

Asa Ki Var

Introduction

Out of the twenty-two *vars*¹ recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib, Asa Ki Var is one such spiritually impactful *var*, that mentors an ordinary person to become Divine-like (an enlightened being full of Divine-virtues). The mentoring encompasses all facets of life, such as religious, social, cultural, moral, spiritual, political, etc. while singing the glory of the Timeless Being. Though the *saloks*² in Asa Ki Var describe the worldly aspects in detail, the *pauris*³ contain praise of the Formless.

The focus of Asa Ki Var is the Creator-Being, and the Creator-Being's extensive creation (nature). The tone of the Var is divine and is laden with social concerns. An intense feeling of adoration for the Guru, the glory of the true Divine, and a beautiful sketch of a sight awestruck by Divine pervasiveness in creation is expressed. Satiristic observations, as well as bold criticism of human egoism, socio-cultural ills, ritualism, and customs are also enunciated.

With the exception of two *vars*,⁴ the 'Asa Ki Var' is titled (as such) in a style similar to the headings of the rest of the *vars*,⁵ in the table of contents of the Guru Granth Sahib. Though, the title 'Asa Di Var' has gained currency in common usage today. Asa Ki Var⁶ appears on page 462 through 475 of the Guru Granth Sahib. It is a collection of twenty-four *pauris* revealed to Guru Nanak Sahib, and a total of sixty *saloks*⁷ (forty-five *saloks* of Guru Nanak Sahib, and fifteen *saloks* of Guru Angad

¹ A heroic poetic form, similar to a ballad, written in stanzas (*pauris*).

² A poetic form, similar to a couplet, mostly consisting of two lines.

³ A distinct pattern or a verse structure of Panjabi heroic-poetry (*var*)

⁴ 'mārū vār mahalā 3' and 'mārū vār mahalā 5.'

⁵ *sirīrāg kī vār mahalā 4, vār mājh kī mahalā 1, gaūrī kī vār mahalā 4, gaūrī kī vār mahalā 5, āsā kī vār mahalā 1, gūjarī kī vār mahalā 3, gūjarī kī vār mahalā 5, bihāgarē kī vār mahalā 4, vadhans kī vār mahalā 4, sorāṭhi kī vār mahalā 4, vār jaitsarī kī mahalā 5, vār sūhī kī mahalā 3, bilāval kī vār mahalā 4, rāmkalī kī vār mahalā 3, rāmkalī kī vār mahalā 5, rāmkalī kī vār rāi balvanḍi tathā satai ḍūmi ākhī, mārū vār mahalā 3, mārū vār mahalā 5, basant kī vār mahalā 5, sārāṅg kī vār mahalā 4, malār kī vār mahalā 1, kānare kī vār mahalā 4.* –Shabdārath, Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, 2017

⁶ Other than Asa Ki Var, there are two more *vars* revealed to Guru Nanak Sahib: *vār mājh kī tathā salok mahalā 1* and *vār malār kī mahalā 1*.

⁷ There are also two lines of *rahāu* (refrain) in the first *salok* recorded along *pauri* number twelve.

Sahib). Generally, two to three *saloks* appear before every *pauri*; but in some places the number is greater (four to five).

In the popular tradition while singing Asa Ki Var, *chants*⁸ revealed to Guru Ramdas Sahib are sung one by one before the *saloks* recorded with each *pauri*. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha states⁹ that “Guru Arjan Sahib included twenty-four *chake*¹⁰ of Guru Ramdas Sahib along with the twenty-four *pauris* in the *kirtan*¹¹.”¹² However, only twenty-four *pauris* and sixty *saloks* (that are recorded with the twenty-four *pauris*), as per the original order (structure) of this *var* in the Guru Granth Sahib will be discussed. The meaning of the *chants* will also be discussed based on their order of appearance in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Regarding the subject of Asa Ki Var, Prof. Sahib Singh believes that “the subject of the entire *var* is the same... the entire *var* has been uttered together.”¹³ However, Bhai Vir Singh, while commenting on the relationship between the *saloks* and *pauris* writes, “minstrels used to sing *vars* and narrate stories of battles and wars, and share them concisely through the *pauris*. In between, they used to utter *saloks*, which sometimes were related to the context, satire, tune, or message of the *pauris*. Similarly, in the *vars* of Guru Granth Sahib, *saloks* sometimes either directly relate to the *pauris*, their satire, their tune, etc., or they allude to any principle; but often the essence of the *saloks* and *pauris* connects with one other, one way or the other.”¹⁴

Historical Dimension

As per the historical tradition, Guru Angad Sahib started the tradition of singing Asa Ki Var in the early mornings in the court of Guru Nanak Sahib.¹⁵ The original source of information on the revelation of Asa Ki Var is *janamsakhi* literature. According to story number thirty-two¹⁶ of Puratan Janamsakhi (writing time - 1657-58; writer -Bhai

⁸ The *chants* from ‘*hari ammrit bhinne loiṇā*’ to ‘*hari jugu jugu bhagat upāiā*’ recorded on page 448-451 of the Guru Granth Sahib. A *chant* is a poetic form mostly consisting of four stanzas; at some places it extends from five to ten stanzas as well.

⁹ Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, Mahān Kosh, Bhasha Vibhag, Patiala, 1974, page 91

¹⁰ A group of six *sabads*.

