

Tracing the Historical Writings on Sikhism

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Abstract

This paper aims at tracing the changing contours of historiographic discourse on Sikhism. It underlines the initiation of modern Studies on Sikhism in the Western enterprise preceding annexation and the various developments explored through the Indian response during the early phase of twentieth century. It is explicated that the modern writings of history on Sikhs was shaped in the past century and half. The emerging outline of Sikh writings during the culmination of the eighteenth century gathered momentum during J.D Cunningham's publication and writings on the history of Sikhs in 1849. Historical writings on Sikhs during the early stages of the colonial period distanced from the Cunningham writings or remained neutral in their perspectives resulting in the emergence of further misconceptions and stereotypes. Having traced the larger development one shift to the state of local historiography and then conclude with a comparative note with the site of historical writings on Sikhism in the historiography of Jammu and Kashmir which clearly points to the need of works on the history of Sikhism in the region of Jammu and Kashmir.


Keywords: *Sikhism, Jammu and Kashmir, Gurudwars, Sikh Shrines*

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Introduction

The beginnings of historical writings on Sikhism may be traced back to the period of the beginning of colonial era. Colonial authors like Antoine- Louis, Charles Wilkins, James Browne and George Forster made an indirect foray into Sikh history. However, one of the earliest works which served to bring history of Sikhs and Sikhism into the mainstream of historiographic discourse was J.D. Cunningham's work on Sikhs History. This publication coincided with the annexation in 1849. The text however, represented a point of departure in the sense that it was the first attempt in the direction of providing a sympathetic and earnest account of Sikhs documented by the historians of colonial times.

Cunningham underlined and articulated the various sources and materials in a meticulous manner and scholarly spirit. He also made an effort to explore not just the official documents and dispatches and the accounts put together by the English, but also deciphered and familiarized himself with the manuscripts in Punjabi and Persian along with the Sikh scriptures as well. Besides his approach also differed from his predecessors in the sense that he made an attempt to explore the various attributes of Sikhism in terms of its religious and moral credentials that inspired them to rise beyond being a religious sect to developing a sense of nationhood whereas the former's focus was largely on assessing the military and political prowess of the Sikhs and describing the functioning of their courts. His work is equally significant as it explores the economic aspects and the geography of Punjab along with exploring the societal aspects and circumstances in which Sikhism emerged. Besides, the meticulousness and diligence of his work is also reflected in the various appendices and detailed footnotes of his work.

The objectives that Cunningham sought in his writings on History included "to give Sikhism its place in the general history of humanity, by showing its connection with the different creeds of India...". Besides, he also aimed "to give some account of the connexion of the English with the Sikhs, and in part with the Afghans ...". His initial chapters incorporated the Historical writings on Sikhs from its genesis to 1764 explicating the emergence of the idea of nationhood from being a living religious faith. He underlined that the prime motivation of their history was their religious faith. This was because it had emerged at a juncture where the historical circumstances were in dire need of it and also because of the pertinence of the message of Guru Nanak. Besides, Cunningham also underlined and emphasized in his writings on Sikhism the prime message that the religion carried which was manifested in its ideas of progress and freedom.

Though his work is seen critically and skeptically in the official circles of colonial rule, eventually his work was recognized as exemplary. It carries pertinence owing to his acknowledgment of the distinctness of the faith of Sikhism, critical and objective engagement of the work on Sikhism by his predecessors, a sympathetic approach towards perceiving Sikhism as a nation in its nascent stage, along with his sound assessment in incorporating factual information respecting the historical illustration of truth.

Following the historical writings of Cunningham, various representatives of the British including the colonial historians, administrators and military personnel also made an effort to write on the history of the Sikhs. However, their prime intention and approach towards the same remained justifying the British rule and its annexation, and locating the historical facts of Sikh rulers and its aristocratic members who remained loyal to the British, while tracing and giving information to the British Army personnel and its recruiting wing regarding the customs and religion of Sikhs while harnessing the assistance of the Sikh people as associates. But, it should be emphasized here, that these writings by the British representatives and historians took little interest in exploring the Sikh past and their traditions as their attitude largely remained apathetic towards the Sikh community. Besides, excluding Lepel Griffin, the other writers demonstrated a large dependence on the published work alone in putting together their accounts on Sikhs.

