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Life at the Lahore *Darbār*: 1799-1839

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Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) occupied Lahore in 1799 and ruled the Punjab from that city for forty years. He chose to live at the Lahore fort built by the Mughal emperors and to some extent, brought back the grandeur and magnificence it knew in Mughal times. This article is an attempt to describe the glamorous life at the Lahore *darbār* (Sikh court) based on contemporary sources, majesty that was lost forever after annexation by the British in 1849.

Ranjit Singh selected the Musamman Burj in the Lahore fort for both his private and official use and chose the *sheesh mahal* chambers or mirror pavilions within the Musamman Burj, built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658), as his residence[1]. Alexander Burnes visited the Maharaja's private quarters in the fort in 1831, and noted that the passages were decorated with "waxen tapers" and that "bottles filled with different coloured water were placed near the lights, and increased the splendor" (Burnes, 1992: 29). He sat with some of his companions in silver chairs in Ranjit Singh's bedroom in the Musamman Burj and describes it in the following words:

> In one end of the room stood a camp bedstead, which merits a description. Its frame-work, posts, and legs were entirely covered with gold, and the canopy was one massy sheet of the same precious metal. It stood on footstools raised about ten inches from the ground, and which were also of gold. The curtains were of Cashmeer shawls. Near it stood a round chair of gold; and in one of the upper rooms of the palace we saw the counterpart of these costly ornaments. The candles that lighted up the apartment were held in branch sticks of gold. The little room in which we sat was superbly gilded; and the side which was next the court was closed by a screen of yellow silk (Ibid: 30).

The account of entertainment offered at the Musamman Burj to a group of British officers including Captain Wade, Alexander Burnes and Doctor Murray, in February 1832, gives a glimpse of how these pavilions looked like during the Sikh

reign. After the inspection of troops of the *Campoo-i-Muallā* (Maharaja's special guards) that included a performance by the dancing girls in male attires, a grand reception was arranged for the guests. The arrangements included illuminations with camphor candles fitted in candle stands that were hung all over the place. The outer and inner walls of the Musamman Burj were covered with fine fabric, exquisite gold-embroidered and gold-threaded curtains hung on all windows and gold-woven carpets were laid in the corridors. Tents with silver and gold plated poles were fixed in the open space in front of the Musamman Burj. A gold-canopied charpoy and gold utensils were displayed and an abundant supply of food and drink was available for the guests. A dance and music performance was presented and according to Sohan Lal Suri, the *sahibs* thoroughly enjoyed the entertainment (Suri, 2002, 3(i):157-59). The illuminations and extravagant decorations arranged by Khalifa Nuruddin (Maharaja's court physician) were meant to leave a lasting impression on the visitors and the Maharaja personally asked them towards the end of the evening, if they had ever experienced something similar in Hindustan (Ibid).

All contemporary historical sources talk about the grandeur of the Lahore *darbār* and have recorded countless occasions where Ranjit Singh emphatically ordered his courtiers and troops to pay special attention to their attire. He wanted to build the morale of his own men with uniforms and discipline in military exercises comparable to the British and impress everyone with the grandeur and riches of his court. The chieftains and troops accompanying Ranjit Singh's eldest son Kharak Singh's wedding procession in 1811 were ordered to present themselves in richly decorated clothes and plumes on their headgear (Ibid, 2:114). They were directed to be magnificently dressed in order to "…strike surprise among the onlookers and create wonder among the spectators…." (Ibid:116). This exercise was especially for the benefit of the British officer Colonel Ochterlony and the Hill Rajas invited for the ceremony.

A similar display of magnificence mesmerized the European visitors when Lord William Bentick, the Governor General of India visited the Maharaja at Ropar in 1831. Raja Dhyan Singh, the Prime Minister was asked to make arrangements that included decorating the camp with velvet and brocade tents, huge canopies of brocade, satin, gold-threaded fabric and *tūs* (or *shahtoosh*, top quality fine wool), as well as excellent floorings. *Misr* Beli Ram was ordered to get fine gifts and rare object, with seventy-one garments bound in *pashmīna* (costly hand-woven woolen fabric) wrappers, ready to be presented to the honorable guest. The platoons and horsemen were all asked to be dressed in brocade suits and ornaments, and to stand in a row from the portico to the bridge for firing a salute upon the chief guest's arrival. The chiefs at Sikh court were also required to wear fabulous clothes and jewelry and were arranged to stand near the Maharaja's canopy according to their ranks (Op.cit, 3(i):112).

G. T. Vigne (2004), the famous English traveler, visited Lahore in 1837. He found the gold and jewels on the Sikh *sardārs* tempting enough to note in his memoirs that "There were scarcely any of the Sirdars around him [Ranjit Singh], whom one would not have been glad to have pillaged in the dark; so bedizened were they generally with gold and jewels, pearls, emeralds, and the rubies of Budukshan" (274-5).

