

Sikhism's Sacred Journey: Navigating Gurbani's Parnalis, Philosophical Perspectives, And Interpretive Traditions

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Abstract:

"Sikhism's Sacred Journey: Navigating Gurbani's Parnalis, Philosophical Perspectives, and Interpretive Traditions" offers a comprehensive exploration of the diverse interpretive traditions and philosophical perspectives within Sikhism, focusing on the sacred journey of engaging with Gurbani, the hymns and teachings found in the Guru Granth Sahib. This article delves into the rich tapestry of Sikh spirituality, examining the various parnalis or interpretive schools that have emerged throughout Sikh history, including Sahaj Parnali, Bhai Parnali, Udasi Parnali, Nirmala Parnali, Giani Parnali, Singh Sabha Parnali, and the Academic School. Each parnali offers a unique approach to understanding and interpreting Gurbani, reflecting diverse theological, philosophical, and socio-cultural perspectives within Sikhism. Through a blend of historical analysis, theological inquiry, and philosophical reflection, the article navigates the intricate landscape of Sikh interpretive traditions, shedding light on the spiritual journey of Sikhs as they seek to deepen their understanding of Gurbani and apply its teachings to their lives. Ultimately, "Sikhism's Sacred Journey" invites readers on a transformative exploration of Gurbani's profound wisdom, guiding them through the diverse parnalis and philosophical perspectives that enrich the spiritual tapestry of Sikhism.

KEYWORDS: Gurbani, Parnalis, hymns, Guru Granth, Bhani

Introduction

In Sikhism, Gurbani refers to the sacred words, hymns, and teachings found in the Guru Granth Sahib, the central religious scripture of Sikhism. "Gurbani" is derived from two words: Gur, which means Guru or Divine Teacher, and Bani, which means word or message. Therefore, Gurbani translates to "the words or message of the Guru. In the Sikh perspective, the interpretation of Gurbani is called Gurbani Vichar. In order to understand Nanak, we have to understand the way Guru Granth Sahb is interpreted. The most reliable source to get to the time and events of Nanak goes through Granth Sahib. In the history of Indian Scriptural tradition, there are four major techniques that are employed in Sikh exegetical methods, i.e., Shabadarath, Tika, Viakhia and Paramartha. Therefore, the interpretation begins with the literal sense of Gurbani but goes deeper and deeper. The different approaches adopted by various schools of interpretation of Guru Granth Sahib include Sahaj Parnali, Bhai Parnali, Udasi Parnali, Nirmala Parnali, Giani Parnali, Singh Sabha Parnali and Academic School¹.

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The term Parnali in Sikhism refers to a specific interpretive tradition or school of thought regarding the recitation, understanding, and interpretation of Gurbani, the sacred hymns and teachings found in the Guru Granth Sahib. Each Parnali represents a distinct approach to engaging with Gurbani and may encompass particular methodologies, perspectives, and emphasis on specific aspects of Sikh scripture and tradition.

Sahaj Parnali (School):

Sahaj Parnali is that school of interpretation, which sought to clarify and expound the meaning of certain words, concepts and themes contained in the Bani. Taran Singh, in his work titled 'Gurbani Diyan Viakhyia Parnalyian', cites certain passages from the compositions of Guru Nanak that were interpreted by Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan Dev respectively in their own works. For instance, the exposition of Guru Nanak Bani can be seen in the compositions of Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amardas, Guru Ramdas and Guru Arjan Dev respectively².

Bhai Parnali (School):

The initiator of the second important tradition of Gurbani is Bhai Gurdas, a nephew of third Guru Amar Das. The authenticity of the work of Bhai Gurdas is accepted by the fifth Guru Arjan Dev by honoring it as the 'key to Guru Granth Sahib'. And for this reason, his distinctive approach of interpretation is known as Bhai Parnali. The important features of interpretation of Bhai Gurdas can be classified under some categories as: interpretation in poetic form, unity in interpretation and formulation, creative interpretation, systematic interpretation, comparative interpretation, interpretation of mythical symbols, description of Sikh history, etc.

Udasi Parnali (School):

The Udasi, an ascetical sect of the Sikhs, was founded by Baba Sri Chand (1494-1629), the elder son of Guru Nanak. Sri Chand preached Gurbani throughout his life and worked for the spread of Sikh religion but his preaching remained oral with no written record of his Gurbani interpretations. However, some of his writings which were written in praise of Guru Nanak are extant even today. These are Arta, Guru Nanak Sahansarnama and Gur Gyatri Mantra. It is noteworthy that Sri Chand used one thousand adjectives of Sanskrit language in his compositions³.

