

Sarkar-e-Khalsa: Status and Role of Muslim Courtiers (1799-1849)

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the role of Muslim Courtiers especially the famous Fakir family under the Sikh rule in Punjab during 1799 to 1849. It challenges the stereotypical approaches, which only highlight conflicts between Muslims and Sikhs. This article is an effort to highlight the strength, composition and working of the Muslims in the Sikh Darbar [Urdu: Court] and the civil and military administration of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (died 1839). The Muslims held many key positions in the administration of Ranjit Singh as ministers, governors, judicial and police officers, generals and foreign diplomats. For Maharaja Ranjit Singh religion was hardly a criterion in deciding state matters or policies. The Muslim clergy continued to enjoy a position of privilege and power. Not long after taking over the administration of Lahore in 1799, the Muslim judges were appointed to hear Muslim civil and criminal cases by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He also assigned Muslim officers the responsibility to guard the borders of the Punjab. Every foreigner entering Punjab's territory would require permission from these officers. The

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famous brothers in the darbar, Fakir Syed Azizuddin (died 1844), Fakir Syed Nuruddin (died 1852) and Fakir Syed Imamuddin (died 1846) had deep and close connections with the Maharaja, occupying respectively the posts of foreign minister, home minister as well as the Maharaja's physician, and various important positions at different times. These individuals remained loyal to his successors even after his demise.

Introduction

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a compassionate ruler who cared for his subjects irrespective of religion, caste or creed. His *darbar* was secular in character so merit and personal qualities were the main criteria for appointment and increased status and position. In selecting the right man for the right job, he also assessed the traits, characteristics and customs of the community or tribe. He had a vision to run the state with some rules and regulations and, like Mughal Emperor Akbar (died 1605), he believed in broad-based harmony and cooperation among all the communities, to create a peaceful and prosperous society. Although an authoritative ruler, yet he commanded the respect and loyalty of his court which comprised nobles and officials from many nationalities and religions i.e. Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and even Christians.¹

In the state machinery, the Hindus and Muslims held more of the key positions than did the Sikhs. It has already been established that the Maharaja cared only for the greatness of the state and welfare of the people; his policies were driven by a secular approach and not by a bigoted or myopic one. Under Ranjit Singh, the Sikh state practiced secularism, which is still uncommon in much of today's world.

Darbar of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

The Lahore *Darbar* was the central institution of the Sikh state responsible for running the state affairs. Maharaja Ranit Singh was certainly the most powerful figure in the *darbar*. All the

1 H. M. L. Lawrence, *Adventures of an Officer in Punjab*, Vol. I (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 30-31.

state affairs i.e. political, foreign and domestic, were completely subservient to his will. He did not follow the Mughal tradition of sitting on the throne, but held the *darbar* in his own way, sitting on a chair or even, more informally, on the carpet, which some courtiers did not appreciate. He ignored their disapproval however, and continued the practice. He wore a simple turban, and plain silk or cashmere clothes, reserving colourful robes for special occasions. He rarely wore jewellery, although during the visits of foreign dignitaries he used to wear a string of pearls or diamonds along with the famous *Koh-e-Noor* diamond on his arm.²

Although the Maharaja was indifferent to personal showiness, 'he liked to be surrounded by magnificently robed ministers and fine looking *sardars* majestically accoutred and armed'.³ Prince Kharak Singh (elder son of Ranjit Singh, died in 1840), Sher Singh⁴ and Raja Hira Singh⁵ were the only persons who had the privilege of sitting on chairs in the court. The court itself stood on golden pillars, and expensive Kashmiri carpets covered the entire floor.⁶ The court colour was yellow or green and most of the officials wore yellow garments of Kashmiri silk or wool. There was no firm gradation of ranks. In fact, the level of trust placed in him by the Maharaja usually determined the position of a courtier. The group of the advisors sat on the floor to the right of Maharaja, headed by Fakir Azizuddin, and

