way the text was hermetically sealed from outside, to reveal its inner structure. In spite of its scientific pretensions, this model of reading had inherent limitations.

In the wake of post-structuralist thinking, the situation of semiotic studies has changed drastically. Post-structuralism has rejected the idea of the text as having a unified, coherent and close structure. In its view structure is not the inherent quality of the text, it is arbitrarily imposed. Therefore in place of fixed semiotic structure the idea of semiotic practice is introduced emphasizing the openness of the text. According to this view text is not closed, its both ends are open. It opens to history, society, culture and ideology. In other words, every text is created in response to various internal and external factors. It enters into a dialogical relationship with other texts, with the past or with the present.

This new semiotic model of reading recognizes the due importance of intertext and context of textual production. It pays greater attention to the socio-cultural and historical situation in which the text are produced. As contemporary culture-critic, Stuart Hall, says; “There is no way that the study of communication systems could proceed without understanding the social, technological, economic, and political conditions in which the systems of representation in society are located—how they are institutionally organized, how they are linked

to particular positions and structures of power, how they are crosscut by the field and operation of power.”¹

In fact this new way of thinking has radically changed our perception and understanding of the world we live in and the texts we produce. By demonstrating the constructedness of everything - the self, the society, the reality and the truth - it has transformed our knowledge and understanding.

With these remarks, we come to our project of semiotic reading or rather contextual re-reading of Guru Granth Sahib. First let us attend to its textual organization and the socio-historical context in which it was produced. As we are aware Guru Granth Sahib is primarily a Sikh scripture. But as a scripture it is unique in many respects. First of all it is not a collection of commandments or a treatise but an anthology of the poetic utterances, reflecting the philosophical meditations of the inspired souls. Secondly the poetic utterances and mystical insights expressed in this Granth are not only those of the founders of Sikh faith but also of the various other saint-poets of India belonging to different religions and cultural traditions. Prominent among these saint-poets are Jaidev, Namdev, Sheikh Farid, Kabir and Ravidas. Chronologically these saint-poets and gurus belong to the vast expanse of five centuries of the Christian era (i.e. from the 12th century to the 17th century) and geographically they represent the regional diversity of the Indian subcontinent. With the inclusion of these prominent religious personalities of the medieval times, the Gurus, the Bhaktas and the Sufis, the text of this scripture transcends the sectarian boundaries and assumes a composite religious and cultural significance.

The basic textual feature of Guru Granth Sahib is that it is an anthology of devotional lyrics or hymns (referred to as Bani by its authors) compiled by Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru in 1604. As indicated earlier it contains the hymns not only of the founders of Sikh faith (Guru Nanak and four other successor Gurus) but also of many other medieval Indian saints whose philosophy and ideology is identical with the Sikh way of life. The original version of this Granth was called Pothi Sahib or Adi Granth. At a later stage Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, gave it the present final shape after adding the Bani of Guru Tegh Bahadur in it. He re-designated this final version as Guru Granth Sahib in 1708. The Guru ordained his followers to

¹ Hall, Stuart, “**Ideology and Communication Theory**”

treat the word (shabad or Bani) of Guru Granth Sahib as the embodiment Guru himself. Consequently the Sikhs all over the world regard Guru Granth Sahib, as eternal, living Guru and a supreme source of spiritual guidance.

Another characteristic feature of this scripture is its language. Although the script of the Granth is Gurmukhi but it is not written in any one particular language. Its poets use not any classical language (be it Sanskrit or Arabic) but the spoken language of the people. Most of these poets use widely prevalent Sadhu Bhasha, the lingua franca of the Indian sub-continent, which is simple and generally intelligible to the largest sections of Indian people. The commonly used vocabulary of the classical languages like Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian (both tatsam and tadbhav) is also used. In addition to it the Gurus and the Saint-poets of this Granth freely use words and expressions of their respective regional languages also. Consequently, not only the Punjabi language but various other Indian languages (Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi etc.) find ample expression in the discourse of this Granth displaying its complex multilingual character.

