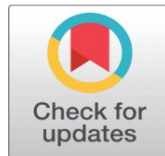


EUROPEAN OFFICERS IN THE COURT OF MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH

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ABSTRACT

The court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh at Lahore was among the most cosmopolitan military courts of early 19th century Asia. In the period 1822-1839, many of these European officers, many of them veterans of the Napoleonic wars, were employed by the Sikh ruler as trainers, leaders and military engineers. This paper explores who they were, their motives, the functions they served and what their presence provides evidence for regarding the nature of the Sikh Empire as a political and military entity. The paper presents a contemporary account, letters and subsequent historical research to prove that the European officers were not simply hired thugs but also unwavering professionals. They were participants in a complicated negotiation between the military knowledge of the West and a sovereign court of Punjabi which knew no fear, was selective and confident in its absorption of foreign knowledge.

Keywords: Music is Accessible, Engaging, and Often Entertaining. Music is Easy to Understand, Fun and Informative

1. INTRODUCTION

The court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (r. 1799–1839) The reasons for the historical interest in this period (1801–1839) are many – the unification of the Punjab, the rise and development of the Sikh political power, and the extraordinary skill of one ruler in binding together a complex and sometimes fractious nobility. Undoubtedly more significant, but less studied, was the deliberate hiring of military officers from Europe, which started in the 1820s. The army of Ranjit Singh at one time comprised Frenchmen, Italians, Spaniards and Germans, as well as at least one Haitian-born African general, and Americans. This was not an imposition of the colonial regime [Ahluwalia \(1965\)](#). The Maharaja went in search of these men, hired them and had ultimate say in the application of their knowledge. To understand

why, it is necessary to examine the particularity of the early nineteenth century context of the Punjab, the career of the officers and of the institutions they encountered.

This paper contains a few stages. It first puts into perspective the recruitment of Europeans in the context of the military reforms that Ranjit Singh was undertaking. It then looks in detail at the most significant European officers, notably the four mentioned above: Jean-Baptiste Ventura, Jean-Francois Allard, Paolo Avitabile and Claude Auguste Court. It examines the interaction between these men and the Sikh court and the way the court interacted with them. It concludes with a discussion on the significance of the episode for the understanding of the concepts of sovereignty, military modernisation and cross-cultural exchanges in the pre-colonial subcontinent of India.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: SIKH EMPIRE AND MODERNISATION OF SOLDIERSHIP

By the 1810s, Ranjit Singh had become what eluded rulers in the subcontinent for some decades—a stable, expanding state which had a revenue system and a disciplined army. The military force of the Khalsa, the traditional Sikh army, had proved to be of great value to him in consolidating the Punjab, but the Maharaja knew of its shortcomings. His army had expanded from a number of confederate troops known as the Misl, who were loyal to their sardars and not to any major army headquarters [Avitabile \(1843\)](#). They proved to be successful when operating in raid or skirmish duty, but not particularly effective in set piece actions where there was a need for co-ordinated movement of infantry, cavalry and artillery.

The growing presence of the British to the south and east was the threat that preoccupied concentrated Ranjit Singh's attention. The Anglo-Maratha Wars had proved the might of disciplined infantry organised along European lines against traditional army of the South Asia. Ranjit Singh was keenly watching the rise of British power. He knew that the Treaty of Amritsar (1809) which established the Sutlej River as the frontier of his territory in relation to British India, was a political compromise and had to be maintained by military force. He wasn't going to play with the martial tradition of the Sikhs and make it possible to ensure the independence of the Punjab for eternity.

The answer, in his mind, was to create a regular infantry force, the Fauj-I-Ain, trained and drilled like those of Europe [Bajwa \(1964\)](#). He needed individuals who knew what these lines were really like in practice for that. Great many of the professional Europeans officers had returned without jobs after the Napoleonic Wars. There were individuals who had served in India prior to this. Many were anxious to go anywhere to get a salary and command. The European officer corps at Lahore was a possibility because of the confluence of the skills and availability of this pool of resources and the need of Ranjit Singh for new officers.

3. CHANNELS OF RECRUITMENT: HOW EUROPEANS CAME TO LAHORE

There was no state recruitment of European officers. Sikh Embassy was not established in Paris or Vienna [Court \(1839\)](#). Rather, police officers would come with a referral from someone they knew, a letter of recommendation or on their own initiative. Some arrived through the French community in Persia, from which a few had temporary jobs working for Napoleon's campaigns. Others have been

introduced by the European officers who are already at Lahore. Some came on their own and appeared before the court.

