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Languages of wisdom:

Multi-lingual poetry in the Guru Granth Sahib

Known as Adi Granth prior to being given the Guru title, the sacred text of Sikhi, Guru Granth Sahib, is inscribed in a single script called Gurmukhi. However, the languages embodied in Guru Granth Sahib are vast. In approaching translation, I seek out the multilingual in Guru Granth Sahib as a way to understand vernacularism.

The wisdom of diverse regional languages, scripts and its multiple forms has been lost or compartmentalized in large part due to the 1947 partition of India and colonial and postcolonial language formations. But this diversity is retained in Guru Granth Sahib, an anthology of 35 contributors from different regions of South Asia whose compositions span a period from the twelfth to seventeenth century.

While practicing the song So Purakh (That Being) from the Guru Granth Sahib, I came across some Panjabi words that I did not initially know how to interpret and place. Some of the pronouns and verb forms in the poem are local to Pakistan-side Panjab: *maiḍhā*- my/mine; *taū*- you; *thīśī*- will become or will happen. I translated *maiḍhā sāmī* (literally my master) as an expression of endearment: I am yours.

ਤੂੰ ਕਰਤਾ ਸਚਿਆਰੁ ਮੈਡਾ ਸਾਂਈ ॥
ਜੇ ਤਉ ਭਾਵੈ ਸੋਈ ਥੀਸੀ ਜੇ ਤੂੰ ਦੇਹਿ ਸੋਈ ਹਉ ਪਾਈ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

tūm kartā saciāru maiḍhā sāmī ॥
jo taū bhāvai soī thīśī jo tūm dehi soī haū pāī ॥1॥ rahāu ॥

You, creator-creation, manifest permanence, I am yours.
Whatever you will, that happens. Whatever you give, that I receive. (1). Reflect.

- Guru Ramdas | Guru Granth Sahib 11 -

The Sikh Research Institute (2014) reports that the following languages are used in Guru Granth Sahib: Sadhu Basha, Panjabi, Lahndi, Braj, (hybridized) Sanskrit, Farsi, Sahaskriti and Gatha. They also note that Sadhu Basha, rather than Panjabi, is more prevalent in Guru Granth Sahib. Sadhu Basha (or Sant Basha) is itself comprised of numerous vernacular forms, or boli, used by poets and sages who make use of local lexicons and oral registers from different regions. A precursor to what is today commonly referred to as Hindi-Urdu, Khari boli forms the core of Sadhu Basha in the writings of Guru Nanak.

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Sheikh Farid, a Sufi poet, brings out the Panjabi boli of southwestern Panjab in Pakistan in the excerpt below.

ਦਿਲਹੁ ਮੁਹਬਤਿ ਜਿਨ੍ਹੁ ਸੇਈ ਸਚਿਆ ॥
ਜਿਨ੍ਹੁ ਮਨਿ ਹੋਰੁ ਮੁਖਿ ਹੋਰੁ ਸਿ ਕਾਢੇ ਕਚਿਆ ॥੧॥

dilahu muhabati jinnhh soī saciā ॥
jinnhh mani horu muhi horu si kāṁḍe kaciā ॥1॥

genuine only those who express love from heart
unripe whose heart and tongue are in disharmony (1)

- Sheikh Farid | Guru Granth Sahib 488 -

The boli of this area, often referred to as Saraiki, is influenced by Sindhi. Interestingly, while linguists have referred to Saraiki boli as Lahndi, meaning western in Punjabi, Saraiki can mean up-river or north in Sindhi and can denote a northern boli. Geographical descriptors of languages and boli themselves are thus relative, contested, fluid and full of discursive power struggles.

Gatha, what Buddhist and Jain verses are sometimes called, also make appearances in Guru Granth Sahib. The poems titled Gatha by Guru Arjan Sahib reflect a mixture of Pali, Sanskrit and Prakrit and are presented in 24 couplets. In Gatha, I came across several words with a -yaṇ suffix that I have not yet encountered in other poems in Guru Granth Sahib.

ਚਰਣਾਰਬਿੰਦ ਮਨ ਬਿਧੁੰ ॥ ਸਿਧੁੰ ਸਰਬ ਕੁਸਲਣਹ ॥
ਗਾਥਾ ਗਾਵੰਤਿ ਨਾਨਕ ਭਬੰ ਪਰਾ ਪੁਰਬਣਹ ॥੧੮॥

carāṇārbind man bidhyaṇ ॥ sidhyaṇ sarab kusalaṇah ॥
gāthā gāvanti nānak bhabyaṇ parā pūrbaṇah ॥18॥

Lotus-feet have pierced the mind, a journey of wholesome wellbeing
O Nānak, chanting of *gāthā* – divine praise – is the fortune to cross beyond this realm (18)

- Guru Arjan Sahib | Guru Granth Sahib 1361 -

In this excerpt, a way (*bidh*) opens up or is pierced as a devotee reunites oneself with lotus flower, which denotes the infinite and the presence of the divine. The reference to the feet (*caran*) of lotus (*ārbind*) invokes a sense of humility in which the separation of the self from the infinite is overcome through awareness and re-centering oneself towards the infinite. *Gāthā* has multiple connotations. While literally a poetic verse and sometimes labelled as a linguistic register itself, I read *gāthā* here as invocation of divine virtues and praise.

The multi-lingual poetry of the Guru Granth Sahib provides an account of a vernacular pluralism, one that interweaves multiple languages and boli to raise spiritual consciousness.

Work Cited:

Singh, Harinder, Jaswant Singh and Surender Pal Singh. 2014. *Gurū Granth Sāhib: Its Language and Grammar*. Bridgewater, NJ: Sikh Research Institute.