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RITUAL, WORD AND MEANING IN SIKH RELIGIOUS LIFE : A CANADIAN FIELD STUDY

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Introduction

In this paper we will first examine the myth of origin for the "making of a devotee Sikh" in Baisakhi day (not as a historical incident but as an aspect of the memory of the community from which the definition of the devout life is drawn); and second analyze the spiritual discipline centered on Guru Granth Sahib which focuses the life of faith for the Sikh devotee. Our goal is to understand the deep structure of these religious forms for the Sikh imagination : to grasp how the religious making of the faith shapes and re-shapes the devotees life. We will begin to examine the historical vaguries that have marked the modern Sikh community in North America and map the various paths that has lead devotees to take in their attempt to make sense of the discipline in the context of modernity. A complete mapping of this however, will rest with a subsequent paper.

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, explicitly rejected the prevailing rituals of his day. He taught that the sole necessity of man for the fullness of divine life was *Nam*, the meditation on the name of God. This became the focus for the ritual development of Sikh tradition. The spiritual life of the devotees and the community is structured around *Nam*. And, through *Nam* union with God is given and the cycle of birth and rebirth is broken and *moksa* (release) attained.

What is *Nam* ? Guru Nanak suggested that *Nam* is the manifestation of God. Meditation on *Nam* is the path, the unity of the divine

presence. This path took on an institutional form with the development of the assembly, or holy congregation. The succession of gurus along with the establishment of holy places in which the Guru Granth Sahib was installed lead to the regular pattern of prayer called *simran*. It was with the events of Baisakhi day in 1699, however, that the faith took its most radical turn. The Baptism of the Double-edged Sword, *Khande-ki-Pahul*, and the discipline or essential *rehat* of the five K's (*kesha, kirpan, kara, kanga, kachha*), the five embodiments of the faith, which set the path for spiritual formation that mark Sikhs to this day.

I. The Initiation Ritual (*Amrit*) as a Myth of Origin

The Heads of the Beloved Ones

There is a myth of origin at the heart of Sikh tradition. It informs ritual practice; it continues to focus the comments on the meaning of the faith for devotees. This formative event was the action of Guru Gobind Singh on Baisakhi day in 1699. The rite of initiation, *amrit* recreates the myth of origin through which Sikhs enter the *Khalsa*, take on the image of the Guru, and, become "the pure ones". Sikhs have understood the events of Baisakhi day in a variety of ways. Some see it as a miracle of re-birth following death at the hand of Guru Gobind Singh. Others are certain he sacrificed a goat in their stead using the blood as a lesson to teach faith, devotion and absolute trust. We have even had some suggest that a form of occult magic was at work, a magic that defies material explanation but gives evidence for the power of the relationship between complete faith, the presence of the guru and divine action. And many argue that the real issue is the change brought about in the ethical life of the Five Beloved Ones on that formative day in 1699. Those who take up the discipline of *amrit* with complete fidelity and those for whom *amrit* remains a call to the "pure life" yet to be adopted, both see the baptism of the double edged sword as the significant point of departure in their spiritual development.

One of our informants speaks about the origin of the discipline on Baisakhi day.

After his martyrdom [that of the ninth Guru], Guru Gobind Singh, though a small child nine years of age, took up the responsibility. He meditated deeply. When he was 33 years of age he gave the discipline at the Baisakhi gathering. Guru Gobind Singh did not create the *Khalsa* as a reaction against the Moslems who had killed his father. It was not a reactionary step. He invited all

the Sikhs from foreign places. It's thought that 80,000 Sikhs gathered on that day. It's recorded by a Moslem writer. He records that there was a big gathering and the Guru came out from the tent with a drawn sword and he asked for the head of a Sikh. "Come forward. I want the head of a Sikh." It was a big surprise for the audience...(who said) "He has gone mad. He is going to kill us." Yes, a mad guru...Some went to his mother (and asked): "What is he doing? You replace him with your grandson?" But Guru Gobind Singh said, "My sword wants the head of a Sikh? Is there any Sikh who would lay down his life on the principles of Guru Nanak?" Guru Nanak mentioned that if you want to follow the path of truth, "come to me with your head on your palm." What he (Guru Gobind Singh) did was dramatize it. The words of Guru Nanak: "If you want to play the game of love put your heads on your palm and come to me. If you want to follow this path you are not to grumble; you have to give your head to me."

As the literature on this incident tells us Guru Gobind Singh had to call three times before a Sikh answered. Our narrator:

"Oh, Guru, this head belongs to you. My whole life is yours." Then he took him to the tent and came back with a drawn sword with blood dripping from it. He repeated it five times. Five offered. After the fifth one he took a long time there. Then he brought the Five Beloved Ones back. They were all changed, its recorded by the historian. Their faces were like Guru Gobind Singh. Some would say he cut their heads. Some would say he cut a goat. But, I don't know what happened. Only Guru knows what happened.

