

# Revisiting Sikh history through prism of Persian Chronicles

Dr. Daljit Kaur

*Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi*

**Abstract:** *The present monogram undertakes a critical examination of significant Persian texts to explicate the developmental path of Sikhism and the formation of Sikh community. The primary texts examined include excerpts from historical documents such as Akbarnama, Tuzuk-i Jahangiri, Dabistan-i Mazahib, Khulasatu 't Tawarikh, Ahkam-i 'Alamgiri, 'Ibratnama, History of Punjab by Syad Muhammad Latif are other relevant manuscripts.*

*The study involves translations of these Persian texts by renowned scholars like Shireen Moosvi and Irfan Habib, constituting secondary literature. This research centers around the historical period spanning from 1600 to 1750 CE, offering a thorough examination of the multi-dimensional intricacies that characterized this era. Most of Persian manuscript primarily date from the period between 1600 and 1765. Chroniclers of these Persian texts provide insights into the complex dynamics between the Sikhs, Mughals, and Afghan communities. The political considerations are evident in the chosen Persian primary sources as the historical period covers the Sikh-Mughal relations and the following resurgence of Sikh authority holds significant importance in the eighteenth century. In the following centuries many Muslim chroniclers presented their respective research monologues, which helped in shaping Punjab's Tapestry.*

*The paper primarily emphasizes political history, it acknowledges the limited availability of this information in current Sikh sources. This highlights the importance of Persian manuscripts with different Perspective in piecing together the tapestry of Sikh history in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.*

**Keywords:** *Persian, Chronicles, Historiography and Sikh History*

## INTRODUCTION

The exploration of Sikh history has often been confined to the narratives woven within the Sikh tradition. However, these Persian texts cover a vast period up to the eighteenth century, leaving hardly any significant historical work untouched. The translations of these works from reliable texts aims to revolutionize our understanding of the Sikh past. The bulk of the evidence presented spans the years 1600 to 1765, with particular emphasis on the period from 1757-58 to 1765. This focus aligns with the critical phase in Sikh history when they re-established their

power, grappling with the challenges posed by the Afghan rulers. The concentration on this period, marked by the Sikhs' triumph, underscores the political concerns of the Persian chronicles' authors. Banda Bahadur, who defied Mughal authority and set up what Sikhs considered a "Sovereign state," receives notable attention. The intensity of the conflict during this period is reflected in the language employed by the writers, ranging from ridicule to anger towards 'the destroyers of peace and order.'

The history of Punjab is enriched by a diverse array of sources spanning multiple languages, each contributing uniquely to different periods. Sanskrit texts primarily illuminate the ancient era, while Persian and Gurmukhi (Punjabi) sources are key for the medieval period. English writings dominate the modern historical narrative.

Persian chronicles, in particular, are significant not only for their political accounts but also for their insights into the social and religious life of the Sikh community. These works reflect a variety of perspectives, shaped by the authors' diverse religious and social backgrounds, revealing a range of attitudes from empathy to hostility. The motivations behind these writings vary, including personal ambition, political aims, literary expression, and a genuine desire to inform. Despite being written from a distance, these accounts, based on personal observation, offer valuable contributions to our understanding of Sikh history.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PERSIAN TEXTS

This paper involves diverse range of works, including general histories like the Akbarnama and Khuldsatu 't Tawarikh memoirs of figures such as Emperor Jahangir and Tahmas Khan, and unique compositions like the Dabistan. This research paper aims to explore and critically analyze specific sections of these Persian texts, focusing on the representation of Sikh history during the Mughal era. The Akbarnama, Khuldsatu 't Tawarikh, Tazkiratu's Salatin-i Chaghat, Muntakhabu 'l Lubdb, and Mir'at-i Wdridat collectively provide a

broader historical backdrop of the Mughal period. These works set the stage for understanding the socio-political milieu in which Sikh history unfolded. The *Nuslcha i Dilkusha*, *Ibratnama* of Muhammad Qasim and Mirza Muhammad, and Imadu's *Sa'ddat* offer insights into specific periods and regions, shedding light on localized events and their impact on Sikh history. Exploring the memoirs of Jahangir and Tahmas Khan, along with official documents like the *Ahkam-i 'Alamgir* and *Akhbarat-i Darbar-i Mualia*, offers an opportunity to understand the Mughal perspective on Sikhism and the corresponding administrative responses.

