

An Assessment of *the Report of the Sodhak Committee*

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In some vocal quarters, great reliance is placed on the document being examined here. It is regarded as proof of the authenticity of the *dasamgranth*, and it is used to determine the Guru's authorship of the volume. The exercise it describes is presented as undertaken by the Akal Takhat and is supposed to have resulted in the emergence of an original volume of the book. It is therefore necessary to examine it with a view to determining the nature of the evidence it presents. Unless the document is thoroughly analysed, its final worth in support of the above propositions cannot be fairly and accurately assessed. The aim of the present exercise is simply to determine the evidentiary value of the report under discussion.

Bhai Manna Singh's *Report: Sodhak Committee*, New Anglo Gurmukhi Press, Amritsar, 1897, pp. 27 is a detailed account ostensibly a work of reconciliation of the text of thirty-two volumes of the *dasamgranth* conducted in 1897 CE. It is alleged that the Akal Takhat sponsored the work¹. Inspiration for undertaking the exercise supposedly came when it was noticed that one Bhai Hari Singh, a proof reader, had not only left many discrepancies in the volume of the *dasamgranth* printed by him, but had also inserted into it his own compositions as the original text². The Khalsa Diwan Amritsar, is reported to have become disturbed about the matter and directed the publisher and also (perhaps the author) Bhai Manna Singh who was the secretary to a Gurmat Parcharak Sabha of Amritsar³, to undertake the work of reconciliation.

Bhai Manna Singh is the key figure in the entire process described in the *Report*. This also becomes apparent when we notice that the entire expenses from the beginning of the exercise to its ending in publication of the end product, came to some six hundred and three rupees and of this Manna Singh alone contributed more than five hundred rupees. He was the overall in-charge of the exercise, the collection of volumes for reconciliation of text was done at his *haveli*, which was near Darbar Sahib and he supervised the actual exercise. He controlled all the finances and kept a meticulous account, which he has appended to the present booklet. He organised all the publicity required, he paid the remuneration to those who worked and he eventually received custody of one of the two reconciled master volumes and so on⁴. Since, he also compiled

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and published the present *Report*, we must take his opinion to be an authentic record of the entire process and on all matters concerning the comparison work and why the exercise was at all undertaken. One is prompted to observe that besides deeming it emotionally satisfying; he also considered it to be a sound business proposition. According to the *Report* itself, it is an interim document on the subject. A final decision on the subject was still to be taken as is apparent from the advertisement printed at the end of the present work.

It needs to be asserted about the finances that in spite of the worldwide appeal made for funds⁵, the general public contributed only fifty-three rupees for the purpose. The opening ceremony and the concluding one were made into spectacular events and much publicity for the events was done, but it does not appear to have generated much public enthusiasm. The Akal Takhat did not contribute even a pice towards the expenses, so much so Manna Singh met even the cost of the customary and ceremonial *krah prasad* from the funds collected by him.

It appears from the description, that the workplace was not actually the Akal Takhat but the drawing room (*hoondi*) of the Malwai Bunga adjoining the Takhat Akal Bunga⁶. For the first eight months, the work continued there and the finishing touches were also given in the Malwai Bunga. The formal closing ceremony was performed in the open space between the *darshani deodhi* and the Akal Takhat. On the occasion of the formal inauguration, as well as the formal completion of the work, Bhai Multana Singh who was the custodian of the weapons at the Akal Takhat, recited the *ardas*. He also participated in comparing the text and received some monetary compensation for his services⁷.

Bhai Arjan Singh Sarbrāh of the Gurdwaras at Amritsar was approached to make available some volumes for the reconciliation work. He was also the President of the Gurmat Granth Parchar Sabha. He talked to the *pujaris* under him and they agreed to lend the volumes available with them. The list of volumes used has been provided in the *Report*. It appears that the copies were collected at random and all of them had originated from Amritsar and its vicinity. It is clear from the *Report* that no original volume of the *dasamgranth* existed at the time of undertaking the reconciliation work. This also became the rationale for the exercise.