With the devotees description of the mythic events of Baisakhi day in mind we would like to discuss the initiation ritual of *amrit*. For it is in *amrit* that the Sikh faithful find their definition of the quality of the spiritual life. And, it is in *amrit* that the "mode of being" is transfigured and the life of the Guru lived. This is no less true for Sikhs who have undertaken *amrit* and have adopted the faithful practice of the disciplines that for those who see it as the goal of their yet not disciplined enough life. All see *amrit* as the point from which to judge the path they trod.

A Theoretical Analysis of the Initiation Ritual

First, however, we will consider briefly from a theoretical perspective the place of initiation rituals in human culture. For this we

rely on the work of Mircea Eliade in his *Birth and Rebirth. The Religious Meaning of Initiation in Human Culture*.¹ It's fascinating to note that Eliade's discussion, based largely on the study of initiation ritual in archaic cultures, is admirably suited to the phenomena of Sikh *amrit* at least as it is understood by the devotees.

In the iconography of the Sikh tradition and in the frequent comments of devotees we are reminded that the Five Beloved Ones mentioned as key players in the mythic events of the founding of the community are described as sharing in the "image of the guru" when they emerged from the tent with Gobind Singh. They are no longer who they were. They have shed the former image and taken on the image of the Guru. Eliade has said that, "It is through the initiation rite that the man of the traditional societies comes to know and to assume this image,"² the fullness of humanity identified with the god. The acquisition of the body of

rites and oral teachings, (part of the preparation, the rite itself and the disciplines that flow from it) produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person to be initiated. In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation; he has become another.³

In the majority of initiation rites the rhythm is similar : an initial movement into death through which the previous existence is discarded and a culmination of the ritual in a reformation, a new creation, in the image of the tutelary god. As Eliade puts it :

The majority of initiatory ordeals more or less clearly imply a ritual death followed by resurrection or a new birth. The central moment of every initiation is represented by the ceremony symbolizing the death of the novice and his return to the fellowship of the living. But he returns to life a new man, assuming another mode of being. Initiatory death signifies the end at once of childhood, of ignorance and of the profane condition.⁴

Just as nothing expresses the end of one form of life more than death nothing expresses the idea of creation, of making, building,

1. M. Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth : The Religious Meaning of Initiation in Human Culture*. New York, Harper, 1958.

2. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

3. *Ibid.*, p. x.

4. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

constructing, than the cosmogony.... For symbolic repetition of the creation implies a reactualization of the primordial event, hence the presence of the Gods and their creative energies. The return to beginnings find expression in a reactivation of the sacred forces that had then been manifested for the first time.⁵

This birth requires rites instituted by Supernatural Beings: hence it is a divine work, created by the power and will of those Beings; it belongs, not to nature but to sacred history... To attain the initiate's mode of being demands knowing realities that are not a part of nature but of the biography of the Supernatural Beings, hence of the sacred history preserved in the myths.⁶

In the following description of the *amrit* ceremony, the initiation of the Double-Edged Sword as it is affectionately referred to, the pattern of death and rebirth is singularly clear. It was our great good fortune to receive the generous invitation of the Five Beloved Ones at the Guru Nanak Center in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, to attend the *amrit* ceremony in Calgary. This description is based on that observation.

Initiation as Entering the Game of Love

How does one offer one's head and enter the game of love? Within secular society the desire for the egoless existence is certainly alive. It's the object of the quest of many well intentioned peoples lives. Sikh tradition through the ritual of *amrit*, of the Baptism of the Double-Edged Sword, structures the path for the memory and the imagination and offers disciplines which invite the devotee to the egoless life. It shares with many forms of initiation the darkness and "secrecy" of the mystic hour, beginning as it does at three a m.

The day chosen for the initiation is Baisakhi day, the first day of the Khalsa calendar, the day charged with the mythic events of 1699. In the solar calendar it marks the first day of the year. The sun shines on this day with utmost power. It's the harvesting season. And there are a series of images associated with it, precursors to the action of Gobind Singh. This is the day that Guru Nanak started his mission at Hardwar. Legend has it that at Hardwar the local Hindu population in celebration of the first day of the year throw water at the Sun, an act of ancestor worship. Guru Nanak started to throw water not toward the rising sun in the East, but toward the West.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

6. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

The Brahmins enquired as to what he was doing. The Brahmins said, "We are throwing water towards the east where our ancestors live." Guru Nanak said, "I am throwing water towards my field in Punjab. I am giving water to the field." They laughed. He suggested that if the water can reach thousands of miles from here surely my water can reach a few hundred miles to the field of Punjab. He taught them that what is important is to water the fields and feed the people who were living among them. This day became important for the third guru as well. He raised the white flag on the bank of the river Beas where he dug a well with 84 steps. He invited Sikhs to "go down and take water together." You must drink water together, dine together for all human beings are equal. It became a tradition for Sikhs to visit this site and drink together on Baisakhi day. It was also Baisakhi day when then Eighth Guru chose his successor. This established the tradition of Sikhs to visit the Guru on Baisakhi. But it was Guru Gobind Singh who called the Sikhs together on Baisakhi day.⁷

