



Jewels from Sikh Wisdom

A Journey of Discovery

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and commentary by Gopinder Kaur*

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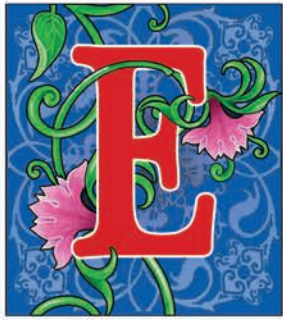
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Everything begins with Ik



everything begins with the number 1. When we learn to count with our fingers as children, or whenever we learn a new language, that's how we usually start – with one. Zero means there is nothing, but as soon as we say 'one' – something exists. Now and then, we might ponder – did everything appear out of nothing, out of an empty zero? For Sikhs, there is always an awe-inspiring 1 at the start. In Punjabi it is written as ੴ and called 'ik'. The numeral ੴ begins the sacred symbol known as *Ik Oang-Kār*. A symbol is a form of communication; without words in sentences, it 'says' something to us and we 'read' meanings from its shape. As a visual and spoken symbol, ੴ (*Ik Oang-Kār*) has a shape in writing and also a shape in sound. For Sikhs, it is much more than a symbol of identity. It holds the essence of the teachings founded in the fifteenth century by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, which Sikhs cherish as a divinely revealed treasury. Its meanings get richer as our understandings get deeper, which is why a neat translation is impossible to find.

Pronounced then as 'ik', the first character of *Ik Oang-Kār* identifies an infinite Oneness, the root and return point of all that exists – a single, indivisible, all-pervading Divine consciousness, by whose grace everything is interconnected and sustained. It underlines with profound conviction that One Eternal Reality exists and that everything exists because of this Reality. It also encapsulates what Guru Nanak had taught during his vast journeys to all four corners of India and beyond – that our differences are to be honoured as part of this infinite and sovereign Oneness.

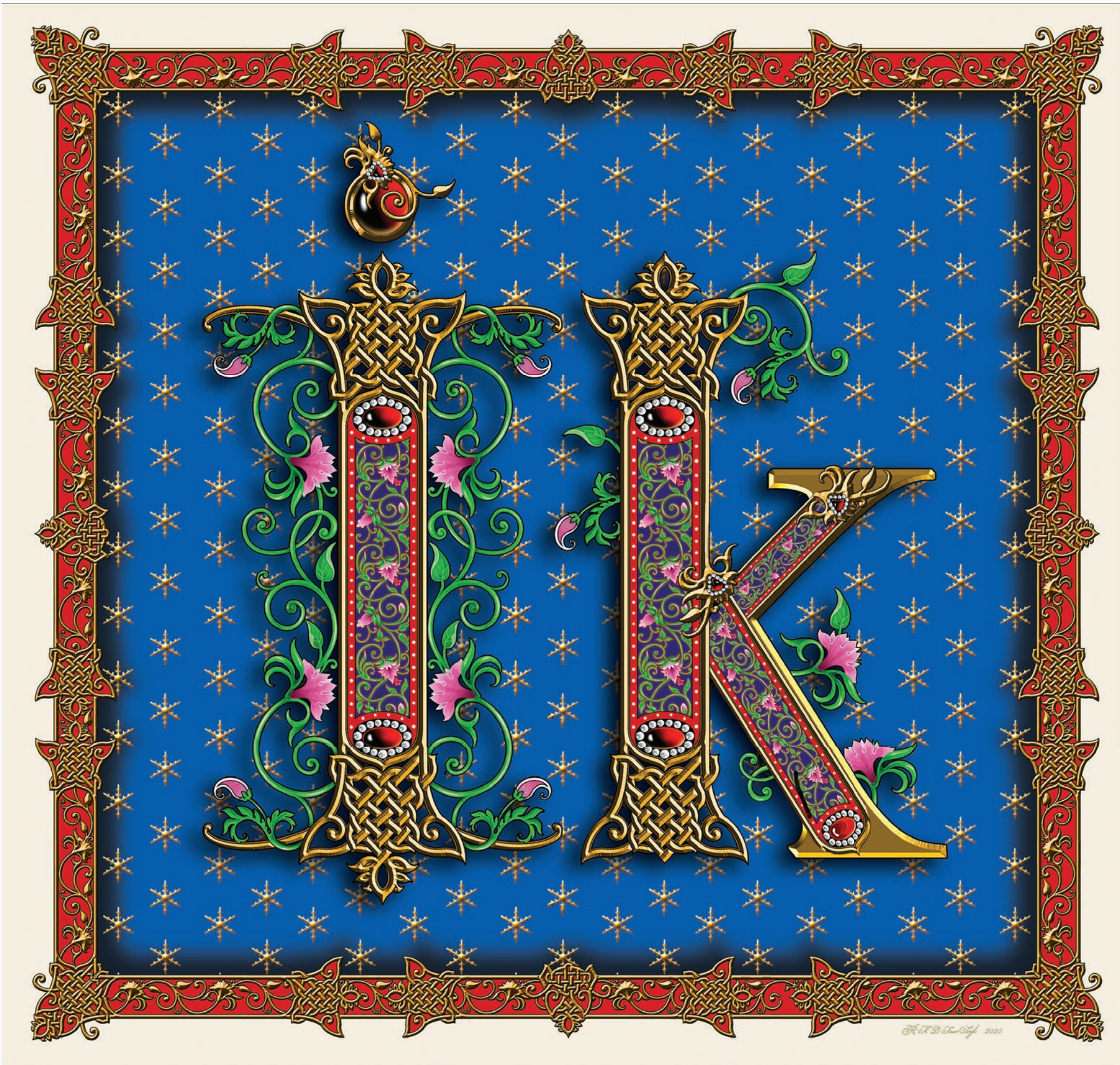
Guru Nanak used many names for God to engage with diverse people, such as *Har* or *Harī*, *Rām*, *Allāh*, *Khudā*, and *Bhagvān*. Yet no established names for God are expressed in *Ik Oang-Kār*. Instead, the numeral ੴ transcends differences of geography, gender and culture, and impressions tied to different religious identities and traditions.