#### SIKH HISTORY THEMES IN PERSIAN TEXTS

Examining passages related to the fifth Guru Arjan and Mughal Emperors reveals the evolving significance of the Sikh movement during the late 16th century. The diplomatic and political dimensions of Akbar's visit to Guru Arjan and Jahangir's disapproval of Sikh conversions, the differing accounts of Guru Arjan's martyrdom in various texts, the role attributed to Jahangir and the involvement of Khatri provides a nuanced understanding of the events. Examining the depiction of Sikhs' religious identity and the change in the attitude of Mughal Emperors towards Sikh Gurus<sup>1</sup> in the *Dabistan* and *Varan* by Bhai Gurdas, including their stance on caste distinctions, idol worship, and acceptance of individuals from diverse backgrounds, provides insights into the inclusive nature of Sikhism. Comparing the perspectives of researchers like the author of the *Dabistan* and *Tazkira Patr Hassu* present on Guru Nanak's spiritual reputation and the stories associated with his Mazar at Kartarpur reveals the interplay between historical events and religious narratives. The *Akhbarat's* account of Guru Gobind Singh's political engagements and the destruction of a Sikh temple in Buriya<sup>2</sup>, in pargana Khizrabad, sarkar Sirhind shed light on the aggressive stance of the Mughals against Khalsa. Analysing the motivations behind these actions provides a deeper understanding of the socio-political climate. Banda Singh Bahadur's Uprising and his activities are detailed, writing down that he set up an independent state and faced opposition from the Mughal Empire. The Khalsa

played a role in the uprising, leading to disorder in the territories. Banda Singh Bahadur was eventually besieged, leading to his surrender and subsequent execution, along with his followers.

#### AKBAR'S MEETING WITH GURU ARJAN IN 1598, ABU'L FAZL'S AKBARNAMA

The text discusses Akbar's meeting with Guru Arjan in 1598, as documented in Abu'l Fazl's renowned *Akbarnama*. This encounter is noted as the earliest known reference to the Gurus or Sikhs in Persian by an external source. The *Akbarnama* provides a brief account of Akbar's visit to Guru Arjan during his departure from Lahore in 1598. It is highlighted that Abu'l Fazl's description of Guru Arjan as the leader of a 'Brahmanical' sect may be attributed to his absence from the Imperial Camp at that time. Consequently, it is suggested that Abu'l Fazl's account is second-hand, likely based on a news report<sup>3</sup>. The historical significance lies in the fact that this text stands for a pivotal moment in the interaction between Akbar, a prominent Mughal emperor, and Guru Arjan, a key figure in Sikh history, marking an early mention of Sikhs in Persian records.

#### GURU ARJAN'S MARTYRDOM IN TUZUK-I-JAHANGIRI

The text is an excerpt from the memoirs of Jahangir, the Mughal emperor, detailing the martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606. Guru Arjan, Sikh Guru, living in Goindwal on the river Beas, was executed on the orders of Jahangir. According to Jahangir, Guru Arjan had attracted a significant following of simple-minded Hindus and ignorant Muslims, fostering faith in his spiritual leadership. Jahangir describes how the Guru's influence had persisted through several generations. The emperor had long contemplated putting an end to what he perceived as a fraudulent enterprise or bringing Guru Arjan into the fold of Islam. The catalyst for Jahangir's decisive action was Khusrau's interaction with Guru Arjan. Khusrau, seeking support, stopped at the Guru's place, where he received blessings and a mark on his forehead. This act, seen as a breach of acceptable conduct, led Jahangir to order Guru Arjan to Lahore. Jahangir asserts that he handed

<sup>1</sup>  
GURU  
DAS  
BHAI,  
VARA  
N

<sup>2</sup> Habib, Irfan, Documents on the Sikhs and Guru Gobind Singh translated from *Ahkam-i-Alamgiri*, 1703-07

<sup>3</sup> Shireen Moosvi, Akbar meets Guru Arjan, Sikh History from Persian Sources, p.55

over Guru Arjan's possessions to his minister, Murtaza Khan confiscated his goods, and ordered his capital punishment. The reason given is Guru Arjan's alleged support for Khusrau and the perceived threat he posed. However, other accounts, as summarized by the Jesuit fathers at Jahangir's court, suggest a different scenario. According to them, Guru Arjan was initially imprisoned to force him to pay a heavy fine. Subsequently, he died from the torture inflicted by his surety, who had pledged to pay the fine on his behalf. The narrative paints a complex picture of religious and political tensions during that period. The translation of Jahangir's memoirs sheds light on the differing perspectives on Guru Arjan's martyrdom, presenting it as a consequence of political manoeuvring, religious differences, and the broader context of Mughal rule and the continuous clash between Mughal and Sikh identity

#### SIKHISM AND THE SIKHS, 1645-46, DABISTAN-I MAZAHIB TRANSLATED BY IRFAN HABIB

The text is an excerpt from the translation of a Persian work called "Dabistan-i Mazahib" by Irfan Habib. The Dabistan is a unique compilation on various religions and sects, and this excerpt focuses on Sikhism and the Sikhs in the years 1645-46. The author of the Dabistan is identified by the title "Mobad" (Parsi priest), and there is no justification for attributing it to Muhsin 'Fan!' or Mirza Zulfiqar.