The rite of initiation begins with the devotees who have come for *amrit* chanting "Sat nam Wahe guru" (the true name, Wonder of God). The Five Beloved Ones inside the room preparing the ceremony were also chanting, "Wahe guru." It's of interest to note that in the interview with one of the Five Beloved Ones following the ceremony, it was inadvertently suggested that he was chanting "Wahe guru." He corrected us: "not myself, all the Five Beloved Ones. I was not myself. It's the very vibration of your life at that moment."

This moment of participation, of presence is highlighted by our informant :

7. The *amrit* ceremony replaced a ceremony of initiation called *Charan pahul* ("feet" "amrit" : *amrit* of the Lords feet). The Guru would touch with his feet a bowl of water and all of the Sikhs would be initiated through drinking it. They would follow him. Nanak suggested that five Sikhs should touch the water and thus initiate the Sikhs. This creates a humble spirit. It is the origin of the meaning of the Sikhs greeting each other by bowing to their feet. Guru Nanak would wipe the feet of the Sikhs with his beard.

Guru Gobind Singh wishing to raise the spirit of the Sikhs taught that you must stand on your own feet (not on the gurus). The first gurus would say, "*Guru prasad*" (I have done this by the grace of the guru). The Tenth Guru would say, 'I have done it God, by the grace.' There is a transformation from "guru's grace" to "God's grace." When you enter the Khalsa, you belong to God, not the guru. *Sat Guru* replaces the personal guru. You are no longer attached to the personal guru. You are attached to the true guru : God.

If I had thought something (at that moment), then that thought would automatically be in their hearts too. I have experienced myself when I participated in the first ceremony There was a devoted dedicated saint who invited me to join Sikhs one by one would appear before the five beloved ones. If we are to take a decision how many days he is to serve in the temple because he has made a breach, if some idea comes in my mind . . . the chief of the five will declare it, saying that (which is in my mind). It's not that you are participating in the ceremony. It is something else. You cannot claim that you are doing something for the sake of the Guru. You are a mortal man . . . You are just an instrument.

Wahe guru is the basic *mantra* of the *Sat Guru*. It was chanted by all the Sikh gurus. The devotees understand it as, "an impersonal name," engaging on the deepest level with the Guru. It contains four linguistic elements, combining the wonder of God which defies intellectual definition, as that which removes the "darkness", "ignorance" and "bodily attachments" that prevent direct communion with the eternal. As one informant put it, "It raises you above all those things that are not eternal. It has enlightened your consciousness, your spirit."

Seven men gather to arrange the ceremony, to adopt the mythic roles of the original *baisakhi* day. One presides at the scripture and one guards the door. The presider at the scripture is chosen first. Each is asked if they have consciously kept the discipline. All potential breaches of the discipline, are enquired about. When they declare their faithfulness and that they haven't consciously broken the discipline, they are appointed to the task. The Five Beloved Ones are chosen. *Baisakhi* day, not in its 1699 form, but *in illo tempore*, occurs all over again.

Sikhs who are coming to receive *amrit* for a second time due to a breach of the discipline enter first and confess their breach to the Five Beloved Ones. They are given a "reward", usually a form of service to the community, as a kind of penance. In the interview we were repeatedly told that the confessions were to the Five Beloved Ones, to the mythic personages and were not remembered beyond the confines of the ritual. It is accepted in the presence of the Guru. That is it. Following the "second timers" the remaining enter through the guarded door. They face the question: "Why have you come here?" They reply, "We have come for *amrit*, to get baptized." They are told, "It is very costly. You will have to part with your head. Are you ready for that?" "Yes we are ready," they say. They bow

before the scripture. The guard tends to the door. No one comes, no one goes. The Five Beloved Ones start the prayer. The commandment for the day, the *hokum* which will define the proceedings from God's perspective is sought. One informant describes the process as follows :

It was wonderful. All the hokums, 3 time : before preparing amrit, second when it is prepared, and, third when everyone is initiated, all these three were so wonderful. They just expressed that event, what has happened. The word amrit was there in all of them. At that we all exclaimed the wonder of the Lord.

The *birasan* or marshal posture of the devotee and the Five Beloved ones during *amrit*, is reminiscent of Gobind Singh. The five prayers used in the *amrit* ceremony are the key prayers of the day. The *amrit* is prepared by the recitation of these five prayers. The informants tell us that in Guru Granth Sahib it says that, "You will prepare *amrit* every morning in your life (following *amrit*) by reciting those five prayers." What takes place here at the initiation models overtly what will take place in the life of the *amritized* Sikh on a daily bases.

