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## **Understanding identity Issues in Punjab: Review of J.D. Cunningham and his History of the Sikhs**

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History of Punjab or of any region is an emergent theme in the contemporary writings but some regions and Punjab in particular has been of much importance. The historiographic traditions have been divergent and multiplicity of perspectives make Punjab a point of debates and discussions in the intellectual and literary circles. The name Punjab also explains its geography, ecology, economy, political history, ethnicity and culture has been interpreted differently. However, there is consensus among scholars that Punjab's legacy still has relevance in the contemporary world. I will attempt to summarize few arguments given by some eminent writers of the colonial period. I focus on some colonial historiographic traditions because the issues of identity of Punjab and the Punjabis were raised during the colonial period and carried forward in the post-partition India. I discuss identity issues in Punjab with a special reference to J.D. Cunningham and his *History of the Sikhs*. I will explore if the personal identity of these authors had also created a difference in their writings. In the colonial context and also the identity of Punjab, it is inevitable to discuss the question of regional histories. In first section, I will discuss how the regions became the focus in historiography. Second section will include political history of Punjab and third section will discuss Cunningham and his text. Last section will be conclusion.

### **I: Region in Indian History**

The question of writing regional history formed centre – stage with the colonial historiography. The colonial administrators and the British colonized many countries in Asia during the eighteenth century. The 'white supremacy', 'East- West dichotomy' and 'Orientalism' have been debated one may not deny that the traditions of history-writing in precolonial India were also influenced by the western intellectual currents. Post-Renaissance, literary trends, Romanticism, Enlightenment or Utilitarian ideologies also had an impact on colonial historiography in India. Among early orientalists, William Jones attempted to defend the colonial footing in India by connecting the British with the Aryans and glorified the Indian past. Contrary to this perception, the Utilitarian view condemned entire Indian past.<sup>1</sup> Romila Thapar has critically examined all these notions in her book *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India*.<sup>2</sup> Though William Jones had valorized India's ancient past, Mill did not accept that historical material could be taken from the Indian epics, and other sacred texts. Indian History was thus periodized into three time periods, namely, ancient, medieval and modern. All these successive labels were further identified as Hindu, Muslim and British respectively.<sup>3</sup> The Ancient as Hindu could serve the purpose of early colonial administrators and the

Nationalists also cherished their 'golden past'. It was beginning of civilizational approach to history writing. The medieval Muslim period was seen as degenerated phase while the British period signified modernity.<sup>4</sup>

It was observed that the period 750-1200 was completely missed out in this scheme of periodization. The British were perhaps guided by the periodization in England in which History was divided into Ancient, Dark Ages, Medieval and Modern. The Dark Ages there and the Dark Ages in India overlapped which signified a bleak era, and therefore the period 750-1200 did not deserve notice for its docile political and socio- cultural conditions.<sup>5</sup> The Indian Marxist historians and others understood the period as one of transition and various perspectives on nature of politics during this period.<sup>6</sup>

Some of these diverse perspectives were based on civilizational approach to study the region which glorified the region through their existence since ancient periods. In other perspectives, the regions were studied in terms of the study of the achievements of kings, their warfare, administration or contributions to art and culture. Kulke believes that histories written so far were either pan- Indic view of the region from the top or perspectives from the region. The plurality of the cultures was ignored in such perspectives. It homogenized all regions and thus ignored specificities of the regions. So the "regional histories" were "consumed by a desire to establish comparative historical precedence, antiquity or uniqueness inspired by regional sentiments and chauvinism" and the "history of the region" involved "discerning of processes, structures and the trajectory of the evolution of institutions and trajectories across the

regions.<sup>7</sup> However, in all writings, a kind of uniformity tended to ignore the regional variations and multiplicity of cultures. The need was to read a region in terms of its own variables. All the pluralistic societies should not be studied in isolation because their existence depended on negotiations with other regions. I, therefore, propose to understand Punjab and its legacy through some texts representing different perspectives. In order to understand it better, an overview of political history and ethnicity of Punjab is essential. I will not touch the geographical features as the space here does not permit the details.

There have been differing opinions about the name of Punjab. This Punjab refers to Punjab of undivided India. I focus on colonization of the region by migratory communities and invaders. The first historical reference to Punjab can be found in the Harappan Civilization. The Aryavarta came next which included the northwest frontiers of India, Ganga- Yamuna doab and regions in Aravali mountains. One may not indulge in the debate over the identity of Aryan as it is not the point of discussion here. J. S. Grewal writes about prosperity of Punjab during the Rig Vedic period. He believes that Vedic economy was not all rural but existence of many towns (pur/ pura in Vedic literature) is proven.<sup>8</sup> The political fabric of Punjab changed with constant invasions by foreign kings, some of whom established dynastic rule in the region.

