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Posthumous Homage Paid to Maharaja Ranjit Singh

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Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Samadhi in Lahore is the funerary monument built by his successors after his death in 1839. All nineteenth century and later historians writing on Lahore and its historical monuments mention the Samadhi but none of them refer to the death rituals that took place on that spot before the building was commenced. An examination of these gives an insight into numerous nineteenth century social and religious practices of the Sikhs that have since been largely abandoned. These events were recorded in detail by the court chronicler Sohan Lal Suri in *Umdat-ut Tawarikh*, were reported by the newsletters called the *Punjab Akhbar* and the *Lahore Akhbar*, and have been discussed in accounts by foreigners who were either present at the funeral or communicated details to each other in letters and reports. Based on contemporary texts and a few paintings on this subject, this paper attempts to narrate the last moments of the Maharaja, the final respects and stately farewell accorded to him not only by his successors and his people but also by the British army while the caravan accompanying the ashes travelled to Hardwar *en route* Hindustan (the name given to British occupied India). The symbolic presence of the ashes in the Samadhi and their removal in recent times is also discussed briefly.

Suri's eye-witness account of the Maharaja's last moments tells us that Bhai Gobind Ram¹ urged the dying man to utter Rama (the name of one of the Hindu gods) thrice, and that Ranjit Singh could only say it twice before he finally ceased to exist, with his gaze fixed on "the picture of Lachhmi and Narain" (Hindu goddess and god, Lakshmi and Vishnu). People in general spent the night crying, while the Brahmins kept reading their holy book *Gita* and *Bishen Sahasarnam* (Hindu sacred texts), and the *bhais* (Sikh holy men) remained busy in reciting *Guru Granth* (Sikh Holy Book).²

Maharaja Ranjit Singh died on Thursday, June 27, 1839, and Suri records that shortly after his death Raja Dhyani Singh ordered a gold and silver bier along with other objects required for the ceremony. The next day, the Maharaja's body was bathed with Ganges water and dressed, complete with a turban and jewels. Ranjit Singh's four Hindu wives and seven slave-girls adorned themselves and got ready to perform the sati or immolation ritual in high spirits, "laughing and dancing like intoxicated elephants".³ At the pyre his most senior wife Rani Katochan, the

¹ Bhai Vasti Ram was a pious Hindu man with medical training that the Maharaja held in great esteem. He built the Bhai's Samadhi adjacent to the northern boundary wall of the Lahore Fort after his death in 1802 and employed his two sons Bhai Gobind Ram and Bhai Ram Singh as court priests.

² Sohan Lal Suri, *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*, trans. V. S. Suri (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2002), 3:484-89.

³ *Ibid.*, 3:486.

daughter of the Hill raja Sansar Chand, placed Ranjit Singh's head on her thighs while the others sat in a circle round him ready to be immolated. Suri further narrates that during the cremation, two pairs of pigeons sacrificed themselves under the order of the Almighty God, as they came out of nowhere and fell into the fire.⁴

Contemporary European sources also give details of the last rites for Ranjit Singh. W. G. Osborne visited the Lahore *darbār* in 1838, a few months prior to the Maharaja's death, and in his memoirs, published in 1840, gives an account of the death rituals according to the information he gathered from European officers present at the event. He writes that although Ranjit Singh's physical being gradually gave way during the last few days of his life, his mental faculties were unimpaired to the last. Osborne writes that four of Ranjit Singh's wives and five Kashmiri slave girls, all extremely beautiful, performed sati on his pyre.⁵

John Martin Honigberger, a Romanian homeopathic doctor, was one of the Maharaja's court physicians between 1829 and 1849. In his memoirs, published in 1852, he also gives a first-hand account of the rituals. He writes that the dead body of the Maharaja was placed on a board and was carried on a bier designed like a ship with sails and flags made of rich silken fabric, woven with gold and of Kashmiri shawls. The ship-like bier was carried by countless people from the inner fort to the cremation site in a small garden where the Samadhī now stands. After reaching the site, the Maharaja's body was taken out of the bier and placed on the ground and the costly ornaments and material used for the bier was distributed among the people. The Brahmans and the Sikh priests chanted their sacred scriptures from their respective holy books while the Muslims who were present kept invoking God by repeating Ya Allah (O' Allah). All this was accompanied by a slow beating of drums in the background. The funeral pyre was a square almost six feet high and was made of dry wood with pieces of aloe in it. The body of the Maharaja was placed on it in the centre. The *ranis* or queens ascended the platform and sat at the head of the body while the slave girls, near the feet. They were all covered with reeds and after pouring large quantities of oil on it, the pyre was set to fire on all four sides.⁶

