

## **Hermeneutics of Guru Granth and Guru Panth**

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### **The Endowment**

I deem it a great honor that I have been invited to present the most prestigious endowment lecture named after Sardarni Kailash Kaur in the Professor Harbans Singh Department of Encyclopedia of Sikhism, Punjabi University, Patiala. I did not have the opportunity to meet or enjoy the hospitality of Sardarni Kailash Kaur, the beloved wife of Professor Harbans Singh. I had two occasions to visit Professor Harbans Singh while he was living in the campus of Punjabi University, once along with Dr. Nirbhai Singh and on another occasion along with Dr. Dharam Singh. When I was introduced to Professor Harbans Singh that I was in charge of Guru Nanak Devji Chair at Madurai Kamaraj University, the learned Professor immediately entered into conversation with me about the details of the establishment of Guru Nanak Devji Chair in Madurai Kamaraj University and about the directions in which I could really contribute to Guru Nanak Studies. I cherish those visits to the esteemed Professor and value the advises he offered to me. It is Professor Harbans Singh's dedication to Sikh studies that compels me to ponder about Sardarni Kailash Kaur. In Indian conditions, a man is not at all a lonely figure and his dedication to a cause cannot be separated from the type of family atmosphere a person acquires. I could understand from the write ups I got and from the discussions I had with Dr. Dharam Singh that Professor Harbans Singh was fortunate to have a wonderful woman in the name and personality of Sardarni Kailash Kaur to take care of the Professor, to permit him to dedicate himself to a meaningful work while taking all the responsibilities of family and attending the friends of the Professor. I am sure that the recognition and respect the Professor got from the most immediate beloved woman is the most energizing inspiration to the Professor. It is immensely rewarding to a man that his wife is applauded by his friends and colleagues and students for her generosity. Sardarni Kailash Kaur had given to us not only Professor Harbans Singh but also a daughter and a son to continue to work in Sikh religious studies. This shows the

amount of respect the Sardarni had to the subject of Sikh studies, the subject of her husband. I am extremely honored that I have been given an opportunity to deliver the endowment lecture associated with the names and lives of such noble souls.

### **Hermeneutics in 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Although Hermeneutics is one of the most ancient disciplines of humanitarian studies, it can also be named as the single most recent discipline that has found the most powerful revival during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. To be more exact, the latest revival of Hermeneutics as theory of understanding and interpretation started with the German philosopher Dilthey, who rendered a non-objectivist meaning to the term ‘understanding’ in the last decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century itself. Dilthey rightly became the predecessor of the phenomenological and existential movement in philosophy that unfurled from the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century and dominated the philosophical space of the entire century. In contrast to the objectivist pole prioritized by the scientific philosophy of positivism, Dilthey and the consecutive phenomenologists took the text and reading closer to the hearts of the readers, the subjective pole of the process of reading and understanding. The term ‘understanding’ was made to compete with the term ‘knowledge’, the latter being, may be, the most powerful term during the entire modern period. (Similarly, the term Truth was replaced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the term Meaning.) The reading of the text, more over, the creation of the text, is said to be a unique individualistic experience where a unique individualistic meaning is produced. Understanding, according to phenomenological hermeneutics, is not an objectivist act of indifference and nonattachment, but it is thickly an intentional and participatory act. The phenomenologists even moved to the extreme of mystifying the subject’s inner world and methodologically suspended the objective end of the process of understanding, never to return to it making it an ontological act (Husserl).

For a brief period immediately after the Second World War, structuralism came to dominate the philosophical space of Europe, in its own way reviving the objective pole of the study of texts, however, by this time making the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy a stable aspect. As the phenomenologists mystified the subject, the structuralists too mystified the automatism of the constructed pattern of the text, suspending the agency or the subject. Anyhow, Structuralism is significant to the third world societies, because it

was daringly critical of the individualistic moments of the phenomenological movement that was very much typical of the European mode of thought. Let us remind that Structuralism paid its attention primarily to the anthropological structures operating among the ancient communities such as language, religion, kinship relations, myths etc. Some of the French structuralists such as Maurice Godelier and Louis Althusser developed the structuralist thought towards discussions on complex social structures of third world countries including that of Asiatic mode of production.

Structuralism was soon repelled by the European self-consciousness and, true to what Eric Hobsbawm named as the age of extremes, it was replaced by Deconstruction and Postmodernism. The subject-agency is all revived in deconstruction and the text is subjected to endless semiosis, a continuous process of producing multiple meanings through 'differences and repetition' (Deleuz) of differences. Postmodernism appeared with the news about the death of the author, along with that, the death of the authority too. The deaths of the author and the authority do have something important to tell about the attitude of postmodernism to tradition, particularly when we gather to speak on religious texts. Making difference and repetition of differences as the only mode of reading, and naming everything else as grand narrative too, is again posing the individualism of Europe as an eternal and permanent value. It is an uncritical acceptance of the European present.

