

INTERTEXTUAL RESONANCE TO INTERFAITH CONSCIOUSNESS: THE HERMENEUTIC BRIDGE IN GURU TEGH BAHADUR'S BANI

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ABSTRACT

Guru Tegh Bahadur's hymns occupy a distinctive space in the Sikh scriptural tradition, marked by their profound ethical clarity, contemplative orientation, and a linguistic texture shaped by Braj and other regional Indian vernaculars. This article examines these hymns through the theoretical lens of intertextuality, arguing that the Guru's selective engagement with Vedic and Upanishadic motifs is neither derivative nor polemical, but a purposeful dialogic gesture. By drawing upon familiar metaphors, terms, and cosmological concepts from earlier Indic texts, Guru Tegh Bahadur cultivates what may be described as an interfaith hermeneutic—one that acknowledges antecedent wisdom traditions while reinterpreting them within the Sikh vision of universality, interiority, and liberation. The article further employs the theological notion of "superabundance" to show how the Guru's vocabulary opens into layered, expansive meanings that transcend sectarian boundaries. Through this synthesis, the study highlights how Guru Tegh Bahadur's Bani models a mode of spiritual discourse that respects scriptural inheritances while reorienting them toward a shared, humanistic consciousness essential for contemporary inter-religious dialogue. The broader scope of this article is to suggest that such intertextual openness helps address the misunderstandings and tensions that can arise around the claims of a higher religion. It argues that Sikh thought recognises these complexities yet provides interpretive possibilities that encourage clearer understanding across communities.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Comparative Theology, Sikh Scripture, Indic Textual Traditions, Interfaith

INTRODUCTION:

Interfaith Questions and the Need for Hermeneutic Openness

Questions surrounding interfaith harmony have become unavoidable in a world marked by religious plurality. How shall we teach for a multifaith world? How can individuals be educated to speak about religious diversity with nuance while remaining capable of building bridges across communities? How do we form persons who can offer leadership in contexts of religious difference?

Hermeneutical philosophy provides a meaningful entry point into these concerns. Paul Ricoeur, in *Oneself as Another* (1991), resists placing the self and the other in a rigid oppositional framework, arguing instead that selfhood is always constituted through otherness.¹ Marianne Moyaert similarly maintains that dialogue is not a modern necessity imposed by social change but a fundamental condition of human existence. To be human is to be dialogical, and to live as a human person is to remain involved in an ongoing hermeneutical process.²

Guru Tegh Bahadur's Bani may be read within this interpretive horizon. His hymns neither reject earlier religious traditions nor subsume them uncritically. Instead, they engage in a dialogic encounter that transforms inherited concepts into vehicles of ethical and spiritual universality.

Intertextuality: Text, Work, and the Absorption of Meaning

Intertextuality, understood as the absorption and transformation of other texts, provides a critical lens for reading Guru Tegh Bahadur's hymns. A useful distinction may be drawn here between "work" and "text".³ A work is that which is consumed as a finished product, whereas a text is something continually produced through interpretation. Gurbani functions as text in this dynamic sense, inviting repeated engagement and renewed understanding.

Within this framework, intertextuality does not imply dependence or imitation. Rather, it signals an active engagement with existing symbolic and conceptual vocabularies. Guru Tegh Bahadur's use of terms, metaphors, and cosmological ideas drawn from Vedic, Upanishadic, and broader Indic traditions exemplifies this process. These elements are not imported wholesale but re-situated within a distinct Sikh theological vision centred on interiority, ethical clarity, and liberation.

Beyond Literary Boundaries: Truth as the Governing Principle

ਬੇਦ ਪੁਰਾਨ ਸਿੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਿ ਕੇ ਮਤ ਸੁਨਿ ਨਿਮਖ ਨ ਹੀਏ ਬਸਾਵੈ ॥

ਪਰ ਧਨ ਪਰ ਦਾਰਾ ਸਿਉ ਰਚਿਓ ਬਿਰਥਾ ਜਨਮੁ ਸਿਰਾਵੈ ॥੧॥

*He listens to the teachings of the Vedas, the Puranas and the Smritis, but he does not enshrine them in his heart, even for an instant. Engrossed in the wealth and women of others, his life passes away uselessly.*⁴ ||1||

(*Guru Granth Sahib, 632*)

A striking feature of Sikh scriptural composition is the absence of rigid boundaries between what might be classified as literary and non-literary texts. For the Sikh Gurus, epics, Puranas, mythological narratives, and philosophical treatises are not hierarchically ranked according to genre. What matters is not the source but the truth conveyed.