On the third day after cremation, the ashes and bones were collected and were placed in urns. Preparations were then made for the ashes to be sent to the banks of the Ganges for immersion. They were conveyed in richly caparisoned palanquins (a point discussed further below).

Two miniature paintings are known that illustrate Maharaja Ranjit Singh's cremation rituals. Each displays some elements recorded or narrated by witnesses. A Kangra painting of ca. 1840, first published by W. G. Archer, shows the pyre with

⁴ Ibid., 3(v):489.

⁵ W. G. Osborne, *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1973), 223-24.

⁶ John Martin Honigberger, *Thirty-Five Years In The East: Adventures, Discoveries, Experiments, and Historical Sketches, relating to the Punjab and Cashmere ; in connection with Medicine, Botany, Pharmacy, & Co., together with an original Materia Medica ; and a Medical Vocabulary, in four European and five Eastern Languages* (London: H. Baillière, 1852), 1:99-100.



Figure 1: The Funeral of Ranjit Singh. The British Museum, Reg.no. 1925,0406,0.2. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum..

the queens and the slave girls willingly adjusting themselves next to the dead body of the monarch while the men in the immediate foreground are shown in great distress (figure 1).⁷ The empty boat-shaped bier in the left foreground is adorned with garlands and flags. According to Honigberger, it was decorated with gold woven flags and Kashmir shawls and that after the ceremony was over, “the costly ornaments of the richly decorated bier were given to the mob”.⁸ All male figures painted here are clad in white, the color of mourning in the subcontinent, while all seven females wear their best outfits bright in color and highly ornamented as they prepare to join their beloved husband and master respectively in his last journey. A *chauri* or fly whisk-bearer at the head of the deceased monarch shows the respect accorded to Ranjit Singh till his very end. Out of the two pairs of pigeons mentioned by Suri, only one bird can be seen here in the smoke above the canopy.

Next to the bier, a man stops Raja Dhyan Singh from ascending the pyre, a historical fact, while a younger person next to him is presumably Hira Singh, Dhyan Singh's son. Naunehal Singh, the Maharaja's grandson was at Peshawar at the time of Maharaja's death and this figure with his shorn hair is not a Sikh. Moreover, Hira Singh was a great favorite of the Maharaja and it was only natural

⁷ W. G. Archer, *Paintings of the Sikhs* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1966), fig. 16.

⁸ Honigberger, *Thirty-Five Years In The East*, 1:102

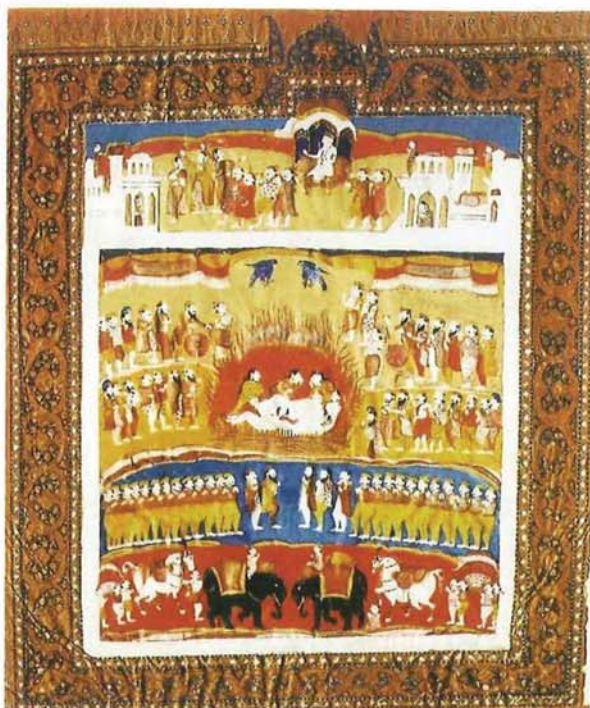


Figure 2. Events from the life of Ranjit Singh, Central Sikh Museum, Amritsar, Photography courtesy of Mandeep Bajwa, 2009.

