



Original paper



Anna V. Bochkovskaya

‘Converting to the Thought, Ideals and Principles of the Christian Religion’: Educational Activities of Protestant Missionaries in North-West India (First Half of the 19th century)

Abstract

By the 1830s, Punjab, or the Land of Five Rivers, in the northwest of the South Asian subcontinent, remained out of the reach of Christian missionaries. With the establishment of the Ludhiana Protestant Mission by American Presbyterians in 1834, their engagement with the local population focused on three domains: preaching the Gospel; preparing, translating into local languages, printing, and distributing books, primarily the Bible; and providing education options through specially established schools. All the steps taken by the missionaries were described in detail in their annual reports; the missionaries (J. Lowrie, J. Newton, E. Wherry, and others) provided detailed accounts in their notes and memoirs related to the activities of the Ludhiana mission and other stations in Punjab and in the neighboring regions of North India. Based on these sources, the article analyzes educational aspects of the missionaries’ activities at the initial stage of their work in Punjab: issues of the students’ ethno-religious and social background, the combination of secular and religious subjects in missionary schools, and the attitude of Punjab’s ruler Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) to the educational activities of the first missionaries.

Keywords:

India, Punjab, Christianity, missionary activities, Protestantism, educational activities

For Citation:

Bochkovskaya A.V. ‘Converting to the Thought, Ideals and Principles of the Christian Religion: Educational Activities of Protestant Missionaries in North-West India (First Half of the 19th century)’ // *The Historical Reporter*. 2025. Vol. 53. P. 282–305. DOI: 10.35549/HR.2025.2025.53.007



Northwestern India had remained outside the sphere of activity of Christian missionaries longer than any other region of the Indian subcontinent. They appeared there only in the first third of the 19th century. Most of Punjab (the Land of Five Rivers)¹ — the core of this region — was part of the possessions of the “Lion of Punjab/Lahore” — the powerful Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839; reigned 1799–1839), and the British were able to fully annex it only in 1849. However, part of Punjab — the lands on the southern (left) bank of the Sutlej River — had come under British control as early as 1809, when a treaty had been signed with the Maharaja, under which, in exchange for territorial concessions, the British had promised not to interfere in the affairs of his state.

The British outpost on the left bank became the station in Ludhiana (Lodiana), where the headquarters of the Political Agent for the affairs of Punjab and the North-West frontier was located. This position was held from 1823 to 1840 by Claude Martin Wade

¹ **Punjab** (Persian *panj āb* — “five rivers”) is the region of the Indus and its five major tributaries — Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, Sutlej.

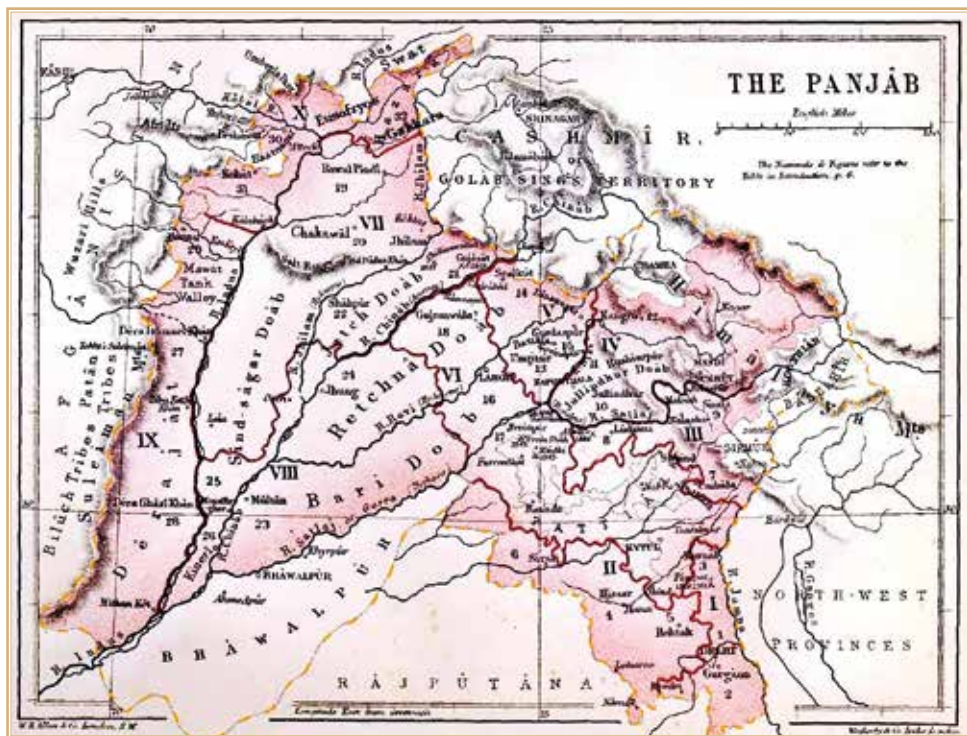
(1794–1861), who established good relations with Ranjit Singh. The British were primarily interested in solving military-strategic and trade issues; moreover, matters concerning the introduction and spread of Christianity in British India remained controversial at the turn of the 18th–19th centuries, and missionary activity was prohibited². However, the East India Company Act 1813 effectively allowed the proselytizing activities of Christian missions, and twenty years later, in 1833, further amendments to it fully opened the way for the evangelization of the natives by representatives of various denominations from both Great Britain and other countries. But by the early 1830s, Northwestern India still remained outside the attention of missionaries.