One copy contributed by an unspecified source was well decorated with a painting each of the Sixth and the Tenth Masters, also contained a *hukamnamah* bound into the volume and it contained some pages in hand writing 'perhaps that of the Tenth Guru'⁸. Almost all the formulae utilised since 1745 CE to establish the book as written by the Guru himself were used in this particular volume. Internal evidence ascribed its writing to two copyists, Darbari Singh (the elder) and Darbari Singh (the younger). The names were presumed, without any scrutiny, to indicate that the scribes belonged to the

Guru's court. It was readily "assumed" to have been corrected by the Guru himself. This volume contained as many old pages as replaced new ones spread all over the text. It had no *Chandi-di-var* and the *pauri* with which the daily *ardas* begins had been inserted in one of the replaced or new pages. It also varied materially from the version finally adopted as accurate. Nevertheless, it was 'taken to be' the 'presiding' or primary volume. It was this kind of uncritical approach that the forgers and *dasamgranth* pushers of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century had placed their reliance on. Manna Singh does not suggest even in whisper, that while examining the volume, a reference was made to any known standards of objectivity. Strangely, it is also not explained why it was not adopted in toto since it was presumed to have been corrected by the Guru himself. This is how easy it had been for the unscrupulous forgers to vend their wares to the unsuspecting Sirdars of the age (1745 to 1897 CE). Apparently besides an inkpot and paper, a person required only unusual handwriting to establish a document as written by the Guru. To challenge or to critically examine a document was tantamount to casting aspersions on the Guru and was avoided like plague. When Livy said 'gods made the cows speak,' challenging the proposition was deemed doubting the ability of gods to make cows speak. Livy's lie remained un-nailed.

Bhai Manna Singh appears to have been a learned man in the traditional sense then in vogue. It is clear that he had conversed with the most well known scholars of his time. He (aided by Sardul Singh?) has carefully given the history of the *dasamgranth* in the booklet. It can be safely assumed that this was all that was available by way of opinion about the *dasamgranth* prevalent as history of the volume at the time of writing the *Report*.

It was believed that the Tenth King had composed all the contents of the book. However, because of later wars and tumultuous times, the original volume was destroyed⁹. Incredible as it may seem, such an assumption is used to establish both the authenticity and identity of the original volume as well as the Guru's authorship of it. Incidentally, this theory also suited the commercial venture Manna Singh was undertaking now. When authorship of the Guru had been decided upon, the only requirement which remained, was to present the arguments in a manner not too obviously untenable to an uncritical mind. This method was extensively used. Several anonymous compositions were assigned to the Guru just because they were anonymous. Mention of poet Shyam as author in the *Chaubisavtar* book also posed no problem. The *Krishanavtar* portion advertises him as the author at least at twenty-five places (actually, his name as author occurs in every definable composition contained in the extensive text). Manna Singh gets over the obvious difficulty by another assumption. He takes it to be the legitimate poetic name of the Tenth Guru, who according to one version of his date of birth, was born in the second (dark) phase of the *satbhikha* planet¹⁰. This explanation presented a difficulty when the date of

Guru's birth came to be determined corresponding to the light half month of *poh*. The challenge was met and a new explanation, equally ingenious, was provided some sixty years later. The name of one Ram appearing as the author in the notorious *charitropakhyan* part was equally ingeniously glossed over smoothly by holding that it was a new development and that in the earlier text, the name Shyam had been mentioned. Another reason was provided by way of abundant precaution. It was that, since some of the compositions of this part were on the same metre as those of the *hanumannatak*, of which the Guru is supposed to have been particularly fond, so the Guru probably had the right to use Ram as his pseudonym¹¹.

Stranger reasons for considering the entire *dasamgranth* to be composed by the Tenth Guru have been adduced. It is stated for instance, that neither in the beginning nor at the end of the volume is it written that it has been composed by anybody else. Another reason is that the opening Jaap is written by the Guru in his own hand and thereafter it is indicated that the rest is in the hand of the scribe, had the rest been the writing of other poets, that too could have been indicated¹². With this sort of logic, a miracle of attributing anything to anybody could have been performed and was performed.

Manna Singh also reports that compositions titled 'Sukhmana, Mal Kaus di var' and several extra verses were found in some recensions¹³. It appears that the legend of the *dasamgranth* was still growing by leaps and bounds. The custom of composing poetry in the name of the Guru had by no means come to an end even in 1897, that is two centuries after his demise. Bhai Hari Singh's contribution to augment the Guru's writings has already been noticed. It is hard to believe that these facts had no message for Manna Singh and others. One helpful fallout of the effort put in by the Gurmat Granth Parchar Sabha was that the process of ever attributing increasing number of compositions to the Guru was mercifully arrested. That was perhaps the only benefit the generations coming after Manna Singh derived from the work done by him.

