

Treaty of Lahore and Beyond: Punjab from Sovereignty to Subjugation

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Abstract

This article investigates into post-First Anglo-Sikh War's Punjab. The Treaty of Lahore, signed on March 9, 1846, signified a substantial shift in the region's political landscape. It initiated a sequence of events that led to the gradual decline of the Sikh sovereignty and the growing domination of the British East India Company. The main clauses of the treaty including territorial cessions, indemnity payments, reduction of the Khalsa, and appointing a British Resident in Lahore, had immediate and long-term consequences for the Punjab. The Treaty paved the way for British imperial penetration and consolidation leading to eventual annexation of the Punjab in 1849. The article examines complex interplay of diplomacy, conflict, and colonial ambition that reshaped the region's trajectory. This study of the Treaty of Lahore and its aftermath accentuates the significant historical shifts that paved the way for British supremacy in the Punjab.

Keywords: Khalsa Dal, Khalsa Sarkar, Ranjit Singh, Lahore Darbar, doctrine of escheat, Sindhanwalia, Sukerchakia, Misls, and Dalip Singh

Punjab's coherence under Ranjit Singh largely relied on his personality. He while consolidating his power brought an end to the theocratic confederacy of the Sikhs.¹ Ranjit founded a military state, in which the army played a central role in the perpetuation of the regime and a key political actor.² The rise of the Sukerchakia *misl*,³ under the ancestors of Ranjit Singh, and the rise to power of Ranjit transformed the *Khalsa Dal* into a *Khalsa Sarkar* and built an empire in north-west India.⁴ Apart from his army, his *Darbar* comprised of talented men from all class, creed and religion. Almost half of the *Darbar* was comprised of Hindus and Muslim officials.⁵ The five distinct groups which comprised his court included; Dogra Rajputs, Sikhs, Hindus including Brahmins, Muslims and Europeans.⁶ The above composition of the Sikh Court suggests that Ranjit by choosing his councillors, civil and military, from widely differing communities and classes, eliminated any chance of conspiracy against supremacy. Secondly, a Court constituted on such a basis, displayed incapacity for presenting an agreed attitude on vital matters confronting the state; and hence needed the direction of one mastermind.⁷ The Punjab management under Ranjit comprised his efficient administration of *Khalsa* and *Darbar*. He had kept a balance in the accumulation of power and wealth among his commanders and courtiers. The *Khalsa* was engaged in many administrative assignments as well and the *Darbar* helped him execute his orders and working of various departments. But after Ranjit, there was a disorder in the balance of power that led to a decline in the Sikh rule.

The rapid decline of the Sikh kingdom after a prolonged period of state formation (1707-65), confederacy (1765-99), and monarchy (1799-1849) were due to four main factors.⁸ Firstly, Ranjit Singh's death triggered the war of succession that prevented the monarchy from asserting itself vis-à-vis the army. The succession dispute brought into sharp focus another structural weakness in the kingdom's polity, a deeper political issue -namely, the antagonism between the older chieftain families and the largely non-

Sikh, and often non-Punjabi, “new staff/parvenu” chieftains. It had been a measure of Ranjit Singh’s political skill that, having consciously fostered this antagonism, he was able to keep it on a slow boil and derive personal advantage from it.⁹ When Ranjit died in 1839 the opportunity was seized by the chieftains to align themselves in new “combinations” in support of one or other of the several claimants to the *gaddi* (throne) and defence of their interests. Yet this double contest; between the sons of the deceased *Maharaja*, and between the established and the parvenu chieftains, was to prove inconclusive. This led to the emergence of the Sikh army as an alternative political force. Sikh army’s interference led to the disastrous First Anglo-Sikh War and consequently to the beginnings of British interference in the internal affairs of the kingdom.¹⁰ Secondly, as the army made or broke regimes, its internal discipline relaxed and it extorted increases in the payroll from the government. Thirdly, the proximity of the British, their humiliating defeat in Afghanistan (1839-42) notwithstanding meant that the Sikh kingdom did not have enough time to resolve its crisis of succession. Fourthly, the rival factions led by Chand Kaur and Sher Singh invited British intervention to reduce the power of their rampaging Sikh army and undercut vital contenders.¹¹

