



## **THE POST-COLONIAL ASPECT OF 'SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB'**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper, The Post-Colonial Aspect of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, as the name indicates, reviews the central religious text of Sikhism Sri Guru Granth Sahib, in post-colonial context. The paper studies the themes and hymns of this Holy Scripture as an agitation against the pre-established religions and their orthodox ideas of cast, creed and hierarchy. Redemption as the main theme of Sri Guru Granth Sahib further fulfills the post-colonial idea of independence. Here in this scripture we observe a freedom struggle against conventionalism, fanaticism and intolerance.*

*The paper in its second phase studies and supports the post-colonial aspects of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, with a view that most of the contributing poets of the book were the men of the soil. A number of them were illiterate who wrote from heart and spirit than intellect. The very concept of their compositions was to expose the hollow intellectualisms that finally lead to socio-moral deterioration. The involvement of poets like bhats, jaats and cobblers and farmers directly showers its post-colonial fervour.*

*The linguistic side of the book further conveys its post-colonial aptitude. The book, in it includes a number of languages and dialects. A rustic communications occurs naturally rather than a single standard language. The involvement of dead languages and iso-quant languages communicating to the heights of spirituality generates the post-colonial self-confidence.*

*The presence of the third world, submissive society, promotion of ecology, and protection of the weak, respect of the women and above all the appeal of co-existence are the other miscellaneous themes of the scripture which make it a post-colonial document. The paper thus finally concludes that Sri Guru Granth Sahib from its approach, idea and consciousness is a document of post-colonial literature.*



*Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is the central text of Sikhism. Apart from spiritualism as its main theme, it leaves so many reflections leading to the socio-cultural development of the society. One of its many aspects is the Post-Colonial aspect. It reflects true post-colonial spirit as it proved to be a new establishment against the pre-dominating religions of its contemporary period. It was the time when Hinduism was the largest religion in India and Mohammedanism was expanding by converting native Indian people to Muslims forcefully. It was the time when *Pundits* and *Kazis* (priests of Hindus and Muslims respectively) were misleading the common people for their personal benefits. Religion and corruption had become synonyms. Spiritualism had no place in this politicized era. At such a crucial time, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* appeared as a true spiritual lighthouse, which guided with its light, to every one whether it belonged to any caste, creed or sect. It came up with a strong message of co-existence and compassion, which was unfortunately effaced by predominating religions. The postcolonial aspect of the scripture thus becomes clearer as it strives for its identity against the pre-established and ruling religions of that time.

Socio-political circumstances at the time of rise of Sikhism were very complex. Situation was quite normal in the days of King Akbar, who was well-known for religious tolerance. But later on the situation deteriorated. When *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* was installed in *Harmandir Sahib*<sup>i</sup>, Mughal emperor Jahangir started causing troubles. Guru Arjun Dev, then, came as a martyr. After death of Jahangir and Shahjahan when Aurangzeb came into the throne, the worst chapter of Indian history opened. Guru Har Rai (1630-61) was persecuted by Aurangzeb. Later, the next Guru Sri Harkrishan (1656-64) was forcibly summoned to Delhi by Aurangzeb for persecution. It was then, Shri Guru Teg Bahadur whom the Pandits of Kashmir came and requested for survival. Guru Teg Bahadur assured them of safety and strongly opposed the forceful religious conversion. He thus, sacrificed his life for this noble cause. Considering the unjust execution of Guru Teg Bahadur, Sri Guru Gobind Singh started with a revolution and agitated against Mughal Empire. Guru Gobind Singh in the protection of Land and Religion thus established *Khalsa Panth*<sup>ii</sup> and established an army of Saint Soldiers in March 1699. *Khalsa Panth* then expanded as a great force raising its sword against the cruel and autocratic attitude of Aurangzeb. Thus, throughout the period of Sikh History a continuous struggle and sacrifice is observed. This struggle indeed is post-colonial in nature. It represents a sacrifice of colonized community, which was being suppressed by the ruler of that time.

Most of the poets of the Holy Scripture belong to different communities, casts, religions and professions. The involvement of writers of such a variety has filled the book with a wonderful variety endowed in the bound of spirituality. Most of the contributing poets of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* were the men of soil. They were neither intellectuals nor scholars. A number of them were illiterate and belonged to down trodden class. Saint Kabir was a weaver by his caste and profession. Saint Ravidas was cobbler by profession and belonged to *Harijan* community. Bhagat Namdev was a *Chimba* (tailor) Bhagat Sain was a hairdresser. What of



weavers and hairdressers, even hymn of a butcher named Sadhna is included in this scripture. The contribution of Brahmins like Parmanand and Jaidev, Surdas and Bhatt<sup>iii</sup>, Kshatriya (warrior) and Vaishyas (businesspersons) make this scripture a deep cultural narrative in which *Jaats* and *Batts*, Cobblers and farmers, butters and teachers, warriors and traders contribute together at one platform. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* thus, including a variety of sounds and songs coming from a wide range of people becomes an encyclopaedia of culture and custom of medieval age. It is just like Chaucer's *Prologue Canterbury Tales* in which all the people belonging to various sects were joining for pilgrimage contribute stories one by one.

The linguistic side of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* also reflects the Post-Colonial flavour. The hymns in the book are compiled not in a single language, but have a variety of languages. The involvement of dialects of that time like *Lehndi Punjabi*, *Brij-Bhasha*, *Khari Boli* and the most refined languages like *Sanskrit* and *Persian* coming under the generic title of *Sant-Bhasha* (language of Saints) fill the scripture with a wonderful variety of post-colonial temperament of assimilation and cultural identity. Use of rustic language further makes this holy book a parcel of the universal property than that of a particular sect. The national and social identity gets expressed without fail as all the occurring languages assimilate in *Gurumukhi* script, which is the native product of Indian Cult, and Sikhs assign it as sacred script. Presently in independent India, *Gurumukhi* is the official script of Punjab. Thus use of multiple languages, iso-quant languages, dead languages, communicating from the third world to intellectual lobby, reflecting numerous cultural, social and national identities add to the post-colonial worth of the scripture. The main reason for its linguistic variety in the book is obviously the involvement of a variety of writers belonging to various casts, religions, professions and parts. The sounds of individual's cultural backgrounds clearly celebrate in the holy chants of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.

The presentation of the hymns in the scripture is purely post-colonial in temperament. It uses purely native style of rhyme, rhythm, intonation and meter. The division of poetical styles in form of *Slokas*, *Mohalla* and *Pauris* directly lead to the native cultural identity. Such division of the hymns has been made for the convenience of the common people who shall comprehend the routine words very easily. Apart from the local style of presentation, hymns have further been assigned with ragas or perfect music patterns corresponding to the time and season. The settlement of particular ragas for a particular hymn has a deep relationship with the principles of Indian Classical Music. As per Indian Classical Music, theory each time of the day has an association with raga. For instance Raga *Bhairav* soothes more in Morning, *Bilaval* in forenoon, *Yaman* is the melody of evening and the song of midnight gets reflected better in raga *Shiv-Ranjani*. Like as the association of Ragas and time of the day. Seasons have collaboration with their Ragas as well. Spring sounds well in Raga *Basant* and rain showers beautifully with Raga *Malhar*. In *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, there is recommendation of thirty-one such music constellations coming as *Ragas* and *Raginis*. Out of total 31 Ragas

there are fourteen main Ragas and rest seventeen are Raginis (minor ragas). Among these 31 Ragas, the most common are *Asha*, *Bilaval*, *Ramkali*, *Bhairav* and *Basant*. Hence, the presentation of hymns in Ragas makes the scripture a pure product of India cult. Apart from Shlokas (couplets) and Sabads (hymns) there are twenty two (22) *Vaars* (Traditional Ballads). Ballads, as they are the oral songs passed from generation to generation, carry true post-colonial spirit in them. Since ballads contain a tradition in them, they communicate the flavour of native cult. The involvement of such 22 Vars (ballads) with specific singing style further adds a post-colonial concept of cultural identity. The impact of these ballads is so deep in our culture that even after intervention of Mohammedanism and British influences, there is hardly a variation in their presentation style. They are sung in accompaniment of harp and duff in the same way as it used to be three centuries back. These local genres, styles of presentation, ballads and dialectical hymns have held our cultural so strong that even after strong endeavours of foreign invaders and colonizers it was nearly impossible to de-root our culture.

