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GHULAM RASOOL MEHR AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SINDH: A STUDY OF TĀRĪKH-I-SINDH: KALHORA DAUR

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Abstract
This study examines Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr's seminal work, Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur, evaluating his contribution to the historiography of 18th-century pre-colonial Sindh. Historically, the study of the Kalhora Dynasty (1701–1783) suffered from a pronounced methodological divide, caught between royal Persian panegyrics that exaggerated courtly virtues and British colonial logs that reduced the region to an object of territorial conquest. Mehr's scholarly intervention transformed this landscape by pioneering a multi-source, archival framework that synthesized Persian royal decrees (farmans), local Sindhi accounts, European travelogues, and administrative gazetteers. By cross-examining indigenous records against foreign observations, Mehr established an empirical baseline that corrected long-standing discrepancies in political chronologies, revenue records, and treaties. Furthermore, his narrative moved past traditional dynastic political history to emphasize socio-economic history and state-building mechanics. He detailed the Kalhoras' extensive irrigation works along the Indus River and analyzed local socio-religious movements, including the agrarian revolt of Shah Inayat of Jhok. Re-evaluating Sindh's position amid the decline of the Mughal Empire, Nadir Shah's invasions, and Afghan incursions, Mehr framed the region as an active, independent frontier state rather than a passive province. Ultimately, Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur remains a foundational text in South Asian regional historiography, proving that post-colonial scholarship can achieve empirical rigor while honoring native historical perspectives.

INTRODUCTION
Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr stands as one of the most versatile intellectuals of 20th-century South Asia, seamlessly bridging the fast-paced, high-stakes world of political journalism with the painstaking, slow-paced rigor of historical scholarship. Born in the village of Phoolpur in the Jalandhar district of British India, Mehr held a lifelong emotional connection to his ancestral roots. He completed his early schooling locally

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before moving to Lahore to attend Islamia College, a city whose unique synthesis of Eastern traditions and Western modernism deeply captivated him and set the stage for his lifelong intellectual pursuits. His political and literary awakening began during his formative years in Lahore and a subsequent, influential stay in Hyderabad. Deeply inspired by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's journal Al-Hilal, Mehr joined Azad's Hizbullah organization and threw himself into the anti-colonial struggle and the Khilafat Movement. It was during his time in Hyderabad that he intentionally shifted his focus from writing poetry to crafting persuasive prose (Mehr, 1952). This transition proved vital when he launched his professional journalistic career at Maulana Zafar Ali Khan's Daily Zamindar, eventually going on to co-found the influential Daily Inqilab in 1927 alongside Abdul Majeed Salik to help shape Muslim public opinion across northern India (Rasool et al., 2023). Parallel to his journalistic crusade, Mehr established himself as a preeminent research scholar and literary commentator. He made monumental contributions to Ghalibiat—most notably through his meticulous compilation, editing, and annotation of the letters Mirza Ghalib wrote to his friends and admirers. His intimate personal and intellectual relationships with leading thinkers of the era, including Allama Iqbal and Maulana Azad, further enriched his literary exegeses, allowing him to produce authoritative commentaries that made complex philosophical poetry accessible to the broader public. Beyond literary criticism, Mehr left an indelible mark on South Asian historiography, particularly regarding regional history and 19th-century reform movements. His landmark work, Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur, revolutionized the study of 18th-century Sindh by departing from traditional court panegyrics. By synthesizing obscure Persian manuscripts, British administrative logs, gazetteers, and local Sindhi records, Mehr provided the first comprehensive social, economic, and geopolitical account of the Kalhora dynasty. His historical monographs, such as Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed and Sarguzasht-i-Mujahideen, similarly showcased his dedication to exhaustive archival research (Khatti et al., 2023). The trauma of the 1947 Partition deeply impacted Mehr, as being uprooted from his native Phoolpur felt to him like wandering into a desert after leaving paradise. In his later years, at the persistent request of his children during lunch-hour conversations, he began dictating his memoirs to record his life's journey and preserve his family's origin story. Though he passed away in 1971 before completing them, these dictations were later compiled by Mohammad Hamza Farooqi into Mehr Beeti. Today, Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr is remembered as a principled writer whose legacy continues to guide historians, literary scholars, and journalists alike.

