

CIVIL AND MILITARY RECRUITMENT OF EUROPEAN AND NON-SIKH OFFICERS IN THE KINGDOM OF MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH: AN ANALYSIS

Shah Noor

Abstract

The Kingdom of Ranjit Singh was officially called Sarkar-e-Khalsa. It covered almost all of undivided Punjab as well as Kashmir, Gilgit, present day Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and Multan. His forty year rule saw communal harmony and peace. This study focuses on the multiethnic and multi-religious policies adopted in bureaucratic recruitment. Not only were the upper administrative echelons filled without any discrimination among Sikh, Muslim and Hindu inhabitants, European civil and military personnel were also appointed on key positions. Ranjit Singh's realm was under constant threat from British Indian territories, not to mention a hostile Afghanistan on the West. Therefore, domestic tranquility was an existential necessity. It could only be achieved if all communities were seen rather equally.

Key Words: Ranjit Singh, Khalsa army, multi-religious recruitment, Europeans, Afghans.

The rise of the Sikhs coincided with the total decline of the Mughal Empire and the ravaging of Indo-Gangetic plan by the hordes of Nadir Shah and Ahmed Shah Abdali. Despite several victories, Ahmed Shah Abdali failed to keep north-western India under his thumb for a long time, which paved the way for the Sikhs to establish their rule in that region. The Mughal Empire had been terminally ill after the demise of Emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir in 1707. Powerful chieftains had declared themselves independent in their domains. However, these principalities collapsed in the face of British advance. The circumstances were very challenging for Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Nevertheless, his strategic prowess aided him to overcome adversity.

The geopolitical scenario augured nothing but trouble. The nascent kingdom would sink in the quicksand of regional power game if it merely

replicated vainglorious despotism. A modernized and administratively efficient kingdom was the only assurance against oblivion.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh also known as *Sher-e-Punjab* (Lion of Punjab) was born in 1780 in Gujranwala and died in June 1839 in Lahore. According to some, Ranjit Singh did not possess a satisfactory moral character.¹ He was not an attractive, handsome or good-looking man, smallpox blinded his left eye but his wit was sharp. W.G. Osborne was a military secretary of Lord Auckland who wrote that “he is mild and merciful as a ruler but faithless and deceitful; perfectly uneducated, unable even to read or write, he has by his own natural and unassisted intellect raised himself from the situation of a private individual to that of a despotic monarch over a turbulent and powerful nation. By sheer force of mind, personal energy and courage, he has established his throne on a firmer foundation than that of any other eastern sovereign.”²

Majid Sheikh wrote that “After almost 777 years of foreign rule, starting from the Afghan invader Mahmud of Ghazni ousting the Hindu Shahi rulers until the time Maharajah Ranjit Singh entered the gates of Lahore, Punjabis had not ruled their own land.”³ The establishment of Punjab Kingdom occurred when Lahore was annexed by Ranjit Singh in 1799. Amritsar, the main commercial trading hub and holy city of Sikh community, was captured by him in 1802. Thereafter he gradually conquered other neighbouring regions of Lahore.

The East India Company gradually turned from a trading company to a colonial power in India. The Company could give a tough time to Sikh forces but it never tried to annex Punjab during the life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

European officers in Maharaja Court

Ranjit’s Court essentially consisted of adventurers who controlled the administrative machinery of the state.⁴ After the Napoleonic wars, several

¹ Gulshan Lal Chopra, *The Punjab as a Sovereign State: 1799-1839*, Ph. D Thesis (Lahore: Uttar Chand Kapur and Sons, 1928), 198.

² W.G. Osborne, *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Singh* (London: Henry Colburn, 1840), 93-94.

³ Fakir Syed Aijazuddin, *The Resourceful Fakirs*, reviewed by Majid Sheikh, *Dawn*, 13 April 2014.

⁴ Chopra, *The Punjab as a Sovereign State*, 189.

