

18th Century Western Perspective Of the Sikhs and Their Scripture

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Introduction:

A cursory glance at the early 18th century medieval India, reveals that the Mughal Empire was on its decline and new powers were emerging on the political horizon. The historians have attributed various factors that led to the weakening of Mughal authority and subsequent rise of successor states in different parts of the country. The emergence of these regional forces – the Marathas in the Deccan, the Jats in and around Bharatpur and the Sikhs in Punjab, were chiefly responsible for the extinction of Mughal authority in their respective regions. Significantly, the British had consolidated their position in Bengal to gain control of Orissa and Bihar. Alarmed by political instability coupled with desire to secure their territorial and commercial interests they were watching very closely the tussle for supremacy that was going at the Mughal court.

Sikh Struggle for Sovereignty:

There is no denying the fact that after the demise of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, the Sikhs under the leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur had conquered a large tract of Punjab territory to replace the Mughal authority with a new administration. The first Sikh rule, which lasted for a short while (June 1710 to December 1715), was unique in its various dispensations. It could not last long or face the might of the State as its military resources were too meager compared to

the Mughals. The manner, in which the Sikhs and Banda Singh Bahadur martyred at Delhi in 1716, had signaled the reign of terror and nature of cruelty, they were to face in the near future. The Mughal Emperors had no qualms to pass orders to exterminate the Sikhs as a religious community. The successive Mughal Governors of Lahore – Abdus Samand Khan (1716-1724), Zakariya Khan (1726-1745) and Muin-ul Mulk (1748-1753) followed a ruthless policy to persecute the Sikhs. Prices on their heads were fixed; they were sought and hunted like wild beasts. To execute them publicly in the most barbaric and cruel manner in the chowks of Lahore, was a common practice of those times.¹ The Sikhs were compelled to seek shelter in the Shivalik hills or in the deserts of Rajputana. They were also hard pressed to save themselves from the successive onslaughts of their new adversary, the Afghans who were vying to gain control of the Punjab on their unhindered passage to Delhi, the seat and symbol of sovereignty of Hindustan. All these odds could not deter the Sikhs in their resolve to overthrow the unjust rule to become the sovereigns of Punjab. Ultimately time had arrived when the Sikhs controlled the whole country from the Indus to the Jamuna.² They not only expelled the successors of Ahmed Shah Abdali from the provinces of Multan and Kashmir but also turned the tables against them to lead military expeditions across the Indus. Militarily speaking they made the North West Frontiers of India so invulnerable that now people were no more at the mercy of foreign invaders coming across the Hindu Kush since the times of Alexander. The legacy to secure the north-west frontiers by the Sikhs is unforgettable in the history of India and the people of India are beholden to them for it.

The period under review for its various reasons is considered a dark period in the history of the Sikhs. However it presents a glorious saga of Sikh struggle when the Sikh spirit- religiously, socially and politically was at its pinnacle. Generally, it is remarked that the Sikhs who rose like a Phoenix have given scant attention to record their annals. Truly what is written by the contemporary and near contemporary writers has come out of the pen of outsiders. Sometimes these chronicles lack in objectivity and neutrality, the two most sought after principles for doing the history. Occasionally, these sources instead of supplementing each other provide divergent accounts, which at times are hardly to reconcile. Prof. W.H.Mcleod has aptly remarked that our knowledge of eighteenth century Sikh Panth is very limited. He is sceptical of the Khalsa tradition and suggests that "the slate must be wiped clean and must not be reinscribed until we have ascertained just what did take place during the eighteenth century."³ Very truly the historians working on the 18th century Sikh history have always felt the dearth of authentic source material. The works on Sikh history and religion produced in the recent past are invariably based on the documents introduced a half century ago. Very little has been done to unearth fresh material. In this context European writings produced in the 18th century deserve our special attention.

