

Grade: 7

Course: Virṣā (ਵਿਰਸਾ)

Lesson Number: 22

Unit Name: The Art of Historiography

Title: Assessing Christian Sources of 18th Century Sikh (ਸਿੱਖ) History

Standards

Standard 6: The Art of Historiography

- Students identify and explore the strains of Sikh historiography.
 - Students understand the reason for the lack of original Sikh resource materials and how to evaluate other historiography, including that of Christian missionaries, Hindu theologians, Ahmadiās, Muslims, and others.

Objectives

1. Students will be given a brief overview of Christian sources on Sikh history.
2. Students will assess an excerpt from J.D. Cunningham’s “History of the Sikhs” in order to determine its reliability as a primary historical source.

Prerequisites

- Students should be aware of how to assess primary historical sources critically (lesson 21).

Materials

- Excerpt from J.D. Cunningham’s “History of the Sikhs” (included in Teacher Resources)
- Handout on major Christian writers on Sikhs (included in Teacher Resources)

Advanced Preparation

- The teacher should read the relevant excerpts from “History of the Sikhs” (If possible, the teacher might also want to read Chapter 4 to Chapter 7 of the text in order to obtain a good contextual background for the excerpts included in Teacher Resources).

Engagement (15-20 minutes)

- Greet students and give them a couple of minutes to settle down and take out their notebooks.
- Remind students of the questions that historians need to ask in order to assess the reliability of a primary source (included in previous lesson).
- Briefly go over the major Christian sources on Sikh history (information located in Teacher Resources).
- The teacher can use the source as a handout or can write the major figures on the board with brief notes, depending on the ability of the individual class.
- If there is not enough time to go over all of the individuals mentioned in the Teacher Resources, the teacher should definitely mention A.L.H. Polier, J.D. Cunningham, Ernst Trumpp and Max Arthur Macauliffe.

Exploration (35 minutes)

- During this part of class, students will be analyzing one British source on Sikh history during the 18th century in detail, by taking into account the background and bias of the author, the intent of the author in publishing the text, the sources for the author’s information and the proximity of the author to the events he attempts to describe.
- Give half of the students a copy of an excerpt from a preface of J.D. Cunningham’s book “History of the Sikhs”. Get them to think about Cunningham’s attitude towards the Sikhs.

- What does his preface seem to indicate about his purpose in writing the text? What are his objectives for England and the East India Company? How does he account for his favorable understanding of the Sikhs? What does this tell us about Cunningham's bias? What does this tell us about how British Imperialist sources on Sikh history should be approached?
- Get the other half of the class to look at the sketch of a Sikh by Baltazard Solvyns and the caption that are included by him. Get students to think about Solvyn as a source for Sikh history in the 18th century: Is he a reliable source? What misinterpretations or misconceptions do his sketch and caption reveal (The teacher should refer to the notes included with the source to supplement the discussion.)? What does this tell us about how we should approach Western/ Christian sources on Sikh history?
- Get students to share their opinions about the reliability of the sources in a large class discussion. The students should identify any misconceptions/ misinterpretations that the author has about Sikh religious beliefs and culture.
- They should also identify the attitude of the author towards the Sikhs (Is it dismissive? appreciative? condescending? hostile? etc.)
- Get students to note that many Westerners looking at the Sikh community in the 18th century were extremely limited due to language and cultural barriers which did not allow them to appreciate the uniqueness of Sikh religion and way of life. Even those scholars who recognized a distinct identity of the Sikhs had some misconceptions about Sikh religious belief and traditions.

Explanation/ Extension (5-10 minutes)

- In this part of the class, the teacher should reiterate the perspectives with which Western (mainly Christian) writers approached the Sikh community historically.
- The teacher should remind students that in order to assess such primary historical sources, historians need to critically assess bias in these texts.
- The aim of the Christian writers was to understand the emergence of Sikh power in the Panjāb so that they could effectively rule the state.
- Recall, Ratan Singh Bhaṅgū's (ਰਤਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਭੰਗੂ) work was the result of Captain Murray's curiosity about the dominance of Sikh power in the 18th century. Later on, Christian missionaries writing about the Sikhs and Sikh scriptures sought to undermine the religion in an attempt to impose their own religious beliefs upon the people of India.

Evaluation (On-going)

- Get students to hand in a paragraph about the primary source that they studied in class.
- The paragraph should answer the questions posed to students in the Exploration section of the lesson and should make a statement about the reliability of the primary source as a historical document.

