Priya Atwal. *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp 288.

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The cover page of Priya Atwal's book is a monochromatic painting on a cobalt blue background depicting Rani Jindan, the youngest and last queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Along with the queen is her five-year-old son, Duleep Singh, who became the youngest and the last maharaja of the shrinking Sikh Empire of Punjab in the nineteenth century. This painting highlights the rich confluence of culture, pivotal to Ranjit Singh's empire. The formidable white portrayal of *Mai* Jindan and Duleep, superimposed on the background of the Lahore fort, conveys the saga of sustenance, struggle, and suffering of the nineteenth-century Sikh empire. Perhaps the author chose this painting to 'rescue' the marginalised characters overshadowed by the tall image of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, very fondly known as *Sher-e-Punjab*. This book, originally a thesis by Priya Atwal, consists of five chapters and engages with socio-cultural events that impacted the high politics of Punjab in the nineteenth century.

The story is about the making of the Sikh empire from the perspective of 'lesser-known' personalities. Atwal writes, "If he was the lion of Punjab, then Jind Kaur was the heroic rebel queen who courageously fought to protect her husband's and son's empire, and ultimately, the freedom of the Sikhs and Punjab as a whole" (p. 6). The author states that British sources have deliberately celebrated Ranjit Singh's over-magnified portrayal, which has gone unquestioned in academic and public circles. This hyperbolised narration of the maharaja has come at the cost of discrediting the political acumen of his heirs and their right to rule after his demise (p. 8). Further, little attention has been given to the role of queens and princes whose support was quintessential for the maharaja's rise to power. Thus, this book examines the role and contribution of women in empire-building, including influential

warrior women such as Sada Kaur (mother-in-law of Ranjit Singh), Raj Kaur (Ranjit's mother), *Mai* Nakain (the second wife of Ranjit Singh), and Rani Jindan (the last wife of Ranjit Singh). Interestingly, not all women came from elite sardar families. Rani Jindan was the daughter of a kennel keeper. Similarly, Begum Gul didn't belong to elite circles either. This book suggests that the strength of Ranjit Singh lay in bringing people from different spheres under his aegis with minimum bloodshed. This presents a culturally holistic picture of the empire. However, after the death of Ranjit Singh, this 'strength' resulted in a family feud over claims to the throne and, ultimately, deflated the empire. While the author has focused on the various symbolisms in the imperial court of Ranjit Singh, the zenana as an institution has been neglected. The internal politics of the queens inside the harem would be worth exploring. Surprisingly, we do not find any mention of the daughters of the empire even though Ranjit Singh and his sons married multiple times. Information on the matrimonial alliances of the daughters becomes hard to locate. With matrimonial alliances comes the question of kinship—*biradari*—which became a fluid medium for social mobility. The author cautions readers to avoid limited comparison of Ranjit Singh's empire to that of the imperial Mughals. Nevertheless, readers might make out an uncanny similarity with Akbar on the aspects of matrimonial alliances and uniformity in the court where the emperor was at the apex. Similarly, the reign of Rani Jindan at the Lahore Court seems congruent in terms of ruling style to that of the junta of Nur Jahan at the Mughal court.

One of the essential elements in the making of an empire is to document events. The author has carefully and critically engaged with available source materials. From the Lahore court, it was Sohan Lal Suri's work, titled *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh*, which captured the story of the maharaja in five volumes. It is reminiscent of a diary-like history of the kingdom of Ranjit Singh's family which began with his great-grandfather, extending to the reign of his youngest son Duleep Singh, and documented the Company's annexation of the Sikh empire. Suri's writing must be taken with a pinch of salt as a court historian. It is no surprise that at Kharak Singh's wedding ceremony, the presence and comments of British official Henry Fane find more mention than the bride Nanki (p. 119). Atwal has also incorporated the writings of poets like Muhammad Shah who wrote *Jangnama*. This poem describes the 'bloody war of succession' after Maharaja Kharak Singh's death. Surprisingly, the British

