Chapter 7

REFLECTIONS IN RETROSPECT

The aim of this study was to focus on social transformation in Sikh society under colonial rule during the period 1849-1919. The theme is rather wide in scope and demands detailed analysis at several levels to make a complete assessment. As the chapter on the overview of literature clarifies, no single work takes into account the census information on numbers and demographic data, the demographic change in the twentieth century in terms of numbers and other demographic features, the beliefs and practices of the Sikhs, the question of identity, and the political aspirations of the Sikh community in the period from 1849 to 1919. This work is an attempt to understand some elements of transformation in all these areas. It is clear that profound changes did occur in Sikh society during this period, covering almost all aspects of life economic, social, cultural and political. These changes amounted virtually to a social transformation of the Sikh people. The term social transformation obviously includes social structure, cultural norms and political attitudes of those who called themselves 'Sikhs' and were recognized as such by others.

In the early census reports, no definition of a Sikh was explicitly provided and in the beginning the Sikhs were bracketed with the Hindus, though the works of the European writers made a very clear distinction between the Sikhs and other communities. In the census taken in the beginning of British rule the Sikhs are seen as in danger of vanishing. In such observations, the Sikhs were equated with the Singhs. The major change witnessed in this period was a phenomenal increase in the number of the Sikhs, including the Keshdharis. In addition to a natural increase, the change in numbers was due to a profound alteration in the self-image of the Sikhs. The number of Sikhs increased from 6.5 per cent of the population in 1881 to about 12.3 percent of the population in 1921, and 14.2 per cent in 1931. The majority of the Sikhs still belonged to the central districts of the Punjab. In
1931 the highest percentage of Sikhs was in the districts of Amritsar, Ferozepur, Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Lahore. The proportion of females to males remained low throughout the period though by 1931 there was a slight improvement, with 793 females to 1,000 males. Till 1911 the Sikhs were at par with the Hindus in literacy and the Sikh women were leading in the area of vernacular education. The decade from 1911 to 1921, and even from 1921 to 1931, did not see much change in the proportion of literate Sikhs. The reason for this apparent ‘stagnation’ was thought to be the addition of comparatively illiterate Mazhabis to the Sikh community. On the whole, literacy was on the rise among the Sikhs. The Sikhs in our period remained largely rural and continued to follow their traditional occupations with agriculture as the main occupation. This carries the implication that the proportion of Sikhs in the new professions was in considerable. The census reports, in all probability, did not take adequate notice of this kind of change.

The number of Keshdharis was on the increase and about 88 per cent of the Sikh population was Keshdhari by 1931, while 7 per cent was Sahajdhari and 5 per cent of the Sikhs returned as sects analogous to other religions. The number of Sikhs returning their sects in 1931 was much smaller as compared to that of the earlier census. The question of identity appears to have induced the people to follow the outward symbols of Sikh religion more meticulously than they were known to have observed in the immediate past.

The increase in numbers was due not only to the change in the manner of returns in 1911 but also to the emphasis of the Sikhs on their identity and due to the prachar by the Singh Sabhas which advocated the importance of a casteless social order in accordance with the teachings of the Gurus. The transformation of self-image conforming to a casteless order was so widespread that it percolated to the village level with the ordinary Sikh not returning his caste. A culmination of this attitude could be seen at the Darbar Sahib when the Khalsa baradari was led by the teachers of Khalsa College to offer prasad. The practice of allotting fixed hours and particular spaces for the use of the Sikhs from the ‘untouchable’ castes was done away with at the Darbar Sahib, the holiest of holies, and the other major shrines, on demand.
from the ordinary practising Sikhs. The Singh Sabha reformers carried forward the reform begun by the Nirankaris and the Namdharis in the early nineteenth century in their attempt to revive the norms and mores of the early Sikh tradition.

What was new in the colonial situation was not the ideas and institutions so much as the means of spreading the message of reform. British rule had brought with itself modern methods of communication and organization. Following the example of the Christian missionaries the Singh Sabha reformers made the maximum use of printing technology and institutional organization. The numbers of books, tracts and newspapers began to increase with the passage of time. Historical works on the Sikhs and by the Sikhs, with a target audience of the Sikhs, was addressed to other sat the same time. The writings of Giani Gian Singh and Bhai Vir Singh became very popular. These writers relied heavily on the works of early Sikh writers in order to emphasize the continuity of their message of a distinct identity of the Sikhs.

In retrospect, a small but significant number of Sikhs can be seen at the forefront of the Singh Sabha movement. These Sikhs represented the emerging middle class among the Sikhs. They were the ones who had taken advantage of the institutions, educational and others, of the British and carved a niche for themselves in the newly emerging social order. The impact of their activities can be seen in the census reports of the British and the emerging political consciousness of the Sikh people. They managed to pass on their message of reform and revitalization to the Sikhs in the rural areas and to mobilize their support for the Sikh causes.

