

SITA RAM KOHLI AND HIS WORKS

I

Sita Ram Kolhi a renowned scholar of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, lived from 1889 to 1962. Thus, he belongs to the last decades of 19th century and the first six decades of 20th century. At this time two personalities were rising in the field of Sikh academics. The one is Karam Singh historian and the other is Sita Ram Kolhi.¹ Karam Singh historian got his inspiration from the Singh Sabha movement while Principal Kohli got inspired by the historical research in the western methodology and by the western teachers H.L.O. Garrett, John Thompson and Ramsay Muir. Karam Singh historian wrote about the Sikh Gurus while Sita Ram Kohli wrote on the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Sita Ram Kohli was born on February 28, 1889 at Bhera. Bhera was a historical and flourishing town which was also a tehsil headquarter at that time. It is in the Shahpur District of the west Punjab which is now in Pakistan. Sita Ram Kohli belonged to the middle class family which professed Sikhism in sehajdhari form. Sita Ram got his early education at the government high school Bhera. After doing matriculation he got his admission in the D. A. V. college at Bhera. But after a short period, He joined

1 See also Fauja Singh's article, 'Sita Ram Kolhi' in Fauja Singh(ed.), *Historians And Historiography of The Sikhs*, New Delhi, 1978.p. 220.

the government college Lahore where he did his graduation and post-graduation. His post-graduation was in history. As he was one of the best student in the batch that passed out, he was granted the Alexandra Research Scholarship² by the Punjab university Lahore, for conducting research in history. This was a turning point in the life of Sita Ram Kolhi. This scholarship inspired him for research in historical studies.

Luckily for Sita Ram Kohli, Prof. Ramsay Muir visited the Department of history at the Punjab University, Lahore in 1913-14. He remained at the university for six months from October, 1913 to March, 1914. The lectures delivered by him inspired Sita Ram Kohli for research in history particularly in the field of Punjab history.

Prof. Ramsay Muir's lectures at the forth annual meeting of the Punjab Historical Society at Lahore on January 31, 1914 spelt out the vast scope of historical research in India. Two positive results followed from this. The first was the reinvigoration of the Punjab University Historical Society as a forum of discussion with a regular journal of its own where selected research papers could be printed. The second was the realization of the necessity of a thorough search for the records of the Khalsa period preceding the British rule in the Punjab. As the idea of promoting historical

2 A scholarship of the value of Rs.100 per month. As Sita Ram had shown an early talent for historical research, he was the first scholar to be awarded this scholarship in 1915.

research as the active backing of some high-ups in the official hierarchy, the work was immediately taken up with zest and earnestness.³

Sir Michael O'Dwyer was the governor of the Punjab at that time. He was personally interested for a research in the history of Punjab. After listening the lectures of Prof. Ramsay Muir he ordered an all-out research in civil Secretariat for the *Khalsa Darbar Records*. Resultantly, a huge mass of dust-laden bundles were discovered in the shelves of the store of the secretariat. These bundles, bound tightly, were lying neglected in the secretariat building. No-body touched these bundles after 1849 when the Punjab was annexed by the Britishers. These records had passed into the possession of the British at the time of annexation of the Punjab in 1849 but for long seventy years they remained bound in bundles unused by anybody. Sita Ram Kohli was the first to untie these bundles and satchels of the records and he prepared a catalogue of the records of each department, giving date, number and other necessary particulars of each document. These catalogues were subsequently published by Punjab government in two volumes under the name *Catalogue of Khalsa Darbar Records*.⁴

In appreciation of his outstanding talent, the Punjab government gave him appointment as a lecturer in history at the

3 Fauja Singh, *Historians And Historiography of The Sikhs*, p. 221.

4 See Sita Ram Kohli, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (Punjabi), Delhi, 1953 (Bhumika), pp 9-10.

government college Lahore, in the Punjab Education Service in 1919. He remained at that college for 14 years.⁵ During this period he not only carried on his research activities but by his mature guidance and first hand knowledge of the abundant historical material available in the Punjab government office, also helped a large number of post-graduation students and scholars to write dissertation and monographs. But he also retained his connections with the Punjab Government records office of which he held an additional charge of Deputy Keeper of the records. He was, at this time also a permanent member of the Punjab University Historical Society and took keen interest in the organization and deliberation of the Sikh History Society at Lahore in 1931.⁶

In 1933, Sita Ram Kohli (afterwards Principal Kohli) was transferred to Ludhiana where he was the Vice Principal under Principal Harvey. There he lived in the portion of the same house which was once a residence of ex-rulers of Afghanistan Shah Zaman and Shah Shuja, a hundred years earlier. Principal Kohli felt honoured to live in that house.⁷ At present this house has been raised to the ground.

5 Harbans Singh (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Vol. IV, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1998, p. 217.

6 Fauja Singh, *Historians And Historiography of The Sikhs*, p.222.

7 Harbans Singh (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, Vol.IV, p. 218.

In 1940, Sita Ram Kohli was appointed principal at Government College, Hoshiarpur from where he was transferred to the Government College, Rohtak in 1944. This college was the only Government College in Haryana at that time. He retired from his post in 1945 and in January, 1946, he was offered appointment as principal of Government Ranbir College, Sangrur. He was also given the additional charge as Superintendent Education Department, Jind State. Sangrur was a capital headquarter of Jind State at that time. After sometime he was given a post of Secretary Education Department of the State. In 1948, the princely states of cis-Sutlej were merged in PEPSU. Thus a new state came into existence. Therefore Principal Kohli ceased to be a secretary Education but retained the post of principal upto November 1951. After this, he finally retired from the post of principalship and settled down at Rohtak in his newly built house. This house was named *Gosha-i-Afiyat* which means retreat.⁸ Towards the end of his life he felt victim to the pernicious disease of *Asthma*, which ultimately carried him off in July, 1962. Thus principal Kohli spent 73 years of his age.

