Bābā Nānak and the Bhagatī Movement

Gurinder Singh Mann
Global Institute for Sikh Studies, New York

As part of the generation born after the partition of Punjab in 1947, my first formal acquaintance with the terms bhagat (Sanskrit, *bhakta*) and bhagatī (Sanskrit, *bhakti*) came through a chapter entitled *bhagatī laihar* (literally, wave of devotion) that was to be found in my middle-school history textbook. That section of the book included sketches of individual saints–-actual pictures, I mean. These were neatly framed by a paragraph or two of prose, providing information about the lives of the persons being depicted. I can still call up the images of Kabīr, Nānak, Ravidās, Sūrdās, and Tukārām that appeared on those pages, and I vaguely remember the thrust of the write-ups that accompanied them. Taken collectively, they suggested that these poets adopted ideas from a shared reservoir of sentiment that challenged existing beliefs and, in the process, opened a path of devotion for ordinary people. If the concept of the bhagatī movement was not made explicit, the general idea of such a thing was certainly implied.

This classroom introduction to various bhagatī poets served to amplify the knowledge of their poetry that I had absorbed courtesy of the first broadcast of the day from All India Radio, Jalandhar, which served the Punjab region. With the radio sitting in the common area of my family house, everyone's morning routine came to be enveloped in the misty waves of bhagatī poetry that flowed from this hour-long program. Other childhood memories of these saints came from diverse sources. My family once went to watch *Mahātmā Kabīr*, a commercial film released in 1954, and pictures of these saints were to be seen in newspapers and magazines that shuffled around in my house. Then there were the people who came to our house for one errand or another and whom my father warmly addressed as Kabīr Panthīs or Ravidāsīs. Indeed, two temples dedicated to Ravīdās and one to Nāmdev existed in and around the town where I grew up.

In the years that followed, the history texts that came my way continued working on the assumption that these saints were part of a spiritual collective who sang about personal devotion and thereby set

the outlines for a religion of the masses. Later we met the paired categories of *sargun* vs. *nirgun* (Sanskrit *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa,* meaning with or without attributes, these being thought of as distinct approaches to the divine) and bhagat vs. sant (these terms designating their respective adherents). These master categories were intended to provide a more textured understanding of bhagatī as a style of spiritual commitment, and that in turn was narrativized as *bhagatī laihar,* the bhagatī wave, which included Bābā Nānak as an active practitioner and effective proponent. Conceptually speaking, this wave soaked the Punjabi air that my generation breathed.

In the period stretching from the celebrations of the 500th birth anniversary of Baba Nānak in 1969 to the 350th birth anniversary of the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh, in 2016, there seems to have been little significant change in Punjabi thinking about this bhagatī wave, either at the scholarly or at the popular level, and this is true both within the Sikh Panth (Sanskrit "path," but in Sikh literature the term means "community") and among Hindu groups with which it is in regular contact. As Baba Nānak's birth was celebrated, he was often remembered as part of this bhagatī wave, which had the effect of positioning Sikhs as an offshoot of the larger Hindu community. Gurū Gobind Singh, in a somewhat similar way, was said to have revived an old Kshatriya ethos endemic to the local soil and by that means to have obstructed the complete conversion of the people of Hindustan to Islam.

Thanks to the labors of a number of scholars, we now have a much more nuanced sense of the details of the lives of many of these saints, the contexts in which their poetry was created, and the way in which their poetic corpuses evolved over time. Jack Hawley's groundbreaking study of the genealogy of the notion of the bhagatī wave—or more familiarly, in its pan-Indian form, the bhagatī movement—has brought into focus the relatively recent consolidation of this powerful construct; he has also underscored and the role that non-religious factors played in causing this notion to flourish, both in the time when it first appeared and in the course of the last century when it jelled. [1] Similarly, I myself have emphasized the need to re-examine the existing image of Baba Nānak as a mystic immersed in bhagatī, so as to account more adequately for the robust sense of activism he exhibited during the twenty-some years he spent founding the Sikh Panth at Kartārpur (Creator's Town).[2]

In the pages that follow, I will pursue that line of thinking, but with a special aim: to show that what Baba Nānak said and did actually constituted a protest against the sort of bhagatī he thought was being lionized in the world to which he belonged. Time and again he tried to separate himself from that milieu. As for the power dimension, I will take this in the literal political sense and show how the exercise of worldly power played a critical role in Baba Nānak's formation. The question of what power he was trying to generate in the community of Sikhs he established at Kartārpur will hover over the chapter as a whole. Was it an independent bhagatī wave that Baba Nānak unleashed, or was it something else entirely?