Nirmala Parnali (School):

According to Kahan Singh Nabha, "Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, sent five Sikhs named, Ram Singh, Karam Singh, Ganda Singh, Vir Singh and Sobha Singh, to Kashi, Varanasi, in the dress of celibacy for the study of Sanskrit. These five are known to be Nirmalas in the Sikh

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¹ Bhai Vir Singh, Santheya Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Bhai Vir Singh Sahit Sadan, New Delhi, 2007, p. 2.

² Taran Singh, Gurbani Diyan Viakhyia Parnalian, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1980, pp. 26-34.

³ Ishar Singh Nara, Itihas Baba Sri Chand Ate Udasin Sampardaya, Delhi Gate Bazar, Delhi, 1959, pp. 441-451.

history.”⁴ Bhai Santokh Singh, Pandit Tara Singh Narotam, Bhai Dal Singh Giani, Bhai Gian Singh Giani, Pandit Gulab Singh, Sadhu Gurdit Singh, Sant Sampuran Singh and Sant Nirankar Singh, who were all interpreting Gurbani from the Nirmala’s perspective in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries⁵. Main features of their writings are the concept of renunciation, myth of Guru Nanak as an incarnation of Vishnu, style of interpretation in question-answer format, format of polysemous meanings and format of Vedantic interpretation of Gurbani.

Giani Parnali (School):

The Giani is a person who must hold fast in every thought, word and deed to the truth and who should remain detached from worldly attractions while still living in this world. The Gianis are traditional interpreters of the Guru Granth Sahib and that is why they are also called the Sampardai Gianis. The term Sampardai means follower of a class of teachers from the old tradition or a class which follows the preaching of their Gurus⁶. The Giani or Sampardai is one of the major schools of Sikh theologians of the Sikh text. Traditionally, this school of interpretation is associated with Bhai Mani Singh who is credited with having learned the exposition of Scriptures from Guru Gobind Singh at Damdama Sahib in Talwandi Sabo. Bhai Divan Singh, Bhai Gurdial Singh and Bhai Gurbakhsh Singh, Bhai Amar Singh, Bhai Surat Singh, Bhai Jassa Singh, Bhai Ram Singh, Bhai Chanda Singh, Giani Hazara Singh, Bhai Daya Singh, Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Bhagvan Singh, Giani Amir Singh, Bhai Fateh Chand, Sant Harnam Singh, Giani Kirpal Singh, Sant Sangat Singh, Sant Kartar Singh, Bhai Gurmukh Singh, Bhai Santokh Singh, etc. can be named as the eminent scholars of Giani or Sampardai Parnali. On the doctrinal level, the Gianis have kept their own course relying exclusively on the teachings of the Gurus. Vedas were not authority for Gurbani and the Guru’s word were accepted as an extension of Vedas or interpretation merely. Similarly, the Guru for them was not an Avtar of Vishnu. Nor did they believe in the Hindu system of Varn-ashrama. The Gianis or Sampardai Parnali has been the most capable exponents of the philosophy and ideology of the Guru Granth Sahib. Bhai Mani Singh made valuable contribution in the early days in the form of Gian Ratnavali and Sikhan Di Bhagtmala. In recent times, Giani Badan Singh (1924), and his colleagues of the Faridkot Tika Bhai Bishan Singh Giani (1936), Akali Nihal Singh (1938), Pandit Narain Singh Giani (1940), Bhai Vir Singh (1957), and Bhai Kirpal Singh (1964), all essentially in the Giani line, have produced the inclusive commentaries of Guru Granth Sahib. In this way, the Giani or Sampardai School is the first among the traditional interpreters of Gurbani, who had completed the four Tikas of Guru Granth Sahib.

Singh Sabha Parnali (School):

The new association which came into being in July, 1873 was given the name of Sri Guru Singh Sabha Amritsar. It may be hoped that like the other Indian reform movements of the period, the Singh Sabha did not owe its existence to one single individual. Because it was a joint endeavor of public-spirited Sikhs, who wanted to save the community from drifting into schismatic sects⁷. The exegetical works created by the scholars of this school clearly exhibit their attempt to bring out the original ideology of the Sikh principles. The Singh Sabha scholars adopted an approach which was mainly guided by the scientific and rationalistic authority of

⁴ Kahan Singh Nabha, Mahan Kosh, National Book Shop, Delhi, 2006, p. 712

⁵ Ganesha Singh, Bharat Mat Darpan, Bhai Bur Singh Giani Manmohan Singh, Amritsar, 1927, pp. 138-88.

⁶ Kahan Singh Nabha, Mahan Kosh, p. 247.

⁷ Shamsher Singh Ashok, Punjab Diyan Lehran (1850-1910), Ashok Pustakmala, Patiala, 1974, pp. 84-88.

Western education. Through this process of reinterpretation of the Sikh tradition they were able to generate detailed commentaries on Guru Granth Sahib.

