

Grade: 7

Course: Virṣā (ਵਿਰਸਾ)

Lesson Number: 23

Unit Name: The Art of Historiography

Title: Assessing Hindu Sources of Sikh (ਸਿੱਖ) History in the 18th Century

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 learn about the general attitudes of Hindu theologians towards Sikhī.
2. Students will assess an excerpt from a 19th century Hindu source that discusses 18th century Sikhs.

Prerequisites

- Students should be aware of how to assess primary historical sources critically (previous Lesson 21 and 22).

Materials

- Excerpt from Major Henry Court's translation of Paṇḍit Shardhā Rām's (ਪੰਡਿਤ ਸ਼ਰਧਾ ਰਾਮ) History of the Sikhs

Advanced Preparation

- The teacher should read the relevant excerpts from History of the Sikhs by Paṇḍit Shardhā Rām. The teacher may also want to do additional research about Hindu attitudes towards the Sikh religion in order to share with the class.

Engagement (15-20 minutes)

- Greet students and give them a couple of minutes to settle down and take out their notebooks.
- Begin by briefly describing the patterns in Hindu approaches to Sikhī over time. This can be done in mini-lecture format and the following points should be mentioned:
 - Because Sikh teachings threatened the division of society by caste (an idea proliferated by some Brāhmins during the time of the Gurūs), many Hindu theologians have historically tried to cast Sikhī as a Hindu sect.
 - Even though Sikhī is generally treated as a separate religion today, some Hindu organizations such as the RSS (Rāshṭrīā Sikh Saṅgat (ਰਾਸ਼ਟਰੀਅ ਸਿੱਖ ਸੰਗਤ), a branch of Rāshṭrīā Svayamsevak Saṅgh (ਰਾਸ਼ਟਰੀਅ ਸਵਯਮਸੇਵਕ ਸੰਘ) and the Ārya Samājīs (ਆਰਯ ਸਮਾਜੀ) continue to campaign the idea that Sikhī is part of the Hindu religion.
 - In the eighteenth century, Brahminical influences began to corrode the Sikh tradition since most of the *Gurduārās* were managed by *Mahants* (ਮਹੰਤ) in the absence of the Sikhs who had gone to the jungles or the hills to escape Mughal persecution (For more information, see excerpt from Saṅgat Singh's (ਸੰਗਤ ਸਿੰਘ) *The Sikhs in History* included in teacher resources). Many alterations were made to Sikh literature and theology by the mahants during their management of the *Gurduārās* in the 18th century, however, it is still

- a matter of debate as to which texts were altered, and to what extent.
- By the nineteenth century, even Westerners were beginning to notice the Brahminical influences in Sikh traditions. For instance, J.D. Cunningham compared Hindu influence to a boa constrictor that seeks to eliminate diversity and Max Arthur Macauliffe noted in his preface to *The Sikh Religion*, “A movement to declare the Sikhs as Hindus in direct opposition to the teachings of the Gurūs, is wide spread and of long duration”.

Exploration (35 minutes)

- During this part of class, students will independently analyze a Hindu source of Sikh history that was created in the mid 19th century. Encourage students to highlight the most interesting or provocative sections of the text. After each student has read the excerpts from Paṇḍit Shardhā Rām’s *History of the Sikhs*, the teacher should lead a discussion about the reliability of the text as a historical source and the effects that texts such as this would have had on the Sikh community’s self-perception. This text was written by Paṇḍit Shardhā Rām in 1866 for the Lieutenant Governor of Pañjāb, Sir Donald MacLeod; the text was translated by Major Henry Court. Shardhā Rām says of it in the preface, “whoever shall fix his thoughts on it, and travel through it from beginning to end, will place in his mind the full particulars of the Pañjāb” which indicates that this text, like that of Ratan Singh Bhaṅgū (ਰਤਨ ਸਿੰਘ ਭੰਗੂ) was meant as a source of information for the British rulers.
- The teacher should stress the fact that this source is not from the 18th century but does in fact, briefly deal with Sikh history during this period. What is significant about this source is that it is a product of Hindu misconceptions (or at the worst, deliberate misrepresentations) about Sikhī. The teacher should ask the students: What characteristics of the text encourage the belief that Sikhī is a Hindu sect (get students to underline these sections as they are pointed out)? Does this appear to be intentional or unintentional? How do we know?
- The teacher should end the discussion by indicating that it was not only Hindu texts that were reproducing views that would allow people to identify Sikhī as a Hindu sect that had been established in order to “protect” the Hindu’s from Mughal persecution. In fact, many texts written by Sikhs themselves during the 19th century reproduced such views due to ignorance and lack of education.

