



Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the Spirit of Dialogism

Navjot Kaur

Abstract: According to Bakhtin, dialogue is an antidote to monologism, which generates difference and as a consequence, has the potential to expand the capacity to cross cultural and individual borders in a process called transgression.

Bearing this in mind, my paper will focus on the dialogism of the Sikh Scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. It is a unique text of inter-religious spirituality unknown in the history of world religions. Its dialogism is registered in the exploration of inter-religious space by the Sikh Gurus. It carries the compositions, not only of the Sikh Gurus but also those of the *Bhakti* and *Sufi* Saints prominent among them being Bhagat Kabir and Shaikh Farid. The *Bhakti* thought of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* imbibes the divine experiences of the early *Bhakti*, assimilates the historical intrusions and consummates itself into Sikh devotion. Going through such interesting cultural phases, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* exhibits the very complex dialectics of devotional, ethical and socio-philosophical streams of thought.

In my paper, I shall discuss the selection and treatment of the *Bhagat Bani* encountered in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and the canonization of it. I will then examine the various issues related to the *Bhagat Bani* from the perspectives of the universal discourse the theory of the Divine Name, the idea of religious pluralism and the issue of self-definition. To fully understand the extent of interaction and mutual influence between the *Bhakti* tradition and early Sikh tradition, the paper further examines the Sikh Gurus' treatment of the verses of *Bhakti* Saints in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. These were crucial for shaping the emerging Sikh identity. Sikhism, as it has emerged, fundamentally overcomes the dualism of spiritual and temporal that was present in traditional religions and philosophies of the world and lays the basis of a new way of thinking that poses a unified philosophy of existence i.e. *miri-piri*. It connotes both the materialist concept of human existence and the spiritual aspect of the human soul. Based on my above study, it is evident that dialogism has the potential to open new pathways



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

and in this spirit *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, today denotes unity of aesthetics, morality and praxis.

Keywords: *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, dialogism, *Bhagat Bani*, inter-religious spirituality, devotional, ethical, socio-philosophical

The idea of dialogue and diversity has had significant importance in the multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural society of India over the centuries. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in the twentieth century has added new insights and perspectives to it. According to Bakhtin, dialogue is an antidote to monologism, generates difference and as a consequence, has the potential to expand the capacity to cross cultural and individual borders in a process called transgression. His emphasis on plurality of points of view and dialogue across cultures has even greater relevance today in this age of globalisation where close encounters with other cultures is an immediate reality forcing individuals to negotiate differences.

The paper attempts to induce a thoughtful interpretation of Sikh ethos and its resonance with the contemporaneous trends in social thought by delving into the dialogism of the Sikh Scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. It is a unique text of inter-religious spirituality unknown in the history of world religions. Its dialogism is registered in the exploration of inter-religious space by the Sikh Gurus whose teachings extend far past their own time. As a canonical text for Sikhs and the faith's sacred scripture, the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Guru Granth)* informs my spiritual practice in a very personal manner. As an initial reference for the reader, the *Guru Granth* is also known as the *Adi Granth*, "the adjective *Adi*, or first has been appended to distinguish this *Granth* from the second sacred scripture of the Sikhs, the *Dasam Granth*, which contains the works attributed to the tenth (*dasam*) Guru, Gobind Singh" (*The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* 1). While acknowledging its premier position "as a super-textual source of authority within the *Sikh Panth*" (*The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* 266) and that personal knowledge of the *Gurmukhi* language is required in order to engage with the original form of the *Guru Granth*, for this paper, I have also relied on English translations of various texts to fully understand and appreciate the



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

form and meaning of the *Gurshabad* (the Word) and the Sikh code. As a young religion, Sikhism (est.1469) is only recently deconstructing the long-forged and existing power relations within social, technological, textual and dialogical aspects.

