



The First Anglo–Sikh War as a Discursive Battlefield: A New Historicist Study of Shah Muhammad’s Jangnama and J.D. Cunningham’s History of the Sikhs

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Abstract

The First Anglo–Sikh War (1845–1846) was a turning point in the history of Punjab. The war reveals both the decline of the Sikh Empire and the eventual consolidation of British colonial rule in Punjab. Beyond the military aspect of the war, it shaped cultural and ideological dialogues that eventually reshaped historical memory. This paper compares two contemporary narratives: Shah Muhammad’s *Jangnama* (1846) and Joseph Davey Cunningham’s *History of the Sikhs* (1849). *Jangnama* is a poetic lament which arouses moral critique and grief over the fall of the Sikh Empire; *History of the Sikhs* is a colonial historiography which justifies British intervention, colonial supremacy, and the annexation of Punjab as historically inevitable. These works have rarely been explored as parallel discourses. By drawing on the insights of the American scholar Stephen Greenblatt, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, and the American literary theorist Louis Montrose, the paper analyses the two narratives as cultural products embedded in a network of power, knowledge, and ideology. It further demonstrates that the First Anglo–Sikh War appears as a challenged space of historical memory, where sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity are constantly renegotiated. Both Shah Muhammad and Cunningham reveal the complex process through which the empire is justified, resisted, and remembered of colonial Punjab even today.

Keywords: Anglo–Sikh War, Colonial Historiography, Cultural Memory, New Historicism, Punjab.

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Introduction

The First Anglo–Sikh War (1845–1846) stands as a decisive moment in the history of Punjab. It was an intense confrontation that conclusively marked the beginning of the end for the once-mighty Sikh Empire and the steady entrenchment of British colonial power in Punjab. Indeed, it was not merely confrontation; rather, it concurrently produced a cultural and ideological dialogue that crucially redesigned and repositioned the place of Punjab in colonial history. The war and the events leading to it have been exceptionally chronicled by two contemporary voices from opposing cultural and ideological spheres: Shah Muhammad, a Punjabi poet and eyewitness to the war, and Joseph Davey Cunningham, a British officer and historian. Shah Muhammad's *Jangnama* (1846), composed in rich poetic verse shortly after the war, firmly captures the emotional resonance, internal dissent, and heroic valour of the Sikh forces from within the cultural milieu of Punjab. Significantly, *Jangnama* holds immense historical importance, directly chronicling events when Punjab and Hindustan were distinct entities, and it consequently offers valuable insights despite its concise nature. Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* (1849) provides a detailed and critical account of the rise and the fall of the Sikh Empire. His role as a participant and observer in the British military campaign reshaped his viewpoint, reflecting a colonial worldview. His narrative tries to justify British intervention, colonial supremacy, and the annexation of Punjab as historically inevitable.

It is pertinent to mention that for the Gurmukhi text, this study relies on the digital file of the edition titled *Qissa Shah Muhammad*, published by Rai Sahib Munshi Gulab Singh and Sons in 1904. For the English translation of selected excerpts from the *Jangnama*, it draws upon P.K. Nijhawan's *The First Punjab War: Shah Mohammed's Jangnamah* (2001).

Both works have been studied in isolation by several scholars. Shah Muhammad's *qissa* has been appreciated for its emotional and cultural significance, whereas Cunningham's

history has been acclaimed for its documentary precision. There has been comparatively little engagement with these works as parallel narratives. Both works function in parallel as discursive structures that reshape the ideological conflicts of Punjab. The present paper aims to address this lacuna through a New Historicist lens. It particularly draws on the insights of the American scholar Stephen Greenblatt, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, and the American literary theorist Louis Montrose, foregrounding the reciprocal interplay between discourse and historical consciousness. It explores the two texts as cultural products which are rooted in networks of knowledge, power, and ideology. Shah Muhammad portrays the decline of the Sikh Empire through poetic lament and moral critique. However, J.D. Cunningham stresses the epistemic authority of colonial historiography. Therefore, by comparing these narratives, the paper demonstrates that the First Anglo–Sikh War performs as a contested space of historical memory. In such a space, sovereignty, legitimacy, and identity are constantly renegotiated.