Along with these factors’ situation in the Punjab countryside after 1839 needs to be examined to understand the demise of the Sikh kingdom. The tumultuous events at the capital had a profound impact on the stability and prosperity of the countryside. In 1839, minor insurrections broke out in the tributary Rajput States of the lower Himalayas and the vicinity of Tank on the far side of the Indus.¹² On the near side of the Indus, the Baloch rebelled in 1842 and the Ghebas in 1845.¹³ The pastoral tribes of the lower Sutlej and Ravi took advantage of the political situation at Lahore to resume their old predatory habits first in 1843, and later in 1845.¹⁴ Several chieftains in the countryside used the opportunity provided by the events at the capital to settle old scores with rival families.¹⁵ None of

these disturbances remained unchecked for long, but while they lasted they posed a serious problem for the provincial administrators. Hence in the parts of the countryside after 1839 the centrifugal tendencies of Punjabi political culture were once again overtaking its centripetal tendencies. Throughout the 1840s it became increasingly evident that, left to its inclinations, “the kingdom would shortly disintegrate into several parts; a Khatri State at Multan, a Dogra State in the Jammu hills, an autonomous trans-Indus frontier, and a small, pure Sikh State in the central districts”.¹⁶

To Ranjit and his successors in particular, and the Punjabi populace in general, it had seemed that the British had all along been bent on encircling the kingdom with a view to its absorption at an appropriate moment. Nor was evidence of British ambition lacking, as almost every British Governor-General since Wellesley (1798-1805) had contributed to their kingdom’s encirclement. Wellesley had sanctioned Lord Lake’s pursuit of Holkar, the remaining Maratha warlord, across the Sutlej to Amritsar (1804-5). Minto (1807-12) had blocked Sikh expansion into the Cis-Sutlej region by moving British troops up to Karnal and Haryana, by placing the Cis-Sutlej chieftains under British protection, and by establishing a British garrison and Political Agency at Ludhiana (1808-10). Auckland (1836-42), using the doctrine of escheat (later made famous by Dalhousie as the doctrine of Lapse), had made Ferozepur, on the right bank of the Sutlej to the south of Lahore, a British cantonment (1838), thereby directly threatening the Sikh capital. Ellenborough (1842-44) had used the Punjab as a military highway for the Afghanistan expedition (1838-42), the purpose of which had been to place a British puppet on the throne at Kabul, and had later scrapped the Tripartite Treaty (between the British, the Sikhs and Shah Shuja) without consulting the Sikhs (1842). Ellenborough had also sanctioned Napier’s malapert annexation of Sindh (1843). Hardinge (1844-48), the veteran of the Napoleonic wars, had taken the aggressive steps of doubling the total strength of

British troops along the Sutlej border and assembling a fleet of boats that could be used to form a pontoon bridge across the river (1844-5). There is little wonder, then, that the Sikhs had come to regard war with the British as being just a matter of time.¹⁷

Late in 1845, when Anglo-Sikh tensions along the Sutlej border, at last, reached breaking point, the army *panchayats* placed themselves under the command of the *Darbar* chieftains whom they had previously treated with contempt. The *Darbar* chieftains, no less than the British, saw in the coming war an opportunity to break the over-powerful army, and so they treacherously cooperated in its defeat by a numerically inferior British army.¹⁸ The factional violence at the Lahore *Darbar* during the six-and-a-half years between Ranjit's demise and the outbreak of the First Anglo-Sikh War had not settled anything. Yet the cost in lives of the kingdom's political elite had been quite appalling: two *Maharajas*, one queen, four princes, and thirty-six prominent chieftains (including three *vazirs*). Some families, like the Sindhanwalias and the Sukerchakias¹⁹, had lost most of their senior males.²⁰

