

SOCIETY DURING MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH

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ABSTRACT

The era of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) was one of the most remarkable social changes in the nineteenth century in India, and the Sikh Empire in the Punjab was founded by him. As a result of the chieftainship of one Sikh misl, Ranjit Singh went on to become the emperor of a sprawling empire that extended from the Khyber Pass to the Sutlej and to create a pluralistic society unlike any found anywhere else. This paper looks at the social texture of Punjab in his reign (1799–1839) in terms of religious composition and tolerance, caste and social stratification, role of women, education and learning, art and architecture, food and dress and social life and culture of the people. The authors contend that the unique feature of the Ranjit Singh's society was its remarkable ability to accommodate diversity: Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims served together in administration and in the army; native lifestyle was combined with Persian, Afghan, and European influences.

Keywords: Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sikh Empire, Punjab Society, Religious Tolerance, Social Stratification, Women's Status, Cultural Diversity, Nineteenth-Century Punjab.

INTRODUCTION

In the late eighteenth century the Punjab was a land marred by recurring invasions, political disunity and the loss of Mughal control. From this upheaval came Ranjit Singh who by 1799 had subdued Lahore and started to bring together the disparate Sikh misls into a unified, centralized Sikh state. For the next 40 years he built an empire which was militarily powerful and a very refined administration, but the most lasting legacy of his empire was the type of society he produced. Ranjit Singh, unlike some of the modern rulers did not try to impose a single religious and cultural identity on the subjects. Rather, his court and his kingdom were a centre of communities, languages and traditions. To learn about this society must be seen in the context of the lives of the peasants, artisans, women, scholars and soldiers that made up the population of the Sikh Empire.

RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION AND TOLERANCE

During the period of Ranjit Singh's rule the Punjabi society was religiously diversified, having Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims with small population of Christians and others who had started settling in Punjab through trade and service in the army. The Maharaja was a devout Sikh and the state had distinct Sikh attributes of the minting of Sikh coins and the use of the Khalsa as a unifying idea, but he deliberately refrained from creating a theocratic regime. He used Muslims to fight on his behalf as Generals and Administrators, the most prominent being Fakir Azizuddin, his trusted Foreign Minister and confidant. Hindus, especially the Dogra and the mercantile class, held key roles in finance and civil administration, especially the Dogra brothers Dhian Singh, Gulab Singh and Suchet Singh who held great influence in the court.

This policy of inclusion was carried over to religious patronage as well. Ranjit Singh gave generously to the Hindu Temples, provided land and protection for the Muslim shrines and the mosques and donated gold for the gilding of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, and he was also a patron of other temples, irrespective of their religious affiliation. The religious

activities of common folk remained more or less unaffected; village temples and statues of deities, Sufi dargahs and gurdwaras co-existed, and festivals of various communities were celebrated side by side. This tolerance was not just a reflection of the personal attitudes of those who ran the state, but also a practical necessity, because a state based on a small group of Muslims and a large group of Hindus essentially dominated by them would not be possible. The social consequence of this was that Ranjit Singh's Punjab was more at peace than many other contemporary states in which the religious identity determined the political and social status.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND THE HIERARCHY OF CASTES

Although the Sikh religious tenets are egalitarian, under the rule of Ranjit Singh, Punjabi society maintained some characteristics of the previous centuries' caste system. Hindus continued to accord ritual prestige to Brahmins, and there were other occupational castes like the Khatri who were highly visible in commerce and office work, and the Jats, who were the backbone of the peasantry and of the army. There were also certain castes of artisans, blacksmiths, carpenters, weavers, potters who were a very important productive class whose skills ensured livelihoods of the rural population and economic sustenance of the cities like Lahore, Amritsar and Multan.

The Khalsa ideal which opposed caste-based oppression in religious community and langar (the communal meal served in gurdwaras) had a softening effect on social hierarchy, especially among Sikhs. In the army and administration, merit and loyalty were more important than birth, so that men of poor birth could become men of command and become rich. The rise of a few through dedication and battlefield prowess like that of Hari Singh Nalwa can be seen as an example of relative social mobility. However, at the village level, caste influenced marriage, food habits and social relations and there was a distinct and noticeable social hierarchy between Jat landholders and artisan service castes and between lower agricultural workers and the above groups, but it was not strictly enforced. Slavery in the strict sense (which existed in other parts of the world) was relatively rare, although there were still some bonded and hereditary service obligations in rural Punjab.