into four registers (figure 2).¹⁰ In the upper register the Maharaja in his lifetime sits in a palanquin accompanied by musicians and dancing girls. The second one shows the scene of the cremation. The funeral pyre encircled by flames in the centre has seven females instead of eleven out of which three richly clad ones appear to be the wives and the rest slave girls. The pyre is surrounded by Hindu celestial figures wearing their five-pointed crowns as well as the Maharaja's courtiers including the Akalis in their blue pointed turbans. Here the pigeons mentioned by Suri, who flew into the flames at the time of cremation, are painted quite large in blue. The lower two registers display Ranjit Singh's army, elephants and horses.

Cremation is an ancient Hindu ritual also followed by Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. Jagdish Narain Tiwari recounts the ritual of cremation taken from the *Mahabhārata*:

Cremation was the standard practice of disposal of the dead body ... The different elements of the rite of cremation included the preliminary preparation of the dead body by formally dressing and anointing it, draping and decorating it with silk cloth, flowers and garlands, carrying it on the shoulders of men in some kind of a palanquin or in a carriage (*śibikā, yāna*) in an impressive procession, joined by bereaved relatives, ... in a grove or forest by the river bank.¹¹

Tiwari notes that in very early times, the Hindus practiced erecting memorials

to show him next to his father mourning the death of his supporter and admirer. Kharak Singh, the Maharaja's eldest son and heir is shown lamenting with his hand raised to his head, while another man offers solace. Archer suggests that the Kangra artist based his information on stories that travelled from Lahore to the Hills after the Maharaja's cremation. He also states that some of it would have been "...hearsay for while certain details are correct, others do not tally" (not mentioning which are authentic).⁹

Another painting from the collection of the Central Sikh Museum, Amritsar, published by Jean-Marie Lafont, is divided

⁹ Archer, *Paintings of the Sikhs*, 30.

¹⁰ Jean-Marie Lafont, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), figure 266.

¹¹ Jagdish Narain Tiwari, *Disposal of the Dead in the Mahabhārata: A Study in the Funeral Customs in Ancient India* (Vanarsi: Kishor Vidya Niketan, 1979), 21-22.

around the pits where the charred bones of the cremated bodies were buried but this practice was gradually superseded by casting of the ashes into the Holy River. He refers to a chapter in the praise of the River Ganges in the *Anuśāna-parvan* [*Mahabharata* 13.27.27,31], where it is stated that persons whose bones are laid in the holy river shall never fall from the heaven and that the stay in heaven would be granted for as long as his bones remained in the waters of the Ganges.¹²

According to Sohan Lal Suri, Kharak Singh went to the cremation quarters on June 30, 1839, three days after the cremation, and picked up the ashes of Maharaja Ranjit Singh with his own hands and put them in gold vessels. The ashes of the Maharaja's queens and the maidservants were picked up by the sardars and preserved separately.¹³ This event is also mentioned by Honigberger who says that the collection of ashes was done in the presence of a select few courtiers.¹⁴ *Punjab Akhbar*, another valuable source of information, reports that the thirteenth day after the Maharaja's demise was observed as the last mourning day and that Maharaja Kharak Singh observed the necessary rituals and generously gave away valuable gifts to the Brahmins of Amritsar, Lahore and Gujranwala as charity. The articles given away are enumerated: a silver and gold bed, 4 jewels, 25 silk suits, a silver chair, 2 silver bowls, plates of gold and silver, shawl quilts, 101 cows, 1 elephant, 2 horses with golden saddles, Rs. 5000 and 2000 maunds of grain. Kharak Singh also gave memorial gifts for the Ranees consisting of 4 silver beds, suits of female apparel, ornaments and jewels, plates, and 2 splendid carriages (*ruth*).¹⁵ Similar instances of charitable activities are also recorded by Suri and in other contemporary documents.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's ashes were sent off to Hardwar or Haridwar (a sacred Hindu city on the Ganges) for immersion along with the ashes of his wives and slave girls – as the contemporary sources relate. On the other hand, later historians mentioning the Maharaja's Samadhi give no reference of it. For example Syed Muhammad Latif writing in 1892, a source used by many later historians, gives us an understanding that the marble urns or knobs placed on a platform in the Samadhi actually contained ashes. He states:

The carved marble lotus flower in the central vault, set beneath a canopy, covers the ashes of the great Mahārāja, and the smaller flowers of the same description around are in memory of his four wives and seven slave girls, who immolated themselves on the funeral pyre of their deceased lord. The knobs representing the queens, are crowned, while plain knobs mark the sacrifices of the equally devoted but less legal wives, the slave girls.¹⁶

Two other nineteenth century historians, Noor Ahmad Chisti (1867) and Kanhaya Lal (1884), do not mention the knobs while describing the Maharaja's Samadhi. Chishti omits them totally and simply states that the square marble

¹² Ibid., 24.

¹³ Suri, 4:4.

¹⁴ Honigberger, 1:100.

¹⁵ Ganda Singh, ed., *The Punjab in 1839-40: Selections from the Punjab Akhbars, Punjab Intelligence, etc. Preserved in the National Archives of India*, New Delhi (Patiala: New Age Press, 1952), 79.

¹⁶ Syad Muhammad Latif, *Lahore: Its Historical, Architectural Remains and Antiquities, with an Account of its Modern Institutions, Inhabitants, their Trade, Customs, etc.* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005), 129.

platform at the Samadhi is two-and-a-half feet in height and is always covered with a *doshala* or *kimkhab* (a shawl or a piece of fabric woven with gold and silk).¹⁷ Kanhaya Lal, on the other hand, refers to the knobs in the following words:

...the square marble platform has the Maharaja's Samadh made of stone in the centre and eleven Samadhs of the queens who performed sati, and two Samadhs of the two pigeons who flew into the pyre while it was being set alight and were burnt with the body of the Maharaja.¹⁸

Following these sources many later historians and the general public at large remain ignorant of the actual facts and commonly believed that the ashes of the Maharaja and his harem were gathered after cremation and placed in the urns. Account of the magnificent farewell given to the ashes at Lahore with salutes of canons and the majestic receptions of the grand procession that took them in all magnificence to Hardwar for immersion have generally been forgotten.

The *Umdat-ut Tawarikh* establishes that the departure of the ashes from Lahore was a grand event and all measures were taken by Raja Dhyan Singh and others to give the dead monarch a suitable farewell. On July 2, 1839, all chieftains prostrated themselves in front of the Maharaja's ashes and they were placed in a special *sawari* or conveyance and covered with *doshālas*. The *sawari* carrying the ashes of the Maharaja's queens and slave girls accompanied his body and, according to Honigberger, were on "five richly caparisoned palanquins".¹⁹ The troops of the regiments and the orderlies marched ahead of these palanquins, as they used to do during the Maharaja's lifetime, marching out of the gate of the Badshahi Mosque.²⁰ Suri states that Dhyan Singh ordered two platoons along with *topkhana* (artillery) and troops of horsemen drawn in lines, well dressed and well equipped, to gather outside Delhi Gate near Kirpa Ram's and Tej Singh's gardens and to discharge a salute of eleven balls per canon upon the arrival of the ashes at each point. He also instructed that the superintendents of the horses and elephants should also be present with their horses decorated with gold and bejeweled saddles and the elephants adorned with seats upon them.²¹ An amount of rupees 10,000 were given to Bhai Gurmukh Singh for the expense of the funeral caravan.

Around July 10, 1839, a letter from Bhai Gurmukh Singh informed the Lahore court that the caravan of the ashes "had crossed from the ferry of Kakriwal", adding that Sardar Nihal Singh Ahluwalia fired canons as a salute and out of respect dismounted his horse to receive the caravan, wept uncontrollably and threw gold over it. Some other sardars including Sher Singh (one of Ranjit Singh's twin sons with his first wife Mehtab Kaur, daughter of Sadda Kaur) also sent their offerings at this stage. The Bhai further stated that the British officers stationed at Ludhiana had one platoon of soldiers and the *topkhana* (canons) drawn up

¹⁷ Noor Ahmad Chishti, *Tehqiqat-e Chishti: Tarikh-e Lahore ka Encyclopedia* (Lahore: Al-Faisal Nashran, 2006), 678; Kanhaya Lal, *Tarikh-e Lahore* (Lahore: Book Talk, 2006), 681.

