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# Cultural Memory And Amnesia Of Sirhind During Mughal Empire Rise And Fall Of Sikh Empire

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## Abstract

Most of the Mughal emperors did not resort to the narrow religious policy of the Delhi Sultanate. They rather adopted a liberal and tolerant policy. Actually, the Mughal rulers were immensely influenced by the liberal current of the 14th and 15th centuries; hence they treated all the inhabitants and followers of different religions equally. During the Mughal period, all the famous religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikh, Buddha, Jain, and Christianity were prevalent. The number of followers of Hinduism was the largest in the country. Although the traditional form of Hindu religion continued most of the Hindus adopted the Bhakti cult. Islam was also divided into two parts: liberal and orthodox. The rise of Sikhism and the expansion of Christianity were also significant events of this age. However, formally, Islam continued to be the religion of the state.

**Keywords:** Sirhind, Mughal, culture, rise, Sikh, fall.

## Introduction

Sirhind was known for dozens of saints, scholars, poets, historians, calligraphers, and scribes who lived there. This city is famous to Muslims for the Great saint Imam-e-Rabbani Shaykh Ahmad al-Faruqi al-Sirhindi (R.) (1564–1624). He was an Indian Islamic scholar of Arab origin, a Hanafi jurist, and a prominent member of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Many buildings survive from this period, including Aam Khas Bagh;<sup>1</sup> it is said that in its heyday, the city had 360 mosques, gardens, tombs, caravansarais, and wells.

During the Mughal period, Hinduism was divided into several sects. Shaivism and Vaishnavism were the most popular forms in vague but they too were further divided into many other sub-sects and they worshipped different gods and goddesses. Vedic religion had lost its significance by now. Devi or Shakti worship, a new form of worship of goddess Durga, Kali, or Bhairavi, also began to gain prominence during this period. A Muslim chronicler Muhsin Fani has also referred to magic (Tantra) and totem which cropped into various branches of the Shaiv cult. Besides Shaivism, Vaishnavism was also divided into two main branches known as the Rama cult and Krishna cult. Chaitanya,

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<sup>1</sup> [Aam Khas bagh | SIRHIND INFO](http://www.web.archive.org). *web.archive.org*. 1 December 2012. Retrieved 12 November 2021.

Vallabhacharya, Swami Hari Dass, and Mira Bai were prominent saints of the Krishna cult. Community Kirtan and Krishna Lila (Rasliila) were prominent features of this cult. This cult was very famous in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Uttar Pradesh and worshipped Chaitanya as Gaurang Mahaprabhu, a joint incarnation of Krishan and Radha. Meera Bai and Surdas also added to its popularity with their Bhakti songs.

Tulsidas was the most prominent saint of the Rama cult. R.C. Majumdar and Ray Chaudhary have pointed out about Tulsidas, "Among the writers of the Rama cult, the most illustrious was Tulsidas. He was not merely a poet of a high order, but a spiritual teacher of the people of Hindustan, whereas his name has become a household word and his memory is worshipped by millions." His best creation Ram Charitmanas is appreciated alike even today by every class of the Hindu community, whether high or low, rich or poor, young or old.

Islam continued to be the religion of the state during the Mughal period. The Shiah, the Sunnis, the Khojas and the Sufis were its significant branches. In comparison to Snnis and Shias the Sufis were liberal in their religious outlook and they emphasized Bhakti and love of God. The Chishti cult of Sufism was greatly influenced by the philosophy of Vedanta. The followers of Islam consider the relation of man and God as that between a slave and his maser but the followers of the Sufi sect take it as that of a lover and beloved. Like the followers of Jainism, they preferred non-violence, meditation, and physical penance. The other famous sects of Sufism were Suhravardi, Kadiri, and Nakshbandi. The liberal attitude of these saints brought the rival cultures quite close to each other. Dr. J. N. Sarkar has remarked, "Sufi philosophy tended to bring the ruling sect and the dominated people closer together."

