
Unlocking the Daftar: Unexplored Archives of the Sikh Empire in Lahore (1801–1849)

Robina Yasmeen

This article explores the rich but underutilized Persian archival sources of the Sikh Empire preserved in Lahore, focusing on the period from 1801 to 1849. It argues that these daftars and manuscripts, housed in institutions such as the Punjab Archives, Punjab Public Library, University of the Punjab Library, and the Faqir Khana Museum, are indispensable for reconstructing the political, administrative, military, and cultural history of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's state. By surveying key Persian chronicles, official records, correspondence, military accounts, and court diaries, the article highlights the sophistication of Sikh governance and the continued centrality of Persian as a language of administration, historiography, and cultural expression. It further emphasizes the need for systematic preservation, cataloguing, and accessibility of these sources to enable more nuanced and empirically grounded scholarship on the Sikh Empire and nineteenth-century Punjab.

Key Words: Sikh Empire, Persian Archives, Lahore, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Daftar, Historiography, Punjab History

Archives are the true ‘treasure troves’ of historical happenings; lending reliability, rigor, and validity to any good research endeavor and scholarship. Archival sources are testimony to the past and explanations of current events and actions. The critical challenge is how well to preserve and access such rare historical records and give this a ‘larger audience’ for any authentic and telling analysis of historical occurrences.

Lahore has many rich archival collections including the Punjab Public Library, Punjab Archives, the Main Library of the University of the Punjab, and the oldest of them all the Faqir Khana Museum and Library. These archives hold a rare collection of historical records of the subcontinent including records of the Sikh era (1799-1849) kept in files, bounded book volumes, and loose sheets. Among others, these archives have a rare official newspaper ‘*Akhbar-Darbar-e-Lahore*’ containing daily proceedings of the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his successors, the treaties of 1809 and 1833, and correspondence between the British Government and the Sikhs, the letters, diaries, and documents relating to the foreign affairs, trade, law & order, daily wages, monthly and yearly grants given during the period of Sikh rule. While highlighting key primary documents on Punjab available in these archives, this paper also emphasizes the urgent need to effectively preserve and make these rare historical records easily accessible to researchers.

Primary Persian Accounts

The Persian sources from Ranjit Singh’s era are invaluable for understanding the internal workings of the Sikh Empire. Texts like “*Zafarnameh-i-Ranjit Singh*” by *Diwan Amarnath* and “*Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*” by *Sohan Lal Suri* offer unparalleled insight into court politics, administrative structures, revenue mechanisms, military campaigns, and daily life at the Lahore Darbar. These sources are especially notable for their firsthand accounts, as their authors held important bureaucratic positions or enjoyed close access to the royal court.¹

Moreover, works such as “*Tawarikh-i-Punjab*” by Bute Shah and “*Ibratnamah*” by Mufti Ali-ud-Din provide valuable ethnographic and geographic information. “*Charbagh-i-Punjab*” and “*Hisab-i-Fauj-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh*” stand out for their statistical and military records, which make them indispensable for researchers investigating the social, economic, and military dimensions of the Sikh state. The level of detail in these manuscripts from land revenue records to military payrolls demonstrates a highly sophisticated bureaucracy operating in Persian.²

The Persian legacy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s court did not end with the annexation of Punjab in 1849. Many Persian records were preserved and translated by British administrators who recognized their importance. This legacy continued to influence administrative norms, education, and cultural production in colonial Punjab. Even after the decline of Persian in British India, these documents remained vital sources for historians.

There are number of documents available in the archives of the Lahore although some of them has been translated in English but the original documents are also present in the different libraries. For example,

Tarikh e Punjab, or Sher Singh Nama written by Muhammad Naqi Peshawri, the publishing date of this document is not mentioned in the text but while reading the text we can confirm the dates, that it was written between 1840 to 1843 because the writer first composed its chronogram in 1840 and then in 1843. He was the eyewitness of the events of the murder of Prince Sher Singh his Son and Prime Minister Dhian Singh. He closely observed the savage drama which was enacted in Punjab from 1840 to 1843. The interesting thing is that the name Sher Singh Nama is not mentioned in the text but somehow it was given the name of Sher Singh Nama, it was more than a *Tahrikh e Punjab*. The name Sher Singh Nama was given by the then commissioner of Lahore Mr. Raikes.

