

A Critical evaluation of Dalip Singh's views on Muslim-Sikh Relations in Mughal India

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Professor Dalip Singh—an eminent academic authority on Sikh Studies, the present chair and senior-researcher of Sikh Research and Education Center based in Chesterfield, Missouri—has written six voluminous books as well as numerous scholarly articles on the history, philosophy, and theology of Sikhism. His books are veritable sources of information on the history of Sikhism and the dynamics of the relationship between Sikh and Muslim citizens during the Mughal Empire's era of ascendancy in India. The rise of Mughal rule directly coincided with the flourishing of the spiritual ministry of Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of the Sikh faith and the subsequent ministries of the nine Sikh Gurus succeeding him. Utilizing Prof. Singh's books as bases of reference, I will evaluate and analyze his views regarding Sikh and Muslim relations in Mughal India.

Prof. Singh's books, *Life of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and His Teachings* (published by his research center in 2004), *Life of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji* (2002), and *Eight Divine Guru Jots (Lights)* (2004) are very helpful in their presentation of the flow of events describing the relations between the ten Gurus of Sikhism and the Mughal emperors contemporaneous with these Gurus.

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak (1469-1539 A.D.), witnessed the defeat of the Turkic Lodhi rulers of Delhi and the rise of the Mughal regime under the leadership of the descendant of Timur, the victorious Babar. The defeated Turkic Lodhi rulers and the Mughal victors were professing Sunni Muslims. Both camps were related by bloodline to the great Turko-Mongol clan of conquerors (Al-Khanids) who ruled the Middle East, Central Asia and North India. The change of rulership in the throne of Delhi—from the Lodhi dynasty to the new Timurid-Mughal conqueror, Babar—established more firmly the hegemonic hold of Sunni Islam in the Indian Subcontinent. The tenth and last Guru of the Sikhs, Gobind Singh (1675-1708) struggled against the ultra-orthodox Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Guru Gobind Singh fought Aurangzeb on egalitarian principles, and not because of religious differences between them. This conflict was triggered by the emperor's apparent partiality and favoritism towards Muslims at the expense of his Hindu and Sikh subjects. While struggling against the oppressive and elitist policies of the Mughals, the Sikh Gurus also fought against the caste-ridden, obscurantist, and discriminatory social practices of medieval Hinduism. This, in a gist, is the historical milieu and

framework of the development of Sikhism as an egalitarian religious-philosophical faith.

Reading Prof. Singh's books, I noticed the objectivity of his historical descriptions of the relations between the Sikh Gurus and the Mughal Muslim rulers. Prof. Singh identified what he calls "Brahminic historical concoctions" regarding many alleged events that transpired between the Sikh Gurus and the Mughal rulers; such historical myths purport to enlarge and blow out of proportion the Muslim-Sikh conflicts. Hindu Brahmin historians who were intensely opposed to the egalitarian and monotheistic message of Sikhism concocted these historical myths. Moreover, these Brahminic "historical concoctions" have adverse effects on the harmonious relations between Sikh and Muslim believers (See *Eight Divine Guru Jots [Light]*, op.cit., pp.180-197).

Prof. Singh's aim in reevaluating Sikhism's history is to reject and dismiss "myths" that tend to destroy the cordial and concordant relations between Muslims and Sikhs. Take for example his strong denial of the popular story propagated by Brahmin historians (a story that is unfortunately believed by most Sikhs) that a Pathan mercenary under the order of Emperor Bahadur Shah martyred Guru Gobind Singh. Prof. Singh utilized more than one-sixth of the total pages of his book, *Life of Guru Gobind Singh* to prove that the story is a "Hindu concoction" intended to sow discord among Muslims and Sikhs. He analyzed the factual events surrounding the last eighty days prior to the assault of Guru Gobind Singh's life to show the story as a total fabrication. Likewise, he also narrated the harmonious, fraternal, and friendly relations between the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah and the Guru (Cf. *Life of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji*, op.cit., pp. 312-336).

Such gestures of fairness coming from a Sikh historian are indeed praiseworthy since there is no dearth of Sikh history books that exaggerate unhistorical polemics against the Mughal rulers. As I see it, Prof. Singh's books set the tone of historical factualness and unbiased research by removing many unfounded and propagandistic misinformation regarding the Sikh Gurus' relationship with the Mughal emperors.

