

CIVIL ADMINISTRATION OF MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH: GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONS, AND THE MAKING OF THE SIKH EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the civil administration set up by Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1704-1748). The Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent in the year 1799-1839 Based on the historical documents, contemporary reports, and secondary scholarly works the study examines the organizational principles of his administration in regard to revenue collection, judiciary practice, provincial administration, military-civil administration and diplomacy. It is contended that the overall governance model that Ranjit Singh devised was pragmatic, a synthesis of Mughal model and Sikh political traditions, and also some European influence, that resulted in a governance framework that was more institutionally coherent than is generally believed. The implications of the findings relate to the processes of pre-colonial state formation in South Asia, and the link between personal authority and institutional capacity.

Keywords - civil administration, Punjab, contemporary reports, Sikh, European influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ranjit Singh moved into the city of Lahore on his nineteenth birthday in 1799 when the state of the Punjab had been characterized by its political fragmentation, the presence of the last of the Mughals and the threat of the Afghans from the north-west. At the time of his death in 1839 he had established a sovereign state between Sutlej River and Khyber Pass and the hills of Kashmir and the border of Sindh. That military success is well attested to. The civil architecture, which bound the empire together between campaigns, receives less attention.

This paper asks: What created the working of the civil administration of Ranjit Singh and what were its structural constraints? The answer is not only relevant to Sikh history but to the larger picture of how pre-colonial states in India structured authority, how they went about raising revenue, dealing with a heterogeneous population and how they survived without the bureaucracy that colonial officials forced upon them[1].

The paper goes on to discuss the administrative framework, provincial organisation, revenue system, judicial set-up, army-civil relations, religious policy, foreign relations management, economic regulation, urban administration, communications, the role of non-Punjabis and the overall legacy of the administration.

2. THE ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORK – STRUCTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

The state of Ranjit Singh was based on the royal court of Lahore, known as the Lahore Darbar, which was also the cabinet, the treasury body and the supreme executive authority. The Lahore Darbar was a working institution, unlike the Mughal court that had a well-structured ceremony hierarchy that had been established over many years. Senior officials (wazirs and sardars) occupied both an administrative position and commanded military forces, and the distinction between civil and military powers was intentionally blurred.

Ranjit Singh's rule was based on personal relations as well as formal hierarchy, as historians like Sita Ram Kohli and J.S. Grewal have highlighted[2]. He personally knew his senior commanders and revenue officers, and consults with them regularly, rather than following the rule of bureaucracy. This was not a failure of administration, it was a well-known form of administration in early 19th century South Asia, in which people trusted the legitimacy of authority as a result of its visible personal engagement.

There were actually departments within the Darbar. Correspondence and orders were dealt with by the Daftar-i-Diwan. Toshkhana was responsible for receipts of the treasury. This was accomplished through the Mir Munshi's office which handled diplomatic correspondence. It was a characteristic of Ranjit Singh's rule that he lacked a separation of powers along European lines, and a codified legal constitution. His administration operated through customary channels and changed with the ever-changing situation.

3. PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATION: NAZIMS AND THE PROBLEM OF CONTROL

It was governed as an empire, which was split into provinces with a Nazim or governor having both military and civil powers in his jurisdiction. The major provinces consisted of Lahore, Multan, Kashmir, Peshawar and Trans-Indus[3]. At the sub-provincial level, there were Kardars, who were responsible for revenue collection, local law and order, and channeled the information up to Nazim.

The appointments of the Nazims were at the Maharaja's discretion and he changed officials regularly, for two purposes. It was a way to ensure that no one administrator could develop a power base of his/her own. Second, it provided Ranjit Singh direct access to the performance of the province, as new Nazims would have an interest in giving him a true picture of their predecessors' failures. It was an expensive administrative continuity system but it was effective as a political control system.

Local revenue accountants (Qanungos), who had the agricultural productivity of each village in their mind, were attached to the office of the Nazim. These officials maintained continuity of administration through the changing of Nazims and were frequently moved from one administration to the next. With this Ranjit Singh's administration was able to gain stability at the local level even though the upper tier remained fluid.

4. THE LAND SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

The empire's biggest financial source was revenues from agricultural land. The misl period and the traces of Mughal revenue tradition have left behind a variety of practices for local assessment to Ranjit Singh. His government did not enforce a single level of taxation throughout all the territories, but instead used a system that has been referred to by scholars as "pragmatic localism".

The basic unit of revenue was the village. The state's negotiation was done with the headmen of villages or with land-owners (Lambardars) who were collectively responsible to collect the assessed revenue. This was a fairly continuous system with the Mughals, which allowed the state to avoid direct assessment of each cultivator[4]. The village community played a role between the state demand and agricultural production.

Assessment rates did not have a consistent pattern across all regions and crop types, or by the bargaining power of local landholders. In the more tranquil agricultural regions of central Punjab the state was able to take between a third and a half of the crop[5]. The effective rate was lower in areas where there was less control, and less direct in their enforcement. This

was done by the officials of Ranjit Singh with cash and in-kind payment, depending on the market situation, and in drought years, the administration maintained buffer stocks of grain.