The causes and events of the First and Second Anglo-Sikh Wars²¹ are beyond the scope of this paper. The focus in this study is to examine the consequences of the treaty signed after the First Anglo-Sikh War. The war was fought not for possession of the Punjab but the destruction of Sikh military power. The first large scale military encounter between the Sikhs and the British took place in December 1845. The highly contested battles at Mudki (December 18, 1845), Ferozeshah (December 21-22, 1845), Aliwal (January 1846) and Sabraon (February 10, 1846) resulted in British hegemony defeating the Sikhs. The peace treaty of Lahore (March 1846) further strengthened British hold in the Punjab. The finish of the First Anglo-Sikh War brought about the Treaty of Lahore (March 09, 1846). Sikhs were made to give up the significant district (the Jullundur Doab) between the Beas River and Sutlej River. The Lahore

Darbar was also required to pay an indemnity of fifteen million rupees. As it couldn't promptly raise this total, it surrendered Kashmir, Hazarah and every one of the posts, domains, rights and interests in the hills situated between the Rivers Beas and Indus to the British. In a later separate arrangement (the Treaty of Amritsar), the *Raja* of Jammu, Gulab Singh, bought Kashmir from the East India Company for an instalment of 7.5 million rupees and was conceded the title *Maharaja* of Jammu and Kashmir.²² *Maharaja* Dalip Singh continued as the sovereign of the Punjab and his mother, Maharani Jindan Kaur, persisted as Regent.

In a letter to Hobhouse in September 1846, Hardinge outlined the three alternative courses of action that had been open to him.²³ The first was to annex the whole kingdom up to the Peshawar border. This certainly would have solved the problem of pacifying the Punjab, but it would have brought the British into direct contact with an even more turbulent frontier beyond the Indus. Moreover, possession of the Punjab would have been a source of weakness rather than strength at this particular period of British rule in India. Given the fact that the Punjab rivers were flooded for half of every year, occupation of the region would have required the stationing of a separate British force in each of the *doabs*. It was also estimated that military and civil administrative costs would exceed the total revenues of the Punjab by more than one million sterling, at a time when opium revenue was precarious and the Company was already suffering an annual fiscal deficiency of that amount.

The second course was to recover the costs of the war by annexing the territory up to the Ravi (the heartland of Sikh power), and by dividing the three remaining *doabs* into smaller principalities. Hardinge rejected this course because frequent and inconvenient interference on the part of the British would be required to keep these small principalities in check. The third course of action was to weaken the Sikh kingdom by depriving it of one-third of its territory (the Jullundur Doab alone was worth about Rs 20

lakhs per annum in revenue) and obliging it to reduce its armed strength considerably. The weakened kingdom could still be expected to act as a non-Muslim buffer State without the power to be a disruptive force.²⁴

Privately, Hardinge admitted as,

In all our measures taken during the minority [he wrote to Henry Lawrence on October 23, 1847], we must bear in mind that by the Treaty of Lahore, March 1846, the Punjab never was intended to be an independent State. By the clause I added, the chief of the State can neither make war nor peace, nor exchange nor sell an acre of territory, nor admit a European officer, nor refuse us a thoroughfare through his territories, nor, perform any act (except its internal administration) without our permission. In fact, the native Prince is in fetters, and under our protection, and must do our bidding.²⁵