Literature Review And Background

The historiography of 18th-century Sindh was long defined by a stark methodological divide. On one side stood court-sponsored Persian chronicles, which served primarily as royal panegyrics designed to legitimize dynastic rule, celebrate military victories, and flatter reigning sovereigns. On the other side were colonial-era British gazetteers, East India Company trade logs, and military memoirs, which consistently interpreted the region through an orientalist lens (Veesar et al., 2025), evaluating Sindh merely as a territory for commercial expansion or territorial conquest. Prior to Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr's scholarly interventions, the era of the Kalhora Dynasty (1701–1783) remained fragmented across these polarized, incomplete records. In his masterwork, Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur, Mehr fundamentally reshaped regional scholarship by moving past both royal adulation and colonial bias, creating a rigorous socio-historical baseline for the study of pre-colonial Sindh. At the core of Mehr's contribution was a multi-source, archival methodology that challenged the structural limitations of traditional court histories. Rather than accepting official royal decrees (farmans) or dynastic genealogies at face value, he subjected them to meticulous cross-examination. He systematically retrieved obscure Persian

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manuscripts, local Sindhi accounts, and provincial revenue records, pairing them alongside European travelogues, such as the memoirs of Dr. James Burnes (Khatti et al., 2023), and early British diplomatic records. By evaluating indigenous accounts against foreign observations, Mehr systematically resolved long-standing errors regarding political chronologies, battlefield casualties, state revenues, and treaties, effectively establishing the first empirical blueprint for 18th-century Sindhi statehood. Crucially, Mehr departed from the narrow focus of conventional political history by prioritizing social history, agrarian economics, and state-building mechanics over mere court intrigue. He demonstrated that the true legacy of the Kalhora rulers lay not in their military skirmishes, but in their extensive transformation of Sindh's physical and economic geography. Mehr documented how the dynasty conceptualized and constructed state-managed canal networks fed by the Indus River, turning previously arid tracts into fertile agricultural hubs. Furthermore, he integrated the history of local Sufi movements and agrarian revolts into the broader state narrative, most notably providing critical socio-historical context to the movement of Shah Inayat of Jhok (keerio et al., 2024), framing such uprisings as structural responses to tax pressures and land policies rather than isolated religious rebellions. From a historical perspective, 18th-century Sindh was frequently mischaracterized by colonial chroniclers and imperial Mughal historians as a passive, chaotic province caught helplessly in the power vacuum of a declining empire. Mehr completely re-evaluated this narrative, framing Sindh as an active, independent frontier state navigating intense regional pressures (Rasool et al., 2023). He provided a granular breakdown of how Kalhora rulers maintained local rule while caught between Nadir Shah's devastating campaigns, the rising incursions of the Afghan Durrani Empire, the expansion of the Maratha Confederacy, and the growing commercial presence of European trading companies. Through this framing, Mehr illustrated how the Kalhoras successfully institutionalized a regional administration that laid the historical foundations for modern Sindhi identity. Ultimately, Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr's historical scholarship provided a powerful alternative to traditional historiographical approaches. By synthesizing Persian administrative archives, local oral histories, and European records into a cohesive academic narrative, he demonstrated that regional history in South Asia could be written with empirical rigor without sacrificing native perspective. Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur successfully elevated the study of 18th-century Sindh from scattered court chronicles to a comprehensive history of state-building, socio-economic development, and regional governance. His work remains a foundational pillar for modern historians, proving that regional scholarship must look beyond the royal court to capture the true life of a society.

Research gap

Despite the foundational significance of Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr's Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur in organizing the historical record of 18th-century Sindh, a profound research gap remains in contemporary South Asian historiography regarding his specific methodological legacy. While existing literature acknowledges Mehr as a journalist, literary commentator, and biographer, no dedicated scholarly study has yet critically analyzed his work as a pioneer of pre-colonial regional historiography. Modern scholars routinely draw upon his historical data to study the Kalhora Dynasty, yet they have treated his text as a passive reference compilation rather than examining the intentional historiographical framework Mehr constructed to synthesize Persian court chronicles with colonial archives.

Furthermore, no comparative research (Rasool et al., 2023; Khatti et al., 2023; Delovarova et al., 2026) exists to evaluate how Mehr's archival methods shaped his interpretation of 18th-century agrarian statecraft, social movements, and regional governance compared to colonial historians. Critical aspects of his methodology—such as how he systematically cross-referenced indigenous

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Persian decrees (farmans) against European travel accounts to document the canal systems of the Kalhoras or the socio-economic dimensions of Shah Inayat's movement—remain completely unexamined as distinct historiographical contributions. By failing to interrogate Mehr's transition from an anti-colonial journalist to a systematic regional historian, current scholarship leaves an unaddressed void in our understanding of how mid-20th-century South Asian intellectuals conceptualized, wrote, and recovered non-imperial regional histories.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive historiographical and qualitative text-analysis methodology to systematically evaluate Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr's contributions to the historiography of pre-colonial Sindh. Rather than examining the Kalhora era merely through the historical data it produced, this research focuses on the analytical frameworks, source-critical methods, and narrative choices employed by Mehr in his seminal work, Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur. The approach is structured to examine how an intellectual trained in anti-colonial journalism and classical Islamic scholarship constructed a systematic regional history from fragmented, often contradictory primary materials(Keerio et al., 2024).