The section on Sikhism in the Dabistan provides insights into the life of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. The author describes Nanak's beliefs, emphasizing the oneness of God, transmigration of souls. However, later Gurus like Arjan Dev and Hargobind allowed meat consumption, leading to differences among followers.<sup>4</sup>The narrative continues with the succession of Gurus after Nanak, their beliefs, and the growth of Sikhism. Guru Arjan faced persecution under Jahangir, leading to his death in 1606-07. Hargobind, Arjan's son, succeeded him and faced challenges, including imprisonment in Gwalior. The Sikhs, under Guru Hargobind, grew in number, and the author describes their practices, including the role of masands (representatives) in collecting offerings and taxes. The text also touches on conflicts between the Sikhs and the Mughal authorities, battles,

<sup>4</sup> Sikhism and the Sikhs, 1645-46, From 'Mobad', Dabistan-I-Mazahib translated by Irfan Habib

<sup>5</sup> Sikh History from Persian Sources, edited by J.S Grewal and Irfan Habib, N. Delhi 2001, p. 10

and Guru Hargobind's resilience. The narrative concludes with the state of Sikhism in the 17th century, mentioning Guru Hargobind as the current Guru and providing details on his activities, battles, and the Sikhs' settlement in various places.

Dabistan underscore importance and understanding of the pre-Khalsa Panth. The information it gives is not only comprehensive but also extremely significant when combined with the evidence of Bhai Gurdas who wrote mostly in the early decades of the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> The Dabistan is an extremely helpful source of information about Sikh community organisation.

#### BANDA BAHADUR'S REBELLION (1710-11) FROM MUHAMMAD HADI KAMWAR KHAN'S 'TAZKIRATU 'S SALATIN CHAGHATA'

Kamwar Khan's 'Tazkiratu's Salatin Chaghata', translated by S. Ali Nadeem Rezvi, stands out for its meticulous detailing of events through precise dates, particularly focusing on the notable uprising led by Banda Bahadur in 1710. The account spans from Banda's ascent to power in 1710 to the culmination of his political career in 1716. The narrative, however, exhibits a notable gap in information for the years 1711 to 1714. The account begins with a brief description of Banda Bahadur's rise to power in 1710,<sup>6</sup> followed by an elaborate portrayal of the actions taken by Bahadur Shah and his commanders against Banda and the Khalsa from October 13 to December 12, 1710. The subsequent years, 1711 to 1714, offer scant details, leaving a historical void that the text acknowledges. Despite this gap, the information provided for the years 1711 and 1713 holds value, shedding light on significant events. In 1711, Bahadur Shah's march from Lohgarh towards Lahore is detailed, involving the imprisonment of Raja Bhup Prakash of Nahari, accused of collusion with Banda. The emperor made Banda's capture a condition for the Raja's release, a narrative underscored by the execution of over thirty Sikhs. The text also notes battles with Sikh leaders such as Shams Khan and the subsequent appointment of 'Isa Khan as the deputy-faujdar of the Jalandhar Doab. The sparse information for the year 1713 highlights skirmishes between 'Abdu's Samad Khan, Ahmad Khan, and the Sikhs. Banda's territorial activities around Lohgarh and

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Banda Bahadur's Rebellion, 1710-16-From MuhammadHadi Kanwar Khan, Tazkiratu's Salatin CHAGHATA translated by s. Ali Nadeem Razavi

Sadhaura are briefly touched upon. The following year, 1714, lacks substantial historical content about Banda's activities. The narrative gains depth in the final phase, covering the period from March 21, 1715, to June 20, 1716.<sup>7</sup> This phase provides a detailed account of Banda Bahadur's last days, including the siege of Gurdaspur in April 1715, culminating in Banda's surrender in December 1715. The report of Banda's fall reached Farrukh Siyar on December 11, 1715, marking the end of the Sikh leader's resistance. Kamwar Khan's account offers a comprehensive overview of Banda Bahadur's rebellion, emphasizing the first and last phases of his political activities while acknowledging the paucity of information for certain years. The detailed descriptions and emphasis on specific events contribute to a nuanced understanding of this crucial period in Sikh history.<sup>8</sup>