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- 2 Fakir Syed Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh* (Karachi: Lion Art Press, 1965), 34.
 - 3 Sohan Lal Suri, *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*, trsa. V. S. Suri. Vol. 2 (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2002), 23 See also; Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 26.
 - 4 He was son of Ranjit Singh and became the ruler of Punjab in 1841 but died in 1843 in the war of succession.
 - 5 Hira Singh born in 1816 was the son of Raja Dhian Singh, an influential courtier. He introduced his son to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who adored the young boy. From the very beginning, the Maharaja treated him with great generosity, bestowing upon him the title of Raja in 1828 and, then, proclaiming him *Farzand-e-Khas* (a favoured son). Hira Singh died in 1844.
 - 6 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 28.

the army officials sat on the left with Raja Dhian Singh (the Prime Minister).⁷

Composition of the *Darbar*: Courtiers

Ranjit Singh's courtiers represented various creeds, diverse races and different traditions, comprising Europeans⁸ as well as Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. Fakir Azizuddin (Foreign Minister), Nuruddin (Home Minister), Ghouse Khan and Elahi Bakhsh (Military Generals) were all Muslims. Dhian Singh Dogra (Prime Minister), Gulab Singh Dogra (Governor of Jammu), Suchet Singh (Chamberlain and Chief Protocol Officer), Hira Singh (a favourite of Ranjit Singh and Prime Minister of the Sikh rulers), Khushhal Singh (Chamberlain), Dina Nath (Minister of Civil Administration), Tej Singh (General in the Sikh Khalsa Army) were Brahmin Hindus.⁹ The Sikhs included Lehna Singh (an avid student of science) became Ranjit Singh's Adviser, the Sandhian Walay *Sardars* (held key positions in the Sikh Army as well as in the Administration), Hari Singh Nalwa (Commander in Chief of the Khalsa Army) and Sham Singh also held key positions at different times in the Sikh Army).

The socio-political background of the aristocracy of the Lahore *Darbar* was heterogeneous. About one-fifth of the members were subjugated chiefs and their dependent relatives who were mostly Sikh *misdars*, Rajputs, Afghans and Pathans. Most nobles hailed from the families of the Pathan rulers of Kasur, Multan and Jhang.¹⁰

7 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 29.

8 The exact number of these European officers who served during Ranjit Singh's era cannot be determined, though Carmichael Smyth enumerates them as 39 in all – Italian, French and English. George Carmichael Smyth ed., *A History of the Reigning Family of Lahore* (Calcutta: W. Thacker and Co., 1847), 1. See also; B. J. Hasrat, *Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (Hoshiarpur: V. V. R. I, 1968), 271.

9 Gulshan Lal Chopra, *The Punjab as a Sovereign State* (Originally published in Lahore: Uttar Chand Kapur & Sons, 1928; reprint Hoshiarpur: Vishveshver Anand Vedic Institute, 1969), 118.

10 Radha Sharma, *The Lahore Darbar* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2001), 15. See also; Bikrama Jit Hasrat, *Life and Times of Ranjit Singh*, A

Ministers and Executives

The Maharaja's policies of recruitment for civil and military posts were based strictly on merit.¹¹ Appointments of ministers, generals and administrative officers, all reflect his neutrality and merit. Moreover, his dispensation of matters relating to religion also speaks volumes for his approach beyond religions or religious affiliation. His *darbar* used Persian script, spoke Punjabi and followed the Hindu calendar of Vikramditya along with the Islamic calendar (AH).¹²

For non-Sikh communities, there was no barrier or constraint in joining any state department or walk of life. Personal ability, competence and hard work were the main criteria for selection to the state services/jobs. Similarly, state donations were meant for all religious denominations.¹³ These facts clearly establish that under Ranjit Singh the nature and character of the Sikh state was secular and neutral. Ranjit Singh himself was engaged with all the religious communities of the Punjab. He respected people and tribes for qualities such as bravery, statesmanship, financial acumen and diplomatic skills and not for their religious affiliation.¹⁴

Given existing military imperatives, the defence industry was an important state enterprise, headed largely by Muslims. Major ordnance factories were set up at Nakodar, Shahdarra, Peshawar, etc. Fakir Nuruddin supervised the workshop at Nakodar and Subha Singh and Jawahir Mal Dogra the

Saga of Benevolent Despotism (Hoshiarpur: V.V. Research Institute Book Agency, 1977), 263 & 265.

