



Research Paper

## Socio-Religious Revivalism and Resurgence in Punjabi Society: A Study of Sikh Community

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**ABSTRACT :** Colonial modernity in British Punjab resulted in introduction of not only new policies but also led to spread of Christianity. The changes at the level of culture and intellect were multilayered. The paper focuses on the Sikh community to show how it strengthened its identity by focuses on tenets of Sikhism. Steps were taken to bring education to community and resources were generated from within. The presence of British colonial master also impacted these efforts when differences also arose from within.

**KEY WORDS:** Sikh religion, Zenana mission, Singh Sabha movement, Khalsa College.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Mid-nineteenth century Punjab saw the emergence of a number of organizations within the Hindus, Muslim and Sikh communities. These organizations on the one hand sought to modernize these communities, and on the other fostered and strengthened religious consciousness among these groups and stressed religion as the dominant form of identity, inculcating religious beliefs. The process invariably fostered two forms of confrontation involving group identity. Firstly, there was intra-communal activity within one religion. Secondly, there was emergence of inter-communal activities which widened the gulf between major religious communities.

The focus of present article is to explore this process in the Sikh community. The context was provided by colonial governance. The response of Sikhs was multi layered. They were aware of loss of political power and the methods adopted by the rulers to assert their power. The initiation of multiple activities connected with strengthening of Sikhs community saw focus on multiple activities connected with education and Sikhism. The Singh Sabha Movement was joined by Sikhs belonging to various classes. There were deliberations and contestations within community.

Between 1849-1875 Punjab was provided with a new administrative structure.<sup>1</sup> Guided by the principles of what came to be known as 'Lawrence School', the new rulers paid special attention to the local circumstances and introduced far reaching changes. The introduction of the Codes of Civil and Criminal Procedure, the Police and Prison Acts, the organization of the educational department, the development of the public works on an extensive scale and the revenue assessment exposed Punjabis to a new administrative set up.<sup>2</sup>

Along with the new rulers, came a new religion- Christianity. In 1834 Rev. John E Lawrie of the American Presbyterian mission founded the Ludhiana Mission followed by similar Missions at Jullundar (1836) and Lahore (1848)<sup>3</sup>. Under Sikh rule there was restriction on their activities but with the annexation of Punjab by the British, missionaries became more free in their activities. They set up Churches, Schools, printing presses, Orphanages and began the process of conversion. In 1853, Kaiser Singh was baptized and in the same year they converted Maharaja Dalip Singh son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and by 1880 had spread all over Punjab.<sup>3</sup>

. Proselytization was done through the press, through education and through preaching on the streets. Trained and disciplined preachers were used for the same purpose. Exposed to this challenge, Punjabi Society rose in self-defence and by the 1860's new types of social groups came into existence among the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

These new groups utilized new methods and the combative attitude of Christian missionaries.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Sikhs**

A crisis of self identity was perhaps most acute among Sikhs. Under Sikh rule, they were enjoying royal patronage, were part of the ruling class and constituted a large Proportion of the army. After annexation, their status changed drastically. With the abandonment of the Sikh Army, the majority of them became unemployed. Educationally, they were backward. There was decline of religious beliefs of Sikhism and many practised Hindu beliefs and considered themselves to be Hindus<sup>5</sup>

In 1853 the first census report did not distinguish between Hindus and Sikhs. It was only in five districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Sialkot, Lahore and Gujranwala that they were counted separately and even here it was not known whether they were 'Keshdhari' or 'Sahjdhari Sikhs. Census also recorded decline in Sikh population. This situation was further aggravated by the presence of Christian missionaries who were slowly converting Sikhs. Faced with this situation, Sikhs also attempted not only to improve their economic condition but reiterated their religious identity. The process began with

Nirankari and Namdhari Movements. Former founded by Baba Dyal Singh (1783-1854) opposed idol worship and tried to simplify prevailing customs<sup>6</sup> This trend was continued by Namdhari or Kuka movement founded by Balk Nath who taught his followers to live simple and truthful life. Under his successor Baba Ram Singh, movement became militant, stressing the preservation of Sikh symbols. It jealously protested against cow-killing. This zeal resulted in killing of Muslim butchers.<sup>7</sup> Baba Ram Singh was deported to Rangoon where he died in 1885. These movements had very limited impact on Sikhs. It was the Singh Sabha movement which impacted the majority. In the wake of increasing proselytizing activities of Christian Missionaries, some eminent Sikhs, including Thakur Singh Sandhwalia, Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Kanwar Bikram Singh convened a meeting in Amritsar in 1873. As a result of their deliberations, an association called Singh Sabha came into existence. Its objectives were to arouse love of religion among Sikhs for which purpose it decided to publish literature on the greatness and truth of the Sikh religion. The Singh Sabha wanted to propagate the words of the Gurus. It was also decided that it would publish periodicals for the spread of Punjabi language and education. Those English officials who respected Sikhism and were interested in Sikhs' education were welcomed to join in the efforts of reformers. In 1879 Singh Sabha started in Lahore<sup>8</sup> and by 1899 there were around one hundred and twenty- one Sabhas working all over Punjab. These Sabhas deliberated over religious matters, appointed preachers for the spread of Sikhism, started schools and built orphanages.<sup>9</sup> Many newspapers were also started. For instance, the Khalsa Samachar was started on November 17, 1899.<sup>10</sup>

It was published from Amritsar and its first issue stated that the paper was meant to serve the Sikh community, spread religion and revive the Punjabi language.

