

... (1963) is well-known for his views on the Sikh religion. His beliefs and faith in the Sikh religion are well-known.

The Bhai Gurdas is a very important figure in the Sikh religion. His work is a masterpiece of Sikh thought.

Steeped in the Sikh tradition, Bhai Gurdas's work is a masterpiece of Sikh thought.

Bhai Gurdas's work provides valuable regional and national perspectives, especially in such fields as history, religion, and economics.

It is a very interesting and important work in the history of medieval Punjab.

Pritam Singh (b. 1918) is the author of this writer of repute in Punjab. Occasionally, he also. The compilation of *Concept of The Sikh Religion* is done by him in English, while he was Professor of Guru Nanak Studies in Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. His writings in Punjabi include *The Evolution of Gurumukhi Script* (1955); *Life and Letters of Khushal Khan Khattak* (1974), *Foreign Influences on Punjab and Punjabi* (1978); *Life and Letters of Bhai Kahn Singh of Nabha* (1989) and *Sant Singh Sekhon* (1991).

In this slender volume Prof. Pritam Singh evaluates the life and work of *Bhai Gurdas*, mainly for the benefit of non-Punjabi readers.

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BHAI GURDAS

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From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd Century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

Makers of Indian Literature

BHAI GURDAS

Pritam Singh



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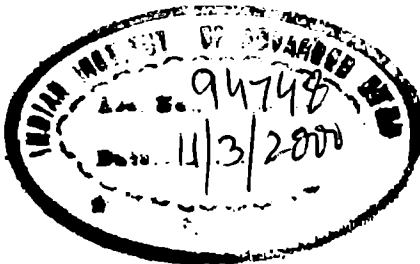
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***DEDICATED TO BHAI CHANAN SINGH
MY FATHER
IN DEEP REVERENCE.***

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Prologue

Bhai Gurdas is one of the greatest tridimensional literary figures that medieval Punjab threw up.

His first dimension is that of an exponent of Sikhism; the second dimension is that of a poet of Punjabi language and his third dimension relates to his Hindi poetry.

In all these three fields of literary activity, the excellence of Bhai's contribution has been proclaimed by perceptive appraisers throughout the centuries after his death.

In recognition of the authenticity of his interpretations of Sikhism, the Sikhs have been viewing his works as *Key* to their Scripture. The late Bhai Jodh Singh, an eminent Sikh theologian, compiled in 1911, a book of selections from the works of Bhai Gurdas and named it *Sikhi Ki Hai? or What is Sikhism?* This shows how high is the position that Bhai Gurdas enjoys among his co-religionists.

As for his status in Punjabi literature, the writer of this monograph had assessed the Bhai's contribution to Punjab's linguistic stock in the following words in his anthology of Punjabi poetry, entitled *Punjabi Kav Dhara* (1948):

Bhai Gurdas never found himself at a loss for words when he wanted to express himself. Language behaved like a slave before him. At the merest signal from him,

it laid before him all its secret treasures for his exploitation. With supreme confidence in himself, he made and unmade vocables according to his contextual need and makes them express required shades of meaning. The number of words that he uses in his *vars* for the first time and which he bequeathes to the common stock of Punjabi vocabulary, is substantial.

Compact, suggestive and evocative vocabulary comes to him naturally. His name has become almost synonymous with concise expression. On going through his works, one can hardly escape the feeling that it is impossible to beat the Bhai at his favourite game of packing great semantic power in the fewest of words. Phrases and lines flashed through his mind in quick succession and in such a pithy and polished form that these could easily pass as centuries-old sayings and proverbs...¹

The striking imagery, the apt illustrations, the similes and metaphors and the subtle sound-patterns created by the Bhai in his *Kabitts* composed in Braji language, now a dialect of Hindi, may easily be mistaken for the work of any of the great medieval masters who flourished in Uttar Pradesh during the hey-day of Braji language.

Thus, Bhai Gurdas's eminent position in all the fields of his literary endeavour is time-tested.

Due to the spatial constraints, the work in hand has been devised not as an exhaustive book on the Bhai, but just as an introduction to his life and literary work, in the hope that some of our readers may be encouraged to study the poet in his original Hindi and Punjabi languages.

The writer is grateful to the following persons for assistance of one sort or the other in the preparation of this monograph:

Bhai Sahib Bhai Kirpal Singh, ex-Jathedar of Akal Takht, Amritsar; Prof. Sant Singh Sekhon; Dr. Piar Singh, Professor, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (now Retd); Dr. Wazir Singh, Professor and Head of the

1. Pritam Singh (ed.), *Punjabi Kav Dhara*, 1948, Delhi. Uttar Chand Kapur & Sons, pp.105-6.

Department of Religious Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala (now Retd.); Dr. Darshan Singh, Reader, Department of Religious Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala; Dr. Harbhajan Singh, Professor & Head, Modern Indian Languages, University of Delhi, Delhi (now Retd.); Dr. Jagjit Singh, Principal, Gurmat College, Patiala; Dr. Gobind Singh Lamba, Language Department, Punjab, Patiala (now Retd.); Dr. J.K. Tripathi, Hindi Department, Mahendra College, Patiala (now Retd.); Doctors Gurbal Singh Sachdeva and Harshindar Kaur, both of P.C.M.S., Patiala and Miss Meena Sawhney of the Department of Religious Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala.

The debt that the undersigned owes to the late Bhais Kahn Singh, Vir Singh and Randhir Singh, being of a different category, he is pleased to acknowledge his special obligation to them.

Patiala

Pritam Singh

April 30, 1991.

Abbreviations:

- P.S. Pritam Singh (the writer of this monograph).
- S.G.G.S. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (the Sikh Scripture covering 1430 page of any edition).

I

Birth to Death

Significance of '*Bhai*'

Bhai, in Punjabi, means 'brother'.

There are indications that all male members of the early generations of the followers of Sikh faith used to be addressed as *Bhais*.

The reason why new faiths usually choose such forms of address for their followers as represent fraternal or close comradely relations, is almost always the same, namely, their unhappiness with the existing religious and socio-political situation that they consider to be responsible for vitiated relations between man and his God and man and God's other creations.

In the case of Sikh faith also the adoption of *Bhai* as the common form of address for males amounted to an open declaration that the social arrangement in which considerations of caste were allowed to dehumanise man, was totally unacceptable to the followers of Guru Nanak.

While this form of address must have conveyed to the non-Sikh population of the region a message that all members of the up-coming socio-religious fraternity were united

like brothers, it must also have confirmed the belief of the neo-converts themselves that the basic impulse of their community was integrative as against the exclusivist nature of the society of which they used to be members before their admission into the Sikh fold.

Soon, however, *Bhai*, which had strong equalizing implications, acquired a titular dimension also. It began to signify the exalted position of the addressee among his co-religionists, especially in the area of religion. According to the *Encyclopaedia of Sikh Literature*, *Bhai* is a "high title among the Sikhs... which continued to be conferred by the Gurus, till Guru Gobind Singh's time, upon the most prominent Sikhs, such as Bhai Buddha, Bhai Gurdas..."¹.

It may, therefore, be safely assumed that *Bhai*, placed before 'Gurdas', points to the prominent and respectable position of the person concerned among his co-religionists in the fields of Sikh religion and Sikh literature and does not form an integral part of his proper name. But the title has stuck to the eminent poet's name so tenaciously that any mention of mere 'Gurdas' without its usual prefix *Bhai* will not immediately evoke the desired image, even among knowledgeable persons.

The author of this monograph, thus, had enough reason to use 'Bhai Gurdas' or simply 'the *Bhai*', and not merely 'Gurdas' which was his proper name.

What's in a Name ?

A rose will be a rose indeed by whatever name it may be called, but a tale hangs by the poet's proper name also.

It may be taken for granted that Punjabi people of medieval times were quite conversant with the honorific title of 'Guru', a multi-functional word that has served, besides other professional fields, the two specialized fields of pedagogy and religion with great steadfastness.

Guru was believed to be a dispeller of mental, psychic

and spiritual darkness and Gorakhnath of the Nath cult was one such spiritual leader whose Guruship was widely and deeply acknowledged.

Came Guru Nanak (1469 - 1539), the founder of Sikhism, and the Guruship of all spiritual teachers, including Guru Gorakhnath, began to pale into oblivion, at least in the Punjab region.

Only one authentic Guruship remained intact and that belonged to the House of Guru Nanak.

Guru Nanak was succeeded by nine more Gurus, who are believed by the followers to have been illumined by the same mystic light as had shone through the first Guru's life and letters.

Quite appropriately, the followers of these Gurus came to be known as 'Sikhs' (Sanskrit = *Shishya*, a pupil or a disciple).

The immediate spiritual successor of Guru Nanak was one of his devout Sikhs, named Bhai Lehna. He was re-named by Guru Nanak as Angad (ornament), when the Guru had decided to nominate him as his successor.

Guru Angad (1504 - 1552) passed on the Guruship to one of his own faithful Sikhs, now known as Guru Amar Das (b. 1479). He occupied the exalted spiritual seat from 1552 to his death in 1574.

Guru Amar Das had three younger brothers, the youngest being Ishar Das. When (Guru) Amar Das had joined the Sikh brotherhood, some other members of his family, including his youngest brother, Shri Ishar Das, were also attracted towards the new faith.

In course of time, Bhai Ishar Das, who had become a regular Sikh of Guru Angad, was blessed with a son. The neo-Sikh family could think of no better name for the new arrival than 'Gur Das' — The Slave of The Guru.

This surmise, first made by Bhai Vir Singh in the Intro-

duction of his edition of the then newly-discovered works of Bhai Gurdas, ² carries the stamp of authority.

Gurdas was the first child born in the family after its admission to Sikh faith in which the office of the Guru played a pivotal role. For all this worldly and other - worldly intents and purposes every Sikh reposed unquestioned faith in the Guru.

The name 'Gurdas' indicates that the family wanted its holder to dedicate his whole life to the service of the Guru. As the available particulars of the life and letters of Bhai Gurdas get unfolded in the following pages, it will become increasingly clear that, true to his name, the Bhai fulfilled the parental expectations almost literally by dedicating all his talents to the Guru's mission.

When Born And Where ?

As in the case of many other old and medieval Punjabi poets, in the case of Bhai Gurdas also, contemporary or near-contemporary literature is not very helpful to his biographers who want to collect definitive details relating to his life and letters. The paucity of information is such that even the identity of his father and the dates of his birth and death have to be worked out with great difficulty.

The late venerable scholar Bhai Vir Singh had accepted Datar Chand ³ as the name of Bhai's father, but relying on the evidence provided by Kesar Singh Chhibbar in his *Bansawali Nama*, the late Bhai Randhir Singh, who had worked for a long time in the capacity of Research Scholar with the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhik Committee, Amritsar, the main religious body of the Sikh community, and later with Punjabi University, Patiala, accepted Ishar Das as the name of Bhai's father.⁴ We have followed Bhai Randhir Singh here.

With the help of certain known dates of events and persons, Bhai Vir Singh was able to fix the lower and upper

dates within which the birth of Bhai Gurdas must have taken place. The estimated period of ten years was between *Samvat* 1600 and 1610 or A.D. 1543 to 1553.⁵ The late Bhai Randhir Singh carried the research further and concluded that Bhai Gurdas's birth took place in A.D. 1551, which year we also accept.

The date of Bhai Gurdas's death too is a contentious issue but depending on the same authority we have settled at A.D. 1635.

The place where Bhai Gurdas was born, was and is still called Goindwal. It is a small town on the eastern bank of the river Beas. The town comes under the administrative charge of Amritsar District of the state of Punjab.

We shall soon have occasion to say something on the significance of being born at Goindwal in the mid-sixteenth century.

It was at Goindwal, the place of his birth, that the Bhai breathed his last at the mature age of 84 years.

Contemporary of Eight Emperors

In order to have a proper feel of the Bhai's period, let us first look at the regimes under which he had to spend his days. Zahiruddin Babar (1483-1530) founded the dynasty of Mughal rulers in India in A.D. 1526 after defeating Ibrahim of the then-ruling Lodi dynasty. Babar was succeeded by his son, Humayun (1503-1556) whose reign had a break of about 15 years (1540-1555) during which interregnum rulers of Sur dynasty, founded by Sher Shah Suri (d. 1545), had got themselves catapulted to the royal throne in Delhi.

It was during this period of Sur domination that (Bhai) Gurdas was born. A ruler, by the name of Islam Shah Sur occupied the Delhi throne then.

Islam Shah died in 1553, leaving his young son Feroze Khan as his successor. Feroze Khan's fate was soon sealed by

his uncle Mubariz Khan who captured the throne and adopted Muhammad Adil Shah as his royal nomenclature. It was now his brother-in-law, Ahmad Khan's turn to oust Muhammad Adil Shah and declare himself as emperor under the royal name of Sikander Shah.

Humayun succeeded in re-occupying his lost throne and empire in 1555, but died in an accidental fall from the stairs of his library in 1556.

Humayun's son, Jalaluddin Akbar (1542-1605), who succeeded him, was a liberal sovereign and occupied the throne for about half a century. Jahangir (1569-1627) reversed his father's liberal policy to some extent. It was during his reign and under his express orders that Guru Arjan (1563-1606), the 5th Guru of Sikhs, was tormented to death.

Then followed Jahangir's son, Shahjahan (1593-1666), who is known all over the world for having caused the beautiful mausoleum Taj Mahal to be built at Agra, to commemorate his love for his departed queen, Mumtaz Mahal.

