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*Of Music and the Maharaja: Gender, affect, and power in Ranjit Singh's Lahore**

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Abstract

This article focuses on performing artists at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (r. 1801–39), the last fully sovereign ruler of the Punjab and leader of what is termed the Sikh empire. After Ranjit's death, his successors ruled for a mere decade before British annexation in 1849. Ranjit Singh's kingdom has been studied for the extraordinary authority it exercised over warring Sikh factions and for the strong challenge it posed to political rivals like the British. Scholarly exploration of cultural efflorescence at the Lahore court has ignored the role of performing artistes, despite a preponderance of references to them in both Persian chronicles of the Lahore court and in European travelogues of the time. I demonstrate how Ranjit Singh was partial to musicians and dancers as a class, even marrying two Muslim courtesans in the face of stiff Sikh orthodoxy. A particular focus is on Ranjit's corps of 'Amazons'—female dancers performing martial feats dressed as men—the cynosure of all eyes, especially male European, and their significance in representing the martial glory of the Sikh state. Finally, I evaluate the curious cultural misunderstandings that arose when English 'dancing' encountered Indian 'nautching', revealing how gender was the primary axis around which Indian and European male statesmen alike expressed their power. Ubiquitous in the daily routine of Ranjit and the lavish entertainments set up for visitors, musicians and female performers lay at the interstices of the Indo-European encounter, and Anglo-Sikh interactions in particular.

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Introduction

Pre-colonial Punjab—a region widely stereotyped as centre of 'folk culture' and far removed from high classical traditions—was in fact a major centre for classical performance. At the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (r. 1801–39), for example, classical musicians and dancers were prominent. Indeed, female performers, who initially were only a politically incidental presence at the Lahore court, gradually emerged as an indispensable component of Ranjit's cultural technologies of rule. This article will add to the existing literature on Ranjit Singh's court in two ways. First, it provides evidence for the flourishing patronage of the performing arts under Ranjit Singh, demonstrating how musicians and dancers were an important and affluent class at the Lahore *darbār* ('court'). Second, it establishes the political centrality of specifically female dancers in the ritual infrastructure Ranjit Singh assembled, as part of political negotiations with the British particularly, and with European visitors more generally.

Louis Fenech has recently restored attention towards the cultural and material technologies of rule that Ranjit Singh and artists at his court employed, skilfully yet subtly conveying the might of the Sikh kingdom to the British through practices of gift-giving.[1] The place of performing artistes at Ranjit Singh's court needs to be similarly examined, and not relegated to the realm of 'mere' entertainment within the quotidian routine of yet another 'native' Indian monarch. Extending analyses of the bestowal of honours and gifts in South Asia beyond commodities and honorific titles, I suggest we reassess 'performance as gift-giving' at the Sikh court, to demonstrate the powerful impact of cultural symbologies of rule and of affect in the history of early nineteenth-century Punjab.

[1] Louis Fenech, 'Ranjit Singh, the Shawl, and the Kaukab-i-Iqbāl-i Punjab', *Sikh Formations*, Vol. 11, Nos 1–2, 2015, pp. 83–107. Bernard Cohn's essays have been pioneering in connecting the bestowal of gifts and honours to state-making and assertions of power in colonial South Asia, particularly in drawing the tension between indigenous gift-giving ceremonies practised by Indian rulers and the more contractual nature of the 'modern' *darbār*s held under the British Raj. See, in particular, Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 165–209. For the wider Punjab context, see the discussion in Anne Murphy, 'Materializing Sikh Pasts', *Sikh Formations*, Vol. I, No. 2, December 2005, p. 180, and also her monograph, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, pp. 46–52.

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Ethnomusicological work on Punjabi music has studied the powerful resonance of the notion of 'affect', or the experience of emotional energy as stimulated in particular by the performative traditions of music and dance, within a wider social and political context.[2] Recent interventions on the history of emotions in South Asia also support an argument for the centrality of affect in shaping the materiality and practices of political diplomacy and the strategic relations of Ranjit Singh with the British.[3] Such a perspective, which investigates how cultural expression aids meaning making in society, has not yet been gainfully employed for a historical understanding of politics and/or culture in nineteenth-century Punjab. Here I hope to address this lacuna.

European accounts of courtesans at the Lahore *darbār* of Ranjit Singh predictably abound in negative stereotypes about the Sikh ruler's so-called 'debauched' appetites, confirming Said's classic thesis about the 'Othering' of non-Western cultures practised by Western writers.[4] From Claude Wade to Henry Lawrence, all travellers to the Lahore court wrote the 'dancing/*nautch* girl' into accounts of Ranjit's life, as a key discursive device to expose his 'profligacy'.[5] As opposed to the

[2] Janice Protopapas (Gurleen Kaur), 'Kīrtan Chauṇkī: Affect, Embodiment and Memory', *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, Vol. 7, 2011, pp. 339–364. In the context of Hindustani music, see Regula Qureshi, 'How Does Music Mean? Embodied Memories and the Politics of Affect in the Indian *sarangi*', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 27, No. 4, November 2000, pp. 805–838.

[3] Razak Khan reassesses emotions as a driving force in history, urging us to view them as 'the mediators of affective meaning producing the materiality and practices around which the idea of space coheres' instead of simply seeing them as 'after-effects of social actions'. Razak Khan, 'The Social Production of Space and Emotions in South Asia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 58, 2015, p. 612. More recently, see the special issue edited by Margrit Pernau, 'Feeling Communities: Introduction', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2017, pp. 1–20.

[4] Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin, London, 1978. While Said was more concerned with European representations of the Middle East, Islam, and Arabs, his observations have been found relevant, though with some qualification, for South Asia as well.

[5] This has been noted for most regions of South Asia. See the pioneering literature on these groups of performers, the most recent being the monographs of Margaret Walker, *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2014, pp. 61–64, 75–88, 89–98; Anna Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion*, C. Hurst and Co., London, 2013, Introduction and Chapter 1; Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012, pp. 6–110.

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supposed triviality of the female performers who function only as markers of decadence, I propose that they held a far more central role in fashioning the dynamics of court ritual at the Sikh kingdom. Ranjit Singh continued in the imperial Mughal tradition of patronizing musicians and dancers, but also extended it, by moulding a special corps of female performers as key representatives of his kingdom to external observers and dignitaries. In the nineteenth century, despite Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's singular legacy as a patron of the arts, and the institution by him of the '*Parikhana*' where many female performers were trained, there is no evidence to suggest that the last independent ruler of Awadh employed a special corps of such performers in his diplomatic and strategic relations with political rivals like the British.[6] Ranjit thus occupied a fairly unique position among his nineteenth-century contemporaries at other Indian royal courts, given that his specialized corps of female performers were not simply skilled musicians and dancers, but also occupied a vital symbolic role in the diplomatic rituals of the Sikh state.

To understand why and how Ranjit conceived of such a central role for female performers, I examine not only musicians and courtesans at the Lahore *darbār*, but also the Sikh ruler's famed courtesan wives, a manuscript on music produced in Lahore during the Maharaja's reign, and engagements with Indian music and dance of the many European visitors to Ranjit's court. A special focus is on Ranjit's corps of Amazons: female dancers dressed as men, performing martial feats, the cynosure of all eyes, especially male European, and their significance in representing the martial glory of the Sikh state. The final section investigates the curious cultural misunderstandings that arose when English 'dancing' encountered Indian '*nautch*ing', delineating how

[6] Shweta Sachdeva, 'In Search of the Tawa'if in History: Courtesans, Nautch Girls and Celebrity Entertainers in India (1720s–1920s)', PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 2008, pp. 164–171; and Richard Williams, 'Hindustani Music between Avadh and Bengal', PhD thesis, King's College London, 2014, pp. 116–123, 135. Anecdotal evidence refers to Wajid Ali Shah employing a personal bodyguard made up of 'female African warriors'; however, this bodyguard did not perform music and dance before visitors. See Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah, 1822–1887*, C. Hurst & Co., London, 2014, p. 90. Similarly, while contemporary Maratha rulers like Daulat Rao Scindia frequently held nautches for European visitors (part of a longer tradition going back to the Mughals), we do not find them positioning female performers in this particular way. See T. D. Broughton, *Letters from a Mahratta Camp During the Year 1809*, Archibald & Constable, London, 1892.

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gender was the primary axis around which Indian and European male statesmen alike expressed their power. In the process, I demonstrate how a spotlight on the performative traditions can deepen our perspective on the *political* world at the Lahore court, the focus of the bulk of historical writing on Ranjit Singh.

Cultural patronage and Punjab's first Sikh Maharaja

> Kirtan singers should also be employed, men from whom music flows as a stream, taming [even] wild animals as they flee [from the sight of men]. [The ruler] should also keep [a troupe of] dancing girls (pātrā) [as attractive as] Indra's beauties (mohanī). The kirtan singers and dancing girls should sing the praises of Sri Akal Purakh for him.
>
> (Anonymous author, *Prem Sumārag*[7])

> On the borderline between Ranjit Singh's harem and his court, between his private and his public life, there was a no man's land, a land of wine and song and dance.
>
> (Fakir Syed Waheeduddin[8])

The above quotes, separated roughly by two centuries, capture two ends of the discursive spectrum on the role of performing artists within a Sikh courtly context. The first points to ideal 'political conduct' as prescribed in an important *Rahitnāma* text (a literature genre in Sikhism detailing the Sikh 'mode of life' and strictures around ideal behaviour expected from Khalsa, or fully initiated, Sikhs), which is simultaneously regarded as the earliest available manual for Sikh rulers, the *Prem Sumārag*. This was most likely written in the years before Ranjit Singh became king.[9] Fakir Waheeduddin's account, on the other hand, is primarily an oral history

[7] W. H. McLeod (trans.), *Prem Sumārag: The Testimony of a Sanatan Sikh*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, 'The Pattern of Political Conduct', p. 91.

[8] Fakir S. Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University Patiala, 1981, p. 171.

[9] The dating of the *Prem Sumārag* is a matter of some debate among scholars. McLeod, whose translation I rely on, argues for a late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century date, certainly no later than 1815. McLeod (trans.), *Prem Sumārag*, pp. 3–6. For a fuller definition of the *Rahitnāma* genre, see Anne Murphy, 'Representations of Sikh History', in Pashaura Singh and Louis Fenech (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, pp. 97–99. In the same volume, Christopher Shackle describes these texts as 'prescriptive manuals for the Khalsa code of conduct (*rahit*)'. See Christopher Shackle, 'Survey of Literature in the Sikh Tradition', ibid., p. 117.

