

FAQIR BROTHERS: STATUS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF MUSLIM COUTIERS IN MAHARAJA RANJIT SINGH KHALSA DURBAR

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ABSTRACT

Founder of Sikh Raj, Maharaja Ranjit Singh was blessed with keen intelligence, warrior skills and foresightedness, he established complete and firm rule in over Punjab and adjoining areas at the early age of 19, then he focused on his Khalsa Darbar which was basically heterogeneous in nature. As he was a secular person, so his Darbar was decorated with different cultures and religions, process of the appointment of his courtiers was totally neutral and based on merit, regardless of religion. Many Muslim Courtiers made their name in his Darbar, but the status and contributions of Faqir Brothers were very high among all of them. The aim objective of this research paper is to highlight the all contributions and services of Faqir Brothers in the focused context of how they won the trust of Maharaja and remained as his close ally till his death. The current study is an attempt to throw light on the all aspects of Maharaja's secular Khalsa State in which skills and talent were the main traits of selecting people as courtiers and ministers. The research has mainly been conducted through primary and secondary sources including historical Government Records, Books of that era, Diaries and research papers published in various journals. Current study has tried to bring out the close connection of Maharaja and Faqir Brothers and it will also analyze the loyalty of Faqir Brothers towards Khalsa Darbar.

Keywords: Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Faqir Brothers, Sikh Raj, Khalsa Darbar, Muslim Courtiers

INTRODUCTION

Punjab, the land of five rivers is witnessed the rise and fall of many great empires, which not only changed the course of history but strategically provided firm defence to the entire sub-continent as Punjab (including the area of Khyber Pakhtunkhawa) was strategically very important place for the external and internal defence of the country. One of many great empires, the renowned Sikh empire was established by 19 years old Ranjit Singh, who was born in Gujranwala and began his career at the age of seventeenth. He inherited warfare skills from his ancestors, as his grandfather Charat Singh protected the Punjab from the invasion of Ahmed Shah Abdali and established the headquarter for defensive warfare, expanded his empire to Sialkot, Wazirabad, Rohtas and Pind Dadan Khan, he died in 1770 and Ranjit Singh's father Maha Singh extended his empire to southward and conquered Akalgarh, he died in 1790 when Ranjit Singh was only ten years old, his mother was his only guardian and she was assisted by Dewan Lakhpat Rai to manage the affairs of the misl. (Krishna, 1933) Ranjit Singh grew up illiterate but he was aspiring to build an empire, at the start of his career he faced two Afghan warriors Shah Shuja and Ahmed Shah Abdali, after years of resistance and battles finally Ranjit Singh successive attacks he became the heir of the Lahore on 6th July, 1799 and defeated Sardar Jeet Singh. It was his first important

victory, after two years, Chiniot and Kasur also made a part of his Empire. Areas around Ravi and Chenab now the property of Ranjit Singh and he had also gained the trust of local chiefs (Government Record, 1814).

His continuous conquests and consolidations made him Maharaja in 1801, formed his Durbar and issued royal proclamation in which public was ordered to call Ranjit Singh rule as Sarkar-e-Khalsa and his court as Darbar Khalsa. According to his royal orders, coins were issued in the name of Guru Nanak as Nanak-Shahai Rupees (of the Emperor Nanak). Ranjit Singh's foresight and authoritarian vision enabled the Khalsa Army to stand on modern foundations, and by 1818 a large area joined the Sikh Khalsa Darbar which included KP and Kashmir besides the present Punjab (Ram, n.d.).

Ranjit Singh was a compassionate ruler as well as secular person; he respected every religion, one of the greatest proofs of his generosity for all communities is his Khalsa Durbar which was secular in character. He believed in merit and personal traits which was the main criteria of the appointment of ministers. One of the major qualities of Ranjit Singh is that he selected the right man for the right job at the right time and he also knew that state machinery could run effectively with the collaboration of all communities on broad based harmony, so he chose one of the brilliant persons irrespective of any religion for his Khalsa Durbar. It is scholarly admitted that in Ranjit Singh's Darbar, the Hindus and Muslims hold main positions than the Sikhs. By adopting a secular approach, he not only kept his Durbar united but also expanded his kingdom from east to west and west to north (Prinsep, 1834).