A meeting between the Maharaja and Lord Auckland took place at Ferozepur on November 29, 1838. Describing the magnificence of the Maharaja's *darbār*, Stienbach who accompanied the British Governor General, notes that the "…Sikh chieftains, all clinquant, all in gold, or clothed in every diversity of colour, and every imaginable variety of picturesque costume, armed to the teeth with spears, saber, shield and lighted matchlock, - scrambled onwards…." (Steinbach, 2005: 140-42). The colonel was mesmerized by the opulence and magnificence of the Indian troops and his awe is evident from his statement that "the scene which now presented itself is utterly beyond description. All that the imagination can conceive of human grandeur – all that the most exuberant fancy can devise in its endeavour to portray the acme of royal splendour – was here embodied forth" (Ibid: 148).

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in later years of his life is recorded to have worn a simple dress with few pieces of jewelry but during his early reign he also used to bedeck himself with fancy clothes and jewels to impress the visitors. In December 1813, for example, he ordered the *vakīls* of Hyderabad to appear in the court before granting them leave and had a very fine carpet laid, and wore a green dress and turban and "ornaments and armlets beset with jewels"(Op.cit, 2:152). Before granting audience to *Dewān* Gudar Mal, the *vakīl* or representative of Alijah Fateh Khan Barakzai in 1811, the Maharaja made sure that the guests were impressed with the riches of the Lahore *darbār* as he put on elaborate clothes and fine jewelry, ordered a superior quality carpet to be laid out and sat in a gold chair (Ibid:111).

The magnificence of the Sikh court was echoed by a silver bungalow Ranjit Singh had ordered for holding court away from the pavilions of Musamman Burj. It was set up for the first time near a "northward garden" near the Lahore fort and he entered it at an auspicious moment calculated by the court astrologers (Ibid: 289). In 1826 or 1827, while the Maharaja was in Amritsar due to ill health, he ordered the silver bungalow to be brought to Amritsar for the Dussehrā celebrations[2]. It was fixed on the bank of the stream in the village Tang. That the bungalow was double-storied is evident because on October 29, 1831, during the display of Maharaja's military drills at the meeting with Lord William Bentick at Ropar, the Governor General was taken to the "upper storey" of the silver bungalow. It is a probable that the "bungalow on wheels" described by Fakir Waheeduddin refers to the same one. He writes that it had silver walls, a shawl canopy and was furnished with carpets, cushions, curtains and chandeliers and was pulled by eight elephants (Waheeduddin, 1965: 159). Another novelty recorded by

Suri is a boat that Ranjit Singh ordered that was shaped like a peacock (Op.cit, 2:427). Other curiosities patronized by the Lahore *darbār* are briefly described; Kharak Singh's wedding procession had a moving throne and a model of the Shalimar Gardens that was carried on the shoulders of about one hundred men and Rani Nakain, the groom's mother sat in a chariot that was set with jewels and had a crown over it (Ibid:117). At the time of Kharak Singh's son Naunehal Singh's wedding in February 1837, Henry Fane noted with approval the trees at the fort of Bhangian (Amritsar) bearing "fruit covered with gold and silver leaves" hanging from the branches (Op.cit, 3(iii):440). Most of the novelties created for the Maharaja and the elite Sikh courtiers are not extant and can only be reconstructed through their accounts in contemporary historical sources.

The lists of items given away as offerings and presents inform us of the riches that circulated in Sikh society. Luxury items made of silver and gold including utensils, beds and chairs, votive objects, picture frames used for sacred images, gold-threaded horse saddles, silver and gold *howdās* or elephant seats are mentioned. *Pashmīna* and gold woven fabrics appear to have been a great favorite along with different kinds of cottons and silks. Jewelry was worn extravagantly by both men and women and names of a few pieces are mentioned by Suri like the *chaura pāīn*, *ponchiān*, *bāzooband*, *qashaqa*, *damnī* and *mālā* (Ibid: 432). Contemporary jewelry pieces are shown in nineteenth century illustrations for the copies of *Ain-i-Akbari* (figure 1).

Fig.1: *Ain-i-Akbari* (The Chronicles of Emperor Akbar), Lahore, Pakistan. Ink, pigment, gold leaf paper, c. 1822. Collection of Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada. (2006.70.1_16_page09_det)

The frescoes in the interior of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's *Samadhī* in Lahore, built around the middle of the nineteenth century, present excellent examples of the ambience of the Lahore *darbār*. Here the mythological scenes are illustrated

with a firsthand knowledge of opulence and grandeur, showing even the shepherds, ascetics and maidservants laden with jewelry and wearing richly embellished dresses.

