

**PROBLEMATIZING THE PROBLEMATIC:
THE NIHANGS WITHIN THE GREAT SIKH COURT
OF 19TH CENTURY INDIA**

by

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to look at the nature of a specific Sikh sect during a very specific period in history. While conducting my preliminary research, I realized that very little work has been done on the Nihangs, and what very little work there was, it was scattered, fragmentary, and contradictory. As such, by looking at this unique sect, I realized that although I would not be able to find all the correct answers, I would still be able to dissect the Nihangs within the 19th century period, and connect them to the great Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh, and his Sikh court.

There is no doubting that Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a great ruler who managed to unite the entire Sikh nation, and even thwart off British interests in his land. Yet, despite the obvious immense power Ranjit Singh held, the presence of the Nihangs, thwarted somewhat, and altered such dynamics of power. And thirdly, I argue that the Nihangs were able to alter the balances of power within the Sikh court through their dual presence as players within the Sikh court, and allies of the Maharaja, and then their opposite role as players outside of the Sikh court, and disturbers of such powers. I argue that although on the one hand, the Nihangs were active fighters for and protectors of Ranjit Singh, and were thus even incorporated into the ever famous *darbar* portraits, there was a dual aspect of this sect which countered their loyal nature. Thus, I also argue that the Nihangs were able to demonstrate great power within the Sikh court of the 19th century as they also were a continual menacing and disturbing presence, often abusing European visitors, disobeying orders, and even verbally and physically abusing the Maharaja himself.

I hope that in reading this thesis, the reader will also come to the conclusion that the Nihangs did have certain privileges and powers within the Sikh court, so much so, that they were also able to dually challenge the powers of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and his court.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

They are, without any exception, the most insolent and worthless race of people in all India. They are religious fanatics, and acknowledge no ruler and no laws but their own; think nothing of robbery, or even murder, should they happen to be in the humour for it. They move about constantly, armed to the teeth, and it is not an uncommon thing to see them riding about with a drawn sword in each hand, two more in their belt, a matchlock at their back, and three or four pair of quoits fastened round their turbans.

Sir Lepel Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*¹

Although somewhat extreme and certainly biased, this description by the military secretary to the Earl of Auckland, W.G. Osborne, is certainly representative of the views most European visitors to the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh expressed when coming across the Sikh sect of the Akali/Nihangs (hereby, they will only be referred to as the Nihangs with the exception to the cases where I make reference to outside observers of the sect). Indeed, there are several written accounts based on European visitors to the court who described the Nihangs in such negative terms. Sir Lepel Griffin for example, having written on the life and times of Ranjit Singh, also described the Nihangs in negative terms, though not to the extent as Osborne: “These were a fanatical body of devotees...[when] excited by hemp, were generally the first to storm a town...but they

¹ Sir Lepel Griffin, *Ranjit Singh* (London: Clarendon Press, 1892) 86.

were lawless and uncertain.”² Likewise, when Emily Eden, sister of the Earl of Auckland was a guest in Ranjit Singh’s court, she was equally astonished by the behaviour of the Nihangs, whom she described as “an alarming class of people, who make it a rule never to live on anything they have not gained by plunder or force...and Runjeet even cannot control them.”³ Even an official British government source such as a gazetteer makes reference to the Nihangs as a unique rebellious Sikh sect, describing them under such terms:

Those Sikhs who adhere to the original doctrines of Nanac are called Khalasa; they are less fanatical and warlike than the Singhs or followers of Guru Govind. Of these latter, a peculiar class is called Acalis, or immortals, and sometimes Nihungs. Their fanaticism, Burnes observes,⁴ borders on insanity, and they seem to be at war with all mankind...They are a lawless and sanguinary class, and would have rendered the country desolate, had they not been vigorously coerced by Runjeet Singh.⁵

In fact, when reading almost all the accounts of European visitors to Ranjit Singh’s court who came into contact with the Nihangs, the word “fanatic” is almost certainly bound to appear.⁶

³ Emily Eden, *Up the Country: Letters written to her sister from the Upper Provinces of India* Vol. II (London: Spottiswoods & Co, 1866) 27.

⁴ Alexander Burnes (1805-1841), an East India Company diplomat in Punjab and Afghanistan who was later assassinated in Kabul.

⁵ Edward Thornton, *A gazetteer of the countries adjacent to India on the north-west: including Sindh, Afghanistan, the Punjab and the neighbouring states* (London, W.H Allen, 1844) 135.

⁶ See: Von Orlich, Captain Leonard, *Travels in India, Including Sindh and the Punjab*, Lahore: East & West Publishing Company, 1976; or Hodson, Major W.S.R, *Twelve Years of a Soldier’s Life in India*, London: Savill and Edwards, 1859; or Elphinstone, Mountstuart, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*

By using European accounts as the sole source to assess the nature of the Nihangs, it is certainly simple to deduce that the Nihangs were indeed a troublesome, dangerous and lawless Sikh sect; however, coming to such a conclusion based solely on European sources is inaccurate. The presence of the Nihangs within Ranjit Singh's court is better described as being problematic, rather than concluding that the Nihangs were just "fanatics." The term problematic has more precedence in this thesis as it is a fitting description not only in terms of their issues of identity, and therefore their presence within Sikhism, but also in terms of the Nihangs' role within Ranjit Singh's court. The Nihangs' role as both insiders and outsiders of Ranjit Singh's court is yet another key example why the term problematic is so fitting. Where on the one hand, the Nihangs were key players in the court, providing military strength especially, as outsiders of the court, on the other hand, they also proved to be a challenging presence to Ranjit Singh in asserting their own independence and power.

Unlike the historical development and growth of other sects and ambiguous religious groups in India, the Nihangs are unique firstly because most issues concerning their identity are ambiguous, contributing to their problematic presence with Sikhism. Because so little is known of the history of the Nihangs, there are no sources which explain the nature of the Nihangs blue dress for example, or the nature of the silver quoits

and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India, London: 1815; or Madra, Amandeep and Parmjit Singh, *Sicques, Tigers, or Thieves*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

which encircle their large turbans. Once again, the term problematic is a fitting description as there is no evidence explaining the nature of the elaborate Nihang material culture. Despite this, there exists plenty of evidence and sources which provides insight into the Nihangs' role within the court of Ranjit Singh. It is thus within this framework that the most fascinating aspects of this sect emerge. Indeed fascinating in the sense that the Nihangs were both players within Ranjit Singh's court as well as outsiders of the court. Despite British and other European efforts to embellish the negative and disruptive qualities of the Nihangs, there is no doubting that this sect was in fact a key player in Ranjit Singh's court. And it is here also that the term problematic is a fitting description. Although the Nihangs, under the leadership of Akali Phula Singh (1761-1823), were a primary source of military strength for Ranjit Singh, they were also equally a source of great embarrassment even, and posed a potential threat to the Maharaja and his court.

Rather than looking solely at the history and framework of Ranjit Singh and his court, or only discussing the identity and emergence of the Nihang sect, this thesis will instead be an exploration of the Sikh ruler of Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his court as an expression of the discourse of power in the 19th century. However, I will be exploring Ranjit Singh's court as an expression of such power in relation to the Sikh Nihang sect as one unique aspect of a discourse of power in the early modern Punjab. And it was the Nihangs' problematic role as players within, and thus partners of Ranjit

Singh's court, as well as their secondary role as rivals, and thus outsiders of the court which will demonstrate the Nihangs' powerful presence in 19th century Punjab.

Furthermore, in developing the nature of the Sikh ruler's power and the powerful presence of his entire court, I will present the argument that because of their own unique (in/out) position within the court, the Nihangs power within this 19th century context rivalled, if not exceeded that of the Sikh rulers as well.

In terms of the Indian historical tradition of the emergence of rebellious religious sects, the Nihangs are indeed part of such a history. Nomadic warrior ascetics such as the Nihangs have always been considered somewhat outside the norm within courtly Indian society.⁷ Warrior ascetics in India can be traced back to sixth century BC caused by competition between different religious sects, "usually capped by theological debates and miracle contests between leaders of rival school."⁸ However, such warrior ascetics did not gain any political strength until the Mughal Empire collapsed in the 18th century. The rise of such militant groups in most cases, comes as a result of social, economic, and political changes, and, "[w]hat distinguishes militaristic religious groups from non-militaristic ones...is, to put it tautologically, their militarism-the fact that military

⁷ For a more detailed look at a history of warriors ascetics in India, see Vijay Pinch's *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empire* (Cambridge Press, 2006). Though Pinch's main focus is to address the common misconception that Hindu warrior asceticism emerged as a result (or challenge) of anti-Muslim sentiment, the general discussions on the emergence of such warrior sects are helpful in understanding the overall Indian concept of warrior asceticism and under what circumstances such sects arise.

⁸ David N. Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 98 (1978) 64.

organization and aims are their central characteristic.”⁹ Once these religious military groups were merged, the majority of these cases often end up moving away from the ascetic/religious doctrines, as they “degenerate into groups of mercenary soldiers, or even bandits, whose claim to religious motivation is exceedingly dubious.”¹⁰ The orthodox Hindu tradition regarded warrior ascetics with contempt, viewing them as heretics. In addition to sect competition, religious persecution from royal courts was also another precursor for the rise of warrior ascetics.

Thus, the 18th century political crises, with the final collapse of the Mughal empire, was thus the more prevalent reason for the emergence and success of militant ascetic groups: “first during the confused formation of the successor states of the Mughal empire and still more during the collapse of the administrative structure and economies of these states under the disruptive effects of conquest and colonial exploitation by the East India Company.”¹¹ Whereas warrior ascetic groupings emerged throughout India due to political crisis, it was in the border areas such as Punjab where the groups of religious ascetics were more prevalent, in comparison to other groups which emerged under the same circumstances in areas such as Rajasthan, Bengal, and the Maratha provinces. The case of Sikhs in Punjab is demonstrative of such warrior sects emerging during political chaos as they did emerge more so during the “sporadically chaotic period between the

⁹ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰ Ibid., 63.

deaths of Aurangzeb and Ranjit Singh,” thus “mark[ing] the political heyday not only for the Sikhs but of other groups of warrior ascetics as well.”¹² As such, despite the Nihang’s origins as predating this politically chaotic period of the 18th century, it is more significant that the sect thrived, and emerged as a powerful presence due to the political chaos infusing Punjab in the 18th and early 19th centuries, during the heyday of the powerful court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Warrior ascetics share features with other groups in India such as Thugs and bandits as they too were outside the normal fabric of society. Although the British changed *thagi*, the act, to “Thag” the person, *thagi* was a native term coined by Indians. Thus, Thugs are predominantly referred to as bandits or robbers who, in the British view, “ritually strangled their robbery victims,” or “people who poisoned their victims and even those who stole children.”¹³ What made thugs significant is the challenging presence they presented to the British: “...as representatives of an alternative political and cultural structure, the thags stood as an important challenge to the exclusive authority of the British Raj over the Indian social order.”¹⁴ Despite not having the formal religious title of “ascetics,” in the view of the British, what was believed to be the ritual/religious aspects (ie. ritual worship of the goddess Kali, etc) is what were emphasized. In both the cases of

¹¹ Ibid., 68.

¹² Ibid., 71.

¹³ Sandra B. Freitag, “Crime in the Social Order of Colonial North India,” *Modern Asian Studies* (1991) 232.

warrior ascetics and Thugs, British perceptions focused more so on religion. Like warrior ascetics, Thugs were also protectors of their local villages, and thus, they were doubly threatening to the British as they often could not be identified, and thus captured, with their local disguises. As such, “administrators commonly complained that such men were almost impossible to root out under ordinary police procedures, for they were camouflaged as local peasants.”¹⁵ Because these Thugs, as did warrior ascetics, provided a sense of protection and authority, they were naturally granted power, as they not only “put the lie to British authority,” they also “paradoxically...exercised a powerful appeal.”¹⁶ Thugs, as the British believed, were a troublesome, even threatening presence as they were not only unlawful, but they also asserted local power and authority. Much like their warrior ascetic counterparts, paradoxically, British authorities even admired these troublesome figures as “admirable and awesome opponents.”¹⁷

As this thesis is an exploration of the discourses of power within Ranjit Singh’s court, and as has been demonstrated so far when briefly looking at warrior ascetics and thugs as manifestations of such power, it is important to define power in relation to this thesis. One cannot discuss theories of power without looking at the influential works of Michel Foucault. Though Foucault’s most famous studies have been done under

¹⁴ Ibid., 233.

¹⁵ Ibid., 234.

¹⁶ Ibid., 235.

¹⁷ Ibid., 236.

institutional settings such as prisons or hospitals, one broad underlying theme which he stresses is that power resides under a sovereignty or higher institutional power, as “in principle, all the activities of power will be traceable to this source.”¹⁸ Foucault argues that there are limits, and that creates what is called a contract-power:

The conception of power as an original right that is given up in the establishment of sovereignty, and the contract, as matrix of political power, provides its point of articulation. A power so constituted risks becoming oppression whenever it over-extends itself, whenever-that is-it goes beyond the terms of the contract. Thus we have contract-power, with oppression as its limit, or rather the transgression of this limit.¹⁹

In other words, though the sovereignty has unlimited amounts of power, the contract element emerges when such figures of authority reach beyond their power into authoritarian methods, and thus, ignoring their contractual agreements to maintain certain boundaries of non aggression. Although this theory can certainly apply to the nature of Ranjit Singh's court as a source for maintaining the balances of power especially with relation to groups such as the Nihangs, it is Foucault's further expansion of this contract-power model which provides even more insight into the power mode of Ranjit Singh's court. In his expansion of the contract-power model, Foucault stresses that the model does not take into account “those exercise of power that are not captured by rights and

¹⁸ John S. Ransom, *Foucault's Discipline* (London: Duke University Press, 1997) 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

their violation or recognition.”²⁰ In other words, whereas the contract-power model focuses only on the roles of power within a sovereignty, Foucault argues that what needs to be assessed are the other, more illegitimate sources of power; for it is these sources, such as the Nihangs, which emerged as sources of power in their own right:

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we have the production of an important phenomenon, the emergence...of a new mechanism of power possessed of...completely novel instruments, quite different apparatuses, and which is also, I believe, absolutely incompatible with the relations of sovereignty.”²¹

As such, Ranjit Singh and his court were engaged in such a contract-power with the Nihangs, even though the Nihangs represented an emerging element of power which would contradict and often clash with that of Ranjit Singh and his court. Indeed, it was these new sources of power (and in the case of the 19th century Punjab, the Nihangs), which, as Foucault argues, contradicted and certainly clashed with the more orthodox sources of powers such as the sovereignty ie. Ranjit Singh.

