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## **Giani Gian Singh as a Historian of the Sikhs:**

### **A Critique of His Literary Creations**

**Sarita Rana**

#### **Abstract**

*Giani Gian Singh is one of the Sikh scholars who took keen interest in writing the history of the Sikhs. He has produced over a dozen works. For the purpose of better understanding of his interpretation of the Sikh history and religion as well as of the Nirmala history it is essential to know his social background and his literary attainments. Giani Gian Singh lived for the period of almost a century from A.D.1822 to A.D.1921. He was an eye-witness to the rise and fall of the Sikh empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his successors. Before him, the bulk of the serious Sikh Studies had come out in English and Persian, which was not easy for everyone to study. Moreover, historiography remained limited to verse up to the last decade of 19th century and took a significant turn when Sikh history began to be written in prose. The present is an attempt to highlight his works and his contribution to Punjabi literature*

**Keywords: religion; historiography, literary creation; successor**

*Panth Parkash* was the monumental work of Giani Gian Singh which was written in A.D.1865. It is most valuable source on Sikh history upto the middle of the nineteenth century. It has been extremely used by almost all the modern scholars and historians of the Punjab of regional and local history. Its first lithograph edition came out in 1880 in Delhi. This is how he took the initiative of writing on various aspects of history of the Sikhs in prose and poetry. The modern historians of



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the Punjab have invariably used his work for various purposes. Infact, the Sikhs started writing their history in prose only from the days of Giani Gian Singh.

Giani Gian Singh's *Panth Parkash* significantly provides us late 19<sup>th</sup> century perspective of the Sikh past in general and the Khalsa Panth in particular by a Sikh scholar. For writing it, first of all, he invoked God and then ten Sikh Gurus and their '*Panth*' and the '*Granth*'. He claims it to be a true and sympathetic account of the Sikh Gurus of the '*Khalsa Panth*' written for the Sikhs on the advice of his literary mentor, Pandit Tara Singh Narotam, and also with the permission of the whole Sikh Panth. *Panth Parkash* was written in *Braj* verse and its extent copy is available in lithograph form. It has 715 folios. Its second edition with certain additions was published from Lahore by Diwan Buta Singh's press in A.D. 1889. Giani Gian Singh had composed 772 pages of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition when he fell ill. As his illness prolonged, the printing work had to be suspended for a considerable time. However, Diwan Buta Singh got it published in A.D. 1889, adding some more pages and it consisted of 1418 folios and Giani Gian Singh was surprised to see his book being sold in the market. In this work, he has given detailed account of thirteen Sikh sects like *Nirmalas*, *Nihang Singhs*, *Udasi Sect*, *Addan Shahis*, *Naranjanias or Hindalias Suthre Shahis*, *Sat Kartarias*, *Gangu Shahis*, *Bhai Behlo Sect*, *Bhai Mula Sect*, *Kuka Sect*, *Hira Dasia and Gulab Dasias*, etc. He was, a contemporary of certain sects such as the *Namdharis*, the *Gulabdasiyas*, *Bhai Mul Chandias* and *Hiradasi* etc. and also contemporary of *Bhai Vir Singh Bawa Prem Hoti* and *Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha*. He was the first who wrote the history of Sikhs in Gurumukhi prose. He wrote both in poetry as well as prose.

Prior to Giani Gian Singh Ibbetson, Maclagan and Temple have briefly mentioned about these sects and their literature. He is almost the only Punjabi writer who has attempted to give information about these sects keeping himself within a certain discipline. *Panth Parkash* was completed in A.D.1867, and published for the first time in A.D.1880. First edition was published



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by Giani Gian Singh himself and the second time it was published in the year A.D.1884. It consists of 960 pages. The edition published by Wazir Hind Press Amritsar. Later it passed through many editions in which its language was made easier to a layman.

*Twarikh Guru Khalsa* is Giani Gian Singh's very first work written in Punjabi prose describing the history of the Sikh Gurus. This *Twarikh Guru Khalsa* is a very voluminous work dealing with the account of the Sikhs right from their origin to the downfall of their political power. It is undoubtedly the first of its kind that covers such a wide range of Sikh history. He has divided this book into five distinct parts and mainly deals with about four hundred years of Sikh history.

In the first part of this work he has written the life sketches of the Sikh Gurus and the gradual progress of the Sikh community under their noble stewardship. The author has very carefully narrated the various measures that the Sikh Gurus took for the many-sided growth of the Sikh religion and the community. He brings out very effectively impact of the sacrifices made by the Gurus. He also describes the building of the Sikh church, the call to arms and the transformation of the pacifist Sikh movement into the militant Sikh khalsa.

In the second part of the work he narrates the bravery of Banda Bahadur and the struggle which was faced by the Sikhs against the Mughals. This part mainly deals with the hard and tedious life of the Sikhs, a period of persecutions and martyrdoms when Sikhs completely lost rights of citizenship in their own land. In the third part he deals with twelve *misals* the glory and fame of the Sikh Panth and then the account of the sovereign house of Maharaja Ranjit Singh till the annexation of Punjab by the British.

In the fourth part the gives the accounts of various Sikh rulers and the Sikh community. The last and the fifth part deals with various Gurdwaras, *Masands*, *Manjidars* and other Sikh preaching



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centers and various sects. The first edition of the *Twarikh* comprising its first three parts was printed in 1891 A.D at Guru Gobind Singh press, Sialkot, with the help of Mahant Prem Singh, Hari Singh of Sialkot and Bula Singh of Rawalpindi. The author handed over the rights of publication to the *Khalsa Tract Society*, Amritsar.

The first three parts of this monumental work ran into many editions in urdu as well as in Punjabi, the last edition being published in Punjabi by the Language Deptt. Punjab, Patiala in A.D.1970. Giani Gian Singh engaged in collecting information from old people for more than one and half decade and collected material from different places like. Banaras, Patiala and Kapurthala with lot of hardships. The encouragement of his teacher Tara Singh Narotam to write in verse the Sikh history entitled *Panth Parkash* which was completed in A.D.1867, gave him a very strong grounding for writing a bigger work in prose.

There could be shortcomings in Giani Gian Singh's *Twarikh* from which every pioneer work suffers in one way or the other but there is no denying the fact that this great work has inspired many readers, researchers and writers of Sikh history. This work itself speaks of the labours that the author undertook in its preparation despite his limitations.

***Gurdham Sangreh*** contains an account of the Sikh historical places and Gurdwaras. Giani Gian Singh personally visited to many such places and collected considerable information in regard to their history and growth as well as historical relics available there in. It also deals with the Nankana Sahib Tragedy and the representative Sikh institutions like Shromani Akali Dal and Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. This book was written by Giani Gian Singh perhaps during the last days of his life. Giani Gian Singh invariably makes references, here and there, to the kinds of the sources he has used, the most significant being the works of Sikh history written previously by his predecessors during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the oral Sikh tradition or the history by



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the word of mouth, listened to or collected personally by him from the elderly men and women of his times; the works of Persian chroniclers; and the last, but not the least, is the evidence of his personal observations. He makes a reference to some of these sources in *Panth Parkash*, while explaining what prompted him to write this work. In view of Sukhdial Singh, Giani Gian Singh's *Gurdham Sangreh* is a survey report of the historical Sikh shrines. He writes that after making extensive tours to the Sikh shrines and the sacred places, which had been established by that time, he has penned their accounts in his *Gurdham Sangrah*. Bhagat Singh's contention is that Giani Gian Singh wrote his *Gurdham Sangreh* towards the end of his life that too at the behest of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala and Maharaja Ripudham Singh of Nabha. Giani Kirpal Singh's view is that the work was written between April 1921 to September 1921.

With a view to its being a rare work and an important source on the historic Sikh Shrines and sacred relics, Kendri Singh Sabha, Academy, Chandigarh, reprinted it in 1999 under the aegis of the Dharam Parchar Committee of Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, in connection with the latter's mission to publish three hundred rare books and manuscripts on Sikh history, religion and literature on the eve of the tricentenary celebrations of the Khalsa Panth of Guru Gobind Singh.

On the whole, *Gurdham Sangreh*, is perhaps the only work by a Sikh scholar. which contains very comprehensive account of the Sikh Gurdwaras and places of historical importance, connected directly with the activities of the Sikh Gurus, besides the places of their birth and death. His information regarding the sources of income of the historically important Sikh Shrines both from revenue-free land grants and the offerings of the devotees is extremely important. References, here and there, concerning the control and management of the Gurdwaras are also very useful. In the last few pages of the *Gurdham Sangreh*, Giani Gian Singh has given very valuable information regarding the Sikh relics then available in some of the historical Sikh Gurdwaras. For instance, he has made a special reference to the precious (gifts) relics donated or gifted to Guru Gobind Singh



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at different times by the rulers of the princely states of Nabha, Patiala and Jind. Giani Gian Singh saw these relics (Kamarkase), arms and precious stones, at the historic Gurdwara, Abchalnagar or Sri Hazur Sahib at Nander in Maharashtra. Significantly, Giani Gian Singh regrets that many a Sikh relics had been lost due to the changing historical situation and the carelessness of the Sikh leadership. In this way, *Gurdham Sangreh* is an important source of information on the centers of Sikh cultural heritage. Thus, he has given information, both in the text as well as in footnotes, about the Sikh relics, which he himself could see during his visits to the important Sikh Gurdwaras in and outside the Punjab.

*Ripudaman Parkash* is perhaps the latest account written by Giani Gian Singh. He started to write it in A.D. 1919 and was published posthumously. It throws a flood of light on the life and character of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha. The author had planned to write it into five volumes but unfortunately he could complete only the first volume which is in verse. It covers the account of Guru Nanak Dev, the first Guru of the Sikhs besides the autobiographical account of his own self. The remaining four volumes of *Ripudaman Parkash* could not be written due to the author's death in A.D. 1921. The accounts of the other nine Gurus and their Gurdwaras were thought to be given in these four volumes.

The book contains scanty information about the life and achievements of the Maharaja Ripudaman Singh. It deals with his personal life. The Maharaja used to wear white dress and blue colored turban. He did not tie his beard and never indulged in any aristocratic activities of life. He used to recite *Gurbani* daily. He did not think about second marriage in spite of being an issueless father for a considerable period. He remained composed in sorrow and pleasure. The Maharaja tried his level best to raise the social status of the women in the state of Nabha. He presided over a conference held on 31 Dec. A.D. 1909 at Lahore. In his presidential speech he stressed the need



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for higher social status of women. Giani Gian Singh gives this speech, which is available in English in his book.

*Bhupendra Nand* seems to suggest that it is a detailed account of the wedding ceremonies of Maharaja Bhupendra Singh of Patiala. After his travels, Giani Gian Singh took rest at Patiala. He had a special love for this city because his teacher Pandit Tara Singh Narotam used to live there. Giani Gian Singh himself performed the *Anadkaraj* ceremony of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. He narrates this in his book *Sri Bhupinder Nand*, written in honour of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. The book contains 110 pages. Giani Gian Singh advocates that all these ceremonies should be in accordance with the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib.

During the course of writing *Sri Bhupendranand*, Giani Gian Singh suggests that women should also be allowed to participate in the preparation of Sikh baptism. He further states that women folk should be at liberty to select their own life companions. His hatredness for giving dowry on the eve of marriage is also depicted in this work. The Maharaja also asked him to write some good books useful for the Sikh studies. Even, the Maharaja, started a separate department named 'History Society' to print the books of Giani Gian Singh and to make them available for the common people. The secretary of this society was Giani Hamir Singh, who was the grandson of Giani Gian Singh's brother. One lakh thirty five rupees were granted to this society. It was Giani Gian Singh's bad luck that relations of the Maharaja of Patiala and the Maharaja of Nabha strained and the literary activities and the printing of Giani Gian Singh's works stopped for the time being.



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## VI

Giani Gian Singh has written the account of *Twarikh Sri Amritsar* in Punjabi and Urdu. Both the editions were published by Bhai Gurdas Singh. The Punjabi edition consists of 288 pages. Its second edition has been published by Kendri Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Amritsar in A.D. 1977. It consists of 124 pages, of big size. Out of these 124 pages eight are added as an Appendix by Bhai Hamir Singh the maternal grandson of Giani Gian Singh. The book has two parts. The first is brief background to the foundation of the city and of Sri Harimandir Sahib while the second consists of a vivid account of Sri Harimander Sahib complex, its *Prikarma*, the routes leading to the precincts of *Darbar Sahib* and other holy places situated in the city.

Giani Gian Singh writes that during his times there were 69 Katras, 69 Bungas, 12 Akharas, 17 Gurdwaras, 69 Thakurdwaras, 19 Shivalas, 214 Dharmshalas, 36 Samadhs, 7 Pakka Sarovers, 10 Muslim takias, 6 Tombs in the city and the total area of the city was 1117 ghumaons, seven kanals and two marlas. Thus, Giani Gian Singh has drawn a beautiful pen-picture of the city of Amritsar of which he was an eye-witness. Significantly, no writer has given a detailed account of Amritsar before him.

Giani Gian Singh wrote his famous work *Itihas Ryasit Bagrian* during the later years of his life. Credit goes to him for writing the history of the House of Bagrian of the Malwa region as so far no serious attempt had been made by anyone. Bhai Arjan Singh of Bagrian was a contemporary of Giani Gian Singh who provided him necessary data about the Bargrian House. This work was published after the demise of Giani Gian Singh and only one edition of this work has been printed so far. It contains the account of Bhai Rup Chand, the founder of Bagrian family and ends with the details of Bhai Arjan Singh of Bagrian and his family. It consists of 168 pages. Giani Gian Singh traces the origin of the Bagrian family from Khokhar Rajput and argues that one Budhan of this house got married to a girl of the carpenter family. But this statement seems to be illogical. He



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states that Bhai Budhu was the first of the Bagrian family who came into contact with Guru Hargobind. Rup Chand, known as Bhai Rupa in the Sikh tradition, was appointed as a preacher of Sikhism in the Malwa region of Punjab by the Guru who continued to the times of Guru Gobind Singh.

Giani Gian Singh further states that during the times of Bahadur Singh and Sampuran Singh, the relations of Bagrian House were not cordial. Consequently, the House lost some of its territory but during the revolt of A.D.1857; it provided assistance to the British and, was, thus, able to secure the lost territory. After the death of Sampuran Singh in A.D.1862, his son Narain Singh succeeded him. He died issueless in A.D. 1890 and his adopted son Arjan Singh, the contemporary of Giani Gian Singh, succeeded him. As he was minor by the time of his succession, he could receive the rights to the Bagrian House only after attaining adulthood in A.D. 1895. Leaving aside the old royal tradition, he took to reciting the hymns and baptizing the people. This gave an impression of the religious nature of the Bagrian House.

Thus the main feature of Giani Gian Singh's writing which distinguished him from his contemporary writers is that he is the first to work on the Sikh sects. He may be regarded as the first Sikh writer who has attempted a systematic and comprehensive account of Sikh history. He has given a very useful information regarding the political and social condition of the people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He has also described the standard of living of the different social classes among the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. He has given briefly the system of government followed by the Sikh Sardars of the eighteenth century. He has also made a comparative study of the social and political institutions of the Sikhs during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



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On the whole, Giani Gian Singh's information on the various Sikh religious denominations is of considerable historical value for the modern historians of the Sikhs and the Punjab in general and the scholars who are interested in understanding the phenomenon of religious diversity within the mainstream of Sikhism in particular. Besides his major interest in history of the Sikhs, he has proved to be the only Sikh writer who also took keen interest in the Sikh religious denominations running parallel to the mainstream of Sikhism and Sikh community.

## Notes

Bhagat Singh, *Giani Gian Singh*, Punjab History Conference Ninth Session 1975. P.183.

Bhai Kahan Singh's first work *Ham Hindu Nahin*, was published in A.D.1897.

Bhai Vir Singh's first work in Punjabi prose was '*Sri Kalgidhar Chamtkar*' which was published in A.D.1925.

Bhagat Singh, *Giani Gian Singh*, Patiala. P.66.

Bhagat Singh, *opcit*, P.16.

Daljeet kaur Gill, *Sikh Shrines from Sikh Historical Literature (Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)* Ph.D. Thesis, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar,2012,PP.58-59.

Giani Gian Singh, *Panth Parkash* (1889 AD), P. 957-60.

Giani Kirpal Singh, *Sri Guru Panth Parkash*, Vol-1, Ajit Nagar, Amritsar, 1977, P-87.

Giani Kirpal Singh, (ed). PP. 81-84.

Giani Kirpal Singh "*Jivan Jhalkian Giani Gian Singh*" *Gurmat Parkash*, April, 1966. P-104.

Giani Gian Singh, *Sri Bhupinder Nand*, Amritsar, 1917, P. 13.

Giani Kirpal Singh, *Twarikh Guru Khalsa, Vol-I*, S.G.P.C, Amritsar, 1969, P. 15.

Giani Gian Singh, *Twarikh Guru Khalsa, Vol-II*, Language Deptt., Punjab, Patiala, 1970, PP. 3-7.

Gian Kirpal Singh, *Twarikh Guru Khalsa*, P. 16.

*Gurdham Sangrah*, PP. 8-9.



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*Gurdham Sangreh*, PP.185-188.

It was published by Bhai Gurbax Singh, Superintended Bhupendra state press, Patiala (n.d.).

*Itihas Ryasit Bagrian*, Amritsar (First edition, n.d.) PP.2-5.

*Panth Parkash*, PP.988-89.

Prem Singh Hoti's first work *Jiwan Birtant Baba Phulla Singh Akali* was published in A.D.1914.

See for Instance, Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, Lahore, 1916, H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of The Punjab And North-West Frontier Province* (1883), Patiala, 1963.

Singh Sabha Amritsar- Niyam, Amritsar 1880; Gurmat Parkashak, Rawalpindi, September 1885;

Parminder Singh, *Singh Sabha Lehar Di Punjabi Sahit Nun Den*, Ludhiana,1987,P-102.

Sukhdial Singh, *Historical Analysis of Giani Gian Singh Writings*, Punjabi University Patiala, 1996, P-88.

Sukhdial Singh, *Historical Analysis of Giani Gian Singh's Writing*, Deptt. of Historical Studies, Patiala, 1996, P. 137.

Sukhdial Singh, opcit, P. 129.

The Lithocopy of *Panth Parkash* is available in the personal collection of Dr. Sulkhan Singh, which he happened to procure it from Mahant Mukat Ram of Village Bhudan,near Malerkotla in Sangrur district.

There are different opinions regarding the late of foundation of Chak Ram Das pur. For instance,

Bhai Khan Singh Nabha gives the year as A.D. 1574, and Madanjit Kaur writes 1573.

*Twarikh Guru Khalsa*, P.197. But in *Twraikh Amritsar*, Gian Singh give the year A.D. 1583

(P.6) which is not correct. See also Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, Its Guru, sacred writing and authors, Vol. III, New Delhi, A.D.1963, P.10. Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, op.cit., P.57; Teja Singh Ganda Singh, *A Short History of Sikhs*, Bombay, 1950, P.28 & Madanjit Kaur, op.cit., P.11.

*Twarikh Sri Amritsar*, PP.10-14.

*Twarikh Sri Amritsar*, 1977 (reprint), P. 4