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based on private records of Lahore's Fakir family—whose forebears ably served the Maharaja.[10]

Analyses of cultural activity under Ranjit's reign have covered various domains like painting, textiles, jewellery, and so on,[11] but have generally overlooked the place of musicians and dancers at his court. This is surprising, since these performers are conspicuous in both the Persian chronicles produced at the Lahore *darbār* itself and also in accounts of numerous European travellers to the city. Existing literature refers obliquely to music at the court of Ranjit Singh, in a generalized acknowledgement of his patronage of the arts.[12] Most writers have only skimmed the surface when speaking about musicians and dancers at the Lahore court, with the possible exception of one brief article by B. N. Goswamy published in 1978.[13] In this, Goswamy proposes that the ubiquity of female performers at Ranjit Singh's court is proof that the performative traditions were highly evolved at the court of the Sikh ruler—a step ahead of developments in the hill states, especially the eighteenth-century court of Balwant Singh of Guler, where there is a rich visual archive on musicians and dancers, courtesy of the brilliant style of painting developing under masters like Nainsukh.[14] Bob van der Linden, in an article on pre-twentieth-century Sikh music, makes cursory mention of Ranjit Singh's famed troupe of 'Amazon' dancers.[15]

[10] Though an account mainly based on oral history, Waheeduddin's work provides us with important information on musicians and dancers not readily available elsewhere. This is hardly surprising, given the primarily oral tradition that Hindustani music has been in India and, indeed, it is difficult to construct a social history of Indian music without relying in some measure on ethnographic evidence, howsoever fragmentary it may often be.

[11] Susan Stronge (ed.), *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdom*, V&A Publications, London, 1999.

[12] Geeta Paintal's monograph on musical traditions of Punjab in Hindi and Balbir Singh Kanwal's extensive writings in Punjabi on Sikh liturgical performers and classical musicians are the only books outside the English language that discuss musicians and dancers at Ranjit's court in any detail. Geeta Paintal, *Punjāb kī Saṅgīt Paramparā*, Radha Publications, New Delhi, 1988; and B. S. Kanwal, *Panjab De Parsidh Rāgī Te Rabābī*, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2010.

[13] B. N. Goswamy, 'Those Moon-faced Singers: Music and Dance at the Royal Courts in the Panjab', *Quarterly Journal of the National Centre for Performing Arts*, Vol. 7, No. 1, March 1978, pp. 1–10.

[14] B. N. Goswamy, Andrea Kuprecht, Salima Tyebji, and Nainsukh, *Nainsukh of Guler: A Great Indian Painter from a Small Hill-State*, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2011.

[15] Bob Van Der Linden, 'Pre-twentieth-century Sikh Sacred Music: The Mughals, Courtly Patronage and Canonisation', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2001, pp. 151–152.

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Virinder Kalra's recent book again provides only a partial reference to music-making under the Punjab's most significant nineteenth-century ruler.[16] Perhaps this is because, as articulated above by Waheeduddin, musicians and female performers have been conventionally viewed as inhabiting a liminal space: the 'borderline' between Ranjit's public and private lives. It is precisely this liminal location of female performers that makes them such an interesting case study: they were well situated, in their status as 'public women', to pre-eminently constitute the image of the Lahore kingdom, while simultaneously holding a special affective place in the eyes of the ruler, on account of their artistic abilities.[17] I propose here to undertake a discursive analysis of the different perspectives on these communities across sources.

Music was a vital marker of being a learned, cultured, and respected nobleman in mid-nineteenth-century Punjab, as per the *Char Bagh-i Punjab* of Ganesh Das, an important mid-century Persian text.[18] Other manuscripts point to ample textual engagement with *raga*-based music in Punjab from at least the late seventeenth century onwards, which continued well into the early nineteenth century, illustrating the centrality of Hindustani musical knowledge in the region.[19] The early nineteenth century also saw translations into Gurmukhi of some classic

[16] Virinder Kalra, *Sacred and Secular Musics: A Postcolonial Approach*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014, pp. 58–59. To be sure, though, Kalra's work is mainly ethnographic, and not historical.

[17] On how social liminality is a defining feature of the lives of musicians, across spatial and temporal contexts, see Katherine Butler Brown (née Schofield), 'The Social Liminality of Musicians: Case Studies from Mughal India and Beyond', *Twentieth-century Music*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2007, pp. 13–49.

[18] J. S. Grewal, 'The Char Bagh-i Panjab: Socio-cultural Configuration', *Journal of Punjab Studies*, Vol. 20, Nos 1 and 2, 2013, pp. 26, 36, 46–47.

[19] Diwan Lacchiram composed the *Buddhiprakasadarpana* in 1681 in Lahore in Brajbhasha verse and Gurmukhi script; a scribal copy of this text from 1823, dating to Ranjit Singh's era, is available in the British Library. See Diwan Lachhiram, *Buddhiprakasadarpana*, British Library MSS Selfmark Or. 2765. I am grateful to Kirit James Singh, who is researching 'Gurmukhi Sources on Musicology in Nineteenth Century Punjab' for his PhD, for pointing out the correct date of this text to me. That Lachhiram was no exception is noted by O. C. Gangoly, who refers to another theorist from the Punjab, Sudarsan-acarya, who composed a Hindi treatise on music named Sangita-sudarsana. O. C. Gangoly, *Ragas and Raginis: A Pictorial & Iconographic Study of Indian Musical Modes Based on Original Sources*, Clive Press, Calcutta, 1938, p. 138. Gangoly does not offer us a date for Sudarsan-acarya's treatise.

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treatises on music such as the *Radha Govind Sangitsar*[20] and the eighteenth-century Brajbhasha text, the *Sangeet Darpan* of Harivallabh.[21]

Along with this information, Ranjit Singh's Persian correspondence during the 1830s contains several administrative orders for the maintenance of musicians through land grants in the *dharmarth* or religious and/or charitable department (for example, a musician named Kharga Das Dhadhi[22]) or grants of revenue-free wells to musicians.[23]

1. Ranjit Singh evidently continued many prevailing Mughal traditions of maintaining court musicians. The Maharaja listened to the flautist Attar Khan almost on a daily basis, given the frequency with which he is referred to in the monarch's routine[24] and, at other times, to the 'music of the bards' or the *mirāsī*s under his employ, who were known to sing songs in Persian.[25] By far the most important musician at the Lahore court was famed *dhrupad* vocalist Behram Khan, who hailed from Ambetha in Saharanpur, at the easternmost

[20] Written in the late eighteenth century by the ruler of Jaipur, Maharaja Sawai Pratap Singh of Jaipur (1776–1804). The Gurmukhi version is available at the Panjab Archives, Chandigarh, and digital editions at the Chandigarh-based Panjab Digital Library.

[21] A Braj translation (made *circa* 1653) of the original Sanskrit text by Damodara (*circa* 1600). The Gurmukhi transliteration is available at the Panjab Archives, Chandigarh, and digital editions at the Chandigarh-based Panjab Digital Library. I thank Richard David Williams for help with identifying these manuscripts.

[22] J. S. Grewal and Indu Banga (eds and trans.), *Civil and Military Affairs of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: A Study of 450 Orders in Persian*, Guru Nanak Dev University Press, Amritsar, 1987, Order Number 244, p. 153. For more stray references to musicians and dancers, see ibid., Order Numbers 49 ('Release of Two Women (Probably Dancers)'), and 287 ('Grant of a Well to the Agent of Jugni Kanchani'). The most comprehensive monograph on *dhadhis* in Punjab remains Michael Nijhawan, *Dhadi Darbar: Religion, Violence, and the Performance of Sikh History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006.

[23] Grewal and Banga (eds and trans.), *Civil and Military Affairs*, p. 146. The format and language of these land grants echo those of Mughal ones pertaining to musicians. In the context of religious grants, Anne Murphy has noted the continuity of old Mughal land-grant practices in Sikh Punjab. See Anne Murphy, *Materiality of the Sikh Past, Materiality of the Sikh Past*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, pp. 163–164.

[24] H. L. O. Garrett and G. L. Chopra, *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh, 1810–1817*, Patiala, Punjab, 1970, pp. 70, 96, 101, 186, 189.

[25] Sohan Lal Suri, *Umdat-Ut-Tawarikh, Daftar III, Chronicle of the Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh 1831–1839 A.D.*, S. Chand & Co., Delhi, 1961, pp. 22, 109–110, 689; Garrett and Chopra, *Events at the Court*, pp. 198, 200, 205. On the *mirāsī*s' facility in singing Persian, see Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, pp. 173–174.

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extremity of Punjab.[26] The Maharaja apparently awarded Behram Khan with the rather high-sounding, grandiose honorific 'Allāma Abul-Āwām-e-Arbāb-e-Ilm-e-Mousiquī, Shat-Shāstri, Svar-Gurū, Brahaspatī, Pātāl Shesh, Ākāsh-Indra, Prithvī Māndli'.[27] Interestingly, this label brings Perso-Arabic and Sanskritic terms in conjunction to grant Behram Khan the status of a highly learned man—universally applicable across both Islamic and Indic traditions.[28] Upon Ranjit's death, Khan migrated to the neighbouring Jaipur court, where he also taught several musicians, including renowned female vocalist Goki Bai—who then went on to train representatives of the Patiala lineage later in the nineteenth century. Irshad Ali Khan, the great-grandfather of twentieth-century Punjab's most accomplished classical vocalist, Us. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, and 'a famous Dhrupada singer of Kasur village'[29] also sang at the court of the 'Sher-e-Punjab'.[30] Several *kīrtankārs* or performers of Sikh liturgical music were also employed by Ranjit Singh, among them Bhai Ameera or Meeran Baksh, Ragi Mansha Singh Amritsari, and Bhai Mayya Singh, forbear of the so-called '*Nāīyāṅ dā gharānā*'

[26] Ritwik Sanyal and Richard Widdess, *Dhrupad: Tradition and Performance in Indian Music*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, pp. 105–108. See also Vilayat Hussain Khan, *Sangeetagyon Ke Sansmaran*, Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, p. 161. Many Punjab vocalists in the twentieth century trace their musical lineages back to Behram Khan. See Kalra, *Sacred and Secular Musics*, p. 104, for the world-famous twentieth-century qawwal Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's family tracing their lineage back to Behram Khan.

[27] Vilayat Hussain Khan, *Sangeetagyon Ke Sansmaran*, p. 162. This translates as 'Very Learned, Servant of the People and Lords of Musical Knowledge, Scholar of the Six Shastras, Master of Svaras, Sage-Counsellor, Serpent-King of the Underworld, Lord of the Sky, Ruler of the Earth'. The 'Shesha Nāga' or Serpent King in Hindu mythology is a companion of Lord Vishnu, and it is believed that the universe rests on one of his many thousand heads. The Shesha Nāga 'keeps his two thousand tongues engaged in singing the glories of God. He is highly learned and wise'. C. L. Dhody (trans.), *The Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa: Concise English Version*, M.D. Publications, New Delhi, 1995, p. 277.

[28] Given this information is available primarily through the oral record, it is arguable whether Ranjit actually bestowed Behram Khan with this title or in fact it is merely a gesture by which his descendants accord him respect. Either way, the distinctive honorific is both a mark of Behram Khan's artistic genius as much as Ranjit Singh's use of both Islamicate and Brahminical symbols in the crafting of a title to signify a man of learning.

[29] Amal Das Sharma, *Musicians of India: Past and Present*, Noya Prokash, Calcutta, 1993, p. 165.

[30] 'Sher-e-Punjab' or 'Lion of Punjab' is how Ranjit was, and still is, referred to in colloquial usage.

