CHAPTER V
REGIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY - THE PUNJAB

The Punjab is another area which has received widespread scholarly attention of American academicians. A renowned contributor to Punjab Studies in the United States in N.G. Barrier, who apart from publishing a number of works on Punjab, has been instrumental in founding the Research Committee Punjab in 1966 which is aimed at bringing together specialists with a commitment to Punjab Studies, preparing a publication series, and holding research conferences. Other who have left an indelible imprint on the historiography of Punjab are Kenneth W. Jones, Richard Fox, Paul Wallace and W.H. Mc Leod.

The Punjab had a rich legacy of historiographical works written by British officials who began coming to Punjab for political reasons from the eighteenth century onwards. The pioneer of British historiography on the Punjab was a European writer A.L.H. Polier, who spent a major part of his life in India as an employee of the East India Company. He wrote a paper, The Siques or History of the Seeks in Delhi around the year 1777. This work was later edited by Ganda Singh in 1962. Though Polier's account is a brief one, it touches upon various aspects of eighteenth century Sikh society - religion, socio-political set-up, military system, customs, food habits and dress. Polier
gives a graphic account of the formidable martial and political institutions created by Guru Gobind Singh but notices with dismay "the disunity, internecine divisions and jealousies which prevented the Sikhs from being as strong as they might have been."¹

Major James Browne wrote a thirty - page treatise on the Sikhs, History of the Origin and Progress of the Sikhs which was published in the India Tracts, London, 1788. This brief text covers Sikh history from the birth of Guru Nanak upto the conclusion of the Sikh - Maratha treaty on 31 March 1785. A major emphasis of Browne’s account is on the activities of Guru Gobind Singh, Banda Bahadur and the struggle of the Sikhs against Ahmad Shah Abdali. He has given an invaluable introduction where he has elucidated their socio-political structures and factors which made the Sikhs a great martial race.

Amongst the early pioneers, the third writer was George Forster who wrote, A Journey From Bengal to England, 2 volumes, London, 1798. A major part of Forster’s volume - I is devoted to the study of Sikh history, culture and religion. To him "the Sikhs were an important factor...in the total picture of the contemporary India which he wanted to sketch."² Religion and their invincible perserverence played

2. Ibid., p. 7.

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a vital role in the emergence of the Sikhs as a political force in the eighteenth century. It was these remarkable qualities of the Sikhs which made them an important force to reckon with rather than the decline of the Mughal and Afghan power, which are considered to be merely "auxiliary causes" in the emergence of the Sikhs.

The British occupied Delhi in 1803 after defeating the Marathas. The vanquished Maratha chief Jaswant Rao Holkar sought the help of the Sikh Misldars against the British forces led by Lord Lake. Lord Lake, who was accompanied by a political officer, John Malcolm persuaded the Sikhs to remain neutral in the Anglo-Maratha contest. The British thus came into direct contact with the Sikhs in 1805 and Malcolm utilised this opportunity to collect information on Sikh history, customs and religion. Subsequently, he wrote a book, Sketch of Sikhs, London, 1812.

Malcolm’s account marks the beginning of the systematic evolution of British historiography on the Punjab. To collect his source material, besides reading the writings of Browne and Forster, he undertook a study of the Vars of Bhai Gurdas, the Janamsakhi Bhai Bala, the Adi Granth, the Dasam Padshah Ka Granth, Bakht Mal’s Khalsa Namah, the Vichitra Natak and the Sivarul Mutakhirin. Apart

from tracing the political history of Sikhs from the birth of Guru Nanak upto 1805, the major accent of Malcolm is on the study of Sikh institutions and customs, without an understanding of which, he states, no justice can be done by any scholar to Sikh studies.

According to Malcolm, the Sikhs had a theocratic form of Government and obeyed a "temporal chief" who in turn "preserves his power and authority by professing himself the servant of the Khalsa." For Malcolm "Khalsa" meant "the state or commonwealth" which was given a mystical connotation by the Sikhs "to imply that superior Government, under the protection of which they live..." The Gurmatta or great national council has been identified by Malcolm as the highest body of the Sikhs and exercised supreme authority over the Sikh federation or republic. The effects of these institutions upon the character and psyche of the Sikhs is meticulously analysed by Malcolm. He arrives at the conclusion that these institutions guaranteed to the Sikhs their basic rights and freedom, which in turn made them fearless and independent.

Two other important British writers on the Punjab were H T Prinsep, Origin of the Sikh Power in the Punjab and Political Life of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, Calcutta, 1834,

5. Ibid., pp. 114-115.
and W.G. Osborne, *The Court and Camp of Ranjeet* London, 1840. Both these works concentrate on Ranjit Singh, the unification of Punjab under his leadership, his court and his administrative policies. Prinsep's book also examines the nature and character of the Sikh *misls* in an objective manner.

