
British Historical Writings on Punjab During The First Half of The 19th Century

Dr Anita Rathi*

The first sign of European interest in the Sikh community date back to the period of Warren Hastings, first British Governor General in India. This was the time around which the Sikhs were also actively engaged in establishing themselves as a political power in the north-western parts of the country.

Sikh studies began to emerge in the eighteenth century. In the earliest European references to the Sikhs there is no interest in the Sikh past. Writings from Lahore in 1606, Father Jerome Xavier mentions the execution of Guru Arjun without saying anything about his antecedents.¹ Writing from Delhi in 1716, John Surman and Edward Stephenson inform the Governor of Fort William about what was happening to Banda Bahadur and his fellow prisoners without showing any interest in the history of the Sikhs.²

It was the coincidence that when Banda and his followers were being executed in Feb 1716 A. D. at Delhi, an embassy of the British Governor of Fort William was present at the court of Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar. This embassy was the eyewitness of these executions and has left a glowing account of this persecution. They write, "It is not a little remarkable with what patience they undergo their fate, and to the last it has not been found that one apostatised from this new formed religion".³ This is the earliest known reference by the British to the religious zeal of the Sikhs.

The first European to take literary notice of the Sikhs was Major James Browne. His work 'History of the Origin and Progress of the Sikhs' is the earliest known historical writings on the Sikhs. He joined East India Company as a cadet in 1765 A.D. and rose to the rank of a captain in 1771 A.D. and was promoted to the rank of a Major in 1781 A.D. In 1782 A.D. Warren Hastings sent Browne as his personal representative to the court of Delhi.⁴

* Assistant Professor, History, R.G.P.G. College Meerut

¹ J.S. Grewal, *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, (Delhi, 1998), p.23.

² Ganda Singh, *Early European accounts of the Sikhs*, 1962, pp. 45-51.

³ Letters from John Surnam & Edward Stephenson to Robert Hedges, President.

⁴ G. Khurana, *British Historiography on the Sikh Power in Punjab*, Allied Publishers Private Limited, First edition 1985, p.2.

The time of two years at Delhi was utilized by Browne and he collected information regarding the Sikhs and the Marathas and he wrote, 'History of the Origin & Progress of the Sikhs'. In it he identifies the Sikhs with the Jat tribe and describes Sikhism as a form of 'reformed Hinduism'. He writes that Sikhism appears to bear that kind of relations to the 'Hindu religion' which the protestant does to the 'Romish'.⁵

Colonel A.L.H. Polier a Swiss engineer was the second to collect information on the striking power of the Sikhs. He talks about their polity and their tenets and manners. He gave us information of preliminary nature regarding the Sikhs.

The third reference of the Sikhs was produced by a British named Forster in 'A Journey from Bengal to England', who was a Civil Servant in East India Company. The importance of Forster's account is from that he gave us the information relating to the contemporary period, in which he describes Sikh society, polity, their mode of warfare, their rule and their religion.

The writings of Polier, Browne and Foster were pioneering attempts- first ever made by the British or Europeans to give a connected account of the Sikhs. The inquiry of these writers was chiefly directed towards discovering the fountain of strength of the Sikhs. They asked questions about the nature of the religion of the Sikhs. They asked questions about the nature of the religion of the Sikhs, the relationship of this religion with other Indian religions, the background and the profession of the converts to this faith and the motives which inspire them to embrace it, the socio-religious structure of the Sikh community and its potential to grow into a formidable power.

John Malcolm took up the thread from his predecessors in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Malcolm resolved to write about the Sikhs. According to Malcolm, the key to the understanding of the Sikhs and their political power lay in knowing their institutions. Malcolm described the Sikh institutions and their Government because he was influenced by Niebuhr's thought that, "the early History of every nation must be rather of institutions than of events; of class than of individuals; of customs than of laws."⁶

Next accounts of the Sikhs were presented by Captain William Murray and Henry Princep. Captain Murray had been staying for fifteen years in Punjab when he presented, 'Political and Historical Review of the Sikh States'. In his writing Murray did not form a good opinion of the contemporary Sikh society. The main causes behind

⁵ Ganda Singh, *Early European accounts of the Sikhs, Introduction to Browne's History of the Origin & Progress of the Sikh*, p. 554 also see in *Indian Studies: Past & Present*. Vol. 11, No. 4, p. 554.