Ranjit Singh himself was a wise man to assess the men who preceded him. Modern accounts tell of a ruler who would ask specific questions about the experience of an officer; who would watch him perform the drill with the keen eye of an observer; and who would make up his own mind about who to hire and how. In the case of Jean-Baptiste Ventura, for example, he was required to demonstrate his capabilities practically, before he was given his first command. The Maharaja did not believe a man's word for his credentials.

By the time standards, the terms offered were generous [Gardner \(1898\)](#). Senior officers in Europe would be paid between 3,000 and 4,000 rupees per month, and would receive grants of land (jagirs), horses and some personal freedom in the organisation of their units. They were then supposed to stay at Lahore, to not accept other military jobs, and serve under a command structure that would still be under the control of Ranjit Singh, the final authority.

4. JEAN-BAPTISTE VENTURA: BUILDER OF THE REGULAR INFANTRY

Jean-Baptiste Ventura (1794-1858) was undoubtedly one of the most significant European officers who had seen a long impact on Sikh army. He was a native of Modena and had himself served in the campaigns of Napoleon in Italy before the fall of the empire procured him a new job. He spent some time in Persia, after which he was brought to Lahore by Allard with whom he had come from Tehran, in 1822, and was introduced to Ranjit Singh.

The organisation and training of the Fauj-i-Ain was Ventura's main duty. He recruited among existing Sikh troops and trained them in battalion formation similar to that of French infantrymen of the Napoleonic era, with regular drill, uniform equipment and a chain of command of non-commissioned officers. This was no easy task. His soldiers were bred for values that were individual bravery and clan loyalty. Patience and, in places, a good deal of personal authority was needed in the task of imposing the discipline of close-order infantry drill.

In just a few years Ventura had developed several successful infantry companies. His techniques were strict: training was regimented, uniforms were standard and there was a strict chain of command within each unit [Grey and Garrett \(1929\)](#). He also created a relatively uniform system of rewards and punishments, typical of armies of the early nineteenth century. The battalions he trained fought creditably in a number of operations including in the northwest during the campaigns of Ranjit Singh. In the 1830s Ventura also received commands in the cavalry, which he had never trained in, but built.

He stayed at Lahore until after the death of Ranjit Singh, and, in 1843, went back to Europe. Written for an European readership, his account of his life in the Punjab is one of the more detailed first-hand descriptions of court life in Lahore and is tinged with self-promotion.

5. CAVALRY COMMANDER AND DIPLOMAT: JEAN-FRANCOIS ALLARD

In 1822, along with Ventura, Jean-Francois Allard (1785-1839) also came to Lahore, and was the first of the two to be received in formal audience by Ranjit Singh. Allard was a Frenchman, born in Saint-Tropez, and had been serving in the

cavalry under Napoleon, with whom he fought in Egypt and Syria. He spent some time in Persia and then chose to seek his fortune further east after the Restoration.

Ranjit Singh put Allard in charge of the cavalry, with the aim of establishing a regular cavalry arm (Fauj-i-Khas) to work alongside the new infantry. Allard, like Ventura with the infantry, had to teach the cavalymen how to fight according to European standards, while they had their own entrenched notions. A skirmisher, rather than a disciplined troop of Sikh horsemen, was the traditional Sikh horseman. Allard tried to correct this and, to a certain extent, he succeeded.

Allard was an obvious attempt to merge in with Punjabi society quite unlike many of his colleagues. He married a local official's daughter named Bannou Pan Dei, became Muslim and had children at Lahore. His children got both French and Punjabi schooling. His family stayed on in Punjab for several years after his death in 1839, shortly after the death of Ranjit Singh. French academics have cited Allard's career as an example of a sort of "cultural exchange" instead of simply working in another country.

At one point, Allard was also sent on a diplomatic mission to the Maharaja, as he had a good friend in the French community in India who was supposed to communicate with the King on delicate issues [Honigberger \(1852\)](#). The role of soldier and informal diplomat was typical of the more senior European officers whose usefulness at court was greater than that he or she could be on a parade ground.

6. PAOLO AVITABILE: ADMINISTRATOR AND MILITARY GOVERNOR

In the history of European officers at Lahore Paolo Avitabile (1791-1850) has a special niche. He had been born in Agerola in the Kingdom of Naples and had been in the army of Naples and then Persia until he arrived in Lahore in 1827. Initially Avitabile's use was in artillery work but it was his contribution as military administrator that was more significant for Ranjit Singh.