Our description of the journey of Hermeneutics in 20<sup>th</sup> century from positivism to phenomenology and through phenomenology to structuralism and then to postmodernism, in a zigzag way, each tilt representing an one side, as an exclusively European phenomenon is justified when we present post colonialism specific to third world communities as an alternative to postmodernism. The clash of civilizational values (Samuel Huntington) in terms of community and individual also plays a role in the understanding of hermeneutics in the most recent period pertinent to postcolonial conditions. We are able to notice that apart from the ontological and the epistemological questions involved in the formulations of the problems of Hermeneutics in 20<sup>th</sup> century, in addition, they contain sociological and cultural dimensions that invite the careful attention of the third world scholars.

In certain important respects, the viewpoints of Gadamer and Ricoeur, the two famous Hermeneuticians of 20<sup>th</sup> century come closer to the post colonial reading, avoiding the extremes of either positivism or postmodernism, rendering adequate space to the text as well as the reader, tradition as well as difference, multiple voices as well as convergence into unity that are pertinent to a third world understanding of religious texts.

The present lecture titled Hermeneutics of Guru Granth and Guru Panth is an attempt to revisit and understand the relations of the Guru Panth to the Sikh Scripture in the context of the hermeneutic situation described in outline above. We are here to willingly explore the possibilities of reading the Sikh Scripture at the interest of the Sikh Panth in the context of the postmodern theory as well as in the context of the postcolonial conditions.

### **The Guru Granth and the Guru Panth**

Let me start the present lecture justifying the choice of the title “Hermeneutics of Guru Granth and Guru Panth”. Above all, the combination of the terms Guru Granth and Guru Panth is peculiar to Sikhism. Although every scripture has its own readers and every religion has its own followers, the Gurus have combined the terms Guru Granth and Guru Panth in a special way that they stand explicitly as inseparable, integrating the two poles of reading, the subject and the object. Guru Granth and Guru Panth can also be treated as the structure and agency from a praxiological point of view. Guru Granth and Guru Panth can also mean the theoretical and the practical ends of the Sikh religion, the Sikh theory and the Sikh practice. In an approximate sense, the Guru Granth and the Guru Panth may also mean together the unity of piri and miri aspects that is popularly emphasized in Sikhism. What is most importantly stressed in this combination is the absence of dichotomy that is put through the idea of Guru Granth and Guru Panth. It is noteworthy to indicate that the dualism of subject and object, text and reader, structure and agency, theory and practice, structuring and deconstruction had become the basic problem in western philosophy that is consciously avoided in the Sikh tradition. It is the dualism of subject and object that compelled the western philosophers either to resort to positivism or to the declaration of the death of the author. On the other hand, by making the Guru Granth and the Guru Panth articulated and understood in convergence, the

relation between the scripture and the readers is made communitarian and fluid in the Sikh tradition.

The Tenth Guru announced that the Guru Granth Sahib must be treated as the Living Guru. The idea of Living Guru is categorically against the closure of the text. It cannot go unnoticed that the term 'Living Guru' literally stands against the post modern idea of 'Death of the Author'. The idea of Living Guru makes the text permanently open to life and contextual reading. Similarly, abolishing the masand system and by choosing the Panj Pyara, the Guru entrusted the religion to his beloved followers. These acts stand to indicate that the system of hereditary priesthood has been abolished in Sikhism once for all. The Guru-religion has been transformed into the Sikh-religion. Let us also remind that the idea of Guru-Sikh and Sikh-Guru, that is, the Guru becoming the Sikh and the Sikh becoming the Guru too exists in Sikhism. All these moments of Sikh tradition hermeneutically mean that there is no privileged reader to the Sikh Scripture of Guru Granth Sahib. The entire Panth has equal access to the reading of the Scripture and for deriving meaning out of the Scripture.

The combination of Guru Granth and Guru Panth thus represents an important arrangement in Sikh tradition that there is a reciprocity between the Scripture and the reader, a communitarian mode has been constructed. The communitarian mode constructed within Sikh tradition between Guru Granth and Guru Panth, in a way, abandons or restrains us to apply the extreme modes developed by postmodernism, such as, the declaration of death of the author or of pure reader activism. The non-dichotomous and fluid relations between the Guru Granth and Guru Panth are productively unique to Sikhism and they are to be hermeneutically strengthened and developed.

The Gadamerian ideas of dialogue, horizons and fusion of horizons are more applicable to the Sikh idea of unity of Guru Granth and Guru Panth.

