

## **Syed Muhammad Latif: A Pioneer Man of Regional Historiography of Punjab**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Historians have tried to state past reality in terms of certainty but what they have been able to achieve is that they wrote nothing more than a mere impression of it. This applies also to Syed Muhammad Latif to whom, however, “the great end of history is the exact illustration of events as they occurred, and there should neither be exaggeration nor concealment, to suit angry feelings or personal disappointment.” The subject which makes on imaginative reconstruction of the past from the date derived by historical methods is known as historiography. In reality, it is a part of historical study, and in rudimentary and perhaps unconscious form, a preliminary to any important historical endeavour. Arthur Marwick considers, nineteenth century is regarded as the renaissance period of modern historiography and also for regional historiography.*

**Key Words:**           **Historiography, Regional, Mughal, European, Gurmukhi, Tarikh**

### **Introduction**

Approach to regional and local history is a well-known feature of historiography in and outside India. In ancient India, Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* is a classical example of regional history. Outside India, this aspect comes to be emphasized by historians with the breakup of the Muslim World Empire into a separate and mutually hostile unit (political and religious). British historian Peter Hardy says that from the time of Akbar until the last generation, the study of the history of medieval Muslim India has been primarily the study of historians by historians. In this, there has been an interesting continuity between the native historiographical tradition developed and maintained by Muslim and Hindu scholar, writings in Persian and Urdu (and, very occasionally in Arabic) (Peter Hardy 1960:1). About the regional historiography in Indian historian Jagadesh Narayan Sarkar considers, in India with the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of virtually independent states on its ruins and the growth of regional consciousness, the regional and dynastic history comes to be composed relating to (a) The Punjab and the Sikhs, (b) Oudh and the Rohillas (c) Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (d) Gujarat and Malwa (e) Hyderabad and the Deccan (Jagadesh Narayan Sarkar 1982:39). But mostly historical works related to a community or a clan and a region. These were not whole history of a reign or regional.

Most of the historical literature, produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in Persian. However, historiography in Punjabi and English was not ignored. During this period a number of books were written in

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both the languages (Tara Shanker Banerjee 1982:212). Professor D.V Potdar, the General President of the first Punjab History conference held in 1965, emphasized that “intensive efforts were required to investigate the part of the Punjab, which was once a cradle of one of the earliest civilizations of the World” (D.V Potdar 1966:75). Historian S.P.Sen also agrees and considers, “In fact, “for any comprehensive assessment of historical research in modern India, one must turn more to regional studies.”(S.P. Sen 1969:7-8)

The sources of the history of Punjab are distributed over several languages including Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu, Punjabi and English. Broadly speaking, the Sanskrit sources are most useful for the ancient period of Indian history, the Persian and Gurmukhi (Punjabi) sources for the medieval period, and the English sources for the modern period of the history of Punjab. Urdu and Persian sources are also used during modern period but only for limited sphere.

The Gurmukhi (Punjabi) sources of the Guru period are primarily concerned with the Sikhs and their theology and only incidentally give information (about the political events of the period). A few of Sikh historiographies remained limited to verse up to the last decade of Nineteenth century and took a significant turn when Sikh history began to be written in prose, of course, in historical perspective (Tara Shankar Banerjee 1970:1). Like that *Panth Prakash* and *Suraj Prakash*. If any information make about the political events of Guru Period, for this purpose Persian sources are indispensable. A few of these Persian sources are such as *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* by Mohsin Fani, *Tuzk-i-Baburi* by Babur, *Tuzk-i-Jahangiri* by Jahangir, *Ain -i-Akbari* by Abul Fazl and *Zafarnama* by Guru Gobind Singh.

For the information about post Guru period, other Persian sources are *Jang Namah* by Qazi Nur Muhammad (1765), *Khalsa Namah* by Diwan Bakht Mal(1810), *Tarikh-i-Punjab* by Ahmad Shah of Batala(1820), *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* by Sohan Lal Suri(1812), *Tarikh-i-Panjab*, by Ghulam Muhayyaddin, Bute Shah (1842), *Khalis Nama*, by Rattan Chand, (1843), *Tazkara-i-Multan* (anonymous) (1861) *Ibratnama* by Mufti Aliuddin (1854).