The preparation of the *amrit* takes place in a large iron bowl set in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. Sugar crystals are added to the water and stirred with a double-edged sword. An icon of Guru Gobind Singh looks down on the ceremony from behind the Granth. Each of the Five Beloved ones takes his turn stirring the *amrit*. As they do so they recite (pray) the one of the five daily prayers assigned to them. This is done from memory entirely.

Amrit is poured into your mouth from outside. It is already there in your body, in your soul. When you follow the discipline, like priming the pump, you start the flow. The Guru has given the method. You must keep on everyday. The flow must be done daily.

As the Five Beloved Ones stir they scrape the side of the iron bowl. Guru Gobind Singh described God as all steel all powerful. "Other metals bend. This will not bend, it is all steel." "Cultivate those qualities" he taught, "you can't have a grumbling heart, quavering mind, shaky personality." All present concentrate on the *amrit* in a manner that can only be described as passionate. Enquiring about the focus, we were told,

It's very deep. Guru Granth Sahib meant that you should be so covered that your sight [could only be] focused on the *amrit*. Guru

Granth Sahib gazed into the *amrit* then he gazed into the eyes [of the initiates, and giving] a shock treatment tried to break the past life. It's finished now, it's a new beginning. Your sole attention in life now is to be the nectar of God the Khalsa.

Each one comes forward, reverences Guru Granth Sahib, kneels in the marshal posture and each of the Five Beloved Ones gives nectar to drink and as they do it they say: "Wahē guru ji ka Khalsa" (Now your direct relationship is with God). The Khalsa belongs to God. If you have achieved any victory it belongs to God. One of our informants comments,

The Pure ones belong to the Wonderful Lord. And the victory also belongs to the Lord. These words were spoken by Guru Gobind Singh. It's repeated 17 times with each sprinkling; eyes, mouth, head, when you come and at the end.

This is an oath taking ceremony: that all belongs to God. You have given your head. There is no question of ego...it's not in your power you are a human being, you can fall. We just offer our short comings, we are human beings...But this is not our ceremony. It's Your (God's) ceremony."

First the *amrit* is drunk. This purifies body with its five senses. Five times the devotee must drink and purify the five evils that cause human beings to remain in the cycle of birth and rebirth. Since the evils of mundane life are reflected through the eyes water is sprinkled in them, again five times. "Your total outlook in life is changed," we are told, "now you look at the beauty and wonder of the world." Then the *amrit* is poured over the head. Sikh tradition with its highly developed understanding of the meaning of hair (unshorn) and of caring for it with the symbolic elements of the comb and turban see the head as the seat of spirituality. Our informants remarked on numerous occasions that here, at the top of the skull is the seat of consciousness. "You are to here the word of God (here). It's the tenth door, *dasam duar*; you rise above the nine doors to the tenth door, the opening to God. It is hidden, you have to search it, rediscover it. The discipline is the path to its discovery."

Amrit is completed with the serving of the *prasad*. Unlike the handing of it directly to all present in the Gurdwara, the initiated sit in a circle and take it themselves from the dish on which it sits. Our informant comments,

We are brothers and sisters...[We] share the meal in the same plate....With the Guru who has become the father the relationship is a *nabe* relationship. *Nabe* means by "word of mouth" (the relationship to ones natural Father is characterized by the word bind). Its a spiritual relationship...The Guru has spoken and you have heard. You have accepted, *nab*. The vibration of the word (is) implanted in you.

Two things are involved here. As Eliade has eloquently expressed it, the initiated undergoes a death to the natural life of birth in the world and is reborn, in this case, into the householder of the guru. The cycle of birth and rebirth is understood to be broken. *Moksa* is attained in this life, in the householder state, through *amrit* and the living out of the disciplines of the faith. Now the initiate lives the life of God, of the *Sat Guru*, attained through the word. The *amritdhari* is a person of destiny, in the household of the *Sat Guru*.

II. Life of Faith in the Guru Granth Sahib

The Place of Scripture in the Sikh Tradition

While most religions have scriptures, the place and function of Sikh scripture seems quite unique. In no other religion can one find a human Guru founder, followed by a series of human Gurus living parallel with a collection of scripture, ending in a breaking of the human succession and the scripture attaining full authority as *Guru*.⁸ Both the Gurus and the Scripture are respected within the tradition because of God's word which they express. This has opened the way for the error of idolatry of the Gurus and the Scripture. Guru Nanak guarded against idolatry of the Guru by making a distinction between himself as God's mouthpiece, and the message he uttered: "I spoke only when you, O God, inspired me to speak" (A.G. 566).⁹ Unlike Hinduism, pictures of the Gurus are not seen as suitable objects for devotion. Instead the picture of the Gurus is said to be the *Gurbani* (God's Word spoken by the Guru). Although first spoken as oral revelations, the words were memorized and written down. The fifth Guru Arjun compiled these utterances into the canonical collection, the *Adi Granth*. Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru prepared the final recension of the *Adi Granth* and when dying,

