



Historical Challenges and Preservation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib

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Abstract: Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the eternal scripture of Sikhism, embodies not only spiritual guidance but also a rich historical, educational, and cultural heritage. This paper explores the unique status of the scripture as the living Guru of the Sikh community, its meticulous compilation by Guru Arjan Dev and finalization by Guru Gobind Singh, and the profound impact it has had on Sikh identity and ethical education. It examines the historical challenges faced in preserving the scripture, including Mughal persecution, invasions, colonial interventions, and the upheavals during Partition. The study also highlights contemporary preservation efforts through digitization, scholarly work, and global Sikh diaspora initiatives, emphasizing the ongoing responsibility to maintain the scripture's sanctity and authenticity. Ultimately, Sri Guru Granth Sahib stands as a timeless beacon of universal wisdom, resilience, and intercultural harmony.

Keywords: Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Sikhism, Sikh diaspora, Historical challenges, Guru Arjan Dev, Guru Gobind Singh

INTRODUCTION

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture of Sikhism, holds a unique position among religious texts, not only as a spiritual guide but also as the eternal Guru of the Sikh community. Unlike scriptures that serve solely as religious or philosophical doctrines, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is regarded as a living Guru, embodying divine wisdom and guiding Sikhs in every aspect of life. It is a compilation of hymns (*shabads*) composed by the Sikh Gurus and other enlightened saints from different religious and social backgrounds, reflecting a universal message of love, equality, and devotion (McLeod, 2005). The scripture's significance extends beyond religious devotion; it serves as a moral, educational, and philosophical foundation for individuals and society. Its teachings emphasize selfless service (*seva*), truthful living (*sat*), and spiritual wisdom (*gyaan*), making it a profound source for character development and ethical education (Singh, 2014).

*and** Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University, Fatehgarh Sahib. The text is structured in poetic and musical forms, organized according to *Raags* (musical measures), enhancing both spiritual and intellectual engagement. Scholars argue that the poetic nature of *Sri Guru Granth*

Sahib fosters critical thinking, linguistic appreciation, and cultural literacy, making it a valuable educational resource beyond the Sikh community (Mandair, 2013).

From a historical perspective, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* was compiled to preserve the unaltered teachings of Sikh Gurus and to provide a singular authoritative scripture, free from misinterpretation. Guru Arjan Dev's careful compilation in 1604 ensured that the Sikh faith remained doctrinally pure, while Guru Gobind Singh's finalization of the text in 1708 institutionalized it as the eternal Guru, preventing any form of human succession (Pashaura Singh, 2000). This decision not only strengthened Sikhism's spiritual foundation but also ensured that knowledge, rather than individual authority, remained the guiding force of the faith.

In an educational context, the scripture continues to play a transformative role. It is recited, studied, and interpreted in Sikh institutions, where its teachings guide students in moral reasoning, ethical leadership, and interfaith harmony. The inclusion of hymns from Hindu Bhaktas and Muslim Sufi saints further promotes a multicultural perspective, fostering religious tolerance and human unity (Grewal, 1998). With modern digitization efforts, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* has become more accessible, enabling scholars and educators worldwide to engage with its teachings in new and meaningful ways.

Thus, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* stands as a timeless beacon of wisdom, bridging spirituality with education, history with contemporary ethics, and religious devotion with human values. Its compilation, canonization, and preservation not only safeguard the Sikh heritage but also offer profound insights for humanity's collective moral and intellectual progress.

I. SIGNIFICANCE OF SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB IN SIKHISM

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the central religious scripture of Sikhism, is not merely a holy book but the eternal Guru for Sikhs. Unlike other religious texts that serve as doctrinal guides, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* holds the unique status of being the living embodiment of spiritual authority, as conferred by Guru Gobind Singh in 1708. It contains the hymns of Sikh Gurus and other spiritual luminaries, emphasizing universal truths such as equality, devotion, and ethical living (McLeod, 2005).

From an educational perspective, the scripture serves as a moral and philosophical compass, guiding individuals towards self-awareness, social responsibility, and spiritual enlightenment. The teachings of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* promote lifelong learning by advocating continuous self-improvement through reflection and ethical action (Pashaura Singh, 2014). The text's poetic structure, composed in multiple languages including Sanskrit, Persian, and regional vernaculars, makes it a rich source of linguistic and philosophical education (Mandair, 2013).

Furthermore, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* transcends religious boundaries, advocating a vision of humanity based on interfaith harmony and respect. Its hymns incorporate the wisdom of Hindu and Sufi saints, reinforcing the Sikh belief in the oneness of God and universal brotherhood. This inclusive philosophy has

profound implications for modern education, where multiculturalism and ethical literacy are essential (Singh, 2000).

