

THE SIKH ZAFAR-NĀMAH OF GURU GOBIND SINGH: A DISCURSIVE BLADE IN THE HEART OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE. By LOUIS E. FENECH. pp. xxiv, 304. New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.  
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The *Zafarnāma* is one of the most fascinating and unusual of early Sikh texts. It is preserved in the *Dasam Granth*, the second Sikh scripture containing a large number of heterogeneous texts associated with the tenth and last Guru Gobind Singh. Much controversy has come to surround the authorship of many of these often very lengthy compositions, which are nearly all written in Brajhasha, whereas the *Zafarnāma* ('Epistle of Victory') is a short Persian composition of 111 verses in the heroic style and metre of Firdausi's *Shāhnāma*. Addressed as a missive to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, it is generally accepted to have been composed by Guru Gobind Singh himself in the aftermath of the capture in 1704 of the Sikh stronghold of Anandpur by Mughal forces who had treacherously offered safe conduct out of the fortress to the Guru's forces. This betrayal of a sacred oath by Aurangzeb's officers provokes the *Zafarnāma* to denounce the unrighteousness of the emperor and to exalt the justness before God of the Guru's cause.

Most studies of the *Zafarnāma* have tended to focus somewhat narrowly upon its status as an historical document. Fenech's fine monograph is the first approach to this peculiarly interesting text to aim to do proper justice, not just to the immediate setting of its contents, but also to the richness of the broader cultural and literary context in which it was produced. So after the opening chapter has described the general status of the diplomatic documents associated with the tenth Guru, Fenech proceeds to examine the connection between the *Zafarnāma* and two immediately related texts. He is able to rebut convincingly the supposition that the so-called *Fathnāma*, a fragmentary Persian text of superficially similar character to the *Zafarnāma* but which is not included in the *Dasam Granth* and which possesses only a dubious twentieth-century provenance, is the follow-up letter from the Guru's pen that is described in the hagiographic accounts of his life. By contrast, in the face of the conventional modern supposition of a sharp separation between the *Zafarnāma* as the authentic utterance of the Guru and the immediately following items in the *Dasam Granth*, the Persian *Hikāitān*, which are rejected as an idle set of mostly romantic tales, Fenech offers a conclusive demonstration of the close links between them.

A similar literary sensitivity informs the next chapter's exploration of the wider intertextual links between the *Zafarnāma* and its classical exemplars in the high Persian tradition that helped define the shared Mughal courtly culture to whose values the Guru is able to appeal in his message to the unjust emperor. Here a close look at immediate parallels in the text of the *Shāhnāma* helps illuminate the rhetorical strategy of the *Zafarnāma*. Fenech also deals with the less widely recognised parallels between the *Zafarnāma* and two other core texts of the Persian tradition, Sa'di's *Būstān* and *Gulistān*, the source of the famous verse *22 chu kār az hama hīlate dar guzasht, halāl ast burdan ba-shamsher dast* ('When the hand is foiled at every turn, it is then permitted to draw the sword'). There is a most interesting demonstration of the reasons underlying the fact that nowadays, when Persian has become a language unfamiliar to most Sikhs, this verse is the only fragment of the *Zafarnāma* still to be commonly cited, albeit usually out of context. Readers should be particularly intrigued by the memorable illustration of the modern physical employment of the verse as an inscription written over a gate recently constructed at the village where the *Zafarnāma* is supposed originally to have been composed.

With the ground well prepared by this extensive literary contextualisation in terms of its relationships with classical Persian texts, questions that have been raised about the authorship and the intention of this unusual composition are then explored in more detail with reference to early Sikh texts of the post-scriptural period, including an illuminating discussion of the historiography of the *Zafarnāma*.

It is hardly possible to summarise all the arguments of the book here, since it is precisely its wide-ranging character that is one of its most attractive features. Fenech's enthusiastic immersion in his

subject leads him to cite numerous illustrative quotations not just in English translation but also in their original form, variously reproduced as appropriate in Persian or Gurmukhi script. As in his stimulating previous study *The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus* (2008), the same enthusiasm has led to the generation of an exceptionally rich body of endnotes, which here is at least as long as the main text, and which constitutes a series of fascinating expansions and asides often to be enjoyed in their own right and certainly to be appreciated by all scholarly readers of this valuable study. chrsh2@hotmail.com

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**SIKH MILITANCY IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN MUGHAL AND EARLY MODERN INDIA.** By HARDIP SINGH SYAN. pp. 320. London and New York, I. B. Tauris, 2013.  
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This spirited study by a young scholar of a central topic in early Sikh history makes stimulating use of a carefully creative reading of a notable range of both primary and secondary sources. The first chapter opens with a provocative challenge to some widely-accepted understandings by twentieth-century Sikh historians and others of how the pacific religious community founded by Guru Nanak in the sixteenth century came to be transformed by the early eighteenth century into the militant brotherhood of Guru Gobind Singh's Khalsa. In questioning the ways in which the modern historiography has long continued to be unconsciously moulded in its approach to the crude categories of 'peace' and 'militancy' by the assumptions and values of the colonial period, Syan's approach is thus very much in line with the revisionism of other contemporary scholars who seek to get behind later biases so as to provide fresh understandings of the earlier history by drawing upon the authentically Indic value systems that inform the primary texts.

The focus of the book is on the seventeenth century, between the martyrdom in 1606 of Guru Arjan, the compiler of the Sikh scripture, and the foundation of the Khalsa in 1699. So far as mainstream Sikh orthodoxy is concerned, this can be characterised as an inter-scriptural period, during which rather little attention was paid to writing by the Sikh Gurus who descended from Arjan's son Hargobind, although other compositions were composed by their followers. Syan's great contribution to the wider understanding of this post-scriptural literature is to put it in proper context, for the first time in English, by reading it alongside the copious writings preserved in the manuscripts of the rival Mina community led by Arjan's elder brother Prithi Chand and the line of Gurus who succeeded him. Long relegated to obscurity by the majority Sikh community's subsequent condemnation of the Minas as schismatics, the Mina literature is only now beginning to be seen as an important subject for study.

Combining a skilfully compiled comparative account of developments in these two groups with close reading of well selected illustrative textual extracts, Syan is able to show how the rival lineages adopted different understandings of the role of sacred leadership. The second chapter looks at the innovative policies of Guru Hargobind that centred upon an explicit combination of the secular with the sacred characterised in the well-known doctrine of *mūr-pīrī*, and at the ways in which these are described by his chief follower Bhai Gurdas. This new style of Guruship is contrasted with the further development of the spiritual understandings of the earlier Sikh Gurus in the prolific writings of Miharvan, who succeeded his father Prithi Chand as the Mina Guru.

These fundamental contrasts in understanding are shown in the next chapter to have continued during the mid-seventeenth century into the time of Miharvan's successor the Mina leader Harji and