This period saw a return to the teachings of the Gurus. An emphasis was laid on understanding of the various aspects of every day life, whether it was the education of women or the political aspirations of the Sikhs or the relevance of the prevailing beliefs and practices in the light of the word of the Guru contained in the Guru Granth. The Sikh society was sought to be rid of the excess baggage of un-Sikh rituals it had acquired in the course of its
history. The guide of the Singh reformers in this endeavour was the eternal Guru, the Guru Granth Sahib.

Changes were sought to be brought about in the self-perception of the Sikhs with regard to their unique identity. The beginning was made with the removal of idols from the precincts of the Darbar Sahib and there was an increasingly popular demand that the Sikh shrines should be controlled by the Sikhs themselves. The Sikhs began to subscribe to the more precise definition of a Sikh by redefining their main religious ceremonies as observed in the society of believers. Changes were sought to be made in various Sikh ceremonies relating to birth, initiation, marriage and death.

In the beginning, the Anand Marriage was advocated by the Nirankaris and Namdhari. With the intervention of political leaders like the Nabha Prince, Ripudaman Singh, and the intellectual leadership of men like Bhai Kanh Singh of Nabha, public support was gathered for the Anand Marriage Bill and it was legalized as the Sikh way of marriage, becoming a permanent feature of Sikh practice in the future. Practices regarding death also underwent a change and the throwing of ashes into the Ganges was considered an un-Sikh act. Kiratpur became the destination on such occasions. Sikh beliefs were clearly delineated and clarified and Sikhs in large numbers were won over to the Singh Sabha understanding of the Sikh tradition.

The activity in the area of transformation of social values was based on the premise that the Sikh Gurus had abandoned the previous path and prescribed new norms for the universal order they brought into existence. The only means of having an intense look into the past was an examination of the scriptures, works of the early Sikh writers, religious literature, and writings of the respected theologians of the past. The historians, political and social leaders, religious heads of institutions, writers and poets tried to discover their society and religion as it was supposed to have been in the ‘golden past’. They came to the conclusion that Sikhism had always been an autonomous religion and had always projected a different personality from the beginning. The Gurus had laid down norms and values new to the practice of faith in
India and had called into existence mental attitudes and transformed the mode of worship and object of worship. All this was brought home to the Sikh public through their publications and prachar, leading to the reaffirmation of faith in the Sikh society and reflected in the increasing numbers of the Sikhs in the census reports.

The intensity of self awareness led the Sikhs to increasing participation in political activity. The Singh Sabhas, which in the beginning had as their objectives only reform and the assertion of loyalty to the British, began to create political awareness among the Sikhs. After the beginning made at Amritsar and Lahore in the 1870’s, Singh Sabhas spread all over the Punjab. The threat from the Arya Samaj and Christian missionaries who had managed to get two high profile converts from among the Sikhs was considered real enough. In 1888, came a break with the Arya Samaj. The Khalsa Diwan in its farewell address to the Governor General in 1888 expressed the view that the Sikhs should not be ‘confounded with Hindus’; in all respects they should be treated as ‘a separate community’. The death of Dyal Singh Majithia in 1898, and the subsequent ruling of the court, gave a new impetus to the Sikh-Hindu debate. Bhai Kahn Singh published his well known work, Ham Hindu Nahin, as an affirmation of a distinct Sikh identity.

After the annexation of the Punjab, the British had tried consciously to involve the aristocracy of the Sikhs, the landed families and the rulers of nearby states in public affairs, partly to legitimize the new government and partly as a help in administering the province. The British had also tried to control the affairs and institutions of the Sikh community by means of appointment of the sarbrah of the Darbar Sahib, the central Sikh shrine. In addition to this the Sikhs had a large presence in the British army. Eventually, however, the British administrators did not succeed.

A transformation in political perceptions was dictated by the gradual relaxing of tight political control of the British over the Indian population. With the corresponding rise in political aspirations came awareness of the importance of the politics of numbers. The result was the formation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902 for coordinating the activities of the Singh
Sabhas. Sikh ‘political’ activity in the 1900’s involved conflict with the British over some basic and volatile issue: the issue of the Khalsa College, the agitation of 1907 in the canal colonies, the Anand Marriage Bill, the definition of Sikh for the census, the issue of the kirpan, the wall of the Rikabganj Gurdwara, and the issue of control over the Gurdwaras.

The formation of the Ghadar Party, though limited in scope, brought about a qualitative change in the minds and aspirations of the Sikhs. With the continued failure of the Sikhs to win enough seats in the Punjab Legislative Council, and the Lucknow Pact of 1916, the Sikhs realized their precarious position in the Punjab and began to agitate for adequate representation. In 1916-17, requests became demands. This change in the tenor of Sikh politics, involving direct action and confrontation as a means of protecting Sikh interests, was not acceptable to the Chief Khalsa Diwan. To meet the new challenges the Central Sikh League was founded in 1919 as the first political party of the Sikhs, committed to ‘freedoms’ of several kinds, in opposition to the British.

On the whole, the Sikhs of 1920 were far removed from the Sikhs of 1850. Their transformation embraced social change, a new cultural awareness and a new political articulation. One end of their response was the early Sikh tradition and the other, the challenges of the colonial environment.