The first to reach there were American Protestants. Their activity in India began in 1812 in a number of cities on the western and eastern coasts of Hindustan, where the first representatives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions had arrived; their movement toward the Land of Five Rivers began after the adoption of the aforementioned Act of 1833. The activity of American missionaries in South Asia and beyond was driven by the expansion of the educational trend within the Protestant movement of the early 19th century, as well as the rise of the “Second Great Awakening”, or “religious revival”, in the United States at the turn of the 18th–19th centuries, which led to the emergence of a number of Methodist and evangelical communities³.

Presbyterian missionaries John Cameron Lowrie (1808–1900) and William Reed (1802–1834) were the first to receive appointments to India from the American Western Foreign Mis-

² For more details, see Бочковская А.В. “Нести свет и избавлять от тьмы”: полемика по вопросу миссионерства в Индии (Великобритания, 1793–1813) // Христианство и традиционные ценности Южной и Восточной Азии: история и современность. М.: Ключ-С, 2021. С. 62–75.

³ On the religious movement in the United States from the 1790s to the 1840s known as the *Second Great Awakening*, see: Birdsall R.D. The Second Great Awakening and the New England Social Order // Church History, 1970. Vol. 39 (3). P. 345–364.



Punjab in 1880.

Pope G.U. Text-book of Indian History: Geographical Notes, Genealogical Tables, Examination Questions. London: W.H. Allen & Co, 1880. P. vii, 574

sionary Society⁴. In October 1833, they arrived in Calcutta, and a year later, in November 1834, Lowrie reached Punjab. It was the Land of Five Rivers – a “blank spot” on the map of Christian presence in India – that he identified as the target of the mission, which began its work in Ludhiana on the southern bank of the Sutlej⁵.

In 1835, missionaries James Wilson (1802–?) and John Newton (1810–1891) also arrived there. Wilson was soon sent to Allahabad in the neighboring Upper Provinces, where he headed another

⁴ Western Foreign Missionary Society – a branch of the Presbyterian Church in the United States; founded in 1813. John Lowrie’s mission was initially funded by this organization, and since 1837 – by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA.

⁵ On the activities of the Ludhiana Mission, see. *Бочковская А.В. “Восхождение утренней звезды”: американские пресвитериане в Панджабе (первая половина XIX в.) // Христианство и общество в странах Азии: история и современность. М.: Ключ-С, 2019. С. 82–90.*

American missionary station, while Newton continued his work in Ludhiana. After the annexation of Punjab by the British in 1849, he founded a Presbyterian mission in Lahore, the capital of the former domains of Ranjit Singh; in total, John Newton spent 56 years in the Land of Five Rivers.

The religious landscape of the Land of Five Rivers differed from that of other regions of India: according to the 1881 census, just over half of the population — 51.4% — were Muslims, overwhelmingly Sunnis; 40.7% were Hindus; and 7.6% were Sikhs⁶. Followers of Islam dominated in the west and northwest of Punjab; Hindus — in the east, as well as in the northern mountainous regions; Sikhs mostly lived in the central part of the Land of Five Rivers (where Ludhiana was located), but there were also many Muslims and Hindus in that area.

In choosing Punjab — the “stronghold” of the Sikhs — missionaries took into account the prevailing view of Sikhs as people ‘more free from prejudice, from the influence of Brahmins, and from caste, than any other people in India’⁷. Defining them as ‘a distinct people, neither Mohammedans nor Pagans in their religion, though their manner of life differs but little from that of the pagan Hindus’⁸, Lowrie was initially convinced that he should begin his work specifically among the Sikhs, who at that time were unfamiliar with any Christian mission. However, in neither the annual reports on the mission’s work nor in his book *Two Years in Upper India* (1850) did he report much about Sikhs as a “flock”. They did not appear in

⁶ Report on the Census of the Panjáb Taken on the 17th of February 1881. Vol. I. Superintendent of Government Printing, 1883. P. 100–110. Historians of Punjab typically rely on religious statistics from the all-India Census of 1881 — the first to systematically account for religious affiliation. They assume that ‘the religious demographics and broad patterns of religious belief and practice [in Punjab] did not change very much between 1800 and 1881, even if some aspects of religious life did change’. See: Webster J.C.B. *A Social History of Christianity: North-west India since 1800*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018. P. 67.

⁷ Lowrie J.C. *Mission to Northern India* // *The Foreign Missionary Chronicle*. April 1934. P. 201.

⁸ Lowrie J.C. *Two Years in Upper India*. (By John C. Lowrie, one of the secretaries of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church.) New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1850. P. 45.

such a role in other missionary reports published in the following decades either.

The work of the first missionaries in Ludhiana proceeded in three main directions: preaching the Gospel; preparation, translation into local languages, printing, and distribution of books, primarily the Bible; education through specially established schools. All their actions were described in detail in the mission's annual reports; later, Lowrie and Newton gave detailed accounts in their notes and memoirs. These materials form the source base of the present article.