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(barbers' musical lineage) of Amritsar.[31] In short, Lahore was a key point of origin for the most important Punjab musical lineage—of Patiala—that was to later emerge in the post-1857 milieu.[32]

Music and dance were an essential component of Ranjit Singh's daily life cycle and his quotidian experience as a patriarchal monarch, evident in a snippet from his typical day:

> At 1 p.m., he rises and spends an hour in hearing a portion of the *Granth* read to him, after which he resumes his Court which lasts till the day begins to close, when he either sends for a set of dancing girls to beguile the time or secludes himself in meditation until his second repast.[33]

This 'matchbox' description, of which multiple versions exist across the record, portrays how enjoying performances by female performers was a regular component of Ranjit's everyday leisure. Recalling strictures for ideal conduct by a Sikh ruler from the *Prem Sumārag* quotation heading this section, enjoying performances by female dancers existed comfortably alongside Ranjit's identity as a practising Sikh, as per his daily practice of listening to scripture.

Locating dancing girls in an essential, quotidian part of a courtly setup contrasts widely with the jaundiced view held by most European observers, who typically regarded these performers as women of questionable character. The origins of this view can be located within an essentially Orientalist discourse on Indian monarchs found in the writings of Ranjit's colonial contemporaries—English, but also all manner of Europeans. The realm occupied by '*nautch* girls' was one where the Maharaja—otherwise widely feared and respected politically[34]—could be unabashedly criticized, and very conveniently

[31] Kanwal, *Panjab De Parsidh*, pp. 94–99.

[32] Daniel Neuman has established how the tumult of 1857 definitively shaped the *gharana* system of modern Hindustani music. Daniel Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organisation of an Artistic Tradition*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1980.

[33] From a letter dated 31 May 1831 by C. M. Wade to the secretary of the governor general. R. R. Sethi, *The Lahore Darbar: In the Light of the Correspondence of Sir C.M. Wade (1823–40)*, The Punjab Govt. Record Office Publication, Monograph No I, Simla, 1950, p. 281.

[34] On the fear and admiration Ranjit inspired among the British, as head of the last significant empire of indigenous origin, see G. S. Chhabra, *The Advanced Study in History of the Punjab: Ranjit Singh and Post Ranjit Singh Period*, Parkash Brothers, Ludhiana, 1962, p. 95; Mohamed Sheikh, *Emperor of the Five Rivers: The Life and Times of Maharajah Ranjit Singh*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2017, p. 4; and Alice Albinia, *Empires of the Indus: The Story of a River*, John Murray (Hatchette UK), London, 2008, pp. 120–121.

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labelled profligate and debauched. The French scientist, Victor Jacquemont, most succinctly expressed this general attitude toward Ranjit when he remarked: 'One knows that Orientals are debauched; but they have some shame about it. Ranjit's excesses [on the other hand] are shameless.'[35] Transylvanian physician, John Martin Honigberger, who was employed to treat the Maharaja, also believed that Ranjit's 'dark side of character, was his extreme devotedness to sensuality, spirits, and opium, by which he shortened his life'.[36] Charles Metcalfe, the British envoy who met the Maharaja in 1808–09 for important political negotiations (leading to the Treaty of Amritsar), also conveyed disgruntlement at the delay in official discussion due to Ranjit's proclivity for evenings devoted to dancing girls and drinking.[37] Based on Metcalfe's correspondence, his biographer, J. W. Kaye, characterized Ranjit as 'a prince … unrestrained by any principles of Christian rectitude or any courtesies of civilised life'.[38]

This stereotypically negative view of musicians and dancers found an echo in subsequent writings of nationalist historians.[39] Most commentators have therefore consistently referred to '*nautch* girls' as being a negative influence on the ruler. The early twentieth-century historian, A. F. M. Abdul Ali,[40] responding to the negative British caricature of Ranjit Singh, attempted to recuperate the image of the monarch, observing how '*even amidst* the pleasures of nautch-girls and shining cups of wine … Ranjit Singh preferred to converse with Sir David Ochterloney on military and commercial subjects'.[41] In current

[35] H. L. O. Garrett (trans. and ed.), *The Punjab a Hundred Years Ago: As Described by V. Jacquemont (1831) & A. Soltykoff (1842)*, Nirmal Publishers, Delhi, 1986.

[36] John Martin Honigberger, *Thirty-five Years in the East and Historical Sketches Relating to the Punjab and Cashmere*, Vol. I, R. C. Lepage & Co., Calcutta, 1852, p. 56.

[37] J. W. Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Charles, Lord Metcalfe*, Vol. I, Richard Bentley, London, 1854, p. 282.

[38] Ibid., pp. 248–249.

[39] An exception to this is Amrit Lal Nagar's largely sympathetic account of courtesans in north India, published shortly after Independence in 1947. See Amrit Lal Nagar, *Yeh Kothewalian*, Ruchika Printers, Delhi, 1958.

[40] A. F. M. Abdul Ali, *Notes on the Life and Times of Ranjit Singh*, Indian Historical Records Commission, Calcutta, 1926. Ali was later in charge of the National Archives of India from 1922 to 1938.

[41] Ibid., p. 15, emphasis added. Interestingly, here, Ranjit is speaking with Ochterlony, who, having styled himself as a 'Nawab', was greatly fond of female performers and Indian music. See William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth Century India*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2002.

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historiography, too, musicians, and especially female performers, figure solely as a narrative trope to vilify the ruler as a greatly debauched monarch; indeed, Ranjit's proclivity for dancing girls is seen as evidence for his disinterest in any other, higher, form of art.[42]

As opposed to this simplistic perspective that limits musicians and dancers to the realm of the trivial, a closer look at the record reveals their significant political import in the functioning of Ranjit's kingdom.[43] These performers occupied what was at times a surprisingly central position in the intricacies of court ritual and spectacle at the Lahore *darbār*, and were a crucial part of Ranjit's political negotiations with the British. First, however, we turn to two exceptional figures who ascended the ladder of social mobility—from being common courtesans, they acquired special status by becoming, at different points in time, Ranjit's legally wedded wives.

Ranjit Singh's courtesan wives: affect and the arts

Ranjit possessed a large harem, with of least 20 legally wedded wives, the most prominent being Sada Kaur's daughter, Mehtab Kaur, from the Kanhaiyya *misl* (clan or confederacy), and Raj Kaur, from the Nakkai *misl*.[44] These were the 'political' wives of Ranjit—women he married to firm up his strategic position as sovereign ruler of the Punjab. As

[42] Pasha Khan notes this historiographical trend in the context of the Persian Hātimnāmah literature sponsored by Ranjit. 'On the one hand, there are the historians who insist that Ranjit Singh was illiterate and uncultured, and cared only for the arts of the vintner and the nautch girl; sunk in the pleasures of wine and women, he sponsored no literature or visual art of any kind. On the other hand, there is a plethora of offhand and strained attempts to prove that various Punjabi poets received patronage from Ranjit Singh.' Pasha M. Khan, 'The Broken Spell: The Romance Genre in Late Mughal India', unpublished PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2013 p. 158.

[43] Allison Busch's recent work on poetry in the courts of medieval north and central India also details the ways in which the presence of females (as performers and otherwise) was associated with the success and abundance of a given court. For example, she discusses the *Kavipriya* (1601) of Keshavdas, which has an important section devoted to explaining the importance of courtesans to the kingdom, especially the education and accomplishments of the singer 'Pravin Ray' at the court of Raja Indrajit of Orchcha in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, pp. 39–40.

[44] This is the number provided by Amarinder Singh, *The Last Sunset: The Rise and Fall of the Lahore Durbar*, Roli Books, New Delhi, 2010. Fakir Waheduddin estimates Ranjit's harem consisted of 46 women; out of these, nine were married in the orthodox Sikh fashion,

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opposed to these alliances, the only women whom Ranjit married for purely affective reasons—that is, having fallen in love with them—were two famous Muslim courtesans from Amritsar.

His attachment to Bibi Moran (so named given 'she danced like a peacock'), the first courtesan whom he married in 1802 shortly after being crowned Maharaja, is the stuff of legend.[45] Ranjit was so enamoured of Moran that he apparently built gardens in her name,[46] and went so far as to strike 'coins or medals' in her honour, inscribed with a peacock (*mor*) in 1811.[47] Ranjit bestowed her with a revenue-free grant at Pathankot and a mosque in her name—the 'Mai Moran Masjid' was built in 1809 at Lahore.[48] It became a great centre of learning, also known as the 'School of Moran Kanchani', with eminent scholars employed to teach Arabic and Persian and lecture on *Hadīth*.[49] Moran's benevolence extended beyond Islamic institutions; once, upon being cured of apparent possession by an evil spirit by the *mahant* (priest) of the *Bhairoṅ kā Sthān* temple near Lahore, she donated to him 'a hundred cart loads of bricks and money which enabled him to build many beautiful chambers and rooms at this place'.[50]

More famously, Moran persuaded Ranjit to construct a bridge in her name, subsequently known as *Pul Kanjarī* or *Tawāi'fpul* (the Bridge of the Courtesan),[51] mentioned in the *Chār Bāgh i Punjāb*, which described the

another nine through the *chadar dalni* ceremony, and seven were courtesans. The remaining were concubines. Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, p. 165.

[45] H. R. Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*, Vol. V, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1982, p. 33.

[46] See Ganesh Das, *Char Bagh- i Punjab*, 1849 (trans. Grewal and Banga 1975), p. 116, for a reference to the gardens of Moran.

[47] J. D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*: *From the Origins of the Nation to the Battles of the Sutlej*, J. Murray, London, 1849, p. 179. See also Lepel Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1892, pp. 108–109; Khushwant Singh, *Ranjit Singh: Maharaja of the Punjab* [George Allen Unwin 1962], Penguin Books, Delhi, 2001, p. 53; and S. M. Latif, *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains*, New Imperial Press, Lahore, 1892, p. 224.

[48] Latif, *Lahore*, p. 224.

[49] See Bobby Singh Bansal, *Remnants of the Sikh Empire: Historical Sikh Monuments in India & Pakistan*, Hay House Inc., New Delhi, 2015. Also Singh, *The Last Sunset*, p. 19; and Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*, p. 527. The mosque was also known as 'Masjid-e-Tawaif'; see Sarbpreet Singh, 'The Darbar Chronicles Vol.5: The Dancing Girls of Lahore Parts I–IV', 2013/2014, https://sikhchic.com/article-detail.php?id=4775&cat=12 (accessed 29 March 2016).

[50] Latif, *Lahore*, p. 199.

[51] The *Umdat* of Suri consistently refers to the bridge as '*Tawai'fpul*', whilst it is colloquially known as '*Pul Kanjari*'. This reveals the gap between history and memory, revealing divergent attitudes to female performers, since '*tawai'f*' refers to courtesan, while '*kanjari*' refers to common dancing girl/prostitute.

