Bengali Perceptions of the Sikhs: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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Nowadays the "study of history from below" is receiving serious attention of scholars in the subcontinent. Against this background, this chapter may not evoke much enthusiasm, for it is apparently based on a "horizontal approach" to history. To a casual observer it may also convey an impression of an exclusive middle-class literary endeavour, catering merely to its middle-class needs. But beyond this narrow limit, the chapter tries to trace the efforts of a community to understand one of its distant neighbours over the years. Of these efforts, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bengali writing dealing with Sikhs has been a meaningful index.

Bengali interest in understanding the Sikhs is reflected in a number of nineteenth-century works, and it continues to the present. A good number of Bengali writers were associated with this endeavour, and different factors brought them together on a common platform. They came from different walks of life: they were poets, historians, essayists, journalists, religious reformers, political leaders and dramatists. A few of them spent long years in the Punjab, where they had gone following the British annexation (1849) in response to the growing administrative needs of the colonial government. They often tried to communicate their local experience and knowledge of the Sikhs to their own people at home.

The majority of these writers were, however, of the city of Calcutta, then witnessing a growing upsurge of militant nationalist opposition to British rule. It brought in its train a greater appreciation of and interest in the Indian tradition of fighting against royal tyranny, foreign invasion and exploitation by the ruling class. Prose writers and poets were encouraged to incorporate this in their

1. I am deeply indebted to my friend Sri Tirthankar Mukherjee, Assistant Editor, Amrita Bazar Patrika, for his comments and editorial help. Dr. Nikhilchandra Guha, Sri Chidananda Bhattacharjee and Sri Asoke Upadhyay also helped me in the preparation of the article.

writing, thereby providing an added stimulus to the contemporary militant politics of Bengal. To many of them the birth of Sikhism, rise of the Khalsa, martyrdom of the Gurus, the “saga of Sikh resistance” to the Mughals and Afghans, the remarkable success of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in building up a powerful Sikh monarchy when the other Indian rulers were “meekly submitting to the British” and, finally, the “valour” of the Sikh army during the days of the Anglo-Sikh wars carried the message of patriotism. It kindled the imagination of many Bengali authors of this period. A few others tried to seek out any similarities between Sikhism and Hinduism, while others sought to evaluate the significance of the message of the Gurus in the wider Indian religious context.

The development of Sikh studies was again closely associated with the Brahmo search in the nineteenth century for a religious identity separate from that of orthodox Hinduism. The Panth perhaps first drew the attention of modern Bengali authors in the second decade of the last century when Raja Rammohan Roy referred to it in his writings. Even after the demise of the Raja, Sikh monotheism continued to draw the attention and respect of leading nineteenth-century Brahmo reformers like Debendranath Tagore, Akshaykumar Datta, Keshabchandra Sen and Krishnakumar Mitra. According to many of them, the practice of social equality and rejection of caste hierarchy generated a spirit of confidence among the Sikhs and made them a community of martyrs.

This Brahmo inquiry into the Panth was subsequently reinforced by a few Hindu nationalist and Sanatanist (i.e., orthodox Brahmanical) authors who

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5. Keshabchandra Sen was the leader of the Nababidhan group of the Brahmo movement. His admiration of Sikh monotheism paved the way for the publication of the *Nanak Prakash*, still regarded as an outstanding biography of Guru Nanak in Bengali. His interest in Sikhism was evinced in the naming of one of his books *Sangat*, published by the Brahmo Tract Society in 1916. Incidentally, the Brahmos had a small informal group for free discussion of different religious and moral problems of their own community. This was named the Sangat Sabha by Debendranath Tagore.

6. Mitra started writing on the history of the Sikhs in the 1880's. But the manuscript was lost while he was on his way to his native village, now in Bangladesh. He decided to start afresh as soon as he was back in Calcutta. When he had nearly completed it, he was arrested by the police for his association with Bengali militant politics. The police took away the manuscript, never to return it. Finally, when he was put in the Agra jail in 1908, he began the work with renewed confidence. He even managed to procure a copy of the *Bala Janam-sakh* from the jail authorities and sat down to writing as soon as he had finished the text. His autobiography gives us a regular record of the progress of his writing. Unfortunately, Mitra mentioned nothing about the fate of the manuscript. For details; see Krishnakumar Mitra, *Atmacharit* (Calcutta: Prabasi Press, 1937), pp. 316, 319-20, 332.

7. For a further discussion on this point, see the author’s article “Sikh History in Bengali Literature,” *Studies in Sikhism and Comparative Religion* (October 1984), pp. 113-14.
provided a newer dimension to Bengali understanding of the Sikhs in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The latter often portrayed Guru Nanak as one of the leading exponents of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century bhakti movement, and declined to accord Sikhism any religious status distinct from that of Hinduism. A few of them were deeply impressed by Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s Hindu revivalist sentiment and wanted to glorify the ancient Indian Hindu fighting tradition. In their opinion, this would offer an answer to India’s enslavement to British rule. Rajanikanta Gupta, for example, made no secret of the fact that the “heroic self-sacrifice of the Sikhs against the Mughals and Afghans was not an isolated chapter of Indian history.” He emphasised the point that Rana Pratap, Shivaji and Ranjit Singh, like Guru Gobind Singh, preached the same message of resistance to royal tyranny and fought for political freedom in the pre-British days. Gupta was also of the opinion that the Sikhs inherited this “militant tradition” from the Hindus, and viewed the Panth in this light in the nineteenth century.

Another point that may be noted in this connection was the ready response of Bengali authors to some significant developments affecting the Sikhs in the Punjab during the period under review. The process may be said to have started during Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s reign in the early 1830’s. Similarly, with the signing of the treaty of Bhyrowal (1846), a monograph entitled Punjabaitihas, dealing with the history of the Sikhs from the days of Nanak till the cessation of the First Anglo-Sikh War, was brought out in 1847. The book was warmly received by the people because “the fate of the Sikh Kingdom was then deeply interesting to them.” There were three quick editions of this volume, an achievement matched by only a handful of famous authors in the mid-nineteenth century. Again in 1893, shortly after the death of Maharaja Duleep Singh, a detailed biography highlighting his career along with an account of the Second Sikh War was published. This nineteenth-century interest persisted in the
twentieth-century Bengali press. Thus the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Dyerism, the struggle for control of Sikh shrines, the religious atmosphere in and around the Golden Temple, the sufferings of the Akali jathas and the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh deeply agitated the Bengali mind. They generated a sense of solidarity between the militant nationalists of Bengal and the Punjab.13

But this is not to suggest that the Sikhs were always the “hot favourites” of nineteenth-century Bengali intellectuals. On the contrary, if we are allowed to apply an order of preference, they perhaps came third, after the Rajputs and the Marathas. For example, the two great contemporary novelists of Bengal, namely Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Rameshchandra Dutt, wrote novels depicting the chivalry and valour of the Rajputs and the Marathas against the “oppressive” rule of the Mughals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Sikhs never figured prominently in their writings.14 Of course, Rabindranath Tagore, somewhat later, was an exception. But in addition to these great masters, there are still many others who enthusiastically wrote about the Sikhs. Since they are too numerous to consider as a whole, we shall be dealing with the works of a few of them. They may be divided under the following heads:

i) biographical sketches and other works highlighting the lives of the Gurus and crowned heads;

ii) monographs on Sikh sacred literature; and

iii) other miscellaneous works.