Although these writers have done pioneering work to shed light on various aspects of Sikh society, and the history of Punjab, their accounts were not totally free from bias. The authors were either military officers or civil servants who wrote mainly to influence the direction of British policy towards the Sikhs. There was, however, a desire among them to know about the region, its inhabitants and their social customs, especially the so-called "bizarre" ones which were not easily comprehensible to the Europeans. This made their writings appear somewhat unsympathetic and not too accurate.

J.D. Cunningham, considered to be one of the greatest historians on the Sikhs, ushered in a new freshness in Punjab historiography due to "his capacity to evaluate Sikh society on its own terms and within its own framework." Unlike most Europeans, he was free from bias and had a great regard for historical facts, authenticity of sources and objectivity. He wrote *A History of the Sikhs* in 1849 and

completed it when the Second Anglo-Sikh War was being fought. His account shows a deep admiration and understanding of Sikh culture, religion, history and martial qualities. He was in fact critical of the British policy towards this sensitive state and advocated a more humane approach by them in order to win Sikh support in Anglo-Afghan relations.

A perusal of A History of the Sikhs testifies to Cunningham's superb scholarship and his knowledge of classical contemporary literary works like Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire; Ranke's Ottoman Empire; Thirlwell's History of Greece; Prichard's Physical History of Mankind, etc. The writer who seems to have exercised the most profound impact on Cunningham was Leopold Von Ranke, as is evident from his tremendous emphasis on facts approached with an open mind.

Cunningham has correctly gauged religion to be the single most important aspect which governs all actions of the Sikhs. But he found the Sikh religion to be free from bigotry, fanaticism and the "panacea to India's spiritual and physical ills" since it is based on universal brotherhood and tolerance. Cunningham is also appreciative of Sikh institutions like the Khalsa or the State which belongs to the whole body of Sikhs and was a "theocratic

7. Ibid. p. 133.
confederate federalism" because "God was their helper and only judge, community of faith or object was their moving principle, and warlike array, the devotion to steel of Gobind, was their material instrument." Though Cunningham's terminology might not be relevant today, his observations were significant at the time when he wrote his book.

He also had a high opinion of Ranjit Singh and his Government, which was despotic, a direct contradiction to the democratic traditions of Sikhism. Cunningham has explained this phenomenon by stating that Ranjit Singh only "appeared to be an absolute monarch in the midst of willing and obedient subjects. But he knew that he merely directed into a particular channel a power which he could neither destroy nor control". The spirit of the Khalsa was utilised by him for expansion of the Sikh Kingdom, which was subsequently annexed by the British only due to their connivance with the treacherous Sikh chieftains, and not due to any superior British military tactics or martial qualities.

With Cunningham's book, early British historiography on the Sikhs came to an end. Despite limitations, these authors have provided subsequent

generations of researchers with a rich legacy of source material for research on the Punjab.

Systematic study on the Punjab began around the middle of the nineteenth century when the British annexed this state and it became an integral part of the British dominions. Enough source material for research already existed at the time of Punjab's annexation in 1849. This was largely because the people of Punjab possessed a deep sense of history and the "vitality of the Sikh faith produced many biographies, chronologies, and collections of religious works..." Apart from that, myths, folk tales and romances incorporated in modern Punjabi literature also aroused the keen interest of scholars towards the study of the history and culture of Punjab. Political unification during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign "in turn generated fresh research material, primarily chronicles and documents on religious endowments, local history and land revenue...."

With the advent of the British, attempts were made by them for the orderly registration and preservation of these documents in order to know about the land and its people. The British took vigorous steps to develop the historiography of the Punjab through census and settlement reports and official government gazetteers. In addition, the

11. Ibid.
introduction of modern education "inculcated western subject matter and supplied fresh models for organisation, literary efforts, historiography and ideological debate."\textsuperscript{12} In this new intellectual climate a number of learned works re-examining Punjab tradition and civilization came to be written.

Although various aspects of Punjab's history were examined and scholarly works written, these tended to be narrative rather than analytical and often lacked depth. This flaw accrued largely because the partition of Punjab in 1947 destroyed innumerable libraries, records and private papers. "Moreover, politicalization of the Punjab involved a wide range of groups, classes, and religious communities, which produced a barrage of documents (tracts, books, newspapers) in three major languages."\textsuperscript{13} Consequently, Punjab specialists at the very outset had to make their choice on the language, community and even country they wanted to concentrate upon for purposes of erudite research. The result was that research institutes in both India and Pakistan tended to produce work with was repetitive and biased.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. xix.

