

“The Other Sikhs:” The Sikh Religion in Marathi Writings®

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@For detailed discussion on the contemporary Marathi sources of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Sikh history, please see Dave's *Niyantakalin Suchi* (Four Volumes). I have collected a sizeable body of materials on The Sikh history available in Hindi writings, and hope to juxtapose both the Marathi and Hindi sources for a possible new volume on the History of the Sikhs.

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ARGUABLY THE NON-PUNJABI orientation of Sikh history is an outcome of many factors. Besides Guru Nanak, two others, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh travelled widely. Assamese *Buranjis* and the *Hukamnamas* in Punjabi may be referred to in this connection. Sikh *masands* were equally active in these areas till they were thrown out by the last Guru in 1699. We have also accounts of Punjabi Khatri traders dealing in foodgrains, cotton cloth, *shawls* and *pashminas* in different parts of India from early sixteenth century. Gradually, local pockets of Sikh population grew up in distant regions far away from Punjab. According to the census (1991), around one-fifth of the total Sikh population live outside Punjab within India. This figure, however does not include many of those Sikhs who keep *kes* and wear turban, but have never been to Punjab, do not or cannot speak Punjabi, and are hardly aware of the Khalsa *rahits*. These Sikhs have their local names, like Assamiya-Sikh, Dakshini-Sikh, Patnaiya-Sikh and Bengali-Sikh. The Punjabi-speaking Sikhs, curiously, do not regard them as true Sikhs. Perhaps this regional profile of Sikhism partly explains the presence of two of the five Sikh *takhts* outside Punjab. Again, this difference within the Sikh orthodox tradition may have added a few interesting shades in the formulation of regional Sikh profile in course of the last one or two hundred years. This may have also precipitated debates in identifying what did actually represent 'typical' Sikh tradition.

Nirguna School: Only a few of the above issues may figure in our present discussion on the twentieth century Marathi writings on Sikh Panth. Unlike the people of eastern India, Marathis had perhaps more effective and direct contact with the Sikhs of Punjab due to geographical proximity. Medieval *nirgun sant* tradition of northern India, as represented in the *Adi Granth* may be cited here as a case study. While the Bengali poet Jaidev has only two hymns in the Sikhs religious text, we have the names of three Marathi *sants* contributing sixty-six hymns in the same arena. The bulk of them came from Namdev (1270-1350). How intimate and deep were the relationship between the Maharashtrian *nirgun sants* and the early Sikh tradition has long been indicated by Professor McLeod in his pioneering study on Guru Nanak (1969). According to one Punjabi tradition, poet Namdev had sometimes been in Punjab, preaching *nirgun bhakti* there and left behind a band of followers. Subsequently, when Guru Arjun started editing *Guru Granth Sahib*, so runs the tradition, he collected the *abhangs* of poet Namdev from his followers in Punjab. This pre-modern Marathi-Punjabi linguistic interaction has, however, given rise to an interesting debate.

Historiography: This tradition has been questioned by a few Marathi scholars. Priyolkar, for example, in his book *Sikhancha Adigranthatil Namdev* (1938) pointed

out that Namdev's visit to Punjab is based on some fictitious and uncorroborated sources of history. This myth may again be connected to the larger Indian hagiographic tradition of the medieval days. He based his arguments on Namdev's *abhangs* which are silent on this point. It seems likely that one of his disciples of the same name wrote these *banis* in the name of his great preceptor (Namdev) in the tradition of the Sikh Gurus who all described them as Nanak in the *Adi Granth*.

There are also others who had gone almost to the other extreme. They ruled out the presence of any indigenous Namdev tradition in Punjab. In their opinion, these *banis* were possibly carried from Maharashtra into Punjab by the Punjabi Khatri traders in medieval times. Incidentally, the *Adi Granth* includes not only the compositions of Namdev, but it also incorporates the writings of Trilochan and Parmanand. All three Maratha saints came from the same Pandharpur-Sholapur region which once stood on the busy overland trade route connecting eastern Punjab plains with the western coastal trade marts of the Bombay Presidency, via Bijapur and Kolhapur. Besides, this region is not far away from Nanded, an important centre of Sikh religion since the days of Guru Gobind Singh in the early eighteenth century. The *Janamsakhi* edition also relates this area to Guru Nanak's *Udasis* in the early sixteenth century. As the larger Maratha *abhang* tradition, conveying the message of monotheism, *bhakti* and protest against caste hierarchy, filtered into Punjab over the centuries, the Sikh Gurus enthusiastically responded towards them.

