

Article

Speaking Truth to Power: Exploring Guru Nanak's *Bābar-vāñī* in Light of the *Baburnama*

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Abstract: This essay offers in-depth analysis of Guru Nanak's works, collectively known as the *Bābar-vāñī* ("arrow-like utterances concerning Babur"), in the context of the memoirs of the first Mughal emperor Babur (1483–1530). It extends the number of works in the collection from a 'fixed' assemblage of 'four' to 'nine,' making it an open collection that dynamically responds to the specific questions raised by historians about Guru Nanak's encounter with Babur. The resulting framework provides us with a fresh analytical gaze into the critical events related to Babur's invasions of India and helps the novel readings of Guru Nanak's verses shine through. It also examines how Guru Nanak's voice of resistance was interpreted in the narratives produced by later generations. Departing from traditional views, the essay ends with a new understanding of the impact of the *Bābar-vāñī* on the evolving Sikh conceptions of the relationship between spiritual and political powers.

Keywords: *Bābar-vāñī*; Babur; *Baburnama*; Dawlat Khan Lodi; Gurdas; Guru Nanak; *Janam-sākhīs*; Miharvan; Rattan Singh Bhangu; Saidpur

1. Introduction

The year 2019 marked the global celebration of the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition. It provided a unique opportunity for academicians to critically reassess the ongoing significance and relevance of Guru Nanak's social, spiritual, philosophical and political contribution to the world. In this context, Roopinder Singh interviewed Professor J.S. Grewal (b. 1927–) on 19 October 2019, an interview which is now available on YouTube under the caption: "Sikh history scholar Prof JS Grewal speaks to *The Tribune* on Guru Nanak Dev." During his conversation, Grewal referred to the "very powerful verses" of the *Bābar-vāñī* in which Guru Nanak "is questioning God" about the suffering of innocent people. According to Grewal, "why do people suffer?" remained a standing question for Guru Nanak, a question which is not "fully answered" in his inspired utterances (*bāñī*). He further remarked that the *Janam-sākhīs* ("Life-narratives") simplify this question. As an eminent historian of the Sikh tradition, Grewal acknowledged that Babur's successive invasions of India were the "most important political events" of Guru Nanak's times about which "his expression is very rare" (R. Singh 2019). The powerful nature of these verses may be related to the etymology of the word *vāñī*, meaning "arrow" and making the compound *Bābar-vāñī*, "arrow-like utterances concerning Babur." In Sikh scriptural terminology, the arrow is the *shabad*, the inner Word through which the Guru communicates with those who seek him out (*Gurū Granth Sāhib*/GGS, p. 1374). Therefore, the verses of the *Bābar-vāñī* pierced the hearts of Guru Nanak's audience like discursive arrows. Acknowledging the terse nature of Grewal's observations in the interview, we intend to look at the *Bābar-vāñī* from a fresh perspective.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the verses of the *Bābar-vāñī* in detail to find the answers to the multiple questions raised by historians from time to time: namely, whether Guru Nanak and Babur met each other, and, if so, when, where, and under what conditions? If they met, whether Guru Nanak blessed Babur that his dynasty would rule over India? (G. Singh 1987, p. 90). Considering the

circumstantial evidence, W.H. McLeod cautiously accepted the possibility of the meeting between Guru Nanak and Babur: “It cannot be ruled out as completely impossible, but it certainly appears to be most unlikely” (McLeod 1968, p. 138). While modern historians are divided over this question of meeting between the two, we will allow the relevant texts to speak for themselves in this study. The overall structure, organization, and the underlying arguments of this essay will be focused on four major points: first, Sikh scholars have generally agreed that there are four specific verses of Guru Nanak that refer to Babur explicitly; second, there are additional verses that could be read as referring to Babur and some supporting evidence for this comes from the analysis of the text of the *Baburnama*; third, subsequent Sikh literature, particularly the *Janam-sākhīs*, has interpreted the *Bābar-vāñī* in a range of ways, and these may be read as changing social/historical contexts and sectarian concerns; and finally, analysis of the *Bābar-vāñī* and their subsequent Sikh exegesis can elucidate evolving Sikh conceptions of the relationship between spiritual and political powers. Thus, we will offer some intriguing analyses of Guru Nanak’s verses, as well as subsequent interpretations of those verses and events in the Guru’s life as exposed in the *Janam-sākhī* traditions. We will begin with a brief introduction to the actual historical context in which the verses of the *Bābar-vāñī* originated and Guru Nanak’s early life at Sultanpur Lodhi, where he came into contact with *Nawāb* Dawlat Khan Lodi (a.k.a. Daulat Khan Lodi) and his subsequent travels. The introductory section will end with a brief note on the theme of the title of this essay, while the concluding section will address the impact of the *Bābar-vāñī* on Guru Nanak’s later works.

In the first place, we need to look at the previous attempt made in 1968 by W.H. McLeod, who critically examined Guru Nanak’s life narratives in light of Babur’s memoirs concerning the third of his preliminary expeditions into North India when the Mughal army assaulted the town of Saidpur, the modern day Eminabad in Gujranwala District in Pakistan (McLeod 1968, pp. 132–35). In this context, the earliest narrative of *Sākhī Mahalu Pehle Kī* (1570–1574) is quite explicit that Guru Nanak witnessed the sacking of Saidpur by the Mughal armies, and it contains the story of his meeting with Babur. The invading emperor is told: “Mīr Jī, if you desire mercy from God, release the prisoners” (*mīr jī mīhar चाहिदां है तान बंदवोण छोड़ी देहि*, Padam 2014, p. 213). Babur then clothed the captives and set them free. The question is generally raised that “it comes as rather odd that if this incident actually took place, Babur failed to mention it in his diary, *Baburnama*, which otherwise records meticulously every detail of his encounters” (Khalid 2016, p. 96). The absence of any mention in Babur’s memoirs about his meeting with Guru Nanak can be explained by the fact that the text of *Baburnama* breaks off at the events of year [Hijra] 926 (1519–1520 CE) and picks up again six years later in year [Hijra] 932 (1525–1526 CE, Thackston 1996, p. 307). Notably, the attack upon Saidpur was “frustrated by the news which took him [Babur] back to Kabul and thence to Qandahar, that an incursion into his territory had been made by Shah Beg” (Beveridge 1921, p. 429). Thus, Babur had to rush back to protect his home territory without writing anything about the Saidpur event in his memoirs, and there was no indication of his intention to join battle with Sultan Ibrahim Lodi (r. 1517–1526) under those circumstances. The issue of silence of Babur’s meeting with the Guru in his memoirs will receive a further comment in the concluding section.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that the *Janam-sākhīs* and other Sikh sources blend history and mythology to describe Guru Nanak’s actual encounter with Babur at Saidpur. We will discuss in the later section the evolution of the narrative positioning between the Guru, Babur and God over time within Sikh history-writing. For instance, Bhai Gurdas (ca. 1558–1636) narrates an actual submission by Babur when he meets Baba Nanak along with a certain *Nawāb* (*Vārān Bhāi Gurdās/VBG* 26:21), while Rattan Singh Bhangu specifically mentions the name of the *Nawāb* as Dawlat Khan Lodi who arranged the personal meeting between the two (Dhillon 2004, p. 265). During the last quarter of the fifteenth century, Dawlat Khan Lodi was the local noble (*Nawāb*) of Jalandhar Doab, with Sultanpur as his capital. One of his officials, Jai Ram, was married to Guru Nanak’s sister, Nanaki. Jai Ram secured young Nanak employment as a steward (*modī*) of *Nawāb*’s granaries and stores at Sultanpur Lodhi, situated on the main road that connected Lahore with Delhi. Nanak worked at his job diligently,

but his mind was mostly preoccupied with spiritual matters, and he spent long hours in meditation on the divine Name (*nām*) and devotional singing (*kīrtan*). Early one morning, while he was bathing in the Vein River, he disappeared without a trace. Family members gave him up for dead, but three days later he stepped out of the water and proclaimed: ‘There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim’. The significance of this statement becomes clear in the context of a religious culture divided between the conflicting truth claims of the Islamic and Hindu traditions. Nanak pointed the way towards the common humanity underlying the external divisions. After his three-day immersion in the waters—a metaphor of dissolution, transformation, and spiritual perfection—Nanak was ready to proclaim a new vision (P. Singh 2017, p. 52). This transforming event was “an authentic tradition concerning a personally decisive and perhaps ecstatic experience, a climactic culmination of years of searching in illumination and in the conviction that he had been called upon to proclaim divine truth to the world” (McLeod 1968, p. 107).