8. W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. New Delhi: Vikas Pub. House, 1978, p. 43.

9. As quoted by W. Owen Cole, *The Guru in Sikhism*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982, p. 55.

installed the Adi Granth as *Guru*. As both Guru and God's Word, the physical text of the Adi Granth became a very tempting object for idolatry. The Adi Granth is housed in its own building or room, the Gurdwara. It is placed on a cushion, covered by a canopy and wrapped in special clothes. It is physically located so that it will be in the most elevated position, and when being moved it is carried on the head all of this to indicate its exalted status as Guru. Just as one would bow before the Lord, so one bows before the Adi Granth and is careful not to turn one's back to it. The book is ritually put to bed and awakened. Before entering a Gurdwara one must have bathed and removed one's shoes. Offerings are placed before the enthroned book and after worship a *prasad* is received. For many Sikhs the very sight of the scripture is a means of receiving grace.¹⁰

These practices surrounding the Adi Granth have a great deal in common with the way images of Siva and Krishna are treated in the Hindu tradition. These devotional practices can deteriorate into mere magic, the very kind of idolatry Guru Nanak was protesting against in the Hinduism of his day. But with the right motivation and understanding, which never confuses the physical symbol (the printed book) with that which it evokes (God's Word), these practices can powerfully serve to separate the spiritual from the ordinary and not degenerate into idolatry.¹¹ They prepare the worshipper to hear the Word of the Lord which, through the Gurus, has been recorded in human language. This Word, the voice of the eternal Guru, is numinously experienced as "vibrating in the pages of the Adi Granth."¹² In terms of its relationship with the Khalsa (the Sikh spiritual community) the Khalsa may be taken as the body and the Adi Granth as the soul. Without the divine Word of the Adi Granth, the Khalsa would be but an empty shell. With regard to the other religions, the words of the Adi Granth speak of one Lord who also speaks through the Hindu Vedas and the Qur'an of Islam. The Adi

10. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

11. Tendencies to pay too much attention to the Adi Granth as a physical object were rejected in the Rehat Maryada, a guide to Sikh life drawn up in 1945. Following the influence of the Singh Sabha movement of the late nineteenth century, the use of ghee lamps, the placing of water near the Guru Granth Sahib to ward off evil, etc., these practices are rejected as Hindu idolatry. Interestingly, within Hinduism itself reform movements of this same period, e.g. the Arya Samaj, also reject any practices which lead to the worship of the physical objects. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Granth proclaims God's path which lies beyond the religions, though Guru Nanak does not deny that it may be reached through them.¹³ Mullahs, brahmans and yogis are censured because they proclaim their path, their guruship rather than God's, and so lead the people into sectarian dispute. Following the spirit of the Adi Granth, Sikhism understands itself not as another sectarian religion, but as a witness to the truth contained in but transcending all religions. The direct voice of this truth is the Adi Granth speaking as Guru to the world. Empirical evidence for the universal claim is seen in the fact that Hindu and Muslim hymns are included in the Sikh scripture.

The Experience of Scripture as Guru

A Guru is the channel through which the divine is revealed in a way specially suited to the time, place and condition of the devotee. Within Hinduism, for example, God takes the human form of a *Rishi* or Guru especially for this purpose—to speak the divine truth in a way that is suited to the needs (*karma*) of the devotee. Without the Guru to individualize it, the Divine Word is in danger of remaining an abstract universal truth passing for above the life experience of the devotee. Without the Guru to individualize it, the Divine Word is in danger of remaining an abstract universal truth passing far above the life experience of the devotee. The Guru engages the Divine Word in worldly life. When Nanak and the other Gurus were alive, Sikhism was not unlike Hindu experience—the Word was experienced as personalized through the Guru. The uniqueness of Sikhism appears when, after Gobind Singh, the written book, in addition to being the Divine Word takes on the function of personal Guru, to Sikhs both in congregational worship and in personal devotion. The relation of the ten historical Gurus to the written book is nicely summarized by Rev. Pashaura Singh of the Calgary Guru Nanak Gurdwara.

There were not ten different Gurus. Guru is the one and the same spirit, and that's the spirit of Nanak. It manifested in ten different historical persons. Finally, it resides in the Word of God, in Guru Granth Sahib.¹⁴

Vak Lao—Taking the Advice of the Word

Just as one would look to a living guru for advice, so Sikhs look to their scripture. The procedure for doing this is called *vak lao*.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

14. Interview with Rev. Pashaura Singh, Calgary, January 18, 1985.

In individual and congregational settings, the process of *vak lao* functions as follows.