Education for “respectable natives” and orphans

Missionaries regarded educational activity — primarily aimed at the local elites — as an integral part of the evangelization of the population. As John Lowrie noted, through education it was possible to achieve real influence over the minds of people from the ‘influential classes, without awakening their religious prejudices, which were represented as peculiarly strong in provinces so lately brought under British rule.’⁹

At the same time, he pointed out that the close attention missionaries paid to this sphere would be important in establishing contacts with the officials of the East India Company in Northern India as ‘education was common ground for them and ourselves to stand on, until they could become acquainted with our views and plans of proceeding’.¹⁰

This was quite significant, since — let us reiterate — this was the first Protestant mission that planned to carry out activities in Northwestern India, and the Americans had to develop their working forms and methods on the fly in a foreign and unfamiliar region. For them, the “others” or the “foreigners” were not only the Indians/Punjabis, but also the English; in turn, the American missionaries were “foreign” to both.

⁹ Lowrie J.C. *Two Years in Upper India*. Op. cit. P. 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

In Ludhiana, the first school with instruction in English had appeared even before John Lowrie's arrival. It had been organized 'under the auspices and generous support'¹¹ of Claude Martin Wade, and was supervised by Mr. Hodges — a clerk from his staff. Wade considered it important to create conditions for educating the children of the local Sikh elite and exiled Afghan rulers who had settled in Ludhiana and some other cities of Punjab as a result of internal conflicts, as well as during Ranjit Singh's conquest of Peshawar and Kashmir in 1818–1819. Therefore, he actively supported the educational activities of the American missionaries in "his" region and transferred the school to them immediately after Lowrie's arrival in Ludhiana. With his assistance, the mission received a convenient plot of land on the promising outskirts of the rapidly growing Ludhiana, and from 1837 the school continued its work there¹².

Lowrie noted that by the time of his arrival, in 1834, there were 14 to 16 boys in the school, mostly from prominent Afghan and Sikh families¹³; among them were children from the elite on the other side of the Sutlej as well — that is, from the domains of Ranjit Singh¹⁴. Teaching was initially carried out by a young instructor,

¹¹ Ibid. P. 229.

¹² In a letter dated December 1862, John Newton writes to Lowrie: 'You helped us to select a site for the Mission premises, where remains of some old brick kilns were still visible, on a small piece of land, which had been promised in 1834 by a native chief, for the use of the Mission. On his death, soon afterwards, without heirs, this land became subject to the disposal of the British authorities, and it was granted to the Mission by Captain Wade, Political Agent, early in the spring of 1835'. *Wherry E.M.* Our Missions in India 1834–1924. (By Rev. E.M. Wherry, M.A., D.D. Author of the Comprehensive Commentary on the Quran; Islam in India and the Far East; Islam in the Religion of the Turk; The Sinless Prophet of Islam. For Forty-Six Years a Missionary of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., in India.) Boston, Massachusetts: The Stratford Company, 1926. P. 20, footnote.

¹³ *Lowrie J.C.* Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 134.

¹⁴ *Newton J.* Historical Sketch of the Lodianna Mission, From its beginning, in 1834, to the time of its fiftieth anniversary, in 1884 // Historical Sketches of the India Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Known as the Lodianna, the Farrukhabad, and the Kolhapur Missions; From the beginning of the work, in 1834, to the time of its fiftieth Anniversary, in 1884. Allahabad: Allahabad Mission Press, 1886. P. 27.



John Cameron Lowrie (1808-1900),
the first American Presbyterian missionary in India
<https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A8658>

Shahamat Ali, who had acquired some knowledge of the English language at the government college in Delhi¹⁵. According to the 1838 missionary report, during its first year, the Lodiana Mission School (as it became officially known) had 58 pupils, of whom 46 were Punjabis, including 28 from Ludhiana; two were Kashmiris, and the rest came from the areas southeast of Ludhiana¹⁶. More than half —33 students —were Muslims, 14 were Hindus, 5 were Sikhs, and another 6 referred to themselves as Christians¹⁷. The number of students varied depending on the season: it dropped to 40 during the hot months but later rose again with the return of former students and the arrival of new ones. This number —

¹⁵ Lowrie J.C. Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 229.

¹⁶ [First] Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Presented May 1838. New York: Printed for the Board, 1838. P. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid.

about fifty students — remained practically unchanged over the decades. By the late 1840s, the school consistently had 45 boys and young men enrolled¹⁸, and in total, over the course of fifty years, no fewer than three thousand students passed through it¹⁹. However, against the backdrop of Punjab's total population (approximately 17.5 million by the mid-19th century)²⁰, this was just a drop in the ocean.

The predominance of Muslims among the students, especially in the first decades of the school's operation, was due both to the general religious makeup of the region and the following circumstance. The wives of the Ludhiana missionaries had established a private fund from which small monthly stipends were paid to those who wished to enter public service after their studies. These amounts had to be repaid later, which in the vast majority of cases was done, although the students were bound only by moral obligations — by a promise to reimburse the fund. Impoverished Kashmiri Muslims were particularly interested in such a career path for their sons and thus agreed to receive the stipend²¹. Later, Hindus and Sikhs began to follow their example, and the proportion of Muslims among the school's students decreased somewhat, although it remained high.

From the very beginning, the Ludhiana school operated with two divisions: elementary and advanced classes. The curriculum offered by the missionaries was quite extensive. In the elementary classes, students studied Urdu in Latin script, practiced reading using English textbooks and books in Urdu (including, in particular, the New Testament and Aesop's fables)²², writing, elements of grammar, and arithmetic. In the advanced classes,

¹⁸ *Lowrie J.C.* Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 231.