Khalsa Nama (Khalisa Nama) by Bakhat Mal lacks an explicit date of composition, yet internal references show it was being written in 1806 and continued into 1807, concluding with mention of Maharaja Ranjit

Singh's second Sutlej expedition of 1807, firmly placing its compilation in 1806-1807. The chronicle's language is often impure and obscure, mingling Hindi, Sanskrit, and distorted English terms. Its author, held in repute by contemporaries (Pandit Dya Ram calls Lala Bakht Mal an elevated, spiritual man devoted to letters), served as a munshi under Dewan Ganga Ram and authored works such as *Gulislatani-Khyal*, *Tilasam-i-Gam*, *Bagh-o-Bahar*, *Khalisa Nama*, and *Louis Nama*; he also appears to have been in close contact with British officers and had firsthand opportunities to observe the late-eighteenth-century contest for dominance among Marathas, French, and English in Upper India. While much of the book described by the author as a Sikh history from Guru Nanak onward, draws on secondary materials and includes legendary matter, its coverage of the opening years of the nineteenth century is contemporary; historically it spans from the Mughal Empire's disintegration in the later eighteenth century to the emergence of Ranjit Singh in the early nineteenth, with particular value for the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the early phase of Ranjit Singh's career.

Shir o Shakar: is written by Pandit Dya Ram, it is an autobiographically sketch and a record of important contemporary political events between 1814 to 1825, even the earlier accounts of scrambles of power between the Marathas, the English and the French after the dissolution of the Mughal empire in the 18th century either eye witnessed by him or the events which took place during that time are observed by him.

Zafar Nama, is a Persian translation of General Ventura's French manual on Sikh army drill and organization, produced at Maharaja Ranjit Singh's order and transcribed by Munshi *Harbhagat Rai*. The scribe records how European officers Ventura, Allard and later Court were recruited to modernize the army; Sardars and their sons trained in the *Fauj-e-Khas* using French methods. Prompted by the Maharaja and Commandant Mahan Singh, Ventura dictated the text, which lays out precise drills and formations with illustrations. The manuscript is a rare primary source documenting the European-led transformation that made Ranjit Singh's forces formidable even against the East India Company.

Khalis Nama by Rattan Chand (son of Raizada Salamat Rai) was begun in March 1842, completed September 1843, with an appendix dated 25 March 1844, and ends with Maharaja Duleep (Dalip) Singh's accession on 27 Oct 1843—making the 1842–43 sections (and some late-Ranjit Singh material) contemporary. Framed as a history of the Khalsa, it briefly treats the Sikh Gurus, the invasions of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali, the fall of Muslim power and rise of the misls up to Ranjit Singh's birth (1780), then focuses on the Shukar Chakya house from Ranjit to Duleep (1780–1843): Lahore's capture, conquests of Kasur, Multan, Kashmir, consolidation in central Punjab, notes on Khalsa Darbar scribes, Kharak Singh's coronation, and the deaths of Nau Nihal Singh. Its chief value is a coherent, near-contemporary narrative of the transition from Kharak Singh to Duleep Singh, preserved in few other sources

Tazkar-i-Multan was written in 1861 by a descendant of Shah Gerdaiz, during Col. G. W. Hamilton's tenure as Multan's commissioner. Based largely on family oral tradition, it traces Multan's history from its origins to the British conquest, explains the city's founding and name, and is organized into three “books,” with a supplement on notable chiefs and families. The closing sections read like a gazetteer—listing people, tribes, and families in and around the city—useful for local detail but of limited strict historical value.

