

Robina Shoeb*

Refocusing on the Education System under the Sikh Rule

Abstract:

Education is a strong means to cope with poverty and improving one's economic condition besides enabling the citizens to get awareness about oneself, society and state. There is a misunderstanding that pre-British Punjab was a land of uneducated inhabitants and was without any proper education system. This paper has focused on exploring the education system under the Sikh Rule; especially Maharaja Ranjit Singh. A quick look at the educational policies of Maharaja Ranjit Singh will give us an insight into the extent to which he was generous and liberal towards the people of Punjab, especially the Muslims and that how much he was committed to educate his people. Although he had no formal education himself, yet he understood its significance. A close examination of education policies of Maharaja Ranjit Singh will lead us to ascertain that if those policies were open and tolerant to let people exploit their potential towards their personal and professional growth.

Key Words: Religion, Education, Muslims, Schools, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sikh Rule.

Religious freedom, equal access to education and economic opportunities, dispensation of fair justice, and security of life and property are the mainstay of any benevolent state. A minority would always like to keep its religious identity intact and have access to all the facilities that other citizens enjoy.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh like Akbar the Great could not read or write in any language, although his exposure to various languages and people, taught him the art of reading people and handling state affairs. He was able to understand even the most complex political, business and war strategies, and undertake decisions on behalf of the state.¹ He did not attempt to bring about changes in the established ways of doing things; for example, Persian continued to be the court's official language. However, he brought about simplicity and candidness in state administration. This arrangement somehow never conflicted with the dispensation of state business.² He supported and encouraged the education sector throughout his reign. Number of schools were opened at Amritsar and Lahore run by the academicians, which were open to all Punjabi population. The Punjab had nearly four thousand schools, catering to the needs of each and every community.³ Religious education was free for all to males and females separately. One of the most comprehensive accounts of educational practices in Punjab was given by G W Leitner in his book, 'History of Indigenous Education in Punjab'.⁴ He

* Dr. Robina Shoeb, Assistant Professor, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

mentioned in his book that the land lords and upper class elites had their own private schools, and mostly the teachers were hired to teach their children at home. The teachers were the most respectful people. It was the responsibility of the wealthy people of the village to provide all the facilities to the teachers. These tutors were responsible to teach the students not only reading and writing, but it was their responsibility to educate them in manners and social values as well.⁵

Leitner was an ardent educational scholar and he founded Government College at Lahore and was also active in the formation of Punjab University. Leitner's book, published in 1882, gives a detailed account of different kinds of schools in Punjab during the Sikh period. He also mentioned the locations of the schools, the qualification and strength of the teachers, monthly salaries, qualification for the subjects they taught and the number of the students in every school.⁶

He mentioned, that every mosque, temple, dharmshala, and Gurdwara had an attached school, where the students got religious education. There was a close bonding between these social institutions, family, and religion. In the Lahore District report of 1860, we see that it had 576 formal schools where 4,225 scholars taught.

By and large, the schools were akin to religious schools, as *gurdwaras*, mosques and temples, and Ranjit Singh very generously helped the custodians of these educational institutes. There was hardly a mosque, a *dharamshala* or a *gurdwar* which was without a school. These schools were mostly in the villages for the religious education of the young ones.⁷ The Muslim schools and *madrassas* worked successfully and without restrictions from the state, which means that Muslim students had complete freedom to study and to progress in life and society.

Ranjit Singh supported contemporary trends in enhancing education. During the last days of his rule, he started encouraging the learning of English. There is evidence that he also obtained the services of a Christian teacher to establish English-medium schools in Lahore however; promoting Christianity or the teachings of Bible was strictly forbidden in the curriculum of these schools. Ranjit Singh did not allow any British missionaries to open Christian schools although they were allowed to preach in other parts of Punjab. Other Sikh kingdoms of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Kapurthala and Faridkot, also accepted British Christian missionaries.⁸ On the other hand, Muslims and Hindus were all allowed to have religious as well as vocational education.