French soldiers decided to try their fortune in the East. They arrived at Lahore, the capital of Sikh Kingdom via Iran and Afghanistan to look for better opportunities. Initially Maharaja thought of them as secret agents of the British Empire but after comprehensive counter-checks he inducted them in the Khalsa army. He was very impressed by their skills and performance. He appointed Messrs. Allard, Ventura, Avitabile, Court and Van Cortlandt at the rank of General and other European adventurers were also given honorable ranks such as colonel, captain, battalion commander etc. in the Sikh forces. Not only as military officials but some were appointed provincial governors too. Josiah Harlan was a medical practitioner and hailed from Philadelphia, USA. He served under East India Company and Dost Muhammad of Afghanistan. Ranjit Singh appointed him as governor of Gujrat in 1832 but after some time he joined the Afghan service. Also, there were foreign physicians in the Sikh Darbar (Court). Dr. Benet served in the capacity of Surgeon-General in the Sikh army. Dr. Honigberger was offered a high administrative post but he preferred the supervision of ordnance factories. His salary was raised to three thousand rupees a month.

The foreigners were not allowed to interfere in the political and judicial affairs of the State. Faqir Waheed Uddin, the great-grandson of Faqir Azizuddin wrote that "Maharaja used his foreign officers mostly for the purposes of training. Although he gave them responsible positions, he never put them in supreme command of any major expedition."⁵

Initially, the Maharaja recruited only French mercenaries but later on American, Anglo-Indian, Anglo-Dutch, Armenian, Belgian, German, Georgian, Greek, Italian, Irish, Scottish and Spanish personnel etc. were also given assignments in the Court of Lahore. Later, some foreign officers published accounts about their visits and experiences. For example the written accounts of Alexander Gardner, Dr. John M. Honigberger, Henry Steinbach, Josiah Harlan and many other have been a useful addition to the history of Lahore Durbar. For instance, General Gordon described Maharaja's non-discriminatory and pluralistic vision in these words, "King and political head of the Punjab, as well as chief of the Khalsa, he aimed at

⁵ Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 122.

reconciling the varied divisions of race and creed among his subjects by employing all in his service.”⁶

Before the recruitment of European officers, an oath was administered to have an explicit acknowledgment that they would uphold and defend all rules and regulations. For example they were forbidden to shave their beards. Also, they had to abstain from the consumption of beef and smoking tobacco. Bobby Singh Bansal wrote that “from their positions as military advisers these Firanghis (foreigners) became influential courtiers and bureaucrats, gained access to higher civil duties and were elevated to the highest ranks of the administration.”⁷ In a very short time, the Sikh forces had become highly modernized due to European trainers. They received handsome salaries, attractive concessions and huge Jagirs (landed property) etc. Apart from one or two cases foreign officers did not conspire against the Sikh rule during Maharaja’s régime.

In various military campaigns Khalsa army fought impressively especially against Afghan and Pashtun warriors. The first of the consecutive triumphs the Sikhs gained against the Durrani Empire of Afghanistan in the battle of Attock, which took place in July 1813. Then, in 1818 Muzaffar Khan Sadozai (Afghan governor of Multan) was killed in the battle of Multan. As a result, Afghan rule crumbled in the Punjab and Multan became the new province of the Khalsa State. Kashmir also became a province of the Sikh Empire after the battle of Shopian in 1819, where the Sikh army trounced the forces of Afghan governor Jabbar Khan.

Various rulers desired to build up friendly relations with the Sikh State. In 1826, Prince Kamran, the ruler of Bokhara, Balkh and Herat, and the Nizam of Hyderabad sent their envoys with lots of presents to the Sikh monarch. Well bred horses arrived at the Court of Lahore from Balochistan in 1829. Well aware of the value of Anglo-Sikh relations, the King of England and Maharaja of Punjab exchanged precious gifts with each other. General Allard faced some difficulty to get a leave. He wanted to visit his native country. He was allowed to leave in the end. When Allard returned to Lahore, he brought a letter of goodwill along with presents from the King of

⁶ General Sir John J. H. Gordon, *The Sikhs* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1904), 114.

⁷ Bobby Singh Bansal, *The Lion’s Firanghis: Europeans at the Court of Lahore* (London: Coronet House, 2010), vii.