\textsuperscript{13} N. Gerald Barrier, "Regional Political History: New Trends in the Study of British India" in Paul Wallace, ed., \textit{Region and Nation in India}, Delhi, 1985, p. 128.
Further, the source material on Punjab also was inclined to be rather lop-sided in scope. This was largely because "prior to 1867 the British Museum and the India Office Library did not acquire Indian publications methodically. Librarians scanned a number of sources for titles and then attempted to purchase whatever seemed worthwhile. The earliest holdings thus reflect the interests of individuals and the availability of ordered books,"\textsuperscript{14} with a heavy tilt towards the study of racial, geographical, religious entities and politics. The cultural approach to the study of Punjab history was totally lacking. The British identified Punjab with the Sikhs and tended to neglect other communities inhabiting the region. One important facet to be overlooked was the functioning of administrative institutions which were in the hands of the Mughals right from the time of Guru Nanak till the invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali. Infact, the medieval cultural personality of Punjab and the elements comprising it which gave it a cosmopolitan cultural entity were not examined.\textsuperscript{15}


After 1960 American scholars began to take a keen interest in the history and culture of Punjab. Between 1966 and 1975 five conferences on Punjab were sponsored by the Research Committee on Punjab where methodology, research proposals and the progress on long-term research projects were discussed. The task of proper identification and cataloguing of important archival sources on Punjab was also undertaken. Despite various limitations, "significant themes of Punjab politics have been studied - the evolution of religious revivalism and consequent communal organisation, the relationship between provincial and national politics, and the Unionist Party"\textsuperscript{16} by American social scientists. Also a Punjab Data Bank has been established at the University of Missourie, Columbia, mainly due to the ceaseless efforts of N. Gerald Barrier. But the research by American scholars on the whole is concentrated on post-annexation Punjab, especially the nature of British administration, the role of Punjab in the freedom struggle and the rise of communalism.

N.G. Barrier has worked on wide-ranging topics pertaining to Punjab. His name is synonymous with bibliography and some of the important bibliographic works compiled by him are: \textit{The Punjab in Nineteenth Century Tracts: An Introduction to the Pamphlet Collections in the British Museum and India Office}, Michigan, 1969; \textit{Punjab

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.}

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Barrier also took the lead in studying British Indian census reports because he was convinced that these censuses were a premier source for the study of colonial India. The book, *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, (Delhi, 1981) edited by N.G. Barrier is a collection of essays by learned scholars on the diverse ways in which statistical data from census reports is useful for various types of social, economic and political research. Kenneth W. Jones' essay assesses census treatment of "religion" by the British and is confined mainly to the Punjab. Jones emphasises that the British viewed Indian culture "ethnologically" in their census reports, which in turn created amongst Indians a "new conceptualization of religion as a community, an aggregate of individuals united by a formal definition and given characteristics based on qualified data."17 Jones argues that many Punjabi Hindus

thus identified "religious communities" with political interest groups and tried to maintain the predominance of the "Hindu community" at the expense of others. This in turn led to the rise of communalism in the Punjab. Taken as a whole, this volume by Barrier examines the relationship between the census and the structure of British rule during the various stages of their hegemony over India.

Sometimes referred to as "the Ulster of India," the Punjab has been seen as a communal cockpit and a backwater of nationalism, a source of irritation and frustration for Congress leaders and a potential powder keg by the British raj."¹⁸ Since 1947 there has been a revival of interest and scholarship on the Punjab mainly due to the prominence of the Sikh community not only in Punjab but all over the world.

The role of the Press in Punjab politics and its contribution to Indian nationalism have also been evaluated by N.G. Barrier. According to him, "the balance between cultural unity and diversity that has contributed to the vitality of Indian civilization involves the effective communication of ideas and symbols over time and space... Tracts, books, and newspapers became major avenues for the transfer of ideas, and for the defense and strengthening of

Indian culture." The press played an important part in creating a national public opinion which eventually paved the way for India's independence. Recent research on Indian politics concentrates more on local organizations, groups and individuals and their contribution to Indian independence. In keeping with the trends prevalent in other regions, Punjabi journalists too concentrated on local and parochial issues and problems. Therefore, there existed a deep affinity between the evolution of Punjab politics and the press in the late nineteenth century. This is the line of Barrier's argument in his paper, "Punjab Politics and the Press, 1880-1910" published in Aspects of India, edited by Margeret H Case (New Delhi, 1986).