As Punjab witnessed change of dynasties so different, the ethnic composition of Punjab also changed. As and one foreign king established his power in the region, the races and tribes associated with them settled and mixed with the local communities. In case

colonization of new areas, conquest or subjugation of the neighbours, it altered the ethnic composition of Punjab. Cunningham has given details of various communities which are indubitably connected with the political transitions.<sup>9</sup> During the period, Brahmins and Kshatriyas promoted their own beliefs. The Bactrians and Scythians entered and settled when Alexander and Huns made their appearance in Punjab and other parts of India. In upper Indus valley, i.e. Laddakh was inhabited by Tatars and hints at Turko- Mongolian invasions that introduced Islam in its new form in Punjab. Turkomans or the Turkmen are a Turkic people located primarily in the Central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, later became mixed races in Kashmir who spoke Hindi but adhered to Muhammadan religion. Yusufzais, the Pathans, were the tribal people living in Swat valley, on the northwest borders of undivided India. It was a Buddhist habitat when Alexander invaded India. Afghans also hailed from the northwest frontier. In small valleys lived Jats, Gakkhars between Jhelum and Indus, Khalils in Peshawar and Afridis in southern Punjab. Baluchis, Aroras and Jats lived around Multan. Cunningham noted Bhutis, Sials and Kathis communities in the waste tracts between Indus and Sutlej. Dardus and Dungars were indigenous communities in lower parts of Punjab. Kukas could be seen between Kashmir and Indus. Between Jhelum and Chenab, Chibs and Buhos in south Kashmir were pastoral and predators, perhaps the original inhabitants of the region. Johiyas and Wattus Rajput clans living along Satluj while Langah tribes dominated Uch and Multan. Dogras were the inhabitants of Jammu. Jats lived over a long track from Jhelum to Panipat. The Sikhs lived in Lahore, Amritsar and Bhatinda. Gujars, Pathans and Rajputs were scattered in all regions. Cunningham observed that all the cities and towns were inhabited by different communities, for example, Kashmiri weavers, Banias, Aroras and Khattriyas etc., who were engaged in manufacturing and trade. Holy Brahmans, Sayyids and Afghans were engaging in preaching their beliefs in shared spaces.

As Cunningham wrote that race and religion had no correlation in Punjab. Asad Ali Khan has written about influence of Aryans on Punjab's culture.<sup>10</sup> He writes that Vedic religion and its beliefs had structured the social system which was based on Varna order. Buddhism had held its sway since the times of Buddha. D.C. Ahir writes in his Book *Buddhism in Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh* that Buddhism was embedded in Punjab's religious culture since the time when Buddha visited Kuru, Kamboja and Gandhara.<sup>11</sup> He described at length the royal patronage to Buddhism by the Mauryan king Ashoka, the Bactrian Milinda and Kushana king Kanishka. The Bhakti movement of the south and Islam had an impact on religious culture of Punjab during the early medieval period.<sup>12</sup> Cunningham believes that systems of Brahma, Buddha and Muhammad were embedded in Punjab, the ritualistic forms and local traditions had altered the original forms. The Arab invasion of Sindh had introduced Shiite culture in the region. A major development was introduction of Sufism in Punjab. Islam as a popular religion proliferated in Punjab through Sufism. Among the noted Sufi mystics of Punjab were Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar, Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariyya of Multan, and Syed Jalaluddin Bukhari of Uch. The Pirs and their shrines enjoyed great influence over illiterate and ignorant rural society that was unaware of true teachings of Islam. In successive periods, the Pirs claim themselves to be the descendants of Sufi Saints who had played an important part in spreading Islam and had led to the conversion of Punjabi tribal society, writes Asad Ali Khan. It has been instrumental in transforming Islam into Indian Islam.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the indigenous

communities also embraced Islam. Cunningham informs that 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the population of Punjab claimed to be Muhammadan of foreign origin while 1/3<sup>rd</sup> professed Muhammadan faith. It implies that majority of people were Indian Muslims.