### **Multiple Voices and the Convergence**

The communitarian idea of unity of Guru Granth and Guru Panth in no way avoids the rupture between the Scripture and its readers. On the other hand, the process of reading and understanding inevitably contains the moments of difference, consequently dialogue and convergence of multiple voices involved in the reading. The history of the making of Sikhism glaringly evidences the innumerably varying voices that were

involved in the process. The biggest difference that was existing, at the macro-level, in Punjab during the days of the Gurus, was that of Hinduism and Islam. At a more micro-level, the Siddhas, the Sufis and the Sants contributed to the complicated religious situation of the then Punjab. Guru Nanak had wide discussions with the differing religious trends of the time. The voices of the Siddhas, the Sufis and the Sants were allowed to be articulated within the Sikh Scripture, Guru Granth Sahib. Not only the Sikh Gurus, but also so many saints of various denominations were made to be the authors of Guru Granth Sahib. Different linguistic paradigms are operative within Guru Granth Sahib. The Arabio-Persian linguistic experience as well as that of Sanskrit linguistic family find a comfortable space within the Sikh Scripture. Guru Granth Sahib covers a wide historical span of time, around five hundred years, it means an extensive temporal variety, and also a broad geographical territory, meaning a large spatial variety.

Udasi, the travels of Guru Nanak can be taken as a metaphor of celebration of multiple voices in Sikhism. A travel is always going out of one's own cultural limits. It is stretching out to the unknown other. It is a great process of learning and preaching, an incessant dialogue with the other. The Janam Sakhis are important to us because they inform us that Guru Nanak on his travels met and conversed with variety of people, elite and folk, rich and poor, peasants and artisans, tribes and settled, religious and irreligious, saintly and sinful. All these voices are alive and vocal in the Sikh tradition.

The Guru Panth at any time in its history cannot claim absolute homogeneity. The Guru Panth had lived through differing social contexts for the last five hundred years. Even during the Guru Period the socio-political conditions were not homogenous. The Sikhs lived a comparatively peaceful life during the period of the early Gurus and soon had to go through the most turbulent years in the later part. The post-Guru period too was terrible and frustrating. The historical contexts of the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the British and the post independent periods too were fundamentally different. Neither the social composition of the Sikhs was ever homogeneous. The social composition of the authors of Guru Granth Sahib or that of the Panj Pyara tells us something important about the social groupings within the Sikh fold. One cannot presuppose that the Panth had similar social composition during the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and during the British period. The Singh Sabha movement had a more educated and elite following than

the mass movement of the Akalis during the Gurdwara Reform movement. The social composition of the Namdharis or the Nirankaris, the Lahore Singh Sabha or the Amritsar Singh Sabha was different. There were and are economic, caste, gender and regional differences among the members of the Panth. All these differences have found ways to articulate themselves.

The multiple voices articulated within Guru Granth Sahib and within Guru Panth Sahib are not merely voices, but they represent the multiple social and cultural layers and contradictions characteristic of complex societies such as India. To enumerate a few, they are the religious differences such as Hinduism and Islam, sectarian differences within Hinduism such as Saivism, Vaishnavism and many more, the Folk cultural traits, economic differences of rich and poor, social differences within the Hindu social order namely that of castes, the conflicts between ritualism and ethics, the dichotomy of spirituality and temporality, the political despotism of the Moghul empire and the prejudices of the Hill Rajas, the linguistic multiplicity of the then north-western India etc. Reading the Guru Granth Sahib and reading the history of the Guru Panth Sahib, one can witness the inexhaustible social and cultural contradictions of the Indian society the Gurus had met with. Sikhism is a popular articulation of these multiple and irreducible social and cultural contradictions. In modern words, a spacious variety of economic, social, political and cultural contradictions find articulation in the popular Sikh religious paradigm. Sikhism is a popular over-determined project.

When I use the words ‘popular articulation of multiple contradictions’ or the terms ‘popular over-determined project’, I consciously employ the terms of the Gramscian school of thought, particularly as they are meant in recent studies of Ernesto Laclau. The first and foremost here is the deep recognition of the existence of multiple structures and multi-layered contradictions. This means not resorting to reducing them into anyone essentialist contradiction. Once such a heterogeneity and unevenness of structures and contradictions are recognized, then proceeds the idea that any attempt to resolve the multiple problems needs a construction of a popular reason. In our case, it is the making of the popular Sikh reason, otherwise called the coming into existence of the Guru Panth or Sikh identity.

Laclau argues that a 'popular reason' becomes inevitable where multiple differences are operative and where they are not reduced into any essentialist paradigm. To construct a popular reason, we are in need of a mosaic, a mechanism of cementing, identifying of common floating/fluid signifiers, working out of a common platform, that are invested into the term 'hegemony' by Gramsci. To construct a popular reason, the realm of plurality or of the multiple contradictions is understood as a sphere of creativity. Every binary of the realm of plurality is mediated and a measure of equivalence is created within the realm of popular reason. Levi Strauss once spoke of reciting even the impossible binaries again and again till one reaches the appropriate mediation or reconciliation. Together taken, the realm of popular reason is the inner space where both the principles of difference and equivalence are alive and operative. Laclau named it the condition of agonistic plurality averting the antagonistic relations inside.

