

Vinoba Bhave
**COMMENTARY ON
JAPUJI**

—*Guru Nanak's Great Composition*

GURBACHAN SINGH TALIB

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Vinoba Bhave

COMMENTARY ON JAPUJI
(Guru Nanak's Great Composition)

English Translation with Notes and
Introduction

by

GURBACHAN SINGH TALIB



PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA

1973

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FOREWORD

It gives me great pleasure to present to the public this book, being an English translation with necessary marginal notes, of the Hindi Commentary of Shri Vinoba Bhave on Japuji. Japuji, Guru Nanak's great philosophical-spiritual text, has aroused India-wide interest for its profound insight into the spiritual and moral life, and the guidance it affords to man to order his life in search for the Infinite and to realize high ideals. As stated by the Translator, it has been commented upon a large number of times in the various Indian languages, and by now several versions in English also exist. Like the Gita, with which it calls comparison, it has an inexhaustible appeal, which makes it a rich mine to work for the interpretation of spiritual ideals.

Shri Vinoba Bhave's Commentary is his gift of love to the people of the Punjab, who should be grateful to this man of God and noble ideals for this interpretation of their sacred text from a wide spiritual and humanitarian point of view. In the count of the large number of commentaries on Japuji, Shri Vinoba's should occupy a place with the best. This is marvellous in view of the fact that he was exploring an undoubtedly difficult text, expressed in a mixture of medieval Punjabi and Braj Hindi. But the spiritual thought of India, in essentials and fundamentals, being common and, at base, closely integrated, a pure-hearted and sincere seeker from one region can easily understand and appreciate the spiritual thoughts contained in the religious works of other regions. It is this, along with the high calibre of the mind of Shri Vinoba which has helped him to produce this profoundly satisfying work.

Punjabi University, Patiala, has already put out a large volume of literature on the study of religion, besides other themes. It is hoped, this book will initiate English-knowing seekers after truth and students of religious thought everywhere, to the genius and

vision of Guru Nanak and the Sikh religious tradition of which he is the Founder. With these few words I commend this book to the reading public.

KIRPAL SINGH NARANG
Vice-Chancellor

Punjabi University, Patiala
March 28, 1973

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Japuji is one of the important spiritual texts of the Indian people, which has been recited, translated and commented upon not only by Sikhs to whose faith it is basic and integral, but by Punjabis in general, as also by people using a number of other Indian languages, particularly Hindi, Urdu and Bengali. Lately, on the occasion of the Fifth Centenary of Guru Nanak's birth which was celebrated in 1969, it got rendered into several other Indian languages besides these mentioned above, and into some European languages as well. In Malaysia and other parts of the Far East, where Sikhs are residing in considerable numbers, its exposition has also been made in those languages. Among the Sikhs and people living in close cultural and spiritual contacts with the Sikh people, Japuji has found earnest seekers of its truths over the centuries, so that in Braji, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and now since over seventy years, in English it has been commented upon over and over again. More than a hundred such commentaries and exegetical texts exist, in addition to about a dozen verse-renderings in Urdu, several of them fine specimens of the poetic art. This process is still continuing, and newer generations of scholars and seekers are at the task to which they come with earnest, dedicated spirits.

Although Japuji is comparatively a brief text, and as Shri Vinoba Bhava has pointed out, its volume is about one-fourth only of Gita, which itself is a compact composition, its popularity has been great indeed. Standing at the head of the Sikh Scripture, Adi Granth, its opening verse, called *Mul-Mantra* (lit. Fundamental Chant) is used on all occasions to invoke divine blessing. As one reads through Adi Granth, one constantly comes upon echoes and amplifications of its expressions and turns of phrase, both in the compositions of Guru Nanak himself, who is its author and of his spiritual successors, the Gurus. In the disquisitional and devo-

tional poems called Vars of the great savant Bhai Gurdas, whose work has been called by Guru Arjun, 'Key to the Holy Granth,' whole texts are just renderings of the esoteric and spiritually-charged phraseology of Japuji. Expositions which bring into the discussion vast ranges of Indian philosophy have been made by Sikh scholars of a somewhat earlier period, when philosophy was an essential part of the equipment of a scholar. As said above, the process of exposition is continuing and fresh secrets and meanings are being explored in attempts further to arrive at the true meaning of what Guru Nanak in this composition has revealed in inspired flashes of vision.