Sikhism emerged as a distinct religion in the Punjab region of northwest India more than five centuries ago in a religious universe that was pluralistic in nature. At the macro-level, it was Hinduism and Islam which represented themselves as the varying religions of the time. At a micro-level, *Saguna* and *Nirguna Vaishnava Bhakti*, the *Nath Sampradaya*, the Sufi tradition of Islam, the *Siddhas* of Tantric Buddhism, Kabir Panthi and many more formed the religio-cultural multiplicity of late medieval India. Sikhism was a positive response to this situation. It was rooted in a particular religious experience, piety and culture and informed by a unique inner revelation of its founder, Guru Nanak. The life of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) is full of religious seeking, wanderings (*Udaasis*) over the entire length and breadth of India and beyond. He travelled widely for two decades (1499–1519) to both Hindu and Muslim places of pilgrimage in India and abroad, with his life-long companion, Mardana, a Muslim bard. The great Guru visited Multan, Pakpattan, Hardwar, Kurukshetra, Kashmir, Benaras, Gaya, Rajgriha, Puri, Rameshwar, Ceylon, Mecca, Medina, Baghdad and Tibet, and there are some suggestive references that Guru Nanak visited Madurai and Palani. (*Guru Nanak and Origins of the Sikh Faith* 144) In all these places, Guru Nanak not only provoked serious discussions with religious scholars of varying types, but he has even recorded some of his dialogues and comments. During these journeys he came into contact with the leaders of different religious persuasions and tested the veracity of his own ideas in religious dialogues. His robust dialogues with respect to the Hindu tradition may be seen in his composition *Dakhani Oankar* (*Sri Guru Granth Sahib* 929–938), with respect to the Nath tradition in his celebrated *Siddh Gosht* (“Dialogues with the Siddhs,” *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* 938–946), and with respect to both Hindu and Muslim traditions in his *Vaar Asa* (*Sri Guru Granth Sahib* 462–475) and other compositions. Guru Nanak frequently appreciated the Sufi path of love. He was a reformer attempting to break down centuries-old, rigid codes of faith ideologies, practice and culture in India in the late 15th and early 16th century. His construction of the thirty-eight stanzas of the *Japji Sahib* is what Rabindranath Tagore called an anthem for the world. According to Bhai Gurdas, the first scribe of *Guru Granth*, Guru Nanak saw a “burning world”. Like the authors of the Earth Charter, five centuries later,



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Guru Nanak also saw the need for a “sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace”. (Earth Charter) Sikhism is thus an indigenous product of a grand religious dialogue and of the genius of Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus.

The Sikh Scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* was compiled by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjun Dev in 1604 and the final edition was done by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru. The *Guru Granth* contains the hymns and songs of thirty six saints, of which six are Sikh Gurus – Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur. The remaining thirty authors of the holy scripture of Sikhism are non-Sikhs and their utterances are referred to as *Bhagat Bani*. Jaidev belonged to Bengal *Vaishnavism* of Krishna worship. Namdev and Trilochan were of Maharashtrian *Krishnite* movement. Sheikh Farid and Bhikhan were Muslim *Sufi Fakirs*. Ramanand and Ravidas hailed from Uttar Pradesh and they were radical *Vaishnavite Bhaktas*. Kabir was a Muslim weaver and one who is known for his revolutionary ideas. To Kabir scholars of today, the *Guru Granth* becomes one of the primary sources. There are 534 songs of Kabir recorded in the *Guru Granth*. Eleven more bards of Punjabi *Vaishnavism* also find a reverent place in the Sikh scripture. (“Sikhism -- An experiment in National Integration of the Country” 285) Harbans Singh, a distinguished interpreter of Sikh history and tradition, holds that Guru Arjan Dev ‘applied rigorous standards and took only such of the hymns of the saints as were in accord with the Gurus’ in their spiritual tone and meaning. (*Guru Nanak and Origins of the Sikh Faith* 14)

The *Guru Granth* is the only text penned by a faith’s teachers, as well as philosophers from other religions. While no modifications can be made to the text, unique to *Sikhi* is the personal interpretation and will of application of the *Gurshabad*. In every Gurdwara all over the world, the scripture which contains the hymns and songs of Sikh Gurus together with that of *Bhagats* and Saints of Hindu and Muslim origin is given the status of Guru, the status of *Gurbaani*, the word of Guru and is respected as the revelation of God. Prof. Jodh Singh mentions, “He cannot be a Sikh who can afford to disown Ravi Das, Namdev, Kabir and Jaidev on the one hand, and Sheikh Farid, Sheikh Bhikan on the other, because they are all