The primary textual corpus for this research consists of Mehr's Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur, alongside his autobiographical reflections in Mehr Beeti, which offer critical context regarding his research ethics, intellectual influences, and archival practices (Mehr, 1952). These texts are analyzed through a comparative descriptive lens alongside two primary categories of historical literature that preceded his work: official Persian court chronicles produced under Mughal and local patronage, and colonial-era British gazetteers, trade logs, and travelogues (Veesar et al., 2025). By mapping Mehr's treatment of specific historical events such as state-managed irrigation initiatives, tribal alliances, and the agrarian uprising of Shah Inayat of Jhok the methodology isolates how Mehr cross-referenced native administrative decrees (farmans) against European observations to resolve chronologies and eliminate courtly or colonial biases.

To address the identified research gap, the descriptive analysis is organized into three distinct thematic vectors. First, it examines Mehr's source-critical framework, documenting his process of collecting, translating, and synthesizing scattered Persian manuscripts alongside British administrative records. Second, it investigates his socio-economic orientation, analyzing how he shifted the narrative focus away from conventional dynastic genealogies toward agrarian statecraft, canal development, and public administration. Third, it evaluates his historical framing of Sindh's regional sovereignty, assessing how he interpreted the state's governance during the collapse of central Mughal authority and subsequent foreign incursions. Through this structured qualitative examination, the methodology provides a clear, descriptive blueprint of how Mehr transformed raw primary documents into a rigorous, colonial standard for regional South Asian history.

Research Questions

To address the identified research gap and execute the descriptive historiographical methodology, this study is guided by the following primary research questions:

1. How did Mehr synthesize court chronicles and British records to construct a source-critical history of 18th-century Sindh?
2. In what ways did his work shift the narrative from dynastic politics to socio-economic statecraft and regional governance?

Findings

Source Synthesis and Methodological Innovation

The critical analysis of Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur reveals that Ghulam Rasool Mehr constructed a unified historical narrative by pioneering a multi-source, comparative archival methodology that resolved long-standing contradictions between court panegyrics and colonial records. Prior to his scholarly intervention, historians of the region were trapped

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in a binary choice between Persian court chroniclers who exaggerated royal triumphs to secure patron favor, and British colonial administrators who interpreted local history strictly through the lens of trade, administrative utility, and eventual conquest (Keerio et al., 2024). Mehr systematically dismantled this divide by gathering, translating, and juxtaposing official Persian decrees (farmans), royal genealogies, and regional revenue documents alongside early British East India Company records (Mehr, 1952), factory records, and European travelogues, such as the memoirs of Dr. James Burnes. Through this rigorous cross-examination, he successfully eliminated dynastic flattery, corrected administrative errors in British gazetteers, and established a reliable empirical chronology for the succession disputes (Mehr, 1958), peace treaties, and internal governance of the Kalhora period (1701–1783).

By refusing to treat either imperial Persian manuscripts or colonial gazetteers as inherently definitive, Mehr introduced an objective, source-critical framework to pre-colonial South Asian studies. He utilized local land grants, tax receipts, and provincial family archives to verify claims made in royal panegyrics, stripping away poetic embellishments to uncover actual historical events and policy decisions. Simultaneously, his meticulous approach exposed the institutional biases of colonial historians, who had routinely framed pre-colonial Sindh as a chaotic and stagnant territory in order to validate later British annexation under Sir Charles Napier (Rasool et al., 2023). Through this dual critique, Mehr demonstrated that regional history could be reconstructed with empirical precision by evaluating indigenous materials alongside foreign observations, ultimately establishing a new standard for historiography in the region.

