

EDITORIAL

The Need for a Standard English Translation of Guru Granth Sahib

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As a result of the programmes organized under the quadri-centennial celebrations of Guru Granth Sahib, the awareness about the Sikh scripture and the living Guru of the Sikhs has reached an unprecedented level. It is increasingly being realized in knowledgeable circles that the message of the Gurus is universal in time and space and is not only relevant to the present century, but is indispensable for the future of mankind. More and more people want to read and benefit from it, leading to a demand for translation of the original text in *Gurmukhi* into all major and minor languages, Indian as well as foreign. Selected hymns have been translated from time to time. The number of translations of *Japu ji* runs into hundreds. The other hymns in this category include *Sukhmani Sahib*, *Asa di Var* and the *banis* of the *Nitnem*. The *Japu ji*, however, has been and will continue to be the favourite of translators.

A number of attempts have been made at translation of the full text of Guru Granth Sahib. There are over half a dozen extant translations into English. As we all know, the first among these was the one by Ernest Trumpp who was commissioned by the British government. He could not complete it, but what he did was indeed a disaster. He was incompetent as well as untrustworthy, and could not rise above his prejudices or bias as a Christian missionary. His work was, therefore, unanimously rejected by all sections of Sikh scholars. Max Arthur Macauliffe who undertook this job later, showed a much better understanding, and with the help of stalwarts like Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, produced an English version which was hailed by all, Sikhs and non-Sikhs. The list of full text translations includes, *inter alia*, the one by Giani Manmohan Singh, published by the SGPC (1962), the one by Dr Gopal Singh published by World Book Centre, New Delhi (1960) and Gurbachan Singh Talib published by the Punjabi University (1988), besides the ones by Chahal and G S Maakin. More recently, Dr Kartar Singh Duggal has undertaken to 'transcreate' an English version in versified form in four volumes, out of which the first volume has already been released.

The above efforts are laudable, and have gone a long way in introducing the Sikh thought to the world. It must be remembered, however, that these were largely individual attempts, and their interpretations of some key verses vary considerably. Examples abound, but let us take the case of the very first verse in the Guru Granth Sahib after the *mool mantra*:

; u?; fu Bk j 'tJh i /; uh by tko . . .

Look at the different English versions:

a) Beyond thought, no thinking can conceive Him, not even if the minds of men should think for ages and ages.

– Prof Puran Singh

b) By thinking I cannot obtain a conception of Him, even though I think hundreds of times.

– M A Macauliffe

c) i /wʌby tkoh (Gh) (fJFBkB nlfde Bkb ; oho dh) ; ʃu oʃk, (sK Gh fJ; soʃ) ; ʃu oyD Bkb (wB dh) ; ʃu Bj H ofj ; edh .

– Dr Sahib Singh

In this version ;fu means bath or cleanliness, while ;ʃu refers to purity of mind.

d) By pondering man cannot have a conception of God, even though he may ponder over lacs of times.

– Giani Manmohan Singh

e) Ritual purification, though million-fold may not purify the mind.

– G S Talib

f) Thinking avails not, how so hard one thinks.

– Dr Gopal Singh

g) (eʌ dh eʌ ; oho XD tkb/eowk Bkb Bj H NNdih, feTfe) Flu eoB Bkb (wB dh) ; ʃu gʌgs Bj H j ʃh, ukj /bʌy tko ; ʃuw fgnk eok .

– Bhai Vir Singh

In the above verse, there are two kinds of interpretation. In some the reference is to ritual physical purification, while in the others reference is to pondering, thinking, etc. And there are respectable scholars on both sides.

Similarly, in the verse eowh nkt?egVk Bdoh wy[dʃko[in the *Japu ji Pauri* 4, egVk is interpreted variously as ‘cloth’, ‘robe of honour’, or ‘human body’ or ‘birth’, etc.

Some more examples of variant interpretations of *Gurbani*, are given in a couple of articles in the present issue of the *Abstracts* (April-June 2005, Vol. VII, Issue 2). Fortunately, in the above two examples, no doctrinal conflict is involved. But when more and more scholars enter this field, individual interpretations may challenge some basic doctrines as well. Even the possibility of motivated misinterpretation of *Gurbani* cannot be ruled out.

With the recent increased emphasis on the need for translation of Guru Granth Sahib into other languages, a number of organizations/individuals have come forward, and are responding to the call in their own way. DSGMC entrusted the task of translation and transliteration into a dozen Indian languages to one Shri Bhannu Murti. The project has already run into rough weather, and the work done so far has had to be withdrawn, because enough thought was not given to the modalities required. Bhai Chella Ram’s organization has been busy translating the scripture for some time past and has already covered some Indian languages. A society has recently been set up at Mohali (Guru Granth Sewa Mission), and is actually engaged in translation work through hired

scholars, according to Press reports. Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, has planned an ambitious project to accomplish the task. Apart from such organizations, some individuals are also busy doing the same thing. Dr Jarnail Singh of Canada has single-handedly translated the Guru Granth Sahib into French and German.

All the above efforts are welcome. One fears, however, that we are heading towards a flood of translations with each individual or organization giving variant interpretations with consequent confusion, and differences and division of the Panth. The present enthusiasm need not be deplored. In fact, it is desirable, but it needs to be regulated and channeled, so that translations present one accurate, clear and consistent message as bequeathed to us by the Gurus.

This responsibility has to be entrusted to a central body of the Sikhs. At the moment it devolves on the SGPC. The following steps appear necessary:

- a) Convene a meeting of scholars who have made or are likely to make a contribution in this regard, from universities and other Sikh organizations.
- b) Constitute a panel of scholars to examine the existing translations and resolve the differences.
- c) To prepare one Standard English Translation of the Guru Granth Sahib acceptable to the Panth.
- d) To promote translation into other languages based on the above Standard English Translation only. No other translation should be permitted for use and the SGPC should ensure this.

The proposal has financial and organizational implications which, it is hoped, will be taken care of by the SGPC in consultation with other Panthic organizations.

On the need for accuracy in translation of a sacred scripture, the following popular warning must be borne in mind:

“Translation is a custom house through which passes, if the custom officers are not alert, more smuggled goods of foreign idioms, than through any other linguistic frontier.”