In congregational worship there is no lectionary of readings that is followed, rather the priest in a ritualized fashion opens the *Adi Granth* at random and begins reading from the first verse on the top left page. Just as a *guru* through divine knowledge of the *karma* of the congregation would choose the right portion of God's truth to speak to that Karmic condition, so divine inspiration operates through the process of random selection to choose the needed word appropriate to the situation. This word, when spoken, is received by the devotees as God's will or command for that moment or situation in life. This process of "taking God's word," *vak lao*, occurs in every service of worship, in individual daily devotions, in the *Amrit* or initiation ceremony and in the naming of one's child, marriage and death. An example as to how effective *vak lao* is in Sikh experience is described as follows. During the 1920's large groups of Punjabi Hindu outcastes were becoming Sikhs or Christians in the hope of improving social status. While the Sikh tradition clearly held that any Sikh could share in offering *prasad* to the congregation, the question was raised as to the suitability of untouchable converts doing this since most Sikhs had been of a higher status. Traditionalists wished to refuse these untouchable converts the honour of offering *prasad* at the Golden Temple. The Singh Sabha reform movement, however, pressed the case of the outcaste converts. It was agreed that advice should be taken from the *Guru Granth Sahib* and a copy was opened at random. The passage which turned up read :

Upon the worthless he bestows his grace, brother, if they will serve the True Guru. Exalted is the service of the True Guru, brother, to hold in remembrance the divine name. God himself offers grace and mystic union. We are worthless sinners brother, yet the True Guru has drawn us to that blissful union. (A.G. 638 : 3) 15.

With the hearing of these words it was clear to all that the *Guru Granth Sahib* had accepted the converts. The Sikhs all followed suit and accepted *Prasad* from the hands of the untouchable converts. This event typifies the Sikh experience of God's commandment given

15. As quoted in *The Sikhs : Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, p. 55.

through *vak lao* as always speaking with power and truth to the situation at hand.

The experience of taking *vak lao* during initiation or *Amrit* is not different from that of congregational worship. As reported (in Part I) above in the experience of one devotee being initiated, the three scripture passages chosen at random at specific points in the ceremony all spoke of *Amrit* in the most appropriate ways. This led those being initiated to, "all exclaim the wonder of the Lord." This divine correlation of God's word to human events is the self-validating aspect of the Sikh experience of the scripture as living Guru. From the purely human perspective the text is being opened at random and the fitness of the verse is a mere chance coincidence. From the Sikh perspective, the ritualized random choosing of the page to read functions to remove sinful human ego from the process so as to allow God to do the choosing. As Rev. Pashaura Singh puts it, "That *vak* will reveal the spirit of the event."¹⁶ The wisdom in God's choice confirms the function of the scripture as Guru.

In Individual daily devotion, *vak lao*, God's word is taken first thing in the morning before beginning the day's activities. This revelation of God's will (*hukam*) serves as a verse for personal meditation throughout the day, just as in Hinduism a Guru gives the student a personally selected *mantra* for meditation. Again during evening prayers *vak lao* is taken as the Guru's word upon which to conclude the day with its particular joys or sorrows. It is through these personalized experiences in daily devotion plus the congregational experiences of *vak lao* that God's grace is understood to operate in such a way as to break the bonds of *karma*.¹⁷

Although the *Adi Granth* functions as a Guru giving specific advice for life, it also has the more general and perhaps more important functions of providing the *banis* (required daily prayers) and *Kirtans* (hymns for congregations singing the *bani* or word of God). God's word as sung individually in the required five daily prayers or as hymns in congregational worship is the heart of Sikh devotional experience. Through such *kirtan* (singing) the individual tunes himself to vibrate in harmony with the Divine Word, just as violin string is made one with the sound of the tuning fork. For the Sikh, as for the Hindu, participation in the Divine Word has power to transform

16. Interview with Rev. Pashaura Singh, Calgary, January 18, 1985.

17. C.H. Loehlin, *The Sikhs and their Scriptures*. Delhi: ISPCCK 1947, p. 53. A 21

and unify one's consciousness.¹⁸ The purifying power of the sacred scripture is understood as a combing of negative thoughts from one's heart and mind that occurs as a regular part of one's daily discipline :

Comb your hair early in the morning and at the time of going to bed. As you remove dead hair, the broken hair with the comb, similarly you comb your heart, remove the negative thoughts, evil thoughts. So you have two types of combs : the one a wooden comb, the other the comb of *gurbani*, of sacred scripture.¹⁹

As the hair is combed morning and evening, prayers are chanted to comb the heart. The outer symbols, of the five K's : of *Kesh* (long hair), *Kachh* (underwear), *Kara* (iron bracelet), *Kangah* (wooden comb) and *Kirpan* (sword) are understood as outer symbols of God's word. When one puts them on, with prayer, one is dressed in the word of God.²⁰ Through this daily ritual, then, the mind is purified and inspired and the body girded to do battle with the day's temptations.

