

**Review Article:**  
**Master Tara Singh in Indian History:**  
**Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Politics**  
**of Sikh Identity**

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**J.S. Grewal, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, i-xv, pp.757,  
price Rs. 2595**

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J.S. Grewal's important recent study, *Master Tara Singh in Indian History: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Sikh Identity* (Oxford) has a photograph on the title page that shows Tara Singh in discussion with Maulana Azad. Standing just alongside Tara Singh is Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Gobind Vallabh Pant, Pakistan's future Prime Minister Liaqat Ali and S. Rajagopalacharia. The clothes that Tara Singh was wearing had probably not even been ironed. And yet the body language leaves little in doubt that Tara Singh was the key figure in the photograph. There are two other photographs in the book as well. In one, Sir Stafford Cripps is leaning over a seated Tara Singh and trying to draw his attention. Another photograph shows Tara Singh in conversation with Jinnah. One can easily notice the stare and the toughness in Tara Singh's gaze as he looks Jinnah straight in the eyes. What is even more interesting in this photograph is that as all the top leaders have reverently lined up to be introduced to Lady Wavell, the Master appears casual and indifferent.

To appreciate the political complexities of the time when the Panth put on the stout shoulders of Tara Singh the responsibility to ensure that its interests were adequately safeguarded, one has to go back a few decades as most events and key players appear linked in a chain. What puts Grewal's work in a distinctive class of its own is that in it we have an authoritative account that fills this gap.

The study comprises besides its 26 chapters an exhaustive introduction and conclusion as also ten key appendixes. A rare collection of photographs, which one wishes could have been a bit larger in size and a comprehensive bibliography, all combine towards making the volume very valuable.

The Introduction runs the reader through some of the writings on Tara Singh and the years in general. Summing up in a few lines, the essentials of the political philosophy of someone as complex as Tara Singh, is not an easy thing even for a scholar of Grewal's eminence. But he does so with ease: '... His cherished wish was that Sikhs should fight at the fore front for the freedom of the country. . . The Sikhs had been partners in the struggle for freedom and Tara Singh wanted them to be partners in power. Only this could ensure an honorable position for the Sikhs in free India' (p. 10).

Grewal puts in perspective how the Sikhs grew in demographic strength. Significantly, the 1911 census had reflected a fall in the population in the Punjab among all communities by about 2 per cent as compared to 1901. But the Sikhs were an exception. Their numbers had grown by almost 37 per cent (p. 38).

The narrative that explains the role of the Sikhs in the uprising of 1857 is a masterly weave by a master historian. In sum, Grewal suggests 'the bulk of the Sikhs had no inclinations to support the British' (p. 50) meaning thereby that the support that the British had received was mainly of the Princes.

For the first time, perhaps, we have a detailed and clear understanding of Tara Singh's early days and childhood. But more importantly, even as Tara Singh took to politics rather late (p. 62), it is the reference to some of the early impressions that formed in Tara Singh's mind that puts things in clearer perspective. The language issue as we know came to dominate the political scene of the Punjab several decades later. But Tara Singh, as Grewal notes, was crystal clear on the issue from the beginning. 'Sanskrit was the mother of Indian languages and its life had expired over 2000 years . . . The Arya Samajists presented Hindi as the eldest daughter of Sanskrit. . . If a relationship between Punjabi and Hindi had to be postulated then Punjabi could be seen as Hindi's mother's sister (*Masi*)' (p. 81).

Grewal explains Tara Singh's basic economic thinking: 'Sikhism was meant for the uplift of the poor... Sikh objective was universal

service and goodwill but the socialists tended to go on the assumption that man lived by bread alone' (p. 230).

While discussing Tara Singh's initial role and political approach (Chapter 4) Grewal notes that '...even though he supported the non-violent non-cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi, Tara Singh sought the real roots of the Akali movement in the Sikh tradition and not in Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence.' (p. 108) Grewal also notes: 'The source of inspiration for the Sikhs was their history as much as their faith' (p. 108).

Grewal observes that Tara Singh was responsible for influencing Sikh opinion with regard to rejecting the Nehru Committee Report (1928), but at the same time, he was not in favor of boycotting the Indian National Congress (p. 149). Tara Singh was in fact keen that the Sikhs should fight for their rights but remain aligned with the Congress in the fight for freedom (p. 170).

Tara Singh's differences with Gandhi had peaked in the post partition weeks. Grewal has, however, traced Tara Singh's early disenchantment with Gandhi to the time of the Round Table Conference. As Grewal suggests, Tara Singh had led a delegation of leaders to Gandhi pleading for safeguarding Sikh interests. But 'at the Round Table Conference the Sikh concern was a low priority for Gandhi' (p. 198).

