

ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL
Available Online: https://assajournal.com
Vol. 04 No. 02. October-December 2025.Page# 5266-5272
Print ISSN: 3006-2497 Online ISSN: 3006-2500
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems

Between Diplomacy and Imperial Expansion: Anglo-Sikh Relations under Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Decline of the Lahore Kingdom, 1799–1845

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Abstract
This article examines the changing relationship between the Sikh kingdom of Lahore and the English East India Company from the consolidation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's authority in 1799 to the outbreak of the First Anglo-Sikh War in 1845. It argues that Anglo-Sikh relations were neither consistently friendly nor inevitably hostile. They developed through a shifting combination of strategic rivalry, negotiated frontier-making, commercial diplomacy, intelligence gathering, and competing ambitions in the Indus and Afghan regions. The Treaty of Amritsar of 25 April 1809 established the Sutlej as the principal boundary between the Company's protected Cis-Sutlej states and Ranjit Singh's expanding kingdom. Although this settlement prevented immediate war, it constrained the Lahore Darbar's efforts to incorporate the Sikh principalities east of the river and redirected its expansion towards the north-west. Subsequent contacts—including the 1831 meeting at Ropar, negotiations over the Indus trade, and the Tripartite Treaty of 1838—demonstrated both cooperation and deep disagreement. The article also considers the instability that followed Ranjit Singh's death in 1839 and the increasing intervention of British officials in Lahore's internal politics. By placing diplomacy within the wider context of imperial expansion and the political structure of the Lahore state, the study offers a critical interpretation of the transition from negotiated coexistence to armed conflict.
Keywords: Anglo-Sikh relations; Maharaja Ranjit Singh; Lahore Darbar; East India Company; Treaty of Amritsar (1809); Indus trade; Tripartite Treaty (1838); Punjab; colonial expansion.

Introduction

The rise of the Sikh kingdom under Maharaja Ranjit Singh transformed the political balance of north-western India. When Ranjit Singh established his authority at Lahore in 1799 and assumed the title of Maharaja in 1801, the East India Company had already become the dominant political and military power across much of the subcontinent. The Company's influence extended towards the Sutlej, while the Sikh ruler sought to consolidate the Punjab and secure its frontiers against Afghan, local and regional rivals. The emergence of two expanding powers in adjoining territories made the question of their political boundary unavoidable.

The relationship that followed cannot be understood simply as a sequence of treaties and diplomatic visits. The Company sought to prevent a strong independent power from extending into the Cis-Sutlej region and to protect its strategic communications towards Delhi and the north-west. Ranjit Singh, meanwhile, sought recognition of his sovereignty, freedom of action in the Punjab, and access to commercial and strategic routes through Sindh and the Indus. Both sides used negotiation, gifts, envoys, military demonstrations and intelligence networks to advance their interests. The outward language of friendship often concealed a substantial difference in political objectives.

This article develops the central themes of the supplied chapter while correcting its chronology and strengthening its historical interpretation. It focuses on the period 1799–1845, with particular attention to the Treaty of Amritsar (1809), the consolidation of diplomatic relations, the Indus question, the Tripartite Treaty (1838), and the succession crisis after Ranjit Singh's death. The First Anglo-Sikh War began in December 1845 and therefore forms the endpoint of the study rather than a conflict fully analyzed here.

Research Questions and Objectives

The article addresses four questions:

(1) What strategic considerations shaped the early relationship between the Lahore Darbar and the East India Company?

(2) How did the Treaty of Amritsar of 1809 alter the territorial and diplomatic position of the Sikh kingdom?

(3) In what ways did commercial and Afghan questions influence relations during the 1820s and 1830s?

(4) How did the death of Ranjit Singh and the subsequent political crisis contribute to the breakdown of the relationship by 1845?

Its principal objective is to explain Anglo-Sikh relations as a changing contest over sovereignty, territory and regional influence, rather than to present the treaties as evidence of uninterrupted friendship.

Research Methodology and Sources

The study follows a qualitative historical method based on chronological reconstruction, contextual analysis and critical comparison of published primary and secondary accounts. The supplied chapter provides the initial narrative and its cited works, including Joseph Davey Cunningham, K. S. Narang, Syed Muhammad Latif, the Imperial Gazetteer of India and Rajmohan Gandhi. These are read alongside modern scholarship on the Sikh kingdom, colonial diplomacy and the political crisis of 1839–1849.

Colonial-era narratives are valuable for dates, official correspondence and diplomatic events, but they must be read critically because Company officials wrote from within an imperial administrative framework. Later historians have also questioned explanations that attribute the kingdom's collapse solely to personal rivalries or the supposed incapacity of Ranjit Singh's successors. Recent scholarship gives greater attention to the political economy of the state, the agency of the Lahore court, and the role of British intervention. The article therefore distinguishes documented events from interpretation and avoids treating every claim in nineteenth-century accounts as neutral fact.

