

## Interfaith Dialogue and Guru Granth Sahib

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As a scripture, *Guru Granth Sahib* is unique in many respects. Firstly, it is not a collection of ‘ethical commandments’ or ‘theological statements’ but an anthology of poetic compositions, reflecting the mystico-ethical meditations of the inspired souls. Secondly, the compositions included in this holy *Granth* are not only of the founders of Sikh faith (Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur) but also of many other prominent medieval Indian Saints and mystics whose world-view and ideology is identical with the Sikh way of life. These ‘Saint-poets’ belong to diverse social, religious and cultural traditions of India. Most prominent among these are Jaidev, Namdev, Sheikh Farid, Kabir and Ravidas. Chronologically these medieval Saints and Gurus belong to a vast expanse of five centuries (i.e. from the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE.). They represent the regional and linguistic diversity of the Indian subcontinent.

Guru Arjan Dev, the compiler and editor of this *Granth*, was a man of prophetic vision and humanitarian concerns. He imbibed the spirit of renaissance heralded by the Bhakti and the Sufi movements during the middle ages in India. In fact, the emergence of these two movements (the Bhakti and the Sufi movement) symbolizes a moment of great cultural awakening and the resurgence of humanitarian spirit during the medieval times in India. In the then prevalent atmosphere of religious intolerance and oppression, these Saints and Sufis sought to generate an environment of dialogue and understanding. Guru Arjan Dev was inwardly aware of the ideological importance of these two movements. Therefore, he collected the poetic compositions (*Bāṇī*) of those prominent Saint-poets and Sufis of India, whose mystico-ethical vision reflected the humanitarian and radical social ideology. As a result, a voluminous scripture, in the form of an anthology, came into existence.

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 narrow boundaries of

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caste, creed and religious dogma. It assumes a wider religious and socio-cultural significance. The text and discourse of this *Granth* emerges as significant ‘knowledge text’ incorporating deep philosophical meditations on the eternal verities of human existence as well as a radical vision of social reform, upholding human equality and dignity. Most important aspect of this *Granth* lies in its idea of religion itself. It emphasizes the essential spiritual core of religion which transcends institutional boundaries. In keeping with the *Rigvedic* injunction – *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti* (the Truth is one but the wise persons call it by many names) – it respects the diversity of religious beliefs and practices. In the present context, such an approach towards religion is most relevant.

The essential spiritual core of every religion is deeply humanitarian. It is a way of life which is primarily concerned with man’s search for final meaning and purpose in life. Every religion contains within its universe the knowledge that is liberative and liberating. As Lord Krishna says in *Bhagvad Gita* “Knowledge is the greatest purifier”

Of all purifiers, like taking bath in the Ganga,  
Doing remedial action, repeating the name of God,  
Knowledge is the greatest purifier.

The basic impurity of ignorance can be removed only by knowledge. <sup>1</sup>

We need real knowledge to purify us and dispel darkness and mistrust born out of ignorance. What is required is the re-reading of our religious texts in the light of our contemporary concerns. We also need to have some knowledge of the basic tenets of our contemporary faiths as well. Only then can we enter into a fruitful dialogue with other faiths. In this context, we are reminded of one of our prominent medieval Saint-poets, Bhakta Kabir, who says –

Do not say that *Beda* and the *Kateb* are false  
False is the person who does not contemplate on them. <sup>2</sup>

The intended meaning of the couplet is very clear. *Beda* (*Vedas*) here represents the sacred scriptures of Hinduism and *Kateba* as the sacred books of Abrahamic faiths. The Saint-poet is trying here to emphasize the underlying spiritual unity in the diverse manifestations of the world scriptures. In order to remove the falsely created environment of mistrust among different faiths, contextual re-reading of the scriptures of world religions is needed. Only by rediscovering

the true essence of religion and by emphasizing the humanitarian moral values of these religious traditions, we can create such an atmosphere of mutual understanding and harmony.

