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European Courtiers in Lahore Darbar; Special Reference to Europeanization of Army

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Abstract

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, ambitious as he was, did not feel satisfied with the Lahore Darbar's affairs he found at the threshold of his reign. He built up a formidable armed force under his own direct control and command. All military matters, organizational, administrative, tactical and strategical, were conducted under his personal and direct supervision, with the result that his wars, as compared with those of the 18th century, were waged in an orderly and organized manner. He set up an efficient system of training and grudged neither money nor time to make his people have maximum benefit out of it. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's extensive empire, which was the product of his conquests, needed a sound system of defense. Not only he had to deal with smaller powers but also with big powers like the British and the Afghans. He had a potential threat of the British in the east and the hostile Afghans on the western border.

Keywords: Ambitious, Threshold, Formidable, Tactical, Strategical, Extensive

Maharaja Ranjit Singh had dreamed of building up a mighty power in the Punjab and the exigencies of the political situation facing him at the outset of his career led him to realize the urgency of creating a very strong force of a superior type on the most up to datelines. He had clearly recognized the dangers inherent in the traditional mode of fighting, and he now began to introduce far-reaching reforms in the composition of his army. The old system stood condemned for it relied exclusively on cavalry and numerous engagements had shown that cavalry could not bear the persistent and steady fire of guns and muskets. Many of Indian princes had adopted themselves to changing conditions, and Hyder Ali, Madhoji Sindhia and Jaswant Rao Holkar had remodeled their army on European lines. Maharaja Ranjit Singh engaged a number of European officers, who had come to India and inaugurated a new era by appointing them to positions of responsibility.

1.Consolidated Empire and Improving Military

Maharaja Ranjit Singh had consolidated his empire by the age of twenty-one. His quest for knowledge both to better his empire and his army continued unabated. A contemporary of Napoleon, he was greatly interested

in the happenings in Europe, the wars, military organizations, tactics and weaponry. His inquisitiveness, verging on impatience was geared towards improving his military arsenal and capability and thereby his military strength efficiency. Now the Maharaja now made up his mind to build up in the Punjab, powerful force well trained in European discipline, command by efficient Europeans officers except of course, the British. The entire emphasis of the Maharaja on Infantry and Artillery.

European officers namely, *Allard, Ventura, Court and Avitable*. The first two arrived in Lahore in 1822 and the last two in 1827. All of them possessed a very rich and valuable experienced of war which they had gained during the Napoleonic wars. The advent of these foreigners, writes Wade, *"has created a new era in his military organization which the benefit of European service is calculated to introduce."*

1.1 Infantry Soldiers

The infantry soldiers were considered altogether inferior to the cavalry and was in time of war, left behind to garrison forts, or to look after the women. The Maharaja changed the entire organization of the Lahore Darbar's army. He devoted particular attention to his infantry. In the beginning the Sikhs disliked the rigidity and precision of the infantry drill. They scoffed at it and called it a dance or (Rups Looluan) or dancing girls' dance. As already said, the Maharaja's tact perseverance, his great personal interest in the infantry and offers of gifts, good pay etc all combined together overcame all opposition and the infantry became the corps d'elite.

Ventura and Allard who gave main contribution in Infantry by introducing strict discipline, dress code and French words of command, a code for recruitment, regular parades and long endurance of fatigue. The infantry was the pick of the youth of the land; only the handsomest and strongest men were selected.

European officers gave special emphasis on good looks and fatigue. Osborne described,

"They are tall, rather slight but very manly looking men, with great length of limb and broad, open chests; are excellent marchers, both as regards speed and bottom, marching with cheerfulness and alacrity," for days together. They are hardly far beyond the generality of natives and seem a merry, light-hearted race of people."

The foot soldiers worked in their ranks and did everything by beat of drum. Beautifully steady on parade, they fired with great precision and regularity.

During the winter, except for head and foot gear, the men of the infantry were dressed and accout red like the British in red and blue, with different coloured regimental facings to distinguish corps as in the British service. Their jackets, called Kurtis, were made of scarlet banat or broad cloth and had white stripes of braid across the breast, while their trousers were of blue linen. The latter were rather of a loose type which did not hinder easy sitting and were sometimes also white in colour.