The pomp and pageantry of the Lahore *darbār* was fully displayed during popular Hindu religious festivals. Dussehrā is celebrated in memory of the Hindu god Rama's victory over Ravanna; an occasion that reinforces the triumph of virtue over evil. Maharaja Ranjit Singh celebrated the event every year with great festivity and ordered his courtiers to participate with equal fervor. He began the celebrations with the worship of the horse and the sword (Op.cit, 2:495). An explanation of this act is found in H. T. Princep's statement: "Guru Govind [the tenth Sikh guru] devoted his followers to steel, and hence the worship of the sword, as well as its employment against both Mahomedans *(sic)* and Hindus" (Princep, 1846, 1:122). James Tod notes that "*Karga Shapna*" or worship of the sword is a Rajput tradition and is "essentially martial" (Tod, 1877, 1:458). Other activities during the Sikh period included putting up effigies of the characters of the epic *Ramayana* and a discharge of the *topkhanā* (canons). In 1811, the festivities included a mock battle of the conquest of Lanka by the Maharaja's armed troops that resulted in a great confusion leaving countless injured and many dead (Op.cit, 2:109).

Dussehrā in V. S. Sambat 1883/1826 A. D. was celebrated at the village Tang, near Amritsar where the Maharaja's silver bungalow was set up after being brought from Lahore (Ibid: 408). Prince Sher Singh, one of Ranjit Singh's sons, "got a hint from the Maharaj" to erect the symbolic "Lanka" in a "graceful and stylish manner". The carpet-layers were ordered to spread fine floorings and to affix tents without poles, woven with gold and silver threads and brocade and gold threaded canopies with golden poles, near the Maharaja's silver bungalow. The *daroghā* or in-charge of the stables was ordered to present the best horses decorated with gold and bejeweled harnesses and the in-charge of elephants was similarly ordered to bring fully decorated huge elephants. Prince Sher Singh, the chieftains and the troops were directed to put on fine clothes and appear for inspection before the Maharaja (Ibid: 409). During the Dussehrā festivities, the chieftains along with their troops of horsemen wore steel armors inlaid with gold and enameled golden that was highly polished. Their bright dresses were made of gold-threaded cloth, brocades and satins of various colors (Ibid: 455).

In March 1832, preparations were made for a grand Holī festival. Holī is a Hindu spring festival celebrated by throwing colored dyes on each other. *Misr* Beli Ram was ordered to give Rs. 500/- every day to Raja Hira Singh (Raja Dhyan Singh's son and a favorite of the Maharaja) for the preparations of the event and the staff responsible for floorings was instructed to make arrangements in the garden of Shah Balāwal. The merriment went on for three days; March 15 to 17, 1832. The Singhs (Sikh *sardārs*) and the troops of *Campoo-i muallā* (According to Lafont, name given to the regular units which did not belong to the Fauj-i khās or

to another French brigade) were made to stand opposite each other to playfully fight with the lac dye in sprinklers while the dancing girls presented their dance and songs. The Maharaja later held a *darbār* at the garden of Chota Ram where all the *vakīls*, *nawābs* and chieftains were invited for the celebrations. They played with the lac dye, sprinkled rose water and saffron. At the end of the celebrations, the dignitaries were awarded robes of honor (Op.cit, 3(ii):170-71).

Basant is another Hindu spring festival, dedicated to the goddess Sarasvati. During Ranjit Singh's times, celebrations usually took place at the mausoleum of Madho Lal Husain, at Lahore. For Basant in 1825, the Maharaja ordered all horsemen and platoons to wear yellow costumes and to form lines all the way from the Delhi Gate to the mausoleum. The Maharaja came out of the fort, performed *suchetā* (ablutions) and inspected the parade of the troops. He then went to the mausoleum and sat under a high yellow canopy and enjoyed watching the fair for two to three hours before returning to the fort (Ibid, 2:388). A couple of years later on Basant day at the same venue, tents, screens and canopies of yellow color, beautifully woven in wool, were set up which the Maharaja had recently received from Kashmir. Chieftains, platoons and the horsemen were all ordered to wear yellow costumes and to stand in rows from the Delhi Gate to the tomb for inspection. After his usual inspection, the Maharaja took his seat in the gold chair in his tent at the tomb (Ibid: 438).

These festivities and royal entertainments also included dance performances by the dancing girls frequently mentioned by contemporary sources. Especially noteworthy is Ranjit Singh's troop of female "Amazons" or the *zenanā* platoon. Each one of these "soldiers" carried a bow and arrow in hand and had a sword by her waist during performance (Ibid, 3(i):114-15). The band consisted of thirty or forty singing and dancing girls chosen for their "beauty of face and figure, playfulness and agility" (Op.cit, 1965: 178). *The Real Ranjit Singh* gives their description in the following words:

> A lemon-yellow *banarsi* turban with a bejeweled crest; a dark green jumper over a blue satin gown, fastened with a gold belt; deep crimson skin-tight *pyjamas* of *gulbadan* silk; and a pair of pointed golden shoes. As for jewelry, they wore a pair of gold earrings set with stones, a diamond nose stud, a pair of gold bracelets and a ruby ring on the middle finger (Ibid).

