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The Punjab Historical Society and the Emergence of Professional Historical Scholarship in Colonial Punjab (1911–1931)

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Abstract

This research paper presents a comprehensive historical analysis of the establishment, intellectual contributions, and organizational evolution of the Punjab Historical Society between 1911 and 1931. The central argument of this study is that the creation of this society represented the formal institutional beginning of modern, professional historical scholarship in colonial Punjab. While older presidencies like Bengal and Bombay had already developed learned societies to explore regional histories, Punjab entered this field later due to its annexation by the British Empire in 1849. Despite this delay, the province quickly developed a vibrant scholarly environment that prioritized archival preservation, primary document research, and critical writing. This study places the Punjab Historical Society within the larger context of nineteenth-century European historiographical developments. In particular, it looks at how the scientific methods of Leopold von Ranke (1824/1981), which emphasized primary archival evidence and rigorous source criticism, influenced historical work in colonial territories. The paper also examines how imperial reforms, including the creation of the Indian Historical Records Commission (1919), helped improve archival care and made public records more accessible to research students. By analyzing official reports, society proceedings, and early journals (Journal of the Panjab Historical Society, 1911–1931), this study shows how the society connected British administrators with local scholars, promoted the printing of primary records, and helped establish history as a professional academic subject. Finally, the paper traces how the original society collapsed under financial and political pressures by 1931, leading directly to the birth of the Punjab University Historical Society in 1932 (Woolner, 1935/1936; Skemp, 1932). This transition successfully shifted historical research from an exclusive club of colonial officers into an active university department that included post-graduate students in the production of historical knowledge.

Keywords: Punjab Historical Society, Colonial Punjab, Historiography, Archival Science, Leopold von Ranke, Punjab University Historical Society

Introduction: The Role of Historical Societies and the Shift in Global Historiography

Historical societies have always played a central role in preserving collective memory, organizing scholarly work, and building historical awareness within a society. When a region decides to set up such institutions, it shows a level of intellectual maturity and a clear commitment to

understanding its past using systematic research methods. By encouraging the preservation of old archives, publishing original historical documents, and demanding careful, critical investigations, these institutions help move history from simple storytelling into a professional academic subject. The creation of such societies in British India was part of a larger global change in how people wrote and understood history during the nineteenth century.

During the nineteenth century, the writing of history underwent a major transformation. It was argued that historical writing should go beyond simple lists of kings and battles to look at broader social, economic, cultural, and philosophical developments. While each of these thinkers had a major impact on the humanities, Leopold von Ranke (1824/1981) occupies a unique place in the history of the discipline. Ranke is widely considered the father of modern professional history because he established it as a distinct academic subject based on the strict study of primary sources and archival documents. Ranke (1824/1981) argued that historians must avoid putting their own modern biases into the past. Instead, they should try to reconstruct historical events "as they actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). To do this, Ranke developed scientific methods for analyzing old texts, encouraging historians to check the authenticity of every document, identify the motives of its author, and compare different accounts of the same event. Because the nineteenth century was an era dominated by rapid scientific progress, there was a strong push to apply scientific accuracy to the arts and humanities. Ranke's methods matched this scientific spirit perfectly. His approach quickly spread across European universities and eventually reached colonial territories, where it fundamentally changed how local histories were gathered, studied, and preserved.

As European empires expanded across the globe, these modern scientific methods of historical research began to influence colonial administrations. In British India, early organizations like the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta (founded 1784) and the Bombay Historical Society led the way in professional historical work. These societies focused on collecting rare manuscripts, documenting archaeological ruins, publishing old records, and encouraging academic cooperation between British officers and Indian scholars. The province of Punjab, which was annexed by the British in 1849, came into contact with these modern colonial reforms much later than Bengal or Bombay. However, because of its strategic position, its strong agricultural economy, and its crucial role in the military, Punjab quickly became one of the most important administrative and cultural centers of the British Empire.