II. THE SACRED STATUS AND AUTHORITY OF SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB

The declaration of Sri Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru by Guru Gobind Singh was a revolutionary shift in religious authority. By entrusting spiritual leadership to the scripture rather than a human successor, Sikhism institutionalized the idea that divine wisdom, rather than a single individual, should guide the community (Oberoi, 1994). This decision reinforced the egalitarian ethos of Sikhism, ensuring that no individual could claim absolute religious authority over others.

Scholars argue that the authority of Sri Guru Granth Sahib extends beyond the Sikh faith, serving as a repository of ethical teachings that resonate with people from diverse backgrounds. The scripture's emphasis on truthful living, humility, and compassion aligns with contemporary discourses on moral education and personal development (Grewal, 1998). Educationally, the recitation and interpretation of its hymns in Sikh institutions cultivate a deep sense of discipline, mindfulness, and cultural heritage among learners.

The practice of *Parkash* (installation) and *Hukamnama* (divine command) in Sikh Gurdwaras reflects the living authority of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs approach the scripture not just as a sacred text but as an interactive guide to life's challenges. This dynamic relationship between the scripture and its followers highlights how religious education, when deeply integrated into daily practice, fosters spiritual resilience and ethical consciousness (Pashaura Singh, 2018).

III. COMPILATION AND CANONIZATION OF SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB

The compilation and canonization of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* was a landmark event in Sikh history, shaping the religious, social, and intellectual foundations of the Sikh faith. Unlike other religious scriptures, which were often compiled posthumously by followers, Sri Guru Granth Sahib was compiled and authenticated by the Sikh Gurus themselves, ensuring its doctrinal purity and authority. The process of compiling, preserving, and finalizing the scripture was not merely a religious act but a revolutionary step in establishing an independent Sikh identity, reinforcing ethical teachings, and promoting interfaith harmony (McLeod, 2005).

From an educational perspective, the compilation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib highlights the importance of textual preservation, linguistic diversity, and ethical storytelling in shaping collective consciousness. The inclusion of writings from Sikh Gurus alongside Hindu Bhaktas and Muslim Sufi saints reflects an open and inclusive approach to knowledge, making it a valuable resource for interfaith and comparative religious studies (Singh, 2014).

Role of Guru Arjan Dev in Compilation (1604)

Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, played a pioneering role in compiling the *Adi Granth* (the precursor to *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*) in 1604. Recognizing the need for a centralized, authentic scripture, Guru Arjan meticulously collected and arranged the hymns of previous Gurus, ensuring that the teachings remained unaltered and free from misinterpretation. This effort was particularly crucial at a time when various sects attempted to distort Sikh teachings by introducing apocryphal compositions (Pashaura Singh, 2000).

The compilation process was methodical and scholarly. Guru Arjan employed Bhai Gurdas, a respected Sikh intellectual, as the scribe, and the hymns were arranged according to *Raag* (musical mode) to facilitate devotional singing and spiritual engagement. This innovative organization of scripture not only preserved the musical and poetic integrity of the hymns but also enhanced their educational and meditative impact (Mandair, 2013).

Beyond theological concerns, the compilation of *Adi Granth* had significant social and political implications. By establishing the scripture as the central authority for Sikhs, Guru Arjan countered attempts to dilute Sikh ideology and solidified the community's identity. The placement of the *Adi Granth* in the newly constructed Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) symbolized the unification of the Sikh community around a shared spiritual and intellectual heritage (Grewal, 1998).

The Role of Guru Gobind Singh in Finalizing the Scripture (1708)

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, played a defining role in finalizing the Sikh scripture and elevating it to the status of the eternal Guru. In 1708, before his passing, Guru Gobind Singh declared that the *Guru Granth Sahib* would be the perpetual Guru of the Sikhs, replacing the line of human Gurus. This proclamation, known as *Guruship of the Granth*, was a revolutionary step that ensured Sikhism remained free from hierarchical priesthood and individual leadership claims (Oberoi, 1994).

Guru Gobind Singh also made critical textual refinements. He dictated the final recension of the *Adi Granth* to Bhai Mani Singh, adding the hymns of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru, while maintaining the structural integrity set by Guru Arjan. However, he ensured that only the writings aligned with the Sikh doctrine were included, thus preserving the theological consistency of the scripture (Pashaura Singh, 2018).

The Guru's decision to establish the scripture as the eternal Guru had profound educational and spiritual implications. It emphasized the role of written wisdom as the ultimate guide, fostering a tradition where Sikhs directly engaged with scripture for moral and ethical guidance. This move also democratized religious authority, allowing any Sikh—regardless of caste, class, or gender—to access divine knowledge, a concept that aligns with modern principles of universal education and knowledge democratization (Singh, 2000).

