



Emperor of the Five Rivers: The Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

By Lord Sheikh
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Lord Lexden enjoys Lord Shiekh's account of the extraordinary life of the man known as the Lion of the Punjab

As the British increased their power in northern India in the early nineteenth century, they encountered a remarkable figure, the Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), known widely as the Lion of the Punjab. They came to admire his brilliance as a military commander, his astuteness as a politician and his dissipation as an individual.

Ranjit Singh subdued an array of warring chieftains to become the dictator of human affairs between the Indus and the Afghan passes, creating a stability the region had never previously known. He was recognised as the head of a mighty Sikh empire in

which other religions were accorded full equality. Prosperity grew as industries – textiles, mines and armaments – became established with the autocratic ruler's benign support. The fabulous 190-carat Koh-i-Noor diamond came into his possession, a glittering symbol of his power.

The British regarded him as a valued and effective ally. In 1838, the Governor-General, Lord Auckland, paid him a state visit, accompanied by his sister, Emily Eden. In a letter home she described the great Indian prince disrespectfully as 'an old mouse with grey whiskers and one eye' (he had lost the other as a result of severe smallpox in youth).

She was diverted rather than shocked by his colourful harem of lively women and graceful painted boys. She observed without censure his addiction to a lethal concoction consisting of opium, raw spirit, meat juice and powdered pearls. He sank slowly into a stupor while discussing a joint expedition against Afghanistan with her brother.

Ranjit Singh's formidable achievements, and unconcealed vices, have been much discussed by British and Indian historians. Mohamed Sheikh, a Conservative peer with wide-ranging business, academic and philanthropic interests, has now joined their number. His beautifully illustrated volume provides a full account of a remarkable life.

Lord Sheikh will not hear a word against Punjab's Lion. 'He was, quite simply, a very great man', this study concludes. Much stress is placed on his humane and generous instincts. He opposed capital punishment (while sometimes permitting mutilations). The author tells us that 'the Maharaja was benevolent to his subjects, no matter what their ethnicity or religion and sought to promote interfaith unity through policies of equality and non-discrimination'. In this account, the ferocious warrior-prince

“ In this account, Ranjit Singh emerges as a pioneer of reconciliation between the world's religions ”

emerges perhaps surprisingly as a pioneer of reconciliation between the world's religions.

Ranjit Singh died in 1839; his Sikh empire collapsed ten years later. A very young son, Duleep Singh, who inherited the extensive territories, surrendered them to the British after military defeat. A brief outline of his extraordinary story is given in a postscript to the book. A fuller account would have provided further bizarre details.

After presenting the Koh-i-Noor to Queen Victoria ('he is so handsome', she gushed), Duleep Singh set himself up as a landowner in Norfolk. He joined the Carlton Club where a copy of a portrait of him, presented by Lord Sheikh, now hangs. He tried unsuccessfully to become a Tory candidate against one of Gladstone's sons. One of his daughters became a prominent suffragette. What on earth would the Lion of Punjab have made of his descendants? 🇮🇳



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