The Maharaja was very fond of watching dance performances and sometimes spent all day or most of the night in such entertainments, if we are to believe the newsletters published as *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh, 1810-1817* (Garrette and Chopra, 1986: 11-12, 26, 53, 56, 74 etc). But these sources also record some of his rare solitary moments away from merriment and expeditions that were spent in listening to one Attar Khan playing the flute, especially on rainy evenings (Ibid: 70, 96, 101, 186, 189 etc). He is also noted to have pleased himself with a ramble in heavy rainfall in summers while enjoying the sight of fountains (Ibid: 83).

Ranjit Singh's martial impression is further softened by his fondness for gardens. Although the outer precincts of Lahore still displayed ruins with abandoned mosques and mausoleums in the nineteenth century as stated by various European travelers and visitors, the main city boasted many gardens (Barr, 1844: 66). The Shalimar Gardens in the outskirts of nineteenth century Lahore was not only visited for enjoying the remarkable beauty but it also offered a place for journey-break on the Maharaja's frequent visits to Amritsar. He used to put up at the Gardens for days while proceeding towards the Holy City or upon entering Lahore on his way back. The pleasure the Maharaja derived from the Gardens is evident from Suri's account of September 1818, given below:

> The Maharaja ordered the march of his royal standards from the village of Sourian, and, by way of the bridge of Kakargill boarded the boats and came over to Shalabagh. As the said garden brightened the eyes of every body on account of its abundant trees, plenty of roses, fruit bearing trees and water channels, the Maharaja was pleased and liked to stay there for a few days (Op. cit, 2:265).

Sohan Lal Suri mentions the Garden in different names; Shalamār, Shalabāgh or Shehla Bāgh and also as Shualā-i-māh or the "spark of the moon" (Ibid: 54). An explanation for this variety of names is found in Sita Ram Kohli's account where he refers to Dewan Amar Nath's *Zafarnama-i-Ranjit Singh*, and notes that in 1803, the Maharaja while strolling in the Gardens with his companions argued about the meaning of the name "Shalamār". According to the Maharaja, the literal meaning of the word in Punjabi was "God's strike" and therefore it was unsuitable for a garden. The courtiers tried to make him understand that this was a Turkish word that meant "*farhat bakhsh*" or refreshing, but Ranjit Singh dismissed them saying that the Punjab was not inhabited by Turks, therefore a name understandable in the local language needed to be adopted and that was to be Shalā Bāgh (Kohli, 2004: 77).

Captain Wade, the British political agent at Ludhiana, visited Lahore in June 1838 prior to the Governor General Lord Auckland's visit in January 1839. The Captain appreciated the delightful Shalimar Gardens but pointed out that dilapidation marred its beauty. He suggested that repairs be made before the Governor General's forthcoming visit, to which the Maharaja readily agreed and ordered Khalifa Nuruddin to immediately visit the Gardens and submit a report (Op.cit, 3(iv):195-96).

Besides the Shalimar Gardens, *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* frequently mentions the Hazuri Bāgh that lies between the Badshahi Mosque and the Alamgirī Gate of the Lahore fort. Sohan Lal Suri records that this garden was laid out at the orders of the Maharaja at the beginning of the new Bikrami year 1870 (April 1813), and expert gardeners were engaged for the purpose (Ibid, 2:136). Following the

Mughal tradition, a marble *baradarī* was constructed in the centre of the garden (figure 2).

Fig. 2: Hazuri Bagh Pavilion, Lahore, Pakistan. (Photo: 2006)

An Englishman, Lieut. William Barr visited Lahore in February 1839. His detailed account of the Hazuri Bāgh *baradarī* given below helps reconstruct the original structure:

> In the center of this square [Hazuri Bāgh], which is laid out in gardens and terraces, is an elegant little building, erected by the Maharaja, with marble pilfered from the tombs of Jahangir and his wazir [Empress Nurjahan's brother Asif Jah], where he transacts business in the hot season. The lower apartment is fourteen feet square, ornamented with looking-glass, gilding, and colours, most harmoniously blended, and extremely rich. Light is admitted through Saracenic arches on pillars, and a verandah, eight feet broad, with a ceiling embellished in the same style of profusion, encompasses the whole, which is built on a chabootra some four of five feet above the ground. We ascended to an upper room of similar size and shape, but even more beautifully and gorgeously ornamented; the four doors being decorated with ivory, inlaid in various devices, each being different from the other, and all arranged with much taste. There is also an apartment under-ground, where the Maharaja takes refuge from the hot winds, and during the hours of recreation admits a few of his most intimate friends (Op.cit, 1844: 98).