The text of Guru Granth Sahib contains 1430 pages and more than three thousand hymns. The main characteristic feature of this Granth is that its hymns are composed in various classical and folk literary forms and meters. These hymns tend to employ mostly the lyrical and the didactic modes of expression. They have been arranged in thirty-one classical Indian Ragas with indications of folk tunes here and there. In fact, poetry and music are integral elements of its discourse. They introduce a dimension of depth in the meaning and import of the message. However the poetry of Guru Granth Sahib cannot be taken as pure and simple poetry in the ordinary sense of the term. The predominantly metaphysical content and idiom of its discourse, in spite of its outward poetic form, makes its poetic status rather problematic. Facing such paradoxical situation Kabir observes at one place :

logu jwnY iehu gIqu hY iehu qau bRhm bIcwr]¹

(People believe that this is just a song, but it is a meditation on the Supreme)

In a similar vein Guru Nanak also says :

¹ Guru Granth Sahib, P- 335.

gwhu gIqu n ibrhVw nwnk bRhm bIcwro¹

(Do not sing the songs of separation, O Nanak, reflect upon God.)

This paradox can be resolved by admitting that poetry functions here as a communicative device and not as an esthetic end in itself. The authors of this Granth refer to their poetic utterances or hymns as Bani which differentiates it from other poetic writings. In fact the Bani of this Granth belongs to a great Bani tradition of India called ‘Siddh-Nath-Sant Bani Parampara’. Therefore the concept of Bani has a specific connotation. Traditionally, an aura of divine inspiration or revelation is attached to its discourse. The authors of Bani also talk of the impersonality of their discourse. They feel that some higher agency is talking through them. In this context following verses can be quoted :

jYsI mY AwvY Ksm kI bwxI qYsVw krI igAwnu vy lwlo]²

(As the word of the lord comes to me, so do I express it, O Lalo.)

hau Awphu boil n jwxdw mY kihAw sBu hukmwau jIau]³

(By myself, I do not even know how to speak;

I speak all that the Lord commands.)

Dur kI bwxI Awel] iqin sglI icMq imtweI]⁴

(The Bani has emanated from the Primal Deep. It eradicates all anxiety.)

These verses demonstrate the recognition of the unconscious dimension of the discourse of Bani. For instance, the signifier of Dhur (the Primal Deep) symbolizes the latent energies of the cultural system which is largely unconscious. The central theme of the Bani of Guru Granth Sahib remains the meditation on the nature of ultimate reality and the search for final meaning of human existence. But this does not mean that it is cut of from the realities of life. Actually the

¹ **Guru Granth Sahib, P- 581.**

² **Guru Granth Sahib, P- 722.**

³ **Guru Granth Sahib, P- 763.**

⁴ **Guru Granth Sahib, P- 628.**

consciousness of the ultimate reality (the paramartha) provides these saint-poets with transcendent vantage point and a liberative vision to re-define the existential social concerns of human life without fear or favor.

Now we come to the context of Guru Granth Sahib. The compiler and editor of Adi Granth, Guru Arjan Dev, was a man of prophetic vision and pan-Indian consciousness. He imbibed the spirit of renaissance heralded by the Bhakti and the Sufi movements during the middle ages in India. Incidentally the Bhakti movement had its roots in Tamilnadu in South India. In words of Dr. Muthu Mohan “Tamilnadu is said to be one of the ancient cradles of devotional culture. The Alwars and Nayanmars of Vaishnavite and Saivite brands represent the early articulation of devotion in South India from the 5th century onwards. . . . The Alwars and Nayanmars sang and danced under the spell of devotion. The Tamil poetry of Bhakti is full of emotion. Bhakti emerged as a burst out of native and nascent feelings in overflow. The dry theoreticism of Jainism and Buddhism was displaced by the fame of God. The water-tight rules of karma were substituted by the loving Grace of God. God can interfere into the rigidities of Karma and save the devotees from the difficulties of existence. . . . If Tamilnadu could be identified as the land of early bhakti, Punjab must be said to be the land of late Bhakti. Both the positions have their advantages.”¹ According to a popular couplet prevalent among Kabir Panthis ; “Bhakti took its birth in Dravid contry, from where it was brought [to the Norh] by Ramanand. And it was Kabir who spread it everywhere”² The power of the Bhakti movement resided in re-kindling the integrating and liberating power of universal love in the popular consciousness. More importantly it awakened the downtrodden and the oppressed masses to a renewed sense of self-respect. Similarly the Sufi movement also played a significant role in creating an environment of universal love and understanding among the different sections of population divided by hatred and strife. Sufis emphasized the oneness of God and equality man (Tasawwuf) by giving mystic interpretation of Islam. In fact this movement deeply influenced by Buddhist way of life and Vedantic philosophy during its formatting period. Its idea of Ishaq Haqiqi (true

¹ Dr. N.Muthu Mohan, **Sikhs and Tamils The Indus Connection** (Internet Resource)

² **Bhakti Dravid upaji laye Ramanand, pragat kia Kabir ne, sapt deep nav khand”**

love) was identical with Bhakti (divine love). Both of these movements were opposed to empty ritualism and sectarian feelings.