Although Thomas Hobbes’ interest lies more in the human psyche, he too, like Foucault, stresses that there are limits to the power any individual has. Hobbes defined power as such a great desire, that “the relentless pursuit of power becomes the only constant purpose of man. And this feverish pursuit of power makes him *concerned* about

²⁰ Ibid., 16.

all kinds of possible future developments.”²² According to Hobbes, this desire for power by every man also was problematic as man would eventually have to fear competition from the other man; and thus, “[w]hen my powers clash with the powers of another man they are reduced to nothing.”²³ The problem resides within this common trait amongst all men, and because all men desire the same thing, it means that no desire can truly be satisfied: “[t]he effectiveness of my powers-be they ‘natural’ or ‘instrumental’-is thus cancelled out by the powers of the other.”²⁴ As such, according to Hobbes definition of power, the only way for power to truly be effective is if one man has “excess” power over the other (through “sheer mechanical strength,”) whereas when powers held equally are involved, they would simply “destroy one another.”²⁵ Despite Hobbes’ analysis on the human desire for power, he also discusses the absolute power which the sovereignty holds, arguing that within this context, absolute power refers to “the kind of power each and every individual has over himself in the state of nature.”²⁶ Yet, much like Foucault’s argument, Hobbes also asserts that even the absolute power which the sovereignty has can be limited as explained in the following: “If A were to exercise power within a state, and if A’s power were to be limited, then somebody would have to impose these limits

²¹ Ibid., 16.

²² Piotr Hoffman, *The Quest for Power: Hobbes, Descartes, and the Emergence of Modernity* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996) 5.

²³ Ibid., 5.

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 46.

upon A.’’²⁷ Therefore, a sovereign’s ultimate power can be limited if another equally powerful presence is imposed on them. Looking at Hobbes’ analysis within the context of 19th century Punjab, it can indeed support the analysis that although Ranjit Singh was exercising power over Punjab, the Nihangs outward/inward problematic , and yet powerful presence, was also limiting and challenging to Ranjit Singh.

Edward Said, in contrast to Hobbes’s focus, places more emphasis on the role of power in terms of knowledge. It was Western knowledge and intelligence on the Orient which Said believes to have been the precursor to Western control of the Orient. But this knowledge needs careful definition. Hence,

the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient (the East as career) despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a “real” Orient.²⁸

Thus, the term “orientalism,” refers to the beliefs and “knowledge” which the West gains about the Orient, despite its falseness, as being a means for hegemonic control over such Oriental countries. Despite the lack of true knowledge over the Orient, Said argues that even in the absence of such truths, the West’s power over the Orient exists within the framework of false knowledge. Indeed, Said goes on to explain how this knowledge over the Orient submerged itself into institutional settings such as educational institutions and

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

museums: “Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient...there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum [and] for reconstruction in the colonial office.”²⁹ Thus, for Said, it was through knowledge only that discourses of power were present, as it was the West’s immense knowledge of the Orient which allowed for imperialism and colonialism to occur: “knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.”³⁰ Though Said’s overall analysis looks at Western dominance over the East through knowledge, the underlying theme is the seeking of knowledge, and furthermore, the expression of such knowledge, as being a benefactor to power and dominance over another. Looking at such a theory within the 19th century Punjab context, with the Nihangs role as insiders of the court, they were thus able to gain the knowledge on aspects of Ranjit Singh’s court, which in turn, legitimized their own power and challenging presence outside of the court.

Simply put, “power is always power over something. Power is power over objects, and all objects over which a given species can have power together constitute

²⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

that species' cosmos.'"³¹ Yet, within this simple explanation of power lies theories on the balances of power in terms of those who have more, and those who challenge such authorities. The theories and outlooks into the nature of power as demonstrated by such figures as Foucault and Hobbes, as well as Said, are certainly applicable to the nature of how power resided and worked within Ranjit Singh's court. And when looking at each of the works on the nature of power, it is evident that although Ranjit Singh represented the ultimate sovereign power in terms of political clout in late 18th, but especially early 19th century Punjab, what proved to be the most challenging to his authority, and thus limiting his power, were the problematic Nihangs. Firstly, as members within the court, the Nihangs had access to all the inner workings of the court, in addition to gaining certain privileges; and yet, in their dual role as outsiders of the court, the Nihangs used the knowledge they had gained in order to assert their own power and realign such balances in challenging Ranjit Singh. As such, this thesis will demonstrate the problematic stance of the Nihangs by first, in Chapter Two, explore the structure of Ranjit Singh's court in terms of power by addressing its workings, structure, the key players, its intelligence systems, etc. After assessing Ranjit Singh's court, the thesis will explore how this Sikh sect was able to accumulate such power and challenge Ranjit Singh's authority through this problematic in and out identity.

³¹ A. Van Ginkel, *General Principles of Human Power* (London: Praeger Publishers, 1999) 115.

Chapter Three will look at two oppositional aspects: the role of the Nihangs as players within the court, and then the role of the Nihangs as outsiders of the court. In terms of their role as insiders, because the Nihangs, under the leadership of Akali Phula Singh in particular, were utilized readily by Ranjit in terms of battle, they held certain privileges. And as will be demonstrated, it was because of these privileges that the Nihangs were a cause of disturbance for the British especially. I will make reference to a number of specific incidents in this chapter. As outsiders, of the Sikh court, the Nihang sect proved to be a distinct element in a discourse of power. After having explored the nature of power through intelligence within Ranjit Singh's court, and then after having explored the Nihang sect specifically in terms of the power and privileges they held as insiders of the court, I hope to demonstrate how the Nihangs role and behaviour outside the court is demonstrative of them being a unique discourse of power in the 19th century. Indeed, because the Nihangs took advantage of their roles within the court, they were thus able to challenge Ranjit Singh and his court and become a powerful presence in Punjab, thus, challenging Ranjit Singh's own power, and the power of that of his court.

Chapter 2 Systems of Power and Knowledge in the Sikh Court

This dissertation cannot claim to prove that the Nihangs were a distinct part of a discourse of power, and thus a challenging presence to Ranjit Singh and his court, without first assessing the systems of power within the Sikh court itself. And if Edward Said's arguments can be used in terms of assessing the accumulation of power through knowledge, then there is no doubting that Ranjit Singh's control of the Sikh kingdom in the late 18th, and early 19th centuries through such systems of knowledge was demonstrative of the immense power which the court attained. Unlike the situation of British dominance occurring throughout India during this same period, the North-West region of Punjab remained unscathed up until 1849 when the British were finally able to annex Punjab following Ranjit Singh's death in 1839. Ranjit Singh's building and uniting of the entire Sikh kingdom can be credited to the impressive systems of knowledge which were formed, and thus, the discourses of power that followed. These systems of knowledge utilized by Ranjit Singh can be discussed in three parts: the controlling of intelligence and knowledge gaining through Ranjit Singh's own network of spies and administrators, the control through territorial organization, and thirdly, the systems of knowledge acquired through the impressive military. Through each of these methods

used to gain knowledge on his court, his people, as well as his (potential) enemies, Ranjit Singh was able to forge his kingdom into one which held great power.

Though the accounts of British travellers and administrators visiting the court of Ranjit Singh are extensive, what has been less emphasized, especially amongst European historians, is how Ranjit Singh not only was aware of all travellers (especially British) entering and exiting his kingdom, but how he was also able to control and gain valuable sources of information from such visitors. Indeed, Ranjit Singh was aware that his kingdom would only maintain intact, as long as he was aware of at all times the happenings around him: "The very emergence...of a more robust and diplomatically acute Sikh state also alerted Ranjit Singh to the importance of controlling intelligence."³² As a result of this need to control intelligence, Ranjit Singh was especially cautious in dealing with British visitors to his kingdom, making great use of his intelligence operators: "The result was a sophisticated secret service which Ranjit Singh used most effectively to confront British intrigues and through which he could feed rumours, information and disinformation of his own."³³ There are numerous examples of Britishtravellers who were witness to Ranjit Singh's suspicious and knowledge seeking nature.

³² C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India 1780-1870*, (New York: Cambridge University, 1996) 143.

³³ Ibid., 133.

V. Jacquemont, the French scientist for example, visited Ranjit Singh in 1831 and described the extent of questions he was berated with: “Ranjit questioned me about my travels, asked me when I had last left France and what countries I had since seen, and examined me about their climate, riches, products, power, etc.”³⁴ Based on the kinds of questions Ranjit Singh posed, it is clear that he was not solely interested in the personal travels of Jacquemont, as he goes on to say, “He asked me a hundred questions about Lord William Bentinck, his age, his habits, what he was doing before he came to India, the extent of his control over the Governors of Madras and Bombay, and lastly his accomplishments.”³⁵ Indeed, in allowing visitors to enter his kingdom, Ranjit Singh always was strategic in remaining kind, courteous, and generous to all his guests, so that in the end, he could question, and gain as much knowledge as possible. Jacquemont certainly was aware of Ranjit Singh’s hospitality as well as his unique enquiring nature as he exclaimed, “His conversation is like a nightmare, he is almost the first inquisitive Indian I have seen...He has asked me a hundred thousand questions about India, the British, Europe, Bonaparte, this world in general and the next, hell, paradise, the soul, God, [and] the devil.”³⁶

³⁴ H.L.O Garrett, *The Punjab a Hundred Years Ago*, (Punjab: Offeat Master Printers, 1971) 36.

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

³⁶ N.M Khilani, *Rise of the Sikh Power in Punjab*, (Delhi: Independent Publishing Company, 1990) 16.

When W.G. Osborne, the military secretary to the Earl of Auckland visited Ranjit Singh in 1839, he also was also bombarded with questions from the Maharaja as he describes, “our time was principally occupied in answering Runjeet’s innumerable questions, but without the slightest chance of being able to satisfy his insatiable curiosity.”³⁷ Ranjit Singh was once again very strategic in the kinds of questions he posed to Osborne, for example, seeking knowledge on issues such as: the kinds of artillery and weaponry Osborne brought with him, the nature of the Company army and the level of its strength, as well as the personal nature of the Earl of Auckland.³⁸ Despite the pleasant and somewhat relaxed settings of meetings with visiting foreigners and officials, there is no doubting that Ranjit Singh’s concerns and questions had political implications as he was also interested in gaining knowledge of his potential enemy, the British.

Upon meeting Ranjit Singh, most European visitors to the court were struck by the Maharaja’s insatiable curiosity and thirst for knowledge, as well as the extent of knowledge he had in terms of matters relating to his court. Captain Leopold Von Orlich for example observed that “[t]he want of education was covered by the splendid mental powers with which nature had endowed him, and prudence and knowledge of mankind enabled him to maintain himself in high station.”³⁹ In other words, Von Orlich attributed

³⁷ W.G. Osborne, *The Court and Camp of Ranjeet Singh*, (Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1973) 79.

³⁸ Ibid., 79.

³⁹ Captain Leopold Von Orlich, *Travels in India Including Sindh and the Punjab*, (Lahore: East & West Publishing, 1976) 172.

Ranjit Singh's success to the great knowledge he had attained throughout his life. Charles Baron Hugel, a German scientist, was yet another visitor to the court who would become victim to Ranjit Singh's bombardment of questions, as he observed, "[h]e rarely spoke of India or the English territories there, but chiefly asked my opinion of his own country, his army, the European officers in his service, and the design of foreign countries and very distant lands."⁴⁰ The "gruelling examination" between Ranjit Singh and Hugel lasted for one hour when all the while, Hugel "felt the Maharaja's single eye piercing into his innermost thoughts."⁴¹ The Baron Captain Murray, yet another visitor to the court, also observed how Ranjit Singh was keen on keeping account of all matters relating to the court: "With great natural intelligence and a wonderfully quick apprehension, his memory was excellent ... He audited all the revenue accounts, and the tenacity of his memory enabled him to follow the most complicated statements."⁴² Dr. W.L M'Gregor was also impressed upon witnessing the Maharaja's uninhibited devotion to all matters concerning the court:

Should the affairs of the State require his attention, Runjeet is ready at all times during the day and night, and it is not unusual for him to order his secretary and Prime Minister to carry the designs on which he has been meditating during the night, into execution before day-break.⁴³

⁴⁰ S.P Singh and Harish Sharma, *Europeans and Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2001) 41.

⁴¹ Ibid., 105.

⁴² Ibid., 43.

⁴³ Ibid.

Of the hundreds of visitors to Ranjit Singh's court, each and every individual would be subject to the Maharaja's thirst for knowledge; and as such, through the intelligence and knowledge he had gained, he also grew more powerful.

Ranjit Singh's knowledge was not limited only in terms of learning about his foreign visitors, and in general, world history. In fact, knowledge in Ranjit Singh's court was also closely connected to intelligence systems within the court, as "[s]o efficient was Ranjit Singh's system of intelligence that every movement...was reported to him."⁴⁴

Ranjit Singh's sources for intelligence can be divided into two parts: firstly, there were the *Punjab Akhbars*, *Lahore Akhbars*, etc., and secondly, there were the individual news writers who were stationed throughout Punjab and even beyond. The *Akhbars* were not only news letters, but also "a mine of information," which recorded every aspect of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his court including "the administrative system of the then Panjab government and on the official and private lives of the Maharajas and their courtiers, [and] the social and economic conditions of the people."⁴⁵ In addition to the *Akhbars*, there were the news-writers who also provided the Maharaja with a regular and constant source of intelligence of the happenings around his court. This system of news-writers collecting intelligence was referred to as the system of *Dak*. The news-writers otherwise referred to as *Akhbar Nawis* or *Waqai Nigar*, would be stationed throughout

⁴⁴ Ibid., 106.

Punjab, and especially alongside military expeditions, so that they in turn would keep the Maharaja updated on any and all events occurring. The *Dak* system was made even more efficient because of the runners who would be stationed a short distance from one another: "Couriers or despatch-riders were stationed at a distance of three *kos* or about five miles to ensure speedy delivery of messages."⁴⁶ Such methods assured Ranjit Singh that all intelligence and matters concerning the court would be brought to his attention almost immediately.

