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Commemorating Rahuldeep Singh Gill's Calling: Translation as Love and Ethical Practice

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Every translation is an act of interpretation. Rahuldeep Singh Gill's *Drinking from Love's Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla*, published by Oxford University Press as part of the American Academy of Religion's "Religion in Translation" series in 2016, represents a significant turning point in English materials available to students and scholars of Sikh texts. Gill was characteristically modest about his goals in his preface to *Drinking from Love's Cup*, claiming that the original language of Bhai Gurdas was too "rich" and "pithy," and that "I have attempted to deliver clean, efficient English renditions of each line and then make adjustments so that the stanzas hold together well—choosing to create readable translations that privilege the historical value of these pieces over aesthetic quality alone" (Gill, 2016, p. xii). Anyone who had the pleasure to hear Rahuldeep Singh Gill discuss his work, knew that, for him, "readable" went beyond simply creating a coherent and accessible English translation. *Drinking from Love's Cup* was not simply a translation, it was also an ambitious attempt at making visible to a larger global audience the multiple layers of historical references, proverbs, polemical discourses, spiritual counsel, and community making that became visible once a particular set of verses was translated and contextualized with early modern Punjab's complex pasts. Since many of these are multivalent, scholars can and do come to different conclusions about the interpretation and contexts of many of these verses, but Gill's work stands out as an original and bold interpretation for many reasons.

From his own experience reading and teaching Sikh and Punjabi texts, Gill knew that the more formal, often stiff, English of many of the translations did little to convey the pleasure of reading such works in the original. For many non-expert readers these also did not convey the dense matrix of literary and cultural allusions contained in the works. He was particularly concerned about the growing number of readers in the global Sikh diaspora for whom the archaic

language of many important texts was difficult to comprehend and who were often unaware of the complex allusions and metaphors in the original texts. He spoke to these points repeatedly in conference presentations and more recently with his new project on translating Guru Nanak's *bani*. Gill was always transparent and enthusiastic about what he saw as his vocation; in one of his last essays, "The Call of Death and the Depth of Our Callings: The Quality of Vocational Discernment," Gill's (2018) own words captured his love for his work and the commitment he brought to it:

As someone who has the ability to do this work, to speak on behalf of his community, and to write academic works, I also have a responsibility to do these things. I have a responsibility to my students because of the career I chose. As a scholar of Sikh literature, I know that my work itself brings a singular kind of joy. Sharing it with my children, and perhaps sharing it with students and the world's English-speaking readers, provides me with great hope. It is certainly a joy to share the thoughts of a too-little-known sixteenth-century poet, who birthed a major world religion, and who saw life as a preparation for death (Gill, 2018, p. 80).

Sadly, Gill would not be able to finish his new project on Guru Nanak, but his other works beautifully illustrate the degree to which these words influenced Gill's choices as a translator and scholar. His attention to the broader range of meanings and connotations of seemingly simple words and phrases is illustrated over and over again in *Drinking from Love's Cup: Surrender and Sacrifice in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla*. The title was based on Gill's focus throughout the book on the imagery of "love's cup," or "*piram piala*," which appears frequently in Bhai Gurdas' poetry. The same imagery is also alluded to frequently in other Sikh texts, and similar imagery that also references the intoxication of divine love are also found in Persian poetry and Sufi texts (Gill, 2016, p. 48-49). Gill made a persuasive case that the deep focus on the imagery of love and martyrdom in Bhai Gurdas' compositions was designed to comfort and provide succor to Sikhs at a very difficult time in their history. At the time Gill was writing, many scholars still believed that Bhai Gurdas, as a close contemporary of the Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev (d. 1606 CE), had composed much of his work during the sixteenth century. Following the noted historian J. S. Grewal's very different perspective on the dating issue, Gill's close reading of the *vars* of Bhai Gurdas offered considerable evidence that not only were many of the *vars* written after the Fifth Guru's

martyrdom, but also that they were written to explicitly protect the interests of the Sixth Guru, Hargobind. Further, the polemical tone of many of the *vars* were designed to combat the claims of various sectarian groups that had sprung up around this time (Gill, 2016, p. 12, 55).