In this Sikh experience of the *Adi Granth*, as providing both *vak lao* (advice everyday problems, daily purification of body and mind) and *bani kirtan* (devotional inspiration), what are the respective roles of the written text and the spoken word ? To begin with the hymns of the Gurus were spoken or sung and then memorized and written down. The collection of the written hymns by Arjun in the first instance may have been his response to spurious hymns being circulated by heretical Sikh movements of the day. It also functioned to give the Sikhs a sacred book alongside the Hindu Veda, the Qur'an of Islam and the Christian Bible. Gobind Singh's final recension not only filled the above functions but also took on the functions filled to that point by Nanak and the nine Gurus. For all of these purposes an official written text was essential. But what role does the written word play in Sikh devotional experience ?

The presentation of the Divine word in the Form of a book with pages is obviously necessary for the "random consultation" mechanism of *vak lao* to function. And it is from the written copy in the village Gurdwara that most Sikh's memorized their prayers and hymns. The presence of the written text in the Gurdwara and in the

18. See Harold Coward, "The meaning and power of *Mantras* in Bhartrhari's *Vakyapadiya*," *Studies in Religion*, 11, 1982, pp. 365-376, for a Hindu view of this process.

19. Interview with Rev. Pashaura Singh, Calgary, January 13, 1985.

20. *Ibid.*

home also provides what a living *guru* would provide—the physical manifestation of God. But the written words of the *Adi Granth* function quite differently from the written words of ordinary books or even of other scriptures. *In Sikh devotion, the written words fulfil the same function as that of a musical score in relation to the performed music.* Just as written music has no value until it is performed, so the written text of the *Adi Granth* has spiritual power only as it is sung. This is evident in the very structure of the written text. It is poetry, and at the top of each hymn the name of the *raga* and rhythm to be used in its singing are clearly stated. This is why the devotional experience of scripture cannot be had from translations—just as it is impossible to translate a Bach fugue into some other form. As is the case with the learning of music, if it is learned by heart in childhood it will never be forgotten. One may not bother with it for awhile, but always be there in the unconscious and later in life one will likely come back to it. But if music is not learned in childhood, it is very difficult to learn it (especially by heart) later in life. As *kirtan*, or sung words, the Sikh experience of scripture is very similar. Its music and poetry, when learned in youth, has a formative influence throughout life. Once learned the constant singing and chanting of the scripture is described by one devotee as “vibrating into you... clearing and opening your mind to God’s grace.”²¹ Ultimately it enables one to “dwell within the house of the Guru’s Word.” In village India, where most adult Alberta Sikhs grew up, this kind of devotional immersing of oneself in scripture happened quite naturally and without great self effort.

I knew people in the village where I grew up as a child... those people had a very simple life. You get up in the morning and do prayers (together as a family or community) and then go and do your work. In the evening you sit and there would be prayers and a wiseman or priest who would interpret the *gurbani* (scripture), and people would sit there for two or three hours with no temptations to get away from it.²²

In this rural traditional environment, with no television, radio, or other modern distractions, the divine music of the *Adi Granth* surrounded one and was naturally absorbed into one’s consciousness.

The above quotation highlights a second aspect of the experience of scripture, namely interpretation. In addition to losing oneself in

21. Interview with Kiran Gill, Calgary, April 14, 1985.

22. Interview with Dr. Ranjit Dhaliwal, Calgary, Feb. 15, 1985.

the devotional singing of the word the *Adi Granth* is to be studied and the meanings of its poetic words understood. Unlike the Hindu experience, a strong scholarly tradition of scripture interpretation did not develop early. In fact the first full commentary was written by Sahib Singh only 40 years ago. Rather than copying traditional Hindu commentarial methods, Sahib Singh takes his influence from the West and applies modern form criticism to the written text of the *Adi Granth*.²³ While the study of the text is deemed useful so as to obtain insights regarding the meaning of life, understanding gained in this fashion is clearly secondary to the wisdom gained from the devotional use of scripture in *vak lao* and *kirtan*. Copies of the text edited with commentaries for intellectual study are not the real *Adi Granth*. Rather, they are of the same status as translations, namely, the presentation of the scripture at a totally different level—the level of the study of the written score as opposed to the playing of the music. The former is simply preparatory for the latter, which is the real thing.

Changes in the Sikh Experience of Scripture from living in Canada

Living in Alberta, or perhaps more correctly, living in modern Western society, is introducing changes in both the devotional and intellectual experience of the *Adi Granth* by Sikhs. Modern society has many distractions and pressures which militate against the natural and simple experience of village India. The individualistic and rationalistic nature of modern society tends to emphasize the study as opposed to the devotional approach to scripture. The crucial importance of being immersed in learning the singing of the scripture as a child poses a major challenge to Sikh parents in Canada. Let us examine each of these problems.