⁶ G.P. Gooch, *History & Historians in the 19th Century*, p. 18.

these opinions were firstly, the lack of literacy among the Sikhs. Secondly, superstitions were widespread in the Punjab.⁷

After Princep W. G. Osborne wrote a Journal who was a nephew of Auckland, the Governor-General of India. Osborne's Journal 'The Court and Camp of Ranjit Singh' was published in 1840 A. D. with a detailed introduction which gives a brief idea of the religion of the Sikhs, circumstances which led to their rise as a political power, rise of Ranjit Singh and his relations with Shah Shuja and British etc.

Steinback was the next in series who wrote about Sikhs. He joined an infantry regiment in the Sikh army in 1836 A.D. He was an eye witness of the climax of Ranjit Singh's power as well as the confusion and anarchy which prevailed after the death of Maharaja in Punjab. He served under Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu from 1844 A. D. and remained there upto 1851 A. D. During this period he wrote a small book on the Punjab titled, 'The Punjab'. He has given a brief account of the history of the country of the Sikhs, its extent, history, commerce, production, government, manufactures, laws, religion etc.

Major G. Carmichael Smith who was a military man, was posted at Karnal before the out-break of the first Anglo-Sikh War. Here he wrote his book – 'A History of the Reigning Family of Lahore' in 1847 A.D, sometimes before the commencement of the Second Anglo – Sikh War. The main purpose behind this work was to give information about the condition of the Lahore Darbar to English readers. The work was compiled partly from native information collected from 'Seik Sardars' and European Officers' in the Seik Service, but chiefly from the notes of a Captain Gardner of 'Seik Artillery'.

Smith's work was followed by J.D.Cunningham. He is regarded as the most intelligent, shrewd and far-sighted historian of the Sikhs. To some, his work is admitted as the 'best history of the Sikhs by an English man'.⁸ Cunningham may be called a bridge, a connecting link among the British historians on the Sikhs since later 18th century till the beginning of the 20th century. He knitted along with its matching shades, the scattered threads of the British travellers and historians like Brown, Foster, Malcolm, Macgregor, Elphinstone, Orne, Murray, Wade, Osborne, G.B. Malleson, L.B. Griffin, Sir Denzil Ibbetson, Gordon, Bingley and Payne.

⁷ Dr. G. Khurana, British Historiography on the Sikh Power in Punjab, Allied Publishers Private Limited, first Published 1985, p. 37

⁸ Sir Gokul Chand Narang, Transformation of Sikhism, (first ed. 1912, revised fifth ed. New Delhi, 1960), p. 27

Joseph Davey Cunningham, 'Historian of the Sikhs', was born in Lambeth on June 9, 1812. He was a great scholar and possessed a great knowledge of History, Geography, Literature, Philosophy, Religion & Science. J.D. Cunningham's 'A History of the Sikhs' from the origin of the nation to the battles of Satluj, is a book of 392 pages consisting of nine chapters and 41 appendixes. Nine chapters expand from page 1 to 290 pages and last 102 pages (from 290 to 392) have 41 appendixes which show his great labour to accumulate his knowledge about Sikh traditions, values, cultures, ceremonies and principles etc.

Cunningham completed his History of Sikhs when the second Anglo-Sikh war was going on its full fury. But the exciting contemporary situation did not sweep Cunningham off his feet. He did not convert his work into a commentary on the campaigns of the war. He discussed all phases of the history of the Sikhs with a perfect sense of proportion which was sadly missing in almost all the earlier works.

Besides J.D. Cunningham's interpretation, his work is comprehensive one, yet it is full of sweeping generalizations, superficial remarks, fallacies and the factual inaccuracies. Some of the interpretations have become out of date on the basis of modern researches and sources. For example, his views regarding the oldest inhabitants of India, their language and religion are not acceptable. Similarly, his views regarding the immigration of the Jats have no basis. His comment like 'Buddhism is old' than Brahmanism is too sweeping generalizations. Being a true believer in Christianity he interprets the philosophical concept of the theory of Karma.