Grewal draws attention to the exchange of letters between Gandhi and Tara Singh in 1940. Gandhi had charged Tara Singh for believing in the 'rule of the sword' and of being a 'communalist' and of weakening even the Congress. Tara Singh's reply was classic, less bitter and perhaps personal than it would be in 1947: 'You may use any word you may like for me. I do not care ... you had recognized the existence of Sikhs as a distinct community and given them an assurance that the Congress would not accept any arrangement unsatisfactory to the Sikhs ... I am as much a communalist and a Congressman today as I was in 1929' (p. 234).

Tara Singh's differences with Jawaharlal Nehru were fundamental and basic. As Grewal puts it, the line 'between the so-called nationalists and so-called communalists was clearly drawn' (p. 295). For Nehru opposing the Congress was against the dignity and honor of the brave Sikhs. For Tara Singh, however, things were less complex. 'The Congress had accepted the idea of Muslim Raj and conceded Pakistan up to the River Beas. This divided the Sikhs into two. If the Muslims were a nation the Sikhs too were a nation. The Muslims had no right to rule over the Sikhs' (p. 295).

Several writings of the period have charged Tara Singh for instigating the March (1947) riots in Lahore by unsheathing his *kirpan* and even tearing the Muslim League flag. Grewal has addressed the issue with substantive evidence. He shows that 'there was no such flag and the question of its being torn did not arise.'

An issue that has perhaps been most misrepresented in the context of Tara Singh is his stand on the exchange of population and property. Grewal explains at length the sequence of events and Tara Singh's perspective. In sum Tara Singh's sole concern was that the displaced Sikh peasantry should not be at a loss beyond a reasonable limit.

What is sad and disheartening is the manner in which Tara Singh was converted from an ally perhaps a dislikeable ally, but all the same an ally, to an 'undesirable element'. The notes and letters – Nehru, Patel, Bhargava, Rajagopalacharia, Baldev Singh and so on leave little to doubt – Tara Singh was unwanted. 'He is a fanatic and will not change ...' (p. 443).

Grewal draws attention to the increasing anger of Nehru with Tara Singh. I am inclined to suggest and perhaps add to Grewal's refined thesis that Nehru's anger with Tara Singh could possibly also be because of Tara Singh's support to the Praja Parishad agitation in Jammu. Nehru's dislike for the Akalis had built up over time. Not surprisingly the Akalis found themselves clubbed with the RSS following Gandhi's assassination. In letter upon letter one notices Nehru's growing dislike if not anxiety with regard to Tara Singh's popularity. The Congress leaders even discuss their inability to identify in the Punjab a person who could 'take on' Tara Singh.

Sustained efforts by the Centre and the government led by Pratap Singh Kairon in the Punjab created a set of conditions that saw the gradual decline in the influence of Tara Singh. As Grewal puts it: 'Tara Singh began to lose ground in Akali politics after the failure of the Punjabi Suba agitation in 1960-61 ... Early in 1965 Tara Singh himself left the field free for Fateh Singh ...' (p. 596).

For Tara Singh the basic issue that enraged him in the politics of the Punjab post 1947 was that the Congress did not recognize the independent political status of the Sikh Panth. The Sikhs could have nothing in common with the Congress, just as for the Congress the Akali Dal was a communal organization.

In the last two paragraphs of the concluding chapter Grewal truly sums up Tara Singh's basic political philosophy, his importance and indeed relevance:

'We can see that Master Tara Singh stood for an Indian national state very different from the one established in India on the basis of the new Constitution adopted on 26 January 1950. Majoritarian democracy based on adult suffrage in a centralized state was weighted against religious and ethnic minorities. Political domination of the majority community was built into the apparently egalitarian Constitution. There were no political safeguards for the minorities and they had to survive on the goodwill of the majority. Master Tara Singh stood for a state that could ensure freedom for the social and cultural ethnicities of India to enable them to play a significant role in national affairs. Master Tara Singh's vision of free India was very different from that of Nehru. There was, therefore, a clash not only between two strong personalities but also between two different ideologies and two different visions of the 'National State in India'.

This is a meticulously researched study that gives the reader a ringside view of the Punjab, its politics, its key political players. A master historian weaves minor details and events into those that had far reaching consequences. It is political history intertwined with the understanding of a master biographer. The narrative is powerful, engaging and engrossing.

The work also stands out for a dispassionate assessment, not an easy thing to do even for one of the most respected historians of our times who happens also to be a Sikh and who takes upon the task to study someone like Tara Singh. The Punjab has been well studied particularly for its colonial period and also its partition. Several of such studies have set new standards and indeed benchmarks of scholarship. Grewal's work is prodigious and hugely enriching. It is bound to remain for a long time the first point of reference for any study of Tara Singh and the politics of Sikh identity, without doubt a new high in the study of the Punjab in recent times.