

The Making of Sikh Scripture : Guru Granth Sahib

Abstract

The compilation of the Holy Granth was 'the greatest work' of Guru Arjan's life. Begun after 1595, it was completed in 1604. Selections from the writings of Hindu and Muslim saints like Kabir, Farid, Namdev, Ravidas, and Bhikhan, most of whom belonged to the so-called depressed, were made by Guru Arjan for inclusion in the Granth. The selected material was reduced to writing by Bhai Gurdas at the dictation of Guru Arjan. Arranged on the basis of *Ragas*, the writings of the Gurus came first in the order of their succession. Then followed the writings of the saints, beginning with Kabir and ending with Farid. Authenticated by Guru Gobind Singh, the Granth came to be known as Guru Granth Sahib in the early eighteenth century as the logical culmination of a process that had started much earlier.

Keywords: Guru, Granth, Sikh, Ragas, Shlokas.

Introduction

The story of the making of Sikh Scripture; begins with Guru Nanak whose own hymns were sung for congregational worship.¹ Three kinds of scripts were in current during his time: *Sharda* in Kashmir, *Takri* in the eastern hills, and *Bhatakshri* in the plains. He adopted a modified form of *Bhatakshri* for his *bani*. His *Asa Patti* contains exactly 35 letters, including the letter 'r' which is peculiar to the script. It was popularized by Guru Angad as *Gurmukhi* because it was used for recording the words fallen 'from the mouth of his Guru'. That Guru Angad had with him the compositions of Guru Nanak is evident from a comparison of their hymns. The nucleus of the Sikh scripture had thus begun to be formed with the *bani* of Guru Nanak recorded in *Gurmukhi*.²

Compositions of Guru Angad together with those of his predecessor Guru Nanak and some Bhagats were available with Guru Ram Das. The compositions of Guru Amar Das were put together by his grandson, Sahansar Ram, son of Mohan. That Guru Amar Das had with him the compositions of Guru Nanak is clear from a comparison of their hymns. Guru Amar Das made a selection from the compositions of the Bhagats whom he used to admire earlier as a Vaishnava. Here and there he added his own commentary. The volumes prepared by Guru Amar Das were later used by Guru Arjan for the compilation of the Holy Granth. Guru Amar Das declared the Guru's Word to be superior to all the scriptures of the world. The Sikhs were enjoined to use only the Guru's Word for worship. The six systems of the Hindus were in vogue, he said, but the Guru's system was profound and unequalled. Adopted with love, it could save the whole world.³

The most obvious religious practice for the Sikhs was the singing of the Guru's Word. All other ceremonies or rituals were excluded. The clever persons like Prithi Chand began to mix up their own spurious writings with the true compositions of the Gurus to make them current among the Sikhs. There was a danger of confusion in the creed and the ritual. Guru Arjan was keen to ensure unity of belief and practice. Therefore, he undertook to collect the genuine writings of his predecessors together with his own to prepare a grand volume. He personally went to Goindval to acquire from Baba Mohan the manuscripts in his possession. However, these manuscripts did not contain all the writings later included in the Holy Granth. Guru Arjan had to explore other sources to get the complete works he required.⁴

Selections from the writings of Hindu and Muslim saints like Kabir, Farid, Namdev, Ravidas, and Bhikhan, most of whom belonged to the so-called depressed, were made by Guru Arjan for inclusion in the Granth. This selection was based on 'the lyrical and living value of the pieces', and not on their doctrinal content. The idea of making this selection was 'inherent in the cosmopolitan nature of Sikhism'. The process had begun with its founder. The fact that many of Kabir's



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expressions are embedded in the writings of Guru Nanak shows that he had Kabir's writings with him. Similarly, some couplets of Farid are embedded in Guru Nanak's writings. There is similar identity or correspondence between the expressions of Kabir and Farid and those of Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das. This could be explained only by 'the supposition that the predecessors of Guru Arjan had before them the writings of these Bhagats'. Guru Arjan, thus, was not the first to think of making a collection of their verses. He enlarged the corpus and gave 'a scriptural position' to Bhagat Bani.⁵

Some of the Bhagat Bani was collected afresh from the followers of the saints in the Punjab, which accounts for the Punjabi flavour of the language of their hymns in the Holy Granth. Many compositions of the saints were rejected due to extreme joy or sadness in the musical modes of *Megh*, *Hindol* and *Deepak*. Significantly, nine odes (*vars*) were actually set to the martial strains of the well-known heroic ballads.⁶

The selected material was reduced to writing by Bhai Gurdas at the dictation of Guru Arjan. Arranged on the basis of *Ragas*, the writings of the Gurus came first in the order of their succession, each calling himself by the common appellation of 'Nanak'. Then followed the writings of the saints, beginning with Kabir and ending with Farid whenever a piece from him was available. Towards the end, after the *shlokas* of Kabir and Farid, came the *savvyas* of eleven contemporary bards who sum up the characteristics of the Gurus. The long Coronation Ode of Satta and Balvand, a short piece (*sadda*) from Sundar on the death of Guru Amar Das, and a few lines of Mardana were also included in the Granth. The *shloks* left over from the *Vars* came before the closing epilogue in which Guru Arjan comments on the importance and significance of the Holy Granth. In this three things replaced Truth, Harmony, and Wisdom; these are seasoned with the Name of God. The Granth was meant for the regeneration of mankind. The compilation of the Holy Granth was 'the greatest work' of Guru Arjan's life. Begun after 1595, it was completed in 1604. The Granth was then installed in the central Temple at Amritsar, and Baba Buddha was appointed its first Granthi.⁷

The Holy Granth prepared by Guru Arjan came Dhir Mal's possession and remained with his descendants at Kartarpur.⁸ It was brought to its 'present final form' by Guru Gobind Singh by adding

the hymns of Guru Tegh Bahadur under different *Ragas* and his own *shalok* at the end. Then, before the end of his life in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh told the Khalsa that the Panth henceforth was to be guided by the teachings of the Gurus incorporated in the Holy Granth.⁹

Authenticated by Guru Gobind Singh, the Granth came to be known as Guru Granth Sahib in the early eighteenth century as the logical culmination of a process that had started much earlier. Great respect began to be paid to the incorporated Word; even the Guru used to have for himself a seat lower than that of the Scripture. At the same time, the Sikh congregations acquired great sanctity; it was believed that the spirit of the Guru lived and moved among them.¹⁰

Conclusion

The most striking aspect of this statement by Teja Singh and Ganda Singh is a strict historical approach to the genesis and evolution of the Sikh scripture from the time of Guru Nanak to the time of Guru Gobind Singh. While they underscore the intrinsic need and fundamental significance of Guru Granth Sahib, they base their arguments on the internal evidence of Gurbani as much as the external evidence of Sikh works and Sikh scriptural manuscripts. They appreciate the relevance of early manuscripts, especially the *Goindval Pothis*, for the compilation of the Holy Granth by Guru Arjan. They appreciate the role of the manuscript copies of the Holy Granth in the preparation of the final version of the Scripture by Guru Gobind Singh. The Holy Granth prepared by Guru Arjan and the Damdami Recension prepared by Guru Gobind Singh were intimately linked with each other. The status of the Granth as the Guru was linked up with the Sikh conception of the Word (*shabad*).

References

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3. Ibid, pp. 22-23.
4. Ibid, p. 28.
5. Ibid, pp. 29-30.
6. Ibid, pp. 28, 30-31.
7. Ibid, pp. 28, 30, 32.
8. Ibid, p. 49.
9. Ibid, pp. 71-72, 74-75.
10. Ibid, p. 105.