The British army moved across the Sutlej after the Battle of Sabraon and occupied the Sikh capital on February 20, 1846. By the Treaty of Lahore, signed on March 9, 1846 by Frederick Currie (1799-1875) and Henry Montgomery Lawrence (1806-1857)²⁶ on behalf of the British Government, and by seven *Darbar* chieftains on behalf of *Maharaja* Dalip Singh, the Lahore Government formally surrendered to the British its Cis-Sutlej estates and the Trans-Sutlej province (the Jullundur Doab) and agreed to the payment of an indemnity of Rs 1.5 *crores* (£1.5 million).²⁷ Since the Lahore Government would probably not be able to pay this sum, additional territories situated in the hills between the Beas and the Indus, including the provinces of Kashmir and Hazara, were surrendered as equivalent to one crore rupees. A few days later on March 16, 1846, Henry's designation was changed to the Governor-General's Agent on the North-West Frontier, and he was directed to supervise

the Cis and Trans-Sutlej district not only in political affairs but also in revenue and judicial administration.²⁸

Other important articles of the treaty stipulated that the Sikh army should be pruned back to 20,000 infantry and 12,000 cavalry; that the British should control tolls and ferries on the rivers Beas and Sutlej as far as the Indus confluence; that British troops should have free passage through the *Maharaja's* territories; that the Lahore Government would recognise the independent sovereignty of Raja Gulab Singh Dogra in such territories as the British Government decided to makeover to him; and that, while the British Government would not exercise any interference in the internal administration of the Lahore State, the Governor-General would exercise the right of giving his advice on any matter that might be referred to him.²⁹

Two days later some supplementary articles were added to the Treaty. One stipulated that at the Lahore Government's solicitation a British force would remain at Lahore until the end of the year to protect the minor *Maharaja* and the citizens of his capital during the reorganisation of the Sikh army. Another clause provided the Lahore Government with the assistance of the local British authorities for the recovery of revenue arrears due from the *kardars*, *ijaradars* and *nazims*. On March 16, 1846, a separate treaty was signed by Raja Gulab Singh Dogra and the British Government. The provinces of Kashmir and Hazara, which the British had taken in part payment of the war indemnity, were made over to the Raja and his lineal male heirs in perpetuity in return for the payment of seventy-five *lakhs rupees* (£750,000) and the acknowledgement of British supremacy in a separate treaty. With the signing of these treaties, an important chapter in the history of the Punjab came to a close.³⁰

By signing the second Treaty of Lahore at Bhairawal on December 22, 1846, the British Government undertook the maintenance of the administration and the protection of

the *Maharaja* Dalip Singh during his minority. The Regent *Maharani* Jind Kaur was pensioned off.³¹ This Treaty gave the British Resident Henry unlimited authority in all matters of internal administration and external relations during the *Maharaja's* minority which would have terminated on 4 September 1854.³² The Council of Regency could be removed by the Governor-General's order. The Council was merely an advisory body, entirely under the guidance and control of the Resident, whose power extended to every sphere of administration. The members were bound to carry out the policy mapped out by him and were completely dependent on his pleasure for their tenure of office. In other words, the power of the Resident extended over every department and to any extent.³³ The entire civil and military administration of the country was vested with him. He could disband and recruit Sikh armies or replace them with British troops throughout the Punjab.³⁴

Along with the administration team comprised of the Sikh aristocracy and the British officers' Henry also assured of support from the British forces in case of any noncompliance by the native agency. The British had stationed 10,000 men at Lahore; 12,000 at Jullundur, 5,000 at Ferozepur, 3,000 at Ludhiana; 3 European Regiments in hills and 7,000 men at Ambala. It was an overwhelming force to crush any attempt or combination against British power.³⁵ On the other hand, the Sikh force which in 1845 was about 85,000 and 300 guns was reduced to 24,000 regular and 10,000 irregular troops, the majority of them employed in the North-West Frontier. In the words of Hardinge, the Punjab never by the Treaty of Lahore "intended to be an independent state". *Maharaja* Dalip Singh was in "fetters".³⁶ By the 1840s, the Court of Directors pursued "an aggressive policy towards the Indian states" and that was followed by each Governor-General.³⁷