In terms of specifics, there are an innumerable amount of examples from the *Akhbars* which demonstrate Ranjit Singh's tenacity for surveillance and intelligence. One such *Akhbar* for example, describes orders given to Raja Dhian Singh to keep surveillance on Sirdar Sooltan Mahomed. And in turn, a news writer was ordered to also keep surveillance on the Sardar:

27 March [1839, Chet 16, 1895-96Bk.]-

...Raja Dhian Singh was asked where Sirdar Sooltan Mahomed Khan might be, and he replied that the Sirdar had gone to Peshawar. He was ordered to review the camp everyday. The Lodiana news-writer was directed to write constantly about the affairs of that quarter. From Peshawar it was reported that a few troops of Dost Mahomed Khan had arrived at Allee Musjid.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ganda Singh, *The Panjab in 1839-40: Selections from the Punjab Akhbars, Punjab Intelligence, etc. preserved in the National Archives of India New Delhi*, (Patiala: Sikh History Society, 1952) 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 13.

No matter how tedious or irrelevant the information may seem, Ranjit made sure that his news-writers reported all the happenings within and outside the court as well. One news writer for example, according to the *Lahore Akhbar*, was ordered to report all the actions of Prince Taimur:

3 April, 1839 [Chet 23, 1895-6]-*Lahore Ukhbar*-

...From the report of the Peishawer news-writer it appeared that Prince Timour had seated himself on the throne, received the respects of the European gentleman and a salute of guns.⁴⁸

And as Ranjit Singh knew all the happenings outside, but especially inside the court, the *Akhbars* also relay an immense of information in terms of the matters which concerned the Maharaja:

10 April, 1839 [Chet 30, 1895-6]-Camp Amb Dhorewalla-

...The Amritsar news-writer reported the constant occurrence of thefts in the City, and Luddha Sing, the Officer there, was urged to take proper measures to check the evil.⁴⁹

Likewise, Ranjit Singh liked to make sure that all urgent matters concerning his kingdom were brought to his attention so he could personally address them. Another *Akhbar* describes two robbers who were ordered to be brought before the Maharaja:

11 [?12] April, 1839 [Baisakh 1895-6]-Camp Amb Dhorewalla-

...Raja Dheyman Sing brought to the notice of the Maha-Raja that two Haekries belonging to the Khatries had been plundered by the robbers in the vicinity of the bridge...Ruttun Singh was

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 27.

ordered to apprehend those robbers and to bring them in his presence.⁵⁰

Almost every account within the *Akhbars* demonstrates the intrinsic intelligence systems of the court, as Ranjit Singh, through his news-writers, and the members of his court, managed to keep tabs on every aspect within, and without the court.

Visitors were not able to freely enter and exit the kingdom as Ranjit Singh controlled (through his intelligence sources) all the whereabouts of guests entering his land. The Superintendent of the East India Company's studs, William Moorcroft for example, during his visit to Lahore between 1819 and 1825 described the difficulties in exploring further into Punjab: "The thannadar of Hoshiarpur refused to allow of our advance without a reference to Lala Seodayal, who was at Phul, thirty kos distant, and we were obliged to await the result; after three days, an answer came from this person, stating that he could not permit us to proceed without orders from Ranjit Singh, to whom he would write, and desired me to do the same."⁵¹ Although Moorcroft was eventually allowed entry into Punjab, he needed yet another approval from Ranjit Singh in order to take an alternate route around Amritsar: "At length, on the 29th, came letters from Desa Singh, announcing the consent of Ranjit Singh to my route back through the mountains or to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁵¹ Horace Hayman Wilson, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab; in Ladakh and Kashmir; In Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz, And Bokhara; By Mr. William Moorcroft and Mr. George Trebeck*, (New Delhi: Sagar Publications, 1971) 82.

Amritsar.”⁵² Ranjit Singh’s control was so great that it was only through his permission that guests were allowed entrance into Punjab; and as such, the whereabouts of these guests were constantly monitored by the Maharaja. Once guests gained entry into Punjab, Ranjit Singh made sure to receive them cordially so that he may gain as much information as possible. Indeed, Ranjit Singh was especially careful in his relations with the British as he could take more advantage of an amicable relationship versus a relationship of enmity: “Ranjit Singh was very well aware of the British strength. He found it expedient to maintain friendly relations with the British with the view of safeguarding his frontier in the east.”⁵³ As such, in allowing amicable relations and conversations with the British, Ranjit Singh accomplished two goals: on the one hand, he could protect his own territorial interests, and on the other hand, he gained important sources of knowledge on the British, their whereabouts, their ambitions, etc.

If ever there was a situation in which his suspicion was aroused, Ranjit Singh made sure the situation was assessed thoroughly. General Ventura, a Frenchman who served in Ranjit Singh’s army, describes in his letter written on March 12th, 1822, how he was called on when Ranjit Singh became alerted to two figures having entered Punjab: “Yesterday the Maharaja sent me a purwannah, intimating that two Feringhees, one a gentleman, and the other a Gorah with several servants had arrived from the westwards

⁵² Ibid., 87.

via Kabul and Ramnagar at Shah Derrah opposite Lahore.”⁵⁴ On orders from Ranjit Singh, Ventura was to maintain surveillance on the whereabouts of the two as Ranjit feared the two figures may be British: “The Maharaja directed Mohal Lal, Poorbiah, and the other trustworthy persons by every means in their power to ascertain whether the two gentlemen were French or English. Mohan Lal could only obtain from them that they were French officers, but the Maharaja, had doubts in his mind and conceived them to be English.”⁵⁵ Because Ranjit Singh had created an intrinsic system of intelligence and knowledge gathering, he was able to not only maintain rule over his own people in India, but was also able to hinder any British advances or suspicious actions.

Ironically though, even before General Jean Baptiste Ventura and the other great European officer, Jean Francois Allard, became such key military players within the court, they too were subject to Ranjit Singh’s intelligence and suspicion: “The *Lahore Akhbar* records in some detail that the Maharaja checked the bonafides of both Allard and Ventura from the British authorities before agreeing to take them in service.”⁵⁶ When Ventura and Allard first arrived in the Punjab area after having served Napoleon, Ranjit Singh made sure that these two new foreigners were brought to his attention. And

⁵³ Fauja Singh & A.C. Arora, eds., *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Politics, Society and Economy*, (Patiala: Phukkian Press, 1984) 119.

⁵⁴ H.L.O Garrett, *European Adventurers of Northern India, 1785-1849* By C. Grey, (Patiala: Offset Master Printers, 1970) 95.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁵⁶ Singh & Sharma, *Europeans*, 60.

although they expressed their desire to serve under the Maharaja, Ranjit Singh was sure not to give any reply until he had satisfied all his suspicions regarding his new guests.

After waiting sometime for a reply from Ranjit Singh, Ventura and Allard sent the Maharaja a letter expressing their desires:

We have therefore at the advice of Faqir Nur-ud-Din renewed our request in the French language... We again supplicate Your majesty to be good enough to give definite order which we shall always follow with the utmost respect and obedience.⁵⁷

In the meantime, Ranjit Singh was trying to confirm that Ventura and Allard were not spies, and in doing so, developed some unique tactics:

The Maharaja had desired the foreigners to write out their applications in French. The petitions as drafted by them were sent to Ludhiana to be translated for him by his agent there. He also had a letter written to Ventura and Allard in English by one of his courtiers. It was sent to them by a special messenger who pretended that he had brought the letter from William Moorcroft, the English traveller, then in Kashmir. Neither Ventura nor Allard knew Moorcroft. They showed utter surprise, and returned the letter to the messenger.⁵⁸

Even when attempting to determine the loyalties of Ventura and Allard through these elaborate tactics, Ranjit Singh purposely kept the two generals distracted as indicated by some of the entries of the *Lahore Akhbars*:

⁵⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 99.

Lahore Akhbar, 17th and 18th May, 1822.

A long conversation upon commonplace topics took place between the French officers, Messrs Allar and Wuntoora. The Maharaja informed them that Mr. Ross had treated his vakil (carrying the letter) with great kindness. The Maharaja begged the French officers to be of good cheer, and he would soon find employment for them, and 500 horsemen were ordered

Eventually however, after using such tactics where Ranjit Singh was assured of the two Generals' loyalty-both Ventura and Allard were given employment and proved to become some of the key players within the court.

Just as intelligence and knowledge of the court was maintained through methods such as the *Akhbars* and the news-writers, etc., so did Ranjit Singh depend heavily on some of the key players within his court. Although Ventura and Allard served as examples of key military figures within the court, Fakir Azizuddin, Ranjit Singh's Prime Minister and personal physician, had the highest position in the court with the exception of the Maharaja himself. Any incoming foreigner entering Ranjit Singh's court would meet with Azizuddin, as he was not only Ranjit Singh's closest confidante, but he was also seen as "[t]he most powerful man in Punjab aside from the ruler."⁵⁹ In being Ranjit Singh's closest ally and confidante, it was also up to Azizuddin to provide Ranjit Singh with any and all information on the guests who entered his kingdom. Moorcroft for example, describes his meeting with Azizuddin, whom he views as a man of "extreme

⁵⁹ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 137.

urbanity and of remarkable intelligence.”⁶⁰ Though Azizuddin’s nature was amicable and respectable enough, as the closest man to Ranjit Singh, he was also a charismatic, almost sly seeker of knowledge. Moorcroft describes his meeting with Azizuddin, explaining how “[i]n the evening came Hakim Aziz ad din, the wazir of Ranjit Sinh [who] engaged in conversation with me for sometime.”⁶¹ It is unfortunate that Moorcroft does not describe in more detail the nature of their conversation; however, British politics and culture would surely have been a part of Azizuddin’s agenda as “[i]n all matters connected with Europeans and the English Government Azizuddin was specially employed.”⁶² When he visited Ranjit Singh’s camp, W.G. Osborne also became aware to Azizuddin’s cunning nature, describing him as having a “crafty-looking countenance.”⁶³ And yet, despite the obvious cunning nature Osborne noticed in Azizuddin, his charms were also too great to ignore as Osborne goes on to say, “and his manners are so kind and unassuming that it is impossible not to like him.”⁶⁴

In all matters concerning the court and Darbar, it would be Azizuddin who would speak as well as handle matters, as demonstrated throughout the *Akhbars*:

Punjab Akhbar- [June, 1839, Har 8, 1896 Bk.]

...Fuqeer Azeezoodeen wrote a general order on the part of the Maharaja, and read it aloud in the Durbar, proclaiming the

⁶⁰ Wilson, *Travels in Hindustan*, 95.

⁶¹ Ibid., 94.

⁶² Sir Lepel Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1892) 118.

⁶³ Osborne, *The Court and Camp*, 69.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 69.

installation, and Deewan Deena Nath was ordered to apprise all the officers of the State.⁶⁵

Like wise, it would be Azizuddin's role to read out treaties and proclamations in the presence of the entire Darbar, and Ranjit Singh made sure that all of Azizuddin's words were heeded: "Every time the resourceful Fakir (Aziz-ud-din) read out the words treaty and agreement, the discharge of guns filled the ears of the audience exactly at that moment."⁶⁶ Captain Von Orlich as well, in addition to commenting on the intelligent nature of Ranjit Singh, also observed that "[e]very embassy to the British government was accompanied by Uzeezoodeen; without him no resolution is formed, and every party seeks his counsel or assistance."⁶⁷ As the right hand man of Ranjit Singh, Azizuddin not only was the charismatic negotiator and consultant to foreign visitors, but he also was Ranjit Singh's personal advisor and advisor to the court.

Just as British informants were sent to Punjab in order to seek knowledge, so was Azizuddin sent on expeditions to meet with Indian, as well as British officials and leaders. In 1831 for example, Azizuddin was sent to Simla to meet with Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor-General of India. On meeting with Lord Auckland at Ferozepur in 1838, Azizuddin's disposition was duly noted by all present as "[h]e was

⁶⁵ Singh, *The Panjab in 1839-40*, 50.

⁶⁶ Sohal Lal Suri, *Umdat-Ut-Tawarikh: Daftar III 1831-1839 AD*, (Chandigarh: Punjab Itihas Prakashan, 1974) 63.

⁶⁷ Von Orlich, *Travels in India*, 174.

one of the ablest and certainly the most honest of all Ranjit Singh's courtiers."⁶⁸ In addition to being a great diplomat and information gatherer, Azizuddin was a very learned man, who "saw himself [as] a ripe scholar in all branches of Eastern science, and [he] was also a generous and discriminating patron of learning."⁶⁹ As a knowledge seeker himself, Azizuddin complimented perfectly with Ranjit Singh, and his own quest for power through knowledge. It is thus no wonder that throughout his position as Prime Minister to the Maharaja, that "the most onerous part of the duties fell to the share of Fakir Azizuddin."⁷⁰ As a seeker of knowledge in all aspects, whether political, cultural, or through the arts, Azizuddin was the perfect partner to Ranjit Singh as he also helped in solidifying the Maharaja's kingdom by both charming the British and gaining knowledge from them.

In addition to gaining knowledge and power through sources of intelligence and keeping track of all the happenings in the court, Ranjit Singh also used territorial organization to attain such feats. By categorizing and separating the territories of the Sikh kingdom into three zones, Ranjit Singh was able to exercise his power and control over the people through organization and observation: "The Punjab was also relatively easy to police, since the state could position agents on the numerous river crossings to take note

⁶⁸ Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, 119.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

of unusual movements.”⁷¹ Indeed, the separation of the kingdom into zones allowed for easy observation and policing of the people. In terms of policing the state, Ranjit Singh acquired full control of such ambitions, with very little help from his advisors with the exception of Azizuddin: “He [Ranjit Singh] was the chief executive authority, the highest court of justice and the chief legislator. The direction of affairs in the state lay entirely with him.”⁷² Another foreign observer, Alexander Burnes, also observed the Maharaja’s depth and array of knowledge, even of the most minute details: “He managed all the concerns of his State from matters of the highest importance to the merest trifle...from the shoeing of a horse to the organization of an army.”⁷³ In order to police and control so meticulously, Ranjit Singh indeed had to have a deep knowledge of the people of his kingdom and the current state of affairs. Because the central zone was nearest to the Sikh capital of Lahore, Ranjit Singh maintained an especially vigilant intelligence system of that area: “The state Intelligence system was much better organized here and there was no difficulty about reports and official *parwanas* travelling about quickly and regularly.”⁷⁴ Not only did Ranjit Singh maintain knowledge and control over the central zone through the distribution of reports, but he also gathered intelligence through his own travelling of the central zone, indeed, “[t]his was also the best place known to the Maharaja since he

⁷¹ Ibid., 133.