¹⁸ Kanhaya Lal, *Tarikh-e Lahore*, 193. (Translated from Urdu by the author of this article).

¹⁹ Honigberger, 1:100.

²⁰ Suri, 4:6-7.

²¹ Suri, 4:6.



Figure 3: *Chhatri* in the interior of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Samadhi. Photographed by the author, 2007.

in equal lines and offered a “salute of 60 balls per canon”.²² A letter from Rai Gobind Jassa elucidated the sorrow felt by Clerk Sahib (Sir George Russell Clerk, GCSI, KCB, political agent appointed by the British at Ludhiana in 1839) upon learning of the Maharaja's demise. Rai's letter stressed the fact that it was the British authorities that had asked the administrator of Ludhiana to offer reception to the ashes upon their arrival with a salute by firing canons. It further stated that the British officers were instructed to offer reception to the caravan all the way as it passed Ambala, Jagadhari and Saharanpur up to the River Ganges and to put *doshālas* upon the urns as a mark of respect according to the local custom.²³

Another letter from Rai Gobind Jassa to the Lahore *darbār* informed them about the progress of the caravan. He stated that the English Governor General (Lord Auckland) had expressed sorrow at the Maharaja's death in a letter to Mr. Clerk. To show his respects for the deceased monarch, he proposed that fifty horsemen of Alexander's Regiment accompany the Maharaja's ashes.²⁴

In a letter dated July 17, 1839, Bhai Gurmukh Singh informed the Sikh court that the ashes had reached Patiala where Raja Karam Singh with his sardars had paid respects and the Raja showered gold coins over the palanquin and gave away many valuable articles in charity. The letter further stated that Raja Saroop Singh of Jind had acted in the same manner and gave away four horses, four pairs of *doshalas* and one elephant with a silver seat upon it. A letter from Fakir Shah Din reiterated the fact that the Nawab Sahib (English Governor-General Lord Auckland) had issued instructions to the British officers to offer respects to the ashes at every stage of their journey and to discharge sixty canons according to the British custom of firing as many canons as the age of the deceased (Ranjit Singh died when he was almost sixty).²⁵

Almost two months after the Maharaja's cremation, on September 5, 1839, Kharak Singh asked Bhai Gurmukh Singh to give an account of the progress of the caravan carrying the ashes in the presence of the British officers visiting the

²² Ibid., 4:17.

²³ Suri, 4:18-19.

²⁴ Ibid., 4:16-19.

²⁵ Ibid., 4:22.

Lahore *darbār*, and thanked them for their assistance. The Bhai eulogized Mr. Collin, a British officer who had accompanied the caravan under the orders of the Governor-General and other officers of Saharanpur (a city in British India *en route* Hardwar) who had provided protection and guard at every stage of the journey and for offering all required support.²⁶ The expense borne by the British Government to facilitate the caravan and to show respects by offering *nazrana* is documented in the register of Fort William, listed in the catalogues pertaining to the records of the Foreign Department of the British Government, dated: April 6, 1840, at the National Archives, Delhi, India.²⁷

Presently, the commemorative marble knobs mentioned by both Kanhaya Lal and Latif, are not on the platform of the square marble *chhatrī* in the interior of the Samadhi (figure 3). Originally fourteen in number; these knobs represented the Maharaja, his four queens, seven slave girls and two pigeons who were cremated on June 28, 1839, in the royal funeral pyre. Presently, the largest and the most elaborately decorated knob, signifying the Maharaja, is missing and only twelve out of the thirteen smaller ones are in a storeroom at the Dera Sahib complex, Lahore.²⁸

They were removed from the *chhatrī* in recent times for religious reasons. The Evacuee Trust Board of Pakistan (ETBP), responsible for the upkeep of the Samadhi and other property of religious significance evacuated at the time of partition of Pakistan and India in 1947 has no documented record of the removal of these commemorative knobs. According to the caretakers of the Samadhi and the Dera Sahib complex the removal of the knobs took place after a Khalsa group from India visited the Samadhi and objected to the placement of the ashes of a



Figure 4: Commemorative knobs on the platform of the *chhatrī*. Photograph courtesy of Dr. Shaukat Mahmood, 1960s.