(Bhai) Gurdas was only five years of age when Humayun reoccupied his throne. At the time of Akbar's ascension to the throne in 1556, (Bhai) Gurdas was a lad of six, but had reached the 54th year of his life when the emperor breathed his last. For the next 22 years, he lived under Jahangir's rule and during the last eight years of his life, Shahjahan was the ruler of India.

And of Gurus

Nearer home, the Bhai was a contemporary of five Gurus, namely, Guru Angad (1504-1552), Guru Amar Das (1479-1574), Guru Ram Das (1534-1581), Guru Arjan Dev (1563-1606) and Guru Hargobind (1595-1644).⁶

(Bhai) Gurdas was a babe of two years when Guru Angad breathed his last. He was 23, when Guru Amar Das said goodbye to this world. For the next seven years, he worked

with his next Master, Guru Ram Das, but with Guru Arjan Dev he had an unbroken innings of 25 years. During the last leg of 29 years he served Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru.

It speaks volumes for the loyalty, adjustability and utility of the Bhai that his services were in eager demand by all the Gurus, beginning with Guru Amar Das, the third Guru and ending with Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru.

Bhai Gurdas's assignments were diverse in nature and sometimes even risky and required immense patience, tact, practical psychology and great confidence in the gifts of his own gab and pen.

His semi-diplomatic - cum - missionary assignment at Agra, his superintendence of Guru's public and private building-projects at Goindwal and Amritsar and his direct confrontation with the schismatic Pirthi Chand, the eldest brother of Guru Arjan Dev and other members of Pirthi Chand's family, were some such activities.

The Bhai converted all such challenges into opportunities. We shall see later in this monograph, how well-informed he was about fields as apart from each other as ancient Indian philosophy, folklore, metallurgy and botany. His travels on missionary duty led him to people of all walks of life. Keen as his observation of facts and situations was, he went on storing in his consciousness every bit of new information which he used later in his poetry with telling effect.

Centres of Bhai's Activities

As one goes through the books of Sikh history available in Punjabi language, one cannot but feel impressed by the number of places that he is shown visiting on one mission or the other. While at a given point of time, he is shown to be striking bargains for horses at Kabul (Afghanistan), at another he is shown as the chief guest at a reception held by the Raja of Kashi.

He may be seen mixing with the hilly folk of Chamba (Himachal) in the capacity of an evangelist deputed by his Guru to spread the latter's message among the people of that area, but he may also be found organizing door-to-door canvassing in the farmlands of central Punjab against fraudulent claimants to Guruship.

Similarly, at some other time one may come across the Bhai quite unexpectedly at Kannauj or Burhanpur, exhorting the few faithfuls of that place to found *Sangats* (congregations) of Sikhs or strengthen the already-existing ones.

Unfortunately, no authentic account of such itineraries exists. Therefore, for the purpose of our monograph we propose to concentrate upon three main centres of the activities of Bhai Gurdas regarding which there is little or less controversy. These centres are: Goindwal, Chak Guru Ram Das (present Amritsar) and Agra.

It was in and around these three centres that the most formative, as well as the most productive years of the Bhai's life were spent. There is no doubt that the socio-political, intellectual, religious and literary climate obtaining in these towns contributed substantially to the growth of his mind and art.

In fact, in the case of Goindwal and Chak Guru Ram Das, the valuable contribution of this bard to their physical enlargement and cultural enrichment can hardly be ignored.

a) Goindwal

Originally, the place now known as Goindwal, must have existed as an undeveloped ferry where passengers from and to Delhi crossed the river Beas for their onward journeys.

Sultanpur (Lodi), an important administrative and cultural centre of the Mughal period and dating back to the eleventh century,⁷ is now well-known among Sikhs as being

the place where Guru Nanak started his career both as a government functionary and as a roving man of God. This town was situated across the river, on the western side, not very far from the Goindwal ferry.

Goinda Marwaha, who had proprietary rights over the land where Goindwal is now situated, visualised the developmental potentialities of the place and founded the township after his own name in A.D.1532.⁸

He offered attractive terms to the new settlers, among whom was the family of Baba Tej Bhan of Basarke village (now in the district of Amritsar). Baba Tej Bhan's eldest son, Amar Das, was destined to become the 3rd Guru of the Sikhs in course of time.

Some anti-social elements, easy with their triggers and morals, turned their vandalistic attention to the nascent settlement which had begun showing signs of affluence.

When Baba Tej Bhan's son Amar Das ascended the spiritual throne of Guru Nanak, Goinda did not lose much time to anticipate the advantages that could accrue to the new township in the event of the new Guru agreeing to shift his headquarter to Goindwal, where the new Guru's own family had already settled, but which seemed to have fallen on bad days.

Goinda approached the Guru and offered many facilities for transferring his seat of authority from Khadur to Goindwal. Guru Amar Das was already thinking in terms of establishing a new centre for his expanding activities at a place having better facilities for incoming and outgoing travellers, than Khadur, his inherited headquarter. So he deputed a team of five leading Sikhs to visit the site and submit a report on the pros and cons of Goinda's request.

The report being favourable, Guru Amar Das shifted to Goindwal, probably in 1546, thereby assuring the prosperity of the place. Bhai Gurdas refers to this fact in the 46th stanza of his first *Var* thus:

"He (i.e., Guru Amar Das), caused Goindwal to be populated..."

It was in this new headquarter of Sikhism that Gurdas was born in 1551. The town had already become a place of pilgrimage for members of the Sikh community.

As at Kartarpur (district Sialkot, now in Pakistan), the place which Guru Nanak had founded, and at Khadur (district Amritsar) which served as the headquarter of Guru Angad, at Goindwal also, the routine of daily religious services began to be observed with great regularity and fervour. These services included devotional music (Kirtan), community-singing, chanting and recitation of the hymns of the Gurus and bhagats, meditation and prayers, besides voluntary social service.

Every visitor was provided free boarding and lodging. Equality, fraternity, friendliness and unflinching faith in God and Guru became the distinctive marks of the Sikhs of Goindwal. They were convinced that their Guru's programmes, whether spiritual, religious or socio-political, were not only relevant but also effective. They felt liberated from the rigours of castes, rituals, superstitions and all types of fears.

We may visualize young Gurdas roaming about all over the Guru's establishment with some abandon. What must he have seen there? Let us imagine the scenario:

A group of boys and girls huddled around a person and keenly observing him draw contours of Gurmukhi characters on the sandy soil with his right pointing finger and asking his young audience to follow suit; a batch of people discussing the literal, implied and metaphysical meanings of a particular stanza of the *Japu*, the most well-known poem of Guru Nanak; another batch of enthusiasts learning from a maestro the proper tension of vocal chords to produce the desired pitch, volume and depth in their voices; a big group of peasants belonging

to the neighbouring villages and newly-arrived pilgrims, listening attentively to a folk-singer narrating in verse the well-known exploits of a popular hero; some seniors warmly embracing new-comers before leading them to the free community-kitchen; other serious-looking people trying to unknot knotty problems of religion and ethics or discussing the merits and demerits of adopting regional languages as media of expression for their new religion at the total cost of Sanskrit or an excited condemnation of the latest incident of *Sati* that had occurred in the area, etc.

Such was the cultural stuff on which children of the campus fed themselves to satiation.

Goindwal played host not only to Sikh scholars from far and near but also attracted many others who were interested in socio-economic betterment, truth, spiritual guidance, comparative study of cultures, political succour, intellectual nourishment or just for the sake of encountering new and challenging ideas.

Many anecdotes relating to the visits of scholars, roving bards-cum-historians, godmen of all shades and political and administrative worthies to Goindwal are available in the works of Sikh historians, but we need not repeat them here.

The Guru's camp encouraged entrepreneurs in the fields of banking, trade, commerce and other professions to settle down at Goindwal. Masons, artisans and other skilled workers began to look to Goindwal as a source which generated work.

A fresh, bright, ready-to-learn and searching mind, such as (Bhai) Gurdas's, could not wish for a better and more exciting place than Goindwal of that time.

Further, he was fortunate to have been able to earn the goodwill of Baba Buddha.

This Baba Buddha had met Guru Nanak and had

become his instant follower and friend. In fact, he was the oldest living person converted to Sikhism by the founder of Sikhism himself and had the distinction of being close to all the six Gurus - Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Hargobind who were his contemporaries. He, therefore, knew Sikhism through and through. He was universally revered among the Sikhs for his loyalty, resourcefulness, knowledge and piety.

Right from the day (Bhai) Gurdas's precocity, bright countenance, inquisitive nature and eagerness to absorb ideas and facts attracted the benign attention of the revered Baba, the latter began to take keen interest in the mental, intellectual, moral and spiritual growth of the baby.

It was Baba Buddha, who first guided the tiny fingers of Gurdas over the straight lines, curves and knots of the first five characters of Gurumukhi script, so lovingly etched out by the Baba himself on the sacred soil of Goindwal. Baba's interest in (Bhai) Gurdas's growth never waned after this day.

Around the fast-growing Bhai was a galaxy of such contemporary and future stalwarts of the Sikh faith as Guru Amar Das; Bhai Jetha (who later succeeded Guru Amar Das under the name of Guru Ram Das) and Shri Arjan Mall (also to become Guru, after Guru Ram Das, under the name of Guru Arjan Dev). All the three were poets and their devotional poetry is preserved in the Sikh scripture, now called *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.

Bhai Behlo (1553-1643) was a Sikh who composed poetry and was, like Bhai Gurdas, a very active worker engaged in the work of construction going on at the Chakk of Guru Ram Das.

Baba Hirdey Ram Bhalla, the celebrated translator into Hindi verse of *Hanuman Natak* (tr. in 1623 from Sanskrit) was, according to the already-quoted Bhai Randhir Singh,

a cousin of the Bhai.

Bhai Gurdas must have also met with his younger contemporary, Baba Handal (1573-1648), a veteran Sikh, also a poet, from Jandiala Guru, a town situated on the present G.T. Road, only 11 miles from Amritsar.

There were others also in the family itself, such as Baba Pirthi Chand, the eldest son of Guru Ram Das, Pirthi Chand's son Manohar Das (Meherban) and grandson Hariji, all dissidents and claiming to be Gurus, but nevertheless composers of devotional poetry.

In short, Bhai Gurdas had all around him an impressive array of the votaries of poesy which helped make the atmosphere highly congenial and uplifting on the one hand and full of literary competition and challenge on the other.

It was not only with metres and rhymes that he must have dabbled early in his home-town, but also taken first sure steps towards scholarship and wisdom there. He was still in his teens when he was nominated by Guru Amar Das as a member of the delegation which was deputed to submit a report on the advisability of digging a tank (Amritsar) at the mapped site, the same where it is situated at present.

Interestingly, it was the town in which he was born and where his unusual talents first flowered, that he repaired to, to relieve himself of his mortal coil which had served him well for four score and four years of creative existence.

b) Amritsar

Amritsar was the second town which played a significant role in the life of Bhai Gurdas.

Normally, Amritsar should not need any introduction, as Harimandir, popularly known as Golden Temple and Jallianwala Bagh, the enclosure where the cruel massacre of 1919 was perpetrated by General Dyer, have succeeded to bring the city on the Tourist Map of India. But the present writer being not very sure that the early history of the city

and the role played by Bhai Gurdas had also become as common knowledge as the name of the city, a few words in this respect may be justified.

Goindwal was already nineteen at the time of Bhai Gurdas's birth, but the latter was senior in age to Amritsar by at least 26 years. This is one reason why he was able to associate closely with all aspects of the new project, right from the state of site-selection and preparation of blue-prints to the collection of raw materials, completion of the whole residential and commercial complexes, the residential quarters for the Guru and finally, the Harimandir, sprouting like a lotus out of the waters of the surrounding tank.

The fact is that the story of Amritsar dates back to Guru Amar Das's lifetime. He had accepted the report submitted by Bhai Jetha and his team-mates, including Bhai Gurdas, in 1572 that the inspected site was fit for a sacred tank to be dug with some habitation around it. Bhai Jetha with his team of trusted Sikhs was, therefore, deputed to supervise the execution of the project at the proposed site.

As is evident from the word itself, originally, Amritsar was the name of this specially-dug reservoir of water (*Amrit* = immortal and *sar* = tank) and not of the town that grew around it.

The formal foundation of the first residential building of what came to be known as Guru Ke Mahal (The Guru's Mansions) was laid on the side of the tank by Guru Ram Das himself. It was 1577 then. The Guru had shifted from Goindwal to the site in 1576 in order to give a boost to the building activity.

The establishment that grew around the sacred reservoir of water (Amritsar) changed names in quick succession. To begin with, it was simply called 'Chakk' (a hamlet), then 'Chakk Guru' (Guru's hamlet) or 'Chakk Guru Ram Das' or 'Chakk Ram Das' or 'Ramdaspur' after the name of the Guru, who was responsible for the construction work of the whole complex from its very inception. In the 47th stanza of

his first Var, Bhai Gurdas refers to this fact in these words:

*"He (Guru Ram Das) got the whole tank to be dug and caused Amritsar to be illumined by his brilliant presence."*⁹

Why did Guru Amar Das not let Guru Ram Das stay on in Goindwal after the latter's nomination to Guruship? Firstly, because it took the Guru-designate away from the scene which could generate envy and ill-will from other claimants to Guruship, whose cases could not be considered favourably and secondly, because it was commensurate with the Guru-policy of creating urban cultural centres throughout the central Punjab.

An interesting windfall after the completion of the sacred complex was a substantial decrease in the financial drain from the Punjab that the annual outflux of Punjabi pilgrims caused when they thronged in thousands the centres of pilgrimage located out of Punjab.