⁷² J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: The State and Society*, (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2001) 92.

⁷³ Fauja Singh, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 156.

was constantly touring through the length and breadth of this portion and had everything under his close personal supervision.”⁷⁵ Ranjit Singh’s infamous nomadic nature was significant because rather than staying within the confines of his palace, he chose to go out and gather his own intelligence and sources of knowledge on his land and his people.

The final source of knowledge, information and thus power that will be explored is through the forging of Ranjit Singh’s infamous military. Although the connection between military and power is quite obvious, what made Ranjit Singh’s creation of his regular army, cavalry and infantry unique is the ways in which he utilized sources of knowledge of European military tactics, to his advantage. In creating, arguably, one of the greater military forces of the 19th century, Ranjit Singh took into consideration a number of factors including: “the geographical situation, the military power of his opponents in relation to his own, [and] the advances in weaponry and the web of political relationships.”⁷⁶ The most significant consideration Ranjit Singh looked upon, was the nature of his opponents military power, namely, the British; indeed, “[t]he efficiency of the British military force was both an incentive and pressure for Ranjit Singh to introduce changes in the then existing system.”⁷⁷ As such, it was only by gaining knowledge on European systems of military that Ranjit Singh was also able to adapt and forge a similar

⁷⁴ Grewal, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 96.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁶ Singh, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 117.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 117.

style army which posed a direct challenge to the Europeans. Observations which Ranjit Singh made in the Anglo-Maratha war based on the efforts of the British military leader, General Lake was what first aroused Ranjit Singh to the superiority of the European military model. There were infact, rumours even that Ranjit Singh had entered the camp of General Lake in 1805 wearing a disguise so that he could get a first hand look into the workings of the British military.⁷⁸ In seeing the levels of strength of the British army, Ranjit Singh made it his goal to learn as much as possible, and then imitate such a style, so that he may dominate: “When he had thoroughly mastered the secret of the superiority of the British organization...he resolved to create an army on similar lines.”⁷⁹

Not only did Ranjit Singh create a strong and formidable army based on the knowledge he gained from his British counterparts, but he went one step further in procuring for himself, former European army leaders. One has already been mentioned in this paper, Captain Ventura, and the other, Captain Allard, had both served under Napoleon and both were therefore priceless to Ranjit Singh in terms of the sorts of knowledge and leadership they could provide. Through the efforts of Ventura and Allard, as well as their successors, General Court and General Avitabile, Ranjit Singh’s army expanded in size, breadth, and intelligence: “By the aid of these officers, on whom Runjeet Singh conferred the rank of generals, the Maharaja succeeded in forming a well-

⁷⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁹ Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, 133.

armed and tolerably disciplined army of 50,000 men, besides 100,000 irregular troops; cannon foundries, powder magazines, and manufactories of arms are established in Lahore and Amritsar.”⁸⁰ Not only did the French Generals teach Ranjit Singh and his army about military tactics, but “[t]he impact of these French officers on the army was so positive that Ranjit gradually adopted the French system of training.”⁸¹ When the knowledge of the British army was not satisfying enough, Ranjit Singh then adopted the superior (according to him) model of the French military system based on the teachings of the two Generals. It is important to recognize Ranjit Singh’s use of outside sources in aiding his military because it is a demonstration of the extent he would go to not only in order to create a powerful army which would challenge the British, but also the sources of knowledge he was able to utilize.

Though he created his army based on the European models through which he gained a great deal of knowledge about, Ranjit Singh’s army was also utilized not just in battles of acquisition, but also in terms of intelligence controlling. Because of the widely held belief that it was because of Ranjit Singh’s army that the Sikh state thrived, as “the State owed its origin, expansion and security to the Army,”⁸² there is indeed no doubting that the military played a role in knowledge gathering, as well as controlling and policing

⁸⁰ Von Orlich, *Travels in India*, 167.

⁸¹ Pradeep Barua, “Military Developments in India, 1750-1850,” *The Journal of Military History* (1994) 611.

⁸² Singh, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 158.

the state. Indeed, although the nature of Ranjit Singh's observance of his state has already been mentioned, what has not been mentioned is the role of the military in such endeavours. Often times, in order for Ranjit Singh to keep "a constant and vigilant eye on the happenings in the region,"⁸³ it was his army which would be stationed around strategic areas in the Punjab region as modes of surveillance: "Quite a large proportion of his armed forces were stationed at strategic points in the entire area, mostly in and around the city of Peshawar which was the most vulnerable spot in the whole country."⁸⁴ As such, the military, much like his other intelligence gatherers, was crucial in keeping Ranjit Singh updated on the happenings within his kingdom: "Through them and also by means of his intelligence people the Maharaja always managed to keep himself well posted with up-to-date information about the border areas."⁸⁵ In addition to intelligence gathering, and somewhat connected to it, was the use of the military as watch guards or "escorts" of European visitors. Although Ranjit Singh may have insisted in using his army as escorts for foreign visitors so that they may be protected, he also most certainly had hidden motives. While visiting Ranjit Singh for example, Osborne describes how he was readily provided with the services of the Sikh military: "21st May- Commenced our march to Adeenanuggur, where Runjeet Sing is now holding his court. We were accompanied by two companies of the 20th regiment, two horse artillery guns, and a horse

⁸³ Grewal, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, 94.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

as an escort.”⁸⁶ The role of the military under the regime of Ranjit Singh certainly took on non-traditional elements as it became a source not only of power through battle, but also as a source for intelligence gathering and policing of the state.

The mobility of Ranjit Singh’s army was yet another unique feature which allowed them to easily access information as all parts of the kingdom could be kept under watch. As mentioned previously, the military would often be stationed in strategic locations; however, it was in their mobility that complete watch over the state was possible. Even Osborne recognized this trait of Ranjit Singh’s army in comparison to the British, saying that “[t]he Sikh army possesses one great advantage over our own- the ease with which it can be moved. No wheel carriage is allowed on a march, their own bazars carry all they require; and thirty thousand of their troops could be moved with more facility...than three Company’s regiments on this side the Sutlege.”⁸⁷ In creating such a powerful and successful army based on the knowledge learned from European systems, Ranjit Singh utilized his army to the greatest capacity as the army allowed conquering, provided protection, and most significantly, provided Ranjit Singh with the intelligence and knowledge gathering he so much desired.

Many scholars have argued that the great Mughal empire, following the last official emperor Aurangzeb, eventually collapsed because of the lack of information

⁸⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁶ Osborne, *The Court and Camp*, 50.

access, i.e., “a failure of knowledge, of the flow of information, and of the central ruling elite’s canny understanding of local circumstances.”⁸⁸ By comparison, the growth of the Sikh kingdom of Punjab with the rising of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is proof that through systems of knowledge, through the flow of information, and through a deep understanding of the land and the people, consolidation and maintenance of power is eminent. Indeed, by looking at some of the arguments of Edward Said, as well as other numerous works on knowledge and power throughout the course of history, there is no doubting the connection between the two. Ranjit Singh was able to forge a Sikh empire of power through his great intelligence systems and the key players within the court whom also provided Ranjit and the court with an abundance of information from both within, and without the court. Western nations were indeed not the only nations to hold such systems of knowledge and power, for “[t]he great importance of surveillance and information-collection for Indian kingship was a reflection of social complexity.”⁸⁹

And just when there are sources of pervasive power, there is bound to be resistance to such power. Foucault’s discussions in terms of the contract-power relationship and the nature of the larger powers relationship with other illegitimate sources can now be understood much clearer. As this chapter has shown the complicated

⁸⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁸ C.A. Bayly, “Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India,” *Modern Asian Studies* (1993) 10.

⁸⁹ Bayly, “Knowing the Country” 6.

intelligence and knowledge systems, ie. power within Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court, the following chapter will provide an introduction to the Nihangs and why the term "problematic" is so befitting to this Sikh sect. Thus, ultimately as is the goal of this thesis, I hope to demonstrate that the Nihangs, through their specifically problematic in and out identity, will become the illegitimate force of resistance to Ranjit Singh, his court, and those intelligence systems which were so effective and efficient.

Chapter 3 The Ultimate Power: Inside and Outside the Sikh Court

In demonstrating the Nihangs' dual roles as players within, and players outside of Ranjit Singh's court, it will become apparent why they were an important element in the discourse of power within the Sikh court, and a challenging presence to Ranjit Singh. The Nihangs role as players within the court is seen through three main components: the incorporation of the Nihangs into Ranjit Singh's military, and thus, being a part of such a payroll; the administrative control the Nihangs had over the city of Amritsar (though as we will see, even this element is somewhat problematic); and finally, the incorporation of the Nihang presence within the *darbars* and the subsequent paintings and artwork.

Probably the most significant indicator of the Nihangs as players within the court was their military presence. Indeed, in some of the more famous military campaigns, Ranjit Singh made sure to access the Nihangs' skills to his advantage. Before looking at these specific battles however, we first need to look at the formal military structures of the Sikh court, and what role the Nihangs played within this structure. Whereas in chapter two, I discussed the nature of Ranjit Singh's military in connection to power and intelligence, in this section, I will look at the formal structure of the military system itself, and incorporate the Nihangs as official parts of such a system. Although the regular army

felt the implications of Western thought and influence (especially through the leadership of Generals Ventura, Allard, Court and Avitabile), the majority of Ranjit Singh's army, ie. irregular infantry, garrisons, and *jagirdari* contingents remained unaffected by such European methods.⁹⁰ The *ghorcchurra's* for example, were one such cavalry group who adopted neither European, Mughal nor Maratha militaristic styles as they avoided any forms of feudalism. And as we will see, those who comprised the irregular infantry also tended to be less organized like the Europeans, but rather, "a body of active fighters with more or less regimentation and discipline."⁹¹

Generally speaking, the army was split into three opposing fractions: ancient and modernized, regular and irregular, and finally, state and *jagirdari*. These three classifications were based on "(i) whether or not it is paid by the state and (ii) whether or not it is trained on the European model."⁹² The Nihangs' roles in this formal structure, for the sake of categorizing, were as a part of the Sikh military's irregular infantry and cavalry. Though the Europeanized regular army was the largest portion of the Sikh army, it is the irregular army which needs more explaining due to the connection to the Nihangs. As mentioned before, the elusiveness of the irregular army in terms of organization and discipline presented the perfect environment for the Nihangs own undisciplined and rash nature. The irregular army consisted of the irregular cavalry,

⁹⁰ Fauja Singh Bajwa, *Military System of the Sikhs* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964) 106.

⁹¹ Ibid., 108.

infantry, garrison forces, and the *jagirdari* troops. Of these categories, the Nihangs were most involved in the cavalry and infantry, which once again, tended to suit their lifestyle “where the demands of discipline were not so urgent as in the regular army.”⁹³ Because the irregular cavalry was disorganized when compared to the regular cavalry, often times, a troop of Nihangs would be enlisted separately, by order of Ranjit Singh. An example of such an order is found in the “Book of Parwanas,” which are a set of 462 military orders sent by Ranjit Singh to his General Sardar Tej Singh:

At the time of departure towards Nakka 100 Nihang Sikhs of Abchal Nagar, both horse and foot, were approved by His majesty for enrolment. Kanwar Nau Nihal Singh has now submitted that 300 Nihang Sikhs have been sent to him by you and Jawahar Mal.⁹⁴

The number of Nihangs within the irregular cavalry and infantry was limited when compared to other groups - only three thousand⁹⁵ at the most. However, their presence in some of Ranjit Singh’s most famous military campaigns proved influential and decisive.

The Nihangs were not called upon merely during times of need during specific battles, but their official presence within the court via the military was proof through the pay and allowances granted. Three such methods of pay included the *Mahdari* system,

⁹² Ibid., 108.

⁹³ Ibid., 141.

⁹⁴ J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, *Civil and Military Affairs of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1987) 160.

⁹⁵ Bajwa, *Military System*, 141.

which was most prevalent amongst the Sikhs, the *Fasalandari* system, upon which payments depended on the crop periods, and the *Rozinadari* system. Of these, the *Rozinadari* system was used specifically to pay foreigners or leaders such as Akali Phula Singh, the Nihang leader. The term *Rozinadari* is derived from the term *Rozina* or *Yomiah*, meaning daily allowance, and *Roz* or *Yom*, meaning a day. In other words, in the *Rozinadari* system, other military personnel within the court like Akali Phula Singh would receive a fixed allowance daily, “though, as in the case of the Mahadari system, it was not essential that the payment should be made every day.”⁹⁶ Though it seems that the Nihangs, such as Akali Phula Singh, were paid an annual allowance, there were other grants and awards provided to the Nihangs as seen in “the Book of Parwanas,” and the “Umdat-al-Tawarikh,” the court daily proceedings as recorded by Sohal Lal Suri from 1831-39. One such order from Ranjit Singh for example, ordered Tej Singh to pay an order of Nihangs according to certain rates:

Take muster of the Nihangs of Abchal Nagar who are with Lala Jawahar Mal. They should be paid by Lala Jawahar Mal in accordance with the existing practice and at the rates given below. For future however this will be done by Kanwar Nau Nihal Singh. An order is issued in his name.

Sipahis: Rs. 10 for trooper; Rs. 6 for foot soldier.

Officers: Rs. 30, Rs. 25, Rs. 20 or Rs. 15.

Lahore, 24 Jeth 1891 (4 June 1834)⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁹⁷ Grewal and Banga, *Civil and Military Affairs*, 153.