¹¹ Singing of *sabads* from the Guru Granth Sahib.

¹² Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha did not quote any historical reference for this tradition of *chant* singing. Scholars need to research this.

¹³ Prof. Sahib Singh, Āsā Dī Vār Sṭīk, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2016, page 9

¹⁴ Bhai Vir Singh, Santhyā Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib (Vol six), editor, Dr. Balbir Singh, Bhasha Vibhag Punjab, 1997, page 2834

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ S. S. Padam, Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī Kī (Puratan Janamsakhi – Narrator Saido Jat), Editor., Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2018, page 155-56

Saido; place of writing – ‘*Caran Majhār Ke*’ near Peshawar),¹⁷ Asa Ki Var was uttered in discourse with Sheikh Braham. Sheikh Braham, or Ibrahim, was the twelfth successor of the revered Sheikh Pharid who reigned from 1511 to 1552 CE.¹⁸

The story in the Puratan Janamsakhi goes like this:¹⁹

¹⁷ *ibid.* page 55

¹⁸ Dr. Jagjit Singh, *Janamsākhīām Srī Gurū Nānak Dev Jī Dā Tārkik Adhiain*, Panjabi Sahit Academy, Ludhiana, 1970, page 112. The names of the successors of Baba Pharid have been listed in this book like this: Baba Farid Shakkarganj (1173-1267 CE.), Khwaja Badarudin, Shah Alaudin, Diwan Muizadin, Muhammad Fazil, Munwar Shah, Nur Din, Bahaudin, Hazrat Yunas, Ahmad Shah, Pir Ataula, Sheikh Muhammad, Sheikh Ibrahim.

¹⁹ “...rāvī canāu dekhi kari ujāri ujāri pai caliā paṭaṇ des vici āi nikaliā. paṭaṇ te kos tini ujāri thī othai āi baiṭhā. mardānā nāli āhā. paṭaṇ kā pīru sekh pharīdu thā. tis kai takhati sekhu briham thā. tis kā iku murīdu subā ke vele lakaṛīām cuṇaṇi āiā thā. tis kā nāurṁ sekhu kamālu thā. so pīr ke mudabarkhāne kīām lakaṛīām cuṇaṇi gaiā thā. dekhai tām akai koli bābā atai mardānā doverṁ baiṭhe hani. tām mardānai rabābu vajāiā. sabadu gāvaṇi lāgā. saloku ditosu rāgu āsā vic.

“salok

āpe paṭī kalam āpi upari lekhu bhi tūṁ. eko kahīai nānakā dūjā kāhe kū.

“jab ehu salok kamāli phakīr suṇiām. tab lakṛīām choḍi kari āi gaiā. araju rakhīasu jīu is kaū hukamu kījai jo ihu bait phiri ākhai. mardāne nū hukamu hoā jo ihu salok phiri dehi. tām mardāne saloku phiri ditā. kamāli sikhi laiā. jo kuch lakaṛīām cuṇīām thīām soī khini kari salāmu kītosu. paṭaṇi āiā lakaṛīām suṭi kari jāi āpaṇe pīr kaū salāmu kīṭīasu. tām ākhiosu pīr salāmati mainūṁ ek khudāi dā piārā miliā hai. tām pīru kahiā. kamāli kithaurṁ milio. tām kamāli kahiā. pīr salāmati mairṁ lakaṛīām cuṇaṇi gaiā thā. us kai nāli iku rabābī hai ate nāu nānaku haisu. āpaṇe salok ākhadā hai tab pīr ākhiā bacā koī taim bī baitu sikhiā. tab kamāli ākhiā jīvai pīr salāmati hiku bait maino bhī hāsalu thīā hai. pīr ākhiā alāi dekhām kehā hai. tām kamāli ākhiā jī uhu ākhadā hai jo “āpe paṭī kalam āpi upari lekhu bhi tūṁ. eko kahīai nānakā dūjā kāhe kū.

“tām pīr ākhiā. bacā kichu samjhio ki nā is bait dā biānu. tām kamāli ākhiā pīr salāmati taino sabh kuchu rosan hai. tām pīr ākhiā. bacā jinhām dā ākhiā hoā ehu baitu hai tis dā dīdāru dekhā hai. ohu khudāi dā phakīru hai. mainūṁ bhī lai calu. osi tām khudāi dīām galām karīām hani.

“tabi sekhu birāhamu sukhvāsaṇi caṛi caliā. kamālu nāli lītā. āmṁvadā āmṁvadā koh tihurṁ upari āiā. jā dekhai tām bābā baiṭhā hai. tab sekhu birāhamu jāi khaṛā hoā. ākhios nānak salāmāalekam. tabi gurū bābai nānak kahiā. alekham aslām pīr jī salāmati. āṭai khudāi asā no miharvānu hoā. tusāḍā dīdār pāiā. tab ino uno dastposī kari bahi gae.

“tab pīr puchaṇā kīṭī. jo nānak terā iku baitu suṇi kari hairānu hoā hām. asām ākhiā jisū ihu baitu ākhiā hai tis dā dīdāru dekhāhai. tabi bābe ākhiā jīu asānū nivājas hoī hai jo tusāḍā dīdāru pāiā. tab pīr kahiā nānak is bait dā beānu dehi. tū jo ākhadā hairṁ hik hai nānak dūjā kāhai kūṁ.