Historians describes the physical appearance of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in different ways, Narendra Krishna Sinha writes that he was short and not handsome, his face had many chickenpox marks and due to smallpox in early age he lost his left eye sight. In spite of how he looked like, he is still known as Lion of the Punjab, (Shair-e-Punjab) for his bravery. (Singh, 2010) He was brilliant horseman, foresighted leader and cool thinker. His dressing was quite simple, wore turban, plain Kashmiri silk clothes and sometimes wore colourful cloths on different occasions. He often used jewelleryes especially on the visit of foreign dignitaries, wore diamonds, pearls and famous Koh-i-Noor. He liked to sit on chair or on carpet, which was criticized by some senior courtiers (Cheema & Ahmed, 2021).

His court was decorated with golden pillars along with colourful Kashmiri carpets on the floor. Yellow colour was Maharaja favourite colour so it became court colour and courtiers wore yellow silk clothes. Group of advisors was headed by Faqir Azizuddin, sat on the right side of Maharaja Ranjit Singh while Raja Dhian Singh with Army officers sat on the left side. As central institution, his durbar was supreme icon of state affairs, it was heterogeneous in nature, represented various religions and castes. Ranjit Singh's Khalsa Darbar was full of cultural diversity, Europeans, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs all had prominent positions in it (Stronge, 1999).

"The socio-political background of the Durbar was heterogeneous; one-fifth members were subjugated chiefs and their dependent relatives who were mostly Sikh misldars, Rajputs, Afghans, and Pathans. Most hailed from the families of Pathan rulers of Kasur, Multan and Jhang" (Krishna, 1933).

In Khalsa Darbar, Ministers had different religions and status. Hari Singh Nalwa was the Commander in Chief; Lehna Singh was Ranjit Singh's key advisor. Tej Singh, a Brahman Hindu was General in Khalsa Army, Khushal Singh and Dina Nath were Ministers of Administration, Hira Singh as Prime Minister, Suchet Singh as Chief Protocol Officer, Dogra Gulab Singh Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, Ghouse Khan and Elahi Bakhsh as Military Generals, Faqir Nooruddin as Home Minister and Faqir Azizuddin as Grand Advisor and Foreign Minister (Edward, 1842). All these ministers not only played a pivotal role in strengthening the Sikh Empire but in them, the status and contributions of Faqir Brothers were exemplary and the present study focuses upon the strategies and policies of Faqir brothers in Khalsa Darbar that how they won the trust of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and obtained

key positions in his Darbar? Furthermore what were the criteria of Maharaja of selecting courtiers irrespective of religion, caste and creed?

Muslim Courtiers of Khalsa Durbar

Khalsa Durbar was accompanied by ministers and advisors from various religions and casts, but the Maharaja Ranjit Singh's policies seemed very neutral, civil military recruitments were based upon purely merit basis. Appointments from grass root level to high command all reflect neutrality and merit of Maharaja. As far as nature of Darbar concerned, all ministers, generals and administrative officers spoke Punjabi, they followed Hindi and Islamic calendar and for writing official documents Persian Script was used. Freedom of adopting any profession or occupation is seen from Maharaja Reign, he respected all religions and castes, preferred high intellectuals and foresighted men for military high command from all religions, this shows that Sikh state was neutral and secular in nature and system of governing was in the iron hands of Maharaja. He participated all the religious activities hold by the people of his secular state (H, 1973).