This order certainly demonstrates the Nihangs role as players within the court, as Ranjit Singh considered them an asset, and thus they needed to be paid accordingly for their contributions to the court. On other occasions, the Nihangs were given rewards in general for their service to the court: “On the 3rd (17th September 1831 A.D) all the things worthy of being given in charity and alms were distributed among the *Akalis* and the deserving.”⁹⁸ Indeed, the use of the term “deserving” as reference to the Nihangs further demonstrates the importance which the Sikh court placed upon the Nihangs. During the celebrations for the ensuing month according to the Sikh calendar, Ranjit Singh distributed gifts and awards to those in his court, of which the Nihangs were indeed included: “On the blessed *Sankrant of Chet* 1889 (11th March 1832 A.D.) the Maharaja gave away in charity, as usual, one elephant, one horse, some suits of clothes...and a large sum of money and enough of grain were given to the *Akalis* and the Brahmins.”⁹⁹ Such rewards were a common practice as on another occasion, in celebration of the new month, Ranjit Singh once again rewarded the Nihangs with money: “On the *Sankrant* of the blessed *Magh* (12th January 1836 A.D) the Maharaja distributed by way of charity...Rs. 3,000 to the *Nihangs*.”¹⁰⁰ In fact, in almost every reference given to the celebration of the *Sankrant* month in “*Umdat-al-Tawarikh*,” there is subsequently an

⁹⁸ Sohal Lal Suri, *Umdat-Ut-Tawarikh: Daftar III 1831-1839 AD*, (Chandigarh: Punjab Itihas Prakashan, 1974) 78.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 133.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 267.

order issued to present the Nihangs with gifts. Even one of the many references to a description of gift-giving uses the term “as usual,” indicating that gifts and awards were regularly granted to the Nihangs: “Early in the morning on the 1st of the blessed *Magh* (11th January 1838 A.D.) the Maharaja secured...respectively, in addition to one elephant, several cows, Rs. 7000 and many other things to be distributed, as usual, with a separate sum of Rs. 1,000 for the *Akalis*.”¹⁰¹

Ranjit Singh’s successful reign as ruler over the Sikh kingdom was due in part to the military conquests he achieved. And it was during some of these key battles which were fought, and won by the Sikh court, that the Nihangs presented themselves as great assets to the court. Even Sir Lepel Griffin, a European biographer on Ranjit Singh, could not deny the Nihangs’ respectable position in the court as he claimed they where “[t]he only infantry who enjoyed any respect.”¹⁰² One such battle in which the Nihangs played a key role, was the Battle of Multan, which was part of a set of smaller campaigns lasting over a decade in which Ranjit Singh attempted to gain control of, and failed, until the final campaign was launched in 1818. Before the successful launch in 1818, Ranjit Singh attempted to unsuccessfully overthrow the Multan Nawab, Muzaffar Khan, four times. The first two attempts in 1802 and 1806 were fruitless ambitions on part of the Sikhs, and the third attempt in 1807, though it did not result in his gaining territory, Ranjit Singh

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 397.

¹⁰² Sir Lepel Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1892) 86.

was satisfied with receiving an indemnity of 70,000 rupees. The fourth attempt in 1810 seemed hopeful in the beginning as the Sikhs did manage to take possession of the city from February 25th to April 19th. However, the Sikhs were forced to retreat after failed attempts to destroy the Multan fortress via poor artillery. When the campaign which would finally prove to be successful was launched in 1818, there were a great number of preparations made, of which the Nihangs were included:

Preparations were made on an elaborate scale. All the boats, on the Sutlej and the Ravi were commandeered to ensure a regular supply of provisions...The big Bhangi gun of Zam Zama was ordered down to Multan. So also were platoons of Nihangs.¹⁰³

Indeed, incorporating the Nihangs in such a significant battle proved to be a positive for Ranjit Singh as this Sikh sect's actions helped in the conquest of Multan. At one point during battle, the Nihangs successfully distracted their enemies by laying a mine under a portion of the Multan fort. A more famous Nihang incident during this battle occurred on June 2nd, when a large contingency of Nihangs took the lead in breaching the Khizri Gate, and "through these breaches the dare devil Akalis entered the fort...and took the defenders by surprise, and occupied the fort."¹⁰⁴ Only after this initial attack by the Nihangs, did the majority of the Sikh soldiers follow.

¹⁰³ Khushwant Singh, *Ranjit Singh: Maharaja of the Punjab*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1962) 124.

¹⁰⁴ Gulcharan Singh, *Ranjit Singh and his Generals*, (Delhi: Sujlana Publishers) 215.

Another significant battle, of which the Nihang's presence was crucial, was the Battle of Peshawar in 1819. Though the conquest of Peshawar itself was fairly effortless, as Afghanistan was already in a state of political chaos, what is significant however, is that the Nihang leader, Akali Phula Singh, was first sought by Ranjit Singh for advice. Phula Singh's knowledge of the north-west frontier was well known, and thus, much of the plans for attack was organized by the Nihang leader:

Phula Singh told him [Ranjit] that Attock was like a small island...If the north-western bastion was to be made secure against the Afghans and Pathans, the frontier would have to be pushed further north to Peshawar.¹⁰⁵

In addition to advising Ranjit Singh on strategies for attack, Phula Singh was also one of the two generals chosen to lead the Sikhs into battle:

On October 15, 1818, Ranjit Singh marched out of Lahore at the head of his troops. Amongst the generals with him were two who knew these lands and the people, and whose names were becoming a terror amongst the tribes, Hari Singh Nalwa and Akali Phula Singh.¹⁰⁶

In terms of the battle itself, because the members of the Khattak tribe of Afghanistan

¹⁰⁵ Singh, *Ranjit Singh*, 129.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 129.

were unable to defend themselves against the Sikhs, they were easily defeated.

Furthermore, upon hearing the defeat of the Khattaks, Mohammad Khan, the governor of Peshawar, admitted defeat and fled the city. Though the details of the battle itself are minor because it was a such an easy victory for the Sikhs, what is significant is the direct inclusion at the request of Ranjit Singh of the Nihang leader Akali Phula Singh.

The Battle of Naushera in 1823 is probably the most remembered amongst Nihangs as it was the final battle of their great leader Phula Singh. When Ranjit Singh heard that a group of Pathans had declared jihad against Yar Muhammad Khan, who paid tribute to the Sikh ruler, a contingent of two Sikh armies were immediately called to the north-west area. Of these two Sikh armies, some of Ranjit Singh's greatest military leaders were called upon, including generals Ventura, Allard, Hari Singh Nalwa, and Akali Phula Singh. The Afghan forces were easily defeated as on one end, Prince Sher Singh (Ranjit Singh's son), crossed the Attock, whilst another body of Sikh troops attacked the fortress of Jahangira. In terms of military strength, both sides were equally equipped, with 20,000-25,000 men on the Afghan and the Sikh end. Despite the equal forces of men on both sides, the Afghans suffered great losses, approximately 4,000. As for the Sikhs and Ranjit Singh, the victory was bittersweet because although the Sikh court had now declared supremacy over the territory past the river Indus valley, they had also lost one of the greater Sikh generals, Akali Phula Singh.

The death of the Nihang leader Akali Phula Singh was indeed a great loss to the Sikh army as we have seen how much Ranjit Singh relied on his military strength. And thus, rather than solely discussing the Nihangs as a larger group, I want to look at the famous Nihang leader Akali Phula Singh in more detail and examine his role as a player within the court and as ally to Ranjit Singh. Though as we will see further in this chapter, Phula Singh was not without his own problematic features, he was still viewed as a great warrior within the context of the Sikh military under Ranjit Singh. Born in 1761 in the village Sinh, Phula Singh's young life was certainly full of its hardships as his father died when he was a child, and Phula Singh was left under the care of his godfather. Through the guidance and teachings of his godfather, Phula Singh was trained in both spirituality and the martial arts. Because of his militaristic skills, especially in riding, Phula Singh decided to join the Nihangs, which was then lead by Narain Singh. Following the death of Narain Singh, Phula Singh was named his successor as the new Nihang leader. Even in terms of his dress, Phula Singh was a true member of the Sikh court, because in contrast to the traditional blue attire worn by the Nihangs, Phula Singh distinguished himself by wearing "a magnificent white costume fitted to the body, with a broad double-side, gold laced *bourdic* hung round his neck and interwoven with a light silk scarf, crossed in front of his chest."¹⁰⁷ As such, because of his unique style of dress especially, Phula Singh was often viewed in contrast to the sect he lead, because "unlike other members of his sect,

¹⁰⁷ Singh, *Ranjit Singh and his Generals*, 81.

[Phula Singh] has the air of a true courtier instead of a religious fanatic.”¹⁰⁸ Even in terms of the Nihang turban, which as we have seen in the previous chapter, was a key identifying factor of the Sikh sect, Phula Singh remained an individual by instead wearing a white turban “with the blue Nihang insignia overhung with a variegated heron’s plume.”¹⁰⁹

Though Phula Singh’s skills were utilized during some key battles, Ranjit Singh first recognized the Nihang leader’s skills during minor skirmishes such as the 1807 attack on Kasur, where in “this battle Akali Phoola Singh and his Akalis, whose number was increasing daily, did a marvellous piece of work.”¹¹⁰ Before launching the Battle of Naushera, it was believed that Ranjit Singh had his doubts, and it was Phula Singh, “a man of determination,”¹¹¹ who persuaded him otherwise.

As mentioned previously, the Battle of Naushera proved to be Phula Singh’s final battle. When the Sikhs had launched some unsuccessful attacks against the Afghans, Phula Singh and his Akalis decided to move their own assault. During the initial assault, Phula Singh’s horse was struck by a musket ball. Despite this, and because of the leader’s determination and skill, he was seen minutes later riding an elephant to launch the attack. During this battle, 5,000 Afghans engaged in hand-to-hand combat with a few hundred

¹⁰⁸ Gulshan Lall Chopra, *The Panjab as a Sovereign State*, (Hosiarpur: VVR Vedic Research Institute, 1960) 151.

¹⁰⁹ Singh, *Ranjit Singh and his Generals*, 81.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 78.

Akalis. It was during this battle that Phula Singh met his end as he was riddled with bullets while riding his elephant. Upon hearing of the Nihang leaders' death, Ranjit Singh commemorated his memory by erecting a *smadh* over Phula Singh's remains at the banks of the Kabul river in Naushera. Although we will see that Akali Phula Singh was a troublesome presence within the Sikh court and to Ranjit Singh, what should not be overlooked is the great military presence he also played within the Sikh court. As such, despite the problematic features he had, it is hard to deny the more noble qualities Phula Singh had, for he truly was "a bold and brave soldier...His successes were mainly due to his offensive spirit, boldness and fearlessness."¹¹² It was thus no wonder that during times of battle, "[w]hen the result of a battle was doubtful, when conventional warfare proved ineffective, it was Phoola Singh's fanatic and sudden attacks which moved the scales in favour of the Lahore troops."¹¹³ We have seen how Ranjit Singh utilized the Nihangs as insiders of his court during key territorial battles; however, what is also significant is that the Nihangs were not simply the hidden or embarrassing members of the court only to be used during severe cases. The Nihangs were as much a part of the Sikh military as any other group as they were even at times displayed proudly by the Maharaja, and within his

¹¹¹ Ibid., 80.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

court as described in this entry in the *Umdat*: “*Jamadar Khushal Singh* presented fourteen *Nihang Singhs*, well-armed and dressed with fine horses.”¹¹⁴

As we have now seen the Nihangs’ role as insiders of the Sikh court through their role in Ranjit Singh’s military, which was the most significant identifier, I want to discuss the Nihangs control over Amritsar as another indicator of their role as insiders. Within the Sikh kingdom during the reign of Ranjit Singh, there were two cities which held the central sources of power and authority. One of these was Lahore, the central site of Ranjit Singh’s court, and the other was the city of Amritsar, located only 35 miles away. More significantly, the city of Amritsar is the sight for the holiest Sikh shrine, the Harimandir Sahib. And because “Gurdwaras in many respects...function like objects, as representations of aspects of Sikh history.”¹¹⁵ the fact that the Nihangs claimed their authority over such a crucial site in connection to Sikh history and the Sikh Gurus further demonstrated their power. Though it is uncertain how exactly the Nihangs claimed authority over this sacred and significant city within the Sikh kingdom, there is no doubting that the Nihangs did assert political control over Amritsar. In 1800, shortly following Akali Phula Singh’s succession as the new Nihang leader, he moved his contingent to Amritsar, so that the Akal Takht could be looked after. Thus, from some

¹¹⁴ Suri, *Umdat*, 590.

¹¹⁵ Anne Murphy, “Materializing Sikh Pasts,” *Sikh Formations*, 1:2, 175-200 (2005) 182.

points, Phula Singh was viewed as a leader of the Amritsar Akal Takht,¹¹⁶ one of the five Sikh thrones which decides on all matters concerning Sikhism. Hence, it was one of the key, if not the key, political site. From this point on, it seems that the Akalis claimed Amritsar as their own possession, something which did not seem to be contested by Ranjit Singh or other Sikh sects. There is evidence which also suggests that the Nihangs had claimed Amritsar as their own even prior to Phula Singh, and during the time of the reign of the Nihang Misal in the latter part of the 18th century. According to Sir John Malcolm, a 19th century writer on Sikhs and Sikh history, Amritsar was particularly important for the maintenance of the Nihang Sikh sect due to its religious and political significance:

Should Amritsar cease to be a place of resort or no longer considered as the religious capital of the state in which all questions, that involve the general interest of the commonwealth, are to be decided, this formidable order [Nihangs] would at once fall from that power and consideration which they possess, to a level with other mendicants.¹¹⁷

Malcolm's observations touch on a number of important elements. First, he addresses and certainly recognizes the power which the city of Amritsar was as a site where the general Sikh population looked to for guidance. And secondly, Malcolm suggests that the

¹¹⁶ Amandeep Singh Madra and Parmjit Singh, *Sicques, Tigers, or Thieves*, 227 has an offhand reference is made to Akali Phula Singh as being the undisputed leader of the *Buddha Dal* as well as the Sikh throne of the Akal Takht.

Nihangs' connection to this powerful city is also connected to the power the sect itself attained. It seems that even Ranjit Singh recognized the Nihangs' control over Amritsar, as the allocation of donations to the city, and even more significantly, the Harimandir Sahib (the Golden Temple) was always discussed with Akali Phula Singh and his Nihangs.