France to be presented to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The official language of the court of Lahore was Persian. When General Allard saw his master after his return, he recited the following Persian verses⁸ in praise of him:

فلک در خدمت او بنده بادا	الهي باد شاهم زنده بادا
دهم جان گردن از حُکمش بتابم	بدر گاهش رحم اعزاز يابم
بود تابوت در غنچه انارم	بود لاهور گر ميرم مزارم

- God, may my King live forever
- The heavens become his slave, serving him
- I found mercy and honor from this court
- Should I disobey him, I should die
- And if I die, I should be buried in Lahore
- And my coffin should be amidst beads of the pomegranate

According to Gen. Allard's will his body was buried with military honors in *Kuri Bagh* (Daughter's Garden) Anarkali, Lahore in 1839.

Annexation of Peshawar

Syed Ahmed Barelvi, a Muslim activist declared Jihad against the Sikhs in 1826. Syed Ahmed was an ex-member of the cavalry division of Amir Khan Rohela. Then, he became a religious leader and set out for pilgrimage in 1822 to Makkah and Madinah. After a four-year journey, he began a campaign against Sikhs in Delhi (British India) and wrote a book named *Taqwiat-i-Islam*. He assembled an army known as *Ghazis*. He wanted to attack the Sikh Kingdom from the west. So he marched with thousands of his followers across the Rajputana region and entered the territory of Sindh. Then he went to Qandahar and Kabul, and, finally, from there he arrived at Yousufzai territory. In this long march the *Ghazis* were supported by the local population. Several battles fought with the Sikhs but the *Ghazis* were ultimately defeated. Syed Ahmed declared himself as the sovereign of Peshawar and issued coins in his own name. However, his rule was short lined and he and his accomplice Shah Ismail lost their lives at the battle of Balakot by the hands of the Sikh forces in 1831.

⁸ Syed Muhammad Latif, *History of the Punjab: From the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Calcutta: Calcutta Central Press Co. Ltd, 1889), 475.

After this battle the power of Maharaja reached its climax. Undeniably, the fear of Muslim invasion was the greatest threat for the first and only Sikh Kingdom, which Ranjit Singh and his dexterous officers met with success. The majority of the population of North Western region consisted of Muslims. Above all the surrounding areas of that region were directly connected to the Muslim world too. According to Sohan Singh Seetal “the English rulers were not sincerely friendly towards the Sikh Raj. He (Syed Ahmed Bareilvi) had raised funds and recruited his fanatical Ghazis in the British territory.”⁹ One can imagine, only one single major victory could increase the popularity of *Ghazis* amongst Muslim population but fortunately or unfortunately they had failed to get their objectives on account of several reasons.

However in May 1834, the eight hundred years of Muslim rule was ended as a result of the battle of Peshawar. The Khalsa army under the command of General Hari Singh Nalwa got the massive victory against the Afghan ruler Sultan Mohammad Khan. Maharaja finally annexed Peshawar to his kingdom thereafter. In the battle of Jamrud in 1837, Hari Singh Nalwa was killed, it was the great loss of Sikhs, halting the westward expansion of the Sikhs, but they had successfully defeated the Afghan military in this combat.¹⁰

According to Captain W. Murray, “the accomplishments of reading and writing are uncommon amongst the Sikhs, and are chiefly confined to Hindu and Muslim *Mootsuddees*, or clerks, who acquire a sufficient knowledge of the Persian language, to enable them to keep the accounts, and to conduct the epistolary correspondence of the chiefs.”¹¹

Hindu courtiers

On the other side, Ranjit Singh also chose for his service capable Hindu officers who were divided into several groups like Brahmins, Gurkhas, Khattris, Purbias and Rajputs etc. The talented Dogra Rajput personnel like

⁹ Sohan Singh Seetal, *The Sikh Empire and Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 2nd ed. (Ludhiana: Lahore Books, 2013), 123.

¹⁰ Tony Jacques, *Dictionary of Battles and Sieges*, Vol.2 (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 485.