Ranjit Singh's relation with Muslim courtiers especially in the government columns remained smooth. In 1801, Ranjit Singh made first bold decision of nominating Qazi Nazimuddin as head of all Muslims, Mufti Mahmood Shah as his advisor in matters of sales and contracts, Imam Bukhsh as head of police. Maharaja had many notable Muslim courtiers like Faqir Azizuddin, Imamuddin, Nooruddin, Chaudary Qadir Bakhsh and others. He nominated Faqir Imamuddin as a custodian of Sikh fort at Amritsar, Faqir Nooruddin was appointed as Governor of Gujrat during great part of his reign (Henry, 1892). He publically expressed his profound regards for Muslims, many times Maharaja ordered the Hafiz-e-Quran Muslims to recite Holy Quran in his Durbar and after recitation and he paid lucrative money to them (Singh, 1981). In his diary on August 25th, 1825, it is written that due to sincerity, devotion and sacrifice, Maharaja presented Khilats and property to the Muslim Qazis, Syeds, Alams, and Faqir Brothers after the annexation of Peshawar. (Government Record, 1814) Qazi Nizamuddin was appointed as religious head of all Muslims scholars and Muftis, he also decide many disputes relating to marriage and divorce. Mufti Muhammad Shahpuri and Saadullah Chishti were ordered to deal with property affairs. System of Ranjit Singh's civil administration was so good, life and property of public was secure, Cities like Lahore and Amritsar had increased in wealth, manufacturing and trade and more important people were not so anxious to migrate to British areas for the sake of good life as they had all comforts in Khalsa state (Sheikh, 2017).

Defence industry was headed largely by Muslims, Nakodar, Peshawar and Shahdarra had major ordinance factories and all state ordinance factories were under the supervision of Faqir Nooruddin and he was the sole alone in charge of them. Lepel H. Griffin describes about the strategies of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in such words:

“Ranjit Singh was a kind and liberal ruler, who did not believe in hostility and aggression, never give preference to one religion to another. He simple needed competent people to work with him, whether they were Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, he did not meddle with their religious beliefs” (Henry, 1892).

Court of Maharaja was full of all religious colours, among all courtiers', status and contributions of Faqir Brothers were up to the mark. They made their name by continuous efforts and dedication, devotion to work and keen intellectual skills led them towards government columns and their deep and close connection with Maharaja was the great proof of secularism in Khalsa state. Origin of Faqir brothers belonged to a noble family headed by Jalaluddin. It is historically proved that Jalauddin converted famous warrior Halaku Khan to Islam. Married his daughter and travelled towards Punjab and settled there, this family later adopted the title of Faqir during Maharaja Ranjit Singh reign (Waheeduddin, n.d.).

“It is narrated that one day Ranjit Singh told Azizuddin that he was very satisfied with their services and contributions, as a reward he wanted to present them a title. After consultation with Azizuddin, title of Faqir was selected, Maharaja along with title presented two precious Kashmiri shawls to Azizuddin” (Ali, 1970).

Finance department is considered backbone of the state, during Ranjit Singh reign finance and revenue departments were improved, Bhai Ram Singh was the in-charge of both departments while Bhai Gobind Ran and Faqir Azizuddin assisted him in treasury, diplomatic and foreign affairs. Important royal instructions were conveyed through Faqir Azizuddin, as he was the closest person of Maharaja, Khalsa Darbar considered him the right hand of Ranjit Singh (Syed, 2014).

Faqir Azizuddin: Right Hand of Ranjit Singh

All courtiers enjoyed high privileges and status in Khalsa Darbar, it is worth mentioning that most of the Muslim courtiers remained loyal to Maharaja till his death and his successors. Among all Muslim courtiers, Faqir brothers had unique status in Maharaja’s heart and mind. Faqir Azizuddin, Faqir Imamuddin and Faqir Nooruddin, these three brothers assisted Ranjit Singh in strengthening and expanding his Empire on smooth and firm basis. They had a very unique place in Darbar, performed the duties of Chief Counsellors and assistants. Among the Public they were considered the right hand of Maharaja but behind the scene they assisted him in state affairs. Ranjit Singh always gave value to their opinions; it seemed that their impact on Khalsa Darbar and Maharaja’s life was very broad and deep.