Colonial Governance, Archival Records, and the Investigative Impulse

The late entry of Punjab into the British Empire meant that it initially lagged behind older presidencies in terms of educational institutions and scholarly societies. However, the British administration in Punjab was highly organized. To govern this diverse and complex region, British officers relied heavily on a paper-based administration. The colonial state needed a massive amount of practical information to collect land revenues, settle local disputes, and maintain political control. As a result, British administrators compiled detailed records of local customs, family histories, land ownership, and tribal laws throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

This administrative work accumulated a vast collection of official documents, letters, and reports, which were stored in the central record rooms of the Punjab Secretariat in Lahore. For decades, these records were viewed strictly as secret administrative papers to help officers run the government. There was no public or academic access to these files, and no organized group existed to study them from a purely historical perspective. The focus of early British writers in Punjab was often practical, resulting in gazetteers and administrative reports rather than critical histories. It was only at the start of the twentieth century that both British and local scholars in

Punjab began to realize that these vast official archives held immense historical value and needed to be studied using modern scientific methods.

At the same time, the wider British administration in India was beginning to take a more systematic approach to public archives. The Government of India eventually established the Indian Historical Records Commission in 1919 to serve as an expert advisory body. The primary goal of this commission was to advise the government on how to properly preserve, catalog, and index historical records across the provinces. The commission made specific recommendations on how to handle archival collections to make them useful for serious historical study, setting standards for how documents should be organized, preserved, and printed. This initiative helped change how people viewed government records, shifting their status from secret state files to valuable sources of historical information that should be made available to researchers.

The Simla Meeting and the Birth of the Punjab Historical Society

The formal beginning of professional historical study in Punjab can be traced back to a historic private meeting held in the summer of 1910 in Simla, the summer capital of British India (Woolner, 1935). This meeting took place at Corstorphan's Hotel, where three highly educated and motivated individuals gathered to discuss the state of historical research in the province. The first of these men was Sir John Perronet Thompson, an enlightened officer of the Indian Civil Service who combined his administrative work with a deep love for culture and learning (Thompson, 1911). At the time, Thompson was working as a judicial officer and was busy researching the old streets, monuments, and municipal histories of Shahjahanabad in Delhi. The second person in this group was Dr. Jean Philippe Vogel, a highly respected Dutch archaeologist and Sanskrit scholar who was then serving as the officiating Director-General of Archaeology in India (Vogel, 1911; Woolner, 1935/1936). Vogel, who later held the chair of Sanskrit at the prestigious University of Leyden in the Netherlands, brought a world-class standard of scientific archaeology and epigraphy to the table. The third individual was Dr. Alfred Cooper Woolner, the Registrar and future Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Punjab, who was a passionate supporter of local arts, literature, and educational research (Woolner, 1935).

The meeting of these three men was a fortunate coincidence. Thompson had been searching for specialized archaeological information for his Delhi project. When Vogel learned of Thompson's careful historical work, he was highly impressed and surprised that such a capable scholar was working in isolation in Punjab without a wider network. This realization led the three men to agree that Punjab needed a formal organization to bring together British administrators, university professors, and local scholars. By creating a shared platform, they hoped to encourage collaborative, scientific research into Punjab's long and diverse past. During their meeting at Corstorphan's Hotel, they drafted the official rules and constitution for the Punjab Historical Society (Journal of the Panjab Historical Society, 1911).

To give the new society strong administrative support, the founders decided to invite Sir Edward Douglas Maclagan, a senior British officer with a deep interest in regional history, to serve as its first President (Maclagan, 1911; Woolner, 1935/1936). The executive committee was quickly filled by prominent figures, with Sir Louis Dane, the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, agreeing to become the society's first Patron. Sir John Perronet Thompson took on the role of Vice-President, Dr. Alfred Cooper Woolner became the Secretary, and Rai Bahadur Pandit Hari Kishan Kaul, a respected local civil servant and scholar, was appointed as the Treasurer. This balanced team of high-ranking British administrators and influential Indian intellectuals gave the society the political and academic backing it needed to succeed. The Punjab Historical Society held its inaugural meeting on December 27, 1910, in the Old Senate Hall of the University of the Punjab in Lahore (Woolner, 1935). The event was a major intellectual gathering, attended by the

Lieutenant-Governor and a wide range of leading scholars from across India and abroad. Among the prominent figures present at the launch or associated with the society in its early years were the famous explorer Sir Aurel Stein, the numismatic expert R. B. Whitehead (1914), the missionary historian Dr. J. Hutchison (Hutchison & Vogel, 1933), the Sanskrit scholar Dr. H. D. Griswold, and local intellectuals like Rai Bahadur Pandit Sheo Narain, Sir Shaikh Abdul Qadir, and Sir John Maynard. Over the next twenty years, this diverse group produced a rich body of historical work that earned the society a high reputation among academic institutions throughout British India.