#### HISTORY OF PUNJAB BY SYED MOHAMMAD LATIF IN 1892

The annexation of Punjab prompted several European administrators to document their experiences, but their accounts often neglected the region's pre-Sikh and ancient history, as noted by Syed Muhammad Latif in 1891.<sup>9</sup> These writings, primarily in English, focused on contemporary events without a comprehensive view of Punjab's historical continuum.<sup>10</sup> In the 19th century, a significant historical work "History of Punjab" emerged, authored by Syed Muhammad Latif, a native Punjabi historian. He was affiliated with the Anjuman-i-Punjab and the Bengal Asiatic Society. His notable contribution "History of Punjab," earned recognition from the Queen Empress of India. Latif started writing in Urdu, with titles like *Tarikh-i-Panjab Mah-halaat-i-Shar Lahore* and *Tarikh-i-Lahore*, before transitioning to English. His historical analyses encompass the ancient, medieval, and modern periods, structured into five parts that explore topics ranging from hydrography and early Muslim invasions to the Sikh Gurus, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and the late 19th century. Latif expressed his motivation to document Punjab's history to share the story of his homeland with his compatriots, aiming for historical accuracy without sectarian bias. His work

reflects an integration of indigenous and European historical perspectives, proving him as a pioneering figure in Punjabi historiography and Sikh Guru period. Though Latif's work mostly depended upon English sources, but despite many limitations, his pioneer work is considered as a milestone in the nineteenth century Indian Historiography.<sup>11</sup> He was the first Indian, who gives a complete and comprehensive histories of the Punjab<sup>12</sup>. By virtue of this he earned a well-deserved title of Syed Muhammad Latif the 'Historian of the Punjab'

Other notable Persian sources written for the eighteenth and nineteenth century are:

- Jang Namah by Qazi Nur Muhammad (1765),
- Tarikh-i-Punjab by Ahmad Shah of Batala (1820),
- Tarikh-i-Panjab, by Ghulam Muhayyaddin, Bute Shah (1842),
- Tazkara-i-Multan (anonymous) (1861) Ibratnama by Mufti Aliuddin (1854).

#### CONCLUSION

The present study paper delves into the rich tapestry of Persian manuscripts to unravel the developmental trajectory of Sikhism and the formation of the Sikh community during the pivotal period from 1600 to 1750 CE. Through a meticulous examination of primary sources such as Akbarnama, Tuzuk-i Jahangiri, Dabistan-i Mazahib, Khulasatu 't Tawarikh, Ahkam-i 'Alamgiri, and 'Ibratnama, the study has shed light on the intricate political, theological, and social dynamics that shaped this era.

The chosen Persian texts, masterfully translated by scholars like Syad Mohammad Latif, Shireen Moosvi, Irfan Habib, Muzaffar Alam and Mohammad Athar Ali offer invaluable insights into shaping and weaving the tapestry of the Punjab's History with special reference to the Punjab. The reliance on Persian manuscripts underscores the interdisciplinary nature of historical research and emphasizes the importance of diverse sources in constructing a comprehensive narrative of the past. These Persian historians throw ample light on Banda Bahadur's administrative and agrarian reforms

<sup>7</sup> Sikh History from Persian Sources, edited by J. S Grewal and Irfan Habib, N. Delhi 2001, p. 15

<sup>8</sup> Dhillon, Balwant Singh, Banda Singh Bahadur: Pharsi Sarot, (Punjabi) 2011

<sup>9</sup> Latif, Syed Muhammad Latif, History of the Panjab, Calcutta 1892, Civil and Military press.

<sup>10</sup> Bal, S.S, Nanak in the Eyes of Non-Sikhs, Punjab University 1969, Chandigarh.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Shafique, Syed Muhammad Latif: Syed Muhammad Latif: A Pioneer Man of Regional Historiography of Punjab, Journal of Indian Studies, Vol.4, No.1, 2018, pp.07-15

<sup>12</sup> ibid

and enrich our knowledge about his military genius, warfare strategy, and social change that he had ushered in. This exploration of Persian texts has enriched our comprehension of Sikh history, offering a nuanced perspective on the complex interactions that defined the Sikh community's emergence and growth based on Guru Nanak's egalitarian ideology. In the compiling of The Adi Granth (Guru Granth Sahib) Sikh Gurus incorporated vernacular languages in it paving way for universal brotherhood irrespective of any caste, colour or creed. Hymns of Baba Farid and Sant Kabir are unique master pieces of Sikh ideology