What do we know about Bābā Nānak?

Let us begin with the basics. Nānak was born in 1469, in a family of Hindu Khatrīs (a regional caste group involved in trade) in Talvandī, a village established by a Rajput convert to Islam. His father, Kālū Bedī, worked as a revenue collector for the village Muslim chief, and also owned land there. This indicates his educated, affluent, landowning background and suggests that he must have had a basic exposure to Islam, especially since a mosque lay at the center of the village. Also, his father's occupation must have meant that he was at least to some extent versed in the ways of revenue administration. He married a woman named Sulakhanhī, a Khatrī like himself; they shared the same family background and social status. Soon afterward they had two sons, Srī Cand and Lakhamī Dās, which evidently caused them to want to establish their independence as a family unit.

Around 1490, Nānak and his wife and children moved to Sultānpur. There he obtained an accountant's job in the district administration under the control of Daulat Khān Lodhī (d. 1526), who was an uncle of the emperor in Delhi and a major figure in his own right. Sultānpur lay on the main route between Lahore and Delhi and as well on pilgrimage routes that connected the Punjab to Hindu temples in the Himalayas. Visitors of many backgrounds must have been a common sight. Around 1500, Lodhī was appointed the chief of the province of Lahore, with the apparent consequence that Nānak left his job, sent his wife and children back to Talvandī, and spent the next two decades travelling with his Muslim handyman, a man named Mardānā, who was also a gifted musician. He played the rebec. Nānak sings of "the sea

shore, rivers, pilgrimage centers, and the big markets" that he visited during this phase of his life (*Gurū Granth* 156:19, hereafter GG).[3]

Shortly after the invasions of Mīr Bābur (1483-1530), the ruler of Kābul who later became the first Mughal emperor—these invasions of the Punjab began in the late 1510s--Nānak returned to his family, acquired a piece of land some thirty miles north of Lahore on the banks of the Ravi river where its enters the plains, and there established Kartārpur, gathering a group of predominantly Jatt families. He assigned himself the title Bābā and spent the final years of his life guiding these people he named the Gurmukh Panth or Sikh Panth. Sikhs are learners; Gurmukhs are those who turn their faces toward the divine; Panth, literally path, is a community. Thus, Bābā Nānak intended to fashion a community of followers that would collectively bear the weight and privilege of divine wisdom. At Kartārpur he created the institution of the sacred book (*pothī*), a ritual routine that would turn upon three prayers a day, and ultimately assigned a Gurmukh or Sikh named Angad (d. 1551) the responsibility of guiding the Panth when he could no longer do so himself.

Bābā Nānak was also a poet; he created over nine hundred compositions. The significance of this poetic corpus for understanding the mind behind it cannot be overstated. Bābā Nānak was clear about the need to commit one's ideas to writing so that they would be preserved (GG 566:1). He therefore organized Gurmukhī ("[of] Gurmukhs"), a distinct script, to clothe his poetry, and compiled these poems into a text known in scholarship as the *Gurū Harsahāi Pothī*. The canvas of his poetry is extensive, and he offers there a sustained commentary on the social, political, and religious life of the times in which he lived. As for the language of Nānak's compositions, his successors labeled it an "auspicious language" (*subhākhā*, M5, GG 611:19). The author of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, a mid-seventeenth century source, however, labels it as the language of the Jatts.[4] Jatts were originally nomads, but they had been practicing settled agriculture since around the thirteenth century in the northwest of Hindustan.[5]

Bābā Nānak's writings, when taken together with the earliest biographical writings about him, stand apart from those that generally serve as the basis for scholarship on bhagatī as practiced in the period when he lived. They give us a body of information about his person, family, and interactions with other people that is unusually detailed. These materials probably have a more straightforward

connection to historical fact than those that report on the activities of any other bhagatī figure of his time. His founding of a town, filling it with persons considered by others to be beyond the pale of caste (Jatts), and creating a set of rudimentary institutions to bring coherence to their lives put him in a class of his own. There are extensive records about the lives of a few religious leaders who were roughly his bhagatī contemporaries, but these accounts seem less firmly grounded in what most people today would recognize as history.