¹¹ Captain W. Murray, “Appendix: On the Manners, Rules, and Customs of the Sikhs,” in Henry T. Prinsep, *Origin of the Sikh Power in the Punjab and Political Life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh; An Account of the Present Condition, Religion, Laws, and Customs of the Sikhs* (Calcutta: G.H. Huttman, 1834), 191.

Dhyan Singh, Gulab Singh, Suchet Singh and Hira Singh etc. were in the Sikh Durbar too. The title of Raja was given by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to all Dogra brothers. Dhyan Singh was the Prime Minister of the Khalsa State while others also possessed high ranking positions. Hira Singh, the son of Dhyan Singh was given the title of *Farzand-e-Khas* (special son) by Ranjit Singh. The group of Dogra Rajput with its ability was the most powerful group in the Sikh Durbar among all Maharaja's courtiers. According to Sir John Gordon "poor, but good family, they (Dogra Rajput) entered the Sikh service as troopers; handsome and well-mannered they soon attracted notice by their ability, and rapidly rose to high positions, where their influence in public affairs became paramount; but not being Sikhs, they were looked on with great jealousy by the other Sardars."¹²

The induction of the Gurkhas in the Sikh army began in 1806. Arjan Singh Thapa and Bhupal Singh were the sons of Amar Singh Thapa, a Gurkha general. Maharaja gave the rank of captain to Arjan Singh who recruited Gurkhas for Khalsa army. Later, Gurkhas became the first choice for the British Indian army in 1860, thus we can understand the importance of these hill people.

Diwan Bhawani Das, Diwan Ganga Ram, Diwan Dina Nath and Misr Beli Ram headed finance and revenue system of Sikh State. Misr Beli Ram, the second son of Misr Diwan Chand was also the head of *Toshakhana* (treasure-house). Diwan Bhawani Das was a skillful finance expert of the Court, who was the son of Diwan Thakur Das who served as the finance minister of Ahmed Shah Abdali. He had served also under Shah Zaman, Shah Mahmud and Shah Shuja before joining the service of Ranjit Singh in 1808. The twelve *Daftars* or departments were made by him to manage military and civil accounts. Diwan Devi Das was the accountant general. Diwan Dina Nath was an admirable administrator who had worked under Ranjit Singh and all his successors till the annexation of Punjab to the British Raj in 1849. He then joined the service of the British East India Company.

Misar Diwan Chand was the general in the Sikh army. He played a pivotal role in the successful campaign of Multan and Kashmir. Diwan Dhanpat Rai served under Sikh government in various positions. Notably, he was the

¹² General Gordon, *The Sikhs*, 120-121.

commander of the army of Prince Kharak Singh. A Kashmiri Brahmin Pandit Lal Kaul was in the Afghan service, and afterwards he joined the Sikh service and participated in the invasion of Kashmir. He also worked as the governor of Multan.

Diwan Sawan Mall was the governor of Multan province during 1821 to 1844. He initially worked as a clerk then he was appointed as *Naib Tahsildar* at Wazirabad. He knew Arabic and Persian languages, and because of good administrative skill he quickly rose to governorship. The agriculture, trade and industry of Multan thrived under the administration of Sawan Mall. Law and order situation improved and Multan became known as *Dar al-Aman* (peaceful place). Professor Humaira Arif Dasti wrote that “Diwan Sawan Mal effected great improvements during his long reign (1821-1844). A productive revenue system was introduced and extensive measures were taken for the improvement of agriculture; peace and order was restored and equal justice was provided for all classes.”¹³

There were over one-hundred Hindu officials in the Sikh service. A list of one-hundred and fifty-two Hindu courtiers and officials in the Sikh Darbar is available as an appendix in the Ph.D. Thesis of Rajinder Kaur.¹⁴ “In fact, by dint of hard work, their caliber, sincerity, loyalty, their military services, their participation in various campaigns and the contribution which they made in the battlefield and their contribution in improving the civil administration they won over the hearts of everyone at the Lahore Darbar.”¹⁵

Muslim officials

Moreover, not on a large number but to some extent the Muslim officials were also hired in his court like the famous three Faqir brothers; Aziz Uddin, Noor Uddin and Imam Uddin. Initially, they began their careers as Hakim (a person who uses traditional medicines for treatment). Maharaja always consulted with Faqir Aziz Uddin before reaching any important

¹³ Humaira Arif Dasti and Abida Kausar, “Multan at the Time of Colonial Annexation”, *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society* 26, no.2 (December 2013): 3.