The second character of this sacred symbol is known as 'Oang-Kār'. In 'Oang', the 'Oa' is pronounced like the 'o' in 'ordinary' and it ends with the nasalised sound 'ng', like the ending of 'hung' in English. Formed from a series of descending and ascending curves, the *Oang-Kār* symbol is first written like a number 3. The bottom line then swoops upwards, extending out to create a canopy and open-ended arch on top. This step-by-step visual formation follows the sound of 'Oang-Kār'.

The opening numeral ੴ ('Ik') represents the One Formless Creator (*Nirankār* – 'without form'). 'Oang-' then represents the energy of the Creator's presence, with its sacred vibration resonating everywhere – across past, present, and future realms of time, and all seen and unseen realms of space, like the waves of a latent pulse, a melody or song. 'Kār' evokes the countless processes and forms of creation, which stem from this Creator-consciousness and energy. *Kār* is also a line which marks a protected zone, evoking how everything is lovingly held together by Divine grace – as indicated by the symbol's elegant overhead arch, whose tip points to infinity.

Guru Nanak was the first of ten Gurus who founded the Sikh faith between 1469 and 1708. Since then, there have been many attempts to translate *Ik Oang-Kār*, which majestically opens all the teachings of the sacred scripture which Sikhs address with reverence as Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Phrases like 'There is only One God' can imply a Creator who is separate from creation, who is 'out there' rather than part of everything, who is 'my' God rather than 'your' God, or wholly opposite to the different forms of divinity that human cultures have perceived. Contemporary explanations, such as 'All is One', 'One Reality Is' or 'One Force' re-align in new ways with this richly expressive scriptural symbol. In the end, there is no substitute for returning to the shape and sound of the original.

Ik (One)
11.81 x 11.2 inch (30 x 28.5 cm)
By The Singh Twins, 2021
Original artwork - digital mixed medium
Archival ink and gold paint on archival paper



Kudrat: The expanse of creation



ncapsulating ideas of Oneness, resonance, and the expanse of creation, *Ik Oang-Kār* express several threefold concepts through its sound and shape. Seen in one way, its three spoken syllables evoke three dynamic aspects – ‘mind’ (*Ik*, the single, all-pervading Divine consciousness), ‘speech’ (*Oang*, the sacred word, rhythm, melody, and mother vibration) and ‘action’ (*Kār*, creation in constant formation and its Divine protection). As we saw, when *Ik Oang-Kār* is drawn or written, the line first follows the pattern of a number three with a swoop upwards on the left to create a canopy. The three resulting curves represent three dimensions, including the past, present and future realms of time, as well three physical realms, pointing to a fourth dimension, both before and beyond time and space. These three physical realms could be seen as land, water and sky. Long referred to in India as ‘*trilok*’ or ‘*tribhavan*’, meaning three habitats or homes, they are viewed too as the visible earth (*dhartī*), the unseen underworld (*pātāl*) and heavenly expanse (*ākās*).

