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MICRO-HISTORY: THE EVOLUTION OF A NEW GENRE

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In their attempts to come to terms with multi-dimensional power relations and the changes that occur within them over time, Societies as well social groups continue to grapple with the following important questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? This 'we' is pre-eminently a cultural artefact. Many a times these are called questions that concern the identity of a society or a social group. In the process of debates and discussions while answering these questions, societies generate stories or narratives about themselves as well as about others in their immediate or distant environment. Poets and writers of the past and the present, balladeers of the bygone days as well as historians of the modern period, have all fulfilled this deep-seated social need by shaping up suitable and desirable 'mirrors' of the past. Creating stories or narratives in the pre-colonial period took the form of various genres.

In the sixteenth century, when the idea of the "scientific" was on the ascendant and replaced the earlier notions of "truth", a new genre of knowledge about a society's past was invented in Europe. This genre sought to appropriate the prestige of the "scientific model" with all its claims to analytical tools of scientific method, involving notions of evidence, fact, hypothesis, verifiability; therefore objectivity and accumulation of knowledge over time. Since the colonial period, this model of history writing has become a universal model and all the non-European societies have produced their own historians who have sought to create new knowledge and new stories based on facts of evidence. Many of the historians in the west have summarized the experience of their writing practices in numerous books and articles. Generations of historians in the colonial world have learnt their historical methods from E.H. Carr's now classic, *What is History?* (1961).

But the creation of such a coherent body of knowledge of the past through the production of convincing and reliable narratives pre-supposes that these societies/groups have preserved numerous sources of evidence about its daily life. Here we can raise some more questions: Did all societies of the past possess the cultural practices of literacy and institutions that generated as well as preserved such sources? Moreover, what kind of sources are produced and who produces them? Can and must the historians of non-European societies produce the same genres of history writing as practiced by the historians of the West?

But the questions regarding evidence/sources do not end with the paucity or abundance of sources. The most important question that is being debated today by the historians and their critics is: how such sources are "read" i.e. interpreted by the historians? This has been the foremost question in my mind while looking at the Introductions to the

collections of documents produced by J. S. Grewal and B. N. Goswamy—*The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar* (1967) and *The Mughals and the Sikh Rulers and the Vaishnavas of Pindori* (1969).

Since the later half of the 19th century, there are many historians, writing both in Punjabi and English, who have attempted to tell us a continuous and logically coherent story about the Sikh people of the Punjab. Thus emerged the dominant genre of telling the ‘story of the Sikh people’.. Historians of each successive generation have only sought to expand and extend the contours of their story. Professor Grewal has made a considerable contribution to this tradition of history writing. In a revised edition of his original book, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, (Cambridge University Press. 1994), the blurb of the book states that Grewal “brings the history of the Sikhs, from its beginnings in the time of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, right up to the present day. Against the backdrop of the history of the Punjab, the volume surveys the changing pattern of the human settlements in the region until the fifteenth century and the emergence of the Punjabi language as the basis of regional articulation. Subsequent chapters explore the life and beliefs of Guru Nanak, the development of his ideas and institutions under his successors and the growth of his following. The book offers a comprehensive statement on one of the largest and most important communities in India today.” (Blurb of the revised paperback edition).

But what do I mean by paucity of sources? The available sources do provide us information about hundreds of issues, events and aspects of daily life. But they lack depth and detail, and therefore, invariably do not help the historian to answer meta-historical questions. For example: What were the patterns of formation and expansion of the Sikh communities during the first hundred years? Did such expansion take place in a series of successive waves or was it a slow-motion linear movement always on the ascendancy? Or did it trace a trajectory that was more complex and followed a zig-zag path? At what stage of the Sikh movement and in what ways the Jatts began to imbibe the influence of Sikh Gurus? The available sources on the Sikhs seem to permit the writing of what Grewal calls ‘general histories’ only.

Desirous of writing a more objective social history in a larger context of Punjab history , a history which takes into consideration a diversity of forces and factors, Grewal’s evolutionary trajectory as a historian has traced two parallel pathways. His historical practice of “rigorous methodology and critical attitude towards both the sources and the work of earlier historians” has objectively generated the form of a new genre in his writings. This task has been accomplished under the banner of writing “Introductions” to three collections of documents—*The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar*; *The Mughal and Sikh Rulers and the Vaishnavas of Pindori* and; *In the By-Lanes of History: Some Persian Documents from a Punjab Town* (1975). Like all creative writers, a creative historian’s text always ends up doing more than what he thinks he has done. Carefully following his intended course, Grewal’s historical practice has led him to not only make a break with traditional historiography but also making him possible to develop a new approach. The unintended consequences seem to be the result of two parallel and crisscrossing processes in his working life: On the one hand, he has been constantly striving to make the story of Sikh people more comprehensive and, on the other, he has been simultaneously turning to

new sources and “contextualising” them. We have argued in this paper that under this “deceptively limited” phrase called “contextualising”, he has been weaving a complex web of small stories to invoke a social milieu which has been partly lost and partly continues even today. If all these so-called introductions are read together as a series of stories about local cultural formations, a different genre, let us call it “Micro-history”, seems to underpin their significance. The methods used for constructing these webs of stories remind one the metaphor of systematic excavation of a site rather than of surveying the vast field with eyes always fixed on the horizon. Through this methodological practice a new genre of micro-history was being created.