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

integral parts of the Sikh Scripture.” (“Inter-religious Understanding: A Sikh Viewpoint” 50-51)

We may delve into Michael Foucault’s writings where the idea of discourse is used to describe individual acts of language or ‘language in action’ – the ideas and statements that allow us to make sense of and ‘see’ things in their proper perspective. These discursive windows or explanations shape our understanding of ourselves, and our capacity to distinguish the valuable from the valueless, the true from the false, and the right from the wrong. The discourses operate as forms of language working through various institutional settings to lay down the grounds upon which we make sense of the world. The discourse of Sikhism as an independent scripture gained currency, especially within the oppositions of Sanskrit/Prakrit and classical/vernacular, leading to a more adequate understanding of the rise of Sikhism as a claim to re-open revelation (*shruti*). Despite the stress laid on the *nirguna* discourse within the Sikh tradition which directs the devotee to worship a non-incarnated, universal God, in the Sikh doctrine God is partially embodied in the Divine Name (*Naam*) and in the collective words (*baani*) and in the person of the Guru and the saints (“The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion” 3). Sikhism thus tries to transcend the dichotomy of *Nirguna* and *Saguna* discourses in the all-encapsulating first words in the *Guru Granth* ‘*Ik Onkar*’ which have a universal appeal. It emerged as a positive response to the religiously pluralistic situation existing at the time of its making and registered the spirit of tolerance and dialogue in its theological concepts explicitly. The concepts of God, *Naam*, *haumain* and other concepts pronounce the dialogic spirit proposed by the Sikh Gurus. There is a particular definition of the concept of God in the *Guru Granth* which needs special attention here. It says that God cannot be comprehended by the human mind, that His greatness cannot be defined.

“His infinity no one may measure or state...
All God’s laudation, repeated over and over again,
Comprehends not His greatness.
He is unknowable as the ocean
Into which streams and rivers fall,
Yet it even eludes them” (*Japuji, Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, 5)



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

Guru Nanak revealed a new inclusive ontology and theology of difference whereby his understanding of the creator's formless quality allowed for deliverance from caste discrimination, gender bias or hierarchy and was a move away from the worship of idols. The *Jaap Sahib* of Guru Gobind Singh expresses again the same idea: "By human mind, He cannot be comprehended even though it cogitated a hundred thousand times." This simple definition regarding the indefinability of God has been elaborated in many more words throughout the Sikh Scripture. The idea is that if God cannot be comprehended by any particular attempt, means that no particular religion, or individual or any one scripture can claim monopoly over God. This forms the theological ground for unity acceptable by every religion.

Briefly focussing on Jacques Derrida's discussion entitled 'On the Name', we find that his underlying theme points to the incomprehensibility of the nature of God's Name. Derrida continues his discussion on the Name as follows: 'It is a matter of holding the promise of saying the truth at any price, of testifying, of rendering oneself to the truth of the name, to the thing itself such as it must be named by the name, that is, beyond the name.' From the Sikh point of view: 'Yearning for Name in *Gurbaani* is tantamount to yearning for the Being whose actual Name we do not know, but to whom we are content to refer symbolically as *Naam*, meaning thereby "whatever His Name is". (*Guru Nanak's Siddha Goshti* 67) It is no wonder that Guru Gobind Singh's *Jaap Sahib* declares the 'Immortal One' (*Akal*) as 'Nameless' (*anam*) even though he offers numerous epithets to describe his Names.