As a result of *Ventura and Allard's* efforts the infantry became the mainstay of the army. A traveller who saw the Punjab in 1836 says: *"The soldiers are tall, thin men with good features; they are capable of bearing the fatigue of long marches for several days in succession, so that it has become a by words that the Punjabi's have iron legs."*

The equipment of an infantry soldier somewhat resembled that of his counterpart in the company's army and consisted of a musket pouch, a cross-belt and a Toshadan or bag for storing food. The soldier cross-belt was, however, of black and not white leather, as was the case with the British Indian troops.

1.2 The Cavalry

The cavalry formed another important branch of Lahore Darbar's New army. It comprised a few regiments of *Dragoons* and *Lancers*, European drill among his cavalry men, but they looked with contempt at new

practices and refused to abandon their old methods of warfare. The cavalry received an impetus from the appointment of *Allard* in 1822 as its officer-in-charge. He not only raised its strength but also introduced the innovation of a cavalry trained and disciplined on European lines. The beginning was made with the raising of *Rajman Khas* in the very first year of his service, which is also known as the first *Dragoons*. Next year, the second *Dragoons*, also termed *Lancia* from *Lancers*, was created. Hence forward, the growth of this arm was steady and continuous upto 1828-1829 when it reached the peak of 8 rajmans.

'The trooper's dress was a red jacket, with broad facings of buff crossed in front by a pair of black belts, one of which supports a pouch, the other a bayonet round the waist, they wore a girdle, partially concealed by a sword-belt to which a Sabre with a brass hilt and leathern scabbard was suspended, before the saddle was small leathern receptacle for the butt of a carbine, which was so attached to the individual as to give it the appearance of being slung across the back. The trousers were long, of dark blue cloth, with a red stripe and their turbans of crimson silk, brought somewhat into a peak in front and ornamented in the centre with a small brass half-moon from which springs a glittering sprig about two inches in height. Their saddles were concealed by a crimson cloth edged with a border of blue and white stripes and the harness was adorned with brass studs. The officers were attired from top to toe in bright crimson silk and the merely carry a sabre attached to their person by an ornamented belt. Altogether, the appearance of the detachment was very creditable, and the men would look remarkably well if a better cloth was used for their jackets.'

1.3 The Artillery

After organizing the infantry and cavalry the Maharaja turned his attention towards the artillery. The soldiers of Lahore Darbar had no experience of heavy artillery and only knew how to use small swivel guns. The Maharaja organized a regular ordinance department and employed a number of courtier- *Illah Baksh*, *Misr Diwan Chand*, *Sardar Lehna Singh Majithia*, *General Court* and *General Gardner*, under their guidance the Maharaja's artillery became a highly organised and efficient arm of his army. It was the Maharaja's conviction that the easy victories gained by the English over numerically superior Indian army were chiefly due to their steady artillery fire, which they directed upon the ranks of the enemy. *Sardar Lehna Singh Majithia* was, an original inventor. He considerably improved the ordinance. A number of good, beautiful guns had been cast by him. The Maharaja's guns were cast in his own foundry at Lahore. The workshops were situated in Lahore, within the fort, as well as, in other parts of the town. Each gun had its own individual name and a dignified name too as *Fateh Jang* (Victorious in war), *Jang-i-Bijli* (Destroyer like lightning) etc. Some of the guns had Persian inscriptions on them, opening with *Sri Akal Sahai* or *God Our Help*. Swords, spears, matchlocks and pistols were also made in Lahore and elsewhere. Armour consisting of helmets, coats of mail, shields, breast plates and gauntlets were manufactured at various places notably Amritsar, Multan, Jammu and Srinagar. Kashmiri artisans and later on trained craftsmen under the supervision of officers like *Sardar Lehna Singh Majithia*, *Faqir- Nur-ud-Din*, *Doctor Honigberrger* and other Europeans carried on the work of casting, boring, polishing and decorating guns and pistol barrels.

