



Zafarnama

Guru Gobind Singh , Navtej Sarna (Translator)

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Written in exquisite Persian verse, the '*Zafarnama*' or 'Epistle of Victory' was a defiant message composed by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, and addressed to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

In this brilliant new translation, Navtej Sarna brings to life the valiant voice of Guru Gobind Singh and the power of his poetic genius in a passionate disavowal of tyranny that remains ever relevant.

Zafarnama Details

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From Reader Review Zafarnama for online ebook

Saba Aftab says

I must say, every historical account you're going to read has to have two views: a bad one and a good one. Aurangzeb though to date remains my favourite of all Mughal Emperors but obviously one cannot deny the brutal realities of life - power struggle whether in the name of religion or equality. At the end, everyone has been right in their own rights. GOD Almighty guide us!

Sridhar Guda says

One of the best books I read on spirituality. This book exhibits valor and spirituality of the Tenth Guru Guru Gobind Singh. I really liked the following couplets;

16th

Huma ra kase saaye aayad bazer
Bar o dast darad na zaag-e daler

The one touched by Huma's (sacred bird) shadow and taken under its wings
Is beyond harm from clever crows, their designs mean nothing.

22nd (probably the most famous)

Chun kar az hameh beelate dar guzasht
halal ast budanbi shamsher dast

When all has been tried, yet justice is not in sight,
It is then right to pick up the sword, it is then right to fight.

108th

Bebin gardish-e bewafai-ye zaman
Ki biguzast bar har makin o makan

Beware the unrelenting turn of time's faithless wheel;
It turns for each and everyone it harbours no appeal.

111th

Khasm dushmani gar bazaar aaward
Na yak mu-ye o-ra aazar aaward

A thousand plots of the enemy, full of treachery and fraud,
They cannot harm a single hair of the one protected by God.

satisfying read overall.

Aditya Raghav says

To be honest, the initial bit about history of Sikhism and Sikh Gurus was more interesting than the poem. Maybe I am not a Persian poetry person.

However, it should be noted how Guru Gobind Singh boasts himself as idol-breaker in the 95th verse.

Manam kushtanam kohiyan but-parast
Ki an but parastand man but-shikast

My fight is with the hill princes,
It is them I kill and slay,
For I oppose worship of idols,
And 'tis to idols they pray.

Aristotle says

Zafarnama is one of the most powerful and expressive pieces of literature I have read. It is in the form of a letter written by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, to the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, who was known for his atrocities and religious intolerance. Guru Gobind Singh uses the finest Persian verse to show the mirror to Aurangzeb, penning down the tortures committed on the hapless Indian people; and reminding him of his duties, as a ruler and as a human being.

With the paucity of English translations of the Zafarnama, Navtej Sarna does quite a decent job with the translation. I have enjoyed other books by Sarna too, so I confess I am a little biased towards him.

Charn Singh says

Whats crude and most convenient way to approach an ideology is to of course have an absolute faith in its pioneers. So much so, that its rather common medium to bestow them with sainthood or even God's title. I won't debate here about irony of us humans judging such titles, and whether they even mean something towards any positive construct in the end.

The question is rather about humanity- the will to overcome struggle, turmoil, and grief, or the toil it takes. History easily renders some as prophets/messiahs (and just as easily forget others). Sikhism's tenth Guru Gobind Singh went on to emphasize this very fact to all his followers; To avoid hailing his physical being as some cosmic power, but to follow the word of Guru Granth Sahib.

To understand literary value of Zafarnama for our community is critical. What inspired me most was that despite suffering such a heavy personal loss, the courage it took to forgive the man responsible for it. The statement in there about use of one's sword as last resort is not shunned either. While ahimsa has its own values, those were times when oppressors would not have even understood the meaning of the word. But again, that is not the point either. Guru Gobind Singh emphasizes that the life and the morality is all to be judged in the end. Call it a judgement by God, Karma, or your own soul. He never tries to be a prophet, or let hate burn away the piousness of his own soul.

Whole Sikh race reveres him as a Guru today and prays to him. But I also try to see a man behind those words, and invincible faith it took to stand against an adversary having control over whole country/far superior resources. And more than that, I try to imagine a man who despite losing his home, his family, his army, his life's work of literature, still had in his heart a power to forgive.