Bhagat and Bhagatī in Bābā Nānak's Thought

The corpus of Bābā Nānak's poetry that has come down to us contains 93,302 words in the canonical collection we know as the *Gurū Granth* or *Ādi Granth.* The latter title is popularly used in current scholarship, but it is useful to remember that this designation for the Sikh scriptures began to be regularly used only in the late nineteenth century. In the *Gurū Granth* the term bhagat appears 32 times (singular: 3; plural: 19; others: 10). Bābā Nānak's preference for its plural form reflects his tendency to see bhagats in groups rather than as individuals—not that he thought of them as always acting communally, but he thought of them as a category, a collectivity. His description of them can be summarized as follows. Bhagats are countless in number, they appear in all ages, and they are distinct from the worldly people (*sansārīs*). They stay immersed in meritorious thoughts, trade in truth, have no worries, exude a certain fragrance, enjoy divine protection and bliss (the messengers of death cannot reach them), and are destined to sit at the gates of the divine court after they die (GG 4:1; 145:14; 148:11; 227:19; 354:2; 416:10; 439:7; 468:2; 567:5; 688:16; 721:13; 877:13). Clearly this is a positive image.

In the literal sense, the activity of the bhagats constitutes bhagatī and all the elements mentioned above are relevant for bhagatī too. Yet in Bābā Nānak's poetry the term bhagatī also has a degree of autonomy that can be seen in its 142 occurrences. Bhagatī is described as a divine gift that removes fear of death, brings comfort, opens the door to liberation, and implies an experience of immersion in the divine name (*nām*), which brings a sense of carrying the feelings of divine fear (*bhai*) and love (*bhau*) in one's heart (GG 60:1, 76:9, 154:14, 221:8, 227:1, 243:11, 354:2, 413:13, 468:18, 685:15, 831:9).

A close look at the above references related to bhagat and bhagatī suggests that sometimes Nānak is accepting the ways in which the terms

bhagat and bhagatī were popularly understood in his time, while at other times he is repositioning them so that they play a role in his own modes of thinking. Take, for instance, the relationship between bhagats and ordinary human beings (*sansarīs)*. On the one hand Bābā Nānak represents these two groups as quite separate groups, apparently adopting a distinction that was uncontroversial in the world in which he lived. Yet on the other hand he seems to call this dichotomy into question. For him the metaphor of a lotus provides the most appropriate representation of a meaningful life, which is implicitly to position the bhagats of this world in conversation with the *sansarīs* around them. The roots and leaves of the plant are an organic part of the marsh that is society; if taken out of the medium that nourishes them, they will instantly wilt. The delicate flower above, while it has certain autonomy of its own (GG 938:21), nonetheless rests firmly on its stalk. Similarly, the life of a successful human being has to be firmly entrenched in the practice of serving fellow human beings (*vici duniyā sev kamāīe, tā dargeh baisanh pāīe,* GG 26:1). We should all appreciate the beauty and multiplicity of the world (*purkhān birakhān tīrathān tatān meghān khetānāh, dīpān loān mandalān khandān varbhandānah, andaj jerag utbhujūn khānhi setajān*, GG 467:4), yet simultaneously keep ourselves above the confusions that arise in daily life. To do this, we should immerse ourselves in the divine name and hold the Creator in our hearts.