²⁵ Ibid., 4:22.



Figure 5: Twelve Commemorative Knobs, Photographed by the author, 2008.

mortal on a higher plinth than the Holy Granth in the Dera Sahib Gurudwara (although, in truth, there were no ashes in the knobs). After the incident, to this date, the ETPB has never replaced the knobs on the *chhatrī* in order to avoid further religious controversies.

Besides historical accounts by Kanhaya Lal and Syad Muhammad Latif, there is visual evidence that the knobs were once displayed on the platform of the *chhatrī* in the Samadhi. An engraving by W. J. Palmer based upon a sketch by J. Duguid of about 1874, shows the knobs placed on the *chhatrī* in the Samadhi interior.²⁹ More importantly, photographs taken in the 1960's by Dr. Shaukat Mahmood, a professor at the University of the Punjab, show all fourteen knobs with the largest one with the most elaborate carving, placed in the center (figure 4).

Latif calls them “carved marble lotus flowers” and mentions that the ones signifying the four queens “are crowned”.³⁰ Only five out of the present twelve feature lotus leaves carved in concentric layers but each has a different diameter at the base as well as at the neck and the lotus petals are of different styles and sizes. The rest of the seven knobs are faceted but have no carving and according to Latif,



Figure 6: Knob with a copper pipe at the base, Photographed by the author, 2008.

²⁶ Suri, 4:49.

²⁷ *Vide*, ref. No. 246-248 and 248-250 respectively.

²⁸ A significant building of the complex is the fifth Sikh Guru Arjun's *Shaheedi Asthan* or the spot of martyrdom where a gurudwara commemorates the event.

²⁹ F. S. Aijazuddin, *Lahore: Illustrated Views of the 19th Century* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2004), figure 44.

³⁰ Latif, *Lahore*, 129.

these plain ones possibly “mark the sacrifices of the equally devoted but less legal wives, the slave girls” (figure 5).³¹ Difference of design suggests different hands working on the knobs.

An interesting feature was that one of the five carved knobs has a hole at its base, fitted with a copper plate and a small pipe; it is currently empty (figure 6). This suggests three possibilities: the initial plan was to fill the knobs with part of the ashes of the Maharaja and the members of his household; the existing knobs are non-functional replicas of original ones (except for the one with a hollow space in it); or the marble lotus bud knobs were created only with a symbolic meaning.

The events that took place at the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death and the ceremonial trip to the Ganges with his ashes shed light on the religious beliefs of the Maharaja and the important people around him. It emphasizes the importance of Brahmins in Sikh society at this time and specifically the attention paid to them by the court. It also explains the use of Hindu religious iconography as subject matter of the majority of frescoes in the Maharaja's Samadhi. The accounts of the cremation ceremony give evidence that the populace of Lahore, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims, along with foreigners associated with the Lahore *darbār*, all participated and offered their prayers. This helps understand the Maharaja's role as a sovereign who offered peace and protection to all.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh ruled the Punjab at a time when most of India had gradually come under the British occupation. The Maharaja signed treaties with the British ensuring noninterference in his territory and adopted the policy of display of his friendship with them. He hosted grand ceremonies and orchestrated religious and social events to impress his fellowmen as well as the foreign visitors and took pride in flaunting his opulence and majesty. The ceremonial culture Maharaja Ranjit Singh had introduced and established at the Lahore *Darbār* continued after his death as his last rites were carried out with great fervor and majestic pomp. The ashes were sent off to Hardwar for immersion in a grand caravan complete with gold embroidered canopies held over gold vessels containing the ashes under the occasional showers of gold coins. Available sources tell us that shortly after the cremation ceremonies the successors busied themselves with plans of erecting a majestic memorial for the deceased Maharaja.