





AN EXPOSITION OF JAPJI SAHIB

Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Scripture, begins with the Japji. This long hymn is the epitome of Sikh religious philosophy and the rest of the Holy Book is an exposition of the thought contained in the Japji.

It is one of the products of those minds which have tasted God – consciousness and whose words beckon generation after generation of men to prepare themselves for the descent of the Divine into their lives.

It is Guru Nanak's most remarkable contribution.



In sacred literature, the Japji may be aptly compared to the Gita and the New Testament. Just as the Gita contains the kernel of the Hindu religious philosophy and the New Testament the fundamental tenets of Christianity, similarly the essence of Sikh religious philosophy is enshrined in the Japji.

This beautiful poem of Guru Nanak is not a hymn to be sung in accompaniment with a musical instrument. He has, therefore, affixed no tune or raga to it, as he has done in the case of all other poems of his.



MOST IMPORTANT BANI FOR THE SIKHS

The Japji is the most important of the five banis which the Sikhs are enjoined to recite daily. There are a large number of Sikhs, men and women as also a number of Sindhi and Punjabi Sehajdharis and Hindus who begin their daily routine with the recitation of the Japji. Most of them remember it by heart and derive a great inspiration and solace from it.

When Amrit or Sikh baptism ceremony is performed, five compositions of Gurbani are recited (as did Guru Gobind Singh himself, when he baptised the Khalsa in 1699 at Keshgarh in Anandpur) and Japji is the first hymn out of the five.



A good Sikh rises very early in the morning and in those early and ambrosial hours of the morning quietly recites the Japji. Guru Nanak himself says in the Japji, “In the ambrosial hours of the morn meditate on the grace of the True Name.” In fact, in the early hours of the morning, the mind is fresh when it is tranquilized by calm sleep at night and is nearer heaven. As such it can dwell on the difficult problems of human life discussed in the Japji.



AUTHENTICITY OF THE TEXT

Guru Nanak took precaution to preserve his own teachings. He made definite arrangements for successors whose primary responsibility was the preservation and spread of his own message. When he designated a succession to himself he handed over his compositions to his successor, Guru Angad.

Although there is no manuscript extant of the Japji in Guru Nanak's hand, he may indeed have written one. At least, he probably wrote separate psalms from time to time and bequeathed them to his followers in fragmentary form. But the Guru himself in the later years may have made a collection of those hymns.



Kapur Singh writes, “The real facts are that the second Sikh Guru, Guru Angad (1504-1552) formed the nucleus of the book, now called, Guru Granth Sahib, by collecting in one manuscript the revelations of Guru Nanak, which then existed in more than one manuscripts, written by Guru Nanak himself. That these manuscripts were written in what are called , Gurmukhi characters, by Guru Nanak himself, is hardly in doubt.”

Guru Nanak’s sacred verses are several, all embodied in the Holy Sikh scripture , Guru Granth Sahib, in which are also placed the hymns composed by some of his successors and a few celebrated saints of India. About one fifth of the granthic hymns are the compositions of Guru Nanak.



At Kartarpur District Jullundur, Punjab, the original manuscript of Guru Granth Sahib, with corrections in the hand of Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, is preserved.

In regard to the authenticity of the text of the Sikh Scriptures M.A. Macauliffe writes:

“The Sikh religion differs as regards the authenticity of its dogmas from most other theological systems. Many of the great teachers the world has known have not left a line of their composition and we only know what they taught through tradition or second hand information..But the compositions of the Sikh Gurus are preserved and we know, at first hand what they taught. They employed the vehicle of verse which is generally unalterable by copyists and we even become in time familiar with their different styles....”



WHEN WAS THE JAPJI COMPOSED?

In the Janam Sakhis of Guru Nanak it is mentioned that the Guru, while residing at Sultanpur, used to go to the nearby stream called the Bein for his daily bath. When he was about 27 years old, one day, he went to have a dip in the stream. He disappeared for three days, when, in response to a special vision, he entered the final phase of his life, when God offered him the cup of amrit, nectar, in token and pledge of divine favour, and in promise of the Guru's ultimate success. God then commissioned him to 'repeat the Name', to inspire his disciples also to repeat it, and teach all mankind the 'true religion'. It is recorded in the chronicles that the Guru under the inspiration of this experience uttered the mulmantra or 'basic text' of Sikhism, and the first shloka which is in the beginning of the Japji.