“paru eku sāhibu tai dui hadī.

kehaṛā sevī te kehaṛā radī.

“...[the Guru] walked through the wilderness along the river Ravi and reached the region of Pattan [in Pakistan]. The Guru camped in a wilderness about six miles from Pattan; Bhai Mardana was along. There was a seat of a Sufi master Sheikh Farid in Pattan, on which his descendant Sheikh Braham was enthroned. One morning, Sheikh Kamal, a disciple of Sheikh Braham, came to the jungle to collect firewood. He noticed that the Guru and Bhai Mardana were sitting there. Then Bhai Mardana started playing the *rabab* and uttered a *salok* in Rag Asa.

“*salok*

(O Divine!) You Yourself are the slate, Yourself the pen and Yourself the writing on it also.

O Nanak! Only the One Divine should be praised; why praise the other (who takes birth and dies)? -Guru Granth Sahib 1291

“When Sheikh Kamal heard the *salok*, he kept the wood aside and approached them. He requested the Guru to direct Bhai Mardana to repeat the *salok*. Bhai Mardana sang the *salok* again. Kamal learnt the *salok* by heart, bid farewell to them and left with whatever firewood he had collected. After reaching Pattan, he kept the wood aside and went to his master Sheikh Braham. Kamal bowed to Sheikh Braham and told him that he had met a lover of Khuda. Then Sheikh Braham asked him, “Where did you meet him?” Kamal replied, “Master! I had gone to collect wood. His name is Nanak and he is accompanied by a *rabab* player. He utters his own *saloks*. Then Sheikh Braham asked, “Child! Did you learn any *salok*?” Kamal replied, “Yes, I have learnt one!” Sheikh Braham said, “Recite, let me see how is it?” Then, Kamal replied that he says:

“(O Divine!) You Yourself are the slate, Yourself the pen and Yourself the writing on it also.

O Nanak! Only the One Divine should be praised; why praise the other (who takes birth and dies)? -Guru Granth Sahib 1291

“tū ākhadā hai ki hiko jo iko hik hai par hindū ākhade han jo asām vici sahī hai atai musalmān ākhade hani jo asām hī vici sahī hai. ākhu vekhām kisu vici sahī karehām. aru kisu vici aṅsahī karehām. tab bābe nānak kahiā jī hiko sāhibu hikā hadi. hiko sevi te dūjā radi...

“... tām phiri pīr kahiā. nānak hik khudāi kī vār suṇāi. asā no eh makhsūdu hai jo vār duhu bājhū hoṁdī nāhīm. ate tū hiko hiku ākhadā hai. vekhām khudāi dā sarīku tū kavaṅ karsī. tab bābe ākhiā mardāniām rabāb vajāi. tām mardāne rabāb vajāiā. rāgu āsā kītā. bābe saloku ditā

“balihārī gur āpaṇe... kari āsaṇu ḍiṭho cāu.

“paūṛīām naūm hoīām etu parthāi...

“Hearing the *salok* Sheikh Braham asked Kamal, “Did you understand anything?” Kamal replied, “You know everything, O Master!” To which Sheikh said, “Child, the man who has uttered this *salok* appears to be a Divinely person. Take me to him; he has praised Khuda!”

“Then Sheikh Braham took Kamal along and went to Guru Nanak. Sheikh Braham reached where the Guru was sitting and greeted him. The Guru also greeted him and said, “Divine has been benevolent, who has arranged our meeting.”

“Then Sheikh Braham said, “I am wonderstruck by one of your *salok*. I said, take me to the one who has uttered this *salok*.” The Guru then replied, “I am blessed to have met you!” Then Sheikh Braham said, “Please explain your *salok* in which you state that there is only One, why praise the other?”

*“But, there is one Master and two instructors.²⁰
Which one to serve/follow and which one to discard?”*

“You state that there is only One; but Hindus say that theirs is true and the Muslims say that theirs is true. Please explain, let me see, who do you consider to be right and who do you consider to be wrong?” Guru Nanak replied, “There is only one Master and only one instruction; serve only the One and reject the other.”

“... Then Sheikh Braham asked, “Please recite a ballad (*var*) of Khuda for us. Our understanding is that a ballad cannot be without two [characters] and you talk about one and only One. Let me see, who do you take as a rival/parallel of Khuda!” Then, Guru Nanak directed Bhai Mardana to play the *rabab*. Bhai Mardana played the *rabab* in Rag Asa. The Guru uttered *salok*:

*“I devote (myself) to my Guru... witnessed Your Own play delightfully.²¹
“Nine pauris were uttered regarding this...²²*

The witnessed-narrative (*sākhī*) number sixteen in the Janamsakhi B-40²³ also contains this narrative. According to Dr. Kirpal Singh, Guru Sahib met Sheikh

²⁰ Instructors, gurus, mentors (one from the Hindus and one from the Muslims). -Dr. Piar Singh, *Ādi Sākhīāṁ*, Editor, Lahore Book Shop, Ludhiana, 1972m page 191

²¹ Here, *janamsakhi* contains the entire text of the first *pauri* in Asa Ki Var and its accompanying three *saloks*.