Although the dating issues cannot be proven conclusively as many of the surviving manuscripts of Bhai Gurdas' works are undated (Singh, 2017), Gill's argument is one worth engaging with, even if overstated. For one, at the time of Guru Hargobind's imprisonment, the Sixth Guru was still very young, in his mid-teens, and the Sikh community had already undergone the trauma of the Fifth Guru's arrest and execution just four years earlier ("Guru Hargobind"). As Gill points out and most reviewers concurred, Bhai Gurdas was by this time considerably older, well-educated in the norms of Sikh ethical thought, and a respected elder in the community.¹ For the older Bhai Gurdas to attempt to rally the community around the young Sixth Guru makes sense. While scholars are right to note that there is not much surviving evidence to prove that Bhai Gurdas' works were circulated widely in the community or had much impact, certainly, by the eighteenth century, his works had come to be highly regarded by Sikhs of that time and several later texts appear to revisit the key portions of anecdotes about Gurdas and demonstrate awareness of his works (Fenech, 2017).²

This later circulation and legacy of Bhai Gurdas' work is not the primary focus *Drinking from Love's Cup*, but scholars rightly point to the importance of the eighteenth-century manuscript record and particularly the circulation of later manuscripts of Bhai Gurdas' *vars* as important facets for understanding the central role that Bhai Gurdas came to hold in Sikh practice for understanding and explaining Sikh ethical thoughts. From my own experience of writing about the eighteenth century, it would make perfect sense for Sikhs in this time period to look to Bhai Gurdas' meditations on martyrdom and justice with renewed interest (Dhavan, 2011). The themes that Gill finds prominent in Bhai Gurdas' compositions are also ones that resonate with the texts of the eighteenth century that center sacrifice, heroism, and justice.

¹ See reviews by Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech cited below.

² Pashaura Singh is right to note the importance of the unfinished work of studying Bhai Gurdas' corpus in a systematic manner.

Gill's interpretive methodology in *Drinking from Love's Cup* also was innovative for the translations available at this time. Following the trends set by scholars such as Allison Busch, Imre Banga, Louis Fenech, and Anne Murphy, he chose to place Punjabi and Braj in a wider trans-regional cultural context. His study of Bhai Gurdas placed Gurdas' *vars* not just within a Sikh context alone, but argued for Gurdas' engagement with contemporary literary practices in Braj and Persian to understand the metaphors and allegories that enriched Gurdas' language and which would have been familiar to his audience. This meant that Gill had to create a delicate balance in his own translation practice, making clear the polemical aspects of Gurdas' rhetorical flourishes, but also situating them in the shared cultural terrain that was the site of this contestation over truths.

For Gill, only a close and attentive study of word and meaning could capture the full force of Gurdas' method. Thus, Gill began by first demonstrating why the metaphor of martyrdom as drinking from "love's cup," was central to the message Gurdas wished to convey. As Gill noted, the metaphor of "love's cup," which occurs only twice in the Guru Granth Sahib, appears over fifty times in Bhai Gurdas' *vars* (2016, p. 65). The trope was powerful, and in Gill's translation and interpretation, it also was able to "mobilize defiance and resistance through a clarified and exclusivist Sikh orthopraxy" (2016, p. 66). At times elements very familiar to the readers of courtly and erotic Persian poetry appear transformed in Gurdas' active reshaping of word and meaning. Here is Gill's translation of *Var II*, in which Guru Hargobind is portrayed as both Emperor and cup-bearer (*saqi*) with Sikhs gathered in his court:

In such royal soirées [majlas], it is difficult to drink from love's copious cup,

But when he himself becomes the cupbearer [saqi], he serves pure joy from his own ecstatic goblet:

Those who drink, walk in the sway of loving devotion, drunk beyond awareness, yet fully aware. Adoring his devotees, he fills their treasuries. (2016, p. 1)