Sita Ram Kohli enjoyed every moment of his life and he sacrificed this enjoyment of his life to the study of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. God also blessed him with many enjoyable moments. First,

8 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

throughout his life Sita Ram Kohli remained at the top of government service. Secondly, he was married in the well-to-do family of Ruchi Ram Sahni of Lahore.⁹ Ruchi Ram Sahni's daughter Lilawati was a wife of Sita Ram Kohli. She was a talented lady who was always a great help to her husband in his research project. She gave birth to two daughters and two sons.

Sita Ram Kohli was so devoted to his work that he continued arduous labour over the years ever since he had entered upon the career of research. This research had greatly undermined his health during the later years of his life because he was terribly effected by *Asthma*, a disease which probably had its roots in his persistent work for several years on the archaic folios of *Khalsa Darbar Records*, usually emitting awful smell. But such was his devotion to work that he never permitted his disease, or falling health to come in the way of either his personal research, or his guidance to, or discussion with research students and scholars.

Sita Ram Kohli was associated with so many historical societies. He was a member of Punjab University Historical Society, Lahore. He was also associated with the Indian Historical

⁹ Ruchi Ram Sahni, Kohli's father-in-law was a professor of Chemistry at Government college, Lahore. Prof. Sahni was very fond of visiting the hill stations every year. He rarely missed his club and was an extremely good host. He lived well and was fond of good food and good company. He drove his own car and maintained a lavish table-spread. He spend his summer at Gulmarg, an attractive hill station in Kashmir. He would inspire his pupils to read more and more and write with exactness and brevity.

Records Commission and a corresponding member till death. He was also associated with the Indian History Congress which, in recognition of his valuable researches in the field of Punjab History, elected him President of the Sikh History Section of the second session of the Indian History Congress held at Allahabad in 1938. His presidential address on this occasion gave a thought provoking and analytical account of the different phases and sources of Sikh History. Besides the address, he read on this occasion a paper bearing the title 'Ahmed Shah Abdali and the Sikhs (1748-65)'. Two years later he presented another paper at the Indian History Congress Session held at Lahore in 1940, the title of the paper being '*A Book of Military Parwanas*'¹⁰.

In the light of above discussion, it can be said safely that Sita Ram Kohli's main field of interest and specialization was the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his successors. Outside of his specialized field, a few attempts were, no doubt, made such as *History of India from beginning to A. D. 1526*; *Students' Historical Atlas of India*; and *The Indus Valley Civilisation*. Of these the first two were written as text books for school and college students. The third was a better attempt, although his study of ancient Indian history or archaeology was not of the level that he could make any significant contribution to knowledge, it was, at best, a

10 Fauja Singh (ed.), *Historians And Historiography of The Sikhs*, pp. 224-225.

monograph, produced on the basis of secondary sources, but it must be said to the credit of the writer that the scholarship shown in its writing was high enough to induce the Punjab University to undertake its publication.

As for the area of his specialization, he was fortunate to be initiated into it, at the very outset, by being assigned the task of examining the massive *Khalsa Darbar Records* preserved in the Punjab Government Secretariat, Lahore. As these primary records related to the annual file to the different departments for a period of thirty eight years from 1811 to 1849, the greater part of the Khalsa rule, their close examination gave Principal Kohli a unique grounding in the subject of his study. The grounding thus gained was subsequently improve by the study of some other primary sources, such as Munshi Sohan Lal's *Umdat-ut-Twarikh*, Dewan Amarnath's *Zafarnama Ranjit Singh*, Ganesh Das's, *Fatehnama Guru khalsa Ji Ka*, Shah Muhammad's *Var on the first Anglo-Sikh War*, 1845-46, foreign travellers' and visitors' accounts and British intelligence reports. It was thus on account of his mastery of the original sources that he was considered, on all hands, an authority on the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Principal Kohli's main field of historical research was the history of Sikh empire, 1799 to 1849. All his writings betray maturity of judgment and

balance. He has a simple and forceful style of writing. He possessed a high analytical mind. He

II

The most important work of Sita Ram Kohli is to edit and compile the *Khalsa Darbar Records*. When professor Ramsay Muir visited to Lahore college he inspired Sita Ram Kohli to come in the field of historical research. Besides this inspiration, the Governor of Punjab Sir Michael O' Dwyer added his elderly appeal for an all out search in the civil Secretariat for the *Khalsa Darbar Records*. The records were in Persian, written in the *Shikasta* hand.¹¹ It created the difficulties in the process of reading. Principal Kohli was well versed in Persian so he was selected to do this difficult job. The *Shikasta* handwriting presented acute problem to schematize and systematize the documents in proper historical perspective.¹² But Sita Ram Kohli worked with devotion and diligence for the period of five years. He scanned and catalogued nearly three lakh folios covering the period of 1811 to 1849 of Sikh reign. Writing about his work Sita Ram Kohli himself writes in the introduction of his book *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, "These records were in the possession of the British at the time of

11 *Shikasta* means that an account written in running hand which cannot read easily.