Bābā Nānak uses two closely connected metaphors to describe the relationship of love that connects the bhagat to the Creator. The first involves the physical love and deep longing that exist between bride (*suhāgan*) and groom (*kant*, the word appears 11 times); the second extends this into the relationship between a wife and her husband (*khasam*, which appears 57 times). Bābā Nānak prefers the latter stage. Since it entails total dependence on the part of the wife, an eternally giving nature on the part of the husband (*dātār*), and a shared sense of responsibility toward each other, the marital relationship seems to him a more appropriate depiction of the love that connects human beings to the divine than the bride-groom relationship which precedes it. Many other bhagatī poets, though not all, saw it the other way around.

Bābā Nānak's uncompromising belief in the unity of divinity also sets him apart from some of his peers. It means that, for him, the bhagatī addressed to gods of the Hindu pantheon is really an exercise in futility. How can devotion offered to beings who are part of the creation

and subject to its problems bring any result *(rogī brahmā bisanu sa rudrā*, GG 1153:16; *pāhānhu nīr pakhālīai jal mahi bhudaih tehi*, GG 637:9)? While the beliefs and practices associated with prevalent modes of bhagatī among the Nath Yogis and the Vaishnavas arouse his satire (*kan parhāi kiā khājai bhugati*, GG 953:4; *udi udi rāvā jhātai pāi, vekhiā loku hasai gharī jāi*, GG 465:10), the Jains and their iconic worship and beliefs provoke his deep disdain. He ridicules the Jains for the way they are always thinking about eating the right things and keeping themselves clean (GG 150:2, 1285:11).

Bābā Nānak is thus evidently familiar with usages of the terms bhagat and bhagatī that were current in his region and time. He appreciates some of the beliefs and practices that he associates with these words, but he clearly disapproves of others. Strangely, however, the position of these concepts in his mode of thinking has not been given as much attention as it should. In the pages that follow, let us try to improve upon this situation.

Suppose we begin with the way in which Bābā Nānak addresses himself. He is emphatic about being "an ordinary human named Nānak" (GG 350:3; GG 721:7); "a human being the certainty of whose life is restricted to the current breath, with no knowledge of whether the next one might come or not" (GG 660:11). At some point in his life, however, he noticed that people around considered him "crazy" or "lost," "a helpless being" *(*GG 991:8), while he saw himself as "an inspired bard," "a drummer who announces the divine truth" (GG 142:24; 566:7). Or he may offer us a mixed image, in which we can feel his confidence in the strength of his Sovereign—a strength in which he shares as a bonded slave of the divine (*bandā*, GG 990:27; *golā[m]*, GG 991:10; *dhādhī*, GG 150:23; *divānā*, GG 991:14; *shāir*, M1, GG 53:15, and 660:14). In this mode he is "a dog at the gate of the divine abode with the responsibility to relay the commands issued inside" (GG 350:4). There are forty-odd verses in which he calls himself Bābā, a term that is likely to have accrued to him after the establishment of Kartārpur. In all these modes of conceiving himself, however, there is no inclination to use the term bhagat. Nor does he register any awareness of the historical bhagats of his time or of their songs and poetry.

The label for a human being whom Bābā Nānak wishes to praise is not bhagat (used 32 times and always restricted to single verse or so) but as we have seen, *gurmukh,* "facing the guru," which in this context means orienting one's face toward the divine. *Gurmukh* appears 411

times in his poetry. One of the passages in which he elaborates on the meaning of this term extends to eighteen stanzas of six verses each (GG 941-943). In a similar vein we might consider the weight borne by the term bhagatī in his writings. It appears 142 times, but when one considers Bābā Nānak's use of the term *nām,* which is in some ways comparable, we see that that concept is for him much more important. *Nām* appears 634 times in his poetry. So far, we have translated the term *nām* as divine name, but its significance needs to be further clarified. Bābā Nānak believes that the Creator came into being and brought forth the *nām* (I would interpret the term here as meaning essence/fragrance), and then went on to create the world (*qudrat*). The Creator placed his fragrance—his *nām*—in the world (*āpīnai āpu sājio āpīnai rachio nāu, duyī qudrati sājīai kari āsanh ditho chāu*, GG 463:6). This is Bābā Nānak's way of saying that the world inheres in the divine essence.