Among three Faqir Brothers, Azizuddin was the eldest and he was physician by profession and a student the chief physician of Lahore Lala Hakim Rai. He was very intelligent and foresighted person as he knew the seven languages including Arabic, Persian, English and French. His first meeting with Maharaja as a physician took him into the circles of Khalsa Darbar, where he was introduced as linguist and physician (Kaur, 2007). Ranjit Singh first assigned him a Jagir and appointed him as an ambassador and foreign minister. He offered multiple diplomatic assignments and performed the role of translator. On different occasions, he skilfully turned risky situations into negotiations; it was the time of 1808 when British East India Company troops were moving towards Sutlaj River in order to capture the Khalsa Kingdom. During crucial times, Azizuddin abstained Ranjit Singh from battle with British. He skilfully directed the two forces towards negotiations, finally his consultations with British remained successful and Treaty of Amritsar was signed between Sikhs and British in 1809, it marks the definite beginning of Anglo Sikh friendship. From 1809 to 1820, he attended different meetings with David Ochterloney, a British ambassador, he was also aware of his multi lingual qualities. He later appreciated his convincing speaking skill and expert planning for the development of Khalsa state. He was also assigned the duty of constructing Baradari and garden named Hazuri Bagh with fountains, walkways, and sitting places in Lahore, Azizuddin completed the task within the short span of two years (Cheema & Ahmed, 2021)

In other occasion, when he settled the Attock colonies, Faqir Azizuddin faced stiff resistance from Muslims, when he was protecting Peshawar city from the invasion of Afghan leader Dost Muhammad Khan. His ambassadorial skills took him in-front of the Afghans leader on behalf of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Dost Muhammad Khan’s companion welcomed him with shout of Kafir, but Azizuddin humbly outshone the Afghans by his persuasive speech. Dost Muhammad Khan listened and appreciated him; Faqir Azizuddin was criticized by people that being a Muslim he was favouring Infidels. Faqir Azizuddin wisely explained the purpose behind supporting Ranjit Singh by showing a letter that Dost Muhammad Khan wanted to fight for territory not for the cause of Islam. Another fine example about his neutrality about religion is, when conservative Muslims criticized him and considered him unbeliever and their criticism reached to the ears of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He called Faqir,

conversation with Faqir Azizuddin became a part of history which also upgraded the prestige of Azizuddin.

“Ranjit Singh asked him whether he favoured Hinduism or Islam. He answered; I am a man sailing along a compelling waterway. I turn my eyes towards the land; however I can recognise no distinction in either bank” (Syed, 2014).

Faqir Azizuddin was cool minded, excellent negotiator and benign person and Maharaja was fully aware from his personal qualities. He was made In-Change of foreign relations; from 1815 to 1820 he made important negotiations with the chiefs and leaders of Rajaori, Mandi and Bahawalpur. His activeness, captivating guts and perfect ministerial traits led him towards the settlement of major disputes. In 1823, he was sent to Peshawar to collect tribute. After the death of Raja Sansar Chand of Kangra in 1824, his son refused to pay tribute, in that tough time Faqir Azizuddin made him understand after a long meeting, resultantly, he paid tribute to Maharaja. In the year of 1827, he went Shimla and met Lord Amherst on behalf of Maharaja (Vigne, 1842). In 1831, Khalsa Durbar sent a delegation to meet Lord William Bentinck; imperial orders were followed by Faqir Azizuddin and Diwan Moti Ram. later on Lord met with Maharaja and Faqir Azizuddin went as translator. That meeting prompted into the shape of Tripartite Treaty of 1838. He also offered a duty of translator when Maharaja met Lord Auckland and at the end he was entitled by British intelligence as “Oracle of the Maharaja” and “masters mouthpiece” (Yasmin & Bilal, 2020).

Faqir Azizuddin was a fountain of knowledge but when Maharaja assigned him military tasks, he accepted wholeheartedly. First of all, for the strengthening of Attock fort, he made possible measures; he captured Gujrat from Shahib Singh bhangi. Faqir also conquered fort of Phillaur from Diwan Kirpa Ram furthermore he took the charges of Fateh Singh Ahluwalia’s property of Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala, Jundiala. In the absence of Maharaja especially when he went to military expeditions, he took the charges of Lahore. Maharaja Ranjit Singh made all important decisions with the consultation of Faqir Azizuddin. Especially the appointment of Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa as Governor of Kashmir was questioned by Faqir Azizuddin. He explained his argument by such words that Hari Singh is extraordinary general but as a leader he was always rude and cruel, his appointment as Khalsa representative again in Kashmir would highlight the resistance. Ranjit Singh immediately withdrew his decision and appointed another capable person for Kashmir Governorship (Singh, 2004).