The European traditions developed and maintained by British scholars and by Muslim and Hindu scholars’ writings were in English with a European training (Hardy 1982:1). The English historiography on the Punjab started after annexation of the Punjab into British Empire. According to Fauja Singh, the existence of the Sikhs was first noticed by the British when the Sikhs having established their political supremacy in Punjab were threatening to become masters of Delhi and Ganga, Jamuna Doab(Fauja Singh 1978:8). No doubt the British historiography on the Sikhs started in the mid of eighteenth century. This was the time around which the Sikhs were also actively engaged on establishing themselves as a political power in the North West part of the country. The first European to take a literary notice of the Sikhs was Major James Browne. His work “*History of the Origin and Progress of the Sikhs*” is the earliest known historical writing on the Sikhs(Ganda Singh 1962:1). The account of James Browne, though brief, offers a fairly good picture of the Sikh polity and Sikh society of those days.

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After the annexation of Punjab, various European administrators came to the Punjab and they recorded their journey of Punjab in their personal accounts or dairies. None of these works tells us anything of the pre-Sikh history or ancient Punjab history (Syed Mohammad Latif 1891:3). It is a clear that these all sources were written by the European in English but these were not covered under the complete history of Punjab from antiquity to contemporary period. They have not thought about an Indian or a country man. The knowledge of western historiography advanced in India by English educated Indian scholars. During the nineteenth century one historical work relating to Punjab's history appeared in English and this was produced not by a European but by a Punjabi native historian his name was Syed Muhammad Latif.

Syed Muhammad Latif hailed from the Lahore district of Punjab, which is now in Pakistan. He was born in 1851 (Syed Mohammad Minhajuddin 1956:1), at Lahore, a historical and flourishing town that was also the headquarters of the all political events of that period. He belonged to an educated family. His father Syed Muhammad Azeem (1815-1885) was a distinguish personality and as the founder of English newspaper "*The Lahore Chronicle*" which started in 1850. Latif received liberal and western education. The result was that he reached the designation of extra Judicial Assistant Commissioner and later on District Session Judge (Syed Mohammad Minhajuddin 1956:1), with a salary of five hundred rupees annually (S.P. Sen 1973:235).

Firstly he was appointed as the translator in the Punjab Chief Court, where his remuneration was hundred rupees per month. Soon he became a Reader in the court. Later he was appointed the Assistant Commissioner at Hoshiarpur in 1880 (Syed Mohammad Latif 2000:1) and after that he received the charge of extra Judicial Commissioner of Lahore, Jalandhar, Gujranwala, Multan, Jhang and Gurdaspur (Syed Mohammad Latif 2000:1). He held his post till the beginning of 1901 and worked at almost all the important places of the Punjab (S.P. Sen 1973:236). For his meritorious services, he was conferred titles of 'Khan Bahadur' in 1892 (S.K Bajaj 2001:5) and Shams-ul-Ulma in 1897 (S.K Bajaj 2001:5) for his remarkable work "History of the Punjab".

As a scholar, Latif has left in the minds of his friends and pupils a memory of sweet cordiality of deep but unostentatious sympathy, and of strong but silent moral influence. His friends included not only Muslims but non-Muslims also. Some of them were selected to clergy. It is presumed that he was a very close friend of Nur Muhammed Chishti and Rai Bahadur Kanahiya Lal. The former was an engineer whereas the latter belonged to the priestly class (S.P. Sen 1973:236).

Like most of his contemporary English educated Indian officials, he was liberal and well aware of the movement of modernization of Indian community. As an educated person of a less educated community as compared to other communities, he realized his responsibility to assist his brethren in the struggle for their identity. He followed the principles of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (S.P. Sen 1973:236). Taking encouragement from Latif's father Azeem's publication '*The Lahore Chronicle*', Sir Syed Ahmad Khan published "*The Aligarh Institute*

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*Gazette*” in 1860. Latif was not only a government official but also genius and a person responsible to his country. He was member of various provincial and national associations. Being a Punjabi he was the member of '*Anjuman-i-Punjab*' (Nazar Singh 1983:11) a provincial association of liberal Punjabi's and on national level he was a member of the '*Bengal Asiatic Society*'. As an academician, he was a fellow (Like a Senate Member of University) of University of the Punjab, Lahore (Syed Mohammad Latif 1892 :11). It may be said that Latif and his friends were the founder members of University of the Punjab, Lahore. We estimated his knowledge of history and literature from his membership of *Bengal Asiatic Society* which reviewed his book, *Early History of Multan* which was published in 1890 and reviewed by renewed and wild Publication of Government, Civil and Military Gazette Press, Calcutta. Queen Empress of India also presents an award to Latif in 1897 for his work '*History of the Panjab*.'