Early Manuscripts and Their Preservation

The early manuscripts of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* were carefully written and safeguarded by dedicated Sikh communities. The first copy, compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604, was placed at Harmandir Sahib. Later, additional copies were transcribed under the supervision of Sikh scholars and distributed to key centers of learning. These manuscripts were written on high-quality paper and preserved in sacred spaces, reflecting a deep commitment to textual integrity (McLeod, 2005).

However, the preservation of early manuscripts faced significant historical challenges. During the Mughal and Afghan invasions, many Sikh scriptures were targeted for destruction. For instance, in 1762, Ahmad Shah Abdali's forces attacked Harmandir Sahib, and several manuscripts were lost or damaged. Despite these challenges, Sikh communities continued to protect and reproduce the sacred text, ensuring its survival through turbulent times (Grewal, 1998).

In modern times, significant efforts have been made to preserve ancient manuscripts through digitization and archival initiatives. Institutions like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and academic centers worldwide have undertaken projects to document and protect historic copies of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Digital archives and translations have made the scripture accessible globally, furthering its role as a living and evolving source of wisdom (Singh, 2014).

IV. HISTORICAL CHALLENGES

The preservation of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* has faced significant historical challenges, ranging from political oppression to physical destruction and modern misinterpretation. Despite these adversities, Sikh communities have remained dedicated to safeguarding the sacred scripture, ensuring its transmission across generations.

Mughal Oppression and Banning of Sikh Scriptures

During the Mughal period, particularly under Emperor Jahangir and later Aurangzeb, Sikhism faced systematic persecution. Guru Arjan Dev, the compiler of the *Adi Granth*, was executed in 1606 for refusing to convert to Islam and maintaining Sikh autonomy (Grewal, 1998). Later, Guru Tegh Bahadur was executed for defending religious freedom, and attempts were made to suppress Sikh scripture and institutions (McLeod, 2005). Sikh scriptures and writings were often confiscated or destroyed, necessitating clandestine preservation efforts.

Destruction of Sikh Manuscripts During Invasions

The 18th century witnessed severe threats to Sikh manuscripts, particularly during the invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali. In 1762, Abdali's forces attacked Amritsar, destroying the Harmandir Sahib and targeting Sikh religious texts (Singh, 2000). Many manuscripts were lost, forcing the Sikh community to rely

on oral transmission and surviving copies hidden in protected locations. The resilience of Sikh scribes and scholars ensured the scripture's continuity despite these devastating attacks.

British Colonial Policies and Impact on Sikh Religious Texts

The British colonial era (1849–1947) brought new challenges to Sikh scripture. While the British administration did not directly suppress *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, their policies reshaped Sikh institutions and practices. Missionary interventions and colonial reinterpretations sought to categorize Sikhism within Western frameworks, sometimes distorting the original teachings (Oberoi, 1994). Additionally, the British attempted to control gurdwaras, leading to tensions over the management and interpretation of Sikh scriptures (Pashaura Singh, 2018). The Gurdwara Reform Movement of the 1920s ultimately led to the establishment of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) to safeguard Sikh religious texts and traditions.

Partition of India (1947) and the Loss of Sikh Heritage

The Partition of India in 1947 resulted in the displacement of millions of Sikhs, leading to the loss of historical manuscripts and sacred texts housed in gurdwaras left in Pakistan. Important Sikh shrines such as Gurdwara Janam Asthan (Nankana Sahib) became inaccessible to many Sikhs, disrupting traditional centers of scriptural learning and preservation (Talbot & Singh, 2009). The community had to reconstruct its religious archives and reestablish educational institutions post-Partition.

Modern Challenges: Digitization, Accessibility, and Misinterpretation

In the digital age, new challenges have emerged. While digitization has made *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* more accessible, concerns regarding the sanctity and misinterpretation of the text persist. Unauthorized online translations and altered interpretations have raised ethical issues about the scripture's integrity (Singh, 2014). Additionally, the rise of social media has led to selective or misleading representations of Sikh teachings, making it crucial for scholars and institutions to provide authentic and contextually accurate interpretations.

V. PRESERVATION EFFORTS THROUGH HISTORY

Despite historical adversities, the Sikh community has demonstrated remarkable dedication to preserving *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Various strategies, from institutional efforts to innovative preservation techniques, have ensured its survival and transmission.

Role of Sikh Gurus in Protecting Sri Guru Granth Sahib

The Sikh Gurus played an active role in safeguarding the scripture. Guru Arjan Dev compiled the *Adi Granth* to prevent distortions of Sikh teachings. Guru Gobind Singh finalized the scripture and institutionalized its authority, eliminating any future disputes over spiritual leadership (Pashaura Singh, 2000). Their foresight in entrusting the scripture with the Sikh community laid the foundation for its preservation.

