

# Subaltern's voice in Guru Granth Sahib

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*Can the Subaltern Speak?* is the title of a book (by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), which is considered as one of the most influential theoretical works in the field of post-colonial studies. The related question is "Are they heard?" While going through some of the reviews of this book, I recalled the fact that we, the Sikhs, towards the end of our daily *Ardaas*, address *Wahguru* "O Thou, the honor of the humble, the strength of the weak: Aid unto those who have none to rely on" the subalterns, the *Dalits*, the schedule castes, and in general the subordinated groups in terms of caste, class, age, gender or office. These expressions for *Wahguru* in our *Ardaas* are derived from the Hymns in Guru Granth Sahib - the visible manifestation of the Lord, the voice of the Lord and an all



embracing Scripture- that includes the hymns (having doctrinal identity with Gurus' *Baani*) by a numbers of *Bhaktas* and mystic saints originating from the subaltern category-weaver, cobbler, barber, butcher, calico printer etc. It is, therefore, logical to expect that *Gurbani* as *Dhur ki Baani* - Voice of God - is bound not only to speak for the subalterns but must also empower them to speak for themselves and also be heard.

The primary objective here is to highlight the conclusion that Guru Granth Sahib provides replies in affirmative to both the question raised in the book referred to above. The Gurus not only identified themselves with the subalterns and spoke for them, they also provided them a spiritual throne - Guru Granth Sahib, from which to speak out with confidence and courage and be heard not only locally but universally.

The approaches adopted by the Gurus for this purpose were: The ideological break with the ancient tradition of rigorous

practice of *Varnasramadharma*. This involved debunking, negating, refuting, repudiating, rejecting and reinterpreting, with new meanings in the direction of a progressive society, most of the concepts, beliefs and extremely rigid, superstitious, inequalitarian and regressive social and religious practices of the ancient tradition.

Enunciation of a praxis-oriented and most liberal ideology in *Gurbani* with a view to inspire subalterns to have self esteem, confidence and courage to speak out as equal to other castes on the basis of having the common Universal Father-God-*Wahguru*. The unique feature of the *Gurbani* is its simplified conception of 'religious' "from a world that was mysterious, transcendental and beyond human reach to the one, that was real, in flesh and blood, within human reach, where man had a direct access to God, provided he chose to live a life of a *Gurmukh*, instead of a *Manmukh*." The *Gurmukhs* from lower castes could attain God realization while *Manmukh* coming even from the *Brahmin* category waste this chance of God realization in this life. In addition, the Gurus recognized in many of their hymns the spiritual attainments of these *Bhaktas*. Special institutional arrangements like *Sangat* and *Pangat* were made effective for creating and promoting an egalitarian society leading ultimately to the creation of *Khalsa*, a model for an egalitarian society, with four of the *Panj Piaras* coming from the then prevalent subaltern categories. The Gurus blended the four *Varnas* into one

Incorporation in Guru Granth Sahib of those hymns of *Bhaktas* of subaltern category that had doctrinal identity with Gurus hymns and further, reflected their self-image, self-esteem, spiritual attainments, confidence and courage in narrating their experiences of injustice suffered at the hands of the upper castes. This by itself effectively signified the strong egalitarian spirit practically embedded in Guru Granth Sahib, who, as Guru, engages the Divine Word in worldly life. The Sikh way of life as prescribed by the *Gurbani*, including hymns of the *Bhaktas*, derives its strength "from the practice of egalitarianism, humility and an honest devotion to God."

The constraint of space permits only the analysis of hymns of the *Bhaktas* to illustrate their manner of speaking to and of being heard by the humanity not merely locally but globally through Guru Granth Sahib's propagation and *Kirtan* recital on the global electronic media and by other means



A forceful clarion call for the protection of subalterns by Kabir:  
**Sooraa so pehchaaneeai jo larai deen kae heit (1105)**  
*(He alone is known as a spiritual hero, who fights in defense of the poor.)*

Kabir challenged the supremacy of Brahmin's caste:  
**Tum kat braahaman ham kat sood. Ham kat lohoo tum kat doodh (324)**  
*(How is it that you are a Brahmin, and I am of a low social status? How is it that I am formed of blood, and you are made of milk?)*