- 11 Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia and Parm Bakhshish Singh, eds., *An Overview of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and His Times* (Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 2001), 111.
- 12 Patwant Singh and Jyoti M. Rai, *Empire of the Sikhs* (n.c: Peter Owen Publishers, 2013), 242.
- 13 A long list of the donations is available in the family archives of Fakir Khana family, which includes the names of the recipients, Mosques, the people who were serving the Mosques and the Muslim shrines. Noor Ahmad Chishti, *Tahqiqat e Chishti* (Lahore: Nashranwa Tajran Jutab, 1867), 169.
- 14 J. S. Grewal, *The Reign of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Structure of Power, Economy and Society* (Patiala: Punjab Historical Studies Department, Punjabi University, 1981), 23.

factories at Shahdara, while Fakir Nuruddin was also the overall in charge of the state ordnance factories.¹⁵

While analysing various departments of Ranjit Singh's polity, it is evident that he generally tried to choose the right person for the right job, irrespective of religion. He deliberately chose the Majha Jats for the army for their bravery and fighting skills, and the Hindu Banias for the revenue and secretarial departments for their accounting, documentation and business skills and their experience with the Mughals.¹⁶ Roughly one-fifth of the members of the *Khalsa Darbar* (Court of Sikh Rulers) had already served under the Mughals; these were mostly Rajputs and Pathans. Under Ranjit Singh, top-ranking Muslim officers included two ministers, one governor and several district officers, and forty-one senior army positions including two generals and many colonels. About ninety-two Muslims served in the judiciary, police and justice department, remaining loyal to the Sikh state even after his death.¹⁷ This lends support and an evidence of the secular policies of Ranjit Singh, who was always far from establishing a Sikh dictatorship over other religions.¹⁸

Syeds, Qazi, Sheikhs, *Ulemas* and *Mullahs* constituted the Muslim religious class. With their knowledge of the *fiqh* [Arabic: Jurisprudence] and the Quran, they commanded significant respect among the community. The *Syeds* and *Sheikhs* belonged to the upper sections of Muslim society and were respected for their knowledge of religion and miracles. The *Syeds* spread across the Punjab and were also

15 Grewal, *The Reign of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 112.

16 Indu Banga, "J. S. Grewal on Sikh History, Historiography and Recent Debates," *Journal of Punjab Studies*, 20, no. 1 & 2 (2013): 301-26.

17 Mohamed Sheikh, *Emperor of the Five Rivers: The Life and Times of Maharajah Ranjit Singh* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 132.

18 Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs, Vol. 1: 1469-1839* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 198.

landowners and farmers.¹⁹ The Sikh government granted them many favours and concessions.

Lepel H. Griffins states that Ranjit Singh was a kind ruler who did not believe in hostility on the basis of religion.²⁰ He never preferred one religion to another; instead, he believed in ability and competence as a measure of respect and position. Therefore, he had no special feeling for Sikhs or eternal hatred for non-Sikhs. He simply needed competent people to work for him, whether they were Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims. He did not meddle with their religious beliefs, there were no segregating taxes, and his approach was free from extremism or any sort of restricted viewpoint and the racial pomposity natural in traditional Hinduism.²¹

General Administration

The land revenue system continued under Ranjit Singh as it had been under the Mughals. He was shrewd enough to find the right persons to administer his revenue system; appointing the experienced Hindu Khattris and Brahmins who had already worked as revenue ministers with the Mughals.²²

Ranjit Singh held supreme authority, personally appointing and guiding his officials in the discharge of their duties. He initially appointed Ramananda from Amritsar and Bhawani Das who had earlier served as revenue officers under Shah Shuja of Afghanistan.²³ Diwan Dena Nath was also appointed to this post. Under their administration, the revenue department improved significantly. Misr Bali Ram was in

19 Daljit Singh, *Punjab Social and Economic Condition 1501-1700* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 2004), 87.

20 Lepel Henry Griffins, *Ranjit Singh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 98-99.

21 S. N. Qanungo, "Decline and Fall of the Maratha Power" in *The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Maratha Supremacy* ed., R. C. Majumdar (Bombay: 1971), 515-16.