Even before the Janam Sakhis were written Bhai Gurdas (1560-1639) had said in his first var that when Guru Nanak settled down at Kartarpur (around 1521 A.D.) after long journeys, the daily routine of the Sikhs was to recite the Japji in the morning and sing the Sodar and the Arti in the evening. Doubtless to say that by the time Guru Nanak came back to live at Kartarpur his Sikhs had started reciting the Japji.

When was this hymn of meditation actually composed? No one knows. 'It may have been when the Guru had settled down at Kartarpur after his years of travel. But what does it matter? No one cares to know when Gita was written, for books like these are never dated. They are as timeless as the doctrine they teach.'



There are different theories about the time when the Japji was written. Some believe that Guru Nanak composed this hymn at Sultanpur. While others, like Bhia Mani Singh, are of the opinion that the Japji is the product of the discussion or colloquy which the Guru had with Sidhas and the Yogis. But some chronicles reveal that the Japji was composed in pieces at different times by Guru Nanak. For example, when the Guru went to Baghad he gave a sermon to the Pirs which formed the 22nd Stanza of the Japji, beginning with these words: 'There are worlds beyond worlds below, and innumerable worlds above'.



A few interpreters believe that when Guru Nanak narrated to Guru Angad his discussions with the Sidhas the latter requested him to compose a hymn of meditation and Guru Nanak uttered the opening of shloka of the Japji, i.e., “God was true in the beginning before all ages began; He is true even now and shall be for ever more.” And Guru Nanak asked Guru Angad, to select and arrange such verses which could be put together under the heading of Jap or ‘meditations’.

Dr. Mohan Singh who has quoted an old manuscript , which gives a little different version. Santokh Singh the famous writer of Gurpartapsurudey (commonly known as Suraj Parkash) also gives a similar version and that is that when Guru Angad asked Guru Nanak to reveal to him the Mul Mantra the latter composed the Mul Mantra and dictated the text of the Japji to Guru Angad.



Some scholars like Sahib Singh and S.S.Kohli say that the Japji is said to have been composed by Guru Nanak in the later years of his life, when he settled down at Kartarpur. He composed this long poem for the recitation, guidance and spiritual advancement of his Sikhs.

Taking an account of the references given above we come to the probable conclusion that the Japji in it's present form was not composed at one time. It was composed by Guru Nanak in bits at different occasions. At what times, in his life, the Guru wrote or uttered the different stanzas of the Japji cannot be said with full authority, but the present form of his long hymn was given at Kartarpur.



MOST DIFFICULT COMPOSITION OF GURU NANAK

The Japji is the most difficult composition of the philosophic and mystic poems uttered by Guru Nanak. This piece of religious literature stands out as also the most difficult part of the Sikh scripture. The thoughts contained in it are of the nature of meditations. They are deep and compact, and as such quite beyond the ordinary man's comprehension. A man must possess a ready knowledge of so many systems of thought, various orders of religion, before he can grasp the full significance of the reasoning by which Guru Nanak clears up the sophistries and follies of men and arrives at the Real Truth.

The Guru has used technical and allegorical expressions which carry special meaning in the mystic literature. E.g., words like kur (for batil, meaning all that is not God), rup (for hussan which means concentration of perfection in one Nature), etc.



THE TITLE OF THE HYMN

The title of this beautiful poem, as given in its beginning is Jap and not Japji as it is popularly named now. The word 'Ji' is used after Jap as a mark of respect. Almost all annotators have taken Jap to mean meditate or repeat, but, if we look through the Holy Volume of Guru Granth Sahib, we will find that the word in this form(i.e. JAP, is always used as a noun, and that when it is intended as a verb imperative, it must have a siari before the pappā. Besides, it is marked off with two strokes on either side of it, which are full – stops before and after it. Hence, the word Jap should be translated as meditation, which is the heading of the text.



THE FORM OF THE JAPJI

The Japji in its traditional form has a prelude to its thirty eight principle stanzas (known as pauris) and also has a postlude, the former professing to set the 'basic theme' (Mul Mantra) consisting of about a dozen words and the latter providing six lines of recitation in conclusion, in Guru Nanak's name.

The Guru has used 4977 letters and exactly the same number of short vowel marks. In each of the stanzas the number of letters is equal to the number of short vowel marks. Same is true for the prelude and postlude. The whole work amounts to three hundred and seventy five lines.