II

In this paper we deal primarily with the first two categories of works, because they not only comprise the largest number of contributions in Bengali but also indicate some of the major trends in twentieth-century Bengali perceptions of the Sikhs. In this regard, a reference to a few nineteenth-century works on the lives of Sikh Gurus will help us better understand the problem. A modest beginning was made during the second half of the nineteenth century, with the serialisation of the history of the Panth with a special emphasis on the biographies of the Gurus and their writings, in such leading journals as the Tattvabodhini Patrika,15 Dharmatattva,16 Vividhartha Samgraha,17


13. For example, Dyerism was reflected in Praphulla Kumar Basu’s Panjab Kahini (Dhaka: Jnanchandra Mitra, 1328 B.S.).

In spite of the conflicting commitments of these journals regarding the various politico-social problems of the times, their published articles generally provide an admiring view of the Panth and Gurus. Another important, if not the most significant, publication of this period was the *Nanak Prakash* by Bhai Mahendranath Bose of the Nababidhan group. Based on *janam-sakhi* sources, it is the most detailed biography of the founder of the Panth in Bengali and seeks to highlight the Guru as a man of saintly temperament fighting against superstition, ritualism and caste hierarchy. Unlike other Bengali biographers, Bose portrayed the Guru in a formal prose style and his interpretations of some of the major episodes of his life were marked by a scientific perspective.

Although in the present century no biography of the standard of *Nanak Prakash* has been published, there are two separate monographs on the life of the founder of the Sikh faith, each displaying a distinctive style and form. The first one is a biography in verse entitled *Nanak* by Kshitishchandra Chakravarti, a lawyer at Midnapur in West Bengal. In his private life he was a man of religious temperament with a definite bias towards the cult of *bhakti*. This largely explains his interest in the life and message of Guru Nanak. He was of the opinion that Nanak played a pivotal role in the sixteenth-century *bhakti* movement, spreading the gospel of love and devotion among the different religious communities of the Indian subcontinent. In his preface to the poem, he noted that this biography would not satisfy those who portray the Guru minus the various hagiographic tales inseparably associated with his life and mission. His work was an attempt, writes Chakravarti, to review Nanak’s life with all its legends and miracles, though they may appear of dubious credibility in the eyes of modern readers.

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15. It was the chief organ of the Brahmo Samaj; it first came out in August 1843. The journal carried articles on the different aspects of the Sikh faith in the following numbers: Shaka 1825, pp. 88-96; Shaka 1833, pp. 65-66; Shaka 1835, pp. 165, 175. See also note 4.
16. It was the chief spokesman of the Nababidhan group headed by Keshabchandra Sen. Bhai Mahendranath Bose’s *Nanak Prakash* was originally serialised in it till July 1883.
17. With the financial assistance of the Vernacular Literary Society, Raja Rajendralal Mitra started *Vividhartha Samgraha*, the first penny magazine in India. It was a “copiously illustrated” monthly publication. In the very first issue of this journal, Mitra wrote a brief but critical life-sketch of Guru Nanak. He narrated the history of the Sikhs till the end of the Second Sikh War in the subsequent issues of the journal.
18. *Bangadarshan* is a monthly periodical founded by Bankimchandra Chatterjee in July-August 1872. The biographies of the Gurus were published in Ashar and Magh 1285 B.S.
19. *Balak* was run primarily by the Tagores in Calcutta. It was a literary magazine meant for the young boys and girls.
20. Bhai Mahendranath Bose tried to explain quite a few sixteenth-century “miracles” associated with the Guru’s life in the context of nineteenth-century Indian socio-religious experience. In this connection one may refer to the story of Bhai Mardana’s sufferings at the hands of demons. Bose suggests that this was “a myth contemplated by some medieval authors explaining Bhai Mardana’s greedy character.” While admitting their historical significance, he was the first Bengali author to point out that it is extremely difficult to reconstruct any meaningful biography of Guru Nanak exclusively on the basis of the *sakhi* sources. Throughout the book, he has tried to maintain a sane balance between myth and reality in the midst of a bewildering mass of contradictions. It attests to his great and healthy historical interest. It is for all these reasons that the *Nanak Prakash* still is regarded as a first-rate biography of Guru Nanak in Bengali.
of an atheist or other nonbeliever. These episodes, according to him, were essential for a better understanding of some of the basic tenets of Sikhism and therefore should be presented without a critical approach on the part of the author.

Chakravarti’s *Nanak* is the lone Bengali poetical work on the life of the Guru. His account is marked by certain distinctive features. For example, the poet presented a few interesting developments of Guru Nanak’s life with significant Bengali overtone and colour. Chakravarti’s *Nanak*, like Subramania Bharati’s Guru Gobind Singh, often comes out of his provincial social milieu and moves freely within a different regional social and value system. The Guru does not always figure as a sixteenth-century religious reformer fighting against social maladies, religious obscurantism and economic inequality. He is often depicted as the son of a typical middle-class family torn between his family status and the broader social commitment of his times. Mother Tripta’s frequent lamentations over the Guru’s otherworldliness are reminiscent of the woes of Sri Chaitanya’s mother, and the village of Kartarpur is set against a background remarkably like the rural Bengal of the early twentieth century. The poem is also imbued with an informal and popular touch, quite unlike the style of Mahendranath Bose’s *Nanak Prakash*.

Perhaps the last Bengali monograph on Guru Nanak came from Rakhaldas Kavyananda in the late 1920’s. Unfortunately very little is known about his life and other literary works. It seems likely that the author undertook the task as a result of politico-religious considerations. He saw Nanak as a messiah propagating the cause of Hindu-Muslim co-operation in an age of religious persecution and communal hatred. He was of the opinion that a proper evaluation of the teachings of the Guru would help strengthen the bonds of inter-communal co-operation and good will.

Regrettably, Kavyananda’s book can hardly be regarded a dependable biography of Nanak. It suffers from chronological lapses and misrepresentation of the significance of the *sakhī* sources. The volume is also full of digressions from the central theme of the Guru’s life; and a pronounced Hindu bias also dominates his style of writing.

III

During these years the life and teachings of Guru Nanak continued to be reviewed either in connection with the study of the religious history of ancient or medieval India or with reference to the general history of the Sikhs fighting against the declining Mughal authority in the later middle ages. The writers came from Brahmo and non-Brahmo ranks and their works are too numerous to permit individual attention to all. Here we take note of three categories of them.

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22. Rakhaldas Kavyananda said he wrote *Guru Nanak* to cement the ties of religion among Indians, irrespective of their caste and regional commitment. For this, see *Guru Nanak* (Calcutta: Barendra Library, n.d.), p. i.

23. For example, Kavyananda wrote that Guru Nanak was born in 1496; ibid., p. 55.
because they have some special characteristics of their own, viz., those presenting Guru Nanak as protesting against oppression, or as preaching Hindu-Muslim solidarity or as articulating a form of orthodox Hindu faith.