Syed Muhammad Latif passed away in 1902 at a relatively young age of 51 at Lahore. In his short but eventful life, he rose to command great respect in Muslim, British and Hindu literary circles. After the death of Syed Muhammad Latif, the Bazaar inside Bhatti Gate, Lahore in Pakistan Punjab was named, as "Bazaar Judge Muhammad Latif". At the early stage of historiography in modern India Syed Muhammad Latif appeared with a rare historical insight which found expression in at least two of his works, 'History of the Punjab' and 'History of Lahore', and indeed, they have placed Syad Muhammad Latif among the eminent historians of India.

Scholarship of Syed Muhammad Latif specifically in the field of history of Punjab is well known. Latif has left to us three valuable contributions. Two of them trace the history, architecture and antiquity of Lahore and Multan and third is a comprehensive study of the history of Punjab. But recently researchers have brought two other books, one is in Urdu entitled *Tarikh-i-Punjab-Mah-halaat-i-Shar Lahore*, (Syad Mohammad Latif 1888 :11). and other is, '*Agra, its historical descriptive, with an account of Akbar and his court*'. (Syed Mohammad Latif 1893 :11)

Syed Muhammad Latif was an Assistant Commissioner. Just two years after his appointment he published history of the Punjab which was recommended by the Punjab Government for presentation to the Queen of India with the following remarks. "Sir James Lyall considers that, the work in question is an exceedingly meritorious one, and it is notable as being the first work of its kind in English language produced by a native of the Punjab" (S.K. Bajaj :1). The book 'History of the Punjab' was dispatched for acceptance of the Crown on 8th September, 1891. (S.K. Bajaj :1).

Due to impact of his friend and his communities, Syed Muhammad Latif starting his writing in Urdu with titles Latif wrote his writing first in Urdu, in title of *Tarikh-i-Panjab Mah-halaat-i-Shar Lahore* in 1888 and 'Tarikh-i-Lahore' respectively. Later he writes in English under the title of '*History of the Punjab*', '*History of Lahore*', '*History of Agra*' and '*History of Multan*'. He wrote, "I have also to thank many kind friends who have assisted me by lending me rare books or

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with advice” (Syed Mohammad Latif 1888:7). His friends also had a fair aptitude in history writing (Syad Mohammad Latif 1888:11). His work ‘history of the Punjab’ deals with the ancient, medieval and modern period of the whole Punjab history. He divided it into five parts. First part deals the history from, Hydrography of Punjab to early Muslim invasions. Second part covered the period from Muslim invasion to last Mughal ruler Ali Gohar Shah Alam II. Third portion of this work is related to Sikh Gurus and Misls period. Fourth and fifth parts deal with the life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and period following the death of Ranjit Singh.

His work 'History of the Panjab' is an important piece of historical work based mainly on original sources in English, Urdu and Persian. About the sources of this work, Syed Muhammad Latif clearly writes in the preface of his book. For different themes in his book Latif used different sources for the writing about the ancient period from Hydrography to Alexander and early Muslim invasion, he consulted Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*, Hunter's *Indian Empire* (ed.)1880, R.N Cust, *The Pictures of Indian, Mahabarta and Ramayna*, James Mill's work. Despite research in the ancient Indian literature and society conducted by H.H.Wilson Prinsep, William Jones and Max Muller, the knowledge of the history of this period remained so miserably inadequate that a non-professional historian had no scope to give anything new. He also mentions the names of various sources, which were used by him. He writes, "I am indebted to the excellent works of Dr. Hunter, General Cunningham, McCrindle, Dunker, Thomas, Maurice, Ludlow, Tavernier and the Rev. Mr. Hunter"(Syed Mohammad Latif 1888:7). As a brilliant historian Latif used official reports of 1890-91 for this work. He used the excellent works of Mr. Baden - Powell for the chapter of Trade and Industry of British period. (Syed Mohammad Latif 1888:7).