Explanation/ Extension (5-10 minutes)

- As an extension of the lesson, the teacher may want to discuss the modern day impacts of the misrepresentation of Sikh history. It was the atmosphere of confusion created by such misconceptions of Sikh history during the 18th and 19th century that led Kānh Singh Nābhā (ਕਾਨ੍ਹ ਸਿੰਘ ਨਾਭਾ) to pen his famous pamphlet “Hum Hindū Nahīn (ਹਮ ਹਿੰਦੂ ਨਹੀਂ)” in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Kānh Singh Nābhā was part of the reform movement, begun in the twentieth century, which attempted to rid the Sikh community of the Brahminical influences which had crept into it over time. Many fundamentalist Hindu organizations, however, continue to assert the false and misleading claim that Sikhs are simply Hindus who were originally meant to protect Hindus and that since India is no longer under threat from foreign invaders, they should revert back to their “original” religion.

Evaluation (On-going)

- Now that students have got a chance to look at various primary sources on Sikh history, get students to “create” a primary source of their own.
- Get them to write a journal entry from either a Fārsī, Western (Christian) or Hindu perspective. Keep in mind that each perspective will have a different bias and this bias should be translated into the journal entry.

Teacher Resources

- Pappas, Peter. Analyzing Primary Sources. March 9th, 2007. <http://www.edteck.com/dbq/more/analyzing.htm>
- Court, Henry. History of the Sikhs. Masūrī, 1888.
- Singh, Saṅgat. The Sikhs in History. New Dillī: Uncommon Books, 1996.

Notes for the Teacher

In the excerpts below we have purposefully left some spelling as is, as they highlight the bias rule of the writer. E.g Gurū GOVIND Singh as opposed to Gurū Gobind Singh Sāhib.

The Sikhs (ਸਿਖ) in History

The Udāsīs (ਉਦਾਸੀ) had earlier, during the period of persecution of the Sikhs, managed the *Gurduārās* (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ) but did nothing to promote Sikhī. They were far from the Khālsā (ਖਾਲਸਾ) fold. Over time, they had relapsed into old Hindu practices and emerged as a monastic order. With the grant of *Jagīrs* (ਜਗੀਰ) (land grants), to the Sikh *Gurduārās*, their outlook became all the more sinister. They did not encourage the participation of Sikh Saṅgat (ਸੰਗਤ) in the management and the *Gurduārās* progressively became like Hindu temples. They began to present ten Gurūs (ਗੁਰੂ) as *Avtārs* (ਅਵਤਾਰ) of Vishnū (ਵਿਸ਼ਨੂ) and Gurū Granth Sāhib (ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ) as the fifth *Ved* (ਵੇਦ). Then, there were Nirmalās (ਨਿਰਮਲਾ) who did not provide teaching of Gurmukhī (ਗੁਰਮੁਖੀ) alphabets and of the Sikh scriptures. Because of their Vedantic interpretation of the Sikh scriptures, their impact was not wholesome. They provided the groundswell in which the activities of Udāsīs and Brahmins could not be looked at with disdain. The Nirmalās began to establish *Derās* (ਡੇਰਾ) (hospices), wherein they began to practise Hindu rites for births and deaths, and guidance regarding Hindu *Sāhas* (ਸਾਹ) and *Nakshatra* (ਨਕਸ਼ਤਰ), auspicious or inauspicious days, and astrological fixtures. They ceased to provide correct lead to the community. This went on during the period of Raṅjīt Singh too.

It was all the more reprehensible that distortions were made in the second half of the 18th century by subverting the Sikh theology and orientation.

Excerpt from: The Sikhs in History by Saṅgat Singh, p 111-112

History of the Sikhs

Part I, Chapter X: The Circumstances of Gurū Govind Singh (ਗੁਰੂ ਗੋਵਿੰਦ ਸਿੰਘ)

‘... he reflected thus too: “The disposition of all these assemblies from the time of Gurū Nānak (ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ) has been like that of fakirs (ਫਕੀਰ), and they do not know the ways of battle and war; it behooves me to make a new sect in my own name, and having taught them the use of arms and mode of government, get them to fight with the Turks.” Thus thinking, he departed from Anandpur Sāhib (ਅਨੰਦਪੁਰ), and went to the peak of Nainā Devī (ਨੈਨਾ ਦੇਵੀ), situated in the mountains about five kohs (ਕੋਹ) distance from there; then, having gone inside her temple, and joining his hands before the goddess, he petitioned; “O Durgā (ਦੁਰਗਾ)! I, for the sake of revenge on the Turks, wish to make a sect, do you give me this power.” Having thus said, he called the Paṇḍits (ਪੰਡਿਤ), and began to perform penance according to their directions. When he had finished his penance, the Paṇḍits began to make him offer burnt offerings. When a hundred mounds of wheat, sugar, fruit and molasses had been placed on the fire, and the burnt offering had been completed, then the Paṇḍits said: “O Gurū, now in this instance for a sacrifice of oblation, do you cut off the head of your son, and offer it up.” Govind Singh had four sons; the name of one was Jorāvar Singh (ਜੋਰਾਵਰ ਸਿੰਘ), of the second Phatah Singh

(ਫਤਹ ਸਿੰਘ), of the third Jujhār Singh (ਜੁਝਾਰ ਸਿੰਘ) and of the fourth Ajit Singh (ਅਜੀਤ ਸਿੰਘ). When the Gurū asked the mothers to offer up their sons as a sacrifice, then they said: “We will withdraw from forwarding your new sect; to kill your sons to create your sect is not pleasing to us.” When he could not get a son, then he again asked the Paṇḍits. “Now do you please name some other offering.” The Paṇḍits fulfilled the sacrifice, by offering up some thing else. It is reported, that the goddess appeared and said, “Go! your sect will be set going in the world.”

Part III, Chapter I: Rites and Customs

‘... Among the followers of Nānak, one sect is called the Nirmalā Sādhū (ਸਾਧੂ), originally these people were of the sect of the Gurū Govind Singh, but, on account of their ancient origin, they are also called the disciples of Nānak; these people are very perfect Sikhs, and, with heart and soul, firmly believe in the Granth of the Gurū. Formerly, agreeably to the orders of Govind Singh, they acknowledged none but the Sikh religion, but now, many of them, having read the Vedānts (ਵੇਦਾਂਤ) and Shāstra (ਸ਼ਾਸਤ੍ਰ), have become Paramhans (ਪਰਮਹੰਸ). Formerly, it was their custom to wear no clothes, except of a white colour, but now, agreeably to the orders of the Vedānts, they have begun to adopt clothes of a reddish yellow color. These people formerly, agreeably to the order of Govind Singh, lived principally at Amritsar and Muktsar (ਮੁਕਤਸਰ) and other places of pilgrimage, but now, copying the Sanyāsīs (ਸਨਯਾਸੀ) and Paramhans, they have begun to live a good deal on the banks of the Ganges (ਗੰਗਾ) and Jamnā (ਜਮਨਾ), and at Banāras (ਬਨਾਰਸ) and other places. These people regard the customs at birth and death agreeably to the rites of the Shāstra, and burn the dead body in the fire, but at marriages, they erect a wooden canopy under which they get married; they do not regard it as a right to perform their marriages, according to the decrees of the Veds.’

Adaptions of the excerpts from: Paṇḍit Shardhā Rām’s History of the Sikhs

Concerning Gurū Gobind Singh Sāhib:

- The author presents Gurū Gobind Singh Sāhib as a worshipper of Durgā.
- The text seems to imply that the Khālsā was created by using the powers of the Hindu goddess and that it could not have been achieved had Gurū Sāhib not implored this deity.
- It also creates the impression that the Gurū relied on Brahmin Paṇḍits for guidance in the creation of the Khālsā (ਖਾਲਸਾ).
- These misconceptions about Sikh theology were very prevalent by the 19th century mainly due to the events of the 18th century.
- Passages such as these have allowed modern anti-Sikh organizations to assert that Sikhism is simply another Hindu sect and that the Khālsā was created in order to protect the Hindu faith.

Concerning the Nirmalā Sādhūs (ਨਿਰਮਲਾ ਸਾਧੂ):

- The author mentions many “followers of Nānak” but the followers that he mentions are actually members of sects such as the Nirāṅkāris (ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰੀ), Dhīrmalīas (ਧੀਰਮਲੀਐ) and Udāsīs (ਉਦਾਸੀ) that Sikhs are forbidden to interact with because they subvert the teachings of Sikhī; the Nirmalā Sādhūs form one such sect.
- The author mentions that members of this sect originally belonged to the “sect of Gurū Gobind” but were persuaded by the “Vedānts and Shāshtra” to denounce their beliefs and live according to Hindu customs.
- This passage describes an actual sect that came into vogue in the 19th century in Pañjāb and allows for the belief that Sikhs would eventually revert back to Hinduism once they were introduced to the knowledge in the Veds and Shāstra.

Adaptions of the excerpts from: Paṇḍit Shardhā Rām’s History of the Sikhs



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 Dhāī-Phaṭ (ਢਾਈ-ਫਟ).

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