The Sikh *sardars* at court were mostly educated. Lehna Singh was a mathematician and an engineer.⁹ Kunwar Nau Nihal Singh, Ajit Singh and Lehna Singh studied the higher concepts of mathematics and astronomy under the well-known Akhvand Ali, who was specially called from the Frontier to Lahore. Lehna Singh, Ajit Singh and Attar Singh also had a good understanding of Arabic.¹⁰

There was no common or formal form of teaching. Education was given on a needs basis. For instance, Persian was the official language and the language of literature and was essential to obtain an executive job that's why there were many schools in which Persian was taught on regular basis, 37.0 per cent learn Persian and Urdu, 41 percent Arabic, 8 per cent learn Nagri, 6.7 per cent learn Gurmukhi

and 7 per cent learn Hindi or Nagri.¹¹ All these languages like Sanskrit, Arabic and Gurmukhi were keys to religious education and employment. These schools were open to all regardless of caste or creed.¹² It is very clear that in the dying days of the Lahore Khalsa Darbar and the years before 1857 had a first rate educational system that was far superior to what the British had to offer. What amazes one the most is the fact that women were more educated than men, and this, Dr. Leitner observes, that with every passing year, the literacy rate increased.¹³

There were different categories of Indigenous schools: (i) first *maktabs*, Persian schools not only for the Muslims but for all the other sects as well, (ii) *madressahs*, Arabic schools from primary to higher education, (iii) *patshalas*, usually for the Hindus but open for all the other sects as well and taught Sanskrit, for religious purposes, (iv) Gurmukhi schools, for Sikh students, taught Gurmukhi, and (v) *mahajani*, schools for trading or economic community.¹⁴ Many schools received donations and land for their management.

Education had mainly been delivered in the mosques from the early period of Islam, and continued during the Sikh period. *Moulvis* or educated women ran schools in their homes.¹⁵ The teachers were mostly Muslims. The syllabus including the *Sikandar Nama* of Nizami, and the letters of Abul Fazal were taught in these schools.¹⁶ Classics such as *Gulistan*, *Boostan* and works of *Saadi* were the typical courses.¹⁷ These schools were capable of delivering education from primary grades for reading Arabic to the higher grades for reading and understanding Arabic works, especially on medicine.¹⁸

The schools were nearly all connected with the village mosque, temples, and *gurdwaras*, where the land was rent-free. The elementary, and sometimes high, oriental classical and vernacular education was more widespread in the Punjab before annexation.¹⁹

There are different statistics regarding the strength of the students in Punjab, but nearly Punjab was home to about 330,000 students learning all subjects in Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit in schools and colleges. Oriental literature, oriental law, logic, philosophy and medicine were also taught to the highest standard.²⁰ Lahore was a center of educational activities with a large number of schools, students and teachers. It is mentioned in the administration report of the Punjab for the years 1849-50 and 1850-51, that in Lahore alone there were 576 schools with the strength of 4,225 students.²¹ Besides Lahore, schools were also open in other parts of the province. Another important point that needs to be highlighted is the student to school ratio. Leitner mentioned that in the Settlement Report of 1852, there was a school for every 1,965 male students in the district of Hoshiarpur. The model of education prevailing in Punjab was almost free.²²

The curriculum and text books used in these schools was depended on the nature of the schools and the level of study. Leitner had mentioned all the information regarding the subjects and the books taught in these schools in detailed. In the Arabic department of for example, the subjects taught were grammar, literature, philosophy, rhetoric, astronomy, law, logic, philosophy, arithmetic and geometry.²³

The teachers were paid in kind, mostly the grain, and they also received 'daily rations' by the local landlords. Sialkot has a special mention about providing quality education to its students which is probably explained by the fact that the teachers used to be paid extra quantity of grains by their local landlords.²⁴

The educational institutions used to open at 7.00 am and close at about 'midday'. In line with modern pedagogical imperatives, each class had no more than 50 students. *Subedar* of the area was deputed to ensure compliance of this restriction. The offender was arrested and punished accordingly to ensure that each student received proper attention in the class.

Famous Muslim Schools in Lahore:

As far as, Lahore was concerned there were four main *madrassa* schools running in the city of Lahore: one was run by Khalifa Ghulam Rasool in the mosque of Mooran (wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh), second by *Molvi* Jan Muhammad in *Noor Iman wali Masjid*, third in Mosque Khurasian, and the fourth one was run by the Fakir brothers in their Fakir Khana.²⁵ Allah Jewaya taught the Quran and other subjects in Arabic in the Kashmiri Bazaar Mosque School, Similarly, Muhammad Abdul Aziz taught Persian and Arabic in the Kucha Chabaksawaran School. In the nearby mosque of Faizullah, the teacher Mahmood, the Eunuch, who excelled in Persian and Arabic, taught learning of the Quran by heart. Similarly, Moulvi Nur Ahmed taught grammar, logic, Muslim law and mathematics in the advanced Arabic school in the Anarkali Mosque. Pandit Gauri Shankar was well known for teaching mathematics, logic, medicine and Puran literature in the Sattar Mandi School.