¹⁹ *Newton J.* Historical Sketch... Op. cit. P. 28.

²⁰ The first census of British Punjab (1855) reported a population of 17.6 million. About 3.5 million more lived in princely states still under local rule. See: *Krishan G.* Demography of the Punjab (1849–1947) // *Journal of Punjab Studies*. 2004. Vol. 11 (1). P. 77–79, 86.

²¹ *Wherry E.M.* Our Missions in India... Op. cit. P. 22.

²² Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. New York: Published for the Board, 1843. P. 15.

studies included reading in English, English grammar, geography, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, English history, Indian history, chemistry, political economy, surveying, physical geography, basics of Christianity, mental philosophy, logic, and the Bible; students also wrote translations and compositions²³. Admittedly, this was the ideal plan: in practice, no single class managed to master the entire program, since the student body was constantly changing.

In addition to Ludhiana, educational institutions soon appeared in two other settlements — Saharanpur and Subathu (Sabbathu), located in the Himalayan foothills. Like the missionary school in Ludhiana, they attracted the interest of the most “respectable natives”. In 1837, the school in Saharanpur had 40 students, most of whom attended classes daily, and at the mission in Subathu, 22 girls — daughters of Gurkha sepoy — came every day to be taught reading and sewing by the wife of James Wilson²⁴. Girls were always extremely few in these schools, since families were not interested in their education. Missionaries reported that Hindu parents perceived no benefit in female education, as they saw no positive examples or appropriate schools, and that the general influence of their social customs and their religion was directed not toward the elevation, but toward the degradation of the female sex²⁵. The same applied to wealthy Sikh and especially Muslim families.

Following Saharanpur and Subathu, schools were opened in Ambala and Jalandhar. All of these missionary educational institutions came to be called Anglo-vernacular: instruction was conducted in English as well as in Urdu or Hindi/Hindustani, and in addition, all schools taught Persian as one of the classical languages of India; in some, students also learned Arabic or Sanskrit²⁶.

²³ *Wherry E.M.* Our Missions in India... Op. cit. P. 22–23.

²⁴ [First] Annual Report... Op. cit. P. 9.

²⁵ The Foreign Missionary Chronicle: Containing the Proceedings of the Board of Foreign Missions and of the Board of Domestic Missions of the Presbyterian Church: and a General View of Other Benevolent Operations. January 1840. Vol. VIII. P. 158.

²⁶ *Newton J.* Historical Sketch... Op. cit. P. 28.

Over a period of a decade and a half, the number of students in these schools grew only slightly. By 1850, the statistics for schools under the supervision of the Ludhiana Mission were as follows²⁷:

Ludhiana	High (English) School	81 boys
	Persian School	100 "
	Gurmukhi School	45 "
	Orphan School	19 girls
Saharanpur	English School	33 boys
	Orphan School	6 "
Sabathu	English School	6 "
Ambala	English and Persian School	60 "
Jalandhar	English School	20 "
	Vernacular (Persian) School	60 "
In total		433 students

In addition to the English-language school, orphanages were established in Ludhiana in 1836, overseen by the wives of missionaries who had accompanied their husbands to assist John Lowrie. One housed and educated six boys, while the other was home to five girls. By 1837, the number of orphans had increased due to a severe famine in the neighboring region (the North-Western Provinces) which led to significant mortality. In response, large orphanages were established at various missionary stations, including Fatehgarh and Agra. Although Punjab was not significantly affected by the famine, a number of children who had lost their parents were transferred by magistrates of the North-Western Provinces to those Punjab-based missionaries willing to take them. Thus, in 1838, 30 boys arrived in Saharanpur from Agra and Mathura, and an orphanage was established at the

²⁷ Table presented in the 1850 missionary report.

^{The} Thirteenth Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Presented to the General Assembly in May 1850. New York: Published for the Board, 1850. P. 22.



Claude Martin Wade (1794-1861),
Political Agent for the Affairs of Punjab and the North-West Frontier
in 1832-1840.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/21239ef0-f322-0130-dc6e-58d385a7bbd0>

Saharanpur station. Two years later, the boys from Ludhiana were also relocated there. From 1847 onwards, it became a vocational school, where the boys were taught carpentry and horticulture²⁸. In these orphanages, labor was a mandatory part of the curriculum, and it was expected to be both practically useful and, ideally, profitable²⁹.

²⁸ Newton J. Historical Sketch... Op. cit. P. 34.

²⁹ In the Fatehgarh orphanage, which housed 110 children (50 girls and 60 boys) in 1839, girls, in addition to schoolwork, spun wool and cotton yarn. Boys were initially engaged in weaving white cotton cloth used to sew their clothes, but the school organizers later realized it was cheaper to buy fabric at local markets. Instead, the boys were trained in carpet weaving. For this purpose, several craftsmen from Mirzapur — a carpet weaving center in North India near Allahabad — were brought to Fatehgarh to remain there until the boys had fully mastered the trade. See: *The Foreign Missionary Chronicle: Containing the Proceedings of the Board of Foreign Missions and of the Board of Domestic Missions of the Presbyterian Church: and a General View of Other Benevolent Operations*. January 1840. Vol. VIII. P. 117.