Henry remained in office till November 1847. He then left the Punjab on account of ill-health; John Laird Mair Lawrence (1811-1879) took the office in his absence as

interim management.³⁸ Currie assumed charge of Resident of the Punjab on April 6, 1848.³⁹ During his term in office, there was some resistance to the British policies by the Local chiefs, resulting in the Second Anglo-Sikh War. On February 1, 1849, Henry assumed the charge of the Residency, by that time the British had successfully dealt with the resisting forces. During the Residency period, Hardinge was succeeded by Lord James Andrew Browne Ramsay, Xth Earl, Marquess of Dalhousie (1812-186) on January 12, 1848. Dalhousie was an imperialist at heart. He wanted the Punjab to be a part of the British empire.

The British Government was eager to annex the Punjab on account of its economic as well as political aspects. Cotton of the Punjab was one of the chief attractions for the British who foresaw in the land of five rivers a favourable market for the consumption of their goods. The Punjab also offered vast opportunities of employment for a large number of British civilians and politicians with handsome salaries, allowances, furloughs and pensions. It also offered facilities of extensive cantonments and mountainous training grounds for the British troops. Strategically the Punjab could serve the British if annexed as a defending frontier to engage the Russian expansion towards India, particularly the British power stations in India.

To conclude, from Treaty of Lahore until the Treaty of Bhairawal, the British devised the policy to weaken the *Khalsa* power and establish their authority in the Punjab. The Treaty of Bhairawal led to the reduction of the Sikh army into one-fourth of its former strength in number. Also, the riches of Jalandhar doab were taken away to reduce the resources of the State that sustained the Sikh army resources of the state. According to the treaty Jammu was given to Gulab Singh along with Kashmir and Hazara to act as a counterpoise to the Sikh State. This arrangement was made to enable Gulab Singh to play the role of defending the Afghan frontier in collaboration with the Sikh State. The

British objectives of imperial penetration and consolidation were served with these treaties. The British troops were stationed in Lahore and the management of the Lahore was placed under the British Resident.

References

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- ² For details see, Khola Cheema, "Survival of Fittest: From *Khalsa* Identity to Military Establishment of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh," *Pakistan Vision* 19, no. 1 (2018): 191-225.
- ³ The Sukerchakia *Misl* was one of 12 Sikh *Misl*s in the Punjab during the eighteenth-century concentrated in Gujranwala and Hafizabad district in Western Punjab (in modern- Pakistan) and ruled from (1752-1801). The Sukerchakia's last *Misldar* (commander of the *Misl*) was Ranjit Singh.
- ⁴ Ilhan Niaz, *The State During the British Raj: Imperial Governance in South Asia* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 47.
- ⁵ Faqir S. Aijazuddin, *The Resourceful Faqirs: Three Muslim Brothers at the Sikh Court of Lahore* (New Delhi: Three Rivers Publishers, 2014), 69.
- ⁶ Gulshan Lal Chopra, *The Punjab as a Sovereign State, 1799-1839* (1929: repr., Lahore: Al Biruni, 1977), 152. Among the Dogra Rajputs, Rajas Gulab Singh and his brother Dhian Singh early attracted Ranjit's attention and rapidly obtained an engrossing influence in his counsels. The Sikh element in the *Darbar* showed unmistakable signs of jealousy over this growing influence the but the rivalry between two factions remained in embryo as long as Ranjit lived, Lehna Singh Majithia and Sindhanwalia Chiefs represented this Sikh element. They were reckless, unscrupulous and selfish and formed ultimately the centre of opposition to the Dogra faction. Raja Deena Nath, Ranjit's finance minister was prominent among the Hindu group. Noteworthy among the Muslims was Fakir Aziz-ud-Din and his brothers, the former in charge of foreign affairs, and all of them cool, simple and astute men who did their jobs well and were held in high esteem. The European Generals, Ventura, Allard and Court enjoyed considerable influence and confidence of the *Maharaja* and were responsible for the introduction of western tactics and European modes of drill and discipline in the Sikh army.
- ⁷ N. M. Khilnani, *The Punjab under the Lawrences (1846-1858)* (Simla: The Punjab Government Record Office, 1951), 4.
- ⁸ Niaz, *The State During the British Raj*, 49.
- ⁹ Andrew J. Major, *Return to the Empire: Punjab under the Sikhs and British in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Sterling Publisher Private, 1996), 73.
- ¹⁰ Andrew. J. Major, "The Punjab Chieftains and the Transition from Sikh Rule to British Rule," in *The Political Inheritance of Pakistan*, ed. D. A. Low (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 57.
- ¹¹ Niaz, *The State During the British Raj*, 49.