Prof. Singh noted various conflicts between Muslims and Sikhs and between the Gurus and the Mughal royalty. Nevertheless, he also emphasized that Muslims, particularly the Sufis and their disciples (i.e. the ordinary Muslims), reached out and helped the Gurus in performing pious activities, in proclaiming the doctrine of monotheism, and in declaring the egalitarian message of Sikhism.

For instance, Bhai Mardana, a Muslim musician, assisted and served Guru Nanak from the start of his ministry until the Guru's demise (See *Life of Guru Nanak Dev Ji*, op.cit. pp.33-36). The Sunni-Sufi saint, Hazrat Mian Mir maintained fraternal friendship with Guru Arjan Dev and remained

constantly by the latter's side all throughout the period of the Guru's imprisonment and eventual martyrdom. Hazrat Mian Mir successfully achieved a rapprochement between the Emperor Jahangir and Guru Hargobind (See *Eight Divine Guru Jots [Light]*, op.cit. pp.178-179, 213).

Likewise, in the lifetime of Guru Gobind Singh, many Muslim *awliya* (Sufi saints) enlisted themselves as the Guru's well-wishers; take the case of Sayyed Bhikha Shah, who consecrated the Guru during the latter's infancy and foretold the Guru's future greatness (*Life of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji*, op.cit., pp 30-31). Pious Muslims like Pir Budhu Shah Sahib and his followers wholeheartedly helped the Guru to the extent that Pir Budhu sacrificed his sons to defend Guru Gobind Singh from the armed attacks of the Hindu *pahari-raj*s (hill-chieftains) of Himachal (Ibid., pp.190-192). The Muslim soldiers, Nabi Khan and Ghani Khan as well as the Sunni saint, Sayyid

discriminatory policies towards non-Muslims. Secondly, the caste-oriented Brahmins, who detested Sikhism's egalitarian ideology and who were firmly opposed to Sikhism's cutting criticisms of Hindu idolatrous ritualism, casteism, and superstitions, oftentimes fan the Mughal emperor's conflict with the Sikh Gurus (*Eight Divine Guru Jots [Light]*, op.cit. pp.16-24).

Prof. Singh also brings into the fore the part played by obscurantist Brahmins in fomenting conflicts between Sikhs and Muslims. He identified the role of Hindu machinations in creating divisions between these two egalitarian religions.

Unfortunately, most Sikh histories fail to show the Brahminic instigations in the Sikh-Muslim conflicts. Prof. Singh stands out in contrast with other historians in his emphasis that most of the troubles that were experienced by the Gurus were not only due to the oppressions of the Mughal *Padshahs* (Emperors) but also due

"Bahadur" (i.e. the Brave Banda). Most Sikh historians consider Banda as the heir to the military prowess of Guru Gobind Singh after the latter's demise (*Eight Divine Guru Jots*, op.cit. p.273). Prof. Singh analyzed the military exploits of Banda Bairagi using firsthand historical accounts of his battles against Mughal authorities. In Prof. Singh's opinion, Banda's rebellion was unjustified since the rule of the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah was characterized by justice and equality for all citizens—be they Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. Moreover, the said emperor was a great ally, friend and well-wisher of Guru Gobind Singh who helped the former ascend the Mughal throne (See *Life of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji*, op.cit. pp.312-336).

Banda's unjustified rebellion against Mughal authorities distorted the true ideology of the Gurus and adversely affected Sikh and Muslim cooperation against the opportunist schemes of the upper class Brahmins. Under the leadership of Banda, Sikhs were unwittingly duped and unwarily misled by Hindus to become their proxy warriors in fighting against Muslims. While the Punjabi Hindus were sitting most comfortably in their respective hearths, the unsuspecting Sikhs fought—as the hoodwinked surrogate fighters of the Brahmins—against the Muslims. Much of the present animosities between Sikhs and Muslims in Punjab can be traced to Banda's looting, pillage, plunder and massacre of non-combatant Muslims—all in the name of Sikhism. Banda's cruel and headstrong warmongering had neither approval whatsoever from the Tenth Guru nor from the sacred writings of the Sikhs (the *Guru Granth Sahib*). Sikh teachings strongly detest aggressive warfare i.e. warfare for the sake of power grabbing and warfare that involves massacre of innocent non-combatants (Ibid.).

