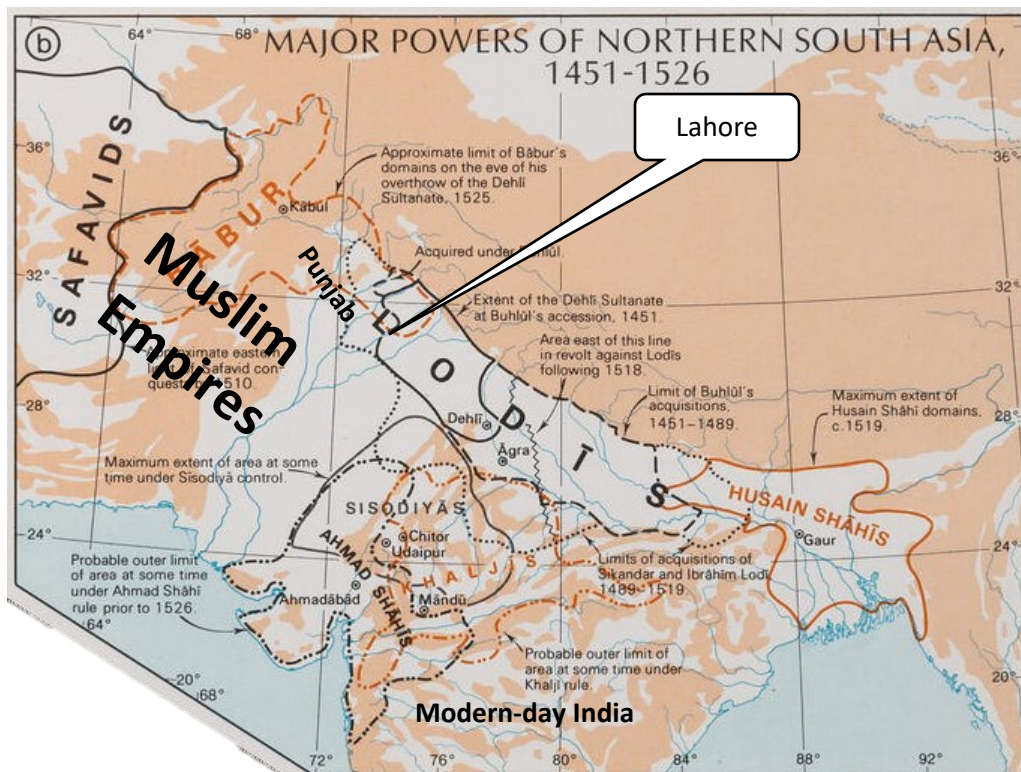


# Providing Context: Sikhism and the Mughal Empire

From *Empire of the Sikhs: Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*:

Nanak, founder of the Sikh faith, was born in times when wars, terror, turbulence and periodic invasions were savaging the subcontinent, although at the time of his birth on 15 April 1469 India was experiencing a spell of rare stability under the benign rule of Bahlol Khan, founder of the Lodhi Dynasty (1451-1526). Nanak's life coincided with the religious renaissance in Europe, and by an interesting coincidence Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64) were his contemporaries.

Nanak, too, felt very early in life that the divisive and destructive trends which had been tearing his country, the Punjab, apart – and the very village of his birth, Talwandi near Lahore, on the direct route of invading armies that had not so long ago poured in through the Hindu Kush – could only be met by the resoluteness and impetus provided by a new religion which would revitalize people to meet these destructive forces. His resolve to give shape and form to such a movement led him to lay the groundwork for Sikhism. The new faith, he was determined, must give a new life, add a new cultural dimension and a wholly new dynamic to India's religious mosaic.



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Nanak was born into a Hindu family and a very happy one at that.<sup>5</sup> At a very young age he astonished his parents and the family's Brahmin priest with some forthright statements and questions. 'There is no Hindu. There is no Mussulman,' he pronounced.<sup>6</sup> And at the age of eleven he baffled a gathering of family, friends and relations when he refused to wear the *janeu* or sacred thread of the Hindus which all male offspring are enjoined to wear from that age onwards, which consists of strands of cotton woven into a thin cord looped from the left shoulder around the right hip. Nanak asked the priest presiding over the ceremony to explain to him what difference wearing the thread would make to his life. If he was unconvinced it could make any real difference, he would prefer not to be a party to the ceremony. He then recited his own composition to him and the assembled guests:

Out of the cotton of compassion  
Spin the thread of contentment  
Tie the knot of continence, and the twist of virtue;  
Make such a sacred thread,  
O Pundit, for your inner self.<sup>7</sup>

When he took his father's cattle out to graze he would spend hours listening to the sages and mystics who have always been a part of India's human mosaic. Although he was most attentive to what they had to say, he usually drew his own conclusions which were, more times than not, at odds with theirs.

At the age of sixteen, on the persuasion of his adoring sister Nanaki, he moved to the town of Sultanpur, a hundred miles away from the parental home, to live with her and her husband, who worked for Nawab Daulat Khan Lodhi, the region's powerful governor and a relative of the ruler of Delhi, Bahlol Khan. A refined and scholarly man, Daulat Khan was so impressed by Nanak that he offered him a job, which he accepted, even though a job wasn't exactly what he was looking for in life.

At this stage he took an extraordinary decision: to visit all the centres of religious learning in his country that he could and to travel to those of far-off countries as well, to see and understand the essence of their beliefs and what helped to sustain them. He himself believed in the concept of one god and was increasingly of the view that only this could help a war-ridden, conflict-prone and utterly divided world in which millions of weak and demoralized victims of aggressors were left to their fate. He wished to meet the scholars and sages at the great religious centres and learn their view of these critical human concerns.