Interestingly the existential situation of the medieval Indian society, in which the text and discourse of *Guru Granth Sahib* participates, is very much similar to our present times. There is a plurality of contending religious beliefs and practices represented by various sects of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Islam. The socio-cultural reality is reflective of these plural world outlooks. Presently, we are concerned with the study of *Guru Granth Sahib*. We will be studying the models of inter-faith dialogue and understanding provided by the Saints and gurus in this Holy Scripture.

In the present-day globalized world, comprising of diverse cultural traditions and religious identities, the significance of interfaith dialogue can hardly be over-emphasized. The processes of globalization have turned our planet into a virtual 'global village' where people of diverse faiths and cultural traditions are obliged to share the common social space out of sheer necessity. In this 'global' village the diversity of faiths is often exploited by divisive forces to create conflicts and tensions in society. In such an environment, interfaith dialogue and understanding is the only alternative available to us to create an atmosphere of communal harmony and peaceful co-existence. Ours is a country composed of diverse ethnic/cultural identities and multiple religious denominations. The atmosphere of traditional communal harmony is presently under grave threat due to clever machinations of the global players as well as due to misguided elements in our own society. These elements are creating an atmosphere of mistrust and tensions in our socio-cultural sphere. Recognition of each other's beliefs and practices is a pre-condition for communal harmony and peaceful co-existence. The need for interfaith dialogue and understanding has become all the more important in such a situation.

Dialogue is a mode of knowledge and understanding used in interpersonal communication. It is natural to human beings in their existential concerns. Most important thing in dialogue is the world view of the participants which needs to be taken into account. In a genuine dialogue the self and the other are present to each other as authentic beings. It calls for openness and equality and the readiness to discard false appearances. Dialogue involves the

encounter of different perspectives, views and worlds. It can be either spoken or silent. Therefore the key to dialogue is respect for the other, a willingness to listen, and a readiness to learn.

Interfaith studies require contextual re-reading of the scriptures of world religions in the light of contemporary concerns. Our present concern is with *Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy scripture of Sikhism. In our view, the Sikh scripture can play a vital and constructive role in creating an atmosphere of interfaith harmony in the contemporary world. For this purpose we shall be exploring the text and discourse of this scripture for insights and models relevant for interfaith dialogue and understanding. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh faith has emphasized the significance of dialogue as a mode of knowledge in clear terms in one of his compositions: *jablagu duntā rahiye nānak, kichu sunie kichu kahīe* <sup>34</sup>“As long as we live in this world, O Nanak, we should listen something and speak something.” Living in the consciousness of death is a mystic expression of spiritual enlightenment achieved through the agency of dialogue. The Sikh Scripture employs this very dialogical mode in dealing with the mystico-ethical issues in general and more particularly with the issues of interfaith nature in its textual space.

In the scriptural tradition of the Indic Civilization, especially in Hindu dharma the importance of dialogue as a mode of knowledge is well established. For instance the whole discourse of Bhagavad *Gītā* is in the form of a dialogue between Krishna and Arjun. Similarly the Upanishads abundantly employ dialogical mode in presenting and clarifying the philosophical issues of life and living. The text of *Guru Granth Sahib* is no exception. It employs dialogue as a textual strategy to settle issues relating to beliefs and practices of various faiths. The discourse of this scripture deals not only with inter-faith issues of Indic dharma traditions but dealing particularly with contemporary Islam in India it connects with inter-civilizational issues of interfaith dialogue.

The inclusion of the hymns of Medieval Indian Saint-Poets belonging to diverse faiths (both Hindu and Muslim) alongside those of the Sikh Gurus is a clear proof of its inclusive and pluralistic approach toward religion. In fact the universal message of *Guru Granth Sahib* not only accepts the diversity but also the distinct identity of these faiths. Although it often criticizes the hypocrisy of the practitioners of faiths, it makes a clear distinction between the inner spiritual essence of these faiths and their outer formal practices.