Sheikh Salim Chishti, Sheikh Abdul Kadir, Sheikh Ahmad Sarhindi, Sheikh Wali Ullah ect. Were a prominent saint of Sufism. They were the true examples of simple living and high thinking. Though the Sufi saints believed in matrimony and led a family life, they did not demand anything from anybody and preferred poverty to begging. They opened the door of salvation for all without any distinction of caste and creed and hence attained a lot of popularity during the Mughal period.

Guru Nanak was the founder of the Sikh cult. He opposed casteism, religious ritualism, fasts and pilgrimages. He believed that salvation could be achieved by worshipping the Guru and by obtaining his blessings. Nanak did not claim to have established a new sect nor he give any name to it. Guru Nanak breathed his last in A.D. 1539 and nine Gurus, viz, Guru Angad (1538-1552), Guru Ammar Das (1572-1574), Guru Ram (1574-1581), Guru Arjun Dev (1581-1606), Guru Hargovind (1606-1645), Guru Tegh Bahadur (1645-1675), and Guru Govind Singh (1675-1708) sat on the gaddi one after the other.

Some of the Gurus raised their voices against the atrocities of the Muslim rulers as well as their officials and sacrificed their lives. Emperor Akbar, being a liberal ruler, granted some land to Guru Ram and Arjun Dev and permitted the construction of Har Mandir at

Amritsar but Jahangir got Guru Arjun assassinated in A.D. 1606 on the charge of providing help to the rebel prince Khusrau. His successor Guru Har Govind also remained in prison in the fort of Gwalior but was released after some time. After the murder of Guru Arjun, the Sikhs began to keep weapons with them and many battles were fought between the Sikhs and the Mughals during the regime of Shahjahan. Aurangzed got Guru Tegh Bahadur murdered on the charge of treason, hence his successor Guru Govind Singh propounded 'Khalsa Panth' and started opposing the Mughals. Though the Guru was killed in A.D. 1708 just one year after the death of Aurangzeb his followers continued to undermine the Mughal empire in the succeeding years.

Before the establishment of the Mughal Empire in India, the followers of Christianity had entered India. They had their colonies and churches on the Malaba coast. In the sixteenth century, several religious preachers and followers of the Je suit cult came to India with the Portuguese sailors, traders, and invaders. They established Catholic Church in India and began to preach Catholicism. In A. D. 1510, the Portuguese established their control over Goa and it became the center of the Catholic religion in due course of time. The Portuguese converted both Hindus and Muslims into the fold of Christianity by force. Their behavior towards non-Christians was very cruel. They raised their churches in places of mosques and temples in Goa, Daman, and Diu. In A.D. 1540, a religious court was established in Goa. Mughal emperors Akbar and Jahangir permitted the Catholics to construct their churches in Agra and Lahore. Jahangir also permitted them to preach and expand their religion. The sons of prince Daniyal were converted to Christianity along with a large number of Indians. It is said that Father Xavier converted at least 7, 00,000 people. It annoyed Shahjahan and he forced the Christians of Bengal to select between death and Islam. As Aurangzeb was a fanatic ruler, he did not permit the Christians to preach their religion anymore.

### **Rise and fall of Sikhs**

The rise of the Sikhs can be traced back to the chaotic political milieu of northern India precipitated by the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in the early 18th century. Though Mughal power attained its zenith under Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707), the seeds of its downfall were also sown during his reign. Though a diligent ruler, Aurangzeb was fanatical in advancing the cause of Islam in India at the expense of his Hindu subjects. The reimposition of the jizya,<sup>2</sup> destruction of Hindu temples, and other discriminatory practices against non-Muslims<sup>3</sup> through state-issued firmans,<sup>4</sup> undermined the fragile compact<sup>5</sup> with their Hindu subjects the Mughal state depended upon to govern. Soon the

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<sup>2</sup> This tax had been abolished in the reign of Akbar, Aurangzeb's great-grandfather as a gesture of conciliation and goodwill to his Hindu subjects.