The first is represented by Debendranath Mitra of Chandernagore. While reviewing the history of the evolution of Sikh militarism of the later medieval days, Mitra sought to assess Guru Nanak's role in it. He argued that it was very much indebted to Guru Nanak's mission of protest against political oppression, social injustice and economic inequality of the times. The author argues that Nanak's inspired leadership made Sikhs "a bold, assertive and dominant race ever ready to defend the case of religion."24 Like Debendranath Mitra, Kumudini Mitra also traced the history of Sikh militarism partially to the first Guru's message during the days of the bhakti movement.25

Another group of writers viewed Guru Nanak in the light of his preaching the message of Hindu-Muslim solidarity in the subcontinent. They pointed out that Nanak's commitment to a unitary God and his attempts at communal harmony were not radically different form the Indian cultural tradition. The Vedas, and later Lord Buddha in the sixth century B.C., had propagated a similar philosophy. During the middle ages the tradition continued uninterrupted through the preachings of Tukaram, Namdev, Ramananda, Kabir and Mirabai. The Guru inherited this religious legacy and made Hindus and Muslims aware of their common cultural heritage. This peculiar Indianness of the Guru's teachings explains his general acceptance among the people of the Punjab. It was this tradition that gave them the resilience to survive foreign invasion, internal strife and anarchy throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Leading Brahmo authorities, like Kshitimohan Sen and Sharatkumar Roy, also argued that this cultural synthesis continued even after Nanak and asserted that Raja Rammohan Roy was one of its exponents in the early nineteenth century.26

Interestingly enough, the Sanatanists also projected a closer religious bond between orthodox Hinduism and the teachings of Guru Nanak. Following the lead of Rajanikanta Gupta, they argued in the present century that Guru Nanak was a Hindu and they advised Bengalis to read the history of the Sikhs, for they fought for the "defence" of Hinduism in the northwest of India. While analyzing the message of the Guru, they pointed out that Sikhism was, in fact, one of the innumerable forms of Hinduism; and had, in fact, rescued sixteenth-century Hinduism from the "clutches of superstitious priests." In their opinion, the founder of Sikhism preached nothing contrary to the message of the sacred Vedas, nor was he opposed to idol worship and the practice of sati (voluntary

self-immolation by widows). The Guru’s reformist zeal also never discouraged Sikhs from coming closer to Hindus, for the two communities continued to share some common festivals, customs and religious symbols. This continued overlapping of these two communities, these writers concluded, reflected their common origin. Hence the attempts of some English authorities to project Sikhs as a community different from Hindus was nothing but an irrational and fallacious historical hypothesis.  

IV

Guru Gobind Singh’s life and teachings and his fight against the Mughals leading to the birth of the Khalsa also figured in Bengali writing. Rajnarayan Bhattacharya was perhaps the first to refer to him in his *Punjabaitihas*. The author briefly recorded the exploits of the tenth Master against the Hill Rajas and Mughals while reviewing the rise of the Sikhs under their different Gurus. Like Bhattacharya, Swami Vivekananda dwelt on the importance of the Guru’s mission in his speeches delivered in Lahore in the late 1890’s. Incidentally, these years also witnessed the publication of a brief sketch on the Guru by Rajanikanta Gupta. He painted the Guru as the father of Sikh militarism, ceaselessly defending the cause of the weak Hindus against the Mughals. The tenth Master, Gupta argues, preached the message of political unity and national consciousness and sought to salvage the Indians from the political anarchy of the seventeenth century. It is obvious that a definite Hindu bias was the hallmark of Gupta’s pen.

Tinkari Banerjee’s *Guru Gobinda Singha* was another important work in this field. The author is accredited as one of the most widely known biographers of the Guru in Bengali. After years of labour in close co-operation with the Bhai of the Barabazar Gurdwara, Calcutta, the monograph came out in 1896. But it turned out to be an incomplete work, with an abrupt end. The author was aware of these limitations, and he assured his readers that he would overcome them should there be a second edition. Generally speaking, he did try to fulfill his promise when a revised and enlarged edition was brought out in 1918. This edition devoted about 350 out of 462 pages to the life and attainments of the tenth Guru, a theme which had covered hardly 60 out of 250 pages in the earlier edition. There are two other noteworthy features in the new edition. It included pictures of all the ten Gurus, which are not generally available in other Bengali books. It was further enriched by the incorporation of two maps, one of which shows the major political centres and religious places associated with the life of the last Guru. The author divided his study of the Guru into five broad sections,

27. This view found its most detailed exposition in Tinkari Banerjee’s *Guru Gobinda Singha* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Press Depository, 1918). A similar view was recorded in Matilal Roy’s *Yuga Guru* (Calcutta: Prabartak Publishing House, 1340 B.S.), pp. 211-12.


each devoted to a specific phase, beginning with his birth at Patna and continuing till his death at Nanded in 1708.

During the years between the two editions, there was hardly any significant change in the attitude and commitment of the author to the Guru. Banerjee wholeheartedly admired and revered him as a messenger of God. Guru Gobinda Singh also merits our special attention for the richness of its source materials. Like Mahendranath Bose, Banerjee almost wholly depended on Punjabi sources. In his search for a biography of the tenth Guru from the point of view of the Sikhs, he drew heavily on the Suraj Prakash and Daswan Padshah ki Granth in addition to the Adi Granth. He was equally conversant with the writings of authorities like Malcolm, McGregor, Cunningham, Cave-Browne and Cust, though he made little use of them in his work. And in cases when there were significant differences of opinion among the authorities, he almost invariably relied on the opinion of Bhai Santokh Singh, author of Suraj Prakash. His uncritical reliance on Punjabi sources, especially on the Suraj Prakash, does not speak highly about his scholarship. Perhaps his conservative Hindu commitment constrained his ability to achieve a proper understanding of some of the fundamental distinguishing marks of Sikhism under Guru Gobind. His views on Sikhism often came closer to Bawa Narain Singh's monograph Sikh Hindu hain (i.e., Sikhs are Hindus). There are also a few historical inaccuracies in the biography, two of which merit our special attention: (i) Banerjee was of the opinion that the Guru and Aurangzeb went over to Mecca for a possible religious settlement between Hindus and Muslims; and (ii) the Sisganj Gurdwara in Delhi was founded by the Guru after his meeting with Emperor Bahadur Shah.

In spite of these shortcomings, Banerjee's Guru Gobinda Singh still remains a significant contribution in the field of Bengali understanding of the history of the Sikhs. It surpassed the works of Rajanikanta Gupta both in historical detail and in the use of source materials in different Indian languages. Though he failed to establish any clear line of demarcation between Hindus and Sikhs, the author never faulted the Guru for the growing "radicalisation" among

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30. Like Malcolm, Banerjee also relied whenever possible on Sikh sources in preference to non-Sikh ones and perhaps believed that "in every research...it is of the essential importance to hear what a nation has to say of itself." John Malcolm, Sketch of the Sikhs (London: John Murray & Co., 1812), p. 5.

31. Bhai Santokh Singh's testimony is often questioned by scholars. Macauliffe thus wrote: "It is, however, doubtful whether Bhai Santokh Singh had access to any trustworthy authority. From his early education and environment he was largely tinctured with Hinduism.... His statements accordingly cannot often be accepted as even an approach to history." The Sikh Religion, v. 1 (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1978 reprint), p. lxxvii. Macauliffe was again criticised for not always being "fair to Hinduism and the Hindus." For it, see Indubhusan Banerjee, Evolution of the Khalsa, v. 1 (Calcutta: A. Mukherjee & Co., 1963), p. 290.

32. Ibid., p. 365.

33. Ibid., p. 388.

34. It was later on described as "a very valuable ornament of Bengali language." For it, see Anurupa Devi, Bhudev Charit, v. 2 (Calcutta: Bhudev Publishing House, 1330 B.S.), p. 52. For other scholarly observations on this volume, see Kartikchandra Mira, Sikh Guru (Calcutta: Sulabh Granthamala Karyalay, 1329 B.S.), p. ii; Sunitikumar Chatterjee, Guru Gobind Singh (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1967), p. 38.
the Sikhs. In this sense it even surpassed Sir Jadunath Sarkar’s assessment of the Sikhs. Based on the materials this book offered, nearly half a dozen Bengali monographs on the Sikhs were published in the present century and this is a great tribute to this historian’s craft.

