

# The Sikh Interregnum: Reassessing the Impact of Sikh Rule on the Administration and Socio-economic of Derajat (1820-1849)

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## Abstract

The geo-graphical factors of the Indian continent have determined its history. As a landform the subcontinent has not changed, however historically the political map of the Indian subcontinent has changed. The abundance of natural resources and hospitable climate has attracted both the settlers and invaders. Its own settlers were bestowed with all basic necessities and economic resources and did not need to cross their boundaries and invade the region beyond it. Though Derajat was poor in economic resources till Sikh imperialism. It appeared as a strong political power that conquered the Derajat and whole Punjab in all direction, North, South, East and West, and established their strength all over the Punjab. Sikh interregnum had socio-cultural and economic impact on Derajat. This creates the change in socio-economic and socio-political status of Derajat and the neighboring region with the change of administration and governing authority in Pre-Colonial time. Objective of the study is to assess and document the impact of Sikh rule on the administrative structures and socio-economic conditions of the Derajat region between 1820 and 1849. Current study uses a historical approach by analyzing the historical documents such as books, gazettes, articles, notes, political maps and all others relevant documents, but research in the context of history is always a difficult task due to the unavailability of authentic historical documents. It is concluded that Sikh rule in Derajat represented an interregnum of imposed order that replaced tribal breakup with a centralized military backed administration, fundamentally altering the region's administrative trajectory such as irrigation, agriculture, tax, law and order, security and socio-economic foundations such as coin system, trade and social changes as well.

**Keywords:** Sikh Interregnum, Sikh Rule, Socio-economic of Derajat

## 1. Introduction

The historical region of Derajat, situated at a strategic crossroads, presents a complex and under examined case study in the history of Punjab. While the Sikh rulers rule (1820-1849) represents a critical and transformative period immediately preceding British annexation, its specific impact on the Derajat region remains inadequately explored and often oversimplified within broader historiographical narratives (Yasmin, 2022). Existing studies have either subsumed Derajat within general history of Sikh rule or focused only on military and political annexation, create a significant gap in understanding the nuances of its

administrative integration and crucially, its socio-economic transformation under the Sikh governance. Current study fulfil this gap by moving beyond a purely political military narrative. Its objective is to provide a detailed reassessment of the Sikh period (1820-1849) in Derajat, especially inquiring how Sikh administrative structure replaced or adapted pre-existing systems and investigating the tangible effects of this transition on the socio-economic fabric of the region-including changes in land revenue policy, trade and social hierarchies. By analyzing primary sources, including colonial period records, native accounts, and fiscal data study illuminate the complexities of Sikh rule in Derajat, challenging any monolithic characterization and providing a detail account of its impact on the administration and socio-economic conditions of Derajat.

This study offers significant scholarly and contemporary value by keenly reassessing an unexplored period in the Derajat history, specifically regarding the Sikh empire's administrative practices. It fills historiographical gaps by challenging simplistic narratives of Sikh rule and providing a nuanced analysis of local governance of Derajat (Dera Ghazi Khan & Dera Ismail Khan). Likewise it highlights the interplay between Sikh administrative structures and existing tribal systems, by focusing on regional culture of the Derajat. Findings of the study contribute to contemporary discussions on governance in modern Pakistan, offering insights into decentralization and integration of diverse regional identities within larger administrative frameworks.

Akhtar et al. (2023) reviewed that the point of view in the Pre-Colonial history of Derajat: Dera Ghazi Khan and Dera Ismail Khan specifically focuses on Dera Ghazi Khan that can be understood through various historical sources and works. One such source is the book "Gulbahar" by Lala Hutto Ram, which is considered the first major historical work on the local and regional history of Dera Ghazi Khan in the Urdu language during the colonial era. The book is based on the revenue record and provides information about the ancient history, major tribes, and castes inhabiting Dera Ghazi Khan, as well as the socio-economic conditions of the local people. It is very important to note that "Gulbahar" is not a primary source and should be examined in the manner of historical criticism. The book is rich in information, but its lack of primary sources and the author's approach to presenting information in his own way make it a significant historical source of its time.