Sikhism as a religion became the dominant religion of Punjab after Guru Nanak as Sikh gurus contributed in their own ways to establish Sikhism in institutional forms.<sup>14</sup> Sikhs assumed political power during the eighteenth century. The real Sikh rule on Punjab started when Ranjit Singh (1799- 1838) took over Lahore in 1799. After many Anglo-Sikh wars, Punjab was annexed by the British. Annexation of Punjab by the British situated it in the national context and new issues of identity, religious or political, surfaced during a time when followers of Hinduism and Islam were attempting to claim distinct identity during the freedom struggle though issues of identities had crept in during the eighteenth century with the rise of Khalsa. Harjot Oberoi has addressed the issue of internal fragmentation of all religious communities eighteenth century onwards and attempts of some organizations to eliminate the differences and strengthen their own communities. Sikhism had branched off into many sects, but was still showcased as singular identity during the freedom struggle. It was during this phase that Singh Sabha Movement showed its intolerance towards multiple Sikh identities being reflected by prevalence of many Sikh sub-sects.<sup>15</sup> She believes that it constrained the possibility of change. A brief review of the texts of Cunningham and Latif might help in understanding how Punjab came to be identified with Sikhism.

## II: Reading J. D. Cunningham

It is not possible to reproduce the whole content of Cunningham's *History of Sikhs: From the Origin to the Battles of Satluj* due to paucity of space here, I will highlight some points to suggest how history of the region was written. I begin with the title of the book itself. It focuses on Sikhs and not on Punjab though description of the geo-political developments constitute part of the text. As the editor H.L.O. Garrett writes in the introductory to the book, Cunningham was not fully acquainted with the land and the culture of Punjab. Cunningham was an established Scottish author and poet. His footnotes and comments demonstrate his knowledge of various subjects. He held various positions under the East India Company as did his brothers. He was demoted to the position of cadet in the end due to displeasure of his superiors after he completed the book. His book had been read and interpreted differently by modern scholars.

The significance of *The History of Sikhs* can better be grasped when we intend to explore Punjab and not Sikhism. The legacy of Punjab can be comprehended not through the Sikh studies but from the descriptions in Cunningham's writings. Cunningham began with the geography and ethnographic details of Punjab. He might not be correct in all the details of the vast diversified geography of the region but it gives us a reason to think that history of the people of a region rests on its geography. The economic activities have been described through the ecological conditions. He identified people of various races and creeds both from the regions they came from and the profession they were engaged. They accommodated the beliefs and practices of people of Punjab and had influenced the ways of life of the indigenous people. The majority of one community in some town or city did

not isolate other social groups. He glorified and appreciated the accommodating tendencies of people. He offered a sharp contrast between India and Rome in their dealing with foreign intrusions. He wrote "India illustrates the power of Darius and the greatness of Alexander, the philosophy of Greece and the religion of China ; and while Rome was contending with Germans and Cimbri, and yielding to Goths and Huns, the Hindus , almost without an effort, swarms of Scythic barbarian".<sup>16</sup>

His analysis of Arab invasions is based on reasoning. The Arabs got interested in Indian subcontinent because they had lost Spain and the conquest of farther regions would cause rebellions. Also, Islam had reached its limits in their country so "Muhammadanism required a new infusion of faith and hardihood to enable it to triumph over the heathens of Delhi and the Christians of Constantinople".<sup>17</sup> After the British appeared in the land, "The well- being of India's industrious millions is now linked with the fate of the foremost nation of the West, and their representatives of Judaean faith and Roman polity will long wage a war of principles with the speculative Brahman, the authoritative Mulla, and the hardy believing Sikh".<sup>18</sup>

He also observed the interactive and discursive processes which influenced not only the natives of India but also had an impact on the Muslims as he wrote "nor did the proud distinctions of caste and the reverence shown to Brahmans fail to attract the notice and the admiration of the barbarous victors. Shaikhs and Saiyidshadaninnate holiness assigned to them, and the Mughals and Pathans copied the exclusiveness of Rajputs....and the Muhammadans almost forgot the unity of God in the multitude of intercessors whose aid they implored."<sup>19</sup> He was not always critical of the Muslims as it can be seen in many places in the text and appreciated the Arabic learning.<sup>20</sup>

He introduces Guru Nanak in medieval context when numerous cults and sects were preaching and propagating their faith under the guidance of a guru. Nanak's inquisitiveness and anxiety about the Ultimate Reality, his interpretation of the existing philosophical thoughts and his search of the path of happiness appealed Cunningham so much that he compared his methods of enquiry with those of Plato, Bacon, Descartes and the Al Ghazali, the Islamic thinker.<sup>21</sup>

