



CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF COL. A. L. H. POLIER ON THE STRUGGLE OF SIKH RULER BANDA SINGH BAHADUR

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ABSTRACT

A lot of historical writings were produced by the British officers between 1780 to 1849 having long and short accounts of the origin and the progress of the Sikhs under the direct patronage or indirect encouragement of the East India Company. They were sent by different patron with different purpose. In preparing their accounts they were influenced by the need and the requirement of the British. The present research paper is an attempt to analysis the information on Banda Bahadur and his nature of the struggle contained in the works of A.L.H. Polier (1772).

KEYWORDS: Historiography, English writing, Banda Singh Bahadur, Polier...

INTRODUCTION

Banda Bahadur occupies an important and vital place in the history of Punjab. Perhaps he was the first indigenous personality under whose leadership the first sovereign Sikh rule was established in the Sutlej-Jamuna divide in 1710's. His execution in 1716 and subsequent life and death struggle of the Sikhs first with the Mughals and later with the Afghans resulted in the reestablishment of the Sikh rule in 1760's. Sikh Sardars had parcelled out the Punjab and the Sutlej-Jamuna divide (Malwa region) among themselves. Prominent Sikh Sardars like Jassa Singh, Baghel Singh etc. started to depredate the territories of Shuja-ud-Duala, the Nawab of Lucknow and the neighbourhood of Delhi. This situation prompted the English at Fort William to know about the Sikhs. Several Officers were deputed or asked by the English to collect more and more information on their political history so that a proper and accurate policy could be framed out to deal with the political affairs of the North West India.

After the death of Sikh Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, Sikhs tried their best to become the master of the land under the leadership of Banda Bahadur, but this movement collapsed within a few years. It was only by coincidence that in Feb. 1716, when Banda and his followers were being paraded in the streets of Delhi and embassy of the British governor of Fort William was present at the court of Mughal emperor Farrukhsiyar. The embassy which consisted of John Surman and Edward Stephenson is known as the 'Surman Embassy'.¹ Surman and Stephenson witnessed the beheading of most of the Sikhs, and left a glowing account of their religious fervor and sacrifice. This is the earliest known reference by the British to the religious zeal of the Sikhs. From 1768 onwards the Sikhs became not only supreme in their own land but also took to a career of gradual aggrandizement. The Sikhs emerged stronger after the Durrani Invasions.² It was because of their incursion near the gate of Delhi and even into the territories of Nawab Wazir of Oudh an ally of the Company, that the Sikhs attracted the attention of the British.³ So, the increasing power of Sikhs impelled the British officials to start the collecting information of a preliminary nature and put it into brief notes, essays or monograph. In the last two decades of 18th century, three literary works with direct bearing on the history and politics of the Sikhs was appeared. The first European to take a literary notice of the Sikhs was Colonel A. L. H. Polier.

COLONEL A.L.H. POLIER:

Colonel Polier had no instructions from the British Government to write on the Sikhs. His work was an independent attempt of his own. It is just a brief paper consisting of a few pages only. Antoine Louis Henri Polier was a Swiss Engineer, Nephew of Paul Philip Polier, the Commandant of St. George (Madras).⁴ He was born at Lausanne in February 1741. His father H. E. Polier was of French origin, naturalized in Switzerland. He entered the service of United East India Company in 1757 and arrived in India 1758. For some years he served in Madras and Bihar and then was appointed Assistant Engineer at Calcutta with the rank of captain in the Army. Being a Non-Englishman he experienced great difficulty in the way of further promotion and faced many difficulties and ultimately had to resign his job in 1776.⁵ Seven years later financial compulsions forced him to seek re-employment with East India Company. Warren Hastings helped Polier to enter into the services of Shuja-Ud-Daula, the Nawab of Oudh, who employed him as an Architect and Engineer. Polier lost his job owing to the hostile attitude of Governor-General's Council and served the Mughal emperor Shah Alam for some time. In 1782-83 Warren Hastings took him back into company service as Lt. Colonel, with permission to reside at Lucknow. He returned to Europe in 1788 and settled in France near Avignon in 1792. His oriental display of wealth attracted robbers or Revolutionaries of France and he was murdered on February 9, 1795.

POLIER'S OBJECTIVE:

It was during his stay at Lucknow that Polier developed interest in the history and religion of India. Lucknow had become a seat of learning and culture during the 18th century, while at Lucknow or moving about in the neighbourhood of Delhi and Agra; Colonel Polier collected a number of Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic manuscripts. Some of these manuscripts along with a complete set of Vedas were presented by him later to the British Museum, London. A good number of his Manuscripts are also preserved in the Bibliotheque Nationale of Paris. Polier became an elected member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 and from then onwards always took keen interest in the affairs of the society. He presented a number of Research papers at its various meetings. He presented his paper on "The Siques" Or 'History of the Seek's' on December 20, 1787. A copy of this paper is available at India Office Library, bears no date but it was written in 1772 at Delhi. This date is mentioned by George Forster who extensively quote from a memoir which he believes, was written by Colonel Polier. That way, it dates even earlier than Major Browne's History of the Origin and Progress of the Sikhs.

The motives which prompted Polier to write his paper are hard to guess. He was not a member of the Asiatic Society when he wrote this paper nor does the language of paper suggest a purely literary temper. It has been suggested that Polier wants to impress upon the British the urgent need to exterminate the 'Evil' of the Sikhs. But he did not take much interest in the propagation of his views and communicated his paper only a decade after he had written it. The Polier's attitude towards Sikhs effected by his prolonged stay at Lucknow. Between the Sikhs and Nawab of Oudh, Polier's sympathy lay with the Nawab because Sikhs are conducting ceaseless raids into the Doab area and posing a serious threat to the integrity and independence of Oudh. Sikhs were looked upon by him as disturbers of peace, freebooter people "noted for being of an unquiet and turbulent disposition"⁶ Sikhs had acquired "National Importance" and might prove very formidable to their neighbours. Thus the major question before Polier was to determine the nature of Sikh Upsurge and to discover the fountain of their energy. Polier agrees that the religion was a vital factor in the emergence of the Sikhs as a Political power. Polier does not seem to be think very high of Sikh religion. He considered Sikhism 'a New Sect' but also notice that it had a strong taint of Hindu Religion from the days of Guru Nanak. Polier has no awareness of "Khande Da Pahul" ceremony initiated by Guru Gobind Singh and instead describe the ceremony of 'Charanamrit' and calls "Letting the hair of the head and beard grow" a filthy beastly ceremony – a result of his ignorance and partly of his prejudice.⁷

POLIER'S ACCOUNT:

Polier's paper though brief touches upon almost every aspect of the contemporary Sikh society. It describes their religious beliefs, socio-political structure, diet, dress and military system. All the information provided by Polier is valuable as it corroborates Browne's accounts. Polier writes about Sikhs and particularly about Banda Bahadur that:

"Originally and in general the Siques are Zamindars or cultivators of land, and of that tribe called Jats which, in this part of India, are reckoned the best and most laborious tillers, though at the same time they are also noted for being of an unquiet and turbulent disposition. This tribe of the Jats, one of the lowest amongst the Hindus, is very numerous and dispersed in all the country from the Attock or the Sind to the southward far beyond Agra; and though in that extent. It be intermixed with some others, nevertheless, in those provinces, it is by far the considerable tribe. The troubles and rebellion which disturbed the empire during the tumultuous reign of Bahadur shah, gave the Siques an opportunity of rising in arms, and shaking off the royal authority; this however, they did by degrees; they fortified themselves at a place called Ramrowny, about 20 Koss this side of Lahore and established their place of worship, which is at a large tank Ambarsar, or Chak.⁸

The Siques then began to increase greatly in numbers, many proselytes were made, some from fear, other from a love of novelty and independence; all that came; though from the lowest and most object caste, and even Mussalman were in the number of the converts. The fame of Guru Govind,⁹ who then made his appearance and of whom many prodigies were related, contributed greatly to establish this sect. This reputed saint soon found himself at the head of a numerous force, began to excursions converts, sword in hand. He exerted himself so successfully, that at last he drew the attention of Government towards him. Farrukhsiyar was then on the throne. An Army was formed in or about 1715 under the command of Abdul Samad Khan Subedar of Lahore, and he had orders to exterminate the sect. It was not an easy task, however, after many marches and pursuits he came up with their main body, which he totally defeated. He had even the Good Luck to take Guru Govind himself prisoner. The Guru was sent to Delhi, shut up in iron cage, and afterwards put to death, and his disciples, wherever they caught, were on their refusal of turning Mohammedans, immediately executed. The chase became so hot after them, and was carried on with so much spirit, and so unrelenting a vigour that the very name seemed extinct, and those few still remained, were obliged by shaving off their beard, and hair, to deny their sect and leader."

POLIER'S CRITICISM:

Polier's chief desire seems to be not so much to collect information as to make out a case for strong and immediate military intervention against the Sikhs. All the same, the information provided by him, imperfect and scanty though it was very useful from the British point of view, anxious as they were to acquire as much knowledge about the Sikhs as possible. Polier fails to appreciate the nature of the Sikh movement. Polier regards the Sikhs as "the terror and plague" of this part of India because Polier was placed at station from where a favourable view of the Sikhs was almost impossible. Like many other writers before and after him, Polier has confused Banda Singh, a disciple of Guru, with Guru Gobind Singh. Originally a Bairagi Sadhu was converted to Sikhism by the Guru at Nander in September 1708 and was given the name of Banda Singh Bahadur. He was sent to Punjab to lead the Sikhs in Military expeditions. He arrived in the year 1709 and conquered the province of Sirhind in the battle of Chapper Chiri on May 12, 1710. And it was during the reign of Bahadur shah (1707-1712), and not in the reign of Farrukhsiyar as Polier writes, that an army was first sent against Banda Singh who had then to seek shelter to the Shivalik Hills in December 1710. The campaign of Abdus Samad Khan in 1715 during the reign of Farrukhsiyar was the last one against the Banda Bahadur. The close examination of Polier's account refers to the edicts issued by emperor Bahadur Shah and Farrukhsiyar ordering massacre of the Sikhs. Though Polier makes hostile judgment on the contemporary Sikh community, yet a close examination of his writing reveals that in reality he is complementing the Sikhs community as a variety of score. For example- Polier notice the excess of the intoxicants used by the Sikhs, and the haughtiness of their deportment but also record that they "Seldom kill in cold blood or make slaves".¹⁰ In the struggle against the Afghans and Mughal, Polier says, Sikhs committed

several communal outrages against Muslim religious place and subsequently Mughal and Afghans damaged the holy shrines of the Sikhs, but Sikhs did so in retaliation only.

CONCLUSION:

In his writing we find Polier's personal hatred for the Sikhs and which encouraged him to advocate a strong anti-Sikh alliance with the support of Maratha. Polier believes that the Sikhs owed their political power primarily to the weakness of the Mughal Government. Religion helped the Sikhs to win the proselytes from "the lowest and most object castes". He also believes that some people embraced Sikhism "from fear, other from a love of novelty and independence. Polier considered Sikhism to be essentially a movement of the "Cultivators of land." About political religious organization Polier termed it as an "Aristocratic Republic".¹¹

¹ Letters from John Surman and Edward Stephenson to Robert Ledges, President and Governor of fort William, Bengal: Dated March 10, 1716, Delhi. C. R. Wilson, *The Early Annals of the English in Bengal*, Vol. II, "Surman Embassy" Letter XII (1), p. 119

² Ganda Singh, Ahmad Shah Durrani, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1959, p. 308

³ William Franklin, *Military Memoirs of George Thomas*, Appendix II, London, 1803. P. 351

⁴ Fauja Singh, *Historians and Historiography of the Sikhs*, Oriented Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, p.8

⁵ G. Khurana, *British Historiography on the Sikh Power in Punjab*, Allied Publication Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, pp. 2-4

⁶ Fauja Singh, *op.cit.* p. 10

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 12

⁸ A.L.H. Polier, "The Siques" Ganda Singh, *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs*, Indian Studies: Past and present, Calcutta, 1962, pp. 55-57

⁹ Like many other writers Polier has confused Banda Singh, a disciple of Guru, with Guru Gobind Singh.

¹⁰ A.L.H. Polier, *op. cit.* pp. 61-63

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp.56-57