Defining the Scientific Agenda and Rejecting Narrative Romance

At the inaugural meeting of the society, Sir Edward Maclagan delivered a keynote address that set a clear intellectual standard for the organization (Maclagan, 1911). Maclagan made it clear that the society was not created simply as a social club for members to share romantic stories or unverified folklore. He argued that the society did not want long, disorganized accounts of historical facts that led nowhere. Instead, Maclagan demanded a scientific approach to history, asserting that the primary goal of the society must be to introduce researchers to original, primary sources. He called for careful, critical studies to help clarify the disorganized mass of facts that formed the basis of Punjab's regional history.

This scientific agenda was designed to shift historical writing in Punjab away from unverified legends and court poetry toward empirical research. The society set two primary goals: first, to search for and discover new, unpublished sources of historical information about Punjab; and second, to critically analyze the meaning and authenticity of existing records (Journal of the Panjab Historical Society, 1911). The geographical scope of their work was vast, stretching from the ancient ruins of Taxila to the historic Mughal monuments of Lahore and Delhi. By applying modern scientific methods to this rich landscape, the society aimed to produce objective and reliable accounts of the region's past. The primary outlet for this research was the Journal of the Panjab Historical Society, which began publication in 1911, with its first volume physically appearing in 1912 (Journal of the Panjab Historical Society, 1911–1931). Published twice a year, the journal quickly became a highly respected academic publication. It featured peer-reviewed research papers on a wide variety of topics, including ancient Greek influence in Punjab, the administration of the Mughal Empire, and the political dynamics of the Sikh Kingdom of Lahore. The journal stood out because of its strict insistence on documentary evidence, requiring authors to back up every historical claim with references to old coins, inscriptions, official letters, or rare manuscripts.

Archival Openings and the Role of H. L. O. Garrett

The scientific work of the Punjab Historical Society was greatly helped by the efforts of H. L. O. Garrett, who served as the Principal of Government College Lahore and the Keeper of Records for the Punjab Government (Garrett, 1926; Garrett & Chopra, 1935). Garrett undertook the massive task of reorganizing and cataloging the vast collections of official papers kept in the Punjab Secretariat. Before Garrett's work, these historical documents were kept locked away, making it impossible for outside scholars to consult them. By organizing these archives and creating clear indexes, Garrett opened up public access to these valuable papers for the first time. This archival opening was a major turning point for historical research in Punjab. It allowed university students and members of the society to move away from secondary sources and study original, unpublished documents instead. Researchers could now inspect old letters, intelligence files, and revenue records from both the Sikh era and early British administration. This direct access to primary sources resulted in a wave of high-quality research papers for the society's journal, helping to build a more accurate and detailed history of the province.

Despite its early achievements and strong academic reputation, the Punjab Historical Society began to face severe challenges during the 1920s. These difficulties came from several directions, including international crises, shifting political priorities, and a sudden financial disaster. The first disruption was the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. While the war did not immediately stop the society's work, it slowed down its activities significantly. Many key British members, who were also active civil servants, had their attention redirected toward wartime duties and provincial security, leaving little time for historical research. After the war, the society faced a loss of scholarly talent with the creation of the Historical Society of the United Provinces in 1917. Many active researchers and British officers who had been key contributors to the Punjab Historical Society since 1911 were transferred to the United Provinces or chose to join the new organization. This move weakened the intellectual core of the Lahore-based society, making it harder to find high-quality research papers for its publications.

At the same time, the broader political environment in British India was changing rapidly. The introduction of major constitutional reforms, such as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, sparked intense national political debates and protests across the country. In this highly charged political atmosphere, both British and Indian intellectuals became deeply focused on the immediate political future of India. The study of ancient history and colonial archives lost much of its public appeal as people redirected their energy toward active political movements and contemporary governance. The final and most destructive blow to the society was a severe financial crisis. The Punjab Historical Society kept all of its savings and operational funds in the Alliance Bank of Simla. At the start of the 1920s, the bank began to show signs of financial distress. In 1922, the bank moved its central headquarters to Calcutta, but its financial position continued to worsen, and in 1923, the Alliance Bank collapsed and closed its doors. This sudden bank failure wiped out the society's entire treasury. Deprived of its savings, the society could no longer afford the high costs of printing and distributing its biannual research journal. As publication of the journal stopped, the society began to lose its members rapidly, as many corresponding members maintained their subscriptions primarily to receive the journal. This loss of membership fees further worsened the society's financial problems, leaving the organization largely inactive by the end of the decade.

