

## FOREWORD

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Sikhism comes to us from history and the lives of the Founder-Gurus along with their writings; as also some selected compositions of *sants* and bards revered in that time and culture.

Many of these poets and bards came from all castes and divisions of Hinduism, others were from Islam. In the Indian culture of the day, these men would never ever sit together to share their beliefs and practices, nor break bread together, and absolutely would not be caught on the adjoining pages of the same holy book. Yet include them in the same Holy Scripture is exactly what the Gurus did. When Guru Arjan compiled the first recension of Sikh scripture in 1604, he included the writings of Hindus – both of low castes and high – and also of Muslims. If Judeo-Christian scriptural writings had been freely available at that time, I have little doubt that some would have found inclusion and commentary in this tome – the *Adi Granth*.

Fully a century later, with minor modifications and the inclusion of the writings of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Master, the living Word of the *Adi Granth* was anointed as the Guru Granth (now respectfully referred as Siri Guru Granth Sahib). Three centuries have now passed.

Even though the northwest part of the Indian subcontinent is where they arose, historically Sikhs were never really limited to Punjab. The past century has seen large and significant Sikh communities in the United States, Canada and Great Britain, with impressive pockets in much of the European Union, and also in East Africa and many parts of South East Asia.

There is now a sea change in reality. There are generations of Sikhs being raised outside Punjabi ambience all across the world. Almost three million Sikhs now live outside Punjab and India. Adding complexity to this narrative is the fact that Siri Guru Granth Sahib was compiled in the language and the cultural context of the times, yet its message speaks across the bounds of time, geography and culture.

Guru Nanak, the Founder of the faith, was born in 1469. His writings form a large corpus of the Guru Granth that was finalized by the tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh in 1708. The script of Siri Guru Granth Sahib is the Guru-designed Gurmukhi; the languages used are many – the lexicon comes from most of the languages extant in India at that time, including Arabic, Persian, the scholarly language of Sanskrit, the language of poetry Braj Basha and, of course, Punjabi – the native language of Punjab, which itself is a fascinating *mélange* of the languages of the many invaders who found their way into Punjab through the Khyber pass. These include the Caucasians and Greeks, as well as people from Iran, and what we now term the Middle East. There are many more.

Much of Sikh teaching, therefore, is cast in the metaphoric structure of Indic mythology. Not that this mythology is integral to the Sikh message, but the teaching has to be in the contextual framework of the language, vocabulary and culture of the

times. Only then can a student find meaning in it. The entire teaching is in the form of inspired, divine poetry, and like all good poetry that is not doggerel, the reader needs to pause a moment to make sense of the metaphoric language along with its many possible meanings and applications. A literal rendering just will not do.

Keep in mind that Siri Guru Granth Sahib deals with eternal themes that have occupied mankind forever, matters that we are seemingly hard wired for in our DNA: the sense of self, the nature of God and man and the relationship between them, the Creator and Creation and mankind's fragile but crucial place in it (from which we then find ways to interpret life and death and principles by which to live and die). This is heavy-duty stuff – though we sometimes dismiss it as merely the “meaning of life” or the “MOL” moment that every life has. The meaning is in the interpretation, and every generation has to explore it anew. This also means that good people will fight over minutiae as well as differ over the broader context.

Obviously then, for a new generation of Sikhs growing up outside the cultural and linguistic milieu of Punjab and Punjabi language, discovering and nurturing a sense of intimacy with the Guru's message is not so simple a matter. I know of what I speak, for I've been there.

This is exactly what Daljit Singh Jawa has to contend with. It is no easy task. It's the kind of work that no one can claim or hope to finish entirely. So Jawa has tried a different tack. He provides the original text in one column and in the next column he gives a transliteration of the original in Romanized script, so that the novice can read the text reasonably competently. I have to add that his transliteration is easy on the eyes; he skips most diacritical marks and the bells and whistles that are so critical to a linguist. One could argue that it leaves the reader without the ability to read or mine the words for their exact meaning, but it helps the reader over the greatest of hurdles without the complexity of fine embroidery. Jawa's approach undoubtedly benefits the average reader and perhaps whets his/her desire to delve more into the intricacies of the language and that's all to the good. And then the icing on the cake: Jawa reserves sufficient space on every page to provide not a literal translation of a hymn (*shabad*), but a conceptual statement of its essential message in serviceable English, often minus the mythological baggage. I find this an essential and most attractive feature of Daljit Singh Jawa's painstaking work.

Many complete translations of Siri Guru Granth Sahib in English are available; I know of at least five, and many more translations of selected parts exist. There is no official, approved version. Personally, I like this. I celebrate them all. We would not always agree with any translation; I don't, and hope that nor will you. What the many viewpoints do is to propel you, the reader, on a path for yourself. And what can be better than that? This is a large canvas that Daljit Singh Jawa has painted. I hope readers will enjoy it as I have done – particularly the millions who now live outside Punjab and Punjabi ambit and yet are intimately attached to or curious about the Sikh message.

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