

Kanwal Khalid *

*Muqaddama-i Hukamā Singh:*¹ A Persian Transcript of the Sikh Era

Lahore has been a centre for arts and crafts since ages and many art forms have flourished here. It was a favourite city of almost all the rulers in its known history of two thousand years that brought wealth and prosperity, both to the city and its inhabitants. But its prosperity also proved to be a curse for its citizens because the invaders from the northwest used it as a first stopover before going towards Delhi. The city was looted and plundered innumerable times. After the decline of the Mughals, it became an easy prey for Afghans and other local forces that invaded it so many times that it became hard to keep count. No long term, stable government controlled the region and chaos prevailed during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Ahmad Shah Durrani invaded Lahore but due to unrest in Afghanistan, had to go back. In 1765, Lehna Singh and Gujar Singh of Bhangi *Misl* took control of the city. Later on Sobha Singh joined them. They divided Lahore into three parts among themselves and began to rule. This *Trimurti* rule of the city was very difficult and the citizens were miserable. Gujar Singh died in 1791. His son Sahab Singh replaced him. Sobha Singh passed away in 1797 and his son Mahar Singh came into power² and in 1798 Lehna Singh died and his son Chet Singh took over.³ These were the circumstances when Shah Zaman, a Durrani ruler of Afghanistan, entered Lahore in 1797 but as his own throne in Afghanistan was in danger, he granted the city to Ranjit Singh.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh

Ranjit Singh's origin can be traced back to a simple farmer, Daisoo. He was a Jāṭ (a local cast) who lived in a village named Sukher Check in the district of Majha. Daisoo's wealth described in the native style was that he owned "three ploughs and a well". His son Nodh, became a Sikh and got married to the daughter of Gulab Singh of Mejithia. He died in 1750 and left his son Chert Singh behind who died by the bursting of a matchlock in 1771. Chert Singh had three children; Sehed Singh who died in 1872, Raj Kaur who got married to Sahib Singh of Gujarat, and Maha Singh⁴ who inherited his father's land and got married to Bhag Singh's sister. Bhag Singh was Raja of Jhind.

On 2nd November 1780, in the house of Maha Singh was born the undisputed monarch of the land of the five rivers, that is, Ranjit Singh and was given the name, Budh Singh. In those days his father conquered Rasool Nagar and changed the name of his son from Budh Singh to *Ran Jeet* Singh, "the one who wins in the battlefield."⁵ How true this name proved to be for the young Ranjit!

Maha Singh died in 1792. He was only 30 years old and Ranjit Singh was a twelve-year-old boy. His father left quite a large territory behind that was managed by his mother who got assistance from the *Dīvān* named Lekheo or Lakhpat. Ranjit Singh was a different kind of child who spent his time in war-based exercises. In one of his conversations in the year 1831, he told Captain Wade, Political Assistant in Ludhiana, "When my father died, he left 20,000 rounds of shots which I spent firing at marks." As a result, by the age of 13, he ended the regency of his mother with the help of his father's maternal uncle, Dal Singh and took over the estate.⁶

From the year 1793, began the career of this shrewd and brave statesman/warrior. In 1799 he attacked Lahore with the help of his mother-in-law Mae Sedda Kower. He faced some resistance but had the cooperation of the citizens of Lahore, particularly Mehar Mohkam Din, the guard of one of

the gates of the city i.e., Lohari *Darvāza*. This gate was opened for Ranjit Singh on July 1799⁷ and he entered Lahore. Chet Singh and Mohar Singh were not brave enough to face the invader so they ran away while Gujjar Singh's son Sahib Singh, the most powerful of them all, was in Gujarat at the time. Ranjit Singh became the undisputed ruler of Lahore. In 1800 he issued a coin⁸ and on 12th April 1801 assumed the title of *Maharaja* of Lahore and was given the name of Singh *Sahib*. The government was called *Sarkar Khalsa* and the court, *Darbar Khalsa*.

Ranjit Singh began to expand his territories and forty years later when he died, the boundaries of his government were touching Ladakh, Skardu and Tibet from one side and from Khyber Pass to Sulaiman Mountains from the other. The southern side included Shikarpur in Sindh. On the eastern side, he did not go beyond the river Sutlej, due to a peace treaty with the British.⁹

From 1801 to 1839, Ranjit Singh was the ruler of Lahore. The Maharaja began renovating the city and the project of reconstruction was given to Mian Salah Maimar who doubled the city wall with a ditch in between. All the twelve *Darvāzas* and two *Morīs* were reopened. Ranjit Singh brought back peace and tranquillity to the city. The people were happy and prosperous and he was able to keep a balance among his subjects. His court was a galaxy of wise administrators, scholars and great warriors. Highly talented people of every religion were serving him. Wise counsellors like Faqir Aziz al-Din, Faqir Noor al-Din and clever generals from Italy and France like Allard and Ventura surrounded him.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh as a Patron of Arts

A lot has been written about the political as well as social life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Details concerning his *Darbar*, army, personal life and behaviour have been recorded by different personalities who met him and spent some time with him. W. G. Osborne, William Moorcroft, Emily Eden, Dr. Martin Honigberger, Victor Jacquemont, Baron Charles Hugel,

Henry Lawrence, Leopold von Orlich and many others wrote in detail about the Sikh rulers of the Punjab. Not many provide any information about his interest in arts but a few references do testify his likes and dislikes. Faqeer Waheed al-Din writes:

Painting, for example, flourished under his patronage and a Sikh school of painting came into existence. It was an eclectic school, combining the Mughal method of treating the subject with the vivid colours of Kangra School.¹⁰

W. G. Archer, while discussing the not 'very flattering looks' of Ranjit Singh, negates this notion:

To such ugliness, Ranjit himself was obviously very sensitive and while we know that by the end of his reign he was sometimes employing painters and even tolerating them in *Darbar*, there is no evidence that he liked and, or encouraged their activities.¹¹

This misconception is very well corrected by B. N. Gosawamy:

Again the Maharaja's prejudice against portraits of himself, even if it is taken to be literally true, need not to be constructed as prejudice against the art of painting itself.¹²

When we study the accounts of Sohan Lal Suri, the famous diarist of the Sikh *Darbār*, facts are completely contrary to what Archer wrote. In his memoirs, Suri mentioned the Maharaja's great interest and love for painting. He wrote about important occasions when painters were officially invited to sit in the *Darbār* or accompany delegations to record the proceedings. They were very well paid by the Maharaja himself. In 1834 Suri writes:

A letter was issued to Sardar Lehna Singh Majithia to construct and repair the vast and extensive *Baradari* situated eastward towards the portico of the garden of Adinanagar, where the Maharaja met the Captain *Sahib* (C. M. Wade) once to inspect the parade of the troops and also the other *Baradari* adjacent, surrounded on all sides with beautiful trees

and a canal that flowed very smoothly and rapidly. It was further remarked that a painter for the purpose of making figures, pictures and marks pleasing to the sight had been sent for and was to be given one rupee a day from the account of the Maharaja.¹³

All these writers were narrating Ranjit Singh's patronizing of the arts but the need was to find concrete evidence of their narrations. There are very few documents that reveal the financial support and care provided for the painters by the Maharaja and other Sikh rulers.¹⁴ Since very little insight is available about the artists of Lahore, even small bits of information need to be collected and compiled.

Research can reveal some very fascinating materials and one such official record was discovered at the Punjab Archives. It is a document, which consists of letters and details of an inquiry and court proceedings, related to an artist of Lahore, Hukama Singh. According to the records of the Punjab Archives, these documents belonged to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's *Daftar*.¹⁵

***Muqaddama-i Hukamā Singh* (Trial of Hukama Singh)**

The patronage of arts under the Sikh rule can be appreciated by a detailed study of this original document, which is coming to light for the first time. Written in Persian, the official language of the *Darbār*, it is an important proof of the significance of art in the Sikh court.

Papers of the document were tied together and labelled as 'Papers Related Hukama Singh, Royal Painter of Sikh Government, 1839, January to April'. Pages inside consist of three letters comprising very interesting events related to the theft of a book of paintings. The letter written on page one is without any sign or name on it but the tone of the text reveals it is from Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Study of the remaining document confirms that this letter was issued from the office of Ranjit Singh and it was addressed to his son Prince Sher Singh.

Letter is dated 8th January 1839 and it says:

Kind and Sincere Person, who has assembled in his personality innumerable virtues,

I got your letter in which you said that the book of paintings has been stolen. My clerk was on leave so I could not write to you any sooner. You have already mentioned that a book of paintings and a gun had been stolen and the thief had sold the book to Quinton. I sent my servant Chandar Singh to buy back the book. That he did. I saw it but did not like it because at many places the pages with the paintings of the Sardārs had been ripped from the book and sold separately. I issued an order that the thief be traced so that he could bring the whole book to you and you could have the stolen paintings repainted from the artist who serves you.

Dated: 25 Poh, Bikrami 1896

The letter reveals that it is an inquiry about a book that was stolen from Sher Singh and later on was recovered successfully but the thief had removed the pages that had the paintings. Now the Maharaja is ordering his son to have the stolen paintings retrieved and repainted. Name of the painter is not mentioned.

The next letter is clearly addressed to Prince Sher Singh and it says:

Honourable Prince, affectionate and kind to friends, Prince Sher Singh, May Live Long,

The meeting that we had, gave me such happiness that I cannot express. May you live long. Colonel Wade Sahib Bahādur has written to me that he had a discussion with you about the book of paintings. Since you are journeying towards Lahore that is why I am writing to you. Colonel Wade Sahib Bahādur had hired a painter Hukama Singh at Ludhiana and had paid him quite a big amount to prepare a book with paintings of all the princes, important Sardārs and courtiers of the Maharaja Sahib. The purpose of such a book was to present it to the Queen when he went to England, so that

people of that country could know about the dresses and lifestyles of the people of this nation. They would also see how tall and beautiful these people are. The book was almost complete when the artist passed away and it was stolen.

Now when the Colonel Sahib came to Lahore, he was informed that the book was with Cortlandt. Colonel Sahib asked for the book. The respectable person, who had the book, said that he was sending it because you asked for it. But he asked a favour and wanted to be informed if you had received the book. Now Colonel Sahib wants you to trace out the real thief.

After the death of Hukama Singh Musavvir, Colonel Wade sold all his belongings and gave the money to your clerk (Munshi) Shadi Lal and asked him to give the money to the artist's family. At the inquiry it was told that they did not receive the money. Now I want you to ask for the money from the above-mentioned clerk and send it to Colonel Sahib so that he would send the money to the relatives of the artist. I hope that you will take some necessary steps and send me a reply at the Tibbi address because that is where I will be.

8th January 1839

In this letter the name of the artist, Hukama Singh has been mentioned who was hired by Col. Wade. Later part of the document revealed that basically Hukama Singh was Sher Singh's painter.

On the third page it is written:

To Prince Sher Singh, affectionate and kind, who has assembled in his personality innumerable virtues, who displays manners of high esteem, May Live Long,

With lots of thanks you are informed that the book with the paintings has been received through your servant. It was observed that all the best paintings that were on twenty-eight pages, have been ripped off from the book. It was asked from

*Cunningham Sahib that the book should be shown to Cortlandt Sahib so that he could look at it. The book was inspected, disliked and it was expressed. You wrote to the respectable person that you owned the book and it should only be given to your servant. This write up by you was due to some misunderstanding on your side. I cannot understand it and I should make it clear that the book was complete before it reached you but later on its best paintings were taken away. Not even a single one of those rare paintings of important Sardārs and the courtiers of Maharaja's court that everyone liked and I was also very impressed by them, is left in that book. That book is useless to me now so I am sending it back through the messenger. Keeping in mind the good relationship that we had in the past, I am asking you to find those stolen paintings for me otherwise I will not be able to continue our relationship. I hope that you will reply to me soon and oblige me to make you happy.
18th January 1839, Gujranwala*

Incredible facts are revealed in these pages where Maharaja Ranjit Singh is showing great concern to retrieve a book with twenty-eight paintings. He has gone even to such a length as scolding *Kunvar* Sher Singh for his negligence and threatening to discontinue his relationship with his own son.

An important name in these documents is Col. Wade *Sahib*. Martine Wade was one of the few British functionaries on the Sutlej who by their tact and amiable disposition had won the esteem and affection of the Sikhs. He remained at Ludhiana for 17 years as assistant to agent (1823-27), political assistant (1827-32), and then as political agent (1832-40). Wade balanced the interests of the two States in such a manner that in due course, he became a personal friend of the Maharaja, who valued his advice and counsel on political matters.¹⁶

Martine Wade advised Ranjit Singh not only about political matters but his opinion on art was also highly valued. On several occasions he is mentioned observing the artwork

produced by the artists of the Sikh court. About one such particular event, Sohan Lal Suri writes:

After this the *Sahibs* presented themselves before the Maharaja. Bhai *Sahibs* (Ram Singh and Govind Ram), the Jamadar (Khushal Singh), Raja Kalan, Sardar Jawala Singh, Desa Singh Majithia and Dewan Moti Ram, all joined in talks purporting to enhance the formalities of friendship and unity with the Captain *Sahib* (C. M. Wade); and the Raja Kalan showed to Captain *Sahib* an album of pictures, according to the orders of the Maharaja.¹⁷

We can fairly assume that the album with paintings is the same that was stolen because it was observed and appreciated both by Ranjit Singh and Col. Wade.

Another person who is related to this particular stolen book was Colonel Van Cortlandt who spent eight years (1818-26) in Persia and joined Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Lahore, where he was to serve from 1827 to 1843.¹⁸

Sher Singh was asked to write to Cunningham *Sahib* about the book and to show it to Cortlandt. Joseph Davey Cunningham was born in Scotland in 1812 and died in 1851. He was the author of the book *History of the Sikhs* and an authority in Punjab historiography. His father was the famous Scottish poet and author Allan Cunningham. Cunningham joined the Bengal engineers in 1834 and he was appointed assistant to the political agent on the Sikh frontier in 1837, and occupied several political positions in this area until 1845.¹⁹ He was also very closely associated to *Darbār Khālsa*.

The document reveals that the artist Hukama Singh, who was hired by Col. Wade to complete the album, had died. The matter of the stolen book was not forgotten and Sher Singh was inquired about it. But now another matter had been raised and it was related to the belongings of the deceased painter that were supposed to be given to his family. Later documents reveal the important fact that Hukama Singh was a Lahori artist and his family was residing there. Basically he was working for

Prince Sher Singh but later on Col. Wade took him to Ludhiana to paint for him.

From here on the focus of the inquiry from the stolen book is shifted to the painter of the book, Hukama Singh and his belongings.

The next page of the document is the report of a meeting under the supervision of the Political Agent of Ludhiana, Wade *Sahib*.

Proceedings Dated on 17th February 1839

After the death of Hukama Singh, who was associated with Prince Sher Singh's Darbār, Munshi Shadi Lal was questioned about his belongings and this investigation was given to the Department of Ludhiana. It has been told that Shadi Lal did not send Hukama Singh's belongings to his family. It has been ordered now that a copy of this order should be sent to the Assistant Political Agent Ludhiana, who will ask the Kotvāl (The Chief Police Officer) of Ludhiana to demand the belongings of the painter from Shadi Lal and send them to his family. If he does not come then the Political Agent Sahib should kindly send us a list of the belongings so that we can send all the stuff back to his family.

17th February 1839

The next page is an application from Shadi Lal dated 20th March 1839.

Got the orders from the Honorary Sir to provide the list and belongings of the painter Hukama Singh and that have I sent the belongings of the deceased to his relatives? With respect it is being informed that all of Hukama Singh's belongings consisted of a horse that was given to him by Prince Sher Singh and it was given back to the Sarkār. Apart from that I paid forty rupees obeying the orders of Colonel Wade, twenty five rupees from the Prince and seventeen rupees from my own pocket that were given to the family of the deceased artist. I have a record for this and most of the servants know

about it. Everybody knows that Hukama Singh neither had property nor any belongings. In fact he had taken money from the Prince in advance. In this situation whatever you will order about the descendants of Hukama Singh and about his belongings, I will obey because you are the master. The painter has been with Colonel Wade Sahib for the last one year and his family is in Lahore. I have no idea about their whereabouts. I am writing it all just to inform your Highness.

Yours obediently, Shadi Lal, Munshi Shahzada Kunvar Sher Singh.

The application has been stamped by the Court of Political Agent Ludhiana.

The following pages are the proceedings of the court hearing that was conducted under the supervision of the Political Agent of Ludhiana.

This year on 1st April 1839, Colonel Wade held a meeting in which it was said that all the belongings of Hukama Singh the painter had been given to Shadi Lal who is a clerk of Prince Sher Singh, so that he could send them to his family which he did not. In this regard Shadi Lal was asked for his statement and an order was issued to the Kotvāl, to provide a list of the belongings. Today an application has come from Shadi Lal as an answer to the order and three lists (of things) of the deceased painter have come from the Kotvāl. On the basis of this it has been ordered that the statement of Shadi Lal along with the three lists (things) attached with an order should be sent to his Honour.

The following is the last paper of the document which has the final order, that was issued from Peshawar because Col. Wade was promoted and appointed as Political Agent in Peshawar in 1839.

Meeting under the supervision of Colonel Wade, who is appointed in Peshawar.

Dated: 15th April 1839

A letter from the Assistant Political Agent of Ludhiana was received in relation to the lawsuit of Hukama Singh the painter that was sent on 1st April 1839. In this order the assistant (clerk) of Prince Sher Singh, Shadi Lal was directed to send the belongings of the painter to his family. In reply to that an application was received from Shadi Lal in which there were details of the artist's belongings and there was also mention of his loans. Through this application it was known that twenty rupees that were paid to the deceased artist were in the government records. Treasurer Lala Gorsī was investigated and he testified. Seventeen rupees were paid by Lala Shadi Lal himself, and three hundred seven rupees and fourteen annas were of the creditors. You are requested to clear the whole business about the personal belongings and the loans after reading all the documents. After the presentation of the authentic documents and the testimony of the right witnesses, whatever loan will be proven, it should be paid by selling the belongings of the artist.

A copy of this order should be sent to the Assistant Political Agent, along with the belongings of the artist for auction so that they would auction the things and creditors should be paid according to the law of the Government.

The document has been stamped by Court of Political Agent Ludhiana.

Significant facts could be gathered from this document. An artist named Hukama Singh lived in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's period and he belonged to Lahore. He was employed by *Kunwar* (prince) Sher Singh and he also worked for Colonel Wade *Sahib* who took him to Ludhiana to finish a book of paintings and it was a routine for artists to travel from one place to another according to the demand of the patron. Hukama Singh went from Lahore to Ludhiana to work for Colonel Wade *Sahib*.

The letters in the document also show that a book of paintings was considered so important that orders from the Maharaja were issued to retrieve the stolen book whose main value was the paintings inside. Ranjit Singh was personally involved first in the preparation of the book and later his deep concern over the whole matter is revealed through his letters. This was the last year of the Maharaja's life and his health was in a bad condition. He had already suffered three strokes of paralysis in the past four years. But even in those days of great stress and disease, he was alert enough to worry about some stolen paintings that he admired and wanted to send them to London to show how beautiful the men of Punjab were.

Another interesting point is the swift process of judiciary in the 19th century that a whole lawsuit was decided within a few months. Although the results are not in favour of the poor artist because it seems that the *Munshīs* (clerks) of that era were not only cunning enough to rob the family of the belongings of the artist but he was able to show Hukama Singh in great debt that was to be paid by selling off his things. The pitiable painter had no property and whatever personal belongings he had were to be auctioned by the order of the court to pay his debts.

The presence of such an important document indicates that Lahori artists were an important part of *Darbār Khālsa* and not only the Maharaja but the princes also employed them. It also gives us a solid proof of Maharja Ranjit Singh's keen interest in arts contrary to the propaganda that he was a man without appreciation of aesthetics. The discovery of the paintings by Hukama Singh is another significant element because it is very rare that we come across the creation of Lahori artists with their name on it.

The present research is a basic overview of this archival document. Given time and resources, I am sure a lot more can be discovered, which will give an immense insight into the arts of Lahore during the Sikh Era.

Notes and References

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- 1 Originally, it is a Persian document but it has been translated. For the translation of the document, I am grateful to Dr. Moeen Nizami, Persian Department, Oriental College, University of the Punjab, Lahore.
- 2 Sayyad Muhammad Latif, *Tārīkh-i Lahore* (Lahore: Takhlīqāt Publishers, 2004), 131.
- 3 Muhammad Baqir, *Lahore Māzi-o-Ḥāl* (Lahore: Punjabi Adabi Academy, n.d.), 12.
- 4 A. F. M. Abdul Ali, *Notes on the Life and Times of Ranjit Singh* (This is a report in the library of Lahore Archives and it has never been published), 5-6.
- 5 Munshi Muhammad Din Fauq, “‘ahd-i Ḥukūmat-i Khālṣa”, *Naqoosh*, Lahore Number (1962), 370.
- 6 A. F. M. Abdul Ali, *Notes on the Life and Times of Ranjit Singh*, 5.
- 7 Muhammad Shuja al-Din, “Siāsi aur Ṣaqāfati Tārīkh”, *Naqoosh*, Lahore Number (1962), 114.
- 8 Hans Herrli, *The Coins of The Sikhs* (India: Munshiram Monoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2004), 5.
- 9 Munshi Muhammad Din Fauq, “‘ahd-i Ḥukūmat-i Khālṣa”, 371.
- 10 Fakir Syed Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh* (Karachi: Lion Art Press, 1965), 121-22.
- 11 W. G. Archer, *Paintings of the Sikhs* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1966), 33.
- 12 B. N. Goswamy, “A Matter of Taste: Some Notes on the Context of Painting in Sikh Punjab”, *Marg*, Special Issue: *Appreciation of Creative Arts under Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, (Bombay: 1982), 51.
- 13 Sohan Lal Suri, *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*, Vol III (Chandigarh: 1972), 192-93.
- 14 For details see: B. N. Goswamy, *Painters at the Sikh Court* (New Delhi: 1999).
- 15 For great help and support I am grateful to Abbas Chughtai, Deputy Director Lahore Archives.
- 16 www.allaboutsikhs.com Dated: 22nd April 2009
- 17 Sohan Lal Suri, *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*, 41-42.
- 18 Jean-Marie Lafont and Barbara Schmitz, “The Painter Imam Bakhsh of Lahore”, Barbara Schmitz (editor), *After the Great Mughals, Painting in Delhi and the Regional Courts in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Mumbai: 2002), 78.
- 19 www.allaboutsikhs.com Dated: 22nd April 2009

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