Akhtar (2018) highlighted that Derajat status as a historically significant and geo-strategically vital city in Pakistan. It underscored the Derajat importance as a cultural crossroads between Central Asia and Northern India, citing its location on key trade routes and its association with historic figures like Alexander the Great and Babur as well as Muhammad Bin Qasim and other famous warriors. The rise of Sikh power and their control over the region, with various expeditions and conflicts. The British annexed the district following the second Sikh War, and General Cortlandt became its first Deputy Commissioner (Akhtar & Shafique, 2021). There are also the events mentioned about the later tribal conflicts involving the Kaaranis and Bozdars. The Gazetteer of Dera Ghazi Khan is a good source of history, which also highlights the administration and governance in the Pre-Colonial era of Derajat. Tapestry of rulers and dynasties reflects the diverse historical influences that have shaped Dera Ghazi Khan regarding socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic backgrounds, making it a unique crossroads of culture and power in Dera Ghazi Khan as well as in South Asia.

## **2. Sikh Interregnum and Derajat**

The Sikh Empire's rule over Derajat ended with its collapse in the middle of the nineteenth century. The region was administered by the British as part of their larger dominion, British India, after the Anglo-Sikh wars (Khanna, 1932). Dera Ghazi Khan's predominant Sikh presence has a significant and enduring effect on the history, culture, and heritage of the area. The city's historical narratives, cultural practices, and architectural designs all bear witness to the remnants of Sikh dominance and contribute significantly to its unique identity. Adding to the region's diverse spectrum of experiences and consequences, including Derajat's past Under Sikh authority, is an essential part of the region's historical narrative.

### **2.1 Impact on Administration**

Sikh empire had administrative effect on Derajat in its centralized administration, tax system and law and order situation during Sikh rule.

#### **2.1.1 Centralized Authority**

The annexation of Derajat (Dera Ghazi Khan and Dera Ismail Khan) by the Sikh Empire in 1821 marked a decisive shift from localized tribal governance to a centralized authority emanating from Lahore. This centralization was a core objective of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's imperial project and was implemented through several key mechanisms:

**1. Appointment of Governors (Nazims):** The Maharaja ended the autonomous rule of local Baloch and Pashtun chiefs by installing his own governors. The most notable was Sawan Mal, who was appointed as the Governor of Multan with direct oversight over Derajat (Ali et al., 2018). These officials were accountable directly to Lahore, ensuring imperial policies were enforced locally.

**2. Centralized Fiscal Control:** The Sikh state imposed a uniform, meticulously documented land revenue system such as Batai (share-cropping) and Kankut (estimated assessment). This stripped local chieftains of their traditional right to collect taxes, transferring this crucial economic power to the state treasury (Ahmed, 1984). Revenue was collected in cash or kind and sent to Lahore, financing the empire's army and administration.

**3. Military Garrisoning:** To enforce its will and deter rebellion, the Sikh authority stationed permanent troops in strategic forts across Derajat, such as in Dera Ghazi Khan and Mithankot. This military presence served as a constant physical manifestation of Lahore's power, ensuring order and compliance with central edicts.

**4. Integration into the Imperial Legal Framework:** While local tribal customs (Riwaaj) were often tolerated in civil matters, the ultimate authority for maintaining law, order, and administering justice rested with the Sikh governor and his officials. This superseded the traditional jirga system in matters of state importance.

In essence, Sikh rule in Derajat systematically dismantled the existing fragmented tribal power structure. By controlling appointment, revenue, and force, the Lahore Darbar established a highly centralized administration, effectively making Derajat an integral province of the Sikh Empire rather than a loose confederation of autonomous tribes.

#### **2.1.2 Taxation System**

The technique of Sikh rule especially by Ranjit Singh had a big impact on the trading of agricultural commodities. Just tariffs were implemented, and a robust legal system was built

to support and safeguard the sector. Domestic retailers paid less in tariffs than did foreign shops. Local silk merchants in Derajat (Dera Ghazi Khan and Dera Ismail Khan) had to pay an import duty of four annas per seer when selling their items, but Afghans just had to pay one rupee. Moreover, the charges differed per product, with cereals having extremely low rates (Gillani et al., 2020). Batai and kankut rates ranged from one-third to one-half in unirrigated regions and from one-fourth to one-sixth in irrigated fields. These costs were typical in Lahore's southern districts and in the area between the Sutlej and Jehlum rivers. In certain regions of the central region, the rates were as low as 20% (16.7%). Many reliable experts have provided proof that the Maharaja's income scheme was neither harsh nor indifferent to farmers. The Maharaja removed the octroi levy on food items during the famine, enabling traders to send massive supply of grain to the ravaged regions. For instance, he released wheat from the octroi tax, a levy on yearly harvests, in February 1838 after learning of starvation in Peshawar (Gillani et al., 2020). This made wheat easier to transport to Peshawar.