Because *nām* thus so deeply inheres the structure of the world, an enlightened or awakened being (*sujāg*) necessarily also bears the *nām.* This is the first and most important element of such a person's being, but he or she also practices *dān* (giving) and *ishnān* (bathing), and offers bhagatī to Harī (Sanskrit Hari, a common designation for Vishnu; *nāmu dānu ishnānu drirhu harī bhagatī sujāge*, GG 419:7). These four terms designate four aspects that are essential to the good life: a realization of the divine immanence in the world, a commitment to help those who are in need, the resolve to practice personal purity as a marker of respect to the creator of the body, and finally, devotion to Harī. Given the emphasis on *nām dān ishnān* as a cluster in Bābā Nānak (*nāmu dānu ishnānu na manmukhi titu tani dhurhi dhumāī*, GG 596:5) and its popularity in later Sikh literature and living, it is not unfair to argue that bhagatī is at the bottom of this hierarchy of four values.

What is the nature of the experience of bhagatī addressed to Harī, as mentioned above? For most of the people who surrounded Bābā Nānak, I think, this would imply that Harī or Vishnu is the supreme deity. For Bābā Nānak, however, Vishnu is not a legitimate object of human devotion (*rogī brahmā bisanu sa rudrā*, M1, GG 1153:16), and as a result this linguistically straightforward interpretation has to be rejected. What then are we to make of its meaning for Bābā Nānak? A second possibility would be to restrict the range of interpretation to meanings that can be expected if Bābā Nānak considered himself to be part of a subset of bhagats that we might call sants, that is, people who address their devotion to a deity conceived as being without attributes (*nirgun*).

Though used neither in scholarship nor by Bābā Nānak himself, the term *santī* (*sant*-ism) is available in the poetry of his successors to designate such a path (M3, *isu jag mahi santī dhanu khatīā*, GG 1092:3; M5, *santī mantu dīo mohi*, GG 206:4; *kaula bapurī santī chalī*, GG 392:24; *agiānu andherā santī kātiā*, GG 530:5; *santī ih bidhi jātī*, GG 677:16; *harī santī mangalu gāiā*, GG 747:19; *santī jītā janamu apāru*, GG 889:23). If we were to read this label back into the time and terms of Bābā Nānak himself, we could interpret his use of the term Harī as signaling his acceptance of a *nirgun* deity—God without form.

But does he? There are actually problems in what we have just said. In Bābā Nānak's poetry the term *sant* appears 28 times (singular: 1; plural: 27); most often it is used as an adjective pertaining to *jan* ("people," 6 times) and *sabhā* ("assembly," 9 times). A close look at these, however, provides no basis to support the distinction between sants and bhagats that is widely accepted in current scholarship—the distinction I have repeated just above. Rather, these terms are used interchangeably, and Bābā Nānak has no qualms in addressing the Nath Yogis, devotees of the god Shiva, as sants. He offers his salutations to their "assembly" (*sant sabhā jaikaro*, GG 938:8).

Nor is there any evidence to establish that the concept of the *nirgun* deity enjoys any special significance in Bābā Nānak's poetry. The term *nirgun* appears four times in Bābā Nānak's poetry (note how infrequent it is). Two of these references could indeed be taken to refer to the deity without attributes (*nirgun rām*, GG 222:3; *avigato nirmāilu upje nirgun te sargunu thia*, GG 940:21), but the other two connote the absence of good qualities (again, *gun*) among human beings (*ham pāpī nirgun kau gunu karīai*; *nirgun deh sac bin kaci*, GG 228:13, 1274:15). And even the first of these usages deserves a second look. One of these may appear in a discussion with the Nath Yogis and the context of conversation clarifies that he is using terminology that is familiar to them and is not proposing a theological position of his own. Only one of these four usages remains, then, and it seems obvious that a single phrase in a corpus of poetry comprising over 93,000 is hardly sufficient to declare Bābā Nānak a proponent of *nirgun* bhagatī—at least in his own terms of reference.