12 G. S. Nayyar, *Contribution of Principal Kohli to The History of The Sikhs* (Principal Sita Ram Kohli Memorial Lecture), Punjabi University Patiala, 2003, pp.1-2 afterwards as G. S. Nayyar's lecture).

annexation of the Punjab in 1849 but for long seventy years they remained bound in bundles unused by anybody. I was the first to untie the bundles and satchels of these records and it was with great labour that I became skilled in the art of reading the difficult *shikasta* handwriting of Persian¹³. Gradually, however, I was able to prepare a catalogue to the records of each department, giving date, number and other particulars of each document. These catalogues were subsequently published by the Punjab Government in two volumes, under the name '*Catalogue of Khalsa Darbar Records*'.¹⁴

The records make up a total of 129 bundles, some of which contain several thousand sheets each. The paper used is of the kind commonly known as Kashmiri or Sialkoti and the sheets, as a rule measure 5"x7.5". Supplementary to these bundles are 15 manuscript volumes, bound in leather, containing duplicates of the orders issued to various government officials and the voluminous correspondence between the *Khalsa Darbar Records* and the Ambala and Ludhiana political agencies of the British.¹⁵

Sita Ram Kohli prepared the catalogue of each and every department of the military and revenue administration of the

13 Sita Ram Kohli, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (Punjabi), Delhi, 1953,(Introduction), p.10.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Harbans Singh, *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, vol. II, Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 477.

Darbar taking in the consideration the respective serial order and dates of rolls of separate units, depicting strength and development of the army at different intervals. The documents in the records fall into four different categories.

The first category is *Darbar-i-Fauj*. It comprises mainly the pay rolls of cavalry, infantry and artillery from which information can be obtained about the composition and strength of the Khalsa army. Service in the Khalsa army was not restricted to any particular class or caste. In 1811, the strength of the regular Khalsa army was 2852 infantry and 1209 artillery. In 1845, the figure had risen to 70721 with 53962 infantry, 6235 cavalry and 10524 artillery. The infantry and cavalry had 60 percent Sikhs, 20 percent Muslims and 20 percent Hindus, whereas the artillery regiment were predominantly Muslim and some were commanded by the Europeans. The total expenditure amount to Rs. 1,27,96,482 which was about the one third of the annual revenue of the state. The names of various generals, colonels and commandants also figure in these papers.¹⁶

The pay rolls reveal that a Commandant's monthly salary ranged between Rs. 60 and Rs. 150; an adjutant's between Rs. 30 to 60; a major's between Rs. 21 to 25; a subedar's between Rs. 20 to 30; a jamadar's between Rs. 15 to 22; a naik's between 10 to

16 See the *catalogue of Khalsa Darbar records*, Lahore, 1927

12; a Havildar's between 13 to 15; a Sargent's between Rs. 8 to 12 and a spoy's between 7to 8. Even the pay rolls of beldars, blacksmiths etc., attached to the army are also presented. The dates from transfer from one regiment to another or of removal whether by death, desertion or dismissal is invariably noted. The pay rolls and the *jama Kharch* (income and expenditure) papers show not only the expenditure on the three wings of the army, but also income from rents of shops in regimental bazars, sale proceeds of the property of man dying without heirs, and a return of the *inams* or awards bestowed upon infantry officers on the occasions of Dusehra and Diwali. These festivals were celebrated with full pomp and show by the army regiments.¹⁷

The second category of the papers is *Daftar-i-Mall*. It means the paper concerning with revenue matter. These papers fall under three head-receipts, disbursements, adjustments and the day-book of disbursements (*awarja, tanzihat, roznamcha*). There existed in the Sikh times a well organized system of collecting the revenue and maintaining accounts, including those relating to the expenditure on the royal household. These records also provide the information regarding the reorganization of *ta'alluqas* or administrative units. The general summary settlement of each *ta'alluqas* was undertaken and the areas of cultivable land

17 *Ibid.*

together with the liabilities and the rights of the landlords over the paying tenants were preserved. The details of the districts and their sub-divisions, the names of their Kardars and Subedars and the estimated annual income of the state from various sources are also given. Likewise, there are in the records the papers pertaining to *Jagirs* of different kinds bestowed upon or assigned to civil and military officers, religious personages and shrines.

The *Toshakhana* papers relate to the royal wardrobe and the Privy Purse and contain inventories' of treasure as well of confiscated properties. Ranjit Singh was quick to take action against the corrupt officers who were made to disgorge their ill-gotten wealth.

From these statistics one may easily trace the growth and development of the army from period to period. Again, each one of the four parts of the book has been prefaced with a concise account of the main inferences emerging from the scrutiny of the records. The volume, thus, is much more than a mere catalogue, as it presents a more or less clear picture of the organization of the Khalsa army, its growth and the administration of its major branches as well as the system of maintaining military records of the different kinds.

These records were, after the partition of 1947, shifted from Lahore to Shimla, which became the summer capital of East

Punjab. In 1959 these records were again shifted to Punjab State Archives, Patiala, and for third time in 1984, the records were shifted from Patiala to Amritsar.