The income from the revenue apparatus was sufficient to support an army of about 80,000 to 100,000 men at full strength, as well as the expenses of the court, public works and diplomacy. Accurate figures are not available but according to the accounts at the Darbar, in the later years of Ranjit Singh's reign the annual income of the state was estimated at 2 to 3 crore of rupees by Fakir Syed Waheeduddin. This was a significant financial foundation for a pre-colonial region state.

5. THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM: CUSTOMARY LAW AND ROYAL ARBITRATION

There was no formal court system in the true sense in the time of Ranjit Singh. There were multiple overlapping avenues of justice: at the Kardar level, a dispute was settled at the village and district level; for Muslim litigants with Islamic litigants, the Qazi courts governed and applied Islamic jurisprudence; the village council (panchayat) dealt with local civil disputes; and the Darbar itself served as the court of final resort on major cases and appeals.

This was no coincidence: legal pluralism. Punjab's population comprised of Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and small population of other communities who have their own means of dispute resolution. Ranjit Singh did not see the need to come up with a Single code for these already existing codes. He did insist on the abolition of capital punishment for nearly every offence which was quite remarkable at his time. William Osborne, the British officer that visited the Darbar in 1838, noted that Ranjit Singh had managed to do away with death penalty even though he maintained a large military state.

In practice, severe measures were taken against serious crimes, such as mutilation, imprisonment, fines or seizure of property[6]. The lack of systematic execution as a judicial instrument reflects the theological orientation in Sikhism towards mercy, and also a political consideration – in an empire with many diverse communities, public executions might exacerbate communal tensions. Ranjit Singh was more interested in destroying his enemies economically, politically or by co-opting them.

6. NON-PUNJABI AND EUROPEAN PERSONNEL AND THEIR ROLE

An interesting aspect of Ranjit Singh's rule was that he accepted talent on merit no matter where it came from. His senior military officers were Frenchmen Jean-Baptiste Ventura and Claude August Court, the Italian Paolo Avitabile (governor of Wazirabad and subsequently Peshawar) as well as the American Josiah Harlan. These Europeans reorganized the regular infantry army Fauj-i-Ain in European fashion.

In the civil administration, Dogra Rajput, Afghan and Kashmiri Muslims, Hindu Khatri along with the Brahmin officials were included in addition to the Sikh sardars. The three Fakir brothers, Azizuddin, Imamuddin and Nuruddin, were at a high administrative trust. Foreign minister and principal negotiator with the British East India Company for almost 20 years, Fakir Azizuddin. In his promotion to such a sensitive job by a Sikh ruler, it is a clear reflection of Ranjit Singh's views on staffing: ability and trustworthiness are far more important than religion.

This multi-ethnic hierarchy gave rise to an element of stability. The empire was not reliant on any one community or kinship group for its functioning. It also demonstrated Ranjit Singh's political acumen – the non-Sikh communities were made part of the system thereby limiting their ability to mount organised opposition from them.

7. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE CIVIL-MILITARY ADMINISTRATION

The Sikh Empire was a fiscal-military state in the sense that historians of early modern states refer to them, a state whose administrative practices were greatly influenced by the need to have a large standing army[7]. Civil administration was more for the purposes of raising money for finance of the military, and high-ranking military officers performed their civilian duties as an extension of political power.

This meant that practical implications for civilian governance were felt. Civil investment was made when it was used for military purposes: roads were kept in good condition mainly for the movement of troops; grain stores were stocked for the supply of the army; and administration of frontier provinces such as Peshawar and Hazara was in the hands of mainly military officers. In Avitabile's government of Peshawar, for example, it was effective in generating revenue and curbing banditry, but on lines that were hard to differentiate from military rule.

The division between civil authority and military authority was a little more obvious in the more peaceful central provinces. The urban administration of Lahore, for instance, had a functioning system of Kotwals (municipal officers), which they inherited from the Mughals, to oversee the operations of the markets, cleanliness and public order in the city. However, here the Kotwal's authority was always subject to military support.

8. POLICY AND ADMINISTRATIVE NEUTRALITY FOR RELIGION.

The flip side of Ranjit Singh's rule is that of his religious tolerance. He was a practicing Sikh, and substantial gifts to the Sikh shrines have been made by him; most notably, he gave gold leaf from his own treasury to have the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) at Amritsar gilded. Meanwhile, his government maintained mosques and temples of Muslims, Hindu and other religious scholars were supported and maintained.

This was not a modern sense of secularism as defined by a constitution. It was a practical religious pluralism of rulers who ruled over multi-faith sub-continental region. Ranjit Singh collected the jizya from non-Muslim communities when it had been introduced by Mughals and later he banned it. He had set up Muslim qazis and Hindu pandits to handle personal laws in their respective communities. He did not try to enforce the Sikh religion as the law of the State.

The political argument was sound[8]. In a state where the population is around 50-50 Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, the state would have been resisted at all times if it had tried to impose a religious uniformity. Ranjit Singh's tolerance was more of a policy than a personal orientation and in the end it proved to be successful. During his reign, religious violence was comparatively subdued compared to the times before and after 1839. However, his religious violence was kept in check, in comparison with the times before and after the collapse of 1839.