Academic School:

In today's post-modern revolutionary times where people become aware of their own identity, Sikh religion raises the serious issues of modernism, post-modernism, feminism, secularism, fundamentalism, orientalism, ecology, globalization, subaltern studies etc., amongst the Guru Granth Sahib studies can be placed in the line with recent trends. The various disciplines and schools of Gurbani interpretation emerged partly because of the differences in the philosophical outlook of the scholars and affiliations of the interpreters to different sects. All the exegetical writings succeeded to a certain extent for the relevant purpose, though all have own limitations and shortcomings as well. Three levels of understanding Guru ghranth:

Philosophical Aspect:

The primary theoretical concept of Sikh religion is the doctrine of Sabad. There are three approaches to understand it; the approach of a Saint, a Scholar and a Soldier.

- (i) **Saint:** For Saint, Gurbani has used the words Sant, Sadh, Bhagat, Jan, Sant Jan, Sadh Jan, etc. interchangeably. The word can be said a modified form of the word 'sat' which can simply mean 'Truth'. So, 'a person who makes up his mind on the path of truth' is said to be a Sant.
- (ii) **Scholar:** The person who practices for the Eternal Word (Sabad) is said to be the disciple of Guru. Till one practices Sabad-Guru he is a disciple because the Eternal Reality or the Eternal Being is beyond the human intellect. As He is beyond our understanding, intellect, unseen and limitless; and one cannot describe Him in lives. So, a true Sikh is one who is always a disciple of His Guru. So, his approach should always be of a disciple, follower, a Sant or a researcher.
- (iii) **Soldier:** In the context of Sikh religion, the term 'Sipahi' means warrior or a soldier of truth. Sikhism strongly advocates the concept of Miri-Piri and Sant-Sipahi. So, it can be said that these concepts are imbedded in Sikh religion and Sikhism cannot be imagined without these concepts. Faith always supports us, sometimes as Sant-Sipahi and sometimes as Scholar.

Objective Aspect:

The objective aspect has two further divisions mentioned below.

Philological Study:

A philological study demands the complete knowledge of language. The language of Scriptures and religious discourses is different from the general usage of language. In religious discourses, symbolic meaning is primary to lexicon meaning. But in semantic form, the esoteric meanings of the words should be more explanatory for the researchers. We come across many examples in Gurbani in which Gurus have explained their ideas in simple language by means of story-telling, as: Where I to be a she-fawn, live in a forest, and pick up and eat fruits and tubers?⁸

⁸ Ibid., p. 157

Theological Study:

Theology, a branch of philosophy, undertakes the study of every aspect of religion. Theology has various important aspects to study. One is the study of revelatory experience of the Eternal Reality. And the second important subject is the study of Eternal Word and the experience of its power through which the divine experience of the Scripture flows through generations. A Sabad is the foundation stone of Sikh religion; here Sabad does not mean a word but an Eternal Reality which is symbolic of the Divine presence in utter darkness.

“For countless ages, there was utter darkness.

There was no earth and no sky, but the Infinite Lord’s will alone was pervasive.

There was neither day, nor night, nor moon, nor sun, but the Lord alone sat in profound trance⁹.”

Comparative Aspect:

Sabad is a Dhawani that gives us a clear picture of the form of any text but Sabad is justified when it gives the knowledge of Eternal Reality. The experiences of saints are considered as Sabad. In other words, Sabad is the sayings of reliable enlightened souls who have attained the Eternal knowledge. The meaning of Sabad can be of two types, i.e., concrete and abstract. The comparative aspect undertakes the study of Sabad to understand the meaning of Guru Granth. Guru Granth Sahib is the sacred writings of Guru Nanak and it also includes his five successors, Bhagats, Saints, Sufis and people associated with the court of Gurus. It comprises the Divine Sabad, indicates the spiritual union with Ultimate Reality. Since its first codification (1604), Sikh Scripture has been looked upon as the most authentic source of the Divine message. The history of the Sikh Scripture goes back from the times of Guru Nanak. This is the narration of his divine experience of the mystical forms. Guru Nanak’s writings reveal that he deeply felt himself as intermediary of Divine Truth, he says, “As the word of the Lord comes to me, so do I utter, O Lalo¹⁰.” Therefore, the Gurbani is not just an outcome of poetic imagination but Gurbani also relates to the revelation of God. It is informed that during the missionary odysseys of West-Asia, Guru Nanak carried with him a book which has been reportedly a collection of a hymns. These hymns also include Bhagats writings which he collected over the years. Before he dies he bestowed Guru Angad a volume of his hymns. These details explain that the formation of Sikh Scripture had already started with Guru Nanak life and time. Nanak’s sacred writings left an unforgettable mark on the successive growth of Scriptural tradition. It was a source of powerful stimulus to his successors to add new hymns into his volume. Though, Guru Angad’s writings are not voluminous but his writings underline the character and implication of the Bani in comparison to the traditional Hindu texts. It emphasizes that the Bani is nectar which reveals the core of ultimate truth. It has come through God-oriented Guru to be understood by Guru-oriented persons. Only the blessed people understand and then praise it and only the blessed can meditate on it. Guru Angad emphasized on the spiritual value of the Bani. Guru Amar Das not only preserved the sacredness of Sikh scripture but he also made a noteworthy contribution by adding new hymns into it. He highlights the status of Bani when he says Bani of God-oriented is God himself. He said that it is the light of the world. He calls Sikh to come and sing the true Bani. Sing the Bani which are the purest form of revelation. He highlights the character of Sikh revelation by maintaining that it resounds in the four Yugas. It is the genuine voice of truth. On the basis of genre and style, it has been concluded that

