

Sikh Education in Colonial Punjab: A Study of Sikh Educational Conferences

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Abstract: *The 19th century was a period of renaissance, in this period a large number of movements exerted tremendous influence on the modernization of Indian society. Prominent of these movements in Punjab were Namdhari movement, Singh Sabha Movement, Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiya movement which have done considerable work in the socio-religious field. Almost all these movements of Punjab played a vital role in the field of education. It has rightly been said that no country or community can make any progress in the real sense without education. Founding of the Sikh Educational Conference laid stress on religious, social, education and literary activities among the Sikhs. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the educational development of the Sikh community through Sikh Educational Conference.*

Keywords: Education, Sikh, Community, Movements

1. Introduction

The Sikh Educational Conference came into existence in 1908 AD to promote education among the Sikhs. In order to objectively assess the achievements of the Sikh Education Conference, one has to keep in mind the pathetic condition of the Sikh community before the foundation of the conference was laid. The initial efforts for the spread of the western education were made by the christen missionaries.¹ They started schools with two objectives, viz: to teach Christianity to Anglo-Indians, secondly colleges were also established to train priests. Missionaries thus used education not as an end in itself, but as a means of propagation.² In Punjab other organizations like Arya Samaj and the Anjuman-i-Punjab inspired by social and humanitarian zeal's, set up schools and colleges to dispel mental darkness, and usher in a new era of intellectual awakening.³ In these circumstances, the level of education of the Sikhs had come down in the last quarter of the 19th century. The Sikhs found it difficult to adapt themselves to the conditions under the British rule and fell behind in education. Another challenge facing the Sikhs was that some high and low caste Sikhs were converting to Christianity and it was feared that many more would do the same.⁴ The more enlightened Sikhs began to think of a new movement which should present the true image of Sikhism. This movement was later on called the Singh Sabha movement.⁵

2. Literature Survey

The period of the research work is vast, moreover in this period the political and socio-economic conditions of whole of India had undergone changes. Colonial Punjab under the

Britishers from 1849-1947 saw various changes in every section of the society. Though much literature and source material is available on this subject, but we find very little work on Sikh education and therefore it needs more probing. Kuldeep Kaur's⁵ work *Education in India 1781-1985: Policies, Planning and Implementation* deals with the development, growth and implementation made in the field of education by a large number of committees, conferences, seminars, study groups, study teams, panels, dispatches, minutes and the commissions appointed by the government of India, state, numerous advisory bodies. Author has arranged her work according to different aspects and highlights the education policy and planning in colonial India, as well as in free India. In her work the author has studied women education, technical education, teacher education, and education of scheduled castes, rural and religious policy. Author has used source material like minutes, letters, charters, acts, commissions and committees, panels, seminars, conferences, reports, yearbooks, Five Year Plans and books to understand the subject. The references have been arranged chronologically. The work highlights the education system in India, which however fails to discuss the system of education at state level. Amrit Walia's⁶ *Development of Education and Social, Political Change in Punjab 1882-1947* gives an account of the development of Primary, Secondary, Higher, Technical and Female Education in Punjab under the colonial rule and its effects on society and politics. Walia gives a backdrop to the present system of education in Punjab. The author examines the education system in Punjab, from the ancient to the medieval. Walia highlights the recommendations of the New Education Policy introduced in 1882. She suggests that female education should receive special encouragement through Zanana teaching. The study shows the effect of female education development in social and political life and mentions that the first girl's education primary school was setup at Ferozepur. Walia has also highlighted the role of Christian Missionaries, socio-religious organization like the

¹ H.R. Mehta, *A history of growth and development of education in the Punjab*, Punjabi University Press, Patiala, 1971, p-4.

² S.N. Mukherji, *History of education in India*, Achary Book Depot, Baroda, 1955, p-5

³ Gurdev Singh Deol, *Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia*, Sikh Historical Research Development, Khalsa college, Amritsar, p-7

⁴ N.G. Barrier, *The Sikhs and their literature: A Guide to Track Books and Periodicals (1849-1919)*, Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 1970, p-XIX

⁵ Kaur, Kuldeep, *Education in India (1781-1985); Policies, Planning and Implementation*, CRIDD, Chandigarh, 1985

⁶ Amrit Walia, *Development of Education and Social, Political Change in Punjab (1882-1947)*, ABS Publication, Jalandhar, 2005.

Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha and the women education development in Punjab. This work does not give us information, for the development of women education in Punjab after independence. Brij Pal Singh⁷ in his work *Education Progress and Economic Development in Punjab* studied an educational progress and economic development in Punjab. The Punjab Government memorandum submitted to the Fifth Finance Commission on social services pointed to return investment in education. After a study of the progress of education in Punjab the conclusion seems inescapable that education has contributed little to the recent economic development of the state. His main analysis is that the content of education is much more important than the linear growth system. He throws focus of his work on education and provides for economic development. He also examines the professional and technical education and their impact on development. However this work fails to discuss the progress of women education and its impact.

Amrit Walia⁸ (1975) elaborated on the role of the Sikh reformists and Educational Conferences conducted by them. The first session of Sikh education conference was held at Gujranwala in April 1908 under the stewardship of S. Sunder Singh Majithia. The conference had certain definite aims and objectives before it. It wanted to foster love for knowledge and education among the youth. It aimed at enlightening the people and making the synthesis of the best of western education and the best of Indian education with religious flavour in it. Apart from stressing the importance of primary education the conference explored the defects and shortcomings of the secondary, collegiate and university education and aimed at its amelioration. The conference was to reform the entire system of the education where foreign language should be replaced by the mother tongue. Side by side with the education of the boys the conference wanted to lay special emphasis upon female education, which hitherto practically ignored.

3. Research Methodology

To study the “SIKH EDUCATION IN COLONIAL PUNJAB: A STUDY OF SIKH EDUCATIONAL CONFERENCES” large numbers of primary and secondary sources have been consulted. The records of Chief Khalsa Diwan, Indian freedom movement, Reports of Sikh Educational Conferences are available in Punjab State Archives and National Archives of India, New Delhi have been studied to examine the role of Sikh Educational Conferences for the propagation of Sikhism and education among the Sikhs in colonial period and after partition. Large numbers of vernacular newspapers, periodicals and statements have been critically examined to make research work more authentic. The secondary sources and research articles have also been consulted for the completion of this work. The purposed work has been a comprehensive study with inter disciplinary approach which has include many vital issues that have not been so far explained.

⁷ Brij Pal Singh, *Education Progress and Economic Development in Punjab*, Punjabi University Press, Patiala, 1974

⁸ Amrit Walia, ‘Achievements of the Sikh Educational Conference’, *Proceedings, Punjab History Conference (9th Session)*, April 26-27, 1975.

4. Discussion

Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia, a leading most personality of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, played a leading role in the Sikh education movement. He organized All India Sikh conference at Khalsa College, Amritsar on 12th April 1904⁹ A.D. The proposal for the founding of Sikh Educational Conference was first time mooted by Sardar Naranjan Singh- officiating Principal of Khalsa College, Amritsar, in his annual report presented in 1905. In this report he suggested the launching of a movement under the name of Sikh educational conference and holding its session on the occasion of Diwali and Baisakhi festivals.¹⁰

Later a Sikh missionary group led by Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia visited Sind and they attended a session of the Muhammadan Educational Conference at Karachi in December, 1907.¹¹ From there the idea of setting up a similar conference for the sikh community was picked up. Returning to Amritsar, Sunder Singh Majithia convened a meeting at his residence on January 09, 1908, to which prominent Sikhs of the time were invited.¹² Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Jodh Singh (Educationist who became the first Vice-Chancellor. Punjabi University Patiala 1962) Harbans Singh Attari etc. attended the meeting.¹³ After some deliberation it was decided to start a Sikh Educational Conference on the pattern of Muslim Educational Conference. To draw up the creed and constitution of the conference, a sub committee consisting of Sardar Gurcharan Singh, Bar-at-law of Rajasansi, Kharak Singh Pleader of Lahore, Bhai Dan Singh B.A., Bhai Jodh Singh M.A., and Babu Gulab Singh was constituted.¹⁴ The proposals of the committee with some minor changes were later approved by the Chief Khalsa Diwan. As per the constitution which was finally adopted, the Sikh Educational Conference was to meet every year. The dates of each annual session were to be determined before hand by an educational committee to be set up as the executive council of the conference. The membership of the conference was to the following categories of persons on payment of certain fees on yearly or permanent basis;