The girls in the Ludhiana orphanage were taught to read and write in Urdu (using the Latin script), as well as to sew and do needlework. On Sundays, they received Bible instruction. They also attended daily services conducted in Hindustani and studied the catechism in the same language. As stated in the 1838 missionary report, ‘the progress of some is quite respectable, but others appear to be too dull to learn’³⁰. The number of female wards gradually increased to 40. Later, in 1871, this orphanage was merged with the Christian Girls Boarding School at Dehra³¹.

John Newton noted that the children in the Ludhiana and Saharanpur orphanages were primarily from Hindu or Muslim families. He assessed the outcomes of missionary work in this way: ‘... they were educated in the faith of Christianity; and a goodly number have become Church members. Some, it is true, have apostatized, and become Mahomedans; and some have become openly wicked, without renouncing the Christian name. Such have brought great disgrace on themselves, and injured the cause of Christ. Still the number, from both institutions, who have filled important places in the Church, or who have, at least, maintained an ordinarily fair Christian character, is sufficient to justify the money and time bestowed on them, — apart from the consideration that to take in children, when deprived of parental care, and to nourish them till they are able to provide for themselves, is an act of charity demanded of us as followers of Christ.’³²

By mentioning “important places in the Church”, Newton referred to the fact that at least six former wards of the Saharanpur orphanage were later ordained and continued their work with the Presbyterians in Punjab, while another ten became catechists or teachers in missionary schools. Moreover, the children of some of these individuals followed in their parents’ footsteps³³. Yet clearly, these numbers cannot be considered impressive, even given the

³⁰ [First] Annual Report... Op. cit. P. 9.

³¹ *Newton J. Historical Sketch...* Op. cit. P. 35.

³² *Newton J. Historical Sketch...* Op. cit. P. 36.

³³ *Ibid.*

very limited total number of orphans in Punjab's missionary institutions. Still less significant were the results of the missionary schools' attempts to promote engagement with Christian ideas.

The secular and the religious in missionary education

When discussing the issue of education for the natives with John Lowrie and his colleagues, British officials familiar with the Punjab region reacted with caution, or even disapproval, toward the integration of religious instruction with secular education. They emphasized that the situation in that part of India and the neighboring Upper Provinces differed significantly from Bengal, where religious schools already attracted a considerable number of young people from the upper castes³⁴. In the Upper Provinces and Punjab, it was believed, the inhabitants were more independent and difficult to govern, and thus, overly assertive religious initiatives could provoke hostility toward the British authorities and incite religious tensions. Nonetheless, after consulting with Claude Martin Wade, the American missionaries attempted to discreetly introduce religious education into their schools³⁵. Lowrie later recalled: 'No professions of our object were ostentatiously made, but on the other hand no concealment of our views was attempted, nor was there any withholding of religious instruction. No alarm was awakened among either Hindus, Mussulmans, or Sikhs; and the school, after a fair trial, was considered a successful effort.'³⁶

³⁴ Lowrie J.C. Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 139.

³⁵ Of his support for the missionaries' efforts, Lowrie wrote: 'I esteemed myself highly fortunate in having to consult with a gentleman of such enlarged and correct views, and of such general zeal for the good of the natives, as were evinced by the Political Agent at Lodiana. With many other men it might have been impracticable for me to have had any connection with the English school at that place, as I could not consent to take the responsible charge of an institution from which our holy religion was to be utterly excluded. After mature reflection, the school was fully placed under my control, and its studies were directed by a settled plan.' Lowrie J.C. Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 139-140.

³⁶ Lowrie J.C. Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 140.

Despite being a missionary school, Ludhiana's institution saw almost no conversions among its students. Nearly fifty years later, John Newton admitted: 'We can hardly count any of them as converts to Christ; though very many have seemed to be *almost* Christians; and no doubt the Christian influence of the school, through its pupils, has been felt far and wide throughout the Punjab. Of some, very high hopes have at times been entertained; but instead of taking the final step into the kingdom, they have gone back; or, as is the case with some, they have continued to linger at the door almost saved, yet almost certain to be lost.'³⁷

Clearly, one contributing factor was the broad curriculum offered in Punjab's missionary schools. The early missionaries soon realized that they could not attract students willing to study solely for the sake of learning the Bible. Therefore, to continue pursuing their religious goals, they also began introducing secular subjects.³⁸

In missionary schools at other Punjab stations, the results of Christianization were similar to those in Ludhiana, though attitudes toward religious instruction varied. In Saharanpur, for instance, missionaries had initially avoided Christian themes. But once the school became well-established, they began each day with Bible readings and prayers, at which point the enrollment virtually disappeared, although it was later fully restored³⁹. Conversely, the same religious ritual in Jalandhar provoked no negative reaction, and the Jalandhar school enjoyed considerable popularity⁴⁰.

The Anglo-vernacular schools came to offer a level of education sufficient for university admission, but only a handful of graduates were actually interested in continuing their studies⁴¹. From the outset, American Presbyterians faced the reality that native students viewed education in missionary schools primarily as a stepping stone to prestigious government employment and financial secu-

³⁷ Newton J. Historical Sketch... Op. cit. P. 28.

³⁸ Report of the Punjab Missionary Conference Held at Lahore In December and January, 1862–63. Lodiana: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1863. P. 47.