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multi-purpose structure vividly as containing 'a *dharamsala*, a well, a tank, a garden and a *sarai*'[52] apart from the bridge itself. Moran was apparently quite popular with the people of Lahore and on account of her 'kind and benevolent disposition was given the affectionate title of Moran Sarkar instead of the more official one, Maharani Sahiba'.[53]

Anecdotal stories assert that, instead of first paying respects at the Golden Temple, Ranjit would usually first meet Moran, incurring the wrath of the *jāthedār* (leader) of the *Akāl Takht* ('Throne of the Timeless One' at the Golden Temple in Amritsar), Akali Phula Singh. Consequently, the Maharaja was summoned to the Akal Takht and awarded the punishment of 100 lashes, which he apparently went forth to receive valiantly.[54] Apart from Sikh opposition, Ranjit also faced tremendous hurdles for marrying Moran from within the courtesan community itself. Moran's benefactor, Mian Samdu, a wealthy Amritsar resident, apparently placed many challenges in Ranjit's way, asking him to fulfil all the rituals one had to follow before marrying a courtesan. Waheeduddin's account narrates that, in order to win the consent of Moran's father, Ranjit had to fulfil a condition:

> It was customary among the families of the courtesans in Amritsar for the bridegroom to build, light and blow ablaze with his own breath a fire in his father-in-law's house. Moran's father, boggling at the idea of marrying his daughter outside his class, made the observance of this custom a condition, *hoping that it would frighten the royal suitor away*. Ranjit Singh unhesitatingly accepted the condition.[55]

In other words, Ranjit's actions, which radically challenged the status quo, were seen warily from the perspective of Moran's community of courtesans, too. Almost three decades after the wedding to Moran, at a meeting in 1831 at Ropar with William Bentinck, the Maharaja witnessed the British governor general graciously helping his wife into a boat 'in such a way that it indicated the heartfelt affection and deep love between' them, which reminded him of Bibi Moran. Suri reports

[52] Ganesh Das also refers to the bridge: 'Pul Kanjri is a well known place on the road from Amritsar to Lahore, with a dharamsala, a well, a tank, a garden and a sarai', Grewal and Banga's (1975) translation of Ganesh Das's *Char Bagh- i Punjab*, p. 139. See also Grewal and Banga, *Civil and Military Affairs*, p. 123.

[53] Singh, *The Last Sunset*, pp. 18–19.

[54] Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*, p. 35. The story may well be anecdotal, but offers us a snapshot into popular perceptions of the Maharaja's association with Moran.

[55] Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, pp. 168–169, emphasis added.

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that he still experienced 'exactly the same kind of love and unity with her and could not prepare his mind to accept separation from her even for a moment and every moment they remain fully aware of each other's doings'.[56] Such examples are reflective of the deep affective bond he had with Moran, some 29 years after having married her. Again, as late as 1835, we find him declaring openly, though obliquely, how he thought Moran was his most beautiful wife. This statement apparently precipitated the suicide of the proud Raj Banso, hailing from a royal family from the Kangra hills and universally regarded as Ranjit's most beautiful wife, who was offended in the extreme at being compared to a former courtesan.[57]

The other courtesan whom the Maharaja married a good three decades after his marriage to Moran, and one who is again mentioned across sources, is Gul Begum. At her wedding with the Maharaja in 1832, Sohan Lal Suri informs us, 'the dancing girls, from Amritsar and Lahore were required to be present in the bungalow' and were granted Rs 7000/- as a reward.[58] After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, she apparently lived on an annual income of Rs 12,380 provided by the British government, in lieu of the forfeiture of her vast estates, until her death in 1863 at Lahore.[59] Such was her stature that, according to Fakir Waheeduddin's trove of anecdotes, 'the Maharaja often profited by her advice on complicated questions'.[60] In indigenous chronicles, therefore, we find none of the moral opprobrium reserved for Ranjit having married courtesans, so amply visible in European accounts. Honigsberger caricatured Gul Begum as irreligious and immoral, and held her responsible for provoking Ranjit's proclivity for 'oriental tricks'.[61]

In another description from the late nineteenth century, Abdul Ali informs us of a particularly distressing dream Ranjit had in 1833 (the year following his wedding to Gul Begum), which featured 'a band of Sikhs dressed in black, with dreadful features, speaking harshly to him'. A perplexed Ranjit consulted the priests who interpreted the Sikhs as

[56] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 99.

[57] Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, pp. 167–168.

[58] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, pp. 149–150.

[59] Parliamentary Papers 1864, p. 12, quoted in Nadhra Khan, 'The Secular Sikh Maharaja and His Muslim Wife, Rani Gul Bahar Begum', in Mahesh Sharma and Padma Kaimal (eds), *Indian Painting: Themes, Histories, Interpretations (Essays in Honour of B. N. Goswamy)*, Mapin, Ahmedabad, 2013, p. 248.

[60] Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, p. 168.

[61] Honigberger,, *Thirty-five Years in the East*, p. 56.

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Nihaṅg (Sikh warrior order) soldiers admonishing him for having 'relinquished the religion of the Guru' by marrying Gul Bahar and prescribed, as atonement, the performance of the *Pahul* ceremony of the Guru for a second time.[62] However, Ali tells, 'in accepting the *Pahul* it was not the intention of the Maharaja to discard Gul Bahar, the charming Nautch girl of Amritsar'.[63] This instance reveals the tension between the rigid Sikh clergy and Ranjit. Similar to the fluid moral codes practised by eighteenth-century Khalsa chiefs, for Ranjit, too, personal liberties and 'popular notions of honor and loyalty' (to use Purnima Dhavan's words) often superseded the strict religious strictures laid out in the *rahitnāmā*s.[64] This anecdote, among others, evokes the broader cultural milieu at Ranjit's court, where a greater eclecticism existed on matters of religion and doctrine.[65] Ranjit's sustained connection with these courtesan wives—despite stiff opposition—is also reflective of the largely pluralist state (despite a greater partiality toward the Sikhs and Hindus[66]) he constructed.

Ranjit's two courtesan wives thus occupied an irreplaceable position for him, both personally and also as his public consorts. This was in stark contrast to the remainder of his harem, who rarely ever appeared unveiled in public. Moran and Gul Bahar were also dearly beloved to the Maharaja, in a way that most of his other more blue-blooded wives were not, given that those marriages were mostly strategic alliances aimed at strengthening the Sikh polity. Ranjit had married both courtesans—for affective reasons—but also given his partiality for their talent as musicians and dancers. We now turn to the condition of these performers as a class during Ranjit's reign.

[62] Ali describes the Pahul ceremony as follows: 'The novice, who must have reached the age of discrimination, stands with his hands joined in supplication and repeats after the priest the articles of his faith. Some sugar and water are stirred in a vessel with a double-edged dagger and the water is sprinkled on his face and person; he drinks the remainder and exclaims "Wah Guru" which completes the ceremony.' 'The Punjab and North-west Frontier of India' by An Old Punjabi, 1878, p. 12. Ali, *Notes on the Life and Times*, p. 15.

[63] Ibid., emphasis added.

[64] Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699–1799*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, pp. 138–139.

[65] While a follower of Sikhism, Ranjit celebrated the festivals Holi, Basant, and Dassehra with great splendour. Anil Sethi, 'The Creation of Religious Identities in the Punjab, c. 1850–1920', unpublished PhD dissertation, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 60–62.

[66] Rajmohan Gandhi, *Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten*, Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 158–160.

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Female performers at the heart of the Punjab–Europe encounter

Why should a Raja be instructed to retain dancing girls? [One of their functions should be] to expose to temptation any who come wearing the garb of ascetic renunciation—any *yogi*, *digambar* or *sanyasi*, any *bairagi*, *pir* or *udasi*. This they should do by proffering wealth, tasty food, perfume, and fine clothing. He who succumbs should be told: 'Bogus ascetic! You are still in bondage to your base instincts …. Resume the life of a householder and find yourself a job.' He who does not succumb should be treated with [respect and] affection.

(*Prem Sumārag*, 'The Pattern of Political Conduct', p. 91)

The *Prem Sumārag*, with its emphasis on the examined life, views the utility of female performers—for the ideal Sikh ruler—within a *strictly* austere framework. However, Ranjit was far from ideal. His life story clearly illustrates how female performers held a special status at his court and were employed for purposes of entertainment, and not simply to expose bogus ascetics alone.[67] Ranjit Singh's partiality to musicians and female performers was reflected in his attention to them as a group, ensuring their material requirements were met. He displayed a keen interest in their lives: attending the wedding of the son of a courtesan,[68] generously distributing Benares *dupaṭṭā*s during the holy month of Ramazan,[69] and ensuring they received handsome salaries. The evidence thus clearly points to Ranjit's consistent encouragement and patronage of performers as a group.[70] Female dancers were accomplished artistes at Ranjit's

[67] Nonetheless, Ranjit often did utilize, rather playfully, the courtesan's charms to test the endurance and self-control of men, be they European travellers like the French mercenary, August Court, or his own courtiers, Fakir Nuruddin and Azeezuddin. See H. L. O. Garrett (trans. and ed.), *The Punjab a Hundred Years Ago As Described By V. Jacquemont & A. Soltykoff*, (Patiala): Languages Dept., Punjab, 1971, Reprinted 1986, p. 45; and Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, pp. 173–174.

[68] This was in 1811. Garrett and Chopra, *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh*, p. 30.

[69] Ibid., p. 278.

[70] However, Ranjit's Lahore also had a hefty red-light district at Hira Mandi, with several women caught in the nets of an exploitative industry, as per Anshu Malhotra's work on female poetess, and originally 'Muslim prostitute' Piro, who went on to join the Gulabdasi sect of Sikhism. The Lahore chapter of Piro's story displays the familiar strand of conventional narratives on female performers in early nineteenth-century Punjab, which conflates the category 'courtesan' or '*tawa'if*' with 'prostitute', since the terms used by contemporaries to refer to Piro were *kasbi*, *ganka*, *besya*, *randi*, *kanchani*, and *kanjari*. See Anshu Malhotra, 'Performing a Persona: Reading Piro's Kafis', in Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (eds), *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance and Autobiography in South Asia*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2015, p. 210;

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court; we find references in the *Umdat* to them playing on the *sāraṅgī*[71] and also to performing a range of dances. Then, there is the sheer ubiquity of female performers at his *darbār*, many of whom are often mentioned by name, such as Dhanno, Nabbo, Kaulan, Khairān, Bannoo, Pahro, and Bahari.[72]

Female performers also hailed from diverse regions and sang in a range of languages, including Punjabi, Persian, Urdu, and Kashmiri. Performers employed by Ranjit Singh were a prosperous class, bestowed with land grants, all the more remarkable when compared to the condition of their associates elsewhere in the Punjab, especially regions outside his realm. During his long career, the monarch had different favourites. Waheeduddin refers to a certain 'Bashiran', a special favourite of the Maharaja, possessing 'musical talent of a high order and her *forte* was singing *ghazals* from the Diwan of Hafiz'. She apparently had a *jāgīr* of Rs 8,000 a year bestowed upon her—double that given to other girls.[73] One of the Maharaja's favourite dancers, Kaulan 'The Lotus', was the owner of seven good villages.[74] In a latter-day account, Baron Hügel noted how dancing girls in the Sikh kingdom are 'always carried about in *Garis*, or covered vehicles drawn by oxen, and usually escorted by a party of armed police who are paid for fear of them being robbed of costly jewels'.[75] In contrast, according to Victor Jacquemont, female performers in Ludhiana in British Punjab were very poorly paid, 'Rs. 2 being considered good pay for two of them, assisted by six musicians' in 1831.[76]

Music and dance by female performers constituted a crucial aspect of Ranjit's quotidian life, pointing to his serious and very pro-active

Anshu Malhotra, 'Bhakti and the Gendered Self: A Courtesan and a Consort in Mid Nineteenth Century Punjab', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 6, November 2012, pp. 1506–1539. The Persian sources analysed here use the term '*tawa'if*' and the more esteemed '*kanchani*' rather than the clearly derogatory '*kanjari*' to refer to female performers, offering us a more fine-grained picture of courtesans' social position in early nineteenth-century Punjab.