<sup>3</sup> S.R. Sharma, *Mughal Empire in India - A Systematic Study including Source Material* (Agra, India: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 1934), [Page 389-390].

<sup>4</sup> Aurangzeb's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam also applied to his personal life: he dismissed artists, dancers and musicians from the court, surrounding himself with instead, orthodox ulema and qadis. He even went as far as prohibiting alcohol and opium sale and consumption across his empire (with dubious success).

<sup>5</sup> John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), [Page 343-344].

Marathas, Rajputs,<sup>6</sup> and Jats were in rebellion, forcing Aurangzeb's successors to commit vast state resources to quell the uprisings. Capitalizing on the breakdown of imperial authority, Mughal governors (nizams) across the empire from Bengal to Hyderabad also began to assert their independence.<sup>7</sup> The Marathas in particular, under their wily leader Shivaji, emerged as the Mughals' most tenacious foe. As imperial power faded, the Marathas replaced them as the preeminent power on the subcontinent.<sup>8</sup>

The Sikhs arose in the 15th century as a movement focused on religious and social reform but after the executions of their 7th and 9th Gurus<sup>9</sup> by the Mughals, they increasingly found themselves victims of imperial persecution. In response, Guru Gobind Singh organized the Sikhs into the Khalsa, a martial brotherhood based on egalitarian, republican principles, and committed them to resist Mughal tyranny and forced conversion to Islam. After his death,<sup>10</sup> his disciple Banda Singh Bahadur took up the mantle of leadership and continued the struggle but his efforts incurred a fierce imperial backlash. In 1716, the Mughals captured and executed Banda Singh and scattered the Sikhs, who faded from the political scene temporarily.

The invasion of Nadir Shah Afshar in 1738 saw the destruction of the Mughal army at Karnal (1739) and the sack of Delhi. Mughal authority was now effectively reduced to just Delhi and its surrounds.<sup>11</sup> Before long, another invader crossed into India in the form of Ahmad Shah Durrani. The Afghans saw India as an easy source of plunder and undertook eight invasions of the subcontinent between 1748 and 1767, devastating the cities of northern India and attaching the Punjab and Kashmir to his empire.<sup>12</sup> When the Marathas attempted to drive him out, they were trounced at Panipat in 1761. The Afghans persecuted the Sikhs viciously wherever they found them;<sup>13</sup> Ahmad Shah, eager to demoralize their proud warriors, demolished their holiest shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, and desecrated its sacred pool with the carcasses of dead cows.<sup>14</sup> These affronts however merely galvanized the Sikhs to resist and following his death in 1772, Sikh war-bands retook much of Punjab.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert C. Hallissey, *The Rajput Rebellion Against Aurangzeb - A Study of the Mughal Empire in the Seventeenth Century India* (London: University of Missouri Press, 1977), [Page 40-46].

<sup>7</sup> S.R. Sharma, *Mughal Empire in India - A Systematic Study including Source Material* (Agra, India: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 1934), [Page 571-574].

<sup>8</sup> James Grant Duff, Esq., *A History of the Mahrattas* (London: A & R Spottiswoode, 1826), 2: [Page 5-11].

<sup>9</sup> The 7th Guru, Arjan Dev was martyred for offering sanctuary to a son of Jahangir who had rebelled against his father. The 9th Guru, Tegh Bahadur was martyred for his friendship with Dara Shikoh, Aurangzeb's brother during a civil war between them over Shah Jahan's throne. Aurangzeb was also outraged that Muslims had been converting to Sikhism.

<sup>10</sup> Guru Gobind Singh was assassinated by Pathans in 1708, but as he lay dying, he told his followers not to appoint a new Guru but to rely upon the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib for spiritual guidance from then on.

<sup>11</sup> Syed Sami Ahmad, *The End of Muslim Rule in India*. (Karachi, Pakistan: Tru-Prints, 1997), [Page 3-4].