I feel Zafarnama has not garnered the attention it deserved in Sikh culture. More research can further help us in our humble attempts to understand the man, who became legend, and forever a Guru.

<https://maniactalkies.wordpress.com/2...>

Sandhya Rao says

valued the historical intro by navtej sarna more

Shriya says

A multiplicity of factors make this book precious to me! yes, precious! The store-it-in-a-lock-and-key kind of precious! So let's start this review with *why I will not lend you this book even if you are my soul mate:*

-It's a first day first edition! I was the first person to buy it minutes after its release from a book store in Chandigarh.

-It's more than just a book, it's an important source of history and helps to understand in depth the aftermath of the Battle of Chamkaur and the History of Sikhs as we know it today.

-It was one of the last books my grandfather read before he died, and being well versed in as well as an avid reader of both Persian and English, he was in a true position to comment on it. I think that mentioning that he died a fan of Navtej Sarna is a testimonial in itself on how brilliantly successful Mr Sarna has been in his endeavour to translate this historic letter by Guru Gobind Singh to Aurangzeb.

-It's a signed copy! Yes! Signed by the man himself with the inscription:

*For Shriya,
In the memory of your beloved grandfather.*

However, even if this book hadn't been so priceless for me, even if Mr Sarna hadn't been one of my most favourite authors and a truly wonderful person at heart, and even if I hadn't been so blessed as to meet him by the most serendipitous twist of fate in a book shop, this book would still have been my, favourite.

Like I said with my other review in the morning, you cannot translate Persian poetry into English very easily. you have to make sure that your words capture the depth, the essence and the very soul of the poet to be able to do this.

I think I just have to thank my stars that Mr Sarna chose to translate this particular piece. One thing I can say without even thinking twice is Navtej Sarna has a natural flare for poetry. He's effortless with his words, his rhymes come out perfectly formed, and even in a translation, his knack for poetry is incomparable.

In the words of my grandfather, who left us last year, "If you can read and understand both Persian and English, you'll be able to see that in case of this particular translation, Navtej Sarna is not merely the translator but also a poet in his own regard."

Well, I couldn't test that theory because I know nothing about Persian but as a student of history, who had already read Zafarnama in a non poetic translation, I would say this is the best one ever!

Laveena Behl says

I wish I was fluent in Arabic script. The transliteration does a good job retaining the rhythmic aspect of the verses. The best part about the text is that the verses are not only specific to the context (the conversation) but contain essential life lessons and should be imbibed by us to tread on the path of righteousness.

Jibran says

*When all has been tried, yet
Justice is not in sight,
It is then right to pick up the sword,
It is then right to fight*

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THE MILIEU

The Sikh community led by Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) was faced with a double whammy. On one hand they braced denunciations of Hindu leaders for their program that challenged caste-based social order and rejected blind ritualism and idolatry as it was practiced at that time. This conflict often turned violent as Sikhs became organised as a distinct socio-religious group with a fighting capacity to defend their stronghold of Anandpur against sporadic attacks from the neighbouring hill rajahs. On the other hand, although it seems that Sikhs did not challenge the security of the state, the reigning Emperor Aurangzeb nevertheless felt threatened by their martial prowess, egged on by rajahs and maharajas that saw the Sikhs as enemies of their religion. The Mughal-Sikh relations had been poisoned before when Aurangzeb, then new to the throne, beheaded Guru Tegh Bahadur, the father of Guru Gobind, for, inter alia, siding with Prince Dara Shikoh in the wars of succession.

Things came to a head with the siege of Sikh stronghold Anandpur in 1704. When supplies bled out Guru Gobind Singh received a message from the Emperor in the form of an oath sworn on the Quran promising him safe passage along with his family if he surrendered peacefully. The Guru, faced with the impending starvation of his community, agreed. But the promise was broken; they were attacked as they left the precincts of the residential complex, and in the pitched battles over a few days four of Guru's sons were killed, his mother died of shock, and many relatives and devotees were put to sword. The Guru, however, escaped to safety. A year later he received a conciliatory message from Aurangzeb inviting him to put an end to hostilities in return for security and friendship. The Guru replied with a poem that was to stand testament to his unbending will and indomitable spirit.