The paper highlights the cultural negotiations, ideological struggles, and historiographical interventions embedded in these accounts. It has been argued in the paper that these accounts transform the war into a discursive battlefield. Such a discursive war continues to shape the cultural memory and historical imagination of colonial Punjab even today. The research paper explores how colonial and indigenous narratives are complex processes through which the empire is justified, resisted, and remembered of colonial Punjab even today.

Shah Muhammad's Jangnama is not only a chronicle of battles, but also conveys the deep social and spiritual upheavals brought by the downfall, lamenting the defeat of the Sikh soldiers, the erosion of cultural identity, and the pulling of Hindu–Muslim unity apart that had sustained the plural society of Punjab for several centuries. As Shah Muhammad pens:

How in the midst of Musalmaans and Hindus,
Living happily together,

Had a scourge of sorts descended from nowhere?
For, O Shah Mohammed! Never in the Punjab,
Was a third caste ever known to have come. (Stanza 03)

The poet portrays colonial rule as a civilisation rupture, causing deep cultural alienation. His lament transforms qissa into witness, protest, and remembrance. As P.K. Nijhawan observes, “From the point of view of the East India Company, it was a war of imperial expansion; the truth of the matter is that the British had been casting a covetous eye on Punjab, long before the actual war took place” (19). Thus, the major battles such as Mudki, Ferozeshah, Badowal, and Aliwal are rendered in *Jangnama* as both historical events and metaphors of moral and political collapse. Being a work of a professional historian, however, Cunningham’s *History of the Sikhs* reveals the rationalist idiom of colonial historiography. Written by a soldier and administrator with intimate knowledge of the Sikh state, it offers a detailed and analytical narrative shaped by imperial concerns. It critically traces the origin and the rise of Sikhism, and records the history of Punjab in the milieu of the geo-political situation prevailing during the decisive period in the nineteenth century. Cunningham’s account shows his sympathy with the Sikh soldiers and their resistance against the British army, yet his framework justifies British supremacy. Viewed through Louis Montrose’s concept of the “reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (20), Shah Muhammad expresses memory through poetic lament; on the other hand, Cunningham explains the memory through bureaucratic record. Both Shah Muhammad and Cunningham construct the past within competing discursive frameworks. Such a discursive framework reveals history as a contested space in which memory, ideology, and power intersect. Both works provide a layered representation of the war in the history of Punjab.

The beginning of the *Jangnama* frames it within a spiritual cosmology wherein worldly events are ephemeral and subordinate to divine will. Shah Muhammad invokes Allah:

First praised be Allah
 Who fills the nature with His redolence and playfulness;
 Who adorns the fourteen worlds in a thousand ways
 supreme;
 Who invests flowers with countless bewitching hues;
 Who despatches the dead wood, verily, into oblivion;
 Who fashions future paths for us, with His ever-renewing
 grace.
 O Shah Mohammed! Him alone must we fear;
 He makes beggars of kings without a tear. (Stanza 01)

From a New Historicist lens, it is not the absolute truth; rather, Shah Muhammad's point of view is shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. His worldview is influenced by Indo-Islamic traditions, cultural anxieties, and the impact of the colonial conquest. He understands the fall of the Sikh Empire through divine causality. He also casts rulers and empires as transient before destiny. Moreover, allusions to Shaddad, Nimrod, Pharaoh, and Akbar reinforce the impermanence of temporal power, turning history into a spiritual elegy shaped by Islamic fatalism and the qissa tradition. However, Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* exemplifies how colonial knowledge and power shaped the narrative of the colonised. Cunningham's perspective, shaped by imperial ideology, attributes the downfall of the Sikh Empire to several factors, such as weak leadership, factionalism, and British diplomacy. His viewpoint illustrates Greenblatt's concept of the "circulation of social energy" (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 19) as his narrative sympathises with the Sikh bravery, yet ultimately justifies imperial authority under the guise of objective analysis. *History of the Sikhs* contains subversive elements of the Sikh Empire, while it finally reinforces British dominance in Punjab. In the case of *Jangnama*, it critiques betrayal within the Sikh regime through divine justice and fatalism, but its critique is circumscribed by its spiritual paradigm. The qissa limits its revolutionary potential, transforming protest into elegy, by locating blame in destiny rather than material conditions. As Michel Foucault observes, discursive practices "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (49). Both writers frame