Hence, the concept of *Naam* is another concept which prepares the ground for religious dialogue in Sikh perspective. Sikhism, gives central importance to *Naam Simran*, which can be translated as devotion to the Name of God or meditating the Name of God. It has at least two dimensions. First, it is the manifested being of the Transcendent God. In this sense, it is this dynamism and creativity which created the universe and sustains it. The second dimension is that from the point of view of the devotee, *Naam* is the Name of God. Consequently, the devotee is expected to devote himself to the Name of God, remember it and meditate over it. It is here that one identifies the space for dialogism and unity of religions in Sikhism. The idea is that Sikhism does not stress the particular Name of God, but its stress is on devotion itself. Particularism and sectarianism are transcended here and a



A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

pristine devotion is proposed. The Sikh Scripture says: “Through whatever road a man takes, or mode of worship he adopts to achieve nearness to God, verily God receives him and accepts him.” (*Sikhism: An Oecumenical Religion* 180)

W. Owen Cole gives a reason for the inclusion of the *Bhagats* in the *Guru Granth* – that their beliefs were based on ethical monotheism, that the features common to all of them are their belief in one God who is ultimately beyond physical form and sectarian garb and their emphasis upon the inwardness of true religiosity (*Sikhism and Its Indian Context* 65). They experienced a vision of *Akal Purakh* (‘the Timeless One’, God) by following the interior discipline of *Naam Simran* (‘the remembrance of the divine Name’). In fact, the discipline of the divine Name was at the heart of various strands of the *Sufi* and *Bhakti* movements. If Sheikh Farid was stressing the remembrance of the divine Name (‘They who forgot the divine Name become a burden on the earth’) in the 13th century Punjab, then Jaidev was singing the glory of God’s name as the ‘sole ambrosia and essence of life’ in Bengal. For the Maharashtrian Sant Namdev, the divine Name is the support of life in much the same way as a ‘guide-stick’ (*khundkara*) is to the blind. In Kabir’s teachings the divine Name is ‘conceived of as unique and as expressing or revealing in a mysterious manner the all-pervading Reality: it is the voiced form of the divine’. Similarly, the transforming power of the divine Name to grant liberation to the fallen is the central feature in Ravidas’ work. In this context, the most striking example is Guru Arjan Dev’s *Basant Astapadi* in which he illuminates the spiritual attainment of all the poet-saints who followed the discipline of the divine Name.

The word *Naam* (‘divine Name’) alongwith its cognates occurs 5999 times in the *Guru Granth* that evidently refers to its centrality in the teachings of the Gurus. In Guru Nanak’s teachings *Naam* expresses the nature of divine revelation in its totality. On the whole the discipline of *Naam-Simran* is designed to bring oneself into harmony with the divine order (*hukam*). Thus one gains the experience of ever-growing wonder (*vismad*) in spiritual life, and achieves the ultimate condition of blissful ‘equanimity’ (*sahaja*) when the spirit ascends to the ‘realm of Truth’ (*sach khand*), the fifth and last stages in which the soul finds mystical union with *Akal Purakh* (God).



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

Accordingly, *Naam* reflects the manifestation of divine presence everywhere around us and within us, yet people fail to perceive it due to their *haumain* or self-centeredness. Deconstruction of ego or *haumain* is another conceptual ground for religious dialogue in Sikhism. *Haumain* is translated by Sikh scholars as self-centredness or individualism of man. It has been identified as the greatest malady of mankind. It is characterised as a curtain or a wall which stands between man and God, man and man :

“Within us abides the inexpressible;
yet he is inaccessible;

In between is spread the curtain of egoism (*haumain*).” (Sri Guru Granth Sahib 205)

Haumain signifies the powerful impulse to succumb to personal gratification so that a person is separated from *Akal Purakh*, and thus continues to suffer within the cycle of rebirth (*sansar*). However, *Akal Purakh* who is the sole Creator of the entire Universe looks graciously upon the suffering of the people. He reveals himself through the Guru by uttering the *shabad* (‘divine Word’) that communicates a sufficient understanding of the *Naam* to those who are able to ‘hear’ it. The Guru is thus the ‘voice’ of *Akal Purakh*, mystically uttered between the human heart, mind and soul. The *shabad* is the actual ‘utterance’ and in ‘hearing’ it a person awakens to the reality of the divine Name, immanent in all that lies around and within one.