The 38 Principal Stanzas of the Japji are known as Pauris. Pauri means the rung of the ladder (or the step of the stair- case). As the rungs of the ladder carry the climber, step by step ahead so do the pauris of a poem array it's idea further, step by step. The padas of long poems or vars are usually called pauris. The pauris in a long poem may or may not have uniformity, i.e., they may differ in metre and in the number of verses. E.g., in the Japji 8th to 15th all the eight pauris have the same metre and the same number of verses, which is six in each case, while 16th pauri contains 24 short verses and 27th pauri has 22 long ones, etc.



The prevailing type of versification of the Japji is what is known as doha, or rhymed 'couplet' each line usually consisting of twelve plus ten mantras, or syllables. The longer verses are composed mostly of stanzas, six lines each or multiples of six although some contain only five or multiples of five each.

In the Japji the rhythm is not that of a regular nature. There is great freedom of movement and a free use of words, with an exhibition of a grammar all their own.

Repetition is frequently indulged in, for some words, phrases and sometimes even the couplets are favorites with Guru Nanak. There is a recurring them of couplet in stanzas 8, 9, 10 and 11.



Similarly the last couplet of each stanza from the 12th to 15th is the same. Again from the 16th to 19th stanzas the last two lines have been repeated.

In stanzas 17, 18 and 19, the word asankh or countless has been repeated in the beginning of almost all the lines and in stanza number 26 the word amul or Priceless has been repeated for more than fifteen times.

But this frequent and sometimes even continuous repetition does not create any monotony for the mind of the reader, but rather adds to the flow, rhythm and music of this poem and helps one to a great extent, to commit to memory this long and difficult hymn.



THE PROCESS

The whole of the Japji is roughly divisible into four parts. They consist of (i) first seven stanzas, (ii) the next twenty stanzas, (iii) the next four stanzas and (iv) the remaining seven stanzas. The first seven stanzas of these define and bring into relief the problem of the seeker of the Divine. The next part takes the reader step by step on the way, till he or she arrives at vision of the Great Reality. The third part describes the attitude and outlook of the person who has tasted of the Divine. The last part summaries the whole process and is very valuable in itself as it vividly describes the stages of the spiritual development of the meditator's soul who is a seeker of the Way of Truth and Eternal Bliss.



But with a little careful study of the Japji it is easily possible to see that a further division of these pauris can be made. The 38 pauris plus two shlokas, i.e., 40 stanzas can be divided into ten parts with a group of four each.

The purpose of the Japji is to seek and arrive at the vision of Reality; and the process adopted to achieve this end has a strange resemblance to what we call the 'scientific method of thought'. In the Japji, first the problem – 'How shall then the Truth be attained and the partition (or veil) of false be demolished' has been defined and then the Guru has put forth his approach. "He exposes the futility of the mechanical forms of thought of worship and sets us thinking for ourselves. He takes up one by one the most important questions of the religious life.



Like a true teacher, he first gives his own impressions as starting points and then he set us thinking originally. Further he gives all the possible data available on the problem and then there is the inter – relationship of the phenomena.

In the next four stanzas, some sort of structure is formed for the solution of the problem and suddenly the solution is given. After the Guru gradually makes us realize the expanding significance and application of the new insight which He bestows upon us, and thus a drastic change in our mode of thinking is made, so much so that the ultimate secret which transmutes the baser metal of humanity into the pure gold of a divinely inspired life is known.



THE THEME OF THE JAPJI

The Japji emphasizes the oneness of God and the cult of the Name or Bhakti, the love for the supreme Lord for which a complete surrender of one's thought, word and deed to His Will is deemed essential.

The great theme of the Japji is the eternal problem of human deliverance. It imparts the knowledge of the Creator and shows a practical path of self – realization. Guru Nanak gives vision of the Divine Being, the Creator and points out the way to become intune with the Infinite.



In the words of Gumukh Nihal Singh the Japji ‘ raises fundamental issues, it discusses the problem of human existence and that of meeting the Creator. It describes very briefly many of the religious practices prevalent in India during the past ages and it discusses the philosophic issues involved in the religious problems. It offers a solution and describes the Sikh way of reaching God. The Japji focusses the attention of the readers upon the Divine Personality, the one Supreme Spirit, the one Source of Life and Light, the Permanent Being, the Creator.

The Japji expounds a ‘socially and spiritually extensive and inclusive religion in the name of Him’ who is introduced in the prelude, the mul mantra, who is the One, Universal, loving God, who makes no unfavourable distinctions among men, even though they themselves are born ‘high and low by His Will’.



The Almighty Lord as described in the Japji looks upon men's hearts more than upon their deeds and takes account of the potential goodness in all mankind. This, according to J. Archer 'is an optimistic note unusual in Hindu India'. Guru Nanak presents the view that God may be called by any name.