writings are not uniform in their narrative. Major George Broadfoot (Company's political agent to the North-West Frontier) was the first to claim that Maharani Jindan was having an affair with the then-wazir Lal Singh. In contrast, Joseph Davey Cunningham, former political assistant at Ludhiana, strongly disagreed with the Political Agent's abrasive style of handling relations at Lahore and publicly challenged the negative characterisations of Jindan Kaur (p. 183). Alexander Burnes, the man behind the fabrication of Kharak Singh as a weak ruler, referred to him as an 'imbecile'. There is little evidence to suggest that they ever met in person. These deliberate attempts to villainise Jindan Kaur were part of the plan to annex the empire completely and dismantle the Khalsa Army. This wide set of sources makes Priya Atwal's work worth reading. The book provides readers with a holistic view of how the making of the Sikh empire unfolded in the nineteenth century. At the same time, it refrains from using anachronistic labels and humanises historical characters in both historical context and fact.

The first chapter, 'To be a Sikh King', contextualises the hardships of the eighteenth century for the Sikh *panth*. The last Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh, died of wounds inflicted by the assassins under the orders of the Mughal governor of Punjab. In this period of chaos, the author examines the notion of governance, the ideals of sovereignty, and the complexity of the Mughal-Sikh relationship, within which the tradition of martyrdom is vital and where both the Mughals and Sikhs supported each other's growth and sustenance. She notes that Ranjit Singh's empire had a strong cultural foundation, with an 'open marriage policy' and strategic public image building, thereby uniting various military factions (misls) into a cohesive Sikh empire. This vast empire extended from the Khyber Pass in the north to the Sutlej River in the south. The author knits this tumultuous time frame with the teachings of the ten Gurus, quintessential for readers to comprehend the context, inclusive of Guru Nanak's commentary on Babur's invasion and the plight inflicted on women. Nanak questions the violent 'imposition of monarchy' on the subjects. However, the Sikh and Mughal spheres of influence complemented each other under the aegis of Akbar. Discord developed with the execution of the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev, by the Mughal emperor Jahangir in May 1606, and this became a critical watershed moment for the existing Mughal-Sikh relationship. The author has attributed this drastic attempt by Jahangir, an outcome of his discontentment, to the upsurge of the growing popularity of

the Guru. The Mughal ruler had witnessed mass conversions of Muslims, Jatt migrants, and Hindu Kings of Punjab who controlled regions of the Hill states for generations because ideals of egalitarianism and anti-casteism had appealed to many communities. This popular appeal emerged as an administrative hindrance to local governance. Further, this constituted a challenge to the contemporary political elite, as the gurus emerged as 'sacred kings' and the 'Caliphs of the Age' in their own right (p. 22). The final *coup de grâce* was to provide shelter and support to the rebellious prince, Khusrau (son of Jahangir).

Despite several hardships, the gurus preached the idea of *Halimi Raj* (the rule of humility). The author has carefully included the commentary of the gurus on political control and governance. Interestingly, while the gurus criticised the emperors and ruling elites, they did not advocate abolishing the institution of monarchy. She writes that the spiritual gurus were perceived as sovereign figures in their own right, further challenging the Mughals and the landed elites. Additionally, three gurus—Guru Arjan (1563-1606), Guru Hargobind (1595-1644), and Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708)—were pivotal in spreading the ideas of Sikh kingship, paving the way for Ranjit Singh's empire. Here, Ranjit Singh must be placed in the nineteenth century, when the Mughal empire was shrinking and Marathas were attempting to unify their territory.