Gurbani thus emerges as an intertext in which diverse textual traditions resonate without losing their distinctiveness. This process may be likened to the fragrance of sandalwood permeating another substance: the essence remains recognisable, yet it is transformed within a new context. Guru Tegh Bahadur's hymns exemplify this infusion, where familiar Indic motifs are reoriented toward a universal ethical and spiritual horizon.

Approaching the Theological Text: Context, Genre, and Intention

A fundamental question for any reader, particularly a beginner, concerns the proper approach to a theological text. The danger of reading a text out of context has been widely acknowledged within hermeneutical studies. Yet context itself must be understood expansively. While historical and linguistic contexts are important, the ultimate context of Gurbani is the articulation of faith in *Nam*:

Within this broader frame, genre assumes particular significance. Each *Sabad* in Gurbani operates within a specific genre that carries its own inherited vocabulary and symbolic register. Guru Tegh Bahadur's Bani, for instance, frequently employs language resonant with Vedic and Upanishadic discourse. Recognising this genre affiliation enables the reader to appreciate how familiar terms are mobilised to convey insights that transcend their original doctrinal settings.

Equally important is the interpreter's own positionality. Interpretation is never neutral; language is inescapably social, and meaning emerges through the interaction between text and reader. Awareness of one's interests, assumptions, and commitments is therefore essential for responsible engagement with Gurbani.

Superabundance of Meaning and Scriptural Openness

Paul Ricoeur's notion of "superabundance" offers a valuable theological insight for approaching classical texts.⁶ Superabundance refers to the excess of meaning that overflows a text's original context, allowing it to speak anew across time and tradition. Gurbani exemplifies this quality through its layered composition and multivocal authorship.⁷

The Guru Granth Sahib brings together the voices of Gurus, Bhagats, Bhattas, and Gur Sikhs, each contributing to a shared articulation of truth. This plurality does not fragment meaning but deepens it. In this sense, definitions of religious concepts—such as the Vedas—need not be confined to their historical origins. They can be reinterpreted within contemporary contexts, guided by the same underlying truth they sought to express.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's compositions thus open into expansive interpretive possibilities, inviting readers from diverse traditions to encounter familiar ideas transformed through a Sikh hermeneutic of universality.

Intertextual Parallels: Guru, Bhagat, and Shared Wisdom

The intertextual character of Gurbani becomes particularly evident when examining thematic and rhythmic parallels between the hymns of the Gurus and those of the Bhagats. The resonance between Bhagat Beni's Sabad and Guru Nanak's composition on the stages of human life illustrates this dynamic vividly. Both employ the imagery of the womb, bodily vulnerability, and divine remembrance to convey a shared insight into human dependence on divine will.

Such parallels do not suggest redundancy but reveal a dialogic continuity. Where elaboration is required, the Gurus provide it, extending and deepening the insight without negating its source. This pattern underscores the Sikh understanding that truth is singular, though articulated through multiple voices.

The dialogic character of Gurbani is particularly evident in the resonance between the compositions of the Gurus and those of the Bhagats. A comparison between Bhagat Beni's Sabad and Guru Nanak's hymn on human embodiment illustrates this continuity.

Bhagat Beni writes:

ਰੇ ਨਰ ਗਰਭ ਕੁੰਡਲ ਜਬ ਆਚਿਤਿ, ਉਰਧ ਧਿਆਨ ਲਿਵ ਲਾਗਾ॥

ਮਿਰਤਕ ਪਿੰਡ ਪਦ ਮਧਿ ਨ ਆਈਹਨਿਸਿ, ਏਕ ਅਗਿਆਨ ਸੇ ਨਾਰਾ॥

O man, when you were coiled in the cradle of the womb, upside-down, you were absorbed in meditation.