Perhaps, it is clear by now, that different names of the township that was on the way to becoming a big commercial centre, on account of the pilgrims that the sacred Reservoir of Immortal Water (Amritsar) had begun to attract, were submerged, as it were, by the tank and the name that has persisted till today is 'Amritsar' (which stands both for the tank and the city), that has come to occupy the status of the religious capital of the Sikh people and the first city of the Punjab.

The causeway that leads to the Temple and the Temple itself in the centre of the tank were conceived and given concrete shape by Guru Arjan and the services of Bhai Gurdas were as willingly available to the Guru for this job as these had been previously available to Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das for the tank and the residential and commercial centres around its banks.

The fourth Guru, Ram Das, had three sons -- Baba

Pirithi Chand, Baba Mahadev and Baba Arjan Mall. In view of the spiritual and other potentialities of the youngest son, the Guru had set his mind on nominating him as successor to Guruship.

It is understood that the Guru's opinion on the fitness of the person designated for the onerous job was based on his personal assessment of the qualities of head and heart of the Guru-designate and not on second hand reports. But, the public announcement of the decision, rather than taming the ambitious rebel in Baba Pirithi Chand, made his aberration more openly ascerbic. A revealing hymn by Guru Ram Das, the father and nominator, begins with the line:

*O my son! Why do you quarrel with your father ?*¹⁰.

Bhai Gurdas knew all the three sons of the Guru from their infancy. He knew that there was no comparison at all between the Guru-designate and the pretender. Both were similarly related to him through their mother, but his sense of justice felt so outraged at the prospect of elder brother's claim that he directed the powerful blast of his pen against Pirithi Chand and his ilk. In his 36th *Var*, he calls him a *Mina*, a derogatory form of address, and repeatedly degrades his activities and denounces him full-throatedly.

As Pirithi Chand outlived Guru Arjan, he got himself declared, by his supporters, as successor of Guru Arjan and increased the output of hymns under the pseudonym of 'Nanak' which only the genuine Gurus were authorized to do. This practice was continued by his son Baba Manohar Das, grandson Baba Hariji and so on, till the dissident line petered out and merged in the main Sikh stream.

Bhai Gurdas's very active and effective role in containing the divisive impact of the revolt of Baba Pirithi Chand, thereby ensuring the unrestricted flow of the mainstream during this very dark period (when the government of the day had openly expressed its displeasure towards the socio-

political policies of the new religion by torturing Guru Arjan to death and winning over the Pirthi faction to be its ally against the Guru), is conceded by all Sikh historians.

Another memorable task, accomplished at Amritsar, with which Bhai Gurdas's name is inalienably associated, is the preparation of an anthology of devotional poetry of northern India under the direct supervision of Guru Arjan. It is the same work that was destined to become the Scripture of the Sikhs, 72 years after the Bhai's death.

The original impulse to undertake this stupendous task must have come from the urgent need to preserve the purity and sanctity of the poetical works bequeathed by the Gurus from the spurious work that the Pirthi faction and others were churning out profusely with 'Nanak' as their nom-de-plume and which had fortunately come to the notice of Guru Arjan.

Convinced that interpolation of the spurious with the genuine would be inevitable if effective anticipatory measures were not taken to stall any such future eventuality, Guru Arjan decided to compile and edit the complete works of the first four Gurus besides some selections from the devotional poetry of northern India. Of course, his own poetry, which forms almost half of the whole corpus, was also included.

Bhai Gurdas was the obvious choice for any assistance in the preparation of this massive religio-literary effort — perhaps the only one of its size in medieval India. We are told that he served as an amanuensis of the Guru during the tenure of this project.

Not very far from his residence, the Guru chose a woody spot for Operation *Pothi* (Book) and working at feverish speed, with day and night shifts of literary workers at the beck and call of the chief compiler and with the active co-operation of Bhai Gurdas, the first authorized version of the

Pothi, the future *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, was finalized and ceremoniously installed in the central hall of Harimandir (later called the Golden Temple).

It is believed by Sikhs that the final copy of this *Pothi* was scribed by Bhai Gurdas and proof-read by Guru Arjan himself.

According to the majority of writers, this important job was completed in 1604.

The venerable Baba Buddha was nominated by Guru Arjan to be the first caretaker and custodian of the *Pothi*. When the Baba breathed his last in 1631, this high office is believed by some scholars to have been conferred upon Bhai Gurdas.

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and the last Guru of the Sikhs, got the works of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru, added to this anthology and ordered in 1707, before his death, that it be treated by all Sikhs as the living Guru for all time to come.

Since then the *Pothi*, compiled by Guru Arjan Dev and scribed by Bhai Gurdas, with additions authorized by Guru Gobind Singh, is being called *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and has come down as the Scripture of the Sikhs. It is worshipped by them as their living Guru.

c) Agra

The third city which was vitally connected with Bhai Gurdas's career was not as recent as Goindwal or Amritsar. It was a city with a hoary past and had been given the status of the capital of the empire initially by Sikandar Lodi in 1504 and later by Akbar, the Great, in 1554.

It appears that Bhai Gurdas was deputed to Agra by Guru Amar Das not only to look after the interests of the Sikhs living in and around the capital, but also to extend, as far as possible, the geographical frontiers of the new

religion, so dear to the Bhai himself.

The Bhai utilized the opportunity to learn the linguistic medium used by the literati of the area in their writings. Moreover, he had further opportunity to perfect the prosodic system followed by the poets who usually wrote in Braji language.

Another benefit that he got out of necessity was to equip himself with wider, better and deeper knowledge of the basic principles of the major religions represented at Emperor Akbar's court.

Emperor Akbar's policy towards non-Muslims was quite tolerant, even liberal. In fact, Akbar had developed a sort of aversion towards the parochial, exclusivist and single-track minds of the priestly class, which tended to noselead political authority towards non-accommodation of any faith other than its own.

Akbar favoured inter-religious dialogues and conferences. The first such dialogue was held in Agra in 1578. He himself presided over this meeting.

Fortunately, Bhai Gurdas, who was 27 at that time, was in Agra. Whether he was formally invited to expound before the assembly, the doctrines and practices of his religion is not known, but there is every reason to presume that a person with his bent of mind would not have missed the chance to mix with the delegates to exchange views and clarifications.

Certainly not the whole, but some, at least of the multi-religious knowledge of Bhai Gurdas, may be ascribed to his exposure to the multi-religious scholarship available at Agra during Akbar's stay there.

With Agra as the base of his activities, Bhai Gurdas went to a number of places, including Kashi, Ujjain and Burhanpur, where Sikh families from the time of Guru Nanak still lived and which needed renewal of contacts with

the contemporary leaders and followers of Guru Nanak's faith.

The cultural influence of the place on the bard's mind is reflected in his literary work, especially the *Kabitts*.

The Last Phase

Sikh tradition is persistent, and equally indiscriminate, in piling up names of distant places to which missionary assignments took Bhai Gurdas. Even a *Gurdwara* in the memory of the Bhai has come up at Kabul. Much critical work may have to be undertaken to sift facts from fiction.

Bhai Gurdas outlived Guru Arjan. He was one of those old-timers who were eye-witnesses to the evolutionary process which helped transform the rosary in the hands of Sikhs into a lasso that served them well at the hour of need.

The sixth Guru, Hargobind, was the son of Guru Arjan, who, as already mentioned, was ordered by Emperor Jahangir to be tortured to death.

The son took to arms, to convey the message to the government in unmistakable terms that from then onwards self-defence would be made an integral part of Sikh faith and, therefore, wanton aggression was to be resisted with full force.

Not that there were no doubting Thomases among the Guru's own camp. There is evidence to prove that some, at least, of the Guru's followers regarded the Guru's posture as a departure from their inherited tradition which they understood to be pacifist to the extreme.

The silent majority followed the Guru with full faith in him and argued that the Guru was the most authentic exponent of Sikhism and, therefore, whatever he does should be accepted as consonant with Sikhism.

Bhai Gurdas, besides being a poet, was an eminent scholar, a passionate preacher and an original expounder of his faith, an able explainer of the theological issues, a dependable amanuensis, an inexhaustible store of pure Punjabi diction, a lover and preserver of folk-culture and the first Punjabi man of letters to have equal mastery over Punjabi and Braj languages.

In practical life, Bhai Gurdas was a paragon of humility, loyalty and sincerity.

He breathed his last in 1635, at the ripe age of 84 years. It may be said in requiem that in his death, the Punjab state lost one of its finest wielders of the pen and the Sikh scripture, apart from the Gurus, its best spokesman.

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II

Writings of Bhai Gurdas

(A.) PUNJABI

Was Bhai Gurdas a prolific writer ?

The dictional abundance of Bhai Gurdas reminds one of God's plenty, promising prolific literary output, but the volume of his available works does not come anywhere near such expectations.

However, the discovery of Bhai Vir Singh in 1939 of 119 unaccounted *Kabitts* of the Bhai in a Gurmukhi manuscript raised the hope, howsoever tenuous and not yet realized, that one day, more of Bhai's so far undiscovered writings may spring a surprise.

At present, his name and fame in Punjabi literature rests solely on his *Vars*, whose number has never been claimed by anybody to go beyond 40. Besides, there are 675 *sorthas*, *Kabitts* and *Sawayyas* in Braji medium, which, unfortunately, are not taken much notice of by historians and readers of Punjabi literature because of their linguistic distance from Punjabi.

Gian Ratnavali

Many manuscripts and published collections of Bhai Gurdas's *Vars* are entitled *Gian Ratnavali* (Gems of Knowledge). A manuscript copied in Vikram Samvat 1840, i.e. A.D. 1782, now preserved in the library of P.S., purports to be a complete collection of the then - known works of Bhai Gurdas. Its *Var* portion begins with the following entry in red ink: *Varan Gian Ratnavali Bhai Gurdas Bhalley ka Bolana*, i.e. '*Vars* [captioned] *Gian Ratnavali*. Thus *spake Bhai Gurdas Bhalla*.' Then follows the first *Var*. At the end of the *Vars* and before the beginning of the second part, containing his writings in Braji language, it offers the following information:

Bani Bhai Gurdas Bhalley ji ki

i.e. The Poetical Works of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla. This *Bani* part contains 556 *Kabitts* etc. of the Bhai. 556 was the number of these units that were available before Bhai Vir Singh's discovery of additional *Kabitts*.

The collection of the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas, published by S.G.P.C. (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhik Committee), Amritsar is also entitled '*Varan Gian Ratnavali*'¹ This would normally be interpreted among Sikhs as their highest religious body according formal recognition to the title of the *Vars*.

But an undated manuscript which belongs to Dr. Gobind Singh Lamba of Patiala and is clearly older in age to the manuscript referred to above by at least 50 years, if judged by the shapes of its letters, begins simply with the words:

Bani Bhai Gurdas Bhalley ji ki. Varan.

Here the title *Gian Ratnavali* is not given. It is simply *Varan* or the *Vars*.

There is another dimension also to this title. There is a well-known Punjabi work ascribed to Bhai Mani Singh, the Martyr, which claims to give the story of Guru Nanak's life on the basis of the 1st *Var* of Bhai Gurdas.

Giving the genesis of the 1st *Var*, the author explains in the Introduction to his book that it was written by the Bhai at the instance of Guru Arjan Dev to provide authentic biographical material relating to Guru Nanak. "So Bhai Gurdas's *Var*, *Gian Ratnavali* is the (only authentic) *Janam Sakhi* (Life Story)".²

Evidently, here the title *Gian Ratnavali* is supposed to be the title, not of all the *Vars*, but that of the 1st *Var* only.

What, then, if any, was the title of the collected *Vars* of the Bhai?

It so happens that the Bhai does not weave into his text any title of the book either in the beginning or at the end of his *Vars*, as was the wont of many oriental poets. He does not do this even in his *Kabitts*.

It seems to us that the original name of the Book of *Vars* was simply *Varan* (The *Vars*) which was sought to be clarified, on their own, by some copyists as *Varan Bhai Gurdas* or *The Vars of Bhai Gurdas*. The writer of *Janam Sakhi*, that goes under the name of Bhai Mani Singh, calls the 1st *Var* by the honorific title of *Gian Ratnavali*. In course of time, the title detached itself from the 1st *Var* and got struck, on the one side to the *Collected Vars of Bhai Gurdas* and on the other to the *Janam Sakhi* ascribed to Bhai Mani Singh.

The Case of the Tenth *Var*

Bhai Gurdas is believed by many writers to have authored 40 *Vars*. Fortunately, the sequence of *Vars* from the 1st *Var* to the 40th remains undisturbed in almost all manuscripts and printed editions.

Out of these *Vars*, the 10th and the 40th *Vars* have come under the strain of certain objectors, who cavil at what they allege to be discordance, in the case of the 10th *Var*, with Sikh religious beliefs, and in the case of the 40th *Var*, linguistic - cum - stylistic incongruities as compared to the other *Vars* of the Bhai.

Fortunately, there has been only one fundamentalist, the late Giani Lal Singh of Sangrur, who led the campaign against the 10th *Var* being retained in *Gian Ratnavali*.

The opposition was based on a whimsical supposition and not on any reasonable argument.

The 10th *Var*, according to the Giani, is anti-*Gurmat*. "Some inimically-inclined persons, wanting to prove that Sikh religion is an off-shoot of Hinduism and thereby harm Sikhism, have interpolated an apocryphal *Var* (into Bhai's other *Vars*)."³

The charge of Giani Lal Singh can be met properly if the contents of the *Var* under discussion are subjected to close examination.

Each stanza of this *Var* refers to a well-known incident in the life-story of a celebrity taken from Indian mythology, ancient and medieval Indian literature and history. In some cases, the stanzas seek to give a brief outline of the complete life-story and in the end make every stanza yield the desired moral.