A somewhat more fluid society was urban society. As Lahore became a political and cultural hub, the merchants, craftsmen, soldiers of fortune from all over India, Afghanistan and even Europe came to settle here, and a class of Court officials emerged who were based on royal favor and not on birth. In the cities, these people mixed and formed cosmopolitan centers where Persian continued to be the language of administration and refined culture while Punjabi and Gurmukhi were rising in importance as media for popular literature and religious education.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN

The position of the women under Ranjit Singh's rule was shaped by the limitations of a patriarchal agrarian society and some forward-looking trends of the Sikh teaching and policies of the reigning Pargatana. Ideally Sikhism taught that women and men were equal and they served in the congregations and langar with men. In this era several women became very influential in political and military matters. Maharani Jind Kaur, who would go on to become the most politically active of Ranjit's queens, regent for his son Maharaja Duleep Singh, was a prime example of royal women being able to exercise real power, although her prominence only came to a head after Ranjit's death. In his own times, some of his wives and those of the aristocratic Sikh and Dogra families played a de facto role in court politics, patronage and family connections.

In the life of ordinary people, however, women were dominated in their lives primarily by domestic duty, agricultural work, and the running of household economies. The literacy of women was also low and formal schooling for girls was relatively uncommon except in the aristocratic and some merchant families. In some Hindu and even some Sikh aristocratic families sati (the immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husband) continued, even though it was not part of the main tenets of Sikhism; a few of Ranjit Singh's wives and concubines immolated themselves during his funeral in 1839, showing the difference between religious ideals and social practice. Female infanticide, especially among some landed families who did not want to burden with dowry, was also a serious issue, though discouraged, in certain areas of the rural Punjab. Female seclusion, known as purdah, was practised in varying degrees in different communities, regions and classes, more strictly in the Muslim and Hindu communities than in the peasantry, who had to work in the fields and where it was impractical.

Courtesan and performing women were also an important but socially somewhat ambiguous category of people, with some popular memory considering them "Anarkali" and playing an important role in the music, dance and court entertainments of the Lahore court, but who were also socially stigmatized. The society of Ranjit Singh's Punjab was complex for women with pockets of real influence and relative freedom in the Sikh community and at court and patriarchal restrictions, custom-bound practices and limited access to education for the majority.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND INTELLECTUAL PURSUITS.

During this time, there was a decentralization of education and it was organized mainly in religious and community institutions rather than the state. Gurdwaras were the place where Sikh children were trained; the teaching was done in the Gurmukhi script and the Guru Granth Sahib was taught; Hindu educational system was provided in pathshalas attached to temples and taught in Sanskrit, religious texts and mercantile maths. Children were taught in maqtabas and madarasas, with learning being based on the study of Persian and Arabic, as well as of the Quran, with a focus on this latter area for Muslims. Persian continued to be the language of administration, diplomacy and literary elite and it was not interfered by Ranjit Singh's regime as it had been used by the Mughals for governance in an efficient manner.

The court served as a center of intellectual and cultural activity, even though there was no public school system. Ranjit Singh, while somewhat illiterate at a formal level, was an astute patron of scholars, poets and physicians and his court was populated with talent from all over Punjab, Kashmir and beyond. The new ideas of military science, medicine, and administration, introduced by European visitors and travelers, and by mercenaries who served with him, trickled into the elite circles. The general population was still moderately literate, particularly the Brahmins, the Khatris who were engaged in trade and accounting, and religious functionaries of various faiths, while the huge masses of peasants were mostly illiterate and learned texts, traditions and knowledge by means of folk songs, religious recitation and oral epics.

INFORMATION ON ART, ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURAL PATRONAGE.

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Ranjit Singh's Punjab had a vibrant patronage of art and architecture – primarily in Lahore and Amritsar. The most famous architectural work of his reign was the gold plating and marbling of Harmandir Sahib, which was an impressive and decorated structure using the style of the Mughals and a touch of Sikh devotion. During the reign of Ranjit Singh, Lahore

experienced the building and upgrading of palaces, gardens and forts, such as Lahore Fort, incorporating elements of both Sikh and Mughal architecture and of the new colonial taste.

Under the patronage of the kings and nobles, painting got a boost and evolved into the Sikh school of painting, a branch and a development of the Pahari and Mughal painting styles, which depicted scenes from the court, portraits of the king, his nobles, and religious themes. Both religion and secular activities had a strong role for music: gurbani kirtan continued to have a significant place in Sikh worship, and classical musicians and dancers were also appreciated by the court, in the Mughal tradition. The folk culture of Punjab, separate from the elite patronage, had a strong tradition of popular social life, mainly in the form of folk songs of Heer-Ranjha and other romantic and heroic songs, and the festivals like Baisakhi, Lohri and Diwali had a rhythm of popular social life, irrespective of religious boundaries. Not only were such festivals not restricted to one community but were sometimes used as public celebrations for the entire community as well, once again demonstrating the syncretic nature of Punjabi society at this period.

CLOTHING, FOOD AND LIVING.