These twin movements symbolized a grand cultural awakening and the resurgence of humanitarian spirit leading to inter-religious harmony and peaceful co-existence. Guru Arjan Dev was very much aware of the socio-cultural importance of these movements as well. Therefore he collected the Bani of those prominent saint-poets of India, whose mystico-ethical vision reflected liberal, humanitarian and radical social ideology and prepared this vast anthology. Actually the visionary in the Guru had recognized the liberative importance of the written word for the suffering humanity. In this manner the text and discourse of Guru Granth Sahib represents the rich socio-cultural and religious diversity of the Indian sub-continent. Obviously such a scripture can easily transcend the sectarian boundaries of religious denominations and rightfully assume the status of a universal world scripture. No single community, not even the Sikhs, can have exclusive claim over it.

In fact the compilation of the Adi Granth was a major achievement of Guru Arjan Dev as well as of the medieval times. But two years after its compilation the Guru had to pay the supreme price for it. The reason was ideological. The emergence of fundamentalist ideology during the later period of Emperor Akbar could not tolerate the message of religious tolerance and equality. The Granth was written at a time when Emperor Akbar, the great Mughal was pursuing a policy of religious tolerance and peace for all (called Sulha-i-Kul) and creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding between the major religious communities. Both Akbar and Guru Arjan Dev were the representatives of religious tolerance and humanitarian ideology. But during the later years of Akbar's rule his Court were divided into two factions - the liberal and the fundamentalists. The liberal faction was favoring Akbar's policy of Din-i-Ilahi and Sulha-i-Kul (Peace for All) but the fundamentalist faction was severely critical of the policy of religious tolerance. After Akbar's death the fundamentalists gained upper hand and Akbar's policies were reversed unleashing a reign of intolerance and hatred. Their main collaborator was Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi whose letters, *Maktubat-i-Emam-i-Rabani*, fully reflect his contempt for the non-Muslims. In one of his letters he writes; "Honor of Islam lies in insulting Kufr and Kafirs... They should constantly remain terrified and trembling." He conspired against Guru Arjan Dev whom he considered the greatest enemy of Islam as his popularity was steadily growing among all the

sections of population. As a result Guru Arjan Dev, the great visionary was put to death. In this connection Emperor Jahangir's own words in Tuzak-i-Jehangiri are more significant. "At Goindwal on the banks of the river Beas, lived a Hindu, Arjan by name, in the garb of a Pir or Sheikh. Thus, many innocent Hindus and even foolish and ignorant Muslims he brought into his fold who beat the drum noisily of his self-appointed prophethood. . . . For a long time I had harbored the wish that I should set aside this shop of falsehood or I should bring him into the fold of Islam. . . . I ordered that he be brought into my presence, that his property be confiscated and his sons and other possessions be made over to Murtaza Khan and he be dealt with in accordance with the political and common law of the land."

Thus the execution of Guru Arjan Dev demonstrates the ideological significance and the power of the written word, embodied in Guru Granth Sahib. Subsequently this liberating power of the word is transformed into the militant power of the sword. And in the hands of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, the peaceful Sikh movement is converted into an armed struggle against the tyrant Mughal regime. He also utilizes the resources of the written word by transcreating the mythico-epical narratives of Indian cultural heritage (like Ramavtar, Krishnavtar, Chandi Charitar, Chandi di Var etc.) He creates a powerful new text in the form of Dasam Granth. But that is another story which can be discussed at some other occasion.

After discussing the textual peculiarities of Guru Granth Sahib and placing it in its proper socio-cultural and historical context we can attend to the semiotic strategies employed by its discourse for the production and communication of meaning. For this purpose we need to look at it as a discursive formation. In fact the concept of discourse is very significant for semiotic studies.¹ The basic feature of discourse is that it is linguistically constructed and socially situated. For a proper semiotic reading both of these aspects are to be kept in mind.