²² S. S. Padam, *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī Kī* (Puratan Janamsakhi – Narrator Saido Jat), Editor., Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2018, page 152-156

²³ Piar Singh, B-40 Janam Sākhī Srī Nānak Dev Jī, editor, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1989, page 70-71

Ibrahim twice; once while going towards the east, and the second time while going towards the west. Asa Ki Var was revealed during their second meeting.²⁴ To support their claim, they have quoted Bhai Mani Singh's Janamsakhi. There is a reference to the meeting between Guru Nanak Sahib and Sheikh Ibrahim during the former's third travel (*udāsī*) in the Meharban Janamsakhi as well. In this Janamsakhi, paramarth (essence) of twelve *pauris* is given in the form of discourses.²⁵ Prof. Sahib Singh also agrees that the Guru's visit occurred during his third *udāsī*.²⁶

According to the Puratan Janamsakhi, the *pauris* that came after *pauri* nine were revealed during the meeting with Duni Chand. Duni Chand was a resident of Lahore. He had prepared a *braham bhoj* (religious feast) to satisfy the hunger of his ancestors. The Guru went to him and counselled him. Thus, Janamsakhi literature points to the revelation of the *pauris* of Asa Ki Var occurring in Pakpattan and Lahore. But, while quoting Gian Ratnavali of Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Manjit Singh²⁷ states that Asa Ki Var had been revealed even before meeting Sheikh Braham (Ibrahim):²⁸

“Sheikh Braham said: ... The minstrels sing praises of the kings...who are pleased by it. Warriors are also pleased and inspired to fight...”

“The Guru said: Just as they ... sing praises of the king and ... the king is pleased and ... [similarly] those who are seekers, their mind and senses are also kindled and inspired...”

“Sheikh Braham: ... So, please recite a ballad of the Supreme Being for me...”

²⁴ Dr. Kirpal Singh, Janamsākhī Paramparā: Itihāsak Drishtīkoṅ Tom, Punjabi University, Patiala, 2009, page 29-118

²⁵ Dr. Kirpal Singh, Shamsheer Singh Ashok, Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Nānak Dev Jī (Miharbān Jī Soḍhī), editor, Khalsa College, Amritsar, 1962, page 488

²⁶ Prof. Sahib Singh, Jīvan-Britānt Srī Gurū Nānak Dev Jī, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2015, page 155-56

²⁷ Manjit Singh, Āsā Kī Vār, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2009, page 34

²⁸ “shekh braham kahiā:... jī ḍhāḍhī rājīum kīāṁ vārāṁ gāvate haiṁ so... mahārājā bhī prasann hote haiṁ. sūrme bhī prasann ho ke judh kā udam hoi āvatā hai...”
“bābe kahiā: taise jo... mahārāj kī vār gāvate haiṁ so... mahārāj bhī prasann hote haiṁ ar... jaūn se jagiāsī haiṁ tin kā bhī man ar indarīahum ke jīlaṅe kā udam hoi āvatā hai...”

shekh braham:... tāṁ te tusīṁ... mere tāīṁ kāī... prameshvar kī vār suṅāvāū...
bābe kahiā: mardāniā! kabīr jī ne gaūrī rāg aṅgīkār kīā hai... ar hamāre... sabh hī rāg haiṁ par... ih pīr āsā vant āiā hai so... ‘āsā ke rāg’ vic vār ‘suṅāvahu’...

“The Guru said: Mardana! Kabir has used Rag Gauri... and for us all rags are [equal], ... but this Pir has come with a hope (*āsā*), so... recite a ballad in Rag Asa.

[It is evident from the word ‘recite’ appearing in the above excerpt from Bhai Mani Singh’s manuscript, *Giān Ratnāvālī*, page 30-31, that ‘Asa Ki Var’ had been revealed to Guru Nanak Sahib even before meeting Sheikh Braham.]”

As per Prof. Sahib Singh “the subject of the entire *var* is the same, wherever it was revealed, it was revealed all together.”²⁹ Other than these citations, there is no other proof available that can shed light on the time and place of this revelation.

Musical Dimension

Singing Style

Singing in the form of *var* is one of the oldest and original folkloric styles of Panjab, in which the focus is on the valor of the warriors. More than mere war-poetry, however, it later evolved into laudatory-poetry. The tradition of *var* singing precedes the arrival of Guru Nanak Sahib. These *vars* were sung by minstrels (*dhadhīs*) or bards (*bhats*)³⁰ in the past.³¹

Out of the Guru Granth Sahib’s total twenty-two *vars*, nine *vars* have instructions provided for singing in specific folk tunes popular during and before the time of Guru Nanak Sahib. There is clear instruction by Guru Nanak Sahib to sing Asa Ki Var in the folk tune of the *var* of Ṭuṇḍe Asrāj (maimed king As). Bhai Prem Singh records the tune of Ṭuṇḍe Asrāj in his book ‘*Ratan Saṅgīt Bhaṇḍār*’ as follows:³²

Asa tune rhythmic pattern 3

bhabkio sher sardūl rāi raṇ mārū bajje.

kh 1 2 3 kh 1 2 3

bhab ki o sher sar dū la rā i vā le vā le vā ā raṇ mārū bajje.

ma ma ma ma pa pa pa pa sa+ni sa+ni sa+sa ni dha ma pa pa. (Note: sa+ means sa of the next octave; *tar saptak*)

- Rest on previous aforementioned notes.

²⁹ Prof. Sahib Singh, *Āsā Dī Vār Sṭīk*, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2016, page 9

³⁰ Traditional poets who wrote in the praise of their patron, usually a king.

Historically, they also served as genealogists and chroniclers to the kings.

³¹ There is a difference between the *ḍhāḍhī* or *bhaṭ* style of singing. While the *ḍhāḍhīs* used to sing ballads with musical instruments, the *bhaṭ*s used to recite poetry without any musical instrument.

³² Bhai Prem Singh, *Gurmati Saṅgīt Bhaṇḍār, Gurmati Saṅgīt (Vol 2)*, Dharam Parchar Committee, Central Khalsa Yateem Khana, Amritsar, 2008, p 101-102

*khān sultān baḍ sūrme vic raṅ de gajje.
khat likhe ṭunḍe asrāj nūrṁ patishāhī ajje.
ṭikkā sārāṅg bāp ne ditā bhar lajje.
phate pāi asrāi jī shāhī ghar sajje.*

In contemporary times, before singing Asa Ki Var, *ragis*³³ sing an appropriate *sabad* in Rag Asa as an invocation. After this, Asa Ki Var is started with the singing of the first *stanza* ‘*hari ammrit bhinne loiṅā*’ from the six *chants* (one *chakā*)³⁴ of four stanzas each revealed to Guru Ramdas Sahib. This is followed by *ragis* taking turns to sing *saloks* in a specified *rag* in a slow rhythm or without a specific rhythm (*bol-ālāp*) in a sequential order, during which the tabla player continues to play notes in a slow tempo (*cher*). In the end, the first stanza is concluded with the *pauri*, which is sung in the form of the popular old folk tradition.

The *pauri* is concluded with a *tihai* (repeating a set of tabla beats three times before ending). The tabla player then recites the *pauri* again. Then the *ragi* begins the next *stanza* of the *chant*. Based on this sequence of *chants*, *saloks*, and *pauris*, a total of six *chants*, sixty *saloks* and twenty-four *pauris* are sung. According to the need of the hour and the message of the respective *chants*, *ragis* also sing appropriate *sabads* on the related themes in between.

Some *ragis* try to sing Asa Ki Var in other *ragis*, which is not recommended. Revelation of Asa Ki Var by Guru Nanak Sahib in Rag Asa in an indication that it is recommended to sing it only in Rag Asa.

As per Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, while singing a *pauri*, a percussion instrument (Pakhavaj or Tabla) is not played in a rhythmic format (*gat*), but only played in strokes (*sath*) as an accompaniment to the *pauri* recitation. The *pauri* is recited to the audience in a singing format so that they can understand the meaning of the words. It is unfortunate that those doing *kirtan* are forgetting the *pauri* rendering

³³ Professional singers of *sabads* from the Guru Granth Sahib.

³⁴ In the Guru Granth Sahib, a group of six *sabads*, etc. is called a ‘*chakā*’; for instance on page 528, 530, 531. Similarly, in Rag Asa of Guru Granth Sahib, there are six *chants* or one *chaka* of four stanzas each under the title ‘*mahalā 4 ghar 4*,’ on page 448-451. But calling the individual stanza of these *chants* as *chaka* has become popular, which is a widespread mistake. There is a need to pay attention to this. For details, please check: Shabdārth, Gurū Granth Sāhib, Vol 2, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, 2010 and Bhai Joginder Singh Talwara, Gurū Granth Sāhib Bodh, Vol 1, Bāṅī Biurā, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2004

style, and they do not sing the *pauris* of *bilāval*, *kānarā*, etc. as per the old tradition while concluding the *caurm̄kī*³⁵ in the morning, evening and night.³⁶

Note: The *pauris* of Asa Ki Var are comprised of four or five lines. Because the last line is smaller than the others, there is a tradition of repeating it, in order to maintain poetic balance. After singing the *pauri*, it is read again to everyone, so that the audience may better absorb the message of the *pauri*. This repetition also gives time to the *ragis* to prepare for the next *pauri*.

Asa Rag

Rag Asa is fourth in the sequence of thirty-one principal *rags* recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib (pages 347-488). Guru Nanak Sahib's one hundred seventy, Guru Amardas Sahib's forty-eight, Guru Ramdas Sahib's thirty, Guru Arjan Sahib's one hundred eighty-eight, Guru Teghbhadar Sahib's one, Bhagat Kabir's thirty-seven, Bhagat Namdev's five, Bhagat Ravidas's six, Bhagat Dhana's two, and Baba Pharid's two *sabads* are recorded in Rag Asa.³⁷ Most of Guru Nanak Sahib's *sabads* have been revealed to the Guru in Rag Asa.

Earlier *ragis* used to sing this *rag* skillfully along with all its subdivisions. There are other prevalent forms of Rag Asa, which are sung along different subdivisions, like Pahārī, Bilāval, Kaliāṇ, and Kāphī.

Rag Asa is a famous and melodious *rag* of Panjab. Prevalent even before Guru Nanak Sahib, the *var* of Ṭunde Asrāj was also sung in this *rag*. Compositions of preceding *bhagats* in Rag Asa serve as evidence of the fact that this *rag* was prevalent even before the arrival of Guru Nanak Sahib. Folk legends, songs, stories and tunes sung and narrated in Rag Asa were extremely pleasing. Because of its unique qualities, outside of the *kirtan* tradition, Rag Asa is dominant in folk-music, classical music, and cinema also.

³⁵ Professional *kirtan* rendering by a group in one sitting that includes four phases: 1. Playing of the instruments to create a conducive musical environment and set the mood (*shān*) 2. Singing of an invocation, like a section of *sabads*, etc. in the praise of the Guru or the Divine (*maṅglācaran*) 3. The main part of the session in which compositions are sung in prescribed *rags* (*sabad*) 4. Recital of a stanza of a ballad as conclusion of the session (*pauri*).

According to certain traditions, the singing of *kirtan* by a group of four is also called a *caurm̄kī*. Traditionally four people used to sit in a *kirtan caurm̄kī*.

³⁶ Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, Mahān Kosh, Bhasha Vibhag, Patiala, 1974

³⁷ Bhai Joginder Singh Talwara, Gurū Granth Sāhib Bodh, Vol 1, Bāṇī Biurā, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2004

The *rag* is devotional in nature. The court singer and poet of Patiala estate, Bhai Prem Singh, in his book '*Ratan Saṅgīt Bhandār*,' writes that Rag Asa is obtained from an elegant combination of Siriragu, Megh Rag, and Rag Maru. Therefore, it falls under the category of dawn-dusk *rags* that are sung and played in the morning and evening. This is a *rag* whose *vadi* note falls in the upper part of the middle octave, i.e., *pa, dha, ni* and is elaborated by singing in higher octave (*utrāṅg vādī rāg*).

That: Bilaval

Notes: All natural (*shudh svar*)

Forbidden Notes: In *aroh* Ga and Ni

Jati: Aurav-sampuran

Vadi: Ma

Samvadi: Sa'

Aroh: Sa, Re Ma, Pa Dha, Sa'

Avroh: Sa' Ni, Dha Pa Ma, Ga Re Ga Sa

Singing Time: First quarter of morning and evening.

Tune of Tunda Asraj

In accordance with the instructions of the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Sahib, it is customary to sing Asa Ki Var in the early morning in the local folk-tune popularly named after King Asraj (Ṭunḍe Asrāj Kī Dhunī). One of the hands of King Asraj was amputated, therefore he was called *ṭunḍā* (maimed).

Scholars have narrated the story of King Asraj differently. Principal Teja Singh has described this story thus:

"King 'Asiraj' was the elder son of King Sarang. 'Asiraj' had two stepbrothers, Sardul Rai and Sultan Khan. Out of jealousy, they took Asiraj out on a hunting expedition, and wounded him before throwing him into a well. They told their father that a lion killed and ate Asiraj. A group of traders happened to check the well for water and discovered Asiraj there. Having pity on him they pulled him out, dressed his wounds and helped him heal. Bhag Jass, who was the king of the country the traders visited next, had died without an heir; so his ministers decided to find and enthrone the first person who entered the city gates the next morning. In accordance with Divine Will, Asiraj happened to be the first person to arrive at the city gates when the ministers were waiting there. They took him and immediately appointed him King of the country. Asiraj ruled well. Somehow his fame reached his father, King Sarang, who repented and wrote Asiraj a letter. When this news reached Asiraj's stepbrothers, they started preparing for a war. Asiraj won that war, and, with the consent of his

father and the latter's ministers, ascended to his father's throne. Minstrels wrote the *var* of Tunde Asiraj in Panjabi."³⁸

It is not known which country or region the characters of this story belong to. The *pauri* of the *var* is in Panjabi and *var* is a genre of Panjabi poetry. Consequently, it seems to be a story of a King belonging to some region in Panjab. The description of this story also matches the characters of Puran Bhagat and Rup-basant, etc. Hence, it requires more scrutiny.

It seems that this *var* that highlights valor and heroism was sung even during the time of Guru Arjan Sahib. The *dhadhis* sang the praises of the king's bravery in a tune that was popular among the people. It seems that among other reasons, Guru Arjan Sahib selected this tune for singing Asa Ki Var due to the structural similarities between the five-line *pauris* of Asa Ki Var and the *var* sung in praise of King Asraj.³⁹

The *saloks* accompanying the *pauris* are also sung in Rag Asa.

The narrative of King Asraj that is popular in Sikh literature is recorded in the Tika Faridkot (approximately 1880 CE). Dr. Charan Singh seems to have recorded this in his book '*Bāṇī Biurā*' (1902 CE) with a difference of only a few words.⁴⁰ All exegetes (interpreters) have used the above source as reference, but no one has quoted the original text; nor is the quote available anywhere.

Sample from Dr. Charan Singh is given below:

bhabkio sher sardūl rāi raṇ mārū bajje.
khān sultān baḍ sūrme vic raṇ de gajje.
khat likhe ṭunḍe asrāj nūrṇ patishāhī ajje.
ṭikkā sārāṅg bāp ne ditā bhar lajje.
*phate pāi asrāi jī shāhī ghar sajje.*⁴¹

³⁸ Principal Teja Singh, *Āsā Dī Vār Stīk*, Dharam Parchar Committee, Sri Amritsar, 1999, page 10-11

³⁹ Guru Harigobind Sahib had these nine tunes sung by the bards to infuse heroism, which the *Ṭaksālī rāgis* and *rabābis* continue to sing even today. Many writers have claimed that the sixth Guru added the tunes to the *vars*, but this is untrue." –Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, *Mahān Kosh*, Bhasha Vibhag Punjab, Patiala, page 669

⁴⁰ Dr. Charan Singh, *Srī Gurū Granth Bāṇī Biurā*, Panjabi Khalsa Agency, Amritsar, p 26

⁴¹ When this *var* was created, *adhak* (suprasegmental denoting stress) and special letters (like sh) were not prevalent. But these signs/marks and letters are noticed in modern publications. For this some old manuscript needs to be referred.