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan - A Cultural and Political History*. (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), [Page 99-100].

<sup>13</sup> Ganda Singh, *Ahmad Shah Durrani - Father of Modern Afghanistan* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1959), [Page 281-282].

<sup>14</sup> Henry T. Prinsep, comp., *Origin of the Sikh Power in the Punjab and the Political Life of Muha-Raja Runjeet Singh* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1834), [Page 25].

Here, they gradually coalesced into twelve misls,<sup>15</sup> independent polities units that vied for power and territory. By 1760, the rulers of Sukerchakia established control over the doab<sup>16</sup> of the Ravi and Chenab rivers. In 1799, its 19-year-old misldar, Ranjit Singh<sup>17</sup> captured Lahore, the biggest city of Punjab, and quickly brought the rest of the misls under his rule. With the acquisition of Amritsar in 1801, Ranjit Singh also claimed the religious legitimacy he needed to be crowned Maharaja.

Ranjit Singh then extended his control over neighboring Jammu, which was ruled by the Hindu Dogras. This campaign brought into his service, the Dogra brothers: Dhyansingh, Gulab Singh, and Suchet Singh. Impressed with their leadership and martial prowess, the Maharaja granted them jagirs<sup>18</sup> and hired them to his court.<sup>19</sup> Possessing shrewd political acumen, the brothers soon gained the confidence of the Maharaja, accruing much wealth and influence in the Lahore Durbar.<sup>20</sup>

In 1822, Ranjit Singh anointed Gulab Singh as Raja of Jammu<sup>21</sup> while Dhyansingh was appointed his Wazir (Prime Minister) in 1828. Dhyansingh's young son, Hira Singh in particular, was a favorite of the Maharaja and was also appointed to important positions at court despite his tender age.<sup>22</sup>

Though restrained in Ranjit Singh's lifetime, after his death the British set in motion a well-honed strategy to rapidly undermine the cohesion of Punjab: liaising with individuals of questionable loyalty and fomenting rivalry amongst its various factions. Broader geopolitical events also played a role. The utility of Punjab as a bulwark against the French had diminished since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. The threat from Persia also faded after their failed siege of Herat in 1838. And though British efforts to prop up

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<sup>15</sup> The Misls, from the Persian word for "similar" or "alike" were twelve sovereign Sikh states in the Punjab that formed a confederacy. They were not all of equal strength and although their rulers, the misldars feuded amongst themselves, they obeyed a single legislature, the Sarbat Khalsa, where foreign policy and religious matters were decided.

<sup>16</sup> Doab is a term to refer to land situated between two rivers, i.e. between the various rivers which form the Punjab.

<sup>17</sup> Ranjit Singh Sukerchakia was the son of Maha Singh and grandson of Charat Singh who won Gujranwala for the Sukerchakia misl. In his childhood, Ranjit Singh was afflicted with smallpox; though he recovered, he was left blind in one eye and pockmarked. Nonetheless, he grew up to be a fierce warrior and skillful horseman, able to command the allegiance of his men.

<sup>18</sup> A jagir was a parcel of land or a village granted by a feudal overlord to his vassals in return for services. The vassals could thus draw their income from the revenues of the land.

<sup>19</sup> Bawa Satinder Singh, *The Jammu Fox - A Biography of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Kashmir* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), [Page 6-7].

<sup>20</sup> The British referred to Ranjit Singh's state as the Lahore state and his court the Lahore Durbar, whose opulence and luxury was a throwback to the heady days of the court of the Great Mughals at Agra.

<sup>21</sup> The post of Raja in this situation was one similar to governor. Gulab Singh was expected to provide tax revenues and manpower to Ranjit Singh when required but otherwise could govern the territory as he saw fit.

<sup>22</sup> Singh, *The Jammu Fox*, [Page 10]. Hira Singh was rumoured to be an object of sexual affection for Ranjit Singh.

