According to the British historian G.R. Elton (The Practice of History, 1976), the primary concern of historical studies today is with 'transformation of things (people, institutions, ideas and so on) form one state to another'. In the sense of 'thorough change in form or character' (The New Oxford Dictionary, 1998) transformation can be both induced and spontaneous and is to be studied in relation to continuities. The term 'social' for this study comprehends social structure, cultural norms, ideological differentiation, communitarian cohesion, self-image, and social and political consciousness of all those who called themselves 'Sikhs*', or were designated as such in the contemporary sources.

As evident from the researcher’s M.Phil dissertation ('Social Change in the Early Nineteenth Century Punjab'), a greater interaction could be effected between the state and society under Ranjit Singh which provided impetus for social mobility among Sikhs through participation in the ruling class, the army and religious life. The Sikh peasantry also benefited from the state’s preference for the actual tillers of the soil. Even the artisans gained materially from the agrarian policies of the state, its military requirements and the demands of an expanding ruling class. The structure of opportunities had altered during the early nineteenth century in a manner that despite their small numbers, Sikhs emerged as the relatively privileged sections of society as a community.

The momentum gained in the state of Ranjit Singh was lost only temporarily after annexation in 1849. Within a decade, the response of the Sikhs to the happenings of 1857 changed the British perceptions about them, and the Sikh aristocracy and the peasantry came to be viewed as the ‘natural allies' of the empire. Barring the Namdhari, the leaders of the religious opinion also enjoyed the rulers’ confidence and patronage. However, with the emergence of the first generation of the educated middle class among the Sikhs in the 1870s, their responses to

* The title page uses the term ‘Sikh’ in the singular because of the technical requirement of retaining the title as it somehow figures in the University records.
the Raj - both as professional persons and as the leaders of the Sikh opinion - became more varied and complex. The Singh Sabhas, Khalsa Diwans and printing presses, among others, became the institutional expressions of a new ferment, with implications for the social, cultural and political existence of the community, for intra-community and inter-community relations, and for attitudes towards colonial rule.

While some of these developments were generated by the British policies, measures and institutions, in some other respects the Sikh community underwent spontaneous transformations in response to the new ideas, situations and priorities. Some of the developments maturing in the second half of the nineteenth century can be traced to the earlier period. Similarly, some processes beginning after 1849 continued until the end of colonial rule, but the broad pattern of socio-economic and socio-cultural transformation was set by 1919, the year in which the Central Sikh League was founded by the emergent middle class to articulate a different idiom of politics in association with the Indian National Congress. By this time the attitudes of the Sikhs towards the Raj had also been affected by the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the Martial Law as well as the indifference of the administration to the issue of the control of Gurdwaras. The year 1919 may thus be regarded as the beginning of a different form of politico-cultural articulation by the Sikhs in both urban and rural areas.

The broad area of this study is the plains of the British province of the Punjab, minus the five districts covered by the North West Frontier Province, the Delhi territory and the Princely states by and large. It is assumed that the historical experience of this region both before and after the establishment of British rule had a close bearing on the social transformation among the Sikhs.

II

The Sikhs have received considerable scholarly attention. During the period of study itself several British administrators took interest in their past and present for political military and economic reasons. After 1947 a far more substantial volume of work has been produced on the pre-independence period, adding new areas of interest. Even when dwelling on social and economic aspects,
much of this work is underpinned by politics: 'nationalist' and 'communitarian', and above all, the politics of the Punjabi collaborators of the Raj. Another important area of interest is socio-religious reform. By now, the volume of publications specifically on the Sikhs is large and important enough to be treated in a separate chapter. The intense debate in recent decades on several key issues has imparted an almost autonomous character to Sikh Studies. The present study, however, is consciously located in the discipline of history, remaining within its methodological boundaries. A large variety of contemporary and near contemporary sources in Punjabi and English have been tapped, and the received wisdom has been reviewed in the first chapter.

To stay close to the ground realities, and as a starting point, the empirical evidence available on the Sikhs in the early census reports has been analysed among others, in terms of numbers, distribution, occupations, sects, and gender. The first half a century of colonial rule had a bearing on change in the early decades of the twentieth century which has been taken up in a separate chapter. The fourth chapter studies the beliefs and practices of what may be termed as the mainstream Sikhism and demarcates it from the sectarian groups.

The issue of identity perplexed the contemporary observers as well as modern scholars. One chapter has therefore been devoted to this complex problem which takes into account objective realities and subjective self-image in relation to the 'others' in a changing historical situation. As a product of these variables identity cannot be static or 'fixed' nor can there be 'homogeneity' among all members of the community sharing a consciousness of distinction from others. During the period of study the question of 'Sikh' identity also got enmeshed with that of 'Hindu' identity. An attempt has been made to address these problems in the discussion of identity.

It would be unrealistic to assume that the Sikh aristocracy, peasantry, religious leaders and the emergent middle classes would have remained unaffected by the policies and measures of the government. Their evolving consciousness and the changing political attitudes and expressions are the subject matter of the sixth chapter. The last chapter ties up the various facets of social transformation among the Sikhs during the first three quarters of colonial rule. This is followed by a Glossary of non-English words, and a
Bibliography of primary and secondary sources consulted for the present study. The illustrations appearing in this study have been borrowed from Bhai Kahn Singh’s *Mahakosh*, and Professor B.N. Goswamy’s *Piety and Splendour*.

III
This study is based on a set of assumptions. First, even when the Sikhs constituted a distinct religious community during the period of study, they did not constitute a monolithic or undifferentiated segment of the society in the region. Second, to account for transformation in different aspects of their life. It would be necessary to evaluate the important role played by the colonial state, its policies, measures and institutions. At least two other factors have to be taken into account. There was a dialectical relationship between the new attitudes of the non-Sikhs towards the Sikhs and the attitudes of the Sikhs towards them. Most importantly, the Sikhs under British rule were not writing on a clean slate; their historical experience, particularly the legacies of the past century were as important as their experience in the colonial situation. Therefore, an approach with this three-pronged view of causation may explain the phenomenon on social transformation among the Sikhs in the Punjab more adequately than what we find in the existing literature on the subject.

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