During the first quarter of the present century, four separate works were published which tried to focus upon Guru Gobind Singh’s exploits from different standpoints. Haranath Bose’s *Guru Gobinda* is one of two historical plays written in appreciation of the tenth Master’s role in the development of Hindu-Muslim communal unity in the later middle ages. The play is presented in the true colloquial Bengali literary tradition. In its five acts, twenty-two major characters appear, of which at least nine come from the pages of history. The drama was brought out during the anti-partition agitation, and Bose sought to convey in his drama the cause of communal amity and good will. Aurangzib’s “intolerant religious policy,” according to Bose, sealed the fate of the Mughal Empire built up by Akbar on the basis of Hindu-Muslim co-operation. The Guru aimed at restoring the constructive Hindu-Muslim relationship.

The Guru was not alone in his war with the “oppressive Mughal state power.” Bose emphasised that the Emperor’s sister Jahanara, along with many liberal Muslim *fakirs*, was in full sympathy with the Guru’s plan of bringing Hindus and Muslims closer together. In spite of his pronounced Hindu bias, however, Bose did not portray the war with Aurangzib as one emanating from a narrow Hindu-Muslim antagonistic relationship. On the contrary, he bitterly denounced the communalists of both camps. In the long run, the Guru’s military success, argued Bose, brought the Emperor back to his senses. The latter realised the ill effects of his policy as well as the greatness of the Guru. The drama ended on an optimistic note of uniting Hindus and Muslims for fighting the disturbers of Mughal peace in India. His emotional appeal, cutting across religious barriers and political differences, was quite in tune with the aspirations of the Bengali middle class in the days of the Swadeshi movement, when the book came out. Bose’s *Guru Gobinda* differs from Tinkari Banerjee’s *Guru Gobinda Singha* in the sense that the latter viewed the Guru as a Hindu messiah fighting for the protection of Hindus. Banerjee’s Guru had nothing to do with the problem of inter-communal co-operation and good will. Bose’s Guru Gobind was more concerned with the contemporary political problems, while Banerjee’s hero showed a greater keenness in defending Hindu religion and his wars with the Mughals provided an effective umbrella to all who accepted his leadership in times of crisis.

35. For Jadunath Sarkar’s comments, see note 44 in Section VI.
37. The partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon, begun in 1905 and rescinded in 1911. —Editors’ note.
In the contemporary Bengali press, *Guru Gobinda* has sometimes been criticised as a caricature of history. It is even accused of introducing a few late-nineteenth-century politico-religious problems into the history of later medieval India. But the drama is especially worth considering on one count: Bose did not blame Guru Gobind Singh for "radicalising" Sikh politics—a theme that elicits bitter observations from Rabindranath Tagore and Jatindranath Samaddar.38

Within a year another important biography of the tenth Guru entitled *Guru Gobinda Singha* was brought out by Basantakumar Banerjee.39 It seeks to highlight some of the constructive qualities of the tenth Master leading to the birth of the Khalsa and its impact on the Panth. The study begins with a general review of the politico-religious conditions of the Punjab on the eve of the birth of Sikhism. Its first three chapters, however, have no direct bearing on the life of the Guru except for a brief reference to his birth at Patna. This is followed by an account of the development of Sikhism under Tegh Bahadur and his martyrdom at Delhi. It is really from the sixth chapter, with Guru Gobind's installation on his father's seat, that he becomes the key figure. The birth of the Khalsa forms the subject of the next chapter. In the opinion of Banerjee, it "paved the way for the foundation of a new state for the Sikhs and provided them a decisive rallying point to protect their home and religion in the face of a determined Mughal persecution." Seven chapters are devoted to a detailed analysis of different aspects of the Mughal-Sikh hostility under the leadership of the Guru. The study is brought to an end by an elaborate exposition of the Guru's character and influence on the history of India during the later middle ages. "The Guru was not merely a religious reformer," concludes Banerjee; "he attempted to build up a new martial nation imbued with a religious spirit. In this sense he was a unique political personality of the country. He gave a distinct shape to the destiny of the Sikhs."

Unlike Banerjee's *Guru Gobinda Singha*, Jogendranath Gupta's volume40 was a popular life sketch written in a simple style aiming at educating school children about the Guru's attempts to unite the Sikhs under the banner of the Khalsa. The contemporary press was favourably disposed to Gupta's efforts to bring the message of the fighting tradition of the Sikhs within easy reach of Bengali youngsters. A systematic perusal of this monograph also reveals his close association with the pioneering works of Rajanikanta Gupta and Tinkari Banerjee.

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38. Jatindranath Samaddar in his *Sikher Katha* (Howrah: Dhirendranath Lahiri, 1319 B.S.) records nothing encouraging about the tenth Guru. He accused him of waging many futile wars throughout his life. Curiously enough, Sammadar offered no valid argument in his defence, and it seems likely that he was disillusioned with the contemporary militant Bengal politics, often guided by communal considerations, of the post-partition years. For Tagore's views on the tenth Guru, see Section VI.

39. Basantakumar Banerjee, *Guru Gobinda Singha* (Calcutta: the author, 1316 B.S.). There were three editions of this book, the last one appearing in 1926. The book was translated into Hindi in the 1920's while its English rendering appeared in 1950 from Chandernagore. It was promptly reviewed in the two leading monthly journals, viz., *Bharati*, Kartik 1316 B.S., p. 403, and *Prabashi*, Ashvin 1316 B.S., p. 448.

A significant aspect of Gupta’s writings was his detailed exposition of the Sikh code of conduct. He referred to a long list of the Guru’s instructions relating to the Sikh view of God, good habits, value system and relationship with the different dissenting sects like Dhirmalis and Ramrais. As in Tinkari Banerjee’s work, Gupta’s Guru Gobind Singh was not a Hindu messiah born in India for fighting the Turks. Rather, he was a man of flesh and blood with natural human feelings and endowed with a penetrating understanding of human character. But the monograph is, however, not an original work in a class with that of Tinkari Banerjee. Its merit chiefly lies in the fact that he conveyed the message of the tenth Guru in a language easily understandable to Bengali school children of his times.

VI

Rabindranath Tagore produced some of the finest pieces of Bengali creative writing on Guru Gobind Singh, over a period of nearly twenty-five years (1885-1909). With the exception of one, these are all devoted to extolling Guru Gobind Singh’s moments of joy and sorrow, his triumphs and anguish, and his deep commitment to the cause of Sikh cultural heritage. Tagore wrote his first essay, entitled “Bir Guru,” when he was in his early twenties, and it was generally marked by a spirit of youthful exuberance regarding the Guru. Published in Balak, the essay primarily aimed at educating Bengali youngsters about the Guru’s life and mission. He repeatedly sought to impress upon the mind of his young readers that Guru Gobind fought for “oppressed humanity” and laid down his life for bringing an end to Mughal authority in the Punjab.41

It was followed by three poems,42 written over a period of nearly twelve years (June 1888 to October 1899): “Guru Gobinda,” “Nishphal Upahar” (“A Futile Gift”) and “Shesh Shikha” (“The Last Lesson”). These concern three phases of the Guru’s life, commencing with his twenty years’ commitment to a strict self-disciplined life and leading to the birth of the Khalsa in 1699 and his end at Nanded in 1708. The seeds of these poems were evident in his “Bir Guru” and they were included in Manasi and Katha o Kahini, generally regarded as his two major anthologies of the early period. Of these poems, “Guru Gobinda,” a lyrical ballad, is the first. It was written when Tagore was disillusioned with the “degrading mendicancy policy” of the Indian National Congress in the late 1880’s. Tagore’s frustration is reflected in a number of poems, songs and essays. On the other hand, he set forth his view of an ideal Indian leader in various prose writings. Here he made no secret of his admiration for Guru Gobind Singh, who had spent twenty years of his life in obscurity before ascending himself to the leadership of his community. During