The methods of writing such histories are very different than the methods of writing meta-histories spread over a long period. For micro-history the working methods of a historian are very much akin to the methods of a goldsmith while in fabricating meta-history, the historian imitates, more or less, the working methods of a blacksmith. As a craftsman of micro-history, the historian painstakingly collects grains of ‘gold’ from the ‘dust’ of old documents in order to forge links necessary to create a pattern or a shape..

At the very beginning of his career as a historian, Grewal worked on a collection of Mughal documents acquired by the art historian Dr. B.N. Goswamy. These *madad-i-ma’ash* documents in Persian related to the Jogi establishment at Jakhbar, near Pathankot. The work was published in book form in 1967, under the title *The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar*. In this team work Goswamy closely observed Grewal’s working method:

Months of careful laborious work followed: evening after evening we poured over these documents, trying to make sense of the unfriendly Shikasta script in which most of them were written; decoding words, phrases, usages; taking a sentence apart and then putting it back again; tracking down the tiniest places that figured in them; reconstructing the history of the establishment and its traditions; discussing the context and the importance of these grants ; and deciding about the format in which our book would appear; It was hard, nuts and bolts kind of research work.”
[Indu Banga, ‘J.S. Grewal: The Historian’, in *Five Punjabi Centuries: Polity, Economy, Society and Culture, c.1500-1990* (ed Indu Banga), New Delhi: Manohar, 2000 (reprint), pp.11-41]

Two years after this i.e. in 1969, they published another set of documents under the title: *The Mughal and Sikh rulers and the Vaishnavas of Pindori*. With the help of these documents the authors have told a very complex story of another local cultural formation, the Vaishnava establishment at Pindori, in the Gurdaspur district of the Punjab. Looked from the point of view of micro-history, the clear and adequate title could be—*The Vaishnavas of Pindori*. It seems to me that giving the text a title such as *the Mughal and Sikh Rulers* imposes a meta-history on to the documents. But essentially it is a story of a local cultural formation. The story has been superbly crafted and the visual photographs and the language has been used with the explicit purpose to help the reader to visualise the physicality of the enclosed space so as to enable him to experience what the authors call the “feeling of history” (p.3). "But the relative commonness of the place-name and its location in a secluded corner, seven mile east of Gurdaspur, are misleading, for Pindori is not only built on a picturesque site close to a small but dense and beautiful forest, not far

from the course of the river Beas; it also has one of the most imposing of constructions that house a religious establishment in these parts. Looking a little like a fortress from the outside, with a massive enclosing wall and a towering gate, the establishment is spread over an extensive area and consists of a series of buildings that have each their allotted role in this complex of buildings. The gateway with its two halves made out of enormous single planks of wood strengthened by metallic bosses and strips is topped by beautiful *chhatris*. At some distance from the main gateway which leads to a vast compound is the second gateway from which the three different compounds are approached. To the left is the compound inside which stand the *samādhis* of the former mahants of Pindori, close to that curious and noble monument which tradition refers to as the structure raised over the remains of Bhagwanji by the emperor Jahangir as an act of homage. Designed like a tomb, the structure may in fact be even earlier and may date from the sixteenth century....” (p.2). The reader cannot but feel as if he is looking at a miniature Mughal painting called Pindori. The Basohli style painting of “Bhagwanji and Narayanji” used as the frontispiece of the book, the photographs of the outer gate, the Samadhi of the founder of the Pindori gaddi, the spot where the presiding mahant of the gaddi gives *darshans* to the devotees, the cubical structure draped with a conical *topi* said to have been worn by Bhagwanji, and finally the photograph of the present mahant of the Pindori Gaddi gives the text a strong sense of anthropological field work.

Grewal's book *In the By-Lanes of History: Some Persian Documents from a Punjab Town* published in 1975, produces a micro-history of local land transfers and the complex matrix of family and community ties. This is probably the only text, along with scores of photographs of important buildings, which allows us to imagine how the day-to-day life would have been actually lived on the ground during the medieval period. But in the book this new genre has modestly been labelled by the author as an “Introduction.” More subtle and insightful parts of this micro-history text appear as notes at the end of documents.