Nature of European Writings:

The stories of Sikh struggle, especially their resistance to the Afghans of Ahmed Shah Abdali, had traveled to far away places such as Fort William, the head quarters of British East India Company. The Sikh incursions into Gangetic Doab had brought them face to face with the British forces stationed in the Avadh. Their growing ascendancy in the North-West of India was a potent threat

to the hegemonic designs of the British in India. For more than one reason the British were anxious to know about the Sikhs and their religion, obviously to formulate their policy towards them. Besides commissioning the civil servants to get information in a clandestine manner, the British residents with the Nawab of Avadh and the Marathas and those stationed at Delhi were pressed into service to keep a vigil on the Sikhs. They were asked to collect every possible information on the Sikhs. Some of the British residents were friendly with the Sikh Chiefs and were constantly in touch with them.

Besides the British East India Company servants, Europeans of various nationalities and belonging to different strata in society had got attracted to the exotic beauty and diversity of Indian culture. Consequently, they were writing on the 18th century India for different reasons and motives. The Christian missionaries who came in wake of the Company were looking into the religious beliefs and practices of the people. The Orientalists, who were intellectually oriented, were delving deep into the Eastern classical literature. The travelers, explorers and geographers were traversing the country to know intimately India's past as well as its topographical features. Not only the British, the Portuguese, French, Dutch, German, Irish and Scottish nationals who came to India in various capacities were not lagging behind to record their impression of the people of India. Their accounts published in quasi-historical form provide significant insights into the 18th century life of the people of India. While dealing with Indian life in general, these writers have also commented on the Sikhs and their religion.

To recapitulate, the 18th century European writings have come to us in various forms and owe their origin to different sources.

Irrespective of their nationalities most of the 18th century European authors got interested in the Sikhs chiefly because of political considerations. While writing on the Sikhs they encountered a few problems of which dearth of authentic material, absence of personal contacts and ignorance of knowledge of Punjabi, the language of the Sikhs, were the prominent ones.⁴ Most of the 18th century accounts by the Europeans on the Sikh history and religion are the product of individual efforts though some of them have been specially commissioned by the British East India Company. These accounts are based on the personal observations of their authors and the information they got from the persons who pretended of possessing authentic knowledge about the Sikhs. Sometimes they got information about the Sikhs through the Persian chronicles which at times were not correct and free from prejudice. Resultantly a number of factual mistakes have crept into their accounts which have been repeated by the later European authors while writing on the Sikhs. Another feature of these writing is that some of them have not been presented in a coherent and systematic manner. Sometime information is very brief and many of the authors have remarked about the Sikhs in a casual manner. A few of the writers had reflected strong bias towards the Sikhs. They had labelled the Sikhs as 'the terror and plague' and desired the British to exterminate this 'evil' from India.⁵ Chiefly because of the political reasons they had circulated a prophecy attributed to the Sikh Gurus that the Sikhs after remaining sometime the terror of India would at

last be finally destroyed by white men coming from the westward.⁶ In spite of all these drawbacks 18th century accounts are very important as they throw immense light on some of the lesser known facets of Sikh religious life of 18th century. It is worth noting that Prof. Ganda Singh has done a pioneer work to produce *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs* in 1962. At that time he introduced the writings of nine authors, which have significant bearings on the Sikh history and religion. Since then no scholar has taken interest to carry the work forward. For the last four years I have been following the subject very keenly. For the present study we have identified about 30 European authors of 18th century who have commented upon the Sikhs in one or another form.

Earliest Observations:

The earliest reference to the Sikhs by any European has come to us in a letter of Sep.25, 1606 of Father Jerome Xavier written from Lahore to the Jesuits Provincial Supervisor of Goa. In this letter he talks about Guru Arjan's holy and saintly personality who enjoyed dignity and reputation as well. He testifies that before his martyrdom Guru Arjan went through a series of torture.⁷ In the eighteenth century first reference to the Sikhs again occurs in a letter of March 10, 1716 by Messrs John Surman and Edward Stephenson to the Hon'ble Robert Hedges, President and Governor of Fort William etc. Council of Bengal. John Surman was leading British Embassy to the Mughal Court and was present when Banda Singh Bahadur and his Sikh associates met martyrdom at the hands of Mughal authorities. He admired the steadfastness and forbearance of the Sikhs who were being executed a hundred a day in the Chandni Chowk of Delhi. He pays a glowing tribute and says, "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 his new formed Religion."⁸ These two letters of great historical value and the evidence offered by them help us to understand the Sikh tradition of martyrdom, a major phenomenon of 18th century Sikhism.