41. Rabindranath Tagore, “Bir Guru,” Rabindra Rachanavali, v. 13 (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1368 B.S.), pp. 457-61. This was originally published in Balak, Shraban 1292 B.S. It was also included in Itihas (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1362 B.S.).
42. Rabindranath Tagore, Rabindra Rachanavali, v. 1 (Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, 1368 B.S.), pp. 653-60, 685-86.
these years of self-exile, wrote Tagore, the Guru wholly devoted himself to the study of sacred literature and introspection—hardly paralleled in contemporary politics. Tagore visualised that his ideal leader, like Guru Gobind Singh, would pay very little attention to any short-term gain, fame and publicity. Instead, he would keep himself away from the vortex of mundane politics so that he could develop his sense of deep commitment to the service of the community.43

Tagore portrayed Guru Gobind's years of self-imposed exile in "Guru Gobinda." In this poem, when the Guru was requested by his close disciples to come out of obscurity and take up the leadership of the Panth, he promptly turned them down. For providing the right type of leadership, the Guru argued, he still had much to learn, and this was the reason for his continued dissociation from the main current of national politics. Until completion of his training, the Guru concluded, he would remain in the woods trying to acquire as much inspiration as possible for serving the community better in the near future.

A similar reflection of the dedication of the tenth Guru to the national cause and his scant attention to any worldly possession characterises Tagore's "Nishphal Upahar." Taking his cue from McGregor's account of the Guru's contempt for wealth,44 the poet projects the last Guru as his ideal Indian leader. Tagore's third and last poem on Guru Gobind Singh is "Shesh Shikha." It provides us an intimate picture of how the tenth Guru cut short his life by inviting the end at the hands of a Pathan assassin at Nanded. Here again the poet took the main theme from McGregor's History of the Sikhs and infuses an ethical message into the whole story of the assassination.

In the present century Tagore wrote a long essay entitled "Shivaji o Guru Gobinda Singha," which is, incidentally, the longest essay ever written by him on the Panth. Here we come across a significant change in the attitude of Rabindranath towards the Guru. While praising Guru Nanak for his saintliness and religious liberalism, he bitterly denounced Guru Gobind for "radicalising" the Sikh movement.45 Instead of uniting the Sikhs on the basis of mutual love and co-operation, Tagore wrote, the tenth Guru sowed the seeds of hatred and revenge among them. This left a very unfortunate legacy for the history of the Sikhs. They were seen, concluded Rabindranath, fighting in the different parts

43. Tagore's view on the Guru may also be seen in his other prose writings. For these, see ibid., v. 11, p. 95; ibid., v. 12, pp. 361, 941.
45. Rabindranath thus wrote: "Guru Govind organised the Sikhs to suit a special purpose. He called in the human energy of the Sikhs from all other sides and made it flow in one particular channel only; they ceased to be full, free men. He...dwarfed the unity of a religious sect into an instrument of political advancement. Hence the Sikhs, who had been advancing for centuries to be true men, suddenly stopped short and became mere soldiers." "Shivaji o Guru Gobinda Singha," Rabindra Rachanavali, v. 13, pp. 443-50. This was translated by Sir Jadunath Sarkar and quoted in History of Aurangzeb, v. 3 (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar & Co., 1928), pp. 302-3. For a similar opinion, see Jatindranath Samaddar, Sikher katha, pp. 142-44. Tagore's essay was originally published as an introduction to Saratkumar Roy's Sikh Guru o Sikh Jati (Calcutta: Indian Publishing House, 1317 B.S.).
of the globe and failed to build up any permanent state on the ruins of the Mughals.

This significant change in the writing of Tagore merits special attention. During the years of Swadeshi and boycott agitation, Tagore’s attitude towards militant politics underwent a gradual but definite change. It “took place in the background of the rise of political extremism and the communal virus during 1906-07.” Rabindranath was convinced that Hindu-Muslim riots frequently flared up in Bengal due to the failure of contemporary national leaders to win over the support of the Muslims. He became increasingly bitter towards both boycott and terrorism because they not only “accentuated communal tension” but also at times involved considerable hardship for the weaker section of the community. Rabindranath broached the plan of “building of a Mahajati in India on the basis of a broad humanism.” This would envisage “a decisive rejection of sectarian barriers” and a “wholesale breaking down of walls of communal separatism.” It would involve the discarding of “much of traditional Hinduism.” This anti-traditionalism, in fact, was to pervade virtually all of Tagore’s post-1907 writings.46

In this context, Rabindranath argued that Guru Gobind Singh’s Khalsa could not offer any effective answer to contemporary national questions. In the later middle ages, he noted, the birth of the Khalsa had frustrated the plan of bringing Hindus and Muslims together on a common national platform. It diverted the liberal message of the founder of the Sikh faith in order to achieve short-term political gains, sharpened communal antagonism and generated an endless hatred and disunity in the rank and file of the community. Tagore attacked the last Guru for creating the Khalsa because it perpetuated sectarian politics at the point of the sword. Thus Tagore made a complete volte-face in his view of Guru Gobind Singh.

Tagore’s critical observations on the Guru’s policy sparked a lengthy debate. He was immediately criticised by Binaykumar Sarkar,47 a noted sociologist and historian of the present century. In his view, the transformation of Sikhism was dictated by the contemporary pressing needs of the society. In the changed condition of the seventeenth century something more was needed, in Sarkar’s view, than what had originally been preached by Guru Nanak. The Khalsa symbolised this change. It would therefore be wrong to regard the new development as a negation of Guru Nanak’s teachings and to blame Guru Gobind for accomplishing it. Another important rejoinder came from Kartikchandra Mitra, author of Sikh Guru. He emphasised that “radicalisation” of Sikh politics provided a new lease on life to the Panth. The Mughal persecution would have crushed the Sikhs, had there been no Khalsa in the

46. This paragraph is based on Sumit Sarkar’s Swadeshi Movement: 1903-1908 (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), pp. 82-85, 90-91, 326, 449.
eighteenth century. Similarly, Indubhusan Banerjee bitterly criticised Tagore’s views. Rameshchandra Majumdar and Anilchandra Banerjee were generally of the opinion that Rabindranath misunderstood the spirit of the Khalsa and based his observations about the Guru’s “militarisation of the community” on a complete misreading of the contemporary politics. The Khalsa saved the Sikhs during the critical years when their existence was in jeopardy, and offered them a symbol of unity throughout their wars with the Mughals.

The achievements and failures of Ranjit Singh were also a subject of considerable interest for nineteenth-century Bengali authors. They admired the Maharaja’s superior military genius and diplomatic skill in uniting the Sikhs under his political authority, though a few of them were critical of his moral lapses. Writers in the present century were not much concerned with the Maharaja’s moral lapses, but concentrated on his political success and organising ability. Of these works, Saratkumar Roy’s *Sikh Guru o Sikh Jati* deserves special attention. It is a well-integrated history of the Sikhs from the birth of Guru Nanak till the collapse of Ranjit Singh’s monarchy after the Second Sikh War. Roy’s study provides us an account of the Maharaja’s ancestry as well as his frequent wars with the *misl* leaders. In Roy’s view, Ranjit’s military success was partly due to his equal treatment of the Hindus and Muslims, which provided a definite source of strength to his royal authority. The writer was, however, of the opinion that Ranjit Singh’s secularism was dictated by his narrow political considerations. There was also an interesting chapter on Ranjit Singh’s relations with the East India Company.