The type of world – renunciation which Guru Nanak recommends in the Japji is not to be professed or realised by rituals, pilgrimages or by ascetic solitude. Rather, the profession and the comprehension of the Name is itself all rewarding. If the devotee will but attend upon the Name he will come to know all worlds, all spheres and everything. If he repeats the Name and comprehends it's love he destroys all sin and sorrow. There is sure salvation through the Name.



In the Japji, there are ‘traces of the prevalent, traditional, indigenious theories of Karma and transmigration, two aspects of one theory, in fact. No strictly Indian thinker or reformer during the last two thousand years has been able to ignore them, or has ignored them, and Guru Nanak was to that extent an Indian’. And it is the Name that frees the devotee from the bondage of Karma and from the round of transmigration has been expressed in the Japji.

But there is a touch of His Will or Order every now and then in this gospel of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak preached a gospel of devotion and not one of karmik determination. He in his Japji teaches loving – kindness of the Infinite giving a lesson that ‘men have the liberty not only to sow but also to reap’. He also says that ‘God gives liberally to those who crave and ask Him.’



LITERARY WORKMANSHIP

Guru Nanak expressed himself in verse which was in accordance with the prevailing literary fashion, but 'he never allowed the exigencies of versification to get the better of his thought.' The reader gets no experience of the monotony of a single verse pattern in the Japji. The Guru has arranged these stanzas such that He changes frequently from longer to shorter and back to longer lines. Sometimes in the midst of longer lines, he punctuates shorter ones which serve to emphasize the thoughts. The number of lines in the stanzas also varies, depending solely on what and how much the Guru has to say. He did not care even sacrificing the rhyming in some stanzas. But it is one of the qualities of his literary workmanship that in all the variation of length and rhyme, the flow of language never loses its rhythm and grace.



Even in the sternly philosophical Japji, we come across moments where the dramatic element has served the argument from becoming an inspired version of itself. The stanza xxviii marks a poetic close to the argument of the Treatise. In the last two lines in each stanza from xxviii to xxxi there is dramatic expression.

In the Japji, the important philosophical truths have been stated in a beautiful, meaningful and terse language and in a succinct poetic form. It is thus, not easy to understand, much less to explain, the masterpiece of the Great Master, but to those who know the language, in which it is written its recitation is ennobling and uplifting. It is the first religious or mystic composition in the Punjabi language and its values as literature is also very great. But of course, the Japji is not the composition to indicate the great Guru's literary craftsmanship.



LANGUAGE OF THE JAPJI

The basic language of the Japji is Punjabi of the time of Guru Nanak. As far as possible the words used are simple, but the piece stands out, as the most difficult part of the Sikh Scripture. The Guru has tried to express his ideas in the shortest compass possible. He has been so sparing of words that, like the old authors of Sanskrit sutras he never gives a syllable more than is absolutely necessary.

The Punjabi language had never before (or since) been put to such a tremendous task. Its vocabulary was very scanty, and that too had never been employed for religious or philosophical purposes. The strain was too heavy for it and it is really a wonder how Guru Nanak was ever able to execute the work with such a fine success.



Even now, with all the increased, resources and facilities of expression, we dare not use vernacular to express our thought half so concisely as Guru Nanak has done in his Jap.

The Japji and the later, more inclusive, Guru Granth Sahib, have their own distinct language, not only in alphabet but also in grammar. The alphabet is Gurmukhi, Gurumukhi or the language uttered from the Guru's mouth. The Japji is in the 'Guru's tounge' which Guru Nanak spoke, although he did not invent it's alphabet. With his distinct language and forceful style, Guru Nanak sought in his Japji to crystallise his highly intellectual and abstract ideas of the Supreme Reality and man's eternal search after it.



In the words of Archer, 'this peculiar language with its peculiar alphabet became the Sikhs own classic medium for the transmission of the founder's gospel, for their sacred scriptures and for their theology.

The old Punjabi of the Japji often has a veneer of what is called the sadh bhakha or sant bhakha the language of their saints, which lends a flavour of Braj bhasha. It embraced to begin with certain old Hindu elements, many obsolescent deshi or local terms and some Arabic and Persian words, all of which were subject to Sikh reconstruction, whetehr by intention or from sheer circumstances a most interesting aspect of linguistics in its religious use of terminology; anew sect, we see, creates its own vocabulary to a marked degree.



Guru Nanak sought to break himself loose from the magic hold of Sanskrit and to reach the heart of the common man through his own tongue. He preached the people in their language and taught them to have direct communication with God in whatever language they spoke. 'All words that were sincere were sacred'.