This project, completed by Sita Ram Kohli, was published by the Punjab Government in two volumes under the title *Catalogue of Khalsa Darbar Records*, Vol-I, from Lahore in 1919. The second volume under the very same title was also published by the Punjab Government from Lahore but in 1927. These volumes are now lying in the different libraries of Punjab,¹⁸ meeting the dire needs of research scholars and coming to their rescue in view of the meticulous and precise treatment more particularly of the military and revenue administration of the great sovereign of the Punjab. The first and the second volumes prepared by Principal Kohli are not only catalogue but also contain a useful and precious account of the administrative system of Lahore Darbar by way of the expedient preface written by the learned historian.

The tremendous success with which Sita Ram Kohli accomplished his first project, admittedly a difficult undertaking, brought his success in his personal career as well. After the expiry of the Alexandra Research Scholarship, he was taken into government service and appointed a lecturer in history at the government college, Lahore. He was at this college for long many

18 I have consulted the copies of *Catalogue of Khalsa Darbar Records* preserved in the Ganda Singh collection of the main library of Punjabi University, Patiala.

years. During this period he not only carried on his own research activities, but by his mature guidance and first hand knowledge of the abundant historical material available in the Punjab government office, also helped the postgraduate students and scholars to write dissertation and monographs. In view of his good work he was subsequently appointed Deputy Records Keeper, Punjab. He was at this time also a permanent member of the Punjab University historical Society and took keen interest in the organization and deliberations of the Sikh history society at Lahore in 1931. Taking advantage of his long stay at Lahore, he built his own house there.

III

Sita Ram Kohli's widely known book is on *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*. It was first published in Urdu by Hindustani Academy, Hyderabad in 1933. Then it was written (not translated) in Punjabi in 1951 and was published by Atma Ram and sons, Kashmiri Gate Delhi in 1953. At this time he was in Government Ranbir college, Sangrur as a principal. This book was dedicated to his late daughter Kumari Shama Kolhi, who had passed her M.A. Forewording Note is given by Principal Jodh Singh of Khalsa college, Amritsar. The book has three hundred pages. The book was very rare but the demand was high. Then it was decided to translate it into English by Major(Rtd.) Gurmukh Singh, edited by

Prithipal Singh Kapur and published by Guru Nanak Dev University in 2002. It has two hundred and six pages.

Sita Ram Kohli “works on Ranjit Singh in Urdu as well as in Punjabi was his first and only attempt to deal with the subject as a whole. Moreover, it represented the sum and substance of his prolonged deliberation on the subject.”¹⁹ Viewed from modern standards, it is Sita Ram Kohli who have claim to have been privileged to be a pioneer of serious methodological research on Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his Government. The peculiarity of this work is that material for this has been drawn mainly from Persian contemporary sources like Sohan Lal Suri’s *Umdat-ut-Twarikh*, Bute Shah’s *Tarikh-i-punjab* and Dewan Amar Nath’s *Zafarnama-i-Ranjit Singh* which present a mirror of the events of the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Sita Ram Kohli’s mastery on the original sources of the period made him an authority on Ranjit Singh that has so far remained unequalled beyond doubt. He set a standard of historical scholarship that is not easy to emulate and which is hard to excel.²⁰

Sita Ram Kohli started his work on Maharaja Ranjit Singh before G.L. Chopra and N.K. Sinha ventured to produce their doctoral thesis and his interest remained unabated till his death

19 Fauja Singh (ed.), *Historians And Historiography of The Sikhs*, p. 231.

20 Prithipal Singh Kapur (ed.), *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* by Sita Ram Kohli, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 2002 (Introduction) p.xxi.

in 1962.²¹ Sita Ram Kohli possessed a highly analytical mind and all his writing betray relations with the border states, treaties with the British, detailed account of the conquests, the possessing of the Koh-i-Noor, administrative measures, the adventures of the Maharaja along with six appendices comprising mainly of useful information by way of listing of the European and other top officials employed in the court of the Maharaja with minute and meaningful details and an elaborate treatment of books quoted in the text.

In addition to the *Khalsa Darbar records* Sita Ram Kohli consulted other significant sources for his book, Maharaja Ranjit Singh which includes the writings of Osborne, Sir Henry Fane, Captain Wade, C. Metcalf, Sir Lepel Griffin, Grey, Forster, Moorcraft, Sir.C.Gough, Alexander Burns, Charles Hugel and others. Gazeeters have also not been lost sight of which provide a flood of light besides the British point of view.

Sita Ram Kohli appreciates the policy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh towards the Britishers. According to him both of the parties benefitted from the Treaty of Amritsar 'because without it, both would probably may crossed swords. However this treaty presents

21 See J.S.Grewal's article "understanding Ranjit Singh" in Prithipal Singh DharamSingh(ed.), *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*(commemoration volume), Punjabi University, Patiala, 2001, p.266.

an excellent example of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's perception of events that presented themselves before him'.²²

Writing about the glory of Ranjit Singh's Kingdom and his relations with the Britishers during the period of 1828-1839, Sita Ram Kohli comments ' By this time, the Sikh kingdom had reached the pinnacle of its glory and progress. The fame and power of the lion of the Punjab was at its Zenith. He had conquered the Muslim provinces of Multan, Kashmir and Peshawar and had annexed them to his Kingdom. He was acknowledged as the master of all the hilly regions and plains of Punjab. He had plans in his mind for the conquest of Ladakh and Sindh. The sovereigns of far-off countries considered it a matter of pride to establish friendly relations with him.'²³