Furthermore, Mehr's methodology represented a significant departure from standard mid-20th-century historiographical practices, which often favored sweeping national narratives over detailed regional studies. His meticulous textual critiques extended to analyzing the specific linguistic nuances of 18th-century administrative Persian, allowing him to decipher local technical terms related to land tenure, taxation categories, and judicial appointments that previous scholars had misinterpreted (Veesar et al., 2025). By providing extensive commentary on his sources within the text (Mehr, 1952), Mehr turned Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur into both a narrative history and an annotated guide to the primary literature of the era. This methodological rigor ensured that subsequent generations of historians could trace his evidentiary claims directly back to primary manuscripts, thereby elevating the study of provincial history to the level of rigorous academic inquiry.

Narrative Shift toward Socio-Economic Statecraft and Local Governance

Mehr's research fundamentally transformed the analytical focus of Sindhi historiography by shifting the central narrative away from conventional dynastic court intrigue and battlefield exploits toward socio-economic statecraft, physical infrastructure, and administrative development. He demonstrated that the enduring legacy of the Kalhora Dynasty lay not in its military skirmishes, but in its capacity for internal governance and state-building. Through extensive archival work, Mehr documented how the Kalhora rulers conceptualized, financed, and constructed state-managed canal networks fed by the Indus River. His detailed findings illustrated how these major engineering projects transformed vast arid landscapes into fertile agricultural centers (Mehr, 1958), which directly expanded the provincial tax base, encouraged internal migration, and established a stable agrarian economy capable of supporting local state institutions.

In addition to agricultural infrastructure, Mehr broadened the scope of regional history by integrating popular social movements and local agrarian conditions into the overarching narrative of state development. Rather than dismissing rural uprisings as isolated fanaticism or minor religious disturbances, he provided deep historical context

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to socio-religious movements, most notably the revolt of Shah Inayat of Jhok (veesar et al., 2025). Mehr analyzed this uprising as a structural response to tax pressures, land-tenure policy changes, and feudal encroachment, framing the movement within the broader material realities of 18th-century peasant life. This analytical shift allowed history to encompass the struggles of agrarian laborers and local religious leaders alongside the actions of the ruling elite, offering a far more holistic depiction of Sindhi society.

Finally, Mehr completely re-evaluated Sindh's historical standing during the fragmenting years of the central Mughal Empire, showing that the region was far from a helpless province caught in a local power vacuum. Instead, he presented the Kalhora state as an active, self-sustaining regional governance model that maintained internal administrative continuity (Mehr, 1952), managed complex revenue collection systems, and preserved regional identity despite external pressures from Nadir Shah's devastating campaigns and subsequent Afghan Durrani incursions. By highlighting the dynasty's capacity to maintain civil administration, judicial processes, and trade routes during periods of intense regional instability, Mehr proved that 18th-century Sindh possessed a distinct, functioning governance model that laid the historical foundations for modern Sindhi identity.

Conclusion

This study contributes to highlight the unexplored work of Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr's Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur which marks a decisive turning point in South Asian regional historiography. It successfully liberate the history of 18th-century Sindh from the dual constraints of Persian court panegyrics and colonial-era gazetteers. By developing an innovative, source-critical methodology, Mehr systematically synthesized scattered Persian administrative decrees (farmans), local revenue documents, and European travel records. This rigorous cross-examination allowed him to resolve long-standing chronological errors, strip away dynastic exaggerations, and challenge the orientalist assumptions that previously framed pre-colonial Sindh as a stagnant or chaotic borderland.

Beyond his methodological contributions, Mehr fundamentally reoriented the focus of regional history by replacing conventional narratives of dynastic warfare with an in-depth analysis of socio-economic statecraft and governance. His detailed documentation of state-managed canal engineering along the Indus River highlighted the agrarian foundations of the Kalhora state, while his nuanced evaluation of popular movements—such as the revolt of Shah Inayat of Jhok—brought peasant realities and rural resistance into the mainstream historical record. Furthermore, by framing Sindh as a resilient, self-sustaining regional state that maintained administrative continuity amidst the collapse of Mughal authority and foreign incursions, Mehr established that 18th-century regional governance possessed its own distinct institutional logic.

Ultimately, this study underscores that Mehr was not merely a passive chronicler, but a pioneering regional historian whose work provided an early model for non-imperial, colonial scholarship. Despite the foundational status of his text, contemporary scholarship has yet to fully interrogate his specific historiographical framework, leaving a clear opening for future research into how mid-20th-century Muslim intellectuals recovered and reconstructed provincial histories. Tārīkh-i-Sindh: Kalhora Daur remains a vital testament to the fact that South Asian regional history, when approached with empirical rigor and indigenous understanding, reveals a complex narrative of social resilience, economic innovation, and administrative state-building.

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