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- ¹² Ganda Singh, ed., *The Panjab in 1839-40, Selections from the Panjab Akhbars, Panjab intelligence, etc* (Amritsar: Sikh History Society, 1852), 97-8, 100-4, 125.
- ¹³ G. L. Chopra, *Chiefs and Families of Note in the Panjab*. Vol. 2 (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, 1940), 97 and 338.
- ¹⁴ *SR Montgomery 1878*, 38 cited in Major, *Return to the Empire*, 91.
- ¹⁵ Griffin, *Chiefs and Families*, Vol 1, 367; Vol 2, 338.
- ¹⁶ See Lord Ellenborough's correspondence with the Duke of Wellington, October 20 and December 18, 1843, and with Major C.M. Broadfoot, British Political Agent at Ludhiana, November 18, 1844, in Bikrama Jit Hasrat, ed., *The Panjab Papers: Selections from the Private Papers of Lord Auckland, Lord Ellenborough, Viscount Hardinge, and the Marquis of Dalhousie, 1839-1849 on the Sikhs* (Hoshiarpur: V.V. Research Institute, 1970), 67, 69, 78.
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- ¹⁸ Major, "The Panjab Chieftains and the Transition," 60.
- ¹⁹ For details on Sindhanwalias and the Sukerchakias see, Lepel Henry Griffin, *Ranjit Singh and the Sikh Barrier between our Growing Empire and Central Asia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916), 153-155.
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- ²¹ For details on the military encounters during the wars see, Haig and Turner, *Punjab Military History in the 19th Century* and J. H. Lawrence Archer, *Commentaries on the Panjab Campaign 1848-49, Including some Addition to the History of the Second Sikh War from Original Sources*. (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1878).
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- ²³ Hardinge to Hobhouse (Private), September 2, in Hasrat, *The Panjab Papers*, 417.
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- ²⁵ Herbert Benjamin Edwardes and Herman Merivale, *Life of Sir Henry Lawrence* Vol. 1 (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1872), 417.
- ²⁶ For the life of Henry and John Lawrence in India see Michael Edwardes, *The Necessary Hell* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1958).
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- ³⁰ Treaty with Gulab Singh Dogra in Cunningham, *History of Sikhs*, Appendix, XXXVI.
- ³¹ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs (1839-1974)* Vol. 2 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974), 59-60. However, Maharani Jindan was given Rs 1.5 lakh a year as pension as mentioned in Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, 125.
- ³² Charles Gough and Arthur D. Innes, *The Sikhs and the Sikh Wars: The Rise, Conquest and Annexation of the Punjab State* (London: A. D. Innes & Co., 1897), 124.
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- ³⁶ Hardinge to Queen, July 27, 1847 in Hasrat, *The Punjab Papers*, 119-120.
- ³⁷ Fauja Singh, *Some Aspects of State and Society under Ranjit Singh* (New Delhi: Master Publication, 1982), 149-50.
- ³⁸ He had been given the charge of the Commissioner of Jullunder Doab after the First-Anglo Sikh War and had initiated his administration in that rejoin. For details see H. L. O. Garret, *John Lawrence as Commissioner of the Jullunur Doab (1849-49)* (Lahore: Government of Punjab, 1930).
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