Another important biographical sketch of the Maharaja was written by Jogendranath Gupta. His *Ranjit Singha*, published in 1923, was the seventh title in the “Three Anna National Biography” series. Like his *Guru Gobinda Singha*, the book under study aimed at educating school children (in this case about the Sikh monarch’s attempt to build up the Khalsa Raj in the Punjab). The author devoted almost one-third of the book to the history of the Panth till the accession of Ranjit Singh. In his opinion, the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the stories of the lifelong struggle of the tenth Guru and the fierce resistance of Banda Bahadur inspired the Sikh ruler to rally the Panth under his political umbrella. In this grand design, argued Gupta, he not only crushed the *misl* leaders but defeated the Pathans at the Battle of Nowshera. The author

50. In this regard Brahmamohan Mallick’s view on the Sikh monarch deserves our special attention. For it, see the author’s contribution in the *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* (forthcoming) on *Ranjit Singher Jiban Vrittanta*.
noted, however, that Ranjit Singh could not establish any permanent peace in northwestern Punjab with frequent revolts of the Pathans requiring an immense drainage of the Sikh treasury. Gupta had a high regard for Ranjit Singh’s decision to modernise the Sikh army along European lines and for the Sikh monarch’s administrative ability and common sense.

These years also witnessed the performance of a historical play entitled *Punjabkeshari Ranjit Singha* on the Calcutta professional stage (1940). It was written and directed by Mahendranath Gupta, a well-known playwright. It idealised the Maharaja’s reign as the last effective barrier between anarchy and order in the Punjab. The Maharaja was portrayed as the symbol of Indian unity, persistently fighting against the forces of anarchy and disorder.

**VIII**

In their search for the history of the Panth, Bengali writers often turned to the Sikh sacred literature. In this sphere they were primarily concerned with the message of the *Japji* and *Sukhmani*, though they were not unmindful of the significance of the *Vachitar Natak* and other literary works of the tenth Guru. Raja Rammohan Roy’s quest for the unitary idea of God among different Indian creeds in the early nineteenth century brought him in touch with the Adi Granth. Debendranath Tagore continued this Brahmó tradition. His profound respect and love for these hymns found reflections in his autobiography, where he quoted a few lines from different *pauris* so suitably that they add a new taste and significance to his writing. It was Shashibhusan Mukherjee who first published, in three installments, a full-length translation of the *Japji* in the *Nabajiban Patrika*. But one had to wait till the beginning of the present century before another edition of the *Japji* would be published for the benefit of the Nanakpanthi Sikhs of Bengal and Assam, who had very little access to the *Japji* in the Gurmukhi script. The *Japji* was rendered for the first into Bengali verse by an anonymous poet under the title *Upasanasar*. The translator was of the opinion that it was a non-communal text that might be read by members of different faiths. This was followed by a prose edition published in 1918, undertaken by Abinashchandra Majumdar, a member of the Lahore Brahmó Samaj. His Bengali rendering, writes Majumdar in its preface, was not meant for highly educated and sophisticated people; he presented it, instead, to those “who had a genuine respect and love for the Sikhs and their literature.”

53. He referred to *pauris* 2, 5, 6, 7, 28 and 29. See also note 2.
57. Abinashchandra Majumdar, *Guru Nanakkríra Japji* (Calcutta: Calcutta Brahmó Mission, n.d.). It seems likely the monograph was published before October-November 1918, because it was reviewed in the *Prabashi*, Agrabhayon 1325 B.S. Dhirendramohan Sen, another member of the...
The process of translating the message of the *Japji* for the Bengali literary world was particularly enriched by the contributions of the disciples of Sri Bijaykrishna Goswami\(^5\) in the present century. The first volume came out in 1921 under the editorship of Kiranchand Darvesh, a poet of considerable eminence. He rendered the text into poetry. The second was completed by Jnanendramohan Datta, a Muzaffarpur-based lawyer, and was published in 1925. Its text was in prose and there were annotations of some important Punjabi terms. The most important volume in the series was the work of Haranchandra Chakladar of the University of Calcutta. He carried on his work on the Adi Granth for nearly forty-five years. Based on the *Faridkot Tika*, his translation of the Adi Granth continued till his death in 1958. During his lifetime only a volume of his work was printed, under the title *Srisrigurugrantha Sahibji* (1958). It included the *Japji*, *Rahiras* and *Sohila* sections of the Adi Granth.

Generally speaking, Chakladar's translation of the *Japji* is still considered to be the most authentic, as well as the most extensive, edition of this text in Bengali. In translating it, he tried to maintain the spirit of the original and followed the written text of the *Japji*, which is sometimes slightly different form the way it is read. His translation also succeeded in communicating the deep emotional feeling and the grand poetic exuberance that are associated with the Sikh morning prayer. These hymns of Guru Nanak, according to him, were part of the Indian religious tradition handed down to us through the centuries. In this sense they are worthy of being respected and read along with the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* of Krishnadas Kaviraj and *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas.

Incidentally, his explanatory note on the *Mulmantra*, running over more than ten pages (nearly one-fourth of the book), still remains an unsurpassed piece of Bengali literary work on the *Japji*. In this connection one may also refer to his long editorial comments on *Ekonkar*, which bear eloquent testimony to his scholarship. In addition, his writings were enriched by numerous cross references from the Adi Granth, which one does not find in any other Bengali edition of the *Japji*. He was also the first Bengali translator to draw our attention to a few points of resemblance between *pauri* 27 and the *Sodoru (I) Rag Asa Mahala I* in the *Rahiras*. Translators who came after him have so far failed to add any additional information on this piece of historical inquiry.

This scholarly effort has, however, a few minor limitations. To begin with, Chakladar was silent about his source materials. Secondly, the number of editorial notes as well as their scholarly quality strikingly declined as he moved from the *Mulmantra* to the *Solaku*. Finally, his observations about the role of the yogis in relation to *pauri* 27 seem to be of doubtful validity. Also he did not offer any logical defence of his hypothesis about the factors leading to the birth of this *pauri vis-à-vis* the criticism of the yogis in the Punjab. Chakladar's

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Lahore Brahmo Samaj, also contributed to the *Prabashi* on the *Japji*. For it, see *Prabashi*, Kartik 1319 B.S., pp. 78-79; ibid., Magh 1319 B.S., pp. 376-78.

scholarship was taken up by the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Rashbehari Avenue, Calcutta and the Sikh Association of Bengal. They partly financed the reprinting of the volume, which included the *Japji*, *Rahiras* and *Sohila*. It came out in 1977, but the task of editing was performed perfunctorily.

There are four more editions of the *Japji*, but none of them surpassed the scholarly achievement of Chakladar. One was translated by Jatindramohan Chatterjee, an enthusiastic admirer of 'Sikhism in Bengal'. It sought to project the *Japji* as one of the finest manifestations of Indian devotional literature. The edition of Sudhir Gupta (perhaps partially financed by the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Rashbehari Avenue), generally reiterated the message of love and surrender as preached by the founder of the Sikh faith. It was followed by Jogeshchandra Bhattacharya's translation of a few *pauris* of the *Japji* in the *Shrigurubani* magazine. Finally, in the early 1980's we find a verse edition of the *Japji* by Amar Chakravarti. The translator had no direct access to the *Japji* in Punjabi, and this perhaps largely explains his failure to give a coherent representation of Sikh philosophy of the mid-sixteenth century.

