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Relations between The Sikh Gurus and Mughal Emperors: From Guru Nanak to Guru Hargobind

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Abstract

This article examines the changing nature of relations between the Sikh Gurus and the Mughal emperors from Guru Nanak to Guru Hargobind. Drawing upon historical sources, it explores the political, religious, and social factors that shaped Sikh–Mughal interactions during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The study finds that while Guru Nanak criticized Babur’s invasions and their impact on the people, direct engagement between the Sikh Gurus and the Mughal rulers became more visible during the reign of Akbar. The period of Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das was characterized by cordial relations, imperial tolerance, and the uninterrupted growth of Sikh institutions. However, relations deteriorated under Jahangir due to the increasing influence of Guru Arjun Dev and his association with Prince Khusrau, culminating in the Guru’s martyrdom in 1606. The article argues that this event marked a decisive turning point in Sikh–Mughal relations. In response, Guru Hargobind adopted a policy of self-defence through the doctrine of Miri and Piri, the establishment of the Akal Takht, and the organization of an armed force. Supported by the people of Punjab, he successfully resisted Mughal authority in several battles. The study concludes that Sikh–Mughal relations evolved from cooperation and mutual respect to conflict and resistance, laying the foundation for the emergence of the Sikh community as an organized religious, social, and military force in Punjab.

Keywords

Goindwal, Masand System, Amritsar, Taran Taran, Kartarpur, Harmandir Sahib, Adi Granth, Akal Takht, Tilak, Miri, Piri.

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The Sikh Gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak¹, had an understanding of the Turks, the foreign invaders. Babur is mentioned in the verses composed by Guru Nanak Dev. Guru Nanak refers to Babur in one of his famous stanzas as follows:²

*“Khurasan khasmana kia, Hindustan daraya;
Aape dos na dei karta, jam kar Mughal chadhaya.
Eti maar pai kurlane, tain ki dard na aaya.”*

After the First Battle of Panipat³ (April 21, 1526) and then the Battle of Khanwa⁴ (March 17, 1526), Babur became the ruler of north India. Although the dynasty he founded was of Turko-Mongol origin, but it later came to be popularly known as the Mughal dynasty. After Babur's death on December 30, 1530⁵, his eldest son, Humayun, succeeded him. Emperor, Humayun was decisively defeated by Sher Khan Suri in the Battle of Bilgram (Kanauj) on May 17, 1540.⁶ Sher Shah ousted Humayun from power and ascended the throne, establishing the Sur Empire of the Afghans.

Humayun fled to Persia (Iran) after his defeat and finally became the Shia. With the support of the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp,⁷ he returned to India and, after defeating the successors of the Sur dynasty, re-established Mughal rule. In 1555, following his victory Humayun recaptured Delhi and thus once again reached Delhi on July 20, 1555. He died on January 26, 1556 in Sher Mandal in the Purana Qila (Old Fort) at Delhi.⁸

There is little direct historical evidence regarding Humayun's relations with the Sikh Gurus. However, Sikh traditions mention an encounter between Humayun and Guru Angad Dev⁹ after Humayun's defeat by Sher Khan Suri. According to these accounts, Humayun sought the Guru's blessings, and Guru Angad had advised him on humility, patience, and righteous conduct.¹⁰

Its first mention is found when Emperor Akbar assigns a land grant to Bibi Bhani, the daughter of Amardas, the third Guru; who was married with Guru Ram das, the fourth Guru. The place is still of high religious importance and is none but Harmandir Sahib or Swarn Mandir at Amritsar.

Guru Arjun was the fifth Guru of the Sikhs.¹¹ He was born on 15 April, 1563 at Goindwal in Punjab.¹² From his childhood, he was known for his calm temperament, humility¹³, and love for knowledge.¹⁴ Guru Arjun Dev played a crucial role in giving Sikhism a more organized structure.

During his Guruship, Guru Arjun Dev travelled among the Sikh congregations in Punjab¹⁵ and established the *Masand* system¹⁶ for collecting the one-tenth of their income from the Sikh followers. The Masands were appointed to spread Sikh teachings and collect offerings from the followers.¹⁷ Through this arrangement, a regular source of income was created and ensured for the Sikh community.¹⁸ The funds collected through that system strengthened the resources of the Sikh headquarters at Amritsar and contributed to the development of towns such as Tarn Taran and Kartarpur.¹⁹ He also completed the construction of the Harmandir Sahib in the centre of the sacred tank at Amritsar on the land assigned to Bibi Bhani by Emperor Akbar.²⁰

One of the most significant achievements of Guru Arjun Dev was the compilation of the *Adi Granth*. In 1604, he successfully collected and edited the hymns of the previous Gurus along with those of fifteen other saints including Kabirdas, Ravidas and Namdev.²¹ The *Adi Granth* was then ceremonially installed in the Harmandir Sahib.²²

This Guru enjoyed immense respect among the people, who regarded him as their spiritual guide. He encouraged his followers to engage in horse trading,²³ which was profitable as well as helpful to develop horsemanship among them. He further promoted physical activities such as wrestling.

