

Zafarnamah: A Glimpse into the Text and its Historical and Intellectual Context

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Zafarnamah: A Glimpse into the Text and its Historical and Intellectual Context

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4 Abstract

Zafarnāmah (Book of Victory), written by the tenth Sikh leader, Guru Gobind Singh (d. 1708), in 1705, about the Mughal emperor of India, Aurangzeb (d. 1706). It is widely considered evidence of a religious leader's spiritual victory over a tyrant who not only broke his Koranic oath (and, consequently, fell from his status as a good believer). The book, originally in Persian poetry, is composed of one hundred and eight *bayts* (verses), and the first twelve verses praise God and His power. Due to its bold divine connotations, Zafarnāmah is widely regarded as a spiritual text. However, as I will argue in the following, Zafarnāmah should not be treated as just a spiritual text but as one of 'the mirrors for princes' that has a well-established tradition in the history of Persian literature and political ethics tradition as well.

Keywords: Zafarnāmah, Guru Gobind Singh, Aurangzeb, India, Persian, Mirror For Princes, Political Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

"Justice brings longevity, while injustice reduces life expectancy, and Comfort is the result of order (Fouchecour, 1999)."

This study uses the original Persian text (both Zafarnāmah and Fathnāmah), published in one volume with an English translation by Sardar Darshan Singh and a foreword by Shri I.K. Gujral. I have compared it to the other two versions as well: Guru Gobind Singh, Zafarnāmah and Fathnāmah, ed: Devinder Singh Duggal 1980 (Jullundur, Institute of Sikh Studies) and Guru Gobind Singh, Zafarnāmah (Letter of Victory) (G. G. Singh, 1980, 2000, 2018).

Guru Gobind Singh's opening section of Zafarnāmah, where God the Almighty is praised as the absolute holder of the attributes such as the Benevolent (G. G. Singh, 2018), the Merciful, the Powerful, the Provider (*rāziq*), among other things, should not make us believe that we are dealing with a religious text or a book of prayer. Under the surface of this beautifully versed manuscript, written in Persian and published many times since its inception, there is a deep and well-established legacy of political ethics and statecraft that goes back to the medieval period. Pertinent to this is its mystical colouring and orientation, reminiscent of a typical Sufi manual and accessible (and, in fact, popular) in Mughal India. Furthermore, Zafarnāmah has gained a worldwide reputation and attention beyond the boundaries of the Sikh community in its homeland, Punjab, and has also been a subject of interest for artists, particularly musicians, singers, and filmmakers, to convert it into a piece of art (Ashkouri, 2020; BMupdate, 2022).

Matthias Haake sheds light on different aspects of this genre, i.e., 'the mirror for the princes', including the appropriateness of its usage not only in Islamic tradition but also for Greco-Roman culture on the one hand and the criteria by which a text should be categorized under the rubric of the mirrors for princes, on the other (Haake, 2015). According to him, "five constitutive determinants" must define whether a text is a mirror of princes or not. The most important of them is that both the author and the addressee should not be just individuals but a "members of a specific social group with a characteristic

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social role" (Haake, 2015). Aurangzeb, the addressee, and Guru Gobind, the author, are members of the Mughal Indian elite.

Mohsen Zakeri defines 'the mirrors for princes':

"A guide to political and social behaviour was drawn up to advise and address rulers, princes, or administrative officials. The present (fictional or real) that the author has guided in some way, or an old ruler to his son. Using various literary forms, it discusses the ruler's duty in managing state affairs and protecting his subjects. It contains war practices, his kingdom, and his government and advises him on choosing officials and female friends and companions. This guide also contains explanations of his religion, duties, and need for self-control, and serves as a role model for his people." (Zakeri, 2015).

As we will observe in the following, Zafarnāmah contains all the requirements that a text in 'mirrors for princes' should have. These manuscripts came to the fore from "the beginnings of the Umayyad period (41–132/661–750) and continued from thereon steadily to the early twentieth century" (Zakeri, 2015).