For example, the first stanza of the 10th *Var* recalls how prince Dhru was not allowed by his step-mother to share his father's affections with his step-brother. Thereupon, the child went away into a jungle, took Narad to be his Guru and rose to be a famous *bhagat* (*Bhakta*.) The Raja was so impressed with the conduct and performance of his son that he handed over the reins of his empire to him. Moral: The Guru-oriented people conquer the whole world by accepting worldly defeat.

The second stanza gives the outline of the most telling incident of the life of Bhagat Prehlad and arrives at the moral: God always comes to the aid of his saints.

In the next unit the poet takes up the story of Raja Bali who is believed to have gone to the extent of donating even his body to Vishnu, who in the disguise of a Brahmin, de-

manded the fulfilment of the Raja's earlier promise. Result: The Raja was rewarded with the gift of perpetual rulership of the nethermost world of *Patal*.

And in this vein we have the morals deduced from the popular stories of Bhagat Ambrik, Raja Janak, Raja Hari chand, Lord Krishna, Dropadi, Sudama, Jaidev, Namdev, Trilochan, Dhanna, Beni, Ramanand, Kabir, Ravidas, Gautam, Valmik, Ajamal, Ganaka, Putna, besides the hunter who had mistakenly shot his fatal arrow in the foot of Lord Krishna.

Clearly, the poet was interested in the moral or lesson that he brought out from the stories which were already embedded in the minds of his readers or listeners, including the Sikhs of that time. The poet was not interested in the veracity or otherwise of the incidents or the historicity or otherwise of the *dramatis personae* involved in them.

This is exactly what the Gurus themselves did when they wanted to use popular images from mythological, semi-historical or even historical sources that were a part of the floating common Indian culture and were already present in the minds of the faithful.

Let us take, for example, Ajamal and Ganika, illustratively used in the *Var* by Bhai Gurdas and compare them with what Guru Tegh Bahadur has to say in Rag Bilawal:

*God's Name is the real deliverer from suffering ;
Ajamal and Ganika got deliverance by
repeating the same Name*⁴.

Dhru, Prehlad, Putna, Daropti and Valmik are some other characters used by the Gurus and / or Bhagats included in Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

Were they all "inimically - inclined persons" intent on proving that Sikhism was an off-shoot of Hinduism?

No writer worth the name regards mythology or legends

to be gospel truth. All that writers of all ages have been doing is to interpret these according to their lights and exploit them to the advantage of the purpose in their view. The Gurus and Sikh writers are no exception to this rule.

Sikhism is no believer in miracles either, but has there ever been a *creative* religious writer in any language and in any country of the world, including Sikh writers, who will be ready to get rid of all this valuable raw material, just because it does not stand the test of their logic? The emphasis on the word 'creative' is intentional.

In spite of the claim of Giani Lal Singh, nobody seems to have come across any manuscript, so far, of the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas without the 10th *Var*.

The 10th *Var* has, in our opinion, not only the genuine tone and tenor of Bhai Gurdas's work, but is also one of the finest products of his poetic genius.

When the 'tone and tenor' give a false ring, the ears of Gurdasian connoisseurs are quick to catch it. Take, for instance, the case of the 49th, that is, the last stanza of the 1st *Var*, in which *Vaheguru*, the Sikh word for God, is sought to be explained. That some fabricator has been at work is clear from the hollowness of the basic argument, the uncharacteristic use of Vishna for Vishnu and the metrical flaw in the last half-line, which happens to be the Bhai's forte. If Giani Lal Singh were to object to this stanza being included in the Bhai's works, we would stand by him, but not in his attack on the 10th *Var* in which no apocryphal bells ring.

The Fortieth *Var*

The case of the 40th *Var* is different. There are manuscripts that have 40 *Vars* and there are others that have 39 and seem to have left out the 40th *Var*, probably under the impression that it is a spurious work.

Supporters and detractors of the *Var* are many, though

we shall avoid giving a summary of their respective positions, but the temptation to quote Bhai Kahn Singh, the Sikh Encyclopaedist, is irresistible. While quoting from this *Var*, the eminent scholar was pleased to give the following information in a foot-note:

Many people think that the 40th *Var* is some other poet's creation or belongs to that Gurdas, who was included among the 52 poets of the 10th Guru, but this is incorrect. Poets can well judge from the versification of the *Var* that it is indeed Bhai Gurdas's. Even in the *Guru Vilas of the 6th Guru*, it is stated that —

Guru Arjan ordered me
To compose 40 *Vars*
So that peace may descend upon me.⁵

There are manuscripts galore with only 39 *Vars*, as already stated. The manuscript with Dr. Gobind Singh Lamba, however, is an interesting freak.

It does not have the first three *Vars*. The 4th *Var* is its first *Var*. The 37th *Var* of other manuscripts, which forms its 34th *Var*, is its last *Var*. If the number of *Vars* is believed to be 40, then the last three *Vars* are missing. If the total number is taken to be 39, then two *Vars* may be said to be missing.

The manuscript, it may be pointed out again, is senior in age to *Gur Bilas* (1833-43) which believes in the *Vars* being 40, as asserted by Bhai Kahn Singh in the quotation given above. The manuscript of *Gian Ratnavali* (1782), preserved in the library of P.S. has 39 *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas.

In view of such confusing external evidence, the best way out for us is an intensive *de novo* study of the whole case of the 40th *Var*.

Is it because of any anti-Sikh stance that it is unacceptable to many critics as genuine work? No, there is no such charge

against it from any quarter whatsoever. There are, at the most, two points made against it:

- (i) That some old manuscripts do not have the 40th *Var*, and
- (ii) the linguistic and poetic brilliance of Bhai Gurdas is not as evident in this *Var* as in the other *Vars*.

Other things being equal, the fact of an earlier manuscript having 39 *Vars* does not seem to establish, beyond any doubt, the claim that the Bhai was not the author of the 40th *Var*. If this criterion were final, all the 119 *Kabitts*, discovered by Bhai Vir Singh, and now accepted as genuine by all scholars, may have to be thrown in the waste paper basket without their deserving a second look.

To determine the authenticity of any disputed literary work on the basis of a comparative study of the language, figures of speech, turns of phrases, styles and themes is not an easy task, but Bhai Gurdas's case seems to be fantastically different from other such cases.

The Bhai's fondness for weaving garlands of illustrations, his habit of leaving voids in narration, forcing the reader's imagination to fill in the blanks from his or her own knowledge of the subject and crippling, maiming, squeezing or mincing words at will to make them suit his rhymes are some of the characteristics that make it easy for any perceptive reader to cognize the Bhai's work from its forged copies.

The writer of these lines has read and re-read the 40th *Var* critically and probingly and has come to the conclusion that in the face of many typically Gurdasian touches, it would be unfair to rob the Bhai of the credit of fathering this *Var* along with other 39 *Vars*.

What is a *Var*?

Var is a form of heroic poetry about which it has been claimed that it owes its origin solely to Punjabi genius as

the same has not yet been discovered as such in the old and medieval literatures of the areas adjoining Greater Punjab — for example, *Var* or its remnants have not been found in North Western Frontier Province or Sind (both in Pakistan), Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, U.P. and Kashmir.

The late Prof. Teja Singh traced *Var's* origin to the Greek Ode but it remains at best a surmise in the absence of any connecting literary or historical link between the days of Greek domination to the appearance of *Var* on the medieval scene.

All that we know for certain is that, originally, the *Var genre* concerned itself with the heroic exploits of two contending personalities or parties with the focus of the poet's attention being fixed on his patron or patron's ancestors.

Written in cantos, called *pauris* (stairs or steps of stairs), the text of the *Var* recreates, in gripping detail, the sound and fury of the battlefield.

Vars were often the creations of roving professional singers, who attached themselves to prominent feudal families and acted as adulatory chroniclers of their exploits.

These poems were sung usually by a team of three singers to the accompaniment of folk instrumental music, on ceremonial occasions.

While references do exist which point to the existence of *Tughlaq di Var* by Amir Khusraw (1253-1327),⁶ its actual text has not survived.

***Vars* in Sri Guru Granth Sahib**

The earliest recorded *Vars* occur in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. These are 22 in number and the oldest among them, in point of time, are the ones by Guru Nanak.

Authorwise, the break-up of these 22 *Vars* is as under:

Guru Nanak	=	3 <i>Vars</i>
Guru Amar Das	=	4 <i>Vars</i>
Guru Ram Das	=	8 <i>Vars</i>
Guru Arjan Dev	=	6 <i>Vars</i>
Balwand and Satta	=	1 joint <i>Var</i>
Total	=	22 <i>Vars</i> .

Granthian Vars

The singers of 9 of these Granthian *Vars* have been advised in writing, by the chief compiler of the Scripture to sing them after the prevalent singing styles of some named popular *Vars*. These prototypes have not been included in the Scripture, but have been identified by the mention of the names of the main contenders occurring in these *Vars*.

It may be safely concluded that these identified *Vars*, sung in catchy tunes, had already become common property of the peasantry of the central Punjab.

The directions to the singers given in the beginning of each concerned *Var*, read as the following:

- (a) *Var* in the musical mode of *Majh*. It is to be sung in the style of (the *Var* of) Malak Murid and Chandrahara Sohia;
- (b) *Var* in the musical mode of *Gauri* (by the 5th Guru). It is to be sung after the style of the *Var* of Rai Kamal Di-Mauj Di;
- (c) *Var* in the musical mode of *Asa*. It is to be sung after the style of the *Var* of one-armed Asraja;
- (d) *Var* in the musical mode of *Gujari*. It is to be sung after the style of the *Var* of Sikandar-Birahim,

and so on in the case of other 5 *Vars*.

It is clear that the directions regarding the adoption of the typical singing styles of some *Vars* were given on the

tacit understanding that all the contemporary professional and non-professional singers were fully conversant with the indicated styles.

To quote one example, if a Punjabi singer were asked today to sing a particular set of verses after the musical mode of *Heer* of Waris Shah or *Mirza Sahiban* of Peeloo or *Kafis* of Shah Hussain or Bullhe Shah, he will understand within the twinkling of an eye what is expected of him. The same must have been the case with the singers for whom the instructions of the Guru were meant at that time.

Unfortunately, in the absence of any notational system for Indian music, these styles of singing have been lost for good.

It is presumed by many men of perception, and for good reason too, that these 9 *Vars* of feudal contenders for power, represented the original and main Punjabi tradition of heroic poetry, which continues till today.

Granthian Vars Are No Chronicles of Medieval Feuds

As against the normal characteristics of *Var*-form of poetry, none of the 22 *Vars* preserved in *Sri Guru Granth sahib* seeks to celebrate the victory of one feudal chief over the other in a battlefield.

There is nothing martial about these *Vars*, except that the notional struggle, insuring the victory of good over evil, may be pinpointed rather clearly in some of them.

Guru Nanak's ears being glued to the indigenous soil, it was natural for him to take over for his own poetical repertoire the most popular forms of poetry that were being used exclusively till then in folk-songs of his state.

For example, he used in his poetry folk-forms such as *alahnian*, reserved for the sad occasion of death, *tithees*, *pehre* and *bara maha* — all connected with division of time.

His treatment of the folk-form of *Var* was similar to the one meted out by him to other folk-forms. He picked up the *Var* form from the lips of the common people but instead of eulogising the exploits of a real or imaginary hero, turned it into a powerful medium for expressing his views regarding such respectable themes as the unicity of God, creation of multiple types of phenomena by one God, inexorability of the divine will, benign and intercessional role of the Guru, the cessation of the cycle of births and deaths and the liberational power of *Nam*, etc.

The 3rd, 4th and 5th Gurus took the cue from Guru Nanak and used the *Var* form almost on the same pattern as had been set by their great forerunner. In fact, by the time of the 5th Guru, the tradition of *Guru-Vars* had already developed into a new *genre* and was adopted by the Pirthi-faction and others as well.

Bhai Gurdas had before him the original heroic models of *Vars*, so popular among the rural people, in addition to the forms introduced by the Gurus.

***Vars* of Bhai Gurdas**

It may be taken for granted that in the rural surroundings of Goindwal, Bhai Gurdas had ample opportunities to attend festivals and other rural gatherings, where *Vars* were sung by full-throated professional teams of singers.

He must have also seen how instantly *Var*-singers aroused heroic reactions among the Punjabi listeners.

When Bhai Gurdas decided to use *Var* form as the only vehicle of his Punjabi poetry, the decision must have been inspired by his awareness that heroic patterns of poetry are naturally attuned to Punjabi folk-psyche, but thematic constraints forced him to restrict his experiments to the modified *Var*-form first introduced by Guru Nanak, as against the popular battle-worthy *genre*.

In actual practice, his finished products proved to be not just pale copies of his models, but shining examples of poetic

presentation of non-romantic themes, creative craftsmanship and masterly management of rich linguistic stock at his disposal.

Even a cursory study of the Bhai's *Vars* is sufficient to confirm that like a goldsmith or a miniature painter, who does not allow his workmanship to suffer because of the non-availability of big surfaces, Bhai Gurdas also managed to stamp his genius on subjects hardly fit for detailed poetic treatment.

This he achieved with the force of his apt similes, ample stock of metaphorical and illustrative imagery, dictional amplitude and prosodiac fluency.

While thinking of the Bhai's overall contribution, one has to keep in mind the fact that in any work done under the shadow of great masters, such as Guru Nanak and Guru Arjan Dev, even small innovations indicate great originality.