The Gurus met with the most complex structures of Indian society, social relations of multiple determinations, one set of social relations superimposed upon the other or over-determined social relations. The genius and greatness of the Gurus lie in not to reduce the complex social and cultural relations into any singular essential contradiction. The traditional way of encountering such problems is to transform the social suffering into the religious suffering. Its methodology is reductionist and essentialist. Every problem is translated into the language of religion. The Gurus did not follow this method. The idea of miri-piri stands to inform us that the social problems are not translated into the symbolic language of religion. The reality of world, the society and the social problems is deeply recognized in Sikhism. The Gurus indeed speak of annihilating the haumain and reaching a state of sahej, or nirvan or Brahmjnan. The Gurus did speak of one God, nameless and formless, Ik Omkar, Karta Purakh. This may appear following the traditional way, however, it should be reminded that eradication of haumain is meant above all to constructing a community. The Gurus reverted to early forms of Bhakti in order to construct a community. The idea of One God as incomprehensible by human means is a successful floating signifier, the meaning of which you are ever in search of. Incomprehensibility of the idea of God reminds us that we keep on reciting endlessly even the impossible binaries as an open and unending search.

The principle of equivalence works in the realm of plurality and differences within the Panth as a Promise. It is a promise of equivalence, it is a promise of mediation of differences, it is a promise of justice, it is a promise of spreading the idea of spiritual equality into the sphere of temporal life if we take the principle of miri-piri seriously. The Panth as an integrated identity has been constructed on the promise of equivalence invested within the differing voices of the Panth. The hymns of Guru Granth Sahib are available to us in the form of Gurbani, in the form of melodious musical songs. The Tamil word for music “Isai” means also consent, consensus, wide acceptance, cementing the differences. While one recites a song, the straight lines drawn from a point (vectors) are transformed into curves and thus made to compose a circle or a spiral. It is the logic of constructing a community, the haumains are transformed into entering a pact or an accord on the basis of a promise. The incomprehensible Ik Omkar, the collective Kirtans, the Langar and the Pangat, the idea of Guru Nanak blending the four varnas into one, the city of Ramdaspur where people from 52 castes were brought together to toil and share, the common bath in the sarovar of Amrit, the common battles and festivals of the Sikhs, the common family names of Singh and Kaur- all these are historical and ideational moments of cementing the differing voices and they are also the reminders of the Great Promise invested into the making of the Panth.

### **Towards a Postcolonial Hermeneutics**

Absolutizing the differences may lead us to a postmodern hermeneutics. Absolutizing the identity may lead us to medieval dogmatism. In both the cases we are led into the trap of dichotomy. A postcolonial hermeneutics is a middle path recognizing in us the differences and retaining the identity. It is reverting to the dialectics of differences and identity. The communitarian logic suggested by the unity of Guru Granth Sahib and Guru Panth Sahib insists us to live through the unstable rupture and making it into a creative exercise. At no time shall we achieve a thorough homogenization and at no time shall we reach the state of thorough individualization.

Postmodernism may announce the death of author, authority and along with that the death of history and tradition. The third world identities cannot afford to this luxury. Our identities whether they are the Sikh or the Dravidian came into existence in the context of multiple socio-cultural structures into which we are thrown into. Our identities

are the responses to internal colonialisms (Brahmanism and Caste system) in which we were living for a long time in history. Our identities are the responses as well as to the external colonialisms (Moghul Despotism or British Imperialism) descended upon us. Our cultural sensitivity rather than our political consciousness helped us to construct and reconstruct our identities. The anti-establishment and anti-colonial traits of our identities are to be cherished and safeguarded. In the age of Globalization, Diaspora and Clash of Civilizations, only a non-colonizing hermeneutics would be at our sake. The Sikh Panth situated in foreign lands already has a good experience of encountering the conditions of Diaspora with the non-colonizing and postcolonial spirit of Sikhism. Dialogue with differing cultures and religions on the one hand and struggles for Sikh identity on the other hand in foreign lands have their long tested history. Values of such a postcolonial hermeneutics must be culled more and more out of our own cultures and popular reasons historically constructed by us.

This does not mean that we must allow our identities to subvert the differences within us. The internal democracy of our communitarian identities should not be suppressed or concealed. That would be equivalent to killing the source of dynamism and creativity. That would be equivalent to forgetting the Great Promise invested within during the making of the identity. Laclau's idea of agonistic pluralism would be operating within the community reminding the Promise and guaranteeing the dynamism of our existence. The community must lend its ears to the voices of the agonistic plurality.

### **Selected Bibliography**

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2. Ernesto Laclau, On Populist Reason, Verso, 2005