THE POEM

*Under the shower of bullets and arrows
So numerous were the dead
That like the poppy flower
The earth itself turned red*

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For a man who suffered a great personal tragedy to show such equanimity and phlegm as evinced in the poem is as remarkable as it is moving. There is a strong sense of a person who's been wronged, deceived, and oppressed, yet there is not a scintilla of self-pity in his lines or bitterness towards his enemy. From the poem emerges an image of a man of high values who is willing to sacrifice everything to protect his people and principles. But The Guru does not mince words; he indicts the Emperor for his atrocities and declares his complete mistrust of everything that comes out of the Emperor's mouth: *"I have no faith at all / In the oath that you swear, / That the God Who is One / Your witness does bear"*, and later, *"In your false oath on the Quran / Had I not believed, / My brave army wouldn't be crippled, / Nor in such manner deceived."*

The poem begins with twelve verses in praise of God that serve as a customary preface to long narrative poems in the Persian poetry tradition. From verse 13 onwards it proceeds to give a brief account of the battle in which, despite being outnumbered, the Sikhs led by him displayed great valour and destroyed the enemy lines before being eventually subdued. He sees victory of spirit and sacrifice in the defeat and affirms that the real victory is to stand true to one's principles. Then in the later part of the poem Guru Gobind Singh turns the tables when, instead of asking for clemency, as the Emperor, being the centre of power, might have expected, offers to forgive the Emperor if he repents: *"Come so that we can meet / And talk face-to-face, / I can show you forgiveness / And grant you my grace"*, preceded by an ironical verse which should shame the Emperor for what his men had done to the Guru in the siege of Anandpur: *"There is no danger to you here, / No one will raise a hand; / This community of Bairars* / Is under my command."*

This brilliant ironical vein continues in the subsequent couplets. After criticising Aurangzeb's subterfuge, his oppressive policies, his claims to piety and justice, Guru Gobind begins praising the talents and virtues of Aurangzeb. This is to achieve two purposes. One, to make Aurangzeb realise how far he has strayed from the ideal he professes and second, in Persian poetic tradition, if high praise follows severe criticism it is done to shame the addressed, to show him the proverbial mirror. The Guru says to Aurangzeb: *"You are handsome and clever / And steeped in wisdom, / Chief among the chiefs, / Lord of this kingdom."* And two couplets later, *"Blessed by looks and beauty, / Good conscience and high mind, / And of land and wealth / A giver, merciful and kind."* In between there is a prescient message that condemns Aurangzeb forever:

*But if you still disregard
Your falsehood and your lies,
You too will be forgotten by God,
Be ever guilty in His eyes.*

Aurangzeb was so moved by the brave and beautiful *Zafarnama* that he instructed his governors to send a word of respect to the Guru. Aurangzeb till he died did not bother him again.

The poem is a gem of Persian poetry and stands witness to Guru Gobind's literary genius. At the same time it showcases his fearless spirit and lays down his philosophy of self-belief and spiritual strength with which to

fight tyranny and oppression even when odds are stacked against you.

*A thousand plots of the enemy,
Full of treachery and fraud,
They cannot harm a single hair
Of the one protected by God.*

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Zafarnama, or Epistle of Victory, is written in the form of masnavi and comprises 111 couplets in short metre. The Persian poem employs high vocabulary and beautiful compound phrases brought to perfection with the musicality of the rhymed endings. A translation should aim to convey the style and diction of the original but in this instance the translator has opted to replicate the rhyming scheme in alternating lines in four-line stanzas which has watered down, to a great extent, the effect of the original. I'd have preferred a freer translation that conveyed the diction of the original instead of getting jammed into simple English rhymes that often read like the work of a novice rhymester. There is a translation by Christopher Shackle but I have yet to read it. There are other prose translations if the purpose is just to understand the text.

Since most readers of this book will understand only English, I am rating the translation. It gets 2.5 stars which I have rounded to three. However, I give additional star for the actual Persian text. Thanks Waheguru it's a dual language edition, I could understand quite a bit despite my fledgling Persian reading skills.

* Bairars refers to the Brars Jats of Malwa who were under Guru Gobind's allegiance. The Guru quips that his men are in his control unlike Aurangzeb's, whose generals and governors are out of the emperor's control.