[71] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 336.

[72] Ibid., pp. 218, 322, 562, 570, 574.

[73] Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, p. 173.

[74] W. G. Osborne, *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing: With an Introductory Sketch of the Origin and Rise of the Sikh State*, Henry Colburn, London, 1840, p. 95.

[75] Baron Hügel (trans. and ed.), *Travels in Kashmir and the Panjab, Containing a Particular Account of the Government and Character of the Sikhs*, T. B. Jervis, London, 1845, p. 311.

[76] See Garrett (trans. and ed.), *The Punjab a Hundred Years Ago As Described By V. Jacquemont & A. Soltykoff*, p. 21.

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connoisseurship of the arts of the performative traditions. This has been demonstrated in the account of Fakir Waheeduddin, the direct descendant of Fakir Azeezuddin and Nuruddin, who were employed at the Sikh court.[77] Contrary to the typical European view, these performances are portrayed by Waheeduddin as 'sober and dignified' affairs during which, often enough, Ranjit 'conducted state business'.[78] Waheeduddin's is a rare memoir that offers a modicum of respectability to female performers, recognizing their crucial role in the state apparatus, in an alternative to the eager reductionism of Western writers:

> [T]hey mostly came from professional families with *generations of training* behind them to perform in royal courts and aristocratic assemblies and *a rigorous code of etiquette* of their own to observe …. Western visitors, unfamiliar with the oriental institution of singing and dancing girls, seem to have allowed their imagination to be led astray by occasional departures from traditional observances.[79]

The rigorous professional acumen of female performers in Ranjit's Lahore is corroborated by the account of Austrian traveller and diplomat, Baron Hugel—who supplies us with an objective perspective, atypical and exceptional when compared with other European writers. Hugel notes that, at Lahore, 'the lavish profusion consequent upon the residence of a court causes their art to be more valued and better paid for'. Besides, he contrasts the distressing condition of Calcutta's dancing girls (sometimes 'stolen children or slaves') with those in Lahore, where 'education for their profession usually begins at five years old, and requires an apprenticeship of nine years to perfect them in the song and dance'.[80]

Female performers were thus a well-regarded professional guild in early nineteenth-century Lahore and played an essential part in Ranjit's crafting of distinctive state rituals, symbolizing his power to outsiders. He particularly employed them to good use in his interaction with the increasingly frequent European travellers to his court. Even prior to the establishment of Ranjit's *darbār*, Western travellers to late eighteenth-century Punjab, like the Englishman George Forster, remarked upon the 'great estimation' in which courtesans from the region were held'.[81]

[77] Waheeduddin, *The Real Ranjit Singh*, p. 171.

[78] Ibid., p. 172.

[79] Ibid., emphasis added.

[80] Hügel (trans. and ed.), *Travels*, p. 344.

[81] George Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England, through the Northern Part of India, Kashmire, Afghanistan, and Persia, and into Russia, by the Caspian Sea*, R. Faulder, London, 1798, p. 250.

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While we do find a note of caution toward courtesans in indigenous accounts such as those of Mohan Lal Kashmiri,[82] Ganesh Das, or indeed, in the orthodox attitude of the Akalis and in manuals for ideal conduct of Khalsa Sikhs (the references above to *Prem Sumārag*), these are largely stray references. Conversely, the consistently censorious note toward courtesans found in European writing on Ranjit was of a different order, given its origin in contemporary European anxieties around gendered social interaction.[83] In the words of Sara Suleri, the European 'will to cultural description' was actually a device to control the apparent threat of India to European identity.[84] To a certain extent, then, we could dismiss these European accounts of female performers altogether, as simply another version of the trope of exoticized Indian women viewed through a specifically European 'male gaze', replete with Orientalist imagery of them being sensual and alluring creatures. Despite the speculative, fragmentary, and pejorative nature of textual evidence gleaned from these conventionally 'Orientalist' accounts, they do help us retrieve, albeit partially, a measure of autonomy for these performers. Read against the grain, they offer a variety of insights unavailable in other accounts of the period.[85]

Most European travellers express wonder at the different gendered norms at the Lahore court, especially at the regular offers made by Ranjit to the travellers—that they be 'gifted' with the women they liked. It is indeed curious that *male* musicians and performers were not exhibited as frequently before a European audience, which begs the question as to whether this was a conscious choice on Ranjit's behalf, if only out of a deference to European tastes.[86] Again, older, female musicians also existed at Ranjit Singh's court, but the reaction of

[82] Mohan Lal, *Travels in the Panjab, Afghanistan, & Turkistan, to Balk, Bokhara and Heart, and a Visit to Great Britain and Germany*, H. Allen & Co., London, 1846, p. 14.

[83] Kate Telstcher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing On India 1600–1800*, Oxford India Paperbacks, Delhi, 1997. See also Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon (eds), *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s: Portrayal of the East*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007.

[84] Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1992, pp. 2–6.

[85] As an example of this methodology, see Katherine Butler Brown, 'Reading Indian Music: The Interpretation of Seventeenth-century European Travel-writing in the (Re) construction of Indian Music History', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2000, pp. 1–34.

[86] The generalized disdain toward female performers and musicians also stemmed in great part from the vast unfamiliarity of the Indian cultural landscape, encountered for the very first time by the bulk of European visitors. Given that musical norms of the

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W. G. Osborne, Military Secretary to the Governor General of India, was typical of most European commentators encountering Indian music for the first time:

The Maharajah sent us in the evening a new set of dancing girls, *as they were called*, though they turned out to be twelve of the ugliest old women I ever saw, and who were highly indignant at being sent away *on account of their looks* without being permitted to *display their talents in screaming*.[87]

Evidently, where the music of India failed to woo foreign travellers, the dancing was quite another matter. When confronted with musicians and singing per se, the French traveller, Jacquemont, was put off by Indian music, yet he was deeply taken in by the dancing of the various groups of female dancers he encountered on his travels, even at times labelling them as superior to ballet performers back home.[88] Most European commentators liberally voiced their dissatisfaction with the music of India, while simultaneously declaring their preference for the dancers. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that most commentators were male and amenable to being favourably impressed by female dancers.[89] Could we then surmise that it was perhaps this strain of appreciation and relative approval from the Europeans for female dancers (vis-à-vis musicians) that accounts for Ranjit Singh's eagerness (in a peculiarly patriarchal logic) to exhibit his female performers to them? At any rate, this does explain the absence, in most accounts, of descriptions of female *musicians* alone, as opposed to the ample references to female *dancers*.

Courtesans emerged as a prominent feature of the courtly setup, largely viewed in a benevolent way in the writings produced by those closest to Ranjit, such as his court chronicler, Sohan Lal Suri. Indeed, they were an important marker of Ranjit's power and sovereignty to the outside world. For example, at the end of a certain performance by musicians in 1831 during the visit of William Bentinck, Suri, author of the

European way differed vastly from the Indian aesthetic, we usually encounter negative appraisals of Indian music.

[87] Osborne, *The Court and Camp*, p. 154, emphasis added.

[88] Victor Jacquemont, *Letters from India: Describing a Journey in the British Dominions of India, Tibet, Lahore and Cashmere during 1828–31*, Vol. II, E. Churton, London, 1834, pp. 85–86.

[89] In the late eighteenth century, Sofia Plowden (of 'Hindostannie Airs' fame) noted how European men regarded physical beauty as a primary consideration in the evaluation of singing women, as opposed to their musical talents alone. Ian Woodfield, *Music of the Raj: A Social and Economic History of Music in Late Eighteenth-century Anglo-Indian Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 155.

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invaluable official Persian chronicle of the Lahore court, the *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*, tells us:

> and the clever singers made it clear in their most pleasant mood that they could make the audience like pictures on the wall by making them listen with one slowly developing, charming tune of theirs and could lay open the doors of happiness, success and pleasure. The dust of ill-will and tiresomeness and the rust of worry and anxiety got erased from the hearts of the world and its people .... The combination of Jupiter and Venus took place in the Zodiacal sign of Pisces and fruits of happiness were put forth in the garden of joy.[90]

The emphasis on planetary bodies above recalls Katherine Butler Schofield's work on the connections established, during Mughal times, between Indic and Persianate traditions of astrology and medicine in attributing supernatural powers to *raga* music.[91] Further, Ranjit's biographies universally note his obsessive interest in medicine, across Indic, Islamic, and Western traditions. Such an outlook on the power of music and the performing arts, then, explains why, after every political negotiation and situation of intrigue, similar references to the 'music of the bards' and the performance of state-employed courtesans are ubiquitous.

The consistency with which these examples are found in the chronicles reflects how music and its impact—in very palpable terms of soothing listeners, but also building unity and goodwill—were recognized as critical, even auspicious, in ensuring the favourable outcome of political negotiations. In 1838, Ranjit again issued an order which insists that only dancing girls 'who were especially good in singing, should be selected' to perform before Lord Auckland, the then governor general. A couple of years before this, we even find Auckland's predecessor, Bentinck, bringing along his own troupe of 'Hindustani dancing girls', on whom the Maharaja generously bestowed Rs 1,000 at the end of a performance.[92] Interestingly, this is part of a longer genealogy of British officials employing their own *nautch* sets, beginning with Warren

[90] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 88.

[91] Katherine Butler Brown (neé Schofield), 'Hindustani Music in the Time of Aurangzeb', unpublished PhD dissertation, 2004, SOAS, University of London, pp. 188, 197–198, 224. This was also evident in the nineteenth century; see the treatise of Muhammad Karam Imam, *Madan-al-Mosiqui*, reprint Hindustani Press, Lucknow, 1925.

[92] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 88; also p. 92; 1831: 'In the meantime Hindustani dancing girls from the troops of the "Nawab" Sahib (the G.-G.) came up for presenting themselves to the Maharaja. The Maharaja, out of great kindness, called those dancing girls before himself and gave them Rs. 200 by way of reward.'