Like many of his contemporaries, he saw much common parallel between the interests of British rule in India and the Muslims of India. He was a member of an association of liberal Punjabis named *Anjuman-i-Punjab*. So he, like all other liberals, found redemption of his fellow brethren in the continuation of the British rule in India (S. P. Sen 1982:238). His admiration for the British values and their modern institutions, Latif went to quite absurd lengths to prove that British rule in India was beneficial. He warns Indians "remember that you are as yet but learning your alphabet in the great School of Progress, that you have only just set your foot on the threshold of that grand institution, that you are as yet but on the first step of the ladder which leads to the lofty palace of Human Glory, and that the ambitious ideas of some among you, of equality with the conquerors of the East, however mildly you may desire to express them, will in the end rebound to your own discomfiture and hurt." (Syed Mohammad Latif 1892:16). Thus, he not only provides a reasonable justification for the support to British rule in India, but also suggests that the change so eagerly sought for by the extremists could wait till the institutions like rule of law and peace and order was firmly established. The line of approach, which Latif adopted has confused many officials and a historian. On the other side, Latif was not consciously trying to save the British Empire in India nor was he writing for their fame. About the main cause, which inspired, Latif for his

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work, he himself writes, "I felt impelled to narrate my countrymen the story of the land of their birth, from the remotest antiquity to recent times; based on historical truth; and free from parity spirit or sectarian prejudice" (Syed Mohammad Latif 1892:16). S.K.Bajaj remarks that as an individual he was one of those many educated liberals who did not approve the methods of the Indian National Congress and who had complete faith in the British sense of justice. S.S.Bal remarks that, as a historian he is generally believed to be appreciative of the Gurus (S.S Bal 1969:144). Inspired by his association with writers in Indian Languages and well informed of the historical literature produced by the Europeans, he presents in himself a reasonable synthesis of the two. Here he is radically different from his contemporaries (Syed Mohammad Latif 1892:16)

Latif wrote the 'History of the Panjab', as he tells us, to meet a need which had long been felt for complete history of the Punjab. In the works of the British writers, one could find the history only of Sikhs, or of the Sikh period. Before Latif there was nothing writes about the pre-Sikh, pre-Hindu periods, just as there was nothing about the British period. (S. P. Sen 1982:238-239)

Latif appealed to the reason, the conscience and the good taste of his fellow countrymen to draw the right conclusion from his facts. Do not think that the Punjab of today is the Punjab forty years back, what the condition of our country was forty years ago (before British), or to appreciate heartily the manifold blessings of British rule and the influence of British civilization on our country (Syed Mohammad Latif 1892:8). Latif also wants the reader to remember that the original writers were men who occupied a very low position in scale of civilization and whose education and mode of life were far inferior to those of the growing generation. (Syed Mohammad Latif 1892:15)

Syed Muhammad Latif combined in his personality three inbuilt characteristics; he was an Indian, a Muslim and an official of the British Indian administration (Fauja Singh 1982:205). A careful perusal of his writings would show his attitude and treatment changing from problem to problem and from chapter to chapter, sometimes obviously contradicting him. Latif therefore, deserves a better treatment not by way of favor but obligation. Placed as he was by national circumstances, his attitude and thinking were conditioned by the contemporary liberalism of Europe and the Muslim renaissance. As an Indian he praised our civilization and India as a land of religious and its importance for huge wealth. As a Muslim he was well aware of his responsibility towards his community. Latif's grandson also writes, following in his father's footsteps, Latif decided to pen the histories of places where eminent Indian Muslims of yester years distinguished themselves in construction, civil work projects, art, culture and architecture (Syed Mohammad Minhajuddin 2000:1). Latif, in no uncertain terms, admired the British raj for its achievements in India. It is true that he truly believed that the British had evolved a superior cultural and economic system and that it was the responsibility of all Indians to embrace it. While he admired India, he realized that the grand old days of Muslim rule in India had ended and the only way Indians could achieve emancipation was to learn from British. While it can

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commonly be misconstrued as a bias, it is only with historical hindsight that one understands the quandary that Latif and his contemporary scholars were faced with. Unlike many Eastern critics of Western Civilization, Latif tried to present a balanced view of history, both from the view of the victor and the vanquished. Furthermore, the print medium was, in those days, controlled by the British Indian Government. The Calcutta central press, where Latif's books were printed, was owned and operated by the British government. It was established in 1863, for the purpose of printing administrative reports, codes and miscellaneous governmental work. Latif would have found it practically impossible to publish his books and distributed it worldwide had he openly criticized the British government's disregard for conservation of Indian history. Against the backdrop of censure, and faced with the great responsibility of documenting Indian history, the foundations of Latif's inferences had to be meticulously researched. In his various books, he drew on the oldest available sources (some of which are now lost or stolen) and cross-referenced them in great detail, whenever possible; to produce remarkably detailed manuscripts that attain the highest standards of accuracy and scholarship. His books bring to light the sharp contrast between the Pre and Post- Islamic India specially, Punjab and the positive impact and gradual advancement that Muslims in India brought to bear upon the Indian landscape. Latif's eloquent descriptions are not bound to historical monuments only; he describes in vivid detail the Flora and Fauna of the area and the roots of various Indian cultures, families and clans. Syed Muhammad Latif, therefore, comes across as a multi-dimensional historian who provides an intricately woven mesh of social, cultural, natural and geographical history. Doing justice with just one of these historical aspects would be a great accomplishment in itself, Latif, however goes far beyond that and recreates a living history. Latif's book especially his "*History of the Punjab*" extols Indians to stop bloodshed in the name of freedom. On page 600 of "*History of the Punjab*" he quotes a speech made by Sir John Lawrence that describes the virtues of British raj and far ranging reforms made by the British government for the citizens of India (Syed Mohammad Latif 1892:16). Inter-spiced between his fascinating historical researches, the contemporary changes in Indian landscape are described in detail. A true visionary, Latif correctly understood the need to embrace the positive aspects of British raj during the Industrial revolution. In doing so, Latif must have encountered great resistance from the Mullahs and conservative elements of the society. Latif was instrumental in introducing the history of some of the most famous Muslim majority Indian cities and provinces to a worldwide audience. His publications on Agra, Multan, Lahore and Punjab remain without precedent in pre-and post-partition India. S.K.Bajaj also writes, placed as he was by national circumstances; his attitude and thinking were conditioned by the contemporary liberalism of Europe. (Fauja Singh 1982:205)

The contemporary writings, which were used by Latif, were not the common man's writings. All these writings were mostly impressed by the possible prejudices of government officers. The source material amply demonstrated the aspects that the official historians found in justification of the British Rule in the

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Punjab. Accounts of the Punjab by Indians closely follow the pattern and style of medieval chronicles, while the works of the British historian were not objective because their writings were mostly based on British view point.

It is clear that Latif mostly depended upon English sources, mainly written by administrative and other Government Officials. The main reason of this was that Latif himself was a Government Officer. No doubt, the records of these government officials were quite authentic as they wrote on personal observation and interest. However, his writings were new but not colorless because a high rank officer did not write against his authority. In the writings of medieval period he ignored various contemporary sources.

Therefore, while passing any judgment about Latif as a historian, it is necessary to keep in mind the political situation and social age he lived in. Despite many limitations Latif's work was a pioneer of its own kind. It may be considered as a milestone in the nineteenth century Indian Historiography (Subdev Kumar 1992:16). It gives for the first time a complete account from the remotest antiquity of the Punjab S.K. Bajaj remarks that, in spite of the distractions and demands of official work, he was the first Indian who wrote one of the most comprehensive histories of the Punjab, and two tracts on Lahore and Multan (Fauja Singh 1982:219). By virtue of this he earned a well-deserved title of Syed Muhammad Latif the historian of the Punjab.

## **Conclusion**

Our historiographical survey of the trends in the Punjab comes to a close now. It has not been ended abruptly. I have chosen a few representatives, historians for this analysis of the problem because their writings have a special bearing on it. Finally if the historian as defined by E.H.Carr is to 'to master and understand the past as a key to the understanding of the present' then we have to undertake the historical reconstruction of our region on an altogether different line. We shall have to examine and explain all those factors which led the people towards progress and also those which brought their retardation and decline. In this process of investigation our approach cannot afford to be traditional, nationalistic or merely political for it has to take a serious note of socio-economic basis of culture formations. It would then become a reconstruction of the various facts of the life of the people, of their aspirations, achievements and failures, in fact, a study of their entire existence.

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