Shah Shuja as their puppet in Kabul faltered,<sup>23</sup> the Afghans were too preoccupied with domestic troubles to foment trouble beyond the Khyber Pass.<sup>24</sup>

With the fall of Sind to Britain in 1843<sup>25</sup> the Sikh state now represented the last piece in the jigsaw to complete British domination of the subcontinent.<sup>26</sup>

The opportunity to advance this objective manifested in the instability at Lahore and the jingoistic, anti-British slant of the Khalsa. In 1844, Henry Hardinge was appointed Governor-General of India. A veteran of the Peninsula Wars against Napoleon, Hardinge was known to be steady and courageous. His early writings indicate some hesitation in going to war with the Sikhs.<sup>27</sup>

The assassination of Hira Singh however, finally convinced him of the Punjab State's inability to redeem itself from its own malaise.<sup>28</sup> In January 1845, he wrote,

"If we can't bolster up this Sikh state, the government of which is carried on by a drunken prostitute – her councillors- her paramours, the only other alternative is (British) occupation... The treasury has in it, we hear, not more than two months' pay... When these means are at an end most of the army will become plunderers and robbers and if we are to arrive at this result I confess I would prefer an abatement of the nuisance at one blow whilst it is an army, rather than be compelled at a later period to have to put it down in the shape of Pindaree warfare."<sup>29</sup>

In April 1848, the governor of Multan rebelled and murdered British officials stationed in his city.<sup>30</sup> Soldiers who had been left without work after the Khalsa's diminution, seized by this spirit of rebellion, rallied to his cause. Lord Dalhousie, now Governor-General, was driven to bellicosity by this development, announcing that,

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<sup>23</sup> British efforts to support Shah Shuja as ruler in Afghanistan against his rival Dost Mohammad Khan were partly due to Dost Mohammad's unwillingness to commit fully to the British and his continued dabbling with the Russians. Ellenborough thus sanctioned an invasion of Afghanistan. Though Shah Shuja was reinstated, opposition to the British presence saw the expulsion and massacre of the British troops and their families. Shah Shuja was overthrown and killed in 1842, and Dost Mohammad, who had been exiled to India was permitted to return.

<sup>24</sup> Patwant Singh and Jyoti M. Rai, *Empire of the Sikhs* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2008), [Page 228].

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence James, *Raj - The Making and Unmaking of British India* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1997), [Page 103].

<sup>26</sup> Penderel Moon, Sir, *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth Press, 1990), [Page 576-579].

<sup>27</sup> Penderel Moon, Sir, *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth Press, 1990), [Page 594].

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, [Page 595].

<sup>29</sup> Bawa Satinder Singh, *The Jammu Fox - A Biography of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Kashmir* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), [Page 100]. The Pindaris were marauding war-bands that proliferated in central India after the British defeat of the Marathas in the 2nd Anglo-Maratha War (1803-1805). The suppression of these bandits led to the third and final Anglo-Maratha War (1817-1818) that saw the dissolution of the Maratha state for good.

<sup>30</sup> Alan J. Guy, R.N.W. Thomas, and Gerard J. DeGroot, eds., *Military Miscellany I - Manuscripts from the Seven Years War, the First and Second Sikh Wars and the First World War* (London: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1996), [Page 72].

“Regards to the preservation of power...it compels us to declare war and to prosecute it to the entire submission of the Sikh Dynasty. The Government of India has without hesitation resolved that Punjab can no longer be allowed to exist as a powerful and must be destroyed. Unwarned by precedents, uninfluenced by example, the Sikh nation has called for war, and on my word, they shall have it and with a vengeance!”<sup>31</sup>

Surprisingly, under a veteran Sardar of the First Anglo-Sikh War, Sher Singh Attariwalla, the rebels initially defeated Gough’s forces at Chillianwala (January 1849).<sup>32</sup> Without further support from the now prostrate Lahore Durbar, however, the rebels failed to foment more revolts elsewhere and were subsequently crushed at Gujrat a month later, thereby ending the 2nd Anglo-Sikh War.<sup>33</sup>