¹⁴ Rajinder Kaur, “Appendix-I: List of the Hindu Courtiers and Officials in the Lahore Darbar” *Role of Select Courtiers and Officials at Lahore Darbar (1799-1849)*, PhD Thesis (Patiala: Punjab University, 2011), 260, available from <http://apnaorg.com/research-papers/english/paper-14/page-260.shtml>, (accessed August 13, 2016).

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 311-12.

decision. According Honigberger, “he (Faqir Azizuddin), the prime minister Dhyan Singh and Diwan Dina Nath, minister of finance, constituted the triad of which the privy-council of the king was composed.”¹⁶ He was responsible for foreign affairs and also worked as medical advisor. “Aziz Uddin was occasionally employed on military service and whenever it was necessary to send a special embassy, as to Lord William Bentinck in 1831 and to Amir Dost Muhammad in 1835, the Faqir was always selected and was always equal to the emergency.”¹⁷ Faqir Shah Din son of Faqir Aziz Uddin was the competent diplomat and also worked as Court’s advisor on commercial affairs such as Shawl trade. He was favourite of both Sikh and British. His brother Faqir Chirag Din succeeded him in 1842.

Faqir Noor Uddin did multifarious duties such as a home minister, royal physician, almoner, in-charge of royal garden and other places etc. The third Faqir, Imam Uddin was appointed on military and administrative positions.

Likewise, General Ghaus Muhammad Khan and Shiekh Ilahi Bakhsh were the important part of Khalsa army too. Ilahi Bakhsh was the most prominent artillerist. In 1831 on the occasion of meeting between Lord William Bentinck and Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Ilahi Bakhsh presented his own firing skills. Ghaus Muhammad was possessed the post of *Darogha-e-Topkhana* means artillery officer. He was in-charge of *Topkhana-e-Khas* and *Topkhana-e-Mubarak* and participated in Maharaja’s early campaigns. Sultan Mahmud Khan son of Ghaus Muhammad was also a capable artillerist. *Topkhana-e-Sultan Mahmud* was famous for its effectiveness. Mazhar Ali was another artillery officer who was called upon by Maharaja to present upon royal juncture, his expertise and usefulness of artillery.

Sheikh Basawan was another Muslim courtier of the Sikh State who worked as a colonel and head of *Toshakhana* (treasury) too. Sheikh Ghulam Mohi Uddin served as governor of Kashmir and Jalandhar Doab under different Sikh rulers. Imam Shah was another Persian-origin veteran who served as colonel and participated in several campaigns under Ranjit Singh. Diwan Lakkhi Mall was an administrator of Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan. In 1844 this post was succeeded by his son Diwan Dawlat Rai. Mirza Ghulam

¹⁶ Dr. John Martin Honigberger, *Thirty-Five Years in the East* (London: H. Bailliere, 1852), 98.

¹⁷ Sir Lepel Griffin, *Rulers of India: Ranjit Singh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 118.

Murtaza, served as a military officer and an able physician was also attached to the Sikh Durbar.

The Sikh bureaucracy

The Sikhs themselves were highly talented and skillful figure in the Court of Lahore, rendering their all kind of services to their State. Most famous noblemen were the Majhithia brothers, the Sandhawalia brothers and Ahluwalias. Hari Singh Nalwa, Sham Singh Atarivala, Lehna Singh Majithia were considered as the most capable and trustworthy Sikh officers. Lehna Singh was a good mechanist and respected administrator who run the armament factory brilliantly. According to Sir Lepel Griffin “The most famous of the fighting chiefs, and the one to whom the Maharaja was most attached, was Hari Singh Nalwa. He was not only the bravest, but the most skillful of all the Maharaja’s generals, and was employed to command all expeditions of exceptional difficulty.”¹⁸ Hari Singh Nalwa was basically worked as *Khidmatgar* or personal attendant of the Maharaja. But he gradually rose to the position of military commander and administrator. He was appointed the post of *Nazim* or governor of Hazara, Kashmir and Peshawar at different periods, where he gained high reputation.