³⁹ Newton J. Historical Sketch... Op. cit. P. 28–29.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. P. 30.

rity —nothing more. The Ludhiana Mission report of 1841, when the middle school had around 70 students (only 16 of whom were in the upper grades), stated that the teachers feared ‘this will continue to be the case for many years to come. The only qualifications necessary for a young man, in order to obtain employment, are ability to write a good hand, and to read well enough to copy. The demand for those possessing such qualifications is so great that we cannot expect to retain them in our schools until that demand is in some measure supplied. It is a cause of great discouragement to us to think that we must be at the labour of teaching so many the mere elements of education, while we can retain none long enough to make them scholars. As an illustration of this remark, it may be stated that only two classes have studied any thing in Mathematics higher than Arithmetic, and none have finished the course prescribed, although the school has been in operation nearly seven years, and all the elder scholars have left the school.’⁴²

For the missionaries, this situation was not only a “great discouragement” but also a serious obstacle to their evangelical work. They naturally began to ask themselves: ‘Could it be possible that their lives were to be spent merely to provide *babus* (office clerks) to supply the needs of the Government? Was a service of this sort compatible with their calling as missionaries of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? What possible good could proceed from a merely secular education of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muhammadans, thereby fitting them to become powerful antagonists of the Christian faith?’⁴³

Similar concerns regarding the purely secular education were voiced by John Lowrie, after his return from India: ‘The English language contains, with much that is evil, all that is good. Studying it, thousands of influential native youth will abandon the religion of their fathers, perceiving that it is altogether irreconcilable with the simplest rudiments of correct knowledge. But will they become Christians? Not necessarily. A large part of the in-

⁴² The Foreign Missionary Chronicle: Containing the Proceedings of the Board of Foreign Missions and of the Board of Domestic Missions of the Presbyterian Church: and a General View of Other Benevolent Operations. January 1842. Vol. X. P. 182.

⁴³ *Wherry E.M.* Our Missions in India... Op. cit. P. 23.

fluence that reaches the Hindu mind through the medium of our language has never received a Christian baptism. Many of these English ideas are engaged in demolishing the Hindu temple, but they do not build up the Christian church. Left to the guidance of their own depraved hearts, without any light from heaven to direct their minds, these Hindu English readers will become infidels, believers in no religion at all. Many of the natives, especially in the cities where Europeans reside, and natives whose English education gives them great influence with their countrymen, are now of this character'.⁴⁴

These reflections were shared by the first American missionaries with their more experienced colleagues in Calcutta, particularly with the renowned Scottish missionary Alexander Duff (1806–1878), who strongly supported and promoted English-language education. As a result, despite considerable doubts, the Presbyterians continued their educational work, idealistically viewing it 'as a principal means of converting India's people to the thought, ideals and principles of the Christian religion'.⁴⁵

“Lion of the Punjab”: The interest in the Ludhiana school on the left bank of the Sutlej

The educational activities of the missionaries attracted the attention of the Punjabi elite on both sides of the Sutlej. It is no coincidence that shortly after arriving in the Punjab region, Lowrie received an invitation from Maharaja Ranjit Singh to visit his capital, Lahore. The “Lion of the Punjab” had heard about the school recently established in Ludhiana and wished to learn more about it firsthand. Moreover, he proposed that Lowrie spend half the year in Lahore to educate the young sons of titled Sikh families⁴⁶. This came as no surprise: being, as Lowrie described him, ‘a man of superior mind, and

⁴⁴ Lowrie J.C. Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 269–270.

⁴⁵ Wherry E.M. Our Missions in India... Op. cit. P. 23.

⁴⁶ Lowrie J.C. Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 269–270.

of no ordinary character',⁴⁷ Ranjit Singh showed an active interest in a wide range of activities and regularly employed Europeans in his service. At the time of Lowrie's visit, his court already included three or four Englishmen, a similar number of Frenchmen, and one American⁴⁸.

John Lowrie replied with considerable regret that he had to decline the opportunity to reside in the 'Delhi of the Punjab'⁴⁹ for an extended period. Such a stay would have presented 'a fine prospect of obtaining a standing and influence, which would have been invaluable to a missionary'⁵⁰, but his health — undermined by a bout of malaria — did not allow him to remain in the hot lowland climate for long. John Newton, however, identified a different cause for the failure of the negotiations: 'the missionary principle of teaching the Gospel in connection with literature and science, was unacceptable to the Maharajah'⁵¹.

Upon arriving in Lahore, Lowrie first had several audiences with Ranjit Singh's close advisors — the minister (*fakir*) Nur-ud-din and his brother Aziz-ud-din, the chief *fakir* at the Maharaja's court. They cautiously inquired about Lowrie's missionary activities, focusing especially on the school. Lowrie recalls that Nur-ud-din skillfully raised the topic of the English school, asking how Lowrie, knowing so little of the local language, could teach English to the natives; and then — how he would proceed if the students wanted to study different subjects, and who would decide the matter. Lowrie's answers seemed to satisfy him and prompted the next

⁴⁷ Ibid. P. 192.

⁴⁸ Ibid. P. 162. See also: Демичев К.А. Опыт неуслышанных: круг общения и особенности социального взаимодействия христиан в Панджабе в первой половине XIX в. // Христианство и духовная культура в Южной и Восточной Азии: история и современность. М.: Ключ-С, 2025. С. 35–48.