All offerings were not necessarily meant to be spent on the *langar* and the work of construction. Occasionally, therefore, disputes could arise over the distribution of offerings among various individuals. This was because the Akalis had been customarily given a certain share. In January 1814, for example, the Maharaja called upon the *Akalis* and the men of Phula Singh Akalia and listened to their dispute and claims about their shares of income.¹¹⁸

This dispute between Ranjit Singh and the Akalis regarding their offerings and offerings to the Harimandir Sahib is indicative of the court's recognition of the Akalis' role in Amritsar. Another such incident which demonstrated the Nihangs' control over Amritsar occurred predominantly when European visitors came to the city. As we will see further in this chapter in terms of the Nihangs more problematic features, there were continuous tensions between the Nihangs and Europeans as the former remained suspicious of the latter. In particular, the Nihangs tended to dislike Europeans and Muslims because of their "anti-Sikh practices," and, as Malcolm explains, "they [Nihangs] were insufferable

¹¹⁷ John Malcolm, *Sketch of the Sikhs; a singular nation, who inhabit the provinces of the Penjab, situated between the rivers Jumna and Indus*, (London: J. Murray, 1812) 119-20.

to strangers for whom they entertain a contempt which they take little pains to conceal.”¹¹⁹ Indeed, the Nihangs not only controlled the more political aspects within Amritsar, they also controlled those who entered the city (in terms of their public abuses of certain people), as well as their behaviours. And because Ranjit Singh understood the Nihangs’ control of Amritsar in such a way, he was always cautious when sending European visitors to the holy city. One famous incident which I will discuss in more detail when discussing the problematic features of the Nihangs, occurred during a visit to the Harimandir Sahib by Sir Charles Metcalf and his Muslim envoy in 1809. For all those who make reference to this incident, they generally describe Amritsar as the Nihang’s territory:

As this noisy procession, with all its pomp, passed the quarters of the Akalis, or immortality of the Sikh military priests, attached to the Golden Temple, the fanatics looked upon it as an insult to their religion and their sacred city.¹²⁰

In this excerpt, the references to the Nihangs are made twice in terms of their connection and essential control over Amritsar. Even Sir Lepel Griffin, although at the same time bashing the behaviour of the Nihangs, also recognizes their control over Amritsar, as it was the location for their head quarters.

¹¹⁸ Parm Bakhshish Singh et. al, *Golden Temple*, (Patiala: Publication Bureau, 1999) 117.

¹¹⁹ Singh, *A History of Sikh Misals*, 245.

¹²⁰ Syad Muhammad Latif, *History of the Panjab: From the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Time*, (New Delhi: Eurasia Publishing House, 1964) 378.

Their insolent swagger and hatred to Europeans made them so obnoxious during the early years of the British occupation and annexation, that visits to the Temple of the Darbar Sahib at Amritsar, where the Akal Bungah formed their head-quarters, were always attended with some risk.¹²¹

Another European visitor to the Sikh court, Captain Matthews, the Deputy Commissary of Ordnance at Fatehgarh, also noted the Nihangs control over Amritsar. In his memoirs which were added to *The Asiatic Annual Register*, Captain Matthews twice makes reference to the Nihangs and Amritsar, first when observing (though an inaccurate observation) that the initiation process to become a Sikh is accomplished through the Nihangs at Amritsar:

A Sik'h wishing to become a Singh, finds no difficulty in accomplishing his proselytism. He goes to the Akalees, or priests of the sect, at Amrutsur, who ask him if he wishes to become a convert...he is given to drink a sherbet made of sugar and water, from the hand of an Akalee.¹²²

In addition to observing, and thus suggesting that only the Akalis initiated Sikhs into the Khalsa Panth at Amritsar, Captain Matthews also mentions the donation process at the Harimandir Sahib, and the Nihangs role in terms of this:

Although no person can visit the temple without paying, on the first admission, a sum of money to the priests, who divide it equally among themselves, yet they are by no means avaricious;

¹²¹ Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, 136.

¹²² Amandeep Singh Madra and Parmjit Singh, *Sicques, Tigers, or Thieves*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 229.

the monies so collected, being either expended on their personal wants, given in charity, or laid out in erecting additional buildings; and there is no instance of an akalee's accumulating money for any other purpose.¹²³

The above two extracts by an outside observer are certainly indicative that the Nihangs did hold certain privilege and power both in the city of Amritsar, but even more specifically, the holiest Sikh site of the Harimandir Sahib. Although the Nihangs' control over Amritsar may have been more self-declared, rather than being formally recognized on paper, the general consensus in 19th century Punjab seemed to be that the Nihangs did have power over this city. And since Amritsar was next only to Lahore in terms of the most powerful city within the Sikh kingdom, it is certainly significant that the Nihangs, as insiders of the court, controlled the area. Furthermore, as we have seen in terms of control over religious sites, the Nihangs' control over the holy city of Amritsar was also significant because of the Harimandir's connections to the general history of Sikhism. As such, in controlling Amritsar and the Harimandir Sahib, the Nihangs inadvertently became connected to the history of Sikhism, and of the Sikh gurus.

The third and final way I want to demonstrate the Nihangs role as members within Ranjit Singh's court is through their physical presence within Ranjit Singh's great *darbars* as seen in the paintings and artwork of the court. Much like the Mughal Emperor's of India's past, Ranjit Singh did not shy away from any elaborateness when it

¹²³

Ibid., 235.

came to his public *darbars*. The public *darbars* played an essential role within any ruling empire, beginning with some of the most famous Mughal emperors. Indeed, Europeans visiting the courts of the Mughal emperors Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, for example, were in awe when witnessing the elaborate *darbars*, in which they described the “ceremonies with sumptuous decorum and endless processions.”¹²⁴ During her visit to the Sikh court for example, Emily Eden also noted that Ranjit Singh’s *darbars* were “not like a common *darbar* for tributaries, who are dismissed in five minutes, but...lasted an hour.”¹²⁵ Although at first, the Sikhs did not seem to display quite the same etiquette as was seen with the Mughal emperors; in fact, many Europeans described the earlier Sikh *darbars* as “an embarrassment in applying a distinct term to the form of the Sikh government, which on the first view bears an appearance of aristocracy,”¹²⁶ such opinions changed when Ranjit Singh arrived as the new Sikh ruler.

For Ranjit Singh, the elaborate and lavish Sikh *darbars* provided him the perfect opportunity to display his court, generals, and advisors, to the rest of the world. In her description of Ranjit Singh’s *darbar*, Emily Eden, the sister of the Governor-General Lord Auckland, described all those in the court who were involved in the process:

G., in a gilt chair, in the centre, the six Sikh chiefs and Mr. B. at the right hand, and all the envoys, forty of them, in full dress and

¹²⁴ Jean-Marie Lafont, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002) 41.

¹²⁵ Emily Eden, *Up the Country: Letters from India*, (UK: Oxford University Press, 1930) 131.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

solemn silence, in a circle all round the room, and in the folding-doors between the two rooms a beautiful group of twelve Sikhs, who had no claim to chairs, but sat on the floor.¹²⁷

The entire *darbar* process certainly provided Ranjit Singh the opportunity to involve all members of his court. If not held during major political events, these public *darbars* were also held during private family matters such as the wedding of Prince Nao Nihal Singh in 1837, or during religious festivals. Ranjit Singh's constant display of his *darbars* is evident when looking at the entries in *Umdat-Al-Tawarikh*. Indeed, almost every other entry in the collections describes a public *darbar* being held for one reason or another. During one such *darbar* held for example, Ranjit Singh made sure it was as elaborate an experience as possible: "On the 24th of Mangh 1887 B.E. (4th February, 1831) the Maharaja arranged for a *darbar* with great pomp and show."¹²⁸ If a group of important sardars were presenting themselves to Ranjit Singh for example, it was an excuse to hold a *darbar*:

On the morning of the 16th (20th Oct. 1831 A.D) the Maharaja invited Bhai Sahibs...After that the *darbar* was arranged and all the associated and sardars presented themselves.¹²⁹

On another occasion, the arrival of a Captain Sahib provided yet another excuse for the Maharaja to hold a *darbar*: "On the 18th of the said month (29th January 1832 A.D) a

¹²⁷ Emily Eden, *Up the Country*, 131.

¹²⁸ Suri, *Umdat*, 6.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 99.

happy *Darbar* was held and the Captain Sahib was seated in a chair and interesting talks went on.”¹³⁰ On other occasions, Ranjit Singh did not require a specific reason to hold a *darbar*, as sometimes it all depended on his mood:

The Maharaja arrived at Lahore in an auspicious hour...The glorious Prince (Kharak Singh) presented himself to the Maharaja and brought two horses and a few other things, and the Maharaja felt very great pleasure at the sight of his happy face...After that the Maharaja held a *Darbar* where all the chieftains and associated presented themselves.¹³¹

There is no doubting the emphasis and importance Ranjit Singh placed on holding his *darbars*. For him, it provided an opportunity to display his court’s strength and splendour to the rest of the world; and as such, any and all of the key players to the court would take part in the lavish procedures of the *darbar*.

Not only did Ranjit Singh choose to display his great court, and its key players through the *darbars*, but he immortalized such events through artwork. It is well known that Ranjit Singh was a great patron of the arts, as he hired a number of artisans and painters to capture the essence of the *darbar*. Of the more famous painters of the court, three were Europeans, August Schoefft, G.T. Vigne, and Emily Eden. In terms of paintings of the *darbar* itself in procession, August Schoefft’s paintings are most famous as he “seems to have seen all the nobles, generals and administrators, and recorded his

¹³⁰ Ibid., 120.

¹³¹ Ibid., 145.

impressions of them in preliminary sketches while he was in Lahore.”¹³² In terms of the connection to the Nihangs, it is significant that in every portrait or painting of a *darbar* in procession, you will see the distinct figure of a quoit turbaned Nihang in sight. And as we have seen the importance that Ranjit Singh placed on his *darbars*, the Nihangs inclusion within this procession is demonstrative of their inclusion as insiders of the Sikh court. One such common painting, though the specific date is unknown, can be viewed at the Maharaja Ranjit Singh Museum in Rambagh Palace in Amritsar, Punjab. This massive portrait of the *darbar* in progress can be described as a “primitivist impressionistic sketch of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in court with the princes, nobles, generals, administrators and attendants...Each person is portrayed authentically in his own image.”¹³³ And within this portrait, amongst the many important figures in the court, can a Nihang Sikh be recognized. Indeed, the layout of each of the court figures is also significant of the general hierarchical role each player within the court had. And whereas the Maharaja is seated on the first row, all his greatest players, generals, and warriors are alongside the same row as Ranjit’s most powerful advisor, Faqir Azizuddin. Interestingly enough, amongst these players from right to left on the second row, the Nihang leader Akali Phula Singh is seated only one seat away from General Ventura.

¹³² Mulk Raj Anand et. al., *Maharaja Ranjit Singh as Patron of the Arts*, (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1981) 113.

¹³³ Ibid., 23.

In addition to the *darbar* portraits, on which we know Ranjit Singh placed such great emphasis, there are also general portraits of Ranjit Singh in meetings with his general and advisors, where once again, a Nihang is distinctly visible. One such portrait, now located at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, is a wonderful display by a painter from the Pahari area, of Ranjit Singh sitting amongst his advisors.¹³⁴ Indeed, as Ranjit Singh sits on a throne surrounded by his advisors, such a site was common as:

[i]n these gatherings, all the affairs of the state, from the from the next campaign against a rebellious chieftain, the non-payment of revenue, the grant of land to someone who has a brave deed, the making of a new gun, the laying of a garden and the sending of a message to a foreign power, were discussed.¹³⁵

And once again, seen standing behind the other seated advisors, is a Nihang Sikh general, most likely Akali Phula Singh, though none of the gatherers are identified. In another such portrait, titled “Maharaja Ranjit Singh, The Lion of Punjab, in Darbar Khas,” Ranjit Singh consults with his generals Hari Singh Nalwa and of course, Akali Phula Singh. The inclusion of Nihangs in Ranjit Singh’s *darbar* is certainly demonstrative of them as players within the court; and yet, even more convincing of the Nihangs as players within

¹³⁴ Reproduced in Sohal Lal Suri *Umdat Umdat-Ut-Tawarikh: Daftar III 1831-1839 AD*. (Chandigarh: Punjab Itihas Prakashan, 1974).

¹³⁵ Ibid., 17.

the Sikh court, are the immortalizing portraits and drawings of the Nihangs always located nearby either the Maharaja, or his closest friends and advisors.¹³⁶

* * *

After assessing the role of the Nihangs within Ranjit Singh's military, their control over the second most powerful city of Amritsar, and finally, their incorporation into the Lahore *darbars* and the encompassing portraits and paintings, it is evident that not only was this Sikh sect insiders of Ranjit Singh's court, but they were also granted great amounts of power. And yet, the power which the Nihangs exhibited as insiders of the Sikh court was no different than the power that all the other key players had within the court. What sets the Nihangs apart from all these other players however, is their duality of roles they had as players within the Sikh court and outside of the court. And as I will demonstrate in the second part of this chapter, because the Nihangs exhibited problematic characteristics in challenging Ranjit and his court as outsiders, they presented a new discourse of power which was unheard of in the court.

I began this thesis with an excerpt from W.G. Osborne in which he presented a very negative and barbaric image of the Nihangs. And although thus far, we have seen a more positive image of the Nihangs as insiders to the Sikh court, I am now going to

¹³⁶ See two examples reproduced in Mulk Raj Anand et al. *Maharaja Ranjit Singh as Patron of the Arts*. (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1981).

explore the more problematic images of the Nihangs as outsiders of the Sikh court, and explore the common British conception of them as “fanatics.” However, in presenting this dual image, it will also prove that the Nihangs were indeed a source of power rivalling that of Ranjit Singh’s and his court. In terms of the Nihangs as outsiders of the court, there are three different aspects which can be looked at: the Nihang conflicts with Europeans, the Nihang conflicts with the Sikh court, and finally, the Nihangs conflicts with Ranjit Singh directly.

I have already briefly mentioned that the Nihangs were mistrustful of all Europeans because of their anti-Sikh practices; and thus, they proved to be very troublesome figures when such Europeans came to the Sikh court. As such, of the majority of European visitors to Ranjit Singh’s court, their encounters with the Nihangs had always been negative as evidenced by their personal accounts. In his 1815 published work describing his journey to Kabul, Mountstuart Elphinstone’s views of the Nihangs were quite similar to those of Emily Eden’s. Upon encountering a group of Nihangs in 1809 as they celebrated their festival of *Holla Mohalla*, Elphinstone observed that “we could not but be struck with the rough manners, the barbarous language...of the people, among whom we were come.”¹³⁷ Though Elphinstone may have been abhorred by the loud and robust behaviours of the Nihangs, it also was likely that the Nihangs were

¹³⁷ Madra and Singh, *Sicques*, 120.

merely in a celebratory mood.¹³⁸ Other encounters between the Nihangs and Europeans, as we will see, were much more violent. One such violent encounter for example, is described by Major W.S.R Hodson in January 1849. While marching alongside his troops along the Doab area of Punjab, Hodson was confronted by a troop of Akalis on foot, and as he describes, a significant mini-battle ensued:

A party of Akhalees* (Fanatics) on foot stopped and fought us, in some instances very fiercely. One fine bold 'Nihung' beat off four sowars one after another, and kept them all at bay. I then went at him myself, fearing that he would kill one of them. He instantly rushed to me like a tiger, closed with me, yelling, 'Wah Gooroo ji,' and accompanying each shout with a terrific blow of his tulwar...I never beheld such desperation and fury in my life.