- Member of the Education Committee
 - Delegates
 - Fellows
 - Members of the Reception Committee
- In addition, the following categories of the people were allowed to attend the conference;
- Special visitor
 - *Sahiks* (helpers) of the Reception Committee
 - Press representatives
 - Volunteers enrolled by Reception committee and Educational committee
 - Holders of complimentary tickets issued by Reception committee and Educational committee
 - Ex-President of the Conference.¹⁵

⁹ Gurdev Singh Deol, *op. cit.*, p-13

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p-14

¹¹ Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 1994, p-231.

¹² Fauja Singh, ‘Sikh Educational Conference’, *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol.xvi-2, October, 1982, p-372.

¹³ Harbans Singh, *op. cit.*, p-231

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p-217

¹⁵ *Silver Jubilee Book, Chief Khalsa Diwan*, Amritsar, 1935, pp 46-

Each member of the educational committee and each fellow, delegate and member of the reception committee was entitled to one vote during the deliberations of the conference. All decisions at the conference were to be made by majority vote.

Educational Committee¹⁶:

The most important committee of the conference was the Educational committee which was to consist of 13 members distributed as under:

Chief Khalsa Diwan nominees	7
Representatives of various Singh Sabhas	1
Representatives of various educational institutions	2
Representatives of registered Sikh graduates	2
Representative of Reception committee inviting next session	1
Total	13

The educational committee had no president but functioned under the guidance of Secretary. The educational committee was given the power to make rules from time to time for the following purpose:

- 1) Election of the members of the Educational committee and Reception committee.
- 2) The language in which the proceedings of the conference were to be conducted.
- 3) Selection of paper readers for the conference.
- 4) Affiliation of educational institutions to the Chief Khalsa Diwan.
- 5) Awarding of scholarship or granting of other financial assistance to students and researchers.
- 6) Opening of new educational institution.
- 7) Establishment of committee to popularize the work of the conference.

Reception Committee: The Control and Management of Reception Arrangements, Tents, House, Loadings, *Langar*, Bath, *golaks*, charity boxes, shops, book stalls, etc., and distribution of books, pamphlets, leaflets, advertisement, pictures, papers and article of any kind whatsoever was to rest with the reception committee. Similarly, the responsibility for the holding morning and evening religious *Diwans*, other gatherings, lectures or recitations of all kinds within the precincts of the conference and exhibitions was to rest with the reception committee. Also the control and management of the conference *pandal* and the arrangement of seats therein was the responsibility of the Reception committee. But the Reception committee was to function under the control of educational committee.

Subject Committee: Subjects committee was another important committee of the conference. Members of the reception committee and fellows whose names were registered 45 days before the holding of the annual conference were entitled to participate in the election of the members of the subjects committee. As per rules framed for the purpose, each district was to return one member to the subjects committee for every 20 members of the reception committee, fellows and delegates that may have been returned therefrom. In case two or more persons had an equal number of votes, the decision was to rest with

Educational committee. The Educational committee was also empowered to reject any person returned to the subjects committee and to invite any person not so returned to take seat on the committee as one duly returned.

The Sikh Educational Conference was a non-political body functioning under the patronage of the Chief Khalsa Diwan and governed by a Sikh Educational Committee.¹⁷ The funds of the conference were to be derived from the fees payable by the different categories of participants and from the voluntary donations in response to general appeals made at the annual session of conference.¹⁸

5. Aims and Objectives

The objectives set for the conference included;

- Spread of western education among the Sikhs,
- Promoting the study of Sikh literature,
- Reform of Sikh educational institutions,
- Opening of new educational institutions,
- To promote the cause of female education among Sikhs,
- Promotion of technical and agricultural education.

With the above objectives, the Sikhs held more or less regular sessions and carried out various schemes for the realization of its programme. During four decades (1908-1947), it had an impressive record of achievements to its credit and rendered unquestionable service to the cause of education.