The Form of Bhai's *Vars*

Let us see a few of the Bhai's innovations in the form of *Var*:

Pauris of the *Vars* included in *Guru Granth Sahib*, except two, namely that of Balwand and Satta, whose co-authored *Var* consists of 8 *pauris* only and of Guru Arjan's in Rag Basant with 3 *pauris* only, are preceded by *Shalokes*, composed either by the *Var*-writer himself or by some other Guru / Gurus.

The inter-dispersal of these *Shalokes*, composed in different rhyme - schemes, are meant to heighten the thematic effect of the *pauris* and serve simultaneously as breakers of formal monotony.

Out of the two non-*shaloke vars*, the one by Guru Arjan gives the impression of an unfinished composition.

Nobody is in a position to assert whether the Guru would have interspersed the completed *Var* with *Shalokes*,

but we know for certain that it was Guru Arjan himself who studded 20 out of a total of 22 *Vars* with *Shalokes*.

Bhai Gurdas, on the other hand, does not use any *Shaloke* - breakers in between the *pauris*, though the poet in him could not have missed the danger of monotony in non-martial *Vars*, thematically delimited mainly to metaphysical, didactic or expository concerns.

He had before him the previous experiments that had already been conducted to escape monotony. Of these, he seems to have been greatly impressed by an ingenious innovation of Guru Nanak, who in his *Var* in the musical mode of *Asa*, had succeeded in creating a highly dramatic effect by cutting the last line of each *pauri* to half the standard size, without disturbing the rhyme.

This *Var* was sung and continues to be sung every morning in all Sikh Gurudwaras and therefore, Bhai Gurdas's ears were fully conversant with the effect that was created by the sudden cut in the last line of the *pauri*.

Guru Ram Das had also used the device selectively but successfully.

Quite avidly, Bhai Gurdas picked up this ingenious metrical device that served as a mini-breaker at the end of each *pauri*, thereby relieving him of the need to introduce *shaloke*-breakers.

This experiment he liked so much that in 26 out of his 40 *Vars*, he used it to his and our advantage.

The number of *pauris* in the Bhai's *Vars* varies from 20 to 49 with such even or odd numbers in other *Vars* as 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 31 and 35.

It may be interesting to compare these numbers with the *Vars* of *Guru Granth Sahib*, where Guru Ram Das, the 4th Guru's *Var* in Rag Sarang has the maximum number of *pauris* i.e. 36 and the 5th Guru, Guru Arjan's *Var* in Rag Basant has, as already stated, the least number of *pauris*,

viz. three only

Bhai Gurdas does not stick to any norm in the number of lines in each *pauri* of the same *Var*. For example, if his norm in a particular *Var* is $7\frac{1}{2}$ lines to a *pauri*, the number may fall to $6\frac{1}{2}$ lines or $5\frac{1}{2}$ lines and rise to $8\frac{1}{2}$ and even $9\frac{1}{2}$ lines before relapsing to the norm of $7\frac{1}{2}$ lines.

This irregularity is probably intentional because the control of the poet over his form is, otherwise, so masterly and meticulous that it is difficult to treat such departures from norms as unintentional nod of a Homer.

The impelling reason to have recourse to breaks in normalcy must be no other than to prevent his poetry from inducing sleep among his readers and listeners.

Guru Arjan in his *Var* in Rag Ramkali weaves a novel metrical pattern - each *pauri* consists of 8 lines and all of these in the first *pauri* have a common rhyme-scheme but the following *pauri* has four couplets with each one having a different rhyme. And this pattern of every alternate *pauri* having a different rhyme-scheme for all its four couplets continues throughout the *Var*.

The Bhai did not have the courage to introduce such a drastic change in the traditional rhyme-pattern of the *Var*, but his manipulation of rhyme does go to the extent of changing it in the same *Var*.

He may, if he so likes, continue with the same rhyme throughout the *Var*, as in his 20th *Var*, but he may change the rhyme with each *pauri*, as for example, in his 1st *Var*, with the exception of 6 *pauris*, which share a different common rhyme.

Content of the Vars

Some idea of what the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas are about must be given at this stage, although a detailed study of this

aspect will follow in the next chapter.

It must be understood in the very beginning that there is a basic difference between the *Vars* of the Gurus and those of Bhai Gurdas. The former are the compositions of the Guru-Masters, while Bhai's are the creations of a Sikh or disciple.

While the Guru-*Vars* are an integral part of the Sikh scripture, Bhai Gurdas's *Vars* are not a part of the scripture and are categorized by the Sikhs as explanations, expositions, clarifications and commentaries of their scripture.

In other words, what the Sikhs do is to highlight the fact that howsoever high the general standard of the Bhai's work, it has to be rated more as derivative and elucidatory literature and not as creative literature, so far as his themes are concerned. But we shall have more of it later.

(B.) BRAJ BHASHA

The First Sikh Writer of Braj Bhasha

While *Vars* were conceived and executed in high Punjabi, the *Kabitts* were conceived and executed in high Braji.

Both the sets of compositions were written for highly educated persons steeped in their respective literary cultures. Their twin audiences were different not only in linguistic habits but also in their literary tastes and cultural traditions.

In practice, the real challenge to the Bhai's literary competence lay not exactly in his mastery or otherwise over his own medium of expression, namely Punjabi language, but in the more difficult task of achieving congenial communion with the speakers and scholars of Braji language. Mastery over Braji idiom must have been a very laborious acquisition.

Bhai Gurdas's success in achieving mastery over both the media of his expression deserves accolades from the

experts of both languages.

With such distinction to his credit this poet may rightfully claim to be the first Sikh poet in history to have used high Braj Bhasha to carry the message of Guru Nanak to the Land of Lord Krishna.

The Result

After Bhai Gurdas, generations of Sikh poets were to crop up to master this language and to use it copiously and fluently in their works even to the extent of ignoring their own language.

Very few of these poets had the opportunity to test their literary achievements among the scholars of Braji language and, therefore, their appreciation could come mostly from their Gurumukhi-knowing counterparts and not from Braji-speaking people.

Even a poet of the calibre of Bhai Santokh Singh, the celebrated author of *Nanak Prakash* and *Gurpratap Suraj*, had to suffer complete anonymity till Dr. J.B.Goyal of Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (Haryana) introduced him to the Hindi world.

What *Kabitts* are about?

The points highlighted by Bhai Gurdas in these compositions, written in traditional literary modes and moulds so popular with Braj Bhasha poets, are more or less the same as covered in his *Vars*. These subjects may be summarized in the following words :

There is only one God. He alone is the creator of all existence. Everyone has to find his own way to God. This can be done with ease through the help of the Guru. No *devi* or *devata* can match the greatness of the Guru. The God - and - Guru - attuned persons, the *Gurumukhs*, are spiritually and morally ideal persons. They have their egos, their passions, their instincts and

intellectual prowess under their conscious control. They owe this discipline to the Guru's teachings and to their regular visits to the congregations of pious co-disciples. The *Gurmukhs* conquer all their spiritual ailments of sex, anger, avarice, attachment and conceit under the guidance of the Guru, live the life of family men and concentrate on God. Such persons do not waste their valuable time over rituals and ceremonies (*Karma Kand*). Every *Gurumukh* works hard, is scrupulously honest and hates beggary.

Avoiding Contentious Subjects

It may be noted that in these *Kabitts*, Bhai Gurdas does not try to give details of the philosophical or doctrinal differences of the Sikh faith with Hindu or Mussalman faiths, as he does in some of his *Vars*, except that he tries to deflate faith in multiple gods and goddesses, as against faith in one God.

He also abstains from raising contentious familial issues, such as the one relating to the parallel guguship by the Mina faction of Baba Pirthi Chand.

His emphasis is on making the readers feel that it is imperative for a human being to get into the disciplinary fold of a Guru and also seek the company of other co-disciples if he is sincerely intent on turning the sand of his life into pure gold.

The Bhai knew that once he succeeded in instilling in the minds of his readers the feeling that a *Gursikh* or *Gurmukh* is morally and spiritually superior to a non-*Gursikh* or a non-*Gurumukh*, it would lead them inevitably towards bringing about an upward social and, possibly, political swing.

He had seen this happen among the followers of Guru Nanak and presumably he wanted this to happen throughout the whole Braj belt — the present Hindi heartland — through its allegiance to the dynamic faith of Guru Nanak, though, like the experience of all passionate traders in proselytism, the

Bhai's achievement could hardly catch up with his ambition.

(C) SANSKRIT

Bhai Santokh Singh has quoted in his *magnum opus*, *Gurpratap Suraj* (1836-1843), 6 *Shalokes* of Bhai Gurdas which he is shown composing in Sanskrit to silence, with his erudition, an adversary, in a literary bout.

Even, if the right of Bhai Gurdas to the authorship of these *Shalokes* is conceded, though this writer is hesitant to do so, they will neither get him laurels from Sanskritists for his contribution to their language, nor will they help him widen the niche already reserved for him in the hall of fame on the basis of his *Vars* and *Kabitts*.

We, therefore, pass on to the next chapter in which we propose to discuss in detail the Bhai's role in elucidating the gospel of his Gurus.

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III

Elucidator of Scriptural Themes

Why is an Elucidator Needed ?

The whole of Sikh Scripture, comprising 1430 standardized pages, is in verse, which would generally mean that the reader would come across more textual difficulties than he would do if the same book had been in prose. The difficulties become more conspicuous as the subject-matter approaches the regions of philosophy and metaphysics.

The Gurus were thorough spiritualists and the physical and sensory experiences received scant attention from them, but for the mass of people, including their followers, the road to understanding passed through their senses.

Similarly, intellect was not considered by the Gurus as a very dependable vehicle to approach the world of spirit. Instead, interiorization of outer experiences, inspiration and divine grace received much more respectable recognition from them.

"The eyes, O Nanak! that *see* my Beloved are different," declares Guru Arjan in Rag Vadhans.¹ The declaration sounds like a rejoinder to some objector for whom sensory perceptions were the most authentic sources of knowl-

edge.

Clearly, one has to have a guide, and a trained one at that, if one is serious to find out how one's own eyes can develop the sight that will make him, "see" God. If one's own intellect is not dependable enough, one has to knock at the door of someone who knows.

All new religions give new dimensions to some of the existing vocables. Persons qualified by their scholastic achievements and their intensive training under qualified expounders of faith, are expected by their co-religionists to explain to them the normative implications of such semantic extensions.

It must also be clear than unless the expounding scholar has full faith in and mastery over the subject which he is expected to elucidate, he may lose the right track and find himself and others in wilderness, just as the Handalias, Minas, Dhirmallias and Ram Raiyyas ultimately did in the history of Sikh theology.

Another aspect to be remembered is that as one enters the portals of the scriptural world, one finds himself suddenly face to face with a situation where all material currencies have to be surrendered in favour of a common spiritual currency.

Not only that; every new entrant may experience all his pre-entry mansions of successes and achievements crumble before his very eyes and may find his dearest ideals fit only for the dustbin, as a result of the influx of new ideas and ideals.

It is not only the new grammar of a new medium of expression or a new syntax of values that have to be made accessible to the expectant community at large but also a whole new approach with its own milestones, beauty spots, pitfalls and a clearly demarcated destination that the expounder or interpreter has to bring within the ken of his

people.

It is a host of difficulties — textual, contextual, allusional, philosophical, metaphorical and metaphysical that call for elucidation, interpretation, exegesis and hermeneutics to come into play.

And it is exactly for solving these and other similar problems that the master-elucidators are given elevated seats in the hierarchy of religions.

Sikhism also, like other religions, has its own philosophy, its own mysticism, its own ethics and its own socio-political ethos and scholars have been appearing in its history who had deep insight into such specialized subjects as lexicography, grammar, stylistics and philosophy, etc. of the Sikh scripture.

The service of such scholars who try to share their insights with their contemporaries, in the idiom which is within their reach, is greatly valued by the community.

Bhai Gurdas, who had the distinction of growing and learning under the direct supervision of some Gurus, during the formative years of his life, was one of the earliest such scholars whose hermeneutic capabilities must have passed through very hard tests because the authors of some of the texts which he took up for elucidation, were very much alive then.

Key to Sikh Scripture

It has been hinted earlier that the whole of Bhai Gurdas's literary work seeks to elucidate some of the basic principles that permeate the Sikh scripture and elaborates the vital elements that have gone into the formation of the beliefs and practices of the new faith.

In fact, the importance of his *Vars* has been summed up by a firm, almost unanimous Sikh tradition, as the 'Key to their Scripture'.

So powerful is the impact of this tradition that it is sought to be given an historical colouring by an assertion

that the honour of being the 'Key' to the Sikh scripture, was a benedictory award conferred upon Bhai Gurdas by Guru Arjan Dev, the 5th Guru, who was also the Compiler-in-Chief of the sacred anthology, in recognition of the great service that he had rendered to bring the scripture within the reach of the seekers who were fond of understanding it thoroughly.

It is implied in this statement that there are parts of the scripture that were in need of further clarification and this service was performed by the Bhai to the great satisfaction of the Guru who was the author of about half of the whole *Pothi*, which became the Guru of the Sikhs later, with only a few additions, as already alluded to earlier.

Rather than wasting our time, and the reader's, over providing convincing proof for arguments in favour of or against the historicity of Guru Arjan's benediction, we shall try in this chapter to find out the Bhai's methodology of handling the elucidatory process.

Incidentally, this analysis will also enable us to determine with a modicum of certainty, the types of elucidatory work in which he wanted to specialize, and we shall also know whether this service of his was qualitatively and quantitatively enough to earn for him the status of being the 'Key' of the Sikh scripture.