22 Gulshan Lall Chopra, *The Punjab as a Sovereign State* (Lahore: Uttar Chand Kapoor & Sons, 1928), 136.

23 Shahamet Ali, *The Sikhs and Afghans, in Connexion with India and Persia, Immediately Before and After the Death of Ranjeet Singh: From the Journal of an Expedition to Kabul through the Punjab and the Khaibar Pass* (London: J. Murray, 1847), 17.

charge of the treasury,²⁴ while Bhai Ram Singh along with Bhai Govind Ram and Fakir Azizuddin assisted in treasury and diplomatic affairs. Fakir Azizuddin conveyed royal instructions to the state functionaries. The Kardars looked after the general administrative affairs of state in each district, although matters relating to the military, settlement of the revenue and audit of the accounts were entirely decided by the Maharaja.²⁵

The *Khalsa* armed force prepared by the Europeans comprised all religious groups. The cavalry was mainly Sikh, the artillery under General Elahi Bukhsh had a majority of Muslims, and the infantry had a mixture of Dogras, Gurkhas, Sikhs and Muslims. In short, this heterogeneous Punjabi fighting force held Ranjit Singh in high regard as their commander and as an individual.²⁶

In comparison, with his contemporaries, Ranjit Singh ensured good administration of justice through a system of civil and criminal courts that existed throughout the state, providing justice to all communities. The justice system was based on the lines of the Mughal courts. The old *muhallahdari* [Urdu: Local township] system was re-introduced, where an influential person in a *muhallah* [Urdu: town] was responsible for resolving petty matters between people. Imam Bukhsh had custody of the office of the *kotwal* and Sadullah Chishti was his representative.²⁷

Muslim Courtiers and Officials

The Muslim clergy continued to enjoy a position of privilege and power. Not long after the control of Lahore in 1799,

24 Ali, *The Sikhs and Afghans, in Connexion with India and Persia*, 16-17.

25 Ali, *The Sikhs and Afghans, in Connexion with India and Persia*, 16-17.

26 Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia and Param Bakhshish Singh, *An Overview of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his Times* (Delhi: Anand Sons, 2001), 121.

27 J. S. Grewal, *In the By-Lanes of History: Some Persian Documents from a Punjab Town* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1975), 12.; See also, J. S. Grewal and Indu Banga ed., *Civil and Military Affairs of Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1987), 59 and Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 34.

Muslim judges were appointed to hear Muslim civil and common cases. In the Lahore *Darbar*, Qazi Nizam-ud-Din was designated as religious head of the Muslims, with full power in religious matters.²⁸ Ranjit Singh appointed Muslim *Qazis* and *Muftis* [Urdu: religious scholar] to dispense justice: Qazi Nizam-ud-Din to decide on disputes relating to marriage and divorce,²⁹ and *Muftis* Muhammad Shahpuri and Sadullah Chishti to decide on matters relating to property and deeds. Common cases like home loans, deals and contracts became the responsibility of *Mufti* Muhammad Shah. Many Muslims were appointed as *kotwal* or police officers.³⁰ Ranjit Singh would mostly assign Muslim officers to guard the borders of the Punjab. Every foreigner entering Punjabi territory required permission from these officers.³¹ Most of the Muslims who held key positions during Maharaja's era remained loyal to his successors as well.³²

Fakir Brothers

The famous brothers in the *darbar*, Fakir Syed Azizuddin, Fakir Syed Nuruddin and Fakir Syed Imamuddin had deep and close connections with the Maharaja, occupying respectively the posts of foreign minister, home minister as well as the Maharaja's physician, and various important positions at different times.³³ These three brothers helped Ranjit Singh to establish his kingdom on sound foundations, and they remained with him until his death. They were among his chief counsellors and assistants, not only in public but also behind the scenes. They left valuable versions not only of the activities in and around the court but also of the day-to-day life of Ranjit Singh and his court.

28 Grewal, *In the By-Lanes of History*, 11.

29 Grewal, *In the By-Lanes of History*, 11. See also, J. S. Grewal, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Polity, Economy, and Society* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2001), 59.