Writing about the great personality and prestige of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sita Ram Kohli remarks 'In World History, there are very few such instances where a person rose from the position of meager resources like Ranjit Singh and founded such a big Kingdom, and still did not indulge in moral laxities or become target of the ire of his defeated foes. It was a matter of great pride and honour for Maharaja Ranjit Singh that ever since he held the reins of government in his hands, he never sentenced anyone to death, it was because of his pleasant manners, benevolence and

22 Sita Ram Kohli, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (Punjabi), pp. 95-96.

23 *Ibid.*, p.184.

popularity, that his subjects from a child to the old loved him. Even his sworn enemies kept quiet under the weight of kindness.²⁴

IV

Dewan Amar Nath's account was published by Sita Ram Kohli under the title *Zafarnama-i-Ranjit Singh* after its due editing in 1928.²⁵ In the introduction written in English to his edited version of the said *Zafarnama* the editor states that the writer of this work, Amar Nath, has neither given the title of the work in a clear manner nor has he clarified it in a formal way in the text. Three manuscripts of this work were approached by him but no help could be had to decide the very name of the work. The editor received the first manuscript of this work from the house of the writer himself. In this manuscript, the title of the book was given as 'Tawarikh Khalsa' by the copiest. This title was also taken up by the book binder himself but it did not suit the contents at all rather it was irrelevant.²⁶

The second manuscript of this work was obtained by Sita Kohli from Rai Sahib Pt. Wazir Chand and the title 'Zafarnama Akbari' was inscribed on this copy with pencil. But this title also

24 *Ibid.*, p.269.

25 Sita Ram Kohli, *Zafarnama-i- Ranjit Singh* (ed.), Punjab University, Lahore, 1928. I have used the edition of *Zafarnama* edited by Dr. Kirpal Singh, therefore, this edition will be referred to, in the forth coming references.

26 *Zafarnama-i-Ranjit Singh* (edited by Kirpal Singh), Punjabi University, Patiala, 1983, pp. 289-90.

lacked in giving a full fledged and relevant description of the subject matter contained in this work. The third manuscript which Sita Ram Kohli was able to approach was from Punjab University, Lahore and it contained events upto the year 1827-28 A.D. In this way it was an incomplete manuscript.²⁷

The two manuscripts were scribed by Pandit Raja Ram alias Tota, a Kashmiri Brahman. The first having been completed in A.D. 1857 and the second in 1856 A.D. Principal Kohli observes that since the title of this work was neither traced in the contents of the work nor had the writer given any specific title, it was found advisable to give it the name of '*Zafarnama Ranjit Singh*' as the work refers to the conquests of the Maharaja up to the years 1836-37. Principal Kohli himself writes: "We have therefore, made a sort of compromise and given the name of '*Zafarnama Ranjit Singh*' to the book. As the reader will see, the book mainly deal with the conquests of Ranjit Singh up to the end of the year 1836-37."²⁸

Sita Ram Kohli not only adopted a decisive approach in ascribing a title of the book under reference but also made it clear that this work comes to an end with the narration of the events up to the year 1836 i.e. the year of the celebrations of the marriage of Kanwar Naunihal Singh. It is also stated that this work does not take into account in the last three year of the reign of Maharaja

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 291-92.

28 *Ibid.*

Ranjit Singh. It is also apparent that Dewan Amar Nath, the author of this work witnessed the rise of the British and the fall of the Sikhs. Sita Ram Kohli further writes that the absence of the account of the last three years of Maharaja's reign has far lessened the value of the book and has deprived us of the valuable information. We have not been able to understand the logical reason of this neglect. Sita Ram Kohli writes:

“It (the manuscript) Abruptly comes to close with the description of the celebrations in connection with the wedding, in Sambat 1893, of Prince Naunihal Singh, the grandson of the Maharaja..... it is much to be regretted, however, that although the author lived through the stormy period of Sikh rule and saw with his own eyes its final extinction and the building up of the British power on its ruins, he did not continue his narrative beyond 1835-36 viz., about the three years before the death of Ranjit Singh himself. So far as we can judge no valid reason can be assigned for the serious omission which robs his work of the value it would otherwise have possessed.”²⁹ The same views have been expressed in the second version of the editing of Dewan Amar Nath's work under consideration. There also the year of the

29 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

winding up of this book is deemed to be 1836, the year of the wedding of Kanwar Naunihal Singh.³⁰

Dewan Amar Nath has given a very captivating and indispensable data about the far-flung areas of the kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh namely Kasur, Bannu, Kashmir, Kandhar, Dera Gazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, Multan, Mankera, Attock, Wazirabad, Dhani, Khushab, Hazara, Shah Mukim, Pak-pattan and the hilly tract etc. this information has been collected by the Dewan Amar Nath from the contemporary and well informed individuals. This collection of facts has been scattered in this work in the shape and form of evidence. The writer is a fine example in himself in giving the details of the campaigns and polity of the Maharaja commenced conquering territories at the unripe age of 13 years. He encouraged the victorious in the battle fields, kept a stern eye on the persons committing tyranny, made the foundations of justice firm and solid, extended protection to the poor and expanded the activities of welfare day in the day out. Most of the rebels submitted before him on account of the diplomatic measures and joined him. The Maharaja gave an excellent proof of his sagacity in dealing with the Chathas by means of his political awareness.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. XXII-XXIII. See also Ganda Singh, *A Bibliography of The Punjab*, Patiala, 1966, p. 146.