Teacher Resources

- Pappas, Peter. Analyzing Primary Sources. March 9th, 2007. <http://www.edteck.com/dbq/more/analyzing.htm>
- Hardgrave, Robert. An Early Portrayal of the Sikhs: Two 18th Century Etchings by Baltazard Solvyns, March 9th, 2007. <http://asnic.utexas.edu/asnic/hardgrave/sikhs.html>
- Europeans in Sikh History. March 9th, 2007. <http://www.allaboutsikhs.com/Sikh-History/Europeans-in-Sikh-History-2.html>
- Cunningham, JD. The History of the Sikhs. Ammritsar: Satvic Books, 2002.

Notes for the Teacher: In the excerpts below, we have purposefully left some spellings as is, as they highlight the bias rule of the writer.

Christian Sources of Sikh (ਸਿੱਖ) History in the 18th Century

Western writers first began displaying an interest in the Sikh people before the end of the eighteenth century. When Europeans, particularly the British, settled in India and Pañjāb (ਪੰਜਾਬ) and took India under their reign, it was in their interests to understand Sikh religion so that they could promote and propagate their own religion and culture in India. The following is a chronological list of some notable western (mainly British/ Christian) writers on Sikhs in the 18th century.

Eighteenth Century Sources

1. **Col. A.L.H. Polier & George Thomas:** Polier was the first Western (French) scholar on Sikhism who collected information about the tenets, polity and manner of the Sikhs. His account was largely unfavorable towards the Sikhs. George Thomas, on the other hand, first recognized the Sikhs as a separate nation and was mainly concerned with the emergence of Sikh political power.
2. **Charles Wilkins:** In 1781, Wilkins visited the *Gurduārā* (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ) at Paṭnā (ਪਟਨਾ), associated with Gurū Gobind Singh Sāhib's (ਗੁਰੂ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਸਿੰਘ) birth. Here, he was told that five Sikhs perform the initiation ceremony. At Takht Paṭnā (ਤਖਤ ਪਟਨਾ), he observed that two Granths i.e. Gurū Granth (ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ) and Dasam Granth (ਦਸਮ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ) were held in veneration and, in his text, he commented upon Sikh congregational worship and the system of voluntary contribution based on his observations. He learnt through verbal inquiry that the founder of the Sikh faith was "Nānak Shāh (ਨਾਨਕ ਸ਼ਾਹ)". Thus, it was Wilkins who said that the Sikhs as a people were distinct from the worshippers of Brahmā (ਬ੍ਰਹਮਾ) and the followers of Muhammed.
3. **George Forster:** George Forster was a civilian employee of the East India Company, whom Warren Hastings selected for his scholarly aptitude, to proceed to Pañjāb for collecting authentic information and writing about the Sikhs. He recorded his impressions in a series of letters, published in two volumes in London in 1798 under the title of "A Journey from Baṅgāl (ਬੰਗਾਲ) to England etc." Forster's account of the Sikhs, which is authentic, informative and appreciative, was written after his numerous contacts with the Sikhs. This is the first objective study of the Sikhs of the second half of the eighteenth century, partly based on "large historical tracts of the Siques" furnished to the author by Colonel Polier, in the service of the East India Company (1757-75). But unlike Polier's, the overall opinion of Forster about the Sikhs was favorable which he frankly expressed in the main letter bearing on the Sikhs, written by him from Kashmīr (ਕਸ਼ਮੀਰ) in 1783, to Mr. Gregory at Lakhnau (ਲਖਨਊ).

Nineteenth Century Sources

In the first decade of the nineteenth century the East India Company came into closer contact with the Sikh rulers in terms of both space and diplomacy. It resulted in their keenness to acquire more knowledge of Sikh religion and people.

1. **H.H. Wilson:** H.H. Wilson's book 'Religious sects of the Hindus' was published later, in which he discussed and focused on the civil and religious institutions of the Sikhs which distinguish them from the Hindus. He argued that Gurū Nānak (ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ), like other Hindu reformers, was a reformer. For him, Gurū Nānak founded a religious sect which later on was transformed into a nation by the contemporary compelling political circumstances. Wilson was of the opinion that the non-existence of caste in Sikhism distinguished it from Hinduism. He depicts Sikhism in negative terms by saying that it did not influence social structure and did not bring any improvement in Hinduism and its belief. Wilson refers to Gurū Nānak as a nominal founder of the Sikh religion and its people.
2. **J.D. Cunningham:** Author of a text entitled "History of the Sikhs", published in 1849, Cunningham was the first Western scholar who looked at the development of Sikh history and religion in a comprehensive manner. His account is the first serious and sympathetic account of the Sikh people written by a foreigner. Cunningham explored the available material with the meticulousness of a scholar. Besides official dispatches and documents and earlier English accounts, he went to the original sources and acquainted himself with Sikh scriptures as well as with relevant manuscripts in Fārsī and Pañjābī. For the publication of this favorable account of the Sikhs, Cunningham was dismissed from his political service.
3. **Dr. Ernst Trumpp:** Dr. Trumpp was perhaps the first writer who wrote about the Ādi Granth (ਆਦਿ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ). In 1877 he published an incomplete translation of the Ādi Granth and said, "that it [the Ādi Granth] was incoherent and shallow in the extreme". His translation of the Ādi Granth may be regarded as the first important attempt at an interpretation of the early Sikh tradition. But, not only does he make derogatory remarks about the Gurūs, his translation of the Bāṇī (ਬਾਣੀ) is very inaccurate and subversive.
4. **Max Arthur Macauliffe:** At the turn of the twentieth century, Max Arthur Macauliffe produced "The Sikh Religion", basically refuting Trumpp's work which, in his view, was 'highly inaccurate and unidiomatic'. Macauliffe was of the opinion that the Ādi Granth embodied all the elements of a new religion. In this regard, he observes, it would be difficult to point to a religion of greater originality or to a more comprehensive ethical system.