Faqir Azizuddin played a vital role as personal secretary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh but he wore the dress of a Faqir and spent very simple life. His personal affiliation with Ranjit Singh was great, when Maharaja suffered paralysis attacked and he was unable to speak and see, it was only Faqir Azizuddin who could understand his orders and decisions. Sister of Lord Auckland considered Faqir Azizuddin as the comfort of Ranjit Singh. FL. P. Griffon described him in such words:

“Faqir Azizuddin was one of the ablest and the most honest of all of Ranjit Singh’s courtiers” (Griffon, 1892).

Faqir Imamuddin

Faqir Imamuddin, the most entrusted and sincere minister of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was at second number among Faqir Brothers. His strategic policies made him popular in Maharaja’s Durbar. Faqir Imamuddin was appointed on different forts to ensure the safety and defence of the Khalsa State. In 1811, Pakpattan including the territories of Nakkias was captured by Mohkam Chand. This land was given to Kharak Singh after the annexation, so Faqir Imamuddin was sent to him for framing the defence policy. He was also sent with commander Ram Singh to conquer the Hajipur Fort, they were also assigned the duties of capturing other places ruled by Nadhan Singh. After remaining successful in all prescribed missions, Faqir Immanuddin was presented Khilat by Maharaja (Syed, 2014).

After establishing peaceful rule in all over Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh constructed Gobindgarh Fort in Amritsar, it was also supervised by Faqir Imamuddin for many years. Though this fort was named after tenth Guru but its security was under the strong hand of Faqir Imamuddin, the most important Sikh stronghold. Construction of fort was very well-planned and guaranteed the protective borders. Though he was not the member of Khalsa Durbar but he had important positions in administration and Khalsa Army. Faqir Imamuddin became the governor of the surrounding areas and posted on major positions throughout Ranjit Singh reign. In the fort he was in-charge of multiple tasks e.g. royal stables, the magazines, treasury and the arsenal (Wilson, 1892).

Like Faqir Azizuddin, he also faced strong resistance and criticism by Sikh Generals, but Maharaja never heard a voice against him. He had numerous tasks to do so he usually stayed away from Khalsa Durbar but his role as correspondent is unforgettable. During 1827, in Shimla he was sent to complementary mission on the special approval of Maharaja, there he performed an active role of bridge between British East India Company and Sikh Khalsa State. Privy Council was set by Maharaja with the foremost objective of the security and stability of the Sikh Kingdom. According to Honigberger:

“The three Faqir brothers, the Prime Minister Dhian Singh and minister of Finance Dewan Dina Nath framed the triad of which the Privy Council was composed” (Krishna, 1933).

Faqir Imamuddin remained loyal till Maharaja’s death; it proves that Sikh rule with the assistance of Muslims not only strengthened but also expanded.

Faqir Nooruddin

The youngest in all Faqir Brothers, Faqir Nooruddin was employed in different jobs like public works, arsenal and commissariat matters but he was actually a royal physician. Due to his native oriented attitude and public centred approaches, Maharaja appointed him as Home Minister, almoner and royal administrator of Palaces, gardens and orchards. His duties were diverse in nature, as he was among the three guardians of the Royal Treasure, Head of stores at fort, judicial integrity keeper, a judge and chief organiser of Royal ceremonies (Syed, 2014). Faqir Nooruddin organised all the Royal events according to Royal splendour and rituals. He also supervised all the royal food at the parties and transport, when it is needed, dozens of elephants and horses had to be ready. Faqir Nooruddin also organised the Full Darbar events, Silk and Pashmina tents were fitted out, floor was decorated with precious rugs and carpets. Gifts of the visitors were also arranged by Faqir Nooruddin, overnight visitor were also accommodated as per Royal splendour (Cheema & Ahmed, 2021).

