

# Akhand Paath

## Ritual or Spiritual?

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THE SIKH REHAT MARYADA (SRM) stipulation for the *akhand paath* begins as follows:

(ੳ) ਅਖੰਡ ਪਾਠ ਕਿਸੇ ਭੀੜ ਜਾਂ ਉਤਸ਼ਾਹ ਵੇਲੇ ਕੀਤਾ ਜਾਂਦਾ ਹੈ।<sup>1</sup>

This stipulation provides the two conditions during which an *akhand paath* is to be done - ਭੀੜ and ਉਤਸ਼ਾਹ. The Punjabi University Patiala's dictionary defines ਭੀੜ as "multitude, swarm, stampede, crisis."<sup>2</sup> The same dictionary defines ਉਤਸ਼ਾਹ as "zeal, enthusiasm, ardour, verve, avidity." Comparatively both terms (ਭੀੜ and ਉਤਸ਼ਾਹ) thus denote two **extreme** ends of sorrow and happiness respectively. Using the vocabulary of the Punjabi University, it can be surmised that an *akhand paath* is to be done when

one's sorrow is akin to being "swarmed or stampeded with a multitude of crisis," or when one's joy is one of "enthusiasm, ardour, verve and avidity". Given the modern world we live in, sorrow and happiness are very subjective indeed. Yet such subjectivity cannot take away rationale and logic from our attempt to make sense of the above mentioned SRM stipulation. And in doing so the one thing that comes across clear is that this is a **limiting** clause. The purpose of using the terms (ਭੀੜ and ਉਤਸ਼ਾਹ) is to considerably and seriously **narrow** the scope of the emotions of happiness and sorrow that are being considered and thereby limit the circumstances under which an *akhand path* is to be undertaken.

The following two points help establish this "limiting clause" argument. First, the provision of limiting clauses is **not** the norm in the SRM. There is no such clause for stipulations regarding *sadharan path* and *kirtan* for instance. The conclusion therefore is that the limiting clause for the *akhand paath* is deliberate, calculated and purposive. In fact the stipulations on *sadharan paath* have the exact opposite objective – "it should be done by EVERY Sikh, at EVERY opportunity and EVERY day even."<sup>3</sup> The section on *akhand paath* comes immediately after *sadharan*

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<sup>1</sup> *Sikh Rehat Maryada*, SGPC, 2006 Punjabi Version, p 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Punjabi University Punjabi English Dictionary*, Punjabi University Patiala, 1999. P 644.

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<sup>3</sup> SRM, p 16, Sadharan Path (a)

*paath*. It is thus logical to assume that the *panth* was definite in the intent that while the *sadharan path* was **virtually unlimited** in its conditions, the *akhand paath* on the other hand was to be **severely limited**. Why this needs to be the case will be dealt with later in this article.

Second, there are other equally severe limiting clauses and principles within the **remaining** SRM portion on *akhand paath*. Such a situation suggests that the limitations of *ਭੀੜ* and *ਉਤਸ਼ਾਹ* are not accidental. Within the first para there are the two additional ones: (i) ਪਾਠ ਸਾਫ਼ ਤੇ ਸੁਧ ਹੋਵੇ। (That the *paath* be clear and correct) (ii) ਪੜ੍ਹਨਾ ਜਿਸ ਤੋਂ ਸੁਨਣ ਵਾਲਾ ਕੁਝ ਸਮਝ ਨਾ ਸਕੇ, ਗੁਰਬਾਣੀ ਦੀ ਨਿਰਾਦਰੀ ਹੈ। (Reading or Recital, from which the listener is unable to understand, is contempt of Gurbani). Within the second paragraph there are two more limitations (i) ਅਖੰਡ ਪਾਠ ਜਿਸ ਪਰਵਾਰ ਜਾਂ ਸੰਗਤ ਨੇ ਕਰਨਾ ਹੈ, ਉਹ ਆਪ ਕਰੇ, ਟੱਬਰ ਦੇ ਕਿਸੇ ਆਦਮੀ, ਸਾਕ ਸਬੰਧੀ, ਮਿਤਰ ਆਦਿ ਮਿਲ ਕੇ ਕਰਨਾ। ਪਾਠੀਆਂ ਦੀ ਗਿਣਤੀ ਮੁਕਰਰ ਨਹੀਂ। (The family or *sangat* that desires to do an *akhand paath* should recite it **themselves**, or collectively with family members, relatives and friends. The number of people reciting is not fixed. Further, (ii) ਇਹ ਨਾ ਹੋਵੇ ਕਿ ਪਾਠੀ ਆਪੇ ਇਕੱਲਾ ਬਹਿ ਕੇ ਪਾਠ ਕਰਦਾ ਰਹੇ ਤੇ ਸੰਗਤ ਜਾਂ ਟੱਬਰ ਦਾ ਕੋਈ ਆਦਮੀ ਨਾ ਸੁਣਦਾ ਹੋਵੇ। It should never be the case that the