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Hastings.[93] Indeed, in the pre-1857 era, *nautch*-es, according to Peter Manuel, 'are depicted in several paintings of the era, and … were often … even sponsored by British officers'.[94]

The importance attached to musicians and dancers by Ranjit was recognized by his political opponents as well. Apart from being conversant in Punjabi and Persian, one of the important ways in which Captain C. M. Wade, the English Political Agent to the Governor General, managed to ingratiate himself with and win the confidence of Ranjit Singh was through an appreciation of his female performers.[95] In 1831, Wade rewarded two favourites of the Maharaja—the performers Dhanno and Nabbo—with the princely sum of Rs 550 each. There were no doubt countless unrecorded instances of the same.[96] If he was to gain any success with the Sikh monarch, Wade shrewdly recognized that he needed to show proof of his interest in the performers closest to the king. Similarly, in 1836, one of Begum Sumroo's musicians, M. Antoine, entreated Ranjit Singh 'to take him and the Begum's band of musicians and the other Indian Officers of her disbanded troops into his service'.[97] This is a good example encapsulating the great importance Ranjit attached to his musicians (apart from the obvious value he attached to military troops)—so much so that this was seen as a good enough bribe by Begum Sumroo to lure the Sikh sovereign away from the British. Alas, he decided to consult the British on the matter, rather than accepting the said band of musicians! That Ranjit instituted a Western-style band is corroborated by the English journalist, Joachim H. Stocquelor, who approvingly notes the way in which 'bands of music, *uncommonly well trained*, played our national anthem, and loud clarions proclaimed the glory of the Maharajah' at a function hosted by Ranjit Singh in honour of William Bentinck.[98] More broadly, this instance reveals how Ranjit set great store by the intricacies of ritual pomp and splendour, ensuring that his

[93] Woodfield, *Music of the Raj*, p. 155.

[94] Peter Manuel, 'Music in Lucknow's Gilded Age', in Stephen Markel et al. (eds), *India's Fabled City: The Art of Courtly Lucknow*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York and Los Angeles, 2010, p. 247.

[95] Ali, *Notes on the Life and Times*, p. 15.

[96] For yet another example, see Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 42.

[97] Ali, *Notes on the Life and Times*, p. 15.

[98] J. H. Stocquelor, *Memorials of Affghanistan between the Years 1838 and 1842*, Peshawar, Calcutta, 1843, quoted in Henry Steinbach, *The Punjaub; Being a Brief Account of The Country of the Sikhs; Its Extent, Hisory, Commerce, Productions, Government, Manufactures, Laws, Religion, etc.*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1845, p. 114, emphasis added. Ranjit's desire

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personal musical band could play the English national anthem, so as to impress Bentinck. The prominent art historian, B. N. Goswamy, asserted almost four decades ago that, under Ranjit Singh, the *nautch* 'became a standard ingredient of state entertainment'.[99] I would go further and argue below how, with the passage of time, it in fact became an *indispensable* part of such entertainment.

The 'Amazonian' dancers: cultural sovereignty and the Sikh state

The call of the bugle and the beat of the drum sounded and resounded over the waves of the Sutlej. Their melody carried the message of good-neighbourliness and friendship across the river to the other bank to a monarch being regaled by the notes of Shahnai and the jingling footsteps of dancing girls.

(Kartar Singh Duggal, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh, The Last to Lay Arms*, pp. 101–102)

Employing female performers especially for purposes of entertainment and spectacle was a way of extending hospitality to the British and the Europeans more generally—part of a larger tradition spread more widely across India.[100] However, in Ranjit's Lahore, female performers emerged as the foremost way to display the sovereignty of the Sikh kingdom particularly to favoured European visitors, especially British rivals. With the passage of time, and the consolidation of the Sikh state, Ranjit Singh felt the need to create a band of performers who could formally embody the martial glory of the increasingly powerful Sikh state. This led him to commission during his 'peak' or 'glory' years[101] a specialized troupe of female performers, who are often colourfully described by European commentators in accounts from the 1830s onwards as 'Amazons'—an invocation of the independent female warriors of ancient Greece. This troupe of 'female bodyguard' dancers

to employ 'good' Western musicians who would 'teach their art to my people' has also been noted. Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*, p. 577.

[99] Goswamy, 'Those Moon-faced Singers', p. 4.

[100] For *shetia* traders in nineteenth-century Bombay using the *nautch* to favourably impress European visitors, see Anish Pradhan, 'Perspectives on Performance Practice: Hindustani Music in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Bombay', *South Asia*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2004.

[101] With the beginning of the 1830s, the Sikh kingdom had reached its widest territorial extent, from Kashmir in the north to Multan and Peshawar in the west. K. S. Duggal, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Last to Lay Arms*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 2001, p. 100.

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was an invention unique to Ranjit Singh. During Mughal times, there did exist female guards (or *urdū-bēgī*), although they were responsible for policing only the *haram* or female quarters and not the male monarch.[102]

Ranjit Singh's troupe of female warriors was more symbolic (we have no evidence of them actually fighting in battle) and connected with the dance and musical performances especially put up for important visitors, foremost among them the British. The reasons for the creative fashioning of such a group lay both in the Maharaja's own partiality for music and dance, and equally in a recognition that the bulk of European visitors to his court tremendously enjoyed *nautch* parties.

This Amazonian troupe of martial female performers began playing a greater role in the political negotiations, especially the battle of grand state spectacles organized in rivalry with the British at Ropar in 1831. The first reference to this cross-dressing troupe of dancers dates to 12 March 1831, in preparation for the impending visit to the *darbār* by Victor Jacquemont, the French naturalist whose research endeavours would be funded by Ranjit, when

> *A royal order was issued to all the dancing girls in the town of Lahore to put on male garments, hold swords and bows in their hands* and be decorated with other arms as well and then to present themselves at the *Deorhi* of the Maharaja *on elephants and horses, in perfect smartness and with great grace*.[103]

The Scottish traveller and explorer, Alexander Burnes, who was part of 'The Great Game' between the British Raj and the empire of Russia for supremacy over Central Asia, in his important travelogue, also refers to Ranjit Singh's court and describes his 'corps of Amazons':

> On our arrival, we found … a party of thirty or forty dancing girls, *dressed uniformly in boys' clothes*. They were *mostly natives of Cashmere or the adjacent mountains* … (and) their figures and features were small, and their Don Giovanni costume of flowing silk most becoming, improved as it was by *a small bow and quiver in the hand of each*. 'This,' said Runjeet Sing, 'is one of my regiments (pultuns), *but they*

[102] See Katherine Butler Schofield, 'The Courtesan Tale: Female Musicians and Dancers in Mughal Historical Chronicles, c. 1556–1748', *Gender and History*, Vol. 24, No. 1, April 2012, p. 153. The only other reference to a male monarch similarly employing female 'bodyguards' (who, however, were not performers) dates to the mid-fifteenth-century Malwa sultanate centred at Mandu, of Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Shah (Khilji), who reigned from 1469 to 1500. Ursula Sims-Williams, 'Nasir Shah's Book of Delights', British Library blog, 21 November 2016, http://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2016/11/nasir-shahs-book-of-delights.html#_ftn2 (accessed 28 June 2019).

[103] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 15, emphasis added.

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tell me it is one I cannot discipline'—a remark which amused us, and mightily pleased the fair.[104]

This regiment of female performers held bows and arrows, and were dressed to imitate male warriors, pointing to an interesting kind of martial dancing troupe peculiar to Ranjit's court. Additionally, the geographical origin of the Amazons, in Kashmir and the hill states—precisely those regions that were the hardest for Ranjit to conquer and control—furnishes another perspective. Ranjit conquered Kashmir in 1819 after suppressing its erstwhile Afghan rulers and the first references to the Amazonian contingent occur a decade hence. It is quite possible that, in Ranjit's eyes, his ability to incorporate the Amazons into a devoted, mock-'bodyguard' regiment (one he allegedly found recalcitrant and unable to 'discipline') was a means to celebrate his control over these frontier regions.[105] This takes us beyond banal explanations situating the importance of this dancer corps in stereotypical notions of their 'beauty' and 'charm', on account of their Kashmiri/hill state origin.

Burnes's account offers us interesting details about the generous terms for the maintenance of this special regiment of martial female dancers at Ranjit Singh's court, especially the fact that two of the women, who served as 'Commandants' to the regiment, had been bestowed with land grants of villages and an allowance of Rs 5 and Rs 10 per day.[106] Clearly, female performers were an important part of the nexus of relationships between the British and the princely states, with a troupe even being exhibited by the governor general's own diplomatic entourage. At the 1831 Rupar *darbār*, following Lord Bentinck and Maharaja Ranjit Singh's joint inspection of the horsemen and platoons of the Sikh state, one of Ranjit's aides suggested that 'the parade of the *Zenana* platoon must also be inspected'. Ranjit was more than eager to do so:

The Maharaja, who had made all the dancing girls dress in special garments … called them into his presence and Bhai Sahibs, Bhai Ram Singh and Gobind Ram, and other Sardars got up at that time under orders of the Maharaja and went into the huge canopy, and the dancing girls presented themselves

[104] Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara Together with a Narrative of a Voyage on the Indus from the Sea of Lahore*, Vol. 1 [1834], Oxford University Press, London, [1834] 1973, p. 75, emphasis added.

[105] Duggal, *Maharaja*, p. 100.

[106] Ibid.

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decorated with clothes and ornaments, moving with a show of attractive coquetry and blandishments. *The Maharaja said, pointing out to them, that there stood the* Subedar, and Jamadar *and the* Chobdar. After that the royal order was given to them to produce tunes ripe with the spirit of exciting joy, delivered in a coquettish way.[107]

Important to note here is the fact that the Maharaja asks the other Sardars, such his aides Bhai Ram Singh and Gobind Ram, to leave the room, marking the display of the '*Zenana* platoon' a privilege reserved for Bentinck alone. It is further interesting how, while presenting the female performers to Bentinck, Ranjit chose to depict them as organized on the lines of a conventional unit of soldiers, with commandants of different ranks. This fits in well with Burnes's account above, and reiterates Ranjit's preoccupation with organization and military discipline.

It would be equally erroneous to argue that the Amazons simply furthered the performance of a fetishized masculinity in a political context where women were otherwise only secondary figures. In the initial days of Ranjit's political career, we find many references to his mother-in-law and political nemesis, Maharani Sada Kaur of the Kanhaiyya *misl*, and her remarkable political astuteness. Rajpreet Atwal's work on gender relations in the Sikh kingdom asserts how Sada Kaur was in many ways the unacknowledged fount of political knowledge and guidance in Ranjit's life.[108] Indeed, as leader of the Kanhaiyya *misl*, Sada Kaur was a very key figure in Ranjit's takeover of Lahore; she commanded a large number of cavalrymen, to the tune of 8,000 according to some sources.[109] Describing this event, Khushwant Singh tells us how, while 'Ranjit Singh entered with his detachment through Lahore Gate in the south; Sada Kaur led in her horsemen through Delhi Gate in the east'.[110] In later life, Ranjit's relationship with his formidable mother-in-law was a more estranged one. Was Ranjit's emphasis on the female performers' *sartorial* appearance as

[107] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 91, emphasis added. These were ranks in the army, the *Subedār* being equivalent to a captain, the *Jamadar* to a troop commandant, while the *Chobdār* referred to a mace-bearer or attendant.

[108] Rajpreet Atwal, 'Between the Courts of Lahore and Windsor: Anglo-Indian Relations and the Re-making of Royalty in the Nineteenth Century', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2017, pp. 46–50.