9. FOREIGN RELATIONS AND DIPLOMATIC ADMINISTRATION.

The most significant challenge that Ranjit Singh faced in his diplomacy was the relationship of the British East India Company, which had fixed its north-west frontier at the Sutlej river by the Treaty of Amritsar, in 1809. That treaty established the boundary of the Company and tacitly recognized the supremacy of Ranjit Singh on the north and west side of the river. It was a compromise between two nascent empires which were not yet prepared for a military challenge.

The diplomatic set-up that Ranjit Singh developed to handle this relationship was well developed. Fakir Azizuddin held regular meetings with British political agents, used to write messages in Persian (the official language of the time), and had informants who monitored the activities of British agents and their plans. British envoys such as Charles Metcalfe (1808) and later Fane and Auckland were received by Ranjit Singh himself and he was described as being a good judge of the information he received from them.

Afghanistan was dealt with differently by military threat and by co-opting the Afghan Sardars who joined in the of Lahore Darbar. The most important advance in the westwards direction of Sikh power was the occupation of Peshawar in 1818 and its formal annexation in 1834, but the Pashtun tribesmen of the northwest were never fully subdued and Peshawar had to be regularly administered.

10. ECONOMIC REGULATION AND TRADE ADMINISTRATION

The Sikh Empire was located along important routes of trade and commerce that linked Central Asia with the plains of India. Lahore was an important commercial town and Ranjit Singh's government took transit duties (rahdari) on goods passing through their areas. They were important duties that brought in additional revenue, aside from land revenue[9].

The administration kept the markets over Kardar's control and the requirement of the Darbar for luxury merchandise, military instruments, horses and metals encouraged business activities. Among the most significant was the horse trade from Central Asia in which many horses were needed by the Sikh cavalry every year, and merchants who supplied them worked under the patronage of the Darbar.

Ranjit Singh was no attempt to create a monopoly trade system, or protectionist trade policy. His administration acted as the arbiters of taxes and law and order along trade routes – a service that merchants paid for[10]. The relative safety in the Punjab during his rule was an economic good and attracted business activity, and the fact that his rule was better than that of the previous misl conflict.

Coinage was issued in the name of the Sikh Gurus, not in the name of the Maharaja, which had religious symbolism and political utility: it bound the currency to religious authority, not to the death of one ruler which would raise issues about the continued validity of the currency.

11. PUBLIC WORKS AND URBAN ADMINISTRATION

Administratively, the imperial capital Lahore was given the most attention. It had a Kotwal to maintain peace and order in the city, a bazaar system based on trade-gilds and there was a system of headmen of neighbourhoods functioning as a link between the population and state officials. The city walls were kept intact and the fort was the seat of government and also Ranjit Singh's residence.

The public work projects of Ranjit Singh were more of a working nature than monumental. Maintenance of roads between important cities was done for military and commercial purposes. Although not systematically extended, the irrigation infrastructure of Punjab (canal system based on water from Ravi, Jhelum and Beas rivers) was maintained. Later, under the British, the large scale construction of canals to change the face of Punjab's agriculture took place.

Ranjit Singh did invest his money in architectural works, mainly religious. Among the most important were the renovations of the Harmandir Sahib, construction of the Samadhi of Ranjit Singh (after his death) and the restoration of many mosques and temples in Lahore.

The devotional and political aspects of these projects cannot be separated, as they were a way to assert the Maharaja's religious commitment and to mark his patronage in the built environment of the city.

12. CONCLUSION

The civil administration of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is one of the most notable instances of state-construction in pre-colonial India. Apart from his military success, the administrative apparatus which ensured political control, economic security and social stability over a large, multi-ethnic empire had played a vital part in the development and survival of the Sikh Empire. Under his leadership, governance and institutional flexibility, Ranjit Singh established a system that enabled him to manage the multi-religious and multi-ethnic population and ensure that there was internal stability.

One of his hallmarks as an administrator was his pragmatism. Instead of trying to create a formula that was to be used in administration, Ranjit Singh adopted several administrative practices of the Mughals, the political traditions of the Sikhs, and some European methods. This flexible solution allowed the state to adjust its revenue collection, judicial system, provincial governance and diplomatic activities to the various needs of the different regions. Merit not religion or ethnic group was the basis for appointment to office, adding to the unity and effectiveness of the empire.

The administration also showed great political intelligence in its policy of religious tolerance. The state respected the customs and institutions of different communities, lessening social tensions and cultivating loyalty among the state's subjects. Likewise, the merging of civil and military responsibilities provided the means to securing the resources for the defense and expansion of the empire and to good governance.

The system was, however, very much personal and autocratic, being based on the personality and authority of Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself. During his lifetime the institutions he set up worked well, but not sufficiently independently or permanently to resist the successions that occurred after his death. The decline of the Sikh Empire was thus a result of the lack of a system of government based on personal leadership.

In summary, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's civil administration was a significant aspect of South Asian history, demonstrating the potential of effective leadership, administrative efficiency, and inclusive governance to build a strong and resilient state without relying on modern bureaucratic structures.

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