

**The Sikh Confederacy and the Rise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh until the
Treaty of Amritsar (1809)**

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Abstract

The Sikh Confederacy (1716–1799), a decentralized yet cohesive politico-military system, played a pivotal role in establishing Sikh sovereignty in Punjab amidst the decline of the Mughal Empire and Afghan invasions. Central to its success was an innovative administrative structure that balanced regional autonomy with collective governance, rooted in Sikh principles of equality and miri-piri (spiritual-temporal unity). This paper examines the administrative framework of the Sikh Confederacy, focusing on the roles of the Dal Khalsa, Sarbat Khalsa, and misl-based governance, and analyzes how this structure facilitated the rise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, culminating in his consolidation of power by the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809. Drawing on historical sources, including SikhiWiki and the Sikh Research Institute, the study highlights the Confederacy's administrative innovations and their impact on Ranjit Singh's centralized Sikh Empire.

Key Words : Sikh Confederacy, Maharaja Ranjit Singh Misls, Dal Khalsa, Sarbat Khalsa, Treaty of Amritsar, Khalsa Fauj

Introduction

The 18th century marked a transformative era for the Sikh community, which evolved from a persecuted religious group into a sovereign power in Punjab. The Sikh Confederacy, comprising 11 misls (warrior bands) unified under the Dal Khalsa and guided by the Sarbat Khalsa, established a unique administrative system that enabled territorial expansion, economic stability, and political legitimacy. This system, characterized by decentralized governance, collective decision-making, and the integration of Sikh ethos, laid the groundwork for Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rise as the founder of the Sikh Empire (1801–1849). By 1809, the Treaty of Amritsar with the British East India Company recognized Ranjit Singh's authority north of the Sutlej River, marking a significant milestone in his consolidation of power. The decline of the Mughal Empire after Aurangzeb's death in 1707, coupled with invasions by Nadir Shah (1739) and Ahmad Shah Abdali (1747–1769), created a power vacuum in Punjab. The Sikh community, galvanized by Guru Gobind Singh's creation of the Khalsa in 1699, capitalized on this instability to assert political and military dominance.[1] The Sikh

Confederacy emerged in the 1740s, formalized by the Sarbat Khalsa in 1748, which organized Sikh forces into 11 misls under the Dal Khalsa. This confederated structure enabled the Sikhs to resist external threats, conquer territories, and establish governance systems that integrated Sikh principles with practical administration. By the late 18th century, the Confederacy controlled much of Punjab, setting the stage for Ranjit Singh, leader of the Sukerchakia Misl, to unify these territories into a centralized empire.

Administrative Structure of the Sikh Confederacy

The Sikh Confederacy's administrative framework was a blend of decentralized feudalism and centralized coordination, rooted in the Khalsa's egalitarian ethos. It comprised three key components: the Sarbat Khalsa, the Dal Khalsa, and the misl-based governance system, each contributing to political, military, and economic stability.

The Sarbat Khalsa: Collective Governance

The Sarbat Khalsa, meaning "entire Khalsa," was the supreme governing body of the Sikh Confederacy, embodying the Guru Panth concept, where the collective will of the Khalsa held temporal authority alongside the spiritual authority of the Guru Granth Sahib. Convened biannually at Amritsar during Diwali and Vaisakhi, the Sarbat Khalsa served as a democratic assembly where Sikhs deliberated on political, military, and religious matters. Decisions, known as *gurmata*s, were reached through consensus, ensuring broad legitimacy.

The Sarbat Khalsa elected leaders, resolved disputes, and set strategic objectives. For instance, in 1733, it accepted a Mughal offer of a *jagir* and appointed Nawab Kapur Singh as the Sikh leader, legitimizing Sikh authority. In 1748, it reorganized Sikh forces into 11 misls, formalizing the Confederacy's structure. The Sarbat Khalsa also coordinated alliances, such as with the Marathas in 1758, and planned resistance against Afghan invasions. Its democratic ethos fostered unity among diverse Sikh groups, providing a cohesive framework for governance that Ranjit Singh later centralized. [2]

The Dal Khalsa: Military Coordination

The Dal Khalsa, established in the 1740s under Nawab Kapur Singh, was the unified military arm of the Sikh Confederacy, comprising the armed forces of all misls. Initially organized into the Buddha Dal (elder group) and Taruna Dal (younger group), it was restructured in 1748 into 11 misls, each led by a sardar. With an estimated strength of 70,000 horsemen by the mid-18th century, the Dal Khalsa operated as a confederated cavalry force, uniting for major campaigns while allowing misls to conduct independent operations.

