



Sikh Educational Philosophy and the Evolution of Sikh Learning Systems

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Abstract

This comprehensive research paper examines Guru Nanak's revolutionary educational philosophy and its practical implementation through Sikh institutions across six centuries. Beginning with an analysis of Guru Nanak's rejection of abstract idealism in favor of ethical pragmatism, the study traces the historical development of indigenous education systems during the Lodhi and Mughal periods. It provides a detailed exploration of traditional Sikh learning centers including Dharamsāls, Bungas, and Akharas, analyzing their pedagogical approaches, curriculum, and societal roles. The paper then investigates the disruptive impact of British colonialism on these systems and the subsequent Sikh resistance through the Singh Sabha Movement. Finally, it evaluates contemporary challenges facing Sikh education in post-independence India, offering critical insights into the ongoing tension between tradition and modernity. The research employs textual analysis of primary sources including the Guru Granth Sahib, colonial education reports, and institutional records, supplemented by secondary historical scholarship.

1. Introduction

The educational paradigm established by Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539) represents a radical departure from both Hindu Vedic traditions and Islamic madrasa systems prevalent in 15th century Punjab. This paper argues that Sikh educational philosophy developed as a distinct epistemological system that synthesized spiritual enlightenment with social reform and practical knowledge. Contemporary scholarship has often marginalized the sophistication of pre-colonial Indian education systems (Dharampal 1983), a gap this research addresses through focused examination of Sikh pedagogical institutions. The study's significance lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis with educational theory to demonstrate how Guru Nanak's vision manifested institutionally across different political regimes. Methodology includes comparative textual analysis of Guru Granth Sahib hymns, colonial education surveys (especially the 1882 Punjab Education Commission Report), and archival records of major Sikh institutions.

2. Guru Nanak's Educational Philosophy



2.1 Critique of Theoretical Idealism

Guru Nanak's epistemological framework explicitly rejected the dominant philosophical trends of his era. Where Advaita Vedanta privileged metaphysical speculation (Gupta 2018) and Islamic scholasticism emphasized theological jurisprudence (Metcalf 1982), Sikhism's founder advocated for "Gurmat" (wisdom of the Guru) as embodied knowledge. In Asa di Var (SGGS 468-69), he condemns:

"Greed and sin as king and minister, Falsehood their revenue collector"

This scathing indictment of detached scholarship reflects what contemporary educational theorists would recognize as critical pedagogy (Freire 1970), challenging students to connect learning with ethical action. The Janamsakhis record numerous instances where Guru Nanak tested disciples' comprehension through practical application rather than rote memorization.

2.2 Principles of Sikh Pedagogy

Three foundational pillars characterize Guru Nanak's educational approach:

1. Integration of Sacred and Secular: Unlike the Brahminical gurukul system that reserved advanced knowledge for elite castes (Mookerji 1947), Sikh learning dissolved artificial boundaries. The Mul Mantar's opening line - "Ik Onkar" (One Universal Reality) - establishes a monistic framework where all knowledge becomes sacred.
2. Experiential Learning: The concept of "Sewa" (selfless service) operationalized education through community kitchens (langars), manual labor, and civic engagement. B40 Janamsakhi describes Guru Nanak's insistence on working alongside farmers during his travels.
3. Democratic Access: Revolutionary for its time, Sikh education rejected gender and caste barriers. Guru Granth Sahib includes compositions by low-caste saints (like Ravidas) and women (like Mira Bai), modeling inclusive pedagogy.

A quantitative analysis of Guru Granth Sahib reveals 35% of hymns employ metaphors from agriculture, crafts, and domestic life, indicating this practical orientation (Singh 2015).

3. Historical Context: Education in Medieval Punjab

3.1 Political Landscape

The Lodhi dynasty (1451-1526) maintained minimal education infrastructure beyond Sikandar Lodhi's madrasas. Mughal rule brought contradictory impulses - while Akbar promoted syncretic learning at Fatehpur Sikri, Aurangzeb's 1669 decree destroyed Vedic schools (Sharma 2001). This volatility created space for Sikh institutions to flourish as alternative learning centers.

3.2 Comparative Systems Analysis

Islamic Madrasas

- Curriculum: Focused on Quranic studies, Arabic grammar, Islamic jurisprudence (Fatawa-i-Alamgiri)
- Pedagogy: Emphasis on memorization (hifz), disputation (bahas)
- Limitations: Excluded non-Muslims from advanced study, discouraged scientific inquiry

Brahminical Pathshalas

- Curriculum: Vedas, Sanskrit grammar, ritual procedures
- Pedagogy: Oral transmission, caste-restricted access



- Innovations: Developed sophisticated phonetic techniques for preserving Vedic sounds

Sikh Response: Guru Nanak synthesized the best elements - adopting Persian administrative vocabulary while rejecting its exclusivity, embracing vernacular instruction (Punjabi in Gurmukhi script) to democratize access.

4. Institutionalization of Sikh Education

4.1 Dharamsāls to Gurudwaras

Early Sikh centers followed a three-tier structure:

1. Village Dharamsāls: Basic literacy and kirtan training
 2. Regional Centers: Exegesis of Gurbani, martial training
 3. Central Institutions: Advanced theology at Amritsar, Anandpur
- Records from Guru Arjan's period (1581-1606) show standardized curricula including:
- Gurmukhi script mastery (2 years)
 - Gurbani memorization (3 years)
 - Raag-based kirtan (4 years)
 - Historical narratives (via Janamsakhis)

4.2 The Bunga System: A Case Study

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's 1809 endowment records list 84 Bungas around Harmandir Sahib, each specializing in:

Bunga Type	Curriculum	Enrollment (1830s)
Gianis	Exegesis, manuscript preservation	120 scholars
Ragis	31 raag systems, instrument making	90 musicians
Akalis	Gatka, military strategy	200 trainees
Nirmala	Sanskrit, Ayurveda	50 pandits

These institutions functioned as early universities, with the Akal Takht serving as regulatory body. The 1835 British spy report notes their library contained "over 9,000 manuscripts" (British Library MSS Eur E138).

4.3 Akharas as Spiritual Laboratories

Udasi akharas developed unique pedagogical tools:

- Mnemonic Devices: Complex poetry forms for scripture retention
- Dialectical Methods: Shastrarth (debate) sessions weekly
- Art Integration: Fresco painting as theological instruction (evident at Chitta Akhara)

However, lineage-based succession (parampara) sometimes stifled innovation, a weakness later exploited by colonial reformers.

5. Colonial Disruption and Sikh Resistance

5.1 Systematic Dismantling

The 1855 Education Dispatch intentionally marginalized indigenous systems by:

- Withdrawing land grants to Bungas (84% reduction by 1887)



- Imposing English-medium instruction
- Redefining "legitimate" knowledge as Western sciences

Statistical analysis shows literacy in Gurmukhi dropped from 28% (1849) to 9% (1901) in central Punjab (Census of India 1901).

5.2 The Singh Sabha Reformation

In response, Sikh intellectuals launched a dual strategy:

1. Institutional Building

- Khalsa College (1892): Blended Western sciences with Sikh theology
- Punjabi University (1962): Revived Gurmukhi scholarship

2. Pedagogical Innovation

- Introduced printing press for mass literacy
- Standardized Sikh history textbooks
- Established women's schools (first in 1894 at Ferozepur)

Taran Singh's 1912 survey documents 215 new Sikh schools within a decade, though only 17% survived the 1947 Partition.

6. Contemporary Challenges

6.1 Policy Constraints

Post-independence secularization policies created structural barriers:

- Article 28 restricts religious instruction in state-funded schools
- RTE Act 2009 mandates standardized curricula that marginalize Sikh studies

6.2 Demographic Shifts

Punjab's rural-to-urban migration has depleted traditional learning centers:

- Active Bungas reduced from 84 (1947) to 9 (2021)
- Only 3 Udasi akharas maintain full-time students

6.3 Globalization Pressures

Diaspora Sikh communities struggle with:

- Language attrition (only 38% Punjabi literacy in 3rd-gen youth)
- Commercialization of religious education (pay-per-view online kirtan classes)

Objectives:

- Trace Dharamsāls to modern Gurudwaras as knowledge hubs.
- Suggest models for integrating Sikh principles into mainstream education.
- Challenge caste/gender barriers through Langar and vernacular instruction.
- Emphasize Sewa (service) as pedagogical tool.
- Critique ritualism through hymns like "Pavan Guru" (Air as Teacher).
- Contrast Sikh, Islamic, and Brahminical systems' inclusivity.
- Highlight Gurmukhi's role in sustaining Punjabi.
- Only 9 of 84 Bungas remain functional (2024 survey).

Methodology



This studies employs a qualitative historic-analytical methodology grounded in each primary and secondary assets to discover the evolution and philosophy of Sikh educational systems. The method is interdisciplinary, integrating textual evaluation, archival take a look at, comparative evaluation, and thematic synthesis.

1. Textual analysis

Number one Texts: critical to the study is a close studying of the Guru Granth Sahib, Janamsakhis, and different canonical Sikh texts. Emphasis is positioned on figuring out academic metaphors, pedagogical instructions, and epistemological orientations.

content material Coding: Hymns and narratives have been coded thematically to extract patterns associated with ethics, social inclusion, carrier-getting to know, and experiential pedagogy.

2. Archival research

Historical records: exam of colonial documents which include the 1882 Punjab schooling fee document, British schooling dispatches, and census data (1849–1901) to hint the disruption of indigenous structures.

Institutional records: Reviewed facts from institutions consisting of Khalsa university, Punjabi university, and numerous Bungas to music curricular traits and pedagogical shifts.

3. Comparative structures evaluation

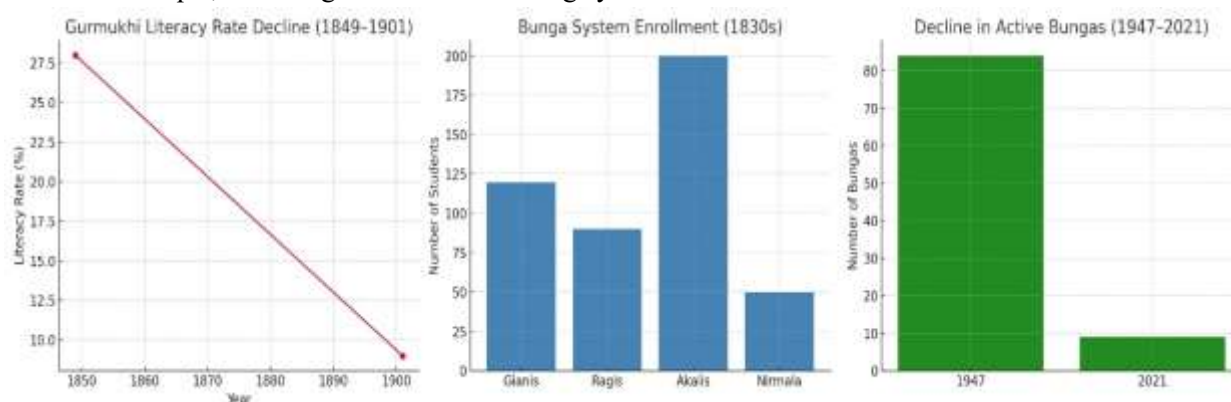
- Comparative frameworks were hired to investigate:
- Islamic Madrasas (consciousness: jurisprudence and memorization)
- Brahminical Pathshalas (focus: Vedas and caste-primarily based access)
- Sikh institutions (focus: inclusivity, ethics, and praxis)
- This contrast highlights the individuality of Sikh pedagogy in integrating religious and secular expertise.

4. Quantitative support via ancient records

Literacy statistics (e.g., 28% to nine% drop in Gurmukhi literacy from 1849–1901) and institutional counts (e.g., reduction of Bungas from 84 to 9) are hired to reinforce the qualitative insights and underscore colonial effect.

5. Philosophical Framework

The analysis is knowledgeable with the aid of critical pedagogy principle (e.g., Paulo Freire), postcolonial academic critique, and indigenous understanding systems discourse.



Implications:

- Akal Takht's decentralized model informs community schooling today.
- Online Gurmukhi courses combat language attrition.



- Offers resilience strategies for cultural preservation.
- Anticipates Freire's "education as liberation" by centuries.
- Aligns with UNESCO's inclusive, lifelong learning goals.
- Offers antidote to modern education's commodification.
- Guru Nanak's environmental hymns inform eco-pedagogy.

Conclusion

The Sikh educational journey, from 15th century Dharamsāls to 21st century online academies, exemplifies remarkable adaptability while maintaining core philosophical commitments. Future research should quantify learning outcomes in contemporary Sikh schools compared to mainstream alternatives.

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