On principles, all Singh Sabhas had similar goals but there were differences in their activities which were due to different ideas and interests of the people associated with these Sabhas. The difference was more profound in case of Khalsa Dewan, Amritsar and Khalsa Dewan, Lahore which often resulted in conflict between the two.<sup>11</sup> Initially Khalsa Dewan Lahore was affiliated to Khalsa Dewan, Amritsar. However, there was often conflict over religious issues. With the result Lahore Khalsa Dewan became an independent unit in 1886 and most of the Singh Sabhas got affiliated with it. The Khalsa Dewan, Amritsar, was left with three Sabhas of Amritsar, Faridkot and Rawalpindi. These were under the presidency of Baba Khem Singh Bedi<sup>12</sup>

In this way all radical reformers gathered around Khalsa Dewan, Lahore which was under the patronage of Maharaja Hira Singh of Nabha. Sir Attar Singh, C.I.E was its president, with Gurmukh Singh as secretary. It enjoyed the patronage of Lieutenant Governor of Punjab and the Commander-in-Chief of Lahore. In 1902 Chief Khalsa Dewan was established for co-ordinating the functions of Singh Sabhas. Under the Presidentship of Arur Singh, with Sunder Singh Majithia as Secretary, it became a spokesman of the Sikh community. These institutions worked for the Sikh Community. In the field of education, their notable achievement was the founding of the Khalsa College.

### **History of the Khalsa College**

It was in 1880's that Khalsa Dewan, Lahore took the initiative in the direction of establishing a central school for the Sikhs.

A formal decision was taken up at a meeting of the Dewan and a committee was appointed.<sup>13</sup> At another meeting of the executive committee of the Khalsa Dewan it handed over the responsibility of the establishment of Khalsa College to the committee under the Chairmanship of Colonel Holroyd; latter set up a sub committee for preparing rules for the conduct of business of the Khalsa College Establishment.<sup>14</sup> Such efforts of the Sikhs found favour with the Civil and Military Gazette.<sup>15</sup> which in one of its articles on the Khalsa college observed, "We think that the Sikh Community is especially lucky in that the party of education and progress among the Sikhs had not adopted an attitude of hostility and contempt towards the Sikh religion can command the respect of educated men and that the Sikh character can stand the ordeal of drinking free draught of western learning without the intoxication, which leads weaker much astray."<sup>16</sup>

For meeting the expenses towards the building of the college, initiative was taken up by the Sikhs themselves. A 'Hukumnama' issued from the Golden Temple asked Sikhs to give a tenth of their income towards the building of the College. Various Sabhas held meetings for this purpose and collected funds. Delegations were sent to Sikh states asking for their patronage and financial support. One such deputation was sent to Patiala State.<sup>17</sup> In his address Bhai Joginder Singh stressed the need of having a Sikh college for improving educational and moral standards of Sikhs so that they could take proper place in civil and military administration.<sup>18</sup> Implementation of this scheme in vol ved fund, for which he appealed to Maharaja of Patiala. The Maharaja was asked to become the patron of the movement. He accepted the request and donated a sum of Rs. One lakh and fifty thousand.<sup>19</sup>

By November 1890, more than two and a half lakh had been collected <sup>20</sup>

There arose a controversy over the location of the college. Both the Khalsa Dewan, Amritsar and the Khalsa Dew an, Lahore asserted claims for their respective places. The Civil and Military Gazette and the Tribune, joined the controversy, siding with contending parties. Claiming itself to be in full sympathy with the Khalsa College movement, professing to air public opinion, the Tribune in numerous articles supported the claim of Khalsa Dewan, Amritsar and wanted the college to be founded at Amritsar. For it, if Sikh sentiments were to be respected then college should be established at Amritsar.

The Civil and Military Gazette supported the Khalsa Dewan Lahore.<sup>21</sup>

Success of the Khalsa College movement was ensured when Sir James Lyall laid the foundation stone on March 5, 1892 in Amritsar. In the ceremony that followed, Mr. Rattigan, on behalf of the Khalsa College reception committee, thanked Lieutenant-Governor, Sikh states of Nabha, Jind, Patiala and Kapurthala for their help and hoped that the college would be a centre and source of intelligent, loyal and patriotic feelings among the Sikhs. Lieutenant Governor in his reply said that British Government was indebted to Sikhs for their victories in China, Abyssania, Egypt and Afghanistan. He also pointed out that from the very beginning, he sympathized with the Sikh cause and was more than willing to help them in the educational movement.<sup>22</sup>

In this way socio-religious revivalism in the Sikh community in the late nineteenth century produced some identical results. Invariably each community analyzed Civil and Military Gazette its condition under colonial rule and made a conscious effort to preserve its religious heritage and for improving its condition special steps were taken to spread education. In the process, new organizations, new institutions, new ideals and new leadership emerged.