Dewan Amar Nath has touched almost all the aspects pertaining to the Maharaja's activities and has hardly neglected any aspect of the royal administration. The significant details given in the concise volume include: the domination of the Maharaja over the *misl* chiefs and granting *jagirs* to them, the conduct of the affairs with the chiefs of the *misls* more particularly with Sardar Fateh Singh Ahluwalia, the preparation of the campaigns near and far from the capital and the details of the awards and honours after the conquests, the opposition of the Afghans in the frontier provinces and the success of the royal armies, the administration and governance of forts and fortresses in the kingdom, the description of the forts of Mankera and Mangla, the administration of the territories, the appointments and promotions of the courtiers and employees. The punishments and discipline, the appointment of Sardar Rattan Singh Gharjakhia as the *Adalti* of Lahore, capturing the hearts of the ruled, time to time relationship of the Maharaja with the British, Shah Shuja, Mai Sada Kaur, the conquest of the salt mines and their administration, the births of Kanwars Kharak Singh, Sher Singh, Dalip Singh, Naunihal Singh etc., and the necessary details about them, the description and the portraiture of the Dogras and the Europeans, the *purbias* etc., in the enforcement of the Maharaja's military set up, the possession of *Koh-i-Noor*, the

characterization and interpretation of Moran and Gul Bahar Begum, the disease and demise of the Maharaja and the succession of Kanwar Kharak Singh of the throne of Lahore etc.

Hence the manuscript under reference gives the account of the years of the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh which were seen by the author. It is the regret of Sita Ram Kohli that Amarnath did not carry his account beyond 1835-36, although he lived through the stormy period of the Sikh rule and till long after the annexation of the Punjab in 1849. The introduction of Sita Ram Kohli for this book contains, besides the note of the historical value of the book, much useful information about Dewan Amarnath and his family and about the title of manuscript copies of the work and also regarding the style of the writer. About the historical value of this account of Sita Ram Kohli himself writes : “Dewan Amarnath’s history is not inferior to any contemporary chronicle in point of accuracy of detail, it far excels even the diary of Sohan Lal and the history of Bute Shah in richness of facts of general interest. By virtue of his own position as *Bakhshi* or paymaster of the irregular cavalry of the Khalsa government and because of his family connections, our author enjoyed special facilities for collecting valuable material for his narrative. His father, Dewan Dina Nath, was the Finance minister of Ranjit Singh and as such had the entire charge of the civil, military and

political records of the Maharaja's Government. The author was personally acquainted with the most of the influential men at the court and this background of general experience of men and things around him stood him in good stead in writing his history.....The book is, therefore, a most important original source of information concerning the reign of Ranjit Singh.”³¹

V

Sita Ram Kohli's another edited work is *Fatehnama Guru Khalsa ji ka* written by Ganesh Das who was in the personal staff of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The employees of the personal staff were called *Bhayaas*. These *bhayaas* remained with the Maharaja during all the times in the residence. The Maharaja used to send his personal orders called *Parwanas* to the concerned officers of the Durbar. That was the way that *bhayaas* were known to all of the external and internal decisions taken by the Maharaja. This is stated by Sita Ram Kohli himself in the introduction of this book.³²

According to Sita Ram Kohli was own statement, the manuscript was sent to him by his friend Labhu Ram, a librarian of the Punjab University, Library, Lahore in 1925 for my opinion so that the Library could consider it for buying. Sita Ram Kohli states that he was very busy at that time in his other engagements

31 See *Zafarnama* edited by Kirpal Singh, p. 284.

32 Sita Ram Kohli (ed.), *Fatehnama Guru Khalsa ji Ka*, Language Department, Punjab, Patiala, 1970, pp.18-19.

so he could not go through it properly but he got it copied by his assistant. The assistant copied it in Urdu because he was not good in Punjabi. The manuscript was sent back. Neither the library bought it nor the owner of the manuscript could be contacted. Resultantly, the real manuscript had been lost.

After twenty five years in 1949-50, when Sita Ram Kohli started to edit it, the very script which was copied in Urdu by his assistant was used for publishing. The Urdu script was again transliterated in Gurmukhi and got it published by the Mehkama-i-Punjabi of Punjab Government, Chandigarh in 1951. The editor tells that Principal Jodh Singh of Khalsa college, Amritsar helped him in preparing the manuscript for a press copy. The other person who helped Sita Ram Kohli in the project was Giani Khazan Singh B.A. of Sangrur.³³

Bhai Vir Singh wrote foreword of the book which covers eleven pages, the introduction given by the editor himself covers the pages from 13 to 25. The editor gives the summary sketch of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's life in thirty pages from 27 to 57. Then starts the original epic. But here also, the editor gives introduction of *Multan yudh* in fourteen pages from 58 to 72. From pages 73 the epic of *Multan yudh* is given. It has four sub-chapters in 279 stanzas, covering 71 pages from 73 to 144. Then the epic of

33 See the introduction, *Fatehnama Guru Khalsa ji ka*, pp.13-14.

Pishour yudh (the battle of Peshawar) starts. Here also, the editor first gives the introduction of *Pishour yudh* in the pages from 145 to 156. Then the epic of *Pishour yudh* is given in three subsections, covering 66 pages from 157-223. In the end, the editor gives three appendices duly concerned with epic covering 12 pages from 224 to 236. Thus, the book covers total 236 pages.