*Sri Guru Granth Sahib* further proves to be a document of postcolonial feminism with the consideration of the rights of fair sex and due respect to women. Condition of women in medieval India was not good. Setting a widow on fire with funeral of her husband was a notorious custom of that time. Woman was treated as an object. The scripture raises a strict voice against this issue:

*Do not call them 'satee',  
who burn themselves along with their husbands' corpses.  
O Nanak, they alone are known as 'satee',  
Who die from the shock of separation. (Dev Nanak, 787)<sup>iv</sup>*

The customs of wearing veil was very common. Women were supposed to stay at home illiterate and take care of household work only. Condition of women was no better than people of lower caste. Though there was a great respect of women in religious theory, yet Hindus and Muslims, both, were treating women badly. In such a male dominating system, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* raises bold voice for the rights of women. Thus says Guru Nanak Dev:

*So why call her bad? From her, kings are born.  
From woman, woman is born;  
Without woman, there would be no one at all. □ (473)<sup>v</sup>*

Though religious codes of Sikhism do not show much feministic attitude, yet respect of women and her involvement is strongly recommended. Thus, the efforts of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* approaching for the identity of the women, becomes a post-colonial document.

To uplift the nature and recommendation of nature worship further communicates the post-colonial eco-critical aptitude of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Nature like women and lower caste people was being treated as an object—an object to fulfil the needs and greed. Though nature-worship was an integral part of Hinduism, yet idol worship had pushed it into background. It was the time when God was worshipped as supreme figure and nature had little ethical consideration. Consumption of natural resources, scarifying animals in religious ceremonies was a very common tradition in mediaeval India. In such a time of deterioration, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* reminded people of the Vedic grace of nature worship and related nature and ethics together. Ultimately, people started believing God in form of nature. To direct the power of science, ethics only can help:

*We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. (Gloufely and Fromm)<sup>vi</sup>*

To save our earth and bring a balance it is the need of time to change the mentality of the human being. To look everything with compassionate eyes we will have to gain deep faith in it. Thus, the work of nature can be done only through eco-critical ethics. It is love of Sikhs for nature that trimming hair is denied in Sikhism with a view that it is alteration of nature. Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the first Guru laid the foundation for a sacred vision for the environment when he composed the *shalok* as second *Mehala*:

*Wind is the teacher, Water is the father,  
And Earth is the great mother.  
Day and night are the two kind nurturers,  
And (the world) plays under them. (Japji Sahib, Epilogue)<sup>vii</sup>*

Thus, the direct support to nature, consideration of Water as father and Earth as mother fulfils the post-colonial-eco-critical urge in the scripture.

*Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, thus, from its establishment, social contribution, coverage of wide range of poets and languages, proves to be a document of post-colonial literature. The native style of its presentation of hymns and *Vaars* in musical patterns, ethical treatment of nature, recommendation of women -respect and above all the message of co-existence further consolidates the post-colonial aspect of the scripture.





## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- <sup>i</sup> The *Harmandir Sahib*, widely known as *The Golden Temple*, is the temple of Sikhs. It is located in the holy city Sri Amritsar Sahib in Punjab. *The Harmandir Sahib* was designed by the fifth guru, Guru Arjan Dev and its cornerstone was laid on 28 December 1588.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Khalsa Panth* generally refers to the sect started by Sri Guru Gobind Singh at Sri Anandpur Sahib. On the establishment of the Khalsa Panth, its founder, first baptised Sikhs and gave them sacred codes, all the people then following the *Khalsa panth* were recommended to follow the similar sacred codes.
- <sup>iii</sup> Many Brahmins who followed the word of Guru Nanak Dev are known as *Bhatts*. There are 11 Sikh *Bhatts* whose Bani is included in Sri Guru Granth Sahib.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Dev Nanak* “Sri Guru Granth Sahib” 2011-12, [www.srigranth.org](http://www.srigranth.org), Guru Granth Sahib Srigranth.org. (Web).26 Nov. 2015.
- <sup>v</sup> ... “Sri Guru Granth Sahib” 2011-12, [www.srigranth.org](http://www.srigranth.org), Guru Granth Sahib Srigranth.org.(Web). 26 Nov. 2015
- <sup>vi</sup> Glotfelty and Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996(print)
- <sup>vii</sup> *Dev Nanak* “Sri Guru Granth Sahib 2011-12, [www.srigranth.org](http://www.srigranth.org), Guru Granth Sahib Srigranth.org. (Web) 26 Nov. 2015