During these years the message of the *Sukhmani* was not altogether unknown to the Bengali literary world. The followers of Sri Bijaykrishna Goswami played an encouraging role in this regard. There were at least three separate editions, all translated and published during the last seventy years. The first one was brought out by Jnanendramohan Datta in 1916. He presented the text of the *Sukhmani* in the way it is read and did the translation in prose. His translation was favourably received and there were three reprints of it during his lifetime, while the fourth one came out long after his death. Another edition of the *Sukhmani* was produced by Kiranchand Darvesh. As early as 1917 he started translating it, though it took thirty years to complete. In his opinion these verses represent one of the finest expositions of the Indian quest for spiritual attainment and hence the Adi Granth must have been greatly enriched by their inclusion. Like Datta, Darvesh reproduced the *Sukhmani* in the way it is read in Punjabi and provided a brief history of the Panth under the fifth Guru. Chakladar's edition is so far the last and perhaps the most detailed analysis of the *Sukhmani* in Bengali. It is a posthumous publication based on his scattered notes and commentaries, written in association with Prabhatchandra Das, a

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62. According to Jogeshchandra Bhattacharjee, fifteen *pauris* were translated under the title "Shrishrijapji" during the period January 1975 to October 1985. He kindly gave me a few back issues of the *Shrigurubani* for necessary consultation.
64. It was reprinted by the *Bangiya Sikh Sangha* in 1982.
residen of Benares. His translation is in elegant Bengali prose while the text is represented in the way Punjabi is written. This is the lone Bengali translation of the Sukhmani that has made extensive use of different Punjabi sources in the notes and commentaries.

The literary genius of Guru Gobind Singh also figured in the different Brahma magazines of the last century. In the present century, Tinkari Banerjee undertook the task of introducing briefly the central theme of some of the tenth Guru's writing. He was also of the opinion that the Chaupayan Chaubis Avatarn Kian, Mihdi Mir, Shasti Nam Mala and Istri Chariti were not the compositions of the Guru, though he did not fail to bring out the historical significance of the Vachitar Natak. In this regard he closely followed Cunningham.

The Daswan Padshah ki Granth (i.e., Dasam Granth) was partially reviewed by Debendranath Mitra and Kartikchandra Mitra in the present century, but we do not have any monograph exclusively on the tenth Guru's writing till Jatindramohan Chatterjee published Japji athaba Guru Gobinda Singher Amar Bani in 1949. This was primarily a selection of the different compositions of the Guru. It was divided into three parts. The first gives us a long introduction (69 pages) emphasising the salient aspects of Sikhism under the tenth Guru. Part Two contains excerpts from his Daswan Padshah ki Granth (72 pages) divided into nineteen sections, their bulk coming from the Jap, Akal Ustad, Vachitar Natak, Gianprabodh, Chandi Charitra and Shabad Hazare. Part Three furnishes their prose translations along with explanatory notes and commentaries.

There is, however, very little order in the selection of these couplets. Further, Chatterjee often followed the rules of Bengali grammar when recording the Guru's Punjabi writing. The book includes only thirteen distiches from the Jap though it is named after it. Finally, a section of Part Three is devoted to the writings of Gian Singh (Panth Prakash) and Bhai Santokh Singh (Suraj Prakash), which, of course, do not constitute parts of the Daswan Padshah ki Granth.

Bengali littérateurs also dealt with a few other aspects of the history of the Sikhs, three of which merit our special attention. The history of the Sikh Wars, Sikh religious institutions, and character sketches of later Sikh heroes evoked their deep interest after the commencement of hostilities between the East India Company and the Lahore darbar in 1845. There were, as we have already seen, two significant publications dealing with the two Sikh Wars in the nineteenth century, namely, Punjabaitihas and Sikh Juddher Itihas o Maharaja Duleep Singha. The former deals with the history of the First Sikh War in two out of its
four chapters, while the latter reviews the Second Sikh War in the first part of the book. In the present century, in the wake of the partition of Bengal, a connected account of the Sikh Wars was published. It was a combined edition of Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* in Bengali together with a supplement which carried the history to the Second Sikh War and sought to update Cunningham. This was entitled *Sikh-Itihas* and was edited by Durgadas Lahiri, a noted Bengali historian of the first quarter of the present century. He was a close associated of Pramathanath Sanyal, the translator of Cunningham's volume, and wrote the supplement. The entire book ran to 740 pages, of which Lahiri's contribution was 61 pages. Lahiri divided the supplement into five chapters, all more or less of equal size. The first chapter reviews the causes of the Second Sikh War, and the author blames the English administration in the Punjab for the Multan uprisings under Diwan Mulraj (1848). The second chapter carries the story of the war to the Battle of Suddosum. The Battle of Multan forms the central theme of the next chapter. Lahiri concentrates on the Battle of Chillianwalla in the fourth chapter, which is one of the two briefest chapters in the supplement. Finally, in the fifth and last chapter, he studies the Anglo-Sikh encounter at Gujrat. In his estimation this was the bloodiest battle the British ever fought in India.

Lahiri, like his predecessor, Barodakanta Mitra, seems to have depended primarily on English sources and to have blamed the policy of the British Resident at Lahore for the Multan uprising of March 1848. Mitra and Lahiri, however, stood poles apart in regard to their observations on Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs*. In spite of his deep regard for the English author, Mitra was of the opinion that Cunningham's volume did not furnish "a detailed and complete record of the First Sikh War." Lahiri had no such reservations and, indeed, an all-round admiration for Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* was the hallmark of Lahiri's historiography. He made no secret of this in his editorial notes.

Another significant field of Bengali literary activity concerned Sikh religious institutions. It was Debendranath Tagore who first referred to the Harmandir Sahib in his memoirs (1857). His description of the serene religious-cultural atmosphere of the Golden Temple complex is an excellent piece of literary craftsmanship. There is an element of poetic exuberance in his observations which even today appears fresh. Rabindranath drew our attention to the place in his autobiography (*Jibansmriti*) and in an early novel (*Chokherbali*). The Golden Temple also figured in the writings of Krishnakumar Mitra and Rameshchandra Dutt. The former was not, however, happy with the presence of Hindu idols in the precincts of the Svarnamandir (Golden Temple) when he first visited the place in the late 1870's. The latter

69. For a further discussion on this point, see the author's "Sikh Itihas: A Supplement to Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* in Bengali," *Panjab Past and Present*, April 1986, pp. 186-96.
referred to the contributions of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the development of this premier Sikh religious institution. In the present century, the Jaito tragedy and its significance in contemporary politics found frequent references in the Bengali press.

Bengali writing on the Sikhs was also greatly enriched by a few character sketches of those who had fought in defence of the Panth in the course of the last three centuries. In this connection one may refer to Kumudini Mitra's widely acclaimed monograph *Sikher Balidan* which brought her immediate fame. Her writing is permeated with unbounded admiration for the Sikhs who suffered at the hands of the Mughals. The book was published on the eve of the partition of Bengal. Mitra preached the cause of militant nationalism, resulting in a rapid selling out of its first three editions within a few years of its publication. Bhai Taru Singh also figured in the writing of Basantakumar Banerjee, who had already made his mark as a biographer of the tenth Guru. Perhaps taking his cue from Rabindranath's writing on Bhai Taru Singh, Banerjee depicted him as a fighter for individual freedom “against the oppression of the Mughal state.” The sketch concluded with a perceptive reference to the “unhealthy consequences of the loss of political liberty in a modern state”—a theme which we do not come across in the pages of the *Sikher Balidan*. The author also highlighted the chivalry and self-sacrifice of eighteenth-century Sikh women in *Sikh Ramani*. These women, the author pointed out, refused to yield to any Mughal pressure, even though they had to undergo immense hardship in the imperial jail.