ਆਪੀਨੈ ਆਪੁ ਸਾਜਿਓ ਆਪੀਨੈ ਰਚਿਓ ਨਾਉ ॥
ਦੁਯੀ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਸਾਜੀਐ ਕਰਿ ਆਸਣੁ ਡਿਠੇ ਚਾਉ ॥

*You Yourself first created Yourself,
Formless Source and Light of All Being,
Infinite Oneness, Eternal Origin.*

*From Yourself, You then generated Nām,
The all-pervading power of the Divine Name.
The mother vibration, the unstruck rhythm and melody,
Giving rise to endless waves, frequencies and geometries,
The life-giving resonance of Your presence.*

*Next, through kudrat, Your creative power,
You shaped all of nature and creation,
The wondrous expression of Your beauty and reality;
Constant cycles of emergence, being and becoming,
With realms that are seen, unseen and unfathomable,
Divinely interconnected and sustained by Your Grace.*

*Permeating everywhere, You transcend everything,
Seated within creation, You behold it with delight.*

– Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 463

Ik Oang-Kār - Oneness
20 x 19 inch (50.8 x 48.26 cm)
By The Singh Twins, 2021
Original artwork - digital mixed medium
Archival ink and gold paint on archival paper

During Guru Nanak’s time, how people conceived these realms would have been influenced by images from classical Indian literature and art, as well as ancient Indian cosmology, where the four directions of the world were seen to be supported by mythical elephants. *Pātāl*, the netherworld, was an enchanting underground realm. Without sunlight, it was lit by gems and jewels and, known also as *nāg-lok*, a place inhabited by mythical and often benevolent snake-like beings. The word *ākās*, meaning sky, space or ether, also suggested ‘*svarag*’, or the heavenly realm. The *Ik Oang-Kār* depiction by The Singh Twins provides a window on to these ancient portrayals of the three worlds. In response, Guru Nanak emphasised that, in the infinite context, there were countless skies, planets and netherworlds (*pātālā pātāl, lakh āgāsa āgās*, as we shall later see in Jap Ji Sahib (*pauri* 22, page 76).

In some schools of thought, the ‘three worlds’ are linked to the mind. This could be to the power of memory, present awareness and imagining the future. They can also relate to the conscious and subconscious mind, as well as a higher state of consciousness. Since ‘*bhavan*’ means ‘home’, ‘*tribhavan*’ can be seen as the three realms in which the soul or ‘inner light’ comes to dwell: in a non-physical dimension beyond the ‘five elements’, within the the womb and then in the home of the world around us. With its curved structure and canopy, *Ik Oang-Kār* reminds us that, whatever our sense of home is, it exists thanks to the One.

In Sikh art, the tree canopy is a popular convention which symbolises the Divine protection. This meaning of protection is often associated with the overhead arch of the *Ik Oang-Kār* symbol. Likewise, the spoken syllable ‘*Kār*’ suggests both creation and protection. In the artwork, this aspect is beautifully portrayed, where the blossoming tree canopy stretches across the sky and points beyond it, to a fourth dimension of sacred mystery and grace beyond our comprehension. Behind this, the design with concentric circles evokes *nām* as waves of sound rippling from a single source, as well as *kudrat* (creation or creative power) emanating from a single source of light (the Divine). In the artwork, a spark of this Divine light is depicted as being latent in all beings, in the imagery that fills the numeral ੴ or ‘*Ik*’. Referred to as ‘*jyot*’ in Sanskrit and as ‘*noor*’ in Persian and Arabic, this light is linked in Sikh teachings to treasuring the values of equality, dignity and kinship, of building cohesion, and of seeing God in all.



ANUR K. D. K. SINGH

R. K. D. Singh 2021

Mool Mantar: Beholding the Root of All Being

ੴ Ik

One, All-embracing Root of Existence

ੴ Oang-Kār

Reverberating, creating, renewing, sustaining

ਸਤਿ ਨਾਮੁ Sat Nām

Innermost, infinite resonance, naming the True Reality

ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖੁ Kartā Purakh

Continuous Doer and Creator

ਨਿਰਭਉ Nirbhau

Without fear

ਨਿਰਵੈਰੁ Nirvair

Without hate

ਅਕਾਲ ਮੂਰਤਿ Akāl Moorat

Undying and Timeless; Image of Eternity

ਅਜੂਨੀ Ajoonī

Unborn and beyond all cycles of birth and death

ਸੈਭੰ Saibhang

Uncaused and Self-illuminated

ਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ॥ Gurprasād

Realised through the Enlightener's Grace.