You took no pride in your perishable body; night and day were all the same to you-you lived unknowing, in the silence of the void.⁸

(Sri raag Bhagat Beni Ji, Guru Granth Sahib, 62)

He recalls the prenatal state of human existence, marked by vulnerability and divine remembrance, contrasting it with later forgetfulness.

Guru Nanak similarly observes:

ਪਹਿਲੇ ਪਹਰੈ ਰੈਣਿ ਕੈ ਵਣਜਾਰਿਆ ਮਿਤ੍ਰਾ, ਹੁਕਮੁ ਪਇਆ ਗਰਭਾਸ।

ਉਰਧ ਤਪੁ ਅੰਤਰਿ ਕਰੈ ਵਣਜਾਰਿਆ ਮਿਤ੍ਰਾ, ਖਸਮ ਸੇਤੀ ਅਰਦਾਸ॥

In the first watch of the night, O my merchant friend, you were cast into the womb, by the Lord's Command.

Upside-down, within the womb, you performed penance, O my merchant friend, and you prayed to your Lord and Master.⁹

(Siri rag Mahala 1, Guru Granth Sahib, 74)

The thematic and rhythmic similarity between these hymns demonstrates how a shared truth is articulated through distinct voices. Where elaboration is required, the Guru extends the insight without negating its original expression.

Indic Philosophy and Guru Tegh Bahadur's Ethical Vision

The intertextual reach of Guru Tegh Bahadur's Bani is further evident when placed alongside classical Indic philosophical texts. Shankaracharya, in *Bhaja Govindam*, reflects on the impermanence of bodily existence:

यावत्पवनो निवसति देहे तावत्पृच्छति कुशलं गेहे ।

गतवति वायौ देहापाये भार्या बिभ्यति तस्मिन्काये ॥ ६ ॥

yāvātpavāno nivasati dehe tāvatpṛcchati kuśalaṃ gehe

gatavati vāyau dehāpāye bhāryā bibhyati tasmīn kāye ॥

When one is alive, his family members enquire kindly about his welfare. But when the soul departs from the body, even his wife runs away in fear of the corpse.¹⁰

-Verse 6, Bhaja Govindam, Shankaracharya

This insight finds a striking parallel in Guru Tegh Bahadur's hymn:

ਘਰ ਕੀ ਨਾਰਿ ਬਹੁਤੁ ਹਿਤੁ ਜਾ ਸਿਉ ਸਦਾ ਰਹਤ ਸੰਗਿ ਲਾਗੀ॥

ਜਬ ਹੀ ਹੰਸਿ ਤਜੀ ਇਹ ਕਾਂਇਆ ਪ੍ਰੇਤ ਪ੍ਰੇਤ ਕਰਿ ਭਾਗੀ॥੨॥

Y

(Sorath Mahala 9, Guru Granth Sahib, 634)

Both texts underscore the transient nature of worldly attachment, yet the Guru's articulation situates this truth within a broader ethical call toward detachment and remembrance.

A similar convergence emerges in relation to the *Bhagavad Gita*. The Gita describes the liberated person as one who remains balanced amid opposites:

समदुःखसुखः स्वस्थः समलोष्टाश्मकाञ्चनः ।

तुल्यप्रियाप्रियो धीरस्तुल्यनिन्दात्मसंस्तुतिः ॥ (२४)

samaduḥkhasukhaḥ svasthaḥ samaloṣṭāśmakāñcanaḥ

tulyapriyāpriyo dhīras tulyanindātmamstutih (14.24)

*He who regards pain and pleasure alike, who dwells in his own self, who looks upon a clod, a stone, a piece of gold as of equal worth, who remains the same amidst the pleasant and the unpleasant things, who is firm of mind, who regards both blame and praise as one.*¹²