History of the Sikhs

"The author's principal object in writing this history has not always been understood, and he therefore thinks it right to say that his main endeavor was to give Sikhism its place in the general history of humanity, by showing its connexion with the different creeds of India, by exhibiting it as a natural and important result of the Muhammadan Conquest, and by impressing upon the people of England the great necessity of attending to the mental changes now in progress amongst their subject millions in the East, who are erroneously thought to be sunk in superstitious apathy, or to be held spell-bound in ignorance by a dark and designing priesthood. A secondary object of the author was to give some account of the connexion of the English with the Sikhs, and in part with the Afgāns, from the time they began to take a direct interest in the affairs of these races, and to involve them in the web of their policy for opening the navigation of the Indus, and for bringing Turkestan and Khorasan within their commercial influence.

It has also been remarked by some public critics and private friends, that the author leans unduly towards the Sikhs, and that an officer in the Indian army should appear to say he sees aught unwise or objectionable in the acts of the East India Company and its delegates is at the least strange. The author has, indeed, constantly endeavored to keep his readers alive to that undercurrent of feeling or principle which moves the Sikh people collectively, and which will usually rise superior to the crimes

or follies of individuals. It is the history of Sikhs, a new and peculiar nation, which he wished to make known to strangers; and he saw no reason for continually referring to the duty or destiny of the English in India, because he is addressing himself to his own countrymen who know the merits and motives of their supremacy in the East, and who can themselves commonly decide whether the particular acts of a viceroy are in accordance with the general policy of his government. The Sikhs, moreover, are so inferior to the English in resources and knowledge that there is no equality of comparison between them.

The glory to England is indeed great, and she may justly feel proud of the increasing excellence of her sway over subject nations; but this general expression of the sense and desire of the English people does not show that every proceeding of her delegates is necessarily fitting and far-seeing. The wisdom of England is not to be measured by the views and acts of any one of her sons, but is rather to be deduced from the characters of many. In India it is to be gathered in part from the high, but not always scrupulous, qualities which distinguished Clive, Hastings, and Wellesley, who acquired and secured the empire; in part from the generous, but not always discerning, sympathies of Burke, Cornwallis, and Bentinck, who gave to English rule the stamp of moderation and humanity; and also in part from the ignorant well-meaning of the people at large, who justly deprecating ambition in the abstract, vainly strived to check the progress of conquest before its necessary limits have been attained, and before the aspiring energies of the conquerors themselves have been exhausted. By conquest, I would be understood to imply the extension of supremacy, and not the extinction of dynasties, for such imperial form of domination should be the aim and scope of English sway in the East. England should reign over kings rather than rule over subjects.”

Excerpt from: J.D. Cunningham's 'History of Sikhs' (Author's Preface to the Second Edition)

An Early Portrayal of the Sikhs: An 18th Century Etching by Baltazard Solvyns

“When the Flemish artist Baltazard Solvyns arrived in Kalkattā (ਕਲਕੱਤਾ) in 1791, the city was already developing a cosmopolitan character. There were Europeans of various backgrounds, Armenians, Persians, Chinese, and, from the reaches of Hindostān (ਹਿੰਦੋਸਤਾਨ) (the term by which India was then most widely known), Muslims and Hindus of numerous sects and castes. There were comparatively few Sikhs in Baṅgāl at that time, but in Solvyns time there were Sikhs in Kalkattā, distinguished by their dress and customs. When Solvyns undertook his great project to prepare “a collection of 250 coloured etchings descriptive of the manners, customs, character, dress, and religious ceremonies of the Hindus,” he included Sikhs, and it is to this Flemish artist that we owe the first published portrayals of Sikhs.”