person reciting does so all by himself/herself, and no member of the family or *sangat* is listening.

Even those with a cursory appreciation of Gurbani would appreciate the severity of the *implications* of the above limitations. Three come to mind immediately. First, since an *akhand paath* must be done by oneself, family, relatives and friends, the implication is that it **cannot and should not be done by hired hands who do so on account of payment**. The concept of paying people to do it is contrary to the intent of the *akhand paath* all together. Second, since the *paath* must be clear and correct, the implication is that those reciting it (self, family, relatives and friends) must possess a reciting ability of a higher standard. The assumption is that they have **themselves** undertaken enough *sadharan paaths* in their lifetimes prior to engaging in an *akhand paath*. The third implication is that those who are undertaking the *akhand paath* must not only ensure that they, their family, relatives and friends recite it, but they must all also **sit and listen** to it to the maximum extent possible. The fourth implication is by far the most serious, and hence most limiting. It arises from the admonishment that **reciting in a manner that does not enable the listener to understand is contempt of Gurbani**. The implication is that if

attention is not paid to this aspect, then the entire exercise stands at risk of becoming contemptuous instead of praiseworthy.

The reasons behind the above severe limitations lie within the philosophical underpinnings of Sikhi and Gurbani. Sikhi principles are varied, but four are **fundamental** and of relevance here. The first has to do with the character and nature of Sikhi. On page 465 of the GGS, the Guru provides a spiritual definition of Sikhi as "ਸਿਖੀ ਸਿਖਿਆ ਗੁਰ ਵੀਚਾਰਿ ॥" (Sikhi is the learning and reflection of the Guru's thought process.) By deduction therefore, the most important aspect of Sikhi is the **message** of the Gurus which is embodied in Gurbani. The 1430 pages is the living Guru in the sense that the *Shabad* (message) is the guiding and commanding force of the spiritual journey of the Sikh. A Sikh needs **to connect to the core of this message**. The second fundamental principle has to do with the nature and purpose of Gurbani. The starting point of the Sikh's journey of Gurbani (as laid out in the order of the *paurees* in Japji)<sup>4</sup> is ਸੁਣਨਾ (listening). It is NOT hearing.

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<sup>4</sup> There are four *paurees* regarding *Sunena* in Japji. They are immediately followed by four on *Manena*. And these in turn are followed by the *Parwaan pauree*. The above flow is developed from this flow within the Japji. For a detailed argument see my