The first session of the conference was held at Gujranwala from April 17-19, 1908. Baghel Singh of Kulla, a graduate of Banaras Hindu University, was president of the conference and Balwant Singh Butalia, chairman of the Reception Committee. The session of the First Sikh Educational Conference was an important milestone in the educational history of the Sikhs.

For the advancement of Punjabi language and the development of Punjabi literature, the conference paid special attention to the enrichment of this language. Two major reasons for that- One, it was the mother tongue of the Punjab and second Punjabi was the repository of the religious literature of the Sikhs. For this purpose, new books were got written, often with the lure of prizes, and translation of standard and useful books in other language were made into Punjabi.¹⁹ As a result of repeated requests from the Sikh Education Committee, Punjab University, Lahore agreed to make Punjabi an optional language along with Urdu and Hindi.²⁰ For the promotion this language, firstly the proceedings of the conference was conducted in Punjabi. Presidential and other addresses were invariably delivered in Punjabi. The results achieved were excellent and the call to duty by the Education Committee was so well responded to that the sister communities envied the Sikhs. Nawab Zulfikar Ali led the Muslim deputation to the 10th

¹⁷ Ganda Singh, 'Sikh Educational Conference', *The Panjab Past And Present*, vol. vii-1, April, 1973, p-70

¹⁸ Fauja Singh, *op. cit* p-375.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p-383.

²⁰ Amrit walia, 'Achievements of the Sikh Education Conference', *Proceedings*, Punjab History Conference (9th session), April 26-27, 1975, p-210.

Sikh Educational Conference at Lahore in 1917 and asked the Sikhs to take their Muslim brothers along.²¹

The Sikh Educational Conference paid special attention towards religious education because religious training must proceed hand in hand with secular training. Along with this, the conference started giving religious instruction in the evening classes. Later, textbooks were prepared for Khalsa schools to cover the scheme of study in religious education. The conference requested the Punjab government to enact a strict law by passing a bill prohibiting underage smoking and drinking. The purpose of this was that students studying in schools or living in boarding houses could not become victims of this evil.²²

Sant Atar Singh (Sikh preacher and social reformer) paid special attention to promote education along with spirituality. He invariably participated in Sikh Educational Conferences. In his presidential speech at the Sikh Educational Conference held at Ferozepur in 1915, he told the congregation that we are all interested in the progress of the Khalsa Panth. But this progress will come when you start waking up early every morning. When each person will contribute one-tenth of his income monthly or annually, then there will be no need to appeal for money for any common works.²³

The demand for national education was strongly raised in the Rawalpindi Conference of 1911. The president of this conference Sunder Singh Majithia appealed that the Sikh National Educational Fund be started for the establishment of elementary schools in towns and villages. Sant Attar Singh promised to collect 5000 rupees from his disciples for this noble cause.²⁴

Sant Atar Singh inaugurated the building of Guru Nanak Khalsa College Gujranwala on March 30, 1918, on the eve of the first session of the Sikh Educational Conference held at Gujranwala. The reception committee of the session tried hard that Sant Attar Singh and Bhai Arjan Singh Bagrian should preside over the session, so that the conflict between the Chief Khalsa Diwan and Maharaja Ripudaman Singh about the Anand Marriage Bill could be removed but this could not materialize²⁵.

From the very first conference (1908) special attention was given to female education because no society can progress if its women are illiterate. The aim of the Sikh Educational Conference was to bring women educationally and socially at par with men. This is evidenced by the fact that several women's conferences were held during the sessions of the conference. A striking feature of the 20th session of the conference was the women conference held during 1929 the first day of the conference. The women delegates discussed the ways and means to promote female education in the

community. It worked for girls' education also with incentive provided by two of the greatest advocate of women education, Bhai Takhat Singh, Ferozepur and Baba Nihal Singh of Kairon²⁶. It also expressed the need for setting up a women's association which should remove their grievances. The exertion of the conference yielded good results and by 1915 several girls' schools had been established. The annual report of the Chief Khalsa Diwan for the year 1914-15 gives the following figures.