[109] S. R. Bakshi and Rashmi Pathak (eds), *Punjab through the Ages (Studies in Cotemporary Indian History)*, Sarup & Sons, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 272–274.

[110] Singh, *Ranjit Singh*, p. 39.

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cavalrymen on horseback perhaps a backhanded compliment to Maharani Sada Kaur's stature? At any rate, his insistence on their particular form of self-presentation worked to represent the contradictions of female power in the Sikh state.

Osborne, whose account was published some six years after Burnes's memoir, also noted the ubiquitous 'detachment of Amazons', which he colourfully called 'one of Runjeet Sing's *capricious whims*, and the result of … *drinking bouts*'.[111] However, their dancing and acrobatics favourably impressed Osborne. He describes that they appeared 'armed with bows and arrows' and how there were originally almost 150 members of this detachment hailing from 'Cachemire, Persia and the Punjab', who often used to appear on horseback.[112]

The peculiar 'huntress' avatar of the members of the Amazonian troupe was also noted by Osborne, who gives us more important details of the administrative maintenance of Ranjit's 'Amazonian' guard:

> During our visit to Lahore, a considerable degree of excitement prevailed amongst this fairer portion of the Sikh army, owing to a report having arisen that the Maharajah intended to *follow the example of the Company*, and resume all grants for which no formal title deeds could be produced; the report, however, proved to be premature; and *I believe Runjeet would sooner face Dost Mahomed and his Afghans than a single individual of his Amazonian body-guard*.[113]

Osborne delineates Ranjit's attempts to adopt efficient bureaucratic principles based on European norms, and how the courtesans perceived such a 'formalization' of title deeds as a threat. Further, he paints a dissatisfied Amazonian bodyguard as posing a greater threat to Ranjit than the eponymous Afghan ruler, Dost Mahomed, and his troops. We saw a little earlier how Burnes noted that Ranjit described his Amazonian '*pultun*' as 'one I cannot discipline'.[114] M'Gregor, writing some six years after Osborne, also noticed a similar trend when he noted that Ranjit 'confesses that his body-guard are the most troublesome, and *least manageable* portion of his troops!!'.[115]

[111] Osborne, *The Court and Camp*, p. 95, emphasis added.

[112] Waheeduddin estimates the number at 125, instead, and remarks how they remained in the troupe up to the age of 25. *The Real Ranjit Singh*, p. 173.

[113] Osborne, *The Court and Camp*, p. 95, emphasis added.

[114] Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara*, p. 75, emphasis added.

[115] W. L. M'Gregor, *The History of The Sikhs Containing the Lives of the Gooroos: The History of the Independent Sirdars or Missuls and the Life of the Great Founder of the Sikh Monarchy, Maharajah Runjeet Singh*, Vol. 1 [1846], R. S. Publishing House, Allahabad, 1979, p. 224, emphasis added.

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The power vested by Ranjit Singh in the troupe of the Amazons is also borne out by other sources. While European commentators have noted the bows and arrows they held, Suri's *Umdat-ut-Tawārīkh* refers to some of them even 'holding swords, bows, guns, and spears in their hands like the soldiers'. The Amazons were invested with the ultimately powerful weapons of warfare, emulating the military basis of the Sikh state. More interestingly, this regimented show of weapons, mimicking soldiers' combat on the battlefield, coexisted with the female performers simultaneously exhibiting a sense of chaos and disarray, through the very act of dancing and performing:

> Some had tied up their hair or had let them loose in a disheveled manner, decorated with gold ornaments and articles of jewellery, and presented themselves to the Maharaja with their crests working as spears of beauty against the buds of men's hearts …. The dancing girls praised the glorious Sahibs greatly with their sweet songs and tunes …. At the sight of the performance of the dancing girls *even Venus on the third heaven* was wonder-struck. The audience stood holding its breath like pictures and the onlookers shut their mouths in silence in their enjoyment of the sight.[116]

Again, we encounter the idea about the powerful supernatural impact of the singing and dancing of the Amazonian troupe on bodies both earthly and celestial, rendering the audience motionless, silent, and awestruck 'like pictures'. The fact that some female performers appeared with loose hair is another marker of the almost carvinalesque edge that performances by this group often had. This chaotic connotation is again evident in the account of Henry Edward Fane from the late 1830s, where he described the Amazons as being:

> armed with bows and arrows, which they drew the moment we made our appearance, in the most warlike style …. Whether in presence of an enemy they would be found equally bold, I know not, but in that of the old chieftain *they dared to do and say in a way that none of his most favourite courtiers ventured to attempt.*[117]

Fane goes on to narrate how the Amazonians were the chief instigators of the riotous subversion that is a hallmark of Holi. Anil Sethi has argued that even the inherently chaotic festival of Holi was used by Ranjit Singh as yet another way to demonstrate his authority by controlling every aspect and detail of the festival celebrations, as a way to buttress

[116] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 36, emphasis added.

[117] Henry Fane, *Five Years in India 1835–1839*, Henry Colburn, London, 1842, pp. 172–173, emphasis added.

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the glory and spectacle organized at the Lahore *darbār*.[118] Given this context, the laxity Ranjit exhibited toward his 'Amazonian' corps is all the more remarkable. They alone were permitted to manifest 'disruption' or 'chaos' in the context of strictly regimented court rituals, by throwing colour on Ranjit, performing what was effectively a 'mock' martial challenge to the monarch.

Accounts of Ranjit Singh interacting with his Amazonian troupe in a jesting fashion, and the way in which he treated them as his property, expose for us the peculiar interstices of (patriarchal) belonging and emotion in which these women were located. In the context of running what Sethi has described as 'a state fashioned from politics riven by conspiracy, treason, invasion and impending conquest, with both the Marathas and the British knocking at Punjab's doors', and also one comprising diverse social and religious groups, these women—openly displayed in mock combat before rivals—were perhaps the sole group Ranjit saw as being *irrevocably* under his control; hence, his emphasis on them being the 'least manageable' portion of his troops points to the deep affective resonance he felt with them. Indeed, in the context of the rigid court rituals practised by an authoritarian monarch, the Amazons were the only group capable of openly challenging, being brazen, and treading where others dared not.

The act of consciously assembling together, in the last decade of his reign, a troupe of cross-dressing female dancers was part of Ranjit's attempt to culturally proclaim his superiority to the British. It also deepens Fenech's recent thesis that, in the context of other technologies of rule and gift-giving, such as Kashmiri shawls, 'both the maharaja and the artists of his court … push(ed) back at what was perceived as British pressure … *but it was done in many cases with great subtlety and much finesse, and appropriated a series of components which divorced of their immediate contexts appear, innocuous*'.[119]

In particular, Fenech notes that Ranjit and his artists offered a new kind of response 'to growing British hegemony in India' by skilfully deploying '*objects in support of an agendum to broadcast the power of the Sikh court* during the colonial encounter'.[120] Female musicians and dancers employed by Ranjit, along with their specific dance practices of gendered performance, and an embodied masculinity were situated within this

[118] Sethi, 'The Creation of Religious Identities', pp. 61–62.
[119] Fenech, 'Ranjit Singh, the Shawl', pp. 91–92, emphasis added.
[120] Ibid., p. 92, emphasis added.

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'broader agendum'.[121] The Amazonian bodyguard then functioned to represent, in an intimate and private yet simultaneously public manner, Ranjit Singh's power to the outside world, in particular to his rivals, the British, as also other Europeans. They were a central part of what Rajpreet Atwal has called Ranjit's overall diplomacy procedure to 'dazzle' 'his most favoured guests … with carefully orchestrated grandeur'[122] in a clear assertion of his own might and power. More crucially, it was also an acknowledgement of the power—supernatural, palpable, and tangible—invested in the figure of the courtesan and female performers, as possessors of artistic and musical acumen in the cultural universe that Ranjit and his courtiers inhabited. This universe was, of course, vastly different from European understandings of the performative traditions, and we now turn to the hilarious misunderstandings that arose when Ranjit and his courtiers encountered contemporary European dance forms.

European dancing versus Indian nautching

If Ranjit and his courtiers regarded the performance of female courtesans as the acme of regal hospitality, they equally viewed state occasions such as balls, where European women danced (as part of European dance traditions that involved the participation of both sexes), as an act of mutually respectful reciprocity. Conversely, most European writers predictably exhibited great wariness at the prospect of their women

[121] The evidence on the importance of these cross-dressing female martial dancers also offers an important vantage point from which to investigate shifting conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and to undertake a 'queering' of social and cultural histories in the region. This, however, would be the focus of an entirely new paper that evaluates the Lahore Amazonians in the context of changing notions of beauty and the emergence of a heterosocial public space in the wake of the colonial encounter. Relevant literature on this theme includes Afsaneh Najmabadi's ground-breaking study on the gradual 'feminization' of beauty and the historical transformations of sexuality in Iranian society from Qajar to modern times, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005; and, in the Indian context, among others, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (eds), *Same-sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000; and Ruth Vanita's essay collections, notably, *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Culture*, Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2005; and *Gender, Sex, and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India, 1780–1870*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012.

[122] Atwal, 'Between the Courts of Lahore and Windsor', p. 102.

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dancing, lest it be misconstrued as 'nautching'. This was in keeping with the European, and specifically the Victorian English, as the ideal norm of femininity. European accounts generally represent the dancing of English ladies as an alternative model of femininity and entertainment to the one present in India.

Writing in 1840, the English traveller, Godfrey Vigne, described the interesting misunderstandings that were so commonplace when Europeans interacted with sections of the Indian nobility. Describing an evening of entertainment hosted by two of Ranjit's European generals, Ventura and Allard, Vigne narrates a particularly amusing anecdote:

> Some of the principal Sirdars were invited in the evening, and came in *anxious expectation of seeing the English ladies dance*, who, it was understood, were going to perform a quadrille, or a waltz, *in order that they might be able to say that they had danced at Lahore*. The Sirdars, however, were disappointed, as it was very properly considered inexpedient to indulge their curiosity in this particular … an officer, who was on duty at the court of a Rajah, on the Indus, told me that *he was seriously asked, if it were not true that Lord William Bentinck, when at Rupur, had made his lady* nach, *i.e., dance, for the amusement of Runjit.*[123]

The above instance draws into sharp contrast the gendered differences in the cultural worlds of nineteenth-century Indians and Europeans. The reference to English ladies dancing *for* the Sardars is relayed in tones of wonder, shock, and incredulity. These tones serve to convey (a) outrage that *their* women could be objectified for the benefit of a vice-riddled 'Oriental' prince (symbolizing loss of power to Indians) and (b) an insistence on the greater 'autonomy' enjoyed by European women as evidence for the superior values of that civilization.