In another volume, The Punjab Press, 1880-1905, edited by N.G. Barrier and Paul Wallace (East Lansing, 1970) the authors have painstakingly listed the various newspapers published in Punjab and the neighbouring princely states between 1880 and 1905, their place of publication, frequency of publication, approximate circulation, publisher, editor, political attitudes and general content. This volume is an invaluable work of reference for a wide range of scholars and also suggests possible areas for further research. The authors see a strong communal orientation of much of the

Punjab Press even before the introduction of separate electorates and the emergence of Gandhi and Jinnah on the national scene.

What led to the emergence of Communalism in Punjab between 1870 and 1908 has been assessed by Barrier in another article, "The Punjab Government and Communal Politics, 1870-1908" published in the Journal of Asian Studies. Volume 27, No. 3, May, 1968. What emerges from this study is that the British fostered Communal politics in the Punjab much before the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 by creating a clash of interests over representation in the municipal committees and employment in the State subordinate bureaucracy. This "creation of an institutional framework for communal competition"20 was done in a most subtle and gradual manner. The British also hoped to widen the gulf between the two communities over the twin issues of recruitment in the armed forces and cow protection.

Another aspect of the historiography on Punjab to receive widespread scholarly attention of American historians is the role of the Arya Samaj in the Congress and in the emergence of Hindu militancy which in turn led to political and communal unrest in the Punjab in 1907. In "The Arya Samaj and Congress Politics in the Punjab 1894-1908" N. Gerald Barrier investigates the relation of the Arya Samaj

to Punjab nationalistic politics preceding the Morley - Minto Reforms. "During this period the Samaj was probably the most important factor in determining the character and direction of the Punjab Congress. Association with the Arya Samaj gave educated Hindus a political orientation and impetus to carry on political work. From 1879 onwards Aryas began to participate in and finally dominate the Punjab Congress...."\(^21\)

The Arya Samaj movement and its role in Punjab politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been studied in a most comprehensive and exhaustive manner by Kenneth W. Jones. His indefatigable research and exceptional insights give us a clear perception of the "forces of cultural change and modernization unleashed by British conquest" of the Indian subcontinent. He states that with the advent of the British, "new forms of affiliation and action arose following the establishment of the British Raj and the resultant introduction of a foreign culture. Although the forces behind this conquest remained constant for much of British India, regional patterns of traditional life, of social structure and of historical experience molded behaviour and determined cultural

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adaptation.\footnote{Kenneth W. Jones, \textit{Arya Dharam: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth Century Punjab}, Berkeley, 1976, p. 1.} And it is this feature of Punjab history that has been examined from different perspectives by Kenneth Jones.

Kenneth W. Jones' most imposing work on the Arya Samaj is the epic \textit{Arya Dharam: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth Century Punjab} (Berkeley, 1976) - a detailed study of the creation, organization and impact of the Arya Samaj movement on the socio-cultural history of the Punjab. Kenneth W. Jones has gone through "complex and extremely diverse" types of source material which are generally "polemical and propagandistic" to give an objective account of the Arya Samaj and its various activities.

More recently Kenneth Jones has edited \textit{The New Cambridge History of India}, Vol. III, No. 1: \textit{Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India} (Cambridge, 1989) - An extremely useful volume which explores the religious issue within the Indian sub-continent during the colonial period, a burning issue in India even today. The chapter on Punjab begins with a narration of the geographical setting of this strategically situated state and then goes on to trace the various transitional movements among the Sikhs (Nirankaris and Namdharis) and the Hindus of Punjab (the Arya Samaj, the Dev Samaj and the Sanatan Dharam). To counter the effects of the religious crusade sweeping through Punjab, the Sikhs
launched a reform or acculturative movement within Sikhism in the form of the Singh Sabha movement. The Singh Sabha were mainly concerned with the question of Sikh identity: i.e., were the Sikhs a part of Hinduism or not? "The more radical Sikhs claimed that Sikhism was separate from Hinduism, while others maintained it was a subdivision of Hinduism. The Arya Samaj added more fuel to this debate" and a raging controversy developed over the issue whether the Sikhs were to be governed by Hindu law or not?

The last section of the chapter on Punjab is devoted to the "messianic" Mirza Ghulam Ahmad who launched an acculturative movement among the Muslims of the Punjab. Ahmad drew up a comprehensive programme for "rejuvenating" Islam and "stressed the fundamental principles of Islam and the duties of all Muslims. His claims to religious authority rested on the visions and messages he received from God." Due to his charisma, he gained instant popularity and his followers came to be called "Ahmadiyahs." But Mirza Ghulam Ahamd's rebuttal of the doctrines of other religions, including orthodox Islam, created a polemical situation in Punjab which led to a growing religious discord and "communal consciousness" amongst various groups.