Sirdar Desa Singh Majithia fought successful campaigns of Kangra, Kashmir, Nowshera and Multan and remained governor of the Kangra and Hill districts until his death in 1832. He was also the In-charge of *Darbar Sahib* (Golden Temple) Amritsar. After the demise of Desa Singh, his son Sirdar Lehna Singh Majithia succeeded to all his estates and honors with the title of *Qaisar ul-Iqtidar* (chief of high excellence).¹⁹

Sirdar Fateh Singh Kalianwala and Sirdar Nihal Singh Attariwala impressively participated in Ranjit’s campaigns during 1801 to 1817. Chet Singh was a revenue officer, commander and engineer too. General Zorawar Singh, Sirdar Deva Singh, Dhanna Singh Malvai, Dhaunkal Singh, Fateh Singh Ahluvalia, Fateh Singh Man, Mahitab Singh Majithia, Mihan Singh and Diwan Baisakha Singh etc. were other prompted Sikh officers too.

According Henry Prinsep, “It cannot be said, that Ranjit Singh has yet given to the Punjab any constitution or fixed form of government. There is no

¹⁸ Ibid, 125.

¹⁹ Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs* (Delhi: Manohar, 1983).

law, written or oral, and no courts of justice have been anywhere established."²⁰ He kept executive, judicial and legislative powers in his hand. He himself had a bird's-eye view upon internal and external affairs of the Kingdom. Maharaja successfully ruled for almost forty years over his native land. But after his death within a few years the Khalsa Raj ended in 1849 on account of internal divisions and political mismanagement of incapable successors. The British East India Company fought two successful wars with the failing State which resulted in its annexation.

Conclusion

Punjab has been conquered and ruled by various nations such as Aryans, Greeks, Persians, Afghans, Turks, Mongols and English. For first time in the history, Punjab rose to an independent State or a Kingdom by native Punjabi ruler, Ranjit Singh. Maharaja was originally a military chief who possessed a clear vision for a civil administrator. He successfully established a cosmopolitan court. European Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs officials were performing diligently their respective duties at the Court of Lahore. Fakir Aziz Uddin (Foreign Minister), Dhyani Singh (Prime Minister), Dr. John M. Honigberger (royal physician) and Hari Singh Nalwa (military general and administrator) were the most trusted officers of Ranjit Singh, who belonged to Muslim, Hindu, Christian and Sikh religions respectively.

Diwan Mohkam Chand, Misar Diwan Chand, Diwan Dhanpat Rai and Pandit Lal Kaul etc. proved their military abilities on the battle-field. European military experts introduced them to the most advanced techniques in the art of war. The infantry under their guidelines became well disciplined, firm and remarkable. Artillery under Claude Auguste Court and Colonel Gardner was designed on western lines. Cavalry had reorganized in European traditions under General Allard. There was no compromise on physical strength and devotion to the Kingdom. There was fixed age for recruitment or retirement. Gallantry and expertise in the given task were the key elements of promotion and remuneration. Maharaja's officers received handsome salaries, *Jagirs* (landed estates) and ample bounty. In a way, this acted as a counter against rebellion.

²⁰ Henry Prinsep, *Origin of the Sikh Power in the Punjab and Political Life of Maharaja*, 191.

The employment policy that was implemented brought great outcomes. Maharaja protected his Kingdom until his demise against Afghans, the East India Company and the military adventures of Syed Ahmed Barelvi. The Sikh soldiers had never been expert in hill-fighting, whereas Afghan and Pashtun tribes excelled in fighting in mountainous terrains. Nevertheless, the Khalsa forces were successful in defeating them in various fights such as in the battles of Nowshera and Peshawar. After his death the Anglo-Sikh relations deteriorated. The British took full advantage of his incompetent successors and the Sikh army, which was once extremely efficient and professional, was routed and the region of Punjab became a part of British realm.