As a result, religious ritualism is replaced by humanistic ethics in Sikhism. Possibly, the Sikh Gurus considered that religious dialogue and unity of religions could not be achieved at the level of rituals and rites, instead ethics can serve such a purpose. Sirdar Kapur Singh rightly points out the importance given to ethics in Sikhism. “Sikhism raises ethical conduct to a higher and more independent, absolute status and makes it as the true expression of the harmony of human personality with the Will of God.” (*Sikhism: An Oecumenical Religion* 129) The Sikh Gurus were very sensitive to the ethical degradation of religious leaders of their time and this became one of the reasons for the emergence of Sikhism.

Besides, Sikhism is different as a religion because it is not a religion of pure metaphysics. It



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

is not a religion of ascetics or asceticism. Metaphysical exclusivism in doctrine and asceticism in the way of life are general patterns of most of the traditional religions. History of religions evidences that most of the world religions centre themselves too much in the metaphysical territory. This phenomenon goes in the history of religions as logocentrism. Logocentrism develops a sort of non-dialogism with earth and earthly problems. Ultimately, most of the religions have become dichotomous. An uncrossable barrier is built between sacred and profane, between spirituality and mundaneness. The prime victims of this over-engagement with metaphysics are ethics, social justice and dialogue with others. A religion, which is over-engaged with its own metaphysical territory, becomes so self-satisfied and self-authentic that it cannot start a dialogue with other religions. Sikhism proposes a whole-life philosophy that amalgamates morality, aesthetics and praxis and it is this spirit which opens up enormous possibilities for real and meaningful dialogue.

The dialogism of the *Guru Granth* was crucial for shaping the emerging Sikh identity. It fundamentally overcomes the dualism of spiritual and temporal that was present in traditional religions and philosophies of the world and lays the basis of a new way of thinking that poses a unified philosophy of existence i.e. *miri-piri*. It connotes both the materialist concept of human existence and the spiritual aspect of the human soul.

From my discussion, it becomes evident that Sikh religion is universal in its approach as reflected in the teachings of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Acceptance of religious pluralism and tolerance is the hallmark in the lives of Sikh Gurus and tradition in general. The first prophetic message of Guru Nanak after communion with God: “There is no Hindu no Mussalman”, emphasised the universal spirit revealed for the first time in the history of world religions. Guru Gobind Singh repeated the message of Guru Nanak when he proclaimed that “all humanity is one in spirit” (*Akal Ustat* in *Dasam Granth*). Contemporary Sikhism is becoming intensely aware of its ethno-religious, ethno-social, ethno-cultural and ethno-political identity and its relevance in the present day.

Religious pluralism requires dialogue and interaction provides opportunities for spiritual reflection and growth. In this context, the *Guru Granth* stresses the importance of keeping an



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

open mind and being willing to learn from other traditions, while preserving the integrity of one's own tradition.

Works Cited

Cole, W. Owen. *Sikhism and Its Indian Context, 1469-1708: The Attitude of Guru Nanak and Early Sikhism to Indian Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984.

Coward, Harold and Toby Fossbay editors. *Derrida and Negative Theology*. State University of New York Press, 1992.

http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_a/img/02_earthcharter.pdf

Lorenzen, David N., editor. "The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion." *Bhakti Religion in North India Community Identity and Political Action*. State University of New York Press, 1995.

Singh, Harbans. *Guru Nanak and Origins of the Sikh Faith*. Asia Publishing House, 1969.

Singh, Jodh. 'Inter-religious Understanding : A Sikh Viewpoint', in *The Sikh Review*, no. 482, Calcutta, Feb. 1994.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. "Translating Sikh Scripture into English". *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, vol. 3, no. 1, June 2007, pp. 33–49.

Singh, Pashaura S. *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Singh, Piar. *Guru Nanak's Siddha Goshti*. Guru Nanak Dev University Press, 1996.

Singh, Sirdar Kapur. *Sikhism: An Oecumenical Religion*. South Asia Books, 1993.



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

Singh, Taran. "Sikhism — An experiment in National Integration of the Country". *Sikhism and Indian Society*. IIAS, Shimla, 1967.

Talib, Gurbachan Singh. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, English Translation. Publication Bureau Punjabi University, Patiala, 2004.