In Gill's interpretation of Gurdas, it was this precisely open quality of the Sikh court that distinguished it from that of their rivals. The "emperor" or Guru was not overly concerned about status, he attended to his court's needs. It was, as Gill noted, also a court defined by humility and service for Bhai Gurdas, one in which

the practice of touching each other's feet, and the ritual of *charan amrit*, were well established. Gurdas pithily encapsulates this as "*rana rank barabari*" in Gill's translation, "parity of prince and pauper" (p. 58). In other words, rival courts, including those of the Mughals, might have offered worldly pomp and riches, but in reality they magnified human egos and selfishness. In Gill's interpretation of Bhai Gurdas, the willingness of devoted Sikhs to embrace self-sacrifice and martyrdom ensured the well-being of the community, and their collective humility and care of each other ensured their spiritual success.

Gills' obvious love of metaphor as meaning was also visible in the book cover selected for the book, which was a somewhat audacious choice. The cover featured the jade drinking cup of Jahangir, the same Mughal Emperor who had ordered the arrest and execution of Fifth Guru, Arjan Dev. I had the opportunity to ask him about this several years after the book was published and he laughed and shared that this was "a long story." While the marketing team was keen on this image, he made his peace with it as well, since it set up the trope of the rival emperors to which Bhai Gurdas had devoted many of his verses. He reminded me that this parallel construction of questioning the identity of the "True Emperor" was one that resurfaced in many different time periods for Sikhs, as they had at the time Nanak composed his *Babarvani* and would later in the seventeenth and eighteenth century itself. He also wanted readers to reflect on the interlinked cultural inheritance of Punjabi, one often rejected at the time he was writing the book, a time of rampant islamophobia.

As I reflected back on this conversation working on this essay, I came across other passages in the book that may explain why Gill felt the cover would help readers read more deeply and thoughtfully. His reading of Bhai Gurdas very concretely centered the view that Gurdas believed Sikh practices and the court of Guru Hargobind to be the right path to spiritual success. However, Gill also notes Gurdas' regret about the lack of mutual respect among humankind (p. 58) and his conciliatory approach to the question of religious differences in other verses (p. 92).

This kind of thoughtful soul-searching and reflection defined Rahuldeep Singh Gill's life as a scholar and as an activist. He was keenly aware of the privileges of academic life, and the sharp critiques such privilege provoked. As many of the

other essays in this volume make clear, Rahuldeep's life was committed to seeking justice and inspired by his understanding of *Sikhi*. He was remarkably clear-sighted in his self-reflection of how he was both inspired to a calling by Guru Nanak's words, and yet also sobered by the everyday challenge of making ethical choices within a social structure that made this very difficult:

This speaks to me as an American who benefits from devastating imbalances in the global power structure. It speaks to me as an immigrant whose parents brought him here to enjoy a life in which the slanted power structure allows abundant fruit to roll down to us. I do not live in a fair world, and many times over I am the beneficiary of that unfairness—even if I am not myself the hunter for flesh. I exist as part of a world that feasts on death and calls it life. (Gill, 2018, p. 67)

For Gill, part of the work of reclaiming a more just order, reclaiming silenced voices, and reclaiming joy was to bring his scholarly work into alignment with the social advocacy he undertook. Thus, we should not be surprised that this is also an ethical perspective that influenced his approach to translation. *Drinking Love's Cup* is both translation and interpretation, a vivid and intimate reading of Bhai Gurdas which helps readers appreciate both the trauma which the Sikh community endured in Bhai Gurdas' lifetime and also understand its resilience in the time that followed. I would like to end with Rahuldeep's own meditation on how he viewed his vocation as a scholar and his own human mortality: "vocation is the heroic act of defying the impending horizon of death by committing oneself to a meaningful life, (Gill, 2018, p. 65). As a scholar, parent, colleague, and human being, Rahuldeep Singh Gill certainly succeeded in bringing meaning to his own life, and his scholarly work is a living testimony to the hard work of making lives meaningful in both past times and our own.

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