ਜਪੁ ॥ ~Jap ~

Here is the wisdom, to chant and contemplate

ਆਦਿ ਸਚੁ Ād sach

Before time began - the Constant Truth

ਜੁਗਾਦਿ ਸਚੁ ॥ Jugād sach

When time began - the Constant Truth

ਹੈ ਭੀ ਸਚੁ Hai bhī sach

Here and now - the Constant Truth

ਨਾਨਕ ਹੋਸੀ ਭੀ ਸਚੁ ॥ Nanak, hosī bhī sach

Says Nanak, the same Constant Truth, forever



Ik Oang-Kār: Recognising our deeper origin

By starting with the visually striking symbol of *Ik Oang-Kār*, the Mool Mantar introduces the One All-Embracing Origin of everything that exists. It urges us to see the Divine pervading everywhere, to revere creation and see God in all, to respect differences and yet seek cohesion – both outwardly, with others, and inwardly with our spiritual self. In this way it prompts us to ponder on the core of our own identity.

Every so often, we all wonder about our origins, be they our biological, cultural, or geographical origins, the origins of a group we feel part of, or even the origins of life on earth. By sensing a connection to things beyond ourselves, we feel a certain wholeness and start to form many-layered identities. *Ik Oang-Kār* invites us to notice a more essential *mool* or origin, glimmering beneath these layers, for we are all connected to the Divine, even if unconsciously. To nurture this connection brings a more fundamental sense of wholeness, which can permeate and transcend the many connections we make in the world.



Nirbhau, Nirvair: Emitting no fear or hate

More than an impersonal force, God is depicted in the Mool Mantar as a Personality, with two founding qualities: *Nirbhau* and *Nirvair* (without fear, without hate). Where there is Oneness, there is no ‘other’ to be fearful of or vengeful towards. When we see others as unfamiliar or alien, the opposition or the enemy, it is easy to emit vibrations of hate or fear. Whilst the egocentric self carves lines of separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the spiritual self allows us to see one another from a perspective of underlying connection.

Embracing the twin values of *nirbhau* and *nirvair*, we learn to work from spirit of kinship and solidarity – even as we face conflict. Likewise, the Sikh principle of *sant-sipāhī* (saintly warrior) then guides us to face life’s inward and outward battles with courage and love instead of fear and hate. Meditating on the qualities of *nirbhau* and *nirvair*, we learn to notice and defuse inner vibrations of fear and hate as they inevitably arise. When fear and hate lose their force within us, the qualities of love, compassion and courage can genuinely take root and radiate.



Sat Nām, Kartā Purakh: Being true to our divine essence, as doers and creators

Embedded also in the symbolism of *Ik Oang-Kār* is the emergence of *nām*, the life-generating vibration of God’s presence, and *kudrat*, the created world. These are now elaborated in the next two phrases of the Mool Mantar: *Sat Nām* and *Kartā Purakh*. *Sat Nām* identifies *nām* as the resonant Essence of Existence and Ever-true Reality – an understanding hinted at in translations such as ‘God’s Name is Truth’ or ‘True Word of God’. *Sat Nām* also inspires us to live authentically, in a way that is ‘true’ to our divine essence, ever-conscious of the eternal self at our core.

Kartā Purakh identifies God as the Continuous Creator and Dynamic Doer, who dwells in the very flow and fabric of creation. Far from being static, creation is always happening, through constant cycles of formation, disintegration and rejuvenation – from microscopic to astronomic levels and from the fastest to the slowest of speeds. *Kartā Purakh* is the Infinite Intelligence in their midst. This phrase also inspires us to be dynamic and creative – to move past inertia or despondency and lead imaginative, active and hardworking lives, in humility before the One who empowers us.



Akāl Moorat, Ajoonī, Saibhang: Discovering the face of eternity within

Conscious that different traditions represented God through different words, images and icons, Guru Nanak puts forward a paradox; to find a *moorat* or form for God, one would have to imagine the face of a Timeless and Undying Reality – *Akāl Moorat*. This statement also gives us a mirror, to recognise a deathless part of our own self which dwells within our mortal body. By reminding us of what is temporary, it inspires us to embrace life in a detached, yet poignant and appreciative, way.

Ajoonī means ‘Unborn’ and not subject to cycles of birth and rebirth over lifetimes. *Saibhang* means ‘Uncaused’ and ‘Self-illuminated’. Ordinarily, we understand our lives through celebrations of our birth, through knowing about our parentage and having some awareness of our inevitable death. These all bring some meaning and value to our lives. Yet, whatever our life circumstances, the Mool Mantar brings into our lives another level of meaning and value, which comes from realising we are part of the One who is Undying, Unborn and Uncaused.



