

# From Martyrdom to Sovereignty: The Sikh Struggle Against Mughal Authority

PARTH KHARE

MA, UGC NET in History and Political Science, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi

**Abstract-** *This paper traces Sikh defiance of Mughal rule from the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev in 1606 through the rise of the Khalsa under Guru Gobind Singh, Banda Singh Bahadur's agrarian rebellion, and the eighteenth-century Dal Khalsa confederacies. It examines how spiritual authority morphed into military organization, how frontier warfare tactics capitalized on local terrain, and how strategic alliances with non-Sikh groups weakened Mughal control in the Punjab. By integrating military history with agrarian and subaltern perspectives, the study illustrates the multilayered character of Sikh resistance and its lasting impact on the decline of Mughal sovereignty.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Sikh resistance, Mughal Empire, Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh, Banda Singh Bahadur, Dal Khalsa, Martyrdom, Agrarian Revolt, Frontier Warfare, Subaltern Agency*

## I. INTRODUCTION

- The Mughal Empire's zenith under Jahangir and Aurangzeb collided with the emerging Sikh community in the Punjab, leading to a century and a half of violent confrontation and political negotiation.
- What began with the execution of a Guru evolved into a fully militarized society the Khalsa, whose fighters leveraged local networks and frontier geography to resist imperial armies.
- This research highlights four phases of resistance: early Guru-led militarization, Khalsa formation and pitched battles, Banda Singh Bahadur's peasant revolt, and eighteenth-century Dal Khalsa warfare.

### Historiographical Context

- Early colonial accounts depicted Sikh uprisings as periodic banditry, emphasizing the Sikhs supported religious fanaticism over political aims.

- Nationalist historians in the mid-20th century reframed the Sikh Gurus and the Khalsa as pioneers of anti-imperial struggle, celebrating martyrdom narratives and military victories.
- From the 1970s onward, subaltern and agrarian historians have highlighted Sikh resistance as rooted in rural grievances, caste solidarities, and regional alliances—showing how peasant soldiers, not just elite Gurus, shaped northern India's political fragmentation.
- Recent memory-studies research explores how Punjabi folk ballads and Gurdwara commemorations actively reconstruct this martial heritage in contemporary Sikh identity.

### Early Militarization: Guru Arjan to Guru Hargobind (1606–1630)

- The execution of Guru Arjan Dev in 1606 by Emperor Jahangir marked the first major clash, transforming the Sikhs from a pacifist order into a community prepared to bear arms.
- Under Guru Hargobind, the principle of Miri-Piri (temporal and spiritual sovereignty) guided the construction of the Akal Takht in Amritsar and the adoption of two swords symbolizing dual authority.
- This period saw the first skirmishes with Mughal forces around Amritsar, where fortified gurdwaras and local militias offered early templates for Sikh military organization.

### The Era of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh (1675–1708)

- The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675 under Aurangzeb's orders galvanized Sikh identity around defence of religious freedom and social equality.
- Guru Gobind Singh's founding of the Khalsa in 1699 formalized this martial ethos, instituting the Five Ks and transforming the Sikhs into a disciplined fighting brotherhood committed to resisting tyranny.

- Key engagements like the Battle of Bhangani (1688) and the prolonged sieges of Anandpur Sahib (1700–1705) demonstrated the Khalsa’s ability to withstand combined Mughal and hill-raja armies, even if ultimate victory proved indefinable.

Banda Singh Bahadur’s Agrarian Revolt (1708–1716)

- Appointed by Guru Gobind Singh on his deathbed, Banda Singh Bahadur launched a widespread uprising in 1708, capturing Sirhind and redistributing land to peasant soldiers.
- Employing swift cavalry raids and fortified outposts, he challenged Mughal revenue farms and disrupted imperial tax collection in the Doab region.
- The 1716 siege and execution of Banda and his followers highlighted both the movement’s initial successes and the Mughal Empire’s capacity for brutal punishments.

Dal Khalsa and Eighteenth-Century Confederacies

- After Banda’s fall, Sikh fighters reorganized into the Dal Khalsa confederacy, divided into Buddha Dal and Taruna Dal to conduct mobile warfare against Mughal governors throughout the Punjab.
- By allying with Afghan invaders and local hill chiefs, the Dal Khalsa exploited Mughal overstretch to seize Lahore (1761) and establish a *de facto* Sikh sovereignty that gave birth to the later Sikh Empire.
- This phase underscored the transition from Guru-centred leadership to regional military coalitions combining caste-based regiments and frontier tactics.

## CONCLUSION

- Sikh resistance to the Mughal Empire evolved through successive stages—from Guru-led militarization to peasant-driven agrarian revolt and mass confederacies, each eroding imperial authority in northern India.
- By combining spiritual legitimacy, guerrilla warfare, and strategic alliances, the Sikhs not only survived Mughal suppression but laid the foundations for a Sikh polity that dominated the Punjab in the early 19th century.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Sikh Encyclopedia. “Sikh Struggle against Mughal Empire [1708–1799].” British Library Manuscript Or. 1870. citationIndex
- [2] “The Sikh-Mughal Wars.” DVNetwork.
- [3] “New chapter: DU plans UG course on Sikh resistance during Mughal period.” Times of India.
- [4] “Mogul-Sikh Wars.” EBSCO Research Starters.