Bara Mian's school in Lahore was as big as a college and was known for delivering quality higher education. The Sikh government supported this school very generously. Students from Iran, Afghanistan and Arabia also received education in these institutions.

Moreover, Lahore had 18 formal schools for girls; and was also the hub of specialised education with professional schools for 'technical training, languages, mathematics and logic'. There were also formal religious schools teaching advanced religious education to Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs respectively. Special vocational and art schools also existed for delivering vocational education in 'miniature painting, sketching, drafting, architecture and calligraphy'.

Besides that, more than thirteen Quran, Arabic and Persian schools in the Punjab were teaching advanced education in 'mathematics, logic, philosophy and medicine.'²⁶ Moreover, Qadri family known for its scholarship, ran a large prominent school at Batala which attracted students from Iran and Afghanistan as well. The Maharaja had donated a big *jagir* (huge estate) for the maintenance of this school, which was taken back later, during the British rule.²⁷ Moulvi Sheikh Ahmed, also known for his knowledge and learning, established a similar school in Sialkot. Khawaja Suleiman also ran a famous school at Sangrosa in Dera Ghazi Khan district where students from Khorasan and other parts of Hindustan studied higher education.²⁸ The state was responsible for providing for free food and books to the students who travelled from distant destinations to attend these schools.²⁹

Famous Muslim Scholars & Teachers:

A long list of very learned and capable tutors and educationists exists during Sikh rule in the Punjab, who received due respect, endowments and land for their personal sustenance and maintenance of their schools by the Sikh rulers.³⁰ Hashim Shah, a literary person, received a *jagir* for his scholarly services despite the fact that he fought against the Sikhs in Shah Ahmad's *jihad* movement.³¹ Ranjit Singh also invited Dubir-ud-Doulah, the grandfather of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, for his knowledge of economics and mathematics. However, he refused to join the *darbar* because of his failing health, returning the money sent to him to travel to Lahore from Delhi.³² This shows keenness of the Maharaja in scholarship and scholarly people, no matter which religion they belonged to or what they had done in the past. He respected them without any communal or religious affiliation. The most scholarly and well respected among them were Ahmad Yar, Qadir Yar, Fazal Shah, Ghulam Rasool and Imam Bukhsh.

Mufti Ghulam Sarwar gives a list of the people who were from the ruling class of Lahore and were known for their literary status and services; among them being the family of the Fakir brothers. Several *maktabs* and schools were run under Fakir family supervision.³³

Farid-ud-Din, Elahi Bukhsh, Mufti Imam Bukhsh and Syed Israr Shah Gilani were very famous for their poetry,³⁴ and Ustad Pir Bukhsh and Mian Fazal-ud-Din for their calligraphy.³⁵ It is striking that neither Ranjit Singh nor the *darbar* ever ordered any work commemorating his military victories, or his memoirs, although Punjabi poets and various authors wrote for him out of their own interest. The Lahore *Darbar* asked Munshi Sohan Lal to write *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* and Moulvi Ahmed Yar *Shahnama* in Persian. Ranjit Singh's courtier Diwan Dina Nath's son Diwan Amar Nath wrote *Zafar Nama Ranjit Singh* in Persian. Sikhs had the tradition of telling their history in poetry in the period of Ranjit Singh. Rattan Singh Bhangu in 1841, wrote his *Prachin Panth Parkas*. Another amazing element was that Punjabi was established as a literary language as a result of the ingenuity and creativity of the writers of those days that flowed out of the love for the common Punjabi and his chores.³⁶

The fifth Guru had recommended that Sikhs commit *daswandh* or one tenth of their income towards a religious cause for the general public, but it is nevertheless, exceptional that Ranjit Singh's government acted likewise.³⁷ Ranjit Singh allocated one tenth of his state revenue for charity, a striking illustration of his personality and government, highlighting its Sikh character: schools and such other institutions were among the key recipients of his charity. Dr. Leitner says that the Punjab, and especially Lahore, was better off educationally in the days of Maharajah Ranjit Singh than in the British days until 1882, when his research was published. His research shows that total revenue collected by Ranjit Singh in his last years (1838-39) was approximately 1.85 million pounds. The British subsequently managed to collect 1.45 million pounds. Leitner further reveals that "The Sikh ruler, as a percentage, spent more on education than the Company from the revenues collected."

***Quaida Noor* – a novel way of educating people of Punjab:**

Now, I would like to highlight a novel initiative that Maharaja Ranjit Singh undertook to educate the people of the Punjab. While main source of this information is the Fakir Khana family, Leitner has also reported this initiative. According to the sources of Fakir Khana family, Maharaja Ranjit Singh desired that every person of his kingdom should be able to read and write. Therefore, he advised Fakir Nuruddin to design a course for this purpose. Fakir Nuruddin prepared a *Quaida* (booklet) titled 'Noor' (light) for learning basics of all key languages including Gurmukhi, Shahmukhi, Urdu and Persian. The booklet also included a basic course for learning elementary and everyday mathematics. About 5000 copies of booklet were prepared and distributed among the *Numberdars* (head of a village) all across Punjab. Each *Numberdar* was directed to learn *Quaida Noor* in three months' time, and afterward distribute five additional copies of *Quaida Noor* among five people more in the village. He was further required to write with his own hand, a letter to Maharaja Ranjit Singh informing that he could write, and has further distributed five copies of *Quaida Noor*. The same process was repeated with each of the five people who received copy from the *Numberdar*: after learning the *Quaida*, he would further prepare five copies of *Quaida Noor* for distribution among five more people of the village. Thus, the process of learning continued and a chain reaction was started to educate the people in the Punjab. In the start, the *Numberdars* would not take it seriously, and would not send letters to the Maharaja. All those *Numberdars* were removed from their *Numberdari* (status of head of the village); that was how the Maharaja enforced learning of *Quaida Noor* in his state. Leitner reports that war of 1857 destroyed this very useful practice and tradition, far superior and effective to what Europe then, had to offer.

Conclusion:

To conclude we can say that there was an impressive system of schooling in the Sikh Period. There were diverse types of schools for all the people based on, languages and ethnic groups. These schools had set curricula, based on teaching knowledge, skills and morals to the students. It is clear that Ranjit Singh had a great respect for learning and education. Although his government was a military association, he gave significant support to the system of native education and literature by making grants of land and money for the upkeep of these educational institutions. It is not an overstatement to say that he not only supported the existing institutions but made positive contributions to the field of education, giving grants regardless of religion or caste. English, Hindi and Persian were taught to the royal family. This also confirms that Muslims and other communities had equal access to education and educational institutions, as teachers and as students. Ranjit Singh gave freedom and opportunity to the whole Muslim population to acquire new skills and knowledge for improving their living standards.

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The German system of education put emphasis on practical education and health improvement. When England took over, they were impressed by the standard of literacy reached by Tanzanian Africans, especially those who had had the opportunity to study science and math in Germany. They produced skilled workers for the German colonial enterprise. African primary school students received six years of education rather than four, and no school fees were charged on the islands; mainland children paid fees. In rural areas Africans attended primary school up to grade six, after which they went to middle school through grade eight. Education remains the trickiest part of attempts to reform the public sector. But as ever more countries embark on it, some vital lessons are beginning to be learned. For this, people blamed a system which allotted pupils to schools on the basis of perceived ability at the age of ten. A race to reform among the states followed, and the victor "to widespread surprise" was Saxony, from the old east, which reached fifth place in the McKinsey table. Since unification Saxony has restored historic cities like Leipzig and Dresden, yet they remain blighted by the uniform social housing of communist days. The old regime still influences education, too. Globalisation has increased the pressure on education systems to improve, but the pressure is now coming from the bottom up too. The rise of charter schools and academies has precipitated a Cambrian explosion of new ideas and innovations, stimulating a debate about methodology led by teachers themselves. The internet has provided platforms for teachers to talk to other teachers, beyond their own schools and outside official oversight. There is entrenched resistance, in the education establishment, to singling out individuals, even to praise or emulate them. The only options for Tan's evaluation were "meets standard performance" and "below standard performance". But if Tan and others like her go unnoticed it is also because they do not look the part.