

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

One sometimes wonders and admires the way Guru Nanak Dev disseminated knowledge and spread the message, the teachings, he brought from the Supreme Master, while travelling almost throughout the civilised world in the beginning of the sixteenth century. He travelled from China to the Mediterranean, and from central Asia to Ceylon and Malaya. He had no interpreter with him during these travels to convey the message. No Prophet or *Avtar* is known to have travelled so far and wide. It could only have been a divine spark in him that guided him to convey the message he carried to all these different peoples, to different countries, and nations.

In the *bani*, he recorded, we find that the Satguru repudiated any claim of sanctity of any particular language as Sanskrit has for the Hindus, and Arabic for the Muslims. He used the language of the masses, making free and generous use of Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Hindi, and Punjabi, and appealed direct to the heart and intellect in simple words and phrases. Thus bypassing any intermediary priest class, he saved the common people from exploitation and subjugation by the priesthood, both Hindu and Muslim, and created a contact direct with the masses.

The Sikh approach being through intellect, argument, and knowledge, literacy was an essential first step on this "Way to Anandpur." Without this, one has to subordinate his self to another for understanding the right interpretation of the *Shabd*. Thus, the danger of creating a sort of priest class becomes imminent. We find that the teaching and propagation of Punjabi in Gurmukhi script

was started on a regular and organised basis, from as early a time as that of the second Nanak, Guru Angad. During the third Satguru's time, the learning of Punjabi had vastly spread amongst the Sikhs. The *Gurbani* was first written down on paper during his time. Finally, the fifth Satguru compiled and completed the Holy Granth. The contribution of the tenth Satguru is as significant as that of his predecessors in this respect. He had as many as fifty-two poets under his patronage and in his service at Paonta and Anandpur. Some of these men of letters, he deputed to go to Banars and other centres of learning to acquire all kinds of knowledge and master the *Shastras* and Scriptures of other religions and schools of thought. He then got all the *Shastras*, classics and old mythological books translated from Sanskrit and other obsolete languages into the everyday language and made them available to the masses. It is regrettable that this cartloads of literature was mostly lost during the evacuation of Anandpur when crossing the flooded Sarsa. Only some was left, a portion of which was collected along with some other portions and copies here and there with the Sikhs, by Bhai Mani Singh, and incorporated later on in a volume called *Dasam Granth*. Eventually, the tenth Satguru was able to announce in 1690 that no one had remained unlettered and illiterate amongst the Sikhs. Every Sikh, young and old, had become literate. This claim was upheld when in 1699, the Satguru administered *amrit* and created the order of the Khalsa. There were no prayer books then as there were no printing presses. There was no volume even of Guru Granth Sahib then in the Satguru's court or anywhere except the one original volume with the Sodhis at Kartarpur. But all the Sikhs, who were at that time initiated, remembered by heart at least the five *banis* that are daily recited, as is evident from the fact that they formed further units of *Panj Pyaras* and continued to administer *amrit*. The Sikhs initiated on that occasion are estimated to be between 70,000 and 80,000.