The philosophical basis of interfaith dialogue lies in the recognition and acceptance of multiple paths to the realization of one Ultimate Truth. All the faiths of Indic Civilization subscribe to this view which can be considered as the core tenet of these *dharma* traditions. This oft-quoted core tenet is expressed for the first time in *R̥gveda*, the most ancient scriptural text of Indic Civilization: *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*.<sup>4</sup> (Truth is one, but the learned refer to it in different names). Here the idea of truth represents the all-pervading impersonal Reality which is essentially a philosophical rather than theological concept. The Vedic deities like Agni, Yama and Matariswan can be taken as personalized symbolic representations of the Ultimate Reality in its various manifestations. In other words the theological diversities are sought to be dissolved in the unitive consciousness of the ground of all being named as ‘*sat*’ (Truth). Similarly in *Bhagavad Gītā*, Lord Krishna, the Divine Incarnate, states: “As people approach me, so I receive them. All paths lead to me”<sup>5</sup> This is reaffirmation of the Vedic injunction of multiple paths leading to one Ultimate Reality/ Supreme Being. The only difference is that the idea of impersonal Reality or Truth is expressed in theological terms.

In *Guru Granth Sahib* the same core tenet of the multiple paths to Reality/Truth is expressed in various forms at many places. For instance Guru Nanak in Sri Raga states: *Ekā surati jete hai jā, surati vihūṇā koe na kīa, Jehī surati tehā tina rāhu*.<sup>6</sup> (One is the awareness among all beings. No one has been created without this awareness. As is their awareness, so is their way). Whichever path a *jīva* takes in life ultimately depends on the state of its awareness. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, has also posited the similar view of man and his approach towards the Supreme Being. In one of his compositions included in *Dasam Granth* he states: *Āpi āpanī buddhi hai jetī. barnat bhinna bhinnu tuhi tetī*.<sup>7</sup> (Depending on the intellect at our disposal, each one of us describes you in diverse terms). In Rag Bilaval Guru Amar Das states: *jagatu jalaṇḍā rakkhi lai āpaṇī kirpā dhāri. jitu duārai ubarai titai lai hu ubāri*.<sup>8</sup> (The fire of suffering is consuming the world, have mercy, save it. Whichever be the door to liberation, lead it to save itself)

Pluralism is an article of faith. It is not just toleration or acceptance of diversity. It is an engagement with the diversity of co-existing faiths in society. In real sense of the term, pluralism means active participation in a two-way process of interaction for gaining knowledge and understanding of each other’s faith. In other words pluralism is more than tolerance of

differences. It also requires knowledge and appreciation of diversity. Moreover pluralism does not mean abandoning the distinctiveness of our own faith.

Dialogue in the real sense is possible among the equals. To engage ‘the other’ in a genuine dialogue process, we need to treat him as our equal, which is most conducive attitude for a meaningful dialogue on matters of faith. The discourse of *Guru Granth Sahib* deals with the idea of ‘the other’ from a philosophical perspective. In Rag Gauri Guru Nanak states in clear terms: *dūjā kauṇu kahā nahī koī. sabha mahi eku niranjānu soī.*<sup>9</sup> (Who is the other? and where he is? There is on one. There is only one Supreme Being who is all-pervading). This metaphysical concept of the unity of all existence is the foundation on which the whole edifice of Sikh world view is raised. This unitive consciousness does not treat anyone as alien or other. Recognizing the Supreme Being as creator and sustainer of the created universe inspires us to treat all beings as equals.

In fact Guru Arjan Dev goes one step ahead. He places the ‘other’ in the category of a friend which is recognized as a relationship among equals. In practice our relationship with the other become problematic when there is enmity between us on any account. There is a beautiful statement to this effect in Dhanasri Rag by Guru Arjan Dev: *nā ko merā dusmanu rahiā nā hama kisa ke bairāī. Brahman pasāru pasārio bhūtari satigura te sojhī pāī. sabhu ko mītu hama āpana kīnā hama sabhanā ke sājana.*<sup>10</sup> (No one has remained an enemy for me, and I am no one's enemy. The Supreme Being, who expanded His expanse, is within us all; I learned this from the True Guru. I have friendliness for all beings and I am a friend of everyone.