Apart from Cunningham, Macauliffe is another historian who wrote extensively on Sikhism. His approach towards Sikhism was compassionate while evaluating the various sources of Sikhism and perceived them as one of an authentic dispensation upholding various political and moral attributes. The translations that he presented of the various scriptures of Sikhs were seen as the closest to the original work. However, his work cannot be appreciated and acknowledged beyond a level as he could not forgo the immediate context, he was situated in. He embraced certain prophecies uncritically as it advocated and supported the loyal Sikh scholarship and the colonial rule. However, Macauliffe was acknowledged by the Sikh community owing to his translations being close to Sikh original work and faithful interpretation of the traditions of Sikhs. Besides, he prepared the base of the succeeding Sikh writings by elaborating the scope of previous traditions of Sikhs.

This was also the time when the historical writing on the Sikhs by Indians started appearing. Syad Mohd. Latif in 1891 also published a huge volume underlining the Punjab History tracing the earlier times to the contemporary times. It dealt in a large way depicting that the British rule was immediately preceded by the Sikhs. The sources utilized by him were primarily Persian while his approach was largely inconsiderate legitimizing and upholding the colonial state.

There were several Indian scholars who tried to correct some of the erroneous perception of Sikhism which they thought was the product of colonial perceptions of Sikhism. It is exemplified through the monograph on the teachings and lessons of Guru Nanak published in 1908 by S.S. Thapar who was a lawyer and also served as a judge. Besides, the work on the life history of Guru Gobind Singh published in 1909 and of the Sikh Martyrs published in 1919 by a Professor Bhagat. L. Singh is equally significant.

As a response to the European writers, these natives made an attempt to rectify the existing misconceptions while laying emphasis on the uniqueness of the faith of Sikhism and the identity of the bearers of this faith. They tried to underline the authentic understanding of the movement of Sikhs, their institutions and doctrines. It is exemplified in the writings of S.Singh on Guru Nanak where the latter explicated the key principals to guide and give direction to the disciples of the religion. B.L.Singh also explicated how the predecessors of Guru Gobind Singh added to his achievements while asserting that one of the key components of Sikh tradition was martyrdom. Therefore, their work could be understood and acknowledged as one of the early manifestations of Sikh scholarship in the modern times as they engaged with the past of Sikhs to facilitate their concern and understating of their present and future of Sikhism.

There was another strand of historiography which was being developed by those who may be described as the native historians of the Punjab the beginning of which can be traced back to Gokul Chand Narang's doctoral study. He is recognized as an early Punjabi Hindu scholar and Author who illustrated and wrote on the Sikhs historical past in the twentieth century. He emphasized that Sikhism constituted a part of the Hindu sect while the Sikh Movement from the first Guru to the tenth Guru was largely a Hindu movement. With the efforts of Banda Bahadur who taught Hindus to overthrow the aggressors and rule added to making Sikhism nationalistic in nature while reducing its sectarian tendencies. He also emphasized the struggles and Khalsa achievements in the political realm following the Banda period, however he largely dwelt on loyalty to explicate the Sikh history during the British rule. With the post-independence era, however, he dwelt on the idea of solidarity among the Sikhs and Hindus and portrayed himself as a missionary of the same while advocating Hindu nationalism using the past history of Sikhism. His work also reflected a transition to the present studies on Sikhism following the British times.

This was also the time when a number of scholars on Sikhism started producing encyclopedic, scriptural, grammatical and textual, and philosophical work in English as well as Punjabi. The Historical understanding was prominent in the writings of Teja Singh and Ganda Singh. Teja Singh in his work primarily emphasized on tracing Sikhism as an authentic and original system in itself. Similarly, Karam Singh also attempted to collect various unpublished evidence on the Sikh dispensation in various languages including Persian, Punjabi and English.

Ganda Singh's work also reflected an inclination towards biography, issues reflecting a contemporary interest and the original source evidences. He is remembered as a prominent Punjab historian for his historical research on Sikhism contributing to the emerging trends demonstrated in Sikh historiography.