The Guru was himself a great linguist and could take direct account of the different religious writings. He had learnt Persian and Arabic in his boyhood. He had acquaintance with the Sufi saints and Islamic literature. He frequently borrowed some fine and expressive words from the vocabulary of Muslim literature written in Persian and Arabic languages.



SYNOPSIS OF THE THOUGHT

There is an Eternal Reality. How to be in tune with that reality or see His Vision? The one Infinite and Eternal God cannot be reached through the deepest meditation or speculative thought, but only through obedience to His Will and a life of self-surrender. He is related to us all as our Creator and Enlightener. His presence in the form of an ever active Order or Will working in the world – processed is to be realised. Each according to his ability and light tries to praise Him and express His action and mighty power. The real worship we can offer Him is a ceaseless loving memory of His goodness. There is no other way of winning His Grace which is His noblest gift that glorifies our souls. We should never forget that there is a Giver of all things to us all, who is a perfect Enlightener. We should give up the traditional ideas of



Karma and should hearken to the voice of the Teacher. That would be far better than if we got incredibly long life, titles or fame. The constant brooding on Him destroys all our faults and sorrows, it exalts us to the highest knowledge, wisdom and goodness to the very threshold of divinity. The Guru's teachings will create in us an interest in the wisdom of God as revealed in physical nature. The study of physical knowledge will make us realise the true relation between Matter and Mind. Next we will develop in us the knowledge of what is true, temperate and good and thus, acquire a steady vision of life. And then we will attain the highest qualities of manhood in all fields. Steady adherence to His known Will saves us from all evils, keeps us in the right path and guides us to the highest goal. The first consequence of complete self – surrender to the Divine purposes is that all the senses of the soul receive an awakening. There is no flattering on the path of



Righteousness and Dharma becomes an inevitable and binding force. We do not think of just our own Salvation but start saving others as well. Gradually, the seeker becomes the true Representative Man, approved and honored in the Court of God. All failures in religious sphere have been the result of not recognising the principle that must be good which is pleasing to the Lord. Sin and suffering go on unrestricted because we forget that whatever pleases Him is good and whatever is repugnant to Him is evil. By the exigencies of expression we may be forced to speak of Him in definite terms, but He does not favour any one name or any one place above another. His entire creation is the manifestation of His Name. All created things in the Universe obey God's Will and thus contribute to His glory. The love of God purifies the heart from all sins, though each soul has still to receive the harvest of it's own deeds.



But to proceed towards perfection and wash ourselves clean of sins, let us not trifle with the terms virtuous and vicious but actively practise the Omnipotent Love. Pilgrimage, austerities and mechanical charities are of no avail. Sincere Loyalty to the cause of God is wanted. There can be no worship without good action. He is Truth, Beauty and the eternal yearning of the heart after Goodness. The Master is great and great is His Manifestation. Only He Himself knows the secrets of his own work in the countless worlds and His own infinite generosity and greatness; we can not fathom them. We can only be thankful to Him for His infinite gifts. Immeasurably great is the gift of Love. Nothing is equal to the ceaseless loving thought of God. God and His Righteousness are the most precious of all things. In His Glory, God sits in the Highest Heaven ruling all the universe and receiving the various adorations of every creature in each of the worlds.



All His creation stands praising and singing at the Gate of Heaven. All are mortals besides Him, they come and go, but He remains, the Eternal Changeless one. Adoring ourselves with all virtues and jewel of self – surrender, let us truly adore Him. We can do nothing of ourselves without His Grace. All dispensations, which are not based upon His grace are false. He gives us grace and then watches how we use it, well or ill. We should only pray for guidance and not try to force it, because by force we can obtain nothing. We have to rise step by step to the highest stage of spirituality. After transcending the physical plane of strife between Right and Wrong which is the domain of Law, the soul ascends through the higher domains of Reason, Self – exertion and Action and lastly to the highest region of the Truth, the very dwelling of God Himself. The soul gets the experience of variety, beauty and power and lastly of Eternal Truth.



He sends his grace to those who work at self – purification through obedience to the Holy Word for which the virtues, like Purity, Patience and Love are needed which are to be hammered out in our daily dealings with others, with constant suffering and sacrifice. Here we have to choose between God and the false petty self, and according to our choice our future state will be a sad wandering in the darkness of ignorance or blissful residence with God. Those who succeed in doing so, their faces glow in the very light of God’s own presence.

Thank You!

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