Thirdly, Guru Nanak’s autobiographical hymn in his *Vār Mājh* marked the beginning of his spiritual reign to preach the message of the divine Name (*nām*) to his audience (GGS, p. 150). He was then 30 years of age, had been married to Sulakhaṇi for more than a decade, and was the father of two young sons, Sri Chand and Lakhmi Das. Yet he left his family behind in 1499 to set out on a series of journeys to both Hindu and Muslim places of pilgrimage in India and abroad along with his lifelong companion, Mardana, the Muslim bard. He proclaimed: “I have seen places of pilgrimage on riverbanks, including shops, cities, and market squares. I have seen all nine regions of the world, weighing as a merchant the merits and demerits of each place in the scale of my heart” (GGS, p. 156). During his travels, he visited the whole of India, Sri Lanka, the Central Asia and the Middle East. He reminisced later that his foreign travels took place in accordance with the divine will: “When it pleases You, we go out to foreign lands; hearing news of home, we come back again” (GGS, p. 145). On his journeys, Guru Nanak encountered the leaders of different religious persuasions and tested the veracity of his own ideas through dialogue with them. His travels exposed him to diverse cultures and societies that helped him evolve his unique lifeworld (P. Singh 2017, p. 52). Before Babur’s invasions, Guru Nanak had settled at Kartarpur (“Creator’s Abode”), a town he himself founded on the right bank of River Ravi in 1519. Approximately a year after Guru Nanak had left his job for his preaching tours, Sultan Sikandar Lodi (r. 1489–1517) appointed Dawlat Khan Lodi as governor of Lahore after the incumbent governor, Sa’īd Khān Sarwānī, was exiled in 1500 for his part in a conspiracy against the Delhi Sultanate (McLeod 1968, p. 108). Thus, Dawlat Khan Lodi occupied a position of considerable importance during the later years of Sikandar Lodi and during the reign of Sikandar’s successor, Ibrahim Lodi, although he became alienated from the latter when he conspired along with Alam Khan by inviting Babur to invade Hindustan.

Finally, the title of this essay makes sense only when we recognize that Guru Nanak kindled the fire of autonomy and courage in those who claimed to be his disciples (*Sikhs*). He inspired them to stand up against any kind of injustice and tyranny. For them, he set an example to raise one’s voice at the right moment from the standpoint of truth and justice: “Nanak speaks the Word of Truth; he will always proclaim the Truth at the most appropriate moment of time” (*sach kī bāṇī nānaku ākhai sachu sunāisī sach kī belā*, GGS, p. 723). This proclamation was made in the historical context of Babur’s invasion of India when Guru Nanak was standing in “the city of corpses” at Saidpur in the period 1520–1521 CE. For the sake of Truth, as Bruce Lincoln remarks, it is essential for the “right speaker” to deliver the “right speech” at the “right time and place” before an audience, the historically and culturally conditioned expectations of which establish the parameters of what is judged “right” in all these instances. Thus, an authoritative speech has to be “much more supple, dynamic, and situationally adaptable” (Lincoln 1994, pp. 116–17). Accordingly, there is no use of raising one’s voice afterwards when the appropriate moment is lost. Thus, Guru Nanak laid down the foundation of a fundamental Sikh principle of “Speaking Truth to Power” for his disciples through his bold response to the political events of Babur’s invasions.

2. The Context of the *Baburnama*

We need to look at the text of *Baburnama* more closely to understand the historical context of Guru Nanak's hymns related to Babur's invasions. Let us begin with four significant points emerging from Babur's memoirs. First, historians claim that Babur entered North India on the invitation of Dawlat Khan Lodi, the governor of the province, and Alam Khan, the uncle of Sultan Ibrahim Lodi (G. Singh 1987, p. 79). It is true that on behalf of Dawlat Khan's son Ali Khan, the notables of Bhera paid homage to Babur on his first entry into Hindustan in 1519: "When we approached Bhera, Deva Hindu, one of the servants of Dawlat Khan Yusuf-Khel's son Ali Khan, and Siktu's son came with the notables of Bhera to present a horse and pay homage" (Thackston 1996, p. 277). Six years later, however, the text of *Baburnama* portrays an entirely different picture of the fluid situation in which Dawlat Khan Lodi had strapped two swords to his waist despite his advanced age to defend the fort at Lahore in 1525. After defeating the army led by Bihar Khan Lodi, Babur exercised his power to dictate the terms to Dawlat Khan Lodi when he came forward to submit himself. The text in this context reads: "When it was time for the interview, he (Dawlat Khan) was slow to kneel, so I ordered his leg pulled to make him kneel. When I had him seated before me, I said to someone who knew Hindustani, "Tell him these words one by one and make him understand. Say, 'I called you father, I honored and respected you more than you could have wanted. I saved you and your sons from wandering like the Baluch [leading a nomadic existence]. I rescued your clan and women from Ibrahim's sequestration. I awarded you with Tatar Khan's three-crore estates. Did I do you ill that you strapped two swords to your waist and led your army against our domains and caused such strife and turmoil?'" (Thackston 1996, p. 318). This conversation clearly indicates that Babur did not know Hindustani language at all. Babur further writes: "We had Dawlat Khan, Ali Khan, Isma'il Khan, and a few of their grandees put in chains and turned over to Kata to be taken to the Malot fort in Bhera and held under guard . . . Dawlat Khan died upon reaching Sultanpur" (Thackston 1996, p. 319). Thus, the person who had invited Babur to India died in his custody in 1526. Guru Nanak must have heard the story of how cruelly the Mughals had treated Dawlat Khan and his family whom he had known personally from his Sultanpur days. That is why he proclaimed: "Lahore city, poison, violence, a watch and a quarter" (*Lahore saharu jaharu kaharu savā paharu//*, GGS, p. 1412). He did not even complete the couplet during that moment of shock.

Second, the only native people of Punjab who offered some resistance to Babur's army were the Jats and Gujjars of Sialkot in 1525. They attacked the rear of his army to take their cattle and oxen back that were snatched forcibly in early raids. In his description of the raids of the region of Bahar and Panjgram to Kira Su, for instance, Babur explicitly writes: "Most of their animals and small children fell prey to the soldiers. A few of them withdrew in safety to the nearby mountains" (Thackston 1996, p. 299). In his report of the Sialkot incidence, however, Babur describes the Jats and Gujjars as "wretches who acted intractably and tyrannically" by plundering the cattle and oxen attached to the army. He further narrates that some of the instigators were located and later "hacked into pieces" as punishment for what they had done (Thackston 1996, p. 315). Notably, the location of Kartarpur was in the vicinity of Narowal and Sialkot, and the Jats of the neighboring areas were simply reclaiming their "rightful property" (*haq halāl*) under the influence of Baba Nanak's teachings to stand up against injustice and tyranny (Mann 2017a, p. 11). Their livelihood depended on their cattle and oxen and they were ready to confront a mighty army at the cost of their lives.

The last two points of Babur's interest in music and drinking are interconnected. The contemporary author of *Tārīkh-i-Rāshīdī*, Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat, testifies that Babur excelled in music and Turki poetry in his formative years (Elilias [1895] 2008, pp. 173–74). He was very fond of listening to the playing of a rebec (*rubāb*, a lute like musical instrument). In his memoirs Babur writes: "We also invited a wandering dervish named Shahi and a couple of *karez* men who played the *rubab*. We sat drinking on the hill behind the *karez* drinking until nightfall" (Thackston 1996, p. 302). The text of *Baburnama* is full of references of Babur's drinking parties. In fact, there is not a single page when he does not mention it. In addition, Babur used to eat *ma'jun*, a mild narcotic concoction made into a chewable pellet. This was equivalent to *bhaṅg*, the Punjabi word for marijuana. The earliest

narrative *Sākhī Mahalu Pahile Kī* describes how Mir Babur offered a pouch of *bhaṅg* to Baba Nanak to eat after he had listened to a hymn sung by the Guru accompanied by the *rubāb* played by Mardana (Padam 2014, pp. 210–11). In response, the Guru recited a second hymn in *Tilaṅg* raga: “The fear of God is my marijuana; my consciousness is the pouch which holds it. I have become an intoxicated hermit” (*bhau terā bhāṅg khalaṛī merā chītu//mai devānā bhaiā atītu//*, GGS, p. 721). The usage of the word *bhāṅg* in Guru Nanak’s *bāṇī* can be explained only in the historical context of his encounter with Babur.

3. Rethinking the *Bābar-vāṇī*

Traditionally, four hymns of Guru Nanak are collectively known as the *Bābar-vāṇī*. These are as follows: *Āsā* 39, *Āsā Aṣṭapadī* 11, *Āsā Aṣṭapadī* 12, and *Tilaṅg* 5 (GGS, pp. 360, 417–18, 722–23). Both Sikh and non-Sikh scholars have thus far focused on these four works to understand Guru Nanak’s response to the political events related to Babur’s invasions of India (McLeod 1968, p. 135; Grewal 2011, p. 23; P. Singh 2012, p. 203; Fenech and McLeod 2014, p. 52; N.-G.K. Singh 2017, pp. 6–14). There is an urgent need to rethink the actual number of works in this list, and I am offering its revision by including the following nine hymns, consisting of four *shabads* (“hymns for musical performance”), three *shaloks* (“couplets” or “stanzas”) and two *aṣṭapadīs* (“hymns of eight stanzas”). Guru Nanak composed these hymns in response to four different historical situations related to Babur’s invasions:

3.1. Four Hymns Are Related to Babur’s Saidpur Invasion (1520–21 CE)

1. *Tilaṅg* 1: *yak araz guftam pesh tau dargosh kun kartār ...* (GGS, p. 721);
2. *Tilaṅg* 2: *bhau terā bhāṅg khalaṛī merā chītu ...* (GGS, p. 721);
3. *Tilaṅg* 5: *jaisī mai āvai khasam kī bāṇī taisaṛā karīn giānu ve lālo ...* (GGS, pp. 722–23);
4. *Āsā* 39: *khurāsān khasamānā kī hindustān ḍarāīā ...* (GGS, p. 360).