April 2015

Simpreet Kaur says

The translation of the "Zafarnama" from Persian to English is hard to find and this one by Navtej Sarna is probably the most comprehensive. It's a powerful poetic letter addressed by the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh to the then Mughal Emperor of India, Aurangzeb. A tyrannical and oppressive ruler, Aurangzeb and his generals broke their oaths in order to wrongly defeat Guru Gobind Singh's army and kill his family. I read both the Persian verse as well as the English translation and wished I knew Persian. The poetry is beautiful and I feel that even though the translator did a wonderful job, there is some essence lost in translation. Nevertheless, this is an important piece of history, penned by the Sikh Guru himself who is known to us not only as a great man of valor, vision wisdom and sacrifice but also as a scholar and connoisseur of arts. The introduction to the book itself holds great value in my eyes, especially for those who are not familiar with Sikh history and need context surrounding the circumstances under which this letter was written.

Jazz Singh says

The Sikh faith led by Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1666 to 1708, was faced with attacks from all angles. Whilst the Sikh faith was growing in peace, love, and harmony in Punjab, India they were endangered to oppression.

On one hand, the Sikhs faced huge criticism by the Hindu leaders for their principles, which challenged the caste system that segregated communities within the same faith and also rejected the acceptance of idolatry worship, which was and still is practiced as part of the Hindu faith today. As the Sikhs grew and became continually stronger in warriorship and spirituality, the Rajput rajas of the surrounding hills watched and planned their intermittent attacks on the Sikhs. The attacks were handled and dealt with relative ease by the Sikh warriors.

On the other hand, the Sikhs having to stand up to injustice and fight off oppression, becoming a force of solidarity and spiritual warriorship.

The relationship between the Sikhs and the Mughal Emperor was hindered severely before when Aurungzeb had ordered to behead Guru Tegh Bahadur (9th Guru of the Sikhs), the father of Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1675 for refusing to convert to Islam.

After the hill rajas multiple failed attempts to restrain Guru Gobind Singh Ji, It was at this point where the hill rajas then travelled to Delhi and vented their jealousy and came to crave the support and protection of the government. The hill rajas pleaded to the government for a quick and abrupt order to act right away, as any delay would result in the Guru's army to expedite your empire. In response to their plea, Aurungzeb dispatched two Mughal commanders, Pundit Khan and Din Beg, to deal with the Sikhs. Pundit Khan was killed in a single battle by Guru Gobind Singh and the hill rajas fled the battlefield only to regroup and lay siege to Anandpur Shaib.

Aurangzeb the then governing Emperor felt uneasy and threatened by the control that Guru Gobind Singh Ji set out for the followers of the Sikh faith. In 1704 the largest ever combined force had been put together of both Mughals and the hill rajas. They had stopped food and water supplies to Anandpur Sahib where the Sikhs were staying. The Mughal Emperor Aurungzeb sent a message to Guru Gobind Singh in the form of an oath sworn on the Quran, which promised him safety of him and his family if only he would surrender peacefully. Faced with the constant detrimental conditions, starvation of his community, Guru Gobind Singh agreed. The promise was broken almost instantly and Aurangzeb ordered attacks to the land of Anandpur Shaib where there was battles consisting over a couple of days. In these raging wars, Guru Gobind Singh's four sons were killed and his mother died out of shock and many Sikhs were taken to the sword and died to uphold their Sikh faith.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji fought his way to safety and a year later received a peace-making message from Aurungzeb, which requested to end the troubles in return for safety and friendship. Here the Guru replied with the Zafarnama, which was to stand firm to his adamant will and unconquerable spirit:

Zafarnama

The Zafarnama is a letter originally composed and written in fine Persian verses by Guru Gobind Singh ji, the tenth Sikh Guru. The Zafarnam is addressed to Aurangzeb, who was the then Mughal Emperor of India and after many brutal and extreme battles between his army and the Sikh warriors, Aurangzeb demonstrated to be a tyrannical and oppressive ruler, Aurangzeb and his generals broke their oaths on the Quran, in the

attempt to wrongly defeat Guru Gobind Singh's army and kill his family to eradicate the existence and fruitful continuation of the Sikh faith.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji experienced the greatest deal of tragedy, loss, and pain in the wars of succession. One, who was wronged, betrayed and oppressed by Aurungzeb who had barbarically killed his family. In such times Guru Gobind Singh showed such equanimity towards Aurungzeb in his poetically scripted letter. It is indeed remarkable as it is moving, for one to experience the atrocities inflicted upon him and yet still remain mentally, physically and spiritually composed, showing no bitterness, hate or frustration to the opposition.