A Sikh Poet *par excellence*

One characteristic of the poetical work of Bhai Gurdas, if not already explicitly clear, may be restressed here: We refer to the fact that the whole of the Bhai's literary output, whether in Punjabi, Braj Bhasha or Sanskrit, is Sikh in nature, although his poetical potentialities were undoubtedly such that he could have crossed the voluntary bar at any time to the great advantage of Indian literature.

However, the Sikh cause was so near his heart that he never thought of diverting his attention to any other subject.

Had he decided to write love poetry and follow the then current Sanskrit or Perso-Arabic models, he would certainly

have made his mark in that field. He shows in the 1st stanza of the 27th *Var* that he knew most of the famous love stories prevalent during his time in the Indian sub-continent:

The love of Laila and Majnu is known all the world over;

*The story that celebrates mutual infatuation of Sorath
and Bija is sung by master-singers in lilting tunes;*

*The friendship of Sassi and Punnu endured till the last,
in spite of the differences in their castes (and
countries);*

*Sohni could not resist meeting Mahinwal
even though she had to swim across the river every
night;*

*The well-known Ranjha and Heer were stricken with
each other's love —*

*Similar is the attachment of the followers with their
spiritual guide, whose hymns they sing every
morning.*

Similarly, if he had decided to divert his poetic faculty towards the creation of heroic mood among his listeners and readers, it may be taken for granted that he would have produced wonderful specimens of martial poetry.

And if he had chosen to prepare a reference compendium of mythological and semi-mythological characters with thumb-nail biographies of each, he would have left priceless literary heritage.

If nothing else, had he compiled a *Guru Maal* or even a *Bhagat Maal* on the pattern of Guru Nanak's life in his 1st *Var*, he would have left a rare literary-cum-historical heirloom.

Further, if he had tried to string together series of folk-tales or left a book of aphorisms, his success would have been both immediate and extensive.

And lastly, if he had decided to leave for posterity the romantic and emotionally-surcharged word-pictures of Guru Nanak after the models already popularized by some Saint-poets who composed their hymns in Braji idiom, he

could have succeeded in substituting, almost completely, the Krishnite and Ramite lores with Nanakian lores, at least in the Punjabi-speaking region.

Compensating Personal Debt

But no, all this was not to be.

The Bhai had set his mind on what he regarded as a much higher mission. Guru Nanak was for him not a subject which needed projection as a playboy. Nor was he to be used as a divine decoy for the exhibition of long suppressed voluptuous desires by poets.

No, Guru Nanak was for him a Guru of cosmic proportions and much above such image-building devices, quite endearing and popular otherwise, but all the same, very earthy.

Any reader may pick up any *Var* at random or any *Kabitt* where Guru Nanak is mentioned by name or by implication and it would not take him long to discover how profound was the Bhai's regard for his Guru's singular contribution towards the enlargement of the spiritual, religious, ethical and social parameters of the then existing knowledge.

Bhai Gurdas turns this general feeling of obligation towards the enormous contribution of the Nanakian school into something that borders on personal indebtedness and that makes him bend all his literary capability to the service of only one cause — to pay back, in some measure, the debt that he, along with others, owes to the great Gurus.

Such a supposition alone will explain satisfactorily why the Bhai did not care to exploit other potentialities of his powerful pen and let it be plied for Sikh themes only.

But Sikh theme itself is a vast subject and, if he had the aptitude for these, he could have chosen any number of themes other than the ones which he finally chose.

As already stated, the Sikh mind remembers him for his elucidatory role relating to the sacred text. We shall,

therefore, try in this chapter to explore this aspect of the Bhai's life-long endeavour.

Some Distinguishing Features

The first thing relating to the Bhai's literary work that attracts one's attention is that neither the *Vars* nor the *Kabitts* can be classified strictly under any systematic branch of *teeka*-literature. His writings do not form a regular and methodical commentary of the *Pothi* or any of its longish poems.

For example, no verse-by-verse or stanza-by-stanza commentary or exposition of the *Japu* of Guru Nanak or *Sukhmani* of Guru Arjan Dev, or for that matter, of any other work is attempted.

Nowhere in his *Vars* or *Kabitts* does the Bhai claim, in so many words, that he is going to explain in his own words the contents of such and such text.

Researchers, fond of tracing influence of classical literary forms over writers of new Indian languages may be disappointed in Bhai Gurdas as he refuses to fit into any predefined literary mould.

In the matter of selection of his theme, as also its presentation, the Bhai is his own master. He is a free bird, a typical free-lancer, not sticking faithfully to any set convention.

Not only that; even in the method adopted by him, he is not uniform. His creativity is never at a loss in its waywardness. One may easily charge him with repetition but to be honest, critics will also have to admit that there are many examples wherein the Bhai manages to present the same material repeatedly in a much fresher and more attractive garb.

There is yet another feature that distinguishes the Bhai from all other poets of Punjabi — there are no ifs and buts in his work. He is never in doubt about the veracity, rectitude,

efficacy and adequacy of the cause that he takes up in his writings.

And when he owns a cause — may be a text, a moral quality, an item from the Sikh Code of Conduct or the defence of his Guru — his commitment with it is unflinching and complete.

He is never content with his role as a dependable ally; he can be at rest with himself only when he succeeds in identifying himself completely with the espoused cause.

He is in his elements when he thinks that he is the only defender of his faith in the whole world!

No Gurdasian School; Only Experiments

Bhai Gurdas's non-conformity with established literary conventions for the purpose of rendition of texts and his fondness for going his own way, may be an interesting fact, but that does not change his status as an elucidator of ideas and situations.

He retains his reputation among Sikh intelligentsia as the author of the most dependable exposition of *Gurbani* (the sacred text).

If the Bhai was not enamoured of any formal classical method of writing a commentary and was also chary of founding a new systematic *teeka* - school of his own, how are we going to define his contribution to Sikh religious literature?

We believe that Bhai Gurdas was interested in conducting new experiments in the art of elucidation, a few of which we shall soon take up for detailed study.

But there is danger of some misconception working here. Anyone feeling smug at having discovered some of the methods that the Bhai used, may be committing a grievous mistake, if, at the same time, his attention is not drawn to the fact that throughout the Bhai's work runs a very strong

undercurrent of *gurbani* in the form of words, phrases, hemistiches, verses and images borrowed from the *Pothi* — his constant source-book.

It is *Gurbani* which provides him inspiration and it is *gurbani* again, which forms the solid base of the Bhai's superstructure.

There is no doubt about the intensity of the creative impulse in this poet — it is probably this creative impulse that marks him out as an experiment-oriented commentator rather than letting him stick to one method and found his own Gurdasian School of Elucidation. Even in cases where his creative power is at its peak, one may find the elements of *Gurbani* emitting their splendorous light through his bejewelled verses.

First Gurdasian Experiment

In order to understand different experiments conducted by Bhai Gurdas, we shall try to analyse four of them here.

To begin with we take his First Experiment which he conducted in his 1st *Var*:

The 3rd Guru, Amar Das, had made it known that he liked anecdotes from the life of the Baba, namely Guru Nanak, to be told and retold, as they had the power to metamorphose people's lives qualitatively.²

Probably, Bhai Gurdas took the cue from Guru Amar Das to launch his first experiment of elucidating *Gurbani* through the Guru's anecdotes.

One thing was clear to Bhai Gurdas. A flat chronological record of events, a sort of history-sheet of the Guru, will not make Guru Nanak stand out as an unusually prominent person in the long procession of Indian history.

He had, therefore, to devise a situational framework from which the Great Guru Nanak would seem to emerge naturally and inevitably.

Further, it was not only the person of Guru Nanak but also the whole movement headed by him, whose cause had to be furthered. This could be achieved by projecting Guru Nanak both as the fountain-head and the symbolic epitome of the continuing Sikh movement.

What did Bhai Gurdas do to achieve all this without violating his ambition of becoming the elucidator par excellence of *Gurbani*?

He took three steps:

- (i) A brief survey of Indian religious philosophy up to the period of Guru Nanak was undertaken. It was pictured as a mutually-frittering, disintegrative scenario culminating in intra-faith and inter-faith Hindu-Muslim conflicts. A vision with such dismal prospects cried hoarse for a new deliverer.
- (ii) Having ascertained the historical necessity of Guru Nanak's advent, he gave some space to the salient incidents of his life, but very important from his point of view was the continuity of the Sikh movement after the demise of Guru Nanak. This he achieved by falling back upon the principle of spiritual identity of Guru Nanak with his successor Gurus, as had been made abundantly clear in the Sikh scripture itself. And lastly,
- (iii) he wove, in his own characteristic way, selected lines from *Gurbani* in the texture of his own verses to show that basically he was not a biographer, but was an elucidator, though of a different sort.

Anyone interested in taking this point to its logical conclusion may compare Guru Nanak's *Kali Kaati raaje Kaasaaee....* (S.G.G.S., p. 145) with Bhai Gurdas's *Kali aae kutte muhee...* (Var I, *pauri* 30th), and Guru Nanak's *Pehra Agni hivai gharu...* (S.G.G.S., p.147) with Bhai Gurdas's *Bastar Pehrai agni kai...* (Var I, *pauri* 43).

The Second Gurdasian Experiment

Now let us have a look at the Second Experiment.

In some cases, Bhai Gurdas takes up for elaboration a subject which occurs repeatedly in *Gurbani* and which Bhai Gurdas regards as essential both for individual and collective growth of his people.

For example, he regards God as the only Mega-Creator of all phenomena and accepts the most wonderful fact about Him, that is His immanent presence everywhere, in as well as out of each created entity, big or small.

Such a belief posits certain logical problems for novices — how can a non-physical entity create matter out of nothing? How can one Being bring into existence the whole range of bewilderingly heterogenous varieties that meet the eye every-where?

For Bhai Gurdas it is a challenging subject and he, therefore, takes it upon himself to bring it within the reach of his co-religionists.

He devotes the whole of *Var II* to this subject and with the help of illustrations and analogies tries to prove that the concept of omnipresence belongs to the realm of possibility.

Here is an example of how he processes the subject with his poetic logic:

*The water and earth are the same,
but the varieties of trees are innumerable.
There are trees with and without fruit,
laden with flowers and fruits, they look beautiful.
According to their varieties, they have their own flavours,
colours and fragrances.
Fire is inherent in all plants and whenever it comes
out of hiding, it reduces everything to ashes.
(Similarly) He is present everywhere and the Guru-
oriented one who understands this fact, it always
happy.*

(Var II, pauri 15)

Let us take another example:

The Bhai regards humility as a cardinal virtue because the Gurus value it as an important behavioural quality that keeps effective check on one's ego and also wins over the hearts of the people. So the Bhai picks up this subject in the 4th *Var* and dwells upon this quality in all its *pauris*. It was his second experiment whereby he provided simultaneous commentary on scores of sacred *gurbani* texts that commend the inculcation of humility as a trait of one's character.

Example:

*Just as the small finger is tiny in size,
but earns the distinction of wearing the ring of
honour.*

*The drop that falls from the cloud is small,
but after getting access into the oyster-shell, grows to
be a pearl;*

*The saffron plant is small, but gets elevated to the
forehead in the form of a distinguishing mark;*

*The philosophers' stone is small,
but turns light metals into gold;*

*Just as the jewel found in the head of King Cobra is
small, but people flock to look at it from their hide-
outs;*

*Elixir, even a gram of which is priceless,
is produced from mercury;*

*Similarly, one should lose (emasculate) one's ego,
rather than enlarging it.*

Gurbani, we know, is quite loud in its praise for *Sadh-sangat*, the congregation of pious persons. It is strongly recommended to the Sikhs to meet together regularly to sing praises of God. Sensing that the nascent Sikh movement will have a strong organizational support if such cells were formed everywhere, he decided to devote one full *Var* (29th) to this subject.

The 30th *Var* seeks to assure the readers that truth shall prevail over falsehood, come what may. This also

is a statement which occurs many times in *Gurbani* and the method of Bhai Gurdas also is the same — to take up one idea from *Gurbani*, devote one full *Var* to it and go on hammering the same idea in *pauri* after *pauri* of the *Var*.

The Third Gurdasian Experiment

Let us now turn to the Third Experiment in which Bhai Gurdas takes up a couplet or a stanza from *Gurbani* and elucidates it in his own words. *Japu* of Guru Nanak gets the foremost attention.

In fact, Dr. Darshan Singh of Punjabi University, Patiala has traced the Bhai's elucidation of about 1/3rd of *Japu* from different *Vars*.³

The constraint of space forces us to desist from quoting copiously, but even one specimen would, we hope, establish our point:

There is a verse in the *Japu* which says:

*One word and the whole of this phenomenal existence
materialized.*

From it flowed thousands of rivers...

Bhai Gurdas elucidates this idea in the 11th stanza of the 13th *Var*. thus:

*One word from God and the phenomenal existence came
into being.*

*From the same Omkar myriads of forms appeared and
the universe was formed.*

*Out of five elements millions were created
including the three oceans, plains, mountains,
trees with fruits, and streams.*

*Innumerable rivers merge (in the ocean), without
making an iota of difference.*

*Nature is immeasurable, beyond all weighing and
counting*

*When we are incapable of understanding nature,
how are we going to encompass its Creator?*

It is in this vein that Bhai Gurudas's Third Experiment proceeds.

The Fourth Gurdasian Experiment

We shall proceed now with the Fourth Experiment of Bhai Gurdas.

In this case, he chooses a line from anywhere and may expand the idea contained therein or just paraphrase it. Elsewhere, he uses such lines, as a builder uses readymade blocks, without any comments.