This attitude of friendliness for all *jīvas* has been expressed in one of the seminal texts of Indic Civilization, *Yajur Veda: mittarasya mā cakṣuṣā sarvāṇi bhūtāni smīkṣamītām.*<sup>11</sup> (Let all the *jīva-s* look towards me with a gaze of friendliness)

The insight expressed in this text is representative of cosmic vision where all enmity is dissolved. It is a prayer invoking the emotion of mutual friendliness in all the *jīvas* of the universe. In Buddhism also the significance of friendliness has been emphasized in a forceful manner. In Buddhist *dharma* tradition *karuṇā* (compassion) and *maitrī* (friendliness) are considered two cardinal virtues for realization and attainment of salvation (*nirvāṇa*). The text and discourse of *Guru Granth Sahib* follows these glorious traditions of Indic *dharma* traditions. As a matter of fact the pluralism of the Sikh Scripture has its roots in the non-dualistic perception

of Ultimate Reality which is all-pervading. It perceives one Lord (*prabhu*) in the whole of creation. For illustration some of the verses are quoted below:

Perceive the presence of Atam and Rama in all beings.

The perfect One is all-pervading.<sup>12</sup>

The Sikh Scripture gives due space to the separate identity of different religious communities along with their distinctive beliefs and practices. This awareness is portrayed in Raga Ramkali where Guru Arjan Dev observes:

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.<sup>13</sup>

A similar semiotic strategy is at work in the following verses of Kabir: “If Allah lives only in the mosque, then to who does the rest of the world belong?”<sup>14</sup> It is the context in which the following statement of Kabir in Rag Prabhati can be gainfully interpreted: *Beda Kateb kaho mat jhūṭhe jhūṭhā jo na bicārai*.<sup>15</sup> (Do not say the Vedas or the sacred Books are false, false are the people who do not contemplate on them). This philosophical vision of cosmic consciousness is the trade mark of the ideology of Sikh Scripture. In Rag Ramkali, Guru Arjan Dev says in a mood of prayer:

Be kind and compassionate to me, O Creator Lord.

Bless me with devotion and meditation, O Creator.

Says Nanak, the Guru has rid me of all doubt.

Allah and Parbrahm are the same.<sup>16</sup>

‘Allah’ and ‘Brahman’ are the prime signifiers of the two religious traditions (the Muslim and the Hindu). The discursive strategy of the text of *Guru Granth Sahib* here is inclusiveness. By indicating the spiritual unity/oneness of these signifiers, peaceful co-existence and communal harmony is emphasized. Such a unifying consciousness emerges only in an atmosphere of inter-faith dialogue and understanding. This is precisely the ideological position of the Gurus, Saints and Sufis whose compositions have been included in this sacred text.

The discourse of Gurbani posits the idea of Ultimate Reality which is both transcendent and immanent at the same time. In its response to Islam it attempts to assimilate the monotheistic

idea of personal transcendent God into its fold in an inclusive manner. This interfaith dialogical response is beautifully expressed in the discursive universe of *Guru Granth Sahib*. For instance in Rag Ramkali Guru Nanak states: “He Himself is near at hand, and He is far away. He Himself is all-pervading, permeating everywhere.”<sup>17</sup> Again in the same Rag, “Your Light is prevailing everywhere. Wherever I look, there I see the Lord.”<sup>18</sup> The terms used for transcendence and immanence are taken from spoken idiom – *nerai* (near) *dūri* (far away) for ease of communication. These efforts at synthesizing of opposing concepts relating to two different Civilizations reflects the spirit of renaissance ushered by medieval Bhakti movement. In this context the following verses from *Dasam Granth* are most relevant: *kahūn veda rīta, kahūn tāsion viparīta; kahūn triguṇa atīta kahūn sarguna smeta ho.*<sup>19</sup> (Somewhere you work in accordance with Vedic rites and somewhere quite opposed to these; Somewhere you are devoid of the three attributes and somewhere you are present with all these attributes). The spirit of this synthesis is reflected in the underlying unity of all faiths in another verse of Guru Gobind Singh: “The temple and the mosque are the same, the *pūjā* and the *namāz* are the same, all men are the same; it is through erroneous judgment they appear different ... All men have the same eyes, the same ears, the same body, the same build, a compound of earth, air, fire and water ... let no man, even by mistake, suppose there is a difference.”<sup>20</sup>