In verses 13 and 14, the Guru declares from this point onwards, he absolutely has no trust in what the Emperor utters out of his mouth.

"I have no faith at all / In the oath that you swear, / That the God Who is One / Your witness does bear",

"Not a jot of trust / Do I now have in you, / Whose generals and ministers / Are all liars, untrue."

And later in verse 18, "In your false oath on the Quran / Had I not believed, / My brave army wouldn't be crippled, / Nor in such manner deceived."

Navtej Sarna has done a very good job here in the efforts to translate the letter from Persian to English, however, I do believe there may be some elements, which are not fully covered and perhaps are lost in translation given the historical context and the huge challenge in the comprehensive transformation of literature.

The original texts, I can only imagine is a real work of written art crafted with accuracy, fluidity, honesty, and respect all the while, spiritually connected with the divine creator of all Akaal Purakh (God).

The Guru says to Aurangzeb in verses 82: "But if you still disregard
Your falsehood and your lies, / You too will be forgotten by God, /
Be ever guilty in His eyes"

A statement, which condemns Aurangzeb's evil actions carried out deceptively against Guru Gobind Singh. Later in verse 90, Aurungzeb has been praised for his wisdom and bravery:

"You are handsome and clever / And steeped in wisdom, / Chief among the chiefs, / Lord of this kingdom.

Praising his bravery and actions however then highlights his spiritual connection to the creator of all, the eternal one (God).

Every verse in the letter shares such a powerful message written in pure excellence and creativity a true unparalleled beauty executed here by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. As Aurungzeb had received the Zafarnama, he was very touched and taken back by the poetic genius expressed and therefore instructed his governors to send a word of admiration to the Guru. It was from this point until his death he did not bother the Guru ever again.

Overall this written literature is an absolute work of art, which displays the Gurus unprecedented warrior spirit and expresses his spiritual philosophy of self-belief as he declared that he would create such a Panth

(community/society), which would challenge the tyrant rulers in every walk of life to restore justice, equality, and peace for all of mankind. A very important chapter in the history of the Sikhs.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji, created the Khalsa (Sikh Warriors) and abolished the caste system. A gentleman of great courage in the face of danger, especially in battle. A true scholar and connoisseur. Ultimately a real saint soldier. More importantly, he took a downtrodden and browbeaten community and turned them into lions. My words are far very far beyond any real reflection of such greatness, which the Guru holds.

The final and ending verse 111 for the closing of my review to which I feel displays the position of a true saintly warrior:

“A thousand plots of the enemy, / Full of treachery and fraud, / They cannot harm a single hair / Of the one protected by God.”

J Singh.

Namrata Tanna says

awesome :-)

Paul says

I was hoping that the letter itself would have been longer, and containing more nuggets like its famous quote. There is, however, an excellent introduction in this edition outlining the history of the Sikh faith that frames the letter very well for newcomers.

Sundeep Mallya says

Wonderful book! I loved the brief history of Sikh gurus that precedes the actual translation of the verses. It gave a solid context within which to read the verses.

I loved the fact that the transliteration of the Persian verses is provided but I do not think it is accurate. E.g. I'd think "itibar" should be "itibaar" but then I don't know any Persian and maybe I'm confusing the words with similar sounding words in Urdu.

I also agree with other commentators that in some cases the translation seems to have been forced into rhymes where a literal translation might have provided a better understanding of the verse.

What also struck me is that fact that even in those medieval days, the level of communication and statesmanship was at such high levels. The fact that the Guru, in the face of murderous attacks (and the death of his four sons), could write to his enemy Aurangzeb (in the enemy's language to boot) in such poetic verse, just blew my mind. In this day and age of Internet trolls, where even the most trivial of debates end in ad hominem attacks, that is a quality that seems almost divine!

Harish Muralidhar says

A letter from the last sikh guru to emperor aurangzeb chastising him for having broken the oath the latter had sworn. Written in persian, the letter is in the form of couplets where guru gobind singh praises the almighty, talks of aurangzeb's virtues and proceeds to point out the oath that he had broken and offers to forgive in the end. It not only shows the warrior that the great guru was but also the human, leader and philosopher in him. A book that is beyond rating, it is a must read for all readers alike.