European Perspective of Sikhism:

A close reading of the 18th century European writings on the Sikhs reveals that almost all the authors are unanimous in their view that Sikhism owes its origin to Guru Nanak. They have not found any connection- doctrinal or historical between Guru Nanak and the Sant tradition. They underline that the doctrines on which Sikhism is based were introduced by Guru Nanak himself.⁹ They remark that Guru Nanak gave birth to a new religious dispensation. Some of these authors equate Guru Nanak and his successors with the Prophets and Pope. Perhaps it was mainly because of their Judo-Christian background. The Sikh institution of Guruship and its central place in the Sikh society had come to their notice quite at an early stage.¹⁰ There is no controversy in them with respect to the nature of God in Sikhism. They found that Sikhs are theists and believe in the unity of Divine Being. James Browne testifies that veneration in Sikhism is not paid to minor deities.¹¹ Crouford says that "Nanuck having stripped the religion of Brihma of its mythology, the Seiks adore God alone, without image or intermediation. Similarly Thomas Pennat remarks that the Sikhs are pure monotheists. They worship God alone without image or intermediation.¹² According to Tieffenthaler, the 18th century Sikhs admit only one God worthy of adoration and vehemently deny divinity to Hindu Gods such as Brahma, Vishnu and Mahadev.¹³ Modave, another

French author remarks that the Sikhs have broken free from the yoke of most of the Brahmanical superstitions.¹⁴

Sikh Society:

Interestingly most of the authors have taken note of the proselytizing character of Sikhism and its impact on the Indian society. They remark that unlike the Hindus the Sikhs admit proselytes of all religions and castes. They found that entry into Sikhism was open to all. In the words of A.L. H. Polier, 'the Sikhs came from the lowest and most abject castes'.¹⁵ According to Father, Wendel, 'Guru Gobind Singh inspired them to have no regard to the distinction of caste..... Everyone could be a Sikh'.¹⁶ Another source reveals that Sikhs make up a body of all types of pagans.¹⁷ Forester and Tieffenthaler find that the Sikh Panth is composed of the Khalsa (baptized) and Khulasa (unbaptised) Sikhs.¹⁸ We find that some European authors of this period had come to know that inter-locking of religion with politics is one of the chief characteristics of Sikhism.¹⁹

Initiation into Sikhism:

Many of these sources have also remarked on the 18th century Sikh institutions of Sarbat Khalsa and Gurmatta which were held in Amritsar once or twice a year. Significantly *Pahul*, the initiation ceremony and the Khalsa code of conduct have also found mention in them. James Brown informs, 'in admitting proselyte they make him drink a sherbet out of a large cup with certain ceremonies which are designed to signify that every distinction is abolished except that being of Sikh, even a Muslim may become a Sikh on these conditions....From the time he is admitted into the fraternity he wears a steel ring

around one of his wrists, lets his hair and beard grow to full length and call on the name of Guru in confirmation of all engagements'.²⁰ He further remarks that 'Guru Gobind Singh established a ceremony to be used on the reception of new proselyte which is called *Pahul* and consists in making them drink sherbet out of a cup stirring it round with a dagger and pronouncing a certain incantation at the same time.'²¹ Charles Wilkins mentions that five or more persons at any place can administer the initiation ceremony.²² Though the Khalsa symbols-- *Kirpan, Kesh, Kangha, Kara and Kachhahira* have not been described in rubric terms yet all of them find mention in one or another source.²³ They are near unanimous to point out that use of tobacco is strictly prohibited. George Thomas says 'in the city or in the field the Seiks never smoke tobacco'.²⁴ Wendel observes that Sikhs did not touch women nor their clothes or jewels.²⁵ A.L.H. Polier says that they repeat *Waheguru* several times a day.²⁶

Sikh Way of Worship:

On the mode and object of worship almost all the French authors note that the Sikhs do not admit any images or sculptures.²⁷ Forester observes, 'their places of devotion are plain and divested of every ornament and figures'. Modave sums up very beautifully the change that Sikh revolution had ushered in India. Sikh revolution and he and remarks 'Sikhs are extremely satisfied with the changes occurring in their religion as well as in their government. All those with whom I had the opportunity to talk about these subjects did not seem to have retained any of the superstitions of other Indians. Even the insignificant practices have been abandoned as soon as the least connection with the religious rites was found. At least it is perhaps unprecedented that a community should have given up so easily

the laws and customs carried on since so many centuries'.²⁸ Charles Wilkins who had the opportunity to visit Takht Patna Sahib observed that the Sikh places of worship were open to all.²⁹

Sikh Scripture:

Though language was the major problem yet 18th century European authors have remarked on the origin, role, status and teachings of the Sikh scripture in a very significant manner. Most of them observe that its genesis lies with Guru Nanak. Father Wendel was perhaps the first European who had observed the Sikh scripture from close quarters. He underlines its prominent features especially language and teachings. He writes, 'What we can say of his (Guru Nanak) writings and dogma was gifted with noble knowledge. There are volumes of his doctrines put together and they are still read today with devotion and admiration.'³⁰ He claims first hand information and says, "I have seen some of these books written in persian and in the Indian language of Panjabi that is as it is spoken around Lahore. Baba Nanac expresses himself quite nobly in them and with an elevated spirit on the essence of God and the divine attributes with which the devotees are delighted.... His other works or morals are no less sensitive. There are many who read them but few understand them without an interpreter due to the way in which he expresses as well as due to the language".³¹ Obviously Father Wendell had access to the Sikh scripture to note its spiritual value and aesthetic beauty as well.

Likewise Father Wendel other European authors had also noted that the Sikh scriptural writings are recorded in *Gurmukhi* or *Panjabi* script. Charles Wilkins writing in 1781 hold that Guru Nanak himself invented the *Gurmukhi*

script. According to him Guru Nanak "left behind him a book, composed by himself in verse and the language of the Punjab but a character partly of his own invention, which teaches the doctrines of the faith he had established. That they called this character, in honour of their founder, Goaroo-Moothee: from the mouth of the preceptor".³² Similarly Crauford reiterates that the Sikh scripture is written in the Punjab dialect but in a particular character called *Gurmukhi*. He holds that credit goes to Guru Angad for producing the first redaction of Guru Nanak's *bani*, which is quite in consonance with the Sikh tradition. He holds that Guru Nanak "entrusted to Guru Angad the care of collecting his precepts which he accordingly did in a *Pothi*."³³ James Browne remarks that Guru Nanak not only took efforts to record his *bani* but also laboured hard to distribute it among his followers. He understood that Guru Nanak's writings were at the base of the Sikh ideology. He says that Guru Nanak "wrote several books upon the nature and institutions of his order.....which he distributed for the regulation of the worship of his followers."³⁴ George Forester alludes to the fact that *bani* of Guru Nanak is an instrument for Divine communication. He finds that instead of the intermediation of inferior Deities they are ordered to address the Supreme Being through the medium of Nanak his favorite agent Deputy."³⁵ Writing towards the end of 18th century William Francklin takes note of the Sikh belief that *bani* of Guru Nanak is of Divine origin.³⁶ James Browne remarks that 'Guru Arjan wrote the Gurunt'.³⁷ Obviously in doing so he was alluding to Guru Arjan's role in canonizing the *Adi Granth* in 1604. Similarly John Griffiths emphasises that "the tenets of Nanak have been collected into a Book which they call their Ghiruntejee

(Granth Ji) and guard as a sacred Deposit or rather Oracle, at a place called Amberser.³⁸