⁴⁹ Thus Lowrie referred to Lahore, which impressed him with its vast number of ruins of palaces, tombs, mosques, and temples. Their grandeur and abundance reminded him of Delhi — the northern Indian capital, which by the 1830s remained the residence of the Mughal ruler, retaining nominal power, but clearly in decline. See: Lowrie J.C. Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 164.

⁵⁰ Lowrie J.C. Two Years in Upper India... Op. cit. P. 143.

⁵¹ Newton J. Historical Sketch... Op. cit. P. 27.

question, which was the main purpose of the long conversation, though he posed it as if it were of little importance: “If a Government established a school, who should decide on the branches to be taught?” I [Lowrie — A.B.] answered, “The Government, certainly.” This was “very good,” he thought. I took care to add, however, that if a Government should establish a school, it would still be optional with persons proposing to take charge of its instruction, to do so or not, as they might approve or disapprove of its plan, to which he assented. The whole conversation was as abstract as if we had been sitting somewhere in the region of the north star; but its bearing on the points of interest here on the earth, and at Labor, is sufficiently obvious.⁵²

At the conclusion of the audience, Lowrie presented Ranjit Singh with an English-language Bible and a copy of the Pentateuch in Punjabi printed in the Gurmukhi script by the Serampore Mission Press⁵³. Clearly, the meeting left a favorable impression on the Maharaja and his entourage, as evidenced by the lavish gifts with which Lowrie returned to Ludhiana. The value of these gifts was recorded in the mission’s financial ledger under the section for income⁵⁴.

The visit was important for Lowrie not only because of the high-level contacts it afforded but also because he sought to assess literacy levels in Ranjit Singh’s domains with a view to future missionary expansion. He concluded that the situation on the left bank of the Sutlej was little different from that in the British-controlled territories, noting that scarcely one in a hundred of the Maharaja’s subjects could read⁵⁵. Of those who were literate, approximately 80% read only in Persian. These figures most likely referred to

⁵² Lowrie J.C. *Two Years in Upper India...* Op. cit. P. 165.

⁵³ The mission of the Baptist Missionary Society, founded in 1800 in Serampore (Bengal), was the first organization established by Christian missionaries. It contributed significantly to the study of local languages and the translation and publication of the Bible and other religious texts in vernaculars, including Punjabi. The Ludhiana Mission later continued this work and published the Bible and other texts in its own translations.

⁵⁴ Wherry E.M. *Our Missions in India...* Op. cit. P. 17.

⁵⁵ Lowrie J.C. *Two Years in Upper India...* Op. cit. P. 189.

Ranjit Singh's immediate circle, as Persian had been the language of the elite in Punjab since the medieval period. Lowrie also noted that some Sikhs could read Gurmukhi (i.e., Punjabi), and that a few Kashmiris also read Persian. He had no definite information on whether they could read in the Kashmiri language. He observed that very few schools existed in that part of Punjab, and those that did had virtually no appropriate books; the few texts available were unsuitable for instruction. In Muslim schools, senior students were taught to recite the Qur'an in Arabic, without any explanation of its meaning.

On the whole, based on his encounters with residents of the other side of the Sutlej, John Lowrie concluded that the large population of the Punjab was in no way inferior – either physically or intellectually – to any of the Indian peoples he had encountered, and was, in fact, ‘far superior to the great mass of Hindus, being energetic, inquisitive, and sagacious’⁵⁶. This was a source of great potential that missionaries had yet to fully tap, although access to the Maharaja's territories was, at that stage, still closed to them. Nevertheless, Lowrie, like many others, foresaw that ‘the moment Ranjit dies, it is highly probable that all this region of country will be in confusion, and a dozen of chiefs will declare themselves independent. Perhaps such a state of things will then follow as will bring the Panjab under British protection, and make the Indus, instead of the Sutlej, the frontier line.’⁵⁷

This is precisely what transpired: following the death of the “Lion of the Punjab” in 1839, his weak successors failed to maintain control over the left bank of the Sutlej River. After two Anglo-Sikh wars (1845–1846 and 1848–1849), the entire Punjab region was formally annexed by the British. The missionaries immediately expanded their field of activity: as early as November 1849, John Newton, together with his colleague Charles Forman (1821–1894) and six other missionaries, proceeded to Lahore, where they established a new mission station and school. In 1864, a Christian College was

⁵⁶ Ibid. P. 198.

⁵⁷ Ibid. P. 193.

founded in Lahore, which, from 1894 onward, bore the name of its founder Forman⁵⁸. As a result of the rapid expansion of missionary efforts, within just six to seven years a network of mission outposts emerged across the plains of the North-Western and Northern India, along the Himalayan foothills. This network included American and Scottish Presbyterian missions, as well as the Methodist Episcopal Church, with the Ludhiana Mission remaining the central hub of these activities.

However, Presbyterian educational efforts in the Punjab and neighboring regions remained almost exclusively directed toward the native elite. Although the missionaries did establish a limited number of elementary schools for the poor, where instruction was conducted in local languages, they saw little value in such endeavors. In most cases, pupils left school shortly after enrollment and did not return. A report from 1840, for instance, noted that as soon as the students reached the age when they could carry a small bundle on their heads or scare birds from the grain fields, their parents began to demand their labor⁵⁹. Among the lower social strata — more precisely, the lower castes — the missionaries began working intensively only in the 1870s and 1880s. This shift gradually led to a more visible, though still far from widespread, dissemination of Christian ideas in Punjab. In the earlier period, from the 1830s through the 1850s, their work had produced only limited, individual results: according to the 1881 census, Christians accounted for just 0.1% of the population of Punjab — approximately 20,000 individuals — while the total population of the region at the time was around 21 million⁶⁰.