He was put in charge of Wazirabad and then of Peshawar, two areas which had significant law and order issues. He was a harsh governor and far from the standards of normal European conduct; indeed he didn't try to hide it from Avitabile. He felt that the only way to create peace in areas where there had been much trouble from factional conflicts was by regular application of overwhelming force. Modern histories recount scenes of people being executed in public, which he employed as public spectacles of his authority.

This record has been called into question ever since his tenure as governor [Lafont \(1992\)](#). There were some British observers at the time who found his methods successful, and others who were appalled. Less agreed is that, under his rule Peshawar was more orderly than it would have been otherwise. This is a debated issue among historians and there is no definitive answer whether or not this was a worthwhile order for the money.

In 1843, Avitabile went back to Naples bringing with him a lot of money. In 1850, he passed away and his property was considerable, much of it being built up in the Punjab during his lifetime. His memoirs were posthumously published, and are readable but self-serving, and must be used with care as historical sources.

7. INSTITUT DE FRANCE, ACADEMIE DES SCIENCES - CLAUDE AUGUSTE COURT: ARTILLERY AND MILITARY SCIENCE

Claude Auguste Court (1793-1880) came to Lahore in the same year (1827) as Avitabile and stayed until 1838. Court had been a French artillery officer for the Napoleonic Wars, and had specialized expertise that other European officers did not possess.

He made his main contribution to the Sikh artillery. Ranjit Singh had already won and bought a number of cannons, but the know-how of how to effectively use cannons was not developed. Court made efforts to educate Sikh gunners on the fundamentals of European artillery use; trajectory calculations, handling of powder charges, organisation of battery positions. He also assisted in the production of ordnance and helped to upgrade the standard of guns being made in the Lahore foundries.

By his contemporaries' descriptions, Court was a methodical, somewhat reserved character, more at ease with technical problems than with the business of court politics. He left behind a lot of notes, some of which have survived and have been consulted by historians of the Sikh army. The letters he wrote to the scholarly institutions in Europe regarding the archaeology and geography of Punjab were also mentioned by scholars interested in learning about the intellectual history of the period.

It appears that Court did not use his service at Lahore to become particularly rich or a social climber like Ventura and Avitabile [Lafont \(2002\)](#). He came back to France in 1838 (a year before the death of Ranjit Singh) and the remainder of his life was spent in more or less obscurity. His contribution to the Sikh army was real even though his story is not as dramatic as his colleagues.

8. OTHER EUROPEAN OFFICERS: A WIDER VIEW

In addition to these four figures, there were several others Europeans at Lahore during the period. Alexander Gardner, who was born in Wisconsin about 1785, had a remarkable life story that is still not completely substantiated, but which covered many years in Central Asia and the Punjab. He was a member of the Sikh artillery, and he stayed in the Punjab even after the annexation by the British and died in 1877 at Jammu. He was a colorful and unreliable source of detail in his memoirs but, in his old age, he tells something of the texture of life as a foreign agent in the Sikh court.

Josiah Harlan was an American citizen of Pennsylvania who briefly served in the Sikh army in the 1820s, before mounting his own political campaign in Afghanistan [Moorcroft and Trebeck \(1841\)](#). One of the more unusual in the history of Westerners in Western Asia. Martin Honigberger was a Transylvanian physician who arrived at Lahore as a doctor and left a detailed account of the court and its ruler. In 1852, he wrote a book which is one of the most reliable eyewitness accounts of Ranjit Singh and his entourage.

They were a mix of officers, some of whom were of colour and whose birthplaces have not been clearly established, indicating a court that was open to talent regardless of its nationality. Competence was the test of Ranjit Singh and not origin.

9. THE FAUJ-I-AIN, THE EUROPEANS ACTUALLY BUILT

By the 1830s, the regular army which the European officers helped establish was a formidable military force. British observers, both military and civilian, of the 19th century commented that the Sikh army was well disciplined and powerful and that they were causing some worry [Osborne \(1840\)](#). The units that Ventura and his cohorts had trained were able to carry out complicated manoeuvres, maintain formations in gunfire and use artillery with a degree of accuracy that had not been realised by the Sikh troops that had previously been trained.

At the height of its strength the Fauj-i-Ain had between 30,000 and 40,000 soldiers, divided into infantry, cavalry and artillery units. The infantry was organised into a battalion of about 800 men, and companies. The infantry consisted of battalions of approximately 800 men, organised into companies, similar to the French format. Although the cavalry no longer possessed the traditional character it had, it was more disciplined than the Misl had been. The artillery was very well organised and technically better, in a number of important aspects, than could most other South Asian rulers at the same time.