Suri's accounts mention that the Maharaja used the *baradarī* not only for recreational purposes but also to celebrate various festivals (op cit, 2:441). The pavilion lost its upper storey on July 19, 1932 and the damaged portion was removed to the fort (Aijazuddin, 2004: 74). Presently, the *baradarī* is a single-storied structure and is in a fairly good condition.

Contemporary sources also record several occasions when the Maharaja ordered the laying out of gardens and construction of *baradarīs*. In November 1819, the Maharaja ordered Fakir Imamuddin, *thanedār* (in-charge) of Gobindgarh fort at Amritsar, to lay out a garden (Rambāgh) outside the *katrā* (or the locality generally occupied) of Jai Singh Kanhaya[3], and that it should be similar to the Shalimar Gardens (Op.cit, 2:312). The garden complex has a double-storied red sandstone gateway and buildings laid out in the *chaupār* (four sections) pattern (Khanna, 2001: 116). Ranjit Singh's summer palace stands in the center of the garden with four ancillary buildings on the cardinal axes. The Garden still exists but is now called the Company Bāgh and the buildings are used for different purposes. The Summer Palace is now used as Maharaja Ranjit Singh Museum (figure 3).

Fig. 3: Rāmbāgh Palace, Amritsar, India. (Photo: 2006)

There are quite a few references in the chronicles of private gardens laid out and owned by the *sardārs* and the elite. The Maharaja frequently visited these gardens (*bāghs*) and occasionally celebrated festivals or held court. Suri states that "he indulged in walks and strolls there among the blossoms and rosebuds which had been set in graceful order by the gardeners" (op cit, 2:415). Among the most frequently mentioned besides Shalimar Gardens are the gardens of Chota Ram, Jamadar Khushal Singh, Amb Dhoorewalā and Anguri Bāgh. These gardens also had small pavilions in them. In September 1827, *ahalkārs* or the officers of the concerned department were issued orders to "get ready a newly founded Baradari in perfect strength together with a fine garden on the bank of river [Ravi]" (Ibid: 430).

The chronicles of 1832 shed interesting light on the architectural activities that prevailed during the Sikh rule over the Punjab. Suri records:

> As the Maharaja always had a great liking for building lovely new buildings, he proposed the building of a *Baradari* at Kaulsar [Amritsar] during these days. He, therefore, appointed Fateh Khan, son of Mian Elahi Bakhsh, for fetching stone from Lahore. Rs. 50 were given to him for his personal use,

> Rs. 10 were given to his *Munshi* and Rs. 20 for cartage (Ibid, 3(ii):176).

Suri recounts in 1826 that the Maharaja ordered bungalows to be built "all along the way from Adinanagar to Amritsar" in all probability as halting places for himself (Ibid, 2:406). Shortly before passing these orders, he is reported to have fallen ill after his visit to the Jawalamukhi Temple in the Hills and had to rush back to Adinanagar, and from there to Amritsar (Ibid: 405). Henry Fane also notes in his memoirs that since the Maharaja is constantly on the move, he has built single rooms along the great roads to seek a cool shelter when the heat becomes unbearable in a tent (Fane, 1842, 1:150). One of the few extant *baradarīs* built by Ranjit Singh is in the Shalimar Gardens. It was occupied by William Moorcroft for some time who mentions it in his memoirs[4]. He stayed at the small *baradarī* that was furnished with a cooling device and describes it in the following words:

> May 6. I started at three, and at nine reached Shahlimar, the large garden laid out by order of Shah Jehan, where I took up my abode in a chamber erected by the Raja close to a well, and a reservoir which it supplies, and from which jets d' eau are made to play so near to the apartment as to cool the air at its entrance (Moorcroft and Trebeck, 2004, 1:91).

The building and its cooling well are visible today but in need of repair (figure 4).

Fig. 4: *Baradarī* at the Shalimar Gardens, Lahore. (Photo: 2006)

In addition to laying out gardens with *baradarīs*, the Sikh monarch and his *sardārs* also built large mansions or *havelīs* in Lahore. Sections of two large *havelī* complexes, Jamadar Khushal Singh's *havelī* in Chūna Mandī and Naunehal Singh's *havelī* inside the Mori Gate survive in their original form and are used today as a girls' college and a girls' school, respectively.

Jamadar Khushal Singh's *havelī* was a part of a triangular site occupying 2.7 hectares, inside the Masitī Gate. Today the site includes three main structures, two

of the Sikh period and the third dateable to the British. The largest of the three structures, the *havelī* itself, covered almost one hectare and the construction was probably started in 1817 (PEPA, 1993: 69-83). A contemporary record indicates that Maharaja Ranjit Singh gave five hundred wooden beams to the Jamadar in August of that year for the construction of a mansion (Op.cit, 1986: 275). The large *havelī* is a huge rectangle measuring almost a hectare, and a portal that faces east. A square garden behind the portal was surrounded by chambers and subterranean rooms (used during the summers). The women's quarters or *zenanā* were situated on the southern and south-eastern sides of the courtyard. The northern side held the baths or *hammāms* as well as the elephant stables or *feel-khanā* (op cit, 1993: 78). Kanhaya Lal describes the lofty southern and westerns walls of the *havelī* as almost equal in height to the walls of the Lahore fort - giving the *havelī* the appearance of a second fort (Lal, 2006: 308).