Let us examine the case of an oft-quoted line, which is almost always misunderstood. It occurs on page 62 of S.G.G.S. Literally, the lines may be translated as:

*Everything is short of Truth,
above it is true conduct.*

Bhai Gurdas interprets this line in his 7th Var, pauri 1 as:

*Every thing is short of Truth,
the Guru has emphasized the mantra of True Name.*

The Bhai's interpretation of 'true conduct' (*Sach aachaar*) as 'True Name' (*Sach Nao*) is in tune with *Gurbani* in general and the intention of this text in particular. This 'true conduct' is 'repetition of God's Name', not 'doing good actions.'

Let us take another example. There are a number of texts which talk of concentrating one's attention on Guru's *moorati*. For instance, take this line occurring at p.192 of S.G.G.S.:

Let concentration of mind be on Guru's moorati (image) or the following one from p.864 of the same scripture:

*Let the Guru's moorati be the object of one's dhyana
in one's mind.*

Now, Sikhism does not favour idol-worship or picture-worship, but the oft-repeated references to Guru - *moorati* are liable to be misunderstood. Here comes to our aid Bhai

Gurdas who says:

*Guru - moorati, namely Gur - Shabad (= Wahiguru)
is to be practised in the early hours of the day
in the company of holy people. (Var 24, pauri 11.)*

or

*Guru - moorati means Guru Shabad which manifests
itself in the congregation of the holy people.*

Scores of such stray elucidations are available in Bhai Gurdas and must be regarded as dependable guides for the fuller and clearer understanding of the sacred text.

Conclusion

Where does all this analysis lead us to? Certain conclusions, we believe, are self-evident: By no stretch of imagination may we define Bhai Gurdas's work as that of a formal commentary-writer. He was definitely not out to do the job which occupied Giani Bishan Singh, Giani Narain Singh or Prof. Sahib Singh, for the whole of their lives.

All the same, Sikhs look upto him as the most definitive commentator of *Gurbani*.

He did not found a school of his own in Sikh exegetical or elucidatory literature, but there has hardly been a practitioner of such literature after Bhai Gurdas, who does not look up to him for ratification of his interpretation.

A unique amalgam of 'is' and 'is not' was this person called Bhai Gurdas! He was not a commentator and yet he is the most eligible commentator-cum-elucidator; he was not the founder of any school of interpretation, yet he remains a school unto himself!

What needs to be understood is that this Bhai was a creative artist. He was as much interested in proper understanding and projection of Sikh ideology, Sikh doctrines, Sikh concepts, etc., as he was in the faultless practice of his

poetic art and display of his all-round knowledge. What he has left behind him may, therefore, be justifiably evaluated not just as a rehash of *Gurbani* but as a creative review, a selective annotation and a judicious confirmation of the Guru's way of thinking about life's major concerns.

If 'transcreation' is the proper term that suits his work the most, let that be applied to him, but there is absolutely no reason why the quality of his work may be underrated simply because he undertook to present scriptural themes in their proper historical, semantic and normative contexts.

Anyone who fails to understand this vital point about the creativity involved in the Bhai's work, may never be able to gauge the real quality of the valuable contribution that the Bhai was able to make to Sikh literature.

In spite of the derivative nature of his work, he has to be regarded as an independent poet of high calibre.

With his independent identity granted, it should not be difficult to understand why he did not always stick solely to the area covered by the texts which he took up as his starting points. He added to them and subtracted from them at will, and might or might not have used the words of the original, but his departures were always under his control and never let him turn his back to the sources of his original inspiration.

Like the traditional Indian bird *hans*, Bhai Gurdas fed himself upon the pure pearls of Sikh thought, liked high and distant side-flights, but never failed to return to his favourite job of sifting real pearls from fakes.

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IV

In the Poet's Workshop

Springs of Poetic Excellence

Throughout this monograph, we have projected Bhai Gurdas as a big name in the history of Punjabi poetry, and justifiably too, but if someone were to undertake an anatomical dissection of his poetry in order to locate the different sources of his poetic pre-eminence, the effort would most likely end in divesting the Bhai's literary work of all that is poetic about it.

Even if some critic claims to have identified the elements that embellish his poetry with unusual qualities, it may be safely presumed that the secret formula with which the Bhai, or for that matter, any great poet, invests his poetry with creative distinction, must have remained beyond the claimant's reach.

Agreed, that poetry is being critically judged all over the globe and is being subjected to any number of analytical operations in the hope that it will be possible to fathom all the subliminal and psychoneurotic layers of mind under which flow, in dark silence, the incessant springs of creative genius, the fact still remains that no research has yet found

the secret that makes an ordinary young person grow into a Valmiki or Homer, Firdausi or Shakespeare and Goethe or Ghalib. To borrow Maulana Rumi's imagery partially, what is it that puts musical life in a hollow bamboo stick?

In this chapter, our main concern is going to be the poetical aspect of Bhai Gurdas, but rather than trying to uncover the secrets of the Bhai's poetic excellence, all that we propose to do is to enter his workshop and try to find out the type of material that he was in the habit of using when at work.

Linguistic Options

Language was the first raw material that the Bhai, like all other poets, had to use to be a successful practitioner of poetry. For this he had a number of options before him, each laying before him its own attractive vista of success.

The first option was that of Persian — one of the most advanced languages of the medieval world and the official language of India at that time. The poetical tradition of the language was long and varied and offered unlimited scope to minds of superior quality. He could also, if he wanted to, ingratiate himself not only with the prominent scholars of his own country but also among those of many other countries of the Middle East.

As his second option, he could go in for Braj language, as the medium of the whole of his poetry. It had already got hero's reception in his workshop and had been accepted as the medium of his *Kabitts*. Like Persian, this medium had also been granted access to the royal court.

The third option was that he could use the prototype of *Khari boli*, the language used by Guru Arjan in his *Sukhmani* or later by Guru Tegh Bahadur in his hymns and try to reach the rural mass of the vast Hindi belt in Northern India.

Another option lay in the type of mixed language used by the Bhagats and the Gurus for their musical exercises.

The next option was to use the particular dialect prevalent among his own people. There is evidence in *Vars* that Bhai Gurdas's mind was full of local culture and, therefore, he could have been quite favourably inclined towards the local dialect.

There was yet another option, the sixth, open for him. He could choose the Multani language which had developed a number of literary forms much earlier than other dialects of Punjab and had been used for part of his poetry by Guru Nanak and Guru Arjan, the latter being, like Bhai Gurdas, the product of Goindwal.

The Bhai's Choice

Bhai Gurdas rejected all these options for his *Vars* and instead went in for high central Punjabi idiom, laden heavily with *tadbhava* vocabulary, closely related to pre-Muslim word - stock.

One fact, worth remembering is that Perso-Arabic vocabulary had been in circulation in the Punjab region for at least six centuries before Guru Nanak Dev. Yet when we examine the borrowed vocabulary of *Japu*, we come to the conclusion that the ratio of Perso-Arabic vocabulary does not really go beyond 5%. The percentage may not exceed that limit even in his whole work.

In the Bhai's first *Var* also, the element of Perso-Arabic loan-words, works out to about the same percentage.

In fact, this ratio may be taken as the overall ratio of vocables drawn from Perso-Arabic cultural milieu and used by Punjabi writers, especially the non-Muslim writers of the period of Bhai Gurdas, in their writings.

There are a few points that emerge naturally from this linguistic affiliation of Bhai Gurdas, namely:

- (i) The Bhai was averse to the highbrow classical San

skritic culture as represented by *tatsama* vocabulary. For him, the linguistic caravan in India had never stopped for good at the OIA (Old Indo-Aryan) resting-place, but had carried on its journey through MIA (Middle Indo-Aryan) to reach NIA (New Indo-Aryan). The linguistic and cultural consequences of this long journey were accepted by him with all its implications. He regarded his regional heritage, full of Prakritic and Apabhramshic remnants, as a valuable cultural asset, worthy of use by competent poets and their bold experiments so that the local dialect may emerge as a full-fledged language — which status it ultimately did achieve.

- (ii) He accepted the plural nature of the vocabulary as a part of his heritage but did not forget that the loan-words from Perso-Arabic sources formed only a margin of the whole stock.
- (iii) Language being the key to the indigenous cultural ethos of the whole linguistic region, it is easily understandable why the Bhai never thought of appropriating poetic forms such as Masnavi, Qasidah, Ghazal, Rubai, Si-harfi, etc. for his self-expression and abstained from adorning his poetry generously with Perso-Arabic motifs.

The Models

We cannot forget that Bhai Gurdas was not writing poetry in a literary vacuum. There were models which he must have rejected and others which he may have regarded with considerable sympathetic attention.

Among the rejections may be included Saint Saaeen Das of Baddo Kee Gosaaeeaan (Gujranwala, now in Pakistan). According to Sir Gokal Chand Narang, who introduced the saint to the literary world in 1964, he was a contemporary of Guru Nanak Dev.¹ While the Gosaaeen is simple and plain, the Bhai is terse and deep and while the Gosaaeen

is musical, the Bhai is deliberative but the main difference lies in the fact that the axle of Gosaaeen's language is not located in any regional dialect of the Punjab, while Bhai Gurdas, as we have already indicated, was deeply involved with the development of the cultural traditions of the dialect of Central Punjab.

It may be easily inferred that there were a large number of poets, big and small, with and without following, whose patterns the Bhai did not choose as models for his own work. Included among these were such poets as Gang, Shah Hussain, Damodar, Chhajjoo, Kaahnaa, etc.

On the other hand, among the influences to which he subjected himself willingly, the foremost was that of Guru Nanak and his spiritual successors. In fact, he was so full of them that he used part or whole of many sacred verses verbatim even when he was not elaborating or elucidating them — just as one does not feel ashamed to wear a borrowed ornament at a party.

From the language used by him and the linguistic-cultural influences to which he gladly exposed himself, it should not have been difficult to predict that this poet's work would be characterized by the folkloristic echoes of the Prakritic - Apabhramshic literary culture and the devotional and philosophical thought-processes that had trickled down to the people of his age in the form of adages, sayings, proverbs and aphorisms, etc.

Similarly, one could have worked out the outer limits beyond which the Bhai was not likely to go because of the compulsions of the cultural atmosphere generated by his language.

To be exact, just as the nature of his language delimited his choice of the forms and metres of poetry to indigenous ones, the *rasas* and *alankars* and myths and allusions had also to belong mainly to the same stock and the same tradition. Let us examine some of them in a comparatively

detailed manner:

Forms and Metres of Poetry

The Bhai, as has already been pointed out earlier, used only one form of poetry, namely *Var* for his Punjabi poetry. *Var* has already been discussed earlier in some detail in this monograph and what remains to be discussed is its metrical aspect, for which we quote Prof. Sant Singh Sekhon from one of his recent communications to the author:

In respect of metrical structures, the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas may be divided into three sections: The first and largest section comprises 24 *Vars*, namely nos. 1, 4-8, 10-12, 15-18, 23-26, 28-33, and 37.

In all these cases, the line consists of two parts of 13 + 16 *maatras* or syllables. The stanza consists of more than 6 lines and the last line has the length of only the first half, that is, has a half line. This *chhand* has been called *Jhulanaa*, obviously because of a pronounced swing in reciting the line, the second half being longer than the first. This *chhand* does not seem to have been used much in Punjabi *Vars*.

The second section consists of 11 *Vars* — nos. 2, 9, 13-14, 27, 34-36 and 38-40. Each line consists of 13 + 10 syllables. It is called *Upman* or *Nishani Chhand*. The same *Chhand* has been used in the *Var* of Guru Gobind Singh by another poet, also named Gurdas. In Najabat's *Var of Nadar Shah* also, this *chhand* has been used for the larger part.

The third section consists of 5 *Vars*, namely 3 and 19-22. The *Chhand* in these *Vars* is called *Aril*. Each line consists of two sections of 11 + 9 syllables. One *Chhand* of this metre has been used in the *Benatee Chaupace* of Guru Gobind Singh recited in *Rahiraas*, the evening prayer of the Sikhs.

The Nine Rasas

Judgement of literature on the basis of *rasas* is an Indian discovery in the field of aesthetics, that has influenced, through the centuries, not only the literary critics, but also the creators of literature.

Rasa is one of those elements which are found in the Bhai's workshop.

Judging his work from the *rasas* created by him, he does not seem to be over anxious to demonstrate that there is no *rasa* which he has not mastered completely.

Perhaps that is so because the power to create the desired psychological mood among his readers/listeners comes to him effortlessly.

It is easy to quote from his work specimens of all the *rasas*, especially of *Shant Rasa* which one would normally expect from a devout poet, but we prefer the readers to see how this serious poet makes us all laugh.

Specimens of the Haas Rasa

*A person (of Khatri caste) took his bath at a (rural) well,
where he left his turban (by mistake)
and returned to his home with his head uncovered.*

*The foolish women of the household,
mistaking this unusual indication
(as intimation of someone's death) began to cry loudly.*

*People gathered there in large numbers
and row after row of men and women arrived there
to participate in the breast-beating ceremony.*

*The barber's wife (who, according to custom,
leads the breast-beating ceremony)
asked one of the (leading) mourners,
"In whose name am I to begin the sorrowful ditty?"*

(When nobody obliged) the daughter-in-law referred the query to her father-in-law, who, also pleaded ignorance!

In the company of fools, you always experience such pointless hulla-baloo.²

The story has been picked up by the Bhai from the common anecdotal property of the Punjabi people.

There is another amusing anecdote that the poet has used in the same *Var*:

A (veterinary) doctor placed a stone-slab under the neck of (otherwise) healthy she-camel and with one hefty stroke of (another) stone, crushed the unripe water-melon that had stuck in her gullet (and thus saved her life).