30 Narender Krishan Sinha, *Ranjit Singh* (Lahore: Nafees Printers, 1992), 164.

31 Lawrence, *Adventures of an Officer in Punjab*, Vol. 1, 30-31.

32 K. K. Khullar, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (New Delhi: Hem Publishers, 1980), 183.

33 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 34.

Jacquemont wrote about them:

Among his most intimate councillors are three Muhammadan brothers, who conceal their wealth under an outward appearance of poverty and seek to atone for their intrusion by the humility of their behaviour. All of them bear the title of 'Fakir,' as do their sons. They know Arabic and have read the medical books in that language, hence their reputation for deep scientific knowledge. The eldest, whom I met near Amritsar, is more or less the minister for foreign affairs; it is he who writes all the dispatches from Ranjit to the British government. Another is the trusted agent at Govind Garh. The third, whom I meet every day, is sometimes appointed governor of the city, when Ranjit does not take him away with him. These brothers have a cipher, which they use in correspondence among themselves and this artifice, hitherto, I believe, unknown in the East, gives them a reputation for great cleverness.³⁴

The family traced its origin from a famous holy man, Jalaluddin. It is written in the records of the Fakir family that he converted Halaku Khan to Islam, married one of his daughters and travelled to the Punjab.³⁵ Being residents of Bukhara the family was called Bukhari, but from the time of Ranjit Singh, it assumed the title of Fakir. It is narrated in the diaries of the Fakir Khana family that one day the Maharaja told Azizuddin that he was so pleased with the services of the brothers that he wanted to confer them a name/title. On the suggestion of Azizuddin, he gave them the name 'Fakir', along with the gift of two prestigious shawls.³⁶

Fakir Azizuddin was a physician, linguist, ambassador and foreign minister at the court of Ranjit Singh.³⁷ He first met the Maharaja as a physician, who was inspired by his medical expertise and facility with languages (Arabic, Persian and English) to grant him a *jagir* [Urdu: feudal land grant] and a position at court. Ranjit Singh adopted a practice of consulting

34 Victor Jacquemont, *Letters from India: Describing a Journey in the British Dominions of India, Tibet, Lahore and Cashmere during the Years 1828, 1829, 1830, 1831*. Vol. 1 (Karachi; Oxford: University Press, 1979), 31.

35 Diaries of the Fakir Khana Family; Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 39.

36 Diaries of the Fakir Khana Family; Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 40-41.

37 Sardar Singh Bhatia, "Vadda Ghallughara", *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, Vol. IV (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1998), 21.

him for important decisions. It was through his wise advice that the Maharaja was well disposed to the British, on the basis of fairness and equality. In 1808, when British troops moved to the River Sutlej, intending to push him North of the river, the Maharaja was angry enough to fight; however, Azizuddin, with extraordinary negotiating skill, discouraged him from this risky course, and skilfully directed the two forces towards a kinship which withstood numerous tests and which demonstrated his own worth to his ruler. His negotiations with the British culminated in the agreement of Amritsar in 1809, and in 1820 he held talks on behalf of the Sikh ruler with David Ochterloney. The British understood that they were confronting a man who could negotiate smoothly in seven languages, including English and French. From 1810-1838, he was given a great number of diplomatic assignments and tasks as a translator.³⁸

Fakir Azizuddin proved especially skilled in dealing with the arrogant Afghans, who continued to cause problems. In 1813, he was given leave to settle the colonies of Attock. With enormous effort and skill, he arranged the transfer of Attock Fort to the Sikhs, and in return the Afghan governor Jahandad Khan accepted a *jagir*. His dealings with the Pathans are another example of his ambassadorial skills. When Dost Muhammad Khan invaded Peshawar to regain the city from Ranjit Singh, Azizuddin was sent with some Sikh representatives to settle the matters with the Afghans. He received an aggressive welcome with shouts of *kafirs* [Urdu: Infidel] followed by a heated debate on religious and political matters, but he outshone the Afghans with his superior knowledge and his ability of persuasive speech. Dost Muhammad Khan listened with great consideration and clapped more than once. One of the Maharaja's courtiers asked him why, being a Muslim, Fakir Sahib was supporting the infidels. He opened the letter of Dost Muhammad Khan to Ranjit Singh, and explained that it clearly showed that Dost

38 Diaries of Fakir Khana Family; See also Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 40-41; and Griffins, *Ranjit Singh*, 23.