The Resurrection: Transition to Punjab University (1932)

By 1931, the original Punjab Historical Society had reached a point of complete stagnation. During the annual meeting of that year, Justice F. W. Skemp, who was serving as the last President of the society, formally announced its official dissolution (Skemp, 1931). However, this did not mean the end of organized historical research in Lahore. Recognizing the valuable legacy of the original society, several prominent local scholars decided to reconstruct the organization on a more stable foundation by linking it directly to the university. In January 1932, Justice Skemp presided over the first meeting of the newly formed Punjab University Historical Society (Journal of the Panjab University Historical Society, 1932). To ensure a smooth transition, all surviving members of the old society were given automatic membership in the new organization, and all remaining assets and records were formally transferred. To maintain a sense of continuity, the founders of the original 1911 society—including Sir Edward Maclagan, Sir John Perronet Thompson, Dr. Alfred Cooper Woolner, and Raja Hari Kishan Kaul—were kept as honorary members and leaders. This structural change was designed to prevent the financial problems that had ruined the old society. By placing the organization under the direct care of the History Department at the University of the Punjab, the society secured a stable home. Dr. Alfred Cooper Woolner, serving as the Vice-Chancellor of the university, announced a regular annual donation to fund the society's work, ensuring it could host meetings and publish its research without

relying solely on private bank accounts (Woolner, 1935). This institutional support shielded the organization from future financial shocks.

Democratizing the Discipline and Broadening Research

The transition from the independent Punjab Historical Society to the university-managed Punjab University Historical Society brought a major change in how historical research was conducted in the province. The original society had been an exclusive organization dominated by elite British civil servants and wealthy Indian aristocrats. While this structure provided early political influence, it kept the society isolated from the growing student population and younger local scholars. The new Punjab University Historical Society, under the guidance of Professor J. F. Bruce and H. L. O. Garrett, made a conscious effort to open up the discipline (Garrett, 1926). In his Silver Jubilee Address, Dr. Alfred Cooper Woolner noted that the transition was born out of a real crisis of resources and enthusiasm. He recalled that when the journal stopped printing, membership and income fell, and the society was held back by a lack of funds and a general lack of enthusiasm among its members. To solve this, the new society abandoned its exclusive publishing policies and began actively inviting post-graduate students and young lecturers to submit their research papers to the newly launched Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society.

This change had a democratizing effect on historical scholarship in Punjab. Instead of publishing only the work of senior British officers and famous professors, the journal became a platform for local research students to publish their findings. Under the supervision of the university's editorial board, these students learned how to analyze primary documents, write clear research papers, and participate in academic debates. This approach helped build a new generation of local, professional historians whose work was grounded in systematic research methods. The new society also broadened its research scope. While the original society had focused heavily on ancient coins and archaeological surveys, the Punjab University Historical Society began exploring a wider range of topics. Its journal, published twice a year in April and December, featured detailed studies on local economic history, the development of agricultural canals, and regional social changes under British rule (Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society, 1932–1936). By focusing on these practical issues, the society made its work more relevant to the local population, helping its membership grow steadily.

Conclusion and Legacy

The Punjab Historical Society and its successor, the Punjab University Historical Society, played a central role in the development of modern historical scholarship in South Asia. Although Punjab came under British rule much later than Bengal and Bombay, the creation of the society in 1911 marked the formal beginning of professional, scientific historical research in the province. By introducing Leopold von Ranke's (1824/1981) methods of primary source analysis and document criticism, the society established rigorous standards of accuracy that replaced unverified legends and romantic tales. The society's work also showed how learned organizations could serve as important links between colonial institutions and local scholars. While operating within the framework of the British colonial government, the society did vital work in cataloging and preserving Punjab's documentary heritage (Garrett, 1926). Opening the public archives of the Punjab Secretariat transformed secret administrative files into valuable public records, allowing researchers to build a detailed and reliable history of the region.

Finally, the transition to the university in 1932 ensured that this scholarly tradition survived the challenges of the colonial era (Woolner, 1935/1936). By integrating historical research into the university curriculum and involving post-graduate students, the society helped establish history as a professional academic subject. The intellectual foundations laid by these societies between

1911 and 1931 continue to influence how regional history is researched, taught, and understood across Pakistan and the wider South Asian subcontinent today.

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