the First Anglo–Sikh War within a discursive framework that defines what is considered legitimate history and whose voices are heard. Jangnama arises from a vernacular moral framework and the History of the Sikhs from colonial epistemology. In the context of the war, both narratives reveal discourse as a mechanism of power that constructs historical truth and marginalises alternatives.

Shah Muhammad casts Maharaja Ranjit Singh as a symbol of moral authority and a protector against foreign domination. Punjab prospered for nearly five decades under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The poet underscores that British ambitions were held in check during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's lifetime. By lamenting his absence, therefore, Shah Muhammad frames Ranjit Singh as the figure whose leadership might have altered the outcome of the Anglo–Sikh conflict. Cunningham echoes this view, noting that "Runjeet Singh labored, with more or less of intelligent design, to give unity and coherence to diverse atoms and scattered elements; to mould the increasing Sikh nation into a well-ordered state" (133), and further records that "he was supreme in the hills and plains of the Punjab proper; the mass of his dominion had been acquired" (165). Similarly, Charles Gough and Arthur D. Innes affirm:

Ranjit Singh possessed precisely the necessary qualities. His prowess in battle was beyond question; the vigour and shrewdness of his judgment were conspicuous; his promptitude of action was obvious. And he struck a note to which the heart of the Sikh people vibrated, by proclaiming himself always as the servant of Guru Govind, and acting always in the name of Govind and to the glory of the Khalsa. (29)

Charles Gough and Arthur D. Innes acknowledge Maharaja Ranjit Singh's military expertise, political acumen, and spiritual authority. Both Shah Muhammad and Cunningham acknowledge that Ranjit Singh's death symbolised the vulnerability of the Khalsa. In Jangnama, the poet expresses that

the Sikh soldiers were defeated at the hands of the British army due to the absence of their strong leader:

The battle of Hind and Punjab now raged furiously.
On both sides were ranged huge numbers.
Had the Sarkar been alive today, he would have certainly valued
The reckless bravery the Khalsa showed on the field that day.
.....
O Shah Mohammed! But for one Sarkar
The forces lost the battle they, in fact, had won. (Stanza 92)

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's legacy endures as a symbol of unity and inclusive leadership. His legacy is celebrated across traditions in India. In *A History of the Sikhs, Volume II: 1839–2004*, Khushwant Singh similarly remarks:

In the forty years that he ruled, he hammered warring Sikh factions into one and welded people of diverse loyalties into a nation; and he made the nation strong and prosperous. Ranjit Singh was like a massive banyan tree which cast its shadow over the whole of the Punjab; and like the banyan he had sheltered the land beneath him to such an extent that nothing but weeds could thrive in it. (45)

Thus, both indigenous poetic lament and foreign colonial historiography render Ranjit Singh as the last strong leader of the Sikh Empire. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's leadership epitomised the pinnacle of native rule before colonial supremacy. The nostalgic portrayal, where memory and mourning merge with myth, reflects both admiration and a yearning for lost sovereignty. The present disunity and the envisioned unified past under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh can be aptly critiqued through a New Historicist lens. Here, Stephen Greenblatt's idea becomes pertinent: "actions that appear to be single are disclosed as multiple; the apparently isolated power of the individual genius turns out to be bound up with collective, social energy; a gesture of dissent may be an element in a larger legitimisation process, while an attempt to stabilise the order of

things may turn out to subvert it” (“Resonance and Wonder” 15). Shah Muhammad’s lamentation expresses the collective grief of the native society. His critique of Rani Jindan, while dissenting, paradoxically reinforces patriarchal authority. Cunningham’s *History of the Sikhs*, though framed as objective imperial historiography, betrays contradictions: his admiration for Ranjit Singh and the Sikh valour deftly unsettles the narrative of British superiority he seeks to affirm. In these works, therefore, dissent and affirmation, legitimation and subversion, are entangled within the circulation of social energy.

