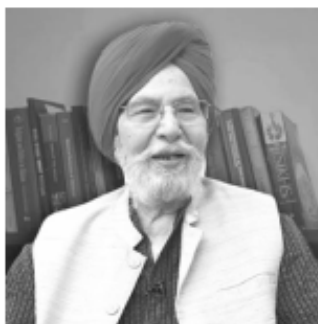


## Professor J. S. Grewal: An Eminent Historian Remembered

*Dr. Devinder Pal Singh and Bhai Harbans Lal\**



Professor Jagtar Singh Grewal, an eminent historian, had a pioneering interest in the historiography of medieval India. He brought the rich history of Punjab and Sikhs from the margins to the mainstream. His outstanding research works took Amritsar's name to national and international levels.

Grewal, a retired national fellow of the Indian Council of Historical Research, used to say: "To understand the present, it's important to understand the past."

Born in 1927, Jagtar was the youngest of five children in his family. As a child, he studied Persian and Urdu in school at Lyallpur (now in Pakistan). His father was well-read in traditional literature and stimulated his son's love for Persian and Urdu languages.

Jagtar was studying math and physics at Forman Christian College, Lahore when the Partition of India took place. After Partition, his family settled at Dhandra village in Raikot where his father had been reallocated land.

Due to changed circumstances, his father could only afford to send him to a government college in Ludhiana. Therein, he did postgraduation in English and geography. During his college days, he participated in debates and loved football. His teachers inspired him to take a shot at the civil services, which he did. He was successful in his attempt and was selected for the audit and accounts training in Nagpur, but he soon realized that his heart lay in history, not accounts.

After quitting the audit service in 1954, Jagtar joined Government College, Hoshiarpur, to study history. The Partition of the Indian subcontinent much influenced him, so he wanted to know more about the cultural interchange between Hindus and Muslims. Thus, he focused on the social and cultural history of the medieval period.

---

\*Center for Understanding Sikhism, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

\*President, Academy of Guru Granth Studies, Texas, USA

As advised by his teachers, he went to the University of Durham in the UK to research how European scholars had treated Sufism in India. In 1963, his research culminated in his doing a Ph.D. on the British historical writing on medieval India. Oxford University Press published his work in 1970 as "Muslim Rule in India: The assessments of British historians."

In the UK in 1964, his meeting with A.C. Joshi, the Vice-Chancellor of Panjab University (PU), culminated in his joining the history department of the University as a lecturer. He served PU for the next seven years. In 1971, he joined Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar, and became the founder and Head of its History Department. During his tenure as the Head of the Department of History, he promoted every aspect of Punjab deeply researched.

His research interests included such diverse elements of Punjab as social, cultural, political, social classes, peasantry, the business community, the economy, and the history of various city areas. Under his stewardship, the History Department was so dynamic that it became one of the top departments in the Punjab state and the entire country.

In addition to his academic duties, he shouldered the responsibilities of the University's first and longest-serving Academic Affairs Dean. He became the third Vice-Chancellor of GNDU in 1981, following Dr. Bishan Singh Samundri and Dr. Karam Singh Gill. Due to his contribution to historiography, he was elected President of the Indian History Congress in 1984. He retired from GNDU in 1987. Soon after, he joined the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), Shimla, as a fellow. Therein, he rose to the position of Director and Chairman of the same institute.

Professor Grewal has been a member of the Religious Advisory Council of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and the head of the Institute of Punjab Studies, Chandigarh. He published numerous articles and books on Sikh history. Some of his notable works include *Guru Nanak in History* (1969), *The Sikhs of Punjab* (1990), *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition* (1998), *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Polity, Economy and Society* (2001), *Social and Cultural History of Punjab* (2004), *Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order* (2004), *Kinship and State Formation* (2007), *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions, and Identity* (2009), and *Historical Writings on the Sikhs: 1784–2011* (2012). In addition, his research has been subjected to studies on academic levels. His contributions to establishing the importance of regional history in the larger perspective of national and international

historiography are outstanding. In 2005 he was honored with Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award, by the Indian Government for his exceptional contributions to Indian literature.

Prof. Grewal was an institution builder, a good administrator, and a good man. Historian of international fame, he gave a new meaning and identity to the history of Punjab and the Sikhs. He had a unique contribution to establishing the importance of regional history in the broader perspective of national and international historiography. He was the only one who promoted the translation of Persian writings on our gurus and their times.

I (Harbans Lal) visited him whenever I visited India, and I learned something new from him every time. He was bold in speaking the truth. He wrote and told me that Guru Gobind Singh was not widely known by that name but popularly known as Guru Gobind Rai. So he signed his name as Guru Gobind Rai Nanakpanthi when he visited Moghal King Bahadur Shah at his inaugural event in 1707.

Dr. J. S. Grewal passed away at the age of ninety-five in Chandigarh on August 11, 2022. However, Dr. Grewal's legacy lives on in his scholarly writings, the many initiatives he gifted to academia, and the various academic institutions he served. □

### ***“Ik Onkar Satgur Prasad”***

There is only one God. Only the grace of true Guru can guide us to Him

#### **Guru Granth Sahib is forever true:**

- ◆ For it contains the message of one God
- ◆ It is for all times Guru of the Sikhs
- ◆ It was compiled by Guru Arjun, the fifth Guru
- ◆ It contains verses by six Gurus as well as saints like, Kabir, Farid, Namdev, Trilochan, Ravidas, Ramanand, Dhana, Jaidev and Surdas.
- ◆ The verses are set in 31 musical raagas (melodies)
- ◆ Most verses are easy to understand
- ◆ God has been addressed by different names, like Ishwar Gobind, Ram, Rahim, Karim and Allah.