Let us return to the introduction of *The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar* as a model text of micro-history. This is how the very opening paragraph of the Introduction reads:

“This tiny village which is the home of Shaiva establishment from which the documents that form the theme of this volume come, bears a very descriptive name: It is called Jakhbar Jogian, “Jakhbar of the jogis.” The first part of the name is explained locally with reference to the small temple of a celebrated and bountiful Jakh (Sanskrit Yaksha), which is topped by an enormous tree, bar, and stands at the eastern gate of the village ; the second part refers to the Nath Jogis around whose monastery or dera the village has apparently grown...Around the village of Jakhbar are several villages which share its comparative obscurity but find frequent mention in the papers belonging to the establishment and possess names suggestive sometimes of historical association.”

In these four lines the authors have already mapped for us the physical and cultural topography of the village. The historical documents discovered are being put to an entirely different use i.e. the anthropology and the historicity of this village and the way it resonates with historical events and personalities. After recording numerous details about

floods, the shifting terrain of river Ravi, *samadhis* of the Jogis, rooms, walls and even the entrance of the dera where the *dwarpal* stands with a musket, British records and the stories regarding the miraculous powers of the Jogis, the authors move on to locate the pre-eminence of the establishment by invoking the very specific cultural history of the entire region.

“This area is unusually,” continue the authors, “rich in religious houses and in the district of Gurdaspur and Kangra, within a radius of not more than twenty-five miles from Pathankot, are as many as three major Vaishnava establishments at Pondari, Damthal and Bathu, the first of these having enormous following even to this day in these parts. The gaddi of Jakhbar has a strangely intimate relationship with all these shrines, in spite of the fact that they are dedicated to the Vaishnava sect which at least at one time stood in direct opposition to the Shaivas, especially the Jogis.”

If the idea was merely to contextualise the Mughal documents this was sufficient information. The authors could have stopped here. But they do not do so and make connections between this remote cultural past to the present situation in the village. Providing an invaluable insight into contemporary politics, the authors make the observation:

One gets the feeling that the *mahants* of Jakhbar has almost a controlling power over the local population. Their spiritual supremacy combined with their humility, if the attitude of the present *mahant* is any indication and the extent of their material possessions must have given them a position of unquestioned eminence in the area, a considerable part of which they undoubtedly enjoy to this day. The tenants and the agricultural labourers, who cultivate the land belonging to the *mahants* stand somewhat naturally in a position of loyalty to the *gaddi*, but the area of their influence is much wider than the neighbourhood of the village...their influence in the area is demonstrated by an event like the general elections in which the support of the *mahants* to a candidate becomes for him a factor of great confidence.

Kindly forgive me for quoting a rather longish paragraph. In one paragraph the authors have underlined the complex relationship between spiritual power, the significance of humility in personal conduct, wealth, and the mode of political influence as it expresses itself at local levels of contemporary politics of Punjab. Here is an excellent demonstration of how to write a micro-history of long-term cultural processes across the historical periods and their contemporary political consequences. Scholars studying the role and influence of numerous *derās* scattered all over Punjab can learn a lot from this. To my knowledge, no one has written a major monograph on the cultural and political influence of the *derās* of Punjab. Once again it points to the well known truth of democratic politics: all politics is local politics.

Today, any conference on Punjab ends up listing a plethora of unanswered questions. In what ways the green revolution has changed the Punjab villages and its environment? What has been the differential impact of these changes on the various groups of Punjabi society? In what ways the network of rural schools has influenced the female education over the years, especially the gender-relations within and outside the domestic space? In

what ways the introduction of radio, telephone, electricity and the arrival of television have affected the people, economically and culturally? You can add many other questions to this list. We can, perhaps create a profile of the Punjab population on the basis of economic statistics. But this will tell us very little about social attitudes and cultural changes, especially about the local cultural formations combining multiplicity of beliefs and customs. The above questions cannot be answered with a degree of precision unless we have detailed studies of micro-histories of the Punjab villages and local regional clusters.

I will end this paper by quoting my own address, which I had delivered at the 37th session of Punjab History Conference (held at Patiala), March 18-20, 2005.

What sort histories ought to be written today in the universities of the Punjab? The popular cliché, ‘think globally, act locally’, provides us the clue. Focusing our attention on the transformation going on in the rural areas as they exist in different cultural milieus can only capture the complexity of Punjab’s cultural life. We need to work out the rules and conventions of composing a new genre of micro-history writing. We can call these village histories.... Students doing M.A. and M.Phil. /Ph.D. programmes in our universities could be allowed to research their monographs on village histories.... Let us acknowledge that these villages are not going to be there forever or even for a long period. Social changes forced through Globalization would metamorphose them into something else....Perhaps, one day, the future generations of the Punjabis would value these monographs as powerful realistic narratives. Almost forty years ago, who would have imagined that Gyani Gurdit Singh’s ਮੇਰਾ ਪਿੰਡ *Mera Pind* (My Village) would be read as a classic of rural life.”

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