The style of Japuji marks the peak of the compact, aphoristic mode in which Guru Nanak habitually expresses himself. This mode is of the *Sutra* (lit. thread—applied meaning, pregnant terse phrase) so well-known in the Sanskrit spiritual texts. That, and the fact that Guru Nanak has also drawn upon some terminology derived from Muslim spiritual sources, by his time fairly widely known in Northern India, makes the determination of its true meaning a very difficult literary undertaking. While in the case of Japuji the text has been unalterable since its inclusion in *Adi Granth*, the problems of exposition have been cropping up and wrestled with, with varying degrees of success. The rise of new social and philosophical points of view among the Sikh people has, as in the case of other great texts in various languages, whose validity has not been rendered obsolete by time, been suggesting fresh lines of emphasis for exposition, so that several points of view have been placed at the centre by scholars according to their respective backgrounds of thought. Yoga, Vedanta, ethical humanitarianism, the integral approach to life's ideals and such other points of view have been at the core of the diverse lines of exposition. All this has resulted in the accumulation of a vast body of exegetical literature on this text.

The language of Japuji is basically a blend of Western Punjabi and Braji Hindi—the former being Guru Nanak's own spoken tongue and the latter the current medium for spiritual and intellectual writing over the Punjab and what are now called the Hindi-speaking areas. The vocabulary also shows such admixture with the philosophical terms, mostly Sanskrit based, in popular forms along with a small proportion harking back to the Muslim

mystical sources. With these features the problem of making a satisfactory exposition of Japuji presents a number of difficulties. Besides being well-versed in Indian philosophy, particularly what is called its Nirguna-dhara (tradition of viewing the Supreme Being as the Attributeless Absolute) the person attempting an exposition of Japuji (or of any other portion of Adi Granth, for the matter of that) must have a thorough mastery of the northern Indian medieval languages, called collectively Hindwi, to penetrate its shell of meaning. Traditional renderings, handed down from of old are not always helpful, because of the habit of traditional Indian scholarship of fragmented, word by word, or even letter by letter, extremely analytical and even fanciful interpretation. One has thus to a great extent, to depend upon experience and intuition and place the whole in the larger context of the teachings of Guru Nanak and his successors.

The commentary by Shri Vinoba Bhave, presented here in English rendering, was written by him originally in Hindi. Shri Vinoba is deeply saturated with religious learning in several traditions—particularly Hindu, Muslim and Christian. He has besides, imbibed the essence of the Gandhian ethical idealism. This equipment renders him excellently qualified to comment on a scriptural text such as Japuji. His knowledge of medieval Indian languages is astounding, of which one finds evidence here with regard to Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi. He is known to have studied the Koran in its Arabic text. His knowledge of the Sanskrit sacred texts is vast and detailed. Few indeed could be better equipped to undertake such a task as Vinobaji has done here.

As one reads through his exposition and notices his grasp of the relevant literary and technical features of Japuji, one is moved with great wonder and admiration. This man of action based on deep moral and religious idealism, learnt the script and language of Japuji, and with painstaking labour aided by his vast learning, arrived very close to its meaning—closer indeed than many who were hampered by one or the other overgrown viewpoints or by defective learning. While here and there (though such places are very few indeed) he has strayed perhaps a little from what in the total context of Guru Nanak's teaching his meaning could have been, his exposition is remarkably in the spirit which the original

should convey. As a matter of fact, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike will find his exposition extremely helpful and valuable.

In view of the great merit of this exposition, and the reverential attitude of mind which Shri Vinoba has brought to his theme, Punjabi University, Patiala, in the Quincentenary year of Guru Nanak's birth (1969) planned to have it rendered into English. Owing to various unavoidable delays, it is only now that it has been possible to prepare it for publication.