By now, Dalhousie was in no mood for compromise. A fervent imperialist, Dalhousie had been strident in his criticism of the treaty arrangements after the first war. He had little respect for the Sikhs and the Durbar, and he desired nothing more than to finish them off as a political entity for good. Dalhousie also refused to retain Dalip Singh as Punjab’s titular ruler. As John Spencer Login, the British-appointed guardian of the Maharaja recounts,

“Dalhousie had little sympathy for the boy who was supposedly his protégé and who had now been relieved of his throne and his fortune. He did not see why a person who he had earlier referred to as a child notoriously surreptitious, a brat begotten of a Bhisti,<sup>34</sup> and no more a son of old Runjit Singh than Queen Victoria, should be treated with more than cursory justice.”<sup>35</sup>

Dalhousie stripped the Maharaja of all his titles and lands; provided with a pension of 1.2 million rupees, the boy was exiled to Britain, far away from his homeland, to forestall any loyalists rallying around the son of the beloved Ranjit Singh. Punjab was absorbed into British India; Dalhousie’s dream of turning India red was achieved.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusions

The rise of the Sikh Empire was so swift that historians often likened Ranjit Singh to a Napoleon in miniature, no small part due to his remarkable martial prowess and charismatic leadership. However, this association does not fully capture the complexity

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<sup>31</sup> Amarinder Singh, *The Last Sunset - The Rise & Fall of the Lahore Durbar*, Lotus Collection (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2010), [Page 230].

<sup>32</sup> J.H. Lawrence-Archer, Capt., *Commentaries on the Punjab Campaign 1848-49* (London: Wm. H. Allen & Co., 1878), [Page 48-53].

<sup>33</sup> Ian Herson, *Blood in the Sand - More Forgotten Wars of the 19th Century* (London: Sutton Publishing, 2001), [Page 116-120].

<sup>34</sup> A woman of a low caste; a reference to the ancestry of Dalip Singh’s mother. The Maharani was the daughter of the keeper of the Ranjit Singh’s hunting dogs. Dalhousie also considered Maharani Jindan a harlot and thus Dalip Singh’s ancestry doubtful.

<sup>35</sup> Singh, *The Last Sunset*, [Page 239].

<sup>36</sup> Dalhousie had been irked constantly by the fact that the map of India still included the Punjab which was not yet red (under Britain). His speeches and writings constantly mention his desire to rectify this.

of his personality. Ranjit Singh was cautious more often than reckless and avoided antagonizing enemies he was not sure he could defeat.<sup>37</sup> He molded the brave but impetuous Sikhs through iron discipline into a formidable fighting force since he knew the army could be the only guarantor of Sikh independence against foes lurking on all sides. Yet, even as he was ruthless in battle, he governed his multi-ethnic, multireligious subjects equitably and effectively.

His successors lacked his foresight and his bravery; pandering to noisome forces, they resorted to scheming to entrench their positions, all failing miserably.<sup>38</sup> The Dogras, particularly Gulab Singh, though loyal to the Maharaja during his lifetime, upon his death, seized the opportunity for self-aggrandizement. Finally, the institution of the Khalsa, the prime defender of the state, once free of Ranjit Singh's restraints, ran wild and brought about its own ignominious demise. Britain saw in Ranjit Singh a reasonable interlocutor, who bore the costs of taming the Afghans; by reducing them to impotency, he served British interests. When these interests were replaced by an uncompromising imperialist ambition in the 1840s however, the Sikh Empire was doomed.

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<sup>37</sup> S.P. Singh and J.S. Sabar, eds., *Rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh; Nature and Relevance* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2001), [Page 75-76].

<sup>38</sup> Patwant Singh and Jyoti M. Rai, *Empire of the Sikhs* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2008), [Page 225].