Kanhaya Lal also writes of a *havelī* built for Naunehal Singh in 1837. It was one of the grandest edifices of Lahore with countless courtyards, subterranean rooms and buildings sumptuously decorated with gold-work on the ceilings. He also refers to "a towering building of glass" that neither survives, nor mentioned in other accounts (Ibid, 306). Including the subterranean floor, it is a five-storied building, 124 feet long, 97.5 feet wide and 51 feet high (Khokhar, 1999: 77). A square courtyard in the centre is surrounded by three floors of rooms. The first floor has eleven rooms, thirteen on the second and nine on the third (Ibid). Above the third floor of Naunehal Singh's *havelī*, a single small oblong room is built on the north-western corner as a *barsātī* and is decorated with frescoes[6]. The east and west facades of the *havelī* are decorated in different materials: the east facade boasts of tastefully executed monochrome cut-brick and masonry as well as relief work whereas the west side shows colorful frescoes (figures 5 - 6).

Fig. 5: East façade, *havelī* Naunehal Singh, Lahore. (Photo: 2006)

Fig. 6: West façade, *havelī* Naunehal Singh, Lahore. (Photo: 2006)

Like the above mentioned *havelī* of Jamadar Khushal Singh, it is also built as a fortress, apparently a common feature of housing of the nobility of this period; similar features are found for Ranjit Singh's Rambāgh Summer Palace, Amritsar.

Fig. 7: Ath Darā, Lahore fort. (Photo: 2007)

Another Sikh pavilion is the Ath-Dara (eight doorways) at the Lahore fort (figure 7)[7]. Maharaja Ranjit Singh, with all his riches and resources, chose to build this simple pavilion outside the Musamman Burj for holding court. According to Fakir Waheeduddin (1965), he turned down all suggestions to use the marble throne of Diwan-i Aam or other Mughal enclosures within the fort for the purpose (op cit: 25). Instead of a traditional throne, he used to sit in chairs of gold and silver, either cross legged or with one leg tucked under him in an informal manner as portrayed by Emily Eden (Aijazuddin, 1979: 31). Ranjit Singh's gold-plated throne, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is one of his chair-like thrones (figure 8).

Fig. 8: Victoria & Albert Museum, London. (Photo 2007)

An unusual metal chair in the Lahore Museum dated to the Sikh period, probably used by the Maharaja as a camp chair has lions cast in metal under its arm-rests and decorative motifs etched on the seat and the back rest (figure 9).

Fig. 9: The Lahore Museum, Sikh Gallery. (Photo 2008)

A wooden throne in the same collection is somewhat similar in structure to the Victoria and Albert gold throne. The motifs painted on it are similar to the ones found on the doors of the gateway apartments of Shalimar Gardens (figure 10).

Fig. 10: The Lahore Museum, Sikh Gallery. (Photo 2008)

In spite of his power, success and control over a vast empire for forty years, Ranjit Singh struck all coins in the name of the Khalsā[8]. None state his own sovereignty - a proof of his deep reverence for his religion and especially for the tenth Guru Gobind Singh, who formed the Khalsā. There is one exception, a coin he struck in the name of his beloved Muslim wife Moran in the early years of his reign as mentioned by several historians. He used to call his court the Khalsā *darbār*, his army the Khalsā, and himself a humble servant of the Guru. A plaque commemorating his additions to the Golden Temple at Amritsar reads as follows:

> The Great Guru in His wisdom looked upon Maharaja Ranjit Singh as his chief servitor and Sikh, in His benevolence, bestowed on him the privilege of serving the Temple (Arshi, 1986: 126).

According to Fakir Waheeduddin, the Maharaja used to explain that his name Ranjit (victorious) was taken from the name of Guru Gobind Singh's drum, and that both were meant to announce the Guru's victory (Op.cit, 1965: 29).The phenomenon of a ruler assuming a secondary role of in a state - and proclaiming a divinity to be the actual sovereign - is not exclusive to Ranjit Singh. The Rajput rulers of southern Rajasthan, notably, the *maharaos* of Kota paid special homage to images of Krishna as Brijnathji for almost a hundred years, or later, as Brijrajji. Icons of Krishna were propitiated and treated as the "true ruler of the state" (Cummins, 2006: 162). Joan Cummins states that "By having a powerful icon in the palace, and by treating it as the true king, the Kota *maharaos* sought to protect their state and to exhibit their own humility before God" (Ibid).