These four hymns provide us with evidence of how Guru Nanak personally witnessed the devastation caused by Babur’s army during the sack of Saidpur. There is vividness and depth of feeling in his descriptions of agony and destruction in his *Tilaṅg* 5 and *Āsā* 39 hymns that can be explained only as expressions of a direct, personal experience. Guru Nanak made a proclamation that “the Mughals have come in seventy-eight and will go in ninety-seven, and another disciple of a warrior will arise” (*āvani aḥatarai jāṇi satānavai horu bhī uḥasī marad kā chelā*, GGS, p. 722). The usual exegesis of this statement refers to Babur’s entry into India in 1521 CE and to Humayun’s departure in 1540 CE. The “disciple of a warrior” is said to refer to Sher Shah Sur who defeated Humayun in 1540 CE in the Battle of Khanua (or Khanwa). Although this event followed Guru Nanak’s death in 1539 CE (which is why McLeod regarded the Guru’s statement in the *Tilaṅg* 5 hymn as “an enigmatic” line; see McLeod 1968, p. 137, n. 2), it must be understood in the context of his prophetic statement made in the future tense. With his mystic insight, Guru Nanak forewarned the people of India of imminent destruction: “The body-fabric will be torn apart into shreds, and then Hindustan will remember these words” (GGS, p. 723).

The opening Persian hymn of *Tilaṅg* raga reflects Guru Nanak’s encounter with Babur. We have already noted that Babur did not know Hindustani language at all. For this reason, Guru Nanak employed Persian language and Islamic concepts to appeal to his conscience in this unique instance. Instead of referring to Babur invading Hindustan as a “god of death” (*jamu kari mughalu charḥāīā*, GGS, p. 360) in Hindustani language, here he is likened to the “angel of death” (*azrā’īl*) by using Islamic terminology. The scene of death and destruction caused by his army reminded Guru Nanak of the final prayer (*taqbīr*) offered in a Muslim ritual: “Spouse, children, parents and siblings—none of them will be there to hold your hand. And when at last I fall, and the time of my last prayer (*taqbīr*) has come, there shall be no one to rescue me” (GGS, p. 721). By addressing himself, Guru Nanak exposed the greedy tendencies of the aggressor in a most powerful way: “Night and day, I wandered around in greed, contemplating evil schemes. I never did good deeds; this is my condition” (*shab roz gashtam dar havā kardem badī khiāl//gāhe na nekī kār kardam mam iīn chinī ahavāl//*, GGS, p. 721). It is instructive to note that

the melody of *Tilāṅg* in which Guru Nanak sang with the accompaniment of *rubāb* played by Mardana is linked with the “sharpening of the sword” to prepare for the battlefield (S. Singh 1985, p. 61). This raga is quite famous among the Muslims, particularly Sufis in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Curtis 1996, p. 173). As already stated, the second hymn in this raga provides us with Guru Nanak’s response to Babur’s offering of a pouch of *bhaṅg* at the meeting.

During his early morning devotions, Guru Nanak addressed *Akāl Purakh* (“Eternal One,” God) in *Āsā* melody. He was pained to see the suffering of the innocent who had little to do with politics and war. In his anguish, he complained to God: “You spared Khurasan but yet spread fear in Hindustan. Creator, you did this, but to avoid the blame you sent the Mughal as the messenger of death. Receiving such chastisement, the people cry out in agony and yet no anguish touches you. Creator, you belong to all. If the mighty destroy only one another, one is not grieved” (GGS, p. 360). The principal theme in *Āsā* hymn is related to the question of why the weak and innocent should suffer unmerited torment at the hands of the strong and, in this respect, this hymn has obvious affinities with the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible. God is called into account, just as Job summons him. Guru Nanak made it quite explicit that it was the Creator who sent Babur as the messenger of death to destroy the Lodi Sultanate through successive invasions. He underscored the point that if any mighty person attacks “the weak and unarmed” person, then it is a violation of an ethical norm of warfare.

Guru Nanak was responding to an actual life situation with his profound inner experience and outer observation. In tune with *Akāl Purakh*, he deeply reflected on the situation at hand and placed the responsibility on the shoulders of various human actors from both sides. In this context, J.S. Grewal argues that there is a moral dimension which restrains Guru Nanak from an outright condemnation of either the conqueror or the conquered (Grewal 1969, p. 163). Balbinder Singh Bhogal, on the other hand, underlines Guru Nanak’s “powerlessness” and “blunt tone of abject resignation” in response to the devastation caused by Babur’s army (Bhogal 2007, p. 119). This was certainly not the case. A careful examination of Guru Nanak’s hymns reveals a powerful denunciation of both the invaders and the rulers. In his *Āsā* hymn, for instance, Guru Nanak described the Lodis as “wretched dogs” for their moral failure to protect their sovereignty and the jewel-like (*rattan*) innocent people (GGS, p. 360). They had acted in a manner contrary to the divine intention and were responsible for the ultimate overthrow of their dynasty. In the *Tilāṅg* hymn, on the other hand, Guru Nanak referred to Babur’s army as the “marriage-party of evil” (*pāp kī jāñj*), charging them for their moral failure to forcibly demand a “dowry” (*dān*) from the suffering people (P. Singh 2012, pp. 204–5). The “dowry” referred to heavy taxes collected by the Mughal army from the conquered subjects.

3.2. Two Shaloks Are Related to Babur’s Invasion of Lahore (1525 CE)

5. *Salok Vārān Te Vadhik: Lahore saharu zaharu kaharu savā paharu.* (GGS, p. 1412);
6. *Mājhi Salok: kali kātī rāje kasāi dharamu pañkh kari uddariā . . .* (GGS, p. 145).

These two *shaloks* are related because both have received direct comments from Guru Amar Das. As noted earlier, Guru Nanak uttered the first aphoristic saying against the ravages caused by Babur’s army at Lahore: “The city of Lahore suffered terrible destruction for four hours” (GGS, p. 1412). This is a single line *shalok*, whereas we find *shaloks* of varying lines from 2 to 20 in the Guru Granth Sahib. Traditionally, Valmiki was India’s first Sanskrit poet who spontaneously uttered words that turned to have measures in two equal parts. As he uttered his feelings of sadness (*śoka*) at the spectacle of a hunter shooting down two birds, his couplet came to be called *śloka* [*shalok* in Punjabi] (Diwana 1975, p. 67). Guru Nanak uttered this unique *shalok* in a traumatic situation arising from the destruction of the city of Lahore caused by the Mughal army. He was stunned to know the ill treatment of Dawlat Khan Lodi and his family, because he had presumed from the Saidpur meeting that Dawlat Khan was an ally of Babur. Here, it is instructive to note that when Dawlat Khan Lodi fell out with Sultan Ibrahim Lodi, he had conspired with the latter’s uncle, Alam Khan, to invite Babur to attack India. As Babur led his armies strategically in a series of invasions, Dawlat Khan realized that “he had come more like a conqueror and new master than like an ally, and turned against him, but was no match for

Babur and suffered a defeat at his hands” (G. Singh 1992, p. 536). Guru Nanak’s aphoristic saying, originating in a catastrophic situation, received a direct comment from Guru Amar Das: “The city of Lahore is a pool of ambrosial nectar, the home of praise” (GGS, p. 1412). These words reflect the changed historical context of the peaceful days of Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), whose liberal policy encouraged religious pluralism and co-existence of different communities at Lahore. Being the birthplace of the fourth Guru, there came into being a Sikh congregation (*saṅgat*), making Lahore the “home of devotional singing of the praises of Akal Purakh” (*siftī dā ghar*).

Guru Nanak continued to express his angst and perplexity in the second *shalok* in *Vār Mājīh* as follows:

The dark age (*kali*) wields the knife, and the kings have become butchers; righteousness has sprouted wings and flown away. In this dark night (*amāvas*) of falsehood, the moon of truth is not visible anywhere. I have searched in vain, and I am so confused. In this darkness I cannot find the path. In self-centeredness (*haumai*) people cry out in pain. Say O Nanak, how will they be saved? (GGS, p. 145).