Our 18th century European authors hold that Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture had been fully installed in the Gurdwaras. Charles Wilkins who had an opportunity to join the Sikh congregation in Patna Sahib, provides a graphic account of the Sikh liturgy which was wholly based and centred on *Guru Granth Sahib*.³⁹ Nota Manus, another European who also had a chance to visit a Gurdwara, subscribes to the above point of view. He says "One day I got within one of their temples invited there to by the tingling of cymbals. On appearing within the door, an old venerable man bid me leave my slippers as none could enter bare footed. This admonition, I obeyed and went into the hall covered with carpets at the northern part of which there were several cushions covered with yellow veil under which I was told lay Nanac-Shah's book, who is their legislator. At the southern end of the hall there were fifteen or twenty men, all in blue and with long beard, sitting, some armed and some not. At the eastern side but very near to it, two of old men with a small drum and a pair of cymbals, were singing some maxims of morality out of that book and this did with a deal of enthusiasm and contortion."⁴⁰ Obviously, in the eyes of these Europeans the Sikh mode of worship comprised singing and reading of hymns from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The object of worship and veneration was nothing else but the sole scripture, i.e. *Guru Granth Sahib*.

The nature and functions of *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata*, the two most important Sikh institutions of eighteenth century had also come under the notice of European authors. John Griffiths alludes to them and hold that they were held

in the presence of *Guru Granth Sahib*. He remarks that the Sikhs "Guard *Guru Granth Sahib* as a sacred Deposit or rather Oracle at a place called Ambersur.... Here they assemble in great numbers (150 or 200,000) at two fixed periods of the years, about October and April, to consult upon their warlike operations. The decision of the Oracle (*Vak, Hukam*) whether for war or peace, they invariably adhere to their Book.⁴¹ It suggests that *Guru Granth Sahib* was not only an object of worship but also enjoyed Divine status among the Sikhs. The Sarbat Khalsa (Ground Assembly) used to hold deliberations on the religious and secular affairs confronting the Panth. After arriving at a consensus and to put a seal on its finality, commandment (*Vak*) was taken from *Guru Granth Sahib*. Thus the collective decision of the Panth took the form of *Gurmata* which enjoyed the status of Divine Order and the whole Panth was religiously and morally was bound to adhere to it. These writings provide a glimpse how the institution of *Guru Granth-Guru Panth* had come to prevail in the 18th century Sikh Panth.

As far as the philosophy or message of *Guru Granth* is concerned, Father Wendel is the first European who has commented upon it very briefly. He remarks that Guru Nanak expresses himself "quite nobly" and 'with an elevated spirit on the essence of God'.⁴² Charles Wilkins during his short stay in Patna Sahib grasped the message of *Guru Granth Sahib* to put it in a forthright manner. He says "that this book of which that standing near the altar, and several others in the hall, were copies, teaches that there is but one God, Omnipotent and Omnipresent, filling all space and pervading all matter: and that He is to be worshipped and invoked. That there will be day of retribution, when virtue will be rewarded and vice punished. (I forgot to ask in what manner)., that it not only

commands universal toleration but forbids murder, theft, and such other deeds as are, by the majority of the mankind, esteemed crime against society., and inculcates the practice of all the virtues but particularly universal philanthropy, and a general hospitality to strangers and travellers. This is all my short visit would permit me to learn this book."⁴³ Significantly Charles Wilkins had noted the presence of a Hinoovee text at Patna but it was not of much consequence. Tieffenthaler testifies that the Sikhs had rejected the eighteen Puranas or book of the Pagans taking as fables whatever is said about Brahma, Bishnu and Mahadeo.⁴⁴ George Forester who travelled through Punjab remarks that "A book entitled *Granth*, Which contains the civil and religious institutes of Nanack, is the only typical object which the sicques have admitted into their places of wroship."⁴⁵

Conclusion:

An analysis of all these writings reveals that 18th century European authors have offered their comments on almost all the important features of the 18th century Sikh Panth. One can easily note that in one or another manner origin and development of Sikhism, Sikh beliefs and practices, composition of Sikh society, social and religious institution, dress and diet, mode and object of worship, the origin, role and status of *Guru Granth Sahib* have found treatment in these works. In their opinion the theoretical, practical and sociological boundaries of Sikhism were well defined. These sources throw immense light on the lesser known facts of Sikh religious life. Though their description of the eighteenth century Sikhs lacks in details yet it is sufficiently equipped to reinscribe the "clean slate."

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