The Europeans didn't do it, and they could not do it, in one fell swoop change the culture of the army. The Sikh soldiers, who were filling the ranks of the Fauj-i-Ain were not blank-cut. They had their own traditions, loyalties and notions of military honour. The European officers had to deal with those traditions time and time again and the army they created was a hybrid, a mix of European drill and Sikh martial culture. This mixture, in fact, was one of the reasons for its success, perhaps.

10. COURT LIFE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The European officers at Lahore were not just technicians who arrived at the parade ground and then went back to some other part of the city inhabited by Europeans [Osborne \(1840\)](#). They were resident at the court, active in its ceremonies, on the Maharaja's durbar, and were involved in the intricate affairs and clannish rivalries of court life at the time.

Some of them acquired a knowledge of the two official languages of the court, Punjabi or Persian. Allard as mentioned had married a Punjabi girl and lived at Lahore with their family. Ventura was also able to develop long-term relationships at court and was obviously trusted by Ranjit Singh beyond the scope of his military service. The ceremonies held in court had no place for these European officers as Europeans; they were amirs of the realm, part of the court but with their own status and responsibilities.

It was not a one-way exchange [Steinbach \(1845\)](#). The Europeans came with their military expertise, but they also went back with something else: knowledge of a non-European society that figured in the lives and writings of several of them for the remainder of their existence. With Allard's family ties, his European and Punjabi identities were, for all intents and purposes, unbreakable by the time of his death.

11. EUROPE'S REACH TO THE LIMITS

It would be an exaggeration to overestimate the impact of the European officers on the Sikh Empire. Throughout the process Ranjit Singh was in masterful command. He used the Europeans with a purpose and rewarded them handsomely, and he let them go, or put them in their place, when they went too far. Some officers

who wanted a say in the government instead of being military men were not interested in sharing power with the Maharaja of Patiala.

The European officers had to operate in an established institutional framework as well. The Sikh court was independent in terms of administration, tax, land and military structures. The Europeans did not hold a privileged position outside of the structure, they held a position inside. There was a class of senior Sikh Sardars, who had their own army followers, and had their rights and claims to the Maharaja's attention, and these were not affected by the influx of foreign soldiers. The Fauj-i-Ain was not meant to replace the existing system of military organization but was a new entity.

The boundaries were only detected after the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839. His death led to political turmoil which culminated in the Anglo-Sikh Wars which revealed the extent to which his army was effective because of his ability to hold together a fractured group of forces [Suri \(1961\)](#). The European officers could raise battalions, but they were incapable of creating a political intelligence that had been responsible for the success of the Sikh Empire.

12. CONCLUSION

The European officers at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is one of the most interesting and unique events in the history of nineteenth century South Asia. Unlike many Europeans who worked for the colonial powers, the people who worked for Ranjit Singh were not just colonial power agents. Some had previously served under European colonial powers, especially under the French and the British during the Napoleonic wars, but they were mostly recruited as military experts, engineers and administrators under the Sikh ruler. But in Punjab, what they did was not due to colonial domination, but because they were able to work in a mutually beneficial relationship where their expertise was recognised and rewarded by the Sikh state.

In a time when the European armies were using the latest technology, better organisation and discipline to make great strides, Maharaja Ranjit Singh discerned the value of modernising his military forces. To bolster his kingdom, he brought in a number of experienced European officers, including generals from France and Italy to train and reorganize parts of his Sikh army. They played a significant role in the creation of the regular army of the Sikh Empire, called the Fauj-i-Ain. The Sikh army was one of the most powerful armies in Asia with the use of modern drill, advancement in artillery, and disciplined infantry formations.

These reforms proved successful in the military strength of the Sikh empire in Ranjit Singh's reign and after. The eventual success of British rule over the Sikh state after the Maharaja's death in 1839 does not reflect poorly on the army itself. The political unrest, the division of the Sikh leadership and the massive resources of the British East India Company were the main factors that led to the annexation of Punjab. The Sikh army fought bravely and skilfully during the Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1845-46 and 1848-49. Later many British commanders admitted that they were dealing with one of the best disciplined and bravely fought Indian armies.

In more general terms, the Sikh experience shows how non-European states acquired military knowledge from the West but could do so without losing their independence or sense of identity. Ranjit Singh did not slavishly copy the European models or turn down innovations from foreign sources. Rather he deliberately made military good points into a political and military system that he wanted. The European officers were thus not responsible for developing the military system of the Sikhs, but they were part of a grand scheme under the direction of the Maharaja.

This is a selective adaptation which accentuates Ranjit Singh's vision, pragmatism and confidence as a ruler who managed to integrate indigenous cultures with global influence to make his empire strong.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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