Muhammad Khan was fighting for territory and not for Islam, and that as a Muslim it was his duty to be faithful to his master.³⁹

During Ranjit Singh's reign, Fakir Azizuddin almost alone was in charge of foreign relations for the Sikh kingdom. In 1815, he held several negotiations with the leaders of Mandi and Rajauri, and later the Nawab of Bahawalpur. In 1823, he was sent to Peshawar to collect tribute from Yar Muhammad Khan Barakzai. After the death of Raja Sansar Chand of Kangra in 1824, his son, Anirudh Chand, defaulted on an instalment of *nazrana* [Urdu: Bestowment], and it was Azizuddin who went to Nadaun and got him to pay tribute to the Maharajah and his successors.⁴⁰ In 1827, he set out to Shimla on a goodwill mission to approach Lord Amherst, the British Representative General. Again, in April 1831, another delegation from the Lahore *Darbar* met Lord William Bentinck; although the Sikh General Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa led it, he had imperial instructions to follow the advice of Diwan Moti Ram and Azizuddin.⁴¹ This led to a meeting between Ranjit Singh and Bentinck in October 1831. Fakir Azizuddin, through Captain Wade, went as translator and led discussions that prompted the drawing up of the Tripartite Treaty of 1838 supporting Shah Shuja on the throne of Kabul. Seven years later, he again went as translator when the Maharajah met Lord Auckland, generally considered to have resulted in extending the life of the *Khalsa* State.⁴² Indeed, Fakir Azizuddin was described in the British intelligence reports as 'Oracle of the Maharaja', and on one occasion even 'his master's mouthpiece'. The British consistently met their match when it came to keeping authorized records of state. His grip on

39 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 41.

40 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 42.

41 Ikram Ali Malik, *A Book of Reading on the History of the Punjab: 1799-1947* (Lahore: Ilmi printing Press, 1970), 102.

42 Malik, *A Book of Reading on the History of the Punjab*, 103.

Arabic, Persian, English and French made him among the most expressive men of his day.⁴³

Fakir Azizuddin was a man of knowledge, not a fighter by profession, although Ranjit Singh assigned him military duties as well. He was sent to seize Gujrat from Sahib Singh Bhangi, to strengthen the fort at Attock, to capture the fort of Phillaur from Diwan Kirpa Ram, and to take charge of Kapurthala, Jandiala, Hoshiarpur and Fateh Singh Ahluwalia's lands. He was sometimes left in charge of Lahore when Ranjit Singh went on military expeditions.⁴⁴

His captivating manners and perfect ministerial behaviour made Fakir Azizuddin a perfect advisor and confidant of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. For example, when Raja Sansar Chand of Kangra came to see the Maharaja to speak to him in private, Ranjit Singh directed him to speak to Fakir Azizuddin.⁴⁵

Conventional Muslims considered him an unbeliever/atheist, although he looked on all religions equally. On one occasion Ranjit Singh asked him whether he favoured Hinduism or Islam. 'I am,' he answered, 'a man sailing along a compelling waterway. I turn my eyes towards the land; however I can recognize no distinction in either bank'.⁴⁶

Ranjit Singh's appointment of Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa as Governor of Kashmir was questioned by Fakir Azizuddin on the grounds that, extraordinary general though he was, but as a leader he was rash and rude. So strongly did Azizuddin feel that he added, if Hari Singh was to go to Kashmir as representative, ploughs should be sent with him to level the thriving towns of the Kashmir valley to the ground. Without a moment's delay, Ranjit Singh withdrew his decision and

43 Fakir Syed Aijazuddin, *The Resourceful Fakirs, Three Muslim Brothers at the Sikh Court of Lahore* (Delhi: Three Rivers Publishers, 2014), 37.

44 Griffins, *Ranjit Singh*, 23.

45 H. L. O. Garret, and G. L. Chopra, *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh: 1810-1817*, trs from the original papers (New Delhi: Amar Prakashan, 1979), 250 and Aijazuddin, *The Resourceful Fakirs*, 22.