The phrase “righteousness has sprouted wings and flown away” (*dharam pañkh kari uḍḍariā*) is parallel to the following expression in *Tilāṅg* hymn: “Modesty and righteousness both have vanished and falsehood struts around like a leader, O Lalo!” (*saram dharam dui chhappi khalote kūṛ phirai pardhān ve lālo*, GGS, p. 722). This desperate situation had arisen from the chaotic circumstances of Babur’s conquest of Lahore in the beginning of January 1526. Dawlat Khan Lodi made a plea to Babur for forgiveness because he had joined hands with Ghazi Khan to defend the Lahore fortress: “Ghazi Khan has fled to the hills. If you would pardon my offense, I will turn over the fortress” (Thackston 1996, p. 318). Instead, Babur confiscated all of Dawlat Khan’s possessions and incarcerated him along with his entire family. Soon after, Dawlat Khan died in Mughal custody at Sultanpur. The news of these events had deeply affected the sensibilities of Guru Nanak because of his close connection with Dawlat Khan Lodi. In a different historical context of Akbar’s peaceful rule, Guru Amar Das once again responded to Guru Nanak’s above *shalok* with an optimistic note: “In this dark age (*kali*) devotional singing (*kīrat*) has appeared as Light in the world. How rare are those few who swim across the other side through the teachings of the Guru! The Lord bestows the glance of grace on the one who receives the gift. [Such a one] is the *Gurmukh*, O Nanak, who receives the jewel [of the divine Name]” (GGS, p. 145). In this intertextual dialogue, the third Guru paid tribute to Guru Nanak by reiterating exuberantly that the performance of his teachings in devotional singing had become “a beacon of light” (*chānan*) for the congregation at Lahore.

3.3. Two *Aṣṭapadīs* Were Written after the Battle of Panipat (1526 CE)

7. *Āsā Aṣṭapadī* 11: *jin siri sohani paṭṭīān māṅgīn pāi sandhūru ...* (GGS, p. 417);

8. *Āsā Aṣṭapadī* 12: *kahān su khel tabelā ghoṛe kahān bherī sahanāi ...* (GGS, pp. 417–18).

These two *aṣṭapadīs* provide extended comments on Babur’s previous invasions and his final victory over the Lodis in the battle of Panipat on April 20, 1526 CE. Guru Nanak’s response to war and suffering was not limited to his personal anguish. He censured the Lodis for acting in a manner contrary to the divine intention and finally losing their sovereignty: “If someone focuses on the Divine beforehand, then why should he be punished? The rulers have lost all sense, reveling in pleasure and sensuality. Since Babur’s rule has been proclaimed, even the [Lodi] princes have no food to eat” (GGS, p. 417). Elsewhere, Guru Nanak holds the heedlessness of Akal Purakh on the part of the general public responsible for bringing about this retribution. In the case of the rape of women, for instance, the Guru makes the following comment: “The wealth and sensual beauty which intoxicated them became their enemies. The messengers of Death, under orders to persecute, strip them of their honor and carry them off” (GGS, p. 417). Here, Guru Nanak is not blaming women’s own behavior for being raped but rather describing the obduracy of human nature. All the violence in war and rape was caused by the senseless pursuit of worldly pleasures and the heedlessness of Akal Purakh. Some other verses represent a terrible portrait of women being raped by soldiers who did not bother

to discriminate between Hindus and Muslims who were in their path: “Some lost their five times of prayer, some the time of *pūjā*” (GGS, p. 417). Thus, Guru Nanak was deeply anguished over the horrible situation of women. He employed the Punjabi phrase “stripping of one’s honor” to describe the rape of women by the Mughal army. In fact, rape is regarded as a violation of women’s honor in Punjabi culture to the extent that it can affect a family’s social standing. For all his sympathy with the suffering people, Guru Nanak was cognizant of the situation of poor women and their agony reminded him of a religious truth that unrighteousness would be punished according to divine justice (P. Singh 2019, p. 4). In this context, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh has skillfully argued that “Guru Nanak makes no distinction between Muslim and Hindu women, or women of different castes in the Hindu world. His compassion for them during the terrible period of Indian history comes out most touchingly throughout *Babarvani*” (N.-G.K. Singh 2017, pp. 14–15).

Guru Nanak was fully aware of the relationship between the two existing domains of temporal and spiritual sovereignties (*mīrī-pīrī*) in contemporary India. He employed the key words *pīr* (saint) and *mīr* (sovereign), representing religious and secular powers in early sixteenth century. In his second *aṣṭapadī*, Guru Nanak claimed that the religious leaders (*pīrs*) miserably failed to halt the invader with their miraculous tricks, by falsely claiming that the Mughals will be blinded when they arrive (GGS, pp. 417–18). Riding on their fast-running horses, the Mughals fired their guns on the army of Pathans on their elephants (*onhī tupak tāṇi chalāi onhī hasti chīṛhāi*, GGS, p. 418). The text of *Baburnama* testifies that Sultan Ibrahim’s “standing army was estimated at one hundred thousand” and that his commanders “were said to have one thousand elephants” (Thackston 1996, p. 329). In this context, Mirza Muhammad Haidar Douglat’s contemporary testimony is instructive: “Ibrahim’s army numbered more than 100,000 men, but the Emperor [Babur] utterly defeated him with 10,000 men” (Elilias [1895] 2008, pp. 357–58). On the whole, Guru Nanak’s description of the Panipat battle was to the point, although it was largely based upon secondhand reports. He admitted the enormity of violence caused by Babur’s army as part of Mughal invasions of India, but he rendered it small from the perspective of a larger metaphysics of divine Order (*hukam*). Most instructively, Guru Nanak fully realized that unchecked political power could easily crush the religious authority of saintly people. It is no wonder that he sowed the seeds of *mīrī-pīrī* tradition in his bold resistance against the power structures of his times (P. Singh 2019, p. 4).

Finally, the opening graphic description of “the beautiful braids of young women adorned with auspicious vermilion in the parting of the hair being shorn of with scissors” (GGS, p. 417) reminded Guru Nanak of his Sultanpur days, when he had witnessed the luxuriant lifestyles of the princesses/queens of the Lodi household. He also knew what had happened to them after the sack of Lahore in late December 1525. These two *aṣṭapadīs* contain a universal warning for earthly kings like the fallen Lodis after the battle of Panipat: one can be “consumed by wealth and ultimately wasted by wealth,” and so even the greatest of riches will not save you when God decides it is time for your departure (N.-G.K. Singh 2017, p. 11). For Guru Nanak, such is the sport of the Creator to make new kings and replace old ones, and the power of any worldly ruler can do nothing to stop this, no matter how much pride such figures might have in their treasure chests, armies or personal strength (Atwal 2020, p. 14).

3.4. One Shalok Was Written after Much Reflection on State Violence

9. *Malār Salok: haraṇā bājṅān tai shiqdārān enāh paṛhiā nāu ...* (p. 1288).

The most poignant analysis of the complexity of state violence is given in Guru Nanak’s *Malār* hymn. Here, the Guru employs the metaphors of deer (*haraṇ*), hawks (*bāj*) and state officials (*shiqdār*) who act as trained agents to push a community on the path of self-destruction. For instance, if a hunter wants to catch the herd of deer’s in the forest, he will pick up a ‘baby deer’. He will then feed him to raise him in a particular way so that the deer becomes fully dependent upon the hunter. After the deer is fully trained, the hunter will let him loose in the forest where he becomes the leader of other deer’s. Eventually, the trained deer will bring the herd of deer’s into the trap of the hunter. Similarly, a trained

hawk will lead other hawks into the snare of the hunter (P. Singh 2019, p. 5). In modern parlance, this is known as a ‘penetration strategy’: “you stand for separation of religion and politics; encourage use of religion in a certain community for political purposes; and then take action against the community for mixing religion and politics” (Grewal 1998, p. 101). The original hymn reads as follows:

Mahalā 1 (Guru Nanak)

Deer, hawks, and government officials are known to be trained and clever. When the trap is set, they trap *their own kind*; hereafter, they will find no place of rest. He alone is learned and wise, and he alone is a visionary scholar who practices the divine Name. First, the tree puts down its roots, and then it spreads out its shade above [to protect *people* from sun]. The kings become tigers—[*beasts of prey*—]and their officials become *greedy dogs*; they go out and awaken the sleeping *people* to terrorize them. The public servants inflict wounds with their nails: O dogs! Lick the blood and marrow of *the poor*. Behold, where creatures will be judged [according to their deeds]; there, the noses of these tyrants will be chopped off [in disgrace] and they will be branded as untrustworthy [in the divine court]. (GGS, p. 1288).

Most of the time, Sikh scholars have a tendency to pick up a few lines of this hymn to show Guru Nanak’s powerful critique of the rulers and the invaders alike, which is partially true (Grewal 1969, p. 157; G. Singh 1987, p. 43). There is a need to maintain the structural unity of this hymn in exegesis so that we can appreciate its true import. In addition to the condemnation of despotic rulers, Guru Nanak offers a severe critique of the agency of various human actors from within the community who are actually responsible for much of its agony. In the Sikh scripture, for instance, a ‘deer’ appears as the symbol of ‘illusion’ without the knowledge that the real ‘musk’ (*kastūrī*) lies in his own body but looks outside in bewilderment. A large majority of any community belongs to this category. A ‘hawkish’ person employs his ‘surrogate power’ to bring oppression to his own people. Similarly, government agents act as ‘extended arms’ of state machinery to carry out its evil designs (P. Singh 2019, p. 5). These officials “act as the sharp claws of the ruler to draw out blood and marrow of the victims for him” (Hans 1988, p. 8).