Listening happens with the mind, while hearing is a function of the ears. The activity of essence in Sikhi is thus listening, as Guru Ram Das ji states on page 719 of the GGS: ਸੁਨਿ ਮਨ ਅਕਥ ਕਥਾ ਹਰਿ ਨਾਮ ॥ Listen, **O mind**, the unspeakable discourse and Name of the Lord. The midpoint of the spirituality journey is ਮੰਨਣਾ (internalizing, or believing). Listening leads to internalizing because the mind is involved in both processes. Listening leads to believing because the midpoint of listening and believing is knowing. Knowing cannot happen unless the mind is present. Kabir says on page 656 of the GGS: ਕਹਿ ਕਬੀਰ ਅਬ ਜਾਨਿਆ ॥ ਜਬ ਜਾਨਿਆ ਤਉ ਮਨੁ ਮਾਨਿਆ ॥ (Now I know. And when I know, my mind believes). The final point on this journey is ਪਰਵਾਨ acceptance of the message by the Sikh, and acceptance of the Sikh's journey by the Guru. It is only at this point that the business of bringing the *Shabad* into the practical life of the Sikh can begin. The third fundamental principle has to do with the mere act of reading – reading without listening and without attempt at understanding. Guru Nanak says on page 468 of the GGS ਪੜੀਐ ਜੇਤੀ ਆਰਜਾ ਪੜੀਅਜਿਤੇ ਸਾਸ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਲੇਖੈ

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ਇਕ ਗਲ ਹੋਰੁ ਹਉਮੈ ਝਖਣਾ ਝਖ ॥ (One may read all one's life; one may read with every breath. O Nanak, only one thing is of any account: (such reading) is useless babbling and idle talk in ego.) It is idle talk in ego because beyond being able to lay claim to how many times one has read, there is no real benefit. The fourth fundamental principle is embodied in the Gurbani verse from the GGS page 474 : ਆਪਣ ਹਥੀ ਆਪਣਾ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਕਾਜੁ ਸਵਾਰੀਐ (With one's own hands, one resolves one's own spiritual affairs). The notion of hiring others to perform spiritual deeds on our behalf is anti thesis to everything Sikhi stands for. Equally repugnant is the existence of pseudo professionals who go around making a living "doing spiritual deeds" for others. This group is referred to by Guru Nanak on page 1245 of the GGS as follows: ਪ੍ਰਿਗੁ ਤਿਨਾ ਕਾ ਜੀਵਿਆ ਜਿ ਲਿਖਿ ਲਿਖਿ ਵੇਚਹਿ ਨਾਉ ॥ਖੇਤੀ ਜਿਨਕੀ ਉਜੜੈ ਖਲਵਾੜੇ ਕਿਆ ਥਾਉ ॥ (Cursed are the lives of those who read and write the Lord's Name to sell it. Their crop is devastated — what harvest will they have? ) A Sikh should pause to think here: if the crop of those I hired is devastated, how can they make mine green?

So the answer to the question "why the limitations within the SRM with regard to *akhand path*" is this: without them, the *akhand path*

practice runs contrary to everything that Sikhi stands for. The following paragraphs attempt to elaborate this very assertion.

**AKHAND PAATHS AS THEY ARE DONE TODAY.** The first point that strikes even the casual observer is the fact that *akhand paths* are being undertaken for the **flimsiest of reasons** or for no particular reason at all. The first limiting factor - ਭੀੜ ਜਾਂ ਉਤਸ਼ਾਹ has been thrown out of the window. Wealthy and not so wealthy individuals are undertaking them merely to make a statement of their financial abilities or of the influence they have over their *sangats*. Gurdwaras undertake them to celebrate renovations to their *langgar* halls, parking areas or even toilets. *Deras* have *akhand paaths* running non-stop merely to prove that they are more spiritual than other institutions. They claim to undertake a *banee da parvaah*; literally a stream or fountain of *banee*. It matters not if no one is drinking even a drop from such streams. *Barsis* for mortals that died mortal deaths decades ago, birthdays, new material acquisitions, job promotions, pay rises etc - the list is as long as it is mindless – have become the excuses for Sikhs to undertake *akhand paths*. The second glaring point regarding modern day *akhand paaths* is that they are invariably done by hired hands or paid individuals. Their number is fixed (contrary to

