Max Muller, a German scholar of the nineteenth-century argued that the intelligentsia of religious studies should have their primary focus on the study of sacred texts as such documents contain the authentic doctrines of the prophets and their disciples. In fact, intelligentsia from times immemorial have always assumed that the primary and only way of learning about a religious tradition is to look into the details of the religious texts whether it is the Bible for Christians, the Quran for Muslims, the Vedas for Hindus, the Adi Granth for Sikhs and so on.

The religious texts, forming a collection of sacred hymns, are considered to be sacramental and give central importance to their religious traditions. The understanding of any religion or culture should not be confined to the study of its scriptural texts only; rather different other such texts need to be studied. The religious texts are always a part of a larger field of religious practices, through reading, speech and performance. The study of religious texts requires that we examine not only the contents of such texts, but also their use in our real life. The understanding of scriptural texts also requires looking at how readers create meanings, either as individuals or as members of interpretative communities. That is, texts come to have particular meanings upon being read, not only upon being written.
In the present times, a variety of aspects concerned with the textuality exist which demand a thoughtful study. These aspects relate to the historical, political, cultural, philosophical, grammatical, religious factors, etc. Any scriptural text can be analyzed in terms of its poetic, form, style, diction and rhetoric. In the same context, the hermeneutics of a text works on different levels; it is concerned with how the text works, what the text says and how the text transcends its hidden revealed message to the mankind. The hermeneutics is a science of interpreting Scriptures. The term ‘hermeneutics’ has a vast and unique history of its own. It constitutes almost all the aspects of a Scripture in its study. The interpretation of a Scripture is linked to the conscious and sub-conscious stages of mind of the concerned author. Therefore, it requires a serious study of spiritual activity not the recitation of written words.

The subject of hermeneutics in the context of Guru Granth Sahib has always been of keen interest to me. The wider scope of hermeneutics encouraged me to move further in this direction. So, I chose to work on this topic for a number of reasons. The main objective of this research work is to establish the standards and methods for the interpretation of Guru Granth Sahib. Apart from it, an attempt has been made to study the research tools or methodologies used for the interpretation of Gurmat and the role of an interpreter.

In the present work, the historical, theological and comparative methodology has been used for the interpretation of Guru Granth Sahib. An
attempt has also been made to study the philosophical and comparative modes of interpretation to understand the concept of Sabad in the context of hermeneutics. The works of various scholars especially those of Richard E. Palmer’s (Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher), Wilfred Cantwell Smith (What is Scripture?: A Comparative Approach), Dr. Taran Singh (Gurbani Diyan Viakhya Parnalian), Dr. Gurnek Singh (Guru Granth Sahib: Interpretation, Meaning and Nature; Guru Granth Sahib: Nature of Numen and Message), Dr. Devinder Singh Chahal (The Essence of Nankian Philosophy), Dr. Darshan Singh (Bhai Gurdas Sikhi De Pahle Viakhiyakar), influenced me the most to undertake this study on the present topic. In the present research work, I have used Manmohan Singh’s English translation of Guru Granth Sahib published by Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar in 8 volumes.

The present study is organized into five chapters and conclusion. The first chapter introduces us to the topic of this study with a description of hermeneutics, its nature, importance, need and scope in the 21st century. It is intricate to give a universal definition of hermeneutics due to its vast scope but an attempt has been made to explore the origin and development of hermeneutics through the ages. Further, an endeavour has been made to find how hermeneutics includes in itself the study of history, language, grammar, etc. The theories of hermeneutics as provided by Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey have been accorded due consideration. The contribution of eminent scholars like Martin
Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer in this field is also in no way less significant. In this way, hermeneutics has been explained in such a manner that it can be understood clearly and deeply as a Western discipline.

The second chapter titled, ‘Compilation of Guru Granth Sahib and its Nature’ describes the Sikh Scripture in its principle sense. Guru Granth Sahib is the holy Scripture of the Sikhs and it is their Eternal Guru; that is, their authoritative religious and spiritual guide, their preceptor and enlightener for all times. The particular understanding of revelation is based upon the doctrine of the Sabad-Guru, enunciated by Guru Nanak and the succeeding Gurus. It is known as ‘Dhur ki Bani’ and ‘Khasam ki Bani’. The Gurbani is secular; united in its ideology, immutable, revelation, spiritual, mystic, unambiguous, tranquil and didactic in its nature. It marks a water-shed in the history of spiritual heritage of Indian sub-continent. A deep discussion on the structure, diction, rhymes and contributors of Guru Granth Sahib is made so that the reader may not have any difficulty while consulting it. After understanding the general attributes of Guru Granth Sahib, the compilation, editing and nature of Gurbani has been explained at length to grasp the internal structure of Guru Granth Sahib. The purpose of the present study is to understand the Divine Revelatory nature of the Word or Sabad in the Guru Granth Sahib in relation to hermeneutics.