Ranjit Singh's deep reverence for his religion is also apparent from the veneration he accorded to Granth Sahib, the Sikh Holy Book. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is noted to have regularly listened to the chanting of the scriptures. At about the third quarter of the day while he was encamped at Ropar for his meeting with Lord William Bentick in October 1831, Suri records that the Maharaja "secured the pride of both the worlds by listening to the *Granth Sahib*" (Op cit, (3i):116). G. T. Vigne (2004) notes that when encamped away from his capital, the *Granth* used to arrive on the next day and in order to show his reverence for it, Ranjit Singh used to ride out of the camp to receive it (245). The Maharaja is also recorded to have turned to the Holy *Granth* for divine guidance in times of trouble. For example, in 1805, Raja Jaswant Singh Holkar of Bharatpur attacked the British and after his defeat, he crossed the Sutlej and came to Amritsar asking Ranjit Singh for help against the foreign invaders. Suri records that the Maharaja finally made the difficult decision of refusing Holkar and winning the goodwill of the British, by randomly placing two slips of papers in the *Granth* and extracting one that indicated an alliance with the British (Op.cit, 2:50).

W. G. Osborne too writes that the Maharaja regularly consulted the Holy Book before undertaking important expeditions. He also talks of the Maharaja's method of placing two slips of paper in the leaves of the *Granth*; one with his wish

and the other with the reverse, and faithfully accepting whatever is indicated on the one he draws out (Osborne, 1840: 122). The practice of deriving divine interpretations from Holy Books was a common practice that still prevails in some areas of the subcontinent irrespective of religious beliefs. In another instance M. Macauliffe (1995) relates that a pious Sikh of Lahore, Bhai Harbhagat Singh was unable to decide whether Guru Nanak's was born in the month of Kattak or Baisakh (names of Indian months). He wrote each month separately on slips of paper, placed them in front of the Holy Book and asked a boy who had performed ablutions in the sacred tank, to pick one. The boy picked up the one that had Kattak written on it, henceforth, this month was accepted as the month of Nanak's birth (181).

Ranjit Singh's religiosity is often tainted with superstition. A renowned twentieth century Sikh scholar Khushwant Singh calls him "superstitious Brahmin-ridden" and complains that he patronized a society that practiced Hindu rites and rituals that were against the teachings of the Gurus. An analysis on the other hand by Harjot Oberoi, of the religious beliefs and practices of the Sikhs in general in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals that what the Maharaja observed and exercised was common practice. Explaining his point Oberoi writes:

> There was no stigma attached to worshipping before a variety of deities, visiting the shrines of a pir, asking for the intercession of a holy man to solve mundane problems, consulting astrologers, necromancers and magicians, or undertaking ritual fasting (Oberoi, 1995: 394).

Umdat-ut-Tawarikh and the collection of newsletters edited by H. L. O. Garrette and G. L. Chopra have recorded countless instances where Ranjit Singh gave away generous amounts in charity especially to the Brahmins[9]. The role of the Brahmins and the sway they held in society is apparent from fact that the Maharaja drank the water used for washing the big toe of many Brahmins. This was advised by one "curd-eating Brahmin" in May 1836, as a cure for paralysis. Suri writes that this particular Brahmin told the other Brahmins who were asked to let their big toes washed, "that they were giving the benefit of all their good deeds including their prayers and penances, religious recitations and pilgrimages to the Maharaja, whose recovery to health would thereby be secured" (Op.cit, (3iii): 378-79). On the other hand Suri states that the Maharaja once asked him to explain why he learnt astrology when he was a *vakīl* by profession. Upon Suri's simple reply, that he was interested in the subject, Ranjit Singh told him that he expected him to say that he did so to be of service to the Maharaja "unlike the Brahmins, who had no other business than filling their stomachs" (Ibid: 395).

One of the religious rites Ranjit Singh unfailingly observed was frequent visits for sacred baths, to Harmandar, Taran Tāran - another sacred Sikh site a few miles from Amritsar - and several other holy places. These visits reflect the general practices of baths at sacred sites that are still observed by Hindus and