#### NOTES

- [1]. Khawaja Sarfaj Hussain, Sikh of the Punjab 1900-1925, A Study of Confrontation and Political mobilization, University of Missouri (Unpub. Dissert. 1980) p. p2-9. .
- [2]. Y.B. Mathur; British Administration of Punjab 1849-75 Surjeet Book Depot: 1947. Also see V.S. Suri, Punjab through the Ages, Chandigarh ; Punjab Itihas Prakashan, 1974; pp. 33-43.
- [3]. C.H. Loehling, The History of Christianity in Punjab, PPP; Vol. VII-I, 1913; pp. 176-199.
- [4]. For Kenneth Jones ,The missionaries brought both a challenge and the way to meet that challenge. They were more successful in converting Indians to their methods and to their combative attitude than to their religious beliefs. See, Kenneth William Jones; The Arya Samaj in the Punjab; A study of Social Reform and Religious Revivalism 1877-1909, university of California (Unpub. Dissert. 1966) p. 22.
- [5]. Census Report Punjab; 1881; chapter IV, NMML, pp.140-141. Also see ,
- [6]. G.S. Chabra, Social and Economic History of the Punjab 1849- 1901, Delhi :Sterling Publishers, Private Limited, 1974, p p 128-130.
- [7]. Khushwant Singh, A History of the Sikhs 1839-1964, Vol. II, Princeton: Oxford University Press, 1966 pp. 127-135.
- [8]. For N.G. Barrier, The Sikhs and their Literature (A Guide to Tracts, Books and Periodical 1847-1919, Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1970; pp. vii; xiv; p. 153.
- [9]. Harbans Singh, The Singh Sabha Movement, PPP; Vol. V I - I , 1973, pp 21-29.
- [10]. It was published in Gurumukhi language.
- [11]. Final issue which broke the unity between two Diwans was Related with Khem Singh Bedi, using cushion in the Golden Temple. This right was asserted by Khem Singh, as being descendant of Guru Nanak but Guru mukh Singh of Lahore Khalsa Dewan opposed it and wanted equal treatment in the presence of Holy Granth Sahib.
- [12]. Teja Singh, The Singh Sabha Movement, PPP; Vol. VI, 1973, pp 31-38. , For the brief history of the Khalsa College Movement, See, Teja Singh, Khalsa College, Amritsar, PPP, Vol. VI-vi-11; 1972 ,pp 31-38 .
- [13]. This meeting was held on November 30th and December 1st, 1889. See, Civil and Military Gazette, December 4, 1894, p 2.
- [14]. These two meetings were convened on February 22 and 23 respectively. At second meeting subscription list for collecting fund was opened. See, Civil and Military Gazette, , December 4, 1899; p. 2.
- [15]. Civil and Military Gazette, May 4, 1890, p.3
- [16]. Civil and Military Gazette May 2 8, 1890, p 7
- [17]. On its deputation were Man Singh, C.I.E; Manager Golden Temple, Sodhi Inder Singh, special Judge Ferozepur, Mahant Prem Singh, Rais, Temple Bir Sahib, Sial kot, Sirdar Hari Singh, Rai Bahadur, Sialkot; Sirdar Arur Singh; Nowshera Nangal, Amritsar.
- [18]. Civil and Military Gazette September 11, 1890; p.6, September 15, 1890; p. 5.
- [19]. Out of Rupees two and a half Lakhs collected, Maharaja of Patiala gave 1.60 Lakhs, state officials Rs. 27000, Lieutenant Governor Rs. 500; The commander-in-Chief, RS 2 8 0 and Sikh people more than Rs. 20,000. See, Civil and Military Gazette; November 17, 1890; p. 6.
- [20]. Tribune, January 25, 1891, p.5; January 31, 1891; p.4.
- [21]. Tribune, March 5, 1891, p.4 March 11, 1891, p.3, May 17, 1899, p 3. Civil and Military Gazette, March 18, 1891, pp 3-4, March 30, 1891, p.3.

- [22]. Tribune; January 25, 1902; p.3. Sunder Singh Majithia in his diary had written about his visit to the Lieutenant Governor in 1903 in connection with proposed funds for constructing the Khalsa College Building. He was told that government would help them only in case of Sikhs collecting funds for it. There upon Sunder Singh Majithia had pointed about the collection of Rs. 600 by Simla Singh Sabha. 1/.