Namdev in Punjab: Incorporation of the *banis* of Maharashtrian Namdev within Sikhism from beyond the frontier of Punjab is not again free from debate. Growing tension around the Non-Brahmin movement of the late 1930s prompted Bartakke to respond to the ongoing debate on the Namdev tradition. In a long essay published in the three successive issues of the *Loksahikha*, he tried to fall back on the older Punjabi tradition regarding Namdev's visit to Punjab. The scholar made a critical use of the Marathi sources and attempted a comparative study between the writings of Namdev of the *Adi Granth* and those of Namdev of the larger Maharashtrian *abhang* tradition. His textual analysis in association with other historical sources led him to conclude that the Marathi saint in his old age (around sixty years) had actually visited Punjab and preached his message in and around the submontane Gurdaspur district. British civilian Rose, as well as anonymous Marathi author from Lahore, also refer to the presence of sizeable number of the followers of Namdev in the region. This is again confirmed by the early twentieth century census reports from Punjab. These men came from both Hindu and Sikh communities who practiced distinct rituals of their own. According to the same testimony, their history may be pushed back to the early fourteenth century when the saint poet had visited Punjab with other Marathi *sants* from the south.

Dalit Debate: It seems that the Maharashtrian Namdev tradition in relation to Punjab occupies an interesting place in the twentieth century Marathi printed sources about Sikh studies. Perhaps the growing dictates of the Dalit politics have partially widened the scope of debate. The setting up of a separate Namdev Chair perpetuating the memory of the poet in the University of Pune is a significant indicator in that direction.

Twentieth century witnessed some distinctive changes in the scope and perspective of Sikh studies. Not only the numbers of publications steadily increased, but their authors sometimes showed a greater keenness in the narration of factual

details and treatment of source materials. Growing importance of the Marathi press in the formulation of radical public opinion and the interesting changes in the regional political scene no doubt offered newer opportunities. Sikh politics experienced no less momentous change during - and after - the Rowlatt Satyagraha and the Akali struggle for the Gurdwara reforms. It was widely held that Sikhs had come closer to the Congress-led nationalist politics through these trials and tribulations. Their history and religion in consequence received greater attention.

A few of these changes gradually came to be reflected in the writings of biographies of Sikh Gurus. The life and mission of the founder of the Sikh faith persisted with some modifications. Besides, the wider popularity of the militant politics brought the fighting tradition of the last Sikh Guru to the limelight. The two masters were sometimes focused separately. There we do not come across any significant attempt to evaluate some of the episodes associated with Guru Nanak's life since the days of the *Janamsakhis* of the medieval times. In this sense, the works differed from the critical Brahmo historiographical tradition of the late nineteenth century. But some of the Marathi authors were soon to catch up the spirit when they brought out separate monographs on the 400 years history of the Sikhs till the annexation of Punjab, and beyond. Some of the biographies of Guru Gobind Singh published in the children's magazines like the *Mulanch Masik* (1930) or the *Chitrajag* (1927) continued to have a distinct Hindu tilt. These were published in the wake of the enactment of the Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Act (1926) seeking to hand over Gurdwara management in Punjab from the hands of the Hindu *mahants* to the Khalsa Sikhs.

Martyrdom: Sikh studies in Marathi soon went beyond the frontiers of biographical sketches. Allied issues like the tradition of martyrdom, gurdwaras as a place of congregational worship, or what Sikhism stands for in relation to Hinduism, were occasionally raised and debated by Marathi authors. These writings no doubt added variety and richness to the regional Sikh studies.