46 Griffins, *Ranjit Singh*, 21.

appointed a more thoughtful individual to Kashmir.⁴⁷ On individual family matters, the Maharaja placed equal trust in the advice of his loyal Fakir. In 1816, he inquired whether Diwan Moti Ram would be able to deal with the possessions of Kunwar Kharak Singh. Azizuddin gave a thoughtful reply, saying that time would be required to check his ability to manage things.⁴⁸ By 1817, Azizuddin was in a unique position, and his brothers highly valued.

Dr. Murray reported on the influence of the three Muslim brothers in 1826. He was received by them and was taught how to present himself in front of the Maharaja. Fakir Imamuddin went with him to court and prevented him from doffing his hat in the Western way of respect, explaining that it was not a Sikh tradition to uncover the head, as this was a sign of social nakedness. Fakir Nuruddin told him that Azizuddin, who was departing to present precious gifts personally to the Governor General, had been instructed to return immediately as he had to be in constant attendance on the Maharaja at night, and was consulted even in the most trivial matters.⁴⁹

Fakir Azizuddin's career as a distinguished ambassador, a convincing speaker, an expert planner and a fluent orator reached its peak in 1838. This was during the last days of Ranjit Singh, when he was paralyzed, had completely lost the power of speech and could only communicate with his eyes; Fakir Azizuddin was the only person who could understand

47 Harbans Singh and Bilbir Singh, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Being Tribute to the Memory of the Great Monarch, Published on the Occasion of the First Death Century* (Lahore: The University Sikh Association, 1939), 28-29.

48 Garret and Chopra, *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh*, 254. See also Aijazuddin, *The Resourceful Fakirs*, 22.

49 Aijazuddin, *The Resourceful Fakirs*, 31-33. See also, Garret and Chopra, *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh*, 167.

him.⁵⁰ Emily Eden, the sister of Lord Auckland, described Fakir Azizuddin as the comfort of Ranjit Singh's life.⁵¹

Imamuddin, the second brother of Fakir Azizuddin, was for many years in charge of the fort of Gobind Garh. After establishing his power in Amritsar, Ranjit Singh constructed this famous fort, named after the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Gobind Singh. It belonged to the Bhangi Sardar Gujjar Singh and was rebuilt in 1809 under the supervision of Fakir Imamuddin who, although not a member of the *darbar*, held an important position at military and administrative levels.⁵² The fort's construction was well planned, as part of the protective line of the kingdom: 'Whosoever will pass the Govind Garh fort will hold the keys of the kingdom'.⁵³ Throughout the reign of Ranjit Singh, Fakir Imamuddin held the key position of protector of the fort and governor of the areas around the city. He was also in charge of the treasury, the magazines, royal stables and the arsenals in the fort.⁵⁴ Although Sikh generals criticized him, the Maharaja would never hear a word against him.⁵⁵ Because his post meant that he was away from the Lahore *Darbar*, he played an active role as a bridge in the correspondence between the British and the Maharaja. In 1827, he was sent to Shimla on a complementary mission.⁵⁶

Fakir Nuruddin was the home minister and also royal physician, almoner, administrator of the royal palaces and gardens, one of the three guardians of the royal treasury,

50 Aijazuddin, *The Resourceful Fakirs*, 214.

51 Emily Eden, *Up the Country: Letters Written to her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India / Emily Eden; Introduction by Elizabeth Claridge; notes by Edward Thompson* (London: Virago, 1997), 207.

52 Madanjit Kaur, *The Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Historians Observations* (Chandigarh: Unistar books Ltd, 2007), 123.

53 William Lewis M'Gregor, *History of the Sikhs* Vol. 1 (London: James Madden, 1846), 19.

54 Kaur, *The Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 123. See also, Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 32.

55 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 32.