The key difference between Bābā Nānak's conception of the divine and that of, say, the Nath Yogis is that Bābā Nānak's vision is very active. We can see this in his understanding of cosmogony. There are four stages. First there was a primeval void (*arbad narbad dhundūkārā*, GG 1035:13); then at some point in time not known to human beings the

Creator created (*sājiā*/*raciā*) himself and his *nām*; in the third stage the Creator brought the world (*qudrat*) into being and happily became immanent in it (*āpīnai āpu sājio āpīnai rachio nāu, duyī qudrati sājīai kari āsanh ditho chāu*, GG 463:6); then, as a fourth stage, once the creation began to function he took up the role of being its sovereign (*khasam, mālik, sāhib*). In the time in which we live, he runs the world with commands (*hukam*) based on justice (*nāi*), and displays, in addition, his grace (*nadar*). It is the final stage of this vision that fires Nānak's imagination. He sings of the divine command that runs the world, raises hills in deep rivers and bring patches of dry land under deep waters (*nadīā vichi tibe dikhāle thalī kare asaghāh*, GG 144:16). In my view, this way of thinking bears a strong relationship to Bābā Nānak's vision for Kartārpur. He wanted it to replicate as many divine attributes as possible--beauty and richness as to its landscape, majesty in regard to the perennial river that flows out of the hills to nourish it, and so forth.

I hope it is clear from what I have said so far that to understand the beliefs and activity of Bābā Nānak through the terminology of bhagatī and related concepts is deeply misleading. A fresh approach is required. What I suggest is that rather than moving from bhagatī inward, as happened so often in my childhood, we move from Bābā Nānak outward, focusing first on what was central in his own thought and then trying, as a second step, to understand that centrality in relationship to other ways of thinking that were prevalent in his time.

Let us begin by returning to the term Harī or *harī;* in Gurmukhi or Punjabi these are equivalent, since capitalization is not employed. First and foremost, it is interesting to underline that Bābā Nānak uses Harī/*harī* 677 times in his poetry, so clearly, he cares about it deeply. Yet among these many mentions, the nominative form of Harī appears only six times. All the other usages are oblique—to, of, or from Harī, which carries the implication that Harī as the object of Nānak's bhagatī is an extremely active entity. Sometimes Bābā Nānak expresses his sense of the immanence of Harī in the world in an interesting way. In Punjabi the term *harī*, when used as a feminine adjective, can mean "green," and Nānak understandably employs this to describe the color of vegetation. By that token, however, it can also be a general marker of freshness. Hence one hears of a mother's "lap turning green" (*god harī ho gaī*) with the birth of a baby. Thus, Bābā Nānak's Harī is literally the chlorophyll in the leaves, and similarly the source of life in human

beings. Harī is sovereign of all that is green (*soī maulā jini jagu mauliā hariā kīā sansāro,* GG 24:1)

In a parallel way we can reconsider how the word bhagatī functions within Bābā Nānak's idiolect. Based on our earlier discussion, we know what it is not. It has little connection with the *bhagatī* that yearns for personal bonding with the object of one's devotion, and it carries no autonomy as a path to liberation. Here it might be helpful to underline that the Farsi/Islamic term *bandaghī* (slavery, devotion to the master) had been around for centuries before Nānak came on the scene. In Farid (d. 1173), the graves are calling the *seikhs* to perform *bandaghī*—death may not be far (*akhīn sekhān bandaghī calanhu aj ke kali,* GG 1383:1). Simultaneously, the person who follows the qualities associated with *bandaghī*—he is learned but does not show it, he has all the strength but does not put it to use, he shares with others no matter what little he has with him—is called a bhagat (*ko esā bhagatu sadāi,* Farid, GG 1384:26). By Bābā Nānak's time, the use of the terms bhagatī and *bandaghī* were in all probability interchangeable.