Both, Shah Muhammad and J.D. Cunningham, offer detailed accounts of the political chaos that followed Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s death, meticulously highlighting the instability during Kharak Singh and Nau Nihal Singh’s brief rule. Both writers constantly agree on key events such as the murder of Chet Singh, the internal power struggles, and the suspicious deaths of Nau Nihal Singh and Udham Singh. Shah Muhammad portrays Kharak Singh as a grief-stricken father destroyed by betrayal and unwaveringly highlights the callousness of Nau Nihal Singh, interpreting the tragic deaths as divine retribution. However, Cunningham depicts Kharak Singh as an ineffectual leader whose poor choices, particularly his alliance with Chet Singh and British agents, ultimately alienated his supporters and led to his downfall, while also suggesting political motivations behind Nau Nihal’s death without asserting divine causality. Additionally, Shah Muhammad emphasises personal emotions and familial dynamics, such as Rani Chand Kaur’s selective grief, whereas Cunningham focuses more on geopolitical manoeuvres, succession disputes, and colonial strategy. Furthermore, both accounts join together on key events such as the deaths of Rani Chand Kaur and Sher Singh, the Sandhawalias’ conspiracies, and the rise of Duleep Singh. *Jangnama*, though it registers as a poetic elegy, boldly defends indigenous memory against imperial rationalism. *History of the Sikhs*, though presented as objective, is likewise a fabricated discourse, formed by colonial ideology. Therefore, both works show that history itself is never impartial but a battlefield where colonial and indigenous voices contest to define meaning.

Moreover, both writers particularly focus on Hira Singh's tyrannical rule, his dependence on his advisor Jalla, and their assassinations by discontented Khalsa forces, subsequently the rise of the Khalsa army as a dominant force that ultimately killed figures like Jawahar Singh. However, both writers show that the young Maharaja Duleep Singh becomes a puppet in the hands of the Khalsa forces amid such chaos. Thus, each account functions not as a crystal-clear document but as a cultural product that forms, and is formed by, the historical perception of its era.

Shah Muhammad depicts Rani Jindan as the key figure behind the English occupation of Punjab. He accuses her of seeking the English support to avenge the death of her brother Jawahar Singh by the Sikh forces. His account, moralistic and emotionally charged, emphasises betrayal and revenge, interpreting her actions as the decisive cause of the Sikh Raj's collapse. Similarly, Rattan Singh Jaggi records, "Shah Muhammad blamed Rani Jindan wholly, citing a now-lost and unverified letter. While clandestine dealings with the British may have involved her, Lal Singh, and Teja Singh. By focusing only on Rani Jindan, Shah Muhammad overlooks the larger imperial ambition driving the British to annex the Lahore Darbar, *suggesting that the war's origins were more complex than his poetic lament admits*" (trans. mine; 15). Khushwant Singh also records a broader pattern of collusion: "Rani Jindan, Raja Lal Singh, the chief minister, and Tej Singh, the commander-in-chief of the Sikh forces, and many of the chieftains, both Sikh and Dogra, were in communication with the British and willing to sell the Punjab provided their lives and jagirs were secured" (43). Shah Muhammad's critique is both political and gendered. His critique reflects the patriarchal anxieties of the nineteenth-century Punjab. In his qissa, he symbolises women as destruction:

From the day one, women have had their way.
 For, they alone account for why Ravana lost his sway.
 The Kauravas and Pandavas too suffered at their hands,
 Full eighteen armies perished in the Kurukshetra sands.

.....