These works represent a fair index of Bengali interest in the history and culture, religion and literature of the Sikhs. They illustrate the pioneering role of the Brahmos in popularising the message of Sikhism in the eastern part of India. Later on, the Brahmo search was reinforced by a few Hindu nationalist and Sanatanist authors, who provided a new perspective to Bengali understanding of the Sikhs. Again the development of a militant nationalist movement led to a new quest for the Panth. Actually, the Bengali literary world was so enthralled by the spirit of martyrdom and self-sacrifice of the Sikhs that monographs like *Sikher Balidan* (1904), *Sikh-Ithas* (1907), *Sikher Jagaran* (1929) and *Sikher Atmahuti* (1932?) not only highlighted this tradition but provided an added stimulus to India’s fight for freedom. A few of them made a direct appeal to the militant nationalists of Bengal to bring an end to the British Raj following the path of the Sikh martyrs. Consequently, it led to the imposition of a ban on

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73. For a further discussion of Kumudini Mitra’s *Sikher Balidan*, see the author’s contribution in the *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* (forthcoming).
Bengali Perceptions of the Sikhs

some of them. *Sikher Atmahuti*, for example, was so effectively proscribed by
the British Government that not even a single copy of it can be found in any
leading library of India.75

But Bengali appreciation was not always characterised by a spirit of
universal admiration for the Panth. For example, Guru Gobind Singh was
accused of “radicalising” the Sikh movement. Similarly, Maharaja Ranjit Singh
was criticised for his failure in the field of administration. Tagore’s criticism of
the tenth Guru, as we have already seen, gave rise to a debate and it evoked a
chain of criticism from scholars like Binaykumar Sarkar, Indubhusan Banerjee,
Rameshchandra Majumdar and Anilchandra Banerjee. The attitude towards the
Maharaja, however, underwent a significant change after the publication of
Brahmamohan Mallick’s monograph in the early 1860’s. Unlike some of the
nineteenth-century English and Bengali critics, all three Guptas (viz.,
Rajanikanta Gupta, Jogendranath Gupta and Mahendranath Gupta) portrayed the
Maharaja as a symbol of Indian national unity, fighting against the forces of
disintegration and disruption. These authors were often more enthusiastic about
the Sikh monarch’s success and tried to refute emotionally the charges of the
English and Bengali historians against the Khalsa Raj.

These works represent an important landmark in the development of
historical writing in Bengali. Though many of them did not have any
professional training, the authors were not wholly unaware of the scope and
significance of history in contemporary national life and social relationships.
Their motives as well as styles of recording the past differed so strikingly from
one another that Sikh studies in Bengal can hardly be regarded as a
homogeneous school of historical inquiry. Thus, historians like Rajanikanta
Gupta and Durgadas Lahiri took up the study of the history of the Sikhs with a
note of sympathy and Hindu nationalistic pride, and concluded their writing with
an open political tirade against British domination in India. On the other hand,
Brahmo authors like Bhai Mahendranath Bose and Akshaykumar Datta had no
such obvious political end and presented the history of the Sikhs in a formal,
analytical style. In spite of these differences in style and commitment, the
authors generally had an exaggerated notion of the role of the individual in
history. They were not wholly aware of the significance of economic forces in
the evolution of the history of the Sikhs in the sixteenth and seventeenth
centuries.

The writers also differed in selection of their historical sources. Most of
them were acquainted with the works of European authorities like Malcolm,

75. *Sikher Atmahuti* deals with the tradition of martyrdom and self-sacrifice among the Sikhs
since the days of the fifth Guru. In the opinion of the author the history of the sixteenth century is
the story of Sikh resistance to Mughal rule. The monograph is divided into four parts, two of which
are devoted to the life and mission of Guru Gobind Singh. For it, see Dinschandra Barman, *Sikher
Atmahuti* (Calcutta: Arya Publishing Company, 1332? B.S.). A copy of it is available in the India
Office Library, London. I am indebted to Captain Bhag Singh, Editor, *The Sikh Review*, for
extending the necessary financial assistance for obtaining its photocopy from the India Office
Library.
Himadri Banerjee

Cust, McGregor, Cunningham, Griffin, Macauliffie, Gordon and Trumpp. Of these works, Cunningham’s volume was the most widely read and used by Bengali writers of our period, and it was even translated into Bengali at the threshold of the century. There are, however, a few works based on Punjabi primary sources. Again, we have a few works often accused of caricaturing Sikh history.

Sikh studies in Bengali spreading over a hundred and seventy years have had a salutary impact on teaching and research concerning the history of the Sikhs in this part of India. It was quite in keeping with this tradition that the University of Calcutta played a pioneering role in this field of historical enquiry. With the introduction of Sikh studies at the post-graduate level in the College Street campus in the present century, a new school of historical research based on archival materials gradually developed in the city of Calcutta. One of the earliest works was Narendrakrishna Sinha’s *Ranjit Singh* in English, first published in 1933. It was followed by Indubhusan Banerjee’s *Evolution of the Khalsa* (in two volumes), Narendrakrishna Sinha’s *Rise of the Sikh Power*, Niharranjan Ray’s *The Sikh Gurus and Sikh Society* and Anilchandra Banerjee’s works on the history, religion and philosophy of the Sikhs—all of them widely read and quoted in the 1980’s. Perhaps this Bengali interest partially explains the uninterrupted publication of *The Sikh Review* over a period of thirty years from Calcutta, as well as an active participation of different Sikh cultural organisations of Bengal in the publication and reprinting of different Bengali works on the history of the Sikhs over the years.

The works mentioned here were all written by Bengali Hindus. They do not reflect the sentiment of Bengali Muslims on the Panth. Generally speaking, the latter did not always hold a sympathetic attitude toward the Sikhs who fought against the Mughal imperial authority, and they sharply reacted against those who had tried to destroy it. A rapid survey of the native newspaper reports would point out that the Sikhs, like the Marathas, were frequently viewed as an enemy of the Mughal Empire and hence received bitter denunciations from those sympathetic to Mughal rule. Many Muslim writers were quite apprehensive of some Hindu authors’ attempts to project Guru Gobind Singh as the “sword arm of Hinduism,” and questioned the relationship of this notion to the Hindu *swarajya*. Similarly, they were critical of Banda Bahadur’s conflict with the Mughal revenue officials and denounced Maharaja Ranjit Singh for waging a war with the “freedom-loving Pathans” and for “destroying their independence.” Instead of the Sikh Gurus, they often looked towards some of the medieval Islamic heroes for redressing the sufferings of the Indian Muslims. Conversely, it seems likely that the Singh Sabha leaders’ bid for redefining Sikhism, their

bitter pamphlet duel with the Arya Samajists, purging the Golden Temple and other gurdwaras of Hindu idols and priestly rituals and, finally, the emergence of a new Sikh identity in the present century have received a warm reception in the Muslim press. This point, however, requires detailed and separate research.

The present study confirms that numerous Bengali authors have taken a lively interest in the history of the Sikhs and Sikhism. They adopted different literary forms, communicating their appreciation and admiration of the Panth. These authors also made no secret of the fact that their goal was to reach the common people. They often used popular religious and cultural symbols to be easily understood by them. They respected the martial tradition of the Sikhs and praised their spirit of self-sacrifice. They admired the Sikhs' monotheism and often tried to share their joys and sorrows. They communicated their feeling through their mother tongue, thereby enriching their own culture and adding a new dimension and colour to their cosmopolitan social milieu. They brought the extreme northwest of India closer to Bengal, and thus indirectly participated in the process of integrating India in the post-Independence decades.