Gurprasād:

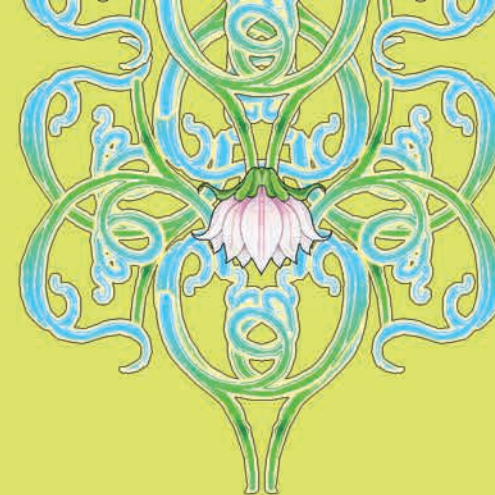
**Balancing effort with humility:
seeing wisdom as a blessing**

In India, *prasād* was a gift or blessing spontaneously bestowed on a disciple by a Guru or ‘enlightener’, just as a teacher might recognise or encourage a student by offering some unexpected reward or help. Whilst the Mool Mantar encourages the discipline of meditation, the term *Gurprasād* – the Guru’s blessing – underlines that God is known ultimately through the qualities of gratitude and humility which evoke Divine grace.

Gurprasād introduces the all-important concept of Guru. In India, this was someone laden with wisdom, a revered teacher or spiritual master. In popular understanding, a Guru is an ‘enlightener’, one who takes us from a state of internal darkness ‘*gu*’ to one of light ‘*ru*’. In Punjabi, ‘*gur*’ also carries the same sense as ‘*jugatī*’, meaning a skillful way, technique or formula to do, create or achieve something.

For Sikhs, ‘Guru’ is both tangible and intangible. It is a title specifically reserved for the ten Sikh Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib. It also refers to their collective power to illuminate, as human and scriptural embodiments of Guru Nanak’s light. The Guru is also the enlightening power of the Formless Creator (whom Sikhs praise as ‘*Vāhegurū*’, the Wondrous Guru), who is likened to the philosopher’s stone (*pāras*), capable of transforming base metal into gold.

Concluding the opening section of the Mool Mantar, ‘*Gurprasād*’ implants a vital understanding. For sure, a *mantar* may be recited with great personal initiative and diligent focus, but enlightenment happens through grace – when all traces of self-centredness are replaced by genuine humility, gratitude and devotion. ‘*Gurprasād*’ introduces the fine balance between steady, focussed effort and selfless surrender that characterises the Sikh spiritual path. With it, the entire treasury of wisdom contained in Sikh teaching is offered as the Guru’s blessing.

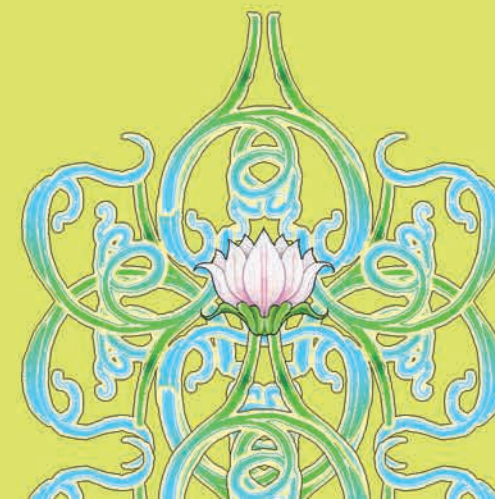


Jap
Ād sach
Jugād sach
Ĥai bhī sach
Nanak hosī bhī sach:

**Cultivating contemplation and
continuity through change**

At the very start of the Guru Granth Sahib, *Gurprasād* is followed by the word *Jap* – from *japnā* meaning to chant and contemplate. *Jap* is often translated as a verb, instructing one to meditate. In the Gurmukhi script, however, it is spelt as a noun which introduces a source of wisdom to be meditated upon. In this way *Jap* serves as a title for the first scriptural composition, known as Jap Ji Sahib. At the same time, the sound of this single-syllable word drives home the importance of cultivating contemplation, by taking time to consciously recite, reflect and nurture a God-conscious mind through daily meditative practice.