The doctor's attendant, having mastered the procedure of the medical profession, (applied the same method and) killed an old lady at which women began to wail.

.

A fool, bereft of wisdom is like a piece of bamboo, which cannot be converted into a sugarcane. He is like an animal born with a human body.³

Alankaars (Figures of Speech)

Bhai Gurdas did not treat creation of a particular psychological mood in literature (*Rasas*) as a very special adjunct of poetry, probably because these (*rasas*) were produced in his poetry as natural by-products of his literary activity. When they did come, they were welcome.

But it was not so in the case of *alankaars*. The real power of these poetical devices, he may have thought, had never been properly tested by any Punjabi poet known to him.

Perhaps the poets were afraid of the artificial effect that

over-ornamentation may leave on the minds of the readers; perhaps they were afraid to be labelled as simply *alankaarists* with scant regard for their themes and perhaps they wanted, if at all, equal mastery over all the *alankaars* and not be content, like him, with mastery over selected *alankaars*.

Bhai's Mastery Over *Alankaars*

If this is the position, there is no escape from an in-depth study of the Bhai's system of *alankaars*.

Bhai Gurdas is such an adept in the use of *alankaars* that, when he likes, he may pack a number of them even in one line.

For example, in *Var* 13, *pauri* 16, the following *alankaars* have been used in the opening line, which reads :

tari dubhai dubbaa tarai, pee piram piaalaa

Here we have

- i) *Virodhabhas* (giving the impression of opposites):
tari dubbai, dubba tarai,
- ii) *Roopak* (Metaphor) *piram-piaalaa,*
- iii) *chhekanupras* (Recurrence of the same sounds in the same order) such as the sounds of 'd' and 'b', in this line, and of course,
- iv) *antyanupras* (rhyme) as *piaalaa* rhyming with the following words in the *pauri*: *chaalaa / naalaa*, etc.

Cosmetic Side of Poetry

It should not be beyond the reach of any knowledgeable critic to prepare an exhaustive list, with proper illustrations, of all the *Shabd alankaars* and *arth alankaars* available in the Bhai's *Vars* and *Kabitts*, but such an exercise will surely produce a sizeable volume, which, as is evident, does not fall in the purview of the present monograph.

What we propose to do, therefore, is to introduce a few

samples of the favourite *alankaars* of the Bhai.

These, we hope, will serve as pointers to the role that Bhai Gurdas assigned to the cosmetic side of poetry.

Shabdalankaars

Among the *Shabdalankaars*, *anupraas*, naturally, occupies the place of pride in the Bhai's work. This *alankaar* revels in sound-play. Such words are used by the poet in which the same sound gets repeated, at least twice, but the more, the merrier.

Bhai Gurdas displays a wide spectrum of sound-patterns, mostly non-text-bookish, but some of them quite intricate in their permutations and combinations. There are patterns woven in single lines, running over to the following lines and even extending over the whole *pauri*. We shall, however, quote here a few plain specimens just to show how effective is the Bhai's artistry.

- i) *Jio mani lahure sapp siri dekhai luki luki lok lukaaee* (4/4).
- ii) *Nikraa Keeraa akhiai patt patoley kari dhang dhovai* (4/7).
- iii) *Ratanmaal gursikh jagi gurmati gun goee* 9/7).
- iv) *Gobind bhaao bhagati daa bhukhaa* (10/7).
- v) *Saadh sangat sach khand wich bhagati wachhal hoi acchal chhalaaiiaa* 16/18).

Arthalankaars

The number of *arthalankaars* is legion. The Bhai's writ runs over the whole gamut of these *alankaars* though he has a clear weakness for some.

For example, he is not as fond of *upama* (simile) as he is of *roopak* (metaphor). For its examples reference may be made to *Vars* 1/1, 1/11, 2/19, 3/19, 4/18, 4/20, 6/12, 6/14,

6/17, 18, 19, 9/12, 9/14, 13/17-18-21 and 14/3-5-6.

The other favourite *alankaars* of the Bhai include *Karan-maalaa* in which a chain of cause and effect is maintained. For example, *pauri* 13 of the 2nd *Var* may be seen:

*Cows may be multi-coloured but their milk
has the same white colour.
From milk is obtained curd, only it has to be so kept
that it is not disturbed by any movement.
When curd is churned butter begins to swim
on the surface of the butter-milk.
Butter is clarified by boiling and ghee is produced,
which, in turn, serves numerous purposes,
including the havans, yajnas and worship.
(Similarly) His omnipresence is patent
but the gurmukhs have to live with the idea with
faith.*

Arthaantranyaas Alankaar

Roughly speaking, in *arthantranyaas alankaar*, either particulars lead to generalizations or generalizations lead to particulars. During this process, the poet may use a number of *alankaars*, as for example, the Bhai does in most of the *pauris* of the 2nd *Var* which is full of *arthantranyaas alankaars*.

Specimen:

*In his dream he roams about in various countries:
From a pauper he rises to be a king and then returns
to be a pauper once more, experiencing
both sukh and dukh at the same time.
Like water, he has to put up with the boiling point,
when cold turns hot.
He enjoys happiness and suffers sorrow
and speaks, when spoken to.
(Similarly) God is present everywhere and realising this*

the Gurmukh leads a happy life. (2/4).

Some readers may locate *Drishtaant alankaar* here, the duty of which is to exemplify, but the author prefers to read *arthaantra* here.

We have before us a list of verses culled from the Bhai's works, which illustrate the use of such *alankaars* as *drish-taant, ullekh, prateep, shalesh, parikar, sansrishti*, etc., but it is no use filling the pages with these because we have already stated that the Bhai is not only fond of using *alankaars*, but also demonstrating his mastery over them.

One characteristic of the Bhai, however, no reader can miss - it is his fondness for chains - of *alankaars*, of minerals, of the names of Sikhs, of professions, etc.

Conclusion

We have seen the sort of raw material that the Bhai used in the construction and embellishment of the edifice of his poetry.

Generally speaking, all poets of the East use the same sort of materials to create poetic effect, but there is no denying the fact that notwithstanding the same or similar raw materials, the work of each mentionable poet casts a different spell.

It is this difference in spell, the exclusive quality of the poet, the typical emotional and / or intellectual atmosphere that he creates in the minds of his readers that become the hall-mark of the poet.

The question that arises is: Now, that we have had a round of Bhai Gurdas's workshop, what is our finding regarding the typical Gurdasian mark of identity?

Our answer is: Whenever the writer of this monograph has entered the mansion of the Bhai's poetry, he has experienced a sudden feeling of landing on a raised platform. This

idea of an elevated spot, an uplifted place, persists because every Gurdasian poetic construct is built on a high plinth.

Take any *Var*, any *pauri* and it will be hardly possible to miss the elitist ring of his creation, a highbrow quality-mark is imprinted on each verse of the Bhai.

In the matter of his composition, the Bhai is not a plebian at all. He expects educated, culturally advanced and theologically groomed seekers to come to him, so that apart from keeping him company during his expositions of the scriptural texts, they may, simultaneously, appreciate his finely sophisticated verbal and semantic flourishes.

Another equally important identification mark of the Bhai is the intellectual base of his poetry. He is the one poet of Punjabi who does not believe in exploiting sentiments to rub in his views. Even emotic provocations are kept in proper check. It is reason, rational sequence of cause and effect, that moves him and it is the sheer power of his illustrative arguments that is made to produce, on his readers, the effect of a vast sheet of water rushing towards its goal and producing light as one of its by-products.

There is no other poet in Punjabi language who is so thoroughly intellectual in his poetry and commands the same highly respected position among his people.

And this is no ordinary tribute to the literary achievement of any poet.

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Epilogue

For the purposes of this monograph, we have nothing more to add to the story of Bhai Gurdas.

It has been the story of a possessed soul, an inspired person, totally committed to the cause that he had decided to make his own at some fateful moment in his life.

In spite of his humility, the poet leaves an impression, on the minds of his readers, that he was an enlightened soul and owed his enlightenment solely to the teachings of Guru Nanak and his other spiritual successors.

He was so enamoured of Guru Nanak that he calls him the *Jagat Guru*, 'The Enlightener of the Whole World.'

Nobody has ever doubted that Bhai Gurdas was the master of an uncommon intellectual apparatus and when he decided to follow the footsteps of Guru Nanak, his intellect must have been greatly impressed by the solutions offered by the Guru to the spiritual and socio-cultural problems facing the people of his time.

Not only that; he must have felt that the treaders of the Nanakian path shall reach the correct destination whatever be their country, caste, colour or sex.

Otherwise, there does not seem to be any reason why

he should become so excitedly full of him at the very mention of the Guru's name.

Fortunately, the Bhai throws hints, here and there, which explain why he was so powerfully drawn towards the Guru's teachings, but for this purpose the 23rd *pauri* of the 1st *Var* demands our special attention. It is in this *pauri* that he first mentions how Guru Nanak was deputed by God to set matters of the world right and then proceeds to give the credit of certain steps that the Guru took to achieve his desired objectives.

Let us examine these in the order in which the Bhai has enumerated these in the *pauri*:

- (i) Guru Nanak devised an initiation ceremony which brought each of his followers into his personal contact.

Thus, re-organization of the atomized community/society into a cohesive and disciplined body was the first task that the Guru undertook and he succeeded in his mission. This is the reason why Bhai Gurdas lionizes the concept of *Saadh Sangat*.

- (ii) The Guru was able to remove misconceptions relating to the supposed dichotomy between the transcendental and the immanent Gods. He pointed out that there was nothing mutually exclusive about these two concepts. In fact, both of them referred to the same and the only Reality from two different angles.

The resolution of mutually antagonistic theological attitudes is shown as occupying the second position on the agenda of the Guru. Here also he met with success.

- (iii) He rejected the *Varna* - based social order with all its religious sanctions and instead welded all the four

Varnas into one *Varna*.

This meant complete rejection of caste system and upholding of the principle of theological and social equality.

- (iv) The rich and the poor were brought to the same level. Everyone had to touch the feet of the other.

This refers not only to the change in the individual's ethical standards which gave practical shape to the quality of humility, but also implies some sort of socio-economic levelling.

- (v) The only *mantra* with which the Guru conquered the whole world was *Satnaam* (the Ever-existing NAME), which means that he did away with the debilitating habit of depending upon the power of *mantras*, *tantras*, soothsayings and superstitions, etc.

Interpretted in the context of Guru Nanak's time, there were intimations enough for the Bhai in the aforesaid Nanakian Charter of Liberty to feel that a Guru had arrived on the contemporary scene who knew how to reorganise Man and his society without any shackles of doubt, fear, falsehood and superstition.

Throughout his *Vars* and *Kabitts*, it is this consciousness of the liberational uniqueness of the Guru's message and its eminent suitability to tackle the spiritual, cultural and socio-political ills of his time that makes him assume the role of a missionary and harps again and again and yet again on the same set of his favourite themes.

The sands of time, he feels, are running out and it may be much too late for those who have already heard of the Guru's message, as well as those who have not, if they do not try to save themselves and others from, what he believed to be, sure spiritual cesspool of the *status quo*.

Religion, philosophy, mythology, anecdotes, general knowledge about nature and science, art and craft of poetry, linguistic proficiency and much more have relevance only if they serve as grist to the only mill that matters for Bhai Gurdas — the mill that turns out human personalities after the Guru's models.

It was, therefore, purely incidental that he used Punjabi language and typically indigneous *Var* form for his Punjabi poetry or used Braj for his *Kabitts*. But what a dignified language did he evolve for his communication! What a mature and pithy way of expression did he devise for himself and what picturesque imagery did his imagination create during the process!

The question is: with such supreme confidence in his subject, with such superb command over the media of his expression and with such image-recalling wizardry, what impact did he leave on the generations that followed him?

It may seem unbelievable, but it is a fact that very few, except his name-sake, whose *Var* is appended at the end of his collected *Vars*, as the 41st *Var*, we do not have any outstanding Punjabi poet who may have succeeded in adopting the idiom and style of the great master. No one is known to have named him as his model mentor in his profession of poetry.

It is only with the advent of Punjabi prose of ideas in the modern period that we find the springs of his linguistic richness being rediscovered and re-exploited to some extent, as for example, by Bhais Vir Singh and Dharamanat Singh, both now deceased.

But his successful experiment with Braj, as the medium of his *Kabitts*, received tremendous response from non-Muslim Punjabi poets, especially Sikhs.

So much so that by the time of the 9th Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, almost all Sikh writers had switched over to Braji

medium for almost all their major literary activities.

Guru Gobind Singh and his court poets wrote in Braji with great gusto.

One oblique result of this obsession of Sikh poets with Braji was that even such a high-ranking poet as Bhai Santokh Singh (1788-1843), whose work has been compared favourably with that of Tulsi Das, was totally lost to Punjabi language.

Looking at the modern trends, the days of Bhai Gurdas's Braji influence are over, at least in the Punjabi-speaking region, but as one influence nears the exit, we find his Punjabi influence coming in with great aplomb from another entrance.

Bhai Gurdas is one of the evergreens of Punjabi literature. He will continue to provide to our writers an unending source of vocabulary and also place valuable unexplored raw material at the disposal of researchers in such diverse fields as philology, phonetics, lexicography, grammar, folklore, comparative religion, philosophy, sociology, history, economics, agriculture, horticulture, ornithology, forestry, pharmacy, etc., besides a host of professions ranging from carpentry and iron-smithy to specialization in precious stones, to petition writing, to the oldest profession in the world!

The writer is certain that with the lapse of time, Bhai's reputation will not only outlive many other literary reputations, but also gather recognition from more and more wielders of pen.

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