In the *Malār* hymn, Guru Nanak presents his own take on violence as politically motivated. He strongly condemns the rulers and the agents of state structures for being ultimately responsible for mass killings. The three categories of people described in this hymn as deer, hawks and agents-provocateurs are actually responsible for creating a situation for state repression. The fourth category consists of ‘visionary intellectuals’ (*paṇḍit bīnā*) who maintain their integrity in all circumstances without shifting their positions. By practicing the discipline of the divine Name (*nām-simaran*), they protect the interests of their community much in the same way as a shady tree protects people during a hot summer. Here, the metaphor of a ‘tree’ is significant because it is rooted, grounded, unwavering, and does not get distracted from the present moment. Therefore, the ideal persons in Guru Nanak’s view are taught to persist similarly rooted, grounded, and unwavering in their meditation on the divine Name. They live and die for protecting the honor and dignity of their faith and community (P. Singh 2019, p. 5). Such people are the backbone of a community.

Finally, Guru Nanak was fully cognizant of the dubious role played by Dawlat Khan Lodi and Alam Khan Lodi in inviting Babur to India in the first place. He became aware of the complexity of the situation as the events unfolded sequentially after the Saidpur invasion. After deep reflection on state violence, he proclaimed that those tyrants and their greedy agents who had committed unpardonable crimes of terrorizing the innocent people by “awakening them in their sleep by coercion” (*jāi jaggāian baiṭhe sutte*) would certainly receive punishment in the divine court. Here, we have a rationale for the normalization of violence from a moral dimension, a process that stresses both free will and retributive themes. Nevertheless, these themes cohere into the higher purpose of divine will, order and command (*hukam*) in such a way that neither divine justice can be ignored, nor divine order can be defied, and that unrighteousness will certainly be punished.

4. Narrativizing Guru Nanak's Encounter with Babur

Guru Nanak's spiritual reputation had already spread far and wide during his lifetime. His charismatic personality won him many disciples who formed the nucleus of the first Sikh community (Panth) at Kartarpur. Unsurprisingly, stories about him started circulating orally during the last decades of his life. These stories must have multiplied only one or two generations from Guru Nanak's death in 1539. Legends became an integral part of these stories because they reflected "the piety engendered by great religious figures and as such serve[d] to communicate, in some measure, an impression of their power to attract and inspire" (McLeod 1968, p. 68). Listeners could learn lessons from these stories to spur on moral improvement in their own lives. We can see this theme of pedagogy in the retellings of narratives in the available *Janam-sākhīs* of Guru Nanak's life (Johnson 2015). In this context, Guru Amar Das specifically described the worth and purpose of these narratives as follows: "The narratives of great ancestors' lives transform ordinary people into truly noble persons. They accept what is pleasing to the will of the True Guru, and act accordingly" (GGS, p. 951). Interestingly, the earliest and the shortest version of Guru Nanak's life-narrative appeared during the period of the third Guru. Its manuscript appears to be an "incomplete draft" (*adhūrī rahī hoī rachanā*). S.S. Padam has aptly made the case for *Sākhī Mahalu Pahile Kī* (1570–1574), written by Sīhān Uppal, to be the source of later extended versions of various *Janam-sākhīs* (Padam 2014, pp. 123–59, 171–214, and 246–47). It should, however, be emphasized that diverse *Janam-sākhīs* were produced by different groups, with different theological and political agenda, within the Sikh Panth. Our main concern here is to look at the evolution of the specific narrative concerning the meeting between Guru Nanak and Babur at Saidpur.

The earliest narrative begins with Baba Nanak and Mardana, reaching Saidpur at a time when its Paṭhān inhabitants were celebrating numerous marriages. Both of them were accompanied by a group of *faqīrs* ("saintly people") who were weak with hunger. They asked for food but were overlooked at every household. This so enraged Baba Nanak that he asked Mardana to play the *rubāb* to the tune in which he recited a hymn in *Tilāṅg* melody (GGS, p. 722). A Brahmin who had heard the hymn recognized it as a summons to Babur to punish the ungenerous town. He begged Baba Nanak to retract his curse. The Guru refused to oblige him, but he promised the Brahmin that he and his family would be spared if they took refuge at a certain pool some distance outside the town. Babur then descended upon the town of Saidpur, sacked it, put all of its inhabitants to the sword and ravaged the surrounding countryside. All this had happened because the rude Paṭhāns had failed to show proper hospitality towards *faqīrs*: "Such was the destruction which Baba (Nanak's) *śabad* brought upon the Paṭhāns. A Great Soul was filled with wrath and because *faqīrs* believe in God He hears their prayers. God hears the petition of *faqīrs* and whatever is in *faqīr's* mind He performs" (McLeod 1968, p. 234). This earliest narrative of *Sākhī Mahalu Pahile Kī* became the template for the various *Janam-sākhī* traditions to add detail and color in different historical contexts.

As a historian, W.H. McLeod dismissed this story on "rational grounds," providing us with the reason that "it is completely out of character as far as Gurū Nānak is concerned." He further remarked: "Nothing in his works, including the verse [*Tilāṅg* 5] which is interpreted as a curse, offer the remotest sign that he could be capable of such vindictive behaviour" (McLeod 1968, p. 134). While we agree with McLeod's assessment to a certain extent, there is an urgent need to contextualize this narrative in the historical situation of its origins. It is instructive to note that during the period of Guru Amar Das, the Mughal–Sikh relations had become amicable due to the liberal policy of Emperor Akbar. In the changed circumstances, it may have become essential for the author of this narrative to put the entire responsibility of the destruction of the city of Saidpur on the shoulders of the *Paṭhāns* who were so engrossed in revelry at the wedding parties that they completely forgot to show proper consideration towards saintly people. In this manner, this narrative would absolve the Mughals.

The concluding part of the narrative in *Sākhī Mahalu Pahile Kī* deals with Baba Nanak's personal meeting with Babur as follows:

Babur then greeted [Baba Nanak] with [a Muslim greeting] *salām[-a-lekam]*, saying, “Please be merciful.” Then Baba said: “Mīr Jī, if you desire mercy from God, release the prisoners.” Babur then said: “I have one request to make if you allow me to do so.” Baba said: “Yes, please go ahead and say it.” “[Faqīr] Jī, if you give me your word then I will release the prisoners.” Baba said: “Ask what you desire.” Then Babur said: “I am asking for this boon that my kingdom should continue from throne to throne among my descendants.” Then Baba said: “Your kingdom will continue for a long time.” Babur then clothed all the captives and set them free. Thereafter, Baba Nanak took leave of Babur. (Padam 2014, p. 213)

Obviously, this narrative indicates that Baba Nanak had the power to grant and take away kingship from earthly rulers. This power highlighted the Guru as a spiritual guide, “with interest and ability to alter the temporal world; his intervention helped free the slaves in Babur’s possession” (Syam 2013, p. 82). In this context, Louis E. Fenech has made a crucial point that “the worldly authority of the Islamicate rulers of the Delhi Sultanate and the later Mughal empire derived principally from the blessings of the revered master who was the object of the hagiographer’s attention” (Fenech 2008, p. 57). In his arguments, he has cited Simon Digby, saying, “In the opinion of their followers [Sufi pirs] held powers for making and unmaking of kings and kingdoms” (Digby 1986, p. 62). Fenech continues to relate this Sufi theme to the awareness of Guru Nanak as the force behind Babur’s victories over the Lodi Sultanate in the Persian text, *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib* (1640s), depicting the contemporary Sikh belief in mid-seventeenth century: “One [of the miracles] attributed to [Baba] Nanak [by his disciples] is as follows: having been afflicted by the Afghans [Baba] Nanak delivered them over to the Mughals so that in the year [Hijra] 932 [1526 CE] Hazrat Firdaus Makani [He whose place is Paradise (Babur’s posthumous title)] Babur Padishah defeated Ibrahim [Lodi] the Afghan” (Isfandyar 1983, p. 198).

Here, it is crucial to underline the point that diverse *Janam-sākhī* narratives present alternative readings of Guru Nanak’s encounter with Babur. The narrative in the *Adi Sākhīs* (P. Singh [1969] 1983, pp. 194–99; Syam 2013, pp. 79–82) is basically an extension of *Sākhī Mahalu Pahile Kī*. Again, the original name of *Purātan Janam-sākhī* was *Sākhī Bābe Nānak Jī Kī: Ādi Ant Kī*, written by Saido Jaṭ (Mann 2017b, p. 174; Padam 2014, p. 246). This version added the story of Baba Nanak and Mardana being captured as prisoners during the Saidpur sack. Like all prisoners, both were made to do forced labor, Baba Nanak as a collie and Mardana as a horse attendant. A certain Mīr Khan who was responsible for watching the prisoners was startled to observe that the Guru’s load remained suspended a full cubit above his head and that the horse followed Mardana without a halter. When this information was conveyed to Babur, he declared, “Had I known there were such faqīrs here I should not have destroyed the town” (McLeod 1968, p. 44). Babur accompanied Mīr Khan to where prisoners were working and observed that a hand-mill (*chakkī*) that had been issued to Baba Nanak turned without any assistance. He approached the Guru who uttered two hymns. Hearing these, Babur fell and kissed his feet and offered him a favor. Baba Nanak asked for all the prisoners to be released, and Babur at once issued orders to free them and restore their property (ibid.). Iqbal Qaiser has given the photograph of Gurdwara Chakki Sahib at Saidpur (Eminabad) in Gujranwala District in his major study of historical Sikh Shrines in Pakistan, commemorating the site “where Guru Ji turned grinding wheel in captivity” (Qaiser 1998, p. 56). Notably, all these *Janam-sākhī* narratives discussed so far record a discourse between Guru Nanak and Babur. They belong to the normative Sikh tradition since they maintain the assertion that Guru Nanak’s authority is greater than Babur’s.