During the reign of Emperor Akbar, the influence of the orthodox Muslim scholar Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi²⁴ remained limited because Akbar followed a policy of tolerance. However, the situation changed after Akbar's death in 1605. Prince Salim ascended the throne as Emperor Jahangir.

Soon after his accession, Jahangir faced the rebellion of his son, Khusrau Mirza.²⁵ Khusrau fled from Agra and moved towards Lahore with a small force. Eventually, he was defeated and captured at Bhairawal.²⁶ His rebellion lasted only three weeks, from 6 April to 27 April 1606. Regarding Khusrau, Dr. Beni Prasad observes:²⁷

“With all personal charm, natural talents, fine education, and blamelessly he was an immature youth of fiery temper and weak judgement..... just the type of the mind, which join with the advantage high station and popularly, forms the most convenient for intrigue and conspiracy.”

Jahangir himself described the suppression of the rebellion in the following words:²⁸

“Before the defeat of Khusru, an order had been issued to all the *jagirdars*, road keepers, and the ferrymen in the Punjab informing them of what had happened, and warning them to be careful. On 3rd Muharram 1015 A.H. Khusru was brought into my presence in the garden of Mirza Kamran with his hands bound and a chain on his leg and he was led from the left side according to the rule of Chengiz Khan... I attributed my success gained in this expedition to Sheikh Farid and I dignified him with the title of Murtaza Khan. To

strengthen and confirm my authority, I ordered that a row of stakes should be set up from the garden to the city and that the rebels should be impaled thereon, and thus receive their deserts in this most excruciating punishment.”

When the rebel Prince Khusrau passed through Amritsar, Guru Arjun Dev received him and blessed him in the manner of a saint. He also applied a ceremonial mark [*Tilak*] on his forehead. Jahangir interpreted this act as support for the rebellion and became highly displeased.²⁹ Consequently, he imposed a fine of two to two and a half lakh rupees on the Guru.³⁰ Guru Arjun Dev refused to pay the fine, arguing that fines were imposed on criminals, whereas he had committed no offence.³¹ He maintained that he had merely extended humanitarian assistance to the grandson of Emperor Akbar and had not supported his rebellion.³²

Jahangir was not satisfied with this explanation.³³ As Guru Arjun Dev refused to pay the fine, he was arrested by the Governor of Lahore and subjected to severe torture.³⁴ On 30 May 1606, he was executed at Lahore on the orders of Jahangir.³⁵ His sacred body was consigned to the waters of the Ravi River.³⁶ This event is regarded as the first martyrdom in Sikh history³⁷ and marked a turning point in the relations between the Sikh Gurus and the Mughal empire.

Guru Hargobind was the sixth Guru of the Sikhs. He was born on 19 June, 1595 at Goindwal in Punjab to Guru Arjun Dev and Mata Ganga.³⁸ Following the martyrdom of his father in 1606, he assumed the Guruship at the age of eleven. Guru Hargobind introduced a new dimension to Sikhism by combining spiritual authority with temporal power. He propounded the doctrine of *Miri* (temporal authority) and *Piri* (spiritual authority) and encouraged Sikhs to develop military skills alongside religious devotion.³⁹ He inspired the Sikh community to bear arms and organized a military force for its protection.⁴⁰ He also established the Akal Takht, which later became the centre of Sikh religious and political authority.⁴¹

Before his death, Guru Arjun Dev instructed that no mourning should be observed after his passing⁴² and that the Sikhs should prepare themselves militarily.⁴³ Guru Hargobind faithfully followed these instructions. Instead of observing the customary mourning ceremonies, he arranged the recitation of the *Adi Granth*⁴⁴ accompanied by musical instruments. During the ceremony of succession, he declared:⁴⁵

“The sword-belt shall be my Seli and the plume shall be my *Dastar*.”

Thereafter, he wore two swords simultaneously, naming them *Piri* (spiritual authority) and *Miri* (temporal authority). This marked the beginning of the militarization of the Sikh community in Punjab. During the same period, the orthodox Muslim scholar Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi openly advocated the destruction of the Sikh community and its conversion to Islam.⁴⁶

Guru Hargobind constructed a raised platform in the centre of the Amrit Sarovar and named it the Akal Takht.⁴⁷ He also fortified the town surrounding the sacred tank and named the fortification Lohgarh.⁴⁸ Owing to repeated military

confrontations with the Mughal authorities, he was eventually compelled to leave Amritsar and shift to the more secure settlement of Kiratpur in the Shivalik hills.⁴⁹

Battle of Amritsar (1628)⁵⁰

The first major conflict between Guru Hargobind and the Mughal Empire took place at Amritsar in 1628. The Mughal commander Abdul Khan launched an attack on Amritsar. Although the Sikh forces were smaller in number, they fought with great courage under the leadership of Guru Hargobind. Baba Buddha, Bhai Jodha, and other prominent Sikh warriors played a decisive role in the battle. Abdul Khan was killed, and the Mughal forces suffered heavy losses. The battle ended in a significant victory for the Sikhs.