At the same time, Persian chronicles for Ranjit Singh's court mention the dancing of English and European women on a par with Indian female performers. In April 1831, during the visit of William Bentinck, Suri records that the audience at the Lahore court was mesmerized when the 'wife of the governor with fifty European ladies came forward and began to dance and sing with instruments'. Describing the gathering later that evening, Suri again approvingly notes that 'a dance of the ladies (English) became a source of pleasure for the hearts of the audience'.[124] On another occasion in the next month, after a great deal

[123] Godfrey Vigne, *A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghazni, Kabul, and Afghanistan, and of a Residence at the Court of Dost Mohamed: With Notices of Runjit Singh, Khiva, and the Russian Expedition*, Whittaker and Co., London, 1840, pp. 300–301, emphasis added.

[124] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 27.

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of merry-making, Suri equates the two different categories of women dancing: 'The glorious Sahibs, who were pleased to the extreme, stated that the Lat Sahibs (GG and the C-in-C) *had shown the Sirdars the dance and music of their wives*, and that the Maharaja had made them see the dance of the women and the music of the dancing girls.'[125]

Above, Suri seems to be insinuating that, in the view of the British 'Lat' (the Punjabi version of 'Lord') Sahibs, the dance of the female performers was shown them by the Maharaja as a reciprocal gesture, *in response to* 'the dance and music of their wives'. Such a 'native' reading of Eden's 'respectable' European dancing would have certainly riled the 'glorious sahibs'! These examples may be read as an attempt on the part of Ranjit to set himself on an equal footing with the English. European women dancing were viewed as a measure of the magnanimity of the East India Company (EIC) state, as a reciprocal courtesy to Ranjit and his courtiers and an acknowledgement of the power of his state.

At another point in the narrative, after Ranjit introduced members of his court to Governor General Bentinck during his 1831 visit, 'according to the wishes of the *Lat* Sahib (G.-G.), *good singers and musicians with ambergris hair, including some English ladies,* started a gathering of merriment and enjoyment'.[126] This is remarkable, since ambergris applied to hair purportedly had an aphrodisiac effect,[127] with the implication that the performers in question were courtesans. What is interesting is Suri's inclusion of 'some English ladies' in the aforementioned group of courtesans, the inference being that they were somewhere on a par with the latter—an abominable idea for the English, were they to read the *Umdat*.

The sister of Lord Auckland (Bentinck's successor), Emily Eden, described her meeting with a female acquaintance in May 1838 in Simla, who told her

> that the ladies … had settled that they would not dance, because the Sikh envoys were asked (to the dance), and *they had no idea of dancing before natives* …. Two of the Sikhs had seen English dancing before, and *were aware that the ladies were ladies, and not* nautch-*girls*; and I hope they explained that *important fact* to the others.[128]

[125] Ibid., p. 36, emphasis added.

[126] Ibid., pp. 88, 1831, emphasis added.

[127] Medieval Arabic medical treatises prescribed ambergris as an aphrodisiac. http://www.doctorsreview.com/history/amazing-ambergris/ (accessed 1 September 2016).

[128] Emily Eden, *Up the Country: Letters Written to her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India*, Richard Bentley, London, 1867, pp. 132–133, emphasis added.

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Perhaps Ranjit Singh and his courtiers did not in fact recognize this difference, for, during Eden's visit to Lahore, the *Umdat* tells us how Englishwomen 'performed a dance *in such a manner that even the houries of the heaven would feel their hearts sink at their sight*. They performed in such a way as will be remembered by us all our lives'.[129] We must remember at this point that Ranjit was always eager to establish the superior beauty of his Amazonian contingent (comprising primarily 'Cachemirian' girls), evident when he asked Osborne 'are they as handsome as Englishwomen?'[130] The English/European woman thus unambiguously figured as an object of desire in the eyes of Ranjit, and comparisons of their dancing with the very 'houries of … heaven' suggest the specifically Indian/Punjabi paradigm of gendered roles through which Ranjit and his courtiers viewed English/European women.

To make sense of these 'misreadings', I find anthropological literature on gift-giving to be useful, in particular Lewis Hyde's notion of a 'labour of gratitude'. For Hyde, this was a cyclical process whereby a gift is given in acknowledgement of the gift previously received.[131] In the eyes of Ranjit and his courtiers, therefore, the sight of English women 'nautching' was above all a 'labour of gratitude' extended by the British. This idea of 'performance as a gift' has been theorized most coherently by Richard Flores in his research on Spanish medieval nativity folk-drama performances in contemporary Texas. Flores proposes a 'gifting of performance' understood as 'a gift-exchange based on the labour of performance' that 'engages performers and audience in a cyclical event founded on shared communication, social solidarity, and mutual obligation'.[132] I would thus propose that we translate the 'misreading' by Ranjit Singh, his courtiers, and chroniclers of English women dancing as akin to Indian '*nautch* girls' traditionally commanded to dance as a sign of the English returning a favour, expressing their 'mutual obligation' in response to being esteemed consumers of performances by the glorious contingent of 'Amazons'.[133]

[129] Suri, *Umdat, Daftar III*, p. 438, emphasis added.

[130] Osborne, *The Court and Camp*, p. 95.

[131] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*, Vintage Books, New York, 1983, quoted in Richard Flores, '"Los Pastores" and the Gifting of Performance', *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 21, No. 2, May 1994, p. 278.

[132] Flores, '"Los Pastores" and the Gifting of Performance', pp. 278–279.

[133] This idea of reciprocity and mutual exchange was first theorized by Marcel Mauss in his classic work on gift-giving, *The Gift: Form and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* [Paris, 1950], English trans. by Ian Cunnison, Cohen and West Ltd, London, 1966.

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Conclusion

That subtle gestures and 'innocuous' (to use Fenech's term) strategies revolving around Ranjit's association with courtesans functioned as a critique of the British is borne out by a remarkable interpretation of the coins struck by Ranjit after his marriage with Moran. According to Baron Hügel, the hidden significance of the coin lay in a symbolic critique of the EIC: 'Ranjit Singh had coins struck in her name … perhaps done by him as a jest against the Company Sirkar, or East India Company, who are generally represented in India as an old woman—the wife, widow, or mistress of the king of England.'[134]

Lepel Griffin upheld this interpretation, noting that Moran's coins were 'struck in caricature of the EIC which, in popular Indian belief, was a woman'.[135] It is interesting how coins struck in honour of Ranjit's first courtesan wife—an exceptional honour, given this privilege was not accorded to any of his other 'political wives'—were popularly perceived in early nineteenth-century India as a satirical excuse to lampoon the EIC. This example captures Ranjit's inventiveness, for, if such a belief existed at the time in India, the striking of coins *ostensibly* in honour of Moran conveniently served a twin purpose. First, it publicly proclaimed his strong affective ties to his courtesan wife, despite the mountains of opposition he faced for having married her. Second, it functioned as a witticism, obliquely punning on and critiquing his political rivals in the EIC, in an understated yet unmistakable assertion of Ranjit's sovereignty. Through such cultural symbologies of rule, gender emerges as a central narrative ploy Ranjit utilized in interactions with political rivals. Similar to the jesting fashion in which the Maharaja interacted with his 'Amazons', this tongue-in-cheek numismatic jibe at the British reveals how emotions like humour, irony, and satire were productive of 'the materiality and practices'[136] through which Ranjit Singh imagined the sovereignty of his state.

This article has sought to nuance our understanding of the performative traditions at Ranjit's court, attempting to establish two important insights. First, far from being a 'cultural backwater', the Sikh state at Lahore was a principal patron of classical music and dance traditions. Second, female musicians and dancers in particular were well endowed and well looked

[134] Hügel (trans. and ed.), *Travels*, pp. 383–384.
[135] Griffin, *Ranjit Singh*, p. 109.
[136] Khan, 'The Social Production', p. 612.

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after as a class and community, and this was evident in their strategic deployment as important instruments of the 'cultural technologies of rule' that Ranjit used in the political dialogue with the EIC state.

Ranjit consolidated and expanded Lahore as Punjab's capital of the arts, music, and culture in the truest sense, attracting a significant number of musicians and artists from across the region—whether *dhrupad* performers from Kasur and Ambetha, courtesans from Kashmir, or music scholars like Diwan Lachhiram. Throughout Ranjit Singh's reign, female performers were a well-off group, who played a significant role in the crafting of state rituals and the articulation of power and identity at the Lahore *darbār*. This was partially on account of their status as harbingers of auspiciousness, and in Ranjit's recognition of their extraordinary power as musicians, to have an impact on not simply listeners in the physical world, but also forces in the celestial and supernatural world beyond.

Ranjit Singh was an astutely creative ruler drawing on a range of eclectic sources—a palimpsest of symbols—in the construction of his personal and political persona. The two were closely connected in the case of Ranjit, especially through the community of female performers at his court. A focus on European travellers' discourses on courtesans in Ranjit's era revealed their telltale 'Orientalist' gaze. Equally, the subtle strategies of self-fashioning and state-ritual adopted by Ranjit offer evidence of a 'reverse gaze' trained on European and specifically British commentators, pointing to how South Asians were, in Tony Ballantyne's words, 'as anthropologically-minded observers of European culture as Europeans were of South Asian culture', marking out the colonial encounter as a 'two-sided' affair.[137]

I have argued that the peculiar nature of the 'Amazonian corps' of female huntress performers makes sense from the perspective of their location within princely culture and paternalism in Ranjit Singh's martial and masculinist state. These women embodied, through their performance of masculine-styled acrobatics integrated into their dance and music, an open celebration of the martial glory of the Sikh state. Their centrality acquired meaning from the affective and emotional charge of their celebration, as women, of the Sikh state's actions and exploits on the battlefield, in a subversion of gendered hierarchies. In a courtly milieu grounded in explicit military discipline, this group was

[137] Tony Ballantyne, 'Introduction', in Baron Charles von Hügel (ed.), *Travels in Kashmir and the Panjab* [1845], Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, p. viii.

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most well suited to subvert the lines of deference maintained towards the all-powerful Ranjit by the majority of his other subjects. With their characteristic performance practices and 'mimic combat' rituals, they slowly emerged as the only ones capable of *publicly* subverting hierarchies of state power. That Ranjit's regime was known for its reliance on politically astute diplomacy as much as active warfare helps us situate the 'Amazonian' dancers at his court in the crucial position of broadcasting not only the military, but also the cultural, superiority of the new Sikh state to its opponents in the volatile political milieu of early nineteenth-century north India.

In short, the Amazonians worked to help Ranjit fashion himself as an all-powerful monarch during a time of political instability and uncertainty, with several different rivals functioning in the mid-nineteenth-century milieu of north India. Ranjit's 'Amazonian' experiment epitomizes a singular martiality, fundamentally different from the aggressive masculinist martiality of the Akali Nihangs. In the construction of a 'mock' martial performance troupe, Ranjit was curiously inclusive and catholic, showcasing a version of Sikh masculinity yoked to a more cosmopolitan variety of statecraft, as opposed to the usual location of Sikh masculinity within an aggressively militant religious setting.

More broadly, this article reframes the debate, discourse, and scholarship on female performers in nineteenth-century India, to re-instate them as an important tool of state negotiation and Indo-European diplomacy. I hope to have highlighted the cultural dynamism of Ranjit Singh in drawing on a range of pre-existing symbols and practices pertaining to female performers in north India to fashion a unique Sikh code of power, framed in a discourse of gender, ethics, sexuality, and affect.

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