मानापमानयोस्तुल्यस्तुल्यो मित्रारिपक्षयोः ।

सर्वारम्भपरित्यागी गुणातीतः सा उच्यते ॥ (२५)

mānāpamānayostulyas tulyo mitrāripakṣayoh

sarvārambhaparityāgī guṇātītaḥ sa ucyatē ॥4.25 ॥

*He who is the same in honour and dishonour and the same to friends and foes, and who has given up all initiative of action, he is said to have risen above the modes.*¹³

Guru Tegh Bahadur echoes this vision:

ਸੁਖੁ ਦੁਖੁ ਜਿਹ ਪਰਸੈ ਨਹੀ ਲੋਭੁ ਮੇਹੁ ਅਭਿਮਾਨੁ॥

ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਸੁਨਿ ਰੇ ਮਨਾ ਸੇ ਮੁਰਤਿ ਭਗਵਾਨੁ॥੧੩॥

ਉਸਤਤਿ ਨਿੰਦਿਆ ਨਾਹਿ ਜਿਹ ਕੰਚਨ ਲੋਹ ਸਮਾਨਿ॥

ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਸੁਨਿ ਰੇ ਮਨਾ ਮੁਕਤਿ ਤਾਹਿ ਤੈ ਜਾਨਿ॥੧੪॥

(Salok Mahala 9, Guru Granth Sahib, 1427)

These parallels reveal not doctrinal sameness but a shared ethical and contemplative orientation that transcends textual boundaries.

Higher Religion, Inner Conflict, and Interpretive Tension

T. S. Eliot observes that a higher religion is more difficult to believe because heightened consciousness intensifies doubt, struggle, and moral tension.¹⁵ Sikhism, with its emphasis on ethical responsibility and interior discipline, exemplifies this challenge. Cultural and religious conflicts often arise when interpreters focus on difference rather than recognising the one primal truth underlying diverse expressions.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's Bani consistently redirects attention toward this unifying truth, offering interpretive possibilities that mitigate conflict and encourage deeper understanding across communities.

World Culture and the Ethics of Universality

Kapur Singh invokes the phrase “world culture” not as a formally theorised concept but as a descriptive expression of the Sikh Gurus' expansive vision of humanity's future.¹⁶ He writes that the Sikh Gurus “stand for a different, more amplified belief and another vision of the future, world culture,” one that unfolds through “a process of synthetic growth, mutual assimilation and emergent evolution of the truths, revealed in the consciousness of the mankind as a whole.” This formulation gestures toward a spiritual horizon in which religious traditions are neither isolated nor opposed, but dynamically oriented toward convergence.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's life and Bani may be understood within this horizon. His sacrifice in defence of human dignity reflects a conviction that truth, wherever it manifests, must be safeguarded against erasure. In his hymns, ethical universality and interior freedom are articulated through a language that remains open to inherited wisdom traditions while reconfiguring them within a Sikh vision of liberation. This intertextual openness does not dissolve difference; rather, it affirms a shared human orientation toward truth. In this sense, Guru Tegh Bahadur's Bani embodies the movement toward a “world culture” envisioned by Kapur Singh—one grounded in ethical responsibility, spiritual depth, and the recognition of a common human destiny.

CONCLUSION

Guru Tegh Bahadur's Bani exemplifies a deliberate intertextual engagement with earlier Indic traditions that is neither derivative nor polemical, but hermeneutical in intent. By drawing upon familiar metaphors and ethical ideals from Vedic, Upanishadic, and philosophical sources, the Guru reorients shared wisdom toward the Sikh vision of interiority, universality, and liberation. This intertextual resonance allows inherited concepts to open into superabundant meanings that transcend their original contexts without erasing their distinctiveness.

Through this dialogic reconfiguration, Guru Tegh Bahadur's hymns cultivate an interfaith consciousness grounded in recognition rather than opposition. The tensions associated with claims of a higher religion are not denied but interpreted through the affirmation of one primal truth underlying diverse expressions. In this way, the Guru's Bani functions as a hermeneutic bridge—honouring scriptural inheritances while transforming them into a shared ethical and spiritual horizon capable of sustaining meaningful interreligious understanding.

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