While Shri Vinoba has, in his exposition, given the original text in Devanagari script, in the English rendering the translation from M.A. Macauliffe's *Sikh Religion, Vol. I*, has been reproduced. Macauliffe's version is the result of painstaking labour by a competent and devoted person, guided by eminent Sikh scholars of his day. It is not too old, being done at the beginning of the present century. Its renderings should be widely acceptable, though there are more than one line of interpretation of Japuji in vogue.

The present English rendering is due primarily to the efforts in the direction of producing new literature about the religion, history and culture of the Punjab, which is a valuable contribution of Punjabi University in this comparatively unexplored field. Under the able and thoughtful stewardship of Sardar Kirpal Singh Narang, its Vice-Chancellor, effort in this direction is proceeding in an ever-expanding volume. The translator earnestly hopes this effort will meet with the approval of the general reader no less than the scholar. Shri Vinoba's own style of writing is simple and straight in the Gandhian tradition which his mind has absorbed. The English rendering has attempted to keep close to the style and turn of phrase of the original.

Here and there footnotes are added by the translator, partly to elucidate certain obscure points and partly also here and there, to point out where the original exposition may have tended to stray from the spirit of the text. Where in the original some passage appeared to be redundant, it has been only alluded to and placed in brackets. The reader is requested to make a note of these points.

Notes on the Structure of Japuji

According to Sikh tradition, Japuji is an integrated whole

outlining the process of spiritual enlightenment and ascent. Its constituent poems, thirty-eight in number in the original, are each called a *pauri*, which in the old Punjabi critical terminology stands for a verse-unit, like the *band* in Persian and Urdu. 'Stanza' which is the rendering given here, would imply a uniform, planned verse-structure. This is not thus, an exact term, but it was perhaps the only one available. While these pieces are not 'stanzas' structurally, they are nevertheless parts of a whole, whose unity derives from an integrated spiritual vision.

The translation and editing is the work of Professor Gurbachan Singh Talib in general consultation with Professor B. K. Kalia.

Note : 1. All footnotes are added by the translator-editor.

2. The translation of the text, standing at the head of the commentary to each 'stanza' is from *The Sikh Religion* by M.A. Macauliffe.