In his no-nonsense denunciations of the military excesses of Banda Bairagi whom Sikhs consider as their folk hero, Prof. Singh fiercely asserts that Banda's rebellion against Emperor Bahadur Shah was devoid of religious legitimacy because it ran counter to the Sikh tenets concerning warfare. In his book, *Sword: Symbol of Divine Authority* (published in 2002), Prof. Singh explained at length the full significance of the symbolism of the sword that Guru Gobind Singh required for devout Sikhs to perpetually carry in their person. The sword signifies the righteous authority of the One God (Ibid, pp. 45-52, 97-98). It further signifies the ideal way of life for Sikhs, viz, that true Sikhs should be submissive to the divine authority of God in the service of truth and justice even to the point of martyrdom (*shahidiyyat*) [Ibid, pp. 53-64,]. The Sikh sword is not meant to aspire for brute power and wealth—it is to be utilized for *seva* (service): service and submission to God's authority, service to the *Khalsa* or Sikh community, and service to humankind. This is the full religious significance of the sword in Sikhism.



PROF. HENRY FRANCIS B. ESPIRITU lectures on the "Dynamics of Sikh-Muslim Relationship in Mughal India." Prof. Espiritu is wearing a turban signifying his being accepted as an honorary member of the Punjabi Indian community of Marikina City.

Muhammad Nurpuri, helped Guru Gobind Singh escape the mercenaries of Wazir Khan, the governor of Sirhind (Ibid., pp.227-230).

It is also interesting to mention that it was not a Sikh, but the Sufi Muslim saint, Hazrat Mian Mir, who laid the chief cornerstone of the holiest Sikh shrine, the *Harmandir Sahib* (literally, the Shrine of the One God) in Amritsar, Punjab. Furthermore, the pages of the sacred scripture of Sikhism, *Guru Granth Sahib* (i.e. Great and Blessed Hymns), contains numerous hymns and spiritual poetry composed by Muslim saints (Ibid).

These historical facts and many more, were narrated to emphasize that a broad section of Muslims from the saintly class (Sufi sheikhs), the Mughal soldiers, as well as ordinary Muslims, enthusiastically aided the Sikh Gurus in their noble cause for a tolerant, caste-free and egalitarian India. Furthermore, these narrations show that there were numerous instances of amity, concord and friendship between the Sikh Gurus and their followers, and the Muslim Sufi saints and their disciples (i.e., the Muslim masses).

Prof. Singh brings home two very important points in his analysis of Sikh-Muslim relations in medieval India. Firstly, the conflicts between the Sikh Gurus and the Mughal emperors were brought about by the Mughal's elitist and

to the plots of upper caste Hindus who were fearful of the teachings of the Gurus against casteism. These Brahmins slandered the Gurus before the Mughal authorities (Ibid, p.209-ff).

Prof. Singh enumerated many examples of Brahmin machinations against the Gurus. The immediate successor of Nanak, Guru Angad Dev, suffered from the persecutions of Brahmins who wanted him removed from "guruship" for his spirited campaign against the caste system. Chandu, the person who martyred the fifth Guru Arjan Dev; Pandit Krishan Lal who vehemently opposed the preaching of the eighth Guru Harkrishan; the upper-class Brahmins and hill-chieftains (*pahari raj*as)—these are not Muslims. These are all Hindus who intensely opposed the Sikh Gurus and caused them much suffering (Cf., Ibid. pp.13-24, 209, 177-178, 312-313; See also *Life of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji*, op.cit. pp.166-177).

Another interesting point in Prof. Singh's Sikh history is his unequivocal denunciation of Banda Bairagi's despicable acts of massacre against innocent Punjabi Muslims. "*Bairagi*" (i.e. Hindu Ascetic) was Banda's title before he joined the *Khalsa* (community) of Guru Gobind Singh. Almost all Sikh historians glorify Banda as a great hero of the Sikh nation; thus, they always refer to him as Banda