1) Kanya Mahavidyal	1
2) Kanya Middle School	8
3) Boarding houses for girls	5
4) Widow Ashram	1

The number of girl's school went up to 100 by 1919.²⁷ The students here were taught those subjects which could prove useful to the girls, such as handwork, cooking and stitching etc²⁸. It is a fact that before the start of Sikh Educational Conference in 1908 there were only 07 Khalsa schools and with the efforts of Sikh Educational Conference this number reached 340 in 1947. Apart from this, many handicapped schools, schools for orphans, blind and handicapped were also opened.²⁹

The 25th session, the silver jubilee of Sikh Educational Conference at Gujranwala on April 1935, was land mark in the educational development of the Sikh community. Sardar Mangal Singh, president of reception committee, while thanking the audience, pointed out that the natives of Gujranwala have done an untiring service in the field of education. It was here that the first Sikh Educational Conference was held and was successful. He also touched upon the issues of unemployment and the ways and means to remove it. Sir Sunder Singh Majithia who was the president of this session delivered his presidential remarks. He draws the attention of the people towards the step- motherly treatment of the educational department towards the Sikh community. In the 25th session more emphasis was laid on the female education.

Many message of congratulation were received by the Educational committee for celebrating it's as 25th anniversary. Professor Ruchi Ram Sahni, wrote 'I hasten to send a few words of my humble appreciation of the work of the Sikh Educational Conference and of my sincerest congratulations on the occasion of its Silver Jubilee. I have followed with the keenest interest the history of the Sikh Educational Conference from the moment of its birth and indeed, I can claim that I know, perhaps, as much of the Sikh awakening during the last 50 years and more as any devoted Khalsa himself. It must therefore, be matter of no small rejoicing and encouragement to the whole Sikh Community to be told that the Educational Conference which they inaugurated 25 years ago has, made a positively larger contribution towards the promotion of literacy of their sisters & brethren than the private enterprise of either the

²¹ 'Chief Khala Diwan- Fifty Years Of Service (1902-1951)', *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol.xii-1, April, 1973, p-61.

²² Amrit walia, *op. cit*, p-211.

²³ Silver Jubilee Book, *op. cit*, p-75

²⁴ D. Petrie, "Memorandum on Recent Development in Sikh Politics", *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol. iv-ii, October, 1970, p-337

²⁵ Fauja Singh, *op. cit*, p-381

²⁶ Ganda singh, *op. cit*, p-69.

²⁷ Fauja Singh, *op. cit*, p-381.

²⁸ Poonam Arora, "Role of Singh Sabha Movement in Promotion of Female Education in Punjab", *Proceedings*, Punjab History Conference (26th session), March 18-20, 1994, p-212.

²⁹ Ganda Singh, *op. cit*, p68.

Hindus or the Muslim in the province have done.”³⁰

The Hon'ble Dr. Sir Gokal Chand Narang (M. A- Ph. D.Minister for Local Self Govt. Punjab) wrote

“I have always watched the Sikh Educational movement with great interest. The Sikh Educational Conference has been a *unique institution*, and anyone who has witnessed any of its sittings must have been impressed not only by the large numbers attending it but also by the great Zeal and enthusiasm manifested by the Sikh delegates and workers. If I am not mistaken, almost every session of the educational Conference has been followed by the establishment of a high school at the place where the Conference has been meeting, and it is due to the activities of the Conference that education has received such a great impetus among the Sikhs. I understand that the next session of the conference is going to be held at Gujranwala and that it will be the Silver Jubilee session of the Conference. I wish it every success.”³¹

In all the previous conferences, the Sikh concentrated their attention on increasing the number of khalsa educational institution, night schools, and on promoting Punjabi language education a religious honor etc. But it was for the first time that their attention was diverted by the president of 31st Sikh educational conference held at Sargodha in the year 1944, towards the very system of education. He said, we are to change the existing educational system root and branch. Besides attaining scientific education we should develop the inner values of man. Due to the increasing problem of unemployment, the conference felt it necessary to promote technical education. This problem forced the Conference to open commercial, technical, agricultural and professional schools and colleges. Seeing that the number of teachers from the training colleges was very keen, a J.A.V. Classes for Sikh students were started in 1919 at Khalsa College, Amritsar ³². During the next session of the conference a demand for an engineering college was made with which polytechnic and industrial institutes should be attached. But unfortunately during the year of 1947, the committee could not organize a session because of communal riots in the country.