JAPUJI¹

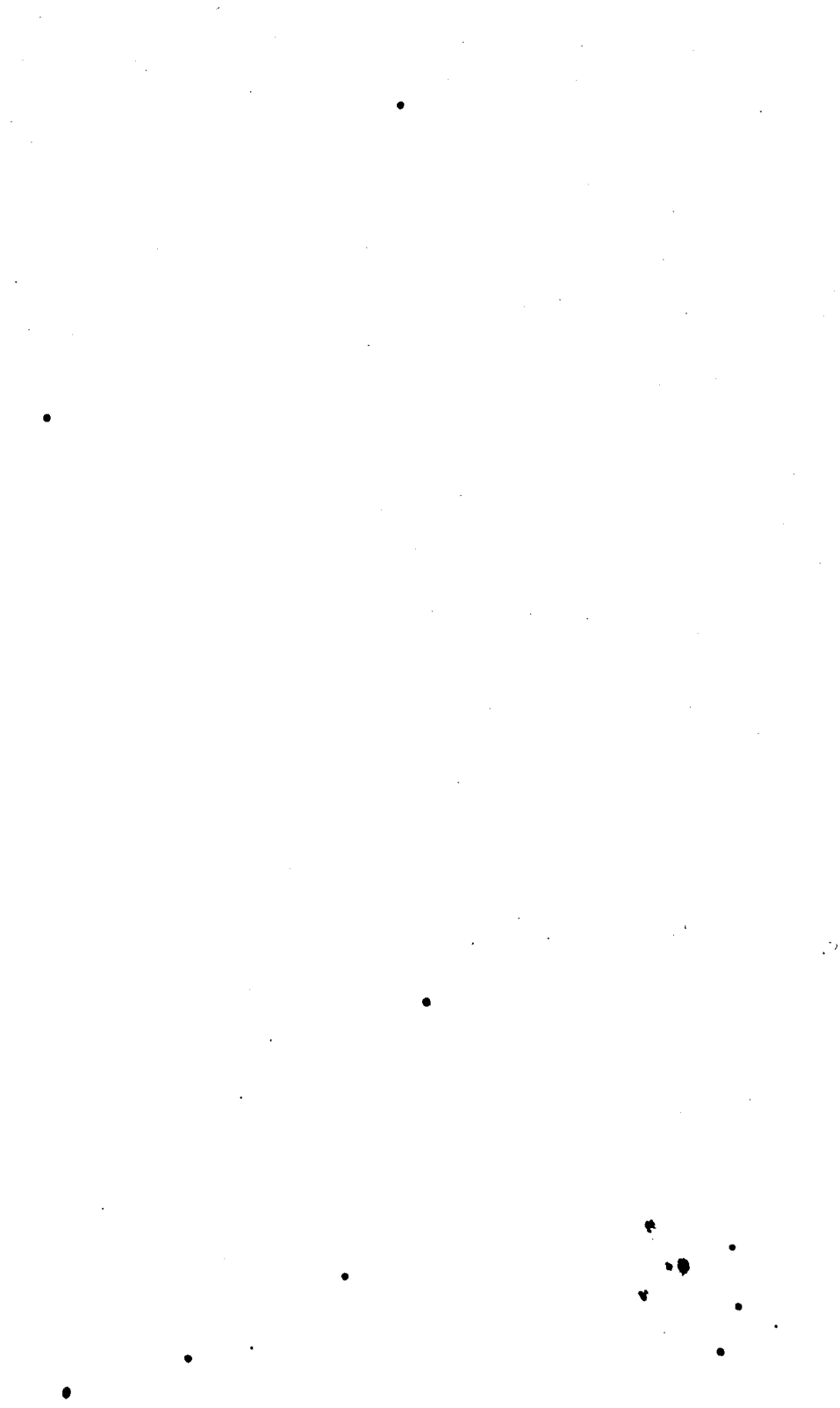
(Introduction by Shri Vinoba Bhave)

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Japuji contains the essence of the spiritual vision. Guru Nanak, towards the close of his life, after he had done with his 'Pilgrimages' in quest of Truth, composed it.² It has made a deep appeal to my heart. In 1940 when I was in jail in the course of 'Individual Satyagraha', I studied it for the first time. At that time I was compiling the Marathi hymns of Namdev.³ Some of his hymns in Hindi are also included in the Guru Granth. That prompted me to get a copy of the Guru Granth and read it through to find out what of Namdev is included in it. In those days a Sikh fellow-prisoner of mine used daily to recite Japuji. In those days I could follow it only vaguely, and did not have the means to understand it better. Certain of its portions do not lend themselves to spontaneous understanding—such for example, as *Karam Khand ki Bani Jor* (stanza 37). Therein Karam stands for divine grace. *Karam* is from the Arabic. Here what is expressed is the form the seeker's expression takes, when he is the recipient of divine grace. In this state he finds union with the Lord Creator.

During my tour of Punjab, I had to enter into an intimate relationship with its people. In view of that I made afresh a study of Japuji. This influenced me deeply. Even while dreaming in my sleep, I would recall Guru Nanak's words. On contemplation one enters into the deeper meaning of these words. The

1. The text popularly known as *Japji*, is more correctly written as *Japuji* in consonance with the rules of Sanskrit grammar, applicable to the classical texts in the Indian languages.
2. Several accounts exist of the process of the composition of this famous text, most of them wrapped in miracle and mystery.
3. A famous Maharashtrian saint, whose compositions have found a place of honour in Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Scripture.

Punjabi University Press, Patiala



JAPUJI

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Among the Sikhs and people living in close cultural and spiritual contacts with them, Japuji has found earnest seekers of its truths over the centuries, so that it has been commented upon over and over again.

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This exposition is remarkably in the spirit which the original should convey. As a matter of fact, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike will find this work an extremely helpful and valuable guide to the ordering of the spiritual life.