The first essay analyzes the meteoric growth of the Arya Samaj movement and shows how the Punjab with its diverse religious communities provided fertile soil for religious controversy. "By 1888 the militant wing of the Arya Samaj intensified its criticism of the three great enemies, the "Kernanis," "Kuranis" and "Puranis" - Christians, Muslims and Orthodox Hindus. In addition there was considerable anti-Sikh agitation throughout the late eighteen-eighties"25 which led to increasing tension and discord between the different religious communities in the Punjab.

In the second essay, the author traces the history of Hindu - Sikh relations which were traditionally cordial as "ties of kinship often linked the two communities within the same Jati (caste) and even the same family."26 However, with the passage of time, "Arya criticisms of contemporary Sikhism grew steadily more shrill" and even for Dayanand,


"Sikhism was one of those innumerable cults of Hinduism, to be noted, refuted and then forgotten."\textsuperscript{27}

With the Arya condemnation of Sikhism becoming more articulate and uncompromising, the Sikhs naturally baulked and retaliated. Public attacks against Sikhism heightened the Sikhs' sense of self-awareness and separation from Hinduism... Aryas, in their own search for a new identity based on a respectable and defensible Hinduism, shorn of much of its traditional structure, contributed to the destruction of bonds between the Sikh and Hindu communities."\textsuperscript{28}

Kenneth Jones, along with W. Eric Gustafson, is co-editor of Sources on Punjab History, (Delhi, 1975), a collection of nine erudite essays by learned scholars on the various types of sources that can be of immense help for research on Punjab history. This project was sponsored by the Research Committee on Punjab to facilitate serious academic enquiry pertaining to "the patterns of interaction between British and South Asian Civilization, the modernization of religious life, changes in family and rural social norms, in patterns of land-ownership, in literary development, the nature of economic change at the village, district and state level, the role of traditional

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 459-60.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., pp. 466-475.
aristocrats in a modernizing world to give an all-encompassing view of the Punjab.

The anthropological approach to the study of Punjab society and culture was first applied by Tom G. Kessinger in his revolutionary study - *Vilvatpur, 1848-1968, Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village*, (Berkeley, 1974). This lead and technique has been subsequently taken up by a number of scholars, including Richard G. Fox, an Anthropologist on the faculty of Duke University.

On Punjab, Richard Fox has written, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley, 1985) wherein he has examined the cultural changes within the Sikh community of the Punjab from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1920s. He had done this by a thorough analysis of the Sikh psyche, their interaction with the British and other Punjabi communities. The primary aim of the author in this work is to try and re-define "culture" by keeping in mind the twin goals of the book - "a better understanding of anti-colonial protest in the Punjab and a better conception of culture... by means of a specific imagery: the Singhs as lions, a martial, courageous and stalwart species of men and women, but also one periodically mastered and used by British."  

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Fox argues that culture is always in the making - it is a continuous process and not a 'structured entity'. "The significant point is that a culture exists in a specific time and place and as the result of a field of differing interests, oppositions, and contradictions. There is no weight of tradition, only a current of action."31

In order to substantiate his hypothesis, Fox has covered diverse subjects in this volume, like the development of rural and urban classes, the use of religious identity and the gradual transformation of the Sikhs from loyalists to antagonists of the British regime, due to the presence of colonialism. This volume gives analytic insights of Punjab society and culture and concludes with a description of the Sikh attempts to gain control of their Gurdwaras in the 1920's.

No account of the historiography on Punjab can be complete without mention of WH Mc Leod, widely acknowledged as one of the leading scholars of Sikh Studies in the West. Though a native of New Zealand, he spent a number of years in India at the Christian Institute of Sikh Studies which was founded at Batala in 1966. By his invaluable work he has been instrumental in inspiring a large number of western scholars, especially Americans, to work on various aspects of Punjab history. WH Mc Leod who is an authority on the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh scriptures, has written extensively

31. Ibid., p. 197.
on Sikh history, including the problem of scarce objective, non-religious source material which the modern researcher encounters. Some of WH Mc Leod’s highly acclaimed publications are: Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion (Oxford, 1968); Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays (Delhi, 1975); Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam Sakhis (Oxford, 1980); Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism (Manchester, 1984); Punjabis in New Zealand: A History of the Punjabi Migration, 1890-1940 (Amritsar, 1986); Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity (Oxford, 1989); and Popular Sikh Art (Delhi, 1991).

The recent unrest in Punjab and the presence of a large number of Sikhs settled in America ensures that Americans continue to evince keen interest in this sensitive state and write about its different facets, even though some of the recent works have attracted vitriolic criticism from Sikh fundamentalist groups, both in India and the United States.