The work of Teja Singh as well as Ganda Singh while deploying a scientific approach to their writings claimed their historical writings to be written from a secular perspective avoiding any impartiality and prejudices. In their work, they delineated the period of the History of Sikhs into three phases. While the first phase comprised of the first ten Gurus who laid the foundation of the faith religiously ranging from 1469 to 1708; the second phase was laid by Banda Singh who established the political base of Sikhism from 1708- 1716. While the third phase was constituted from 1716- 1765 marked with persecution which resulting in acquiring power. They also laid emphasis on the fact that Sikhism emerged as a novel faith from its very genesis with the social order of Sikhs being based on its ideology and religious institutions. The Sikh ideology which represented the various ethics, ideas and values comprising Sikhism facilitated the Sikhs in responding to various circumstances in a constructive manner. Therefore, their insightful study demonstrated closeness with the sixteenth as well as eighteenth century sources and a considerable dependence on Sikh sources of contemporary times referring to the Guru Granth Sahib as well.

The historical writings on Sikhism started gaining further new dimension since 1960s with various historians writing anthologies as well as monographs on varied themes. Mentions may be made of the works by J.S. Grewal and S.S. Bal on Guru Gobind Singh. The importance of their works lies in the fact that they in order to understand the creative responses in different contexts and their status, focused on the various writings written by

the Gurus themselves. Another historian whose works have generated a fresh interest in the historiography of Sikh is W.H. McLeod. His two works *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (1968), and the *Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1975) has served to lend a new orientation to the continuing Sikh historiography.

A brief survey of the existing Sikh historiography is enough to indicate that it has grown tremendously since its inception. What is significant is the fact that the growth has been thematically and also in terms of discovery of new materials.

However, despite the rich repository of historical writings, the study of the spatial dimensions of Sikhism still remains a desideratum. There are not too many works which try to deal with the rise and growth of Sikhism in other regions. As far as the region of Jammu and Kashmir is concerned, the volume of historical writings on Sikh is certainly thin.

One of the important initiatives, however, has been taken by Commodore Dalbir Singh Sodhi's works titled *Historical Sikh Shrines Of Jammu And Kashmir*. The work largely based on his field work and therefore brings out several new facts about the Sikh Shrines of Jammu and Kashmir region. It also gives an insight of some important constituents related to the Sikh faith like, *Gurdwaras*, *Nisban Sahib* and *Guru Granth Sahib Ji*.

He mentioned almost all the *Sikh Shrines* which commemorate the visit of *Guru Nanak Dev Ji* and *Guru Hargobind Rai Ji* to *Jammu And Kashmir*. But, while providing information about all those *Sikh Shrines* which he mentioned in his work, few Shrines are covered by him completely whereas most of the *Shrines* lack complete information. For example, if we study the *Sikh Shrines* of *Ladakh* region then we come to know that *Commodore Dalbir Singh Sodhi* gives complete information about only one *Shrine* out of three present in *Ladakh*. He gives us information about *Gurdwara Pathar Sahib*, how it was constructed, its historical significance and also mentioned legend related to *Pathar Sahib* in his work but he provided very less information about *Datun Sahib*, *Leh* and *Gurdwara Charan Kamal Sahib Patshahi Pehli, Kargil*.

What emerges out of the discussion is the outline of historical writings on Sikhs in the modern times which were shaped in the previous century and a half. Therefore, the various gaps that existed in the eighteenth century in terms of the Historical writings on Sikhism were substantiated gradually with the considerate academic work of J.D. Cunningham in 1849. Gradually, there was also the emergence of Sikh scholars who were a product of English education. Followed by a host of other scholars, especially after 60's, studied Sikh history from various standpoints. What is, however, intriguing is the fact that despite increasing varied research output on Sikhism, the study of Sikhism at regional level has not yet been addressed adequately by historians. In the case of Jammu and Kashmir, there is hardly any work which deals with the history of Sikhism and Sikh shrines in a detailed manner. The present study is just a modest attempt to fill this gap of historiography.

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