As we have seen, Bābā Nānak does not use the epithet bhagat for himself, but he does call himself *bandā,* a servant, and a number of additional terms evoke the same spirit—terms to which I have already referred: *ādamī, mānas, janu (*variants for human being marked by the frailty of its existence), *cākar (*servant*), dhādhī* (singer associated with low status in regional society), *tabalbāz (*public announcer, a low level position job in the village hierarchy*), vecārā (*helpless*),* all implying a clear sense of dependence on the creator. To cap them all off, we have Bābā, "an old man." All of these terms, and especially the last, express a profound realization of human limitations and the consequent obligation to serve the Creator and creation (e.g., *tū dānā sāhibu siri merā khijmati karī janu bandā terā*, GG 990:26). Epithets such as *kartā* and *kartār* (creator, used 124 times), *sāhib* (sovereign, 114), *shāh* and *pātishāh* (lord, 63), *khasam* (master, 57), and *hukamī* (commander, 32), all names for the divine, point to the Creator's control on the creation. Humans, as his subjects, owe their allegiance to the divine, and they pray to him for answers to their needs (*jis dā ditā khāvanhā tisu kahīai sābāsi, nānak hukamu na calaī nāl khasam calai ardās*, GG 474:26). The term *ardās* (prayer/supplication) appears 26 times in Nānak's poetry and is derived—perhaps significantly—from the Farsi word *arz* (appeal) rather than from an indigenously Indic vocabulary (*sachā arzu sachā ardāsi*, GG 355:16).

It is hard to know whether Bābā Nānak's reading of Harī is self-consciously a rejection of the way other people in his world used the term, or whether the connotations associated with *bandaghī* were part and parcel of his understanding of bhagatī, but the shift of tone and reference, when compared with much of the bhagatī utterance that seems to have been circulating in Bābā Nānak's world—as he reports it—is genuinely worth notice. A bit playfully, in the context of this volume, I would like to think of this as a protest against bhagatī. Certainly, it is an articulation of a very clear sense of the divine as creator—rather than, say, lover or a participant in some more indefinite theater of superior beings. Here we have a sense of the divine as a person who wields power and intervenes directly in human affairs—nothing more opaque than that.

Two powerful turning points in Bābā Nānak's life are helpful for appreciating what is involved. In the first we sense the power of a direct moment of divine intervention in the normal state of affairs. As Bābā Nānak says,

> I, an unemployed bard, was assigned work.
> "Speak praises day and night," came the order.
> The bard was summoned to the true palace
> And was honored with a mantle of praise.
> The nectar of the true name became his food.
> Whoever might wish to have such food will attain comfort.
> The bard sings and spreads the divine word.

This experience of being "given employment" seems to have caused Nānak to leave whatever routine life he might have been following at Sultānpur and to embark on his travels (GG 939:26). He is a servant of the Person who has intervened in history to give him, as it were, a job. Assuming that servant's role was the first turning point in Nānak life.

The second turning point in Nānak's life was somewhat different. This time Nānak's life changed in response to his perception that divine power has been expressed in the affairs of earthly power. We can see this in four compositions—a total of 27 stanzas—that comment on the invasions of Mīr Bābur. Bābur's attacks in the Punjab began in the late 1510s and culminated in the capturing of Delhi in 1526, so we are able to pinpoint the moment of these verses' composition with relative confidence. In these four compositions Bābā Nānak describes how

Bābur's army, in search of booty, turned the landscape into "the city of the dead" (*māspurī*) with "brutalized women and widows" haunting the graveyards (GG 418:5). He denounces the cruelty of the invading army toward the local people in the strongest possible terms, but at the same time he credits Bābur for taking good care of his own people in Khurasan. In his eyes, Bābur's benevolent rule in Khurasan stood in contrast to the attitude of the Afghans in Delhi, who disregarded the welfare of their people during times of peace and failed to protect them in war. On this basis, Bābā Nānak seems to expect that the life of ordinary people will improve once the warfare is over, and in some indirect but nonetheless definite way, he sees the divine hand behind these dramatic events.

This shift in regional history seems to have caused him to make a radical revision in his conception of what would be expected of him in the years ahead. If the vision of his ascension to the "divine abode" set him to singing songs of divine magnificence, which he broadcast to those who met him, the realization that the Mughal invasion was actually a divine intervention in history seems to have allowed him to return to a routine life. The horrors of Bābur's attacks were not random, Bābā Nānak was convinced. Rather they presaged a new political era in Hindustan —as indeed history shows they did. This sense of a fundamental shift in historical forces seems to have enabled Bābā Nānak to envision a comparable mission for himself: the task of ushering in a new religious dispensation that would parallel the political one. Rather than traveling about and observing the beauty and complexity of the divine creation, he turned his efforts toward bringing comfort to the people around him and putting their lives on the right track.