Overall, the principal outcome of the missionary schools in Punjab was not an increase in the number of converts to Christianity. Rather, as John Newton observed, these institutions raised

⁵⁸ Forman Christian College, still under the management of the Presbyterian Church, remains one of the most prestigious liberal arts universities in modern Pakistan.

⁵⁹ The Foreign Missionary Chronicle: Containing the Proceedings of the Board of Foreign Missions and of the Board of Domestic Missions of the Presbyterian Church: and a General View of Other Benevolent Operations. January 1840. Vol. VIII. P. 158.

⁶⁰ *Krishan G. Op. cit.* P. 79.

up ‘thousands of influential men who entertain a life-long-respect, and even friendship, for the missionaries; and most of them look favorably on Christianity, as a religion which, if not exclusively a religion from God, is at least better than the other religions of the country.’⁶¹ Newton’s claim regarding the superiority of Christianity was likely an overstatement. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that the early missionary schools contributed to the development of a positive attitude among the Punjabi elite toward religious outsiders – those considered “foreign”, “other”, or just “different”.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



References

1. Bochkovskaya A.V. “The true cure of darkness, is the introduction of light”: Debates on the missionary activities in India (Great Britain, 1793–1813), in: *Christian engagement with traditional values of South and East Asia: History and modernity*. Moscow: Klyuch-S; 2021. P. 62–75. DOI: [https://doi:10.48647/f0684-9368-9835-a](https://doi.org/10.48647/f0684-9368-9835-a) (in Russ.).
2. Bochkovskaya A.V. “Rise of the morning star”: American Presbyterians in Punjab (first half of the 19th century), in: *Christianity and society in Asia: History and modernity*. Moscow: Klyuch-S; 2019. P. 82–90 (in Russ.).
3. Demichev K.A. Experience of the unheard: Circle of contacts and features of social interaction of Christians in Punjab in the first half of the 19th century, in: *Christianity and spiritual culture in South and East Asia: History and modernity*. Moscow: Klyuch-S;

⁶¹ Newton J. Historical Sketch... Op. cit. P. 31.

2025. P. 35–48. DOI: <https://doi:10.56700/t9526-9709-3336-o> (in Russ.).
4. Birdsall R.D. The Second Great awakening and the New England social order. *Church History*. 1970;39(3):345–364.
 5. [First] *Annual report of the Board of foreign missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (May 1838). New York: Printed for the Board; William S. Martien, printer; 1838. 36 p.
 6. Krishan G. Demography of the Punjab (1849–1947). *Journal of Punjab Studies*. 2004;11(1):77–89.
 7. Lowrie J.C. *Two years in Upper India* (by John C. Lowrie, one of the secretaries of the Board of foreign missions of the Presbyterian Church). New York: Robert Carter and Brothers; 1850. 276 p.
 8. Lowrie J.C. Mission to Northern India, in: *The Foreign Missionary Chronicle*. April 1934.
 9. Newton J. Historical Sketch of the Lodianna mission, from its beginning, in 1834, to the time of its fiftieth Anniversary, in 1884, in: *Historical sketches of the India missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, known as the Lodianna, the Farrukhabad, and the Kolhapur missions; From the beginning of the work, in 1834, to the time of its fiftieth Anniversary, in 1884*. Allahabad: Allahabad Mission Press; 1886. 186 p.
 10. *Report on the census of the Panjáb taken on the 17th of February 1881* (Preface, contrib. by D.C.J. Ibbetson). Vol. I. Text and Appendices C and D. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing; 1883.
 11. *Report of the Punjab missionary conference held at Lahore in December and January, 1862–63*. Lodianna: American Presbyterian Mission Press; 1863. 398 p.
 12. *Sixth Annual report of the Board of foreign missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*. New York: Published for the Board; 1843. 41 p.
 13. *The Foreign Missionary chronicle: Containing the Proceedings of the Board of foreign missions and of the Board of domestic missions of the Presbyterian Church: And a general view of other benevolent operations*. Vol. VIII (January). New York – Philadelphia: Robert Carter; William S. Martien; 1840.

14. *The Foreign Missionary chronicle: Containing the Proceedings of the Board of foreign missions and of the Board of domestic missions of the Presbyterian Church: And a general view of other benevolent operations.* Vol. X (January). New York – Philadelphia: Robert Carter; William S. Martien; 1842.
15. *The Thirteenth Annual report of the Board of foreign missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Presented to the General assembly in May 1850.* New York: Published for the Board; 1850.
16. Webster John C.B. *A social history of Christianity: North-west India since 1800.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2018. 428 p.
17. Wherry E.M. *Our Missions in India 1834–1924.* Boston (Massachusetts): The Stratford Company; 1926. 356 p.



Anna V. Bochkovskaya

C.Sc. (History), Associate Professor, Department of South Asian History,
Institute of Asian and African Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Moscow, Russian Federation.

email: abochkovskaya@iaas.msu.ru

SPIN-код: 2600-2048

ORCID: 0000-0001-6666-4246

AuthorID: 573061

Received
20.03.2025

Revised
21.05.2025

Accepted
15.06.2025