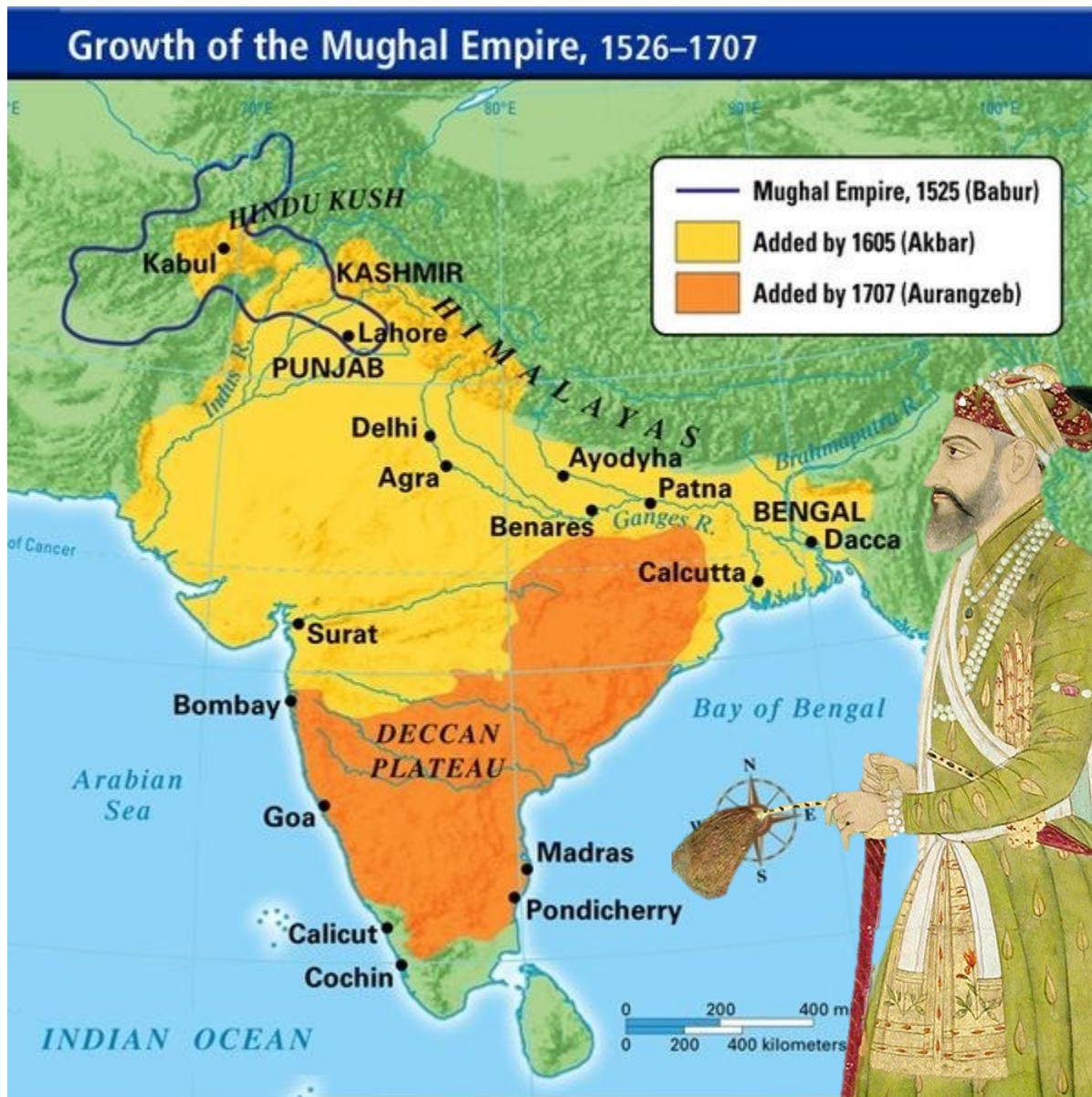
Starting in 1496, Nanak's travels lasted twenty-eight years. His journeys were a remarkable feat for those times. But Nanak's gentle and saintly appearance belied his iron will. His travels in India took him from Hardwar to Benares, Kamrup (Assam), Jagannath (Orissa) and to southern India and Ceylon. In the next phase of his travels he visited Tibet, Kabul, Mecca and Baghdad. Each new encounter with men of learning and philosophical bent helped him to define more sharply the contours of the faith he was shaping in a number of newly composed hymns, in which he drew on the basic compassion of Hinduism and the essential brotherhood of Islam, rejecting the demeaning role of the caste system which, in his view, was no less pernicious than the destruction of temples and places of worship.

The word 'Sikh' comes from the Sanskrit word *shishya*, which means a devoted follower. It was very much in tune with the new faith. After Nanak's return from his travels he settled in a peaceful spot by the River Ravi, where he spent the last fifteen years of his life. There he built a village which he called Kartarpur, where his devoted disciples gathered in increasing numbers. Its idyllic setting, the easy flow of the community's daily routine in which all participated, Nanak's reading of his own hymns – he composed 974 in all – and the philosophical discourses he initiated, all helped to establish a daily format which Sikhs have followed, with some variations, ever since.

This man of extraordinary vision, exemplary concern for fellow humans and a resoluteness which helped him achieve the seemingly impossible died a peaceful death in Kartarpur on 7 September 1539.



- From the 10<sup>th</sup> century until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, northern India saw successive Muslim dynasties exercise sovereignty, the last being the Mughal Empire.
  - Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb ruled over the empire from 1658-1707.



- Following his death, the Mughal Empire experienced a series of weak reigns by ineffectual emperors. The empire began to contract.

Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb

Source:

Singh, Patwant and Jyoti M. Rai. *Empire of the Sikhs: Life - and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*. Peter Owen, 2008.

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