As he was appointed as Public works, so distributions of charitable gifts and grocery to the poor’s, was also selected by Faqir Nooruddin. Basically he was a physician so Maharaja made him in-charge of all dispensaries of Lahore and area nearby, especially in big cities, medicines were also distributed among people. His diverse duties made him super close to Ranjit Singh and he was revered by the Royal Family on different occasions. William Barr describes his versatile nature, pure discussion and benign behaviour in February 1839 in such nice words:

“Faqir Nooruddin was a short person, simply dressed and graceful, with an intelligence amiable cast of the countenance and the perfect gentleman in his manners” (Yasmin & Bilal, 2020).

Another exceptional duty was assigned to Faqir Nooruddin was the provision and safety of Ranjit Singh’s food. Maharaja’s food was prepared under the strict supervision of Hakim Bhishan Das but overall control was in the firm hands of Faqir Nooruddin. A regular team of 6 persons was organised to test the every food before being poured into Maharaja’s gold dishes. The food was secretly kept in the special containers and Faqir Nooruddin fastened his personal stamp on them. Maharaja Nooruddin never tasted any food, which did

not have his stamp. This shows that how much Maharaja trusted on him because whatever it is Maharaja's food or dress, Medicines or transport, ceremonies or delegations, each and everything was supervised by Faqir Nooruddin (Singh, 2010). He also had closeness to Ranjit Singh's family; especially he was very close to Prince Sher Singh. A very interesting event happened with Faqir Nooruddin, when Prince Sher Singh demanded one of Maharaja's favourite horses named Dooloo to ride without the consent of Ranjit Singh, Faqir Nooruddin did not agree so one day Prince took it from the stable and run away. When Maharaja heard this, he ordered that the prince be arrested. In that crucial time, Faqir Nooruddin supported Prince Sher Singh and explained to the Maharaja that Dooloo was taken away by his permission. Upon hearing this, the Maharaja's anger subsided; he not only revoked punishment but also granted his horse to Prince Sher Singh (Waheeduddin, n.d.). Faqir Nooruddin stayed with the Maharaja till the last days of his life, due to his truthfulness, honesty and hard work; he not only won the trust but also the heart and mind of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

CONCLUSION

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's practise of consulting important decisions with courtiers led him closure to Faqir Brothers and their honest contributions in very task enabled them to win the mighty trust of Maharaja. Their relationship begins when Ranjit Singh assumed the title of Maharaja, Ranjit Singh decorated his court with intelligent courtier's regardless of religion or race. His Khalsa Court was heterogeneous in nature and presented diverse culture. It was basically a nursery for every minister because Maharaja had laid down special rules and regulations for his courtiers, only those who were part of his court, could learn these laws and royal manners. Among the courtiers of the Maharaja, the status of Faqir brothers is the highest; Ranjit Singh himself used to honour and respects them. Faqir Brothers were known as perfect advisors and confidants of Maharaja, they performed multiple duties and services as they were at a time, a physician, ambassador, councillor, treasure, organizer, correspondent, translator, negotiators, Foreign and Home Ministers. Despite the criticism of various courtiers, Maharaja Ranjit Singh never separated them from him. On the contrary, he began to trust these brothers more than ever ignoring the criticism.

Ranjit Singh was a secular person and he only liked capable and talented persons regardless of religion, he only believed in merit and personal traits which was the main criteria of the appointment of courtiers. The presence of Faqir Brothers in Maharaja's court shows that he hired the right people for the right job at the right time. In spite of many objections by many important Hindus and Sikh courtiers, Ranjit Singh appointed them on extra important positions. Whether it was a defence matter or an administrative, court matter or royal issues, Ranjit Singh only appreciated the opinions of Faqir Brothers. They remained loyal to the Khalsa State even after the death of Maharaja in 1839 and played a key role in shaping and execution of state policies. Close association with the Faqir Brothers is a testament to how he trusted the Muslims despite being the most capable Hindus and Sikhs in his Khalsa Court and reign.

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