Atwal writes that notable historians, like Khushwant and Patwant Singh, have emphasised, 'Sikhism and monarchy are a poor fit' (p. 29). They suggest that with the creation of the Khalsa sect, traditional royalty was uprooted and an attempt was made to make it more democratic and republican. Contrary to this, Ranjit Singh established a hereditary monarchy, a clear departure from the 'republican' model of 'joint sovereignty'. Patwant Singh has attributed the misguided imposition of a system of hereditary monarchy on the Sikhs as a cause of the failure of the Sikh Empire (p. 30). The author has rejected these binaries of 'monarchical rule' versus 'republicanism', citing the complex and evolving nature of Sikh political thought. However, after the tenth guru, a political vacuum seems to have prevailed. With Afghan incursions and massacres, the *panth* found itself in immense trouble, leading to the formation of a republican and democratic Sikh body called '*Gurmata'*. These fissures were visible, with the sardars working for their autonomous share and acting as rajas, deviating from the promised ideals of the last guru. Thus, various

factions called misls began to emerge. In the second chapter, 'New Dynasty, New Empire', Atwal explores the traits and tactics of Sukerchakia Misl credited for unifying other misls and ruling massive territories by the time Ranjit Singh took over. Certainly, what worked in the favour of Ranjit Singh was that he was not the founder but an heir apparent to the Sukerchakia Misl, one of the most powerful war bands that had a major role in the creation of a new empire (p. 44). The author calls it a shift from 'misl-age' to a form of 'dynastic colonialism'. She presents the empire as an entity in which power was extracted from lands inherited through multiple matrimonial alliances while also increasing its cultural soft power.

The book delves into the geopolitics of the region in the third chapter titled 'All the World's Stage'. Increasing Russian strongholds in Afghanistan caused anxiety to the British officials. Consequently, a formal agreement—the Friendship Treaty of 1809—between the Company and Lahore was signed for demarcating River Sutlej as the southern boundary of the Sikh empire. According to this Ranjit Singh could not extend his empire to the Phulkian state but he could expand into central Asian and Afghan regions. This certainly benefited the British more as it restored peace in the north and provided protection from Afghan incursions. Ranjit Singh agreed on terms that recognised him as the Company's primary ally in the Punjab. Before this, his uncle Bhag Singh, who was the raja of Jind, was coordinating the Lahore-Delhi relationship. With this recognition, Ranjit Singh received an equal footing with the British (p. 96). Further, he hierarchised the imperial court of Lahore. Sher Singh, the son of Ranjit Singh, was deputed to entertain political agents like Wade, Kharak Singh (the heir apparent), Nau Nihal Singh (grandson of Ranjit Singh) while other princes in the direct line of succession were given the responsibility of attending the Governor-General (p. 101).

The 1830s marked the pinnacle of Lahore and Company relations, especially with two successive British Governor-Generals, Lord Bentick and Lord Auckland, at the helm of discussions. The courtly practices of giving Khilat, exchanging turbans and incorporating royal insignia such as kettle drums, elephants or parasols, and granting gifts to the British officials were also essential 'political weapons' with which Ranjit Singh experimented (p. 91). Informal and formal parties, along with other forms of gatherings, were another medium through which friendship and stringent diplomatic relations

were cemented. The chroniclers of this period suggest a thick bond between Singh and the Company; thus, one wonders if there were any matrimonial alliances between Sikhs and the British. The author documents each occasion for Ranjit Singh as being meticulously transformed into political benefits. For instance, the marriage of Kharak Singh to Chand Kaur in 1811 and the union of his son Nau Nihal Singh and Sahib Kaur in 1837, were matters of great pride for the *Sher-e-Punjab*. He showcased this exorbitant wedding ceremony as the highest exhibit of his power which was to continue even after his demise. He had an heir and a whole line of successors with the Khalsa Army to guard them. The author points out the dramatic increase in the level of royal symbolism used, projecting the establishment of a new social hierarchy in the Punjab (p. 113).