56 Chopra, *The Punjab as a Sovereign State*, 178-79.

head of the stores at the fort, a judge, keeper of the Maharaja's judicial integrity, and master of ceremonies in charge of royal splendour and ritual. When guests arrived, they had to be received with the appropriate amount of *zeafat* [Urdu: food] and a suitable level of generosity. If transport was needed, elephants and horses had to be ready. If a full *darbar* was to be held, the pashmina tents had to be fitted out, expensive rugs freshened and the gifts given and received displayed and accounted for; overnight guests had to be accommodated, and reports on all this work given to the Maharaja.⁵⁷ With the passage of time, it became second nature of Nuruddin to arrange such functions. His true achievement, however, was being able to complete his duty in line with the customs held by the court.⁵⁸

Among his many other tasks, Nuruddin was required to select the charitable gifts of the Maharaja to the poor. He was in charge of the dispensaries in Lahore and all the other big cities, where indigenous medicines were given to the people.⁵⁹ Because of these multifaceted duties, he became so close to Ranjit Singh that, although he was not a member of the council, he had great influence on him. The Fakir family's records illustrate other instances of this closeness. His son, Prince Sher Singh, had an eye on one of the Maharaja's favourite horses, Dooloo. He tried to ride it on several occasions. One day, he took it from the stable and did not return it, and his father ordered that all the prince's possessions should be taken away and he himself exiled. Before the orders could be executed, Fakir Nuruddin intervened on behalf of the prince. When the Maharaja complained to him about Sher Singh, Fakir Nuruddin gave a

57 Malik, *A Book of Reading on the History of the Punjab*, 105.

58 Aijazuddin, *The Resourceful Fakirs*, 35.

59 Prithipal Singh Kapur and Dharam Singh, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Commemoration Volume on Bicentenary of his Coronation, 1801, 2001* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2001), 129.

witty reply and Ranjit Singh not only cancelled the punishment but also gave Dooloo to the prince, with the royal trappings.⁶⁰

Another exceptionally important duty of Fakir Nuruddin was the provision of the Maharaja's food, prepared under the supervision of Hakim Bhishan Das and tested by a team of professionals before being poured into special dishes, which could detect poison. The food was then locked in special containers under the supervision of Nuruddin, and fastened with his own seal. Ranjit Singh never ate anything, which did not have the seal of Fakir Nuruddin.⁶¹

Nuruddin shared the qualities of versatility, persuasiveness, clean discussion, refined behaviour and comprehension of political matters of his brother Azizuddin.⁶² William Barr in February 1839 praised him in these words: 'He was a short, elderly, and rather plainly dressed man, with an intelligent and somewhat amiable cast of the countenance and the perfect gentleman in his manners'.⁶³ By 1838, the three Fakir brothers achieved a uniquely unassailable position in the Sikh Court. Moorcroft was especially complimentary about them, recognizing them as men of extreme sophistication and extraordinary intellect.⁶⁴

Conclusion

When Maharaja Ranjit Singh came to power, he wanted all his subjects, including Hindus and Muslims, 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. He gathered around him a pool of able and

60 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 44.

61 Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, 45.

62 Malik, *A Book of Reading on the History of the Punjab*, 105.

63 Lieutenant William Barr, *Journal of a March from Delhi to Peshâwur, and from thence to Câbul, with the Mission to Lieut-Col. Sir C. M. Wade, etc. [With plates.]* (London: J. Madden & Co., 1844), 74-75.

64 Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab: in Ladakh and Kashmir; in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz, and Bokhara from 1819-1825* (Patiala: Languages Dept, 1970), 94-95.

talented people from all religions and communities; the most notable of whom have been described above. His *darbar* was secular in character; merit and personal qualities were the main criteria for appointment and increased status and position. In selecting the right man for the right job, he also assessed the traits, characteristics and customs of the community or tribe the incumbent belonged to. On this basis, he entrusted the revenue and financial departments to Hindus who had been in the service of the Mughals. Similarly, the Jats were best suited to the *Khalsa* army. Those individuals from the landed aristocracy and upper classes, whose personal stakes made them carry out their obligations sincerely and enthusiastically, were generally sent on diplomatic missions.

Despite many reservations and objections by influential Hindus and Sikhs, Ranjit Singh appointed Fakir brothers to important positions. These administrative decisions confirm that for Ranjit Singh religion was hardly a criterion in deciding state matters or policies. He wanted able and competent people to run his kingdom. These were the individuals who remained loyal to the *Khalsa* State even after the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839. This study hints that Muslims under the Sikh rule occupied key positions in the echelon of civil and military administration and played an important role in the formation and execution of state policies.