Sikhism was widely portrayed as a faith of martyrs by the British administrator-historians since the late nineteenth century. Nationalist writings while confronting British rule however appropriated the Sikh martyrdom tradition with some modifications and readjustments. Sikh resistance against the Mughals and Afghans was thus given a patriotic colour in their writings. Those Sikh Gurus and leaders who had met their tragic end in medieval times were turned into martyrs and attained all India fame. Sometimes a definite Hindu orientation was given to these personalities. Marathi literary journals like *Usha* (1915), *Chitrajag* (1927) and *Vividhgyanvishtar* (1930) took an important lead in this regard. Some of these sources again portrayed Sikh personalities with reference to King Sambhaji's tragic end at the hands of the Mughal army (1689) and sought to convey almost a similar message in the regional setting. **These did not however achieve the height which the Bengali writings had already attained through the creations of Tagore even before the close of the last century.**

Another significant item of discussion were the *Gurdwaras*. Akali struggle for the reforms of Sikh shrines generally shaped and sharpened Marathi interest in this field. Reports of the vernacular press of the early 1920s enthusiastically referred to the Akalis, their causes of conflict with the Punjab government, etc. A few of these news reports took note of the Akali *satyagraha* in and around *Gurdwaras* like Nanakana,

Jaito and Nabha, and referred to the memory and tradition associated with these Sikh religious places.

Finally, the Sikh search for a separate identity also did not miss the attention of Marathi writers. Sikh struggle of the Singh Sabha days (1873) could not evoke much enthusiasm, perhaps its programme of action as well as its extent of success did not always reach Maharashtrian ears. In the present century, as the Tat Khalsa ideology became increasingly militant, Sikh assertion *Ham Hindu Nahin* received wider audience. Marathi response was not slow to come in. Unlike the mid nineteenth century Brahmo reformers of eastern India, it was generally sympathetic to the contemporary Sikh aspirations. Sikhism, recorded *Purushartha* (1926), was nothing but a limb of Hinduism and expressed sorrow for the contemporary Sikh separatist move. But the *Sahyadri's* reaction was even more terse.

Sikh studies in Marathi reached a new height with the publication of a few monographs dealing with the history of the Sikhs since its birth, and the story was then carried forward till the annexation of Punjab (1849). Sometimes, it went beyond the Mutiny years and reached the post-independence decades. Here authors were generally more serious in the treatment of their sources and referred to them in preface, footnotes and bibliography. This we do not generally come across in some of the biographical Sikh studies of the nineteenth century.

Marathi Perception: In this section we would briefly refer to three monographs perhaps representing three different shades of Marathi perceptions of the Sikhs of history and each of them was published with an almost routine gap of two decades. The first one was the *Punjabcha Ladwaya Sikh* written by Narayan Hari Apte, a member of the Konkanatha Brahmin community whose predecessors had dominated nearly every sphere of Marathi life of the nineteenth century. Much of their old ascendancy had however been eroded when Apte took to the documentation of Sikh history. So had also gone away much of the early Chitpavan enmity towards British rule. On the contrary, the high rate of education and the lack of adequate employment opportunity prompted many of them to look forward to the colonial masters for convenient placement anywhere in the *Desh* region of Maharashtra. This might have required a sense of loyalty towards British rule. The book also came out when the Sikhs were fighting for the defence of British empire in the first world war (1917). The author did not fail to highlight the fighting tradition among the Sikhs. But the vindication of that spirit never crossed the limits of loyalty challenging the security of British rule in India. Written in a popular journalistic style, the major emphasis of the volume had been devoted to Sikh *bhakti*. There was a brief reference to the *misls* days and the rise and fall of the Khalsa Raj. In other words, the Sikh struggle of the eighteenth century and the reign of Ranjit Singh for which Professor Narendra Krishna Sinha wrote two separate volumes, Apte could spare only four pages for the same.

Again *Punjabcha Ladwaya Sikh* keeps a low profile towards the Sikh tradition of resistance and martyrdom, both of which had long remained a favourite pasturage for the nationalist historiography. But Apte sings the glory of the British empire and projects the Sikh Panth primarily as a community devoted to *bhakti* tradition. He perhaps deliberately refuses to take note of the process of transformation in the Sikh faith which our next author enthusiastically documents in his study. Sankar Purushottam Joshi's *Sikhancha Sphurtidyak Itihas* is a typical nationalist work on

Sikh history. The book came out when the Congress ministries had already been in office in different provinces and the struggle against the British was carried to a new height (1939). In this background Joshi had very little difficulty in highlighting the military greatness of the Sikhs. He divided the study into ten chapters and based his work on some well known secondary sources. Unlike Apte, he briefly reviews Guru period and devotes nearly two-thirds of the volume to the military exploits of the Sikhs. Even the two *sahibzadas* find a place of honour while Banda Bahadur's resistance is remembered with all respect. His review of the Maratha-Sikh relation before and after the third battle of Panipat provides a distinct regional profile to the volume. But Joshi's assessment of the Sikh Maharaja's principles of administration seems to be on the whole unsympathetic because of his uncritical reliance on the writings of British administrator-historians. His methodology however suggests a distinct improvement from that of Apte.