¹ "Discourse is language use within multiple context – textual, social, cultural, and historical . . ."

Foucault, Michel Foucault, *The Discourse on Language*, in, Brooker, **A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory**.

When we look at the discourse of Adi Granth, we find that its language is predominantly metaphysical. It employs the transcendent signifiers of the various religious and philosophical traditions to construct final meaning of human existence as well as to resolve the prevalent social, cultural and religious conflicts. For instance the following verses of Guru Arjan Bani can be quoted :

koeI bolY rwm rwm koeI Kudwie] koeI syvY guseIAw koeI Alwih]1]
 kwrX krx krIm] ikrpw Dwir rhIm]1] rhwau]
 koeI nWvY qIriQ koeI hj jwie]
 koeI krY pUjw koeI isru invwie]2] koeI pVY byd koeI kqyb]
 koeI EFY nll koeI supyd]3] koeI khY qurku koeI khY ihMdU]
 koeI bwCY iBsqu koeI surigMdU]4] khu nwnk ijin hukmu pCwqw]
 pRB swihb kw iqin Bydu jwqw]5]9]¹

(Some call Him, 'Ram, Ram', and some call Him, 'Khuda-i'. Some serve Him as 'Gusain', others as 'Allah'. He is the Cause of causes, the Generous Lord. He showers His Grace and Mercy upon us. Some bathe at sacred shrines of pilgrimage, and some make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Some perform devotional worship services, and some bow their heads in prayer. Some read the Vedas, and some the Koran. Some wear blue robes, and some wear white. Some call themselves Muslim, and some call themselves Hindu. Some yearn for paradise, and others long for heaven. Says Nanak, one who realizes the Hukam of God's Will, knows the secrets of his Lord and Master.)

In this passage the belief-systems, the religious practices and conceptual categories of the major religions (Hinduism and Islam) are placed in a composite frame of reference and the signifiers of both the traditions used as signifiers to construct a meaning that emphasizes unity in diversity. At the same time the discourse recognizes, accepts and celebrates the religious and cultural differences.

¹ Guru Granth Sahib, P- 885.

As we have seen, this discourse presents a counter-ideological model in the context of emergent religious fundamentalism. In a way it is confronting and opposing the reactionary ideology used as a political weapon oppression.

A similar semiotic strategy is at work in the following verses of Kabir :

Alhu eyku msliq bsqu hY Avru mulKu iksu kyrw]
 ihMdU mUriq nwm invwsI duh mih qqu n hyrw]1]
 Alh rwm jIvau qyry nweI]
 qU kir imhrwmiq sweI]1] rhwau]
 dKn dyis hrI kw bsw piCim Alh mukwmw]
 idl mih Kojh idlY idil Kojhu eyhI Taur mukwmw]2]¹

(If the Lord Allah lives only in the mosque, then to whom does the rest of the world belong? According to the Hindus, the Lord's Name abides in the idol, but there is no truth in either of these claims. O Allah, O Ram, I live by Your Name. Please show mercy to me, O Master. The God of the Hindus lives in the southern lands, and the God of the Muslims lives in the west. So search in your heart - look deep into your heart of hearts; this is the home and the place where God lives. The Brahmins observe twenty-four fasts during the year, and the Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan. The Muslims set aside eleven months, and claim that the treasure is only in the one month. What is the use of bathing at Orissa? Why do the Muslims bow their heads in the mosque? If someone has deception in his heart, what good is it for him to utter prayers? And what good is it for him to go on pilgrimage to Mecca? You fashioned all these men and women, Lord. All these are Your Forms. Kabeer is the child of God, Allah, Ram. All the Gurus and prophets are mine. Says Kabeer, listen, O men and women: seek the Sanctuary of the One. Chant the Nam, the Name of the Lord, O mortals, and you shall surely be carried across.)

In fact this is recurrent theme of the discourses of all the saint poets of Adi Granth. They emphasize the essential unity of all creation including man and cosmos. Awakening to such a

¹ **Guru Granth Sahib, P- 1349.**

cosmic consciousness human beings are liberated from the ego-centric existence and false pretensions.