6. Conclusion

To sum up we can say that the first and foremost duty of the Sikh Educational Conference was to raise the standard of education among the Sikhs and remove the darkness of illiteracy among the Sikhs. Its laid as much stress on male education as on female education; as much on higher education as on primary education; as much on Sikh religion, Sikh history and Sikh tradition as on the new ideas from the west and as much on learning of English as on learning of mother tongue and the use of it as the medium of instruction. The Sikh Education Conference worked hard to improve education among the Sikhs. Compared to other religions, Sikhs were behind in education, but due to the Sikh Education Conference, the education consciousness

and standard of education among the Sikhs definitely increased.

Sikh Educational Conferences (1908-1946)

No.	Place	Year	President of the conference
1.	Gujranwala	April 1908	Sardar Beghal Singh, (Rais, Lahore)
2.	Lahore	April 1909	Sardar Joginder Singh (Rais, Agra Estate)
3	Amritsar	March 1910	Kanwar Daljeet Singh, (Raja sir K.C.M.C Jullunder)
4	Rawalpindi	April 1911	Hon'ble Sir Sunder Singh Majithia
5	Sialkot	April 1912	S. Joginder Singh, Rais, Estate Home Minister, Patiala.
6	Ambala	March 1913	Diwan Lila Ram, Hydrabad
7	Jullunder	March 1914	S.B. Balwant Singh, Rais, Butala
8	Ferozpur	October 1915	Sant Attar Singh Maharaj Mastuana.
9	Taran Tarn	April 1916	S. Kharak Singh, Rais of Sialkot.
10	Lahore	April 1917	S.Harbans Singh, Rais of Attari.
11	Gujranwala	April 1918	S. Raghbir Singh Sanadhawalia, Rais of Raja Sansi
12	Dinga	April 1920	S. Shivdev Singh, Rais of Sialkot.
13	Hoshiarpur	April 1921	S.Bhai Jodh Singh, M.A.
14	Delhi	August 1922	Prof. Puran Singh, Gwalior Estate
15	Patiala	April 1924	Hon'ble Sir Sunder Singh Majithia
16	Amritsar	April 1925	S.Mehar Singh Chawla Rais Lahore
17	Lahore	May 1926	S.B.Malik Mohan Singh, Rais Rawalpindi
18	Rawalpindi	April 1927	Hon'able Sir Joginder Singh, Lahore Estate.
19	Mintogramy	April 1928	S.B.Malik Mohan Singh, Rais Rawalpindi
20	Sargodha	March 1929	S.B. Bishan Singh, Principal of Khalsa college, Amritsar.
21	Amritsar	April 1931	S.B. Kahan Singh Nabha.
22	Lahore	March 1932	S.B. Bishakha Singh of Delhi
23	Peshawar	April 1933	Hon'able Sir Joginder Singh, Lahore Estate.
24	Rawalpindi	April 1934	S.Raja singh, M.A., Advocate Peshawar
25	Gujranwala	April 1935	Hon'ble Sir Sunder Singh Majithia
26	Layallpur	October 1936	S.Gurdial Singh Mann.
27	Amritsar	April 1938	S.Arjan Singh, Rais Bhagharian
28	Sialkot	October 1939	S.Bhai Jodh Singh, M.A. (Principal, Khalsa college, Amritsar)
29	Mandi Bhurewala	April 1941	Kanwar Manjit Singh of Faridkot.
30	Faridkot	April 1943	S.Kirpal Singh Majithia.
31	Sargodha	April 1944	S.Teja Singh Malik
32	Sheikhupura	April 1945	S.B. Ujjal Singh, M.A., M.L.A.
33	Karachi	April 1946	S. Bhai Jodh Singh, M.A. (Principal, Khalsa College, Amritsar)

³⁰ Silver Jubilee Book, *op.cit*, p 153.

³¹ *Ibid*, p-152

³² Amrit walia, *op.cit*, p-211.