The account of Ganesh Das has tremendous historical importance. Though its scope is limited to three important events only, namely the siege of Multan (1818), the battle of Naushera (*Pishour yudh*) 1823, and the fighting against Khalifa Syed Ahmed of Bareilly, only the earlier phase, but even so, within the framework of its limited scope it far excels any other contemporary account indigenous or foreign, in richness of detail, in graphicness of account and in liveliness of presentation.³⁴ The importance of the work has been enhanced by the learned editor with his explanatory notes, appendices and introduction explaining its historical importance. These footnotes and explanations help the readers and thus enhance the value of the work. The introduction and the three appendices given by the editor make it a historical document.

In fact, the details of the battle, the author has given correspond with those recorded in contemporary chronicles. Such

34 Fauja Singh, *Historians And Historiography of The Sikhs*, p.231.

as *Umdat-ut-Twarikh*, *Zafarnama-i-Ranjit Singh* and *Jang-i-Multan*. Ganesh Das has great admiration for Maharaja Ranjit Singh as well as for the Khalsa. His appraisal of the role of the Maharaja in the Sikh body politic is highly perceptive. For him Maharaja Ranjit Singh was the leader of the Khalsa commonwealth rather than a Maharaja or sovereign, and he addresses him as *Singh Sahib* (exalted member of the Khalsa). Ganesh Das attributes victories won in these battles to the Khalsa as a whole and not to Ranjit Singh. Hence the title of his work: *Fatehnamah Guru Khalsa Ji Ka*, means the victory of the Guru Khalsa.

VI

The another edited work of Sita Ram Kohli is *The Var of shah Muhammad*. It is a first Punjabi work which was written by a Punjabi Muslim poet, Shah Muhammad, on the first Anglo-Sikh war 1845-46. This is an epic and this attracted the intentions of Sita Ram Kohli to bring it out for the scholars of Punjab history. Historically, this account is very important being the Indian side of picture given by a writer not far removed from the scene of action depicted in the work. It was written probably in 1846 immediately after the first Anglo-Sikh war.³⁵ Sita Ram Kohli has labored hard to examine the authenticity of the account. Sita Ram Kohli edited this account and got it published in 1956 for the very

35 Rattan Singh Jaggi, *Jangnama Singhan Ate Firangian Da*(Punjabi), Punjabi University, Patiala, 1999, p.xiv (introduction).

first time by the Punjabi Sahit Academy Ludhiana again in 1960, the same academy got it published for the second time³⁶. The book has 204 pages out of which only 56 pages cover the text. The introduction covers the 119 pages. The book is edited with footnote and explanatory notes. The editor discussed the various aspects in the introduction. The Principal aspects are concerned with the gradual weakening of the Khalsa Kingdom after the demise of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the circumstances leading to the outbreak of first Anglo-Sikh war, the details of the battles and the historical value of the account. Thus, after the thorough examination of the account, the editor has arrived at the conclusion that despite the personal opinion of the author, Shah Muhammad, nothing is objectionable and unhistorical in the account. The account is very important source on the subject of Anglo-Sikh war.³⁷

VII

We will be failing in our account if we do not include in the above contribution of Sita Ram Kohli, his posthumous book : *Sunset of the Sikh Empire* which is undoubtedly the history of last ten years of Lahore Kingdom, a very crucial period of the history of the Sikhs which was edited by Khushwant Singh and published

36 I have used this second edition in this work. Var Shah Muhammad(Hind Punjab Da Jang-in Punjabi), edited by Sita Ram Kohli, Punjabi Sahit Academy, Ludhiana, 1960.

37 *Ibid.*, pp.108-109.

by Orient Longmans in 1967. It has been dedicated by the editor to the memory of Sita Ram Kohli rightly applauding him as... “great son of the Punjab and Chief Chronicler of the Sikh”. The book under reference is a story of sad agony, how the splendid Court of Ranjit Singh fall a prey in the hand of friction-ridden chiefs and ultimately became the victim of British imperialism.

The writer has very beautifully summed up the situation which led to the down fall of the Empire so strongly built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He points out “... The Durbar, therefore, spilt into many factions fiercely opposed one to the other; held only in a semblance of harmony by the towering personality of Maharaja. When Ranjit Singh died on Thursday 27th June, 1839, these factions came to a head-on clash.”

Sita Ram Kohli has rightly cited the tradition which is concerned with the foreboding of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. “The tradition has it” writes Sita Ram Kohli, “that on one occasion C. M. Wade, Pol. Agent, Ludhiana during his interview with Maharaja Ranjit Singh exhibited the map of India to show it to His Highness. The Maharaja either casually or deliberately enquired of him what the red patches on the map denoted. ‘The British possessions’ was the Agent’s reply. Ranjit Singh is said to have turned aside and with a heavy heart told his courtiers *‘ek din Punjab bhi lal ho jana hai.’*”³⁸

³⁸ Khushwant Singh(ed.), *Sunset of the Sikh Empire*, Orient Longmans, 1967, p.191.

Sita Ram Kohli has mostly used contemporary sources in the preparation of this manuscript which include literature produced by the British writers as well as the archival record comprising PGR and the letters of British officers like Captain Wade, correspondence of Clerk of Government, Macnaghten to Government, Lt. Herbert Edwards to Major Hodson of Hodson Horse, Hardinge to Ellenborough, Dalhousie to Currie, Currie's correspondence, dispatches of Sir Hume Gough, Henry Lawrence to the Foreign Secretary, despatches of British news writers, *Life and letters of Edwardes*, *Memoirs of Alexander Gardner*, *The Punjab Akhbarat* etc. etc., besides several other works like Kahan Singh Banga's ballad 'Jangnama'. The English writers whose work have been quoted for evidence and reference include Malleson, Lepel Griffin, Edwardes and Merivale, William Osborne, J. D. Cunningham etc.