the SRM injunction) because of the monetary factor. The third is that virtually no one sits down to listens. *Akhand paaths* are recited by these hired hands at Formula One speeds to the walls of empty Gurdwaras while the *sangats* are either absent or sitting in the *langgar* halls. One is hard pressed to blame the *sangat* because to sit and listen to such paid recitations would be meaningless and totally unfruitful if one intends to understand any messages of Gurbani. After all the prime objective of the paid *pathee* is to complete his two hours, finish his 60 page quota and collect payment. The most glaring and dangerous (from a spiritual stand point) however is the fact that *akhand paaths* have become cash cows for Gurdwaras and many other institutions. These institutions have trampled upon the most fundamental principles relating to Gurbani by putting up *akhand paaths* for sale. A Gurdwara announces that it is conducting a fixed number of *akhand paaths* within a fixed time frame. Some do them concurrently – multiple *akhand paaths* at a time, others consecutively – one after another in a continuous string. The latter has emerged as a new concept in our Gurdwara practices as *laree akhand paaths*. These are then sold at fixed prices. All the family has to do is pay the amount and one particular *akhand paath* will be assigned to it via the family's mention in the starting and

ending *ardas*. All other arrangements are undertaken by the Gurdwara in collaboration with a group of *pathees* on hire. Families that cannot afford the full rates can buy "shares." The consequences of these transgressions are serious and need our attention. Three are listed below.

First, *akhand paaths* as they stand today have lowered the stature of Gurbani to that of a *means to an end*. This is the direct result of the mindless reciting that we call *akhand paath* or the so called *banee da parvaah*. It is mindless because we have not applied our minds at any step of the process of the *akhand paath*. It is mindless because we are doing it for the wrong reason (or no reason at all). It is mindless because we are paying a person to recite something that was meant for us to read ourselves or at least listen; and to understand and apply. It is mindless because we don't even *hear* it being recited, let alone listen to it. It is mindless because we are being contemptuous of Gurbani while attempting to do something praiseworthy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It may be worth noting that the sale of *Akhand Paaths* parallels the sale of indulgences by the Catholic clergy in the 1400s— an act which made the Church extremely rich, but resulted in the split of Christianity into Protestantism. Martin Luther led the birth of the Protestants (about the time of Guru Nanak's coming) by organising mass protests against the sale of indulgences.

The argument by the proponents, propagators and direct beneficiaries of the mindless *akhand paaths* in relation to the above consequence are as deceptive as they are self-serving. None of the arguments have any philosophical or spiritual basis. But they are tailored to meet the spiritual demands of large numbers of un-enlightened and gullible Sikhs. These arguments are further aimed at ensuring that such mindless activity continues and the livelihoods of its proponents remain protected. Punjab has created a whole host of pseudo *pathees* who have become the state's number one export commodity to countries where Diaspora Sikhs reside. Thousands of Punjab's youngsters who are school dropouts, otherwise unemployable, shady characters and with hosts of ulterior motives need do as little as adorn the garb of holy men and head for the streets of foreign capitals declaring themselves as *pathees*. Local *granthis* (also from the same school of thought) act as employment agents for these youngsters in the field of *akhand path* recitals. These *granthis* persuade our *sangats* to agree to multitudes of *akhand paths* for the flimsiest of reasons and make arrangement for *pathees* from their preferred lists – charging commissions in the process. When the supply of *pathees* exceeds the demand, suggestions are made for Japji to be

read continuously and simultaneously on the left of the GGS. This adds five more *pathees*. Throw in the reading of Sukhmani Sahib on the right, and five more *pathees* get employed. It matters little that these so called *pathees* are totally unschooled in the job of GGS reading. Their only claim to spirituality is the spiritual garb that they have invested in. It matters not that they make as many mistakes as there are vowels in every sentence, because they know no one ever listens to them to know of their gross inadequacies. Other more complicated (and of course expensive) varieties of the *akhand path* have been invented by the market forces. There is the *sampat akhand path*, where the a particular chosen *shabad* is inserted after each of the 5,800 odd *shabads* of the GGS – thereby doubling the job hours (48 x 2) and manpower (ten *pathees*). The decadent argument that works is simply that “we” are people of spirituality, we know what we are doing and we ensure you that we will intervene on your behalf with Guru and God and that will bring you all your innermost desires – whatever they may be.