⁹ Ibid 1035

¹⁰ Guru Granth Sahb, P 72

the collection of Bhagat-Bani which began with Guru Nanak was also available with his successors. Guru Amar Das' lighting comments upon the compositions of Farid and Kabir coupled with his admiration of the spiritual rightness of Namdev and Kabir signify that their writings have not only found reception but also become a part of the Sikh scripture. With the addition of 3rd Guru Amar Das' and of Bhagats, the collection of hymns increased; consequently he handed it to his successor, Guru Ram Das.

The 4th Guru Ram Das was associated with the organizational structure of the Panth. Therefore he was fully aware of the Sikh scriptural tradition that had developed over the time by his predecessors. He introduced new Ragas and metres into the text which marks a new stage in the development of Holy Scripture. He employs the word 'Bani' in modern sense which later developed into the doctrine of Guru Granth Sahib. The contemporary evidences suggest that Guru Ram Das had taken ardent interest to organize codices in which authentic text had been arranged. In line with his predecessors Guru Arjan Dev, the 5th master, is credited for development of the Sikh scriptural tradition in more than one way. He composed various Ragas and metres about 2312 hymns¹¹, which is the single largest contribution by any author to the Guru Granth Sahib. He followed the footsteps of his predecessors and reiterates that I do not speak by myself. He claim that whatever I utter has been ordained. His words that the Pothi is veritably the abode of God, remind that installation of Adi Granth in the Darbar Sahib is not far away.

The basic qualification to be included in Guru Granth Sahib was the intensity of love present in the compositions of the contributors. Though there are varieties of expressions for the Divine worship, yet we find almost similar type of craving amongst the composers for the Divine emergence of their individual souls. This is perhaps the basic qualification of all the hymns composers of Guru Granth Sahib. The enormous task of compilation carried on carefully culminated in the form of a volume. The traditional Sikh scholars describe that Guru Arjan had procured Bani from diverse sources, including the Sikh Sangat and devout Sikhs settled in different regions of the Sikh world. With the "codification of Adi Granth in 1604 the Sikh canon had been closed."¹²

In conclusion, "Sikhism's Sacred Journey: Navigating Gurbani's Parnalis, Philosophical Perspectives, and Interpretive Traditions" offers a panoramic view of the multifaceted landscape of Sikh spirituality, anchored in the exploration of Gurbani, the sacred hymns and teachings enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib. Through an examination of diverse interpretive traditions such as Sahaj Parnali, Bhai Parnali, Udasi Parnali, Nirmala Parnali, Giani Parnali, Singh Sabha Parnali, and the Academic School, this article illuminates the richness and depth of Sikh philosophical inquiry and theological reflection. As Sikhs navigate the sacred journey of engaging with Gurbani, they encounter a tapestry of interpretive traditions that offer distinct lenses through which to understand and apply its timeless wisdom. Each parnali reflects the unique socio-cultural contexts, theological insights, and philosophical perspectives that have shaped Sikh spirituality over centuries. Yet, amidst this diversity, there remains a common thread of devotion, humility, and reverence for the divine that unites Sikhs in their quest for spiritual enlightenment. Through the exploration of Gurbani's parnalis and philosophical perspectives, readers are invited to embark on their own spiritual journey, guided by the

¹¹ G. S. Talib, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib (English Translation)*, Vol. I, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1988, p. xxxviii.

¹² Sahib Singh, *About the Compilation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, Lok Sahit Parkashan, Amritsar, 1996, pp. 34-108; Balwant Singh Dhillon, *Early Sikh Scriptural Tradition: Myth and Reality*, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 1996, p. 59.

profound wisdom and universal truths encapsulated within Sikh scripture. "Sikhism's Sacred Journey" celebrates the richness of Sikh interpretive traditions and the transformative power of Gurbani, inspiring seekers of truth to deepen their understanding, cultivate spiritual growth, and embody the teachings of love, compassion, and equality enshrined in Sikhism's sacred scriptures.

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