In addition to land revenue, the state also made money from monopolies, excises, and customs. Tirni was a grazing tax, whereas Mohrana was judicial revenue. Lower-skilled labourers like barbers and washer men, as well as craftsmen, paid high taxes (Hasrat, 1977). The prince eventually increased the stated earnings of the deceased Jagirs from 88 lakh rupees to one crore, indicating their substantial contribution. Another significant source of income was nazrana, or tribute paid by vassals. Vassals like Raja Bhup Chand and Sansar Chand paid tribute to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and throughout his rule, salt mines were still producing a sizable amount of revenue.

### **2.1.3 Law and Order**

As a minister, Sawan Mal kept two Sikh battalions and eight Pathan regiments to preserve law and order. There were no robbers or thieves. Industry and trade prospered. The Punjab region had unity and calm thanks to the Maharaja. He brought order back into what had been a chaotic situation. He created a legal system to take the place of chaos and anarchy (Gillani, 2020). He ruled with a kind of authoritarianism that set him apart. His principles aligned with those of his community. The carrying of weapons was not prohibited. Bahawalpur, Khairpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, Lachah, Shujabad, and Mithankot were the main cities of Multan. They engaged in commerce with merchants from Peshawar, Amritsar, Sind, Kabul, Herat, Bokhara, and Shikarpur, among other cities in India. Sawan Mal took over as Multan's finance manager in 1820. Bahawalpur, Khairpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, Shujabad, and Mithankot were Multan's principal marketplaces. They traded with merchants from all throughout India, notably from Sind, Peshawar, Amritsar, Kabul, Herat, Bokhara, and Shikarpur.

Except in cases where the hill tribes give up their strongholds, Lieutenant William Barr described the 'North-Western' Frontier Province as a location where killings only happened on rare occasions (Lafont, 2023). In January 1839, Barr travelled from Lahore to Peshawar. A similar tragedy happened among the powerful and savage Baluchi tribes along the Sind border. About 500 Sikh soldiers were stationed in Dera Ghazi Khan and Mithankot, which are about 130 miles apart, according to Captain Wade's 1837 report. The fact that there aren't many Sikhs fighting in the vast territory they recently took over indicates that they are

actively working to placate and put an end to the chiefs' disobedience in the Derajat region (Banga & Grewal, 2009).

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army was led by the well-known Sikh general Hari Singh Nalwa (1791–1837). Recognized as one of the most accomplished generals in Sikh history. The Sikh Empire relied heavily on Nalwa to expand, seize important lands, and defend its boundaries from invaders. A very skilled military commander, Hari Singh Nalwa oversaw several victorious battles, leading his forces to conquer Peshawar (1818), Multan (1818), and Kashmir (1819). His innovative techniques and training regimens increased the Sikh Khalsa Army's efficacy, and he was instrumental in its growth into a powerful force. Nalwa's military victories increased the Empire's frontiers and ensured peace by establishing stability and wealth in the regions it governed (Noor, 2018). Nalwa stood out as a commander because of his dedication to the well-being of his warriors as well as his sense of fairness and compassion. His place in Sikh history and the annals of Indian military history has been cemented by his enduring reputation as a skilled military tactician and compelling commander (Singh, 1993). Nalwa left an enduring effect on Sikh culture and the military triumphs of the Sikh Empire, even after his horrific death at the Battle of Jamrud in 1837.

## **2.2 Impact on Socio-economy**

Sikh rule had great impact on Derajat agriculture system, irrigation system, trade and commerce as well as in social changes of the derajat tribal system.