The advent of Europeans was responsible for improvement in the art of founding guns, both *Court* and *Avitable* were expert in this art. They were therefore, specially charged with the supervision of arsenals and foundries. Much improvement was noticed by Capt. Burners, who says, "The guns were well cast and the carriages in good repair: they had been made in Lahore and had cost him (*Ranjit Singh*) Rs 1,000 each". There was a great deal of improvement in gun carriages as well. Baron Hugel bears testimony to the excellence of those he saw at Lahore during his visit, some of them being constructed after the English model. Even more significant improvements were affected in ammunition. The latest innovations, spherical cases and iron shrapnel were adopted. In 1833 Court introduced the *Fuze* for which he was rewarded Rs.5000.

"Court has brought his artillery and musketry to great perfection, the latter being quite as good as those of the Company with the advantage of being lighter."

The uniform of artillery men described by Lieutenant Barr which is as follows:

'The men dressed something like our own horse artillery, except that instead of helmets, they wore red turbans (the officers being Sikhs) which hang down so as to cover the back part of the neck; white trousers with long boots, black waist and cross belts; and black leather scabbard with brass ornaments.'

The French Legion (*Fauj-i-Khas*) formed the model brigade of the army and therefore required a special description. *Generals Ventura and Allard* raised it. This brigade was composed of four battalions of infantry, two regiments of cavalry and one troop of artillery comprising twenty-four guns. It was the best organized brigade of regular army. In this section of the army French terminology was used for various command. *Captian Wade* has given following description of the French Legion:

'They are dressed, armed and equipped like Raja's other regular battalions but in a neater and superior style. The four battalions wear the Sikh turbans, the colour of which is different in each battalion. The Gurkhas and Purbias wear Chakos of neat manufacture. M. Ventura put his legion through maneuvers which the corps executed with a steadiness and precision it would be difficult to excel. Their formation into close columns and their march and deployment into line were performed with such closeness and accuracy as to surprise the whole party. It was indeed impossible not to admire the high degree of perfection to which M. Ventura had brought his legion. It was in fact a show piece of the Maharaja's army, well-dressed, well-armed and well- equipped.'

According to the records, Maharaja Ranjit Singh kept largest number of troops in Lahore of all the three arms, i.e., infantry, cavalry and artillery. From there troops could be rushed to any area whenever there was needed. These facts prove that Maharaja Ranjit Singh had taken into consideration the geographical position, the dimension of the distance and the tasks of logistics and the dimension of time and its military utility for establishing his defence system.

2.1. Particular about the Essential Things Required during the Warfare

The Maharaja was very particular about the essential things required during the warfare like tents (camp), mess, boats etc. The camp lay -out of the army, like many other aspects of their military system, marked the blending of the new and the old systems. For example, describing one of Lahore Darbar's camp *Capt. Wade* says: "In the centre of the groves is the Maharaja's residence. The rest are occupied by the Sardars of the court and beyond them there are encampments of troops on all sides, consisting of the *Ghorchurras*, his principal camp of infantry of 11 battalions, several brigades of horse artillery, the corps of Messrs *Allard* and *Court*." Every unit having a mess was provided with cooks and watermen.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh gave special attention to use boats for carrying supplies, sometimes after rains the bridges were broken and boats were needed, these boats could be hired by the state. Maharaja motivated *Ventura* to prepare a Paddleboat for him, he immediately sanctioned rupees forty thousand. He accepted the challenge and manufactured the first Paddleboat for Punjab. Although *Ventura* did not spend more than two thousand rupees on it, he was rewarded with a handsome prize.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh created his kingdom with the help of his military. He maintained peace and order in the country and checked foreign invasions by it. The modernization of the military on western lines was one of the greatest achievements of Lahore Darbar. By introducing western mode of warfare with the assistance

of European courtiers he converted the Lahore Darbar's army into strong and efficient fighting machine. *"The changes were indeed radical, and it looked as if the whole of the old material was thrown into melting pot and cast into a new shape"*.

Thus, Maharaja Ranjit Singh did his efforts to make military Modernized on European style with the enrolment of European courtiers, who played a crucial role in transforming the army into well - disciplined and modern military tactics, which helped to strengthen the army's Infantry, Artillery and Cavalry, but under his direct command, was the best tool which the Maharaja devised to keep the Lahore Darbar strong, unified and peaceful.

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