The Rise of the Lahore State and the British Frontier

Ranjit Singh's consolidation of Lahore in 1799 initiated a process of state-building that brought many Sikh misls and neighbouring territories under a central authority. His government expanded through military campaigns, negotiated submission, revenue arrangements and the incorporation of local elites. The resulting kingdom was not simply a religious polity: it was a territorial state whose ruling and administrative classes included Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. J. S. Grewal emphasises that Ranjit Singh extended patronage across

important sections of the population and that Hindus and Muslims formed a substantial element of the ruling class (Grewal 1991).

The Company's expansion towards the north-west created a direct strategic challenge. Its officials were concerned that Ranjit Singh might absorb the Cis-Sutlej Sikh principalities, many of which sought British protection against Lahore. Ranjit Singh, in turn, regarded these principalities as part of a wider Sikh political sphere and resisted the Company's attempt to establish a protected belt between its own territories and the Sutlej. The dispute was therefore not merely a question of geography; it concerned competing claims to authority over the Sikh chiefs.

The events of 1805, when the Maratha leader Jaswant Rao Holkar sought refuge and assistance in northern India while being pursued by Company forces, heightened the urgency of defining the frontier. Ranjit Singh explored the possibility of using the Sutlej as a boundary, but the negotiations involved several parties and competing interests. An agreement involving Ranjit Singh, Fateh Singh Ahluwalia and the Company was concluded in January 1806. It did not, however, settle the larger question of the Cis-Sutlej states.

The Negotiations of 1808–1809 and the Treaty of Amritsar

In 1808, the Company sent Charles Metcalfe to negotiate with Ranjit Singh. Their first important meeting took place near Kasur in September 1808. British proposals included cooperation against a possible French threat and arrangements that would allow Company forces to move through Punjab in the event of a wider conflict. Ranjit Singh sought recognition of his authority over the Sikh chiefs and a commitment that the Company would not make separate arrangements with them. These positions revealed the central disagreement: the Company wanted to protect the Cis-Sutlej states, whereas Ranjit Singh wanted their political status settled in his favour.

As negotiations continued, Ranjit Singh moved troops towards the Sutlej, while the Company strengthened its military presence around Ludhiana. The movement of forces made the possibility of war credible, but neither side considered a major conflict desirable at that moment. Ranjit Singh faced the risk of confronting a materially stronger military power; the Company, for its part, preferred to secure its frontier without an expensive campaign. The negotiations culminated in the Treaty of Amritsar on 25 April 1809.

The treaty recognised the Sutlej as the effective boundary between the Company's protected sphere to the south and Ranjit Singh's dominions to the north. Ranjit Singh agreed not to interfere in the Cis-Sutlej states, while the Company undertook not to interfere in his territories north of the river, provided that he maintained the stipulated limits on his forces and conduct. The settlement prevented immediate war and provided a framework for formal relations. Yet it was unequal in its longer-term consequences: the Company consolidated its influence over the Cis-Sutlej chiefs, while the Lahore Darbar's expansion eastwards was restricted.

The agreement should therefore be understood as both a diplomatic success and a strategic limitation for Ranjit Singh. It secured the independence of his core kingdom from immediate Company intervention, but it also blocked the possibility of a unified Sikh political domain on both sides of the Sutlej. Khushwant Singh's discussion of the treaty highlights how the settlement helped prevent war while enabling the Company to consolidate the Malwa and Cis-Sutlej region (Singh 2004, 211–23).

Diplomatic Coexistence, Visits and Mutual Surveillance, 1810–1831

Following the treaty, relations were marked by formal courtesies, exchanges of gifts, diplomatic missions and periodic disputes. The marriage celebrations of Kharak Singh in 1812 provided an occasion for British representatives to visit Lahore and observe the court and army. Such ceremonies were not merely social

events: they allowed rulers to display status, assess military strength and maintain channels of communication. British visitors were received with honour, while the Lahore court used diplomatic hospitality to affirm its standing as a sovereign power.

The relationship nevertheless remained cautious. British officials monitored the military and political development of the Lahore kingdom, while Ranjit Singh remained alert to Company intentions. Medical and diplomatic missions, including the presence of Dr Murray during Ranjit Singh's illness in the 1820s, created opportunities for observation and intelligence gathering. The Company's representatives were not simply neutral visitors; their reports contributed to the strategic knowledge on which British policy rested.

Disputes over places such as Ferozepur demonstrated that the frontier settlement did not remove all tension. Ranjit Singh's claims and movements in the region generated diplomatic friction, but both sides generally sought to avoid escalation. The meeting between Lord William Bentinck and Ranjit Singh at Ropar in October 1831 was a major symbolic event. It projected an image of cordial relations and mutual recognition, while the exchange of presents and ceremonial honours served the diplomatic purposes of both governments.

The Ropar meeting should not, however, be mistaken for a complete strategic alignment. The Company's growing interest in the Indus and Afghanistan increasingly conflicted with Ranjit Singh's ambitions in the same region. The language of friendship coexisted with a competition over routes, markets, buffer territories and political influence.

The Indus Question and Commercial Diplomacy

The Indus was central to the strategic and commercial calculations of the 1830s. For the Company, navigation of the river offered a route for trade and a means of gathering geographical and political intelligence about Sindh, Punjab and the approaches to Afghanistan. For Ranjit Singh, access to the Indus was essential to his own commercial interests and to any future expansion towards Sindh. The Company's negotiations with the Amirs of Sindh therefore raised concerns in Lahore that British influence might encircle or constrain the Sikh kingdom.

Agreements concluded in 1832 with the rulers of Sindh facilitated commercial navigation under restrictions. British policy formally presented these arrangements as commercial, but they also served strategic purposes by opening a route for British movement and information gathering. Robert A. Huttenback's study of British relations with Sindh shows that the arrangements restricted the carriage of military stores, armed vessels and permanent British settlement while still advancing Company commercial access. The distinction between commerce and strategy was consequently difficult to maintain.

Ranjit Singh sought assurances that new arrangements would not undermine the 1809 settlement or his own rights. The supplied chapter refers to negotiations concerning customs, transit duties and the movement of goods through the river system, including arrangements involving Mithankot and Harike. These details illustrate the administrative complexity of river trade: the parties had to negotiate duties, inspection, passports, security and the authority of officials at designated points. The resulting arrangements were not simply free-trade agreements; they were instruments for regulating movement and asserting jurisdiction.

The dispute over Sindh became more serious when Ranjit Singh considered extending his influence towards Shikarpur. The Company did not wish to see the Lahore Darbar dominate Sindh, whose rulers were increasingly drawn into British diplomatic arrangements. Ranjit Singh's requests concerning access to routes and military supplies were therefore treated cautiously or rejected. This episode reveals a fundamental limit

to Anglo-Sikh cooperation: the Company was prepared to recognise Ranjit Singh's authority within the agreed frontier, but not to support expansion that threatened British strategic interests.

Afghanistan and the Tripartite Treaty of 1838

Afghanistan added another dimension to Anglo-Sikh relations. The Company feared the growth of Russian and Persian influence in the region and sought to establish a friendly government in Kabul. Ranjit Singh, however, had his own strategic interests, especially in Peshawar, which had been brought under Sikh control. Dost Muhammad Khan's claim to Peshawar conflicted with the Lahore Darbar's position, while the Company's efforts to restore Shah Shuja to the Afghan throne required Sikh cooperation.

The Tripartite Treaty, signed in June 1838 by the British, Ranjit Singh and Shah Shuja, was designed to facilitate the restoration of Shah Shuja and to counter the perceived threat of rival influence in Afghanistan. Yet the treaty did not represent a partnership of equals with identical aims. Ranjit Singh was reluctant to surrender his claims and strategic position, particularly regarding Peshawar and the arrangements affecting Sindh. British diplomacy sought to secure Sikh participation while limiting the scope of the Maharaja's independent action.

The agreement illustrates how the Company converted regional cooperation into an instrument of imperial policy. It needed the Lahore Darbar's support for the Afghan campaign but was unwilling to endorse all of Ranjit Singh's territorial demands. The Sikh ruler's participation was therefore pragmatic and constrained. The treaty's significance lies not only in its immediate Afghan objective but also in the way it exposed the imbalance between British strategic ambitions and Sikh sovereignty.

Ranjit Singh died on 27 June 1839, shortly after the signing of the treaty. His death removed the political figure who had managed the relationship through personal authority, diplomatic skill and military strength. The stability of Anglo-Sikh relations had depended heavily on his ability to balance the interests of the court, the army and neighbouring powers.

The Succession Crisis and the Weakening of the Lahore Darbar, 1839–1843

The years after Ranjit Singh's death were marked by rapid changes in succession and factional conflict. Kharak Singh succeeded his father but failed to establish durable authority. His son Nau Nihal Singh died in 1840 in circumstances that have been debated by historians. Chand Kaur briefly claimed the regency, while Sher Singh became Maharaja in 1841. The court remained divided among royal factions, influential chiefs, ministers and military leaders.

These events should not be reduced to a simple narrative of personal weakness. Recent scholarship, particularly Priya Atwal's work on the heirs of Ranjit Singh, warns against accepting colonial accounts of the royal family and court politics without examining their political and gendered assumptions. Andrew J. Major likewise interprets the post-1839 crisis in relation to the structure of the Sikh state, the ambitions of its chiefs and the pressures created when territorial expansion slowed. These approaches provide a more complex explanation than the claim that the kingdom collapsed merely because Ranjit Singh had no capable successor.

British officials watched the instability closely and maintained contacts with competing figures. At the same time, the Company continued to strengthen its frontier position. The presence of British troops near Firozpur and the dispatch of diplomatic missions to Lahore generated suspicion within the Darbar. Meetings between Sher Singh's representatives and Governor-General Lord Ellenborough in 1842 were formally presented as expressions of friendship, but they took place in an atmosphere of anxiety about British intentions.

The Lahore state's internal problems were real, but they did not exist in isolation from external pressure. The Company's expanding military resources, its political agents and its ability to cultivate relationships with factions within Punjab altered the balance of power. As the crisis deepened, the distinction between diplomatic observation and intervention became increasingly blurred.

From Uneasy Peace to the First Anglo-Sikh War, 1845

By 1845, the relationship had deteriorated substantially. The Khalsa army had become a major political force within the kingdom, while the court struggled to maintain authority over military commanders and competing factions. The Company had built up forces near the Sutlej and was increasingly concerned about the possibility of a crossing by Sikh troops. Sikh suspicions were intensified by British military preparations and by the history of Company involvement in the affairs of the Cis-Sutlej states.

The First Anglo-Sikh War began in December 1845 after Sikh forces crossed the Sutlej. The causes of the war remain a subject of historical debate. Older British narratives often represented the conflict as an unprovoked Sikh invasion, whereas later scholarship has drawn attention to the mutual military preparations, the political instability of the Lahore Darbar and the Company's expansionist calculations. The outbreak cannot be explained by a single event alone. It emerged from the long-term consequences of the 1809 frontier settlement, the unresolved strategic rivalry over the Indus and Afghanistan, and the political crisis that followed Ranjit Singh's death.

The war falls beyond the principal chronological analysis of this article, but its outbreak marks the failure of the diplomatic framework established in 1809. The First Anglo-Sikh War ended in 1846 with the Treaty of Lahore and a major reduction in the sovereignty of the Sikh kingdom. The Second Anglo-Sikh War of 1848–1849 subsequently resulted in the annexation of Punjab. These later developments confirm that the period of negotiated coexistence had given way to direct colonial domination.

Discussion

Three interrelated patterns emerge from the evidence. First, the Treaty of Amritsar was a foundational diplomatic settlement but also a mechanism of territorial containment. It reduced the immediate risk of war while enabling the Company to consolidate its influence over the Cis-Sutlej states. Second, commercial diplomacy along the Indus was inseparable from strategic competition. Navigation, customs and trade regulations provided opportunities for political influence and intelligence gathering. Third, the death of Ranjit Singh exposed the institutional and political vulnerabilities of the Lahore kingdom at a moment when the Company possessed both the capacity and the incentive to intervene.

The relationship was therefore characterised by pragmatic cooperation within a framework of structural rivalry. Ranjit Singh was not simply a British ally, nor was the Company a consistently trustworthy partner. Each side used diplomacy to protect its own sovereignty and strategic position. The imbalance of military and imperial power, however, increasingly favoured the Company. The Lahore Darbar's independence depended on the personal authority of Ranjit Singh and on a delicate balance among military, fiscal and political interests. After his death, that balance became harder to sustain.

Conclusion

Anglo-Sikh relations between 1799 and 1845 developed through a changing combination of rivalry, negotiation and constrained cooperation. The Treaty of Amritsar in 1809 prevented immediate conflict but fixed a frontier that restricted the Lahore Darbar's expansion east of the Sutlej and consolidated British influence over the Cis-Sutlej states. Subsequent diplomatic exchanges created an appearance of friendship,

yet disputes over Ferozepur, the Indus, Sindh and Afghanistan revealed persistent differences in strategic objectives.

The Tripartite Treaty of 1838 demonstrated the limits of cooperation: the Company sought Sikh assistance for its Afghan policy while resisting Ranjit Singh's independent regional ambitions. His death in 1839 removed the central figure who had managed this difficult relationship. Succession struggles and military-political tensions weakened the Lahore Darbar, while British officials expanded their influence and strengthened their frontier position. By 1845, the diplomatic settlement had broken down and war followed. The history of this period is consequently not a story of inevitable Sikh-British hostility, nor simply one of internal Sikh decline. It is the history of two neighbouring powers whose interests overlapped in diplomacy and commerce but diverged over sovereignty, territory and imperial expansion. Understanding this interaction is essential to explaining both the outbreak of the First Anglo-Sikh War and the eventual incorporation of Punjab into the British Empire.

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