It was Bābur's attacks, I believe, that impelled Bābā Nānak to found a new *panth*, thereby creating a world that would stand apart from the senseless carnage he had observed. Gone now, it seems, was the period in his life when he was content to issue faith-based pronouncements as he traveled the roads of northwest Hindustan. Gone too were his conversations with fellow seekers of truth. From this point on, Bābā Nānak determined to create a new center of power, a stable institution for which his family would serve as the nucleus. Having seen the workings of Bābur's power, he returned home and attempted to translate his reactions to the wielding of worldly power into concrete action. At Kartārpur, at least, if not in other areas as well, he hoped to supplant the sorts of institutions that shaped the world in which he

lived. Later Sikh literature distinguishes sharply between the religious authority of Bābā Nānak and the political authority of Mīr Bābur, and it makes sense that this clear distinction should be made, but there was a hidden connection, too.

How Bābā Nānak's modes of thought and action evolved in the days after he had passed away is a theme for another essay. Suffice it to say that it did not take long before a group of bhagats entered the Sikh orbit. Gurū Amardās (1551-1574), the third Sikh guru, was a Vaishnava before he joined the Sikh Panth, and seemingly had the bhagatī poems collected during his visits to Hindu pilgrimage centers. He mentions Nāmdev and Kabīr in his own poetry (*nāmā chīmbā kabīru julāhā* M3, GG 67:13). He took a monumental step of appending a set of compositions attributed to the *nirgun* bhagats to the volume of poems that Bābā Nānak had begun to develop—provided, of course, that they echoed Sikh belief in the unity of the divine. Let alone remembering the precise reasons that went in the making of his decision, the entry of these bhagatī compositions into the Sikh scriptural text was misattributed to Gurū Arjan (1584-1606), the fifth Sikh guru, in the later Sikh writings. In any case, the decision of Gurū Amardās was the start of a process we might call the bhaktification of the Sikh Panth. Staying aloof from it in times that followed has not been easy.

I hope I have been able to show, however, that Bābā Nānak himself stood at quite some remove from all this. For him, bhagatī was only a relatively limited aspect of the sort of life he envisioned and tried to establish. Indeed, his teachings and actions can be read as a protest against the common bhagatī perspectives he believed he heard being voiced around him. Abuses of worldly power (by Bābur) and the hope for something better (at Kartārpur) played a significant role in impelling Bābā Nānak to move beyond such bhagatī commonplaces. Worldly power showed him that a new channeling of power—divine power—was the need of the moment, and he believed he had been chosen to do the job. Bhagatī would become an aspect of the community he sought to create, but not an overwhelmingly important one—unless, that is, scholars revise their sense of bhagatī such that it is able to encompass the work and words of a person like Bābā Nānak. Is bhagatī big enough to do that job?

*My personal gratitude goes to John Stratton Hawley and Swapna Swarma for their kind invitation to participate in "Exploring Bhakti," a conference held at Yale University in 2015, and Professor Hawley's magical retouching of the final version of this essay that helped enhance its clarity immensely.

---

[1] John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[2] "Guru Nanak's Life and Legacy: An Appraisal," in *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture, and Practice*, ed. Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 116-60; "Baba Nanak and the Founding of the Sikh Panth," *Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2017).

[3] The *Gurū Granth* exists as a standard text with 1430 pages. The designation GG 156:19, for instance, refers to page 156 and verse 19. In the case of Nānak, only the page numbers and the verse numbers are provided, but references to the compositions of his successors include the designations beginning with M2 (Angad), M3 (Amardās), and so on. All references to the *Gurū Granth* are from *Shabadārth Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib Jī*. 4 vols. (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, 1969).

[4] J.S. Grewal and Irfan Habib, eds., *Sikh History from Persian Sources* (Delhi: Indian History Congress, 2001), 63.

[5] Irfan Habib, "Jatts," *Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2017).