

Dissertation Abstract

In Praise of the Guru: A Translation and Study of Sainapati's *Sri Gursobha*

by

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This dissertation is first and foremost a project of translation. Composed by the poet Sainapati during the years 1701-1708, the *Sri Gursobha*, "In Praise of the Guru," is a contemporary written narrative of the life and death of the last human Guru of the Sikh tradition, Guru Gobind Singh (1661/6-1708). In the first chapter of the text, Sainapati begins his narration of events with a recognition of the ten Gurus of the Sikh tradition, followed by a brief account of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom, until the main subject of his work – the life of Guru Gobind Singh – is narrativized in verse in the remaining nineteen chapters. Tasked with the mission of establishing *dharam*, Sainapati's depiction of Guru Gobind Singh blurs the line between the divine and the human; he is Vahiguru's Guru as well as Vahiguru himself. As a divine man, his mission to establish *dharam* is multifaceted. He is at once a political leader who guides his community through a complex web of imperial machinations and treacheries; a warrior who leads his troops into battle and is himself involved in the shedding of blood; a religious figure who seeks to ensure the safety of his Sikhs in this world and their liberation in the next; and, a father and husband who experiences the unimaginable loss of his four sons.

Written in the north Indian vernacular languages of Punjabi and Braj Bhasa and recorded in the *gurmukhi* script, the *Sri Gursobha* is an invaluable source of information on the life and legacy of Guru Gobind Singh and the history of the Sikh community at the turn of the eighteenth century in northern India. However, despite its importance it has been of limited scholarly value because thus far there has been no available translation of the text in English. By providing the first unbroken English translation of the *Sri Gursobha*, based on manuscript evidence and printed editions, this study makes an important but otherwise inaccessible text available to both scholarly and non scholarly audiences alike. This translation is supplemented by an extensive glossary of epithets and terms used in the text, a timeline of events, and information on historical actors mentioned in the text.

Chapter One situates the *Gursobha* within a larger examination of the development of the Sikh literary corpus during the Guru period (c. 1500-1708). Given the importance attached to writing and the authority of texts from the time of Guru Nanak

onwards, this chapter argues for the importance and relevance of textual sources in understanding the trajectory of the Sikh tradition. This discussion of textual sources is informed by a revised schema of dating *janamsakhi*, *rahitnama*, and *gurbilas* literature based on extant manuscript evidence that challenges current scholarly positions regarding the chronological emergence of these sources and their concomitant associations with particular Gurus. By questioning the scholarly equations of genre and Guru, this chapter questions scholarly assessments that equate the *janam sakhi* literature with the mystical interiority of Guru Nanak and *gurbilas* and *rahitnama* literature with the aggressive exteriority of Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh. A close reading of these sources suggests that scholarly arguments regarding “radical changes” in the nature and constitution of the *panth* over time are overstated, and that the Gurus were equally concerned with issues of religious identity and community formation and divine and worldly realities.

Chapter Two examines the narrative contents of the *Sri Gursobha* in light of evidence that this was a contemporary biography of Guru Gobind Singh composed in the Anandpur court and completed soon after his death in Nanderh. Over the course of the twenty chapters that comprise the *Sri Gursobha*, Sainapati presents Guru Gobind Singh’s life and mission not in opposition to the lives and teachings of the previous nine Gurus, but rather, as a fulfillment and realization of their legacy. While many scholars use the language of “rupture” and “contradiction” to explain the emergence of the Khalsa during the tenure of Guru Gobind Singh, there is no evidence in the *Sri Gursobha* to suggest such an interpretation. As one of the earliest articulations of the doctrine of *gurkhalsa*, the equivalence of the Guru and his Sikhs, according to Sainapati’s account, the entire community is to be understood as the Khalsa; the Khalsa is not a “warrior” identity or an exclusive identity that pits Sikh against Singh or Khatri against Jat. The *Sri Gursobha* closes with an unequivocal statement of the doctrine of *guru granth* and *guru panth* at the time of the Guru’s death and a vision of re-establishing the Sikh community at Anandgarh through the blessings of Guru Gobind Singh.

Chapter Three compares the narrative of the Guru’s life and mission as found in the *Sri Gursobha* with three other contemporary narratives – *Apani Katha* (1688), *Das GurKatha* (~1704), and *Parcchi Patshahi Dasvin Ki* (1709)– written during the lifetime of Guru Gobind Singh and in the immediate aftermath of his death in 1708. Writing between 1697-1709, these authors lived within the same spatio-temporal parameters as the Guru, and may have even been first-hand observers of his life. While many scholars

have focused on the *gurbilas* as the representative literary genre of Guru Gobind Singh's life, the fact is that during his own lifetime he was written about in a wide variety of genres— *parchi*, *gursobha*, and *katha* – that did not include *gurbilas*. This chapter compares and contrasts these biographical accounts of the Guru in order to understand how his life was understood within Sikh sources during his lifetime; no single account fully traces the Guru's life from birth to death, but when they are read collectively they follow the entire arc of his life and address his legacy beyond death. While scholars have argued that the contours of Guru Gobind Singh's life only become clear in the later half of the eighteenth century or that we possess an inadequate or limited amount of source material from this period, a close reading of these four contemporary sources indicate, quite to the contrary, a remarkable consensus regarding the events in and meaning of the Guru's life and death.