The Dal Khalsa implemented the *Rakhi* system, a protection tribute paid by villages, which ensured economic stability and rural allegiance. Its military successes, including the capture of Lahore (1765) and Sirhind (1763), expanded Sikh territory and weakened Mughal and Afghan control.[3] The Dal Khalsa's flexible structure, coordinated by the Sarbat Khalsa, enabled rapid mobilization and strategic adaptability, laying the military foundation for Ranjit Singh's empire.

Misl-Based Governance: Decentralized Administration

Each misl functioned as a semi-autonomous unit, controlling distinct territories with its own administrative system. Led by a sardar, misls governed through a combination of Sikh principles and localized feudal practices. Key administrative features included:

- **Revenue Collection:** Misls levied taxes, including the *Rakhi* and land revenue (*lagaan*), to fund military campaigns and infrastructure. The *Rakhi* system, offering protection in exchange for tribute, secured rural loyalty and generated significant income.
- **Judicial System:** Misls adjudicated disputes based on Sikh ethical codes and customary laws, often through *panchayats* (village councils). The Sarbat Khalsa and Akal Takht resolved inter-misl conflicts, ensuring cohesion.
- **Fortifications and Infrastructure:** Misls built forts, such as Ramgarh by the Ramgarhia Misl, to secure territories and establish administrative centers. They also maintained roads and trade routes, boosting economic activity.
- **Military Organization:** Each misl maintained a cavalry-based force, with horsemen recruited from Sikh and non-Sikh communities. The misls' meritocratic structure allowed mobility, as warriors could switch allegiances, fostering competition and innovation.

The misls' decentralized governance, described as "theocratic confederate feudalism," balanced regional autonomy with collective action under the Dal Khalsa and Sarbat Khalsa.[4] This system enabled the Sikhs to govern diverse regions, from Punjab to parts of modern-day Haryana, while maintaining a shared Sikh identity.

Role of the Administrative Structure in the Rise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

Born in 1780, Ranjit Singh inherited leadership of the Sukerchakia Misl at age 12, following his father Maha Singh's death. The Sikh Confederacy's administrative structure provided the political, military, and economic framework that enabled Ranjit Singh to consolidate power, unify the misls, and establish the Sikh Empire by 1801. The following sections analyze how each component contributed to his rise until the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809.

Sarbat Khalsa: The Sarbat Khalsa's democratic framework provided Ranjit Singh with legitimacy and strategic guidance. As a young sardar, Ranjit Singh participated in Sarbat Khalsa assemblies, gaining recognition among Sikh leaders. In 1799, the Sarbat Khalsa endorsed his campaign to capture Lahore, a symbolic and strategic city, from its Afghan rulers. This gurmata legitimized Ranjit Singh's leadership, enabling him to declare himself Maharaja in 1801, marking the transition from the Confederacy to a centralized empire. The Sarbat Khalsa's emphasis on consensus-building allowed Ranjit Singh to navigate alliances and rivalries among the misls. His diplomatic skills, honed through Sarbat Khalsa deliberations, secured the support of powerful sardars like those of the Ahluwalia and Phulkian Misls, strengthening his position. However, as his power grew, Ranjit Singh reduced the Sarbat Khalsa's role, centralizing authority by 1805, a move facilitated by the Confederacy's established legitimacy.

Dal Khalsa: The Dal Khalsa's military structure was critical to Ranjit Singh's conquests. As leader of the Sukerchakia Misl, he inherited a well-trained cavalry force, which he expanded

by incorporating other units. The Dal Khalsa's campaigns in the 18th century, such as the capture of Lahore (1765) and resistance against Ahmad Shah Abdali, had weakened external threats, providing Ranjit Singh with a stable platform to launch his campaigns. Ranjit Singh leveraged the Dal Khalsa's organizational model to modernize his army, known as the Khalsa Fauj. He recruited European officers, such as Jean-Baptiste Ventura, to train infantry and artillery units, complementing the traditional Sikh cavalry. The Rakhi system, inherited from the Dal Khalsa, provided revenue to fund these reforms. Key victories, including the capture of Gujranwala (1799), Lahore (1799), and Amritsar (1802), were facilitated by the Dal Khalsa's legacy of mobility and coordination, enabling Ranjit Singh to consolidate Punjab's core territories.

Misl-Based Governance: The misls' decentralized administrative system offered Ranjit Singh a template for governance, which he adapted to create a centralized empire. The Sukerchakia Misl's control over Gujranwala and surrounding areas provided Ranjit Singh with a revenue base and administrative experience. He adopted the Rakhi and taxation systems, appointing kardars (revenue collectors) to streamline collection across his territories. The misl practice of fort-building inspired Ranjit Singh to construct strategic strongholds, such as Gobindgarh Fort in Amritsar, securing his empire. Ranjit Singh integrated non-Sikh communities, including Muslims and Hindus, into his administration, a practice rooted in the misls' inclusive governance. He appointed capable administrators, such as Fakir Azizuddin (foreign minister) and Diwan Mohkam Chand (military commander), reflecting the misls' meritocratic ethos. The judicial system, combining Sikh principles with local customs, ensured stability in diverse regions, facilitating Ranjit Singh's expansion into Multan (1802) and Kashmir (1808).[5] The misls' autonomy posed challenges, as rival sardars resisted centralization. Ranjit Singh used diplomacy, marriage alliances, and military force to subdue or co-opt misl leaders, such as those of the Bhangi and Ramgarhia Misls. The Confederacy's administrative flexibility allowed him to gradually absorb these territories, transforming the decentralized structure into a unified empire by 1809.

Consolidation of the Sikh Empire by Maharaja Ranjit Singh

The period from 1782 to 1792 shaped Ranjit Singh's early life and the Sukerchakia Misl's position within the Sikh Confederacy. In 1782, Ranjit Singh was two years old, and his father, Maha Singh, led the Sukerchakia Misl, controlling territories around Gujranwala. The Sikh Confederacy, formalized in 1748, had weakened Mughal and Afghan control through campaigns like the capture of Lahore (1765) and Sirhind (1763). However, by the 1780s, the Confederacy faced challenges from Afghan invasions led by Ahmad Shah Abdali and his successors, as well as internal rivalries among the misls, particularly the Bhangi, Kanhaiya, and Sukerchakia. Maha Singh's conquests, including Rasulpur and Sodhra, strengthened the Sukerchakia Misl, providing Ranjit Singh with a robust territorial and military base. Maha Singh's death in 1792 left 12-year-old Ranjit Singh under the regency of his mother-in-law, Sada Kaur of the Kanhaiya Misl, whose alliance was critical to his early survival.[6] The power vacuum in Punjab, exacerbated by Afghan withdrawals and Mughal decline, set the stage for

Ranjit Singh's rise, with the Sikh Confederacy's administrative and military structures offering a foundation for his ambitions.

Military Consolidation (1792–1809)

Ranjit Singh's military campaigns were central to consolidating the Sikh Empire, transforming the Sukerchakia Misl's regional influence into a unified imperial force. His strategies included leveraging the Dal Khalsa's legacy, modernizing the army, and subduing rival misls and external threats.

Early Campaigns and Leadership (1792–1799) : At age 12, Ranjit Singh assumed leadership of the Sukerchakia Misl, guided by Sada Kaur and Diwan Lakhpat Rai. His early campaigns focused on securing Sukerchakia territories and asserting dominance over rival misls. In 1795, he repelled an attack by the Bhangi Misl on Gujranwala, demonstrating military acumen. By 1797, he had strengthened his cavalry, drawing on the Dal Khalsa's model of mobile warfare. In 1799, Ranjit Singh captured Lahore, the historical capital of Punjab, from the Bhangi Misl's weakened sardars, Chet Singh, Sahib Singh, and Mohar Singh. This campaign, endorsed by a Sarbat Khalsa *gurmata*, marked a turning point, as Lahore's symbolic and strategic importance legitimized Ranjit Singh's leadership. The conquest was achieved through a combination of military force and diplomacy, with Sada Kaur's Kanhaiya forces playing a crucial role. Lahore became the administrative and military center of the emerging Sikh Empire, enabling further expansion.

Modernization of the Khalsa Fauj (1799–1809) : Ranjit Singh transformed the Sukerchakia cavalry into the *Khalsa Fauj*, a modernized army that integrated traditional Sikh warfare with European techniques. He recruited European officers, such as Jean-Baptiste Ventura and Jean-Francois Allard, to train infantry and artillery units, complementing the Dal Khalsa's cavalry-based model. By 1809, the *Khalsa Fauj* included disciplined battalions, equipped with muskets and cannons, enhancing its effectiveness against Afghan and regional rivals.[7]

The *Rakhi* system, inherited from the Dal Khalsa, provided revenue to fund these reforms, while *jagirs* (land grants) secured the loyalty of Sikh and non-Sikh warriors. Ranjit Singh's military reforms enabled key victories, including:

- Amritsar (1802): Captured from the Bhangi Misl, Amritsar was the spiritual center of Sikhism, enhancing Ranjit Singh's legitimacy as a Khalsa leader.
- Kasur (1807): Conquered from Afghan chief Qutb-ud-Din, securing Punjab's southern frontier.
- Kangra (1809): Annexed from the Katoch Rajputs, extending control into the Himalayan foothills.

These conquests consolidated Punjab's core territories, neutralizing internal rivals and external threats.

Subjugation of Rival Misls

The subjugation of rival misls was a critical strategy employed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to consolidate the Sikh Empire between 1792 and 1809, transforming the decentralized Sikh Confederacy into a unified state. Upon inheriting the Sukerchakia Misl in 1792, Ranjit Singh faced competition from powerful misls like the Bhangi, Kanhaiya, Ramgarhia, and Phulkian,

each controlling significant territories and resisting centralization. He employed a combination of military force, diplomacy, and marriage alliances to neutralize these rivals. In 1799, with the Sarbat Khalsa's endorsement, Ranjit Singh captured Lahore from the Bhangi Misl's weakened sardars, Chet Singh, Sahib Singh, and Mohar Singh, leveraging his alliance with Sada Kaur of the Kanhaiya Misl; by 1802, he further annexed Amritsar, effectively marginalizing the Bhangi Misl. The Kanhaiya Misl, initially an ally through Sada Kaur's support, was absorbed by 1807 after her influence waned, with Ranjit Singh integrating their territories around Batala. The Ramgarhia Misl, led by Jodh Singh, posed a challenge due to its control over the Doaba region, but Ranjit Singh's diplomatic overtures and military pressure secured their allegiance by 1808, reintegrating their forces into his empire. The Phulkian Misl, based in the Cis-Sutlej region, was co-opted through alliances, with sardars like Sahib Singh of Patiala accepting Ranjit Singh's suzerainty, securing his southern flank. By 1809, most misls were either subdued or subordinated, allowing Ranjit Singh to centralize authority, replace autonomous sardars with loyal governors, and lay the foundation for a cohesive Sikh Empire, as formalized by the Treaty of Amritsar.[8] This strategic subjugation, rooted in the Sikh Confederacy's flexible structure, demonstrated Ranjit Singh's ability to balance coercion with collaboration, ensuring unity while preserving Sikh identity.

Administrative Reforms (1792–1809)

Ranjit Singh's administrative reforms built on the Sikh Confederacy's misl-based governance, centralizing authority while integrating diverse communities. His system balanced Sikh principles with pragmatic administration, ensuring stability and resource mobilization.

Revenue and Economic Administration : The misls' *Rakhi* and land revenue systems were refined by Ranjit Singh, who appointed *kardars* (revenue collectors) to streamline taxation. He conducted land surveys to assess agricultural productivity, ensuring equitable revenue collection. Trade routes through Lahore and Amritsar were secured, boosting commerce and attracting merchants. By 1809, the empire's economy supported a standing army and infrastructure projects, such as canals and markets.

Ranjit Singh maintained the *jagir* system, granting land to loyal sardars and European officers, but introduced oversight to prevent autonomy. He also minted the *Nanakshahi* coin in 1801, symbolizing sovereignty and standardizing currency, which enhanced economic integration.

Judicial and Governance Systems : The Sikh Confederacy's judicial system, combining Sikh ethical codes with *panchayat*-based dispute resolution, was adapted by Ranjit Singh. He established courts in major cities, presided over by *qazis* (Muslim judges) and *pandits* (Hindu scholars) for non-Sikh subjects, ensuring inclusivity. Sikh disputes were adjudicated by *granthis* or referred to the Akal Takht, reinforcing Khalsa authority.

Ranjit Singh appointed capable administrators, such as Diwan Mohkam Chand (military commander) and Fakir Azizuddin (foreign minister), reflecting the misls' meritocratic ethos. Provincial governors, or *nazims*, oversaw regions like Multan and Kashmir, reporting directly to Lahore. This centralized structure replaced the misls' autonomy, ensuring loyalty to the Maharaja.

Infrastructure and Fortifications : Ranjit Singh invested in fortifications, building Gobindgarh Fort in Amritsar and strengthening Lahore's defenses. He constructed roads, bridges, and canals, improving connectivity and agriculture. These projects, funded by revenue reforms, enhanced administrative control and economic productivity, solidifying the empire's foundation by 1809.

Diplomatic Strategies (1792–1809)

Ranjit Singh's diplomatic acumen was critical to consolidating the Sikh Empire, navigating alliances with Sikh sardars, regional powers, and the British East India Company.

Internal Diplomacy : Ranjit Singh secured alliances with misl leaders through marriage and diplomacy. His marriage to Sada Kaur's daughter, Mehtab Kaur, in 1785 (formalized during his minority) cemented the Sukerchakia-Kanhaiya alliance. Similar alliances with the Ahluwalia and Phulkian Misls neutralized potential rivals. He mediated disputes among sardars, leveraging the Sarbat Khalsa's legacy of consensus to maintain unity.

Regional Diplomacy : Ranjit Singh balanced relations with Afghan rulers and neighboring states. He negotiated truces with Zaman Shah Durrani in 1798–1799, delaying invasions while consolidating Lahore. His alliance with the Phulkian states in the Cis-Sutlej region secured a buffer against Maratha incursions, protecting Punjab's eastern frontier.

Relations with the British : The British East India Company's expansion into northern India by 1803 posed a challenge. Ranjit Singh's conquests in the Cis-Sutlej region, including support for Saharanpur Sikhs in 1806, alarmed the British, who sought to limit his influence. In 1808, British envoy Charles Metcalfe negotiated with Ranjit Singh, leading to the Treaty of Amritsar (April 25, 1809). The treaty recognized Ranjit Singh's sovereignty north of the Sutlej River, while placing ceding Cis-Sutlej territories under British protection. This agreement stabilized his empire's eastern boundary, allowing him to focus on western and northern expansion. Ranjit Singh's diplomacy with the British reflected his ability to balance military strength with strategic concessions, leveraging the empire's consolidated resources to secure international recognition.

Challenges and Resilience

Maharaja Ranjit Singh faced formidable challenges during the consolidation of the Sikh Empire from 1782 to 1809, yet his resilience, rooted in the Sikh Confederacy's legacy and his strategic adaptability, enabled him to overcome these obstacles. Inter-misl rivalries posed a significant internal threat, as powerful misls like the Bhangi, Ramgarhia, and Kanhaiya resisted centralization, necessitating a blend of military campaigns, such as the capture of Lahore in 1799, and diplomatic alliances, like his marriage to Mehtab Kaur of the Kanhaiya Misl, to subdue them. Afghan invasions, particularly by Zaman Shah Durrani between 1797 and 1799, tested the Sukerchakia Misl's defenses, forcing Ranjit Singh to delay expansion plans while fortifying Gujranwala and negotiating truces to buy time. The emerging British East India Company's expansion into northern India by 1803, especially their influence in the Cis-Sutlej region, presented a geopolitical challenge, culminating in the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809, which required Ranjit Singh to cede territories south of the Sutlej in exchange for recognition of his sovereignty north of the river. Economic constraints, including the need to fund a modernized

Khalsa Fauj, demanded innovative revenue reforms, building on the misls' Rakhi system. Ranjit Singh's resilience was evident in his ability to leverage the Sikh Confederacy's military and administrative frameworks, such as the Dal Khalsa's cavalry model and the Sarbat Khalsa's legitimacy, while integrating non-Sikh communities to foster inclusivity. His pragmatic leadership, combining Sikh principles of perseverance with meritocratic governance, allowed him to navigate these challenges, transforming Punjab into a centralized empire by 1809.[9]

The Treaty of Amritsar (1809)

The Treaty of Amritsar, signed on April 25, 1809, between Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the British East India Company, was a pivotal milestone in the consolidation of the Sikh Empire, recognizing Ranjit Singh's sovereignty over territories north of the Sutlej River while placing the Cis-Sutlej regions under British protection. This agreement formalized the empire's boundaries, securing diplomatic recognition and marking the culmination of Ranjit Singh's rise from a misl leader to an imperial ruler. The Sikh Confederacy's administrative and military structures were instrumental in this achievement. The Dal Khalsa's legacy provided a robust military foundation, enabling Ranjit Singh to maintain a formidable *Khalsa Fauj*, which deterred British aggression and ensured favorable treaty terms. The misl-based governance system, with its decentralized yet cohesive administration, fostered internal stability, allowing Ranjit Singh to negotiate from a position of strength. The Sarbat Khalsa's endorsement of his leadership, particularly for the capture of Lahore in 1799, lent him legitimacy among Sikhs and external powers, reinforcing his authority. By stabilizing the eastern frontier, the treaty allowed Ranjit Singh to focus on consolidating his empire, modernizing his administration, and expanding westward, building on the Confederacy's foundations of military prowess, administrative resilience, and diplomatic unity. The Treaty of Amritsar thus not only secured the Sikh Empire's geopolitical standing but also highlighted Ranjit Singh's strategic acumen in leveraging the Confederacy's legacy to navigate the complex dynamics of colonial expansion.

Conclusion

The Sikh Confederacy's administrative structure, comprising the Sarbat Khalsa's collective governance, the Dal Khalsa's military coordination, and the misl-based decentralized administration, was a cornerstone of Sikh state formation in the 18th century. This framework provided Maharaja Ranjit Singh with the legitimacy, military strength, and administrative template to unify the misls, establish the Sikh Empire, and consolidate power by the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809. The Confederacy's integration of Sikh principles with practical governance enabled Ranjit Singh to navigate internal rivalries and external threats, transforming Punjab into a formidable empire. The legacy of the Confederacy's administrative innovations underscores the Sikh community's resilience and adaptability, offering insights into the dynamics of state-building in a turbulent era. The consolidation of the Sikh Empire from 1782 to 1809 was a remarkable achievement, as Ranjit Singh transformed the decentralized Sikh Confederacy into a centralized, sovereign state. His military conquests, including Lahore, Amritsar, and Kangra, unified Punjab's core territories. Administrative reforms, building on

misl-based systems, ensured economic stability and governance efficiency. Diplomatic strategies secured alliances and neutralized external threats, culminating in the Treaty of Amritsar, which formalized the empire's boundaries. The Sikh Confederacy's institutions provided the foundation, while Ranjit Singh's vision and pragmatism shaped a modern empire. This period underscores the interplay of Sikh principles, strategic leadership, and historical opportunity in state-building, offering insights into the dynamics of 19th-century South Asian geopolitics.

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