Waqai-i Jang-e Sikhan, composed by Ajudhia circa 1845–46, is a contemporary, largely eyewitness chronicle of the First Anglo-Sikh War, especially the battles of *Ferozeshah* and *Sobraon*. The *Ferozeshah* account blends his own observations with named on-the-spot reports; the *Sobraon* section begins from verified reports (he was not across the Sutlej) and ends with his personal knowledge. Written in plain, unadorned prose without courtly embellishment, it is one of the few native records of the Sikh kingdom's first open clash with the British amid Punjab's turbulence and is treated as credible eyewitness evidence given the author's long familiarity with politics since Ranjit Singh and access to first-hand information.

***Tawarikh-e-Sikhan*:** Authored by *Khushwaqt Rai*, this work traces the history of the Sikhs from their beginnings up to the year 1811. It

provides a narrative covering the lives of the Sikh *Gurus* through to the rise of *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* and also includes details of the Metcalfe negotiations up to June 1811.

Tarikh-e-Hind: Ahmed Shah Batalia's work is particularly valuable for its section titled *Zikr-e-Guruan va Ibtida-i-Singha va Mazhab-i-Ishan*. In this portion, he provides a concise history of the Sikhs from the time of Guru Nanak up to 1824. The text offers significant insights into Sikh social life, including their customs of inheritance, their spirit of religious tolerance, and their non-sectarian outlook. Notably, this section, *Zikr-i-Guruan*, was later incorporated as an appendix to the first volume of Sohan Lal Suri's *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*.

Zafarnameh-i-Ranjit Singh: Diwan Amarnath, the son of Diwan Dina Nath and an official in the service of *Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, authored this work at the Maharaja's request. Composed between 1833 and 1837, it was later edited by Sita Ram Kohli and published by Punjab University, Lahore, in 1928. Widely regarded for its accuracy, depth of detail, and richness of content, the text is often considered superior to Sohan Lal Suri's *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* and Bute Shah's *Tawarikh-i-Punjab*. Amarnath's close association with the court, particularly in his capacity as *Bakshi* (paymaster), afforded him direct access to official records and reliable information. As a result, his chronicle provides a valuable account of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign from his rise to power up until 1837.

Tawarikh-i-Punjab: Completed in 1848 by Ghulam Muhayuddin (Bute Shah), *Tawarikh-i-Punjab* is a major Persian chronicle of Punjab from antiquity to the fall of the Sikh Empire. After a geographic introduction, it unfolds in five *daftars*: (1) Hindu rajas to Rai Pithora; (2) Ghaznavid invasions through Aurangzeb; (3) the Sikh Gurus especially the Sodhi and Bedi lineages; (4) the rise of the Sikh *misl*s; and (5) the careers of Charhat Singh, Mahan Singh, and above all Maharaja Ranjit Singh, with rich detail on administration, campaigns, and politics. Written just after the empire's decline, it preserves contemporary perspectives on the Mughal-to-Sikh-to-colonial transition; its fifth section is considered the most

authoritative, making the work indispensable for studying nineteenth-century Persianate historiography and memories of Sikh power.

Umdat-ut-Tawarikh: compiled by Sohan Lal Suri, court diarist of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, with earlier portions by his father Ganpat Rai is the most authoritative Persian chronicle of the Sikh period. In five *daftars* it traces Punjab from Guru Nanak (1469) to the 1849 annexation: I (1469–1771), II (rise of Sikh power to 1830), III (Ranjit Singh's reign, 1831–39, in five subparts), IV (the post-Ranjit turmoil, 1839–45 *Kharak Singh, Nau Nihal Singh, Sher Singh, Duleep Singh*), and V (*Duleep Singh* and the Anglo-Sikh wars). Written from within the Lahore Darbar using official papers, accounts, and eyewitness testimony, it offers unparalleled detail on politics, military campaigns, diplomacy, and administration. Preserved and printed by Sohan Lal's descendants at Arya Press, Lahore (1885–89), it remains an indispensable source and a key witness to Persianate continuity under Sikh rule.

Ibratnamah: Mufti Ali-ud-Din's *Ibratnamah* is a major 19th-century Persian source on Punjab, combining geography, history, and ethnography. In three main *daftars* (plus an editor-added fourth), it surveys the region's environment and agrarian economy; charts Lahore's growth and civic life; and narrates Sikh history from Guru Nanak to the 1849 annexation. The added section analyzes social and religious practices Sufi orders (*Qadiri, Suhrawardi, Naqshbandi, Chishti*), Hindu ascetics, and community customs offering rich ethnographic detail on Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. The work also records the court culture around Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Overall, it is an indispensable, contemporary compendium for reconstructing Punjab's political, social, and cultural landscape on the eve of colonial rule.

Charbagh-i-Punjab: *Charbagh-i-Punjab* (1855) by *Ganesh Das Badehra, a Qanungo* under Maharaja Ranjit Singh is a gazetteer-like, mid-19th-century survey of Punjab drawing on official records and close local knowledge. It systematically describes rivers, doabs, canals, soils, agricultural productivity, and catalogs towns, villages, and trade centers, illuminating settlement and urban patterns. Equally, it documents Sikh

gurdwaras, Hindu temples, Muslim shrines, community customs, and folk tales, yielding a rich ethnographic portrait. The work is a key source for Punjab's geography, religious pluralism, and folklore during the transition from Sikh sovereignty to British rule.³

Tarikh-i-Panjab, Tuhfat-ul-Ahbab: *Abdul Karim's Tarikh-i-Panjab, Tuhfat-ul-Ahbab* (1862) is a Persian chronicle that outlines Sikh beliefs and institutions, traces Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rise and administrative state-building, then follows his successors through the weakening of the polity, the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46), and the 1849 British annexation. Written shortly after these events, it provides a contemporary Persianate perspective on the internal divisions of the Khalsa, external British pressure, and the Sikh kingdom's consolidation and decline making it a valuable mid-nineteenth-century source.⁴

Awraq-i-Prishan-i-Tawarikh-i-Panjab: Edited by Ganda Singh, *Awraq-i-Prishan-i-Tawarikh-i-Panjab* is a Persian compilation detailing key episodes of Ranjit Singh's rule and its aftermath. It records major campaigns, the battle of Multan, the conquest of Peshawar, the annexation of Kashmir, and the incorporation of Mankera, showing his strategy to secure Punjab's frontiers. It then traces the post-Ranjit turmoil, including the assassination of Dhian Singh, Lahore Darbar instability, and the Hazara affair. Together, these accounts chart the empire's shift from consolidation to factional decline, making the work a valuable companion to other nineteenth-century chronicles.⁵

Tarikh Saadat Jaavid: (1850) by *Harnam Singh and Gurdas Singh* is a Persian general history that pays special attention to Punjab. It profiles Maharaja Ranjit Singh's political authority, campaigns, and state-building; notes the Jats' social-political influence; and records episodes such as *Jaswant Rao Holkar's* flight, placing Punjab within wider subcontinental power struggles. Written soon after the Sikh kingdom's fall and close to the events it describes, it offers a near-contemporary perspective that complements chronicles like *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* and *Zafarnameh-i-Ranjit Singh* in showing how Sikh sovereignty was remembered in Indian historiography.⁶

Hisab-i-Fauj-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh: This manuscript provides a meticulous account of the military organization under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It categorizes the army into three divisions, infantry, cavalry, and artillery and details the composition of each regiment under its commanding officer. The manuscript records the pay and allowances of officers, the financial arrangements of each infantry company and cavalry squadron, and even includes expenditure attached to artillery units. Many of the artillery officers were Muslims, and the entries, though originally Persian, are transcribed in elegant *Gurmukhi* script. This document is invaluable for reconstructing the financial and administrative systems of the Sikh army.⁷

Tarikh e Sikhan: An anonymous East India Company official, writing at Col. David Ochterlony's direction in 1811, chronicles Mughal history from *Farrukh Siyar* to the rise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Only the sections up to 1811 are contemporary, likely based on firsthand or near-firsthand knowledge. It covers Ranjit Singh's early consolidation of central Punjab and his impending expansion west of the Sutlej, and it resembles *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* and *Bute Shah's Tarikh-i-Punjab* in style and scope.

Kanhaya Lal Hindi Rai Bahadur Ranjit Namah: Written in 1876 and published by Mustajee Press, Lahore, this work provides a history of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign and includes an account of the decline of the Sikh kingdom up to its annexation in 1849. As a retrospective account, it reflects both contemporary admiration for Ranjit Singh and a recognition of the challenges that followed his death.⁸

Kirpa Ram, Gulabnama: This text records Maharaja Ranjit Singh's military expeditions to Kashmir and contains details about his campaigns and eventual death. Its narrative is a significant source for understanding the Maharaja's northern frontier policy.⁹

Masnavi-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh Composed by Manna Lal, the son of Bahadur Singh, this Persian masnavi (poetic composition) is dedicated to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It celebrates his virtues and reign, reflecting the literary traditions of courtly praise.¹⁰

Tarikh-i-Kashmir by A voluminous and statistical history of Kashmir written during the Maharaja's era, this chronicle provides detailed administrative, demographic, and geographical information about the region, situating Kashmir within the Sikh Empire's wider dominion.¹¹

Waquat-i-Shah Shuja published by Majma-ul-Bahrain Published by Majma-ul-Bahrain Press, Ludhiana, this work records important events involving Shah Shuja, Diwan Mohakam Chand, and the Kohinoor diamond. It also details the Tripartite Treaty between Ranjit Singh, Shah Shuja, and the British, illustrating Lahore's pivotal role in regional diplomacy.¹²

Tarikh-i-Ahd-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh va Sardaran-i-Khalsa This historical account focuses on Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign and his relations with the Sikh Sardars. It provides insight into governance, military campaigns, and the dynamics of leadership among the Khalsa aristocracy.¹³

Ahmad Yaar, Mian, Maulvi Shahnameh-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Composed by Ahmad Yaar, a court poet of Ranjit Singh, this text blends Persian literary conventions with Sikh themes. It includes narratives about the rulers of Punjab and glorifies the Maharaja's reign, contributing to the cultural memory of the Sikh state.¹⁴

Insha-i-Khujasta (MS) written by Qazi Nizammuddin This is a collection of historical letters containing detailed notes on events in Punjab during Ranjit Singh's time. The Maharaja is referred to as "Singh Sahib," and the correspondence provides insight into contemporary political and social developments.¹⁵

Risala-i-Sahibnama, Tarikh-i-Panjab Written by Ganesh Das Badehra, a revenue officer (*Qanungo*) of Gujrat, this history covers Punjab from its earliest times up to 1847. It is notable for its integration of local geography, folklore, and political developments into a coherent narrative. **Scroll of Monthly Stipends** (*Faqir Khana* Library), Records detailing financial allowances granted to individuals by the state.

Lists of Court and Army Personnel, Official rosters identifying those serving in *Ranjit Singh*'s administration and military.

Makatib-i-Azizuddin – A collection of letters written by *Faqir Azizuddin*, some on behalf of the *Maharaja*, addressed to European officials.

Sujjan Rai's Persian Diary, A personal account offering firsthand details of contemporary events.

Madhu Lal Hussain's Urs Reports (Civil Secretariat Archives, Lahore), Intelligence reports documenting gatherings at the saint's shrine.

Revenue Reports of Multan District, Instructions issued to revenue officials, reflecting fiscal administration.

In the Bay Line of History (1975), J.S. Grewal, Analysis and publication of Persian documents from a Punjab town.

Catalogue of Khalsa Darbar Lahore by *Sita Ram Kohli*, A catalogued record of documents from *Ranjit Singh*'s court.

Punjab Akhbar (1839–1840), Contemporary newspaper reports capturing political developments of the period.

Khalsa Durbar Records, Official documents of state administration preserved from the Sikh Darbar.

Roznamcha-i Ranjit Singh (up to 1817), Daily record of events during the early reign of *Ranjit Singh*.

Hisabnama'-i-Fauj-i-Ranjit Singh – Accounts related to the finances and expenditures of the *Maharaja*'s army.

Akhbarat-i-Sikhan, Persian-language newsletters chronicling Sikh affairs in Lahore.

Maulvi Ahmad Baksh Chishti's Roznamcha (1819–1860), A chronicle of day-to-day events extending into the *post-Ranjit Singh* era.

The other sources like the unpublished Diary of Sikh Times, *Akhbar Darbar- Maharaja*, *Akhbarat-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh* and also some papers written by Maulvi Ahmad Bakhsh Chishti but they are not fully available but his work was preserved by his son Maulvi Noor Ahmad Chishti who wrote *Tahqiqat e Chishtia* and as he was not an employ of any court, and he wrote only for himself or these are the private chronicles so we can have a very clear and unbiased picture of the Sikh period and the British period as well.

After reading all the above sources, It is clear that Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign Persian literature flourished across genres, historiography, epistemological writings, *masnavi*, and poetry. Despite his continual military engagements, the Maharaja made earnest time for, and patronized, Punjab's literati.

In sum, the Persian sources on Maharaja Ranjit Singh illuminate not only the contours of Sikh sovereignty but also the cultural and administrative sophistication of one of the most dynamic polities in South Asian history. They represent a vibrant confluence of Persianate and Sikh traditions that defined an era and continue to shape our historical imagination.

Conclusion

The Persian sources on Maharaja Ranjit Singh provide a rich and multifaceted portrait of his reign, administration, and cultural patronage. Far from being limited to the courtly elite, Persian was a language of administration, diplomacy, education, literature, and everyday governance in the Sikh Empire. These sources not only highlight the Maharaja's strategic and pragmatic use of Persian to maintain continuity with Mughal and regional traditions, but also emphasize his inclusive vision that accommodated Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh intellectuals alike. Persian

madrasas, poets, chroniclers, and administrators played a pivotal role in shaping and recording the era's socio-political landscape.

Documents such as *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*, *Zafarnameh-i-Ranjit Singh*, *Ibratnamah*, and *Tawarikh-i-Punjab* demonstrate the depth of bureaucratic sophistication, cultural pluralism, and intellectual vibrancy under Ranjit Singh. These Persian chronicles reflect not only historical events but also capture the ethos of a time when the Punjab emerged as a major regional power under Sikh rule. As such, they remain indispensable for historians and scholars seeking to understand not only the administrative machinery and military structure of the empire, but also its ideological underpinnings and the role of Persian cosmopolitanism in legitimizing Sikh sovereignty. Therefore, any scholarly engagement with Ranjit Singh's rule remains incomplete without a serious consideration of these Persian sources, which continue to shape our understanding of nineteenth-century Punjab and its enduring legacies.

Notes and References

¹ J. S. Grewal and Irfan Habib, eds., *Sikh History from Persian Sources: Translations of Major Texts* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001).

² Ganesh Das Badehra, *Charbagh-i-Punjab*, trans. and ed. J. S. Grewal (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1970).

³ Ganesh Das Badehra, *Charbagh-i-Punjab*, ed. and trans. J. S. Grewal (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1970).

⁴ Abdul Karim, *Tarikh-i-Panjab, Tuhfat-ul-Ahbab* (Lahore, 1862).

⁵ Ganda Singh, ed., *Awraq-i-Prishan-i-Tawarikh-i-Panjab* (Patiala: Punjab Government Record Office, 1942).

⁶ Harnam Singh and Gurdas Singh, *Tarikh Saadat Jaavid* (1850).

⁷ *Hisab-i-Fauj-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (MS), Punjab Archives, Lahore.

⁸ Kanhaiya Lal Hindi Rai. *Ranjit Namah*. Lahore: Mustajee Press, 1876.

⁹ Kirpa Ram. *Gulabnama*. Punjab Archives, Lahore.

¹⁰ Manna Lal. *Masnavi-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh*

¹¹ Mihan Singh Colonel. *Tarikh-i-Kashmir*. Punjab Archives.

¹² *Waquat-i-Shah Shuja*. Ludhiana: Majma-ul-Bahrain Press, 19th century.

¹³ *Tarikh-i-Ahd-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh va Sardaran-i-Khalsa* (MS).

Punjab University Library, Lahore.

¹⁴ Ahmad Yaar. *Shahnameh-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (MS).

¹⁵ Qazi Nizammuddin. *Insha-i-Khujasta* (MS).