Sometimes you will hear the Mool Mantar recited to *Gurprasād* (where two vertical lines in Gurmukhi indicate the first full stop). Often, however, the word *Jap* and the following short couplet are also included: ‘*Ād sach, Jugād sach, Ĥai bhī sach, Nanak hosī bhī sach*’ (which is punctuated at the end with the Punjabi numeral one). This elaborates on God’s identity as the Ever-True Reality, existing before the dawn of time and forever into eternity. It also directs us to align with Divine Truth as we cross different stages of our own life and as we think about the kind of legacy we could leave for future generations.





Overall, this artwork uses the language of global symbolism to express something of the personality and teachings of Guru Nanak Ji, which led him to be revered by those of different faiths as a universal teacher and a humanitarian.



Inspired by the earliest janam sākhi descriptions and established artistic representations of Guru Nanak, the central depiction shows him in elements of Hindu and Muslim attire, including the sindhī topī (the honoured cap from the region of Sindh), a saffron robe (colour of saintliness and self-sacrifice) and the patchwork shawl (associated with travelling holy people).

The prayer beads adorning Guru Nanak's turban denote his status as an enlightened spiritual teacher. Made of wood, they symbolise the tree, rooted in the earth, signifying the importance Guru Ji gave to keeping one's mind fixed on God whilst living fully involved in the world. Commitment to the life of a householder is represented by a small scene (far right) featuring Gurdwara Kandh Sahib, where Guru Ji's wedding party rested before his marriage. Gurdwara Nankana Sahib (far left) marks his birthplace. Just underneath, a line from his verse ('The age is like a knife') describes the state of the times into which he was born, reminding us of his vision to uplift society. In the background, a boat ferries people across the river, based on the scriptural analogy of the Guru who transports the devotee across life's ocean.

The candle represents Guru Nanak's message, illuminating the world in a time of darkness – when, in his own words, 'the moon of Truth was nowhere to be found'. The butterfly, as a universal symbol of renewal and birth, represents his founding of the Sikh faith. Incorporated into the lattice balcony work is a sword (a universal symbol of justice) along with a six-pointed star or hexagram which, although significant to many world cultures, has been included in our artwork as the Christian symbol of creation, evoking the six days of creation. These represent the concept of Divine Justice to which all of creation is subject, as well as Guru Nanak's outspoken defiance of the injustices of his time, which laid the foundations for the Sikh principle of mirī-pirī, where upholding one's religious and secular responsibilities go hand in hand.

The six-pointed star, in addition, denotes Guru Nanak's state of spiritual perfection. Composed of two triangles – denoting masculine (upward pointing) and feminine (downward pointing) entities – it also reflects his teachings on the equality of men and women. The archway draws on architectural elements from the Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar, with its four gateways signifying an openness to all.

ਧਨਵੰਤ ਨਾਮ ਕੇ ਵਣਜਾਰੇ ॥

ਸਾਂਝੀ ਕਰਹੁ ਨਾਮ ਧਨੁ ਖਾਟਹੁ ਗੁਰ ਕਾ ਸਬਦੁ ਵੀਚਾਰੇ ॥

*Rich are those who travel to this world
To trade in nām, the Divine Name*

*Partner with them, earn the wealth of nām,
Reflecting on the Guru's wisdom.*

*Abandon fraud, deceit and malice,
See God's light always within you.*

*Trade in and accumulate this true wealth,
And you shall never suffer loss.*

*Use and spend it; its treasures are abundant
And cannot be exhausted.*

*Says Nanak, your travelling soul shall then
Return with dignity to the Divine Court.*

– Guru Arjan Dev Ji, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 1219

ਪਰਦੇਸੁ ਭਾਗਿ ਸਉਦੇ ਕਉ ਆਇਆ ॥

*Having travelled across new lands,
I have come here to do business,*

*For I had heard of an incomparable Merchandise
which brings true profit.*

*I arrive here with a precious bundle –
The wealth of spiritual virtue
Which is my business capital.*

*Beholding this fascinating jewel,
My mind is in awe.*

– Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 372



ਇਸਕ ਮੁਸਕ ਮਹਕਾਰੂ ਹੈ ਹੁਇ ਪਰਉਪਕਾਰੀ।

*Just as love and fragrance so naturally emanate outwards,
Those who follow the Guru's way go beyond themselves to uplift others
They come to emanate 'parupkār' – altruism across everyday divides and borders.*

– Bhai Gurdas Ji, Vār 9, *paurī* 3



(above) The Blessed Journey
5.3 x 7.9 inch (13.4 cm x 20 cm)
By The Singh Twins, 2021
Original artwork - Digital mixed medium
Archival ink on archival paper