O Shah Mohammed! No wonder then that the queen Jind Kaur
Had the entire country laid waste in its darkest hour. (Stanza 102)

Such invocations of myth, therefore, from Ravana to the Mahabharata, transform political crisis into allegory, recasting imperial defeat as the consequence of female transgression. This blame based on gender reflects a critique of women in society, likely influenced by the qissa literary tradition, which falls into wider patriarchal discourses that blame women for social collapse, so even in lamenting the lost Sikh Empire, Shah Muhammad's Jangnama together maintains the prevailing ideologies. Cunningham, on the other hand, does not show Rani Jindan seeking revenge for her brother's death; instead, he finely criticises her character, stating to the "impure mind of Ranee Jindan" (273), locating her involvement in the intrigues and corruption at the Lahore Darbar. Cunningham further records that after Jawahar Singh's death no one assumed supreme authority (280). In this vacuum, Rani Jindan herself took the hold of Lahore Darbar as a supreme administrative authority, and her assertion of authority as a woman highlights both the assertion of female power and the fragility of the political structure of Punjab during that era. While acknowledging her ambition, Cunningham embeds her within a narrative of dynastic instability and imperial response. A New Historicist reading, thus, views both portrayals as fabricated discourses rather than apparent truths: Shah Muhammad mobilises misogynistic tropes to articulate cultural grief, while Cunningham uses moral judgment to rationalise British authority. In each case, therefore, Rani Jindan becomes a site of contested meaning, revealing the entanglement of gender, politics, and ideology in colonial Punjab even today.

Shah Muhammad and Cunningham agree that the Sikhs initiated the First Anglo-Sikh War, though they frame responsibility differently. Shah Muhammad attributes the outbreak to Rani Jindan, portraying her as conspiring with the British to avenge her brother's murder and urging the Sikh armies into battle. In his account, causality is personalised and gendered, transforming political crises into a moralised tale of

vengeance and betrayal. According to Cunningham, the initiation of the war by the Sikhs was a violation of the treaty signed in 1806 between the British and Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Cunningham also interprets the advance as a tactical error rooted in factional intrigue and reckless aggression, privileging a rationalist and military explanation. Cunningham further emphasises internal rivalries, noting that “the selfish chiefs of the Sikhs had always desired that such a degree of interference should be exercised in the affairs of their country as would guarantee to them the easy enjoyment of their possessions” (281–82). In Cunningham’s view, therefore, leaders such as Maharaja Sher Singh and the Sandhanwalas “had clung to wealth and ease rather than to honour and independence, and thus . . . had been ready to become tributary and to lean for support upon foreigners” (291–92). Cunningham also records that the Sikh perceptions of Major Broadfoot and Sir Charles Napier’s actions amounted to a *de facto* declaration of war, reinforcing their sense of British hostility. Yet, importantly, the English policies over the years did not help maintain peaceful relations. Consequently, the English cannot be completely exonerated from the war, even though they did not want it and knew it would benefit them (294). Read through a Foucauldian lens, therefore, Cunningham’s history exemplifies colonial discourse: by casting the Sikh chiefs as selfish and divided, it constructs native incapacity as a justification for intervention. However, his perspective also admits the British’s strategy of opportunism, which reveals the ambivalence of colonial power, exposing contradictions within his narrative that tries to legitimise the annexation as historically inevitable.

Shah Muhammad and Cunningham’s perspectives diverge in tone and emphasis when they narrate the events leading to and including the Battle of Mudki. Indeed, both acknowledge the bravery of both the Sikh forces and the British army, and both recognise the military prowess of the British forces and the decisive superiority of the English artillery. Shah Muhammad also discloses the mental state of the Sikh soldiers who were petrified by the British forces, and eventually they abandoned the battlefield. While Shah Muhammad laments the sacrifices of

the Sikh soldiers in the Battle of Mudki, Cunningham offers a measured analysis rooted in diplomatic missteps, political strategy, and opportunism among the Sikh chiefs. Cunningham notes, “Lal Singh headed the attack, but, in accordance with his original design, he involved his followers in an engagement, and then left them to fight as their undirected valor might prompt” (301). His colonial worldview legitimises British victory in Mudki by attributing the decline of the Sikh Empire to internal betrayal and poor leadership. A New Historicist viewpoint reveals how claims of neutrality mask imperial power in the construction of the narrative of Cunningham. In the context of the Battle of Ferozeshah, Shah Muhammad condemns Pahara Singh for treachery. But he remains silent on the treachery of Lal Singh and Teja Singh. However, Cunningham directly blames these treacherous Sikh commanders, emphasising native collaboration to validate the British victory in Ferozeshah. Shah Muhammad frames the betrayal through poetic invective:

Pahara Singh was the friend of the Feringhee,
For, he bore enmity to the Singhs.
He left the field to tell the Lat,
What, in fact, was a great secret. (Stanza 75)

Both narratives, nevertheless, agree that the British were placed in jeopardy, with Shah Muhammad likening the Sikh assault to falcons swooping upon prey and Cunningham conceding the army faced “real danger and great perplexity” (303). Yet, significantly, where Shah Muhammad attributes the turning point to Pahara Singh’s duplicity, Cunningham emphasises Teja Singh’s deliberate delay and Lal Singh’s retreat. As supporting evidence, Rattan Singh Jaggi observes, “Teja Singh only entered the battlefield on the second day, after the Sikh retreat had begun, though Shah Muhammad depicts him as engaged from the outset” (trans. mine; 19). Khushwant Singh substantiates the allegation of treachery:

Tej Singh’s guns opened fire. The British artillery had no shot with which to reply. Then, without any reason, Tej Singh’s guns also fell silent, and, a few minutes later,

Tej Singh ordered his troops to retreat. Lord Gough quickly realised that the Sikh commanders had fulfilled their treacherous promise. (49)

Moreover, Shah Muhammad condemns Gulab Singh for his conspiracy to undermine the Sikh Empire due to his personal ambition to consolidate Dogra power. In their respective accounts of the battles of Badowal and Aliwal, Shah Muhammad glorifies the heroic resistance of the Sikh soldiers, while Cunningham attributes the Sikh defeat to strategic errors and poor leadership. Therefore, both narratives acknowledged betrayal as decisive but differ in attribution and framing. While Shah Muhammad focuses on communal mourning, Cunningham justifies imperial authority by holding the treacherous Sikh leaders as culprits in the downfall of the Sikh Empire. Shah Muhammad further glorifies the bravery of Sikh soldiers like Mewa Singh, Makhe Khan, and Sham Singh Attariwala:

Both Mewa Singh and Maghe Khan took them head on.
Three attacks of the Feringhee were broken and beaten
back.
Sham Singh, the honourable Sardar of Atari,
Was resplendent in the battlefield despite his years.
O Shah Mohammed! In that blinding action,
The Singhs spilled the Feringhee blood like squeezing
ripe limes. (Stanza 90)

A significant divergence lies in Shah Muhammad's omission of the exact location of the Battle of Sabraon, while Cunningham specifies it to highlight how the Sikh valour was undermined by flawed leadership. As Cunningham remarks, "The entrenchment likewise showed a fatal want of unity of command and design; and at Subraon, as in the other battles of the campaign, the soldiers did everything and the leaders nothing. Hearts to dare and hands to execute were numerous, but there was no mind to guide and animate the whole" (317–18). Following the battle of Sabraon, the Treaty of Lahore (1846) was signed between the Sikhs and the British, leading to the annexation of significant Sikh territories and allowing the British to wield considerable

influence over Sikh affairs. In Cunningham's view, all the Sikh chiefs, motivated by self-interest, sought British support even against the weakened Sikh army to secure their positions in the Lahore Darbar. He attributes these Sikh chiefs the responsibility for facilitating British influence in the administrative affairs of the Lahore Darbar. However, Cunningham upholds a reverential tone towards Sham Singh Attariwala in his account, writing:

But the ancient Sham Singh remembered his vow; he clothed himself in simple white attire, as one devoted to death, and calling on all around him to fight for the Gooroo, who had promised everlasting bliss to the brave, he repeatedly rallied his shattered ranks, and at last fell a martyr on a heap of his slain countrymen. (319)

Therefore, Cunningham frames Sikh resistance through religious idioms, acknowledging the Sikh spirituality while portraying it as pre-modern, fatalistic valour driven by faith rather than strategy, thus reinforcing the colonial contrast between irrational native passion and rational British command. Ultimately, both authors acknowledge the Sikh bravery but frame betrayal differently. Read together, therefore, their works highlight how historical writing, whether poetic or archival, is never neutral but an ideological struggle over how the war, and its memory, is to be understood.