Significant Terms

Var

‘Var’ is a heroic poetic form, similar to a ballad, written in stanzas (*pauris*).⁴² According to the Mahān Kosh: “*Var* is a composition that describes war. The meaning of the word ‘*var*’ has become *pauri* (*ni:shreni/nisheni/nishani*) *chand* also, because poets have mostly used this *chand* to sing praises of the valor of warriors.”

In old Panjabi literature, the subject of *vars* is generally focused on worldly rule and the struggle for material wealth. Although *vars* written in the Guru Granth Sahib bring other subjects within their expansive scope, they fundamentally focus on the internal struggle of virtues and vices within the human mind, in a quest to become Divine-like. At the same time, these *vars*, while praising the Divine-existence, also praise the Truth-seeking travelers and the Guru, their mentor on this path.

In their original form, *vars* recorded in Guru Granth Sahib were written only in the form of *pauris*. During the compilation of the Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Arjan Sahib added appropriate *saloks* with the *pauris* of each *var*, while maintaining the central message of the *pauris* (usually expressed in their last line). Those *saloks* that did not match the central message of any *pauri* were recorded on pages 1410-1426 under the title ‘*salok vārām te vadhīk*’ (*saloks* beyond the *vars*).

Information given at the beginning of a *var* about its creator, *mahal* (e.g., *mahalā* 1), is actually an indicator of the creator of all of the *pauris* in that *var*. Wherever a *pauri* by another *mahal* is used, it is indicated through an appropriate title (e.g., *pauri* m: 5).

There are twenty-two *vars* included in the Guru Granth Sahib. Out of these, two *vars*⁴³ contain only *pauris* and no *salok*. In the rest of the twenty *vars*, *saloks* accompanying the *pauris* that are either of the same *mahal* or another were added by Guru Arjan Sahib at the time of Adi Granth’s compilation. Usually these *saloks* (accompanying a *pauri*), are two or more in number.

In a *var*, *saloks* appear before the *pauri*. The number recorded at the end of each *pauri* indicates only the number of *pauris* (in a *var*), and not the number of *saloks*.

⁴² In the thirteenth century, Cāṁd Bardāi wrote a granth named ‘*Prithvī Rāj Rāso*.’ Its composition in the form of *pauris* proves that ‘*pauris*’ is a technical requirement of a ‘*var*,’ and ‘*var*’ means a ‘laudatory poem,’ which in Sanskrit is known as ‘*rāis*.’ Guru Nanak Sahib has also used the word ‘*rāisā*’ for Divine praise: *rāisā piāre kā rāisā jītu sadā sukhu hoī. rahāu.* –Guru Granth Sahib 725

⁴³ ‘*rāmkalī kī vār rāi balvanḍi tathā satai ḍūmi ākhī*’ and ‘*basant kī vār mahalu 5*.’

For this reason, numbers counting the *pauris* (in a *var*) remain in sequential order from the beginning to the end, while the numbers counting *saloks* are limited to their respective *pauris*. The numbers accompanying *saloks* restart (from 1) with every new *pauri*.⁴⁴

Pauri

'*Pauri*' is a distinct pattern or a verse structure of Panjabi heroic-poetry (*var*). In other words *pauri* is that genre of poetry that is especially employed for the creation of a *var*. "Actually, there is a traditional relationship between *var* and *pauri*. Poetry on war cannot be called a *var* if it is not composed in the *pauri* form. '*Nādarshāh Dī Vār*' (ballad of Nadirshah) is written as '*Nādarshāh Dī Pauri*' (*pauri* of Nadirshah) even today. The author of '*Lau Kush Dī Vār*' has stated '*kīrati dās suṇāī paṛi paṛi paūṛīāṁ; dās thīā kurbāṇe paūṛī ākhi ākhi*' (Kirati Das recited by reading *pauris* repeatedly; Das was humbled by repeating the *pauris*) at a lot of places in the ballad. Even at the end of '*Chandī Dī Vār*' (ballad of Chandī), it says '*durgā pāṭh baṇāīā sabhe paūṛīāṁ*' (Durga composition was created entirely in the form *pauri*). It is clear that *pauri* is an inseparable part of a *var*, and both are based on each other. Dr. Charan Singh has described *pauri* as a genre of ballad in '*Bāṇī Biurā*'. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha has offered *pauri* as one meaning for *var* amongst others in Mahān Kosh."⁴⁵

A *pauri* cannot be categorized into any particular poetic genre, though it is commonly used in poetic forms such as '*sirkhandī*' and '*nishānī*.' Just as a poem or stanza of six verses (*musaddas*)⁴⁶ is used in Urdu-Farsi, *pauri* has been used similarly in Panjabi poetry to accommodate long compositions.