The most significant narrative in this context appears in Bhai Gurdas’s stanza in *Vār* 26: 21. Strangely, this stanza escaped W.H. McLeod’s attention in his analysis based solely upon *Vār* 1: 23–45 (McLeod 1968, pp. 14–15, 34–36). The relevant stanza about a meeting with Babur reads as follows:

Debating frequently with the saints (*siddh*), master yogis (*nāth*), and incarnations (*avatār*) [Baba Nanak] made them feel disconcerted (*kann pharāiā*). Babur and his entourage (*bābar ke*) met with Baba [Nanak], and they all humbly submitted to him along with the *Nabāb* (Persian, *Nawāb*). Leaving temporal kings (*patishāh*) aside and abandoning both austerity (*jog*) and

prosperity (*bhog*), he commenced a wonderful new way. Becoming a carefree (*bemuhataju*) Lord of spiritual and temporal domains (*dān dunī dā pātishāhu*), he brought sovereignty to the life of the householder. As the Creator (*qādar*) is in the creation (*qudrat*), so Nanak too is one with creation. Some are united to be separated eventually; whereas others are brought together who were long separated. In the holy congregation (*sādh saṅgat*) the unknowable (*alakh*) is luminously known (*lakhāiā*). (VBG 26:21; V. Singh [1911] 1977, pp. 434–35 and also see Gill 2017, pp. 225–26, 231–32)

Here, Bhai Gurdas's stanza provides us with little more than eloquent panegyric by describing the personal meeting of Babur and his retinue with Baba Nanak (*bābar ke bābe mille*). The usage of the word 'Nawāb' in the text basically points towards Dawlat Khan Lodi who had arranged a personal meeting between Babur and Baba Nanak. At the time of the Saidpur expedition, Babur had good relations with this very Nawāb of Lahore who had invited him to visit India. He had not yet established the Mughal rule over India; therefore, the only Nawāb accompanying him would be Dawlat Khan Lodi. The testimony of the *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib* (1640s) is equally instructive to underscore Guru Nanak's relationship with Dawlat Khan: "Before the victory of the late Emperor [Babur] he (Nanak) was a *Modi* to Dawlat Khan Lodhi, who was one of the high officials of Ibrahim Khan Emperor of Delhi. And, *Modi* is an official in charge of the granary" (G. Singh 1969, p. 45). Interestingly, Dawlat Khan's high reputation within the early Sikh community (Panth) may be seen from Bhai Gurdas's list of prominent followers of the first Guru: "Dawlat Khan Lodi was a good (*bhalā*) person who achieved the status of a living Pīr" (VBG 11:13). This was indeed a glowing tribute to him because the tradition of a "living Pīr" enjoyed the exalted status among contemporary Sufis.

Bhai Gurdas specifically referred to Guru Nanak as a "king of both spiritual and temporal realms" (*dān dunī dā pātishāhu*) who brought sovereignty to the life of the householder. He was writing at a time when Guru Hargobind had donned two swords, symbolizing temporal and spiritual (*mīrī-pīrī*) authority. Militancy had become an integral part of the evolving Sikh tradition when Sikhs took up arms under the guidance of the sixth Guru in order to protect themselves from Mughal hostility. By contrast, the Miharvan *Janam-sākhī* de-emphasized the militant aspect completely. It did not claim that Guru Nanak ever met Babur or had any discourse with him. It gave the same explanation for the sack of Saidpur that "those who do not heed the request made by faqīrs are tormented in hell. Behold their condition!" (K. Singh 1962, p. 465). However, the Miharvan narrative then added that afterwards Babur assaulted Ṭillā Bālgundāī, the major center of Nath-yogi ascetics:

Seizing the yogis, he [Babur] began hacking their ears off and looting all their possessions. Even if some yogis resisted by using their steel discs to fight, they were eventually killed. They all died with the prophesy [*shabad*, "Word"] of Baba Nanak. Neither was any Mughal horse killed nor any Mughal soldier blinded. None of the yogis' miraculous powers of turning death on its heels came to any avail. These master ascetics' ability to turn death had no substance in the end. Say Waheguru. (Syan 2013, p. 78, translation slightly amended; K. Singh 1962, p. 469)

Hardip Singh Syan has competently examined the Miharvan narrative in detail. He draws the following conclusion:

Miharvan's anecdote focuses on Guru Nanak as the spiritual guide. Guru Nanak does not engage with kings like Babur but guides foolish ascetics to the truth. Significantly, Miharvan stresses Guru Nanak's humbleness by repeating his identity as a simple Khatri householder. Moreover, Nanak appears like a renouncer with 'inactive' militancy, because he knew the ascetics would be murdered by Babur. Despite the claims of the ascetics about their miraculous powers, they could not foresee their impending doom and due to his occult powers, Nanak did not need any temporal powers. (Syan 2013, p. 78)

The changed historical situation after the execution of Guru Arjan in 1606 by the orders of Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) brought a fundamental shift in Mughal–Sikh relations. The Mughals intensified their interference in Sikh affairs. They encouraged the Miharvan group (called *Mīnā* sect) to downplay

‘militancy’ advocated by Guru Hargobind in the mainline Sikh tradition. It is no wonder that Miharvan offered a strained interpretation of certain verses of the *Bābar-vāṇī* that “neither was any Mughal horse killed nor any Mughal soldier blinded” due to the miraculous powers of the Nath-yogis. In the original context, Guru Nanak had referred to the failure of the Sufi *pīrs* to forestall Babur’s invasions.

The Bala *Janam-sākhī* offered an entirely different version of Guru Nanak’s discourse with Babur. It originated in the circle of heretical Hindalis who subverted the Sikh tradition by making Guru Nanak subservient to Baba Hindal’s authority. According to this narrative, Guru Nanak was captured and brought to Babur by his soldiers who told him that he was a saint. However, the conversation between the two was full of disrespect towards Baba Nanak; for instance, Babur accused him of being a liar when Nanak spoke of his intoxication (Syan 2013, p. 82). Some excerpts of the concluding paragraph of this discourse read:

Then Babur spoke, “Listen Nanak dervish. You are a follower of Kabir.” Then Guru Nanak replied “Listen Babur Qalandar, Kabir was such a devotee who was blessed by God. There was no duality between him and God . . . Then Babur said, “Nanak dervish, you accept this gift, you take some stipend. You are a good faqīr.” Then Nanak said: “God has given me one gift [of the divine Name]. All people partake this gift.” Babur said, “Go Nanak dervish whichever direction you want to go that route is open to you”. (K. Singh 1969, p. 313; Syan 2013, p. 83, translation amended)

In this narrative, Guru Nanak is made the disciple of Kabir who “occupies a position of spiritual authority in the Hindali pantheon of saints” (Syan 2013, p. 83). The usage of the word *qalandar* (“Sufi mystic”) for Babur in the *Janam-sākhīs* was actually based upon a popular legend preserved in *Tārīkh-i-Daudī*, written by Abdullah in 983 AH/1575–1576 CE, depicting Babur as a clandestine *qalandar* (Roy 1958, p. 123; Siddiqi 1954). The earliest *Sākhī Mahalu Pahile Kī*, written in the period 1570–1574 CE during the same time period, explicitly recorded that “Mir Babur was a *qalandar*” (*mīr bābar jo thā so qalandar thā*, Padam 2014, p. 209). This legend relates how a *qalandar* once visited Sultan Sikandar Lodi in Delhi. The Sultan accorded him due reverence and hospitality, and later learned, to his great dismay, that he had missed an opportunity of capturing Babur (McLeod 1968, p. 134, n. 4). This legend simply shows that in the garb of a *qalandar* Babur had been gathering intelligence about the Lodi Sultanate much before his actual invasions of India. Although the Bala tradition achieved popularity as a mainstream *Janam-sākhī* from the nineteenth century onwards, its prominence was eventually replaced by the *Purātan* tradition due to the discovery of Colebrooke and Hafizabad manuscripts (McLeod 1980, pp. 15–30).

Further, the phrase *bābe ke bābar ke* became popular during the period of Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) to describe the relationship between the descendants of Baba Nanak and those of Babur: “Baba Nanak’s descendants (*bābe ke*) and those of Babur (*bābar ke*) are two separate entities but both were given power by the Supreme Lord. Recognize Nanak as the King of Spirituality (*dīn shāh*); acknowledge Babur’s descendants as Kings of Temporality” (R. Singh 1973, p. 89). For Guru Gobind Singh, Baba Nanak’s power was greater than Babur’s power, though both had divine mandate to rule in their respective realms. The tenth Guru further remarked that those people who did not offer their wealth and service to the saintly people like Baba Nanak were then robbed by men like Babur and his descendants. Thus, Mughal kings were shown in the Dasam Granth as being selfish and hoarders of wealth, while Baba Nanak was shown as selfless and a re-distributor of wealth among the poor. According to Guru Gobind Singh, as Syan argues, “those who remain with the spiritual kings are forever safe, but those who go with temporal kings ultimately become impoverished” (Syan 2013, pp. 224–25). The verses of the *Bābar-vāṇī* certainly inspired Guru Gobind Singh to write his epistle of moral victory called *Zafar-nāmā* to Emperor Aurangzeb (1618–1707), inserting “a discursive blade in the heart of the Mughal Empire” (Fenech 2013).

Furthermore, the Bhai Gurdas tradition became the source for the narrative produced by the late eighteenth-century author, Rattan Singh Bhangu, suggesting that Guru Nanak and Babur had a

personal meeting at the instance of Dawlat Khan Lodi: “Babur asked the question from Dawlat [Khan]. What should I offer to the Pīr? Dawlat [Khan] told him that he does not accept anything from anyone. All people go to him for his blessings. All temporal and spiritual powers (*mīrī pīrī*) are deferential to him. You will see for yourself when you go near him” (Dhillon 2004, p. 265). Most interestingly, Bhangu narrates in a unique way that Guru Nanak was the supreme spiritual sovereign of Hindustan, over and above the Prophet of Islam, whose powers were supposedly limited to Khurasan alone:

Babur pleaded to be blessed with sovereignty over India, so that his writ might run over twenty-two Indian provinces. Instantly did prophet Muhammad reject Babur’s plea with a remark, that he had no divine sanction for granting sovereignty over India. (76) . . .

. . . [This] being the sole prerogative of Guru Nanak, Babur should have no expectations from his Prophet about it. (77) (K. Singh 2008, p. 271)

For Bhangu, Guru Nanak was the sole representative of God on earth who had the power to sanctify Mughal rule over India.

Finally, Bhangu’s extended narrative implies that in his grace, Baba Nanak gave the political power to Mir Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, with a time limit of seven generations. However, three generations later, Babur’s descendants began to misuse their power (exemplified by the execution of Guru Arjan and later that of Guru Tegh Bahadur and his four grandsons) and forfeited their right to rule as a result of their misdeeds. As already noted, Bhai Gurdas specifically mentioned that the descendants of Baba Nanak had separated themselves from the temporal rulers (VBG 26:21). In this context, Priya Atwal aptly remarks that Bhangu’s account “completely subverts eighteenth century Mughal-centric perspective of the relationship between the imperial state/dynasty with the Sikh *panth*, where the Gurus and the *mīsls* [“Sikh confederations”] were portrayed as deviant upstarts who threatened Mughal sovereignty. Instead, Guru Nanak is here presented as the original fount of honour for Mughal rulership” (Atwal 2020, p. 15). As soon as Babur’s dynasty turned against the house of Baba Nanak, in Bhangu’s eyes, only Sikh rule could be the rightful replacement to Mughal political hegemony in the Punjab—specifically, the Khalsa Sikhs were collectively designed to be the heir of the royal standing that Guru Gobind Singh wrenched back from the unworthy Mughals (ibid.). Therefore, Bhangu offered an early modern interpretation of the narrative in which Guru Nanak and Babur discourse on religion and politics. He used it as a template to explain Mughal moral decline and Sikh political triumph. Hardip Singh Syan rightly contends that “in these narratives, early Mughal history was embedded in a Sikh narrative of sovereignty and state formation” (Syan 2013, p. 76). In his conversations with Captain Murray, who was charged with preparing the history of the Sikhs, Bhangu underscored the point that the Sikh Panth had always “preserved the right to sovereignty” (*ham rākhāt pātishāhī dāāvā*, Dhillon 2004, p. 207), a right to self-determination promised by the Eternal Sovereign (Satguru).

5. Conclusions

In this study, we have explored Guru Nanak’s own works concerning Babur’s invasions, and looked at different historical narratives produced much later about the Guru’s encounter with Babur, originating at different times from diverse circles and reflecting their ideological and political agenda. These narratives offered different interpretations of the verses of the *Bābar-vāñī*, reflecting the historical contexts and motives of their authors. In our analysis, we have drawn supporting evidence from the text of the *Baburnama* to extend the number of works in the *Bābar-vāñī* from a ‘fixed’ assemblage of ‘four’ to ‘nine,’ making it an open collection that dynamically responds to specific questions raised by historians from time to time. The new framework created by our revision offers us a fresh analytical gaze into the critical events related to Babur’s invasions and helps the novel readings of Guru Nanak’s verses shine through. One can raise the issue of the *Bābar-vāñī* being the ‘exception’ in the context of the overall emphasis of Guru Nanak’s teachings of ‘interior devotion’. This is a simplistic assertion, since Guru Nanak’s critique of political structures of his times may be seen in other works, particularly in his celebrated *Japjī* (GGS, pp. 4, 6–8), *Vār Mājh* (GGS, p. 145), *Vār Āsā* (GGS, pp. 468–9), *Vār*

Malār (GGS, pp. 1287–88) and the opening hymn of the very first melody of *Sirī Rāgu* in the Sikh scripture (GGS, p. 14). The three categories of people referred to in Guru Nanak's *Malār* hymn actually provide us with a lens to deconstruct the Punjab crisis of 1984 (P. Singh 2016, pp. 173–90) from a fresh perspective. The present study challenges the reductionist approach that confines Guru Nanak's teachings to "interior devotion" limited essentially to the private sphere without taking into account its relevance in political, economic and social arenas of public sphere (P. Singh 2019, p. 3).

The most significant impact of the *Bābar-vāṇī* has been on the evolving Sikh conceptions of the relationship between spiritual and political powers. Guru Nanak sowed the seeds of *mīrī-pīrī* tradition in his bold response to Babur's invasions because he maintained that unchecked political power could easily crush the religious authority of saintly people. In central Asia, the relationship between the Sufi shaykhs and political elites was well established in Islamicate dynasties. For instance, Omid Safi points out that "the *baraka* ["blessing"] of the saint legitimizes the military conquest of the warlord in exchange for promise of justice for the people" (Safi 2006, pp. 133–34). The *baraka*-legitimizing narratives may be seen in connection with Timurid and Ottoman dynasties. In particular, Babur was connected to Naqshbandi Sufi order: 'Ubaydullah Ahrar granted victory in taking Samarqand (Eaton 2019, p. 205). Babur later patronized the Shattari order, as did Humayun (ibid., p. 241). Humayun "re-confirmed" tax-free land for the Naqshbandis to "consolidate his grip" on Kabul (ibid., pp. 212–13). For Akbar, however, the Chisti Sufi order was an "indigenizing force", whose shrines in India "made India itself the spiritual home of Chisti Sufism" (ibid., p. 75). Thus, Akbar signaled a shift away from the Central Asian Sufi shaykhs toward the "Indianized Chistis" (ibid., p. 221). Azfar Moin has argued that the Indo-Timuri empire was based on such ideas of sacred kingship gleaned from the Safavids: "the Sufi practice of inculcating loyalty and marking fealty that had been inflicted upon Babur by Shah Isma'il had, over the course of a century, become an institutional scaffolding of the Mughal imperial system ... Babur had witnessed how the Safavids acted as both kings and saints, first absorbing his Timurid cousins and then him as their subordinates and disciples" (Moin 2014, p. 177). Unsurprisingly, after his victory in the battle of Khanua in 1527, Babur added the title of "Ghazi" ("Holy Warrior") to his official seal to claim authority in both temporal and spiritual realms: "For the sake of Islam I became a wanderer; I battled infidels and Hindus. I determined to become a martyr. Thank God I became a holy warrior" (Thackston 1996, p. 387). In light of this background, we can safely say that the Saidpur invasion of Babur was of an exploratory nature where he came across Baba Nanak through the courtesy of Dawlat Khan Lodi. It must have been difficult for him to accept an Indian saint in preference to Sufi shaykhs. This may have been another reason for his silence over his meeting with the Guru in his memoirs.

This study has revealed how Guru Nanak was moved by the ill treatment of Dawlat Khan Lodi and his family at the capture of Lahore by Babur in the period 1525–1526. As a matter of fact, Dawlat Khan was an important political figure in the Punjab, whom Babur mentioned in his memoirs frequently: "Dawlat Khan's father Tatar Khan was one of the seven or eight commanders who had rebelled, taken over Hindustan, and set up Bahlol as padishah ["emperor"]. All the areas to the north of Sirhind and the Sutlej River belonged to Tatar Khan, and these districts had a revenue of more than three crores [thirty million]. After Tatar Khan's death, Sultan Sikandar in his capacity as padishah seized the territory from Tatar Khan's sons. A year or two before I came to Kabul, he gave Lahore to Dawlat Khan" (Thackston 1996, p. 278). This early reference shows the esteem in which Babur held Dawlat Khan. In order to use diplomacy, Babur handed Mula Murshad letters he had written to Dawlat Khan and Sultan Ibrahim along with a hawk to lay claim to the territories that had belonged to the Turk: "Dawlat Khan kept our man in Lahore for a few days without seeing him or sending him to Ibrahim. A few months later he went back to Kabul without having received a reply" (ibid., p. 279). This incidence irked Babur immensely, because he considered himself the rightful heir of Amir Temur (1336–1405), who invaded northern India in 1398. The territories he conquered came to be known as Turkish. In 1524, however, Dawlat Khan revolted against Sultan Ibrahim to become an independent ruler, and he reached out to Babur to come to his aid in Punjab. At the same time, the Afghan

nobles at Lahore had decided to send Alam Khan Lodi and Dilawar Khan, Dawlat Khan's son, to persuade Babur to help them in removing Ibrahim Lodi and placing his uncle Alam Khan on the throne (G. Singh 1987, p. 80). Babur was watching these developments of rebellion in Hindustan carefully, and he strategically camped at Sialkot on 29 December 1525 (Thackston 1996, p. 315). There, he learned of Alam Khan's defeat by Sultan Ibrahim, and later on Babur defeated the forces led by Bihar Khan Lodi to capture Lahore. As already noted, Dawlat Khan surrendered with the hope to be forgiven but Babur had him and his family members, along with few of their grandees, put in chains. On Monday, 8 January 1526, Babur "entered the fortress for an inspection and went into Ghazi Khan's library, which held a few valuable books. I gave some of them to Humayun and sent others to Kamran" (ibid., p. 319). Babur further noticed that the troops were raising a ruckus at the gate of the Lahore fortress: "as peremptory punishment I shot a few of them. All at once a fateful arrow hit Humayun's storyteller, and he died on the spot" (ibid., p. 319). Guru Nanak referred to this destruction poignantly: "Lahore city, poison, violence, a watch and a quarter" (GGS, p. 1412; also see SGPC [1941] 1979, *Shabadārath*, p. 1412, n. 15). The defeat of Sultan Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat in 1526 was ingrained in his memory when he sang the opening hymn in *Sirī Rāgu*: "If I were to become a Sultan and raise a huge army, and sit on a throne, issuing commands and collecting taxes, O Nanak, all of this could pass away like a puff of wind" (GGS, p. 14). In this context, J.S Grewal adroitly argues that Guru Nanak continued to exhort his audience at Kartarpur "to turn to God, the true king, the king of kings", [whose] "service alone is true service" (Grewal 1990, p. 29).

As already noted in the introduction, the text of the *Baburnama* breaks off at the events of year [Hijra] 926 (1519–1520 CE) and picks up again nearly six years later in [Hijra] 932 (1525 CE). The gaps in the text are likely the result of loss of quires during storm (see fol. 376b in Thackston). Several comments show that Babur was working on parts of his memoirs in [Hijra] 935 (1528–1529 CE)—the last year for which there is an entry—and he died in the following year, in 1530. It is possible that Babur himself removed some portions from his memoirs at this time of final editing. Babur's son Humayun (1508–1556) knew Chaughatay, the Timurids' spoken Turkish language, well and he read his father's memoirs frequently. Babar's grandson, Akbar (1542–1605), also knew Chaughatay, for he was only fourteen years when his father Humayun died in 1556 (Thackston 1996, pp. 11, 440). The memory of Babur's meeting with Baba Nanak at Saidpur may have been alive in Humayun's mind, and that is why he went to see Guru Angad after his defeat at the hands of the Afghan general Sher Shah Suri in 1540. Worldly rulers normally turn to spiritual leaders in their moment of distress. Similarly, Akbar officially visited the Sikh Darbār at Goindval on 4 November 1598. He was pleased to listen to "the recitation of Hindi verses that had been composed by Baba Nanak for expounding the knowledge of God" (P. Singh 2006, pp. 19–21). This strong tradition was suppressed by later Mughal rulers. The invasion of Saidpur in the period 1520–1521 may not have carried much importance in Babur's eyes; hence it did not find a place in his memoirs. For Guru Nanak, however, it was the most significant event, because he had first-hand experience of violence at Saidpur. Its impact may be seen in his later works. While appreciating the beauty and wonder of goodness in the world in his *Japjī*, Guru Nanak praises "countless heroic warriors who bear the brunt of attack in battle" (GGS, p. 4). He simultaneously admits the existence of evil and tyranny in the following stanza: "Countless the fools, the thieves, the swindlers; countless those who rule by force. Countless are the cutthroats and violent murderers; countless those who live evil lives" (GGS, p. 4). Again, violence is divinely sanctioned: "When it pleases You [O divine Sovereign!], some wield swords cutting off heads [of their enemies] as they move" (GGS, p. 145). In the *Mārū* hymn, the Divine is represented as both violent and benevolent: "He himself kills and rejuvenates" (GGS, p. 1034). Not surprisingly, love and violence, pains and pleasures, good and evil, matter and spirit are intrinsic to human condition. In Guru Nanak's spiritual vision, therefore, both good and evil exist in the divine plan (P. Singh 2012, p. 203). The *Bābar-vāṇī* highlights this fact: "The Creator himself acts and causes others to act. Unto whom should we complain? Pain and pleasure come by Your will, unto whom should we go and cry?"

The divine Commander is pleased by issuing the command, O Nanak, we receive what is written in our destiny" (GGS, p. 418).

For a deeper understanding of the impact of the *Bābar-vāñī* we need to understand the human actors who participate in warfare or sporadic acts of violence. One must comprehend the motivation of those warriors who fight in the battlefield, resulting in the shedding of blood in violent encounters. The invaders are always triggered by the motivation of conquering new lands. The text of *Baburnama* explicitly records Babur's motivation of the conquest of Hindustan in January 1505: "In consultation we decided on a campaign to Hindustan . . . I had never seen a hot climate or any of Hindustan before. When we reached Nangarhar, a new world came into view—different plants, different trees, different animals and birds, different tribes and people, different manners and customs. It was astonishing, truly astonishing" (Thackston 1996, p. 186; also see G. Singh 1987, p. 78). The opponents of invaders may be inspired by the patriotic spirit to defend their country from the aggressors. This is what Sultan Ibrahim Lodi was doing at Panipat, although he was defeated in the battle. Still others may die fighting for "heroic values" and their death may be constructed as the ideal of a martyrdom. For Guru Nanak, a heroic death must be based upon the true "honor" obtained before the divine court of Akal Purakh: "Blessed is the death of heroic persons if their dying is approved of [by the immortal Lord]. Only those people may be called heroes who obtain true honor before the divine Court" (GGS, pp. 579–80). Such spiritual heroes who practice the discipline of meditation on the divine Name (*nām simaran*) during their lifetime receive true honor at the final moment of death. In fact, the fourth stage on the mystic path described in the *Japjī* is the "Realm of Grace" (*karam khaṇḍ*), which is the abode of "divine heroes and mighty warriors" who pass beyond error and transmigration. They are the 'real martyrs' in Guru Nanak's eyes. They are in full control of themselves, since they have conquered their 'self,' an achievement that goes beyond the conquest of nations and people (GGS, p. 8; P. Singh 2014, p. 233). By contrast, "the noses of tyrants [who terrorize innocent people] are chopped off in disgrace and they are branded as untrustworthy in the divine court" (GGS, p. 1288). Gurinder Singh Mann compellingly argues that it was Babur's invasions that "impelled Bābā Nānak to found a new *panth*, thereby creating a world that would stand apart from the senseless carnage he had observed" (Mann 2018, p. 177). He continues to demonstrate that Guru Nanak's immediate response to the political violence generated by these invasions set him far apart from the contemporary poet-saints (*bhagats*) of North India.

In sum, the *Bābar-vāñī* verses elucidate how Guru Nanak encountered Babur at Saidpur, singing a hymn in Persian language to the tune of a wartime melody, and exposing the greedy tendencies of the aggressor in a most intimate way. These verses further reveal how he invoked the Creator of the universe with awe and anger to complain that the Divine had been unjust in wreaking havoc upon innocent people who had nothing to do with war and politics. The "very powerful verses," to use historian J.S. Grewal's illuminating phrase, have cultivated the spirit of speaking Truth to Power among the Sikhs at most critical junctures. They have provided a radical new reading of the traumatic events of Indian history and have become the source of multiple interpretations for later generations. The novel readings of these verses and their subsequent Sikh exegesis can illuminate evolving Sikh conceptions of the relationship between spiritual and political powers. The framework of this study will offer a counter perspective to the most popular narrative among traditional scholars. It will certainly challenge the Mughal-centric imperial perspective.

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