The following famous verse of Kabir demonstrates the liberating force of cosmic vision in metaphysical idiom :

Avil Alh nUru aupwieAw kudriq ky sB bMdy]

eyk nUr qy sBu jgu aupijAw kaun Bly ko mMdy]1]

(First, Allah created the Light; then, by His Creative Power, He made all mortal beings. From the One Light, the entire universe welled up. So who is good, and who is bad?)

Guru Granth Sahib is a vast repertory of discourses touching the various aspects of human existence. These discourses tend to employ signifiers and codes (i.e. the language) of human personal relations, of social institutions and of cultural practices. For instance they often use the language of love and friendship conveying the man's emotional relationship with the divine (the ultimate self-image of man)². Semiotic reading of such a vast text is a tremendous task. Obviously it is beyond the scope of present paper. But we can explore some of the important areas of its discursive practice. For the present let us take two such areas – the discourse of human liberation and the discourse of the oppressed.

First let us take the discourses of freedom. The main thrust of these discourses is on creating a liberated and integrated human subject. Most of the the signifiers used for freedom are related to the Indian metaphysical tradition - mokh, mukti and nirvan. But the idea of liberation or freedom, here, is not other- worldly. It is not liberation after death but achieving a liberated state of being here and now. It is freedom from slavery and from suffering. The bondage or slavery is of two types – the internal and the external. Internal source of slavery is ego-centricity and rampant desires destabilising the mental poise. In this context the following verses can be quoted :

ijsu AMqir pRIiq lgY so mukqw]

ieMdRI vis sc sMjim jugqw]

¹ **Guru Granth Sahib, P- 1349-50**

² See, **Systematic Theology** by, Paul Tillich.

gur kY sbid sdw hir iDAwey eyhw Bgiq hir BwvixAw]¹

(Those whose inner beings are attached to the Lord's Love are liberated. They control their desires, and their lifestyle is that of self-discipline of Truth. Through the Word of the Guru's Shabad, they meditate forever on the Lord.

This devotional worship is pleasing to the Lord.)

Finally we come to the semiotic reading of the discourses of the oppressed. Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikh faith makes his ideology clear by taking the position of the oppressed section of society in a direct manner in the following verses :

nIcw AMdir nIc jwiq nIcI hU AiQ nIcu]
 nwnku iqn kY sMig swiQ vifAw isau ikAw rIs]
 ijQY nIc smwIIAin iqQY ndir qyrI bKsIs]4]3]²

(Nanak seeks the company of the lowest of the low class, the very lowest of the low. Why should he try to compete with the great? In that place where the lowly are cared for-there, the Blessings of Your Glance of Grace rain down.)

Most of the saint-poets have taken this anti-Brahmanic stance in their discourses. They reject the caste divisions on the same metaphysical grounds, using the same signifiers. Some of the prominent saint-poets of this Granth are from the dalit castes and they have self-consciously stated their subaltern position in the caste-centered Hindu society treating the downtrodden with inhuman contempt. Kabir is most critical and sarcastic in his discourse He uses the forceful arguments of folk logic to destroy the foundations of caste-system :

grB vws mih kulu nhI jwqI]
 bRhm ibMdu qy sB auqpwqI]1]
 khu ry pMifq bwmn kb ky hoey]
 bwmn kih kih jnmu mq Koey]1] rhwau]
 jO qUM bRwhmxu bRhmXI jwieAw] qau Awn bwt kwhy nhI AwieAw]2]¹

¹ Guru Granth Sahib, P- 122.

² Guru Granth Sahib, P- 15.

(In the dwelling of the womb, there is no ancestry or social status. All have originated from the Seed of God. Tell me, O Pandit, O religious scholar: since when have you been a Brahmin? Don't waste your life by continually claiming to be a Brahmin. If you are indeed a Brahmin, born of a Brahmin mother, then why didn't you come by some other way?)

The discourse of Guru Granth Sahib presents the idea of the spark of divine light in place of caste (jati) which it considers as the false construction of the unjust hierarchical caste-structure of Brahmanic ideology. We end our discussions with the following verses, where all the artificial boundaries are dissolved by meditating on the word of Guru :

jwīq brn kul shsw cUkw
gurnīq sbid bīcwrī]1]²

(Social class and status, race, ancestry and skepticism are eliminated, contemplating on the Word of the Guru)

¹ **Guru Granth Sahib, P- 324.**

² **Guru Granth Sahib, P- 1198.**