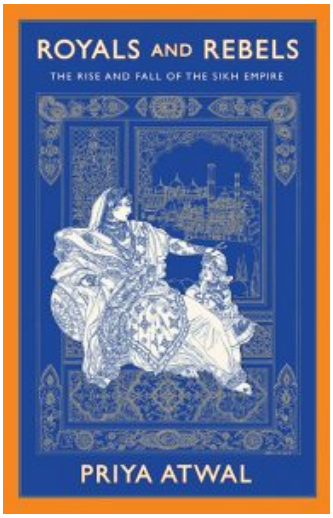
Book Review: Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire by Priya Atwal

In **Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire***,* **Priya Atwal** *offers a new study that convincingly pushes against the historiography that has positioned the Sikh Empire as a one-man enterprise, delving deep into archival sources to reveal the rich, energetic and flawed lives of the Punjabi royal elite as they tried to carve out their dynastic place in India during the first half of the nineteenth century. The book is a tour-de-force, finds* **Diya Gupta***, with the clarity and authority of Atwal's writing and her careful reading of historical material succeeding in revealing the contingencies of the past in all its complexity.*

***Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire*. Priya Atwal. Hurst. 2020.**



Ik si rajah, ik si rani,

Dono margeh, khatam kahaani!

Once there was a King, once there was a Queen,

Both died, and there the story ends!

Priya Atwal's *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire* alludes to this humorous Punjabi couplet, only to highlight the book's own impulse for resurrection. In Atwal's deft hands, it is not simply a king and a queen who are reborn, but *Shere-e-Punjab* or the 'Lion of Punjab', Ranjit Singh himself, juxtaposed against the agency of his family – sons, grandsons, mothers-in-law and wives. Atwal convincingly pushes against the historiography of seeing the Sikh Empire as a one-man enterprise, and delves deep into archival sources to reveal the rich, energetic, colourful and flawed lives of the Punjabi royal elite as they tried to carve out their dynastic place in India during the first half of the nineteenth century. Looming over them is the ever-encroaching shadow of the British East India Company.

The book is a tour-de-force, as Atwal brings her careful reading of a wide range of historical material to reveal the contingencies of the past in all its complexity. Beginning by dismantling the belief that kingship was not inherently a Sikh attribute, she highlights how early sources such as the *Prem Sumarag Granth* (*The Book of the True Path of Love*) constructed the figure of the king as one to be emulated as well as offering service. The fact that such ideas about the role of kingship were being debated in eighteenth-century Punjab helpfully contextualises why Ranjit Singh in the early nineteenth century chose to adopt the title of 'Maharajah' for himself but referred to his government as the *Sarkar-i-Khalsa*, Khalsa being the community of committed Sikhs.

Atwal then directs us to a significant shift in Ranjit Singh's use of marriage as a political instrument within the Sukerchakia *misl* or Sikh sovereign state, of which he was a third-generation member. By taking on wives who came from across the regions and communities of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh was able to broaden his kinship ties and establish his ruling base – similar, Atwal argues, to the practices of the Mughal emperor Akbar before him.

Indeed, the synergies established between Punjabi and Mughal rule form one of the highlights of the book. Atwal, for instance, notes how 'the Maharajah's court lavishly celebrated many of the key festivals observed (often jointly) by Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus throughout the year' (65). Going beyond the Maharajah and his family, these observations provide crucial insights into the long history of the syncretic, pluralistic traditions on which modern-day India is based – which are, in the twenty-first century, under threat.

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Ranjit Singh's expansive and strategic attitude to marriage, Atwal argues, led to 'young women who were themselves interested and skilful in supporting and enhancing the dynastic project – in their own ways and for their own purposes' (65). She points to how his first two wives, Mehtab Kaur and Mai Nakain, chose to live on their own *jagirs* or estates rather than at court in Lahore. Muslim queens Moran and Gul Begum, who came from the *tawaif* or courtesan class, also took full advantage of the possibilities afforded to them. Moran commissioned the building of a mosque and madrasa in Lahore, while Gul Begum authorised the construction of a pavilion and insisted on managing the finances of her own *jagir* herself. These examples forcefully drive home Atwal's point – 'Despite the repeated reference to the queens being *purdahnashin* (observing the veil or *purdah*), these women were not secluded' (59). Orientalist gender stereotypes, which pitted masculine martial prowess against the 'feminised' space of the court, are confidently undercut here, as are modern idealised conceptions of Khalsa history mythologising Ranjit Singh and the men surrounding him as warrior-heroes.

Where, then, do the English fit into this story? Atwal believes that Ranjit Singh repeatedly decided that cordial relations with the East India Company and the British Crown would cement the foundations of the Sikh Empire, and thereby signed the 1809 friendship treaty. His ambitions, she claims, soared even higher – 'the goal Ranjit Singh had in mind as he shaped the Sikh Empire's foreign policy was nothing short of projecting the name and fame of his kingdom onto a global royal stage, and securing its position there for generations to come' (90).

The East India Company, she argues, shared the same perspective – that an alliance rather than animosity worked in both parties' interests. Atwal's analysis here is abundant in detail, drawing upon material as varied as Bhag Singh's influence upon his nephew Ranjit Singh, *durbars* or court sessions hosted by the Maharajah in 1831 and 1838 for welcoming two British Governor-Generals and the political purpose underpinning ceremonial gift-giving. This was a dynastic participation in politics, she stresses, with Ranjit Singh's sons and wives performing as ambassadors for a cosmopolitan audience.

But how, after only ten years following Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, did the Sikh Empire crumble? Atwal believes that our fixation with this date needs to change – the untimely demise of the Maharajah's son Kharak Singh and grandson Nau Nihal Singh within five days of each other in 1840 was just as catastrophic. A whole array of players now laid claim to the throne – from junior royals to aristocrats, from the Khalsa Army to the East India Company. Eventually, it was the young boy Duleep Singh who inherited the Sikh Empire, with his mother Jind Kaur, legitimised by the Khalsa Army, becoming Regent in 1844.

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Atwal's examination of the contesting narratives constructing Jind Kaur is fascinating. Mythologised as the 'mother of all Sikhs' on the one hand, and misogynistically seen as emotional and incapable of ruling as surrogate on the other, this rebel queen never gave up the fight. Even after the Khalsa Army was defeated by the East India Company in 1846 and the Punjab was annexed in 1849, Jind Kaur escaped from imprisonment and made her way to Nepal, seeking a base to continue fighting for her son's right to the throne.

It is testament to the clarity and authority of Atwal's writing that she is able to bring in an unmistakable note of tragedy towards the book's conclusion. Not only did the ten-year-old Duleep Singh lose his Empire and familial wealth, but also his personal freedom. He would not return to the Punjab, ultimately dying 'a broken-spirited man, alone in a Paris hotel room in 1893' (213). And the Punjab itself would never be the same again – controlled by the British until 1947, it was traumatically partitioned on communal lines between the newly independent countries of India and Pakistan. Perhaps that is what makes the history of the Sikh Empire so emotionally resonant today. But the story, as we have seen, does not end there: Atwal's act of resurrection skilfully recreates the men and women of Ranjit Singh's dynasty 'not as the weak, dissolute figures of British colonial accounts, but as the dynamic, ambitious players that they were, battling for power in a world and era of great change' (213). As another royal, Mary, Queen of Scots, would say – In my end is my beginning.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: 'Ranjit Singh, Maharaja of the Punjab, with his wife and child accompanied by his secondary wives. Gouache painting. Page 140.' Credit: Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

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