The list of volumes used in the reconciliation exercise has been carefully provided. It is obvious that all the volumes were collected at random and from the vicinity of Amritsar. No attempt was made to distinguish what kind of copies could have been useful for the purpose. Similarly, it was also arbitrarily decided that a certain copy should be declared as the one corrected by the Guru himself. No procedure of any kind was followed to determine that. That some of its pages looked very old was enough to make the far-reaching decision. This was a supposition, which nobody really believed in or else all reconciliation work would have come to an end with that discovery.

Actual functioning and the qualifications of the people chosen for the reconciliation work left much to be desired and gives a poor impression of the whole exercise. Among the eleven who participated in the reconciliation work

without remuneration, are Bhai Manna Singh and Narain Singh who, it is noted, 'seldom attended' the work sessions. Two more missed half the sittings¹⁴. Of the rest, it is recorded that Surat Singh worked only for three months and Bhagwan Singh Sindhi died before completion. There is no mention of replacements having been provided for these persons. A comic touch is provided by the observation about a brave Nihang, Darbara Singh, who, it is mentioned, continued to work to the end for the 'love' of the Guru¹⁵ although he could not read very well. Such remarks serve to highlight the non-serious nature of the proceedings managed by Manna Singh.

Manna Singh does not clearly state the methodology of reconciliation work done by his Sabha beyond indicating that one person read his copy and the rest corrected. The mode of nominating the reader is not indicated. Whether the reader changed from one session to another is not mentioned but the presumption to that effect would not militate against the wording of the *Report*. That a single specified person always read aloud or that a particular volume was always used for reading is also not clearly stated. Of the actual work done, we hear very little in the booklet. It does not give any clue as to how the 'original' was calculated to emerge by following this procedure. Of the thirteen people who assembled in the Malvai Bunga to consolidate the work done in the first phase, four attended daily and the other nine 'once in a while.' Nothing in particular was accomplished and therefore there are no highlights of the booklet. This is one area in which he is particularly inarticulate. It leaves an uncanny impression that his objective was different from what it was projected to be or that his understanding of the work undertaken by his organisation was woefully inadequate.

Summing up does not present an edifying picture at all. All thirty-two copies of the *dasamgranth* for comparison were chosen at random. None of them was of known antiquity, authenticity or was of any definable significance. The main 'presiding' copy was chosen at face value without any rational enquiry into its nature. It is clearly stated that its contents did not coincide with those of any other available copy. No one amongst those chosen to execute the actual work was known for learning or was even ordinarily engaged in some sort of academic work. None of them was qualified for the undertaking or had any idea of the methodology suitable to serious reconciliation of differing texts. They did not follow any specific technique. None among them was known for expertise in making sense of manuscripts¹⁶. They most certainly worked at will and followed no scientific procedure. Comparison work was an exercise in publicity more than anything else was. The fanfare, which attended the opening and the closing ceremonies, the publicity given by conscious advertisements suggest the same. The exercise was not either sanctioned, initiated or supported by the Akal Takhat. The Sikh people in general did not contribute towards the expenditure, most of which was incurred by Manna

Singh. Great amount of publicity was done before and after the event but it failed to evoke any response from the Sikh masses. The real failure lies in the tardy manner in which the actual work was undertaken. It cannot be said with any degree of certainty that any reconciliation of the text actually took place. In short, it can be stated that it was as much of an exercise in futility if there ever was one.

It appears that Manna Singh was merely trying to create evidence for doing the work. Actual reconciliation of the text does not appear to have been his concern. He arranged for the closing ceremony to be photographed and later copies of that picture were also put up for sale. To him photographs were enough of proof. He also printed a volume of the *dasamgranth* that emerged from the exercise, for commercial use. The *Report* he presumably presented and also published is priced. The question to be answered is whether Manna Singh only had a commercial interest in the entire exercise? The possibility is difficult to rule out.

NOTES

1. See Kirpal Singh's letter quoted by Gurbaksh Singh Kala Afghana, in *Bipran Ki Reet Ton Sach Da Marg (Part 10)*, Sri Akal Sahai Society (Regd.), Amritsar, May 1999, pp.136-137. The *Report* is so vague that Kirpal Singh was led to believe that the work took two years to complete. Actually it was done in eight plus three months at a very leisurely pace. He is again misled into projecting it as a report of 'a committee of the Akal Takhat'. Elsewhere, Kirpal Singh takes it to have been compiled by Sardul Singh. Manna Singh is actually responsible for it. Sardul Singh's name appears as one who perhaps only issued the advertisement appearing at the end.
2. Singh, Bhai Manna, *Report: Sodhak Committee*, New Anglo – Gurmukhi Press, Amritsar, 1897, page 10.
3. It appears to have been contrived especially for the purpose. The entire initiative seems to have been that of Manna Singh.
4. Even a cursory reading of the *Report* confirms the central role played by Bhai Manna Singh Hakim in the entire proceedings.
5. See *Report op. cit.* p.10.
6. See Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, *Mahankosh*, p. 280 for the word *hoot*, from which the word *hoondi* appears to have been derived. *Hoot* means an invited person.
7. *Report, op. cit.*, p.16D.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. *Ibid.* p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6. Name of Shyam as author occurs in verses: 1116, 1119, 1147,