The last monograph of the series came from Narayan Vishnu Gadgil, a colourful political personality hailing from the Konkan coast. A Chitpavan Brahmin undergoing imprisonment during national movement and committed to the Gandhian ideals of the upliftment of the untouchables, Gadgil's association with the Sikhs may be traced back to 1934 when he was elected to the Central Legislature. A profile writer in Marathi, he also busied himself in translating Sikh morning prayer *Japji* (1959) after his elevation to the Raj Bhavan at Chandigarh. It offered him wider opportunity of studying Sikh scriptures and other Punjabi sources. He also came in touch with many senior Sikh scholars, which proved to be useful in his study of the five hundred years history of the Sikh Panth. His *Sikhancha Itihas* (1962) thus turned out to be a detailed account of the history of the Sikhs in Marathi and concludes with a subtle hint that the Sikhs be given a better deal within the existing framework of the Indian Constitution. The book came out when the agitation for the Punjabi Suba was affecting the political barometer of the Land of Five Rivers. It perhaps paved the way for his premature resignation. The book cannot be regarded as a critical account of the history of the Sikhs based on Punjabi, Hindi and English sources. He had access to the Sikh devotional literature which his predecessors, like Apte and Joshi, had never taken into consideration. His bibliography as well as the internal evidence suggest that he was particularly aware of the debate which the writings of Tagore and Sarkar had introduced in Sikh studies in the early years of the century. Similarly, his introductory study outlining the background of Guru Nanak's mission is not only analytical but has a stimulating timber.

Pasnipat and Mutiny: The Sikhs were accused of not responding to the call of the hour and declining to play the vigorous role in the history of India. Perhaps one such occasion was the third battle of Panipat when the Marathas fought the Durrani king single-handed and faced a total defeat. Many Marathi critics of the late nineteenth century argued that the fate of the battle would have been otherwise if the Sikhs were not indifferent towards the Maratha fortune in the early 1760s. Needless to add these authors were swayed by the contemporary nationalistic aspirations and consequently expected that Marathas and Sikhs could have joined hands against Abdali, an 'aggressor' on the Indian soil. Almost a similar sentiment was evinced when the Sikhs declined to respond enthusiastically during the days of 1857 Revolt. Sikhs even fought under the banner of the East India Company and took an active part in the recapture of Delhi and Lucknow from the mutinous sepoys. During the same period, the Sikhs remained indifferent to the cause of Nana Saheb and Rani

Laxmibai. This Sikh 'silence' to the Maratha cause continued to dominate Marathi psyche long after the suppression of the Revolt. This led to the use of many invectives against the Sikhs of Punjab. But the writings of *Bhau Mahajan*, editor of *Dhumketu*, an ardent critic of British rule, differed significantly from the majority opinion.

Besides these larger issues, there were also a few minor points of conflict. Udasi Sikhs were not altogether unknown in this part of the country in pre-British times. As suggested earlier, many of them were here in connection with trade of missionary activity. Poona, the capital of the Peshwas, had long been associated with their coming and going. There was also a *math* of the Udasi *sadhus* in the city. They were entitled to many tax exemptions under the Peshwas. During the mid eighteenth century, when the local economy showed signs of strain, they were even asked to pay certain taxes. There was also attempts to deprive them of a part of their revenue free holdings recently improved by the *mahant* of the *math*. This led to a legal battle. Contemporary records of the Poona town (c. 1740-c. 1761) pointed out how the Udasi mohant had to defend his property in the midst of hostility.

Subjective: Marathi authors were therefore not always in praise of the Sikhs, who were both lauded and reprimanded. Sometimes they came to be studied in the perspective of the medieval Maratha success and failure in resisting the Mughals or building up a strong empire on their ruins. Those who had been participating in the process were not all professional historians. Their style of writing, treatment of sources or assessment does not reach the height of contemporary critical tradition of history writings. But they made a good beginning and the process still goes on.