Namdev describes his anguish and humiliation suffered by him when he was asked to leave the temple due to his low caste:  
**Bhagat karat naamaa pakar uthaaeiaa (1164)**  
*(While Namdev was worshipping, he was grabbed and driven out.)*

Total lack of inferiority complex or self-pity in *Bhakta's Baani* is evident here:

**Kabir maeree jaat ko sabb ko hasanaehaar.**  
**Balihaaree eis jaat ko jih japiou sirajanhaar (1364)**  
*(Kabir, everyone laughs at my social class. I am a sacrifice to this social class, in which I chant and meditate on the Creator.)*

Declaration of spiritual attainments by *Bhaktas* despite their low caste:

**Mairee jaat kutt baandhalaa dhor dhoovantaa. Nitt baanaarasee aas paasaa. Ab bipar paradhaan tehe karehe dandaut tere naam saranaae Ravidas daasaa (1293)**  
*(It is my occupation to prepare and cut leather; each day, I carry the carcasses out of the city. Now, the important Brahmins of the city bow down before me; Ravidas, Your slave, seeks the Sanctuary of Your Name.)*

Mutual recognition of the spiritual attainments of subaltern *Bhaktas*: Kabir on spiritual attainment of Namdev and Jaidev:

**Sankar jaagai charan sev. Kal jaagae Naamaa Jaidev (1194)**  
*(Shiva is awake, serving at the Lord's Feet. Namdev and Jaidev are awake in this dark age of Kali Yuga.)*

Mutual dialogue between Namdev and Trilochan:  
**Naamaa maaeiaa mohiaa kehai Tilochan meet. Kaahae chheepau chhaaeilai raam n laavahu cheet naamaa kehai Tilochanaa mukh tae raam samhaal (1375)**

*(Trilochan says, O Namdev, Maya has enticed you, my friend. Why are you printing designs on these sheets and not focusing your consciousness on the Lord? Namdev answers, O Trilochan, chant the Lord's Name)*

In the end, I cannot resist the temptation to mention an incident in 1920s when Guru Granth Sahib, granted divine sanction to the equal rights of the 'untouchable' converts, whom the traditionalist refused to let distribute *Prasad* in the

Golden Temple despite the insistence of the *Singh Sabha* reformers. It was agreed to take the *Vak-Hukum* from Guru Granth Sahib as *Vak-Hukum* is considered as "God's commandment always speaking with power and truth to the situation at hand." The passage of the *Vak* that turned up read:

**Niguniaa no aapae bakhas lae bhaae satgur kee seva laae. Satgur kee seva uttam hai bhaae raam naam chit laae. Har jeeo aapai bakhas milaee (638)**  
*(He Himself forgives the worthless, O sibilings of Destiny; He commits them to the service of the True Guru. Service to the True Guru is sublime, O sibilings of destiny; through it, one's consciousness is attached to the Lord's Name. The Dear Lord forgives, and unites with Himself.)*

With the hearing of this *Vak*, every one was satisfied that the Guru had accepted the converts. The dispute was resolved by this divine sanction.

The teachings of *Gurbani*, including the hymns of *Bhaktas*, have a conspicuous impact on the contemporary *Dalit* society of Punjab as:

The caste hierarchy structure does not conform to the *Varna* system:

The brahminical ideology is quite weak:  
 "Sikhism remains an important ideological force against the caste system;

The egalitarian ideology has resulted into greater self-confidence and into entrepreneurial capabilities leading to significant occupational diversification amongst some of the sub-castes, particularly in *Doaba* area in caste-free occupations like surgical industry in Jalandhar.

However, the prevailing socio-economic conditions of subalterns, especially of the 'Depressed Schedule Caste' do require very effective upliftment programs and projects to integrate them into the Sikh egalitarian society as equal partners on the lines envisaged by the Gurus.

More of the Sikh NGOs functioning on the basis of the model set up by The Kalgidhar Trust, Baru Sahib is the crying need of the hour. The factors, which generate the conditions of anomie responsible for creation and expansions of sects within the Sikh society, are the other areas needing urgent attention and redressal.