1159, 1177, 1180, 1222, 1233, 1298, 1300, 1412, 1416, 1430, 1449, 1455, 1481, 1530, 1560, 1562, 1583, 1707, 1751, 1776, 1853, 1872 and several times in *Charitropakhyan*.

11. *Ibid.* p. 7.
12. *Ibid.* pp. 6&7.
13. *Ibid.* pp. 6 (paragraph12) &7 (paragraphs numbered 15).
14. *Ibid.* p.9 and p.6.
15. *Ibid.* p. 16B.
16. *Ibid.* p. 16 A,B,C&D.

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ੴ ਵਾਹਿਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਕੀ ਫਤਹ ॥

ਦਫਤਰ - ਸ਼੍ਰੋਮਣੀ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਕ ਕਮੇਟੀ, ਤੇਜਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਮੁੰਦਰੀ ਹਾਲ, ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਸਰ
ਨੰ : 36672 3/4-8-73,

ਸ੍ਰ : ਸੰਤੋਖ ਸਿੰਘ

ਕਾਟੋਜ, ਲੋਅਰ ਮਾਲ, ਕਸਾਉਲੀ (ਹਿ:ਪ੍ਰ:)

ਪ੍ਰਯੋਜਨ : ਧਾਰਮਿਕ ਪੁਸ਼ਟ ਸਬੰਧੀ

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਮਾਨ ਜੀ,

ਆਪ ਜੀ ਦੀ ਪੱਤਰਕਾ ਮਿਤੀ 6-7-73 ਦੇ ਸਬੰਧ ਵਿਚ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਾਹਿਬਾਨ, ਸ੍ਰੀ ਦਰਬਾਰ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਅਤੇ ਜਥੇਦਾਰ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ ਸਾਹਿਬ, ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਸਰ ਜੀ ਦੀ ਰਾਏ ਹੇਠ ਲਿਖੇ ਅਨੁਸਾਰ ਆਪ ਜੀ ਨੂੰ ਭੇਜੀ ਜਾਂਦੀ ਹੈ :-

1. "ਰਾਜ ਕਰੇਗਾ ਖਾਲਸਾ" ਜੋ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਅਤੇ ਹੋਰ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਿਆਂ ਵਿੱਚ ਪੜ੍ਹਿਆ ਜਾਂਦਾ ਹੈ, ਇਹ ਗੁਰਮਤਿ ਦੇ ਅਨੁਕੂਲ ਹੈ, ਕਿਉਂਕਿ ਦੋਹਰੇ ਪੜ੍ਹਨੇ ਪੰਥਕ ਫ਼ੈਸਲਾ ਹੈ। ਇਸ ਫ਼ੈਸਲੇ ਤੇ ਸ਼ੰਕਾ ਨਹੀਂ ਕਰਨੀ ਚਾਹੀਦੀ।

2. "ਚਰਿਤ੍ਰੋਪਖਯਾਨ" ਜੋ ਦਸਮ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਵਿਚ ਅੰਕਿਤ ਹਨ, ਇਹ 'ਦਸਮੇਸ਼ ਬਾਣੀ' ਨਹੀਂ। ਇਹ ਪੁਰਾਤਨ ਹਿੰਦੂ ਮਿਥਿਹਾਸਕ ਸਾਖੀਆਂ ਦਾ ਉਤਾਰਾ ਹੈ।

ਸ਼ੁਭ ਚਿੰਤਕ,

ਸਹੀ-ਮੀਤ ਸਕੱਤਰ

(ਗੁਰਬਖਸ਼ ਸਿੰਘ)

ਧਰਮ ਪ੍ਰਚਾਰ ਕਮੇਟੀ, ਸ਼੍ਰੋਮਣੀ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਪ੍ਰਬੰਧਕ ਕਮੇਟੀ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਸਰ