

**FROM FOREIGNER TO  
LOCAL CITIZENS: EUROPEANS IN PUNJAB  
UNDER MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH**

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Ranjit Singh (1799-1838) frequently said, 'God had given me one eye to be able to see all the religions with one eye'.<sup>1</sup> Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a kind ruler who cared for his subjects irrespective of their religion, caste or creed. He wanted to make his kingdom great; fostering a peaceful and prosperous society with harmony and cooperation among all communities. His court comprised of nobles and officials from many nationalities and religions including number of European notables and officers. These Europeans officers played a critical role in the expansion and growth of the Sikh Empire, the most famous being Jean-François Allard, Jean-Baptiste Ventura, Paolo Di Avitabile and Claude August Court. They were primarily responsible for the training of the army. Additionally, they also had to deal with civil, foreign, judicial and educational affairs of the state. They also enjoyed significant influence in political as well administrative affairs. In order to retain them, the Maharaja supported them financially and socially, and also, encouraged them to marry the local women and settle their family life in Punjab.

This paper attempts to explore the evidence that it was not the religion or nationality but the ability and the state interest that actually mattered in the court of the Maharaja, and that primarily governed the state policies and behaviour of the Maharaja.

**Keywords:** I Khalsa Darbar, East India Company European Military Officers. Explosives.

### ***Composition of the Darbar: Courtiers***

Ranjit Singh's courtiers represented various creeds, diverse races and different traditions, comprising Europeans<sup>2</sup> as well as Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. Fakir Azizuddin, the foreign minister, Nuruddin, the home minister and Ghouse Khan and Elahi Bakhsh, military generals, were all Muslims. Dhian Singh Dogra, the prime minister, Gulab Singh Dogra, Governor of Jammu, and Suchet Singh and Hira Singh who held key posts. Khushhal Singh, Dina Nath (minister of civil administration), Ganga Ram, Tej Singh and Lal Singh were Brahmin Hindus. Other Hindus were Diwan Mohkam Chand, Moti Ram, Ram Dial, Diwan Bhawani Das, Diwan Devi Das, and Diwan Karam Chan.<sup>3</sup> The Sikhs included Lehna Singh, the Sandhianwalay *sardars*, Hari Singh Nalwa, and Sham Singh. The Maharaja's policies of recruitment for civil and military posts were based strictly on choosing a right person for a right job.<sup>4</sup> His appointments of ministers, generals and administrative officers all reflected his neutrality. Moreover, his dispensation of matters relating to religion also speaks volumes for his secularism. His *darbar* used Persian script, spoke Punjabi and followed the Hindu calendar of Vikramditya along with the Islamic calendar (AH).<sup>5</sup>

Who so ever had the ability, was welcome to participate in the administration (not just civil administration but also in the military). Being of one religion or the other did not matter. There was no barrier or constraint on any community in joining any state department or walk of life. Personal ability, competence and hard work were the main criteria for selection to the state service, it is clear that he always tried to choose the right person for the right job, irrespective of religion.<sup>6</sup> He simply needed competent people to work for him, whether they were Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims or even Europeans. He did not meddle with their religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

The Lahore *Darbar* had a number of French and other foreign notables and officers. However, not much is known about their role in shaping the foreign policy of the Lahore *Darbar*. Ranjit Singh was worried about the expanding power of the British in the Indian subcontinent. He was aware of the fact that only a trained army could stop their growing influence, and so he began to employ European officers to train his army.<sup>8</sup> The *Fauj-e-Khas* was a model unit trained under their command. Many Europeans served in the army of the Punjab, the most famous being Generals Jean-François Allard, Jean-Baptiste Ventura, Paolo Di Avitabile and Claude August Court.<sup>9</sup>

Ventura, Italian by birth, and Allard, French, came to Lahore in 1822 to seek employment in the Sikh army. Both had served under Napoleon in the imperial army of France, losing their positions after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and were now, in fact, political exiles. Ventura had been the bodyguard of Prince Eugene and had fought alongside Napoleon in Russia. Allard had fought in Italy, France and Spain during the Napoleonic campaigns of 1814 and 1815.<sup>10</sup> These are the information which were provided by the Allard to Guizot in 1835-36 for After the fall of Napoleon, Allard had planned to go to America, but on the advice of Ventura they set off for Egypt. Diverted by an outbreak of plague, they went instead to Constantinople and finally reached Iran, where they were employed by Shah Abbas to train his army.<sup>11</sup>

However, due to the political pressure of the British officers in Iran, they had to leave that country in 1821, reaching the Punjab and the court of Ranjit Singh in March 1822.<sup>12</sup> In fact, they had already heard about the Maharaja of the Punjab and his wisdom. Being a cautious ruler, Ranjit Singh carefully probed the antecedents of the two European generals before admitting them to the Sikh army<sup>13</sup> and it took some time and the facilitation of Fakir Azizuddin before both the generals were hired.<sup>14</sup> In fact, on the advice of Fakir Azizuddin, the generals wrote to the Maharaja himself, asking for employment in training the *Khalsa* army, and it was this letter that ended the doubts of the Sikh ruler.<sup>15</sup> Both generals served him well and contributed significantly to the Sikh army.

By the time the European generals joined the Sikh army Ranjit Singh had already annexed most of the territories in the Punjab, so some members of the Lahore *Darbar* thought their appointment unnecessary. On the contrary, the two officers improved the skills and performance of the Sikh army. The Maharaja was a man of vision, who recognized that conquering a territory was easier than governing and controlling it. Caught between the two Muslim states of Afghanistan and Sindh, as well as the British, he wanted to have a strong army.

Ranjit Singh was already much impressed by George Thomas,<sup>16</sup> who had defeated a large Malwa Sikh army with only a small number of men, and by a similarly small number of trained soldiers who had defeated the *Akali* assailants at a Muharram procession.<sup>17</sup> All these incidents were in his mind when he hired the European generals in 1822 to train his troops. Their salaries were not determined until he was satisfied with their performance. The Sikh army had to undergo such rigorous training that some soldiers left altogether.<sup>18</sup> Three months after joining the imperial service, the generals arranged a parade of the four

companies of cavalry trained by Allard and four battalions of infantry trained by Ventura. The Maharaja was very pleased to see the discipline of his army and decided to create the *Fauj-e-Khas* or the French legion. This army proved their worth until 1846 when they surrendered to the British.<sup>19</sup>

Ranjit Singh especially respected Allard for his vast experience in Europe, and he sought his advice on many matters. When the number of European officers in civil and military administration was increased, Allard was considered as the senior, helping to settle many affairs of state.<sup>20</sup> Both Allard and Ventura started their service with the monthly pay of Rs.500, but soon their salaries were increased by the granting of *jagirs*. Ventura's troops were the best trained in the *Fauj-e-Khas*, and in 1832 he was appointed governor of the Derajat and promoted to the rank of general along with six Indian officers. He married an Armenian Jewish lady in 1825 at Ludhiana, and they had a daughter. He went on leave to France in 1837, but returned on the illness of the Maharaja and was sent to Peshawar to join the British forces to help Shah Shuja.<sup>21</sup> Captain Wade, a British agent in the Punjab, once commented that Ventura was the only man who had a firm control over the Sikh soldiers,<sup>22</sup> but despite his strong personality his men were not ready to fight in alliance with the British army. He left the Sikh army after the death of Sher Singh and returned to France where he died in 1858.<sup>23</sup>

The British Archives hold two important reports revealing the state of affairs in the Sikh state. Dr. Murray, although apparently sent to Lahore to treat the Maharaja, was instructed by the British to send back details of the military training and its strength. He attended several parades of regular infantry and was surprised by the precision of their firing. On another occasion, he observed the parade of Ventura's battalions, and the discipline of the Sikh army surprised him greatly.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, he reported the superiority and the style of the Punjabi army.<sup>25</sup> Dr. Murray's reports were highly informative for the British, although he had only met Ventura for fifteen minutes in the presence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He never met General Allard, but communicated with him through letters. The British government pressurized Dr. Murray to get more information regarding the military preparedness of the Punjab, recognizing that the *Khalsa* army was as good in terms of military training as were the British troops.<sup>26</sup> The effort put into training the Sikh army<sup>27</sup> greatly worried the British envoy at Ranjit Singh's court.<sup>28</sup>

Allard and Ventura worked hard with the Sikh army and infused great discipline and skills into it, although these did not come very easily.

The army went through a rigorous training programme before becoming *Fauj-e-Khas*, making the generals unpopular. The most serious incident occurred in 1826 when Ventura and Allard faced a serious mutiny, which almost claimed their lives. Ranjit Singh acted swiftly and with his typical political sagacity. He camped at Anarkali with his own bodyguards, arrested the ringleaders of the rising and amicably negotiated the whole matter.<sup>29</sup> Such a firm and quick response was a stern warning to the opponents of the officers, and it also increased the confidence of the officers themselves. Nevertheless, the Maharaja would never agree to their demand for enforcement of the death penalty for serious offences in the army.<sup>30</sup> These developments strengthened the position of the European officers in the eyes of their soldiers, and the Sikh army never again revolted against them.

Jacquemont reported strong bonds between the Sikh soldiers and the European officers, although he attributes this to the fact that the soldiers' promotion depended on the goodwill of Ventura and Allard. Interestingly, both of them were particularly kind to the Muslim soldiers and officers, who held many key positions in the artillery. In fact, from an early period the Muslims were the first to employ firearms, cannons, and hand grenades in their conquest of the subcontinent, and they maintained their superiority in this field.<sup>31</sup> Sultan Mahmood and Elahi Bukhsh were famous generals of artillery under Ranjit Singh. The *Fauj-e-Khas* and Allard's cavalry also counted many Muslims in their ranks.<sup>32</sup> In 1839, part of the Muslim Punjabi contingent from the French brigades assembled at Peshawar to capture Kabul, commanded by Sheikh Basawan of the *Fauj-e-Khas*.<sup>33</sup> As stated earlier, the famous Sonehri Mosque was given back to the Muslims at the request of the General Allard and its beautiful domes were recoloured with his donation.<sup>34</sup>

The *Akalis* were always a trouble to the Maharaja, especially during festivals. They crossed the border and spread anarchy on both sides of the River Sutlej, and Captains Murray and Wade, British envoys to the Lahore *Darbar*, never lost a chance to create tension between the Sikhs and the British over even small incidents. Ranjit Singh was always concerned about handling the *Akalis* and maintaining law and order in these areas. In 1824, Murray again advised his government to protest against the mischief of the *Akalis*. This time, the Maharaja responded swiftly and sent troops to Phillaur. The unexpected entry of the *Fauj-e-Khas* impressed the people on both sides.<sup>35</sup> Allard provided Jacquemont with an escort of Muslim horsemen on his way to Kashmir. These horsemen were well trained by the European officers and were capable of taking on the fanatic *Akalis*.<sup>36</sup>

The main campaigns of the *Fauj-e-Khas* included the battles of Naushehra, Dera Ismail Khan, Kangra and Peshawar. In 1829 they advanced from Lahore to Attock to stop the followers of Syed Ahmad from crossing the Indus; Allard's strategy prevented Syed Ahmad from entering the Punjab to call the Punjabi Muslims to *jihad*. General Court and his forces played an important role in the annexation of Peshawar. Again in 1837, these troops stopped Dost Muhammad Khan's *jihad*, an attempt to seize Peshawar for Afghanistan. The *Fauj-e-Khas* actively participated in the conquest of Kulu and Mandi in 1841.<sup>37</sup> In fact, trained by the European officers, the *Fauj-e-Khas* never lost a battle in 23 years.<sup>38</sup>

Within a short period of time, Ranjit Singh completely transformed an unruly crowd of looters and guerilla warriors crying *maro, waddo, lutto*,<sup>39</sup> into a well-organized army. However, this was only possible because of the efforts of the European generals.<sup>40</sup>

Although the European officers were very close to Ranjit Singh, even their positions were not permanent and their pay and position totally depended on their performance and the pleasure of the Maharaja.<sup>41</sup> Strangely, he never allowed them to go on leave, expecting them to consider the Punjab as their home. Those who wanted to leave had to resign, although they were rehired if they returned within a reasonable time. Paid leave was granted only in very special and rare cases.<sup>42</sup>

Allard had been away from France for many years, and he requested leave of a few months. The Maharaja was reluctant to let him go and sent Jamadar Khushhal and Bhai Gurmukh to prevent him returning to France, although he was finally forced to grant him leave on half pay.<sup>43</sup> Allard was received in France with great honour and was invited to dinner by King Louis Philippe, who appointed him ambassador of France to the Punjab. He returned having with many expensive gifts for the Maharaja, who was very pleased to take him back. Allard died in 1839 and was buried in Lahore with military honour.<sup>44</sup>

Ranjit Singh was enthusiastic about modern technology and scientific inventions. Once he heard about a steamboat and asked Ventura to build one for him, sanctioning Rs. 40,000 for this purpose; Ventura spent less than Rs. 2,000 and the rest was given to him as reward.<sup>45</sup> One day he asked Ventura if he could make anything to keep water cool without ice in summer. Ventura constructed a well during winter, filled it with water from a nearby stream, and closed the mouth of the well with an airtight seal. When it was opened in the hot season, the water was still cool.<sup>46</sup> In 1827, two more Europeans entered the service of the Maharaja: Court and Avitabile.<sup>47</sup> Court, was an infantry officer in Napoleon's army. After

leaving France, he joined the Iranian forces of Shah Mirza Muhammad Ali, but left for the Punjab in the company of the Italian Avitabile. They were well received by the Maharaja.<sup>48</sup>

Court was appointed Ordnance Officer of the *Khalsa* army. He supervised the manufacture of guns at the Shahdarra and Lahore foundries.<sup>49</sup> In 1827, he redesigned the cannon department into three wings.<sup>50</sup> Pleased with his services, the Maharaja increased his salary to Rs. 25,000 a year and in 1836 promoted him to general. Hennyery Lawrence considered him to be the most respectable of all the French officers.<sup>51</sup> He was present at the Peshawar campaign, where his timely help saved the Sikh army from humiliation. His main work was organization of the artillery and the manufacture of cannons, which seriously damaged the British forces during the Anglo-Sikh wars.<sup>52</sup>

Court taught the *Khalsa* army how to use iron to make the cannon ammunition shells, as the Sikhs had only used brass. The Maharaja rewarded Court with Rs. 30,000 when the Sikh artillery exploded its first iron shell. Despite receiving the immense respect of his soldiers, he never mixed with them.<sup>53</sup> After the death of Ranjit Singh his brigade turned against him but his life was saved with the help of General Ventura. He resigned from the army, but when Sher Singh became the ruler of Lahore, he invited him to resume his duties in Peshawar. Again, the hostility of the army forced him to leave and he settled in Grasse with his Kashmiri wife, where he died in 1861.<sup>54</sup>

Among the European officers the career of Avitabile was the most audacious and complex. After several voyages and a journey through Turkey he entered the service of the Shah of Iran. After five years he left the Shah and returned to Naples, but soon tired of the gentleman's life and decided to go to India. He had heard that his former companion Ventura had a very good life at the court of Ranjit Singh and wrote asking for a post in the Lahore *Darbar*. Avitabile arrived in Lahore with many gifts for the Maharaja, along with Court. Both were taken into the *Khalsa* army in 1827.<sup>55</sup> He was appointed at Rs.700 salary a month, which was increased to 12,000 and later 50,000 a year.

Avitabile, who had been taken on at the recommendation of General Ventura, soon came to the notice of the Maharaja for his administrative qualities, and he was made Governor of Wazirabad and Peshawar. Avitabile, who was known for his vociferous barking while training his platoons, used a seal depicting a dog on a letter he sent to the Maharaja. This created much hilarity in the *darbar*, and Jamadar Khushal Singh said that in training the units he had turned into a dog, for he followed

them shrieking like this creature. However, his severe punishments for disobedience were less popular at court and he was the most carefully watched European officer.<sup>56</sup> He was relieved from service in 1843 and returned to Naples, where his wife poisoned him to death.

The Lahore *Darbar* kept the Europeans under strict control and encouraged them to marry and settle in the Punjab, wearing turbans and beards like the Sikhs and not eating beef or smoking in public.<sup>57</sup> This is the reason that Allard, Ventura and Court married Punjabi girls and settled down after leaving France.

The civil, military, foreign, judicial and educational services of the *darbar* were not strictly delineated. Although the primary duty of the European officers was the military training of the army, the nature of the *darbar* did not permit them to confine their work to this sphere. There were many incidents of military officers being given administrative duties, especially in problem areas such as the borders with Kashmir and Peshawar. In fact, they had significant influence in political affairs, without restriction during the lifetime of Ranjit Singh. On their side they gave him their complete loyalty. Allard, who was the most senior, had great regard and admiration for the Maharaja, and with the passage of time the friendship between them developed, as can be seen from their private correspondence and the public and private reports of the general on his visit to Paris. Ranjit Singh's reluctance to let him leave the Punjab has been described above.<sup>58</sup>

As soon as both Allard and Ventura had joined Ranjit Singh they were given a number of duties. Wade wrote a letter to the British Government in 1823 describing the influence of these two officers.

The French gentlemen possess at this moment a degree of influence with the Raja to which none else can pretend. The Raja listens no one's advice in opposition to them. If fines and penalties are to be levied from any of the courtiers, the farmers of the revenues, or jagirdars, the French officers are entrusted with their execution and levy the money. All the officers of the court declare that French men have brought some spell on the Maharaja for whatever they suggest is immediately adopted.<sup>59</sup>

There were many reasons why Ranjit Singh had such confidence in them, not least being his strong belief in their ability and their loyalty. Another reason may be that these officers had no personal interests or family in the Punjab, and were dependent solely on the Maharaja for their positions.



A number of incidents are related in the *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* concerning their duties, which they fulfilled responsibly. In 1832 Ventura was given orders to arrest Asad Khan, and he effectively secured his obedience. In 1833, Diwan Waisakha Singh was ordered to pay Rs. 5 lakh but only managed Rs. 211,000; he was released on the surety of General Allard, who paid the balance without delay. In October 1833 Ventura successfully seized the whole state of Jawala Singh, and on 31 December 1835, he again had to manage the land of the Garjakhia in the district of Lahore, worth Rs. 21,000.<sup>60</sup>

These actions were not always easy for these officers, and they sometimes shrewdly used their own judgment in obeying instructions. For example, when Allard in 1834 was again sent to extract Rs. 100,000 from Waisakha Singh, he first asked what job would be given to the Diwan. The Maharaja assured Allard that when the money was received, he would give him a post.<sup>61</sup>

In the same year, when Avitabile was ordered to confiscate the estates of the chiefs of Jasrota, he asked to be allowed to bring them before the Maharaja; only then would he carry out whatever orders were given to him.<sup>62</sup> These examples demonstrated Ranjit Singh's trust in the officers, whom he sent to confiscate territories, carry out administrative tasks and collect the arrears from persons who owed him money.

Other casual duties were also given to them, such as solving a dispute between zamindars. In 1838 Ranjit Singh had to interfere in a matter between the zamindars Munj Kakra and Taj Singh, and he sent General Court to solve the problem, who decided the matter in favour of Taj Singh. Some months later, travelling through these areas, the Maharaja was stopped by the zamindars who complained that Court had been unjust. The Maharaja refused to blame General Court, saying that he was impartial because he was a stranger at that time to both parties.<sup>63</sup> The officers also solved a dispute between Lehna Singh Majithia and Misr Rup Lal.<sup>64</sup> Such incidents were common because of political manoeuvring, and the European officers were not parties to such disputes, as they had no political affiliation with the Punjab. Ventura was even appointed as a qazi and Governor of Lahore in 1837. Hugal described his influence at court as the third place in the Lahore Darbar.<sup>65</sup> The Maharaja had complete confidence in the diplomatic intelligence of his European officers.

In addition to the good salaries paid to these officers (see above), they were given extra allowances for their special duties, including expensive shawls, pashminas and robes of honour. In *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*

a number of instances are given of the distribution of large or small amounts; for example, Allard was awarded Rs. 50,000 and shawls worth Rs. 30,000 when he left Lahore for another posting. Ventura was given Rs. 5,000 for his recovery of arrears and treatment of Ludhiana. Both took leave in Europe on half pay and they were also granted jagirs, wells and land for their services.<sup>66</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The civil, military, foreign, judicial and educational services of the *darbar* were not strictly defined. Although the primary duty of the European officers was the military training of the army, the nature of the *darbar* did not permit them to confine their work to this sphere. There were many incidents of military officers being given administrative duties, especially in problem areas such as the borders with Kashmir and Peshawar. In fact, they had significant influence in political affairs, without restriction during the lifetime of Ranjit Singh. On their side they gave him their complete loyalty. Allard, who was the most senior, had great regard and admiration for the Maharaja, and with the passage of time the friendship between them developed, as can be seen from their private correspondence and the public and private reports of the general on his visit to Paris. Ranjit Singh's reluctance to let him leave the Punjab was described above.

In summary, we can say that when Maharaja Ranjit Singh came to power, he wanted all his subjects, including Hindus, Muslims and Europeans to feel themselves as part of the Sikh kingdom. Hence, he created an environment in which his people believed that they had equal rights, no matter whatever religion or community they belonged to. Ranjit Singh had realized that he could not fight the trained army of the British, whose secret of success was good organization and training on modern Western lines. If he wanted to be anything more than a minor ruler, he must establish a strong army for which he hired European officers. In addition to training his army in the Western style, these officers also contributed to the security of his state by helping to bring about the treaty with the British under which they agreed not to cross the Sutlej. However, the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839 never allowed for a Sikh army captained by Europeans to face off against the British or Afghans. The death of the Maharaja plunged the empire into anarchy, and by the time of the first Anglo-Sikh war, nearly all the European generals had abandoned the Empire and returned to Europe.

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