RESEARCH METHOD

The present research is historical research based on a desk study (Korzenik, 1985) in which the author has conducted a preliminary investigation into Zafarnāmah, an important literary writing in Sikhism, in the context of the theories and the mechanisms of historical texts in statecraft and political ethics. Utilizing the existing theoretical frameworks in this field, the author has argued that Zafarnāmah shares similarities with its peers with a long and well-established history in the medieval ages. As qualitative research, the author relied on analyzing data obtained by reading a historical manuscript, which embeds a great load of the legacy of political ethics and Persian literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Suppose we classify political thought in general into three categories of political philosophy, *siyāsatnāmah nivīsī* (books in politics and statecraft, or mirrors for princes), and *sharī'atnāmah nivīsī* (*sharī'a*-based books, also political jurisprudence/fiqh) (Kalāntarī, 2004). In that case, Zafarnāmah falls within the second class. It is not a political philosophy text because it does not philosophize about the best kind of government or the common good. However, these two remain his main concern throughout the text. In the same way, it should not be treated as a text in *sharī'atnāmah nivīsī*, either, not only because the best kind of politics does not generate from religious law but also because the author's life has been damaged by a ruler who wants to enforce the *sharī'a* law, and *sharī'a* (religious law) stands against the political rule (*siyāsa*), which is inclusive, just, and non-violent (Hazelwood, 2019). Guru Gobind's way of criticizing Aurangzeb's political approach also for portraying his political ideals mixed with morality, which contrasted sharply with his opponents (G. G. Singh, 2018).

Furthermore, he has a wider and more comprehensive perspective of life, and spirituality, which goes beyond the scope of *sharī'a* (Fenech, 2013). The frequency and the supremacy of political ideas over theological ones are relevant to this. As Seyed Sadegh Haghighat indicates, if in the 'state' and 'religion' twin of the *siyāsatnāmah/sharī'atnāmah* writings, political power gains superiority to religion, then the text is one of the first. If theological terms and ideas gain supremacy and prevalence, then the text is one of the *sharī'atnāmah* (Haghighat, 2015). Political ideas such as justice, honesty (to people), and avoiding oppression are superior to theological ideals.

We know a lot about the *sīyāsatnāmāh* genre, its main ideas, and the authors, who reminded us that *sīyāsatnāmāhs* are the expressions of the continuity of pre-Islamic wisdom and practicality of statecraft and good governance - as the main goal of Persian kings and their viziers - to the Islamic era (Ismail, 2021). However, here the author is not a vizier (who traditionally carried the burden, as well as the wisdom of monarchies), but a spiritual leader whose destiny was supposed to be in the opposite direction of Aurangzeb's, i.e., on the right side of history and morality in early eighteenth-century India. Categorizing *Zafarnāmāh* as an example of "mirrors for princes" is deliberate because, as an insider and one of the elites, he is concerned with the destiny of the monarchy of Aurangzeb and his fortune. This is why he places a mirror in front of Aurangzeb to see his true face and who he is. Any good ruler "must seek consultation (*mushāwara*)" (Leder, 2015), and since Aurangzeb lacks such a thing (because if he had sought consultation, he would have been better behaved), Guru Gobind offers it to him by all means (G. G. Singh, 2018).

Putting the dichotomy of *sīyāsatnāmāh* or *sharī'atnāmāh* aside for now, both genres have been written for counsel and well-wishing of monarchies, and both are pursuing the same ethical objectives (Rizvi, 1981). The only difference is the authors' standpoint: the first is secular based on the classic duality of religion and state. Scholars such as Javad Tabatabai and Neguin Yavari believe that the internal logic of the *sīyāsatnāmāh* genre is secular, and that's why these books should not be classified under *kalām* or *sharī'atnāmāh*. At the same time, the second one is religious, with *sharī'a* at its centre. The key term is justice, the missing link of Aurangzeb's reign because the absence of justice and righteousness in his political and personal manner destroyed his monarchy and separated people from him (*passim*) (Forster & Yavari, 2015). And that is why we called *Zafarnāmāh* a typical text in *sīyāsatnāmāh nivīsī*, because, like all other similar texts, it mainly concerns with justice (both divine and mundane and in its relationship to people) and honesty. In a nutshell, the unjust ruler is ineligible to rule, and 'adl and *ṣidq* are two pillars of governance and rulership. So, we have theological virtues/values, and political and civic ones, and justice in *Zafarnāmāh* (as well as *sīyāsatnāmāh* and *sharī'atnāmāh* texts) is political and civic and, therefore, secular (Briggs, 2015).

On the other hand, the extensive use of animal fables indicates *Zafarnāmāh*'s tribute to texts such as *Kalīlah wa Damnah*, which contains another aspect of ancient political wisdom or the significance of physical beauty and a healthy body in governance (Zakeri, 2015). More importantly, an ideal ruler cannot be devoid of a good-looking face and a harmonious physique (*passim*). Ostensibly, we see the mark of Ferdowsi again, whose heroes and heroines in *Shāhnāmāh* all benefit from the virtue of beauty. Since justice classically means balance and harmony among pieces and sections of things, a just ruler is physically balanced, and all pieces of their face and body are in the right place. Generally speaking, in 'the mirrors for princes' literature, the nexus between good governance and physical beauty and corporal perfection has been emphasized (Hugen, 2020).

Even a quick glimpse into the classics such as *Naṣīḥat ul-mulūk* of Sa'dī (d. 1291/1292), *Sīyar ul-mulūk* of Khwaja Nizām ul-Mulk (d. 1092) and *Naṣīḥat ul-mulūks* of Ghazali (d. 1111), displays some similarities with *Zafarnāmāh* of Guru Gobind Singh. However, the text diverges from its peers when it seems that less emphasis is placed on the political philosophy of good governance and instead focuses on practicality and spiritual weight and colouring due to the status of Guru Gobind Singh (G. G. Singh, 2000).

Guru Gobind is forced to take arms against the *ẓālim* ruler because the latter has broken his oath. He has every reason to feel uncomfortable with Aurangzeb's misconduct, but probably the most important of all is his dishonesty when he broke his *Qur'ānic* oath. Guru Gobind mentions Ferdowsi as the only Persian poet whose name appears in *Zafarnāmāh* is deliberate (G. G. Singh, 2000). Of course, he was

familiar with other poets, not only because he was one (and that is why he chose poetry to convey his messages) but also because the Persian language was an established language in the late Mughal court. Muzaffar Alam, quoting Qasim Ghani, shows how Persian had established itself “in large part of northern India as the language of the Muslim elite Ghani, 1941, 152-233, 381-485 in Alam (2013). In the following, he brings the famous line of Hafiz of Shiraz (d. 1398) saying that “All the Indian parrots will turn to crunch sugar with this Persian candy which goes to Bengal”, as proof to “the receptive audience that Persian poetry had in India”.

But why Ferdowsi and not other poets such as Rumi, Sa’di, and Hafiz? Because Ferdowsi is the only poet who exclusively recites about monarchy and the virtues of good monarchies and of those who preserve them. *Shāhnāmāh* (the Book of the Kings), as the title sounds, is a long epic poem, which tells the mythical, and to some extent historical, past of the Persian Empire from the creation of the world until the Muslim conquest in the seventh century.

Guru says:

“How beautifully Firdausi, the eloquent Iranian poet, has expressed it! He who acts in haste pays the devil” (G. G. Singh, 2000).

He slams Aurangzeb for his hasty manner after he broke his oath and killed his two sons (However, in the following copy, four sons, which does not seem to be correct See: Guru Gobind Singh, *Zafarnāmāh* and *Fathnāmāh* title the Book of Victory (G. G. Singh, 1980) and ascertains that even if Aurangzeb “swear on the Holy Quran a hundred times, I will never trust you because your past actions have only shown that you are a great liar” (Ibid., p. 115). He mentions Ferdowsi immediately after he accuses Aurangzeb of the wrongdoing of killing fire (metaphor of truth). In contrast, the blaze of fire turns into a “devastating conflagration”, and Aurangzeb himself will be a witness to “its ramifications” (Ibid., p. 107). But what does he mean by the frequent references to “truth” and its connection to himself? Does he mean that he is an ideal type or the representative of truthfulness and righteousness and, therefore, is standing on the right side of history? In all probability, yes, and it is exactly here where *Zafarnāmāh*, just like *Shāhnāmāh*, gains an apocalyptic tone of the battle between good and evil as well. Like Ferdowsi’s heroes, Guru Gobind talks about his virtues and Aurangzeb’s countless vices, according to the author (G. G. Singh, 2000).

In his brilliant paper entitled “A Muslim State in a Non-Muslim Context: The Mughal Case”, Muzaffar Alam discusses the popularity, as well as the functionality of Persian, not only as a vehicle of liberalism but also as a symbol of the Mughal triumph in India. Alam reads: “the Persian cosmopolis was the third important idiom to reinforce the Mughal political discourse. The resources for developing this Indo-Muslim imperial idiom came from Persian literary culture. The Mughals showed unprecedented interest in patronizing Persian literary culture under their rule. Mughal India has hence particularly noted for its extraordinary achievements in poetry and a wide range of prose writings in Persian. In terms of sheer profusion and variety of themes, this literary output was probably incomparable with that under any other Muslim dynasty” (Alam, 2013). In addition, Eaton’s book discusses the same problem in more detail. Eaton shows how important the Persian language was at all administrative, political and cultural levels in the Mughal period (Eaton, 2019).

However, from the perspective of our research, Persian, in which the author of *Zafarnāmāh* was an expert, was also a vehicle of spirituality and mystical ideas. Pertinent to this is *ma’rifāt* (true and divine knowledge) and its significance in defining who the winner (in both spiritual and non-spiritual battles) is. *Ma’rifāt* and *dānish parastī* (wisdom), alongside justice, is another key motif of *Zafarnāmāh*, which helps Aurangzeb to avoid wrongdoings and always walk on the path of *‘idalat* (G. G. Singh, 2000).

But suppose *Zafarnāmah* portrays a religious leader who, by his counsel, attempts to warn a tyrant from the consequences of his wrongdoings. In that case, *Faṭḥnāmah* should be treated as an expression of the wrath of an assertive and outspoken rival whose life has been damaged by Aurangzeb. Because Guru had been wounded, he did not fear displaying his feelings in his book for all to see. Just like *Zafarnāmah*, *Faṭḥnāmah* also initiates with the praise of God, not the God of *rahma* and *karāma*, but the Creator of blades, bows, spears, and axes. The God of horses and brave men. He has no appreciation for Aurangzeb's wealth, throne, and army, this time not because of Aurangzeb's misconducts, but because the Almighty has endowed him with the better, which is the *dawt* (i.e., the priceless wealth) of good faith and spirituality that peoples like Aurangzeb will never have (G. G. Singh, 2000).

Taking off the mantle of a gentle counsellor and adopting the bitter tongue of an open enemy, Guru Gobind calls Aurangzeb "cunning and deceitful" (G. G. Singh, 2000) because he does not stand for his name (G. G. Singh, 2000). He eventually threatens him with revenge by "putting fire under the hoof of his horses and banning him from drinking Punjab's water" (G. G. Singh, 2000). Finally, he calls Aurangzeb "a cunning and sneaky jackal who has killed two lion cubs", although he alerts him that "if those lions were still alive, they took a hard revenge from him" (G. G. Singh, 2000). *Faṭḥnāmah*, a concise text of eleven pages, should also be understood in the context of Guru Gobind's theological *Weltanschauung*, again with justice at its centre. *Faṭḥnāmah* finished in December 1704, and *Zafarnāmah* was written a few months later, in May 1705. However, since justice is a political virtue, the author will not leave the job to the Almighty to execute because he and his Khalsa, with the blessings of God, are mighty and capable enough to "pour the stream of steel and iron on [Aurangzeb's men], until there remains no sign of the abode of evil [i.e., oppression, injustice and oppression] in this pure land" (G. G. Singh, 1980).

CONCLUSION

We gained some lessons from Guru Gobind Singh's *Zafarnāmah* and his political ethics. His foe, Aurangzeb, is ineligible to rule because he has broken his oath to the *Qur'ān*. Equally, he is *ẓālim* because he lacks the two important political virtues of justice and honesty, and therefore, he is dishonest to people and God both. In such a condition, the battle with him, standing on the wrong side of history and morality, is a battle for establishing a just order based on divine law, which Guru represents. It is a battle for justice. *Zafarnāmah* is a text in statecraft and rulership mixed with political ethics, in which civic virtues such as justice and honesty play central roles. Alongside virtues, the author benefits from the rich treasury of fables and animal stories as a medium to call out his political opposition. *Zafarnāmah* is also significantly impacted by the mystical culture of Mughal India. The first twelve verses are dedicated to the praise of God, who displays His presence through His names and attributes, and from this perspective, *Zafarnāmah* diverges from its peers. The way Guru Gobind Singh praises the unseen and non-graspable God who displays Himself through his manifestations (*tajalliyāt*, also the doctrine of theophany), or attributes such as *karīm*, *qayyūm*, *kāmil*, *amīn*, *razzāq*, *dīpadhīr*, *inter alia*, is a witness to the proof that *Akbarian* mysticism, and particularly the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, had already become integrated into the mystical teachings of eighteenth-century India.

One of the things that the author of the *ṣiyāsatnāmah* emphasizes is the caring nature of a good ruler. One of his main responsibilities is that which God bestows to be a shepherd for his people and take care of the lives of his people. It is obvious that as a religious individual, Guru does not only think of the physical well-being of the subjects under Aurangzeb's rule but their spiritual and ethical status as well, which, unfortunately, have been decayed by his tyrannical misconduct.

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