Poetic forms like two-line verse (*doharā/dohā*) and four-line verse (*caupaī*), etc. have been used in the *pauris* of the *vars* recorded in the Guru Granth Sahib. That is why there is no uniformity in the number of lines used in these *pauris*. *Pauris* in Asa Ki Var are mostly four or five lines long; the last line is half in length. According to Dr. Ratan Singh Jaggi,⁴⁷ the last phase of a *pauri* is shortened to highlight its meaning.

At the time of the compilation of the Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Arjan Sahib retained the prominence of *pauri* in a *var*. He recorded the first line of the *pauris* in the table of contents of Guru Granth Sahib instead of the *saloks*.

⁴⁴ Bhai Joginder Singh Talwara, Jaitsarī Kī Vār Ate Vār Mārū Ḍakhāṇe Saṭk, Amritsar, 2010, page 7-8 (adaptation).

⁴⁵ Dr. Ratan Singh Jaggi, Sikh Panth Vishav Kosh, Vol 3, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, page 1255

⁴⁶ A poetic form.

⁴⁷ Dr. Ratan Singh Jaggi, Āsā Kī Vār, Gurmat Prakashan, Patiala, page 58

Salok

‘*Salok*’ is a poetic form, literally meaning ‘*praise*.’ In Sanskrit, *chands* (*anushtup* - अनुष्टुप्) are written under the title ‘*salok*.’ Due to the prominence of compositions based on letters (*varṇak-chand*) in Sanskrit, this *chand* was also used under the *varṇak* system. As popular pronunciation of the language evolved, over time, *varṇak chand* also gave way to compositions based on the poetic meter (*mātrik chand*). In Prakrit, the systemic approach towards *chand* was replaced by the usage of a single title (*salok*) for different types of *chands*. The transition of *salok* into poetic forms such as ‘*gāthā*’ in Prakrit and ‘*dohā*’ in Apabhraṁsh is a testimony to that.

The poetic form ‘*salok*’ has enjoyed a special place in medieval literature. In the Devanagari and Gurmukhi writings of the medieval period, there is broad usage of ‘*dohā*’ *chand* under the title *salok*. The same holds true even in the Guru Granth Sahib. For example, the *saloks* (first and second) appearing with the first *pauri* of Asa Ki Var have also been written in ‘*dohā*’ *chand*, even though there is no uniformity in the meter. This is primarily because in the Guru Granth Sahib, the message supersedes specific poetic restrictions. Bhai Kahn Singh, the author of ‘*Gur Chand Divākar*’ has indicated the use of *saloks* in poetic genres such as ‘*upmān, anushtup, sarsī, saloks* in the form of *dohā,*’ etc.

Saloks ranging from one to twenty-six lines can be found in the Guru Granth Sahib, although most of the *saloks* are two lines long. It is clear from the diversity visible in the number of lines in the *saloks* that, in the Guru Granth Sahib, meaning and message take priority over maintaining structure.

Mahala

The word ‘*mahalā*’ used in the titles within the Guru Granth Sahib indicates the Guru who has uttered the respective composition. There are different opinions on the etymology, meaning, and pronunciation of this word. Some scholars believe the Arabic word ‘*halūl*’ (محل) to be its source. They interpret it as ‘the place of alighting (descending),’ and pronounce it as ‘*ma-halā* (*mahallā*).’⁴⁸ On the other hand, some scholars connect it with the Sanskrit ‘*mahalā*,’ and interpret it as ‘body.’ They read it as ‘*mahilā*’ on the pattern of *pahilā, gahilā, etc.*

⁴⁸ “The author of ‘Dabistan-e-mazahib’ writes that the place of *halūl* (محل) is *mahal*. For this reason, successors of Guru Nanak Sahib are known as *mahal*; that is, each Guru descends their Self into the other, or merges into the successor Guru.” –Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, Mahān Kosh, Bhasha Vibhag Punjab, Patiala, 1974, page 974. The popular term ‘*holā mahallā*’ in the Sikh tradition and vocabulary also supports this pronunciation.

Regardless of the origin of this word, the real issue is related to its pronunciation, which in turn is connected to the break-down of the syllables of this word. Even though research on this topic should continue, the solution to this for now could be that we break-down and pronounce it as ‘ma-ha-lā’ instead of breaking it down and reading it as ‘ma-halā’ (mahallā) or ‘mah-lā’ (mahilā). Regarding the pronunciation of this word, ‘mahalā shabad dā shuddh ucāraṅ,’⁴⁹ ‘bāṅī biurā’⁵⁰ and the bibliography given in the latter can also be checked.

Numbers appearing with ‘mahalā’ in the Guru Granth Sahib are ordinal numeral adjectives. They depict the sequential order of ‘mahalā.’ Because of that, its correct pronunciation here is *pahilā* (first), *dujā* (second), *tijā* (third), etc. and not *ik* (one), *do* (two), *tin* (three), etc. Guru Arjan Sahib, the compiler of Guru Granth Sahib, has indicated this at many places. For example:

rāgu sirīrāgu mahalā pahilā 1 gharu 1. –Guru Granth Sahib 14
gūjarī mahalā 3 tijā. –Guru Granth Sahib 492

⁴⁹ Giani Gurdit Singh (editor), Singh Sabha Patrika, Chandigarh, 1994.

⁵⁰ Bhai Joginder Singh Talwara, Gurū Granth Sāhib Bodh, Part 1, Bāṅī Biurā, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2004