In ‘Siddha Gosti’ composition of Guru Nanak we find an excellent example of interfaith dialogue. Composed in conversational style, it is a poetic rendering of dialogical exchange of views between Siddhas (the ascetics or Jogis) and Guru Nanak. It is comparatively a long composition containing 73 poetic stanzas, the main theme of which relates to two divergent world views - the Siddha and the Gurmat world views. “The text itself does not provide any clue as to the time and place of its composition, though it is generally placed in the last years of Guru Nanak’s life when he had finally settled down at Kartarpur.”<sup>21</sup> Prof. Dharam Singh observes, “Guru Nanak’s “*Sidha Gosti*” as we find it included in the scripture, is a sort of spiritual dialogue between Guru Nanak and the *Siddhas* on the Sikh philosophy of life vis-à-vis the philosophy of yoga. Throughout the long-drawn dialogue, the serenity and sobriety is retained and the aim is to realize the truth. Guru Nanak is of the view that it is only through meaningful dialogue that truth can be arrived at. It is also this sort of attitude which modern mind must cultivate so as to resolve most of the socio-political and inter- and intra-community problems.”<sup>22</sup>



The composition begins with an invocation to Supreme Being and a show of reverence for the assembly of the learned (the Siddhas and the Sants): The Siddhas, sitting in their traditional posture, formed an assembly shouted, ‘Salute this gathering of Saints.’ I offer my salutation to the One who is true, infinite and incomparably beautiful. I cut off my head, and offer it to Him; I dedicate my body and mind to Him. O Nanak, meeting with the Saints, Truth is obtained, and one is spontaneously blessed with distinction. ||1||”<sup>23</sup> This invocatory piece also contains an indication of the central theme of the composition in the following statement: *Kiā bhavīai saci sūcā hoi. Sāca sabada binu mukati na koi.* (What is the use of wandering around? Purity comes only through Truth. Without the True Word of the Shabad, no one finds liberation.)<sup>24</sup>

The attitude of reverence for the contending party (the other) of the dialogue, as expressed here, is a traditional convention of our Indian culture. It creates an appropriate atmosphere congenial to interfaith dialogue where differences of opinion in matters of beliefs and practices are sought to be clarified and resolved if possible. Such an interfaith dialogue, if conducted with good will and honesty, can provide an excellent opportunity to understand each other’s philosophical positions and theological assumptions better. It is a win-win situation for both parties.

The Siddhas initiate the dialogue with some preliminary queries addressed to Guru Nanak regarding his personal life, his source of knowledge and his Guru, to which the Guru responds in a polite manner. And then the Siddhas ask a pertinent philosophical question: “The world is said to be an ocean which is treacherous and impassable; how can one cross over?” The answer is also forthcoming – “As the lotus flower floats untouched upon the surface of the water, and the duck swims effortlessly through the stream; with one’s consciousness focused on the *sabda* (Word/vehicle of liberative knowledge), one crosses over this terrifying world-ocean. Nanak, chants the Name (of the Lord). One who lives alone, as a hermit, enshrining the One Lord in his mind, remaining unaffected by hope in the midst of hope and sees and inspires others to see the inaccessible, unfathomable Lord. Nanak is his slave.”<sup>25</sup> Here the classical symbol of a lotus flower growing in water drawing its sustenance from the mud below and yet remaining untouched by it has also been used to illustrate the point that man can live a detached life in this

world and realize the Supreme Lord by enshrining His Name in his heart. So has been the symbol of the duck swimming in water without wetting its wings.<sup>26</sup>