However, tables turned with the death of Ranjit Singh in 1837, after which Kharak Singh took over the throne. The historians of this period have declared that the prime reason for the decline of the empire was the presence of weak successors. Chapter four, 'After the Lion: Writing the Story of Ranjit Singh's Heirs', challenges this by emphasising on a story of sustenance rather than decline. Scholars are divided on who would have been an efficient ruler to carry forward the legacy of Ranjit Singh—Kharak Singh or his son Nau Nihal Singh. Atwal remarks that Kharak Singh as the 'weak maharaja' was a narrative constructed and circulated by the British commentators (p. 128). Kharak Singh reigned for a very brief period, from 27 June 1839 till 5 November 1840. An unexpected turn of events resulted in the untimely death of Nau Nihal Singh within five days. At this juncture, Rani Chand Kaur declared her regency with the assumption that the widow of Nihal Singh would give birth to the future maharaja of Lahore. This certainly angered Sher Singh, who was second in the line of succession, and he also had a twin brother Tara Singh. Then takes place a bloody war of succession with multiple stakeholders - junior royals, the aristocratic nobles of the durbar, Khalsa Army and the British officials. Ultimately, it was five-year-old Maharaja Duleep Singh who sat on the Lahore throne with his mother Rani Jindan as his regent. The subsequent wazirs - Dhyan Singh, Gulab Singh, Lal Singh, along with the British, a former ally, betrayed the promise of friendship with Ranjit Singh. At this juncture, the alternate title of the book could be 'Loyal and Rebels'. Ultimately, this story is about who benefited the most from the deaths of the

royals and sought to seize power by placing themselves at the centre of power - the Lahore throne.

In chapter five, 'The Boy King - the Rebel Queen and the British Empire', Atwal writes that Rani Jindan had become the site of scrutiny from the time she initiated her regency for her five-year-old son, the new Maharaja Duleep Singh. The first Anglo-Sikh war, in which the Khalsa army fought the British, resulted in the slashing of two-thirds of the Ranjit Singh empire, massive war indemnity, and Kashmir ceding with the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh. There was an oriental outlook regarding the women of the east being 'unfit for rule'. The British portrayed the Rani as the 'Messalina of the East'. She was held responsible for the second Anglo-Sikh war during which she took vengeance for the ruthless death of her brother Jawahar Singh from the Khalsa Army. Consequently, she was labelled as a bad influence on the maharaja and hence separated and later imprisoned in Chunar Fort. Such fabrications show that Jindan Kaur fought till the very end for her son's rights. Even when she was in exile, she was able to ignite the Multan rebellion against the British which was later suppressed. However, morally, she triumphed when 'English, Christian turned Duleep Singh' chose to revere the tenets of Sikhism. But till her very last breath, feisty Rani Jindan left no stone unturned in preparing her son to pick a fight against the crown. Although Rani Jindan died in 1861, her continuous efforts had a lasting impression on Duleep. So much so that in the 1880s he reconnected with his family at Lahore and the Sandhanwalia cousins (who had supported him to take the throne at the age of five and attempted to avenge Chand Kaur's murder), along with Thakur Singh, acted as the 'provisional government-in-exile' and became his allies. However, all these were futile efforts as it became clear to Duleep that Dalhousie and his colleagues had made no plans to support his heirs. Duleep had six children (with his first wife, Bamba Muller) and two with his mistress, whom he later married after Bamba's death. It is important to note that his eldest son was named Victor after his godmother, Queen Victoria. The last maharaja of Punjab, Duleep Singh, died a broken-spirited man in Paris in 1893 (p. 213).

Throughout the book, Atwal has managed to keep the reader engaged while raising diverse questions. Her curious observations and inquiries keep the readers wanting more, for example: what happened to the other queens when the company took over the Sikh empire? She writes, "Gul Begum became the

senior-most queen in the pension rankings when Queen Jind Kaur was in exile… it was the dancing girl and the kennel keeper's daughter who had the last laugh" (p. 212).

> '*Ik si rajah, ik si rani,*
> *Dono margeh, khatam kahaani!*'
>
> ['Once there was a King and a Queen,
> they both died, end of story!'] (p. 207)

The author has used this folk couplet to narrate the story of the Sikh Empire and its lasting impression on popular memory. However, to tweak the couplet to fit the present narrative, there was one maharaja, many ranis and multiple royal stakeholders. This book is a reminder that history writing must question contemporary concerns and biases pertaining to hagiographies, misogyny, and orientalism, concepts that are packed with stereotypes, oversimplifications, and have coloured perceptions over time. This makes Atwal's book an essential read for anyone interested in exploring the Sikh empire of nineteenth-century Punjab.