Guru Nanak, according to the author, inducted the good thoughts of his preceding 'social reformers' and avoided their errors. Cunningham also examined Nanak's idea of transmigration of the soul apropos the Islamic notions, Egyptian and Judaic interpretations. He further believed that Nanak's reforms were simply religious and moral and initiation of "Sikhs" was just as disciples and not as his subjects. He then discussed through the aggressive endeavours of Guru Teg Bahadur, Guru Gobind Singh and Banda Bahadur against the Mughals which transformed Nanak's faith into a political religion which shaped Punjab's identity as a distinct nation/ region. The author then acknowledged that Sikhism after the death of Guru Nanak became political in which religion was used to establish a state. A quote from the Text explains author's perception "but Amar Das declared passive and recluse 'Udasis' to be wholly separate of active and domestic 'Sikhs ', and thus finally preserved the infant church or state from disappearing as one of many sects."<sup>22</sup>



Cunningham gave credit to Guru Arjan Dev for making Amritsar the seat of the Sikhs and compiling the *Granth*. As his disciples managed all other cities, Sikh tradition became a 'government'. His perception of Punjab under Sikhs as a state is reiterated frequently. He writes, "During the ministry of Har Gobind, the Sikhs increased greatly in numbers, and the fiscal policy of Arjun, and the armed system of his son, had already formed them into a kind of separate state within the empire."<sup>23</sup>

The Sikh gurus engaged in the Mughal politics but could never become submissive to the authority of the emperors. The major struggle was not converting the people of all faiths but to confront the army of the emperor. Cunningham's observation in this context deserves notice. He wrote, "But the extensive empires of the East, as of semi-barbarism in the West, have never been based on the sober convictions of a numerous people ; There have been mere dynasties of single tribes, rendered triumphant by the rapid development of warlike energy, and by the comprehensive genius of eminent leaders. Race has succeeded race in dominion, and what Cyrus did with his Persians and Charlemagne with his Franks, Babar began..."<sup>24</sup>

Initial success of the Guru against Hill chiefs, the Pathans and the Mughal expeditions, but the governors of Lahore and Sirhind under the command of Aurangzeb's son Bahadur Shah at Anandpur, chased for long and finally martyred in 1708. Cunningham however considers that the real difference lay in the difference between the Sikhs and other Indians, a difference even the learned men of Rome and Greece could not understand in context of Jews and those who got converted to Christianity. Banda, a Bairagi from south India, was the chosen disciple of Guru Gobind. He plundered Sirhind and murdered the governor of Sirhind. As there were political disturbances and wars of successions after the death of Aurangzeb, the Sikhs became active again but the brutal end of Banda came in 1716. Henceforth, formation of Punjab state under Jassa Singh in the wake of political turmoil due to withering away of the Mughal power and foreign invasions, and rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and annexation of Punjab by the British have been narrated. Cunningham was perhaps impeached for commenting on the erroneous policies of the British in handling the provinces of Afghanistan and important cities in the northwest frontier. The book is extensive and it is not possible to reiterate how Cunningham described all the developments till he died in 1851.

Some details as given above help us in understanding Cunningham and his approach of writing history of Sikhs and Punjab. Firstly, he does not emerge to be an orientalist. He might sound to be an orientalist when he keeps the British on top and perceives the possibility of conflicts with the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs as well. I however think that it was his observation during the period when the East India Company was attempting to bring Punjab under its control. His statement must be read carefully as he clearly wrote that India was situated in larger context of the European power. He otherwise admitted the distinguished position of Brahmanical and Sikh religions. He even indirectly explained the notions of Indian Islam. Though he is deeply imbued in cherishing the European political thought and Christianity which is obvious due to his birth, education and training, he nowhere criticised the Indian culture. He appreciated the assimilative culture of Punjab which transformed and got transformed over period of time. Secondly, he traced the evolution of Sikhism from a religious and social reform movement to a political power

under various gurus which drew strength during the political turmoil during the eighteenth century. Thirdly, he situated Sikhism as a distinct religion which was different from Brahmanical, Buddhist and Islamic faith. He was not critical of the first two but had bias against the Muhammadans and their faith due to their religious conflicts in Europe. He denounced Rome at many places which is also due to the protestant ideology of England. Fourthly, he offered parallels between the ancient Greek and Roman religious culture and political thought.

It seems that idea of Punjab as a separate nation or state which some people have inherited was because of the perception of some historians like Cunningham. It will still be a misinterpretation of Cunningham's vocabulary. We may not enter into the debate on definitions of nation and nationality as there are differing opinions on it. The culture, the geographical boundaries, language, religion and so on. When Cunningham acknowledged that the boundaries of Punjab were continuously shifting, Nanak and the successive gurus included the teachings of their contemporary religious thinkers, Gurumukhi alone was not the language of Punjab, he could not mean Punjab to be a separate nation. The regional histories of early medieval kingdoms of north, south, central and eastern India, the Chalukya, the Pallava or the Rashtrakut kingdoms used word 'Rashtra' in their administrative records. It is a complex issue which needs to be discussed in context of region and nation. Cunningham may be criticised for his poor understanding of Indian culture but the details he produced have been significant and may be cross-examined by serious scholars. We may also compare Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* with one written by Muhammad Latif.