Some of Guru Nanak's journeys remain unknown, but his four recorded *Udāsīs*, plus later visits across the Punjab, made him one of the most travelled figures of his time. Often, we link the idea of 'travel' to tourism, trade, escapism or exploration. The word 'odyssey' comes from the adventurous voyages of the Greek hero, Odysseus and, since ancient times, trading routes like the Silk Road used to inspire many stories. Just as Guru Nanak embarked on his journeys, Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama had found the first ocean routes to America and India, in the European 'Age of Discovery'. Centred on the trade of spices, gold and slaves, their expeditions led to new forms of domination and profit-driven global connectivity. Over the ages and still today, people also migrate for basic survival as well as to seek new opportunities.

To understand Guru Nanak's intentions as a traveller, the term *Udāsī* suggests he journeyed with a detached yet sombre and compassionate gaze at the plight of a suffering world. Prepared for hardships ahead, he had set off, then, not to seek fame or fortune or to expand knowledge and power, nor to conquer or convert others or to escape from the world. Just as modern-day explorers and cartographers were drafting the first accurate world maps, Guru Nanak was travelling vast distances, illuminating the geography of our inner world and the uncharted waters of a sublime reality we are all part of. Taking a panoramic view of our common humanity, and teaching with humour and warmth, he showed how – by trading in the practice of spiritual attributes – people could connect and flourish across all boundaries and borders.

(left) Early Traders: Exploration and Exploitation
29.5 x 28 inch (75 x 150 cm)
By The Singh Twins, 2021
Original artwork - digital mixed medium
Archival ink and gold paint on archival paper

Guru Nanak's *dharamsāl*: Cultivating the faith at Kartarpur



uring his travels, Guru Nanak returned intermittently to the Punjab. In time, by the banks of the River Ravi, he was donated a belt of land by a local governor, who had inherited it from his forefathers. His wife had been greatly inspired by hearing Guru Nanak's hymns, but the governor himself remained troubled at first by the Guru's popularity. One day, as he explained how he had come to own the land, Guru Nanak asked if any of his forefathers could have been its permanent owners. As he dwelt on his own mortality and on leaving a meaningful legacy, the governor decided to dedicate the land to Guru Nanak (which is today located in Pakistan, very close to the border with India). The Guru insisted that, instead of naming the settlement 'Nanakpur', they would name it 'Kartarpur', 'town of the Creator'. This echoed the way Guru Nanak often addressed God as *Sat Kartār*, the Ever-Real, Ever-True Creator.

It was here in Kartarpur that Guru Nanak established a *dharamsāl*. In India, a *dharamsāl* was a religious centre which often served as rest-house for pilgrims. The word-ending, 'sāl', means a space constructed for a given purpose, like a home or a school, a studio or a workshop, a sanctuary, or a place of worship. A *dharamsāl*, then, was a place devoted to *dharam*, or faith-inspired living. In the ancient language of Sanskrit, *dharmā* was the cosmic law by which all things are subtly held together to flow in harmony with their given roles and purposes. Consequently, *dharmā* also meant a religious path, where one learns to live in tune with the divine order and with the divine aspects of our human nature.

The concept of *dharmā* evoked different ideas, then, about the enduring principles which govern the universe as well as good human conduct. In the Pali language, the equivalent word – *dharmā* – refers to the Buddha's teachings. In Hindu tradition, *dharmā* also means following one's 'duty' in the social hierarchy as well as being righteous or virtuous in one's conduct.

In his teachings, Guru Nanak uses the Punjabi word *dharam* in some bold and specific ways. Just as elements of nature have defining properties (the nature of water is to flow, and of fire is to give heat), human beings are blessed with spiritual characteristics that define our true humanity. Irrespective of our social status, *dharam* is then a path of spiritual and social upliftment within every person's reach. Through it, we learn to live 'in God's image', by embodying values such as compassion, courage, responsibility, contentment, integrity, and wisdom.

Where irresponsibility, greed and apathy had taken hold in society, Guru Nanak states that *dharam* had taken wings and flown. Religion had become an empty shell or a cover for hypocrisy (*pākhāṇḍ*). True *dharam* is about living as a sovereign human being, committed to timeless goodness – this involves recognising the Creator's ultimate sovereignty and seeing the earth itself as

a *dharamsāl*, an abode for *dharam* – as we shall soon see in *paurī* 34 of the morning prayer, Jap Ji Sahib, Guru Nanak's founding scriptural composition. Sikhs learn that, wherever Guru Nanak made a lasting impression on his travels, that place became a *dharamsāl*. Settling in Kartarpur, Guru Nanak established a formal *dharamsāl* institution – a place to transform his vision into a working model with social impact. Exchanging his travelling attire for that of a simple householder, he took to a life of farming.