### **2.2.1 Agriculture and Irrigation System**

The majority of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Punjabi irrigation system depended on ground water and natural resources. Aside from rainfall, rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds were all-natural irrigation supplies. Maharaja worked hard to create irrigation infrastructure to counteract the desert terrain and low rainfall by drilling wells and building canals. The Punjab region, under the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, witnessed extensive advancements in irrigation infrastructure, crucial for supporting its agricultural economy. A vast network of canals was constructed, significantly enhancing the irrigation capabilities across the empire. Among the most notable canals in Multan were the Khanwa, Diwanwah, and Shahpur canals (Singh, 2017). These waterways not only facilitated the distribution of water to farmlands but also played a vital role in managing water resources during periods of drought, effectively becoming the backbone of Punjab's agricultural prosperity. In addition to the prominent canals of Multan, similar irrigation systems were established in other key areas, including Dera Ghazi Khan, Khangarh, Sialkot, and various districts throughout Punjab. These canals ensured that even during arid conditions, farmers could rely on a steady supply of water, thereby sustaining crop yields and supporting the livelihoods of countless families. Another common irrigation technique that has gained popularity is drilling wells, especially in areas like Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur, Amritsar, Sialkot, Derajat (Dera Ghazi Khan), and Gujranwala. During the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the approximate number of wells in Punjab was 136,638. It was necessary to use these wells to get groundwater, and several mechanical devices were used to make this procedure easier. To raise water from deep down and make it usable for residential and agricultural purposes, tools like the Rahat, Dhingli, and Charsa were frequently employed.

Another significant aspect of the irrigation system was the use of kulhs minor channels that branched off from larger water streams. These channels were specifically designed to irrigate agricultural fields and power small flour mills in rural Punjab. Kulhs played a crucial role in ensuring that even the most remote farms had access to water, thereby contributing to the overall agricultural productivity of the region (Wahi, 2016). The jhallar system, although less widespread, was utilized in specific areas where water was found just below the surface, such as in Derajat. This method involved two individuals using a large leather bucket to draw water from the river. They would throw the bucket into the water, and then swiftly raise it, allowing them to transfer water to the riverbank. While not as efficient as other irrigation methods, the jhallar system provided a means for communities in water-scarce areas to access essential resources (KKhalid, 2018).

When combined, these various irrigation techniques wells, canals, kulhs, and jhallars showcased the creative strategies Punjabis used to increase agricultural productivity. Along with sustaining the empire's economy, the vast irrigation system encouraged a sense of camaraderie among farmers who worked together to preserve these essential resources. The region's agricultural methods are still influenced by the legacy of these irrigation systems, which emphasizes the administration of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's vision and creativity in advancing sustainable agriculture.

### **2.2.2 Trade and Commerce**

Derajat supplied opium, charas, and snuff, and Shikarpur contributed pearls. Finally, Dajal brought in oil, butter, and ghee and also exchange masala's and fruits, vegetables. These imports had an approximate yearly value of Rs. 15,000 in total (Singh, 1984). Derajat engaged in commerce with merchants from Peshawar, Amritsar, Sind, Kabul, Herat, Bokhara, and Shikarpur, among other cities in India. Sawan Mal took over as Multan's finance manager in 1820. Bahawalpur, Khairpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, Shujabad, and Mithankot were Mullan's principal marketplaces. They traded with merchants from all throughout India, notably from Sind, Peshawar, Amritsar, Kabul, Herat, Bokhara, and Shikarpur (Singh, 1984). Sikh rule under the vision of Maharaja Ranjit Singh introduced coinage to Lahore in 1801, resulting in the creation of the Nanak-Shahi coin. The ruler's name and likeness are absent from this coin. Mohur coins in gold and silver were very common. Coins for one, half, and quarter rupees (1.25 Rs) were frequently made. Persian script was used throughout the coin's production. In Multan (1818), Kashmir (1819), Derajat (Dera Ghazi Khan and Dera Ismail Khan, 1821), and Peshawar (1834), the Maharaja founded mints. The leaf is the main design on most of the coins. The Nanak-Shahi coins minted in Kashmir were called Hari-Singhi, after the region's monarch, Hari Singh Nalwa. The Morashahi in Amritsar and the Naunihal Singhi in Peshawar are two other coins made in Punjab.

The coins were created using a die and were only produced under government oversight. To create the coins, the state hired Sarafs. After a Nazrana was appointed, the Sarafs were expected to present the state with him. It bore engravings of the coin's insignia, the mint's name, and the year it was minted. Yet, no coins bearing Maharaja Ranjit Singh's name have been discovered. Nonetheless, there are coins bearing the names of Sikh Gurus. Ranjit Singh used gold mohar, silver rupees from Nanakshahi, and Mansuri paisa as currency. The mohar was worth fifteen Nanakshahi silver rupees or sixteen East Indian Company rupees. The

distribution of it was restricted.

The Nanakshahi silver rupee was widely distributed across the Sikh kingdom, especially in the Multan district of Dera Ghzai Khan (Taylor & Hussain, 2023). The pair of coins originated in Amritsar. Simple and simple, the Mansuri paisa was made entirely of copper. A group of five or six persons was called an anna. They were taken out of Jagadhri, a settlement on the Yamuna River. The Maharaja banned imports. The traders refused to supply the copper metal that was supplied by Mussoorie, also known as Mansuri. Ranjit Singh gave his approval for the import. There was no modern-day large-scale industry during the period. Because of the turbulence and instability that existed in Punjab until the nineteenth century, trade, both internal and external, was not well established.

Sea and interior trade remained slow due to traditional sources of transportation and communication. Private persons collaborated with the state to build businesses in both rural and urban areas. State-owned royal industries usually produce items for the government, whereas rural cottage companies meet the needs of the ordinary population. The lives of laborers and employees in these industries were miserable. Among the most important manufacturers were the wood, leather, and metal sectors. Prior to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's arrival, trade in the region was in decline, especially when Mughal rule in Punjab ceased. He tried to control Punjabi business and trade. However, customs taxes were ruthlessly imposed on traders and merchants to support Maharaja Ranjit Singh's massive army and maintain control over them (Gannie & Parhar, 2022).

### **2.2.3 Social Changes**

The consolidation of Sikh power in Derajat between 1821 and 1849 brought crucial and nuanced social changes in Muslim tribal regions including Derajat. A key transformation was to shift of tribal administration to centralized structure administration, which eroded the absolute authority of local Baloch chiefs (Sardars). Power became concentrated in the hands of governors (Nazims) appointed by Sikh rulers from Lahore (Capital of Sikh rule), giving rise to a new administrative elite loyal to the Sikh empire. This reorientation of patronage networks elevated collaborators, such as certain Hindu mercantile groups, while diminishing the influence of traditional tribal leaders. Additionally, the establishment of military garrisons and a new administrative apparatus facilitated an influx of non-local officials, soldiers (including Sikhs, Hindus, and Europeans), and traders from Punjab, introducing new ethnic and religious elements into the region's demographics. The focus on securing trade routes and enhancing agricultural output also shifted local occupational patterns, promoting a transition from pastoralism to settled agriculture and trade. Culturally, Sikh rule was marked by pragmatic tolerance rather than forced conversion; while the state was Sikh-led, it did not impose its religion on the Muslim majority. Historical accounts, such as those by Alexander Burnes, highlight the peaceful coexistence of various communities (Shaheen, 2012). However, the presence of Sikh governors, soldiers, and symbols of state authority, like coinage minted in the name of the Sikh Gurus, introduced new cultural and religious motifs into the public sphere of Derajat.

### 3. Conclusion

The Sikh interregnum in Derajat was a transformative period characterized by the imposition of a centralized region apparatus upon a traditionally tribal landscape, challenging monolithic portrayals of Sikh rule between 1820 and 1849. During Sikh rule Derajat face significant administrative overhauls and nuanced socio-economic changes. The most definitive impact of Sikh governance was the systematic dismantling of localized tribal authority, with the Lahore palace (Darbar) replacing the autonomous power of Baloch Sardars through the appointment of governors like Sawan Mal and the establishment of a uniform land revenue system such as Batai and Kankut. While local customs were tolerated, ultimate legal authority be inherent in with Sikh officials, effectively integrating Derajat into the empire. Financially and economically, Sikh rule under the supervision of Raja Ranjit Singh stimulated regional commerce by establishing law and order and securing the routes of trades, linking markets from all over the Punjab with Derajat. The introduction of Sikh coinage standardized trade, while state initiatives in irrigation aimed to enhance agricultural productivity, albeit with an extractive focus to fund the imperial machinery. Socially, the period also observed the rest ratification rather than a revolution, as the influx of non-local officials and traders curtailed the power of traditional tribal chiefs, created a new loyal administration of Sikh empire. The Sikh administration also practiced pragmatic religious tolerance, introducing Sikh cultural elements without imposing any restriction on Muslim community and other minorities. Ultimately, Sikh rule in Derajat represented an interregnum of imposed order that replaced tribal breakup with a centralized military backed administration, fundamentally altering the region's administrative trajectory and socio-economic foundations.

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