I suggest that history of Punjab should not be seen as history of Sikhs. Sikhism was new religion which attracted large number of people from different caste and creed sixteenth century onwards. History of Punjab if viewed in its own terms would enable us to understand the Sikhs and Sikhism in better ways. The 'militancy' of the Sikhs needs to be revised by contextualising it in terms of Punjab's geography, economy and socio-cultural conditions since ancient period. It would apprise us of the legacy of Punjab. Punjab was a land which confronted innumerable foreign invasion and yet accommodated the invaders. Its people were tolerant to all religions and never hesitated in acquiring the beliefs and practices of foreign people, integrated the folk culture of the tribals and supported the dynasties which ruled since the Aryan period till the British period. The legacy and relevance of Punjab may be gauged if we look at its history not from western lens. We must write the history of a region in terms of its own variable though inter-regional linkages were important in evolution of societies.

## **End notes**

1. Mill, *History of India*, vol. I, pp. 100–1. For more details, see Sharma, R. S. *India's Ancient Past*, 2005: New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 6-8.

2. Thapar, Romila. *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India*, 2013: Permanent Black: New Delhi, pp. 3-48. Thapar analyzes the reason which influenced the colonial historians and administrators to periodize Indian history. She does not condemn these notions but tries to explain how we should interpret Indian Past.
3. Mill, *History of India*, vol. I, p. 431
4. Phillips, C.ed. *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*.1961: London, Oxford University Press, pp.217-29.
5. Singh, Upinder. ed. *Rethinking Early Medieval India: A Reader*, 2011: New Delhi, Oxford University Press, In Introduction, Upinder Singh has reviewed the Indian Historiographic tradition and highlighted the inefficacies in the Colonial and Marxist perception of Indian History.
6. Sharma, 2005, pp. 8-11 and see also Jha, D. N. *Economy and Society in Early India: Issues and Paradigms*, 1993: New Delhi, MunshiramManoharlal, pp.1-3. See also, Chattopadhyaya, B. D. *The Making of Early Medieval India*, 2<sup>nd</sup>edn. 2012: Oxford University Press, Introduction to 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Chattopadhyaya discusses all aspects of Indian society which reflected integrative processes in order to reject all the existing theories.
7. Sahu, Bhairabi Prasad. *The Changing Gaze: Regions and the Constructions of Early India*, 2013: New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.4.
8. Grewal, J.S.  
[https://punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/journals/volume11/no1/2\\_grewal.pdf](https://punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/journals/volume11/no1/2_grewal.pdf), pp.2-3.
9. Cunningham, Joseph Davey. *A History of Sikhs From the origins of the Nation to the Battles of Satluj*, ed. H. L. O. Garrett, Humphrey Milford, 1918: Oxford University Press, pp. 5-9.
10. Grewal, p.10 and see also, Khan, Asad Ali. South Asian Studies A Research Journal of South Asian Studies Vol. 24, No.2, July-December 2009, pp. 301-05.
11. Ahir, D.C. *Buddhism in Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh*, 1971: Mahabodhi Society of India, Delhi. pp. 12 -15.
12. Grewal, p.10.
13. Kumar, Sunil. "The Pir's Barkat and the Servitor's Ardour: The Contrasting History of Two Sufi Shrines of Delhi" in Dayal, Mala. Ed. *Celebrating Delhi*, 2010, New Delhi: Delhi: Penguin and Ravi Dayal, 2010. pp. 47-76. Simon Digby, "The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India", *Purusartha (Islam and Society in South Asia)*, 9, 1 & Eaton, Richard M. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
14. Fenech, Louis E. "Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition" in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Oct. - Dec., 1997, Vol. 117, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1997): American Oriental Society, pp. 623-642.
15. Oberoi, Harjot. *Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, 1994, Delhi: Oxford University Press, Introduction.
16. Cunningham, pp.19-20
17. Ibid. p.30-31 .
18. Ibid. pp. 20.
19. Ibid. p. 32.



20. Ibid. p.33. Cunningham wrote "TheArabs,indeed,werethepreserversand diffusers of that science or knowledge which was brought forth in Egypt or India, which was reduced to order in Greece and Rome, and which has been so greatly extended in particular directions by the moderns of the West."
21. Ibid. pp. 40-41.
22. Ibid. p. 50.
23. Ibid. p.59.
24. Ibid. pp.74-75.