Sikhs and are believed to cleanse the person of both spiritual and bodily sins and ailments. After establishing himself at Lahore, most of Ranjit Singh's early years were spent in conquests. He is recorded at times to perform his sacred rites and military operations simultaneously. One such instance is when he went to bathe in the holy tank of Katas, on the banks of the River Indus, in April 1806 and "reduced the zemindárs [landlords] in the vicinity of that river to subjection" (Latif, 1997: 364). During the campaign against Ludhiana and its surrounding areas, he performed his ablutions in the sacred tank at Thanesar (Ibid, 366). Suri writes that in the middle of his conquests of 1807, the Maharaja went to River Jamuna for a scared bath on Bhai Dooj, a day thought to be propitious for the removal of ailments (op cit, 2: 67-68). On January 8, 1813, he went to Amritsar for a sacred bath on the day of Maghi and distributed alms[10]. Later he went to Taran Tāran, and donated a few thousand rupees for the construction of stairs for the sacred pool (Ibid: 132-33). While in the Kangra Valley in October 1813, Ranjit Singh got up early in the morning on the 11th, took a sacred bath and changed his clothes and later paid a visit to the temple of Devi Nagarkot (op cit, 1986: 102). In January 1816, he went to Amritsar for his bath on the Sankrant Day and offered charities (Ibid, 227)[11]. During the last few years of his life, his visits to Amritsar for sacred baths increased and the third volume of *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* records him leaving Lahore frequently for baths on auspicious days.

With an increase in age as well as the riches of his state and his power, the charities and alms Ranjit Singh offered on his visits to holy sites and on auspicious days also increased. Most of the time, the donations included articles that were meant for personal use of only the elite. A study of these items reveals that such expensive objects were not confined to the use of the royalty and that the magnificence trickled down to the common man as well – mostly Brahmins. The *Punjab Akhbar* reported on June 13, 1839 that on Sankrant Day, when the Maharaja was gravely ill, he gave away eleven cows with their horns covered with gold, two horses, an elephant, two diamond rings, ten golden and silver images, five golden deer and as many of silver, eleven coral things and two thousand rupees to the Brahmins (Ganda Singh, 1952: 45). *Misr* Ram Kishan reported on June 24, that he had prepared a golden chair, a bedstead, plates and many other items amounting to twenty one lakhs of rupees to be given as alms (Ibid, 59). A day before his death, the Maharaja also tried to give away the famous Koh-i-noor diamond to the Jagannath Temple in South India dedicated to the worship of Vishnu and Krishna, but *Misr* Beli Ram declined the Maharaja's orders stating that all assets now belonged to Kharak Singh. As compensation for Koh-i-noor, two armlets with diamonds, worth two *lakh* rupees, several other jewelry pieces, eight Persian-style top-hats, two elephants with gold *howdās* and five *lakh* rupees in cash were given away in *sankalāp* (charity). After that the Maharaja put on all his jewels and took them off one by one, and having lost his speech, made a sign that he had done it for the last time (Op.cit, 3(v):482). Similar amounts of alms were

given in charities almost every day till the Maharaja passed away on June 27, 1839.

The magnificent life at the Lahore *darbār*, so painstakingly introduced and maintained by Maharaja Ranjit Singh did not come to a halt at his death. His cremation ceremonies were celebrated with equal fervor and majesty. His final conveyance to the funeral pyre and the pyre itself made of sandalwood was elaborately decorated with *pashminā* shawls and silks. His ashes were collected in gold vessels and dispatched to Hardwar for immersion in grandeur, with all pomp and ceremony and protocol offered to him while he was alive, living up to the magnificent standards he had set during his lifetime.

Notes

1. There were at least two separate sets of sleeping chambers known as *barī khwabgāh* or the large sleeping chambers built by Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), and the *chotī khwabgāh* or the small sleeping chambers, by Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1656).
2. A Hindu festival celebrating their god Rama's victory over Ravanna, who had abducted Rama's wife Sita.
3. The property belonged to Ranjit Singh's mother-in-law, Sadda Kaur who was the daughter-in-law of the Kanhaya chief and after the death of her husband and father-in-law, headed the *misl*.
4. Moorcroft was a surgeon by profession who visited Punjab on his way to Turkistan in May 1820, to procure stallions for the East India Company's military stud at Bengal, where he was engaged as the Superintendent.
5. A top storey above the main portal was added by Khushal Singh's nephew Raja Teja Singh, who inherited the *haveli* in 1844. Pakistan Environmental Planning & Architectural Consultants.
6. *Barsāt* is the monsoon season and a room built at the top floor of a house in the Punjab was usually used to catch the breeze and enjoy the rain.
7. The pavilion is a rectangle with eight archways in an inverted L-shape, five in its longer side and three in the other. *Ath* means eight in Punjabi and *darā* is a distortion of the Persian word *dar,* meaning door. The pavilion was built by Ranjit Singh adjacent to the Musamman Burj or the Octagonal Tower's interior boundary wall in the Lahore fort. He used it to hold his court and is depicted by August Scheofft in one of his famous paintings.
8. *Lit*. "Pure." A name given by the tenth Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) to his disciples who were given an initiation after the "Amrit Sanchar" ceremony.
9. The highest among the four Hindu castes.
10. In memory of forty Sikh martyrs who sacrificed their lives to save Guru Gobind Singh.
11. A Hindu festival celebrating the solar movement towards the northern hemisphere, a time considered auspicious.

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