Contributions of Sikh Institutions (Akal Takht, SGPC) in Preservation

The Akal Takht and SGPC have been instrumental in the preservation and dissemination of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. The SGPC has overseen the publication and distribution of authorized versions, ensuring that no alterations or misinterpretations occur (Grewal, 1998). The Akal Takht issues guidelines on proper handling, recitation, and interpretation of the scripture, maintaining religious discipline and authenticity.

Sikh Historical Gurdwaras and Their Role in Safeguarding Manuscripts

Key gurdwaras such as Harmandir Sahib and Takht Sri Damdama Sahib have historically served as repositories for sacred manuscripts. Damdama Sahib, where Guru Gobind Singh prepared a standardized version of the *Adi Granth*, remains a center of Sikh scriptural learning (McLeod, 2005). These institutions have played a vital role in training generations of scholars and preserving rare manuscripts.

Techniques Used for the Physical Preservation of Ancient Manuscripts

Traditional manuscript preservation techniques involved using high-quality paper, ink, and protective coverings. In modern times, archival methods such as climate-controlled storage, digitization, and conservation sciences have been employed to protect ancient copies from deterioration. Efforts by institutions such as the Punjab Digital Library have contributed significantly to these preservation initiatives (Singh, 2014).

VI. CONTEMPORARY PRESERVATION INITIATIVES

Modern preservation efforts have expanded to include digital archives, global accessibility initiatives, and ethical discourse on the representation of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.

Digitization of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Its Global Accessibility

Organizations like the Punjab Digital Library and SGPC have undertaken projects to digitize rare manuscripts and make them accessible worldwide. This has enabled scholars and the Sikh diaspora to engage with the scripture despite geographical barriers (Mandair, 2013). However, digitization also raises concerns about maintaining the sacredness and accuracy of the scripture.

Role of Sikh Scholars and Institutes in Translating and Spreading Teachings

Sikh scholars have worked to translate *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* while ensuring the integrity of its message. Institutes like Guru Nanak Dev University and the Sikh Research Institute have played a crucial role in scholarly interpretation and public education (Singh, 2018).

Ethical and Religious Concerns in Modern Printing and Digital Platforms

While modern printing technologies have increased the scripture's availability, issues regarding its handling and storage persist. Sikh traditions require that printed copies of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* be treated with utmost reverence, leading to ethical debates on mass printing and online access (Pashaura Singh, 2014).

Role of Sikh Diaspora in Promoting Awareness and Preservation

The Sikh diaspora has played a crucial role in promoting the teachings and preservation of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. Initiatives such as online katha (scriptural discourse) programs and funding for research projects have contributed to global awareness and respect for the scripture (Grewal, 1998).

Conclusion

The enduring legacy of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is a testament to its profound spiritual, educational, and historical significance. More than a scripture, it is a guiding light that has shaped Sikh identity, preserved ethical values, and inspired countless individuals across generations. Despite immense historical challenges—from Mughal oppression and colonial policies to modern issues of digital access and misinterpretation—the Sikh community has continually demonstrated an unwavering commitment to protecting and preserving this sacred text.

The declaration of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* as the eternal Guru by Guru Gobind Singh was not just a religious milestone; it was an extraordinary affirmation of the power of divine wisdom over human leadership. By entrusting the Guru's authority to a scripture rather than an individual, Sikhism ensured that spiritual guidance would remain accessible to all, transcending personal hierarchies and reinforcing the egalitarian spirit of the faith. Throughout history, Sikh Gurus, scholars, and institutions have played an instrumental role in safeguarding the integrity of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. From Guru Arjan Dev's meticulous compilation of the *Adi Granth* in 1604 to Guru Gobind Singh's finalization in 1708, the preservation of the scripture has been a sacred duty. Even in the face of destruction during the invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali or the losses suffered during the Partition of India, the resilience of Sikh communities ensured the continued transmission of its teachings.

In modern times, preservation efforts have taken on new dimensions. Digital initiatives, global accessibility projects, and the diligent work of scholars and institutions continue to safeguard the scripture for future generations. However, with this accessibility comes responsibility—the need to maintain the sanctity, accuracy, and ethical representation of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. The Sikh diaspora, along with academic institutions and religious organizations, must remain vigilant in ensuring that the scripture is not only preserved but also understood in its true essence.

Ultimately, Sri Guru Granth Sahib is not confined to a single community; its universal messages of love, equality, and devotion resonate with all of humanity. It serves as a bridge between history and modernity, spirituality and scholarship, individual growth and collective harmony. The challenges of the future—whether they be technological, social, or political—will continue to test the preservation and interpretation of this sacred text. Yet, as history has shown, the Sikh spirit of resilience and devotion will ensure that Sri Guru Granth Sahib remains a beacon of wisdom for generations to come.

In the words of Guru Nanak Dev, "*Truth is high, but higher still is truthful living.*" It is this principle that continues to inspire Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike to engage with the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, not just as a scripture, but as a way of life.

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