Calcutta: Section I, Number 9

“A Sic in his family dress--the back ground represents them armed as Soldiers. These Hindoos form also a people with independent laws and customs. There are persons who hesitate to rank them among the Hindoos. But it is certain that their tribe was founded by Nanuck-Shah [Gurū Nānak], a descendant of Timur's, who through expiations and money was allowed to become a Hindoo. The Sics never quit their families but for military service. They are brave, and acquit themselves well in battle; but all their force is in their first charge: if that is resisted, their defeat soon follows. It is worthy of observation, that among them a family goes into mourning on the birth of a child, and rejoices and puts on white clothes when death carries off one of its members. This custom, which has been remarked among other nations, proceeds from an opinion perhaps too well founded, that this world is a vale of tears and misery, from which it is always a happiness to be delivered. The Sic who forms the principal figure in this engraving, is in his ordinary costume, which is black, or oftener very dark blue. The background of the plate gives a view of the mountainous country which these Hindoos inhabit, with a group of their warriors near a tent, which is their ordinary abode.”



Source: Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr.

Notes for the Teacher

Gurū Nānak Sāhib was often referred to as Nānak Shāh by the Europeans. Solvyn's account of Gurū Nānak as a Timar (ਤਿਮਰ) who converted to Hindūism is clearly erroneous; one can only wonder where he got this information. The fact that Solvyn states, "There are persons who hesitate to rank them among the Hindus", clearly indicates that Sikhī was seen as a distinct religion by many. Solvyn's comment on Sikh military tactics - that "all their force is in their first charge; if that is resisted, their defeat soon follows" - is unsupported. Colonel Polier, in his 1787 presentation on the Sikhs before the Asiatic Society in Kalkattā, held that "their military capacity... are far from being so formidable as they are generally represented, or as they might be," attributing this to "disorderly manner" in which they fight." Such views may have been held by a few Europeans in Kalkattā in Solvyn's time, but they contrast with the more general judgment of "remarkably good" Sikh military skill. Solvyns (and others) may have been confused by a frequently used Sikh tactic "to feign flight and then pull up suddenly and strike their enemy who would be caught off balance" also referred to as Dḥāī-Phaṭ (ਢਾਈ-ਫਟ).

- lives in defense of Darbār Sāhib (ਦਰਬਾਰ ਸਾਹਿਬ) against a thirty-thousand strong Afgān cavalry.
- In many places, as in the excerpt provided in this lesson, Kāzī Nūr Muhammad has referred to the Sikh warriors with derogatory expressions such as “dogs” but at the same time, he shows his admiration for these warriors.

Tāhmas Khān

- Born in eastern Turkey, c. 1740
- Captured by Nādir Shāh’s soldiers when he was only five years old.
- Ultimately became a slave to Mīr Mannū, who became the Mughal Governor of Pañjāb.
- Consequently, Tāhmas Khān’s memoirs give us a first-hand glimpse of the re-emergence of Sikh power in the 1750s.
- Though he witnessed the slaughter of the Sikhs at Malerkoṭlā (ਮਲੇਰਕੋਟਲਾ) at the hands of Ahmad Shāh Durrānī in 1762, he predicted the revival of Sikh power, which soon came true.
- Tāhmas Khān does not give any dates for any of the events he describes, except for the dates of the births of two of his sons. But because he follows the true sequence of events, his narrative can be set in a tight chronological framework.
- The excerpt about the Sikhs under the governorship of Mīr Mannū describes the torture that the Sikh community suffered, which the students can probably corroborate with other sources.
- The second excerpt discusses the problems that the Sikh uprisings caused the Mughal rulers during that time.
- Students should note that the different point of view really affects the way that the Sikh community is portrayed; they should ask themselves: are Sikhs being portrayed as victims or tyrants? Are they portrayed as meek and helpless or capable and rebellious? Are they seen as patriots and defenders of the weak or rebellious insurgents?

News Reports from Dillī

- These reports are contemporary to the events they describe so they are fairly accurate.
- They mainly describe political events and are valuable for the study of Sikh history because they cover a crucial period of the emergence of Sikh power in the Pañjāb and the contest with Abdālī (1659-65).
- These sources help us to date certain events better, and also add other significant information not known to us from any other source (they describe a major defeat inflicted on Abdālī in February 1764 which does not seem to be known otherwise).
- The excerpts provided in the lesson cover the rise and expansion of Sikh power during the late 1750s.

Excerpts from translations of News Reports from Dillī, 1759-65 (During the Re-emergence of Sikh Power)

Source: Grevāl, J.S. & Habīb, Irfān. Sikh History from Persian Sources. New Dillī: Tulikā, 2001.

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History of the Sikhs

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Calcutta: Section I, Number 9

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