Battle of Himmatpur (1629)⁵¹

In 1629, another conflict took place at Himmatpur. Guru Hargobind had earlier secured the release of fifty-two Hindu rulers from the Gwalior Fort. This act was viewed unfavourably by the Mughal authorities, who considered it a challenge to their prestige. Consequently, an attack was launched under the leadership of Lala Beg. The Sikhs adopted guerrilla warfare tactics and successfully resisted the Mughal advance. Lala Beg was defeated, and the Mughal forces were compelled to retreat.

Battle of Ruhila, Haryana (1631)⁵²

The third major battle occurred at Ruhila in present-day Haryana in 1631. Emperor Shah Jahan dispatched a large army under Mukhlis Khan to suppress the Sikhs. The Sikh forces displayed remarkable courage, discipline, and unity. During the course of the battle, Mukhlis Khan was killed, and the Mughal army suffered a decisive defeat. The victory further enhanced the military reputation of Guru Hargobind and the Sikh community.

Battle of Goha/Kirat (1634)⁵³

The fourth major conflict took place at Goha (Kirat) in 1634. Guru Hargobind had developed Kiratpur into an important religious and social centre. The growing popularity and influence of the Guru alarmed the Mughal authorities, who launched another military campaign against him. Guru Hargobind adopted effective guerrilla tactics and received considerable support from the local Sikh population. The battle was fought across hilly and forested terrain, where the Sikhs had successfully resisted the Mughal forces and had preserved their position.

The leadership of Guru Hargobind marked a decisive transformation in Sikh-Mughal relations. The martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev had convinced the Sikh community of the necessity of self-defence. Through the doctrine of *Miri* and *Piri*, the establishment of the Akal Takht, the construction of Lohgarh, and the organization of an armed force, Guru Hargobind laid down the foundations of Sikh military tradition. The four battles fought during his Guruship demonstrated the growing strength of the Sikhs and signalled the transition of Sikhism from a purely

spiritual movement to a community prepared to defend its religious and social rights against Mughal opposition.

Conclusion

The relations between the Sikh Gurus and the Mughal emperors underwent significant changes from the time of Guru Nanak to Guru Hargobind. During the reign of Emperor Akbar, relations remained largely cordial and cooperative. Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das were able to expand Sikh institutions and promote social and religious reforms without interference from the Mughal state. Akbar's meetings with the Sikh Gurus and his favourable attitude towards the Sikh community reflected a period of mutual respect and religious tolerance.

However, the situation changed after the accession of Emperor Jahangir. The growing influence of Guru Arjun Dev, the expansion of Sikh institutions, and his interaction with Prince Khusrau created suspicion in the Mughal court. Jahangir regarded the Guru's actions as support for rebellion, which ultimately resulted in Guru Arjun Dev's arrest, torture, and martyrdom in 1606. This event marked the first martyrdom in Sikh history and became a turning point in Sikh-Mughal relations.

The martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev profoundly influenced Guru Hargobind, who adopted a policy of self-defence and military preparedness. Through the doctrine of *Miri* and *Piri*, the establishment of the Akal Takht, the construction of Lohgarh, and the organization of an armed force, Guru Hargobind transformed the Sikh community into a body capable of protecting its religious and social interests. The battles fought against the Mughal forces at Amritsar, Himmatpur, Ruhila, and Goha/Kirat further intensified Sikh-Mughal tensions and demonstrated the growing military strength of the Sikhs.

Thus, the period from Guru Amar Das to Guru Hargobind witnessed a gradual transformation in Sikh-Mughal relations from cooperation and mutual respect to conflict and resistance. These developments not only shaped the future course of Sikh history but also laid the foundation for the emergence of the Sikh community as an organized religious, social, and military force of the Hindus in Punjab.

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41. *Ibid.*, 20.
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44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. Sheikh Ahmad Sarhindi was the most fanatic Muslim scholar of his times. He deadly affected the policies towards the Hindus.
47. *Ibid.*, 20.
48. The good memory of this name of '*Lohgarh*' was referred to many of the strong forts in later periods. For example Banda Bahadur's strong fortification was given the same name of Lohgarh as well as after some more 50 years, the king of Bharatpur used to call their fort as '*Lohgarh*'.
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