ਮਨੁ ਹਾਲੀ ਕਿਰਸਾਣੀ ਕਰਣੀ ਸਰਮੁ ਪਾਣੀ ਤਨੁ ਖੇਤੁ ॥
ਨਾਮੁ ਬੀਜੁ ਸੰਤੋਖੁ ਸੁਹਾਗਾ ਰਖੁ ਗਰੀਬੀ ਵੇਸੁ ॥
ਭਾਉ ਕਰਮ ਕਰਿ ਜੰਮਸੀ ਸੇ ਘਰ ਭਾਗਠ ਦੇਖੁ ॥

*Embracing daily meditation, with your mind, work the plough
And put your efforts into cultivating a spiritually rich life;
Let your body be the field that is gently irrigated
By the waters of your hopeful trepidation.
Let the Divine Name be the seed you plant within it;
And let contentment be the soil's continuous leveller.
Train your mind to be humble and let this be your attire
To create a sheltering fence as you steadily cultivate.
Through deeds of love, the seed will gradually germinate
And you will see the home of the self so bountifully flourish.*

– Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 595



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A journey through Jap Ji Sahib



It was in Kartarpur that the practice of reciting Jap Ji Sahib, the first Sikh morning prayer, was established. This was a distillation of all Guru Nanak had observed and taught over his panoramic journeys, dialoguing with so many different people along the way. In some early scriptural collections, this *bāni* or composition is entitled ‘Jap Nishān’. *Nishān* means a mark, seal or insignia – so Jap Ji Sahib can be seen as the hallmark of Sikh teaching. It also suggests a stamp or passport, which enables one to step onto the Guru’s path. As the first composition of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Jap Ji Sahib is the only one not set to a *rāg* or musical framework. All that follows afterwards is a rich and melodious elaboration of its teachings.

The awakening to life’s calling

The title of this *bāni* appears simply as the noun ‘*Jap*’, indicating it is a body of wisdom to be chanted and contemplated upon, until its repetition shapes our daily awareness and life’s direction. Over time, Sikhs referred to this composition as ‘Jap Ji Sahib’, where the words *Ji* and *Sahib* accord it deep respect. For some Sikhs, *Ji* echoes the word *jīa*, from *jīv*, which means a living being. Jap Ji is then a Song of Life, awakening us each morning to imagine life’s rich potential, to work to realise its true worth and to leave a meaningful legacy when we eventually depart.

The 38 stanzas which make up the Jap Ji Sahib are known as *paurīs* or steps. Steps were a common feature of pilgrimage sites in India, so the *paurīs* can be seen as stepping-stones to the shrine within. They map out Guru Nanak’s essential teachings and stimulate inward change through their very practical slant. Recited each morning in Sikh households around the world, the original words are often known by heart. Today, a wide range of written and spoken commentaries can be accessed, reflecting different approaches to interpret the meanings held in their poetic form. By lifting out lines that will be familiar to Sikh readers, we will now journey through the *paurīs* and consider how they link together, as landmarks and signposts along the path that Jap Ji Sahib invites us to follow.

Stepping through the archway: the infinite context

As the introduction to Jap Ji Sahib, the Mool Mantar – up to ‘*Gurprasād*’ – is considered a *manglācharan*. In India, this was a devotional invocation sung to open a composition, to evoke a deity or create a frame for the verses that followed. In Jap Ji Sahib, the Mool Mantar establishes the distinctive view of God as an all-pervading Oneness, which all the *paurīs* refer back to. After ‘*Gurprasād*’ comes the title of the composition, ‘*Jap*’, followed by an opening couplet – ‘*Ād sach, jugād sach, hai bhī sach, Nānak hosī bhī sach*’. Here we glimpse the spectrum of past, present and future time – from before time’s birth and far into infinity. Throughout, the One Creator remains ‘*Sach*’ – the Constant Truth or Unchanging Reality.

This preamble to Jap Ji Sahib forms an archway to inspire an opening of the mind as we step on to the path of its 38 stanzas. In our daily life, everything we think or do has a limited frame or a context. We might live as if we will stay the same age forever, but this reality is bound to change. And so, this short opening to Jap Ji Sahib is both poignant and humbling. It expands our perspective to see a vast and infinite context of our existence and invites us to align constantly with Divine Truth, even as life keeps changing.