The third chapter named, ‘Interpretation of Gurbani: Its History and Features (1604-2004)’ deals with the various nuances of interpretation. The
interpretation begins at the discursive level of the consideration, at which one deals with the literal sense of Gurbani but goes deeper and deeper as one contemplates the Divine mysteries by gradually penetrating into subtler levels of the meaning. The interpretation of Guru Granth Sahib began soon after its compilation. The primary concern is to introduce briefly the different approaches adopted by various schools of interpretation, especially in the context of Guru Granth Sahib. The prominent schools of interpretation include Sehaj Parnali (School), Bhai Parnali (School), Udasi Parnali (School), Nirmala Parnali (School), Giani or Sampardai Parnali (School), Singh Sabha Parnali (School) and Academic School. The exegetical works created by the scholars of these traditional schools clearly exhibit their attempt to bring out the original ideology of the Sikh tenets. The scholars of Academic School adopted an approach which was quite different and primarily guided by the scientific and rationalistic influence of Western education. Through this process of re-interpretation of the Sikh tradition they were able to produce detailed commentaries on Guru Granth Sahib. The various disciplines and schools of Gurbani interpretation emerged partly because of the differences in the philosophical outlook of the scholars and affiliations of the interpreters to different sects. All the exegetical writings succeeded to a certain extent for the relevant purpose, though all have their own limitations and shortcomings as well. The chief motive of this work is to provide an inclusive hermeneutical study of the Guru Granth Sahib from comparative, historical, theological and philological perspectives.
The fourth chapter titled, ‘Understanding of Guru Granth Sahib: A Hermeneutical Study’ forms the basis of the present research work. Today, the religions are becoming more and more dynamic, and their social and political involvements more provoking and problematic. It is the task of every country to contextualize the message of its Scriptures and to seek their faithful meaning in and for its particular cultural, geographical and historical situation. The study of Guru Granth Sahib has been undertaken from the hermeneutical point view. The philosophical vision in the Sikh Scripture has been studied to find on what basis the faith in the Sikh religion is based, how a Sikh vision is formulated, and what factors influence them.

Any research work is not complete unless we discuss the subject in its comparative sense. So, a comparative approach has been followed to study the level at which faith works in the Sikh religion and how it is applied. The theological as well as epistemological meanings of Sabad are studied as a comparative tool with reference to its practicability in different religions. The issues such as the role and importance of language, and limitations of hermeneutics and an interpreter have been specifically emphasized.

The fifth chapter describes the various methods for the understanding of Guru Granth Sahib. It attempts to establish certain principles for the research methodology to be followed in the perspective of Gurmat. A question is generally raised when Gurbani is a subject of spiritual experience then
why its research methodology is not based on the principles of Gurmat and what
should be the basis of its research and forms related to the Gurmat. Therefore, an
attempt has been made to find the basis of this research and its forms related to
Gurmat. A collection of references is explored to put them in a systematic order.
These have been broadly divided into two parts. The first part contains the
references from the Gurbani, and the second incorporates the references given by
various Sikh exegetes and scholars. The references within the Gurbani and the
unexplored references of various scholars have been considered for the present
study. The arguments come to a close by defining the qualities of a good
interpreter. The limitations and problems faced by an interpreter during the
interpretation of a text are also discussed in an explanatory form.

The sixth and last chapter provides the conclusion. Hermeneutics is
considered to be of utmost importance to reach at the right meaning of any
Scripture. The Divine message of Eternal Reality can be conveyed to the entire
humanity only after finding a true meaning of a Scripture. Until and unless we
search for the hidden idea of any religious Scripture, we cannot convey the
message of brotherhood and universality to the world. Some people believe that
hermeneutics is a Western discipline, so it cannot be used as a research tool for the
study of Guru Granth Sahib. Here, it should be remembered that if the positive
elements of another culture can be used for the understanding of some text, then
why can’t we accept hermeneutics as a discipline to interpret Scriptures other
than the Bible? In fact, hermeneutics provides us tools, skill and guidance to
pursue right vision and perspective. It not only provides us the techniques and process to perceive meaning and reality but also sharpens our vision and understanding of the meaning with new and more possible dimensions and thereby improves our perception of reality. No doubt, we need to make efforts for initiating a discipline of Sikh Hermeneutics or Gurmat Mimamsa based on the interpretation of Gurbani.

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