The lifestyle of the people in Ranjit Singh's Punjab was a blend of the local culture and the taste of the royal court. The men of the Khalsa normally wore the five articles of Sikhism, like uncut hair wrapped in a turban, as well as clothing, such as the kurta, tehmat or dhoti and turban, whereas the clothing among the communities was largely the same, namely salwar-kameez, or dhoti-like garments depending on the region and community. On ceremonial occasions, the richly embroidered garments, jewels and ceremonial armour were favoured by the ruling aristocracy, including Ranjit Singh himself; this included a mix of Sikh, Persian and Punjabi sartorial elements, the Maharaja being described by contemporary European visitors as "relatively simple" in his personal clothing when compared to the splendor of his court and army on parade.

The common people were mainly dependent upon wheat, maize, pulses and milk products that were already famous in Punjab and seasonal vegetables and fruits, and the agrarian economy had a great impact on their diet. Avocations of eating meat were different among communities and people, with some Hindu communities being more strict with vegetarianism, while Sikhs and Muslims were more likely to eat meat (in accordance with their various customs on how it was prepared). The langar system of the gurdwaras made this possible on a daily basis, providing a meal in a community to everyone irrespective of caste or creed, both as a religious value and as a form of social security in times of scarcity. Textiles, shawls, metalwork and spices were traded in the urban markets of Lahore and Amritsar, which were part of a thriving economy that linked the region to other trans-regional trade networks reaching all the way to Central Asia, Kashmir and the rest of India.

THE ARMY, ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY.

The Khalsa Army was reorganized in modern terms with the assistance of European and American officers, and was one of the most important means of social mobility in Ranjit Singh's society. It was open to Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims and successful promotion was based on ability and allegiance. This military institution offered economic opportunity for the peasants and other lower ranking people, but also served as a unifying social experience, uniting together men from various regions and religious backgrounds with a common discipline and purpose. Civil administration also recruited personnel from various communities, including revenue officers, officials of the judiciary, and provincial administrators, who were all drawn from a blend of Sikh sardars, Hindu officials and Muslim

administrators and brought different style of administrative practices from the Mughal and earlier eras.

The army and the bureaucracy were generally merit-based, whereas the social order in the village was more conservative, in which most of life was still determined by land ownership, caste and custom. The duality of a modernizing and inclusive state machine, and a traditional rural social structure, is one of the key conflicts in Punjabi society during this era, and one which would be important to its post 1839 heirs.

HUMAN HEALTH, JUSTICE AND SOCIAL WELFARE.

During the rule of Ranjit Singh, custom law and panchayats were used extensively to ensure the administration of justice, most cases being settled on the basis of a community's custom by village panchayats. Capital punishment was used sparingly and European visitors frequently commented on the relative lightness of the Maharaja's sentence, favouring fines and confiscation rather than execution, and this led to a feeling of personal safety such that trade and agriculture prospered.

In this period, healthcare was still confined to traditional medicine such as Ayurveda (Hindus) and Unani (Muslims) practiced by hereditary physicians working in the service of the court and general population; Western medicine started to come into Punjab through European officers in the royal service. There was no central public health system; the coping in times of trouble was mainly through charitable institutions and royal charity and community spirit through the langar.

REGIONAL, LANGUAGE DIVERSITY.

After a series of conquests the Sikh Empire under Ranjit Singh spread over a large and diverse land that not only included Punjab but also Kashmir, Multan, Peshawar and the north-west frontier. This diversity of area resulted in a high degree of linguistic diversity: Punjabi was still the language of the majority, Gurmukhi was related to Sikh religious and literary use, Persian was still the language of administration and high culture, and Pashto, Kashmiri and other languages of the newly conquered peoples were heard. This plurality was akin to the religious and social plurality already examined and gave the idea of a composite society, one that was much less held together by cultural similarities than by the power of the Maharaja and the institutions he established.

Kashmir annexed in 1819 and the Peshawar valley later, added new peoples into the sphere of Sikh rule, whose social practices remained unchanged despite all other common features, though local governors were appointed, usually from trusted families of Sikhs, Dogras, or Muslims, to ensure continuity with pre-existing elites.

CONCLUSION

The society that thrived during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule was not exclusively democratic and was not entirely traditional but a dynamic amalgamation of the social order inherited from the past and a uniquely open political ideology. Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims were granted some religious toleration and could participate in the run of the kingdom in areas of governance, defense, and cultural development, all of which were rare in early-nineteenth century South Asia. Meanwhile, caste-based hierarchies, patriarchal practices that impact women and restricted access to formal schooling continued to exist mainly as before among the majority of the rural population. Under the patronage of the royal family, art, architecture, music and life of festivals thrived, creating a rich and syncretic culture that continues to help forge a Punjabi identity. While the contemporary society is studied from the perspective of

the military power of its kingdom, its ability to create a viable albeit flawed social system that incorporated a variety of communities remains equally significant in the understanding of the history of the Sikh Empire and its founder.

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