Furthermore, while Shah Muhammad expresses hope in the enduring strength of the Hindu-Muslim bond as a source of renewal, and further portrays the world as a drama, indicating that the past, present, and future are all predestined according to God's will, interpreting all events as being designed by destiny. However, Cunningham advocates that the British rule over the subcontinent could be maintained through a strong military system, namely "the formation of regiments separately composed of soldiers of different tribes and races" (331), to prevent their unification against the colonial authority and thereby ensure British supremacy. He also added that the social and religious changes in the subcontinent also needed to be

carefully monitored. Sikhism's growth and its distinctiveness from Hinduism and Islam are presented as the ideal catalyst through which significant positive changes could be brought about in Indian society. He further argues that if the Sikh power resurges, people might start to see Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh as their long-awaited saviours. The Sikhs, however, were defeated at the hands of the powerful British army, which established the supremacy of "a third race", consequently altering the mindset and objectives of the people. Moreover, the British introduced new ideas, which created confusion and potentially paved the way for new religious or social movements. Cunningham even speculates that a new prophet or religion might emerge, replacing traditional scriptures and resolving prevalent unrest. He further advocates that the British should guide this change, directing it towards a "religion of truth" and a "government of freedom and progress" (332), thereby indirectly suggesting that Christianity and British governance could serve as the models for this change. In this way, he legitimises the British rule as a progressive mission rather than exploitative in nature, carried out in the name of religion. From a New Historicist viewpoint, therefore, Shah Muhammad's optimistic vision reflects the collective memory and mindset of the native community, envisioning the resurgence of Hindu-Muslim unity and the future of the native community, whereas Cunningham portrays the British governance and Christianity as the epitome of civilisation and progress, so justifying the British rule. Cunningham's emphasis on the British military organisation reveals the divide and rule policy, through which the British consequently exploited differences of caste, religion, ethnicity, region, and language to create mistrust and rivalry among native communities to prolong colonial rule. Thus, these two accounts demonstrate how historical narratives construct power dynamics, with one reinforcing the native community's aspirations for resurgence, while framing its uncertain future as God's will and the other naturalising imperial dominance, simultaneously imagining the better future of the native community under British governance.

To conclude, the juxtaposition of Shah Muhammad's Jangnama and J.D. Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs* offers a rich and multifaceted exploration of the decline of the Sikh Empire, providing divergent perspectives on the crucial episodes of the First Anglo-Sikh War while simultaneously creating dialogic interventions formed by political, ideological and cultural disruptions of a transitional epoch. Through a New Historicist approach, both works underscore the infeasibility of a singular and neutral historical truth. They reveal history as a discursive space where power, identity, and memory are contested through language. Shah Muhammad's elegiac qissa inscribes the downfall of the Sikh Empire through divine will, internal betrayals, leadership failures, the erosion of cultural identity, the fracturing of Hindu-Muslim unity and moral decline. These factors transform lament into cultural resilience and memory. However, Cunningham's colonial historical prose is a meticulous and analytical account. It—shaped by his imperial concerns—precisely highlights the political instability, military strategy, leadership failures, and administrative flaws that became the reasons for the collapse of the Sikh Empire. His perspective simultaneously normalises colonial rule and encodes the ideological underpinnings of colonial historiography. With these disparate narrative modes, however, both writers come together on the matter of internal betrayal as the catastrophic point of historical rupture. Indeed, both writers acknowledged the bravery of the Sikh forces and the British forces, and both recognise the military prowess of the British army. Hence, these works reciprocally demonstrate that the First Anglo-Sikh War was both a physical battle between armies and a battle of ideas and narratives, with literature playing a conspicuous role in shaping historical meanings.

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