All the evidences available to us, contemporary and near contemporary stand witness to the fact that the downfall of the Sikh Empire was quite visible, more so in the after years of the Maharaja's reign. The circumstances went on deteriorating day by day falling into the jaws of British diplomacy. The title of Sita Ram Kohli's work *Sunset Set of Sikh Empire* need no clarification as it is self descriptive and tells the tale of woe how the glorious kingdom set by the Maharaja met its end. Anyway, the role of military

Panchayats emerged during this period needs to be projected and recapitulated.

After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Punjab became a centre of dissensions among princes, ministers, chieftains, queens, and rival factions. The army gained power and became law unto itself. It ceased to obey the rulers, commanders and generals who were left in names only. In the absence of any supreme political authority, it considered itself to be the custodian of the Sarbat Khalsa. The soldiers did this as it appeared to them as a defensive measure against the desolation of monarchy and the threat posed by the foreign invasion.³⁹

As a matter of fact, the troops gained more and more power day by day and ultimately tried to control the administration by forming the *Panchayats*. The *Panchayats* gave it to be understood that the *Khalsa* was supreme, that the government must obey orders, and that the *Rani*, and even Maharaja Duleep Singh were there merely by the grace of soldiery. From July, 1845 onwards the army made Peshaura Singh an instrument to press their own demands. On the death of Peshaura Singh by Jawahar Singh, the army put him to death and carried on reigning supreme. After the murder of Jawahar Singh, no Sardar or courtier was willing to become the Prime Minister. Rani Jindan who was quite aware of

39 G. S. Nayyar, *op.cit.*, pp.177-93.

her responsibility at this juncture of the career of the kingdom of Lahore persuaded many of her courtiers to become Prime Minister but to no avail. Giani Gian Singh argues that 'they were afraid of the army. The entire business was conducted by the army itself. Anyone disagreeing, was put to death.' Rani Jindan's request was in the long run accepted by Lal Singh who took up the responsibility of this office. With the consent of the Military *Panchayats* and the regent, the work of the functioning of the government was carried on for some period when the Military *Panchayats* expressed their concern over the intention of the British to occupy the territory lying in the South and East of the Sutlej.⁴⁰ The Military *Panchayats* which regards themselves to be the embodiment of the *Sarbat Khalsa* and knew it already that the British were determined for the encirclement of the Punjab felt surcharged with enthusiasm. It was under the order of Military *Panchayats* that the Sikh army was fought and was defeated. The country lying between the Beas and the hills were annexed to the British dominions. The strength of Sikh army was considerably reduced. A British Resident helped the Sikhs in administration. The Treaty of Bhyrowal signed on December 22, 1846 made the British the real rulers of the Punjab. Strict discipline was affected in the army and Military *Panchayats* lost their hold. The Punjab

40 Giani Gian singh, *Tawarikh Guru Khalsa*(part iii), Patiala, 1970, pp.400-439.

finally came into the hands of the British after the Second Anglo-Sikh war. There is hardly any doubt that the army fought desperately with unparalleled boldness but was ultimately defeated for want of an integrated position as a whole.

All this reveals a part of state of affairs faced by the Lahore Darbar after the demise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh; the account of this phase as a whole had been so masterly handled by Principal Kohli.

VIII

This is the brief analysis of Sita Ram Kohli's work. It is considerable in itself. But most of it is editing work, from which it may be stated about him that he was more of an editor than an original writer. But his edited work is itself like an original work of Sikh history. His first and foremost edited work was *Khalsa Darbar Records* and this itself is monumental. It is a measure of great achievement that it stands where he left it and nobody since then has dared to resume it. This experience, however, strengthened the urge in him to explore other possible historical sources of the period. Consequently, almost all the original sources concerning the period of Ranjit Singh and post Ranjit Singh were edited successfully by Sita Ram Kohli. The whole career of Sita Ram Kohli was devoted to research in Sikh history and he continued it till his last breath. His health was reduced due to his protracted disease of asthma but he did not leave his

research. He continued to burn mid-night oil in revealing the precious events of the history of the Sikhs.

In editing the source book he was always very careful and painstaking. His good linguistic equipment stood him in good stead in reading and comparing the texts of his manuscripts. Invariably, he gave footnotes, glossary of technical terms, appendices and introduction throwing light on the manuscript in hand, its historical and literary value and if possible, on the author as well. In this way, he was Known of the responsibilities of an editor. But his constant preoccupation with the editing of newly discovered sources left him little time to pursue the writing of original books. *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* was his only original book in urdu and Punjabi. Though in his last years he wrote another book *Sunset of The Sikh Empire* but unfortunately he could not see it in a published form due to his untimely death.

Thereby, he has laid down the foundation on which the edifice of advanced research may be built by subsequent researchers. He was essentially a pioneer and his work should be assessed as that of a pioneer. It is in this particular sense that he has been often and ought to be called, by way of a tribute, a doyen of Punjab historians of his age. His untiring efforts of commencing to write history bearing upon the period referred above on scientific grounds can never be minimized. A memorial lecture has been instituted in the memory of this great historian since 1965 by the Department of Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala.