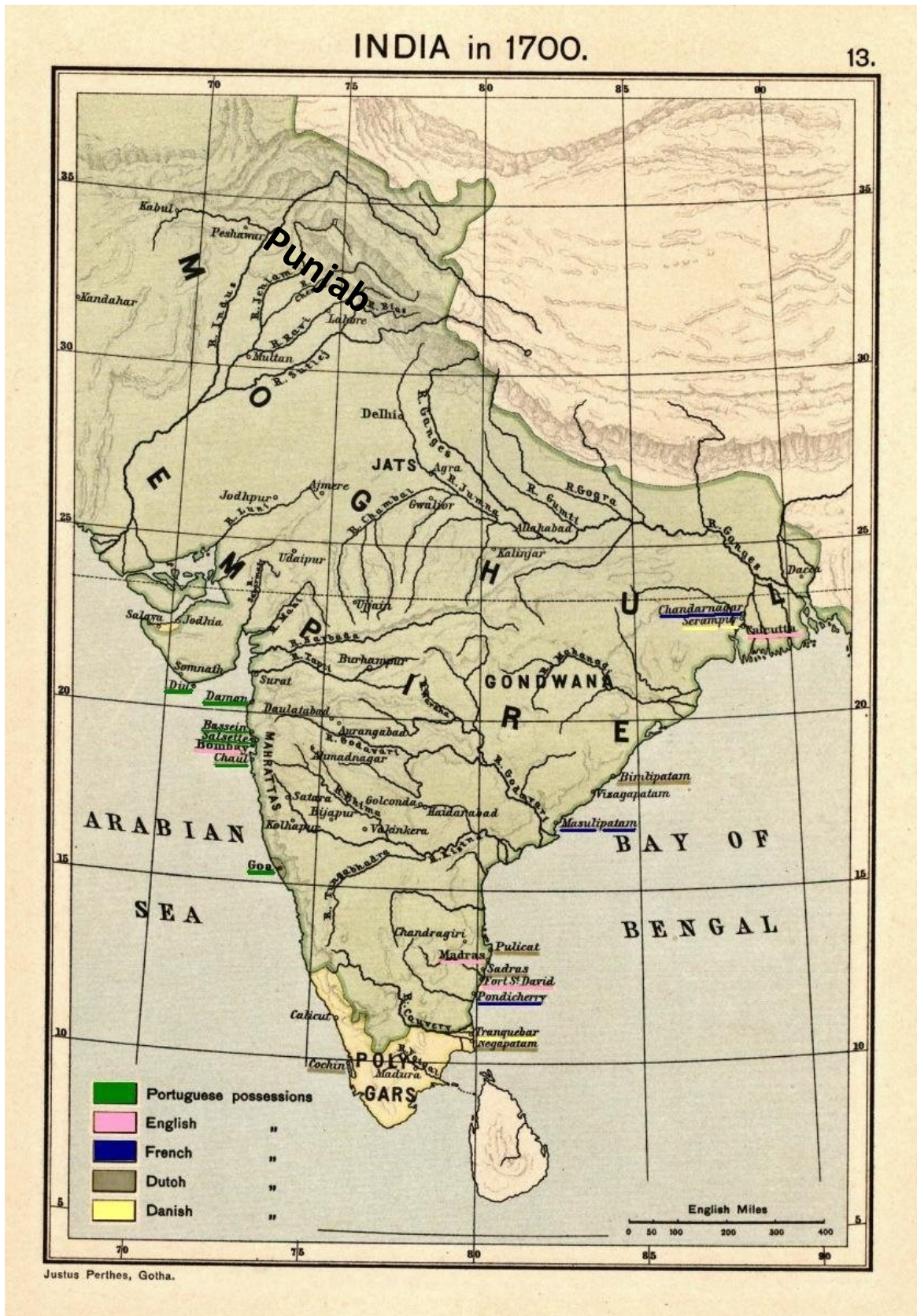


# Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Sikh Empire



Map of India 1700 showing the Mughal Empire and European trading posts/factory towns from: Joppen, Charles [J.] (1907), *A Historical Atlas of India for the use of High-Schools, Colleges, and Private Students*, London, New York, Bombay, and Calcutta: Longman Green and Co. Pp. 16, 26 maps.

Padshah	<i>Padshah</i> is one of the most esteemed royal titles within Indian and Persian culture. The origin of the word means 'master king' and the title was used through the centuries by a number of high-ranking monarchs to express their imperial power or elevated sovereignty.
Nawab	<p><i>Nawab</i> was also a royal title given to a sovereign ruler, though was generally deemed to be a level below that of an <i>Emperor</i> or <i>Padshah</i>. This unique title was often granted to Muslim rulers throughout the Mogul Empire who held semi-autonomous control over their regions or vassal states, though they remained loyal and subject to the imperial Moghul ruler.</p> <p>The term translates as <i>viceroys</i>, as in an assistant to the king or sovereign. <i>Nawab</i> is the title for males within this role, and the female equivalent is <i>Nawab Begum</i>, or simply <i>Begum</i>.</p>
Maharaja	An Indian Maharaja is considered a king or prince, who would rank below a <i>Padshah</i> but above a <i>Raja</i> . The term derives from the Sanskrit words for great ( <i>mahat</i> ) and king ( <i>rajan</i> ).
Raja	<p>Although the precise rank and role of a <i>Raja</i> varies across the Indian regions and cultures that make up India's historic legacies, it is commonly regarded as the level of a reigning monarch, such as a king or ruler of a princely state. There are occasions, however, when the title of <i>Raja</i> implies a regal status or lineage, but without the power, privilege, land or wealth of a modern monarch.</p> <p>The term <i>Raja</i> originates from <i>rājan</i>, a name of Sanskrit and Hindi origin, which means ruler (similar to the Latin word <i>rex</i>).</p>



- Ranjit Singh was born November 13, 1780, Budrukhan, or Gujranwala [now in Pakistan]. Died June 27, 1839, Lahore [now in Pakistan]. He was reported to be short and unattractive. He was blind in one eye and had a face pitted with pockmarks thanks to smallpox. A lover of life, he liked to surround himself with handsome men and women, and he had a passion for hunting, horses, and strong liquor.



- Ranjit Singh was the first Indian in a millennium to turn the tide of invasion back into the homelands of the traditional conquerors of India, the Pashtuns (Afghans), and he thus became known as the *Lion of the Punjab*.
- In July 1799 he seized Lahore, the capital of the Punjab (now the capital of Punjab province, Pakistan). The Afghan king, Zamān Shah, confirmed Ranjit Singh as governor of the city, but in 1801 Ranjit Singh proclaimed himself Maharaja of the Punjab.



- He had coins struck in the name of the Sikh Gurus, the revered line of Sikh leaders, and proceeded to administer the state in the name of the Sikh commonwealth. A year later he captured Amritsar (now in Punjab state, India), the most-important commercial entrepôt in northern India and sacred city of the Sikhs. Thereafter, he proceeded to subdue the smaller Sikh and Pashtun principalities that were scattered throughout the Punjab.
- His later forays eastward, however, were checked by the English East India Company.

- In July 1819 he finally expelled the Pashtuns from the Vale of Kashmir, and by 1820 he had consolidated his rule over the whole Punjab between the Sutlej and Indus rivers.
- In 1820 Ranjit Singh began to modernize his army, using European officers—many of whom had served in the army of Napoleon I—to train the infantry and the artillery. The modernized Punjabi army fought well in campaigns in the North-West Frontier.<sup>1</sup>
- The magazine *BBC History Magazine* (**a British magazine that voted Maharaja Ranjit Singh “The Greatest World Leader” in 2020**) described Ranjit Singh’s leadership of the empire he founded:<sup>2</sup>

*He thus embarked on a public campaign to restore Sikh temples – most notably rebuilding the Harmandir Sahib, the Golden Temple, at Amritsar in marble (1809) and gold (1830) – while also donating a tonne of gold to plate the Hindu Kashi Vishwanath temple to Lord Shiva in Varanasi. He patronised Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, and Sufi shrines, and in a nod to Hindu sensibilities banned the slaughter of cows. In his lands, forced conversions were largely unheard of, and even his Muslim and Hindu wives were freely allowed to practice their faiths. On a few occasions he did convert mosques to other uses – Lahore’s Moti Masjid (Pearl Mosque) became Moti Mandir (Pearl Temple) – but he tried, with some success, to limit the destruction of conquered religious sites. **He was a conqueror, even a unifier, not a crusader.***



<sup>1</sup> Singh, K.. "Ranjit Singh." Encyclopedia Britannica, November 9, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ranjit-Singh-Sikh-maharaja>.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Lockwood, "Who Was Maharaja Ranjit Singh?," HistoryExtra (Immediate Media Company Limited, August 30, 2022), <https://www.historyextra.com/period/georgian/maharaja-ranjit-singh-who-bio-profile-born-died-life-sikh-empire/>.

- The *BBC History Magazine* writes:<sup>3</sup>
  - Ranjit Singh presided over a multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-caste empire of remarkable toleration and inclusivity. The army, the empire's predominate institution, included Hindus, Muslims, and European Christians – French, Spanish, Polish, Russian, and Prussian, though not British, who history showed should be kept at arm's length – as well as Sikhs.

Author Mohamed Sheikh <sup>4</sup>writes in *Emperor of the Five Rivers: The Life and Times of Maharajah Ranjit Singh*:

The Punjab's long-established mixed population has bequeathed a rich cultural tradition of dance, music, folk ballads and a literature dating back to the Islamic poetry of Attar, a thirteenth-century follower of Sufism. But it also included an astonishing variety of different groups, divided by clan, religion and ethnicity. The Punjab in the decades before Ranjit Singh unified it was a patchwork of small clan-ruled areas known as *misl*s, all with their own traditions and interests. To persuade and force such diverse entities into a single state was one of Ranjit's greatest achievements.

- His administration was likewise a diverse affair; his prime minister was a Dogra Rajput (a Dogri-speaking member of the Rajput warrior caste or clan group), his finance minister a Brahmin (a member of the high-status Hindu priestly caste), his foreign minister a Muslim.
- Numerous castes and clans lay claim to Ranjit Singh as an ancestor, a reflection of both his tolerant rule and his appeal as a symbol of unity and inclusion.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Lockwood, "Who Was Maharaja Ranjit Singh?"

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed Sheikh, *Emperor of the Five Rivers: The Life and Times of Maharajah Ranjit Singh*, (Bloomsbury: 2017), 7.



*Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Queen Camilla, and the Koh-i-Noor*

*What is the link?*