In this composition the true spirit of interfaith dialogue is maintained in accepting the validity of Truth possessed by the contending party but its empty ritualism is not tolerated either. In a polite manner Guru Nanak is able to show the hollowness of certain ritual practices using the conceptual terminology of Siddha world view and way of life. According to Guru Nanak meditating on the unchanging Truth (the Name or essence of Supreme Being) and living a life of detached attachment is the only way to liberation. In fact, the entire text of *Guru Granth Sahib* is full of such insights which are relevant for an effective interfaith dialogue in our contemporary context as it was so in its original historical context.

### Notes and References:

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<sup>1</sup> Bhagvad Gita – 4/38.

<sup>2</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 1350.

<sup>3</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 661.

<sup>4</sup> *Rigveda Samhita* 1.164.46.

<sup>5</sup> *ye yathā māṃ prapadyante tāṃs tathāiva bhajāmyaham  
mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ.  
Bhagavad Gita* 4:11.

<sup>6</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Dasam Granth*

<sup>8</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 853.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 671.

<sup>11</sup> *Yajur Veda*. 36.10.18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ātam Rāmu sarab mahi pekhu.  
Pūran pūri rahiā prabh eku.*

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- Guru Granth Sahib*, 892.
- <sup>13</sup> *Koī bolai Rāma Rāma koī Khudāe.*  
*Koī sevai Gosaiān koī Alahi.*  
*Kāraṇa karaṇa karīm. Kirpā dhār Rahīm.*  
*Koī nāvai tīrathi koī hajja jāe. Koī kare pūjā koī sira nivāe.*  
*Koī parhe Beda koī Kateb. Koī odhai nīla koī supeda.*  
*Koī kahai Turaku koī kahe Hindū.*  
*Koī bāchai bhisatu koī surgindū.*  
*Kahu Nānak jini hukamu pachātā.*  
*Prabha sahib kā tini bhedu jātā.*  
*Ibid*, 885.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 1349.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 1350.
- <sup>16</sup> *Mihar dayā kari karnaihara.*  
*Bhagati baṇdagī dehi sirjaṇhara.*  
*Kaho Nanak guri khoje bharam.*  
*Eko Allahu Parbarahm.*  
*Ibid*, 897.
- <sup>17</sup> *Āpe nerai āpe dūri.*  
*Āpe sarab rahiā bharpūri.*  
*Ibid*, 876.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 876.
- <sup>19</sup> *Dasam Granth*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p – 51.
- <sup>21</sup> <http://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/>
- <sup>22</sup> Dharam Singh. ‘The Sikh Spirit and the Global Society’ In *Understanding Sikhism Research Journal*, January - June 2005, Vol. 7, No.1.
- <sup>23</sup> *Siddha sabhā kari āsaṅI baiṭhe saṅta sabhā jaikāro.*  
*Tisu āgai raharāsi hamārī sēcā apara apāro.*  
*Masataku kāṭi dharī tisu āgai tanu manu āgai deo.*  
*Nānaka saṅtu milai sacu pāiai sahaja bhāl jasu leo.*  
*Guru Granth Sahib*, 938)
- <sup>24</sup> *Guru Granth Sahib*, 938.
- <sup>25</sup> *Dunīā sāgaru dutaru kahīe kio kari pāiai pāro?*

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*Jaise jala mahi kamalu nirālamu muragāī nai sāṅe.*

*Surati sabadi bhava sāgaru tarīai Nānaka nāmu vakhāṅe*

*Rahahi ikānti eko mani vasiā āsā mahi nirāso.*

*Agamu agocarū dekhi dikhāe Nānaku tā kā dāso.*

*Ibid , 938.*

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/>