A modern Alberta Sikh describes the pressure he finds in the push for more and more material possessions, the social pressures to drink and eat meat, and the lack of time for the daily discipline of saying morning and evening prayers (which usually takes 2 hours):

I think we need to go back to more devotion. Living in the Western context you are torn apart by these things. So many Sikhs, even those who have taken Amrit have betrayed the religion . . . I can easily opt out of so many things, accept only 20% of Sikhism and live the other life for 80% of the time.²⁴

He feels himself pulled apart by the pressures towards egoism, selfishness and competition. All of these tendencies go directly against the

23. Sahib Singh, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Darpan*, 10 vols., 1963.

24. Interview with Avtar Gahunia, Calgary, Feb. 16, 1985.

Guru Granth Sahib. In this situation many are moving to see the full commitment to scripture required by *Amrit* as the only solution. This seems very hard at first, but once the discipline has begun and *Amrit* taken, the practice seems quite possible and the obvious solution to the problem. Thus there may turn out to be a greater stress on the need for *Amrit*, for Sikh living in modern society, if they are to have the full experience of scripture. In Canada, TV, not the *Adi Granth*, is what one naturally absorbs. Special discipline is, therefore, essential if the scripture experience of village India is to be had in the modern West. Saying prayers morning and evening is not something that happens "naturally" in Canadian life, it requires considerable self-discipline.

The rational emphasis of the modern West is another influence which produces differences from the Sikh experience of village India. Congregation services in the Gurdwara in Canada (following the Protestant example) give more emphasis to sermon and rational interpretation than is the case in India.²⁵ In their Canadian homes, Sikhs are more tempted to spend their valuable time in study and interpretation of the text rather than in oral devotional practice.²⁶ In addition there is the problem that children in Western schools and society are being trained to be critical and rational. Unless the family and Gurdwara make a strong effort, against the flow, the devotional approach to scripture will not be given value or development in the child's experience. In this connection a fundamental prerequisite is the teaching of Punjabi language to the children—something which is being done with vigour both in the Gurdwara and in the families studied. In the absence of grandparents, parents or priests from whom one can learn how to "sing" the scripture by joining in, modern practice has introduced the use of cassette tapes. One family extensively uses tapes of the sung or chanted *Adi Granth* to provide leadership during morning and evening prayers, to play in the car while driving to work as a way of "getting in" the last half-hour of the morning prayer, and to provide a general atmosphere in the house during the day.²⁷ The family reports that their young child likes these tapes of the *Adi Granth* so much that she chooses them herself and puts them on to play in preference to other English children's stories and songs. In this way, the voice of the *Guru Granth Sahib* is modernizing by

25. Interview with Rev. Pashura Singh, Calgary, May, 30, 1985.

26. Interview with Avtar Gahunia, Calgary, Feb. 16, 1985.

27. Interview with Rajinder and Kiran Gill, Calgary, April 14, 1985.

“speaking” through the new communications technology—a form of “computer assisted *Guru* instruction.” All these tapes are in the original Indian languages of Punjabi, Hindi, or Urdu rather than English. Only in these languages is the “spiritual vibration” of the *Guru* “present”. In this way they provide a dynamic structuring of consciousness for the modern spiritual Sikh. As one respondent put it “hearing the tapes (of the *Adi Granth*) makes you feel light, clears your mind, leaves worries to God.”²⁸

It may be concluded that living in Canada has not significantly changed the formative role played by scripture in Sikh life. What is different are the added challenges and obstructions that a modern technological society puts in the way of the spirituality of the Sikh tradition (as formulated in village India). Perhaps more successfully than other Indian religious movements, Canadian Sikhs are responding to these challenges. The significance and need for the full commitment of *Amrit* is receiving new recognition, especially by young adults. The daily discipline of dressing oneself in scripture (as symbolized by the five *K*'s) and living in the house of the *guru*'s word is the focal point of the life being lived by many Canadian Sikhs. An interesting and innovative feature in this regard is the use of tapes of the *Adi Granth* to replace some of the functions filled by the spiritual environment of the Indian village. A danger, which may prove more difficult to handle, is the emphasis of the modern rational mindset to study the scripture for its meaning. While this can be an enrichment of the Sikh tradition, an addition of a valuable component not common in village India, it must not be allowed to overbalance the devotional or meditative practice of the word. It is the latter which is the heart of traditional Sikh spiritual experience. Should meditation in the word be overcome by rational study of the word, Sikh practice would have fallen prey to the barren rationalism that results when modernity robs religion of its soul.

28. *Ibid.*