It was not *human* scarcely.¹³⁹

Of specific interest in this excerpt, is that although there seemed to have been no precursor to the assault, and despite alluding to their "fanatic" and inhuman-like behaviour, Hodson still recognized and appreciated the valiant and fighting militaristic nature of the Nihangs.

Although Leopold Von Orlich did not make any specific references to any encounters with the Nihangs' during his travels through the Sinde and Punjab areas, he does make a detailed reference to them, describing them as "acknowledge[ing] no superior governor, and merely tolerat[ing] their reigning prince, whom they traduce in every possible way,

¹³⁸ Ibid., 120. The context in which Elphinstone describes seeing the Nihangs occurred as they celebrated their "Holla Mohalla" festival, which is a Sikh festival celebrated annually at Anandpur Sahib. During the festival, the Nihangs display their skills in military through drills, demonstrations, etc.

¹³⁹ Major W.S.R Hodson, *Twelve Years of a Soldier's Life in India*, (London: Savill and Edwards, 1859) 81.

and even openly seek his life, if he opposes their views.”¹⁴⁰ Whereas Orlich did not witness the abuses of the Nihangs first hand, Osborne on the other hand, did witness the disruptive behaviour of the Sikh sect. While visiting the Sikh court, Osborne sent a member of his entourage out on a task, only to discover that the poor man had been brutally assaulted by a troop of Nihangs: “he came back covered with blood, and stripped to the skin, with the account of his having been attacked about seven miles from Lahore by a band of Akalees.”¹⁴¹ Following the signing of the Treaty of Amritsar between Ranjit Singh and the British, the Nihangs, lead by Phula Singh, in their great anger and disappointment vented their frustrations through a raid on Captain White’s camp, where the “English were infuriated at this affront to a white man and demanded the arrest of Phoola Singh.”¹⁴² However, once again, such European demands on punishing the Nihangs were fruitless because “the Akali leader was too powerful to be rounded up.”¹⁴³ In demonstrating the extent of their influence and power, the Nihangs abused any and all European dignitaries to the court without any concern or fear from punishments from the Sikh court, the Maharaja, or the Europeans themselves.

Many of the European accounts and historians make reference to the Nihangs and their leader Akali Phula Singh, in equally negative terms. Sir Lepel Griffin for example,

¹⁴⁰ Captain Leonard Von Orlich, *Travels in India, Including Sindh and the Punjab*, (Lahore: East & West Publishing Company, 1976) 164.

¹⁴¹ W.G. Osborne, *The Court and Camp of Ranjit Singh*, (Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1973) 181.

¹⁴² Rajinder Singh, “Akali Phoola Singh: The Great Warrior,” *Sikh Review*, 42-45 (March 1981) 43.

describes the Nihang battle in Multan through a different, and much more negative perspective. According to Griffin, during the battle Phula Singh and his entourage of Nihangs were more wild in their actions rather than noble and composed as they, “mad and drunk with *bhang*, led a storming party of fanatics...against the town, and with such impetuosity did they make the attack that they gained possession of some of the out works of the citadel.”¹⁴⁴ Though he acknowledges the militaristic abilities of the Nihangs, Griffin seems to attribute the skills more to the Nihangs intoxication through *bhang* rather than anything else. According to some views, even the Nihang leader Phula Singh was not a one dimensional character as he had many flaws: “The famous Phula Singh, erst an outlaw...though a robber and an outlaw, he was nevertheless a splendid soldier, and a brave and enthusiastic man.”¹⁴⁵ Even in describing the more negative qualities of Phula Singh, there is no doubting that he was also a complex character as he was a great asset to the court as a soldier despite his flaws. In a very interesting case, the European visitor to the court, William Moorcroft, describes his correspondence with Phula Singh and suggests that the latter was disloyal to the Maharaja:

I had also a message from Phular Singh, the Akali...expressing his...dissatisfaction with Ranjit Sinh, his determination to attach himself to the English, and his readiness to carry fire and sword wherever I bid him I declined the interview which he solicited,

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, 185.

¹⁴⁵ Latif, *History of the Panjab*, 43.

and recommended him to entertain more prudent and loyal purposes.¹⁴⁶

Moorcroft's admission of Phula Singh's disloyalty to Ranjit Singh can be looked at in a couple of ways. Though on the one hand, we cannot interpret Phula Singh's true intentions because as we have seen, he resented the British; therefore, it was unlikely that he would be willing to serve them with the utmost of loyalties. And on the other hand, if Phula Singh's true intentions were to betray Ranjit Singh, it demonstrated the power the Nihang leader had in willing to take such a bold step against the Sikh leader, as well as the entire court.

Throughout the *Umdat-Al-Tawarikh* as well are references made where Ranjit Singh attempts to protect his European visitors from the aggressive and disruptive behaviours of the Nihangs. During a visit by Captain Burnes to the Harimandir Sahib for example, Ranjit Singh made sure that the European was accompanied by a courtier so that the Nihangs would not cause any disturbances: "a letter was sent issued to Sardar Desa Singh that he was to make Burnes Sahib enjoy the sacred sight of *Harmandir Sahib* in how own company so that none of the *Akalis* might become a source of mischief or molestation."¹⁴⁷ In another situation, the Baron Hugel was a visitor to the Sikh court, and likewise, Ranjit Singh made sure that the Nihangs would not be a cause of any

¹⁴⁶ William Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in Hindustan*, (New Delhi: Sagar Publications, 1971) 110.

¹⁴⁷ Suri, *Umdat*, 72.

disturbances: "A letter was issued to Sardar Lehna...to give Baron Hugel Sahib Rs. 500 and 15 utensils containing sweets...to guard and protect them satisfactorily in such a way that none of the *Nihangs*...might indulge in raising shouts."¹⁴⁸ Another reference is made during the visit of Emily Eden to the court, where a number of courtiers were required to accompany her in fear of another disruption by the *Nihangs*:

Fakir Aziz-ud-din submitted that the sister of the '*Nawab*' Sahib (Miss Eden) and wife of Macnaughten Sahib wished to make a round of the bazaar of Amritsar, see the town and visit the holy *Darbar*. Presently Sardars Ajit Singh and Lehna Singh Majithia were ordered to send their associates with the ladies to the *Darbar Sahib*. They should see that none of the citizens, *Akalies* or *Nihangs* should utter any undesirable word."¹⁴⁹

With the numerous examples of the precautions made to protect Ranjit Singh's European visitors to his court from the volatile *Nihangs*, what is especially interesting is the demonstration of the power of the *Nihangs*, because although Ranjit Singh uses great measures to protect his European visitors from the Sikh sect, he does not reprimand the behaviours of the group.

One very famous incident of an encounter between the *Nihangs* and Europeans occurred when Charles Metcalfe, then just a representative of some British interests, visited the Sikh court in the year 1809. Many would argue that this incident with the *Nihangs* is what provided Charles Metcalfe his claim to fame, as he would become the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 269.

eventual acting Governor General of India in 1835. The purpose of the mission was to sign a treaty of friendship between the British and Sikh Maharaja, and on April 25th, this goal would be accomplished. However, prior to this, on February 25th, a minor battle occurred between Charles Metcalf's entourage, and a group of Nihangs. With his entourage which included a group of Muslims, Metcalfe walked past the Nihangs headquarters in the Golden Temple. And it just so happened to be that on that day, Muslims around the world were celebrating the Moharram festival. Meanwhile on the other end, Sikhs around the world were celebrating the festival of Holi. In celebration of the Moharram festival, Metcalfe's entourage were loud and robust in celebration as they were followed by musical processions. And as this excited and loud group walked past the Nihang headquarters, the latter were affronted by the behaviour they deemed as being disrespectful to the Harimandir Sahib and to their own celebrations. As such, a confrontation ensued between the Sikh Nihangs and the Muslims accompanying Metcalfe which gradually grew from verbal to physical. Although there were more casualties on the Nihang side than the European side, there is no evidence which suggests that it was due to the more advanced European skills, which was the normal orientalist argument. Even with the battle between Metcalfe's troops and the Nihangs, Ranjit could not punish the Sikh group. However, the battle did result in the signing of the Treaty of Amritsar on April 25, 1809, in which Ranjit Singh agreed not to claim the territory south of the Sutlej

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 593.

as his own; and thus, “was a grievous blow to Ranjit Singh’s dream of a unified Punjab.”¹⁵⁰

Though the sources on the British end tend to lay the entire blame of the infamous “Metcalfe” incident on the supposed fanaticism of the leader Phula Singh and his Nihangs, there also exists another side, namely, those on the side of the Nihangs. According to such popular vernacular sources, the violent incident between Metcalfe and the Nihangs could have been avoided if one Nihang’s *dastar* (turban) had not fallen to the ground as a result of an argument with a Muslim, which was a grave insult. It was only then that Phula Singh became involved and the scene worsened:

Is route gade vic ik Singh di dastār heṭhā
digg paīl Tad ih khabar akālī phulā Singh
nō pahuricī tã us dīā akhñā vic lahe
utar āiā!

During this hustle and bustle one Sikh’s turban fell down. When this news reached Akali Phula Singh, then his eyes filled with blood!¹⁵¹

Accordingly, this narrative goes on to describe Ranjit Singh’s reaction on hearing the hurtful news that a Nihangs’ turban had fell to the floor:

¹⁵⁰ Singh, *Ranjit Singh*, 94.

¹⁵¹ Baba Prem Singh, *Akali Phula Singh*, (Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, 1940) 28.

Para mossalmanā dha hutha ika Singh di dastār
di ūtharaya jāna sunake 'saera punjaba' dhae
dila nū artha rājā haūya |

But on hearing that a Singh's turban had fallen off at the hand of a Muslim. The Lion of the Punjab [Ranjit Singh]'s heart was in despair.¹⁵²

With the onset of the minor battle between Metcalfe's envoy and the Nihangs, many historians and Europeans alike used the opportunity to portray the Nihangs in certain negative lights. Some have claimed the battle to be nothing more than "an outburst of Sikh fanaticism and [of] no political significance," led by the "fierce desperado named Phula Singh."¹⁵³ And those Europeans who wrote biographies of Metcalfe have blamed the entire incident on the Sikh sect alone, whereby, they describe "[a] body of *akalis*, 'Immortals'-enthusiasts whom Ranjit used as berserks or shock troops, too infatuated to fuss about being flung away in battle-marched from the Golden Temple....and attacked the British camp."¹⁵⁴ Indeed, most European perceptions on the Metcalfe incident assert that it was the Nihangs who enforced the attack, as they "marched out of town, with drums beating and colors flying, followed by a surging rabble, intent upon the plunder of the British camp."¹⁵⁵ Others such as Griffin blamed the aggressions on the Nihangs being in a state of intoxication, in which "the Sikh soldiers of

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Latif, *History of the Panjab*, 378.

¹⁵⁴ Edward Thompson, *The Life of Charles Lord Metcalfe*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1938) 98.

¹⁵⁵ John William Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Charles, Lord Metcalfe: Late Governor-General of Canada, from unpublished letters and journals preserved by himself, his family, and friends*, (London: R. Bentley, 1854) 303.

God drew their courage more from drink and maddening drugs, than from the depths of enthusiasm which inspires the wild children of Islam.”¹⁵⁶ Despite the varied interpretations on the infamous clash between Metcalfe and the Nihangs, this incident is one of the prime examples of the claim to power which the Sikh sect demonstrated as they attacked the camp of one of the most rising stars of the British Empire.

Thus far, we have seen the problematic features of the Nihangs mainly according to European accounts, which can certainly have their own set of biases and orientalist views. On the other hand, because of the Nihangs’ great distrust and resentment for Europeans, it was more than likely that they did exhibit such violent and aggressive behaviours when confronted with these outsiders. And although the Nihangs’ audacity and boldness in confronting European visitors without any fear of the repercussions is certainly demonstrative of the power and control they had in the Sikh court, what further signifies their power is their behaviours towards the Sikh court and the Maharaja himself. As we will see, in addition to abusing Europeans as outsiders of the Sikh court, the Nihangs also abused Ranjit Singh without ever fearing the ramifications. These problematic behaviours of the Nihangs is what proves them as the ultimate power within the Sikh court, because they had access to certain powers as insiders of the court, and more so, they demonstrated their powers as outsiders of the court through their abuses.

¹⁵⁶ Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, 136.

As outsiders of the court, the Nihangs proved to be very troublesome figures for Ranjit Singh's court. Once again the *Umdat-al-Tawarikh* is proof of the many conflicts the Nihangs aroused. In some references in the *Umdat*, the Nihangs' rude attitudes are referred to: "After this the *Akali* troops came forward, and Jaimal Singh and other *Nihangs*, who rode on elephants, began to talk in rude and meaningless terms."¹⁵⁷

Another reference made to the Nihangs' loud and obnoxious-like behaviour occurred during a visit of *sardars* to the Harimandir Sahib, where "[t]he *Akalis* also gathered together in large numbers and began to raise great hue and cry abruptly...and went knocking at the door with so much severity that the proverb 'the mob are like the cattle' applied to the situation."¹⁵⁸ Not only were the Nihangs behaviour's rude within the court according to the *Umdat*; but individual Nihangs also engaged in physical battles and conflicts against the wishes of the Maharaja. In one case, a sole Nihang attacked a *vakil* of the court: "On the 20th of the said month (31st May 1831), some *Akali* Singh was reported to have attacked with sword the man of Kari Husan, *Vakil* of Shuja-ul-Mulk."¹⁵⁹

Even in this case, where a Nihang acted against the Sikh court on his own, Ranjit Singh could not do much in terms of punishment, and so he opted to relocate the Nihangs:

"Thereupon, under orders of the Maharaja, all the *Akalis* were rusticated from the triumphant troops, and Sardar Tej Singh was emphatically ordered to make them leave

¹⁵⁷ Suri, *Umdat*, 38.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 73.

for the other side of the river.”¹⁶⁰ In another instance, Ranjit Singh sought the advice of Fakir Azizuddin on who should be chosen to watch over the Nihangs’ in light of an upcoming Holi celebration: “He asked the respectable Fakir (Aziz-ud-din) which suitable chieftain they were going to appoint towards Anandpur to avoid disturbance among the *Akalis*, which was feared on account of the *Holi* days drawing near.”¹⁶¹ In the following account of yet another disturbance caused by the Nihangs in the city of Amritsar, a courtier accompanied by his horsemen attempted to “satisfactorily” punish the Sikh sect, although it proved to be ineffective overall:

News from Amritsar intimated that the *Akalis* had become a source of disturbance and disorder in the neighbourhood, whereupon Sardar Ladha Singh was appointed with one cannon and one hundred horsemen, who captured the *Akalis*, took them to task satisfactorily; but the disorder and noise of the *Nihangs* and the *Akalis* did not subside in Amritsar.”¹⁶²

And upon hearing of this disturbance, Ranjit Singh waves the issue aside and concludes that such is the behaviour of the Nihangs as claims they are nothing more “loafers and desperados and had received no share of wisdom or intelligence from God.”¹⁶³ In another entry of the *Umdat*, the author describes the potential mischief which would be caused by the Nihangs as they attempted to “raise the dust of misfortune over their heads, had left

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁶² Ibid., 400.