The collective force of the above decadency that has crept into the *akhand path* process has shredded the SRM injunctions, made a mockery of the basic principles of Sikhi and earned us the collective disrespect of Gurbani and the Guru

Granth Sahib. Sikhs – individuals, families, Gurdwaras and institutions who are party to the *Akhand Paaths* described above are in extremely serious contempt of Gurbani.

**WHAT CAN WE DO?** Obviously, our leading organizations, the *Akaal Takhat* especially need to provide guidance in this regard. Yet the *Akaal Takhat*, the *Harmandar Sahib* and all the five *Takhats* stand guilty of performing, advocating and sanctifying the mindless *Akhand Paaths* mentioned above. These *takhats* have become the source of the problem in every sense of the word. *Akhand Paaths* at these places are booked up to ten years in advance. Special offices have been set up to take bookings electronically from all over the world: bank in the money and book the date. They have become *Akhand Paath* factories. One *Takhat* – Patna – is even undertaking *Akhand Paath* of a book which is NOT the Guru Granth Sahib at twice the price – effectively reducing by 50% the fiscal value of the GGS ! At our local Gurdwara and institutional level, the practice is too deeply embedded and our *parbhandaks* too much in slumber to be expected to do anything. One would be deeply surprised of any one of our local institutions so much as speak out against such malpractice. For our *parbhandaks*, the *Akhand Paath* is a cash cow – easy and guaranteed money churning. All that is required is regular scheduling

and dubious announcements to the effect that the Guru will double your investment. Our *granthis* and *parcharaks* (with few exceptions) have vested interests in continuing with the practice. Limiting or ending it would result in serious loss of income for these groups. So they have no interest in stopping this mindless act.

The answer therefore can only lie in educating ourselves. If individual Sikhs make an effort to understand the basic principles of Sikhi, the SRM and Gurbani, we would not sponsor, support or partake in such mindless activity. A thinking Sikh would take his/her problems to the Guru and not to *Akhand Paath* promoting *granthis*, *deras* or *pathees*. A thinking Sikh would support the Gurdwara but he /she will not buy “shares” of an *Akhand Paath* even if to finance its upkeep. Thinking Sikhs should persuade their *parbhandaks* to refrain from selling the Guru and Gurbani in the name of *Akhand Paaths*. There can be no bigger contempt than selling the Guru. The seller and buyer are equally guilty. The best form of persuasion is not to be party to such a contempt and disrespect of Gurbani. Even better persuasion can be guaranteed when we withhold our hard earned money from such Gurbani disrespecting activity.

If, and only if, conducted within the framework of the SRM's stipulations, the *Akhand Paath* is a spiritual activity indeed. There can be no bigger ਭੀੜ than death. A family, joined by friends and relatives, undertaking the reading of the *Akhand Paath* **jointly themselves** during such bereavement is indeed performing a spiritual and healing activity. Similarly there can be no bigger ਉਤਸ਼ਾਹ than the birth of a child into a Sikh family. What better way to rejoice and be thankful to God than by getting together and reading and listening to the entire 1430 pages – jointly and collectively. If however, the family's resources and its *paath* reciting abilities are limited – one should still refrain from hiring people to do it because the purpose is defeated. It would be better if the family and relatives themselves undertake a *sehej paath* that is completed within ten to fourteen days (for the occasion of death) and up to a month for the joyous event. The important thing is for the individual, family and friends from within the *sangat* to do the recital themselves.

This article is an attempt to educate the individual Sikh in this regard. The title question is whether the *Akhand Paath* is spiritual or a ritual. The answer is that we have turned it into a ritual in every aspect of the word. The defining

core of Sikhi is that it stands against every form of ritual. Ritual in essence is meaningless and worthless. Ritual is replaced by enlightenment that is Gurbani. Every word of Gurbani is an attempt to enlighten the human mind. The irony of ironies is that we Sikhs have turned Gurbani into a ritual – the performance of which is for sale even. The *Akhand Paath* stands today as the central and core ritual of Sikhi – nothing more nothing less. This is one transgression for which the Sikh world may not have a ready remedy.

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