Amritsar to create mischief and had a sinister design to cross the river Sutlej.”¹⁶⁴ In order to halt the Nihangs’ potential for disruption once again, Ranjit Singh had to take extreme measures:

Tara Chand was appointed with 1500 strong horsemen of the camp of the orderlies, 800 horsemen of the regiment along with Bhoop Singh Attariwala with his 6 cannons to surround those mischief-makers and send a report to that effect to the Maharaja. At the same time he issued an order that no *Nihangs* should be allowed to cross the Sutlej.¹⁶⁵

Because of their power, and thus potential for creating great problems for the Sikh court, Ranjit Singh had to utilize a great amount of his own resources to put an end to the Nihangs’ disturbances.

Because of their privileged position within and without the Sikh court in terms of power figures, it was rare for Ranjit Singh to actually punish any Nihangs for their behaviour. Instead, they would be strategically manoeuvred or verbally reprimanded. Even while visiting the Sikh court, W.G. Osborne discovered the privileged position of the Nihangs’, and the inability of Ranjit Singh to punish this sect for their behaviours as he claimed, “[t]hough Runjeet Singh has considerably moderated the nuisance, he has by no means exterminated it.”¹⁶⁶ In one case for example, after a Nihang had raised mischief,

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 439.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Osborne, *The Court and Camp*, 146.

he was ordered to be expelled; however, even when punished by the Maharaja, the Nihang refused to adhere to the orders and instead chose to runaway: "Sardar Attar Singh Kalianwalia was appointed to expel Naina Singh *Nihang*, who had raised disturbance and mischief in the country of *Manjha* and Patti. On hearing the news of the appointment of the troops against him the said *Nihang* at once left for the other side of the river."¹⁶⁷ Not only did Naina Singh *Nihang* disobey the orders of the Sikh court, but Ranjit Singh now feared the repercussions from the larger Nihang troops, who could now possibly seek revenge for their fellow Nihangs' troubles: "On hearing the news of his crossing the Maharaja remarked that the *Akalis* would create mischief and disturbance in the country protect by the Sahibs, who would be driven to make a complaint against them."¹⁶⁸ In another incident, a group of Nihangs were once again creating "excitement," and when the Maharaja's troops attempted to reprimand the group, the Sikh sect simply escaped without any fear of Ranjit Singh: "On the 25th (8th Nov.1835) the Maharaja heard that great excitement had been created by the *Akalis* in the village of Sheikh and ordered the *Daroghas* and the platoons to root out the very foundations of their existence, but the *Akalis* escaped and avoided the troops of the Maharaja on their appearance."¹⁶⁹ In one interesting example of an "obedience order" administered to the Nihangs, Ranjit Singh ordered his General, Hari Singh Nalwa, to "march with two platoons and a regiment to

¹⁶⁷ Suri, *Umdat*, 174.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

prosecute the *Akalis*, who were on their way to the other side of the river Satlej and were feared to create mischief and disturbance.”¹⁷⁰ The one example of a Nihang who was somewhat severely punished, was in the case of Durga Singh Nihang, who was imprisoned for his misbehaviours; however, even with this punishment, Ranjit Singh had to protect his orders from the rebellious Nihangs:

An order was given to Khalifa Nur-ud-din, stating that Durga Singh Nihang was imprisoned in the camp of Gulu Khan only because he beat the man of *Lat* Sahib (Sir H. Fane) with something like a stick, and ordered him not to allow anybody to enter the town, and that definite and decisive order should be given at every gate of the town that, if any *Akali* would enter the town and cause any kind of inconvenience to the men of the Sahibs, Rs. 1,000 would be deducted from the salary of the gatekeeper.¹⁷¹

Interestingly enough, even Ranjit Singh’s attempts to punish a Nihang are followed with fears of the powerful Sikh sect; as such, precautions had to be made to restricting the Nihangs access nearby the prisoner. And yet, despite all his attempts to subdue the problematic aspects of the Nihangs, Ranjit Singh never administered a punishment in any severity, which would have been the easy solution when dealing with another group within the Sikh court.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 255.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 256.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 344.

If anything, the ultimate demonstration of the extent of the Nihangs power was through the physical and verbal abuses they administered to the Maharaja himself. What we have seen so far are the Nihangs' disturbances in terms of the "other" i.e., Europeans, as well as other figures and aspects within the Sikh court. However, it is also well known, and recorded by many, that the Nihangs physically and verbally abused the Maharaja himself. W.G. Osborne, for example, observed that Ranjit Singh "failed in emancipating himself from their [Nihangs'] insults and abuse."¹⁷² Osborne goes on to describe these abuses, and the extent of the power the Nihangs exhibited as "it is still a common occurrence for them, on marching past him [Ranjit Singh], to throw handfuls of musket balls at his feet, and abuse and insult him in every sort of manner."¹⁷³ Even more appalling than the Nihangs' very public abuses against him was the way in which the Maharaja responded. Rather than have the trouble makers killed or imprisoned as what would have been the case with any other abuser of the Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh instead "bears it all with the greatest coolness."¹⁷⁴ Griffin also notes the many threats and dangers the Nihangs presented to the Ranjit Singh, as he describes, "[t]hey were an unmitigated nuisance and danger during the Maharaja's reign, and more than once they attempted his life."¹⁷⁵ Other Europeans who noted not only Ranjit Singh's, but also his son Sher

¹⁷² Osborne, *The Court and Camp*, 146.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 147.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, 136.

Singh's abuse at the hands of the Nihangs included Captain Leopold Von Orlich, who described:

As we approached the Akalees, those savage hordes set up a scornful shout; some galloped out of the ranks and, with uplifted hands, abused us. His Highness [Maharaja Sher Singh] however, kept his cool and took no notice whatever, and said he was glad that they had not pelted us with mud, as they had done to men with Runjeet Singh on similar occasions.¹⁷⁶

It is certainly amazing that the Nihangs were able to not only abuse, but threaten the life of the Maharaja and his courtiers, without ever fearing any punishment as Ranjit Singh never reacted to the threats. Another well known incident which demonstrates the Nihangs great power and influence over Ranjit Singh occurred when the Nihangs witnessed the Maharaja riding on an elephant in the presence of a Muslim dancing girl. Because of this scene which was viewed as an affront, the Nihangs demanded Ranjit Singh's presence in the Akal Takht (holy throne of Sikh religious authority) at the Harimandir Sahib. Without hesitation, Ranjit Singh obeyed the orders, and awaited his trial and punishment for the "heinous" act. Although Ranjit Singh "duly confessed his guilt and the punishment of flogging was announced,"¹⁷⁷ when the time for the beating came, the Nihangs decided to withdraw the punishment due to "the high status he [Ranjit

¹⁷⁶ Captain Leopold Von Orlich, *Travels in India, including Sindh and the Punjab* Vol. 1 (Lahore: East & West Publishing Company, 1976) 229-30.

¹⁷⁷ Fauja Singh, *Ranjit Singh*, (New Delhi: Master Publishers, 1982) 15.

Singh] occupied.”¹⁷⁸ In this instance, despite the Nihangs choosing not to physically assault the Maharaja because of his high station, the fact that they had the authority to put the Sikh ruler on trial, as well as forcing “his hands...bound down at the back,”¹⁷⁹ is very clearly a demonstration of the great power this Sikh sect had.

In this chapter I have developed the overall crux of my argument, that the Nihangs were a source of power unlike any other power within the Sikh court because of their dual positions as players within and without the Sikh court. As players within the court, the Nihangs had privilege, respect and authority as members of Ranjit Singh’s famous military, as controllers of the city of Amritsar (the most religiously powerful city in the Sikh empire, and only second to Lahore), and finally, through their proud representations and incorporation in the famous Sikh *darbars* and the subsequent paintings. As players outside the Sikh court, the Nihangs further demonstrated their power in abusing and disturbing European visitors to the Sikh court, as well as being a constant disturbing presence to the Sikh court in general. But above all else, in having the authority and power to physically and verbally abuse the Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the public sphere, the Nihangs proved that they were a Sikh sect that could not be touched as they were the ultimate source of power, no matter how problematic this power proved to be.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

This thesis began with a quote from a European observer who presented the Sikh Nihang sect as nothing more than a group of lawless, violent, and abhorred peoples. In sharing such an observation, I wanted to demonstrate two things: firstly, that the Nihangs had a certain negative reputation which resonated amongst Europeans especially; and secondly, that even within this negative interpretation, the Nihangs were a unique and fascinating presence within the Sikh court in the 19th century. My hopes were that in beginning with such a negatively loaded statement, that the reader would also pose themselves the question “why?” Why were the Nihangs seen in such negative lights, and especially within the 19th century context? And clearly, there must be more to this story. And as I have attempted to demonstrate in this thesis, there is certainly much more to the story of the Nihangs.

As has been reiterated several times, it is difficult to argue against the fact that the Nihangs’ presence within the Sikh court in the 19th century was problematic. Their problematic features are most asserted when looking at them in conjuncture with the Sikh court, and the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the 19th century. Although there is no doubting that Ranjit Singh’s reputation as the “lion of Punjab” was certainly merited, as

he was able to, at such a young age, unify the many fighting Sikh *misl*s and leaders, in order to create a large and successful Sikh empire, and as we have seen, forge great intelligence systems within his own kingdom which rivalled European ones, the presence of the Nihangs however, put such hegemonic powers out of balance.

Generally, the ambiguous nature of the Nihang sect itself in terms of origin, dress, doctrine, etc., lends itself to the sect's problematic features as seen in the 19th century. However, while one might assert they are problematic in a very general social stigmatic sense, it is their role within the Sikh court more specifically which further proves their problematic nature. On the one hand, the Nihangs were active players within the Sikh court, they fought for Ranjit Singh in significant battles, they received gifts, awards, etc from the court, they were incorporated within the *darbar* settings, and they even had tentative control over the most important Sikh city only second to Lahore, Amritsar. And yet, on the other hand, the Nihangs were outsiders of the court, disturbers, trouble causers, and even violent and abusive to the Maharaja himself. So what do all these dualities suggest exactly? I would argue that such a problematic stance as a sect both "in and out" of the Sikh court makes for some fascinating discourses on the nature of power within the court.

So what comes from all of this then? According to those theories which were discussed in the beginning of this dissertation by both Hobbes and Foucault, the nature

and balances of power can certainly be altered. For example, both Hobbes and Foucault discuss the limitations which any powerful sovereignty can face, whereas “if A’s power were to be limited, then somebody would have to impose these limits upon A.”¹⁸⁰

Foucault further argues that even within the contract-power model, there are possibilities for “illegitimate” sources of power to challenge the sovereign’s power. Thus, after looking at the various roles of the Nihangs within the Sikh court, it is possible to place the Nihangs within such power theory models. In other words, the Nihangs are one such group which not only challenged the sovereign power of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the 19th century Sikh court, but they also exceeded the power of the Maharaja and the Sikh court in challenging his authority and claiming their own authority within the court. As such, the Nihangs prove Hobbes’ and Foucault’s theories on the nature of power and the possibilities for “illegitimate,” or equally powerful figures to not only challenge, but even overthrow the legitimate sovereign powers.

So now that we have seen the Nihangs power relationships within the 19th century Sikh court, what of the Nihangs with connection to other themes which are not central to my thesis, however still are significant points to think about? One such significant theme which has not been explored in this thesis for example, are the Nihangs’ understanding of themselves. Though such a theme should have been a central focus of my thesis, it is a

¹⁸⁰ Piotr Hoffman, *The Quest for Power: Hobbes, Descartes, and the Emergence of Modernity* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996) 47.

much more difficult question to ascertain. This is because even the Nihangs' understanding of themselves is problematic. The Nihangs and/or Akalis of the 21st century for example, may have very different perceptions of themselves and their history than what the primary and secondary sources explored in this thesis claim. Likewise, the term "Akali" within contemporary Sikhism is now a separate entity in itself from the term "Nihangs." Within modern Sikhism, the term Akali has heavy political connotations, due to the connections to the official Sikh party, the Shiromani Akali Dal, which was founded in the 1920's. The Shiromani Akali Dal Sikh party was forged not only to represent and protect Sikhs, but also to coincide with the Gurdwara Reform Movement which occurred in the same period from 1920-25. Often referred to as the "Akali Movement" alone, the movement which the Shiromani Akali Dal party fought for was the reformation of the management of all Sikh places of worship in India which eventually resulted in the passing of the "Sikh Gurdwaras Act."¹⁸¹ Because of the dramatic political change in connection with the use of the term "Akali," the Nihangs as we have seen throughout this dissertation became an entity in themselves and were no longer referred to as Akalis, but solely as Nihangs. Such dramatic changes over time and history from warrior traditions to purely political ones further prove that the Nihangs are part of a continuing tradition, which makes it difficult to pinpoint a one, exact tradition amongst the sect. Whereas the term "Akali" in the modern context conjures up purely political images and texts, the

¹⁸¹ Harbans Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism* Vol. I (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1995) 39-42.

term Nihangs within most contemporary contexts still conjure up traditions of the past in terms of their warrior attributes, etc. Thus, because the Nihangs are certainly a part of a unique continuing tradition, it would prove to be fruitful to assess the Nihangs' historical and contemporary understanding of themselves as a further area of inquiry.

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